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—SHERRILYN KENYON,
#1 NYT bestselling author
of the *Dark-Hunter* Series
on *Moonlight*

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SERIES

Fight for love...

Hunter's Moon

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Hunter's Moon
A Moon Series Novel

Lisa Kessler

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For Ken and Panda –
Thanks for all your love and support for this book,
even though I didn't put in the extremity shot...*

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Chapter One

AREN

The dry Las Vegas wind stung my eyes as I rounded the building, scanning the shadowed parking lot for my prey. Even the dark of night couldn't cool the desert heat wafting up from the pavement. The stench of the spy's fear teased my nostrils, making the corner of my mouth twitch. I could admit I was eager to take this guy down, but knowing he was scared shitless sweetened the deal considerably.

For the past several months, this secret had festered inside me like an open wound. I'd been traveling too often. Instead of protecting my Pack back in Reno, I had found myself sneaking around, unable to stop tracking her, protecting our enemy.

Sasha.

The wolf inside of me growled, aching to fight for this woman I barely even knew, who'd tried to kill me. Twice. I forced a slow breath into my lungs. *Patience*. I could wait this guy out. My bum ankle left me little choice anyway.

My senses were on full alert, adrenaline pumping through my veins. The Nero Organization was still searching for her, and this scumbag was the latest in a string of informants looking for easy money. With a bounty on her head, they were eager to provide proof that she was still on the loose.

Finally he made his move. Footsteps raced toward the alley. Toward me. Perfect. I stepped into his path, blocking his only exit. He tried to pivot and change course, but it was too late. The weasel rammed into me, falling backward. Before he could roll over and scramble away, I grabbed his shirt

and yanked him off the ground.

“You’re not going anywhere.” My eyes narrowed as I pulled him even closer, his scent filling my nostrils. He was human. Apparently Nero wasn’t ready to risk another jaguar assassin to search for her. Maybe they were starting to believe she really had died at the fight in Lake Tahoe. “Tell me about Nero.”

“I don’t know nothin’.”

He wriggled like a fish, his feet struggling to touch the pavement. I was at least six inches taller than him, and I had no intention of letting him get away. I head-butted him. Blood erupted from his nose, the thick coppery scent immediately bringing the wolf inside me to full attention.

“Goddammit,” he shouted, kicking me in the shins while he yanked at my wrists. “Let go of me, you crazy son of a bitch.”

I kept my grip tight on his shirt. “I asked you a question.”

“And I told you, I don’t know nothin’.”

“You’re lying,” I said before slamming him against the brick wall of the alley.

He coughed, spewing putrid breath into my face. He reeked of week-old cigarettes and cheap vodka. “Please,” he stammered. “I never heard of any Nero.”

“Why have you been trailing the red-haired woman?” He started to shake his head, so I freed one hand from his shirt and landed a solid punch to his stomach to joggle his memory. “Answer me.”

He stopped kicking his feet, and his stare met mine. Gradually the fear in his eyes faded. My patience was wearing thin, but before I could rattle his cage for a reply, he started to smile. “They know she didn’t die in that fight,” he whispered.

Pain burst through my gut, setting my entire side on fire. *Dammit!* The slimy little bastard had stabbed me.

I pressed him against the wall, forcing myself not to loosen my grip. Fear crept back into his eyes when I didn’t let him go. I held him up with one arm and pulled his knife out of my side with the other.

His eyes opened wide. “What the hell are you?”

Using both hands I threw him across the alley, his skull crunching against the bricks. He hit the ground like a rag doll while I clutched the new hole in my side.

“I’m a wolf, asshole.”

• • •

Usually Jason, our Pack doctor, patched up our wounds, but that wasn’t an option for me right now. My twin, Adam—our Alpha—would demand to know what happened.

And for the first time in my life, I had no intention of telling him. What could I say? I let the Pack believe I’d killed Sasha during the fight with Nero six months ago instead of admitting I’d pulled her to safety. And now I watched out for her, protecting her from a distance. Even Adam wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—let that one alone.

Never in a million years would I have ever believed myself capable of betraying my Pack, my family. But I also hadn’t understood the depth of my wolf instincts. Now they demanded I walk both sides of the line, leaving my loyalty torn in shreds.

I couldn’t return to the Pack with this wound. I had to sort it out without them. Besides I was at least an eight-hour drive from Reno. I’d have to risk a few stitches here in Vegas and be sure I didn’t allow any blood to be drawn. I could do that.

By the time I pulled into the urgent care center, I knew the stab wound wasn’t too serious. If he’d hit an artery or a major organ, I would have bled out by now. But ignoring a gaping wound in my side wasn’t an option either. Werewolves may heal a little faster than humans, but a nasty staph infection could take a wolf down just as well as the next person.

Stepping out of the car, I winced as pain radiated up my leg. I sucked in a deep breath through clenched teeth. My ankle was fucking killing me. Perfect. At least I had the guy’s knife wrapped and hidden under the floor of

the trunk with my spare tire. Maybe I'd be able to pull fingerprints from it later and get something out of this other than a stab wound.

Wiping the sweat off my forehead, I limped into the brightly lit ER. The triage nurse jumped up and rushed me to an exam room. Being covered in blood apparently trumped the other emergencies.

I hated the smell of hospitals. My acute wolf senses caught a mixture of blood, urine, and disinfectant, morphing it into a disgusting scent of decay that turned my stomach. I got up on the exam table, slightly wobbly from the blood loss. The nurse laid a clipboard on the counter and scribbled something quickly before turning to face me.

"So what happened?" She snapped on a pair of latex gloves and reached for the hem of my shirt to inspect the wound.

"I'm all right. It's just a little scratch."

Her eyes widened when she found the source of my bleeding. "This isn't a scratch. You've been stabbed."

I forced what I hoped was a convincing smile. "All I need is a couple of stitches, and I'll be on my way."

She shook her head and stepped back. "You can try to charm me all you want, but you'll still need to speak with the police about your injury. It's hospital policy with stabbings and shootings."

"It was an accident. I fell while holding a steak knife." This was exactly the reason no one in the Pack went to hospitals—too many questions. "Come on, I feel stupid enough as it is."

She raised a brow and left the room.

I raked a hand back through my hair and groaned. I was screwed.

I couldn't talk to the police any more than I could face the Pack and tell them why I was in Las Vegas killing Nero informants. No self-respecting cop was going to believe my story. I needed something better than falling on a steak knife.

My gaze flicked to the closed door. Physically I was only a wolf one night a month, but I still had heightened senses while I was a man. My hearing and sense of smell were far stronger than any human's, and right now I could hear

a woman talking to the staff, followed by introductions and the click of determined footsteps.

I recognized that voice.

When the door opened the wolf inside of me howled.

“This is Detective Marsh.” The nurse snatched my chart from the counter. “The doctor will be in shortly to check your wound.”

Once the nurse was gone, I couldn’t help but stare at the most incredible woman I’d ever seen. Tough, beautiful, resilient Sasha. Her full lips were pressed together as her dark eyes met mine. I struggled to remind myself that this was also the same woman who had Tasered me and then shattered my ankle with a single gunshot. She had threatened to kill Adam...and his mate Lana. The Nero Organization had ordered her to do so. They bred jaguar shape-shifters and trained them as silent assassins for the highest bidder. Sasha had been bitten rather than bred, but she was in their employ nonetheless. Or at least she used to be. So what was she doing here impersonating an officer?

I had every reason to hate her. Yet here she was, standing five feet from me, and not only was I not attacking her, but I was drinking in her scent. She didn’t smell like most of the women I worked with, like flowers and lace. Or like any of the jaguars I’d encountered. Her scent was spicy, like leather and musk.

And I was more certain with each breath that I’d never be able to deny my instincts. I needed her.

When my brother told me he’d found his mate, I didn’t understand how he knew. I wasn’t sure I believed the old stories about the wolf recognizing the one woman we’d spend a lifetime with from one touch of her skin, and when Adam claimed a jaguar for his mate, I thought he’d gone insane. The bottom line was simple: We *don’t* take in enemies of our Pack.

But here she was, glaring at me in the urgent care center, and instead of killing her I caught myself wondering how her mouth might taste. I shoved aside the lust and dug deep for cold indifference.

“It’s Detective Marsh now? I thought you’d sold your badge to Nero.”

She dodged my barb without even acknowledging it. “Look, wolf, I’m doing you a favor by coming in here flashing a phony badge. I don’t know why, but you saved me at the lake, so I figure I owe you this.” She tucked the fake ID into her pocket and met my eyes. “If you came here to settle the score with me, then bring it on. I deserve it. But if you think you’re slowing Nero down, you’re not. I can fight my own battles.” She looked poised to say something else but just shook her head slowly. “Just back off.”

I laughed and sat up. It took all I had not to wince at the pain that burned through my abdomen. “You think I’m trying to help *you*? Is that it?”

Her chin lifted as she crossed her arms over her chest. I did my best not to stare at her breasts. “What I *think* isn’t important. What I *know* is that you’ve been following me, and this is the second Nero informant you’ve killed. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?” Her hands dropped to her sides again. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with, wolf. Nero has eyes and ears everywhere. Do yourself a favor and stay out of this.”

She spun on her heel and left, slamming the door behind her. I could hear her telling the nurse she’d sign off on my medical treatment. She confirmed it was a household accident. No investigation would follow.

I smirked. Sasha, the jaguar assassin who tried to kill me twice, had helped me.

Go figure.

Chapter Two

SASHA

I cranked up the stereo in the Beamer as I pulled out of the parking lot. It was a nice ride and I didn't lose sleep keeping the Nero Organization's car. I knew they couldn't report it stolen. The last thing they would want is the police nosing around their door.

Since I'd made the irreparable mistake of allowing Sebastian into my bed and my heart, I'd been bitten and converted into a jaguar shifter against my will. If I'd known about what he was, and whom he worked for, I would've run as fast I could. Instead, they changed me and stole my career and my life.

The least they owed me was a car.

Or so I told my conscience.

It'd been over six months since I'd heard the wolf's voice—since that night I spared his life and shot his ankle instead of his head. My stomach twisted. I wished that statistic didn't come to me so quickly. It wasn't like I missed hearing his voice.

Much.

I'd never met a man like him before. Although I'd Tasered him and held him hostage, he was never afraid. I'd know—I could smell fear. He'd tried to talk to me, to negotiate, until I gagged him. And even then, no panic. Instead he wore a quiet confidence in himself and his Pack. It reminded me of being on the police force.

Somehow he'd wormed his way under my skin even when he couldn't speak. His green eyes would watch me, but they never pleaded. Quiet strength, that was all I got from him, and in spite of spending years in a male-

dominated field proving I wasn't the weaker sex, he made me very aware I was a woman.

It didn't help that when I had walked into the emergency room he'd been half-naked. And completely gorgeous. I did my best to banish the memory and lust from my mind and focus on the road. I didn't even know this man.

He'd been following me off and on for months now. At first I thought he was hunting me, maybe looking for revenge. I wasn't really concerned; I'm never more than an arm's length from a weapon, and when I fire, I don't miss. But as time passed and he didn't attack, I realized I wasn't the prey.

I kept my attention split between the darkened streets in front of me and the rearview mirror. After the conversion, my night vision became superhuman. The BMW's headlights were only on to keep other drivers from hitting me. I could see just as well without them.

And so far, no one was tailing me.

Not a huge surprise since the wolf killed the last one. I'd circled back to take care of the Nero informant myself, but the dreg was already dead and the wolf wounded. I shouldn't have followed him to the ER, but I couldn't help myself. Seeing him continue to be hurt because of me was a millstone I was sick of wearing around my neck.

Besides, it wouldn't be long before Nero sent someone else. Ever since the fight at Lake Tahoe, I'd been on the run. The bastards were never going to give me a cure anyway. I knew that now. The moment they hit me with a tranquillizer dart at Lake Tahoe, it was painfully clear they had no intention of giving me what I'd been promised in exchange for Lana and the wolves. I was stuck. A monster.

But I wasn't going to be their puppet. Not anymore.

That's why I had to keep moving. By now, they probably knew I'd survived the showdown at Lake Tahoe, and there was a good chance I was marked for death. I'd lived inside of Nero's walls—I knew too much.

But jaguar assassins like me were just the tip of the shape-shifting iceberg. They were also involved in covert experimental DNA enhancement. And the women... They kidnapped and imprisoned human women within the

compound to be part of Nero's jaguar-shifter breeding program and DNA testing. I didn't have proof yet, but if I could find some solid evidence before they killed me, I'd have the leverage I needed to bargain for my life.

I checked my rearview mirror, trying to clear my mind of the memories, of the other women still inside the Nero compound. Bitten, converted into jaguar shifters, and being used, with no hope of escape.

I pressed the accelerator, aching to evade the mental images. I'd been in Las Vegas too long. I needed to disappear. Maybe this time I could dodge Nero *and* the wolf. He couldn't keep being hurt on my behalf. The last thing I needed was more blood on my hands.

I hurt him enough on my own.

I merged onto the highway and slid my Bluetooth over my ear. One voicemail.

"Hi, Sash. I hope your case is going all right. Maybe we could get together over the weekend? I miss you, sis. Hope I can see you soon..."

I bit my lip as I listened to my younger sister's sweet voice. I'd only managed to visit her once since the Nero nightmare began. Nadya still thought I carried my badge, fighting the good fight. How could I tell the sister I'd raised, who'd idolized me, how far I'd fallen, how much I'd changed?

I sighed and glared at the dark sky. It was a goddamned new moon this weekend, too. Around midnight the night of the new moon, I'd sprout fur, teeth, and claws until I was fully shifted into a black jaguar. I couldn't see my sister like that. For all I knew I'd eat her.

I had lost everything after Sebastian bit me. I couldn't lose her too.

It'd been over a year since I visited her at college, and with Nero tailing me I didn't see that changing anytime soon. With the hope of an antidote, I'd kept postponing my next visit, thinking we'd get a chance when I was back to myself again. And now, since the showdown at Lake Tahoe, I'd been laying low, drifting between Las Vegas and Phoenix, far from the east coast and Nero's headquarters. I couldn't risk a cross-country trip to the Boston area to see her.

But lying to Nadya never got easier. I'd just have to make another excuse not to visit. She would understand. She always did.

I jammed the gas pedal to the floor, and my sleek black BMW purred as I maneuvered around the other cars. Speed made me focus. Speed cleared my head. Speed kept me ahead of Nero.

For now.

...

It was almost sunrise when I crossed the Los Angeles city limits. I made record time across the Mojave Desert and couldn't help but smile. If the police academy hadn't worked out, race car driver was going to be my fallback career. Ever since my dad used to put me on the back of his motorcycle, I'd been addicted to speed. Less than an hour later, I pulled into the parking structure of my hotel.

I checked my make-up in the mirror on the back of the visor. I still wasn't used to my new auburn hair, which had always been jet black. Not anymore. I was no longer Sasha Kincade, either. Time to find out my new alias.

I closed the visor and punched the number five on my cell phone.

"You made the reservation?"

"Hello, Beautiful One," Sebastian purred. "I trust your trip to Los Angeles was smooth."

I ground my teeth to hold back my frustration. If police work had taught me anything it was not to bite the hand that feeds you. We hadn't parted on great terms, but I needed whatever help Sebastian might offer, which was probably exactly where he wanted me. "I don't have time for small talk. Do I have a reservation or not?"

He sighed. I checked my new California driver's license and grabbed my purse.

"Your reservation is under Sasha Newark. You are also registered for the Anime Expo."

I almost dropped the phone.

“For the what?”

“The Anime Expo is like a police convention but instead of officers discussing how to subdue assailants, the attendees discuss the latest in—”

I cut him off. “Cartoons. I get it. Why?”

“It’s being hosted by your hotel. I thought you might blend in better there.”

“Bullshit. You thought it’d be funny to see me surrounded by girls dressed up like Sailor Moon and that chick from Inuyasha.”

He paused. A sure sign I was right. Goddamn him. Hadn’t he screwed with my life enough yet?

“Bye, Sebastian.”

I closed my cell phone and went inside to check in. If there was any other way for me to stay ahead of Nero I’d take it, but for now Sebastian was my inside man. Of course, he could’ve been the one tipping off Nero to my locations, too, but I doubted it. If Mr. Severino, Nero’s founder and CEO, knew where exactly where I was, he’d be ordering a trained team to haul me in, not the small time thugs that had been tailing me so far.

They were sending out feelers for now, not sure yet if I survived the showdown at Lake Tahoe. Once they had confirmation that I was still alive, the game might change drastically.

I’d keep running until I found the hard evidence I needed. If I could hack my way into the computer security system files, I’d be able to produce pictures of the lockdown wards the government had no idea existed. They thought they were just financing enhanced soldiers. They had no idea that Severino had another secret bunker with scientists and abducted women.

Once I had some pictures, maybe a captured email or two, Nero would have to let me go or risk exposure.

At least that’s how I hoped it would end. Outcomes were tricky to predict.

After checking in, I rode the elevator up with Goku from Dragon Ball Z and some elf-looking thing that I didn’t recognize, silently cursing Sebastian the whole way. I hauled my duffel down the hallway to my new room and fell onto the bed. It was going to feel so good to sleep.

But I needed to call my sister.

After doing the time-difference math between Los Angeles and Massachusetts in my head, I figured she was probably up by now. I hit the speed dial for Nadya.

“Hey, Sash! How’s the hush-hush case going?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.” I kicked off my shoes and stretched out on the bed.

“Or you’d have to kill me. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ve heard that one before. Are you coming home soon? Think we can get together over the weekend? I haven’t seen you in ages.”

God, it was good to hear her voice again. I closed my eyes, picturing her face. We looked a lot alike, but Nadya’s eyes were emerald green instead of dark brown like mine. She was also half an inch taller than me which she used to love pointing out when she was in middle school.

“I wish I could,” I said, “but I’m knee-deep in this big case right now. I promise as soon as I have the evidence I need, I’ll be dragging you out to Leggio’s for deep-dish pizza. How’s the semester going?”

“It’s going well. I have finals soon.”

“Study hard.”

“I will.” She paused. “Sash?”

“I’m here.”

“Be careful, all right? You’re all I have left.”

“I know.” I blinked hard, shoving my emotions aside. “You do the same, okay?”

Nadya laughed. “I’m at Williams College. Not much danger around here.”

“Just watch yourself. You still have the pepper spray I gave you, right?”

“Yes, Mom.” I could hear the smile in her voice.

“I love you, Nadya.”

“I love you, too. Come see me soon, all right?”

“Will do. As soon as I can.”

I closed my phone and placed it on the nightstand with a sigh. At least she was safe. That was all that mattered.

The sun was bright, burning my exhausted eyes. I yanked the blackout

drapes closed and turned toward the bed. *Sleep.* The pillows looked fluffy and inviting. I tossed my trench coat on the chair and unfastened my shoulder holster. I freed my compact Ruger LCP from my calf holster and slipped it under my pillow.

The Ruger was quickly becoming my favorite weapon. I carried my Glock in the shoulder holster, but the Ruger was lighter and easier to hide, and it didn't trade size for accuracy. Accuracy was the one thing in my life that I could count on. A kill shot at thirty feet was standard for me.

With the gun stowed for quick access, I swapped my pants for baggy sweats and collapsed on the bed. My entire body ached. I was definitely going to sleep most of the day away.

As I closed my eyes, my cell phone started vibrating. My pistol was in my hand and pointed at the nightstand before I realized where the noise came from. I picked up the phone and felt the hair on my arms stand on end as I stared at the text from a number I didn't recognize.

Here, kitty kitty.

Chapter Three

AREN

I pulled into my brother's stable and parked in the shade of an oak tree. Whispering Pines Farm was home to twenty-six head of horses. Adam always had a way with the gentle beasts. While I followed in our father's footsteps toward business investments, Adam wanted to be outdoors, working with animals.

The animals I worked with were the human variety.

"Hey, Aren." My brother's wife, Lana, grinned as she propped a chubby baby on each hip.

"I'll come to you." I hustled toward her before she could try to muscle the infants over to my car.

Babies were a new phenomenon for our Pack. Other than the elders of the Pack, most of us were pretty close in age. We'd never watched a younger generation grow up before our eyes. Malcolm, named after my father, stretched his pudgy hands out toward me, opening and closing his fingers like that would draw me to him.

It worked.

I slid my hands under his arms and lifted him up into the air, pulling at the new stitches in my side. He squealed with laughter as I brought him closer to my face, doing my best not to wince in pain.

Concern lined Lana's face. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah." I nodded, placing my nephew on my hip opposite of the wound. "They're getting so big already. I was only gone a week."

Her dark eyes searched mine, but I waited her out and she finally let it go.

“You’ve been out of town a lot lately.”

“I’ve had a few deals going down in Vegas.” I nipped at Malcolm’s fingers, enjoying the sound of his laughter.

He and Madeleine were fraternal twins, sharing the same coloring, dark hair, and olive skin. But the similarities stopped there. For one, there’d never been a set of twins born to the Pack that weren’t both male. Females are never born with the shifter gene, and yet from the moment they were born, their scents revealed that while Malcolm was a werewolf like his father, Madeleine was a jaguar like her mother.

And like Lana, somehow Madeleine carried the shifter gene from birth.

Another reason Nero would never leave us alone.

Until a few months ago, we hadn’t known Nero even existed, but once they invaded our territory chasing after Lana, we lost one of our own, Gabe, and also discovered Nero had been cooking up more than just selling out jaguar shifters as high-priced assassins. They’d also been experimenting on human women with psychic abilities to produce female offspring born as shifters. Lies and betrayal were all that Nero stood for as far as I was concerned, and we were ready for them. They’d never touch my brother’s new family.

I rubbed noses with the little boy, soaking in his smiles. Malcolm had my father’s light green, almost grey, eyes. Sometimes when I watched him playing on the floor, he would look at me and my heart would clench; he looked so much like our dad. And someday we’d tell him that his grandfather gave his life for him and his sister.

Malcolm wriggled and reached for his mother. How such a tiny woman lugged around and kept up with two active six-month-olds with their added animal instincts was beyond me.

“Have you heard a word I just said?” Lana took Malcolm from me and shook her head. “You seem far away.”

“Sorry about that. I guess I’m a little preoccupied.” I shrugged. “Did I miss anything important?”

Lana laughed. “Not really, I was just trying to catch you up on baby milestones. Sometimes I forget that other people might not be as interested in

the new baby foods Madeleine has tried and Malcolm has spit out.”

“He’s a picky eater, huh?” I grinned. “Already taking after his dad. Speaking of...” I glanced over toward the barn. “Is Adam here?”

“Yep. He and Luke are just re-bedding the stalls.”

“Great.” I leaned in to kiss her cheek and then the foreheads of my niece and nephew. “I’ll go find him.”

“You’re welcome to stay for dinner.”

“I might take you up on that.”

I turned for the barn, but Adam met me halfway.

“Good to see you, bro.” He clasped my forearms in our Pack’s traditional greeting. “Where have you been hiding?”

I did my best not to react. I hadn’t been *hiding*, but I also wasn’t keen on my Alpha discovering I’d been wounded while killing a Nero informant either.

Adam was my older brother by a few minutes, so when our father sacrificed himself to protect Adam’s mate during the fight with Nero, the mantle of Alpha fell onto his shoulders and with it... Well, I wasn’t exactly sure, but my brother knew things instinctively now. The same way our father, our Alpha, had. Maybe it was a sixth sense? It was hard to tell. We used to complain when our father seemed to sense when there was a problem. It was tough to hide anything from him.

Now I saw those same traits in my twin brother. Like looking into a mirror where my reflection could see more of me than I could. Unsettling.

“I haven’t been hiding. Just...working.”

Adam raised a brow. “Awful lot of out-of-town work lately.”

I nodded, following him back into the barn. “I guess, but there’s more money in Vegas than here in Reno, so it’s not really surprising.”

Luke, our youngest Pack member at twenty, carried an empty bag of wood shavings out of a stall and grinned. “Hey, Aren.”

He tossed the bag aside, and I clasped his dusty forearms. “Good to see you. How’s my brother treating you? Need me to renegotiate your contract?”

Luke laughed and shook his head. “Nah, I’m okay.”

Adam smiled and picked up the empty bag, folding it up to put it in the trash barrel. “Why don’t you call it a day, Luke?”

He grinned. “You sure? We’re almost done bedding the stalls.”

“Yeah, Aren can help me.” Adam glanced my way. “Right?”

My brother definitely sensed something. Shit.

I nodded. “Happy to help.”

“Thanks.” Luke headed out of the barn toward Adam’s ranch house and left me alone with my brother.

My Alpha.

Adam lowered his voice. “Aren, we’re all watching for Nero. You can’t keep going off on your own to even the score. I need you here.”

I felt like I just got sucker punched in the gut. How could he possibly know that’s what I was doing?

My brow furrowed, but I did my best to hide my surprise. “Why would you think it had anything to do with Nero?”

Adam pulled open the last stall door and dragged in a fresh bag of shavings. “Because Sasha attacked us in Las Vegas. She knew the area, and if she survived the fight at Lake Tahoe, then it’s logical she’d lay low there, right? Then you suddenly have business in the same place. Did you find her?”

I closed the door before the bay mare could make a break for freedom. “That’s a stretch isn’t it? There are a lot more people in Las Vegas than the bitch who shot me.”

“True, but the last couple times you’ve gone to Vegas on *business*, two men have died. One of the deaths made the news, Aren. It’s not often someone hits their head against a brick wall so hard it crushes their skull.”

I pulled my hair back from my face. “Are you spying on me, Adam?”

He spread the clean shavings around the stall and folded the bag as he came back out. We watched the mare in silence while she walked in tiny circles in search of the perfect spot to drop and roll in the new wood shavings.

I waited for my brother to answer. It wouldn’t be long now—Adam was a

hothead. Even with his new Alpha powers, I still had all the patience in our gene pool.

Adam wiped his forehead, his eyes meeting mine. “I’m not spying. But I know you’re not being honest with me either. You tell me you’re in Vegas. I see news headlines about a man with a shady past who ended up with his skull crushed in a back alley. It’s not tough to connect the dots.” He turned toward the bay mare in her stall. “I haven’t seen a news story about her though. So, have you found her? Did Sasha survive the shoot-out at the lake?”

I nodded. No sense lying.

I chose not to mention that I was the one who saved her that night at the lake, though.

Adam glanced at me. “Any reason you’ve been keeping that a secret?”

“All your questions are starting to piss me off.” I glared at my brother. Having all the patience in our gene pool didn’t mean I was Job. “I’m not some kid, and you’re not my father. I can take care of myself.”

He started dusting the shavings off his shirt. “That’s not what I’m worried about. If she’s still alive, she can come after Lana and the babies.”

My hackles started to rise. Adam had every right to suspect the worst from Sasha, but the wolf inside of me demanded I protect her. I did my best to keep my voice even. “Sasha isn’t working for Nero anymore.”

Adam raised a brow. “How do you know that?”

“Because I killed the guy they sent to look for her. Nero wants her back.”

Chapter Four

SASHA

My brain buzzed as I stared at the text on my phone. I tried to call the number, but it was blocked. If I were still on the police force, I could've triangulated the cell towers to try to narrow down from where the person sent the text. It didn't really matter. With all the cell phone users in Los Angeles, it'd be like trying to find a needle in a haystack anyway.

Besides, I wasn't a detective anymore.

I took in a slow breath through my nose, regaining control of my heart rate. The text was creepy, but all it really meant was that someone who knew what I was had gotten my cell phone number. It didn't mean they knew where I was staying.

But it also didn't mean they *couldn't* know. If Sebastian slipped up at his end, Nero could break my door down at any moment.

A drop of adrenaline shot through my bloodstream. I set the phone back on the nightstand and got up. Pacing back and forth, I ran scenarios through my head until I was dizzy with all the potential outcomes and probabilities.

All of them sucked. Dammit.

I sighed and went to my bag, digging around for a hair tie. Panic wasn't getting me anywhere. I needed to think. Once I had my hair pulled back in a ponytail, I snatched one of the large towels from the bathroom and laid it on the floor beside the nightstand. I wanted to clear my head and calm my spirit so I could think, but just in case, I wasn't going to be far from my gun. Sitting on my knees I took a couple deep breaths before warming up my body with a few simple yoga postures.

Stretching out my muscles felt like heaven. Between the anonymous text message and the long drive across the desert, my entire body ached. Focusing on my breathing and balance quieted my mind until I finally felt peace replacing the anxiety. My pulse found its normal rhythm, and rational thought came creeping back.

Whoever was looking for me wouldn't have bothered sending a text if they knew where I was. They would've just made the grab. They were trying to rattle me and force a mistake. I still had the upper hand.

I straightened up and took the towel back in the bathroom. Untwisting the hair band, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. With my fair complexion and now auburn hair, my brown eyes seemed even darker, almost black. I shook my hair out, letting it fall back on my shoulders.

The wolf still recognized me.

The wolf... Maybe he sent the text. It didn't really seem like his style, but it was a lead to consider that calmed my nerves a little. At least he was a known entity. I needed some sleep before I attempted a coherent conversation, but later in the afternoon, I'd do a little searching and track him down. He wasn't the only one with stalking abilities.

Not that I wanted to talk to him again. I shook my head, rolling my eyes. Who was I fooling? Dammit, I needed to get him out of my head. This annoying attraction was throwing my focus off. I couldn't afford to be distracted.

But I didn't know why in the world he would help me, so what reason could he have for taking out the Nero informants? It definitely couldn't be to help me. I found out through Sebastian that the Pack's Alpha died in the fight at Lake Tahoe. Nero wouldn't have been there if it weren't for me. It was my fault.

I closed my eyes, struggling to keep the memory of that night from replaying in my head. Waking to find a huge werewolf licking my face, sharp deadly canines brushing my skin almost tenderly. It hadn't been until he stepped back, favoring one of his hind legs, that I'd realized I recognized those dazzling green eyes.

Ugh. I shut down my line of thought. He was good looking, strong, and brave, and he'd saved me. Any woman would be attracted, but it had to end there. I had to stop thinking about him. Instead, I thought about Sebastian. That's what trusting a man brought—betrayal and pain. I'd vowed to never forget and never make the same mistake again.

I slid my fingers back through my hair and rolled my eyes at my reflection. A wolf was the last thing I needed in my life right now.

It'd be much easier to stop thinking about him if he'd been wearing his shirt when I walked into that emergency room. No man with a chiseled torso like his should be allowed to sit around without a shirt on. And those eyes, that voice.

Okay, enough.

The leather band that covered my left wrist stole my attention. I knew what it covered, but some part of me always hoped that somehow that damned tattoo of the lion head with an "N" on its forehead would vanish. Sadly, the black brand that labeled me as a Nero operative was still there, staring back at me, reminding me of every crime I committed for them. No amount of evidence against Nero would clear my conscience, but if I could get away and go back to my job on the police force, at least I could start making strides toward justice and the woman I used to know.

Rubbing my wrist, I went to the bed and picked up the Ruger beside my cell phone. After checking the chamber to be sure it was loaded—a force of habit—I slid the pistol back under my pillow. With my weapon stowed, I crawled under the covers and clicked off the light. When I woke up I'd check with the wolf about that text message, and then I'd get back online and see if I could hack my way into some photos or records inside the locked ward of the Nero compound. Having a plan calmed my mind. If I could get some dirt on them, I'd have the leverage I needed to get them off my ass and stop running. That was the goal anyway.

I just wanted my life back.

Chapter Five

AREN

From my corner office, I had a view of downtown Reno, surrounded by mountains in the distance. After my dad died, I could've moved into his office. I knew he'd want me to have it. But it felt haunted to me.

I ran Sloan Consulting without him now, but I would never be able to fill his shoes. I wasn't going to try. Although my twin brother took over our father's position as Alpha of the Pack with ease, I was the only one who'd ever been interested in our father's business. My brother opened his horse-training ranch, and I headed off to college to study business and eventually ended up in the Sloan high-rise helping businesses grow by connecting them with likeminded investors.

Staring at the people walking on the sidewalk below, I couldn't stop searching for her face. There was no way Sasha would come back to Reno and risk running into the Pack, but I couldn't help myself.

My stomach tightened. I was losing my mind. She'd slipped through my fingers and vanished and now I searched for her everywhere I went.

How could I protect her if I couldn't find her? I'd run Internet searches and called my contacts in Vegas to check for her aliases on the hotel registers, but nothing came up. Aside from Vegas, I didn't have any clue where she might go.

Elvis was crooning "Suspicious Minds" out of the speakers behind my desk. Great song but not something I wanted to hear right then. I felt like I really *was* caught in a trap. And now I couldn't think straight, which *used to be* one of my strong points.

I hit the remote, silencing the music.

Almost on cue, Maggie buzzed on the intercom. “Aren? You’ve got a call on line four. She wouldn’t tell me her name.”

I opened my mouth to tell her to put the call through to my voice mail, but I stopped myself. Instead I picked up the phone and pushed the line. “Aren Sloan.”

“I told you to leave me alone.”

My grip tightened on the receiver. “Where are you?”

“I think you already know.”

I frowned and leaned forward in my chair. “I haven’t seen you since you walked out of the ER in Las Vegas.”

She paused before replying. “I don’t believe you.”

“Then don’t.” My jaw clenched. “That won’t change the fact that I’m sitting in my office in Reno. Where are you?”

The line went dead.

“Goddammit.” I resisted the urge to chuck the phone across my office. This was insane. Every cell in my body needed to find her and make sure she was safe.

Using the caller ID, I dialed the number back on my cell phone. It couldn’t hurt to have her number on my contacts list, but there was no answer and no voice mail picked up. Not that I expected otherwise, but I couldn’t help hoping. If she was calling from her cell phone it’d be tough to track her down, even if I hired a PI. I glanced at the clock. Not quite lunchtime yet, but I needed some fresh air.

After pocketing my phone, I blew out of my office and past the front reception area.

“I’ve got an appointment, Maggie. Barry can handle whatever comes up. You’ve got my cell number if you need me, right?”

“Yes.” Maggie’s bright blue eyes were full of concern. “I don’t have an appointment on your schedule. Is everything all right?”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She nodded in that female way that every guy knows means she doesn’t

believe a word you just said, but I wasn't going to make the effort to convince her. I hit the button for the elevator.

Once I was outside, I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with air. If only clearing my head was so simple. In the parking structure, Adam jumped out of his Jeep. I groaned. This day just kept getting better.

"Hey, Aren. I'm glad I caught you. We need to talk."

I glanced around for any additional unwanted company. "About what?"

"About you going after Sasha."

I met his gaze. "I told you she's not working for Nero."

"I know." He nodded. "But if she's not a threat to us anymore, then why do you keep going to Las Vegas?"

"I get it, you're the Alpha now, but I can't take being watched and questioned all the time. I'm your brother, not your son."

Adam yanked his hair back from his forehead, doing his best to swallow the growl I could hear forming in his chest. He kept his hair longer than mine, but otherwise it was like staring at my own reflection.

"I have an appointment," I lied. "Can we talk about this later?"

I started walking to my car, but Adam stepped into my path. "No. We've waited long enough."

I bumped his shoulder, powering past him. "I can wait longer."

Adam grabbed my arm, yanking me around. Rage smoldered, building inside of me, but unlike my impetuous brother, channeling my emotions was usually more beneficial than the instant rush of throwing a punch.

But punching him would probably feel incredible.

I jerked my arm free. "Don't push me, Adam."

"I know something is up with you and Sasha. You told me she's not working for Nero anymore. How can you be sure? She could be using you to get close to my kids. Can you imagine what kind of reward Nero would offer to anyone who brings them children that carry the bloodlines of both werewolves and jaguars? They'd use my kids as lab rats, Aren. Just like they wanted to use Lana. I can't risk it."

Years of business negotiations trained me to always take a deep breath

before responding to a confrontation, but hearing Sasha's voice on the phone made the wolf inside me impatient to find her. There had to be a reason she thought I was watching her again. Could another Nero informant be tracking her already?

I met my brother's eyes. "Sasha needs my help. If anyone could understand this, it should be you. I kept your secret when you told me your mate was a jaguar. You owe me this, Adam."

He crossed his arms over his chest, brow furrowed, and for a second, he looked exactly like our father. "This isn't like you to run off half-cocked, Aren. And to help Sasha? Have you forgotten she tried to kill you?"

Abandoning all my business training, I blurted out. "She's my mate, Adam."

His jaw went slack for a second, and before he could speak I held up my hand. "I know this is nuts, and it's tearing me up inside, but it is what it is. How we both ended up with jaguar shifters for mates, I have no clue. Maybe Dad would've been able to figure out the connection—you said he knew more about Nero than he let on, right? But he's not here anymore. But no matter the reason, I still need to make sure they don't get their hands on her again. Nothing you say is going to change that."

Concern lined his eyes, aging him a few years. "Jaguars don't have our instinct to find a mate. She doesn't experience the same connection you do." His voice softened. "She'll kill you, Aren."

I shrugged, looking over at my car. "She's had plenty of opportunities."

"Your ankle is never going to be fully functional again, and it's her fault. How can you ignore all she's done? Jesus, Aren, she kidnapped Lana, and Malcolm *died* saving her. How do you expect me to handle this?"

"This isn't about you." I shook my head. "You think I'm happy about this situation?" I knew I was raising my voice, but I didn't give a shit if anyone heard me. "You found your mate, and she was crazy about you. Love and marriage and a family—you got the whole package deal. But here I am, drooling over a woman who hates my guts. It's fucking pathetic. But I can't help myself." I shoved my way past him to my car. "Maybe it'd be better if

she did kill me. At least I'd be out of this hell."

"Aren, I need you here. The Pack needs you."

I glanced over my shoulder at my brother, my best friend, and my heart sank. "I can't be what you need. Not right now."

I popped the lock on the Lotus and sank down into the leather seat. The engine roared to life as I revved the accelerator. I jammed it into gear and shot out of the parking structure like a bat out of hell.

Once I hit the freeway, I gave the engine more gas and my supercharged baby flew past everything with wheels. The needle hovered at 120 mph and my pulse thrummed until I smiled in spite of my crappy goddamn day.

Speed was my drug of choice.

The wind gusted through the open moon roof, ruffling my hair and deafening my ears. Too bad it couldn't drown out the voices in my head. The wolf inside of me was screaming to find Sasha, while the man in me was grumbling that I should be responsible to my family and turn around. I should be protecting the Pack from Nero.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, fighting to find balance with my warring loyalties, but I couldn't block out the echo of Sasha in my mind.

I don't believe you.

She said the words, but her voice had been shaking. She'd wanted it to be me.

Chapter Six

SASHA

I stared at my cell phone for a minute, like that might change the wolf's answer. He wasn't the one who sent the creepy text message with the return number blocked. In my gut, I knew it wouldn't have been him, but I didn't want it to be true.

I parked in an empty lot on the west side of Griffith Park. With the new moon only a few hours away, I couldn't stay in downtown Los Angeles. Just outside of the park, the undeveloped terrain stood in stark contrast to the skyscrapers and traffic gridlock of the massive city. Steep untamed cliffs loomed before me in the twilight, waking the animal lurking inside of me. This seemed like the perfect place for a jaguar to stay out of trouble.

I hoped. Since I'd been converted, Nero trained me to remain alert while the jungle cat prowled. Eventually I'd started to share the cat's memory of new-moon nights and occasionally even control the jaguar. It had taken a few months before my human mind finally joined with the jaguar, accepting that one night a month I became a passenger within my own body, trusting that I would regain control with the sunrise.

