



Falling for My Shifter Boss (Wild & Forbidden Mates #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I took this job to get ahead—falling for my boss was never part of the plan.

Working for Adrian Blackwell was supposed to be simple.

Answer his emails. Manage his calendar. Ignore his grumpy attitude.

But nothing about Adrian is simple.

He's brilliant, intense, and dangerous—he's a lone wolf.

I should be worried, but all I can think about is the way he looks at me, like I'm his.

Now, I'm caught between the world I've always known and the world Adrian belongs to.

One wrong move could cost us everything.

One right move could ignite a bond neither of us can deny.

In a world of secrets and hunters, can we trust each other enough to take the risk?

This is a Steamy, Wolf-Shifter Romance. No Cliffhangers. This is the seventh in the Wild Forbidden Mates series, but it can also be read as a standalone. If you love shifter romances with steamy sex scenes and a sweet love story, then you'll love this book.

Total Pages (Source): 15

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Adrian

The scent of freshly brewed coffee and sugar-dusted pastries drifts through Whispering Pine's only decent café. I pause at the entrance, scanning the interior with the practiced wariness that's kept me alive all these years. Early morning light spills through the windows, casting long shadows across empty tables. Perfect. No pack politics or forced pleasantries before my first cup of coffee.

Then I sense her.

My wolf stirs beneath my skin, alert and focused before my mind can process why. It's not danger—I know that particular strain of tension intimately. This is... different. A presence that commands attention, desperately unwanted but impossible to ignore.

When I see her, everything shifts.

She's small but moves with a fluid grace that speaks of hidden strength, maneuvering between tables with two oversized coffee cups and a paper bag that smells of cinnamon and butter. Dark curls tumble past her shoulders, catching the morning light. Wolf-shifter—the scent is unmistakable, pine and lavender wound together with something wilder underneath. But she's not from either of the local packs. I'd remember her.

My body moves before I can stop it, muscles tensing as one of the cups wobbles. Her golden-brown eyes flick to mine, catching the movement. A slow, knowing grin spreads across features that are all sharp angles and quiet defiance.

"Relax, big guy. I've got this."

The casual familiarity in her tone catches me off guard. Most wolves recognize what I am—feel the predator lurking beneath the tailored suit and careful control. They lower their eyes, bare their throats, follow the ancient rules that keep our kinds from tearing each other apart.

She does none of that.

Instead, she meets my gaze directly, amusement dancing in eyes that seem to glow with internal fire. My wolf rumbles, unsettled by her lack of deference and... something else. Something I refuse to examine.

When she reaches the door, she glances back over her shoulder. Sunlight catches her profile, highlighting the curve of her jaw, the slight upturn of her lips. "You know, holding the door open for someone wouldn't kill you, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Overgrown."

The words hit like a physical thing—sharp, teasing, and entirely too familiar. Before I can stop myself, I move forward, reaching past her to pull the door open. She pauses, and for a moment, I catch her scent fully—earth and sky and female wolf, wrapped in that maddening hint of lavender. Her eyes narrow slightly, like she wasn't expecting compliance, then that damned smirk returns.

"Hey, thanks. See? Being a gentleman isn't so hard." Her voice drops lower, almost conspiratorial. "Even for a grumpy wolf."

Then she's gone, disappearing into the cold morning air with her precarious cargo, leaving nothing but the ghost of her scent and an unsettling warmth in my chest that I immediately try to freeze out.

I close my hand into a fist, focusing on the bite of nails against palm. A distraction. Nothing more. I have a company to run, a community to protect, and hunters circling our borders. I don't have time for golden eyes and defiant smirks.

Squaring my shoulders, I place my usual order, adding Eli's disgustingly sweet concoction to the list. My second-in-command's addiction to sugar-laden coffee is almost as irritating as unexpected wolf-shifters who don't know their place.

Almost.

Minutes later, with two drinks in hand, I push thoughts of her firmly aside. I have meetings to attend, security protocols to review, and a gala to organize. I don't need complications.

But as I stride toward Blackwell Corporation's gleaming headquarters, her scent lingers, refusing to let me forget.

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Eli is waiting when I step inside my office. He's perched on the edge of my desk, arms crossed, looking entirely too amused for this early in the morning. Behind him, through floor-to-ceiling windows, Whispering Pines spreads out like a promise—all misty mountains and ancient forest. My latest project. My chance to build something that matters.

"Let me guess—black coffee, no sugar, no joy," he says as he reaches for the cup in my hand. I let him take his overpriced caramel abomination instead.

"You act like I drink motor oil."

"That's what it tastes like." He takes an obnoxiously slow sip, dragging out the

inevitable commentary. "You know, normal people actually enjoy their beverages."

"Normal people aren't trying to build supernatural safe havens while juggling two territorial wolf packs."

My tone carries an edge, but Eli just grins. He's been by my side since the beginning, since the night I swore I'd never let another family suffer what mine did. Together, we've turned Blackwell Corporation from a dream into something real—a force capable of protecting our kind in a world that grows more hostile by the day.

"Speaking of our local wolves," he says, "anything new?"

I move to my desk, scanning the reports laid out in precise lines. "The land deal is moving forward, though Sawyer's still smoothing over resistance from the local council. The gala should help push things in the right direction. Whispering Pines and Howling Pines haven't fully committed to backing us."

"Can you blame them?" Eli's voice softens. "They don't know us from Adam."

"They'll see soon enough. What we're building here isn't just another town." I gesture to the blueprints spread across my desk—detailed plans for wards, safe houses, escape routes disguised as hiking trails. "It's survival."

Eli tilts his head slightly, like he's debating how much trouble he wants to start. "Speaking of moving forward... your new assistant should be here this morning."

A flicker of irritation beats beneath my ribs. "I thought Lisa was coming back."

"She changed her mind. Decided to stay in the city."

I exhale through my nose, glancing at my desk. Lisa knew how I worked, understood

the stakes of what we're doing. I don't have the patience to break in someone new, not with hunters closing in on three different territories.

"And you decided this without telling me?"

Eli shrugs. "You pay me for decisions like this."

"Who is it?"

His smirk sharpens, something suspiciously smug in his expression. "Local hire. Should be here any second. Maya Ramirez. She's got experience, an energetic personality..." He pauses for effect. "You're going to hate her."

Before the name fully registers, there's a quick knock, followed immediately by the creak of the door.

Then that scent hits me again.

Lavender. Pine. Wild warmth that makes my wolf stir.

A presence shifts the air in the room. It's not magic. Not anything overt. Just... awareness. Recognition. My inner wolf snapping to attention despite years of iron control.

The woman from the café steps inside.

Maya.

She stops just inside the doorway, her golden-brown eyes locking onto mine, and for half a second, the room stills. She's small but carries herself with refreshing defiance, chin lifted, shoulders back. A cascade of dark curls refuses to be contained by her

attempt at a professional bun. Everything about her radiates life and challenge.

Her lips tilt into something dangerously close to a smirk, and amusement flickers through her gaze. "Well, this is awkward."

Eli chuckles behind me, not bothering to hide his satisfaction. "I'll leave you two to get acquainted."

For the first time in years, I have no immediate response. My wolf paces beneath my skin, caught between the urge to establish dominance and an unexpected pull to move closer, to breathe in more of that intoxicating scent.

Maya raises an eyebrow, waiting.

This is going to be a problem.

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Maya

I settle into my desk after distributing coffee to my new coworkers. It's my first day, and I'm determined to make a good impression, even if my wolf is still unsettled from that earlier encounter with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Brooding. His scent lingers in my memory, making her pace restlessly beneath my skin.

I shake my head, forcing those thoughts aside. I have a job to do, and one grumpy, magnetic presence isn't going to derail me. After six years of pulling double shifts at the diner to help Mom with the bills while my younger siblings finished school, I finally have a real shot at building something for myself. Alex and Sofia are in high school now, capable of looking after themselves, and even little Marco has outgrown needing his big sister to check for monsters under the bed. It's time—past time, really—for me to chase my own dreams instead of just surviving.

"Maya." Eli's voice breaks through my thoughts as he approaches my desk. He's the CEO's right hand man, a bigshot in the company. "Change of plans. You're being reassigned."

"Reassigned?" I raise an eyebrow, clutching my coffee closer. "To where?"

His grin widens, and I already know I'm not going to like what comes next. "Adrian Blackwell's office. You're his new personal assistant."

The coffee nearly slips from my grip. "I'm his what now?"

"Lisa decided to stay in the city." Eli's eyes sparkle with barely contained amusement.

"And you, my friend, just got promoted. Adrian needs someone who understands the local community, especially with the gala coming up."

My wolf stirs again, more insistent this time. "Does he know about this?"

"He does now." Eli gestures toward the elevator. "Better not keep him waiting. He's not exactly known for his patience."

The elevator ride gives me just enough time to steady my nerves and smooth my expression into something professional. I can do this. I've dealt with demanding alphas my whole life—Theo isn't exactly a ray of sunshine himself. Besides, this is my chance to prove I'm more than just another pack wolf.

When I knock on Adrian's office door, my heart betrays me again, skipping several beats as his deep voice commands, "Enter."

He's standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows when I walk in, his broad shoulders tensed beneath his perfectly tailored suit. The office itself is exactly what I'd expect—minimalist, everything in its place, not a paper out of order on the imposing desk that dominates the room. It's a space designed to intimidate, to remind visitors who holds the power here.

When he turns, those storm-gray eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, the world narrows to just us. Recognition hits me like a punch to the gut—he's the same wolf who'd brushed past me at the coffee shop this morning, leaving behind a scent of sandalwood and winter storms.

And something else. Something that makes my inner wolf howl in recognition.

Mate.

The realization hits like a punch to the gut, and I instantly slam mental walls around it. No. Absolutely not. I refuse to even consider the possibility. But my wolf knows, and from the way Adrian's nostrils flare slightly, the sudden tension in his jaw, I suspect he knows too.

"Mr. Blackwell." I keep my voice steady, professional, grateful for years of practice hiding my emotions from pack politics. "Eli mentioned you need an assistant?"

His jaw tightens further. "Apparently so." He moves to his desk, every movement calculated and controlled, though I notice his fingers curl into his palm when he reaches for a tablet. "The gala is in three weeks. It's crucial for securing local support for our community development project. I need someone who can handle the logistics while maintaining discretion about certain... sensitive matters."

"You mean the hunters." I meet his gaze without flinching, refusing to dance around the subject.

His eyes narrow at my directness. "Among other things." There's a warning in his tone that my wolf bristles at. I'm not one of his employees he can intimidate into submission.

"I can handle it." I straighten my spine, chin lifting slightly. "I know this community, and I know how to be discrete. The question is, can you handle working with someone who won't just bow to your every command?"

Something flickers in his eyes—surprise, maybe even appreciation, before it's quickly masked. "We'll see." He slides the tablet across the desk. "These are the preliminary plans. Review them before the meeting at ten."

I reach for the tablet, and our fingers brush for the briefest moment. The contact sends electricity racing up my arm, and I notice his sharp intake of breath, the way his

fingers curl into a fist the moment they leave the tablet. My wolf howls louder, demanding I acknowledge what we both know to be true.

I turn and walk toward the door, fighting every instinct that wants me to stay, to circle back, to figure out what this pull between us means. But I've spent years building my independence, my identity outside of pack expectations. I won't let biology—or destiny, or whatever this is—decide my fate.

"Maya." His voice stops me at the door, rough around the edges in a way that makes my skin prickle. "Don't be late to the meeting."

I glance back over my shoulder, catching the intensity in his gaze before he masks it. "Wouldn't dream of it, boss."

As I walk away, I can feel his eyes on me, and the weight of everything we're both pretending not to know settles heavy between my shoulder blades. This job just got a lot more complicated.

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The scent hits me before I even enter the conference room. Adrian's presence saturates the space so thoroughly that my wolf stirs beneath my skin, equal parts wary and intrigued. I take a steadying breath, adjusting my blazer before stepping inside.

The sleek corporate setting feels at odds with the primal energy emanating from its occupants. Around the polished mahogany table sit Eli, Adrian's right-hand man, looking deceptively relaxed in his chair; Sawyer, the bear-shifter head of security, whose steady gaze misses nothing; and several other executives whose subtle shifts in posture acknowledge my entrance without breaking their focus on their alpha.

Adrian stands at the head of the table, commanding attention without effort. His

tailored suit does little to hide the predator beneath, and when his steel-gray eyes meet mine, my pulse quickens traitorously.

Now that we're all here, let's get started," he begins, his deep voice filling the room. "Today's topic is the gala. It should demonstrate our commitment to the supernatural community. We need the local packs' support to move forward with the sanctuary project."

I sit up a little straighter, surprised by the weight of his words. A sanctuary. I hadn't realized this was the true vision behind Blackwell Corporation—not just business expansion, not just another detached corporate move, but a real effort to create safe havens for supernaturals. Places where families wouldn't have to live in fear of hunters, where we could build something lasting. Something protected.

A thrill runs through me at the thought of being part of something that could change lives. The company I'd initially written off as cold and impersonal is doing something meaningful, something desperately needed. For the first time since I started working here, I feel a sense of purpose.

But as Adrian continues, detailing projected costs, security measures, and implementation timelines, my excitement dims. Everything is numbers, strategies, and risk analysis. He speaks with precision, his focus strictly on logistics, on data. My wolf stirs uneasily. Is that all this is to him? A well-calculated business maneuver with an acceptable margin of risk?

"The ROI on initial investments should—"

"And how exactly do you plan to get that support?" The words burst out before I can stop them, tasting like defiance on my tongue. "By treating them like business assets instead of people?"

The room goes deadly quiet. Eli's eyebrows shoot up, and I catch the ghost of a smile playing at Sawyer's lips. The temperature seems to drop as Adrian turns to me slowly, his expression carved from granite.

"Excuse me?"

My heart pounds, but I refuse to back down. The scent of his displeasure—sharp and electric like an approaching storm—fills my nostrils. "You're talking about building a sanctuary, but you're approaching it like a hostile takeover." I lean forward, fighting every instinct screaming at me to bare my throat in submission. "These aren't just numbers on a spreadsheet. They're families. Packs. People who've lived here for generations. If you want their trust, you need to show them you understand that."

His eyes flash amber for a split second—the wolf beneath the businessman's mask making itself known. The air between us crackles with tension. "And you think you know better than I do what it takes to protect our kind?"

"I think I know what it takes to earn trust." I hold his gaze, even as my wolf whines at the challenge. "And it's not PowerPoint presentations."

The tension thickens until it's almost suffocating. Every shifter in the room has gone absolutely still, caught between their instinct to defer to their alpha and their recognition of the truth in my words. Then, surprisingly, Eli chuckles.

"She's got a point, boss."

Adrian's jaw works silently, a muscle ticking in his cheek. His scent shifts subtly—anger tinged with something else, something that makes my skin tingle. "We'll discuss this later," he finally says, his tone brooking no argument. "Meeting adjourned."

As everyone files out, I feel the weight of his stare on my back. The heat of it follows me to the door, and when I glance back, there's something different in his expression—frustration, yes, but also a hint of curiosity. Maybe even respect.

