







# The Alpha's Forced Plus-Size Mate (Silverfang Creek Wolves #3)

**Author:** *Layla Silver*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The evil Alpha kidnapped me and mate-marked my plus-size curves...

His pack needs new mates and babies to strengthen it.

But when the mate match ritual announces that I'm his new mate, I run. Not that he cares.

He catches me and makes me his prisoner...so he can make me his forced mate.

I'm the "normal" one. The bridesmaid. The bestie. I don't impress anyone.

Until the bad alpha sets his eyes on me and gets obsessed.

He monitors my every move and watches me sleep.

He studies my body in detail, unsettling me to the core.

Barefoot and afraid, I try to make a run for it, but his giant black wolf pins me to the ground.

Warmth glows in my belly, confusingly excited over being caught by him.

Desire flows through my body, achingly desperate for his control over me.

But when demonic influence licks at my curves, will he throw me away?

Or will the evil Alpha get even more obsessed with me?

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

I didn't usually break out the good whiskey on a weekday, but there was something heavy in the air that made me reach for the precious bottle on the top shelf. I poured Julian and myself two fingers of Pappy Van Winkle and carried the glasses out onto the back patio.

He looked up briefly when I handed him his drink, but it was clear something was weighing heavily on my old friend. I sat in the plastic chair beside him, kicking my feet up and getting comfortable. "What's on your mind, Julian?"

Julian was a tall, rugged, and tan man who could bench press a motorcycle, but the way he sat on my chair was small and defeated. "How did things get so fucked up?"

There wasn't a doubt in my mind what he was referencing—the pack. I took a sip and savored the smooth, oaky flavor that was a bit spicy in the end. "Don't act like you don't know. I should've done more." Before I took over as Alpha, I was never so pathetically self-deprecating, but now it comes to me like second nature. "I'm the pack leader. It's my fault."

"No, man, not just that." He ran a hand through his messy brown hair. "How did the pack get so small? We've always been on the edge, but now, it feels like we're on a razor-thin precipice, man. And I'm not sure if the next wind will send us toppling."

"We'll get some new mates," I said, "Start producing pups. We know the solution; it's just a matter of putting it into action."

Julian looked doubtful. "It's not going to be that simple."

“It's a start,” I argued, getting frustrated. “The pack is a disaster. No one has any sort of discipline. It's partially Dad's fault, but I'm not going to have any success turning things around if everyone keeps acting like assholes.”

“That's your problem right there,” he pointed out, taking a sip of his whiskey.

I frowned, sitting back. “What?”

“Everyone keeps acting like an asshole.” He took a sip. “That's your problem, and that's their problem. Your dad wasn't the perfect Alpha, but he was a badass. You need to take that specific page out of his book and crack down on some of the pack's bullshit. Plus—” Julian looked over at me but then scoffed. “Actually, never mind.”

As if that was going to work. “What, Julian? Spit it out.”

“You want everyone to get in the family mindset, start mating and having kids—well, you need to lead by example.” He shrugged and then took a big swig. “And I think that means getting yourself a mate and starting your own family.”

A mate. A wife. Someone to hold in my arms, to protect and to adore. Someone who would love me and stay by my side until the end. But that could never happen, not with what I am.

I stared into my drink, trying to swallow the painful lump in my throat. “I'm not worthy of a mate.”

Julian frowned at me, confused. “What?”

I slammed the rest of the glass and set it on the table. “Exactly what I said—I'm not worthy. We're losing numbers and slinging drugs as our main source of income. Plus, it's not like I've got any prospects lined up, either.”

What I didn't say was that I was cursed. I killed my mother simply by being born, and now I was cursed to be alone for the rest of my life. Julian didn't buy into my self-flagellation, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

My friend turned to me, no doubt to tell me all about the sort of woman I should take as a mate, but we were interrupted. One of the pack, a younger wolf named Ted, bursts through the patio door, one hand pressed against a bleeding shoulder wound.

“The demons,” he gasped. “They attacked. They're—they're here. For us.”

I didn't hesitate. I rushed outside, Julian right behind me, ready to defend my people. Pack headquarters was a bar in downtown Athens called The Howler, only a ten-minute drive from my house. It felt like the longest ten minutes of my life.

All thoughts of a mate, our pack numbers, and my curse fell to the wayside. It was time to kick some ass.

My truck squealed into the parking lot, right into the middle of the battle that was already raging. I crushed one demon under my tires before jumping out of the cab, grabbing the baseball bat I kept in the bed, and running into the fray.

Julian grabbed the only weapon available, a crowbar, from under the passenger seat and was right there with me. “Danny,” he shouted. “We've got this!”

“Stay together!” I yelled back. “Don't let them separate us!”

A demon lunged at Julian and missed, allowing him to smash his arm with the crowbar. Another went for me, and I took a swing, crushing his head. Julian and I fell into sync, a pattern we'd learned in battle training.

We made our way through the fight, taking down any demons who tried to come for

us. They were easy to spot—their skin had a grayish tint, and their eyes burned black. The ones we took out exploded, sending ash flying.

I was focused on protecting my pack. Julian and I were far from the only wolves here, and my appearance seemed to bolster the other fighter's spirits. It was a hell of a fight, though, and I found myself nearly overcome at a few points. Before things could get really ugly for us, one of the demons, possessing the body of a tall, stocky man, yelled to the others, “Retreat! What we came for isn't here!”

With that, the remaining demons, who were down to a few stragglers, rushed away with preternatural speed. One second, we were fighting, and the next, it was all over. Just like that.

Exhausted, I sank to my knees, breathing hard, my bloody face turned to the sky. Damn. I'm not nearly as strong as I once was against higher numbers. An Alpha is only as strong as his pack. My strength had bled away as our pack's population had dwindled, and I was just beginning to notice it. I have to do something about that. I have to make us strong again.

A shadow fell over my face, and I looked up into Julian's eyes. He looked just as bad as I did, but he offered me a hand, and I took it, rising to my feet. “What the hell was that about?”

“Hell, if I know,” I grunt, looking around at the carnage. There were still a few of my guys moaning on the ground, but most of them were well enough. I felt a surge of pride at their willingness to fight. But at the same time, there was a sense of guilt. If I was a better Alpha, this wouldn't have happened. We wouldn't have gotten caught off guard like this.

“We've got to do better. We've got to get some of these men mated or we're going to keep finding ourselves a step behind.”

Julian nodded in agreement, brushing some of the demon ash from his leather jacket.

“So, what now?”

I didn't get a chance to answer, which was fine with me, considering I didn't know exactly what to say anyway. The back door of the bar opened, and the bartender, a burly man with a handlebar mustache and a bald head, stepped out and called to the wolves in the parking lot. “I've got a message for the Alpha!”

Stepping forward, I raised my arm so he could see me better. “Right here, Johnny. What's going on? Besides—” I waved my hand to the disaster of the parking lot, “—the obvious.”

He didn't answer until I was close to him, ushering me into the darkened building and closing the door behind him. “Boss, I just got a call from a contact I have in the Silverfang Creek pack. They just held a mating ceremony, and one of ours was chosen as the mate for one of their wolves named Naomi Frazier.”

I scoffed. The Silverfangs—one of the more powerful packs in the east. Snotty and stuck up, they were everything the Red Canines weren't. “Are you sure?”

Johnny nodded.

“It's not a mistake?”

He shook his head. “I don't think so, Boss. My connection seemed really serious when I asked him. Said it was a pretty big deal.”

This made me frown, a thread of unease creeping in. A big deal? Mates in different packs weren't ideal, but it wasn't unheard of, either. Surely, our reputation hadn't fallen so far that being mated with one of our members was an issue. “Why is it a big

deal? Who did she match with?"

"Ah. Well. That's the thing." The bartender rubbed the back of his neck. "They said her petal read 'Daniel Turner'. It's you, Boss."

My vision blurred at the edges, and an odd buzzing filled my ears. "Say that again?"

"It's you, Danny. She's your mate."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“Wipe that sour look off your face.”

I turned to Whitney and scowled, “No. I feel sour. I have so much paperwork to do at the storage facility—”

The other she-wolf only sighed, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “Where’s your sense of adventure? What if you’re the only one getting a mate today?”

“As if,” I checked my phone for the time once more, biting the inside of my cheek in annoyance. “I’m going to go and check to see how much longer this thing will last. I’ll catch up with you at the end.”

Whitney had already lost interest in me and looked starry-eyed towards the cauldron where our Alpha’s mate and resident pack witch, Faye, stood, stirring her concoction. It almost made me laugh. Whitney, a demon-slaying specialist and certified badass, was still caught up in the so-called magic of the mating ritual. It almost made me feel silly for being so dismissive...but then again, Whitney was interesting, beautiful, and strong. I was—normal.

I had meant to move through the crowd a little and see if I could get an idea of how close Faye was to being finished, but the crowd began to stir before I could leave. It was nearly time.

Mating rituals were normally held on Friday or Saturday nights so everyone could drink and party to their heart's content. Having one on a Monday afternoon was strange, and I had every intention of skipping until the Alpha made it clear that every eligible wolf was expected to be there.

There is no mate in the world for me. I've already figured that out as I watched everyone else around me get married, settle down, have kids, and live perfect lives. Beautiful people, beautiful future.

But I was Normal Naomi. No one was interested in chubby, Normal Naomi. God forbid I was ever matched with a mate—it would ruin their lives to have to be paired with me.

Some might say I was being too hard on myself, but they hadn't ever walked in my shoes. I'd been the background character to everyone's main story, and there was no changing that.

I was a rule follower, though, so when the Alpha said to show up to the mating ritual, I showed up. Now, I was milling around on the outside of the crowd, waiting for the petals to rise to the surface and reveal the newly formed mate couples so I could go back to work.

The Silverfang Creek pack had always been home, but home was different for me than it was for most of the other members. I was around six months old when my so-called parents dropped me off with the pack doctor, and no one had heard even a whisper about them since.

Growing up in the pack's boarding school wasn't all bad, but it wasn't great for a young wolf, either. At first, I didn't feel all that different from the other kids, but it soon became clear that they had parents showing up for games, activities, and holidays. I spent many a December day with my nose pressed to the cold glass of a school window, watching the other kids be picked up to go home for Christmas. Meanwhile, I was left behind, alone besides the live-in teachers and nannies.

I was accepted as part of the pack but never found a permanent home. I spent 18 long years at that school before getting a job and moving out on my own, and my

memories of the place were confusing. There was comfort in them, remembering the warmth of my little bed and how sweet the women working there were to me, but there was also a feeling of isolation. Of abandonment. Of being allowed to exist, but never actually being wanted.

All the reminiscing wasn't doing me any good, so I swallowed it down and pulled my mind out of the past and locked it back onto the dreaded match ceremony.

I wasn't expecting anything exciting, so when I heard "Naomi Frazier," called out by the Alpha's mate, Faye, I was sure that I was hearing things at first. Faye, confused, called the name again, and then a third time, until Whitney grabbed me by the elbow and hissed, "Go on!"

The world felt like it was flipping upside down. No way. No way did I just get a mate. This wasn't my destiny; this wasn't in my future plans. For one brief moment, I was filled with joy that I didn't know was possible. I wouldn't be alone my entire life. I'd have someone to love me, just like I always wanted.

I squashed that joy down just as quickly as it popped up. Without even knowing who my mate is, there's no reason to be happy. My so-called mate is bound to be disappointed when they see me.

Pulling at my beige sweater, I swallowed and made my way through the crowd. They parted for me, many of them with their mouths hanging open. I could hear whispers of surprise, and they made me lower my head even more. Being the center of attention in a crowd like this was my worst nightmare. I couldn't help the blush that spread across my face, and my heart beat loudly in my chest.

Finally, I reached the cauldron and had to face Faye. She held two petals. I was distracted trying to read the names on them, but when Faye cleared her throat to speak, I finally looked up at her face, and my heart sank. Faye looked

disturbed—unhappy even—and it all had to do with whoever my mate was.

“Naomi Frazier's mate is Daniel Turner of the Red Canines!” she announced, and the murmurs in the crowd exploded into surprised exclamations. Everyone started talking and pointing at me, and I knew that my cheeks were as red as they could possibly be. I tried to look back down at the petals, but Faye was moving away. She was still holding both petals, and her face was stony.

And that was it. My mate had been declared.

Oh no, I thought. Oh no, no, no. This can't be happening. Daniel Turner, also known as Danny, was the Alpha of the notorious Red Canines clan. They were a group of rowdy, rough, tough, and violent wolves who didn't play by the rules. They were criminals and had a reputation for having the most fun, too. I didn't know much else about them, but I did know this: Danny was my worst match.

I was boring. Calm. Certainly not a criminal. And my idea of fun was a whole lot more subdued than what the Red Canines got up to.

I looked up to see the rest of the Silverfang Creek pack staring at me. There were gasps, some smiles, a few looks of concern, and then, all at once, the crowd started clapping. I stood stock still, trying to figure out what to do.

I walked through the crowd, which parted for me like water now. I felt self-conscious and a little bit nauseous. The idea that I was going to have a mate, and it was him, was terrifying. I had never even spoken to the man before, and here I was, going to be linked to him? It was unthinkable.

I couldn't tell for sure, but my mind insisted that people were already gossiping. I was Normal Naomi, boring and unassuming. The least interesting person in the pack, and now I was going to be mated with the Red Canines' leader. It was laughable.

The ritual continued on—I wasn't the only one to be mated today—and I took the opportunity to try and disappear into the crowd as best I could. Apparently, my mating was the most exciting, though, and no one was making it easy for me to hide.

I heard chattering from the edges of the field where the ceremony was being held, and when I peeked over the heads of some of the other attendees, I saw Alpha Hector scanning the crowd. Something told me that he was looking for me, and I definitely didn't want to be found. A conversation with my Alpha about my new mate being an enemy Alpha from a problematic pack would just add insult to the injury of this so-far horrible day.

I turned around and pushed people out of the way, trying to get lost in the madness of it all. It was hard, and a couple of times, people stopped talking mid-conversation and turned their heads to stare at me.

I felt a hand on my arm and whipped around to see Whitney, her eyebrows drawn together in concern. “Naomi, are you okay?”

I shook my head, hair flying, and kept moving. “No. No. I just need some air.”

She was behind me by the time I heard her call, “Naomi!” but there was no way I was turning back. There was still a crush of people between me and freedom, and I had to fight through it.

“Excuse me, excuse me, sorry, coming through.”

My voice sounded muffled by the murmuring of the crowd, but I continued to push and shove my way through the throng of people, not stopping until I reached the other end.

There was a small opening in the line of trees at the edge of the field, and without

looking back, I ran toward it. I still had to make it to where everyone was parked to get my car, but I knew that the further I could get away from the ceremony, the better.

Finally, I emerged and made a beeline for the parking lot. I'd never been so happy to see my old red hatchback in my entire life. I heard the sound of multiple pairs of boots on the ground and the low sound of men talking, and when I turned, I could see Hector and a few of his men getting closer.

Not happening. I'm out of here.

I was in the driver's seat and pulling out of the field before they made it to me, but I couldn't help but spare a glance at all of them in the rearview mirror, watching me go. It made me feel a little bit like a circus attraction, which made me scowl.

Normal Naomi gets a man, which must be headline news for them, I thought with a sneer. Whatever. I didn't care what any mating ceremony said, there was no way in hell I was going to the Red Canines and giving myself over to their Alpha like a wrapped Christmas gift. The idea of leaving everything I knew behind made me feel ill, but maybe I'd just have to be on the run for a little while before the heat died down and I could go back home.

Little did I know just how wrong I was.

\*\*\*

My apartment was dark when I got back home, and I was able to breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that I had at least a little time to pack. My mind had been racing since I left the mating ceremony, trying to conjure up a plan to escape out of thin air. I didn't think there would be any real help for me here among the Silverfangs—most of them would think that poor Normal Naomi should take whatever man would have her.

So that meant I had to leave and find my assistance elsewhere.

It placed me way closer to the Red Canines than I was comfortable with, but I did have a friend named Kate, a dancer in Athens, Georgia, who might be far enough removed from the situation to keep me hidden for a bit. She was human and, therefore, uninvolved in complicated pack politics.

I called her as I unlocked the door to my apartment, and she picked up on the third ring.

“Naomi, hey,” she said.

“Hey, Kate,” I answered. “Sorry this is out of the blue, but—I'm wondering if I could crash on your couch for a bit?”

There was a brief silence, and then she asked, “What's going on? Are you okay?”

“I will be,” I told her. “It's—it's really hard to explain, but I just need somewhere safe to stay for a little while.”

Kate lived a whopping four hours south of my place, but if I could just get there, I was pretty sure the Silverfangs wouldn't come looking for me. Not right away, anyway.

“Of course, Honey,” Kate said, her voice concerned. “You know you're always welcome here.”

“Thank you.” I sighed. “I'm really sorry to ask this.”

“No, no,” Kate protested. “We're good. Just stay safe and give me a heads-up when you're close, okay?”

“Will do. See you soon.”

After I hung up the phone, I stared at the screen for a minute. I'd done it. I'd actually done it.

I was leaving my home.

Maybe for good.

With the sun setting over Beaufort outside of my windows, I tried to figure out what the most important parts of my life were and if they could fit into a single duffle bag. It was hard. I'd had a life in Beaufort for a long time, and it was impossible to just abandon it all.

Still, I had no choice.

As much as the pack liked to pretend otherwise, we weren't living in a modern world. Mating rituals and traditions were the law of the land, and no matter how I felt about it, there was no getting out of this.

I couldn't stay. If I did, they'd have to drag me to the Red Canines, kicking and screaming the whole way. The more I thought about it, the more it felt like a good idea. I'd head south to Athens, crash with my old friend Kate for a while, and figure out what the hell to do next. All while staying out of the way of Danny Turner, of course. Not that I think he'd actually want me anyway, but who knows? Some wolves had such an outdated view of the world that he might think I was his property once it was announced we were mates.

Ugh. No, thank you.

I packed clothes, coming to the conclusion that I didn't have nearly enough hot

weather stuff for somewhere like Athens. Confidence in my body and appearance wasn't exactly a strong suit of mine, so I was sorely lacking in the shorts and breezy tops department, but I did the best with what I had.

For my escape, I dressed in head-to-toe black and covered my head and neck with a black scarf. I planned to drive a little bit south, ditch my car to throw off the rest of the pack, and hitchhike from there. If that didn't work, I'd hoof it to the Greyhound station and pay for a ticket. I needed to empty my bank account when I was closer to Kate's house, but for the time being, I shoved a \$50 bill in each shoe for safekeeping and was on my way.

Four hours. That was all the time between me and freedom.

I was almost giddy as I slung the duffel bag over my shoulder and walked out of my apartment, locking the door behind me. It's been a long time since I've gone out of town, and a change of scenery would do me good.

When I walked out of the building, the street was quiet. The moon was high in the sky, and a slight breeze rustled the trees.

All in all, the night was perfect for an escape.

My car was waiting in the lot, and I popped the trunk and threw my bag inside. With one last look at my apartment, I swallowed back my tears and climbed into the driver's seat. It was now or never. Run, or end up Danny Turner's mate.

So I ran.

I drove forty-five minutes south to a rest stop, passing by farmland on my way. Once I arrived, I pulled the scarf tighter over my head, grabbed my bag, and locked up my car once more. I patted the hood, thanking it for a job well done, and went in search

of a ride.

I've known truckers all my life working at the storage center—some will rent a unit to keep their things in, living out of their trucks for long periods of time between homes. They've always been kind to me, which is why I wasn't too afraid to try and score a ride with one.

I scanned the parking lot, looking over the semis to see if there were any clues as to which ones might be headed in my direction. Luckily, a man named Frankie, driving a dark blue rig, was headed through Atlanta. I showed him the fifty I had stuffed in my boot, and he took one look at my face and waved me in.

“You’re lucky I ain't no serial killer,” he said. “Good thing you got with me instead of some of the weirdos out there.”

I was grateful and told him so. “Thanks, Man. You're really saving my bacon here.”

Frankie snorted. “That's fine. The money helps, but it ain't necessary. Just get settled back there. It's a long ride to Atlanta.”

I nodded and hopped up into the truck, making myself comfortable in the back. It was a small space, just a bed, a tiny television, and a pile of blankets. It was plenty for me, way better than being squished on a bus, at least.

Frankie didn't talk to me, and I didn't have much to say either, so the first leg of the journey was relatively quiet. The further we got away from Beaufort, the more nervous I became. It's not every day that a wolf packs up and runs away from her pack and her life, but that's exactly what I'd just done.

What if Danny Turner came looking for me? What if he wanted to force the mating and wouldn't let me go, no matter how hard I fought?

I shuddered. It's not the first time someone has been kidnapped to fulfill their mating, but the stories I've heard aren't good.

But what else can I do? Stay and be his prisoner? No thank you.

I was sitting and reading a magazine, and Frankie was smoking his pipe when suddenly he reached out and grabbed his ringing cell phone. He answered it and listened to the voice on the other side. Wide-eyed, I saw him glance back in the rearview mirror directly at me before saying, “Uh-huh, right—Wait, give me that description again? You're kidding.”

A chill ran down my spine, but after that single look, Frankie talked quietly, finished his call, and stayed silent as he continued on his way. I convinced myself I was imagining the shock in his eyes when he looked back at me and forced myself to relax, settling back into the small sleeping cab.

Eventually, I fell asleep halfway sitting up, and when I woke up again, we were at a Pilot gas station. Rubbing my eyes, I checked my phone and saw it was just past 3 am. We'd been driving for hours. We should have been close—right?

“Go use the restroom,” Frankie told me gruffly, stretching as he slid out of the truck. “Don't know when we'll get a chance to stop next.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The gas station was mostly empty, except for a couple of people filling up their vehicles. The cashier watched us, his eyes following Frankie as he went out back and disappeared from sight. I went into the bathroom, and when I was done, I headed outside and leaned against the rig.

Frankie was nowhere to be seen, so I took the opportunity to stretch my legs, walking

around the front of the truck. When he returned, he handed me a white plastic bag, a stiff smile on his face.

“Got you some snacks. Figured you'd be a little hungry by now.”

His kindness warmed my heart, and I thanked him profusely before climbing back into the sleeping cabin. The semi jostled me around as Frankie got it started, but then it was smooth sailing again once we were on the highway.

Inside of the bag was a granola bar, a wrapped bologna sandwich, and an orange juice. Frankie didn't speak to me again, so without much else to do, I tucked into the small meal he provided me. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I took the first bite of the sandwich, and my stomach rumbled angrily for me to give it more.

I'd eaten half the sandwich when I opened the juice and took a swallow. Cringing, I put the lid back on—something about the juice was strangely bitter, but at least it was cold. I finished the meal, polishing off the rest of the juice last and wishing for a piece of gum to clear the bitter taste away. I'd have to remember to avoid that brand in the future.

I expected to sleep, watching the streetlights pass on the highway in a perfect pattern. But when my tiredness hit, it wasn't the easy sleepiness that comes at the end of a stressful day. Instead, it felt like I was being hit by a train and then dragged by my ankles down into the abyss of unconsciousness.

Like I had no choice but to sleep.

It came on so fast that I didn't even manage to fully lay down. I had barely a second to realize something was wrong, that this wasn't normal. Then, between one breath and the next, everything went black, and I fell unconscious, slumped against the side of the cab.

The last thing I heard was a sad “Sorry, kid ” from Frankie, and then I knew no more.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Fate was a funny thing.

I had every intention of hunting Naomi down and bringing her to Athens myself, but on Julian's suggestion, I put out an APB to the rest of the pack and our contacts to keep an eye out for her. My friend had been thinking ahead and figured that a wolf from a stuck-up pack like the Silverfangs might not want a Red Canine as a mate. Julian thought Naomi might flee to keep herself out of my clutches, and that was exactly what she did.

I've been trying to pull the pack out of the drug running game somewhat for a while now, putting our money into more legitimate business dealings just to have a safety net and maybe clean up our reputation some. It was a good thing I didn't manage to close down all of our illegal dealings, though, because it was a truck driver carrying a certain white powdery parcel for me that managed to pick up Naomi at a rest stop.

What in the hell were the chances? It seemed impossible, yet here she was, lying in my bed, delivered to me safe and sound. I paid that truck driver a hefty bonus to keep his mouth shut and sent him on his way, promising that I meant the girl no harm.

In fact, she was one of the most precious things in the world to me already, though I'd never admit it out loud. At least not yet.

The driver had drugged her, figuring that he didn't want a pissed-off she-wolf in the back of his truck once she figured out where he was actually taking her—right to my doorstep. She'd been so out of it when they arrived, totally dead to the world, that I had called the pack doctor, Dr. Travis Sweet, to look her over and make sure she was going to be okay. He assured me she'd wake up in a few hours and took some blood

just to ascertain that my new mate was healthy.

Now, I was just waiting for the good doctor to return with those results. For now, I had the privilege of watching over sweet Naomi all on my own.

She was beautiful in a subtle way that drove me wild. Her hair was long, a light brown that fell over her shoulders with bangs that framed her face. Her features were soft and delicate, and her cheeks had a rosy glow. In her right nostril, a gold nose ring gleamed. Her curves were out of this world, the kind a man could fill his hands with over and over again and never get tired.

It wasn't long before the doctor returned, his briefcase in his hands and a smile on his face. "Your mate is in excellent health," he said. "She should be waking up soon. She's going to be sore from being limp for so long, her legs especially, so watch out for that. Otherwise, she looks great. And congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks, doc," I told him. "I appreciate the help."

Dr. Sweet shrugged. "No problem. Let me know if you need anything else. If you'd like, I can arrange an appointment for the two of you to come in so we can set a date and check on her."

"Yeah, that'd be good," I agreed. The doctor nodded, shook my hand, and left.

I sighed and turned my attention back to the gorgeous woman in my bed. My mate. My fated mate.

It seemed surreal. The mating ceremony had only been the day before, and here she was, delivered right into my hands. Fate had a way of surprising a person.

And boy, did fate ever have a sense of humor. The Silverfangs, the biggest pompous

pricks in the region, had sent me a woman who had to be among their best and brightest. Already, I knew she was incredible.

My research into Naomi hadn't given me a hell of a lot to go on, but a perusal of her social media had revealed that one of her favorite places in the world was a small pastry shop just outside of Beaufort. I obviously couldn't go there for her, but I managed to get a variety of donuts, croissants, and Danishes delivered for when she woke up. There was hot coffee brewing in the kitchen and a pitcher of ice water on the bedside table. I knew she'd be parched when she woke up.

My heart beat hard and heavy in my chest as I dragged my eyes up and down her sleeping form. When the truck driver had brought her in, I'd stripped her of her heavy sweatshirt, leaving her in just black leggings and a matching tank, and now I couldn't get enough of her. I'd heard all about how fated mates make a man's entire life feel like it was worth something. I didn't believe in that nonsense, and I didn't have any plans on getting married or even settling down—why would I? I was fucking cursed. Hell, a relationship was the last thing on my mind. But now, everything changed.

She intrigued me, and that was hard for anyone or anything to do. And she hadn't even opened her eyes yet.

Bartender Johnny had provided me with some information from the Silverfang Creek pack, but it had been less than I was hoping for. Naomi apparently wasn't a big figure in the pack, and not much was known about her outside of her close circle of friends. That was okay, though. I liked a challenge.

She was so still. If Dr. Sweet hadn't given me the green light, I'd be worried. For now, though, there was nothing else to do but wait. Sighing, I grabbed the true crime book I'd been reading the last week off the bedside table—a secret pleasure of mine, especially mafia history—and settled in to read. The chair I'd pulled in from the dining room wasn't the most comfortable, but even I'm not enough of an asshole to

climb into bed with her when she's unconscious and hasn't met me yet.

The hours passed. My back hurt from the shitty chair, and I had to rewarm the pastries twice so she wouldn't wake up to cold food. Finally, around noon, Naomi began to stir. She didn't wake up immediately but turned her head and coughed, her legs kicking against the blanket.

That must be the leg cramps Sweet was talking about , I thought. Carefully, not wanting to freak her out, I rubbed my hands together to warm them and started to gently massage her calves, moving upward.

Naomi's legs were soft and supple even through the leggings, and they felt so good under my hands that I was careful not to linger, even if I wanted to. The massage must have brought her back to the waking world because her eyes opened. She blinked a few times before her gaze locked on mine.

She gasped, sitting straight up and scooting backward so fast she almost fell off the other side of the bed.

“Whoa, hey,” I said. “Calm down. You're alright.”

Her eyes were owlishly large, slowly looking around as if she thought she might be in a dream. Carefully, I moved up beside her and cradled her behind her shoulders with one arm. Naomi fixed her gaze on me as I dipped my hand into the pitcher of water, plucking a few ice cubes from inside and holding the first one to her plump lips.

“Here. You must be parched.”

She opened her mouth, allowing me to place the ice cube inside. Her tongue rolled around it as she sucked, and I swear to god, my dick jumped in my pants. Down boy. Now was not a good time.

Like a baby bird, she opened her mouth, and I placed a second cube inside. While she sucked on that one, I dug around in my end table drawer and grabbed the little thing of Vaseline I kept inside. With a dollop on my thumb, I swept it over her poor, chapped lips and smiled at the sigh of relief that escaped her throat.

“I know,” I told her. “It's been a long trip, huh? How are you feeling?”

She looked up at me, blinking slowly. Her eyes were a pretty, deep shade of brown, like dark chocolate or fertile earth. “Tired,” she said. Her voice was hoarse, and she licked her lips before speaking again. “Sore.”

“I know. I'm sorry about that,” I told her. When she unconsciously winced and reached down for her legs, I resumed the massage, causing her eyes to flutter once more as she fell back.

“That's nice,” Naomi whispered. “This is a good dream. Better than the last one, that's for sure.”

I couldn't help but laugh. “This isn't a dream, Naomi. It's real.”

At first, I could tell she didn't believe me, but my words seemed to hit her all at once. Flustered, a blush rushing over her chest and face, Naomi bolted to a sitting position and gaped down at me. “W-what do you mean!? W-who are you?”

“Shh. Just relax for right now. Take it easy.”

“Take it easy?” Naomi sputtered. “Why am I here? What's going on? What did you do to me?”

“Nothing,” I said, trying to keep my voice comforting so she didn't panic. “Naomi, this isn't a trick. It's not an attack. This is the real deal. You're my mate. I've been

waiting for you.”

“I—What?” She seemed shell-shocked, and I didn't blame her. This was a lot to take in. “Your mate? No, no, you're wrong. I'm not supposed to be your mate; I'm not.”

She tried to push my hands off her legs, but instead of letting her, I grabbed them. My pulse was pounding in my ears as I raised her still-cold hands to my lips and kissed each one in turn. “You are, Naomi Frazier. I'm Danny Turner, Alpha of the Red Canines pack and your mate. We shouldn't waste any time. Marry me.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“Marry me. ”

The words bounced around inside my skull like a ping-pong ball, the haze of sleep still making everything fuzzy. One thing was for certain, though—I couldn't be his mate, I just couldn't.

“I'm sorry,” I said, pulling my hands out of his grasp. “I can't do that. I won't.”

Danny's eyes flashed dangerously. “You won't?”

“No. No way. I don't care what the little ceremony said. It's bullshit.”

“It's not,” Danny insisted. “Naomi, I promise. Everything is going to be okay. I won't hurt you. You're safe here.”

“Safe?” I scoffed. “If I was safe, why did your driver drug me, huh?”

“Because you were running away,” he replied, not even trying to deny it. I had known the moment before passing out that something was terribly wrong with me, and his easy admission confirmed it.

I tried to get a good look at him but my eyes feel like they're crossing if I tried too hard to focus. He was attractive, that much I could discern. He kept his dark curly hair just long enough for the curls to form around his ears. Pieces of it hung in front of his steely gray eyes, and it was the same color as the dark scruff on his square jaw. Danny was tan from the tips of his fingers all the way to his face, not a tan line in sight, telling me that he spent plenty of time under the hot Georgia sun.

And those lips. They were frowning right now, but they were full and looked soft, with a perfect cupid's bow. The thought crossed my mind of what they would feel like pressed against my own. Wait. What am I thinking?

"I'm not a prisoner here," I snapped. "You can't keep me. Let me leave."

"Leave and go where?" he demanded.

"Back home."

"Home? You think the Silverfangs want you back? You think you'd be better off there?"

Ouch, That one stung. I narrowed my eyes menacingly at him, ignoring that he was twice the size of me. "I'm not yours."

"You are," he said firmly.

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm not."

Danny growled, dragging his hand through his hair and shooting to his feet. "You know what? You keep telling yourself whatever you want. I'll give you some damn space to figure yourself out, Naomi, but you're going to have to come to terms with this eventually. You. Are. Mine."

With that, Danny stomped toward the door, but not before plonking a plate of pastries on the side table next to the pitcher of water. Then he was out of the room, shutting

the door behind him hard enough to emphasize his annoyance, but not quite a slam. If he hadn't been my kidnapper, it might have been funny.

Once he was gone, I allowed myself a few minutes to sit on the bed, my thoughts whirling a thousand miles a minute. When the dizziness threatened to overtake me, I flopped down, lying flat on the soft blankets. The ceiling was a smooth white, the texture painted into it, and I stared up at it, trying not to panic.

I wasn't supposed to be anyone's mate. Especially not his. The ceremony was a sham. Fate was wrong.

But was it?

The idea was tempting. Most would call thoughts like that the beginnings of Stockholm Syndrome, but wolf culture was different from human culture. Kidnapping of mates wasn't—great, but it also wasn't unheard of.

That didn't make me any less furious. But my mouth was so dry it felt like I had been chewing sand, and my stomach had started growling the second I saw the pastry plate. Sighing, I pushed myself up and grabbed the pitcher, filling a plastic cup and then taking a long swallow. Once my thirst was quenched, I filled it again and set it down, digging through the food.

A Danish seemed the most appealing, so I snatched it and took a bite. It was heavenly, sweet and fluffy with the perfect amount of blueberry, and I moaned a little at the taste. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until now, and the food was doing wonders for the fog that had overtaken my brain.

By the time I had finished the Danish and the plate of pastries, the food had perked me up. I had no idea what to do.

Was Danny really my fated mate? Would he really keep me prisoner if I tried to leave? And what was with the kidnapping and the drugging?

Oh god, I had to find a way to call Kate. She was probably panicking.

It was a lot to take in, and I found myself getting frustrated just trying to sort it all out. My emotions were everywhere, and I needed to get out of here.

Carefully, I got up from the bed. When I made sure my legs could hold me, I padded over to the window. It had a small latch, but it was locked, and when I pulled on it, it wouldn't budge. There was no lock on the door, but when I tested the handle, it was locked from the outside.

Dammit.

There was a bathroom attached, but the window was far too small for me to climb through, especially with the screen in the way.

What the hell? I was really a prisoner.

The idea made me feel sick to my stomach, and I rushed back to the bed and dropped onto it, burying my head in the pillows. I wanted to scream, or cry, or both, but mostly, I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

It didn't seem like that was happening any time soon, though.

“Hey.”

The word made me jump, and I sat up, clutching a pillow in front of me. Standing in the doorway was a short woman with curly black hair and big brown eyes. She had a round, pretty face and a bright smile on her full lips. The red scrubs she was wearing

were faded, and she was wiping her hands on a rag.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“My name is Rhonda. I'm your nurse, and I'm here to take you to one of the pack boarding houses until you're settled in.” Rhonda paused. “That is, Danny said, unless you want to just stay here at his house.”

“Oh no, no, no,” I said, shaking my head. “I'll go with you. Please.”

“Okay.”

Rhonda didn't seem put off by my eagerness to get the hell away from Danny, and she beckoned me forward. I stood and followed her, but as soon as we stepped out of the room, my foot caught the carpet, and I stumbled, pitching forward. Rhonda managed to catch me and help me upright, a frown on her face.

“Careful. I don't want to let the Alpha's new mate get hurt on my watch.”

All I could do was give her a glare.

She chuckled and led me out of the house. Danny's house was a two-story house surrounded by trees—he clearly valued privacy. There, a white van with the words 'Red Canines Pack Medical Unit' painted on the side was waiting. She opened the back door and helped me in before shutting the door and climbing into the front seat.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as we started driving. “I know you're probably still a little disoriented. Did you eat?”

“Yes,” I told her.

“Good. It will help you feel a little better. How about your legs? Still sore?”

“I’ll be fine,” I told her.

“Mmhmm.” She didn’t sound convinced. “I can get you some more painkillers for the aches. If you want them.”

I sighed. “Yeah, that would be good.”

“Alright. We’re heading to the boarding house, and that’s where you’ll stay until the mating ceremony.”

“I’m not mating with him,” I insisted.

“We’ll see about that.” Rhonda laughed.

The rest of the drive was silent, and when the van stopped, she helped me out. In front of us was a squat white house painted a light blue. It had a wide front porch, and several rocking chairs and potted plants decorated the landing.

“This is one of our pack’s boarding houses,” Rhonda told me. “You will be staying here while you’re in Red Canine territory—that is unless you choose to move in with Danny before the ceremony. You may make that choice at any time. As of right now, there are two other women living here. You all have your own rooms, and they know that you’re arriving today.”

I frowned. “Are they kidnapped mates too?”

