



# Tempting the Wolf

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** He was sent to silence her. Instead, he claimed her.

Kieran Silvercrest was born to protect his pack and uphold their laws — even when those laws demanded blood. When a human researcher captures footage of him mid-shift, the command is clear: eliminate the threat. But from the moment he catches Maya Collins' scent, everything changes. She's not just the enemy. She's his. Maya thought she was chasing wolves. What she found was a hidden world—and the one man who threatens her career, her safety, and her heart. Kieran is wild, dominant, and unrelenting. But as danger closes in from both his world and hers, one truth becomes undeniable: the only thing more dangerous than a wolf shifter claiming his mate...

Is trying to run from him.

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

ONE

MAYA

Maya's fingers nimbly secured the motion-activated camera to the pine tree. Despite the fading afternoon light, her movements were precise and efficient. The golden-hour sun filtered through the dense canopy of trees surrounding the Cascade Mountains, casting dappled shadows across her freckled face. She stepped back to examine her handiwork, tucking her copper-red hair behind her ear.

"Well, that's the sixth one this week," she muttered to herself, making a notation in her weathered field journal. "If these wolves don't start giving up their secrets, I'll need to reconsider my entire research career."

The breeze rustled the pines around her, carrying the earthy scent of loam and decay. Maya inhaled deeply, feeling that familiar, inexplicable connection to these woods that had drawn her here weeks ago. Something about this particular pack had captured her attention in ways she couldn't articulate to her academic peers.

She flipped through her journal, scanning her meticulous notes and detailed sketches. The evidence was mounting, pageafter page documenting behaviors that defied conventional wolf research.

"Complex sentinel rotations," she read aloud, tracing her finger along a diagram. "Coordinated hunting patterns with deliberate diversionary tactics. Strategic territory marking that changes based on human activity."

Maya closed the journal with a snap. Her research was veering into territory that would make her colleagues raise skeptical eyebrows. She'd already faced enough academic derision when proposing her communication theory.

"Dr. Collins, wolves don't have language," she mimicked her department chair's dismissive tone. The memory made her jaw clench. "They operate on instinct, not cognition."

She checked the camera angle one final time, ensuring it covered the clearing where she'd observed multiple pack gatherings. The setting sun glinted off the lens, reminding her that darkness would soon fall.

"Well, Professor Hammond, explain how a 'mere instinct' told the alpha to station sentries in a perfect hexagonal pattern around their meeting site." Maya adjusted her heavy leather backpack filled with equipment. "Or how they've developed at least seventeen distinct vocalizations that consistently correlate with specific pack behaviors."

A twig snapped somewhere in the underbrush behind her. Maya froze, her senses immediately heightening. This deep in the forest, encounters with wildlife were expected, but caution remained prudent. She slowly turned, scanning the darkening woods.

Nothing.

She exhaled. "And now I'm jumping at shadows. Perfect."

The data she'd collected over the past weeks scrolled through her mind as she gathered her equipment. These wolves exhibited collaborative problem-solving beyond anything documented in scientific literature. They communicated across distances with a nuance that suggested complex information transfer, not just simple

warnings or location signals.

Maya crouched to examine fresh paw prints in the soft earth. "Look at the deliberate placement," she whispered, pulling out her phone to snap a quick photo. "They're not just walking—they're following a pattern."

Her scientific mind battled with observations that seemed impossible. These weren't just smart wolves. These were wolves that demonstrated something approaching human reasoning. Their pack hierarchy showed flexibility based on situation rather than rigid dominance. Even more baffling, they seemed aware of her observation, occasionally leaving what appeared to be intentional signs—like the perfectly preserved deer leg positioned directly in front of her previous camera.

The shadows lengthened around her as she packed up. That sense of being watched prickled along her spine again—more intense than usual. Maya glanced over her shoulder, her green eyes narrowing as they scanned the tree line.

"I know you're out there," she called, surprising herself with the boldness. "And sooner or later, I'll figure you out."

Maya trudged back to her van as darkness swallowed the forest. Fatigue pulled at her limbs after another twelve-hour day stalking the movements of her wolf pack. The silvery glow of the waxing moon lit her path, casting long shadows between the pines. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was being followed—had felt it for days now—but chalked it up to the natural unease of being alone in the wilderness.

Her modified Sprinter van appeared through the trees, a sanctuary of steel and comfort amid the primeval landscape. Maya had transformed the interior into a functional living space with a fold-out desk, compact kitchen, and the crown jewel—her mobile research station. The university grant hadn't covered these modifications. Those had come from her modest inheritance. Money well spent, in

her opinion.

"Home sweet temporary home," she muttered, unlocking the door and flicking on the solar-powered lights.

The familiar scent of coffee grounds and dried pine needles greeted her. She tossed her backpack onto the narrow bed and grabbed a protein bar. Dinner of champions. Her ritual after field work never varied. Download footage, analyze data, document observations, and sleep. Repeat tomorrow.

Maya settled into her ergonomic chair and plugged the memory cards into her laptop. She stretched her neck while waiting for the files to load, rubbing at the knot forming between her shoulders.

"Come on, come on," she urged the progress bar on the screen. "Show me something extraordinary."

The first thirty minutes of the camera footage—from the camera positioned near the rocky outcropping where she'd documented unusual pack gatherings—revealed nothing unusual. Deer passing, raccoons investigating her scent markers, and a juvenile wolf touching its nose curiously to the camera. Standard wildlife behavior. But then, when the thirty-first minute marker clicked by, what she saw on the screen made her sit upright instantly.

"Holy shit."

Maya's fingers froze over the keyboard. The footage showed a clearing bathed in moonlight two nights ago, during the full moon. A man walked into frame, tall and powerfully built. He moved with predatory grace, his shoulders broad beneath a dark shirt. He stopped, seeming to scent the air, before turning slightly toward the camera, completely unaware of its presence before him.

"Who the hell are you?" she whispered, leaning in closer to the screen.

The stranger's face was partially shadowed, but she could make out a strong jawline shadowed with stubble and the glint of unusually bright eyes. Then something impossible happened.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:10 am*

The man's features contorted. His back arched in what appeared to be some kind of transformation pose. His hands curled into claws as dark black hair began sprouting along his forearms. His face elongated impossibly, and his teeth visibly sharpened even in the grainy night footage.

And then—nothing. The screen went black.

"No, no, no!" Maya slapped the side of her laptop. "You have got to be kidding me!"

She rewound and replayed the footage three times. Each viewing confirmed what she'd seen—a man beginning to transform into something else. Something with fur and fangs.

"I can't believe my damn battery died!" She pushed away from the desk, pacing the narrow confines of her van. "Go figure. The one time I capture something truly extraordinary, and the equipment fails on me."

Maya's heart hammered in her chest. The rational part of her brain searched for explanations—costume, camera malfunction, elaborate hoax—while another part, a primitive instinct she rarely acknowledged, recognized the truth immediately.

"Werewolves," she breathed, the word hanging in the air between scientific impossibility and undeniable evidence. "Actual werewolves."

She returned to the screen, freezing the frame on the man's face at the moment his transformation began. Something about those eyes, silver-blue and piercing even through digital pixels, stirred a response in her that wasn't entirely professional

curiosity.

"This changes everything." Maya grabbed her journal, scribbling furiously. "If there are people who can transform into wolves... that would explain the advanced pack behaviors, the intelligence beyond normal lupine capacity, and the strategic territory marking."

Her excitement built with each connection her mind made. "I need more footage. I need to find him."

She glanced at the frozen image again, studying the man's features with new intensity. Broad shoulders, powerful build, that intriguing scar running from his temple to his jaw.

"Who are you?" she wondered aloud, her finger tracing his outline on the screen. "And what will you do when you discover I've seen what you really are?"

Maya's hands shook with excitement as she soon marked the coordinates on her topographical map, the red X stark against the green contour lines. She double-checked the position against her GPS data, matching it to the timestamp on the camera footage.

"You're not getting away that easily, Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Turns-Into-A-Wolf." Her finger traced the path she'd take tomorrow, through the dense forest to the clearing where she'd caught him on camera.

She packed methodically for tomorrow's expedition—extra memory cards, fresh batteries, her best telephoto lens, and even the night-vision monocular she rarely used. Each item went into its proper place in her field kit backpack with the precision of a surgeon preparing instruments.



"If werewolves exist, then everything I know about evolutionary biology needs serious revision." Maya tapped her pen against her journal where she'd sketched the man's face from memory. Those eyes haunted her—impossibly bright, primal yet intelligent.

She crawled into her narrow bed after setting her alarm for pre-dawn. The small space felt suddenly vulnerable, mere aluminum and insulation separating her from whatever prowled the forest. Maya pulled her sleeping bag up to her chin and stared at the roof of the van.

"What if he knows I saw him?" The question hung in the darkness. "What if he comes looking for me?"

Sleep eventually claimed her, dragging her into vivid dreams that blurred the line between terror and desire.

She stood in a moonlit clearing, mist curling around her ankles. Dark shapes emerged from the tree line—wolves with eyes that gleamed with human awareness. They circled her, drawing closer with each pass.

"Stay back," she called out, but her voice sounded small in the vast dreamscape.

The wolves snarled, showing teeth that seemed to elongate as she watched. Their bodies contorted, shifting between wolf and human forms in a fluid, impossible motion that her scientific mind both rejected and was fascinated by.

One wolf broke from the circle—larger than the others, with striking midnight black fur. It approached her with deliberate steps, its eyes the same piercing silver-blue from the camera footage.

Maya stood her ground even as her heart jackhammered against her ribs. "I'm not

afraid of you," she lied.

The wolf stopped mere inches from her. Then it changed—fur receding, limbs elongating, spine straightening—until the man from the footage stood before her. His height towered over her, his broad shoulders blocking the moonlight, casting her in his shadow.

"You should be afraid," he said, his voice deep and rich with power. He reached out, cupping her face with a hand that could easily crush her bones but instead touched her with unexpected gentleness. "You don't know what you've just done."

"I know enough," dream-Maya responded with a boldness her waking self might have lacked.

His face drew closer, those luminous eyes studying her with predatory intensity. "What makes you think I'll let you leave with that knowledge?"

"What makes you think I want to leave?"

The dream shifted. They were running together through the forest, his hand gripping hers as they darted between trees. Behind them came snarls and howls—the pack in pursuit.

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"They won't accept you," he panted. "They'll tear you apart."

"Why are you helping me?" Maya asked as they splashed through a creek.

He didn't answer. He just kept pulling her deeper into the forest.

They reached another clearing where he pulled her against his chest, one arm around her waist, the other tilting her chin up. His eyes glowed brighter now, his breath hot against her lips.

"I shouldn't want you," he growled, the sound more wolf than man.

"But you do." Maya's dream-self pressed closer, feeling the solid warmth of him.

His mouth claimed hers just as the howls grew deafening. Maya jolted awake, gasping, her body flushed and her heart racing. The dark interior of her van slowly came into focus as reality reasserted itself.

"That was..." She touched her lips, the dream kiss feeling impossibly real. "That was certainly not part of my intended research grant proposal."

TWO

KIERAN

Kieran stood by the window in his father's study, watching the morning light filter through the ancient pines surrounding the Silvercrest estate. His broad shoulders

tensed as his father Alpha Alaric paced behind him, each footfall landing with deliberate force on the hardwood floor. The familiar scent of old leather, wood smoke, and his father's distinct cedar-and-iron aroma filled the room.

"I think I was spotted." Kieran turned, squaring his shoulders as he faced his father. "Three nights ago. During the full moon."

Alpha Alaric halted mid-stride. His dark hair with silvered temples caught the morning light, giving him an almost ethereal appearance that belied the ferocity lurking beneath. "Explain."

"I was camping near the eastern ridge in Granite Ridge territory," Kieran said, his deep voice steady despite the storm building in his father's eyes. "Went for a run under the moon when I needed to clear my head. I was already shifting when I caught a flash of red light from the trees."

"A light?" his father's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "What kind of light?"

"A camera. Motion-activated, from what I could tell." Kieran ran his hand through his black hair that rested just above his shoulders, pushing it back from his face. The scar on his jaw pulled tight as he clenched his teeth. "I didn't think anyone would be out there. Hell, I've never seen cameras in those woods before."

Alpha Alaric slammed his fist against his desk, sending a stack of papers fluttering to the floor. "Your carelessness could've exposed our entire kind! Centuries of secrecy destroyed because you needed to 'clear your head'?"

"It was an accident." Kieran's silver-blue eyes flashed, his wolf stirring beneath his skin at the challenge in his father's tone. He tamped down the urge to growl—that would only escalate things. "I've run those woods a hundred times without incident. There's no reason for cameras to be out there."

"And yet they were." Alpha Alaric stalked closer, standing toe-to-toe with his son. Though Kieran matched his height, there was an undeniable power to the older wolf shifter that came from three decades as Alpha.

Kieran met his father's gaze without flinching. "The cameras must be new."

"New cameras mean new interest in our territory." Alpha Alaric turned away, his rigid movements betraying his agitation. "Human hunters, perhaps. Or worse—human scientists."

"Who would put cameras in Granite Ridge territory? It's protected land with no development plans." Kieran crossed his arms over his chest, the muscles of his forearms flexing. "It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing humans do makes sense," Alpha Alaric growled. "That's what makes them dangerous. They're unpredictable and chaotic." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "How much did the camera capture?"

Kieran considered lying but thought better of it. His father would sense the deception. "I'd already begun the shift. Face elongating, fur starting to emerge. If the footage is clear enough?—"

"Then we're exposed." Alpha Alaric closed his eyes briefly, a rare display of vulnerability. When he opened them, they were cold as winter ice. "The High Council must be informed immediately. This requires an emergency session. This incident of yours endangers the four major packs of the Pacific Northwest's Cascade Territory."

"The Council won't be pleased to be disturbed," Kieran noted, feeling a twinge of guilt for creating this situation.

"The Council's pleasure is irrelevant when our entire kind faces exposure." Alpha

Alaric retrieved his phone. "You'll accompany me to Moon Hollow. The session will be called for noon."

Kieran nodded, already calculating the quickest route to the neutral meeting grounds. His wolf paced restlessly beneath his skin, sensing the gravity of what was coming. Whoever had placed those cameras had unknowingly triggered what could become the most significant crisis their shifter kind had faced in generations.

Alpha Alaric paused, his finger hovering over his phone. "The Council will ultimately decide our course of action."

The air in Moon Hollow hung thick with tension as Kieran stood before the High Council at noon that day. Seven pairs of ancient eyes bore into him from their elevated semicircular table. Each elder represented one of the four major packs, along with three esteemed elders from their Silvercrest pack. Sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees surrounding the open-air meeting pavilion, dappling the stone floor with shifting patterns that seemed to mirror the restless energy of the wolf shifters gathered there.

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Kieran's jaw tightened as his father finished recounting the incident. Kieran kept his posture rigid, his shoulders squared, refusing to show weakness despite the weight of judgment pressing down heavily on him.

"So," Elder Isolde of the Shadow Pack broke the silence, her silver-streaked hair cascading over her narrow shoulders, "the Silvercrest heir has potentially exposed us all because he needed to stretch his wolf legs under the full moon."

Kieran met her intense gaze with his own. "I accept full responsibility for my carelessness."

"Responsibility won't erase footage that could destroy centuries of secrecy," Elder Thorne of the Granite Ridge Pack growled, his voice rough as the mountain territory his pack claimed. "What exactly did the camera capture?"

"The beginning stages of my transformation," Kieran replied, his deep voice carrying across the hollow. "Enough to raise questions, not enough to provide conclusive proof."

"Even suspicion is dangerous," Elder Merrick of the Tidewater Pack leaned forward, the beads woven into his beard clicking softly. "Humans with their technology are more dangerous than any hunters of old. They'll dissect the footage, enhance it, and analyze it until they find exactly what they're looking for."

Alpha Alaric stepped forward, his presence commanding the space. "The solution is clear. We must eliminate the threat."

The word 'eliminate' echoed in Kieran's mind, causing his wolf to stir uneasily beneath his skin.

"The human with the camera must be silenced," Alpha Alaric continued, his authoritative voice filling the hollow. "Permanently."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the Council. Kieran's blood ran cold despite the warmth of the day.

"I agree," Elder Isolde nodded. "We've maintained our secrecy through far worse threats by taking decisive action."

"A human life weighed against the safety of all shifter kind is no contest," Elder Thorne added.

Before the Council could continue their grim deliberation, Kieran stepped forward. "I'll handle it."

The elders fell silent, evaluating him with renewed interest.

"This was my mistake," Kieran continued, his silver-blue eyes intensifying as he addressed the Council directly. "I'll track down the camera owner and contain the situation. Alone."

Alpha Alaric scowled. "This isn't a training exercise, Kieran. The threat must be eliminated."

Kieran locked eyes with his father. "And it will be. By my hand." The challenge in his voice was subtle but unmistakable, a reminder that while he might not yet be Alpha, he wasn't a subordinate to be dismissed.



The Head Elder, Callum of the Silvercrest Pack, leaned forward. "You're volunteering for a containment mission against an unknown human threat?"

"Yes." Kieran's voice carried no hesitation. "It was my error that created this situation. I won't risk anyone else cleaning up my mess."

The elders exchanged glances, their silent communication honed by decades of leadership.

"Very well," Elder Callum finally spoke. "The Silvercrest heir will handle the human witness. The evidence must be destroyed and the threat eliminated. That is our ruling."

As the meeting adjourned, Kieran's thoughts churned beneath his impassive expression. The casual way they'd ordered a human's death disturbed him more than he cared to admit. Who was this person with the camera? A hiker? A researcher? Did they deserve to die simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

He'd spent those two years traveling among other supernatural communities far away, seeing firsthand that coexistence was possible. The old ways—the swift, merciless elimination of threats—seemed increasingly archaic. Barbaric, even.

Yet here he stood, tasked with murder by the very Council he would someday need to work with when he became Alpha. The irony wasn't lost on him that his father, who preached pack loyalty above all else, seemed coldly indifferent to killing someone who likely had family and friends—a pack of their own.

Kieran flexed his hands, feeling the power in them. He would find this human, yes. But what he'd do after that... he wasn't as certain as he'd led the Council to believe.

Kieran stalked away from Moon Hollow, the weight of the Council's decree hanging

heavy on his shoulders. The forest around him blurred into a green haze as his mind churned with conflicting thoughts.

"Eliminate the threat," he muttered under his breath, kicking at a fallen branch. The wood splintered beneath the force of his boot. "As if killing is the only solution we have."

His father's rigid stance on humans had been drilled into him since childhood. Humans were dangerous. Unpredictable. Enemies to be avoided or eliminated. Never allies. Never friends. Certainly never mates.

And yet, during his two years of self-imposed exile, Kieran had witnessed vampire covens with human servants who knew their masters' true nature. He'd seen fae who openly practiced magic in special human nightclubs. Hell, even the selkie colonies along the eastern coast occasionally revealed themselves to select human partners.

"Why are we the only ones still hiding in the shadows?" Kieran's voice echoed through the empty forest. His wolf prickled under his skin, sensing his agitation.

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The solitude that had once felt natural now seemed stifling. In the Silvercrest pack, every interaction was layered with politics and hierarchy. Every conversation carefully constructed to maintain order. What would it be like, he wondered, to speak freely with someone who had no expectations of him? Someone who didn't see him as the future Alpha, but simply as Kieran?

"Damn it," he growled, pushing his hair back. "I'm not going to become my father."

The certainty of that thought surprised him. For so long, he'd accepted that becoming Alpha meant becoming like his father—cold, calculating, and ruthless. The crown and the man were inseparable. Or so he'd been taught.

As he approached the clearing where he'd shifted three nights ago, Kieran's senses heightened. The forest smelled different today—pine and earth and something else. Something that hadn't been there before, or at least not this strong.

A human scent. Female. Fresh.

Kieran froze, inhaling deeply. The scent hit him like an electric shock, shooting straight to his core and settling low in his belly. His wolf lurched forward in his mind, suddenly alert and interested in a way that Kieran had never experienced.

"What the hell?" he whispered, his voice rougher than before.

He tracked the scent to the remains of a small camera mounted to a tree—now in pieces on the forest floor. Someone had been here recently. Very recently.

Following the trail deeper into the woods, Kieran moved with predatory silence. Each breath brought more of that intoxicating scent—vanilla and jasmine and something uniquely her. His chest tightened as if an invisible thread was pulling him forward, drawing him toward its source.

The realization slammed into him with the force of a physical blow.

"It can't be," he murmured, but his wolf knew better. This pull and instant connection meant only one thing.

A mate. His mate. A human.

The absurdity of it would have made him laugh if he wasn't so shaken. His father would sooner disown him than accept a human daughter-in-law. The Council would see it as further evidence of his unfitness to lead.

Yet the pull remained, undeniable and powerful.

Kieran crested a small hill and finally spotted her—a woman kneeling beside a fallen log, scribbling something in a notebook. Her copper-red hair caught the sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a halo effect around her pale face. She wore practical hiking clothes, a worn leather backpack at her side.

The sight of her sent another shock wave through his system. His wolf howled within him, recognizing what his human side was still struggling to accept.

"Eliminate the witness," his father had suggested. The Council had agreed.

Kieran's hands clenched into fists. No. He couldn't kill her. He wouldn't. But he couldn't let her expose their kind either.

His cabin in the remote reaches of Granite Ridge territory flashed through his mind. Isolated. A place where he could keep her safe while figuring out what the hell to do about this impossible situation.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, watching her from the shadows, already formulating his plan. "But I need to know who you are... and what this feeling means."

### THREE

#### MAYA

The insistent beeping of Maya's alarm sliced through her dreams at 5 AM sharp. For once, she didn't resent the early hour. When her eyes fluttered open, her mind already started to race with possibilities as the camera footage played on repeat in her mind—a man starting to transform into a wolf. Not a costume. Not a camera trick. A literal transformation.

"This is either career-making or career-ending," she muttered, swinging her legs over the side of the cramped bed in her research van.

She dressed quickly in her practical clothes—worn dark hiking pants, navy thermal shirt, and her lucky army-green field jacket with a multitude of pockets. Her fingers traced over the small wolf embroidered on the collar, a gift she'd given herself after receiving her PhD.

"Today's the day I find you," she whispered, whether to the embroidered wolf or the shapeshifter from her footage, she wasn't entirely certain.

She finished packing her field kit methodically—notebook, pencils, small specimen containers, compass, high-resolution camera, water, protein bars, and the small silver pendant her grandmother had pressed into her palm years ago with those cryptic

words about the deep woods. Maya had always dismissed it as superstitious nonsense, but today, the pendant felt important somehow.

The hike took longer than anticipated. By the time she reached the clearing where she'd set up the motion-activated camera that captured that strange man, golden morning sunlight filtered through the trees. Nearly 9 AM—later than she'd planned.

"What the hell?"

The camera lay in pieces at the base of the tree, clearly destroyed with purpose rather than by accident or animal. Maya knelt beside the fragments, picking up the shattered lens.

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"Someone really doesn't want to be on camera." Her scientific mind cataloged the destruction, while a small voice whispered that perhaps her grandmother's warnings held more truth than she'd credited. "Was it you, wolf-man?"

For the next hour, Maya scoured the clearing, methodically documenting every irregular mark, every broken twig, and every footprint that might tell her something about the visitor who'd destroyed her equipment. The scientist in her remained clinical, but something deeper, more primal, sent occasional shivers up her spine despite the warming day.

Finding nothing conclusive, she ventured deeper into the forest, compelled by a strange certainty that answers lay ahead. The scientific part of her brain tried to convince her that the footage must have a rational explanation—a hoax, perhaps, or a trick of the light. But she knew what she'd seen.

As she walked, last night's dream resurfaced unbidden—a vivid fantasy of silver-blue eyes and strong hands. A dream-kiss that had felt so real she'd woken with her lips tingling.

"Focus," she chided herself, her cheeks warming. "No time for ridiculous fantasies when there's literal werewolves to study."

After several hours of hiking, Maya froze. Through the trees, nestled among natural formations that camouflaged their presence, she spotted what appeared to be homes. Not the rough cabins of off-grid enthusiasts, but impressive structures that somehow blended perfectly with their surroundings. Further along, a larger building stood with people outside of it—people who moved with a fluid grace that immediately struck

her as familiar.

Maya slipped behind a large pine, notebook in hand, and began documenting their movements. The way they communicated with subtle head tilts and body postures. The clear hierarchy evident in how they interacted. The territorial way they patrolled the perimeter.

"Those aren't human behaviors," she whispered, excitement making her hands tremble as she sketched a quick outline of what appeared to be a security or medical center. "That's pack behavior."

One particular man caught her attention—tall, broad-shouldered, and commanding. The others clearly deferred to him with subtle nods and gestures that Maya recognized instantly from her years studying wolf packs. An alpha, in a human body.

"Impossible," she breathed, even as the evidence mounted before her eyes.

She pushed a branch aside for a better view, becoming completely transfixed by the display of wolf pack dynamics in human form. Her fingers itched to document every interaction, and every subtle head tilt and body posture that confirmed her wildest theories. This was it—proof of something revolutionary.

The crack of a twig behind her came a millisecond before a large hand clamped over her mouth. A muscular arm wrapped around her waist like an iron band, pinning her against a rock-solid chest.

"Don't move. Don't scream." The voice was low and commanding—a rumble that vibrated through her back where it pressed against his torso.

Something electric shot through Maya's body at the contact—a jolt that started where his skin touched hers and radiated outward in waves of heat. It wasn't fear, though



fear certainly pulsed beneath it. This was something primal, something her body recognized even if her mind couldn't comprehend it.

Instinctively, she turned her head slightly to glimpse at her captor, and her breath caught. Silver-blue eyes—bright, almost luminous—bore into hers from a face sculpted with harsh angles and shadowed by dark stubble. A jagged scar ran from his right temple to his jaw, somehow enhancing rather than detracting from his fierce attractiveness. Recognition slammed into her.

"You're him," she whispered against his palm. "The wolf."

His eyes narrowed, flashing brighter. "And you're the camera woman."

The heat lingering in her veins transformed into panic. This man—this creature—had most likely destroyed her equipment. What would he do to the woman who'd witnessed the start of his transformation?

Maya drove her elbow back hard into his ribs. He grunted but didn't loosen his hold. She stomped on his instep next, twisting to create leverage, and managed to break free enough to spin and land a solid punch to his jaw.

"Damn it," he growled, his eyes flashing electric blue. "You'll bring the entire patrol down on us."

Rather than escalating, he somehow moved with liquid precision, catching her mid-swing on her second punch. His fingers encircled her wrist, and that same inexplicable current raced up her arm. Maya gasped, momentarily disoriented by the sensation—like recognition on a cellular level.

"What are you doing to me?" she demanded, hating how breathy her voice sounded.

His expression shifted, revealing a flash of confusion that mirrored her own before hardening again. "I'm not doing anything. Yet."

With supernatural speed, he pulled her against him, one arm locked around her waist while the other reached into his jacket pocket. Maya struggled, simultaneously terrified and fascinated by the inhuman strength in his hold—a hold that, despite its firmness, seemed carefully calibrated not to hurt her.

"I can't let you expose us." His breath was warm against her neck, his voice almost regretful. "I'm sorry about this."

A sharp sting in her neck made Maya jerk. "What did you—" Her tongue suddenly felt thick, her thoughts fuzzy at the edges. "No fair... I had... questions..."

As her knees buckled, he caught her with surprising gentleness, sweeping her up into arms that felt bizarrely safe despite everything. Maya fought the encroaching darkness, desperate to stay conscious. The world tilted as he began walking, carrying her deeper into the forest, away from the settlement.

"You're... really strong," she mumbled, her scientist's brain still cataloging data even as consciousness slipped away. "Fascinating muscle... density..."

The last thing she registered was a rumbling chuckle against her cheek and those silver-blue eyes looking down at her with an unsettlingly complex emotion.

"Rest now. We have much to discuss when you wake up."

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The forest canopy blurred above her as darkness claimed her completely.

Consciousness returned to Maya in stages, her senses waking before her mind caught up. First came a woodsy scent—pine, cedar, and something wild and masculine that tugged at a primitive part of her brain. Next, the rough texture of handwoven blankets against her skin. Then, the dull throb at the injection site on her neck.

Her eyelids slowly fluttered open to find herself in a small bed tucked into the corner of what looked to be a one-room cabin. Maya's throat felt like sandpaper, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth as she tried to swallow. The lingering effects of whatever sedative he'd used made her head swim when she attempted to sit up.

Outside the small window across the room, darkness had fallen completely. Stars glittered in a velvet sky unimpeded by light pollution. Six, maybe seven hours since her capture, she calculated, noting the moon's position. Her scientific mind continued functioning despite her predicament.

Maya scanned her surroundings methodically. The cabin was simple but not uncomfortable—more like intentional minimalism. A small kitchenette occupied one corner with basic appliances and a wooden counter. The living area consisted of a worn leather sofa, a rug that looked handwoven, and a stone fireplace where embers glowed. Bookshelves lined one wall, surprisingly full.

Not what I expected from a werewolf bachelor pad, she thought, the absurdity of her situation hitting her. A small hysterical laugh bubbled up in her chest which she quickly suppressed.

Her gaze caught on a half-carved piece of wood abandoned on a side table, the knife beside it gleaming in the low light. Tools of his human side. How fascinating. How terrifying.

That's when she noticed him.

He sat in a leather armchair positioned strategically between her and the cabin's only door, those extraordinary silver-blue eyes watching her with predatory intensity. In the dim light cast by the dying fire, shadows accentuated the sharp planes of his face. He hadn't moved or spoken—just observed her with unnerving focus.

His legs were spread wide, claiming space with the unconscious dominance of an apex predator. One hand rested on the armrest, the fingers long and powerful, while the other held a small wooden figure he'd been carving. His black henley stretched across his chest, revealing the muscular physique that had so easily overpowered her in the forest.

A frisson of something that wasn't entirely fear traveled up Maya's spine.

The surreal reality of her situation crashed over her. She'd been kidnapped by a shapeshifter—a biological impossibility according to everything she'd ever been taught. She should be terrified and planning her escape right now. Instead, her mind buzzed with questions, observations, and hypotheses.

What's your body temperature when you're in human form? Is the transformation painful? Do you maintain human consciousness in wolf form? Is it genetic or viral? Are there others besides the ones I saw?

Questions piled up behind her lips, but she bit them back. First, she needed to understand her situation. Was she a prisoner? A threat to be eliminated? Why bring her here instead of simply killing her in the forest?

Maya glanced toward the door, calculating distance and probability. As if reading her thoughts, his posture shifted subtly—a silent warning. His eyes flashed brighter for an instant, reminding her that she wasn't dealing with a normal man.

This was the predator she'd spent her career studying—just wrapped in human packaging. Dangerous, unpredictable, and utterly fascinating.

## FOUR

### KIERAN

Kieran remained motionless in his chair, the wooden wolf figure half-carved between his fingers forgotten as he watched her wake. The sedative had worked precisely as expected—six hours of unconsciousness, just enough time to bring her to his sanctuary and prepare. The cabin's single room felt smaller somehow with her in it, as if her presence expanded to fill every corner.

She sat up slowly, those remarkable green eyes—flecked with gold like sunlight through forest leaves—taking inventory of his space. Kieran felt an unexpected vulnerability as she studied his belongings. Each item she noticed seemed to expose another piece of him. The worn leather of his favorite chair he was sitting in now, the carefully arranged first-edition books on his bookshelves against the wall, and the unfinished carving he'd been working on to calm his thoughts while she was asleep.

This was his refuge—the one place where he wasn't Kieran Silvercrest, heir to the Silvercrest Alpha. Just Kieran. And now she was here, disrupting everything.

The pull in his chest intensified as her gaze finally found him. Six hours of watching over her unconscious form had only confirmed what his wolf already knew the moment he caught her scent in the forest. Mate. The recognition hummed in his blood with primal certainty.

He'd spent years dismissing his father's lectures about finding a suitable female from an allied pack. Years deflecting the not-so-subtle matchmaking attempts from pack elders. Years ignoring the emptiness that plagued him even surrounded by his people.

And now his mate turned out to be human. A human who'd surely witnessed him shift, no less.

The corner of Kieran's mouth twitched at the memory of her fierce resistance when he'd captured her. She'd landed a solid right hook to his jaw—a jaw that had withstood blows from fully shifted Alphas. He'd been more surprised than hurt, but the audacity of it... No one challenged him that way. No one dared.

She had no idea who he was, and what power he wielded in his world. The realization was strangely freeing.

Her eyes narrowed as she assessed him, probably reasoning why she was here and calculating escape options. Kieran shifted his weight slightly, a subtle reminder of his position between her and the door. Her gaze flicked toward the window instead, as if measuring distance and drop height.

Clever little thing, aren't you?

Something flickered in those green eyes—not fear, but curiosity. Scientific interest rather than self-preservation. That was... unexpected. Dangerous yet fascinating.

The scent of her filled his nostrils—earth and wildflowers with a hint of vanilla. Clean, natural, and perfect. His wolf strained beneath his skin, desperate to claim, to mark, and to protect.

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Kieran suppressed a growl. He had to be careful. She was human. Fragile. And yet the beast inside him recognized her on a level deeper than conscious thought.

The protocol was clear—eliminate the threat. But the moment he caught her sweet scent in that forest, everything had changed. The magnetic pull, the electric recognition, and the sense of rightness that penetrated to his bones... it couldn't be denied.

Kieran's wolf howled silently. Mine.

The silence in the cabin snapped like a tripwire.

"Who the hell are you, and why did you kidnap me?" Her voice filled the room, sharp as a blade. "I saw you on my footage. You were changing—into a wolf. What are you? Some kind of experiment? Military project? And what exactly do you plan to do with me now?"

Kieran's eyebrows rose slightly at the barrage of questions. His wolf stirred, intrigued by her fierceness. Most humans cowered in the presence of predators, even when they didn't consciously recognize them as such. Yet here she was, her copper hair catching the dying firelight from his fireplace, challenging him with those remarkable green eyes.

"One question at a time," Kieran said, his voice deliberately calm, a counterpoint to her intensity. He set the half-carved wolf figurine aside and leaned forward. "My name is Kieran Silvercrest. My family has lived in these mountains for generations."

"That's not what I asked." She crossed her arms, her jaw set in defiance. The subtle flex of her forearms suggested she was calculating how hard she'd need to hit him to gain advantage. "I saw you. On my camera."

Kieran maintained his steady gaze. "You saw a man walking in the woods at night. Nothing more."

"I know what I saw." Her chin lifted, revealing the elegant line of her throat. "The footage shows you beginning to transform."

"Cameras malfunction." He shrugged one broad shoulder. "Especially in this remote location."

"So you're denying it?" Her eyes narrowed, challenging him openly. "I'm a scientist. I trust evidence, not convenient explanations."

The corners of Kieran's mouth quirked up. She was smart—dangerously so. His wolf preened at the idea of a worthy mate, one who wouldn't be easily deceived or controlled.

"I brought you here because you were trespassing," he deflected. "These lands aren't open to the public. We don't take kindly to strangers setting up surveillance equipment on our property."

Her freckles stood out against her pale skin as she flushed with indignation. "I wasn't on private property. I checked the land surveys."

"You checked wrong." Kieran stood, unfolding his tall frame slowly, a deliberate display of physical dominance. The move brought him closer to her, and the scent of her—wildflowers and determination—hit him harder. "Your turn. Who are you?"



Their proximity seemed to register with her, but she didn't cower. Instead, she leaned her weight forward slightly on the bed, as if accepting his unspoken challenge.

"Dr. Maya Collins. I have a PhD in Wildlife Biology specializing in wolf pack dynamics and communication patterns." Her voice took on a different quality when she spoke of her work—passion threading through the anger. "I've been tracking unusual wolf packs in these mountains for several weeks."

Unusual wolf packs. Kieran nearly laughed aloud. If only she knew she was looking at the son of one of the Alphas she'd been studying.

"And what makes them unusual, Dr. Collins?" He couldn't resist asking, amused by the irony.

"Their behavior is too sophisticated." Her eyes lit up, professional excitement momentarily replacing her wariness of him. "Their pack dynamics show almost human-like decision-making patterns. They're displaying intelligence beyond anything documented in scientific literature."

