



# Ranger's Code (Lone Star Wolf Rangers #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** She runs a cupcake shop. He's a wolf shifter with a badge. When sweet meets savage, sparks fly, and danger rises.

I don't scare easily. Not when my gourmet cupcake shop, Sea Salt Sugar, is the hottest spot on the strand. Not when I've built everything from scratch with a whisk, grit, and stubborn dreams. But lately, things aren't adding up—employees quitting without notice, orders going missing, small “accidents” that feel anything but accidental.

I should've known telling my best friend would lead to trouble, especially when her big brother is none other than Gideon Bonham. Former military. Texas Ranger. And the man who once starred in every teenage fantasy I ever had. He shows up with a wink and an application to be my assistant baker. I rip it up. He bakes anyway.

Turns out, he's not just Kari's older brother anymore. He's a wolf shifter on a break between assignments, and now he's in my kitchen, under my roof, and way too close to the parts of me I've kept carefully locked away.

But the threats are escalating. The saboteur is getting bold. And every time Gideon's near, my heart beats louder than my KitchenAid mixer on high.

When the case is closed, will he walk away or stay to claim his mate?

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## PROLOGUE

### GIDEON

Just Outside Galveston, Texas

Six Months Ago

The first time I touch a whisk, it's out of boredom.

The second time? Survival.

Not from bullets or enemies—hell, I've danced with both and barely blinked—but from myself. From the silence that follows missions, that creeps in like fog and settles in my chest like a second heartbeat. One with teeth. One that growls. The kind of silence that gnaws at me and bites down hard. I feel it then—that edge, that snap waiting to happen. The line between man and wolf is always tight, but after a mission, it's damn near threadbare.

But baking... baking keeps that line from breaking.

There's something in the way it demands control. In the way the weight of a whisk fits in my hand—light, sure, nothing like a weapon but solid in its own way. There's order in it. Rules. Structure. A system. Something my instincts can bend to without blood on the floor. In that moment, I'm not a weapon. I'm not a wild thing trying to stay leashed. I'm just a man, standing on a thread, trying not to come apart.

I'm barefoot in the kitchen of the Team W ranch house, bare-chested, Levis hanging low on my hips, still dusted with dirt from earlier. This place isn't official, but it's home. As close as we get. Our team doesn't do official. We answer to the governor and not much else. Off the books. Off the grid.

The air smells like gun oil, old bacon grease, and whatever the hell Gage burned last time he tried to "experiment." The walls are thick, reinforced, but the sound still bleeds through—Dalton giving Deacon hell over a game, Gage adding fuel to the fire, and Rush, calm as ever, dropping one-liners like a sniper takes shots. Always clean. Always lethal.

I can't be still. The run didn't help—too much animal, not enough release. The mission clawed something open in me. They all do, in one way or another, but this last one... it asked too much of the beast inside me. Asked me to go deeper, stay longer, tear cleaner. My body's humming now, wired like a trip cord, twitchy and strung tight. I've cleaned my gear. Twice. Checked my sidearm. Paced the perimeter until the ground remembers my boots better than it remembers rain.

And still... I'm not settled. I can't shift again, not here. Not without a reason. The others don't need to see what I'm holding back.

But doing nothing? That's a death sentence.

So I move. I open the pantry. Flour. Sugar. A crusted bottle of vanilla extract. These aren't my tools—not the ones I trained with—but they're something. And I need something .

Eggs crack under my fingers—one hand, no shells. Instinct. Measure by feel. Stir. Fold. Pour.

It comes quick, faster than I expect. There's peace in the process.

No thinking about targets or triggers. No blood. No heat rising under my skin, begging for claws.

Just rhythm. Follow the damn recipe. That's all.

The first cake sucks. Dry as sand. Edges crisped to hell. Probably too much baking soda. Doesn't matter. The wolf's quiet.

Next night, I'm back at it. Still wired. Still human enough to stay on two legs, but only just.

I don't say a word to the team—not about the light burning past midnight. Not about the way the house starts smelling like cinnamon and butter instead of sweat and steel. I just keep baking. Cakes. Cookies. Cupcakes. Whatever the pantry throws at me.

There's control in it. Precision. No games. No bullshit. No commands from above. You follow the steps, the results show up. No politics. No collateral damage. No cleanup crew.

Just sweetness. Rising.

One night, after a hard run, I come in from the back—still half-charged with stormlight, skin raw from the shift—and there's Rush in the kitchen, eating a blondie straight off the cooling rack.

He raises an eyebrow. "You gonna open a bakery next?"

I don't answer. Just pull on my jeans, tie the apron around my waist, rinse the blood and dirt off my hands, and get back to it.

Dalton wanders in, swipes a blondie without looking. "Ew, are you gonna drip sweat

all over the treats?”

I growl low. “It’s my secret ingredient.”

He makes a face, but he eats the damn thing, anyway.

No one asks. No one pushes.

And I don’t tell them that this—this ritual, this rhythm—is the only thing that makes me feel like I still belong in my skin. That this kitchen is the only place I’m not halfway to wolf. That without it, I’m not sure I’d still be here at all.

### CHAPTER 1

#### MAGGIE

Galveston, Texas

Present Day, 4:47 a.m.

I wake up in my loft condo—a cozy, one bedroom unit tucked inside a converted warehouse that sits right on the Galveston beachfront. The industrial bones of the place show through in exposed brick walls, steel beams, and high ceilings, but I’ve softened it with pastel rugs, stacks of cookbooks, and the smell of vanilla that never quite leaves my clothes.

I pad barefoot across the cool concrete floor, still groggy from another night of stress dreams about collapsing cake towers. After a hot shower, I step out and stretch naked in front of the massive floor-to-ceiling windows that frame the ocean like a living painting. It’s one of my favorite indulgences. There’s something about standing there, unguarded, the sea breeze sneaking through the slightly open window I allow myself, that makes me feel strong in my own skin. Thankfully, I don’t have to worry about voyeurs—not this early, not from this angle. Especially with only the soft glow of the bathroom light behind me.

I get dressed, leave my home, and head toward my bakery—Sea Salt the shells crunch beneath my fingers like they personally offended me. Yolks splatter into the stainless-steel mixing bowl with satisfying plops. I reach for the sugar with a swift, practiced motion, dumping a measured scoop in without even looking. If my

emotions had a flavor, they'd be bitter and burnt around the edges—but I'll still find a way to fold them into the batter and make something edible. That's my superpower: rage baking. Fury-fueled frosting. The more the world spins sideways, the harder I lean into butter and precision.

The silence of the kitchen feels heavier than usual—no low hum of friendly ovens, no music, no Kyle talking about his weird obsession with lemon zest ratios. Just my heartbeat and the ticking clock over the espresso machine.

By 6:15, I have three dozen cupcakes in the working oven and two mixers going at once. By 6:32, the piping bag has blistered my thumb, and I haven't frosted a single cooled cake because I can't find my tip set. By 6:48, I'm holding a broken pastry bag over the sink, shaking my head like I can physically rattle the day back into order.

My phone buzzes on the prep counter. I glance at the screen.

Kari Bonham—6:49 a.m.

I hit accept with my elbow. "Tell me you're bringing caffeine or a gun—your choice."

"Who's the gun for?" asks Kari.

"Me or Kyle—take your pick."

"I haven't even gotten out of bed yet," Kari says, voice still scratchy with sleep. "What's going on?"

I exhale hard, dragging a hand down my face. "You called me, but in answer to your question, everything is flaming garbage on a gasoline cake stand. I jacked up the ovens—one is trying to incinerate my batter, and the others are dead as my love life.

Kyle ghosted. Left a note like we're in middle school. And I've got a wedding pickup in three hours with cupcakes that look like a toddler decorated them using sidewalk chalk and a fever dream."

Kari goes quiet for a second longer than normal.

I frown. "What?"

"Nothing. Just... that's a lot of bad luck."

"Tell me about it," I mutter, cracking open another egg and fishing out a rogue piece of shell. "And it's not just today. Last week, that order from Milk & Honey never showed up. I had to improvise whipped cream with powdered milk like it was 1950. The week before that? All three fridges lost power for about six hours. Long enough to ruin all the milk and eggs I'd just taken delivery of."

"You think someone's messing with you?" Kari's voice loses its sleepiness in a snap, turning crisp and alert. It's not just concern—it's the kind of sharp that comes from gears turning fast behind her words. Like she's already considered the possibility before I even said it out loud. Like she's been waiting for the pieces to click.

I bark a tired laugh. "No. I think I push people too hard and they finally get fed up. It's me, not a conspiracy."

"Mags..."

"I'm serious. I'm not easy to work for. I want things done a certain way, on time, with no shortcuts. That kind of precision doesn't win popularity contests. I'm not warm and fuzzy when someone forgets to sift flour or skips the resting time on dough. I correct them. I expect better. People tire of that. They want praise for just showing up, not getting it right. It's a cupcake shop, Kari, not a cartel war—but some



days, it damn well feels like one.”

More silence.

I balance my phone between my shoulder and cheek while I start another batch. “Don’t give me that thoughtful quiet. I know that tone. You’re thinking.”

“If I’m not talking, I can’t have a tone. Look, why don’t I try to stop by later?”

“You don’t need to...”

“Maybe, maybe not, but I want to,” Kari says firmly. “You sound like you’re two cupcakes away from a breakdown.”

“That’s because I am,” I say, laughing without humor. “But if you bring coffee, I’ll forgive your unsolicited concern.”

“Deal,” Kari says, but her voice is still off. Controlled. Too even—like she’s masking something behind the word. It’s the kind of tone that makes my skin prickle, the one Kari uses when she’s already ten steps ahead in a mental chess game and doesn’t want to tip her hand. She isn’t just being a good friend. She’s planning something—God only knows what.

I hang up and toss the phone onto the counter, watching the frosting swirl in the bowl like it might give me answers. The motion is hypnotic, steady in a way the rest of my life refuses to be. I focus on the ribboning sugar and butter, half-hoping some kind of clarity will rise to the surface with the peaks. My brain keeps circling the conversation with Kari, picking apart tone and timing and intent. I’m not the paranoid type, but I know Kari—and Kari’s quiet isn’t quiet. Kari’s quiet is always loaded. Calculated. And if Kari has picked up on something, it means this mess might be more than bad luck and overworked staff. Still, I can’t afford to chase shadows. Not

yet. Not until the wedding cupcakes are boxed and the ovens either function properly or explode.

I don't believe in sabotage. That sounds too dramatic, too much like a Lifetime movie for a cupcake shop run by one over-caffeinated perfectionist. People don't care that much—not about me, not about this place. They quit. They flake. They forget. They move on without a second thought while I stay behind, scraping burnt batter off pans and rebuilding my schedule from scratch. Life is full of screwups, and I figure I've just been given a messy, unlucky streak. That's all. Has to be.

But still... I glance at the ovens. One of the offline ones is now blinking too cold. One is flashing over-temp, and one is completely dead.

Maybe it's not personal, but then again, maybe it is. In either event, it's starting to feel pointed.

### CHAPTER 2

#### GIDEON

The waffles are good, but the bacon is better. Crisp, peppered, exactly how I like it—none of that flimsy diner stuff, but thick-cut and seared with purpose. I sit in a back booth at the Stranded Waffle, a pier-front joint that straddles the line between kitsch and comfort with the kind of charm only an upscale greasy spoon could pull off.

Nautical flags hang from the beams, and the salty air carries the scent of griddle oil and sea breeze. The place is noisy without being loud, and just offbeat enough that no one pays much attention to a man who could bench press a truck and looks like he hasn't smiled in a week. I have one elbow on the table, a fork in my hand, and a cooling mug of black coffee in front of me. Across from me, my little sister, Kari, levels me with the kind of look that means I'm not getting out of here without a mission.

"So did you roust me out of bed to stuff me with waffles," I say, taking another bite, "or for a favor you haven't asked yet?"

Kari arches one eyebrow over the rim of her coffee cup. "You always were even faster with your mouth than you are with your Glock, but yeah. I need something."

I lean back. I don't like surprises, but when Kari calls and says, "Meet me," I go.

No questions. I owe her that. More than that. She covered for me when I couldn't

cover for myself, back in the days when I'd come back from missions with hands that wouldn't stop shaking and a jaw so tight I could barely speak. When the silence between adrenaline spikes started to feel like it was swallowing me whole. Kari never pushed. She just gave me a place to stay, bringing me coffee, making dumb jokes, and reminding me of who I was when the lines between man and wolf blurred too far. We have a bond that goes deeper than blood—pack-deep. Wolf-deep. The kind of connection you don't question. You honor it.

"It's Maggie," Kari says, voice low.

I blink, a corner of my mouth twitching in something almost like a smile. "The shy one with the enormous eyes and cupcake fixation? Yeah, I remember her. Always wore those baggy hoodies like she was trying to disappear, but even then... she had this quiet kind of beauty. Like she didn't know what to do with it, so she hid it. Always hanging back, but watching everything. Thoughtful."

Kari gives me a look, but nods. "That's the one. I never even thought you noticed her..."

"Oh, I noticed," I chuckle.

"She's my best friend, Gideon. You are not allowed to think of her that way," Kari scolds.

My little sister can be fiercely protective of the people she cares about, and even I know Maggie Tate probably deserves someone a hell of a lot cleaner and less complicated than me—especially considering the little human has no idea I'm a wolf-shifter.

Truth be told, I haven't forgotten her. Not really. Even back then, when she was just Kari's quiet friend hovering around the edges in oversized sweatshirts with sleeves

too long for her hands, I noticed. She had this way of drawing attention without trying, like a secret waiting to be uncovered.

After seeing a photo of her all grown up in a glossy baking magazine, hair pulled back, eyes sharp, and lips quirked with barely contained mischief, it stirred something primal. I've had more than one dream since then I wouldn't exactly confess to Kari—dreams where Maggie wasn't just Little Red Riding Hood, but the kind of woman who dared the wolf to bite.

When I say nothing, my sister eyes me suspiciously, but says nothing... for at least a minute—something of a record for my chatterbox sister. "Her fixation," Kari finally continues, "is now a full business called Sea Salt let that settle. Something inside me stirs—a low, subtle thrum that isn't quite thought or instinct. It's older than both. The wolf in me stirs like it's caught the scent of something that matters. My jaw tightens slightly, my focus narrowing. "She come to you?"

"No. She's blaming herself. Thinks she's just hard to work for. But it's more than a few burnt batches of cupcakes and cranky staff."

"Like what?"

"Ovens malfunctioning; deliveries that are late, wrong or never show up. She's had a fridge—a brand new one—go out for exactly six hours. Twice. That's not just bad luck."

I don't speak right away. Instead, I pick up my phone and pull up the bakery's website. Sleek. Clean. Reviews are glowing. The shop has a loyal following and a ridiculous number of preorders for a business that doesn't even have a walk-up window. I dig deeper. Local features. Small-business awards. Wedding vendor recommendations. It isn't a fluke. Maggie Tate has built a damn good operation.

"Doesn't add up," I mutter.

"Exactly."

I set my phone down. "You want me to look into it."

"I want you to help her. She won't ask. But if something's going down, I want someone on the inside who can sniff it out. Someone who knows how to watch without drawing attention. Someone who can handle it if things go sideways."

"She still doesn't know about us, right?"

Kari shakes her head. "No. She doesn't need to know. She does, however, need help."

"Does she know I'm a Texas Ranger?"

Kari shakes her head. "No. She knows you're not in the Marines anymore, but not any details of when that happened or what you're doing now. She doesn't need more reasons to feel watched. And I know you. You're wired and need a mission right now or you'll climb out of your own skin."

She isn't wrong. The last op Team W pulled left a sour taste. Not the mission itself—that was clean enough. But the aftermath, the politics, the way our work never seemed to stick—it all drags at something raw beneath my skin.

I haven't shifted in days—even though Rush has urged me to—and the wolf inside me is pacing. Snarling. Growling low in the back of my mind, frustrated by the stillness, the waiting. I feel it in the way my muscles tense for no reason, the way my jaw aches from clenching, how my hearing stays dialed up like I'm waiting for a shot to ring out.

Restless doesn't cover it—not even baking, my usual therapy, is helping. The quiet rhythm of measuring and mixing no longer soothes the part of me that growls for release. The wolf is close to the surface now, prowling beneath my skin, ears pricked, teeth bared.

I feel it in the constant thrum of unease in my chest, the low-grade adrenaline that has nowhere to go. I need motion. A fight. A mission. Something to chase or protect or destroy—anything that gives me purpose. And right now, Maggie Tate's trouble doesn't just look like a distraction. It looks like a trigger. Something in her story scrapes against my instincts like flint against steel. The wolf inside me isn't just awake. It's watching.

"What is it you want me to do?"

Kari leans forward. "I want you to go undercover."

I chuckle. "You want me to pretend to be a baker? Don't you think she might recognize me?"

"Oh, I'm sure she will. But that's why her knowing you're not a Marine anymore will work for us."

"Us?" I query.

"You. It'll work for you. And here's the best part: you don't have to pretend to be front of the house staff or a dishwasher. You can be a baker, because you are a baker, and a damn good one, I might add."

"I just bake for myself and the guys..."

"Gid, I've tasted your stuff. Trust me, Maggie will be lucky to have you. She can

really use the help—not just with figuring out if something is going on, but her assistant left her in the lurch. You can apply for Kyle's job. You can help her with the baking and watch her back at the same time. Find out who's trying to screw her over. And if it turns out to be nothing? Then you get a few weeks here in town close to your favorite sister..."

"You're my only sister." It's an old joke between us.

"Whatever," Kari says with a wave of her hand. "But you'd be here in town, close to the beach and me and making cupcakes. Worst-case scenario, you learn to pipe buttercream."

I almost smile. Almost.

"Fine. But if someone lays a hand on her, all bets are off."

"That's why I called you."

Later that afternoon, I pull into the small parking lot behind Sea Salt & Sugar, the rumble of my engine cutting through the coastal quiet. I sit for a long beat, letting my eyes roam over the storefront. The place is charming as hell, almost too perfect. Coastal blue paint, curved gold-trim signage, a storefront window framed with pale curtains and little chalkboard signs touting today's flavors. It looks like the kind of place that sells joy by the dozen, yeah, but there's more to it. Something about it feels...alive. Like it breathes. My wolf stirs beneath my skin, not in warning, but in recognition—like it knows this place matters before I even step foot inside. Like it's waiting.

I pull up the image of Maggie on her website's 'About' page. She is smiling, holding a tray of cupcakes like they are crown jewels—bright-eyed, confident, and completely in her element. But it isn't just the professional pose that catches me. It's the way her



smile doesn't look staged. The glint of something sharp and self-assured behind her eyes.

The girl I remember always wore her hoodies like armor, soft and oversized, as if hiding in plain sight. She'd been more shadow than person, sure—but I saw her even then. Noticed the way she observed everything, how her quiet wasn't emptiness but thought. And now? Now she isn't hiding anymore. The woman in the photo has stepped into the light, and it hits me in a way I'm not ready for.

My wolf stretches beneath my skin, low and alert, drawn to her with a quiet intensity that makes my breath come a little slower, heavier. Something ancient shifts inside me—not quite lust, not quite possession, but something primal. A flicker of recognition, like she belongs to a part of me I rarely let surface. My instincts twitch. Not danger, exactly. Just... awareness. Interest. Fate. A magnetic pull I don't try to fight. My wolf stirs, not just curious now, but ready. Hungry. Protective.

I shut off the engine, get out, and head for the front door. A handwritten sign, slightly crooked yet charming as hell, is taped to the glass. Now Hiring—Assistant Baker. Must love sugar and early mornings. The words make me chuckle under my breath. There is something disarmingly honest about it—no corporate branding, no buzzwords. Just need, spelled out in looping script.

My wolf perks up again, drawn to the scent of vanilla and the low hum of energy inside the shop. There's something about it that makes my pulse both slow and sharp at the same time—like walking into the edge of a storm that hasn't broken yet. My body responds first, then my instincts. And for one sharp second, the wild part of me whispers a word I never let myself consider lightly: mate.

I shut it down fast. That isn't what this is. Can't be. Fated mates are a fairy tale the old packs cling to—a myth wrapped in biology and magic. I don't do fate. I do control. Strategy. Intention. Whatever this pull is, it's just instinct. Curiosity. Maybe

attraction, sure. But not fate.

Still, my wolf doesn't agree. It prowls forward like it knows something I don't, ears perked, tail high. It isn't just a job post. It's a signal. One I'm here to answer.

I grin as I step inside.

Game on.

### CHAPTER 3

#### MAGGIE

Sea Salt I will be professional; I will be... In order to be any of that, I have to be able to move and speak. Neither of which is possible as I come to a dead stop and freeze.

Gideon Bonham is sitting at one of my reclaimed wood café tables, legs stretched out like he has all the time in the world, calmly filling out a job application with that same unbothered confidence he wore like armor in high school. He has no business being that tall, that broad, or that devastatingly good-looking in my bakery. He looks like he belongs on the cover of a military romance novel, not parked in my pastel-and-buttercream world with a ballpoint pen between his fingers. His presence doesn't just clash with the space—it claims it.

Oh. Hell. No.

He looks up. Smiles. That lazy, confident smile that hits me like a warm hand sliding low over my spine—steady, knowing, and entirely too familiar. It isn't just a smile. It's a weapon, disarming and practiced, like he knows exactly what it does to my nerves and chooses to use it, anyway. My pulse stumbles. That smile has no business being here, in my bakery, on his face, directed at me.

My brain short-circuits for a full second. I glance down at my chest, grateful for my loose chef's coat and apron that will hide my stiffening nipples. I've been dreaming about Gideon since I was twelve. He'd been my first and most persistent crush. I've dreamed of him on and off over the years. Only now those dreams have taken a sharp

left turn into downright X-rated territory.

Like the one I had three nights ago—Gideon, bare-chested, flour dusting his naked abs, leaning over me, pressing me against the counter as he whispered in my ear in that rough voice telling me, "it's all about getting your hands deep in the dough," and then licking the outer shell of my ear saying "wet, moist heat is always the best to get things to rise."

My cheeks flame, and I banish the memory of what came after that in my dreams.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mutter.

Gideon sets the pen down and leans back in the chair like he owns it—and the surrounding space. "Morning, Magnolia."

"No. Don't you dare use that name like we're old friends."

"We are old friends."

"Not true. You never even knew I existed. What the hell are you doing here? Did Kari send you?"

"I'm applying for the job," he says simply, nodding toward the form.

"You're a Marine."

"I left the Marines. I've been looking for the right fit. When Kari mentioned you were looking for a baking assistant, I thought I'd throw my hat in the ring."

"You bake?"

He grins. "According to Kari, better than the last guy. I think Josie said his name was Kyle, and he was a jerk."

I step forward, jaw tight, heat rising under my chef's coat. The man hasn't changed. Still smug. Still too handsome for his own good. Still able to rattle me without lifting a damn finger. And the worst part? I can now feel my pussy getting wet and softening, as if it expects him to bend me over the counter and have his way with me. I shake my head, trying to dispel the visceral image.

I grab the application, rip it clean down the middle with deliberate force, and let the pieces fall like dead leaves between us. My hands are steady, but my pulse is wildly erratic. "Not interested," I say, each word clipped, sharp as a knife through fondant.

It's not just about the job—it's about the storm of emotions he brings in with him, the memories he reawakens, and the dangerous pull that makes my pulse skip and my thoughts scatter. He's too calm, too comfortable, like he belongs here. Like he's always belonged. I'm not about to give him even a crack to wedge himself into my carefully built walls.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't blink. Just stands up with that same deliberate ease, walks over to the self-serve station, and pours himself a cup of coffee like he owns the damn shop and has already clocked in for the day. Then he returns to his seat, legs stretched, completely unbothered.

"I'll wait," he says easily.

"For what?" I snap.

"For you to change your mind."

I turn, catching Josie and Jamal peeking from behind the espresso bar with wide eyes

and expressions that practically scream popcorn-worthy. Josie is openly grinning, elbowing Jamal, who pretends to be focused on wiping down the counter, but is definitely listening to every word. Great. Now my staff is watching this unfold like it's the season finale of a slow-burn workplace romance—except it's my actual life going up in flames, and Gideon Bonham is the damn match.

I storm back into the kitchen, furious. At Gideon, for showing up like some cocky heatwave in my already crumbling day. At my body, for responding to him like a match struck to dry tinder. And most of all, at my own damn mind for replaying that dream in vivid detail—the heat of his breath on my neck, the rough scrape of his jaw against my skin, the way his voice makes my toes curl. The flutter in my stomach isn't innocent. It's want. And the worst part? The real man looks even better than the one in my head. Stronger. Smarter. More dangerous. And far, far harder to ignore.

Having to deal with Gideon Bonham is the last thing I need, but if I'm being honest with myself, the thing I want most in life. Would it really hurt to let him work here? Isn't it a good thing to employ a veteran—especially one that would have the morning break crew coming in to drool... and buy baked goods?

If he really can bake, maybe I can charge more for the things he bakes...

### CHAPTER 4

#### GIDEON

I've spent my entire adult life learning how to read people, rooms, and danger long before anyone else realizes something is off. It's instinct for me now—part training, part blood, part something older and wilder humming beneath my skin.

By noon, I have the entire layout of Sea Salt & Sugar mapped in my head. Not just the physical setup—where the ovens sit, how the front counter creates choke points, which doors squeak and which don't—but the flow, the rhythm, the energy. I watch Maggie move from station to station, noting how her staff navigates around her, who gives her space when she's focused, and who intuitively synchronizes with her rhythm.

The place runs like a living thing, each part connected to the next, pulsing with the quiet hum of purpose. But beneath the scent of cinnamon and sugar—sweet, comforting, familiar—something else lingers. Something off. It isn't strong, not enough to trigger alarms in a human nose, but my wolf senses it instantly. A bitter note woven through the walls, tucked in the corners, like mold just beginning to grow. A wrongness, subtle and deliberate, that doesn't belong in a place built on warmth and precision. And my wolf hasn't stopped sniffing for it since I walked through the door.

The customers? Loud, loyal, and hungry for more than just carbs. They come in waves—morning regulars who practically have assigned seats, tossing around cheeky banter and exchanging inside jokes with the staff, then a slow swell of tourists drawn

by the intoxicating scent of butter and sugar wafting out the front door.

I listen. Watch. I observe how baristas greet regulars with ease and open body language, smiling wider and moving with less tension when recognizing a familiar face. Newcomers get polite service, but there's a subtle shift—shoulders squared a little more, voices tightened slightly. Maggie's team isn't unfriendly, but they're vigilant. Not enough to alarm the average observer.

But I'm not average. My wolf picks up the edge behind the smiles, the wary glances toward the entrance, the micro-pauses in conversation when someone new steps through the door. It isn't paranoia. It's a conditioned instinct. Muscle memory that comes from too many missions where a casual glance missed meant someone bled. Learned caution that keeps you alive. And it raises every hackle I have. Something here isn't right, and every fiber of my being—from the man to the animal—is waiting for the moment it snaps into place.

Maggie, for her part, ignores me with impressive, almost theatrical dedication. She doesn't look at me. Doesn't talk to me. Doesn't so much as twitch in my direction, even when I refill my own coffee like a man who belongs behind the counter. It amuses the hell out of me. The more she tries to pretend I'm not here, the clearer it becomes that she's aware of my every move. She's more flustered than she cares to admit. Trying not to be. Trying harder not to let me see it. Her control is sharp, but it has cracks, and I'm becoming very good at finding them.

She's failing, and we both know it. Every once in a while, her eyes flick toward me when she thinks I'm not paying attention. Her jaw clenches. Her lips twitch like she wants to say something, scream something. I like that. Like the fire.

Vendors come and go. I make a mental log of every delivery and transaction, eyes sharp for inconsistencies. A produce guy hustles in crates of fruit, scrawls something barely legible on a clipboard, and hightails it out like he has somewhere better to



be—fast. A dairy truck rolls up late, the driver barking about traffic and heat, unloading with the kind of rushed aggression that doesn't match the usual pace of a chill bakery drop-off. My jaw ticks. None of it screams sabotage, but none of it smells right, either. Maggie's staff tries to keep pace, subtly leaning on one another, covering mistakes with practiced teamwork. But they keep glancing at the back door with too much tension, like they're waiting for something worse to show up. It isn't fear exactly—but it's close.

It isn't nothing. My gut says there's a pattern hiding in plain sight, and my wolf agrees—circling it like prey it hasn't fully cornered yet. But it isn't enough yet. Not enough to act. Not enough to name. Just enough to keep me coiled tight, waiting for the thread that will finally unravel the whole damn thing.

The sun dips low, and the crowd thins to a trickle of late stragglers sipping lukewarm coffee and debating one last cookie. Staff moves into autopilot, wiping counters, flipping chairs, locking the pastry case with practiced motions. The hum of closing time settles over the bakery like a soft exhale. Josie stretches behind the counter with a dramatic yawn, arms overhead, and glances at me like she isn't sure whether to flirt with me or ask me to take out the trash.

“So, uh... closing time,” she says.

Jamal coughs behind his hand. “Yup. All locked up soon.”