She huffed a laugh. “No, Honey. That distinction is uniquely yours. Come on, Danny already brought your stuff over.”

She helped me inside. The floors were hardwood, and the furniture looked old and comfortable. Rhonda led me up a set of stairs, down the hallway, and stopped in front of a wooden door.

“Here we are. Why don't you have a seat and rest for a while? Your room is all set up.”

I nodded, and she opened the door for me. Inside, it was just like the rest of the house. It contained a four-poster bed with a quilt, a vanity, a dresser, and a closet. For entertainment, there was an older television and a small stack of books. My duffel bag, which I hadn't seen since the semi-truck, was sitting on the bed.

“I'm going to go now, but the other girls will be in to say hi.” Rhonda told me, “You should be fine from here on out, but if anything happens, Danny knows to call me. Have a good night, Naomi.”

With that, she shut the door, and a moment later, I heard the click of the lock.

Of course.

It was like I was under house arrest, and the feeling was horrible. My heart was beating a thousand miles a minute, and a sheen of sweat broke out on my forehead. The walls felt like they were closing in, and the air was getting thin. I felt like I was going to faint, or throw up, or both.

Slowly, I forced myself to sit on the bed and close my eyes. Breathe. Just breathe.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

After a few minutes, my heart had stopped racing and my breath came a little easier. When the wave had passed, I got up and started unpacking my clothes, putting them away in the dresser and the closet. There was no sign of a cell phone or any kind of electronic communication device, and that meant there was no chance for me to call or text my friends.

It had been almost a full day since the mating ceremony, and I was sure that at least someone would have noticed that I was gone.

Unless—unless they really didn't care.

The thought was a painful one. It made sense. They were probably partying right now, glad that I wasn't around, and not even sparing a thought about me. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I bit my lip hard. Now was not the time for tears, no matter how much it hurt. Right now, I needed to find a way out of here.

My planning was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. The lock clicked over again, and a small woman with dark hair entered. She was carrying a white plate that held a turkey sandwich and a handful of potato chips.

“Hey,” she greeted me softly, “My name is Natalia. I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you some lunch.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I'm Naomi.”

“I know.” She smiled. “Can I sit with you?”

“Sure.”

Natalia perched herself on the end of the bed, watching as I picked at the chips. “Are you settling in okay? Do you have everything you need?”

“For the most part.” I took the plate from her and set it on the bed next to me, my appetite long gone. “I guess you and the other woman here are supposed to watch my every move, huh?”

She shrugged. “Danny has us look after you, yes. He wants to make sure you're taken care of.”

“Doesn't he trust me not to run away?”

Natalia laughed, shaking her head. “Not in the slightest.”

She was friendly enough, and I had nothing else to lose. So instead of picking up the plate, I leaned in closer to Natalia and lowered my voice. “Listen, I know asking you to go against your Alpha is crazy, but I have to get—”

“What is it that you have to get, Naomi?”

Danny's deep voice came from the doorway, making both of us jump. He was leaning against the doorframe, watching me like a hawk. How in the hell was he so quiet?

“N-nothing,” I stammered.

He gave me a flat look and strode into the room, standing tall over both of us. I shivered at his size but held my ground, raising my chin and meeting his gaze.

“Natalia, get out,” he said.

“But, Alpha—”

“I said, get out,” he repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument. He scowled down at the sandwich plate and picked it up, thrusting it toward Natalia. “Make this again. It looks sloppy. My mate deserves the best.”

“Y-yes, Alpha.” She got up and left, throwing me a worried glance.

When she was gone, Danny fixed his glare on me. “You think you're going to play my pack against me? Think again. She would have never done whatever it was you were about to ask her.”

“Whatever,” I snapped. “She could have. And she would have if she didn't fear you.”

“Mm.” Danny came to sit on the edge of the bed, causing me to jump up to get away from him. I didn't want him near me.

I kept waiting for Danny to berate me more or tell me that there was no use trying to escape, but he didn't. Instead, he surprised me by watching quietly as I finished putting my clothes away. Every once and a while, I'd catch him staring, but he didn't speak or move.

“Can you not watch me?” I snapped after a few minutes, the tension getting to me.

“Why not?” He sounded genuinely curious.

“Because it's creepy. What do you want, Danny?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you here?”

“You're here.”

The statement was so simple and so direct that I couldn't think of a response. Huffing, I finished putting up the measly amount of clothes that I packed, annoyed and flustered. I tried my best not to look back at him, but in my quest to avoid eye contact, my still-cramping legs got tangled up with one another, and I tripped.

Before I could fall, though, Danny was at my side, wrapping a large hand around my arm and pulling me upright. The movement put us chest to chest, and my breath caught as I stared up at him. He was beyond handsome, with a jawline that could cut glass, and the stubble on his chin only added to the rough look. His eyes, steely gray in the lighting of the room, were framed by thick lashes, and his mouth was full and inviting.

Kissable, even.

I could feel the heat radiating off of his body and smell his heady scent. It was like sandalwood and a cool autumn night, and it was so enticing that I leaned closer. Oh, why did he have to feel so good when I was supposed to be hating him?

“Don't worry,” Danny purred, “I've got you.”

“D-don't touch me.” I pulled out of his grasp, stumbling back and nearly falling again.

I couldn't stand the way he was looking at me like I was the last drop of water in the desert and he was dying of thirst. It was making me dizzy.

“Leave me alone,” I muttered before sitting down heavily on the bed.

Danny frowned, the corners of his lips turning downward, and I hated the twinge of

guilt that came with seeing it. He gave me no peace, sitting down beside me and catching a strand of my hair between two of his fingers and tucking it behind my ear. When he put his hand on my knee, I gasped, frozen as he came ever closer.

“I won't be leaving you alone. Not now, not ever.” He breathed the words against the shell of my ear, and I shivered, hating myself for the reaction.

Before things could go any further, Natalia returned with my newly perfected turkey sandwich—which was fine before, thank you very much. I thanked her profusely, glaring at Danny the entire time for being so rude to the poor woman. She left, giving Danny and me one more nervous backward glance before disappearing out the door. Then we were alone again.

“Eat,” Danny commanded. “You need it after sleeping for so long.”

“I wouldn't have had to sleep so long if someone hadn't poisoned me,” I grumbled but took the plate. The food was good, and my starved stomach had burned through the earlier pastries in no time flat, so I was hungry. Even if I didn't want to admit it to Danny.

“How do you feel?” he asked after a moment.

“How do you think I feel? I've been drugged, kidnapped, and locked in a room. My head hurts, my legs are still sore, and I've lost my pack. Oh, and there's the whole thing where I'm apparently your mate.”

“So the aches and pains are better?”

“That's not the point!”

“Then what is the point?” Danny sighed, shaking his head.

“I don't want to be here.”

“And why not?”

“Because—because you've done nothing but show me that you're an asshole,” I snapped, “If you wanted to talk to me, you could have just asked, but instead you had your driver kidnap me. You've locked me in here. You've threatened me. And now you're just sitting here, and you won't even let me leave this room!”

“I'm not going to apologize for that,” he replied. “We were fated to meet. The ceremony was only meant to jump-start it all. As far as the kidnapping goes, I knew you wouldn't have come otherwise.”

“Maybe not, but it was wrong,” I countered.

Danny sighed, his hand tightening into a fist. “What can I do to make you comfortable here?”

“Let me go,” I told him.

“That's not going to happen. But I can try and make your life easier if you'll let me. For now, just eat. We don't have to talk until you're ready.”

I hated to do what he said, but I wasn't about to let the food go to waste. So, with Danny watching me intently, I devoured the sandwich and then got up to take the plate to the kitchen. He followed me.

Danny beat me back to the bedroom door, propping himself on the doorframe with one arm above his head as he loomed over me upon my return. He gave me so little space and made me feel so small, even if he was doing nothing but existing.

“Don't want you to fall again,” he rumbled, but I knew better. He just wanted to be in my space and have control over me.

“Yeah, thanks,” I grumbled. “Move.”

He stepped aside, but not without touching me again. It was a casual brush, his hand against my lower back, but it sent sparks up and down my spine and made me shiver.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Fine,” I muttered.

“Naomi, why don't we go sit back down.”

“No, thank you. I'd rather not.”

“You're still wobbly.”

“And you're annoying.”

Danny sighed. “Naomi, come here.”

“No.”

“Come. Here.”

I was a bit like a deer in the headlights, stuck between a rock and a hard place, and I wasn't quite sure how to escape. Danny took my hand, and the sparks were back. I could feel him all around me, the heat of his body, the power radiating off him. I couldn't breathe. His touch was gentle, and his calloused thumb rubbed circles on my palm.

“Naomi,” he breathed. “What do you want? What do you need?”

Head spinning, thoughts all over the place, all I could do was be honest. “A shower—alone, obviously.”

He nodded once and walked me back to the bed, his hand on the small of my back. Danny had me sit, asking which clothes I wanted, and then disappeared into the bathroom for a split second. I heard the shower kick on. When he returned, he motioned for me to enter.

“The shower is running. I got it all set up for you. Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” I whispered.

I had to walk past him once more and felt that pull of attraction as our bodies came within inches of each other again. Then, finally, I was in the bathroom, able to shut the door. Finally, finally alone, with no one else's eyes on me.

The door only had a flimsy knob lock that any self-respecting werewolf could knock down with barely a finger, but I turned it anyway, just for the sense of privacy. Undressing, I folded my dirty clothes and set them on the ground, checking over my shoulder at least ten times to make sure Danny wasn't somehow in the room and watching me.

As the room filled with steam, I pulled back the curtain and prepared to step inside. With the shower running, I almost didn't hear what was going on outside the door. But I heard a rustling and paused, my stomach sinking when I realized what it was.

Danny was settling himself onto the floor outside the bathroom door, waiting on me. I sighed, stepping under the hot water and letting it cascade over me. It looked like he was going to keep tabs on every move I made. It was going to be a long night trying

to figure out how to escape.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

As a werewolf, most of my injuries healed so rapidly that I didn't have to deal with the pain for long. I was more than used to stabs, scratches, and bites. But there was something humbling about the pain from sleeping on the cold, hard floor as a grown man—werewolf or not.

I had been in that exact spot since Naomi went to bed, and my back and neck aches were worsening every passing hour. No matter how many times I shifted or how often I stretched, there was a constant throb.

But it was worth it, I decided, to keep her safe.

After all, a good Alpha did everything he could to ensure the safety and happiness of his pack and his mate. I would never let Naomi come to harm. She might not appreciate it now, but she will. I'm sure of it.

Natalia brought me a pillow and a blanket, and I tried to make the most of the situation, pretending I didn't feel my hip bone and shoulder digging into the floor. Damn. I should have chosen a plusher carpet for the pack's boarding houses.

Eventually, I managed to find sleep, turning in the night like a chicken on a spit whenever my bones protested. It definitely wasn't the best sleep of my life, but it was sleep nonetheless. Something told me that I was going to need all the rest I could get to keep up with Naomi, who seemed poised to run at any second.

Waking up outside Naomi's door felt right in a way I couldn't explain. It'd feel even better to wake up in bed with her, but one step at a time. Protecting her wasn't just instinct; it was a necessity. She didn't want me here, sure, but I couldn't trust anyone

else to keep her safe. Not when I knew the kind of threats that lurked outside these walls.

Fate couldn't take her from me if I never let her go.

I stretched, rolling my shoulders to ease the stiffness. The morning light filtered through the narrow window at the end of the hall, painting everything in muted gold. It gave the otherwise dreary boarding house a sort of dreamlike air, but I wasn't feeling very dreamy myself. My wolf stirred, restless and irritable from the interrupted sleep, but I shoved the feeling down.

I felt the other wolf nearby before she spoke, the pack connections buzzing. "Good morning, Alpha."

Pushing myself to a sitting position, I turned my head to see Natalia padding past in slippers and an oversized hoodie. Her hair was tangled like she'd slept in a windstorm. She barely spared me a glance as she yawned, covering her mouth.

"Morning," I grunted, standing up and brushing off the back of my jeans. I needed a shower, but that would have to wait.

"Sleep well?"

"Fuck no."

I could see her stifling a smile, which annoyed me, but I let it go. It wasn't Natalia's fault I had chosen to sleep on the carpet like a teenager at a sleepover. She and Penny were some of the more vulnerable of our wolves, and this was the most relaxed either of them had ever been with me. I don't exactly give off a friendly air, so I'm not trying to ruin it. I need the pack to see me differently if I want them to follow in my footsteps and feel comfortable really putting down roots and starting families.

Natalia disappeared down the stairs, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the closed door in front of me. Naomi's scent seeped through the wood, that perfect mix of cinnamon-spiced cherries, something uniquely hers. It called to me in a way nothing ever had before.

I reach for the handle before stopping myself. Hm. She's my mate; I have every right to just open the door and enter. But I would bet that Naomi wouldn't enjoy that one bit. Instead, I smooth out the wrinkles in my shirt and pants before dragging my hands through my hair, trying to give it some semblance of neatness.

Not like I needed to impress her—the way Naomi has reacted to me, I could be the hottest guy on the planet and she'd still slam the door in my face. But I wasn't about to face her looking like a total fucking mess.

Once I was as presentable as I was going to get without a real shower, I raised my fist and knocked.

For a moment, silence answered. Then her voice filtered through, groggy but sharply annoyed. I could just imagine her on the other side, warm from sleep and discombobulated about where she was.

“Who is it?”

“I'll give you one guess. Let me in, Naomi. I've been out here all night.”

Another pause. I could picture her standing there, debating whether to let me in or tell me to go to hell.

“No one asked you to do that, especially not me.”

Oh well. I asked permission, and she took too long to answer, so I took matters into

my own hands. The door creaked as I pushed it open, stepping inside without waiting for her permission. Probably not the smartest move, but I wasn't here to win points for politeness.

Naomi was sitting up in bed, her warm brown curls forming a wild halo around her face. She was wearing some oversized t-shirt that slipped off one shoulder, exposing smooth, sun-kissed skin. She blinked at me, those sharp eyes narrowing in instant suspicion.

Oh. She really doesn't like me. I suppress a smile. I sort of like it. She's feisty. Spicy. A challenge.

"What the hell, Danny?"

"I wanted to check on you." I kept my voice low and calm, even though her gaze was razor-sharp.

Her lips twisted. "Might I remind you that the only one that has ever done me harm is the man who had me kidnapped—you! I think I can survive a night without you playing guard dog outside my door."

I leaned against the doorframe, crossing my arms. "You're welcome, by the way."

"For what?"

"Keeping you safe while you sleep."

Her face went red, and I got the impression that if she wasn't still in her pajamas, she would have launched herself at me with the intent to harm. Instead, I watched as she fisted her hands in the sheets.

“I told you to leave me alone, Danny!” Naomi snapped, her voice like a whip. “I want to go home! And if you aren’t going to give me that, at least give me some privacy!”

The sharpness in her tone cut deeper than it should have, but I didn’t let it show. My jaw tightened, and I nodded, retreating without another word. She didn’t want me there—fine. But that didn’t mean I was about to stop taking care of her.

I made my way downstairs, shaking off the sting of her rejection. There was the smell of burnt coffee in the coffee pot, the orange light still on even though the pot was nearly empty. Natalia or Penny had set out a box of prepackaged donuts and muffins, but the sight of them just pisses me off. Naomi deserves better. She deserves more, and I’m going to prove to her that I can provide.

Opening the fridge, I grabbed eggs, vegetables, and a pack of black forest bacon. She needed real food, something that would keep her strong. Protein, vegetables, calories, and maybe most importantly of all, fresh caffeinated coffee. I worked quickly, cracking eggs into a bowl and whisking them with practiced ease before dumping and rinsing the coffee pot, refilling it, and starting it anew. Cooking wasn’t exactly my forte, but for Naomi, I’d figure it out.

Plus, who couldn’t make eggs and bacon? I wasn’t totally helpless.

As I set the bacon to sizzle in the pan, Penny appeared, a travel mug in one hand and a half-eaten muffin in the other. Her sandy blonde hair was pulled into a loose braid, and she was already scrolling through her phone like the morning hadn’t just started.

“Morning, Boss,” she said around a mouthful of muffins. “What’s got you playing chef today?”

I glanced at her but kept my hands busy, flipping the bacon with a spatula. Grease popped, hitting my bare wrists, but besides flinching, I ignored it. “I need a favor.”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“There’s still a bookstore in town, right? Get me some bridal catalogs. All the ones you can find.”

Penny paused mid-bite, her eyes narrowing as she processed my request. “Bride catalogs? Did I miss something? From what Nat said last night, Naomi isn’t exactly amenable.”

“She will be,” I said simply, pouring the scrambled eggs into the pan. “Just do it, okay?”

Penny lowered her muffin, blinking at me owlishly. “I—well—okay. Sure, I can do that.”

Satisfied, I nodded. “Good.”

Her mouth opened, then closed. Finally, she just stared at me, clearly trying to piece together whatever crazy logic had brought me to this decision.

“Okay, back up,” she said, setting her mug on the counter. “You have to at least have an idea of what kind of wedding you want. Traditional? Rustic? Boho?”

I fought back the urge to snap at her. Those were reasonable questions—too bad I have no idea what Naomi would like. Then, an idea comes to me, and it just feels right. “A wedding fit for the new Red Canine queen.”

Penny clearly had more questions, but she held them in. “Ah—okay. I’ll do my best, Alpha.”

“Quickly,” I remind her. There was no time to waste.

Penny swallowed and took a bracing drink of her coffee. “You know, she might appreciate being given some time to settle in first. But you’re the Alpha, so if you think this is the right path, I believe you.”

“The sooner,” I repeat, leaving no time for argument this time. “The better.”

The truth was, I couldn’t wait. Every second Naomi wasn’t bound to me felt like a risk. Mates were supposed to protect each other, and if something happened to her—if someone took her from me—I’d never forgive myself. My wolf growled low in agreement, the possessive need to claim her burning hotter with every passing moment.

“The sooner I marry her, the sooner I can keep her safe,” I said, more to myself than to Penny.

Penny raised a brow. “You don’t think this might come off as—I don’t know, a little intense?”

“She’ll understand,” I said, my voice firm. “Eventually. But it’s important that the marriage happens sooner rather than later. Once it’s done, she’ll see that this is for her own good.”

The sound of something clattering behind me broke my train of thought. I turned just in time to see Naomi standing in the doorway, her eyes wide with a mix of shock and fury. Her face has gone white, and the hairbrush she had been holding has fallen from her numb hands to the floor.

Fuck. I hadn’t locked her bedroom door behind me. What the hell was I thinking?

“For my own good?” Her voice was strained, like she was forcing the words out through a lump in her throat.

Before I could respond, she bolted, her footsteps echoing through the hallway as she made her escape.

“Naomi!” I called after her, abandoning the pan and the half-cooked breakfast.

But she was already gone.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The first thing I noticed when I burst out of the front door was that it was hot as hell. The second was that I wished I was wearing more than an oversized sleep shirt and a pair of loose fabric shorts. The heat clung to my skin almost instantly, and the porch creaked under my weight as I sprinted barefoot out of the safehouse and into the yard. Beneath my feet, the grass was cool and still covered in the morning dew, but I barely noticed. All I cared about was that each step brought me closer to the shaded green woods in the near distance.

I didn't think about where I was going or the fact that I'd never even set foot in this town before, let alone the woods around it—I just went. Escape was the only thing on my mind.

Danny had to be behind me somewhere, but I hadn't heard him yet, and I felt a shot of victory as soon as I crossed from the manicured lawn and into the forest. The cool soil turned to rough patches of pine needles and jagged roots, biting into my feet as I darted between the trees. My breath came fast, ragged, and my wolf stirred restlessly, her need rising in my mind.

The temptation clawed at me. It had been so long since I let her free, since I felt the earth under her paws, the wind slicing through her fur. Even if I was running to escape, it was still nice in a way. Cathartic, after the day I had yesterday. The excitement of it throbbed beneath my fear, cleansing and distracting.

But I wasn't running for fun. I was running because Danny wanted to marry me 'for my own good', and he wanted to do so as soon as possible. The prospect made my stomach sink. My life was spiraling out of control so fast, and I couldn't figure out how to stop it.

He thought he could own me. Well, I'll show him.

Focus, Naomi. Focus.

The woods grew darker the deeper I went, the air heavy with the scent of moss and damp earth. Sweat dripped down my back, sticking the thin fabric of my t-shirt to my skin. The humidity felt like a second layer, clinging and suffocating, but I didn't stop.

Then I heard it—the low, haunting sound of a howl in the distance. It sounded so familiar to me, and something in my soul stirred at the sound. It was a warning but also a call home.

I moved forward again, slower this time, careful not to trip over the underbrush. My breaths came shallow and fast, and my legs burned from the strain. I didn't know where I was anymore. The trees all looked the same, their thick trunks and gnarled branches stretching endlessly in every direction. I was dying to just sit for a moment, catch my breath, and let some of the sweat evaporate from my skin. But there was no time. He was close. I could feel it.

Feel it and hear it, apparently. There it was, the snap of a twig. I spun, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Someone—or something—was coming, feet crunching in the underbrush.

My wolf surged again, but I held her back. If I gave in to the change, I don't know what I would do. I'm sure the Red Canines wouldn't be thrilled if I mauled one of their wolves to escape, let alone the Alpha. I was afraid that was what it would come to. I felt backed into a corner.

Then I saw it.

A black shape against the green of the trees stalked forward—a massive wolf, his

coat the color of midnight, markings like a snow-white scarf around his neck. He moved with a cool confidence and didn't even look winded from the chase. An Alpha, no doubt about it.

It was Danny. He had caught me.

“Just let me go,” I begged. “Please let me go. I don't belong here.”

Danny huffed once, and then he charged.

I tried to run, but my legs betrayed me, stumbling over a root. I hit the ground hard, the air rushing out of my lungs in a startled gasp. Before I could scramble to my feet, the wolf was on me, its massive paws pinning me down by the shoulders.

Hot breath fanned against my neck, the scent of earth and musk overwhelming my senses. Then, underneath it, the addicting scent of sandalwood. Wolf and man, all mixed into one. My wolf perked up in interest, but the human part of me was terrified.

He leaned closer, a growl building in his chest. It was so deep that I could feel it through his paws. I couldn't tell if the shiver running down my spine was from fear or something else entirely.

Slowly, he lowered himself down till he was almost entirely lying on me. The warmth of his fur was against my bare legs and arms, and the strong, steady beat of his heart was against my chest. This was the power of the Alpha, calming me even when I wanted to scream, even when I should be panicking—because the wolf on top of me was also that man who wanted to force me into a marriage.

“Danny,” I whispered, barely more than a breath.

The wolf's growl softened, but he didn't move. He nudged his nose against my neck, and before my brain could even catch up, I was reaching to run my fingers through his fur. It was nice, soft and clean. The adrenaline was starting to drain out, and a warm, inevitable helplessness was taking its place. He had me. What was the point in fighting it?

My body and the wolf within were desperate to submit. And it terrified me.

No, I told myself, forcing the warmth away. Don't be excited. Be afraid!

But my body betrayed me, trembling not from terror but from something far more dangerous. The thrill of the chase, the heat of his gaze, the way he'd hunted me down like I was the only thing that mattered in the world—it stirred something in me I hadn't felt in years.

I didn't feel normal. I felt wanted.

My wolf stirred, too, not with defiance but with quiet curiosity. She liked this. Liked him. The traitor.

Stop it! I snapped at her, but the only answer I got was a silent growl of amusement from the most primal part of me.

"Fine. Well done," I relented. "You managed to catch a barefoot woman running in strange territory. What a big victory for you."

I couldn't tell exactly, but it seemed to me like the small yip he gave was amused. I heard his tail swish in the leaves behind us.

"Let me go." I pleaded again, but this time even I could hear the weariness in my own voice. "You've caught me twice, but that doesn't mean I'm yours."

For a moment, Danny didn't move, simply looking down at me with storm-gray eyes. Then, with surprising grace, he raised up and moved off of me. But even though his body was gone, his gaze and the warmth that it was raising in me remained.

I sat up and brushed the dirt from my legs, trying and failing to look away. "You don't get to decide for me, you know."

Danny didn't respond right away. Instead, he took a few steps away and shifted back to his human form in a blur of motion, and there he was—Danny, the man, standing tall and unapologetic, his eyes still burning with that same intensity.

Naked, of course. But I wasn't going to look down below his collarbone. I wasn't. Damn, though, even everything from the collarbone up was gorgeous.

"You can keep running, Naomi," he said, his voice sure. Like he knew the future, and all of my protesting was just a waste of time. "But trust me, I'm fast as hell, and I've got stamina for days.

Then he was reaching out his arm, offering to help me up from the forest floor. Despite my better judgment, I took it, and he's hoisting me up as though I weighed nothing. He moved too fast, and a sharp pain lanced through my shoulder.

"Ow!" I hissed, wincing.

Danny froze, his grip loosening instantly. "Shit. Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

His voice was soft, with worry driving away some of the normally present intimidation. He pulled me closer, his strong arms wrapping around me as though he could hold me together. Danny was rock solid, much taller than I am, and my head naturally slotted into his neck. Oh, he smelled so wonderful, almost mouthwatering. My eyes fluttered shut, and for a heartbeat, I let myself pretend that this thing with

him was something I could really have. We stood stock still as the warmth of his body seeped into mine, any twinge of discomfort in my shoulder long forgotten. There was comfort in it, but also something much more dangerous. Danny made me feel, made me burn with—

Desire.

Danny held me like something precious to him, his Alpha energy radiating. I'd been around the Silverfang Creek Alpha, of course, but being the center of an Alpha's attention was something else entirely. I wanted to nuzzle his neck and put my lips on the place where I could feel his heart beating. All of a sudden, it mattered so much less that he chased me down or that he had me kidnapped. Belonging to him would be oh so easy.

What little bit of my logical mind that was still working railed against these desires, and I opened my mouth to once again tell Danny to let me go. But when I glanced up at him, the words caught in my throat, unable to escape.

His face was so close, the intensity in his dark eyes enough to drown me. His jaw was tight, but his expression shuttered as he looked at me, his gaze flicking between my eyes and my lips.

“Naomi,” he said, putting worlds into that single word.

And then he kissed me.

It wasn't cautious or hesitant; it was overwhelming and urgent, as if he had been holding back for far too long and could no longer contain himself. His lips were pressing against mine with a consuming need that left me breathless.

For a moment, I let him. I don't think there was enough willpower on the planet to

make me pull away immediately. For a moment, everything narrowed down to the pinpoint of Danny's lips, the way he tasted like coffee, and the sharp pine-needle scent of the forest around us.

It made me weak, but I let it happen, a glutton for punishment. I imagined him pulling me to the ground, peeling my pajamas off—

But I couldn't have it. I was being a stupendous sort of idiot.

I managed to grasp onto a single thread of logic and pulled. It caused reality to pour over me like ice water, and before I could fall back down into the haze of desire once more, I put my hands on his bare chest and pushed. "No!"

Danny stumbled back, letting himself be moved by me, even though I knew he could have held his place if he really wanted to. He stood there, his chest heaving, his eyes searching mine with a mix of frustration and hurt.

"I can't," I explained, speaking not just to Danny but to myself. "This is crazy. We don't even know each other. I can't!"

Danny's jaw worked, an argument forming, but I watched as he swallowed it down and shook his head. He crossed his arms, the muscles there bunching.

"You can fight it all you want, Naomi," he said quietly. "But you're mine. You're just trying to delay the inevitable." Then he waved his hand back toward the way we came. "Go on. Back to the boarding house. I'll let you have this victory, but don't mistake me. We're mates. We belong together."

I turned away, my cheeks heated and my lips still tingling from his kiss. It was easier now that I didn't have to see him standing there, naked and strong, vibrating with how much he wanted me. No one has ever wanted me. Danny seemed so sure that

we'd be mated sooner rather than later, and as I set off back toward the house, there was a maddening voice inside me that whispered he was right.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“Hold still, Danny,” Penny muttered, tugging at the hem of the tux jacket as I stood on the little platform she’d set up in the corner of the boarding house living room. It was a shock to everyone that I’d never worn a full tux before, but when I discovered just how uncomfortable they were, I wished that I could get out of it this time, too. But if I’m marrying Naomi, I need to look the part—I need to be the groom that she deserves.

“I am holding still,” I grumbled, but my fingers twitched, itching for something to do. My mind wasn’t here—it was upstairs. I could hear the woman I desired more than my next breath moving around up there, and all of my senses were fixated on her.

Naomi was with Natalia, getting fitted for her gown. I hadn’t seen it yet, but Penny had described it in maddening detail. A leather dress tailored just for her, something that would hug every curve and make her look perfect. Like the queen of the Red Canines pack. The thought of it made all the blood rush from my head to my groin—I couldn’t fucking wait to see her.

If only she felt the same. Even if I haven’t spoken to her today, I still know that she’d flee and run back to her old home if given a chance. The last thing I wanted was an unwilling bride, but Naomi wasn’t giving me a damned chance.

I guess my displeasure was showing on my face.

“Danny, you’re scowling,” Julian said from his perch on the arm of the couch, one ankle crossed over his knee. His easy smirk grated on me today, even though I usually appreciated his calm presence. “You’re supposed to look happy. You’ve got a mate; you’re getting married—this is exactly what the pack needs.”

“I’m not scowling,” I lie.

Julian snorted. “You know I can see your face, right? You’re scowling the biggest scowl ever scowled.”

I flipped him off in the mirror, and all he did was laugh.

Penny stood and took a step back, examining her work with a critical eye. “He’s nervous,” she said, her voice matter-of-fact. “All grooms get like this. They want everything to be perfect.”

I didn’t correct her. Let her think it was the tux, the ceremony, or whatever else grooms were supposed to care about. The truth was that my nerves had nothing to do with perfection and everything to do with Naomi.

Two days. I hadn’t seen her alone since the woods two days ago. She’d been avoiding me like I was a damn plague, slipping away every time I so much as stepped into the same room. Even when we managed to get a second, she froze me out, so it was like I was totally alone anyway. And as much as it killed me, I gave her space.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t watching. Every move she made, every breath she took—I was attuned to it all. She didn’t know it, but when she paced the porch late at night, I was there in the shadows, making sure she was safe. When she sat by the window in her room, staring out at the woods, I could feel how tense she was, how much she wanted to flee for any chance to try and make it back to the Silverfangs. I was fine standing back and letting her believe I was giving her a little bit of freedom, but little did she know I was always there. I was never letting her go. I just had to find out a way to make her WANT to stay.

And now? Now, she was upstairs, being perfectly fitted into a leather dress to be my bride. My queen—and she’d probably rather be anywhere else on the planet, dammit.

What was I doing wrong?

Besides the whole drugging and kidnapping thing, that was a necessary evil. Otherwise, she would have never come to me of her own accord. Naomi just needed a rather firm push in my direction.

Julian cleared his throat, bringing me back to the present. He and Penny are both staring at me in the mirror. Neither of them has to say anything—my annoyance was advertised loud and clear on my face.

“If you keep making that face,” Julian said, “it’s going to get stuck like that.”

“Shut up,” I muttered, glaring at him.

“You can’t shut me up, man. Best friend privileges.” He grinned, leaning back like he owned the place.

“Keep talking, and I’ll revoke those privileges,” I warned, though there was no real heat behind the words. His teasing wasn’t exactly a welcome distraction, but at least it broke up the silence.

Penny stepped forward again, adjusting the lapel of my jacket. She had a pencil behind her ear and a chain of safety pins around her neck. What luck that one of our she-wolves, one that was even living with Naomi, was a seamstress. I don’t think I could have gotten Naomi into a bridal shop without her trying to run out of the door the moment I looked away.

“Alright, turn to the side. Let me see the back.”

I complied, turning slowly. The suit jacket was black, but not leather. Instead, the waistcoat on the second layer was leather to match Naomi’s dress. A full leather suit

would have left me sweating to death before I could get down the aisle, and I didn't want to be a sweaty mess while marrying my mate.

Penny took the pencil from behind her ear and tapped her lips with it, walking a slow circle around me. "I have to say, I'm damned good at my job. Move around a little; is everything comfortable?"

I did as she said, twisting and squatting to make sure that nothing pulled or tore. Although it pained me to play into Penny's ego, she deserved it. "It's good. Everything fits."

"Comfortable?" he asked again.

"Comfortable," I confirmed. "Perfect for if I have to chase my runaway bride down."

I meant the words to come off as humorous, but she and Julian both wince. There was a little too much worry and too much honesty in them. I found myself frowning again and met my own eyes in the mirror instead of looking at the other two wolves anymore.

I looked—different. Too put together, too clean-cut. I didn't recognize myself, but was that really a bad thing? The man in the reflection looks like an Alpha worthy of a mate like Naomi. The picture was perfect. Now, I just needed to make sure the reality matched.

Upstairs, I heard the faint sound of footsteps and fabric shifting, followed by a low murmur of voices. My ears strained, desperate for a hint of her.

"You're hopeless," Julian sighed, lightening the mood with his sarcasm. "Just wait till you see her in that dress. You'll be lucky if you survive the ceremony."

“Shut up,” I said again, but this time, there was a flicker of amusement in my tone. Because as much as I hated Julian’s smugness, he wasn’t wrong. Then, his words really hit me. “Wait, how in the hell did you see MY mate in her wedding dress, you asshole?”

“Easy, Alpha,” Julian chuckled. “Penny showed me a picture. Nothing more. I had my doubts about the leather, but Penny is an artist.” His grin grew. “Maybe we should have an ambulance on site just in case seeing her kills you.”

Naomi in leather? He’s not wrong. I might not survive. Instead of agreeing with Julian, though, I started to shrug my jacket off. “Get me out of this thing. I’ve got to take a piss and get away from this prick before we end up fighting and ruining all your hard work, Penny.”

The female wolf laughed, and after a few minutes of removing pins and making tiny last adjustments, Penny had me out of my tux and back into the sweats that I had worn over. Not that I’d spent much time at home, considering watching and protecting Naomi was a full-time job. Even though everyone would tell me I was being paranoid if I voiced my concerns out loud, I was so sure fate was plotting to take her away from me that I wasn’t going to take any chances.

The creak of the old staircase sounded louder than usual as I made my way up, each step groaning under my weight. Penny had finally declared me ‘acceptable’ and let me escape her pin-pricking clutches. All I wanted was a few minutes to myself—use the bathroom, maybe splash some water on my face, and figure out how to survive the next few days without losing my mind.

And maybe to get a little bit closer to Naomi. Hearing her moving around above me, the soft drone of her voice, called me like a siren song.

I caught a glimpse of my face in the bathroom mirror, struck by my reflection once

more. Up close, I could see the flaws that had escaped me in the brighter-lit downstairs mirror—stubble that’s just a bit too long, long-healed scars from fights, the lines at the corners of my eyes that have come prematurely with the stress of being Alpha. It’s hard for me to see the good, but I have hope that, eventually, Naomi will be able to.

Just as I splashed water over my face, the droning of voices in the other room changed pitch. It’s Naomi, louder than before, and she’s—crying.

Her voice was muffled, but the hurt in it sliced through me. I moved closer, careful to stay silent as I pressed my back against the wall near the door. I knew I shouldn’t listen, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“It’s just—I feel like I don’t belong here, Natalia,” she said, her voice thick with tears. “This place, these people—they’re not my pack. They’re not my family.”

My gut twisted at her words. Of course, I knew that she felt this way, but it still hurt to hear.

“Oh, Naomi,” Natalia murmured, her voice full of sympathy. “It’s okay to miss them. The Silverfang Creek was your home for so long. It’s only natural.”

I clenched my fists, my nails biting into my palms. She missed her pack? Of course, she did. The Silverfangs were her roots. But from what I understood, from the information I had gathered, Naomi wasn’t nearly as valued by her old pack as she should have been. I could understand her being comfortable there, but there was a stark difference between comfort and happiness.

“I don’t even know who I am anymore,” Naomi continued, her voice breaking. “I’m stuck here with strangers, with—him.”

Her tone sharpened on that last word, and I didn't need to ask who she meant.

"Danny isn't a stranger," Natalia said gently. "He's your mate."

"No," Naomi snapped, her voice rising with anger and despair. "I didn't choose this, Natalia. I don't feel like Danny is my mate. I feel like he's my prison guard or something. There were a million different ways he could have approached me, tried to see if we were compatible, but he jumped straight to kidnapping me."

"Well—he's an Alpha. We both know things are different in pack culture than in the rest of the world. Look, I know our pack has a bad reputation, but things are different for Danny. He wants to change things, but I think he needs you to do that, Naomi. You're the missing piece."

I heard Naomi shifting around, maybe pacing restlessly. "But no one actually knows that. He's just hoping that's the case. And until we figure it out, I'm trapped."

I felt like the air had been knocked out of me.

I wanted to burst in, to tell her she wasn't trapped, that I wasn't trying to cage her. But my feet stayed rooted to the floor. What good would it do when it was a lie? As much as I wanted to think of myself as a good man, it turns out that my limit was with Naomi. I can't give her up. Won't. So she was trapped, at least until she chose to stay willingly.

"You're stronger than this, Naomi. Things might not feel right now, but—maybe they will. Maybe Danny isn't the enemy you think he is."

Naomi didn't respond right away, and the silence stretched, heavy and suffocating.

