



Billionaire Wolf Needs a Writer

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: He's a billionaire alpha with a dark past. She's the ray of light he never saw coming.

Sterling Nightfang clawed his way out of his family's criminal empire to build a fortune of his own. But when scandal threatens to rip his empire apart, he needs a ghostwriter to spin his story before the world brands him a monster.

Enter Ariel Hayes, a struggling writer with a heart full of dreams and a bank account on life support. She's used to rejection, but she's not used to working for a growly, gorgeous billionaire who looks at her like she's both his salvation and his biggest distraction.

The deal is simple. She writes his autobiography. He saves his reputation. They do not fall for each other.

Too bad fate has other plans.

As Ariel digs into Sterling's past, she uncovers dark secrets, mafia ties, betrayals, and a mother who'd rather see him ruined than redeemed. But beneath his grumpy exterior, Ariel finds a man desperate to break free and the more she sees of the real Sterling, the harder it is to remember this is just a job.

With the media circling and his family out for blood, Sterling must choose. Does he fight for his legacy, or risk it all for the woman who sees the man behind the beast?

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Chapter 1

STERLING

Up here among the clouds, my executive office was far removed from the noise down on the streets. It was quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet that pressed against my eardrums. My phone buzzed against the glass tabletop of my desk, the sound breaking the silence. I picked it up and my stomach tightened at the number on the display. It was the football association president. I didn't want to answer, but I had no choice. Ignoring him wasn't an option.

"Sterling Nightfang."

"Sterling." The strain in his voice was evident even through the tinny phone speaker. "We need to talk."

I leaned against my desk, letting the edge of the glass dig into my hip. The pain was a welcome distraction from the dread pooling in my stomach. "Talk, then."

He paused. "It's about your family," he said carefully. "There are rumors circulating. Ones that don't reflect well on the association or the sport."

I froze. "What rumors?"

The pause stretched for an eternity. "Your family's name has come up in association with some damning accusations."

My blood ran cold. “My family,” I repeated.

“Rumors about their business dealings. Human trafficking, arms smuggling, ties to the mob.” I could practically see him choosing his next words like he was stepping across a minefield. “If any of these allegations gain traction, the association cannot afford to be connected to that kind of scrutiny and scandal.”

The edges of my vision turned red, slowly the room faded away in the crimson haze. Despite the rage in my veins, I kept my voice steady. “Is that a threat?”

“I’m giving you a heads-up, Sterling. You know the association’s stance on this. If your family’s connections become public knowledge, we’ll have no choice but to reevaluate your suitability as an owner.”

My jaw clenched so hard it ached, and I could feel my wolf stirring beneath the surface, ready to lash out. “Reevaluate meaning what, exactly?”

A heavy sigh came through the line. “Meaning you’d be forced to divest. I’m sorry, Sterling, but the association’s reputation is on the line.”

The threat in his words was undeniable. I felt my carefully constructed world begin to fall around me like a house of cards. I forced a slow breath through my nose. “Those rumors are baseless,” I said, though the words tasted bitter on my tongue. “My family’s business has nothing to do with me. I’ve spent my entire career distancing myself from that.”

“I understand that,” the president replied, his tone softening slightly. “But perception is everything. If the media gets hold of this, it won’t matter what’s true. It’ll be a scandal, and the association can’t afford that kind of fallout,” he said. The resignation in his voice made my teeth grind.

“Then control it.” The words came out sharper than I intended. “You’ve buried stories before.”

The phone went quiet, and I could hear the faint sound of his breathing. When he spoke again, it was quieter. “Not like this. Not when it’s your blood tied to organized crime. The association won’t risk the fallout.”

“So that’s it?” I asked. “After everything I’ve built, after all the revenue I’ve brought in and the team I’ve turned around, you’ll throw me out over rumors of my family?”

“It’s not personal,” he said, but the words were hollow.

“The hell it isn’t,” I shot back, my grip tightening on the phone. “You’re telling me my blood is a liability. That’s as personal as it gets.”

“I’m saying you need to get ahead of this, Sterling. Control the narrative before it controls you. If you don’t, the committee will have no choice but to act.”

The line went dead, and I stood there, the phone still pressed to my ear, the silence louder than any words. My chest felt tight. I tossed the phone onto the couch, where it landed with a dull thud, and ran a hand through my hair, tugging at the roots as if the pain could ground me.

For a heartbeat, the silence threatened to drown me, and then the ghost of 80,000 screaming fans rushed in, the phantom scent of grass and sweat clinging like a second skin. I’d given everything to that pitch. It had been my salvation. And now they were going to strip my legacy away with a fucking signature.

My mind flashed back to the last time I’d seen my mother, Violet Nightfang. The memory was bitter, like medicine I was forced to swallow.

Her eyes were cold as she sliced into me one last time. “You’ll never be more than a disappointment.”

And Rafe, always lurking behind her like a shadow, smirked. “Should’ve stayed in your place, brother.”

I walked out that night and never looked back. I built my own life, my own fortune, first on the pitch, then in the boardroom. I clawed my way to the top, building a wall between myself and the Nightfang legacy, brick by brick. But blood had a way of clinging, a stain that wouldn’t wash out.

The phone buzzed again, pulling me from the memory. A text, from an unknown number.

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“You will always be a Nightfang.”

I stared at the screen, my pulse quickening. The words felt like a taunt, a reminder of the past I’d tried so hard to escape. I deleted the message and tossed the phone aside, but the words lingered, echoing in my mind. I dialed the only person who would understand.

Dean answered on the second ring. “You sound like hell.”

My older brother was the only Nightfang who got out before me. He’d left the mob behind and built a cybersecurity empire that even Interpol relied on. While I tried to cleanse our family name by becoming a famous athlete, he retreated from the world into his fortress of technology. If anyone knew how to battle the taint of our bloodline, it was him.

“I need a favor.”

A pause. “Let me guess. Violet’s making moves.”

I paced the length of the office. “The association’s breathing down my neck. If this goes public—”

“You’ll lose everything.” Dean’s words hung between us, cutting to the chase.

I dragged a hand down my face, my skin tight with frustration. “I didn’t call for a recap.”

“No, you called because you’re backed into a corner.” A chair creaked on his end of the line, and I could picture him leaning back, his eyes calculating as he strategized. “So here’s your play, you control the story before it controls you.”

I scoffed. “And how the hell do I do that?”

“An autobiography.”

I froze mid-step. “You’re joking.”

“Dead serious. You’ve got a story people will pay to hear. Soccer prodigy. Self-made billionaire. The Nightfang heir who walked away. But more importantly, it’s your chance to define the narrative. Show the world who you are, not who they think you are.”

“You’re asking me to spill my life onto paper like some damn confessional.”

“I’m asking you to fight back,” he growled. “Violet’s weaponizing your past. So you take that weapon and you break it over your knee.”

The image hit me. I could already picture the satisfaction as I used her own tactics against her, watching as her smirk dissolved into horrified shock. My reflection in the window hardened as I considered my brother’s words.

“And if it backfires?” I ground out. “If I pour my history onto the page and they use it as a roadmap to bury me?”

Dean exhaled. “Then you make sure the ghostwriter understands what’s at stake. Someone ruthless with words.” His chair creaked. “Call Discreet Talent Connections. They specialize in this.”

My chest burned. Partly from anger at being forced to reveal myself to the public, and partly from fear of losing everything I had built.

“Fine.” I ended the call and stood there, the phone still clutched in my hand.

At that moment, I realized that I had climbed to the top of the world, but what did any of it mean? Dean had Nina. I had what? A shiny glass office that felt like a cage and a legacy that threatened to crumble at the first whisper of my bloodline.

I grabbed my phone and wrote a text to my assistant, Clara, with instructions to find me a ghostwriter at Discreet Talent Connections. If they filled the role today, there was a one-hundred-fifty-thousand dollar reward. One hundred for the agency and fifty for the writer.

I had barely hit send when she shot back a response.

Clara: “Yes, Mr. Nightfang. Anything else?”

Me: “Clear my schedule for the rest of the afternoon. And when the writer arrives, send them to the gym.”

Clara: “Understood.”

Some overpriced wordsmith would fix this? I had my doubts. But if they could spin my past into something even half as pristine as the association’s reputation, it might just buy me enough time to outmaneuver Violet.

I headed for the elevator. The gym was my sanctuary, a place where I could channel the storm inside me into something physical, something I could control.

The doors slid open, and the scent of rubber, stale sweat, and disinfectant hit me,

reminding me of why I was here.I stripped off my suit jacket and rolled up my sleeves, the cool air against my skin making the hairs on my arms stand up.

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I stepped onto the treadmill and cranked up the speed, the rhythmic pounding of my feet against the belt matching the rhythm of my thoughts. It brought me back to the pitch. I closed my eyes, hearing the roar of the crowd, feeling the weight of the ball at my feet, and remembering the split-second decision that had won us the championship. That moment had been mine, untainted by the Nightfang name. And now, it was all on the line again.

But I wasn't that scared kid anymore. I'd built an empire from nothing. I'd fought for every inch of my success. And I wasn't about to let my family's reputation destroy it.

As I ran, the tightness in my chest began to ease and a steely resolve took its place. I'd write the damn book. I'd tell my story before anybody else could. I'd do it my way. And if anyone thought they could take me down, they were in for a fight.

The treadmill beeped as I hit my target distance, and I slowed to a walk, my breath coming in steady bursts. I grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat from my face. In the mirror, my reflection in the mirror staring back at me, my gaze steely and determined.

The game had changed. And this time, I was going to make the rules.

Chapter 2

ARIEL

The stack of rejection letters on my desk had officially surpassed the height of my coffee mug. I stared at them, my chin propped on my hand, and sighed. Another day, another email that began with "We regret to inform you." I'd lost count of how many

I'd received this month alone.

The scent of stale coffee and old paper filled the air, a bitter reminder of countless hours spent hunched over my desk, pouring my soul onto the page only to have it rejected time and time again. My ancient laptop's fan was the only sound in the room, a constant drone that usually comforted me but now only served to highlight the silence of my solitude. I reached out, tracing the edge of a crumpled rejection letter, the paper rough under my fingertips. Each one was a dream deferred, a story untold, a piece of my heart sent out into the world only to be returned, unwanted.

My apartment was small. I liked to call it cozy, but sometimes, it felt more like a prison cell. Clutter surrounded me, threatening to fall on me like a tsunami of half-finished manuscripts, sticky notes with scribbled ideas, and old takeout containers that I really needed to throw out. My laptop screen glowed in the dim room, the cursor blinking on a blank page, taunting me.

I leaned back in my chair, running a hand through my hair. "Come on, Ariel," I muttered to myself. "You're better than this."

My phone buzzed, and I nearly knocked over my coffee in my haste to grab it. The screen lit up with an unknown number. My heart skipped a beat. Could this be it? The call I'd been waiting for?

My hand trembled slightly as I swiped to answer. "Hello?" I answered, trying to sound professional and not like I'd been staring at rejection letters for the past hour. I straightened in my chair, my back stiff with anticipation.

"Ariel Hayes?" a woman's voice asked, crisp and businesslike.

"Yes, this is she."

“This is Gladys from Discreet Talent Connections. We’ve reviewed your portfolio, and we’d like to offer you an assignment.”

I sat up straighter, my pulse quickening. “An assignment?”

“Yes. A high-profile client is in need of a ghostwriter for his autobiography. The pay is substantial, and the exposure could be career-changing. Are you interested?”

“Interested?” I repeated, my voice rising an octave. “Yes! Absolutely. Thank you so much for this opportunity.”

“Good,” Gladys said briskly. “The client’s name is Sterling Nightfang. He’s expecting you at his office today at three o’clock.”

I blinked, my mind racing. Sterling Nightfang. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. “Sterling Nightfang,” I repeated slowly, as if saying it out loud would jog my memory. “Wait, isn’t he that billionaire? The soccer player?”

“Former soccer player,” Gladys corrected. “Now a CEO and investor. He’s looking for someone to ghostwrite his autobiography. It’s a high-profile project, Ariel. If you do well, it could open a lot of doors for you.”

My heart raced. This was the kind of break I needed. A high-profile project with a billionaire client. But something about the way Gladys said his name gave me pause. “Is there anything I should know about him? Anything specific he’s looking for in a writer?”

Gladys hesitated. Her cold no-nonsense tone softened for a moment. “He’s particular. Demanding. But he’s also fair. If you can handle the pressure, this could be a game-changer for you. Oh, and Ariel, there’s a fifty-thousand-dollar bonus if you meet him and secure the job.”

I nearly dropped the phone. “Fifty thousand dollars?” I squeaked, my voice cracking. “As in five-zero-thousand?”

“Yes. But don’t get too excited yet. You’ll need to impress him first. He doesn’t suffer fools lightly.”

My mind was spinning. Fifty thousand dollars. That was more money than I’d made in the last two years combined. It could pay off my student loans, cover rent for months, and maybe even let me finally upgrade my old laptop. “I’ll impress him,” I said with confidence despite the butterflies in my stomach. “I won’t let this opportunity slip away.”

“Good,” Gladys said. “I’ll send over the details. And Ariel? Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

The line went dead, and I stared at my phone, still processing what had just happened. A high-profile ghostwriting job. A billionaire client. A fifty-thousand-dollar bonus. My stomach churned with a mix of excitement and anxiety. This was it, the big break I’d been waiting for. But it also felt like standing on the edge of a cliff, the wind pushing at my back, daring me to jump.

A wave of doubt crashed over me. What if I’m not good enough? What if I freeze up or say the wrong thing? This could be my one shot, and I can’t afford to blow it. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “Okay, Ariel,” I muttered. “You’ve got this. Just don’t mess it up.”

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The next few hours were a whirlwind of preparation. I rushed to my closet, yanking out clothes and tossing them onto my bed. Professional but not stuffy. Confident but not arrogant. I needed to look like someone who could handle a billionaire's demands. I finally settled on a navy blazer over a white blouse and dark jeans. It was polished but approachable. I paired it with my lucky purple glasses, hoping they'd give me an extra boost of confidence.

I spent the next hour Googling Sterling Nightfang, trying to get a sense of the man I was about to meet. Former soccer star turned billionaire investor. Reclusive. The more I read, the worse my stomach felt. This man was powerful, private, and used to getting what he wanted. And I was about to walk into his world armed with nothing but a notebook and hope.

My reflection in the mirror stared back at me, wide-eyed and frenzied. "You got this," I told her, adjusting my glasses. "Just be yourself. And for God's sake, don't spill coffee on him."

The Sterling Sports Headquarters loomed over me like a glass mountain, all sharp edges and sparkling windows. My sneakers squeaked against the pristine lobby floor as I approached the reception desk, acutely aware of how underdressed I suddenly felt. The woman behind the counter gave me a polite smile.

"Ariel Hayes for Sterling Nightfang," I said, my voice steadier than I expected.

"Mr. Nightfang is expecting you. Take the elevator to the 42nd floor. His assistant will meet you there."

The elevator ride was silent except for the pounding of my heart. When the doors slid open, a young man in a crisp suit nodded at me. “Ms. Hayes? Mr. Nightfang is in the gym. Follow me.”

The gym? I blinked but kept pace as he led me down a hallway. The scent of antiseptic and rubber hit me as we entered a sprawling fitness center. In the center of it all, was Sterling Nightfang.

Shirtless, glistening, every muscle defined like a Renaissance sculpture of the perfect male form. His fists pummeled the bag with a rhythm that echoed my suddenly erratic heartbeat. My throat went dry. God help me.

He didn't notice me at first, lost in the rhythm of his movement. I stood frozen, clutching my notebook like a shield, as I took in the sight of him. His dark hair was damp, stuck to his forehead, and his jaw was set in a hard line, every punch delivered with controlled fury. He was every inch the powerhouse I'd imagined the world's most famous soccer player to be, intimidating, commanding, and undeniably magnetic.

The sight of him, all rippling muscles and glistening tanned skin, was almost too much to take in. His muscles bunched and released with each punch, a powerful force of nature in skin and bones. Even from across the room, I could see the sweat glistening on his skin, tracing every ridge and valley across his body as each drop dripped to the floor. He was utterly magnificent. A statue of a god come to life. The heat of the room seemed to press in on me, my notebook a flimsy shield against his intensity.

Finally, he paused. Turning to face me, his chest heaved. His eyes, sharp and assessing, locked onto mine. For a split second, I felt like prey under the gaze of a predator. My pulse hammered in my throat.

“You must be the writer.”He didn’t look up from his punching bag as he spoke.

“Ariel Hayes,” I managed, my fingers tightening around the spine of my notebook. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Nightfang.”

He grabbed a towel from a nearby bench and wiped his face. His expression was unreadable. “Call me Sterling.” He tossed the towel aside and crossed his arms, his biceps flexing in a way that made it hard to focus. “Gladys tells me you’re the best. Let’s see if she’s right.”

I swallowed, my confidence wavering under his scrutiny. “I’ll do my best to live up to that.”

He nodded, gesturing to a set of weights by a weightlifting bench. “Good. Sit. I don’t have time for chit-chat, so let’s get to work.”

I hesitated, glancing back at the weights. Was he serious? Did he expect me to sit on a stack of weights while we discussed his autobiography? But then I noticed the faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, and I realized he was testing me. Of course.

“You’re the boss,” I said, raising an eyebrow as I perched on the edge of the bench. “But if I fall off, it’s on you.”

His smirk widened, just barely. Something hot and feral coiled in my belly. “Fair enough.” He grabbed a water bottle and took a long swig before leaning against the rack opposite me. “So, you’ve read the brief. What do you need from me?”

I flipped open my notebook, grateful for something to focus on besides his intimidating presence. “I’ll need to interview you. Extensively. Your childhood, your soccer career, your transition to business. The more honest you are, the better the book will be.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Honest?”

“Yes,” I said firmly, meeting his gaze. “The good, the bad, and the ugly. People want authenticity, not a polished version of your life.”

He grunted, his expression unimpressed. “Authenticity. Right. Because the world’s dying to hear about my feelings.”

I couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at my lips. “Well, Mr. Nightfang. Sterling, if you’re worried about oversharing, don’t be. I’m not here to write a tell-all tabloid. I’m here to tell your story. But it’s your call how much of it you want people to see.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he crossed his arms again, the movement drawing my attention to the way his muscles shifted under his skin. I forced myself to look back at my notebook, but the image was seared into my brain.

“My call, huh? Good. Because I’m not interested in airing my dirty laundry for the world to pick apart.”

“I’m not here to pick it apart either,” I said, meeting his gaze again. “I’m here to help you tell it in a way that’s true to you. Whether that’s polished or raw, it’s your choice. But the more open you are, the more impact it’ll have.”

He studied me for a moment, and then he let out a short, humorless laugh. “You’re persistent. I’ll give you that.”