Kieran bit back a smile. She was describing pack meetings and territory patrols, seeing only the shadow of his world projected against her human understanding. The wolf inside him rumbled with satisfaction at her unwitting compliment.

"Fascinating theory," he said, stepping closer still, deliberately invading her space. "Except wolves are just wolves. Maybe you're seeing what you want to see."

"I don't make that mistake." Her breathing quickened, but she held her ground. "I record observable facts. And one of those facts is that you were turning into something not human on my camera."

The tension between them crackled like static electricity. He was close enough now

that he could count each freckle scattered across her nose, and close enough that his heightened senses could detect the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

"You should be more careful about the conclusions you draw, Maya," he said, her name rolling off his tongue like something to be savored. "There are things in these mountains older and more dangerous than scientific curiosity."

Maya rose up on her knees on the bed, bringing herself nearly eye-level with him. The movement was bold and deliberate—a challenge he found both infuriating and intoxicating.

"And you should be more careful about who you kidnap, Kieran," she fired back, her voice low and steady.

The sound of his name on her lips sent a jolt through him that was almost physical. Her scent intensified with her defiance—wild and untamed—and his wolf surged forward, demanding he claim what was his. Kieran clenched his jaw, fighting back the primal instinct to pull her against him and to press his mouth to hers, and taste the fire he sensed beneath her cool exterior.

Six generations of Alpha blood roared in his veins, urging him to dominate and to possess. With supreme effort, he leashed the beast within, though his eyes flashed silver for the briefest moment before he regained control.

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"You must be hungry," he said, deliberately changing course. "You've been unconscious for six hours."

Her eyes widened slightly. "What the hell did you give me?"

"Something harmless. Something that ensured you wouldn't remember the route here." Kieran stepped back, needing distance before he did something irreversible. "I brought your backpack. It seemed important to you."

Relief flickered across her face, softening her defiant posture. "Where is it?"

Kieran gestured to the worn leather bag he'd placed carefully on his desk. He'd noticed how she'd instinctively reached for it even as she started to lose consciousness. Something protective had stirred in him then—a strange, unfamiliar desire to preserve what mattered to her.

"Thank you," she said, the first words without challenge behind them. "My research notes are in there. My observations."

"Your theories about wolves who aren't just wolves?" He couldn't help the slight smirk that tugged at his mouth.

She narrowed her eyes. "My evidence."

Kieran moved to the small kitchenette tucked into the corner of his cabin. The urge to provide for her hit him with unexpected force—a deep, primal need to demonstrate his ability to care for her needs. He'd never felt this with anyone before, this bone-

deep impulse to protect and nourish.

"Turkey or ham?" he asked, pulling bread from a small cabinet.

"I... turkey, I guess."

He assembled the sandwich with precise movements, aware of her eyes tracking him. His wolf preened under her attention, showing off as he sliced the bread with a hunting knife he kept razor-sharp.

"I brew my own beer," he said, nodding toward a bottle on the counter. "But water might be better after the sedative."

"Drugging me and then offering refreshments." Maya's voice carried a sardonic edge. "Such a thoughtful kidnapper."

Kieran turned, sandwich plate in one hand, water bottle in the other. "I prefer to think of it as protective custody."

"Is that what you call abduction where you come from?" She hadn't moved from her kneeling position on the bed, still maintaining that small height advantage. The stubborn tilt of her chin stirred something primal in him.

"Where I come from, trespassing has more severe consequences than a nap and a sandwich." He set both items on the small table beside the bed, close enough for her to reach but not crowding her space.

She eyed the food but didn't immediately take it. Smart. Cautious.

"I didn't poison it," he said, reading her hesitation. "If I wanted you dead, I wouldn't waste my food."

Her eyes met his, searching for truth. "Why am I here, Kieran? Really? If this is about the cameras, I can remove them."

The genuine confusion in her voice punched through his defenses. She truly had no idea what she'd stumbled into—or what she was to him. The revelation should have simplified things, but instead, it complicated everything. How could he explain that by shifter law, she should be dead, but by something older and deeper than law, she was his?

"Eat," he said, the command instinctive. His voice softened as he added, "We have a lot to discuss, and it will go better if you're not hungry."

FIVE

MAYA

Maya eyed the turkey sandwich as if it might leap from the plate and bite her. Her stomach growled, betraying her body's true needs despite her mind's suspicions.

Before she could argue with Kieran any further, a shrill ring cut through the cabin's stillness. Kieran's expression transformed instantly as he pulled a cell phone from his pocket. His commanding demeanor cracked, revealing something Maya hadn't expected—fear.

"I need to take this," he said, his jaw tightening. "Eat your sandwich and drink the water. It'll help with the aftereffects of the sedative."

He crossed to the fireplace, his shoulders rigid as he turned his back to her. "Yes?" His voice lowered to a dangerous whisper, but in the small cabin, she caught fragments. "No, I said I'd handle it... You gave me until..."

Maya lifted the sandwich, inhaling the scent of smoked turkey and fresh bread. Her stomach contracted painfully, reminding her she hadn't eaten since her granola bar at sunrise. Kidnapping aside, scientific excitement had consumed her morning and early afternoon until this... situation... had developed.

She took a cautious bite, reasoning that if he'd wanted her dead, he wouldn't have bothered with the whole abduction routine. The flavors exploded on her tongue, reminding her body how desperately it needed sustenance.

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While chewing, she analyzed her surroundings with renewed clarity. One small window, firmly sealed. One door. No convenient air ducts or secret passages—just a spartan, efficient space that somehow managed to feel like an extension of the man himself.

Think, Maya. What would an apex predator do?

Her gaze swept over the cabin's interior again. Bookshelves lined one wall—first editions, based on their leather bindings. Handcrafted wooden figurines stood sentinel on a rough-hewn mantle. The half-carved wolf he'd been working on when she awoke caught her eye—the detail was extraordinary, capturing movement and power in static wood.

"I don't care what Alpha Alaric says," Kieran hissed into the phone, his broad back tense beneath his black henley. "That's not how I operate."

Alpha Alaric? Maya filed the name away, building her mental dossier. Knowledge was power, and right now, she needed every advantage.

Her scientific mind still rebelled at the reality she'd glimpsed on that video. Men didn't turn into wolves. Except, apparently, they did. And one of them had kidnapped her and was now feeding her sandwiches while having tense conversations about... what? Her? The cameras? The fact that she had evidence that could upend scientific understanding and expose whatever secret community existed in these mountains?

The strangest part wasn't even the whole wolf thing. It was her body's inexplicable reaction to him. Even now, watching him from across the room, something electric

hummed beneath her skin. When he'd stood close, she'd caught his scent—pine and mountain air and something deeper and more primal. It had sent heat spiraling through her core, a reaction so visceral and immediate it defied her normally rational nature.

It's just biology, she told herself firmly. He's objectively attractive, and your body is responding to pheromones. Nothing more.

But that didn't explain the strange pull she felt, as if invisible threads connected them across the room. She'd never experienced anything like it—not with colleagues, not with previous partners, not with anyone.

"I expect the Council to keep their word," Kieran's voice hardened.

Council? Maya's pulse quickened. So, there was organization and structure to whatever community he belonged to. How many were there? Was an entire shadow society of wolf-people living alongside humans, undetected by science?

The academic treasure trove this represented momentarily distracted her from her predicament. What a paper this would make—if she lived to write it.

Kieran's shoulders stiffened further. "That wasn't our agreement." His voice contained a rumbling undertone that raised goosebumps on her arms. "Tell Alpha Alaric I need more time. Tell him that she is proving difficult to find."

She. Difficult to find? But he already found her. A chill raced down Maya's spine. They were discussing her, and he was hiding information from them. But why?

Maya set down the half-eaten sandwich. The need to escape crystallized with sudden clarity. Whether Kieran claimed this was "protective custody" or not, the phone conversation confirmed her instinct—there were others involved, others who had



plans for her, plans Kieran might not entirely agree with but was bound to by some hierarchy.

Her eyes darted to the door. One exit. One very large, very fast, very not-entirely-human obstacle between her and freedom.

The sensible approach would be to gather more information, and to understand exactly what she was dealing with. But instinct screamed that time was running out. Whatever tenuous protection Kieran's "custody" offered might vanish with his next phone call.

Maya swallowed hard and reached for the water bottle, her mind racing through scenarios as she took a sip of water. Her hiking boots sat by the door, perfectly positioned for a quick grab. Her backpack with her research was on his desk—could she reach both in time?

"I told you, I'm going to handle this my way," Kieran growled into the phone, his back still turned.

Now or never.

Maya set the water bottle down without a sound and slid off the bed. Her sock-covered feet made no noise on the wooden floor as she crept forward, every muscle tense and her heart hammering in her chest. She'd spent countless hours stalking wildlife—now those skills might save her life.

Kieran's voice dropped lower, something guttural entering his tone as he argued with whoever was on the other end of the line. "I said I'd take care of it."

Six steps to the desk. Four to the door beyond it. Maya moved with the precise control of someone accustomed to fieldwork, where one misplaced footstep could

scatter your research subjects.

Her fingers closed around her backpack strap. The worn leather was comfortingly familiar against her palm.

Another step.

"No, Damon?—"

Maya lunged for the door, yanking her backpack with her. Her fingers closed around the metal doorknob, cold against her sweating palm. She twisted it, feeling the mechanism give, a burst of triumph flooding her veins?—

A large hand slammed against the door above her head, holding it firmly shut. Heat radiated from the body suddenly pressed against her back, and Maya's breath caught in her throat.

"Going somewhere, Dr. Collins?" Kieran's voice was dangerously soft against her ear.

Maya spun around, her back pressed against the door, clutching her backpack against her chest like a shield. Kieran's arms caged her, one palm flat against the door on either side of her head. His silver-blue eyes had taken on an unearthly glow, his pupils slightly elongated in a way that wasn't quite human.

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"Let me go," she demanded, but her voice betrayed her with a slight tremor.

"I can't do that." His gaze dropped to her lips, lingering there as something shifted in his expression—the predatory hunger tempered by something else, something almost vulnerable.

Maya's entire body hummed with an electricity she couldn't explain. His proximity sent waves of heat cascading through her, awakening parts of herself she'd long ignored in favor of academic pursuit. The scientific portion of her mind frantically cataloged responses—elevated heart rate, dilated pupils (both his and, she suspected, her own), shallow breathing—while another, more primal part simply registered—want.

"What is this?" she whispered, the question encompassing everything—her abduction, the wolves, the video, and most confusingly, the inexplicable magnetic pull between them.

Kieran's chest rose and fell against hers, his heart beating as wildly as her own. She could feel the rhythm of it, strong and fast, like he'd run miles instead of merely crossing a room. His scent enveloped her—pine and earth and that undefinable musk that made her knees weaken.

"I don't entirely know yet," he admitted, his voice rough. "I've never—" He stopped, seeming unable to finish the thought.

They stood frozen in tableau, their breaths mingling, neither advancing nor retreating, caught in a moment of perfect tension. Maya's gaze traced the scar that ran down his

face, wondering what battle had marked him. Her fingers itched to touch it and to map the topography of his face with scientific precision—and something far less analytical.

A heartbeat passed. Two. Three.

Kieran stepped back abruptly, breaking the spell. The cool air rushed between them, and Maya felt bereft in a way that made no rational sense.

"Go back to the bed." His command held no room for argument, though something unsteady lurked beneath the authoritative tone.

Maya's feet moved before her brain caught up, carrying her back to the bed as if pulled by invisible strings. She perched on its edge, still clutching her backpack, watching as Kieran remained by the door, his broad shoulders taut with what looked like painful restraint.

"What are you planning on doing with me?" she asked, hating how breathless she sounded.

Kieran's jaw worked, the muscles there jumping with tension. "I haven't decided yet."

The metallic scrape of the key turning in the lock resonated through Maya's body like a death knell to her freedom. Kieran dragged a small wooden chair across the floor, its legs scratching against the wooden planks, and planted it firmly in front of the door. He sat down with deliberate slowness, crossing his arms over his broad chest, his eyes never leaving hers.

Maya held her backpack tighter against her chest, the familiar weight of her research journals and field equipment offering little comfort now. Her heart still hammered erratically from their encounter by the door—not from fear alone, but from something

far more confusing.

"That was a spectacularly bad idea," Kieran said, his voice deceptively soft despite the steel underneath. "I wouldn't try it again."

Maya lifted her chin. "What do you expect? You've kidnapped me and locked me in a remote cabin. Of course I tried to escape."

"And yet..." His eyes—those impossible silver-blue eyes—narrowed slightly. "Your heart wasn't fully committed to leaving, was it?"

Heat flooded Maya's cheeks. He was right, and that was the most infuriating part. Even as she'd grabbed the doorknob, something inside her had hesitated, and had almost welcomed his intervention.

"That's absurd," she snapped, though the tremor in her voice betrayed her. "I don't know what kind of Stockholm syndrome you think you're inducing, but my biology degree tells me?—"

"Your biology degree." Kieran's laugh was low and rich, sending an unwelcome shiver through her. "Dr. Collins, there are things in these mountains your textbooks never covered."

Maya's fingers dug deeper into the worn leather of her backpack. "Like men who turn into wolves?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Among other things."

The silence stretched between them, electric with possibilities. Maya's scientific mind scrambled for explanations, for categories and classifications to make sense of this new reality—and of her own inexplicable reactions to this man.

"This connection between us," she ventured finally, unable to stop herself. "Is that part of your... abilities? Some kind of pheromone or biological manipulation?"

Kieran's expression shifted, a flicker of surprise crossing his features before he masked it. "You feel it too."

It wasn't a question. Maya swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry. "I'm trying to understand it scientifically."

"Some things exist beyond science." He leaned forward slightly, and despite the distance between them, Maya felt the movement as if he'd touched her. "What you're feeling—what we're both feeling—there's a word for it in my world."

"And what world is that, exactly?" Maya asked, desperate to steer the conversation toward facts, data, anything but the molten heat pooling in her body whenever his gaze lingered on her.

Kieran's lips curved into a smile that was both predatory and, somehow, sad. "A world you stumbled into by accident, and one that might not let you go."

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Maya's breath caught. "Was that a threat?"

"No. A reality." He uncrossed his arms, his posture still alert but less rigid. "I haven't decided what to do with you yet because there are no good options. The Council wants—" He stopped abruptly.

"Wants what?" Maya leaned forward, her scientific curiosity momentarily overwhelming her fear. "To silence me? To make sure I don't reveal your existence?"

"They have traditional methods for handling humans who discover us." His voice was flat now, emotionless.

"And those methods are?"

Kieran's silence was answer enough. The implications sent a chill through her that momentarily doused the inexplicable heat their proximity generated.

"So why am I still alive then?" she whispered. "Why bring me here instead of... whatever it is your Council wants?"

Something raw and conflicted passed across Kieran's face. "Because the moment I caught your scent, everything changed."

SIX

KIERAN

The small cabin suddenly felt like a cage—not for Maya, but for Kieran, as the weight of his father's expectations, shifter law, and this new, overwhelming instinct collided within him.

Maya stared back at him, her eyes wide with confusion and growing fear, her fingers tightening around her worn leather backpack. The copper highlights in her red hair caught the cabin's low light as it cascaded past her shoulders. She'd pushed herself further back on his bed, her thermal-clad shoulders pressed against the wall.

Kieran's wolf clawed at his insides, demanding he cross the room and claim what was his. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the seat of the wooden chair he was sitting on as he fought the urge.

Mate. Mine. Protect.

The primitive thoughts crashed against years of rigid training and traditional beliefs. His father would never accept this. A human mate for the future Alpha? Unthinkable. Alaric Silvercrest would sooner banish him from the Silvercrest pack—or worse, eliminate the "problem" his own way.

Damon's warning echoed in his mind. "Your father's patience is running out. He wants the human dealt with tonight. He's talking about sending enforcers if you don't report back with confirmation soon."

Kieran had barely contained his growl. "Tell Alpha Alaric I need more time. Tell him that she is proving difficult to find."

"He's not buying it, Kieran. You've never failed to track anything in your life."

"Just buy me time."



"What aren't you telling me, Kieran?"

Before Kieran could tell Damon the truth, that Maya was something more than just a human witness, Kieran had to end the call abruptly to stop Maya from escaping out the cabin's front door.

Now he watched Maya's pulse flutter at her throat, the rapid beat visible even across the room. Her scent—wildflowers, earth, and something uniquely hers—filled the cabin, driving him half-mad. When he'd pinned her against the door, their faces inches apart and her breath mingling with his, it had taken every ounce of control not to claim her mouth with his own.

"You're afraid," he said, tracing the contours of her face with his gaze. "But not of me."

Maya lifted her chin. "I'm afraid of whoever wants me dead." Her voice was steady despite her mounting fear. "And maybe a little afraid of whatever this is between us."

Kieran inhaled deeply, letting her scent settle in his lungs. "Smart woman."

"Are you going to explain what you meant? Why did everything change when you caught my scent?"

He considered his options. Truth would endanger them both further. Lies would erode any chance of trust. Half-truths might buy him time to figure out how to keep her alive.

"In my world," he began carefully, "there are connections that form sometimes. Rare, powerful connections that can't be denied or ignored."

Maya's analytical mind visibly engaged behind those striking green eyes. "Like mate

selection in wolves?"

A humorless laugh escaped him. "Something like that."

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"And you think that's happening between us?" Her scientific curiosity seemed to momentarily overtake her lingering fear.

"I know it is," Kieran said, his voice deepening to a rumble. "Which is why I'm protecting you right now."

His wolf howled approval at the declaration. The man in him recognized the danger. But looking at Maya, her copper hair falling around her shoulders, her small hands clutching that ridiculous backpack like it could shield her from monsters, Kieran knew he'd tear apart anyone who tried to harm her—even his own kind.

Mine to protect. Mine to claim.

The certainty of it terrified and exhilarated him in equal measure. The electric tension between him and Maya crackled like lightning before a storm. His declaration hung in the air, raw and undeniable. Maya's lips parted to respond when the cabin door suddenly swung open with such force that Kieran's chair tipped forward.

"Shit!" Kieran tumbled forward but caught himself with the reflexes of a predator, springing to his feet in one fluid motion. His body instinctively positioned itself between Maya and the intruder before recognition dawned.

His younger brother Malcolm stood in the doorway, his arms loaded with grocery bags, and his eyebrows climbing toward his hairline as he took in the scene. His blue eyes, so similar yet so different from Kieran's intense silver-blue gaze, darted from his brother to the red-haired woman sitting tensely on the bed.

"Bad time?" Malcolm asked, his mouth quirking into that infuriating half-smile that had charmed his way out of trouble since childhood.

Kieran's jaw clenched. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Malcolm shouldered past him, dumping the bags on the small kitchen counter. "Nice to see you too, brother." He began unpacking supplies with practiced ease. "I've been crashing here. That a problem?"

"This is my territory," Kieran growled, his wolf rising close to the surface. With Maya's scent filling his senses and Malcolm's unexpected intrusion, his control felt thinner than usual.

Malcolm shot another curious glance toward Maya, who was watching them both with the wide-eyed intensity of a scientist discovering a new species. Which, Kieran realized with grim amusement, wasn't far from the truth.

"Relax. I brought food. Liquor. Even those pretentious artisanal coffee beans you like." Malcolm's casual tone belied the tension in his shoulders. "Figured you might come here after that Council meeting today. Father was in rare form—even for him."

Kieran crossed his arms, his muscles bunching beneath his black henley. "You still haven't answered my question."

Malcolm's expression sobered. "This area's getting hot, Kieran. Moonfire sympathizers are scattered throughout Granite Ridge territory now. They've tagged three buildings with that crescent moon symbol just this week." He gestured vaguely around the cabin. "I've been keeping an eye on your place. A Silvercrest-owned cabin is a tempting target these days."

"I can handle a few rebellious pups," Kieran said dismissively, though his mind was

already calculating risks and advantages. If rebel activity was increasing this close to his private sanctuary, it complicated his plans for keeping Maya safe.

Malcolm's laugh held no humor. "It's not just 'a few pups' anymore. It's grown into something bigger." He lowered his voice. "Something I might be part of soon."

The declaration landed like a physical blow. Kieran's eyes flashed dangerously, his wolf surging forward. "What did you just say?"

"You heard me." Malcolm met his gaze unflinchingly. "I'm done watching Father crush anyone who dares question tradition. Arranged matings? Territorial disputes that cost lives? The hierarchies that keep wolves trapped in roles they never chose?" He shook his head. "The world is changing. We need to change with it."

Kieran's nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply, fighting for control. "You know what Father would do if?—"

"If what? If his second son joined the rebellion while his heir plays jailer to human women?" Malcolm's eyes flicked meaningfully toward Maya.

The growl that rumbled from Kieran's chest was pure animal. "Watch yourself, little brother."

Malcolm tilted his head, his nostrils flaring slightly as he scented the air. His eyebrows shot up, and he looked between Kieran and Maya with newfound interest. "What exactly is happening here? The tension in this room is..." He waved his hand through the air. "Thick enough to cut with a claw."

Kieran shifted his weight, placing himself more firmly between his brother and Maya. His wolf bristled at another male's presence near her, no matter that it was his brother. The primal possessiveness surprised even him.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend," Malcolm continued, his voice dripping with amusement as he unpacked more groceries. "Though she doesn't look particularly thrilled to be here." He nodded toward Maya, who remained huddled against the wall on Kieran's small bed, her knuckles white around her backpack.

"She's not my girlfriend," Kieran said, the words emerging more roughly than he intended.

"Clearly," Malcolm smirked. "Most women don't look like they're plotting to run away when they're dating you."

Kieran ran his large hand through his black hair. "She's a wildlife biologist. Researching regular wolves." He emphasized the word 'regular' with pointed significance. "At least, she was until about three nights ago."

Understanding dawned on Malcolm's face. "The camera Father mentioned. That was hers?"

"Yes," Kieran replied. "She caught me shifting on a motion-activated camera she'd set up in the woods. Father and the Council ordered me to find the human witness and..." He glanced at Maya, whose eyes were transfixed on them, absorbing every word. "Eliminate them."

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"Fuck." Malcolm's usual diplomatic veneer cracked. "They want you to kill her just for seeing something? That's exactly the kind of backward, paranoid thinking that's driving younger wolves to the rebellion."

"I know," Kieran said quietly, the admission surprising himself. The thought of harming Maya made his wolf snarl in protest. The connection between them—volatile and unexplained as it was—had rendered the Council's order impossible to follow from the moment he'd caught her scent.

Malcolm seemed to sense something deeper in his brother's reluctance. "So what's the plan then? Keep her here indefinitely?"

"For now, yes," Kieran said, his voice taking on the commanding tone he used when issuing pack orders. "I'll safeguard her until I figure out what to do. Nobody else knows about her that I know of, except Father, the Council, and Damon. They think I'm still tracking her."

While they spoke, Malcolm placed several items on the small end table in the living area, including what looked like a pamphlet. When he turned back to continue unpacking in the small kitchenette area, Kieran noticed movement from the bed. Maya had risen slowly, her researcher's curiosity evidently taking the place of her fear. She moved cautiously across the cabin toward the living area, her eyes fixed on the pamphlet Malcolm had left on the end table.

Kieran watched her, fascinated by her boldness even in captivity. She reached for the paper, her fingers closing around what he now recognized as Moonfire propaganda—the rebel faction's distinctive crescent moon symbol emblazoned across

the cover. His stomach tightened. Hard evidence of their existence, right in her clever hands.

His wolf paced anxiously beneath his skin, torn between protecting their secret and protecting her. The pamphlet contained enough information to confirm everything she'd begun to suspect. Yet he couldn't bring himself to snatch it away from her yet.

Malcolm followed Kieran's gaze and swore under his breath when he saw what Maya had found. "That's not going to help your containment plan."

"No," Kieran agreed, his voice low as he watched Maya's expression shift from fear to fascination—the look of a scientist finding evidence to support her hypothesis. "But I'm beginning to think containment was never really an option."

Kieran's muscles tensed as he watched Maya hold the pamphlet between her slender fingers, her copper hair falling around her shoulders as she tilted her head to read. The navy thermal shirt hugged her curves in such a way that made his wolf howl appreciatively inside him. Her sock-covered feet padded silently across the wooden floor as she moved closer to the light.

"'The Moonfire Rebellion,'" Maya read aloud, her scientist's precision giving each syllable equal weight. "'Challenging outdated traditions and fighting for wolf shifter equality.'" She looked at him, those green eyes blazing with intelligence. "Wolf shifters. So I wasn't hallucinating. You really did transform into a wolf that night."

Kieran's jaw tightened as he battled between truth and tradition. His wolf urged him to drop the pretense—she was his mate, after all—but years of conditioning under his father's rule held him back.

"What exactly is this movement?" she continued, tapping the crescent moon symbol on the front. "And what 'outdated pack traditions' are they referring to?" Her



researcher's mind was clearly piecing together the puzzle with alarming speed.

Malcolm leaned against the small kitchenette counter, amusement dancing in his blue eyes. The bastard was enjoying this.

"It's nothing," Kieran said, moving across the room with predatory grace. He reached for the pamphlet, but Maya stepped back, clutching it to her chest.

"No way," she said. "This confirms everything I saw on my footage. I want answers."

The defiance in her stance stirred something primal in Kieran. Most wolves backed down when confronted with his dominance—but not her. Never her.

"Maya," he growled, his voice lowering to a dangerous register that usually made pack members flinch. "Give me the pamphlet."

She raised her chin. "Or what?"

Malcolm's soft chuckle infuriated Kieran further. He shot his brother a glare that promised retribution.

"Let me introduce you to my younger brother," Kieran said abruptly, gesturing toward Malcolm. His silver-blue eyes silently conveyed the message: Help me change the subject. Now.

"Malcolm Silvercrest," his brother said smoothly, pushing off from the counter. His white henley contrasted with Kieran's darker clothing, just as his diplomatic approach always contrasted with Kieran's more direct methods. "Sorry for the intrusion. I didn't realize my brother had... company."

Maya's eyes narrowed, not falling for the deflection. "Nice to meet you. Now about

this rebellion?—"

"You must still be hungry," Kieran interrupted, placing his large hand at the small of her back and guiding her toward the kitchen. The contact sent electricity surging through him, his wolf recognizing what his human side still struggled to fully accept. "Malcolm brought better food. I can make dinner."

"I don't want food," Maya said, though her stomach chose that moment to growl audibly. "I want explanations."

Kieran looked down at her, struck by the fierce determination in those green eyes. His mate was magnificent in her stubbornness. The realization that he'd now begun thinking of her as "his mate" without qualification sent a jolt through him.

"You're in a cabin with two men you don't know, in the middle of nowhere," he reminded her, his voice low and intense. "And you're more concerned with satisfying your curiosity than your safety?"

"My safety was compromised when you kidnapped me," she countered, holding the pamphlet tighter. "Knowledge is my only defense right now."

Malcolm cleared his throat. "She's got a point, brother."

Kieran's head snapped toward him. "Stay out of this."

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"I've spent eight years studying wolves," Maya continued, undeterred by the tension crackling between the brothers. "But nothing in my research prepared me for... this." She waved the pamphlet. "People who turn into wolves? Rebellions? Pack traditions? It's like discovering a parallel society has existed alongside humanity this entire time."

The awe in her voice made Kieran pause. There was no fear there now—only fascination. The scientist in her had completely overridden her survival instincts in pursuit of understanding.

There was only one question burning in Kieran's mind now. Where do they go from here?

SEVEN

MAYA

Maya clutched the pamphlet tighter between her fingers. This paper was evidence of everything her scientific mind had been piecing together these past few weeks. The crescent moon symbol glinted in the cabin's dim light, mocking her previous understanding of the natural world.

"You can keep avoiding the subject," she said, tapping the pamphlet against her palm, "but this right here confirms what I saw on my footage. Wolf shifters. An entire secret society living alongside humans." Her heart raced as she locked eyes with Kieran. "You cannot deny it any longer."

The brothers exchanged loaded side glances. Malcolm leaned casually against the counter while Kieran's jaw flexed, the scar along his temple whitening as his face tightened.

"Look," Maya continued, her scientist's instinct for classification kicking in, "I'm already here against my will. You've already confirmed you were supposed to 'eliminate' me." She made air quotes with her fingers. "So what's the point of keeping secrets now?"

"She's got you there, brother," Malcolm said with a roguish grin.

Kieran shot his brother a withering glare that would have made most people cower. Maya noticed how the silver flecks in his blue eyes seemed to catch the light, almost glowing with an inner fire. Was that part of his wolf nature?

"These pack hierarchies," Maya pressed on, scanning the rebellion literature, "they're fascinating. There are parallels to what I've observed in natural wolf populations, but this is more... complex." She looked up. "It's like evolution took a completely different path."

Kieran stepped closer to her, and Maya felt her breath hitch. Despite the danger he represented, her body responded to his proximity with a traitorously electric awareness.

"What you've stumbled into," he said, his voice lowering to a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through her, "is a world that's existed in secret for centuries. For good reason."

"And what reason would that be?" Maya challenged, refusing to back down even as he towered over her.

"Humans have a habit of destroying what they don't understand," he replied, reaching out to trace the edge of the pamphlet with one finger, deliberately brushing against her hand.

The touch sent warmth cascading up her arm. Maya swallowed hard, fighting to maintain her scientific detachment.

"So there really is a civil rights movement happening among wolf shifters?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain steady. "Against what, exactly? What are these 'outdated traditions'?"

Malcolm snorted. "Where to start? Arranged matings, territory laws, human segregation policies?—"

"Malcolm," Kieran growled in warning.

"What? She's already here. She's already seen the pamphlet." Malcolm gestured expansively. "Besides, it's not like you're planning to follow through with the Council's elimination order, or we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

Maya's brain whirled with new information. "Arranged matings? Human segregation? Your society sounds positively medieval."

"Our ways have kept us safe for centuries," Kieran countered, moving closer still until Maya could feel the heat radiating from his body. "But yes, some traditions need... reconsideration."

The intensity in his gaze made her wonder if there was more to his words than simple politics.

"Well," Malcolm said, pushing away from the counter and breaking the tension, "I

should get going. Let you two sort out... whatever this is." He winked at Maya. "Don't let my brother intimidate you. His bark is worse than his bite."

"Debatable," Maya muttered, earning a rare flash of amusement in Kieran's eyes.

"I'll walk my brother out," Kieran said abruptly, his deep voice reverberating through Maya's chest.

The door soon clicked shut behind them, and Maya's heart thundered. Freedom beckoned just steps away. The logical part of her brain screamed to make a break for it—dash into the woods and use her hiking experience to lose them.

But the scientist in her...

"Evidence," she whispered, her eyes darting around the sparse cabin. "I need more evidence."

## Page 16

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Maya moved silently across the wooden floor in her socks, her fingers trembling with a mixture of fear and exhilaration. Outside, she could hear the brothers' muffled voices. She had minutes at most.

Her attention snagged on a handwoven rug decorated with intricate geometric patterns that seemed slightly askew from the rest of the meticulously arranged cabin. Maya dropped to her knees, pushing back her copper hair as she traced the edges of the rug. Not quite centered under the coffee table. As if it had been moved.

"What are you hiding?" she murmured, pulling back the rug's edge.

The faint outline of a rectangular cut in the floorboards made her pulse quicken. A trapdoor, cleverly disguised but visible to her trained eye for detail. Maya glanced at the window, catching a glimpse of Kieran's broad shoulders as he gestured to his brother.

She wedged her fingernails into the nearly invisible seam and pulled. The door lifted with surprising ease, revealing a small compartment beneath. The musty scent of old paper wafted up.

"Jackpot," Maya breathed.

Inside lay several leather-bound journals, their spines cracked from use, and a stack of papers yellowed with age. With deft fingers, she lifted the topmost journal, its leather cover soft from decades of handling.

The first page bore a date from 1994 and an elegant script: Property of J. Silvercrest.

Maya's eyes widened as she skimmed the entries. Accounts of pack meetings. Territory disputes. Enforcement of human segregation policies.

March 15, 1995 — Council voted unanimously to execute the human witness. Even Maria protested, but traditions must be upheld. Granite Ridge territory remains secure.

Maya's stomach churned. The stark description of a cold-blooded killing was recorded with the same detachment she might use to document wolf feeding patterns.

She flipped further, finding another entry that made her breath catch.

June 7, 2001 — Rebecca refuses the arranged mating to H. Blackwood. Her third refusal. Alpha decreed isolation punishment until the next moon. The old ways must prevail if we are to survive.

Maya grabbed another journal, this one newer. Same handwriting, dated 2010:

The younger generation questions our traditions more openly now. Dangerous talk of human integration circulates among them. Some even suggest letting chosen humans know of our existence. Madness. We cannot allow such rebellion to take root.

Her fingers trembled as she picked up a third book. This handwriting was different—stronger and more decisive. The first entry was dated just five years ago in 2020.

Father grows more tyrannical with each passing year. The methods he uses to quell dissent among the packs sicken me. I've begun documenting the worst abuses. Someday, when I am Alpha, this evidence may help me reform our ways without bloodshed. — K.S.



K.S. Kieran Silvercrest.

The realization hit Maya with physical force. The very man who'd kidnapped her was secretly documenting his father's, the Alpha's, abuses. The same man who'd been tasked with eliminating her was collecting evidence against his own kind's traditions and laws.

Outside, the conversation grew louder. Malcolm was leaving now.

"I should go," Maya heard Malcolm say. "Good luck with your... situation."

"I'm handling it," came Kieran's deep rumble.

Maya frantically gathered the journals, placing them back exactly as she'd found them. Her hand froze on the last one—Kieran's—tempted to keep it as insurance. Instead, she tucked it carefully with the others and lowered the trapdoor.

As she smoothed the rug back into place, her mind raced with new understanding. Kieran wasn't just any wolf shifter. He was heir to the Alpha leadership, and apparently caught between tradition and reform. A man who'd been ordered to kill her had instead hidden her away.

She needed answers. Now.

The dusty journals and their secrets had changed everything. Wind whistled through the cabin's eaves, announcing the coming storm as the front door handle turned.

Maya pushed to her feet, her copper-red hair falling wild around her shoulders as she squared off in the center of the room. Kieran stepped through the doorway, his large frame filling the small space with an energy that made the air suddenly feel too thick to breathe.

"Who's J. Silvercrest?" The words tumbled from her lips before she could think better of it.

Kieran froze, his eyes sharpening to silver points. "Where did you hear that name?"

"I have a PhD in research. I'm good at finding things." Maya crossed her arms, refusing to back down despite the dangerous flare in his gaze. "Are you going to explain this wolf shifter business to me now, or keep pretending I didn't see what I saw on my camera, in that pamphlet, and in those journals?"

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Lightning flickered outside, illuminating the hard lines of his face for a split second.

"You went through my things." Not a question. His voice had dropped an octave, vibrating with barely controlled anger.

"You kidnapped me." Maya stepped closer, heat flooding her cheeks. "I'd say we're even."

Kieran closed the distance between them in two long strides, his nostrils flaring as if scenting her defiance. "Those journals are private."

"Execution of human witnesses? Arranged matings? Isolation punishments?" Maya listed firmly, each offense making her voice rise. "Are you really upholding this medieval system?" She paused for a moment, feeling a twinge of fear pulse in her veins. "So what, if you don't figure something out soon, you're going to kill me to appease your kind's crazy thinking?"

Thunder cracked outside, as if punctuating her accusation.

"If I was going to follow my kind's thinking, you'd already be dead." The quiet certainty in his voice sent ice down her spine. "I'm the one keeping you alive."

"Then tell me the truth. All of it." Maya jabbed a finger against his chest, surprised by her own boldness. "Who are you really? The journals mentioned an Alpha heir. Is that really you?"

Kieran caught her wrist, his touch burning against her skin. "Yes."

The confirmation knocked the wind from her lungs. "So, you're not denying it anymore?"

"What would be the point?" His thumb traced unconscious circles against her pulse. "Yes, I'm a wolf shifter. Yes, I'm the heir to the Silvercrest pack. My father is the current Alpha."

"And J. Silvercrest?"

Something painful flickered across his face. "My uncle John. He died ten years ago in a territorial dispute, right when the Moonfire Rebellion began."