Finally, she whispered, "I don't know if I can trust him. Or myself."

Every instinct in me screamed to go in, to hold her, to erase the hurt that had taken root inside her chest. But I couldn't barrel in like the Alpha trying to fix everything. That hadn't worked so far, and it wasn't going to work now. Naomi was mourning the loss of her independence, of the life that she had been living before the mating ceremony. How can I possibly make her see that her life will be leagues better now with me?

I wanted to crush my mouth to hers, kiss her until the worries and hesitations bled out of her, but that's just not how it was going to work with Naomi. She needed a gentler touch. It was almost enough to make me laugh—we were wolves, dammit. Yet Naomi needed to be treated like a frightened rabbit. It would have been so easy to just bust the door down and pull her into my arms until the mutual attraction took over, but—no.

Instead, I knocked softly and politely against all of my usual instincts.

The door creaked open, and Natalia's face appeared in the crack. Her eyes narrowed slightly, though not in outright hostility.

"Alpha," she said, her tone cautious.

"Can I see my bride?"

Natalia hesitated, her gaze flicking back toward the room where Naomi was still hidden. For a moment, I thought she might refuse me, and I braced myself for the challenge. But then she seemed to remember that I was her Alpha and stepped aside, shoulders stiff.

"Be gentle," Natalia whispered as I passed her.

There was a clear warning in her voice. I didn't respond; I just nodded once before

stepping into the room.

Naomi stood by the window, her arms wrapped around herself. She didn't look at me, but I could see the tension in the rigid line of her back, the way her fingers gripped her sides like she was holding herself together. She wasn't in her wedding gown, but a loose sweatshirt and black leggings, her hair piled on top of her head in a haphazard bun. I knew she heard me come in, but she didn't turn to face me.

"Naomi,"

She turned slowly then, her face guarded, her eyes still red from crying. It made me clench my fists. I'd tear any person that made my mate cry to pieces, but that became a little harder when I knew I was actually the one that was the problem.

"What do you want, Danny?" she asked, dragging one hand over her face.

I took a step closer, careful not to crowd her, eyes flickering over to Natalia. "I want to talk. Alone."

The laugh she let out was dry and empty of humor. "Talk? What's left to talk about? You've made it clear how this is going to go. I'm your mate, and we're getting married, whether I like it or not. What else is there to say?"

Behind me, I heard Natalia slip out of the door and shut it quietly behind her,

I crammed my hands into my pants pockets, resisting the urge to close the distance between us just to touch her. "I know that you think this is the end of the world for you, but I want to convince you that things will be good with me. That I can be good for you if you'd just—I don't know, relax a little."

Her eyes narrowed. Fuck, that was the wrong thing to say. "What's that supposed to

mean?”

“It means you’re not a prisoner here. I just need to keep you here because I know that otherwise, you wouldn’t give me a chance.” I said firmly. “You’re safe. With me. With my pack. I’m a damn good Alpha, Naomi, no matter what my reputation is. I’m not just some drug-dealing asshole. I want more for my pack. I want more for us.”

She shook her head, looking away as her lip trembled. “You don’t get it. I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel free. I feel—lost. I had an entire life—a job, friends—”

My chest ached at her words, but I pushed forward. “I know this isn’t what you wanted. I know you miss your pack, your home. But you have to believe me when I say that I’m not trying to take those things away from you. I’m trying to give you something better. A future. A partner who will fight for you, protect you—”

“Protect me?” she cut in, her voice rising. “You mean control me. You don’t trust me to make my own choices, Danny. You just—decide what’s best and expect me to follow along.”

Her words hit their mark, but I stood my ground. “Listen. You’re here. We were matched in a mating ceremony. There’s no denying we’re mates. But I want to give in a little for you Naomi. We obviously can do this the normal way—dating and whatever else—but I can try to get closer.”

“Closer, how?”

“I don’t know—normal couple stuff.”

“Normal couples don’t kidnap each other!”

My frustrations were rising, but I tried to tamp them down. Getting mad wasn’t going

to get me anywhere with her. “Naomi, you don’t understand. I need to protect you and—”

“I don’t need you to protect me!” she snapped.

“Yes, you do!” I shot back, my voice firm but not raised. “Because the world we live in doesn’t care how strong you are, Naomi. It doesn’t care how capable you are. It’ll take everything from you if you’re not careful like it did me, and I can’t—I won’t let that happen.”

Her lips parted, her expression flickering between anger and something softer, something she didn’t want to admit.

“We’re fated, Naomi,” I said, my voice dropping to a near whisper. “Why in the hell would you have gotten picked up by a trucker that was working for me? That’s fate. But I can’t make this work if you aren’t here. Give me a chance to show you the kind of man I am.”

Her breath hitched, and for a moment, I thought she might let me in. That she might see what I was trying to give her.

But then she turned away, her voice barely audible. “I don’t know if I can trust you, Danny.” Her defiance was written all over her face, but beneath it, I caught the smallest flicker of something else. Uncertainty.

It was hard as hell, but I kept myself in check. She needed time. Hell, she deserved time, but if I left her now, hurting, we’d be even farther from understanding each other than we were before. So I took a chance. “Can I hold you?” I asked carefully. “Just for a moment.”

Her eyes snapped up to mine, suspicion clear in her gaze. “Why?”

“Because I think we both need it,” I said simply, shrugging one shoulder.

Naomi paused, and for a heartbeat, I was sure she was going to say no—the word was poised right there on her lips. But then, her shoulders loosened, and I could see that she was going to give in. Triumph soared inside of me.

Slowly, my mate approached. Naomi lifted her arms and they went around my neck as she leaned into me, resting her forehead against my chest like it was the most natural thing in the world. And for us, maybe it was. Naomi just had to admit it to herself first.

I didn’t move at first, afraid that she would bolt a scared fawn. When she didn’t pull back, I gently wrapped my arms around her, linking my fingers at her lower back, feeling the warm strip of her bare skin between her shirt and leggings. She was so soft against me, yet I could feel her strength in the way her body resisted relaxing, her muscles taut and ready to retreat at any moment.

Her fruity, spicy scent wrapped around me, soothing my restless wolf that had been dying to be closer to our mate. I wanted to pull her tighter and bury my face in her hair, but I held back.

And then, just as quickly as she’d stepped into my arms, she pulled away, leaving a cold emptiness where her warmth had been. I wanted to reach for her once more, but I let her go, knowing she needed to see that I had control a lot more than I needed to hold her for a moment longer.

“Thanks,” she muttered, looking anywhere but at me.

I nodded, shoving my hands back into my pockets to stop myself from reaching for her again. “Anytime.”

We stood in awkward silence for a beat before I spoke again, my tone lighter this time. “How about a date?”

Her head jerked up, surprise flashing across her face. “What?”

“A date,” I repeated. “You and me. Somewhere nice. No pack business, no obligations. Just us.”

“Why?”

“Because we need to get to know each other, Naomi,” I said plainly. “I know you wish this was more like a normal relationship, and like I said before, I want to try to meet you halfway when I can. You think I’m just some overbearing Alpha who wants to control your life, and maybe I’ve done a shitty job proving otherwise. But I want to change that. I want you to see the real me.”

She crossed her arms, clearly unconvinced. “And what if it goes terribly? What if we aren’t compatible, if we don’t have anything in common? It could be a mess.”

The image was almost funny, if there wasn’t so much weighing on Naomi giving this mating a chance. “What, like we argue over appetizers and call it quits?”

“I mean it, Danny,” she said, her voice serious. “If we don’t get along, will you let me go home?”

The air seemed to still, the question hanging between us like a challenge.

Enough playing it safe just to keep the calm between us. This was something I wasn’t willing to lie about. I took a step closer, my expression hardening as I looked her dead in the eyes. “I’m never letting you out of my sight, Naomi.”

Her breath caught, her lips parting slightly as my words sank in. I knew how it sounded—possessive, absolute—but it was the truth. Letting her go wasn't an option. Not for me. Not for us.

Her gaze searched mine like she was looking for some kind of hidden motive, some angle. I stayed still, letting her see exactly what I meant.

“Fine,” she said at last. “One date.”

Relief coursed through me, but I kept my grin small. I didn't want to scare her off now that I'd finally gotten a step closer.

“Deal,” I said, nodding. “7 pm tonight. Be ready.”

She rolled her eyes but didn't argue. Instead, she turned back to the window, her shoulders still tense but not as rigid as before.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. And I'd take it.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The mirror in Penny's room was too small for a full view, but I could see enough to know the dress suited me. Penny had dug it out of her wardrobe, mischief written all over her face when she handed it over. I'm lucky as hell that she was plus size like me, as opposed to our other roommate, the reedy Natalia.

Penny's clothes reflected just how confident she was in herself and her body. It wasn't that I was necessarily self-conscious about my own curves, but I was always keenly aware that I was different than a lot of the pack members my age. I didn't dress like someone who loved herself, but Penny did. Standing in her clothes, I felt a mix of feelings—a thrill at how genuinely good I looked and a sinking feeling at how uncomfortable I would be with anyone else's eyes on me.

“I don't know. Maybe this is too much.”

“It's perfect for a date,” she'd said, brushing off my protests.

And it was. The fabric was soft and flowing, the deep forest green color complementing my dark hair and eyes—It hugged my curves just enough to be flattering but loose enough to feel comfortable. A subtle V-neckline and short flutter sleeves added a touch of romance, while the hem fell just below my knees, grazing against my bare calves.

Smoothing the skirt, I let out a long breath. “This was a bad idea.”

Penny snorted from her spot on the bed, where she was lying on her stomach, looking at something on the phone. “You look gorgeous. Now stop fidgeting before you wear a hole in that dress.”

Before I could argue, a low rumble sounded from outside. My heart skipped, and I quickly turned away from the mirror, giving Penny a panicked look. She had hopped up and was looking out the window, turning around to give me an excited thumbs up. “It’s go time!”

“I guess that’s my cue, then.” My voice was wavering, devoid of any of the confidence I had hoped to put in it.

Penny smirked, clearly enjoying my nerves far too much. “Have fun, Naomi. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I shot her a glare, but it was half-hearted. “I have no idea what you would or wouldn’t do.”

She wagged her eyebrows, grabbing the bag she was letting me borrow and tossing it in my direction. “Oh, I don’t know. I think I’d play a little hard to get, but if I had a sexy Alpha on my tail, I might roll over and show him my belly a little.”

I flushed red, shocked. “Penny!”

Laughing, she pushed me toward the door. “Get out of here, lady. Have fun.”

There was no going back now. I had agreed to the date, and now I wasn’t going to chicken out.

I thought I was totally prepared, but when I stepped out onto the porch, I nearly stopped in my tracks.

Danny was leaning casually against a sleek black Harley-Davidson Road Glide, the chrome accents gleaming in the soft glow of the porch light. He’d swapped his usual rugged jeans and T-shirt for something slightly more polished—a fitted black button-

up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing his strong forearms, paired with dark jeans and leather boots. A simple silver chain glinted at his throat, catching the light as he straightened at the sight of me.

For a moment, neither of us said anything. His dark eyes traveled over me slowly, and I felt heat rise to my cheeks under his gaze. I fidgeted with the necklace Natalia had forced on me—a tiny gold paw print on a delicate chain.

“You look beautiful,” he said, his voice low and genuine.

“Thanks,” I muttered, looking away to hide the flush that had crept up my neck. “Should I uh—put pants on? I guess it slipped my mind that you all were in a biker gang.”

Amusement glittered in his eyes. “Motorcycle club. But no. A lot of the ladies like the vibrations.”

Oh my God, I thought, covering my face with my hands, I’m going to be blushing the entire night, right?

Danny’s laugh was genuine, which was enough to get me to lower my hands and accept the helmet he was holding out for me. “Sorry, I couldn’t help it. You’re so pretty when you blush. Ready?”

I hesitated for a heartbeat before nodding, taking the helmet from his hands, and slipping it over my head. I wasn’t fond of how restricting it felt, and Danny could tell, reaching up to help me adjust it. His fingers brushed against my face, and the brief contact made me shiver.

He helped me climb onto the back of the bike, his hands steadying me as I adjusted to the unfamiliar seat. Once I was settled, he handed me his leather jacket, insisting I

wear it for the ride.

“It’ll keep you warm,” he said simply, as though I could argue with the protective edge in his voice.

“I’m a wolf too, you know. We run warm naturally.”

“I’m well aware,” he chuckled, helping me shrug on the jacket anyway and zip it up to my neck. “Wolf or not, we all feel the wind going 60-plus miles per hour.”

Danny climbed on in front of me, and there was a brief moment when I realized that there was no choice but to wrap my arms around him. Oh, it was nicer than I could have imagined. Danny was firm and warm, his muscles shifting as he put his hands on the handlebars. I couldn’t lean my cheek against his back like my body so wanted to—the helmet was in the way—but I shifted forward, and we were in full body contact from our hips up. Ugh. He felt so damned good. If I wasn’t supposed to be pissed at him, it’d be way too easy to give in.

The ride through Athens was exhilarating, the rush of the wind tugging at my hair and the hum of the engine beneath us like a heartbeat. I couldn’t stop myself from gripping him hard, feeling the strength of his body through the leather as he guided the bike with practiced ease.

He was right. The vibration was nice. I was glad Penny had given me a longer dress so my modesty was slightly preserved, but it was teetering on erotic—the hard lines of Danny’s body, the shaking of the bike beneath me, the world racing by at impossible speeds.

We left the city behind, the roads winding into the quiet woods that surrounded the area. The air was warm, thick with the scent of pine and earth, but there was a faint coolness as the sun began to dip lower in the sky.

Eventually, we came to a stop near a small clearing by the river. The spot was breathtaking, the water shimmering with the last rays of sunlight filtering through the trees. Fireflies flickered around us, more joining their brethren as the sun continued to lower.

Danny helped me off the bike, steadying me again as my legs adjusted. I tugged the helmet off, looking at my reflection in the mirrored visor and wincing at the state of my hair. When I looked up, Danny was watching me with painful fondness. “Most of the girls braid their hair. I should have told you.”

“Most of what girls?” I ask, suddenly jealous when I had no right to be.

“Calm down, Sweetheart. I meant the other guys’ wives and girlfriends.” He gestured around us. “What do you think?”

“This is—beautiful,” I admitted, my voice softer than I intended.

Danny shrugged, but there was a hint of pride in his expression. “Thought you might like it.”

For once, I didn’t feel the need to argue. I simply let myself enjoy the moment, even if a part of me remained guarded. Of course I was still pissed about the kidnapping and the house arrest, but I wasn’t a fool. This was pack politics; this was just how it worked sometimes. I’d like to think the Silverfangs were more modern than this, but I’d be lying to myself. Add in the fact that Danny was an Alpha, and I should have known that running was pointless.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to give up fighting, though. I might be destined to lose, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to make this easy on him.

Danny crouched by the bike, pulling a leather bag from the back. He worked quietly,

methodically, as though this were something he did often, though I doubted he brought many people to secluded riversides for a picnic. I was still somewhat surprised he hadn't taken me to some smoky biker bar. Surprised, and relieved.

When he began unloading the contents—a bottle of wine, a wooden board piled with an assortment of cheeses, deli meats, and a small loaf of crusty bread—I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

“Didn't peg you as the charcuterie type,” I said, folding my arms as I watched him spread everything out on the blanket.

Danny glanced up at me with a faint smirk. “I'm full of surprises.”

The casual flirtation caught me off guard. I quickly looked away, focusing instead on the soft babble of the river in the background.

We sat down across from each other on the soft, blanket-covered grass. I folded my legs under myself, kicking off my sandals, infinitely glad that my black gel pedicure was hanging on from before the kidnapping.

He poured us each a glass of wine, the deep red liquid catching the firefly light, and offered me the first piece of cheese. I took it reluctantly, nibbling on it more to fill the silence than because I was actually hungry. It was mild and fruity, and my stomach rumbled at the first bite. Okay, so maybe I was hungry. Big deal.

Danny, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at ease. He leaned back on one hand, his dark eyes flicking over me in a way that made my skin prickle with awareness. I watched his large fingers grab wedges of cheese and pieces of cured meat, following suit and trying whatever he seemed to enjoy. It was all delicious—unctuous, cheesy, salty, sharp, and sweet, depending on which piece I chose. Danny kept my wine glass full and kept the conversation surface-level for the time being—what I did for work,

how I liked Penny and Natalia, etcetera.

“So,” I said finally, breaking through the casual chit-chat to ask something I was actually curious about. “Do you usually whisk women away to places like this, or am I special?”

He chuckled, the sound low and warm. “You’re special.”

I rolled my eyes, though my heart betrayed me with a tiny flutter. “Sure I am.”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “You don’t believe me?”

“Not really,” I admitted, swirling the wine in my glass. “Everyone in my old pack thought I was as interesting as a slice of white bread.”

Anger flickered over his features. “Idiots, then. All of them.”

This made me blink in surprise. “How can you say that, though? You don’t even know me. So what is it? Why are you so—fixated on me? Why can’t you let me out of your sight for five minutes?”

Danny’s easy demeanor shifted. His shoulders tensed, and for a moment, I thought he wouldn’t answer. Then he sighed, running a hand through his dark curls.

“It’s not just about you,” he said quietly. “It’s about what you mean to me.”

“That’s vague,” I said, trying to keep my tone light even as my stomach tightened. We were getting into serious territory quite fast.

He looked at me then, his expression unguarded in a way that made my chest ache. “You remind me of what I lost once. Of what I can’t lose again.”

I frowned, the playful edge to our conversation gone for good. “What do you mean?”

Danny took a sip of his wine before setting the glass aside. He stared out at the river, his jaw tight as he spoke. “My parents were fated to be together. My father used to tell me that she was his everything, the other half of his soul. They were mates, no question about it. Then I went and killed her during childbirth, and everything was ruined.”

I was stunned and heartbroken for Danny all at once. The words were heavy and raw, and it was clear that he had been dreading telling me. He spoke about it like an old wound that had never healed, hurting him day after day.

“I don’t remember her, obviously,” he continued, his voice steady but distant. “But my dad—He loved her so much it nearly killed him. He spent my whole life telling me that when you find your mate, you do whatever it takes to protect them. That nothing else matters.”

I swallowed hard, unsure how to respond. “So, this—This is about your parents?”

Danny’s gaze snapped back to mine, full of misery but also a fierce determination. “This is about you, Naomi. You’re my mate. Whether you like it or not, you’re mine. And I can’t lose you.”

His words should have terrified me. They should have sent me running back into the woods. Instead, they lodged somewhere deep inside, planting themselves in a corner of my heart I didn’t want to acknowledge, roots sinking deep. I couldn’t have pulled them out even if I wanted to.

I looked away, focusing on the distant forest instead of the pain of the man in front of me. “That’s a lot of pressure to put on someone you barely know,”

Danny reached out, his hand brushing a strand of my wind-swept hair behind my ear. “Then let me get to know you.”

His voice was quiet and sincere, and it was the first time I felt like maybe—just maybe—he wasn’t trying to trap me. Maybe he was just trying to keep me safe in the only way he knew how. Some of my anger at him bled away, replaced by a fondness that I feared more than I welcomed. Danny wasn’t just some possessive asshole. He was an Alpha who was terrified of losing something he had waited his entire life for—a mate. Me.

I reached for something to say, something that wouldn’t drag us deeper into the sadness of it all but something that would let him know I understood. That I was listening. “Your parents—” I began, licking my lips. “They sound like they had something special.”

“They did,” Danny replied, his voice gentler now, the sharpness of loss replaced by a yearning. “But it wasn’t perfect. It was messy, like all the best things are. It’s just—knowing you’re meant for someone makes the mess worth it.”

I nodded slowly, my fingers tracing the edge of my wine glass. “I wouldn’t know.”

Danny looked at me, his brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Don’t do it! My psyche screamed. Don’t open up like this. You can’t take it back!

But my heart was stronger, and it really, really wanted to connect with Danny. To give him something about me that was just as valuable as what he had just shared. “I don’t have parents,” I said, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. “I mean, I had them, obviously. But they didn’t stick around.”

His eyes darkened, and for a moment, he didn’t say anything. The silence felt heavier

this time, like he was waiting for me to explain. I swallowed hard and continued.

“They left me with the Silverfang Creek pack’s doctor when I was a baby. No note, no explanation. Just—gone. I grew up in the pack boarding school. The other pups had parents—pack moms who brought them snacks, pack dads who showed up for training. I had teachers, nannies, whoever happened to be around.”

I laughed, but there was no joy in it. “It was why I always thought the mate match ceremonies were a waste of time. There had never been a single person on this planet that wanted me in any way, shape or form. I had spent so many years hardening myself to be alone that it was almost insulting to be called to every match ceremony as if there was hope. Then fate throws a curve ball in my direction and I’m matched with you of all people. An Alpha...wanting me, good ol’ Normal Naomi. It was ridiculous. But now I’m here and you look at me like I’m something special, something precious, and it—” My throat was tight, and getting out the last few words was almost impossible. “It brings me right back to that boarding house, when I still had hope I’d be chosen. I thought I’d killed off that part of myself a long time ago. It’s...it’s fine.”

Danny leaned forward slightly, his hand brushing against the blanket between us. “Naomi—”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly, cutting him off. “I’ve had a long time to get used to it. I couldn’t exactly miss something that I never had, you know?”

But it wasn’t fine, and I knew he could tell. I felt uncomfortable, exposed. Had I taken it too far?

“Why would you want to go back?” he asked after a moment, his voice careful, deliberate. “To a pack that didn’t give you a family?”

It was a sore spot. Yeah, Normal Naomi, why would you go back? I bet they don't even know you're gone. I bristled, the heat rising in my chest. "You don't get it," I snapped, turning to face him. "They protected me."

Danny tilted his head, studying me like I was a puzzle he couldn't quite figure out. "And? You were a child, and they weren't monsters, so of course they did. But that doesn't mean you owe them your entire life."

"They raised me, Danny. They fed me, clothed me, and made sure I had everything I needed to survive. Just because they weren't my blood doesn't mean they didn't care." My voice cracked, and I hated the way it made me feel small. "And I'm sure they'll come find me."

Danny didn't argue, but the way he looked at me said he wasn't convinced. There was a quiet pity in his expression, and it made me want to slap the look off his face. How dare he pity me? I was fine before he took me. Fine!

"They might," he admitted finally, his voice low. "But they'd have to go through me to get to you."

With my throat dry, I turned back to the river, reaching for my wine glass and draining it. There we were, all the way back at the beginning. Danny had me trapped, and he had no plan of letting me go. Did the reasons why even matter at this point?

"Would you leave if they came for you?" His voice was quiet, but there was a deadly edge to it.

The question sent a jolt through me. My first instinct was to say yes, to reaffirm my loyalty to the pack that had raised me. But the words felt heavier on my tongue than they should have. It took me long seconds to answer.

“Yes,” I said finally, wishing like hell I sounded like I believed my own words.

Danny’s lips curled into a slow, infuriating smile, the kind that made my pulse spike with equal parts rage and unwanted attraction. “I’ve already won, then.”

I blinked, thrown by the statement. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He leaned back slightly, his arms bracing behind him as though this was all a game to him. “You’re lying to yourself, Naomi. You don’t want to leave. If you did, you wouldn’t have hesitated. I can smell the lie on you, hear your heart kicking up. You’d be tempted to stay. With me. As my mate.”

His words pierced through the carefully constructed armor I’d built around myself. The worst part was he was right. And he knew it.

“Oh, fuck you, Danny.”

“Brave to speak to an Alpha like that—unless you’re his mate. Admit it, Naomi, you’re mine, and you’re staying,” he replied, his tone maddeningly calm, like he was stating a simple fact.

The heat in my chest turned to a full-blown wildfire, and before I could stop myself, I felt my wolf rising to the surface.

To hell with it. My wolf had been begging to be released for days now. Maybe I needed to show Danny that I was a force to be reckoned with, too. My skin tingled, bones shifting and muscles stretching as my body gave way to instinct.

The transformation was quick, seamless. One moment, I was sitting there in human form, and the next, I was on four paws, my sandy fur shimmering in the moonlight as I shook off and stepped out of the green dress. My emotions were completely

different like this—simpler, black and white instead of a million shades of gray.

Danny didn't flinch. He didn't even look surprised. Instead, his smirk deepened as though he'd been waiting for this. He looked damned delighted.

"Feeling a little wild, huh?"

I growled, low and threatening, and then I lunged.

The impact sent him sprawling backward onto the blanket, his breath escaping in a sharp exhale of laughter. My paws pinned his broad chest, my sharp teeth bared inches from his face. He stared up at me, and to my frustration, he didn't look the least bit intimidated. If anything, his grin widened. "There's my girl," he murmured, his voice almost—proud.

I snarled in response, pressing down harder with my weight. But even as my wolf demanded I put him in his place, another part of me—smaller, quieter—thrilled at the way he looked at me. Like I was fierce. Powerful. His equal.

"Go on," he taunted softly. "Show me what you've got."

His words only fueled my anger, and I snapped my teeth dangerously close to his throat. He didn't flinch. Instead, his hand moved slowly, deliberately, brushing against the white heart-shaped marking on my chest.

I froze, my wolf's instincts warring with my human emotions. He wasn't supposed to touch me like that—not with tenderness, not with reverence. It wasn't fair.

Danny's eyes softened, though his smirk lingered. "You can fight me all you want, Naomi. But we both know I'm not the one you're really mad at."

My growl faltered, the weight of his words sinking in. He was wrong—he had to be. I wasn't mad at myself. I wasn't mad at the pull I felt toward him.

Was I?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Naomi stood a few feet away, her sandy fur bristling in the moonlight. That white heart on her chest was rising and falling with every angry breath she took, and for a split second, I was mesmerized. She didn't know what to think of me. I liked it. Keeping her on her toes was exhilarating.

Her growl echoed through the trees, sounding way more genuine than I would have expected. She was serious in her annoyance with me, and that made a pleasurable shiver run up my spine. Oh, this was going to be fun.

She could have run. After knocking me down, she could have bolted into the woods, disappearing into the shadows without a trace. But she stayed. She stayed to fight me, defiance blazing in her eyes.

Naomi didn't want to leave me. She wanted to show me how much I pissed her off, sure, but I'd take pissed-off Naomi any day instead of no Naomi at all.

Damn, she was something else.

Her paws dug into the earth, her stance low, poised to strike. I felt the pull of my wolf rising to meet her challenge, but it wasn't anger driving me. It was something deeper, something primal. I wanted to run with Naomi through the moonlit forest, wanted to hunt beside her, wanted to swim in the river and dry our fur side by side in the sun.

Really, I just wanted her, any way I could have her.

She was breathtaking. If I wanted to keep up with her and let her vent some of her frustrations I was going to need to change the game a little bit.

I shifted before I could second-guess myself, the familiar heat and stretch of the transformation ripping through me. In seconds, my wolf emerged, black fur blending with the night, my white necktie marking stark against the darkness.

Naomi growled, low and warning, but I could hear the undertone of hesitation. She didn't want to hurt me—not really—which was amusing. She was an impressive wolf, but I was far larger than she was. It would take a lot more than Naomi to seriously harm me.

Which was good because I didn't want to hurt her, either.

With a playful bark, I lunged toward her, not with the intent to dominate but to engage. She darted to the side, quick and graceful, her movements calculated. She snapped at me, her teeth grazing my shoulder—not enough to break the skin, just enough to show me she meant business. Naomi was quick, her movements clean and practiced. She would make a great addition to the pack.

I laughed—or at least, my wolf did, a low rumble of amusement. She was holding back. Even in her fury, she was being careful.

You're trying too hard to act tough, I thought, knowing full well she couldn't hear me.

We circled each other, paws kicking up soft dirt, the scent of the woods thick around us. Our charcuterie board and wine were long forgotten, red liquid spilling on the picnic blanket. She charged again, and this time, I let her hit me, her weight crashing into my side. The impact sent me rolling, but I didn't fight it. I used the momentum to twist back onto my paws and nip at her tail as she tried to leap away.

She yelped in surprise, turning on me with a growl, but I could see the spark of excitement in her golden eyes.

This wasn't a fight—it was a dance. A test. And damn if she wasn't holding her own.

She pounced, her paws colliding with my chest, and we went down together in a tangle of fur and claws. I let her pin me for a moment, her teeth hovering near my throat. She could have gone for it—could have claimed the win. But instead, she hesitated.

With a burst of energy, I flipped us, pinning her beneath me. She squirmed, growling in frustration, but her blows were controlled, precise. No claws raking my face, no teeth snapping too close.

She wasn't as angry with me as she thought she was. It was hard for her to admit that she would have a hard time leaving the Red Canines to return to the Silverfangs or that she could actually see a future at my side. Maybe this fight, letting Naomi explore her wild side with me, would help her think more clearly when she was back in her human form.

Instead, I let her wriggle free, giving her space to dart away again. She didn't go far, circling back around to face me. Her growls were quieter now, less threatening, and more playful.

And that's when it hit me.

She wanted to stay. Maybe not with me, maybe not here, but deep down, her wolf didn't want to run. She wanted this—this connection, this clash of wills. How long had it been since someone had run beside her, played with her like this? How many people had overlooked this amazing woman because she didn't fit some mold that they thought she should?

Never again. I would make her feel wanted. For as long as she'd have me and more.

It wasn't just her strength or her fire that pulled me in—it was her choice. She chose to stand and fight instead of running. Chose to give me a chance even though I had to bring her to me in the roughest way possible. Naomi was willing to give this connection a chance, even if it went against her better judgment.

And I was absolutely, completely captivated.

The growl in Naomi's throat softened, her tension easing as I let her wriggle free again. Her sandy fur was dusted with leaves, her chest heaving from exertion. I stood still, letting her circle me one last time, waiting to see if she'd charge again.

It was a beautiful night. We were far enough from the city that it smelled like nature and not pollution. The grass was soft under our feet. Bats chittered and chirped in the sky above us.

Then it came.

A low, guttural sound, distant but unmistakable. Not a growl. Not anything natural. My ears perked, my wolf going rigid as I scanned the dark woods around us. Naomi froze, too, her golden-brown eyes narrowing as the noise came again—closer this time.

I didn't wait. Shifting back into human form and scooping my discarded jeans up in one smooth motion, I barked, "Naomi, shift!" laying all the power of an Alpha behind it I could.

She obeyed without hesitation, her sandy fur giving way to soft skin. I didn't bother to consider if it was because I was an Alpha or because she trusted me that she did it so quickly. Her expression, usually defiant, was wide-eyed now, her lips parted as though she were about to speak but couldn't find the words. I had her dress in my hand, tugging it over her head as soon as she was human again, resisting the urge to

look over her body that I had coveted since the moment I laid eyes on her. Danger was looming, and her safety was maybe the only thing in the world more important than how fucking gorgeous she was to me.

I grabbed her hand and tugged her close, shielding her with my body as I scanned the tree line. Naomi was taking me seriously, not bothering to try and shove me away.

The forest was too quiet. The usual hum of crickets, the rustle of leaves—it was all gone, swallowed by an oppressive silence. The same sort of silence that came when a predator was around and all the prey animals went quiet. Naomi and I were, of course, predators, but it wasn't just the usual wolf prey subjects that had ceased to make sound; it was everything.

Then I saw them.

Dark shapes slinking between the trees, their movements unnatural, jerky. The glow of their red eyes pierced through the shadows, and a scent hit me—acrid, sulfuric, wrong. They were positioned to where we'd have to pass them to get back to the Harley, and that just wasn't a risk I was willing to take. I was fast, and even if Naomi wasn't, I would carry her if I had to.

“Run,” I hissed, pulling Naomi with me. I didn't even really need to bother; she had caught the scent, too, and was already poised on the balls of her feet, ready to fly.

We sprinted through the woods, the ground uneven beneath our bare feet. My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline pumping through my veins as the demons' snarls grew louder and closer. I didn't dare look back, focusing instead on the path ahead, on the faint glow of the house in the distance.

I hadn't told Naomi, but I chose our picnic spot not just because it was beautiful but because it was part of my property, the same property my home was built on. She'd

have seen it as another sign of how obsessed I was with control and protection, but it looked like I was right on the mark. It was a stroke of luck, but at the same time, it was bad fucking news that demons were getting cocky enough to creep around an Alpha's property.

The demons gave chase, their guttural cries tearing through the night. Naomi stumbled once, but I caught her before she hit the ground, hauling her upright without breaking stride. When we burst through the tree line and onto the lawn, my nearby house loomed like a beacon. Naomi had only seen the place the morning after the kidnapping and never the back, but she believed in me enough not to ask questions as I shoved her toward the porch.

"Get inside!" I barked.

I wasted no time. Once inside, I locked every door. My wolf roared inside me, demanding I ensure her safety. I had pack security on the phone within seconds while I manually checked every door, window, and vent in the place. I commanded security to head to every pack house, including extra personnel for my property. But there was one other property I thought might be more vulnerable than the others, and there was one person I trusted above all others to keep it safe.

It only rang once before Julian picked up. "What's wrong?"

"Demons," I said curtly. "In the woods near my place. Fuck, M an, they came out of nowhere!" I swallowed hard before continuing, letting my racing heart slow bit by bit. "Look, I need you to go and secure the boarding house immediately. I don't like leaving our girls without defenses."

"On it." Julian's voice was serious and clipped. "Do you two need backup?"

"Not right now. We're safe."

After ending the call, I paced the living room, checking my phone for alerts from our perimeter system. Nothing. No alarms. No breaches. Yet. Naomi appeared in the doorway, her hair tousled, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. She watched me silently, her body language as I checked the locks for the third time. She was barefoot, her dress slightly sideways, and her breathing was still slightly elevated.

When I finally turned to her, the look on her face stopped me in my tracks—was that—affection? For me?

It was there in her eyes, unguarded and soft like she was seeing me for the first time. The fierceness I'd come to expect from her was still there, but it was joined by something warmer. My chest tightened. I opened my mouth to speak, but the words caught in my throat, and all I managed to get out was, "Naomi?"

"Thank you." The simplest words, but they meant everything to me.

"For what?" I asked, my voice rough.

Her lips twitched into the faintest smile. "Oh, don't play dumb. For keeping us safe back there, obviously."

She had no idea what she was making me feel. Confidence, arrogance, triumph, and affection just as strong as the same emotion written all over her expression. Damn, I wanted to kiss her, but I gave her the space that was oh-so-important to her. She had more to say, and I didn't want to rush her.

Her arms were still crossed tightly over her chest like she was trying to hold herself together, but there was a flicker of something in her eyes—something that wasn't fear or defiance. She licked her lips before speaking. "You saved me back there. I—those were demons, weren't they? I don't think I would have recognized the signs if I had been by myself. So, uh, yeah. Thank you, Danny."

“You don’t need to thank me for that. Protecting you—it’s not optional for me.”

She tilted her head slightly, studying me like she was seeing past my words, straight to the person I didn’t often let people see. It made my skin prickle and made me want to fidget like some rookie wolf caught off guard.

But instead of calling me out, she nodded slowly. “Still,” she said, her voice firmer now, “it means something. I’m not used to anyone going out of their way for me like that.”

Her words were like a knife twisting in my gut. “You deserve it. You deserve to feel safe, Naomi.”

Her lips parted slightly, her eyes flicking down like she couldn’t hold my gaze anymore. There was something vulnerable about the way she stood there, barefoot and wrapped in uncertainty, but she didn’t pull away. I wanted to reach for her, to do something—anything—that would bridge the growing connection between us. But I didn’t. She needed space, and I’d already learned how stubborn she could be when she felt cornered.

Instead, I leaned against the wall, keeping my voice low. “I’d do it again, you know. Without a second thought.”

Her eyes lifted back to mine, and this time, there was no mistaking the shift in her expression. Her walls weren’t down entirely, but a crack was starting to form, just enough for a little light to shine through.

“Maybe you’re not as terrible as I thought,” she murmured, a tiny smile playing on her lips.

It wasn’t much, but it was enough to make my chest ache in the best way.

I smirked, trying to lighten the moment. “Careful, Naomi. If you keep talking like that, I might start to think you actually like me.”

Despite herself, Naomi smiled, and it was warm like a fire on a cold winter's day. Then, as quickly as it had arrived, the smile was gone and she was looking at me with those searching eyes. “That’s the thing. I’m starting to think I do like you, and that makes no damn sense.” She crossed her arms, a guarded gesture to protect herself. “The date was nice, and then you saved my life, but before that...? You had me drugged, kidnapped, and then locked away. It makes me think that something is wrong with me, the fact that I’m growing so...so attached to you.”

Shocked, I raised my eyebrows so quickly they almost hit my hairline. “You know I was just teasing you, right?”

“Yeah, but—” she waved her hand in the air, trying to find the words. “What I’m saying is true. I feel crazy. You should be my enemy, but...” her eyes locked onto mine, “I’m so drawn to you.”

Taking a chance, I stepped forward, and ghosted my knuckles down her soft cheek. Naomi didn’t flinch, and it was a small victory. “Would you have come to me if I hadn’t forced you?”

I watched her swallow, thinking. “No. Probably not.”

