



Fated to the Enemy Alpha (Destined Contract #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My mate rejected me.

My family sold me to his father.

Now I'm pregnant, hunted, and running from a wedding soaked in blood.

Lina

I built an empire from scratch. Buried my name. Hid our daughter.

But when I heard my mother might still be alive—trapped by his father.

So I came back. In heels. With lies, leverage, and a lockbox full of secrets.

To make the plan work, I'm stuck sharing an office with the ex who still looks like trouble.

Strictly business, of course.

Except... the way he watches me still feels like gravity.

Stephen

I was busy plotting my father's downfall.

Played the loyal son while sharpening the blade.

Didn't expect to fall for his bride
The pawn, also my mate.

So I burned the wedding.

I let her go.

I watched her slip away, regret gnawing at me for not pulling her back.

Until she appeared in my office as my assistant

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:58 pm

Lina

A wry smile crossed my face as I approached the pub, “Howl at the Moon.” Its neon sign flickered, casting a glow on the damp pavement of downtown New York. The dive was tucked between two towering brick buildings as if the city were trying to swallow it.

Perfect.

With the wolf-and-moon design, no self-respecting shifter would set foot inside. Exactly why I chose it. Walking in, I inhaled deeply, the aroma of stale beer and liquor wrapping around me. A couple of doors down, a rundown motel room waited, a temporary refuge from the life I was escaping.

A handful of barflies sat at the counter, their silhouettes and features blending into the dimly lit space as they nursed their drinks: my new pack for the hour. In this part of the city, I was safe from being recognized.

“What’ll it be, sweetheart?” the bartender, sporting a thick beard and enough eyeliner to give him a Johnny Depp vibe, asked.

I perched on one of the rickety stools. “Whiskey.”

He poured three fingers of amber liquid. I downed it in one, grimacing as the burn raced down my throat, offering only temporary relief. My thoughts spiraled, pondering how quickly the news of my impending mate ceremony had spread among the shifter elite. Did they gossip about me, delighting in my fate?

“Another,” I requested, my voice cutting through my internal chaos.

My mother’s shrill shout still rang in my ears, “Lina deserves better.” But my father’s stern command had followed: “In a week’s time, Lina will do her duty.” Our villa had resounded with silence, my mother unable to oppose him. It was over; it was decided. Soon, I would become the luna of the Blackthorn Pack.

Anger simmered. I knew the arranged bond was a maneuver to forge a business alliance to solve our pack’s financial crisis. But what killed me was that I could have offered a solution if my father had only sought my advice months ago instead of offering me up as the solution.

One week of freedom left.

“Hit me,” I told the bartender, taking another shot. My anger mingled with the alcohol, warming my veins. I closed my eyes, savoring the tingling numbness. My shifter constitution allowed me to drink more than the average human.

Magnus Blackthorn—alpha of the Blackthorn Pack, a man twice my age—invaded my thoughts. He was my father’s best friend, a relationship forged in years of business meetings. Silvermoon Corporation had had links with Magnus for years. As such, interning at my father’s company and attending board meetings the last few summers—I’d met Magnus plenty of times, but I’d never imagined a mate bond with him.

As the haze of alcohol settled, a hollow sense of desperation engulfed me. I had no say—no escape—unless I discovered my fated mate. In the world of shifters, a fated mate was a sacred bond, often revered above all else. It was believed that those destined for each other possessed an unbreakable connection. Mates would always protect one another no matter the circumstances, and society would honor their union. Finding my fated mate would offer me an escape from my predicament, a chance to

break free from my father's orders and the arranged mate bond to Magnus. I had always believed that I'd find that bond. Instead, it was a week before my arranged mate ceremony, and here I was, sitting in this dive bar, getting trashed.

I couldn't help but snort at the thought. I turned to the bartender, my liquor-loosened tongue quipped, "I need to find my white knight."

"You and me both, Princess," he replied, topping off my glass.

Downing it, I felt the weight of the world lift momentarily. I had always believed that I'd find my fated mate. I'd had a handful of boyfriends, both shifter and human, who had been disappointments. At twenty-one, I should know better; fairy tales didn't happen. Yet, deep down, that dream lingered.

The bartender seemed to get that I was seeking oblivion and was already poised to pour another. I shook my head, the mixture of rage and powerlessness urging me to step outside to feel the night air on my skin.

"Can I bum a smoke?" I asked, surprising even myself. I never smoked, but I'd never drank this much, either. Although I could handle it better than your average human, it had definitely started to befuddle my senses. I needed fresh air.

A sudden burst of raucous laughter from the only occupied table stole the bartender's attention for a moment. "Sure, but you'll need to settle your tab before stepping out."

After I'd paid, I stepped outside with my lit cigarette. The fresh chill of fall caressed my cheek. I had barely taken two drags when the pub door swung open, the rowdy guys swaggering out onto the street.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" one of them slurred as he shuffled closer, his gait unsteady.

Their predatory gazes set every instinct in my body on high alert.

“You looking for some fun, Princess?” another one asked as he drew closer, his breath reeking of stale beer.

They’d been listening to my conversation with the bartender. Perhaps I hadn’t blended in as seamlessly as I thought. These humans didn’t have a clue how much like royalty I was. As the daughter of the Silvermoon pack alpha, amidst shifter kind, I was often in the limelight, but being reminded of that was the last thing I wanted. It was my position that forced me to sacrifice my freedom to Magnus Blackthorn. Fury pulsed through me.

“I’m not a princess,” I shot back, the words tumbling off my tongue and cautiousness set to nil thanks to the liquor. “I’m a...wolf.”

The nearest man blinked, confusion giving way to a smirk. “Oh, ‘Howl at the Moon.’ Cute. So, you think you’re the big bad wolf, do you?”

He crowded into my space, stepping closer on the cracked sidewalk. The stench of cheap beer and sweat filled my nostrils, making my stomach churn. “You think you can take us?”

Anger flared, burning away the last of my common sense. I shoved him hard. The alcohol dulled my reflexes but not my temper. “Get out of my face,” I growled, the words a low rumble in my throat.

He stumbled, surprised by the force of my shove, but he quickly recovered. “Feisty, huh? I like that.” My stomach twisted with disgust at the leering look on his face. He moved to grab my arm, but I yanked it away, sidestepping him.

That’s when the other two men surged forward, cutting off my retreat back into the

warm glow of the bar.

My heart hammered against my ribs like a frantic bird trapped in a cage.

This isn't good.

The men moved with a practiced coordination that belied their drunken state, a silent communication passing between them. They herded me along the sidewalk, which suddenly felt incredibly narrow and exposed. I noticed, with a sickening lurch, that the streetlights were broken this way, casting long, distorted shadows that danced around me like grasping claws.

One thug blocked my path while the other who'd spoken darted forward, backing me against the cold, grimy brick wall. He smirked, a lewd glint in his eyes making my skin crawl. "I'm sure you can take us all, Princess."

The whiskey in my stomach soured, turning into bile at his insinuation. Adrenaline surged through me, a jolt of raw power trying to cut through the alcohol-induced haze. My shifter strength thrummed beneath my skin, a desperate urge to break free. But I was outnumbered and cornered, and the thought of shifting and revealing my true nature in the middle of the street was a risk I couldn't take.

Another of the thugs reached for me, his fingers digging into my upper arm, squeezing and holding me against the rough brick. The coldness of the brick wall seeped in against my back. The first man started to unbuckle his belt, the metallic rasp of the buckle a horrifying sound in the quiet of the night.

I winced, struggling against their combined strength, but the other man's grip only tightened. The sidewalk tilted beneath my feet as a wave of nausea washed over me, cold sweat prickling my skin. My wolf clawed at the edges of my control, desperate to defend herself.

In a final attempt to fight back, I raised my knee, aiming for the thug's groin. He quickly reacted, blocking my strike and slamming his work boot down on the inside of my ankle. A searing pain exploded. I let out a cry of agony as a blinding pain coursed through my leg, making me feel like it was about to collapse underneath me.

The thug took advantage of my momentary incapacitation to lean in, his hot, fetid breath washing over my face. Just as he raised his hand, his fingers reaching for my throat, a voice cut through the stillness, low and dangerous, like the rumble of distant thunder. "Get away from her."

The grip on my arm loosened slightly, and my gaze darted through the shadows, searching for the source. My vision swam, but I could make out a figure standing a few feet away, silhouetted against the dim light, his presence radiating a quiet, unwavering power.

The thugs hesitated, their eyes flicking between me and the newcomer. The first man spat on the sidewalk, but his bravado faltered as he took a step away from me. His buddy turned to the newcomer, too.

The stranger was a tall, imposing figure with eyes that seemed to pierce through the darkness. He moved with a quiet confidence, his presence commanding attention.

The first thug, emboldened by his two companions, puffed out his chest. "Mind your own business. This doesn't concern you." He took a step forward, trying to intimidate the newcomer.

The stranger stopped a few feet away, his gaze unwavering. "I'm making it my business. You have ten seconds to leave, or you'll regret it." His voice was calm, but a current of steel ran beneath it, sending a shiver down my spine even in my drunken state.

The thug scoffed. A swagger suffused his step. “Three against one? I like our odds.”

Before anyone could blink, the newcomer moved. He closed the distance between him and the first thug with lightning speed, delivering a sharp, brutal punch to the man’s solar plexus. The thug doubled over, gasping for air.

The stranger didn’t give him a chance to recover, following up with a powerful right hook to the man’s temple, sending him stumbling backward to crash against his friends. The second thug lunged at the newcomer but didn’t stand a chance. The stranger dodged the clumsy attack and landed a swift uppercut that snapped the thug’s head back, dazing him as he staggered along the sidewalk.

The third man, seeing his buddies defeated in a matter of seconds, muttered, “Fuck this,” turned and bolted.

The other two thugs, still reeling from the newcomer’s blows, joined the panicked retreat, stumbling and pushing in their haste to escape.

The lingering residue of shock and fear wafted over me, and I felt my face flush with embarrassment. I’d been a moron coming out here while my reactions had been so dulled with liquor. But as I locked eyes with the stranger, I felt a spark of connection ignite within me. If his lightning-fast reflexes hadn’t been enough, his scent—a raw, undeniable spice that filled the air—told me he was a shifter, too.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice firm but gentle.

I nodded, still trying to process what had just happened. The overriding feeling I was experiencing now was shame at my own recklessness. “Just feeling like an idiot,” I murmured.

“Don’t beat yourself up—you did well not to shift, given the circumstances,” my

rescuer said. His words sent a comforting warmth through me as my cheeks heated more at his praise.

I went to move away from the wall, but as I put pressure on my ankle, hot pain issued up my leg, making me gasp.

In a moment, he was beside me. “They hurt you?” The low rumble of his tone had goosebumps breaking over my arms. His body bristled with tension that made my heart flutter.

“Just my ankle,” I murmured.

“Lean on me,” he offered.

A sense of calm washed over me as he wrapped an arm around my waist, taking my weight. I leaned into him, instantly feeling safer than I had in a long time. His scent intensified, a mix of spice and something wild, drawing me closer. My wolf stirred with a low rumble of contentment, a sensation that eased the tension in my shoulders.

“Let’s grab a cab,” he said as his eyes tracked to the end of the road.

I was thrilled that he took it for granted we were going together, but I shook my head.

“My motel room’s just there,” I nodded to the building we were coming to.

“Is that right?” Surprise infused his tone, a definite note of curiosity there. I knew he was likely wondering why I was staying in such a dodgy area, but the last thing I wanted to get into was what had brought me here.

I braced myself against him as I rummaged in my coat pocket for my key. It wasn’t until I’d unlocked the door, with the lamplight spilling from the room, that I finally got to sate my curiosity and take in my rescuer properly.

He had a jet-black mane of hair, a strong jaw, and a bronze complexion. But it was his eyes that ensnared me—deep green, like the lush patches of parkland amongst concrete. They pierced me, holding an intensity that made me feel seen in a way I had never known.

His gaze roamed my face, drinking me in just as much as I was him. “Want a hand inside?” he asked.

My heart hammered. I suddenly didn’t have the capacity for speech, so I nodded instead and put my weight on him as he helped me to the bed. As I eased down, my heart was thrumming again as if I were back out on the sidewalk in danger. But it wasn’t thumping in fear anymore. Something warm and exhilarating had encircled it. My rescuer’s scent washed over me again, spicy and earthy, igniting a lick of heat in my belly.

“Thank you,” I said. He nodded, letting go of me and backing up, and I felt a ridiculous sense of loss at losing his touch.

I told myself that this was silly. I needed to get my ankle boots off and then get some sleep. But the boot on my sprained foot proved hard to remove.

As I winced, the man said, “May I?”

My breath hitched. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

He was soon kneeling in front of me, carefully easing off my boot. He surprised me as he didn’t stop at the boot but eased off my sock, too, his hands touching my swollen ankle as he rotated it carefully one way and then the other, watching my reaction for any pain. A thrill shot through me as the pad of his thumb caressed the sensitive skin just above my ankle bone. My skin hummed in response.

I had to school my features as eddies of heat whirled through me from the feel of his palm on my skin.

It's only your foot he's touching.

The stray thought set off a cascade of fantasies of my rescuer touching me in different ways.

"It's not broken," he announced, his gaze lifting to meet mine. A question lingered in his eyes, and I found the heat pooling in my belly was mirrored in his stare.

He held my gaze for a long moment, the world seeming too narrow for just us. He cupped my heel in his hand, and his thumb ran gently back and forth over my arch. He didn't look away as the pad of his thumb slid over the top of my foot.

"How does that feel?" he murmured, his voice a low, husky rumble that resonated deep within me.

"Good," I whispered, the word feeling like such an understatement for the desire building in me. His touch made my body feel alive, prickling with awareness. I couldn't help the way my eyes darkened or the hitch in my breath from just his touching my foot.

A smile played on his lips. "Good," he echoed. He continued to massage the sole of my foot with his thumbs in slow circles.

I took a deep breath and fought for composure. But it was a losing battle. I filled my lungs with his scent, and the longing inside me surged stronger with each gentle stroke of his hands.

In that moment, reality crystallized, and the realization of who he was dawned on me.

My body pulsed with recognition, and even deeper, my wolf stirred within me, a primal acknowledgment echoing the truth my mind had just grasped. A thousand unspoken promises lingered between us, awakening the deep longing I had been about to give up on.

Heat flushed over my cheeks as the undeniable truth settled in: this man—my rescuer—was my fated mate. I had found him in downtown New York right when I needed him most. I sensed the ancient spark of something deep in my bones—the assurance that he'd take care of me because I was...his.

His stare remained unwavering, filled with fierce want that made my heart soar and my body tremble, just as his touch caused a moan to slip from me.

His gaze snared on my lips, and he surged forward, claiming my mouth with a heat and thoroughness I'd somehow already known he would. I melted into him, losing myself in the heat and hardness of him. Every nerve in my body suddenly ignited.

Better than whiskey. Better than smoke.

Yet, the spiciness of his scent and taste weren't entirely dissimilar to those two vices. I'd found the perfect thing to lose myself in.

As his hands traveled up my spine, burrowing into my hair, I moaned into his mouth, suddenly feeling more than I had all night.

He pulled away, and I worried he was going to stop this, especially as I must taste of whiskey, but he surprised me as he said, "I don't know your name."

I didn't want the reality of my life to ruin this moment. It was silly, but something compelled me to answer his question with another.

I arched a brow, a challenge in my voice. “Don’t you?” He looked confused until I added, “Mate?” I licked my lips as if tasting the word, a completely new flavor I’d despaired only moments ago I’d never get to say with such relish.

I worried he’d question me more, but the heat in his eyes blazed with the same recognition. In a moment, he was shucking off my coat, and his own hit the floor next. He dragged his claws down my inner clothing, the sound of tearing fabric sending shivers down my spine.

With the flick of his fingers, he unclasped my bra, and my breath hitched, the cool air pebbling my skin. He leaned closer, teasing the curve of my breasts with a feather-light touch before his eyes smoldered. His mouth descended to suck my nipple as his hand stroked the other. I arched into his touch, my body already melting against his. Grabbing my ass, he pulled me against his body as I whimpered in pleasure at the feel of him, wrapping my legs around him.

Whether it was the liquor or my own wolf’s possessiveness rising, telling me to take what was mine, I rocked against his delicious hardness.

I want you. I need you.

As I ground against him, a deep rumble reverberated in his chest, making the slick pooling between my legs gush even more—something he smelled. My back suddenly hit the bed. He threw me into the middle of it, his bright green stare positively feral as he stared down at me.

“I want to taste my mate on my tongue,” he rasped, his green stare almost glowing in the dim lamplight. In a moment, he’d rid me of my jeans, spread my legs, kissing and nipping at my lace knickers, teasing the wet slit beneath until I whined with want. I had never been this wet before, never so needy and out of my mind with desire.

The graze of his teeth on my soft belly and the slight scrape of his slightly shifted claws at my hips were just the right amount of rough. His hands made quick work of my knickers. When his tongue finally pushed through my folds, already so slick for him, I almost came.

“Ah!” I gasped.

My mate lapped between my legs as if he were parched. The pleasure building low in my belly engulfed me as a cresting wave took me into the haze of pleasure I’d been chasing all night.

“Uh! Ah!” I cried out.

He kissed his way up my body, his big palms, slightly calloused, sliding up my stomach as if he wanted to claim every inch of me. But I needed more of him. My greedy hands squeezed him through his jeans, eliciting a deep groan, one I already wanted more of.

“You in a hurry, Darlin’?” he asked, the slight smile on his lips and the scrape of his voice sending another shiver through me.

“I need you,” I begged, and whether it was my voice or my hands already helping him shuck his jeans, he stopped his perusal of my tits and hurried to help me with his jeans and boxer briefs.

Almost delirious with want, I drank in the sight of his rigid, thick cock, and I knew this was going to be the best sex I’d ever had.

My skin felt tight with want, and I realized I was already rocking up to him, out of my mind with need in a way I’d never been before. “Please,” I purred.

His thick cock nudged against my entrance, and I looked up through half-lidded eyes at the hard lines of him, that luscious green stare as mesmerizing as when he'd stepped out of the shadows earlier. "I need you," I whined.

He cupped my ass, bringing me to him before sinking into me, inch by inch, filling me up so that I could only expel a breathless gasp.

Fuck.

My mate's eyes shuttered as he gritted his jaw, and he let out a rumble. "You're so soft, so perfect," he murmured.

"Move," I demanded, rocking my hips up, chasing that high he'd already given me.

He thrust, and I moaned, feeling the low build in my belly spark again. He pounded me against the bed, and I climbed higher. My fingers dug into his shoulders, feeling the tautness of his muscles as my nails raked down his back rough enough to leave a mark, something that made my wolf howl with satisfaction.

Mine, mine.

As he fucked me deeper and harder, my pussy clenched around him, my inner walls clenching and shuddering as another orgasm engulfed me.

"Oh! Oh!" I cried out, the shock of sensation shivering through my body.

With a primal roar, my mate found his release within me. My inner walls squeezed around him, milking every last drop he gave me. Yet, as I stared up at him, my body shuddering around him, I knew I hadn't had my fill of him yet.

Along with the physical satisfaction flooding my body, a deep relief washed over me,

so potent it was almost dizzying. I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling of safety and belonging. When I opened them and stared into my mate's luscious green eyes, I knew that everything was finally going to be all right. Magnus Blackthorn and our arranged mate bond evaporated in the heat of this very real connection with my mate.

He's here. He's real.

My heart sang that he was my salvation, and I knew, together, we would face whatever came next.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:58 pm

Lina

The morning light seeped through the curtains, casting a soft glow in the room that felt surreal after the whirlwind of the night before. I lay tangled in the sheets, the scent of spice and musk clinging to the air. It was a scent that brought a rush of memories flooding back—his touch, the heat of his body against mine, the all-consuming need and want: my mate.

As I blinked the fog of sleep away, reality suffused the warmth of last night. I turned over to see him still asleep beside me, his powerful frame relaxed, morning light dancing across his strong features. For a moment, I reveled in the gorgeousness of the man beside me—his tousled ebony hair, the way his lips were slightly parted as they had been when he'd sunk into me, the memory of his low voice, mumming, "so soft, so perfect," sent goosebumps over my skin. I squeezed my legs together as I remembered the feel of him. I'd never felt such rightness before, and I was almost tempted to climb on top of him again as I had done that the second time we'd done it, oh, and a bit the fourth time, too.

Heat cascaded through me at the thought of how amazing our nocturnal athletics had been, but I needed to face reality. I watched him, a potent blend of hope and dread knotting my stomach. Today was the day I had to face the future. I had to convince him to come back with me to Silvermoon. Presenting him as my fated mate to my father was the only thing that could save me from the arranged mate bond.

I went to open my mouth, wanting to wake him, and realized I didn't know his name. Instead, I placed a hand on his shoulder, my hand traveling up his throat, cupping his strong jaw and then his cheek. He stirred slightly.

When his eyelids fluttered open, I felt a rush of warmth flood me as his deep green eyes locked with mine, that same impossible connection stirring in my chest.

“You’re even more beautiful in the daylight, mate,” he murmured, his voice raspy and deep, making my insides tighten. A smile tugged at my lips at the promise in his tone, even as my heart clenched with the weight of what loomed ahead.

With any other bed partner in the past, I’d have thought such a line was full of bullshit, but hadn’t I just been thinking the same thing, looking at him in the morning light?

But I had to get a grip. We couldn’t live in this bed as much as I wanted to.

“Last night...we didn’t really talk, but...there’s something I need to tell you,” I confessed, the words trembling, an edge of vulnerability creeping into my voice.

Tension settled over my mate’s face, and he edged up against the headboard. “Is this about why you’re staying here?” he asked, his gaze wandering to our surroundings briefly.

For a moment, I almost got distracted by the sheer amount of muscle on display as the sheet pooled around his waist. But snapping my eyes back to his face, I nodded. “I need you to come back to my pack, the Silvermoon. I need to tell my pack about...us.” My voice trailed off, filled with hope and vulnerability. I wouldn’t usually be pressing to move forward so quickly, but time really was of the essence here.

He reached for me, cupping my cheek as he must have seen that something was weighing on me. “The Silvermoon, that’s your pack?”

I nodded, my heart racing as I felt desperation clawing at my insides. “My father’s

the alpha. You're the only one who can get him to break off the mate bond he's arranged for me in a week's time."

Unmistakable shock flashed across his face, and he drew back, his hand suddenly withdrawing from my cheek. That and the astonishment on his face told me he knew exactly who I was now. Everyone had heard of Lina Silvermoon. I wondered what pack he was from. We had business links with most packs along the East Coast. I wondered if we'd negotiated some deal with his pack that had gone south. We weren't in the best financial position after all.

Or was he afraid of going against my father, an alpha? But that didn't pair with the confidence I'd witnessed in him last night. I definitely didn't get the impression my mate scared easily.

I could see the hesitation flickering in his deep green eyes, a storm of emotions swirling just below the surface. His jaw tightened as he seemed to wrestle with something, perhaps visions of his father's wishes clashing with the pull he felt toward me.

"I can't go with you," he said, his voice steady but laced with an undercurrent of torment.

"What?" My voice came out sharper than intended, disbelief coursing through me. "What do you mean, you can't?"

"I can't go to your pack. If I'd known you were Hector Silvermoon's daughter, I'd never..." he trailed off as my face fell.

I felt like I'd been sucker-punched. If he'd known who I was, he wouldn't have slept with me, that's what he'd been about to say.

I scrambled out of bed, searching for my clothes at the foot of the bed on the floor. Likewise, my mate shot out of bed, going for his own clothes as if he couldn't be out of here fast enough.

Anger soon came to my rescue as I threw out, "What could the Silvermoons have done to your pack that would make you reject your mate?" I accused, turning a withering look as his brow knitted together.

"Your pack hasn't done anything," he said, sounding almost pained.

I laughed darkly. "Yeah, right. Then why are you looking like you just got burned?"

"Because I'm Magnus Blackthorn's son," he said, his scowl deepening as he did up his jeans.

My heart catapulted.

Stephen Blackthorn.

My fated mate was Stephen Blackthorn, Magnus's son.

The revelation left me breathless. My heart rattled in my ribcage, and a rush of heat colored my cheeks as I realized I'd slept with the man who was meant to become my stepson in a week's time. In the last few years, as the business partnerships and friendship between Magnus and my father had grown, I'd been attending Harvard University, and for whatever reason, my path had never crossed with Stephen.

It was something that seemed excruciatingly unfair, yet again, now that I knew Stephen was my fated mate. How different would things be if we'd only discovered our connection sooner? But maybe it wasn't too late.

“What if,” I said, “we spoke to our fathers? If they knew we were fated mates, we could still join our packs but with a mate ceremony between us.”

For a fleeting second, a flicker of something crossed Stephen’s features—a tightening around his eyes—but then he shook his head, resolve gritting his voice. “I can’t. The alliance between our packs has already been ratified. I have to prioritize my loyalty to my father and my pack’s interests.”

Shock and fury beat through me—“ratified,” “pack’s interests,” “loyalty to my father”—his coolness reminded me of my father telling me about the arranged mate bond he’d made for me with Magnus.

“Then what was last night?” A wave of anger surged through me, hot and fierce, mingling uneasily with the residual warmth of our shared intimacy. “Was it a lie?”

“No!” Stephen’s rugged features grew taut with frustration. “It was real. But I can’t defy my father, Lina. We can’t be together.”

Anger cloaked me. “Get out!”

“Lina,” he started, but anger fuelled my voice.

“Get out! Get the fuck out!”

Stephen dragged down his shirt, picked up his leather jacket, and bundled his shoes in his arms. I slammed the door behind him.

Reality crashed down around me, suffocating and relentless. I had held onto hope, clinging to it like a lifeline, but it had been wrenched away. I thought of how amazing it had felt as Stephen had stepped out of the shadows yesterday, confronting those thugs, but really, this feeling of powerlessness against a future I didn’t want had only

been interrupted.

Once again, there was no hope.

As I leaned back against the door, my heart hammering, my breathing coming in angry, painful bursts, and my eyes stinging with tears, I realized I was as alone as ever. Within, my wolf let out a sorrowful howl. Stephen's rejection cut her to the quick, and she curled in upon herself, feeling like she was burrowing deep down, and it would take an eternity for her to surface.

Time had no mercy, and within a week, I walked down the aisle in the grand hall of Blackthorn Villa. My father's arm felt like a vice, and my heart felt like a stone lodged in my throat. The sound of a string quartet filled the air—each sharp, shrill note slicing through me.

Crystal chandeliers hung like shimmering ice above. Velvet drapes embraced the tall windows, filtering the sunlight into gentle streams that illuminated the lavish floral arrangements peppered throughout the grand room.

Despite telling myself that I wouldn't, my gaze wandered to the one man who could have changed my wretched fate: Stephen. He stood in the front row, his gaze cold and distant. My throat tightened, and my chest squeezed. How could Stephen be right here—so close and yet so far from me?

Turning and looking to my left, I found my mother's bright blue eyes, the same shade as my own. She was the one who had kept me together this week. I reminded myself of what she'd uttered in my ear before kissing me goodnight last night, "Just because your mate bond isn't what you hoped for, doesn't mean you can't be a strong and devoted luna to your pack." With heart-wrenching clarity, I knew that she was talking from personal experience and knew that in time, at least my fate, would bring me a deeper understanding of my mother.

Up at the front of the room, as my father brought me to a standstill beside Magnus Blackthorn, I reminded myself of my mother's words. My gaze took in the gray-haired man beside me, his cool brown eyes sweeping me with a covetous look that it took everything in me not to retch at. I told myself to be as strong as my mother.

I caught glimpses of familiar faces—my packmate's smiles were strained, and beneath their false cheer was a pooling look of pity. It was that, paired with not wanting to glimpse Stephen, that had my gaze firmly glued to the officiate, one of the Blackthorn elders, directing the ceremony.

Beyond the elder and outside the windows lay manicured lawns bordered by blooming flowers—red roses, white lilies, and golden daffodils. I blinked past at the blooms—this villa and its grounds for all their refinement felt like something out of a nightmare.

As the officiant began his speech, the words flowed over me like water over a stone, ungraspable and devoid of meaning. My thoughts spiraled as I tried to grapple with the fact that this was really happening. I was about to be mated to Magnus Blackthorn.

Suddenly, a growl broke through my inattention. I turned around, expecting to see a couple of overzealous packmates, perhaps having shifted to howl their excitement. It was not something you'd expect in our high-society world, but maybe they'd been drinking.

You know how weddings can be.

But then, wolves, their coats etched with strange markings, stormed into the huge hall. Screams erupted, and some guests froze in terror, while others—Silvermoons and Blackthorns alike—started to shift, their gray coats the same as the attacking wolves, except for the totem markings the invaders had. My pulse skyrocketed.

Panic consumed the hall as packmates scrambled back from the aisle where the rogue wolves were surging. I watched as my father transformed—fur erupting from skin and bones shifting as he morphed into his wolf. A powerful growl reverberated from him, blending with the rumbles of the rogue wolves and shouts of guests, who frantically edged back against the walls.

I stumbled as fear grasped at my throat. The luxurious wedding hall had devolved into chaos, and I couldn't help but feel that the foreboding sense that had been blanketing me had been prophetic.

My shock made my reactions sluggish, and I still hadn't shifted as the rogue wolves surged toward me.

"Lina!" My mother's frantic call split the air, urging me from my stupor just as a rogue lunged toward me.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion, the rogue wolf springing at me and Magnus, who I realized hadn't yet shifted either. But then a silvery wolf leaped in front of us, a blur of sleek, rippling fur and muscle acting as a protective arc. I gasped as he took a vicious hit in his side. My chest squeezed, his overpowering spicy scent telling me exactly who he was: Stephen. His body crashed down in front of me and his father.

"No!" My scream tore through the air, resonating with anguish, but shock kept me rooted to the spot.

The rogue staggered back, dazed, and it then lunged again, teeth bared as Stephen's wolf shot up and barrelled into the rogue. Magnus's wolf collided powerfully with another rogue, but there were too many, crashing like waves around us. One of the totem-marked wolves struck Magnus, his teeth clamping onto his shoulder. The next moment, Stephen careened toward his father, mauling the rogue wolf in the side with a furious viciousness, even as his own wound seeped a steady stream of blood.

The room was a sea of screams and growls. Most of the packmates had run out of the room. The rogue wolves were going for the alphas and their immediate families. The thought had my brain finally kicking into gear.

My eyes hurried to my mother. Like me, she hadn't shifted, and she was on the floor. Just then, a brutal force crashed into my side, sending me sprawling to the floor, too. Heat radiated down my arm, and I gasped in pain as fabric and flesh tore.

Stephen's silvery wolf crashed into my attacker, forcing the totem-marked wolf away from me. Gratitude mingled with my shock as he defended me. But almost immediately, resentment needled through me. If he'd only stood by my side as any true mate would, I wouldn't even be here amidst whatever this attack was.

Quickly, I shot over to my mother. Panic punctured through me as I took in her sage green dress, covered in blood. I darted to her, picking her up off the floor and forcing her to her feet.

Suddenly, the only thing that mattered was getting my mother out of there. I hurried her toward the wall, past the rows of chairs, darting toward the main doors as quickly as I could while supporting her weight.

We were going to make it. The other rogue wolves were engaged with Stephen, Magnus, and my father.

I chanced a glance back at them as we'd almost made it to the door. In that split second, I saw four rogue wolves pounce on my father, their vicious jaws sinking into him. Despair flooded me, bringing me to a startled halt. Blood sprayed across the polished floor, splattering the chairs draped in white linen as my father let out a piercing howl and fell to the floor.

My mom startled me as she leaned closer to me. "This is your chance. Go, Lina.

Now!” She shoved me toward the door with a force that sent me stumbling. “Go!”

“No!” I cried, clawing at the ground, but she’d already shoved the doors shut behind me. Dread pounded through me as I heard the key in the lock.

I pounded on the door, but her distant scream came through the wood.

“Go!” she shouted.

I stumbled forward, anguish piercing my chest, but I was jolted out of my spiraling despair by a sharp tug at my arm. I blinked at one of my packmates, Mira, her eyes wide with urgency.

“Lina, we have to get out of here. Now!” She glanced back, fear etching her brow.

I could hear the guttural snarl of wolves from behind the door, and my heart battered against my ribcage, the instinct to run battling with the agony of leaving my mother behind. My wolf cried out in frustration at the prospect of abandoning her, but as Mira yanked me onward, panic surged. There was no time to think, only to run.

The urgency in Mira’s voice propelled me to move, and the resolution in her expression drove me on.

I ran faster and faster as if to try to make up for the way the shock had paralyzed me back there. My mother’s voice mingled with each of my hurried footsteps as if I could still hear her, propelling me into a desperate sprint, “This is your chance. Leave, Lina. Now!”

It hit me that the desperation in her voice hadn’t just been about the attack. She meant this was my chance to get away from Magnus. Thankfulness beat through my chest as I thought of her words. My heart squeezed painfully as I realized that even as she’d

been bleeding out, she'd been thinking of me.

I crashed down the cavernous hallway, my heart pounding in my ribcage. I glanced over my shoulder, every moment expecting to be pursued by those totem-marked wolves who had brought my father down.

My hands shook, my legs threatening to buckle as the gruesome image of my mother's dress, stained with blood, flashed in my mind. My parents...My parents were likely now both...But I forced the unfinished thought away, remembering the steel of my mother's blue eyes. She wanted me to get away. With instincts I didn't know I possessed, I ran with utter abandon as if those rogue wolves were clawing at my heels.

As I hurtled outside, Mira broke off to the right, running toward other packmates, but I spotted the catering van parked with its engine idling. I rushed inside and put my foot on the gas. The engine roared to life, the sound sparking hope. With trembling hands gripping the wheel, I pressed down on the accelerator, shooting forward and leaving behind everything I'd ever known.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:58 pm

Stephen

Five Years Later

Tension as heavy as the metallic tang of blood hung in the air. I leaned against the long, polished table, noting each one of my colleagues around the boardroom, visibly strained as they waited to hear the reason for Magnus's impromptu summons.

"Gentlemen," my father began from his place at the head of the table, cutting through the heavy air like the first rumble of a storm, "The Ashford Pack has just informed me of their intention to walk away from our partnership."

The Ashford Pack wasn't just a fellow shifter group. It was a vital supply chain partner for Blackthorn Corp. They operated a logistics and distribution network that provided essential resources to our product lines—primarily in pharmaceuticals. Losing them would impact not just profit margins but our entire market strategy.

Garret, the head of our logistics division, ran a hand through his hair, his agitation palpable. "Ashford asked at our last meeting about renegotiating the terms of our deal. They claim our payment for their services isn't equitable."

Magnus growled, his voice creeping to its lower warning pitch. "And I recall advising you that Blackthorn Corp doesn't give its resources away for free."

The Ashford pack hadn't asked for anything extreme in wanting to renegotiate their prices. They were only restructuring their prices to match the changing market. But, as usual, Magnus always wanted to get more than his fair share.

But the board knew better than to disagree with my father, and a murmur of agreement rippled through the room. I felt a blaze ignite at the back of my mind, telling me this was my opportunity.

With a surge of confidence, I straightened and said, “What if we offer a three-month agreement at a better rate as a trial period?”

I felt the weight of my colleagues’ scrutiny. They were looking to Magnus’s righthand man, his dutiful son, to have the solution they hadn’t thought of. At twenty-nine years old, I may be the youngest at the table, but I was the one that everyone counted on to handle every difficult deal. It was a reputation I’d carefully fostered over almost a decade of working at Blackthorn Corporation.

Garret frowned, not letting me get to the other part of my plan. “But Stephen, if we give them that rate, what will change in three months’ time?”

“In three months’ time, the deal I’ve been negotiating with a human company that possesses equivalent capabilities to handle the same distribution for us—exactly like Ashford—will be under Blackthorn’s umbrella.”

A mix of surprised expressions ran through the room. Magnus stared at me, a quiet, impressed satisfaction settling over him.

“What if this motivates their pack to act aggressively against us?” Garrett asked.

Confidence radiated from me as I assured, “If they know we have an option waiting in the wings—one that will effectively destroy their business—their leverage will disappear. They won’t kick off against someone so vital to their survival.”

Magnus’s eyes narrowed, weighing my words. After a moment, he leaned back in his leather chair, a look of respect dawning on his face. “Good work. Prepare a

presentation for the Ashford pack outlining your proposal for tomorrow. You'll head this deal, Stephen."

A wave of exhilaration surged through me as relief swept over the room. I had navigated a precarious situation, solidifying our partnership while not losing our strength.

"Thank you, Alpha," I said, masking the quiet simmer of anger always there with feigned gratitude. In the boardroom or in front of the pack, it was always 'Alpha,' never 'Father.' He insisted on it. He saw it as a sign of respect, an acknowledgment of his position. To him, it signified that I understood the weight of leadership and that I could separate personal feelings from business. Little did he know that my addressing him as Magnus was my preference, a wall I built between myself and the man who deserved the title of "Father" so little.

Magnus nodded curtly before dismissing the board. His giving me this deal running such a vital part of the company showed that his trust in me was complete—as complete as it could ever be for someone with a heart as cold and callous as Magnus's.

With the meeting adjourned, my colleagues began filing out, and I hurried to my own car. We were entertaining at our family's villa in Southampton tonight; Magnus expected me, as his beta, to be there, too. The two-hour drive out of the city was one of the few moments I got to myself.