Maya pulled her hand away, needing distance to process this information. "That rebellion from the pamphlet—the civil rights movement."

Kieran nodded, running his large hands through his midnight hair. "This cabin sits on Granite Ridge territory, not Silvercrest land. There are four major packs in the Cascade Mountains region—Silvercrest, Granite Ridge, Tidewater, and Shadow Pack. Each has their own pack laws, but there are some universal shifter laws. The four packs of the Pacific Northwest's Cascade Territory are governed by the High Council."

"And your pack laws are..."

"The most traditional." His jaw clenched. "The most rigid."

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the struggle in his eyes. For a moment, Maya glimpsed the weight he carried—heir to a legacy he seemed to both honor and question.

"So, why didn't you kill me in the forest?" Maya asked, the question that had haunted

her since she woke up in this cabin. "Your father recommended it, didn't he? And the High Council ordered it, right?"

The wind howled louder outside, tree branches scraping against the cabin's roof like skeletal fingers.

"Because it's wrong." Kieran's voice was quiet but firm. "Killing humans who discover us might have made sense centuries ago, but not now. Not you."

Something in the way he said "you" made Maya's spine tingle. "So what? You're some kind of wolf shifter reformer?"

"It's not that simple." Frustration edged his tone. "These traditions kept us alive for centuries. You can't just tear down a society's foundation without something to replace it."

"Oh please." Maya scoffed, anger bubbling up. "That's what every corrupt system says to avoid change. 'It's complicated.' 'It's for protection.' Meanwhile, you're executing innocent people and forcing arranged matings!"

Kieran surged forward, backing her against the wall, his arms caging her in. "You think I don't know that?" His voice was a growl now, his eyes flashing with inner light. "You think I want to be heir to a system that does those things? That I don't lie awake every night trying to figure out how to change it without starting a civil war?"

Maya's breath hitched as his face lowered toward hers, close enough she could count his eyelashes. The scent of pine and something wild filled her senses.

"Then why hide me away?" she whispered. "What am I exactly to you?"

Thunder boomed directly overhead, rattling the cabin window. The storm had arrived

in full force, echoing the tension between them.

EIGHT

KIERAN

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:10 am*

Maya's question hung in the air as he caged her against the living room wall. The heat of her body radiated through her thermal shirt, and her scent of wildflowers and vanilla wound through his senses, tangled with something else—something wild that called to the primal part of him. His wolf strained against his human skin, desperate to claim what it already recognized as theirs.

"What are you to me?" he repeated, his voice softening to a dangerous whisper.

Before he could tell her, the cabin door exploded inward. Splinters flew as three large men burst through, their eyes glowing amber in the dim light.

Kieran whirled, immediately pushing Maya behind him with one powerful arm. His muscles coiled tight, ready to spring.

"Silvercrest," the tallest intruder snarled, his broad shoulders nearly filling the doorway. "You're trespassing on Granite Ridge territory."

"This cabin is mine," Kieran said, his voice deadly calm despite the rage building in him. These wolves had the audacity to invade his space and threaten what was his. "I built it during my exile years."

"With outdated permission." The second wolf, lean with short hair, circled to the right. "And harboring a human spy? That's a violation of shifter law."

"She's under my protection." The words came out as a growl, his eyes flashing silver.

The third shifter, stocky with a jagged scar across his throat, chuckled. "Your father's

going to love hearing that his precious heir is harboring humans. Hand her over and nobody has to get hurt."

Kieran felt Maya's fingers dig into his back, her heartbeat thundering against him. She'd seen his journals and knew exactly what "handing her over" meant in their shifter world.

"Not happening," Kieran growled, his lips pulling back to reveal teeth that were already sharpening.

The stocky wolf smirked. "We've been watching you for an hour, Silvercrest. Saw your brother leave. It's three against one."

Kieran's mind raced, calculating angles, distances, and weaknesses. They'd been watching the cabin—waiting for Malcolm to leave. Smart. But not smart enough.

"Maya," he murmured, not taking his eyes off the intruders, "when I move, get behind the couch."

"What are you going to?—"

"Trust me." The plea in his voice surprised even him.

The leader stepped forward. "Last chance, Silvercrest. Give us the human. She's been snooping around our territory for weeks. The Council will want her silenced properly."

Kieran's wolf surged forward, riding a wave of protective fury. No one was taking her. No one was hurting her. She was his.

"You know what your problem is?" Kieran rolled his shoulders, feeling the shift



beginning to ripple beneath his skin. "You think because I'm a Silvercrest, I play by the old rules."

With blinding speed, he lunged for the lamp on the end table and hurled it at the window. Glass shattered as thunder crashed overhead.

"Maya, now!"

The cabin erupted into chaos. Maya dove behind the couch as Kieran met the first attacker head-on. His black henley stretched across his shoulders as he drove his fist into the tall shifter's solar plexus, following with an uppercut that sent the man staggering back.

The lean wolf leaped over the coffee table, his fingers already extending into claws. Kieran caught his arm mid-swing, using the momentum to slam him into the wall with enough force to crack the wooden panels.

"You touch what's mine," Kieran snarled, his voice deepening as the shift crawled through him, "you die."

The stocky one circled behind, trying to reach Maya. Kieran whirled, his eyes blazing silver, and caught him by the throat. With a roar that shook the cabin, he hurled the shifter across the room, sending him crashing into his companions.

"She's just a human," the leader spat, blood trickling from his mouth as he struggled to his feet. "Since when does the Silvercrest heir care about them?"

"Since this one," Kieran growled, feeling his bones begin to crack and reform.

The three wolves exchanged glances, realizing too late what they were witnessing. The silver fire in Kieran's eyes, the protective stance, and the uncontrolled fury.

"By the moon," the lean one whispered. "She's his mate."

Kieran's lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing teeth that were now sharpened to deadly points. "And you're dead men."

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The shift tore through him like wildfire, more powerful than any he'd experienced before. His body knew what was at stake. This wasn't just territory or pride—this was his mate. His. The primal knowledge blazed through his veins hotter than the burning feeling of transformation.

He dropped to all fours as his transformation accelerated. His clothing split along the seams as muscle and bone reconfigured, his spine elongating with a series of wet cracks that echoed through the cabin. Midnight-black fur erupted through his skin, and his jaw extended with a pop that would have made him howl instinctively if he weren't focused entirely on the threat before him.

He felt Maya's eyes on him from behind the couch. He could detect with his heightened senses her fear, her fascination, and her heartbeat racing with a cocktail of terror and something else. Something that called to his wolf. Her scent spiked with adrenaline, an intoxicating perfume that only fueled his rage.

The stocky wolf broke first, lunging forward with a roar as his own shift began. But Kieran was faster. His transformation complete, he launched himself across the room—a massive black wolf with silver-blue eyes that gleamed like arctic ice. His jaws clamped around the attacker's forearm with bone-crushing force.

Blood sprayed across the cabin floor. The stocky wolf howled in agony.

"Kill him!" the leader shouted, his own clothes tearing as he began to shift.

Kieran released the stocky wolf's mangled arm and pivoted, dodging the leader's attack. His wolf moved with a grace his human form could never match, muscles

coiling and releasing with lethal precision. He felt invincible, empowered by Maya's presence and the primal instinct to protect what was his.

The lean wolf circled toward the couch where Maya had pressed herself into the corner, her eyes wide with shock and awe.

Don't you fucking touch her, Kieran snarled, the words emerging telepathically. Understanding flashed in the lean wolf's eyes.

Kieran launched himself over the coffee table, a black blur of fur and fangs. He caught the lean wolf mid-shift, tearing into the exposed flesh of his throat. Blood gushed, hot and metallic, filling Kieran's mouth as they crashed into the wall. The wolf's dying whimper cut short as Kieran ripped through his jugular.

One down.

Pain exploded across Kieran's flank as the leader—now fully shifted into a massive brown wolf—tore into him. Teeth sank deep into his shoulder, scraping bone. Kieran twisted, snapping his jaws at his attacker, but the wolf danced away.

The cabin became a battlefield of snarls and blood. Fur flew as claws tore flesh. The stocky wolf, having completed his shift into a mottled gray beast, joined the fray. They coordinated their attack, one from each side.

Kieran's mind calculated even as his wolf raged. He feinted toward the leader, then spun with unnatural speed to catch the stocky wolf across the muzzle. His teeth tore through sensitive tissue, and the wolf recoiled with a yelp.

The momentary advantage was enough. Kieran pressed forward, driving the wounded wolf back until his haunches hit the overturned table. The wolf stumbled, and Kieran struck—his jaws closing around the wolf's throat in a killing blow.

Blood filled his mouth as he crushed the wolf's windpipe, but white-hot pain lanced through him as the leader's teeth tore into his hindquarters. Kieran released his kill and whirled, his hackles raised, blood dripping from his muzzle.

He caught Maya's scent again—that undeniable pull that he'd felt since he first tracked her in the forest tightening in his chest. Her presence steadied him, even as blood soaked his midnight fur. She wasn't screaming. Wasn't running away. She was watching, her scientist's mind processing even through her fear.

You'll die for her?the leader growled in the telepathic language of wolves.Throw away your birthright for a human?

Kieran's eyes narrowed, the silver-blue burning brighter.Without hesitation.

They circled each other, wounded predators leaving crimson trails on the hardwood floor. Kieran felt his strength ebbing from the deep gashes along his flank and hindquarters. But his resolve hardened. He would not fall. Not with her watching. Not with her safety at stake.

With a roar, Kieran lunged forward in a final, desperate attack. The leader met him head-on. They collided in a tangle of teeth and claws, rolling across the floor in a deadly dance. Pain exploded through Kieran's body as teeth found his throat, but he twisted, freeing himself just enough to sink his fangs into the leader's exposed belly.

Kieran tore upward, ripping through vital organs. The leader's howl became a gurgle as blood filled his lungs. His grip on Kieran weakened and the leader's eyes dimmed.

Kieran pushed the dying wolf off him and struggled to his four feet. His four legs trembled with exhaustion. Blood—his and his enemies'—matted his fur. Each breath came as a labored rasp.

But he was alive. And Maya—his Maya—was safe.

He turned toward the couch, his eyes meeting hers. Would she run now? Scream? See him as a monster?

The shift back to human form rippled through him, painful with his injuries. Bones cracked and realigned, fur receded into skin slick with blood, and his massive wolf frame condensed into his human body. The pain was excruciating, but he forced himself through it, never breaking eye contact with Maya.

When the transformation completed, he stood naked and bleeding before her, his broad shoulders heaving with each ragged breath. The gashes on his shoulder and thigh pulsed with fresh blood. The cabin floor beneath him became slick with crimson.

But it was her expression that stole whatever breath remained in his lungs.

Maya watched him with eyes wide and clear—no fear, no disgust, just pure fascination. Her scientist mind seemed to catalog every detail while something deeper, more primal, seemed to recognize what he was on an instinctual level.

"You understand now," he whispered, his deep voice cracking with disbelief.

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She stepped from behind the couch, moving toward him with careful steps. "The apex predator hiding in human skin." Her voice held wonder rather than terror. "You're magnificent."

His legs finally gave out. Kieran crashed to his knees, the room spinning around him as blood loss took its toll. His hand pressed against the deep wound in his thigh, but it was useless—too much blood was trying to escape.

"Worth it," he growled to himself, a primal satisfaction warming him despite the growing cold in his limbs. He'd protected what was his. Three enemies dead at his feet. His sanctuary defended. His mate safe.

Maya rushed to him, kneeling in the blood without hesitation. Her hands—those delicate, scientific hands that had so meticulously set up cameras to study wolves—now pressed firmly against his wounds.

"Stay with me," she commanded, her voice stronger than he'd expected. "Focus on my voice."

His eyes locked onto her face—those copper-flecked green eyes, those freckles scattered across her nose, and that determined set to her jaw. Even covered in his blood, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"Never thought..." he murmured, reaching up to brush a strand of hair from her face, leaving a smear of blood across her cheek. "Never thought I'd find you."

"Find me? What do you mean?" She tore strips from her shirt, pressing them against

his wounds.

The room darkened at the edges of his vision. His wolf howled inside him fighting against the growing weakness, desperate to stay conscious, to protect and to claim what was his.

"Should've known," he whispered, a ghost of a smile touching his bloodied lips. "Red hair. Like fire. Like you."

Maya cradled his head in her lap as he slipped sideways, no longer able to stay upright. Her scent enveloped him—wildflowers, vanilla, and something wild that called to his wolf. Something that had always been there, waiting for him to find it.

"Kieran, stay with me. You're healing somehow. I can see it and I can sense it." Her voice trembled now, her scientific detachment cracking.

His eyes fluttered. The darkness pressed closer. As consciousness slipped away, his wolf released the one truth that mattered.

"Mate," he breathed, his final conscious word both a revelation and a promise to her.

NINE

MAYA

Maya's hands trembled as she tore another strip from her thermal shirt, now reduced to barely more than a crop top. Blood—so much blood—saturated the makeshift bandages she'd already applied to Kieran's wounds. The metallic scent filled her nostrils, mingling with the lingering smell of damp fur and something wild that permeated the cabin.



"Don't you dare die on me," she whispered, pressing the fresh fabric against his thigh wound. The laceration was deep, but before her eyes, the edges seemed to crawl toward each other in microscopic increments. "That's... impossible."

Her scientific brain rebelled against everything she'd witnessed in the past thirty minutes. Men transforming into massive wolves. Kieran—this frustrating, commanding, impossibly attractive man—tearing through three attackers with fangs and claws. The blood-soaked battlefield that had once been a cabin floor.

And that word. That single, breathed word before he lost consciousness.

Mate.

The moment he'd said it, something deep within her had resonated like a struck tuning fork. A primal recognition that bypassed all rational thought. Her body had understood before her mind could process it, sending heat spiraling through her despite the horror of the situation.

"What the hell does that even mean?" she muttered, checking his pulse at his neck. Strong but erratic. "I'm a biologist, not a supernatural heroine."

Yet the word echoed in her mind, awakening something dormant she'd never acknowledged until that exact moment he uttered it. The strange pull she'd felt toward him from the moment they met. The electricity when they touched. The way her body instinctively leaned toward him even when her mind screamed to run.

Kieran stirred slightly, his massive chest rising with a labored breath. Even wounded and unconscious, his body radiated power—lean muscle carved from years of running as both man and wolf, and skin marked with old scars that told stories of battles she couldn't imagine.

"Fascinating," she whispered, her scientific curiosity momentarily overriding her panic as she watched blood clot faster than humanly possible. "Your cellular regeneration rate must be exponentially higher than a human's."

She applied pressure to his shoulder wound, wincing as her fingers slipped in the warm blood. Three dead wolf-men lay scattered around them, their bodies already reverting to human form in death. Men who had come for her, and who would have killed her if Kieran hadn't intervened.

"This isn't peer-reviewed research anymore," she said, anger rising through her fear. "This is actual wolf pack politics. And I stepped right into the middle of it."

Her grandmother's warning echoed in her memory. Never go into the deep woods, Maya. Some things there remember what humans have forgotten.

The blood flow from Kieran's thigh finally slowed to a trickle. Maya exhaled shakily, brushing her copper hair from her face with the back of her wrist to avoid smearing more blood on herself.

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"You have to live," she told his unconscious form, surprising herself with the fierceness in her voice. "I have about a thousand more questions, and you're the only one with the answers."

Like whatmatemeant in a world where men became wolves. Like why her heart raced every time those silver-blue eyes locked with hers. Like why she felt more alive in this blood-soaked cabin than she had in years of meticulous research.

Kieran's eyelids flickered, and a low groan escaped his throat. His hand suddenly clasped her wrist, startling her with its strength despite his injuries.

"Maya," he rasped, his eyes opening to reveal that impossible silver-blue—brighter now, almost glowing. "Are you okay?"

The question floored her. Here he was, torn open and bleeding out, and his first concern was for her safety. Something fierce and protective flared in her chest.

"Am I okay? You nearly died protecting me from werewolf assassins, and you're asking if I'm okay?"

A hint of a smile touched his bloodied lips. "Wolf shifters. Not werewolves."

"That's what you're correcting right now? Terminology?" She couldn't help the slightly hysterical laugh that escaped her. "I think I'm entitled to get the monster classification wrong when I've just watched you transform into an enormous black wolf and tear through three wolf bodies."

His grip on her wrist tightened slightly. "Not a monster." His voice held an edge that sent a shiver through her—not offear, but of something far more dangerous. "Protector. Your protector."

There it was again—that possessive tone that should have offended her independent nature but instead sent heat pooling low in her body.

"What did you mean exactly," she asked, her voice dropping to barely a whisper, "when you called me your mate?"

Before he could respond, his eyelids fluttered, and his grip slackened. The silver-blue glow in his eyes dimmed as consciousness slipped away from him again. Maya's breath caught.

"No, no, no. Don't you dare." She pressed her palm against his stubbled cheek. "Kieran? Damn it, stay with me."

She'd been so close to answers, so close to understanding what this overwhelming pull between them meant. Her scientific mind craved explanation, classification, data—anything to make sense of how her body recognized something in him that transcended rational thought.

Hours passed like molasses as Maya settled into caretaker mode. She found a woolen blanket in a trunk by the bed and carefully covered his massive, naked form, averting her eyes from the sculpted terrain of his body.

"You're incredible," she murmured, tucking the blanket around his shoulders.

In the small kitchenette, she discovered a wooden cabinet filled with unlabeled jars containing salves and powders. Her nose—always sensitive—detected hints of comfrey, yarrow, and something musky she couldn't identify.

"Werewolf medicine," she said to herself with a half-hysterical laugh. "Wolf shifter medicine," she corrected, imagining his irritated response.

She selected a green paste that smelled of healing herbs and applied it to his wounds with gentle fingers. The deep gashes were already knitting together at an impossible rate, but the salve seemed to accelerate the process even further. His skin felt feverishly hot beneath her touch.

"Your temperature is skyrocketing," Maya whispered, pressing the back of her hand to his forehead. "Is this normal for your kind, or are you really dying on me?"

She dipped a cloth in cool water and bathed his face, neck, and chest where the blanket had slipped down. His muscles flexed involuntarily under her ministrations, and a soft groan escaped his lips.

"I should be running for my life right now," she told him, knowing he couldn't hear. "Three dead wolf shifters on the floor. The man who kidnapped me now unconscious and vulnerable. This is my chance to escape."

Yet she couldn't imagine leaving him like this. The thought of him dying alone twisted something painful in her chest—something that had nothing to do with scientific curiosity and everything to do with the word that hung between them. *Mate*.

"What have you done to me?" She brushed a lock of black hair from his forehead. "I've built my entire career on observable data, and here I am, feeling things I can't explain."

As the night deepened, his fever worsened. Maya's anxiety spiraled as she continually refreshed the cool cloth, her fingers tracing the sharp line of his jaw, and the scar that ran from temple to jawline.

"Come on, big bad wolf. You didn't fight off three attackers just to succumb to a fever."

His breathing became labored, his powerful chest rising and falling in uneven rhythms. Sweat beaded on his skin despite the cabin's chill.

"Don't you dare die." Maya's voice cracked. "I'm not done being furious with you for kidnapping me." Her attempt at humor fell flat even to her own ears. "And I'm not done... feeling whatever this is."

Something primal and protective surged through her veins—an unfamiliar sensation for a woman who'd spent her life maintaining emotional distance. She found herself lying beside him on the floor, one arm draped across his chest, her head resting on his uninjured shoulder. The intimacy should have felt foreign and inappropriate, but instead, it felt like returning to a place she'd always belonged.

"This is ridiculous," she whispered against his skin. "I don't even know you."

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But her body disagreed. Her body recognized him as if they'd known each other across lifetimes.

As dawn light filtered through the cabin's single window, Kieran finally stirred beneath her. His hand came up to cover hers where it lay against his heart.

"You stayed," he murmured, his voice rough with pain and something deeper.

Maya lifted her head to find his silver-blue eyes—still fever-bright—fixed on her face with an intensity that made her breath hitch.

"Don't read too much into it," she said, fighting the heat rising to her cheeks. "I'm a scientist. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to observe accelerated healing in a new species."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Is that why you've been talking to me all night? For science?"

Heat flooded her face. "You heard that?"

"Not everything." His thumb traced circles on the back of her hand. "But enough to know you care whether I live or die. That's progress."

"I have questions. A lot of questions."

"I bet you do." His eyes drifted closed again, but his grip on her hand remained firm.

Maya watched as Kieran's breathing steadied again, the rise and fall of his muscular chest becoming more rhythmic. Even in sleep, raw power radiated from him—an alpha predator at rest. She gently eased her hand from his grasp, a strange reluctance tugging at her as she broke the connection.

"I need to process," she whispered to herself, rising from the cabin floor.

Blood stained the wooden planks where the three bodies lay. Maya's stomach turned at the sight of them, their human forms a stark reminder of the violence she'd witnessed. With methodical movements, she located a stack of sheets in a small linen closet and draped them over the corpses.

"There. Scientific objectivity maintained." But her hands trembled as she smoothed the last sheet, betraying the clinical detachment she tried to project.

The cabin's broken window and splintered door frame left them exposed. Outside, birdsong had resumed after the night's carnage, deceptively peaceful. Maya surveyed the damage with a critical eye.

"Why am I trying to fix his cabin?" she muttered as she gathered tools from a small utility box near the kitchenette. "Stockholm syndrome in full effect?"

Yet she couldn't deny the strange possessive urge that drove her—the desire to secure this space and to make it safe for them both. For him.

"This is absolutely irrational," she chided herself, hammering a piece of plywood she'd found outside the cabin over the shattered window. Each strike echoed her frustration. "I'm a PhD in wildlife biology, not some primal female securing a den for her mate."

The wordmate pulsed in her mind with each heartbeat. What did it mean in his world?



Why did it resonate on such a visceral level within her? She'd certainly never felt anything like this electric pull before—this instinct that defied her lifelong devotion to empirical evidence and rational thought.

After securing the door as best she could with the limited materials available, Maya wiped sweat from her brow and stepped back to assess her work. Not perfect, but it would keep anyone else from simply walking in.

Her gaze drifted to Kieran's sleeping form, now partially covered by the blanket she'd pulled over him. His black hair fell across his forehead in stark contrast to his tanned skin. The scar that ran from temple to jaw only enhanced his rugged appeal.

She retrieved her backpack from where she'd left it on the bed and pulled out a fresh notebook and pencil. She walked back to where Kieran lay on the floor and sat down beside him. Her fingers traced the empty page of her notebook before taking up her pencil. With swift, precise strokes, she began to sketch from memory.

His transformation had been both terrifying and magnificent. One moment Kieran had stood protective before her, the next his body had contorted—bones shifting, muscles redistributing, and dark fur sprouting along powerful limbs. The massive black wolf that had emerged had retained Kieran's silver-blue eyes, a bridge between man and beast that had shaken Maya to her core.

"How is this even possible?" she whispered, adding detail to the massive paws in her sketch. "Conservation of mass alone would suggest?—"

A low groan from Kieran interrupted her scientific musings. His eyelids fluttered but didn't open.

"Maya," he murmured softly. "Stay with me."

Something warm and unfamiliar bloomed in her chest at the command—not irritation at being ordered, but a strange compulsion to comply. To be near him.

"I'm here," she replied, surprising herself. "Just making notes."

"Always the scientist." His lips curved slightly, though his eyes remained closed.

Maya examined him clinically, noting how the wounds that should have been fatal were now reduced to pink lines across his skin. "Your healing rate is phenomenal. I've never observed anything like it."

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"Wolf shifter thing." He shifted slightly, wincing. "Mate thing too."

"About that." Maya set her notebook aside and shifted closer. "What exactly does that word mean to your kind? Because I've been experiencing some very unscientific responses since meeting you."

Kieran's eyes opened then, the silver-blue irises bright with an inner light that was decidedly not human. His gaze locked onto hers with an intensity that stole her breath.

"It means you're mine," he said simply. "And I'm yours. Biology more ancient than science."

Heat flooded Maya's cheeks. "That's...that's not an explanation. That's mythology."

"Is it?" His hand reached for hers, an uncharacteristic vulnerability in the gesture. "Then why are you still here, Dr. Collins? Why not run away while I was unconscious?"

The questions struck at the heart of her confusion. Why hadn't she fled? What invisible tether kept her bound to this man she barely knew?

"I need more data," she deflected, but her fingers intertwined with his of their own accord.

Kieran's thumb traced her palm, sending electric currents up her arm. "Some things transcend your science, Maya."

TEN

KIERAN

The fever rolled through Kieran again in waves later that day, his body's accelerated healing demanding a price. Through the haze, Kieran marveled at Maya's presence by his side—this stubborn, brilliant woman who'd patched together his torn flesh last night had stayed when any rational human would have fled.

"You should have run far away," he murmured, watching her copper hair gleam in the firelight. Her scent—wildflowers and vanilla—filled his senses, intensified by his healing state. "Why didn't you run, Maya?"

She adjusted the cool cloth on his forehead with a scientist's precision that couldn't disguise the tenderness in her touch. "And miss carefully documenting unprecedented cellular regeneration in an entirely new species of wolves? Not a chance."

Kieran's laugh turned into a grimace as pain lanced through his shoulder. "Always the researcher."

"Always," she agreed, but something flickered in those green eyes—something that had nothing to do with science whatsoever.

His wolf surged inside him, demanding he pull her down, claim her mouth with his, and mark her as his own. It took every ounce of his discipline to resist. She wasn't pack. She didn't understand their ways. And yet, his body recognized her more surely than any wolf shifter-born female he'd ever encountered.

"Sleep," she commanded, unaware of the battle raging inside him. "Your body needs rest to heal."

"Stay close," he growled softly, hating the vulnerability but unable to stop himself. His hand reached for hers again, needing the connection. "Please."

Darkness claimed him again, pulling him into dreams of fire and forests—and Maya, always Maya, running beside him through moonlit clearings, her human form shifting seamlessly to wolf, her copper fur gleaming. In his dream, they hunted together, moving as one and sharing a bond no council could sever.

"Maya," he murmured in his sleep, reaching for the phantom of her.

He woke up disoriented, night having fallen outside the cabin once more. Twenty-four hours since the attack. Twenty-four hours of Maya's steady presence, her touch alternating between clinical and something that felt dangerously like affection. His body burned with fever, but her cool cloth soothed the fire in his blood.

"You said my name," she said quietly from beside him, her silhouette backlit by the dying embers in the fireplace. "In your sleep."

"I was dreaming." His voice rasped from his dry throat.

She handed him water without being asked, supporting his head as he drank. The simple gesture—so intimate and so natural—stirred something powerful in his chest.

"Of what?" She sat back on her heels, her notebook still clutched in one hand.

"You." No point in lying. His wolf was too close to the surface, his defenses eroded by pain and fever. "Running with me. As if you were pack."

Color rose in her cheeks, visible even in the dim light. "I don't run. Not unless something's chasing me."

"You're running now," he challenged, his eyes holding hers. "From what's happening between us."

She broke eye contact first. "Nothing's happening between us except unusual biochemical reactions to stress and trauma."

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Kieran pushed himself up onto his elbows, ignoring the protest from his healing wounds. "Is that what your science tells you?"

"Yes." Her chin lifted defiantly, but her pulse jumped at her throat, betraying her.

"Your pulse says otherwise." He reached to brush his fingertips against the fluttering beat at her neck. "Your pupils dilate when I touch you. Your breath quickens. Your body leans toward mine without conscious thought."

Her eyes widened. "Heightened senses too?"

"Among other gifts." He let his eyes flare with the wolf's silver light, watching her breath catch.

"Simply fascinating," she whispered, leaning closer rather than away. "Do all your kind share these traits?"

Kieran gently grabbed her wrist, his patience fraying. "Maya."

"Yes?"

"Stop analyzing me for five seconds and answer my question from earlier. Why didn't you run away from here?"

The silence stretched between them, thick with possibility. Her scent changed subtly—fear giving way to something sweeter and headier. Desire.

"I couldn't," she finally admitted, her voice barely audible. "It felt... wrong. Like leaving part of myself behind."

His wolf howled in triumph. His mate recognized the bond, even if her human mind couldn't comprehend it yet.

"That's the first honest thing you've said since I woke up today."

"I'm always honest," she huffed. "Just not always... completely."

"Incomplete data leads to flawed conclusions, Dr. Collins." He grinned at the flash of irritation in her eyes. "For someone so devoted to scientific truth, you're working awfully hard to deny what's right in front of you."

Kieran's fingers remained wrapped around Maya's wrist, feeling her pulse flutter beneath his touch like a captured bird. The contact sent electricity crackling up his arm, his wolf pushing beneath his skin, demanding more.

"Fine. There's something between us," Maya finally admitted, her scientific resolve cracking. "Something I can't explain with any research methodology I've ever used."

He released her wrist only to trace his thumb along her jawline. "Not everything can be quantified, categorized, or documented in those journals of yours."

"That's not helpful," she said, but leaned into his touch. "I need to understand what this is. Why my body responds to you like?—"

"Like we're made from the same cosmic dust?" Kieran replied softly. "Like your cells recognize mine?"

Maya's breath hitched. "That's not scientifically sound."



"And yet, you didn't disagree." Kieran shifted and reached for her, ignoring the pull of his healing wounds. The pain was nothing compared to the need to be closer to her.

She laid beside him on the cabin floor, her body hesitantly aligning with his. "In wolf biology, there's no precedent for instant chemical bonding between different species."

"We're not different species. I'm both wolf and man." Kieran pulled her closer, his arm wrapping possessively around her waist. "And what's happening isn't just chemical."

"Then what would you call it?" Her green eyes challenged him, her scientific curiosity battling with something deeper and more primal.

He considered telling her everything—about mate bonds and about the biological imperative that had recognized her as his perfect counterpart from that first whiff of her scent. But something held him back.

"In my world, we have certain names for connections that transcend explanation," he said instead. "For bonds that form regardless of pack laws or logical reasoning."

"Like fairy tales?" A hint of skepticism colored her voice.

"Like ancient truths your science hasn't caught up with yet." He brushed her hair from her face. "You'll understand soon enough."

As moonlight filtered through the cabin's small window, which was now partially boarded up, Maya's body gradually relaxed against his. The tension between them transformed, no longer just electric but somehow deeper and more fundamental. Kieran felt his wounds knitting impossibly faster than normal—his shifter blood already worked miracles, but something about Maya's presence seemed to accelerate his healing.

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"You're recovering remarkably fast," she whispered, her fingers ghosting over the nearly closed wound on his shoulder. "Statistically impossible for normal human physiology."

"Good thing I'm not entirely human." His arm tightened around her waist. "Does it frighten you?"

"No," she answered immediately. "It... fascinates me."

His wolf preened at her acceptance, at the way she pressed closer against his side despite knowing what he was. The mate bond strengthened with each moment they spent together, weaving invisible threads between their souls. Kieran had heard stories of such bonds from elders, but nothing had prepared him for the reality—the visceral need to claim, protect, and cherish.

As Maya fell asleep against his chest, Kieran remained alert, his senses scanning the cabin and surroundings for any threat. His fingers traced idle patterns on her arm, memorizing every freckle and every curve.

"I'll keep you safe," he murmured into her hair. "Always."

The possessiveness of his thoughts should have alarmed him. He barely knew this woman, yet his wolf had already decided their shared fate. The rational part of him—the part trained to be Alpha—recognized the complications ahead. His father would never accept a human mate for his heir. The High Council would see her as a threat to their secrecy and way of life.

Yet holding her against him felt like finding a piece of himself he'd never known was missing. She fit perfectly in his arms, as if designed specifically to complement his strength with her brilliant mind.

He could mark her now, his wolf urged. A single bite at the junction of her neck and shoulder would complete the bond and tie her to him irrevocably. But Kieran reined in the instinct. She deserved to understand what she was agreeing to—deserved the freedom to choose him knowing all the consequences.

For now, he would savor this moment, when she'd chosen to stay rather than run, and to trust rather than fear. The rest would come in time.

Kieran woke up to the warm weight of Maya nestled against his chest, her copper hair spilling across his arm. Morning light filtered through the hastily boarded window, casting golden patterns across her freckled skin. His wolf purred with satisfaction at having her so close, her scent mingling with his own. For a moment, he simply breathed her in—wildflowers and vanilla and something uniquely Maya that called to both man and beast.

Three dead wolf shifters lay inside his cabin, and the High Council would inevitably demand answers. His father was still expecting him to eliminate the human witness. Yet in this moment, with Maya's steady heartbeat against his skin, Kieran had never felt more certain of anything in his life.

She's mine to protect. Mine to keep. My mate.

He brushed a strand of red hair from her delicate face, marveling at how quickly she'd become essential to him. The mate bond had taken root deeply, twining through his soul with an intensity that left no room for doubt.

Kieran shifted slightly, wincing as his healing wounds pulled. The injuries were

nearly gone—far faster than normal, even for a shifter. Maya stirred against him, those intelligent green eyes fluttering open to meet his gaze.

"I'm still amazed you're still here," he murmured, a hint of wonder in his voice.

She stretched against him, seemingly unconcerned by their proximity or his nakedness beneath the woolen blanket. "Where else would I be? You're the most fascinating specimen I've ever encountered."

"Specimen?" Kieran raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a predatory smile. "Is that all I am to you, Dr. Collins? A research subject?"

A delicious blush colored her cheeks. "I didn't mean?—"

"I know exactly what you meant." He cut her off with a finger to her lips, savoring the way her pulse quickened at his touch. "And I think we both know now, I'm more than just data for your journals."

Maya sat up, tugging the blanket around herself. Her breath caught when she saw his nearly healed wounds. "Your wounds look significantly better. The accelerated healing is so remarkable."

"I agree," Kieran said, stretching his powerful frame, unashamed of his nakedness as he stood. He felt her eyes tracking the movement of his muscles. "I need to make some calls. We need reinforcements."

She averted her gaze as he moved toward the small dresser. "Is that really necessary?"

"Three dead Granite Ridge wolf shifters in my cabin? Absolutely." He pulled on a pair of dark jeans, watching her from the corner of his eye. "I need people I can trust."

Maya hugged her knees to her chest, suddenly looking small and vulnerable. "More wolf shifters?"

"My brother and my Beta, maybe a few others," Kieran confirmed, noting how her shirt—what remained of it after she'd torn strips for his bandages—hung in tatters. "You need a new shirt. Here."

He tossed her one of his black t-shirts, watching with satisfaction as she caught it one-handed.

"Turn around," she instructed, her chin lifted in defiance.

Kieran's wolf bristled at the command, but he found himself complying, amused by her boldness. The rustle of fabric behind him sent his imagination into overdrive.

"I need to check your wounds before you get fully dressed," she said once she'd changed.

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His t-shirt swallowed her smaller frame, hanging to mid-thigh and sliding off one shoulder. The sight of her in his clothing triggered something primal—a need to scent-mark and claim.

"Be my guest." He sat on the edge of the bed, presenting his shoulder to her.

Maya's touch was clinical at first as she peeled away the makeshift bandages, but Kieran caught the slight tremor in her fingers when she applied more of the healing salve she'd found in his cabinet.

"This should have taken weeks to heal," she murmured, her scientific mind warring with disbelief. "It's almost gone."

"Perks of being what I am." Kieran caught her wrist before she could pull away. "Thank you, Maya. Not just for this—" he gestured to his wounds, "—but for trying to secure the cabin. The window, the door. Smart thinking."

Her eyes widened slightly at the praise. "I wasn't sure it would hold, but it seemed logical to create some barriers."

"Logical and brave," he corrected, pulling on a navy henley that stretched across his shoulders. "Most humans would be catatonic after what you've seen."

"I'm not most humans." The defiance in her voice delighted him.

"No," Kieran agreed, reaching for his phone. "You certainly aren't."

He dialed Damon's number first, his mind already mapping out contingencies. His Beta answered on the first ring.

"Sir."

"I need you at my cabin. Bring Malcolm for sure, maybe a few others you trust." Kieran kept his voice level, his eyes on Maya as she busied herself straightening the sparse cabin. "We have a situation."

"The human witness?" Damon's voice remained neutral.

"And three dead Granite Ridge wolves." Kieran watched Maya freeze at his words. "I'll explain when you get here."