“Then I don’t regret what I did,” I told her, hating the way her mouth pulled down in a frown, but I soldiered on. “You were too important to me, Naomi, and hearing that you had left the safety of the Silverfangs had me ready to rip someone apart. Knowing that my mate was out there, alone, brought every Alpha instinct I had to the surface. I wish like hell that we could have met on better terms, but I won’t lie and say I regret capturing you. I’ll spend my life making it up to you if that’s what it takes.”

Naomi was silent for a long moment, her fists opening and closing as she tried to get a handle on her emotions. When she spoke, her voice was utterly small. “Do you think—God, Danny, I really want you to hold me right now.”

I closed the space between us in an instant, and pulled her to me. Naomi was warm and soft, and her hair smelled like honey. She melted into me, her arms clasping around my back and her face finding the crook of my neck. When I brushed her hair aside to press my lips to her temple, I could smell cinnamon and cherries. My mate. My sweet, fierce mate who wanted so badly to belong. I’d never let her feel alone again. I wanted to tell her that, but we were careening into serious territory, and I just wasn’t sure if she was ready to hear it yet.

Instead, I joked, lightening the mood, “You smell fucking delicious, you know that? Downright edible.”

Her smile grew just enough to make my wolf preen with satisfaction, but then she rolled her eyes and stepped back, retreating into her guarded demeanor. “Don’t push your luck.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I lied. I was already dreaming of a hell of a lot more than that.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

I padded softly across the hardwood floor, two mugs of coffee warm in my hands. Danny was on guard, but I had a feeling he'd been up much earlier than me, so I'd taken the initiative to figure out his coffee maker and brew us a few cups.

The morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a golden glow that felt almost too serene, given the events of the night before. Outside, the world looked deceptively calm. The dew glistened on the grass, and the soft hum of cicadas rose with the heat of the Georgian morning.

But the stillness was a lie. There had been demons in those woods last night, and they would surely still be there now.

Danny sat in a sturdy leather chair near the front window, his broad shoulders hunched as he cradled a shotgun. Its polished barrel glinted in the light, the etched runes along the stock faintly shimmering. I'd seen similar weapons before—it was undoubtedly loaded with shells that were spelled to kill demons. He didn't look up as I approached, but the tension in his posture eased just slightly when I set the cup down on the small table beside him.

"Thought you might need this," I said, settling into the chair next to him and taking my first sip. I'd added cinnamon and cream and hummed in appreciation.

Danny looked at me then, the noise enough to get his full attention. There was a warmth in his eyes, somewhere underneath all the concern that was riding him. "Thanks," he sighed, his fingers brushing mine as he reached for the mug.

I sank into the chair opposite him, casting a glance at the other man in the room,

sitting at the walnut dining table behind us. Danny had introduced us when I first came downstairs—his name was Saul Church, and he was the Red Canine’s resident witch. His dark hair was streaked with silver, and he had the kind of angular, sharp-boned face that always seemed to be scrutinizing the world around him. Tattoos covered his arms, runic designs that glowed faintly when he muttered incantations under his breath. His eyes—so pale blue they were almost white—met mine briefly before flicking back to the notebook on the table in front of his. I had dropped a cup of coffee off near him before pouring mine and Danny’s but it sat untouched still.

He creeped me out a little. The Silverfang Creek witch was much less—strange. She could pass for a normal person, but Saul seemed to be leaning heavily into the witchy identity.

“How was the guest room?” Danny asked, breaking me out of my thoughts. The question made my cheeks warm, and I hid the blush by raising my mug up for a drink. Danny had made it all too clear last night that I’d be welcomed in his bedroom with him if I so desired.

The worst part was that I DID desire it, but doing so made me feel stupid. So I stubbornly slept in the guest room, all too aware that he was right down the hall the entire time. Laying in the same bed I had been in when I woke up from my kidnapping had settled my libido some, but seeing Danny in the morning light, ready to protect us, brought it back in full force.

“I did,” I admitted, feeling the weight of his gaze as I continued. “It was—nice. Did you sleep okay?”

“I could have slept better. Felt like something was missing.” Danny didn’t elaborate, but his lips twitched like he was holding back some sarcastic remark. I huffed, refocusing on the view in front of us.

From where we sat, the front yard looked untouched, peaceful even. The trees swayed gently in the breeze, their leaves fat and green, only a few of them starting to change for fall. A handful of birds flitted past the window, their chirps happy and at ease, as if there weren't demons lurking in the shadows.

"They shouldn't have come this far," Saul muttered, finally breaking the silence. He tapped his pen against the page, his brows furrowed. "Demons don't just wander into werewolf territory without reason."

"What reason could they possibly have?" I asked, turning toward him.

Saul's pale eyes flicked up sharply. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Danny grunted, setting the shotgun down across his lap. "I don't care why they're here. I just care about making sure they don't come back."

"Bold of you to think it's that simple," Saul said, his tone laced with dry amusement.

Danny shot him a glare, but before he could retort, Saul continued, "They were drawn here. Something—someone—brought them close. If we don't figure out what, we're going to be sitting ducks."

I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. The warmth of the coffee lingering on my fingertips wasn't enough to dispel the chill creeping up my spine. I had no idea why the Red Canine s would be the target of demon activity, but they weren't the only ones. I wasn't high in the pack hierarchy back home, so I only got information as it filtered through the pack grapevine, but even I knew that demonic activity had kicked up around the country. Maybe this was random, or maybe—

Maybe the Red Canine's Alpha getting ready to take a mate had set off alarm bells with the demons. Danny and his pack would be stronger if we committed to the

mating, but would that really make them—us—a target?

“And what happens if we don’t figure it out in time?” I asked quietly.

Danny’s jaw tightened, his eyes narrowing as he stared out the window. “Then we make damn sure we’re ready for them.”

His certainty should have reassured me, but instead, it only made me more aware of the weight of the danger looming over us. The peaceful morning outside suddenly felt like a fragile illusion, one that could shatter at any moment.

Danny’s voice broke the heavy silence. “Naomi.”

I looked up from my coffee, startled by the intensity of his gaze. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, the shotgun forgotten at his side. His expression was unguarded, raw in a way that caught me completely off guard. Uh oh, he was about to hit me with something really serious, and I didn’t know if I was ready for it.

“I can’t keep you safe if we don’t do this properly,” he said, his voice firm and leaving no room for argument. “I want to mark you.”

Oh, shit. The words hit me like a bolt of lightning. My heart stuttered, then raced, a quiver rippling through my chest that I didn’t know how to contain. I was hit by a wave of warmth that started at the top of my head and continued all the way through the tips of my toes.

“Mark me? Do you mean—bite me? The mating bite?”

“To protect you,” he said quickly, almost like he needed to explain before I could shut him down. “The demons—they’ll know you’re mine, that you’re under my protection. They’ll think twice before coming after you again.”

My heart twisted. For all his dominance, all his rough edges, there was something undeniably vulnerable in the way he looked at me now. He wasn't demanding or ordering. He was asking. Up until this point, everything with Danny had been on his schedule—forcing me to come to him, planning our wedding, all of it. But now, he was giving me control of one of the most important decisions either of us would ever make, and it was shaking me to my core.

Could I trust him? He saved my life last night, so why would this be any different? It was just another way of protecting me, wasn't it?

I thought of the Silverfang Creek, of the pack I'd left behind. I'd convinced myself that they would come for me, that they would sweep in and take me away from the evil Red Canine's Alpha and his suffocating grip. They still hadn't arrived, but it didn't offend me as much as I thought it would. In the quiet corner of my mind, a startling truth began to take shape: I didn't think of Danny as evil anymore. Not by a long shot.

He wasn't what I'd expected, but he was something else entirely—someone who fought for me, who stood by me when he didn't have to. And as much as I hated to admit it, the idea of going back to the Silverfangs felt—hollow.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. "So, this—mating ritual," I began, my words measured. "It would protect me from them?"

Danny nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. "It would bind us together. You'd be under my protection and the protection of the pack completely."

It didn't sound terrible or like I'd be losing my identity completely. I knew other mated couples, but I'd never been present for the ritual itself. The thought of it made my blood run hot.

“I—I think we should do it,” I said, the decision slipping from my lips before I could second-guess myself. It definitely wasn’t just a reason for me to get closer to Danny like I’d been secretly craving. No, the mating ritual was something I had to do.

Or at least that was what I was going to tell myself so I didn’t feel too guilty for giving in to him so easily.

Danny’s breath hitched, his gray eyes darkening with something I couldn’t name. He sat up straighter, his presence impossibly more commanding. He reached out, and I gave him my hand, loving the way he swept his thumb across my knuckles.

“You can have some time to decide if you need it. Not long—but I wasn’t going to force an answer from you right here and now.”

“I’ve decided,” I replied, squeezing his hand. “I need the protection, Danny. And maybe—” My voice faltered as I searched for the words. “Maybe it’s not the worst thing.”

A genuine smile bloomed over his face. God, he was so handsome that it made my stomach do flips. He was everything that I shouldn’t want, but I really, really did.

“Then we’ll do it.” He raised my hand to his lip and kissed the back of it, his lips lingering a moment longer than normal. It was such a gentlemanly gesture that it was almost comical coming from the rough-and-tumble biker Alpha, but the emotion behind it was real.

And for the first time, the thought of being bound to Danny didn’t feel like a cage. I could make the choice myself, and that seemed to make all the difference.

Saul leaned back in his chair, his pale eyes steady as he regarded the two of us. “The ritual is simple in concept, but it holds deep significance for our kind. It’s rooted in

tradition, in instinct.”

“I’ve seen it done before, but I have to admit I’ve never looked too closely into the ritual itself.” Danny rubbed his scruffy chin in thought. “Can you explain it a little more so Naomi and I both know what we’re getting into?”

Saul nodded, and Danny and I stood, walking over to join Saul at the dining table so he didn’t have to keep looking back to speak to us. “Naomi will wear a doe mask, a symbol of the hunted. At dusk, she’ll be taken to the woods and directed toward a torchlit camp. Her task is to run toward the light between the trees. Danny, you’ll shift into wolf form and give chase.”

My breath hitched at the word chase, and my heart beat faster as Saul’s voice pressed on, steady and calm. I could envision it, fleeing through the darkened trees, breathing hard, my hunter hot on my heels. It made a heat burn low in my belly.

“If Danny catches you before you reach the torch, you’ll consummate your bond, and then he’s to mark you with a bite on your neck. That mark will seal your bond and announce you as his mate. But if you make it to the torch untouched—” Saul’s voice trailed off, his expression hardening.

I didn’t need him to finish. I already knew. Female wolves were told about the dangers of being shunned as soon as we were old enough to understand. “I’ll be shunned. I know.”

Saul nodded. “Yes. The pack will see it as a rejection of the bond. It’s rare, but it has happened.”

What none of us said was that it was common knowledge that most female wolves would take a dive and fake an injury to ensure that their mates catch them. It was embarrassing, sure, but worth it to make sure that they’re caught. After all, most of

them wanted nothing more than to be caught and marked.

Would I fall to let Danny catch me? I—I think I would. There was no reason to lie to myself anymore. But one look at Danny, the muscles rippling in his arms, told me that he'd probably have no issue catching me. He kept telling me that he was fast, and I believed him.

Danny made a low sound in his throat, a growl that had goosebumps rising up on my skin. "She's not making it to the torch."

The words were final, absolute. My stomach churned, a strange mix of fear and arousal. I imagined him catching me over and over, and I had to shake my head to dispel the image before I became too fixated on it.

Saul stood, dusting his hands as if the weight of the ritual had been transferred to us. "Then it is decided. The ritual will take place at dusk. You'll both wear robes in earthy tones to blend with the forest. Naomi, you'll be masked to embrace the role of the hunted. Danny, you'll shift as soon as she begins to run." He looked between us, his gaze lingering on Danny. "You understand what's at stake."

Danny nodded once, his jaw tight. "I do."

With that, Saul left the room, leaving me alone with Danny in the heavy silence. Finally, I managed to squeak out, "Tonight?"

A hint of amusement passed over Danny's face, but he still looked so serious. Maybe the most serious I'd ever seen him. "There's no time to waste. Not when it comes to keeping you safe."

I stared at my hands, trying to process what had just been decided. The image of myself running through the woods, barefoot and vulnerable, with Danny in wolf form

chasing me, wouldn't leave my mind. What Saul didn't say was that I'd be completely nude beneath my robe, bare and ripe for the taking. The thought made my skin tingle in a way I couldn't explain.

"You're okay with this?" Danny asked, breaking the silence.

I looked up, startled by the gentleness in his tone. We both knew there was really no other choice, but I could tell he wasn't interested in forcing me to do the ritual. Danny actually cared about what I wanted. Had that happened to me before, ever, with anyone?

His gray eyes searched my face for an answer I wasn't sure I could give. But I had to give him something. Silence wasn't going to protect me from the demons that had inexplicably shown up in Danny's territory.

"I think so."

His gaze lingered on mine for a moment longer, then he nodded, his expression unreadable once more. "Good."

I wanted to hate his confidence, but I couldn't. Instead, I felt a strange flutter in my chest, like my wolf was already preparing for the chase. The thought terrified me, but it thrilled me, too.

I tried to tell myself it was just instinct, just some primal reaction to the ritual. But as I glanced at Danny again, his broad shoulders tense and his hands clenched into fists, I knew that wasn't the truth.

It wasn't just instinct. It was him. I wanted Danny. I hungered for him so badly that it felt like I had been starving for his touch much longer than the days we'd spent together.

I wanted him to catch me, bite me, take me. And that realization scared me most of all.

\*\*\*

There was so little time to prepare that I almost chickened out, but if I'd learned anything the past few days, it was that Danny was going to find me no matter how far I ran. Instead, I waited until I knew Danny was in his bedroom alone, and knocked on the door.

He answered, and looked surprised to see me. "Naomi?"

"Can we talk?" I blurted out.

Confused, Danny stepped aside and let me into his room. It was decorated in forest green and black, and his scent surrounded me like a warm blanket. Everything about Danny, the supposedly evil, dangerous Alpha, made me feel that way—comforted.

"What is it?" he asked, watching as I sat on the edge of his bed and lowered my head to my hands. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"No. It's not that. It's just—" I swallowed hard, and looked up at him. "Danny, if we weren't in danger, would you still want to have the mating ceremony this quickly? We barely know each other—right?"

He didn't sit on the bed next to me, but instead knelt in front of me and took my hands in his. "Do you really feel that way? Like we barely know each other?"

I shook my head. "No, and that's ridiculous, isn't it? How can I feel like I know you so well, like you're—you're—"

“A part of you?” Danny smiled slowly, his teeth bright white against his tanned skin. “It’s because I am, Naomi. Just like you’re a part of me. We’re mates. Two sides of the same coin. Soulmates, if you want to use the human term.”

I sniffled, but turned my head, the expression in his gray eyes so powerful that it made me nervous. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Naomi, I would have agreed to the mating ceremony within hours of your pack witch pulling those rose petals out of the cauldron.” His thumbs swept over the sensitive skin of my inner wrists, and I shivered. “The fact that we had time to get to know each other will just make it all the sweeter.”

He sounded so confident, so sure, that my fears started to melt away. All except one of them. “But what if you don’t catch me?”

Danny’s hands cupped my face, and he pressed his forehead against mine. When he spoke, there was a lot of wolf in his voice. “Oh, sweet Naomi. I’m going to catch you, don’t you worry about that.”

Despite how twisted my emotions were, I believed him wholeheartedly. Whether that fact made me feel better or worse, I wasn’t sure.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The ritual loomed closer, and my hands tightened on the edges of the robe as if holding onto it could steady the storm brewing inside me. The loose fabric hung off my shoulders, the earthy tones meant to blend into the woods where I'd chase her, where I'd claim her. The thought sent a charge through my blood. But beneath the excitement was something darker.

Fear.

I wasn't afraid of the ritual or not catching Naomi. There was no way in hell that I wasn't going to catch her. I was afraid of the curse that I felt had hovered over me my entire life, afraid that just when I finally found my mate, she would be torn away from me. I hated that the fear was tainting the feral joy that comes with the mating ritual, but it was better to get it out of my system before the chase began.

Julian stood by the door, arms crossed, his brow furrowed in that way that said he had words I wouldn't want to hear. He let out a sigh. "Danny, you sure about this?"

I didn't meet his eyes, adjusting the fall of the robe in the mirror. "Of course I'm sure."

"That right?" Julian pushed off the doorframe and came closer, his boots scuffing against the floor. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're moving too fast. It's been, what, a week? Not even. I know that makes me sound like a hypocrite since I've been on you to settle down, but I never expected you'd jump in neck deep so quickly. If you lock her into this mating and she hates it—"

My reflection stiffened, my jaw tightening as his words hit a nerve. "She's not being

locked into anything. She's my mate. This is what's supposed to happen."

He let out a low laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Oh yeah? Then why has she tried to run already? Have you considered that she'd be free to escape when she's supposed to be running from you during the ritual?" He pointed at me, frustration lining his features. "This isn't about her. This is about you trying to stop fate from screwing you over again."

I spun on him, my voice sharp. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Julian's shoulders dropped, the fight in him softening as he rubbed a hand over his face. "It means you're scared, M an. Scared she'll leave. Scared fate's gonna take her away like it took your mom."

The words hit me like a runaway train, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe. The thought of Naomi being ripped from me, of waking up one day and finding her gone—it was a hollow ache I couldn't afford to feel. He wasn't wrong about one thing—I was terrified to lose Naomi, and I had no intention of that ever happening. But if I wanted to keep her as safe as possible, I needed to mate her.

"It won't bring your mother back," Julian added, empathy thick in his voice as if that would soften the blow of what he was telling me.

My fists clenched at my sides, but I forced myself to keep calm, to shove down the anger and the pain that threatened to rise. "I don't need my mother. I need my mate."

Julian studied me for a long moment, his lips pressed into a thin line. Finally, he sighed and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Just—don't screw it up, okay? I don't want to see you hurt—either of you. Naomi is a good woman, but you and I can both see that she doesn't exactly fit the mold of what people expect from the Red Canine's Alpha. I mean, we're bikers, and something tells me that she's not prepared for that

sort of life.”

“It’s not just because she’s my mate. The demons—”

Julian held up a hand to stop me. “You might be able to make Saul and whoever else believe that, but I know good and well that you jumped on the opportunity to have the mating ritual the second it presented itself. Sure, it will help with the demon problem, but don’t lie and say this isn’t what you wanted all along.”

I was quiet for a long moment, considering everything. Would Naomi be able to fit into our pack? It would be a learning curve, considering how uppity the Silverfangs were, but I was confident she’d be a biker queen in no time. Naomi was smart and adaptable. “This is the right path, Julian. As your Alpha, I’m asking for you to drop this shit now. We’re on our way to the damn ceremony, there’s no backing out now.”

“Fine.” He opened the door, but not without some annoyance behind the movement. “After you, Alpha.”

Julian didn’t say anything else as we headed to the edge of the woods. The evening air was heavy, thick with Georgia heat and the hum of crickets. Saul stood waiting, his hands weaving through the air as he murmured an incantation. The shimmer of a protective barrier rippled through the trees, warding off the demons that had dared to cross into my territory and interrupt the ritual. Having him maintain a shield for long periods of time would be too draining, but I sure as hell didn’t want any demonic interruptions during this all-important moment. Saul could at least give us this.

There were a few pack members gathered around a fire, just bullshitting and drinking beer, all of them in leather vests or jackets with our insignia on them. There hadn’t been enough time to arrange for a big pre-ritual celebration, but I was glad that at least a few of my wolves showed up to witness it. I gave them all nods of appreciation before walking alone to the point from where I would be released. There

were a million different emotions thrumming beneath my skin—before the night was up, Naomi would be all mine. It didn't even seem real. I was determined to make it good for her. I hadn't even kissed her yet, and I was on the precipice of fucking her and biting her. It didn't feel real.

But damn, did it feel right.

If I had been given the time, I would have done exactly what Naomi wanted—dates, getting to know each other, and, hell, even getting married before the mating ritual. But with the demons on the doorstep, we had to skip to the end. I swore to myself that I would give her all those things once we were safe.

I should have felt relief and joy, but all I could focus on was the torchlit path stretching into the woods. The place where Naomi would run, where I'd have to catch her—or lose her forever. Natalia and Penny would be masked and running, too, but that was more for tradition than anything else. Their scents were familiar to me—pack members, uninteresting and simply a distraction. I hoped they wouldn't be too disappointed that there was no chance of actually tricking me. I'd know Naomi's spiced cherry scent anywhere and would be able to track her to the end of the earth if needed.

She and I had done this once before, only a few days ago. The memory of her bolting from the boarding house hit me like a flash. Her wild eyes, her bare feet pounding the dirt. She'd fought me then, desperate to escape, and I'd chased her down. It had been a thrill—a wild, animalistic satisfaction in catching her, in pulling her back to me. Then I thought Naomi actually wanted to escape, but this time was different. It had to be—but the end should be a lot more fun.

Sweet Naomi wasn't just running from me now. She was running from fate, and I couldn't shake the thought that fate might still win. I shook my head hard to make the thought leave. The next hour was something I was going to want to be seared into my

memory forever. I couldn't let those old doubts ruin it for me.

Julian's voice broke through my thoughts. "You look like you're ready to tear through those woods right now."

I turned to him, forcing a smirk. "I am."

He gave me a look, half amusement, half worry. But I couldn't deal with his doubt, either. Not now.

Saul straightened, his ritual complete. He turned to us, his face calm, his tone steady. "It's time."

The words sent a surge of adrenaline through me, my wolf clawing to the surface. I rolled my shoulders, letting the tension melt into determination. She wasn't going to get away. Not tonight. Not ever. Naomi wasn't just my mate—she was my anchor, my chance at something real. A chance at a change for my pack, to be more than the Alpha of a group of wolves with a bad reputation. A chance to find the love that I didn't think I deserved but still wanted a whole hell of a lot.

Somewhere in the near distance, my sweet Naomi was waiting, masked and wearing nothing but a cloak to protect her delicate skin as she fled through the forest. And I wasn't letting fate—or anyone else—take her from me.

Saul handed Julian a ramshorn, and my friend put it to his lips. The horn sounded, its deep, resonant call cutting through the quiet woods like a drumbeat straight to my chest. I didn't wait, didn't hesitate. My wolf surged forward, taking control, and I shifted mid-stride, muscles stretching and reforming in a familiar burst of pain and power.

The ground blurred beneath my paws as I leaped forward, the scent of pine and damp

earth filling my nostrils. The night was alive, every sound sharper, every scent clearer. But I didn't care about the rustling leaves or the scattering of small creatures. My focus was singular.

Her. Naomi. Mate.

The first scent I caught was chemically sweet and totally wrong—Penny, having soaked herself in her favorite body spray. I sneezed, pausing to paw at my nose. I wouldn't mistake her for Naomi, but she had managed to slow me down nonetheless.

I caught Natalia's scent second, which told me they had a head start on Naomi. This time, there was the smell of cherries, but like before, there was a chemical edge to it. Another perfume. Too bad both of the other she-wolves' true scents were right there beneath the chemicals. I knew instantly that they weren't Naomi.

When I finally caught her scent, it was intoxicating enough to make a lesser man dizzy. Naomi's scent hit me like a jolt of electricity—wild, familiar. My paws dug into the soft ground as I raced forward, weaving between trees with ease, the light of the torch in the distance a faint guide. She wasn't far ahead; I could hear her footsteps, quick and uneven, as she darted through the underbrush.

I caught sight of her—a flash of sandy brown hair, the flutter of the loose robe she wore. She was fast, her bare feet barely making a sound against the forest floor. My wolf growled with satisfaction. She was putting up a fight, and it thrilled me in a way I hadn't expected.

For a moment, I let her stay ahead, her figure weaving through the trees like a ghost. Her breathing was quick, shallow, the adrenaline in her scent thick and enticing. My wolf wanted her, needed to claim her. But I held back, pacing myself, letting her run.

She glanced over her shoulder, and our eyes met through the eyeholes of her doe

mask. Even in the dim light, I could see the fire in her gaze—determination, panic, arousal. My wolf rumbled with approval. This wasn't just instinct—she was fighting this, but she also wanted it. Badly.

I sped up, closing the distance between us. The sound of her heartbeat was a drumbeat in my ears, quick and frantic. She stumbled, catching herself against a tree, but kept moving. I veered left, cutting through a cluster of bushes to flank her.

She darted to the right, her movements agile despite her panic. Clever girl. But I was faster.

Her breathing grew heavier, and I knew she was tiring. My wolf surged forward, unwilling to wait any longer. With a burst of speed, I closed the gap between us.

She didn't even have time to react before I leaped, my weight slamming into her back. We hit the ground hard, the impact knocking the air from her lungs. Her body tensed beneath me, her hands clawing at the dirt as she tried to twist away.

I pinned her easily, my paws on either side of her shoulders. Her robe had slipped, exposing the curve of her neck, the rapid rise and fall of her chest. She was trembling, her body taut with resistance. Her scent wrapped around me, and my wolf growled low in satisfaction. She was mine, and nothing—not her doubts, not her fear, not even fate—would take her from me now.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Danny hit me with the force of a meteor, and together, we both went tumbling to the forest floor, a tangled mess of a cloak, limbs, and fur. He managed to right himself first, landing on top of me. The world seemed to tilt as Danny's weight pressed me into the earth, his chest rising and falling against my back. My robe was tangled around my legs, leaves clinging to the fabric and the strands of my hair, but I hardly noticed. My pulse pounded in my ears, drowning out the quiet hum of the forest.

He caught me. Thank God. I wouldn't be shunned, and I would be safe.

But now, there was no way I could escape him. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I was caught, and I knew exactly what was coming next. My core throbbed, my nipples tightening in the cool evening air.

His body shifted against mine, the heavy weight of his wolf form lightening until I felt the heat of his skin through the thin fabric of my robe. I dared to turn my head slightly, catching a glimpse of him in my periphery. He was human again now, kneeling over me, his dark hair a disheveled mess, his eyes sharp and full of intent.

My stomach flipped, a rush of exhilaration making my fingers curl into the dirt beneath me. This was real—so real it was almost too much.

“Naomi,” he rumbled. The scent of his was so strong now, sandalwood and pine. His hands were on either side of me, pinning me in place, but he wasn't holding me roughly. If anything, his grip felt more like an anchor.

I swallowed hard, my breath hitching as I turned onto my back, meeting his gaze

fully. His eyes burned into mine, and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

“You ran well,” he murmured, his lips curling into the faintest of smiles. “But you knew I’d catch you.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. Of course I knew he’d catch me. What shocked me was just how effective he was. There was no need to fake a fall—Danny caught me all on his own, even when I was at a full sprint.

“Danny—” I started, my voice trembling, but I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to say. He was blazing hot on top of me, both of us bare to the world. When he shifted, the hard length of him brushed against my leg, and all words left my head in a rush.

“You don’t need to be afraid,” he said, leaning closer, his voice oddly soft. His hand came up to cup my jaw, the warmth of his palm making my skin tingle as he swept his thumb over my lower lip. “This is what we’re meant to do.”

The words should have scared me. They should have made me fight harder, scream louder, run further. But instead, they settled into me, wrapping around the deepest part of my soul and squeezing tight.

“Who said I was afraid?”

He chuckled, nuzzling his face against mine. “Your heart rate, for one.”

I could feel his breath against my skin, warm and steady, as he dipped his head closer. I knew what was coming—the bite, the mark, the tether that would tie me to him forever. The thought sent a fresh wave of nervous energy coursing through me, but it was tangled with something else.

Excitement.

I didn't want to admit it, not even to myself, but the idea of being his—of belonging to him—stirred something deep and primal within me. My wolf was howling in approval, practically begging me to submit. But I wasn't just my wolf. I was Naomi, a woman with her own fears and desires, and right now, both parts of me needed to be present for this.

He brushed his nose against my neck, the movement slow and deliberate. My breath caught again, my body tensing beneath his.

"I'll take care of you," he whispered, his lips grazing the sensitive skin where his teeth would soon sink in. "Brave girl. My Naomi."

I closed my eyes, letting the weight of his words settle over me. He meant it—I could feel it in the way he held me, in the steady thrum of his heartbeat against my own. This was the plan. This was what I wanted. This was what was going to protect me. All I had to do was let it happen.

But was I ready to let go? To trust him?

His teeth brushed against my neck, and I felt the tiniest nip of pressure before he pulled back slightly, giving me one last chance to stop him. My brain was scrambling, and I felt like I was hyperventilating. Not sure what else to do, I grabbed the first thing that came to mind and ran with it.

"Will you—will you kiss me first?" I knew I was jabbering, but I wanted this to be special. "All this time, and you still haven't kissed me, and if you're going to mark me, at least—"

"Oh, sweet girl," he murmured, his fingers tangling in my hair. His eyes were full of affection, a hint of sadness behind them as he pulled back, looking down at me. "Of course. Of course I'll kiss you."

My chest ached as he lowered his head, his lips hovering a breath away from mine. He was so close, the heat of him washing over me like the sun. The mating bite was one thing, but this, our first kiss—I could say without a single doubt that I wanted this terribly.

He leaned in, and then his mouth was on mine, soft and warm and perfect. He kissed me gently, but there was a hunger behind it, a barely restrained need that echoed the chase we just had. I could feel the beast inside of Danny dying to be set free, but the fact that he was being so careful with me despite all that made my affection for him grow even more.

I parted my lips, letting him deepen the kiss, and it was like lightning surging through me. Danny growled, but still he was patient, his tongue swirling with mine, but with none of the feral energy that was nearly radiating off of him.

I broke the kiss long enough to murmur, “I’m not made of glass. Kiss me like you mean it, dammit.”

Before he could respond, I kissed him back with a fervor I didn't know I had, and I could feel him smile against my mouth. Then, between one heartbeat and the next, Danny unleashed himself.

His hands cupped my face, one knee moving between my legs and forcing them apart so he could get as close to me as possible. My breasts were pressed up against his hard chest, and he was kissing me like he wanted to map out every tiny detail of my mouth. It was dark, claiming, and heated. He tilted my face to just the right angle and kissed me like his life depended on it.

It was almost funny. His life didn’t exactly depend on this mating, but mine might.

He must have felt the smile on my lips. “Something funny, Mate?”

“Not funny,” I promised, grazing my lips over his jaw. “Just good.”

It was the right thing to say. Danny rumbled in appreciation, kissing down my neck while my hands explored the firm planes of his back. I closed my eyes, letting him consume me, letting the fire between us burn hot and bright. His hands were everywhere, his kisses searing my skin, and I was lost. Every nerve ending was alight, my body buzzing with anticipation. His hands roamed lower, and I arched into him, eager for his touch.

Danny swept my cloak aside, baring me to him, and rocked back onto his heels to get a full look. I expected to be self-conscious, but to my surprise, the lust-blown, awed look on Danny's face drove all the negative feelings away.

He liked what he saw. Really, really liked it, curves and all.

I'd never felt sexier in my life.

“Naomi,” he rasped, his hand sliding up my thigh. I trembled beneath his touch, my core aching for him. I watched as he slid a finger through my slick folds, his gaze darkening. “God, you're wet.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I'd never been so turned on in my life, and he'd barely touched me.

He smiled, a predatory glint in his eye, and then his fingers were sliding into me, stretching and filling me. I moaned, my hips arching off the ground. It was too much and not enough, and I was suddenly desperate for more.

“You're the most beautiful thing I've ever fucking seen, Naomi, and I'm going to do a hell of a lot more than kiss you.”

I raised myself onto my elbows to get a good look at him, too, and it made my mouth go dry. I'd seen him shirtless, but now, knowing he was about to fuck me changed everything. I was sure there had never been a more perfectly crafted man on the planet.

His muscles rippled as he moved, his abs contracting with each motion, and his cock was hard and thick, standing at attention. He was every fantasy come to life, and he was mine—at least for now.

Danny curved his fingers inside of me, and my back arched when he hit a particularly sensitive spot deep inside. He chuckled, and then his mouth was on mine again, kissing me until I lost all sense of place and time.

I couldn't help the noises that were coming out of my mouth or the way my body was moving in time with his. I'd never felt anything like this—being caught, captured, and totally owned. His free hand moved up my body, cupping my breast, his thumb brushing against my nipple. The sensation sent a jolt of pleasure through me, and I cried out, my head falling back.

“You're perfect,” he breathed, his teeth nipping at my neck. “Absolutely fucking perfect.”

His words made me flush with pleasure. Danny pulled his fingers out of me, and then both of his hands were on my hips, pulling me closer to him as he moved into position. His cock was rock hard, and I was aching for him.

He took his time, dipping his dark head to tongue and suck each of my nipples in turn while his cock pushed at the entrance of my pussy. He'd thrust up, not in, the broad head of him stroking against my clit and making me moan, then back down until he was poised back at my entrance again.

It was maddening. I was aching to be filled.

“Danny—” The word came out a whine.

“Say it.”

“Take me.”

That was all he wanted to hear. The teasing stopped all at once, and Danny was suddenly serious and intent on one thing only—fucking me. With his hands locked onto my hips, he pushed into me slowly, giving me time to adjust to his size, and I gasped at the stretch. When he needed a better angle, he hitched one of my legs over his shoulder, and the fit was so perfect it made my eyes roll back in my head. It was almost too much, but he was careful and gentle, his hands rubbing soothing circles on my hips as he bottomed out.

“Fuck,” he hissed, his eyes locked on mine. “You’re so tight, Naomi.”

I couldn't form a coherent sentence, so I just nodded, biting my lip. Danny’s hands worshiped me as I adjusted, stroking every soft, curved inch of me, driving away any hesitations I may have had. Then, finally, when my muscles started to relax, he was done waiting.

Danny began to move then, his thrusts slow and deep. My hands clawed at his back, and I clung to him as he took me, giving me everything I needed and more. He knew just where to touch me, just how to move inside me. Every nerve ending was on fire. I was lost in him.

“I’m going to mark you,” he rasped, his pace picking up, his fingers digging into my hips. “You’re mine, Naomi.”

Those words should have sent me running for the hills, but instead, they made something snap deep within me. A fresh wave of desire crashed over me, and I arched against him, a breathless moan escaping my lips.

He leaned forward, his mouth trailing kisses up my neck until he reached the spot where my neck and shoulder met. I trembled beneath him, knowing what was about to come, and the anticipation only heightened my pleasure.

“Do it,” I whispered. “Now, Danny.”

His teeth sank into my skin. The pain was sharp, a flash of heat that quickly dissolved into something deeper—an ache that spread through me like wildfire. My breath caught, and for a second, I couldn’t tell where the pain ended and the pleasure began.

A rush of emotions hit me all at once, like a dam breaking wide open. Fear, excitement, longing—all of it swirling together, too much and not enough. It felt as though my very soul was being split open and stitched back together, every piece of me rearranged to fit him.

I gasped, my fingers clutching at his arms as a strange warmth began to spread from the bite. It started as a spark and quickly grew, racing through my veins like liquid fire. Danny’s mouth was on mine again, and I could taste the copper of my blood as his thrusts became erratic.

He was close. Good. So was I.

I tilted my hips up until he was slamming into my G-spot with each thrust. That sensation, mingling with the soul-deep pleasure of the mating bite, was all I needed and more. In seconds, I was tumbling head-first into the strongest orgasm of my life, nearly sobbing as I gripped Danny’s arms, wave after wave rolling over me.

“Fuck,” was all he was able to say before he thrust harder than before, only a few more times. Then Danny was coming too, filling me up, hot and liquid and perfect. We collapsed against each other, our hearts beating in sync, our breaths ragged. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so utterly content, and I didn't want this moment to end.

Danny held me close, his breath warm against my skin, and I could feel the bond between us strengthening with each passing moment. It was done. We were linked now, bound together by fate, and there was no going back. I knew I should be worried, but all I felt was a sense of peace, a connection I'd never experienced before. I wasn't foolish enough to think that things wouldn't change once the haze of the sex and the bite had faded, but I wasn't about to deny myself this moment of happiness.

And then I felt it—the connection between Danny and me. The fierce protectiveness, the unwavering determination, the all-consuming need to keep me safe. But beneath it all was something unexpected, something that didn't seem to fit with the tough biker Alpha at all. It was the way he felt—for me.

He cared for me. Not just as his mate, but as Naomi.

Tears stung my eyes, unbidden and unstoppable. I pressed my hand to the mark, feeling its heat beneath my fingertips, and looked up at him. His expression softened, his thumb brushing away a stray tear as it fell.

“Do you feel it?” he breathed, unable to hide the victory on his face. He had well and truly claimed me, just like he wanted.

I nodded, though I wasn't sure how to put everything I was feeling into words. The bond had changed something inside me, something fundamental.

“I—” My voice broke, and I swallowed hard, refusing to cry. “Yeah, I do.”

His lips curved into a smile, the kind that made my knees weak and my stomach flip. He pulled me into his arms, holding me close, his chin resting on the crown of my head. This was real. He was real. And now, we were bound together in a way that no one—not demons, not my old pack, not even fate—could tear apart.

\*\*\*

The bonfire crackled with a fiery intensity, embers floating like fireflies into the warm Georgia night. Laughter and chatter filled the air, blending with the occasional howl of excitement from the gathered pack. The Red Canines surrounded us, a mix of rugged bikers and wild souls, the majority of whom I had never met before.