As I drove back from the city toward the Hamptons, where Blackthorn Villa rested amidst luxurious grounds, thoughts about the past inevitably intruded. It had been five years since the attack I'd orchestrated at the mate ceremony. The scars I had were wicked. The way Victor and Ben had mauled and sliced me that day had ensured that the attack couldn't be traced back to me while deepening Magnus's trust in me. The way I'd protected him that day had meant his trust in me had gone from

strength to strength, which had been the reason for instigating such an attack in the first place.

Not the only reason.

My knuckles turned white on the steering wheel as my thoughts fell to her.

Lina.

I thought of the moment she'd told me who she was and of her proposition that I intercede with her father over the arranged match. I hadn't been able to intercede because doing so would have muddied my position and influence with my father. It was a risk I hadn't been able to take, not even for her.

Some days, when I remembered her jasmine perfume and dreamed of the soft swell and slopes of her beautiful body, paired with her commanding voice, it was the biggest regret of my life.

After all, she was very much part of the reason I'd organized the attack on the ceremony. I hadn't been able to stand by and watch her become bonded to my father. But then she'd disappeared during the chaos of the attack. An outcome that part of me was thankful for. Yet, despite five years having passed, there wasn't a single day that went past, perhaps not a single hour, where she didn't stray into my thoughts.

Too soon, the opulent décor of Blackthorn Villa appeared before me. A couple of our packmates were acting as valets, and Carson climbed into my car as I exited, the party guests for tonight already starting to arrive.

The doors to the terrace were thrown open, and already lots of elegantly dressed males and females from New York packs mingled on the terrace, the sea breeze welcome in the heat of the evening.

The garish décor of bright lights and too many flowers made me miss the understated stylishness the place had in my youth when Blackthorn Pack had been under the leadership of my mother. As I paused to look at the terrace, I could almost see my mother walking in a white linen dress. The driftwood she liked to have brought up from the beach gave an authenticity to this place, marrying into its surroundings in a way the gauzy lights and bling didn't. It was hard to see this place washed out of its character. I remember when my mother had stood at its center, greeting shifter high society to these receptions with a strong yet caring and compassionate kind of leadership.

The Blackthorn pack's original alpha had been my mother, Charlotte Blackthorn. Magnus had killed her to seize the alpha position. Although I'd never found evidence against him, it was the sole reason I was still here, working night and day to ingratiate myself into every aspect of his business and life so that I could eventually prove his crimes and destroy him. That fire had been burning in my soul for almost a decade since my mother's death. It was a fire that had been fueled by the fact that he'd almost got his grasping hands on Lina, too. No female deserved such a fate. That's what I'd told myself as I'd orchestrated the attack on their mate ceremony. But even now, as I stood on the terrace, thinking about Lina and how she'd disappeared that day was both a torment and a blessing.

Forcing myself to bury the past, I hurried upstairs to my room, took a shower, and donned a tux.

Soon, I was back down on the terrace, greeting my packmates—Blackthorns and Silvermoons—as well as the entrepreneurs and investors of other packs.

After the attack at the mate ceremony and the deaths of Hector and Miriam Silvermoon, their alpha and luna, the Silvermoons had been absorbed into Blackthorn. Their presence made many whisper about the possibility that Magnus had instigated the attack, a rumor my rogue, totem-marked wolves fanned whenever they

got the chance. I felt a pang of sorrow at the thought of Lina losing her parents—parents who had been decent, honorable leaders—caught in the turbulence of an unwarranted power struggle.

“Hi, Caleb, how’s it going?” I greeted warmly, shaking hands with the heir of the Ashford Pack, one of the males I would be presenting to tomorrow.

“Hi, Stephen. I’m good, thanks. I need to be honest, though. I’m a little surprised my father wanted us to come tonight, given our current situation.”

He was referring to the fact that Ashford Corporation was threatening to pull out of our partnership. Here we go again, I told myself. It’s time to smooth over any ruffled feathers while ensuring Magnus comes out on top, no matter how little he deserves it.

“I’m glad you both came,” I said smoothly. “My father’s actually put me in charge of renegotiation tomorrow. Perhaps you can share some of your ideas with me after dinner?”

Caleb looked surprised but visibly relaxed as he said, “I’d be glad to.”

As always, I maneuvered through business with a calm and charming demeanor. I remained focused, telling myself that in the future, when I was the head of Blackthorn Pack and our business, I wouldn’t screw the other New York packs over like Caleb’s, who, unfortunately, was a nice guy and didn’t deserve the underhanded tactics we were employing. But the same burning desire that had consumed me kept me steady now. Soon, I would pull the rug out from under Magnus. It was maintaining this facade of dutiful son and beta and sacrificing my own moral compass that was going to allow that.

Suddenly, the scent of jasmine pulled my attention, sharp and alluring. I scanned the crowd, keeping my expression neutral as emotions churned just below the surface.

Then, amidst laughter and banal chatter, my breath caught. A figure across the terrace struck me—golden hair shimmering under the lights, a confident posture that sent recognition prickling over me.

I froze, the world fading in a blur of noise and color as disbelief surged within me, my heart pounding like thunder.

Excusing myself from Caleb, I found my grip on reality slipping as I strode along the terrace, my gaze landing on a slender beauty in a long lavender evening dress, her bright stare fixed on the sea view.

Am I dreaming? How is Lina here?

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:58 pm

Lina

The afternoon sunshine painted patterns across the living room of my Philadelphia villa, chasing away the morning chill.

My daughter, Betty, a whirlwind of pink tulle pirouetted across the sheepskin rug.

“Look Mommy! Look. I’m a bird!” she shouted, arms outstretched.

The memory of Swan Lake, the ballet we’d seen last month, still held her captive. I had bought her the cutest little ballet shoes, and she kept trying to point her toes, sending her stumbling onto the soft sheepskin rug. But every day, she got steadier.

I clapped, smiling. “Beautiful, Sweetie. As graceful as a swan, nearly.” The “nearly” might have been overly generous, given the wobbles, but her face, alight with fierce determination, stole my heart.

The memory of my own mother surfaced, her voice, soft as a summer breeze, using the story of Swan Lake to help me understand my shifter heritage. “Just like the princess, one day you’ll change too. You see, we’re wolves, Lina, who can change whenever we want to.” A pang broke through me. It had been five years since the day I’d lost her and my father, and although I’d built a new life, her loss was most apparent in these beautiful, seemingly everyday moments when it hurt to think she’d never see her granddaughter.

“Mommy, I’s flying,” Betty called out as she threw her arms out wide and twirled.

“Magnificent!” I enthused, my own thoughts drifting. Betty’s joy, her embracing the story and magic, was a gift from my mother, a legacy. I imagined explaining her own shifter abilities using the story of Swan Lake, just as my mother had. The thought both soothed and stung.

I turned my gaze out the picture window. The world outside, with its twenty acres and quiet luxury, felt a million miles removed from the concrete heart of New York. Yet, I’d never taken my hand off the city’s pulse.

From here in Citrus Hill, I monitored Magnus Blackthorn and his company’s dealings. I’d built a network of wellness products, a company called Luna Remedies. We were dedicated to the ethical practice of using herbal and natural remedies. To the major pharma players, including Blackthorn Corp, we weren’t a company worth looking at. But I had built a secret empire underneath. Blackthorn didn’t know the wealth and information I was acquiring. My business was built on grey-market dealings.

Each day, I reminded myself that my journey with Blackthorn wasn’t over. From the rumors my team and I had collected, the consensus was that Magnus had organized the attack of the rogue wolves at our mate ceremony, meaning to do away with the Silvermoon Pack alpha, luna, and its heir in one fell swoop. We hadn’t found proof, but Magnus had snatched control of the Silvermoon Pack after my parents had been killed and believed I was gone. But I was like a vengeful ghost, gathering my strength and biding my time. The past remained alive, and the flames of vengeance still burned within me.

“I’s tired,” Betty said, collapsing on the rug.

“Nap time, Swanling,” I said gently, smoothing her hair.

“No!” she protested.

“But don’t you want to snuggle up and read Swan Lake?”

The magic word!

Betty danced toward the child gate at the bottom of the stairs. I lifted her into my arms, carrying her upstairs. Within minutes of starting the story, she was asleep in her bed.

Ballet really is a godsend.

I secured the safety gate at the top of the stairs, hoping to get a couple of hours of work done before she woke.

I had fled to Philadelphia after the attack, seeking refuge with a close-knit group of university friends. They were both shifters but came from a small, unassuming pack here in Philly. They had little knowledge of the ruthless shifter world I belonged to, and for a time, I’d disappeared from the shifter community, attempting to rebuild my shattered life amidst the ordinary. Accessing my bank accounts had proved impossible, with Magnus Blackthorn exerting his grip over what was left of my parents’ business and resources, and I had to start anew.

Through sheer determination, I’d built my company from the ground up. We had offices in the city of Philadelphia, but I moved my core team here to Citrus Hill a couple of years ago, which gave me much more time with Betty.

Back in the living room, my hand went to the book that opened my team’s secret office. Emily, my employee and friend, had insisted on the bookcase entrance when we’d renovated my villa to house our office. She, along with my trusted assistant, Matthew, were the only two who knew all of my secrets.

I walked into our office, my gaze instantly drawn to the back wall where six huge

screens were taken up by Emily's hacker operations. The monitors displayed a constant stream of data, Em's code the sole artwork in our otherwise white-walled space. She had an array of cacti on her desk, along with a sea of coffee cups that told me she'd either been hard at work since early morning or had pulled an all-nighter.

Mine and Matthew's desks were minimalist, with clean surfaces hosting laptops and organized piles of paperwork. The whole space was brightened by the concealed skylight, the only window so as to help keep our space secret.

"Lina, we've found something," Matthew said in way of greeting. He was wearing slacks and a pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal strong, ink-stained forearms. Matt was tall, with kind sky-blue eyes, but his usually comforting tone was a little strained.

"Is this about the Ashford Pack?" I asked.

Magnus's Blackthorn Corporation was finalizing a deal with Evervine Industry, a human company, replacing the distribution network they had with the Ashford Pack. My team and I had debated leaking this information to the Ashford Pack to sabotage Magnus but had held back. We weren't ready to take Magnus down.

Matthew frowned, shaking his head. "Emily."

My stomach clenched. Ordinarily, Matthew was the talker. The fact that he was turning to Em for help set off alarm bells—a fact further reinforced when Em left her keyboard.

"Have a seat," she said, coming over. She had on her usual work attire—a band T-shirt paired with black jeans, a suit jacket, and dark hair swept back into a long braid.

"Okay," I took a seat. My eyebrows shot up as she passed me the mug she held.

Clearly, they'd been waiting for me. She'd made me my favorite almond milk chai. I set it down on my desk, narrowing my eyes. "Just spit it out," I demanded.

"Your mother's alive," Matthew blurted out.

"Christ, Matthew!" Emily exclaimed. "I thought we were going to lead into that or—"

"What?" I demanded, the word sounding torn from my throat. Shock crashed over me, an electric wave of disbelief that sent my heart skyrocketing. I gripped the arms of my desk chair, my knuckles whitening. Hope fought with grief. "How do you know? Are you sure?" The questions spilled out in a frantic rush, desperate for clarity as my pulse thudded in my ears, thrumming with the urgency of unresolved pain.

Matthew's eyes were wide as he said, "We've seen her on Blackthorn security footage. "She's alive, Lina." His words were steady and sure, cutting through the fog of shock that enveloped me.

With his assurance, the world around me shifted, tilting off its axis. My mother, who'd always been my rock, whose absence made me ache every single day—was alive. The astounding realization filled me until I felt lit up—my mom—was still with me.

Now it started. The avalanche of words flew from Matthew in a way that was far more natural. "Remember the USB drives we planted in Blackthorn Corporation through Rufus at Hardwire?"

Hardwire was one of the tech companies Matthew oversaw to manage our tech infrastructure. Rufus was the head of the team and was a good mate with Matt. He'd had a contract setting up tech infrastructure across a number of Blackthorn Corporate offices and planted a bunch of malware in their network to monitor their

communications there.

I nodded, expectation tightening my chest.

Emily slumped into her huge swivel chair in front of the wall of monitors. With a few quick jabs of the keyboard, she said, “Here. With our bugs planted, we were able to download the surveillance footage, too. We’re not sure which building she’s in yet because of the way the footage is stored centrally, but with time, I’ll figure it out.”

It was a fuzzy image, but sure enough, my mother, Miriam Silvermoon, was framed on the screen. I blinked at the grainy video of her pacing across a small, spartan room. A few seconds later, she sat down on the single bed. I expected to feel like I’d break, but instead, a blaze of fury roared through me. I wanted to destroy something—preferably someone he loved.

At the thought, Stephen came into my thoughts. And with him, a dozen feelings fluttered through me. When I’d escaped that day of the attack, I’d kept picturing the way Stephen had shielded me from the rogue wolves. Then, six weeks later, when I’d still been reeling from my parents’ deaths, I’d been rocked to my very core when I discovered I was pregnant with Stephen’s child.

She’s not his. She’s mine.

For a long time now, I’d seen Betty as only mine. I was the one raising her. I was all she needed. Stephen knew nothing of her existence, and I was damn well going to keep it that way.

Yet still, I couldn’t deny that Stephen had always been with me. It was impossible for him not to be when every time Betty’s earthy scent washed over me, it seemed like a whisper of Stephen’s own. The thought of seeing him again had my stomach clenching and my heart fluttering.

But I quashed the thought.

“I need to get my mom,” I stated firmly, my voice cutting through the quiet of our office, my gaze hovering on my mom’s picture.

My heart squeezed at the thought of her being there all these years. Suddenly, I saw her walking through Central Park with me, a steaming cup of coffee in hand as she listened attentively. We used to do a coffee catch-up every few weeks, even when I’d been at Harvard. There hadn’t been a month in which I hadn’t had her comforting, loving presence in my life until she was just...gone. To think of all those moments Magnus had stolen from me had my burning hatred toward him soaring higher.

“We agreed we’re not ready to attack Blackthorn Corporation yet,” Emily cautioned.

I nodded. “I know, but I can reposition myself in New York and Blackthorn until we are,” I said confidently, already formulating a wild plan.

My mother’s alive.

My heart hurried with relief and hope for the first time in years.

“There is a banquet on at Blackthorn Villa, hosted by Magnus himself,” Matthew said.

An image of Blackthorn Villa flashed through my head, its grand hall decorated in white linen and dozens of bouquets of flowers. Then, the totem-marked wolves attacking, my father’s wolf fighting, and my mom on the floor, blood seeping through her pale dress.

“That’s tomorrow!” Emily exclaimed, looking skeptical. “You don’t have to go so soon. There’ll be other events.”

I shook my head, squeezing my hands into fists. “I can’t wait now that I know he has her.” My gaze crept back to the monitor, every ache that I’d been feeling since losing my mom resurfacing, leaving me feeling more fragile than I had in a long time. But I did what I always did—I focused on covering the rising tide of emotion with the fire of vengeance, always flickering within me.

“I can’t let this opportunity slip away. I need to go tomorrow,” I said, feeling a newfound urgency ignite.

Matthew nodded, his expression a mixture of determination and concern. “We’ve got your back. We’ll figure this out.”

As my heart raced with anxious excitement, a sliver of doubt crept in. “Will you two be okay with Betty while I’m gone?”

“Of course,” Emily replied, her voice steady and reassuring. “She’s used to spending a night or two with us. It’ll be fine.”

Em was right. Every few weeks, when I had a big client meeting, I left her with them. Both Emily and Matthew had rooms here in the villa. They had apartments in Philadelphia, too, but split their time between the city and here.

“You can count on us,” Matthew reassured me, watching me with his kind, blue stare and looking as if he wanted to say more.

I smiled. “I know I can. Thank you both,” I said, picking up my chai tea to prevent Matt from hugging me. If he did, I didn’t think I’d be able to hold myself together.

But I knew Betty was in the best of hands. My two colleagues and best friends were pros at grey-market dealings and running my business empire but also at feeding time, bedtime, and everything else in between.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the fluttering in my chest. Before I could overthink it, we fell to concocting a plan.

After an afternoon of planning, I had a harder job to do. I sat with Betty on the living room floor, surrounded by her colorful toys. She looked up at me, her big blue eyes so like mine and my mom's that I felt again how important it was to go to New York and save the woman who meant the world to me and who I wanted my own daughter to have the chance to know.

"Sweetheart, I need to talk to you about something important," I said softly, brushing a black strand away from her forehead. The light kiss I planted there felt more significant than I intended, tinged with a gentle sadness. This was the first time I'd be leaving her for an extended period.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to go away for a little while," I explained carefully. "But you're going to stay here with Auntie Em and Uncle Matt. I know you'll be a good girl for them, won't you?"

Her brow knitted in confusion, and my heart squeezed. She nodded slowly. "How long, Mommy?"

"I'm not sure, but I promise to call you whenever I can," I reassured her, hoping to soften my sudden absence. "And when I come back, we'll do something special!"

Her bright blue eyes lit up, and she shrieked, "We go see Swan Lake!"

I laughed, instantly promising, "Yes, we can go see Swan Lake again when I get back."

As she wrapped her tiny arms around me, I let out a shaky breath. I kept seeing the way my mom had pushed me out of those doors at Blackthorn Villa, risking her life

for mine. If there was a chance that I could bring her back and share the precious life I'd built for Betty with her, it was worth the risk I was taking.

Later, when Betty was fast asleep in bed, I packed for tomorrow's trip. I planned to drive to New York early tomorrow morning, then check into a hotel and dress for the evening.

That night, I tossed and turned, finding it hard to sleep as I went over the plan. Early in the morning, I looked in on Betty, both relieved and disappointed she wasn't awake. Part of me knew it would be easier for Em and Matt if I was already gone, but the other part already missed her and wanted to soak up every last moment. I settled on planting a light kiss on her forehead before quietly leaving.

Matthew had already brought one of the cars round to the front. The SUV was exactly what I'd planned to take. It wasn't too conspicuous or one that wouldn't make Magnus ask too many questions.

As I reached the living room, the bookcase door opened, and Matthew came out. "Tell her I want New York pizza when she comes back!" Emily called out.

"Noted," I called into Em's lair with a smile, knowing that was her version of goodbye.

Both Em and Matt had lived in New York in the past, too, and I knew they would launch into the ordinary argument later about which pizzeria was the best now that the topic had been brought up.

I stifled the pang at the thought of leaving them and my little Swanling.

Outside, I thought I'd successfully avoided falling apart, but just before I opened the car door, Matthew pulled me into a hug. Emily wasn't good at the touchy-feely shit,

as she liked to say, hence staying in the office.

“Lina, we’re only a call away if you need to talk about anything,” Matt assured me as he hugged me. “You’re not alone, okay?”

I felt those cracks in my chest again, the ones I’d been trying so hard to shore up. I nodded. “I know. Thanks, Matt.” Both he and Em knew everything about my past with Stephen, too, and I knew from the look in his kind eyes that Matt was referring to the heartache he knew I was about to walk into once again. I had entrusted them both with my daughter as well as all the secrets of my heart. They weren’t just my friends; they were my family.

With my mind sharpened by purpose, I settled in for the drive to New York. It was a four-hour journey, and I only stopped once for coffee and gas. As I crossed the Hudson, the skyscrapers of Manhattan were dazzling in the afternoon sunshine, and it finally hit me—I was home.

I spent the afternoon getting ready in my hotel room before driving out to the Hamptons. When I arrived at the opulent Blackthorn Villa, trepidation, along with the sea breeze, washed over me.

I moved past the throng of other shifters, my heart pounding with every breath, and grateful that with my lavender evening gown, strappy heels, and my long glossy locks, I blended into the throng.

In a moment, I was walking into the hall, the very one where I thought until yesterday both my parents had died. My gaze strayed to the polished floor where my father had fallen—the wood shiny as if the attack had never happened.

I shook my head, forcing my thoughts away from the past. I had to be here. Now. I took in a deep breath of salty air as I stepped through the open door onto the terrace,

where more party guests mingled. Familiar faces of the shifter elite filled the terrace, their laughter mingling with the clinking of glasses.

I felt his presence before I saw him—that unmistakable frisson of energy that had once arrested me on a dark, downtown street. My skin prickled with awareness, and this time, as I inhaled, the definite scent of spice and earthiness infiltrated my lungs.

Stephen.

He was there, standing on the terrace, exuding confidence. I could hardly breathe as I caught sight of him. My heart fluttered against my will, both thrilling and terrifying. My wolf surged up, instantly awake at his scent, too.

He strode toward me. The one stolen night we'd shared before reality intervened waltzed unbidden through my thoughts. The ache of an unfulfilled connection resonated through me, reminding me of a moment when I had thought he was the solution to all my problems.

Forcing my breath to steady, I felt the weight of my plans pressing against my chest and forced a calm over my body. My revenge was in motion, and I wouldn't allow Stephen to get in the way. And I sure as hell wouldn't allow him to stop me from saving my mother. Tonight marked the beginning of a dangerous dance, one that required all my attention.

"Hello, Darlin'," he greeted, his voice a low rumble.

The greeting could have been used by any host welcoming his visitor, but the way Stephen uttered 'Darlin' drew my thoughts back to the memory of our bodies intertwined, and a shiver of memory, heat, and wanting rushed through me. "You in a hurry, Darlin'?" he'd asked as I'd bucked my hips up to meet him, telling him I needed him with a deep longing that I'd only ever experienced once in my life.

His bright green eyes seemed imbued with the same intensity they'd had in that moment.

“Stephen,” I said, plastering on a strained smile. The tumultuous emotions within me threatened to spill over, but I couldn't show he'd gotten under my skin. So instead, I said, “It's been too long.”

He studied me for a moment, his gaze searing into mine like he was searching for all the secrets I had to hide.

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Stephen

“It’s been too long,” her deceptively simple phrase cleaved through my chest.

“Where have you been?” I demanded, my gaze scanning her for clues.

All I found was the stunning beauty she’d grown into. The silk evening gown hugged the swell of her breasts and hips, accentuating every curve.

“I moved cities,” Lina remarked as if we hadn’t been apart for five long years.

I took a sip of my drink, and the room spun. It wasn’t the whiskey but her scent, a blend of jasmine and something wild, something undeniably Lina, that had me reeling.

Yet my lungs dragged it in, demanding more, tormenting me with the memory of countless half-remembered dreams. The scent of her was enough to make me want to risk everything.

Yet, her simply being here was a risk. My gut clenched. A visceral warning buzzed through me: if I didn’t stay in control, the mask I’d worn for years was going to crack.

“You need to leave,” I growled.

She couldn’t be here—not with Magnus.

I scanned the hall for him. Urgency rang through me as I located his imposing figure in the thick of the crowd. He was engaged and oblivious. It wasn't too late. If we slipped to the terrace, I could still get her out unharmed.

My wolf's growl collected within me as he readied to defend his mate. I leaned toward Lina, my hand grazing her arm. My beast's growl lowered into a contented rumble as my fingertips grazed her soft skin.

But my touch sent her recoiling, a spark flaring in her eyes. "You have no right to interfere in my affairs," she shot back, her voice sharp and defiant.

Fire burned in those electric blue eyes, but their beautiful incandescence burned me as I absorbed the meaning of her words. I felt as if the wind had been knocked out of my lungs. She was right. I had no right. I'd abandoned any right the moment I failed to intervene on her behalf in her arranged mate ceremony. As far as she was concerned, I'd stood by, prizing my own standing with my father over her needs.

Frustration and regret pulsed through me. In a way, my self-preservation had been her destruction. Except those rogue wolves in the attack I'd orchestrated to make Magnus believe in me had set her free from the arranged mate bond.

Of course, I can never tell her that.

But the slaughter I'd caused, all to solidify Magnus's trust in me and to save her from my father, was about to be in vain if she didn't leave.

The defiance on her face, the fierce glint in her eyes, and the authority radiating from her all had my heart racing. It sparked a memory. I'd never been so alive as when I'd made love to her. The night we'd spent together still tormented me in my dreams. I recalled her bossy tone when I'd sank between her legs with torturous clarity. "Move," she'd commanded, urging me to thrust as she'd bucked up to meet me.

I gritted my jaw, struggling to contain the storm her nearness was unleashing. How could she both infuriate me and send heat through my veins, making me want to abandon all reason and pull her out into the night, where I could silence her defiant mouth with my own?

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

“Might I remind you to be more respectful?” Her beautiful lips curled in a taunting smile, and her eyebrow arched in a way that only she could make look so sexy. “After all, I am about to become your stepmother.” Her expression was a mask of audacity, her tone dripping with mockery.

Her words struck me like a blow, a betrayal that cut even deeper than my own self-reproach. I felt as if I’d stumbled into a nightmare instead of the beautiful dream her presence had ignited. The hall, with its glittering chandeliers, swam before my eyes, the very air seeming to vibrate with danger.

Suddenly, she’d pivoted away from me, her movements precise and purposeful, as she headed toward Magnus.

My heart, a violent drum against my ribs, screamed at me to protect her. But my carefully cultivated facade and my position as Magnus’s trusted beta bound me. My gaze tracked her, unable to look away.

Why is she doing this?

I watched as she sauntered up to him, her golden locks gleaming, her lavender dress a whisper of color against the formal black and white décor of the room. Everything about her was poised, from the way she moved to the way she held herself. Her gaze never wavered, and my chest felt like it was going to explode. Then, I saw the moment my father’s attention fell on her, and it took all of my control to master my

wolf.

It was only a split second, hardly a blink, but I saw the surprise on Magnus's face. His face had frozen, his eyes widening almost imperceptibly. Then, with a grace that stunned the room, Lina exclaimed. "Alpha, it's so good to see you after all this time." The greeting was designed to present the idea that she'd been invited here and hadn't just caused the scandal of the year with her surprise return.

My father took her hand, his gaze never leaving hers as he brought her knuckles to his lips. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes," he said, a practiced charmer.

A moment later, she smiled, looking up at him with an earnest expression. "It's good to be home," she replied, her voice soft yet with a seductiveness that made my blood run cold.

I gripped my glass tighter. I felt an urge to throw it. I didn't.

The blood in my body started to boil with a mixture of rage mingling with the ferocious protectiveness still flooding me. Why was she flirting with him? Was this some elaborate game of revenge? Was she testing me? Did she really think she could manipulate me, provoke my wolf, and force me to claim her?

Tension thrummed through the hall. Gasps and whispers murmured under the guests' breath, a mix of chatter about long-held grudges and unspoken desires.

Cold anger stole through me as I wondered how I was going to manage to maintain my composure when the man who was the architect of my mother's murder now had his cool, calculated eyes fixed on my fated mate.

The scent of her perfume, that intoxicating blend of jasmine and danger, filled my senses. The desire to protect her warred with the bitter taste of betrayal. I wished

more than anything that I'd succeeded in getting her out of here. Envy, a bitter, corrosive emotion, twisted within me, my wolf's dominant instinct threatening to override my self-control.

Magnus stood before her, his attention wholly captured. He towered over her, a picture of confidence, and with each word he spoke, I could see her leaning in a little closer, hanging on his every syllable as if he were the only man in the room. The intimacy of their exchange stung.

Lina angled her body toward Magnus, every gesture effortlessly inviting.

"It doesn't feel as if any time has passed. You look the same as ever, Alpha," Lina flattered.

The expression of admiration playing over her face as she looked at my father had white-hot rage blinding me. My wolf stirred, furious at the way she seemed to be vying for his attention.

"And may I say that you're even more beautiful," Magnus said, his voice as smooth as silk.

"You flatter me, Alpha," she replied, a teasing lilt to her voice that twisted the knife deeper into my chest.

Meanwhile, the whispers of the other guests rose from the terrace, their voices carried in on the sea breeze, a chorus of speculation.

"She's back."

"Lina Silvermoon's returned."

Lina Silvermoon's return would be the talk of all New York shifter society tomorrow. For years now, the gossip mill had been strengthened by my rogue wolves, who said that Magnus had wiped out all the Silvermoon family. The gossip was a ploy, but perhaps Lina believed that rumor and had returned to take what she believed Magnus had stolen from her through the only means she knew how—by convincing my father she still wanted to be his mate.

Lina's eyes roamed the room, pausing for a brief moment on some Silvermoon pack members. It was clear they already recognized her as their rightful luna, the expressions on their faces clear.

Forcing myself to act, I moved toward my father and Lina. My movements were deliberate as I tried not to show any emotion. The party seemed to fade as the pulse of my own blood pounded in my ears. My gaze was locked on Magnus's dark eyes. With a careful aside, I said in his ear. "Forgive my interruption, Alpha, but perhaps this is a conversation best continued somewhere more private?"

I fought every desire I had to look at Lina and instead kept my attention focused on Magnus. His expression was unreadable. His eyes flickered to Lina as he said, "Will you join me in my study, my dear?"

"I'd be delighted, Alpha," Lina said.

My insides churned into knots. The last thing I wanted was to secure a private audience for Lina with my father, but I had built a persona, one I was determined to preserve. Admittedly, Lina's presence made that far more challenging to keep than ever before.

Before Magnus left, he ordered, "Inform Hugo that we'll be a little longer before dinner. Tell him to give the guests more drinks and canapés. I'd like you to come join us in my study when you've relayed the message, Stephen."

So, Magnus wanted me to hear everything Lina had to say. No doubt so his trusted son and beta could weigh her words. I did my best not to betray my tension, but as I strode through the guests to relay Magnus's orders, I wanted to rip this party to shreds.

The party around me blurred into a distant hum, and in that moment, all I could see was her. The way her electric blue gaze swept over Magnus's profile as if she was delighted to be offered his arm.

I longed to reach out to her, to pull her back from the edge and into the safety of my arms. Instead, I was expected to interrogate her. With every step I took, my duty to Magnus loomed over me while the desire to protect my fated mate surged within. How the hell was I going to maintain this delicate balance before it all came crashing down?

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Lina

Magnus released my arm as he swept the heavy oak door open to his study, gesturing for me to enter. The contrast was immediate. In the banquet hall, the open doors had let the breeze in, and the air had borne a chill. Here, within the confines of Magnus's study, the air was hushed, warm from the fire licking at the hearth. "Please," Magnus said, his voice a low rumble vibrating with authority. "Take a seat."

The study itself was an assertion of power, a curated space of masculine dominance. Two Chesterfield sofas, worn and softened with age, stood before the crackling fire, offering a deceptive promise of comfort. At the opposite end, a massive mahogany desk, its surface gleaming under the soft light of a brass lamp, and floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with leather-bound tomes dominated the room. The air hummed with unspoken authority. It was the type of room where decisions were made, deals forged, and secrets kept.

It reminded me of my father's study, and a familiar wave of vulnerability threatened to overtake me. It recalled all the times my father had, with the same air of quiet command, decreed what was to be: my place and my destiny like his decree that I would enter into a mate bond with Magnus Blackthorn.

My once-intended mate.

Now, that very man sat across from me, his dark gaze assessing me. Short gray hair, streaked with a few strands of still-ebony black, framed his face, hinting at the power of youth Stephen still possessed. His jaw, as square and unyielding as his son's, was set in a line that spoke of iron discipline. Thick, bushy eyebrows, still mostly black,

gave his forehead a heaviness like a gathering storm cloud. He watched and waited, ready to dissect my words and intentions. As I sat on the sofa, its cold, unyielding design made me sit up straighter, reminding me that everything in here was a facade, including myself.

This was a test of wills, and I knew it. I steeled myself, reminding myself to use the truth that I could share to my advantage.

Just then, the door opened again, the soft click a sharp intrusion.

Stephen entered, his movements as precise and economical as always. He closed the door, shutting out the distant hum of the party, trapping us in the study's confines. Magnus didn't look at him. Stephen took up a position by the door, like a bodyguard, his stance rigid. My heart, which had steadied at my entrance, began a rapid beat against my ribs. My skin prickled. With Stephen's hands clasped behind his back, the white of his shirt strained against the taut muscles of his chest beneath his tuxedo jacket. His square jaw and straight nose mirrored his father's—a shared lineage of strength and control. He looked like the statue of some classical hero, standing there, guarding the door.

Magnus clearly trusted him, or he wouldn't have asked him to be present. But I had leverage over Stephen. I had secrets that could destroy him. Secrets that could destroy my plan, too. But if there was one thing I knew about Stephen, it was that he didn't want his father finding out about our past intimacy. I'd wager that was why he'd been so eager to get me out of here earlier. He'd been worried about me revealing the secret I had over him to Magnus. But he could relax. As long as he kept quiet about us, so would I.

I turned my attention back to Magnus, suddenly aware of his scrutiny. I knew it was wise to give him as much truth as I dared. His dark brown eyes, like polished mahogany reflecting the firelight, searched me, already trying to detect the lies I was

about to tell.

“I still can’t believe you’re here, Lina,” Magnus began, his voice far less emotive than it had been in the hall, where his charm had been on full display. “After all these years. The day of the attack, my packmates searched for you, but there was no trace.”

His words hung heavy in the air. He had believed me dead. I forced myself to meet his gaze, maintaining an unyielding front.

This was my moment. To convince him I was back to reclaim what was mine—without being a threat.

I nodded, striving for a tone that was respectful but resolute. “That day, my mother threw me out the hall, screaming at me to run. She locked the doors to stop me from going back to help her.” I swallowed, blinking back the sudden sting of tears, allowing the memory of that horrifying moment to pool in my mind, a raw vulnerability I let him see. “I wanted to go back. She was bleeding, but Mira, one of my packmates, found me in the corridor and told me to run. I remember coming outside with her, and then, he took me.”

“Who?” Magnus asked, his voice low, his eyes narrowing.

“A male shifter,” I said, forcing a tremble into my voice. “A rogue wolf.”

“One of the Totem-marked wolves?” Magnus pressed, the question sharp.

I shook my head. “They were plain gray.” I knew I couldn’t pin this on the rogue wolves who had attacked the mate ceremony as they were likely Magnus’s men.

“Where did they take you?” Magnus asked.

“I don’t know. I was blindfolded and tied up. He and some other shifters bundled me into a van.”

“How long was the drive?” Stephen’s clipped voice, laced with a quiet intensity, sliced through the silence, making my nerves tingle. He had moved closer. His tall figure now loomed over me from the end of the sofa. His expression was controlled, masking whatever thoughts and emotions churned beneath. I sensed his anger, and I had to tread carefully to ensure that I didn’t betray any feeling toward him, anything that might alert Magnus to the secret about our shared past.

“A few hours, I suppose,” I said, my voice wobbling slightly. “I don’t know the exact time it took—I was bound and blindfolded,” I repeated.

“What did they want with you?” Magnus asked.

“To ransom me to my parents,” I said. “But when they heard they had been killed, their plan changed.” I took a steadying breath, knowing this was the moment to lean on the truth to give my fabrication some credit. “They tried to use me to access funds from my mom and dad’s accounts.”

Magnus’s attention sharpened. “How—did they take you to a bank?”

I shook my head. “No, they had a tech guy who used my knowledge of my father’s accounts to try to hack into them,” I said.

“How many years ago was this?” I definitely had Magnus’s attention now. Because Emily had tried to hack into my parents’ bank accounts a few months after their deaths. We’d abandoned the operation as we’d been detected by Blackthorn’s security team both times. Pulling funds out into our own accounts had proved too risky.

“Early on, a few months after my parents passed,” I answered.

“Did they try again?” Magnus asked, his attention razor-sharp.

I frowned, pausing. “Yes, about a year of being with them, the hacker came back, asking to check the bank account details again.”

Magnus looked reflective, his gaze snapping to Stephen for a moment before he centered it back on me.

I thought I caught a flicker of disbelief in his expression. “When did you escape?” Magnus asked.

“Four months ago,” I said.

“How did you get out?” Stephen asked.

“I faked an illness, and they brought a doctor in. I managed to shift. I surprised the guard and ran like hell.” I paused, allowing a flicker of defiance to ignite in my eyes. “It wasn’t easy, but—”

“Did you get a look at the building?” Magnus interrupted. “Do you know where it’s located?”

“It was an old power station on the river in Philadelphia.”

“An old power station?” Stephen echoed, his gaze narrowing, his jaw ticking slightly. “The conditions you were held in must have been basic.” He was definitely calling me out on my bullshit.

I wasn’t going to let him. It was time to let my own defiance come out. I couldn’t

allow him to crack my facade. I let the defiance pool in my eyes, and I stared him down. “It wasn’t the Ritz, by any means. But I had a mattress and a bucket and a hot meal on a good day.”

I let it show in my voice—the rage and indignation. Yesterday, Matthew had planted a few signs of occupation in the old power station that my shadow company owned, corroborating my story—right down to the mattress and bucket I claimed to have used. And, although my shadow company’s network consisted primarily of human employees, I knew a handful of shifters who had been willing to help me leave their scent around the few Philly buildings Matthew had planted evidence in. It made me feel secure, and I let the anger I felt toward Stephen, daring to try to pick holes in my story, show. It was the kind of anger I’d have toward captors who had held me for years.

A muscle ticked in Stephen’s jaw. He turned his gaze to Magnus. I thought he was about to seek his father’s approval to continue his line of questioning, but he surprised me as he blurted out, “I’ll go to Philly tomorrow and see what I can find,” he said, the words clipped—a promise of action. I sensed the anger rolling off him in waves.