“And you’re stubborn,” I shot back before I could stop myself. My cheeks warmed, but I held his gaze. “But I think we’ll make a good team.”

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His lips twitched, almost like he was fighting a smile. “We’ll see.” He quickly schooled his expression back into its usual stern lines, before pushing off the weight rack. “But don’t think this means I’m going soft on you. I expect results, not excuses.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” I said, my voice steady despite the flutter in my chest. “But don’t think this means I’m going to let you bulldoze me. I’m here to do a job, not be your punching bag.”

His eyes flicked to mine, and for a moment, I thought I saw a spark of approval. But then he grunted and turned away, grabbing his shirt from the bench. “Good. I don’t have time for pushovers.”

I smiled faintly, tucking my notebook under my arm as I stood. “Glad to hear it. But just so you know, I’m not exactly known for being quiet when I have something to say.”

This time, he did smile. It was small, just a fleeting curve of his lips, but it was enough to make my pulse skip. “I’m counting on it,” he said, his tone almost teasing. “We’ll start with soccer. But not here.” He jerked his chin toward the door. “My office. Five minutes.”

I barely had time to nod before he strode past me, leaving me scrambling to gather my things.

I followed him, my steps quick to match his long strides, but my mind was still stuck on that brief, unexpected smile. It had transformed his face, softening the sharp angles. For a second, he hadn’t been the grumpy billionaire or the retired athlete. He’d

just been a ridiculously attractive, infuriatingly guarded man.

Focus, Ariel. I tightened my grip on my notebook. This was a job, not a romance novel.

Sterling shoved open the glass doors to his office with one hand, barely glancing back at me. "Keep up, Hayes. I don't like repeating myself."

I rolled my eyes but bit back the retort on my tongue. "Noted," I said instead, stepping inside. There was something about him, something that drew me in and made me want to unravel the mystery that was Sterling Nightfang.

The office was all modern lines and spotless panoramic windows. We looked down on the city like we were gods. It was as imposing and untouchable as its owner.

He dropped into his chair with a sigh, rubbing his temples. "Alright, hit me with your questions. But make it quick."

I perched on the edge of the chair on the other side of his desk. I flipped open my notebook. "Quick? Sterling, this is an autobiography. It's kind of a deep-dive project."

He shot me a look that could've withered steel. "Then start with the shallow end."

I leaned forward slightly, my voice soft and teasing. "Fine. What's your favorite color?"

His eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"You heard me. Favorite color. It's an easy one."

He leaned back, arms crossed, studying me like I'd sprouted a second head. "Black."

I scribbled it down. “Predictable.”

His scowl deepened. “You asked.”

“I did,” I agreed cheerfully. “Next question. What’s the most ridiculous rumor you’ve ever heard about yourself?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “That I bribed a referee to win the Champions League.”

I gasped in mock horror. “Did you?”

His glare could’ve melted glass. “No.”

I grinned. “Good. Because that would’ve made for a very awkward chapter.”

Something like amusement flickered in his eyes. “You’re annoying.”

“And yet, you haven’t fired me yet.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he muttered, but there was no real bite to his words. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, and fixed me with a look that was equal parts exasperation and curiosity. “You’re not what I expected.”

I tilted my head, my pen poised over my notebook. “Oh? And what did you expect?”

“Someone quieter. Less...you.”

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I couldn't help but laugh. "Sorry to disappoint. I'm not exactly the 'sit quietly and nod' type."

He grunted, but the corner of his mouth twitched again, like he was fighting a smile. "I'm starting to see that."

I couldn't help but feel a flicker of triumph. I was getting to him. "Good," I said, meeting his gaze. "Because if you wanted a yes-man, you hired the wrong writer."

He studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. "Alright, Hayes. Let's see if you can keep up. Next question."

I smiled, feeling a flicker of triumph. "What's the one thing you've never told anyone about your soccer career?"

His eyes narrowed, and for a moment, I thought he might shut me down. But then he sighed, running a hand through his hair before he leaned back in his chair. "Fine. But if this ends up in some tabloid, I'm holding you personally responsible."

"Deal," I said, leaning forward, my pen ready. "Spill."

He hesitated, his gaze distant, like he was weighing his words. "There was a game, where I played with a broken rib. The team didn't know. The press didn't know. I didn't even tell my coach."

I blinked, surprised. "Why not?"

“Because we needed to win,” he said simply. “And I wasn’t going to let something as small as a broken rib stop me.”

I scribbled furiously, my heart pounding. This was the kind of raw honesty I’d been hoping for. “That’s incredible,” I said, looking up at him. “And a little insane.”

He shrugged, his expression unreadable. “It’s what had to be done.”

I nodded, feeling a newfound respect for him. “Alright, next question—”

“Enough,” he interrupted, standing abruptly. “We’re done for today.”

I blinked, caught off guard by the sudden shift. “Done? But we’ve barely scratched the surface.”

He shot me a look that brooked no argument. “I said we’re done. I’ve got a meeting, and you’ve got enough to start with.”

I hesitated, my pen hovering over my notebook. “But—”

“Hayes,” he said, his voice sharp but not unkind. “I don’t have time for your ‘buts.’ You’ve got your first chapter. Use it.”

I closed my notebook slowly, trying to hide my frustration. “Fine. But don’t think this means I’m going to let you off the hook. Next time, we’re diving deeper.”

He raised an eyebrow, his expression unimpressed. “Next time, bring better questions.”

I stood, tucking my notebook under my arm. “Oh, I will. And maybe I’ll even bring coffee. You look like you could use some.”

His lips twitched, but he quickly masked it with a scowl. “I don’t drink coffee.”

“Tea, then?” I asked, tilting my head. “Or do you just run on pure grumpiness?”

This time, he did smile. It was enough to make my heart skip a beat. “Get out of here, Hayes.”

I grinned, feeling a flicker of triumph. “See you tomorrow, Sterling.”

As I turned to leave, I couldn’t help but glance back at him. He was already focused on his computer, his expression stern and unreadable once more.

This wasn’t just about the money. This was my shot to prove I wasn’t the washed-up almost-writer my inbox insisted I was. And if Sterling Nightfang’s story was the hill I died on? At least the view was spectacular. After years of rejection letters and half-finished manuscripts, I wasn’t going to waste this once-in-a-lifetime chance.

But there was more to Sterling Nightfang than he was letting on. And whether he liked it or not, I was going to find out what it was.

Chapter 3

STERLING

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Sleep was a lost cause after meeting Ariel Hayes. She asked all the right questions, pushing me harder than anyone had in years. And her smile? It was infuriatingly knowing, like she held some secret power over me. I wasn't used to being challenged like that, and it left me feeling restless and annoyed, my wolf clawing beneath the surface.

I walked into my office and threw my jacket on the back of a chair. Ariel's notes from the meeting glared at me from the desk. I picked up the top sheet and scanned through it.

Sterling Nightfang: A man who built an empire to escape his past, but his past is catching up with him.

My jaw tightened at how accurately she summed up my situation.

The elevator doors swung open, breaking me out of my reverie. I checked the clock. It was 7:30 a.m. She was early.

Ariel stepped into the doorway. She carried two cups, one in each hand, and a paper bag that smelled like freshly baked pastries. Her attire was casual today, dark jeans that hugged her legs and a soft loose sweater.

Seeing her again sent a jolt through me. My wolf stirred, but I quickly schooled my features into a scowl.

She was shorter than I remembered. Perhaps it was the way she carried herself, all warmth and unapologetic presence, that made her seem larger than she was. The

sweater slipped off one shoulder, revealing a freckled collarbone I had no business noticing. Her hair, that wild blonde mess, was tamed into a braid today, but a few stubborn tendrils had already escaped, framing her face as if she had just rolled out of bed. Christ. I couldn't think about her like that. And those purple-rimmed glasses sitting slightly crooked on her face made her gray eyes look even bigger, like she was perpetually caught between surprise and amusement.

It was irritating.

And worse, it was distracting.

"Morning," she said cheerfully, setting the coffee cups on my desk. "I brought fuel."

The paper bag rustled as she placed it next to the cups. My nose twitched. I could almost taste the buttery, flaky pastries inside. Toasted almonds. Butter. Sugar. My stomach growled traitorously, and I scowled deeper, as if it were her fault my body was betraying me.

I raised an eyebrow. "I don't drink coffee."

She smirked, sliding one of the cups toward me. "You're a liar. I saw the empty espresso cup in the trash yesterday."

I stared at her, caught off guard, my pulse quickening. The scent of her perfume, something green and fresh, filled my nostrils. "You went through my trash?" My voice came out harsher than I intended, echoing slightly in the quiet room.

"Not intentionally," she said with a shrug. "But I'm observant." She gestured to the steaming cup in her hand, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee rich and inviting. "And you look like you could use it." Her eyes flicked to mine, a small smile playing on her lips.

I grunted, reluctantly taking the cup. The warmth seeped into my palms and I took a cautious sip. The coffee was good, strong and bitter. Just the way I liked it. The heat traveled down my throat, warming me from the inside out.

“Alright, Hayes,” I said, setting the cup down on the desk. “What’s the plan for today?”

She pulled out her notebook, the pages rustling as she flipped it open with practiced ease. My nose picked up the scent of bleached paper and the sweet smell of ballpoint ink, mingling with the coffee. “We’re diving deeper,” she said firmly.

She tapped her pen against the page. Her eyes gleamed with determination. “Yesterday, you gave me the polished version. Today, I want the why. I want the raw, unfiltered truth.” Her pen hovered over the paper, ready to capture every word.

I stiffened. “The why?”

“Why you played through with the broken rib. Why you built this empire. Why you’re letting me poke at your life when you clearly hate it and every muscle is twitching to throw me out of your office.” Her gaze didn’t waver, and I could see the gears turning in her head, the curiosity and determination that drove her. She wasn’t just asking. Ariel was digging, searching for something, and I wondered what she hoped to find. “People don’t care about what you did, Sterling. They care about what it cost you.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rose up. I could’ve shut her down. I should’ve, by all accounts. It was what I usually did when people got too nosy, too personal. But there was something about her, something different. Earnestness. That’s what it was. The quiet certainty in her voice made me hesitate. It made me want to consider her words instead of dismissing them outright.

I leaned back in my chair, studying her. The way she held herself, the set of her jaw, the glint in her eyes. The top of her head didn't even come past my chest but here she was, challenging me. I couldn't help but admire her for it. "You're pushy," I said, a hint of amusement in my voice despite myself.

"And you're evasive." She grinned, unrepentant. "Guess we're at a stalemate."

A reluctant smirk tugged at my lips. "Fine." I exhaled sharply, rolling my shoulders. "The why is simple. Control."

She scribbled a note, then glanced up. "Explain."

I flexed my hand, the old ache in my knuckles flaring. "On the pitch, I decided the game. In business, I decide the rules. I cut myself off, but Ariel didn't press. She just waited, her silence more compelling than any question."

"The Nightfangs don't play by rules," I said at last. "They take. They destroy. I won't be like them."

Her pen stilled. "So you built something they couldn't touch."

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I gave a terse nod.

Ariel's expression softened, her eyes filling with something I couldn't quite name. Understanding? Empathy? Whatever it was, it made me want to push her away and pull her closer all at once. "That's the heart of your story, Sterling. Not the trophies or the billions, but the fight."

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed. Violet's name flashed on the screen. My eyes flicked down to the screen as dread settled in my chest. I wondered what she could want this time. My thumb hovered over the answer button, hesitating for just a moment. Should I take the call or let it go unanswered?

I snatched it up, turning away from Ariel. "What?" I barked.

"Charming as ever, Sterling." My mother's voice dripped with disdain. "I hear you've hired a writer."

My grip tightened on the phone. "It's none of your business."

"Everything about you is my business," her voice hissed through the line. "You think you can rewrite your story, Sterling? Erase us? You're a fool if you believe that."

I clenched my jaw, my free hand curling into a fist. "I'm not erasing anything. I'm reclaiming it."

Her laugh was cold, devoid of humor. "Reclaiming? You're exposing us. And when the world sees the truth, they'll tear you apart. You'll have no one to blame but yourself."

The threat hung in the air, heavy and suffocating. I glanced at Ariel, who was pretending to focus on her notes but I noticed the way her pen had stilled, the small furrow of her brows as she listened in on every word.

“Listen carefully. I’ll burn everything you care about to the ground. I don’t care what it takes. Don’t test me.”

For a moment, I thought she’d hung up. Then her voice came through, quieter but no less menacing. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Sterling. And when you lose, don’t come crawling back to me.”

Even after the call ended, I stood there, the phone still pressed to my ear, my heart pounding in my chest.

I set the phone down, my hand trembling slightly. The room felt colder, the shadows deeper, as if Violet’s venom had seeped into the very air. I’d spent years building walls, carving out a life that was mine alone, and yet she could still reach me. Still hurt me like I was a little boy again.

Ariel’s voice broke through the silence, soft but steady. “Sterling?”

I turned to her, my chest tight. She was sitting there, her notebook forgotten.

“I’m fine,” I said, the lie tasting bitter on my tongue.

She didn’t call me out on it, but her gaze lingered, as if she could see the cracks in my armor.

She shook her head slowly. “That was intense.”

I rubbed my temples, the beginnings of a headache pressing at my skull. “My mother

is a piece of work.”

Ariel hesitated, then set her notebook aside. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” The word came out sharper than I intended. I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “Not now.”

She nodded, not pushing, but her gaze was thoughtful. Ariel studied me for a long moment, then reached into the bag. “You know,” she said, her tone casual, “I’ve heard that butter and sugar are scientifically proven to make terrible phone calls 97% less awful.”

I blinked. “That’s not a real statistic.”

She shrugged, nudging the pastry toward me. “Maybe not. But the croissant is.”

The absurdity of it drained the anger out of me. How was it possible that this tiny woman could slice through the fear in my chest with nothing but a smirk and a pastry?

I stared at the flaky croissant, then back at her. “No interrogation? No psychoanalyzing my tragic childhood?”

She took a bite, flaky crusts dusting her lips. “Nope. But I am going to ask you something completely unrelated to distract you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yep.” She wiped a crumb from her lip, her eyes twinkling. “What’s the best goal you’ve ever scored?”

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The question was so unexpected, that I barked out a laugh. “That’s your distraction tactic?”

“Hey, it’s working, isn’t it?” She grinned, nudging the croissant closer. “So? Spill.”

I picked up the pastry, the layers crumbling under my touch. Shaking my head, I took a bite. “Champions League semi-final, 2014. Last minute of extra time.”

Her eyes widened. “The bicycle kick? That was you?”

I smirked. “You’ve seen it?”

“Are you kidding? That clip’s legendary! The way you just soared through the air, like the laws of gravity didn’t apply to you. And the look on the goalkeeper’s face? It was priceless.” She leaned forward, her excitement shining in her eyes. “What was going through your head when you did it?”

“Honestly?” I took another bite of the sugary croissant. “I was just pissed we were about to lose.”

She laughed, the sound bright and unguarded. “Of course you were. You’re always so competitive. I can’t imagine you letting a loss slide.”

I raised an eyebrow, a hint of a smirk playing on my lips. “And what makes you think you know me so well, Hayes?”

She shrugged, a small smile tugging at her lips. “I don’t. Not yet, at least.” Her eyes

met mine, the grey irises seeming to darken, a hint of challenge flashing in their depths. “But I intend to. That’s what this book is about, isn’t it? Getting to know the real Sterling Nightfang?”

I held her gaze, the tension coiling tighter, like a spring ready to snap. “And what if you don’t like what you find?” I asked.

She didn’t flinch, didn’t look away. Instead, she leaned in, her eyes never leaving mine. “Then I guess I’ll have to write about that too, won’t I?” Her voice was steady, sure, the sound of it like a challenge, a gauntlet thrown down between us.

I couldn’t help but admire her, this woman who sat before me, all warmth and light, unafraid to push me, to challenge me.

My eyes flicked to the bag the croissant came from, and I frowned. “Isn’t that bakery on the other side of the city?”

Ariel glanced at the logo on the paper bag, then nodded. “Yeah, I live upstairs from it. Best almond croissants in Huntington Harbor.”

I stared at her, my mind ticking through the logistics. “You’re commuting two hours across city traffic for this job?”

She shrugged, picking at her own pastry. “It’s not that bad. I’m used to it.”

“Unacceptable,” I said, the word slipping out before I could think better of it. “You’re wasting hours every day just getting here. That’s time you could be working on the book. Time you could be doing something else...” I trailed off, the thought of her spending hours in traffic, exhausted and frustrated, pissed me off.

She blinked, caught off guard. “It’s fine, really. I don’t mind the commute. It gives me

time to think, to plan. And besides, I like my apartment. I like the bakery downstairs. I like my life.” She crossed her arms over her chest, her chin tilting up, a clear challenge in her eyes.

“I mind.” My tone brooked no argument. “You’re staying at the Four Seasons. It’s a block from here. I’ll arrange it.” My voice was firm, the words like a command.

Her eyes widened. “Sterling, you can’t just do that! It’s too much. I don’t need—”

“You’re here to work, Hayes,” I interrupted. “Not to sit in traffic. If you’re late because of some gridlock, it’s my time you’re burning. And I don’t waste time.”

She opened her mouth to protest again, but I leveled her with a look that silenced her. The stubborn tilt of her chin told me she wasn’t happy about it, but she sighed, shaking her head. “Fine. But only because I don’t want to argue with you. And only until I finish this book. Then I’m going back to my apartment, and my bakery, and my life.”

“Smart,” I said, though the corner of my mouth twitched. It wasn’t strictly about efficiency, and I suspected she knew that, but I wasn’t about to admit it.

In fact, as I watched her pick up her notebook, her pen hovered over the paper and ready to dive back into the depths of my past, I realized that I didn’t hate it at all. I craved it, craved her.

It was unsettling.

But I couldn’t tell her that. Not yet, at least. Not until I was sure that she could handle the truth, the raw, unfiltered reality of who I was.

So instead, I leaned back in my chair and gestured for her to continue. “Alright,

Hayes, let's get back to work.I've got a story to tell, and you've got a book to write.”

As a smile curled across her lips, I knew that I was in trouble.

Chapter 4

ARIEL

I arrived at Sterling's executive office early, greeting the morning as it broke over the skyline of Huntington Harbor. My stomach was in knots as I clutched my notebook. Today I was going to dig deeper into Sterling's past, and I had to be careful. For every probing question I asked, he put up five roadblocks. But I was going to get to the core of Sterling Nightfang, even if I had to piss off the big bad wolf to do it.

Sterling was at his desk when I entered, his dark hair tousled and brown eyes downcast as he reviewed a stack of documents. He barely acknowledged my presence. "You're early."