Danny stood at my side, his hand resting possessively on my lower back as he introduced me to what felt like every single member of his pack. Each one greeted me with curiosity and warmth, their eyes occasionally flicking to the fresh mark on my neck.

Danny and I had gone to snuff out the torch I had been running toward and pulled on the clothes that were waiting for us there. I was most thankful for the shoes—my trusty Converse. The rest of my body might have still been humming with pleasure, but my feet were still pretty pissed at me from the chase.

Afterward, we returned to the bonfire hand in hand, barely speaking. What was there to say? Everything had changed so fundamentally that I thought we were both still processing it. But Danny was an Alpha, which meant he had to make an appearance at the celebration being held in honor of his mating.

“This is Naomi,” he told each wolf, his voice carrying over the noise. “My mate.”

The way he said it, like it was the most natural thing in the world, made me happy in a way I hadn’t realized I was craving. To Danny, I was special. Not normal at all.

Special and wanted.

A wiry man with scruffy hair and a leather jacket stepped forward, clapping Danny on the shoulder. “About damn time you found yourself someone, Boss. We were startin’ to think you’d go gray alone.”

Danny smirked, his steely eyes flickering in the firelight. “Told you I’d surprise you one day, Buck.”

It was infectious, the way his pack looked at him, the respect that radiated from every glance and word. I watched as he moved through the crowd, shaking hands, exchanging jokes, and slapping backs. He was magnetic, a man who carried the weight of leadership with an ease that only came from years of practice.

And yet, beneath the rough charm, I could see something else—a man who’d been forced to survive. The patches on his leather jacket told stories of loyalty and sacrifice, the scars on his knuckles spoke of battles fought and won, and the faint lines at the corners of his eyes hinted at sleepless nights spent protecting these people.

“He hasn’t smiled like this in years,” a soft voice said beside me. I turned to find Penny, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug. “You’ve done something none of us could, Naomi. You’ve made him happy.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. Had I really done that? I glanced at Danny again, watching as he ruffled a young pup’s hair, his laughter loud and genuine. It was the first time I’d seen him like this, too. Not just the intense, brooding Alpha who seemed to dominate every room he walked into, but a man who deeply loved his pack. A man who would sacrifice anything to keep them safe.

“He loves this pack,” I murmured, almost to myself.

Penny nodded. “They’re his family.”

The Red Canines were more or less what I had expected—almost every one of them dressed the part of the rough and tumble biker, many of them with black bandanas tied around their heads. It was almost all men of varying ages, which surprised me, but explained why there was so much joy to be found in their Alpha taking a mate. Danny being mated would make other females feel safer with the pack, who, in all honesty, still had a pretty shit reputation. I knew Danny was trying to fix it, but those things took time. It could still be some time before the other packs nearby saw them as anything but trouble.

As the night wore on, I found myself softening, my guard slipping inch by inch. Maybe it was the warmth of the fire or the way the pack welcomed me like I belonged, but I felt content in Danny’s orbit. His attention, his constant hovering, might have felt suffocating to some, but I found myself soaking it in happily. After all, Danny was gorgeous and an Alpha. Reputation or no, he was a hell of a catch, and having all his attention focused on me made me feel like I was glowing.

Maybe I was home. I’d have to check with myself again once the good-time sex hormones had faded, but damn, it did feel right being there with my mate.

When Danny slipped his hand down to take mine, it was a strange comfort, one I didn’t expect to welcome so easily. His fingers were rough, calloused from years of work and fighting, but his touch was steady, grounding. It was like he needed the connection as much as I did—or maybe more.

I didn’t pull away when he tugged me closer, wrapping an arm around my waist and holding me against his side. Normally, I would have bristled at the possessive gesture, but tonight—I didn’t mind. His body was solid and warm, a shield against the crisp night air that had started to settle over the clearing. We stood near the fire, its glow casting shadows across his sharp features.

“You’re quiet tonight,” he murmured, his voice just low enough for me to hear over the crackling flames and the pack’s chatter.

I tilted my head up to meet his gaze. His iron eyes were softer now, less intense, but no less focused on me. “I’m just—taking it all in.”

His arm tightened around me briefly, like he was afraid I might slip away. “You fit here, you know,” he said, his tone almost reverent. “With them. With me.”

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

“Always.” His grin was wolfish, but there was a sincerity behind it. “Plus, the way you were screaming—”

I reached up and laid a finger across his lips, the flush I was feeling not from the fire but from his smart mouth. “Hush, you. We’re in public.”

Danny laughed and kissed my silencing finger. As the night stretched on, Danny stayed glued to my side, introducing me to pack members who hadn’t yet approached and making sure my plate was always full when food was passed around.

He was a good mate, I realized. We might have a lot of things to figure out between each other, but Danny’s quality as a partner wasn’t going to be one of them.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The world seemed to slow down as I leaned against the porch railing, the wood warm under my palms in the late morning sun. Dad was leaning next to me, drying his forehead on the ever-present bandana from his pocket. It was a hot, early fall day, only two days from the mating ritual, and we had been hard at work bringing in the wood to put together raised garden beds for Naomi.

It might have been a little much for a post-mating gift, but I used the excuse that I had planned to overhaul the backyard of my house anyway. It was a little white life that Naomi would never be any of the wiser about.

Plus, watching her move about the space, joy obvious on her face, made it all worth it.

She was barefoot, her toes sunk into the soil as if she could draw life directly from the earth. Her hair was piled in a loose, haphazard bun, tendrils falling into her face as she moved. Dirt streaked her cheek, smudged her arms, but she didn't seem to care.

I hadn't known what to say at the time, too caught up in the unexpected comparison. Now, as I watched Naomi in the garden, I understood exactly what he meant.

The sunlight caught on her sandy-brown hair, illuminating it like a halo as she knelt beside a row of wilting vegetables. Her hands moved deftly, coaxing the plants upright, whispering to them under her breath. I couldn't hear her words, but the soft cadence of her voice carried on the breeze, weaving a spell over the garden—and over me.

The flower beds she'd tackled the day before were already showing signs of revival,

their colors more vibrant, the blooms fuller. She had this way of making everything she touched better, brighter. It wasn't just her hands; it was something deeper, something in her presence.

I couldn't stop staring.

My father had laughed when I told him she'd agreed to the mating ritual, though it was more of a knowing chuckle than anything cruel. He'd said something about fate being stubborn, about how I'd always been a force of nature when it came to getting what I wanted.

"She's like your mother, you know."

The words shocked me out of my oblivion, shaking me hard. Dad hardly ever spoke about my mother anymore. The memories were too painful. "W-what?"

Peter Turner, my father, the previous Alpha of the Red Canines, smiled sadly. "The way she tends to everything she touches. Even the messiness—it's a charm, not a flaw."

Her laughter broke through my thoughts, soft and airy, carried on the wind like a melody. She'd found something—an earthworm maybe, or a stubborn root she couldn't pull—and it brought a smile to her face.

It wasn't just her carelessness with clothes or her tendency to lose herself in a task until she was smeared with dirt and sweat. It was the way she brought life to everything she touched. The way she poured herself into the world, unguarded, even after everything she'd been through. I knew that she would do the same for my ailing pack. She would be the lifeblood that we needed.

"That's a hell of a statement to drop, Dad."

He shrugged one shoulder, mopping his forehead again. “When you get old, it gets easier to speak your mind.”

“I’m getting us some drinks,” Naomi announced, adjusting her hair before it fell even more out of its tie. “Just let me finish this section!”

I crossed my arms over my chest, forcing myself to stay where I was, even though my wolf itched to go to her. To pull her into my arms, smear that dirt on my own hands, bury my nose in her hair, and inhale the scent of soil and sunlight that clung to her.

Instead, I stayed rooted, watching as she stood and wiped her hands on her gardening apron. The fabric was stained and wrinkled, a far cry from the polished image I associated with the Silverfangs, but she was even more beautiful because of it. She looked radiant, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with satisfaction.

Fuck. I loved her. When exactly did that happen?

“Caught you staring again,” my father’s voice drawled from behind me, a hint of humor in his tone.

I didn’t bother denying it.

“She’s beautiful.”

“She’s more than that,” he replied, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “She’s exactly what you need. What this place needs.”

He was right. Damn it, he was right.

I straightened, my gaze never leaving Naomi as she moved to a different section of the garden, humming softly to herself. She wasn’t just tending the earth. She was

tending to me. The pack. This home.

Love. It wasn't a revelation I wanted to face, not with everything that had happened and the constant threat of losing her looming over me like a storm cloud. But there it was, undeniable. Naomi wasn't just my mate because of some ancient pull. She was my mate because she was Naomi.

As if summoned by the thought, Naomi appeared on the porch, carrying a tray with three glasses of lemonade. The sight of her stole my breath for the hundredth time that day.

"I thought you two could use a break," she said, her voice light, though her cheeks flushed under my father's watchful gaze.

She handed him a glass first, then turned to me. The lemonade was tart and sweet, ice clinking against the sides of the glass as she passed it into my hand. I barely registered it. All I saw was her—flushed, beautiful, and utterly mine.

I set the glass down on the railing after taking a single sip.

"Danny?" she asked, tilting her head, her brow furrowing in confusion.

I didn't answer. Couldn't. Instead, I stepped forward, wrapping my arm around her waist, and kissed her.

Her gasp of surprise melted into a soft sigh as I pulled her closer, my other hand cupping the back of her head. She tasted like lemons and sunlight, and I kissed her deeper, pouring everything I couldn't say into that moment. When I finally pulled back, her lips were slightly swollen, her eyes wide with a mix of shock and amusement.

She slapped me in the chest with her gardening gloves, but she wasn't mad—maybe just a touch embarrassed with me kissing her in front of my father, but fuck it. I would have kissed her no matter who was there; she was the only one that mattered.

From that moment, I couldn't help myself. I was stuck to her side like a burr. Naomi, to her credit, didn't try to remove me either.

When she wandered into the woods later that afternoon, I followed. Not far, just close enough to make sure she was safe. She didn't notice me at first, her attention on the wildflowers she was picking. It wasn't until she turned back toward the house that her eyes caught mine. She didn't scold me this time, just rolled her eyes and muttered something under her breath.

Later, when she went to shower off the garden dirt, I grabbed an old copy of Popular Mechanics and sat on the floor outside the door. Waiting. Guarding.

When she climbed a step ladder to reach a jar on a high shelf in the pantry, I was there before she even realized she needed me. The moment the ladder wobbled, I had my arms around her, steadying her, pulling her down before she could fall.

“You're impossible,” she muttered, but her hands still came up to cup my face before she kissed me thoroughly.

“And you're reckless,” I shot back, setting her on the ground and reaching for the jar myself. Her lips quirked into the smallest of smiles, and it was all I needed to feel justified.

I stayed close to her for the rest of the day, ensuring she didn't wander too far, didn't overwork herself, and didn't risk a single damn thing. Because Naomi was mine, and I kept what belonged to me safe.

Dad hung out for a few more hours, and by the time we checked the clock again, it was nearly dinner time. Naomi asked him to stay for the meal, and together, the two of us cooked. The kitchen smelled like rosemary and garlic, the scent thick in the air as Naomi hummed softly to herself. She was standing at the stove, flipping steaks in a cast-iron skillet with the precision of someone who enjoyed the art of cooking. I leaned against the counter, pretending to dice potatoes for the roasted side dish she'd insisted on making, but mostly, I just watched her.

She moved with a kind of natural grace that always left me spellbound. It wasn't deliberate; Naomi didn't even realize she had that effect on me, and that only made it worse. Or better, depending on how you looked at it.

"I can feel you look at me," she said without turning around, her voice teasing.

"You make it hard not to."

She shook her head, hiding the smile I knew was there.

We'd fallen into a routine the past few days. She worked on her garden or tinkered in the kitchen, and I was always nearby, watching, helping when she'd let me, catching her whenever she decided to push her limits. It was a rhythm I hadn't expected to like—hell, I hadn't expected to fall this hard for anyone—but it felt right. She fit into my world so seamlessly that it scared me.

"Potatoes?" she prompted, nodding toward the cutting board.

I glanced down at the uneven chunks I'd hacked out of the poor vegetable and grimaced. "They're fine."

She stepped over, her brow lifting as she inspected my work. "You're hopeless," she teased, grabbing the knife from me and quickly slicing the rest with practiced ease.

Hopeless was a good word for it. I was hopelessly gone for her, and the scary part was that I didn't even care anymore.

By the time dinner was ready, Peter had settled at the table as Naomi placed a plate in front of him. She'd made steaks, garlic-roasted potatoes, and some kind of fancy salad with goat cheese and cranberries. It wasn't the kind of food I usually ate, but that was probably a good thing. Way too many of my meals had consisted of some kind of jerky.

"This is incredible," Peter said, cutting into his steak.

Naomi grinned happily from the praise, brushing her hair behind her ear. "It's nothing. Just something simple."

I'd begun to understand something—Naomi undervalued most of her talents, which told me that no one had noticed them back in her own pack. She had lived a quiet, if lonely life. She was still embarrassed by the praise but was getting better at accepting it. By the time I'm through with her, she'll be confident in her gifts, but it was slow going.

My father regaled us with stories from his younger days—about my mom, about the pack before I took over—and Naomi listened with rapt attention, occasionally glancing at me as if piecing together the puzzle of my life.

It was the kind of evening I never thought I'd have. Warm. Peaceful. Whole.

Until the knock shattered it.

It was loud and deliberate, cutting through the comfortable buzz of conversation. I shot out of my chair, my instincts firing on all cylinders. Naomi flinched, her fork clattering against her plate.

“Stay here,” I ordered, my voice harsher than I intended as I grabbed the shotgun leaning against the wall by the door.

Naomi’s eyes widened, and Dad rose to his feet, his hand on the knife at his belt. His old Alpha tendencies apparently weren’t totally gone, made clear when he shoved Naomi behind him and stepped forward in the protector's stance.

The knock came again, more insistent this time. The memory of the demons and their dark eyes hovering on the edge of the forest returned to me, and it made me clench my jaw. Surely not—

My grip tightened on the shotgun as I approached the door; every muscle in my body coiled like a snake, ready to strike. Whoever was on the other side had better have a damn good reason for interrupting my dinner, or they were about to regret it.

When I reached the door, I hesitated for half a second, glancing back at Naomi. Her expression was worried, but there was also a defiance beneath it. She would fight beside me if I needed her to. A true mate.

Damn, did I love that woman. That thought alone was enough to steady me.

With a deep breath, I yanked the door open, shotgun raised, and prepared for whatever the hell was about to come through.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The door slammed open with the force of Danny's grip, and a gust of cool evening air swept into the house. I froze as my eyes landed on our visitor. His identity was good news, really, because I was sure he meant us no harm. But on the other hand, it was probably the person I expected to see the least in the world—my old Alpha.

Hector stood towering on the porch with Faye, his mate, standing stoically beside him. Hector's face was neutral until he saw the shotgun, but it turned briefly furious.

Danny didn't flinch when Hector shoved the shotgun aside with a growl. "You better get that piece out of my face, Alpha. Where's Naomi?"

"She's here," Danny said evenly. I wondered if Hector could hear the threat in it. Danny didn't step back, didn't invite them in. His body blocked the doorway like a stone wall, his protective presence nearly overwhelming even from across the room.

Faye's gaze darted past him, landing on me. "Naomi," she called gently, her tone soothing, like she was trying to coax me out of hiding. "Tell your friend that you'd be happy to speak to us, please."

I stood slowly, my chair scraping against the floor as I pushed it back. My legs trembled as I moved toward them, though I kept my head high. I wasn't the same woman that they'd seen panicking over her name having been drawn at the match ceremony. It hadn't been long, but I'd been changed.

"Let them in," I said softly, placing a hand on Danny's arm. His muscles were tight beneath my touch, but he stepped aside reluctantly, his glare sharp enough to cut through steel.

They followed me into the house, and we all sat around the dining table. Danny put the shotgun back, and the angry energy in the house lowered significantly. Neither Alpha was thrilled, though, and the former Alpha, Peter, had his arms crossed as he watched them both. It reminded me of a father ready to pull apart his two arguing children, and I had to repress a smile at the thought.

“Danny, Peter,” Hector started. “I apologize for entering your territory without prior notice, but we wanted to make sure our Naomi was safe without anyone having time to hide something. Would you mind if my wife and I spoke to her alone?”

Danny didn’t even blink. “No.”

“Danny—” Peter began, but Danny cut him off with a look.

“She’s my mate,” Danny said firmly. “Anything you have to say to her, you’ll say in front of me.”

Hector’s nostrils flared, but he didn’t argue further. His temper had been short, but becoming an Alpha had made Hector much more patient. Deep down, I thought that Hector would have done the same thing as Danny if Faye had been in my place.

Faye placed a hand on Hector’s arm, calming him slightly before turning her attention to me. “Naomi, you disappeared without a trace. We thought you were dead. A friend of yours said you were supposed to come to her house but never arrived, and your phone stopped pinging not far out of Silverfang Creek territory. Then we heard whispers—that you were with the Red Canines.”

“I didn’t disappear,” I snapped, my voice sharper than I intended. Oh, now they were worried about me? Now that I’d been drugged, kidnapped, stalked by demons, and then partaken in a mating ritual for my own safety? A little fucking late, in my opinion, but I kept my response clipped. “I was taken by the man you yourself said I

was matched with. And no one came to find me.”

Hector’s brows furrowed, expression twisting into something almost like guilt, but not quite. “We didn’t know where you were. Of course we called Danny’s people when you first disappeared, since it had been so soon after the match ceremony, but we were stonewalled. We searched—”

“Not hard enough,” I interrupted. “You searched, but you didn’t find me. Now you’ve found me, and there’s no point anymore because I’m not part of your pack.”

Hector and Faye looked stunned, glancing between Danny and me quickly. “Already—?” Faye asked. “But it’s been so short a time.”

Danny’s hand brushed mine under the table, steadying me. His silent support was the only thing keeping me from shaking apart under Hector’s intense glare. I kept my shoulders strong as I spoke. “Danny took me. It scared the shit out of me at first, but things changed.”

Instead of elaborating further, I pulled down the neck of my sweater and showed them the mate bite mark there. Faye inhaled sharply.

“We came as soon as we knew.” Faye sounded fully thrown off. She had apparently expected a different outcome here. “We never expected you’d have done the ritual already. I know the match ceremony linked you and Alpha Danny, but if you don’t want to stay—I know the Red Canines—” She trailed off, eyes flickering toward Danny, clearly not wanting to be too offensive.

Her husband had no such qualms.

“They have a shitty reputation,” Hector finished before nodding to Danny. “No offense meant, Alpha. I’ve heard rumblings that you’re trying to change things

around. It's none of my business how another Alpha runs his pack, but since you have one of my pack here, I unfortunately have to intervene to make sure she's safe."

Danny leaned forward, his own glare meeting Hector's head-on. "She's my mate. And she's safe. That's all you need to know."

"I'm not here to argue with you, Turner," Hector sighed, his gaze snapping back to me. "But I need to know—are you safe, Naomi? Truly?"

I bit my lip, my gaze flickering between Hector and Faye, and finally landing on Danny. His expression was guarded, his dark eyes searching mine. I thought about the past few days, the way he'd caught me, protected me, and stayed by my side.

"I am," I said firmly. "I'm safe. I'm happy."

Hector didn't look convinced, but he leaned back in his chair with a frustrated huff. "You've bonded," he said finally, his voice tight. "I can feel it. Is there any reason for me to think this has been done against your will?"

"No," I said sharply. "There isn't."

Hector relaxed some. It was Faye who spoke next. "We only want what's best for you, Naomi. That's all we've ever wanted."

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. "Be for real, Faye. If that were true, maybe you would've gotten here before I had to fend for myself. I bet it took a long time to even notice I was gone."

The silence that followed was deafening, the weight of my words sinking into the room like a stone.

“That’s not true,” Faye countered quietly. It was a little cruel for me to say—I was sure they’d noticed rather quickly that I was gone, especially when I didn’t show up at my friend’s house, but that didn’t mean they’d paid me any mind beforehand.

“You can stay for dinner,” Danny interrupted. “Or you can leave. But Naomi’s not going anywhere. She’s told you she wants to stay, so there’s nothing else for you two here.”

Hector’s lips pressed into a thin line, his gaze flickering to Faye before he finally stood. “Well, I have to admit, this was not what we expected. I suppose I should congratulate you two on a successful bonding, but I’d like my wife to stay here for a few days until she’s confident our Naomi is settling in okay. I’m sure you’re more than happy to offer hospitality to the wife of the Silverfang Creek Alpha, right?”

Danny’s jaw worked—he was definitely NOT more than happy to offer hospitality. The exact opposite, probably. But Alpha to Alpha, Danny couldn’t risk being an outright asshole to Hector. The Silverfangs far outnumbered the Red Canines, not to mention an alliance between the two packs would go a long way toward the renewal of the pack that Danny wanted. So, after a long moment, he nodded. “Of course. Dad, could you go get the guest room ready?”

Peter, who had been silent the whole time, looked utterly relieved to leave the table of tension. “Sure thing, Kid.”

\*\*\*

Just as Hector had promised, Faye stayed behind. I had held out hope it was a bluff until Hector’s truck drove off into the distance, leaving his wife and the bag that she had conveniently packed and brought with her behind.

So much for the blissful post-mating period Danny and I had been enjoying. Now my

ex- Alpha's wife was here for a check-in, and I had to play hostess.

It shouldn't have surprised me—Hector had always been calculating, and leaving his mate here to “monitor” the situation was exactly his style. Still, the tight line of Danny's mouth as Hector left made it clear he wasn't thrilled. And I wasn't sure if I was supposed to feel reassured or insulted by their sudden friendliness.

Only a week ago, I was just Naomi. A pack outsider with no family, nothing remarkable to speak of. Now, I was interesting enough to warrant a visit to another pack's territory. Compelling, even.

Apparently, being mated to an Alpha changed things.

Faye seemed to take her task seriously, inserting herself into conversations, asking polite but probing questions about the Red Canines, Danny, and me. I gave her curt, borderline civil answers, playing along for the sake of peace. Danny hovered near me like a storm cloud, ready to unleash thunder, but she didn't seem fazed. If anything, she looked amused.

Being a wolf-witch hybrid probably allowed her to be amused about most things. There wasn't much that could scare someone like Faye.

When Danny left to see his father out, Faye cornered me in the kitchen. Her tone was friendly as she leaned against the counter, her fingers toying with the edge of a dishtowel.

“I owe you an apology,” she said.

“For what?” I asked, setting down the knife I'd been using to slice an apple. “For showing up here?”

She shook her head. “No. For not seeing you before this,” she replied, her bright eyes meeting mine with something that looked like regret. “For how the pack treated you.”

I stiffened, unsure where this was going. “What do you mean? The pack raised me, and I’m grateful. No one was ever cruel.”

She sighed, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re—different, Naomi. Or maybe I’m wrong, and you’ve always been like this—” She motioned to me. “—and we just never noticed. And that was our fault. You’ve got a strength that not everyone sees right away, and the Silverfangs didn’t do you any favors by ignoring it. By ignoring you.”

I swallowed hard, unsure how to process her words. “I was just existing, yeah, but it wasn’t that bad.”

Her expression pinched slightly, but she didn’t argue. “We should have done more than just tolerate you. And now that I see you here, standing your ground, I can’t help but think we underestimated you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. The idea that my old pack had overlooked me wasn’t new—it was a truth I’d learned to live with. But to hear it admitted out loud, by Faye of all people, left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“And now you think what? That Danny found something you all missed?” I asked, forcing a sharpness into my tone to mask the lump forming in my throat. I never wanted to be Normal Naomi again, and now Faye was here, bringing her back into the spotlight.

“I think Danny sees you for what you are,” she said gently. “And maybe the Silverfangs failed you by not doing the same.”

Her words left me feeling shaken. I didn't know if I believed her or if this was just another way to appease me, to sweep the fact that they had taken so long to find me under the rug. I had longed to hear something like this for so long, but now that it had been said, the apology fell—flat. There was no sweeping vindication like I had expected.

And then there was Danny, who immediately saw me as someone interesting, attractive, someone special. Hell, Danny had wanted me badly enough to have me kidnapped. He didn't need convincing like everyone else. It reinforced what I had told my old Alpha earlier—I wanted to stay here.

“Thanks, Faye,” I sighed, the words basically meaningless at that point. “Better late than never, I guess.”

\*\*\*

Later that night, Danny and I lay tangled together in bed. His arm was draped over my waist, his body radiating a comforting heat that had quickly become my favorite thing about sleeping next to him.

“Still feels strange,” I murmured, tracing absent patterns on his chest.

“What does?” he asked, his voice rough, like gravel shifting under tires.

“That Hector and Faye showed up. They've never cared much about me before.”

Danny grunted in agreement, his fingers stroking absentmindedly over my hip. “Hector's up to something. Leaving Faye here? Doesn't sit right.”

I nodded, though I wasn't sure I agreed. Hector's behavior was odd, but Faye—Faye seemed genuine. At least as genuine as someone like her could be. Her position in the

pack was so high that I wondered if it made it harder for her to understand someone like me.

Then, with a start, I realized something that made me bark out a surprised laugh. It made Danny jump.

“What is it?”

“I was just laying here thinking about how Faye outranked basically everyone in the Silverfang Creek, but now I’m also an Alpha’s mate, so we’re like—on the same level. That feels impossible to me.”

“You’re a queen,” Danny rumbled, pulling me into a kiss. “My Canine Queen. Don’t you ever forget it.”

After Danny showed me just how much of a queen I was by worshiping me head to toe, I found myself exhausted. The weight of the day caught up with me fast, pulling me into a drowsy haze. The last thing I remembered was Danny kissing my forehead, his arm tightening around me protectively before I drifted off to sleep.

But hours later, I jolted awake to the sound of a blood-curdling scream.

My heart raced as I shot upright, Danny already halfway out of bed before I could even process what was happening.

“Stay here,” he ordered, but I was already on his heels, pulling a sweatshirt over my head as we sprinted down the hall to the guest room.

Faye’s screams cut through the silence like a knife, ragged and desperate.

Danny reached for the doorknob, but I stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Wait.

She's not going to want you in there. Let me go first."

His jaw tightened, but he stepped back, his gaze hard. "If there's someone in there—"

"I think it's just her," I panted. "A night terror, maybe. But a strange werewolf will scare her even more. I'll just be a few feet away."

Danny wasn't thrilled, but he could hear the sense in my words. I pushed the door open and slipped inside, not closing it all the way so Danny could watch me. Faye was curled in a tight ball on the bed, her face pale and tear-streaked. She was shaking, her breathing shallow and erratic.

"Faye," I said softly, moving closer to touch her shoulder. "It's okay. It was just a nightmare."

She flinched at my touch, her wide eyes locking onto mine. "It wasn't just a nightmare," she whispered, her voice raw with terror.

"What do you mean?" I asked, crouching beside the bed.

She clutched the blanket tighter around herself, her gaze darting around the room like she expected something to leap out of the shadows. "I saw her. My daughter. She was—she was being taken by demons."

My stomach twisted—she was talking about Sierra, her and Hector's daughter, and the pride and joy of the entire Silverfang Creek pack. "Hector would be home by now. I'm sure Faye is safe."

Faye shook her head, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. "It was crystal clear, like I was watching from outside of a window and couldn't reach her."

I reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. “Faye, it was just a dream. You’re safe here. Danny and I won’t let anything happen to you, and Hector and the rest of the pack are definitely protecting Sierra.”

“Tell her we can drive her home tonight if she wants,” Danny called from outside the room, his rumbling voice a balm to my nervous spirit. “It’s a long drive, but we’d have her there by dawn.”

But she shook her head violently, her fingers digging into the blanket. “No, Naomi, Danny—you don’t understand. It’s impossible. I can’t leave—I can feel them! The demons. They’re here. They’ve surrounded your house.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The house was too damn quiet.

Too still, considering what was going on outside. It put my nerves on edge. I paced the length of the living room with the phone pressed to my ear. Saul's number rang again and again, but there was no answer. What the hell was the point of having a witch on contract if he wasn't going to answer the fucking phone?

"Pick up, dammit," I growled under my breath. My wolf clawed at the edges of my control, uneasy with the silence stretching between rings. When the call finally dropped to voicemail, I slammed the phone onto the counter, my jaw clenched tight enough to crack teeth.

Behind me, Faye stood in the center of the room, her hands raised and her lips moving in silent prayer or incantation—probably both. Her face was pale, sweat beading on her brow as she worked to wrap the house in some kind of invisible shield. Power radiated from her, a slightly different flavor from my pack's human witch. Hector's wolf-witch wife was infamous, and if my house wasn't under fucking attack, I might have been impressed. Before she had begun the chant, she told us that she could only hold a full shield for a few minutes before it knocked her unconscious. We were banking on Saul showing up to add his power, which would give us significantly longer.

Naomi hovered close by, her eyes wide and dark. She was scared, which was natural, but she also refused to go into the basement where she might have been safer. If there was going to be a fight, Naomi would be right there in the middle of it with everyone else.

I both loved and hated that about her. I wanted to keep her safe, but I also admired her bravery. So complicated, my mate.

“You sure this is worth the time?” I asked Faye, my tone sharper than I intended.

She flinched but didn’t stop chanting, simply giving me a thumbs up. I guess that was all the answer I was getting out of her.

“Saul’s not answering,” I snapped to no one in particular, frustrated and feeling helpless. I was the Alpha, dammit. I was supposed to be the one driving the demons away, not waiting for them to show their ugly faces.

As if on cue, a deafening crash rattled the walls. I spun toward the window just in time to see something massive and shadowy slam against the invisible barrier Faye had erected. The witch stumbled like she had been physically shoved. The shield rippled with the impact, faint golden light sparking along its edges before fading again.

“Five,” Faye gasped, her voice shaking, tone otherworldly. “There are five of them.”

“Demons,” Naomi breathed. “Five demons. Oh my God.”

Five—we were outnumbered. Adrenaline surged through me, my wolf rising to the surface, ready to fight, but there was nothing to hit. Not yet.

“Keep trying to hold the shield,” I ordered Faye.

“I’m trying,” she bit out, her voice strained. “But they’re—They’re strong.” There was a grey tint to her lips that worried the hell out of me. She must have been expending a massive amount of power. “Call—Hector— please.”

“He was my first call,” I assured her. I might have been an asshole, but not so much of an asshole that I wouldn’t let another Alpha know his mate was in danger.

Another crash. Then another. Each one sent a tremor through the house and a wave of golden light flickering across the shield. Faye’s knees buckled, and Naomi rushed to steady her.

“Faye, don’t stop,” Naomi urged, her voice steady despite the fear I knew she felt.

“I won’t,” Faye said through gritted teeth. “I’ll hold until I can’t anymore.”

I gripped the shotgun leaning against the wall, my knuckles white around the stock. The rounds were spelled against demons, but shooting through the barrier would weaken it—and Faye. We needed to be calculated about this.

“Can you let one through at a time, Faye?”

A loud, guttural roar erupted from outside, followed by the unmistakable sound of claws scraping against wood. They were testing for weak points.

“Maybe,” she huffed. “Definitely—if—your witch—gets here.”

“Dammit, Saul,” I muttered under my breath. “Where the hell are you?”

As if summoned by my frustration, the air in the room shifted, a sudden gust of wind sweeping through. The doorway was flung open by the gale, and Saul appeared in the doorway, looking like some wild priest blown in from the distant past.

“Looks like I’m just in time,” he said, his sharp gaze assessing the situation in an instant.

It was Naomi who snapped at him, and if the situation wasn't such a mess, I would have loved to see that fire in her. "Actually, you're fucking late, Saul. Help her!"

Saul ignored her, already stepping past the two of us to stand at the center of the room. He raised his hands, his voice low and commanding as he joined Faye in reinforcing the shield. The crashes came faster now, each one making the walls tremble. But with Saul's help, the golden light around the house grew brighter, stronger. Faye sighed in relief, her legs and arms no longer trembling.

"I told Faye to let them in one at a time," I told Saul. "We can take them easily like that. Only. One!"

"Yes, Alpha," Saul droned, already lost in the spell. "Be prepared."

The first demon breached the barrier, wearing the body of a middle-aged man whose eyes were pitch black, his fingers curled in claws. I didn't hesitate. Raising the shotgun, I fired, the spelled round tearing through the demon's chest and sending it sprawling to the ground. It degraded immediately, disappearing in a flash of light and ash. I felt a rush of triumph.

"Hell yes. Saul, these rounds are incredible."

Voice just as otherworldly as Faye's, Saul spared me a chuckle. "I know."

Two more followed; their grotesque shapes, once normal and human but now utterly corrupted, were illuminated by the golden glow of the shield as they were individually let through. The shotgun barked, and Saul shouted something I couldn't hear over the gunfire, his hands moving in complex patterns as he hurled spells at the demons.

Whistle. Pop. The smell of brimstone and burning rubber. The demons fought, but

they still died to our hands, bullets, and spells.

We fought like hell. By the time it was over, three of the demons had been destroyed. The other two had vanished into the night, retreating with eerie, inhuman cries. Faye collapsed to her knees, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Naomi rushed to her side, murmuring reassurances I couldn't make out, stroking the witch's overheated forehead.

I turned my attention to the black smears on the ground that had once been demons, my wolf growling low and angry as I noted the scorch marks where they had tried to crawl in their last moments. They'd reached for Faye. For Naomi.

They weren't just here to destroy. They were here to take our women. The thought was like a bucket of ice water over my head.

I watched as Saul and Naomi helped Faye to the dining table and got her some herbal tea and cookies to regain some of her energy. There was cleaning to be done, and I needed to investigate outside to see if I could find any clues about where the demons had originated from, but that would all have to wait. First, I needed to circle the wagons.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Julian. He picked up on the first ring.

"We've got a problem," I said, my voice grim.

His voice was rough like he had been sleeping. "What happened?"

"Demons," I said simply. "We killed three, but two got away. They were after Naomi and Faye."

Julian swore under his breath.

“My friend,” I growled. “We need to prepare for war.”

Because this wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

\*\*\*

The first rays of dawn filtered through the curtains, painting the kitchen in muted golds and reds. It should have been a peaceful scene—the kind of calm that settled after a long, brutal night. But the air inside the house was anything but; it was charged with an energy that had no outlet.

Julian had arrived late last night, and we sent the women to bed, cleaning up the demon remains alongside Saul while we discussed what to do next. The investigation outside hadn’t given us any information either. It seemed like the demons had shown up out of nowhere, disappearing just as quickly when it became clear we would obliterate every one of them.

Naomi sat at the table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, the steam curling in lazy spirals toward her face. She was pale, her usually warm complexion drawn tight with exhaustion, nose ring winking in the light. Next to her, Faye poked at a plate of scrambled eggs, her appetite clearly gone after last night’s events.

Across the table, Saul leaned back in his chair, his sharp, calculating eyes scanning the room like he was piecing together some invisible puzzle. Julian, on the other hand, was slouched forward, his arms crossed over his chest, radiating an energy that was uncomfortably close to hostility.

Something was up with him, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. He had been pissed when he showed up last night, but I had chalked it up to being woken up in the middle of sleep and missing out on the action. Now, though, I had no idea why he was being such a grumpy prick.

I sat at the head of the table, trying to focus on the food in front of me, but my wolf was restless. The events of the night before kept looping in my head—Faye’s screams, the demons tearing through the barrier, the way they’d reached for Naomi like she was some kind of prize.

My hand clenched around my fork.

“Worried about your straight-laced mate?” Julian asked, his tone mocking. Naomi’s head popped up and she looked in our direction, confused.

I looked up, frowning. Surely I had heard him wrong. “What?”

Julian tilted his head toward Naomi, his expression unreadable but his tone sharp enough to bite. “She’s too straightlaced for this. For you. For us. You think she can handle the biker life, Danny? Hell, you think she can handle the demon-fighting life? She’s barely holding it together.”

The words landed like a slap. Naomi flinched, her hand tightening around the mug. She didn’t say anything, but the hurt was plain in her eyes.

“What the hell, Julian?” I had to force the words between my teeth.

He shrugged, leaning back in his chair like he hadn’t just insulted my mate in front of me. “I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking. She’s not cut out for this. You’re setting yourself up for failure, Danny. And her. You’d be better to send her back to the Silverfangs.”

My wolf surged forward, a growl rumbling in my chest. I pushed back from the table, standing so fast that my chair scraped loudly against the floor.

“Don’t you dare talk about her like that!”

Julian raised an eyebrow like he couldn't believe I was serious. "Come on, Man. You know I'm right. She's—"

"She's my mate," I snarled, cutting him off. What in the fuck was wrong with him? Julian had expressed concern about the mating, but he trusted me when I reassured him. Julian always trusted me. "Naomi is my Canine Queen. And if you think for one second I'm gonna let you—or anyone else—disrespect her, you've lost your damn mind."

The room went deadly silent. Faye's fork clattered against her plate, her wide eyes darting between me and Julian. Great. Fighting in front of the Silverfang Creek Alpha's mate. So much for proving the Red Canines weren't the brash assholes our reputation made us out to be.

Julian stood slowly, his movements deliberate, like he was trying to remind me that he wasn't afraid of me. "You really think she's queen material, huh?" he asked, his tone mocking.