“You will await my orders.” Magnus ground out, his voice a low warning. His thick brows scowled as he shot a look at his son. Stephen seemed to get the message, snapping his jaw shut and returning to his position by the door, as still and silent as a statue.

A surge of satisfaction shot through me that Stephen hadn’t succeeded in rattling me.

After a weighty moment of dangerous quiet, where it took all of my willpower not to squirm, Magnus finally shot another question at me. “When did you escape?”

“Four months ago,” I said, realizing he’d already asked me this. He was testing the

consistency of my story and whether it remained the same under pressure. Anxiety coiled in my gut.

“Is that so?” Magnus’s tone lifted slightly, something sinister lurking beneath.

I willed myself to hold his forceful stare, steadying my breath.

He continued, “What I don’t understand, Lina, is why your kidnappers didn’t reach out to me to ask for a ransom for your return?” He paused for a moment and added, “Or why it’s taken you months to come see me?”

I knew without looking somehow that Stephen was as rigid as when he’d first entered the room. An infuriating urge to look at him shot through me, but I forced my attention to remain where it belonged. “I wanted to at first. After all, the day the rogues kidnapped me, both you and your son defended me.” I allowed myself a glance at Stephen, my skin prickling with a mix of acknowledgment and trepidation.

Stephen’s bright green eyes flared, suddenly as hard and cold as ice.

I feigned a nod of gratitude at him. “I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you both. When I got out, I was so glad to hear you were all right...” I added, my gaze slipping back to Magnus, allowing myself to flush slightly as I broke eye contact.

“But then, both my kidnappers’ gossip and the rumors about the attack after I escaped gave me pause.” I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “I don’t doubt your integrity, Alpha—”

“Don’t you?” Magnus shot back, his voice suddenly sharp. His eyes bored into mine. “It sounds like you have your suspicions.”

My heart beat with alarm. I hadn’t expected him to go easy on me, but having the full

force of Magnus's displeasure was potent. This was the test. The question I had built my entire return around.

I didn't back down, holding his dark brown stare. "Forgive my bluntness," I apologized, "but I came here tonight because I had to ensure that Silvermoons saw me to protect myself." I let a bit of my strength show in the way I lifted my chin up. "My parents died protecting me and our pack. My father raised me to ask tough questions and to assess threats. So, I came here tonight to ask you to tell me that you had no involvement in the attack."

Magnus studied me, his expression unreadable. The firelight flickered across his face, casting shadows that deepened the lines of his disapproval. My own vulnerability was as genuine as it was a calculated tool. I didn't have proof, but I had very real suspicions that he had planned that attack. But my survival depended on convincing him I didn't know just how crooked he was. Now, he was trying to assess how much of his shadowy dealings were known to me. I had revealed my determination and my grief, and, most importantly, enough of the truth that my story had a firm foundation.

"Your father raised you to ask tough questions," Magnus repeated. "Not your mother?" A flicker of something—suspicion?—danced in his eyes. For a horrible moment, I thought I'd said something that betrayed I knew she was alive. But I hadn't. I tried to slow my breathing and ensure my heart rate was even. No doubt, he was trying to trip me up.

A thoughtful look fell over my face. I had to be careful. I needed to sound both grief-stricken and strong. "My mom wasn't a strategic thinker like my father was. Don't get me wrong, she was a wonderful luna, but since the attack, since I was taken," I let the vulnerability thicken my voice. "I know that only strong leadership can ensure a pack's safety. And it was my father who taught me to think analytically."

Magnus weighed my words and then said, "Your father, Hector, was one of my

closest friends. I swear that I had nothing to do with the attack that took your parents' lives." I didn't break eye contact even though my skin crawled as everything in me told me he was lying to my face. After all, he'd said, "parents lives," and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was holding my mother captive.

I did the last thing I wanted to do and feigned acceptance. "Thank you, Alpha," I said.

He nodded, a small, almost imperceptible movement.

I held his stare, keeping my own emotions firmly in check. The final part of my plan had to be enacted so I could reposition myself from within our packs. "There's one other matter I'd like to raise with you, Alpha. It was my parents' wish for me to be luna and unite our two packs. Now that all is right between us, I would like to honor their wishes and renew our mate bond."

I was the grieving daughter, asking Magnus to honor his friend's wishes. He couldn't possibly say no, could he?

"My dear, we need not discuss such matters so soon. After all, with you but recently escaped from the rogues, it is perhaps best to wait before you commit to such a big decision."

I shook my head. "I don't need to think about it," I assured him. "My parents' death and being kidnapped have proved to me that our packs need strong leadership now more than ever. I want to stand by your side and ensure our packs' legacy."

Magnus's dark stare took on a greedy quality as he watched me. "The fact that you're already prioritizing our pack's needs over your own shows what a strong luna you'll be. Nothing would give me greater happiness than renewing our mate bond," he agreed.

I didn't miss that he spoke about our packs as if they were one. Surely, with me back, it would be more diplomatic if he spoke of them as separate entities. But Magnus had conjoined the Silvermoon and Blackthorn Packs for five years, and I knew he didn't want to relinquish what was already in his control.

I smiled, trying to convince him that I felt warmth at his decision rather than the ice-cold chill in my blood as he leaned forward to take my hand, bringing it to his lips as he had in the hall to plant a kiss across my knuckles. But the kiss against my skin reminded me of the cold horror I'd once felt before as I stood beside this man at the altar. It took everything in me not to shudder or to wipe the back of my hand against my dress.

From the covetous gleam in his eyes, I knew he was pleased by my request. After all, securing our mate bond would legitimize his claim over the Silvermoon Pack. Earlier in the banquet hall, I'd heard the whispers and gasps and caught the looks from the Silvermoons. I could tell from the way some of the packmates had looked that they were one rallying cry from fighting against Magnus's rule.

"You say you want to be a strategic thinker like your father, my dear. That is a praiseworthy goal. You interned at your father's company years ago, didn't you?"

"I did," I agreed, keeping my answers short and demure. I'd also studied Business at Harvard University, but I wasn't going to oversell my skills to Magnus.

"Our pack's strategic interests are best understood and developed from within Blackthorn Corporation. I'd like you to shadow Stephen at work starting tomorrow. He'll catch you up on what partnerships and deals our pack is moving with currently, which should make you feel more at home and help you get the lay of the land."

I could read between the lines: Magnus intended to test my abilities and loyalty by having Stephen lurking as I worked at Blackthorn. I was his student, but the

important thing was that I was getting into Blackthorn exactly as I'd wanted. Whichever building Magnus placed me in, I was one step closer to finding out where he was holding my mother.

The fact that he was putting Stephen on my tail was a minor complication. The way he'd grilled me throughout this little interview showed that he was as cold and callous as his father. But at least I had enough leverage over Stephen. With the secret about our past intimacy, I reckoned that should push come to shove, I could easily force him to keep his mouth shut.

But the dark and calculating look simmering in Magnus's eye reminded me that there was nothing this man wouldn't do to get what he wanted. As I returned to the party with him, I knew I was walking a precarious line between truth and deception and that any misstep could cost me everything.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:58 pm

Lina

The morning light spilled through the panoramic window of the Blackthorn Corporation high-rise, illuminating the sleek, modern office. A hum of activity surrounded me—clattering keyboards and soft conversations—the air thick with the scent of fresh coffee and polished surfaces. Today marked my first day of “work,” a term I used loosely, given the stealth mission I was really here to accomplish: find where my mother was and break her out.

I had barely slept the night before, the thought of the banquet swirling in my mind like an uninvited guest. Magnus Blackthorn’s announcement of our impending mate bond reverberated in my ears, a promise I loathed. I had spent years fleeing the constraints of my father’s wishes, and now I was willingly giving away my freedom.

Walking through Blackthorn Corporation, I reassured myself that it was only an act. It wouldn’t come to that. I’d discover where my mother was, and we’d both get out of the city this time and away from Magnus Blackthorn forever.

A secretary—a female Blackthorn shifter I recognized from last night’s banquet—Ella, showed me toward my office, a corner space with an expansive view of the city—status wrapped in glass and steel. But all focus faded the moment I caught sight of the man seated behind the desk inside: Stephen Blackthorn.

My gaze snapped to the desk on the opposite side of the room. Magnus had said I would be shadowing Stephen, but I hadn’t banked on having to share an office with him. Stephen was dressed in a shirt and slacks. His powerful frame was accentuated in the clean-cut lines, and his dark hair was tousled just enough to give him an air of

roguish charm. My heart raced as familiar memories of our night together clashed with my current reality, fueling the resentment I tried to suppress.

“Is everything all right, Ms. Silvermoon?” Ella stammered.

I forced a smile. “Great, thanks Ella. Please, call me Lina.”

Her smile reached her eyes this time, and I felt how essential it was going to be to make allies if I were going to survive working at Blackthorn in such close proximity to my enemy.

Because that’s what Stephen was, I reminded myself. The fact that he’d been invited to last night’s interrogation suggested he was deep in Magnus’s trust; for all I knew, he knew my mother was imprisoned. He was as much my enemy as his father was.

Beyond that, he had rejected me five years ago. If he hadn’t pushed me away back then, wouldn’t everything be different? If he had intervened with my arranged mate bond with Magnus in the first place, I wouldn’t be leading this double life, and my mother wouldn’t be a prisoner. And although I loved my daughter and being a mother, Stephen’s rejection and abandonment led to me being a solo parent.

Yes, Stephen has a lot to answer for.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed down this churning whirlpool of resentment deep into the pit of my stomach and pushed back the door to the office.

“Good morning, Lina,” Stephen said, his voice clipped but looking up at me.

“Stephen,” I said, trying to force a similarly brusque tone. I went to the glass desk on the other side of the room, willing my heart rate to stop its damned dancing. A hint of Stephen’s spicy cologne paired with his natural earthiness teased me, a potent

reminder of the desires I needed to crush.

“Or would you prefer, Stepmother?” he said after a moment.

I willed myself not to react. “I think Lina’s fine,” I said, sitting down at my desk before catching his eyes. “For now.”

His lush green eyes hardened, and my gaze went to the files on my desk, focusing on what I was supposedly here for.

I opened the folder. “So, what are we working on?”

“Magnus wants a report on the Ashford deal by the end of the day. Familiarize yourself with the financials and distribution network,” he said, his eyes assessing me with that look I was growing familiar with—like I were a puzzle he’d crack.

“Of course.” I bristled at having to take orders from the man who had abandoned me all those years ago. But his scrutiny only fueled my resolve to play the part I’d committed to. “And the rest?” I asked, my tone crisp as I shifted my focus to the other files on my desk, trying to reduce the memory of how he’d spurned me to nothing more than a footnote on a ledger.

“Contain details of our investors for the various pharmaceuticals we manufacture. I’d like you to familiarize yourself with each one, as there’s an investment round coming up. You’ll have to learn fast,” he warned, “the funding round Magnus wants you to attend is in under a week.”

I nodded, my attention already turning to the reading assigned. Yet as Stephen’s spice and earthiness infiltrated my lungs, even here on the other side of the office, the past crept back in. Stephen’s rejection of me rang through my mind. His deep-seated betrayal echoed through the quiet, burrowing into my chest like thorns.

My fingers curled around the papers I was reading, scrunching the corners. I forced my grip to loosen. I had to be sharp to navigate this treacherous landscape. Emotion would only endanger my mission. I concentrated on Blackthorn's deals, recalling every detail I had learned over the last few years. I was well-equipped to handle the numbers and strategies, and I had to rely on that knowledge despite the undercurrent of resentment flaring in Stephen's presence.

When it got too much, I spent an inordinate amount of time at the printer, "grabbing files," even though Ella offered to get them for me. I made small talk about the deals with Ella and the other employees who passed by. Annoyingly, the nearest photocopier was in the line of sight to our office, and every time I lingered there, I'd glance over only to find Stephen's eyes on me.

The couple of times I managed to slip away without him—to the break room or to the bathroom—he just so happened to have the exact same need at the exact same moment. It was clear that Stephen's shadowing was going to be very literal. By the end of the day, I hated that I clearly wasn't going to get to take any scenic wanderings around the building by myself.

Days bled into one another, reading files, attending meetings, and working on presentations, all relentlessly with Stephen. Each interaction was a careful maneuver where we tried to gauge the other's intention. I tried to keep a veneer of professionalism in place, but I could feel him constantly assessing me, waiting for me to slip up so that he could haul me before Magnus and reveal me as the enemy I was.

And always, at the back of my mind, the haunting thought of my mother's captivity lingered—her safety hung in the balance of every interaction I had with Stephen. The weight of our shared secrets tightened around my chest, strangling any chance I had of letting my guard down.

One day, as we were working on ideas for the upcoming investor's meeting, I piped

up, “I think we should add Connor Hamilton to the investors coming.”

“Hamilton’s already got all his skin in Valace and Platel. He’s not going to be up for funding us,” Stephen replied from his side of the room.

I knew he was basically rolling his eyes by the note of impatience in his tone. Something I was mostly screened from, thanks to the leafy and tall plants I’d gotten for my desk. I had placed the leafy tall plants on my desk as a buffer, hoping they would screen me off from Stephen and reduce the resentment bubbling up every time I caught sight of him. They formed a living wall that helped me maintain some semblance of focus. Yet, even with the greenery encasing me, I couldn’t help but notice how the lush color of the leaves evoked the shade of Stephen’s eyes, sending a shot of frustration through me.

“Hamilton’s pulled out of Platel. The animal trials didn’t pass.” I informed Stephen.

“What’s your source?” Through my living wall, I caught his look of suspicion. Thanks to my shadow company, Platel was old news, but I had doubled down on finding a source I could share and came up with a small journal article on the drug trial that Platel hadn’t managed to hush up.

“I’ll forward you it.” I attached the article to an email.

Stephen’s suspicious look only deepened, and he shot up. “I need to stretch my legs, anyway.” In a moment, he was beside me, leaning over to read the article on my screen. “The high levels of cortisol encountered in the test subjects show the drug requires more testing before it can be approved for human trials.” I’d highlighted the scientist’s name, the lead on the trials currently running with our competitor.

“This is...brilliant,” Stephen said.

“Thanks—” I managed, disoriented by the compliment. His eyes continued to run over the line in the journal I’d highlighted, still engrossed in checking my findings. He leaned closer to read the article on my screen, his fingertips brushing against my forearm where I leaned on the desk. It was just a fleeting touch, yet it sent an electric current coursing through me.

I caught the subtle change in Stephen’s complexion, a flush creeping across his cheeks as he tried to maintain his composure. Just as quickly as it had happened, he withdrew his hand, but the warmth where our skin had connected lingered.

The next moment, Stephen’s lush green eyes fell on me, and the heat in his stare had my head spinning. But before I could dwell on the familiar pull between us, Ella, our assistant, stepped into the room. My stomach bottomed out as disappointment flooded me. My wolf whined, pacing within me, eager for the connection that was slipping away.

“I have the final details for Friday’s presentation,” she announced.

Stephen snapped out of the moment. “Thank you, Ella.” He took the papers before returning to his desk. His voice was lower, almost scratchy, and sent a shiver down my spine.

As he sat down, he said, “I’ll call Hamilton and invite him to the investor’s meeting.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. But I was still reeling from the look of desire in his eyes.

It doesn’t mean anything.

Then why do I feel so warm?

Stephen was looking at me through the wall of leaves. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, fine.” Why was my voice so husky? “I need a water,” I said, my tone clipped as I stood up. I turned my back on Stephen, forcing myself to walk with purpose toward the door. As I exited, I took a deep breath, grounding myself in the reality of my mission.

From the break room, through the glass wall, I watched Stephen reclining back in his chair, his handsome profile silhouetted against the afternoon light filtering in through the window, and my traitorous heart beat a frantic rhythm. Sipping my water, I reminded myself that I mustn’t let our past history distract me. Returning to work, I kept my focus razor-sharp and poured all of my effort into the upcoming investment presentation we had in two days.

A couple of evenings later, Stephen and I wrapped up our report in the conference room after a very successful meeting in which we’d secured all the investment we’d wanted.

“I think that’ll do for the night,” Stephen said as he closed his laptop. Likewise, I was slipping my laptop away. The vibe tonight was almost amicable as we walked out of the conference room, which set me on edge.

Stephen hit the button to the elevator. “You were great in there today, Lina,” he said.

“Thanks.”

My fingers tapped nervously against my thigh as I watched the shifting numbers above the doors light up, the elevator ascending.

Tension swooped through my stomach. The oppressive thought of being in the small, enclosed space behind those doors grew heavier—a dread I knew all too well.

It's just an elevator ride. You'll soon be in your car.

But the mantra felt hollow. Just thinking about the confined space already had my breath shallow. But it wasn't just the small space that was setting me on edge. It was Stephen's compliment. A mix of confusion and conflict threaded through my veins as I thought of how brilliant Stephen had been in the conference room today, too.

During the presentation, Stephen spoke with a magnetism that ensured everyone was captivated. I swallowed, my throat tightening as I admitted to myself how drawn I'd been to him, whether I liked it or not. It was something in the way he carried himself—confident and assured—that made it difficult to concentrate. Every time he spoke, the authority in his voice cut through the room, but it was the quick flashes of warmth in his eyes when they landed on me that ignited a longing I struggled to ignore.

“Lina?”

Shit. He said something again.

“Sorry?” I asked.

“You can follow up with Hamilton next week if you'd like,” he said.

I blinked, surprised. It was an olive branch. I had secured Hamilton's funding. It was my information that led to including him in the round, and Stephen was giving me the credit I deserved: a client of my own to handle.

I tried not to let it mean too much. “Thanks. Sure, I'll call him Monday.”

“You all right? You seem distracted,” he said, his gaze searching mine.

“Yeah, fine,” I replied, keeping my voice cool and detached.

He frowned, taking in my fingers, still tapping nervously against my thigh. “You can talk to me if there’s something on your mind.”

Awkwardness swam through me, curdling with the resentment that was never far away. Perhaps it was my agitation, the thought of the enclosed space I was soon to be ensconced in, but I snapped, “Talk to you?”

He looked taken aback by my tone for a brief moment. Then, he more gently added, “Of course. I care about you, Lina.”

Even though I felt the charged moment, I pushed past it. His gentle tone had the opposite effect he’d intended, and the bitterness bubbled up in my chest until I couldn’t hold it back. “Let’s be crystal clear—it’s only business between us, nothing else. After all, it won’t be long before I’m your stepmother.”

A shadow of hurt flickered in his eyes.

He nodded slowly, a subtle tension threading through his posture.

Finally, the elevator reached the fiftieth floor, and we got in. He pressed the button for the basement car park, the silence thick and awkward as the doors closed behind us.

The elevator began its descent. The quiet in the small space felt grating, but I was determined to maintain the line I’d just drawn between us.

But then, the lift reached the eleventh floor and lurched.

My stomach somersaulted, the sound of grinding metal setting my teeth on edge, and

the elevator ground to a shaky halt. The lights flickered, and we were plunged into darkness.

I gasped. “What’s happening?” I hated the unsteadiness of my voice.

“Just a power outage, I think,” Stephen’s voice was firm, cutting through my panic for a moment.

He tried the emergency button. “Hello? The elevator’s broken down. Can anyone hear me?”

The silence ensuing on the other end had my heartbeat skyrocketing.

The darkness around me seemed to stretch and grow while the space seemed to press in on me. Suddenly, my heart was in my throat.

“It’s just a technical glitch,” Stephen’s voice sounded again. “They’ll have it sorted in no time.” I could hear the certainty in his voice, as if he were trying to reassure me, but he sounded far away.

My back hit the elevator wall, and it was then I realized my breath had started to quicken, and I was shaking. Stephen’s voice had sounded drowned out because my breathing was so loud.

I knew exactly what was happening, but it didn’t help. The darkness suffocated me, as did the small space. It had been years since I had suffered a panic attack, but as the paralyzing wave of terror hit me, I recognized the monster from my childhood.

Suddenly, I was a girl, and my father was pushing me into a small, windowless room. His shout boomed through my head, “You’ll stay in there until you learn your place!” He’d slammed the door behind him, the key turning in the lock, and my panic had

clawed through me.

“Please,” I begged, the words coming from my throat as if being dragged out of my airways. “Please. No.” I was back there, in that small room, unable to get enough air into my lungs.

A firm touch on my arm jolted me from my panic. “It’s okay, Lina. You’re okay.”

Stephen’s hand slipped into mine. Then he reached for my other hand. No, I’d grasped onto his other hand. I was squeezing both his hands as if they were the only thing keeping the darkness from taking me. Even in the pitch black, I reckoned my vision was already tunneling, just like it used to when I was thrown into that small room as a kid; whatever misdemeanor my father had to discipline me for, the punishment was always the same. This little room, where I inevitably passed out in.

The panic slashed through me, taunting me that it wouldn’t let me out of its clutches.

Stephen squeezed my hands right back, and although the warmth of his touch shouldn’t be comforting... it was. The familiarity of his scent, earthy and spicy, swirled around me, grounding me, and his gentle, commanding tone found me,

“Breathe, Lina. Breathe with me. In....and out...In.... and out....”

For a long time, there was only Stephen’s breath mingling with mine. For a long time, all we were was our breath.

But after a while, the darkness and small space didn’t feel threatening anymore, but...comforting because the darkness was full of Stephen now. His breath, his warm, gentle hands in mine, and his earthy scent wrapped around me.

My death grip had eased, and as I opened my palms, his thumbs began to massage

circles in the center of my hands.

The feeling sent a jolt of awareness rushing through me, my skin tingling with anticipation instead of panic.

“How does that feel?” he murmured, his voice a low growl, and instantly I was caught up in another memory. But this was a good memory. Or it was now, as all I remembered right now from the night we met was the heat that was pooling in me again, along with the jolt of recognition of who Stephen was to me: my mate.

“Good,” I’d whispered, and giving myself to this moment completely, I dared to whisper. “Good.”

“Good,” he echoed, continuing to massage the center of both of my palms in slow circles, just as he had massaged the arch of my foot the night he’d helped me back to my motel room.

The last rational part of my brain told me to stop this. There were so many reasons why we shouldn’t give in to this pull between us, but the same fierce want that had awoken years ago now trembled through my body.

Just then, the elevator jolted, the sudden movement causing me to stumble into his chest, and all at once, I was pressed up closely against him, the feel of his muscles against my breasts sending a jolt of desire straight to my core. My hands curled around his arms, gripping his biceps for support. He’d grabbed hold of my arms protectively, drawing me nearer, and I felt his heartbeat pounding against my own rapidly beating heart.

All the want that had built over the last couple of weeks while working together rushed up, and I murmured, “Stephen.”

In an instant, Stephen cupped my jaw, his kiss a slow, exploratory one as his lips asked wordlessly whether I was okay. I hadn't even known I needed this gentleness, but I melted into him, telling him I was and that with him, I felt safe.

There was nothing but the heat of his mouth against mine, a connection that sent shockwaves along my skin. The games of control and the secrets I had to hide were swallowed by the dark, too. All that remained was the heady mix of the taste of him on my tongue. It mingled with the memory of our night together, and time telescoped until I felt as if we were suddenly back in that dark motel room.

My wolf roared within me.

Him, him, him.

Mine, mine, mine.

She loved the primal quality of the darkness, feeling as if she were in a den in the earth, with only hunger and heat blanketing us.

As his teeth grazed my bottom lip with a perfect blend of teasing and urgency, I gasped, needing more. I nibbled back, our tongues dancing in a slow rhythm that felt both familiar and excitingly new. The intoxicating spice and earthiness of him that I'd been battling for weeks now enveloped me, and I was lost, drowning in the scent, taste, and feel of my mate, suddenly never wanting to leave this place.

Stephen

When Lina's fear had blossomed, I'd rushed to her side, intending only to offer comfort. But the moment her breathless whisper—"Stephen"—escaped her lips, laced with such raw want, it had shattered my control. Within seconds, my lips were on hers, craving the connection, needing to assure myself that she was okay.

As Lina's beautiful lips opened to me, it was like a match striking kindling. The hunger I'd worked so hard to keep at bay ignited with searing intensity, coursing down every nerve ending and filling me with insatiable need. Protectiveness charged through me like a jolt of electricity, compelling me to wrap my arms around her, drawing her closer until every inch of space between us was obliterated.

My wolf, who had been prowling just beneath the surface, restless since her panic had erupted, surged forth—driven by the primal instinct to be close to our mate. I felt the needs of my beast mingle with mine, and we both wanted one thing: to drink down her greedy moans as I marked her with our claws.

My breath grew ragged as Lina pressed her lower body against mine, her softness and heat pressed against the hardness already straining through my pants. She'd followed my commands earlier, matching her breaths with mine, but now, as our panting breaths mingled, the other commands I wanted to give her filled my thoughts. I imagined pushing her against the elevator wall, her legs wrapping around my waist as I urged her, "Open for me, Darlin'."

She'd obliterated the careful facade I'd maintained the last couple of weeks, but as she quivered beneath my kisses, I couldn't find it in myself to give a damn. I wanted

her, plain and simple. The thought sent a thrill through my body, emboldening me to tighten my hold on her locks, dragging her hair down so that she tilted her mouth up to mine more, my fingers gliding possessively down her exposed neck.

But just as I felt like we could tumble into something more—something raw and all-consuming—the sudden hiss of the metal doors sliding open shattered the moment. A group of repair workers appeared in the doorway, flashlights cutting through the darkness with blinding beams, ruining our sanctuary.

“You all right, folks?” One of the maintenance crew asked.

“Fine, thanks,” I ground out, having to stifle the protective urge to draw Lina into me, wanting to shield her from their eyes. In the light, her lips looked beautifully bruised, and her hair was tussled.

“I’m taking the stairs,” Lina blurted before barreling out of the lift and past the maintenance team.

I followed her, the need to protect her still riding me hard.

“Lina?” I called after her. “Wait a moment.”

She paused, and we both stopped, catching our breath as the air around us thickened with unspoken words and lingering heat. In the quiet of the corridor, the moment felt loaded as if anything might still happen. But then, Lina pushed through the door to the stairs, and I hurried after her.

Once in the stairwell, she turned around. “Can we just...forget that happened?” She couldn’t meet my eyes. The distance she placed between us felt like a chasm, but I felt how right she was.

“Yes, that’s for the best,” I agreed.

Lina’s gaze snapped to mine now, and whatever she saw there only caused her resolve to strengthen because she looked even more distant. “See you Monday, Stephen.” Her tone was clipped, devoid of warmth, but I still heard the way she’d uttered my name in the darkness.

“See you, Monday,” I echoed. The familiar weight of our strained dynamic settled between us as if another presence were here, stifling us.

It is—Magnus’s.

My father’s presence weighed down with all the force it always did, smothering all chance of a life with my mate. I’d tasted her sweetness again, but I had to remind myself that life wasn’t mine. I let Lina’s footfalls fade as the distance opened up between us.

I regretted losing control back in the elevator, allowing my instincts to guide me in ways that didn’t make rational sense. I reminded myself that the cold fire of vengeance against Magnus was the one that fueled my life, not the passionate blaze that had consumed me in the elevator.

Once alone, I descended the stairwell. By the time I entered the parking lot, Lina’s car was gone. My resolve not to involve myself with her was once more in place. I couldn’t jeopardize Magnus’s trust in me.

Yet, as I drove back to my apartment in the city, the lingering memory of our encounter in the darkness flickered to life within me, teasing me with whispers of how desperately right it had felt. My heart still pounded with the furious protectiveness that her fear had ignited in me. I knew deep down, alongside my quest for vengeance against Magnus, I’d stop at nothing to ensure Lina was protected.

Friday night loomed ahead as I arrived at Club West, where the weekend buzz hummed quietly. Magnus was back in town, and I had a meeting with him. I ordered two Manhattans, my father's drink, partially to steady my nerves but also to remind myself of the bond I was expected to honor.

When Magnus arrived, the *maître d'* served our drinks, and I felt the weight of tension settle between us as Magnus kicked off the conversation I'd been dreading.

"Carson and Finn found signs of habitation at the power plant Lina claimed she'd been held in," Magnus informed me. "Her story checks out, but something in it still isn't sitting right with me."

The sharp twist of unease flared low in my gut, a reminder that I'd slipped up the night I'd interrogated Lina in front of my father. I'd demanded to go to investigate the power plant too eagerly. I knew from tonight's events that had been my wolf's protective instinct flaring.

I knew I'd displayed more emotion than I should have that night, something I intended to rectify. Once again, my body language was too tense, betraying too much emotion, and I knew I had to give an explanation.

"Lina Silvermoon is your intended," I said, forcing the words out. "If these rogues did abduct her, then it's a direct insult against you and our pack." I clenched my jaw before taking a sip of my drink. "Just like Mother's murder was."

Magnus's bushy eyebrows shot up, surprise flickering across his face. "You don't talk about her often, son."

I grimaced at his use of the word "son." No matter how many years passed, the gaping wound of my mother's loss never closed. "This situation with Lina reminds me that our enemies succeeded in taking her from us. We must remain vigilant. I

swear I won't fail you again in protecting your mate."

Magnus regarded me, an unsettling intensity flickering in his dark brown eyes. "I know you won't, Stephen," he replied.

I forced my fingers to relax around my glass. I'd been away at Yale when my mother was murdered, but the painful memories clashed with those of my visits home in the months leading up to her death. Magnus had pressured her to change long-held traditions within the pack—changes she disagreed with vehemently. I remembered how her gaze had grown increasingly jaded, the light fading in her eyes as he pushed against her will. Just days after her death, he had enforced the changes she had been holding out against with no shame.

The same rage that had simmered within me back then flared now as I pictured my mom walking along our private beach, where her savaged body had been found. The story Magnus had spun—about how she was the victim of a "rogue wolf"—was one I'd later turned to my advantage as I established my secret rogue pack against him, relishing establishing the very enemy he'd concocted.

Yet here I was, tangled in a web of duty again—ever the dutiful son seeking his father's approval. I had to pivot the conversation back to something I could control. "Even if those rogue wolves didn't imprison Lina, they killed her parents. I think we're her allies because we share a common enemy."

"Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary working with her?" My father pressed.

Out of the ordinary? Lina was anything but ordinary. Her aptitude for working through business dealings was like nothing I'd ever seen.

I found her extraordinary in everything she did, but I only said, "She's been quick on

familiarizing herself with our deals and helped a lot. As you know, she brought Hamilton on board.”

Magnus sipped his drink, his eyes distant as he mulled things over.

“She carries herself with confidence,” Magnus said, “But at times, I think she’s a little uptight, like she’s hiding something. It shows in her body language, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I said, carefully. “But that could be trauma from the rogue attack at the ceremony,” I suggested.

Magnus had seen Lina a few times this week in meetings and presentations at Blackthorn Corporation before he’d flown to Los Angeles.

Again, I thought of Lina’s panic attack in the elevator, and I hated how right my father was. I hated the thought of someone hurting Lina and causing that fear. I wanted to know where she’d been these five years but for very different reasons than my father. All she’d told us was that she’d been staying with friends in Philadelphia since she’d escaped the rogues. She hadn’t made any attempts to go see anyone. While I watched her at Blackthorn, my father had packmates watching whenever she left Blackthorn Villa.

Once again, the desire to protect and destroy anyone who might be responsible for the change in Lina made me take extra care of my expressions and tone. Luckily, reining in my anger in front of my father was second nature.

“I suppose so,” Magnus agreed. “But I want you to keep watching her closely. Understand?”

“Understood, Alpha,” I said.

Soon, Magnus dismissed me, and I left the club. But as I left, it hit me that I'd made a massive error tonight. My mind had been so full of Lina leaving Blackthorn tonight that I hadn't considered the CCTV device fitted in the elevator. Even with the power down, the security cameras would have recorded everything as they were powered by individual batteries to maximize security.

With tension straining through every fiber of me, I drove back to the office. I went to the monitoring room, relieved when no security personnel greeted me. They must have been making their patrols.

I'd soon found the right cam, but...as I tried to play the footage, an error message came up on the screen. I kept rerunning the footage, only to be met with the same thing.

That is...convenient, isn't it?

As I let myself out, riding the now-fixed elevator back down to the parking lot, I knew that only one other person had just cause to want to delete that footage.

Lina.

With astonishment, I realized she must have double-backed, as I had now, and had beaten me to erasing the footage. In a moment, I was searching the security footage of the parking lot, playing back the last few hours since Lina left to see if she had returned. But the only car after Lina's car left was mine. Now, I was even more perplexed. Even I had to come on site to access the closed circuit to delete the footage. The only way Lina could have succeeded in wiping the footage remotely was if she'd bugged our network.

I thought of how I hadn't let her out of my sight these last two weeks, but I knew that she'd somehow succeeded in slipping past me. The usual blend of infuriation and

admiration confused the hell out of me as thoughts of Lina burned through me. As much as I knew I needed to keep her at arm's length to prevent something like what had happened in the elevator from occurring again, I knew that I was going to have to keep an even sharper eye on her than I had been.

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Lina

A text came in from Emily: “The footage is deleted. I’ve got it safely stored. You can access it on your USB. “Embarrassment squirmed through me as I wondered whether Emily had watched it. I supposed she had to watch it to know she’d gotten the incriminating evidence I’d asked her to delete.

As soon as I’d gotten to my car after leaving Blackthorn, I’d texted Emily about how I needed her to delete all security footage from the elevator camera from the last hour.

I opened up my laptop, the cool light of the screen bathing my face as I sat on the edge of my bed in the luxurious guest suite at Blackthorn Villa. After thoroughly inspecting the room for any suspicious surveillance devices the moment I moved in, I felt confident in being able to make calls to my friends without hesitation.

My heart still skipped with what had happened, and I desperately wanted something to ground me. If I’d been home, I’d have wrapped my arms around Betty’s soft little body, inhaling her earthy scent, and been instantly calmed.

So far, since arriving here, I’d only managed a handful of calls home. With it already being a couple of weeks since I’d left, I missed her terribly.

Feeling lonely, I video-called home.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Betty screeched, radiant with excitement.

I had the volume low, and I allowed myself to beam at her, my voice quiet compared

to hers.

A smile blossomed across my lips, melting away the lingering tension I'd carried all day. I leaned forward, the warmth of her joy igniting a deep happiness within me.

"Hi, sweetheart! How's my little ballerina?"

"Good! I's practicing!" she moved back, twirling around. My heart swelled as she spun. "You're doing so well. I miss you, baby."

"Yes!" she giggled. "Look, look!" She exploded into a series of spins, wobbling a little as she laughed.

"My teacher says I's the best!" she insisted, and I caught a glimpse of Matt on the sofa, his grin warm as he added. "Miss Hutton awarded you a prize, didn't she?"

Betty nodded so vigorously that her black waves bounced. "I got a star."

"Well done, sweetie," I cooed.

"Mommy, you coming home?" Betty asked, her face suddenly earnest.

My stomach tightened. "As soon as I can, baby," I promised, already wishing I could reach through the screen and scoop her into my arms.

"I got a secret show," she said, clapping her hands delightedly, even as Matthew put a finger to his lips, trying to shush her. "Remember, it's a secret show, isn't it, Betty?" For the next five minutes, she delightedly showed me snippets of the top-secret dance routine she was working on for my homecoming.

Too soon Matthew left to take Betty up to bed. But with the way she was yawning, I

could see she'd had another fulfilling and stimulating day, one I tried not to feel too guilty about missing. A wave of longing washed over me, and I turned my attention to Emily, who was framed on Matt's laptop.

She was on the other end of the couch, typing away on her own laptop. "I've still not been able to work out which of the Blackthorn buildings this footage came from," Emily said, her dark braid swinging as she typed.

I knew she was working, even as she spoke to me. Once Em put her mind to a task, she'd keep at it until she cracked it. Her persistence when it came to her work was both the best thing and the worst thing about Em.

I'd lost count of the number of times I'd found her passed out with keyboard prints imprinted onto her face. Both Emily and Matthew had been my friends since my late teens. Matthew had been on the same business course as me at Harvard; Emily was a friend of his from high school and had studied Computer Science at Boston University. The three of us hung out often in Boston throughout our university years.

When my parents died, both my friends had already graduated and moved back to Philly for jobs. I'd stayed with Matt those first confusing months of mourning my parents and piecing together my suspicions that Magnus was behind the attack, but Emily had been there for me just as much. We had tried in those early months to access my family's funds, but she hadn't been skilled enough then to liberate them without the Blackthorn security team's notice.

"I appreciate everything you're doing, Em," I said, not just meaning for what she was doing now, diligently working away day and night to find my mom, but for the past, too. But I made a mental note to check with Matt about when Em's last bedtime had been, never mind Betty's.

Em waved me off, never being great at accepting affection. But then she looked

up—footsteps sounded, and I realized Matthew had come back.

Matthew took a seat on the couch beside Emily.

Em's eyebrows drew together as her brown gaze found me. "We found signs earlier that Magnus has begun digging into your past."

I blinked, my heart thumping. "But how?" I exclaimed. "We've been so careful. Has he linked me to Betty White?"

Em shook her head. "No, he's not onto Luna Remedies in any way."

I hadn't opened my company of Luna Remedies under my own name but with an alias—Betty White, my daughter's name paired with Emily's surname. It had been my new identity these last five years. After the attack in New York, Lina Silvermoon had to disappear. So, the idea that Magnus had found anything on me was perplexing.

Em continued, "When his men investigated the power plant and the other buildings you mentioned, Magnus began digging around."