"Miss Ramirez." His voice, rougher than before, stops me at the threshold. "Don't ever challenge me like that in front of others again."

I turn, offering him my sweetest smile even as my heart races. "Of course not, Mr. Blackwell." I meet his gaze one last time, surprised by the intensity I find there. "Next time, I'll wait until we're alone."

His sharp intake of breath follows me out the door, along with the spicy surge in his scent that tells me I've affected him more than he'd like to admit. I hurry down the hallway, my wolf practically preening with satisfaction despite my professional anxiety.

I've either just made the best career move of my life or the worst.

Only time will tell which—and why the thought of being alone with him again makes my pulse skip in a way that has nothing to do with fear.

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Adrian

Lucien D'Arcy sits at the farthest table in the VIP section, looking every inch the aristocratic predator he is. The leader of the D'Arcy Coven, a vampire older than most buildings in this town. The restaurant is one of the few supernatural-friendly establishments in Whispering Pines, a sleek, candlelit space offering both standard meals and more... niche options for its clientele.

He is elegance and danger wrapped together, and, as usual, he looks entirely amused to see me.

The wolf in me bristles.

I don't like dealing with vampires, but I need his cooperation. The gala requires powerful allies, and Lucien's endorsement would be a game-changer. That doesn't mean I have to enjoy groveling for it.

Beside me, Maya Ramirez walks with an easy, almost careless confidence that is entirely at odds with the tension threading through my shoulders. It's been days since Maya started working with me, and not once has she failed to draw my attention—or my attraction.

She's wearing a sleek black dress that hugs her curves just enough to make my pulse jump—striking a perfect balance between sophistication and subtle temptation. I shouldn't be noticing those details, shouldn't let my gaze drift lower, shouldn't let my thoughts wander down a path that will only lead to complications.

And yet, here we are.

The scent of pine and lavender clings to her, winding its way through my senses like a phantom touch I can't shake. My wolf stirs at the proximity, a slow, simmering awareness that tightens my jaw and coils heat low in my gut. It's instinct, I tell myself. A biological reaction. Nothing more.

I force my attention forward, locking my focus on the task at hand. Because the last thing I need right now is to be distracted by Maya Ramirez.

Lucien rises gracefully from his seat as we approach, flashing a smile that doesn't quite touch his cold, piercing gaze. "Blackwell," he greets smoothly. Then, his focus shifts to Maya, and something predatory glints in his expression. "And who is this delightful creature?"

My muscles coil instinctively. The urge to step between them, to shield Maya from Lucien's calculating gaze, surges through me with surprising force.

Mine—

No. Not mine. I shove down the intrusive thought before it can fester, but my jaw clenches anyway.

"My assistant," I state flatly. "Maya Ramirez."

If Lucien notices the growl underlying my clipped tone, he doesn't comment. He simply extends a hand, palm up, in a ridiculous show of courtly manners. "A pleasure, Miss Ramirez."

Maya doesn't hesitate—of course she doesn't. She shakes his hand with a firm grip, flashing a smile that's all polite confidence, though I catch the slight uptick in her

heartbeat. "Likewise, Mr. D'Arcy."

Lucien chuckles, clearly entertained as he gestures for us to sit. "Charming," he murmurs as he settles back into his chair. His gaze flicks between Maya and me, too knowing for comfort. "She doesn't flinch at all, does she, Blackwell? Rather... refreshing."

I don't respond, but my fingers press harder against the table's surface.

A server appears, refilling Lucien's glass with something deep, red, and unmistakably laced with blood. He swirls it lazily before taking a sip, his eyes never leaving us.

"Let's skip the posturing," I say, leaning forward, my hands clasped in front of me on the table. The sooner we finish this, the better.

"Indeed," Lucien muses. "You want my support for your little gala. More specifically, you want my endorsement. The backing of the D'Arcy Coven." He tilts his head, gaze glittering. "And why, pray tell, should I offer it?"

I grit my teeth. "The gala isn't just for show. Strengthening supernatural alliances is the only way we stand a chance against the hunters. My vision for Whispering Pines—"

"Yes, yes," Lucien sighs dramatically. "Your grand vision. " He taps a single, elegant finger against the rim of his glass. "You call yourself a lone wolf, Adrian. Yet here you are, building sanctuaries, forging alliances." His smile turns razor-sharp. "One might wonder what changed."

Maya shifts beside me, and the movement draws both our attention. Her amber eyes are fixed on Lucien, thoughtful and sharp. Before I can formulate a response, she speaks.

"Funny," she says lightly, flipping her curls over one shoulder. The motion sends another wave of her scent washing over me, and I have to force myself not to inhale deeply. "I'd imagine a vampire of your status would appreciate this kind of forward-thinking, Mr. D'Arcy."

Lucien raises an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Maya shrugs, but there's steel beneath her casual tone. "I mean, it's not like your kind are thriving in isolation, either. The days of hidden covens tucked away in dark castles are kind of over, right? Everyone needs safe places, strong partnerships." Her eyes flash. "Adrian's just building something that actually makes that happen."

Lucien watches her, a slow smirk spreading across his lips. Something dark and ancient stirs in his gaze. "You have a sharp tongue, little wolf."

Maya grins, unfazed. "So I've been told."

The air between them crackles with tension, and my wolf growls, not liking the way Lucien's studying her. But there's something else too—a grudging respect in his expression that wasn't there before.

"You make a compelling point," he admits. Then he turns his gaze back to me, and there's definitely amusement dancing in those ancient eyes now. "Fine. I'll attend your gala. And I'll bring the coven's support with me."

There's no reason for the satisfaction that surges through me when Maya beams.

But there it is.

The rest of the meeting flows smoothly enough. We arrange the necessary agreements, confirm details, and by the time we step outside into the crisp mountain air, the tension in my shoulders has eased—but only slightly. Lucien might be amused for now, but I know better than to trust his good mood entirely.

"Such a delightful meeting," Lucien purrs, his silver-gray eyes fixing on Maya. "Your assistant is truly... enchanting, Adrian. A rare find indeed." He takes Maya's hand, brushing his lips across her knuckles with old-world charm. A low growl builds in my chest before I can stop it.

A sleek black car glides to the curb, and Lucien steps toward it with fluid grace. "Until next time, my dear," he says to Maya with a smile that sets my teeth on edge. The car door closes behind him with a soft thud, and I watch it disappear around the corner, my jaw clenched.

Maya stretches beside me, rolling her shoulders. The movement draws my eye to the elegant line of her neck, and I force myself to look away. "That went well," she says, casting me a sidelong glance. "You're welcome, by the way."

I shoot her an unimpressed look. "For what?"

She smirks, and something warm curls in my chest at the sight. "For reminding D'Arcy that you're not entirely devoid of good ideas."

I exhale sharply, shaking my head. "You're insufferable."

Her laughter is bright, unguarded. It hits me like a physical thing, that sound, making my wolf stir with interest I can't afford.

Something about her pulls at me, at my wolf, in ways I can't explain. She stands there, defiant and beautiful, amber eyes flashing with that familiar spark of challenge.

The late afternoon sun catches in her dark curls, making them shine like polished mahogany. My fingers itch with the sudden, maddening urge to reach out and touch them, to see if they're as soft as they look. It's dangerous, this loss of control she inspires. More dangerous still is how much I'm starting to crave it.

"I'm just saying," she continues, clearly enjoying herself now. "Maybe loosen up once in a while, Blackwell. It won't kill you."

I should tell her to mind her business. I should remind her that I don't do casual conversation, that I don't indulge in idle chatter.

Instead, for reasons beyond my own understanding, I let my lips curl into a smirk.

Maya's amber eyes widen, like she wasn't expecting it. The surprise in her expression stirs something primal in my gut—a dangerous flutter of attraction I thought I'd buried. She's deceptively tempting, this small wolf with her sharp tongue and fearless attitude. The way she shifts her weight, clearly thrown off balance by my response, only intensifies the pull. I want to see that look again, want to be the cause of it.

And that's exactly why I need to stop this now. Wanting leads to caring, and caring... caring is what gets people killed. I've learned that lesson the hard way.

A sleek black car pulls up to the curb. The door swings open, and Eli leans against the hood, arms crossed, eyes glittering with amusement.

"I see we survived vampire negotiations. Impressive." He glances between us, an all-too-knowing smirk forming. "But you... you're in trouble, boss."

Maya huffs out a laugh. "Finally, someone says it out loud."

I scowl. "Get in the damn car."

Eli just grins, and Maya? She throws one last smirk over her shoulder before turning away. Something inside me tightens as I watch her walk off, her scent unmistakable, lingering long after she's gone.

As much as I want to deny it, Eli's right.

I'm in deep trouble.

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Maya

I hang up the phone and lean back in my chair, exhaling slowly as I update Adrian's schedule on my tablet. My fingers move automatically, but my mind keeps drifting to the man behind the closed office door. To the way his presence fills every room he enters.

My wolf stirs restlessly beneath my skin, too aware of him. Always too aware. It's been like this since I started working for him—this constant, electric awareness that makes focusing on mundane tasks feel like trying to ignore a thunderstorm.

I can hear him pacing in his office, each sharp, measured step against the polished wood floors like a steady drumbeat calling to the wolf inside me.

The intercom beeps. "Maya." His voice is deep, smooth, and entirely too commanding. My name in his mouth feels like a caress and a challenge all at once. "Come in."

I clear my throat, trying to steady myself. "On my way."

Grabbing my tablet, I head to his office. The moment I step inside, my senses are overwhelmed—his scent is stronger here, concentrated in his private space, and my wolf practically purrs. He's standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows, afternoon light streaming in around him like a halo, casting dramatic shadows across his sharp features.

He looks devastating.

His tailored charcoal-gray suit fits him perfectly, emphasizing the broad strength of his shoulders and the lean power of his frame. The crisp white dress shirt underneath is unbuttoned just enough to reveal a hint of collarbone, and I have to fight the urge to trace that small patch of exposed skin with my fingertips. My gaze flickers lower, catching the way the fabric stretches over his chest as he breathes, and I force myself to look away.

He doesn't acknowledge me right away, his focus still on whatever thoughts are weighing down those powerful shoulders. I take the moment to pull myself together, to suppress the heat curling low in my stomach. If he isn't going to acknowledge what we are—what we could be—then neither will I.

"You wanted an update on your schedule?" I ask, proud when my voice comes out steady and professional.

He finally turns, and the full force of his gray eyes locks onto mine. There's something unreadable in his gaze, something that makes my pulse skip and my wolf pace restlessly. "Yes."

I step forward, maintaining what I hope is a professional distance as I glance down at my tablet. The air between us feels charged, like the moment before lightning strikes. "You have a conference call at ten with the Kingsport investors, followed by a security briefing with Sawyer. Lunch is at one, and then the meeting with Howling Pines at three."

He nods, but instead of dismissing me, he leans back against his desk, watching me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle with awareness. My wolf wants to move closer, to press into that heat radiating from him. I hold my ground.

"I want you to take the lead on the meeting this afternoon."

I blink, caught off guard. "You...what?"

"Theo is your alpha," he says, as if that explains everything. His voice drops lower, sending a shiver down my spine. "You know how to handle him better than I do."

I swallow hard, my fingers tightening around my tablet. This is more than just a task—it's trust, responsibility, a chance to prove myself. Despite the nerves curling in my stomach, warmth blooms in my chest at his faith in me.

"I can do that," I say, keeping my voice even while my heart races.

His lips twitch, just barely, and something in his eyes softens for a fraction of a second. "Good."

I turn slightly, ready to make my exit, but before I can take a step, he moves. One moment he's by his desk, the next he's in front of me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body. Time seems to slow as his hand lifts—hesitates—before his fingers brush against my temple, pushing a stray curl back from my face.

The touch is brief, barely there, but it sends electricity coursing through my veins. My breath catches in my throat. His eyes darken, pupils dilating, and his fingers linger for just a heartbeat too long. My wolf surges forward, wanting more—wanting everything.

For a moment, I think he might say something—might do something—but then his hand drops. The mask slips back into place, his expression shuttering closed as he takes a deliberate step back. His voice turns cool again, though there's a roughness to it that wasn't there before. "Don't mess it up."

The moment shatters. I exhale sharply, forcing my lips into a smirk even as my skin still tingles from his touch. "Wouldn't dream of it, boss."

I turn and walk away, my steps measured and steady despite the chaos inside me. It's only when I'm safely back at my desk that I allow myself to press my fingers to my temple, where the ghost of his touch still burns like a brand.

My wolf whines, already missing his proximity. I push the feeling down, buried beneath schedules and meetings and professional distance.

But I can still feel his eyes on me through the wall, and I wonder how long we can keep pretending this is nothing more than business.

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I smooth my palms over my slacks, exhaling as I stand outside the conference room of Blackwell Corporation. The massive glass doors reflect my own impatient expression back at me—amber eyes a little too bright, dark curls refusing to stay properly pinned back despite my best efforts. I don't know why I'm nervous. This is just a meeting. A standard, professional, completely normal meeting.

Except it's not.

Because Theo is on the other side of that door, and Adrian Blackwell is standing beside me, his presence a wall of barely restrained tension. His scent—sandalwood and winter storms—fills my nose, making it harder to focus than I'd like to admit.

"You don't have to stare down the door, Ramirez," Adrian mutters, arms crossed over his broad chest. "It's not going to open out of fear." His voice carries that familiar mix of irritation and amusement that seems reserved just for me.

I roll my eyes and push the door open without knocking, striding in like I own the place. My wolf bristles at his tone, urging me to snap back, but I channel the energy into confidence instead.

Theo and Ethan are already seated at the long conference table, both wearing expressions that immediately set me on edge. Theo, as always, looks like he's been carved from solid rock—tall, sturdy, and exuding the kind of authority only an Alpha could. His dark eyes assess me carefully, checking for any sign that working for Blackwell has changed my loyalty to the pack.

Ethan, on the other hand, lounges back in his chair with the casual grace of someone who knows exactly how attractive they are, a lazy smirk tugging at his lips as he watches me enter.

"Well, well," Ethan drawls, tilting his head. "If it isn't Maya Ramirez, still looking like trouble."

I snort, setting my tablet down on the table with perhaps more force than necessary. "And you still look like a headache, Maloney. Good to see some things never change."

Theo doesn't smile, but there's a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes. "Maya." His voice is deep, steady—a contrast to the sharp, assessing gaze he flicks toward Adrian as the CEO steps inside behind me.

"This is Detective Ethan Maloney," Theo says, his tone measured as he gestures toward Ethan. "He's our in with the police—makes sure we stay ahead of any... complications on that front." His meaning is clear: Ethan isn't just here for pleasantries. He's a crucial link between the pack and law enforcement, ensuring that human authorities don't interfere too much in supernatural matters.

Adrian stays silent, but his presence fills the room like smoke, impossible to ignore. He doesn't need words to command attention. I feel him move to stand near me, close enough that the heat from his body sends little sparks of awareness down my spine—a distraction I don't need right now.