I took a step toward him, my fists clenched at my sides. "Say one more word, and I'll make an example out of you in front of the entire pack—but first, I'll kick your ass right here and now as a warmup."

His eyes narrowed, and for a moment, he didn't look like himself. His eyes were dark, and it looked like he might actually challenge me. But then he stepped back, shaking his head.

"You're making a mistake, Danny," he said, his voice quieter now but no less bitter. "Maybe it's time I started my own pack. One that doesn't get dragged down by bad decisions."

I didn't say anything, didn't trust myself to speak. My wolf was too close to the

surface, too ready to lash out. Julian turned and walked out, his boots echoing against the hardwood floor. The door slammed shut behind him, leaving the room in heavy silence.

Naomi shifted in her seat, her gaze fixed on the table. “He didn’t mean it—”

“I don’t care if he did or not. The words still came out of his mouth,” I said, my voice still rough with anger. “And he can go to hell for it.”

I glanced around the table, meeting the wide-eyed stares of Faye and Saul. “This is my pack,” I said firmly. “And Naomi is my queen. Anyone who has a problem with that can join Julian on his way out.”

No one said a word, the room’s energy thick and suffocating. I went back to my seat, blood rushing in my ears with the fury I was feeling. Of all the times for my best friend to be a fucking moron. I needed all the help I could get right now, and I’d just lost my biggest asset over some stupid opinion he had.

But then I looked over at Naomi and saw the thankfulness in her gaze. She appreciated that I protected her, even against Julian. Her approval, her happiness, was all I needed to know that I had done the right thing, no matter how hard it was.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

It had only been a day since the demons attacked, but it felt more like a week. Danny had been adamant that no one left the house—except for Saul, who apparently was trusted to handle himself where Faye and I weren't. Logically, I understood—I was his mate, and Faye was the mate of another Alpha, which meant we were vulnerable targets. But it still annoyed the hell out of me.

Where did I even want to go? Hell if I know. All I knew was that I didn't like being trapped one bit, and it seemed I was trapped more often than not in Red Canine territory.

The sun was dipping low in the sky by the time Faye and I settled at the small desk in the guest room. Shadows stretched across the walls, soft and hazy. Faye's laptop glowed bright in the dim space, the faint hum of its fan filling the quiet.

She'd already spoken to her incredibly unhappy husband, but it was also important that we both speak to him together. My mate was spending every spare minute investigating what was happening with the demons and working with Saul to reinforce the warning wards on not just this house but the ones on the boarding house, too. So it was up to the two of us to give the Silverfang Creek Alpha a full run-through of what was going on.

Faye sat straight-backed, her fingers poised over the keyboard as she waited for the call to connect. I couldn't help but notice the way her hands trembled slightly. It wasn't like her—at least, not the version of her I thought I knew. Faye was graceful and calm, always composed. But now? She seemed as shaken as I felt.

She noticed me looking and gave me a tired smile. "I just really miss them, is all."

The screen flickered, and then Hector's face appeared, his expression stern. He was in his office, the dark wood paneling behind him giving off the same commanding energy he carried everywhere he went.

"Faye," Hector said, his voice a low rumble. "Naomi." His eyes scanned the screen, "How's it going over there?"

Faye took a breath, her lips pressing together before she began. "As you know, we've had an incident here," she said, her tone steady despite the weight of her words. "Demons attacked the house last night, five of them, but we managed to handle it."

Hector nodded. "Go on."

"We're all safe for the moment," she said firmly, as if she was trying to reassure both herself and Hector. "But they were after Naomi and me. Saul and I managed to hold them off with Danny and Naomi's help, but it was close. Too close."

Hector's expression darkened, his eyes narrowing. "This isn't good. I've been sensing something brewing, but I didn't think it would escalate this quickly."

"There's more," Faye said, her voice quieter now. "I didn't tell you this earlier because I didn't think it was pertinent, but Naomi thinks I should. I've been having dreams. Nightmares about—about Sierra being taken." She swallowed hard, her composure cracking.

"Don't worry, Love," Hector reassured. "She's safe in her room napping right now. But do you think these dreams might mean something?"

"I can't say for sure," Faye whispered, her eyes flickering to me before settling back on the screen. "She was taken by demons in my dream. I—I can't shake the feeling that it's a warning."

Hector's jaw tightened, his hand running through his hair. "Faye, I know you want to get home to Sierra, but you need to stay in Athens. I'm afraid something is sending you these dreams to get you on the road back home, and something terrible will happen while you're between packs. Don't come back yet. Bunker down with Danny's pack. I'll handle things here."

Faye's face fell, her composure faltering. "Hector, I can't—"

"You can," he interrupted firmly. "And you will. I'm not risking you or anyone else. We'll figure this out, but I need you safe."

I sat there, silent and unsure, my chest tightening with guilt. Splitting them up wasn't right, no matter the circumstances. They were mates, like Danny and I, but I sensed that it was at an even deeper level for them. Maybe because they had a child together, or maybe it was just something that came with time.

"Hector—" I started, but he cut me off with a shake of his head.

"Naomi, this isn't on you," he said, his tone surprisingly kind. "Faye knows what she's doing, and so do I. Protecting you both and Sierra is all that matters."

I bit my lip, glancing at Faye, whose eyes were glassy but determined. She reached out and squeezed my hand, her grip warm and reassuring. "It'll be okay," she said softly, her voice steady despite the tear glistening at the corner of her eye. "Hector and I both have mate bites. That bond isn't something distance can break."

I blinked a few times, confused. "Wait, you both do? Like, you bit him, too?"

Faye nodded sagely. "Yes. It brought us closer and made our bond stronger. As much as I'll still miss him when we're apart, I can still feel him here." She tapped her chest directly over her heart.

Hector's voice drew my attention back to the screen. "Stay vigilant. I'll keep in touch. And Naomi?"

I straightened instinctively, meeting his gaze. Old habits were hard to break.

"The Silverfangs are proud of you. Take care of my mate, okay?"

I nodded once. The call ended with a soft click, the screen going dark. Faye leaned back in her chair, exhaling deeply as if she'd been holding her breath the entire time. I wanted to believe her, believe Hector, believe in whatever strength they saw in me. But as the silence settled around us, I couldn't shake the gnawing worry. What if I wasn't up to being an Alpha's mate?

After I left Faye in her room to take a nap, I found Danny upstairs, leaning against the doorframe of our bedroom like he'd been waiting for me. His arms were crossed over his chest, the strength in his shoulders evident as his muscles stretched his black shirt's fabric. He looked at me, his expression unreadable but intense, and for a moment, I thought he might be angry.

"Danny?" I asked cautiously, stepping closer. The sound of my voice seemed to break whatever thoughts had been circling in his head.

"I wasn't trying to listen in, but I caught the tail end of your conversation."

I frowned, confused. "Oh. Okay—?"

"Hector and Faye were talking about their mate bites," he clarified, pushing off the doorframe and closing the space between us. "She marked him, too. Faye said that the bond doesn't break. Not even with distance."

"Oh," I said again, my stomach knotting. "I didn't know it worked that way. And

when they mentioned it, I didn't think—”

“That I'd want you to?” he interrupted gently. “I do, Naomi.” His hand lifted to my face, his thumb brushing softly along my jaw. “I want your mark on me so fucking bad. I just didn't want to push you after we had to rush the mating ritual.”

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. “You're saying you want me to—so should I—”

“Bite me back,” he finished for me, his lips quirking into the faintest smile. “If you're ready for it.”

My heart thudded in my chest, so loud that I was sure he could hear it as I stared up at him. His face was so close I could see the different shades of gray in his eyes. His hand slid from my jaw to the back of my neck, thumb tracing soothing circles there. The gesture made my skin prickle with warmth.

“Danny,” I started, but the words tangled in my throat.

“You don't have to. But I want you to know it'll only make the bond stronger. I'll feel it, same as you. It's protection for both of us. And—I want it, Naomi. I want you.”

His admission sent a wave of something fierce and tender crashing through me. I was desperate for comfort, for the security that his presence always gave me. But it wasn't just about needing him—it was about wanting to protect him, too. To anchor him the way he anchored me.

I nodded, my voice too shaky to trust. “Okay,” I whispered. “I'll do it.”

He guided me into the bedroom, closing the door softly behind us. The room was dim, the golden light of the setting sun spilling through the window. Danny stood in

front of me, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the soft glow, and I couldn't help but marvel at how this man—this tough, relentless Alpha—was looking at me like I was the answer to something he'd been searching for his whole life.

He didn't need me to save him. He needed me to accept him.

Danny sat on the edge of the bed and drew me closer between his legs. I hesitated, then lifted my hands to the sides of his face. My thumbs brushed along the strong line of his jaw, and I could feel the heat radiating from his skin. His eyes were fixed on mine, his gaze heavy with anticipation.

My breath caught as he pulled me closer, his hands settling on my hips. His scent enveloped me, the familiar mix of sandalwood and pine. My heart was hammering, but I was determined to stay calm.

I leaned in, pressing my lips to his. The kiss was soft and sweet, and it sent a rush of heat through my veins. The second, though, was different, less patient and more passionate. I could feel the hunger and need in his touch, and it ignited something ferocious in me.

I wanted this. Wanted him.

The kiss deepened, and I melted into him, our bodies pressed together, the heat between us rising. Danny's hands roamed over my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I was lost in him, the world narrowing down to just the two of us, and there was nothing else I wanted more.

He broke the kiss, his breath coming in ragged gasps. His eyes burned with desire, and I knew that look well.

This time, though, I wanted to surprise him. Danny Turner didn't give up control

easily, but something told me he'd give it up to me if I just asked nicely enough.

Or offered him something he couldn't resist.

Mischief gleaming in my eyes, I lowered myself to my knees in front of him. It took a second for his brain to catch up to what I was doing, but his pupils dilated once it hit him.

“Naomi, you don't—”

“Shhh,” I worked at the button of his black jeans,

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. “Fuck.”

I grinned. “I'm gonna,” I promised. “Just be patient.”

“Patience isn't exactly my strong suit.”

I laughed, finally managing to get his zipper down. He wasn't wearing any underwear, and the sight of his hard cock nearly made me drool.

“Well, you'll just have to try,” I murmured, leaning in to kiss the head.

He shuddered, his hands tangling in my hair. “Oh, fuck.”

I smirked, then parted my lips and took him in my mouth.

His grip on my hair tightened, but he didn't force me down, just letting me explore him. I swirled my tongue around the tip, tasting him, savoring his flavor. It was dark and musky, and it drove me wild.

I wrapped my hand around the base, stroking him as I licked and sucked him. Danny's entire body shuddered.

“That feels fucking amazing,” he groaned.

Encouraged, I took him deeper, the tip hitting the back of my throat. My eyes watered, but I didn't gag.

“Oh, shit,” he moaned, his hips bucking slightly.

I kept going, bobbing my head, working him with my mouth and hand. He was thick and heavy, and it was all I could do to fit him. Danny's breathing grew more labored, his grip on my hair almost painful. But I didn't care. All I cared about was making him come.

“I'm gonna—fuck, Naomi,” he rasped, “If you keep going, I'm gonna come.”

I pulled back slightly, just enough to breathe, “Good.”

With that, I picked up the pace, sucking and licking him like he was the last meal I'd ever have. Danny groaned, his body tensing, and then he was coming, his release spilling into my mouth. I swallowed every drop, then slowly pulled back, licking him clean.

I slid up his body, meaning to kiss him, but Danny's chain had snapped. As soon as he was able to get his hands fully on me, I was being flipped onto my back. Danny had kicked his pants fully off and ripped his shirt over his head before crushing his mouth to mine. He gathered my wrists in one of his big hands, pinning them above my head as he had his way with my mouth, dragging his lips down the column of my throat.

“I’m going to let you go,” he rumbled, “And you better get your fucking clothes off as quick as possible, Woman, because I have to have you.”

“Yes, Sir,” I whispered, a thrill of desire shooting through me.

His grip on my wrists relaxed, and he slid off the bed. I sat up, fumbling with the buttons on my shirt. My fingers were shaking, and it was taking forever.

Danny chuckled, reaching down and grabbing the front of the garment. With a hard yank, he tore it open, exposing my bra. “Don’t complain. I’ll buy you another one.”

I was still laughing as I stepped out of my leggings. Danny yanked my panties down my legs, and then I was on my back on the bed again, and he was stretching his big, hard body over mine.

“This isn’t going to be sweet or gentle,” he growled. “I can’t wait.”

I arched beneath him, already wet with desire. “Good,” I panted. “Because neither can I.”

His mouth crashed down on mine, hot and hungry. My hands roamed over his body, memorizing every curve and ridge. He was perfect, and he was mine.

His teeth nipped at my bottom lip, and I moaned, loving the little pinch of pain. He kissed his way down my neck, sucking on the sensitive spot where my shoulder met my neck. Right where he had marked me. I gasped, my nails digging into his back.

He released my lip and trailed kisses down the center of my chest, his hands cupping my breasts. His thumbs brushed over my nipples, the fleeting arcs of pleasure going straight to my pussy.

His mouth followed his hands, and then his tongue was swirling around one nipple, his hand pinching and tugging the other. The dual sensation sent a rush of pleasure through me, and I couldn't hold back the moan that escaped my lips.

Danny looked up at me, his eyes burning with desire. "You like that?"

"Yes," I breathed.

"Good," he murmured before moving to the other nipple and giving it the same treatment.

I was lost in a haze of pleasure, my body responding to his every touch. His fingers trailed down my stomach, then between my legs, finding the spot that ached for him.

He stroked me, teasing and torturing, until I was squirming beneath him. "Danny," I pleaded, needing him to ease the ache inside me.

He chuckled, his voice low and rough. "What do you want, Naomi? Tell me."

"You."

"Oh, you will. But first, I have to repay you for earlier."

As he spoke, Danny hitched one of my legs over his shoulder and lowered his dark head between my thighs. I bit back a gasp as his tongue stroked me, then circled the tight bud of nerves at the apex of my pussy. The pleasure was electrifying.

"So fucking wet," he murmured, his breath hot against my skin. "You're delicious, Mate."

He teased and tormented me, licking and sucking, until I was practically begging him

for release. "Please," I gasped, my hands fisting in the sheets.

"Come for me," he demanded.

And I did. My climax ripped through me, sending waves of pleasure crashing over me. My body trembled, and I cried out his name. Stars danced in my vision, the muscles of my stomach clenching with how powerful the orgasm was.

Before I could even catch my breath, Danny was positioning his cock, already hard again, at my still spasming entrance and driving inside.

"Oh!" I gasped, pleasure mingling with surprise. He was so big, and I was so sensitive, but it was the best kind of discomfort.

"That's right," he growled, his hands gripping my hips tightly as he thrust into me. "Take all of me."

My hands scrabbled for purchase, clinging to his broad, muscled shoulders.

"Danny!"

"Mmm, you feel so fucking good, Naomi. So tight and wet."

He picked up the pace, driving into me, filling me completely. I arched beneath him, taking everything he gave me and wanting more. My nails dug into his skin, and the scent of blood filled the air, but we were both too far gone to care.

"You're mine," he panted, his breath hot against my ear. "Are you ready to make me yours, Mate?"

It took me a few heartbeats to even remember what he was talking about. All of my

thoughts and attention were on Danny and what his body was doing to mine. But then it struck me—the mating bite. This was all a lead-up to me biting him.

“How—?” I panted. He tilted his head to the side, exposing the strong curve of his neck. The spot where his pulse beat steady under his skin called to something deep inside me. An instinct.

“Right here, Naomi.” His hips never stopped moving, never stopped giving me pleasure, but he was still guiding me through it. “Claim me, Mate.”

His words were my undoing. I leaned in, my breath ghosting over his skin, and sank my teeth into the place where his neck met his shoulder.

The moment my teeth broke the surface, a rush of sensation flooded me—warmth, light, a dizzying wave of connection that left me breathless. It was like I could feel him in every part of me, his strength, his resolve, his love—the same as it had the night he bit me, but this time doubled.

Danny let out a low groan, his hands gripping my waist as if to steady himself. When I pulled back, his eyes were dark and intense, his gaze locking onto mine like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

“Naomi!” Danny roared, every muscle in his body tensing. His thrusts were erratic, driving me across the bed until my hands were braced on the headboard. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

The pleasure was overwhelming, and I cried out, clinging to him as he pounded into me. My entire body shook, the tension inside me reaching a breaking point.

I could feel his energy pulsing through me, his desire, his need, and it was all too much. I cried out his name, the sound echoing off the walls as I came hard, my whole

body shuddering with the force of it.

Danny buried his face in the crook of my neck, his fingers digging into my hips as he found his own release, his cock throbbing deep inside me.

We clung to each other, our breaths ragged, as we came down from the high of our climaxes. Danny rolled onto his back, pulling me close against his chest.

I was exhausted and sated, but I couldn't help the giddy grin that spread across my face.

“That was—intense,” I murmured.

“Yeah,” Danny said, his voice low and raspy. “It was. And now you're stuck with me.”

I propped myself up on my elbows, gazing down at him. His face was flushed, his hair tousled. He was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

“I wouldn't want it any other way,” I said softly.

He grinned that wolfish grin that I was beginning to cherish so much. “Me either.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The world was different when I woke up the following day—maybe not for anyone else, but it would never be the same for me. I had marked my mate, and she had marked me in turn. Our bond was solid, and it seemed to bring color to the world that wasn't there before.

I was inspired. I had planned to gather the pack this morning to discuss the demon threat, but there's more I wanted to speak to them about, too. A change that didn't just affect me but the pack at large. Something that would give them all a better future, even if it fundamentally changed the Red Canines forever.

I arrived at The Howler at a little past 11 am. The parking lot was already full—a good sign that everyone had listened when I called for an all-pack meeting. I rubbed at my neck as I put the kickstand on my bike down. The bite Naomi gave me burned in the best way possible, its heat pulsing in my veins like wildfire. It wasn't just a mark anymore; it was a promise. Her loyalty. Her protection. Her love. She hadn't said the words out loud, but I felt them with every fiber of my being. It made me feel unstoppable. Whatever challenges came our way—demons, rogue wolves, even traitors like Julian—I'd tear through them all. For her. For us.

Today, though, wasn't just about me and Naomi. My pack needed to feel this strength, too. We'd been scraping by for years, clawing out our survival one turf war, one stolen shipment at a time. But love had done something to me. It had changed the way I saw the world. And I wasn't going to stop until my pack felt the same fire that was now coursing through me.

Just like I thought, The Howler was packed to the gills. The air reeked of beer, leather, and sweat, just like always. My boots hit the sticky floor as I strode through

the crowd, nodding at the familiar faces. Most of the pack had gathered. News of the demons had everyone on edge.

I climbed onto the worn wooden bar, my leather jacket creaking as I moved. Every eye in the room turned to me. Some looked hopeful, others wary. They needed direction. They needed their Alpha.

“Listen up!” My voice boomed, silencing the murmurs. I let my gaze sweep across them, lingering on their faces—wolves who’d been with me since the beginning. “By now, I know you all have heard about the demon attacks. Saul has been visiting pack houses to check for demonic residue and setting up warning wards when needed. At this moment, I don’t think the pack as a whole is in danger. The attacks seem to be focused on my mate, and while that pisses me off to no end, it means your daily lives shouldn’t be affected. Still, be on guard and report anything strange to me or Saul.”

There were some sounds of agreement among the wolves, but I wasn’t finished. I changed my tone to signify that we were leaving the demon discussion behind and embarking on something new.

“We’ve been through hell, haven’t we? Scraps with rival packs, cops breathing down our necks, demons at our doorstep. We’ve survived it all.”

A few heads nodded, but others looked confused at where this was going.

“But surviving isn’t enough anymore,” I continued, my voice hardening. “Surviving doesn’t protect our families. It doesn’t give our pack. Surviving isn’t what I want for you. For us.”

I paused, letting my words sink in.

“I’ve found something worth fighting for. Worth living for.” My hand brushed my

neck where Naomi's bite had marked me, though I didn't need to say her name. They all knew. "Love. It's not a weakness. It's a strength. And it's time we used that strength to turn this pack into something more. Something better."

Chatter rippled through the room, doubt mingling with curiosity.

"I know some of you don't trust me. Maybe you think I've gone soft." My eyes flicked to a few faces I knew were still on the outskirts of the pack and who survived almost solely on the most illegal trades. "But let me make one thing clear—this pack is mine. Our legacy doesn't end in survival. It starts with redemption. We've been thieves, outlaws, and rogues long enough. It's time we build something we're proud of."

The crowd shifted, unease giving way to a spark of interest.

"Anyone who wants to leave? There's the door." I gestured toward it, letting the silence stretch. No one moved. "Good. Because if you're with me, we're not just surviving anymore. We're going to rebuild this pack. We're going to fight back against the demons and anyone else who dares to threaten us. We're going to win."

Applause broke out, hesitant at first but growing louder. A weight lifted off my chest.

The applause died down as I raised my hands, signaling for quiet. My pack wasn't done hearing from me yet. Their faces were alight with something I hadn't seen in a long time—hope.

"There's more," I said, letting my voice carry across the room. "Last night, I spoke with Hector, Alpha of the Silverfang Creek."

That got their attention. The room grew so quiet you could hear the faint hum of the old fridge behind the bar. The Silverfang Creek were everything we

weren't—structured, respected, traditional. A stark contrast to our rough-and-tumble ways.

I let the tension simmer for a beat before continuing. “He offered us something. Something I think this pack desperately needs. Once the demon threat is dealt with and this territory is secure, Hector and his mate Faye, their pack witch, will help us bring the mate match ritual to Red Canine soil.”

Gasps rippled through the room, especially from the older members. My gaze landed on Vince, an elder who'd been around longer than I had. His gray brows furrowed, skepticism etched into every line on his face.

“The mate match ritual?” he echoed, his gravelly voice cutting through the murmurs. “Danny, we've never done anything like that. That's not who we are.”

I nodded, expecting the resistance. “You're right, Vince. It's not who we've been. We've been outlaws, loners, barely holding on to this pack by our claws. But look around—how many of us are without mates? How many pups have been born in the last five years?”

The weight of my words sank in. Heads lowered, and a heavy silence fell.

“The mate match ritual will change that,” I continued. “It'll bring female wolves to our territory. It'll give us a chance to grow, to build families, to thrive. This pack isn't just about scraping by anymore. We're going to turn the page and start fresh.”

A younger wolf near the back, Mark, stood up. “You really think it'll work? That wolves from other packs would want to come here?”

I met his gaze. “If we prove we're worth it. If we protect our territory, clean up our name, and show them we're more than a gang. We're a pack. A family. And family

means something.”

Excitement buzzed through the room, spreading quickly. Mark sat back down, nodding, and others followed suit.

“Think about it,” I said, letting my own excitement shine through. “In a few years, this bar won’t just be filled with us. It’ll be filled with pups running around, mates laughing together. It’ll be the start of something new. Something we can all be proud of.”

The roar of approval that followed was deafening. Even Vince, though still skeptical, gave me a slow nod. My pack wasn’t perfect, but they were mine. And for the first time in a long time, I believed we had a future.

The pride that had been building in my chest faltered the moment I caught sight of Julian. He was huddled in a dark corner near the back of the bar with a handful of other pack members—ones I trusted about as much as a demon’s handshake. Their body language was tight, aggressive. Shoulders squared, heads close together, voices too low to hear but heated enough to make my instincts bristle. My speech hadn’t gone down well with everyone, apparently.

This was supposed to be a moment of unity, of moving forward. So why did it look like Julian and his crew were plotting a coup? I had to break up whatever was going on, and fast.

I stepped off the bar, my boots hitting the floor with a thud. The Howler wasn’t all that big, but the crowd was tight, and I was going to have to push through it to reach Julian and his cohorts.

“Danny, that was amazing—” one of the pack members started, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Thanks,” I said quickly, brushing past them. A few others tried to stop me, their words blending into the noise of the bar. Questions, congratulations, excitement—I didn’t care. My eyes were locked on Julian and his group. By the time I pushed through the crowd, they were already moving. I saw them slipping out the back door, their leather jackets gleaming in the dim light.

“Damn it,” I muttered, picking up my pace.

The bar’s door slammed behind me as I stepped into the cool air. My eyes immediately scanned the parking lot, catching the flash of taillights as motorcycles roared to life.

“Julian!” I shouted.

If he heard me, he didn’t show it. He was already straddling his bike, revving the engine. The others did the same, their movements quick and deliberate.

“Julian, stop!” I barked, running toward them. But they were too far gone, the sound of their engines drowning out my voice. I skidded to a stop just as the last bike peeled out, the pack crest on the back of their jackets disappearing into the distance. My fists clenched at my sides, and I swore under my breath.

What the hell was going on? Julian had been my second for years, my brother in all but blood. Sure, we’d butted heads recently, but this? Skulking around with dissenters and riding off without a word? It wasn’t just a bad feeling—it was a betrayal.

\*\*\*

I hadn’t planned on telling Naomi about my fears with Julian. I knew she felt guilt over it and thought that her presence had caused the rift in our friendship. But I also knew that she’d feel like I was hiding things from her if I didn’t open up. So,

reluctantly, I explained the entire morning to her while she prepared dinner.

My mate was thrilled with the reaction of the pack to the mating match, but her shoulders slumped, sullen, when I got to the part about Julian and his little group of assholes. I tried to reassure her, and while she smiled, I knew she was still holding on to her guilt.

Dinner was quiet, tense. The kind of quiet that comes before something snaps. The chicken Naomi had made was good, but no one was really eating, just picking at their plates. Even Saul, who usually ate like he hadn't seen food in weeks, was unusually slow, his fork scraping against the plate every now and then. Faye sat across from me, her shoulders drawn tight, her gaze distant.

Naomi, though, kept trying. She passed the breadbasket, filled water glasses, and asked if anyone needed seconds, even though no one did. She was trying to keep us together, keep some semblance of normalcy, and it gutted me because I could see how much it cost her.

My phone buzzed on the table, breaking the uneasy silence. I glanced at the screen and saw Hector's name. I had a bad feeling, but I had to answer.

"I need to take this," I said, pushing back from the table. I stepped into the hallway and answered. "Hector."

His voice was sharp; no time for pleasantries. "Danny, we've been hit. Demons. At least six of them."

I gripped the phone tighter. "Are you okay? What about the pack?"

"We held them off, but it was ugly without Faye. They're targeting my strongest fighters and anyone with magical blood." He hesitated, his voice dropping.

“Something tells me that they’re after Faye and Naomi and are hitting the two most likely packs where they might find them.”

It wasn’t anything I hadn’t already concluded myself, but hearing it said out loud still made my stomach clench. Demons after my mate—it was a nightmare. “I agree. Unfortunately.”

“They’ll come for her, Danny. They’re going to hit your pack again after not finding either of them here. You need to be ready.”

I closed my eyes, my teeth clenched. “We’re ready,” I lied. “Let me know if anything changes.”

When the call ended, I stood there for a moment, gripping the phone so hard I thought it might break. The demons weren’t just after us—they were targeting her. Naomi. Where Faye had magic to protect her, Naomi was just a woman and a wolf. The thought of losing her, of them taking her away, made me feel insane.

I shoved the phone in my pocket and walked back to the dining room, my face like stone. Naomi looked up, her fork paused mid-air. “Who was it?” she asked softly.

“Hector,” I said, my voice rough. “The Silverfangs were attacked. Demons.”

Faye shot to her feet, her face draining of blood. “What!? Are they okay!?”

“Yes, everyone is fine. Hector and Sierra are fine.” I quickly reassured her, and Faye settled back into her seat, weak with relief.

For a long moment, the room was still. Saul put his fork down, wiping his hand on his napkin. “How bad was it?”

“Bad enough,” I said. “They’re after Faye and Naomi. Hector thinks they’ll come for us next.”

It wasn’t a surprise to anyone, but knowing that the demon attack was basically inevitable now sucked any hopefulness or peace out of the room. Everyone was on edge. There was nothing to do but wait.

“We’ll handle it,” I said firmly, looking around the table. “Saul, keep doing what you’re doing. Faye, I’ll need your magic to strengthen whatever wards Saul sets, but don’t overexert yourself. We want you at full power when the attack comes. We’re not giving those bastards a chance to get close.”

Everyone nodded, but Naomi stayed frozen, her eyes wide. I walked over to her, crouching so we were at eye level. “Hey,” I said softly. “We’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Danny, it’s not just about me.” She swallowed hard, her hands gripping the edge of the table. “This is my fault. If I hadn’t left the Silverfangs—”

“No,” I said, cutting her off. “This isn’t on you. This is on them. And we’re going to make them pay for every step they take toward us.”

Her eyes searched mine, and after a moment, she nodded, though her hands still trembled.

\*\*\*

The house was quiet, but sleep wasn’t coming for either of us. So far the night had been uneventful, and I had security heightened to almost a comical level. We should have been able to sleep just fine. In fact, we needed to get rest for the battle ahead, but it simply wasn’t coming.

Naomi lay beside me in bed, her head resting on my chest, her breathing uneven. I ran a hand through her hair, trying to calm her, trying to calm myself.

“Do you think they’ll come tonight?”

“They’d be stupid to try,” I said, though the truth was, I didn’t know. I hated not knowing. “Not so soon after attacking the Silverfangs.”

She shifted up onto one elbow, looking up at me. “Do you ever think about what happens after this? After the demons?”

The question caught me off guard. I had only recently started allowing myself to think that far in the future, and Naomi was the only person in the world I would even consider discussing it with, mainly because she herself was my future. “I think about you. About us. About building something real.”

Some of the anxiety bled out of her expression, replaced by affection, and she reached up to trace her fingers along my jaw. “I never thought I’d have a mate, you know?”

“I get it. Neither did I—until I heard your name for the first time. Then you were all I could think about.”

She pressed closer, and for the first time that night, her breathing evened out. But I stayed awake, listening for the sound of claws or footsteps in the dark, ready to fight for her if it came to that.

I’d die for Naomi if I had to, but I’d much rather live for her and get to experience what our bond held in the years to come.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

Shockingly, I slept well. The exhaustion of constantly worrying, mixed with the balm of Danny's talk about the future, had lulled me into a deep sleep, and the following morning, I felt like a new woman.

Which was good, considering that Danny planned to work us all to the bone today.

At 7 am, an unexpected visitor arrived. The warning wards pinged, but Saul didn't look concerned.

"It's a wolf," he explained, not even looking up from his coffee, "A Silverfang by the feel of it."

Faye had perked up, and ran outside to see who had arrived. I was hot on her heels, but by the time I made it to the front porch, Faye was already squealing in excitement as she hugged our visitor.

Whitney, who I hadn't seen since the match ceremony, untangled herself from Faye's arms and gave me a wave. "Hello, Mrs. Red Canine, how nice to see you!"

"Whitney," I hustled down the steps to hug her too, taking solace in the fact that the Silverfangs were sending help in whatever way they could. "We had no idea you were coming."

When she pulled away, she dusted off her jacket and adjusted the enormous backpack on her shoulder. "It wasn't in my original itinerary, but Hector all but commanded me to come by. I can't stay—this demon problem is more widespread than you can imagine, and I've been called elsewhere—but I've got some fun toys that might help

you out.”

We invited her in for coffee, which Whitney accepted happily. While drinking her sugar-heavy caffeinated beverage, Whitney emptied her bag to show us what goodies she had brought. A demon slaying specialist, Whitney would have been a huge help in the battle to come. Unfortunately, she couldn’t fight beside us, but she could offer us some tools to hopefully turn the tide in our favor.

Whitney spread ten blades out on the dining room table. They were longer than a dagger, but not quite a sword, and the steel blades glowed a curious blue. Saul picked one up and examined it as Whitney spoke. “These are specially spelled to be one hit kills against demons, but the downside is the spell is finite. Once the magic is used up, it becomes nothing more than a mundane knife. Use your strikes wisely.”

“This is good work,” Saul commented, begrudgingly impressed. “Did you spell them?”

Whitney grinned, wagging a finger in his direction. “Ah-ah, I never share my trade secrets.”

True to her word, Whitney wasn’t able to hang around long. Too soon for my liking, Faye and I were hugging her goodbye and sending her on her way. Whitney crossed the wards, calling back that she’d see us soon, when all of the demon nonsense calmed down.

I wished I had her optimism. From where I was standing, it felt like it would never calm down.

By 9 am, I was in the backyard with all of the other women in the pack, plus Faye, training for the battle to come. We were practicing with the blades Whitney had given us after they had been approved by Saul. If used correctly, the spells would activate

and hopefully eliminate whatever demon we were fighting. Danny was slightly frustrated when it turned out I had never fought with a blade, but Faye turned out to be a very experienced fighter and was happy to train me and the other women. Penny and Rhonda had a fair amount of experience, but Natalia was just as clueless as me.

It was fun, sweaty work.

My muscles burned pleasantly from the effort. The morning sun was warm on my skin, its rays filtering through the leafy canopy of trees surrounding the backyard. It was one of those perfect days where the air smelled like fresh grass, and the world felt almost peaceful.

I stood barefoot in the soft dirt, the spelled knife in my hand feeling heavier than its weight should've allowed. Faye stood opposite me, her stance loose but her focus razor-sharp. Beside us, Rhonda, Penny, and Natalia stretched or practiced quick strikes, the thuds of their movements breaking the stillness.

"Focus, Naomi," Faye said, her tone firm but not unkind. She flipped her knife from hand to hand effortlessly. "The spells only activate if your aim is true. The rest is up to you."

I nodded, tightening my grip on the hilt. I was breathing hard, and my cheeks were flushed, but Faye looked like she was barely exerting herself.

"You'll have to strike faster," Faye continued, moving in a quick feint. "Demons won't wait for you to decide when you're ready."

She darted toward me, and I barely dodged, my heart racing as I countered with an awkward swipe. Faye sidestepped easily, her movements fluid, almost lazy. "Better," she said, smirking. "But not good enough."

Behind us, the men were making their own racket. Danny's laugh carried across the yard, deep and unmistakable. I glanced over my shoulder to see him standing shirtless with a group of his packmates, holding a thick wooden staff and demonstrating some kind of move.

"Eyes on the prize," Faye teased, and my cheeks burned.

"I wasn't—" I started, but the giggles from Rhonda and Penny cut me off.

"Oh, you were," Natalia said, raising an eyebrow, her smirk conspiratorial. "Not that any of us blame you."

Jealousy surged, but I tried to tamp it down before any of the other girls saw. I must have failed because they laughed again. "Don't worry, Hun," Rhonda assured me. "None of us want the responsibility of being an Alpha's lady. He's all yours. You and Faye are crazy."

I looked back, trying to refocus, but Danny caught my gaze. He grinned, that cocky, knowing smirk that always seemed to light a fire in my chest. He made a show of looking me up and down, taking in the tight yoga outfit that he had bought me just for training. I had been unsure about how tight it was, but he reassured me all of the other women would be dressed the same, and he was right.

Plus, his face when he first saw me wearing it made everything worthwhile. The yoga outfit was why both of us were late for the training session that WE scheduled. The memory made my mouth pull up at the corner.

As if on cue, he flexed, twirling the staff before slamming it into the ground dramatically. His friends roared with laughter, slapping him on the back and jabbing at each other like they didn't have a care in the world.

“He’s showing off,” Penny said in a sing-song voice.

I rolled my eyes, pretending it didn’t affect me, but the flutter in my stomach said otherwise. He was fine with a capital F.

“Should we give them a show?” Rhonda asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Faye shrugged, a smile tugging at her lips. “Why not? Might as well remind them we’re not just here to look pretty.”

Before I could protest, Faye lunged at me again, faster this time, forcing me to react. I blocked her strike, managing a decent counter, and the knife’s magic sparked faintly where it made contact with hers.

“Not bad,” she said, stepping back. “Keep going.”

We fell into a rhythm, the knives clanging together as we moved. The sound drew the attention of the men, and I could feel Danny watching. I didn’t look, though. Not yet. When we finally paused, breathless but grinning, Faye pointed her knife toward the men. “Think they’re up for a little friendly competition?”

Danny didn’t miss a beat. “What kind of competition did you have in mind, Silverfang?” he called, strolling over with his packmates in tow.

“A sparring match,” Faye said, her tone challenging. “Men against women. First to disarm wins.”

Danny raised an eyebrow, his grin widening. “Oh, so we should take it easy on you, then?”

The women behind me bristled, and I couldn’t help but smirk. “You’ve got a lot of

confidence for someone who spends more time flexing than fighting,” I shot back.

His packmates laughed, egging him on, and Danny’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “Alright, Sweetheart,” he said, spinning the staff again. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

The match was chaos, but the good kind. Laughter and teasing flew back and forth as the yard became a blur of movement. Danny squared off against Faye, their strikes quick and calculated, while I found myself sparring with one of his packmates, a wiry guy named Jack.

For all the tension of the last few days, this felt—normal. Almost fun. The women were faster, the men stronger, and the sparring turned into a contest of wit as much as skill. At one point, Danny caught my eye again for just a moment. He looked proud—like he wasn’t just showing off but truly impressed by what he saw.

He also looked turned on by seeing me fight, but that was a conversation for a later time. When we were alone.

When the match ended, the women emerged victorious, earning the men’s exaggerated groans and complaints. Faye had struck Penny’s opponent with a disarming spell, taking him off guard and sending the spelled knife flying across the yard. It might not have been exactly fair having a witch on our side, but I wasn’t about to complain.