Matthew said, "The solicitors have had various requests for the deeds to those buildings. Magnus's team is trying to track down ownership. He's also run credit checks on your name. He's trying to connect you to our shadow company."

I fought back a shudder. I'd sensed he'd been regarding me with a sharper focus in the handful of meetings over the last week. But I'd been telling myself that I was overthinking things.

But the last thing I needed was for him to find evidence that I was the owner of the shadow company that was the saboteur to much of his business—leaking information and swooping in ahead of him to make deals with clients that Blackthorn was

interested in.

“I promise, I’ll be careful,” I reassured them, grateful for the skilled team I had watching my back.

Emily said, “What happened in the elevator didn’t look careful, Lina.” My heart ricocheted in my chest, and I hoped that in the low light of the bedroom, it wasn’t too obvious how flushed my cheeks were growing. But I knew how little Em liked to talk about this touchy-feely shit and was moved that she cared enough to push through her discomfort.

“It was a mistake. It won’t happen again,” I reassured her.

Matt’s expression became serious, though. “Emily told me about the footage, Lina.” He frowned. “I know it must be tricky to be around Stephen, but you need to be careful. If Magnus found out about you two, this whole rescue mission would be over.”

From the look of concern on his face, he didn’t need to say that my life would be at risk and that Betty would be without a mother. I let out a sigh. It had been a stupid moment of weakness.

I finally said what I’d called to say to them. “I miss you guys. I wish I could be home with you and Betty instead of here.”

Matthew’s kind eyes softened. “We miss you, too, Lina. And although Betty’s been great, I know she misses you so much.”

“Thanks, Matt,” I gushed. “She looked so happy. I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You know we love spending time with her. It’s no trouble.”

Matt’s easy friendship was something I was so grateful for. The fact that he and Emily had always been such a big part of Betty’s life made me so thankful. When I’d had her, both Matt and Em had been even more supportive. They’d basically lived at my apartment in the first two years of Betty’s life. When Luna Remedies had taken off a couple of years later, we’d decided to relocate to the villa, renovate it, and make it our main office as well as mine and Betty’s home.

Emily went back to typing. “Keep your head in the game, and you’ll be back before you know it.” My lips twitched. Always the tough love approach with Em.

“Em’s right, the better you play your role, the sooner you’ll be home with us,” Matt agreed.

“Hang on, what was that?” Em stopped typing. “Did he just say I’m right? Fuck, I wish I’d gotten that on tape.”

Matt’s mouth quirked for a moment, and I wondered if this time away from my favorite duo might at least help Matt make his move. Emily didn’t do the touchy-feely shit, but they’d been into each other for so many years. Maybe some time alone together was exactly what they needed.

“Besides,” Matt said. “Betty’s still not nearly rehearsed enough for your homecoming show. And you can’t rush good art.”

Finally, I wished them both goodnight and told them I’d check in with them whenever I could.

As the quiet of the room pressed in on me, my thoughts strayed to the elevator surveillance footage. I settled into my pillows with the laptop on my stomach and slid

a USB drive into the port.

The seconds dragged by with anticipation as I clicked open the file, the whisper of anticipation thrumming through me like an echo of what I'd felt in that dark space with Stephen. I was barely breathing as I watched Stephen and me enter the elevator. The lurch and the darkness made our silhouettes hard to see, but they were still visible on the CCTV, far more than they had been to us in the dark.

The footage played out, and I heard my panicked gasps filling the elevator in a way I'd been too out of it to notice. Stephen's reassuring voice came through my speakers, "You're okay, Lina. Just breathe." My fear reverberated in my short, shallow breaths, and the memory made my heart race.

I watched in a trance as Stephen's figure approached me in the video. I couldn't see him gripping my hands, but as my breathing calmed, the ghost of his touch lingered on my palms, igniting a warmth that spread through me. His voice, low and commanding yet gentle, whispered through the playback, "Breathe in... and out..." Each word felt like a caress, pebbling my skin and awakening an unexpected rush of desire that I couldn't ignore.

Instinctively, my fingers traced my collarbone, moving slowly down toward my breast. My breath caught as I imagined it was Stephen's hand on my body. I circled my breast, teasing my nipple through the fabric of my shirt, feeling a thrill ripple through me with each brush. The heat pooled low in my belly as my hand trailed lower, across the plane of my stomach, descending farther, where I was already growing slick.

As my fingers strayed beneath the band of my pants and into my lace knickers, I felt each of Stephen's intentional words echo in my mind, "Breathe in...and out..." Every repetition filled me with an aching need. I envisioned it was Stephen stroking me, and as I touched myself, electric sparks raced through my body. I gasped, my

skin alive with sensation, my world narrowing to this moment of forbidden pleasure, imagining Stephen was here with me, touching me in the way I wished he had in the elevator.

But it was the sound of my own voice echoing from the audio—"Stephen"—that jolted me back to reality. Shock flooded through me as I realized what I was doing, the intensity of my longing for him overwhelming. How had I let myself slip so easily into such desire so deep it left me breathless?

Quickly, I withdrew my hand from beneath my knickers, taking a deep, steadying breath before forcing myself to close the video. I stifled the memory of his gentle lips, the caress of his fingertips against my jaw. Then, with a trembling finger, I clicked delete on the video.

I reminded myself that what was between us was just the result of chemistry, the result of pheromones bringing about that delicious heat that made me ache for...

Nope, nope. I'm not doing this.

Closing the laptop, I decided to go for a shower and wash away the lingering scent of him. It was just a physiological reaction and nothing else. With the weekend to get my head in the game, I decided to have some retail therapy. I'd only brought a handful of business outfits with me, so I went shopping at Macy's for some new work outfits. On Monday, I doubled down on keeping focused at work. By the end of the week, I couldn't believe it had already been three weeks that I'd been at Blackthorn Corporation, which was the completion of my probationary period.

Toward the end of the day, Magnus called me into his office. I'd been trying to keep my head down this week, too, on account of the news that Magnus was digging into my shadow company and looking for a connection to me. I'd gone about my work as diligently as possible.

“I wanted to congratulate you on your work the last few weeks,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “It goes without saying that you passed your probation period with flying colors.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” I said. “I’m very happy with how it’s been going, too.”

Magnus’s dark brown stare brushed over me, and I got the usual uncomfortable feeling I did during our meals at Blackthorn Villa on the weekends when we were both there, and he continued to slip in questions about the past five years as if still trying to trip me up. “Stephen has had nothing but praise for you,” he added.

The usual undertow of anxiety thrummed through my veins at the mention of Stephen. My palms grew clammy in my lap, but I forced the calm I’d been trying to keep over myself. “I appreciate everything he’s done in showing me the ropes, too.”

“Now for the best part,” Magnus said, buzzing his intercom and saying, “Would you join us in here, Stephen?”

When Stephen joined us, keeping my cool wasn’t as easy. Already, my thoughts were skipping over what Magnus could have to say that would involve us both. And the memory of our kiss loomed like a hidden crevasse that I was in danger of falling into all too swiftly.

“I’ve decided to send you both on a business trip on Monday,” Magnus informed us. “Stephen is familiar with Haldon Limited in California. They recently absconded to one of our competitors. I’ve set up a pitch with them for you on Tuesday.”

Anxiety bubbled up within me. Of all the clients that Magnus could have chosen, of course, it would be the client my shadow company had recently poached. We’d struck solid gold by poaching this key client from Blackthorn, and I fought to keep my expression solemn as triumph sizzled through me.

“Sounds exciting,” I said, carefully schooling my features to convey neutrality.

However, the thought of the client wasn’t the only thing that had my heart quickening. A business trip away with Stephen was the last thing I needed. It had been a week since the moment we’d shared in the elevator, and we had successfully kept our distance in the office. But how much harder would that be on a plane, journey, and worse still, over two nights away together? There would be nowhere to hide and no distractions to pull me away from the weight of what lingered between us.

“Stephen, you’ll take the lead on the presentation,” Magnus continued, his attention thankfully on my traveling companion. Stephen nodded, but I had the distinct impression, based on the quiet intensity blanketing his strong features, that he was feeling similarly unsettled by this news.

“But Lina, I want you to be closely involved in the discussions,” Magnus said. “Your perspective on the market will be invaluable to resecuring Haldon.”

“Of course,” I managed to say, my voice steady despite the tumult of thoughts swirling within me.

I heard Emily’s words from our call playing in my head, “Keep your head in the game.” I wouldn’t let anything—especially not my feelings toward Stephen—undermine my efforts to keep my cover.

“Let’s get this client back in the fold,” Magnus said.

I nodded again, forcing a lightness in my tone. “We won’t disappoint you.”

Once the meeting concluded, I left Magnus’s office, adrenaline coursing through my veins. Worry knotted my stomach as I contemplated the need to put my all into a

pitch to secure a client that my shadow company had just acquired. But what if this was an opportunity—one I could use to divert suspicion away from myself?

Just as I was packing up my things and formulating a plan, Stephen rejoined me in our office.

“Congrats on the probation period,” he said as he returned to his desk. “I owe you a drink in California. The flight’s not until one, so we can work on the pitch in the morning.”

His tone was amicable and just the right level of professionalism we’d been keeping to all week. But I was suddenly picturing us in a hotel bar, leaning in close to one another. Just like that, my heart was thumping, my mouth was moistening, and my legs were feeling weak.

I shook the thought away. If my plans came to fruition, we wouldn’t even be making that pitch in California. I had to be strategic. The stakes were too high for mistakes. But whatever happened, I needed to maintain the facade that I was just another employee eager to impress Magnus, so I quickly agreed. “Thanks. Let’s get an early start Monday—8 a.m. so we have most of it ironed out before the flight.”

Stephen nodded his agreement. But as I left the office, the determined glint in my eye wasn’t for the pitch but for the plan I was formulating. With an impending business trip on the horizon, it was time to make a move before the walls closed in around me.

Stephen

Our sleek black car glided effortlessly along the freeway, the hum of the engine vibrating through the luxurious leather backseat where Lina and I sat. We were on our way to LaGuardia Airport, riding a wave of adrenaline from our early morning run-through for the pitch.

She'd delivered her part of the presentation with confidence, captivating me with her sharp insights into profit margins and cost analysis. "I can't believe how quickly you found that solution," I said, meeting her gaze.

"Thanks, but it's just good analysis. We're leveraging our strengths against competitors," she replied, the faintest smile warming her lips. I marveled at how that small gesture radiated charm, igniting a warmth within me that seemed to grow every time we worked side by side.

"Unbelievable," I murmured, struck by how she was downplaying her solution. By sharing our supplier for Lenidex with Haldon, the percentage difference in production costs alone should convince them to come back to us.

I knew at the pitch tomorrow she'd command the room in her crisp white button-down, open gray blazer, and gray cropped trousers paired with Louboutin heels. She looked every part the razor-sharp businesswoman she was, but I had the sudden urge to pull her into my lap, wanting to see her with tousled hair, her lips bruised. My yearning for a connection beyond the office flared.

In the back here, the sensory overload accompanying Lina's presence was

intoxicating. The sweet, wild scent of jasmine intertwined with the faint hint of greenery from the plants on her desk. I'd started to suspect she'd bought those plants as a barrier against my lingering gaze, which only made me want to enjoy the unimpeded view I had of her now.

You shouldn't be having these thoughts.

Not about your co-worker.

Not about your future stepmother.

Not about the fated mate you were forced to give up.

As Lina angled her profile toward the window, I allowed myself a moment's indulgence. Her golden blonde hair caught the morning light like spun silk, her gracefully upturned nose lending a girlish charm to her face, offset by her plush, full lips.

"We can show them the projected market expansion for the East Coast," I said, trying to force my thoughts back to the upcoming pitch with our client in California tomorrow.

"Good idea. The projected growth rates will be attractive too," Lina agreed, that same small smile on her lips. Warmth spread through me as I honed in on those luscious lips.

So attractive.

God, work wasn't doing anything to distract me from her closeness.

I want this car to be bigger.

No, if I'm wishing for things, I want it to be smaller.

God, I don't know what I want.

"The pitch could be stronger if we considered what our competitor might offer Haldon to retain them," she said.

Lina was digging for information about the company that had poached Haldon. My father had warned me of our shadowy competitor last Friday and had explicitly instructed me not to share that tidbit with Lina.

"Our offer is strong enough to resecure them," I said, deflecting her inquiry.

Her fierce gaze brushed over me, reflecting the same tenacity she brought into every boardroom, and I wished I could confide in her. But duty as Magnus's right-hand man shackled my truth.

Just as she was about to speak, our driver abruptly shouted, "What the—" and in an instant, the screech of tires clawed at the air, metal crunched, and I was thrown forward. My seatbelt jerked me back, forcing the air from my lungs as the car careened violently to the right.

Time slowed, and blood thrummed in my ears. As my head smacked against the headrest, I sat dazed for a few seconds. Then, the realization pounded through me: we'd been struck by another vehicle.

"Lina?" I rasped, turning to check on her. My heart hammered in my ribcage. She was on the left side of the car, the one that had been hit. My gaze darted over her, scanning her for injuries.

She winced, hands clutching her head.

Urgency spilled through me as I gripped her shoulders. “Lina, are you all right?”

“I’m okay,” she replied.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, but my relief was cut short.

Outside, the sound of a door sliding open set off my protective instincts. I peered out her side to see the black van that had rammed us.

“Lock the doors, Chuck!” I shouted, but my stomach lurched as I saw that he was slumped forward with his head on his chest, unconscious and bleeding. The driver’s side, where the van had hit, was crumpled and mangled.

Adrenaline thumped through me. I needed to get Lina to safety. I unbuckled her seatbelt before tearing open my door and pulling her out my side—farthest from the threat.

Crouching down, I commanded, “Stay down.”

Instinct screamed for my wolf to surface, but I fought against it, acutely aware of the humans surrounding us. The sound of the collision had drawn nearby pedestrians and curious drivers to stop and stare.

I edged around to the front of our car. My heart pounded as I assessed the scene—three masked figures poured out of the van with guns in their hands.

I darted toward the front of the car, opened the passenger door, and kept low to find the gun in Chuck’s holster. It was customary for Blackthorn drivers to carry one, although I’d never had to use one before.

Carson, one of our packmates, had taught me to shoot a gun at a firing range when I

was a teenager, though. I'd never been more grateful for that training than right now.

From behind the crumpled hood, the three figures strode toward us, their movements unnervingly coordinated, guns clenched tightly in their hands.

Their scent wafted through the air—a pungent blend like pine sap. Shock crashed over me: they were shifters. Why were other shifters targeting us? We shifters were more likely to have showdowns in the boardroom or in the privacy of our own gated communities so that we could fight things out in wolf form. Were these the rogue wolves who had kidnapped Lina?

As one of the assailants leveled his weapon toward us, protectiveness surged through me. “Keep low,” I ordered Lina, angling my body in front of hers just as the crack of volleys resounded, slicing through the metal of the car and setting off the smell of burnt propellant, sharp and acrid.

With a pounding heart, I waited for a moment of silence before darting up to fire back at them. One of the gunmen shouted, falling to the ground. Adrenaline raced through my veins as another of the gunmen stopped firing, pulling back the injured one toward the van.

I ducked lower as the remaining gunman fired at us again. The sound of glass shattered above me, and I covered my head, but pain cascaded over my scalp and face as the car window exploded above us, raining down slivers of glass. The warm trickle of blood on my face and neck told me I was bleeding from multiple places. I turned back to check on Lina, only for my heart to still.

In horror, I watched her fall onto the ground, curling in on herself as she clutched her shoulder. Shock reverberated through me as her light grey blazer and the white shirt became tinged with crimson. That wasn't glass embedded there. She'd been shot.

Urgency, like never before, spiralled through me, and I wanted to shift so as to take care of our attackers once and for all. But just off the freeway, on the streets of Queens, with the sound of screams and yells from other drivers who had stopped farther back witnessing this shootout, I couldn't risk it. The need of my wolf mingled with my own; we needed to protect our mate.

I pressed Lina's hands to her wound, telling her, "Keep the pressure on. I'll be back in a moment."

Keeping low, I waited for the gunman to stop firing. Then I dashed up, focusing my aim with razor-sharp precision. I fired. I heard his shout as my bullet hit him in the shoulder. With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I slid over the crumpled hood of the car, dashing toward him where he'd fallen on the road. I knocked him out before kicking the gun out of his hand and away from him.

The uninjured gunman was sheltering behind the door of the van, and I pointed my gun at him as I backed away. I wanted to fire at him, to take him out, too, but I needed to get Lina out of here.

Finally, I was back with her. She was pale. Her hands were still pressed against her shoulder, and her skin looked clammy. Although we shifters were affected by blood loss, we weren't usually so quickly affected. The sheen on her face had me stooping down and examining her, placing my hand against her forehead. She was burning up.

Fuck.

I didn't know what this was. Had the bullet hit a major artery? The thought of her hemorrhaging internally had my heart beating in a frenzy.

Horror pounded through me. I gathered her up into my arms, laying her in the back seat. My voice was low as I said, "You're going to be all right, Lina."

I closed the back door. Then, unbuckling Chuck's seatbelt, I gently hefted him over into the passenger seat, fastening him in, before running to the other side of the car, still pointing my gun at the gunman who hadn't ventured out of the van again. I climbed into the driver's seat.

Silently, I prayed that the car would start. Otherwise, I was going for the gunman again—for his van. As I turned the key, the engine roared to life. In a moment, I revved the engine and careened down the road, urgency pounding through me. I needed to get Lina to a hospital with a shifter unit.

We were in Queens, and the nearest hospital with one was in Elmhurst. The fifteen-minute drive was one of the longest of my life. I couldn't see Lina's face from here in the front and had to content myself with forcing words out of my mouth, "Keep the pressure on. We're not far now. We're almost there, Lina." But then, as I glanced in the rear-view mirror, I saw that her arm had fallen away from her shoulder, dangling in the footwell. Panic thumped through me.

I glanced at Chuck, whose chin was slumped on his chest, still out cold. The iron tang of his wound filled the air. I swallowed hard, fighting the growing sense of urgency threatening to steal my concentration from the road, forcing myself to concentrate.

I screeched to a halt outside the hospital, bursting from the car before I even shut off the engine. I bundled Lina into my arms, her frame suddenly feeling so fragile as I lurched toward the shifter ward. There was a medic out front, looking toward us, and I yelled, "We've been in a crash. Can you help the man over there?"

The medic ran toward Chuck, and I hurried into the shifter entrance of the hospital, the air laden with antiseptic and a faint hint of herbs.

A sharp-eyed nurse met me, her movements brisk and efficient. "We need to get her on the table, now!" she directed, guiding me through the sterile corridor illuminated

by fluorescent lights that buzzed in the silence.

“Lay her down here,” a shifter doctor said as I approached the surgical room, urgency saturating her tone.

“She was shot! She’s burning up!” I blurted out, breathless with urgency.

“Sounds like wolfsbane bullets,” the nurse interjected, her eyes flickering back to me before her focus returned to Lina. Her words blasted through me like ice—Wolfsbane was a manufactured poison that could be lethal to us shifters.

In a moment, the doctor ordered, “I need the room clear.”

“Please! Let me stay with her!” I protested, but the nurse’s firm hand on my shoulder steered me away. Sometimes, the shifter doctors and medical staff in these infirmaries were more like the healers of old, letting loved ones stay with patients, but more often than not, they were like human doctors, and I was ushered out of the room while the doctor removed the bullet.

As I looked back, the doctor was already working with quick, methodical precision, cutting away her blazer and shirt, revealing her soft skin marred by blood and the wound that still oozed crimson. A leaden weight settled in my chest.

My lungs seemed to burn as the nurse closed the door. Time felt suspended, and the sting of antiseptic mingled with the one at the back of my throat as I waited and waited.

After what felt like hours, the nurse returned, her face a mask of professionalism softened by a hint of empathy. “The antidote’s working.”

A wave of relief crashed over me, making my heart feel too big for my chest. “Thank

you!” Before I knew what I was doing, I’d seized the nurse’s hands, squeezing them as gratitude colored my voice again. “Thank you.”

She nodded, her expression compassionate. I had no further words as the torrent of what could have been swirled in my mind as I let go of the nurse’s hands.

After the doctor had left, I sat by Lina’s bedside, her soft breaths mingling with the beeping of machines. I felt immense gratitude rush through my veins as the sound of her breaths and the sight of her chest rising and falling ever so slightly centered me in a way I’d never known before. The overwhelming realization of how much Lina meant to me confronted me. My chest felt too full, and I knew that Lina had nestled even more fully into my life—and heart—than I’d been willing to admit until now...Until I’d almost lost her.

Just the thought had me laying my hand on her arm again, needing the feel of her soft skin and her warmth to soothe my edgy wolf.

The nurse had stayed behind and was cleaning and dressing the wounds on my face and neck where the glass had cut me. The distinct antiseptic smell filled my lungs, and despite the sting and burn of some of the deeper wounds, I felt only immense gratitude.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor behind me, and I stood up. Something about the heavy tread told me it wasn’t the doctor’s gentler footfalls. My hand fell from Lina’s arm.

The door opened, and Magnus stepped inside. His expression was tight, clearly annoyed. “I received a call from the hospital, Stephen, telling me Chuck and Lina had been admitted to the hospital.” His voice was sharp.

I realized in my absent-mindedness, as my thoughts had been too full of worry about

Lina, I'd forgotten to phone him.

My father's clipped tone turned to the nurse. "Leave us," he commanded.

Unwisely, the nurse said, "I still need to treat some of these—"

Magnus interrupted, "My son will be fine. Leave us," he ordered, his tone becoming a growl.

"It's fine. Thanks," I said to the nurse, although I knew some of my wounds still had glass in them, their prickling feeling telling me they did still need tending to. She left the metal dish, tweezers, and antiseptic wipes she'd been using. At least I could tend to them myself.

As soon as the nurse had exited, Magnus launched into his lecture. "Your attackers were members of the shadow company. The van was traced back to a leased deal through a company name we've linked to them previously," he informed me.

Shock spilled through me. So far, I'd only ever felt secretly pleased with the shadow company that had picked away at Blackthorn Corporation and sabotaged my father's dealings. I'd always felt like I had a secret ally working away at ruining him, too, as if our goals aligned. But now, with what the shadow company had done to Lina, now that they'd almost taken her from me, hatred for that organization burned through me.

"Really, Stephen, I expected better performance from you," Magnus continued.

His words felt like a slap. All the warmth of gratitude shattered, replaced with frustration and anger. All I wanted was to hold Lina's hand again and bask in the relief of knowing she was safe, but I couldn't in front of Magnus. The walls closed in on me, igniting rage within.

I clenched my jaw, battling the tension while Magnus continued to dissect my failure. The weight of my emotions was in danger of bubbling up, but as usual, I had to bury them. But never had my mask of dutiful son been as hard to maintain as it was now. My hatred burned toward him for intruding on my relief and on my moment with Lina. Lina needed her rest and didn't need my father's abrasive words to disturb her.

I suggested, "Let's go next door into the waiting room outside so that your intended can rest."

Your intended.

Those words seemed to burn like wolfsbane through me as I tried not to let how much she meant to me show once again. I took the metal dish, tweezers, and antiseptic wipes out with me, feeling as if I'd rather suffer a thousand lacerations with these slivers of glass burrowing in than face the wrath that I knew was coming.

Lina

The sterile smell of antiseptic swathed the air, yet I found myself quietly relieved to find myself nestled in the scratchy hospital linen sheets. The muted beeping of the monitors and the overly harsh white light surrounding me felt oddly reassuring because the hospital bed was exactly where I'd planned to be.

Over the weekend, I coordinated with Emily and Matthew for a team to target our car on the way to the airport. By sustaining this injury from my very own company, I hoped to deflect Magnus's suspicion from me.

Matthew had warned me that the wolfsbane would leave my limbs aching, but he had seriously undersold how achy. I felt as if I'd run a marathon or as if my wolf had been sprinting through the forest for hours.

I closed my eyes, briefly letting the warmth of the cover over me ground me in comfort, but the murmur of voices from the adjacent room broke into my reverie. My heart quickened as I strained to listen, tension coiling in my stomach.

“—You should have been able to apprehend them, Stephen!” Magnus's voice thrummed with a deep, simmering rage, echoing off the stark walls.

“There wasn't time; the priority was protecting your future mate,” Stephen replied, his tone steady. But something about the steady pacing of his words told me that burning fire I'd sensed so often in him was dangerously close to the surface.

I flinched at Stephen's words. Future mate. Even though that was the part I'd been

playing, those words from his lips made me feel ill. But I reminded myself that my life—and my mother’s freedom—was entwined in maintaining that cover.

My heartbeat had quickened, something which the annoying beep of the heartbeat monitor echoed. With effort, I focused on breathing more deeply, congratulating myself as the beeping slowed.

With conscious breaths, I forced calm over my body, determined to take the opportunity that my being here with Magnus and Stephen in the next room presented.

“This company has been sabotaging us for years. Yet, all three attackers escaped. This was poorly done, Stephen,” Magnus rebuked again.

So, Magnus had already deduced that my shadow company was behind the attack. Yet, even as I knew that I should be thinking about myself and how well this should divert Magnus’s suspicion away from me being involved with the shadow company, my thoughts turned to Stephen. Magnus said that he’d done poorly, but he’d protected me so fiercely that he’d made it almost impossible for my employee to shoot me.

I hadn’t counted on how selfless Stephen would be. He’d grabbed me and pulled me out of the car before I could stop him. Paul had been meant to shoot me through the window, but suddenly, I’d been on the other side of the vehicle, with Stephen shielding me as best as he could. It was only while Stephen had been shooting at one of my employees that I’d been able to angle my body in front of the window so that Paul could shoot me.

Suddenly, Stephen’s stricken face was in my thoughts as I recalled the moment he’d realized I’d been shot. My heart squeezed as I remembered him urging, “Keep the pressure on.” A moment later, he’d been firing at Paul again. I’d heard his shout as he shot him. I hoped he wasn’t too badly injured, but I’d been in no position to intervene

as the wolfsbane was already making me feel like I was on fire. The plan had been for them to drive away once they'd shot me, but Stephen's overzealous, protective instincts had injured two of my guys. Even as I hoped they were okay, I couldn't find it in me to dislike Stephen's behavior because it meant that he cared.

Tenderness seared through me as flashes of the drive here to the hospital came back. His voice had reached through the darkness as he'd reassured me. "Hold on, Lina. You're going to be okay, Darlin'." I remembered the catch in his voice as if he were struggling to keep his emotions in check. As if... I mattered.

"I'm sorry I failed again to protect your mate, Alpha," Stephen said.

Again?

What did he mean by that? Besides, he hadn't failed. He'd gone above and beyond in defending me.

I'd seen the protectiveness stealing through every inch of his powerful body as he took the shots. His body angled over me as he tried to shield me from harm. My wolf surged up, a sudden excitement tripping through her as she thought of the ferocity with which Stephen had protected us and how much she needed him next to her again.

Magnus's voice sounded again, "Well, there's other business to talk about—"

The heart rate monitor suddenly increased in a hurried tempo as my wolf's want pummelled through me.

In the other room, Magnus's voice trailed off, and a moment later, footsteps brought him into the room. He was closely followed by Stephen.

“Alpha?” I croaked, feigning disorientation and only half pretending that sleep was making me bleary-eyed. The poison was still making my head too heavy. The simple effort of lifting myself up in bed slightly on my arms caused me to groan. “What happened?”

It was Stephen who answered. “You were shot, Lina. The bullets were laced with wolfsbane. But you’ve had an antidote. You’ll be fine.” Tension was evident in every line of his body, and his expression was taut. I ached to stroke it away, to say thank you for what he’d done in protecting me, despite it making my employees’ job harder.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” Magnus said finally. “My son should have guarded you better.” Rather than offering me any reassurance, he took my question as an opportunity to chastise his son again. I noticed that Stephen had set a metal dish down on one of the hospital trolleys nearby and was wiping at the wounds still covering his face.

My heart fluttered as I breathed in, trying to keep my pulse steady as I said, “Believe me, Alpha, I owe your son my life. If he hadn’t gotten me here, I might not be here at all.”

Magnus’s black look at his son didn’t lessen, but he deigned to say, “You’re safe now, I promise.”

I couldn’t help but feel angered by Magnus’s obvious indifference toward his own son’s injuries, choosing to criticize him for failing to prevent the attack rather than get the medical attention he needed.

A lump rose in my throat as I took in the deep lacerations Stephen had received from the glass being shot out when he’d been trying to protect me.

“Stephen, can I help with those?” I asked, a protective urge stealing through me as I

looked at the way he was dabbing at his cuts.

His intense green eyes seemed to spark with something, but it was so fleeting I barely caught it.

He shook his head. "It's fine. You need to rest. Your body's still fighting off the poison."

I nodded, trying not to let the disappointment show. Something in me ached to be close to him. The need to tend to his wounds made me want to reach out to him. I needed to get myself under control; otherwise, I'd just replace Magnus's suspicion of me for one reason with another.

Magnus's gaze was running over me as I feigned wooziness. "You're right, I feel so tired," I complained.

"That'll be the poison," Stephen said, taking a few steps closer as if he, too, wanted to be closer. But I forced my gaze to Magnus instead as I asked him, "Will you stay a while?"

Magnus's dark brown eyes didn't alter at all. He was as inscrutable as ever, as he agreed, "I'll be right outside. We'll get the nurse to give you something for the pain to help you sleep."

"Thank you," I said, settling down as if soothed, yet knowing all too well that Magnus's offer of pain medication was likely more so I didn't overhear them than out of consideration for my pain.

In another moment, Magnus walked out of the room, Stephen shadowing his father without a backward glance.

Left in the quiet of the room, my thoughts fell to their contrasting behavior, and I reconsidered my assumption that Stephen and Magnus were alike. Didn't Stephen's actions in shielding me during the attack, as well as his priority in getting me to the hospital, show that he possessed a compassionate and caring nature despite the coolness he generally hid behind? Whereas Magnus's cold chastisement of his son's actions during the attack, as well as his complete disregard for his injuries, proved all too well how cold and callous he was.

A moment later, the nurse came in and said, "Let's get you some morphine."

I shook my head. "No, I'm all right. I think I'll be able to sleep without it," I assured her.

She raised her eyebrows. "There's no need to be a hero."

I shook my head. "I'm feeling all right."

She nodded. "Just buzz if you need anything," she reminded me, checking my monitors before leaving me.

As the quiet settled over the room, I heard Magnus's voice sounding once again. "The other matter I wanted to inform you of was the fact that the board's decided to reinstate the Omega Concord Program."

Omega Concord Program?

I knew that if I wanted to avoid his suspicion, it was essential I kept my vitals under control, no matter what I heard. I envisioned little Betty, hugging her to me, her faint earthy scent mixed with talcum powder after her bath. I sank deeper into the mattress, its support prickling over me, grounding me more.

“But that hasn’t been in place since the fifties, since my grandfather’s generation,” Stephen argued. His voice had an edge of shock to it. What was this company policy that I sensed had Stephen’s control hanging by a thread?

“Now, don’t be so quick to dismiss something just because it hasn’t been used since a previous generation. After all, I would have thought I’d taught you to respect your elders’ practices. What worked efficiently for past generations might well work for our pack again.”

“Well, I think it would undermine Blackthorn’s entire ethos and exploit our employees and packmates.”

“Sometimes, a packmate’s merit isn’t in their business prowess but in their more physical attributes. Not all females can be like my intended and suited to the boardroom, but they can earn their place in the pack in the bedroom.”

Fuck.

Magnus was talking about bringing back a policy that implemented Omega wolves as breeders. It was in our packs’ history that we’d studied in high school that two generations ago, such practices had been common, but civilized packs like the Silvermoon and the Blackthorn Packs of New York City had long been more enlightened and progressive than that.

“This isn’t a decision to enter into lightly, Alpha,” Stephen added, his voice steady as he fought to rein in the anger I knew was simmering just beneath the surface. “We need to consider the implications this will have going forward.”

“The implications?” Magnus echoed, his voice dangerously low. “The implications are clear cut. Packmates that haven’t been pulling their weight will give strength to our pack by increasing our pack’s size and strength.”

A chill swept through the room at Magnus's words, my stomach knotting at the thought. I pictured young women from our pack being reduced to mere breeding vessels, stripped of all they contributed beyond that.

"I just don't believe a packmate's value should be measured by the offspring they bear," Stephen asserted, his tone unwavering, projecting an iron control that made it clear he was fighting against his rising indignation.

For a moment, a heavy silence loomed, and it took everything in me once again to keep my breathing calm and measured.

I heard movement. Magnus's low voice sounded, feeling even more insidious after his misogynistic suggestion. "I didn't think you could disappoint me more today, Stephen, but once again, you've proved me wrong." With that, I heard Magnus's footsteps retreating from the hall.

I steadied my breathing, feigning calm while allowing the heaviness I'd battled all afternoon to pull me into slumber. More than anything, it became painfully clear that Stephen was not aligned with Magnus as I had once believed. The memory of Magnus's cruel rebuke of him clashed sharply with the fierce defiance Stephen had just shown, igniting a troubling longing within me. I ached to comfort Stephen, to lay my hand on his arm and whisper that he was right—that he was a far better man than his father.

But even as this urge surged, I was confronted with a harsh reality. Embracing that desire would threaten everything I had painstakingly crafted. Besides, the memory of Stephen's past rejection still festered. I was teetering on a tightrope, desperately maintaining this facade of loyalty to Magnus. Any misstep could spell disaster—not just for me, but for my mother's freedom. I had to ignore my heart.

Lina

By midweek, I was well enough to return to the office. Magnus had deemed it best to keep me safely tucked away at Blackthorn with Stephen after the attack. He flew to California for the pitch instead. Back in our shared office, Stephen and I worked along as if Monday's events had never happened—almost.

Except although I hadn't believed it possible, I was even more aware of him now. Each time I caught his earthy, spicy scent, it evoked the memory of how he'd shielded me, while the sound of his voice set off a warmth as I remembered the moment he'd rushed me to the hospital, his tone making me believe I was the only thing that mattered to him: "We're almost there, Lina."

But as Wednesday drew to a close, and Stephen remained absorbed in his work, my thoughts shifted from the past to the palpable tension radiating from him. I knew, even though he hadn't said anything, he was fixated on the Omega Concord Program, fingers striking the keyboard with renewed urgency.

"Is there anything else I can help with?" I asked, pushing back my chair from my desk so I could see him properly without the wall of plants, hoping he might confide in me about Magnus's plans.

He blinked, momentarily surprised, then shook his head. "No, thanks. You should go home and rest. I'll see you tomorrow." He returned to his relentless typing.

A pang of frustration shot through me. I knew I shouldn't confess that I'd eavesdropped on his and Magnus's conversation at the hospital, but the thought of the

Omega Concord Program and the harm it could do filled me with determination. “You’re working on the Omega Concord Program, aren’t you?”

Stephen’s fingers halted. He looked up, his green gaze piercing me. My heart thumped as I wondered whether I’d made a massive mistake in admitting I’d overheard. But I couldn’t keep silent. What if my helping made the difference in protecting Blackthorn omega wolves from being reduced to nothing but breeders?

“I am,” Stephen finally said. He added, “I can’t allow such an unethical practice to happen in this company and pack.” He gritted his strong jaw, sweeping his hands through his ebony hair, making it distractingly tousled. “The fact that it violates shifter rights should be enough to stop it from happening but...” He trailed off, his bright eyes burning with sparks of anger; I’d seen rage in his stare before, like when he’d stood off against the gunmen, but this light in his eyes was a different kind. It burned with righteous fury, and God help me, he’d never looked so hot.

“But only facts and figures will speak to Magnus,” I finished for him, forcing myself to focus on the serious matter we were discussing. I felt the weight of our conversation deepen as I implied I knew exactly what kind of man Magnus was. Trepidation swirled through me. What if he began questioning why I’d ever consider marrying someone like Magnus?

Stephen’s gaze bore into me, and I could see him battling with his own thoughts. “I need enough evidence by Friday morning to persuade Magnus the Omega Concord Program will hurt our company.”

I knew Magnus was back in on Friday, and despite having other things I’d planned to do while the alpha was gone, determination seared through me. “Send me what you’ve got.”

As the week wore on, our days turned into nights, and we combed through data and

prepped arguments against the program.

I still couldn't pass up the opportunity that Magnus's absence presented to search the Blackthorn offices for possible places where my mother was being held. Two floors were closed for renovation, and late on Wednesday and Thursday night, after Stephen had left, I doubled back, checking for any hidden rooms or signs of comings and goings. But other than evidence of workmen, I came up empty.

Friday morning and our meeting with Magnus came too swiftly. The alpha's surprise at my presence was overshadowed by the hardness in his eyes as they flicked to Stephen. From that one look, I garnered Stephen hadn't told his father I was in the loop about the program.

Magnus schooled his features as he said, "I didn't realize I'd have the pleasure of your company, too, Lina?"

I waited a beat, wondering if Stephen was going to say that I'd overheard their conversation in the hospital.

"As future luna of our pack, I thought it only right for Lina to be brought in on this," Stephen said.

Magnus nodded, but I knew that even as luna, he believed I had as little right to be involved in this decision as he believed the omegas had in general.

As we presented to Magnus, Stephen and I both took different topics, exhibiting how the Omega Concord would prove inefficient and detrimental to Blackthorn Corp.