He ended the call and crossed to where Maya stood, her back rigid with tension. Without hesitation, he placed his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him.

"You have my word, no harm will come to you," he promised, his voice dropping to a growl. "Anyone who tries will answer to me."

She studied his face, those remarkable eyes searching for deception. "Why? Why risk everything for me?"

The truth burned in his throat—mine, forever—but he swallowed it back. There would be time for that revelation.

"Because some things are worth fighting for," he said instead, brushing his thumb across her cheek. "Now, let's clean up this place before my reinforcements arrive."

ELEVEN

MAYA

Maya wrung out a blood-soaked rag into a bucket of now-crimson water, trying not to think too hard about the three sheet-covered bodies in the corner of the cabin. Thirty-six hours after the attack, the coppery smell still clung to everything, making her scientific mind catalog unwelcome details about coagulation rates and decomposition.

"You missed a spot." Kieran's deep voice sent an involuntary shiver down her spine as he knelt beside her, his shoulder brushing against hers.

His navy henley stretched across his chest as he reached past her to scrub a particularly stubborn bloodstain. The fabric pulled taut, revealing the muscular contours of his back. How was it possible he'd nearly died just yesterday? His healing rate defied every biological principle she'd ever studied.

"Your recovery is incredible," Maya said, tucking a loose strand of copper hair back into her braid. "Statistically impossible, actually."

Kieran's mouth quirked up at one corner. "Going to write a research paper about me, Dr. Collins?"

"The scientific community would never believe me." She gestured to the bodies. "Not without evidence."

"And that evidence stays in this cabin," he said firmly, his eyes flashing with something primal that made her stomach flip.

Maya tugged at the borrowed black t-shirt she'd tucked into her hiking pants. "I wasn't planning on?—"

The sudden crunch of boots on gravel outside silenced her. Kieran was on his feet in



an instant, positioning himself between her and the door with a fluid grace that reminded her he wasn't just a man but something altogether more dangerous.

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"Stay behind me," he commanded, his stance widening as the door swung open.

Five people filed into the cabin, led by a tall, imposing man with dark hair and green eyes that missed nothing as they swept the room, cataloging details with military precision.

"Three dead Granite Ridge wolves and one very alive human." His voice was cool and neutral. "Interesting problem-solving approach, Kieran."

Maya analyzed the newcomers from behind Kieran's protective stance. The man who'd spoken had to be Damon—Kieran's Beta, whatever that meant in shifter hierarchy. Beside him stood a younger man with the same black hair and sharp features as Kieran—obviously Malcolm, the brother she'd met briefly before. The petite woman with startling violet eyes and the two wary-looking men bringing up the rear were unknown quantities.

"This is Dr. Maya Collins," Kieran said, his hand finding her back in a possessive gesture that should have bothered her but instead sent heat spiraling through her body. "Wildlife biologist. And my guest."

The collective intake of breath at this introduction wasn't lost on Maya. Even with her limited understanding of shifter society, she recognized that Kieran was breaking protocol by introducing her so directly.

"Father will be thrilled by this situation," Malcolm said dryly, stepping forward to place his hand briefly on Maya's arm with unexpected familiarity. "Good to see you again, although I'd hoped under better circumstances."

"Damon Gray," the imposing man said, extending his hand after a brief hesitation. "Kieran's Beta and best friend."

His grip was firm but controlled, as if he was carefully measuring his strength. Maya noted the way his eyes tracked between her and Kieran, assessment and calculation visible in their depths.

The violet-eyed woman stepped forward. "Lena Nightshade. Healer for those who need it." Something in her gaze lingered on Maya with uncomfortable intensity. "Fascinating to meet you."

The other two men introduced themselves as Jake and Elias, rebel sympathizers according to Malcolm's quick explanation, though Maya noted they kept their distance from her, their discomfort evident.

"So, this is the human who's caused all the fuss," Damon said, circling the room to examine the bodies. "The one you were dispatched to eliminate."

Maya tensed, but Kieran's hand pressed reassuringly against her back.

"Circumstances have changed," Kieran replied, his tone brooking no argument. His voice carried the weight of command that made everyone in the room stand a little straighter.

"Clearly," Damon murmured, exchanging a loaded glance with Lena.

"These Granite Ridge wolves attacked without provocation," Kieran lied, his thumb tracing small circles on Maya's back. He cleared his throat before telling them at least one true statement. "They came for Maya."

Lena's violet eyes widened. "For the human specifically? That's interesting."

"Do they know something we don't?" one of the rebel sympathizers—Jake—pondered.

Maya felt the weight of their collective scrutiny. Something flashed in Lena's eyes—recognition, perhaps?—before the petite woman masked it.

"Knowledge is the new currency," Malcolm said, leaning against the wall with casual grace that didn't match the tension in the room. "And our guest here has plenty of it about us now."

Kieran's jaw tightened. "She stays under my protection."

The air in the cabin seemed to thicken with unspoken implications. Maya's scientific mind raced to catalog the complex dynamics unfolding around her. These weren't just people—they were predators with human faces, and she was witnessing pack politics in real-time.

"The rebellion will want to meet her," Lena said softly, her violet eyes never leaving Maya's face.

"The rebellion can wait," Kieran countered, his voice carrying unmistakable authority that seemed to reverberate through the small cabin. "First, we deal with our dead guests and secure this location."

Maya tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, feeling the weight of everyone's stares. She tugged at Kieran's borrowed black t-shirt where she'd tucked it into her hiking pants, acutely aware of how it swallowed her frame despite her athletic build.

The reactions around the room ranged from Malcolm's open curiosity to Damon's guarded assessment. The rebel sympathizers—Jake and Elias—kept a deliberate distance, their discomfort at her human presence palpable.

"I'll help," Maya offered, stepping forward. Six pairs of eyes widened simultaneously.

"You don't have to—" Kieran began.

"I do." Maya reached for the shovel Damon had brought in. "I'm not some delicate flower. I've done field autopsies on wolves before." She paused. "Just not ones that were people a few days ago."

Malcolm's unexpected bark of laughter broke the tension. "I like her."

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Outside, the summer afternoon hung heavy with humidity as they dug three graves at the edge of the clearing. Maya worked methodically, sweat beading across her forehead. She noticed how the others arranged themselves—always keeping her within someone's sightline, usually Kieran's.

"So, your pack dynamics," Maya ventured, driving her shovel into the soft earth. "They're hierarchical like natural wolves, but more complex, I'm guessing?"

Damon exchanged a look with Kieran before answering. "The Silvercrest pack is one of the oldest and most traditional. Rigid hierarchy, absolute obedience to the Alpha—Kieran's father."

"And humans?" Maya asked, watching their faces carefully.

"Tolerated at best, eliminated at worst," Malcolm said bluntly, ignoring Kieran's warning look. "The older generation believes interaction with humans threatens our survival."

"Hence your predicament," Lena added, arranging stones around the first completed grave. "By traditional shifter law, you shouldn't be standing here breathing right now."

"Yet here I am," Maya said, meeting Kieran's intense gaze across the clearing. Something electric passed between them.

"Here you are," Kieran agreed, his voice dropping an octave.

They worked in focused silence until the graves were complete. As they carried the bodies out—Maya insisting on helping despite Kieran's protests—she absorbed their dynamics with the analytical precision that had earned her doctorate.

"The rebellion isn't just about human integration, is it?" she asked as they returned to the cabin. "It's about freedom from outdated shifter traditions and laws."

Lena's violet eyes sparkled with interest. "You understand quickly for someone who just learned we exist."

Maya shrugged, feeling a strange familiarity with their struggle she couldn't explain. "Evolution is necessary for survival. Any species that refuses to adapt?—"

"Dies out," finished Damon, regarding her with new respect.

"Exactly." Maya gestured to the group. "Your younger generation sees what the elders don't—isolation isn't protection anymore. It's extinction."

Kieran leaned against the cabin wall, his eyes never leaving her face. "And your scientific opinion, Dr. Collins? What would you prescribe for a species at this crossroads?"

Maya felt a flush creep up her neck under his intense scrutiny. "Controlled integration. Careful alliance-building. Preserving crucial traditions while discarding harmful ones."

"She sounds like one of us," Malcolm murmured.

"Perhaps she is, in her way," Lena whispered back, though Maya caught it with surprising clarity.

As daylight faded and they secured the cabin with surprising efficiency, the conversation shifted to lighter topics. Maya found herself laughing at Malcolm's impression of their father's perpetual scowl, while even Damon cracked occasional smiles.

"For someone who should be terrified, you're remarkably calm," Kieran observed later, approaching her as the others gathered firewood. His proximity sent her pulse racing in a way that had nothing to do with fear.

"I'm still processing everything," Maya admitted. "Two days ago, I was tracking wolves. Today I'm burying them after they tried to kidnap me. It's a lot."

Kieran's hand brushed her arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake. "You've earned my trusted pack members' respect. Not many humans could face all this with such..." He searched for the word.

"Scientific detachment?" she offered.

"Grace," he corrected, his eyes intensifying to a brilliant silver-blue that stole her breath. "Though I'm beginning to suspect there's nothing detached about you, Dr. Collins."

The way he said her title—like a caress rather than a formality—made heat pool low in her stomach. Maya swallowed hard, suddenly very aware of how his scent wrapped around her, woodsy and wild and distinctly male.

"Your wolf," she said, desperate to regain her analytical footing. "When you shifted to protect me—it was beautiful."

Something primal flashed across his features, and he stepped closer, invading her space in a way that should have frightened her but instead set her nerve endings on



fire.

"Be careful with compliments like that," he warned as he put his hands on her waist. "My kind takes them very seriously."

Maya's breath hitched as she tilted her head up to meet his gaze, her analytical mind temporarily short-circuiting under the intensity of those silver-blue eyes. The air between them crackled with an electricity she couldn't explain through any scientific principle she'd ever studied.

The moment shattered as the cabin door swung open, bringing a rush of cool night air and five bodies laden with firewood. Damon entered first, his eyes immediately taking in their proximity with a raised eyebrow that made Maya's cheeks flush.

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"Interrupting something?" Malcolm asked with a knowing grin, brushing past them to deposit an armload of logs near the hearth.

Kieran stepped back, but Maya noticed how his hands lingered for a moment, as if reluctant to break contact. "Perfect timing as always, little brother."

While Damon, Jake, and Elias busied themselves with building a fire, Kieran moved toward the kitchenette, gesturing for Malcolm to follow. "Let's see what we can salvage for dinner."

Maya watched him go, still feeling the ghost of his presence against her body, when a light touch on her elbow made her turn. Lena stood beside her, her violet eyes gleaming with something that looked suspiciously like recognition.

"Come with me," the petite woman whispered, guiding Maya toward the bed at the far side of the cabin. "There's something I need to discuss with you."

Maya followed, her scientific curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

Lena's voice dropped lower as they sat on the edge of the mattress. "I sense something about you—something deeper than simple human awareness. It's like..." She paused, searching Maya's face. "Like recognition of a wolf shifter."

"I don't understand," Maya said, her brow furrowing.

"You might carry wolf blood." Lena's violet eyes never left Maya's face. "Dormant shifter genes."

Maya's mind raced, trying to fit this new information into her understanding of genetics. "That's not possible. I would have known if?—"

"Would you?" Lena challenged gently. "How many humans recognize the source of their inexplicable affinities?"

Before Maya could press further, Kieran's commanding voice carried across the cabin. "Dinner's ready."

The conversation dissolved as they joined the others around the small table. Maya found herself seated beside Kieran, hyperaware of every brush of his arm against hers as they shared the cramped space. The meal was simple—venison stew and crusty bread—but Maya devoured it, suddenly realizing how famished she was.

The conversation flowed with surprising ease, punctuated by Malcolm's witty barbs and even occasional dry comments from Damon that made everyone laugh. Maya found herself smiling more than she had in years. Her scientific mind cataloged the complex social dynamics at play while another part of her simply... enjoyed the company.

"We should head out," Damon announced after about an hour, rising from his seat. "The Alpha will notice our absence if we're gone much longer."

"And you're still officially in hiding," Malcolm added, clapping his brother on the shoulder. "No one can know you're here."

Maya watched as goodbyes were exchanged, noting how even the rebel sympathizers treated Kieran with deference despite their ideological differences. Lena lingered by the door, her gaze finding Maya's one last time, laden with unspoken meaning before she slipped out into the night.

Later that evening, Maya nestled against Kieran's chest on his bed. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath her ear created a counterpoint to her racing thoughts. The last few day's events whirled through her mind like leaves caught in a storm—wolf shifters, attacks, revelations—yet somehow, lying here in his arms felt like the most natural thing in the world. His body radiated heat that penetrated her borrowed t-shirt, warming places inside her that had been cold for years.

"Lena said something strange to me," Maya murmured, tracing an idle pattern on his chest. "Something about me possibly having dormant wolf shifter genes."

Kieran's body tensed beneath her. "What?"

"She said she sensed something about me." Maya lifted her head to study his face. "Some kind of recognition. Does that make any sense?"

He frowned, his silver-blue eyes searching her face with such intensity that heat bloomed across her skin. "It's not possible. You should have shifted during puberty if you carried the gene."

"That's what I thought." Maya sat up, drawing her knees to her chest. "But Kieran, there are things about me that I've never been able to explain scientifically."

His large hand slid up her back, coming to rest at the nape of her neck where his thumb traced small circles that sent electricity down her spine. "Tell me more."

"The full moon has always affected me." Maya closed her eyes, allowing buried memories to surface. "I couldn't sleep during full moons as a child. I'd sneak out of my bedroom window and just... run through the woods behind our house. For hours. My parents worried I'd get lost, but I never did. I always knew exactly where I was."

Kieran sat up, his muscular arm wrapping around her waist with possessive ease.

"What else?"

"Animals have always responded to me strangely." She turned toward him, her knee brushing against his thigh. "Especially canines. Dogs, wolves—they don't fear me. And when I was ten, I got into some trouble with bullies at school. I was cornered, and I felt this... rage building inside me. My vision actually changed. They ran away screaming that my eyes had turned yellow."

Kieran's breath caught. His hand came up to cup her face, tilting it to catch the moonlight filtering through the cabin's patched-up window. "Your eyes. They have gold flecks in the green. I noticed when we first met."

"And my grandmother." Maya's voice dropped to a whisper. "The only thing she said about my parents after they died was that they never wanted me to go into the deep woods alone. Our kind doesn't belong there anymore, she said. I always thought she was being superstitious."

"Or cautious," Kieran added. "Maya, what if she knew? What if you do carry wolf blood?"

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Her scientific mind raced through possibilities, cataloging genetic inheritance patterns, recessive traits, and dormant genes activated by environmental factors. "Is that even possible? For someone to carry shifter genes but not express them?"

Kieran's fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her closer until their foreheads touched. "There are legends of bloodlines that went dormant centuries ago. Shifters who chose to live as humans for generations until the wolf was forgotten."

"And what happens if that dormant gene wakes up?" Maya asked, her breath mingling with his.

His eyes flashed, burning brighter blue. "I'm not sure. But it would explain why you feel so right here. With me." His arm tightened around her waist. "Why your scent calls to me in ways I can't ignore. Why every protective instinct I possess roars to life when you're near."

"I need to know more. I need to understand what's happening inside of me, what's happening between us." Maya gestured between them, suddenly aware of how their bodies had gravitated closer together, fitting against each other with impossible perfection.

Kieran's smile turned predatory, his lips brushing her ear. "I already know what's happening between us. It's what happens when a wolf finds their fated mate."

TWELVE

MAYA

Maya barely had a moment to process Kieran's words—fated mate—before his mouth claimed hers with breathtaking intensity. His lips crashed against hers, not asking but demanding, taking what he seemed to know was already his. The kiss wasn't gentle or exploratory. It was hungry and desperate, filled with days of pent-up longing and primal need.

Her analytical mind short-circuited completely. All those careful observations and all that scientific detachment—gone in an instant as her body responded with a ferocity that shocked her. Every cell in her body lit up like a forest fire, recognizing something her conscious mind hadn't yet fully accepted. This wasn't just attraction or chemistry—this was recognition on a molecular level, as if part of her DNA had been dormant until the touch of his lips activated it.

Maya's hands found his shoulders, her fingers digging into the hard muscle as she matched his ferocity with her own. She'd never kissed anyone like this before—like she was drowning and he was air, like she'd been wandering lost and finally found her way home.

When they finally broke apart, both gasping for breath, Maya's vision seemed sharper. Colors were more vibrant. Kieran's eyes had transformed to molten silver, his pupils dilated with desire. His hands framed her face with surprising gentleness despite the barely contained power in his touch.

"Maya," he growled, the sound reverberating through her body like thunder.

He dipped his head to her neck, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses along her throat. Maya tilted her head instinctively, giving him better access in a gesture of submission that would have horrified her scientific, independent self just days ago. His large hands explored the curves of her body, sliding under her borrowed t-shirt to trace the contour of her spine.

"Kieran," she gasped, arching against him as electricity coursed through her veins.

Just when she thought she might combust from the heat building between them, he froze. His body went rigid against hers, his muscles tensing beneath her fingertips. With what appeared to be monumental effort, he pulled away, his breathing ragged.

"We need to stop," he said, though his silver-blue eyes said exactly the opposite.

"Why?" The question slipped out before she could stop it, embarrassingly close to a whimper.

Kieran took her hands in his, pressing them against his thundering heart. "Because if I don't stop now, I won't be able to. And you deserve better than a rushed first time while you're still processing what all this means."

The rejection stung despite his explanation. "I'm not some fragile human who doesn't know her own mind."

His mouth quirked up at the corners. "No, you're possibly the most stubborn, brilliant woman I've ever met, with potential dormant wolf genes and a scientific mind that won't rest until it understands everything." He brushed her copper hair behind her ear. "Which is exactly why we're going to take this slowly."

Maya bit her lip, trying to silence the unfamiliar, primal part of herself that was screaming for his touch. "And if I disagree with that assessment?"

His eyes flashed dangerously, and for a moment, she glimpsed the predator beneath the man. "Then my control might not hold. And as much as my wolf wants to claim you right now, the man wants to do this right."

He pulled her down against his chest, arranging them on the bed so her head rested



over his heart. The strong rhythm beneath her ear was comforting, though her body still hummed with unresolved tension.

As they lay in the darkness in his cabin, Maya's mind raced wildly. Dormant wolf genes. Fated mates. Scientific impossibilities that somehow felt more right than anything in her carefully ordered life.

What would this mean for her research and her career? What would it mean for her identity?

Sleep claimed her eventually. But not before her scientific brain cataloged a dozen more questions she needed answers to.

In her dreams, she ran through moonlit forests on four paws instead of two legs, a large black wolf at her side. They moved as one unit, perfectly attuned to each other's movements, racing toward some unknown destination where acceptance awaited them.

Maya woke gradually the next morning, her consciousness filtering through layers of warmth and contentment before she registered the solid wall of muscle pressed against her back. Kieran's strong arm was draped possessively around her small waist, his breath warming the nape of her neck.

The memory of their kiss sent a current of electricity through her body. Since that moment when his lips had claimed hers, something had changed—awakened—inside her. It wasn't just emotional. It felt... physical. Like dormant parts of her DNA had suddenly switched on.

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She shifted slightly, and immediately his hold tightened.

"Good morning," he murmured, his voice sleep-rough and impossibly sexy.

Maya turned to face him, momentarily stunned by the sight of his tousled black hair and the intensity of his eyes regarding her with undisguised hunger. "Morning."

"I've been thinking," Kieran said, his expression turning serious. "After what you shared last night about your childhood, and considering what Lena said about dormant genes... there's a place I should take you."

Maya propped herself up on one elbow. "What kind of place?"

"The Silvercrest archives. We keep records going back centuries—genealogies, shifting histories, and medical research." His fingers traced her jawline. "If you have wolf blood, there might be answers there."

Her scientific curiosity instantly ignited. "You'd take me there? Isn't that against your pack rules?"

"Spectacularly so." He grinned, the scar along his temple crinkling. "But I'm finding that a lot of rules seem less important since I met you."

Maya bit her lip. "Before we go, could we stop at my van? I need my clothes, my notebooks?—"

"It's risky," he frowned, suddenly all Alpha male again. "But it's on our way. We'll

need to make it quick."

An hour later, they were making their way through the forest. Maya couldn't help noticing how different everything felt. The earth beneath her boots seemed to speak to her with each step. The scents of pine, moss, and nearby water registered with startling clarity. But most disorienting was her awareness of Kieran—his scent wrapped around her like a physical entity, woodsy and wild with undertones of something uniquely him that called to her on a primitive level.

"You keep sniffing," Kieran observed, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"Everything smells... more." She inhaled deeply. "Especially you."

His pace faltered. "What do I smell like to you?"

"Like... pine and thunderstorms and..." she hesitated, embarrassed by the intensity of her reaction, "...like something I've been looking for without knowing it."

Kieran's eyes flashed silver. "That's your wolf recognizing mine."

"But I don't have a wolf."

"Not yet." His voice dropped an octave. "But something's waking up in you, Maya. I can sense it."

When they reached the clearing where her modified research van was parked, Maya stopped abruptly. The driver's side door hung open, swinging slightly in the breeze. Even from a distance, she could see the destruction.

"No, no, no..." She broke into a run.

The interior had been systematically destroyed. Her specialized cameras smashed, hard drives cracked open, and maps torn to shreds. Even her carefully organized specimen collection had been scattered across the floor and stomped on.

Maya stood frozen among the wreckage, her hands trembling. "All my research..."

Kieran moved through the space with predatory alertness, his nostrils flaring. "Granite Ridge wolves. Same ones who attacked the cabin." His jaw clenched. "This is territorial marking—destroying what belongs to someone they see as an enemy."

Maya opened a hidden compartment she'd created for theft protection, where she kept her backup laptop and drives. She never thought it would come in handy against the wolves she was researching. She gathered her spare backpack from the hidden compartment, relieved to find her laptop and drives still intact inside. "At least I have this. Small miracles."

"Take what you need," Kieran said, his eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. "We shouldn't linger."

She quickly gathered clothing, toiletries, and a few treasured books that had survived the attack. As she worked, she caught Kieran watching her with a mixture of concern and something deeper and more possessive.

"What?" she asked, self-conscious under his intense gaze.

"You're handling this better than most would." Pride colored his voice. "Most humans would be falling apart."

Maya squared her shoulders. "Maybe I'm not most humans. Maybe I never was."

The truth of her words hung between them as they set off toward their next

destination—and possibly, answers about who she really was.

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Maya followed Kieran through the dense forest, her hiking boots catching on exposed roots as they traveled westward toward Silvercrest territory. Her backpack, filled with the rescue remnants of her research, bounced against her spine with each step. The early afternoon sun filtered through the canopy in golden splinters, casting dappled light across Kieran's broad shoulders as he forged ahead.

"How much farther?" Maya asked, brushing her hair away from her face.

Kieran glanced back, his eyes assessing her. "You tired already?"

"Just curious." She matched his pace, refusing to show weakness. "I'm trying to calculate our position relative to pack boundaries."

"You're always the scientist, aren't you?" His lips quirked into that half-smile that sent heat pooling in her stomach. "We crossed into Silvercrest territory about fifteen minutes ago. The archives are housed beneath the old meeting hall."

Maya evaluated each sensation in her body as they walked—the heightened awareness of scents and the strange pull she felt toward the tall, imposing man leading her through the woods. Was this what having dormant shifter genes felt like? Or was it simply the aftermath of that earth-shattering kiss they'd shared?

"Tell me more about these archives," she prompted, her scientific mind hungry for details. "How far back do they go?"

"The oldest texts date back to the 1500s," Kieran replied, ducking under a low-hanging branch and holding it aside for her. "Oral histories go back even further. My

great-grandfather was obsessive about documentation—he established the modern classification system."

Two hours later, they approached a modest stone building half-buried in the hillside. From the outside, it looked like an abandoned storage shed, but Kieran led her to a hidden entrance at the rear.

"Stay close," he commanded, his voice lowering to that authoritative tone that simultaneously irritated and aroused her. "If we're caught, the punishment is severe."

"What level of severe are we talking?" Maya whispered as they slipped through the doorway.

"Exile for me." His jaw clenched. "Something worse for you."

Once inside, the archives were a labyrinth of oak shelves and glass cases illuminated by soft amber lights. The air smelled of aging paper, leather bindings, and secrets. Maya's fingers itched to touch everything.

"Focus on the genetics section," Kieran directed, pointing to a corner filled with leather-bound volumes. "I'll keep watch."

Maya's scientific training took over as she methodically searched through the texts. Most referenced pureblooded lineages and pack hierarchies, but yielded little about dormant genes. Finally, she found a slim volume with a faded spine.

"Kieran," she called softly. "I found something about hybrids, but it's frustratingly vague."

He moved to her side, his heat enveloping her in the cool archive. "That term went out of use centuries ago. It was considered... derogatory."

"What does it mean exactly?" Maya flipped through brittle pages.

"Half-bloods. Children of wolves and humans." His voice was tight and uncomfortable.

Intrigued, Maya dug deeper, pulling down older volumes with increasingly ornate bindings. In the oldest section, she discovered a chest of scrolls sealed with wax emblems.

"Should I..." she began, but Kieran had stepped away to check the entrance.

Maya's curiosity won out. She carefully broke the seal on the largest scroll and unrolled it on the reading table.

The ancient text was illuminated with gold leaf and intricate illustrations showing wolf shifters and humans living side by side. Detailed accounts described unions—both marriage and mating bonds—between species.

"Oh my God," Maya breathed, her heart racing. "Kieran, these aren't just records. They're celebrations. Look at this!"

Reluctantly, he approached, his eyes widening as he scanned the text.

"These unions were once common," she continued, her excitement building. "Encouraged, even. Until..." Her finger traced the date. "Three hundred years ago, when the High Council forbade them."

On the final page, an illustration showed a human woman with fiery hair standing between two worlds, wolves at her feet and humans at her back. Beneath it, words in an ancient script glowed faintly in the dim light.



"What does this say?" Maya asked, pointing to the text.

Kieran's face had gone pale. "It's the Lunar Prophecy. 'When the blood of both worlds runs through the one who bridges understanding, the old ways shall return and harmony restored.'"

The implications hit Maya like a physical jab. She stared at the illustration, at the red-haired woman who could have been her mirror image.

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"I'm not just someone with dormant genes, am I?" Her voice trembled. "I'm part of this prophecy."

Kieran's expression shuttered, the vulnerability she'd glimpsed vanishing behind a mask of authority. "We need to go. Now."

"But we've barely scratched the surface?—"

"Now, Maya." His tone brooked no argument as he rolled the scroll and returned it to the chest. "This place isn't safe any longer."

The journey back east was tense and largely silent. Maya's mind raced with the implications of what they'd discovered. Not just that she might carry shifter blood, but that she could be the key to something that terrified Kieran enough to make him retreat behind his Alpha walls.

"Are you going to talk to me at all?" she finally demanded as the sun began to set.

"What do you want me to say?" His voice was clipped. "That finding out my mate might be the subject of an ancient prophecy that could upend our entire shifter world doesn't complicate things for me?"

"How about saying that this prophecy scares you?"

He stepped closer, his expression fierce. "What scares me is what they'll do to you if they find out about this prophecy. What scares me is that I might not be strong enough to protect you from that."

## THIRTEEN

### KIERAN

Maya stepped even closer to Kieran, her chin tilted upward in defiance. Her green eyes blazed with a fire that made his wolf howl inside him. The evening sun caught the copper highlights in her hair, turning them to liquid flame.

"I'll be fine," she insisted, jabbing her finger into his chest. "Nothing bad will happen to me. I'm not some fragile little human who needs protecting."

Kieran's jaw clenched, his teeth grinding against the force of his frustration. How could she be so brilliant and yet so blind to the danger she was in? "I can't guarantee that's true, Maya. The Council has killed for less than what we discovered today." His voice lowered to a low growl. "And I can't let anything happen to you because you are my mate. Do you understand what that means? I cannot lose you."

The word 'mate' hung between them, charged with a significance neither had fully addressed until now.

Maya's expression softened, though that stubborn spark remained. "I'm not going anywhere, Kieran. I'll be by your side while we figure this out together."

Something in the way she said it—the quiet certainty and the absence of qualification—made Kieran's carefully constructed barriers crumble. His wolf surged forward, demanding he finally claim what was his. The rational part of his mind, the part that had spent years navigating pack politics and hiding his true feelings, simply surrendered.

Without warning, he bent down and swept her into his arms, backpack and all, lifting her against his chest as if she weighed nothing.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, her arms instinctively wrapping around his neck.

"Showing you exactly what you mean to me," he growled, kicking open the cabin door and carrying her inside.

He set her down gently once they crossed the threshold, her backpack sliding to the floor with a thud. His eyes never left hers as he moved deliberately to secure the door, sliding the heavy wooden beam they'd constructed yesterday into place across it.

Maya watched him, her breath coming faster and her pupils dilating as he stalked back toward her. "Are you planning to keep me prisoner again?" Her voice carried a husky edge that belied the challenge in her words.

"No," Kieran reached her in two long strides, cupping her face in his hands. "I'm planning to worship you."

Any response she might have had disappeared as his mouth claimed hers, hungry and possessive. His hand slid into her hair, cradling the base of her skull as he deepened the kiss. She tasted like something sweet and something uniquely Maya—something his wolf recognized as home.

"I've wanted this since I first caught your scent," he murmured against her lips, walking her backward toward his bed. "You have no idea what you do to me."

Maya made a small sound of pleasure as his kisses trailed down her neck. "I think I'm starting to get the picture."

Kieran smiled against her skin, then gently guided her down onto his bed. She looked at him with those impossible green eyes, her red hair fanned out across his pillow, and something primal roared to life inside him.

Mine, he thought, lowering himself over her. His hands skimmed the curves of her body through her clothes, memorizing every dip and rise. His lips found the pulse point at her throat, and he dragged his teeth lightly over the sensitive skin there.

"Tell me you want this," he demanded, his voice rough with need. His wolf was nearing the surface now, demanding he claim, mark, and possess. But the man in him needed her consent, needed to know she was choosing this—choosing him.

Maya's fingers tangled in his hair, pulling his mouth back to hers. "I want this," she breathed against his lips. "I want you, Kieran."

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Kieran's breath hitched as her words sank into him—a permission, a demand, and a plea all at once. She wants this. She wants me. His wolf pushed forward, a primal force that burned through his veins, but he held it back, just enough to savor the moment. Her hands were already pulling at his shirt, her fingers trembling with urgency as she yanked it over his head and tossed it aside. The cool air pricked his skin, but the heat of her gaze on his bare chest made him feel like he was on fire.

"Maya," he said, his voice low and rough, before capturing her lips again. Her mouth was warm and insistent, and he couldn't get enough of her taste—like the forest after rain, wild and intoxicating. His hands moved to the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and over her head in one swift motion. She sat up slightly, letting him discard it, then reached behind her to unhook her bra. He watched, mesmerized, as the fabric fell away, revealing her perfect breasts, her pale skin flushed with anticipation.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, his voice thick with reverence. He kissed her again, slower this time, before trailing his lips down her throat, then her collarbone, until he reached the curve of her breast. He took her nipple into his mouth, flicking his tongue over the hardened peak, and she gasped, arching into him. Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as he sucked and bit gently, teasing her until her breath came in short, ragged pants.

"Kieran," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Please."

The sound of her begging lit something raw and untamed inside him. He smiled against her skin, kissing a path down her stomach, his hands working to rid her of the rest of her clothes. He tugged her pants and panties down in one smooth motion, leaving her completely bare before him. His breath caught at the sight of her—her

body flushed, her thighs trembling, and her arousal glistening in the dim light of the cabin.

"You're perfect," he said, his voice a hoarse growl. He settled between her thighs, his hands gripping her hips to hold her steady as he lowered his head. Her scent was intoxicating, a mix of her natural sweetness and the heady musk of her arousal. He couldn't resist. He pressed a kiss to the soft skin of her inner thigh, then another, working his way higher until his breath brushed against her core.

"Kieran—" Her voice broke on his name, her hands tightening in his hair.

He didn't give her time to think or to protest. He licked a slow, deliberate stripe through her folds, relishing the sound of her gasp. She tasted like everything he'd ever wanted, and he couldn't get enough. He teased her with his tongue, circling her clit until she was writhing beneath him, her hips rocking against his mouth.

"More," she begged, her voice cracking. "Please, Kieran."

He complied, sliding two fingers inside her as he returned to her clit, sucking and licking with a rhythm designed to drive her out of her mind. Her inner walls clenched around his fingers, and he could feel her on the edge, her body tensing as pleasure coiled tighter and tighter inside her.

"Let go, Maya," he growled against her skin, his words vibrating through her.

She soon cried out, her body arching as the orgasm ripped through her. Her thighs squeezed against his head, her hands pulling at his hair as she rode the wave of her pleasure. But he didn't let up, keeping up the rhythm of his fingers and tongue until her body went limp, her breathing ragged and her skin glistening with sweat.

He kissed her thigh, then crawled back up her body, his own need burning like a

wildfire. She looked at him, her eyes dazed and full of something that made his chest ache. He brushed her red hair from her face, his hand trembling slightly.

"You're mine," he said, the words more of a growl than anything else.

She reached up, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw. "And you're mine," she whispered.

He kissed her again, slow and deep, pouring everything he couldn't say into it. His hands roamed her body again, memorizing every curve and every dip, as if he could imprint her on his soul. When he pulled back, it was only to look at her, to take in the sight of her beautiful naked body lying there on his bed in his sanctuary.

"Come here," Kieran commanded softly, reaching for Maya to get on top of him.

Maya's hands trembled slightly as she crawled onto him, her green eyes dark with desire. Kieran watched her intently, his eyes glowing with a feral light as she undid the button of his jeans, her fingers brushing against his taut stomach. She slid the zipper down with deliberate slowness. Her breath hitched as she pulled his pants and boxers down in one fluid motion. His cock sprang free, fully erect and throbbing, and she let out a soft gasp. Her gaze flickered to his face, and he saw the mix of curiosity and hunger in her eyes.

"You've seen me before," he said, his voice rough with restraint, "but not like this."

She swallowed hard, her fingers tracing the length of him, and he gritted his teeth against the surge of pleasure. "Straddle me," he commanded, his voice low and gravelly. "Take control."

Maya hesitated for a moment, her cheeks flushing. But then she positioned herself over him, guiding his cock to her slick entrance. She lowered herself slowly, inch by



agonizing inch, her breath coming in shallow gasps. Kieran's hands gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her skin as she took him deeper, her warmth enveloping him completely. When she finally seated herself, she let out a loud moan, her head tilting back as she adjusted to the feel of him.

"You're so tight," he growled, his voice strained. He fought to keep still, to let her set the pace, but it was a battle. Every movement of her hips was pure torture, her body molding to his in a way that felt fated and inevitable. She began to move slowly, her hands braced against his chest, her eyes locked on his.

"You're so big," she breathed, her voice shaky. "It's... it's a lot."

Kieran's laugh was low and dark, his hands sliding up her sides to cup her breasts. "You're perfect, Maya. Just like this. Take what you need."

She bit her lip, her hips rolling with more confidence now, and he groaned. His wolf surged forward, urging him to take and to claim. But he held back, letting her guide the rhythm, her movements growing faster and more desperate. Her moans filled the cabin, mingling with the sound of their skin slapping together, and Kieran felt his control slipping.

"Kieran," she whimpered, her hands gripping his shoulders. "I'm close..."

"I know, Maya," he rasped, reaching between them to circle her clit with his thumb. Her inner walls tightened around him, and he knew she was on the edge. He thrust up into her, driving deeper and harder, his own pleasure building to a fever pitch. She leaned forward, her arms wrapping around his neck, her breath hot against his skin.

"Don't stop," she begged, her voice breaking as she clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders.

He didn't. He couldn't. His wolf snarled inside him, demanding more—demanding he claim her fully, mark her, and make her his in every way possible. His teeth ached with the need to sink into her throat, to seal the bond that pulsed between them like a living thing.

And then—she shattered.

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Her orgasm crashed through her violently, her body convulsing around him, her cry ringing through the cabin. The scent of her pleasure, the way her muscles locked around him, sent his own release surging to the brink. His vision blurred, his wolf surging forward?—

Mine. Now.