After stashing my wallet and cell phone in the trunk, I locked the car and scanned the area for any onlookers. In the distance, a child rode on a large horse, trotting around the arena, but that was the only activity nearby. With my dinner and water bottle stashed in my backpack, I hit the trail up the east side of Mt. Lee. I'd eat at the base of the Hollywood sign. It'd be a good landmark to stow my pack so I could find it again in the morning. Plus, a chain-link fence topped with razor wire surrounded the perimeter, which I

hoped meant that the jaguar wouldn't be able to wander near any humans.

Assured that I was alone, I pulled out my toolkit, clipped a seam, and silently slid through the fence. I spent the next couple of hours carefully avoiding the security cameras. They were stationed randomly along the fence and on either side of the ends of the Hollywood sign, a necessity after folks decided the best revenge against the city of broken dreams was to kill themselves on it. Luckily they were outdoor, stationary cams so dodging them wasn't difficult for me. After I shifted, I could become part of the wildlife, but until then, I couldn't let the LAPD get tipped off to my trespassing. All I needed was to be arrested during a new moon. Just the thought of it sent a cold chill down my spine.

The only perk of working for Nero was safety when we needed to shift. The corporation owned thousands of acres of land, so all the jaguars in residence could shift during the new moon without the threat of being captured. Or worse. But working for them wasn't worth the safety they promised. The veiled threat of exposure always lingered.

They used subtle methods of intimidation to keep us dependent on them for everything from a furnished apartment, to the use of company cars, to the top-notch medical care we could no longer receive from a hospital. Most of their operatives became so dependent and compliant that Nero was all that mattered. We got the tattoo and accepted our place as a cog in the Nero machine.

For the few like me who refused to conform, there were other incentives dangled before us. For me, it was a cure, a chance to go back to being myself, a woman. No jaguar, no shifting. Just Sasha Kincade, detective.

I took a deep breath and kept hiking. Selling my soul for an empty promise of a cure wasn't something I liked to think about. Night had settled in by the time I reached the sign at the top of the mountain. The lights sparkled along Sunset Boulevard, hiding all the broken dreams behind the glamour of Hollywood. I sat down in the shadows of the large letter D and pulled out my foot-long Subway sandwich. Best to fill up before I changed, a full belly was my only hope to keep the jungle cat from killing. It didn't always work, but it

seemed to help.

From my perch, the congested freeways were silent as the stars twinkled above, giving my hideout an unexpected peace. In the distance, I could hear the lonely cry of the coyotes echoing through the valley. Peering up at the stars, my time was short. The cool breeze sent a shiver through me. Until then, I hadn't noticed I was sweating.

I still dreaded the change. To say it hurt would be a huge understatement. Maybe it wasn't so bad for the males who were born with shifter abilities, but for me, one of the bitten females, the pain was indescribable.

And the fact that it was unavoidable also sucked.

My fingers trembled as I unzipped my black sweatshirt. Next came my shoulder holster and the holster on my calf. I felt more naked without my guns than I did without my clothes, but I'd be armed again soon enough.

Sebastian had shown me security video of my jaguar form when we were both back at Nero. I doubt anyone would be stupid enough to try to mess with me after I shifted.

I tucked all my clothes and weapons into my backpack and stowed it behind the *D* of the Hollywood sign just as my back seized. Pain stole my scream before I could make a sound. I fell to the ground on all fours while my joints popped, bones mutating. Fire burned my flesh until sleek black fur forced its way through my skin like a million tiny needles. My throat constricted and my teeth lengthened as a growl of pained frustration escaped my powerful jaws. I panted through the anguish that brutalized my body.

When the ache finally subsided, I got to my feet, shaking off the last vestiges of humanity before I stalked silently into the darkness. My ears flicked, tracking the night sounds around me. In my jaguar form, my senses were heightened, and although I couldn't speak, the human part of me remained alert, aware but trapped inside an animal with feral instincts. The cat stretched, enjoying its freedom while my mind lingered in the background.

My first few new moons after being bitten had been terrifying. Shape shifting wasn't pretty like movie special effects—it was gut wrenching and

ugly. The claustrophobic panic that gripped my mind made the jungle cat agitated and angry. These days I'd seen more changes than I wanted to count, and allowing the cat freedom to hunt came as second nature. Catching the scents of rabbits and gophers, I stalked my prey and listened for intruders. The pads of my large feet caressed the earth, moving silently through the moonless night. Sticking to the shadows, I raced faster, hunting.

Until I caught an unfamiliar scent.

The cat froze, whiskers shifting, nostrils flaring, while I scanned the darkness. Gradually I recognized what the cat had sensed. Similar to a coyote, but that wasn't quite right. Then I placed it. *Wolf*.

My jaguar flattened its ears as I searched for the source of the scent. Inside I urged the cat to run. The jaguar couldn't have known that wolves don't run free in Los Angeles. But I did.

With all the mental push I could muster, I forced my will until we spun around and raced through the bushes without a sound, keeping distance from the wolf's scent. When all traces of the intruder vanished, I stopped, listening to the night around me. The cat swished its tail, daring its adversary to show himself, and I cringed internally.

The sunrise couldn't come soon enough.

...

I squinted into the daylight and took a deep breath. I was me again. Dirty, but alive. I wasn't far from the Hollywood sign, either, so I carefully made my way to the *D*, dodging security cameras. Being caught naked on a security tape, definitely not on my to-do list. I wasn't vandalizing, but this was private property. Naked trespassing wouldn't be great on my resume.

I cursed under my breath when sharp rocks and dried stickers dug into my bare feet. By the time I reached the sign I was anxious for my clothes and definitely my shoes. I retrieved my backpack, and my brow furrowed.

I smelled the wolf again.

I ripped my bag open, my pulse racing. The scent was stronger inside. He'd

been in my pack. I pawed through my clothes for my guns. Both pistols were there. I checked the magazines, and the bullets were all accounted for, too. Frowning, I scanned the area. What was he after? I didn't have any money, and my wallet and cell phone were locked in the trunk of the car.

The keys.

With my heart pounding in my ears, I yanked the rest of my belongings out of the pack and let out a sigh of relief. The keys to the Beamer were safe at the bottom of my backpack.

Maybe he'd given up when he realized there wasn't any cash or credit cards? But it didn't add up. Why would a werewolf be up here anyway? Unless he tracked me here, it was the only explanation that made sense.

I put on my bra and shirt while watching the bushes for any sign of movement. He could still be out there somewhere, although right now his scent only lingered around my bag. I picked up my pants and realized he had taken something after all.

The sick bastard had my underwear.

Gritting my teeth, I finished getting dressed. Once I had my Glock and my Ruger back in place, I felt less exposed and phenomenally more pissed.

Why was this asshole toying with me? I needed to force him to make a mistake so I could take him out.

Game over.

I got back to my car and opened the door. An unopened pouch of kitty treats waited for me on the driver's seat. The asshole had been in my car. Instinctively, my hand slid under my coat, hovering over the handle of my Glock while I took cover behind the driver's side door. Nothing moved, but that didn't mean I was alone.

How could he have known this was my car? I glanced at my leather BMW key ring and sighed. I had the only BMW parked in this lot. He didn't have to be a genius to figure it out. My car had probably been the only one left in the lot overnight.

He'd be able to tail me now. *Shit.* I drew my gun and called out, "Hey chickenshit, enough with the cat toys. You want me? Here I am."

I waited. Waiting was the toughest part of police work. All it took was a second of uncalculated panic for all hell to break loose. That's how cops died.

Okay, so shouting for a stalker to come and get me wasn't standard procedure, but I didn't want him to think he scared me. Plus the sooner I found out who was after me, the sooner I could take him out. But he wasn't grabbing the bait.

I kept my gun at the ready as I went to the trunk to grab my wallet and cell phone. My fake ID and credit cards were all accounted for. Maybe he hadn't been through the trunk. I reached for my cell phone, and my heart stopped.

My welcome screen read "Meow."

No. Oh shit. No. My phone had Nadya's number in it.

In case he watched me from a distance, I struggled to keep my expression neutral. I slammed the trunk closed, slapped the cat treats out of the car, and slid behind the wheel. My palms were slick with sweat as I revved the engine. The tires squealed when I cranked the wheel, spinning my car into a 180-degree turn as I punched the accelerator. My eyes flicked from the windshield to the rearview mirror, watching for a tail. Where was he?

When no cars followed, I relaxed my grip on the steering wheel and forced myself to take a deep breath. This wasn't just another informant for Nero. Not this time. This guy was too slick to be a snitch. But if Nero had sent an assassin to take me out, it would be a jaguar. Wouldn't it? There were rumors floating around of werewolf experiments, but they'd been abandoned years ago.

I pulled out my cell and hit the number for Sebastian.

He sounded out of breath when he answered. "Not now."

"Did Severino put someone new on my tail?" I kept watching the road ahead and behind me.

"I said not now. Beware the Jabberwock."

The line went dead. My brow furrowed. The cryptic poetry signaled his phone was compromised. I was on my own.

I checked my mirrors again. Seeing that my stalker still wasn't following me, I had to assume he put a tracker in or on my car somewhere. I'd have to

swap cars. But first I needed to be sure Nadya was safe. I hit her number on speed dial and held my breath.

“Sash?”

I’d never been so grateful to hear her voice. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“Thank God! I was worried about you.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Worried?”

“Yeah, the paramedic called me this morning asking if I was a relative. He told me you were in an accident, and he needed to know if you were allergic to any medications.”

I fought the urge to hyperventilate and took the next exit off the freeway. “How long ago did he call you?”

“So you’re all right?”

“Nadya, he’s not a paramedic.” I stopped in a McDonald’s parking lot and shut off the engine. “There was no accident. This is about that case I’m working. He stole my cell phone.”

In the silence, I could almost hear her frown as she connected the dots. “I didn’t tell him where I am, Sash.”

“Good.” I rested my forehead against the steering wheel. “Get packed and call a cab for the airport.”

“The airport? Where am I going?”

“I’m not sure yet, just get out of Massachusetts. This guy is good, Nadya. If he wants to use you as leverage to get to me, he’ll find you.”

“But I didn’t tell him where I was. I can’t just up and leave. The semester’s not over yet.”

“Tell the Dean you had a death in the family. Staying there isn’t an option.” I rubbed my forehead, fighting against the headache blooming behind my eyes. “He has your number, and he knows your name. It won’t take him long to find you.”

“Fine.” She sighed. “I can’t afford to repeat a semester.”

“Nadya, it’s only money, okay? I’m talking about your life.” I did my best not to yell. It wasn’t her fault any of this happened, and because I couldn’t tell her what was really going on she had no concept of the danger.

I'd tried so hard to keep her out of all this.

"Okay, I get it. I'll get packed."

"And ditch your phone."

"But all my—"

"Just get rid of it. We'll buy you another phone. Email me from your laptop when you're at the airport. I'll get you an eTicket out of there."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"As long as you are." I just had to keep her that way. "Talk to you soon."

I closed my phone. The bastard had spoken to my sister. My weak spot was exposed. I slapped both hands against the steering wheel. He was probably already on his way to Massachusetts. That would explain why I wasn't being followed.

Damn it.

I rubbed my hands down my face. Sitting on my ass worrying wasn't going to right this sinking ship. With Sebastian on the run, I couldn't count on him for help either. Besides, while I was fairly certain he didn't have anything to do with the sick asshole tracking me, I still couldn't be sure of his motives.

I'd never trust Sebastian completely. Never again.

I stared at my cell phone and sighed.

I must be insane.

Chapter Seven

AREN

After the visit with my brother, I called Maggie to tell her I had to go out of town for a meeting. I didn't tell her I was putting some distance between me and my Alpha. The wolf inside of me demanded I take action, but what could I do? I had no goddamn clue where Sasha might be. So I drove to the last place I'd seen her. Maybe I'd catch a scent. Desperate, but at this point I was eager to have a clear goal to focus on.

I made it to Vegas in just over six hours, checked into a suite in the Wynn tower, and spent half the night canvassing the city for any sign of Sasha. Between the smoke-filled casinos, the blinking lights, and the loud bells ringing to announce a winner, my wolf senses were on overload.

And not a single trace of the woman I was looking for. Perfect.

My cell phone buzzed in my pocket, a respite from the failure of my search.

"This is Aren."

"Where are you?"

The corner of my mouth tilted up slightly at the sound of her voice. I sat on a stool in front of a slot machine. "Looking for you."

"I told you not to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"So you say." I circled my foot slowly in an attempt to loosen my stiff ankle. "But this is the second call from you in two days. What's going on?"

Damn, it was good to hear her voice.

"I know there's no reason in the world for you to help me, but my sister is in trouble. I need to get her someplace safe before he finds her."

“Is it Sebastian? Is he after you?” I frowned, gripping the phone tighter. In my mind, I imagined the slick jaguar bastard with her, and the wolf inside of me growled, distracting me for a second.

Wait, did she just tell me she had a sister?

“I don’t know who is threatening me yet,” she went on. “But I need time to figure it out, and I need to know Nadya is safe.”

“So you called me?” I ran my fingers through my hair and got up.

“Sebastian told me about your Pack taking Lana in. He also told me she had twins.” She paused and added softly, “babies who aren’t being used as lab rats for experiments.”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head.

She cleared her throat. “You’re the only person with the ability to protect her. Nadya is innocent in all this. She doesn’t know I’m a monster. She doesn’t even know shape-shifters exist. She’s a college student.” She paused, her matter-of-fact tone softening. “I haven’t seen her in almost a year. She thinks I’m on a classified undercover case. I can’t let her get mixed up in all of this shifter stuff because of me.”

“Sending her to stay with a bunch of werewolves isn’t exactly going to help keep her out of all the ‘shifter stuff,’ you know.” I ground my teeth to keep from saying something about her “monster” comment. Scaring her off wouldn’t help my cause, but hearing her refer to shifters as monsters rubbed me the wrong way.

“I know, but I need someone who knows about them to protect her. The guy after her...is a werewolf.” If I hadn’t had enhanced hearing I never would have caught the end of her sentence.

I frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t have time to discuss it with you. Will your Pack protect her or not?”

How could I explain any of this to the Pack? Adam would *not* bring an outsider in, especially an outsider who also happened to be the sister of the woman who kidnapped Lana, shot me, and indirectly led to the death of our father.

Before I replied, she jumped back in with a cold professional edge to her voice. “I’m going to get her a plane ticket to Reno. I just need someone to pick her up and hide her for a few days. Can you make that happen? I’ll pay you. Please. She needs to stay safe.”

“If I agree to this, you have to let me do it my way.”

“As long as she’s protected.”

“Where are you?” I walked toward the elevators.

“I can’t tell you that.”

I ground my teeth together. “You agreed to do this my way. I’ll have the Pack watch out for your sister, but I’ll be coming to watch out for you.”

“What?”

She sounded frustrated, but I wasn’t going to budge. Not on this.

Sasha sighed. “No way. No. I don’t want to pull you any further into this, wolf.”

“My way or no deal.” I clenched my fist and waited. Negotiations were my specialty.

“Damn it, I don’t have time for this.”

I shrugged. “So tell me where you are.”

“And you’ll help Nadya?”

“You know I will, or you never would have called me.”

I waited.

Finally she said, “Los Angeles.”

“On my way.”

I stepped in an elevator and hustled to my room. After tossing my few belongings back into my bag, I left the hotel and headed for Los Angeles. I’d only packed to be away for a couple of days, but I could buy more clothes when I got to LA.

Sasha was all that mattered to the wolf inside of me. She was worried, and she had reached out to me. Hearing her voice again made the wolf anxious, eager to hunt for its mate. But it wasn’t that simple.

First I had to figure out the best way to get my stubborn brother to agree to help Nadya. He wouldn’t want to risk bringing Nero back to Reno, whether

Sasha's sister was an innocent in this or not.

Then it hit me.

Lana would.

• • •

I called Lana while I sped across the Mojave Desert. Interstate 15 was lonely this early in the morning, and the Lotus ate up the road. Lana arranged for Jason to pick up Nadya from the airport. Although she wasn't thrilled about helping the sister of the woman who abducted her, after I explained that Nadya had no idea her sister was a jaguar, Lana agreed to help her stay away from Nero.

Jason was a good choice to pick her up. He was a doctor who could've just walked off the set of *General Hospital*. She'd never suspect that he was more than human, and out of all of our Pack, he was probably the tamest.

But with our Pack, that might not be saying much.

Not that it mattered to me. I'd be with Sasha soon, too bad she only agreed because she wanted the Pack to protect her sister. I really was fucking pathetic.

But no amount of pride stood a chance against the overwhelming instinct that drove me to keep her safe.

My phone buzzed, interrupting my thoughts. The address for Sasha's hotel was in the text window, along with "I'll meet you in the movie room."

Movie room? What kind of hotel was she staying in? I didn't care. Instead, I shrugged it off and gave the Lotus more gas.

I started to smile until my phone rang and Adam's name flashed on the screen.

"Shit." I clicked "answer." "Yeah?"

"What the hell, Aren?" He yelled. "Are you certifiable? How can you ask me to do this for her?"

I gripped the wheel tighter. "Do it for *me*."

"What am I supposed to tell the Pack? We should all risk our lives to

protect Sasha's sister? Sasha, who led us into an ambush at Lake Tahoe, the ambush that killed our father."

"Jesus, Adam." I struggled to keep from raising my voice. "Do you think I've forgotten how Dad died? None of this is easy for me either."

"So you went behind my back and arranged it with Lana."

My brother had every reason to be pissed. Hell, I'd be pissed if he'd done this to me, but I didn't have any other choice. Sasha needed me. And everything inside of me needed her.

"I'm sorry, bro. What I did sucked, but none of this is Nadya's fault. Lana understood that. This guy working for Nero could scoop her up to use her as leverage against Sasha in a heartbeat."

"And they'll come straight for us to get her."

I passed another car while I talked into my Bluetooth. "No, that's the beauty of this. They'd never expect us to help Sasha. Reno will be the last place they'll look for her sister."

Adam was quiet for a minute, and I took a slow breath, waiting him out. Finally he cleared his throat.

"Shit." He grumbled, probably kicking the dirt at the barn. "Fine, but the less everyone in the Pack knows the better. We won't have her very long anyway, right?"

"Maybe a week or two?"

"Okay. I'll talk to Lana. Maybe Nadya could work as a nanny to help her out with the twins or something."

I started to smile. My brother could be a huge pain in the ass, but when he was on your team you couldn't lose. "Sounds perfect. Let me know the cover story, and I'll be sure we stick to it."

"Be careful, Aren."

"I will. You too."

...

In just over three hours, I pulled into the hotel, gawking at all the costumed

masses. What the hell? It wasn't Halloween.

"Cool wheels, Bruce Wayne." I must've looked as confused as I felt because the guy dressed as Speed Racer—complete with white helmet and red ascot—pointed at my black Lotus and added, "Batmobile. Bruce Wayne. Get it?"

I got it and tried not to roll my eyes. "Do you know where they're showing movies in the hotel?"

Speed Racer pointed inside. "The Grand Ballroom on the second floor. You can't miss it."

I nodded and jogged toward the automatic doors, wincing when my ankle throbbed. The pain reminded me of the irony of my choice in mates.

Like I had any choice.

Fucking fate.

Chapter Eight

SASHA

Heat shot through my body the second I caught his scent as he walked in the door. The determined look on his face kicked my pulse up a notch. In spite of sitting in the dark movie room, seeing wasn't a problem. Not everything about being a jaguar sucked.

He moved with confidence even though it was nearly pitch black. I watched his broad shoulders weave between the costume wings, weapons, and who knew what else and my blood ran hot. The moment he reached my row of chairs and his green eyes met mine it was all I could do to stay in my seat.

What was it about this guy?

I forced myself to shift my focus toward the movie screen. I needed to get past this attraction. The stakes were too high. Besides, if hitting him with a Taser hadn't been enough to make him hate me, putting bullet a in his ankle pretty much guaranteed it.

I couldn't blame him.

He sat down beside me, but I didn't turn his way. "Is someone picking up my sister?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him nod. He leaned in closer to me and muttered, "We need to talk."

I tried not to notice how amazing he smelled. Clean, but wild, very masculine. Distracting. I cleared my throat and stood to make my way to the end of the row. The wolf shadowed me, and a tiny place inside of me wanted to stop walking, yearning for his body to brush against mine when he bumped

into me.

Get a grip. I kept moving.

Outside of the movie room, more costumed characters wandered the hallways. Finding a quiet place to talk would be a challenge. I stopped as a blond guy with a big metal arm passed by with a large robot mumbling about the world's one and only truth.

"What's up with this hotel?" he asked.

I turned back to find him very close to me, and for a moment I couldn't process his question. "Oh." I shook my head, breaking my temporary stupor. "Something called Anime Expo. People come from all over the country to watch these anime cartoons and dress up as their favorite characters. Some of them even act out the parts."

He glanced at a team of Teen Titans posing for a photo. His eyes had a playful sparkle in them that I'd never seen before.

Probably because he'd been bound and gagged during most of our time together.

"So this is like a speakeasy for geeks?"

I raised a brow and felt myself start to smile. "I think you hit the nail on the head."

Right on cue a couple of Sailor Moons passed by in their tiny micro-mini pleated skirts with tall knee socks. They eyed the wolf, giving him a long look before they flipped their long blond pigtails and walked past us.

We watched them go and I tsked. "If I weren't here, you might've had some company."

He shook his head. "Not the company I was hoping for."

My pulse jumped a little before my head reminded me that *my* company probably wasn't what he'd been hoping for either.

"I don't know where to suggest we talk. This place is a zoo." I contemplated all of my options. "I do have a room here, though."

Surprise flashed across his face, but he masked it quickly. "I don't think that's a good idea. We don't exactly have a trusting relationship, and I didn't come to this meeting armed."

I deserved that, but it didn't make it sting any less. "I told you to stay out of this, and you muscled your way in anyway."

"So give me your gun."

"What?" I took a step back. "No way."

He shrugged. "Then we talk right here in the hall with all the cartoon characters."

"Fine." I wished I didn't have to look up to glare at him, but he stood about eight inches taller than me, so I offered up my best all-business detective stare. "You wanted to talk, wolf. Talk."

"First off, my name is Aren."

I already knew that, but it was easier to keep an emotional distance if he didn't have a name. I tilted my head and waited for him to go on.

"I need to know that we're on the same team right now. I can't help you if you're shooting at me."

Another zinger that I definitely earned. I wasn't sure why it got under my skin so much. This would be easier if I could hate him, but so far the only person I was pissed at was myself.

"Do you want me to apologize? Is that what you want?" Raising my chin, I shot him a cold glare. "It wasn't personal. I had a job to do."

"A job to do?" He crossed his arms over his sizeable chest. "To send an innocent woman to the same organization that screwed you over? How noble."

"Don't judge me. I didn't ask for any of this to happen to me, all right? I was a good cop and a great detective, but a slick, attractive man stole it from me. So forgive me for not swooning at your offer to help. My only hope for an antidote was to deliver Lana alive. They wanted to study her, so they couldn't kill her."

Acid burned in my stomach. I sounded like the criminals I'd questioned over the years, rationalizing away their poor judgment. It was always someone else's fault.

"You'll be happy to know there is no antidote," I went on. "They duped me. I'll never get my life back."

He took my hand and tingles slid up my arm. “Why are you so busy looking forward to yesterday?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I know becoming...” He lowered his voice. “Becoming a jaguar wasn’t your choice, and Nero forcing you to leave your job and work for them left you without any options. But you escaped. You’re out now, and not only that, you’ve got heightened senses that would make you an even better cop once we get Nero off your tail. You could probably see me just fine in that dark movie room, right?”

I nodded slowly.

“All I’m saying is maybe this isn’t the future you would have chosen, but it might not be all bad.” Another group of characters gathered beside us, and he gave my hand a tug. “Let’s talk somewhere more private.”

I raised a brow. “I’m not giving you my gun.”

“I’m not asking for it.”

“Why the change of heart?”

He grinned with a shrug, and I caught my stupid stomach fluttering. I’d never seen him smile before. No one should be allowed to be that good-looking.

“I’m trying to trust. One of us has to. But hopefully if you shoot me again you won’t miss. The Pack would never let me live it down if you wounded me again.”

“I didn’t miss,” I whispered to myself.

“What?”

Instead of answering him, I tightened my grip on his hand and pulled him toward the elevator. The night I shot him, he’d thought I aimed for his head. At first I did, but when our eyes met, that quiet courage in his stare, that fearless acceptance, had pulled me out of the dark path Nero put in front of me. Something in the way he’d stared up at me reminded me of who I really was. I wasn’t an assassin.

The real me would never kill an unarmed man.

I’d made sure he couldn’t chase me and shot his ankle instead.

And I'd never felt worse.

A couple of ThunderCats crowded into the elevator, and we enjoyed a few floors of awkward silence until we could step out. We didn't speak until we were safely inside my room.

"Thank you for helping my sister. You had every reason to say no." I swallowed what little bravado I had left and gave honesty a shot. "I can't let her get involved in this. She's all I have."

I stared into his eyes, my stomach tying in knots. The last man I trusted had lied to me, killed a man under my protection, and bitten me. With all I'd seen on the force, the dark underbelly of humanity, I'd set aside my cynical views on love and opened my heart anyway.

And it ruined my life. Now my sister's life was in jeopardy, too. A rough lesson that love without honesty wasn't love at all.

Aren was different, willing to die for the ones he loved—I'd witnessed it firsthand. But my record in good judgment when it came to men was tarnished. I'd been fooled once, and I would never let it happen again.

Since then I kept all my relationships physical. My heart remained safely stowed away where it couldn't get me into any more trouble. Nero actually encouraged promiscuity. Sexually transmitted diseases were an anomaly for jaguar shifters. Something about our DNA kept infections and viruses away, and unplanned pregnancies were seen as a bonus to the organization.

I'd had a couple of flings while inside Nero's walls, but it ended when I realized the doctors were monitoring my cycle. Infertility lowered my value considerably. Luckily my marksmanship kept my stock high enough to stay alive, so that's where my focus needed to be.

Discovering there wouldn't be any children in my future was unexpected but not devastating. I'd raised my sister from the time she was in elementary school, leaving me more a mother than an older sister already.

And I wanted her to remain untouched by the Nero machine. I'd give my life to keep them from her.

"We'll keep her safe." That quiet courage shone in his eyes again, battering my emotional walls. He opened his arms and wrapped me inside his embrace.

Although my mind screamed for me to pull away and keep my distance, my arms moved around him. For the first time in months, I wasn't alone.

“Why are you helping me after all I've done?”

He drew back just a little and tilted my chin up. I drank in his crooked smile. “You wouldn't believe me if I told you,” he whispered.

I stared into his eyes, watching his smile gradually fade away. His fingers slid along my chin and back into my hair. My lips parted, and my breath caught in my throat as his gaze wandered over my features like I was the only thing in the world that mattered to him.

Finally he kissed me.

Chapter Nine

AREN

The wolf inside me howled as her body molded close to mine. Her lips were soft but not fragile. She was cautious but not resistant as she returned my kiss, allowing me to taste her. This was my mate, and I wanted more. I held her tighter, closer. God I couldn't get close enough to this woman. Our tongues explored with an unspoken hunger, passion, need.

She spread her fingers wide against my chest, sliding her hand up until her fingertips brushed the skin along the base of my neck. The heat of her touch scorched my skin. My pulse pounded and with my hips pressed against hers, there was no hiding how much I wanted her.

And I didn't care. She was my mate. Mine.

I claimed her lips over and over again, savoring the warmth of her mouth. She moaned into the kiss, and my gut tightened. I'd never wanted anyone like this before. Passion burned hot through my entire body as I crushed her against my chest, wishing we didn't have clothes between us. My hand slid up her back, brushing over the bulge of her gun.

Reality slammed into me, and without any warning, Sasha broke the kiss and stepped back.

I raked my fingers through my hair, watching her, waiting. If she expected me to apologize she was going to be sorely disappointed.

I'd never be sorry for kissing her.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and shook her head while she stared down at her shoes. Finally she flipped her silky hair back and met my eyes, her lips still swollen from the hungry kiss we'd shared. Her mouth drove me

crazy. I wanted to kiss her all over again.

I wanted to do more than kiss her.

“So if you’re here in Los Angeles, who is picking up my sister in Reno?”

Her radical change in subject made my head spin for a second.

“Jason, one of my Pack mates.” I pressed my lips together and struggled to rein in the lust burning a hole in me. With my hand in my pocket, I shifted my raging erection inside of my jeans as nonchalantly as I could. I felt like I was in high school again. “He’s a doctor. Adam told him she’s a nanny who’s going to help Lana with the babies for a while.”

“Would the Pack hurt her if they found out she was my sister?”

I wanted to deny it, but I also didn’t want to lie. “I don’t think so. Adam figured she won’t be with them long, and the fewer people that know who she really is, the easier it’ll be to hide her.”

“Good.” She nodded, lacing her fingers together. “That’s good.”

I watched her, wondering if I was the only one who felt the incredible chemistry in that kiss. Then I reminded myself this was the same woman who shot me, and she was still armed. I was probably lucky to get away uninjured. That thought sobered me up.

But it didn’t stop me from thinking about the way her body felt pressed against mine.

I cleared my throat, wishing I could clear my head. “Any idea where this guy is?”

Sasha shrugged. “Probably Massachusetts. He found out my sister lives there.”

“When he comes up empty back east, he’ll come back out here looking for you. You’re his only lead, right? And when he does, we need to flush him out into the open.” I sat down at the desk and grabbed the hotel notepad and a pen. I glanced back over my shoulder. “I’m better if I have a list. What do you know about him so far?”

She walked over and stood behind me, intoxicating me with her scent. I fought the urge to swivel the chair around and pull her into my lap.

“His scent is definitely werewolf. He’s got my cell phone number and used

it to send me a creepy text.” She hesitated for a second. “Last night he also took my underwear out of my backpack while I shifted. There’s a good chance he’s got other plans aside from anything Nero is paying for.”

Rage shot through me before I could rein it in, and the pen busted in my hand. Usually I was a master at controlling my emotions, but the thought of some other wolf lusting after Sasha kicked my territorial animal instincts up a few notches.

My voice was low, guttural. “He did what?”

Sasha walked toward the window. “My underwear was missing from my bag. He either wanted to scare me, or he gets off on imagining what he’ll do when he catches me. Either way, he’s not all business.”

Oh, I wanted to give him some business he’d never forget.

I got up, managing to control myself just enough to keep from shoving the chair across the room. “That last informant I took out in Vegas—”

“The one who stabbed you?”

“Yeah. He told Nero you didn’t die in Tahoe that night. I think he got your Vegas location to them before I...”

I didn’t finish. She already knew what I’d done.

“This new guy could be a bounty hunter they hired to bring me back.” She hesitated for a second and added, “Or an assassin.”

I moved closer to her, but I didn’t make any move to touch her. “Why wouldn’t they send one of their own? If they were going to kill you, they have the best assassins money can buy. Why hire a werewolf?”

“I thought the same thing at first. But maybe Nero figured I would recognize their people?”

“Maybe.” But I wasn’t convinced. “Any other ideas?”

Her eyes met mine. “Sebastian’s been helping me from the inside. Mr. Severino heads up Nero for a reason. He’s a paranoid control-freak. If he even suspected I was getting help from someone within the organization, he wouldn’t hesitate to bring in a werewolf. That way even his own people wouldn’t know what he had planned.”

“Or Sebastian set you up.” Just saying his name put a bad taste in my

mouth. "I don't know if you've noticed, but his top priority is himself. Maybe Nero made him an offer he couldn't refuse."

"If that were true the werewolf would know exactly where I'm staying. He'd have already made the grab."

"You're telling me that asshole knows you're here?" I clenched my jaw, biting back a few other choice names for the jaguar.

Her eyes narrowed. "He made my reservation. And before you get all high and mighty you should keep in mind that I've done just fine up until this point without your help. I'm not a damsel in distress, so you can come down off Neanderthal mountain there."

I raised my eyebrows at her verbal slam. "Neanderthal mountain?"

Her lips started to curl at the corners into a sexy smile that left me temporarily defenseless. I could only hope she never discovered the power she wielded. Damn, I was in trouble.

"Yes. Neanderthal mountain. Where all the men go to slap their fists against their chests and fight each other for their women."

I chuckled. I couldn't help it. "All right, you win. I'm off the mountain." I caught her staring at me, but she quickly turned away. "Maybe we can lure him out, let him think he found us, but we'll be ready for him." I glanced over at her bag. "We can find a mall or something, go out in the open and let him see us. I'm going to need some extra clothes if we're staying here for a few more days anyway."

"We should get you a room, too."

"I think we should stick together until we catch this guy."

Sasha shook her head. "Having you here would just be a distraction."

I clenched my jaw. How much longer could we ignore the huge elephant standing in the center of the room?

"Is this about the kiss?"

"No." She shifted her weight to one foot, pushing her hip out slightly. "But I don't think we should do that again."

I raised a brow. "No?"

"We've got to get this guy, wolf."

Apparently she still wasn't going to call me by my name. But she wasn't shooting me with a Taser either.

Baby steps.

"We have to stay focused." Her gaze met mine. "It was one thing when he was just after me, but he knows about my sister now. I need to end this before she gets hurt."

"We need to end this. We're on the same team, remember?"

She didn't look convinced, but she didn't deny it. "If we're going to get you a room and some clothes, we'd better get going. Maybe we'll get lucky and pick up his trail."

She grabbed her room key and phone, every movement fluid and noiseless. Her soft cashmere sweater hugged her curves as she pulled her trench coat on. Even with the coat and her slacks, I caught the outline of her guns when she moved. She was sexy and deadly all wrapped up in one curvy combination.

In a strange way, I felt a burst of pride that she was my mate. I ground my teeth together in silent censure. When did I turn into such a naïve idiot? Sasha was many things, but "mine" wasn't one of them.

Now that I'd tasted her lips, I was most definitely hers. Whether she wanted me or not.

Chapter Ten

SASHA

We stepped out of the hotel room, and the wolf took my hand. My fingers started lacing with his before I realized it and pulled my hand away.

“Why are you holding my hand?”

He gave his broad shoulders a little shrug. “We’ll look less conspicuous if people think we’re a couple out for the night. If he’s watching, he might think we let our guard down and make his move.”

I pressed my lips together as I gave a single nod of my head. I had no clue why his answer disappointed me, but it did. Maybe the kiss in my room was all an act too. A trick to lure me into trusting him.

It would be much easier to stop obsessing over it if he hadn’t been so damned good. My lips still tingled. All this unwanted attraction wasn’t getting me any closer to finding the bastard following me.

He took my hand again and pressed the elevator button with his other hand. The doors finally opened, and the moment they closed again I yanked my fingers free.

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“No sense pretending when no one else is around.”

I took some satisfaction in seeing the crease in his brow, but as soon as we hit the lobby and the doors slid open, he grabbed my hand again. I rolled my eyes but played along. For now.

As we walked toward the hotel doors, I tugged him to the front desk. I smiled at the flustered desk clerk. “Excuse me, we just got married, and we love anime.” I glanced up at the wolf, relishing the shock on his face. Two

could play this game, and I'd worked undercover enough that I was pretty sure I was better at pretending than he would ever be. "Is there any way we could get a room for a few days?"

The clerk didn't need to know I already had a room, and the honeymoon suite could go on the wolf's bill.

"Congratulations. Umm...let me see..." His fingers burst into a flurry of keystrokes, only to sigh. He finally shook his head. "Sorry. With the Anime Expo in town, I won't have a room available until Monday."

Shit. I really thought the newlywed act would work. The wolf's piercing green eyes met mine, and he started to smile before turning his attention back on the desk clerk. "Thanks for trying. We really appreciate it."

The wolf would be staying in my room after all. Perfect.

The clerk let out a relieved breath. "If you want to make a reservation for Monday, please let us know."

"Will do."

I waited until we were outside to speak. "You staying in my room is a big mistake."

He stared down at me and started to grin. My determination faded like the stars at sunrise. Seeing him smile made the guilt inside of me swell. I had Tasered and shot this man. I shouldn't warrant a smile from him.

"Believe it or not, I do have some self-control." He squeezed my hand. "This isn't some kind of ploy to hit on you. I can sleep on the pull-out sofa. You won't even know I'm there."

It was impossible for me not to know when he was close to me. His scent enticed my heightened senses, and my growing desire to hear his voice and see his smile didn't help either. The problem wasn't him.

It was me.

But if rooming together wasn't going to distract him, then I'd be sure I didn't let it distract me either.

"Fine." I reached for my keys, when I remembered my stalker might have put a tracker on my car. "Can we take your car? I haven't checked mine over for bugs yet so I parked mine a good walk away from the hotel."

“Sure.” He handed his ticket to the valet and took his keys in trade.

“Where is it?”

He pointed at a sleek, shiny black car that oozed pure speed even though it was standing still.

My eyes widened a little. “The Lotus?”

He grinned with a nod. “You like it?”

I smiled up at him before I could stop myself. “Love it.”

“You want to drive?”

His kindness unnerved me, and seeing a playful gleam in his eyes left me struggling to keep my balance on uneven ground. “You’re sure you’re okay with me driving it?”

“Of course. You’re a cop.” He shrugged and dropped the key ring into my hand. “You understand the importance of the speed limit.”

I raised a brow, and chuckled in spite of myself. “This car is over the speed limit when it’s in park.”

“I like the way you think.” His fingers caught my elbow and glided down my arm. Every feather-light caress from his large hand made me hungry for more of his attention.

I clenched my jaw, fighting to stop thinking about being in his arms again. If I could trust myself to keep these urges on a purely physical level, it wouldn’t be a problem. *Big if.*

He had to have an endgame, but I couldn’t figure out his angle. Why was he being so nice after all I’d done? What was in it for him?

When we got to the car, I popped the locks. “Last chance. You’re really going to let me drive?”

He made his way to the passenger side. “You better fire up the engine before I change my mind.”

I sank into the driver’s seat and gripped the wheel while I investigated the gauges. Once I had the mirrors and the seat adjusted, I slid the key in the ignition and turned it. The engine roared to life.

Glancing over at my very well-built passenger, I grinned. “Your car rocks.”

His green eyes sparkled with fire. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” He opened

the moon roof. “Wait until you hit the freeway.”

I merged onto Interstate 5 and made my way to the carpool lane before easing the pedal down even further. The Lotus sprang to life, eager to please. Within ten seconds, the speedometer needle was hovering over 95 miles per hour. The wind pulled at my hair until it danced around my face and up through the moon roof. The growl of the engine ran up my arms through the steering wheel until my stomach tightened in a good way.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, raising my already heightened senses like a drug. I spared a quick glance over at my passenger to see if he was ready to take the keys away from me, but instead of being concerned, he seemed like he was enjoying it.

“Handles great, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yeah, no high-speed death wobble when we hit ninety.”

“Too bad there are so many cars here. When I drove across the Mojave from Vegas it was deserted, so I took it up to 120. What a rush.”

A large shopping mall was coming up on our right, so I grudgingly made my way across the slower lanes of traffic. By the time we pulled into the mall, I was elated and unable to hold back my smile.

“Thank you for letting me drive your car.” I handed the keys back to him.

“You’re welcome.” He took them with a sparkle in his eyes. “I’ve never let anyone else drive it before.”

My eyebrows raised in shock. “And you trusted it to *me*?”

“We’re on the same team now, remember?”

But were we really? Or was he just waiting for me to drop my guard? As I got out of the car, my fingertips brushed along my collarbone, over the scar from Sebastian’s bite.

That was where trust got me.