Danny shook his head, laughing as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Alright, you win this round,” he said, his voice full of warmth. “But next time, no holding back.”

“Bring it on,” Faye replied, grinning as she high-fived the rest of us.

As we cleaned up and gathered our things, I felt a strange sense of belonging settle over me. These women—they were my friends. Real friends, not just acquaintances

or people I worked with. I didn't feel like an outsider. I was part of something, part of them.

And when Danny passed by, brushing his hand lightly against mine as he went, I knew he felt it, too.

\*\*\*

Our peace and our enjoyable time as a pack didn't last long at all. It was a little past 9 pm when the property alarms began sounding. Seconds later, Saul came running into the living room where Danny and I were going over battle plans, exclaiming, "Something is at the wards."

We rushed outside, Faye and Saul hot on our heels. There, just on the edge of the wards, two dark figures stood unmoving. Waiting on us.

Danny had his shotgun in hand, and the faint hum of magic vibrated through the ground beneath my bare feet from the wards. Slowly, we approached the barrier, but still, the demons didn't try to advance. Something about the way these two stood—eerily still and patient—made me shudder. They looked human, but everything about their movements, or lack thereof, was utterly disturbing.

Danny was the first to reach the ward, his shotgun gleaming under the moonlight, his muscles tense with the promise of violence. He radiated authority, his every step commanding the attention of those of us who followed. I was beside him, and Faye trailed behind us, her eyes narrowed and her hands glowing faintly with her magic, ready to cast if necessary. Saul brought up the rear.

The demons stood unnaturally stiff, heads cocked at identical angles. Their eyes, black and glassy, reflected none of the humanity that had once lived within. It was the kind of sight that made me nauseous, but I forced myself to stand tall.

“You want to come here and fight?” Danny growled, his voice low and menacing as he brandished his weapon. “Then come on. I’m sick as hell of waiting.”

The demons smiled, slow and unsettling. “Not yet,” one said, his voice echoing unnaturally, as though layered with another beneath it.

“We’re just here to deliver a message,” the other added, her tone almost mocking.

Danny bristled, his grip tightening on his weapon. “I’m not interested in your messages. If you want a fight, you’ve got one. Otherwise, get the hell out of here.”

The male demon chuckled, the sound grating against my nerves. “So impatient, Alpha. But very well.” He straightened, clasping his hands behind his back as though this were a polite negotiation instead of an enemy encounter. “We’re here for the witch Faye or her daughter Sierra.” Behind me, I heard Faye suck in a terrified breath—not at the mention of her own name, but the name of her daughter. “Hand one over, and we’ll leave your precious pack alone. Deny us, and we’ll take your mate instead.”

“Not fucking happening,” Danny snapped, his voice like a whip.

The female demon stepped forward, pressing her hand against the invisible barrier that separated us. The wards shimmered faintly at the contact, but she didn’t flinch. The spell was mostly for show, meant to activate if something crossed it, but not strong enough to keep the demons out. They seemed to know it and were mocking us. Her gaze turned to me, and a cold smile spread across her borrowed face.

“Are you sure?” she said, tilting her head. “Isn’t she your precious Naomi? We figured you’d give up anything for her, Alpha.”

My blood ran cold, and a spike of fear twisted in my gut. Danny’s posture stiffened

further, his presence like a wall between me and them. “You’re not going to have the chance to get near her, asshole, so give it up.”

The demon shrugged. “Maybe we haven’t succeeded yet, but we’ll keep trying. Your precious queen is well-guarded, but even the strongest guards eventually fall.” Her lip curled in disdain. “But the offer still stands. Give us Faye, and we’ll leave. No more games, no more blood.”

“Faye isn’t going anywhere,” I said, stepping up beside Danny before I could think better of it. My voice shook, but I held my ground. “She’s under my protection and the protection of the Red Canine pack.”

The demons’ expressions flickered, something almost amused crossing their faces. “Bold,” the male one said. “But foolish. Very well, suit yourself.”

He turned to leave, the female following, but not before she threw one last glance over her shoulder. “You’ve got until morning. We’ll see if your bravado holds then.”

And then they were gone, their stolen bodies vanishing into the darkness as though they’d never been there.

I stood frozen, my fists clenched as we all processed what had just happened. They’d targeted me. Me. Not because of anything I’d done but because they’d known Danny would do anything to keep me safe. And now they wanted Faye.

Faye placed a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll be ready by morning,” she said, though her voice carried a hint of weariness. “And, for the record, I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused by being here.”

I met her gaze, the beginnings of a vow forming in my mind. Faye had become more than an ally. She was a friend, a confidante, someone who’d stood by me when I’d

felt so out of place in this new life. I wouldn't let her be taken—not by demons, not by anyone.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Don't worry, we won't let them take you,” I said, my voice quiet but firm. “Not while I'm here. You'll be back with your husband and daughter before you know it.”

Faye smiled faintly, but her eyes held a sadness I didn't fully understand. “I hope you're right, Naomi. I really do.”

Danny lingered beside me in a silent gesture of reassurance. “We'll fight them off,” he said. “No one's taking you or Faye. Not now, not ever.”

I nodded, though the knot in my stomach remained. Morning would come too soon, and with it, a battle I wasn't sure any of us were ready for. But I'd fight. For Danny. For Faye. For the pack that had become my home.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

The call came just before dawn, my phone vibrating on the nightstand like it had a vendetta against sleep. I was already awake, sitting on the edge of the bed, my thoughts a jumbled mess of plans and contingencies. As I answered, a voice crackled on the other end.

“They’ve gathered,” the scout reported, his tone clipped and urgent. “Small field outside town off Timber Road. At least a dozen. Maybe more.”

I cursed under my breath, the weight of the inevitable settling on my shoulders. The battle was today, just like the demons promised. “Stay there. Keep eyes on them, but don’t engage,” I ordered. “I’ll rally the pack.”

As I hung up, I turned to the bed where Naomi lay curled under the blankets, her chest rising and falling with the rhythm of sleep. She looked peaceful, her face soft and untroubled in the pale light creeping through the curtains. For a fleeting moment, I considered letting her stay behind, away from the chaos about to unfold. But I knew her too well. Naomi would fight, not just for herself but for the pack.

She’d never forgive me if I tried to leave her behind.

I leaned down, brushing my fingers along her cheek. “Naomi,” I said softly. Her eyes fluttered open, and she blinked up at me, confusion quickly giving way to clarity.

“What’s going on?” She was still warm and sleepy, and the urge to lay back down and gather her back into my arms was intense.

“It’s time.”

“They’re here aren’t they?” she asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “We’ve got to get ready.”

She sat up, determination already etched across her features. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

In less than an hour, the house buzzed with urgency. Faye sat at the kitchen table, murmuring incantations as she practiced her charms. Saul was by the door, checking over his gear. I double-checked my weapons as well—a set of silver-edged knives, the spelled shotgun, and a Glock loaded with blessed rounds.

I sent out a message to the pack, keeping everything as clear and concise as I possibly could. “Demons have gathered outside town. All willing to fight, meet at the field off Timber Road. This is our chance to show them what the Red Canines are made of.”

Responses came quickly, some eager, others hesitant. Not everyone was a fighter, and I didn’t blame them for staying back. But those who answered the call—they were mine to protect, to lead.

When it was time to leave, I grabbed my leather jacket and slung my knife belt over my shoulder. Naomi appeared beside me, dressed for the fight in sturdy boots and a jacket that hugged her curves. She carried a small pack filled with the luck charms Faye had made, her expression resolute.

“You’re riding with me.”

She smiled up at me, a bright spot in the face of the darkness of the upcoming battle. “There isn’t anywhere else I’d rather be.”

Naomi followed me out to the driveway, where my Harley gleamed under the morning light. Faye climbed into Saul’s truck, her hands clasping the spell book she

carried like it was a lifeline. Naomi climbed onto the back of the bike, her arms wrapping around my waist without hesitation. The warmth of her touch grounded me, even as the tension of what lay ahead coiled in my gut.

“Hold on tight,” I told her over my shoulder. “Don’t let go.”

I felt her lay her cheek against my back. “I won’t.”

I handed her a helmet, pulling on my own afterward. With a growl of the engine, we tore out of the driveway, Saul’s truck rumbling behind us. The wind whipped past us as we raced toward the field, the horizon brightening with the gracefully rising sun.

This wasn’t just a fight. It was a stand, a declaration. We weren’t going to let these demons take what was ours. Not our land, not our people, and sure as hell not my mate.

I wouldn’t lose her. Fate be damned. Naomi was never leaving my life.

The roar of engines echoed through the empty streets. It was early, and most of the human residents of Athens were still sleeping. It was only the Red Canines that had early morning wars to fight.

As we sped toward the field, the sound multiplied. The rumble bounced off the buildings and spread out into the countryside like a war cry. At first, it was just Saul’s truck rumbling behind us, but soon, a low, familiar growl joined in. A lone motorcycle appeared in my side mirror, pulling up beside us. Then another. And another.

The Red Canines.

Naomi leaned closer, her voice just audible over the wind. “They’re coming.”

I glanced back briefly, catching sight of more headlights cutting through the morning haze. One by one, they fell into formation, their riders clad in leather and resolve. My throat felt tight, not with fear but with something fierce and proud.

The pack was answering my call.

By the time we reached the outskirts of town, there were at least twenty bikes surrounding us, their engines harmonizing in a rumble that vibrated in my bones. Familiar faces turned toward me as they rode up—wolves I'd fought beside, laughed with, and was going to bleed for.

Penny and Rhonda rode in tandem, their expressions determined. Big Jake was there too, his hulking frame unmistakable even beneath his jacket. Finn, who'd once doubted me, raised a fist in silent acknowledgment as he pulled up beside me.

The sheer number of them—it was overwhelming. Naomi's arms tightened around my waist, and when I looked over my shoulder, I caught her expression. There was awe in her eyes but also worry. She knew what this meant. How many of us might not ride back?

I focused ahead, keeping my jaw clenched and my thoughts steady. This was bigger than just survival. This was about proving we were more than our past mistakes, that the Red Canines were a pack worth fighting for.

The group swelled as we drew closer to the field, bikes flanking us on either side until we were a thundering army on wheels. The sight of it—of us—made something shift inside of me. These weren't just pack members. They were family. Naomi leaned closer again, her voice a little softer this time. "They trust you."

I swallowed hard, my hands gripping the handlebars tighter. "They trust us," I corrected.

The field loomed ahead, bathed in the faint orange light of the rising sun. I slowed the bike as we approached, signaling for the others to spread out. The promise of a fight was hanging heavy in the air. The grass, damp with dew, shimmered. It was beautiful, sure, but the scene was far from peaceful.

At the far end of the clearing, the demons waited, a grotesque, writhing mass of human shapes twisted into something unholy. Their eyes glowed faintly in the dawn, their inhuman grins promising violence. They shifted restlessly, their clawed fingers twitching like they couldn't wait to dig into flesh. Some looked more human than others, so fresh that they'd be able to pass as normal on the streets. Others seemed like they were melting before our eyes, deep into the process of decomposition, reeking and falling apart.

The pack and I pulled into formation, bikes fanning out to encircle me. The growl of engines faded as, one by one, we killed them. Naomi slid off the back of my bike, her hand brushing against my shoulder before she joined Faye and Saul. I stayed seated for a moment longer, taking in the sheer number of pack members that had shown up.

Dozens of them stood with their bikes now parked in an imposing semi-circle. My heart swelled. We were the Red Canines, loud and defiant. Every face turned toward me, waiting for my word. I glanced toward the demons again. They hadn't moved closer, but their presence was creeping over the field. I didn't let myself dwell on what might happen if we lost.

We weren't going to lose. We couldn't. Not when we were standing on the edge of becoming the pack we always should have been. I raised my voice, letting it carry over the stillness.

"This is it," I began, pacing in front of the pack. "This is what we've been waiting for!"

The crowd let out a low growl of agreement.

“They think they can break us. They think we’re still the same scrappy, out-of-control pack we used to be. But look at us!” I gestured around, my voice rising. “We are the Red Canines, and today, we remind them who they’re messing with!”

A roar went up from the group, fierce and unrelenting. The sound made my blood pump harder, adrenaline roaring through my veins.

“They’re here to take what’s ours.” I scanned their faces, locking eyes with as many of them as I could. “They’re not just fighting me. They’re fighting all of us. And we’re fighting for our mates. Our pups. Our future.”

The response was deafening—a unified bellow. My wolves. My pack.

I stepped forward, planting my feet firmly on the ground, and let my voice drop just enough to be heard clearly over the noise. “After this, those demons will know better than to ever cross us again.”

Then, the time for talk was over. The first demon charged across the field, and my shotgun felt like an extension of my arm as I leveled it and fired. The blast rocked through my body, the sound cashing over the field. The demon’s stolen body jerked back before exploding in a burst of white light, disintegrating into ash.

“Hold the line!” I shouted.

All around me, the pack fought with everything they had. Gunshots cracked through the air, knives flashed in the sunlight, and the ground was littered with spent shell casings and streaks of blood. The demons were relentless, their movements jerky and unnatural, but they came at us with precision, their eyes burning with hatred.

Naomi stayed at my side, her face pale. She gripped her spelled knife tightly, her knuckles white against the hilt. Every part of me wanted to shield her, to pull her back and keep her from the madness. But through the mate - bond, I could feel her, and it helped me keep tabs on her. It was a layer of safety I was thankful for.

“Stay close,” I growled, barely sparing her a glance as I reloaded the shotgun.

When one of the demons lunged too close, she was already moving, her blade slicing upward. The demon let out a guttural cry before its body burst into ash. The spelled blades could kill two, maybe three demons if we were lucky, and that had been her first. Naomi looked shocked but held strong, widening her stance and waiting for the next danger.

God, she was beautiful—fierce, capable, and terrifyingly exposed. I didn’t want to take my eyes off her, but there was no time to get distracted, so I relied on the bond.

Another demon rushed me, screeching. I brought the shotgun up just in time, pulling the trigger. The blast sent it reeling, its stolen body crumpling before disappearing in another bright flash of light. A single arm survived the explosion, falling blackened to the grass, fingers still twitching.

The pack was holding its own, but it wasn’t without cost. A cry of pain tore through the air, and I turned just in time to see one of my men fall, a demon ripping into him. My gut clenched as he managed to fire a shot into the creature’s face even as he went down, taking it with him.

“Behind you!” Naomi’s voice rang out, and I whirled, my knife already in hand. I slashed upward, the blade sinking into the demon’s chest. It hissed before exploding into ash, the dust settling on my boots.

“Thanks,” I grunted, grabbing her arm to pull her closer.

“I’m not going anywhere!” she swore, teeth clenched.

Good, because I wasn’t letting her out of my sight.

The demons came in waves, their bodies twisted and wrong as they charged. Their howls were like nails on a chalkboard, setting my teeth on edge. I fired shot after shot, each blast a momentary relief as another enemy turned to ash.

But the fight wasn’t just physical. Every time a demon fell, I couldn’t help but see the human body it had stolen. I told myself they were already gone, their souls devoured or destroyed, but it didn’t make the weight on my chest any lighter.

Another wolf cried out as claws raked across his side. He managed to take the demon down, but the sight of him bleeding in the dirt made my blood boil. This wasn’t just a fight. It was a goddamn war, and we were paying the price.

When the last two demons broke away, their inky black eyes locking on me, I raised my shotgun again, ready to fire. But they didn’t attack.

“This isn’t over,” one hissed, its voice like gravel scraping over steel. Then they turned and ran, their twisted forms disappearing into the tree line.

It was the end. We’d done it.

I didn’t lower my weapon until the sound of their footsteps faded completely. Around me, the pack was catching their breath, their weapons hanging at their sides. Three of our own lay dead. I couldn’t take my eyes off their crumpled forms, my chest tightening like a vise. Naomi’s hand slipped into mine, her touch keeping my rage at bay. I glanced at her, her face streaked with ash and her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“We made it,” she said, her voice cracking.

I nodded, swallowing hard. “Not all of us.”

Slowly, the exhausted pack gathered around me, some of them actively bleeding, but at least all the survivors were on their feet. Some were reluctant to leave the fallen—Vince, the older wolf that had spoken up at the bar, and two other younger males, Tim and Ken.

“Bring them home,” I called out, so tired that it was difficult to raise my voice loud enough to be heard. “We’ll honor them properly. They fought like warriors, and they’ll be remembered as such.”

A few heads nodded, and the wolves began to move, carrying our fallen brothers back to the few parked trucks as tears streamed down their faces. The pack was solemn, the weight of loss heavy. I let the silence linger for a moment before raising my voice again.

“But tonight,” I said, forcing strength into my tone, “we celebrate. Not just for them but for us. We stood together, shoulder to shoulder, and we won. Against demons, against odds that would’ve crushed anyone else. The Red Canines are still standing, and that means something.”

There were murmurs of agreement, low growls of approval that slowly grew louder. I scanned the faces of my pack, their exhaustion mingling with hope.

“And starting tonight,” I continued, “we’re changing this pack for the better. No more drugs. No more guns. We’re done with the shit that’s dragged us down for years. We’re going straight.”

That got a reaction. A ripple of shock passed through the crowd. Some looked

tentatively agreeable, while others exchanged uneasy glances. I met their eyes, one by one, daring them to challenge me. A bolt of shock ripped through me when I saw Julian at the back of the crowd, his face turned away from me. He had come to fight? I had expected him to avoid the battle, considering how much of an asshole he had been, but seeing him there gave me a small kernel of hope for my friend.

“This pack has a future,” I said, addressing the pack once more. “One with mates, pups, and peace. But that future doesn’t come with dirty money and a trail of bodies. We’re better than that. We have to be.”

The voices grew louder. There was support and resistance. I could see the tension brewing, especially in Julian. He stood with four others near the back, his jaw tight, arms crossed, eyes burning into me.

“For tonight—rest, eat good food, and hold your loved ones close. We’ll figure out the changes later, but we’ve done more than enough for today.”

As the pack began to disperse, the din of voices fading, Julian stepped forward with his crew—Rick, Kane, Tanner, and Liam. Everyone stopped once more, turning back to see what the new disturbance was.

“You really think this is gonna work?” Julian said, his voice laced with disbelief. “You’re just gonna flip a switch, and everyone’s gonna be okay with losing everything we’ve built? The guns, the drugs, the money—it’s what kept this pack alive, Danny.”

I squared my shoulders, meeting his glare. “The guns, drugs, and money also brought us bloodshed, arrests, and most of the pack without mates. I’m done with it, Julian. We’re done with it.”

Julian let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “You don’t speak for all of us.”

“Wrong. I’m the Alpha,” I growled. “I do speak for all of us.”

A furious energy crackled between us, and I could see the decision forming in his eyes before he even said the words. I wanted to pull him back, to make him reconsider, but I couldn’t lower myself in front of my pack—not even for my best friend.

I was the Alpha, and I had to stand tall.

“You’re not my Alpha,” he spat. “Or theirs.” He gestured to his crew. “We’re out. We’re starting our own pack, one that doesn’t forget who we are.”

“You walk away now,” I said, danger ringing in my words, “and you’re not coming back. Ever, Julian.”

Julian’s eyes narrowed, his lips curling into a sneer. “Oh, I’ll be back, Danny. And when I am, you’ll regret abandoning your brothers.”

With that, he turned on his heel, his crew following him as they stalked off toward their bikes. I didn’t move, my fists clenched at my sides as their engines roared to life and they disappeared into the distance.

It was hard to breathe. My head swam. Julian—he’d really done it, and on the day of our victory, no less. A piece of my heart turned black.

The pack was quiet, the absence of Julian and his crew leaving a noticeable void. I felt Naomi’s hand slip into mine, but her skin was cold. I looked down at her, her expression troubled, guilt written all over her face.

“Naomi,” I reached down, turning to face her fully. “What is it, Mate?”

She shook her head, her eyes shimmering. “I—I feel like this is my fault. Julian—he wouldn’t have left if I hadn’t—”

“Stop.” My voice came out firmer than I intended, but I needed her to hear me. “This isn’t on you. Julian made his choice. None of us made it for him, especially not you.”

“But if I hadn’t—”

“You’re everything to me,” I cut her off, pulling her closer. “You’re my mate, my queen, and this pack needs you. I need you. We’re building something better, Naomi, and I can’t do it without you.”

Her breath stuttered, and for a moment, I thought she might argue again. But then she nodded, leaning into me, her head resting against my chest.

“I’m with you,” she breathed.

“Good,” I said, wrapping my arms around her. “Because we’ve got a long road ahead.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

A week after the battle, life began to find a new rhythm. The scars from that horrible morning were still there—emotionally more than physically—but the pack had started to move forward. It wasn't easy, but it felt right. The weight of what we'd endured lingered in the air, but there was something else now, too—a hopeful look forward.

Faye had left two days ago, packing her things into Saul's truck with an energy that buzzed with longing and relief. Watching her go had been bittersweet, and I missed her like hell already. She'd been a rock for me in ways I hadn't even realized I needed, but her place was with Hector and her little girl.

Any resentment I might have had from my earlier years in the Silverfang Creek pack was long gone. Faye had more than made up for any wrongdoings, and I considered her a dear friend.

Before she left, she hugged me so tightly I could feel her heartbeat. "You'll be okay," she whispered in my ear. "You're stronger than you think, Naomi."

Her confidence in me felt like a warm blanket, and I held onto that feeling as I stood in the new community garden, pulling weeds out of the raised beds Danny and a few of the others had built. With all of the changes that the Red Canines were about to go through, Danny felt it important that the pack had a place to gather and relax, so the idea of the community garden had been born right there in his backyard.

Well—our backyard, really. That thought made me feel bubbly with contentment.

"Hey, let me help with that." Danny's deep voice came from behind me, and I turned

to see him approaching, sleeves rolled up, a streak of dirt already smudged across his forearm.

I handed him the gardening claw with a smirk. “You sure? You’re starting to look like an honest man. You okay with that?”

He chuckled, crouching next to me and dragging the tool through the soil. “I think I can handle it. Besides, this is the sort of honest work I don’t mind.”

I looked around the garden. The beds weren’t much to look at yet—mostly empty except for the weeds we were pulling out—but it was the beginning of something. Other pack members were scattered around, hammering together the trellises we’d need for climbing plants, spreading mulch, and chatting as they worked.

“It feels—peaceful,” I admitted, leaning back on my heels. “I don’t think I’ve ever had this kind of peace before.”

Danny grinned, a streak of boyish mischief crossing his face. “Enjoy it while you can. Once we get that mate-matching ritual going, this place is going to be crawling with new couples and pups running around.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the image. “You’re really serious about that, huh?”

“Dead serious.” He rested his arms on his knees. “This pack has spent too long stuck in the past, chasing things that didn’t matter. Drugs, guns—it kept us alive, sure, but it was killing us at the same time. Families, bonds, community—that’s what we need now.” His expression turned heated, his mouth quirking up at one corner. “And maybe we can lead by example with the whole baby thing.”

Arousal skittered through me, followed by embarrassment. I slapped at him. “Hush! There are so many people here.”

His humor was infectious. “Hey, who knows? Maybe we’ll make a match at our first ceremony and the new couple will beat us to the punch.”

“So you’re still hoping for a mate-matching ritual every month, huh? That’s ambitious.”

“Gotta be.” He shot me a lopsided grin. “I’m setting the bar high since I already found my perfect match.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks, but I didn’t look away. “You’re such a sap.”

“Only for you, Canine Queen.”

We worked in companionable silence for a while, the sun warming our backs and the scent of fresh earth filling the air. Danny was called over to Saul and Natalia about the placement of the next bed. He was in his element, leading without dominating, encouraging without demanding. This was a new Danny, one shaped by the battle, by the changes in the pack, and by us.

The sun was starting to dip low in the sky, casting a warm orange glow across the garden as I knelt beside, planting another row of herbs. The soft rustle of the leaves in the breeze and the earthy smell of thyme surrounded me, and I should have been happy. But once Danny left my side, and I was left alone with my own thoughts again, they shifted to the one dark spot on our horizon. And it was darker than I could have imagined.

Julian and his new pack, the Reckless Stalkers.

Don’t think about it, I chanted in my mind. Don’t think about it.

I worked in silence, my fingers gripping the small trowel, but my thoughts were

elsewhere. My mind kept going back to Julian's promise. The words echoed in my head like a broken record, the weight of them sinking deeper and deeper with each passing hour.

"Oh, I'll be back, Danny. And when I am, you'll regret abandoning your brothers."

I couldn't shake it. It gnawed at me from the inside, making my stomach twist in knots. I glanced at Danny, watching as he adjusted the stakes in the soil, his broad shoulders rippling with each movement. He looked so focused, so determined, as if nothing in the world could threaten what we had here. But he had to have it on his mind, too, right? Julian had been his best friend until our mating had driven him away.

My emotions must have been showing on my face because when Danny caught my eye, his brow furrowed slightly. He could tell something was off, even if I hadn't said a word.

"Naomi," he stood, dusting off his hands and heading over to me. "Something is on your mind. Talk to me."

I shook my head, forcing a tight smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. "I'm fine."

He tapped where his neck met his shoulder, right over the mating bite. "You can't lie to me, remember? I can feel that you're upset."

I let out a breath, finally setting the trowel down and standing up to face him. The weight of his gaze was too much to bear when I was pretending everything was okay. The unease had been building, and I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Danny, I—" I hesitated, struggling to find the words. "I keep thinking about Julian. About what he said."

He stiffened. “Don’t waste your time worrying about him. He’s not the same man I knew. He’s like—a stranger. An asshole. But you don’t need to worry about him, Naomi. He’s not a part of this anymore.”

“I know,” I whispered, but the words felt hollow. “I just—I can’t stop thinking about how he said he’d come back

“You’re scared.”

I nodded, unable to deny it. “I’m scared for us, Danny. For what might happen if he does come back. What if we’re not ready?”

Danny cupped my face, his thumb brushing over my cheek. “You’ve got me, Naomi. And that means you’ve got everything you need.”

“Don’t you see, Danny?” I said, my voice breaking slightly. “He’s not just angry at you. He’s angry at everything we’re trying to change. He’s angry because of me, because of the way I’m—we’re—changing everything. He’s not gonna let that go.”

Danny stepped back slightly, his brow furrowing in thought. I could see the internal struggle written on his face, but then he took a deep breath, as if pushing the anger aside.

“We’ll handle him when the time comes. But until then, we focus on what we have.” He leaned in and pressed a reassuring kiss to my lips. “You’re everything to me, Naomi. We’ll make sure this pack never looks back. You and me, we’re in this for the long haul.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I whispered, the words more to myself than to him.

Danny pulled me into him then, wrapping his arms around me, holding me close as if

he could shield me from everything that was still unknown. He didn't say anything more, and I didn't need him to.

The embrace, Danny Turner himself—it was enough.

\*\*\*

Everyone had finally gone home. We were finished with the garden for the day, and I was treating myself to a hot bath while Danny talked pack business with Saul. He had promised to join me when he was finished, but for the moment, I was soaking in all of the alone time I could get. I was so rarely alone anymore.

The warm water of the bath wrapped around me, soothing my muscles as I leaned back, closing my eyes. The scent of lavender and rose petals filled the air, and steam covered the mirrors. It was a small paradise just for me.

But as I sunk deeper into the warmth, letting it rise up to my chin, a rustling sound near the bathroom window made my eyes snap open.

At first, I thought it was just Danny playing one of his usual tricks—maybe trying to sneak up on me. I'd gotten used to his playful side, even though sometimes his humor was as dark as the leather jackets he wore. I smiled to myself, pushing aside the knot of worry in my stomach. But then the rustling came again, more deliberate this time, and a chill slithered down my spine.

Something wasn't right. My wolf stirred beneath my skin, sensing that something was off.

I quickly reached for the edge of the tub, slipped out of the water, and grabbed my silk robe, tying it around my waist as I moved toward the window. Maybe it was just an errant branch or a raccoon.

But as I slid the window open, my breath caught in my throat. It wasn't Danny standing outside.

It was two of Julian's wolves—Rick and Tanner.

“What's up, Canine Queen?” Tanner sneered.

The moonlight reflected off their eyes, gleaming with a predatory hunger that sent a shock of fear through me. I opened my mouth to scream for Danny, but before I could utter a sound, Rick lunged at me through the window. I stumbled back, barely managing to slam the window shut, but it caught on Tanner's outstretched arm.

And Rick was in the bathroom.

I needed to get to Danny. I needed to—

Rick grabbed me, his arms like iron ropes, one hand over my mouth and the other around my torso. I fought like a scalded cat, kicking back at his kneecaps and trying like hell to bite his fingers.

“Hurry the fuck up, Tanner,” Rick hissed.

“I've got it. I just need to get to her neck.”

The panic that coursed through me was icy. I managed to turn my head enough to see Tanner right before Rick uncovered my mouth to fist a hand in my hair and pull my neck to the side.

I also saw what Tanner held—a needle.

The Reckless Stalker wolves didn't care if I screamed because they were nearly done.

Still, I screamed my heart out as Tanner brought the syringe down and into the side of my neck.

The pain shot through me like a bolt of lightning, and I gasped, stumbling back against the wall. The world spun, a nauseous, disorienting wave crashing over me as the poison began to seep into my bloodstream. My vision blurred, and I clutched my neck, trying to stop the burning sensation, but it was useless.

Rick and Tanner were out the window just before I collapsed onto the ceramic tile floor.

My legs gave out beneath me, and I fell to the ground, helpless. The last thing I heard was Danny's voice, distant but desperate, yelling my name.

“Naomi!”

But even that seemed to fade into the darkness, my body too heavy to move, my mind slipping away from me as everything went black.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

Naomi lay motionless on the bed, her skin pallid and clammy. Her breaths were shallow, each one reminding me just how close she was to slipping away. The sight of her like that was enough to break me. It felt like someone had broken my ribs and grabbed my heart in their fist, squeezing hard.

Fucking wolfsbane. My mate had been poisoned with wolfsbane under my own fucking roof.

She was so still, so quiet. Naomi was never quiet like this. Even when she was mad at me—or scared—there was always some spark in her, some fire. But now—she looked lifeless. And it was my fault.

“Dammit!” I growled, pacing the room. I raked my hands through my hair, tugging hard enough to make my scalp burn. The sharp pain wasn’t enough to drive away the self-hate, though. I left her alone, and she was attacked. Poisoned. “How could I let this happen?”

“Danny,” Saul’s voice came from the bedside. He was trying to remain calm, but there was an edge of worry in his voice. He’d been working tirelessly for hours, but still, Naomi was stuck in a wolfsbane coma. “You didn’t let anything happen. Julian’s wolves ambushed her. They’re the ones who—”

“I should’ve been there!” I snapped, rounding on him. “I promised her I’d keep her safe. What good am I as an Alpha, as her mate, if I can’t even protect her? I’m never letting her out of my sight again!”

Saul didn’t answer right away. He just looked at me with those steady eyes of his, a

faint sheen of sweat on his brow as he adjusted the IV hooked into Naomi's arm. She looked so small under the blankets, her head resting limply against the pillow. Her lips were tinged blue, and the faint scent of wolfsbane still clung to her skin despite the hours we'd spent trying to clean it off.

"She's holding on," Saul finally said. "But she's slipping deeper into herself. The poison didn't kill her outright—it's like it's keeping her trapped in her mind. The dual existence of werewolves makes them especially vulnerable to this kind of thing."

I slumped into the chair by the bed, burying my face in my hands. I didn't care if the poison had come from Julian or some random thug who followed him. I was going to rip them apart for this. Every last one of them. I would taste their blood and make them pay.

But first, I had to save her.

"What do we do, Saul?" I asked, my voice raw. "Tell me how to fix this. Tell me how to free her."

Saul hesitated, his hand lingering on Naomi's wrist as he checked her pulse.

"There's something we can try," he said carefully. "It's risky, but—I've seen it work before. When someone's trapped like this, a strong enough bond can pull them back, and the mate-bond is one of the strongest connections out there. You'd have to go into her mind, though. Connect with her on that level and guide her out."

I stared at him. "You're saying I have to—what, like a dream? How do I even do that?"

Saul exhaled, pulling a small pouch from his jacket pocket. The faint smell of sage and something acrid drifted from it as he opened it. "There's a ritual. The connection

you two already have through the mate- bond will help. But it'll take all your focus, Danny. And if you don't find her in time—"

He didn't need to finish. I knew what he was saying. If I failed, Naomi wouldn't just stay like this. She'd die.

I stood, pushing the chair back with a scrape that echoed in the room. My fists clenched at my sides. "I don't care what it takes. I'm doing it."

Saul nodded. "Then let's not waste any time. Lay next to her." His lips thinned. "And please don't fail. I don't feel like being ripped limb from limb by the Red Canines for killing their Alpha."

I stepped closer to the bed, my eyes locking onto Naomi's face. She looked so fragile, so unlike the fiery, stubborn woman who had challenged me every step of the way since we met. I reached out, brushing my knuckles along her cheek. Her skin was cold, and I swallowed hard, forcing back the fear that threatened to drown me.

"Hold on, Naomi," I murmured, my voice barely audible. "I'm coming for you. You're not leaving me. Not like this."

Saul began setting up the ritual, lighting herbs and drawing symbols on the floor. The room filled with a heady, smoky scent that made my head swim.

As I climbed into the bed, I clasped Naomi's hand in mine, focusing on the feel of her fingers, even as limp as they were. My heartbeat was a drum in my ears, and every second felt like a countdown to disaster. I leaned closer, pressing my forehead against hers, breathing the smoke of the sleeping herbs deep into my lungs. "I need you, Naomi. More than I ever thought I'd need anyone. Just hang on a little longer, okay? I'm coming."

\*\*\*

The moment I opened my eyes, I knew I wasn't in my world anymore. I was in some dreamscape inside Naomi's mind.

Saul hadn't had much time to explain to me what diving into my mate's mind would be like, but he did tell me that it was likely Naomi was hiding in her memories somewhere.

At first it didn't seem too odd—just a normal house, with chalkboards hung on the walls and toys scattered about. The closer I looked, though, the sadder it all felt. Everything around me seemed washed out, like someone had drained all the color from the place. It shifted between an average, well-kept house and a creaking structure with faded wallpaper curling at the edges and worn carpeting underfoot.

Reality, and what it had felt like to Naomi.

I took a cautious step forward, the floorboards groaning beneath my weight. The place felt familiar, even though I knew I'd never been there before.

Then it hit me: this had to be Naomi's foster home.

Sadness filled me as I took in the drab surroundings. This was where she'd grown up. Where she'd been taught to believe she was invisible. That she didn't matter. She had been safe, warm, and fed, but emotionally, she had suffered for years and years, craving some permanent connection.

"Naomi!" I called, my voice echoing down the dimly lit hallway. "It's me, Danny. I'm here for you. You're safe."

No answer. Not that I expected it to be that easy.

I moved deeper into the house, stepping carefully over a frayed rug and past a dented banister. The whole place was eerily quiet like it had been abandoned for years. It didn't feel like a home—it felt like a cage. I thought back on how I'd kept her hostage in the boarding house and cringed. It was no wonder she wanted to kill me in the beginning.

Room by room, I searched. The kitchen was cold, its countertops littered with phantom dishes. The living room was dim, the furniture threadbare and sagging. Every inch of the place screamed neglect, and I hated the idea that she'd spent her childhood here, thinking this was all the world had to offer.

“Naomi!” I called again, my voice growing more urgent. “I know you're here. Please, talk to me!”

I opened a door to find a narrow staircase leading down into a basement. The shadows stretched long and deep, but I didn't hesitate. My boots thudded against the wooden steps as I descended, my eyes scanning every corner.

Nothing. Where in the hell was my woman?

I clenched my fists, frustration mounting. “Naomi, I'm not leaving without you! You hear me? But you have to come out. You've been poisoned.”

“I know about poison, and you're wrong” The voice was small, barely audible. I whipped around, and stumbled backwards in shock when I saw the little girl. “They taught us all about it in school, and I'd never be dumb enough to drink it.”

The girl looked to be around six, with light brown hair in a short bob, straight bangs covering her forehead. They were a little long, and she kept blowing them out of her eyes. In her arms was clutched a well loved black wolf stuffed animal. “N-Naomi?”

“Yeah, duh,” The girl rolled her eyes, and the gesture was so familiar that I almost laughed. “But you’re wrong. I’m not poisoned. See?” She did a spin. “Perfectly healthy.”

I swallowed hard. “Naomi, I don’t even know how to explain—none of this is real. You’re trapped here in your mind and I need to bring you home.”

Little Naomi’s face shuttered, and she let a single snuffle sneak out before she turned her head away. “I don’t have a home. I don’t have anyone. All I have is this place.”

I stepped closer, but little Naomi stepped back. “It won’t always be that way. When you’re grown up, someone will appreciate you very much. They’ll give you a home, a place to belong. But you can’t stay locked away here.”

“LIAR!” the little girl screeched so loudly that the windows closest to them shattered in a spray of glass. Tears were covering her face, and she threw her stuffed animal down to the glass-covered floor. “No one EVER wants Normal Naomi! It’s always a LIE!”