"I like to be prepared," I said, injecting cheer into my voice. I sat across from him and clicked my pen. "Ready to talk about your soccer career?"

He exhaled and leaned back in his chair. "What do you want to know?"

I started with his early days on the field, the thrill of his first professional game. His responses were short, almost curt, as if he was reluctant to revisit those memories. But I needed more. I needed to understand the man behind the legend. So, I pressed him, gently prodding for more details.

His voice softened as he recounted his team, the camaraderie, the rush of scoring a winning goal. I could see the ghost of a smile playing on his lips, his eyes distant, lost in the past. "It was like nothing else," he murmured, more to himself than to me. "The roar of the crowd, the adrenaline. It was intoxicating."

And then, the injury. His face darkened, the smile vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. "It was a routine play," he said, staring off into the distance. "I'd done it a thousand times. But this time..." He paused, swallowing hard. "I heard the snap before I felt the pain. It was like a gunshot, loud and final." He looked down at his legs, flexing them as if remembering the feeling of the moment. "My career was over in an instant."

I paused, my pen hovering above the page, his words hanging heavy in the air. I could feel the weight of his loss, the echo of his shattered dreams. "That must have been devastating," I said softly, my heart aching for him.

He shrugged, but not before I saw the flash of pain in his eyes. The muscles in his jaw bunched. "It was. But I couldn't just sit around feeling sorry for myself. I had to reinvent myself." He looked up at me, his gaze steady and sure. "Life doesn't stop for anyone, you know? It keeps moving, and you either move with it or get left behind."

Right now, I was getting a rare glimpse of the man behind the grumpy billionaire persona. The man who had faced adversity and come out stronger. The man who had taken his pain and turned it into power. I found myself drawn to him, his strength and resilience calling to me like a siren's song.

As I sat there, my mind raced with possibilities. I needed more, more than just the surface-level information I had on Sterling Nightfang. I wanted to delve deeper, to understand the roots that shaped him into the man he was today. And who better to provide that insight than his older brother, Dean Nightfang?

I recalled the brief mentions of Dean in my research. He was a shadow, a ghost from Sterling's past. Dean was rarely spoken about, but besides Sterling, he was the only Nightfang to escape the family. If I could get Dean to open up, perhaps I could uncover the truths that Sterling himself might not even be aware of.

After the interview, I went to Dean Nightfang's penthouse, my thoughts a jumbled mess. The building was luxurious and modern, but the inside of his apartment was a chaotic mess. Next to half-built robots with their wires and circuits exposed were piles of fabric samples and color swatches. A giant wedding mood board leaned against one wall. As I stepped inside, a voice spoke from the ceiling. "Welcome, Miss Hayes. Mr. Nightfang is in the study. Please try not to trip over his wife's insanity."

Dean greeted me with a warm smile. "Don't mind the mess. Nina is going to become Huntington Harbor's premier wedding planner." His chest seemed to puff with pride as he spoke of his wife.

I laughed. "It's nice to see a home that looks lived in."

After we got comfortable, I began the interview. As our conversation shifted to Sterling, Dean's smile was replaced by a grim solemn expression. "Leaving the family was not an easy decision," he began. "It was a matter of survival. I had to save myself first." He paused, his eyes reflecting a pain that ran deep. "I always regretted not taking Sterling with me, but it was impossible. He was so young..."

I nodded, my pen gliding across the paper, capturing not just his words but the emotion behind them. "And now? Do you think he regrets staying?" I asked, genuinely curious about the dynamics of their past.

Dean hesitated, his fingers tracing the rim of his whiskey glass. He shook his head slowly. "Sterling is not the type to look back. He has always been strong-willed and hellbent on forging his own path. But that doesn't mean it has been easy for him. The Nightfang family is not just powerful, Ariel. We're cruel. Our father was the one who doled out the punishment, but our mother... she has ways of making sure her people stay in line." He swallowed hard, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the glass tighter. "She would lock us in a sealed room for days, no food or water, just to teach us a lesson. And Rafe, our youngest brother, he's incredibly loyal to her. He's

dangerous, more so than you can imagine. He's a monster, Ariel, a monster with no conscience. If he sees you as a threat to the family, he won't hesitate."

I felt a shiver run down my spine at his words, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. I could see the caution in Dean's eyes. He was genuinely concerned for my safety. To see a powerful man like him react that way made me pause. "I'll be careful," I promised, my voice steady despite the turmoil within. I kept my expression neutral, not wanting to show the fear that was slowly creeping into my heart. But inside, I was terrified. I had heard whispers about the Nightfang family. If Rafe was half as dangerous as Dean made him out to be, I was in way over my head.

The ride back to my hotel felt longer than usual. A sense of unease crept over me as I stepped onto my floor. It was too quiet, except for the distant hum of a vacuum three doors down. My keycard slipped twice in the lock before the light flashed green. When I opened the door, it swung open with a groan.

Then I saw it.

My room had been ransacked. There were piles of clothes on the floor, dresser drawers pulled out, and my belongings tossed all over the place. My laptop was open, and the screen was cracked. A single sheet of paper was on the bed with a message written in bold, jagged letters.

Stay out of our business.

My heart pounded as I picked up the note and my hands trembled. Rafe's warning was clear, and the violation of my personal space sent a wave of fear washing over me. I clenched my teeth and forced myself to remain calm. This wasn't just a threat. It was a reminder of the dangerous world Sterling was trying to escape.

My phone felt heavy in my hand as I dialed Sterling's number. I tried to keep my

voice steady, but the words shook as they came out. “Sterling, I need to see you.”

His response was immediate, concern sharpening his tone. “What is it?”

“My hotel room. Someone broke in. They left a note.”

“Stay there. I’m on my way.”

It didn’t take long before there was a knock on the door. I opened it to find him standing there with a dark expression on his face and his jaw clenched. He strode in, and his large form seemed to fill the space, making the room feel smaller. His nostrils flared as he took in the disarray, and then he snatched the note from my hand, crushing it in his fist.

“Rafe,” he muttered.

“Dean warned me about him,” I said softly. “I didn’t think...”

Sterling sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. “This is my fault. I should have known he would come after you.”

I bent over to pick up a toppled stack of papers and ran my thumb over the corner of a crumpled page. “Funny. I thought billionaires were supposed to be good at risk assessment.” The joke was lame, but it at least lightened the mood. Sterling’s mouth twitched, as if he was amused, though the smile never materialized.

He lowered his gaze, and his brown eyes searched mine. “You shouldn’t have to deal with this, Ariel. My family’s a mess. It’s not your burden to carry.”

“But it is yours,” I said gently. “And if I can help you bring it to light and lighten the load, then I want to.”

Sterling’s gaze dropped to my lips for a split second before exhaling sharply and stepping back. “You shouldn’t stay here tonight. It’s not safe.”

“Where else would I go?” I hugged myself, suddenly aware of the chill in the room.

His jaw worked silently for a moment before he spoke. “My penthouse has a guest suite. You’ll stay there until we figure this out.”

I blinked. “Sterling, I can’t just—”

“You can,” he interrupted, his voice hard. “And you will. Unless you want to risk Rafe paying you another visit?”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “Okay. Thank you.”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he turned and began gathering my scattered belongings with surprising efficiency. I watched him for a moment. There was a carefulness in the way he folded my clothes. His fingers lingered on my cracked laptop as if he was already calculating how to replace it. His actions carried a quiet protectiveness that shocked me.

I grabbed my bag and started helping him. Our hands brushed as we reached for the same notebook. A jolt of electricity shot up my arm at the contact, and I jerked my hand back, my cheeks heating. Sterling froze and locked his gaze with mine. For a heartbeat, neither of us moved. Then, with deliberate slowness, he reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering against my skin.

“It’s okay to accept help sometimes,” he murmured.

The words settled deep inside me, warm and reassuring. I nodded, unable to trust my voice. “Right back at you.”

We finished packing in silence. As we left the hotel, Sterling’s hand hovered at the small of my back, guiding me through the lobby and to his waiting car. The city blurred past us in the car window, but all I could focus on was the heat of him beside me and the unspoken promise in his touch.

Chapter 5

STERLING

Ariel sat on the edge of the guest bed, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She hadn't said much since we'd left the hotel, and the silence was unnerving. I wasn't used to seeing her like this. It was wrong.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. Stupid question, but my vocabulary had shrunk to idiot levels whenever she was around.

She shook her head, her gaze fixed on the floor. "No. I'm fine."

"You're not," I snapped, the words coming out harsher than I intended. She flinched, and I immediately regretted it. Fuck. I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. "Sorry. I don't know how to do this."

"Do what?" she asked softly, finally looking up at me.

"This. I'm not used to caring about someone else's safety. Not like this."

Her lips curved into a small, sad smile. "You're doing fine, Sterling. Really."

I grunted, unconvinced. "You don't know what you're signing up for, Ariel. Rafe's dangerous. And my mother is even worse."

"I know," she said simply. "But you're not getting rid of me."

She didn't understand. She couldn't. The Nightfang legacy was a rot deep in my bones, and I'd spent my entire life trying to outrun it. But now, it was catching up to me and dragging her down with it.

I couldn't let that happen.

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“Get some rest. We’ll figure this out in the morning. She nodded, but as I turned to leave, her voice stopped me.” Sterling?”

I glanced back, my hand on the doorframe. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. For letting me in.”

I gave a stiff nod and stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind me with a quiet click.

I paced the length of the living room, my mind racing. Rafe’s message had been clear, a venomous whisper that slithered through my thoughts. Ariel was a target now, a pawn in Rafe’s twisted game. And if I knew my brother, this was only the beginning.

I poured myself a whiskey, the burn as it went down my throat did little to settle the storm inside me. The amber liquid sloshed in the glass as my hand shook. I hated this helplessness and fear. I’d spent years building walls, making it impossible for anyone to hurt me again. And now, in a matter of weeks, armed with nothing than a cheap notebook and a disposable ballpoint pen, Ariel had dismantled my defenses without even trying.

It was past midnight, but sleep was the last thing on my mind. I found myself standing outside the guest room door, listening for any sign that Ariel was still awake. The faint rustling of sheets confirmed it.

I knocked softly. “Ariel?”

The door opened a crack, revealing her tired face. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

I shook my head. “Kitchen. Now.”

She followed without protest, padding barefoot across the marble floor. I poured her a whiskey, sliding it across the counter. She took it with a grateful sigh.

We drank in silence for a while, the alcohol warming the space between us. Finally, Ariel spoke. “Tell me about them. Your family.”

I stiffened, my grip tightening around my glass. “What’s there to tell? They’re criminals. Violent. Manipulative. Ruthless. Take your pick.”

“But you’re not like them,” she said softly.

I scoffed. “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” she insisted. “You’re nothing like them, Sterling. You never were.”

I looked away, focusing on the night sky beyond the window. “I used to think that. But I’m starting to think that it’s impossible to wash away your past, Ariel. No matter how far you run.”

She reached across the counter, her fingers brushing mine as she took the glass from my hand. Her fingers lingered for a moment, and I could feel the gentle pressure of her touch, the softness of her skin. In that instant, time seemed to slow, and I was acutely aware of the space between us. “You’re not your family, Sterling. You’re you. And from what I’ve seen, that’s someone worth fighting for.”

I stared at her, my throat tight. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I do. And I’m not going to let you push me away because you’re scared.”

“Scared?” I echoed. “I’m not scared.”

She raised an eyebrow, a small smile playing on her lips. “Aren’t you? Because it sounds to me like you’re terrified of letting someone in. Terrified of caring about someone who might get hurt because of you.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words caught in my throat. She was right, and we both knew it. I was scared. Scared of losing her. Scared of failing her. Scared of the chaos my family could bring into her life. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

She grinned. “So I’ve been told.”

I shook my head, a reluctant smile tugging at my lips. “Alright, Hayes. You win. For now.”

Her smile widened. But the reprieve was short-lived. My phone buzzed on the counter, the screen lighting up with a notification. I picked it up, my stomach sinking as I read the headline.

I scanned the article, my stomach sinking further with every word. The piece didn’t just target me. It went after Ariel, too.

“Who is Ariel Hayes? The mysterious woman spotted with Sterling Nightfang has been revealed as his ghostwriter. But sources close to the Nightfang family suggest there’s more to their relationship than meets the eye. Is she a gold-digger capitalizing on Sterling’s vulnerability, or is she another pawn in the Nightfang family’s dangerous game?”

I cursed under my breath. “She’s making her move.”

Ariel leaned over. The furrow on her forehead deepened as she read the screen. “Your mother?”

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I nodded. "Violet's not going to stop until she's ruined me. And now, she's dragging you into it."

Ariel's hand found mine, her fingers lacing through my own.

I looked at her, the determination in her eyes mirroring my own. It scared the shit out of me.

But I didn't pull away.

The next morning, I found Ariel in the kitchen, already dressed and nursing a cup of coffee. She looked up as I entered. Dark shadows under her eyes revealed that her night had been as restless as mine. "Sleep okay?"

I grunted, pouring myself a cup. "You?"

She shrugged. "Better than expected. Though I did have a dream about being chased by a very angry Rafe in wolf form."

I set my cup down, studying her. "We need to talk about last night."

Her smile faded. "The article?"

"That, and Rafe." I leaned against the counter, crossing my arms. "He's not going to stop. And neither is Violet. You're in danger as long as you're with me."

Ariel set her mug down with a sharp clink. "So what? You're just going to fire me?"

“It’s the only way to keep you safe.”

“Bullshit.” She stood, her hands braced on the counter.

“You didn’t sign up for my family’s bullshit, for Rafe breaking into your room, for the media painting you as some kind of—”

“Gold-digging slut?” she finished dryly. “Yeah, I saw the comments section. Real classy stuff.”

I exhaled sharply. “Ariel, this isn’t a joke.”

“I know it’s not. But running isn’t the answer. You’ve spent your whole life running from them. It’s why you hired me, remember? When does it stop?”

The question hung between us, heavy and unanswerable. I turned away. “I don’t know.”

She moved then, closing the distance between us. “It’s time to stop running.”

I looked down at her, at the stubborn set of her jaw and the fire in her eyes. She was infuriatingly reckless. And too foolishly brave for her own good. Yet, right now, she was the only thing that made sense.

“Fine,” I muttered, squeezing her hand. “But we do this my way.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Your way or the highway. Got it, boss.”

I scowled, but the corner of my mouth twitched despite myself. “Smartass.”

“Takes one to know one.” She grinned, then sobered. “So, what’s the plan?”

I exhaled, my mind already racing. “First, we make sure you can defend yourself. Rafe won’t hesitate to go for your throat if he gets the chance.”

Ariel paled slightly but nodded. “Okay. Teach me.”

The penthouse gym was spacious and outfitted with top-of-the-line equipment that I rarely used these days. Ariel stood in the center of the mat, her arms crossed as she eyed me warily. “So, what? You’re going to show me how to punch?”

“Among other things. I rolled up my sleeves.” First rule, don’t panic. That’s when you make mistakes.”

“Easy for you to say,” she muttered. “You’re basically a walking tank.”

I ignored that, stepping closer. “If someone grabs you, you go for the weak points. Eyes, throat, groin. Nothing is off-limits in a fight for your life.”

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Ariel swallowed but squared her shoulders. “Eyes,” she breathed. “Throat. Groin.”

My cock twitched at each word. “Exactly.” I moved behind her, my hands hovering near her shoulders. Her body was warm against mine, her back pressed firmly to my chest as I demonstrated a hold. The scent of her floral shampoo filled my senses, driving the wolf wild. I had to force myself to focus.

“If someone grabs you from behind, you drop your weight and twist. Like this.”

I guided her through the motion, my hands firm on her shoulders. She moved with surprising agility, her elbow jabbing back toward my ribs. I caught her wrist, spinning her to face me.

Her chest rose and fell with quick breaths. For a moment, neither of us moved. The wolf stirred restlessly.

“Good,” I managed. “But don’t hesitate. Hesitation gets you killed.”

She nodded, her lips parting as if to speak, but no words came. My hands trembled at my sides, itching to reach out and pull her close. I stepped back, putting distance between us before I did something reckless.

For the next hour, I walked her through basic moves, how to break a hold, how to use her smaller size to her advantage, and how to put enough force behind a strike to actually hurt someone. She was a quick learner. The same determination she showed in her writing carried through in every movement.

At one point, I demonstrated a move where I pinned her against the wall. Our bodies were pressed together, hip to chest. Her breath hitched, her eyes locking onto mine. For a moment, neither of us moved. The closeness was intoxicating. Her soft curves molded to my body. I could feel her warmth seeping into me, and the rapid beat of her heart against my chest.

“See?” I said, my voice low and rough. “You’re trapped. What do you do?”

She hesitated, her lips parting slightly. “I go for the eyes?”

“Good,” I murmured, my gaze dropping to her mouth. The tip of her tongue darted out to wet her lips. The sight sent a jolt to my cock. I groaned. “But you have to be quick. Don’t give them a chance to react.”

She nodded, her breath shallow. “Got it.”

I stepped back, forcing myself to focus. “Again.”

We repeated the drill, but the tension didn’t dissipate. If anything, it intensified. Every touch, every glance, every brush of our bodies sent a shock of lust through me. By the time we finished, I was wound tighter than a spring.

Ariel wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “I think I’m getting the hang of this.”

“You’re doing well,” I said gruffly. “But don’t get cocky. Rafe’s not going to play fair.”

She nodded. “I know. But I’m not going to let him scare me.”

Her bravery was both admirable and maddening. I wanted to protect her, but I also

knew she wouldn't let me.

"Come on," I said, grabbing a towel and tossing it to her. "Let's get cleaned up. We've got a long day ahead."

Later that evening, we took a walk through the city, the cool night air a welcome relief after the intensity of the day. Ariel chatted animatedly about the book. Her enthusiasm was infectious. But as we turned down a quieter street, a familiar scent hit me.

My body tensed. Every instinct was screaming at the threat. "Ariel, stay close."

She glanced at me. Her smile faded as she caught the edge in my voice. "What's wrong?"

Rafe stepped out of the shadows. "Well, well. Brother dearest. Out for a stroll with your little human pet?"

The streetlight above us flickered, casting jagged shadows across Rafe's sneer.

I growled and stepped in front of Ariel. My muscles were coiled and ready to strike. "Back off, Rafe. You're lucky Dean didn't finish you off the last time. He should've killed you when he had the chance."

Rafe's smirk faltered for a split second. His golden eyes flashed in anger. "Dean's soft. Always has been. And you? You're just like him. Weak."

"Soft or not, Dean made you submit," I shot back. "Tell me, Rafe, how does it feel to kneel before your older brother? To know you'll never measure up, no matter how much of Violet's dirty work you do? You're her lapdog, but you'll never be her favorite son."