His teeth grazed her neck, a half-bite, a warning—before his human mind wrenched control back at the last second. He tore his mouth away, pulling out of her just as his own climax threatened to consume him, spilling himself against her thigh instead of inside her.

Panting, he stared at the small trickle of blood on her neck, his stomach twisting.

Shit.

He hadn't asked. He hadn't warned her. His wolf had nearly taken what wasn't fully his to claim—not yet.

Maya blinked at him, dazed, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Kieran?" Her fingers brushed the bite mark on her neck, coming away with a faint smear of red. "Did you just?—?"

He caught her wrist before she could touch it again, his grip firm but careful. "I didn't mean to." His voice was rough, laced with a growl he couldn't suppress. "My wolf got too close."

She studied him, her green eyes searching his face. "But you stopped."

"Barely." He exhaled sharply, his thumb tracing the edge of the bite. "It's not a full mark."

He hadn't meant to do it—his primal instincts took over. But he'd stopped himself before it was too late. Maybe. He wasn't sure. The bite wasn't deep, but it was enough to leave a mark, and enough to make him worry.

Maya frowned, her fingers touching the spot on her neck. "Is this... part of the whole mate thing?"

Kieran nodded, his jaw tight. "Yeah. My wolf wanted to claim you. To mark you as mine."

She was quiet for a moment, her eyes searching his. "And you didn't want to?"

"I did," he admitted, his voice rough. "More than anything. But I wanted it to be your choice. Not something I forced on you."

Maya's expression softened, and she leaned forward, brushing her lips against his. "It's okay, Kieran."

Her words soothed the storm inside him, but the guilt still lingered. He'd come so close to crossing a line, to taking something she hadn't fully consented to. And now, he didn't know what the small bite might mean for her or for them. His wolf had been too close to the surface, too desperate to claim her, and he'd lost control of himself. He couldn't let that happen again. He wouldn't.

FOURTEEN

## MAYA

The knock on the door came that morning just as Maya finished spreading a thin layer of Kieran's homemade blackberry jam across her toast. The sharp, insistent rap made her jump, causing her knife to clatter against the plate. Kieran was across the cabin in three long strides, his movements fluid and predatory.

"It's Malcolm," he said, his nostrils flaring slightly as he scented the air. His eyes flashed toward her with a hint of possessiveness that sent delicious shivers through her. "And Lena."

Maya's fingers automatically went to her neck, where the shallow mark from last night remained. It wasn't a full claiming bite—Kieran had made that clear—but it felt significant nonetheless, like a promise written in her skin.

Kieran slid the heavy wooden beam away from the door and swung it open. Malcolm strode in, bringing the crisp morning air with him. His eyes darted between her and Kieran, a knowing smirk forming on his lips.

"Well, well," Malcolm drawled, "don't you two look... rested."

Lena followed, her petite form a stark contrast to the Silvercrest brothers' large frames. Her unusual violet eyes fixed immediately on Maya, then widened slightly as they caught the bite mark on Maya's neck.

"Father's getting restless," Malcolm said, cutting straight to business. "He knows you've gone AWOL, and he's not stupid, Kieran. He's put two and two together about the human witness."

Maya felt her cheeks flush. Human witness. Is that all she was to these people? After last night, she'd thought... but no. Pack politics were complex, and her relationship

with Kieran was barely a day old.

"How much time do we have?" Kieran's voice was hard and commanding, the voice of a future Alpha. Maya watched the muscles in his jaw tighten, fascinated by how quickly he could shift from the tender lover she'd known last night to this formidable leader.

"Not much," Malcolm replied, running a large hand through his short black hair. "Damon and I can only run interference for so long. Father's sent scouts to check your regular spots. This place was never on his radar before, but?—"

"But he's not above following even his own sons," Kieran finished grimly.

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Maya set her half-eaten toast down, her appetite gone. "What happens if he finds me?"

The silence that followed her question felt heavy enough to crush her.

"Nothing good," Malcolm finally said, giving her an apologetic look.

Kieran moved to Maya's side, his large hand finding her lower back in a gesture that was both protective and possessive. "I won't let that happen."

The certainty in his voice should have been comforting, but Maya felt a chill. How could he possibly stand against his father—the Alpha—and an entire pack, not to mention the High Council, that viewed humans as threats?

A sudden tension filled the room. Both Silvercrest brothers stiffened simultaneously, their heads turning toward the window with eerie synchronicity.

"Someone's out there," Kieran growled, his eyes flashing an unnatural blue. "In the woods."

Malcolm nodded, already moving toward the door. "I smell them too."

"Granite Ridge again?" Kieran's voice was tight with controlled fury.

"Can't tell." Malcolm's hand went to his waistband, where Maya glimpsed the handle of a knife. "But we should check."

Kieran turned to Maya, his expression intense. "Stay inside with Lena. Do not leave this cabin under any circumstances." His voice left no room for argument, the command of a future Alpha.

"But—" Maya started.

"Promise me," he insisted, gripping her shoulders gently but firmly.

Maya swallowed the protest that had risen to her lips. Part of her—the independent researcher who had survived alone in the wilderness for weeks—bristled at being ordered about. But another part—the part that had witnessed what these wolves were capable of—understood the danger.

"Fine," she conceded. "I promise."

Kieran's expression softened for just a moment. He brushed his thumb across her cheek, a fleeting touch that felt like a brand. Then he was gone, following Malcolm out the door into the surrounding forest.

Maya heaved the heavy wooden beam across the door, wincing at the strain on her pleasantly sore muscles from last night's activities. The solid thunk of wood against the frame echoed through the small cabin, sealing her and Lena inside while Kieran and Malcolm investigated whatever lurked in the forest.

"That should hold," Maya said, testing the beam with a firm shake before turning to face Lena.

The petite healer stood near the small fireplace, her violet eyes tracking Maya's movements with unsettling intensity. Something about those eyes made Maya feel exposed, as if Lena could see straight through to her core—to the place where Kieran had touched something primal and undiscovered.



"Why does the Silvercrest pack want me dead so badly?" Maya asked, sliding into one of the wooden chairs at the kitchen table. "I was just doing research. It seems extreme to execute someone just for witnessing your existence."

Lena's lips quirked in a sad smile as she settled into the chair across from Maya, her small hands folding neatly on the weathered table surface.

"Alpha Alaric and the High Council are... inflexible when it comes to secrecy," she said, her voice soft but clear. "But Alaric especially. He became Alpha at eighteen—youngest in pack history—after his father died unexpectedly. He's built the Silvercrest pack into what it is today through sheer force of will."

"And what is that exactly? A dictatorship?" Maya couldn't keep the edge from her voice, thinking of the journals she'd found documenting decades of abuses.

Lena sighed, tracing an absent pattern on the wooden tabletop. "He believes he's protecting his people. Preserving our way of life."

"By murdering innocent humans?" Maya challenged.

"There was a time when I thought there might be a softer side to Alaric," Lena continued, her violet gaze distant. "But lately... his actions have grown more extreme, almost impulsive. It's like he senses something coming—a storm—and he's battenning down every hatch."

Maya shook her head, her red strands falling across her face. "And he tasks Kieran with the dirty work. Kill the human witness." She pushed her hair back with agitation. "It's barbaric. How could anyone expect their own son to commit murder just to uphold some outdated laws and traditions?"

"That's how Kieran was raised," Lena said, her eyes flickering to the mark on Maya's

neck before quickly looking away. "From birth, he's been taught that protecting the pack comes before all else—before morality, and definitely before personal feelings."

"But he's questioning it now, isn't he?" Maya asked, her fingers unconsciously rising to touch the place where Kieran's teeth had grazed her skin.

"More than ever," Lena affirmed. "I've known Kieran since we were pups. He's always had doubts, but meeting you..." Her voice trailed off meaningfully.

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Maya stared out the top of the cabin's patched-up window at the dense forest beyond, thinking about the enormity of what Kieran was doing by protecting her. He was defying his Alpha, his own father, and everything he'd been taught. The weight of that rebellion seemed suddenly staggering.

"I shouldn't have judged him so harshly in the beginning," Maya admitted quietly, more to herself than to Lena. "Breaking away from lifelong indoctrination isn't simple. And he's risking everything—his position, his family, maybe even his life—by keeping me alive."

She remembered his fierce protectiveness, the way his powerful body had shifted into his wolf form and shielded her during the attack, and the tenderness in his touch afterward. For a man raised to be ruthless, he'd shown her nothing but care.

"He can't keep protecting me forever though, can he?" Maya asked, turning back to Lena. "We can't just stay on the run indefinitely."

Lena's violet eyes studied Maya's face with uncomfortable intensity. "No," she agreed. "But there may be another way forward—one that neither of you has fully considered yet."

Maya caught the meaningful look in Lena's eyes, the way they lingered on her neck, and she knew the healer suspected much more than she was saying. About the mark. About what Maya had found in those ancient archives. About the dormant wolf genes that might be stirring within her own blood.

The conversation hung in the air between them, poised on the edge of revelation.

"You know," Maya said, tracing the grain of the wooden table with her fingertip, "in evolutionary biology, we have a principle—change isn't just good, it's necessary." Her scientific mind always found comfort in facts when emotions became too tumultuous. "Species that don't adapt become extinct. That's just nature."

Lena's lips curved into a small smile. "The rebellion has been saying that for years. The old ways served their purpose, but times change. We must change with them."

Maya nodded, emboldened. "Kieran took me to the Silvercrest archives yesterday," she confessed, watching Lena's face carefully. "We found records showing humans and shifters lived together, even formed relationships, until about three centuries ago."

Something flickered in Lena's eyes—recognition, surprise that Maya knew, perhaps even relief. "The Severance," she murmured. "When the High Council made the decree that separated our worlds forever."

Maya leaned forward. "But why? What could possibly?—"

"Maya," Lena interrupted, her voice suddenly urgent. "This is actually why I came with Malcolm today." She glanced toward the door nervously. "The High Council knows about your dormant shifter genes."

Cold dread pooled in Maya's stomach. "What? How could they possibly?—"

"I don't know," Lena whispered. "Maybe they picked up your scent at the archives. Or Kieran's. But something alerted them." Her small hands gripped Maya's across the table. "This is serious. If they find you?—"

Three sharp knocks on the cabin door made both women jump.

"Kieran," Maya breathed, strangely picking up his scent with crystal clarity. She rushed to slide the heavy wooden beam aside, her heart pounding.

Kieran and Malcolm burst through the door, tension radiating from their powerful frames. Kieran immediately moved to Maya's side, his hand spanning her lower back possessively as his eyes swept over her, checking for any harm that might have befallen her in his absence.

"We need to move," he said, his voice deep and commanding. "Now. It's not safe here anymore."

The authority in his tone sent an involuntary shiver down Maya's spine. Despite everything rational in her mind that rebelled against submitting to anyone's orders, her body responded to him instinctively.

"What did you find out there?" she asked, already reaching for her backpack.

Malcolm's expression was grim. "Signs of scouts. Not just Granite Ridge this time."

"Silvercrest?" Lena asked, her voice barely audible.

Malcolm's tight nod confirmed her fears.

"I know a cave system to the south," Kieran said decisively. "Maya and I will head there. Malcolm, take Lena back to territory—make it look like everything's normal."

Malcolm nodded. "I'll find you after. You're going to need backup, brother." The undercurrent of worry in his voice made Maya's pulse quicken.

Within minutes, Lena and Malcolm were gone, and Maya found herself trudging through dense forest behind Kieran's broad back. He moved with predatory grace

over fallen logs and through thick underbrush, occasionally reaching back to steady her when the terrain grew treacherous.

"Lena told me something," Maya said when they'd put sufficient distance between themselves and the cabin. "The High Council knows somehow about my dormant shifter genes."

Kieran stopped so abruptly that Maya collided with his solid back. He turned, his eyes blazing with a piercing intensity that stole her breath.

"What did you say?" His voice was dangerously soft.

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Maya took a deep breath. She held his gaze despite the flutter of fear in her stomach. "The High Council. They know about me—possibly about what I might be. But I'm not sure. Lena didn't get a chance to finish explaining."

Kieran swore under his breath, his jaw clenching as he struggled to contain his reaction. The muscles in his forearms flexed as his hands balled into fists at his sides. When he finally spoke, his voice was tight with controlled fury.

"If they know about the prophecy and suspect you're connected to it..." He shook his head. "This changes everything."

"I'm not afraid," she said, squaring her shoulders despite the fear coursing through her veins.

Kieran's expression softened for just a moment before hardening into determined resolve. He reached for her, his large hand cupping her cheek with surprising gentleness. "You should be," he murmured. "But I won't let them touch you. I'd tear apart anyone who tried."

The fierce possessiveness in his voice should've alarmed her, but instead, it sent a wave of heat through her core. This was no ordinary human male posturing—this was a wolf claiming what was his.

And despite everything her rational mind knew about autonomy and independence, some primal part of her responded to that claim with fierce joy.

FIFTEEN

## KIERAN

Kieran's senses prickled before his conscious mind registered the threat. The wind shifted, carrying unfamiliar scents—five distinct markers, all Granite Ridge wolves. His hand shot out, grabbing Maya's wrist in mid-stride.

"Don't move," he commanded, his deep voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

Maya froze, her green eyes questioning but trusting. The copper in her braid caught sunlight filtering through the canopy, creating a halo effect that made his chest tighten. His wolf howled inside him—protect mate.

"What is it?" she whispered, instinctively moving closer to him.

"Ambush." Kieran scanned the surrounding forest, mapping escape routes. They were still fifteen miles from the cave system—too far to outrun wolves. "Five of them. Granite Ridge."

The undergrowth rustled as five figures melted from the shadows, surrounding them in practiced formation. Kieran shifted Maya behind him, his body a shield between her and the approaching threat.

"Well, if it isn't the Silvercrest heir," drawled a tall, rawhide-tough shifter with a jagged scar across his nose. "Playing bodyguard to a human. Your father must be so proud."

Kieran recognized him—Torren, a Granite Ridge enforcer with a reputation for excessively violent takedowns. The other four spread out in flanking positions, cutting off escape routes.

"This doesn't concern Granite Ridge," Kieran growled, adjusting his stance for



combat. He could feel the wolf inside him straining for release, clawing at his restraint.

"It does now." Torren's thin lips curled. "The High Council has taken special interest in your... companion. They've authorized us to capture her." His eyes slid to Maya, predatory and calculating. "You know, your failure to eliminate the human as ordered is quite the topic of discussion lately."

Kieran's hand moved imperceptibly toward the hunting knife strapped to his thigh. "You're not taking her anywhere."

A slow, dangerous smile spread across Torren's face. "Going to fight all five of us, heir? Bold, even for you."

Maya's fingers pressed into Kieran's back, the warmth of her touch grounding him. Her scent—wildflowers and earth—filled his senses, strengthening his resolve.

"Leave while you can still walk," Kieran said, his voice deadly calm.

Torren laughed, a harsh sound. "I do enjoy a challenge."

They attacked simultaneously—a coordinated assault that spoke of practiced precision. Kieran moved with lethal efficiency, blocking the first strike from Torren and countering with a brutal uppercut that sent him staggering.

The second attacker received an elbow to the throat, dropping him momentarily. Kieran spun, catching the third with a roundhouse kick that connected with a satisfying crack of ribs.

"Kieran, behind you!" Maya's warning came just in time.

He ducked, narrowly avoiding a swinging branch aimed at his head. The odds were poor—even with his training, five against one left little room for error. Each second brought the wolves closer to Maya.

"You're outmatched, Silvercrest," Torren spat, blood trickling from his split lip. "Give us the human, and we might let you return to your father with some dignity intact."

Kieran bared his teeth, feeling his canines lengthen slightly as his wolf pushed closer to the surface. "You'll have to kill me first."

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"Don't tempt me," Torren growled, circling closer.

In his peripheral vision, Kieran saw two wolves edging toward Maya. Time slowed as calculations raced through his mind—if he shifted, he'd have the strength to match them, but Maya would be momentarily unprotected during the transformation. If he stayed human, his combat skills might hold them for a few more minutes, but eventually the numbers would overwhelm him.

"Maya," he said without taking his eyes off Torren, "when I tell you to run, head southwest. Don't stop."

"I'm not leaving you," she hissed, the stubborn defiance that both infuriated and captivated him shining through.

"This isn't a debate," he growled back, blocking another attack and countering with a punch that sent one attacker crashing into a tree.

Four wolves remained standing, circling closer. Torren's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "Your father wanted us to bring you back alive," he said, "but accidents happen in combat."

The challenge in Torren's voice ignited something primal in Kieran. He felt the shift coming—unstoppable now—as heat flooded his veins. His bones ached with the impending transformation, his muscles already rippling beneath his skin.

"RUN, MAYA!" he roared, his voice deepening as his vocal cords began to transform.

Through the haze of his transformation, Kieran saw a flash of red hair as Maya bolted between two trees. Good girl. Smart girl. His mate was running in exactly the direction he'd told her—toward the limestone caves where she might find shelter.

The shift overtook him in a violent rush. Bones snapped and reformed, his spine elongated, and thick black fur burst from every pore. The pain was searing but familiar—a baptism of fire he'd endured since puberty. His heightened senses flared to life—scents exploded around him, sounds sharpened, and his vision adjusted to detect the slightest movement.

The other wolves had begun their shifts too—but Kieran had the advantage of starting first. His massive black wolf form stood taller than average, muscles bunched beneath his midnight coat. Silver-blue eyes—unchanged from his human form—locked onto his opponents.

Torren's wolf—a mottled gray with battle scars crisscrossing his muzzle—snarled a challenge. The others closed in, forming a deadly semicircle of teeth and claws.

A movement at the edge of his vision caught Kieran's attention. His head whipped around just in time to see Maya stumble mid-stride, her body jerking unnaturally before she collapsed to the forest floor. A tranquilizer dart protruded from her shoulder, its bright orange fletching obscenely vibrant against her olive jacket.

A figure emerged from the dense foliage—a sixth Granite Ridge operative. The bastards had a contingency plan. The shooter slung his rifle and sprinted toward Maya's crumpled form.

The sight tore through Kieran like lightning. A ferocious roar erupted from his chest—not the howl of a wolf but the primal scream of a mate seeing his other half threatened. His vision tunneled, the world narrowing to Maya's vulnerable form and the enemies between them.

MINE.

Torren lunged first, teeth aiming for Kieran's throat. But Kieran was beyond tactical thinking now. Pure instinct and fury drove him as he twisted, catching Torren's subordinate instead. Kieran's massive jaws closed around the smaller wolf's neck, crushing his windpipe with a single savage bite.

One down.

He pivoted, using momentum to slam into a second attacker. Claws raked across Kieran's shoulder, drawing blood, but he barely felt it. His own teeth found purchase on a foreleg, and he wrenched with such force that bone splintered. The wolf's agonized yelp cut short as Kieran's jaws closed over his skull.

Two down.

The remaining wolves attacked simultaneously. Kieran met their charge head-on, no longer fighting to win but to annihilate. Every second they lived was another second someone was taking Maya from him. He caught one wolf in mid-leap, using his superior weight to drive his opponent into the ground with crushing force. His teeth tore through fur and flesh, ripping out the wolf's throat in a spray of crimson.

Three down.

The fourth wolf hesitated, seeing the carnage. Kieran gave him no chance to reconsider. He lunged, a black missile of muscle and fury. The wolf tried to dart away, but Kieran's teeth closed around his spine. A vicious shake, a sickening crack, and the wolf went limp.

Four down.

Only Torren remained. The gray wolf circled warily, recognizing the deadly berserker rage in Kieran's eyes. Torren was larger than his packmates, battle-hardened and cunning. Hefeinted left before attacking from the right, teeth sinking deep into Kieran's flank.

Pain lanced through Kieran's body as muscle tore. He twisted violently, dislodging Torren but leaving a gaping wound. They circled, blood dripping onto fallen leaves. Torren struck again, this time catching Kieran's hind leg, teeth grinding against bone.

Kieran stumbled but didn't fall. The image of Maya collapsing burned in his mind, fueling him beyond physical limitations. He didn't just need to win—he needed to end this now.

When Torren lunged again, Kieran was ready. Instead of dodging, he met the attack directly, absorbing the impact. Torren's momentum carried them both to the ground in a tangle of fur and fangs. They rolled, each seeking the killing bite, claws tearing flesh.

Kieran took more wounds—a slash across his chest, a bite on his ear—but he pressed forward relentlessly. When he finally found his opening, he struck with terrifying precision. His jaws closed around Torren's throat, his teeth sinking through fur, skin, and muscle until they met in the middle.

The light in Torren's eyes dimmed, then extinguished completely.

Five down.

Kieran staggered to his feet, blood matting his black fur. The copper scent of it filled his nostrils, but he forced himself to focus through the pain. His head swung toward where Maya had fallen.

She was gone. The shooter was gone.

The realization hit him with devastating certainty. He'd been too slow. Too focused on the immediate threat. They'd taken her—his mate, his future, the woman who'd turned his world upside down.

A sound escaped him—half snarl, half howl—as the magnitude of his failure crashed down upon him. He lurched forward, desperate to follow her scent, but his injured leg buckled beneath him. The forest spun sickeningly as blood loss took its grim toll.

Not now. Not when she needs me.

Kieran forced himself forward on three legs, his determination overriding the pain signals bombarding his brain. Maya's scent trail led northeast—away from the caves, away from the cabin, away from safety.

Blood dripped from his matted fur, leaving a crimson trail behind him as he staggered through the underbrush. Each step sent fire through his torn muscles, but he pushed on, her scent driving him forward. Her scent lingered on the forest floor—wildflowers and vanilla mixed with the chemical tang of the tranquilizer and the bitter trace of fear. The combination made his wolf whimper with rage and

desperation.

Five more steps. Just five more.

He collapsed after three, his massive frame crumpling beneath him. His consciousness wavered, the forest dimming around the edges. Kieran fought the encroaching darkness with everything he had, clawing at awareness.

Find her. Get up. FIND HER.

His wolf's strength was fading, the natural healing abilities of his kind overwhelmed by the severity of his wounds. The shift back to human form began involuntarily—his body's last-ditch attempt at survival. Bones cracked and realigned, fur receded, and vulnerable human skin replaced his protective coat. The transformation, usually fluid and controlled, came in agonizing spasms.

Blood smeared across his bare skin as Kieran tried one last time to rise, his human arms trembling beneath him. The face of his mate—her green eyes flashing with that stubborn independence and her copper-red hair catching sunlight—floated before his fading vision.

"Maya," he whispered, the word barely audible as darkness claimed him.

Hours passed in a blur of pain and fragmented consciousness.

"Kieran! Fuck—KIERAN!"

Malcolm's voice cut through the haze. His brother's scent—pine and leather—reached him before the sound of rushing footsteps.

"What happened?" Malcolm's hands were on him, assessing the damage with quick,



practiced movements. "Where's Maya?"

Kieran forced his eyes open, finding his brother's face swimming above him. "Granite Ridge... ambush." Each word felt like gravel in his throat. "They took her. Tranquilizer."

Malcolm cursed, the vulgarity creative and extensive. "You're bleeding out. I need to get you somewhere safe."

"No." Kieran grabbed his brother's wrist with surprising strength. "Find her first."

"No. You're no good to her like this or dead," Malcolm's voice was iron beneath the concern.

With efficient movements, Malcolm stripped off his jacket and shirt, tearing the latter into makeshift bandages for the worst wounds. The pressure sent fresh agony shooting through Kieran's body.

"The High Council," Kieran managed through gritted teeth. "They know about her dormant shifter genes."

Malcolm's hands stilled momentarily. "How?"

"Don't know. But that's why they want her." Darkness threatened again, and Kieran fought it back. "Northeast. They went northeast."

With practiced ease, Malcolm hoisted Kieran over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Despite being the younger sibling, Malcolm had always been nearly as strong.

"There's a safehouse twenty minutes from here," Malcolm said, already moving through the forest with determined strides. "Lena will meet us there."

The journey passed in painful jolts and half-consciousness. Kieran's thoughts circled endlessly around Maya—her smile, her scent, her stubborn refusal to be intimidated by him. The memory of her body against his, that electric moment when everything had changed between them in the forest.

They're not taking her from me.

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The safehouse was a low, ramshackle cabin cleverly disguised to look abandoned. Malcolm kicked the door open rather than put Kieran down.

"Goddess above," Lena gasped, rushing forward. Her small hands guided Malcolm to lay Kieran on a table covered with clean sheets. "What attacked him?"

"Granite Ridge wolves," Malcolm explained tersely. "Five of them, from the look of the blood on him."

"Six," Kieran corrected, his voice a rasp. "Sniper got Maya. Tranquilized her."

Lena's violet eyes widened, but her hands remained steady as she began cleaning his wounds. The sting of antiseptic barely registered compared to the burning in his chest at the thought of Maya in enemy hands.

"You killed five Granite Ridge wolves?" Malcolm whistled low. "Father would be impressed."

"I don't give a fuck what father thinks right now." Kieran's words came with sudden clarity, his eyes flashing. "Maya is all that matters."

Lena worked methodically, stitching the deepest gashes across his chest, shoulder, and leg with practiced precision. Her fingers, cool against his feverish skin, pressed healing salve into the wounds.

"Lena." Kieran caught her wrist, his grip firm despite his weakened state. "Send runners. I need eyes in Granite Ridge territory now. Every rebel sympathizer, every

informant we have."

She nodded, understanding the urgency without needing explanation. "They'll want to know why."

"Because I fucking said so." His voice dropped lower, the timbre vibrating with authority that made both Malcolm and Lena straighten instinctively. "Because they've taken what's mine."

"She's your fated mate." It wasn't a question. Lena's intuition had always been uncanny.

"Yes." The admission cost him nothing but filled him with renewed purpose. "And if they harm her, I will tear the entire Granite Ridge pack apart with my bare hands."

Malcolm moved to the window, scanning the forest beyond. "The High Council must want her dormant genes for something specific. This isn't just about silencing a human witness anymore."

"We're in a race now." Kieran pushed himself up on his elbows, ignoring Lena's protests. "They know what she is, maybe even what she could become."

SIXTEEN

MAYA

Maya woke to clinical brightness that assaulted her senses. Blinking against the harsh fluorescent lights, she found herself in a sterile room where everything—walls, floor, ceiling—gleamed with an unnatural white intensity. No windows broke the seamless surface, only a single metal door disrupted the pristine enclosure.

She tried to sit up, but her limbs felt weighted and uncooperative. The hospital gown rustled against her skin, thin and paper-like, reminding her of her vulnerability. A strange tingling sensation radiated from the small mark on her neck—the place where Kieran's teeth had partially sunk into her during their heated encounter in his cabin. It burned with an intensity that seemed disproportionate to its size.

"What the hell?" she whispered, her fingertips exploring the tender area.

The sensation wasn't just physical though. Something deeper pulsed within her chest—a strong tether pulling taut toward some distant point. Along that invisible connection flowed emotions that weren't entirely her own. Rage, pain, and determination. Kieran. Somehow, she felt him.

"He's alive," she breathed, relief washing through her. The last image before the tranquilizer took her down had been Kieran mid-transformation, facing impossible odds. Five massive wolves against one.

Maya closed her eyes, focusing on the strange connection. He was hurt—badly—but alive and burning with fury. His anger wasn't cold or distant, it blazed hot and personal.

"He's coming for me," she realized, the certainty settling into her bones.

She glanced around the room again, assessing her prison with a scientist's methodical attention. The folding chair beside her bed looked deliberately uncomfortable, designed for brief visits rather than extended stays. The IV stand beside her bed remained empty, but the presence of medical equipment suggested they weren't finished with her yet.

Granite Ridge territory. It had to be. The wolf shifters who ambushed them had mentioned the High Council—the mysterious governing body Kieran had explained

with such conflicted respect.

"They know about my dormant shifter genes," she murmured, touching her neck again. The burning had intensified, spreading tendrils of warmth throughout her body.

The scientific side of her brain inventoried her symptoms clinically: increased body temperature, heightened sensory awareness, and strange phantom emotions. The more intuitive part—the part she'd suppressed beneath years of academic rigor and human ignorance—recognized something transformative stirring beneath her skin.

What would a group of tradition-bound wolf shifter elders want with a human who carried dormant shifter genes? The possibilities made her stomach clench. Test subject. Breeding experiment. Genetic research.

"Not exactly the type of field study I signed up for," she muttered, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

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The room tilted alarmingly, the aftereffects of the tranquilizer still lingering in her system. She gripped the edge of the mattress, waiting for equilibrium to return. Whatever they'd shot her with had been potent—designed for wolf metabolism, not human.

The connection in her chest pulled tighter, like an invisible string connecting her heart to Kieran's. His emotions sharpened—determination cutting through pain. His wolf was closer to the surface now, she could somehow tell, raw and primal in its focus.

"I need to get out of here before he gets himself killed trying to rescue me," she whispered to the empty room.

Maya forced herself to stand, gripping the IV pole for support. Three unsteady steps brought her to the door—stainless steel with no interior handle.

The door suddenly buzzed, making her jump back. The metal panel swung inward, revealing a diminutive woman in a white lab coat. Her dark hair was pulled into a bun, accentuating her sharp cheekbones and her calculating eyes.

"Ms. Collins," the woman said, her voice surprisingly melodious for her stern appearance. "Please return to bed. You're not strong enough to be mobile yet."

Maya backed away. "Where am I? What do you want with me?"

"You're in a secure medical facility within Granite Ridge territory." The woman closed the door behind her with practiced efficiency. "As for what we want—" Her

eyes flicked to the bite mark on Maya's neck, lingering there with unmistakable interest. "That's a rather complicated answer."

Maya backed against the wall, the thin hospital gown providing little protection against the woman's clinical assessment. "I'm not interested in whatever this is."

"Back on the bed, please." The woman gestured with a clipboard. "Don't make this difficult."

"Difficult?" Maya laughed, the sound brittle. "I was drugged and kidnapped. I think we passed 'difficult' several exits back."

The woman's expression didn't change. "I'm Dr. Sonya Blackwell. I'll be overseeing your tests while you're our guest."

"Guest?" Maya's scientific mind recorded everything about this Dr. Sonya—trim build, late forties, fingers stained with chemical residue, no wedding ring, and eyes that noticed everything but revealed nothing. "That's what we're calling captives now?"

Dr. Sonya sighed, pressing a small button on her wristband. "Compliance assistance needed in Room 5."

The door swung open immediately. A man with shoulders like mountain ridges stepped in, his presence reducing the already small room to claustrophobic dimensions.

"Ms. Collins refuses to cooperate." Dr. Sonya's tone suggested this was merely a technical problem requiring a technical solution.

Maya darted for the space between the man and the doorframe, desperate for escape.



His hand shot out with inhuman speed, catching her arm and lifting her as easily as a ragdoll.

"Let me go!" Maya thrashed against his grip as he deposited her onto the bed. Her feet connected with his ribs—might as well have kicked concrete.

"Hold her steady, Vance." Dr. Sonya prepared an IV line with methodical precision, tapping a vein in Maya's forearm.

"What are you doing?" Maya's voice rose with panic, the needle hovering above her skin. "What tests are you performing? Answer me!"

Vance pinned her arms while Dr. Sonya slid the needle home, taping it securely. Restraints came next—thick padded cuffs binding her wrists and ankles.

"These precautions are for your safety," Dr. Sonya said, checking the restraints.

"Safety?" Maya pulled against the bonds. "You haven't answered a single question. What tests? Why am I here?"

Dr. Sonya connected the IV to a bag of clear fluid, making adjustments with the focus of someone tuning a delicate instrument. "The High Council would prefer I limit explanations until we have results."

"Results of what?" Maya's voice cracked as Dr. Sonya began attaching monitoring electrodes to her chest, temples, and wrists.

Instead of answering, Dr. Sonya reached for a small vial of amber liquid. She injected it directly into the IV port.

"What is that?" Terror clawed up Maya's throat. "Tell me what you just put in me!"

"We're activating certain dormant genetic markers." Dr. Sonya settled into the folding chair and opened her notebook. Her pen hovered expectantly. "Now we wait."

The burning started in Maya's fingertips—a prickling heat spreading up her arms like wildfire through dry brush. Her skin felt too tight, her muscles clenching involuntarily beneath the surface.

"Oh god." Her back arched against the restraints as waves of intense heat pulsed through her body.

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The burning concentrated in her jaw—her teeth aching as they tried to lengthen. Her spine contorted, her bones seeking new alignment. Her fingernails stretched painfully in their beds, fighting to become claws.

"Subject shows accelerated response to Compound W-47," Dr. Sonya noted, her voice detached. "Initial transformation markers appearing within forty seconds of administration."

Maya screamed as her ribs began to shift. A wolf. They were forcing her body to become a wolf with whatever drug they'd given her.

"Heart rate 185 and climbing," Dr. Sonya continued, glancing at the monitors. "Blood pressure elevated but within acceptable parameters."

Maya's vision sharpened, the white color of the room intensifying unnaturally. Her canine teeth extended, cutting into her bottom lip. A whimper escaped—not entirely human.

Dr. Sonya nodded, satisfied. "Partial shift achieved. Dormancy theorem confirmed."

She abruptly disconnected the IV line, stopping the flow of the amber liquid. Maya collapsed against the mattress, her bones reluctantly returning to human configuration and her muscles trembling with exhaustion.

"Why..." Maya whispered, her throat raw from screaming.

Dr. Sonya prepared another injection, this one containing a milky white substance.

"This will help you rest."

"No more," Maya begged as the needle pierced her skin. "Please..."

Darkness gathered at the edges of her vision. Maya instinctively reached for that strange connection in her chest—that tether linking her to Kieran. She pushed everything she had through it.

Find me. Please find me. They're turning me into something.

As consciousness slipped away, she felt an answering pulse of raw fury and determination through the bond. A promise wrapped in a growl.

Hold on, I'm coming for you.

Two days later, Maya's third injection of the day burned through her veins like liquid fire. Her back arched off the bed, her restraints cutting into her wrists as pain exploded across every nerve ending. The room blurred, then sharpened to such crystal clarity she could count the microscopic pores in the paint on the walls.

"Increased dosage showing accelerated receptor response," Dr. Sonya noted, her clinical detachment maddening as Maya's body contorted. "Partial transformation progressing deeper with each treatment."

Maya bit back a scream as her fingernails thickened and curved, not quite claws but no longer human. The sensation of her teeth elongating sent her tongue probing her mouth in horror. Her jaw ached with the pressure of accommodating her extending canines.

"Please," she gasped when the wave subsided. "What's happening to me?"

Dr. Sonya adjusted a monitor. "Your genetic markers are activating. Three days of treatment, and you're already showing remarkable adaptation rates."

Three days. Maya had been here three endless days filled with needles and pain. The thin hospital gown clung to her sweat-drenched skin. Her muscles trembled with newfound strength she couldn't control.

Each forced partial shift had left her senses more acute. The scent of guards outside her door. Water pipes three floors up. The electrical hum of security systems. Her world had expanded into an overwhelming sensory panorama.

The bite mark on her neck—Kieran's mark—pulsed with heat. Each injection seemed to accelerate whatever changes his teeth had started. She felt the connection to him strengthen, a tether pulling taut across miles, carrying echoes of his raw rage and fierce determination.

Dr. Greene, the senior physician, entered with a tablet. His expensive cologne hit Maya's heightened senses like a sledgehammer, making her gag.

"Blood work finally came back and confirmed it," he said, oblivious to her discomfort. "Dormant shifter genes. Fourth generation by my estimate, though diluted through human interbreeding."

Dr. Sonya nodded. "The heritage markers match our database. Her maternal great-great-grandmother disappeared from Silvercrest territory during the Border Wars."

"A Silvercrest's mate, taken by humans," Greene mused, examining Maya like a particularly interesting specimen. "Poetic that her descendant would return as the mate of the Silvercrest heir."

Maya's heart hammered. "I'm not?—"

"The mating mark disagrees." Dr. Sonya tapped the bite on Maya's neck, sending shockwaves of sensation through her body.

Greene lowered his voice, but Maya's enhanced hearing caught every word. "The High Council wants to know if she can fully transform. Her genetic activation could prove our recessive gene theory."