I sip my coffee with the unhurried patience of a man who has nowhere else to be and no intention of taking the hint. I let the silence stretch just long enough to make it awkward, then give the smallest shrug, as if to say closing time has nothing to do with me.

Eventually, Maggie appears from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel like it personally offended her. Her expression is flat—professionally blank—but her eyes

are sharp, cutting, like twin blades aimed right at me. She isn't tired. She's furious and holding it together with threadbare grace.

"We're closed," she says, voice tight with authority and exhaustion, like the words are doing double duty as both a business notice and a personal boundary. The way she stands—arms crossed, jaw locked, eyes unblinking—makes it clear this isn't a polite suggestion. This is her turf, and I'm still in it.

"I noticed," I say, rising slowly to my full height, voice calm but edged with something that makes the air feel tighter. I don't rush. Don't posture. Just move like someone who's already decided how this is going to go—and doesn't need her permission to see it through.

"So why aren't you gone?" she asks, voice clipped and strained. I look down at her and smile, slow and infuriatingly calm. "Never mind," she snaps, before I can answer. "I don't care. Just leave."

I give her a smile that barely touches my mouth but burns slowly in my eyes, like a fuse lit with no hurry to detonate. "Sure," I say, in that low, unshakable tone that makes it sound like her demand is just a suggestion I'll get around to ignoring.

I step outside, but I don't leave. Instead, I move a few yards down the sidewalk, lean against the corner of the building, and fold my arms like I'm settling in for the long haul. The shop lights click off one by one, the inside dimming into a soft afterglow. The air cools with the thick weight of coastal nightfall, damp and humming with the buzz of distant streetlamps. And that feeling—the one that has prickled the back of my neck since sunset—grows sharper, more insistent, like the kind of pressure that makes my wolf pace under my skin and my senses stretch into the dark. Something is coming. I can feel it.

When Maggie finally exits through the back door, backpack slung over one shoulder,

keys jingling like a warning bell in the stillness, my senses snap into high alert. I catch a flicker of movement near the alley, low and deliberate—the kind of motion that doesn't belong near a quiet, closing bakery. Two men. Lurking, angled just enough to look like they aren't watching her. But they are. And every inch of my body knows it.

Two men. Lingering too long near the alley, moving like they don't care who notices. One leans against the wall, head low but eyes tracking every move Maggie makes. The other stands half-shadowed, pretending to scroll on his phone but angled just right to block her path. Predators playing casual. My muscles coil, tight and ready, instincts snapping into formation as I step forward, quiet but deadly sure. No way in hell I'm letting them get any closer.

“Evening, sweetheart,” one man calls, stepping out of the shadows with a grin that doesn't reach his eyes and the smugness of someone who thinks the dark gives him power. He speaks too casually, too smoothly, as if he has rehearsed his intimidation. Every syllable slides over my nerves like a blade.

I see her freeze, her whole body locking up like prey sensing the snap of a trap. I track her movement, my instincts lighting up before my mind catches up. Her keys jingle in her hand, too loud in the quiet alley, her knuckles white where she grips them.

I can't hear her breath, but I can feel it—ragged and shallow—even from this distance. She hasn't recognized the men. I can tell by the flicker of confusion on her face. But the rest of her posture, the way her body braces and her eyes widen, says she knows exactly what kind of danger she's looking at.

The two men aren't rushing her. That's the worst part. They stroll closer with that loose, oily confidence I've seen too many times before. Men who think they own the night. Men who think women like Maggie are easy targets.

They're wrong.

Because they don't see me yet. But I see everything. And my body is already moving.

"Keep walking," I say from behind them, my voice low and cold as a steel blade. It isn't a suggestion—it's a promise. The kind of tone that freezes blood and makes smarter men turn heel before things get ugly. My wolf pushes forward, teeth bared beneath the surface, just barely held back by the thin thread of control.

The men turn. One is wiry, all jittery limbs and a sneer that doesn't reach his eyes—posture slouched like he couldn't care less, but his gaze is sharp and mean. The other is a tank of a man, thick shoulders, dead stare, the type who moves when told and hits hard when he does. They don't smell right. Not like locals, not like curious idiots. They smell like gasoline and cheap motel soap, like adrenaline and something metallic beneath. Trouble. Professional, calculated trouble.

"You her boyfriend?" the wiry one asks, his voice full of mockery, like the idea amuses him—like I'm not a threat, just some guy playing protector for attention. His grin curls higher as he adds, "Didn't figure cupcake shops came with built-in muscle."

"No," I say, stepping closer, my tone flat and lethal. "I'm the last mistake you'll make tonight."

That's the only warning they get—barely a heartbeat between the last word and the moment I move. One blink and I'm in motion, all controlled violence and predator precision. No theatrics. No noise. Just the clean, brutal efficiency of a man who knows exactly how to end a threat before it begins.

One man slams back against the brick wall with enough force to knock the air from his lungs, my forearm pressed tight across his throat. The other goes down with a

grunt, swept off his feet in a blur of motion that leaves him gasping on the pavement, wide-eyed and stunned. I don't draw blood. I don't have to. My presence alone, the coiled violence simmering beneath my calm, does all the talking. No broken bones. No visible bruises. Just fear—raw, cold, and lingering in the air long after I step back.

“Next time, you won't get a warning,” I say, my voice like gravel and gunmetal, quiet enough to make them lean in—and cold enough to make them regret it. My eyes burn, steady and unblinking, daring them to test me again.

They bolt, stumbling over each other in their rush to get away, shoes scraping the pavement, the stench of fear clinging to them like smoke. One mutters a curse, the other doesn't look back. They disappear into the dark like rats flushed from cover, and I stand still, watching, until they're swallowed by the night.

Maggie is pale, furious, and rattled all at once. I can sense her pulse still thundering in her ears, drowning out the city's background noise. Her hands clench at her sides, her breath coming too fast, too shallow. She hates how shaken she feels, how the fear slides under her skin like ice—and how badly she wants to lean into the safety I just provided. That makes her angrier than anything else.

“They were probably just...” she begins, but her voice cracks halfway through the sentence. She clears her throat, trying to force it back into something solid, something unaffected. Her body betrays her—her hand trembles as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, her breath still uneven, skin still buzzing from the adrenaline. She's scared, yes, but something else has her off-balance too—the sheer proximity of me, the way I stepped between her and danger like it was instinct, like she belonged there, behind me. It leaves her shaken in ways she doesn't want to admit, and her flustered attempt at denial feels paper-thin even to her own ears.

“No,” I cut in, my voice rougher than before, darker. “That wasn't random.” My eyes stay locked on hers, refusing to let her look away. “That was a test. Someone sent

them to see how far they could push—and how fast I’d respond.”

I don’t say it to scare her. I say it because she needs to understand. Because her fear is justified. And because the idea of someone targeting her—my Maggie—sets something wild and feral stirring in my chest. I take a step closer, close enough that she has to tilt her head to keep meeting my eyes.

“You need to take this seriously,” I add, voice low, meant only for her. “Because I sure as hell am.”

She opens her mouth, but no words come. Everything she wants to say—thank you, I’m fine, I don’t need you—dies on her tongue. The heat of my presence, the way I look at her like she’s something worth protecting, unravels her resolve. Her throat bobs as she swallows the emotion trying to claw its way up. She closes her mouth slowly, then nods once, jerky and reluctant, like the admission costs her something she doesn’t want to give.

“Come on,” I say, my voice softer now, but no less firm. “I’ll walk you home.”

I don’t offer it like a suggestion. It’s a declaration, a silent vow embedded in those six words that says I’m not letting her walk home alone—not tonight, not ever, not while I’m breathing. And maybe it’s the way my eyes pin hers, steady and protective, or maybe it’s the way her heart won’t slow down, but she doesn’t protest. She doesn’t want to. She just falls in beside me, too aware of the heat radiating off my body and the silence stretching between us, thick with unspoken things neither of us is quite ready to name.

She doesn’t argue. The words hover on her tongue, unspoken and heavy. She isn’t used to leaning on anyone. Doesn’t like how easily I make her feel safe. Or how tempting it is to let me protect her—even just for one night.

When we reach her building, I slow my steps, not crowding her but staying close enough to intercept anything—or anyone—that dares get near. She fumbles with her key code once before getting it right, fingers shaky, breath shallow. I don't say a word, just stand there like a wall between her and the rest of the world. Only when the door clicks open and she steps inside do I let my muscles unclench.

“Lock it. Don't open it for anyone but me. Got it?” My voice drops lower, rough with the edge of command that leaves no room for argument. It isn't just protective—it's primal. My body stands taut, eyes trained on the door, daring her to test the boundary I'm setting. Not because I don't think she can handle herself, but because I can't stomach the thought of her facing another moment of danger alone.

She hesitates, the weight of the moment catching up to her. There's a flicker in her eyes—defiance, curiosity, maybe even a challenge—but under it all is a trembling she can't hide. “And if I do?” she asks, voice low and taut, trying to sound braver than she feels. The words aren't flippant. They're a test, not of me, but of how far I'll go to keep her safe.

“Then I sleep on your doorstep.”

She rolls her eyes, but it doesn't have the same bite it usually does. It's softer this time—deflection more than defiance. “Fine,” she says, the word laced with reluctant surrender. Holding herself together has spent all her fire, so her voice lacks heat.

The door closes, I hear the lock click, and I step back into the shadows, swallowed by the night like smoke. Hours pass. The world dims and quiets, but the energy in me never settles. I leave her building only long enough to patrol the area but always keeping it within sight.

Later that night, when the sky blackens, and the streetlamps buzz to life, I return. Mist rolls across the pavement like a living thing, curling around my boots, drawn to

me. The wind shifts, sharp with salt and storm. Overhead, clouds swirl and gather, charged with something more than weather. Something ancient. Something watching.

And in a pulse of lightning and heat, I shift.

It isn't just a transformation. It's a release. My body blurs into motion, the air cracking with magic as bone and sinew bend, stretch, reshape. Light fractures around me, silver licking across my skin before it vanishes beneath fur. My eyes glow like wildfire. Massive, black as midnight and silent, the wolf emerges—not separate from me, but more of me than anything else ever is.

Massive, dark fur bristling with electric energy, eyes glowing like twin moons lit from within. I lift my muzzle to the sky, and the howl that tears from me splits the night open—long and low, wild and ancient. It echoes through the mist-laced streets like a vow, a warning, a claim.



### CHAPTER 5

#### MAGGIE

The morning after the alley incident feels like someone else's nightmare has overtaken me—one that clings to my skin and breathes down my neck. I've barely slept. My muscles ache from tension, my eyes are gritty with exhaustion, and my brain spins like a mixer left on high. Every time I close my eyes, I see the alley. The dark. The glint of something in one man's hand. The smug tilt of the other's grin. But most of all—I see Gideon. Stepping forward like the storm he is. Unshakably calm, carved from something harder than stone. Solid. Dangerous. And far too steady in the face of chaos. It rattles me almost as much as the attack itself.

I dream of Gideon—of his commanding presence stepping out of the shadows to rescue me. Only this time, the alley isn't cold or dark. It shimmers with heat and the weight of expectation. He pulls me against him, those same hands that had pinned a man to a wall now dragging down the zipper of my dress with devastating patience.

In the dream, he doesn't speak. He doesn't have to. His mouth finds my neck, my collarbone, my lips—each kiss slow, deliberate, possessive. My body melts into his, desire pouring through me like molten sugar. His strength isn't a threat. It's a sanctuary. And when his hands finally slide beneath the fabric at my hips, coaxing pleasure from me like he already knows the recipe by heart, I arch into him and give in.

I wake gasping, sheets tangled, heart pounding, and then curse myself for letting him into my dreams at all.

When I step out of my building, hair hastily twisted into a bun and coffee in hand, he's waiting. He leans against the same lamppost as if it had been made for him, arms crossed in that patient predator stillness. Sunglasses shade his eyes, but I don't need to see them to feel the weight of his gaze. He wears jeans and a black t-shirt; they cling to his torso like a second skin, showcasing his quiet strength, which warns rather than boasts. Every inch of him looks like trouble wrapped in calm, and the worst part? My pulse jumps like it's happy to see him.

"You sleep?" he asks, his voice smooth and deep, cutting through the morning quiet like it has every right to be there. He falls into step beside me with a certainty that steals my breath for half a second, as if his presence isn't just assumed—it's inevitable. Like we've been doing this for years. Like the world has already decided where he belongs, and it's right next to me.

"Barely." I don't look at him. Can't. If I do, I might remember the dream too vividly—the way his hands had felt in that not-quite-real world, sliding down my body, undoing me like a ribbon. My cheeks warm just thinking about it. We walk in silence, my heart thudding with leftover adrenaline and something far more dangerous. Something want-shaped. Eventually, I mutter, "Kari is so dead."

But the words lack bite. They're mostly cover. A shield to mask the truth slinking through my bloodstream—the truth that part of me is relieved he was there. That despite the danger, despite the chaos, part of me slept better knowing he was near. That I'd woken up with the ghost of his hands still on my skin, and for a moment—before the guilt, before the embarrassment—I'd wanted to fall back into that dream and stay there.

It terrifies me. But not nearly as much as how good it had felt.

I call my best friend from the bakery's back hallway as I slip on my apron, one hand still trembling from nerves and not enough sleep. The second Kari picks up, I don't

bother with hello. My voice is low, sharp. "You sent your brother to babysit me? To stand outside my door like some sexy human alarm system?"

There's a pause. Silence is never good where Kari is concerned.

"Oh good," Kari says cheerfully, completely unfazed. "I was starting to worry that you'd miss your own plot twist. But now that we're here, how are the brooding bodyguard vibes working for you?"

"You're the writer. I don't do plot twists and I don't need a bodyguard, brooding or otherwise."

"Correction," Kari says. "I sent a trained, off-duty Texas Ranger to make sure you don't get mugged, kidnapped, or murdered in your own alley. You're welcome."

I rub my temple. "You had no right..."

"I had every right," Kari snaps. "You think I'm going to sit back while my best friend brushes off being targeted like it's a faulty smoke detector?"

There's a beat of silence.

"Besides," Kari adds more softly, "last night proves you needed someone there."

"How do you know about that?"

"He is my big brother..."

I don't argue. Because deep down, under all my pride and resistance, Kari is right. As much as I hate the idea of needing protection, last night shook me to the core. And knowing Gideon had been there—had seen the threat before I had, had stepped in like

it was second nature—makes me feel something dangerously close to safe. It also makes me feel something else entirely, and that's the part I don't want to name just yet.

After opening and running through the morning rush with one eye constantly tracking Gideon's presence in the corner of my kitchen—calm, quietly competent, and somehow always in my periphery—I finally break down. Not because he's in the way, but because every time I turn, he's there. Watching without judgment. Moving with practiced ease. And every once in a while, our hands brush as we pass trays or utensils, sending a jolt of awareness straight through my spine. It's not just distracting. It's disarming. I need control in my kitchen. The problem with Gideon is that while I feel safe with him, I also feel tempted. That's when I snap.

“You want to work here?” I ask, dragging him into the walk-in so we can talk without being overheard. “Fine. But only if you can actually bake.”

“I can,” he says, with that quiet certainty that makes my stomach flip. Not cocky. Just... sure. Like he knows I won't believe him, but he also knows it doesn't matter—because he'll prove it, and I'll see.

“Prove it.”

And he does, moving with a quiet confidence that makes my breath catch, sleeves rolled, apron tied without fuss. Then he gets to work. His hands—those same hands that had pinned a man to a wall just hours before—are now expertly folding batter, checking texture, adjusting temperature with an ease I hadn't expected. The contrast rattles me. Power and patience, violence and delicacy. It should be unsettling. Instead, it's... distracting. Addictive, even.

To my shock and reluctant admiration, Gideon handles the batter like a seasoned pro. His technique is unpolished but instinctive. His hands move with confidence and

care, and within two hours, he has cupcakes cooling on trays. The trays look perfect, the cupcakes don't look half bad.

I hate how impressed I am. It blooms in my chest like heat, stubborn and unwelcome. Every time I catch myself staring at the way his forearms flex as he stirs, or how he tastes the batter with a level of focus that makes my mouth dry, my pride wants to revolt. But my body? My body wants to lean closer, watch longer, and find out what else those hands are capable of when they're not deflecting punches or folding flour.

Midway through the afternoon, I sigh and ask, "Do you even have a place to stay in the city, Bonham?"

"Nope," he says, popping a cooled blueberry mini into his mouth with maddening ease. "Didn't figure I'd need one yet."

He chews slowly, like he has all the time in the world and no doubt I'll end up offering. And damn it, he isn't wrong. The way he leans against the counter, so relaxed and grounded in my space, it feels inevitable. Like he's already decided where he belongs—and it's here, with his hands in my batter and his mouth full of my blueberries.

I stare at him for a long second, then exhale.

"God help me," I mutter. "My condo only has one bedroom, but I do have a murphy bed in the office area. It's yours, temporarily, if you want it. And I mean temporarily, Bonham. Don't touch my bedroom, don't touch my stuff, and don't even think about confusing buttercream with bodyguard duty."

I try to sound stern. I really do. But something about the way he looks at me—like he can see straight through my defenses and isn't afraid of a single one—makes my voice sound thinner than I like. The worst part? Part of me wants him there. Not just

for protection. But for the solid, quiet presence that has already started to feel too steady. Too familiar. Too tempting.

His grin is pure sin, lazy and slow like honey melting over something too hot to touch. “Yes, ma’am,” he says, but there is a glint in his eye that makes my stomach clench—like he’s heard the unspoken parts of my warning, the part that doesn’t mind him being too close. The part that maybe wants it.

That evening, after we lock up, Gideon ushers me into his vintage truck and drives us to my condo. He grabs his duffle bag and follows me silently inside. Once we enter, I can feel my entire body go on high alert.

"I normally like to shower in the morning. So you can shower at night if you want..."

"No long, luxurious bubble baths?" he teases, giving me an appraising look that makes me blush. I hope he doesn't notice.

"No. I hate bubble baths. They're too... passive."

"Ah," he says, his voice a shade lower, the smile curling at the edges of his mouth slow and deliberate. "You like your showers like your men—scorching, relentless, and impossible to ignore."

He lets the words hang there between us, heat pulsing in the pause that follows. The tease in his tone dances just close enough to seduction to make my breath hitch. Flustered and not knowing what else to say, I walk to my bedroom door, each step an effort to ignore the heat still lingering in the air between us.

"I'm afraid I'm really tired," I say, my voice thinner than usual. "I think tonight I'll take my shower and go straight to bed. You can use the shower in the morning. There's also a powder room over there," I say, indicating its location.

I don't glance back as I speak, but I feel his gaze all the same—like a touch I can't shake. Every nerve under my skin buzzes, alive with everything I'm not letting myself feel. And when I finally close the door behind me, I don't lean against it because I'm tired. I lean because my knees are no longer cooperating.

The next morning after breakfast, we head to the bakery. Gideon attempts to decorate a batch of cupcakes with all the seriousness of a man defusing a bomb. I catch him squinting at the piping bag like it has personally insulted his honor. He adjusts his grip like it's a tactical weapon, eyes narrowed, jaw tight. When he finally frosts the cupcake, the result is so catastrophic—lumpy swirls, sagging edges, and something that might have been a rose if roses had been flattened by a truck and then run over again—that I have to walk away before I burst into laughter.

I duck behind the prep table, hands over my mouth, shoulders shaking. The frosting looks like a toddler with no motor skills and a deep-seated vendetta against buttercream had applied it. And yet... the sight of his big, battle-hardened hands fumbling through flower shapes tugs at my chest in a way I can't quite shake.

I double over behind the prep table, muffling the laugh with the crook of my arm, tears stinging my eyes. It wasn't just bad—it was gloriously, epically bad. And yet... there was something undeniably endearing about it. This man, lethal and composed, a weapon in combat, earnestly trying to create buttercream rosettes with the same intensity he probably applied to hostage situations. That kind of effort? It cracked something open in me. Something soft.

“What the hell is that supposed to be?” I ask, pointing at a mangled rose.

“Ambition,” he says. “Felt right in the moment.”

I roll my eyes, but my chest tightens anyway. Because he tried. He was trying—and not in the casual, half-hearted way most people offered help. No, he was giving it his

full attention, fumbling through flour and buttercream like the mission mattered. And maybe that's what got me most. That this dangerous, brooding man with callused hands and a soldier's stare was putting effort into my world. My space. My rules. He was meeting me where I lived, and that was the kind of intimacy that snuck past my walls before I could stop it.

Then the flour delivery arrived. Wrong brand. Wrong size. Again. This wasn't the first careless error; we dismissed the first one as chance, but this one wasn't a coincidence. I feel it like a punch to the gut. I check the invoice twice, then the original order, fingers moving faster as my breathing tightens. I hadn't messed up. I know I hadn't. The creeping dread that had been building all week twists tighter in my chest, wrapping around my ribs like a vise. My jaw clenches. My pulse kicks hard enough to make my vision blur for a beat. Something was wrong. And it was getting worse.

Gideon says nothing, but I can feel his attention sharpen beside me, like a lens clicking into tighter focus. It wasn't just the error he zeroed in on—it was me. The way my shoulders tensed. The way my jaw flexed. The flicker of panic I tried to swallow down. He watched it all with that quiet, methodical intensity that made my skin prickle, like I was under examination and protection all at once. Taking notes. Tracking patterns. Calculating the angles of pressure. Waiting for the next shoe to drop—and already preparing to crush it under his boot when it did.

And for once, I don't mind that someone else is watching. I feel the weight of his gaze like a second skin—steady, capable, almost comforting in a way I don't want to name. Gideon didn't just see the surface. He saw the cracks forming underneath; the pressure mounting. And that unshakable sense that he would catch whatever broke before it hit the floor makes me exhale just a little deeper. I just hope he's fast enough—and fierce enough—to stop whatever storm is building on the horizon.



### CHAPTER 6

#### GIDEON

I'm up before the sun. Not because I have to be—my internal clock simply doesn't understand what it means to rest. Years of military deployment, followed by a stint in Team W, have stripped me of the luxury of sleeping in. Mornings are for motion. For clarity. For getting ahead of whatever storm might be coming.

I stretch, pull on jeans and boots, and step outside with the crisp intention of surveillance hard-wired into my bones. No noise, no wasted movement. Just me, the street, and the pull of instinct that never quite dulls. My wolf stirs under my skin, alert, prowling beneath the surface. Not anxious. Just ready.

By the time the fog starts to lift off the sidewalk and the storefronts begin flickering to life, I've already walked two full blocks in either direction from Sea Salt its corners are greasy and torn, as if it's been repeatedly shoved in and out of a glove compartment. Sloppy. Rushed. Wrong.

Maggie accepts it, her fingers tightening slightly on the clipboard the moment it touches her hand. Her brow furrows almost instantly, lips pressing into a thin line as her eyes scan the page. The numbers don't add up. Again. Her shoulders rise with tension, and she exhales slowly through her nose, the way someone does when they're trying not to snap—but are damn close to it.

I step forward. "Mind if I take a look?"

She shoots me a look over her shoulder, part irritation, part warning. The kind of look that usually means she's about to bite back with words sharp enough to slice. But instead, her fingers loosen, and she hands it over. Silent surrender. Or maybe just exhaustion. Either way, it surprises us both.

I scan it quickly. Wrong product. Wrong weight. Again. "This isn't what she ordered."

The driver shrugs. "It's what's on the sheet."

"Then the sheet's wrong."

I don't raise my voice. I don't need to. My tone is ice-calm and razor-sharp, the kind of voice honed from giving orders in hostile terrain. It isn't loud, but it carries weight—the kind that makes people rethink their life choices. The driver fidgets, suddenly unsure of his footing. The bakery staff, mid-motion, stills like prey scenting a predator. The silence isn't empty. It pulses with warning.

"I'll look into it," the man mutters and disappears fast.

Maggie sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Don't interrogate my suppliers in front of customers."

"I didn't. Do you want people to cheat you? Do you think your customers want you to get cheated? Either the suppliers you have start fulfilling their obligations to you or you get new suppliers," I say calmly, handing her back the clipboard.

She doesn't argue. Her jaw flexes, and she opens her mouth like she might, but the fight in her seems to sag under the weight of everything she's been holding together. The clipboard stays in her hand, her fingers white-knuckling the edge. Her face reveals frustration, fatigue, and the grudging sting of knowing I'm right. She hates

that this keeps happening. Hates even more that she can't stop it alone.

Later, when the afternoon lull dips into the pre-evening rush, I step outside again—not just to get fresh air, but because something itches beneath my skin. The kind of itch that tells me danger hasn't passed, only circled wider. I scan the alley and the back lot, mentally clocking angles, shadows, and line of sight. This isn't just recon anymore. This is territory. Not long before I spot one of the drivers—same company as earlier—heading for the alley with a crate.

I catch him just before he reaches the back entrance, stepping into the man's path with silent precision. No raised voice. No visible aggression. Just presence—unmistakable and immovable. The driver nearly collides with me, startled enough to suck in a breath and stumble back a step. I don't move. I just stare, unreadable and calm, the stillness of a wolf waiting to pounce if provoked.

"Hey," I say smoothly. "Got a second?"

The man startles, nearly drops the crate. "Just making a delivery."

"Sure. Before you do, mind answering a couple of questions?"

I don't threaten. Don't even square up. Just stand there, relaxed and steady, gaze fixed like a laser sight. That kind of stillness isn't passive—it's power held in check, and everyone with a guilty conscience recognizes it on sight. It's the look of a man who doesn't need to raise his voice or throw a punch to make you wish you'd never crossed him.

The man adjusts his stance. Looks away. "I just drop the boxes, man. I don't handle orders."

"Except your paperwork doesn't match the product. And your route changed

yesterday. You weren't supposed to be here."

That makes him flinch. Not a big movement, just a twitch—a flicker of guilt, or fear, or maybe both. His eyes dart to the side like a man looking for exits, not answers. And that's enough. I've seen that reaction too many times in interrogation rooms to mistake it for anything else. The guy isn't clean.

I lean in just enough. Not touching. Not aggressive. Just closer—close enough to crowd the driver's breath, to make every inch of personal space evaporate. My eyes never waver, steady and unreadable, a silent dare embedded in the space between us. It isn't physical intimidation—it's the kind of still, coiled presence that makes a man question everything he thought he knew about courage.

"You working under someone new?"

The man shakes his head too fast. "I don't know anything. I swear."

He bolts before I can press further, stumbling in his haste like prey breaking from cover. The sound of his retreating footsteps echoes down the alley, uneven and panicked. I don't follow. I don't need to. The man's reaction paints a clear enough picture—nervous, defensive, and clearly coached not to answer questions. Whatever is going on, that guy isn't just a delivery man. And now I have his scent.

Back inside, the rush slams into us hard and fast—customers lined up, orders piling up. I step in without being asked. Grab trays, refill displays, man the register with a quick study of the POS system like I've been doing it for months. I move like I belong there, not as a guest, not as a shadow, but as someone who understands pressure and refuses to flinch from it. Maggie doesn't say thank you. Doesn't need to. But something in the way her eyes flick to me—brief, unreadable, almost... grateful—says more than words. She doesn't glare either. And that? That feels like progress.

We move together in sync. Not perfect. Not polished. But there's a rhythm, a pulse to it, like the kitchen has found its second breath and I'm part of it. We're not speaking much—just passing trays, exchanging glances, reacting to the needs of the rush like dancers who've trained for years. And for the first time, I don't feel like I'm tagging along behind someone else's mission. I feel integrated. Useful. Like I belong in her chaos and can carry some of the weight she tries so hard to shoulder alone.

That night, after closing, I step out into the back alley, the city's hush wrapping around me like a shroud. The air is thick with salt and cooling asphalt, but beneath it, something still pulses—residual tension, a hum of wrongness that hasn't left since earlier. I pull out my phone, the glow briefly lighting the hard line of my jaw, and make a call.

"Deacon, I've got something. Delivery inconsistencies, vendor name flagged under a shell corp. Something's off."

"Send me the invoice. I'll dig."

I hesitate. "Also, I caught a scent."

"Human or shifter?"

"Shifter. Not ours. Not local. Too faint to track, but it's recent."

Deacon swears low. "Someone's circling. You need backup?"

"Not yet. I'm on it."

I end the call and turn slowly, letting the air wrap around me as the silence takes hold. The night air presses in thick and briny, wind curling through the alley like a warning too soft to hear. The scent is gone now, drowned by the ocean breeze and city

rot—but the memory of it lingers, phantom-sharp on the edge of my senses. Wolf. Not mine. Not welcome.

But the instinct in my gut won't settle. It churns low and steady, like an engine waiting to be unleashed, a hum of warning vibrating beneath my ribs. Not the instinct born from paranoia—but the kind born from countless missions gone sideways, from knowing that predators can stalk silence as well as shadows. My wolf doesn't pace. It watches. Waits. Ready to bare its teeth the moment the threat makes itself known.

Someone has been watching. Not casually. Not accidentally. The kind of watching that leaves a mark in the air, a static tension that buzzes under my skin. I can feel it even now—like the brush of breath at the back of my neck. They weren't just nearby. They had been here. Close enough to see her. Close enough to scent me. Too close.