The wolf hit the button to lock the car and took my hand. I already enjoyed his touch way too much. As our fingers entwined, I did my best to ignore my desire and focus my senses on searching for my stalker while also trying to look like a distracted couple.

It would be much easier if the wolf wasn’t so close to me. His scent, the

way he touched me, the sight of his smile, they were all impossible to ignore. Raising my chin up a notch, I dug deep into my cover. We were a couple out for dinner and a shopping trip. I could do this.

While we walked through the mall, I remained on alert, ready to go after my stalker if he appeared. The wolf seemed to understand that our tail would have heightened hearing because he didn't bring up Nero or the guy following us. It was nice knowing he had a brain to accompany the brawn he hid underneath his button-down business shirt. We ducked into a department store, and he bought a few changes of clothes before we wandered out to find some food.

Still no sign of the guy who had pilfered through my car.

The wolf led me toward an Outback Steakhouse at the end of the mall. "How does steak sound?"

"Sounds great to me."

We walked inside and were quickly seated. After we placed our orders, he sat across from me, staring like he was memorizing my face.

"What is it with you?" I tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"Nothing." He shrugged, but didn't break eye contact. "Do your parents know you sent your sister...away?"

I pressed my lips together, fighting the urge to confess my whole life story. Why did this man...no... I had to remember he wasn't just a man. He was a werewolf—deadly—and he had every reason to want revenge. But instead he was asking about my family and letting me drive his Lotus. It didn't add up. Some strings had to be attached somewhere.

Finally I sipped my drink and met his eyes. "I don't know why you haven't tried to kill me yet."

"So you're not going to answer my question?"

I shook my head. "Not until I understand why you haven't tried to get even with me."

He rested his arms on the table and leaned in closer to me, his intense gaze making my stomach tingle. "Believe me, I've asked myself why I can't kill you *many* times."

I wet my lips. “And what was your answer?”

He took my right hand, the same fingers that shot him with a Taser and then a bullet, and ran his thumb along my knuckles. For some reason it felt intimate.

“My answer? The sound of your voice makes the chaos around me vanish. The smell of your hair calms my soul. The sight of your smile tames the wolf inside of me, and touching your skin...” He glanced at our joined hands. “Touching your skin makes the broken parts of me whole.”

My throat tightened as I gently pulled my hand free of his. I wanted to bring back the angry wolf. I was comfortable with his snide remarks and verbal jabs. His honesty and kindness left me defenseless.

Sebastian had wooed me with poetry and false promises, I reminded myself. “Pretty words are what got me into this mess.”

He leaned back against the booth on his side of the table. “You think I’m just spouting off words to impress you?”

“How could you feel any of those things for a woman who nearly killed you?”

“Believe me, if I could turn off these feelings I would. In a heartbeat.” His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed. “You have got to be the most impossible woman I’ve ever met.”

And we were right back into my comfort zone.

But for some reason it didn’t make me feel any better.

We ate our steaks in silence. I kept my attention on the meat and did my best not to sneak glances at him while I tried to convince myself that it was better this way. Once we got the werewolf who was tracking me, I’d find out if he’d told Severino about Nadya and plan accordingly. She wouldn’t be a fan of taking on a new identity, but there might not be another way around it. If my tracker told Nero about my sister, I’d have to hide her. Permanently.

Then I’d be back on my own searching for dirt on Nero to free myself.

I didn’t have room in my life for a “partner,” let alone a wolf.

He picked up the bill and we headed out to his car. We didn’t hold hands this time. He didn’t even try. It shouldn’t have bothered me.

Get a grip, Sasha.

As I followed him to the car I caught my stalker's scent. I had my Glock drawn and ready just as quickly as the wolf crouched down between the cars. He was on the move before I could stop him. *Shit.*

I took cover behind a pickup truck and scanned the parking garage for movement.

"Is that another wolf I smell?" The tracker had a Texan accent, but that fact wouldn't help me find him. "Bad kitty."

I spun around, trying to locate the source of the voice. The sound echoed off the cement walls in every direction.

"You want me asshole?" My finger caressed the trigger. "What are you waiting for?"

"Whatcha doin' with some other wolf, pussycat? Tryin' to make me jealous?"

"Why don't you be a man and show yourself?" My senses were on high alert as I tried to bait the bastard into the open.

"You brought your little gun." He made a slow *tsk* sound. "Think that'll protect you?"

His voice wavered like he was on the move. With my back pressed against the side of the pickup, I made my way around to the front of the truck and squatted to check the view.

"I *know* my gun will protect me." I scanned every shadow. "Want to test my theory?"

"Oh, I want to test all sorts of things." His voice was thick with perverted innuendo.

I smirked and jogged down the center of the row of cars, my pistol at the ready and my animal eyesight working overtime to locate the bastard. "Come on out, and we'll see who passes."

When I swung to the right the wolf yelled, "Sasha, get down!"

I dropped to the ground and glass rained over my head as the silent bullet exploded the car's headlight. I heard a struggle, blows, curses, and finally the sound of a gun hitting the concrete. Knowing the perp was momentarily

unarmed, I ran toward the noise. I would've been faster if I hadn't been wearing heels for the trip to the mall.

They were sexy to look at, idiotic to chase stalkers in.

He ran for the exit. I took my stance, aiming my shot, but he was out of my Glock's range. I wanted to shoot at the bastard anyway, but I didn't have a silencer and nothing would get me arrested faster than firing a gun at a shopping mall. I stashed my gun back into the shoulder holster when I suddenly remembered I had a partner.

I ran down the aisles until I found the wolf in a heap. "Oh, Jesus."

Racing to his side, I sent up a silent prayer he wasn't shot. I knelt beside him and carefully rolled him over. He had some blood on his lower lip and a painful-looking bump on his forehead, but I couldn't find any bullet holes.

Thank God. I rested his head on my lap and tapped his cheek to wake him.

He didn't move. I leaned down to listen for any sign of breathing and closed my eyes in relief when I felt air brush over my skin. His chest rose and fell while I stroked his hair back from his forehead.

"Aren?" I waited and held my breath, but still no movement. "Come on, Aren. Wake up."

His eyelids fluttered and finally opened, followed by a crooked smile that melted my heart before I could get a grip on myself.

"You're all right," he whispered, reaching up to cup my cheek.

I nodded, fighting the urge to nuzzle into his touch. "Only because you warned me to duck."

"I knocked his gun free and got a good punch in before he swept my ankle. I hit the ground, and everything went black."

I glanced down at his swollen ankle—his one weak spot. I had done that to him. My stomach clenched. "By the time I saw him, he was out of range for me to get a shot off. He got away."

"Not that it helps much," he said, "but I saw his sad excuse for a face before he took me out. I'll recognize him if I see him again."

"That's something." I lowered his hand and helped him up to a sitting position. "You saved my life tonight."

He shot me a playful smile in spite of his swelling lower lip. “And you said my name.”

My jaw dropped slightly. “You heard that?”

“Course I did.” He raised a brow. “I liked it so much I waited for you to say it again.”

I nudged him and shook my head. “You’re lucky I don’t just leave you here.”

“I’m safe.” He patted his pants pocket. “I have the car keys.”

I got up and offered him a hand. He winced, losing all traces of his playful smile.

“Fucking ankle,” he growled. “Dammit.” He steadied himself against the car bumper and grimaced.

“I could bring the car over.”

He shot me a glare in return. “I’ll make it. Just give me a second.”

“Can I at least offer you a shoulder to lean on?”

He grudgingly draped his arm over my shoulder and together we hobbled back to his car, stopping only once so I could grab the stalker’s gun and silencer. I tucked it into the waistband of my slacks, and we continued our slow journey back to the Lotus.

Chapter Eleven

AREN

I couldn't even drive my own fucking car back to the hotel. The next time I saw the bastard tracking Sasha, I was going to kill him. And I wouldn't need a goddamn gun to do it.

When we got back to the room, the pain in my ankle had downgraded from sharp and stabbing to throbbing and aching. Sasha helped me to the chair at the desk and then disappeared with the ice bucket. She came back with a plastic bag of ice and propped my leg up on the other chair.

"Keep it elevated and iced." She managed to make it sound like an order.

I glanced up at her. "I'm a werewolf. We heal pretty quickly."

She kept her eyes on my swollen ankle. "Doesn't look like you've healed very well to me."

Before I could respond, she shook her head and vanished into the bathroom. She came out wearing loose gray sweatpants and a tank top that fit in all the right places. Her hair was up in a ponytail, what little make-up she'd worn to the mall was gone, and I wanted her so bad that part of my body forgot I was injured.

I shifted in my chair.

She walked past me and laid out a towel. "I'll never be able to sleep tonight if I don't regain some focus."

She knelt on the towel and started stretching.

"Yoga?"

She nodded, glancing my way. "I usually crank up the heat when I stretch, but I don't want to melt that ice on your ankle."

“My ankle’s fine.”

She raised a brow. “I doubt it.” She leaned to the side with her palms pressed together. After a long slow breath, she asked, “do you know how to do yoga, wolf?”

“It’s Aren. You’ve already said it twice tonight, so I know you can.”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “Do you know how to do yoga, *Aren*?”

My name sounded so good coming off her lips. I shifted in my chair again. I wasn’t even sure a cold shower could tame the lust building up in my pants.

Did she have to be limber too?

I shook my head. “No. I’m a weightlifter now. I used to be a runner—” I cut myself off, but not before her eyes darkened. I started to rub my forehead. The painful bump stopped me. “The simple answer is no. I don’t know how to do yoga.”

She shrugged and moved into another pose. “Weightlifting can make you tight. Yoga will keep everything loose and supple. When your ankle is better you should try it.” I could see the sweat glisten on her neck, down her chest, and then disappear along the curve of her breast. Screw my ankle.

I set the ice aside and got up, patting myself on the back for hiding the twinge of pain. “I told you, my ankle is fine.”

She frowned. “That guy could show up again at anytime. You should keep icing it.”

I quickly unbuttoned my shirt and tossed it aside before grabbing my bag. I dug around for a pair of shorts. “It’s fine, and if that ass shows his face again, I’ll be ready.”

I went in the bathroom before she could protest. I would’ve been fine with changing right there, but I didn’t want to chance getting Tasered again. If I’d learned anything about this woman it was that she looked like heaven, but she could make you hurt like hell.

Since she’d opted to change in the bathroom, I figured I better do the same.

When I came out, her eyes moved over my bare chest, her lips parted slightly. I smiled, fighting the urge to pull her into my arms. She was just as attracted to me as I was to her. It was right there on her face.

Then her gaze fell onto my ankle. *Shit*. I should've left my socks on.

"It looks worse than it is."

Her eyes rose up to meet mine. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"It's just scarred up." I walked over to her, doing my best not to limp.

She knelt down to inspect it, her fingers lightly tracing my skin. "This is my fault."

I reached to tip her chin up, exposing the scar along her shoulder by her collarbone. "Is this where he bit you?"

She broke eye contact and tugged the strap of her tank top over the scar. I leaned down and clasped her forearms, bringing her up to me. "You don't have to be ashamed. It wasn't your fault."

"Everything about it was my fault." Her dark eyes met mine in a fiery gaze. "I should have known Sebastian was using me, but I was blind and stupid. I bought into his romantic crap even though my gut screamed that he wasn't all he seemed. Instead of being wary, it turned me on—I liked that he was dangerous."

She shook her head and I did my best not to throw anything across the room. Just the thought of that jackass of a jaguar touching Sasha pissed me off. Knowing she had *wanted* him to touch her made me blind with jealousy until the wolf inside of me howled for vengeance.

"He ended up killing the witness I was supposed to be protecting and stole my humanity with one bite." Her eyes were haunted, weighed down with regret. She gestured to her shoulder and then my ankle. "This is my fault."

Chapter Twelve

SASHA

Guilt curdled in my stomach until I thought I might throw up. Seeing the mangled mess of Aren's ankle and watching him stare at the scar on my shoulder left me emotionally bare. At least my wrist cuff still covered the Nero tattoo. I didn't think I could hold it together if I had to face that reminder in front of him as well.

I tugged my shirt to cover the scar, and he caught my hand. I readied myself for some kind of judgment. Slowly, he moved closer, and his lips brushed the scar on my collarbone. His words lingered on my skin. "I'm sorry you lost so much, but if he hadn't bit you, and you hadn't captured me, I might never have found you."

Leaning away from his comfort, I frowned. He didn't sound like he was being sarcastic, but he couldn't mean it. The other shoe had to be about to drop. I started to move away, but he trapped my hand again.

"I meant what I said at dinner tonight. I know it doesn't make any sense to you. I don't even understand it, but wolves mate for life, and when you find her and touch her skin, the wolf inside of the man recognizes her. That headbutt you gave me in San Antonio changed everything, and trust me, I hated that it was you for months. I tried to ignore it, deny it, run from it, but the fact remains: when I'm with you I know I'm where I'm supposed to be." He tipped his head toward the door. "Even if it's Los Angeles, surrounded by people dressed up like Speed Racer."

"I swear Anime Expo was *not* my choice." They were the only words my brain could process as my mind raced. *Mate?* What the hell was happening? I

wasn't sure I wanted to know. Jaguars didn't mate for life. Did anyone, really? What did that even mean?

I opted to retreat and regroup, reaching for a way to change the subject. "But I guess this is actually a good cover. If we shifted here there's a good chance no one would notice."

He nodded. "You're probably right."

We sat in awkward silence for a moment, and I waited for him to say something. Preferably something not insane like "you're my mate."

But he didn't say anything. He was forcing me to make the next move, and it sure as hell wasn't going to be to talk about mating. I grabbed his hand. "Come on, I'm going to show you a yoga pose that'll help clear your mind and restore your energy."

Yes. Yoga. Calm my mind, and maybe his too.

"I've got a bum ankle, remember?" He raised a brow. Smart ass. He almost made me smile.

Chapter Thirteen

AREN

“We’ll be careful of your ankle.” Sasha disappeared into the bathroom and came back with another towel. Laying it out beside hers, she patted the ground. “Just try it.”

I couldn’t resist her dark eyes looking up at me. Even though it was going to hurt like hell to get down on the floor, I managed it with only one “goddammit.” Not bad. I stayed up on my knees on the towel, careful to keep my weight off my injured joint.

“Okay, you’re going to bend at the hips, your rear going down toward your feet, but be sure to keep the weight on your knees.” Sasha sat back toward her heels. “Sit back really slowly, and be careful not to press on your feet.”

“No worries there.” The last thing I was going to do was put weight on my throbbing ankle.

“All right. Good.” She nodded and raised her hands up over her head, pressing her palms together. “This is the half-tortoise. It’s going to bring fresh oxygen to your brain and clear your head.”

Before I could scoff, she leaned forward resting her forehead on the towel while her hands remained in a prayer position up above her head. She stayed there, breathing slowly, sweating, and when she finally moved to sit up again, it was completely controlled. After another deep breath she glanced my way.

“Your turn.”

I shook my head. “Nah, I think I’ll stick to push-ups and sit ups.”

“You think those are tougher than yoga?” She raised a brow.

I gave it some thought and nodded. “Yeah. Probably.”

“Won’t know until you try.” But she smiled like she already knew.

That was all the challenge I needed. From up on my knees, I bent at the hip and sat back, careful not to rest my ass on my ankles. Then I brought my arms up over my head, pressed my palms together, and bent forward toward the towel like she had.

But for some reason my forehead wouldn’t touch the floor.

Sasha pressed down on my back. “Flatten your back so you can get your forehead to touch.”

I winced, but I finally did get my damn forehead down. Next, I felt her fingers clasp my bicep just above my elbow. “Lock your elbows, and pull your shoulders back. Only the edge of your pinky fingers should be touching the towel. Your elbows should be locked and up off the floor.”

“Jesus, this hurts,” I grumbled.

“Not so simple, huh?”

I sat up, proud that I kept my body tight like she did, although my back and abs were screaming. “It wasn’t too bad.”

“Ready for a second set?”

I struggled to keep my expression neutral. “Second set?”

“Yeah.” She got back on her knees on the towel beside me. “We’ll hold it a little longer this time.”

“Longer?” Crap, did I sound whiney?

Her eyes lit up with a playful sparkle. Shit.

“Still think push-ups and sit ups are tougher than yoga?”

“Yes,” I grunted, while raising my hands up over my head to bend forward.

Once I finally got my back flattened and my arms straight and my fucking forehead on the towel, sweat ran into my eye. Fighting the urge to break the pose and wipe it, I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing. One breath and another.

Sasha moved beside me, and I tightened my abs to lift myself up. My back muscles screamed, but I managed to right myself without a word. My gaze locked on hers, her lips parted, so close to me I could almost taste them.

“How do you feel?” Her voice was soft, breathy.

“Like I need to kiss you.” I didn’t wait for an answer. Our lips met, fire coursing through me as I clutched her waist, drawing her in close. Her hands slid up my back, teasing my already hot skin into an inferno. I lifted the back of her tank top, my hands brushing against her silkiness. Our tongues tangled, hungry, as I slid my fingers up her spine to unclasp her bra. I needed her bare skin pressed against mine.

But before I could lift her shirt off, she pulled away.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” She got up. “Everything.”

She pulled her arm out of the bra strap and then slid it free from under her tank. Her nipples were erect against the fabric of her top, and every curve of her body tempted me. I wanted to touch and taste every inch of her. Our bodies should’ve been pressed together, writhing on the bed, the floor, the shower.

Instead, she was pacing again, and I was left with a raging erection.

Running my fingers along my jaw, I shook my head. “This dance we’re doing is making me crazy. Can we just lay the cards on the table? I showed you my hand when I told you about the wolf recognizing its mate.”

“What do you want from me?” She stopped pacing and turned toward me with pain in her eyes. “You’ve got some crazy werewolf mating instinct kicking in, but you told me yourself you wished it wasn’t me. It’s like cupid hit you with some arrow, and now you’re convinced I’m the one for you, but I’m not. If you didn’t have the wolf instincts making you crazy, you’d be killing me now, not helping me.”

I got to my feet, wincing a little when pain flared in my ankle. “Earlier tonight you said I saved your life, and I’m pretty sure you know who pulled you out of the fight with Nero up at Lake Tahoe. What else do I need to do to prove that you can trust me?”

“You’d need to go back in time. I don’t do trust. Not anymore.” She pulled the hair tie from her hair, shielding her eyes from mine as it fell. “And you and your wolf shouldn’t either. How many times have I attacked you already? I’ll never deserve you.”

Part of my brain short circuited. She'd never *deserve* me? Did that mean she might enjoy my company? I silenced the questions in my head and forced myself to take a deep breath. I'd faced tougher negotiations during business mergers but never for anything I wanted to win with every fiber of my being.

I met her eyes. "Are you saying you don't hate me?"

"I've never hated you." She turned toward the window. "Just myself."

Okay, this wasn't the right time to smile, but it felt like a huge weight had been lifted. She didn't hate me. Then confusion settled onto my shoulders.

"So, if you've never hated me, then why do you keep pushing me away?"

"Are you nuts?" She shot me a look over her shoulder like I had two heads. "I shot you with a Taser, tied you up and held you hostage, and if that wasn't enough, I shattered your ankle with a bullet. I ruined your life for my own selfish reasons. I was so anxious for an antidote that I behaved exactly like the criminals I used to arrest."

My shoulders tensed up. "Look, I will admit I was bitter when my leg didn't heal up the way I'd hoped it would. But I figure it makes us even."

"Even?"

I nodded. "When I followed Adam and Lana to San Antonio, I went with one goal. I wanted to kill whoever made a move against my brother. Simple. I didn't care who you were or why you were there, I hated you because you were a jaguar. Even though Adam trusted her, I thought Lana was setting him up. You know why I was so sure of that? Because *she* was a jaguar. I didn't even know her, but I thought I did just because she didn't shift into a wolf."

"You were protecting your family. Justified suspicions based on past experience."

I ground my teeth together. "And you were promised a way out, a way to get your job back and be with your sister again."

"Don't pretend you understand." She spun around eyes blazing. "I was desperate. Nero isn't a place you trust, but I took their bait anyway. I hurt you to get what I wanted."

My patience evaporated, temper flaring. "Without any proof of any kind, I believed Lana killed a member of my Pack, simply because she was a jaguar."

I made judgments against her and you based on my sense of smell alone, so spare me your self-loathing. I'm no better than you."

"Fuck you," she spat as she stormed into the bathroom.

Dammit. I yanked out the sofa bed, directing my frustration to the hotel furniture in the process. When I finally got into the bed, the cool cotton sheets soothed my hot skin and my equally hot temper. Fate was really fucking with me. First I find my mate and she's trying to kill me, now we're on the same team, and... And the woman drove me crazy.

Being with her was near impossible.

But being without her... I didn't want to think about it.

Inside the bathroom, the shower came to life, and I rolled onto my side, trying not to fantasize about her slick, wet, naked body.

Too late.

Chapter Fourteen

SASHA

Hot water ran down my feverish skin, unable to calm the fire smoldering in my belly. Everything about the man called to me. Seeing him in his shorts and nothing else stole my breath away. And his kiss was pure sin. Delicious.

And undeserved.

How could he think we'd ever be "even"? I hurt him, not once but twice. And spare him my self-loathing?

Oh, please.

He barely had a glimpse of the depth of my self-loathing. Bastard.

I didn't warrant any kindness, least of all from him. I'd almost killed him for no other purpose than to get what I wanted. No one else mattered to me.

How could I ever make anything right again after that?

I leaned back into the shower, closing my eyes. Lather ran down my hair, my back, my legs, and in my mind it was his fingers. I replayed the way his muscles tensed beneath my hand when I'd helped him with the yoga posture. His tanned skin enticed me to touch and taste.

My pulse was racing by the time I turned off the shower and reached for the towel. I needed to get a grip or I was going to be useless against the werewolf stalker who was after me.

The cold dose of reality went a long way to chilling my desire.

My head had to be back in the game, not distracted, daydreaming about Aren's touch. I had work to do. The bounty hunter's weapon was in the other room, and I should've already inspected it for serial numbers or anything else I could use to trace its owner. Instead I'd been fighting with a way-too-sexy-

for-his-own-good wolf who had me so off-balance it made it tough to think straight.

With the towel back on the rack, I reached for the robe and wrapped it around myself. Holding my breath, I opened the bathroom door. Aren was sound asleep on the sofa bed. A sigh of relief escaped my lips. I could deal with him later.

Quietly, I made my way over to the bags from the mall. Stashed in the large Macy's bag was my stalker's gun, the silencer still attached. As I lifted it from the bag I quickly realized it was a Beretta.

A military Special Forces weapon.

Oh, shit.

I brought it into the bathroom so I could inspect it under better lighting. I couldn't find any identifying markings. The serial numbers were scraped clean.

Who was this guy?

I gathered my wet hair and pulled it over the front of my shoulder. Mr. Severino hadn't been messing around when he hired this bounty hunter. Could he still be part of the military?

Doubtful. There'd be too many questions. But judging by his weapon of choice, I had to assume he'd been a Green Beret at some point.

Maybe in the morning Aren could give me a visual description of him. He said he'd recognize him if he saw him again.

I turned the Beretta over in my hands. Goddamn. Special Forces. Maybe Severino didn't want me back after all.

He wanted me dead.

I needed to talk to Sebastian. If Nero still had ties with the military, he would know. Could the Army have known one of their own was a werewolf? They couldn't have. No one believed werewolves were real. Did they? My mind raced with a million scenarios all at once.

Slow breath.

I massaged my temple and turned off the bathroom light, moving back to the main room. I placed the gun on the table by the television, careful to stay

away from the window. My stalker hadn't tailed us back to the hotel, but it was only a matter of time. No sense taking stupid chances.

The bed seemed huge and empty. Against my better judgment, I walked over to the sofa bed and sat on the arm. Sprawled out across the mattress was a man who'd risked his life to save mine tonight. He was stubborn, smart, and way too sexy to ignore. And while he slept on his stomach, the only thing covering him was a white hotel sheet, draped across his hips.

Before I could stop myself, I leaned over to brush a lock of his dark hair behind his ear. His sleeping face was peaceful, not frustrating.

My gaze wandered over his masculine features to his lips. Just remembering the way he kissed me sent heat pouring through my veins. He shifted his broad shoulders, and I almost wished he'd open his eyes. Maybe if we had sex it would relieve some of the crazy tension between us and I'd be able to concentrate again. One night couldn't hurt...

It'd been over six months since I'd shared a bed with a man. Maybe I was thinking with the wrong body part.

The big empty bed taunted me across the room. I should've walked over there and gotten under the covers before I did something I might regret.

Instead, I ran my fingers lightly down his back. His bright green eyes opened and his gaze was instantly latched on mine, demanding and full of silent questions. He rolled onto his side, facing me, and started to say something, but I knelt down and pressed my finger to his lips. The last thing we needed was another argument.

"Don't talk," I whispered.

He kissed my fingertip in answer and brought his large hand to my face. My head warned that we were going to scratch an itch, nothing more, and as I lay beside him I bargained to enjoy this. Just for tonight.

His lips caressed mine, slow and sensual, his warm breath teasing my skin. He ran his hand down my body and unfastened the tie on my robe. Before he made any move to open it, his eyes met mine, analyzing my reaction.

This was my chance to say no. He was giving me an out.

In spite of everything, he respected me.

My inner voice taunted me. I shouldn't be in this man's arms. He should have a woman worthy of his love and affection, not a fallen cop who tried to kill him for her personal gain.

Sensing my hesitation, he pulled me close and kissed away my doubts. His lips fed on mine, and my entire body responded. I moaned when our tongues touched, my fingers sliding back into his hair. He silenced my inner voice. It didn't matter if I was worthy of his attention or not. I wanted him, needed him.

"Just for tonight," I whispered before I gasped.

He rolled over me, and my robe opened, pressing his warm skin against mine. My pulse raced with need. "We'll see."

His lips trailed down my neck as his hand rose up slowly from my hip, along my stomach, until he finally cupped my breast. Another gasp escaped my lips as his thumb brushed over my nipple. My back arched, my entire body aching for his attention. His touch sent a current through my bloodstream, heating me from the inside out.

I ran my fingers down his back, my nails biting into his skin as his lips closed over my breast. His hips pressed against mine, our bodies eager to collide. Watching his mouth on my skin, the rest of the world ceased to exist. I wanted to touch and know every inch of this man.

His eyes met mine from under his brow, passion and fire burned in his gaze. I pulled him back up to me, and our lips fused together in an urgent kiss. We rolled again until I was on top, straddling his waist, my hips grinding into him. He pulsed through his shorts and my body answered, hot and wet.

My teeth grazed against his lower lip as I kissed my way down his chest. The salty taste of his skin teased my senses, reminding me of the powerful way his muscles flexed during our yoga session. My lips drifted down his abs, and I slid a finger along the waist of his shorts. His hands fisted in my hair as I drank in the desire in his gaze. I pressed a hot, slow kiss to the soft skin just below his navel and carefully pulled his shorts off.

Standing before him in my open robe, my eyes ran over his body. Every

part of him was chiseled, proud, and ready. When my gaze reached his, I brought my hands up and pushed the robe off my shoulders. My skin felt warm where his eyes moved over me. He sat up on the edge of the bed and brought me closer, his fingers trailing up the back of my legs, along the curve of my ass until he gripped my hips. I bent to kiss his lips as I settled onto him, wrapping my legs around his waist until the tip of him brushed against me, teasing me.

His hot mouth fed on the skin along my shoulder, and my body tensed. He froze for a second and leaned back just enough to make eye contact.

“I want you, Sasha. Scars and all.” He tilted his hips, sinking deep inside of me, and I let my head fall back.

His lips left slow sensual kisses over the scar that ruined my life. And I didn’t retreat—I rode the passion, my hips bucking against his, my body aching for release. His fingers tightened on my waist as my nails scratched down his back. Our lips met again, needy and urgent, and he claimed my mouth over and over again.

“Don’t stop,” I begged, my muscles starting to clench around him.

He growled in answer, working himself even harder, deeper, touching me in places I never knew existed. Our bodies fit together, perfect, so different from the insanity my life had become. I struggled to cling to the pleasure, but the tide was building until I finally felt myself surrender. My entire body shuddered, trembling in his arms as he erupted inside of me.

Chapter Fifteen

AREN

I held her in my arms, closing my eyes and drinking in her scent. Praying this wasn't all an amazing dream. If I woke up and found her in the other bed sleeping, I was going to be royally pissed. I twirled my fingers in her hair, still wet from the shower, and felt her hand slide up my back.

My lips curled into a smile. This wasn't a dream.

She started to pull away, but I didn't loosen my grip. I didn't want the moment to end yet. I wasn't sure what had happened between her telling me to fuck off and her coming out to seduce me, but if I asked she probably wouldn't tell me. In fact, it'd likely make her run.

But if I kept her in my arms, everything didn't have to get complicated.

As the blood returned to my brain I realized we hadn't used a condom. I usually didn't give it much thought since a female couldn't conceive—at least not from me—unless she was converted to a wolf.

But Lana was a jaguar, and she had twins. This was a helluva lot more complicated. Shit.

I held Sasha a little tighter, forcing the thought from my head for now.

"Okay, you've got to let me breathe, wolf."

"We just made love, and you still can't say my name?"

She stared at me with her dark, mysterious eyes. "I don't want to fight."

"I'm not fighting." I slid my hands down her body and did my best not to sigh when she got up.

She bent down to grab her robe and slipped it on. Cinching it at the waist, she started pacing, and it was all I could do not to ask her flat-out what the

hell was going on. I had a right to know, but that didn't necessarily mean she'd tell me. Not until she was good and ready.

A minute ago we were moving together, connected on more than one level. Now she stood across the room, and I was left wondering why the fates were fucking with me again.

"That gun we brought back from the mall is a Beretta, a Special Forces gun. And judging by the kill shot he attempted tonight, his mission isn't to bring me back alive."

Would this woman ever stop making my head spin? I forced myself to take a breath before I spoke. My cool head in tough situations used to be something I was proud of, but she pushed buttons I didn't know I had. All my years of business experience, negotiating multi-million-dollar investment deals, went right out the window when Sasha was involved.

"How can you shift gears so fast?" I looked up at her. "Are we going to pretend like we didn't just have sex? Is that your plan?"

She stopped pacing and spun around. Her eyes blazed with frustration, and the wolf inside of me growled in response. She was a beautiful, sexy ball of fire. And even though she didn't believe it yet, she was mine.

"I'm not pretending anything." She brought her hand up and pointed to her chest. "*I'm* trying to keep my head clear and stay alive. This isn't a game."

My shoulders tensed. "I'm well aware of that, but I wasn't the one who came out of the shower and got in bed with me."

"I didn't hear you complaining."

"Neither were you, so why are you pretending it didn't happen?"

"It was just sex, all right?" She shook her head and resumed pacing. "It doesn't change anything."

My gut tightened up. It changed everything. The wolf inside of me had claimed her. In spite of whatever Sasha thought, to the wolf it was very simple: she belonged to us, my mate. We were bound together come what may. How could I make her understand that?

I couldn't. I reached for my shorts and pulled them on before moving past her to the untouched king-sized bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Going back to sleep. Since we already had sex, sleeping together shouldn’t be an issue, right?” I tossed the extra pillows on the floor and slid between the crisp sheets. “With any luck, I’ll wake up and all of this will have been a bad dream.”

The heat in her glare almost burned. “Why are you being such an asshole?”

“Look, *you* told me we shouldn’t kiss again. *You* locked yourself in the bathroom, and I went to sleep with my shorts on in the other bed. I played by *your* rules. You changed the game when you came out and woke me up. If you’re unhappy now, you’ve got no one to blame but yourself.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say a word, the room phone rang. Sasha moved with inhuman speed to the bed. In one fluid movement, she retrieved her gun from where she must’ve stashed it under the pillow and had it aimed at the door while she reached for the phone.

I could see by her expression and the way she lowered the pistol that she recognized the person on the other end of the line. When she placed the handset back on the cradle she met my eyes.

“Sebastian is at the Denny’s about two blocks from here.” She plucked some clothes from her dresser and headed for the bathroom.

Just the mention of the slimy bastard’s name made my gut clench. “You’re going out now? It’s after midnight.”

“It’s open twenty-four hours.” She started to close the door.

“I’m going with you.” I got up, shaking my head. “This could be a trap. You’re not meeting with him alone.”

She rolled her eyes. “If he was trying to double-cross me, he would’ve given Nero’s guy my hotel and room number by now. I don’t have time to debate this with you.”

The second the bathroom door closed I wanted to break the goddamn thing down. What was she thinking? Sebastian had fucked up her life, and now she was getting dressed to go meet him? Why was she working with him anyway?

I changed, pulling on the new black jeans we bought, along with a dark

green button-down shirt. When Sasha emerged from the bathroom she almost smiled, but just as quickly her all-business mask was in place. She slipped her arms through her shoulder holster and drew her gun to check the ammunition in the magazine.

I forced my lips into a firm line. Weapons weren't my style. I could use a gun, but I wasn't comfortable with them. Watching her slap the magazine back into the Glock and snap up her smaller pistol from the nightstand, it was easy to see that her weapons were an extension of her body. She trusted them like she did her own legs. Almost on cue, she placed her right foot on the chair and pulled up her pant leg. A leather calf holster was already in place and her weapon stowed in the blink of an eye.

An efficient killer if she had to be.

A sexy killer.

I ground my teeth together, trying to keep my head. This was the same woman who seduced me and then wanted to pretend it never happened. She ran hot and cold until I couldn't find my equilibrium anymore.

She snagged her coat from the closet and glanced back at me. "You coming, wolf?"

I fought the urge to remind her of my name and just nodded. She did let me open the door for her, and when we got to the elevator she glanced up at me. "I'm sorry."

The door opened and we stepped inside. That was all I was going to get, but for now it was enough.

...

Sebastian's eyes locked on mine the minute we walked into the Denny's. He had a table in the corner of the nearly empty diner. I hadn't seen him since the night Sasha shot me.

The bastard had been busy conning my brother and Lana at the time.

My eyes narrowed when he stood up. Sebastian opened his arms to Sasha, but she just raised her eyebrow and slid inside of the booth. Tough not to

smirk at that.

The jaguar's dark eyes moved from her to me. "Should I take care of this wolf for you?"

This was the same cat that had killed Gabe, a member of my Pack. He'd bitten Sasha and ruined her life, and he'd also gone after Lana. A smooth jaguar assassin from the Nero Organization. More than enough reasons for me to take him out.

My hands balled into tight fists, but I didn't move. Decking him in the middle of Denny's would only land me in jail. I couldn't help Sasha from behind bars.

So I baited him to throw the first punch. "Now that I'm not tied up, I'd like to see you try, you gutless bastard."

Sasha cleared her throat and leaned out of the booth. "Can you two save the pissing contest for later?"

"But of course." Sebastian rolled his shoulders back and shot Sasha a GQ smile that made me want to pummel him all over again. "Not that it would be much of a contest."

A growl escaped my throat at his taunt, and I smiled when Sebastian took his seat in the booth, leaving me the last man standing. "I think I can finally agree with you on something." I sat down beside Sasha never taking my attention off of him. "It wouldn't be a contest at all."

Chapter Sixteen

SASHA

Aren waited for Sebastian to sit down before he moved into the booth beside me.

“Thank you for meeting us.” I kept all my attention on Sebastian, but underneath the table I gripped Aren’s knee.

I hated myself for the weak moment. It was like my hand reached out for Aren without any conscious thought on my part, an instinctive need to touch him and know he was with me. At least he didn’t react outwardly. I just felt his large hand cover mine in silent solidarity.

Did he know that was exactly what I needed from him? It didn’t have to mean anything. Nothing about tonight changed the facts.

Seeing Sebastian reminded me of my own mistakes. His dark, handsome face brought back memories of him purring lines of poetry against my ear. He wrapped his long fingers around his coffee mug, and for a second, I could remember him touching me, filling my head with lies about love and destiny, using me to complete his mission and ruin my life. Asshole.

Under the table, Aren’s hand gave mine a squeeze and I loosened my grip on his knee. Damn it. I needed to focus.

“Severino hired a new guy to bring me in.” I lowered my voice a little. “He was carrying a Beretta with a silencer.”

Sebastian sipped his coffee like none of this surprised him. “Before we talk business I need to know why this wolf is at our table. Is he your prisoner again?”

Now Aren’s hand clamped onto mine, almost painfully, under the table, but

he remained silent while I replied. “No, and why he’s here is none of your business.”

Sebastian raised a brow and lowered his mug. “I believe it *is* my business. I have risked plenty to help you, my sweet. I will not take risks for a wolf.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth, fighting the urge to reach across the table and slap Sebastian. “The bounty hunter Severino sent is a werewolf. Who would be better to catch a wolf than another wolf?”

I prayed Aren would stay quiet. I could explain everything later, but I needed Sebastian to buy this. The bounty hunter could’ve told Nero about my sister already, but until I was sure, I wasn’t going to chance it.

If I told Sebastian about Nadya, eventually Nero would know too.

Sebastian started to smile. “Very good point.” His eyes flicked over to Aren. “So how much is she paying you, wolf?”

“Enough,” Aren said.

I squeezed his knee, silently thanking him for playing along and focused on Sebastian. “What do you know about this werewolf on my tail?”

“The last informant that Severino sent for you got word back that you survived the attack at Lake Tahoe. We were all questioned. He suspected me, given our romantic past...” He shot a smile at Aren, which made the wolf’s entire body tense up beside me, but thankfully he didn’t take the bait. “Severino knew someone on the inside was assisting you, so he hired outside.”

“Far outside if he’s paying a werewolf,” I added.

Sebastian shrugged. “And not just any wolf.” He lowered his voice. “He went to the last member of the Lycan Squad.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sounds like a bad horror movie. Are you telling me the government has a division of the military filled with werewolves?”

Sebastian wet his lips. “There are many secrets I cannot share with even you, Beautiful One. I will tell you that when Nero began the government funded our program. There are branches of the military that even top-secret security clearance cannot reach.”

“So this guy could be working for the government *and* Severino?” I rubbed

my forehead, fighting back the headache that was brewing.

“I don’t know that yet. Our communications are not safe right now so do not contact me through the phone or Internet. I will find you when I have more information.” He paused, glancing at Aren before he met my eyes again. “Because of the *notations* by the doctors in your file, my father has given the authorization to kill you. He’s not trying to retrieve you.”

My back stiffened at the realization that my infertility made my life completely worthless in the eyes of Nero. For a moment Sebastian’s features softened, all of his arrogance melting away. “If I could have made different choices I would have. I never meant for any of this to happen to you.”

“Too late for that.” I nudged Aren who took the hint and got up from the booth. Once I was on my feet, I nodded to Sebastian. “Thank you for the information.”

I turned on my heel and headed for the door. Outside, Aren popped the locks on his car and we got inside. He didn’t say a word until we pulled out of the parking lot.

“Severino is the founder of Nero, right?”

I nodded and kept my focus out the window.

“So Sebastian is the son of the head of Nero.” He bopped the steering wheel. “Perfect.”

I gave another nod, but my mind was far from the car. Between the guilt for my selfish choices and replaying Sebastian telling me that because I was unable to have children I was more valuable dead than alive, I felt like I could snap any second.

Aren touched my thigh. I turned, his gaze holding mine. “Are you all right?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I mean, I knew my life was on the line, but having it confirmed...” I bit off my words and prayed he wouldn’t push any further. My emotions swelled, but crying in front of someone was *not* an option.

Aren pulled up to a red light. “You didn’t tell him I was hiding your sister.”