Rafe's face darkened.His hands curled into fists.“Shut up!”

He lunged at me, his shift instantaneous.Disheveled fur erupted from his skin in tufts.Bones cracked as he took the form of a lean, snarling wolf.I barely had time to shove Ariel behind me before I met him mid-air, my own body contorting in a burst of white-hot pain and power as the shift tore through me.The world around me blurred and my senses sharpened as the bitter scent of blood and adrenaline filled my nose.

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Our bodies collided with a clash of snarls, teeth flashing in the dim light. Between the three of us, Rafe's wolf was the smallest, but he was spry. Worst of all, he was vicious, but Ariel's voice cut through the chaos.

"Left side!" Ariel's shout cut through the rush of blood. "He's favoring it!"

My eyes snapped to Rafe's stance. A barely perceptible limp. Dean's handiwork from their last clash, I suspected. Clever girl, I thought before I lunged for the weakness.

Every snap of my jaws and swipe of my claws was a message. Dean should have killed him, and if Rafe didn't back off, I was going to finish the job.

I clamped my teeth into the scruff of his neck, the taste of his blood flooding my mouth as I slammed him into the pavement. He yelped, thrashing, but I held him there, my growl vibrating through both of us. His whimpers tasted better than whiskey.

Ariel's voice cut through the haze of battle. "Sterling!"

I didn't let go. Not until Rafe's body went limp beneath me. His whimper of submission was music to my ears. Only then did I release him, shifting back in a rush of heat that left me panting.

Rafe staggered to his feet, human again, as he clutched his bleeding shoulder. His eyes burned with humiliation. "This isn't over," he spat.

"It is for you," I snarled. "Tell Violet her favorite attack dog just lost his fangs."

He bared his teeth, human and weak, before limping into the shadows.

Rafe's blood still coated my tongue. I spat onto the pavement, my hands shaking, not from the fight, but from the way Ariel was staring at me.

Her lips parted, sucking in shallow breaths as her chest rose and fell too fast.

This is when she runs.

But then she stepped forward. Her hands trembled as she brushed the gash on my shoulder. Her touch was light as a feather, but it burned hotter than the wound. "You're hurt."

I flinched. "It'll heal."

"I know." Her thumb traced the edge of an old scar just above my collarbone. A childhood relic of one of Violet's lessons.

Her gaze held mine. There was no revulsion in her eyes, only concern. My throat tightened.

I caught her wrist. "I'm fine." My voice cracked. "You saw what I am. What I can do."

She shook her head. "I've never seen anything like that," she whispered. "You were incredible."

I reached for her, pulling her into my arms. She fit perfectly against me, her warmth a balm for the wounded parts of my soul. "You're going to be the death of me, Hayes."

She laughed softly. Her breath tickled my chest in warm puffs. "Or maybe the reason you start living."

I held her tighter, my heart pounding in a way that had nothing to do with the fight and everything to do with her.

Chapter 6

ARIEL

Sterling perched on the edge of the couch, with his shirt unbuttoned and in a puddle around his torso. The gash on his shoulder ran down half of his back. I knelt beside him and rummaged through the first aid kit on the table. Gauze, scissors, tape. The antiseptic bottle clinked as I grabbed it. With trembling hands, I dabbed some on the open wound.

When I pressed the soaked cotton to his torn flesh, his whole body tensed. The damp cotton came away crimson. My stomach twisted. He didn't flinch, but the rigid line of his shoulders screamed louder than any curse. This wasn't just pain. This was pride.

"I know it stings. Sorry," I murmured.

"Don't be." Brown eyes meeting mine. "I've had worse."

I didn't doubt it. The scars that mapped his chest and back told stories I wasn't ready to read. But the fresh wound that I watched him take while protecting me was different. It was mine to tend to.

I finished cleaning the cut and reached for the bandages. My hands were still shaking, but I forced myself to focus. "You're lucky it's not deeper."

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“Lucky,” he echoed dryly. “That’s one word for it.”

I glanced up at him. “You could’ve been hurt worse. Or—”

“Or what?” he asked.

“Or killed,” I whispered, the words catching in my throat. “Rafe wasn’t holding back.”

Sterling’s expression softened. Warm hands engulfed mine. “I’m fine, Ariel. You’re safe. That’s what matters.”

I nodded, but I couldn’t help but worry. Rafe’s attack had been a stark reminder that his family wasn’t going to let him go. And now, with the media storm brewing, it felt like the world was against us.

My phone screen lit up with a notification. I glanced at it and my stomach sank. More gossip headlines about Sterling. About me.

I’d spent years clawing my way up, rejection after rejection piling up in my inbox. Every email chipped away at my confidence, but I kept going. And now I was reduced to a tongue-wagging headline. Gold-digging hussy. The words stung more than I wanted to admit. All those nights hunched over my laptop. All the cheap canned noodle soup dinners when rent was due. None of it mattered. To the world, I was a gold-digger.

Sterling grabbed the phone from my grip. “Don’t read that garbage.”

“It’s not garbage if it’s everywhere,” I said, my voice hollow. “They’re digging into my past, Sterling. My rejections, my failures. It’s all out there now.” My thumb hovered over a particularly vicious comment.

He cursed under his breath. “These people don’t know you. They don’t know your fire. Your goddamn talent.”

“But they think they do,” I whispered. “And that’s what sticks. I’ve spent my whole life trying to prove myself as a writer, and now they’re making me out to be some kind of opportunist.”

Sterling’s expression darkened. He stood, pulling me to my feet with him. “You’re not an opportunist, Ariel. You’re the most talented, determined person I’ve ever met. And I’m not going to let them tear you down.”

His words should have comforted me, but the judgment of the world still hurt. “Sterling, this isn’t just about me. It’s about you, too. Your reputation, your business, everything you’ve built. I can’t be the reason it all falls apart.”

He cupped my face in his hands, his calloused fingers caressing my cheeks. “Ariel, stop. Listen to me. You’re not the reason for any of this. My family’s mess, the media, none of it is your fault. And I’m not going to let them win. Not this time.”

I wanted to believe him. “What’s your game plan?”

“We’re going to face the rumors head-on. Shut them down before they have time to spread,” he said. “I’m sick of running away from their attacks.”

His thumb traced the curve of my jaw. “We’ll continue your work. The novel, the articles, everything. People will see that your talent isn’t just a means to an end.”

His confidence in me was inspiring, but I knew it wasn't going to be as easy as he made it out to be. "The media's relentless. They'll find a way to twist our words and turn our actions against us."

Sterling pulled me closer, and I buried my face against his chest, letting the steady beat of his heart comfort my fears. "Then we'll face them head-on. We'll give them nothing to twist."

I looked at him and wished that I could have just a fraction of the conviction I saw reflected in his eyes.

The next morning, paparazzi swarmed like vultures outside of Sterling's office. Cameras flashed, a blinding strobe of bright light that made it impossible to see where I was walking as I ducked my head and dodged their questions. We should have taken the back exit, I thought. Too late now. I wanted to push them out of the way, to scratch and claw my way through the crowd, but it would only end up as tabloid fodder.

"Mr. Nightfang, is it true your family is involved in illegal activities? What does that mean for your business empire?"

"Ariel! Gold-digging bitch, look here!"

I froze, the words a shock to my system. Sterling's grip tightened on my elbow, whether it was to steady me or himself, I couldn't tell.

"Enough!" His voice ripped through the crowd, dominant and filled with barely-leashed violence.

The swarm fell silent for a heartbeat. Then came the growl. I met Sterling's eyes, and the force of what I saw there nearly knocked the air from my lungs. It wasn't just

anger. There was something primal. A possessive fire that took my breath away. This was the anger of a wolf one second away from tearing out throats.

His voice, when it came, was almost a low snarl. "Ariel Hayes is the best damn writer I have ever worked with. She is not only my ghostwriter, she is the only reason why this project exists." He wrapped his arm around my waist, his fingers drifting down to my hip as he held me tight. Making it clear that I was his to protect.

His words sent a ripple through the crowd, the reporters exchanging uneasy glances. I felt a surge of pride and gratitude, but it was quickly overshadowed by the fear of what this would mean for him. For us.

One reporter, undeterred, stepped forward. "Mr. Nightfang, what about your family's alleged involvement in criminal activities? How do you respond to those claims?"

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Sterling bared his teeth. He was about to lose his temper and make a mess of things. Enough was enough. I beat him to it. "Sterling has worked tirelessly to build his own legacy. One that is separate from his family's past. He's not defined by their actions, and to imply that he is guilty by association is a witch hunt. If you're looking for a scandal, you're looking in the wrong place. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have work to do."

A flicker of pride flashed in Sterling's eyes. He took my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze as we pushed through the crowd. Once inside, Sterling pulled me aside. "You were amazing."

Was I? Now that we were out of the spotlight, I could feel my heart racing. "I don't know what came over me."

For a moment, I thought he might kiss me right there in the crowded office lobby. His thumb traced my jawline, but before I could respond, his phone rang. My cheeks flushed with heat as the spell was broken.

"Sterling," he barked into the phone. His expression hardened as his eyes flicked over to me before he hung up.

I frowned. "Is everything okay?"

Sterling was already guiding me to the elevator. "It's Dean. He's waiting for us upstairs."

We found Dean in Sterling's office. A cardboard box sat on the desk. "She's making a

move. This was delivered to my place an hour ago.”

I looked on curiously as Sterling tore it open. His expression darkened as he pulled out the shredded soccer jersey. It was black and green, his old team’s colors. I could barely make out the number 9 under the blood stains and the large gashes. There was something else inside the box under the jersey. I peered around Sterling and gasped. It was one of my notebooks. Rafe must have taken it when he tore apart my hotel room. Like the jersey, it was covered in dried blood and looked like it had been gnawed on by a rabid dog.

Sterling slammed the jersey into the box and threw the whole thing across the room. “Fucking bitch is threatening Ariel too.”

Dean shook his head. “It’s not just threats. Mother’s got your scent. You know how she gets once she has her jaws on something.”

My stomach twisted.

Dean’s eyes flicked from me and then to his brother. “You know what you have to do. There’s no way out unless you end this for good.”

I froze at his words. “What does that mean, Sterling?”

The muscle in his jaw ticked and he paced the room twice before stopping. “I’m not going to let her dictate this for me too.”

Dean scoffed. “You don’t have a choice, little bro. Mother won’t back down unless you make it clear that Ariel is under your protection as your mate.”

“Mate?” I whispered.

Sterling's eyes snapped to mine. The raw emotion in his gaze knocked me back. It was feral, possessive.

I wasn't completely sure what being the mate of a wolf involved, but at that moment, I knew that I was willing to risk it. "I'll do it. Dean's right. You can't keep playing defense. The ball's in your court now, Sterling."

He stopped pacing. For a moment, he just stared at me with an unreadable expression. Then, just as I was going to ask him if I had toilet paper stuck to my forehead, he crossed the room in two strides. He cupped my face. "You're impossible, you know that?"

I managed a shaky laugh. "So I've been told."

His gaze dropped to my mouth. One heartbeat, and then the next, he kissed me. It was desperate. The kiss of a starving man who finally got to take in all the emotions he had been too afraid to admit to. His hands tangled in my hair as he pulled me closer and held my head in place for his mouth to plunder. It was all desperation and teeth, and weeks of pent-up restraint finally snapping. I clung to him, my fingers digging into the lapels of his shirt. All of my senses were drowning in Sterling. The fierceness of the kiss left me breathless and when we finally pulled apart, my heart was pounding and my lips were tingling.

Sterling rested his forehead against mine, his breath landing in warm puffs against my cheeks. "I'm not letting you go," he murmured. "Not now. Not ever."

Dean cleared his throat, breaking the moment. "As touching as this is, we've got a problem to solve. She's not going to wait for you two to declare your love to the world."

Sterling exhaled sharply. His grip on me tightened for a moment before he reluctantly

stepped back. “Right. What’s our move?”

Dean’s gaze flicked between us, his expression grim but resolute. “Hit her where it hurts. Her reputation. Her power. We expose the family.”

“But how? Everybody knows about the Nightfangs, but nobody has ever been able to pin anything on them.”

A slow, calculating smile spread across Dean’s face. “I’ve been collecting evidence for years. Bank records, encrypted communications, even a few phone calls she thought were private. It’s enough to bury her if we time it right.”

Sterling’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve been planning this.”

Dean shrugged. “Call it a contingency plan. I always knew she’d come for one of us eventually.”

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I swallowed hard as I understood the implication of what Dean was suggesting. This wasn't just about Sterling's past anymore. Somehow, I had gotten drawn into the line of fire. It was my future at stake too. "What do you need me to do?"

Dean's smile had a flash of fang. "Write the truth. Not just Sterling's story. Hers. Every lie, every crime, every life she's ruined. We'll leak it to the press in tandem with the evidence. She won't see it coming."

Sterling shook his head. "You don't have to do this," he murmured. "It's dangerous."

"I'm already in danger, Sterling. And I'm not going to back down."

His gaze burned into mine, pride and something fiercer flickering in its depths. He nodded curtly. "Then let's start today."

The plan was set in motion by nightfall. Dean's contacts in the media were ready, and my fingers flew across the keyboard as I wove the damning narrative of Violet Nightfang's reign of terror. By the time I hit send, my hands shook from exhaustion and too many cups of coffee, but not from fear. This was my fight now, too.

Sterling's hand settled on my shoulder. "You're sure about this?"

I nodded. "I've never been more sure of anything."

He leaned down, his lips brushing my temple in an unexpectedly gentle gesture. "We're going to win this battle, I can feel it in my bones."

By morning, the article had made its way around the world. The internet exploded with outrage at the list of the Nightfang family's crimes, and most of all, at its matriarch, Violet. I had included Dean's evidence, interviews with victims of the family's violent tactics, and proof of the lives they had taken. The outcry on the internet was swift and brutal.

Despite his hatred of his family, Sterling couldn't bear to witness the mess as it exploded online. But I could. Wrapped in his arms, I scrolled through my phone, sifting through the reactions. People were part horrified, part skeptical, but none of them could look away from the trainwreck.

"How could a mother be so cruel to her own son?"

"There's no way any of this is true. It's a PR smear piece."

One viral post caught my eye and brought a smile to my lips. It was a picture of Sterling in his jersey. He smiled at the camera, revealing none of the pain and suffering he was suffering privately. I scrolled through the hashtags. #Nightfangsexposed #SterlingDeservedBetter

This was it. After so many years of running away and secrecy, the truth was out there. Sterling was finally free from the manipulative clutches of his mother. There was nothing more she could hold over his head.

Sterling uncurled from his position on the couch and walked to the window. He was stoic and unreadable as ever as he stared out at the city below. On the television, a reporter stood outside the Nightfang family estate. The news ticker scrolled at the bottom of the screen.

"VIOLET NIGHTFANG HIDING FOLLOWING SHOCKING ALLEGATIONS..."

Sterling grabbed the remote and the screen went black. “They’re all treating it like some damn soap opera.”

I grabbed his hand and pulled him back down next to me. “But they’re listening. People are finally seeing the truth. And they’re on your side. How are you feeling?”

He exhaled sharply and rubbed his eyes with the base of his palm. “Relieved. Angry. Guilty. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

I ran my hand through his hair. “That’s okay. No matter what she’s done, she’s still your mother. It’s natural to be conflicted.”

He turned to me with bleary eyes. “You’re too good for me, you know that?”

My heart swelled. Beneath the cold exterior, Sterling had a softness to him that the world couldn’t destroy. “And you’re too good to be a Nightfang, so that makes us perfectly even.”

He let out a deep chuckle and then pulled me into his arms.

While we waited for the media storm to blow over, and the paparazzi to disperse from the outside of his building, Sterling decided that it was best if we stayed in the penthouse. For dinner, we ordered Chinese takeout.

With cartons of stir fry and lo mein surrounding us, I finally asked the question that had been gnawing at me since Dean’s visit. “What did your brother mean earlier, about me being your mate?”

His chopsticks froze in mid-air. He swallowed and put down his carton of rice. “It’s a shifter thing.”

I scoffed. "I figured as much." Poking at my noodles, I chose my next words carefully. "Is it like marriage?"

"More like destiny. Soulmates." His features softened as he looked into my eyes. "For our kind, finding our fated mate is a rare once-in-a-lifetime thing. It isn't by choice. There's a deep connection that goes beyond conscious understanding. It's something we feel in our blood, like finding a part of ourselves we never knew had been missing."

My heart thudded in my ears. "And you know this about us? Is that how you feel about me?"

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He reached out, cupping my cheek in his large palm. I nuzzled into his warm touch. "From the moment you stepped into my office with your annoying questions, Hayes. I knew that I would tear apart anybody who tried to take you away from me."

Chapter 7

STERLING

After the events of yesterday morning and bearing my soul to Ariel, my insides felt raw. Flayed open like a carcass and exposed. A lifetime of control, sawed apart in an instant and obliterated.

My nerves were frayed and every cell of my body punished me for finally embracing the truth. Maybe that was why I was here, in the elevator going up to Dean's place. My brother and I had been sidestepping the past for years, but tonight, it was time to stop pretending.

The doors slid open with a ding, revealing Dean's foyer. The place smelled like stale coffee, citrus cleaner, and the crisp ozone scent of whatever Frankenstein robot creation he was working on at the moment. But unlike the last time I was here, his living room was an explosion of pale cream colored lace. Vases of pastel floral arrangements covered the coffee table. The sight of the domestic chaos sent a pang of longing through my chest. My brother had found his mate and built a life free from the darkness of our family.

"Master Sterling," said Jenkins's dry robotic voice from the ceiling speakers. "Your visit is unexpected. Shall I inform Master Dean of your arrival? Or do you need a

moment to admire the fabric samples?”

Leave it to Dean to program a snarky AI butler. “He’s in his office, as usual, I gather?”

“You are a genius as well as a soccer prodigy,” Jenkins replied.

I ignored his jab as I made my way to Dean’s office. My ears twitched as my enhanced hearing picked up the sound of a feminine voice humming in the direction of Dean’s bedroom. Nina, Dean’s mate. There was no time for social niceties. Tonight, I was here to see my brother.

The sound of clacking from his keyboard and his muffled curses came through the closed door even without shifter hearing. While I found healing on the field, Dean found his in computers and robots. Despite our differences, we were more alike than either of us wanted to admit. Still, the old anger bubbled in my chest. Yet another Nightfang wound. One that I was going to mend right now.

“We need to talk,” I said from the doorway.

Dean didn’t look up. “You look like shit.”

“Can I get your guest anything, Master Dean?” asked Jenkins.

“Alone.” I nodded in the direction of his balcony doors.

Dean let out a terse exhale, but followed me outside. Out here, with the noise of the traffic masking our words, we were safe to speak.