"I thought we'd start with employee morale and company culture," I said as I opened the various case studies, presenting shifter companies treating their employees fairly and with respect. "You can see Ashford, Glen Cove, and Woodhaven's productivity

and retention rates for their employees are parallel to our own. These three New York packs offer good comparatives with which to measure our own percentages.”

Stephen’s firm voice took over as he cautioned Magnus about the potential backlash from the shifter community by bringing in the Concord Program. “The Hamilton Pack in Ontario suffered from a ten percent drop in their shares once they’d implemented a similar program ten years ago. The Gladwin Pack in Michigan, too, tarnished their company’s public image with their breeding program.” Stephen pulled up a report on the company being boycotted and a report on their business going into administration, making Magnus’s bushy brows gather together.

I chipped quickly in to build on the negative repercussions the omega-breeder program had caused in these two packs and companies. “Although the program might bring short-term gains, it undermines the company’s long-term sustainability. You can see here that by exploiting this segment of the workforce, a high proportion of the talented individuals within these companies left.” I drew up the graph showing Hamilton and Gladwin’s high employee turnover.

I glanced at Magnus, whose frown had deepened considerably over the course of the presentation. “Alpha, we understand the pressure to increase profits, but we need to consider the long-term impacts of the Omega Concord Program.”

Stephen nodded in agreement. “Utilizing our employees in this way may yield short-term gains, but it’ll cost us significantly in the long run. Public backlash, low morale, high turnover of staff—these factors could be devastating to our reputation and our bottom line.”

Magnus stopped and narrowed his eyes. “You really think shifter high society cares about omegas?”

“Yes,” I said before Stephen could. “The facts speak for themselves. Their suffering

will resonate beyond our pack. We could lose valuable partnerships and face protests. This won't just impact us within Blackthorn Corporation and our pack but will be felt throughout shifter society at large."

Stephen interjected, "Whereas a company known for its ethical stance will attract innovative talent, boost employee satisfaction, and allow us to continue to lead the market."

"Very well, let's call it there," Magnus said, his voice dipping low, sending an icy chill creeping down my spine as I wondered whether all our research had been in vain. "I want projections on retention and profits by the end of the day with and without Concord before I finalize my decision." Magnus added, "And let's not put both of you on this today. I think enough resources have been swallowed up by the Concord Program, don't you? You'd be much better getting on with some work on Lenidex, Lina," he commanded.

I nodded. "Of course, Alpha." I fought the flurry of apprehension churning through my gut. Was Magnus just annoyed that I'd been working on the Concord Program because he wanted to instigate it in the pack, or was he suspicious of Stephen and I working so closely together?

Nervousness fluttered through me as I returned to our office, but I reminded myself that Magnus hadn't been here for the last two days.

The rest of the day, Stephen put together the projections Magnus had requested while I worked on Lenidex.

That evening, Magnus's sharp rap sounded on the door. He stepped in, a slight crease forming on his brow.

Stephen stood up quickly, gesturing to the sofas by the window. "Alpha, please have

a seat.”

“No, I won’t be staying long,” Magnus said.

Anxiety twisted through me. His reaction gave nothing away as to whether Stephen’s final projections had cinched the outcome we wanted.

Finally, he put us out of our misery. “I’ve decided to put a pin in the Concord Program,” he announced, his voice tinged with begrudging reluctance. “Your figures were very convincing, Lina.”

I felt a small flicker of triumph, and yet, I was disappointed as Magnus’s presence meant I couldn’t share the feeling with Stephen. But the important thing was that the immediate threat of the program had thankfully been staved off, if only temporarily.

Magnus’s dark stare went to me for a moment, and he added, “You should come home and rest, my dear. You look tired.”

I smiled, trying to give my expression a warmth I didn’t feel. “I was just going to head home. Would you walk me out?”

Magnus helped me with my coat, and I was reminded once again that time was slipping away from me. Since the attack, Magnus had mentioned a couple of times that we should discuss dates for our upcoming nuptials. I felt queasy at the thought and reminded myself to refocus on what I was really here to do: find my mother. We both said goodnight to Stephen, even as my heart ached to stay here and celebrate our success.

The following week was filled with late nights and the heavy weight of the backlog caused by giving so much of our time to working on the Omega Concord Program. Once again, though, luck seemed to be on my side, as more client meetings took

Magnus out to the West Coast again, and I continued to use my late evenings when Stephen had gone to hunt on the less used floors for any signs of places my mother might be.

But when Friday finally came back around again, exhaustion and a sense of hopelessness at finding nothing on my mother clung to me. At least we'd successfully caught up on our workload and wouldn't see Magnus until tomorrow back at Blackthorn Villa when he'd be back from the West Coast.

"Let's order takeout," Stephen suggested, his voice breaking the heavy air in the office late that evening.

"Make it Nonna's, and I'm in," I replied, fingers still dancing across the keyboard.

"Oh, you're a Nonna's girl, are you? But Giuseppe's on 4th's so much better."

Warmth blossomed through my chest. "All right, Emily!" I exclaimed before I'd even thought about it. Just for a moment, I felt as if I were home, swept up in a world of passionate pizza debate.

Stephen's brow arched with curiosity, and I explained, "My friend Em swears by Giuseppe's," I added, wishing I was with her and Matt. Then a flurry of confusion whipped through me as I admitted to myself that wasn't entirely true; I liked the unguarded spark of warmth simmering in Stephen's eyes as he watched me. "Let's order both, then," he declared.

We fell back into our work, settling into an oddly comfortable silence. Thirty minutes later, reception called up. This late in the evening, the security guard couldn't leave his post, so Stephen stood up, flashing me a grin. "I'll be back with Nonna in a moment."

That had to be the first time Nonna had ever sounded sexy.

When the aroma of pizza finally wafted through the office, I savored the scent of warm, cheesy goodness. We sank into the plush couch by the floor-to-ceiling windows, with the glittering skyline of skyscrapers to our left. The city was alive outside, a splendid backdrop as we indulged in our feast.

Stephen poured a couple of glasses of sparkling water, offering me one as he said, “Here’s to a belated toast. I couldn’t have shut down the Omega Concord Program without you. Thank you,” he said before clinking his glass with mine. My stomach somersaulted. He’d mentioned the Omega Concord Program a few times this week, thanking me for my help on it, and I’d experienced this same discomfort. I couldn’t put my finger on what was bothering me.

Turning my attention to the pizza, I flipped the lid and peeled a slice from the box. “Nonna’s has the best crust,” I declared, taking a huge bite.

“Giuseppe’s pizza sauce is superior,” he shot back, attacking his preferred pizza, an infectious grin on his lips. He took a bite, and said sauce smeared slightly at the corner of his mouth. My breath caught, and I imagined leaning in to taste it—my skin tingling.

“Agree to disagree,” I said, a part of me disappointed as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

As I finished my first slice, I snapped a picture of our feast, intending to send it to Emily and Matt later, imagining how wildly jealous they’d be.

I thought fondly of the last few video calls I’d had with them and Betty. My daughter had gotten really into playing house with her friends at nursery school. On the last few phone calls, she’d told me that Matt was the daddy and Emily the mommy when

they played at home.

My heart squeezed as I felt the usual stab of guilt at being away from her for so long. Was that why she'd taken to this new game with such gusto? Did she miss me as much as I missed her? I hated the idea of her feeling abandoned by me.

Too late, I realized that my thoughts must be playing across my face as Stephen asked, "Are you all right?"

I flushed under his gaze. God, the last thing I should be thinking about around Stephen was Betty. Finally, I told a sliver of truth, "Yeah, I just really miss Em."

Stephen replied, "Lina... I'm really glad you had someone looking out for you." Something in the way he said my name and the way his eyes bore into mine stripped away my defenses.

"Thanks," I replied softly. Words spilling out, unguarded. "I've stayed with Em for years. She's kept me grounded. I owe her so much." I wasn't supposed to be opening my heart while I was here, yet intimacy flowed between us like a current I didn't want to fight.

His eyes locked onto mine, the closeness of our bodies igniting a raw energy to the air. "You deserved that. To be cared for. You—deserve so much more." Stephen's voice had dropped to that low rasp that I seemed to feel across my skin.

My heartbeat thumped, quickening like a drum roll as if urging me to close the distance between us. My pulse raced, a heady mix of longing and tension coursing through my veins.

I could feel the soft warmth of his breath against my skin, and my senses sharpened, sending shivers down my spine. My breath quickened as his gaze, those vibrant green

eyes, filled with hunger and something deeper—a yearning that mirrored my own.

“God, Lina,” he murmured, his voice low, wrapping around me, along with his spicy, earthy scent. “You don’t know what you do to me, do you?” he asked, his tone and expression the exact ones I’d grown to want more than any other, the one that told me the iron control he kept over himself was slipping and that with the right word or look, I could snap it.

The heady sense that I had caused that, that I had robbed him of his cool, made heat stir through me. Every thought seemed to melt into that heat. I leaned closer, aware of the moment we were teetering on—the point where temptation and reality collided.

How many times over the last weeks, in this room where we’d spent so many hours together, had I fantasized about this? About Stephen taking me in his arms as he had in the elevator?

My gaze, which had to be full of the forbidden thoughts I’d harbored for so long, brushed over him, willing him to cede control to me. “Show me,” I whispered, daring him to act.

The intake of breath he took was sharp. The delicious tension mounting between us ratcheted up.

His gaze fell to my lips, but his fingers came to my face first, his thumb grazing my cheek with a tenderness that had me aching.

The moment seemed to stretch and elongate. Would he succumb to temptation?

His lips dipped to mine, the sweetness of pizza sauce mingling with something deeper, with the connection that had been strengthening for weeks.

The office faded, the outside world slipping further away as we inched closer together, the warmth between us becoming an intoxicating force.

As he deepened the kiss, his calloused hand clasped the back of my neck, tugging me closer, and I surrendered, opening to him.

Our kiss became urgent, filled with pent-up desire. I lost myself in the sensation as he consumed me, his lips moving with a want mirroring my own. My wolf stirred, whimpering with satisfaction, and I began to explore him with more wildness, nipping and sucking at his lower lip, teasing him. He hissed, the sound rippling through me and sending heat straight between my legs.

His hand slid up, tangling in my hair, pulling me back slightly so he could trail kisses down my neck. I arched into him, inhaling his familiar earthy scent, the hint of his spicy cologne mingling with the warmth radiating from his body. It engulfed me in a heady sense of comfort and the desire for more.

We melted into a blissful bubble of intimacy, suspended high above the city, and a thrill charged through me, my want climbing higher—desire spiraling, beckoning me to cross a line we'd come so close to in the elevator.

His fingers dug into my waist, grazing the hem of my shirt, igniting a fire that made me gasp. Without consciously meaning to, I leaned in, my heart pounding, and pulled him back against me, reveling in the delicious weight of him pinning me to the couch.

I pulled his shirt out of his waistband, my greedy hands already wanting to explore the strong muscles of his back, moaning into his mouth as the feel of his hardness pressed against my stomach. I remembered how I'd watched the footage of our kiss, touching myself as I'd imagined it was him. At the thought, my hips were already grinding against his, my core aching with need.

“Can I touch you?” Stephen growled into my ear, sucking my earlobe into his mouth and making me arch again.

That was exactly what I wanted. “Yes. Please,” I ground out huskily, already feeling out of my mind with need.

In a moment, he undid my trousers and pushed aside the fabric of my knickers, sliding his finger between my legs. I gasped as a delicious heat rushed through me. His appreciative groan mingled with my own, each caress making me tremble with pleasure that shot right to my core.

He explored slowly, teasingly, his finger gliding through the slickness he coaxed from me. Each stroke was measured and deliberate, an effort to sustain control as if he still couldn’t let go of the discipline he always wore.

I want to shatter it.

I nibbled at his ear, sucking it, nipping and nibbling my way down his neck as I arched my back, encouraging him to go deeper until he pushed two fingers inside me.

“God, Lina,” he murmured against my neck. “You’re so perfect.” The sincerity in his voice made my insides flutter, but his words stirred an old memory, tangling around my heart.

Yet, the thrill of desire was swiftly followed by a wave of fear. I was thrust back to that dark motel room when I’d been in his arms, just as I was now, feeling safe as if everything was going to be all right, but it hadn’t turned out that way.

As pleasurable sensations blurred my thoughts, memories of our past—of his silence, his rejection, those agonizing moments when he had refused to protect me—flooded my mind, constricting around me like a vise.

“Wait,” I gasped.

Worry filled his eyes. “Are you okay?” He drew his hand out of my knickers.

“Yes—No—” I said, shaking my head as I moved back on the couch, away from him. “I can’t do this again,” I explained, feeling my stomach clench.

Stephen’s expression fell, longing still bright in his gaze. He let out a breath. “Lina, I’m sorry for what happened years ago,” he began, urgency creeping into his tone. “I did everything wrong. I wish things had been different—”

“But they weren’t,” I choked out. My voice shook as reality struck. Stephen had walked away from me then. “You say I’m perfect, but you said that back then, too.” My heart thumped with urgency as the pain welled up. “Then you rejected me and refused to protect me.” My own words brought to mind how he’d spoken up against the Omega Breeding Program. It was why I’d been feeling so unsettled about it every time he mentioned it. He had spoken up for his packmates to save them from an unwanted mate bond, but he hadn’t done that for his own mate.

“You don’t understand—” Stephen began, his hands running through his hair in frustration.

“I do,” I exclaimed, backing away from the temptation he represented. “You care about the Blackthorn Pack above anything else. You care about it enough to stop omegas from unwanted mate bonds that would see them yoked against their will. But you didn’t care enough about me to do the same. And like you say, I deserve so much more,” I said. Everything in me was still crying out for his touch, and my wolf felt like she was angrily biting at my insides, but I delivered those last three words with iron resolve.

I fumbled to fasten my trousers, a healthy distance growing between us as I stalked to

my desk. I couldn't let my feelings for Stephen cloud my judgment.

Focus.

My mother depended on me. My own freedom depended on keeping my head in the game. I needed to focus on my plan to marry Magnus—that was going to lead me to attain true freedom for all of my family, not this mess between Stephen and me that only ever ended in heartache.

“Lina, please, wait. Can we talk about this?” Stephen called out from behind me.

Grabbing my bag and coat, I hurried out of the office, ignoring him and trying to keep the cracks Stephen had caused all those years ago from shattering my heart again.

Lina

I didn't sleep well that night. Despite knowing that shutting down what was happening between Stephen and me was the right call, I returned late that night to Blackthorn Villa, feeling unsatisfied and agitated. Most of the night, I tossed and turned, haunted by how good and right it had felt to be so close to Stephen again. All night long, I kept trying to find a way to dismiss my feelings.

It's my wolf. It's the mate bond. When I finally managed to sleep, it wasn't for long. I woke in a cold sweat from a nightmare: Magnus had uncovered our intimacy through a hidden camera in our office. It took me ages to reassure myself that I'd thoroughly searched our office for surveillance equipment in the first few days of working at Blackthorn Corporation.

Early that morning, I woke to a dull, pounding headache and a hollow feeling gnawing at me.

Sitting up in bed, I looked at my mobile and groaned: it was only 6:00 a.m. I longed to talk to Emily and Matthew again. It was Saturday, and by 8:00 a.m., Betty's usual waking time, I'd be able to give them a call.

I remembered what I'd confided to Stephen. "She kept me grounded." Of course, Em and Matt had been a grounding influence these past few years, but as I'd opened up to him, I'd been thinking about Betty. She was my anchor, my reason for being. Indirectly, I'd told him about her. I shouldn't have opened up to him like that. I was already on dangerous ground trying to protect my real reason for being here—to rescue my mother. The last thing I needed was for Stephen to be getting in my head.

God, I need my friends.

As if Emily's ears were burning, her name suddenly flashed up on my screen. Worry pounded through me. Since I'd been away the last month, neither Emily nor Matthew had called this early, not once.

"Em?" I picked up, "What's wrong?"

"Lina, Betty's been up all night with a fever. We didn't want to worry you. We thought it would get better by the morning, but she's agitated and keeps asking for you—"

"I'm on my way," I exclaimed. "Keep me posted if anything changes," I added, already climbing out of bed.

In a moment, I was dressed and out the door. Luckily, at this time, Magnus hadn't risen yet, and I was able to sneak out of the house and into my car without any questions—something I was immensely relieved about, given that the only thought in my mind was Betty. I didn't think I'd be able to keep the worry tearing at me from showing.

Yet, even as I drove away from the Hamptons and into New York, I kept my eyes peeled for any sign of Magnus's men. They'd tailed me the first few times I'd come into New York on the weekend to go to Macy's, but today, this early, there was no sign of them.

Once out of New York, I settled into the drive, feeling both anxious about my little one and relieved as I'd finally get to hold her after so long. Four hours later, when I pulled up outside my villa, with only a text from Emily to say that there wasn't any change in Betty's fever, I felt as if I'd been driving for days.

Emily was at the door as I arrived, her face a picture of relief as she shut the door. “She’s been asking for you all morning.”

My chest ached, and I hurried up the stairs to Betty’s room before I’d even shucked off my boots. Matt was bathing Betty’s forehead with a washcloth.

He glanced at me with a smile and said, “She’s been a little trooper.”

Betty’s face was clammy, but some brightness returned to her eyes as she caught sight of me. “Mommy?” She asked, her face crumpling as she cried. “I missed you so much. I’m so glad you’re back.”

Every word seemed to wrap itself around my heart, squeezing tight until it felt full to bursting.

“It’s okay, sweetie. I’m here,” I soothed, climbing into bed with her.

“Mommy,” she sobbed, her tiny hands clutching at my shirt.

In a moment, Matt had given me the washcloth for her forehead. There were deep shadows under his eyes.

“Go get some rest,” I told him.

He nodded, leaving me with my daughter, who I relished just holding, her earthy scent giving me a peace I hadn’t known in weeks.

“I missed you, Mommy,” Betty murmured, sounding more relaxed despite her groggy voice.

“I missed you, too,” I said, smoothing back her hair and dabbing her brow and

cheeks, my worry melting away as I saw that she was okay.

It was a typical shifter fever, the kind I had suffered from as a kid. Our temperatures always ran hotter than humans, and I could see the worry etched into Emily and Matthew's exhausted faces. They were shifters like me, but the early shifter fevers were notoriously tough on both the young and their caregivers. The sleepless night had clearly worn them down, and I was grateful they'd done the sensible thing and called me.

It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes after arriving back when I softly sang a lullaby to Betty, my voice a gentle murmur in the dimly lit room. The rhythm and melody coaxed her into sleep.

But just as I was lost in the comforting routine, Emily poked her head around the door, whispering, "Lina. You better come here." Her voice was strained, and the weariness was evident in her eyes.

Reluctantly, I maneuvered myself away from Betty, hoping the lullaby would keep her sleeping while I was gone.

I tried not to disturb her. She stirred, but then her breathing settled back into its peaceful rhythm.

Hurrying downstairs, I found her peering out the living room window. My blood ran cold as I followed her gaze to Stephen's car parked on the driveway.

"Fuck," I whispered, panic coursing through my veins. "What if he sees Betty?" My gaze darted around, honing in on each of the toys in the room, evidence of the life that was about to be exposed. What the hell do we do, Emily?"

"Tell him she's mine," Em suggested, her tone serious.

“What?” I blinked, unsure I had heard correctly.

“Tell Stephen that Betty’s my child. You came to visit me when you heard she was ill. You are Auntie Lina, her favorite aunt, after all.”

It was a risky idea, yet hadn’t Betty just gotten into playing house these past few weeks at nursery? If I could get Betty on board, this might actually work.

I saw Stephen had caught sight of me and Emily through the window. “Stall him for a moment while I make sure Betty knows the game. Okay?”

“Yep, ahead in the game, Lina,” Emily agreed.

In a moment, I was back beside Betty, who was awake again. “Mommy?” She looked wide-eyed and asked. “You’re not going again, are you?”

My heart squeezed, and I settled onto the bed beside her. “No, I’m going to stay right here with you. In fact, I was hoping that when you feel better later, you’ll let me play house with you?”

Betty brightened instantly. “I love playing house.”

“Emily and Matthew have loved playing it, too. They’re not ready to stop pretending. Do you think you can keep calling them Mommy and Daddy for a bit longer?”

Just as I asked her, there was a knock at the front door downstairs. My heart raced; I needed to act fast.

“I’m the best at pretending, Mommy!” she chirped, her spirits rising.

I winced but forced a grin. “That’s perfect, my little actress. But shouldn’t you call

me Auntie Lina if Emily is Mommy?”

“Right! Auntie Lina!” Betty laughed, momentarily distracted from her fever. “Can I have some juice, Auntie Lina?”

“Auntie Lina is on it!” I promised, grabbing the moment to fortify our play. With a racing heart, I hurried down the stairs to greet Stephen. The murmur of voices washed over me as I came down to see the last person I’d ever thought would be sitting on my couch in Philadelphia.

He looked concerned and apologetic.

“Stephen said you had a file he needed,” Em said as if she’d bought his reason for appearing. “I’m going to make us all some coffee—want one, Lina?”

“Stephen and I will make them,” I said, my voice steady despite the fluttering nerves in my chest. “Betty wants a glass of juice.” I spoke Betty’s name openly, offering Stephen knowledge of her existence so that it didn’t look as if I were trying to hide her.

I noticed Stephen looking around the house, his gaze lingering on the colorful toys scattered across the living room. It was obvious to anyone that a child lived here.

Em and Matt’s daughter, I reminded myself, trying to convince myself that if I repeated it enough, I’d be able to pull this cover story off with Stephen.

Emily nodded, retreating upstairs while I faced Stephen, anxiety twisting in my gut.

“A file?” I asked him as he joined me in the kitchen. He shrugged. “It was all I could think of.”

The unasked question lingered between us as he looked at me. What had compelled me to expose my friend's location? What urgency had driven me here, prompting me to return to Philadelphia?

"I told you how important Em is to me," I said, flushing as I thought of last night. But there wasn't time to think about that right now. "She has a daughter, Betty. She's not well. I came as soon as I heard."

"I'm sorry," Stephen said, his brow creasing as he listened to the murmur of soft voices above. "God, I feel even more of a jerk for needing to follow you now."

"How did you know where I was?" I asked.

He heaved a sigh. "After the attack, Magnus had me put a tracker on your car."

My eyes widened. So that's why I didn't see anyone following me. They hadn't needed to. Stephen must have started following me when he saw me heading out of the city.

"It's okay," I said, feeling conflicted as I could see how cut up he was about needing to track me. I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "I should have realized Magnus would have you tailing me. He's been more protective since we were attacked." I remembered that Magnus and I were meant to be discussing mate ceremony dates this weekend. Ever since the attack, too, he'd been keener on moving things forward.

I met Stephen's steady green gaze. He was watching me with an intensity that had my heart fluttering again. But I had to ask, "What will you tell Magnus?"

He was quiet for a beat, then said, "That you met friends in Philadelphia."

I exhaled a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived because the next moment, Betty

wailed. “I want Auntie Lina!”

My heart twisted in response, and I rushed to her room, finding her agitated. “I’m here, sweetie. I’m here.”

I rocked her, and she soon calmed down.

“I’s good at this game, ain’t I?” she said, a proud smile illuminating her clammy face.

“The best, sweetie.”

Before long, her tiny breaths slowed, and I gently laid her back down, watching her sleep for a while. With difficulty, I left her room, my shoulders tightening.

Returning downstairs, I found Stephen and Emily sipping coffee, chatting about New York and Em’s work as a software engineer. As I watched him engage with one of my best friends, the world seemed surreal, as if I’d stumbled into a dream.

We took our coffees to the living room, where the world became even more off-kilter as Betty suddenly appeared, her blankie trailing behind her.

“Hey there, sweetie. How’s my little Swanling feeling?” Emily exclaimed in a bright tone that didn’t sound anything like her usual one.

Betty blinked at her dazedly, and for a moment, I thought our game was all able to come crashing down like a house of cards.

But Betty’s flushed face brightened with a smile. “I’s feeling a bit better, Mommy.” She wandered over to Emily, letting her pull her into her lap.

But my daughter’s gaze pivoted toward me, then curiously over to Stephen.

“Would you like to come meet Auntie Lina’s friend?” I asked Betty, not expecting her to move from Em’s lap. My daughter had always been shy of strangers. Even the few times she’d met Matthew and Emily’s family, she’d barely said a word.

But my heart beat rapidly as she nodded, a small smile edging her lips as she came over to us.

“This is Stephen, sweetie. Stephen, this is Betty, the finest ballerina you’ll find in all of Philadelphia.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Betty,” Stephen said, his gaze brushing over her.

In that harrowing moment, as our fabricated story hung by a thread, I struggled to keep my composure. Would he recognize something in her? The way her bright blue eyes sparkled in the sunshine reminded me so much of my own.

“My daddy’s sleeping,” Betty told Stephen, and in that moment, I seriously thought she deserved an Oscar.

“Your daddy’s been up all night because you were feverish, isn’t that right?” I said.

Betty nodded, still not taking her eyes off Stephen. “Are you my Uncle Stephen?” Betty asked, her beautiful blue stare hopeful.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and in this precarious moment, I felt exposed, knowing my entire life was in danger of being laid bare to him. Needing to get his attention off me, I suggested, “How about Auntie Lina reads you a story?”

Betty cheered up, oblivious to the weight of the moment. She wandered to the coffee table where Swan Lake lay, but instead of bringing it back to me, she turned to Stephen. “Will you read, Uncle Stephen?”

“Of course I will. How can I say no to the little ballerina?” he said, a genuine smile breaking across his face. For a moment, I was dazzled by its brilliance. I didn’t think I’d seen that smile since the night we met. My throat tightened, and my heart fluttered.

As Betty settled beside him, nestling into his warmth, Stephen began to read the story in a low and soothing tone, a departure from his usual cadence. And the effect his voice had on my daughter as if a spell were falling over her, was evident in every word.

Emily shot me a surprised look. I couldn’t help but feel an unsettling blend of worry and wonder. I knew deep in my bones that their unexpected bond was something that not even all our pretending could prevent. After all, we weren’t humans. There was something instinctual in us shifters when it came to recognizing our mates and our young.

The nervous energy beat through me as I felt how precarious a position I was now in. Even if Betty continued to give the best performance, how long was it before Stephen uncovered who she really was?

Stephen

Later in the afternoon, I met Matthew—Betty’s father. He was almost as tall as my six-foot-two frame, which made me feel a flicker of camaraderie tinged with competition as we greeted one another. His blond hair framed a strong face, the sunlight catching the angles of his jaw. Those blue eyes, however, held a quiet intensity that felt scrutinizing and assessing. He wore sweatpants and a simple T-shirt that showcased intricate tattoo sleeves winding down his arms.

Matthew mostly kept to himself throughout the afternoon, looking worn and tired. There were shadows under his eyes—testament to the sleepless night spent caring for Betty. And yet, he frequently cast curious but cautious glances my way. As Betty’s father, it was natural for him to be protective, but something hinted at deeper concerns as he gauged the situation. I was just a colleague and friend of Lina’s—at least in theory—but I felt as if he could see through to the more complicated layers of our relationship. Beneath his scrutiny, I couldn’t help wondering how much Lina had told her friends about me.

Emily was in the kitchen, her striking black hair mirroring the ebony hue of Betty’s, working intently on her laptop while the soft tapping of keys was the only sound that punctured the stillness around us. Her focus felt misplaced when her daughter had a fever. Why was she so engrossed in her work while her little girl was sick? I reproached myself for my judgment. After all, perhaps she’d called Lina here because she really needed to get some work done.

As the afternoon wore on, questions about Lina and how tense she seemed since my arrival plagued me. Her accusation from last night continued to torture me, “You

rejected me and refused to protect me.” I knew she hadn’t forgiven me for walking away from her all those years ago, but I longed for the opportunity to explain to her why. The mate bond in my chest that had burned with ecstasy when I’d held her in my arms last night told me that I could still mend things with her. Yet, with her growing unease, my own frustration mounted with other wonderings. Did she still hold it against me that I’d followed Magnus’s orders and tracked her? I’d told her that I wouldn’t tell Magnus anything about this place. Did she still not believe me? Despite these worries, whenever I focused on Betty, who was nestled comfortably between Lina and me, I felt bewilderingly soothed. Betty’s electric blue eyes, so uncannily similar to Lina’s but glassy from fever, held me captive. I couldn’t help but picture her in brighter circumstances, playing in a sunlit park with her aunt, laughter ringing from them.

Auntie Lina moved with a quiet efficiency. She tended to Betty’s fever, showing she was well-versed. She checked the girl’s temperature every half hour, her brow furrowing with concern each time. Today, Lina wore the most casual outfit I’d seen her in—a simple gray jumper that draped loosely over her slender figure and a fitted pair of black slacks. Her long golden hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders, shimmering in the light as she shifted to adjust the blanket over Betty.

Sitting next to Betty, who insisted I read *Swan Lake* twice, I was swept into a daydream of what might have been—one in which Lina and I were parents together, caring for our child on a sunny afternoon. I found myself lost in this beautiful fantasy as Lina handed out juice and medicine, tending to Betty as if it was second nature.

A surge of protectiveness and yearning moved through me. Not just toward Lina but toward Betty. Why was I feeling like this? Was it because of Lina’s closeness to the little girl? Was it our mate bond giving me this warmth of feeling? I hadn’t felt instincts as strong as this since I’d been hell-bent on protecting my mother. The thought of her had the usual flash of regret and anger searing through me. I longed to talk to Lina about how I felt. Were her feelings for me as strong as this? I glanced

over at her, but once again, she averted her gaze to Betty, fussing over her blanket. She definitely seemed to get edgy whenever I paid her attention.

God, how I wished we hadn't left things the way we had last night. Her closeness had gotten the better of me last night. I'd wanted to talk to her. I'd begun to tell her how pleased I was she'd had friends there for her these past few years, meaning to tell her that I should have been there for her. But then, we'd kissed, and there'd only been the heat and softness of her. Then, she'd broken things off with those words. "You care about it enough to stop omegas from unwanted mate bonds...But you didn't care enough about me to do the same." Those words had cut deep because she was right. I'd fucked up. I should have found a way to protect her as my mate, as well as ensuring I continued on my path of vengeance against Magnus.

As I sat here, nestled beside Betty, with Lina on the other side, I felt again as if I were getting a glimpse of what could have been.

As the day waned, Matthew got up from the opposite couch and said as if in a daze, "I guess we should all eat something."

"How about Lina and I cook tonight?" I piped up. "Looks like you folks could do with sleep rather than food?" I offered.

Betty's face lit up with enthusiasm as she clapped her little hands. "It's biscotti night!" she exclaimed with all the delight a feverish child could muster.

"I don't think spaghetti is a good idea tonight," Lina said, glancing at Betty. "How about you see if you can manage some toast instead?"

"Toast is good," Betty nodded, snuggling closer to me. The warmth radiating from her little body set off that protective surge through me. I wanted to be here for Betty. I wanted tonight to be a step toward making amends with Lina. I regretted not being

there for her when it mattered in the past, but if I could be here now, it would prove I was trying to do better.

“That’s really kind of you, Stephen,” Emily remarked, glancing between me and Lina, but there was a moment where I caught them both looking too quickly away. That sense of uncertainty thickened in the air and prickled along the back of my neck.

“Actually, any chance I could crash over tonight?” I asked, determination spreading through me. “I could do with Lina’s help on that file I came for. We could get some work done once the little ballerina’s in bed.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Emily hesitated, adding awkwardly. “I don’t want you catching whatever Betty has.”

I frowned. If Betty’s fever was something I was likely to catch, sitting beside her all afternoon would have infected me, anyway. Besides, it was your typical shifter fever that young pups tended to come down with—the kind my mom had nursed me through when I was about four or five years old.

That feeling of suspicion wound through me again as the sense that something wasn’t quite right returned. I could see it in the way Emily exchanged a quick look with Lina, both of them conveying more than words could express.

Lina shifted slightly, glancing at Emily before turning her attention back to me. “Sorry, Em, we don’t want to impose on you and Matt. It wouldn’t be fair to you to have to make up another room anyway.”

“I’ll make the bed!” I said, a mixture of hope and urgency in my voice. “I want to help out, and Betty might like having me around.”

Betty, nestled comfortably between Lina and I, perking up at the mention of me

staying. “Please, Auntie Lina! I want Uncle Stephen to stay!” Her little face beamed with excitement.

The warmth in her blue eyes ignited that protective surge within me once again, and my chest filled with emotion as I heard that she wanted me around, even if it was only for tonight.

“Okay then, sweetheart,” Lina said, her voice soft but laced with worry as she glanced back at me. I could see the internal battle she was having from the clouded look of her gaze, but I couldn’t help pressing my point.

I’d driven here to follow orders, but now I was here for different reasons—the need to bridge the distance between Lina and me was all-consuming. My instincts were telling me to be here for little Betty, too. I hadn’t listened to the mate bond that was thrumming in my chest in the past, and I was intent on damn well not making the same mistake.

Once Emily and Matthew had retired upstairs, Lina put cartoons on for Betty, filling the spacious living room with laughter and chattering voices. The open-plan kitchen felt warm and inviting, accented by the soft light spilling from elegant fixtures that hung low over the dining area. At the polished granite island, I rolled up the sleeves of my shirt and prepped a simple marinara sauce, the sweet scent of tomato, garlic, and herbs filling the space.

As I slid into my seat, Betty chirped, “Why you cut my toast like that?”

“It’s how my mom used to make them for me,” I said, nostalgia coloring my voice. “They’re called soldiers.” I mimed them marching on her plate and was rewarded with her giggles, filling the space with lightness.

I caught Lina watching me with a gentle smile that sent warmth cascading through

me. The air around us swelled with anticipation. Was it wrong to want more? To wish she would tell me her secrets and share her dreams and regrets? My heart beat with urgency, willing time to march on so that I might be granted the privacy with her I craved.

“What is it, sweetie?” Lina asked, and for a foolish moment, I thought she was talking to me.

Betty squinted up at her, a frown creasing her brow. “You’re not eating it like Daddy does! Eat it the silly way!”

“You mean like this?” I exclaimed, slurping up my spaghetti. I was rewarded with peals of laughter from Betty, lightening the tension in the room.

After dinner, the evening was filled with light-hearted chatter and stories. Then Betty finally succumbed to sleep. Lina carried her up the stairs, and I was left alone with churning thoughts. I felt a stillness sweep through the house, and yet urgency coursed through my veins. I needed to confront Lina about everything lingering between us—the regrets of the past, the longing of the present, the future I couldn’t envision without her.

Feeling restless, I picked up the books that I’d read to Betty over the day, carrying them to the bookcase. I slid them neatly into place until a stubborn volume refused to budge. I tried to pull it out, but it angled strangely as I tugged. Then, the entire bookcase slid right, revealing a hidden corridor behind.

My heart raced as the corridor illuminated automatic lighting, and a pulse of adrenaline shot through me.

What the hell was a hidden room doing in Emily and Matt’s villa?

Automatic lighting lit up the corridor, and the suspicion that had been growing in my gut made me track down the corridor.

As I stepped down the corridor, the shadows seemed to beckon me, leading me into an office illuminated by soft white lighting. Two modest desks, one with a laptop and one without, sat alongside a more elaborate setup with six screens lining the back wall, each displaying streams of code that danced across the screen.

Emily had said she was a software developer, but this was an elaborate setup for your average engineer.

The laptop on the desk at the back was open, running a program. I strode to it, looking down at the screen. Curiosity and suspicion made my fingers itch, and in a moment, I was clicking through files.

Distrust flared through me as I discovered the files were encrypted. Your average developer didn't encrypt their files. My disbelief thickened the more I investigated, clicking through the files, unsure exactly what I was looking for, but as I clicked into one of them, familiar names flashed before me.

Indent, Boden Ltd—companies I knew had plunged Blackthorn Corporation into turmoil. These were the culprits behind the sabotage and poaching that had plagued Magnus's company.

Each click tore apart the carefully curated image I had of the simple family I'd spent time with earlier. I cycled through more names, and shock surged through me; names of companies I knew had flooded Blackthorn Corporation with troubles and sabotage over the years. Each revelation made the blood pound in my ears with disbelief.

The network of carefully hidden companies led back to Luna Remedies, registered under the name Betty White. As far as I knew, neither Emily nor Matthew had

motivation to provoke this mess. Clarity morphed into a chilling realization: Lina was behind this vast business network.

I leaned against the desk, grappling with the reality of everything I had once thought I understood. How deeply had she become entrenched in the shadowy dealings of our world? The woman I loved wasn't a mere bystander; she wielded power as a player in this dangerous game of deception, her efforts quietly undermining Magnus from the shadows.

Awe mingled with my protective instincts, simmering just below the surface. I needed to confront her. I needed her to explain everything.

Lina

Adrenaline spiked through my veins. The bookcase door to our secret office was wide open. I hurried down the corridor, fervently hoping I wasn't too late. Maybe Stephen hadn't discovered anything substantial. Maybe he'd simply come across locked computers.

Emily was quirky. She and Matt had more money than sense. There was nothing incriminating about a hidden office. Emily had just watched too many superhero movies and was eccentric.

My heart plummeted as I rounded the corner to see the six screens displaying text: doorways into my hidden world.

Stephen turned at the sound of my footsteps, and my two worlds collided.