Theo shifts slightly in his chair, glancing between Adrian and me with an expression I can't quite read. "Let's get to it."

I pull out a chair and sit, acutely aware when Adrian takes the seat beside me. He moves with that same controlled precision he applies to everything, but I swear I can feel the weight of his presence even more now that we're this close. My wolf stirs restlessly beneath my skin, attuned to the energy in the room, but I push the sensation aside.

I take the lead, grateful for the distraction from Adrian's proximity. "We all know tensions are rising. The hunters aren't just lone extremists anymore—they're organizing. We've had incidents near the town borders, and it's only a matter of time before a real attack happens." I pause, meeting each man's gaze in turn. "The gala is an opportunity for us to strengthen alliances, raise funds, and build awareness for the supernatural-friendly community Blackwell Corp is planning. A sanctuary designed to provide protection against hunters. But that also makes it a target." I exhale slowly. "That's why we need a coordinated security effort."

Theo nods, but his expression remains unreadable. "And you think Blackwell Corp should be the one calling the shots?"

Adrian, who has been quietly listening, finally speaks. The low rumble of his voice sends an involuntary shiver through me. "I think Blackwell Corp offers something your pack doesn't—resources and an infrastructure designed to handle large-scale threats outside of pack politics." His tone is cool, impassive, but I catch the slight tension in his jaw.

Theo's shoulders straighten imperceptibly. "Pack politics are exactly why we've survived this long. We protect our own."

Adrian leans forward, clasping his hands on the table. "And yet the threat keeps

growing.”

Tension crackles in the air, thick and suffocating. I don’t miss the way Ethan glances between them, clearly entertained by the alpha posturing. My wolf paces restlessly beneath my skin, responding to the charged atmosphere.

I clear my throat. “That’s why we need cooperation. Blackwell Corp has technology and reach. Theo’s security company has experience in supernatural combat. We’re not asking you to hand over control—we want to hire your team to provide security for the gala and, potentially, as consultants for the sanctuary project.”

Theo’s dark eyes study me for a long moment before flicking toward Adrian. “You want to bring us in long-term?”

Adrian exhales through his nose. “If this partnership works, yes.”

Theo leans back in his chair, arms crossing over his broad chest. “Fine. We’ll discuss logistics.”

I feel Adrian shift beside me, his shoulder brushing mine for just a moment. The contact sends electricity racing through my veins, sharp and unexpected. I swallow hard, forcing myself to focus on the discussion—but I don’t miss the way Adrian’s fingers flex slightly against the tabletop, as if he felt it, too.

Ethan grins, leaning toward me slightly. "I gotta say, Maya, I don't remember you being this persuasive back in the day. Maybe I should've taken you out for that drink when I had the chance."

I chuckle, shaking my head. "You would've embarrassed yourself, Maloney."

"Still might," he teases, flashing a grin that would make most women swoon.

Adrian shifts beside me, his muscles visibly tensing. His expression doesn't change, but I can feel the surge of something dark and possessive in his energy. His gaze flicks to Ethan, then to me, sharp and assessing. The temperature in the room seems to drop several degrees.

Interesting.

The meeting wraps up, agreements made, and plans set into motion. As Theo and Ethan leave, Ethan gives me one last wink before stepping out the door. I pretend not to notice how Adrian's hands clench at his sides.

I barely have time to exhale before Adrian's voice cuts through the lingering silence. "My office. Now." There's something raw in his tone, something that makes my wolf sit up and take notice.

I blink, heat crawling up my neck. "Excuse me?"

He turns, already walking away, expecting me to follow. His usual rigid control seems... different. Fractured around the edges.

I glare at his back but, with a sigh, grab my tablet and trail behind him. As I follow him down the hallway, I can't help but wonder what's cracked his perfect facade—and why the thought of finding out makes my pulse race.

Adrian closes the office door behind us with a deliberate click that makes my wolf instincts prickle. The air feels charged, heavy with something I can't—or won't—name. I've barely taken two steps into his sleek, modern office when he rounds on me, his presence filling the space like a gathering storm.

"Who is he?"

I blink, caught off guard by the raw edge in his voice. "What?"

Adrian's gray eyes narrow, and for the first time, I notice the flicker of gold in them—his wolf straining against his rigid control. "Ethan Maloney." He practically growls the name. "You seemed... comfortable with him."

Something inside me stills, the weight of his words settling over me in a way I don't expect. My wolf stirs, restless, because I know the truth—Adrian is my mate. I've known it for a while now, felt it in every heated glance, in every unspoken moment of tension that crackles between us. But this? This is the first time I realize he doesn't know. Not fully. He's in denial, refusing to see what's right in front of him.

The thought is almost laughable.

A startled chuckle escapes me, and I shake my head, my curls brushing against my shoulders. "What? No." I arch a brow at him. "What kind of question is that?"

Instead of answering, Adrian steps closer. The temperature in the room seems to spike, his body heat rolling off him in waves, seeping into my skin. "He's interested in you."

His scent wraps around me, familiar and maddening all at once. He's too close, too overwhelming, and my pulse betrays me by kicking up a notch. I smirk, using attitude to mask the way my heart pounds. "And why do you care?"

His jaw tightens. "I don't."

"Liar." The word slips out before I can stop it.

Something in his expression flickers—frustration, denial, something deeper he refuses to name. I take a step forward, closing the distance between us until I have to

tilt my head back to meet his gaze. His breath hitches, barely perceptible, but I catch it. His eyes drop—to my lips, just for a fraction of a second—before snapping back up. His fists clench at his sides, as if he's fighting something he doesn't want to acknowledge.

The air between us is electric. Unstable.

And for the first time, I realize that Adrian Blackwell is losing control.

And maybe... just maybe, I want him to.

"Are you asking as my boss," I press, my voice lower, almost challenging, "or as something else?"

He goes completely still, like a predator before the strike. In one fluid motion, his hand captures the back of my neck, drawing me close. My breath catches as he lowers his head, running his nose along the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder. He inhales deeply, and the touch of his lips—soft, almost reverent—against that same spot sends electricity racing down my spine.

Then, just as suddenly, he releases me. His hand runs over his beard—a rare tell of agitation—as he puts distance between us. "We're done here."

I stand frozen, my pulse thundering in my ears, watching as he retreats behind his desk. Every line of his body screams restraint, but I catch the slight tremor in his hands before he clasps them behind his back.

I should be relieved. This is exactly what I wanted when I first started working here—professional distance, clear boundaries, no complications.

But I'm not.

Because for the first time since I walked into Blackwell Corporation, I've seen behind Adrian's mask of cold control. And what I glimpsed there—the raw need, the barely contained desire—matches something wild and wanting in my own chest.

Adrian Blackwell is losing this battle.

And as I turn to leave his office, my skin still tingling from his proximity, I realize something that should terrify me but instead makes my wolf howl in triumph: I don't want him to win.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Maya

The office is silent except for the hum of fluorescent lights overhead and the rhythmic tap of my fingers against the keyboard. Even the usual nighttime sounds of the city seem muted from up here, like the building itself is holding its breath.

I glance at the clock. Nearly nine. I should have left hours ago, but the gala preparations are a beast with far too many moving parts, and I refuse to let anything slip through the cracks. The venue contract alone took half an hour to decipher—all that fancy legal language designed to confuse rather than clarify—and I still have to double-check the security arrangements with Sawyer.

I stretch, rolling my shoulders to ease the stiffness settling in. My wolf stirs restlessly beneath my skin, eager for movement after being cooped up all day. The building is mostly empty now, the usual office chatter replaced by the occasional creak of the walls settling. I like the quiet, though. No distractions. No one breathing down my neck. Just me, my to-do list, and—

"You're still here."

The low, deliberate voice cuts through the silence like a blade. I jump, my heart lurching as I whirl around to find Adrian standing in the doorway of my workspace. His suit jacket is gone, the sleeves of his crisp white dress shirt rolled up to reveal the strong lines of his forearms. His presence fills the room instantly, commanding attention with an effortless intensity that makes my skin prickle.

"Jesus," I exhale sharply, pressing a hand to my chest. "Make some noise when you

walk, would you? Not all of us have superhuman hearing."

A flicker of something—amusement?—crosses his face. "The lights were still on."

I blink at him. "Yeah, because I'm working. That's what you hired me for, right?"

Adrian doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he steps forward, and it's only then that I notice the white takeout bag in his hand. The rich aroma of food hits my nose, making my stomach clench. Without a word, he sets the bag down on my desk.

"Eat," he says simply.

I frown. "I don't have time—"

He gives me a look. One of those calm, immovable stares that somehow manages to silence arguments before they even form. "You've been here for fourteen hours. Take a break."

I cross my arms, arching a brow. "Is this you being concerned about my well-being, Blackwell?"

He exhales, the barest hint of exasperation flickering across his face. "This is me ensuring my assistant doesn't collapse from exhaustion before the gala." His eyes meet mine, and there's something else there, something softer that makes my breath catch. "Though I suppose the two aren't mutually exclusive."

I narrow my eyes at him, but my stomach betrays me with a low, traitorous growl. Adrian raises a single brow, and I groan. "Fine," I mutter, standing. "But only because I don't want to listen to you nag."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "I don't nag. I direct."

"Right. Because that sounds so much better."

We move to the conference room, where floor-to-ceiling windows offer a stunning view of the city lights spread out below us like scattered stars. I open the takeout bag to find an assortment of high-end dishes. Definitely not from the cheap Chinese place I usually hit up when I'm working late.

"You didn't have to do this," I say as I dig in, the warm, savory flavors immediately melting away some of my tension.

Adrian, who has taken the seat across from me, leans back slightly. "I know." His eyes track my movements with an intensity that makes my skin warm. "You remind me of someone I used to know. Always putting everyone else first, forgetting to take care of yourself."

The admission catches me off guard. Adrian rarely offers personal information voluntarily.

"Who?" I ask softly.

He's quiet for so long I think he won't answer. When he does, his voice is low, careful. "My sister. She was the heart of our pack before..." He trails off, jaw tightening.

I set down my fork. "Before what?"

Adrian's eyes meet mine, and the raw pain I see there makes my chest ache. "Before the hunters found us."

The words hang heavy in the air between us. I want to reach across the table, to offer comfort, but something tells me he's not ready for that. Instead, I share a piece of

myself.

"My dad was killed by hunters when I was twelve," I say quietly. "That's why Theo's so protective of the pack now. Why we all are."

Adrian's expression shifts, something fierce and protective flashing in his eyes. His hand moves across the table, not quite touching mine but close enough that I can feel the heat of his skin.

"Is that why you work so hard?" he asks. "To protect them?"

I nod. "Partly. But also because I want more than what the pack can offer. I love them, but sometimes it feels like they're holding on too tight." I meet his gaze. "You understand that, don't you? Wanting something different?"

His fingers brush against mine, just barely, sending electricity skittering up my arm. "More than you know."

The conversation shifts as we eat. I tell him about growing up in Howling Pines, about being the eldest sibling and always feeling like I had to have everything under control. He listens with an intensity that makes me feel seen in a way I haven't experienced before.

When I flip the question back on him, Adrian hesitates, but this time he doesn't completely shut down. He tells me about his old pack, about the weight of expectations and the guilt of surviving when others didn't. Each word seems carefully chosen, measured, but I can hear the pain underneath.

"Since you're so invested in making this gala a success," I say, lightening the mood, "you should come to the next pack run. You and Eli."

Adrian gives me a measured look. "You think that's a good idea?"

I shrug, offering a small smile. "It wouldn't hurt for you to show your face outside of this office. Maybe remind people you're not just some corporate overlord trying to buy up their town."

A muscle in his jaw ticks. "That's not what I'm doing."

"I know," I say softly. "But not everyone else does. And maybe..." I hesitate, then push forward. "Maybe it's time to stop running from what happened. To let yourself be part of something again."

His eyes lock with mine, intense and searching. After a long moment, he gives a slow nod. "I'll think about it."

For Adrian Blackwell, that's practically a yes.

I get up to refill our water glasses, but the moment I stand, a sharp cramp lances through my leg. The pain hits like lightning, making me yelp as my knee buckles. The glass slips from my fingers as I pitch forward.

My wolf instincts kick in, but before I can catch myself, a powerful arm wraps around my waist.

Adrian.

He moves so fast I barely register it happening—one second I'm falling, the next I'm pressed against his chest, his heart thundering beneath my palm.

"I'm fine," I manage, trying to ignore how perfectly I fit against him. "Just a cramp, I can—"

"Stop talking." His voice is rough, almost a growl.

Before I can protest, he lifts me like I weigh nothing, carrying me into his office. My breath catches as his arms tighten, just slightly, before he sets me down on the sleek black couch.

He kneels in front of me, and something in my chest constricts at the sight of Adrian Blackwell—feared CEO, notorious control freak—on his knees.

When his hands move to my calf, I nearly jump out of my skin.

His touch is careful but firm, strong fingers pressing into the tight muscle. The warmth of his skin seeps through me, and I have to bite back a sound that would be mortifying to let escape.

I should stop this.

I should definitely stop this.

But I don't.

Instead, I watch him work, mesmerized by the way his dark brows furrow in concentration, the way his jaw clenches slightly as he focuses. His hands are surprisingly gentle for someone so powerful, each movement precise and measured.

The cramp begins to ease, but Adrian doesn't pull away. His thumbs trace slow circles that send sparks of electricity up my leg, and I forget how to breathe.

"Better?" he asks, his voice lower than usual.

I mean to say yes. I mean to thank him and get up and put some much-needed

distance between us.

Instead, I whisper, "Don't stop."

His hands still.

Slowly, so slowly it feels like time itself has frozen, Adrian lifts his gaze to mine. The storm in his eyes makes my heart stutter—there's something raw there, something dangerous and hungry that makes my wolf want to run.

Or maybe stay very, very still.

He leans in, just slightly, and I catch the slight tremor in his breathing. His hand slides up to my knee, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

"Maya." My name falls from his lips like a warning—or a prayer.

The air between us crackles with electricity, with all the things we shouldn't want but do. With all the reasons this is a terrible idea, and all the reasons I don't care.

His face is inches from mine now. I can see the flecks of silver in his eyes, the slight stubble along his jaw, the way his pulse jumps in his throat.

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Adrian

I tell myself this is a mistake.

I tell myself I should stop.

But the moment Maya's scent wraps around me—wild pine and lavender, mixed with something uniquely her—I'm lost. My wolf stirs, pressing against the cage of control I've spent years perfecting. The beast wants out. Wants her.

She's too close in my office, perched on the edge of the leather couch where we've been reviewing security reports. Or maybe I'm the one who's moved, drawn to her like a moth to flame. The air between us crackles with tension, heavy with possibility. Her amber eyes flick up to mine, sharp and questioning, her lips parting like she's about to say something smart—probably another challenge to my authority.

I don't let her.

I kiss her instead.

The moment our lips meet, years of careful restraint shatter. It starts as a tentative press, a test of boundaries, but the second she responds—soft and fierce all at once—I'm gone. My hands slide into her curls, tangling in the silk of them as I pull her closer, needing more. Maya doesn't hesitate. She matches my hunger, pressing against me with a fire that makes my blood run hot.