### CHAPTER 7

#### MAGGIE

The morning begins with me arriving early, unlocking the front door with robotic precision. I flip on the lights one by one, like a ritual to keep the shadows at bay. The scent of butter and sugar—normally grounding—hangs too thick, too sweet, like it knows I’m lying to myself, puttering in the front instead of heading into the kitchen.

My hands move through the usual motions of readying the front for the coming day—putting chairs back on the floor, rearranging artisan supplies I sell as a small revenue and to help other small entrepreneurs begin to make their own dreams come true.

I walk into the back and find Gideon already there.

Of course he is. He has to have been up for hours. The coffee is brewed. Inventory logs reviewed. The wobble in the back door hinge—fixed. He stands at the prep counter, sleeves rolled up, wiping it down with quiet efficiency, moving like the place has always been his. Like he belongs there.

It makes something inside me clench—an unwelcome knot of appreciation, irritation, and something I don’t dare name.

This bakery—especially the kitchen—is supposed to be my domain. And yet, here he is. More useful than the rest of my staff put together. Twice as steady. And every time I find myself adjusting to his presence instead of resenting it, it shakes me.

Gideon is Kari's big brother. He's only here as a favor to Kari. I know I need to get over my perpetual crush on Gideon, but then I've known that for years and, as yet, have not accomplished it.

"You don't have to do everything, you know," I mutter, grabbing a tray from the drying rack with a little too much force. My hand trembles slightly, but I tighten my grip, hoping he doesn't see. Everything is piling up—late deliveries, rotating staff, the quiet whispers behind my back. My world is unraveling thread by thread, and here Gideon is, just... fixing things. Steady. Unshaken. Like he belongs in the middle of my chaos. And that only makes me angrier.

"Someone has to," he says without looking up.

I turn on him. "You may be on the payroll, but that doesn't make this your kitchen."

He finally meets my eyes, calm and unbothered. "No. But someone's been treating this place like a target, and I don't look the other way when people are under attack. You hired me as your assistant, Maggie, and Kari asked that I keep an eye on you..."

"Kari worries too much. I suppose it's a common affliction of writers..."

"I don't think Kari is being overzealous. My little sister has pretty good instincts about these things. So either let me help or tell me which part of the sabotage I'm supposed to pretend doesn't exist. Because I'm not wired to watch it happen and do nothing."

The words land hard. My breath hitches, my spine stiffening as if I can will the reaction away through sheer force. But it's too late. The truth of what he says scrapes against the inside of my chest, raw and too close to the bone. I turn away before he can see the flinch, jaw clench, throat tight, everything inside me just one more push from cracking wide open.



Mid-morning brings a brief lull, and a regular named Clara—an older woman with a sharp bob, sharper tongue, and a tendency to notice everything. She leans on the counter like she owns it, tapping the glass case with her perfectly manicured nails in a slow, deliberate rhythm that grates on my nerves. Clara never misses a thing and today is no exception. There's curiosity in her eyes, but also something else—concern, maybe. Or suspicion. I can't tell which, and that only makes my chest tighten further.

“You've had a lot of unfamiliar faces lately,” Clara says casually, eyeing the kitchen staff. “Seems like a revolving door back there—although I must say this latest one is easy on the eyes. And the vendors... a different guy every week.”

I paste on a smile so tight it hurts. “We've had a few changes, that's all.”

My voice comes out too bright, too practiced—like I've rehearsed the line in the mirror that morning. Because what else can I say? That my staff keep quitting or ghosting with zero warning? That every unknown face comes with the question: are they working for me, or against me? My grip on the counter edge tightens just slightly as I hold the smile a beat too long.

Clara hums, lips pursing like she already doubts the answer. “Hope that's all it is,” she says, but her tone holds a note too pointed, too knowing. Like she's not just making conversation—she's issuing a warning dressed up as a pleasantry. It lodges in my spine like a splinter, sharp and impossible to ignore.

That comment sits heavy on my shoulders long after Clara leaves. It trails me like a shadow through the kitchen, slipping into the quiet moments between orders and clinging to me like the smell of scorched sugar. Each time I glance at my staff, the words echo—unfamiliar faces, different vendors, a revolving door. It isn't just gossip. It's a mirror. And I hate what it reflects: a business slipping out of my grip, and the creeping dread that Clara has simply said what I'm too afraid to admit.

The rush hits soon after, and I dive into my work like it might save my sanity. I move with the frenetic energy of someone trying to outrun their own thoughts, barking instructions and clattering bowls louder than necessary. My hands move quickly, automatically—cracking eggs, leveling flour, setting timers—but my mind stays knotted around the weight of Clara’s words and Gideon’s too-steady presence.

I’m halfway through measuring ingredients for a custom wedding order, trying to pretend the ground beneath my feet isn’t shifting, trying to pretend the pressure in my chest isn’t tightening with every passing hour. If I just keep moving, maybe the panic won’t catch up. Maybe the cracks in my foundation won’t spread.

I reach for the fresh bag of sugar, mind buzzing, hands on autopilot as I empty it into the container from which I measure out the amounts I need, spilling a bit on the counter. Taking a cloth, I sweep it from the counter into my hand and freeze. My pulse skips. My breath hitches. My stomach turns cold, a thick weight dropping in my gut as dread claws up my spine. I can feel it; contained within the sugar crystals like a buried mine—glass—shattered, jagged, unmistakable.

This isn’t just careless. Not just bad luck. This is a deliberate act. An invasion disguised as an accident, a threat masquerading as a mistake. A message, yes—but not subtle. Bold. Brazen. And it had nearly slipped past my fingertips like a whispered warning I almost didn’t hear. Someone wants me scared. Someone wants me off-balance. And now, they have my full attention.

My breath catches like a snare tightening in my chest. My hands shake so badly I nearly drop the bag, and my knees threaten to give out. My heart thunders against my ribs in a frantic, stuttering rhythm, so loud it drowns out the hum of the ovens, the music playing from the front, the rest of the world entirely. My vision blurs—not from tears, but from the sick, disorienting flood of adrenaline that says this isn’t an accident. Someone wants to hurt me.

I dump the sugar and the glass into the trash, seal the bag with shaking hands, and carry it out back with the stiffness of someone moving through a dream turned nightmare. The moment the lid snaps shut on the dumpster, the silence hits me—louder than the clatter of trays or the hum of the ovens. I make it back inside and to my office in a haze, each step heavier than the last, until I close the door behind me and press my back to it. Only then does my spine sag and my shoulders collapse inward, like the fear has finally found its way into my bones. I haven't just found glass in a bag of sugar. The discovery proves that my safety has already been compromised. And that realization nearly knocks me to the floor.

My hands brace on the desk, chest heaving, as if the act of holding myself upright is the only thing keeping me from shattering. The walls feel too close, pressing in with a suffocating weight, and my skin itches like the air itself has turned hostile. My control—already shredded by weeks of unease and mounting failures—snaps in a silent scream behind my teeth, pain and fury tangled so tightly together I can't tell where one ends and the other begins. I want to scream, to throw something, to cry, but all I can do is breathe through clenched teeth and pray the tremble in my legs doesn't give me away.

I open my eyes to find Gideon standing behind me, feet planted wide like he owns the damn room, his attention locked on his phone screen with that impenetrable calm I'm coming to both resent and rely on. He looks quiet—comfortable, focused, and steady like nothing has rattled him all day. Like he hasn't just witnessed me fall apart.

"Found something," he says without looking up.

"So did I."

Gideon looks up. "Tell me."

I hesitate, arms crossed tight over my chest like I can hold the fear in by force. "There

was glass. In the sugar.”

His expression doesn’t change, but something in the room does—it goes still, sharper. “How much?”

“Enough that if I hadn’t seen it...” I shake my head, jaw tightening. “It wasn’t a broken jar or a crack in the bag. It was inside a new sealed bag. It was buried and hidden as if it was meant to be missed.”

He swears under his breath, low and quiet. “Anyone else touch it?”

“No. I dumped it. Bag’s out back, double-tied. But Gideon...” My voice dips. “That was no accident. Someone wanted it in the batter. Someone wanted someone to get hurt.”

His jaw flexes, but he says nothing.

That’s when I try to make light of it. I stare at him, pulse still thudding in my ears, my voice thinner than I mean it to be. “Do you just... lurk everywhere now?” My attempt at sarcasm falls flat, the edge dulled by the tremor I can’t quite swallow. I don’t know whether his presence annoys or relieves me—but the part of me that feels less alone also bothers me.

"Only where it matters," he replies, glancing up at me.

I move past him to see his phone. Delivery logs—columns of data, time stamps, product codes, signatures. My eyes catch on the repetition instantly. Three different shipments logged under the same ID number in the last ten days. The same manifest number. The same vendor name. But subtle differences in product weights, driver names, even crate markings. My throat tightens. That kind of discrepancy isn’t just oversight—it’s orchestration.

"These aren't the same deliveries," I whisper.

"Nope." His gaze lifts to mine, just for a second, and lingers. Not just to confirm what he already knows—but to check on me. The tightness in my voice. The tension in my shoulders. Something about me is off, and he clocks it. I can see it in the narrowing of his eyes, the subtle shift in his posture. He isn't just focused on the sabotage. He's reading me, too.

My fingers curl around the edge of the desk. "You're sure?"

"Cross-referenced with footage. Different drivers. Different crates. Same manifest," he says, choosing to ignore what I'm sure he's seen in my demeanor.

I'm grateful, but I don't want to be grateful. Gratitude feels too close to dependence, and dependence is dangerous. It makes my chest tighten in defense, even as something warmer—something quieter—uncoils just beneath the surface. I don't want to feel the weird twist in my stomach that comes every time he looks at me like that—like this is more than a job to him. Like he sees me. Not just the bakery, not just the problem. Like I'm not alone in this. And maybe that's what scares me most of all.

"Thanks," I say, voice quiet.

He finally looks at me then, eyes dark and steady. "Don't thank me. Just stay sharp."

The words are simple. But the look? That look carries something weightier than reassurance. It's steady, unreadable, and far too focused on me—not just the problem. It makes my throat close up, the pressure building there a mix of panic and something I refuse to name. Like he sees too much. Like he already knows what I'm trying so damn hard to hide.

I walk away before I say something I'll regret—something sharp, something too raw. I clench my jaw so tight that my teeth ache. Gideon says nothing but follows behind me like a shadow made of flesh and purpose. I try to ignore him, but Gideon is a difficult man to ignore—too steady, too present, and far too good at making me feel like I'm not nearly as alone as I need to be.

That night, long after Gideon has left to do whatever shadowy patrol thing he does, I sit alone in my condo with the lights dimmed low and my pulse still fluttering beneath my skin. I can't relax—not with the day's unease still thrumming in my bones, not with the image of broken glass buried in sugar burned into the backs of my eyes. I replay it in my mind, the silence in the room so deep it seems to echo off the walls.

I watch the video Gideon left for me, dragging the cursor frame by painstaking frame, every second a punch of tension in my chest. Delivery by delivery blurs together, but my eyes stay locked to the screen, searching for something I can't name—until it's there. A flicker of movement. A shadow turning just enough to make my breath still in my lungs. I see it.

A hoodie. A posture. A flash of a jawline, a turn of the shoulder. Just enough to make my breath catch hard in my throat. My stomach drops, icy dread seeping into my limbs. It can't be—but my body reacts before my brain can argue. I know that walk. That casual arrogance in the way they move, like they own the ground beneath their feet. And if I'm right—and God, I'm certain I am—then someone I once trusted, someone I've let into my world, has come back to tear it all down from the inside. This time, they're not hiding anymore. They're circling.

### CHAPTER 8

#### GIDEON

The city is mostly asleep when I hit the sidewalk at a steady jog, the collar of my hoodie pulled high and the brim of my cap low. My breath steams faintly in the cool, salty air, and every footfall on the concrete echoes with the kind of stillness only the dead of night brings.

The Gulf breeze tugs at the edges of my clothes, heavy with brine and moisture, thick enough to taste. But beneath the damp and salt is something else—an undercurrent, electric and wrong. It hums against my skin like a wire strung too tight, vibrating with tension I can't quite place. I don't need to go far. Just to the edge of the block where the streetlights go dim, the traffic thins, and the shadows gather like they're waiting for something to happen.

I duck into an alley, scan once to be sure I'm alone, and slip into the familiar rhythm of ritual. Removing my boots, I peel off my hoodie and jeans with practiced efficiency, folding them into a tight bundle and tucking them behind the dumpster where I've stashed my clothes for the last few nights. A dry spot, shadowed, shielded.

The cement is cool against the soles of my feet, grounding me in the moment. I inhale once—deep, centering—then hold the breath like a diver before a plunge. Every instinct in me stretches taut, preparing for the shift.

The shift is fast. Familiar. A flash of heat and light that ripples through muscle and bone, bending reality as my human form gives way to something older, deeper, and

infinitely wilder. Mist swirls up from the ground, curling around my ankles like smoke, drawn by the pulse of magic in the air. Lightning dances across my vision—white-hot, primal—and then, with a final jolt that steals the air from my lungs, I’m gone. In my place stands the wolf: dark as shadow, muscles coiled and ready, eyes aglow with silent fury and unwavering purpose.

Fur black as oil, catching the moonlight in a way that makes me almost vanish against the shadows. Eyes sharp, scanning with relentless focus. Nose twitching, pulling in every scent like a map of the city’s secrets. I pad out into the street, silent as smoke, each movement fluid and lethal, the quiet confidence of a predator who knows exactly what he’s hunting—and what is his to protect.

The city looks different this way—colors dimmed, buildings flattened into silhouettes, but scents and sound flare in vivid contrast, as if the world itself whispers its secrets straight to my skin. I can hear the distant flick of a rat’s claws against brick, the faint drip of condensation falling from an air conditioner three rooftops away. But what arrests me—freezes me mid-step—is the scent. It’s back. And this time, it isn’t just faint. It’s fresh. Wound tight around the edges of Maggie’s block like a thread around a snare, coiled and deliberate. Someone has been here. Watching. Circling. Testing my patience. Testing my claim.

I growl low. Not out of fear. Not even out of anger. It rumbles from deep in my chest, raw and guttural—a sound of possession, of warning. Every nerve feels on edge, and every instinct screams that this ground is claimed. Someone is circling what is mine, and neither I nor my wolf tolerate challengers.

I push forward, every step driven by the low hum of urgency rising in my chest, following the scent around the alley behind Maggie’s building. It is recent—sharp and warm, like the intruder has only just slipped away. Within the last hour, maybe less. Male. Young. Wolf. Not from Team W. And not subtle. The scent has arrogance threaded through it, a kind of taunt in the way it lingers too long in one place, like



whoever left it wants to be noticed. Wants to be challenged.

Every instinct inside me coils tight. My hackles rise, muscles tensing like a bowstring pulled to its limit. The wolf in me wants to do more than growl—it wants to claim, to mark, to sear a message into the pavement itself: this place, this territory, this woman, is not to be touched. She is under my protection. Under my watch. But I hold back, teeth gritted against the instinct screaming in my blood. Marking territory here would raise questions Maggie isn't ready to have answered. And maybe... I'm not ready to admit how deep this bond has already sunk into me, either.

Still, the need buzzes under my skin like static—restless, electric, primal. It itches beneath my flesh, a low-level vibration that refuses to quiet. A need not just to protect, but to stake a claim. My wolf wants to howl, to announce my presence to anything within a mile. The restraint it takes not to give in makes my muscles ache.

When I circle back, the scent has faded, thinned into the general haze of city grit and midnight damp. No sign of entry. No breach. No evidence of paws or hands where they don't belong. But that doesn't ease the coil in my gut. It doesn't matter that the perimeter held tonight—what matters is that someone has been bold enough to walk that close. To linger. The warning has been delivered, and I've received it loud and clear.

They are getting closer. And it isn't just the physical distance that makes the wolf in me bristle—it's the intent behind it. Whoever is out there isn't circling blindly. They are learning her patterns, testing response times, mapping weaknesses. This isn't curiosity. It is preparation. And I've been in the game long enough to know exactly what that means: the next move won't be a warning. It will be a strike.

I shift back behind the dumpster, the burn of transformation short and brutal in the quiet. My bones ache, muscles twitch from the snap of magic tearing through me, and for a second, I lean against the brick wall, catching my breath. Sweat clings to my

skin, cooling fast in the night air. I wipe my brow with the back of my arm, roll my shoulders, then reach for the clothes I've stashed. Each motion is precise, habitual—jeans, boots, hoodie—armoring me in the mundane as my breathing levels. Once dressed, I step out into the street, my gait steady, and walk the few blocks back to Maggie's condo. Once inside, I glance toward the closed bedroom door before retreating to the office area of the open space and dialing the one number I trust.

Dalton answers on the second ring. "This better be about muffins and not more suspicious vendor drama. The team's about to mutiny without their nightly sugar rations, and I'm one tantrum away from feeding them protein bars just to watch the world burn."

I let out a short, humorless breath. "I wish it was just drama. Someone planted glass in a sealed bag of sugar today. Maggie nearly used it in a batch of cupcakes."

Dalton's tone sharpens. "Shit."

"Yeah. So no, we're not just dealing with late shipments or bad bookkeeping anymore. This is targeted. It's personal. Did you get anything back on that vendor's name?"

I can hear the tension beginning to coil tight in Dalton's voice as he says, "Yeah. The real name on the registration tracks back to a shell corporation out of Austin. That shell corp is registered to the Grangers."

I go still. "The Grangers?"

"Yup."

The Grangers are old blood—shifters—steeped in legacy and ruthlessness. Wealthy enough to buy silence, connected enough to erase enemies, and dangerous enough to

make most others think twice before crossing them. They don't make mistakes. They make statements. And every move they make comes at a cost.

"Why would they target a cupcake shop? It makes little sense on the surface—unless it isn't about the cupcakes at all. Unless the location, the people, or something buried deeper beneath the frosting and storefront charm has value to someone powerful. And if the Grangers are involved, it means the reason wasn't just personal—it was strategic."

Dalton laughs without humor. "I think they'd torch a preschool if it stood in the way of what they wanted."

I rub the back of my neck. "Keep digging. Quietly."

"Always."

I end the call and stare toward her bedroom door, the soft glow of light showing from beneath it. My jaw tightens as I lean against the murphy bed before pulling it down and sitting on the edge. I walk to the expansive window overlooking the beach, tracking the shadows outside, watching the stillness like it might crack.

I move back to the bed, taking off my t-shirt and boots. Leaving my jeans on, my hard cock pressing against the button fly, I stretch out on top of the bedclothes. I don't sleep. Don't even pretend to try. My body stays wired, alert, my mind replaying every step of the scent trail, every possible weak point in her defenses. Rest isn't an option. Not when the threat has crept that close to her door.

\* \* \*

The next day, I make myself scarce at the bakery, shadowing the vendors so closely I'm practically breathing down their necks. I don't just watch them—I study them.

Memorize their tells, the hesitation in their hands, the way one delivery guy's eyes flick to the security camera before unloading a single crate. Every wrong invoice, every short delivery—I log it with cold precision. I ask no questions, make no accusations. But I let silence do the work for me. Let them feel my presence like a blade resting just shy of skin. No confrontation. Not yet. But I make sure they know I'm watching. And I'm not going anywhere.

Maggie doesn't ask what I'm doing. But she notices. Her eyes keep flicking to me when she thinks I'm not looking, curiosity and something quieter—something cautious—flickering behind her lashes. Each time she catches my gaze, her breath hitches just slightly, like her mind is fighting to make sense of my constant presence. She doesn't glare. Doesn't push. But she looks away a little too fast, like the intensity in my eyes touches nerves she isn't ready to name out loud.

Mid-afternoon, a call comes in. Someone has vandalized a rival bakery down the block. Broken window. Graffiti. Spray paint scrawled in large, jagged letters across the glass reads, "Sweets Rot." The damage is surgical—not random, not reckless. It sends a message, but not to that bakery. It's close enough to be seen from Maggie's front patio. The implication is deliberate, a shot across the bow. Someone wants to shift attention. And it works—just long enough to make me leave her side.

I make sure Maggie has backup—one of the part-timers on duty stationed near the front. I bolt the alley door from the inside. I linger for a moment longer than necessary, eyes scanning the space one last time. I slip out the front entrance only after ensuring her safety, walking calmly but with watchful eyes as I head down the block to check.

The second I see it, I know. The clean slashes in the glass, the crude but strategic placement of the graffiti, the absence of looting—it all screams intent, not impulse. This isn't about that bakery. It isn't even about competition. It's a warning wrapped in theatrics. A diversion engineered with precision. Someone wants to see how fast

I'll move, how long I'll stay gone, how far they can stretch my focus. I'm being pulled away. And it works—for a heartbeat.

I turn around and charge back to Sea Salt & Sugar, muscles tight with adrenaline, heart pounding louder than my footfalls. Each step slams against the pavement, propelled by something hotter than fear—something territorial, primal. I burst through the front door, the bell overhead ringing wildly, and the sudden entrance makes customers jump, the staffer flinch, and Maggie nearly drops a tray of cupcakes. Her eyes lock on mine, wide with surprise and something close to worry.

Maggie is fine. The shop is intact. But my pulse doesn't slow until I've crossed the threshold and swept the space with a glance, taking in every detail—the angle of her shoulders, the quick flutter of her breath, the wide-eyed look of someone who hasn't expected me to come crashing back in like a storm. Only when I'm certain she's safe—unharmed, unshaken, still standing—does the tension in my chest ease by a fraction. I only then realize how tightly I have wound myself once my eyes find her and my inner wolf ceases its pacing.

"Are you all right?" Maggie asks, one brow arched and a cupcake balanced in one hand. "Or did someone try to mug your sense of subtlety on the way back? Because you just made three customers consider bolting for the exits."

"I'm good," I say, casually grabbing a sample cookie and taking a bite like I haven't just stormed in like a battering ram. "You know me—priorities. Couldn't let someone else snag the last cookie while I was out."

But someone is testing the perimeter. Looking for cracks and soft spots—testing how close they can get without triggering alarms. Probing for weaknesses like they have all the time in the world. What they don't know is that I've already marked the edges in my mind, mapped every vulnerability. And if they think they can sneak past me, they are about to find out just how wrong they are.

\* \* \*

That night, long after I should have been asleep, I crack open the door to her room and stick my head in to make a last check on her. Maggie sprawls across the bed, one arm flung above her head, the other tucked beneath the pillow, her blonde hair a chaotic halo across the pillowcase. The tangled sheets lie at her waist, and her tank top is pulled askew, as if she tossed and turned through vivid dreams—possibly the kind that make her cheeks flush and her lips part slightly. The sight hits me like a punch to the chest—desire laced with something tender and dangerous. Something my wolf doesn't know how to back down from.

I stand in the doorway for a long moment, arms crossed, jaw tight, trying to pretend that the sight of her doesn't undo me in a thousand quiet ways. Then, slowly, like something ancient and instinctual is pulling me forward, I step inside. Closer. My hand hovers above her skin for a breath, then another—until finally, I brush her hair back from her temple with a tenderness that betrays just how hard I'm fighting the urge to lean down, inhale her scent, and stay.

My wolf stirs—possessive, protective, aching with the primal need to curl around her, to guard her through the night, to make sure she wakes safe and untouched. It isn't just instinct anymore. It is something deeper, more dangerous. Already claiming.

I clench my jaw and step away, dragging every ounce of discipline with me. She isn't mine. Not yet. And wanting her—protecting her—with this kind of ferocity isn't supposed to happen. Not here. Not now. But the wolf doesn't care about timing. And I'm starting to wonder if I do, either.

But God help whoever keeps trying to mess with her, because I'm done pretending to be civilized. The next time someone gets close, they won't meet the man. They'll meet the wolf—and he won't be interested in warnings.

### CHAPTER 9

#### MAGGIE

The sabotage has gone quiet.

No midnight tampering with the ovens. No swapped invoices or phantom deliveries. No broken shipments. No taunting messages buried in bags of sugar. No unexpected disappearances of staff or unsettling confrontations in the alley. It's like someone has pulled the plug on the chaos. Just silence, and that calm should bring relief, but it doesn't. Instead, it crawls under my skin.

Silence, I'm learning, can be its own kind of threat—insidious in its quiet, stretching long and thin like a wire drawn taut, ready to snap. It doesn't shout or slam. It doesn't rattle doors or break glass. It just lingers. Waiting. And the longer it stays, the more it feels like a promise of something worse to come.

It feels like a breath held too long—an unnatural stillness that makes me wonder if the storm has truly passed or if it's simply crouched, coiled like a snake in tall grass, waiting for me to relax my grip. Every day without an incident doesn't soothe me; it sharpens my nerves. Deliveries that arrive on time feel too neat, too rehearsed. Every signature matches too perfectly. Each night I scroll through hours of clean security footage, my eyes flicking across the screen, desperate to catch even the slightest twitch in the shadows. The quiet isn't a comfort. It's a countdown.

Because silence like this doesn't mean safety. It means planning, recalibrating, circling the target with a predator's patience. It means someone out there is watching,

waiting, and I hate not knowing what comes next—hate the way it forces me to live with my fists clenched and my breath held, dreading the next blow I can't see coming.

I try to keep things normal. Try to pretend I'm not falling apart—one glance, one breath, one brush of his arm at a time. Every time Gideon enters the room, my pulse gives a traitorous kick, like my body recognizes something I refuse to recognize, much less name. His eyes follow me—not possessive, not invasive, just always... aware. And it unravels me. My chest tightens when I feel the weight of his gaze, my skin humming with awareness long after he looks away.

He shadows vendors, handles deliveries, and fixes things I didn't even know were broken. He's reorganized the damn dry goods shelf again, and instead of being annoyed, I'm almost grateful. Almost. Because he's helpful. Steady. Unshakable. And I hate how much I'm starting to rely on that.

And I'm coming undone—quietly, messily, from the inside out. It isn't a scream or a sob or a meltdown I can point to. It's smaller than that. The way my hands tremble just slightly when I grip a measuring spoon. The way I double-check the locks on my bedroom windows before getting into bed. The way I catch myself searching for Gideon's presence before I take a full breath. Every moment feels like a thread pulled loose, another layer of my calm coming undone, and I'm running out of stitches to hold it all together.

I find myself staring at the broad stretch of his back as he hauls sacks of flour, the muscles shifting beneath his shirt in a way that makes my mouth go dry. The low rumble of his voice across the kitchen sends shivers down my spine, making me drop my train of thought like a cracked egg. Everything about him—his presence, his control, his damn quiet confidence—grates at me in the worst and most irresistible ways.



He moves with a lethal kind of grace, powerful and contained, and it makes my skin buzz, my nipples tighten, and my thighs clench when I catch myself imagining those hands—so sure and strong—on my body instead of the countertops. It's maddening. Erotic. Infuriating. And getting harder to ignore by the hour.

So when he corners a delivery driver just before closing—one I've already flagged as suspicious—and looms in that quiet, dangerous way of his, his voice low and coiled with warning, I react on instinct. The surrounding air has gone charged, the way it always does before a storm, and I don't need a forecast to know trouble is about to break loose.

"Gideon," I snap, storming outside after him. "Back off. Not everyone is a suspect."

"They are in my book... at least until evidence proves otherwise."

The driver mutters something and scurries off, avoiding Gideon's eyes like a man who's just realized he's prey and not a predator. Gideon doesn't even flinch. He stands there, calm as ever, like the whole encounter hasn't raised his pulse a single beat—like he hasn't just exhaled restraint in the shape of a warning.

I grab his arm, fingers digging in harder than I mean to. "You don't get to charge into every delivery like you're the last line of defense. This isn't a war zone—it's my business. You could've gotten into a fight. Or worse, escalated things in a way I can't control." My voice wavers at the end, frustration tangling with something sharper, something too close to fear.

His gaze drops to my hand on his arm. "You worried about me, cupcake?"

"Don't call me cupcake."

Gideon grins. "Why? It seems appropriate."

I glare. "You can't intimidate every delivery person who comes here. I will lose my suppliers."

"One of those suppliers put glass in your sugar... maybe you need new suppliers."

"One bag of sugar, and we don't even know that the supplier knew anything about it. It could be one rogue employee."

"Maybe, but maybe not."

"Gideon, I'm serious. I need you to back off."

His expression turns serious and his jaw ticks. "So am I."

That tension doesn't break. It follows us all the way home, settling around us like the charged air before a lightning strike. Even as we walk side by side from the bakery to the loft, the space between us vibrates with things unsaid—anger not fully burned off, fear still flickering under the surface, attraction pulled so tight it hums. Every brush of our arms, every sideways glance, only stokes the pressure building between us, until I'm sure if one of us so much as exhales wrong, the whole thing will ignite.

\* \* \*

Later that night, we make a pizza from scratch. I put together the basic ingredients in a bowl. Our hands brush more often than not, the tension between us simmering beneath every touch. The flour dusts my forearms and streaks across the front of his shirt, but neither of us seems to care.