I gripped the metal railing between my hands, relishing the sting of the cold metal biting into my palms. The winds whipped around us, signaling the rain that was going

to fall at any moment from the gray clouds overhead.

“You left,” I started, the words loaded with anger and hurt from somewhere deep. “You left me there with them.” Each word was raw. Words from a younger version of myself that had been betrayed by his older brother. Dean flinched at the accusations, but I forced them out anyway.

“You walked away. No warning. No explanation. Just one day you were there, the next, you were gone. Like I meant nothing.”

“I didn’t leave you, Sterling. I left them. There’s a difference.” He stared out at the skyline as he bit out each word.

I let out a bitter laugh. “Is there? Because from where I’m standing, you cut me out just the same. Like I was another part of the Nightfang problem.”

Dean finally met my gaze, his eyes flashing gold as the wolf clawed to the surface. “You think I wanted to leave?” His voice turned into a growl as he spoke. “Mother was using me against you. If I stayed, we would have turned on each other. She would have bled both of us dry. I thought that if I disappeared, she would go easier on you.”

“Bullshit. You were wrong. Years, Dean. I spent years thinking you saw me as dead weight. That I wasn’t worth fighting for.”

When Dean finally looked at me, something in his expression shattered. “Fuck, Sterling.” He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “You were sixteen. You should’ve been worrying about your games and studying for finals, not whether your big brother was going to make it out alive after a pack meeting.” His voice broke. “I’m sorry I failed you.”

It was everything I had ever wanted to hear, and yet, there was no satisfaction. All these years, I'd nursed the anger and hurt in my heart, never once considering that Dean had been carrying his own pain. The first drops of rain fell on my face, like the heavens were opening up to wash away the years of misunderstanding between us.

"You should have told me." There was no bite left in my voice, only the regret that we had wasted so many years.

Dean let out a bitter laugh. "And say what? Hey kid, Mom's going to give you to the Songs as a chew toy if I refuse to bite when she orders?" He shook his head. "I know you, Sterling. You would have given her shit, and then she would have made you bleed for it."

The truth of it stung. Dean wasn't wrong. I had always been too hot-headed and reckless. Too stupid and full of hormones to know I couldn't win a fight.

"So what now? We just pretend the last twenty years never happened?"

Dean reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a tattered piece of leather. I would have recognized the familiar scrap anywhere. The yellowed leather was from the ball we had kicked around until the stitching burst and the pieces fell apart. He tossed it at my chest, and I caught it in one deft motion. It was still warm between my fingers despite the steady rain falling on us. "We start over."

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The weight of it sent me back to when we were kids, with grass-stained shorts and scratched knees from hiding in the woods on the Nightfang estate. My throat closed. “I hated you so much for leaving.”

“I know.” Dean gripped my shoulder. Rain plastered his hair to his forehead. “But you’re not that scared kid anymore. Neither of us are.” His eyes burned with intensity as he spoke. “You’re my brother, and I’m ready to stand beside you, whatever you decide to do next.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and hurled the scrap back at him. “You still throw like a drunken toddler.”

Dean caught it with a grin. “And you still mope like you’re living in a romance novel.” He jerked his head toward the penthouse. “Come on, Jenkins is dying to insult you over your choice of booze.”

As I followed him inside, the storm outside began to ease into a gentle patter of rain, much like the turmoil inside of me. The past was just that, a shadow at the edges of my mind, but the weight had been lifted off of my shoulders.

Dean and I were brothers once again. And that was enough.

Chapter 8

ARIEL

The rain outside fell in a relentless sheet, resuming shortly after Sterling came back

from his trip to Dean's place. He didn't elaborate on what had happened, but I could sense that something big had shifted in the relationship between the two brothers. He stood by the wet bar, his back to me and his fingers tight around a bottle. His shoulders were tense as he poured our drinks, like he was ready to snap at any moment. The liquid sloshed in the glasses, catching the glow of the bright city lights outside.

I accepted a glass from him, our fingers grazing just enough for me to feel the tremors in his hand. I hit record on my phone and set it on the coffee table between us. "Are you sure you still want to do this?" I asked, watching his face carefully.

Sterling sat down slowly and took a sip. The ice clinked as he swirled the whiskey in his hand. He let out a long exhale before he nodded. "I still have a story to tell."

"Okay, then." I forced myself to keep my tone light, like we were talking about the weather instead of poking and prodding at his hidden wounds. "Dean mentioned your father taught you to shift. What was that like?"

The question was a grenade, and I watched it detonate in slow motion. His shoulders stiffened. For the briefest moment, his fingers flexed around his glass. Crack. The whiskey glass shattered in his fist and shards of glass and drops of liquor scattered across the floor.

"We're not discussing him." His growl vibrated through my bones. Blood welled between his fingers, and dripped onto the rug.

I should've backed off. He was silent, the raw power in his body ready to explode at any moment. But I didn't flinch. Instead, I leaned forward. "You hired me to tell your truth. Right now? It's full of holes and the public already has their shovels ready to fill them with rumors and lies. Is that what you want?"

Sterling got up and stalked across the room. He slammed a palm against the glass, leaving a bloody handprint on the surface. For a long time, he said nothing. Then, he spoke, so quietly that I almost missed it. "My father believed that everything could be taught with pain. We had a room in the family home. The white room. There were no windows. Only white tile on the floor, walls, and ceiling. Nobody could hear you scream from inside. He locked me in there with him. If I couldn't control the beast, then I didn't deserve to be a Nightfang."

My pen paused, ink soaking into the page and spreading like blood. "How old were you?" I asked softly.

"Six." He turned slightly. "Those scars you saw on my ribs? That's where he used a cattle prod on me for whimpering like a pathetic human."

My stomach churned. I set my pen down, all thoughts of the book forgotten. "Sterling—"

"Don't," he barked. "I don't want pity. You wanted unfiltered, and I'm giving it to you."

I swallowed hard, then thought better and took a gulp of whiskey. We had to keep going. I picked up my pen and drew a new line. "The incident in Barcelona. The tabloids called it a violent outburst. They blamed it on roid-rage. What really happened?"

He let out a bitter laugh. "I tore a teammate's throat out with my claws. Not enough to kill, just a warning he would remember every time he looked in the mirror. He drugged a girl in the VIP section. Let's say that my wolf disagreed with the defense he gave."

I tilted my head. "You never told anyone about this?"

His eyes locked onto mine. “Not until now.” A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Happy? That juicy enough for your book?”

I closed my notebook with a snap. “This isn’t about juicy.” My voice came out steadier than I felt. “It’s about showing the man behind the monster they’ve painted you as.”

Sterling stood there at the window, blood still dripping onto the floor. I reached out, brushing my fingers over his hand. He took in a shuddering breath, then his shoulders dropped.

“I’ll help you clean this,” I whispered. He didn’t respond, but he didn’t pull away. And that was enough. Like a docile puppy, Sterling followed me to the bathroom. I worked in silence, disinfecting the cuts and tweezing out pieces of glass. As I bandaged his hand, Sterling watched me with an intensity that would have sent me running just weeks ago. Now, it only captivated me.

When I finished, he caught my wrist. Not hard. Just enough to make me look up.

“Why does it matter to you? The truth. The scars. All of it.”

The bathroom light caught the gold flecks in his eyes, the ones that only appeared when his wolf was close to the surface. I could lie. Say it was professional curiosity. But Sterling wasn’t the only one who was done running. “Because no one’s ever fought for you before.” My thumb grazed the edge of his bandage. “Not the way you fight for everyone else.”

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His grip tightened. Just for a second. Then he let out a breath, long and slow before he lowered his head and rested his forehead against mine. We stayed like that, breathing the same air in silence.

“Tomorrow, we talk about Violet,” I said softly.

His lips curved, not quite a smile, but he let out a chuckle. “You’re going to kill me, Hayes.” And when he squeezed my hand this time, he didn’t let go.

The next morning, the storm had passed, leaving the city washed clean and glistening. Sometime during the night, the housekeeper had cleaned up the living room, removing all traces of glass and bloodstains. By the time I padded out to the kitchen, Sterling was already there, his bandaged hand wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. He looked up as I entered.

“Ready?” I asked, setting my notebook and phone on the counter.

He nodded. “Let’s get this over with.”

I took a seat across from him. “Tell me about Violet. What was she like as a mother?”

“Violet wasn’t a mother. She was a strategist. Every move she made was calculated, every word a jab. She didn’t raise us. She molded us. Dean was her golden boy, the heir apparent. Rafe was her enforcer. And me?” He laughed bitterly. “I was the spare. The one she could afford to break.”

The pain in his voice made me want to find Violet and force her to feel every bit of

abuse she inflicted on Sterling. Instead, I focused on jotting down my notes. "Did she ever show you any kindness? Any affection?"

He shook his head. "Affection was a weakness in her eyes. The closest she ever came to praise was when I scored my first professional goal. At least you're good for something, were her exact words."

"And your father? How did he fit into all of this?"

Sterling's expression darkened. "My father was Violet's puppet. He did whatever she told him, no questions asked. He was the one who enforced her lessons."

I swallowed hard. "Why did you stay? Why not leave like Dean did?"

He looked at me, his eyes filled with a mixture of anger and sorrow. "I tried. More times than I can count. But every time I got close, she'd find a way to drag me back. Threats, blackmail, manipulation. She had a way of twisting the knife until I had no choice but to comply."

I leaned forward, my voice soft but insistent. "But you did leave eventually. What changed?"

For a moment, I thought he might shut down again. "The injury. When I tore my ACL, it was the first time I couldn't fight back. I was vulnerable, and she saw it as an opportunity to tighten her grip. But it was also the first time I realized I didn't have to live like that. I didn't have to be her pawn. So I walked away. Cut ties. Built something of my own."

I nodded, scribbling furiously. "And now? She's still trying to control you. I need to understand. What drives her? What does she want?"

Sterling's expression darkened, his voice low and venomous. "Power. Control. She's obsessed with the Nightfang legacy, with maintaining her grip on the family name. To her, we're not her children. We're tools. Pieces on a chessboard. And if we don't play our part, she'll eliminate us without a second thought."

"What about Dean? How does he fit into all of this?"

Sterling's expression softened slightly at the mention of his brother. "Dean's always been the only one who saw her for what she was. He tried to protect me when we were kids, but there was only so much he could do. Eventually, he had to save himself. Even if it meant leaving me there in hell, it was the only way he could break free. I don't blame him for it. Not anymore. The past is what it is. All we can do is move forward."

I nodded. It seemed like whatever rift had existed between Dean and Sterling had been resolved. My heart ached for the boy he had been and the man he'd become. "And Rafe? Do you think there's any chance of reaching him?"

He shook his head, a bitter smile tugging at his lips. "Rafe's too far gone. Violet's made sure of that. He's her weapon, her enforcer, and he'll never see it any other way. I've tried to get through to him before, but..." He trailed off, his voice heavy with regret. "Some people are too broken to fix."

I set my pen down. "Sterling, I know this is hard, but thank you for trusting me with this. It's not just about the book, it's about understanding who you are. The man behind the bigger-than-life persona."

He looked at me, his expression filled with a mixture of vulnerability and resolve. "You're the only one who's ever asked, Ariel. The only one who's ever cared enough to dig beneath the surface."

I reached across the counter, my fingers brushing his. "I want to know you. Not just

the superstar or the billionaire or the wolf. Just you.”

For a moment, he didn’t respond, his expression unreadable. Then, with a soft sigh, he turned his hand over, his fingers intertwining with mine. His grip was firm, but gentle, as if he was anchoring himself to me in the midst of the storm.

We sat like that for a moment, the silence between us comfortable. Then I pulled my hand back, picking up my pen again. “One last question. Your soccer career, was it just a way to escape, or was there more to it?”

Sterling leaned back in his chair and sipped at his coffee. “At first, it was an escape. A way to prove I was more than just Violet’s pawn. But then, it became something else. Soccer was the one thing she couldn’t control. The one thing that was mine. When I was on the field, it didn’t matter who my family was or what they wanted from me. All that mattered was the game. The rush of the crowd, the feel of the ball at my feet. It was freedom.”

I nodded, scribbling down his words. “And when you had to leave it behind? How did that feel?”

“Like losing a part of myself. But it also forced me to find a new purpose. When I was forced to build my own empire and create something that wasn’t tied to the Nightfang name, it became a different kind of fight. But it’s mine.”

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“You’ve been through hell, Sterling. But you’re still standing.”

He looked at me with a piercing gaze. You make it sound so simple.”

“It’s not,” I admitted. “But it’s the truth. And that’s what this book is about, showing the world the man behind the scars. The man who’s still fighting, even when the odds are stacked against him. The man who’s more than his past, more than his family’s reputation. That’s who you are, Sterling. And I’m going to make sure the world sees it.”

He was silent for a long moment, his gaze locked on mine. Then, he reached across the counter and grabbed my notebook. “You really believe that?”

I leaned my elbows on the counter and watched as he flipped through the pages. “I do,” I said firmly. “And I think deep down, you do too. You just need someone to remind you of it.”

“You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Should I be?”

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that sent a rush of warmth through me. “Most people are. My family, my reputation, the wolf, it’s enough to send any sane woman running for the hills.”

I met his gaze head-on, my voice steady. “I’m not most women. And some would argue that I’m a bit crazy. Besides, I’ve seen the man behind the growl. He’s not so

scary.”

“Careful,” he said, his tone teasing but with a hint of warning. “You might just start liking me.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

He didn’t respond, but the look in his eyes said more than words ever could.

Chapter 9

STERLING

The flood of tabloid gossip continued to flow onto my phone even after our public attack on Violet. Now that we had public sympathy on our side, the tone had changed. My relationship with Ariel was now framed in a positive spin. I swiped at another headline that popped up in my notifications, “Billionaire’s Secret Romance!” then “All about Ariel Hayes’s Super Sexy Romps With Soccer Superstar!” After so many years in the spotlight, I was used to the public dissecting my life, but I hadn’t expected the fury I felt at Ariel being caught in the crossfire.

I found her in the kitchen, wearing her pajamas decorated in books and Jane Austen quotes. She looked like she just rolled out of bed, with her blonde curls piled high on her head in a messy bun. An unfamiliar, but not unpleasant warmth filled my chest at the thought of her being comfortable enough in my home to walk around without a care about how she looked. Her purple glasses were slightly askew as she stared into her coffee like it held the answers to the universe. At that moment, I realized that I wanted every morning for the rest of my life to start like this. There was no one else for me. Ariel Hayes was it. Dean was right. I had to claim her as mine. My wolf purred in approval.

She glanced up at the sound. Sleepy soft gray eyes met mine, but they shimmered with a mix of amusement and annoyance. “I take it you’ve seen the news already? You’re famous now.”

I let out a snort at her awful joke. “Don’t quit your day job, Hayes.” Then, I became serious again. “I’m sorry for dragging you into the public eye.”

She set her mug down and walked across the room to me. Wrapping her arms around my waist, she looked up at me with those big doe eyes. “I knew the risks when I signed up for this job.”

Bullshit. “You signed up to write a book, not to become the subject of one and have a bunch of vultures pick apart your private life.”

“All jobs come with occupational hazards, Sterling. And if this is what it takes to make us work, then in my opinion, it’s a small price to pay.”

I gathered her closer. Somehow, this tiny woman who foolishly burst into my life and had shown me what it was like to have hope again.

The rest of the day was spent drafting PR statements and dodging calls from Ariel’s friends and family. It seemed like news of our relationship had reached every corner of the country. Each time her phone screen lit up, she frowned and shoved it aside.

The reporters were relentless, camping outside my building like they were fighting for front-row seats at the World Cup. There was no telling how long Ariel and I were going to be prisoners in my home. As evening fell, we ordered takeout again, sushi, this time. We ate in the living room, and I opened up my prize bottle of sake which I received as a gift the last time I played in Tokyo.

Ariel curled up on the couch, typing away on her laptop in between bites while I sat

on the floor next to her. Her brows pinched in concentration whenever she got stuck at a particularly challenging bit of prose and had to stop and think. Whenever her glasses slipped too far down, she would scrunch her nose adorably.

“You’re staring again,” she muttered without looking up from her screen.

“I’m observing,” I corrected her before picking up a piece of uni sashimi and popping it in my mouth. The sweet creamy flavor and fresh salty scent of the sea melted on my tongue. “You’re the one who’s always studying me like I’m some kind of scientific specimen. It’s only fair play that I get to watch you for a change.”

She glanced up at me over the rim of her glasses. It was an innocent gesture, but it made her look like a sexy librarian who was going to scold me for misbehaving during quiet hours. I bit back a groan at the unexpected image. My cock throbbed against my zipper. Fuck. Focus, damnit. Those purple glasses should be illegal.

“Sterling, it’s my job to figure you out. It’s not like you’re an open book.”

Her phone rang again, breaking the moment. Ariel glanced at the screen and groaned. “It’s my mom. Again.”

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“You should answer,” I said. Even though every instinct screamed at me to toss the phone out the window.

She hesitated, then picked up. “Hey, Mom. No, I’m fine. Really.” She rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know what the news said. No, he’s not holding me hostage. No, I haven’t hit my head.” Ariel sighed before she paused and listened to the other end. “Because I like him, okay?”

A primal satisfaction flared in my chest at her casual admission.

She glanced over at me for a moment before looking away. “Look, I’ve got to go. See you next weekend, okay? Love you!” She hung up a minute later, tossing her phone onto the couch. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.” I wanted to wrap myself around her like a blanket and devour her lips until every bit of myself was melded with her.

Ariel cleared her throat and stood up. She gathered the empty takeout containers and stacked them inside the delivery bag. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear nervously. “I should get some sleep. It’s late.”

I jumped to my feet and grabbed her elbow. “Ariel.” Her vulnerable eyes gazed at me and all I could think about was kissing her until her lashes fluttered closed. It was time to stop running. My thumb traced her silky soft cheek and before I could fuck it up and talk myself out of it, I dipped my head and crashed my mouth onto hers. We were past gentle hesitation. I was ready to take what was mine.

Her breath hitched before melting into a soft kittenish moan.

It wasn't gentle. Teeth and tongues collided with zero subtlety. It was fire and need and weeks of pent-up passion crashing into one searing moment. My hands slid into her hair, knocking her glasses askew as I pulled her closer. She made a sound against my lips, half-laugh, half-moan, and then we were moving, stumbling back toward the bedroom, shedding layers between frantic kisses.

I backed Ariel against the door, my mouth claiming hers in a hungry kiss. She tasted like alcohol from the sake and a sweet flavor that was all Ariel. It was a heady mix that made my blood run hot. I had to consume her. My hands roamed her body, greedy for every curve, every line. I was going to possess her, to make her mine in every way.