A low growl rumbles in my chest as my wolf surges forward, instinct flooding

through me like wildfire. Mine, the thought whispers, primal and unrelenting. The feeling is raw, consuming—possessive in a way I've never allowed myself to be. Her hands fist in my shirt, and I can feel the heat of her skin through the fabric, burning away what's left of my control.

I should stop. This isn't who I am anymore. I don't let people in. I don't take risks.

But I don't stop.

Maya's fingers dig into my shoulders as I press her back against the couch cushions, caging her between my arms. She gasps against my lips, and the sound nearly undoes me. Her heart pounds against my chest, matching the frantic rhythm of my own. When my teeth graze her bottom lip, she makes a sound somewhere between a whimper and a growl that sends electricity down my spine.

I devour her mouth, unable to stop, as my hands find the buttons on her blouse. With fumbling fingers, I undo them, my need for her overwhelming any semblance of control I have left. Pulling the cups of her bra down, I cup her breasts with my hands. She feels incredible, her softness against my palms igniting a fire within me. My cock is hard as a rock, straining against the confines of my trousers, desperate for release.

Then my cell phone rings.

I ignore it, losing myself in the way Maya arches into me, the way her breath catches when I trail kisses down her throat. My wolf howls in triumph, urging me to mark her, claim her. The rational part of my brain—the part not drunk on her taste and scent—knows we're crossing a line we can't uncross.

But as I reach her breasts, as I take one pert nipple into my mouth, licking and sucking with fervent hunger, all logic fades away. Maya's gasp of pleasure, the tightening of her fingers in my hair, spur me on. I lavish attention on her nipples, my

tongue swirling around each one, my teeth grazing them gently.

The ringing stops.

Then starts again.

A growl tears from my throat, frustration slicing through the haze of desire. I force myself to pull back, resting my forehead against hers as I try to catch my breath. My pulse is pounding, my wolf snarling in protest at the sudden distance. Every instinct screams at me to keep kissing her, to show her exactly what she does to my carefully constructed walls.

Maya's eyes are hooded, her lips swollen from my kiss. A flush stains her cheeks, and her curls are wild where my hands have been. Her breasts, lush and pink, add to her thoroughly kissed, utterly tempting appearance. She looks like a vision of untamed beauty—a sight that makes my wolf howl with possessive pleasure. Her scent, lavender and pine now mingled with the heady notes of our shared desire, wraps around me.

The phone keeps ringing.

I grit my teeth and glance at the screen. Sawyer.

That's enough to force me to move, though every step away from her feels like fighting gravity itself. Maya watches as I stand, my hands still curled into fists at my sides. The distance between us feels fundamentally wrong, like trying to tear apart something that should remain whole. I need it though. Need to remember who I am, what I've built, and why I can't risk it all for the fire in her eyes and the taste of her on my lips.

But my wolf knows. Has known, perhaps, since the moment she stormed into my

office with that defiant tilt to her chin. The truth hits me like a physical blow—she's my mate. The connection I thought I'd never have, the one thing I convinced myself I didn't deserve.

I exhale sharply, dragging a hand through my hair. "We shouldn't have done this."

Maya stiffens, her breath catching like she's just been doused in cold water. For the first time since I met her, she doesn't have a quick comeback, no sharp-edged joke to throw between us like a shield. Instead, her hands move automatically, fumbling to adjust her bra before she buttons up her blouse with quick, precise movements. But I see it—the slight tremor in her fingers, the way her pulse jumps at her throat.

She swallows hard, lifting her chin, her expression smoothing into something unreadable. "Understood," she says, her voice too even, too controlled. A muscle ticks in her jaw, a tell I know well by now. "I'll clean up and head home."

She turns before I can say anything else, and the loss feels immediate. Final.

She walks to the door with her head high, and something in me fractures at the sight. My wolf surges forward, desperate to stop her, to explain, to claim. The mate bond thrums between us, raw and terrifying.

But I let her go.

She closes the door behind her with a quiet click that sounds like finality.

I stand there, frozen, her taste still on my lips, her warmth still ghosting across my skin. The wolf in me rages, demanding I follow her, explain, make this right. But the man—the one who built an empire on control and calculation, who watched his sister die—that man knows better.

I don't know how to reconcile these warring parts of myself. I thought I wasn't capable of this kind of connection. And yet, here she is.

Here she's always been.

And I just pushed her away.

I watch the door for a long moment, jaw clenched so tight it aches. Then, forcing every thought of Maya—her taste, her scent, the soft sound she made when I kissed her—to the back of my mind, I answer the damn phone.

"What?" I snap.

Sawyer doesn't even flinch at my tone. "We have a problem," he says, voice grim. "There's been movement from the local hunter cells. They've officially organized under a name—True Humanity."

I go still, my blood turning to ice.

Sawyer continues. "According to my sources, they're planning something big. Theo and I both agree the gala might be their target."

The gala. A high-profile event. A gathering of supernatural leaders. A golden opportunity for hunters to strike.

My mind shifts instantly into strategy mode, pushing aside everything else—trying to, at least. "We need to prepare for every possibility," I say. "I want full security sweeps, background checks on every guest, and—"

I stop.

Because the only thing I can think about is Maya.

The hunters are growing bolder. More organized. More dangerous. If they're planning an attack, she's at risk. The thought sends a wave of primal rage through me, my wolf clawing at the surface. The mate bond, new and raw as it is, amplifies every protective instinct until I can barely think straight.

And I realize, with crushing clarity, that pushing her away won't protect either of us. It won't stop me from feeling what I feel, won't change what she is to me. Won't keep her safe.

"Adrian?" Sawyer's voice cuts through my thoughts. "You still there?"

"Yes." I force the word out past the growl building in my chest. "Get me everything you have on True Humanity. And Sawyer?"

"Yeah?"

"No one touches what's mine."

Because there's no way in hell I'm letting them get anywhere near her.

Not now.

Not ever.

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Maya

The forest hums with life as the Howling Pines Pack gathers beneath the full moon. Moonlit Ridge stretches before us, the towering trees casting long shadows over the clearing. The scent of pine, damp earth, and wolves fills the crisp night air. The energy is electric, running through me like a current, urging me to shed my human skin and embrace the wild.

But I'm distracted.

I told myself I wouldn't be. I told myself I wasn't waiting for him.

Yet, here I am, standing at the edge of the pack, scanning the treeline for any sign of him.

"Maya." Olivia appears beside me, her knowing smile too perceptive. "You're going to get whiplash if you keep looking around like that."

"I'm just being vigilant," I mutter. "You know, with the hunters and everything."

She snorts. "Right. The hunters. Nothing to do with a certain brooding CEO?"

Before I can respond, Theo's voice rumbles through the gathering. "Listen up!" His commanding tone draws every eye. "With hunters in the area, we're keeping tonight's run tight. Two hours max. Enforcers will maintain the perimeter." His dark gaze sweeps over us. "No lone wolves tonight. Stay with your assigned groups."

The pack shifts restlessly, their excitement tempered by the weight of danger pressing against our borders. I should be focused. I should be grounding myself in the moment.

But then I catch it—the scent of pine and storm on the wind.

My stomach clenches, my pulse kicking up as I turn toward the trees. And there he is.

Adrian Blackwell stands at the edge of the clearing, his imposing figure drawing every eye to him. He isn't dressed in his usual sharp suits—tonight, he's in a simple black t-shirt and dark sweatpants, his presence just as commanding as ever. The pack quiets, shifting uneasily at the sight of him. A lone wolf. An outsider.

"Blackwell." Theo's voice carries a hint of challenge. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"Maya extended an invitation," Adrian replies, his tone measured and controlled. His storm-gray eyes find mine for a fraction of a second before returning to Theo. "I hope that won't be a problem."

"Oh, did she now?" Ethan's teasing voice carries across the clearing as he shoots me a playful wink. "Getting cozy with the corporate wolf, Maya?"

I feel heat rise to my cheeks, but before I can respond, Theo cuts in. "Stand down," he orders, though his stance remains tense. He studies Adrian for a long moment before nodding. "Your help is... appreciated. But you run with us, you follow pack rules."

"Understood." Adrian's gaze drifts to me again, longer this time, and something hot and electric sparks in my chest.

"Since when does he join pack runs?" Olivia whispers.

"He doesn't," I whisper back, trying to ignore the way my wolf stirs at his presence.

Theo rolls his shoulders, breaking the tension. "Alright, let's run!"

There's a rustle of fabric as everyone quickly strips, leaving piles of clothes scattered across the clearing. I slip behind a tree to remove my own clothes, folding them neatly on a low branch—a habit my mother drilled into me since childhood.

When I step back into the clearing, the shift is already rippling through the pack. Bones crack, muscles stretch, and fur erupts as my packmates shed their human forms. The air fills with the sound of paws hitting earth, bodies vibrating with the primal need to move.

I let my own change take me, the shift rolling over me in a familiar wave of heat and pressure. When I land on all fours, my wolf surges forward, eager and free.

From the corner of my eye, I see Adrian step away from where he's placed his clothes. And then he shifts.

A collective pause sweeps through the pack. His wolf is massive—bigger than any of ours. His fur is a striking pale gray, almost silver under the moonlight, and his presence commands attention. He's a predator, a true alpha, and even the most dominant wolves in my pack hesitate at the sight of him.

I don't.

I step forward, my sleek, dark wolf locking eyes with his. His storm-gray gaze holds mine, and something passes between us—a challenge, an invitation, a promise. My wolf responds instinctively, drawn to his power even as my human side rebels against the pull.

Theo howls, signaling the start of the run, and the pack surges forward. I launch myself into the forest, my paws barely touching the ground. The world blurs into streaks of moonlight and shadow.

And then he's there, running beside me. Not too close, but close enough that I can feel the power radiating from him, can sense the way his movements mirror mine. It's too natural, too right—this synchronicity between us.

I push myself faster, trying to outrun both him and the dangerous thoughts crowding my mind. But I can feel his presence behind me, steady and unwavering, like a shadow I can't shake.

Like a destiny I can't escape.

We run together.

The forest blurs around me as I dart between trees, my paws barely touching the ground. Behind me, Adrian's wolf keeps pace—not chasing exactly, but dancing with me through the shadows. The night air rushes through my fur, carrying his scent: sandalwood and storms. My wolf thrills at it, at him, at this game we're playing.

I leap over a fallen log, twisting mid-air to snap playfully at his muzzle. His answering growl is deep, amused, sending shivers down my spine. For someone so controlled in human form, his wolf moves with fluid grace, powerful muscles rippling beneath dark fur.

We weave through the trees, our bodies falling into perfect sync. Sometimes I lead, sometimes he does, but always we move as one. The moon bathes the forest in silver light, and my heart pounds with something more than exertion. He's so close I can feel the heat of him, his presence both thrilling and terrifying.

My wolf yearns to get closer, to nip at his ear, to feel his fur brush against mine. The urge is so strong it makes me dizzy.

Breaking away from our usual running path, I follow my instincts toward a quieter part of the forest. The sounds of the pack fade behind us. I don't check to see if he follows—I can feel him, like a shadow connected to my soul.

The clearing appears ahead, bathed in moonlight. I slow, turning to face him as he emerges from the trees. His wolf is magnificent—larger than mine, with storm-gray eyes that pierce through the darkness. He circles me slowly, deliberately, his movements pure predator. But there's something else there too, something that makes my breath catch.

I dance away when he gets too close, my tail swishing teasingly. He lunges, quick but gentle, and we tumble together in the grass. His wolf pins mine, careful not to hurt, and the rumble in his chest isn't threatening—it's possessive, wanting.

The energy between us shifts, electric and inevitable. My wolf recognizes what's happening before I do, and suddenly I'm shifting back, my human form replacing fur and claws. Adrian freezes, his wolf's eyes widening before he too gives in, his transformation smooth and controlled.

We stand facing each other in the clearing, our breaths heavy in the night air. Moonlight plays across his bare chest, highlighting the tension in his muscles. His eyes are still wolf-wild, fixed on me with an intensity that makes me shiver.

"You ran with me," I say softly, taking a step closer.

His jaw tightens. "I told myself I wouldn't."

Another step. I'm close enough now to see the flecks of silver in his eyes, to feel the

heat radiating from his skin. "Then why did you?"

His hand lifts slowly, hesitating for a heartbeat before his fingers brush my jaw. The touch is impossibly gentle, at odds with his usual stern demeanor. A tremor runs through him.

"Because," he says, his voice rough with emotion, "I've been fighting this since the moment I met you. Fighting us. And I'm tired of fighting."

My chest tightens. "You know what this is. What we are."

His wolf is still in his eyes when he pulls me closer, his hand sliding to the back of my neck. His voice drops to a low growl.

"Yes." His lips brush mine. "You're mine."

Then he kisses me.

It isn't soft. It's desperate, consuming.

His lips are firm, demanding, and I meet his hunger with my own. My hands explore the hard planes of his chest, tracing the lines of his muscles, reveling in the raw power beneath my fingertips. His heart races against my palm, a wild drumbeat that echoes my own.

He deepens the kiss, his tongue sweeping against mine, claiming me. I press closer, my body molding to his, and I can feel him—all of him—hard and ready against my stomach. A shiver of anticipation runs through me, pooling heat between my legs.

Adrian's hands roam my back, his touch possessive, igniting sparks of pleasure everywhere he touches. I gasp into his mouth as he cups my ass, pulling me tighter

against him. His cock is a hot, hard brand against me, promising pleasure and danger all at once.

"You feel that?" he growls, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me. "You feel what you do to me?"

I nod, breathless, my fingers digging into his shoulders. "Yes. God, yes."

He trails kisses down my neck, his teeth grazing my skin, sending jolts of electricity straight to my core. I arch into him, offering more, begging for more. His hands slide up my sides, his thumbs brushing the undersides of my breasts, teasing, tantalizing.

"Adrian," I whisper, my voice barely a sound. "Please."

His mouth finds my breast, his tongue circling my nipple before drawing it into his mouth. I cry out, the sensation shooting straight to my clit, making me ache for him. He lavishes attention on one breast, then the other, his hands roaming my body, stoking the fire within me.

I reach between us, my fingers wrapping around his cock. He's thick and hard, pulsing with need. I stroke him, reveling in the velvety smoothness of his skin, the heat of him in my hand. He groans against my breast, his hips thrusting into my touch.

"Maya," he rasps, his voice ragged. "You're playing with fire."

I look up at him, my eyes meeting his storm-gray gaze. "Maybe I want to get burned."

His eyes darken, and he captures my mouth in another searing kiss. His hand slides down my stomach, his fingers finding my wet heat. He strokes me, his touch sure and

confident, sending waves of pleasure crashing through me. I rock against his hand, chasing the sensation, desperate for more.

"You're so wet for me," he murmurs, his voice a low growl. "So ready."

"Yes," I gasp, my body trembling with need. "Adrian, please."