Gideon opens the fridge, finds the bottle of chianti he picked up with quiet intention that afternoon—like some part of him had known we'd need it. He twists the cap and pours the wine slowly, watching the deep red swirl in the glass like something rich

and waiting. He hands one to me, our fingers brushing as I take it, the contact light but loaded. Then he lifts his own glass, clinks it softly against mine, and takes a slow sip—eyes never leaving mine.

When I roll up my sleeves and begin to work the flour into the mixture with practiced precision, Gideon moves behind me. His arms reach around me, his hands covering mine as if adding his strength and skill to my own. I can't ignore the way his warm hands move in perfect synchronicity with mine, steady and capable. When his fingers linger on my wrists as we begin to roll out the dough, it feels electric—harmless and intimate and anything but accidental.

I can feel the strength in his fingers as he works the dough beside me, his knuckles brushing mine, the heat radiating off him in waves. When I lean forward to stretch the dough, his body moves with mine so close that the warmth of it wraps around me like a blanket.

My breath catches when his hand slides beside mine on the counter, steadying the dough, but it feels like he's steadying me too. Every press of palm to flour, every indistinct murmur about texture or heat, layers with something unspoken—something thick with wanting. And when I glance over my shoulder, our eyes meet and I'm not sure if it's dough or desire I'm shaping in my hands.

We bicker lightly over toppings, and I laugh when he claims anchovies are a sin, while passionately defending pineapple as the only acceptable 'controversial' topping. I counter that pineapple is only acceptable on pizza if paired with Canadian bacon, and even then, it depends on my mood. He looks personally offended, joking that I've just confessed to culinary heresy. The banter sparks heat that has nothing to do with the oven. When I finally stretch the dough and slide the pizza into the oven, I'm breathless—and not just from the heat of the kitchen.

Later, we eat cross-legged on the floor of my loft, our knees bumping now and then,

the pizza pan balanced between us on a dish towel. The scent of garlic, roasted tomatoes, and charred crust hangs thick in the warm air, wrapping around us like a memory.

We're too tired to pretend the day hasn't frayed us both—too wrung out to keep up our usual snark or sarcasm. Half-empty wine glasses stand like forgotten sentinels on the coffee table, and flour streaks through my hair in places I've stopped trying to fix.

The silence has changed. It's thick with the weight of a hundred unsaid things, but no longer sharp-edged or brittle. It has mellowed into something softer, slower. It's intimate now, like a shared breath in the dark or fingers brushing beneath a table. Not tense, but charged. Comfortable in a way that makes my chest ache—heavy, not with pressure, but with possibility. It wraps around us like warmth from the oven, a quiet understanding that neither of us needs to name to feel.

Once we've finished eating, Gideon stands to clear the plates, and I follow him into the kitchen, drawn by more than just the need to tidy up. I watch the way his muscles flex under his shirt with every movement—slow, precise, effortless. He rinses a dish and sets it aside, the veins in his forearms catching the low light as he reaches for the next one. Something about the domesticity of it—his big body moving so calmly in my space, his strength turned toward something so ordinary—makes my stomach twist. He turns, about to speak—probably something safe, probably polite, the kind of words meant to put distance back between us. But I'm not in the mood for safe anymore.

"Thank you," I say, my voice softer than I mean, but completely honest. No deflection. No shield. Just truth, raw and quiet, and finally said out loud.

He stills.

"For everything," I add. "For not letting me drown."

His throat works. "You're not a woman who drowns easy."

"Doesn't mean I don't get tired."

A pull I've stopped resisting draws me forward into his space before I can talk myself out of it. He starts to retreat, but I reach out, halting him with my touch. My hand slides along the length of his forearm, slow and deliberate, my fingertips brushing over the fine dusting of hair and the corded strength beneath his skin. I pause at his bicep, feeling the flex beneath my palm. Warm. Solid. Real. My thumb traces a slow arc along the curve of muscle, and when his breath catches just slightly, it makes mine do the same.

His eyes darken. "Don't push me, cupcake."

"Or what?" I challenge with a small smile, liking the way he seems just the tiniest bit off kilter.

He growls—not a sound of anger, but something deeper, rawer, a sound pulled from the depths of restraint giving way. It vibrates against my skin, rolls through my chest like a warning and a promise all at once. Then he kisses me—fierce and consuming, like the only way to silence everything between us is with the press of his mouth against mine.

It isn't gentle.

His mouth takes mine with a force that steals my breath and scatters my thoughts, every movement demanding, every brush of tongue a tease and a claim. He kisses me like a man who's waited too long and doesn't trust time to give him another chance. My body responds instantly, hunger blooming low and hot, my hands flying to his shoulders, then sliding into his hair, dragging him closer like I can pour myself into the spaces between our mouths.

My pulse thunders as heat sparks under my skin, curling in places that have ached for this exact touch. I feel his weight, his strength, the hard press of his body lined up perfectly against mine, and it makes me dizzy with wanting. His taste—earth and heat and something uniquely him—fills my mouth, and my knees nearly buckle from the rush of it. There's no hesitance, no soft exploration—just need and tension breaking all at once, raw and consuming... and it's glorious.

His hands lock around my hips, dragging me against him like he's been starving and I'm the first taste of salvation. The press of his body against mine sends a bolt of heat straight through me, my nipples pebbling instantly under my shirt, the ache between my thighs sharpening with a needy pulse. My fingers fist in his shirt, yanking it up with a growl of frustration, craving the heat of his bare skin, the feel of his muscles beneath my hands. The kiss deepens, all tongue and heat, a messy tangle of lips and teeth and breath as he walks me backward with quiet dominance. My back hits the edge of the kitchen counter with a thud, but I barely notice—too focused on the delicious friction where our bodies meet, the way my body melts and clenches under his touch, every nerve ending blazing awake. I feel wild and grounded all at once—like I'm burning alive and don't want the fire to stop.

"Tell me to stop," he murmurs against my mouth.

"Don't you dare. I'm clean and on birth control."

His wolfish grin is all I need. We never reach the bedroom; the frenzy of our desire leaves shirts strewn carelessly aside and jeans yanked down in a frantic pulse of need. With a gasp that tears free from my very soul, my head flings back as his mouth discovers the delicate, trembling curve of my breast—a searing heat both commanding and aching tender. His tongue dances in deliberate, relentless circles around my nipple until my knees buckle, teetering on the edge of surrender. His hands, grounded on my hips, do more than steady me—they claim me as if I'm the sole anchor in a tempest of want. Every subtle scrape of his teeth and fervent suction

of his mouth sends blazing currents surging through my veins.

My fingers, tangled in his hair, drive me to arch into him, every nerve ignited by a long-dormant, primal hunger. When he plunges into my depths, I moan his name with raw intensity against the soft expanse of his neck, my breath ragged as if each throbbing beat of need compels me to reach ever farther for him—thick, primal, and wholly alive. Each slow, grinding thrust erodes my resistance, dissolving the fragile line where I end and he begins, until our bodies merge into a fervent tapestry of raw, unyielding passion.

It's wild; it's desperate—my legs coiling tightly around his waist, anchoring him as though our entwined bodies are vines caught in an inferno of shared rhythm. His whispered adoration cascades over me like cryptic incantations in a hallowed, fevered sanctuary, while my responses become a symphony of gasps, moans, and fervent invocations—a litany of his name straddling the line between sacred prayer and untamed profanity.

He thrusts up into me, thick and hard, and my breath catches in my throat. The stretch is perfect—deep, delicious, almost overwhelming. I gasp, my hips rising to meet him, needing more, needing all of him. He growls low in my ear, trying to hold back, trying not to lose control. I can feel it in the way his muscles tremble, how tightly he grips my thighs.

But I don't want restraint.

“Don't hold back,” I whisper, dragging my nails down his back. “I can take it. I want it.”

His mouth crushes against mine as he pulls almost all the way out, then slams back in, making me cry out. He fucks me harder this time—rough, hungry, like he's starving for me—and it makes me moan, makes me wrap my legs around him tighter,

pulling him in even deeper.

The sound of skin slapping skin fills the room, along with the wet, obscene noises of him driving into me over and over again. My body welcomes it, slick and eager, clenching around him with every deep thrust. I arch into him, breasts pressed to his chest, my clit grinding against his pelvis with each movement. Every stroke hits that spot that makes me see stars. My moans turn breathless, then ragged.

Every motion unleashes surges of fiery bliss through me, sending my toes curling and my spine arching until every inch of my skin pulses with the incandescent essence of our union. I claw at his shoulders, a silent, desperate plea for more, as the sound of his ragged breath in my ear edges me closer to the precipice until, when I finally shatter, it is not merely pleasure I experience but a surrender so complete it dissolves into a mingling of relief and delirious ecstasy—a deep, soul-stirring connection that defies all my wildest imaginings.

He kisses me as if each press of his lips is a lifeline, an indispensable act in the very fight for existence, every fleeting brush against my mouth a vicious grasp at meaning. My hands roam his body with an almost desperate reverence, mapping each scar and contour like a sacred script written in the language of raw passion and yearning confession. And when I whisper his name once more, it is not just a sound but an invocation of need—a declaration of surrender to something profound that leaves his breath hitching and his rhythm faltering. In that sacred, fevered moment, his whispered reply resounds with every promise sealed in the mingling of skin, breath, and sweat—a vow as intimate as it is ferocious.

His kisses continue throughout it—his mouth never stops moving—rough, desperate, and I kiss him back just as fiercely. I can feel the edge coming, fast and hot, my whole body winding tighter.

Then he adjusts his angle, grabs my hips and slams into me even harder, deeper. I



shatter. My orgasm rips through me, sharp and blinding, and I scream his name as my body locks around his cock, milking him. That's all it takes. He curses against my neck, grips me so tight it almost hurts, and comes deep inside me, thick spurts filling me, his body jerking with every pulse.

He collapses on top of me, still inside, both of us shaking, breathless, slick with sweat. My arms wrap around him, holding him close, not ready to let go. Not ready to come down from what we've just claimed.

Afterward, he lifts me into his arms with reverence, my body still trembling against his. His touch remains gentle but possessive, like he's not ready to let me go—not even for a second. As he carries me through the loft, the air is thick with heat and the scent of us, my cheek pressed to the curve of his neck, my lips brushing the pulse that still thunders beneath his skin. He lays me down with a care that feels like devotion, not duty—his eyes lingering on my flushed face, swollen lips, and the dazed look that mirrors everything in him. No words pass between us. No words are necessary. The silence is full of everything we've said with our bodies.

I fall asleep curled against his chest, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat and the weight of his arm draped protectively over my waist. His warmth cocoons me, anchoring me to something that feels impossibly real in a world that has gone sideways.

But when I wake, the room feels too quiet. The sheets are still warm beside me, a ghost of his body lingering in the indentation where he's been. The space he occupied so completely now stretches wide and empty. My hand reaches out instinctively, but finds nothing. Just tangled linen and the fading scent of his skin on my pillow.

And Gideon is gone.

### CHAPTER 10

#### GIDEON

I leave Maggie's bed with regret thick in my chest. Every instinct screams at me to stay—to pull her closer, bury myself in her scent, and pretend the outside world doesn't exist for a few more hours. But I'm not just a man anymore. I'm her protector now, and something—someone—is circling too close. Tomorrow, Dalton and Gage will be in town to help cover ground, but tonight, the responsibility is mine alone. If any threat lingers, it needs to know that Maggie isn't unguarded; that she belongs to someone who can—and will—fight to keep her safe.

I leave the loft building and make my way down to the dock. With methodical ease, I strip, folding each item as if grounding myself in a familiar routine before the storm. Tucked behind a rusted dumpster where the salt air clings thick and heavy, I fold my clothes and place them in a waterproof bag and hide them beneath a tarp.

Then I reach inward, summoning the presence that lives beneath my skin—ancient, instinctive, coiled like lightning waiting to strike. It's more than muscle memory now; it's a bond of blood and bone. The wolf doesn't just rise—it surges, wild and ready, demanding the night like it belongs to it.

It rises fast and feral, a pressure behind my ribs that makes me feel as if my entire body is cracking wide, demanding release. The swirling mist surges around me, curling in supernatural tendrils as color shimmers within it. A crack of thunder rolls over the waves as lightning streaks across the sky like the threads of a spider's web, drawn to the moment my body begins to change.

My bones reform with a soundless ripple, skin giving way to fur, heat blooming down my spine. The pain is brief but biting, sharp-edged and familiar. And when it passes, I stand silent and watchful, all muscle and fang, the moonlight casting silver across my coat.

The skies rumble in harmony as I lope into the shadows—a living, breathing warning cloaked in muscle and menace. With each paw striking the ground, I silently declare my claim to this territory. My presence isn't just defense. It's a promise. To any predator foolish enough to get close, it says one thing clearly: you'll have to go through me.

The moon is low when I hit the beach on which Maggie's building fronts—the sand cold beneath my paws. A misty spray curls around the edges of the surf like a secret whispered in code. In this form, the world slows and sharpens—every grain of sand, every crackle of air and shifting breeze coded into instincts as old as the blood in my veins. Each wave that breaks on the shore carries information: who has passed, what has lingered, how close danger has come. My claws leave purposeful marks in the sand as I prowl along the edge of the surf, head low, senses flaring wide. This is my time, my terrain, and anyone foolish enough to challenge that will meet more than just muscle—they'll meet wrath.

Except tonight, there's no calm. The air is too sharp, too charged—like the storm doesn't just hang overhead but coils around me. The ocean whispers of trespass, and the breeze carries tension through the salt-heavy mist. I feel it before I can even form the thought: something is off. Watching. Waiting. The kind of stillness that doesn't bring peace, but the eerie quiet before something violent cracks open in the dark.

I scent it the second I pass the old lifeguard station—a thread of scent that snaps taut through my chest. It's not Team W. It's not Kari. It's not local. It's not right. It's sharp, predatory, unfamiliar. Rogue. And worse, the lingering scent is an arrogant, deliberate message, not an accident, from whoever left it.

It's faint, but fresh. Too fresh. Like whoever left it behind did so minutes ago—not hours. It clings to the breeze with a kind of smugness, as if daring someone to notice, to follow. It's not just territorial; it's taunting.

I track it toward the north edge of the block—where Maggie's loft stands, warm light still glowing behind drawn curtains. The scent flares again as I near, sour and sharp with arrogance, like rust on old steel. It curls through the air, too deliberate to be passing. I slow near the trash bins, nose to the ground, every muscle coiled tight. The scent lingers there—bold, oily, unbothered by the idea of being found. Then it veers west, pulled like a thread toward the narrow alley behind the bakery, the path precise and unapologetic. Whoever it is, they've come close. Too close.

I don't chase. Not yet. The sun is beginning to send streaks of light over the horizon, heralding the dawn. It's time I get back to the loft. I shift, pull on my clothes and enter the building. By the time I come upstairs, dawn is encroaching on the day, painting the water pink and orange like a lie.

Maggie is already up. She's in the kitchen, hair twisted up in a messy knot that probably started as neat but lost the battle somewhere between stress and caffeine. She perches on a stool, tucking one socked foot beneath her other leg, and squints at her laptop while nursing an espresso shot and crunching determinedly through a slice of blackened toast. She looks like someone who lost a fight with her morning but refuses to admit defeat. The moment she spots me entering, her eyes narrow like she's preparing to add me to her list of problems.

"Let me guess," she says, waving the toast with mock menace. "You were out brooding under the moonlight, regretting the choice you made last night."

Ah, so she's angry about waking up alone. She has no idea what it cost me to leave her, and now's not the time to tell her.

"Not at all. I was doing my job. In case you've forgotten, someone is trying to sabotage your bakery and I'm trying to figure out who and why. It's become apparent that this is more than someone just trying to drive you out of business. I've talked with the team; Dalton and Gage will be here sometime today and they can keep an eye on things overnight, which will leave me to ravish you at will."

There's a certain satisfaction in watching her blush and almost spit her coffee onto her laptop screen.

"What makes you think I'll let you do that?" she says, waving her toast like a warning.

Pouring myself a cup of coffee, I take a sip and level her with my most lascivious stare. "What makes you think you can stop me?" I lean against the wall, arms crossed. "You burning the toast on purpose now?"

"It's called caramelization, Ranger."

"It's called 'about to set off the smoke detector,' Cupcake."

"Don't call me that."

"Don't tell me what to do."

I catch the twitch at the corner of her mouth—a flicker of a smile she clearly doesn't want me to notice, much less acknowledge. It's not much, but it's real. She turns away fast, like she can hide it behind the movement, but I don't miss the subtle warmth rising in her. It's there in her posture, the flush crawling up her neck. She might be trying to keep me at arm's length, but her body is saying something else entirely.

\* \* \*

Later that morning, we open Sea Salt she's venting. Scooping, pouring, slamming plastic lids shut like they're responsible for every piece of stress weighing her down.

I lean against the doorway, arms crossed, watching her. She knows I'm here. I can feel it in the way her movements stiffen, the way her shoulder blades lock tight beneath her shirt. Still, she doesn't look up.

Not until she's good and ready to.

"Got something you need to say, Ranger?" she asks, dry as dust but not half as subtle as she thinks. She doesn't even glance up from the bin she's aggressively re-labeling. I know she's rattled without seeing her face.

I can feel it rolling off her in waves. The kind of brittle tension that comes from waking up alone and pretending it hadn't mattered. Like she hadn't searched for me in the sheets, or checked her phone for a message that never came. And now she's hiding behind her sass, trying to slap a label on her disappointment just like she's doing with the sugar bins.

I let her snark stand for a beat, watching the rigid set of her shoulders. Then I answer, voice low and even. "No. Just trying to decide if I should kiss you again or throw you over my shoulder and remind you what last night actually meant."

That gets her attention. Maggie turns to face me, eyes wide, breath caught somewhere between disbelief and something far more dangerous. I don't wait for her to decide if she wants this. I already know she does.

I cross the space in two strides, my hand cupping the back of her neck with a possessive, dominant pressure. The first step she takes is hesitant, defiant even—but

the next? She melts into me, mouth parted, heat rising off her skin like a storm ready to break.

My mouth claims hers, not with patience, but with purpose—like a man who's spent all day resisting the urge and finally lets the leash snap. Her lips part on a gasp and my tongue slides against hers, coaxing and demanding at the same time. It's a deep, consuming kiss that doesn't need to ask for permission. She finds the front of my shirt, fisting the fabric as if anchoring herself to something solid.

Her knees buckle slightly, and I steady her with an arm at her waist, pulling her flush against me. She tastes like sugar and something wilder, and when she whimpers into my mouth, my pulse detonates.

It's not a kiss. It's a claim. A warning. A promise. And her body answers all three.

I lift my head. "Any questions?" I ask in a calm and steady voice. She shakes her head. "Good." I kiss her again and step back before offering her a slick flyer I picked up earlier in the day. "Have you seen these?"

She takes the flyer and looks at them and then up at me, brow furrowed, confused.

"Granger Shores—a brand new beachfront condo development. Spa, gym, rooftop pool."

She squints. "Are you looking to move to a condo here in town?"

"If I was, I'd be looking to move into a really nice converted warehouse loft with a sexy blonde to warm my bed."

Her eyes widen, and her cheeks flush, color blooming in a fast, telltale rush. I feel the twist of satisfaction coil in my gut. Not because I enjoy embarrassing her—but

because I enjoy getting to her. That blush isn't shame. It's heat, stirred up from memory, from want. It's the answer to a question neither of us has been brave enough to ask out loud.

Good. Let her feel it. Let her remember every damn second of last night. Maybe now she'll stop pretending it hadn't meant something. Because I sure as hell haven't forgotten. Not for a heartbeat.

"Then why show it to me?"

"Because their pool's gonna sit exactly where your mixer is."

That gets her. Her mouth opens. Closes.

"Fuck me," she whispers.

"I plan to and often. Two Granger-connected companies have made offers to half this block. You're the only one left; everyone else has either sold or been forced out. I don't know how to tell you this, but Sea Salt I'm too focused on the scent that hits me when the door cracks open.

Shifter. Wolf.

Not one I know. Not Team W. Not local. But the signature is unmistakable—predatory and pungent, threaded with something oily and chemical like burned plastic. Whoever this is, they're covering their tracks poorly. Or worse, not at all.

I take the slip and step closer, deliberately invading the guy's space. "New route?" I ask casually, voice low and edged with something sharper.



The man blinks, caught off guard. “Just filling in.”

“Sure you are.” My eyes narrow as I take in every detail—scuffed boots, a twitchy jaw, the way his fingers keep flexing around the clipboard.

He hands over the flour without another word and turns, walking fast, not quite running.

I don’t follow.

Yet.

Instead, I turn back into the bakery, scent still clinging to my nostrils like a warning.

Maggie is watching me, eyes wide, pulse ticking fast at her throat.

I meet her gaze as I hold up the slip, the paper already curling under my grip. Then I lift the slip to my nose and inhale slowly, deliberately.

“We’ve got another problem,” I mutter, my tone low and lethal. I look down at the slip, then back at the door, jaw tight enough to creak. “And this one? This one reeks of trouble we can’t afford to ignore.”

### CHAPTER 11

#### MAGGIE

I wake to the echo of his absence. The spot where Gideon had been is still warm, but he's not here. For one soft second, I allow myself to believe he might just be in the bathroom or getting water—then my hand lands on the folded note resting on the pillow beside me.

On the roof. Back soon.

It's scrawled in bold, military block letters, all edges and precision, just like him. No heart, no smiley face, no sweet nothings. Just presence. That's so very Gideon. But it's enough. More than enough, really. My fingers brush the paper as I sit up, his scent clinging to the sheets, and something inside me aches with the kind of longing I don't want to name.

I pad barefoot to the kitchen, the moonlight still clinging to the loft like a secret. The space is quiet, too quiet, with only the soft hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of waves breaking against the sand outside. I wander over to the desk nook, the office space tucked into the far corner of the open-plan loft where Gideon was supposed to have been sleeping on the murphy bed—so much for that plan.

I grab my phone and creep back into my bedroom. I sink into the reading chair tucked into a nook, phone to my ear, waiting as it rings. Kari picks up and yawns. I don't realize how much I've been holding in until I hear her speak.

“Mags? Good god, do you know what time it is? If you're calling to tell me you've finally binged watched that docuseries I told you about...”

My throat tightens. My mouth opens, then shuts again. I swallow, force my voice into something resembling casual. “Not exactly.”

Kari's voice softens immediately. “Okay. What's wrong?”

“I'm fine,” I lie, my voice straining for casual but catching slightly at the end. “Just... needed to talk. Or vent. Or scream into the void for a second.”

There's a beat of silence, the kind that stretches just long enough to make my stomach twist. Then Kari's voice drops a notch, full of amused horror and something that sounds way too close to glee. “Oh, my God. You slept with him.”

I groan and fall back against the pillows, covering my face with one hand like I can smother the heat rising in my cheeks. “You're not supposed to be psychic, Kari. That's cheating.”

“I'm not. But I know you. And I know him. And I know that particular brand of existential dread in your voice. It's the same one you had when you got accepted into pastry school and almost didn't go because you were afraid you'd fall in love with the idea of something that might never love you back. You don't get that tone unless your heart's already more than halfway committed.”

I exhale through my nose, my chest tightening around the words before I speak them. “It was a mistake, or I thought it was. I tried convincing myself of that all day, but then...”

Even as I say it, something inside me flinches. The words don't feel right. Should I even be talking to Kari about any of this? I feel like I've said too much and not

enough—like the kind of thing you say when you’re trying to take back something that meant too much, too fast.

“Oh, honey,” Kari says, and the two words are packed with so much amusement, sympathy, and smug satisfaction that I can practically hear her grinning through the phone. It isn’t judgment—more like gleeful vindication. Like she’s been waiting years to see this exact emotional chaos unfold and is now living for every second.

“I mean it. He was there, I was stressed, and... it just happened. It shouldn't have, but it did... and then it happened again. It was a lapse, that’s all. A lapse. It’s not like we’re suddenly a thing now, or that there’s some epic love story brewing. It’s not that deep, Kari. Seriously. So whatever romantic comedy scenario you’ve cooked up in your head, maybe just... don’t. I don’t know why I called you...”

“You called me because I’m your best friend and you’ve been in love with Gideon since before he joined the Marines. Don’t even try to deny it. You used to turn into a babbling wreck any time he so much as looked in your direction. You’d blush for hours and then claim it was the heat or your blood sugar or Mercury being in retrograde or whatever excuse you thought sounded plausible at the time.” Kari’s voice is equal parts affectionate and smug, clearly reveling in every second of this development like she’s waited more than a decade for it to finally play out.

“That’s not fair. I’ve changed. I’m not that girl anymore. I don’t blush when someone gives me a second glance, and I don’t fantasize about someone who barely knew I existed. I run my own damn business, I take care of myself, and I don’t need anyone else to fix my problems.” That part about fantasizing about Gideon is a lie, but Kari doesn’t know that.

“No, you’re not,” agrees Kari. “You’re stronger. Smarter. Fiercer. And still absolutely horrible at lying to yourself—which, by the way, has always been kind of endearing. Like a baby duck trying to look intimidating. Except when it’s driving you

crazy. Then it just makes me feel like I should charge for emotional labor, or at least handing out honorary therapy degrees.”

I close my eyes and groan. “What if I ruined everything?”

It’s not just Gideon I’m worried about. It’s the whole damn thing—my business, my sanity, my friendship with Kari. I feel as if everything is balancing on a blade’s edge. I don’t know what I’ll have left if I let this spiral, let myself fall for him, and everything goes sideways. I’ve opened a door I hadn’t meant to, and now I can’t unsee what’s on the other side.

“You didn’t.” Kari’s voice doesn’t waver—just the opposite. It steadies, softens. “Mags, look at me—well, mentally. You couldn’t ruin us if you tried. You’re my person. There’s nothing you could do, no matter how complicated or messy, that would change that. You hear me?”

“You can’t say that for certain. He’s your brother, and I know how close you are.”

Kari pauses. “I do know. Clearly you aren’t thinking straight. I do think, however, we need to acknowledge the slightly awkward, rather well-endowed, I’m told, elephant in the room.”

I groan again. “God, Kari, he’s your brother.”

“And you’ve seen him naked now. Thoroughly, I assume. I mean, I get it—he’s built like sin, moves like a military-grade panther, and probably has abs you could play xylophone solos on. But still. My brother, Mags. That’s sacred territory. There’s not enough brain bleach in the world, and I may need therapy. Or wine. Or a lobotomy... or a lifetime supply of cupcakes.”

“Oh my god, Kari,” I snort.

“Sorry, I cope with discomfort through humor. You know this.”

I laugh despite myself, the sound watery. “It wasn’t supposed to mean anything.”

But even as the words leave my mouth, they ring hollow. Because deep down, in some half-buried part of me, I don’t dare admit it out loud—I wanted it to mean something. This afternoon he made me feel that way in spades, but still. When the weight of him was still on my skin, and the silence had settled into something almost intimate... yeah. I wanted it. Wanted him.

“Wasn’t it? Hard truth time... I think you’ve always fantasized about you and Gideon...”

“You knew?”

“What do you think? I’m an idiot? I’m your best friend and he’s my big brother. You may have fantasized about having sex with him, but I had fantasies of my own...”

“Ew...”

“You are one sick puppy, you know that?” laughs Kari. “I always dreamed he’d realize how terrific you were, scoop you up like some brooding, broody bakery-themed romance novel hero, and carry you off into the sunset while your apron strings fluttered in the breeze. Then I’d get to have you for a sister and endless access to buttercream. Yum. Win-win.”

I don’t answer right away. Instead, I stare up at the ceiling, heart a mess of tangled threads. “I am so fucked up.”

Another beat of silence. Then Kari’s voice, quieter this time, almost cautious. “I don’t know that you are. I think men like Gideon can be incredibly imperceptive where

their love lives are concerned. At least that's what I tell myself..."

"Are we talking about Dalton?" Dalton Calhoun is one of the members of Gideon's team and I know Kari has a major thing for him.

"We are not."

"Liar."

"Mags... what if none of this was random? What if Gideon didn't just show up to help? What if that ridiculous hot-and-broody act he pulls around you is because he's been circling you for years without knowing why? What if part of him came to Galveston because some part of him couldn't not come? I mean, it wouldn't be the weirdest thing to ever happen in our lives. And honestly, it would make a lot of sense. So don't try to logic this away—lean into the weird for a minute and ask yourself if you really think this was coincidence."

"He didn't. You sent him."

I mean it to sound firm, like I'm shutting the door on the idea, but the words lack heat. And the second they leave my mouth, I hate how unsure I sound. Because part of me—a small, traitorous part—wants to believe it.

"I asked him to help you," Kari admits. "But he could have asked anyone, including the local cops. He could've passed it off to someone else or just kept tabs from a distance. But he came himself. No hesitation. And I don't think that's just big brother protective energy, Mags. I think he felt it. You. Something. What if there's a reason... if it's always been you? What if some part of him always knew where he was supposed to end up—and it just took a little sabotage and a cupcake crisis to get him here? What if this thing between you two wasn't just timing or heat or stress, but something inevitable? Something that rewrites your whole damn life? Fate . "

\* \* \*

The envelope comes with the following morning's deliveries, tucked between a vendor invoice and a glossy food distributor catalog.