She turned and ran, and I reached out an arm to stop her, “Wait!”

But my hand passed through her shoulder like she was a ghost, and between one breath and the next, she was gone. I felt my heart breaking. My sweet Naomi put on such a tough exterior, but that lonely little girl was still alive inside of her, wandering the halls of the boarding school that had taken the place of the warm family home she longed for.

But that hadn’t been my Naomi. That had simply been an echo of her past. I still had to find my mate, wherever she was in this labyrinth.

As I walked, faint memories of Naomi’s life played on the white-washed walls

around me. There was little Naomi, finishing a portrait of only herself that she was told to hang among the scribbled pictures of entire families on the classroom wall. Naomi shifting for the first time, and the rest of the young wolves making a game out of leaving her behind. Lonely summers in the boarding school with only the teachers for company. A sad Christmas tree with a few gifts bought by school employees that felt sorry for her.

Naomi was never hurt, or hungry, or abandoned. But her loneliness was suffocating.

I called for her, again and again, to no avail.

Then I heard it. A soft whine.

My head snapped toward the sound, and I followed it to a small closet tucked into the far corner of the basement. The door was slightly ajar, and as I approached, a familiar scent hit me—spiced cherries.

“Naomi?” I said gently, reaching out to push the door open. The hinges creaked, and there she was—but not like I’d expected to find her.

Her wolf slunk out of the shadows, her fur dull and her tail tucked between her legs. Her eyes—usually so fierce and full of life—were filled with loneliness and regret. She looked up at me, trembling, and my chest ached at the sight of her like this. It just wasn’t right.

“Hey, hey,” I said softly, dropping to my knees in front of her. “It’s okay. You’re okay now. I’ve got you.”

She whined again, her ears flattening against her head, and tried to back away.

“No,” I said, holding out my hand. She stopped but didn’t come any closer. “You

don't have to hide anymore, Naomi. Not from me. You're safe now. I promise you nothing and no one will ever hurt you again."

She hesitated, her body low to the ground, as if she didn't quite believe me.

"You aren't alone in this place anymore. The Red Canines are waiting for you. Your pack needs you; your friends need you. And I—" I had to swallow past a lump in my throat. "I need you, Naomi. You have to come back to me."

Her eyes flicked to mine, and for a moment, there was nothing but silence between us. Then, slowly, she began to change. Her fur receded, her body twisting and reshaping until she was human again, kneeling in front of me. She was trembling, her arms wrapped around herself, and tears streamed down her face.

"Danny," she whispered, her voice cracked and raw. "I was so scared."

I didn't wait. I pulled her into my arms, holding her tightly against me as she sobbed into my shoulder. My mate was cold, but I was more than happy to give her my body heat.

"I've got you," I murmured, my lips brushing against her temple. "You're safe. You're okay. I'm not letting go."

Tiny degree by tiny degree, Naomi relaxed. She melted into me like ice cream in the hot summer sun.

"You've been poisoned with wolfsbane, Sweetheart," I explained, rubbing comforting circles on her back. "But we can save you if you come back with me. You want that, don't you? You want to come back home?"

She nodded, her fingers curling into my shirt. "I hate it here."

“Look at me,” I tilted her chin up so her eyes met mine. “I love you, Naomi. Come home to me.”

Her beautiful brown eyes filled with tears, and she let out a shuddering breath. “I love you too. I’m ready to go.”

The world around us began to shift, the dull, oppressive atmosphere lifting as if a weight had been taken off our shoulders. Light filtered in, soft at first, then brighter and brighter until I couldn’t see anything but her.

And then, just like that, we were back.

Naomi’s body jerked slightly on the bed, and her eyes fluttered open, her hands reaching blindly for me. I leaned into her touch, pulling her close. She was solid and warm and real. The relief was staggering.

“Danny,” she whispered again, her voice full of wonder and relief. “Are we alive?”

I smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “We sure as hell are. Welcome back, Canine Queen.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

Three days later, I finally felt like I could breathe again.

The fog from the poisoning had cleared, but my body was still weak, and my muscles ached in ways I couldn't explain. Danny had been at my side through all of it, a steady and unyielding presence, even when I told him he didn't have to hover.

He provided an endless stream of cold ice water, chicken noodle soup, and physical comfort. We watched movies cuddled up in his bed, and he helped me to the shower when I simply couldn't take being dirty any longer yesterday.

Soon, I felt almost like myself again. The wolfsbane was fully out of my system. I was healed.

I knew I was lucky. Not every wolf had a mate like him—one who didn't just claim them but stood by them, no matter what. It scared me how much I depended on that now, but it was also a comfort. I'd never even thought that connections like the one Danny and I have could exist, but here I was. He might be overbearing and have a tendency to hover, but after the Reckless Stalker attack, I was a lot more willing to indulge him in his protective behavior.

Sitting on the couch, a blanket draped over my lap, I watched Danny move about the house. He was fussing with something in the kitchen, but I couldn't quite make out what. His broad shoulders filled the doorway, and watching him cook in a simple white t-shirt was enough to make my mouth water.

"I can feel the way you're looking at me!" he called. "We still need to wait a few days, no matter how badly you want to jump my bones."

“Oh, shut up.”

He turned, a grin tugging at his lips. Then, he tugged his shirt over his head and threw it in my direction, continuing to prepare the meal while naked from the waist up. I couldn't help but laugh, but I still appreciated the view.

“Happy?”

I reclined, sighing happily. “Yes—yes, I am.”

He served us spaghetti with garlic bread—no wine, though. Not while I was still recovering. It was a simple meal, but because my mate made it for me, it was one of the best things I'd ever tasted. We went back to the couch afterward, where Danny massaged my legs, which were sore from lack of use.

I watched his face in profile, emotion welling up in me. There, in the low, buttery yellow light, I was overcome with how strongly I felt for this man. He was a mystery, so hard and tough and possessive, but undeniably sweet when we were alone. I looked down at my hands, twisting the edge of the blanket between my fingers.

“Danny—”

He must've heard something in my tone because his busy hands stopped, and he gave me his full attention. “What is it?”

I looked into his eyes, the ones that always seemed to hold so much patience and understanding, and I knew I couldn't keep hiding the depth of my feelings. Not from him. “I need to tell you something.”

His brow furrowed, and concerned lines formed across his face. “You can tell me anything, Naomi. Always.”

I took a shaky breath, my hands gripping the blanket tighter. “I’ve been scared,” I admitted, the words tumbling out faster than I intended. “Not just because of Julian or the demons, but because of—us. Of how much you mean to me. I didn’t even realize it until I was—stuck in my own head. I thought I’d lose you, and it was like—it was like losing myself.”

He reached for my hands, gently prying them away from the blanket and holding them in his own. His warmth was reassuring, his strength unwavering. “You’re not going to lose me. You’re my mate, Naomi, and I’m not letting you leave. That’s not changing.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. “I know. But it’s not just about that. I realized I’ve been holding back. I’ve been so scared of—of being abandoned again, of not being enough, that I wasn’t letting myself really trust this. Trust you.”

A million different emotions played across his face, but he kept his cool, squeezing my hands gently. “Naomi, you’re everything to me. You know that, right? I’d fight every demon in the fucking country, any pack of wolves—hell, the military if that’s what it took to keep you as my mate.”

“I know,” I said, my voice breaking slightly. “And I want to stop holding back. I want to stop being scared. I’m all in, Danny. I want this—us. I want to be the mate you deserve. I love you.”

His smile was small but radiant, and he lifted one of my hands to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles.

“You already are, Naomi,” he said. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted. I love you too.”

My lip quivered, and a tear slid down the apple of my cheek. Danny winced, wiping it away. “Ah, Sweetheart. I hate to see you cry.”

“It’s a good cry,” I insisted. He didn’t look convinced, but I could see the wheels turning behind his gray eyes.

After a moment, Danny perked up, a small grin on his lips. “You know what I think we need?”

I sniffed, tilting my head at him. “What?”

“A date. A real one. None of this demon-interrupted picnic or battle-for-our-lives bullshit. Just you and me, somewhere nice, where I can spoil you properly.”

A surprised giggle escaped despite the tears, the sound surprising even me. “You want to take me on a date? I think we’re way past the dating stage now.”

“I insist on it,” he said, his grin widening. “Dinner, maybe some dancing—whatever you want. What do you say, Canine Queen? Let me remind you how good life can be.”

Warmth spread through me, chasing away the last of my lingering doubts. I smiled, leaning forward to rest my forehead against his. “I say yes.”

\*\*\*

The following day, I felt even better, and Danny didn’t complain when I got myself out of bed and roamed the house. After lunch, Danny and I sat across the kitchen table from Peter and Saul, books and documents spread out before us. Peter adjusted his glasses, flipping through an old leather-bound volume, while Saul was hunched over a laptop, his face illuminated by the blue glow of the screen.

We had agreed to help Hector figure out what exactly the demons were looking for when they targeted Faye and Sierra. Demons had always been a problem, but the

concentrated efforts they were putting out to capture one person were unheard of.

I had been excited to have a task after days of bed rest, but the research was way more boring than I anticipated. It felt like high school study hall all over again. Peter had at least brought a meat and cheese tray, which I picked at while the men talked.

Peter cleared his throat, drawing our attention. “So I don’t know if the demons want Faye herself, now that I look into her family history,” he said, pointing to a passage in the book. “If what I’m reading is correct, Faye’s bloodline ties back to an old coven—one that held significant power centuries ago. The demons aren’t targeting her randomly. They’re after the Spear’s inheritance, and I guess she or Sierra would work to claim it.”

I frowned. “Her inheritance? What does that even mean? Money? Land?”

“See, that’s where I keep getting hung up,” Peter replied, his tone careful. “It’s all so vague.”

“It’s more—esoteric,” Saul added. “Coven leaders often passed down magical artifacts or knowledge through their bloodlines. If Faye inherited something, it’s likely a powerful artifact or spell that the demons believe they can use.”

Danny leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “That aligns with what I’ve been finding—but I have to admit all of this brainiac shit isn’t my forte. Are you sure I have to be here?”

“Yes,” all three of us answered in unison.

Danny scowled. “Fine, fine, I’ll stay. So—these demons are willing to tear apart packs and hurt innocent people just to get their hands on some damned mystery inheritance?”

“Seems that way,” Saul said, tapping a few keys on his laptop. “I can put in a formal request to access the Spears’ original estate records in Raleigh, North Carolina. There might be more details there—legal documents, personal writings, etcetera.”

This perked me up. A road trip sounded fun. “Do you think the estate could still have something like that? It’s been generations, hasn’t it?”

“It’s a long shot,” Saul admitted. “But it’s worth pursuing. If the demons are convinced Faye has it—or at least access to it—then the answers might lie in the estate records. And even if the inheritance is gone, we might find a clue about where it went or what it was.”

Danny nodded. “Got it. Obviously, we have to pass all this on to Hector. He might not even want us messing with it anymore. Honestly, that wouldn’t bother me. I’m fine with our boring, non-demon- attracting witch.”

Saul, the witch in question, flipped him off.

Peter tapped his pen against the book. “There’s another angle we need to consider. The demons are going to look for weak spots, not just in Hector’s pack but in other packs, too. That’s what they were trying with Naomi—they wanted the Red Canines to do their dirty work. They’ve already shown they’re willing to use violence and manipulation to get what they want. We need to keep all of the packs that will listen to us informed.”

“We’ll double the security,” Danny said firmly. “Hector’s already ramped up patrols, but I’ll talk to him about hiring more hands.”

“And Faye herself?” I asked. “She’s strong, but this is so much bigger than her.”

“Hector has her training hard,” Danny said. “She needs to be ready for anything.”

Saul nodded, already typing on his laptop. “I’ll handle the request for the estate records. It might take some time to process, but I’ll expedite it as much as I can.”

Peter leaned back, his expression grave. “We’re running against the clock. The demons know what they’re after. It’s only a matter of time before they escalate.”

Remembering the battlefield, the three fallen wolves, and all of the blood, I couldn’t imagine things getting much worse. But knowing these demons, the battle we had to face could only be the tip of the iceberg.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

The backyard buzzed with the sound of laughter, the sizzle of food on the grill, and the low hum of chatter as the pack gathered for the first annual Red Canines Fall Fest. The community garden, Naomi's brainchild, had transformed into the perfect spot for the celebration. String lights crisscrossed above, casting a soft golden glow over the garden beds, now brimming with vibrant fall flowers and vegetables. Bonfires crackled in the corners, their warmth battling the brisk October air as some of the younger wolves toasted marshmallows and pack members passed around mugs of cider.

I leaned against the fence, watching Naomi laugh with Rhonda and Penny as they worked the grill. She had a way of lighting up the space around her, her smile soft and genuine, her laughter cutting through the cool night like music.

The pack was at ease, and for the first time in months, I felt it, too. My wolves—gritty, leather-clad bikers who once thrived on chaos—were smiling, joking, and genuinely enjoying themselves. It wasn't just the festival or the food; it was this new chapter. They'd started calling the garden "Naomi's Garden," a nod to her vision and effort, and it filled me with pride to see her woven into the fabric of the pack. She was their Canine Queen, even if she didn't fully believe it yet.

There was more to tonight than just the fall get-together, though. I checked my pocket for the millionth time, clutching the little black box, uncharacteristic nerves swamping me. I had the perfect plan, and my father was in on it, so why in the hell did I feel like I was going to vomit from stress?

And why the hell was I, the Alpha of one of the most notorious packers around and a man who had recently fought off demons, stressed to the point of puking at the

prospect of proposing?

One glance back at Naomi answered all my questions. She was radiant, even in just her ripped jeans and wine-red sweatshirt. There was nothing on the earth worth more than her, and I was about to ask her to be my wife.

We'd gone from kidnapping to proposals in less than a year. It had been one hell of a ride. Now, I just had to convince myself that she was going to say yes.

After all we'd been through, it'd be crazy for her to turn me down. We're already mate-bonded, for God's sake. We even have our wedding clothes already tailored, just waiting on us. Of course she'd say yes.

But—what if she didn't?

Snap out of it, asshole! I scolded myself mentally. Stop acting like a coward and make that woman your wife!

Dad sidled up to me as I was having my internal crisis and waited for me to snap out of it before bumping me with his shoulder. "You ready, Kid?"

"Yes. No. Yes. Fuck."

He laughed heartily. "That sounds about right. I'd be more worried if you were calm. Losing your mind before proposing is like a rite of passage." He adjusted the collar of my motorcycle jacket before patting me hard on the shoulder. "You'll do fine, Son."

I swallowed once and then twice, but the inside of my mouth still felt like it was full of glue. A clang was heard as Naomi, on the other side of the garden, turned off the grill and shut the lid, dusting her hands off. Dad grinned at me, almost giddy. "Looks like your lady is all done with her job. That's my cue."

Dad stepped up to the center of the group, tapping his beer bottle with a fork to call for quiet. His gruff voice, usually reserved for dry humor, carried over the crowd. “I want to say a few words, Canines!” The wolves whooped and hollered in response to their old Alpha.

“When my son brought Naomi home, I didn’t know what to expect. The boy made his share of mistakes—and brought home his share of trouble.” That earned a ripple of laughter from the pack and a mock-offended look from me. “And our sweet Naomi came to Red Canine territory in, let’s say—a less than typical fashion—” This got a groan from Naomi.

“But Naomi—she’s different. She’s not just smart and hardworking; she’s got heart. She reminds me of my late wife in that way.” He paused, his voice thick with emotion. “My wife had a way of making people feel seen, feel wanted. Naomi, you’ve got that same gift. You’ve not only brought my son peace, but you’ve brought this pack together when we needed it most. Welcome to the family, Naomi.”

The applause was loud and genuine, and Naomi blinked quickly, like she was trying to hold back tears. She stepped forward, her voice steady but her hands twisting nervously in the hem of her sweater. “I don’t have parents,” she said, her eyes scanning the crowd. “Not like most of you. I’ve always kind of felt like I was on the outside looking in. But being here, with all of you—It’s the first time I’ve felt like I really belonged somewhere. Thank you for welcoming me. I—I can’t tell you how much it means.”

Naomi sniffled, wiping her eyes before something else occurred to her. “Oh! And sorry I made you guys quit drugs,” she said, holding up her hands in mock surrender. “But I promise to be a good mate to your Alpha.”

Dad let out a loud guffaw, slapping his knee. “Hell, I think we’ll forgive you for that one, Naomi. Probably saved us a few years of our lives!”

She smiled, full and genuine, and it was like looking into the sun—impossibly bright but beautiful all the same.

My heart clenched inside my chest, and I knew it was time. As the applause died down, I stepped forward, reaching into my pocket for the small velvet box. My pulse thundered in my ears, and I wasn't sure if it was from nerves or anticipation, but either way, there was no going back.

“Naomi,” I said, and her eyes snapped to mine, wide and startled. The crowd fell silent. I reached for her hand, pulling her closer. “From the moment I first heard your name, I knew you were going to change everything. You’ve made me better. You’ve made this pack better. You’ve given me something I didn’t think I’d ever have—a future worth fighting for.”

I dropped to one knee, flipping open the box to reveal the ring—a delicate band with a solitaire diamond, simple but perfect for her. “You’re my mate, my partner, my everything. Will you marry me?”

Her hands flew to her mouth, tears spilling down her cheeks as the pack erupted in cheers and whistles. For a moment, I thought she might be too overwhelmed to answer, but then she nodded, her voice breaking as she whispered, “Yes. Hell yes.”

I stood, slipping the ring onto her finger before pulling her into my arms. The pack howled around us, their voices blending into the crisp night air, but all I could hear was her soft laugh and the steady beat of her heart against mine.

I kissed her then, not caring who was watching, making sure she knew just how seriously I took this. When I released her, she stood beside me, her cheeks flushed from the cold and from the attention, a shy smile tugging at her lips.

“To the future Mr. and Mrs. Turner!” someone from the crowd called, and the cheers

started all over again.

Naomi gave a small, self-conscious laugh. I wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer, feeling how she fit perfectly against my side. She might still be getting used to this—being in the spotlight, standing next to me as the Canine Queen—but damn if she didn't look like she was born for it.

As the night continued, we made our way around the garden, chatting with the pack members, thanking them for coming and listening to their ideas and concerns about the changes we were making. People asked to see Naomi's new ring, and she showed it off happily, flushed with all the congratulations she was receiving. It felt good—like we were building something real, something lasting.

Best of all, there were no mentions of the Reckless Stalkers or demons the entire night.

Later, when we finally had a moment alone, Naomi turned to me, her expression thoughtful. We were sitting on the edge of one of the raised planters, hidden by the tall tomato plants, so we could have some privacy.

“So,” she said, tilting her head, “are we going to jump right into planning this wedding, or are you going to let me catch my breath first?”

I laughed, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “How do you feel about getting hitched—oh, on Halloween.”

Her face went blank, then flushed, and then white. “You're kidding.”

I didn't want to laugh at her, but she was so damn cute when she was shocked. “Not at all.”

“I, well—woah. That’s super fast. Like two weeks fast.”

“It is,” I agreed, but then it was time for me to make a minor confession. “But I rented the venue the day you were brought to Athens, so—”

Her eyes went wide, and there were a few seconds where I was sure that I had fried Naomi’s brain for good. Then, thankfully, she laughed, throwing her head back with the force of it. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Oh, I’m well aware.”

“Halloween,” Naomi repeated, tapping at the corners of her eyes to catch any tears that had appeared during her laughing fit. “You know what? Fuck it. Let’s do it Halloween it is.”

“God, I love you,” I sighed, kissing her soundly. “I would have rescheduled if you wanted to, but damn, that was a big deposit I put down. Any stipulations, Mate?”

She smiled, leaning into my touch. “Let’s see—I want it big enough to celebrate with the pack and small enough that it doesn’t feel overwhelming. That’s about it. Deal?”

“Deal.” I kissed her, slow and lingering this time, savoring the moment. “We’ll plan it together. Every step. Just like everything else.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

I was floating, my head in the clouds, my stomach in knots, and I hadn't even been drinking. In the distance, I could hear the sound of violins being played, signaling exactly where I was to go—my own wedding ceremony.

It was Halloween. My wedding day. And I was getting ready to walk down the aisle to meet my mate, the love of my life, Daniel Turner.

I was so nervous that I wanted to shift and bolt through the forest—not to get away from Danny, but just to burn off some of the energy whirling around in me. I could barely hold onto my bouquet of blood-red roses.

My fingers trembled as I adjusted the hem of my leather wedding dress—a sleek, tailored piece that was both unconventional and perfectly me. Penny was an artist of the top caliber. I mean, who else would be able to make a leather wedding dress on such short notice? I had been hesitant about it at first, but when she first put me into the finished piece, I saw the vision. I was all curves, and the intricate floral embroidery on the bodice caught the light, giving the rugged material an unexpected elegance.

Gently, I touched my head. Hair, check. Then my lips. Makeup, check. I was as ready as I was ever going to be.

I couldn't wait to be Danny's wife, but damn, being the center of attention was still so new to me.

We chose a gorgeous outdoor venue tucked away in a forest grove. When it was fully decorated, it looked almost like another world—a fairy garden dripping in tiny lights

and flower petals. The leaves were changing color, painting everything in the shades of autumn. If I squinted, I could see the guests seated on long wooden benches, waiting for me.

I couldn't see Danny, though. The trees perfectly hid him from view, so when we saw each other in our wedding attire, it would really be the first time.

Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. You can do this, Naomi.

Faye and Hector had made it to the wedding, along with a few of the people I had worked with at the storage facility back in Silverfang Creek territory. I didn't have a father to walk me down the aisle, but luckily, Danny's father was thrilled to do the honor.

Peter stood beside me, his arm outstretched for me to take. He wore a simple but classic black suit, his silver hair neatly combed back, and a proud smile on his face. "You ready, Kiddo?" he asked. We had been standing still for an excessive amount of time, but at least he was patient with me.

I was lightheaded. My stomach hurt. But those were all excuses. It was time.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I whispered, taking his arm. My heart was beating so hard that I could feel my pulse in my temples. The scent of wildflowers filled the air, mingling with the faint woodsy aroma of the forest, bringing me back to reality as we took the first steps down the path.

"You're doing great," Peter encouraged. "When you're up there with him, everything else will fade away."

I really hoped he was right.

The trees were dense enough that I couldn't see the ceremony site in full, though I knew Danny was there, waiting. We'd kept to tradition—or as close to tradition as a biker pack wedding could get—and avoided seeing each other in our wedding attire until this moment. It was the most time I'd spent apart from Danny since I was brought to him. I missed him, and the anticipation of being with him once again thrummed through me.

The path curved around a towering oak, and as we turned the corner, it felt like the world stopped spinning. There he was.

Danny stood at the end of the aisle, framed by the open sky and the colorful leaves. He wore a classic tuxedo but with his own flair—a black leather vest under the jacket, the edges of it peeking out just enough to show. His dark hair was combed back neatly, but a single rebellious strand fell across his forehead. His gray eyes locked onto mine, widening for a fraction of a second before softening into an expression so full of love and awe that it almost made me giggle.

He looked like he was seeing the world for the first time.

I barely noticed the murmurs from the seated pack members or the rustle of movement as they turned to watch me. My gaze was locked on Danny, and his on me. His lips parted, his breath visibly hitching as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. The raw emotion on his face made my own eyes fill with tears, but I forced myself to hold them back. Not yet. I wanted to see him clearly, every detail of his face, without the blur of tears.

“You look stunning,” Peter whispered, his voice breaking the trance. “He doesn't stand a chance.”

I smiled through my nerves, squeezing his arm in gratitude. We reached the end of the aisle, and Peter gave Danny a firm nod before placing my hand in his. “Take care

of her,” he said gruffly, though his eyes twinkled with approval.

Danny took my hand as if it were something fragile and precious, his fingers warm and steady. “Always,” he promised.

The ceremony was simple but beautiful. The altar was a rustic wooden arch adorned with wildflowers and ivy, the perfect blend of natural and untamed, just like us. The officiant, a longtime pack member, spoke of love and loyalty, weaving the words with a quiet reverence.

When it came time to exchange vows, Danny went first. He held my hands tightly, his gaze unwavering as he spoke. “Naomi,” he began, his voice steady but thick with feeling. “Before you, I thought my life was set. I thought I was destined to walk a path of darkness. But then you came, and you didn’t just light the way—you gave me a reason to walk it. You are my strength, my partner, my everything. I promise to stand beside you, to protect you, and to love you for the rest of my life. You saved me, Naomi, and I’ll spend the rest of my days making sure you know what that means to me.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks, unstoppable now. I had to take a shaky breath before I could speak. “Danny,” I said, my voice trembling. “I’ve spent so much of my life feeling like I didn’t belong, like I didn’t deserve the kind of happiness I saw in others. But then I met you, and you made me feel like I belonged for the first time. You showed me what it means to be loved, truly loved, and I’ll never stop being grateful for that. You’re my anchor, my home, my everything. I promise to stand with you through anything and everything.”

Danny’s thumb brushed away a tear that slipped down my cheek as the officiant announced us married. “You may kiss the bride,” he said, and Danny wasted no time pulling me close, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that was both tender and fierce. The pack erupted in cheers and howls, their joy ringing through the air.

As Danny pulled back, his forehead rested against mine, and he whispered, “You’re mine forever, Naomi.”

“And you’re mine,” I whispered back, my heart soaring as the pack surrounded us, welcoming me not just as Danny’s mate, but as their queen.

\*\*\*

We were married. Danny was my HUSBAND. I could barely believe it, even after the four-hour drive to Tybee Island, where Danny had rented us a private beachside cottage for our mini honeymoon.

With the demonic threat still looming, we didn't want to be away from the pack for too long. But dammit, we deserved some time alone.

The sun was setting when Danny pulled the truck into the tiny driveway next to the cottage. The ocean was only a little more than twenty feet away, and I could hear it gently rolling across the sand.

It was perfect.

“You ready?” Danny asked, unbuckling his seatbelt.

I grinned, excitement fluttering in my stomach. “Definitely.”

Danny came around to the passenger side and opened the door for me, offering his hand. I took it, and he swept me up into his arms, his lips brushing against mine.

“Let's go,” he murmured, his voice low and husky.

After carrying me across the threshold, he grabbed our bags from the bed of the truck

and bounded up the steps to the porch. The cottage was small and cozy, with whitewashed walls and a shingled roof. It looked like it had been built in the 1950s, and the interior was decorated with simple furniture and seaside-themed decor.

I loved it immediately.

Danny set the bags down by the front door and took my hand. “Ready to check out the bedroom?”

“Is that a trick question?” I teased, letting him lead me down the hall.

The bedroom was at the end of the hallway, with a king-sized bed covered in a fluffy white duvet and a window overlooking the beach.

“Wow,” I breathed, taking it all in.

Danny wrapped his arms around me from behind, nuzzling my neck. “I’m glad you like it. Now, let’s get you out of these clothes.”

I laughed as he started tugging at the hem of my sundress, lifting my arms so he could pull it over my head. “No swimming first, then?”

“No way. Don’t you know we need to consummate this marriage, or it isn’t official?”

I giggled. “Danny. We’ve consummated our MATING plenty. I’m not sure we’d be in trouble if we went for a little swim—oh—oh, keep doing that. Forget everything I just said.”

He’d gotten the dress up and off and his lips were now busy working their way across my collarbone. “Don’t worry. We can make time for swimming later.”

I shivered as his fingers skimmed over the sensitive swell of my abdomen. “Good.”

Danny turned me in his arms, his eyes dark with desire. “But right now, I want to focus on you.”

I leaned into him, nipping at his bottom lip, feeling light as a feather. “Focus away, Alpha.”

Danny's eyes flashed, and a thrill ran down my spine. He scooped me up into his arms and carried me over to the bed. There, he laid me down gently, his eyes never leaving mine.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he murmured, trailing his fingers down my bare stomach.

I reached out to trace his jaw with my fingertips. “So are you.”

He smirked, then dipped his head to kiss his way down my neck, across my collarbone, and lower, pausing to pay extra attention to each nipple.

I gasped, tangling my hands in his hair, holding him close. He seemed to enjoy it because he spent a good amount of time there, lavishing my breasts with kisses, licks, and gentle nips. By the time he moved lower, I was squirming beneath him, desperate for more.

“Patience, Wife,” he teased, his breath hot against my skin.

I groaned, tugging at his hair. “You're the worst.”

“Am I?” he asked, sliding a finger along the length of my slit.

"Yes," I moaned, bucking my hips.

"Hmm. Then maybe I should stop."

"No! Please. Don't."

He grinned, clearly enjoying having the upper hand. "Then flip over for me. Ass in the air."

I was a little lust-addled, the attention he paid to my nipples having made me wet and anxious for his touch. "What?"

"You heard me. Roll over."

I hesitated, then did as he asked. He tugged at my hips, helping me into the right position, and then his hands were on my ass, squeezing and massaging.

"This is a nice view."

"Glad you like it." I breathed, all but purring as his massage kicked up in intensity.

"I sure fucking do," Danny rumbled, giving one of my ass cheeks a quick smack, making me yelp. "I'm going to eat your pussy with you bent over like this, and when you come, I'm going to fuck you senseless. How does that sound?"

My eyes rolled back in my head, and my mouth went dry. "It sounds amazing," was all I could manage.

He chuckled, then parted my thighs, spreading me wide. His tongue stroked my folds, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through me. He lapped at me, licking and sucking, his stubble scraping against my skin. I gasped, gripping the sheets, my body

trembling. He was merciless, teasing and torturing me until I was a panting, begging mess.

“Please,” I gasped. “I need you.”

“Oh, you'll have me, Sweetheart. All of me.”

As he spoke, Danny slid two fingers inside me, curling them upward to stroke that sweet spot. I cried out, pleasure coiling tightly in my core. He thrust his fingers into me, faster and deeper, while his tongue swirled around my clit. I was lost in a haze of pleasure, my body responding to his touch like it had been made for it. When Danny repeated his earlier action, spanking each of my cheeks in quick succession, the little bite of pain intensified everything. He took great pleasure in that discovery.

“You like to be spanked, huh? I'm going to have a lot of fun testing that out.”

I couldn't respond; I could barely breathe. He had reduced me to a quivering mass of sensation, and all I could do was surrender to it.

I was close, so close. Danny could tell, and he increased his efforts, fucking me with his fingers, his tongue swirling and flicking. I was teetering on the edge, my body taut as a bowstring. And then, he did something completely unexpected. He slapped my ass hard, and I came apart, crying out his name as I climaxed.

The intensity of my orgasm caught me by surprise. It left me shaking and breathless. Danny held me, whispering words of praise and affection as I came down from the high.

I tried to collapse onto my belly, feeling boneless and sated, but Danny caught me. “Ah, ah, keep that ass up for me, Wife. We're only halfway done.”

I shivered, the aftershocks of my climax still rolling through me while I listened to Danny undress behind me. My whole body felt like Jello, and I could barely hold myself up, but the anticipation of feeling him inside me again was enough to keep me in place.

He knelt behind me, the heat of his body searing into mine. He leaned over me, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear. “Are you ready for me, Naomi?”

I nodded. Words were beyond my ability.

He chuckled a low, sexy sound that made my pulse race. “Good. Because I’ve been thinking about fucking you like this all fucking day. Especially when I saw you in that leather dress.”

A jolt of desire shot through me, and I pressed back against him, desperate for more. He growled, the sound vibrating through me, and then his cock was pressing into me, filling me completely.

“Oh!”

“Mmm, you feel so fucking good, Baby,” Danny groaned, his fingers digging into my hips. “So tight, so wet.”

I moaned, rocking backward, needing him deeper. He obliged, thrusting harder, his cock hitting just the right spot. The pressure was building again, and my body was already primed for another orgasm. Danny fucked me relentlessly, his pace hard and fast, the wet, slapping, erotic sounds filling the air. He took what he wanted but made sure that I was enjoying it just as much as he was, peppering kisses along my spine as he thrust in and out.

I could feel him losing control, his rhythm faltering, his breathing becoming more

ragged. He reached around, finding my clit and circling it with his thumb. I gasped, the pleasure almost too much to bear.

“Come for me, Naomi,” Danny commanded.

And I did, shattering into a million pieces, crying out his name as my body clenched around his cock in spasms. He thrust deep, grinding against me, and I could feel him pulsing inside my pussy, his release mingling with mine. We stayed like that for a moment, locked together in perfect ecstasy, neither of us wanting to move.

Finally, Danny eased out of me and collapsed onto the bed, pulling me with him. We lay there, catching our breath, basking in the afterglow.

“Holy shit,” I murmured, still trying to get my bearings.

“Agreed.” Danny exhaled.

I snuggled closer to him, sighing happily. The setting sun was streaming through the window, and it was warm on my bare skin. I was starting to feel drowsy when Danny spoke again.

“Hey Naomi, remember when I said this was a private beach? That no one is around to see us?”

I was only half paying attention. “Mmhmm.”

“Still want to swim?”

Eyes closed, I shook my head once. “Later.”

When he spoke again, his voice was wicked. “Actually, I was thinking now.”

Before I knew it, I was in Danny's arms, and he was carrying me out the back door and into the sand, both of us still naked. I was fully awake in an instant, screeching, "Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

Danny was laughing a full, body-shaking laugh as he carried me into the surf. "Swimming."

He was waist-deep when he slowly plopped me into the water, and I surfaced, pushing my soaking wet hair out of my face, ready to murder my brand-new husband. "Oh, you asshole—"

"Hey, hey, that's Mr. Asshole to you." He was still grinning, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

"I'm going to kill you!" I was sputtering; the water was cold, but the expression on his face was so funny that I couldn't help but join in his laughter.

"Maybe," he said, scooping me up in his arms again. "But let me have my way with you first. I promise you won't regret it."

And with that, he kissed me hard and deep, his hands roaming over my body.

As it turned out, he was right.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:22 pm*

The smell of warm apple pie hit me the moment we stepped into Faye's house, and my stomach growled in approval. It was cozy inside, the kind of home that made you feel instantly at ease. The walls were painted soft beige, and photos of Faye, Hector, and Sierra adorned the walls. A stack of toys was nestled in one corner of the living room, all evidence of the whirlwind that was Sierra.

Faye greeted us with a wide smile, balancing Sierra on her hip. The little girl squealed at the sight of us, her chubby arms reaching out enthusiastically. "You came just in time," Faye said, laughing as she handed Sierra to me. "I was about to put her down for her nap, but she's clearly not ready for it."

As soon as Sierra was in my arms, all my worries melted away. Her tiny hands grabbed at my necklace, and her wide eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Hey, sweet girl," I cooed, bouncing her gently.

Sierra responded with a string of baby babble and an adorably toothy grin. Danny stepped closer, his expression softening as he gazed at the baby. "She's getting so big," he murmured, gently brushing his fingers over her curls.

Faye laughed, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "Tell me about it. I swear she learns something new every day. Just yesterday, she figured out how to stack her blocks without knocking them over."

"Genius in the making," Danny said, chuckling as Sierra reached for him. "Come here, Brat."

I handed her over, and Danny's face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. He held

her up high, making airplane noises that had Sierra giggling uncontrollably. Watching them together sent warmth through my chest. Danny, the rough-and-tumble Alpha, looked so natural holding a baby, his tough exterior melting away in Sierra's tiny grasp.

I turned to Faye, who was leaning against the kitchen counter with a knowing smile. "He's a natural," she said quietly.

I nodded, unable to look away from the sight of Danny cradling Sierra in his arms. "He really is."

Danny glanced over at me. "Think we'll get one this cute?" he teased, making Sierra laugh by crossing his eyes.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, but I couldn't help laughing. "I don't know. Our baby would have some pretty tough competition."

He grinned, his gaze softening as he looked at me. "I think we'd do all right."

Faye cleared her throat, clearly enjoying our exchange. "You two are going to have the whole pack spoiled with pups soon enough."

"Not too soon," I said, though the thought of it made my heart flutter. "We've got a lot to figure out first."

"Yeah, but one day," Danny said, his voice wistful. He gently passed Sierra back to me, brushing a kiss over my temple as he did. "I'd like that. A family of our own."

The thought filled me with a mix of excitement and nerves. It was hard not to imagine a little boy or girl with Danny's eyes and my stubbornness running around. As Sierra snuggled into my shoulder, her tiny hand clutching my dress, I could picture it so clearly.

“She’s out,” I whispered to Danny, noticing Sierra’s eyes fluttering closed.

“Guess the Alpha charm works on babies, too,” he said with a grin.

Faye smirked. “She’s just exhausted from being adored by you two. I’ll take her to her crib.”

Reluctantly, I handed Sierra back to Faye, who disappeared down the hall. Danny and I stood in the living room, the echoes of Sierra’s laughter still lingering in the air.

“I meant what I said,” Danny murmured, pulling me into his arms. “I want that with you, Naomi. A family. A little piece of us running around.”

My heart swelled, and I leaned into his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. “I want that, too,” I admitted softly. “One day.”

Danny tilted my chin up, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. “You’re going to be the best mom,” he said, his voice filled with conviction.

“And you’re going to be an incredible dad,” I whispered back, knowing it was true.

As we stood there, wrapped in each other, I felt it again—that sense of belonging I’d spent so much of my life searching for. I had found my home, my partner, and my future. And the possibilities ahead of us felt endless.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END