He guides me down to the soft grass, his body covering mine. His cock presses against my entrance, hot and hard, and I wrap my legs around him, urging him closer. He looks down at me, his eyes filled with a mix of raw desire and something deeper, something that makes my heart ache.

"Tell me you want this," he says, his voice low and rough. "Tell me you want me."

I cup his face, my fingers tracing the lines of his jaw. "I want this. I want you."

He enters me slowly, his gaze locked on mine, his body trembling with restraint. I feel every inch of him, filling me, stretching me, completing me. When he's fully seated within me, he pauses, his breath ragged, his eyes filled with a mix of wonder and desire.

"You're mine," he says, his voice a possessive growl. "Mine."

I nod, my heart swelling with emotion. "Yours. Always."

He begins to move, his hips thrusting in a steady rhythm, his body claiming mine. Pleasure builds within me, each thrust sending me higher, closer to the edge. I cling to him, my nails digging into his back, my body meeting his with every thrust.

His mouth finds mine, his kiss fierce and possessive. Our bodies move together, our breaths mingling, our hearts beating as one. The pleasure builds, intensifies, until it's

all I can feel, all I can think about.

"Adrian," I gasp, my body trembling on the edge. "I'm close. So close."

"I know," he growls, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me. "I can feel you, Maya. I can feel everything."

He adjusts his angle, his cock hitting a spot deep inside me that sends sparks of pleasure shooting through my body. I cry out, my nails digging deeper into his back, urging him on. His pace quickens, his thrusts becoming harder, more urgent.

"Come for me, Maya," he commands, his voice rough with desire. "Let me feel you come undone."

His words send me over the edge. Pleasure explodes within me, my body convulsing around him as waves of ecstasy crash through me. I cry out his name, my voice echoing through the forest, wild and free.

Adrian's body tenses, his cock pulsing within me as he finds his own release. He groans, his face buried in the crook of my neck, his body shuddering with the force of his orgasm. I hold him close, my arms wrapped around him, my body still trembling with the aftershocks of pleasure.

We lie there for a moment, our bodies entwined, our breaths slowly returning to normal. Adrian lifts his head, his storm-gray eyes meeting mine. There's a softness in his gaze, a vulnerability I've never seen before.

"You're incredible," he murmurs, his voice barely a whisper.

I smile, my heart swelling with emotion. "You're not so bad yourself, Mr. Blackwell."

He chuckles, a low, warm sound that sends shivers down my spine. "Is that so?"

I nod, my fingers tracing the sharp lines of his face, memorizing the way his skin feels beneath my touch. "That's so. Though I must admit, I never expected this. Never expected us."

His expression turns serious, his storm-gray eyes searching mine, as if trying to decipher something unspoken. "Neither did I."

It's then that I realize—he hasn't bitten me. And I haven't bitten him. Here we are, still teetering on the edge of something unfinished. A choice neither of us has made yet.

I whisper, "Does this mean you want to complete the mating?"

His breath hitches, tension tightening his jaw. But before he can answer, a distant howl shatters the moment, yanking us back to reality.

The pack is calling us back.

Reality crashes in.

For a long second, neither of us moves. Then, without a word, Adrian pulls away, his expression unreadable.

The warmth of his body disappears as he shifts back into his wolf and takes off toward the sound.

I stare after him, my heart pounding.

And I wonder if that was my last chance.

If the moment we just shared is already slipping away.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Adrian

Monday morning.

I should be focused. The gala is in a week, security reports need reviewing, and the threat of True Humanity looms larger with each passing day. But none of that matters right now. Not when Maya Ramirez is walking through my office, her scent curling around me like a damn siren call, making it impossible to think about anything but the way she felt in my arms that night.

My wolf is restless, pacing beneath my skin, demanding that I go to her, that I finish what we started in the forest.

We hadn't talked about it—what it meant. What we meant.

I should have said something. Asked her if she wanted this. But I hadn't. And now, in the cold light of day, I don't know where we stand.

The fear coils in my gut like a cold, heavy stone—the same fear that's haunted me since the night I lost Sarah. My sister's death taught me that loving someone means giving them the power to destroy you. My wolf bristles at these human doubts, sees only the undeniable truth—Maya is ours to protect, to claim, to cherish. Since Saturday night, these primal instincts have been riding me hard, making it impossible to think clearly. Every molecule in my body screams at me to go to her, mark her, keep her safe.

I barely slept. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her—pressed against me, her breath

warm against my lips, her hands clutching my shoulders, pulling me closer instead of pushing me away. Mine.

The word hums through me like a drumbeat, primal and absolute.

I shove the thought down, gripping the edge of my desk until the wood creaks in protest. Sawyer and Eli are expecting a full breakdown of our intel later this morning, and I need my head in the game. The hunters are getting bolder, their presence near Whispering Pines an undeniable threat. The gala is a prime target, and if they plan on making a move—

Maya walks past my office again, oblivious to the way my eyes track her. She's wearing a fitted black blouse and a high-waisted skirt, her dark curls piled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. Professional. Sophisticated. The sight of that exposed curve of her neck makes my wolf snarl.

She doesn't look at me, but I know she feels me watching. The way she tenses slightly, the way her pulse jumps beneath the delicate skin of her throat—it's enough to send my control slipping.

When she disappears into the copy room, I don't think. I move.

The moment the door closes behind me, I lock it. The click seems too loud in the small space.

Maya turns, startled, her amber eyes widening slightly when she sees me standing there. Beyond the door, I can hear the murmur of voices, the steady thrum of office life continuing just feet away. The forbidden nature of this moment crackles between us like electricity.

"Adrian—" Her voice wavers, uncertain.

I step forward, closing the distance between us until she's backed against the counter, my hands braced on either side of her, caging her in. The copy machine hums behind her, a steady counterpoint to our uneven breathing.

Her breath hitches. "We shouldn't—"

"Tell me to stop." The words come out rough, desperate. "Tell me you don't want this, and I'll walk away."

Footsteps pass by the door. We both freeze, hearts racing. Maya's fingers curl into my shirt, but I can't tell if she means to push me away or pull me closer.

When the footsteps fade, she looks up at me. The war in her eyes mirrors my own—desire warring with propriety, need fighting common sense.

"I—" She swallows hard. "I can't tell you that."

Something inside me snaps.

I cup her jaw, tilting her head up, and claim her mouth with mine. The kiss is deep, hungry, possessive—a battle for dominance that neither of us is willing to lose. She gasps against me, her hands fisting in my shirt as I press her back against the counter.

My hands skim down her sides, tracing the curve of her waist, pulling her closer until there's no space left between us. She's warm, soft, perfect against me. When she arches into my touch, a growl rumbles in my chest, too loud for our precarious situation.

"Shh," she breathes against my lips, even as she hooks her fingers through my belt loops, keeping me close. The gesture is maddening—telling me to be quiet while making it impossible to maintain any semblance of control.

Someone laughs in the hallway. Maya tenses, but I don't let her pull away. Instead, I trail kisses down her throat, feeling her pulse race beneath my lips. Her head falls back, giving me better access, even as she whispers, "We're going to get caught."

"Let them catch us." I nip at her skin, gentle enough not to leave a mark, but enough to make her shiver. My wolf snarls in satisfaction at her reaction.

Maya's hands slide up my chest, and for a moment, I think she's finally going to push me away. Instead, she tangles her fingers in my hair and pulls my mouth back to hers. The kiss is fiercer this time, demanding, like she's done fighting whatever this is between us.

The copy machine beeps loudly, making us both jump. Maya laughs softly against my lips, the sound both nervous and aroused. "Your entire office is going to know."

"I don't care." And I don't. Let them hear. Let them see.

I slip my hands under her skirt, feeling the smooth skin of her thighs. Maya gasps, her eyes widening as she realizes what I'm about to do. "Adrian, we can't—" she starts, but her words turn into a moan as I trail my fingers higher, brushing against the lace of her underwear.

"Shh," I murmur, capturing her mouth in another kiss. She melts against me, her body responding even as her mind protests. I hook my fingers into the side of her panties, just enough to give me access.

She's already wet, already ready. I run my fingers along her folds, feeling her shudder against me. Her grip on my hair tightens, her eyes fluttering closed as she tries to keep quiet.

I circle her clit with my thumb, applying just enough pressure to make her gasp. Her

hips buck against my hand, seeking more friction, more contact. I oblige, sliding two fingers inside her, curling them slightly to hit that spot that makes her breath hitch and her body tremble.

"Oh god," she whispers, her head falling back against the wall. I can feel her tightening around my fingers, her body coiling with tension. She's close, so close.

I lean in, capturing her mouth with mine, swallowing her moans as I pump my fingers in and out of her, my thumb never leaving her clit. She's writhing against me now, her body tense and shaking, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

And then she comes. Her body convulses, her inner muscles clamping down on my fingers as she rides out her orgasm. I can feel her pulsing around me, her wetness coating my hand. It's the sexiest thing I've ever felt.

I slow my movements, letting her come down from her high. When she opens her eyes, they're glazed and satisfied, a small smile playing on her lips. I can't help but smile back, a sense of male pride washing over me. I did that. I made her feel that good.

I withdraw my fingers, and she watches as I bring them to my mouth, licking her taste from them. Her eyes darken, her breath hitching again as she watches me. I can see the desire building in her again, the need for more.

I reach for my belt, ready to give her what she wants, what we both want.

A sharp knock on the door shatters the moment.

"Mr. Blackwell?" It's Sarah from accounting. "The investors are waiting in the conference room."

I rest my forehead against Maya's, both of us breathing hard. Reality crashes back in, but I can't make myself move away from her. Not yet.

“Come with me tonight.”

Maya hesitates. “I have a last-minute catering meeting after work.”

My grip on her waist tightens for a moment before I force myself to release her. “What about after?”

“Okay,” she whispers, smoothing down my shirt with trembling hands. “Now, go.”

I catch her wrist, pressing a kiss to her palm. “This isn't over.”

Her eyes darken. “It better not be.”

???

An hour later, I'm in my office with Eli and Sawyer, going over security plans for the gala. The conversation is serious—we still don't know what True Humanity is planning, and that uncertainty has us all on edge.

“Something's coming,” Sawyer says, frowning at the scattered reports on my desk. “They're too quiet. When hunters go silent like this...”

“They're planning something big,” Eli finishes, his usual playful demeanor replaced by focused intensity. “Question is, what?”

I'm about to respond when Maya's scent hits me—lavender and pine, growing stronger. My wolf stirs, and I force myself to remain still as she enters without knocking. As always.

She approaches my desk with the file I requested earlier, and something in her walk—that slight sway of her hips, the determined lift of her chin—makes my mouth go dry.

"Here's the property assessment you needed," she says, extending the file.

Our fingers brush as I take it. The contact is brief, barely a whisper of skin against skin, but electricity shoots through me. Maya tenses, her breath catching. Her pulse—which I shouldn't be tracking but am—speeds up slightly.

Her amber eyes meet mine for a fraction of a second, and in that moment, I want nothing more than to pull her closer, to—

She breaks away first, turning quickly. "If that's all..."

"Thank you," I manage, my voice rougher than intended.

The door closes behind her, but her scent lingers, tormenting me. I grip the file too tightly, leaving slight creases in the corners.

Eli lets out a low whistle. "Damn, brother. You've got it bad."

I shoot him a warning glare. "We were discussing security."

"Oh no," Eli leans back, crossing his arms with that infuriating smirk. "We're definitely discussing how you're completely obsessed with your assistant."

"I'm not—"

"Your eyes follow her everywhere," Sawyer interrupts, his tone matter-of-fact. "Your wolf responds to her presence before she even enters a room." He pauses, studying

me. "She's your mate."

It's not a question. I don't deny it.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with understanding. They both know what I'm not saying—what I'm fighting against. The memory of blood and gunshots, of arriving too late to save my sister, still haunts me.

"You can't protect her by pushing her away," Eli says quietly.

I stand, pacing to the window. The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across Whispering Pines, the town I built to keep others safe. "I can't lose anyone else."

"Do you trust someone else to protect her better than you?" Sawyer's question is blunt, cutting through my brooding.

The answer comes without hesitation. "No."

"Then stop fighting it," Eli says. "You're all in, whether you admit it or not."

I turn back to face them, decision crystallizing. They're right. I've been holding back, letting fear dictate my choices. But Maya... she deserves more than my hesitation. She deserves everything.

Tonight, when I see Maya, I'm done holding back. She'll know exactly where we stand.

And may the gods help anyone who tries to come between us.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Maya

The scent of roasted garlic and seared meat fills the catering kitchen as I inspect the latest round of samples. Chef Marcus slides another plate toward me—filet mignon, perfectly seared and glistening. My wolf perks up at the rich aroma, and I have to resist the urge to devour it whole.

"We've adjusted the seasoning as you suggested," Marcus says, his experienced eyes watching my reaction. "Less pepper to accommodate the enhanced senses of our shifter guests."

I take a careful bite, letting the buttery richness melt on my tongue. The meat is tender enough to satisfy even the most discerning supernatural palate, while the subtle blend of herbs won't overwhelm sensitive wolf noses. Perfect.

"This is exactly what we need," I say, jotting notes in my planner. "The vampires might not eat, but the shifters will appreciate this."

My mind drifts to the menu planning session with Adrian a few days ago. He'd insisted on being involved in every detail of the gala, looming over my shoulder as we reviewed options. I remember the way his breath caught when I'd reached past him for a menu, the electric tension that crackled between us.

Marcus's voice pulls me back to the present. "We'll have stations set up exactly as discussed—seafood here, carving station there." He gestures around the kitchen. "And the blood-wine bar will be separate, as requested."

I nod, checking another item off my list. The gala isn't just a corporate event anymore—it's a statement. A chance to show the supernatural community that we aren't just surviving, we're thriving. And somehow, I've become integral to making it happen.

My phone buzzes. Another message from Sawyer about security protocols. The hunters have everyone on edge, and Adrian's insisting on unprecedented precautions. Extra wards, enhanced patrols, background checks on every server and vendor. Part of me wants to call it paranoid, but after the recent attacks...

"The dessert course?" I prompt, pushing away darker thoughts.

Marcus grins, producing an elegant plate of dark chocolate mousse topped with gold leaf. "For our more traditional guests. And..." He reveals a second plate. "Blood orange sorbet for our vampiric attendees. A little culinary wordplay."

I can't help but smile. It's exactly the kind of detail that will help bridge the divide between species—something I've learned is crucial in my months at Blackwell Corp. When I first started, I thought Adrian's obsession with these details was controlling. Now I understand he sees what I couldn't: every choice is political, every detail matters.

This is the work I always wanted to do, even if I didn't know it while slinging hash browns at the diner. Making a real difference, helping build something lasting.

After approving the final menu items, I shake the chef's hand and gather my things. My heels click softly against the tile floor as I weave through the back hall toward the exit.

I check my phone as I walk through the kitchen's back hallways. Several messages from Olivia flash across the screen:

****Olivia:**** *Dress fitting at 3 tomorrow! Don't you dare be late.*

****Olivia:**** *Also... so are we pretending you're NOT excited to see your broody boss tonight?*

I roll my eyes, fighting back a grin.