Plain. No return address. Handwritten name.

I slice through the envelope's flap without thinking, my fingers executing the well-practiced motion on autopilot. But the second I see what's inside, my breath catches—and my pulse stutters. This isn't a bill or a vendor update. It's something colder. Something meaner. Something that sends an immediate chill racing down my spine.

Inside is a postcard—a photo of Galveston's pier, old and faded. Just the words:

We're not done, you and I.

Typed. No signature.

But the greasy fingerprint smeared across the front tells me everything I need to know.

My stomach turns to stone.

I fold it shut, my fingers trembling slightly, and slip it between two invoices in the folder I keep behind the counter. My breath comes shallow, chest tight. The chill that races down my spine doesn't fade—it lingers, heavy and cold, coiling at the base of my neck like a warning.

I glance over my shoulder once, half-expecting to see Gideon watching me again, reading me too easily. But he's not there. And somehow that makes it worse.



I won't tell him. Not yet. Not until the tremor leaves my hands. Not until the dread stops scraping at my ribs like a dull blade. Not until I figure out what the hell this means—and what Chas Warren is trying to say by sending it now, when I'm already on edge.

I need to stay steady. For myself. For my business. I cling to the illusion of control amidst the spiraling mess.

Dalton and Gage arrive just before the late morning rush, posing as old military buddies in town for a visit. I know who they are, though I've never met them. I recognize Dalton immediately from the way Kari described him—cocky, all easy grin and reckless charm. Gage, on the other hand, is a quiet shadow—like he could blend in anywhere. He's all sharp eyes and honed edges.

They don't carry weapons—or at least not visibly—but the way they move, scan the space, exchange glances that mean more than words? It's tactical. Controlled. Like they're waiting for a breach. I've seen enough cooking competitions and bad reality TV to spot a team used to operating under pressure. They aren't just visiting. They're casing the place like it's enemy territory. Recon unit, plain and simple. Disguised in civvies and cinnamon sugar.

Gideon introduces them with minimal fuss, and I offer them coffee and cinnamon twists without asking why they're really here. I don't need the answer spelled out.

Midday prep is a controlled whirlwind—flour in the air, timers beeping, staff hustling through tight choreography—and I'm right at the center. I move quickly, efficiently, hands dusted in sugar and tension, barking orders and assembling trays like my sanity depends on it.

Even so, I feel it. That pressure. That heat. I look up, and there he is. Gideon stands at the prep counter, arms folded across that annoyingly broad chest, eyes fixed on me

like I'm a crime scene he's piecing together. He doesn't speak. Doesn't move. Just watches.

It's not predatory, not exactly—but it's not passive either. It's Gideon. Focused. Intense. The kind of stare that sees more than it should and says nothing, which somehow makes it worse. My breath hitches. I drop my gaze, grab the next order slip, and will my hands to stop shaking. I can handle heat. Pressure. Chaos. I lack the ability to cope with that kind of knowing.

He isn't hovering. He doesn't interrupt. He just leans against the prep counter, arms crossed, gaze locked on me like he's reading between the lines of my every move. It's the way his eyes track my hands. The way he doesn't look away when I glance at him. The way he doesn't speak, but knows, and damn it, I hate how much that gets under my skin.

I double down on my tasks, barking instructions at my staff, measuring out ingredients with a level of precision that would impress a lab tech. But my fingers tremble when I grab the next order slip, and I know he sees it.

He says nothing... neither do I.

We close late that evening, exhaustion thick in the air. Dalton and Gage clean up with practiced efficiency, and the second the door locks behind the last customer, the shop falls into a hush. Gideon keeps his distance, sensing my fraying edges. I don't say a word as we walk back to the loft. Dalton and Gage follow behind, chatting low between themselves.

Once inside, I mumble something about needing a shower and slip into my bedroom before anyone can stop me. I don't turn on the water. Don't change. Just sit down on the edge of my bed, head in my hands, the silence pressing too close. I don't cry so much as leak—slow, bitter tears that burn on the way down.

The door creaks open. I don't look up—I don't need to. The bed dips beside me, and a strong, warm arm slides around my shoulders. Gideon doesn't say a word.

I turn to him and finally let myself fall.

“I got a postcard,” I whisper, voice thick.

His jaw flexes against my hair, arms tightening.

“Typed. Said, ‘We’re not done you and I.’ I think it was Chas.”

He exhales, slow and low. “Warren? He’s already on our radar.”

“You knew?”

He doesn't deny it, and for once, I don't push. Instead, I lean into the heat of him, my forehead resting against his chest. For a long moment, neither of us speaks.

“You should be out there with them,” I mumble.

He curls his fingers under my chin and tilts my face up. “And leave you like this?”

“I'm fine.”

“You're not,” he says quietly. “But you don't have to be.”

My breath hitches. I search his face, looking for pity, for judgment—anything I can use to shove him away. But there's none. Just a quiet, unwavering presence.

“You're infuriating,” I mutter.

His lips quirk. “You might find it hard to believe, but that’s not the first time I’ve heard that.”

Before I can snap back, he kisses me—slow, deliberate, the kind of kiss that unravels me from the inside. He undresses me without hurry, like he’s peeling away all the layers I use to hold myself together. Then he strips and joins me under the covers, swallowing my weak protest about Dalton and Gage with a low growl against my throat.

“They already know,” he murmurs. “They just don’t say anything because they’re smarter than they look.”

The next morning, just as the bakery opens its doors, Gideon’s radio crackles to life in his pocket. Gage’s voice comes through, clipped and tight.

“He’s back.”

Gideon’s gaze snaps toward the rooftop across the street.

The hunt is on. “You and Dalton get eyes on him and report back.”

### CHAPTER 12

#### GIDEON

The scent of flour clings to the air, warm and heavy, layered over butter and yeast—and something brighter that clings to Maggie like sunlight off of steel. She isn't brittle today. She's sharp, self-contained, humming with a kind of focused calm that makes my chest tighten in ways I don't have names for.

I stand in the bakery kitchen, sleeves rolled up, forearms dusted with flour, watching Maggie work the bread dough with the kind of quiet concentration that always disarms me. Her motions are firm but graceful, a rhythm of push and fold that speaks of muscle memory and control. She has her hair twisted into a loose knot that's already failing, a few golden strands escaping to cling to the soft skin along her jaw. My chest tightens at the sight—not with worry, but with something more grounded. Want. Awe. The sharp-edged need to step into her space and offer my steadiness to match hers.

She doesn't glance at me, but I know she feels me. Her awareness of me is too acute to miss the weight of my gaze. She just keeps working, like she's waiting to see if I'll move first.

I step behind her. "You're pushing too hard on it," I murmur.

Maggie doesn't look up. "Are you going to mansplain gluten development to me now, Ranger? You do remember I'm the one who graduated top of her class at pastry school, right?"

“I remember. I'm just offering backup.”

I move closer, my chest brushing her back with slow, deliberate contact, body heat seeping into her spine. My hands slide around to cover hers, large and warm, a steady weight over her fingers. My touch doesn't jolt—doesn't startle. It folds over hers like it's always belonged there, guiding her hands through the dough with practiced pressure. Not forceful. Just confident. Certain. Like a current she doesn't have to fight, only follow. The rhythm changes as our hands move together, slow and grounding, like muscle memory re-learning intimacy one fold at a time. My breath is at her ear, not quite touching but impossibly close, and she doesn't pull away. She leans in, steady and sure, letting the contact hold—not because she needs the help, but because something in the warmth of my presence whispers that maybe, just maybe, she doesn't have to hold it all alone.

The dough compresses under our touch, pliant and warm, a rhythm settling between us like a second heartbeat. Maggie isn't brittle—she's fire held in check, focused and sure—but her body leans into mine, drawn by something deeper than want. Her breath hitches as my hands slow, my thumbs brushing lightly over the sides of her wrists, a silent coaxing more than a command. I lean in, lips near her ear, the words threading into her skin like silk over wire, my voice low enough to blur the line between suggestion and promise.

“You're tense.”

“Gee, I wonder why.” Her voice is clipped, but the way her body eases against mine says something different. It says she needs this. The steadiness. The connection. Me.

“You could tell me to stop,” I say.

“You wouldn't.”

“No,” I agree. “I wouldn’t.”

\* \* \*

Dalton’s voice crackles through the comm clipped to my belt. “Perimeter clear. Gage is looping the west side.”

I answer with a low, “Copy.”

The team’s all in now—Dalton, Gage, Deacon, Rush. Full recon mode. Dalton and Gage are in San Antonio—in fact, they’re staying at Maggie’s loft. Deacon and Rush are still at Team W’s remote ranch outside the city. Maggie’s sleepy bakery has turned into ground zero for something a hell of a lot bigger than spoiled sugar.

My phone buzzes.

Deacon: Confirmed. Chas Warren’s directing the operation under the Grangers’ order through one of their shell corps. Payroll hit last week.

Rush: Warehouse leased two blocks from the pier. Same shell. Same scent.

Maggie pulls back from me, dusting her hands on a towel. “So I’m officially a blip on the Texas Rangers’ radar, huh?”

I meet her eyes. “Not just a blip.”

She folds her arms. “Let me guess—I’m not a civilian in this anymore.”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Exactly.”

She pushes me away and scoffs, pacing. “Great. I just love that for me. So now I’m

bait? Is that it?”

“You’re not bait,” I say evenly. “You’re a variable in a hostile op. You think Chas is working alone? The Grangers don’t hire small-time screwups unless they serve a bigger purpose. And you... your shop... it’s not random.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

The bell over the alley door jingles, a brittle sound against the tension laced thickly through the kitchen. My head snaps toward the sound. An unscheduled delivery. I reach behind my back, fingers brushing the edge of my concealed weapon out of habit, and nod once toward Maggie without speaking.

She doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t ask. Just moves to the far side of the counter and stands ready—calm, focused, sharper than ever. She isn’t brittle. She stands braced.

Dalton steps in from the front of the shop, eyes already scanning. We exchange a look—one of those wordless, tactical flashes Team W has honed to muscle memory.

The door at the back of the kitchen, the alley entrance used for deliveries and back exits, opens. A vulnerability I’ve begun to mentally clock whenever I hear it.

I move through the kitchen and into the rear delivery area, my stance locking into something still, dominant, unshakable. The man standing just inside the open back door clutches a clipboard and a crate—but it isn’t just the unfamiliar face that raises every internal alarm I have. It’s the way his eyes flit too fast around the space, the way his fingers grip the crate like it’s a lifeline. Wrong. Shifty. Not the same guy as yesterday—and nowhere near confident enough to be legitimate.



“You’re late,” I say flatly.

The man freezes, eyes wide and wild. Then, without another word, he bolts—crate thudding to the floor as he shoves through the alley door and sprints down the back lot, feet scrambling for traction.

“Really?” I mutter.

I don’t hesitate. Don’t need to shift into my wolf form. The man inside me is more than enough. I charge after him, boots pounding the pavement, the sound a drumbeat of inevitability. The runner zigzags toward the street, but I’m faster. Smarter. Trained.

He’s fast. Sloppy. Feet pounding pavement, breath ragged. But I’ve trained for worse terrain. I sprint past a stack of rusted bins, closing the gap with unrelenting speed, and intercept him just behind a dumpster. Without breaking stride, I grab the collar of his jacket, spin him, and pin him hard against the brick wall with a forearm across his chest. The clipboard slips from his fingers, but I catch it mid-fall, my grip unyielding.

The guy’s voice cracks. “I—I was just paid to drop the crate!” he wheezes.

“For who?” I growl.

“I don’t know. I picked it up from a warehouse near the marina. I know nothing else. I swear.”

My grip tightens. “Who paid you?”

“I don’t know names. They gave me a location. Warehouse. Marina district.”

“Address.”

“Pier thirty-seven. Old cannery building.”

The minute I divert my attention, the man bolts. I let him go. He has nothing more to tell us.

Dalton catches up, breath steady. “What’s at thirty-seven?”

My jaw tightens. “Pier thirty-seven. Old cannery. That’s all I got. “Let’s find out.”

I tap my earpiece. “Gage, track the van in the alley and stay with Maggie.”

“Got it. Where are you and Dalton headed?”

“An old cannery near the marina.” I turn to Dalton. “Up for a little recon?”

Dalton grins. “Always.”

\* \* \*

The warehouse reeks—mildew clinging to the rafters, salt crusting the corners of broken crates, secrets hanging in the air like fog that refuses to lift. Someone has strewn empty pallets across the concrete floor in haphazard piles, as if they left in a hurry. Near the back wall, a whiteboard leans at an angle, half-erased notes smudged beneath a tangle of red string and pushpins.

On it, a map of Galveston. Circled in red: Sea Salt I said no. It happens all the time.”

“But you’re one of the last holdouts. You became the block. That makes you dangerous.”

She leans back, arms crossed. “And what? You care because Kari does?”

“I care because you matter. To her. To me.”

She holds my gaze, not blinking, as the weight of my words sinks in. Her expression isn't afraid—it's steady, calculating, full of things she hasn't said yet. Her eyes scan my face like she's mapping every line, every twitch, every truth I'm not voicing. When she finally speaks, her voice is quiet but firm.

“You mean that?”

I don't flinch. “Every word.”

She nods once, slowly, then looks back at the map. “Now what?”

“Now, I burn down anyone who gets close.”

\* \* \*

That night, the four of us gather in the loft, the air thick with a quiet intensity that never quite eases. The kind of quiet that isn't peace, but pressure—like the city itself is holding its breath. Maggie sits cross-legged on the couch, her back resting against me and nursing a mug of something hot. Her eyes flick occasionally to the windows as if expecting the silence to break with a sound that hasn't yet come.

Gage leans against the far wall, arms crossed, gaze sharp and distant. Dalton perches on the kitchen island, body coiled like a runner waiting for a starting gun. And I—I sit with Maggie leaning against me, one arm wrapped around her, my hand resting lightly on her waist, my body thrumming with restrained energy.

The light is low, the room too still, and none of us say it out loud, but we all feel it. Something is coming. And it's close.

Then comes the howl.

Low and primal, it rises from beyond the loft windows—a sound that doesn't belong to the streets or the surf or any part of the city Maggie has ever called home. It threads through the air like an ancient summons, not loud, but so distinct it sinks into the bones. Not the sound of a stray dog or distant coyote. This is deeper. Wilder. A voice pulled from the marrow of something old—too knowing, too deliberate.

The others freeze. The silence that follows isn't hollow—it bristles with the aftershock of recognition.

Maggie straightens slowly, her heart already thudding, and turns toward me. My jaw is tight. My eyes hold an ethereal light she hasn't seen before.

I stand instantly. Dalton and Gage are already reaching for their weapons.

“Check it. Go light. Stay sharp.”

Dalton and Gage nod, both leaving their guns on the island. “Copy that.”

The front door clicks shut behind them with a soft finality, the sound echoing through the loft like a quiet lock sliding into place. Maggie and I stand still for a moment, the hum of the city beyond the glass muted by distance and insulation. Inside, the air carries the faintest trace of cinnamon and ozone, tension coiling low and slow between us.

She turns to me, arms still folded tight across her chest, her gaze fierce despite the questions rising behind her eyes. I don't move toward her. Not yet. I watch the way her jaw sets, the way her chest rises and falls in tight, measured breaths. I can feel the storm gathering inside her before she even speaks.

“They left their guns,” she says. “You told them to go unarmed. That makes little sense unless you know something I don’t.”

I don’t answer right away. The moonlight spills across my features as I step forward, the silver light catching in my eyes until they shimmer with gold. Not just reflection—a glimmer from within, alive and unmistakable. Her breath hitches, something primal seems to be stirring in her chest. She sees it—not imagined, not refracted. Real.

I step closer now, unhurried, each footfall measured. The glow in my eyes hasn’t faded—it shimmers faintly in the dim light, too subtle to mistake now that she’s seen it. Her pupils dilate, her stance shifts, and still she doesn’t back away.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I say quietly.

### CHAPTER 13

#### MAGGIE

"Start talking."

My voice lands like a match struck in a quiet room—low, firm, and utterly non-negotiable. I don't raise it. It doesn't waver. But it cuts through the air between us like a blade, sharpened by disbelief and something far more dangerous—clarity. My spine is straight, chin tipped forward, hands curled at my sides like I'm holding myself back from throwing something. It's the kind of stillness that comes just before the storm. My eyes, wide and wild, pin him in place like a knife through glass.

The golden glow that flickered in his irises moments before—unmistakable, impossible—hangs between us like smoke that hasn't cleared. I saw it. I know what I saw. Now I want the truth—and nothing less. His voice isn't loud, but it doesn't need to be. The weight behind it is enough to make him still. The glow in his eyes is fading, but not fast enough to pretend it hadn't been there. Not fast enough to pretend I hadn't seen it.

He exhales, slow and steady. "I'm not just a Texas Ranger, Maggie. I'm a wolf-shifter."

My brows shoot up, but I don't move. I don't laugh or scoff or call him crazy. I just stare. Then say flatly, "Come again?"

"A shifter. Not metaphorically. Not symbolically. Not a nickname. I turn into a wolf.

Kari too. All of Team W."

My lips part, close again, then part once more, as if words are just out of reach. My gaze bounces from the door to the window and finally back to him, a flicker of disbelief still clouding my features. "You mean... as in some kind of weird were-wolf part man, part wolf? The whole cinematic horror reel—fur sprouting, bones cracking?"

He shakes his head. "Not at all, and it has nothing to do with a full moon. When we transition—when we move from human to wolf or back again—there's always a surge of energy. It builds fast, burns through you like lightning under the skin. And right at the edge, there's this mist. Thick. Pale. It curls around us, drawn from the air like it's responding to the pull of something ancient. That's not just for show—it's raw magic. The boundary between forms softens, and that mist? That's the moment where both exist at once. Wolf and human. The in-between. It's brief. But it's always there."

"You expect me to believe I've been running a bakery while the cast of a supernatural crime drama runs tactical ops in my alleyway?"

"It's not fiction, Maggie. There are three species—purebred humans, purebred wolves, and hybrids like me. We evolved along different evolutionary lines, right beside purebred humans like you. Hidden, mostly. Quiet when we can be. Somehow, the governor found out about Rush and he recruited the rest of Team W. The governor is the only one, outside the team, who knows about our true nature. We are shifters with control, loyalty, and purpose."

I shake my head, pacing now, agitation rippling through every step. Then my eyes snap up, wide with sudden realization. "Wait. Are you telling me... Kari, too? She's like you?"

Gideon meets my gaze without flinching. "Yeah. She is. Born same as me. She's a wolf-shifter too. Always has been."

My mouth drops open. "Jesus. I've known her my whole life and she never..."

"She's good at keeping secrets. We all have to be. Never doubt that Kari has always been your friend. She sent me because she trusts me. Because she knew you were in danger."

"And she conveniently forgot to mention you might howl at the moon?"

He steps forward, quiet but unrelenting. "You wanted answers. That's the truth. You've been pulled into something big, and the people responsible don't care what species you are. You're a target because you didn't back down. Because your bakery is a keystone in their little plan."

"And you? What does this make me to you?"

His jaw clenches. "You're my mate."

The room drops into silence, dense and electric.

I blink. "Your what now?"

"Mate. It's instinctual. Soul-deep. It's not about logic. Not about choice. It's just... true."

"So you're telling me everything that's been happening between us—the chemistry, the sex—was some pre-programmed biological imperative?"

He gives a short laugh, stepping in until our bodies nearly touch. "Maggie, I've



wanted you since before I even knew what you smelled like. The mate bond didn't make me kiss you. It just made it harder to stop."

I look at him through narrowed eyes. "So what stopped you?"

"Kari."

That makes me laugh, a sharp burst of sound. "You're scared of your sister?"

He groans, running a hand down his face. "She can be mean when she likes... and sneaky. I'm going to catch hell from her."

I grin, wicked and knowing. "She already knows."

His head snaps up. "What?"

"I called her, and she guessed. She was positively gleeful..."

He curses under his breath. "I'll bet. You do know she will never let me hear the end of this."

I move then, fast and fierce, grabbing the front of his shirt and yanking him down into a kiss that's messy, angry, and full of fire. My teeth graze his bottom lip. My breath is sharp against his skin.

"Then prove it's not just some kind of primal instinct," I whisper.

"If we do this, there's no going back. If I claim you as my mate, you will no longer be wholly human."

"I want to be one with you."

The grin that tugs at the corners of his mouth bares his teeth, slow and wild, like something ancient and hungry is waking just beneath his skin.

We collide with the explosive force of a dam obliterating its barriers, our hands and mouths driven by a ravenous, insatiable, almost painful desire. Clothes disappear in a whirlwind of frantic, feverish motions, discarded like leaves torn from trees in a hurricane. I push him back toward the couch, my palms pressing firmly against his chest, feeling the scorching heat radiating from his skin stretched taut over sinewy, defined muscle. I climb into his lap, straddling him, grinding down against his arousal with a moan that resonates through our very cores like a deep, primal hum.

His hands seize my thighs with a commanding, almost ferocious grip, guiding me into place with a raw dominance that makes my breath catch in my throat. I crave the cutting edge, hunger for the ferocity of it.

"You still want proof?" he growls, his voice a rough, gravelly challenge.

"I want you," I breathe, my voice a whisper drenched in need.

He plunges into me with a smooth, claiming thrust, and I gasp, my fingers digging into his shoulders, nails carving crescent-shaped indentations into his skin like tiny, intimate signatures of possession.

Our rhythm is unyielding, relentless, driven by a desperate, all-consuming hunger. My back arches as he fills me over and over, each thrust a searing brand, each movement a vow resonating deep within my very bones. Sweat slicks our skin, our bodies moving together with a perfect, primal urgency.

His mouth is everywhere—tracing my throat, gliding over my collarbone, caressing my breasts—his teeth grazing the edge of pain, a tantalizing threat hovering in the air. I bite into his neck and he growls, the sound reverberating through my chest like a

deep, rumbling purr.

"You're mine," he declares, his voice possessive and unwavering.

"Then take me," I challenge fiercely.

And he does. As my climax erupts within me, loud and blinding, Gideon sinks his teeth in a spot just to the side of the hollow of my throat—the curve where my neck meets my shoulder melded—in a deep, savage and instinctive bite that seals our bond with primal finality. His scent melds with mine, an indelible mark of our union.

I cry out, my body clenching around him, and everything explodes into a searing crescendo—my muscles tightening, my nerves alight, as a wave of white-hot sensation tears through me with breathtaking force. My vision goes hazy at the edges, breath stolen from my lungs, as if the world itself has narrowed to the place where we connect. Around us, the air thickens, charged and humming, pulsing with something too wild and elemental to name. It isn't just pleasure—it's transformation. A crackling surge that leaves me gasping, clinging to him as if letting go would mean being unmoored from gravity itself.

My body collapses into him, muscles trembling and nerves frayed to the edge of sensation. I sag against his chest, boneless, breathless, my head lolling to the side as the last ripple of pleasure fades into a warm, dizzy haze. Gideon catches me easily, one arm locking around my back, the other cradling my thighs as he lifts me. My flushed skin is damp with sweat; a soft gasp parts my lips, as if my mind has outpaced my body. I murmur something unintelligible, then go utterly still—my body limp, my breath slow. Not broken. Not defeated. Just undone. Completely and entirely his. Gideon holds me against him like something precious, his jaw tight, his pulse still racing. I pass out in his arms, consumed by the intensity of what we've just shared—claimed, marked, and transformed.

When I wake, the loft is still cloaked in quiet darkness, broken only by the faint orange line of streetlight bleeding through the blinds. I hold Gideon close, our bodies intertwined beneath the thin cotton sheet; our skin is warm and damp from sleep and sex. The ache in my muscles throbs with delicious satisfaction—low, deep, and earned. My head rests against his chest, the slow rise and fall beneath my ear matching the soft rumble of his breathing. His arm lies heavily and possessively across my waist, even in unconsciousness, and he has wrapped his legs around mine, as if he has no intention of letting go.

The weight of the night clings to me in the best way—body sore, heartbeat steady, breath slow. My skin still holds the scent of him, musky and wild and uniquely Gideon, and for a long moment I stay there, letting it wrap around me like armor against whatever comes next. But something pulls me from the haze. A flicker of instinct. A sense.

I lift my head slowly, groaning a little as my body protests the movement. Then I turn toward the window—glass black and reflective at this hour, the faint glimmer of city lights painting my silhouette in faint silver.

I push myself upright, my body slow to cooperate, a dull ache spreading through my limbs like a reminder of everything that passed between us. The cotton sheet slips down my back as I shift forward, breath catching as my toes find the cool floor. I blink into the low glow of city lights bleeding through the window and catch movement in the glass. My reflection.

I rise, drawn toward it. My body feels foreign and familiar all at once. I stand before the window, bare and breathless, staring into myself.

And there it is. What I see in that reflection makes me go still. My eyes. They glimmer with a faint golden hue—muted, pulsing like embers banked under ash. Not a trick of the light. Not imagined. Alive with something new.

My pulse kicks hard, slamming through me like a starting bell. My lips part, dry and slightly trembling, the breath caught behind them. And then the truth unfurls—slow and all-consuming. It doesn't crash into me like a sudden impact. It creeps in like tidewater, rising inch by inch, until it soaks everything I thought I knew, warm and disorienting, leaving nothing untouched.

I've changed. My eyes shimmer with an otherworldly light, a color caught between molten amber and sunlight through whiskey. Not the exact hue of Gideon's, but close enough to send a tremor through my chest. They aren't just reflecting light—they're emitting it, soft and steady, like a lit match held behind my irises.

My hand goes to the prominent bite mark at the hollow of my throat, fingertips brushing lightly over the sensitive, swollen flesh. It throbs faintly beneath my touch; not painful, but undeniably alive—as if it carries its own pulse, separate from mine. A living brand, heat still blooming beneath the surface. I don't know if it's my imagination or something more, but the surrounding skin feels warmer, as though it has absorbed part of him and is keeping it close. The moment my fingers graze the curve, I feel him stir behind me.

Gideon's arms slide around me from behind, strong and sure, drawing me back against the solid wall of his chest. His bare skin presses to mine, warm and grounding. He dips his head, the stubble of his jaw grazing my neck, and nuzzles into the spot he marked. A low sound escapes him—not quite a growl, not quite a sigh—just the raw sound of possession and contentment. I shiver as his lips ghost over the fresh mark.

"You feel different," he murmurs, voice rough against my skin.

"I am," I whisper, eyes locked on our reflection in the window. My gaze flicks at the glowing embers of my eyes. "Aren't I?"

He presses a kiss to my shoulder. "Yeah, baby. You are."

### CHAPTER 14

#### GIDEON

What have I done?

I don't regret claiming and marking her—she's my mate. That truth is bone-deep, cellular. But part of me still reels from the weight of it, from the jarring contrast between instinct and memory. I've known Maggie since she was a teenager—sharp-elbowed, all knees and stubborn fire, Kari's best friend with a laugh that was too big for her frame. I watched her grow up from a distance I thought was safe. Now she isn't a girl anymore. She's mine. And that rewrites everything.

"The bite changed everything."

I say the words quietly, my fingers trailing over the edge of the sheet still tangled around Maggie's waist. She sits cross-legged on the bed, my hoodie draping over her like a second skin, bare legs folded beneath her, posture loose but alert. Her golden-tinged eyes study me—not fearful, but sharp, curious, and calculating, like she's working her way through a math problem with high stakes. There's an additional weight behind her gaze, not just from the changes she's undergoing, but from the knowledge that her world will never return to what it was. She isn't backing away. She's leaning in—measuring me, measuring herself, adjusting to the truth as it reveals itself layer by layer.

"You didn't just mark me," she says, voice low, her fingers brushing the sensitive edge of the bite. "You rewired me. You changed the rules of what I am—of who I'm

going to be."

I nod. "It restructured your DNA. It's why you feel a little out of sorts. Your body is trying to integrate something it wasn't born to carry. It's a violent thing the first time. The bond snaps into place, and then the biology scrambles to keep up."

She's quiet for a moment. "So what happens now?"

"You'll change. You already are. Your body will adapt to the shifter genome. You'll heal faster. Get stronger. Live longer. You'll be able to change form at will once the transition completes."

She doesn't speak right away. Her eyes lift toward the window, following the ripple of the blinds as the Gulf breeze stirs them with gentle insistence. The motion is small but grounding, like she's letting the wind cool the swirl of thoughts behind her eyes. Her gaze lingers there—on the shimmer of moonlight catching against the glass, on the faint reflection of the two of us tangled up in a future neither of us planned for—until her shoulders ease and she turns back to me.

"And the instincts? The wolf part?"

"They're already waking up," I say. "Which is why you're feeling everything so sharply. The speed, the hunger, the emotional surges—they're all part of it. You're transitioning faster than most. Probably because of the bond. But it's going to hit hard. And when it does, I'll be here. Every step of the way."

Her eyes cut to mine. "You're not going to pull the alpha card on me, are you?"

A grin tugs at my mouth. "Only if you ask nicely. Technically, Rush is our alpha—Team W follows his lead. But all of us? We're alphas too. It's not a hierarchy, it's a powder keg with discipline. Sometimes it means butting heads.