I froze, feeling the weight of the truth throbbing between us. His expression went rigid. "Lina." His voice was tight. "So, this is what you've been hiding."

"What are you talking about?" My voice sounded tense even to my own ears.

"You've been sabotaging Blackthorn Corporation," he accused.

I frowned, trying to present a calm that my hurried heartbeat didn't help with. "Sabotaging?" I echoed, playing for time and trying to garner how much he'd discovered.

He continued, his green stare merciless. “You’ve been here, sabotaging Blackthorn Corporation for the last five years.” His gaze swept over our secret office, setting alarm bells blaring through me.

He knows.

How long would it be before a team of Magnus’s men descended on this place?

God, how have I let this happen?

But every fiber in my being shrieked at me to find out exactly what he knew. So, once again, I feigned confusion.

“Stephen, this is Emily’s office. She works for all sorts of companies. She’s a contractor. If she’s working for Blackthorn competitors, that’s hardly anything to get upset about.”

Stephen’s nostrils flared, and his voice dropped low. “Cut the act, Lina. I know you weren’t abducted and held prisoner. You’ve been here instead, picking away at Magnus’s empire. The network of umbrella companies in these encrypted files all track to Luna Remedies, registered under the name Betty White.”

As he exposed my secret identity, I knew my charade was up.

“That’s the alias you disappeared with and registered your new company under—through it, you’ve made it your mission to destroy Magnus and Blackthorn Corporation.”

He’d moved toward me, towering over me where I stood beside my desk.

Fuck.

He knows everything.

I fumbled for something to save me. “And I suppose I organized the attack on us on the way to the airport? The one I almost died in.”

“Damn right, you did,” Stephen said, fire blazing through his eyes as he stared me down. “The day of the attack, Magnus informed me the van our attackers used was leased through Boden, a company we’ve linked to the shadow company before, one I just saw listed in these files. So, yes, you organized that attack to divert suspicion from you,” he said unquestionably.

Shit. I’m completely exposed.

He ran a hand through his jet-black hair so that it looked distractingly tousled. I thought bitterly that even now when all my instincts should be on my survival, he still managed to get under my skin.

“So that’s it, is it? Now, you sell me out to Magnus?” I blurted out.

He flinched, his looming figure suddenly deflating. “Of course not,” he said as if he’d never put his father’s interests above mine.

Anger flared through me, and I laughed bitterly. “Sure. After all, you don’t have a track record for putting your father’s needs above mine.”

Urgency pounded through me. I needed to alert Emily and Matthew to take Betty and escape before Stephen could sound the alarm. But as I began to move, he quickly blocked my path, his arms boxing me in. He’d rolled up his shirt sleeves earlier when cooking, and his muscular arms, covered with black hair, had me as distracted as I’d been at the dinner table.

“Wait. You don’t need to run again,” His voice was firm yet pained, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. “You never need to run from me. I couldn’t intervene between you and Magnus years ago because—”

“Because your duty to your father, despite the bastard he is, won over me,” I interrupted, my voice rising as I buried the pain behind fury.

Stephen’s green gaze flashed with fire. “I stayed by his side because he killed my mother, Lina.”

The weight of his words slammed into me like an avalanche, burying my thoughts and leaving me dizzy. Whatever I’d anticipated, it wasn’t this. “What?”

“The last nine years, I’ve been gaining his trust, all so that I can pull his world apart like he did mine when he killed Charlotte Blackthorn, my mother and our pack’s alpha.”

I saw it then, the flicker of grief mixed with righteous fire in his gaze as the past descended. The urge to soothe that pain was all-consuming and I reached out, my hand going to his arm, which brought him back to me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

I knew his mother had passed away. Given my extensive research on everything Magnus related, Charlotte Blackthorn’s death was just a fact like any other, and it was easy to find out online. But I hadn’t known she’d been murdered by Magnus, her own husband.

“Lina, I should have told you back then. But...” his expression softened as he frowned, the lines of worry now tracing his handsome face, “I was so consumed by vengeance that I...hurt you. I’m sorry. So sorry.”

In that moment, as he gazed down at me with such heartfelt longing, I felt myself melting under his honesty. My breath caught in my throat. Could it really be true? The years I had believed he'd chosen an allegiance with Magnus over my safety weren't true.

I knew something of being consumed by vengeance. Hadn't that been my driving motivation against Magnus these last five years, too? To enact revenge for my parents' murders, just as my motivation was to rescue my mother from Magnus now that I knew she was alive.

At the thought of my mom, I needed to be sure that Stephen hadn't been keeping that from me. The worry that he had been aware of that had gnawed at me over the last month and secured the belief that he was just like his father.

I ventured my own truth, "Emily, Matthew, and I hacked Blackthorn Corporation network and found footage of my mother. Magnus has been keeping her prisoner since the attack at the mate ceremony. That's why I came back to New York. I need to save her."

I watched shock flicker over his face. He hadn't known. No one was that good a liar. I knew we were both skilled at harboring secrets, but the look of astonishment, swiftly followed by an intense look, told me he hadn't known. The certainty that he wasn't his father's son had the rush of warmth and attraction filling me again.

"We'll find her, Lina, I promise," Stephen vowed. That vengeful light in his eyes returned, and yet the warmth remained as that word "we" resonated between us.

Stephen's own path of vengeance wasn't so different than mine. Unknowingly, we'd been sharing that path. I felt as if my mission was reflected in the fire burning in his gaze, tightening his taut shoulders, and threading through his arms. My body pounded with adrenaline, and there was a rush of blood in my ears as I finally realized we had

been united in our goal from the very beginning.

As I allowed the thought to fill me, I whispered, “So, we both want revenge?”

His green gaze smoldered with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine, the heat pooling deep in my lower belly. “I want revenge, Darlin’, but for a long time now, I’ve wanted you even more.”

The confession made my heart gallop. A blush crept across my cheeks as my hands slid up his strong arms, tracing the taut muscles beneath his shirt. The memories of our shared moments flooded back, and I was swept up in the realization that he was choosing me over everything else.

The look of hunger on his face made my knees feel weak.

I felt the warmth radiating from his body as desire hung heavy and thick between us. “I’ve never stopped wanting you,” I admitted, allowing myself to be exposed beneath his searching gaze.

His response was immediate and devastating—a kiss that ignited every nerve ending in my body. It was hot and wet and savagely consuming. His scent of spice and earthiness enveloped me as he picked me up, my legs wrapping around his waist.

He pushed me back against my desk, looking down at me as if he were feasting on the sight of me. “God, I’m glad there are no goddamn plants,” he growled, a smoldering look in his eyes as he positioned me against the cool surface, his body caging me in.

I smiled as he confessed he’d had the same fantasy I had about him laying me out like this in our office.

The thrill that we could now be honest about how much we'd been repressing had me sharing things, too. As we surfaced for air, I told him with a mischievous grin, "I watched our elevator kiss back."

Stephen's hungry gaze raked over me. "What did you do while you watched, Darlin'?" His voice was thick, a throaty rasp as delicious as his stubble against my cheek.

"I'll show you," I teased, my heart racing at the electric tension sparking between us.

My hands fell from my collarbone down to my breast, and Stephen's gaze grew darker until he groaned with want. "I need a better view." In the blink of an eye, I heard the rip of fabric. My T-shirt fell away, discarded in an instant.

As I continued to tease, I caught Stephen's arm near his waist. Every breath I took was heavy with anticipation, desire coiling around us like a heady perfume. He groaned, fire igniting in his eyes as he palmed himself through his pants. The sight of his need had heat pooling between my legs.

"I went back to get that footage," he growled, desperation harsh in his voice. "I can't believe you kept it all to yourself. I think you need to be punished."

As he rasped the last word against my lips, the heat we'd been repressing for weeks broke free. We were once more kissing and licking each other—every bit of exposed skin was fair game, as if we were in competition with one another, trying to see who could drive the other one out of their mind first.

I pulled at Stephen's bottom lip, then sucked on his ear, my kisses trailing down the spicy earthiness of his neck. Although, suddenly, I was a lot barer than him as his deft fingers undid my clasp, and my bra fell to the floor.

He cupped one of my tits, and I gasped as my nipple hardened beneath his teasing stroke. Then his mouth came to my other one, sucking it until I moaned.

Stephen stripped off my jeans, but just like last night in our office, he shoved aside the fabric of my knickers as he thrust a finger between the wetness pooling between my legs.

I arched up, a greedy moan escaping me as he stroked me. “That’s it, Darlin’. This is what’s been keeping me awake.”

Soon, he stroked me with two fingers, his thumb making slow, luxurious sweeps of my clit, and his mouth sucking my tits. I was almost delirious with need.

“Please,” I implored, urgency tinging my voice. “I need you.”

“Not so fast,” he ordered. “I need you on my tongue,” he said, his breath hot against my skin as he sank to the floor.

He pulled my knickers off, easing my legs over his shoulders as he sank his tongue between my folds. Soon, he was teasing and sucking my clit until I was a quivering mess. I moaned as shivers cascaded down my spine, a primal want thrumming in my core as I begged, “Fuck me, Stephen.”

I felt him go still at my words, and as I gazed up from beneath my lashes, his powerful body suddenly looked like it was under my complete control. His own claws shredded his shirt, and he shucked off his pants, his boxer briefs releasing his thick cock. I shivered in anticipation as wetness pooled between my legs even more, heady anticipation thrumming through me as he looked at me with such devastating hunger.

Oh god, how have we wasted years without this?

He pulled my hips to the edge of my desk, his knees pushing my legs open wider. I gasped as I felt his cock against my entrance, then the most blissful sense of fullness as I cried out with relief and pleasure.

He groaned out his own exhale of satisfaction as I took each inch of him, the blissful stretch around him making me quiver. His hands moved from my hips, cupping my ass as he brought me even closer to him, thrusting as deep as he could.

I held onto his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as I pulled him closer, relishing in the closeness with him I'd ached for so long. A sigh escaped my lips, longing mixed with need as every thrust brought us closer and closer.

"Move," I whispered, echoing the command I'd given him once before, reveling in the memory of our first night—a reminder that this was a continuation of everything that we hadn't gotten the first time. But this time was different: he knew exactly who I was, and I him.

My wolf whimpered as she sang with pleasure that our mate was once more ours.

"Harder," I insisted, the urgency of pleasure tightening within me. "Faster."

"That's right," he growled, his voice thick with passion, each of his hard muscles slamming against me as I began to shudder, a familiar warmth pooling in my core. "Come for me, Darlin'. Come on my cock."

With each command we gave each other, bliss crashed over me, driving me over the edge again and filling me with joy as I surrendered to him in a way I hadn't ever imagined I could again.

Lina

I'd just been to check on Betty again. She was still fast asleep, and the peaceful rise and fall of her chest were a comforting sight. She'd woken once in the night, needing some medicine, but she was definitely on the mend.

Now, as I returned to my room, I was met by the delicious sight of Stephen sound asleep in my bed. After we'd fucked on my desk, we'd come up to my bedroom and done it again. It had been slower and quieter, a new flavor of intimacy burgeoning between us with a peacefulness that seemed to linger on as I savored the sight of him sleeping in the soft dawn light filtering through the drawn curtains.

The sheets had slipped low on his back, exposing the strong muscles that rippled beneath his taut, bronzed skin. I felt breathless with anticipation as I replayed last night's events, each moment swirling through me, making me eager to wake him and have my fill of him before the day took us away from each other.

In the lightening room, my gaze distinguished some markings down the center of his spine, a tattoo I realized. I hadn't noticed last night. But as I took in the shapes of the black markings, shock thumped through me.

The lingering warmth of Stephen's kisses, still thrumming in my veins, seemed to turn to ice. The tattoo was a totem mark. It was the one the rogue wolves who had attacked at my arranged ceremony had along their backs.

I forced my trembling legs to react, rushing to my bedside table. I snatched up my phone, snapping a picture of Stephen's exposed back and another with his face angled

toward me, visible in the picture. Cold reality washed over me as I recorded this new evidence that once more twisted everything I thought I'd known.

Stephen blinked awake, his emerald eyes sweeping over my silk robe where I stood beside the bed.

A smile formed on his lips, but it quickly vanished as he took in my tense stance and expression. "What's wrong?" His voice was thick with sleep. "Is it Betty?" he demanded, instinctively rising as if he were about to go stumbling out of bed to her.

I felt my heart crack, those fractures across my heart starting to splinter, threatening to make a mess if I let them. But I couldn't pretend my thoughts hadn't already galloped ahead. In this moment, as dread clawed at me, I knew I'd already begun to envisage a future with Stephen. I had already imagined telling him who Betty really was. After last night's honesty, the future had seemed to glimmer with possibility.

It was a future that I knew was about to vanish. "I've just checked on her. She's fine," I said, my voice clipped.

His gaze flickered over me, searching. "Then what is it?"

I forced the words out. "You have a totem tattoo on your spine."

Shock seized his features. He quickly got out of bed now, shucking on his pants that were on the floor. He regarded me with a wary look. He sat down at the foot of the bed, angling himself toward me. "I set up the rogue wolf attack on your mate ceremony."

My gut clenched. As soon as I'd seen the totem tattoo, I'd known. But I shook my head, part of me wanting him to deny it. "But you were injured in the attack—"

“Victor and Ben, my associates, were rough,” he agreed, his hand falling to the white scar marking the edge of his torso and crisscrossing his right rib, running down his right side. “I needed to get Magnus to trust me,” he explained. “I needed to divert his suspicion from me. Protecting him—and you,” Stephen added, regret clouding his expression and wincing as pain stamped across my face. “It was the best way to ensure I gained his trust.”

The bottom fell out of my world. All this time, I’d thought that Magnus had organized the rogue wolf attack on our mate ceremony—to take out my parents and me and take the Silvermoon Pack for himself.

But I’d been utterly mistaken. It had been Stephen. He was the leader of the rogue wolves.

“You used me,” I said, my voice sounding hollow.

Just last night, he confessed to me that he was sorry he hadn’t found a way to protect me as his mate all those years ago and that he regretted choosing vengeance over me. But he hadn’t just walked away from me. He’d used me in his plan to gain Magnus’s trust without regard for the danger it posed to me and my family.

“My father died in that attack,” I accused.

A flicker of remorse crossed his face, but he quickly argued, “Your father sold you to Magnus.” His voice was low and rife with defiance.

“That’s your excuse?” I snapped, bitterness eclipsing the urge to simply walk away. “You—orchestrated a violent attack, endangering me and my family—yet you twist it as if you were saving me from my father?”

“I did set the attack to save you from that ceremony, too,” he argued. “Your father

would have let you be yoked to a man no woman should be.” The furious light returned to his green eyes. “I moved my attack forward to stop you from suffering the fate my mother did.”

“And got my mother injured in the process,” I threw back at him.

Real regret this time flashed across Stephen’s face, but once again, that righteous fire lit up his gaze. “And you would never organize an attack, risking lives to make your cover look authentic?”

I flushed, realizing I had done similarly when I’d organized the attack on Stephen and me on the way to the airport.

But my fury for his lies overshadowed my guilt. “If you’d let Paul shoot me, you’d never have been in any danger,” I argued.

“So, I’m the bad guy for wanting to protect you?” he shot back.

The thought of how he had shielded me—both at the mate ceremony and from the gunmen whirled through me. But just as I’d set up that attack, he’d set up the one in the beginning. The fact was his need for vengeance against Magnus had, from the very beginning, eclipsed his feelings for me. I couldn’t trust him. The rawness of that thought had my throat closing up, disappointment seeping through me.

“Lina,” he said, “please, let me help you. With both of us looking for your mother and helping each other at Blackthorn Corporation, we’ll be better placed to rescue her.”

I shook my head. “No, I see you for who you really are now—someone who puts vengeance before the safety of their mate. Last night was a mistake—”

He stood up, coming toward me. “Lina, please—” He reached for me.

“Don’t come near me.” I ground out, flinching away.

He froze, hurt clouding his expression.

“I want you to leave,” I told him fiercely. “I don’t want to see you except at work. And if you dare tell Magnus anything about me and my friends, I’ll present evidence of your alliance with the rogue wolves.” I clenched my phone in my fist.

Fury stole over his features, and a muscle ticked in his jaw as his attention fell to what I held.

“Lina, don’t do this. I never meant to hurt you. I regret how I handled things between us back then, but I want to be here for you now.”

“I don’t need you,” I argued. “I don’t want you in my life, Stephen.”

His nostrils flared, and a muscle ticked in his clenched jaw, but in a moment, he’d pulled on his shirt. I flushed as I saw how shredded it was down the middle, barely covering up evidence of our shared passion, something I told myself I could forget once again. Something I needed to.

In a moment, I had the bedroom door open. He strode down the stairs. I got to the front door, opened it, and silently willed him to leave, refusing to look at him.

But his step paused. “I know you’re strong, but you don’t need to do this alone, Lina.”

I shook my head, feeling emotion constricting my throat again, but I forced it away. “You’re wrong. I do need to do it alone because that’s the path you set us on when

you chose vengeance over your own mate.” I averted my gaze and shut him out of my life for the second time.

Needing to wash the torturous spicy and earthy scent of Stephen off, I showered and dressed in a fresh pair of pants and jumper, tossing my shredded clothes into the bin. After a quick check on Betty—still safe in her slumber, her little form stirring ever so slightly beneath her blankets—I went downstairs to our office with cleaning supplies.

As I moved through the sunlight beneath the skylights, my heart squeezed painfully as I cleaned up, wishing I could wash away all traces from my memory and heart of what had transpired between Stephen and me here as easily.

I’d just retrieved my laptop from my bag and booted it up when the sound of the bookcase rolling aside echoed down the corridor.

Both Emily and Matt walked in. I’d texted them that Stephen had gone, so they knew the office space was useable again.

“God, I slept like a log,” Matt said, his voice buoyant as he carried a cup of coffee and a chai tea for me before going to his desk.

“Thanks,” I said, a wash of comfort enveloping me as I reveled in how familiar this felt with the three of us settling into our space.

“How come Stephen didn’t feel the need to tail you anymore?” Em asked, eyebrows knitting together as she twirled around in her chair to face me.

As much as I wanted to push aside the events of last night, I owed my friends honesty about the danger surrounding us. “I found him in here last night,” I revealed.

“Shit,” Matt said, his expression tightening. “Shall I go get Betty ready?” The

protectiveness in his tone touched me.

Em's gaze darted straight to her machines, probably already calculating what she needed to wipe.

I shook my head quickly, reassuring them. "We're fine. Stephen won't report us to Magnus."

"How can you be sure?" Em asked incredulously.

"Because it turns out Magnus murdered his mother, Charlotte Blackthorn, the original alpha of the Blackthorn Pack."

"Holy cow!" Emily exclaimed, returning to sip her coffee and stare at me as if she were watching one of her favorite K-Dramas.

"There's more," I said darkly. I attached the picture of Stephen in my bed, the totem tattoo on his back on full display, sending it to both Matt and Em; it needed to get uploaded to our network so that should I need it, the evidence I had on him was backed up. I tried to see it as just that, but as Em brought it up on her laptop screen, my heart climbed into my throat.

"What the fuck?" Em exclaimed.

"Stephen's the leader of the rogue wolves," I explained.

"Something he only told you after jumping into bed with you, I guess?" Em said.

Yeah, of course, eagle-eyed Em has spotted that it's my bed he's in.

"Yeah, the whole I'm-a-rogue-wolf thing only came up after," I said, disappointment

and vulnerability washing through me.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Lina,” Matt said.

I shrugged. “That’s how I know he won’t speak out about us. We’ve got dirt on him. He won’t tell Magnus anything.”

“I’ve got news, too,” Emily announced. “I got some work in this morning—”

“Yeah, thanks for that,” Matt grumbled into his coffee cup, his voice laced with mock irritation. “Nothing like waking up to the sweet sound of keys clacking in one’s ears.”

As his words hung in the air, a flush crept up his neck, and I could see Emily’s cheeks turning a shade pinker. They exchanged a glance, a flicker of shared intimacy passing between them.

Oh my god!

My mouth fell open as it hit me that Stephen and I weren’t the only ones who had been bunking up together.

Emily quickly re-focused her attention on her computer, her fingers flying over the keyboard. As always, her computer was her safety blanket. Matt, on the other hand, struggled to maintain his nonchalance, his eyes darting to me and betraying a mix of embarrassment and happiness.

Their reactions spoke volumes, and it was clear: my two best friends had finally crossed that line into the intimacy they’d been dancing around forever.

“Don’t make a big thing of it, Lina,” Em said without looking away from the screen, the hint of discomfort thrumming through her tone.

But it was a big thing. My two best friends had finally gotten together, and I wanted to bounce off the walls in excitement despite how much my own heart was bruised by Stephen. But I refrained, knowing Emily would clamp up tighter than a clam if I pressed too hard. I'd have to rein in my excitement for the how and when until I could get the details from Matt later.

"Tell me what you've found," I prompted Emily, diving back into the mission ahead.

She cleared her throat and swiveled around to her screens, bringing up text onto the big screens on the wall. "So, Magnus has been sending his men to scour Silvermoon territory," she said. "For a while, I couldn't pinpoint what he was after. Then, I intercepted a few emails that referenced a lockbox—reinforced with a strong metal, chromium. It's supposed to be one of the toughest metals on Earth."

"A box?" My heart quickened, and a flash of memory flickered in my mind. "It reminds me of a lockbox made out of Chromium." My mom's voice echoed through my mind. I saw her in Central Park, a coffee cup in hand, and her slim mouth turned down in a frown. A rush of recognition surged within me, igniting a flicker of hope. "I think my mom might have mentioned it once."

"What did she say about it?" Matt asked, turning to me, anticipation lining his features.

"When? Where?" Emily asked, her voice eager, too, as she pressed for details.

I hesitated, feeling a small sliver of doubt creep in. It had been a fleeting memory, and the more I tried to place when it had been, the farther it seemed to get from me. "I don't know." The memory was hazy, like a dream lingering at the edge of my mind. "We were in Central Park, and I'm sure she mentioned a lockbox once, and maybe the word Chromium, but... maybe it's just wishful thinking."

“Maybe it’ll come back to you in time,” Matt offered kindly, anchoring me to the now and helping me push away the tide of uncertainty threatening to swamp me.

“That’s not all,” Emily said, her voice snapping my attention back as she clicked play on a video cast up on one of the big monitors on the wall.

The video played footage captured by one of our cameras angled into Magnus’s office in Blackthorn Villa. I hadn’t been able to bug more cameras at the Blackthorn Corporate office, given how closely Stephen had tailed me, but I had, while alone in the villa, bugged the network of cameras there.

Emily said, “You know how I said cool people and villains have doors behind their bookcases?”

On the screen, through Magnus’s open study door, a sliver of the wall behind his desk flickered across the screen, one where a bookcase stood ajar.

“But the footage came from one of the Blackthorn Corporation buildings,” I said.

That’s why our plan had been for me to infiltrate their head office, the one Magnus spent most of his time in and where I’d spent the last month searching for my mother.

Emily shook her head. “With the IP address, it looked like it was coming from a Blackthorn building. But their security team was using an elaborate VPN—virtual private network—” she added at my frown, “disguising their true location.”

“With the bugs you planted in the villa, not only have you found this secret room, but you’ve shown this footage is actually coming from Blackthorn Villa.”

My heart raced as Emily’s words sank in. This last month, while I’d been sleeping in that villa every night, there was a secret space below me.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins. Had we found where my mother was?

My pulse raced with expectation. I knew that Magnus's men patrolled the ground floor of Blackthorn Villa while he wasn't there. It had taken every ounce of my watchfulness, working out their patterns, before I'd been able to safely bug the cameras.

But one thing was for sure, when I returned to New York, I was damn well going to find a way to get into that secret room, no matter what.

Lina

God, I hated Mondays. The two-hour drive from Blackthorn Villa into the city was bad enough, but coming from Philly meant leaving two hours earlier, hitting the road at 5:00 a.m.

Still, it had been worth it to stay with Betty and my friends as long as possible. My daughter's fever had lifted completely last night, and I had been able to enjoy some quiet time in which I gently prepared her for my departure again.

I'd promised her I wouldn't be gone long, a couple of days at most. I fully intended to keep that promise by taking advantage of the leverage I had over Stephen. Just as he would have already handed a pre-approved report to Magnus detailing how I had spent the weekend in Philadelphia with my friend, I'd get him to tell the same story later this week.

As I exited the elevator and walked toward our office, my heart raced—an anxious countdown echoing in my chest with each step. A heady mix of anticipation and anxiety coiled inside me at the thought of seeing Stephen again. I'd told myself I wouldn't be affected by him. I'd spent so much time with him this weekend that I reasoned I was immune, but as I stepped into our office and caught sight of him behind his desk, my resolve shattered.

His jet-black hair, the strong cut of his jaw, and the way he filled that clean-cut shirt made my pulse quicken.

"Stephen." I greeted him, striving for indifference as I settled into my chair.

“Lina,” his voice layered with an intimacy that made me freeze mid-task. I couldn’t control the flush stealing across my cheeks.

My gaze charged to him, anger clouding my expression. I saw that his green stare had a heat that matched his tone.

What the fuck is he doing?

We were at work. Dozens of colleagues roamed the shared office space beyond our door. I suddenly didn’t know if I wanted to shout at him or straddle him, either of which would decimate the careful facade I’d crafted the last month. The memory of his mouth on my body flashed through my mind, igniting a desire that threatened to steal my reason.

Just as the tension escalated, Ella, our assistant, knocked on the door. Relief and annoyance mingled within me.

“The Alpha wants to see you, Lina,” Ella greeted me.

“I’ll be right there.”

As soon as the door clicked shut, my gaze shot to Stephen. “What did you tell Magnus?”

“Only that you spent the night with a female friend in Philly,” he replied, his gaze protective, an undercurrent of something deeper simmering just beneath the surface.

Something my wolf wanted to trust.

“I’m coming with you,” he asserted, rising.

“He didn’t summon you,” I bit out. “Don’t disrupt my plan—”

He opened his mouth to argue, but I cut across him. “Or yours.” I savored the brief satisfaction as he sank back into his chair, tension radiating off him like heat while he cast a murderous look at the door.

But my satisfaction was replaced by icy dread the instant I knocked on Magnus’s door, and he called for me to enter.

Magnus regarded me with a cool, piercing gaze that set my instincts on edge. The tick in his jaw suggested his displeasure, a reminder of the severity that lay beneath his calm facade.

He didn’t ask me to sit down. “You weren’t home this weekend,” he began, leaning back in his desk chair, his brown eyes boring into me, a fierceness in them I hadn’t yet witnessed. In contrast, his tone was calm. “We planned to finalize a date for our mate ceremony.”

I feigned forgetfulness, smacking my brow. “I’m sorry, Alpha. I forgot. A friend from Philly wanted to catch up.”

“No matter,” he replied, his slight smile only seeming to amplify the menace lurking beneath. “I took the liberty of sending out invitations. Our union will take place this Saturday.”

The coolness with which he informed me of it sounded as if he were talking about a deal Blackthorn was entering into. To be fair, he’d likely have shown more excitement about a lucrative deal.

A wave of panic tore through me despite this having always been my plan.

“I trust you have no meet-ups that will conflict with this date?” His tone dared me to oppose him.

“No, Alpha,” I murmured, the authority in his voice telling me not to try to sugar-coat my answer.

The silence stretched, heavy, and I fought the urge to squirm under his gaze. Submissiveness was all he desired. Dread curdled in my stomach the longer the quiet wound on for. I fought the urge to look away or fidget with my clammy hands.

“Let me say this only once,” he continued, the gravity of his words sinking into my bones. “The union your parents brokered with me will be honored. But any hint of deceit, and you will regret crossing me.”

I nodded, dread coiling within me. Magnus didn’t want me. He wanted absolute control over me.

“Before you return to work,” he added, a glint in his eyes suggesting something sinister, “I remember your mother had a pendant, a family heirloom she wore during your parents’ mate ceremony. It must be in your parents’ lockbox. Do you remember where she kept her lockbox?”

A frown tugged at my lips as I pretended to search my memories. The realization struck me like ice water. That was why he kept my mother alive.

“I don’t recall a lockbox, unfortunately,” I replied, affecting confusion while frustration darkened his brow.

“Very well,” he growled, dismissing me with a wave. “You best be getting on.”

Relief flooded me as I escaped his unsettling presence, my instincts still reviled by

his scrutiny.

As soon as I shut the door to our office behind me, Stephen's tense frame came into focus. "What did he want?" he growled.

"To set a date for our mate ceremony," I said, refusing to meet his gaze, knowing it would fill with a mix of anger and hurt.

"And when is that happy event?" he demanded, his voice tight.

"This Saturday," I stated flatly, withholding Magnus's inquiry about the lockbox.

We don't share our secrets.

The day passed in a painful silence, and every short exchange was reduced to work-related messages via our internal chat. I told myself the distance between us was what I wanted, yet it was the absence of connection that ate at me, gnawing away at my thoughts.

In the relative silence of the office, the mystery of the lockbox loomed large in my mind. What did Magnus want inside it, and why did he keep my mother alive? More importantly, had my mom ever mentioned it to me?

That evening, as the workday drew to a close, I remained seated at my desk, thankful to have finally reached the last page of the dry medical study I had been reading, when a flicker of memory teased at the edges of my thoughts: a sun-drenched day in Central Park, the vibrant fall colors around me like flame.

I'd been waiting for my mom for one of our usual catch-ups. She always made time for me, regardless of her demanding duties as Silvermoon luna. But this time, she'd been late, and I'd sat on a bench, the sun beating down on the two steaming coffees in

my hand, growing lukewarm, and the first stirrings of worry had flickered.

When she appeared, she was out of breath and her eyes too bright. She waved away my concern about her tardiness, attributing it to a meeting at the docks on pack business—a matter that had taken longer than expected.

But by the time we'd walked through the park and wandered through the Met art gallery, my worries had gone. I could almost hear her laughter now, light and melodious, lifting my spirits. But later, in the gallery, she'd lingered over a striking abstract of silver and blue, and she'd turned to me, her eyes sparkling with intensity.

“It reminds me of an ornate lockbox we have in storage at the docks, made of chromium. Beneath the second window to the right of the door.”

“A lockbox? At the docks?” I'd echoed curiously. “Like where you were today?”

She shook her head, suddenly looking embarrassed. “Art stirs the strangest associations, doesn't it?”

Her manner and her distractedness had struck me as odd at the time. But when she hadn't elaborated, I'd taken her words at face value.

But with wonder, now, I realized she'd been telling me a secret without me knowing it at the time. I knew my father had rented a warehouse by the docks for storage. And unknown to me now, she'd given me the means to find whatever she'd hidden.

“Lina?” Stephen's voice cut through my reverie, pulling me back into the present.

I startled, looking up from my laptop. I caught sight of the message on my screen, too. He'd messaged me three times and was looking at me, concern stamped across his face.

“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head as my gaze fastened onto him. But whatever he saw there only made him more agitated. “You’ve gone really pale, are you all right?”

“Yeah, just...tired,” I said, leaning back in my chair and massaging my temples. “What do you need?” I asked.

“It’s not important,” he said, then added more gently. “How was Betty last night?” he asked instead.

My gaze shot to him, my chest fluttering as he said her name. “Her fever’s gone,” I shared.

“That’s good,” he said with a smile. Once again, my heart twisted, not knowing what to do about the tenderness I saw in his expression.

But...maybe this was an opportunity.

I looked at the time. 5:00 p.m. It wasn’t too early to knock off.

“Listen, can I take an early finish?” I ventured. “I really need to get some sleep.”

Once again, protectiveness stole over Stephen’s face. A softness that made my heart twinge played at the edges of his mouth. “Of course, go—get some rest.”

Thanking him, I stepped into the office’s mundane corridor, my heart racing as conflicting emotions surged. The want in his gaze was palpable, a tether that both anchored me and stifled me.

But I quashed the feeling down. I needed to follow the trail of breadcrumbs my mom had left for me by myself.

Soon, I drove out of the parking lot toward the docks. The Hudson River shimmered in the fading light, its surface dancing like liquid silver as I navigated the congested streets of New York. The salty scent of the water wafted through my slightly cracked window, mingling with the earthy aroma of wet asphalt.

In the distance, the silhouettes of warehouses loomed against the horizon, their weathered facades whispering secrets of a bygone era. Approaching my family's old warehouse, my heart raced with anticipation. The memory of my mother's voice urged me on.

With my shifter strength, I ripped the padlock off the chain wrapped around the gates and stole into the warehouse. Shadows draped across the dusty wooden floorboards while the faint sounds of the river lapping against the docks reached my ears.

"Beneath the second window to the right of the door," my mother's voice echoed in my mind, each word a mantra that drove me forward.

I inspected the bricks carefully and found four that looked loose. With a steady hand, I removed the first and then another, creating just enough space to reach into the hollow. Cold metal met my fingers, sending a thrill of hope coursing through me.

When I finally laid eyes on the lockbox—adorned with delicate swirls—I traced the dial mechanism on the front. It had six numbers, requiring the right code to unlock whatever secrets lay inside.

Hope surged through me, and I felt reinvigorated, warmed by the memory of my mother's voice urging me onward. I clutched the box to me, hugging it to my chest, feeling as if she were guiding me to her.

Stephen

I sat in my car in the Blackthorn Corporation parking lot, scanning the lot to check that no one was near.

It was early evening, and no one was in sight. I dialed Ben, my best friend and the first shifter to join my fight against Magnus after my mother's death. Ben was the son of two shifters who had emigrated from Europe, disconnected from their pack's roots. We had met at university, and his desire to belong to a pack had paired with my need to mobilize my own group of shifters who could move against Magnus.

He picked up on the third ring. "Hey, everything all right, buddy?"

"Hi, Ben. As good as it can be." I'd already filled him in after Lina demanded I leave Philadelphia upon discovering my role as leader of the rogue wolves.

"What's up?" he asked, his tone bristling with alertness. I pictured him on his balcony in Astoria, overlooking the Hudson. After university, he'd settled there and shared a condo with Victor. Vic came from a rural pack in Michigan, but due to moving to New York for work after university, had likewise been missing running with other shifters. He and the majority of our other rogue brothers came from the same backgrounds and had joined Ben and me in their quest to belong to a pack in the city. I knew that one day, Vic and many of the others might relocate back to their own packs, but with the loyalty and friendship they'd given me, they'd always have a place with me.

"Magnus has set a date for Lina and his mate ceremony for this Saturday," I said.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I want you and the pack to be ready to move on him on Saturday.”

“At Blackthorn Villa?” Ben asked.

The ceremony was set to take place at Blackthorn Villa. In some ways, it felt like a bad case of Deja-vu as I imagined the villa decked out once more for the ceremony as it had been years ago.

But something in my gut told me it wouldn't be that simple this time. There were too many players on the board, with too many secrets and agendas for my rogue wolves to end this so easily.

“He's suspicious,” I said. “The ceremony's due to take place at the villa, but I don't see it being that simple. He's keeping his cards close to his chest more than ever.” Magnus had told me more about the outcome of the deal with Haldon than he had spoken or directed orders concerning Lina. I didn't like how quiet he'd gone on that front.

“Do you think he suspects you?” Ben asked with an edge to his tone.

“No, I don't think so. I'm still tracking Lina and delivering reports, but he's keeping his own counsel more and more, asking for less from me when it comes to investigating Lina.”

“It sounds like he's suspicious of your girl,” Ben said.

Ben's words had the usual wash of protectiveness swirling through me as I thought of Lina. God, I wanted to keep her safe, but she was infuriatingly mistrustful and seemed hell-bent on keeping her own counsel, as much as Magnus was. The last few

days of working in our shared office space only seemed to have strengthened the silence and walls that Lina seemed determined to build between us.

My phone sounded an alarm, and I said, “Hold on, Ben.”

I looked at my phone, and an update from my tracking app flashed on my screen. Tit was the one I had attached to Lina’s car. She’d finished early again this evening, ducking out of the office even earlier than I had. Now, as I opened the tracking app and saw her car’s progress leaving the city, I swore, “Fuck.” I held the phone to my ear again. “I’m gonna have to call you back.”

“No worries, bud. I’ll spread the word about Saturday with the rest of the pack.”

I hung up and once more followed Magnus’s orders, following Lina out of town. But frustration shot through me. Did she really think that just because I wasn’t reporting the truth to Magnus she didn’t need to be more careful? With the date of her mate ceremony so close, she should be more careful. She shouldn’t be taking another reckless trip out to her friends.

Then, the thought of little Betty had me worried she might be unwell again. My heart squeezed, and I drove swiftly, not just for Lina, but with thoughts of checking in on the little one.

When I got to the villa, Emily opened the door, hardly blinking as she took me in. “Stephen,” she said. “To what do we owe the pleasure?” She asked wryly.

“Nice to see you again, Stephen,” Matthew said, joining us by the door and schooling his features better than Emily did. She really didn’t look pleased to see me.

“Sorry to barge in like this again. But I need to see Lina.” I didn’t feel the need to elaborate. After all, I’d seen their shared office space and so many of their secrets that

they were more than aware of the elaborate subterfuge we were all in.

Betty, wearing a tutu and ballet pumps, skipped over to us. “Uncle Stephen!” She greeted me. “Will you play with me?”