****Me:**** *You're ridiculous.*

****Olivia:**** *I'm right and you know it.*

A warm flutter settles in my stomach. She is right, damn her. The memory of the pack run floods back—Adrian's wolf, huge and powerful, running beside mine through moonlit woods.

My wolf pushes closer to the surface, remembering. Wanting.

I force myself to focus on my checklist. Flowers confirmed. Security briefing completed. Seating arrangements triple-checked to avoid any territorial disputes. Being Adrian's assistant means anticipating problems before they arise, and tonight has the potential for plenty.

The Howling Pines pack still isn't happy about Blackwell Corp's presence in town. Theo tries to hide it, but I catch the tension in his jaw whenever Adrian's name comes up. And the vampires... Lucien D'Arcy's RSVP came with so many conditions and caveats that it took two days just to negotiate where his coven would be seated.

I push through the kitchen's back door into the evening air, writing a quick message to Adrian. The sun has nearly set, painting the sky in deep purples and blues. My wolf suddenly goes still, every instinct screaming that something's wrong.

The usual scents of asphalt and pine are tainted by something sharper—acrid sweat, metal, and a chemical tang that makes my nose burn. My heart pounds as I realize what my wolf already knows: we're not alone.

I whip around, but it's too late.

A figure lunges from the shadows. I barely have time to snarl before a needle pierces my neck. Wolfsbane. Fire ignites in my veins, spreading like molten lead through my blood. My muscles seize as the poison works its way through my system.

I stagger, trying desperately to shift, to let my wolf take over. Another set of hands clamps silver-lined cuffs around my wrists. Agony sears through my skin, the metal burning like acid.

"Got her," a rough voice mutters.

Fighting through the pain, I slam my elbow backward, feeling cartilage crunch as I connect with someone's face. A curse. The satisfaction is brief—my limbs are growing heavier, my thoughts clouding. The wolfsbane is working too fast.

My phone clatters to the ground. Adrian. I need to call... but my fingers won't cooperate. My vision swims, dark spots creeping at the edges.

A cloth presses over my mouth, reeking of chemicals. My wolf's fury turns to panic as our shared consciousness begins to fade.

No. *No.*

The last thing I hear before the darkness swallows me whole is a low chuckle.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Adrian

I know something's wrong the moment Maya doesn't show up.

At first, I try to rationalize it. She's running late. She's caught up with work. She's lost track of time in that carefree way of hers that usually drives me crazy. But as the minutes tick by, something dark and primal stirs in my chest. My wolf paces beneath my skin, agitated, sensing what I refuse to acknowledge.

One hour becomes two. Her phone rings straight to voicemail now.

She always answers. Even when she's angry with me—especially when she's angry with me—she answers with some sharp-tongued retort that simultaneously infuriates and fascinates me.

By the time I reach her apartment, my control is threadbare. The wolf inside me is no longer pacing but prowling, ready to tear through anyone or anything standing between us and her. The hallway feels too narrow, too confined. Her scent lingers here—lavender and pine, wild and warm—but it's hours old.

I knock once. Hard enough that the door frame shudders.

Nothing.

I knock again, my knuckles white with tension.

Silence.

My phone is in my hand before I realize I've moved, dialing her number one last time. It rings once before cutting to voicemail. Her voice, teasing and bright, fills my ear: "You know what to do. Unless you're Adrian Blackwell, in which case, try smiling first."

A growl builds in my throat. Even now, when she's missing—when something is terribly, undeniably wrong—she manages to get under my skin.

I don't hesitate. The lock gives way easily under my strength, and I step inside. The apartment is dark, still. Too still. Her scent is stronger here but fading, like morning dew burning off in the sun. My eyes adjust instantly, scanning for signs of struggle. No overturned furniture. No shattered glass. No blood.

But no Maya either.

The wrongness of it hits me like a physical blow. She should be here, curled up on that worn leather couch with a book, or dancing around her tiny kitchen to music only she can hear. Her absence feels like a wound—raw and aching in a way I refuse to examine too closely.

My jaw clenches so tight my teeth grind together. I pull out my phone and dial Eli.

He answers on the third ring, voice thick with sleep. "Adrian?"

"Maya's missing." The words taste like ash in my mouth.

A heartbeat of silence. Then Eli is fully alert, the rustle of movement carrying through the line. "What do you mean, missing?"

"She was supposed to meet me tonight. She never showed. She's not answering her phone. I'm at her place now—she's not here." My voice remains steady, controlled,

but my free hand has curled into a fist so tight my claws are drawing blood from my palm.

Eli curses, low and vicious. "Where was she last?"

I force myself to think past the rage and fear clouding my mind. She mentioned something earlier—something about final arrangements for the gala. "The catering company. She had a meeting there this afternoon."

"I'm calling Sawyer. We'll meet you."

I hang up and immediately dial another number.

Theo answers on the first ring. "Blackwell."

"Maya's missing." Saying it again makes it more real, makes my wolf thrash against its restraints with renewed fury.

A heartbeat of silence, heavy with threat. Then Theo's voice sharpens to a deadly edge. "Where?"

"I don't know yet." My control slips just enough for a growl to color my words. "But I'm going to find her."

"I'm on my way."

I end the call and stand motionless in Maya's empty apartment, letting her fading scent wash over me one last time. My wolf howls inside me, desperate to track her, to find her, to tear apart anyone who dares harm what's ours.

What's ours.

The streets blur as I drive, my grip white-knuckled on the wheel. My wolf claws at me, demanding release, demanding I run , but I force myself to stay in control. Control is all I have left. Control is what will help me find her.

But every second that ticks by is a second too long, and Maya's absence tears at something deep inside me that I've kept locked away for years.

The catering company's parking lot is eerily still when I arrive. Maya's cherry-red Corolla sits abandoned. The sight of it hits me like a physical blow.

I step out of my vehicle, inhaling deeply. The air is thick with scents—garlic and rosemary from the kitchen, exhaust fumes, the lingering trace of Maya's presence. Her scent is everywhere—lavender and pine, defiant life—but beneath it all, something darker lurks.

Wolfsbane. Sharp and acrid. Human sweat. At least three distinct signatures. Fear. Maya's fear, spiking the air like electricity.

My vision sharpens, the world taking on predatory clarity. My wolf lets out a low, warning growl that reverberates through my chest.

Hunters.

A car pulls up behind me—Sawyer and Eli climbing out with grim expressions. Eli's usual easy smile is nowhere to be seen.

"Adrian." Sawyer's voice is tight. "Security cameras show three men. They knew what they were doing."

I barely hear him. Near Maya's car, something glints in the fading light. Her phone, screen cracked but still displaying an unfinished text message to me: Leaving now.

Those investors better appreciate all this foo—

The device nearly cracks in my grip. She was thinking of me, even then. Teasing, as always.

Theo and Ethan arrive moments later, moving fast. The Howling Pines alpha barely spares me a glance before scanning the area, nostrils flaring. His voice carries barely restrained fury. "This was hunters. They've been watching. Waiting."

"They took her because of me." The words scrape out of my throat. "Because she works for Blackwell."

"You don't know that," Theo snarls, rounding on me. "Don't make this about you, Blackwell."

But it is about me. Everything about this is personal.

Because somewhere between her irreverent smiles and fierce determination, Maya became more than just an employee. More than just another wolf to protect.

She became mine .

My fists clench at my sides, fury burning through every inch of me. My wolf surges forward, and this time I don't fight it. The snarl that tears from my chest is barely human.

"Adrian." Eli's hand lands on my shoulder. "We'll find her."

I shake him off, lifting my head to inhale once more, locking onto her fading scent trail. West. They went west, toward the old industrial district.

I know exactly what I have to do.

Find her. Tear apart anyone who stands in my way.

And this time—this time I won't let her go.

Because Maya isn't just another name to add to my list of failures. She isn't just another person I couldn't save.

She's everything I never knew I needed.

And I'll burn this whole city down to bring her back.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Maya

Consciousness returns in fragments. First, the cold—a bone-deep chill seeping through my clothes. Then pain, radiating from my shoulders down to my bound wrists. When I try to move, metal bites into my skin, and the sharp burn tells me everything I need to know. Silver.

I force my eyes open, but darkness greets me. The air is thick with the smell of damp concrete and something metallic—blood. My blood. Memory floods back: walking to my car after work, the strange scent I caught too late, the cloth pressed against my face. Hunters.

"Look who's finally awake." The voice comes from somewhere in the darkness, followed by footsteps. A light flicks on, harsh and blinding. I squint against it, trying to make out the figure approaching. "Sorry about the accommodations. Can't be too careful with your kind."

As my vision adjusts, I see him—tall, well-dressed, with the kind of face you'd expect to see in a boardroom, not a torture chamber. But his eyes are cold, calculating. Behind him stands a broader man with scarred knuckles, watching me like a cat eyeing wounded prey.

"Where am I?" My voice comes out raspy. How long was I unconscious?

"Somewhere no one will find you." The leader—because that's clearly what he is—crouches down to my level. "Unless you decide to be reasonable."

I test my bonds again, but the silver chains hold firm. My wolf, usually a constant presence in my mind, feels distant and sluggish. They must have dosed me with something. Wolfsbane, probably.

"The gala," he continues, studying my face. "Security details. Access points. Guest list. Simple information that could save you a lot of pain."

I manage a laugh, though it sounds more like a cough. "Go to hell."

The punch comes from the other man—Knuckles, I decide to call him. It catches me across the cheekbone, snapping my head to the side. Stars explode behind my eyes.

"That's just the beginning," Knuckles growls. "We've got all sorts of toys that work real nice on wolves."

As if to prove his point, he pulls out a syringe filled with purple liquid. My heart rate spikes—more wolfsbane. They're going to keep dosing me until I break or die.

But I won't tell them anything about the gala, about Adrian's plans. He's been working too hard, sacrificing too much to create a real sanctuary for our people. A place where supernatural children can grow up without fear, where families can put down roots without constantly looking over their shoulders. And Adrian... my mate, though we've barely acknowledged it. I won't be the reason his dreams turn to ashes.

"This is concentrated stuff," the leader explains casually, holding up the syringe so it catches what little light filters through the grimy basement windows. "Most wolves can't handle more than three doses before their systems start shutting down. But you seem strong. Maybe you'll last longer."

The needle slides into my neck. Fire spreads through my veins, and I can't hold back a gasp. My wolf whimpers, retreating further into the recesses of my mind. The room

spins violently.

"We'll give you some time to reconsider your position," the leader says, his expensive shoes clicking against concrete as he moves toward the door. "Maybe a few hours alone will help adjust your attitude. Think about your family, Miss Ramirez. Think about what matters most."

The door slams shut, leaving me in near-total darkness. My throat burns with thirst, though the lingering effects of wolfsbane keep my stomach too unsettled for hunger. The silver cuffs have become a constant, searing presence around my wrists, made worse by every futile tug against the restraints. My shoulders scream from being bound behind me for so many hours.

The concrete floor beneath me has leached away what little warmth I had left, but I barely notice anymore. Everything hurts too much to distinguish individual discomforts. My wolf, usually a warm presence in my mind, feels distant and weak, like a candle flame struggling against the wind.

I fight to stay conscious, but the wolfsbane pulls me under like quicksand. Time becomes fluid, marked only by brief moments of consciousness between waves of nausea and pain. The pitch darkness of night eventually gives way to a pale glow of dawn through the high window, and then the harsh glare of afternoon sun. Nearly a full day has passed since they grabbed me outside the kitchen.

Heavy boots scrape against concrete, and the metal door groans open. Three shadows stretch across the floor – the hunters returning after leaving me alone for hours. The leader steps into the shaft of sunlight, his clean face throwing harsh shadows. Behind him, two others flank the doorway.

"Ready to talk yet?" Knuckles' voice comes from somewhere to my left. "The gala's security details. That's all we need."

I manage a weak laugh, though it sounds more like a wheeze. "Still not happening."

"Your loyalty to Blackwell is touching." It's the leader again. His footsteps echo as he approaches. "But misplaced. You really think a corporate alpha gives a damn about some pack wolf? Men like him use people like you as shields."

The words sting more than they should. I know what Adrian and I are to each other, even if we've both been fighting it. But doubt creeps in anyway, aided by exhaustion and pain. Would he really come for me? After everything?

"Do you have any idea who's going to be at that gala?" The leader continues, his voice taking on an almost conversational tone. "Lucien D'Arcy. The entire supernatural council. Pack alphas from three states. It's a perfect opportunity to cut off the head of the snake."

My heart pounds harder. Lucien. The council. All those powerful supernatural beings in one place—it would be a massacre.

"Fuck you," I say, because it's easier than examining the fear building in my chest.

A hand grabs my hair, yanking my head back. Knuckles' breath is hot against my face, reeking of cigarettes and coffee. "Watch your mouth, bitch. We've been patient, but that can change real quick."

I bare my teeth in what I hope is a threatening smile, even though my fangs won't descend with all the wolfsbane in my system. "Try me."

The punch catches me across the jaw, snapping my head to the side. Pain explodes through my face, and I taste blood, copper-bright and warm. But I don't scream. I won't give them that.

"You wolves," the leader sighs. "Always so stubborn. But everyone breaks eventually. It's just a matter of finding the right pressure point." He pauses, and I can hear him moving closer. His expensive shoes click against the concrete. "We have people watching your pack, you know. That little sister of yours—Sofia, isn't it? Sweet girl. Always walking to school with her friends, stopping at that little café for hot chocolate. Be a shame if something happened to her."

Ice floods my veins. The thought of Sofia—bright, fierce Sofia—in their hands makes my wolf surge against the wolfsbane, howling in helpless rage. "Touch my family and I'll tear your throat out."

"Bold words from someone who can barely lift their head." His footsteps circle behind me. "But I believe you mean them. Which is why we're going to try something different."

The needle slides into my neck before I can react. More wolfsbane, stronger this time. The room spins violently, and I can't hold back the whimper that escapes my lips. My wolf, already weak from the previous doses, retreats even further into the recesses of my mind, leaving me feeling hollow and vulnerable.

"We'll let that sink in for a while," the leader says. "Think about your choices. About what matters most. The gala's in a few days. We don't need you alive to make our point—just visible enough to serve as a warning to others who might stand in our way."

Footsteps retreat. A door slams. Darkness swallows me whole, but not before memories of Adrian flash through my mind—his rare smiles, the warmth in his eyes when he thinks no one's looking, the way his hand felt against my cheek.

I don't know how long I drift in and out of consciousness. The wolfsbane makes everything hazy, dreamlike. But in the depths of that chemical fog, something stirs. A

pull. A connection I've been trying to ignore since that first kiss in Adrian's office.

Adrian.

I reach for him instinctively, not even sure if it's real or just desperation. But I picture him anyway—those storm-gray eyes that see right through me, the slight curl of his lip when he's trying not to smile at one of my jokes, the warmth of his hands when he touched me like I was something precious.

Please, I think, though I don't know if he can hear me. Please find me.