"We'll need higher doses." Dr. Sonya glanced at Maya. "Careful with the next round. Shifter with human cellular structure—unpredictable combination."

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They left, locking the door behind them. Maya collapsed against the bed, processing the revelation. Shifter genes confirmed. Her own blood carried the wolf within like Lena suspected.

Her grandmother's warning echoed in her mind. Never go into the deep woods. Her grandmother had known, or at least suspected, something lurked in their bloodline.

And Kieran... The electric connection between them made so much more sense now. Her body had recognized his at a cellular level almost immediately. The primal attraction and the instant bond—not just chemistry but biology like Kieran had told her.

"I should have known," Maya whispered to herself. "All those years feeling like wolves were a part of who I was. They were literally part of me."

That night, Maya tested her restraints, noting the slight give in the left cuff where her wrist had grown thickened with muscle during partial transformations. Her newfound strength surprised her, the leather stretching where it wouldn't have days ago.

"They'll keep increasing the doses until they break me," she whispered, testing the restraint again.

Her scientific mind assessed her changes from the past three days. Enhanced strength, accelerated healing, and heightened senses. Perfect tools for escape.

A guard passed by her door, his footsteps distinctive. A different guard would relieve him in twenty minutes based on the pattern she'd memorized.

Maya closed her eyes, focusing on the connection to Kieran that grew stronger each day. His presence filled her consciousness with protective fury and raw determination. Wherever he was, he was coming for her. But she couldn't wait around for him like some fairytale princess anymore.

If she couldn't reach Kieran through their connection, perhaps she could reach the wolf inside herself—on her terms, not through their drugs. Maybe that same wolf could help her break free.

If I'm going to become a wolf, she thought with grim determination, it'll be on my timeline, not theirs.

## SEVENTEEN

### MAYA

Early the next morning, Maya worked her wrists and ankles against the restraints, her enhanced senses picking up the distant beeping of monitors down the sterile hallway. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting harsh shadows across the clinical white room that had been her prison for three endless days.

She'd spent most of the night methodically testing the thick padded cuffs on her wrists and ankles, finding that each forced partial shift had left her incrementally stronger. The restraints that had initially held her securely now had just enough give.

"Just a little more," she whispered, flexing her wrists and ankles. The leather stretched, then slackened. "There."

Maya carefully positioned her arms and legs to appear still restrained while listening to the approaching footsteps she now recognized as Dr. Sonya's. Her footsteps had shorter strides than the guards, with the distinctive tap of low heels against linoleum.



Maya's heart raced. She had exactly one chance at this.

The metal door buzzed open.

"Good morning, Ms. Collins." Dr. Sonya entered with clinical efficiency, a syringe of amber liquid prepared on her tray. "Ready for today's progression tests?"

Maya kept her eyes downcast, feigning resignation. "Do I have a choice?"

"I appreciate your cooperation today." Dr. Sonya turned to set her clipboard down, her back momentarily exposed.

In one fluid motion, Maya slipped her hands and feet free from the restraints and swung her legs off the bed. Before the doctor could turn around, she wedged the folding chair against the door, preventing it from closing completely.

Dr. Sonya spun around. "What do you think?—"

Maya pounced with a speed that surprised even herself, grabbing Dr. Sonya's wrist and twisting the syringe from her grasp.

"You've been so interested in studying transformations," Maya snarled, her canines slightly extended with adrenaline. "How about experiencing one firsthand?"

She plunged the needle into Dr. Sonya's arm, depressing the plunger fully.

The doctor's eyes widened in shock, her mouth opening in a silent scream as she crumpled to the floor. Whatever they'd been planning to inject Maya with today worked fast.

"Not so fun being on the receiving end, is it?" Maya muttered, stripping off Dr.

Sonya's white lab coat and slipping it over her thin hospital gown.

Maya quickly checked Dr. Sonya's pulse—steady, if rapid. The scientist wasn't dead, just incapacitated. Pocketing Dr. Sonya's keycard and pulling her hair back into a tight bun to better mimic the doctor's appearance, Maya peered cautiously through the doorway crack. The hallway appeared momentarily clear.

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Her heightened senses detected two guards stationed around the corner—their scents distinct with gun oil, coffee, and the underlying musk that all wolf shifters seemed to share.

Maya slipped into the corridor, keeping her head down and clipboard raised as if reviewing notes. Her bare feet padded silently against the cold tile floor.

Stay calm. Act like you belong, she coached herself. You're a scientist observing specimens, not a specimen escaping.

The connection in her chest pulled stronger than ever, a compass needle pointing toward Kieran. She could feel him somewhere outside these walls—closer than before, his presence burning like a beacon of fury and determination.

He's coming for me, but I'm meeting him halfway.

Maya turned left at the junction, following instinct more than logic. The scent of fresh air—however faint—drew her forward like a lifeline. Each step away from her prison cell sent waves of elation through her trembling body.

I'm coming, Kieran. Just hold on.

She could almost feel his response, a primal growl of approval resonating through their connection. Whatever bond they shared, it was growing stronger with each passing hour.

The thought of seeing him again sent unexpected heat spreading through her body.

His silver-blue eyes flashing with possessive intensity, his powerful hands pulling her against his chest, and his mouth claiming hers with that perfect mixture of dominance and tenderness.

Focus, Maya, she chided herself. Escape first, fantasize later.

But the connection pulled tighter, and somewhere in the distance, she could have sworn she heard the howl of a wolf—commanding, powerful, and unmistakably coming for her.

Keep it together. You're almost out.

Her bare feet padded against the cold linoleum floor, each step sending electric signals of freedom up her spine. The lab coat flapped softly around her legs as she moved with growing confidence.

That's when she saw them—the two guards stationed at the exit door of this underground section of the medical facility, their broad shoulders blocking her path to freedom. One leaned casually against the wall while the other stood at attention, their scents now unmistakable—gunmetal, leather, coffee, and that musky undertone of wolf shifter.

"Hey, doctor," the taller guard called, straightening. "ID badge?"

Maya's stomach clenched. She hadn't thought to take Dr. Sonya's ID badge off her.

"I must have left it in the lab," she replied, attempting to mimic the clinical detachment of the facility's staff. "I need to get to the main level of the facility for a moment. Signal's terrible down here and I need to make an urgent phone call."

The guards exchanged glances.

"Protocol says no one exits the underground section without proper credentials," the shorter guard said, stepping forward. His eyes narrowed. "Where are your shoes, Doctor?"

Maya's heartbeat thundered in her ears as their expressions shifted from suspicion to recognition.

"It's the specimen!" The taller guard reached for his radio. "Code Red in Section?—"

"I am not a specimen!" Maya hurled the clipboard at his face with unexpected force, buying herself precious seconds.

The shorter guard lunged for her arm. Maya twisted away, but he caught the sleeve of her lab coat, yanking her backward. Panic flooded her system as memories of needles and restraints flashed through her mind.

No. Not again. Never again.

Something primal erupted inside her—a scalding heat that raced through her veins like molten fire. Her vision sharpened to crystalline clarity as the world slowed around her.

"You're not taking me back there," she snarled, her voice lowering to a register she'd never heard from her own throat.

The partial transformation began with her hands—bones cracking and reforming as her fingers shortened and nails extended into curved, lethal claws. Pain lanced through her jaw as her canines lengthened, sharp points pressing against her lower lip.

The guard's eyes widened. "Holy shit, she's shifting!"

Maya didn't recognize the feral growl that tore from her throat as she lunged forward. Her movements were fluid and instinctual—her body knowing exactly what to do even as her mind struggled to comprehend what was happening.

The first guard went down with a swipe across his chest, fabric and flesh tearing under her claws. Blood blossomed across his uniform as he crumpled against the wall. The second guard drew his weapon, but Maya moved with supernatural speed, knocking it from his grip before delivering a powerful kick that sent him flying into the exit door.

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"You don't—" she gasped between ragged breaths, "—own me."

The guards lay groaning on the floor, wounded but alive. Maya stood over them, her chest heaving, the scent of their blood filling her nostrils with copper and salt. Looking down, she barely recognized her own hands—half-human, half-wolf, powerful enough to rend flesh yet still possessing opposable thumbs.

What am I becoming?

The rush of power ebbed as quickly as it had come, leaving her dizzy and disoriented. The world tilted sideways as fatigue crashed through her system. Maya staggered toward the exit door, her vision blurring at the edges.

Kieran, she thought desperately, reaching out with that strange new sense that connected them. I'm coming.

Her legs buckled beneath her, unable to support her weight any longer. Her body totally spent from the raw power she just exerted to transform naturally. Maya collapsed in a heap on the cold floor, the lab coat pooling around her. Her last coherent thought before she passed out from exhaustion was of silver-blue eyes and strong arms.

Find me.

Strong arms slipped beneath Maya's limp body, lifting her from the cold tile floor. For one delirious moment, her heart soared with hope.

"Kieran?" she mumbled, her eyelids fluttering as consciousness teased her.

"Not quite," came a low voice, unfamiliar yet somehow reassuring. "I'm with Lena. Name's Eli."

Maya forced her heavy eyelids open, disappointment washing through her as she met dark green eyes instead of the silver-blue ones she craved. The man's face was lean and weathered, his dark beard neatly trimmed. Not Kieran. Not her wolf.

Kieran, where are you? she called silently through their connection, feeling the tether between them pull taut with longing.

"More guards will be here any second," Eli whispered, adjusting her against his chest. "Can you walk?"

Maya tried to nod, but her body betrayed her. The natural partial shift had drained every ounce of her energy, leaving her muscles quivering.

"Apparently not," she muttered dryly.

Eli's mouth twitched with reluctant amusement. "Lena said you were tough."

"Tough doesn't mean functional."

He carried her swiftly down a service corridor, his footsteps nearly silent despite their pace. Maya's head lolled against his shoulder, her copper hair spilling from the tight bun she'd fashioned earlier.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her voice a ragged whisper.

"Safe room on the east wing. Old supply closet they converted for medical storage."



He paused at an intersection, scenting the air. "Don't worry, I've got clearance to be here. Supply manager by day, rebellion operative by... well, also day."

An alarm blared overhead, the shrill sound piercing through Maya's sensitive ears. She winced.

"Looks like they found your handiwork," Eli remarked, picking up speed. "Nice job on those guards, by the way. Two male wolf shifters with a single partial shift? Lena will be thrilled her theories about your genetics were right."

Maya would have preened if she wasn't halfway to unconsciousness. "Just discovered my claws naturally today. Still workshopping my technique."

Eli ducked into a narrow stairwell, taking the steps two at a time. Maya's stomach lurched with each jostling movement, but the nausea was preferable to being strapped back onto that examination bed.

Kieran, I need you, she projected through their bond. Please hurry.

Something vibrated through her chest in response—a distant growl of acknowledgment and a promise of violence to come. He was close. She could feel him like fire on the horizon.

"He's coming," she murmured. "I can feel him."

Eli glanced down at her, his eyebrows raised. "You've got a mate bond? With Kieran Silvercrest? Lena didn't mention that part."

"Is that what this is?" Maya asked, her hand pressing against her sternum where the connection burned brightest. "This... pull?"

"If you have to ask, then yes." Eli reached a heavy metal door marked with faded red lettering. "The mate bond is unmistakable once it takes hold. Makes Kieran even more dangerous right now—he'll tear this place apart brick by brick to get to you."

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The thought sent an inappropriate thrill through Maya's exhausted body.

"Good," she whispered fiercely.

Eli placed her gently on a makeshift cot inside the storage room, surrounded by medical supplies and forgotten equipment. The fluorescent lights flickered, casting shadows across his concerned face.

"We're safe here for a while, but every exit is triple-guarded now. We'd need an army to fight our way out."

Maya closed her eyes and focused on the tether between her and Kieran. It pulsed with his rage, his determination, and his need.

"We don't need an army," she said with absolute certainty. "We have my mate."

EIGHTEEN

KIERAN

Kieran paced the safe house like a caged animal, his heavy footfalls echoing against the wooden floors. Three days. Three whole days since they'd taken Maya. The half-healed wounds across his body pulled with each movement, but the physical pain barely registered. All he could feel was the hollow ache spreading through his chest.

He stalked to the window, scanning the tree line for any sign of their scouts. Nothing. His fist slammed against the windowsill, splintering the wood.

"Where are you?" he growled, pressing his forehead against the cool glass.

The mate bond pulsed between them—stronger today than it had been since their separation. He could feel her reaching for him, calling to him, her presence flickering like a distant flame. Each time he felt her consciousness brush against his, he pushed back reassurance. I'm coming for you. The lie tasted bitter. How could he come for her when he didn't know where the hell she was?

Kieran closed his eyes, focusing on their connection. She was alive. Afraid, but alive. The bond wouldn't exist if she wasn't. That knowledge was the only thing keeping him from tearing the entire Granite Ridge territory apart tree by tree.

The scent of antiseptic and herbs announced Lena's arrival before she pushed through the door. One look at her face sent his wolf charging forward, his eyes flashing as he stalked toward her.

"You found her." It was not a question.

Lena nodded, setting her medical bag on the table. "One of our operatives infiltrated their medical facility months ago as a supplier. Maya's there. They've been?—"

"Tell me," Kieran demanded, his voice dropping to a dangerous octave.

Lena met his gaze unflinchingly. "They've been administering compounds to force partial shifts, activating her dormant shifter genes."

A growl rumbled from deep in Kieran's chest. "They're experimenting on her?"

"The genes aren't dormant anymore, Kieran." Lena's violet eyes reflected concern. "The changes are happening rapidly—unnaturally so. Her body is transforming without proper guidance."

Kieran's claws extended involuntarily, scoring deep grooves into the wooden table. "I'll kill every last one of them."

"You need to get to her soon," Lena continued, ignoring his threat. "Her human cellular structure combined with the newly activated shifter genetics... she needs stabilization. She needs her mate."

The word 'mate' sent a surge of possessiveness through him. Maya was his—had been since the moment he'd picked up her scent in the forest. The wolf inside him howled for her, demanding he protect what belonged to him.

"I'm the only one who can help her find her wolf fully," he acknowledged, not bothering to deny what Lena already knew. "The mate bond will guide her transformation."

"Yes." Lena pulled a folded blueprint from her bag, spreading it across the table. "Our operative can get you into the facility through the maintenance tunnels, but security's been tripled since they brought her in."

Kieran studied the blueprint, committing every corridor and checkpoint to memory. His tactical mind mapped out entry points and escape routes with clinical precision while his wolf raged for blood.

"Where in the facility?"

"Underground east section." Lena pointed to a quarantined area. "But Kieran?—"

He was already stripping off his shirt, revealing the constellation of half-healed wounds across his torso. The scars from the ambush would remain, adding to the collection that marked his skin.

"I'm going now."

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"You need a team," Lena protested. "At least wait for Malcolm?—"

"She called for me." Kieran's voice brooked no argument as he strapped a sheath to his forearm. "I felt her today, stronger than before. She's fighting, Lena. My mate is fighting alone while I've been sitting here useless."

The bond pulsed again, a desperate tug that nearly drove him to his knees. Maya was reaching for him with everything she had.

"They made her shift." Rage thickened his voice. "They forced transformations on her body without preparation and without guidance." He pulled on a black tactical shirt, wincing as it stretched over his wounds.

"You need a strong strike team for this rescue mission, Kieran. Maya is strong. She can hold them off a bit longer while you assemble a team. Our operative says she took down two guards during an escape attempt. Her wolf is powerful, just not properly trained."

Pride surged through him. Of course she had tried to escape. His mate wouldn't go down without a fight.

His wolf prowled beneath his skin, demanding immediate action, but the tactical part of his brain—the part his father had trained since childhood to lead—knew Lena was right about needing a strong strike team.

"Fine. Thirty minutes to assemble a team. Not a minute more." He pulled out his phone, dialing Malcolm while pacing the length of the safe house in three long

strides. "I need you at the safe house. Now. Bring everyone who's loyal—rebels, traditionalists, I don't care. Anyone who will fight."

Malcolm's voice crackled through the speaker. "Give me fifteen minutes."

Kieran ended the call and turned to Lena. "I need weapons, medical supplies, and comms. Maya will need stabilization immediately after extraction."

Lena nodded, already moving toward her supplies. "I've prepared a sedative that should help control her partial shifts during transport. Her system is in chaos right now."

The mate bond flared again, sending a jolt of electricity down Kieran's spine. Maya was fighting against her chaotic partial shifting and possibly threats inside that medical facility—he could feel her determination pulsing through their connection. Her strength both awed and terrified him. If she pushed herself too hard before he reached her...

Kieran shoved the thought aside. Failure wasn't an option.

Twenty minutes later, the safe house was packed with wolves from various factions. Some wore the insignia of therebellion openly, while others—traditionalists who had secretly questioned the High Council for years—stood awkwardly apart, eyeing their counterparts with wary respect.

Malcolm clapped Kieran on the shoulder. "Everyone who matters is here."

Kieran stepped into the center of the room, his posture straight and his chin lifted. The black tactical gear he wore emphasized the breadth of his shoulders and the coiled power in his stance. The room fell silent as his eyes swept over the assembled wolves.



"I'm not going to waste time with politics," Kieran began, his voice filling the space without effort. "A woman with dormant shifter genes has been captured by Granite Ridge with High Council backing. They're experimenting on her and forcing transitions her body isn't prepared for."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. A broad-shouldered traditionalist—one of his father's usual supporters—stepped forward. "Why risk our lives for one woman?"

Kieran's eyes flashed, a growl underlying his next words. "Because she's my mate."

The declaration silenced the room completely.

"But more than that," Kieran continued, stalking forward, "because what they're doing violates everything our kind should stand for. Do you want our legacy to be known for force, coercion, and torture? Is that the pack you want to belong to?"

He met the eyes of each wolf in turn, challenging them to look away. None did.

"My father taught me that an Alpha's first duty is to protect. Not just those who follow his rules, but all wolves under his care." Kieran's voice hardened. "The High Council has forgotten that duty. They've forgotten that strength doesn't come from forcing others to submit, but from standing together against true threats."

Malcolm moved to his brother's side, his presence a silent endorsement.

"I'm going after Maya," Kieran stated, authority resonating in each word. "Those who come with me are choosing to stand for what our pack should be, not what it has become. My father will call it treason. The High Council will call for our blood."

He paused, letting the weight of that sink in.

"I'm not asking you to choose me over my father. I'm asking you to choose what's right over what's easy."

A young rebel wolf stepped forward first. "I'm with you."

Then another. And another. Until the entire room had pledged their support.

Kieran felt a weight lift from his shoulders even as a new one settled in its place. This moment marked a permanent shift—he would never be the heir his father wanted. The path to becoming Alpha of the Silvercrest pack had just vanished beneath his feet.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:11 am*

Strangely, the thought brought more relief than regret. For the first time in his life, his choices were his own, guided by what he believed rather than what was expected. Maya's safety mattered more than his birthright. His future with her mattered more than a title.

"We move in three teams," Kieran instructed, leaning over the facility blueprints. "Alpha team with me through the maintenance tunnels. Beta team creates a diversion at the main entrance. Gamma team secures our escape route and provides medical support."

The wolf shifters gathered around, their faces set with determination as Kieran laid out the assault plan with natural authority.

Malcolm caught his eye across the table. "You know what this means, right? After today, there's no going back."

Kieran nodded, feeling the mate bond pulse within him like a second heartbeat. "I wouldn't want to."

The early afternoon sun cast sharp shadows across the concrete exterior of the Granite Ridge medical facility as Kieran and his strike teams moved into position. Dressed in black tactical gear that hugged his powerful frame, Kieran felt the weight of the mission in every fiber of his being. The mate bond thrummed steadily now, stronger with proximity—Maya was inside, and she needed him.

"Alpha team, comms check," Kieran's voice was low and commanding as he tapped his earpiece.

Malcolm adjusted his tactical vest, the quiet confidence in his movements mirroring his brother's. "All units reporting ready," he confirmed, his blue eyes revealing none of the anxiety that must have been churning beneath the surface.

"Remember," Kieran addressed the six wolves comprising Alpha team, "we move as one unit. No heroics." His eyes swept over each face, his gaze hardening. "And anyone who hesitates when we find Maya answers to me personally."

The maintenance tunnel entrance loomed before them—an innocuous grate set into the hillside behind the facility. Kieran knelt, his broad shoulders blocking the view as his fingers worked the lock with practiced precision. The latch gave way with a soft click.

"Beta team, begin your distraction in sixty seconds," he instructed through the comms. "Gamma team, secure the southeast exit and prepare medical."

Malcolm crouched beside him, his shoulders nearly touching. "Just like when we raided the Shadow Pack for taking our territory marker," he whispered, a flash of their shared childhood briefly lighting his eyes.

"Except this time, I'm not letting you take point," Kieran replied, unsheathing a serrated tactical knife. "My mate. My lead."

The tunnel stretched before them, damp and narrow, forcing the team to move in single file. Kieran led, each step silent despite his size, his senses hyper-focused on detecting any signs of guards or surveillance. The mate bond pulled at him like a physical tether, growing stronger with each yard they advanced.

"She's below us," Kieran whispered, feeling the connection pulse with renewed intensity. "East wing, just like the intel said."

Malcolm nodded, pressing a digital blueprint against the tunnel wall. "Maintenance shaft should branch right in twenty yards. Takes us directly to the sublevel access point."

The sounds of chaos erupted from above—Beta team's distraction beginning right on schedule. A smile that held no warmth curved Kieran's mouth. "That's our cue."

They moved with fluid precision, years of training transforming seven individuals into a single predatory unit. At the first junction, Kieran held up a closed fist, bringing the team to an immediate halt. Two heartbeats ahead—guards stationed at the sublevel access door.

"Two targets," he mouthed to Malcolm, who nodded and signaled to the others.

Without hesitation, Kieran rounded the corner in a controlled rush. The first guard barely had time to register the intrusion before Kieran's fist connected with his throat, crushing his windpipe. The second guard reached for his weapon, but Malcolm was already there, his forearm locking around the man's neck in a precision choke hold.

"Keycard," Kieran said, his voice barely a whisper as he searched the unconscious guard. Finding it clipped to the man's belt, he swiped it through the reader beside the heavy metal door.

The sublevel opened before them—stark white corridors that reeked of antiseptic and fear. Kieran's nostrils flared, sorting through the chemical stench until he caught it—the unmistakable scent of Maya, laced with something wild and uncontrolled.

"She's shifted," he growled, the wolf inside him clawing to break free at the wrongness of her scent. "Not fully, but enough."

Malcolm touched his brother's arm. "Kieran, remember the plan. We clear the path,

then extract."

But Kieran was already moving, drawn by instinct more powerful than strategic training. The bond between them sang in his blood, drowning out everything but the need to reach her. Two guards rounded the corner ahead, weapons raised. Kieran didn't break stride, his movements a brutal dance as he disarmed the first and used his momentum to slam the second into the wall hard enough to crack the plaster.

"Alpha One has gone off-plan," Malcolm's exasperated voice came through the comms. "Alpha team, adapt and follow."

Kieran barely heard him. Another corridor. Another door. The bond burned brighter with each step. He could feel her now—her fear, her rage, and her confusion as her body battled changes she couldn't understand.

"Maya," he whispered, the name a prayer and a promise as he prepared to breach the final door separating them.

NINETEEN

MAYA

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:11 am*

The word 'mate' felt foreign on Maya's tongue yet somehow perfect. The bond between her and Kieran wasn't something she could graph or document in her research journals, but it existed with more clarity than any fact she'd ever known.

Thirty minutes later, Maya's strength was returning, but something else was happening—something alarming. Her muscles twitched and contracted without her permission. Heat flashed through her body in violent waves.

"What's happening to me?" She clutched at her abdomen as another spasm ripped through her. It felt as if her body was attempting to shift into something else without her conscious decision. The partial wolf aspects she'd managed to control during her escape were surfacing again, unbidden and chaotic.

It's like I'm short-circuiting, she thought frantically. What did those drugs do to my genes?

Her analytical mind raced through the possibilities. The compounds they'd injected into her had clearly activated her dormant shifter genes, but her human cellular structure couldn't handle the rapid transformation. It was like forcing software to run on incompatible hardware—eventually, the system would crash.

Eli looked over, his eyes widening as he watched claws extend from her fingertips, then retract, then extend again.

"You're shifting," he observed, backing away slightly.

Maya shook her head, panic rising. "I'm not trying to! It's just happening." Her voice

distorted as her teeth elongated then shortened in her mouth. "I can't control it."

"Fight it. Push the wolf back down." Eli's voice was calm, but his posture had changed—more alert and ready to move.

"How?" Maya snarled, the sound more animal than human. "I don't know how to talk to it. It's not listening to me."

A low growl escaped her throat as another wave of painful transformation rippled through her. She could feel something wild and primal pushing against the edges of her consciousness—her inner wolf demanding control.

Alarm flashed across Eli's face. "We can't stay here. This room's too confined—it's making your wolf feel trapped. That's why she's fighting harder."

She. The pronoun struck Maya oddly. Her wolf was female, a separate entity yet part of her. Why won't you listen to me? she silently pleaded with this new aspect of herself.

"We need to move," Eli decided, helping her to her feet. "There's a maintenance shaft two corridors over. Less confined, might help you stabilize until your mate arrives."

Maya nodded, struggling to keep her increasingly feral instincts in check. "Kieran," she whispered, drawing strength from the name itself. The tether between them pulsed stronger, as if in response.

They slipped into the hallway, Maya's bare feet silent against the cold floor. Her senses had sharpened exponentially—she could smell the chemical antiseptic, hear the heartbeats of guards stationed at distant checkpoints, and feel the vibration of the facility's generators through the soles of her feet.



"Left here," Eli whispered, guiding her with a light touch on her elbow.

They had almost reached the junction when boots echoed against tile—guards approaching fast. The sound triggered something primal in Maya. Threat. Danger. Enemy.

"No, no, no," she whispered, feeling her body respond to the perceived threat. The shift came harder and faster this time.

Eli's eyes widened in alarm. "Maya, hold on?—"

But it was too late. The added stress and panic shattered what little control she had left. Maya's inner wolf surged forward, fur sprouting along her spine, her face elongating partially into a muzzle. Not a full shift, but three-quarters of the way there—caught between woman and wolf in a feral hybrid state that terrified her.

Oh god, what am I becoming? Her mind remained her own, trapped inside a body that followed more primitive instincts.

The guards rounded the corner, their weapons raised. "There they are! The specimen is loose!"

Maya's wolf responded before she could think, a warning snarl ripping from her throat that echoed through the sterile hallway. Her body crouched, ready to spring.

Kieran, she called through the bond, desperately hoping he could somehow hear her. I need you now. Please hurry.

The guards inched closer to Maya's three-quarters shifted wolf form, making her inner wolf angrier. The rational side of her brain tried to assert control, but the primal instinct roared louder, drowning out human reason.

"Maya, don't—" Eli tried to calm her, but it was useless. Her body wasn't hers to command anymore.

"Tranq her!" one of the guards barked, raising a dart gun.

The threat registered in Maya's mind as her muscles bunched and released in one fluid motion. She lunged for the three guards down the hallway before she even knew what she was doing consciously. A strange electric thrill coursed through her veins—half terror, half exhilaration.

"Shift!" another guard yelled.

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In a chaotic storm, Eli and the three guards shifted into their wolf forms in the maintenance tunnel. The air filled with the sound of ripping clothes and multiple snarls. Four wolves now faced her—three with hostile intent, Eli standing apart, uncertain.

Maya's wolf form fought in a state of feral rage and panic, tearing and biting and clawing at the three guards in a dance that felt foreign yet oddly familiar and natural, as if her wolf form knew exactly how to defend itself.

This isn't me, Maya thought as her jaws snapped shut inches from a gray wolf's throat. But the moves came instinctively—duck, lunge, and slash with her newly formed claws. Her body moved with a grace she'd never experienced in her human form, pivoting and striking with lethal precision.

One of the guards, a russet-colored wolf, charged at her flank. Maya spun with unexpected agility, her newly grown claws raking across his muzzle. The wolf yelped, blood spattering the sterile white floor.

I've never fought a day in my life, her human mind protested even as her body executed another perfect defensive maneuver, driving the largest black wolf backward with a ferocious snarl.

The sound that tore from her throat was primal and fierce—a declaration that despite her newness to this form, she would not be taken down easily.

"Maya!" Eli called out telepathically to her in the language of wolves that she now strangely understood. "You need to get control! They're calling for backup!"

Maya heard the words but couldn't process them through the red haze of battle rage. Her fangs found purchase in the shoulder of the smallest wolf, and the taste of blood filled her mouth, copper-sweet and horrifying. She released immediately, shocked at herself, but her wolf pushed forward again.

One of the guards circled behind her. Maya sensed the movement and pivoted, but not quickly enough. Pain exploded across her back as claws raked her flesh. She howled—a sound that started animal but ended almost human.

Kieran, please. I don't know how to do this. She sent the desperate plea through their unexplainable connection as she staggered, trying to regroup.

The largest wolf lunged at her throat, forcing Maya to dodge sideways into the wall. The impact knocked the breath from her lungs. For a split second, her vision swam, her body faltering between forms—fur receding slightly and her claws shortening.

That moment of weakness was all the guards needed. They closed in, their teeth bared, ready to subdue her.

This is it, Maya thought, bracing for their attack. I've come this far only to be caged again.

The hallway echoed with the sound of snarls and snapping jaws as the three wolves coordinated their approach. Maya backed against the wall, her muscles tensing for one final desperate fight.

A thunderous crash shook the tunnel as the metal service door at the end of the corridor flew off its hinges. Through the opening burst seven massive wolves, led by one with midnight-black fur and silver-blue eyes that blazed like cold fire.

Kieran.

Maya's heart lurched with recognition. Even in wolf form, she knew him instantly—the way he moved, the commanding presence, and the electric connection that pulsed between them.

The three guard wolves swiveled, caught between Maya and the new threat. Their hesitation lasted only a fraction of a second before Kieran's tactical assault began with ruthless precision.

He signaled with a sharp bark, and his pack split into a perfect flanking formation. Three wolves circled wide to cut off retreat while Kieran and three others drove straight at the guards.

The largest guard wolf, a mottled brown beast, lunged for Kieran's throat. Kieran feinted left, then pivoted with shocking speed, his jaws clamping around the attacker's exposed flank. Bone crunched beneath his bite.

He moves like water, Maya thought, mesmerized by his lethal grace.

The guard yelped in pain, but Kieran gave no quarter. He drove the wounded wolf toward Maya, almost as if offering her the kill. Her newly awakened instincts recognized the gesture for what it was—a display of dominance, trust, and partnership.

Without thinking, Maya launched herself from the wall, her half-shifted form moving with unexpected agility. Her claws raked across the wounded wolf's throat, opening it in a spray of crimson.

I just killed someone, her human mind registered with shock. But her wolf felt only satisfaction and the primal thrill of survival.

Kieran's eyes met hers across the dying wolf, approval and something far more

intimate burning in their silver-blue depths. A silent communication passed between them—hunt together, fight together, and survive together.

The two remaining guards fell back, realizing they were outmatched. One turned to flee, but Kieran's wolves had cut off escape. Panicked, he charged at Maya, perhaps thinking her the weaker target.

Maya felt Kieran's rage pulse through their bond at the threat to her. He moved with blinding speed, but Maya was already reacting.

She dropped low, letting the charging wolf sail over her, then twisted to catch its hindquarters with her teeth. The wolf howled as it crashed against the wall. Before it could recover, Kieran was there, his massive jaws closing around its neck with decisive finality.

The third wolf backed away, hackles raised, seeking any opening for escape. It found none. Cornered between Kieran's pack and the wall, it made one desperate lunge toward a ventilation grate.

Maya intercepted it mid-leap, her body moving instinctively in concert with Kieran's. As she knocked the wolf off-course, Kieran delivered the killing blow, his teeth severing the wolf's spine with surgical precision.

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The fight ended as suddenly as it began, leaving three dead guards on the tiled floor. Blood pooled beneath them, steam rising from their cooling bodies in the cold tunnel air.

Maya's half-shifted form trembled with adrenaline and exertion. She turned to Kieran, feeling her features soften and shift back toward human. His magnificent black wolf padded toward her, nuzzling against her neck with a gentleness that belied his ferocity moments before.

She buried her hands in his thick fur, feeling the solid warmth of him against her. His wolf made a sound somewhere between a growl and a purr, vibrating through his chest into hers.

Each breath synchronized between them, their heartbeats finding the same rhythm. The other wolves retreated, giving them space in a show of respect that even Maya's novice shifter instincts recognized.

Then, in a fluid motion, Kieran's wolf form melted away, replaced by his human shape. Maya's body responded in kind, completing her transition back to human form.

Kieran pulled her into his powerful arms. Against her ear, his voice was rough with emotion. "I felt you calling me," he whispered, his lips brushing her temple. "I felt your fear, your pain."

Maya's fingers dug into the muscles of his bare back, anchoring herself to him. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again." Her voice cracked with relief and lingering terror. "I didn't know if I could hold on long enough."

Kieran pulled back enough to frame her face with his hands, his eyes almost glowing with possessive intensity. "I would have torn this building apart stone by stone to find you."

His hands tightened on her, as if assuring himself she was real. Maya felt the tremor in his fingers—not fear, but rage barely contained.

"We just killed together," she whispered, the reality of what they'd done settling over her.

"Yes." His eyes searched hers, looking for signs of regret or disgust. "My wolf and yours. Our first hunt." The possessive pride in his voice sent a thrill through her blood.

"It felt... right," Maya admitted, surprising herself with the absolute truth of it.

TWENTY

KIERAN

Kieran's chest swelled with primal satisfaction. His mate had embraced her true nature—had fought alongside him. The bond between them pulsed with renewed strength.

He pressed his forehead against hers, breathing in her scent now laced with the metallic tang of battle. "Much as I'd like to savor this moment, we need to move." His voice dropped to a commanding whisper as he addressed the pack around them. "Three minutes to dress and form up."

His brother nodded sharply, already pulling on tactical gear from a backpack one of the team had carried. Kieran kept his body between Maya and the others as they



dressed, his protective instincts flaring. She might have proven herself in battle, but she was still new to this world—his to shield.

"Put this on," he said, handing Maya the white lab coat. "Blend in until we're out."

Maya slipped the coat over her hospital gown. Her movements were a bit sluggish from her recent transformation but efficient and focused. Kieran noted with approval how quickly she was adapting, especially in his presence—a survivor's instinct that called to his own.

"Southeast exit?" she asked, tying her copper hair back.

"Good instincts," Kieran replied, zipping up his tactical vest. "Gamma team secured it ten minutes ago."

Malcolm approached, now fully dressed in black combat gear. "Ready when you are, brother."

Kieran nodded, surveying his team with a critical eye. Five of his most loyal Silvercrest pack members plus Malcolm and Eli. A small force, but each wolf was battle-tested and committed to the cause. To Maya's cause. His cause.

"Formation delta," Kieran ordered. "Maya stays between Malcolm and me. No one engages unless necessary."

They moved through the sterile corridors of the Granite Ridge medical facility with practiced stealth. Kieran felt Maya's presence behind him like a heat signature, his senses hyper-attuned to her every movement and every breath. The need to protect her burned in his blood with an intensity that surprised even him.

Two corridors from the southeast exit, Kieran held up a fist, halting the group. His

nostrils flared at the scent of unfamiliar wolves ahead—at least six of them.

"Shift," he ordered, his voice a low rumble. "They're waiting for us."

The transformation rippled through the team in near silence, clothes discarded as fur erupted over skin. Kieran glanced at Maya, watching as she fully shifted with surprising grace for someone so new to her nature. He knew it must be because his wolf was stabilizing hers now.

Her wolf form was smaller than his, russet-gold with hints of copper, her bright green eyes maintaining that fierce intelligence that had first drawn him to her.

Stay close to me, he projected to her through their mate bond, uncertain if she could hear him yet.

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The slight tilt of her head told him she had.

They rounded the corner into a broad atrium, sunlight filtering through high windows onto the clinical white floor. As expected, a blocking force of Granite Ridge wolves had assembled, their postures aggressive.

Kieran launched forward without hesitation, his massive black form a blur of deadly purpose. His team fanned out behind him in perfect coordination, a testament to countless hours of training together. Malcolm flanked right while two others went left, creating a protective corridor for Maya.