“No. Sebastian’s father is business first, family second. They fight a lot and Sebastian’s relationship with his dad is definitely love-hate at best, but if he

found out about Nadya, eventually his father would too. It would only be a matter of time.”

“I’m guessing since he hired this werewolf, he doesn’t trust his son either.”

“Sebastian is Severino’s oldest son, but he’s not the only son. He’s got to watch his back at Nero just as much as anyone else does. Maybe more.”

Aren nodded and drove through the intersection, watching the rearview mirror. I took a long slow breath, relieved as the emotional tidal wave subsided a little.

Outside, another light turned green as we approached. Aren gave the Lotus a little more gas, and my head pressed against the headrest. “Thanks for following my lead in there.”

“We’ve got to get back to Reno.”

I don’t know why I was expecting him to ask about the “notations” in my file, but the change in subjects surprised me. It took a second for my brain to shift back into gear.

“No, we can’t.” I shook my head. “It’ll lead them right to my sister.”

“No.” Aren’s gaze hardened. “It’ll lead him to my Pack. I can call Adam and have him take Lana, Nadya, and the twins out of town. One werewolf, even Special Forces, wouldn’t be a match for the group of us. We need the numbers. If this guy really is a Green Beret you and I can’t do this on our own. We’re going to need help.” Aren gripped the steering wheel tighter, every muscle in his arms contracting. “I know jaguars pride themselves on working alone, but there’s nothing stronger than a pack of werewolves. We’ll all work together and get him.”

I peered over at him, studying every line and angle of his face as he drove in silence. After all I’d done to him and his family, how could he possibly want to help me?

It had to be an act.

He pulled into the parking lot of our hotel and gave my hand a squeeze. “You’re awfully quiet over there. Are you waiting until I park to tell me to fuck off?”

Laughter bubbled out of me unexpectedly. “Am I that much of a witch?”

He parked and stared into my eyes. “I could get used to hearing you laugh.”

He kissed me then. It wasn’t the hungry, urgent kisses we shared after my shower. This time his lips caressed mine, savored them. He drew back before I was ready and whispered, “I could get used to kissing you too.”

A red-alert air horn went off in my head. I’d promised myself tonight would be a one-time-only scratch-an-itch kind of thing. We couldn’t be “getting used to” anything.

Aren got out of the car and was around to open my door for me before I could move. I took his hand and got out, annoyed to find my knees a little wobbly. Aren’s kiss was a dangerous weapon. Seeing the hint of a smile on his face tempted me to kiss him all over again, but I fought the urge. Apparently his smile was just as lethal.

“We should get inside.” I scanned the shadows of the parking lot. “We’re too exposed out here.”

Without a word, his fingers twined with mine, and we watched each other’s backs while we headed through the front door of the hotel. Nothing seemed out of place as we made our way to the elevators, but I couldn’t relax until we were inside. The doors closed, and I took a deep breath and met his eyes.

“If, and I’m only committing to if, we did go back to Reno, how would we handle your brother? I doubt he’ll be willing to leave the Pack and put them jeopardy to help me. I still don’t know how you got him to agree to take care of Nadya.”

The elevator doors opened, and we walked down the hallway. He waited until we were in our room to answer. “I’m not promising it will be easy. In fact, I’m positive it’ll be ugly and a huge pain in the ass, but Adam will come around. The rest of the Pack will follow their Alpha’s lead.”

“Even if they don’t want to?”

His lips curled into a half smile. “Family is there for family. We’re a Pack through thick and thin.”

“You bringing me to Reno would probably stretch it thinner than ever.”

He took a step closer, his broad chest almost touching my body, and I felt

my stomach flip-flop. “We’ll make it work.”

There was that “we” word again. My back pressed against the door as his hand came to rest at my hip. I started to tilt my chin up toward him, unable to resist the lure of his lips. His breath brushed my skin when he suddenly pulled back, frowning.

“What the hell is that?”

I turned and spotted a small red dot sliding down the wall toward my head. “Get down!” We crumpled to the floor just as a bullet sliced through the window and embedded in the thick hotel room door.

“Dammit!” Crawling on my elbows, I drew my Glock and peered over the windowsill. I held my breath, watching for any movement from the adjacent hotel. Finally, a shadow darted across the roof.

“Shit. He’s too far away.”

Aren already had the Beretta in his fist and was reaching for my hand. “He knows where we are. We need to get out before he’s inside the hotel.”

I glanced at his hand. “I thought you didn’t like guns.”

“They’re not my weapon of choice, but I’ll shoot if I have to.”

“Good to know.” I snagged my bag with my laptop and fake ID and hustled out. He nudged me toward the stairwell, but I hedged. “Your ankle.”

Shaking his head, he threw the access door open. “We can’t risk the elevator. I’ll live.”

Racing down the flights of stairs, I should’ve been thinking about our next move, weighing the possibilities of making it to Aren’s car if our attacker was waiting for us at the bottom. But instead, I kept wishing there was another way so that Aren wasn’t punishing his injured leg.

What was wrong with me?

By the time we hit the ground floor, he was right behind me. His face looked pale, covered in a sheen of perspiration, but he was there, jaw set, ready for our next move. I couldn’t ask for a more tough-as-nails partner when the chips were stacked against us.

“Can you run?” I asked. He raised his arm and wiped his brow on his bicep, then met my eyes and nodded. Drawing my gun, I reached for the door

handle. “All right. Then we’ll run for the car. If he’s waiting for us, we’re going to have to take him out. Aim for his chest, it’s the easiest to hit.”

He tightened his grip on the Beretta and nodded.

“And don’t get shot,” I warned.

“Good plan.” Aren gave me a half smile that shored up my confidence. “Let’s do this.”

I flung open the door, sweeping the area with my gun as we scrambled for the car. Aren already had the locks free and jumped behind the wheel. I climbed in, and the side mirror exploded, showering me in glass.

“Go-go-go!” I shouted.

The Lotus roared, tires squealing as Aren ripped it out of the parking space. Burning rubber stung my nostrils as the front end of the car swung around. I could see the guy’s outline now, his face shadowed by the lights from the hotel behind him. As he readied for another shot into the windshield, Aren gunned the engine and we flew straight toward him.

I kept my eye focused down the barrel of my Glock. Waiting. Patient. Just a little closer.

I tightened my finger on the trigger and squeezed off my shot, but he dove to the side at the last second. My kill shot ended up grazing his shoulder as we blew past him.

But we were still alive. I checked Aren for any signs of gunshots.

He glanced at me. “No injuries here. You all right?”

I breathed a sigh of relief and stuffed the Glock back into my holster. “Adrenaline overload, but other than that, I’m unscathed.”

The night air gusted through my open window as Aren picked up the speed. The Los Angeles freeway traffic was much lighter than when we were out earlier, thank God. From the passenger seat, I watched the speedometer creep up, past 100 mph, pushing 120.

The wind yanked at my hair, and despite being nearly shot more than once in the same night, I laughed. “I love this car.”

Aren turned my way, and the smile on his face reached all the way inside of me to touch places I thought had died years ago.

A dash of fear mingled with the adrenaline.
I could love a lot more than his car.

Chapter Seventeen

AREN

With no sign of anyone tailing us, Sasha finally relaxed and drifted off to sleep as we crossed the Nevada border. With sunrise right around the corner, I was fading fast too, so I found a cheap motel right off the freeway and got a room.

After a few hours of sleep, some coffee, and drive-thru breakfast sandwiches, we were back on the road. I kept my eyes on the rearview mirror, reminding myself to stay sharp. We weren't home free.

Since we lit out of the parking structure so quickly, I doubted the sniper got my car's plate number, but he probably caught the Nevada license plate. He may not have followed us from Los Angeles, but he could guess we were on our way to Nevada. It was a big state but only had two major cities. What if he met us there?

I checked the rearview mirror again. "Does Nero have connections in the DMV? Could our guy have someone look up all the registered Lotus vehicles in Nevada?"

Sasha nodded. "I wouldn't put it past them. Nero has all sorts of government connections, according to Sebastian. It might take a little time, but eventually he could have a list with your name on it."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"So what's the plan?" she asked. "We're not just going to show up on your brother's doorstep, right?"

"I called and warned him to get Lana and Nadya out of town with the twins before I fell asleep. I told him I'd explain everything later." I took a sip of

coffee and shook my head. “I don’t know if Adam’s had a chance to get Lana and the twins out of Reno yet, so we’re definitely not risking showing up at the ranch. Besides, he hasn’t told the Pack who your sister really is. If she sees you, the cat will be out of the bag.”

Bad pun, but I shot her a smile, hoping she’d loosen up instead of telling me off. She rewarded me with the sound of her laughter.

“All right. Where are we headed then?”

“My company owns a cabin up by Lake Tahoe. We can settle in there, and I’ll call my brother again and ask him to meet us there.”

She crunched up the wrapper from her sandwich. “So we’ll ambush him with this crappy news about a Green Beret werewolf on your home turf.”

I shrugged a shoulder and nodded. “Basically.”

“Sounds good to me.” She started to check for any sign of someone following us and sighed. “Sorry about your mirror.”

“It can be fixed.”

“How’s your ankle?”

No sense lying. I shrugged. “Hurts like an S-O-B but I’m not fishing out a bullet, so I’m not complaining.” I started to smile. “Can’t say the same for the other guy. That was an amazing shot, by the way.”

“Thanks.” She tucked her hair back behind her ear. “I would’ve had him if he hadn’t ducked.”

“I’m sure the moving car didn’t help.”

“Probably not.”

Sasha turned toward the window. I couldn’t help but wonder what she was thinking. I’d never met a woman like her. So calm and cool when it counted. Lethal. And yet she didn’t have an ego.

In the passenger seat, she sipped her coffee. Without a drop of make-up on, weapons at the ready at all times, she was hands down the sexiest woman I’d ever known. I only wished our homecoming could be a happier occasion.

Nothing about this was going to be easy or joyful. If my mate were anyone else, she’d be welcomed into the Pack with open arms. I wanted my family to be hers too. Wishful thinking.

Delusional thinking.

At least Sasha would get to see the younger sister she loved so much. She'd mentioned Nadya was all she had, but I wasn't entirely sure what that meant. Sasha never mentioned her parents—they could be dead, have abandoned their daughters, anything. I pressed my lips together to fight off the urge to ask.

Soon I pulled into the gravel drive of the cabin and hit the button for the security gate. We rolled up to the two-story, redwood log cabin. The sunlight sparkled on the arched glass window spanning both stories and overlooking the lake. Sasha shook her head. "You call this a *cabin*?" She raised a brow. "Handsome and rich too? Damn, wolf, you've got it going on."

I turned off the engine and grinned. "You know how you told me you never miss with a gun?" She nodded. "I'm like that with business deals. Come on, I'll show you around."

We walked around the deck to the door, but before I could unlock it, she moved in front of me, running her fingers over the distressed hardware and ornate handle of the dark, solid oak double doors. "These are really beautiful."

"Thanks. Jared made them for me. He's an amazing carpenter."

"Part of your Pack, I assume?" She stepped inside with me.

"Yeah, he's Jason's twin brother."

She stopped and turned toward me. "So the rumors were true? Werewolves are always born as a set of twins?"

"Yeah, male twins. Only males carry the shifter gene."

"Jaguars are similar but twins are rare. Since only the males carry the shifter gene for us, too, it makes reproducing tricky when Nero needs more employees. That's why they want Lana so bad. She's the only female born with the shifter gene."

I nodded. "We figured they wanted her because she was a female-born shifter, but I never thought about the twin angle. I bet it pisses Sebastian off to think we might have something over his precious race."

I placed my hand at the small of her back, guiding her into the living room.

She sat on my leather couch with one leg tucked up underneath her as she went on.

“Well, Severino isn’t letting that slow him down. He thinks if he can breed females who already carry the shifter gene then he could have a self-contained jaguar-breeding program. He could build up his compound without the threat of bitten females escaping.”

I frowned, sitting beside her. “He’s planning on keeping women locked up forever like broodmares?”

“Probably? I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I do know that they have to plan carefully to bring in more females.” Her shoulders tensed as she went on. “They have to pick strong, healthy women who can survive the bite. The women also need to be people who can vanish without causing too many waves.”

I reached over and took her hand. “You’re definitely strong and healthy, but I’m surprised they brought in a police detective. Risky move.”

Her dark eyes met mine. “Not really. Nero didn’t know about my sister, and I had told Sebastian about my parents’ murder.”

There had never been any arrests, and knowing the killer was still out there always shadowed me with worry when Nadya was small. As I worked my way up to detective, I was grateful every day that she had our father’s last name and I had taken our mother’s. A vengeful criminal wouldn’t connect us and hurt Nadya just to get to me.

“To Sebastian, I had no familial ties, and I worked in a kick-ass, high-stress department of the force. Made me a great match in Nero’s eyes, and no one in the department was shocked when I took a leave of absence after my witness was murdered.”

“I’m sorry about your family.” I held her hand a little tighter. “I didn’t know.”

Her features smoothed out. I recognized the now familiar all-business expression she wore when she was about to make a 180-degree turn in conversation.

“Did your brother bite Lana? Did she need to be converted in order to

conceive? I assume if werewolf males are the only shifters then you must have the same problem Nero does with finding women to bring into your Pack.”

Comparing my Pack to Nero made me grind my teeth, but at least this time I’d seen the rapid change in topic coming. I could anticipate it. A little.

“My Pack is nothing like Nero. We only convert our mates, not random women against their will.” I tried to keep emotion out of my voice. “Normally we do have to convert our mate into a shifter before she can ever get pregnant. But Adam never bit Lana.”

Sasha let go of my hand and popped up from the couch, pacing. I watched the silent, calculated way she moved while she pondered and I smiled. This woman was definitely getting under my skin like no one else ever had.

“What are you smiling at?” Her eyes narrowed, but the corner of her mouth turned up, giving her away.

“I like seeing you pace around my living room.”

She lifted her chin a notch. “I wasn’t pacing. I’m thinking. Do you mind?”

I opened my hands. “Be my guest.”

“Thank you.” Her sexy smile almost made me forget we were on the run from a Green Beret. “So, if Lana isn’t a werewolf and still got pregnant, was it because she’s a jaguar? I don’t know enough about the genetics. Obviously the werewolf shifter gene must be different from the jaguar one, right? Otherwise we’d be able to shift into both...”

I shook my head. “Jason is definitely more knowledgeable than I am, but as I understand it, only males have a shifter gene, but the animal we shift into is hereditary from our father. I got the shifter gene from my father. He shifted into a wolf, so I do too. As far as I know it’s the same for the jaguars.”

“And Lana had the shifter gene, so she got pregnant without being bitten.”

Something inside of me whispered a warning not to share too much. She kept peppering me with questions that I had no business sharing outside of our Pack. And as much as I didn’t want to think about it, Sasha was not Pack.

I hated that I had to even consider keeping anything from her. I trusted her with my life.

But this was my *brother's* life, his family. Our Pack. It was ingrained in me to put the Pack first, but my heart struggled with my torn loyalties. Sharing about Adam's family felt...risky. I trusted Sasha, but Adam didn't.

I could risk my own destiny, but it wasn't my place to risk his family's.

"Probably, but we're not sure yet. Jason's been doing some research in his off hours from the hospital." That much was true. Vague, but I hadn't technically lied.

Before I could pat myself on the back, the detective questioned me again.

"Sebastian told me they're a boy and girl, right? Are they shifters? Can you tell yet?"

"No," I lied, rationalizing that it was for the best for now. I could set everything right once the danger passed, once Adam saw that Sasha wasn't a threat to the Pack. "We won't know until they're older."

She sighed and stopped walking. Shaking her head, Sasha held her hand out to me. "Sorry about the third degree. You can take the girl away from being a detective, but you can't take the detective out of the girl."

I took her hand and got up. "Why don't I finish showing you around, and then I'll give my brother a call with our happy news?"

"You should call him first. Best to rip the Band-Aid off fast, right?"

"You're probably right, but I wanted more time with you before all hell broke loose."

"Have we ever been together when hell wasn't breaking loose?"

"True." I laughed. "Why start now?"

I didn't let go of her hand as I walked through to the kitchen to grab the cordless phone and made the call.

"Hey, bro. Change in plans. I'm at the cabin in Tahoe."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Where's Sasha?"

I lifted her hand to my lips, my gaze locked on hers as I kissed her knuckles. "She's with me."

"Godammit, Aren!" my brother yelled. I held the phone away from my ear. "When you told me you'd fill me in on the details I thought it'd be before you brought her and the guy hunting her into my backyard. Have you lost

your fucking mind?”

I took a deep breath, bringing the phone back to my ear again. “It’s more complicated than we thought.” Sasha gave my hand a squeeze. “This guy’s a werewolf, Adam.” I wished there some other way, but I had to tell him. “He’s also a Green Beret.”

“Fuck.” I could almost hear my brother aching to hit something. When he finally spoke again, his voice was low, almost a growl. “You didn’t give me enough time to get Lana and the babies out of town. I’ll get the Pack over here to guard them and I’m coming to the cabin. Stay there.”

“Will do.” I hung up the phone, guilt digging a bitter pit in my gut. “That went well.”

“I’m sorry I got you involved in this.”

I reached over and caught her chin, tilting her head so I could see her dark eyes. “We’re going to get through this. All of us. This isn’t your fault. Nero thinks they can kill you and no one will notice, but they’re wrong. And I’m happy to be the one to tell them so.”

“Severino won’t stop, Aren. Nero is his baby, his legacy. Men like him don’t take no for an answer. He has money and power and he’ll take out your entire Pack if that’s what it takes to get me before I spill his secrets. I should get out of here.”

“You’re underestimating our Pack. If he started knocking off Pack members, people in Reno would notice. We own businesses, we’re members of society—we’re not lost souls no one would miss. There’d be investigations, questions, and attention he wouldn’t want.” I slid my fingers along her jaw, caressing her soft skin. “They caught us off guard before. It won’t happen again.”

She stared into my eyes and whispered, “I don’t deserve your help, but thank you. For everything.”

I leaned a little closer, aching to kiss her lips. “You don’t have to thank me... Just don’t ever shoot me again.”

She gave me a sexy smile. “Stop making me want to kiss you.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

Her lashes lowered. “We don’t have time to be distracted. It’s too dangerous.”

“Everyone knows those are the most delicious kisses of all...” My lips brushed hers, and I smiled when her arms moved around my waist.

Chapter Eighteen

SASHA

Aren's cabin was immaculate and pure male. In spite of the rustic landscape outside, every room had some high-tech audio or digital flat screen or wireless networked computer. Most of the rooms had hardwood floors, with only the bedrooms having ivory Berber carpets. Right below the deck was a redwood spa. It would be too easy to imagine myself reclining in the warm water with Aren and a glass of wine, watching the sunset.

I shook off the fantasy. What was happening to me? We had no future. Once we took out the Green Beret, Nadya and I were out of here.

Aren led me back into the living room. Neither of us talked about his brother's impending visit. What was there to say? Adam had every right to be pissed. I had kidnapped his wife less than a year ago. I had also shot his twin brother. That pretty much guaranteed I wasn't someone he'd be happy to see again, let alone help.

Aren sat on the sofa and reached for one of the remotes. The stereo lit up and Elvis came crooning through the surround sound.

I smiled. "I never would have pegged you for a fan of the King."

"My mom loved Elvis. That's why she named me Aren and didn't spell it traditionally. Elvis's middle name was Aron with only one A."

I rested my elbow on the back of the sofa. "Most kids hate their parents' music on principle."

He put the remote back on the table and met my eyes. "We lost her when I was little. I used to play her records, and it'd remind me of her. I didn't want to forget."

A lump in my throat threatened to suffocate me at the hurt in Aren's eyes. I did my best not to think about my own parents. I had never really dealt with the pain of their loss. I dove into caring for my baby sister and never looked back. Did I even remember what kind of music my mother liked?

Before I could say anything, the front door opened. We both turned to see Adam filling the doorway.

His green eyes flicked from Aren to me and quickly back to his twin. "She can't stay here. You're putting the entire Pack in jeopardy."

"Hello to you too." Aren got up from the couch and went to his brother. They clasped their forearms, and then he took a step back. "I'm sorry we had to come back, but this guy is good. We wouldn't be able to take him out on our own."

"You have no right to bring the Pack into this." He pointed at me. "This is *her* mess, not ours. I'm already in deeper than I should be by hiding her sister."

"Thank you for helping her." I got up and came around the couch, but I didn't move any closer to the agitated wolf. "How is Nadya?"

His jaw clenched, but he answered even though he wouldn't look at me. "Your sister is fine. She's been helping Lana with the babies."

After I said her name out loud, I wanted to see her. Now. But if she was with Lana, I could bet I wasn't getting anywhere near her.

Adam's attention shifted to Aren again. "Tell me what you know."

We shared how we found the Beretta and our conversation with Sebastian about the Lycan Squad. The information about Nero being mixed up with the military didn't faze Adam the way I thought it would.

He crossed his arms "Impossible."

I had enough years interviewing suspects to recognize that flicker in his eyes. He was hiding something about these military werewolves. Interesting.

"Sebastian told us the unit was top secret. Even some people with top security clearance didn't know it exists." Aren shrugged. "I don't know why he'd lie about that."

"He'd lie because he's a weasel." Adam shot his glare my way.

I raised a brow, doing my best not to get in the punchy Alpha's face. "I'm not a big fan of Sebastian either, believe me. But he's very well connected inside Nero. If he says there's a werewolf squad in Special Forces, then there probably is."

Adam ran a hand down his face, shaking his head. "You're asking too much, Aren. We can't risk the Pack. We've always kept to our territory, and we've never had any problems with other wolves. If there are other Packs out there, or werewolf Special Forces squads, we're better off staying out of it." Adam went for the door. "I'm sorry I can't help you more, but taking in her sister is as far as I can go."

"We won't stand a chance against this guy alone."

Adam stopped and slowly turned around. "If it were just me, you know I'd have your back in a heartbeat, but if we let Sasha stay here, the entire Pack, my family, all of us would be at risk. I'm the Alpha now. Their needs have to come first."

I shifted my gaze from Adam to Aren. The Alpha was right, but we'd already been in Reno too long. That Green Beret could be in town for all we knew. Tracking the Lotus owners in Nevada and tracing one to Reno wouldn't be that tough with Nero's resources at his disposal. He'd come looking for me, and when he found me, Nadya would be his, too. Adam knew something, and if it might help me keep this guy away from my sister, then I needed the intel. Now.

Rounding the couch, I marched up to Adam. "You know something you're not sharing. Ante up, wolf. We don't have time for this. Your brother trusts me. That should be good enough for you."

He lunged toward me, forcing me to step back. His muscles were taut and his eyes narrowed. "*You* are in no position to question *me* about anything. I have every reason not to trust you." His voice lowered to a growl. "In fact, I could kill you now, and I don't think anyone would miss you."

Aren stood between us in a heartbeat. He shoved his brother. Hard. Adam fell back, smashing the glass coffee table. He popped back onto his feet with surprising speed.

Aren widened his stance, his eyes locked on his twin's. "So help me, Adam, I don't want to hurt you, but if you threaten her one more time I will. That's a promise."

Adam stared at his brother, then over at me. "You claimed her."

I had no clue what he was talking about, but Aren nodded. "I did. You know I didn't choose this. It chose me."

Adam growled. "What has *she* chosen?"

Both brothers turned their attention on me. The tension sparked, almost palpable in the air. "I've chosen to do whatever it takes to keep my sister safe."

Adam shook his head. "Not good enough."

My brow creased in frustration. "What do you want from me?"

Neither brother spoke.

I opened my mouth, but before I could say a word, a loud *bang* sounded from outside. Some kind of explosive detonated. Aren pulled the door open. The tree right outside the cabin gate was on fire, and the gate itself tilted, warped and leaning off the guide track. A wall of intense heat blew through the door, and black smoke plumed into the otherwise blue sky.

"What the fuck?" Aren rushed out the door with Adam right behind him.

I glared at the fire for a second, before it all clicked. Starting after them, a bullet whizzed past my ear and embedded itself deep in the side of the log cabin.

I dropped to the ground and shouted. "It's a trap!"

Adam and Aren let go of the hose they were pulling out and ran around the corner of the house as silent bullets danced across the dry dirt, chasing their steps. I crawled behind a planter on the deck, peering through the foliage as I drew my weapon.

"Come on, you gutless bastard," I whispered. "Show yourself."

Sirens echoed in the distance as my index finger caressed the delicate trigger. But nothing moved. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears while I waited for more gunfire. By the time the fire truck finally arrived, I started breathing again. He wouldn't attack with so many people around. Publicity

and any chance of being apprehended would be a death sentence for a bounty hunter who knew too much.

If Sebastian was right, this guy needed to be careful. If Nero didn't kill him, the government might.

Aren appeared around the side of the house, walking down to talk to the fire department. The firefighters were already at work dousing the hot, hungry flames, as Adam came back up the steps.

"The explosion was just a ploy to get us outside." At least he was speaking to me now, instead of guttural threats. "He figured he could pick us off from a distance."

I nodded, still scanning the landscape. "Looks that way."

"Thanks for the shout out."

I let myself glance over at him for a second. "No problem."

"If he saw me with Aren, it won't take long for him to connect the dots on this one. Damn." He raked his fingers through his hair, pulling it back from his forehead. "I shouldn't have come up here."

I sighed. It was a little startling to see Aren's deep green eyes on another person. "I know you have every reason not to trust me, but I can finish this. We can make a stand here and take this guy out."

"But you and Aren can't do it alone. That's why you came, remember?" Adam focused on his brother in the distance talking with the fire chief. "I don't know if the Pack will back me on this one. It's because of you that I'm the Alpha now." His gaze met mine and for a moment it felt like he could see directly into my soul. "Asking them to help you now..." He shook his head. "I don't think they will."

"Don't do it for me. Do it for your brother and your Pack. No one is safe with this guy lurking in the shadows."

Aren came up the steps. "They found shrapnel. The asshole lit off a grenade."

"I've got to get to the ranch before he figures out where I live. Help me get the gate open."

Aren put his shoulder into the twisted metal and grunted. "Be sure you're

watching for him. He could tail you, and you'd lead him right to the Pack."

"I'll be careful." Adam reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. "Be at my place in two hours." He nodded toward me. "And leave her here."

Chapter Nineteen

AREN

Sasha insisted I loan her my other car and left for downtown. It made sense—she'd be able to grab some food, and she was capable of protecting herself—but with the Green Beret lurking, I needed to be at her side. My gut felt tight, my muscles tense and mind sharp. I recognized the feeling. This was my game face before an important business meeting, when the stakes were high.

Couldn't get much higher than this.

I greeted my Pack as they arrived at the ranch, traditionally making eye contact as we clasped our forearms together. Gareth was the last to show up, and I noticed he didn't greet Lana. Adam didn't say anything, but I could tell by the way his jaw clenched that it pissed him off.

Maybe that explained why I hadn't seen Gareth much over the past several months. Maybe he still held a grudge against Lana for his brother's death. She hadn't killed him, but Sebastian wouldn't have been in Reno during the new moon if she hadn't been here. Gabe might still be alive.

At the back of Adam's barn, we all gathered, with our Alpha in front of the group. Lana was on his right and I stood off to his left as he addressed the Pack.

"I appreciate everyone coming tonight. We need to be watchful and stick together. There's a dangerous wolf in our territory. We believe he's ex-Special Forces, and he's working for Nero. He already dropped a grenade on the gate at the cabin in Tahoe and took shots with a long-range rifle at Aren and me."

Adam left Sasha out of the equation. Probably for the best, at least for now.

I scanned the Pack, trying to gauge their reaction while my brother told them more about Sasha's stalker.

Luke and Logan stood together. I knew Luke better than I did his twin brother. Logan sang lead in a local rock band, so he toured around Nevada playing gigs and wasn't usually home for long stretches of time. I'd seen him perform once or twice, and it was obvious he enjoyed the spotlight and had girls whipped into a frenzy, tossing underwear and God only knew what else up on the stage.

But deep down, I had no idea what really made him tick. He was loyal to the Pack—that was all that mattered. The two brothers stood tall with their arms crossed, their ice-blue eyes focused on Adam's face.

Jason lingered toward the back of the group, listening. I could almost see him taking mental notes of the facts. Nothing slipped past the detail-oriented doctor in him. His twin brother Jared was nearby, too. He shared the same light-brown hair and hazel eyes but was more rugged looking, with perpetual dirt on his clearly calloused hands. Jared could make masterpieces out of wood. He was an amazing carpenter, and whenever things got tense, he always had your back. I grew up with Jared and Jason. They'd follow through, whatever Adam decided.

Then my gaze locked on Gareth. His jet-black hair was tied back, and his dark brown, nearly black eyes were unreadable. Even when Gabe was still alive, Gareth hadn't been one to smile much. Born a few minutes before his twin, he carried the weight of being the "older" brother on his shoulders like a yolk on an ox.

When Gabe had been murdered, Gareth hadn't shown any emotion. Many of us in the Pack tried to talk to him, but what could we say? The brothers had lost their parents when they were fifteen, and now his twin was dead too. He was alone in the world. And in spite of everyone's efforts to include him, Gareth retreated from us.

He crossed his arms over his chest and nodded toward Lana. "Are they coming for her again?" He distanced himself from the others, glaring at Adam. "How long are we going to keep protecting jaguars? Until we're *all*

dead?”

Adam’s brow furrowed and I watched Lana reach out to hold his hand. Gareth was obviously baiting him. *Don’t take it, bro. Rise above it.*

“I’m not asking you to protect *any* jaguars, Gareth.” Adam managed to keep emotion from his voice. He spoke with authority. “I’m telling you we have to be on alert for this werewolf. I already told you he took shots at Aren and me. He’s a danger to all of us.” Adam made eye contact with each Pack member. “This isn’t open for debate.”

Many heads started to nod, but Gareth didn’t move. I ground my teeth. I wasn’t sure we could trust him with an attitude like that. I’d never doubted any member of my Pack before. We were family. But now I had to wonder if we lost both brothers when we lost Gabe.

“Excuse me, Lana?” In the middle of the barn aisle a woman stood with a baby slung on each hip. She had black hair, and her eyes were the same rich green as the pine trees that grew all over Adam’s property. I recognized her smile in an instant. This had to be Sasha’s sister.

Lana rushed over and relieved her of Madeleine. “Is everything all right?”

Nadya nodded and handed her an envelope. “A courier just dropped this off for you.”

Lana gnawed at her lower lip as she took it and glanced over at Adam. “I wasn’t expecting anything.”

He shook his head and grabbed the mail from her. “I’ll open it.”

Adam pulled the tab across the back and slid a single piece of paper out. Frowning, he handed it to Lana. She opened it so they could both read it. Concern lined her brow as she gave the paper back to my brother. He quickly folded it and tucked it in his pocket.

Madeleine got a kiss on her pudgy cheek from her dad as he glanced at Lana. “Can you take Nadya and the babies back up to the house? I’ll be right behind you.”

Lana hustled Sasha’s sister and the diapered twins out of the barn. When they were out of earshot, Adam addressed the Pack again. “Stick together and watch each other’s backs. I’ll let you know when we hear anything more

about this guy.”

Adam tipped his head toward the house, signaling me to follow. Even in human form, werewolves have amazing hearing, so instead of telling me what the letter said, Adam handed it to me as we walked up from the barn.

Dearest Lana –

Beware the Jabberwock.

Green Beret. Goes by Darrien Fonhill.

S

I crumbled the paper. “‘Beware the Jabberwock’ sounds like some kind of Sebastian code, but I’m guessing Darrien Fonhill is the name of our guy. He told Sasha he’d try to figure out who his dad hired.”

“His dad?” Adam stopped in his tracks.

I nodded. “Yep. Sebastian is heir to the Nero monster.”

“Great.” Adam crossed his arms staring up at the house. “He’s probably setting us up. Dammit, this keeps getting better and better.”

I stepped up beside my brother. “I don’t know what game Sebastian is playing, but he’s been helping Sasha from the inside for a few months. Nero would’ve had her by now if he’d spilled.”

Adam started for the house, keeping his voice down. “Are you telling me you think we can trust that back-stabbing asshole?”

“No.” I frowned, stopping just outside the house. “But he’s aware I’m helping Sasha. His lines were compromised, so he wasn’t going to communicate by email or phone. Since we left Los Angeles, he must’ve figured the best way to get the information to Sasha was through Lana. She’d get the message to me.”

“I don’t like this. The Pack isn’t sold either.” He paused and glanced back over his shoulder toward the barn. “Especially Gareth.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too. But he’ll do what he has to.” I said the words but wasn’t sure I believed them.

Adam shook his head and reached for the door. “Not this time. He’s ready to leave.”

I frowned. “How do you know that?”
Adam didn’t answer.

Chapter Twenty

SASHA

Downtown Reno was jumping, my senses tingling, on edge. I hadn't been there since... I didn't want to think about it. Cruising through a green light outside Harrah's Casino, I wished I had my BMW, but Aren's silver Infiniti was growing on me. It wasn't the Lotus by a long shot, but it had some power under the hood. Besides, beggars couldn't be choosers.

I pulled into the Harrah's parking garage and tucked the car away. I'd be going on foot from here. My heightened senses were better used outside anyway. If the guy hunting me was around, I didn't want him surprising me.

The sidewalks crawled with tourists, gamblers, and the occasional con artist. Loud music blared at me in bursts as people came and went through the automatic glass doors. I caught the scents of booze, sweat, and cigarettes, but no sign of the wolf who had pilfered my backpack in Hollywood.

I wouldn't be so anxious if I'd had a physical description. At this point, I'd have to catch his scent before I'd recognize him, and with the cacophony of cigarette smoke, cologne, and alcohol assaulting my senses it'd be tough.

I stayed alert, kept my head up, and watched my back as best I could. The man hunting me was still a mystery, and he'd be looking for me. Using myself as bait wasn't always wise, but it was usually effective. That was how I caught Lana at that rest stop.

I shook it off. No time to think about that.

Crossing the street, I slipped my hand inside my coat and brushed my fingertips against the Glock in my shoulder holster. The Ruger was still attached to my calf. It reminded me with every stride. Now I just needed the

bastard to show me his face.

But after two hours, up and down both sides of Virginia Street, I hadn't picked up on anyone following me. Maybe setting off the grenade this afternoon was all the excitement he could take for one day.

The delicious scent of barbeque wafted out one of the revolving doors and lured me in. I couldn't remember the last time I ate. My stomach grumbled, urging me toward the faux brick hostess stand.

"Welcome to Tom's Grill." She had a platinum-blond ponytail and a wide smile, displaying perfectly straight, bleached teeth. "How many in your party?"

I stared at the perky hostess, weighing my options. "I think I'll take it to go."

"No problem." She handed me a menu, her ultra-bright smile never faltering. "Let me know when you're ready, and I'll get your order back to the kitchen."

I glanced over the menu. Would Aren want food too? The thought startled me for a second. When did I start caring if he was hungry? Sweeping my hair back from my forehead, I made the quick decision to order enough for two. I could always eat the leftovers tomorrow.

Bright Smile took my menu and my order, then offered me a place in their waiting area. I sat on the red vinyl bench and pulled out my cell phone. If Aren and I were really partners in finding this guy, I needed to let him know where I was.

I searched through my contacts for his number when I caught someone moving in my peripheral vision. Glancing up, my brow creased and the hair on the back of my neck started to rise. The man waiting to my left was about six feet tall with broad shoulders and sharp, jagged features that could cut through you with just one look. I recognized him even before his silver eyes met mine. Darrien Fonthill. I hadn't seen him since I'd helped get him booted from the police force.

"Why, if it isn't Sasha Kincade." He wet his thin lips as he stared at me. "Long way from New York, aren't you?"

“I took a leave of absence.” I glanced toward the kitchen, hoping someone would call my name. The barbeque smelled heavenly, but apparently it wasn’t already cooked and waiting for to-go orders.

“I heard you had some trouble. Lost a key witness.” He tsked and shook his head. “How the mighty have fallen, huh, sugar cakes?”

I shot up from my seat. “Look, Fonhill, I didn’t take your shit when I was a rookie, and I’m sure as hell not going to take it now.”

“Still a fiery one.” He raised a brow, his nostrils flaring a little. “We woulda been good together.”

His silver eyes flashed, and a chill shot down my spine. He’d lost his badge over a sexual harassment complaint. The female officer he’d attacked was a friend of mine, and Fonhill had done much more than “harass” her. She had bruises that proved it. He was an asshole who didn’t think no meant no. I testified against him at his review hearing.

My phone rang, breaking the tension, and I turned away to answer.

“Sash, where are you?” Aren asked.

“Tom’s Grill downtown. Your meeting is done?”

“Yeah, and Sebastian sent us a message.”

I gripped the phone a little tighter. “Did he find anything out?”

They called my name behind the counter. Propping the phone on my shoulder, I paid and collected my bag of barbeque.

“Yeah, he did. I’ll be right there,” Aren said.

My eyes drifted over to Fonhill only to find him leering at me. I sighed. “I can’t stay here. I’ll meet you back at your place.”

He paused and I waited for an argument, but instead he agreed. “All right. Everything okay?”

Other than an asshole from my past trying to intimidate me?

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I said in my outside voice.

Stowing my phone in my pocket, I pushed my way past Fonhill when he stepped into my path. The brush of his body against my shoulder filled my nostrils with a familiar scent.

And it wasn’t barbeque.

Adrenaline lit up my veins. This was the man who had dug through my pack in Hollywood. The one who stole my underwear and shot at Aren and me. My bounty hunter had found me. And he was no stranger.

Slowly, I turned around, reaching for my gun with my free hand.

He gave me a menacing tight-lipped smile. “Hey, there, kitty, kitty.” He lowered his voice. “Whatcha gonna do? Shoot me dead right here?”

My mind raced. This was a bad cop. When had he become a werewolf? I needed to get a grip, stall for time. I fumbled for something to say. Keeping my voice low, I tightened my hold on the Glock. “How’s your arm?”

“You just nicked me back in L.A. Losin’ your touch, Dead Eye. You had the chance for your kill shot.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t miss next time.”

He pressed his lips together until all the color drained from his mouth, his silver eyes sliding over me from head to toe. I was definitely going to need a shower when I got back.

“Once I find your sister, I won’t need to play with you anymore. They’re offering me a pretty price for your head on a platter. Then I can take baby sister and retire.”

“Bastard!” I shoved him, plowing my shoulder into his abdomen with all I had.

Fonthill tumbled backward to the ground just as Bright Smile rounded the corner. Her beaming grin faltered for a moment. “Ma’am, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Not a problem.” I gave Fonthill a kick on my way out. “Next time I see you, you’re dead.”

I turned to go, but his growl cut through the melee of the restaurant noise. “You’re mine, bitch, and you’re gonna *wish* you were dead.”

I didn’t reply. I just got the hell out of there.

...

Aren met me at his front door. “Sebastian found out who Severino hired, and

he is a Green Beret.”

I moved past him to set the barbeque on his kitchen counter before I dropped it. My pulse pounded in my ears. “I ran into him at Tom’s Grill.”

“What?” His gaze moved over my body. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” I started unpacking the Styrofoam boxes but finally stopped and shook my head. It was all I could do to keep my hands from shaking. “No. I’m not all right.”

“Oh, Sash.” He stepped up beside me and took my hand. “I’m sorry. I should’ve been there to back you up.”

“That’s not the problem.” I stared into his eyes, his gorgeous, intense green eyes, full of color and spirit. So different from Fonhill’s cold, soulless, silver eyes. “I know this guy. When I was a rookie cop, he started coming on to my roommate. She kept refusing him, and finally one night he stopped taking no for an answer.”