Sometimes it means watching each other's backs harder. But for you? You'll always answer to me. I'll always be your alpha."

She rolls her eyes, but her smile cracks through—sharp, crooked, and radiant, lit by the familiar gleam of mischief I know better than my name. But something else lives behind it now. That fire I've always seen smoldering in her has grown into a blaze—hotter, wilder, laced with something raw and primal. It isn't just attitude anymore. It's something elemental, electric. Like the wild has touched her and left its mark. A pulse of feral heat shimmers beneath her skin, not quite visible, but feels like the moment before a storm breaks open the sky. And God, it stirs every instinct in me—the beast, the protector, the man. All of them answering to her.

Just as I lean toward her, ready to pull her closer, my phone vibrates sharply on the nightstand. The screen lights up with a name I know too well, and the second I read the message, the lines of my body go taut. "Damn it," I mutter, already sitting up.

Maggie stiffens. "That the team?"

I nod, already standing, already halfway back in my jeans. "Some kind of rogue pack—six of them, shifter signatures confirmed. Tied to the Grangers. They're armed and heading into Galveston. Tonight."

She's off the bed in an instant. "Then we go."

"Mags..." I reach for her arm, not to stop her, but to steady her. Her scent has changed—no, evolved—enough that I can feel the storm beneath her skin. Her pupils are wide, jaw tight, breath coming fast. She isn't panicking. She's speeding up. Her system is surging with instinct, her body fighting to align what it remembers being with what it's now becoming. I see the shimmer of pain flicker behind her eyes, just for a second. A spike in her pulse, an internal war she's too proud to show.

"Maggie," I say more gently. "You're still transitioning. You're not like the rest of us—yet. Your instincts are going to override logic. Things might come faster than you expect. Too fast. You could get hurt."

She looks up at me, fierce and unflinching, but there's a tremor in her fingers that betrays the raw edge of the transition burning under her skin. "Then I'll fight through it," she says, her voice rough but steady. "But don't treat me like I'm breakable just because I'm new. I'm not porcelain, Gideon. I'm fire. And you damn well know it."

The defiance in her eyes is bright, the flush on her cheeks more heat than fear. Her breath comes in shallow bursts, her body humming with a primal energy she's only beginning to understand—but none of it dulls the truth in her tone. There's strength there, not recklessness. She isn't asking for permission. She's demanding respect.

My mouth tugs into the barest grin, pride cutting through the undercurrent of concern like a blade through cloth—sharp, undeniable, and full of heat.

"No. Don't 'Mags' me. I'm one of you now. You don't get to lock me in a tower because it's inconvenient."

"You're not a Ranger."

She's still for a moment, as if considering. "Kari isn't a Ranger either. Can you honestly tell me if your sister was the baker, and I was the romance writer, you would try to exclude her?"

"Wouldn't I?" I say, scrubbing a hand over my jaw, watching her. That doesn't seem to appease her. "First, if Kari owned the bakery, she'd be in jail for unintentional manslaughter—she'd have killed people with food poisoning. You've tasted her cooking, right?"

Maggie laughs in spite of herself. “I understand your point, which is why I was so shocked at your baking skills. Kari and I agreed a long time ago—my talent was in pastry; hers was in writing.”

Her eyes are fierce, her jaw set in that familiar line of stubborn resolve. The surrounding air seems charged, not with fear, but with rising power—raw and electric. Her scent has begun to evolve—damn it, transform—deepening with the markers of change that prickle against my skin. It isn’t just adrenaline. It’s the thrum of something ancient awakening inside her, a new rhythm syncing with the pulse of the night. She doesn’t just want to help. She’s burning to step fully into this new skin, to own every inch of what she’s becoming.

"Fine," I say. "But you stay close. You let me lead. No heroics. No exceptions."

She nods. "Deal."

\* \* \*

Shadows and silver cloak the waterfront, the moon hanging low like an omen carved from ice. The sea laps lazily at the piers, each soft crash of water echoing like a held breath across the stillness. I walk in step with Maggie, Gage, and Dalton, the four of us strung in silent formation. We look like what we are—a pack hunting not with teeth, but with readiness, every sense attuned to the tension in the air. Maggie’s arm brushes mine once, and her warmth grounds me even as the wind cuts cold through the cotton of my shirt. She doesn’t speak, but her eyes scan the horizon with sharp, new clarity. The calm around us feels deceptive—not peace, but pause. Like the city itself is crouched, waiting for violence to bloom.

Then it hits—an explosion that shatters the night. One of the food trucks at the end of the pier—a ball of fire and shattered metal.

Fire roars up from the far end of the pier, a blinding bloom of orange and red against the silver quiet of the waterfront. Heat punches the air, shoving it outward in a wave that makes windows rattle and sends flocks of startled gulls screaming skyward. The blast rolls through our bones, gut-deep and final. Smoke blooms fast, acrid and thick, already curling up into the sky like a signal.

Shadows move in the firelight. Armed. Aggressive. The food truck—what had been a familiar stop for tourists and locals alike—is now a twisted skeleton engulfed in flame. And from within the flickering chaos, the figures move. Not civilians. Not allies.

I don't think. I roar, body already responding to the deep instinct that surges from my core. The mist rushes in, coiling around me—cool, electric, alive. It spins like fog with a mind of its own, summoned by the ancient magic of my kind. One heartbeat I'm a man. The next—I'm power incarnate. Muscle, fang, and fury unleashed into the night.

Dalton and Gage lunge into the fray a breath behind me, their forms blurring into massive wolves in a flash of fur and bone. Our howls split the night—a battle cry, a claim, a promise of violence to anyone stupid enough to test our pack. The sound echoes across the waterfront, primal and furious, harmonizing with the chaos blooming around us.

Maggie gasps, frozen for a heartbeat as three massive wolves launch into action around her—one black as midnight, one slate-gray with a jagged scar down its side, and one streaked with copper, its eyes gleaming like molten gold. Our sudden movement is a shockwave, the force of our presence hitting her like wind off a cliff. And then something in her responds—a snap of adrenaline, a burst of clarity. Not fear. Recognition. The part of her that has begun to change, to awaken, rises like a tide. And instinct takes her.

Something primal snaps loose inside her, like a tether giving way. Heat surges beneath her skin, adrenaline sharpening her senses. She doesn't hesitate—can't. Her legs move before the thought can catch up, boots pounding the pavement as she hurls herself forward, teeth bared in a snarl that doesn't belong to the woman she used to be. Her vision tunnels, locked on the threat, on Dalton's exposed flank. Maggie sees it before he does. Her fingers curl like claws, and she moves faster than she ever has—no time to think, just motion, just muscle. She slams into the attacker, knocking the blade off course.

She can't change form—not yet—but that doesn't matter. She's not defenseless. Not anymore.

She slams into the thug's arm mid-swing, throwing his balance off. The blade misses its mark by inches, and Dalton spins, jaws snapping.

I see it all—Maggie's body moving with raw instinct; her strike saving Dalton from a blade that would've torn straight through him—and something fierce clenches deep in my chest. Pride, yes, but something bigger. Something harder to name. A primal surge of awe and fierce protectiveness, braided with the staggering realization that this woman—my mate—is fighting beside me, not behind. The blood arcing through the air is real, but so is the fire in her. And that fire is mine to protect, to nurture, to stand beside for as long as I have breath in my lungs.

We're able to thwart the Grangers' thugs. Brutal. Messy, but we win.

When it's over, we linger in the shadows beyond the wreckage, adrenaline still buzzing through our veins. The scent of blood clings to the salt-heavy breeze. Maggie, breathless, looks to the pier—nothing. No sign of Chas. No final blow. Not yet.

I nudge her with my muzzle.

“We need to move,” she says, her voice low but urgent.

Dalton and Gage, still bloodied and probably bruised, fall in behind us without question. Maggie gives a tight nod and leads the way, cutting through the alley behind the beach cafés, ducking between buildings, avoiding streetlights and the possibility of being seen. Her steps are light, fast, calculated—a new grace in her body that hadn’t been there days ago.

We reach the back of the loft building without incident, slipping through the employee access door she keys open with trembling fingers. “Come on,” she whispers, glancing over her shoulder.

We slip into the back entrance of the building, avoiding the main stairwell and hugging the walls as Maggie leads the way. I follow close behind her, my senses on high alert for any trace of pursuit. The hallway is quiet, dimly lit, with the muffled hum of distant appliances seeping through the walls. Once inside her loft, she motions toward the guest bathroom and the secondary closet in the spare bedroom. Dalton and Gage duck inside and re-emerge a few moments later, changed into the fresh clothes they’d prepped and hidden in advance—hoodies, jeans, boots—simple and tactical.

I close my eyes, summoning the part of me that remembers being more than muscle and fang. The mist begins to rise—color swirling like storm clouds laced with electric threads, thunder rumbling low in the distance, and the air crackles as the magic coils tight. The shift comes with a flash of power, bone and sinew reforming until the storm recedes and I’m standing upright again—human, breathless, and utterly bare. Maggie’s already there, steady and silent, holding out a pair of sweatpants. I take them from her hand and pull them on without a word, my eyes still dark with the echo of the run and the memory of her scent in the moonlight.

I step closer, lowering my voice, my hand gently grazing her elbow.

"You okay?" I ask, more than casual concern behind the words—my eyes sweep over her, looking for signs of pain, disorientation, anything that says she's pushing too hard.

She nods once, but her eyes stay on the closed door. "No one saw."

But the night isn't done.

I lower my mouth to her neck, breathing in the wildness that clings to her skin—her scent is richer now, threaded with the electric charge of magic and the unmistakable echo of change. I brush my lips against the fresh bite mark, pressing a kiss to the bruised edge where her skin still pulses with the heat of the bond. She tilts her head slightly, not pulling away but leaning in, her fingers lifting to trace the wound slowly, reverently, like she can still feel the moment it happened. Her touch lingers, fingertips exploring the tender curve of the mark, half in awe and half in wonder, as if it holds a truth her heart already understands—even if her mind hasn't caught up yet.

"You're still burning from it," I murmur.

"I can feel you in my skin," she whispers, and I don't miss the awe or the tremble beneath the words.

I kiss the mark gently, then press my forehead to the curve of her shoulder. "That's because we're not finished yet."

I see the tension still simmering beneath Maggie's skin—the faint twitch in her fingers, the rigid line of her shoulders, the way she moves away and paces by the window like a storm waiting to break. Her eyes are alert, scanning the quiet skyline with the same vigilance I've seen in battle-hardened Rangers. But it isn't fear driving her—it's something wilder, coiled and growing.

I close the distance between us without a word, silent on the hardwood until I stand just behind her. Then, I slip my arms around her waist and pull her back against my chest. My hold is firm, grounding—no hesitation, no ask. Just presence.

She doesn't tense. Instead, her body softens against mine with a slow, deliberate breath, her spine easing into the curve of mine. Her head tilts slightly, resting against my chest, and I feel her heartbeat slowly sync to mine. Her hands lift to rest over my forearms, fingers sliding lightly along my skin, not clinging—but claiming.

I nuzzle the top of her head, breathing in her scent, my voice low and quiet. "You're not alone in this, Maggie. Never again."

Her response is a small nod, but her body tells me more. She isn't standing because she has to. She's standing because she chooses to. And this—this quiet, fierce trust—is everything.

I lead her down to the beach, the salt-heavy breeze whipping at our clothes, the ocean's pulse matching the energy still humming in our blood. The sand is cool beneath our bare feet, moonlight painting the shoreline in silver and shadow. I stand beside her in the surf, close enough that our arms brush, and when she looks at me—uncertain, breath catching—I dip my head to whisper against her ear.

"Breathe deep. Feel your heartbeat. Let it settle, then listen for the one underneath it. That's the rhythm. That's the call. Don't chase it. Let it find you."

She removes her clothes and closes her eyes, drawing in a lungful of sea air, her chest rising and falling in time with the waves. I watch her face change—eyebrows pulling tight, lips parting slightly as something deep inside her stirs. The air thickens around us, humming with power.

Then it comes—slow and certain. The mist.



It rises from the sand like breath from a slumbering beast—cool and electric, laced with the scent of salt and ozone. It whispers across the ground in sinuous tendrils, curling around her ankles, coiling up her spine. The air shifts, the temperature dropping just enough to raise goosebumps along her arms. It makes a soft, barely audible sound, like silk brushing over stone, and carries with it the sharp tang of coming change—metallic, wild, alive. The mist isn't just a herald of transformation. It's a force, a veil between what was and what will be. As it thickens, the moonlight fractures through it, casting halos and shadows in equal measure, cloaking her in something ancient and infinite.

It curls around her feet like a thin, sparkly fog, spiraling upward, winding along her legs, her arms, and her torso like ribbons pulled by unseen hands. It shimmers faintly with energy, not quite light, not quite shadow, as though the very air is being rewritten around her. Her skin glows in its embrace, outlined in something ancient and alive.

She gasps, the sound sharp but awed, her eyes wide as her body begins to hum with energy. Magic curls up her spine like a wave cresting, her skin glowing faintly under the moonlight. Her hands clench, her knees wobble, and her spine arches as if something ancient and primal is being drawn up through her bones. The mist enshrouds her in slow, spiraling tendrils—cool and electric, wrapping her in an ethereal cocoon of light and shadow. And then—without a cry or warning—she vanishes into it.

In the place where Maggie had been, a tawny she-wolf stands, sleek and regal beneath the moonlight. Her fur shimmers in shades of gold and warm amber, catching the light like something forged in fire and starlight. Her eyes—still hers, still fierce and clever—lock onto mine, filled with new instinct, wonder, and wild recognition. Her form is different, but the essence of her has not changed. It's deepened, become something ancient and unbreakable.

I step forward. She nuzzles my hand gently with her snout. She looks down at her front paws, then back over her back to her tail, which she wags. She lets out a sharp yip—a surprised, instinctive sound that bursts from her throat before she can stop it, more animal than human, and entirely non-verbal. Then she takes off like lightning.

I shed the last of my clothes, shift, and launch after her, my form low and powerful, paws churning up the sand as I chase the blur of tawny fur ahead. The beach stretches out before us like a silver ribbon under the moon, the crash of waves harmonizing with the pounding of our paws. The world shrinks to wind in my ears, the clean snap of salt in the air, and the magnetic pull of her energy just ahead. We race together, wild and free, our bodies moving in perfect tandem—two predators, two souls, born to run beneath the stars.

Our limbs stretch long and fast beneath the moonlight, fur glinting silver where it catches the light, breath puffing in tandem as we tear down the shoreline. Every muscle moves in harmony, each beat of our paws a drum against the sand. We don't race—we fly. A pair of primal echoes reborn under the stars, our bodies carving matching paths across the wet earth like we've been chasing each other for lifetimes.

\* \* \*

Back at the loft, her body still humming from the shift, Maggie pads barefoot across the floor, hair tousled from the run, skin glowing with sweat and moonlight. She turns to me as I stand by the window, shirt half-on, chest rising with each breath.

“So,” she says, voice low and unreadable. “What happens when I stop being yours?”

I still. The air between us pulls taut. And then I cross to her, slow and deliberate, cupping her jaw with one large, steady hand.

“That's never going to happen, Maggie,” I growl low. “Because you're not a

possession. You're a part of me. And no part of me walks away."

She doesn't respond. She just kisses me with a hard and relentless passion, and I let her take exactly what she needs.

Blood, power, and love all blur into one elemental craving when it's her on my tongue—not just hunger, but reverence. It's a vow sealed in sensation, primal and precise, a claim deeper than instinct and more potent than any promise I could make with words alone. The taste of her lingers like memory and possession, threading through me with the quiet finality of fate accepted and owned.

### CHAPTER 15

#### MAGGIE

I wake tangled in the sheets; the linen clings to sweat-damp skin, my body humming like a power line after a storm. It's funny how I now think of them as Gideon's sheets and Gideon's bed when they were mine to start with, but his presence is so overwhelming, it just seems that things become his almost by osmosis.

The loft is quiet except for the rhythmic hush of waves rolling through the open balcony door, their sound weaving in and out like breath. But the quiet doesn't feel hollow—it shimmers with something reverent, as if the very air remembers what happened between us. It's full—of magic, of muscle memory, of something raw and real. My body aches in that perfect, post-battle way—like I've run for miles barefoot over hot sand and kept going, anyway. My bones pulse with the echo of transformation, of claws that haven't quite come, of instincts half-settled and humming under my skin. Every breath reminds me I'm not who I used to be. And every beat of my heart tells me I'm not alone in it.

Everything is... sharper. The smell of coffee grounds from the kitchen cuts through the air like dark chocolate and burnt earth. Outside, the gulls are louder, almost annoyingly so. My skin tingles, and not in a pleasant, afterglow kind of way—though there's some of that. No, this is more primal. Like my senses are trying to outrun my brain.

I sit up slowly; the sheet slips down to my waist, and the moment the breeze kisses my skin, it's like an electric current dances across every nerve ending. Not

sharp—just alive. My neck pulses with awareness, not pain, but a low hum that blooms from the spot where his teeth claimed me. The mark isn't just skin-deep—it thrums in sync with my heartbeat. A tether. A brand. A truth that pulses in my blood: I'm his, and he's mine.

Gideon is nowhere in sight, but his scent lingers in the room—oak, smoke, a hint of something wild and ancient. It's warm and grounding, a phantom presence that wraps around me like a blanket fresh from the dryer. The wild edge of it catches in my throat and curls down my spine, a quiet reminder that he's never far, not really. It eases the tightness in my chest, slows the flutter of my pulse, and makes me feel tethered to something bigger than the storm inside me.

Then comes the spike—a sudden, blistering surge of heat that slams through my belly and up my spine, wild and consuming. It isn't just warmth—it's fire, liquid and low, curling through my nerves with feral intent. My breath hitches, sharp and involuntary. One hand claws at the sheets; the other curls into a tight fist as my body trembles, my skin too hot and tight, as if trapped within itself. I'm burning from the inside out, and it's only just beginning.

Before I can panic, he's there. Just—there. Like he's felt it through the bond or read the change in the air. I hear the soft rhythm of his bare feet against the floor, the gentle hush of the bedroom door gliding open. And then his voice—low, steady, already grounding me before I even see him.

“You're spiking again,” he says gently, not asking. Telling. Knowing.

I nod, unable to form the words. Gideon's expression changes—something primal flickering in his eyes as he crosses the room in two swift, purposeful strides. He crouches beside the bed, his presence commanding but calm, and cups my cheek with one warm, calloused palm. His thumb brushes gently along my jaw, his touch careful, grounding. “You're okay,” he murmurs, voice deep and low like a river smoothing

stone. “I’ve got you. Breathe. Let your body find me.”

And it does. The moment his skin touches mine, the worst of it recedes. His scent rolls over me like a warm front—rich, grounding, unmistakably him. It wraps around my senses, heavy with cedar and smoke and something wilder that I can’t name. The burn inside me dulls. The chaos in my bloodstream steadies. My fingers loosen, shoulders unlock, and I take a deep, shuddering breath that grounds me in the here and now. Slowly, the heat ebbs. My pulse steadies, syncing with the deep, unwavering calm of the man holding me tethered to reality.

“This is going to keep happening for a bit,” he murmurs, brushing his thumb slowly over the sharp line of my jaw. “These instinct spikes come in waves—intense, fast, then gone. It’s your senses stretching into unknown places, catching signals your body’s still learning to understand. You don’t have to fight it. Just ride the wave, and let me anchor you through it.”

“Lucky me,” I mutter, my voice rough as I lean into him.

He smirks. “You’re handling it better than most.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, I’m back in the bakery, though I haven’t flipped the sign to open. The doors stay locked, the chairs still upturned on tables. But the ovens are already warm, casting that familiar, golden heat across my skin as I move through the back kitchen like it’s part of my body.

I’m not ready to face the world yet—not the questions, the watchful glances, the strange new rhythm my body has taken on—but I need this. The simplicity of it. The dough that responds to my hands. The scent of yeast and vanilla and scorched sugar that calms something wild inside me. The space feels steady when nothing else does.

The radio buzzes softly in the background, some bluesy station playing low and slow. I press my fingers into the dough, folding it over itself with smooth, practiced movements. My wolf hums under my skin, quiet for now, but alert. The stretch of flour-dusted countertops, the rhythm of kneading, the pulse of my breath—it all brings me back to center. This place, this work, is part of my soul. And maybe it always has been.

I don't need to bake today. But I need to feel like myself, even if that self is something new and raw and still evolving. Before getting out the ingredients I'll need for a special artisan bread, I unlock the front door, but don't switch on the lights or the open sign. I'm elbow-deep in bread dough when the front bell jingles.

"Hello?" I call out.

"Hello. Does my big brother know you left the door open?" Kari's voice replies, smug and warm.

I wipe my hands on a dish towel, smoothing flour from my fingers as I pad toward the front of the bakery. "Probably not. Are you going to tell him?"

Kari grins. "Probably not."

The air grows noticeably lighter, warmer—probably because Kari is already waiting there, leaning on the counter with two lattes and wearing the unmistakable expression of someone holding premium blackmail material and knowing it. It's part amused little sister, part romance writer looking for a plot twist, and all smug mischief.

"Brought caffeine," she says, sliding one across. "And questions."

I lift my cup. "You want answers or alibis?"

“Oh, I already know,” Kari says. Her gaze drops to my neck, to the bite I haven’t bothered to hide. She arches an eyebrow. “About time.”

There’s a pause. Then I exhale. “I’m scared, Kari. Not of him. Not of the change. I’m scared that I like it. That I like what I’m becoming.”

Kari’s expression softens. “Maybe that’s not something to be afraid of. Maybe it means you were always more than human. Maybe your soul was always wolf and the rest of you is just... catching up. Take care of him. He may be all lethal and shit, but he’s not indestructible, and I think you could destroy him if you wanted.”

I reach across the counter, smile, and squeeze Kari’s forearm. I blink hard, my lashes brushing against flushed cheeks, then give a small nod—less a gesture of understanding and more of surrender to the weight of the moment.

“He’s safe with me.”

Kari returns the smile and the nod. “Never doubted it for a minute. I love you both.”

The knot I haven’t even known I’ve been carrying—tight, coiled, forged from years of trying to control too much and feel too little—eases at the edges. It doesn’t unravel all at once, but the pressure inside my chest shifts. I feel a quiet stretch of space open up inside me, where fear has lived. And in that space, something steadier settles—acceptance, maybe. Or at least the start of it.

\* \* \*

When the bakery is finally cleaned and locked up for the night, I take my time walking back to the loft, with Gage as my escort. Gideon and Dalton left earlier in order to do what I’m quickly beginning to think of as ‘Ranger things.’



The streets are mostly empty, the ocean air damp and heavy with the promise of a storm. I need the silence, need a minute to feel like myself again—whoever that is now. My keys jingle in my pocket as I climb the stairs to the loft two at a time, heart pounding faster than I'll admit. Dalton is waiting outside. He indicates he and Gage have other places to be and that Gideon is waiting.

Inside, the loft is dim except for the glow from the under-cabinet lights in the kitchen. The scent of sea salt and sugar still clings to my skin, and the faint sound of waves brushes up against the silence. I step through the doorway slowly, toeing off my shoes, my fingers already working loose the buttons of my flour-dusted shirt. My body hums from a long day that started in chaos and is about to end in something far more intimate.

Wordless and intent, I cross the space between us slowly, peeling off each layer of clothing as I walk. The loft is dim, quiet, private. Mine. Ours. The cool tile presses against my bare feet as I stand naked in the kitchen, the air thick with the scent of butter and vanilla from the frosting I've begun mixing in a half-hearted attempt to find calm.

The moment I stepped into the loft and saw Gideon standing in the kitchen, all quiet dominance and smoldering patience, something inside me clicked into place. The bowl of buttercream sits on the counter, frosting clinging to my knuckles in luscious peaks. I stir absently, my mind flicking between unfinished thoughts and the magnetic pull of the man who's claimed me as his own.

Gideon stands leaning against the counter behind me, shirtless, his jeans riding low on his hips, his arms crossed. His molten steel and wildfire gaze tracks my every movement, as if I'm something precious and breakable—or something he's moments from devouring. There's no smile, no grin—just heat, raw and focused. I don't need to see his expression to feel it. The air between us tightens like a string pulled taut.

It isn't just the kitchen that's warm. It's thick with tension, the kind that buzzes just beneath the skin and makes each breath feel like a prelude. My body picks up on the signal before my brain does—the heavy pulse of his attention, the invisible pull of gravity between us. I know that look, even with my back turned. That weight in the air. The quiet hum of want pressed close behind my ribs. I know what he remembers. I know exactly what he wants. And I want it, too.

“You keep looking at me like that,” I murmur, not glancing up, “and I’m going to make a mess we don’t clean up.”

His eyes burn. “Promise?”

I turn, powdered sugar dusted across my collarbone, arms bare, breath shallow. And I don’t wait.

I dip my finger into the bowl, taste the frosting slowly, letting my tongue drag across my fingertip with a deliberate tease. I don’t turn around. I don’t need to. His presence curls down my spine, awakening the wolf that still trembles just beneath my skin.

“You’re cleaning up the mess,” I say quietly.

He doesn’t answer with words. I can feel him moving restlessly, like the predator he is. Glancing over my shoulder, I see powdered sugar along his jaw, caught by his five o’clock shadow, and a smear of buttercream on his chest where I’d playfully swiped him with frosting. He watches me now, like he’s barely holding something in.

“You gonna keep staring or actually help?” I ask, not turning around.

His voice is low, rough. “Depends. You planning to bake cupcakes to go along with that frosting or just keep pretending that buttercream isn’t an excuse to distract yourself?”

I scoop a finger full of frosting, lick it slowly. “I don’t know that the two are mutually exclusive.”

He moves before I can blink. One long stride, and the space between us evaporates as his hands grasp my hips, spinning me to face him, backing me into the counter. The bowl wobbles behind me, but neither of us cares.

His eyes are dark. Not with anger. With hunger.

“You keep looking at me like that,” I say, my voice breathless, “like you’re starving.”

His mouth dips to my neck. “I am.”

My breath catches as his teeth graze my skin, the sharp tease of danger rolling over nerves already stretched taut. He follows it with a slow drag of his tongue, hot and deliberate, a sensual balm that sends a tremor down my spine. I reach for the top button of his jeans, but he catches my wrists mid-motion, his grip firm and unyielding.

With a low growl that thrums against my throat, he pins my arms behind my back, forcing my chest to rise against him. One hand locks my wrists together with dominant precision, while the other slides possessively down my bare spine—because I wear nothing but the flush on my skin and the scent of sugar. His fingers explore my body with reverent urgency, mapping the curve of my back, the dip of my waist, until they find the heat of my belly and linger there. My knees tremble. Between the cool tile and the consuming heat of his body, I’m trapped and gasping for breath—a needy, raw, fiery sound.

“You sure?” he asks, voice low.

I arch against him. “I started this, didn’t I?”

He doesn't speak—he devours. His mouth claims mine with a hunger that sears, wild and consuming, lips crashing in a clash of teeth and tongue that pulls a whimper from my throat. My nails score across his back, sharp crescents of need anchoring him as he presses me firmly against the counter. His thigh muscles between mine, a demanding intrusion that makes me gasp, the hard ridge of it grinding against my center until my legs lift instinctively, locking around his waist, tethering us as our bodies find a rhythm older than words.

Laid bare in every way, my skin flushed and glowing in the low kitchen light, I've never felt so exposed—nor so invincible. He drinks me in, his gaze roaming from the part of my lips down the soft line of my throat and over the curves of my breasts. His touch is reverent, deliberate, the slow trail of his hands painting fire across my ribs, up to cup my breasts in his palms. His thumbs flick over my nipples, drawing a sharp gasp as I arch into his hands.

His mouth follows, taking me with aching precision, lips wrapping around a pebbled peak as his tongue circles and teases, slow and relentless. I moan his name—a sound pulled from the marrow of my being—as his mouth lavishes attention, staking another claim.

My body, slick skin against his hard muscle, moves against him as if made for it; friction and fire meet at every contact point. My hips rock with increasing need, grinding with purpose, a slow, relentless drive that leaves no room for hesitation. I'm claiming him with every motion, every breath, every demanding move of my body—this isn't surrender. It's sovereignty.

And Gideon? He gives it to me. All of it.

“Gideon...”

“Say it again.”

“Gideon. Please.”

He steps back just enough to undo the buttons of his jeans, slow and deliberate, his eyes never leaving mine. With a low groan, he frees himself, his cock thick and already showing a drop of pre-cum at its tip. He reaches down, guides himself to me, and presses forward in one smooth, claiming stroke—deep, slow, and perfect—filling me until our bodies lock together like a seal, like a promise.

I cry out, nails digging into his back as my hips arch to meet his. He fills me with an exquisite stretch, slow at first, drawing every inch of sensation out like molten honey. Then he thrusts again—deeper, stronger—his hands gripping my hips as the rhythm builds into something primal, something wild. Every stroke is a declaration, every movement a promise, driving me higher, pushing me to the brink where breath dissolves into heat and thought vanishes into pleasure. My head falls back with a moan, surrendering to the delicious fire curling low and deep, rushing me toward the edge like a tide I can’t fight—and don’t want to.