The clash was brutal and swift. Kieran took the largest enemy wolf, his jaws clamping around the challenger's throat in a display of dominance and skill. He sensed rather than saw Malcolm dispatching another with ruthless precision.

Through the chaos of snarling wolves and striking claws, Kieran kept Maya in his peripheral vision. Pride surged through him as she fought with instinctive skill, her smaller form using speed and agility where she lacked raw power.

They were halfway across the atrium when Kieran's enhanced senses detected the metallic click of a rifle safety being disengaged. His head snapped toward the sound—a human hunter on a second-floor balcony, taking aim at Maya's russet form.

Silver bullets. He caught the distinctive gleam as light reflected off the chambered round. Fatal to shifters with a direct heart shot, debilitating anywhere else.

Time compressed into crystal clarity. The distance between himself and Maya. The

trajectory of the bullet. The fraction of a second before the trigger would be pulled.

No conscious decision was made—only the absolute certainty that he would die before allowing harm to come to her.

Kieran launched himself across the remaining space, his powerful limbs propelling him into the path of the bullet just as the rifle discharged with a crack that echoed through the atrium.

Fire erupted in his flank as the silver-laced bullet tore through muscle and lodged, just missing his spine. The poison burned through his veins immediately, his wolf shifter magic fighting against the corrosive metal.

He staggered but remained standing, a wall of black fur between Maya and the shooter. Malcolm's enraged howl cut through the momentary silence as he and two others charged the stairs toward the sniper.

Kieran felt his shift destabilizing, the silver forcing him back to human form against his will. He fought it, his muscles spasming as he tried to maintain his wolf shape.

Kieran! Maya's voice pierced his mind, frantic with concern.

His legs buckled beneath him as the poison spread. The transformation back to human form overtook him in waves of agony, fur receding as his body betrayed him. Maya's wolf form appeared above him, her eyes wide with panic. Behind her, the remaining members of his team formed a protective circle, holding off the last of the attackers.

"Southeast exit," Kieran managed through gritted teeth, his naked human form vulnerable on the cold floor. "Get me out... poison working quickly."

Maya's wolf seemed to understand. With surprising gentleness, her jaws closed around the scruff of his neck, strong enough to drag him but careful not to break skin. The gesture was so primal, so perfectly wolf, that even through his pain, Kieran felt a surge of possessive pride.

My mate, he thought as the venom pulled him toward unconsciousness. Fighting for me as I fought for her.

Malcolm appeared in his vision, now back in human form, firing covering shots as Maya dragged Kieran toward the exit. "Hold on, brother," Malcolm's voice seemed to come from underwater. "We're almost clear."

The sunlight hit Kieran's face as they broke through the southeast doors, the scent of freedom mixing with the copper tang of his own blood. Maya's wolf still had him by the neck, her determination a tangible force.

I'm not dying today, Kieran projected through their shared bond, hoping she could hear him. Not when I've finally found you.

With each dragging step Maya took, Kieran felt the silver's poison creeping further through his system. His vision narrowed to pinpricks of light, his consciousness ebbing and flowing. Still, beneath the pain, he registered her strength—the way her wolf form moved with purpose, navigating the terrain as if she'd been born to it.

"She somehow knows the trails," he muttered through gritted teeth.

Behind them, the sounds of battle faded. His strike teams were buying them time, sacrificing themselves for their future Alpha and his mate. The knowledge burned through him like the silver—responsibility and privilege wrapped in one painful package.

"When we get out of this—" he coughed, his body wracked with spasms, "—I'm promoting every one of them."

Maya's wolf form growled softly in what he took as agreement, her pace never slowing. Her russet fur caught the dying sunlight, making her seem to glow against the darkening forest. His scientist. His wolf. His salvation.

As they moved deeper into the mountain terrain, something unexpected began to happen. Each mile they put between themselves and the Granite Ridge facility, the burning in his veins lessened incrementally. Every time Maya readjusted her grip on him, a wave of warmth flowed from the point of contact, pushing back against the poison.

Their mate bond. It was actually healing him somehow.

"Keep going," he urged, his voice stronger now. "You're doing something to the silver in me."

Maya took a sharp left, avoiding a ridge line where they might be spotted. Her knowledge of the territory was impressive—even more so considering she was operating primarily on newly awakened instinct.

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The first drops of rain pelted them as the storm clouds gathered overhead. Perfect. The rain would mask their scent and make tracking them more difficult.

Lightning cracked across the sky as Maya pulled him under the shelter of a dense pine thicket. She paused, her wolf ears swiveling to catch any sounds of pursuit. Kieran forced himself to stay silent despite the pain, trusting her newly heightened senses.

When she moved again, it was with renewed purpose. The rain fell harder now, soaking Kieran's naked form. The cold was actually helpful, numbing the worst of the pain from the silver bullet still lodged in his side.

Through bleary eyes, Kieran spotted the dark mouth of a cave up ahead. Safety. Shelter. His wolf recognized it instantly.

"Perfect," he managed. "You found us a den."

Maya dragged him the final distance with a herculean effort, her wolf form trembling with exertion as they cleared the cave entrance. The thunder crashed outside as if celebrating their temporary victory.

Inside the cave, she gently released his neck and moved to the back, checking for other inhabitants with efficient sweeps of her powerful nose. Finding none, she padded back to him and began the shift.

Kieran watched through half-lidded eyes as fur receded, limbs elongated, and his beautiful mate took human form. Even naked and exhausted, Maya moved with

determined precision, gathering what dry vegetation she could find to create a bed for him away from the cave entrance.

"You need to stay warm," she said, her voice husky from the transformation. "The silver is fighting your healing abilities."

She knelt beside him, pressing her warm body against his side, sharing her heat. Where their skin touched, the burning of the silver poison retreated slightly.

"How did you know where to find this place?" Kieran asked, reaching up to touch her face.

"Wolf habitat mapping. It's literally what I do for a living." Her lips quirked in that half-smile he found so endearing. "Plus, your wolf shifters' territory patterns weren't that difficult to decode once I started looking for them."

Kieran laughed despite the pain. "Remind me never to underestimate you, Dr. Collins."

"Too late for that." She carefully examined his wound, her touch clinical but tender. "The bullet's still in there. I need to get it out or the silver will keep poisoning you."

"Do it," he commanded, his eyes locking with hers. No hesitation and no doubt.

Lightning illuminated the cave briefly, highlighting the determination in her eyes. "I might not be a medical doctor, but I've extracted enough tracking devices from wolves to know the basics."

"Such pillow talk," Kieran smirked, then winced as she probed the wound. "I knew there was a reason I kept you around."



## TWENTY-ONE

### MAYA

Maya laughed, the sound echoing against the cave walls. "Hold still or I'll have to pin you down."

"Under different circumstances, I might enjoy that challenge." His silver-blue eyes flickered with heat despite his pain.

Maya carefully prodded Kieran's bullet wound, her touch clinical but tender. The silver-laced metal gleamed malevolently in the flash of lightning that illuminated the cave. Blood seeped slowly from around the foreign object, but what concerned her more was the network of blackened veins spreading outward from the wound like poison-filled tributaries.

Maya focused on the task, using her newly enhanced vision to locate the bullet lodged against his rib cage. The silver had prevented his shifter healing from working properly, but somehow their connection seemed to counteract the worst effects. With careful, steady fingers, she dug into the wound, following the path of destruction until her fingertips brushed metal.

"Almost there." She bit her lower lip in concentration. "This is going to hurt."

Kieran's jaw tightened. "Just do it."

With a swift, decisive movement, she extracted the bullet, immediately tossing the toxic metal as far from him as possible. Blood welled up, but already she could see his natural healing beginning to respond.

"I need to dress this. Don't move."

Maya darted outside into the storm, her naked form drenched within seconds. The large gash across her back stung as rain hit the raw flesh, but she pushed aside the pain. Her newly awakened wolf senses helped her quickly find what she needed—large, waxy leaves and the sticky sap of a balsam fir. She gathered an armful, the rich scent of the forest intensified by her enhanced smell.

Back in the cave, she crafted a makeshift bandage, spreading the antiseptic sap onto the leaves before placing them over his wound.

"You're a natural," Kieran murmured, his hand brushing against hers.

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The touch sent electricity through her. Maya's mind flashed back to the medical facility—to the moment her wolf had killed for the first time. Under Kieran's wolf's guidance, she had taken down a guard who'd tried to drag her back to that cold hospital room. The memory should have horrified her human mind, but instead, it felt right. Natural. As if her DNA had been recoded for this very purpose.

"I can't believe I killed today," she said softly, securing the leaf bandage with strips of bark. "In wolf form. It felt..."

"Like coming home," Kieran finished for her.

"Yes." She met his gaze. "How did you know?"

"Because that's what finding your true nature feels like."

Maya nodded, remembering how her wolf had instinctively known what to do after Kieran was shot. Without conscious thought, she'd seized him by the scruff of his neck and pulled him to safety, traversing miles of mountain terrain with a certainty she'd never experienced in her human form.

"Before you came to rescue me," she admitted, "my wolf was chaotic—shifting in and out without my control and not listening to me. But when you arrived, everything clicked into place." Her fingers traced the edge of his bandage. "My wolf listened to yours instantly. Submitted to you. Accepted its place."

"Not submitted," Kieran corrected, his voice deep with meaning. "Recognized. There's a difference."

He struggled to sit up, grimacing with the effort.

"You shouldn't move yet."

"Turn around," he commanded softly. "Your back needs tending."

Maya hesitated, then complied, presenting him with the long claw marks that ran from her right shoulder blade to her lower back.

Kieran's sharp intake of breath was followed by gentle fingers tracing the edges of her wound. "Who did this to you?"

"The guard with the gray muzzle. Before I..." She didn't need to finish.

"Good." His approval was primal, sending an unexpected thrill through her. "Hold still."

Despite his own injury, Kieran meticulously cleaned her wound, his touch possessive yet gentle. The intimacy of the moment—both naked and tending each other's battle injuries—struck Maya as more binding than any formal ritual could be.

"Your wolf is already healing this," he noted, his breath warm against her skin. "Faster than it should for someone newly awakened."

Maya shivered at his proximity. "I think it's because of you. Your presence seems to stabilize me, physically and emotionally."

His hands worked gently but firmly on her back. His breath was hot against her skin, sending tiny shivers down her spine as he cleaned the long claw wound. His touch was deliberate, almost reverent, as if he were tending to something far more precious than just flesh and blood. She could feel the weight of his body behind her, his legs

straddling her hips, his chest pressing close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from him despite his weakened state. The air between them was thick with something unspoken—something primal and electric.

His response to her words was a soft hum, a vibration that she felt more than heard. Then, his lips were on her neck, trailing soft, feather-light kisses along the curve of her shoulder. The sensation was both soothing and electrifying, as if his kisses were somehow stitching her back together from the inside out. She let out a soft gasp, her fingers gripping the makeshift bed beneath her.

"Kieran, you should rest," she breathed, her voice trembling with a mix of surprise and desire.

He didn't stop though. His lips moved lower, kissing along the edge of her wound with a tenderness that made her heart ache. His hands slid around her sides, brushing against her ribs before settling on her breasts. His touch was firm but careful, his fingers teasing her nipples into hardened peaks. Maya's breath hitched, a soft moan escaping her lips as pleasure began to pool within her.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered against her skin, his voice thick with emotion. "Every inch of you."

Maya turned in his lap, her movements slow but deliberate. She faced him now, their bodies pressed together, her hands on his shoulders. His silver-blue eyes were dark with desire, his gaze locked on hers. She leaned in, capturing his lips in a kiss that started soft and tentative but quickly deepened into something hungry and desperate. Their tongues tangled, the taste of him flooding her senses—wild and untamed, like the forest itself.

When she finally broke the kiss, her chest heaving, she leaned back just enough to look at him. His face was flushed, his breathing ragged, but there was a softness in

his eyes that made her heart swell. She trailed her fingers down his chest, marveling at the hard planes of muscle beneath her touch. Her lips followed, pressing soft kisses along his collarbone, down the center of his chest, and over the ridges of his abs. Each kiss felt like a promise, a silent vow to heal him just as he had healed her.

"Maya," he groaned, his voice thick with pleasure as she moved lower, her lips brushing against the sharp V of his hips. His hands tangled in her hair, not guiding her but simply holding on as if he needed the anchor. "Whatever you're doing... I think it's helping. I'm feeling stronger."

She looked up at him, her green eyes meeting his silver-blue ones, and gave him a small, knowing smile. "Good," she whispered before taking his hard length into her hand, her touch firm but gentle. His sharp intake of breath was all the encouragement she needed. She leaned down, her lips closing around the tip of his large cock and felt him tense beneath her.

"Maya, you don't have to—" he hissed softly, his fingers tightening in her hair.

"I want to," she interrupted, her voice steady despite the heat flooding her cheeks. And she did. There was something about this—about the way he responded to her, and the way he seemed to come alive under her touch—that made her feel powerful in a way she never had before. She took him deeper, her tongue swirling around his cock as her hand worked in tandem with her mouth. His groans filled the cave, the sound raw and unfiltered, and it only fueled her determination.

But just as she felt him tensing, on the brink of release, he gently pulled her off him, his chest heaving. "Not like this," he said, his voice rough but firm. "I want to be inside you when I come undone."

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Maya's breath caught, her heart pounding in her chest. She nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his. The air between them crackled with anticipation. She shifted closer, her hands on his thighs as she prepared to climb into his lap, ready to take him in a way that would bind them even tighter together.

Maya's breath hitched shakily as she climbed up into Kieran's lap, her body trembling with anticipation. His hands gripped her hips, steadying her as she positioned herself over his cock. The heat of his body radiated against her, and she could feel the tension in his muscles, the way he held himself back, even now. She lowered herself slowly, inch by inch, until he filled her completely, stretching her in the most delicious way. A soft gasp escaped her lips as she adjusted to his size, her inner walls clenching around him instinctively.

"You're perfect," Kieran murmured, his voice thick with need. His hands slid up her sides, leaving trails of fire in their wake, before settling on her back, careful to avoid the wound. "Take your time."

Maya nodded, her hands resting on his broad shoulders for balance. She began to move, rocking her hips in a slow, deliberate rhythm. Each movement sent waves of pleasure coursing through her, and she could feel the way he responded, his body tensing beneath her. His eyes locked onto hers, and she could see the raw intensity in his gaze, the way he was holding himself back, letting her set the pace.

"You're still healing," she whispered, her voice trembling with the effort to keep her movements slow and controlled. "I don't want to hurt you."

Kieran's lips curved into a smirk, his hands tightening on her hips. "You could never

hurt me, Maya. Not like this."

She laughed softly, the sound mingling with the distant rumble of thunder outside. Her movements grew bolder, her hips rolling against his as she sought the perfect angle. Kieran's breath hitched as his hands slid up to cup her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her nipples causing her to gasp.

"You're driving me insane," he growled, his voice low and husky.

Maya's response was cut off as he surged up, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. His tongue swept into her mouth, claiming her in a way that left no doubt about his dominance. She moaned into the kiss, her hands tangling in his hair as she ground down against him, seeking more of the pleasure that was building between them.

Kieran broke the kiss, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "I love you, Maya," he said, his voice raw with emotion. "I've never felt this way about anyone. You're my mate, my everything."

Maya's heart swelled at his words, and she felt a surge of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. "I love you too, Kieran," she whispered, her voice trembling with the intensity of her feelings. "I've never felt this connected to anyone before."

Her confession seemed to unleash something in him, and he surged up, flipping her onto her back with a growl. His body covered hers, his hips driving into her with a rhythm that left her breathless. Maya's nails dug into his shoulders as she clung to him, her body arching up to meet his thrusts. The pleasure built, coiling tighter and tighter until it finally snapped, sending her over the edge with a cry of his name.

Kieran followed her over, his body shuddering as he spilled himself inside her. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, his breath hot against her pale skin as he whispered her name like a prayer. The small mark on her neck from their previous



encounter seemed to burn with a new intensity, as if recognizing the bond that had just been solidified between them.

They lay there for a long moment, their bodies still joined, their breaths slowly returning to normal. Kieran finally pulled back, his eyes soft with affection as he brushed her hair from her face. "You're mine, Maya," he said, his voice firm but gentle. "And I'm yours. Nothing will ever change that."

Maya smiled up at him, her heart full. "I know," she whispered, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw. "And I wouldn't want it any other way."

They curled up together on the makeshift bed, their naked bodies pressed tightly together for warmth. The storm outside raged on, but inside the cave, there was only the warmth of their love and the promise of a future together. Maya's mind drifted to the challenges they still faced—the silver poisoning, the High Council, and the uncertainty of what tomorrow would bring—but in that moment, she felt a sense of hope. With Kieran by her side, she knew they could face anything.

## TWENTY-TWO

### KIERAN

The morning sunlight filtered through the cave entrance, casting a golden glow over their naked bodies. Kieran stirred first, his eyes blinking open to find Maya curled against his chest, her copper-red hair spilling across his muscular torso like living flame. The silver poisoning still coursed through his veins, but something felt different—stronger and more vital. He knew immediately it was her. Their mate bond.

"Maya," he murmured, brushing her soft hair from her pale face. "We need to move."

Her green eyes fluttered open, sleepy confusion giving way to sharp awareness as she took in their situation. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than I should be." He sat up, wincing slightly as the movement pulled at his wound. "But not out of danger. We need to find a safe house and get this silver treated."

Maya nodded, rising to her feet in one fluid motion that made Kieran's breath catch. Her naked form was magnificent—all lean muscle and pale skin dotted with freckles. The clawmarks on her back had already begun to heal, the edges knitting together faster than any new shifter's should.

"We'll have to travel as we are," he said, forcing his eyes back to her face. "Our clothes are gone."

"I think nudity is the least of our concerns right now." A smirk played on her lips. "Though I have to say, being naked in the wilderness feels surprisingly... right."

Kieran chuckled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest as he stood. "Your wolf is embracing her freedom." He paused for a moment as he steadied himself. "There's a safe house about five miles northeast—one the rebellion uses."

They set out through the forest, Kieran setting a pace that respected his wounded state while still maintaining urgency. The morning dew clung to the underbrush, cool against their bare skin. As they walked, Kieran became increasingly aware of a new intense sensation within him. Maya's thoughts and emotions now flowed into his consciousness and body like a gentle stream, strong and steady. Not the distant and muted sensations from the past few days, but clearer and more powerful.

"Can you feel that?" he asked suddenly, pausing to look at her.

Maya's brow furrowed. "Feel what? Your pain? Yes, strangely I can... it's like a strong pulsating feeling in my chest."

"Not just that." He stepped closer, placing his hand over her heart. "Last night, when we joined... when I released inside you... it wasn't just physical. I claimed you as my mate."

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"I thought as much. I felt a strong burning sensation coming from my small bite mark—your partial mate mark." Her voice was steady, but her heart raced beneath his palm.

"The mate bond has almost been solidified," he continued, his voice softening to a husky timbre. "True fated mates can develop a telepathic connection after this claiming—in both human and wolf form. That's what you're feeling. Plus, a heightened physical awareness of my state."

Maya closed her eyes, concentrating. Like this? Her voice echoed in his mind, tentative but clear.

Kieran's eyes widened. "Exactly like that," he whispered aloud. "Most fated mate pairs take weeks to achieve that clarity."

A smile lit up her face, sending an unexpected surge of joy through him. "This is..." She shook her head, searching for words.

"Incredible," he finished for her, unable to stop his eyes from trailing down her body. The sunlight dappled across her skin, highlighting the curve of her breasts and the gentle slope of her hips. His wolf stirred, possessive and hungry despite their dire circumstances.

You're staring, her amused voice filled his mind.

"Can you blame me?" he growled, his eyes flashing silver. "You're breathtaking."

"And you're distracted," she countered, but her cheeks flushed with pleasure. "We need to get that silver poison neutralized. I can feel it fighting against your natural healing."

Kieran nodded grimly, forcing himself back to their mission. "The safe house might have a healer. But we should call Lena and have her come there. She'll help us."

They continued through the forest, Kieran's thoughts darkening as they walked. The long-term effects of silver poisoning could be devastating—weakened shifting ability, compromised strength, even permanent damage to his wolf. And beyond his physical concerns, there were the political ramifications of his recent actions.

"Malcolm..." he muttered, worry for his brother creasing his brow.

"You're concerned about him," Maya observed, catching the thought through their bond. "And about what your father will do."

"He'll disown me," Kieran stated flatly. "Declare me traitor to the pack for rescuing a human—even one with dormant shifter genes. Malcolm too, if he suspects his involvement."

The heavy weight of responsibility pressed down on Kieran's shoulders. His mind raced through calculations of what might have happened to Malcolm and the strike teams after they'd split up during the chaos of their escape. The silver bullet wound throbbed in his side, a constant reminder of the price he'd willingly paid to protect Maya.

"The teams should have scattered into four different directions according to the extraction plan," he said, scanning the forest for potential threats. His wolf senses remained partially muted from the silver, but his instincts were sharp as ever. "Malcolm was leading the western team. If they followed protocol, they should be

safe."

"But you don't know for certain." Maya's voice was steady, analytical even in crisis.

"No." Kieran's jaw tightened. "And my father will be livid. This isn't just about breaking pack law—it's a direct challenge to his authority."

They navigated through a dense thicket, Kieran's hand instinctively reaching back to guide Maya through the narrowest parts. His touch lingered on her skin, drawing strength from the contact.

"I never wanted open rebellion," he confessed. "But I'll burn down the whole damn system before I let anyone hurt you."

Maya's fingers intertwined with his. "For what it's worth, I'd do the same for you."

After an hour of careful navigation, they reached the edge of a clearing. A rustic two-story cabin stood nestled against the mountainside, smoke curling from its chimney. Positioned precisely on the border between Silvercrest and Granite Ridge territories, it represented a physical manifestation of rebellion—neither here nor there.

Kieran's nostrils flared. "There are at least seven shifters inside. Young ones." He glanced at Maya. "Stay behind me."

They approached cautiously. Before they reached the door, it swung open revealing a young woman with a streak of blue in her dark hair. Her eyes widened at the sight of the naked pair.

"Holy shit, it's Kieran Silvercrest," she hissed, pulling them inside. "And you must be the human everyone's talking about."

The interior bustled with activity as the young wolf shifters scrambled to attention at Kieran's presence. Despite his nakedness and wounded state, his authority filled the room. Spines straightened, eyes lowered in deference.

"Clothes," he commanded simply, and three different wolf shifters rushed to comply.

Once dressed in borrowed jeans and a tight black t-shirt that strained across his shoulders, Kieran gathered the rebel sympathizers in the main room. Maya stood at his side, now clad in leggings and an oversized flannel shirt.

"What news from the packs?" he demanded.

A lanky male with nervous eyes stepped forward. "Your father called an emergency Council meeting at dawn. He's—" The young wolf swallowed hard. "He's publicly banished you for treason against our shifter kind. Said you chose a human over your blood and pack."

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The words hit Kieran like physical blows, though his expression remained stoic. Inside, a storm of emotions raged. He'd known this was coming, had calculated it as the most likely outcome, yet the finality of it—the public severing by his own father—cut deeper than he'd anticipated.

"Was my brother implicated?"

"Not yet," the blue-haired girl answered. "But there are whispers."

Kieran nodded once, absorbing the information. The rational part of him processed the strategic implications, while something deeper—something primal—mourned the loss of his birthright and family connection. But when he felt Maya's hand slip into his, he knew with utter certainty he'd make the same choice a thousand times over.

"My father chose politics over blood first," he said, his voice carrying the weight of command. His eyes surveyed the room. "And he's about to discover exactly how much he's underestimated me."

The acrid scent hit Kieran first—a chemical tang that cut through the cabin's woody aroma. His nostrils flared, his body tensing despite the silver still coursing through his veins. There was no mistaking that smell. Wolfsbane oil mixed with gunpowder.

"Everyone down!" He lunged toward Maya as the first window shattered, glass spraying across the wooden floor. "Hunters!"

The blue-haired girl crumpled instantly, a tranquilizer dart lodged in her shoulder. Two more young shifters dropped before they could react.



Kieran's tactical mind assessed their situation in milliseconds. Ten heartbeats outside—all pumping with adrenaline. Ten human hunters with specialized weapons. Against four remaining young shifters, one silver-poisoned Alpha heir, and one newly awakened wolf.

Maya's eyes met his, wide but focused. "How many?"

"Ten," he growled, dragging her behind the heavy oak table as bullets splintered the doorframe. "They shouldn't have been able to track me with this silver dampening my scent."

Understanding dawned on her face. "Unless they knew exactly where to look."

The remaining wolves huddled near them, looking to Kieran for direction despite his compromised state. Their fear scent was sharp, cutting through the chaos.

"They'll be coming through every entrance," Kieran commanded, his voice steady despite the rage building in him. "Maya, you need to shift."

She shook her head, panic flashing across her features. "I can't control it very well yet—last time it was chaotic and?"

"I'll guide you." His hand clasped the back of her neck, his fingers tangling in her copper hair as he pressed his forehead against hers. "Our mate bond. Use it."

Their connection flared between them, a tether of primal energy. Kieran's consciousness brushed against hers, his wolf reaching for her emerging one.

Feel it in your bones, in your blood. Let it rise naturally, like breathing.

Her breath quickened as she closed her eyes. The first snap of transforming bone

made her gasp.

"That's it," he murmured against her ear. "Don't fight it."

The front door crashed inward as three hunters stormed the cabin, their weapons raised. Kieran shoved Maya behind him, shielding her transformation with his body as he bellowed to the young shifters, "Now!"

Four wolves leapt into action, their bodies blurring mid-air as they shifted and attacked. But these were inexperienced fighters against trained hunters. Two more dropped under tranquilizer darts.

Behind him, Maya's transformation accelerated. Through their bond, Kieran channeled decades of shifting experience, guiding her through the cascade of biological changes.

Release your human form. Embrace your wolf. Let go.

The final barrier within her broke. Where Maya had stood seconds before, a breathtaking russet wolf emerged—sleek and powerful with intelligent green eyes that held her human consciousness intact.

Beautiful, he thought, unable to stop the admiration flooding their bond.

She bared gleaming teeth in response, her mind clear in his. What's the plan?

Five hunters had breached the cabin now, while the others maintained position outside. Kieran couldn't shift to help them, but his strategic mind was unimpaired.

Circle left, he directed through their bond. Take the one with the rifle first. Go for the wrist, then throat.

Maya moved like liquid fire, her wolf form surprisingly agile for one so newly awakened. She launched herself at the hunter, her teeth sinking into his wrist with surgical precision. The rifle clattered to the floor as she pivoted toward his throat.

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Kieran barely had time to admire her execution before engaging a hunter who'd spotted him. Despite his weakened state, years of combat training made his movements efficient. He disarmed the man with a brutal twist, using the hunter's own momentum to drive him into the wall.

Through their bond, he continued directing Maya, and the two remaining wolves in a coordinated attack pattern.

Flank them. Drive them toward the center. Work as one.

The hunters, expecting disorganized resistance, found themselves facing precision predators moving with tactical unity. Maya, under Kieran's guidance, demonstrated an uncanny ability to anticipate and lead. When one of the young wolves faltered, she darted between him and the hunter's weapon, buying crucial seconds.

Pride surged through Kieran as he watched her—not just fighting but protecting. Leading. She was magnificent, her russetfur stained with blood, her eyes burning with fierce intelligence as she executed complex maneuvers he'd only thought in their bond.

The battle ended with Maya's teeth around the throat of the lead hunter. Kieran approached, his eyes cold as winter as he gazed down at the man.

"Did Alaric Silvercrest send you?" he demanded, his voice deadly quiet.

The hunter's laugh was wet with blood, then he uttered his last words. "Of course he did. Your father wants his wayward son brought home for proper

punishment—privately. Can't have the pack seeing him get soft about family, can he? Publicly banishes you, privately wants to handle you himself." The hunter's eyes then dimmed permanently.

The betrayal cut deep. His father had allied with humans—the very beings he'd taught Kieran to distrust and ordered him to kill a week ago—to hunt down his own son.

Maya padded to his side, pressing her warm flank against his leg. Through their mate bond flowed strength, understanding, and fierce loyalty.

Kieran loomed over the hunter, whose blood pooled beneath him on the wooden floor. The man's final confession burned through Kieran's veins hotter than any silver poison ever could. His father—the great Alpha Alaric Silvercrest—had arranged this ambush personally, outside the High Council's knowledge or approval.

Kieran's muscles coiled with barely contained fury as he processed the revelation. He turned away from the corpse, his eyes flashing dangerously as he met Maya's wolf gaze.

"Hypocrite," he snarled, slamming his fist into the cabin wall. "My entire life, he preached about honor, about transparency, and about the danger of humans. And here he is—making backroom deals with human hunters while maintaining his public face of righteousness."

Maya padded closer, her russet fur gleaming in the dim light. He felt her concern wash over him like a soothing wave through their bond.

"My own father," Kieran growled, raking his fingers through his black hair. "All these years, I've defended him. I've questioned myself, thinking I wasn't seeing the bigger picture." His laugh was harsh and bitter. "And here he is, working with the very humans he condemns while pretending to cast me out for treason."

The remaining shifters watched him warily. They'd never seen the normally controlled heir to the Silvercrest pack so raw and so exposed. But something had broken inside Kieran—a final thread of hope that his father might someday understand.

"Get the injured to safety," he commanded the others, his voice steady despite the storm raging within. "We're moving out in five minutes. Leave nothing behind. Torch the building."

As the others scrambled to comply, Kieran crouched beside Maya's wolf form, one hand buried in the thick fur at her neck. The contact grounded him, pulling him back from the edge of his rage.

"You know what really kills me?" His voice dropped, meant only for her ears. "It's not even the betrayal. It's that he can't see what's right in front of him. Change isn't just coming—it's here. You're here."

He cupped her wolf face between his hands, staring into her intelligent green eyes that held her human consciousness.

"If he could just stop seeing the world as it was and look at what it could be." Kieran shook his head. "We could have moved forward together. Instead, he'd rather destroy his son than question his convictions."

Maya pressed her muzzle against his chest, a comforting weight.

"I'm done trying to earn his approval," Kieran decided, steel entering his voice. Through their bond, he felt her fierce pride and approval. "If he wants to cling to outdated traditions while lying to his own pack, that's his choice. But I'm making a different one."

He stood, shoulders back, chin lifted—every inch the Alpha he was born to be, even without a pack or territory to call his own. The silver poisoning still weakened him, but something new burned in his blood—purpose, clarity, and the freedom of finally breaking free from expectations he'd carried since birth.

"We're forging our own path now," he announced, his voice carrying the weight of command. "Together."

TWENTY-THREE

MAYA

Maya watched Kieran transition from a hurt son to a commanding presence in the span of heartbeats. The renewed purpose radiating through their bond felt like lightning, sharp and electric against her consciousness.

Through her wolf eyes, the world appeared in vivid detail—heart rates, scent markers, and subtle shifts in body language. The young rebel sympathizers scrambled with their unconscious packmates, moving with urgent efficiency under Kieran's command.

Kieran knelt before her, placing both hands on her wolf face. "Let me help you shift back. Focus on my voice, feel your human form."

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His deep voice guided her through the transformation, his hands steady and sure on her changing body. The shift rippled through her muscles, less painful and chaotic this time—bones reshaping and fur retracting. She collapsed against his chest, naked and trembling from the energy expenditure and fatigue of battle.

"That was..." Maya gasped, finding her voice again. "More incredible than the first time. I could feel everything—smelleverything. Their fear, your anger. It was like experiencing the world in high definition."

Kieran's eyes flashed with heat as they swept over her bare form. "You were magnificent," he murmured, his voice lowering to a rumble that sent shivers across her skin. "A natural leader."

One of the young wolf shifters tossed her clothes—black leggings and an oversized t-shirt. Maya dressed quickly, her mind racing between scientific fascination with her second full transformation and the more pressing reality of dead bodies and a safe house that needed destroying.

As they dragged the hunters' bodies inside, Maya noticed Kieran's increasingly labored movements. The silver was taking its toll.

"Your body temperature's rising," she noted, her scientist's mind cataloging symptoms even as worry clutched at her heart. She pressed a palm against his forehead. "The silver's spreading further."

Kieran grabbed her hand, kissing her knuckles with unexpected tenderness. "I've had worse."



"Doubtful," she countered, unwilling to let him minimize the danger. "Silver poisoning is progressive, and you've had it in your system for nearly twenty-four hours."

He flashed her a grin that was equal parts arrogance and charm. "Worried about me, Dr. Collins?"

"Desperately," she admitted without hesitation, surprising herself with the raw honesty. His expression softened at her words.

They worked methodically, preparing the cabin for destruction. Maya soaked curtains in cooking oil while Kieran arranged the bodies. When they finally stepped outside, Kieran struck a match and tossed it through the doorway. Flames erupted with satisfying ferocity.

As fire consumed the evidence of the attack, Kieran borrowed a phone from a young rebel sympathizer with dark hair. "Need to call Lena," he explained to Maya. "She can neutralize this silver."

The trek through the forest toward the second safe house was grueling. Kieran insisted on helping carry one of the unconscious shifters despite his worsening condition. His face had paled alarmingly, a sheen of sweat glistening on his brow.

Maya refused to let fear overtake her. Not after everything we've survived.

"You know," she said conversationally, supporting his increasingly unsteady frame, "for someone who's spent his whole life planning to lead a pack, you're remarkably good at being a revolutionary."

His laugh was strained but genuine. "Turns out I have a talent for treason."

"It's not treason to choose what's right over what's traditional," Maya countered.

Kieran's silver-blue eyes fixed on her, intensity burning through his pain. "No," he agreed softly. "It's not."

Maya staggered alongside Kieran as they finally reached the second safe house—a weathered two-story cabin nestled deep within the woods. His normally commanding presence had diminished with each step, the silver poisoning visibly ravaging his powerful body. The tight black t-shirt that had earlier showcased his muscular physique now clung to him damply, his jeans dragging in the dirt as his gait faltered.

"Just a few more steps," she encouraged, her arm braced firmly around his waist.

His eyes flashed with stubborn determination despite his pallor. "I'm fine," he growled unconvincingly, adjusting the unconscious young shifter in his arms.

The wooden front door opened before they even reached it. Young faces—some wary, some hopeful—peered out at their battered group. Recognition dawned instantly when they spotted Kieran.

"The Alpha heir!" someone gasped.

"Former heir," Kieran corrected through gritted teeth. "Get these wounded inside. Now."

His commanding tone brooked no argument. The young rebels jumped to action, taking the injured from their companions. Maya watched the efficiency with which they moved—these were children of traditionalists who'd chosen a different path, just like Kieran had.

"You need to lie down," Maya insisted, pulling him toward a small cot in the corner

as the others tended to the wounded.

Kieran resisted. "I need to make sure?—"

"You need to not die from silver poisoning," she snapped, her scientific brain assessing his worsening symptoms with growing alarm. His temperature had spiked dangerously, and the veins around his wound had taken on a sickening grayish tint.

When he finally relented and sank onto the cot, a ripple of whispers spread through the room.

"That's her—the hybrid."

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"She fought like a born wolf."

"They say she carries the dormant genes."

"The prophecy..."

Maya pressed her palm against Kieran's burning forehead. She closed her eyes, trying to channel the healing energy she'd somehow conjured the previous night. Their mate bond thrummed between them, but the silver poisoning seemed to resist her efforts.

"Damn it," she muttered, frustration mounting. "It's not working like before."

Kieran captured her wrist, his grip surprisingly strong. "You've already done more than anyone could expect." His eyes burned with intensity despite his fever. "You fought for my people. Led them. Protected them."

A young female shifter approached hesitantly, offering a bowl of water and clean cloths. "Is it true?" she asked Maya. "Are you really half-human, half-shifter?"

Maya dipped a cloth in the cool water and pressed it to Kieran's forehead before answering. "Apparently my great-great-grandmother had quite the secret."

"And you saved those pups back there," another voice added with reverence. "Even traditionalists are talking about it."

As Maya tended to Kieran, she became increasingly aware of the growing crowd gathering around them. Young wolf shifters with traditional upbringings mingled

with hardcore rebels, their previous divisions seemingly forgotten as they exchanged stories of the battle.