Aren held my hand a little tighter, but he didn’t interrupt.

“He beat the crap out of her, but she got away. I testified against him for her complaint, and he lost his badge. He was lucky she didn’t press criminal charges. She just wanted him gone.” I blew out a breath, trying to keep myself from allowing panic to cloud my head. “He’s like a force of nature. I don’t know if he was a werewolf back then. While I was on the force, I didn’t realize werewolves and jaguar shifters even existed. I guess it doesn’t really matter. He’s a werewolf now, and he’s a sick son of a bitch. He threatened that after he kills me he’ll collect the bounty and take off with my sister.”

I pulled my hand free and started pacing the kitchen. I couldn’t help it.

“Nadya’s safe.” Aren leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms. “He doesn’t know where she is.”

“Not yet.” I stopped for a second. “He knows who you are, and when Adam ran out with you this afternoon, he also learned you have a twin brother. It won’t take him long to put the pieces together.” Running my hand down my face, I started pacing again. “God, I’m still reeling thinking of him working for the government. Give that kind of guy Green Beret training, and well, shit.”

“We can’t stay here.” Aren put the containers of barbeque back in the bag. “He found the cabin, and he probably already knows my home address, too. He’ll come here for you.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll get a hotel room for now, and I’ll let Adam know you ran into this Darrien Fonhill.”

I nodded and added quietly, “He won’t stop, Aren.”

He grabbed my arms and stared right into my eyes. “The Pack is ready. They’ll keep Nadya safe. It’s our job now to get this bastard, and we will.”

I almost believed him. He bent to kiss my lips, slow and soft. His kiss was a refuge from the danger. I sank into the warmth of his mouth, the safety of his arms, and then reality smacked me upside the head.

I pushed away from him. “We should go.”

“Why do you do that?”

I grabbed the bag of food. “Do what?”

“Shut me out.”

I stared at him for a minute, and part of me wished I could let him in, if only it could be so simple. But the reality was that life would never be simple for me again. When he held me in his arms, shielded me with his body, I felt ready to surrender. Just imagining giving myself to another person like that terrified me. Although it felt better to love him than to fight with him, fighting was safe. I understood it.

Trust and kindness scared the hell out of me.

“Because even though you claim to have some sort of wolfy matchmaker gene, *I* don’t. I like to think I’ve learned from my mistakes. I know better than to lean on someone. It just makes you an easy target, weak and vulnerable when they’re gone.”

“Bullshit,” Aren growled, snatching his car keys off the counter. “You know damn good and well I’m not Sebastian. I’ll always be there when you need me.”

“Thanks.” I headed toward the door and glanced back at him. “But I don’t *need* anyone.”

Chapter Twenty-One

AREN

We spent the cab ride in silence. It wasn't worth chancing that Fonthill had seen Sasha driving my Infiniti to pick up the barbeque, but every turn the driver made still had us checking behind for any sign the bastard was following.

Even inside the hotel, we didn't speak until we were behind the closed and locked door of our room. I watched her move through the space, hooking up her laptop, charging her phone, anything to keep from making eye contact with me.

When she made another pass by, I caught her hand and pulled her into my arms. At first her entire body tensed, but gradually she relaxed into my embrace and her hands slid around my waist.

"I'm damaged goods," she whispered against my chest. "I can't be what you need. I'm terrified of making another mistake. The last time I thought someone cared, he stole my life from me."

She lifted her head, staring right into my eyes, and the sorrow in her gaze weighed on me. This was the same fearless woman who carried two loaded pistols on her body at all times, ready to draw at any moment. But here in my arms, where she should be safe, vulnerability and fear haunted her beautiful eyes.

If it was possible, I hated Sebastian even more now than before.

"All I want from you is a chance, Sasha. That's all I'm asking for."

Her mouth tightened, and all at once her expression changed. Her tough-girl shell was firmly back in place. It was enough to make my head spin.

“Even if I could give you that chance, after everything I’ve done, I don’t deserve you, or any of your family. Not that they’d want me anyway.”

I sighed and took a step back. “Will you at least hear me out?” She tipped her head with a shrug, and I went on. “I’m going to be painfully honest, but I need to know you’re not going to get pissed and run out on me before I finish.”

The corner of her mouth curved up. “We didn’t bring a car.”

She was so sexy it made it tough for me to say what I’d planned. It’d be much more fun to kiss her smile and carry her off to bed. But the sorrow I’d seen in her eyes haunted me, reminding me that in spite of her tough exterior, on the inside, she needed to believe in me and my motives. I resisted the urge to make a PowerPoint presentation.

This wasn’t my usual business meeting.

“I know you don’t have the mating instinct hardwired like I do, and I admit that without it, I may have never gotten past being pissed at you for shooting my ankle and trying to kill my family.” She raised a brow, and I shook my head with a smirk. “All right, all right. We both know I wouldn’t have gotten past it in a million years. Fine.” I took a deep breath. “The thing is, when my wolf instincts kicked in that you were my mate, I wasn’t happy about it. But no matter how pissed I was at fate, I needed to be sure you were safe. *That* was instinct. But since we’ve been together, everything has changed for me. An insane part of me loves knowing you have loaded weapons on you at all times. Seeing you smile and hearing you laugh make me happier than I’ve ever been. I trust you with my life, and I wouldn’t hesitate to give up my own to save yours. That goes way beyond any animal instincts, Sasha.”

Her dark eyes were unfathomable and unreadable. I searched for any sign of how she felt, but she didn’t have a single tell.

I wanted to keep rambling on, but that’d be a rookie mistake. Resisting the urge to fill the silence, I took a breath and waited.

Finally, Sasha whispered, “So if it’s not your wolf instincts, then what is it?”

Love. God, I wanted to scream *I love you* and make love to her until we fell

asleep in each other's arms. But my gut told me it wasn't time. Sasha had heard those words before, and they turned out to be empty. I wanted her to know they weren't just words when I said them.

Burying the emotion, I reached out and took her hand, grateful when her fingers laced with mine. At least she wasn't locking herself in the bathroom. Yet.

"It's me getting to know you and who you are, what you like... I seem to have a good handle on what pisses you off." That earned me a soft laugh and a nod. We sat on the edge of the bed, and I kissed her hair, drinking in her exotic scent. "Believe it or not, I really enjoy being with you."

She squeezed my hand, but her voice was tentative. "I wasn't very good with partners in the police force. Most of the time they slowed me down and I never felt like I could really count on them. I've been surprised how well we work together."

I smiled and raised her hand to my lips, kissing her fingertips. "I'd love to *work* with you more."

Catching the turn in my voice, her full lips parted as she met my eyes. "I'd like that too."

All the blood rushed from my head to slam into my groin with a vengeance. Her free hand reached over to slide up my thigh, and I pulled her close, fusing our lips together. My tongue caressed hers as I ran my hands up her back. This time the bulge of her shoulder holster and the Glock didn't slow either of us. I laid her back on the bed, enjoying the way her fingers tightened in my hair. My lips brushed against hers, hungry and tender all at the same time. I wanted to be even closer, but her hardware was still in the way.

I pulled back, staring down at her. She took my breath away, lying beneath me with her auburn hair spread across the white sheets, her cheeks flushed with color and her rose lips parted.

"Could I take off your guns?"

She started to move. "I can do it."

I kept her pinned under me and shook my head. "I know *you* can. I asked if

I could."

She seemed to hesitate for a second but then relaxed and let her hands come to rest on the bed. I sat up and slid her arm out of the leather shoulder holster, carefully pulling it free. I placed the gun and holster on the nightstand, and then knelt down and slowly removed her shoes. Sliding her pant leg up, I ran my fingers along the smooth curve of her calf before freeing the buckle on the small holster. The weight of her pistol surprised me.

Knowing she trusted me to take her weapons surprised me even more.

My gaze never strayed from her face as I moved my hands up her thighs to the top of her pants. Sasha feathered her fingers up my arms, her touch sending sparks through my entire body as I unfastened her pants and pulled them down her tan legs. Seeing her lying in front of me in black lace panties made me crazy.

It was bordering on impossible to take this slow.

But I wanted to savor her.

Kneeling at the edge of the bed, I massaged her calves, opening her legs as I ran my hands farther up her body. When I reached her knees, I tightened my grip and tugged her down the bed toward me. She gasped as I kissed along the seam of her panties. I smiled against her, catching the scent of her excitement as my fingers slid between the lace and her warmth. My lips brushed the soft skin of her inner thigh and her fingers tangled in the back of my hair.

Need coursed through my entire body. I couldn't wait a second longer. I needed to hear her moan, to give herself to me. A growl rumbled in the back of my throat as I ripped the elastic at her hip and pushed the remains of her underwear out of my way so I could taste her.

Her hips tilted up, and she pulled at my hair. My erection throbbed almost painful inside my jeans. My tongue slid through her folds, and I groaned into her. I would never get enough of her. I was addicted from the first taste. Her hands fisted in the back of my hair as I toyed with her, using my lips while I freed myself from my jeans. I ran my hands up her legs, placing them over my shoulders, while I fed off of her passion.

“Aren, I’m almost... Oh, yes!”

I moaned against her, teasing her with my tongue until her entire body shuddered in ecstasy.

Kissing her inner thigh, I peered up at her face while she struggled to catch her breath. When her eyes met mine, she started to smile, a sexy, exhausted grin. I already wanted to make her come again.

“Stand up,” she whispered.

I obliged, bringing her legs up with me.

Sasha laughed and wriggled free. Then her eyes moved over me, and her laughter faded away. She sat up on the edge of the bed and very lightly stroked her fingers along my raging erection until it was dancing in her hand.

She slid her fingers up under my shirt. “I need you naked.”

I couldn’t get my clothes off fast enough. Her lips parted, and her hungry gaze made parts of me incredibly impatient. If she didn’t touch me soon, I was going to lose it. She finally met my eyes as she ran her fingers up the backs of my legs, her nails lightly scratching my sensitive skin.

She stood up, her hands smoothing over every taut muscle until her arms were around my neck. Our lips met in a desperate, urgent kiss. I crushed her body to mine, enjoying her full breasts pressed against my chest.

Sasha moaned into my mouth as I slid my hands down her back. I lifted her and her legs clasped around my waist. I brushed against her, my body tense and eager. She was warm and wet and so welcoming. I laid her on the bed, entering her as her back rested against the sheets. Her body fit around mine perfectly.

Like she was made for me.

Kissing my way down her neck, her fingers gripped the back of my hair as our hips ground together. I growled against her skin when my name left her lips and brought my hand up to cup her breast. I took her nipple into my mouth and her back arched, offering herself to me while I struggled to keep my thrusts slow and deep. It was a delicious torture.

I wanted to make love to her all night, and at the same time it would be easy to slam into her until I came so hard I never recovered.

Passion lined her features as I teased her nipple, circling it with my tongue. Her gaze was on fire, locked on me when I moved to her other breast. I felt her nails rake down my back, her hands tightening on my ass, urging me even deeper inside of her.

My lips pressed fevered kisses up her neck until my mouth was just above hers, our eyes latched on one another, our bodies one.

“Not yet,” I whispered, my lips brushing against hers.

She brought her long legs up, wrapping them around my waist. “I can’t...” she gasped.

Her muscles started to tighten around me as I worked into her harder and faster, never breaking eye contact. Half of me expected her to close her eyes, to shut me out of this moment, but she didn’t.

We crested the wave of pleasure together, her orgasm pulling me over with her until I erupted deep inside the warmth of her body. We finally kissed, her moans echoing my own as aftershocks rocked through our bodies.

I rested my head on her chest, closing my eyes and drinking in the sound of her heartbeat while her fingers slid back through my hair. The words “I love you” were on the tip of my tongue, so I couldn’t trust myself to open my mouth. Instead, I held her close and wished we could stay in this moment forever.

Chapter Twenty-Two

SASHA

I lay underneath Aren, stroking the back of his neck with my fingertips and doing my best to bask in the afterglow. His words still echoed in my mind. Could it be more than instinct that made him want me? I hadn't made being with me easy on him by a long shot. Was he really here in my arms because he enjoyed my company?

And how did *I* feel?

Now that was a horrifying question. Somewhere along the way I allowed myself to *feel* again. What happened to "just this once"?

I kissed his hair and closed my eyes. My mind screamed at me to reinforce the carefully crafted wall around my emotions. There was too much at stake to risk losing my heart, too.

Darrien Fonhill lurked out there somewhere, hunting me and searching for Nadya. Hadn't I learned anything from trusting Sebastian? Adam could be handing Nadya over to Fonhill with the understanding he leave the Pack alone and get out of Reno.

Aren lifted his head and turned those gorgeous, dark green eyes on me. "Your heart is racing."

"Just thinking I should be doing something to protect my sister instead of indulging my animal urges."

I waited for anger or frustration, but instead, he propped himself up on his elbows, looking down at me. "You should cut yourself a little slack, don't you think?" His thumb brushed along my temple. "He doesn't know where we are. Nadya is safe on the ranch with Adam and half our Pack. You're not

going to be able to help her if you don't ever rest."

I stared up into his eyes. "Want the truth?"

He nodded. "Always."

"I promised myself I'd keep this physical between us. Things get complicated when emotions come into play." I swallowed my anxiety. "I can't fall for you, Aren. I won't. I swore I'd never..." I closed my eyes, unable to face the weight of his stare. "I'll never put myself in a position where someone can fill my head and heart with lies and hurt me. I learned. I have the scar and a tattoo to remind me."

His lips brushed my forehead. "Look at me." I sighed and opened my eyes. His fingers traced my jawline. "Just be with me. That's all. I don't have an agenda or a time frame. If it takes fifty years to break down that wall, I'll be there." He smiled, and my heart fluttered. "You'll have to Taser me and run to get away."

A grin snuck up on me. "I'm not going to Taser you. Never again."

His eyes sparkled. "That's the best news I've heard all day." He kissed me, his tongue finding mine in a comforting caress, warming me all the way down to my toes. When he drew back he rested his forehead against mine. "I knew you'd come around eventually."

"Come around? All I agreed to was no Taser!" I rolled my eyes and laughed.

He grinned and kissed my shoulder before whispering against my ear. "It's a start."

I shoved him over, rolling on top of him with a grin. "It's a good thing you're kind of cute."

He raised a brow with a sexy smile. "Kind of?"

Okay, he was far beyond "kind of cute," but it was obvious he already knew it. I kissed him, laughing against his lips as he pressed his groin up against me. "More? Already?"

He held my hips and growled into another hungry kiss. My body rocked into his, riding him until we were both sweaty and exhausted. And very satisfied. Making love to him did crazy things to me. Sexy was a given, but it

went deeper than that when our bodies came together. He made me feel like we were really one, like I wasn't alone anymore. He'd experienced firsthand that I was far from perfect, and in spite of that, he thought I was just right, flaws and all.

Settled in his arms, his breathing slowed, and his hold on me loosened as he drifted off to sleep. I wished I could sleep, but my brain had other plans. I carefully slid free of his arms and sat up. He seemed so calm while he slept. It was tough not to be jealous. Would I ever know that kind of peace again?

It had vanished from my life the night I lost my parents and became my sister's guardian.

I stared out the window into the darkness. Darrien Fonhill was out there somewhere. Now that my stalker had a face and a name, my desire to take him down festered, mutating into something bordering on obsession. As long as he lived, my sister and I were in danger.

My gaze shifted to my guns. They were still on the nightstand, within an arm's reach. Until tonight, I never let anyone else disarm me. Even with Sebastian, I never trusted him enough to let him get into a position to kill me. Aren could have pulled either trigger and gotten the ultimate revenge. I looked back over at him. There wasn't any revenge in his heart.

His Pack would never be able to forgive me like he seemed to. Besides, from everything I'd been trained to believe, werewolves were all about family and the Pack. Would Aren's feelings for me change when he found out I couldn't give him one? We hadn't used any birth control, and Aren hadn't asked me if I was on the pill. He had no idea I was infertile. I mentally kicked myself. I shouldn't care about having a family. I'd mothered my sister—that was enough for me.

But hearing the value of my life had been reduced to nothing because I couldn't produce offspring left my self-confidence bruised. I wasn't sure I could handle seeing the look on Aren's face when he learned he'd never have little wolves to raise if he stayed with me.

Before I realized what was happening, my head had me completely agitated, trying to predict possible outcomes for everything, from why I cared

what Aren thought to if the government really have a Special Forces squad of werewolves.

I got out of bed and wandered into the bathroom. After a hot shower, I wrapped myself in a robe and quietly laid a towel on the floor. I focused my mind on simply breathing. After half-tortoise, I moved into camel pose and finally got to my feet. When I turned around, I gasped.

Aren was watching me.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He started to smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I scooped up the towel to put it back into the bathroom. “How can you stay so calm when the world around us could go to complete shit at any moment?”

“I can’t control the whole world, only myself.” He shrugged. “I trust the Pack. Nadya’s protected. My only concern now is nailing Fonhill. We’ll figure out the rest later.”

I slid back into bed, accepting a warm spot in his arms, and closed my eyes against his chest. “One step at a time, right?”

I felt him nod and kiss my hair. And although I could have brought up our lack of birth control, I kept silent.

I was getting way too fond of the sound of “we.”

• • •

A shaft of pure sunlight burned through my eyelids and right into my retinas. I covered my head with a pillow, groaning.

“Morning, sunshine.”

I peered out from under my protective covering to see Aren already dressed and standing at the foot of the king-sized hotel bed.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” I sat up, squinting and imagining how amazing my bed head hair must look.

“Because I figured you needed some rest. As long as he doesn’t know where we are, you should take advantage of it.”

I got up and dressed before attempting to tame my hair. “So am I correct in

assuming I'm not welcome at Adam's ranch today either?"

I could almost see the tension attack the back of his shoulders. "I thought you didn't want to go there anyway. Didn't you want to keep your distance from Nadya for now?"

"Yeah, but knowing Darrien Fonthill is out there..." Just saying his name made me wince. "I'd like to see her for myself." I gave up on my hairbrush and pulled my hair in a ponytail.

"I saw her last night. She looks a lot like you."

"She was at the Pack meeting?" I peered out of the bathroom. "Did she seem miserable or scared?"

"No." He shook his head. "She came down as we were finishing up. She had the twins, one on each hip. She and Lana seemed to be getting along pretty well too."

Relief washed through me as I stared into his eyes. "Thank you for helping her."

"I'm glad we could."

After brushing my teeth, I came out of the bathroom, slipped on my shoulder holster and gazed at the clear morning outside our hotel window. "Something's bugging me. It used to happen during complicated cases. A piece of the puzzle is right in front of me, but I can't quite see it. Makes me crazy"

"Can I help?"

I didn't even flinch when I felt him come up behind me, his arms sliding around my waist. Having him close was becoming a comfort in spite of my efforts to keep him out of my heart.

I glanced back at him over my shoulder. "I don't think so. It's just a hunch, but I think there's some other connection with Fonthill I'm missing."

Aren's hold on me tightened a little. "Maybe with your roommate he attacked?"

I shrugged giving that angle a thought. "Maybe."

"Does she know what happened to you?"

"Nancy? No." I rested back against his chest. "Not too long after Fonthill

lost his badge, my parents were murdered. I had to take care of Nadya, so I moved us to a tiny place on the other side of town. New school, new everything. I didn't know what else to do since we never caught their killer."

"Did Nadya see it happen?"

My chest constricted with pent-up emotion. This was the first time I'd ever talked to anyone about my parents' deaths. The department kept me out of the investigation, standard practice since I was related to the victims, but when the case went cold, I'd called in some favors to get copies of the file. All the details and evidence were engrained in my memory.

But saying them out loud was a whole different ball game.

I cleared my throat, finding my voice again. "Nadya was at school when it happened. Thankfully my mom had called me and asked me to come by. I got off work early and found them."

He pressed a kiss to my hair. "You think Fonthill might be connected to their deaths somehow? He could've been taking revenge for your testimony or something."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. He wouldn't have known where my parents lived, and if he was out for revenge, he would've come after Nancy or even me, not my folks. But when we were in Los Angeles, when the laser came through our hotel room window..." I lost myself for a minute. "That moment made me think of it again. My parents were killed by a long-range rifle. That's part of why they could never find the killer. The only evidence we had were the bullets. I didn't ever realize Fonthill shot long-range rifles. And I definitely had no clue he was a Green Beret."

"Why would your parents be targets then?"

I shook my head. "That's the part I'm missing. If I had a motive, I'd have something to run with." I sighed. "I shouldn't let it bother me. It's not going to help us right now."

Aren turned me around to face him, his gaze demanding mine. "One step at a time. Let's get Fonthill first."

"Good plan." I walked over to my laptop and quickly opened the LexisNexis website. It was the quickest way to track down info on people

since I didn't have access to the database at the NYPD anymore. After typing in Darrien Fonthill's name, I started scanning information.

Behind me, Aren's cell phone rang.

Chapter Twenty-Three

AREN

My twin's name flashed across my cell phone screen. "Hey, Adam."

"I need to talk to you about Nadya."

I frowned. "Everything okay?"

Sasha looked up from her laptop.

"She's fine," Adam said. I mouthed the words to Sasha. "Did Sasha mention anything about her sister to you? Anything more than the fact she didn't know about werewolves and jaguars?"

I glanced over at Sasha, watching her work. "No, just that she was working on her degree to become a teacher."

Adam was quiet for a minute and finally said, "We need to talk. Where are you?"

"We're at the top of the Tuscany Hotel right now."

"Okay. Meet me at Harrah's in the main bar of the casino. That ought to make it more difficult for him to catch our scents if he's on the prowl."

"Will do."

I put my phone back in my pocket. "I guess I'm meeting my brother over at Harrah's."

"I assume I'm not invited?"

"He didn't say you shouldn't join us." He also hadn't asked me to bring her, but I kept that to myself.

"It's okay. I've got plenty to follow up on now that I have a face and a name to work with."

Part of me couldn't believe she was letting me off the hook. But I wasn't

stupid enough to point it out. “All right. I shouldn’t be long. I’ve got my phone if you need me.”

I bent down to kiss her, surprised by how natural it felt.

• • •

Adam didn’t waste any time. Our eyes met, and he walked through the people on the floor like they didn’t exist, straight over to me at the bar. He took the stool beside me, and I caught the vibe instantly that he was unsettled.

I frowned. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nadya isn’t just a human.”

Before I could laugh, the bartender sidled up and took our drink orders. I watched her leave and glanced at my brother again. “She didn’t look like an alien to me.”

Adam groaned. “You know what I’m talking about. She’s got something more. I’ve never met anyone like her before. Lana has noticed it too. It’s not just me.”

Nothing he said was making much sense. “Then lay it out for me. What’s going on?”

“She knows the babies are more than human.”

It was my turn to look unsettled. “What? How? Did someone say something to her?”

“No.” He shook his head. “The Pack thinks she’s a college student helping Lana with the twins. She’s an outsider. They’d never expose our nature to her.”

“Then how could she possibly know?”

Our drinks were delivered, and Adam took a slow sip of his beer. “I have no idea. But she does.”

“Why would you think that?”

He ran his fingers back through his hair, his eyes sweeping the restaurant. “Because she was drawing with them and she drew a wolf for Malcolm and a jaguar for Madeleine.”

“That’s it?” I picked up my rum and Coke and shrugged. “Maybe she just likes drawing animals.”

“That’s what Lana figured at first, but I think she might suspect things about us, too.”

My eyes widened as I set my glass down. “There’s no way unless someone told her. We’ve still got over a week until the full moon. She’d have no clue.”

“She’s got more than a clue, Aren.” My brother’s frustration was showing. “Dammit, I was hoping you knew something more about her.” His eyes locked on mine. “Who is this girl we took in?”

“I’m not following why you’re so upset by a couple of drawings.” I gripped my drink a little tighter.

“Lana complimented Nadya on the drawings and when she questioned why Malcolm got the wolf, Nadya said Malcolm likes them.”

“That’s it?” I started to grin. “He probably does like them. She just noticed it, that’s all.”

Adam wasn’t smiling. “He doesn’t own a single wolf toy, Aren. Not one. And he can’t talk yet, so he didn’t tell her either. None of this is a coincidence. And there’s more.”

“Like what?”

“Like she knows Lana loves pancakes for breakfast, and she asked if Gareth is mourning someone close to him.”

“Impossible. He wouldn’t tell her anything.”

Adam nodded. “He hasn’t even spoken to her yet.”

“So, she’s intuitive. Very intuitive, that’s all.” I was reaching, but what else could it be?

“Face it, Aren. Sasha’s sister is more than she lets on. This isn’t an average college student, and she’s way beyond simply being observant.” He paused and lowered his voice. “She’s gotta be psychic, Aren. And if she is, Nero might—”

“If she is, then Sasha doesn’t know about it,” I interrupted.

“I don’t buy it.”

My hackles were rising. The wolf inside of me sensed him accusing my

mate, and I forced myself to take a breath and calm the storm.

“I’ll go talk to Sasha, but she would’ve said something.” I met my brother’s eyes. “If we met up somewhere, she could talk to Nadya herself. She’d be more likely to tell Sasha than us anyway.”

“It’s too dangerous. If we bring Nadya to meet with Sasha it’s a package deal for the guy who’s after them, and the Pack wouldn’t be backing us up. We’d be sitting ducks.” He took another slow swig of his beer and shook his head. “The only way to be sure we’re protected is to meet at the ranch. The Pack is guarding the property in shifts and Luke, Logan, Jason, and Jared are sleeping in the spare rooms so they can be there if anyone catches his scent.”

“What happens when they notice Sasha’s scent?” That was the million-dollar question.

“I’ll be sure they’re not inside the house.” A muscle in Adam’s cheek clenched. “We’ll need to keep it short, and you have to be certain you’re not followed.”

“We’ll be there at six p.m., before dinner. Be careful. It’s only a matter of time before he connects us and finds you. He may not need to follow us to know about the ranch.”

Adam got up from the table. “We’re ready for him.”

I got up and pulled my brother into a tight embrace. We clasped forearms and, for a minute, I forgot he was my Alpha. In that moment we were just brothers.

He stepped back and nodded. “Six o’clock.”

“See you then.”

Adam left, and I tossed a few bills on the bar. Could Sasha have been hiding Nadya’s gift from me? My mind turned over the possibilities as I took the elevator back up to our room. Why would she have been so insistent that they not tell Nadya they were werewolves if her sister would be able to sense it anyway? It didn’t add up.

Part of me hated that I was questioning her honesty. After spouting off about being partners, I felt like a heel for doubting mine.

I opened the door and Sasha already had her gun aimed at my chest. I put

my hands up.

Rolling her eyes, she lowered her weapon. “Sorry. You surprised me.” She holstered the Glock and got up from the chair. “What did Adam say? Is Nadya all right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but he’s concerned about her.”

“Concerned?” She frowned. “Why? What’s wrong?”

I sat on the edge of the bed trying to think of some subtle way to ease into the subject. “Any chance your sister is psychic?”

Apparently I wasn’t feeling very subtle after all.

“What?” Sasha crossed her arms, with her brow arched up, staring at me like I just called her sister a sea monster. “Why would she be psychic?”

I shrugged and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my legs. “Adam and Lana have noticed a few things, and he seems pretty sure Nadya is figuring out they’re connected to animals. She may not have figured out how yet, but somehow she knows. It appears she senses things she shouldn’t know anything about.”

Sasha stared at the floor. “My mother told me stories once about some of the women in our family having gifts. She described it as mothering instincts, though, that they could tell when someone was hurt, or lying, or sad.” Her chin lifted so our eyes met. “I’ve never been able to sense any of those things. I thought they were just stories to convince me that if I lied to my mom she’d be able to tell. If Nadya has some sort of psychic ability, I don’t know about it. She’s never said anything to me.”

“Do you think someone told her to keep it a secret?”

Sasha rubbed her forehead. “Maybe? She’s ten years younger than me. By the time she started school, I was busy in high school.”

“Adam wants us at the ranch tonight to talk to her about it.”

She dropped her hands to her sides. “Didn’t we already decide it was a bad idea for me to see Nadya right now? What if we lead Fonthill right to her and the Pack?”

“Adam thinks the ranch is the only place where he has the backup to keep everyone safe. We won’t stay long, and he already has the property

surrounded.”

“While your Packmates are outside guarding, we’re going to sneak me in. That’s what you’re saying.”

I nodded. “Adam doesn’t want the Pack to find out Nadya is your sister. This is the only way.”

“The dangerous way.” She started pacing again. “Has Adam said anything to my sister yet?”

“I don’t think so. He was checking with me first to see if I knew about her being psychic.”

“And he invited me to come along too?” she asked. I nodded, wondering where her train of thought was headed. “Adam and Lana are allowing *me* into their home with their babies?”

“Yes.” I opened my hands, trying not to show my frustration. “Sash, they’ve got your sister. I’m sure they don’t think you’d hurt them or the babies in front of Nadya. This isn’t some sort of ambush.”

Her pacing continued, and I waited, watching. Gradually her steps slowed and she stopped. “Sorry about the third degree. I’m always cautious when accepting invitations from people that don’t like me much... Habit.”

“Maybe when all this is over they’ll feel differently about you.”

She started to smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Maybe.”

Before I said a word, she spun on her heel and started showing me all the information she’d dredged up about Fonthill.

Apparently we were finished discussing family.

I picked up her notes while she shared the background she found on him. He was definitely a Green Beret. He’d joined the police force after he’d received an other-than-honorable discharge from Special Forces.

“This doesn’t say anything about any Lycan Squad... And what the hell does ‘other-than-honorable’ mean?”

“Since no one believes werewolves exist, I’m guessing the ‘Lycan Squad’ is something that very few people know about.” Her voice softened. “I didn’t realize werewolves existed until...” She paused a beat, then went on. “Fonthill was always strong and moody, had tendencies toward violence, and

was possessive. His discharge was probably related to that.”

“A werewolf doesn’t do well without a pack.”

She rubbed her forehead, closing her eyes for a second. “I hadn’t been converted then, so I wouldn’t have noticed his scent. I had no idea I’d been working with a werewolf.”

“A Special-Forces-trained werewolf.”

“Exactly.” Sasha tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she paced. “Typically an other-than-honorable discharge means you didn’t commit a crime, but you also weren’t able to do your job any longer. I wish I could find out exactly why he was kicked out, but it wasn’t listed anywhere I had access.”

I snapped the plunger on the pen a few times. “Don’t the police do background checks before they hire officers?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “And usually an O-T-H is an automatic disqualification for the NYPD, but he had an in. I remember during his review after he’d attacked Nancy, the mayor and a general of some sort were sitting in on the proceeding. Someone must’ve pulled strings to get him the job.”

“And he let them down.” I glanced back at the notepad and frowned. “After he lost his badge, he went to jail?”

“He got nailed for assault with a deadly weapon, but after he was paroled, he disappeared.”

“So he’s been living under the radar for the past five years?”

“Looks that way,” she replied. “There’s nothing on him. No bank accounts, phone numbers, nothing. It’s like he dropped off the face of the earth.”

“I’m guessing Nero had a way to reach him.” I set the notepad aside.

She traced her fingertip across the leather band she always wore on her left wrist. “I’m sure they did. Once Severino has you in his database of ‘paranormals’ he never forgets, and you can never really get away. He regards jaguars as the top of the paranormal food chain, but he keeps a record of every paranormal he comes across.”

My brow furrowed. “Does he keep our Pack in his database too?”

“He does now.” She sighed and shook her head. “You weren’t on his radar until he started hunting for Lana. When Sebastian didn’t complete the mission, he sent me to finish the job...and I reported back.”

“Sounds like Sebastian is lucky he’s related to the head honcho after the major clusterfuck at Lake Tahoe.”

She sat down beside me. “Sebastian is *very* lucky to be Severino’s eldest son. He won’t be quick to kill his heir. Not that it means much in their family. Nero comes first. If Severino found out Sebastian was at Lake Tahoe that night and not fighting for the ‘right team’...” Her voice trailed off for a second. “Sebastian is a master at keeping himself out of trouble. Nero’s goons probably didn’t even realize he was at the lake that night.”

“Or that he was helping Adam stop you.”

Sasha’s hand slid into mine, and our fingers twined together. “I wish I could go back and do things differently. The moment Severino promised me an antidote to stop being a jaguar, I was blind to everything else. I played right into his hand.”

I gave her a squeeze. “I wasn’t trying to nail you all over again. I was just pointing out that for some reason Sebastian *did* help Adam. Adam thinks it was because Sebastian still wants Lana for himself, but I doubt it’s that simple.”

“Nothing about Sebastian is simple.” She pressed her lips together and took a deep breath. “I have no idea why he’d risk so much to help your brother. At the time, I figured he just wanted to continue fucking up my chances for a normal life. If he kept me a jaguar shifter, then he’d still have me in his pathetic excuse for a life. But after Lake Tahoe, when he started helping me stay a jump ahead of Nero from the inside, my theory didn’t really hold water anymore.”

Truth be told, I didn’t really give a flying fuck about Sebastian, but discovering Nero was keeping tabs on my Pack changed the dynamics of the situation. We weren’t going to be pawns in Severino’s game.

If Sebastian had reasons for helping us, whatever they were, we’d take all the insider information we could get.

Chapter Twenty-Four

SASHA

Aren managed to pull me away from my Internet research long enough to grab sandwiches for lunch in the hotel café. We even laughed a couple of times. If a hired killer hadn't been lurking in the shadows somewhere waiting for me, it might've felt like an actual date.

My phone buzzed just as Aren was paying the bill. I pulled it out and a chill shot down my spine. The text message had no return number listed, and it read simply:

Tell the wolf Barry has been working too hard.

What the hell did that mean?

"What's wrong?" Aren asked as he slid his wallet in his pocket.

"I'm not sure." I handed him my phone and watched his jaw tighten as he read.

"Shit." He gave the phone back to me.

I followed him out of the restaurant into the noisy chaos of the casino. "Are you going to clue me in?"

Aren stopped and turned to face me. "Barry works for me. I'm guessing Fonhill has him, or he's already dead. Think I'm close?" He rubbed his forehead shaking his head. "Damn it. I should've done something. I didn't realize he'd go after my employees. What could it possibly gain?"

"Hindsight isn't going to solve anything at this point." The police detective in me kicked into high gear. "We need to think this through. Fonhill must've backtracked to your company, probably looking for the twin he saw

yesterday. When your office didn't lead to a relative he could use for leverage, he took the next best thing."

He mulled over what I said, but in the end, he groaned. "I can't think in this place." Looping his arm around my waist, he ushered me forward. "Let's get out of here."

Weaving through the bright flashing lights and dodging scantily clad cocktail waitresses, we made our way toward the exit doors. I couldn't stand cigarette smoke when I was human, but with my heightened jaguar senses, the odor was stifling, not to mention it stung my eyes. By the time we got back outside my mouth tasted like I'd just licked a dirty ashtray.

I took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air for a moment before we settled back into the shit storm that was brewing. Aren was quiet as we walked toward a cab outside the hotel lobby. I didn't prod him. At this point, I was pretty sure Barry was dead. There was no reason for Fonthill to ransom him. He wasn't a relative, and kidnapping wasn't his mission anyway.

He wanted us out in the open. And we were obliging.

"What's your plan?"

Aren stared straight ahead. "I have to go to my office."

"That's what he wants, Aren."

His expression darkened as he turned. "What if Barry's still alive? I can't leave him in the hands of that asshole. He could be torturing him right now." He rubbed his forehead, his tone softening. "He has a family, Sash. I left him in charge of the office when I took off to help you in Los Angeles. This is my fault."

Guilt was something I could relate to. I took his hand. "It didn't occur to me that your employees might be in danger either. It's not your fault."

"I can't just assume he's dead and not do something." He stared into the distance. "He's not a werewolf. He doesn't stand a chance. How can I leave him to die?"

I didn't answer. What could I say? Could I walk away if it were an officer being held hostage?

"I get that there's no reason for him to send that text other than to find us. I

get it.” He shook his head. “But if there’s even a sliver of a chance Barry’s still alive, I have to try.”

Every muscle in Aren’s arms tightened. It was obvious he had no intention of leaving his second-in-command at the office behind as a casualty of this battle.

This was the Aren I’d met in that alley behind the library in San Antonio. At the time, I’d thought I was attacking Adam, not knowing he had a twin brother. He’d been cold and calculating, a fierce opponent.

And he’d been willing to die to keep his brother safe.

He let me go on believing I had found my mark. When Adam showed up in that alley and I realized my mistake, I couldn’t take them both at once and fled the scene. I remembered being haunted by the focus and determination in Aren’s green eyes.

I didn’t think I’d ever see him again, and never in a million years did I dream I might see those same eyes sparkle when he smiled at me. Life had definitely tossed me a curveball I’d never seen coming when we ended up on the same team.

Aren hopped into the back of the cab and give the driver the address and an extra twenty.

I slid into the seat beside him. “It’s the weekend. Do you think Barry was at the office?”

“Yeah.” Aren nodded, his gaze never straying from the street as if he could move the traffic with his mind. “Barry was in charge. He had keys. The only way Fonthill could have found him is at the office building. It has my *name* on it.” He cleared his throat, struggling to keep the growl out of his voice.

“You didn’t know Fonthill would come after your business.”

He let out a pent-up breath. “I was busy worrying about keeping you, the Pack, and the babies safe. I should have protected everyone associated with me. It was a stupid mistake.” He finally turned toward me. “Barry’s a good guy. He’s worked with me for more than five years now.”

He focused forward again. He was right—we should have considered collateral damages when we came back to town. But it was my fault just as

much as his. I wanted to comfort him, but this was definitely not my area of expertise. I understood how to be an island, being a team was unexplored territory.

I reached over and rested my hand on his thigh, surprised when he laid his on top. Staring at our fingers, the way his large hand covered mine, I felt my heart pound with emotions that terrified me.

Without removing my hand, I turned and watched the scenery fly past my window. Time to focus. We couldn't change the past no matter how badly either of us might want to. So I needed to concentrate on the future. I had no intention of letting Fonthill hurt us.

I lowered my voice to keep the driver from hearing. "He'll probably be watching for us," I said. "We know he's got a rifle with a scope so he could pick us off before we ever see him."

Aren nodded and leaned forward to tell the cabbie to let us out at the next block. The cab pulled around the corner, and we exited.

I glanced up at Aren. "Now what?"

"If we go on foot, we have a better chance of surprising him."

I pondered it for a moment. "He has your wolf sense of smell. He'll know we're coming."

"If we stay downwind, *I'll* find *him* before he ever realizes we're there."

I started to smile. My partner rocked.

We crossed through an empty parking lot across the alley from the Sloan Consulting building. I double-checked my guns—both were loaded and ready to fire. Aren was tucking the Beretta we'd taken from Fonthill in Los Angeles into the waistband of his jeans. He'd have to pull back the slide before he could fire, but at least there was no danger of the weapon going off accidentally. Always a hazard when you don't have a holster.

I stared up at his office building, checking if I could see Fonthill. The reflective glass building rose up toward the sun, mirroring its surroundings. I couldn't see shit.

"How many floors?"

"Six." Aren took my hand, leading me to the north side of the building.

“You’ve got a big office.”

He shook his head. “We lease the other five floors out. Sloan Consulting is up on the sixth floor.”

“You figure he’s on sixth floor then?”

He started to shrug. “I don’t...”

His words faded away as his brow knit together. I drew my gun, scanning for any sign of movement. Then I caught the scent of blood on the breeze.