“Sweetie,” Matthew began, “Uncle Stephen’s here to see Auntie Lina. You come down with me and Mommy to the office—”

“I don’t mind,” I interrupted. “Betty can keep me company while I wait for Lina,” I suggested. That same eagerness to spend time with the little girl filled my chest, and relief trickled through me to see her looking so much better. Her bright blue eyes sparkled with health, and she clearly had oodles of energy as she jumped up and down, her black wavy hair bouncing.

Matthew and Emily exchanged an uneasy glance, and then Emily said, “Lina went up for a shower. She shouldn’t be long.”

I nodded. “Betty can keep me entertained, isn’t that right?”

“I’s show you a new dance,” Betty exclaimed, already skipping across the living room.

Emily went to the bookcase, and it rolled away, leaving the corridor to the office bare. It felt refreshing that she and Matthew didn’t bother to conceal the space from me. If they were more accepting of me, maybe there was a chance that Lina would be.

As I relaxed into the space, the memory of sitting beside Betty and Lina washed over me, and for the first time, I was pleased Lina had driven out here. Maybe here, where she felt safe and at home, she’d listen to me and accept my help.

“Be good, sweetie,” Matthew said as he followed Emily down the corridor.

Betty didn't seem to hear her father, though, and danced over to me until she came to a standstill, blinking up at me with those bright blue eyes—so uncannily like Lina's.

“Want a story?” I asked.

Betty shook her head. “I want to play—Hide and Seek. You hide, and I's count. I's count to ten,” she announced proudly.

I beamed at her. She was so precious. “Aren't you a brainiac? But you've got to give me time to hide. So how about you count Mississippi, too?”

“Miss—sippi?” She asked curiously, stuttering over the word adorably.

“You have to count slowly and say Mississippi after each number—like this: One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi.” I demonstrated.

“Okay,” she answered brightly, climbing up on the sofa and burying her face in her hands as she began to count. “One Miss—sippi, two Miss—sippi, three Miss—sippi, four Miss—sippi...”

I hurried quietly into the kitchen area, pulling open the door to another room. It was a utility room with a washer and dryer and the backdoor in the corner.

Perfect.

A smile crept over my face as I listened to Betty's endearing counting and the way she diligently kept trying to say the word Mississippi.

I was standing behind the door in the utility room when I heard a soft tread on the

stairs. I thought about coming out and announcing myself, but I didn't want to ruin Betty's game. She'd been so excited to play.

"Five Miss—sippi..."

I knew the minute Lina heard I was here, she'd have it out with me and send Betty to her parents in the office, too. Selfishly, I savored the little moment of precious fun I got to share with Betty.

"Hey, little Swanling," Lina greeted. "What you doing?"

"I's playing hide and seek, Mommy," Betty said.

My throat tightened, and my heart seemed to explode in my chest.

"Mommy?"

Sparks of knowing fired through me. Betty's eyes were the exact shade of electric blue as Lina's. I'd known it deep in my bones already. Betty was Lina's daughter.

"Six Miss—sippi..." Betty continued.

"Where'd you learn to count Mississippi?" Lina asked, and I could hear the smile in her voice. My heart seemed to strain against my chest.

"Uncle Stephen," Betty said.

Now my heart was drumming as if it were counting down to the moment I knew I'd be found.

"Seven Miss—sippi..."

“Stephen?” Lina said, her voice taut.

“Eight Miss—sippi...”

“Is Stephen here?” Lina asked, the anxiety evident in her voice even as she tried to make it even.

Betty laughed. “Not here. He’s hiding, silly.”

“Nine Miss—sippi...”

“I think I might have seen him going into the office,” Lina whispered.

“Ten Miss—sippi!” Betty exclaimed. “Here I come, ready or not!”

I heard her little steps hurrying away just as Lina’s footfalls grew louder, but the blood pounding in my ears roared.

In a moment, she pushed open the door.

“Not here,” Lina whispered, pushing my chest and shutting the utility door behind her. She stepped past me, drawing the back door open, and I stumbled out after her, clicking the door shut behind me.

The gentle dusk wrapped around us as I followed Lina into the garden, the air thick with the fragrant scent of blooming buds and the faint hum of the night awakening. We moved past a copse of trees shielding us from the house, and Lina finally turned to face me. Her long hair was darker, still damp from the shower. My pulse quickened as I took in the sight of her, the blue sweater she wore, so soft and inviting that I immediately imagined running my hands over it, feeling the curves hidden beneath.

But for once, my need for the truth was stronger than my want for Lina.

“I heard her call you Mommy, Lina,” I pressed, the fullness in my chest all I was able to feel right now and unable to let this go.

A storm brewed in her blue eyes—a mixture of defiance and vulnerability. Lina’s gaze wandered, her expression drawn tight as if she were searching for a way out of this. “Betty likes to play house. It’s her favorite game at nursery school.” She shrugged as if she could dismiss Betty’s comment so easily. “Sometimes she pretends I’m her mom while Em and Matt are her aunt and uncle...”

My jaw tightened as I realized Lina was leaning into part of the truth to wriggle out of the lie she’d been caught in—she had gotten Betty to call her Auntie when I’d first appeared like she’d made her call Emily and Matthew Mommy and Daddy.

“Her eyes, Lina,” I lowered my voice, feeling the weight of truth crashing down around me. “They’re exactly like yours, the most electric blue I’ve ever seen.”

Although Matthew’s eyes were blue, they weren’t the bright, vivid shade of Lina’s and Betty’s.

The sense of certainty grew as I remembered how obvious it had been the first night I was here. Betty had yelled out for Lina when I’d first arrived. When Betty came downstairs, Lina had been the one to nurse her, taking her temperature and giving her medicine, while Emily became absorbed in work.

Her gaze snagged on mine, and I watched as she swallowed.

“She’s mine,” she finally exhaled, her voice barely above a whisper. Her confession didn’t seem to do anything to relax her, though. Her shoulders and expression both still seemed too tight.

“I knew it,” I breathed, my chest suddenly feeling too tight. “The way I feel about her, Lina, I knew she was yours.”

Now that she had admitted it, her own gaze kept making me remember the way Betty’s eyes lighted up tonight when I’d arrived. And in an instant, a tidal wave of recognition crashed through me, filling me.

Then, that feeling that had awoken again at the sight of Betty, no—at the mere thought of her earlier, sang through me.

“When Betty was ill, I needed to be around her,” I blurted out. “It was like I couldn’t leave,” I added, remembering how I’d been utterly consumed by the need to care for the little girl. I suddenly realized the deep instinct I’d felt toward Betty had been my wolf’s need to protect his young. “And when I saw you driving back here today, I was worried she was ill again, our mate bond tugging at me.” My words spilled out in hushed excitement, both awe and anticipation fizzing through my chest.

Lina paled, and I knew I’d pieced together the last bit of the puzzle about the years she’d been absent. Memories of our time together darted through my mind, and suddenly, everything clicked into place.

“I should have known...” I murmured more to myself than to her.

I have a daughter.

“Betty’s mine,” I said, the truth finally out in the open.

The guarded intensity in Lina’s eyes flared, and she shook her head. But it was a truth I couldn’t unsee now.

“Betty is my pup, isn’t she, Lina?” Now, my own gaze locked with hers, unyielding,

daring her to deny it.

Lina considered me for a moment, then swallowed thickly. She held my gaze. “She...is...yours,” Lina said, her voice strained but resolute.

Exhilaration flooded my veins, swiftly followed by that demanding pulse of protectiveness.

But before I could wrap my head around this revelation, Lina said, “I need you to understand something. We’ve been fine by ourselves. I don’t want anything from you.” The words hung in the air, sharp and cutting.

Her words laid her scars bare for me to see—the years of heartache I had thrust upon her by walking away.

“Lina—” I started, but she shook her head.

“I’ve learned to be self-reliant.” Each word dripped with a mixture of defiance and pain, reminding me of the gift I’d held and squandered.

Hurt ratcheted through me, but I knew it was exactly what I deserved. After all, all those years ago we’d been together, we’d made a kid, and then...

I’d rejected Lina.

My chest felt too full, especially as Lina’s blue stare—the exact shade as Betty’s—was fixed on me. I saw her struggling to compose herself, to keep the strong facade she always did in place.

Never before had my regrets felt so heavy as all the years I’d missed out on with her and Betty seemed to accrue in the thick air around us. How was I ever going to make

that up to her?

“I’m sorry,” I said. “So sorry I wasn’t there for you both.” I took a deep breath, aching to touch her, but the tightness in her shoulders and expression acted like armor against me.

“Why’d you come here tonight, Stephen?” she asked, changing the subject.

“You know Magnus has me tailing you.”

“So, you’re still doing Magnus’s bidding?” she shot back.

“Still keeping my cover,” I said. “Still being cautious. Something you could do with exercising more of,” I urged. I tried to rein in my frustration and added. “I came to warn you. Magnus is on edge. I don’t like how little he’s shared with me lately.”

“I’ve got this,” she said dismissively. “I know where my mother is, and I’m making arrangements to execute my plan on Saturday. I can handle myself.”

Her obvious unconcern made my stomach clench, igniting my protective instincts all the more. “You don’t understand the danger Magnus poses. He’s ruthless. I can’t let you and Betty stay here, not when—”

“Let me?” Her voice rose with indignation. “Are you serious?” I could feel her anger radiating off her like heat. “For years, I’ve laid the groundwork for this, and now I’m ready to take action, and you want to whisk us away just because you found out Betty’s yours?”

I stepped closer, desperate to make her see sense. “I just want to keep you safe. I came here to persuade you to let me help you, even before I knew about Betty.”

“So, you think I’m helpless?” The fury in her eyes was palpable, like cold blue flames searing me.

“I never said you were helpless!” I shot back, but I could feel the tension building, a wall rising between us. “But I know Magnus—the lengths he’ll go to. My throat tightened, and I forced the words out. “Like he was with my mother.”

For a fleeting moment, Lina’s gaze softened, and I took the opportunity to press my point. “You must know that the moment you walk into that ceremony, you risk everything.”

And I meant it; the thought of her being hurt, of her and Betty being in danger, burned through me like poison.

“I know he’s dangerous—he’s held my mother for five years. But I won’t cower from him or leave my mother to rot.”

My heart sank, the weight of her mistrust pressing down on me all the harder. “You don’t have to do this alone,” I urged, softening my tone and pressing my hand to my own chest. “I want to protect you. You must feel that truth. If you feel even half of what I do right now, you know that.” I let the heat I felt show in my gaze, refusing to let go of her electric blue stare, trying to reach her with the strength of what I felt for her and Betty through our bond.

The atmosphere thickened, charged with our unspoken connection. I could feel it pulling us closer despite the chasm threatening to widen between us.

“I can take care of this,” she reiterated, her tone uncompromisingly firm.

“Lina.” Her name came out as a plea, frustration coloring my tone. In a last-ditch attempt, I said, “Then let me help you strategize. Let us coordinate our attacks

together and lay back-up plans. We can pool our resources.” If I made this tactical and strategic, would she come around?

The silence stretched between us, and she simply said, “I’ll see you at work tomorrow.” Then she turned and walked away as if we didn’t have a whole past, a kid together, and our mate bond pulling and wrapping itself around us.

But Lina’s resolve was immovable. I stood there watching her strong and slender figure walk away. But I was just as stubborn and determined as my mate, and whether she wanted it or not, I swore I’d fight for her and our family.

Lina

The first notes of the bridal march echoed from the piano, announcing my arrival. Before me, elegantly dressed packmates filled the rows of Blackthorn Hall, their faces turned to me in expectation, smiles painted on their lips as I walked up the aisle.

Disorientation swept through me. It was as if I'd traveled back in time. For a terrible moment, I had the sense that the last five years of my life had never happened. But differences abounded, thankful tell-tales that time had, in fact, passed. And I grasped at each one of these to ground me.

With the edges of my pinkies beneath the bouquet of gardenias, I stroked the fabric of my gown. Gone was the beautiful gown adorned with the intricate lace and tulle my mother had chosen with loving intent. Instead, the modest white dress I wore was off the rack from a boutique in Manhattan, the fabric thin and unremarkable.

The familiar faces peering at me from both sides of the rows were a painful mix of wistfulness, like Mira and Eileen, who I had once been so close to in high school and who I'd first shifted with as a teen in the grounds of Silvermoon Villa. They didn't look pitying like the last time I walked this path, more...resigned.

The newer faces like Ella and Brynn, both Blackthorn packmates who had offered me camaraderie and warmth in the past few weeks, smiled at me with more joy. They felt lucky that I was going to be their luna. Ella had, while she'd helped me dress earlier, thanked me for the part I'd played in persuading Magnus about the Omega Concord Program. She had omega friends in the pack, whose lives I'd directly altered. The genuine warmth toward me from many of the Blackthorns caused a bout of

uncertainty to move through me as the charade I was caught up in confused me all the more.

As the pianist continued playing and I continued my walk up the aisle, my heart pounded with a mix of nerves and anxiety. Each step felt like a weight dragging me down.

As I neared the front of the room—and Magnus—all the warmth I'd garnered from my packmates dispersed. Magnus looked like he was attending a funeral, or perhaps a business deal had already gone south. The chill in his demeanor caused the panic already thrumming through me to balloon.

He suspects.

My gut churned.

The notes of the piano fell deathly silent as I stopped beside Magnus. As I faced him, that prickle of foreboding swelled.

He knows.

The same officiant as the last time we'd attempted this, Cyrus, a Blackthorn elder, began our ceremony. His voice rang with authority yet lacked any warmth. "Please be seated, packmates."

Both packs' elders sat in the front rows while other packmates filled six other rows.

Just beyond the windows, the perfectly manicured lawns were edged with the first buds of spring, a misleading reflection of new beginnings.

But then I caught sight of Stephen, standing tall and utterly gorgeous in his tailored

suit and tie, his dark hair slicked back perfectly. I caught his emerald eyes for a fleeting moment, as vibrant as the spring shoots beyond, and my chest filled with warmth.

And for a moment, it felt again as if I was right back where I'd been years ago, my heart twisting achingly, my wolf howling with want at his presence. After all, I was once more standing beside Magnus while the mate bond squeezed tighter, threatening to choke the breath from my lungs, begging me not to go through with this. With each passing moment, doubt threatened to overtake my resolve, but I pushed it back.

I pushed back the treacherous doubt nagging at me. My own plan was finally coming to fruition. I kept smiling, a shield against the storm brewing within, reminding myself to play the part of the blushing bride and be what the Silvermoons and Blackthorn wanted, a dignified luna they could be proud of.

Elder Cyrus's voice began the ceremony. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Alpha Magnus Blackthorn and Lina Silvermoon."

Magnus had opted for the most perfunctory ceremony, and Elder Cyrus barely paused for breath before he launched into the vows, "Do you, Magnus Blackthorn, take Lina Silvermoon to be your mate? To have and to hold in sickness and in health, to honor and protect until death should part you?"

"I do," Magnus intoned.

Dread prickled along my skin as I prayed that the plan was underway and would prevent this ceremony from coming to a close in time.

"And do you, Lina Silvermoon, take Magnus Blackthorn to be your mate? To have and to hold..."

My thoughts scattered as a loud ring from a cell phone pierced the air, shattering the quiet.

For a moment, my right hand fell from my bouquet, going to the hidden pocket in my gown, one of the few things I liked about this dress. But I quickly returned my hand to my flowers. Emily and Matthew wouldn't call until Magnus had been alerted by his men to what was happening at his warehouse.

“In sickness and in health—”

One of Magnus's men, Carson, slunk out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

Carson's voice competed with the Elder Cyrus's, “What? How many?”

“To honor and protect—”

My heart hammered as I caught Carson's raised voice echoing through the hall, “Fuck!”

Packmates began to murmur, causing Elder Cyrus's words to trail off. My heart hammered in response, a rapid beat echoing in my ears.

In a moment, Carson reached Magnus, speaking urgently, “One of our warehouses has been attacked. It's Boden again.”

I watched, feeling an unpleasant twist in my stomach as Magnus's countenance hardened.

Magnus turned toward me, his eyes cold and sending a jolt of dread through me.

He suspects me.

Terror pounded through me. Was my chance over? Was he going to bid me to come with him?

“I’m sorry, but this is urgent,” he said simply. “We’ll finish this when I return.”

I nodded. “Of course.” I tried to arrange my expression so that I looked suitably worried.

I wished Mira hadn’t used so much blusher. I was sure that beneath I was looking as pale as a ghost, which might add to the look of worried bride.

But Magnus barely looked at me. Instead he commanded his men. “I want everyone with me.”

A good half of the male Blackthorns left their seats, including Carson and Finn, who usually patrolled the lower floors of the villa.

I congratulated Emily, Matthew, and myself for planning to use as many of our shifter contacts as possible in this attack. We’d sent in all the firepower we had—some twenty shifters—to attack Magnus’s warehouse under the ruse of being after one of the ingredients he used in the production of one of Blackthorn’s drugs, Lenidex. Seemingly, we had attempted to sabotage Magnus’s new deal he’d brokered with Haldon, the client we’d previously poached.

Only Stephen hung back at the front of the room with me, and for the first time, as my nerves climbed, I was pleased he remained with me.

But as if Magnus had heard my thought, he turned back around and ordered, “Everyone with me, Stephen!”

Stephen went with his father, and my stomach bottomed out as I watched him stride

out the hall.

But I told myself that this was for the best. I didn't need him. He was Magnus's right-hand man. I was self-reliant.

Everything was going as planned. Taking advantage of the distraction, I went to Ella, drawing her to the door. "Could you organize some refreshments for everyone while we wait for the alpha's return?" I looked out into the hallway as if thinking of him, worrying my lip. "I need to take a minute. Are you okay to sort things?"

"Go," Ella said. "Of course, take as long as you need, Lina."

I nodded, feeling time flying by, even though it had only been a few minutes since Magnus and his men had gone. But I knew I couldn't count on having any longer than an hour to find the entrance to the secret room, find my mother, and run.

Suddenly, I was at Magnus's study door and entering the room. The cacophony of the guests' chatter was smothered by the heavy door. A prickling sense of foreboding came over me as I breathed in the stale air. The study itself seemed to reprimand me, its mahogany wood desk, looming bookcases, and dark red leather sofas exuding that same territorial masculinity that had unnerved me the first time I was in here.

I hadn't been in here since that first evening when I'd sat with Magnus, and he'd interrogated me. We'd had all our meals together in the dining room and sat in one of the smaller lounges to discuss our mate ceremony plans this week. Carson and Finn's relentless patrolling of the villa had made it impossible for me to search this room until now.

I went straight to the towering bookcases, remembering how the middle one had shown a doorway in the footage Emily had shown me. My hands trailed over the spines of the books and the few paperweights that rested there. I looked for any signs

of dust trails that would highlight recent movement.

One of the books had a slight dust track, and my heart pounded. I pulled out the book. The entire bookcase swung forward, revealing the darkened passage that had plagued my dreams all this week.

I drew my phone from my pocket, turned on the torch, and hurried down the corridor.

My heels echoed on the stone floor, and my steps quickened, my veins filling with adrenaline and my chest with hope. The bodice of my dress suddenly felt too tight, the usual fear of the small space threatening to steal my breath. But I forced a deep breath, slowing my heart rate and the deafening pounding of blood in my ears.

As I turned left, the room opened up into a small chamber, and my gaze landed on a bed. “Mom?” I called out. It was the same small space I’d seen in the footage—the frame of the bed and the small washbasin on the other side of the room telling me she had been in here.

My gaze flew around the room, once, twice, as if more space might materialize. But, searching the small space, dread trickled through me.

It’s empty.

Intuition bristled along my skin, and I couldn’t help remembering Magnus’s ominous expression as soon as I reached him.

He knows.

Panic thumped through me as I just stood there, staring at the emptiness.

I rebuked myself and made myself move. I needed to get out of here. Matthew,

Emily, and I could regroup, but I had to get out.

Going back through the narrow passageway was even worse, and it was actually a relief to stumble out into Magnus's study.

I was still clutching my phone, taking it off of torch mode, when it started to buzz with an incoming call.

I took a sip of air, relieved to see Matthew's name on the screen. I had planned to call them once I had found the room and my mother or if I had trouble getting into the chamber. They must be getting anxious that I hadn't called yet.

Answering, "Matt," I said. "It's empty," I blurted out, not really knowing what to do, feeling the threatening panic swelling my chest and needing my friends' advice more than ever.

But Matt's voice was frantic through the speaker, "Emily's home was attacked." I could hear the terror in the way Matt's gruff tone.

"Is she okay?" I gasped, dread pooling through me.

"I'm on the way to the hospital. She's wounded and unconscious," he trailed off, then added, "but her pulse is strong."

Pain clawed through my chest, and tears pricked my eyes.

No, no, no, this isn't happening. This isn't meant to happen.

"What about Betty?" I asked in another hurried gasp. I couldn't hold back the panicked question. After Stephen had come to see me mid-week and explained that Magnus seemed edgy, we'd all agreed that having Emily take Betty to her place in

Philadelphia, where Stephen had never been and that had even fewer links to me, would be safer for her.

But somehow, Magnus knew where they were.

My heart felt like it would explode as Matt confirmed my worst fears. “Magnus’s men took her before I could get there, Lina.”

Panic made my knees weak and my legs quiver. I wobbled toward the sofa.

Not only did Magnus have my mother, he had my daughter.

Lina

I was taking sharp, shaky breaths. I didn't know how long it had been since Matt had hung up, his desperate tone telling me that he'd let me know as soon as he had news about Em's condition.

Nausea swirled through my stomach as I felt my world disintegrating around me. But I was pulled out of the sinking feeling that was taking hold as my phone once more glowed. I looked at it, expecting to see Matthew's name again, but the screen was lit up with the name Magnus Blackthorn. I stared at the buzzing phone in my hand as if it were a hornet, each thump of my heart accentuating my fear.

I swallowed hard, my palms clammy as I accepted the call, the chill of dread curdling in my stomach.

"Lina," Magnus's voice slithered through the receiver, smooth but laced with menace.

"Magnus." I forced the word past my clenched throat, nerves juddering through me. I tried to grasp what was happening and how everything had gotten away from me.

"I warned you not to play tricks on me. I trust you're aware I've taken the liberty of relocating your mother to ensure she's safe...for now." His voice deepened, lowering like thunder rumbling beneath darkened clouds.

"So, what do you want? Do you want me to congratulate you and your son on playing me so well and uncovering all my plans?" I challenged. I didn't actually believe

Stephen had sold me out, given what he was hiding himself and what I had on him. But I needed to know whether Magnus suspected him.

“Oh, my son doesn’t deserve your praise,” he said. “It was Blackthorn’s security team who unearthed your digital secrets. We found a bug on the Blackthorn network, and my team traced it back to the company Hardwire. My team bugged Hardwire’s network in turn, intercepting communications between them and a company that I believe you’re familiar with, Luna Remedies.” A flurry of contradictory emotions charged through me. I was shocked that I’d been unmasked as the owner behind the shadow company, but I was relieved that Magnus didn’t seem to realize Stephen was working against him. I ferreted that thought away. As much as I’d said I didn’t need Stephen’s help and I could do this alone, I was beginning to see how wrong I’d been.

“What a busy woman you’ve been these last few years, eh, Betty White?” Magnus continued, his voice low and dangerously calm. “It’s a shame the real Miss White had to suffer for your schemes. And it would be even more of a shame if the real Betty was affected because of her mother’s tricks.”

My skin crawled as he reminded me of what he’d done to Emily and that he had my daughter. Suffocating fear wrapped itself around me, but I forced myself to breathe through it and try to understand what he was saying.

So, others besides Stephen had been tailing me. They’d investigated me and unraveled my secrets. Magnus knew I was the mastermind behind the shadow company that had been sabotaging Blackthorn Corporation these last five years. Before, Magnus had been dangerous, but now that he knew, he was lethal.

“If you want to see your mother and daughter alive, you’ll comply this time and give me what I want,” Magnus ordered.

Trying to buy for time, I asked, “What do you want?”

“I told you not to play games with me,” he warned.

The next moment, I heard a high-pitched scream of pain in the background.

“Mom!” I yelled, recognizing her even as her voice was edged in pain.

“I have it!” I shouted. “I have the lockbox.” My voice trembled, just like my hand, as I barely managed to keep the phone against my ear. It was shaking so terribly.

“That’s better. I would have thought you’d be more respectful after what you know I did to your friend. Any more tricks and it will be your daughter incentivizing you s—”

“No, please,” I begged, hating the way my voice shook, my chest twisting as I imagined all too vividly Betty crying out in pain instead.

Panic clawed at my insides, my wolf desperate to break free with the thought of her pup in harm’s way. My thoughts raced back to the last few days—Stephen’s warning about Magnus echoing too late in my ears.

“What happens to them is entirely up to you. Bring the lockbox to the location I will text you in the next hour. You’ve tested my patience for too long, Lina. If you want your daughter in one piece, you’ll bring the lockbox to my facility. Alone.”

The line went dead, leaving me with the hollow echo of his cruelty. The depth of my despair was suffocating.

The sharp bite to his tone kept crashing through my head, scratching at my fraying nerves and deepening the dread in my stomach. All I had in the way of leverage was the lockbox, but as soon as I delivered it, there was no reason for him to let us go.

I knew it was a trap, but I had no choice but to walk into it. He had my daughter and my mother. As I tore upstairs, I felt out of my mind with impatience. I needed to get to them.

Now.

I clutched my phone as I charged along the hall to my bedroom. My fingers itched as I thought of Stephen. Part of me ached to call him. He'd tried to warn me, but I'd shut him out. But Magnus had said to come alone.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I couldn't risk alerting him and putting Betty or my mother's life in jeopardy.

I wrenched up the floorboards in the corner of my bedroom where I'd hidden the lockbox. Grabbing my car keys, I ran downstairs and out to my SUV, ignoring Ella's shout behind me.

Each moment pulsed with the weight of losing my entire family. I couldn't afford to fail.

Half an hour later, I arrived at Magnus's facility, situated in a deserted neighborhood along the riverfront. I stepped out of my SUV, my footsteps mingling with the muted sounds of the river lapping against the concrete bank.

I approached the inconspicuous concrete building, taking note of the heavy garage door partially open. The chill in the air seemed to seep into my bones, gnawing at my resolve.

Warily, I crouched near the door, peering inside, the low light causing shadows to stretch ominously. The scent was damp and musty. The air was thick with tension. My body was rigid, and my heart raced in a frantic rhythm. Each breath I took was a

struggle, my lungs tightening with dread.

As I crouched at the garage door, I dipped my head inside, taking in the dimly lit space. I felt exposed and vulnerable, but I forced myself to announce myself. “Magnus, I’m here. I’ve got the box!”

Shadows loomed and danced around me, playing tricks on my mind. My pulse spiked, and anguish threaded through my veins as I thought of Betty and my mother somewhere in this dank building beyond, my loved ones held hostage by the monster who had dominated our lives for so long.

“Here comes my beautiful bride.” Magnus’s voice rang out mockingly as he stepped into view. His presence was suffocating, every bit the predator prowling toward his prey. “I’m glad you’ve finally decided to follow my commands.”

“Where are they?” I demanded, forcing composure into my words, trying to preserve the fragile mask of bravery I clung to. “Let them go. You have me here. I’ve brought what you wanted.” Out of the periphery of my vision, I noticed a few of Magnus’s men standing at the far edges of the room, too. I hadn’t expected Magnus to be alone, but he had a good handful of men with him.

Magnus tilted his head, a gleam in his eyes. “Yes, I have you and the lockbox, but you’re only one piece of the puzzle, my dear. It’s your mother who knows the code to get into it.

“She, too, has secrets to share, and you were going to be her incentive.” A twisted smile swept across his face. “I’d thought I’d have to threaten your life to make her tell me, but your daughter has been a lovely surprise.”

He gestured, and Carson, one of Magnus’s most trusted packmates, drew back the door behind him. Cold air rushed out, carrying the faint scent of sweat and fear. I

could see my mother—pale, thinner, and more fragile than I’d ever seen her. Her honey-blonde hair was now a pale silver and rattier than the glossy locks I remembered. But, otherwise, her slim face and bright blue eyes were the same. My heart seized as I saw her bound hands slung over my daughter. Even tied up, she managed to hug Betty to her, attempting to shield her from harm.

“Betty! Mom!” I started forward.

But Magnus ordered, “Not so fast!” He lifted a finger. “Come forward Lina and lay the lockbox in the center of the floor,” he commanded.

Betty had looked up from where she was burrowed into my mom, and her bright blue eyes were wide and startled as she silently took me in. I could see the puffiness around her eyes and the wetness of her cheeks. She’d been crying. Protectiveness simmered through me, and the thought of Magnus or his men hurting her had rage pummeling me. My wolf wanted to rip into them, but I wrestled her back down.

I ventured forward, setting the box in the middle of the room. I stepped away, backing up toward the garage door again.

“Now, Miriam,” Magnus continued. “If you wish for your granddaughter to remain unharmed—you’ll tell me the password to the lockbox.”

Panic coursed through me as I locked eyes with my mother, who looked as though the weight of the world rested upon her shoulders.

But a flicker of anger stole across my mother’s pale face. She said, “It’ll take far more than destroying the evidence in there to remove my friend’s blood from your hands. But I think you know that. Charlotte’s still very much with you, isn’t she?” My mother taunted Magnus.

Charlotte.

Stephen's mother, Charlotte Blackthorn. So that's what the lockbox contained: evidence of Charlotte Blackthorn's murder, the true alpha of the Blackthorn pack.

I thought of how my mom had looked shaken that day she met me in Central Park and the mysterious directions she'd given me to the lockbox, which was housed in our warehouse by the docks.

My heart raced as I realized the truth—this box held more than secrets; it contained the remains of Magnus's past that would enable the Council of Blackthorn elders to condemn him. My heart clenched as I wished once more that Stephen was here. He deserved to know that evidence existed that could prove Magnus's crime against his mother.

"Miriam, you should choose your words with greater care," Magnus replied, his demeanor colder than before. "The password or your granddaughter will pay the price." He nodded to Finn, one of Magnus's most trusted men, who stood close to my mother and Betty. Tall and muscular, with sharp features, he advanced toward them.

"Mom..." I begged, my heart squeezing as I watched my mother wrestle with the choice Magnus demanded of her. I had put her in this situation, and guilt gnawed at my insides. But Betty mustn't suffer at the hands of this odious man.

My mother's expression was a mixture of resignation and love. "The password is 210704."

My heart pounded. They were our lucky numbers: my birthday, which fell on Midsummer's in June, and then the fourth of July. My birthday had always kicked off our summer celebration, which culminated with the fourth of July. My mom and I had always found the time to celebrate—going out on the Hudson River in our boat to

watch the fireworks or taking a special trip away. Those wonderful memories now seemed to spill into the present, such a startling contrast to this dank facility that we now found ourselves trapped in.

Magnus went to the lockbox, while my mother stood up, attempting to use Magnus's inattention to move toward me. But Finn held her back, and Carson stood guard at the door, ready to shut them back in if they tried anything.

A cold smile spread across Magnus's face as he leaned down to the box, aligning the numbers on the combination dial as a satisfied click filled the space.

With deft hands, Magnus opened the box, retrieving a USB drive encased within. The innocuous bit of plastic looked so underwhelming and not the priceless treasure it was.

But Magnus raised it high, a sinister gleam in his eyes. "Finally—the last gift from my late wife will be laid to rest."

His odious brown stare shot to me as he threw the USB on the floor, crushing it under his foot and grinding it into the concrete. Shards of metal and plastic scattered across the floor as a sinister grin swept over his face. "Your game ends here."

Magnus's cruel gaze swept toward my mother and Betty as he nodded to Finn and then to Carson, still holding the door. "Keep them back," he ordered, "We'll deal with them after." Then his stare went to me, a dark shadow falling over me as he came toward me.

"It's time to clean house, and I'm going to enjoy dealing with you myself, Lina." The dark promise in his voice had my skin crawling, and my legs instinctively backed up toward the open garage door.

Feeling cornered, my wolf rose up, bristling under my skin as I prepared to shift. She was fierce, but even so, I knew she was likely no match for an alpha. The thought of Magnus' great grey wolf that I'd once seen in Blackthorn Hall had horror pounding through me, and I thought of the area outside the building. At least outside, I could hope my speed might tire his bulkier wolf, but as I backed up, telling myself that this was my one chance to save my daughter and my mother, instead of finding the door, I hit into someone: a warm, hard chest.

Fuck.

I recoiled, trying to wrestle out of the male shifter's grip. One of Magnus's men had somehow snuck up behind me, but their hands came around my wrists, gripping them tight and holding me rigid against them.

Lina

The scent of the male shifter who held me now filled my awareness: a grounding and heady mix of spice and earthiness, conjuring memories of warmth and want. My heart thundered in recognition.

Stephen.

Heart-stopping relief flooded me as I realized he'd come through for me. Even though I'd told him I didn't need him, even though I'd refused to tell him anything about my plan, he'd come. For a moment, I remembered Stephen telling me, "I want revenge, Darlin', but for a long time now, I've wanted you even more." And without realizing it, I stilled in my struggle against him, the wash of his scent settling into my lungs and deep into my bones.

"What are you doing here?" Magnus bellowed, his voice tight with rage that echoed off the concrete walls, reverberating through my bones.

"We chased off the Boden lot and secured the warehouse, Alpha," Stephen answered coolly, his deep voice steady and resolute as it flowed over me. His grip on my wrists was firm—a mixture of protection and restraint that sent tremors of both comfort and fear through me. I could feel his heartbeat, steady and strong—a stark contrast to the panic igniting my veins. "I saw Lina's tracker on the move and followed her here."

Had he seen Betty and my mom? They were in the shadows of the room beyond, their forms barely moving, with Betty tucked tightly into my mom's chest. My mom's silvery, bowed head caught the light. He'd seen them, right? He knew the stakes were

higher than just our own lives, right?

The longing to tell him that Betty was here washed through me like a tide, but saying anything would break his cover. And that was the only lifeline we had right now. Each beat of my heart quickened as the tension in the air built like a storm, heavy with foreboding.

Magnus's calculating gaze raked over me. Then, it moved upward, scrutinizing Stephen with a predatory intensity that made me shiver. I felt exposed beneath Magnus's brown stare, yet even with Stephen's grip tightening, the mate bond in my chest sang that I was safe.

"Your timing is perfect," Magnus said, a thin smile curling his lips, dark and chilling. "We've caught the culprit behind the Boden attack. Lina Silvermoon is the mastermind behind it all. She's the owner of Luna Remedies and the one who has cost our company millions."

Stephen's fingers bit into my wrists as he pulled me tighter against him, and a cry escaped my lips. I could sense his handsome face twisted with wrath, the muscle ticking dangerously in his jaw. Yet, even as I screamed in pain, I knew he was doing what he must to maintain his cover, to give us both a fighting chance of survival. I struggled to bite back my cry, knowing the conflict raging within him would be excruciating.

"I want you to execute her, Stephen," Magnus announced, the words chilling as they settled in the air—a sentence that constricted around my chest like a vice.

Deep, visceral fear seized me. I knew Stephen wouldn't, but his cold voice sounded close to my ear. "Yes, Alpha," he answered, the flatness of his voice brimming with suppressed rage. The hairs on the back of my arms stood on end, sensing the ominous shift in the atmosphere—the air heavy with impending violence.

Before I could process what was happening, Stephen's grip loosened just enough for me to feel the devastating weight of the frightful choice he was making. In an instant, he shoved me with violent force to the floor. I crashed against the cold, hard ground, pain exploding in my arm, elbow, and knee as the breath was knocked out of me.

Stephen was shifting, and a fresh wave of panic clawed up my throat as I scrambled onto my hands and knees, my eyes stinging with pain and confusion, trying to blink back the sting of painful tears.

"Lina!" My mom shouted.

"Mommy!" My heart splintered at the sounds of Betty's sharp and desperate cry, cutting through the chaos, too. The rawness and terror in my daughter's voice pierced my heart. I wanted to tell her to look away, to keep her safe from this horrible nightmare.

But I had no time. My gaze snapped toward the claws that belonged to Stephen's massive grey wolf, leaping through the air on powerful limbs toward me.

My heart flew into my throat, instincts screaming that this ferocious beast was about to kill me.

But just as he reached me, Stephen pivoted. With a primal growl reverberating through the air, he lunged for Magnus.

In that instant, the Alpha shifted. Magnus's bones cracked, flesh morphing into fur as his own wolf leaped to meet Stephen—the clash of alpha against his heir. Magnus's age was evident in the silver streaks of his coat, yet his form betrayed the power that came with his long-held title—every muscle rippling with raw authority and fury.

The rest of the room erupted into violence simultaneously. Carson, stationed just

outside the door where my mother and daughter were held hostage, transformed into his wolf, eyes burning with a fierce intent to protect his alpha. A savage growl rolled from his jaws as he charged toward Stephen, too. But suddenly, the Blackthorns weren't the only wolves in the space.

My breath hitched as wolves poured in through the garage door, their totem marks gleaming across their spines, a tribal banner of resistance against Magnus's rule. Hope surged back through my veins, swelling and warming me from within. Stephen had brought reinforcements—his rogue wolves.

They streamed through the open space of the facility, zeroing in on the Blackthorn wolves circling the edge of the room. I caught glimpses of their fierce, determined faces amid the chaos, the sight igniting a fervor I had not anticipated. The blend of ferocity and loyalty was intoxicating, dissipating the darkness Magnus had cast over us for too long.