Something stirred inside her—a sense of rightness that transcended her scientific skepticism. Her entire life, she'd felt drawn to wolves, studying them and understanding them. Now she realized why.

"The Lunar prophecy," someone whispered. "Humans and shifters united once more."

Kieran's feverish eyes met hers. "They need this," he murmured for her ears alone. "Hope."

Maya's heart swelled with unexpected emotion. In just a week, she'd gone from studying wolves to becoming part of them—to potentially being the bridge between two worlds.

"Lena better get here soon," she said, fighting back tears as she stroked Kieran's damp hair back from his forehead. "I'm not losing you when I've just found you."

His lips quirked into that arrogant half-smile that managed to infuriate and captivate her simultaneously. "Don't worry, sweetheart. It takes more than a little silver to keep me down."

Thirty minutes later, Maya's fingers interlaced with Kieran's as his body burned with silver fever on the small cot. She dabbed his forehead with a cold cloth, her heart clenching each time he winced or shuddered. His powerful frame looked vulnerable now, silver-threaded veins creeping outward from his wound like a toxic spiderweb.

"Stay with me, stubborn wolf," she whispered, brushing his sweat-dampened hair from his forehead. Even incapacitated, his masculine beauty stole her breath—the strong cut of his jaw and the sensual curve of his lips.

The cabin door burst open with a gust of pine-scented air. Lena rushed in, her petite frame somehow commanding the space as she carried a worn leather satchel. Her violet eyes locked onto Maya's.

"Thank god you're finally here," Maya said, relief flooding through her.

Lena knelt beside the cot, pulling out small clay jars and bundles of dried herbs. "The silver's spread further than I expected." Her fingers moved with practiced precision. "We need to work quickly."

"What do you need me to do?" Maya asked.

Lena's knowing gaze swept between them. "You're his fated mate. Your connection will amplify the healing." She handed Maya a small ceramic bowl filled with a paste that smelled of earth and smoke. "Apply this to his wound while I prepare the rest."

The young shifters gathered in a circle around them, their faces reflecting equal parts curiosity and reverence. Maya felt their eyes on her as she gently applied the pungent mixture to Kieran's side. His skin burned beneath her fingertips.

"You're enjoying playing doctor a little too much," Kieran mumbled, his eyes flickering open for a moment, his silver-blue irises bright with fever.

Maya tried not to chuckle. "Of course you'd make jokes while dying."

"I'm not dying. Just resting." His voice was weak, but his smirk remained intact.

Lena placed candles at four points around the cot, lighting each with a whispered word. "Maya, place your hands over his heart. Channel your energy into him—your bond will guide the rest."

Maya hesitated. "I'm still new at this whole supernatural thing."

"Trust your instincts," Lena said softly. "They haven't failed you yet."

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Maya closed her eyes and laid her palms flat against Kieran's chest over his heart. His heartbeat thrummed beneath her touch, strong but erratic. She focused on that rhythm, imagining it stabilizing and strengthening.

Lena began chanting in a language Maya didn't recognize, burning herbs that released sweet smoke into the air. The scent triggered something primal in Maya—her wolf stirring beneath her skin.

Heat flowed from her palms into Kieran's body. Maya gasped as she felt the silver poison respond, pulling toward her hands as if magnetized. Dark silvery tendrils emerged from his skin, wrapping around her fingers like living mercury.

"That's it," Lena encouraged. "Draw it out."

Pain seared through Maya's arms as she absorbed the poison. Kieran's back arched off the cot, his body convulsing. His eyes flew open, glowing wolf-bright.

"Maya," he gasped, her name sounding like salvation on his lips.

The silver poison collected in the bowl Lena held beneath Maya's hands, pooling like liquid metal. Around them, the young shifters watched in awe, whispers flowing through their ranks.

"The hybrid is healing the Alpha."

"Just like the prophecy said..."



"She's the One..."

A final violent shudder passed through Kieran's body before he collapsed back against the cot, his breathing suddenly deep and even. The silver veins had vanished from his skin.

"It worked," Maya breathed, dizzy with relief and exhaustion.

Kieran's hand shot up to capture her wrist, holding her in place. "Stay," he commanded, his voice regaining its familiar authoritative edge.

Maya rolled her eyes despite the fluttering in her stomach. "I just saved your life. I don't plan on going anywhere."

His lips curled into that infuriating smile that never failed to quicken her pulse. "Good."

The air in the cabin seemed to vibrate with possibility. Maya glanced around at the faces watching them—young shifters whose lives had been shaped by outdated traditions and unyielding hierarchies. In their eyes, she saw hope blossoming.

"You see what they see in us, don't you?" Kieran murmured, following her gaze.

"A bridge," Maya whispered back. "Evolution and tradition. Human and wolf."

He nodded, his eyes intense as they locked with hers. "We could change everything, you and I."

The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating. A week ago, she'd been a wildlife biologist tracking unusual wolves. Now, she was part wolf herself, bound to this powerful, maddening man—and possibly the key to transforming an entire society.

"Ready to rewrite history, Dr. Collins?" Kieran asked, his thumb tracing circles on her wrist.

Maya smiled, warmth blooming in her chest. "With you? Always."

## TWENTY-FOUR

### KIERAN

As the minutes passed by, Kieran's strength returned in waves, each one stronger than the last. The silver poison that had weakened him was gone, drawn out by Maya's touch and Lena's ancient ritual. He flexed his fingers, marveling at how quickly his body recovered once the toxic metal had been purged from his system.

Inside the safe house, the younger wolves had finally settled, their whispers about prophecies and hybrids quieting as exhaustion overtook excitement. Kieran watched Maya through half-lidded eyes as she spoke in hushed tones with Lena about her newly awakened abilities.

The moonlight streaming through the window pulled at him like a physical force. His wolf, no longer subdued by the silver, surged forward beneath his skin, demanding freedom and connection with his mate under the moon's watchful gaze.

"Maya." His voice cut through the women's conversation, low and commanding. Both turned toward him, but his eyes fixed solely on the copper-haired woman who had fought for him, healed him, and changed him. "Come with me."

He didn't wait for her response, simply rising from the cot with fluid grace and striding toward the door. The eyes of every young shifter in the room followed him—the deposed heir who'd chosen love over legacy.

Outside, the night air carried the scent of pine and distant rain. Kieran breathed deeply, relishing the clarity in his lungs after twenty-four hours of silver-induced fire. He led Maya away from the safe house, his hand capturing hers with possessive certainty.

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"Where are we going?" she asked, her scientist's curiosity never far from the surface.

"You'll see." The corners of his mouth lifted in that half-smile he knew drove her crazy.

He guided her through the trees until they reached a small clearing bathed in moonlight. Here, away from watchful eyes and hushed prophecies, Kieran could finally breathe. Could finally be just a man with his woman, not an heir or a rebel or a symbol.

Maya's copper hair gleamed like a living flame in the silvery light. Kieran reached out, wrapping a strand around his finger, savoring its silken texture and the way her pulse quickened at his touch.

"You saved my life today," he said, stepping closer until barely an inch separated their bodies. His voice dropped lower and rougher. "Drew poison from my veins with your own hands."

Maya tilted her chin up, that stubborn defiance he adored flashing in her eyes. "I wasn't about to let you die when I just figured out what to do with you."

Kieran laughed, the sound rusty and genuine. Her scientific mind, always cataloging and analyzing, was one of countless things he loved about her. Loved. The realization wasn't new, but its intensity knocked the breath from his lungs.

"I don't know who I'd be without you," he admitted, vulnerability raw in his throat. "Or where I'd be. Lost in tradition, blind to possibilities. Alone even surrounded by

pack." His thumb traced the delicate line of her jaw. "I love you, Maya. Not because of prophecies or politics or rebellions. Just you."

Her green eyes widened, luminous with unshed tears. The tough, analytical scientist who'd faced down captors and hunters suddenly looked as vulnerable as he felt.

"You know, for someone who kidnapped me and ruined my research, you've become surprisingly essential to my existence," she whispered, her voice catching. "I've spent my life studying connection without experiencing it. Until you." Her fingers traced the long scar on his jaw. "I can't imagine my life without you, Kieran Silvercrest, and that terrifies me more than any shifter or hunter ever could."

Something primal and possessive surged through him. Kieran tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling her mouth to his in a kiss that began tender but quickly ignited into something hungrier. She melted against him, her body fitting perfectly against his larger frame as if created solely for this purpose.

"You're mine," he growled against her lips, his other arm banding around her waist to eliminate any remaining space between them.

"Is that your eloquent way of saying you feel the same?" Maya murmured, nipping at his bottom lip with newfound boldness.

"Scientists require evidence, don't they?" Kieran backed her toward a massive oak at the clearing's edge, caging her between his body and the ancient trunk. "Let me show you exactly how I feel."

His mouth found the spot on her neck where he'd left a small bite mark a week ago, a claiming that had been accidental then but would be absolute tonight. His lips brushed over the sensitive skin, trailing kisses down her neck as he lifted her oversized white t-shirt and pulled it over her head, tossing it aside.

The cool night air kissed her skin, but his hands were fire as they roamed her body, pulling her leggings off her next. His mouth soon found her breasts, alternating between them. His tongue flicked over her hardened nipples, teasing and drawing out soft moans from her as her fingers tangled in his dark hair, pulling him closer.

"Kieran," she breathed, her voice trembling with desire.

He grinned against her skin, the Alpha in him reveling in the way her body responded to him. "You have no idea how much I've wanted this," he murmured, his voice husky with need. "How much I've wanted you. Forever, Maya. Not just tonight."

Her hands slid down his chest, fumbling with the hem of his black t-shirt. He stepped back just long enough to yank it off, revealing the hard planes of his muscular torso. His jeans followed, discarded in a heap on the mossy ground, leaving them both bare under the moonlight.

He guided her to the soft patch of moss in the clearing, laying her down with a gentleness that belied the hunger in his eyes. She arched beneath him, her bare skin glowing like moonlight against the dark green moss.

"Kieran," she whispered again, her eyes locked on his. "Are you sure?"

He paused, his hands resting on her hips, his gaze softening. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life. You're my mate, Maya. My partner. My equal." He leaned down, brushing his lips against hers. "But I need to hear it from you. Are you ready? Are you ready to be mine, completely?"

Her answer came without hesitation, her voice steady and sure. "Yes. I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

He kissed her deeply, his tongue tangling with hers as he positioned himself between

her legs. His cock, hard and thick, pressed against her wet entrance, and he paused for a moment, savoring the feel of her warmth against him. He pushed forward slowly, inch by inch, filling her completely, stretching her in such a way that made her gasp and arch into him.

"You're so tight," he groaned, his voice strained as he fought to keep control. "So perfect for me."

Her inner walls clenched tight around him, drawing a deep moan from his chest. He began to move, his thrusts slow and deliberate, each one drawing out her pleasure and sending sparks of ecstasy through her body. His hands roamed her curves, worshiping every inch of her as if she were the most sacred thing he'd ever touched.

As the pleasure built inside him, his thrusts grew harder, deeper, and faster, a primal rhythm that she matched with equal intensity. Her nails dug into his shoulders, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she neared the edge.

"Maya," he breathed. "Are you ready for my bite? Are you ready to be mine forever?"

She nodded, her eyes dark with desire. "Yes. Please, Kieran. I'm ready."

With a growl of possession, he thrust into her with even more force, driving her over the edge into an earth-shattering orgasm. Her body convulsed beneath him, her inner walls clenching around him as she cried out his name. The sensation tore through him. With one final, deep thrust, his powerful release ripped through him, and he spilled his seed into her as he sank his teeth into her neck, fully claiming her as his mate.

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A surge of energy coursed through them both as their bond solidified, the ancient magic of the mating ritual binding them together in a way that was as much spiritual as it was physical. Kieran licked the blood from her throat, sealing the wound and their bond permanently.

He collapsed beside her, pulling her into his arms as they both caught their breath. The clearing around them seemed to hum with energy, the earth itself responding to the completion of their mating.

Kieran pressed a kiss to her temple, his voice soft but filled with awe. "You're mine, Maya. And I'm yours. Forever."

She turned to face him, her green eyes shining with tears. "Forever," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the rustle of the trees.

He held her close, his wolf and his heart at peace for the first time in his life.

Suddenly, the air around them seemed to thicken and shimmer, an electric energy pulsing outward from where their bodies connected. Kieran felt it first as a warmth spreading through his limbs, then as something more primal—an ancient recognition awakening in his blood.

"Do you feel that?" Maya whispered, her body tensing.

The ground beneath them trembled slightly, not with threat but with recognition. The moonlight, already bright in the clearing, intensified dramatically, bathing them in silver so pure it made their skin luminous.



"What the hell?" Kieran sat up, pulling Maya with him, his arm still wrapped protectively around her waist.

The energy coursed from them in concentric waves, rippling outward through the Silvercrest territory. Kieran could sense it reaching the borders of their land, washing over sleeping pack members, injured wolves, even the scorched earth from recent battles. Wherever it touched, something healed.

"It's you," he breathed, staring at Maya with newfound awe. "Your hybrid nature. The prophecy wasn't just about uniting our kinds—it was about healing the land itself."

The moon above them pulsed with an unearthly brilliance, as if acknowledging their union. Kieran had never seen it so bright and so alive with purpose.

"Science doesn't explain this," Maya whispered, her scientific certainty faltering as she watched the celestial display.

Kieran gripped her chin, turning her face to him. "Sometimes the oldest magic defies modern explanation." His eyes burned with raw intensity. "You are the bridge indeed, Maya. The first human hybrid mating in centuries. You've awakened something dormant in our world."

The energy continued to spiral outward, and Kieran could feel through his connection to the territory—a connection all Alpha bloodlines possessed—the land responding. Dead areas greened, wounds closed, and springs that had run dry for decades bubbled forth once more.

"My grandmother told me never to go into the deep woods. But I didn't listen." Maya said softly, her eyes wide with understanding. "She knew, didn't she? About what I was?"

"And what we would become together." Kieran kissed her with fierce possession, growling against her mouth as the moon bathed them in its blessing. "The beginning of everything."

## TWENTY-FIVE

### MAYA

Maya's fingers trembled as she tugged her black leggings back over her hips. The earth beneath her was still vibrating with a subtle pulse—like the land itself was breathing again after centuries of suffocation.

"Do you still feel that?" she whispered, balancing on one foot to slide the other through the legging. "It's like the whole forest is singing."

Kieran, already pulling his tight black t-shirt over his sculpted torso, paused mid-motion. "Not singing. Healing." His eyes flashed silver in the moonlight. "Whatever just happened between us—it's spreading."

Maya couldn't help but touch the fresh bite mark on her neck, still tender and warm. A scientist to her core, she wanted to analyze this phenomenon, to understand how their mating could trigger geological and botanical responses. But the wolf in her—that newly awakened part—simply accepted the truth with primal certainty.

"Your father isn't going to like this," she murmured, pulling on the oversized white t-shirt that hung to mid-thigh. "A humanhybrid triggering magical forest events isn't exactly in the traditional shifter handbook."

Kieran laughed, the sound rich and deep in the night air. "Nothing about us has ever been in any handbook." He moved behind her, wrapping his powerful arms around her waist and nuzzling the mark he'd left. "And I couldn't care less what my father

thinks right now."

Walking barefoot back to the safe house, Maya marveled at how different the forest felt under her feet. Every step connected her more deeply to the earth—she could sense water running beneath the soil and feel the ancient roots stretching beneath them. Her newly heightened senses registered everything from the smallest mouse scurrying underbrush to an owl's silent wings passing overhead.

"This is so incredible," she breathed. "I feel connected to everything."

"That's the mate bond being completed and fully solidified," Kieran squeezed her hand. "But heightened by whatever your hybrid nature awakened."

As they approached the safe house, Maya could hear agitated voices before they even reached the clearing. Kieran tensed beside her, instantly alert.

Inside, Malcolm was pacing frantically, his usual diplomatic composure shattered. The moment they entered, he whirled toward them.

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"Where the hell have you been?" His eyes dropped to Maya's neck, widened briefly, then returned to his brother's face. "Never mind. I know exactly what you've been doing."

"What's happened?" Kieran's voice shifted instantly to command mode, making several young rebels straighten instinctively.

"Father is gone," Malcolm said, his voice tight. "Vanished during dinner at High Elder Thorne's home. No warning, no trace."

Maya felt her breath catch. Her scientific mind instantly calculated the timing—exactly when Kieran's teeth had pierced her skin, when their mate bond had sealed permanently.

"When?" Kieran demanded, his hand tightening protectively around Maya's.

"About an hour ago," Malcolm replied.

Lena stepped forward, her violet eyes fixed on Maya's neck. "The same time your mating completed," she whispered. "That can't be coincidence."

Maya felt everyone's eyes shift to her, their gazes a mixture of awe and suspicion. The knot of anxiety that had begun forming in her stomach tightened. Was their union somehow responsible for the Alpha's disappearance?

"The human hunter operatives," Kieran muttered, pulling Malcolm and Maya aside. "Father's secret allies. Could they have turned on him?"

Malcolm frowned. "Or someone from the rebellion faction that discovered his betrayal?"

"Or enemies we know nothing about," Maya added, keeping her voice low. "Your father seems to have been playing a much deeper game than either of you suspected."

Kieran's jaw clenched, the scar on his temple whitening. "I'll need to call an emergency meeting with the High Council soon, but not yet." His silver-blue eyes darkened. "First we need information—real information, not political posturing."

Maya pressed closer to him, suddenly aware of how their joining had irrevocably altered not just their bodies and the land, but potentially the entire power structure of the shifter world.

"What happens now?" she asked, feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable.

Kieran's arm wrapped around her, pulling her against his side in a gesture both protective and possessive. "Now," he rumbled, his voice pitched low, "we find my father—and discover exactly what our mating has unleashed."

Maya squinted at the red-gold sunlight filtering through ancient pines as their small convoy approached Moon Hollow. Her body ached from the all-night search, her muscles protesting after hours of trekking through unfamiliar terrain. Despite Kieran teaching her tracking techniques—harnessing her newly awakened shifter senses to detect scents and subtle trail signs—they'd found nothing of Alpha Alaric Silvercrest.

He had simply vanished without a trace.

"Any news?" she whispered to Kieran as the imposing stone structure that housed the High Council came into view.

He shook his head, his jaw tight with tension. "No. Nothing from the eastern scouts either."

The mate mark on her neck throbbed in response to his distress, their bond transmitting emotions like electrical currents between them. She reached for his hand, squeezing it gently. His fingers laced through hers instantly, a gesture that still surprised her—how naturally their bodies sought connection.

"How are you holding up?" Malcolm asked, falling into step beside them. Dark shadows circled his eyes, his usual diplomatic polish dulled by exhaustion.

"I'm fine," Maya answered automatically, then corrected herself. "Actually, I'm terrified. I've gone from wildlife biologist to wolf shifter to potential Alpha's mate in... what, one week? And now we're walking into a meeting with the most powerful wolf shifters in the territory who probably think I'm responsible for all this, especially after I escaped from that medical facility."

Kieran's arm snaked possessively around her waist. "They can think whatever they want. You're mine now. You're protected."

The primal claim in his voice sent a shiver through her that had nothing to do with fear.

Damon appeared from the tree line ahead, his expression grim. "Council's assembled. All seven elders."

"That was fast," Malcolm murmured.

"Too fast," Kieran agreed, his eyes narrowing. "Someone wanted this meeting to happen immediately."

Inside the council chamber, seven austere figures sat in a semi-circle on elevated stone chairs. Maya tried not to fidget as their penetrating gazes swept over her, lingering on the fresh mate mark.

"Former Silvercrest heir," the central elder addressed Kieran, "you've called this emergency session during a time of unprecedented crisis."

"As you know, my father is missing," Kieran stated, his voice resonating with authority that made the hairs on Maya's arms stand up. His silver-blue eyes flashed as he surveyed the room. "As his next viable successor, I request temporary appointment as Alpha of the Silvercrest pack until he's found."

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Maya felt a rush of pride watching him. Where was the conflicted man who'd captured her in the woods just a week ago? In his place stood a leader—commanding and resolute.

"You were banished by your father," another elder countered. "For treason."

"For love," Kieran corrected, his hand finding Maya's. "And for challenging outdated beliefs that will destroy us. The very beliefs that led to whatever has befallen my father."

"Bold accusation," a female elder with silver-streaked hair remarked. "What evidence connects your father's disappearance to his policies?"

"The timing," Lena stepped forward, her violet eyes unflinching despite addressing the Council uninvited. "Alpha Alaric vanished precisely when Kieran and Maya's mate bond completed. That's not coincidence."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the chamber.

"We've confirmed through multiple witnesses that none of the Silvercrest siblings could have been involved," Damon added, his voice cool and precise. "They were miles away when it happened."

The Council exchanged meaningful glances before the center elder nodded.

"Very well. Given these extraordinary circumstances, we hereby appoint Kieran Silvercrest as Acting Alpha until Alaric Silvercrest is found or confirmed deceased.



The banishment is thereby lifted."

Maya felt a wave of relief and terror simultaneously wash over her. Their lives had just changed irrevocably—again.

"Your official coronation will occur tomorrow at dusk," the elder continued. "Until then, gather your lieutenants and secure your territory. These are uncertain times."

As they exited the chamber, Kieran pulled Maya against him, his mouth claiming hers in a kiss that left her breathless.

"My Alpha," she whispered against his lips, half-joking, half in awe.

"Acting Alpha," Kieran mused as they walked toward the waiting vehicles. "Not exactly how I pictured taking on the role."

"Nothing about us has followed the expected path," Maya reminded him, her fingers brushing the mark on her neck. "Why start now?"

At dusk the next day, Maya's heart hammered as she stood beside Kieran at the ceremonial stone dais. The ancient circular clearing was packed with hundreds of Silvercrest wolf shifters, their expressions ranging from open curiosity to barely concealed hostility. Torches blazed around the perimeter, casting flickering shadows across the faces of the seven High Council elders who stood in a solemn arc behind them.

Kieran looked every inch the Alpha in his formal black attire, the silver embroidery catching the firelight as he squared his broad shoulders. His voice carried effortlessly across the clearing as he completed his acceptance speech.

"I stand before you not as a replacement for my father, but as a guardian of his legacy

until his return. The Silvercrest pack has always been strongest when unified. That unity is what I pledge to restore."

His bright eyes blazed with fierce intensity as he surveyed the crowd, his expression both commanding and challenging. Maya felt a shiver run through her when those eyes found hers. Even now, the mate bond between them pulsed with raw energy.

"And now," Kieran's deep voice resonated, "I invite my mate, Dr. Maya Collins, to address you."

Maya's mouth went dry. Drawing a steadying breath, she stepped forward. The ceremonial dress Lena had provided—emerald silk that complemented her red hair and made her green eyes seem to glow—rustled softly against her skin.

"My journey to this moment began with scientific curiosity," she began, her voice finding unexpected strength. "I came seeking to understand wolves—not knowing I would find my own wolf within."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Maya sensed both resistance and fascination.

"The disappearance of Alpha Alaric Silvercrest has left a wound in this community," she continued, her chin lifting. "But wounds can either fester or heal. The choice is ours."

She felt Kieran's pride radiating through their bond, along with a heat that made her skin flush.

"Division weakened us. Unity will strengthen us." Maya swept her gaze across the gathering, finding Malcolm's encouraging nod and Lena's subtle smile. "What good is tradition if it doesn't evolve to protect the pack? What good is change if it destroys what makes us who we are?"

The crowd had fallen completely silent, every eye fixed on her. For the first time since discovering her wolf shifter heritage, Maya felt her dual nature as an advantage rather than a conflict.

"I stand before you as living proof that worlds can merge—that science and magic, human and wolf, tradition and evolution can coexist. Not as enemies, but as partners." Her voice gained passion as she continued. "This is our opportunity to heal ancient rifts, to become something stronger than separate factions."

A few hesitant nods appeared among the traditionalists. One elderly woman near the front wiped a tear.

"I don't pretend to know all your traditions or history," Maya acknowledged, her hand unconsciously finding the mate mark on her neck. "But I know what I've seen since coming here—courage, loyalty, and love worth fighting for. Those values transcend any divide."

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She felt Kieran's hand at the small of her back, strong and steady.

"Alpha Alaric is missing because our pack was fractured. Let us honor him by becoming whole again—by showing that Silvercrest wolves can adapt without losing their soul." Her voice cracked with emotion. "I pledge myself to this pack, to this new path forward—where we are stronger together than we ever were apart."

The silence that followed seemed to stretch into eternity. Then, from the back, a single pair of hands began clapping. Another joined, then another. Like a wave, the applause built until it thundered through the clearing, echoing off the ancient stones.

Kieran pulled her against him, his lips brushing her ear. "You're simply magnificent," he growled, his voice rough with pride and desire. "They'd follow you into fire."

Maya leaned into the solid warmth of his chest, hardly believing the response. "I was terrified," she whispered back.

"I could tell," he murmured. "But they couldn't."

The days that followed the ceremony blurred into a whirlwind of meetings and negotiations. Maya watched in amazement as former enemies began tentative collaborations—traditionalists offering their knowledge of pack history while younger rebels contributed fresh perspectives.

"I never thought I'd see Elder Callum sitting at a table with rebellion sympathizers," Malcolm remarked one evening, pouring wine for their small inner circle gathered in Kieran's—now their—quarters.

"This time of emergency creates strange allies," Damon observed, his green eyes missing nothing.

"It's not just this time of emergency," Lena corrected, nodding toward Maya. "Some people just naturally build bridges."

Maya blushed under the attention, but Kieran's arm tightened possessively around her. "My mate," he said with unmistakable pride, "the diplomat who captures hearts by simply being herself."

"Who would have thought," Maya mused, leaning into his warmth, "that a human hybrid with a PhD would end up being the glue for a wolf pack in crisis?"

"I did," Kieran answered, his eyes darkening as he pulled her closer. "The moment I first caught your scent."

The coalition forming around them remained fragile—a delicate balance of old guard traditionalists cautiously embracing moderate change while rebels agreed to work within the system, at least temporarily. But for the first time since Alaric's disappearance, there was a current of hope flowing through the Silvercrest territory.

Maya knew the road ahead would be challenging. Alaric remained missing, the rebellion still simmered in other territories, and the full implications of her hybrid nature were yet to be understood. But with Kieran at her side, his strength matching her intellect, she felt ready to face whatever came next.

Together, they were building something new—a bridge between worlds that had been separate for too long.

TWENTY-SIX

## MAYA

Maya stood at the edge of the clearing where, three months ago, she had become forever bonded to Kieran under a bright moon. Today, the late afternoon sun filtered through autumn leaves, casting dappled golden light across her simple white dress. Wild roses and mountain asters woven through her copper hair caught the breeze as she took in the circle of friends gathered to witness this more human celebration of their union.

"Nervous?" Lena whispered, adjusting the small bouquet in Maya's hands.

"Oddly, no." Maya's fingers traced the mate mark at her neck, now a silvery scar that tingled whenever Kieran was near. "I faced down crazed scientists, wolf shifter guards, and human hunters. This should be easy."

But her heart raced anyway as she spotted Kieran waiting by the natural stone altar, looking devastatingly attractive in a charcoal suit that emphasized the breadth of his shoulders. His silver-blue eyes locked onto her green ones across the clearing, their piercing intensity making her breath catch. Through their strong mate bond, she felt a wave of possession and pride that made her knees weak.

"He still looks at you like he might devour you at any moment," Malcolm commented, appearing at her side to walk her down the improvised aisle. "It's both sweet and slightly disturbing to witness as his brother."

Maya laughed, threading her arm through his. "Says the wolf who spent last week's full moon howling at Damon's cousin."

Malcolm's ears reddened. "Touché, sister of mine."

As they walked forward, Maya marveled at how drastically her life had transformed.

Three months ago, she'd been a solitary researcher tracking what she thought were unusual natural wolves. Now she was a wolf herself, mate to an Alpha, and at the center of the most significant social evolution in wolf shifter history.

Elder Callum stood beside Kieran, his weathered face softened with unexpected approval. The patriarch had become their strongest ally in navigating pack politics, though Maya suspected it was less about progressive ideals and more about his deep-rooted belief in the prophecy.

"You look stunning," Kieran murmured when she reached him, his hand sliding possessively around her waist. The naked hunger in his eyes made her wolf stir just beneath her skin.

Elder Callum cleared his throat. "We gather today to honor the human tradition of marriage between Kieran Silvercrest, Acting Alpha of Silvercrest Territory, and Dr. Maya Collins, his fated mate and partner in leadership."

Maya listened to the elder's words about bridges between worlds, and about honoring both her human heritage and their shared wolf nature. As Kieran recited vows that blended traditional wolf shifter promises with human sentiments, she found herself reflecting on how completely her scientific worldview had expanded.

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Her wolf—once dormant and now as much a part of her as her analytical mind—purred with contentment. The transformation came easily now, as natural as drawing breath. Sometimes at dawn, she and Kieran would race through the forest in their wolf forms, her reddish coat flashing beside his midnight black one.

"When you captured me in those woods," Maya said during her vows, feeling the ripple of amused recognition from their small audience, "I thought you were the most dangerously beautiful man I'd ever seen. I was right about the dangerous part."

"And the beautiful part?" he challenged, one dark eyebrow raised.

Maya felt her cheeks flush. "Still under scientific observation. I'll need several more decades of close study."

She watched his pupils dilate at her promise of forever.

As Elder Callum pronounced them married in the human tradition, Kieran's hand tightened on hers, his thumb brushing across her knuckles in a gesture both tender and possessive.

"Mine," he growled against her lips before kissing her with such thoroughness that Malcolm let out a low whistle.

"Save something for later," Damon muttered, his stoic face cracking with a rare smile.

When they broke apart, Maya felt dizzy with happiness. "I never expected any of this



when I set up those motion-activated cameras," she said, leaning into Kieran's solid warmth.

"Best scientific discovery of your career." His eyes gleamed with mischief and heat. "Though I think we have many more discoveries ahead, Dr. Silvercrest."

The new name sent a thrill through her. Dr. Maya Silvercrest—wolf shifter, bridge-builder, mate to an Alpha, and still, at her core, a woman of science seeking truth.

"Speaking of discoveries," Lena said cryptically as she embraced Maya after the ceremony, "we should talk about the second part of the prophecy soon."

Maya pulled back. "What second part?"

Lena's violet eyes sparkled mysteriously. "Later. Today is for celebration, not prophecies."

The following morning, Maya sat at the kitchen table in their cabin, nursing a steaming mug of coffee when her phone buzzed. The screen displayed Lena's name, and Maya's stomach fluttered with anticipation. Just yesterday, Maya had become Mrs. Silvercrest in a ceremony that still felt like a beautiful dream. But Lena's cryptic words about "the second part of the prophecy" had lodged in her mind like a splinter.

"Lena?" Maya answered. "Tell me about this second?—"

"Portland. There's another hybrid." Lena's words came through breathless and urgent. "She's transitioning violently—uncontrolled shifts, blackouts, and attacking neighbors. Local police are calling it a mental health crisis, but we need to extract her before they realize what she really is."

Kieran appeared in the doorway, gloriously shirtless, his muscled torso gleaming in

the morning light. His eyes narrowed at Maya's expression.

"Another hybrid?" he asked, their bond allowing him to sense the tenor of her thoughts.

Maya nodded, sliding off the chair to pace. "Just like me. Someone else with dormant wolf shifter genes." Her fingertips traced her mate mark absently. "Three months ago, I was setting up cameras to study wolves, completely unaware that I'd be studying myself. Now I'm married to an Alpha wolf and navigating a dual identity."

Kieran crossed the room in three swift strides, pressing his body against hers from behind, his heat enveloping her like a living blanket. "And doing a damn good job of it."

"This human hybrid needs our help." Maya turned in his arms. "She's experiencing what I did, but without anyone to guide her through it."

Kieran's jaw tightened, his protective instincts flaring. "I'll send Logan. He's discreet and efficient."

Maya arched an eyebrow. "Logan? The one who glares at me whenever I use scientific terminology?"

"He's cold and precise, and won't hesitate if trouble arises." Kieran's voice dropped to a growl that vibrated through her bones. "Those scientists who experimented on you are still trying to figure out hybrid DNA for some reason, and this woman is vulnerable."

Maya's fingers spread across Kieran's chest, feeling his heart pound beneath her palm. "We need to protect her—not just from exposure, but from herself. I remember that terrifying confusion, the feeling that your body is betraying you while your mind

expands."

Kieran captured her mouth in a searing kiss. "This is why we need you, Dr. Silvercrest. Your perspective bridges both worlds." His thumb traced her lower lip. "My father never understood that strength could come from change, and from blending."

Maya's wolf stirred beneath her skin, responding to the intensity of his gaze. "These hybrids are the future—the literal embodiment of what harmony between our worlds could look like." She pressed closer to him, savoring his scent. "But not everyone will welcome us."

"Then we'll change their minds," Kieran said with Alpha certainty, his hands possessively settling on her hips. "One hybrid at a time."

Maya leaned into his touch, savoring the heat of his palms through her thin cotton pajamas. Her wolf stirred, responding to his nearness as it always did. But behind that instinctual reaction, her analytical mind was racing, evaluating the threats that surrounded them from all sides.

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"You're thinking too loud," Kieran murmured, his full lips brushing against her temple. "I can practically hear the gears turning."

Maya tilted her head back, meeting his gaze. "Someone has to think while you're busy being all growly and Alpha-like." Her fingers traced the long scar on his jaw, a habit she'd developed in their months together.

"Three different groups have claimed responsibility for my father's disappearance," Kieran said, his jaw tightening beneath her touch. "The Council's refusal to investigate is suspicious at best."

"And treasonous at worst," Maya finished for him. She moved toward the maps spread across their coffee table, red pins marking locations of alleged sightings. "The Council might be behind it themselves. Your father represented the old guard, but you—" she turned to face him, "you're something new. Something they can't predict or control."

Kieran stalked toward her, his movements fluid and predatory in a way that still made her pulse quicken. "I never wanted leadership this way. My father and I didn't agree on much, but he's still?—"

"Family," Maya completed softly. "I know. Despite everything he did to us."

"If he could see you now," Kieran said, tucking her copper hair behind her ear, "he might change his mind about you. About us."

Maya wasn't so sure, but she kept that doubt to herself. The complicated emotions

Kieran harbored for his missing father—anger, disappointment, and lingering respect—were his to navigate.

Through their powerful mate bond, she felt the conflicting waves of his emotions. Frustration at the Council's indifference, determination to find his father, and a deeper current of protectiveness that was always present when it came to her.

"The rebellion is getting bolder these days," she said, changing the subject. Her fingers traced the eastern border of their territory where recent clashes had occurred. "With your father gone, they see an opportunity. And with us openly advocating for moderate reforms?—"

"We're caught between traditionalists who think we're too radical and revolutionaries who think we're not radical enough," Kieran concluded.

Maya gave a small nod, her thoughts turning back to the human hybrid in Portland. "She doesn't know what she is yet. But there's people who do. And they're coming for her." She swallowed hard, memories of her own captivity and experimentation rising unbidden. "We can't let them get to her first."

Kieran caught her chin between his fingers, tilting her face up to his. "We won't." The fierce certainty in his tone washed through her like a wave. "I'm dispatching Logan today."

Her wolf preened at his efficiency. Her human side worried about the logistics.

"What if she doesn't want to come?" Maya asked. "I didn't exactly welcome being kidnapped by a sexy, brooding Alpha, if you recall."

Kieran's lips curled into a dangerous smile. "Sexy?"

She rolled her eyes, though heat bloomed in her cheeks. "That's what you took from

that?"

"Absolutely." He pulled her flush against his body. "I seem to remember you came around to the idea eventually."

His mouth descended on hers, stealing her clever retort with a kiss that sent fire racing through her veins.

When they broke apart, Maya rested her forehead against his chest, listening to the strong, steady rhythm of his heart. "I still believe we can change things—create a world where humans and wolf shifters exist together openly. Where hybrids aren't threats but bridges."

"If anyone can do it, it's you." His voice held that particular note of fierce pride that always made her inner wolf preen. "My brilliant, stubborn, rebellious mate."