My head slumps forward as exhaustion takes over. I can't fight anymore.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:48 pm

Adrian

The world has narrowed to a single truth: Maya is missing, and I will tear this town apart to find her.

It's been nearly twenty-four hours, and every second without her grates against my sanity like broken glass under my skin. I haven't slept. Haven't eaten. My wolf is relentless, snarling beneath my skin, demanding blood. The beast wants to shift, to hunt, to destroy everything in its path until we find her.

I stand in my office, hunched over a spread of maps and reports, trying to make sense of the scattered leads we have. The paper crumples under my grip, my claws threatening to emerge. Eli and Sawyer flank me, their expressions grim in the harsh fluorescent light.

"Theo's scouts found activity in the warehouse district near the industrial zone," Eli says, voice tight. His usual easy manner is gone, replaced by coiled tension. "No confirmation yet, but it's our best lead."

I nod, barely registering his words. My hands clench into fists, nails biting deep enough to draw blood. The metallic scent only feeds my rage—a rage I can't unleash until I have something to sink my teeth into. Until I find her.

Then it hits.

A sharp, searing pain rips through me, sudden and undeniable. It's not mine—it's hers. The agony drops me forward, my palms slamming onto the desk as my vision

blurs. The bond— our bond —shifts inside me, raw and unrefined but strong enough to bring me to my knees. I don't question it. I don't hesitate. I latch onto it like a lifeline, and suddenly, I know.

"She's there." My voice is guttural, barely human. The wolf bleeds through, turning the words into a growl. I shove back from the desk, sending my chair crashing against the wall.

Sawyer and Eli exchange quick glances before Eli nods. "Then let's go."

I grab my phone and call Theo. He picks up on the first ring.

"We found her," I say, already moving. My boots echo against the hardwood floor, each step a countdown to violence.

"We're closing in on the warehouses now," Theo responds, his alpha authority clear even through the line. "We'll be in position by the time you arrive." There's a pause, heavy with unspoken tension. "Blackwell—if they've hurt her—"

"They're already dead," I finish. "They just don't know it yet."

I don't waste time with pleasantries. I hang up and make one more call.

Lucien D'Arcy answers with his usual amused drawl. "Blackwell. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Maya's been taken. Warehouse district." The words burn my throat like acid.

A pause. Then, he hums. "Well, I suppose I could lend a hand. Though I must say, seeing you this... invested in a little wolf is quite entertaining."

I hang up before he can bait me further.

By the time we reach the industrial zone, Theo's pack is already in position. His enforcers blend into the shadows, weapons ready, their eyes reflecting moonlight with predatory focus. The night air carries the scent of rust and diesel, overlaid with the sharp tang of anticipation.

Lucien arrives moments later, stepping out of a sleek black car like he has all the time in the world. His suit is immaculate, his smirk infuriating as he surveys the scene with detached amusement.

"I trust you don't expect me to get my hands dirty," he muses, adjusting his cufflinks. "I'll assist once the mess is cleaned up. Though I must say, Adrian—this protective display is rather telling."

I ignore him, turning to Theo instead. The alpha's eyes are hard, matching my own deadly focus. "We cut the power. Hit them fast, hit them hard. No one gets out."

Theo nods, and for once, there's no friction between us. Just shared purpose, shared rage.

Another spike of pain hits through the bond—duller this time, but enough to make my wolf howl inside me. Mine, it snarls. They dare touch what's mine.

I look at the warehouse, my vision sharpening with predatory clarity. My last thought before we move is a promise written in blood: I will burn this place to the ground if they've harmed her.

"Let's end this."

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Darkness swallows the warehouse.

The moment the power cuts, silence follows—a tense, waiting breath before the inevitable storm. I don't hesitate. My night vision sharpens, my senses stretching outward, catching every heartbeat, every shift of movement in the pitch-black space. My wolf surges forward, clawing at my control, driven by a single purpose.

Maya.

I move like a shadow, silent, unrelenting. The first hunter doesn't even have time to scream before I grab him from behind, my hand clamping over his mouth. A precise strike to the back of his head, and he crumples unconscious. I lower him to the ground without a sound, my wolf snarling for more.

Gunfire erupts somewhere to my right—muffled curses, the scent of blood thickening in the air. The metallic tang mingles with gunpowder and fear, a heady mix that feeds the rage building in my chest. Theo's enforcers have engaged, their wolves disabling the hunters with calculated force. Somewhere in the chaos, I hear Eli's sharp bark of laughter, followed by the heavy thud of a body hitting concrete.

Sawyer moves ahead of me with ruthless precision, his strikes clean, efficient. One by one, the hunters drop unconscious. But I barely register their defeat.

The bond pulls me forward, insistent, primal. It's not a mating bond—not yet—but it's something deeper than instinct, more consuming than logic. Every cell in my body screams to reach her, to tear through anyone who stands in my way.

I push forward, navigating the maze of corridors, my breath steady despite the fury boiling in my veins. The closer I get, the stronger her scent becomes—lavender and pine, laced with something bitter. Wolfsbane.

My control slips. A growl rips from my throat, echoing off the walls.

A heavy steel door stands between us. I don't hesitate.

I slam into it with my full strength, letting my wolf's power surge through my muscles. Metal groans and gives way, the hinges snapping with a satisfying shriek. The door crashes inward, revealing the dimly lit room beyond.

And there she is.

Maya is chained to a chair, silver cuffs biting into her wrists. Her skin is raw where the metal touches her, angry red welts rising beneath the cursed restraints. Her head lifts weakly at the sound of my entrance, amber eyes locking onto mine. Despite the pain in her gaze, despite the blood trickling from a cut above her brow, she still manages that damned smirk I've grown to crave.

"About time," she rasps. "I was starting to think you'd gotten lost."

Something inside me snaps.

Before I can reach her, movement to the left—

A hunter yanks her upright, pressing a silver blade to her throat. The room stills.

I stop where I stand, my body coiled tight, every muscle locked in place. My wolf rages, but I force myself to stay still. One wrong move, one miscalculation, and that blade will cut deep. The thought alone makes my vision blur red.

The hunter's grip on Maya is too tight, his breathing uneven. He's nervous. Good.

"You think that knife will save you?" My voice is low, steady. Deadly.

The hunter tenses, his hands trembling slightly. "Stay back, or I'll—"

I lunge.

It happens too fast for him to react.

In a blur of motion, I grab his wrist, twisting hard. The knife clatters to the floor as his bones snap beneath my grip. His scream is cut short when my other hand wraps around his throat, lifting him clean off his feet.

"You touched what's mine," I growl, my wolf's rage bleeding into my voice.

He claws at my grip, his face turning red, but I don't squeeze hard enough to kill—just enough to make him feel the weight of his mistake. Then, with a flick of my wrist, I toss him aside. He crumples to the floor, unconscious.

I turn back to Maya, my hands gentler now as I reach for the chains. The silver burns my fingers, but I don't stop. I snap the cuffs, the scent of scorched flesh filling the air as I toss them away.

Maya sags forward, too weak to hold herself up. I catch her before she can fall, her body pressing against mine. Her heartbeat thunders against my chest, quick but steady.

Her fingers tighten in my shirt, twisting the fabric as if anchoring herself to me. "I knew you'd come," she whispers, her breath warm against my neck.

I exhale sharply, my forehead pressing against hers. My hands cup her face, thumbs brushing away traces of blood and dirt. "I'll always come for you."

The words escape before I can stop them, raw and honest in a way I haven't allowed

myself to be in years.

My wolf rumbles in satisfaction as Maya's scent wraps around me, the relief overwhelming. She's hurt but alive. Safe.

Mine.

I scoop her into my arms, cradling her close as I step out of the room. She nestles against my chest, her nose pressing into the curve of my neck. "My hero," she murmurs, managing a weak laugh that makes my heart clench.

The fighting outside has died down. Theo and his wolves finish off the last of the hunters, their snarls fading into silence. Eli wipes blood from his knuckles, glancing up as I emerge from the warehouse. His sharp hazel eyes flick to Maya in my arms, then back to me. He doesn't say anything, but his knowing smirk says enough.

Lucien stands off to the side, watching the carnage with elegant detachment. He tilts his head, silver-gray eyes gleaming with dark amusement as he murmurs, "Well, well. You really are quite terrifying when provoked, Blackwell. I do believe I'm starting to see the appeal."

I don't respond.

I don't care about Lucien, or the hunters, or the blood staining the ground.

Maya is safe in my arms, her breath steady against my skin, her fingers still gripping my shirt like she never wants to let go.

That's the only thing that matters.

But as I hold her closer, breathing in her scent—lavender and pine beneath the

metallic tang of blood—I know one thing for certain.

This war isn't over.

And neither is this thing between us.

Because she is mine.

And I will tear apart anyone who tries to take her from me again.

Maya

I'm barely standing outside the warehouse, wrapped in Adrian's coat, the heavy fabric doing little to stop the tremors wracking my body. Each breath sends daggers through my chest where the hunters' fists connected. The night air feels like needles against the silver burns on my arms, and the lingering wolfsbane in my system makes the world tilt and spin. Only Adrian's arm around my waist keeps me upright, though I hate admitting I need the support.

The hunters lie restrained on the ground, some unconscious, others groaning in pain. Theo's enforcers stand guard, their expressions unreadable as they ensure none of them attempt escape. Eli and Sawyer patrol the perimeter, scanning for stragglers. The only sounds are the distant rush of wind through the trees and the faint crackle of fire still smoldering inside the warehouse.

Adrian is a barely contained storm beside me, his body rigid with fury. His wolf lingers just beneath the surface—I can feel it in the way his muscles coil and tense against me, in the low growl that rumbles through his chest whenever I sway. The arm supporting me tightens each time I stumble, and I know he's fighting the urge to simply carry me out of here.

"What are we going to do with them?" My voice comes out raw, throat still burning from the wolfsbane they forced down it. The words trigger a coughing fit that makes my ribs scream in protest.

Adrian's other hand comes up to steady me, and I hate the way my body betrays me by leaning into his warmth. His jaw tightens as he glares at our captives. "They

deserve worse than death for touching you."

The pure violence in his tone should frighten me. Instead, it sends an inappropriate shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with pain or cold. I force myself to focus on the hunters, their faces twisted in fear and agony. Part of me—the part that still tastes blood and silver in my mouth—wants them to suffer. But I can't let Adrian cross that line.

"We can't—" Another wave of dizziness hits, and I grab his shirt to stay upright. His arm becomes a steel band around me, and I have to take several breaths before continuing. "We can't make them disappear. People will notice. And it would expose everything you're building here."

"Maya." The way he says my name is half-growl, half-plea. "They nearly killed you."

Before I can argue, Lucien steps forward, adjusting his cuffs like we're at a board meeting instead of a battlefield. His presence hits me like a physical force—maybe it's the wolfsbane making me more susceptible to his vampiric aura, but the air feels heavier, colder.

"That," he purrs, silver eyes glinting with dark amusement, "is precisely why I was invited to this little gathering."

I press closer to Adrian instinctively, and his grip tightens in response. The vampire's gaze sweeps over the hunters with elegant disdain.

"I'll ensure they confess. Every detail. They'll turn themselves in as violent extremists, and the authorities will see nothing more than dangerous fanatics who got what they deserved." Lucien's smile shows just a hint of fang. "They might even remember their time here as... considerably worse than reality."

Theo crosses his arms, expression grim. "And Ethan handles the rest."

The detective nods, his amber eyes hard. "The reports will be clean. Just another domestic terrorist cell that got sloppy."

The room spins again, and this time I can't hide how badly my legs are shaking. Adrian notices—of course he does—and suddenly I'm being lifted into his arms before I can protest.

"We're done here." His voice brooks no argument, though I try anyway.

"Put me down," I mumble, even as my head falls against his shoulder. "I can walk."

"You can barely stand." His chest rumbles against my cheek as he speaks. "And if you think I'm letting you out of my sight after what just happened, you're delusional."

I want to argue, to maintain some shred of dignity, but the wolfsbane makes everything fuzzy, and Adrian is so warm. My eyes drift closed despite my best efforts.

The last thing I hear is Lucien's amused voice floating after us: "Do take care of our little wolf, Adrian. She's quite something."

Adrian's only response is a warning growl that vibrates through his chest and into my bones. As consciousness starts to slip away, I feel his lips brush my temple, so softly I might have imagined it.

"I've got you," he whispers.

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I barely register the sensation of movement until I feel the solid warmth beneath me. Strong arms hold me close, careful but unyielding, and the steady rhythm of footsteps echoes through the vast space around us. I blink sluggishly, my body still heavy from the wolfsbane, but I know exactly where I am.

Adrian.

His scent—sandalwood and winter storms—envelops me, grounding me even as exhaustion claws at my senses. Through half-lidded eyes, I take in glimpses of his home. Everything is exactly what I expected from him—sharp angles, floor-to-ceiling windows, and sleek modern furniture in shades of gray and black. A fortress of glass and steel, as controlled and imposing as the man himself. Yet there's something else too—subtle touches of warmth in the rich leather and dark wood, hints of the alpha beneath the businessman's facade.

"Put me down," I murmur, but there's no real fight in my voice. The wolfsbane has left me feeling disconnected from my wolf, like there's a wall between us, and my limbs feel like they're made of lead.

Adrian doesn't answer, but I feel the subtle flex of his jaw against my temple, the tension in his hold as if he's reluctant to let go. Still, he lowers me carefully onto the plush leather couch in his living room. The moment I'm free of his grasp, I sag against the cushions, wincing as my body reminds me of the abuse it's taken.

Sawyer Kane is already waiting, crouched beside the sleek coffee table with a med kit open, his steel-blue eyes sharp and assessing. He takes my wrist gently, his touch firm but professional.

"You'll heal fast," he says, examining the angry red burns left by the silver cuffs. "But the wolfsbane needs time to work its way out of your system."

I groan. "Great. So I just have to feel like death for a while?"

Sawyer's mouth quirks. "Pretty much."

Adrian growls lowly beside me, the sound vibrating through the air. His frustration is a palpable force, and I catch the way his hands clench at his sides. "What can we do?"

Sawyer reaches into the kit and pulls out a small vial of liquid. "This will help flush it out faster. Tastes like hell, though."

I sigh, too exhausted to maintain my usual stubborn independence. "Just give it to me."

He hands me the vial, and I down it in one go, instantly regretting my life choices. The bitterness burns all the way down, and I cough, my face twisting in disgust. "That's disgusting."

Sawyer snorts. "You're welcome."

He turns to Adrian. "Bandage her wrists. The burns will heal, but covering them will keep them from getting irritated in the meantime."

Adrian takes the medical wrap without hesitation, kneeling beside me. His movements are precise, careful, his large hands inexplicably gentle as he wraps the gauze around my wrists. Each brush of his fingers against my skin sends tiny sparks through me, and I can't tell if it's from the silver burns or something else entirely.

I watch him work, my throat tightening at the intensity of his focus. This is Adrian Blackwell—the cold, ruthless alpha businessman—handling me like I'm something precious.

I swallow against the lump in my throat. "I'm okay, you know."