Her hands clung to my arms, her fingers digging in as she pulled me close. The sting only excited the wolf. It clawed at my chest, testing the boundaries of my control. Mine! The beast roared for me to take her and dominate her. To mark her as ours.

"You drive me crazy, you know that?" I murmured against her lips. My hands slid up to tangle in her hair. I gripped the blonde curls tightly, wrenching her head back to expose her neck. She gasped, her eyes widening with surprise and desire. I leaned down, my mouth finding the soft flesh where her neck met her shoulder. My teeth grazed the soft spot where her pulse was so close to the surface. I taunted us both with how easy it would be to sink my teeth in and mark her.

Every untamed instinct roared approval as I imagined my teeth breaking skin, branding her where anyone could see.

Her breath caught in her throat. She pressed her body to mine until her heart pounded against my chest. I released her hair, my hands moving to her blouse. I undid the buttons slowly, my eyes never leaving hers. She swallowed hard, her chest rising and

falling rapidly as I stripped her bare, one piece of clothing at a time.

Once she was naked before me, I stepped back, taking in the sight of her. She was so small, so delicate compared to me. I felt like a monster looming over her, a beast ready to consume her. Her eyes watched me, wide and eager behind her glasses. I cupped her generous breasts and brushed my thumbs across her nipples until they hardened into peaks. She was the perfect blend of soft curves and wild heat that beckoned my hands to follow them. My palms traced over the gentle curve of her tummy and the dip of her hips, becoming familiar with what was mine. All mine. Her chest heaved with rapid breaths as I stroked her. And when her eyes dropped to my belt, my cock jerked in response, as if it felt her touch.

“On the bed,” I ordered, my voice leaving no room for argument. She complied, sitting on the edge of the mattress, and worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she waited for my next command. She was nervous, but she wanted this. She wanted me.

Her trust in me and willingness to obey was overwhelming. Every part of my body and brain felt that this was perfect and right. I stalked towards her and her lips parted in anticipation. Fuck. Wasting no time, my hands gripped her hips and pulled her to the edge of the bed. I stood between her knees and felt like a beast, my body towering over her. The wolf clawed to the surface. Mate her. Dominate her. Mark her.

By the end of tonight, I was going to obliterate all of her boundaries. My palm locked around her throat, thumb pressing just enough to feel her swallow. Collaring her, testing, claiming, needing that surrender. Her eyes widened and her breath quickened. She swallowed and I saw the fear in her eyes. But she didn't pull away. A dark voice whispered in my head. She was mine to possess. Mine to control. Beneath my thumb, her pulse raced. At this moment, I held an enormous amount of power over her. The scent of a fresh rush of her arousal hit my nose. My wolf went wild at the scent of her sweet honeyed musk. She was turned on by this. My length swelled and I

flexed my grip a little.

“You’re mine, Ariel.” My thumb brushed against her pulse point. “Every inch of you belongs to me.”

She cried out, her hands reaching up to grasp my wrist, but she didn’t push me away. Instead, she held onto me, her eyes filled with a mix of fear and desire.

I released her neck, trailing my hand down her body, between her breasts, and over her stomach, until I reached her wet heat. She moaned, her hips bucking against my touch. I slid a finger inside her, her tightness making me groan. “So wet for me, Ariel,” I murmured, my voice rough with need. “So ready.”

I added another finger, stretching her, preparing her for what was to come. She writhed beneath me, her breath coming in short gasps. I leaned down, capturing her mouth in a brutal kiss, swallowing her cries as I brought her to the brink with my fingers.

But I didn’t let her come. Not yet. I needed her desperate and writhing for me. I pulled back, my eyes locked onto hers as I brought my fingers, slick with her wetness, to my mouth. I sucked them clean, her taste exploding on my tongue. “Delicious.”

I stepped back, shedding my shirt and then undoing my belt and sliding my pants and boxers off. My shaft was rock hard, the tip already leaking with anticipation. I took my length in my hand and stroked up and down, making sure to spread the moisture along my shaft. She was captivated as she took in the sight of me.

I gripped her chin gently, tilting her head up to look at me. “Don’t be scared, Ariel,” I soothed. “Do you trust me?”

Her eyes searched mine for a moment before she nodded. “Yes, I trust you.”

I grabbed a silk tie from the nightstand. Wrapping it around her wrists, I tied them to the headboard. She watched me, her breath coming in short pants, but she didn't protest. Once she was secured, I turned my attention back to her body.

My lips followed my hands, starting from her neck down to her breasts. I lavished attention on each one, sucking her nipples into hard peaks. Continuing my exploration, my mouth and hands roamed every inch of her skin, claiming it as mine.

Sucking one hardened nipple into my mouth, I let my teeth graze the sensitive flesh before moving onto her other breast. Ariel arched off the bed, a cry escaping her lips, half-pleasure, half-pain. I released her nipple with a pop, my hand coming up to smack the side of her breast, not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to leave a pink mark. She gasped, her eyes flying open in surprise.

"You like that, don't you?" I growled. I did it again, smacking the other breast, watching her flesh bounce and her eyes widen. She squirmed beneath me, her breath coming in short pants. I could smell her arousal growing stronger, her body responding to my dominance.

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I gripped both her breasts, squeezing them roughly as I captured her mouth in another brutal kiss. She cried against my lips, her body writhing as I pinched her nipples, rolling them between my fingers. I was going to make her to feel every touch, every sensation. She was going to dance to my touch, to surrender completely.

I released her breasts and trailed my hands down her body before gripping her hips tightly. I flipped her onto her stomach, her bound hands crossing above her head. I smacked her ass, hard. The satisfying sound echoed through the room. She yelped, her body tensing, but the fresh flood of dew that flowed from her sex revealed that she liked it. I couldn't wait to shove my fat dick into her tight pussy and have her gush all over me.

"You're mine, Ariel." My voice was barely human. I smacked her ass again, watching the pink print of my hand appear on her soft flesh. She squirmed, letting out a cry as I gripped her hips, and pulled her up onto her knees.

My hands fit around her waist almost entirely. "You're so small," I murmured. "So breakable." The wolf within me howled. It was eager to mark this delicate woman as our mate. I had to remind myself to be gentle, to not let the beast overwhelm the man.

I moved lower, my mouth raining kisses down her back, over her ass cheeks, until I reached her inner thighs. Her heady aroma filled all of my senses, making me delirious. I could bathe and drown in her scent and die a happy man. It was intoxicating. I looked up at her. She knelt before me like a feast, her hands bound above her head.

"Sterling," she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath. "Please."

I growled and lowered my head. With one swipe of my tongue, I licked along from her clit to her cleft. She cried out, her bound hands clenching into fists above her as I tasted and sucked, driving her to the brink once more. Her orgasm was building, her muscles tensing, her breath coming in short gasps. But again, I didn't let her come.

I pulled back and went to the nightstand. She turned her head and my eyes locked onto hers as I reached for the lube and the plug. Panic flashed in her eyes. "Sterling, I don't know about this."

"Shh," I soothed, running a hand down her thigh. "Trust me, Ariel. I won't hurt you." I said as I coated the plug with lube. "But I am going to push you. I'm going to make you feel things you've never felt before."

I positioned the plug at her tight entrance, rubbing it gently against her, pressing and teasing her tight ring of muscles, but not pushing it in. She tensed, her muscles clenching. I landed a sharp smack on her ass, the sound echoing through the room. She yelped, her eyes flying open in surprise.

"Relax," I commanded, my voice firm. "Let me in, Ariel."

Her body was mine to command, mine to invade. A rush of power surged through me as I felt her resistance melt away.

She took a deep breath, her muscles relaxing slightly. I pressed the plug against her again, feeling her give way slowly. A broken sound escaped her throat as the tip slipped in. Her hands clenched into fists as her fingers dug into her palms. I eased the plug in gently, pumping it in and out shallowly and twisting it, letting her adjust to the intrusion. Her entire body was as tight as a drawn bow, but she didn't pull away.

I rubbed her back soothingly. "You're doing so well, Ariel," I praised. "You're taking it like you were made for this."

As if on command, she let out a kittenish moan, and the plug slid all the way in to the base. I let out a chest-rumbling growl of approval. The plug would stretch her wide for me. She was going to be tight still, too tight, but I was going to slide right in. I was going to make it feel good for her, but after tonight, every part of her was going to be mine. Once it was seated, I flipped her back over and spread her legs wide. Her sex was wet, glistening in the soft light. I couldn't resist any longer. I needed to taste her. I dipped my head between her thighs, my tongue finding her clit. She cried out and her entire body shook as I licked and sucked her to the brink.

She was almost ready to come. Grabbing the plug, I twisted it, fucking her with it while I lapped at her nub. She clenched around it, her body trembling as her hips rode my face and the plug. But still, I pulled away before she could come. Her wild eyes met mine, her chest flushed pink and rising rapidly as she panted in desperation.

"Sterling." Her eyes pleaded for mercy. "Please, I can't take any more."

It still wasn't time for her to come yet. She had to be utterly willing to do anything for me. My hand grasped her chin gently. "Look at me, Ariel." Her lust darkened eyes locked onto mine. "I'm going to fuck you now. With the plug in." Her breath caught in her throat, but she nodded, her gaze never leaving mine.

I positioned myself at her entrance, rubbing the head of my cock against her wetness. My fingers dug into her soft flesh as I thrust into her. "You'll take all of me, Ariel." She cried out, her body arching beneath me as I filled her completely. She moaned, trying to push against me, but I held her hip firmly, controlling the pace. Slowly, I pushed inside her, feeling the plug through the thin wall separating her channels. She was so tight. I was going to explode at any moment.

"Fuck, Ariel," I groaned, sinking deeper. Her body tensed as it adjusted to the double fullness. "You feel incredible."

Her core gripped me like a vice, milking me as I rode her with a brutal rhythm. Fast and deep, I plunged in until my balls slapped her ass, each thrust pushing me closer to the edge. I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to come right then and there.

Her body twisted beneath me as I slammed into her. She took every inch like she was made for me. I captured her mouth as her moans turned into screams.

I broke our kiss and clamped my teeth on her neck, giving her a light nip. "Good girl," I murmured. "You're taking me so well."

Her body arched as her breath came in short rapid gasps. The walls of her sex pulsed around me, quivering as she approached her climax. I sped up, driving into her harder.

"Say it, Ariel," I demanded. "Tell me you're mine."

She let out a moan as she shook, and looked away.

I growled at her disobedience. Lifting her leg, I smacked her ass. Again and again, until her bottom was scorching hot and red. Then, I shifted my palm and struck the plug, jostling it as I fucked her at the same time.

"Say it," I ordered.

"I'm yours," she gasped, her voice barely a whisper. She cried out, her body convulsing as she fell over the edge. Her walls clamped down hard on my shaft, as she squeezed the life out of me. I didn't stop. While she came, I continued to pound into her, riding her waves of pleasure. There was no doubt, I was going to come inside of her, filling her with my cum until it dripped out of her, but not yet. She was still resisting too much to my dominance. I wanted her completely submissive to me.

When her quakes quieted down to tremors, I pulled out. Ariel looked at me in surprise

and confusion. Deftly, I untied her hands and pulled her on top of me. Like second nature, she straddled my hips. Her eyes were slumberous with pleasure. Good. She was almost there.

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I handed her the bottle of lube. "Prepare me," I ordered.

Obediently, she took the lube and poured it all over her hands before drizzling it on my cock. She wrapped her fingers around my length. The sight of her small hands barely wrapping around the base was a sight to behold.

She stroked me, her touch sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body as my hips bucked into her touch.

"That's it. Show me how much you want my cock inside of you." I wrapped a hand around hers, and squeezing tightly, I showed her just how I liked to be jerked off. She caught on quickly and her hands pumped up and down, making obscene wet sounds. While she worked me, I reached behind her and gripped the plug. With a tug, I pulled it out with a loud pop that made my length twitch.

"Enough!" I grabbed her hips and pulled her on top of me. With one hand, I guided the head of my shaft to her sphincter.

"Sterling," she whispered. Her voice was laced with a mix of fear and desire. She hesitated, seeking purchase and splaying her palms against my torso.

"Shh," I soothed, rubbing her back gently. "You can do this, Ariel. You're mine, remember? I would never hurt what's mine." Gripping her hips with my other hand, I pushed her down with steady pressure. Slowly, her body yielded to my invasion, her tight ring of muscles swallowing the fleshy tip of my shaft.

Ariel cried out, her nails digging into my stomach.

“That’s it, baby,” I groaned, my eyes never leaving hers. “Now fuck yourself on my cock.”

She whimpered but began to move, her hips tentatively rising and falling as she took me. I gripped her both sides of hips, guiding her, and forcing her to take more of me with each downward stroke. She panted, her face flushing deep red as I pushed her to take every single inch. Her body shook as she adjusted to the overwhelming fullness.

“Good girl. You’re so good at taking my cock.” I could feel the rush from the base of my shaft as my knot began to swell. “Now, I’m going to give you more.”

Her breath caught in her throat as she felt my swollen base begin to stretch her opening. Shock and curiosity filled her eyes. “Sterling, what?”

“That’s my wolf’s knot, Ariel. It’s going to stretch you so good.”

The sight of her struggling to take me as she stretched to accommodate me sent a thrill through me. I was a beast fucking her, and I couldn’t stop. I wouldn’t stop. I thrust upwards, plunging in to the hilt. She cried out, tensing as my mating bulge plugged her. Ariel clamped down on me and her muscles rippled around my shaft as she came again.

Her screams of pleasure filled the room as I bounced her up and down, forcing her to ride me harder as my swollen thickness grew even more inside of her. Her body was slick with sweat as she took everything I gave.

The way her tits bounced with every desperate slide, that wrecked expression as she took every inch, was enough to undo my control. Fuck. I’d die happy right here watching her come apart on my shaft.

My cum was building, ready to burst into her, to mark her from the inside out. The

bestial urge to breed her, to fill her with my seed, was uncontrollable.

“Mine.” My voice turned inhumanly feral. The wolf within me clawed its way to the surface. The tips of my canines pricked against the inside of my lips as I lost control of the savage urge to mark her. “You’re mine, Ariel.”

I surged up and caught her shoulders, pulling her down to me. My teeth sank into the soft flesh where her neck met her shoulder. The coppery taste of her blood filled my mouth as I marked her. She cried out, her body seizing around me as another orgasm ripped through her.

“Yours,” she whispered against my ear.

I spiraled, falling over the edge. A guttural growl tore from my chest as I came. Streams of cum spilled out of my shaft into her in hot waves. As I spurted, my base swelled and pulsed, stretching her to the breaking point and locking us together until she took every last drop.

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as we rode out the storm together, our bodies locked together in a carnal dance.

“My brave girl,” I murmured, my voice hoarse with spent passion. I stroked her back gently, soothing her as she shivered in my arms. “You did so well, Ariel. You accepted all of me.”

She nuzzled into my chest, her breathing slowly returning to normal. Her heart raced against mine. We stayed like that for a long time, our bodies slick with sweat and our mingled releases, as we came down from the high.

Eventually, my knot began to recede, and I slipped out of her. She winced slightly, her body still tender from the intense mating. I eased her off me, laying her down on the

bed beside me.

I could see my cum dripping out of her, coating her thighs. The sight filled me with a dark, possessive pride. I reached down, gathering the mixture of our releases, and painted her stomach and breasts with it.

She mewled as I marked her once again and reached out for me. I pulled her into my arms, cradling her against my chest. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“Sleep, Ariel,” I murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. She sighed softly, as she relaxed against me. I listened as her breathing deepened and her heartbeat steadied into a peaceful rhythm.

While she drifted off to sleep, I couldn’t help but marvel at the woman in my arms. She had given herself to me completely, trusting me with her body and her pleasure. The musk of our sex and sweat filled the room. My brand on her neck glowed, a tangible reminder of the intensity we had shared. But it was more than just physical release. It was a bond that went beyond sex.

My hands stroked through her hair, the silky blonde curls tangled and wild from our lovemaking. Her skin was warm and flushed and she smelled of my claim. The bite mark on her shoulder stood out as a clear sign of my possession. She was mine, in every sense of the word.

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But with that possession came responsibility. I had brought her into my world, a world filled with danger and secrets. I had exposed her to the scrutiny of the media and the threats from my family. I had to protect her, shield her from the dangers that were sure to come.

As the night wore on, I found myself unable to sleep. My mind raced with thoughts of the future. I tightened my hold on her, my wolf letting out a protective snarl. Whatever came our way, I was determined to keep her safe, to protect her from the darkness that lurked in the shadows of my world. She was my light, and I would do everything in my power to ensure that her brightness was never extinguished.

With that thought, I finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 10

ARIEL

The helicopter blades thundered overhead as we lifted higher into the sky. I pressed my palm to the window and watched as Huntington Harbor shrank below us like a miniature model city. When Sterling suggested that we flee the media circus and Violet's threats by taking a vacation, I jumped at the chance. Except, I never factored in the fact that I had never been on an airplane before, much less a helicopter.

Sterling's hand tightened around mine. His thumb brushed against my knuckles. "Breathe." His command cut through the rotor's roar like a knife.

Outside, the world transformed as we left the concrete jungle behind for jagged

mountain peaks and the endless pine tree forests of Paradise Peaks. The Hughes Hotel emerged like a mirage, its stone turrets and arched windows straight out of a Gothic romance. This wasn't just luxury. It was a fairy tale come to life.

The moment we touched down on the hotel's private landing pad, I knew Sterling hadn't just brought me to any resort. A concierge team was waiting for us before the rotors had even stilled. Their synchronized bowing was something out of a movie. As they led us to the presidential suite, I gaped in awe at my surroundings. Everything reeked of exclusivity and money. The staff didn't just greet Sterling, they catered to his exact demands.

The suite was impressive, an entire apartment with an unobstructed view of snowcapped peaks and the shimmering blue alpine lake at the foot of the mountains. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would be staying in the same hotel as royalty and presidents.

Sterling watched with an amused expression as I explored the suite, my fingers trailing over the imported Italian marble surfaces and hand-embroidered silk curtains. When I walked into the bedroom, I stopped and stared at the package in the middle of the king-sized bed.

The gift waited like a promise wrapped in shimmering silver paper. Carefully, I unwrapped the present without tearing the paper. Inside, was a bound notebook with a buttery-soft tawny leather cover and thick creamy pages that felt like fabric. Next to the notebook was a slender black box that contained a silver fountain pen.

My breath caught in my throat and my eyes grew wet when I noticed my initials etched along the barrel. This gift was the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for me. Sterling had noticed and remembered all the times I complained about the cheap dollar-store spiral notebooks I used. They were perfectly fine for jotting down notes and book ideas, but it always felt wrong to keep my journal in something

disposable. I could never justify spending more for something better, no matter how much I had always wanted a proper journal.