“Ride me,” he growls against my throat.

He lifts me again—this time one powerful arm tucked under my thighs and the other braced at the small of my back—keeping me flush against him, still joined, still pulsing with the aftershock of that last thrust. He carries me to the bedroom with a rough grace, our mouths fused, my breath ragged against his neck. When we reach the bed, he drops onto it with a low groan, letting me straddle him fully, thighs wide around his hips, hair tumbling in waves over my shoulders.

I brace myself, palms splayed against the hard planes of his chest. I don’t wait for him to guide me. I rise, slow and deliberate, and sink down again, a whimper caught between pleasure and power escaping my lips. The drag of him inside me is blissfully deep, and as I find my rhythm—riding him with fierce intent—my body becomes a litany of control and carnal devotion.

He lets me take him, his gaze locked on the way I move—deliberate, sensual, fierce. My hands frame his chest for leverage, my thighs tighten around him, hips rocking with a rhythm that makes thought impossible. Every slow descent drags a low groan from deep in his chest, his fingers gripping my hips like a man holding on for dear life. My hair spills over my shoulders, a wild halo that brushes his skin as I lean forward, lips ghosting over his jaw, my breath warm and wicked. I move like I own every inch of him, like he's mine to devour, to ride, to love—and God, he is.

The rhythmic sound of our bodies colliding fills the quiet bedroom, a slow, primal percussion echoing against the walls. My back arches, my spine a perfect curve of tension and release as I move atop him, claiming each thrust with a breathless whimper. My hands fan across his chest for leverage, my thighs tightening around his hips with every descent. Gideon's grip on my waist is possessive, fingers digging into my flesh as he matches my rhythm, guiding me with reverent force. My head tips back, a flush blooming across my chest as I ride him harder, my moans low and wrecked, my movements nothing short of worship.

“You're mine, Maggie. Say it.”

I lean down, press my mouth to his ear. “Yours. Always. You're mine too.”

I shatter with his name on my lips, my body locking around him in a wave of slick, electric release that leaves me gasping. Gideon follows with a guttural roar muffled against my mouth, the sound raw and primal, his hips grinding up in desperate pulses as he empties into me, our bodies quaking through the last tremors of release. In the place where we forge and claim trust in fire, we cling to each other, undone together in a tangle of breath, sweat, and heat.

We collapse, sticky, breathless, tangled in each other.

“So,” I say, breathless but smug, “still think I can't lead?”

He chuckles against my skin. “You led me straight to sin, Cupcake.”

Neither of us moves for a long time. The cupcakes are forgotten, the frosting abandoned—but neither of us cares.

### CHAPTER 16

#### GIDEON

The scent of her still clings to me—vanilla, rich and familiar, threaded now with something untamed. It's like heat woven into silk, primal and unforgettable. I am seared with Maggie's essence, her voice echoing—“You're mine, too”—etched into my chest like a second heartbeat. It wasn't just sex. It never is. The way she takes me, owns me with her mouth, her fingers, her fire—it cracks something wide open inside me. Something ancient. Something raw. Something that howls her name with every breath I take.

I lie there for an hour after she falls asleep. My arm curves around her waist, fingers lightly tracing the edge of her hip like I'm memorizing her. Her body molds against mine, breath soft and steady, but I don't find sleep. I can't. Not with her scent still flooding my senses, not with the awareness of how different—how irreversible—everything has become. I feel the change blooming in her blood, can almost hear the echo of it in her pulse. The bond has taken root, deeper than anything I've known before. And Maggie—my mate, my fire—has taken root in me. She isn't just mine now. She's part of me. And the knowing of it pulses beneath my skin like a promise too big for words.

And God help me, it isn't her changing that scares me. It's what comes after. The quiet moments when she'll look at me and maybe realize she's made a mistake. That she could've chosen easier, safer, simpler. That loving me means chaos and scars and truths too heavy to carry. If she walks away, I'll live with the regret forever. But if she stays—if she loves me back—there'll be no armor left to hide behind. No more



pretending this is about duty or instinct or the timing of a mission gone sideways. It'll just be me, raw and exposed, the man beneath the soldier, hoping she'll choose me not out of fate, but out of fire. And that kind of hope? That terrifies me more than anything with teeth or claws ever could.

Because that kind of love isn't mission-grade or forged in combat. The worth of that kind of love isn't determined by your ability to withstand punishment or obey orders. It's surrender—open and visceral, the kind that turns you inside out and dares you to stay that way. It demands vulnerability, not strategy. No armor. No fallback plan. Just truth. And I've spent my entire adult life making sure nobody ever sees me without my metaphorical Kevlar. Letting Maggie see all the way in? That's more terrifying than walking into enemy fire without backup.

I rise from the bed with careful slowness, lingering for one last look at her. The sheet clings to the curve of her bare back, her hair tousled across the pillow, one hand reaching across the mattress like she's searched for me in sleep. It tugs something deep inside me—tender and raw and rooted in something more than instinct. I want to stay. To crawl back in beside her, wrap my arms around her and forget for just one more hour that the world outside our bed still burns.

But the duty runs louder, deeper—etched into my bones long before fate ever whispered Maggie's name. I scribble a quick note, my handwriting less controlled than usual:

Gage's inside. Dalton is watching the block. I'll be back. You're safe.

I set it on her nightstand, anchor it with the pen she always uses to correct invoices, then bend low, lips brushing her temple. "Sleep. I've got you," I murmur, my voice no more than a rasp carried on breath and promise.

I need to drive. Not far—just enough to put distance between myself and the all-

consuming gravity of Maggie. Not that distance dulls her. She's in my skin, my bloodstream, my bones. The loft has become saturated—thick with the memory of her bare body arched against mine, the sound of her voice like honey poured over a growl. She's taken me, claimed me, left me trembling with the sharp, stunning reality of belonging. And when she whispered, You're mine, too, it didn't just knock me off-kilter. It carved into me—proof that someone sees me, wants me, not for the uniform or the strength, but for the quiet beneath all that steel. That's what scares me. Because now that I have it, I can't stop needing it. And needing her? That's a vulnerability no amount of training has ever prepared me for.

The truck's tires thrum a low rhythm against the blacktop as I roll along the seawall, wind tearing across my skin, bracing and briny. The salt air does little to cool the wildfire crawling under my skin. Every breath only reminds me of her—her scent, her voice, the imprint of her body under my hands. Distance is supposed to help, to put space between need and impulse. Instead, it only amplifies the ache, making my knuckles tighten around the wheel. My instincts aren't quiet. They're roaring, primal and possessive, demanding I turn back, haul her against me, and make damn sure she never forgets who she belongs to. And worse—who I belong to now.

Ragged grasses and a whisper of salt-heavy wind surround a windswept slab of concrete that juts out toward the sea like the edge of the world; the lookout point remains deserted. I roll to a slow stop; the headlights catching a flicker of sea spray before I cut the engine. Silence floods in, thick and expectant. Above, the moon hangs full and merciless, casting a glow so bright it turns the ocean into a roiling expanse of molten silver, broken only by the jagged rise of black rocks and the restless hiss of tide against shore. It's a place for confessions—quiet, wild ones whispered to the dark.

I don't summon the wolf—not tonight. It's not that kind of need. The animal presence inside me is already awake, prowling just beneath my skin, restless and keyed-up. Not because it needs freedom, but because it's focused entirely on Maggie. Her

safety. Her scent. That unmistakable pull of belonging. It's instinct sharpened to a blade, a territorial compulsion that vibrates through every muscle and tendon. Not freedom. Possession. Protection. That soul-deep loyalty only my kind knows, fierce and ancient and absolute.

But it isn't just the need to protect that has me bracing both hands on the steering wheel like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to the moment. It's the raw ache of something deeper—something with roots and claws and no off switch. Love, not the clean kind that looks good on paper, but the feral kind that tangles around your ribs and refuses to let go. It slowly, then suddenly, overtakes me, etching itself into my bones. And it isn't just love for Maggie—it's the terrifying realization that I need her. That she sees past the soldier, past the control, and loves what she finds. That she can strip me bare with a look and make me want to be undone. And that? That kind of surrender? It's more dangerous than any enemy I've ever faced.

"You look like hell," Kari drawls, her boots crunching against the gravel with a dramatic lack of stealth that's probably on purpose. "You brooding, or just rehearsing your tortured hero monologue?"

I don't flinch, but I do grin and continue to stare out at the ocean. "When did you get so sneaky?"

"I was born sneaky, and when I'm checking on my big brother after he marks my best friend for life, I'm especially sneaky."

I drag a hand down my face. "She should hate me."

Kari gets in the truck, sitting beside me with her arms folded. "But she doesn't. Because you're not an idiot. Well. Not entirely... at least not most of the time."

I glance at her, eyes shadowed and serious. "I've loved her for years, Kari. Since

before I even had words for what it meant. I just... I didn't think I could keep her. That I'd ruin her."

Kari's expression softens. "You're not scared of losing her. You're scared she'll finally see how much she's always meant to you—and hold you to it."

I look down at my hands. Calloused. Strong. Capable of building and breaking in equal measure. "I'd give her everything."

"Then maybe stop acting like you don't deserve it."

We sit in silence for a long moment until my phone buzzes against my thigh. I pull it out, thumb the screen, and read the message from Gage:

They're moving tonight. The rogue shifter pack, Granger-affiliated. Warehouse grid near the docks.

I read it twice, the message burning a hole in my gut, then drag a hand down my jaw, clenching it tight as I stare out at the endless churn of waves below. The wind slaps cold against my face, but it doesn't cool the heat rising in my chest—heat that smells like blood, betrayal, and the promise of a fight that's just become personal.

"Trouble?" Kari asks, watching me carefully.

"Yeah," I say, voice low. "Gage just texted—they're coming in tonight. We've got a location." I straighten, my focus snapping back into place. "I'll get the team and recon with Maggie. We need to get you to safety."

"Why does Maggie get to recon, and I get shuffled off to 'safety?'"

"Because she is my mate, and you are still my little sister."

Kari snorts as I hang up a call with Deacon, who's just confirmed Gage is en route to her location. "What, you're sending me a chaperone now?" she says, arching an eyebrow with theatrical indignation. "You do realize I'm perfectly capable of handling myself—and that I once stabbed a guy with my favorite pen at a signing, right?"

\* \* \*

Back at the loft, Maggie's asleep on her side of the bed, the sheet tangled around her legs, her hair a chaotic halo of blonde waves across the pillow. I kneel beside her, just watching for a long minute, taking in the rise and fall of her breath, the soft crease between her eyebrows. Even in sleep, she never really lets go.

I brush a curl from her temple, fingers trailing down to her neck where the mark pulses steady and sure.

"I didn't fall for the wolf," I whisper against her skin. "I fell for the fire."

My phone buzzes.

Gage: Kari is safe. Two targets confirmed. You and M take the east dock. Dalton will meet you at the pier at midnight.

I stand, already moving, already switching gears. I leave her a note, but she's already awake by the time I grab my gear.

"We going hunting?" she asks, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

I hesitate. "I was going to let you sleep."

She stands, crosses the room, and starts tugging on her clothes with a glare that dares

me to argue. “Oh yeah, because that’ll go well. Lock me in a tower and I’ll just burn the place down. Or pick the lock. Or bribe Dalton with baked goods until he lets me out. Either way, I’m not staying behind.”

She has a point.

We move through the shadows together, just the two of us. I lead the way, with Maggie close behind. We walk silently in the sand along the dock’s edge, scenting the wind as we do.

“Anything?” I ask.

She inhales slowly. “Sweet. Rust. Blood. And... mildew?”

I grin. “Old fishing trawler two slips over. But that blood scent? That’s real.”

We creep closer, following the scent trail until it leads us straight to the rusted door of a shipping container. Maggie presses a hand to the metal, then nods.

“Someone was here recently.”

I look at her, pride flaring in my chest. “You nailed it.”

She grins. “Told you I’m a quick study.”

I step close, voice dropping. “You’re more than that, Cupcake. You’re dangerous.”

She turns her head, meeting my gaze dead-on. “Then maybe you better quit calling me Cupcake.”

“Never happen.”

### CHAPTER 17

#### MAGGIE

The warehouse reeks of salt, rust, and old betrayal—like the air itself remembers every secret whispered between its decaying walls. The scent wraps around my senses the moment I step inside, dragging feelings and instincts to the surface in equal measure. It's not just the tang of sea and metal—it's something deeper, more corrupted, like the rot of long-buried lies finally exhaling into the open.

I step over a coil of rope near the entry, my flashlight casting long, wavering beams across the floor as I follow Gideon deeper into the warehouse's guts. The corrugated metal walls moan with each gust of wind, like the place itself is bracing for what's coming. Gideon moves with coiled grace—silent, watchful, lethal. There's a weight to him tonight, a sense of focused violence barely leashed. But I don't flinch. I'm not just a witness to his world. I'm part of it—fang or no fang, claws or not. I won't be left behind.

“Back corner,” he murmurs, his voice barely more than a vibration in the heavy air, chin tilting toward a shadowed recess where dust floats in slats of moonlight like suspended ash.

I follow the scent trail with a certainty that startles even me. Every breath brings a fresh wave of sensory clarity—the tang of rusted metal, the old motor oil seeping into concrete, even the faint trace of something chemical beneath the dust. The world around me vibrates at a different frequency now. My eyes lock on the trail as it curves behind a stack of shipping pallets, the air humming with the copper-bright

buzz of purpose. A stained blue tarp sags over a pile of crates, its hem fluttering faintly in the breeze like it's breathing. I don't hesitate. Jaw set, I grab the tarp and peel it back in one swift movement. Gideon is beside me in an instant, and together we pry open the top crate, the crowbar groaning against the nails as secrets wait in the dark beneath the lid.

What we find looks mundane at first: boxes labeled as restaurant inventory—flour, sugar, yeast. But my senses, sharpened and strange, catch something wrong. Leaning in with slightly flared nostrils, I discover someone has tampered with the bags. Not torn—sliced. Too neat, too clean. Each one resealed with tape as if no one would ever look closer. I reach in, pushing aside the top layer of decoy goods. My hand brushes something stiffer, papery. Beneath the baking supplies lies a row of manila envelopes, the edges worn and labeled in block script. They're not just hidden—they're buried like a secret someone's trying very hard to forget.

Gideon pulls one free, flips it open, and lets out a low whistle. "Shipping manifests," he mutters. "Dozens of them. Nothing with the Granger name, but the LLCs match what Deacon flagged in the shell company sweep. They've been laundering everything through fake restaurant orders—dry goods, perishables, even fake invoice trails." He passes one to me. "See the delivery addresses? Most of them are closed businesses. Half the others are fronts. This is how they've been moving product and money unnoticed for years."

I lean in, fingers trailing over the meticulous, too-perfect rows of deliveries. "Food routes," I murmur. "Smart. Quiet. Nobody questions a bakery truck or a produce shipment—especially not here, where half the traffic smells like shrimp and diesel." My gaze flicks to Gideon, sharp and knowing. "They used the smell of normal to hide rot. It's almost elegant in a disgusting way."

"Come here," he says, beckoning me to the next crate like he already knows what's inside.



He wedges the crowbar under the lid and pries it open with a metallic groan. What spills out isn't inventory or supplies—it's evidence. Stacks of bank logs, wire transfer records, notarized land deeds. Each document practically glows with implication. The paper edges curl from time and secrecy. I step closer, my stomach flipping at the weight of what we've uncovered. This isn't just shady business. This is infrastructure—an empire built on fraud, coercion, and blood money, mapped out across state lines in ink and cold precision.

I exhale hard, holding up the folder between us. My voice, though quiet, cuts through the tension like a wire pulled tight. "This isn't just a breadcrumb trail, Gideon—this is a blueprint. Land grabs, forged invoices, shell companies strung together like pearls on a noose. It's not just evidence. It's a kill shot. We could bury the Grangers with this."

He nods, but his gaze lingers on the crates with a frown that pulls tight at the edges of his mouth. His eyes flick back to the exit, as if expecting ghosts to claw through it. Years and secrets burden him like sandbags, and despite his silence, I see his unconvinced expression regarding the plan's efficacy and propriety. Not yet.

"We need to go public," I say, voice firm. "Leak it to the press. Law enforcement. Someone outside our circle. If we hold this, we become the weak point."

Gideon closes the lid with more force than necessary. "First, there is no 'our circle;' second, the Rangers are 'law enforcement;' third, I want to take down the lot of them, not just the ones we could snare with this information; and last, but certainly not least, I don't want you exposed. If the Grangers know you're part of this, they won't just retaliate. They'll make an example of you."

I step in close, hands on his chest. "You can't protect me by keeping me hidden. Not anymore. You said it yourself, I'm in their way. Intimidation and sabotage haven't worked, so they'll up the ante. Besides, you bit me, remember? I'm in this. With

you.”

His jaw works, eyes dark with conflict. But after a beat, he nods. “Fine. We leak enough to stir the fire—not enough to blow the lid. And we leave a trail. Something Chas can follow.”

“Like bait?”

“Exactly.”

\* \* \*

The trap is set by midnight. It’s as if the air all around us is holding its breath.

I crouch in the steel rafters of the warehouse, tucked between two girders, my pulse a steady roar in my ears. The metal beneath my feet is the kind of surface that makes me hyperaware of every movement. Far below, the bait document—an artfully forged purchase ledger peppered with just enough truth to tempt a greedy bastard—rests atop an open crate like low-hanging fruit. The whole warehouse shimmers in moonlight, filtered through dirt-streaked skylights, casting everything in a faint silver glow. The stillness isn’t peaceful—it’s taut, like breath held too long. It doesn’t feel like anticipation. It feels like provocation.

Gideon crouches in the shadows with Dalton and Gage, their forms nearly invisible in the warehouse gloom. With coiled muscles, measured breaths, and scanning eyes, they wait in the darkness for the signal to strike. No transformation tonight. No fur, no claws. This isn’t a battle for dominance. It’s a takedown—quiet, efficient, surgical. The kind of operation that relies on skill and strategy, not brute force or supernatural advantage. Still, the energy between them is feral, a low thrum of violence held on a razor’s edge.

Then—headlights. A van barrels around the corner and screeches to a halt outside the loading bay. The doors fly open, and six men jump out, armed and fast-moving, every one of them dressed in tactical black like they're auditioning for a bad heist film. But it's the figure at the front who stops me cold.

Chas.

Leaner than I remember. Meaner, too. Gone is the cocky swagger he wore like cologne back when he was just another poor decision. Now, he moves with lethal precision, barking orders like a man who believes in his authority. His hand sweeps out, directing two of the mercenaries forward. They run with military discipline, crouching low as they dash toward the crates—one of them carrying what looks like a pack of C-4.

They're here to erase every trace—to torch the evidence, rewrite the narrative, and silence the truth before it can roar into the light. The Grangers haven't come to steal or intimidate this time. They've come to end it. Permanently.

I tighten my grip on the pipe beside me, heart slamming against my ribs like a war drum. The cold metal grounds me, anchors me in the storm of adrenaline and fury that surges through my veins. This is the line in the sand. Not just for Gideon, Dalton, or Gage—but for me. Others have underestimated, overlooked, and forced me to swallow my rage countless times. I'm not here as bait; I'm here to help end this. And the moment my eyes lock on Chas, every muscle in my body coils like a spring pulled tight. This is it. My reckoning. My war.

Below, Gideon gives a silent hand signal. Dalton peels left. Gage takes the far flank, and then... all hell breaks loose.

Steel clashes against concrete. The sharp clang of metal meets the raw thud of bodies as the warehouse erupts into chaos. Gage lunges first, a blur of motion, slamming into

the nearest merc with a punishing shoulder tackle that knocks the man clean off his feet. The merc hits the ground with a groan, limbs scrambling for traction before Gage's elbow puts him down for good.

Dalton flows in from the left—fast, surgical. He ducks low, spins, and cuts the legs out from under an attacker with a sweeping kick that sends the man airborne for a heartbeat before crashing down hard. Without hesitation, Dalton follows through, slamming a knee into the man's chest with a thud that rattles nearby crates. No wasted motion. Just brutal precision—the kind that comes from years of doing this exact thing and always walking away.

And Gideon—Gideon is ferocity in motion. He fights like the storm he carries inside him, a brutal cadence of fists and footwork, each movement honed and relentless. His strikes are silent declarations of fury, and his blocks, instinctual ripostes sharpened by years of violence. One merc takes a straight punch that cracks bone and sends him sprawling; another flies back from a ruthless kick, his breath knocked out in a strangled grunt. Gideon doesn't hesitate. He doesn't blink. His eyes are flat with lethal purpose, his face unreadable. Power radiates from him with every impact, and with each takedown, the balance of the fight bends in our favor—like even the shadows know who the predator is.

Chas doesn't flinch. He strides toward the crates, his gaze narrowing as he spots the forged document lying atop the open ledger. A slow grin spreads across his face, feral and mean. "Idiots left a treasure map," he mutters, the words laced with disdain, his fingers twitching like he can already feel the cash.

He crouches, reaching for the ledger without a second thought, so focused he doesn't notice the hush sweeping across the warehouse like a held breath. The air thickens, electric with warning, each molecule tinged with a hush that prickles against Chas' skin. It's not just quiet—it's expectant, alive with the kind of silence that precedes something irreversible. Like the building itself knows what's about to happen before

he does.

I ease my stance, adjusting my position for a better view—and the old beam beneath me groans in protest. Chas' head snaps up, eyes narrowing as he locks onto the source of the sound.

“Well, well,” he sneers. “It seems the little baker girl grew teeth.”

He pulls a knife and pivots toward Gage, who's just gone down hard against a steel beam. I don't think. I launch myself off the rafter, muscles coiling and releasing all in one instinctive surge. My landing isn't elegant—I hit hard, knees jarring—but it's enough. I slam into Chas, the bone of my elbow catching his jaw with a sickening crack. He reels back, dazed, and I don't let up. A savage knee to his ribs, the thud of impact vibrating up my spine, then my fist to his throat—quick, brutal, unrelenting.

He stumbles, choking, and still I come at him. No claws. No fangs. Just the fury of a woman who's borne the weight of too many secrets and refuses to break. My strikes are fast, deliberate—rage with a purpose. This isn't wild instinct; this is a kind of power that has been earned, sharpened by loss and forged in survival. My fury isn't borrowed from the wolf—it's my own. Blazing. Controlled. Final.

He lunges, catches my arm, and twists—but I plant my feet, yank free with a sharp grunt, pivot on my heel, and drive his head hard against the steel beam. The crack of impact echoes through the rafters. His knees buckle, eyes roll back as he crumples to the ground, unconscious, before he hits the floor.

Silence reigns.

I stand over Chas, chest heaving, knuckles scraped and raw. The rush in my ears is deafening, a low thunder that pulses with each heartbeat. I don't shake. Don't flinch. The beast within me stirs but stays buried—watchful, respectful. My instincts don't

surge with the need to become something else; they ground me in the heat of what I already am. Human. Determined. Unyielding. This isn't about the wolf. This is about me. My fury. My reckoning. My victory.

Gideon emerges from the shadows, his expression carved from stone. Blood streaks his knuckles and smears across his forearm, a visceral echo of the chaos that's just unfolded. His eyes lock first on Chas—crumpled, groaning—and then slide to me, lingering. There's something electric in his stare, a flash of shock followed by raw pride. His jaw ticks once, a pulse of restrained emotion beneath the surface. Without a word, he takes in the sight of me—bruised, defiant, standing tall over the man who once made me feel small. I did this. On my own terms. And I can sense his wolf, even buried beneath the surface, roars with approval.

“You didn't shift,” he says softly.

“Didn't need to,” I reply, voice steady. “Sometimes human is enough.”

His eyes burn with something fierce and deep—pride, relief, and something older, more elemental. Reverence, maybe. A recognition of everything I am and everything I've claimed tonight. He doesn't argue, doesn't deflect. Just steps in, slow and sure, his hand finding the back of my neck. His palm is warm, fingers splayed with deliberate tenderness as he draws me close, resting his forehead against mine like a vow sealed in silence.

“You're mine,” he murmurs.

The corners of my mouth curl upward. “Damn right I am.”

And beneath our feet, the empire the Grangers have built begins to crumble—one forged invoice and broken jaw at a time. But in the rafters, the echo of my last strike still lingers, humming through the metal bones of the warehouse like a war drum that

hasn't stopped beating. Chas is down, but the war isn't over. Not yet. Somewhere out there, the rest of the Granger rot still festers, and my fire? It's just getting started.

### CHAPTER 18

#### GIDEON

The air inside the bait shop clings like old smoke and sea rot—thick, stale, with a trace of rust that scrapes at the lungs. Paint peels from the walls in curling strips, and the exposed beams above sag under years of salt and silence. I stand in the center, arms crossed, my stance loose but loaded, like a spring coiled beneath still water. My eyes lock on the man tied to the chair in front of me, gaze steady and cold.

Chas Warren looks worse than he did a few hours ago. His skin's gone waxy, sickly pale beneath a sheen of sweat, and his once-pristine polo shirt clings to his frame like damp tissue—wrinkled, stained, and darkened at the collar and underarms. The zip ties around his wrists bite deep, the skin there inflamed, swollen, bruising to a sickly purple. He shifts in his seat with the twitchy movements of a man trying not to unravel but failing, anyway. The longer he sits there, the more the carefully curated mask of calm peels away—his veneer of control cracking, piece by piece, like old paint blistering under a blowtorch. There's desperation behind his eyes now, the kind that doesn't just hint of guilt—it screams it.

I don't speak at first. I don't have to. The silence stretches between us, thick and deliberate, like smoke from a fire we haven't fully extinguished. It winds through the bait shop's rafters and seems to wrap around Chas' already fraying nerves, smothering the illusion of control he clings to. With each passing second, an invisible wire tightens the tension, squeezing breath and bluster from the man in the chair until only sweat, twitching fingers, and crumbling pretense remain. He sits straighter, tries to blink away the unease—but I see it. The way his throat bobs. The way his jaw



works overtime trying to bite back fear. Silence has done more damage than fists ever could.

Deacon leans against the opposite wall, flipping through a manila folder with the detached ease of a man who's seen worse and expects no surprises. "Financials are all there," he says, his tone dry. "Shell accounts, offshore wire transfers, and enough falsified documents to bury a grand jury. That marina property? Purchased through a dummy corporation that doesn't even have a working phone number. The surf shop? Pressured with fake code violations until the owner caved. And Maggie's bakery? That was on the Granger hit list—scheduled for acquisition under eminent domain until someone got bold with sabotage. Too bold. Left a trail."

Chas doesn't react. Not in any way most people would. But I catch the change—the faint tensing of his shoulders, the way his nostrils flare like he's caught a scent he can't outrun. It's the reaction of a man who gambled on bravado and is just now realizing the pot he wagered on won't save him. He tries to keep the rest of his body still, tries to hold his expression flat, but the micro-tells give him away. His fingers curl tighter, white-knuckled, and his gaze flickers—not in confidence, but in calculation. The kind of look a cornered animal gives right before it turns feral. The walls are closing in, and now he can feel the air thinning.

I step forward with the slow, deliberate grace of a predator closing in—measured, grounded, each step an unspoken warning. My boots thud softly against the worn wood floor, a rhythm that echoes like a countdown. Shoulders squared, spine straight, my entire presence narrows into something colder, harder. Controlled, yes. But barely. There's heat simmering under the surface—something old and dangerous—and every inch I close between us presses that weight tighter into the room.

"You knew what you were doing when you took the contract," I say, voice even. "You knew what the Grangers were planning. You targeted her because she wasn't

one of us. Because she was human.”

Chas’ eyes flick toward Maggie. She sits on an old wooden crate in the room’s corner, her arms folded, posture deceptively relaxed. But her stillness isn’t passive—it radiates quiet authority. Her expression’s unreadable, but her eyes pin him in place like a specimen under glass. She doesn’t say a word. Doesn’t need to. Her silence coils tight, made of judgment and steel. I see the way it lands—hard and sudden. Chas stiffens, like something heavy just slammed into his chest, like he can’t draw a full breath. It shakes him more than any threat I could’ve ever thrown his way.

He squirms in his seat, trying to find a new angle, but the zip ties hold fast, biting deeper into his swollen wrists. His jaw clenches so tight the muscles twitch under his skin, and a bead of sweat rolls down his temple. The veneer’s cracking—he knows it, and so do we.

“What’s the endgame, Chas? What kind of name is that for a wolf, anyway?” I ask. “Are the Grangers planning to buy the whole damn coastline? Burn anyone who gets in the way?”

Still, silence.

But it’s not the silence of defiance anymore—it’s thinner, reedy, the kind of quiet that comes when words can’t compete with the freight train of realization. Chas’ breathing changes, faster now, more ragged, like each inhale scrapes past a weight in his chest. His knee bounces once before it stills. His fingers twitch again, subtly, then more obviously, betraying the storm starting to churn beneath the remains of his brittle exterior. The crack isn’t just showing now—it’s spreading, webbing out from the center of his calm like a windshield spidering after the first hard impact.