Adrian lifts his gaze to mine, his storm-gray eyes dark with something that makes my breath catch. "You weren't."

The raw edge in his voice steals any response I might have had.

Sawyer straightens, snapping the med kit closed. "What she needs now is rest."

Adrian nods. "Then she stays here." His voice is final, brooking no argument.

I blink, fighting against the heaviness in my limbs. "I can go home—"

"No."

It's not an order, not quite. But there's something in the way he says it, something raw and unyielding, that makes me hesitate. The look in his eyes tells me this isn't about control—it's about need. His need to keep me close, to know I'm safe.

I'm too exhausted to argue, and if I'm honest with myself, I don't want to.

As sleep pulls me under, I feel Adrian's arms wrap around me again, shifting me carefully until my head rests against his chest. His warmth surrounds me, his scent lulls me, and for the first time since the hunters grabbed me, I feel truly safe. His heart beats steady and strong beneath my cheek, a rhythm that seems to say: you're here, you're safe, you're mine.

Just before I slip into unconsciousness, I hear his voice—low, rough, full of something that makes my wolf stir despite the wolfsbane.

"Rest, little wolf," he murmurs, his arms tightening fractionally around me. "You're

mine now. And I won't let anything happen to you again."

I fall asleep with the ghost of those words echoing in my mind, knowing that, for once, I don't have to fight alone.

Maya

I wake to the warmth of Adrian's body wrapped around mine, his presence achingly familiar. His strong arms hold me close, one hand splayed protectively across my stomach, his steady heartbeat a grounding rhythm against my back. The weight of him feels like an anchor, keeping the lingering memories of silver burns and wolfsbane at bay.

Blinking against the soft morning light filtering through floor-to-ceiling windows, I take in the space around me. Adrian's bedroom is exactly what I expected—dark, sleek, and meticulously organized. Everything speaks of careful control, from the precise angle of the minimalist furniture to the subtle, masculine scent that permeates the air.

The bed is massive, the sheets whispering against my skin with an impossible softness that speaks of luxury I've never known. It should feel intimidating, this precise slice of Adrian's world, but his warmth beside me transforms the space into something else entirely.

A deep inhale from behind me, then a ripple of muscle as Adrian stirs. His grip tightens instinctively before his eyes open, fingers pressing into my skin as if ensuring I'm still there. The possessive gesture sends a shiver down my spine.

I turn my head slightly, meeting his storm-gray gaze. He's still heavy with sleep, but his wolf lurks beneath the surface, assessing me, searching for any lingering weakness. The intensity of his stare makes my breath catch.

"How are you feeling?" His voice is rough, edged with a concern that makes something warm unfurl in my chest.

I stretch slightly, testing my limbs. The wolfsbane has mostly worked its way out of my system, though my muscles still ache with a bone-deep weariness. My wrists throb where the silver had burned into them, but the pain is duller now, manageable. "Better. A little sore, but nothing I can't handle."

Adrian studies me for a long moment, his jaw tightening as his fingers brush over my wrist. The touch is feather-light, barely there, but it sends electricity racing through my veins. His thumb traces the raw skin where the silver had bitten into me, and the tenderness in the gesture contrasts sharply with the darkness that crosses his face.

"You shouldn't have had to handle it at all."

The protectiveness in his voice—bordering on a growl—sends another shiver through me. "But I did. And now I'm here."

His eyes darken, something unreadable flickering across his face. The morning stubble along his jaw makes him look rougher, more primal. "And you're not leaving."

The possessiveness in his tone does something to me, something dangerous and thrilling all at once. My breath catches, my pulse quickening as I stare up at him. My wolf stirs inside me, responding to the raw authority in his voice even as my human side bristles at the command.

For a moment, neither of us moves. The air grows thick with tension.

Then I shift in bed, suddenly, acutely aware of just how close we are—his bare chest pressed against my back, our legs tangled beneath the sheets, my thin t-shirt doing

little to shield me from his heat. The fire between us is immediate, a slow-burning flame ready to ignite at the slightest spark.

I push myself up, stretching with a soft groan that I immediately regret when Adrian's eyes track the movement. "I need to get clean."

Adrian watches me for a second longer, his gaze heavy with something that makes my skin tingle. Then he moves, rising from the bed in one fluid motion that reminds me just how powerful he is. "I'll run you a bath."

I blink at him, surprised by the offer—and by how much I want to accept it. This isn't the cold, calculating CEO I'm used to. This is something else, something raw and protective that makes my wolf pace restlessly beneath my skin.

By the time I step into the bathroom, the sound of running water fills the space. Adrian stands by the massive, high-end bathtub, twisting the taps with precise movements. Steam curls into the air, carrying the scent of eucalyptus and something rich and earthy—him—that lingers, mixing with the warmth of the room. The marble counter gleams, everything pristine and perfect, just like him.

I raise a brow, aiming for lightness I don't quite feel. "Fancy."

Adrian gives me a look that makes my stomach flip. "You were drugged, burned, and kidnapped. You deserve a bath."

I smirk, tilting my head, unable to resist pushing him just a little further. "And are you planning on helping?"

He doesn't flinch, doesn't waver. Instead, he takes a slow step forward, his gaze locking onto mine, unreadable and scorching all at once. "If you need me to."

The air is charged, heavy with the scent of steam and desire. The oversized shirt I'd borrowed from Adrian's closet feels like a barrier now, a flimsy one at that. The fabric slips off my shoulders, pooling at my feet, and I stand before him, bare and unashamed.

Adrian's gaze rakes over me, hunger flashing in his stormy eyes. His control is slipping, the carefully constructed walls around him crumbling with each passing second. He takes me in, his breath hitching ever so slightly, and the sound sends a thrill through me.

I step into the warm water, the heat enveloping me like a welcome embrace. I sink into the bath, the water lapping at my skin, and I can't help but watch him from beneath my lashes. My voice is a soft challenge, laced with a teasing note. "You're just going to stand there?"

His jaw tightens, the muscle there ticking with restraint. But there's a shift in him, a subtle loosening of the iron grip he maintains on his emotions. Then, he moves.

Adrian discards his clothes with an economy of motion that speaks of leashed power. He steps into the bath, settling behind me, and the space between us disappears. His legs cage mine, his chest a solid wall against my back. The water rises, spilling over the edge of the tub in a gentle rhythm that matches the pounding of my heart.

He reaches for a washcloth, wetting it before running it over my shoulders, my arms, my back. His touch is slow, reverent, claiming. Each stroke of the cloth is a brand, marking me as his. My skin pebbles under his attentions, goosebumps rising in the wake of his touch.

My wolf stirs within me, her instincts sharp and clear. She wants our mate, wants to be claimed and cherished by him. She urges me to turn, to face him, to claim what we both know is ours.

I turn in the water, facing Adrian fully. His gray eyes search mine, the depth of emotion there taking my breath away. "But you didn't," I whisper, answering his earlier confession.

His hands slide to my waist beneath the water, gripping me possessively. "I'm done holding back, Maya. No more fighting this. No more pretending I can stay away."

His words wrap around me, a vow more binding than any promise. I see it in his eyes—the decision, the certainty, the raw, unshakable devotion. This is more than physical need; it's a connection that runs soul-deep, a bond forged by shared pain and mutual respect.

I lift a hand, tracing the hard line of his jaw. "I want this, Adrian. I want you."

The words hang between us, a declaration of my own. I'm choosing this, choosing him, with every fiber of my being. This isn't losing myself; it's finding something I didn't know I needed—a partner, a protector, a mate who sees all of me and wants me anyway.

Adrian's gaze darkens, his grip on my waist tightening. "Mine," he growls, the word a claim and a promise.

And then he's kissing me, his lips moving against mine with a desperation that speaks of all the moments we've wasted, all the words left unspoken. His hands tangle in my hair, holding me close as our tongues meet.

I melt into Adrian's kiss, my body pressing against his as the water sloshes around us. His hands are firm, possessive, as they slide down to cup my ass, pulling me closer. I can feel him hard against my stomach, and a thrill shoots through me at the size of him, at the promise of what's to come.

His lips trail down my neck, his teeth grazing my skin in a way that sends shivers down my spine. "You're mine, Maya. My mate," he growls against my collarbone, his voice a deep rumble that vibrates through me. "Every inch of you."

I gasp as his hands move up to cup my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples in a way that makes me arch into his touch. "Then take me," I challenge, my voice breathy with desire. "Claim me, Adrian."

His eyes flash with hunger at my words, and he captures my mouth in another searing kiss. His hands explore my body, sliding over my slick skin, teasing and tantalizing until I'm writhing against him, desperate for more.

I reach down between us, wrapping my hand around his length. He's thick and hard, pulsing with need, and the feel of him in my hand sends a surge of heat through me. I stroke him slowly, my thumb circling the sensitive tip, and he groans into my mouth, his hips jerking forward.

"Maya," he growls, his voice a warning and a plea all at once. "I need to be inside you. Now."

I guide him to my entrance, my legs wrapping around his waist as he presses against me. He's big, so big that I feel a moment of panic, but he senses it, his hand coming up to cup my face, his thumb brushing gently over my cheekbone.

"I've got you, Maya," he murmurs, his voice soft but firm. "I'll always have you."

And then he's pushing into me, inch by slow inch, giving me time to adjust to his size. I gasp at the sensation, the stretch and burn of him filling me completely. He pauses, his forehead resting against mine, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

"You feel so good," he groans, his voice strained with the effort of holding back. "So

perfect."

I rock my hips against him, urging him to move. "Don't hold back, Adrian," I whisper, my voice a plea. "I want all of you."

He growls, a sound that's more wolf than man, and then he's moving, thrusting into me with a force that steals my breath. Water splashes around us, sloshing over the edge of the tub as our bodies come together, again and again.

His teeth find my shoulder, biting down in a way that sends a shockwave of pleasure through me, but doesn't break the skin. I cry out, my nails digging into his back, urging him on. He growls, his thrusts growing harder, more urgent.

I can feel my orgasm building, a coil of heat and pressure deep in my core. Adrian's hand slides between us, his fingers finding my clit, circling and teasing until I'm panting, desperate for release.

"Come for me, Maya," he growls, his voice a command. "Let me feel you come all over my cock."

His words push me over the edge, and I cry out, my body convulsing around him as waves of pleasure crash through me.

He groans, his thrusts growing erratic, and then he's coming too, his teeth sinking into my shoulder as he claims me, marks me, makes me his. As the waves of pleasure wash over us, I instinctively lean in and bite his shoulder, claiming him as mine in return.

We ride out our orgasms together, our bodies locked together. He holds me close, his breath coming in ragged gasps against my skin.

"Mine," he growls, his voice a possessive rumble. "You're mine, Maya. Forever."

I smile, my body still trembling with aftershocks. "Forever," I agree, my voice soft but sure.

Adrian

The gala is a masterpiece, just as I'd hoped. The ballroom glows with candlelight, crystal chandeliers casting prismatic shadows across marble floors. The air hums with conversation—supernatural leaders from across the region gathered under one roof. Werewolves, vampires, witches, and fae, all mingling in a rare show of unity.

From my vantage point near the balcony, I scan the crowd, my senses tuned for any sign of trouble. The memory of the hunter attack still lingers, a dark presence lurking beneath the polished surface of the event. Security is tight—Sawyer made damn sure of it. But tonight isn't about fear. It's about progress.

Theo stands near the entrance, deep in discussion with Sawyer, no doubt talking security expansions. Lucien D'Arcy lounges by the bar, swirling a glass of blood-infused wine, watching the room with his usual brand of amused detachment. He catches my eye and lifts his glass in a silent toast. I ignore him.

"I'll never get used to this," Eli mutters as he joins me, adjusting the stiff collar of his dress shirt. He looks vaguely uncomfortable in formal attire, but at least he made the effort.

I arch a brow. "Used to what?"

"This," he gestures broadly. "Dancing, small talk, pretending we're civilized creatures."

I smirk. "You're the one who insisted on attending."

He shrugs, taking a sip of his drink. “Had to see it for myself. You, of all people, hosting a damn gala. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re starting to enjoy this whole community-building thing.”

I don’t dignify that with a response, but Eli’s grin only widens. His eyes flick toward the crowd, then back to me. “You’re not a lone wolf anymore, you know.”

The words settle like a weight in my chest. Not unwelcome. Just... unfamiliar.

Before I can respond, something catches Eli’s attention—a flicker of movement near one of the grand columns at the edge of the ballroom. A small girl, barely more than a shadow, peeking out from behind the pillar.

Eli frowns. “Were kids invited to this thing?”

“No.”

He sighs, already moving toward her. “I’ll take care of it.”

"Eli." He pauses, glancing back. "Everything alright?"

A shadow crosses his face—gone so quickly I might have imagined it. "Always is." He flashes his trademark grin, but there's something different in his eyes. "Go find your mate, Adrian. Some of us have more important things to deal with than fancy parties."

I watch him disappear into the crowd, noting the way he approaches the girl with careful, measured steps. There's a story there—one he's not ready to tell.

But my thoughts are already drifting elsewhere. To Maya.

I find her near a candlelit table, deep emerald dress hugging her curves, her amber

eyes glowing with warmth as she speaks with Olivia. Her laughter carries across the room, pulling me in like a gravitational force. The sight of her still hits me like a physical blow—this fierce, beautiful woman who crashed through every wall I built.

I close the distance between us, wrapping an arm around her waist from behind. Her scent—lavender and pine—fills my senses. "You're the most beautiful thing in this room."

Maya hums, leaning back against my chest. "Flattery, Mr. Blackwell? I must have done a great job on this event if you're this charming."

I press my lips to her bare shoulder, feeling her pulse quicken beneath my touch. "You did more than a great job. You made this possible."

She turns in my arms, resting her hands against my chest. The candlelight catches the amber flecks in her eyes, making them glow like molten gold. "You sound almost sentimental."

"Don't push it." But there's no bite in my words, not anymore. Not with her.

Her fingers trace patterns on my chest, sending electricity through my veins. "Admit it—you're proud of what we've built here."

I cup her face in my hands, studying the fierce determination in her eyes, the slight upturn of her lips that never fails to undo me. "I'm proud of you."

For years, I built Blackwell Corporation to protect others. To create order in a world that had stolen everything from me. But I never let myself belong anywhere.

Until her.

Maya is still fiercely independent, still determined to carve out her own path. But

she's done it with someone who doesn't hold her back—someone who walks beside her.

I slide my hand up her back, fingers tangling in the soft curls at the nape of her neck. Her breath hitches as I pull her closer, our foreheads touching. The world narrows to just this—her warmth, her scent, the way she fits against me like she was made to be here.

"I told you I wouldn't let you push me away," she whispers, her lips brushing mine.

"And I told you I'd never let anything happen to you." My voice is rough with emotion I once thought myself incapable of feeling.

When I kiss her, it's slow and deep, a promise sealed in the space between heartbeats. She melts into me, one hand gripping my lapel while the other slides into my hair. In this moment, surrounded by candlelight and the quiet hum of celebration, I know with bone-deep certainty that whatever battles come next, we'll face them together.

The lone wolf has finally found his pack.