But now, I had something worthy of my private thoughts. "Sterling, I don't know what to say," I breathed out.

He watched me from the doorway, all casual indifference, but his soft eyes revealed the truth. "You said your old one was falling apart."

Even among the chaos and danger surrounding us, he took the time to find something that was perfectly me. "Thank you. It's perfect."

That night we went downstairs to the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant for dinner. After we had savored every morsel of the exquisite truffle tortellini and sipped wine that was older than me, we found ourselves drawn to the warmth of the crackling fireplace in our room. The vintage Barolo had left us both pleasantly relaxed.

Sterling sprawled across the plush leather sofa first, his long legs stretching toward the hearth, while I curled up against his side. The flames danced hypnotically in the grate, casting an amber glow throughout the dimly lit room.

As the fire crackled and popped, I found myself mesmerized by the way the golden light played across Sterling's features. The fire highlighted the strong line of his jaw, the gentle curve of his lips, and most notably, the thin white scar that traced from just below his collarbone down the side of his ribs. The dancing flames painted ever-changing shadows across that familiar mark, a permanent reminder of his nightmarish childhood.

I reached out with tentative fingers to touch the raised flesh. My fingertips followed the raised line of scar tissue, feeling the slight roughness where the skin had healed

imperfectly all those years ago.

“What are you thinking?”he asked.

I hesitated. “That I wish I could take away your pain.”

Sterling’s throat worked as he swallowed hard, his amber eyes darkening with raw emotion. “You have,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “God, Ariel, you have no idea what you’ve done to me.”

His large hands framed my face. “The mate bond has filled the constant aching hole that I’d carried for so long I thought it was just part of who I was.” A tremor ran through his powerful frame. “But you. Fuck. You filled every broken part of me with light. It’s like I can finally breathe without it hurting.”

It couldn’t have been easy for someone like Sterling to bear his heart. That made his confession all the more touching. I rose to my knees and pressed my lips to his. The kiss was soft at first, a gentle promise, but Sterling groaned low in his throat and yanked me across his lap. His mouth moved against mine with desperate tenderness, pouring every emotion he couldn’t voice into this single point of connection. Through the bond, a warm comforting sensation filled my chest. He was finally at peace.

The next morning, we got up early. Room service arrived with silver-domed trays, and we lingered over coffee and croissants, crumbs scattered across the white sheets. After we finished eating breakfast, Sterling suggested we go for a hike around the lake.

In the closet hung a new fleece-lined jacket, the tags still attached, alongside hiking trousers and boots in exactly my size. The leather still smelled fresh from the box. Sterling must have made a call during dinner last night. A single message and the hotel anticipated our every need. It was amazing the kind of service money could buy.

We walked in comfortable silence. The air smelled of frost and pine. Each breath I took came out in a puff of steam. But as we reached a rocky outcrop, the hairs on my neck stood up. The forest had gone eerily quiet. The birds had stopped singing. Not even the buzz of insects broke the silence. Our footsteps seemed as loud as an exploding bomb in the stillness.

“Sterling,” I whispered. “Something’s wrong.”

He stopped, his body coiled tight as he scanned the tree line. “Stay close,” he muttered.

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Then a twig snapped.

Sterling whirled, shoving me behind him just as Rafe stepped from the shadows. He wasn't alone this time. A menacing group of men followed him. Wolf shifters, I realized, as their eyes glowed unnaturally.

Rafe's sneer was all teeth. "Running away, brother? How unlike you."

I clutched Sterling's arm, my pulse hammering in my ears. Rafe looked worse than I remembered. His eyes were bloodshot and he moved with a twitchiness that put me on high alert. This was a wolf pushed too far.

Sterling's voice was steel. "Last chance. Walk away."

Rafe barked a laugh. "Or what? You'll write me out of your little fairy tale?" His predatory gaze slid to me. "Though I do like your damsel. Maybe I'll keep your bitch. After I break her."

Something hot and fierce surged through me. I stepped forward, my voice steady despite the fear clawing at my chest. "You're pathetic."

Rafe's smile vanished. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "What did you say to me, human?" he snarled.

"All growling and snapping because you're jealous," I continued, my voice rising. "Sterling built something an empire. You? You'll always be your mommy's little pet, too scared to think for yourself."

Rafe's roar was filled with inhuman rage. His shift was instantaneous as he lunged. So was Sterling's. Before my eyes, he shifted into a massive black wolf with molten amber eyes. He collided into Rafe with a crash. Claws swiped faster than I could follow. Sterling's powerful jaws locked around Rafe's throat, but the other wolf twisted free, leaving behind only tufts of torn fur and the blood that dripped from Sterling's snout. Rafe's answering strike caught Sterling across the ribs, claws carving deep furrows that had him snarling in pain and fury.

They circled each other now, hackles raised, lips peeled back to reveal razor-sharp canines. When they clashed again, it was with the devastating force of two freight trains, all snapping teeth and slashing claws, each determined to tear the other apart.

I didn't hesitate, knowing I had to help Sterling in any way I could. I grabbed a sturdy fallen branch and recalled the self-defense training. As one of the wolf shifters broke around Sterling and lunged at me, I swung the branch with all my might. It connected with a sickening crack, sending the wolf sprawling.

Another shifter, this one still in human form but with eyes glowing yellow, charged at me. I ducked just in time, feeling the rush of air as his fist missed my face by inches. I drove the end of the branch into his stomach, using the momentum to knock him off balance. He stumbled, giving me enough time to land a solid kick to his knee.

Sterling fought like a force of nature, his massive wolf form was a blur of fangs and fury. He took down one shifter after another, but they kept coming. I kept my back to a large tree trunk, using it as a makeshift shield while I fought off the remaining pack members.

As Sterling dispatched the last of the Nightfang pack members, Rafe made his move. I dashed forward, the branch still in hand, and swung at Rafe's hindquarters just as he was about to make contact with Sterling. The branch knocked him off balance and gave Sterling the opening he needed.

Sterling pounced, his massive form colliding with Rafe's in a brutal clash. The two wolves rolled and tumbled, their snarls echoing off the cliffs. I stumbled back, my heart pounding as I watched the ferocious battle unfold.

In a final, crushing move, Sterling surged forward, his powerful jaws clamping down on Rafe's shoulder. With a mighty heave, Sterling threw Rafe off the edge of the cliff. Rafe's howl of pain and rage echoed through the mountain air, fading into silence as he plummeted to his death at the bottom of the cliff.

The forest fell silent, but it roared louder than a scream. Only the distant rustle of leaves and Sterling's heavy breathing, as he shifted back to his human form, could be heard. He stood at the cliff's edge, his expression unreadable.

I approached cautiously. "Sterling."

He didn't turn, his gaze fixed on the abyss below. "I didn't want it to come to this."

"You didn't have a choice. He would've killed us both."

Sterling's jaw clenched, his fists tightening at his sides. "I know, but he was still my brother."

As the frenzy of the battle subsided, I felt a mix of exhaustion and relief. The adrenaline that had coursed through my veins began to fade, leaving me shaky.

Back in our suite, Sterling cleaned up while I sat by the fire, the leather-bound notebook untouched still. The words still wouldn't come, my mind replaying the events of the day. But as Sterling emerged from the bathroom, his hair damp and a fresh shirt clinging to his frame, I felt a sense of calm settle over me. He crossed the room and sat beside me.

“You okay?”he asked, his voice soft.

I nodded.“Just processing.”

His gaze softened, and he brushed a strand of hair from my face.“You stood up to him, Ariel.You didn’t back down.”

I managed a small smile.“I had to.I couldn’t let him win.”

Sterling’s thumb brushed over my knuckles.“My fierce mate.You’re incredible, you know that?”

Heat crept into my cheeks, but I didn’t look away.“So are you.”

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“What happens now?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Sterling’s fingers traced idle patterns on my arm. “We go back. We finish what we started.”

I tilted my head to look at him. “And your family?”

His jaw tightened, but his voice was steady. “Violet won’t stop. Not after this. But I’m done running. I’ll face her. On my terms.”

Chapter 11

STERLING

The morning of the press conference, I stood in front of the windows of my penthouse. Behind me, Ariel sat cross-legged on the couch with her laptop balanced on her knees. Her glasses slipped down her nose as her fingers tapped out a relentless beat on her keyboard.

“You’re pacing,” she said without looking up from her screen or pausing her fingers. “It’s distracting.”

I stopped mid-step and turned to her. “I’m not pacing. I’m strategizing.”

She glanced up and pinned me with a sharp look. “You’re pacing and you’re going to wear a hole in the floor if you don’t stop.”

I sighed before running a hand through my hair. “Fine. I’m pacing.”

She set her laptop aside and stood. Then she crossed the room calmly. Without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into her warm embrace. The moment her body pressed against mine, the mate bond flared to life between us. Pure love and acceptance flowed from her soul to mine. Ariel’s scent enveloped me, and my beast purred with contentment.

“You’re going to be fine,” she whispered against my chest. “You’ve got this.”

The knot of anxiety that had been strangling me for hours began to loosen. Through our bond, I felt her unwavering faith in me, her love washing over my doubts like a tide erasing footprints in the sand. My wolf settled, no longer thrashing restlessly beneath my skin. In her arms, the weight of expectations and fear simply melted away, leaving only the certainty that with her by my side, I could face anything.

“Do I?” I asked, my voice more unsteady than I intended. “This isn’t just a speech, Ariel. It’s me standing in front of the world and saying, ‘Hey, my family’s a bunch of criminals, but I’m not.’ How do I know they’ll believe me?”

She cupped my face gently, her thumb brushing against my stubble, and I nuzzled my cheek into her touch. “Because it’s the truth. And because you’re not just saying it, you’re showing it. You’re donating your fortune, Sterling. You’re making amends. That’s real.”

I’d spent so long running from my family’s legacy, trying to outpace it, that I hadn’t stopped to consider what it meant to face it head-on. To own it. To change it.

“What if I’m not enough, Ariel?” I asked. “What if I’m just another Nightfang, no matter how hard I try to outrun it?”

“You’re not your family, Sterling. You’re the man who’s fighting to be better. That’s what matters.”

“And what if I fail?”

Her hand moved lower to rest on my chest, right over my heart. “Then you’ll get back up. Because that’s who you are. And because I’ll be here to kick your ass until you do it,” she said with a smirk.

We spent the next hour rehearsing. Ariel’s notes were scattered across the coffee table as she played the role of both skeptical journalist and supportive confidante. Every time I stumbled over a phrase, she’d nudge my shoulder with hers, and help me get back on track.

The quiet moment was shattered when my phone lit up with a notification.

Violet: “Meet me at Amalfi. One hour. Or the world sees what you really are.”

Ariel’s hand closed around my wrist before I could throw the phone across the room. “What is it?”

“Violet,” I said flatly. “She wants to talk.”

Ariel’s expression hardened. “Then we’ll talk.”

“No. I’ll talk. You’re staying here.”

She crossed her arms. “Like hell I am.”

“Ariel—”

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“Sterling, I’m not letting you walk into that alone.” Her voice was steel. “You don’t get to shut me out. Not now. Not after everything.”

I exhaled sharply, torn between the urge to protect her and the undeniable truth that I didn’t want to face Violet alone. “Fine. But you let me handle her.”

She smirked. “I’ll be your silent, terrifying guard dog.”

Amalfi was nearly empty at this hour, the dim candles on each table flickering across the white linen tablecloths like ghosts. Violet sat at a corner table. She was impeccable as always in a Chanel suit. Her smile was just as vicious as her style.

“Sterling.” Violet’s gaze flicked over Ariel dismissively before settling on me. “I see you’ve brought your pet. How adorable.”

Ariel didn’t flinch. “Mrs. Nightfang.”

I pulled out a chair for Ariel before sitting across from Violet. “Cut the theatrics. What do you want?”

Violet’s fingers traced the rim of her wineglass. “Such hostility. I merely wanted to offer you a final chance to reconsider your public spectacle today.” She slid a manila envelope across the table. “Before you humiliate yourself.”

I didn’t touch it. “What’s in it?”

“Proof, that you’re just as complicit as the rest of us. Bank records from your early

investments.All of it tied to our offshore accounts.The press will have a field day.”

Ariel’s knee pressed sharply against mine under the table, reminding me of what was at stake.I kept my voice even.“Those were before I cut ties.And you know I didn’t know where the money came from.”

Violet’s laugh was like shattering glass.“Oh, Sterling.Naivety isn’t an excuse.The world will see you as a hypocrite, denouncing us while profiting from our work.”Her eyes gleamed.“Unless you cancel the press conference.Walk away quietly.And come home.”

Ariel’s hand clenched around my wrist.“He is home.”

Violet’s smile faltered.“Excuse me?”

Ariel leaned forward, her gray eyes blazing.“You don’t get to blackmail him into being your puppet.Not anymore.”She tapped the envelope.“And if you’d done your homework, you’d know Sterling already submitted those records to the authorities weeks ago.Along with testimony about your operations.”

The color drained from Violet’s face.“You’re lying.”

I folded my arms.“It’ll be on the news soon.It’s all public now.”The lie came easily, but the flicker of doubt in Violet’s eyes told me Ariel’s bluff had landed.

Violet’s nostrils flared as her voice lowered to a hiss.“You ungrateful whelp.After everything I’ve done for this family—”

Ariel scoffed.“Done?You mean the trafficking?The smuggling?Or just the part where you sent Rafe to kill your own son?”

Violet's chair screeched as she stood. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, little girl. This family survives. It doesn't bow to sentimentality or weakness. And if you think Sterling's little rebellion will change that, you're even more naive than he is."

Ariel didn't flinch. "We're not afraid of you."

Violet's lips curled into a sneer. "You should be." She turned to me, her voice dripping with venom. "You'll regret this, Sterling. Mark my words."

I stood. "I already do. I regret every second I wasted trying to please you."

Violet turned to leave, but hesitated at the edge of the table. For a heartbeat, her rigid posture wavered and her fingers tightened around the strap of her purse. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter. "You were always the strongest of them, Sterling. Even as a child. Dean was too soft, and Rafe could never lead. But you had the teeth for it."

A muscle in my jaw twitched. "Is that why you're doing this? Because you'd rather destroy me than lose control?"

For a fraction of a second, her mask slipped. I saw it, the raw, desperate flicker in her eyes, the same look she'd had years ago when Dean walked out. Then it was gone, buried deep inside once again as the mask slipped back into place. "Enjoy your victory, Sterling. It won't last." She strode out of the restaurant without another glance at us, her bitter scent lingering like a curse.

Ariel exhaled sharply. "Well. That went about as well as expected."

I reached for her hand. "You were magnificent."

She smiled faintly. “I had a good coach.”

The press conference was held in the grand ballroom of the Hughes Hotel, the entire room filled with a sea of reporters. Cameras flashed as I stepped up to the podium with Ariel beside me.

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“Thank you all for being here,” I began, my voice steady despite the knot in my chest. “Today, I want to address the rumors and speculation surrounding my family and my past.”

The room fell silent, and every eye fixed on me. I took a deep breath as my gaze swept the crowd. “The Nightfang name has been synonymous with corruption for decades. My family’s legacy is one of greed, violence, and exploitation. And for too long, I’ve allowed that legacy to define me.”

I paused, my eyes finding Ariel’s. She gave me a small nod, her expression filled with quiet encouragement. “But today, I’m reclaiming that name. Not for my family’s legacy, but for the future I choose to build. A future rooted in integrity, accountability, and change.”

The room erupted in murmurs, but I pressed on. “To that end, I’m announcing the creation of the Nightfang Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting victims of human trafficking and dismantling the systems that enable it. Every dollar of my personal fortune will be invested in this cause.”

The voices grew louder, but I didn’t stop. “I know this won’t erase the past. It won’t undo the harm my family has caused. But it’s a start. And it’s a promise, to the people who have been hurt, and to myself. I will no longer be defined by the sins of my family. I choose to be defined by the actions I take moving forward.”

The room fell silent for a moment. Then, like a dam breaking, the applause began. It started as a tentative ripple but quickly grew into a thunderous wave. I caught Ariel’s eye again, her small smile a beacon of light in the chaos.

As the questions began, I answered them as honestly as I could. Ariel stood by me throughout, her presence a silent reminder of why I was doing this. It wasn't just for myself, but for us, for the future we might build together.

When the conference ended, we retreated to a private lounge. As soon as the hotel staff closed the heavy wooden doors, the noise of the reporters faded behind us. I sank into a chair, my hands trembling slightly. Ariel perched on the armrest, her hand resting on my shoulder.

"You did it," she said softly.

"We did it," I corrected, looking up at her. "I couldn't have done this without you."

Her smile widened, but there was something bittersweet in it. "Yes, you could. You just needed someone there to remind you."

I pulled her onto my lap. "Maybe. But I'm stronger with you."

She leaned closer, her lips brushing my forehead in a gentle kiss. "Always."

For a moment, I let myself be vulnerable, the weight of the day pressing down on me. "I don't know how to thank you," I admitted, my voice thick with emotion.

She cupped my face, her gray eyes soft. "You don't have to thank me. Just keep being you, the man I see when you're not trying so hard to prove yourself."

Her words unraveled something tight in my chest. I buried my face in the crook of her neck, breathing in the scent of her. Her arms wrapped around me, holding me together when I felt like I might shatter.

"I love you," I murmured against her skin, the words slipping out before I could

second-guess them.

She stilled for a heartbeat, then pulled back just enough to meet my gaze. Her eyes were bright, searching. “Say that again.”

I swallowed, my throat tight. “I love you, Ariel. I think I have from the moment you stormed into my life.”

Her smile was like dawn breaking. “I love you too, you grumpy, impossible man.”

Chapter 12

ARIEL

The next morning, I woke up expecting to find Sterling beside me, but I rolled over to find cold sheets. A note rested on his pillow, scribbled in his sharp jagged handwriting.

Gone for a run. Don't start the coffee without me.—S

I smiled, tracing the letters with my finger, imagining him scowling as he wrote it, as if the mere idea of me brewing my own cup without him was some unforgivable betrayal. Even now, after the danger, the late-night confessions, the way he had slowly let me in, he was still Sterling. Grumpy. Disciplined. Impossibly, infuriatingly endearing.

My phone rang on the nightstand. Martha, my agent's name, flashed across the screen, and I snatched it up before the third ring.

“Ariel,” she said, her voice crackling with the kind of excitement that usually preceded either very good or very bad news. “Tell me you're sitting down.”

I sat up straighter, the sheets pooling around my waist. “Why?”

“Because,” she said, drawing the word out like she was savoring it, “I just got off the phone with three publishers who are begging for a meeting after reading your draft. That biography on Sterling? They’re drooling over it. No ghostwriting bullshit, Ariel. Your name. On the cover. Your story.”