Chapter Twenty-Five

AREN

Judging by how strong the scent hit me, the blood was fresh. And there was a lot of it. I didn't draw my weapon. I was a fucking werewolf—I didn't need a goddamn gun. It pressed into my back, reminding me I had bullets if push came to shove.

Good enough for me.

Sasha covered me as I tracked the scent toward the source. The air reeked, thick with the metallic aroma, overpowering anything else I might've been able to pick up. I whispered over my shoulder to Sasha. "I can't smell anything but blood."

She came closer to me, never lowering her Glock as she scanned the opening to the parking garage. "He's counting on that. The scent is coming from down there." She tipped her head toward the ramp to the underground parking. "We're probably walking right into a trap."

"You should stay up here," I said, taking a deep inhale to confirm her suspicion. "I'll go find him."

"Not a chance." She started down the ramp, staying close to the wall. "If we go, it's together."

If I wasn't so distracted by the scent and keyed up about saving Barry, I might've taken a minute to enjoy the moment, knowing no matter what kind of crazy-ass plan I came up with, Sasha was ready to fight right beside me.

She adjusted her grip on the Glock and gave me a nod. My pulse pounded, and my nerves felt raw. Adrenaline coursed through my muscles like a drug. Right now, I could probably pick up one of the empty cars with my bare

hands and toss it aside if I had to.

Silently we made our way across the first level, scrambling for cover from car to car. It would have been easier to hide during business hours, but on the weekend the parked cars were few and far between. Now I understood what those little ducks felt like in shooting galleries. All I needed was a big target painted on my back.

We knelt down behind a Volkswagen Bug by the elevator, and I reached over to touch Sasha's shoulder. "I see Barry's car." I pointed about halfway down the next incline. "The brown Honda Accord."

She scanned the area while I studied the car. I thought I could see someone in the driver's seat. Then I noticed the dome light on and the door ajar. "Shit. He's in there."

I started toward the car, but Sasha caught my arm in a tight grip. "Not yet."

She put her hand back on the Glock, ready to take her shot. "Stay with me."

We moved slowly while she canvassed the area for any sign of Fonthill. I kept my attention focused on the car. As we neared the bumper, the stench of death hit me like a truck.

"Oh, fuck." I forgot about being quiet or careful when I saw what was inside the car. If Fonthill was going to kill us he would've done it by now anyway. I raked my hand through my hair, trying to process the carnage that used to be a friend, one of my best employees.

Sasha came up behind me and took a deep breath, but she didn't say a word. She'd probably seen many more mangled bodies in her line of work than I ever had. I turned away, struggling to keep my head.

Sasha holstered her gun. "I'm so sorry, Aren."

"We're too late." I shook my head. "Did you see what that sick bastard did to him?" I stared at the mangled body in the driver's seat behind her. "He didn't just shoot him. He..."

Something didn't make sense. The fog of shock that gripped my mind thinned as I moved around Sasha for a closer look. Fonthill's scent lingered all over the body, but it wasn't exactly the same one that came off the man

I'd wrestled with in Los Angeles.

Barry's throat was slashed so severely that his spinal cord was all that kept his head attached. His eyes were still open, his face frozen in a state of terror. I reached in to close his eyes and noticed his injuries didn't end there.

A shudder shot down my spine. Chunks of Barry's arms, hands, and legs were missing. His clothes were ripped, and one shoe was obviously gnawed on by a large animal.

"Impossible," I whispered.

Sasha stood beside me. "What's impossible?"

I took another deep breath, sampling Fonthill's scent again. There was no mistake. "Barry was attacked, mauled, and eaten alive..." I stared into her eyes. "By a wolf. Fonthill shifted."

Worry clouded her dark eyes as her brow furrowed. "That's impossible. The full moon is still over a week away."

I nodded. "Yeah, but there is no denying this scent." I rubbed my hand down my face, wondering if I looked as pale as I felt. "Somehow that crazy bastard shifted in broad daylight."

...

I called Adam first to warn him. After I explained the circumstances of the attack, he made the decision as the Alpha to send Jason over to take samples and help us clean up the crime scene. We couldn't leave Barry's body to be found by the police. All we needed was for a crime lab to work up some DNA strands from the saliva in Barry's wounds. We couldn't risk the medical community discovering the shifter gene that would point to werewolves being real.

I tucked my phone in my pocket. "Jason's on his way. He doesn't want us to move anything until he gets here."

"All right." Sasha popped open Barry's trunk and started rummaging through it. She came back with a blanket tucked under her arm. "He did this to show us what he's capable of."

“What?” Would I ever be able to keep up with her rapid subject changes?

“Fonthill.” She glanced up at me. “He couldn’t send a text as a wolf. He had to have sent it after he’d shifted back.” She paused as we both stared at Barry’s mutilated remains. “This wasn’t a trap to lure us out in the open. He just wanted us to know he can shift anytime. At will.”

“He wants us to be scared, like Barry was.” I struggled to bite back the rage that ate me up inside and kept my voice level and even. “He fucked up, Sash.” Our eyes locked on one another. “I’m not afraid. I’m pissed.”

“I know you are, but we have to think clearly. Knowing he can shift whenever he wants makes him even more dangerous.”

I started to nod when Jason pulled up. Taking Sasha’s hand, I walked toward his car. “It won’t matter what shape he chooses. We’re ending this. Either way, he’ll be dead.”

Jason got out with a bag of medical supplies. I could tell the exact moment he recognized Sasha’s scent.

Jason froze. His hazel eyes looked orange in the yellow lights of the lot as he stared at the two of us.

“Thanks for coming, Jason.” I stepped forward, clasping our forearms together, but his eyes were still looking past me, locked on Sasha. I took a step back and reached out for her. “This is Sasha.”

I held my breath while the two of them sized each other up. Of my Pack, Jason, being a doctor, was probably the most levelheaded. But he was still territorial, protective of his own, and still a werewolf who had seen the damage brought to our doorstep by jaguars first hand. He also carried around a truckload of guilt for not being able to save my father, our Alpha, after he got shot in the firefight.

Finally, Sasha nodded. “Nice to meet you, Jason.”

He remained stoic. His face was devoid of that warm everything-is-going-to-be-all-right doctor smile. “I believe we’ve met before.”

Jason took another step toward her until she had to tilt her head to look into his eyes. Tension ignited the air around us. I moved closer to Jason. “She’s not working for Nero anymore.”

He turned to face me. “Did you forget we lost Malcolm because of her?”

I set my jaw, fighting to keep my fists at my sides. “As I recall, she was out cold by the time the bullets started flying.”

“We never would have been fighting Nero if she hadn’t kidnapped Adam’s mate.”

Sasha shoved her way in between us. “Look, we can all discuss what a deceitful bitch I am later. Right now we have a body to deal with.”

I kept glaring at Jason, daring him to make a move. I almost wanted him to push me just so I could let loose some of the anger and frustration that brewed inside of me. Jason finally picked up his bag, breaking eye contact.

“Keep her away from me,” he growled under his breath.

Before I could kick the shit out of him for insulting my mate, Sasha shook her head. “No worries, buddy. I have no interest in being anywhere near you.”

She picked up the blanket from the trunk and waited behind Barry’s car. Leaning back against the bumper, she kept alert, watching for any movement in the shadows while Jason finished his inspection.

Warring loyalties stretched me in opposite directions. I wanted to comfort Sasha and make Jason apologize for insulting her, and at the same time, seeing Sasha had to bring that night back for Jason. He’d shifted back from his wolf form and did all he could to save my father’s life, but in the end, without surgery, he couldn’t stop the internal bleeding. On some level, Jason thought he let our Pack down that night.

But just because I understood his position didn’t mean I agreed with it.

I raked my hand back through my hair, grinding my teeth as I approached Sasha. “Sorry about that.”

She shrugged without looking at me. “It’s fine. I earned it.”

“You’re helping us now, making things right.”

Her eyes flashed with fire. “Please don’t stand here trying to make me feel better. Nothing your Pack buddy said was out of line. I don’t know how you rationalized forgiving me, but they have every right to hate my guts.”

I clenched my jaw to keep from raising my voice. “They may not forgive

you, but they are going to have to learn to accept you.” I walked around the car to find Jason, closing up his medical bag. “Got everything you need?”

He nodded and straightened up. “Yeah.”

There was no way his werewolf hearing didn’t pick up every word Sasha and I had just said. I waited for him to say more, but my patience was rewarded with him turning to put the tissue samples back in his car.

Sasha came around with the blanket. “Can we move the body now?”

I glanced over toward Jason, and he gave me a nod. “Looks like it.”

She opened it and laid it on the concrete floor. “We need to move him onto the blanket. Then we’ll wrap him up so we can transport him out of here.”

Seeing Barry in this condition was a nightmare in itself, but touching his cold, blood-wet body was a whole new level of horrific. At least he wasn’t stiff yet. Sasha had his legs—or what remained of them—while I braced his head and shoulders. We laid him out on the blanket, and Sasha quickly wrapped it around him. Most of the blood had already seeped out onto the seat of the car and the concrete underneath his door, so thankfully it didn’t soak through.

I scooped him up into my arms and stashed him in the trunk of Jason’s car, sending out a silent prayer that his spirit was already long gone. No one should end his life wrapped in a blanket and stashed in a car like garbage.

Jason carried a bucket of cleaning supplies to Barry’s car. Wordlessly, Sasha took a pair of rubber gloves and a bottle of bleach from the bucket while Jason pulled out a large trash bag and started fashioning a cover for the blood-soaked driver’s seat. I grabbed a scrub brush and got down to help Sasha wash away the evidence from the concrete.

Together we made quick work of the crime scene. Jason finally broke the silence. “Someone’s going to have to drive his car. We’ll need to get it far from here, and maybe Gareth can rig the engine to spark.”

“We’re going to set his car on fire?” I asked.

Jason crossed his arms. “Unless you’ve got a better idea. Barry’s family will file a missing persons report when he doesn’t come home tonight. If the police find this car...” He frowned. “They can’t *ever* find this car.”

“I’ll drive it.”

I shook my head, denying her request. The stench of blood still hung heavy in the car, not to mention sitting in the spot where a violent death occurred. It would be torture for whoever had to endure it.

“No.” I worked with Barry. It felt like I should be the one to drive his car. “I’ll do it, Sasha can ride with you.”

Jason started to hand me his keys. “I’ll take it. I work with blood all day. It won’t bother me as much.”

Sasha pushed past us and sat on the black plastic covering the driver’s seat. “You’re both wolves. My sense of smell isn’t quite as keen as yours.” She looked up at me. “And I didn’t know Barry, plus I’m a police officer. I can distance myself from what happened here.” Slamming the car door, she added, “Just tell me where I’m going.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

SASHA

The car stunk. Even with all the windows rolled down, death drowned me in its stench. No amount of showering was going to get this reek out of my nostrils. The plastic bag crackled and flapped in the wind as I followed Aren and Jason toward a remote destination. A condemned casino sat just outside of the city limits. We'd leave the car parked in the lot and one of the other Pack boys would meet us and rig the engine to blow.

I could hardly wait to meet the next member of Aren's Pack.

After spending years as a female detective in the police department, I was somewhat numb to being judged, often unjustly so. Playing it tough and proving their impressions wrong was hardwired in me now. Jason's reaction got under my skin because his judgments weren't unfounded. Aren's Pack had every right to hate me. When he blamed me for getting their previous Alpha, Aren's father, killed, he was right.

There were days after that blood bath when I wished I'd been the one shot at the lake that night. Other than a few bumps and bruises, I was unharmed. A green-eyed werewolf favoring his back leg had pulled me to safety away from the fight. A few days later, Sebastian brought me up to speed on what had happened.

Aren dropped Jason off at his house before we made our final stop. Another Pack member, Gareth, would be meeting us to finish the job. We'd return Jason's car when the deed was done. Lucky for us, the doctor had more than one vehicle, and Fonthill wouldn't be looking for an ivory-colored Lexus.

The brake lights lit up in front of me, and I followed Aren on another right turn. The abandoned casino sat up ahead on the left. I pulled around the back of the building and got out of the car, grateful to be free of the blood-soaked driver's seat. Even with the plastic barrier, the death seemed to seep right through my clothes.

"You all right?" Aren walked toward me. The car keys jangled as he put them in his pocket.

I nodded. "Yeah." His arm slid around my waist, drawing me in closer, and I let my head rest against his warm chest. He smelled like heaven after the hell I'd been trapped in on the drive over. I closed my eyes and whispered, knowing he'd hear me just fine. "I'm so sorry about your father, about Barry, everything."

His grip tightened, pulling me even closer. I wrapped my arms around his waist, grateful for his comfort and his silence. I didn't want him to lie to me and tell me none of this was my fault. We both knew the score, and he was still at my side.

In that moment something shifted inside. I knew I didn't deserve him, but I was damned well going to do all I could to change that.

A roar ripped through the silence. I scanned the street. About a block away a motorcycle rolled toward us. Aren straightened beside me, the muscles in his arms contracting.

"It's Gareth." He met my eyes. "I almost thought he wouldn't show. You better get in the car."

I raised a brow. "What? Why?"

"I'll explain later." He checked the progress of the Harley and then gave me his keys. "Just do it. Please."

I snatched the keys and jogged to the car. Once I was inside, I adjusted the rearview mirror and watched. I did my best not to acknowledge the hurt twisting up inside of me. He'd sent me away so he wouldn't have to introduce me again. Not that I could blame him.

But it didn't make it hurt any less.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AREN

I watched Sasha head for the car, feeling like a complete prick. Sending her away when I saw Gareth coming was really low, but after Adam warned me how close Gareth was to leaving the Pack, I couldn't jeopardize this. My brother hadn't told the Pack about Sasha's involvement in this mess, and it was probably the right move.

Now Jason knew, but he tended to be level-headed and most likely he'd take it up with Adam directly. He wouldn't rile the entire Pack. It was still going to be tough for my brother to keep a lid on it for much longer.

Gareth was another matter altogether. If anyone could make this car fire look unintentional, it was him. He was a master with engines. But the chances of him helping me with Sasha nearby dwindled drastically.

Even with that knowledge, I couldn't rationalize away that I'd been an asshole.

Gareth gave the Harley a final pump of the throttle and pulled up beside me. My ears were still ringing after he'd killed the engine. He yanked his leather gloves free, tossing them on the flat top of the gas tank before pulling off his helmet. His black hair fell down just past his shoulders, and his dark eyes scanned the lot as he reached back to release the stand.

"Where is she?"

"Who?" I crossed my arms.

"Jason called me." His brow furrowed. "I knew a jaguar was behind all this shit."

So much for Jason taking it up with Adam directly. Dammit.

“She’s waiting in the car.” No sense lying to him. He’d probably catch her scent eventually anyway.

He kicked his leg over the bike and stood up. We were about the same height, but that didn’t stop me from straightening up a little. I could sense his aggression, almost smell it, and I wanted him to know I was ready to take his ass out if it came to that.

Gareth’s eyes narrowed as he turned toward the car. “Don’t want to introduce me?” He glared at me next. “I never thought you’d be the one to betray your Pack for a woman.”

“Don’t say something we’re both going to regret,” I said through gritted teeth. “Let’s just get this done.”

“I’m not going to regret anything.” He walked around the back of his motorcycle, unfastening one of the black saddlebags. “My conscious is clear. I’m not fucking the woman who got my father killed.”

I was on top of him before he could say another word. My right fist slammed into his mouth as he rolled us over, planting a solid punch to my eye. Stars lit up the edges of my vision, and the scent of fresh blood invaded my senses. I kept hitting him and taking hits as I lost myself in the pain and adrenaline. All my frustrations and fear and rage poured into our struggle across the pavement.

Until something yanked me back. Hard.

“Enough!” It took a second for the haze of aggression to clear before I recognized Sasha’s voice. “You’re both wasting time we don’t have.”

Gareth was on his feet, blood dripping down his chin. Before I got a chance to gloat about it, I wiped the sweat off my forehead and saw it was blood too. Sasha stepped up beside me, facing Gareth.

He glared at her and spat on the ground. “Fuck you both. I don’t need this shit.” He reached for his helmet.

“So you just start shit and leave?” Sasha cocked her head toward Gareth. “Is that how you roll?”

“I came here to help clean up a mess I had nothing to do with.” He slammed his helmet back onto the handlebars and got up in Sasha’s face.

“You’d already be dead if I had anything to say about it.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I shoved him. “Get out of here. We don’t need your goddamn help.”

“Yes, we do.” Sasha glared at me, then at Gareth. “Look, I get that this isn’t your problem, but if the police find this car and pull DNA samples from the upholstery, werewolves in Reno won’t be a secret anymore.” Gareth clenched his jaw and did his best not to make eye contact as Sasha went on. “If you want to ride off and wrap yourself up in your self-righteous bullshit, you go right ahead, but when a crime lab gets finished examining the samples from this car, you won’t be able to blame *this* fuck up on me.”

Without another word, Sasha turned and walked back to the Lexus. Gareth wiped his mouth, watching her. I waited, but he didn’t get on the Harley. Instead, he pulled a couple of tools out of the saddlebag. He tipped his head toward Barry’s car.

“You gonna pop the hood, or what?”

I started to nod, and my split lip stung when I tried to smile. “Yeah, I got it.”

After about ten minutes of wire clipping, Gareth yelled from behind the hood. “Start it up!”

The engine turned over, and he dropped the hood closed. “Get out, and let it idle. Let’s see if it’ll spark.”

“You don’t need to light anything?”

Gareth shook his head. “Nah, then they’d know someone set it up to burn. This way it’ll look like an accident, electrical fires take cars out all the time. I shaved the battery cables, so when they touch the metal of the hood they should arc.” He shrugged. “I dripped some oil around the head gasket too, so that should help get it going. We just need it to spark first.”

I wondered how long it would take before the police were sniffing around asking questions. Barry’s family would file a missing persons report when he didn’t come home and they couldn’t get in touch with him. I’d be near the top of the interview list being Barry’s employer. Without a body or any evidence of foul play, I figured they’d have to decide he wanted to disappear. It was a

crappy thing to do to his wife and family, but what could I tell them? Sorry Barry got eaten alive by a werewolf?

It'd be better if they pictured him drinking piña coladas on a beach in Rio with a new identity and cash to burn.

Black smoke started to seep through the seams of the hood, and Gareth smirked as he gathered up his tools. "Job's done. I'm gone."

I walked with him back to his Harley. "Thanks, Gareth."

He nodded and yanked on his leather gloves. Glancing over at Sasha sitting in Jason's borrowed car, he picked up his helmet. I braced myself for a snide remark about Sasha, but it didn't come.

Gareth glared at me as his bike roared to life. "Tell Adam I followed through here."

He pulled on his helmet and gunned the engine and raced across the parking lot. I took a deep breath and went back to the car. When I got in, I could see flames billowing from underneath the engine of Barry's car.

"Looks like it worked," Sasha said.

"Yeah." I reached over and kissed her, wincing a little when my split lip burned. As I straightened up she started to smile.

"I have every right to be pissed off at you for leaving me in here."

"I know." I caressed her cheek. "Thank you for covering my back."

"So, what's Gareth's story? Besides the obvious, why does he hate me so much? That was over the top."

"Sebastian killed his twin brother, Gabe." She rested against her seat, pulling back from my touch. "Sebastian was trying to set Lana up so she'd have to turn to him instead of the Pack. Regardless of the reasons, we lost Gabe because of Nero, and then we lost Malcolm."

"And Gareth blames me for all of it."

She stared out the passenger window, shutting me out. If I could think of something brilliant to say to smooth everything over, it would have helped, but I was all out of words. I took her hand, my fingers twining with hers.

"I'm sorry this can't be simple."

She nodded without making any eye contact. "Me too."

Fire erupted through the front grill of Barry's car.

"We'd better get out of here." I glanced over at her, but she didn't say anything, so I started the engine and headed toward Adam's ranch.

...

We were almost two hours late. I parked in the driveway. "You're awfully quiet. If this is too much I can tell Adam we need a rain check."

Sasha shook her head and finally met my eyes. I could see the sadness in her gaze, but her strength lingered there as well. Without a word, she leaned over and kissed me. Her lips were tender and soft, careful not to hurt my injured lower lip. When she pulled back she rested her forehead against mine.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'd never have a chance to make things right if it weren't for you. Knowing you believe in me after all we've been through..." She paused, clearing her throat a little. "I couldn't do this without having you in my corner."

Jesus, I loved this woman. I kissed her again, urgently, wishing my Pack would accept her like I had. If I could forgive her, why couldn't they? When I pulled back, my thumb lingered against her skin, brushing across her warm cheek. "Let's do this."

As soon as we got inside the house, Lana met us at the door. She gave me a hug. "Adam's waiting for you in the kitchen." I arched a brow, and she added, "I need a minute with Sasha."

Sasha nodded and I shrugged. "All right." I headed for the kitchen, stopping to brush a kiss against Sasha's cheek as I went by. "We'll get through this."

Our eyes met just long enough for me to see her determination before I went around the corner. I found Adam leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Good to see you," he said. "Sorry about Barry."

I went to him, and we clasped forearms. "Me too. The body is in the trunk. We couldn't risk someone putting out the car fire while he could still be identified."

“Jason got all he needed from the scene?”

“Yeah, and Gareth wanted me to let you know he held up his end and took care of Barry’s car.” I glanced toward the babies’ room. “Where is Nadya?”

Adam pointed out the window. “She’s got the twins down at the barn.”

“They shouldn’t be out of your sight.” I gripped the granite countertop. “He could be out there right now.”

“Luke is with her, and Logan’s down there too.”

“Fonthill can shift at will. I don’t know how, but he managed it in daylight without a full moon.”

“I know, Jason called me.”

I turned toward my brother. “You think two twenty-year-olds are capable of keeping Nadya and the twins safe from this guy? He could be hunting them right now.”

“I trust them.” Adam crossed his arms over his chest. “They’re not boys anymore. They can handle this. They know the danger, and they’re staying alert.”

I tried to remind myself that my brother was our Alpha now. He understood the Pack better than anyone else. If he trusted Luke and Logan to protect his children, I could certainly trust them to keep Sasha’s sister safe.

“Jason also had some concerns about Sasha being involved in all this.”

I groaned. “Sorry about that, but there was no way I was sending her off alone with Fonthill lurking. I thought Jason would keep it to himself until he talked to you.”

“He didn’t?”

I shook my head slowly. “No, he told Gareth.”

“And he still helped you out with the car?”

“Barely, but yeah he did.”

“Is he the one who gave you that shiner and split your lip?”

I started to smile and winced. “Yeah, but I rearranged his nose for him. We’re even.”

“Gareth won’t keep quiet about her involvement, and until Jason finishes testing the tissue samples he took from Barry’s car, we won’t have any more

information on Fonthill.” Adam opened the refrigerator and handed me a beer. “But that’s not why we’re here. We need to find out what’s going on with Nadya.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

SASHA

Lana waited for Aren to disappear around the corner before she met my eyes. “I wanted to say a couple of things without Aren jumping to your defense.”

I dropped my hands to my side and nodded. “Fair enough.”

She took a couple of steps closer and then stood her ground, bringing one hand to rest on her hip. “Over the past few months, I’ve spent more time than I care to count being angry at you. Every time I watch Adam struggle with the weight of being the Alpha of this Pack, or see pain in his eyes when he holds little Malcolm in his arms, I wanted to get even with you. Because of you, my children will never get to meet their grandfather.”

I did my best to bite my tongue and keep my chin up. Since I’d started to care about Aren and consider the possibility of some kind of future with him, this meeting was inevitable. I earned this, every bit of it, but when I envisioned it in my head, it didn’t sting quite so much.

Lana sighed and took a step closer. “But after that night at the lake, when some members of the Pack were struggling to accept me, Aren did. He’s been the best brother I could wish for.”

“Look, I know—”

“Let me finish.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and shook her head. “Sorry, in my head this sounded much better.”

I knew the feeling.

She met my eyes. “You had your reasons for what you did. But I want you to know if you hurt my brother or my family again, God help me I will ruin you, and I won’t need a gun or a Taser to do it.”

Lana wasn't quite as tall as me and maybe slightly curvier. She was probably a few years younger than me. I was sure I could take her in a fight. But that didn't matter now. What I saw in her eyes wasn't a threat or hatred.

It was resolve to protect the ones she loved.

"Aren's lucky to have you for a sister," I said with a nod. "And for what it's worth, I regret everything that happened before. My reasons don't matter—it was still wrong. I can't bring Aren and Adam's father back, but I hope I'll be able to make it up to all of you somehow."

Her eyes bored into me, and I did my best to hold still and wait her out. Finally her features softened a little, and she released a pent-up breath. "Just get this guy, and be good to Aren."

"I have every intention of getting Fonthill and ending this threat. Aren" —I shrugged— "is another story."

We stood in awkward silence. Aren must've told Adam about the mate thing, but what was I supposed to say? I couldn't lie—I enjoyed being with him more than any man I'd ever known, but I'd never be a part of his family, or give him a family, or... I halted my train of thought and changed the subject. "Thank you for helping Nadya. You had every right to tell me to fuck off."

She started to smile and shrugged. "Yes, I did, but when Aren told me the situation, I couldn't say no." She met my eyes. "Nadya is amazing, by the way. The twins love her to death already. She told me you raised her yourself."

"Our parents were murdered right after I joined the police force. I did my best to keep her safe. After Nero got me, it was more of a struggle, but until Fonthill found my cell phone, even Sebastian had no idea she existed."

"When she asked how we met, I told her we'd worked together in the past." She hesitated for a second. "She misses you."

I gnawed at the inside of my cheek. "Since Sebastian bit me, I've been dodging her. Until recently, I thought there was an antidote, so I kept putting off a visit. We talk on the phone, but I haven't seen her face to face in almost two years..."

The door opened and Adam peered out. "Ready to join us?"

...

I sat on the sofa, trying not to fidget. Now that I was actually going to see Nadya again, my stomach twisted in knots. "Is Nadya here?"

"She's down at the barn with the twins." Before I could jump up to go check on her, Adam shook his head. "Don't worry, they're not alone. Luke and Logan are down there keeping watch."

Aren sat beside me and took my hand. "Adam wanted to talk to us first before Nadya gets up here."

"Aren told me you think she's psychic," I said. "But she would have said something to me if she was."

"All the horses are fed." My heart leapt into my throat at the sound of my sister's voice.

Lana rushed past me and took the twins as my sister rounded the corner into the kitchen. My eyes brimmed with tears when I saw her.

"Sash!"

She rushed to my arms, and I held her tight. "Sorry I've been away so long."

Nadya gripped me back and then stiffened against me before pulling away. Tears swam in her eyes, making me wonder if I had imagined the physical change in her. "I was so worried about you."

I could tell there was more she wanted to say, but she didn't. Could she tell I was something more than the big sister she'd always known, too? Was she afraid of me now?

"We have a lot to catch up on." I glanced over at Aren then back at Nadya. "Let's sit down."

Lana vanished into one of the back bedrooms with the twins while Nadya and I found a place on the sofa by Aren. Unable to come up with a smooth opening, I opted for charging straight ahead.

"There's a psychotic bounty hunter after me, Nadya. That's why I wanted

you to come here to stay with Lana and Adam. If he found you, he'd find my weak spot."

"A bounty hunter? Why? Who hired him?"

Aren leaned forward, resting his arms on his thighs. "He's not the reason we're here tonight."

Nadya's brow creased. "All right."

I sighed, resting my hand on his leg. "Long story short, when I lost that witness, I left my job."

"You did?" Her eyes searched mine, but I didn't see shock in her gaze. She'd sensed something wasn't right, probably for a long time. "Then why haven't I seen you? You told me you were on a case."

I took a deep breath. "Adam and Lana think you might already know the answer."

"What? I don't have any idea what you're talking about." Nadya shot up from the sofa so fast that Adam and Aren were on their feet too. Her body language screamed my statement hit close to home.

I reached for her hand, encouraging her to sit beside me again. "I think you understand more than I realized."

"Who are these people, Sasha?" She sounded like she was pleading with me, but I couldn't figure out why.

I kept a grip on her hand and answered. "Aren and Adam are werewolves, and Lana is a jaguar shifter." I swallowed a giant knot in my throat, struggling to keep my voice from cracking. "I spent the last couple years trying to find an antidote because..." I felt Aren's fingers caress the small of my back and accepted the small measure of comfort. "Because I was bitten, Nadya."

She pressed her lips together for a moment. "Let's say I believed you. Tell me how this works. Can you turn into an animal right now?"

I shook my head. "It's not like that. The shifts coincide with the lunar phases. The wolves shift when the moon is full and the jaguars change during the new moon."

Adam sat back down in his chair. "When we agreed to hide you from Nero,

we also agreed not to tell you about our true natures.”

A loud roar cut through the silence. I frowned, reaching inside my coat for my gun.

“It’s Gareth. He’s going to the barn to relieve Luke and Logan. Jared should be here soon, too.”

I relaxed and took a little comfort in seeing first-hand Adam had a handle on protecting his own. And my sister.

Lana came back down the hall. “When we realized you were figuring out our ‘secret’ on your own, you threw us for a loop.” She sat on the arm of Adam’s chair. “The babies are down for naps.”

I gave my sister’s hand a squeeze. “Mom told us once about women in our family who knew things. I thought her tales were just superstitious stories from the old country, but now...” Her eyes met mine and for the first time, I noticed shadows hidden there. “Now I’m not so sure.”

“I didn’t know what happened to you, Sash. I sensed you weren’t telling me the whole truth and I felt your guilt, but I can’t see the future. I wanted to help you, but I didn’t understand what was wrong.” Nadya sighed and stared at her feet. “I see things when I touch people. Mom and Dad knew, but they told me not to tell. They told me people would be afraid. Then after they died, you pulled me out of my special school, and I was too afraid to tell you.” Her eyes met mine as a tear slid down her cheek. “I thought you might send me away. When I got older, I got better at controlling it, so I never said anything.”

I cupped her cheek. “I never would have sent you away.”

Lana crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s probably wise your parents told you to keep it secret. Nero’s been experimenting with psychic females for their breeding program.”

Beside me Aren stirred and sat forward again. “What kind of special school were you in?”

“Brightwood Academy.”

I nodded, trying to swallow my fear about the news Lana just shared. “It was a school for gifted kids, but after our folks were killed, I pulled her out

and moved across town. I didn't want whoever murdered our parents to find us."

"It was more than that." Nadya's voice was so soft I barely heard her.

I frowned. "What?"

Her eyes met mine, before looking at the others. "It was a school for children who display unexplained psychic gifts."

My jaw went slack. "That's not what I understood."

"They didn't advertise the types of gifts. You just assumed it was for reading and writing."

"So you *are* psychic?" I tried not to sound betrayed, but I felt like the rug had been yanked out from under me. I'd raised Nadya from the time she was ten years old. How could she have kept such a huge secret from me?

"Calling someone psychic is really generic." Nadya fidgeted with the sleeves of her sweatshirt, sliding them up her forearms slightly. "Like I said, I can touch people and sense things about them, usually their emotions, but sometimes deeper things. It depends how open they are."

"Like reading their mind?" Adam asked.

"It's not that clear." Nadya shrugged. "It depends on the person, but I usually get images I have to decipher."

"When I hugged you, you saw what I was, didn't you?" I had to ask even though the answer seemed obvious. I needed to understand how it all worked.

"Not exactly. You behaved differently, and I saw a jaguar, but I didn't realize people could actually shift into animals. I wasn't sure what it meant." She paused and added, "How did you get bitten?"

"I got mixed up with the wrong guy." Admitting it out loud was like tattooing idiot on my forehead. I got up, crossing my arms. "I think we have bigger issues to talk about now, though."

Lana nodded. "We need to discuss how you want to handle your sister with the Pack."

"Handle?"

Adam nodded. "Now that Gareth and Jason know you're involved with

Aren and in this mess with the werewolf bounty hunter, the rest of the Pack will find out soon, if they don't know already. For now, they think Nadya's a nanny to help Lana with the twins. But it's only a matter of time until they notice the similarities and the timing of Nadya coming into our lives. I think we should come clean with the rest of the Pack."

My chest constricted. Was I going to have to explain to Nadya why the entire Pack hated me? As if he sensed my wariness, Aren got up beside me.

"No." Aren shook his head. "We need everyone focused on Fonthill. If we bring up Nadya's family history, it's going to cause more drama we don't have time for."

I watched Adam weighing the decision. As the Alpha of the Pack, it couldn't be easy for him to lie to them, but Aren had a good point.

Eventually Adam nodded and stood up. "You're probably right." He turned toward Nadya. "Until this is over, you're just our nanny." My sister agreed and Adam went on. "Is there anything about your gift that we could use to help us in this mess?"

"Not unless I touched him." Nadya laced her fingers together, keeping her eyes on her hands.

The thought of Fonthill touching my sister made my skin crawl. "I'm doing all I can to keep that from happening."

Aren glanced at his brother. "What if the Pack figures out who Nadya really is? I noticed the family resemblance right away."

"We'll deal with it if it comes. For now, we've got enough on our plates." Adam focused on Nadya. "You understand you can never tell anyone about werewolves and jaguar shifters, right?"

Nadya chuckled. "Like anyone would believe me." She sobered and met his eyes. "I've kept my secret my whole life. I won't have any trouble keeping yours."

Adam started to smile. "Fair enough."

I hugged my sister and kissed her cheek. "When this is over, we'll talk, okay?"

"Definitely." She stared into my eyes. "Be careful."

“I will.”

I watched her as she made her way down the hall to check on the twins. No wonder she'd always been so good with children. It never occurred to me that she might know what they needed even if they couldn't tell her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AREN

While I haggled with Adam and Sasha over some sort of plan to take care of Fonthill, I noticed Lana hunched over her laptop. Her fingers moved in flurries over the keyboard, and her expression went from concerned, to intrigued, and finally to frustration.

Someone knocked at the front door before I could ask her what she found. My shoulders tensed. It was after eleven o'clock at night, past bedtime for door-to-door salesmen and religious missionaries. I gestured to my brother to stay put, my instinct to protect my Alpha kicking into high gear, and headed for the door.

I recognized the scent before I reached for the handle and opened the door a crack.

"Sebastian." I glanced past him. "Alone?"

"Until you alert the neighborhood," he grumbled.

I stepped aside to allow him in, keeping myself between the jaguar and Adam. "What brings you here?" Sebastian's dark eyes locked with Sasha's and a surge of jealousy stabbed my chest. "I asked you a question."

He finally turned my way. "I have information, but I would be happy to walk out of the door and cease putting my own life in jeopardy."

"Wait." Lana got up from her chair. "Please, come in."

I followed him into the room, kind of hoping he would make a move so I could beat the crap out of him. Sebastian took Lana's hand and kissed her knuckles in a cheesy gesture that went out of style a hundred years ago.

"Motherhood agrees with you, Little One." He turned toward Sasha. She

brought her hands up to her hips before he could reach for her, making me smile. He straightened up. "It is good to see you, too, Sasha. Living among wolves hasn't improved your manners."

"Spare me, Sebastian." She rolled her eyes. "You risked a lot to come here. Spill it."

He raised a brow. "'A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed one too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.'"

Lana moved back around her laptop. "Percy Shelley, right? Mary Shelley's husband?"

"Like *Frankenstein's* Mary Shelley?" I shook my head, ready to knock the information loose if he didn't stop speaking in cryptic poetry.

"Exactly." He focused on Sasha. "I located a file on the Lycan Squad experiments."

I glared at Sebastian. "So what did you find?"

He kept his attention on Sasha and Lana. "The government had a top-secret contract with Nero. A program called Operation Moonlight. Severino began recruiting werewolves to join the military in hopes they could become powerful weapons to protect our nation. The unexpected pack mentality of the race proved inefficient for assassins, but the military brass saw an opportunity to use them as a unit."

Adam's brow furrowed. "The Lycan Squad."

"Yes." Sebastian turned his attention toward Adam. "Operation Moonlight was closed, and a new project started. With the government's help we began to assemble the Lycan Squad, and it was quickly determined that a trained squad of Green Beret werewolf soldiers would be unstoppable if—"

"If they could shift anytime without waiting for a full moon," I interrupted. Sebastian seemed almost proud of his company's involvement in experimentation on young men who thought they were protecting their country. I ground my teeth together to keep from saying any more.

"Our scientists were working to perfect a serum to simulate the magnetic pull of the full moon on the DNA in werewolves." Sebastian started to frown.

Sasha shook her head. "We already know this guy can change at will."

We've seen the damage, and he attacked someone in the middle of the day."

Sebastian took another step into the room and handed a flash drive to Lana. "The serum caused insanity and death. You can read the test-subject results. I am surprised this wolf is still alive. They discharged the few wolves who survived and mainstreamed them back into society, but judging by the data, I didn't think they could have lived much longer." Sebastian sighed and shook his head as he backed toward the door. "The information is on the flash drive. I have done all I can."

He stopped at the door, his gaze locked on Sasha, then left without another word.

I crossed to her side and put my arm around her, not giving a damn if it was possessive. Lana plugged the flash drive into her laptop and started scanning files as the back door opened. We all tensed, relaxing only when we saw Logan walk into the kitchen.

"Gareth and Jared just got here, so Luke and I are going..." His voice trailed off as he noticed Sasha. Logan frowned. "What's she doing here?"

I didn't move from her side. "She's helping us stop the werewolf who shot at Adam and me."

His gaze moved to Adam. "And you're all right with this?"

He nodded. "We can use all the help we can get with this situation."

Logan chewed on that for a moment before he finally tipped his head. "If you think we can trust her."

"She's working on earning it." Adam stood and crossed the room to clasp forearms with Logan. "Thanks for keeping watch tonight. There's one more thing I could use your help with before you go." Adam gestured for me to come over. "Barry from Aren's office was attacked by the rogue werewolf I told you about. We can't have the police finding his body."

Logan nodded, understanding my brother's implied request. "All right. I'll go back down and get things ready."

Adam turned toward me as Logan left. "Drive to the barn and get this done. I'll stay here to be sure everything's secure."

I frowned. "Someone should be protecting you, too."

“It won’t take long. We’ll be fine.” He gripped my shoulder. “I’ll yell for you if anything changes up here.”

Becoming Alpha had made my brother’s stubborn streak even worse.

I gave up trying to talk reason into him, and drove my car around the house down the back road to the barn. I couldn’t stop worrying about everyone. Leaving them unguarded bugged me. Not that my brother wasn’t completely capable of keeping them safe—he was. But he was also our Alpha now, and his infants and Sasha’s sister were defenseless.

I didn’t like it.

When I got to the barn and popped my trunk, Gareth came over and nudged me. I was glad to see his jaw was bruised and swollen similar to my lip. “You look like you got hit by a truck.”

His dark eyes flashed, hinting at a smile. “You should see the other guy.”

I laughed even though it hurt. We clasped forearms. It was as close to an apology as either of us was going to get.

Jared walked up next, and I nodded toward the house. “Adam’s got Lana and the family up there. Can you stay close and keep watch? We can handle this.”

Jared nodded. “Sure thing.”

Gareth took one end of the blanketed body, and I took the other while Jared jogged off into the darkness.

“Luke and Logan should have the pyre ready by now,” I said.

We carried Barry’s body down the barn aisle and out the back to find the two younger Pack members stacking wood and shavings. Because of the secrecy of our nature, we couldn’t bury our dead. Over the years, I’d seen Gareth’s parents cremated, their spirits freed to join our ancestors. My mother followed a few years later.

But recently there had been too many fires, too much death. We lost Gabe and then my father in less than two weeks time. Their lives were cut short. They didn’t leave us for the next life—they were stolen from us.