My heart raced as my gaze shot toward Betty and my mother, still visible through the door. Betty struggled to untie her grandmother's bound hands, her small face etched with determination and fear.

My protective instincts ignited—heavy and fierce.

I have to get to them.

As I edged around the fighting wolves, I stole fleeting glances at Stephen, who stood his ground against Magnus's hulking form, teeth snapping dangerously close to his son's flank. Each rush of their jaws and rake of their claws threatened to distract me.

Yet, in the midst of my panic, I couldn't help but admire Stephen's formidable strength. His wolf was a majestic embodiment of the power he wielded. His grey coat shimmered in the fading light, muscles rippling beneath the surface as he moved with

assured confidence. Every move exuded a powerful resolve, a clear declaration of his commitment to protect our daughter and me, alongside an unwavering intent to take Magnus down. In that moment, confidence surged through me. I knew he'd come through for us. That certainty in him allowed me to focus on my mother and daughter.

Darting toward the edge of the room, I dodged rippling muscle and fur, weaving between Magnus's guards, who erupted from the shadows, snarling at the rogues. My heart raced as danger pulsed around me, but my focus thrummed with necessity—I needed to reach my family.

With one final push, I reached the door that separated me from my mother and daughter.

“Lina!” My mom gasped with relief.

“Mommy!” Betty's voice lifted like a prayer amidst the chaos swirling around us, hope etched on her face.

“Keep her safe, Mom!” I shouted, determination surging through me. I dashed at the door, shoving it closed. The memory of my mother's fierce protectiveness during my mate ceremony all those years ago, closing the hall's door on me, shielding me from our enemies, echoed through me now. It was my turn to protect her and my daughter. A strange sense of comfort enveloped me, making me feel as if fate were on my side.

With that thought and all the fierceness of a mother's love, I shed my white bridal dress and transformed into my wolf—bones cracking, muscles reforming under the weight of instinct. Clarity enveloped my senses, honing my resolve to guard my pup and my mom with every ounce of strength and breath in my body.

As my consciousness melded with my wolf, I felt her ferocity course through me. A

massive Blackthorn wolf—a muscular brute with a dark grey coat and savage, hungry eyes—lunged for me, his claws glinting menacingly.

I barely dodged his attack, rolling to the side as he crashed into the door I'd just closed. The rush of adrenaline spiked through my system, transforming my fear into raw power and igniting my instinct to banish him away from my family.

When I sprang to my feet, I met the Blackthorn wolf head-on. There was no time to hesitate. I launched myself at him with a primal growl.

Teeth bared, the Blackthorn wolf lunged for my throat, his jaws snapping with lethal intent. I twisted and dodged, narrowly escaping. Pain jolted through me like fire as he scraped my side with ferocious claws. My wolf's growl intensified, a fusion of pain and fury as he turned back to face me.

We collided—teeth and claws snapping together. My instincts sharpened as I maneuvered, finding my footing and dodging his blows. My heart raced, muscles propelling me forward, until finally, adrenaline fueled every sinew as I sank my teeth into the scruff of his neck.

With a howl that echoed off the walls, I pinned him down, needling my fangs into his shoulder with a ferocity that surprised me. The world around me faded as instinct drove me forward, my focus narrowing to the need to protect what mattered most. His growls transformed into whimpers as I claimed my victory, and he shrank away from me, keeping his belly low to the ground and cowering.

I turned my gaze back to the center of the room, the blur of the two greatest wolves locked in battle igniting my heart with dread and uncertainty clawing at my mind. One of them landed a decisive blow on the other's flank, and a howl tore through the air—a sickening and haunting sound that shattered the chaos surrounding us. My stomach dropped as dread unfurled inside me.

Please let it be Magnus.

But with the two still entwined in a flurry of motion, I couldn't tell if it was Stephen or Magnus who had been injured. The thought twisted into my gut, an icy grip constricting around my resolve.

No, it can't be Stephen. Please, it can't be Stephen.

Time seemed to stretch, the roar of the battle fading as I concentrated on their movements, praying that my mate would emerge unscathed. And, at that moment, when I didn't know whether he'd won in the deadly dance we'd been engaged in for so long with Magnus, I realized that I'd been wrong. I did need him. Every fiber of my body and being ached with need for him.

I ran toward the blur, protectiveness surging through my veins, preparing to defend the man I loved with everything I had.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:59 pm

Stephen

The pungent scent of blood filled the air, warm and metallic, as my claws sank deep into Magnus's flesh. A howl tore from his throat, raw and anguished, as he pivoted away from me. He still leaped, dangerously, feigning going left, and I didn't let my guard down yet but raked another claw over his shoulder so that he yelped and weaved again.

But he went to jump again and then collapsed...

Fuck, I've done it. Magnus is down.

As the adrenaline faded, I became aware of the shift in the atmosphere around me. Magnus's guards, fierce and unwavering until moments ago, turned their eyes to me, their postures shifting from aggression to alertness.

Shock shone in their wide eyes, and I took the opportunity to warn them with a growl that they needed to surrender to me if they wanted leniency. In another heartbeat, all of the Blackthorn wolves lowered their heads, tucking their forelegs beneath them, their powerful bodies folding in acknowledgment of my new authority. They were abandoning their alpha and surrendering to me.

My wolf rumbled an understanding to them. I padded over to Magnus's broken wolf. I snarled, still poised above him, the urge to be done with him, biting in my chest and making me draw back as I considered him.

It would be so easy to rip into his throat and end all this, but something in the air

caught my attention.

The scent of jasmine and wildness—Lina’s intoxicating essence, called to me. My pulse quickened, the violent instinct within me fading into the primal instinct of want and protectiveness; my mate was just behind me.

Before I could react, I felt her shift into her human form, her gentle touch against my fur. My alert, lupine eyes noted the relief washing over her delicate features, the lines at the edges of her full lips softening. She’d been worried about me. My stomach somersaulted with hope that she cared and that there was still a chance for me...for us. But that thought was interrupted by Lina’s next words.

“Stephen, I have evidence of your mother’s death that incriminates Magnus.” Her touch was like the softness of dawn breaking through the night, and the violent tension that had held me ebbed away.

My heart thrummed in my chest as I shifted, fur becoming flesh. The conflict within me melted away, but protectiveness still had me paying sharp attention to Magnus. “Shift!” I commanded, my voice brimming with the full force of my new alpha authority, the one I’d won in defeating this vile creature lying at my feet.

Magnus’s beast growled, but he had no choice but to shift, his body shrinking into his human form.

Lina moved away, and I turned to watch her retrieve her white gown. I almost didn’t want her to put it back on, but possessiveness rippled through me as I looked at her beautiful body, suddenly very aware of the other males in the room. But then I noticed the claw marks on her side, and a growl rumbled through me. It took every ounce of willpower to prevent me from immediately gathering her into my arms as she reached me, the dress still in her arms.

She drew something out of it—a USB drive. “My mom hid this in a lockbox. That’s why Magnus kept her alive. He knew Charlotte had hidden proof with my mom of the fact that Magnus wanted her dead. I opened the box before I got here in case Magnus forced my mom to open it.”

“You swapped the real one out, you bitch!” Magnus rasped, rage clouding his features as he clutched his side, a slow trickle of blood pooling beneath him.

Understanding surged through me. Magnus had thought he’d destroyed the real one. But Lina had saved the real one, and I now held it in my hand. The thought made my chest feel too full. Gratitude and longing swept through me as I looked at the amazing woman beside me. But I didn’t have a chance to thank her as she spun around, drawing her dress on over her head and heading toward the door.

As soon as Lina drew open the door, she announced, “Mommy’s here, sweetie!” Her voice rang out, and even through the heavy atmosphere, it resonated like the most beautiful music, melting the tension I still felt thrumming through me into something soft.

Betty rushed into her arms, and warmth glowed within me at the sight—the picture of strength and love as Lina embraced our daughter, comforting her. “Are you okay?”

Betty sobbed, “I thought the monster got you, Mommy!”

My chest tightened, worry creasing my brow at the thought of what Betty had seen. She was too young to know what we were yet. Guilt gnawed at me for what she’d witnessed. I wondered how we’d explain it to her.

Suddenly conscious of trying to make the scene around me as “normal” as possible, I said, “Vic?” My nearest rogue wolf and friend padded over to me in his grey wolf form. “Guard Magnus for a moment.” He growled and padded over to stand over my

father.

I took the moment to go put my jeans and shirt back on, which were in a heap by the door, slightly shredded from my shift but better than nothing. I ordered the wolves—both rogue and Blackthorn—“Shift and get dressed.”

An older woman stepped through the door. Her silver hair seemed to glow, but it was the blue of her eyes, vibrant and piercing, that confirmed she was Miriam, Lina’s mother. She looked worn out but proud, and I felt a fierce surge of love and protectiveness for her. She’d kept the priceless treasure I now held in my hand safe for the last five years. How was I ever going to repay her for what she’d done for my mother and me?

When Miriam spoke, her voice trembled with relief. “Sweetheart,” she said, stroking Lina’s hair gently. A wave of protectiveness washed over me.

It was only when they turned their gaze toward Magnus, still bleeding from my attack, that less fulfilling feelings returned to me, a reaction to the cold contempt radiating from him. I could practically feel his fury thickening like fog in the air.

Miriam’s words cut through the tension. “I’m sorry, Stephen, I had to tell him the password,” she said, her eyes darkening. “He threatened Betty.”

“It’s okay, Mom. Stephen has the real USB. “I guessed the password was our lucky numbers,” she announced, fondness lighting up her eyes. “It took me a while; I kept trying combinations until finally, I hit the right one. I swapped the USB out before I arrived in case Magnus succeeded in opening it. I didn’t have time to see what was on the stick before I arrived, but it’s safe.”

Pride exploded through me, surging like wildfire. Lina was brilliant. A smile erupted across Miriam’s tired face as realization sank in. “You darling girl.” Then, her

attention came to me again. “Your mother left that with me. She had evidence of Magnus’s execution order on her. She also said there were two elders who had sanctioned the order—Cyrus and Isaac. Their messages are there, too. I tried to convince her to go before the High Council rather than confront Magnus herself, but she gave him more credit than he deserved.”

“You meddlesome—” Magnus ground out.

“Silence,” I barked at Magnus, and with a glower, he clapped his mouth shut, constrained by my alpha order.

“You’ll answer for your crime against my mother before the High Council as you have long deserved. Until then, you can hold your tongue,” I ordered, not wanting to subject the people I loved to any more of his hateful words.

Shock and rage spilled over his face as if he were seeing me properly for the first time ever—which, I suppose, he was.

“Your mother wanted to tell Magnus that it was over,” Miriam continued as if Magnus hadn’t interrupted, “and that she wanted a divorce. She was going to lead the pack alone, but he killed her himself, rather than lose his alphahood. After her death, I tried to bring my evidence before the High Council, but my husband, Hector, caught wind of it and threatened me.” Her gaze flicked to Lina. “I’m sorry for not being braver.”

That hatred that I’d felt earlier threatened to burn through me again as I fixated on what Magnus had robbed me of.

But as if sensing it once again, Lina said, “We can take him before the Shifter High Council of New York. I’ll make a call now.” The High Council consisted of an elder from each of the New York packs and was used to arbitrate any heinous acts such as

murder.

Lina, always quick and efficient, had her phone out, ready to communicate our victory to the council.

“Thank you,” I said, a feeling of awe and fondness for her squeezing my chest as she pulled her cell phone out of her pocket.

She handed Betty to her mom. “You stay with Granny, won’t you a moment, sweetie.”

Betty wrapped her arms around Miriam, already looking at home in the older woman’s arms as if she recognized her instinctively as her family. My chest tightened, wondering and hoping for a moment, but Lina’s footsteps reminded me that I needed to lead, too.

Power and purpose filled me. “Mason,” I ordered, calling over one of my rogue wolves. “Bring the bindings from over there.” I gestured to the room in which Miriam and Betty had been contained. “Tie him up.”

“Hey Ben, come here, would you?” I called over to my leading pair of rogue wolves, who were still guarding Blackthorn wolves.

“Of course, Alpha,” Ben said, a smile on his face. As my best friend, I didn’t use my alpha’s tone. Gratitude for his loyalty filled me. We’d done what we’d set out to do almost ten years ago after my mother had died.

Lina returned from making her phone call. “Paul and some of my team are coming to escort Magnus to the High Council.”

I nodded. “Ben and Victor, you can escort him, too. Take all of the pack,” I said,

gesturing to our rogue brothers around us. “I know I can entrust you with this, too,” I said, handing Ben the USB stick. “Make sure the Council gets this evidence.”

As Lina’s men joined us at the facility, along with my rogue wolves, they led Magnus out of the facility, taking him to the High Council.

My rogue wolf pack had been instrumental to that. But as I looked at Lina, Miriam, and Betty, my chest swelled full of love for the strength and resilience of these wonderful women, and I knew I couldn’t have reclaimed my heritage and be on the cusp of getting justice for my mother without them.

“Thank you, Miriam—for all you’ve done for my mother and me. I know if she could be here, she’d tell you she’s grateful for your friendship.”

Miriam came over and wrapped her arms around me. “And she’d be proud of the man you’ve become,” she whispered.

My throat tightened as I hugged Lina’s mother, feeling for a moment as if I’d gotten a little piece of my mom back through her friend, who had been brave enough to protect her secrets, even at the cost of her own freedom.

As Miriam let go, she turned to Lina. “Sweetheart, I...I’m so sorry,” Miriam began, her voice trembling, her eyes shimmering with unshed emotions. “I wasn’t brave enough to stop your father from forcing you into that mate ceremony with Magnus.”

“Mom—” Lina began.

“I heard what happened today,” Miriam interrupted. “When I heard you were once more forced to stand beside that loathsome man today, I was out of my mind with worry.”

My chest felt tied up in knots as Miriam's words mirrored so many of my own regrets. I should have found a way to save Lina from that arranged ceremony years ago. Seeing her walk down that aisle toward my father earlier had been excruciating. I was glad Magnus had already been taken to the High Council because otherwise, I'd be tempted to enact my own justice.

"You did save me all those years ago," Lina replied to her mom. "If you hadn't pushed me out those doors, I wouldn't have had the chance to escape him. You saved us," she said, squeezing Betty more tightly to her.

Miriam's tears finally spilled over, but the fondness dancing across her face as she ran her hand over Betty's hair was one of sheer joy.

"Besides," Lina said. "I'm sorry, Mom. "I thought I lost you," she explained. "I did lose you for years—"

Miriam shook her head. "You found me, Sweetheart." She cupped Lina's cheek with her other hand. "And I'm going to cherish every day I get to spend with you and my beautiful granddaughter," she said firmly, her gaze dipping to Betty, who now with Miriam smiling and her full attention once more on her, chirruped, "Beautiful like a ballerina!"

Miriam laughed. "A beautiful ballerina," she agreed.

"Granny, I teach you ballet!"

"Now that sounds like a fabulous idea," Miriam declared.

I felt a swell of warmth as Lina's loving smile had never looked so radiant. She gently handed Betty over to Miriam, and I watched the older woman delighting in this precious moment with her grandchild, who was soon leading her granny across

the concrete floor as if it were a stage, not an abandoned, drafty space.

I drew toward Lina, feeling the hairs on the back of my arms prickling, responding to her nearness, my whole body lighting up at her scent and nearness. But I didn't want there to be anything left unsaid between us. I needed to leave her in no doubt of my feelings for her. Now that there was no Magnus overshadowing us and making us contort ourselves into playing parts.

But as she came toward me, I wondered if now was the right time. "Are you all right?" She looked tired, and I couldn't help myself. I laid a gentle touch on her side, where she'd been wounded.

"I'm fine," she assured me.

A smile tripped over her face as she looked at Miriam, copying Betty in a dance only a few meters away. "My mom took me to see Swan Lake at Betty's age. I'm pretty sure Betty's got a new bestie."

A smile lifted my own lips as I looked at the pair. You wouldn't believe Miriam had spent years locked up. She looked graceful and strong as she copied her granddaughter.

But even though I was happy for Miriam to be with her family, my chest ached with longing. And I needed to know whether I could hope to be a part of this one day. "Lina," I said, dropping my voice and needing whatever moment of privacy was given. "I know you don't need me. You're perfectly capable, more than capable by yourself, but if there's even an ounce of you that thinks we could try again, please tell me."

My gaze swept over her beautiful blue stare, widening in surprise. I forced myself to try to tell her the truth I felt I'd been forced to hide for too long, to conceal and bury.

“I’ve loved you since the first moment I laid eyes on you,” I declared, my heart racing. I could still vividly remember our first encounter—my mind flashed back to the night I’d found her downtown. “You were so alive and so fierce challenging those men. I’d never encountered anyone so captivating, someone who combined vulnerability with unyielding strength. Even then, my wolf recognized you at a primal level.” I felt my beast bristle beneath my skin, agreeing to my words, his want making my words become even lower, resonating with his want. “I’ve wanted you every day. Being forced to hide that love and want and present the opposite to the world has been a torture I don’t ever want to have to endure again. You’re remarkable, and I want to be there every day for you—and for Betty,” I added, dropping my voice even lower. “Please, tell me there’s a chance.”

Lina stepped toward me, her electric blue eyes drinking me in, and my heart climbed into my throat as I waited, my stomach tying itself into knots, half hopeful, half in agony.

“You’re right, I don’t need you—”

My heart sank, and I tried to prepare myself for the rejection I knew was coming—

“But I want you,” she murmured, drawing closer to me so that my heart soared and my gaze locked onto her with utter attention. “I’ve wanted you since I first saw you. I’ve loved you since you first kissed me, and I’m looking forward to never having to pretend you’re anything except what you are—my mate.”

My chest burst with a feeling that felt too big, and the need to kiss her overwhelmed me. My lips dipped to Lina’s, devouring her with an urgency and need I didn’t think would ever lessen.

“What are Mommy and Uncle Stephen doing?” Betty’s shrill voice announced, stirring a low, joyful laugh from Miriam.

I felt Lina's smile against my own lips, and then she was drawing me toward Betty and her mother.

"Betty, I'd like you to meet someone else properly," Lina said, her voice filled with warmth. "This isn't Uncle Stephen—Stephen is your daddy."

Joy flooded my heart, swelling like a bird unleashed from its cage as Betty blinked up at me with wide-eyed surprise.

"I knew it!" she chirped, reaching for me with open arms, her small, delicate frame radiating unfiltered excitement.

I laughed, feeling a tight knot of emotion in my chest. "How did you know, my little ballerina?" I asked, pulling her close. Her deep, earthy, green perfume, reminiscent of fresh grass after the rain, was—I now realized—similar to my own.

"I just did!" Betty declared, her small hands sweeping over my face as if she were trying to memorize every detail of me. I couldn't help but marvel at her features, too. The gentle curve of her forehead and the shape of her lips felt familiar to me. They were little echoes of my own features reflected back at me. Her ebony, wavy locks mirrored my own, too, an undeniable link that tugged at my heartstrings.

"Ah, you're a clever one, aren't you?" I said, cupping her cheek gently, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my palm. "I knew it, too." I laid my hand over my heart, holding her stare. "I felt it right here. I recognized you and loved you the moment I saw you, Betty," I said, needing her to understand that our bond was deeper than mere words. "I can feel it here right now."

Tilting her head, her big eyes shone with joy. "This is the best day ever—I get a daddy and a granny!"

I exchanged a knowing glance with Lina and Miriam. Their radiant smiles mirrored the tumultuous joy swelling within me. “It really is the best day ever,” I agreed, my heart racing as possibilities unfurled before me. “And it’s all thanks to your mommy, Betty. She brought us all together.”

Lina stepped closer, wrapping her arms around us, and I felt her strength and fierce love wash over me, lighting me up. “From now on, Betty, I’m always going to be here to take care of you both, I promise,” I said, needing to reassure them both of my commitment that they would never have to face anything alone again.

Betty snuggled into my chest, the softness of her hair brushing against my chin, while Lina blinked back tears. The smile on her face told me she was happy—her spirit lighting up the room. I sensed our bond solidifying as if invisible threads of connection were weaving their way around our hearts.

A moment later, Betty piped up, “Wanna see what I taught Granny?”

Lina and Miriam laughed, their voices harmonizing beautifully, and I felt as if I were dancing into the future, too, as I watched Betty lead her granny across the concrete floor. With each twirl and spin, the ordinary space transformed into a grand stage filled with laughter and light, echoing with the joy of family.

A profound sense of belonging enveloped me, and as I looked at the three most important girls in my life, the realization sank in that nothing would be the same again. I couldn’t wait to see what adventures lay ahead for us as a family. The warmth of our newfound connection cocooned me in a new reality, and as I reflected on everything we had accomplished while keeping parts of ourselves hidden, a thrill shot through me at the prospect of how our lives would unfold when we embraced the fullness of our love and the deep-seated bonds we now shared.

Lina

Since Betty, my mom, and I had moved into Blackthorn Villa, it had been transformed. I didn't just mean in its oppressive, dark décor, although tearing out the secret room my mom had been imprisoned in had been one of the first things we had done. I knew I'd always remember her in safety goggles and with a demolition hammer, knocking down that partitioning wall with such vehemence as if she were striking Magnus with every swing.

Blackthorn Villa, three months on, simply had transformed with the chatter, laughter, and joy that was housed within it once again. Now, three months after moving in and at the height of summer, the celebratory atmosphere today made it feel full to bursting.

Betty proceeded down the grand staircase ahead of me in a lilac dress similar to my own. Our bouquets of lilac filled the warm summer air. My mom waited at the bottom of the stairs, her tearful gaze skipping between Betty and me. My mom had on a peachy-hued gown to the knee and was positively glowing with health.

Matt came out of the study that my mom had enjoyed doing demolition on so thoroughly. "Get your ass out here, Em," he called. "Or we're gonna miss the bride walking down the aisle."

Matt's blue eyes were bright as they swept over me. "You look beautiful, Lina."

"Thanks, Matt," I beamed, reveling the third and final time of being a bride. But today, the fizzing in my chest wasn't because of nervous anxiety, but excitement. The

bubbly, effervescent feeling was because I was about to commit to the man I loved.

Matt looped his arm through Emily's, dragging her out the door as he murmured, "I swear even if it was us walking down the aisle, I'd have to drag you from the office."

"Maybe we'd just have it in the office, then I wouldn't even have to take the day off," Em quipped, full of her usual sardonic wit.

But I didn't miss the pleased look on Matt's face as she didn't completely oppose the idea of a ceremony.

Emily had spent a few weeks in hospital after Magnus's men had injured her. But with her shifter healing, she was back to her usual bossy self. She and Matt had happily relocated back here to New York, and although they had an apartment in the city, just like in Philly, they had rooms here in Blackthorn Villa, as well as Magnus's renovated office that they spent most days working in. They were still my most invaluable employees for Luna Remedies.

I took my mom's arm as Betty skipped ahead of us, leading us through Blackthorn Hall. We continued out the wide-open doors and into the garden, and I took in a breath of relief.

I hadn't wanted mine and Stephen's mate ceremony to take place in the hall, which seemed tainted with the memories of the other two times I'd unwillingly felt forced to play the part of a bride. So, we'd decided to have a summer ceremony out here in the garden.

Thank God it isn't raining today.

We'd just celebrated my birthday last week at Midsummer's, and now, a week later, Stephen and I were celebrating our mate ceremony. The fourth of July was in a week's time, and now, to add to this time of year that my mom and I had always

loved, it would now mean even more to me. Every year, it would be the anniversary of my special day with my mate.

Betty led the way, scattering rose petals as she skipped toward Stephen. The little girl went at a much swifter tempo than Mom and I walked, but Betty was dancing, of course. People cooed and cheered her as she danced lightly toward her father, where Stephen spun her until she bowed and then stood beside him, beaming at me.

“Good job, my little ballerina,” Stephen murmured, stooping down to her, and something in my chest squeezed even tighter.

Stephen looked breathtaking. I felt my legs go weak as I took in his perfectly tailored suit, bright white shirt and navy tie, and artfully tussled black hair.

Ben stood beside Stephen as his best man, one of his rogue wolf brothers. Stephen had told me how much Ben had been there after his mother died, swearing to help him in his quest to take his father down and prove him guilty of Charlotte’s murder. It was a quest that was now complete, with Magnus found guilty of murder by the Shifter High Council and sentenced to life imprisonment. I knew Ben—and Victor—who was in one of the front rows, smiling too—were Stephen’s Matt and Em. Gratitude beat through me that we were all standing here together, united. All our allies who had helped us over the years to triumph against Magnus and bring him to justice were gathered today.

As my mom and I reached Stephen, she kissed my cheek, leaving me to link arms with Stephen.

“You look absolutely stunning,” he murmured to me.

I let out a slow exhale, grinning. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

His bright green eyes brushed me with tenderness and loyalty, and for a moment, I

found myself breathless, hardly daring to believe that we were finally standing here together. My fated mate was finally going to officially be mine.

The two corrupt Blackthorn elders who had colluded with Magnus in murdering Charlotte had been imprisoned along with Magnus by New York's High Council of shifters.

Instead, it was one of the Silvermoon elders, Rosemary, who officiated our ceremony.

The ceremony began with a reminder of the sanctity of the mate bond and how it was something hoped for and wished for above all others. "For fate to sanctify a bond is something unusual and special, but one that you—Lina Silvermoon, and you—Stephen Blackthorn, have been lucky enough to be given.

"But given the fraught history between our packs—your fated bond might have been seen as a crux to bear instead."

We had spoken with Rosemary about what we were setting right between us, here before our packmates and ourselves, and the kind-faced elder said, "I believe you each have your own vows prepared?"

We nodded, and Stephen began, his gaze finding mine and making me feel like I was the only one here. "Lina, for too long, I have had to hide my bond with you, which given that this," he laid his hand over his chest, "is like trying not to breathe, pretending you don't need to drink, I never want to do again. I promise to honor and celebrate the bond between us, to strengthen it, and to listen to it so that it is the guiding light in my life that I now know it's meant to be."

Tears pricked my eyes as I blinked at the look of love on Stephen's strong, handsome face, and I had to take a moment to find my breath again. "Stephen," I choked. "I've always felt like I had to be enough myself, strong enough, fast enough, happy enough. But with you, I never feel like I need to be anything but myself. I promise to

give my all to our bond because I know that together, you, me, our family, and our pack make me feel not just enough but whole and happy.”

The look of adoration and passion crossing Stephen’s face made me practically giddy, and it was a relief as Rosemary announced, “I now pronounce you fated mates. Stephen, you may kiss your mate.”

The raucous applause that resounded as we kissed told me that our packmates valued our unity and strength as much as we did. This time, the Blackthorn and Silvermoon Packs had come together organically because Stephen and I were meant to lead together, and each one of our packmates was valued.

We soon began mingling with our guests, sharing drinks and chatter. As we stood beside each other, we reveled in every brush of our gaze, every casual touch, and, most especially, every kiss because even now, after months of being with each other, the memory of being unable to be so carefree with one another lingered still.

Once the champagne had been served, waiters began to bring out canapes.

“Oh my god!” Emily exclaimed as she spotted the trays of pizza pies; I’d deliberately kept it a secret from her, knowing she’d otherwise have found a way to raid the caterer’s stash early. “Is that Giuseppe’s and Nonna’s?”

When Stephen and I had been planning our wedding breakfast, and he’d asked what I’d like, I’d jokingly said, “Nonna’s.”

But instead of laughing it off, his gaze had softened, and he’d confessed, “That night was the first time I felt there might really be a chance for us. The way you told me about Emily and opened up was the first time I dared to truly hope.”

So now, as the guests started to crowd the trays, my gaze met Stephen’s, and his tender look undid me all over again.

“Nonna’s!” Betty shouted with joy, already well-acquainted with the establishment.

“Traitor!” Stephen said, rolling his eyes as Betty’s only cackled. “Daddy just has worse taste than me and Mommy,” she teased, repeating the taunt I liked to throw at Stephen whenever we ordered in.

“That’s right,” Miriam said, “You’re definitely a Granny’s girl!”

“I am so unfairly outnumbered in this family,” Stephen griped, but his bright green eyes sparkled with happiness.

Because other than their pizza preferences, Stephen and Betty were as thick as thieves. He’d been giving her swimming lessons since we’d moved into the villa, and Betty could be found in the pool with her father as often as she danced across Blackthorn Hall with her granny.

The rest of the afternoon whizzed by in a blur of celebrations—drinking, eating, and dancing.

But later, in the falling light, Stephen and I finally got to sneak away from the festivities.

He drew me down to our private beach, and I relished the stillness, with only the lapping waves rolling in.

Stephen had built a summerhouse on the beach before we’d started renovating Blackthorn Villa. For those first few weeks, while all the work was going on at the main house, Stephen, me, and Betty had slept in the big bed in the summer house. The place had been a magical cocoon where we’d gotten to find our feet as a family, away from the lingering ghosts that memories of Magnus had cast in the villa.

Stephen’s bright green eyes fell over me, and the look of desire in them made me feel

aglow, the softness and heat as magical as the setting sun kissing the horizon. “Do you want to go inside yet?”

I shook my head, a smile tucked in the corners of my mouth. “Walk with me.”

“Whatever you want, mate,” he murmured.

My toes curled in my heels, and sparks started low in my belly at the low rumble of promise in that word.

I kicked off my heels, relishing the bare sand on my feet. I ventured along the sand, and Stephen slipped my hand into his again.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, watching me attentively.

I looked out at the sea and said, “I’m not. No plans. No next moves. Just this. Just us.”

He swallowed, a mix of tenderness and want washing over his features. He pulled me against him, leaning down to kiss me. “Just us,” he echoed back, breathing me in as he stared down with a hunger that I swore became more and more open with every passing day.

Sometimes, I wondered if that look was so devastatingly delicious because it had been hidden for so long. Maybe our love had grown so strong because we’d buried it, and it had strengthened and matured like fine wine or whiskey, growing potent until just one taste was enough to get drunk on.

At the thought of tasting, my gaze unconsciously sunk to Stephen’s lips.

A mischievous light sparked in his bright green eyes, and my heart skipped in my chest. I darted away but only got a few steps before he caught me, kissing me. His

mouth was rough and urgent, each kiss growing messier and wilder by the second.

“Lina,” he intoned against my lips, his thumb pressing at my jaw and his tongue teasing my mouth open until he was devouring me.

He kissed me ferociously as if he hadn’t been able to these last three months. My mouth pulled up as I wondered whether it would always be like this and we’d never get our fill of each other.

“What are you grinning at?” Stephen rasped against my lips.

“That we’re still as hungry for each other as we were when we first met.”

“No, I’m even hungrier,” Stephen growled. “In fact—” A moment later, he had me down in the sand, my tulle skirts shucked up around me, and the evening air dancing over my bare legs and silk underwear.

“What if someone—” I began.

“My rogue wolves are under strict orders to ensure our guests know our beach is off-limits tonight,” Stephen said. An appreciative groan climbed up his throat as his attention fell to me, his mouth already kissing up my calf, licking and kissing at my soft inner thigh.

“Stephen,” I moaned as his mouth teased me through my knickers, a jolt of pleasure making me buck against his mouth. He ran his nose up over the silk, nuzzling along my slit, his decadent groan sending shivers down my spine as much as his touch.

“I’m going to have this pretty pussy right here in the open.” He kissed me through the silk, nipping and teasing me and making me grow wetter by the second until he ordered, “Lift your hips.”

“You’ve definitely got bossier,” I joked. It was true. I’d noticed a change since he’d become alpha. He was definitely more domineering in bed. Not that I minded. It turned out I liked to be bossed around, too.

I lifted my hips, and he pulled off my knickers.

“Open your legs,” he growled, and a judder of pleasure beat through me as my legs fell open to accommodate him. Pleasure sparked as his mouth sank between my folds, his finger falling to my clit. My body turned molten, and I felt as fluid as the silvery sea.

My hips rolled up against his mouth, rising to meet him like a cresting wave, and he murmured, “Come for me, Darlin’. I need you on my tongue.”

And just like that, I was over the edge, feeling as if I was boneless and drifting on the sea. But Stephen held me, lapping at me until I collapsed back into the sand.

Stephen’s mouth traveled up my body, his big hands managing to slip up under my bodice and beneath my silk bra, cupping my breast and pinching my nipple. I moaned, heat climbing in me again as I arched up into him.

As his mouth met mine, I could taste myself on him. It mixed with his spice and earthiness, and I felt intoxicated yet still in need of more. The salty fragrance of the sea mixed with the heat radiating from his body, and I nipped and licked at his skin, tasting the salt of him and the air on his neck. I moaned, arching my back to press myself into him. “Stephen...I need you.”

He pulled back for a fleeting moment, a smirk on his lips. “Ask me nicely.”

“I need you, Alpha,” I purred, my voice a sultry whisper, my eyes shining with want.

His bright green eyes blazed with heat, and then the sound of his zipper had a heady

need consuming me. I sighed, overwhelmed as he parted my folds and thrust between my legs.

“My alpha,” I moaned, my hands coming up under his shirt, feeling the hard muscles of his back flexing as he moved.

His green eyes darkened, flashing with desire, warmth pouring off him like the summer night around us. “My luna,” he answered.

And it was like it had always been with us, the fire igniting between us and feeling as if we were about to combust together. But this was the fire of passion. The cold flicker of vengeance had burned itself out, and there was only us.

Just us.

The reality of that sank in, and each of Stephen’s thrusts, as he seated himself as deeply as he could, seemed to deepen that truth, too.

My mate’s fangs lengthened, a flicker of his wolf leaping to the surface. I felt the power rolling off him. His fingers moved to my waist, grasping me as his claws shifted slightly, too.

“Claim me,” I urged, my voice low and husky, fingertips tangling in his hair as I pulled him closer.

The moment hung in the air between us, heavy and charged, and then, Stephen lowered himself, his mouth brushing against my neck. I gasped as he placed gentle kisses along the sensitive skin, each press of his lips igniting a fierce heat. Then he found his mark—the place where our bond was woven—and, with intent, pierced the skin with his fangs.

A thrill of ecstasy and sharp pleasure coursed through me, overwhelming everything

else. I gasped, my body rippling with an earth-shattering release. I felt his claim radiate through me, resonating deep within my core, filling my body with heat and ringing through my very essence.

My back arched instinctively, and I cried out—caught between the pleasure of his thick cock sheathed inside of me and the delicious sting of his teeth still singing through my neck. The bite of his claws sank deeper into my hips, amplifying this all-consuming feeling, the intimacy like nothing I had ever experienced as if our very souls had merged.

When his fangs left my neck, his tongue licked at the mark, and he whispered, “Lina.” His voice was thick with desire and wonder, low and laced with tenderness that made me melt into him. “You’re mine.”

“And you’re mine,” I echoed, my nails digging into his back and drawing him closer.

The taste of saltwater, spiciness, and earth enveloped me. The waves continued their hypnotic dance behind us, and every kiss and touch made me feel as if we’d left the world behind. But it was better than that. This was our world, the one we were building together.

Stephen’s hands swept more urgently over my body, lifting my ass up in the sand, and bringing me even closer to him as he rolled his hips, his glorious cock filling me. Another wave of heat built low in my belly, climbing with every second.

“I need your tits,” he murmured, his tone demanding. Suddenly, his claws raked down the back of my dress, and the night air whispered against my breasts. In another moment, Stephen sucked and nipped at them, making me moan and buck against him.

That molten desire crested with every tantalizing kiss and bite. His mouth devoured mine, and I was helpless to think of anything but him. Each brush of his lips was a promise, affirming that this moment—this connection—was eternal. My heart raced,

echoing the rhythm of the crashing waves, that wildness beyond mirroring the one pulsing between us.

“Stephen,” I gasped, wanting to lase my tone as the pleasure mounted. I pulled him closer, desperate for him, my nails raking down his back.

“Come for me,” he commanded, his fingers dipping between us, stroking my clit, and coaxing me back toward that glorious release. I bucked against him, gasping and moaning as I lost myself to the feeling. This time, as I spiraled into bliss, Stephen roared out his own release, drowning in the fire we created together as his warmth filled me completely.

When the waves of ecstasy ebbed, Stephen leaned over me, his elbows resting in the sand as he smiled down at me, his face shining with satisfaction. As my breath steadied, my heart thrummed softly, and I soaked in the love and intimacy between us that was so full of promise.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“Just us,” he said, a goofy grin spreading over his face, one that quickly spread over my face, too. Because this type of happiness was infectious, it felt easy and wonderful. He lay down beside me, wrapping me in his strong arms, and my contentment sent my thoughts drifting to us again, too.

Because the truth was I was so goddamn happy. I looked forward to spending every day with this man doing ordinary things, like working at Blackthorn where she was part of our lives, eager to share in the life we were weaving—filled with warmth, laughter, and love. And then, of course, there was Betty, dancing through our home and spreading joy wherever she went. My hand slipped to my belly as I hoped that our family would grow before long. Betty had already asked for a little brother or sister, and I couldn’t wait for that moment when we might be able to tell her she was going to be a big sister.

A sense of lightness enveloped me as if we were floating on a gentle current. “I can’t wait for what’s ahead, too,” I murmured, brushing my fingertips along Stephen’s jaw. “Together, we’re going to build something incredible.”

His hands tightened around me, roguish delight lighting up his features. “With you by my side, I know we will.”

As our lips found each other, I surrendered to the warmth of that promise, lifted and lightened by the love we had created.