The room tilted. My throat tightened. “You’re joking.”

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“Do I sound like I’m joking?” Martha laughed. “Ariel, this is it. Your break. They want you.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. The morning light suddenly too sharp, too real. They want me. Not just my polished sentences slipped into someone else’s memoir, not just my invisible fixes. Me. My words. My name.

All those years of rejections, of barely scraping by, of wondering if I’d ever be more than a ghost behind someone else’s story. I pressed a hand to my mouth, my eyes stinging with tears. And now, here I was, in Sterling’s penthouse, my name on the lips of publishers who’d once dismissed me. It felt surreal, like I’d stepped into someone else’s life.

Sterling would be back soon, sweaty and breathing hard from his run, and I’d tell him, watch his face do that thing where he tried not to look too excited and fail miserably. But for now, I just sat there, phone clutched in my hand, staring at the empty space beside me and wondering how the hell my life had changed so completely in the span of a single morning.

“Ariel? You still there?”

“Yeah,” I managed, wiping at my cheeks. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“Good. Because we’ve got meetings to schedule. And, Ariel?” She paused. “I’m proud of you.”

I hung up, clutching the phone to my chest. The penthouse was silent except for the

steady rhythm of my own heartbeat.

The sound of the espresso machine hissing in the kitchen pulled me from my thoughts. I glanced toward the doorway, a smile tugging at my lips. Sterling was back from his run, and the scent of coffee was already filling the penthouse. I padded barefoot across the cool floor, the excitement of this morning's news still buzzing in my chest like champagne bubbles.

I found Sterling in the kitchen, shirt damp from his run, his dark hair tousled. He was scowling at the espresso machine like it had personally offended him.

"You're supposed to wait for me to make the coffee," I said, leaning against the doorway.

He turned, his scowl softening when he saw me. "You were sleeping. And this thing is a menace."

I crossed the room and nudged him aside with my hip. "Move over, billionaire. Let the professional handle it."

He raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Professional? Last time I checked, you burned toast."

I shot him a mock glare. Holding his gaze, I pressed the espresso button with exaggerated precision. "That was one time. And it was your fault for distracting me."

His laugh was low and warm. His hands settled on my hips as he leaned in. "Guilty as charged."

I couldn't stop the grin that spread across my face. "Martha called. Publishers want my book. My name, my words."

Sterling went still. Then, in one swift motion, he spun me around and lifted me onto the counter with his hands framing my hips. His eyes burned with pride. "About damn time."

"I know," I breathed, my fingers curling into his damp shirt.

The kiss that followed stole my breath and my sanity. It was hard, possessive, joyous. We were both breathless before he pulled back just enough to press his forehead to mine. "I told you they would see how brilliant you are."

I laughed, giddy. "Took them long enough."

His lips found mine again, slower this time, lingering with promise. "Their loss. I've known for months."

The espresso machine hissed, breaking the moment. Sterling reached behind me to turn it off, his chest brushing mine. "Breakfast first. Then we celebrate."

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of laughter and stolen kisses, the anxiety of the past few weeks melting away. Later, as we ate, the news played on the penthouse's massive television screen. Sterling's press conference dominated every channel, his face splashed across every news and entertainment channel.

Nightfang Heir Denounces Family Empire, Pledges Fortune to Charity

Billionaire's Bold Move: Sterling Nightfang's Redemption

FBI Raids Nightfang Compound: Matriarch Violet Nightfang in Custody

Sterling's fork clattered against his plate. On the screen, footage showed federal agents swarming the Nightfang estate, and Violet being led away in handcuffs, her

once-impeccable coif disheveled. Even then, she stared defiantly at the camera, her face a cold mask. The reporter's voiceover rattled off the charges one by one, racketeering, money laundering, human trafficking, each word a hammer blow to the family's legacy.

I reached for Sterling's hand, my fingers threading through his. He didn't speak, his gaze fixed on the screen, his jaw tight.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly.

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He exhaled, long and slow, before turning to me. “Yeah. It’s just strange. Seeing it all come crashing down like this. I hated what she stood for, what she did, but she’s still my mother. And now she’s gone.” He looked at me, his eyes searching mine for understanding. “Does that make me weak? To feel this way?”

I shook my head, my heart aching for him. “No. It makes you human. You’re allowed to grieve the mother you deserved, even if she wasn’t the one you had.”

I squeezed his hand, my thumb brushing over his knuckles. “It’s over. She can’t hurt you anymore.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s just, I spent so much of my life running from her, from all of it. And now...”

“Now you’re free,” I finished for him.

His eyes met mine, and for a moment, I saw the weight of everything he’d carried. The guilt, the fear, the anger. But then he smiled, slowly but genuinely. “Yeah. I am.”

The rest of the day was quiet, the two of us wrapped in our bubble, safe from the chaos outside. But that evening, Sterling surprised me with a reservation at Elysium. The maître d’ led us to a private table by the window, and as Sterling pulled out my chair, I caught the faintest smirk on the man’s face before he discreetly slipped away.

The meal was exquisite, each course a deliciously crafted piece of art. But it wasn’t

the food or the shimmering city view that made the night unforgettable. It was the way Sterling looked at me, like I was the only thing in the room that mattered.

When the dessert plates were cleared, he stood, holding out his hand. "Dance with me."

I raised an eyebrow. "Here?"

He grinned, pulling me to my feet. "Why not?"

The restaurant's soft music swelled as he led me to the small dance floor. His arms wrapped around me. The violin's melody wrapped around us, the scent of roses from the centerpiece mingling with his scent. His hand was warm against the small of my back, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear. I rested my head against his chest.

"I never thought I'd have this," he murmured, his breath warm against my ear. "A life that's mine. A future I can be proud of. You." His lips brushed my temple. "I love you, Ariel. More than I ever thought possible."

I tilted my head back to look at him, my throat tight. "I love you too," I whispered. "Always."

His hand cupped my cheek. "You didn't just remind me of who I could be," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "You showed me how to get there. Every step of the way, you were there, pushing me, believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself."

I smiled, my heart swelling. "You did the hard part, Sterling. I just held your hand."

He shook his head, his gaze unwavering. "No. You gave me the courage to take the first step."

He hesitated for a moment, his grip tightening slightly around me. “When I was a kid, I used to sneak onto the roof of our estate and pretend I could see the whole city,” he admitted. “I’d imagine a life where I wasn’t a Nightfang, where I could just be me. But I never thought it would actually happen.” He pulled back just enough to meet my gaze. “And then you came along.”

I smiled, tracing the line of his jaw with my fingertips. “And now you have it all.”

“No,” he corrected, pressing a kiss to my palm. “Now I have you. That’s everything.”

The music faded, but we stayed on the dance floor, wrapped in each other’s arms. I wasn’t just surviving anymore either. The girl who’d once been afraid to dream too big was gone. In her place was a woman who’d found her voice, her strength, and her place in the world. It was right here, in Sterling’s arms. Together, we weren’t just thriving. We were unstoppable.

Chapter 13

STERLING

The restaurant was alive with the hum of conversation and laughter. For the launch party of Ariel’s biography, we were hosting a party at Elysium. Champagne flowed freely and no expense was spared for the event. The 360-degree windows offered a breathtaking view of Huntington Harbor, and the ocean surrounding the shores of the city.

I stood near the bar with a glass of whiskey in my hand as I watched the crowd. It was a mix of business associates, former teammates, media personalities, and friends. Dean and Nina were across the room, deep in conversation with a group of investors. Dean caught my eye and raised his glass in a silent toast. I nodded, a small smile tugging at my lips.

It was surreal, to see this room filled with people who had come to celebrate me. The book, a raw and unfiltered account of my life, had already climbed the bestseller lists, and the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was being seen for who I truly was instead of a cursed extension of my family.

Then her scent hit me. The reason any of this was possible. Even before she spoke, my skin prickled with recognition. My wolf purred in contentment that she was here.

“You look like you’re about to bolt,” a familiar voice teased, pulling me from my thoughts.

I turned to see Ariel standing behind me, her gray eyes sparkling with amusement. The sight of her almost made me drop my glass. Her emerald gown clung to every curve, and her hair was swept up in an elegant twist that begged to be pulled loose. She looked radiant, and for a moment, I was struck speechless that this gorgeous woman was my mate.

“Just taking it all in,” I admitted, setting my glass down. “I can’t believe the book’s finally out.”

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She reached for my hand, her fingers intertwining with mine. “You deserve this, Sterling. Every bit of it.”

“We both deserve it. I wouldn’t be here without you.”

The music began filling the room with a slow, melodic tune. “Dance with me.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Here? Now?”

“Why not?” I smirked, tugging her toward the center of the room.

Ariel laughed but followed. The crowd parted slightly as we stepped onto the floor, the soft glow of the overhead lights casting a warm halo around us. I pulled her close, one hand settling at the small of her back, the other cradling hers against my chest.

“You know I’m terrible at this,” she murmured, her breath a warm caress against my neck. Despite her protest, the catch in her breath when my hand slid down her back told a different story.

“Liar,” I countered as I swayed us gently to the music. Your body remembers every step we’ve ever taken together. “I nipped lightly at her earlobe, grinning when she shivered. “Just like it remembers every other way we’ve moved together, sweetheart.” My fingers tightened on her hip. Later, I promised my wolf.

She rested her head against my shoulder. As we moved together, her body melted into mine and our heartbeats synced. The chatter, the clinking glasses, the flash of cameras, all of it faded away into the background until all I could hear was the sound

of her heart. It was just us, moving together in the quiet rhythm of the moment.

I pressed my lips to her temple, inhaling the faint scent of her perfume and her scent. "I have something for you," I murmured against her skin.

She tilted her head back, curiosity flickering in her eyes. "Oh?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I took her hand and led her away from the dance floor, toward the elevator. The doors slid open, and I punched the button for the rooftop landing pad.

Ariel's brows furrowed. "Sterling, if this is your idea of a quickie—"

"Trust me," I said with a gentle squeeze of her hand.

The elevator ride was silent. Ariel was ready to burst with anticipation. When the doors opened, the cool night air rushed in, carrying the distant sounds of the city below.

Ariel stepped into the night, the harbor wind catching the hem of her dress like waves against the shore. The city lights shimmered hundreds of feet below us. She turned, and the moon was like a spotlight on her. "It's beautiful, Sterling."

I swallowed hard, my pulse pounding in my throat. This was it. The moment I'd been planning for weeks. My hands shook slightly as I reached into my pocket. Then, before I could second-guess myself, I dropped to one knee. The ring box felt unnaturally heavy in my palm.

Ariel's eyes widened. "Sterling—" Her hands flew to her mouth.

I held up the ring, a simple platinum band studded with smaller gems surrounding a

large diamond in the center.

My voice shook as I spoke. "Ariel Hayes, you walked into my life and turned it upside down. You saw me at my worst, my most broken, and you didn't run. You stayed. You fought for me, even when I didn't know how to fight for myself. You taught me how to trust, how to love, how to live. You're the reason I'm standing here today, not as Sterling the Nightfang, but as Sterling the man I want to be."

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. "You've shown me that I'm more than my family's mistakes, more than the darkness I've carried for so long. With you, I've found light. With you, I've found me. And I don't ever want to lose that. I don't ever want to lose you. So, Ariel, will you spend the rest of your life with me? Will you marry me and let me love you, protect you, and stand by your side as we take on the world together?"

A happy sob escaped her mouth. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she dropped to her knees in front of me, her hands clutching mine. "Sterling," she whispered, her voice breaking. "You've made me feel like I'm enough, just as I am. And that's why I'll always choose you, Sterling. Always."

A choked laugh escaped me as I slid the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly. Her tears mixed with the laughter bubbling up from her chest, and then she was in my arms, her lips crashing into mine.

I held her tightly, the world around us fading away until it was just us, two souls who had found each other in the chaos and made something beautiful out of it.

"I love you," I murmured against her lips. "More than anything."

"I love you too," she whispered back. She cupped my face and kissed me again. "Always."

Epilogue

ARIEL

SEVEN YEARS LATER

The scent of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the faint sweetness of maple syrup from the pancakes Sterling was flipping on the stove. Outside, the garden was alive with the chirping of birds and the distant hum of the city waking up. It was quiet, warm, and filled with the kind of peace I'd once only dreamed of.

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I leaned against the counter with a steaming mug of coffee in my hand as I looked out the window. Half-empty plates and sticky drips of syrup covered the surface, but it didn't bother me. Out in the garden, Oliver and Adeline raced across the dew-kissed grass outside. A year after our wedding, we moved from the penthouse in the city to a house with acres of land for the kids to run around in. Oliver, ever the little alpha, dribbled a soccer ball between his tiny feet while Adeline, my curious girl, chased after him. The sound of her wild laughter drifted across the garden and into the kitchen.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around my waist, and a familiar warmth pressed against my back. Sterling's lips brushed the curve of my neck, his voice still gruff with sleep. "They're going to wake the neighbors."

I grinned and tipped my head back against his shoulder. "Just like their father."

He huffed a laugh, his breath warm against my skin. "Kid's got a better left foot than I did at five."

Pride swelled in my chest as I watched Oliver fake left, then dart right, his little face screwed up in concentration. Sterling's old jersey dangled past Oliver's knees, the fabric swallowing him whole.

"He's your biggest fan," I murmured.

"And I'm your biggest fan." His lips traced the line of my neck. "Every day, I wake up and wonder how I got so lucky. You've given me everything, Ariel. A family. A home. A life I never thought I'd have."

I turned in his arms, my palms flat against his chest. “You’ve given me the same, Sterling.”

A shriek cut through the air as Oliver tackled Adeline into the grass, the soccer ball forgotten. Sterling sighed, releasing me to grab the skillet from the stove. “Breakfast. Before they start a war.”

I sipped my coffee, watching him move through the kitchen with the same effortless grace he’d once had on the field. Six years of marriage, and the sight of him still stole my breath. Leaning against the counter, I observed the way his T-shirt stretched across his shoulders, the faint scar above his eyebrow from a long-ago match, and the quiet intensity in his eyes when he glanced back at me.

“What?” he asked, flipping a pancake with a flick of his wrist.

“Nothing,” I lied. I hid my smile behind my mug.

He arched a brow but didn’t press before he turned back to the stove. I traced the rim of my cup as my gaze drifted to the framed photo on the fridge. It was taken on our wedding day. Sterling in a tailored tux, and me in a lace gown that had taken Nina three months to source, both of us laughing under a shower of rose petals. The event had been the talk of Huntington Harbor for months, a fairy-tale affair orchestrated by the woman who’d become my closest friend.

Every time I looked at that photo, I was reminded of the moment Sterling slid the ring onto my finger.

A crash from outside snapped me back to the present. Oliver stood over a toppled garden decoration, his face the picture of innocence. Adeline pointed at him as she broke into a fit of giggles.

Sterling sighed. "I'll get them."

I caught his wrist before he could move. "Let them be. They're just kids."

He hesitated, then leaned in, pressing his forehead to mine. "You're soft on them."

"And you're not?" I challenged.

His lips quirked. "Never."

A knock at the front door interrupted us. Nina breezed in before I could answer, her arms laden with a photo album and a bakery box. "Morning, lovebirds," she sang, as she dropped the box on the counter. "Brought croissants. And memories."

Sterling groaned. "Not the wedding photos again."

Nina ignored him. "I was going through my archives and found some gems. I thought you should have a copy." She flipped the album open to a page where Dean, who officiated the wedding, had somehow gotten tangled in the ceremonial ribbon. "Remember this? I thought he was going to shift right there and shred the ribbon with his claws."

I laughed, the sound mingling with Sterling's reluctant chuckle. The kids burst in then, Oliver covered in grass stains, Adeline with her hair in wild tangles.

"Aunt Nina!" they cried out before launching themselves at her.

She caught them with practiced ease, pressing kisses to their heads. "My favorite monsters. Did you save me any pancakes?"

Sterling slid plates loaded with pancakes onto the counter. "Eat fast. We've got a

camping trip.”

Oliver’s eyes lit up. “With Uncle Dean and Noah and Savannah?”

“Yep.” Sterling ruffled his hair.

After breakfast, the kids scrambled out of their seats.

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“Grab your stuff. We leave in twenty minutes,” Sterling said.

The kids bolted upstairs. Nina watched them go, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “They’re getting so big,” she murmured.

I nodded. “Too fast.” I made a silent promise to enjoy the moments while they lasted. From the way the kids would curl up against Sterling’s side during movie nights, with their little hands clutching at their father’s shirt, to the way they tore through the house the same way Sterling used to tear through soccer fields. Watching them with Sterling always filled me with awe. He had come so far, from a man who’d once been afraid to let anyone in, to a father who wore his love for his children like a badge of honor.

Sterling’s hand found mine under the counter, his fingers twining with my own.

The kids tumbled back downstairs, backpacks half-zipped, excitement buzzing around them like static. Sterling herded them toward the door, pausing to press a quick kiss to my lips. “Back by sunset.”

I nodded, watching as they piled into the car, with Sterling behind the wheel, Oliver chattering nonstop, and Adeline already nodding off against the window.

Nina sighed and bumped her elbow against mine. “They’ll be fine.”

“I know,” I said, though my heart ached just a little. Tonight would be Oliver and Adeline’s first full moon with their father and uncle. Their first controlled shift under the guidance of the two men who’d taught them what it meant to be strong, to be

kind, to be themselves.

It was a milestone I'd been both dreading and anticipating. The thought of my babies shifting for the first time was overwhelming. But I trusted Sterling and Dean to guide them, to show them that their wolf sides weren't something to fear, but a part of who they were. A part that could be as beautiful and powerful as they chose to make it.

The day passed in a haze of laughter and nostalgia. By evening, the car pulled into the driveway, and Sterling stepped out with a sleeping Adeline in his arms. Oliver trailed behind, his eyes heavy but bright with excitement.

"How was it?" I whispered as Sterling laid Adeline in her bed.

He brushed a curl from her forehead. "Perfect," he murmured. There was a rawness in his voice that made my chest ache. He looked at me then, his eyes shining with something I couldn't quite name. Pride, maybe, or gratitude. "They were amazing, Ariel," he said, his voice breaking. "So brave, so strong. Watching them was like seeing a part of myself I'd spent years suppressing, but through their eyes, it was beautiful."

I reached up and brushed a tear from his cheek. "You've given them that, Sterling. You've shown them there's who they are is beautiful."

He pulled me close then and tightened his arms around my waist. "Thank you," he whispered into my hair. "For giving me this. For trusting me with them."

A lump rose in my throat. "You rewrote your story, Sterling. And it was your strength that helped me write mine."

Sterling's lips met mine, tasting of campfire and s'mores. "Our story has just begun, Ariel."

I smiled. With his arms around me and our children upstairs, I believed him.