Now another fire would be lit but not for one of our Pack. He was an innocent, killed because he had the bad fortune to work for me.

Gareth and I placed Barry's body on top of the pyre and doused the blanket with oil as Luke and Logan lit the kindling. The wood cracked and shifted in the heat. We stood around the body like silent sentries.

Usually ritual words were spoken by the Alpha, comforting those of us left behind while opening the heavens above to welcome a new spirit into their midst. I felt like I should say something. Barry's own family would never know what became of him. We had to stand in their stead.

I opened my mouth, not sure what to say. "Barry wasn't a member of our Pack, but he was killed simply because he knew us." Black smoke plumed into the night sky, dimming the bright stars overhead. "He was attacked and murdered by an enemy wolf while he was unarmed. I ask our ancestors to welcome his spirit like one of our own and guide him into the next world."

The primal growl of the fire and the snapping of the wood were the only sounds as I watched the flames lick at the edges of the blanket. When the fire tasted the oil, the inferno raged, engulfing his body.

"I'm sorry, Barry," I whispered.

Heat stung my face as I watched my friend's body being consumed. The next one to burn would be Fonthill. Dead or alive.

Chapter Thirty

SASHA

Even though I was heavily armed, I felt vulnerable after Aren left me alone with Adam and Lana. My eagerness to find a cure for my “condition” had caused both of them pain. Nothing could correct my mistakes. I couldn’t bring Adam’s father back to life any more than I could heal Aren’s ankle. I started trying to think of a way to excuse myself and get out.

Lana worked feverishly on her laptop, scanning through the files on the flash drive Sebastian left us. “You can sit over here if you want to.”

Adam pulled over a chair. “I think your pacing is making her nervous.”

“Oh...sorry.” I hadn’t even noticed I was pacing again. I sat in the chair beside Lana and glanced at her laptop screen. There was so much data to comb through. “Could I get a pad and paper for notes?”

Adam nodded and gave Lana’s shoulders a squeeze. She sat back in her chair. “Nero shot these werewolves up without testing the serum first. When it appeared to work, they shot them up with more.” Adam handed me a pen and paper. “They didn’t know if the solution would permanently alter their DNA or if the soldiers would need regular injections.”

“So if it seemed to be working,” I pondered aloud, “why did they stop?”

She clicked a couple of buttons and turned the laptop my way. A photo of a dead man labeled TEST SUBJECT B, filled the screen. He was drenched in sweat, blood trailed down from both nostrils, and his dead eyes were wide open.

“Apparently long-term dosages led to mental breakdown and finally hemorrhaging in the brain.”

I turned from the computer to Lana. “So why is Fonthill still alive?”

“It looks like they divided the Lycan Squad into three sections. The first group of test subjects was given a low dosage daily. Within three months all of the test subjects were dead, all victims of brain hemorrhages.”

I jotted a note and pointed to the screen. “And this guy?”

“He was from the second group. They’d adjusted the dosage and dispensed injections once a week. This group lasted much longer with only one dying within the first three months.”

I frowned. “So what happened to the rest of them?”

“The shift in their DNA also brought about aggressive changes in their behavior. Most of them were unable to complete their missions because of headaches, fights, paranoia. One even refused to shift back to his human form. Nero stopped the injections and observed them to see if the subjects’ DNA would repair itself.”

“I’m guessing the dead body is proof it didn’t?”

She nodded and Adam walked away, shaking his head as he pulled his hair back from his face. “And even after they all died, Nero still experimented on more soldiers?”

“Yeah, apparently they enlisted from Packs, telling the recruits they could serve their country for elite missions, like Navy SEALs only better.” Lana answered. “Fonthill was part of the final group, according to this file. They boosted the serum’s potency but only administered it once a month for three months. From the notes here it seemed to produce a permanent shift in their DNA structure.”

I made more notes, tapping the end of the pen against the pad while I put the pieces together in my mind. “So the last group is still alive and able to shift whenever they feel like it?”

Lana scanned more of the file and shook her head. “Not quite. One had a brain hemorrhage after the first dose. The others survived but many couldn’t control their shifting. It looks like one shot himself, too. The remaining soldiers finished the trial and maintained the ability to shift without the full moon.”

Adam stopped and turned to face us. “How many werewolves are we talking about who can shift anytime?”

“I’m not sure. It looks like there were twelve? Minus the other two, there could be ten if they were still alive.” She clicked on the last file labeled FONTHILL. Her brow furrowed as she leaned in closer to the screen. “Oh, crap.”

I tried to see over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“Fonthill was discharged from the military because of his repeated acts of aggression.” She looked up at Adam. “It doesn’t specify what they were. He didn’t pass the psych evaluation so they kicked him out of the program.”

“The NYPD never would have hired him with that kind of military record.” I frowned. “How did he get a badge and a gun?”

Adam crossed his arms. “You can get anything if you know the right people.”

“You think Nero has a mole in the police department?” I asked.

“Why not?” He shrugged. “They only found out Lana existed after someone in the hospital leaked her CAT scan results. Nero’s got eyes and ears everywhere. They’ve got money, too, and money spreads and corrupts along the way. All it would take is for an elected official to accept a large donation from Nero. They could put some weight on the department to hire an ex-Green Beret. It’d be easy to float him under the radar.”

I hated to admit it, but he was probably right. Following a money trail was often the best way to track down criminal activity. How Fonthill got hired to be a police officer didn’t really matter anymore anyway.

We needed to know how to stop him.

“So as far as you can tell, the only enhancement he has is the ability to shift at will, right?” I asked.

Lana shook her head. “Because the wolf gene is more prominent in his DNA now, his vitals show an elevated body temperature, but that’s about it.”

Lana clicked a few buttons and pulled the flash drive free, handing it to me. “I saved the files. You can take this and maybe go over them later and see if I missed anything.”

“Thanks.” I pocketed it and got up to leave, but something made me stop. I took a deep breath and turned around to face them again. “I wish I could come up with some way to make up for the past. I know I caused you both pain, and I really appreciate that you’re willing to work with me on this.” I gestured down the hall. “And for protecting Nadya. I want to repay you. Somehow...”

Adam rested a big hand on Lana’s slim shoulder, and she brought her hand up to cover his. He seemed older than his years, truly like the Alpha of the Pack.

“You want to make up for the past?” He lowered his voice, gripping Lana’s shoulder a little tighter. “Be the mate Aren deserves.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, but I nodded slowly. If we lived through this we definitely had to talk. Aren deserved a mate who could give him the family these wolves cherished and protected. And that wasn’t me.

Chapter Thirty-One

AREN

I caught Sasha's scent before her hand slid into mine. All that remained of Barry's pyre were red-hot embers, smoldering orange in the dark night. She squeezed my hand in spite of the cold looks from Gareth.

"How did it go with Lana?"

"Fonthill is definitely mentally unstable and most likely dying. That serum they shot them up with permanently altered their DNA. No cure."

Gareth went into the tack room, and I turned toward Sasha. "Barry's blood is on my hands. I can almost feel it."

"You had nothing to do with this."

Gareth came back with a shovel. "Do you want to smother the fire?"

Traditionally the family dispersed the embers and ashes of their fallen loved one. Even though Barry wasn't part of the Pack, I took the shovel and started the somber work of putting out the fire and spreading the ashes. I kept my eye on Gareth, but Sasha had already held her own against him once today. She didn't need my help.

Sasha eyed Gareth and walked away, returning with another shovel. She moved in beside me, tossing dirt over the embers and fanning them out to cool.

Gareth watched us but didn't say a word.

Once the heat was gone and the remnants of the pyre were dispersed, I wiped the sweat off my brow and leaned on the shovel. "I think we're done here."

Sasha straightened up and met my eyes. Her skin shone in the faint light of

the moon and for a second I was tempted to pull her into my arms and let the rest of the world fade away.

Gareth broke the moment when he stepped toward us. “I’ll put the shovels back.”

“Thanks.” He took mine, and then Sasha’s—and without ripping it out of her hands.

She walked across the now barren area and met my eyes. “I need a shower.”

“Me too.” We made our way down the barn aisle.

When Gareth came out of the tack room, he didn’t break the silence.

I was grateful he didn’t say anything. My ass was dragging and the last thing I needed was to get in another fight. We walked up to the house and said our goodbyes to Adam and Lana before collapsing into the Lexus.

Jason and Adam agreed we should keep using Jason’s car for now. Fonhill wouldn’t recognize it. I was happy to be behind the wheel instead of paying for cabs. I turned the key and put the car in gear when Sasha’s hand rested over mine.

When I looked over at her, she sighed. “I need a shower in a big way.”

“Amen to that.”

• • •

We got back to the hotel without anyone tailing us, a good sign that Fonhill hadn’t realized we switched cars. I parked the Lexus and then Sasha and I hustled inside, keeping alert for any sign of danger. Once we were safe in the elevator, I let out a breath I hadn’t noticed I’d been holding. I took Sasha’s hand, grateful when her fingers wrapped around mine. Just touching her skin settled the storm inside me.

Inside our room, I embraced her, breathing in the scent of her hair. Her hands made their way up my back, warming my skin right through my shirt, loosening the tension I’d been hoarding between my shoulder blades.

She pulled away, looking up at me from under her lashes. “How are you

holding up? This was a heavy day even for a homicide detective.”

I went in the bathroom and washed my hands, wishing the guilt would wash away as easily as the grime. “I’m a little messed up, pissed, sad, but mostly grateful to be alive. You sort of take it for granted until you see someone you care about—” I couldn’t finish the sentence. Luckily I didn’t need to. Sasha was already nodding slowly.

“Yeah. The fact that life’s short really hits home when you lose a friend.” Her voice softened. “What you said tonight, for Barry, that was really kind. You’re a good guy, Aren Sloan.”

I crossed to her, kissing her deeply as her words sank into my heart. Her arms tightened around me again and I held her closer, deepening the kiss. Somehow in the middle of all the crap brewing in my life, I’d found her. She was alive, safe, and in my arms.

My pulse raced by the time I pulled back. “I’m going to grab a shower.” I started to smile. “Join me?”

Her eyes sparkled. “I’ll wash your back if you wash mine.”

“Deal.” We kicked off our shoes, and Sasha rocked up on her toes to meet my lips. I pulled her up, walking us both backward toward the bathroom. By the time we got inside, I leaned her against the wall without breaking the kiss, and she made quick work of the buttons on my shirt while I worked on her pants.

Sasha pulled back, breathless. “Wait. Let me take off my holsters.”

Having a gun go off would definitely ruin the mood, so I let go of her and turned on the shower. She lifted the shoulder holster over her head and hung it over the hook on the back of door, then placed her foot on the closed lid of the toilet. Before she could reach down, I rested my hand on her calf.

“Let me.” I knelt down and slid her pant leg up, without taking my eyes from hers. I unbuckled the holster and kissed along the indentation in her leg.

When I got back to my feet, steam billowed from the shower. I placed the gun on the shelf with the hand towels and pulled her close, kissing her neck as I finished unfastening her pants. She stepped out of them and reached for the button on my jeans. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her hard

enough to make my split lip protest, but I didn't care.

I needed her. Now.

In one fluid movement, I lifted her up onto the edge of the vanity. She gasped into the kiss when her bare legs came in contact with the cool marble. Pushing her knees open, I pressed up against her, making it plain how badly I wanted her. I pulled her top over her head and dropped it behind me while my eyes feasted on the sight of her.

I ran my hands up from her feet, caressing every curve of her shapely legs, then along the hourglass of her waist until the weight of her breasts filled my hands. Her back arched, and I popped the front clasp on her bra. Every inch of her was calling to me. I bent to take her breast in my mouth, enjoying the salty taste of her soft skin.

Her fingers combed through my hair, and I straightened up enough to claim her lips, our tongues tangling as my hands moved lower to peel off her silk panties. I caressed the insides of her thighs until I reached her curls. She moaned into my kiss as my finger entered her. Her legs opened wider, her hips tilting toward me until I couldn't stand it any longer.

I moved back just enough to get free of my shirt and pants. She pulled me to her, kissing me as she wrapped her legs around my waist. I growled into the kiss and slid inside of her. The steam of the fogged-up room, the heat of her body, her fingernails digging into my shoulders, all of it took me away from the danger and death that had surrounded us all day. We were alive.

Invincible.

Our bodies rocked together, and I lifted her from the vanity, carrying her as I stepped into the shower. The hot water poured over us, washing away all traces of smoke from the fire, erasing the pain of our day. I rested my forehead on hers, staring into her dark eyes. Pressing her back against the shower wall, I worked my hips up into her as we kissed again, over and over.

I wanted to make love to her all night, escaping the world that existed outside of our room. We belonged to each other, no clashing with the Pack, no worrying about a crazed werewolf, just us.

I brought one hand down between us, rubbing and teasing her until I found

the right spot. She gasped, moaning my name as her legs wrapped around my waist even firmer. “You’re mine,” I growled against her ear. “Give yourself to me, Sash.”

Her fingernails dug into my shoulders as she rode my hips, her muscles spasming around me until I slammed into her one last time. I came so hard I couldn’t move. I held her tight, struggling to catch my breath, kissing the scar on her collarbone.

She didn’t pull away this time.

Slowly her legs loosened and her feet slid down, separating our bodies. She opened her eyes and I wished I knew what she was thinking. Could she see how much I loved her? Could she see I would do anything to protect her, to make her smile?

I had no idea. So I kissed her before I blurted out that I loved her more intensely and deeply than I ever realized I could love another person. I told myself it was to keep from scaring her.

But deep down, I may have been the one who was afraid.

Chapter Thirty-Two

SASHA

My legs were wobbly when I stood up in the shower, my insides sore in a delicious kind of way. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't find the words. I wasn't sure when I had given myself to him, but somewhere along the way, everything had changed. I was his, and it wasn't because he had just growled it in my ear.

But would he still want me if he knew I'd never give him a set of cuddly twins? Fear coursed through my veins. I couldn't stay his.

This was going to hurt.

"Are you all right?" Aren picked up the shampoo.

I shook my head and took the shampoo. "We need to talk."

The muscles across his chest tightened up, and a voice inside insisted I shouldn't ruin the mood with what I was about to say.

I took a deep breath and met his eyes. "We haven't used any birth control."

"I know..." He looked guilty for a split second. "I'm sorry. I should've gotten some protection, I just—"

I covered his lips with my finger. I didn't want apologies.

"I would've insisted on it if I thought I might get pregnant." I waited for my words to sink in.

Aren shook his head. "I wouldn't worry about it either, but Lana got pregnant even though Adam never converted her." His voice softened, and he reached up to caress my cheek. "I wouldn't be upset..."

I stopped him again, petrified he'd tell me about how much he wanted a family.

“I’m trying to explain...I can’t get pregnant. That’s why I’m worthless to Nero. Even as a traitor they could still kidnap me and force me to give birth to the next generation of jaguar assassins.”

Part of me waited for him to turn and walk away. He didn’t say anything, and the silence tormented me.

I sighed and shook my head. “After I raised my sister, I felt like that was enough. I’m good with it.” My chest constricted, and he still didn’t say a word. “You’ve been honest with me, and I thought you should know. Your brother told me to be the mate you deserve, but...” Oh, God, tears were welling up. I ground my teeth together forcing them back. “I’ll never be able to be what you need.”

There. I said it. Now I needed to escape.

I turned to get out of the shower, but he caught my wrist, pulling my attention back to him. “Don’t go.” He lifted my chin until our eyes met. “You think your ability to bear children is what makes you a worthy mate?” He shook his head slowly, water beading on his face. His hand slid from my chin to rest over my heart. “This. This is what makes you a worthy mate.”

The wall around my heart crumbled a little under his hand. I swallowed the lump of emotion in my throat. “You’ve never dreamed about having a family or teaching a boy to play catch?”

“I already have a family. A big one. And I can teach Malcolm to play catch. I was always better at it than his dad anyway.” A gentle smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “What I want is a mate with enough brains and backbone to put up with me.”

I stared into his eyes, searching for a trace of dishonesty, but Aren was an open book. And I caught myself wanting to believe him. This was a heavy thing to drop on him right after we made love. Maybe after he thought it over, after the blood returned to his brain, he’d want to reconsider his position. I guessed I would have to wait and see, but at least he had all the facts.

“Are we okay now?” The sound of his deep voice broke me out of my thoughts.

“I am.” I nodded slowly, drinking in the sight of his smile. “Better than

okay.”

Tipping the shampoo in my hand, I squeezed a little into my other hand. There was a handsome naked man in the shower with me. I refused to let myself worry any more about something I couldn't control. “Get down here so I can wash your hair.”

Bending his knees, he wrapped his arms around my waist, nuzzling my breasts as I lathered up his hair, massaging his scalp and enjoying the way he moaned against my skin. Knowing I made him happy empowered me. Until now, only my guns had ever given me that kind of confidence.

“Rinse.”

He straightened up and closed his eyes as he leaned back into the shower spray. I feasted on his naked body. The soapy water slid over his chiseled chest, down to his trim waist, and finally a little lower. I even allowed myself to look at his scarred ankle.

If not for that one injury, the man had the body of a god. And in spite of the wound I'd inflicted on him, he had my back anyway.

Amazing.

“Your turn.” His voice surprised me. “You sure you're okay?”

I nodded and switched places with him. I closed my eyes and my knees got weak all over again when his strong fingers massaged my scalp and carefully slid back through my hair. His hands made their way lower, massaging my shoulders until my head lulled back to rest against his chest.

“That feels good,” I whispered.

He kissed my temple, his lips brushing my ear. “Rinse.”

Mmmm, that word had never sounded so sexy. I turned around, leaning back into the water as I rinsed the shampoo from my hair. When I opened my eyes again, his gaze was hungry, and my body responded.

“You are so beautiful.”

My face flushed with heat, and I reached out to run my finger along his strong jaw. “You make me feel that way.”

He shook his head. “You really are.” He started to smile. “And I'm not just saying that because you're naked in the shower with me.”

I laughed and gave him a half-hearted wet swat. He picked me up and dipped me under the shower, kissing me when I squirmed. And again, he made me feel like a woman instead of a cop.

It felt damn good.

Once we were towed dry, I fired up my laptop while Aren flipped on the news and checked his phone. I started downloading the files on Fonthill while the meteorologist told us about warm temperatures in the background.

Aren got up from the bed and brought his phone over with an email from Lana.

Hi, Sasha –

I didn't have your email, so I'm sending this to Aren for you. This may be nothing, but I thought you should see it anyway. Be sure to check their donor page. Follow the money.

Lana

I glanced up at him, and he shrugged. “Before Lana met Adam, she supported herself as a freelance journalist. Research was one of her specialties.”

Knowing that, whatever she found was probably far from “nothing.”

I typed in the website from the email on Aren's phone into my browser. Brightwood Academy for Girls. Nadya's elementary school.

Dread ran cold fingers down my spine, and I struggled to keep my breath even. Nero couldn't have anything to do with that school... They just couldn't.

When the website loaded, I went straight to the donor page. I didn't see anything that struck me as odd. It was a typical list of names, family trusts, and a few foundations for education.

Nothing seemed unusual to me.

But Lana wouldn't have sent me the link unless she had found something.

I clicked on one of the education foundations and skimmed their site. Again, nothing suspicious jumped out. I was about to give up when I clicked

the “Educational Research Grant” link. It took me to another generic-looking foundation page, but something in the corner of the website caught my eye.

“Hidden talent counts for nothing.”

- Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus

The hair on the back of my neck started to rise. That was the same quote on Nero’s letterhead and on the cornerstone of the main facility building. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

Nero funded the school Nadya had attended for gifted kids. For psychics.

“Oh, shit.”

Aren sat up. “What’s wrong?”

I held my hair back from my face. “Nero is involved with Nadya’s old school.” I met his eyes. “Trolling for talent?”

“I know Nero’s been experimenting with psychic women, but using a school for girls to find females to experiment on for their breeding program? They’d have to wait too long for them to grow up.” He shook his head.

I stared at the quote again. “Maybe not.”

But in my gut, I knew.

Nero hadn’t wanted me. They wanted my sister.

I closed the laptop and got up on the bed. Aren lifted the remote to turn off the television but stopped when a familiar face stared back at us.

“That’s Fonhill.” He turned up the sound.

“Police are searching for this man in connection with an attack on a gas station owner. This is footage from the surveillance tape. The victim is in critical condition at St. Mary’s Hospital. If you see this man, call the police. Do not approach the suspect. He’s considered armed and dangerous.”

Aren turned off the television as the reporter changed topics. “Why would he attack a guy at a gas station?”

“Because he’s insane. The drug that altered his DNA is flawed. Eventually it brings out aggression and psychotic episodes until their brain finally bleeds out.” I got under the covers. “We’ve got to find him and stop him. And we need to get to St. Mary’s first thing tomorrow.”

“The hospital? Why?”

“Because we need to know if he bit that guy.”

“Oh, shit.”

I nodded. “Exactly. This could get really ugly and hard to contain if Fonthill is unraveling.”

Aren turned off the light and pulled me into his arms. Listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat and the way his thumb stroked my back were comforting. But despite all that, I couldn’t shut my brain off.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Brightwood Academy.

Once Aren’s breathing slowed and he drifted off to sleep, I slid out of bed and fired up my laptop. It took a little while, but through some focused searches, I located a few graduates of Brightwood who had vanished. Two had been “abducted” in grade school, and six as young women at college. Those odds were skewed for such a small school.

Why hadn’t anyone working the cases ever tied that thread together?

Maybe they were “encouraged” not to...

I rubbed my forehead, struggling to connect the dots. Maybe it would make more sense after I had some sleep. I started to close the laptop but stopped.

Follow the money.

Money had led to Fonthill making it into NYPD, but who was really behind making that happen: the government or Nero? My fingers flew over the keyboard. Searching old news stories about Fonthill’s dismissal from the force, I finally found what I was looking for. He had become an officer a month before my parents were killed. My fingertips tingled. I was getting closer.

If Nero had been watching my sister at Brightwood, if they wanted her, they would’ve needed to get custody without any interference from the legal system. My last name was different from hers, and I wasn’t living at home anymore. They wouldn’t have realized she had an older sibling. Just as I’d thought, they’d never known I had a younger one.

A chill shot down my spine.

Then I pulled my sister out of their school and moved away.

Had they been searching for her ever since?

Sebastian came into my life shortly after Nadya started college. It couldn't have been coincidence. I pulled up her college webpage and started scanning for donors there. It was like searching for a guppy in the Great Lakes. If Nero had a connection to her university, it was well hidden. But if they did, they could have gotten my address and my name off her college application.

Sebastian showed up in my life to get me out of the way.

"Dammit," I mumbled.

Could it have all been a setup to grab Nadya?

Other than my sister, I didn't have anything else that connected me to Nero. Maybe Sebastian had been sniffing around my address for my sister and couldn't find our connection. When he discovered I had weapons training and no family it made me the perfect mark to become a killer for his father.

I ground my teeth together to keep from screaming and waking Aren.

I glanced up and found him staring at me anyway. "Can't sleep?"

Shaking my head, I closed my laptop. "Too many loose ends." I got up and grabbed a towel from the bathroom. "A couple yoga poses should help me get a grip. I'm too off-balance to sleep."

To my surprise, Aren got out of bed. He brought over another towel, and then went to his suitcase and pulled out his laptop. I raised a questioning brow, and he smiled while his laptop booted up.

"If I'm going to do yoga in the middle of the night, you'll have to endure some music."

"I didn't mean to wake you." I shook my head, kneeling on my towel. "You don't have to get up too."

He was clicking through files on his laptop. "You're not alone anymore, remember?" He peered at me over his computer screen. "We're in this together."

I couldn't hold back a little smile. Hearing him say "we" was nice, but seeing him walking over to me, in a hotel robe and nothing else, to do a couple of yoga poses that didn't come easy to him, melted my heart. He set the laptop down beside us, and Elvis erupted from the speakers with "A Little

Less Conversation.”

“My playlist is on shuffle.” I must’ve made a face, because he started to smile. “Too fast for soothing yoga?”

“That’s all right. It’s late for yoga too, so why not go all out?”

Draped in our white robes, we moved in unison, our breathing eventually as one, too. He even managed not to groan when we shifted into half-tortoise pose. We made it through three postures before the anxiety started lifting from my shoulders. Aren didn’t complain; he just followed my lead.

While we meditated, Elvis belted out “Jailhouse Rock” followed by “Hound Dog.” Hearing Elvis, I remembered Aren telling me he liked it because it reminded him of his mother.

I turned my head toward him as we lay down on our backs. “Tell me about your mom.”

Aren met my eyes. “I wish I remembered her better. We were pretty young when she passed away.” He stared up at the ceiling. “She loved us, though. And I remember her hugs.” A sad smile pulled at his lips. “When I started school, I came home one day and told her she spelled my name wrong. She told me about Elvis and how the spelling meant I was special like he was.” He met my eyes again and grinned. “I was sure that meant she loved me the most, but I never said anything to my brother.”

He reached for my hand, his fingers weaving with mine. “What about your mother?”

I took a long, slow breath. How long had it been since I talked about my parents out loud?

“She was beautiful. I remember watching her do things around the house and wishing I could be pretty like my mom. Her family immigrated to the U.S. when she was a teenager, so she always had a Russian accent. When Nadya was about three, she asked me why I talked different than our mom.” I shook my head, surprised at how easy it was to talk to him. “My mom took charge no matter what life threw at us. We always felt safe with her.”

He gave my hand a squeeze and smiled. “I guess we were both lucky.”

I shrugged. “We still lost them.”

“Not really.” He kissed my hand and placed it over his heart. “They’re still right here. With us.” His laptop whirled, shuffling to the next song. The moment the music started, Aren tugged at my arm. “Dance with me.”

I shook my head as he got to his feet. “I don’t dance.”

His smile made me warm all over. How could I refuse him anything? I stood up, wondering when I got to be so soft.

“There’s no one here but you and me.” His lips caressed mine, further knocking down my defenses. Our eyes met, and he took my hand in his as he rested his other one at the small of my back. “Just follow my lead.”

Sure enough, not only could he lead, but it seemed like I could actually waltz while I was in his arms. Elvis poured his heart out, about fools rushing in as the belt on my robe loosened. His warm chest pressed against mine, and he held me even closer. My eyes drifted shut, and I lost myself in moving with him, enjoying the way his breath brushed over my ear.

Then I started to realize he was actually singing, soft and low along with the music. The deep baritone of his voice made my body weak, but I was afraid to say anything. I didn’t want to break the spell we seemed to be under.

“Take my hand... Take my whole life too...” He hummed the rest of the line, and I smiled against his chest. As the song slowed, and Elvis hit the final chorus, Aren drew back. My heavy eyelids lifted, and I found him staring directly into my soul. When the final chord rang out he whispered, “I love you.”

He kissed me before I could say a word. Thank God because if he hadn’t I might have cried. I was no expert with love. I’d been fooled into believing it was flowers, gifts, and romantic lines of poetry. But here in Aren’s arms, dancing alone in our room in nothing but terrycloth bathrobes felt better than any long-stemmed roses and diamond earrings ever had.

Our tongues mingled together, and I savored the taste of his lips as I slid my hands inside his robe, pulling it open. He hummed into the kiss and slowly pulled back, resting his forehead against mine.

“I’m not sorry,” he whispered. “It just slipped out.”

“Was it honest?” I held my breath.

“Completely.”

I brought my hand up to cup his cheek. He turned to kiss my palm, and his gaze locked with mine. I wanted to tell him how I felt, but when I closed my eyes, I saw his face the moment I pointed my pistol at his head.

And guilt stole my voice. I tilted up on my toes, kissing him deeply, hoping my body would give him the answer my lips couldn't.

He carried me back to the bed, and made love to me slowly for hours. This raw, real love made me strong and weak, like a thrill ride and a cup of hot chocolate all at once.

Already, I was hooked.

Chapter Thirty-Three

AREN

The sun peered into our room through a tiny opening in the blackout drapes, shining right into my eye. I squinted, trying to see the digital clock near the bed. It was 11:30 a.m.

Shit.

I should've woken Sasha, but seeing her dozing beside me gave me time to keep her to myself. When she woke up, she'd be putting her guns on and jumping right back into the center of the fight with Fonhill.

Sometimes reality was a raving bitch.

Sasha's lashes fluttered, and she opened her eyes with a dreamy smile. "I'm starving."

I let my head fall back onto the pillow and laughed, pulling her into my arms. She grinned down at me with her bed-head hair.

"What's so funny? It's all your fault."

I did my best to produce an innocent smile. "My fault?"

"Yes." She kissed me, and then saw the clock.

The afterglow bubble burst.

"Damn. It's almost noon!" She shot out of bed, hustling toward the bathroom. "We've got to go check out the gas station guy at St. Mary's, and I need to find Sebastian."

Afterglow officially fucking gone.

I sat on the edge of the bed and turned to look over at her. I was doing my best not to be an asshole, but hearing her mention Sebastian a few hours after I told her I loved her was definitely bringing out my less flattering qualities.

“Why exactly do you want to see him?”

She came out and started getting dressed without making eye contact. “Because I think he knows a lot more than he’s telling me.”

“That’s hardly a news flash.” I yanked my hand back through my hair, struggling not to growl in frustration. “The guy is a weasel, Sash. Half-truths and secrets are his specialty. He’s only looking out for himself.”

She spun around so fast I almost flinched. Almost.

“Do you honestly think I don’t know that? I’m pretty sure I know better than most what a lying bastard he is.”

I put my hands up in surrender as I walked over to get dressed. “I just think it’s a waste of time to search him out when he’ll only tell you what *he* thinks you need to know.”

She popped the magazine out of her Glock, checked the ammunition, and slammed it back inside the gun. “I’ll just have to persuade him.”

I got dressed, watching her put on her shoulder holster. She yanked up her pant leg and quickly fastened her smaller holster to her calf. We moved past each other in silence, until we were both ready to go.

“It makes me crazy to think he hurt you before. He’s wasted skin as far as I’m concerned.”

“I’m not really happy about seeing him either.” She sighed. “I checked some dates last night and Fonthill started at the department the same month my parents were killed. I think it’s connected. Nero was watching my sister at her school, too, and they wanted her so it all makes sense. I don’t think they knew I existed until after.”

“Shouldn’t we concentrate on Fonthill for now? We can worry about Nero later.” I held the door open for her, but she stopped.

“Short answer, I think Nero made Fonthill a deal. Someone got him into the force regardless of his other-than-honorable discharge. He’s obviously good with a sniper rifle. He killed my parents for Nero, and in trade, Nero got him a job. Nero wanted Nadya. They didn’t know she had an older sister.” I followed Sasha to the elevator. Once she punched the button she added, “I changed my last name when I entered the police academy. I wanted it to be

different than the rest of my family in case I ever crossed the wrong perp in my job. I also didn't live at home. Nero wouldn't have connected me to my sister."

She shook her head as the elevator descended. "It all adds up. Fonthill was in the department when they were shot, and when he got in trouble for beating up Nancy, no one from Nero backed him up. They didn't need him in place anymore."

I thought about it as we walked out of the hotel into the afternoon sun. If she was right, Sebastian didn't come into her life to kill her witness. He came looking for her sister.

...

After we parked at St. Mary's Hospital, Sasha pulled out her leather wallet and whipped out her fake ID and badge. "Ready?"

I nodded, and we made our way through the parking lot toward the main entrance of the hospital when a window above us shattered. I yanked Sasha in close to me as a man plummeted three stories and landed in a lifeless heap on the pavement at our feet.

Sasha shaded her eyes, staring up at the window, while I started to reach for the victim. I didn't bother checking for a pulse. Blood already pooled around his head like a dark halo, and medical personnel rushed toward us.

"Watch the front doors. I'll check around the back," she said.

"Fonthill?"

"Probably." Her eyes met mine. "That man didn't just *fall* out the window."

Without another word, she vanished into the mayhem. I moved out of the way of the medical team and the curious people trying to sneak a peek at the accident. In the distance, I could already hear the police sirens. News vans wouldn't be far behind.

I kept my eyes on the front entrance, wishing I had some way of knowing how Sasha was doing on the other side of the building. While I stood watch, I

concentrated on the scents around me. At first I didn't recognize anything—lots of cologne, perfume, body fluids, but nothing that would be out of the ordinary for a hospital. Making my way closer to the automatic doors, I froze. I took in a slow, deep breath, my wolf senses analyzing the scent.

Sebastian.

I tracked the scent through the doors until it ended at an elevator. He must've entered from the front of the building but he hadn't left that way. I searched the ground floor, struggling to find the path he took out. He couldn't have left from the third floor. He was a professional killer, but he couldn't fucking fly.

My phone buzzed, and I yanked it out. "Yeah?"

"I'm around back by the fire-escape stairs." It was good to hear her voice.

"It's Sebastian." I was already making my way toward the rear exit doors. "I caught his scent going in the front doors."

"I know. I'm with him now."

I ground my teeth as I pushed open the exit door. "Be right there."

Chapter Thirty-Four

SASHA

I kept my Glock aimed at Sebastian's forehead. "I should turn you over to the police right now."

His intense gaze never left my face, the single visible sign that he was even mildly concerned at having a gun pointed at his head. He was the same height as Aren, but Sebastian was built slim and lean. Aren had broader shoulders, muscled and strong, while Sebastian's torso was sleek like a jungle cat. I wished I wasn't comparing them in my head, but it was tough not to, even at a time like this. They were the only men I ever thought I loved.

Sebastian opened his hands to show me he was unarmed. "Handing me over to human authorities will not correct this situation."

"And tossing an innocent man out of a building does?" I tightened my grip on the gun. "Who sent you here?"

"Fonthill is unstable. Nero has determined he must be silenced."

"Again, how does killing an innocent man stop Fonthill?"

"Collateral damage, I'm afraid." He shrugged matter-of-fact without a trace of remorse. "He might have witnessed Fonthill shifting into a wolf. We couldn't risk that he had."

I fought the urge to pull the trigger. "So you killed him *just in case*?"

His eyes narrowed. "I did what had to be done, what I am trained to do. You have no room to judge me, Carina."

I cringed, hearing him refer to me by the pet name he used when we had been together.

"Don't call me that." I lowered my gun but didn't put it back in the holster.

“So Severino put a price on my head with this guy, and now he’s sent you to take his bounty hunter out. Am I next on your hit list?”

Sebastian raised a brow. “No matter my answer, would you believe me?”

“I wouldn’t.” We both turned to see Aren rounding the corner. Even in our current situation my pulse raced when he came to stand beside me.

“What *you* choose to believe is of no importance to me, wolf.” A muscle jumped in Sebastian’s cheek as he turned toward me again. “I would think you might be anxious for my assistance in this matter, since your wolf has apparently not been much help in stopping Fonhill.”

Aren slammed Sebastian back against the building, pressing his forearm into Sebastian’s windpipe. Equally as quickly, Sebastian retrieved a switchblade from his pocket. The blade sprung out, and he pressed it to the base of Aren’s neck.

“Call off your dog,” Sebastian wheezed.

I stepped between them. “Enough.” I shot each of them a glare. “Both of you back off.”

Aren jerked away from Sebastian, leaving him to cough and gasp for air. With a sigh, I holstered my weapon.

“We can’t stay here.” I glanced over at Sebastian. “But we do need to talk.”

He cleared his throat, but his voice still sounded raspy. “Meet me at Lulou’s restaurant at seven p.m.” He rubbed his neck and added, “Alone.”

Before Aren could protest, Sebastian walked around the corner of the building. He started to follow, but I caught his elbow. “Let him go.”

“You’re not thinking about going tonight...” He searched my eyes, then shook his head. “Fuck. You’re kidding. Sash, you could be his next target!”

He cursed under his breath, walking away from me. He pivoted back, looking a little more controlled. “He’ll take Fonhill out of the picture and then finish what Nero’s bounty hunter started.”

“I need intel from Sebastian, and I’m going to get it. This is about *my* life, *my* sister, and *my* parents. It’s my risk to take.” We remained in a silent standoff until I couldn’t take it any longer. “This is something I have to do.”

His jaw clenched, but he didn’t say anything else. We walked around the

hospital and blended in with the controlled insanity out front. A police officer was conducting a witness interview while the medical examiner's office took photos of the crime scene. Weaving through the onlookers, we made our way back to the Lexus. It wasn't until we were inside that he met my eyes.

"I'm sorry I lost my head, but I don't want you to meet with Sebastian, especially not alone."

I took his hand. "For what it's worth, I don't like it much more than you do, but I'll be ready." He stared out the front windshield. "I need to see this through."

"I know." He gripped my hand tighter. "I'm still not going to like it."

"Fair enough." I almost smiled. "Let's get out of here."

He nodded and started the car. My blood pressure leveled out once we were out of the parking lot. "Any interest in lunch? I'm still starving."

"The gore that dropped at our feet didn't ruin your appetite?" He merged onto the freeway with a hint of a smile.

"Police work numbs you after a while." I shrugged. "Not to mention I've got an iron gut."

Aren glanced my way. "Thoughts on what we should do about Fonthill?"

I sighed. "He's obviously deteriorating and getting careless. Now that he attacked the gas station owner and let his face be captured on the security camera, not only is Sebastian after him, but the police are on his tail too. No doubt the cops are assuming Fonthill is the most likely suspect who pushed the guy out the hospital window, but if Severino gave the order to take him out, Nero has much better resources to track this guy than we do."

"So you're comfortable leaving him to Sebastian?"

I shook my head. "That's not what I'm saying. I'm just thinking out loud." He pulled into a burger joint and turned off the engine. "Do you have any paper in here? Maybe we should make some notes."

Over lunch, we drafted a few ideas.

With full bellies and a few leads to follow up, we drove around the area surrounding the service station. I was hoping we'd get a few clues where Fonthill might be staying, but we came up empty. He could've been

anywhere.

Aren was less than chatty, still stewing about my dinner meeting with Sebastian. If there were some other way I would take it, but for now, I needed to play by Sebastian's rules.

...

Back in our hotel room, I worked at my laptop, logging into my faux PI account in LexisNexis again to check for any other sightings or police reports that might involve Fonthill. The first time I ran into him was on Virginia Street, the main drag in Reno, so maybe he had a room at one of the casino hotels. It'd give him cheap rates, and make it easier to hide amongst all the tourists and gamblers.

While I researched, something hit me. Aren was still on the phone with Adam, but when he finished, he came over to sit beside me. "What's up?"

"I just realized that we never found out if Fonthill bit that guy. What if something shows up on the autopsy?"

He thought about it for a second. "I'll give Jason a call. He can check into it. If he has bite marks like Sebastian claimed, we wouldn't want them swabbing the wounds for DNA, but the guy wouldn't have experienced any real physical changes until the full moon. It takes that long whenever we convert a woman." He paused for a second, brow furrowing. "Unless Fonthill's altered DNA warps all that."

I should've been focusing on Fonthill, but my attention was stuck on women being converted. "So your Pack only bites women? Men don't get ever turned into werewolves?"

"No." He shook his head. "We're not trying to create a shape-shifter empire like Nero. We're a family." He came over to sit beside me. "And we don't run around biting just anyone. This isn't like what happened to you."

He took my hand, our fingers lacing together. "In the Pack, we're raised to believe that when you find your true mate, there are no secrets. She knows your true nature, and in order to have children, she has to be converted. The

only way to do it is through a bite.”

On the surface it sounded noble. I rubbed at the scar on my collarbone. “What if she’s not keen on becoming a shifter like you?”