He glances up—but not at me. At Maggie. And when his eyes land on her, the last mask he wears begins to buckle. Because she’s not afraid. Because she’s still

standing. Because he wasn't supposed to lose to someone like her.

Chas twitches—a subtle, involuntary jerk of muscle along his shoulder, like a man realizing the temperature of the room has changed but refusing to name the cold settling in. His eyes dart briefly toward the warped floorboards, jaw flexing hard, lips pinched into a tight line as if biting back the next stray thought. His knee bounces again, the motion aborted halfway through as though he remembers he's being watched. But it's too late. The tell has shown. He's fraying, and the fray is beginning to burn.

The twitch isn't much—a flick of his fingers, a flex of his bound wrists against the zip ties that hold him—but I see it. Not just defiance anymore. Frustration. Panic. The kind of jittery, edge-fraying fear that creeps in when confidence starts to rot. Sweat gathers at Chas' temples, and he blinks rapidly, jaw grinding like he's chewing on regret and swallowing down whatever scraps of control he has left.

His gaze skates back to Maggie. It doesn't linger—he can't seem to hold it. But the flicker is enough. I catch the stutter of his breath, the way his pupils flare just a little wider. It's like her presence rattles him. Not just because she remains standing when she should be buried, but because her sharp, steady gaze shows she has already analyzed the situation and found him wanting. There's no fragility in her presence, no crack to exploit. Just coiled intelligence and quiet confidence, the kind that makes predators hesitate and gamblers fold. Chas blinks fast and looks away, but the damage is done. He's shaken. And she hasn't even spoken.

Chas laughs, but it cracks down the center, fraying at the edges. “You think this ends with me giving you what you want? That the Grangers won't just rebuild somewhere else?”

Maggie rises from the crate with a slow, deliberate precision that sends a ripple through the stale air of the bait shop. She doesn't rush—she prowls, each step

measured, her feet brushing the weathered floorboards as if testing the ground before claiming it. There's a newfound command in the way she moves, like her bones have learned a different rhythm, her instincts coaxed closer to the surface with every breath. Her eyes never leave Chas. When she finally stops, standing only a few feet from him, the weight of her silence hits harder than any accusation. Chas flinches—just barely—but it's enough. He's already unraveling, and now she's the one pulling the thread.

“No,” she says softly. “I think it ends with you realizing you already lost.”

His jaw ticks. His eyes jump back to me, then to Deacon, flicking with the nervous energy of a man whose bravado is coming apart thread by thread. He opens his mouth like he means to deliver some cutting retort—maybe a last jab—but nothing comes. Just a harsh exhale through his nose, ragged and thin. He slumps a fraction lower in the chair, his body no longer holding the pretense of confidence. The swagger, once so ingrained it clung like armor, begins to flake off in strips, brittle and hollow. The shine in his eyes dims, replaced by something rawer. And I see it then—what I've been waiting for. The tipping point. He's beginning to buckle beneath the weight of his own facade.

He's coming apart—and he knows it. The confidence he's wrapped around himself like armor has thinned to gauze, and every second under Maggie's unwavering stare strips another layer away. His pulse thuds visibly in his neck, each beat a countdown. The man is running out of thread, and everyone in the room can see the seams starting to split.

Deacon doesn't move, but his tone drops a notch, quiet and certain. “We've got a file headed to the FBI right now. Signed statements. Encrypted audio. Shell company transfers. You know what that means, don't you?”

Chas finally looks up. “If I talk, I'm dead.”

“You don’t talk, you’re dead slower,” I say flatly.

His laugh is bitter, a rasp more than a sound. “You think I’m scared of you?”

“No,” I say, stepping in close, boots scuffing the old boards. “I don’t think you’re smart enough to be afraid of me. I think you’re scared of what happens when the Grangers realize you couldn’t handle one human woman and a bakery.”

That hits. He flinches—a sharp, involuntary jerk that betrays the split-second crack in his composure. His shoulders twitch, mouth flattening into a grim line as if he can will the reaction away. But it’s too late. Everyone’s seen it. His control—what little remains—is slipping through his fingers, one flinch at a time.

Maggie tilts her head, voice razor-sharp. “Sheila and Conrad Granger. They’re the ones pulling the strings.”

He doesn’t answer. His lips part, then shut again, as if the words are there, just beyond reach—but he can’t will them out. His gaze flicks between the folder in Deacon’s hand and the jagged steel calm in Maggie’s eyes, and for a split second, he looks like a man standing on the edge of a cliff, knowing the fall is inevitable. A tremor passes through his shoulders. Not a quake, not yet—but the prelude to one. Even so, he says nothing. But in that silence, everything spills out. The guilt. The fear. The dawning realization that his empire, his immunity, has already crumbled. That silence? It’s not defiance. It’s the sound of a man coming undone under the weight of his own ruin.

“You helped them with fake credentials. You intimidated property owners. You sabotaged a business whose owner refused to sell. How far does it go, Warren?”

He swallows hard; the motion jerking down his throat like broken glass. His eyes dart to the folder in Deacon’s hands—sharp, twitchy, full of calculation. But there’s panic

there too, barely concealed beneath the brittle sheen of his bravado. The kind of panic that bleeds through when instinct takes over and reason loses its grip. He can't stop looking at the folder, like it holds the verdict already written in ink he can't wash off. His lips part slightly, then press together again. No words. Just a quiet, sinking realization that the ground under him is gone—and he's falling fast.

"Far enough," he mutters. "There are call logs. Financials. You find those, you don't need me."

"But we have you," I say. "And your testimony gets you protection. Maybe even a deal."

There's a long pause. Then he gives a single jerky nod. It's not a gesture of confidence—it's a fracture in resolve, the kind of involuntary motion that slips past the last defenses of a man realizing the fight is no longer his. A twitch masquerading as agreement. But it's enough.

I exhale slowly, a long breath that rakes through my chest like gravel. The air in the bait shop doesn't clear—it just settles, still dense with adrenaline and old smoke—but the moment cracks open enough to breathe. No release. Not yet. But the beginning of it. The weight hasn't vanished. It's only shifted, from anticipation to consequence, from confrontation to aftermath. And though the silence lingers, its shape has changed—it's no longer the quiet before the storm. It's the pause before justice.

I turn to Deacon. "Get that file to Rush. Tell him it's time."

Deacon nods, his jaw tight, and steps outside with purposeful strides, already pulling his phone from his back pocket. Through the warped pane of the bait shop window, I see him pace once before bringing the phone to his ear, his expression sharpening as the call connects. The wind off the water rustles his jacket, and even through the glass, I see the change—focused, intent, every muscle tensed like a fuse has just been

lit. Inside, the air still buzzes with the crackling collapse of Chas' composure. Outside, justice is being set in motion.

I look back at Maggie. She hasn't moved, hasn't so much as blinked—but something in her presence has altered entirely. With quiet ferocity, she fixes her storm-bright eyes on Chas; not rage, not defiance, but an unnerving clarity that cuts deeper than any threat. There's no trembling, no tension. Just a stillness so precise it feels carved from steel. It's not fire burning in her—it's ice, hard and resolute. And it's that calm, unflinching certainty that makes Chas visibly recoil, as if he's just realized too late that the balance of power has turned—and she's the one holding the line.

### CHAPTER 19

#### MAGGIE

It starts with silence. Not the kind that demands attention, but the kind that lingers in the wake of truth. The kind that vibrates just under the skin, reverberating through muscle and breath like the last echo of a storm. It isn't loud—but it's final. And I feel it in my bones.

By the time we make it back to the bakery the following morning, the streets are already buzzing. News vans clog the curb like scavengers with press passes, and camera crews jockey for angles, their lenses pointed straight at Sea Salt—it's a patchwork monument to standing your ground, taped up in neon notes and shaky hearts, a mural of what it looks like when a community says, *We've got you.*

I drop my keys on the counter, my fingers trailing over the cool surface as my eyes lift toward the television mounted above the espresso bar. The screen is dark, reflecting the morning light through the front windows like a mirror. Gideon comes up behind me, close enough that I can feel the quiet weight of him at my back before he moves. His arm reaches around my side—steady, deliberate—and he flicks the TV on with a click that feels far louder than it is. His palm lingers for a beat against my lower back, the pressure warm and grounding. A small thing. But it anchors me. Calms the buzz just under my skin.

The world has finally caught up with the truth—live, public, and broadcast in high definition. There's no spinning it, no walking it back. The Grangers aren't just exposed. They're finished. And this time, everyone sees it happen.



The footage loops on every screen in the bakery, each replay more surreal than the last. Sheila Granger, glittering in a silver gown, frozen mid-toast as officers move in—her smile still half-formed, the champagne flute never spilling a drop. She looks untouchable until the cuffs click shut. It's the fall of a queen caught in high-def, broadcast across morning news segments and late-night reaction reels. I stare at the image, not with glee, but with a still, sharp kind of satisfaction. Not triumph. Not vengeance. Just the quiet settling of something long overdue. The empire has cracked, and the entire world has seen it break wide open.

I stand behind the counter, arms folded, my eyes fixed on the muted television above the espresso machine. Around me, the staff hover in suspended animation—drinks half-poured, orders abandoned mid-swipe, phones held aloft like totems of disbelief. No one moves. The footage speaks louder than anything we could say.

Sheila Granger's arrest plays again—silver gown, tight smile, wrists bound in polished cuffs. The symbol of power dismantled frame by frame.

I take a slow sip of my coffee. It burns a little, and I welcome the heat. My voice cuts through the hush like a thread of steel. "It's not revenge," I say. "It's release."

And just like that, the spell breaks. A few murmurs rise. Someone exhales hard. But no one contradicts me. They don't need to. We all feel it—that shift in the air, the moment power changes hands. And it's not going back.

No one argues.

Gideon is at the back table, arms crossed, his attention locked on me instead of the screen. His expression is unreadable—jaw tight, eyes dark—but the weight of it settles low in my belly. That look always makes me feel too seen and too safe all at once. He doesn't speak. Just meets my gaze and gives a single, deliberate nod. No words. Just that. It's enough. More than enough. The kind of confirmation that

doesn't need to be said out loud to matter.

By the time the afternoon rush hits, the bakery looks like a parade has kissed it—and then it's been hugged by half the town. Locals come in waves, arms full of wildflowers, jars of homemade jam, and hand-lettered thank-you notes. Someone slipped hand-drawn cards through the mail slot; they also left a basket of still-warm tamales labeled Fuel for Warriors, and a few homemade brownies from the neighborhood kids. It's chaotic and sweet and utterly human, the kind of support that can't be bought or staged.

I press my palm to the glass, blinking hard. The love—messy, misspelled, impossibly earnest—hits me straight in the chest. I haven't gone looking for this. I haven't expected to find it.

I stand in the center of it all—dusty, tired, and held together by something steadier than adrenaline and deeper than relief. It isn't pride, exactly, or even triumph. It's the quiet conviction of a woman who has never needed rescuing—who built something strong and good with her own hands and refused to let fear or pressure steal it from her. I'm the woman who outlasted sabotage, who stared down power and didn't blink.

And the town? They heard the whispers—the sabotage, the threats, the pressure meant to scare me off. They know I didn't flinch. They rally—not because I was barely hanging on, but because I never stepped back. I stood my ground when it counted. I didn't sell out. I didn't bow. I held firm; flour on my hands and fire in my spine. And that—my grit, my refusal to fold—means everything.

This isn't about proving anything anymore. It's something steadier. More personal. It's about owning what I've fought for—this town, this bakery, this life shaped by choice and stubborn grit.. They aren't just witnesses to my fight—they're co-authors, tracing my line in their own uneven script.

Through sheer refusal to back down, I've drawn a line so bold the whole town has chosen to stand behind it. And now, they're with me. A community not just rooting for me, but rising with me.

"You got a visitor," Gideon says from behind me, voice low and threaded with something I can't quite identify.

He nods toward the front door, where a woman in a tailored gray suit stands just inside, tablet in hand, and a professional smile that says this isn't just a courtesy call. Fifteen minutes later, I find myself in the tiny back office that doubles as flour storage, a folded offer letter clutched in my flour-dusted fingers. The scent of yeast and warm vanilla still lingers in the air, grounding me in the familiar while the future changes beneath my feet.

Board seat on Business on the Strand Co-op. The proposal includes protective zoning to shield historic areas from predatory development, a commitment to local-first ordinances, and a meaningful say in shaping Galveston's future business policies. My name won't just sit under a menu anymore—it'll sit next to people shaping the city's next chapter. My signature will carry weight beyond buttercream and brioche.

"You're stunned," the woman says, amused.

"I bake cupcakes and swear at spreadsheets," I reply.

"Exactly. You're not one of them. That's why you matter."

I sign, my grip steady even as my pulse thrums in my ears. A little dazed, sure—but not uncertain. This isn't a decision made in haste. It's a line in the sand. A declaration. My name, penned in looping ink at the bottom of the page, feels like a battle cry in cursive.

Later, after scrubbing down the bakery, rearranging the flowers, and gently smoothing the last sticky note against the window, Gideon and I step out into the fading light. The warm hush of twilight wraps around us like a promise. We don't talk much; we don't have to. His hand brushes mine once, then again. The third time, I curl my fingers through his like it's instinct. It seems we were always destined to walk this way together.

Back at the loft, the wind skims off the Gulf like a secret, salty and warm against my skin. I reach for Gideon's hand as we step out onto the rooftop where it all began—where a kiss split open something big and raw and irreversible between us. The rooftop hasn't changed—same rusted chairs, same chipped railing, same view of the sea stretching dark and endless into the night. But we have.

The horizon pulses with shrimp boats moving like slow, steady constellations. Their lights blink through the humid dark, each flicker echoing across the water like Morse code. The night air holds the brine of salt and the trace of something electric—like the hush before thunder. It smells like seaweed and stories. I watch them from the rooftop, my breath syncing with the waves. It's the kind of view that doesn't ask questions—it just waits for you to answer. A living lullaby daring me to stop, to feel, to believe.

I pull a cupcake from the box I've hidden behind the HVAC unit, the icing still perfectly swirled, the single candle tucked gently into the top like a quiet dare. I strike a match, watching the flame flicker to life before shielding it with my hand from the breeze that curls across the rooftop. I turn to Gideon, holding it out like an offering, like a promise wrapped in sugar and spark.

“One cupcake. One candle. One ridiculously sentimental gesture,” I say, arching a brow, blowing out the candle as I step into his space. “Don't get used to it.”

Gideon arches an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching like he wants to tease

me but thinks better of it. He takes the cupcake, leans back against the railing with a casual kind of grace, and watches me like I'm the only thing in the world worth noticing.

I don't hesitate. I step between his legs, slow and sure, each movement deliberate. My fingers hook into his belt loop, drawing him just that little bit closer. My body brushes his, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off his skin, the solid weight of him grounding me in the quiet dark. I tilt my face up, my voice softer now, threaded with something that feels like both surrender and challenge.

He kisses me—slow, deep, reverent—like he has all the time in the world and nothing else he wants to do with it. The wind tugs at my hair, the scent of salt and cooling rooftop swirling around us. I lean in, letting the warmth of his mouth anchor me. His hands slide to my waist, firm and sure, holding me steady as mine slip under his shirt, fingers tracing the ridges of muscle like I'm learning him by touch. I smile against his lips. Because this—this is ours now. No more hiding, no more fear. Just this moment, just this man, just this love.

And then his phone buzzes. Deacon. One text:

Feds froze the last offshore account. We got them all.

I feel Gideon's breath stall against my cheek before he even speaks. He glances down at the screen, then angles it so I can see it too. The message's glow lights his face, casting hard shadows across his jaw—and just like that, the tension between us vanishes.

I reach up, brushing my fingers against his cheek. "That's it?"

His answering smile is razor sharp and deeply satisfied. "That's it. Every shell company, every bribe, every offshore funnel. Gone."

I let out a shaky breath, half-laugh, half-disbelief. “You sure?”

“Deacon doesn’t use words like ‘all’ lightly.”

I nod slowly, a grin spreading across my face. I reach for the cupcake still in his hand, pluck the candle out, and pop the entire thing into my mouth without ceremony. He stares at me, amused and a little awed, as I chew.

“Now it’s a celebration,” I say, licking a smear of frosting off my lip. “Tell me that wasn’t the most satisfying dessert of your life.”

Gideon’s eyes darken, his voice dropping low. “Still waiting for dessert.”

I laugh, flushed and fearless. “Then I suggest we move this party indoors, Ranger.”

The phone buzzes again—another message from Deacon: Confirmed. FBI’s launching the press conference tomorrow. You’ll want to watch.

Gideon clicks the screen off and looks at me, his expression sliding from primal satisfaction to something more intimate—something quieter, grounded in something deeper. It’s not victory in his eyes. It’s reverence. Like seeing me now, whole and unbroken after everything, humbles him in a way nothing else could.

“It’s done,” he says again, quieter this time.

And I nod, because I know it too. The storm has passed. But our story isn’t over.

Gideon exhales and looks down at me. “That sound?” he asks. I raise an eyebrow. “That’s the sound of a very expensive house of cards collapsing,” he says with a feral grin.

### GIDEON

The beach is quiet at midnight; the world hushed beneath a sky slicked with stars. Only the rhythmic whisper of waves meeting the shore, soft and ceaseless, like a lullaby drawn out by the sea itself. Galveston rarely sleeps—it pulses with life even in the deepest hours—but tonight, the beach feels changed. Not empty, not still. Just aware. As if it has borne witness to the collapse of something dark and heavy and now stands watch as something new takes root. The air holds its breath, reverent and expectant, cradling the edge of a beginning.

Maggie and I slip off our shoes and step onto the cool sand, walking hand-in-hand through the hush of midnight. Her fingers lace with mine, cool and steady, but her energy thrums with quiet confidence. She takes each step with grounding, deliberate movements, as if she belongs in this in-between place—where sky meets water, and something ancient whispers in the waves. The moon hangs swollen and bright above us, casting molten silver over her bare skin, and turning her hair into a tangle of stormlight and promise. She looks over at me; her smile soft and sure, edged with something new: peace.

“Care to go for a run?” she says.

“I can think of few things I’d rather do,” I say in a low, seductive growl.

We stop near the dunes, where the sand stretches pale and unbroken, shimmering under the moon’s watchful gaze. Maggie turns to me with a half-smile, the kind that dares me to look away—and promises I won’t want to. Slowly, deliberately, she reaches for the hem of her t-shirt and pulls it over her head, the fabric sliding upward

like a caress. The moonlight follows every inch of newly revealed skin, casting her in silver and shadow, soft and powerful all at once. When the shirt clears her head, she shakes out her hair—wild and free—and folds the shirt with casual care, placing it atop a flat rock with reverence, as though this undressing is a ritual shared only between us and the stars.

Piece by piece, she undresses—sliding off her jeans with a slow roll of her hips, then her underthings with the kind of grace that makes the night hold its breath. Her body is bare, not with shyness, but with purpose. She moves like a woman who has shed more than fabric—like she’s sloughing off fear and doubt with each layer. Lean and luminous in the moonlight, her figure is all shadowed curves and quiet command, shaped by strength and softened by survival. The breeze caresses her skin, and she welcomes it. There’s no shame in her stance, only fierce composure. No hesitation, just the undeniable presence of someone who has claimed every piece of herself—and is now letting me see it all.

I can’t move, can’t breathe. Watching her like that—with the moonlight painting her skin in soft silver and the sea breeze teasing strands of her hair loose—feels like witnessing something elemental and untouchable. She’s luminous, carved from shadow and starlight, a woman not trying to become anything but simply being everything. Power curls beneath her skin like a promise, her stance both unguarded and unshakable. It’s not just that she’s beautiful—though she is—it’s that she stands there fully seen, fully known, and wholly unafraid. And I want nothing more than to deserve to be beside her in this moment.

Awe prickles under my skin like static as I tug off my shirt, then unfasten my jeans with practiced ease, folding both garments with a reverence that mirrors the quiet intensity in my chest. Every movement feels deliberate, tethered to something sacred. My pulse thuds—not just from the hum of attraction that never truly dulls around her—but from something deeper, bone-deep. This moment isn’t about possession. It isn’t even about passion, though it simmers hot and constant. It’s about honoring what we’ve become together. Something wild. Something earned. Something



permanent.

She moves toward me, slow and sure, the soft pads of her feet whispering against the sand. Her gaze never leaves mine, bold and steady, and when she reaches me, her fingers slip into mine without hesitation. The contact is grounding, electric. Together, we step forward, letting the space between us widen only as much as necessary for the transformation to begin—the moment intimate and inevitable.

The mist comes fast, rising like breath from the belly of the earth. It curls around our ankles, not cold or damp like fog, but warm and electric, shot through with threads of gold and silver that shimmer like starlight caught in motion. The air pulses with it—an almost silent thrum, like a heartbeat too large for one body to hold. The scent of it is wild and grounding all at once, like pine smoke and rain-soaked stone, ancient and familiar. As the mist thickens, it seems to recognize us, folding around Maggie with a kind of reverence, brushing against her bare skin like a whisper of welcome. It climbs higher, tugging at the edges of what will be. Lightning flickers faintly inside it, veiled and playful, as thunder rolls far off like a drumbeat marking time. It doesn't feel like a warning. It feels like a promise. A reckoning of blood and bone. Like coming home.

Her wolf form stands tall beside me—radiant and wild. Her coat gleams like burnished gold, woven through with streaks of sunlight that dance with every shift of her body. The hues in her fur seem alive, flickering like firelight, casting a glow even under the moon's silver gaze. Her eyes—no longer just amber, but molten—shine with a fierce clarity that takes my breath. Intelligence burns in them, sharp and knowing. Pride. Power. Freedom. She doesn't just look like herself; she looks more. Transcendent. A creature born not of myth, but of memory and magic.

Beside her, my wolf stands steady—darker, more grounded. My coat ripples with charcoal and ash, my frame broad and unshakable. Together, we are contrast and complement, shadow and flame. We don't move at first. We don't need to. The bond between us hums like a live wire, a pulse exchanged through breath and silence. And

when we finally turn to the shoreline, it's not with urgency. It's with intent. Two wolves. One rhythm. A promise written into the night.

Then we run. Together, we surge forward as if the earth itself has whispered go . Our paws strike the sand in perfect rhythm, spraying fine grains into the air like stardust, the cool ocean breeze slicing through our fur as we race. This isn't survival. This isn't duty. It's something older, purer—the pure thrill of freedom. The tide roars beside us, whitecaps catching the moonlight, echoing our joy with each crashing wave. Our bodies stretch into motion, a blur of golden fire and shadowed steel, two wolves streaking down the shoreline, breathless, alive, and limitless. There is no destination, only the rhythm of our bond, the celebration of what we've survived—and who we've become. Nothing chases us. Nothing holds us. There is only this: the night, the sea, and everything ahead.

The surf laps at our heels, a steady rhythm to match the thunder of my heart. Above us, stars spin in their endless celestial dance, distant but radiant, like they're bearing witness. And between the earth and sky, there is her—my mate, my fire, the axis on which my world turns. Every part of my soul finds anchor in her presence. She runs beside me like she's always belonged to the wild, like the sea knows her name. There's no fear anymore. No duty. No past grief clawing at my spine. Just her. Wild and golden. And mine.

Eventually, we slow, breath coming hard and fast, hearts still drumming from the thrill of our run. The mist rolls in to meet us once more, curling around our legs with a sentient kind of grace, like it remembers our shapes and stories. It shimmers gold in the moonlight, soft as breath, alive with heat and memory. As we return to human form, the mist dissolves around us, leaving a whisper of warmth in its wake.

We collapse onto the blanket we brought, limbs tangled and skin cooling under the coastal breeze. Sand clings to our calves and forearms, tiny grains etched like stars against flesh. The surrounding air is thick with salt, the faint trace of ozone, and something more elusive—something that feels like magic not just in the air, but in

our blood.

The beach cradles us, quiet and endless, as if the sea itself has fallen into awe-struck silence. The tide moves with reverence, gentle and rhythmic, like a lullaby played in the key of breath and heartbeat. Above us, the stars blink into place one by one, a thousand tiny witnesses to the making of something sacred. Around us, the sand holds our shared heat, a cradle of warmth and wonder, the imprint of two souls newly written into the story of the earth. And within the hush, it is not silence we hear—but belonging, vast and certain.

Maggie turns onto her side, her skin still kissed with the memory of the mist and the salt-streaked wind. She lifts her fingers to her neck, brushing over the mark—no longer raw or searing, but something else entirely. It shimmers beneath her touch like liquid moonlight, no longer a scar but a promise etched into flesh. The sensation sends a pulse through her body, not pain, but recognition. Her breath catches in her throat, and when she speaks, it's barely more than a reverent whisper, shaped by awe and truth.

“I get it now.”

I look at her, my palm rising to cup her jaw. “I didn’t bite you because I had to. I did it because I couldn’t imagine a world where you weren’t mine.”

She blinks slowly, then leans forward and kisses me—soft at first, then deeper, lingering like she could pour everything she feels into that single moment. When we part, our breaths tangle, and she eases against me, curling into the steady thrum of my heartbeat. Her cheek rests over my heart, bare skin to bare skin, warm and alive beneath the open sky. The moon creeps higher, casting silver across our bodies, and the waves roll on in a rhythm that feels less like background and more like benediction.

“What happens now?” she asks. “Still worried about that noble brother’s code?”

I smile. “Nah. I say from now on, we write our own code.”

And under the rising moon, we do.

\* \* \*

Deacon

The woman at the bar doesn't belong here.

I knew it the second I walked in.

The Devil's Den is the kind of place where desperate men come to make bad decisions, and where worse men come to make sure those poor decisions turn into something permanent. A hole-in-the-wall dive sitting on the edge of the Texas border, it reeks of cheap whiskey, cigarette smoke, and violence waiting to happen.

And yet, there she is.

Perched on a cracked leather barstool, her shoulders squared like she's daring someone to look at her the wrong way. A whiskey glass sits untouched in front of her, and her gaze flicks around the room like she's memorizing faces, looking for something—or someone.

She's got trouble written all over her.

Not in the usual way, though. She's not a cartel princess slumming it in the dark corners of hell, and she's sure as hell not looking to pick up one of these lowlifes. She's dressed casually—dark jeans, a fitted jacket, and a ponytail that doesn't do a damn thing to hide the sharp edge of her jawline.

She doesn't belong here. And she knows it.

But she's not leaving.

I sip my beer, keeping my posture loose, casual, even as my gut tightens. Because I know who she is.

Sutton Blake.

Daughter of a decorated officer. Good girl with bad luck. Witness to something she shouldn't have seen.

She's also not supposed to be here.

We started tracking Hollister's last remaining enforcers weeks ago. The bastard might be dead, but his reach lingers, his men still moving in the shadows, covering their tracks, settling old debts. Sutton's name came up exactly once in our intel—just a blip in a report, a neighbor who noticed too much.

I was supposed to track her, make sure she didn't stick her nose in places it didn't belong. Keep her safe from a distance.

That plan is already going to shit.

Because here she is, parked in the middle of cartel territory, looking for a man who would snap her neck before she had time to scream.

I exhale through my nose, tapping my knuckles against the bottle in my hand. A slow beat. Calculating.

How the hell do I play this?

If I walk up to her and tell her to leave, she'll dig in deeper. I've seen the type—determined, guilt-ridden, too damn stubborn for their own good.

But if I let her stay?

I glance toward the back of the bar. A group of men sit huddled in a dark booth, their voices low, their body language tense. I don't need enhanced senses to know they're watching her, too.

I curse under my breath. Too late. She's already made an impression.

Sutton moves, pulling out her phone and typing something, then tucking it away. Her fingers tap against the bar, restless. She's waiting for something.

Or someone.

My jaw ticks. Time to move.

I push away from the bar, making my way toward her, keeping my steps measured, my approach calculated. I don't know what she's expecting, but she sure as hell isn't expecting me.

I lean in just enough to invade her space, just enough to make her stiffen. Good. That means she's paying attention.

"You're in the wrong bar, sweetheart," I murmur, my voice low enough that only she hears.

She turns her head slowly, her hazel eyes sharp, assessing. Not scared—curious.

"You don't even know what I'm looking for," she says, her tone even.

I let out a rough chuckle, shaking my head. "Doesn't matter. You're not gonna find it here."

Her lips curve into something that isn't quite a grin but isn't not one either. "You don't even know me."

I adjust my posture, letting her feel the heat of my presence, letting her understand that I'm not just some asshole at a bar.

"Oh, but I do." I tilt my head, letting my gaze flicker over her, slow, deliberate. "Sutton Blake. Good girl with a bad habit of getting into things that aren't her business."

Her breath hitches. Gotcha.

But she recovers fast. She narrows her eyes. "And who the hell are you?"

I grin. "I'm the guy who's going to keep you alive if you listen."

Her fingers flex on the bar. "And if I don't?"

I step even closer, my voice dropping into something darker, something final.

"Then, sweetheart, you're gonna get yourself killed."

She exhales slowly, but she doesn't look away and doesn't back down.

And damn it all to hell, I know right then and there—this woman is going to be a problem.

A big one.

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