His gaze locked with mine as he lowered his voice. “No werewolf from my Pack would bite his mate against her will. It’s the ultimate sign of trust, but only if she chooses it. Once she’s bitten, we have a celebration and honor her, welcoming her to the Pack.”

“And you’ve never bitten anyone?”

“No.” He lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss on my skin. “I never believed the old stories about finding your one and only mate. It sounded like a big fairy tale to me. Then I watched it happen to my brother.” He stared into my eyes. “And I found you.”

My breath caught in my throat. “What would happen if you bit me?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

AREN

I pondered her question. The wolf tensed inside me, my animal instincts ripping and tearing their way to the surface of my consciousness.

“That’s a loaded question.”

She raised a brow. “Is it?”

I nodded and stared down at our hands. How could I look her in the eyes and explain that part of me salivated just thinking about tasting her skin and marking her as mine? Even *I* didn’t understand it, so how could I expect her to?

The human part of me was repulsed at the thought of biting her, but it was obvious to me now that the feral instincts of the wolf inside of me were enticed at the prospect.

“Until Jason was certain it wouldn’t hurt you” —I met her eyes again— “I wouldn’t risk it. It’s not like we’d be trying to have children anyway.”

I wanted to yank my words back into my mouth when I saw her face fall.

“I haven’t signed anything in blood agreeing to be your mate anyway.”

“No, you haven’t.” I shook my head staring at my shoes. “I didn’t mean for that to come out the way it did.”

“You act like not having any kids is no big deal, but I’ve had a year to accept it, plus I already raised my sister. Someday the rest of your Pack will have a new generation of wolves. How can you be so sure you won’t be aching because you don’t? Because you chose me?”

I mulled over her words for a moment before turning toward her. “I trust the wolf inside me. It didn’t come easy. I thought it was a mistake and fought

my mating instinct, but once I got to spend time with you, I realized the wolf knew all along. I've never felt the way I do when I'm with you. I can't imagine a more perfect woman for me."

I waited for a second, but she didn't say anything. "You're probably right. There will be kids in the Pack." I started to grin at the thought. "And we can watch them grow, we can even babysit, and then we can give them back."

She almost smiled, then it faded a little. "The Pack already questions your judgment when it comes to me. What will they think when we don't ever have children?"

"I don't care what they think." I shrugged. "It's none of their business."

"Does anyone wonder why Adam hasn't bitten Lana?"

"I'm not sure. He obviously doesn't have to convert her since they have the twins."

"If Lana has the shifter gene just like any male-born shifter, wouldn't her twins have it too? Maybe Madeleine will be able to shift without being converted. I wonder if she'd be a wolf or a jaguar..." Her brow creased. "I guess you can't tell yet though." She swallowed and shook her head slowly. "I bet Nero will want to know too."

My chest felt tight, and I was grateful she hadn't heard my conversation with Adam about the pictures Nadya had drawn for the twins. I was also glad Sasha hadn't held them. Any werewolf could tell by the twins' scents from a distance that they were both shifters, but being a jaguar, Sasha would probably only be able to tell once she held them and caught the scent of their skin. I should've told her, but the mention of Nero made me hesitate.

Sasha removed her hand from mine and focused back on her laptop, shutting me out while her fingers danced over the keyboard. I watched her, still debating whether or not to tell her about the babies. Did it really matter? She didn't need to know if they could shift. It wouldn't affect our problem with Fonthill. I was making a big deal out of nothing.

Once everything settled down I'd mention it to her. Hopefully she'd agree to be my mate, and then the Pack secrets would be hers, too.

"Hey." I reached over to catch my thumb under her chin, shifting her

attention back to me for a moment. “I hope you know that even if Jason decided it wasn’t safe to convert you, it wouldn’t change how I feel about you.” Her eyes searched mine. “I love you, Sasha. Whether or not I put my mark on your body with a bite wouldn’t make me feel any differently.”

She leaned up to kiss me, whispering against my lips, “I would let you.”

I crushed her body to mine, oblivious to her laptop as it slipped to the carpeted floor. Her fingers slid into my hair, pulling, drawing a growl from my throat as I laid her back on the bed. Our mouths met in a slow, sensual exploration. Heat pumped through my body as her teeth nipped at my lower lip. Her taste was a drug, and I was hopelessly addicted.

She smiled up at me when I pulled back. “Are all wolves amazing kissers?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never kissed one.” I grinned and stole one more taste of her lips. “But I’m pretty sure my skills far surpass any other wolf’s.”

Sasha laughed and rolled us over. “You just don’t want me to check into it.”

I tightened my hold on her. “Damned straight.”

She kissed me again and settled down against my chest. To say I loved holding Sasha in my arms was a huge understatement. Having her body against mine and hearing her breathing settle to match mine made the rest of the world cease to exist.

She was my world.

“Once we get rid of Fonhill, I don’t want you to go.” I went on before she got a chance to say anything. “I was thinking, since you took a leave of absence from the NYPD, maybe you could get a job with the police here in Reno instead.”

Sasha lifted her head, her eyes searching my own. “Even if we get Fonhill, Nero still wants me dead. I know too much.”

I reached up and cupped her cheek. “I know you think Nero stole your life, but that’s only still true if you let them.”

She nuzzled into my touch, closing her eyes. “Getting to work again seems like too much to hope for. I don’t think I could stand the disappointment. I bet the Pack would be *thrilled* if I decided to stick around.”

“Don’t think about the Pack.” I brushed my thumb along her cheek until she met my eyes again. “Just us right now.”

“If it were just us, I’d do everything I could to stay.”

I grinned and rolled over so she was pinned underneath me. “Then let’s finish Fonthill and get moving.”

She laughed. “You make it all sound so simple.”

“It’s called a business plan. Once we agree on what we both want, we can take steps in that direction.”

She rolled her eyes, her lips brushing against mine again. “It doesn’t change the fact that Nero still wants me out of the picture and your family probably does too.”

“No, but knowing we want the same thing is a big step.”

A monumental step.

I lost myself in her arms, her lips, her touch, until my cell phone interrupted us. Content to ignore it, I held her even tighter until she whispered to me between kisses. “You...should...get...that...”

Groaning, I loosened my grip on her and reached for my phone. Adam’s name lit up the screen. “Yeah?”

“Hey, Aren. Jason’s got some results back on that Fonthill guy. You better get over here.”

“Will do.” I closed my phone as Sasha sat up. “Jason’s got results back on Fonthill. ”

She nodded glancing over at the clock. “I’ve got to go meet Sebastian anyway.”

...

I drove to the ranch on autopilot.

Sasha meeting with Sebastian had me completely distracted. My gut twisted imagining him touching her, even briefly as they went to a table. I trusted Sasha, and she was well armed if Sebastian had any other intentions, but that didn’t relieve the jealousy that was infecting me like a cancer. Maybe

it was the wolf inside of me, but I didn't want him to share any of her smiles, her laughter. In fact, I didn't want him anywhere near her.

By the time I pulled into Adam's ranch, every muscle in my body felt taut and tense. I hauled in a deep breath, willing myself to focus before entering my brother's house.

Lana opened the door with a welcoming smile, and once I got out of Jason's Lexus, she hugged me before I said a word. When she released me, I realized I was smiling. There was definitely something to be said for family. Adam came over, and we clasped forearms before I greeted Jason.

"Good to see you." I glanced around the house. "Where are the little knee-biters?"

Lana grinned. "Nadya took them down to the barn to visit the horses." Before I could ask Lana added, "Gareth's with them."

Looking at my brother, I raised a brow. "I thought Gareth was on the edge."

"He was." He smiled over at his wife. "But he's been coming around a little more lately. Malcolm loves sitting on his motorcycle."

We went inside the house, and I walked over to the window. Nadya was holding Madeleine down by the barn. Gareth sat on his Harley with Malcolm right in front of him while the baby slapped his pudgy hands against the shiny black gas tank.

But it wasn't little Malcolm who had the Gareth's full attention.

"Jason's got some information for us about Fonthill."

The sound of my brother's voice made me turn away from the window. "What'd you find out?"

Jason sat at the dining room table with a medical file in front of him. "His DNA is fundamentally altered from ours." He flipped through his notes. "I also got a blood sample off the carpet of the car that didn't belong to Barry. Apparently our Green Beret gashed himself while breaking the window." He glanced up from his notes. "Fonthill's hormone levels are elevated, and his abnormally high adrenaline levels are definitely impacting his mental state."

I waited for more, but Jason was quiet. Deep down, I had hoped he'd be

able to tell us Fonthill was already dying or maybe pinpoint a chink in his armor. Finding out he had more testosterone than an average werewolf didn't seem like anything we could use to our advantage.

"Tell him about the mutation, Jason."

I shifted my attention between my brother and Jason. "What about it?"

Jason sighed and closed his file before looking up at me. "I don't think it was the military's intention but the mutation is highly contagious."

My brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Jason frowned. "What I'm saying is that when he bites someone, they would carry his genetic mutation, not the genetics of a natural werewolf."

I took a seat at the table, rubbing my forehead. "Whoever he bites would be able to shift at any time, too."

"Looks that way," Jason said, nodding. "They'd also have the same medical issues, be prone to mental illness, and eventually brain hemorrhaging." He met my eyes. "It'd be a death sentence."

I put my elbow on the table, resting my head against my hand. "So if he did bite the guy at the service station, then Sebastian probably did the guy a favor in the long run."

Adam raised a brow. "Sebastian?"

I filled them both in on our trip to the hospital, and my brother leaned back in his chair brooding. "Nero wants Fonthill out of the picture too?"

"He's a liability now," I said. "Sasha's meeting with Sebastian now to get more info, but if the cops catch up with him, he could expose Nero."

"And werewolves in general," Jason said. "Wait, *she* is meeting with Sebastian? Alone?"

"I know you can say her name." I clenched my jaw and glared over at him. "And she's not working with him, if that's what you're thinking."

"It's a logical assumption." Jason shrugged. "You're not even mildly concerned?"

"Fuck you, Jason." I shot up from my chair. "I would've gone with her if I had any doubts about her loyalty. She had some more questions about Nero, and he's the only one who can answer them. End of story."

“Enough.” Adam gave us a long stare until we each relaxed. “I know you’re a doctor, Jason, but contrary to popular belief that doesn’t make you smarter than everyone else.”

I tried not to gloat, or at least not to let it show, but then my brother focused his attention on me. “And you know damned well each member of this Pack has every right to doubt Sasha’s intentions.”

“Do *you* think she’s conspiring with Sebastian?” I searched Adam’s eyes waiting for him to answer.

He kept his gaze level with mine. “I trust your judgment.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Adam crossed his arms, his face becoming a familiar mask that our father used to wear. The Alpha. “It’s the best I can give you right now.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

SASHA

I got out of the cab in the lot behind Lulou's Restaurant. I was a few minutes early, but I planned to get inside and take a look around before Sebastian arrived anyway. I headed for the entrance when a familiar scent stopped me.

Blood.

My muscles tensed as the hair at the back of my neck stood on end. I spun around, scanning the cars. The sky began to color with the setting sun, casting shadows that made it tough see. My vision would improve once the sun set completely, but until then, I felt vulnerable. I slid my right hand inside my bolero jacket, keeping my fingers on the butt of my Glock, ready to draw if necessary.

I jogged silently between cars, taking cover while I searched the area. Using my animal senses, I tracked the scent, wishing I could see if I was stumbling into a trap. Forget X-ray vision, being able to see the future would definitely be my choice of superhero abilities.

Since I was anything but a superhero, I continued on with caution. Three rows over from where I started, I saw something move inside a black Mercedes. The car was parked in the far corner spot, with the driver's side window down. I took a cursory glance across the rest of the parking lot to be sure no one else was around, then pulled out my gun.

With the barrel pointed toward the sky, I gripped the Glock with both hands and took a deep breath before approaching the vehicle. Adrenaline burned through my veins as I scrambled for the driver's side, pointing my gun at the man's forehead.

His hands shot up at the same moment I recognized him.

“Sebastian.” I lowered my weapon and frowned when I realized he was the source of the blood I smelled. “What the hell?”

He’d been doctoring his wounds before I’d ambushed him. I could see his medical kit on the passenger seat. He had new stitches just over his eyebrow, his lower lip was swollen and still bleeding, not to mention his left eye was already darkening with a nasty bruise.

“Did you get hit by a truck?”

He shot me a less than amused glare. “Your bounty hunter paid me a visit.”

“When?” I jammed the Glock back into my shoulder holster.

“About an hour ago.” He placed an alcohol-soaked wipe onto his split lip without so much as a wince, then stuffed the bloodstained fabric into a plastic bag.

“Severino is aware his dog has gone rabid. He claims he’s sending backup.” He checked his face in the rearview mirror. “Until then, my mission is to keep the animal from exposing us all.”

“Did you find out if he bit the gas station guy?”

Sebastian’s dark eyes met mine. “Twice.”

“Oh, shit.” I shook my head. “So he really is losing it.” I thought of Aren’s mauled and eaten employee, my missing underwear, and the dead attendant, and realized “losing it” was probably an understatement. Fonthill had lost sight of his original mission to kill me and collect the bounty. I didn’t want to know what he had planned next.

“Wolves are aggressive anyway, and this one is angry.” He shrugged his shoulders in an unnaturally fluid movement, but for Sebastian everything was smooth—he was the epitome of a male jaguar. “He knows he’s dying, his friends are all dead, and he blames Nero for the experiments.”

“Maybe we can track him. I could take him out with one shot if we find him.”

The corner of Sebastian’s mouth smirked. “Fonthill is a trained Green Beret, Carina. If he does not want to be found, he won’t be.”

“Don’t call me Carina.” I fought the urge to punch his sore lip. “And you

already found him once today. Let's retrace your steps."

Sebastian swiped the bag of medical waste off the passenger seat and hit the button to put the window up between us. Apparently we were done talking. Asshole.

I walked to the rear of the car, leaning against the trunk while I waited for him to get out. He slammed the door, rocking the entire vehicle.

"He found me."

That was all he said. Sebastian walked toward the restaurant and I followed, counting all the ways the pompous bastard pissed me off. When I got to the door, Sebastian held it open for me.

At least he still had his manners.

Once we were seated with menus and drinks I lowered my voice. "Should I ask why you didn't kill him when he found you?"

He didn't glance up from his menu. "No."

I reached across and lowered his menu for him. "Well, I'm asking anyway."

A muscle in his cheek clenched as his eyes narrowed. "He tackled me in the parking structure outside my hotel. I didn't catch his scent until it was too late."

The tone of his voice made it clear that his pride was wounded worse than his face. I dropped the subject when the waitress returned to take our orders. After handing over the menus, Sebastian sipped his drink as silence blanketed us.

I needed to be cautious. It only took one misstep with Sebastian for him to clam up. His loyalties were in a constant state of flux between his father and Nero, me, sometimes Lana, and his own interests—which even I had no idea about.

The waitress finally returned with our food, and I couldn't stand it any longer. While Sebastian poked at his salad, I cleared my throat, and he met my gaze. "I need to talk to you about Brightwood Academy."

His hand froze for a split second before he recovered with a shrug and forked his food again. "I have never heard of such a place."

““Hidden talent counts for nothing.”” I paused, watching his face. “Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus”

“I am aware of who spoke the phrase.”

I wanted to stab him with my butter knife. “I’m sure you are. Because it’s on Nero’s letterhead and on the freaking building. It’s also on Brightwood’s donor list.”

He shrugged. “Coincidence.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes, struggling to keep from raising my voice. “Don’t insult my intelligence.”

“My father supports many causes.” He drank from his glass and met my eyes. “Perhaps the school is one of them.”

It was all I could do not to reach across the table and smack the bastard. “Your father supports causes that benefit him. This wasn’t for charity, Sebastian.”

He set his glass down. “I thought the purpose of this meeting was to discuss Fonthill.”

“You’re right.” I nodded. “Was Fonthill the one who shot my parents?” He started to balk, but I held up a finger before he could reply. “I’m not finished. See, before my parents were murdered, my sister attended Brightwood Academy for Gifted Children. I always thought it meant academically gifted students, but it’s actually geared toward students who show psychic gifts, isn’t that right?”

He opened his hands like he had nothing to hide. “You know more about this place than I do.”

I yanked my napkin out of my lap and threw it at him as I got out. “Screw you, Sebastian. Your lies are all the answers I need.”

He caught my wrist as I started to leave, and my eyes narrowed. “Let. Me. Go.”

He kept his voice low, but his tone was clear. “Sit down or you get nothing.”

I glared at him for a moment, and part of me wanted to keep right on walking, but the temptation of finally getting answers to my parents’ deaths

was too strong.

I slid back into my side of the booth.

He wet his lips and leaned in closer to me. “Nero does have an interest in Brightwood Academy. My father keeps spies in place to report to him on possible candidates for future projects. I am not privy to all of his decisions.” His eyes locked on mine. “I don’t know if he gave Fonthill the order to kill your parents.”

“Was he looking for my sister when he sent you to seduce me?”

Sebastian rubbed his forehead. “I have told you before that I wasn’t sent to seduce you. Your witness was my target.”

“What if you’re wrong?” Instinctively I reached to touch his hand but recoiled my fingers when I realized what I was doing. Sebastian glanced at my hand and then back up to my eyes.

Anger bubbled up inside of me. This was a man I could never trust. Not fully. “I understand Severino is your father, but on some level you must know you’re still a pawn to him. My witness was supposed to testify against a company bringing in prescription drugs from Canada illegally. Does that sound like something Nero would be interested in? He could have given you that assassination assignment because he suspected I might be Nadya’s sister.”

His brow furrowed. “If you had a sister from Brightwood Academy that interested Nero, my father would have just taken her.”

“That’s what I’m saying Sebastian.” I rested my elbow on the table pressing my fingers to my temple. “Maybe that’s why he had Fonthill kill my parents. Severino thought he would be able to step in and take my sister. He could pose as a long-lost uncle or something.” I straightened in my seat. “He may have already had the false documents prepared before he ordered the hit. I took my mother’s maiden name when I joined the police force, so there’s a good chance Severino had no idea Nadya had an older sister. After I got word about the shooting, I went to Nadya’s school and took her away. We moved and enrolled her someplace else. I was trying to hide her from the killer.”

“And you believe my father found her again and sent me to you?”

“I believe there are no coincidences when Severino is involved.” I sighed. “I’m looking for answers, Sebastian, not more questions.”

His eyes searched mine, and I wished I had Nadya’s ability. Could she reach across this table, touch him, and somehow sense if he was lying? When things settled down, I’d have to ask her.

He spoke soft and slow. “‘Seeker of truth, follow no path, all paths lead where truth is here.’”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have time for your poetry. I should go.”

“I’m trying to tell you that regardless of who pulled that trigger, it won’t change that your parents are gone. That is the truth.”

Emotion churned in my stomach, but I grit my teeth to keep it buried. “If Nero ordered the hit on my parents, then it is highly possible that your father sent you to me with an ulterior motive. I want to know what it was.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you.” He set his napkin on the table and reached for the check. “Enjoy your lunch.”

“You owe me an answer, Sebastian. You claimed your feelings for me were real, so prove it.”

He snatched up my hand, bringing my fingers to his lips before I realized what was happening. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the scent of my skin. “Why would I bother to prove myself to you when you’ve already settled for a wolf, Carina?”

His eyes flashed as he released my hand and walked away.

I caught my breath while I watched him pay for the expensive meal neither of us enjoyed. After the door closed behind him, I got up to follow. He spun around when he got to his car, stopping me in my tracks.

“My patience has worn thin. I have a wolf to track.”

I nodded. “I know.” We stared at each other for a moment as I struggled to find words. “Did you bite me to get to my sister?”

Sebastian stared at the sky and shook his head, finally meeting my eyes again. “I already told you—I know nothing of your sister. You were bitten because my father found out I loved you.” His brow creased. “I thought I had kept my secrets, but somehow he’d discovered it. The choice was to make

you one of us or leave you behind.”

“You don’t know what love is.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” He slid his hand into his pocket, glancing down at the pavement. “But I have worked at Nero long enough to know that if I left you behind he would have had you killed. You already knew too much.” He shrugged and lifted his gaze to meet mine. “The choice was made.”

I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or if I’d just ripped open a deep wound. “So as far as you know, Severino didn’t connect that Nadya was my sister.”

He shook his head. “As far as I know.” His dark eyes held mine, and he lowered his voice. “He is aware of her now, of course. In Fonthill’s last report he mentioned discovering your sister. He told us he planned to use her to barter for you.”

“I figured as much.” But it still made me sick inside to hear it confirmed. With a sigh, I held my hand out to shake his. “Thank you for answering my questions.”

He stared at my hand and finally took it, pulling me into his arms. I stiffened. I guess he noticed because he let me go. “I would have given you the world,” he whispered.

I stepped back shaking my head. “All I wanted was honesty.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

AREN

Adam and I walked down the barn aisle in silence. Jason got an emergency call and had to go to the hospital. Gareth went back to his motorcycle shop, and Luke guarded the house while Lana and Nadya gave the twins their baths. Adam stopped in front of the Bruce's stall. He stroked the bay stallion's thick neck.

"I'm going to call the Pack together tonight," he started. "We have to figure out how to stop Fonthill. Lana can't sleep at night she's so worried, and keeping the Pack on twenty-four-hour guard duty is making everyone punchy. We need to take action."

"I'm all for action." I waited for the other shoe to drop.

"I want you to be there when we plan this. Alone."

And there it was.

I groaned. "Sasha saved our asses up at the cabin. She's not our enemy."

He started to open his mouth when a vehicle groaned in the distance. My body tensed. With our enhanced hearing, I could already tell the engine was too large for a car, but it also didn't sound like Jared's truck. And it definitely wasn't Gareth's motorcycle.

"I'm not expecting any deliveries." Adam took off running for the house.

I was right behind him. We met Luke in front just as a black Hummer with dark-tinted windows pulled into the driveway.

"Luke," Adam said without taking his eyes off the Hummer. "Tell Lana to be ready to take the babies out the back."

He nodded and went inside while Adam and I stood facing the intruder.

The passenger door opened and I held my breath. Polished black shoes stepped out onto the pavement, and I could see khaki green slacks, but the rest of the man was still hidden behind the door and tinted glass.

When he slammed the door closed, my heart stopped. Beside me, Adam rubbed his eyes.

Standing by the Hummer, in full general dress uniform, was our dead father.

He straightened his coat. "You two look like you've seen a ghost."

Jesus, his voice sounded like Malcolm's too. Other than his graying hair being kept in a short military cut, he looked, sounded, and moved exactly like our father. If I hadn't scattered the ashes myself, I might've believed this was him.

It was tough to bury my shock, but I did my best to hide my emotions.

I glanced at Adam, but he didn't take his eyes off of the general.

Our father's twin brother. Holy shit. The Pack elders and our dad never told stories about the past or our uncle, and when we pried, our Alpha redirected our attention. We finally assumed his brother must be dead, and he never corrected us. Maybe to our father he was.

The man approached with his hand outstretched. "I'm General Miller Sloan."

Instinctively I took a step forward in front of my Alpha, making no move to touch the stranger. "What brings you here?"

The General raised a silver brow, dropping his hand back to his side. "I'm here on business. I need to speak with my brother. I received intel that Malcolm Sloan's Pack meets up here."

"Malcolm's dead," I said evenly.

Genuine surprise flooded the general's features for a split second before his face became a mask of government authority. He rolled his shoulders back. "I'm sorry. I was afraid something might have happened to him. I hoped I was wrong." He cleared his throat and went on. "Who has ascended to Alpha?"

If it weren't so obvious he was my father's twin, I never would have

believed we were related to this man. Our blood ran hot, yet this general stayed completely in control when he learned his twin brother was dead. They obviously weren't close, but they must've been at some point. How could he be so calm when I told him Malcolm was gone?

"I'm not sure that's any of your business," I said. "Malcolm never mentioned his brother."

At that I caught a flicker of emotion, but in a blink it vanished. "We had a parting of ways years ago. I should have made contact sooner." He shook his head. "I'm here on government business. Your father may not have mentioned me, but he probably told you about Operation Moonlight."

Adam nodded. "He told me he thought he was going to serve his country and instead he and his friends became lab rats for Nero."

The corner of Miller's mouth pulled up a little. "He didn't see the potential like I did."

Adam shook his head. "You call shooting up werewolves for some Lycan Squad until their brains hemorrhage *potential*? Sorry, General, but that's not the first word that comes to mind when I think about the unhinged wolf hiding out in my territory."

"It went too far with the Lycan Squad. We realize that now, and that's why I'm here. I came to help the Pack with this situation."

"Thanks." Adam let out a humorless chuckle. "But we've been fine without you all these years. I think we'll pass."

I caught a flash of anger in the general's eyes. Maybe a Sloan heart was still buried somewhere under the military medals pinned to his chest.

His eyes narrowed. "Why don't we let your Alpha decide?"

"Adam is our Alpha." I added with a touch of sarcasm, "*Uncle* Miller."

...

Since it was clear that the general had close ties with Nero, we were careful to keep the twins away. Adam suggested we talk in the barn. Miller followed us down the driveway on foot. I kept expecting him to ask how Malcolm

died, but he didn't. In fact, he didn't say anything at all.

Adam leaned back against a stall door, and I took a post beside him, my muscles taut. I had worked with my father every day for years. Why would he let me believe his brother was dead all that time?

"Why are you really here?" Adam asked. "If you knew where Malcolm's Pack was, why didn't you ever contact him?"

Miller glanced at the horses and back to Adam. "I was respecting my brother's wishes."

I frowned. "He asked you not to contact us?"

"His actual words were more like 'If you stay with these madmen then you're dead to me.'"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "And you chose Nero over your Pack."

"My brother wasn't my Alpha. He disobeyed our Alpha by leaving us. Our country needs us, now more than ever. I saw the mission through. *He* gave up."

"You don't know the first thing about our father." Adam straightened up, stepping toward the general.

"I didn't come here to argue with you. I came to collect my soldier." His gaze moved between Adam and I. "I was the leader of the Lycan Squad before it disbanded. When I got word Fonthill had gone rogue in my brother's territory, I thought I could help talk him down."

"You're his leader?" I frowned, struggling to contain the rage that smoldered deep in my belly. "You watched your men die at the hands of the Nero Organization and you did nothing?"

"My men understood the risks." His jaw clenched, and he raised his chin. The stern gesture probably made men in uniform hop to and salute or something, but it made me want to punch the elitist bastard. "They volunteered to help their country." His eyes narrowed. "Don't judge things you don't understand."

Adam raised a brow. "Did they understand they'd be juiced up and mutated until they went insane?" His gaze locked with Miller's, baiting him. "Or was that in the fine print?"

“Impudent, short-sighted—” He lunged for my brother, but I knocked him back hard enough to get his attention.

It felt good, too.

“Damn, you are a fucking cold-hearted bastard,” I spat. “No wonder our dad never mentioned you.” I almost hoped he’d make a move, but he didn’t. “Don’t you even care what happened to Malcolm?”

A shadow of emotion clouded the man’s gray green eyes, and as quickly as I noticed it, it was gone again. “My brother and I chose different paths. I’m sorry I let time slip away like I did.”

Adam’s cheeks were flushed with color, like a volcano about to blow. “You let time slip away while you worked for the bastards who experimented on werewolves and made them into monsters.” He took a step toward the general, but the older man stood his ground. “You let time slip away while Nero waltzed in here and murdered your twin brother, you son of a bitch.”

Miller’s brow furrowed, and for once the emotion didn’t fade away from his features. “Nero killed Malcolm? That can’t be. He’s never been part of the mission.”

“He wasn’t their mission—Adam’s mate was.” His gaze shifted to me. I crossed my arms over my chest. “They sent their own private army to Lake Tahoe. Malcolm died in the fight.”

His confusion morphed into denial right before my eyes. “Impossible. Nero works for the government to enhance soldiers. Your brother’s mate wouldn’t be a target unless she was in the military or a part of our program.”

“That’s what Severino would like you to believe.”

Silence blanketed us while I watched the general. I wished I could glean something more about him, like his real agenda. I could see Severino calling in a favor and sending our own flesh and blood to betray us. This could be a smokescreen to finish Fonhill’s mission and kill Sasha.

Adam glanced at me, then Miller. “Thanks for the offer, but we can handle this.”

“This soldier you’re after is trained in guerilla warfare and his wolf senses are enhanced.” Pride infused the general’s voice. “He’s stronger, faster, and

has more weapons training than any of you. Plus, he can shift anytime.” He opened his hand in front of us. “I’m offering to help. No strings attached.”

Adam shook his head. “If dad didn’t want anything to do with you, why would I?”

“Then you’ll get what you deserve,” the general growled as he turned to go.

I ground my teeth. “Wait.” He stopped and looked back at me. I wished I could tell him to go to hell, but as long as his whacked-out soldier was out there, Sasha and Nadya were in danger. “If you think you can stop Fonthill, I’m willing to listen.”

His eyes moved from me to my Alpha. Adam gave him a sullen nod. Good enough for now.

“I think I can get him to stand down from this mission,” Miller said, “but I need to find him in order to make that happen.”

I shook my head. “Good luck with that. So far he’s been the one finding us. He’s already shifted in broad daylight and killed one of my employees. Then he attacked a guy from a gas station. If we knew where he was we would have already ended this.”

“Nero has sent someone here to neutralize Fonthill,” Adam added. “Do they know you’re in Reno?”

“I don’t work for Nero, if that’s what you’re really asking. I work for the United States Army. Fonthill was discharged years ago, but Nero contacted me after the gas station incident. It is in the company’s and the government’s best interests to bring him back before our program is exposed.”

Miller slipped a hand in his pocket, his gray-green eyes reminding me so much of my father that my chest constricted. But even with his familiar looks, he was a stranger. How could we believe anything he had to say?

As if the distrust was written all over my face, the general sighed and went on.

“I know you don’t approve of the project.” Miller watched my brother. “But if America had a unit of highly trained Green Berets who could shift into wolves anytime, without waiting for a full moon, our country would be

stronger for it.”

Adam shrugged. “Tell that to the people Fonthill’s attacked in the last few days. Having a crazed lunatic on the loose that can shift anytime seems like a bad idea to me.”

“Let’s get this back on track.” Truthfully, I wanted to get some time to digest that we had blood my father never mentioned. Getting rid of General Miller Sloan was just a perk. “Since he was caught on security cameras running from a gas station after attacking that attendant, the police are on a manhunt for him, the government wants to protect the program from exposure, and Nero also sees him as a liability. You sound like you want to take him out with a chat instead of a bullet, am I right?”

“I owe the last of my men a chance at surrender instead of assassination.”

At least he had a thread of integrity left.

“Then I suggest we come up with a plan to lure him out of hiding.” My gaze moved between Adam and Miller. “You can try to talk to Fonthill, but if he makes a move, we’ll end him.”

The general nodded. “Fair enough.”

...

Adam didn’t invite Miller inside the house. I didn’t blame him. Blood or not, General Sloan had worked with Nero and had no business being anywhere near Lana and the babies. As far as we could tell, he didn’t know the twins existed, and we were going to do our best to keep it that way for now.

We moved our planning meeting up to the general’s Hummer. He produced a legal pad and a pen and I started writing down the few things about Fonthill, adding in points he offered up.

“Even in his over-stimulated state, Fonthill won’t repeat an error.” Miller stared at me now. “You’ll need a new tactic to draw him out.”

Miller turned toward Adam. “He’ll also be able to smell a trap, so you shouldn’t bring your Pack. With some tactical planning, we could probably post three or four of your men at a distance and keep them under Fonthill’s

radar.” His light eyes focused on me. “Do any of your Pack members have marksmanship training?”

The image of Sasha and all of her concealed holsters filled my head. “We do, and if she gets a clear shot, she’ll take it.”

“Fair enough, but only if my negotiations fail.”

Adam nodded, and Miller continued. “Then I’ll leave you two to put together your team and decide on the location for the operation. This is your territory. In the meantime, I’ll keep trying to make contact with Fonthill on my own.” He handed my brother a no-nonsense government-issue business card. “My contact numbers are listed here. I’ll expect to hear from you by tomorrow morning.”

I raised a brow. “That only gives us a few hours to get this together.”

“Hopefully that’s soon enough to keep him from harming more innocents. Every hour is crucial.” He walked around to the passenger door of the Hummer and stopped. “I am sorry to hear about Malcolm.” He glanced over his shoulder at us. “He was obviously a good father.”

“The best,” I said without hesitation.

He paused a moment, and I thought he was going to say something, but he shook his head and climbed into the vehicle with his driver. Adam and I took the pad and walked back toward the house. The tinted window lowered as the Hummer drove away. The general gave us a single salute, then he was gone.

Inside, Adam and I kept writing down ideas and scratching them out again. There was one plan that seemed viable, but it was risky. I closed my eyes and scrubbed my hand down my face. Sasha was never going to go for it.

“There has to be another way. We can’t dangle Nadya out in front of this freak.”

“I don’t like it either.” Adam leaned against the table. “But he won’t fall for you and Sasha walking around downtown again. We’ve given him chances, and he hasn’t shown himself.”

I set the pen down and crossed my arms over my chest. “If Nadya agrees to this, how are we going to keep her safe? Not that it really matters because Sasha is never going to agree to use her little sister as bait.”

“I’d love to hear a better idea, bro.” Adam glanced out the window toward the barn. “This is probably the only way to stop this guy before he exposes all of us.”

“Fuck.” I got up from the table, stretching my legs. “You really think we can trust Miller?”

Adam sighed, staring down at his boots, then raised his eyes to meet mine. “You remember how Dad used to just know things? How he could look at us and know if we were hiding something?”

I nodded.

“Well since I became the Alpha, I wish I could explain it, but I know things, too. Not like reading minds or anything, just a hunch that seems so real... I’m learning to let go and trust my instincts. Miller’s not being completely honest with us, but he had no idea Nero ambushed us. That part was true. The way I see it, we can move forward with this plan and if it turns out I’m wrong about the general, we’ll be in position to take Fonthill down ourselves anyway.”

I stared at my brother for a moment, wondering how my act-first-think-later brother had morphed into our Alpha so seamlessly. If we had more time I might’ve even told him I was proud of him. But right now time was a luxury.

“I’ll work on Sasha, and you pick the team to come with us.” I opened the door and glanced back at my brother again. “Don’t talk to Nadya about this yet, okay? Sasha should ask her. I don’t want Nadya to agree to this without understanding the risks.”

“You got it.” He came around, and we clasped forearms. Adam shook his head and took a step back. “Was it just me or was it creepy to see Miller show up here? I always figured Dad’s twin had died.”

“None of the Pack elders ever mentioned him either.”

Adam shrugged. “Maybe Dad told them not to tell us.”

Wyatt—Jared and Jason’s father—and Nick—Luke and Logan’s dad—had both grown up in the same Pack as Malcolm, but neither of them discussed the past much. Until Adam told me about our father’s brief experience with

Nero and Operation Moonlight, I never thought about any of them belonging to another Pack as kids. I guess I didn't think it mattered.

That was all changing now.

The past just showed up on our doorstep.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

SASHA

The streets and hotels blurred together as I rode in the taxi to the hotel. My brain was busy, too busy, and I struggled to wrestle my thoughts back in check. With Fonthill showing signs of a violent mental breakdown, I needed to be focused and ready, not riding a rollercoaster of emotions.

Even though Sebastian wouldn't—or couldn't—give me confirmation that Nero had ordered the hit on my parents, my gut told me I was right. And when Severino's plan to take custody of Nadya hadn't worked out, he'd bided his time until her name and new address surfaced on college apps. The man was anything but stupid, and he didn't rely on luck.

He made his own.

The cab stopped in front of the hotel, and I scanned the area for any sign of Fonthill before paying my fare and getting out of the car. Fonthill had jumped Sebastian at his hotel only a few hours ago—he could be anywhere.

Inside, the flashing lights and constant ringing chimes signaling winners drowned out my thought process. It was a welcome break. Between discovering a link between Nero and my sister, and Aren planting the seed that maybe I could work again in Reno, my mind whirled with all the possibilities.

After being bitten, I thought of myself as a monster. Any plans for the future had been narrowed to finding an antidote for my condition. Until Aren, it never occurred to me that being converted to a jaguar gave me abilities that could make me a better cop. I was so busy wallowing in anger and betrayal that I almost killed him in an effort to get my old life back.

Now I'd never get a new one if I didn't get rid of Fonthill before he got me.
I needed to center myself.

Once I got inside the room, I tossed my purse on the chair and cranked up the thermostat. After a change of clothes, I laid a big towel out on the floor, I got on my knees and took a few deep breaths.

It felt good to focus on breathing instead of my future. At least I could control my breathing.

One posture moved into the next, and as the sweat rolled down my body I realized my mind was finally quiet. I got on my knees, my hands in prayer position, and I leaned forward until my forehead brushed against the towel, blood rushing to my head. Taking a few slow, deep breaths through my nose, I lifted myself up again. I closed my eyes for a moment waiting for the dizzying buzz in my head to die down.

When I focused forward, I almost smiled. Maybe I could have a future. Maybe the wolves had the right idea.

I wasn't at the mercy of the phases of the moon.

I was enhanced by them.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

AREN

I slid my hotel key card through the lock and walked into a wall of tropic heat and humidity that made me smile. Sasha's scent hung heavy in the air, and I could hear humming from the bathroom. I dialed the thermostat down from ninety-five degrees and bent to scoop up her towel from the floor. It felt good to come back to her. This wasn't my home, but finding her here made it seem like it.

I tapped on the bathroom door. "Honey, I'm home."

The humming stopped, and her laughter echoed off the tiled walls of the shower. She pulled the curtain back enough to peek out at me and grinned. "Good to see you, too."

I kissed her before she could draw the curtain again, her lips wet and delicious. My eyes met hers. "Am I in time to wash your back?"

Sasha started to smile. "Actually, I was just finishing up. How did it go with Adam?"

Hearing my brother's name was like stepping into a cold shower. For a moment I'd been so happy to come back to Sasha that I'd managed to forget about the rest of the world. "It was really...surreal."

She turned off the water and pulled her towel down from the curtain rod. "Surreal? What happened?"

I leaned back against the sink, trying to focus while she dried off. Damn, the woman was sexy. I told her about Miller Sloan's surprise appearance in Adam's driveway and his interest in Fonhill.

Sasha dried off and sat down beside me. "Do you really think he can help

with Fonthill?”

I shrugged. “I’m not ready to trust him after one meeting, but I figured if Fonthill knows him, it couldn’t hurt to try to talk him down.” I should’ve told her about using Nadya to lure him out, but instead I bought some time. “How did it go with Sebastian?”

She told me about her meeting, but when her eyes met mine, my kick-ass mate seemed vulnerable. It made my chest fill with the sudden urge to beat the shit out of Sebastian. I took her hand. “I’m sorry he didn’t give you the answers you were hoping for.”

Watching our hands she said, “He told me he would have given me the world.” Sasha shook her head and tipped her chin up to gaze at the ceiling. “I never asked for that. All I wanted was a partner. Someone I could trust to have my back, you know?” She met my eyes. “Like you.”

I kissed her, our lips brushing slowly as I savored the way she tasted and the scent of her freshly washed hair. This was the woman I wanted to spend my life with. If she was there, then I was home. And I needed to tell her. About everything.

But taking down Fonthill needed to be first.

I pulled back and lifted her hand to kiss her fingers. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

I filled her in on General Sloan’s opinion about bringing in new bait and waited for her to digest it.

Sasha let go of my hand and shot up from the bed. “You’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

“If you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

“No way. We can’t toss Nadya into this.” She pulled her wet hair back from her face and shook her head. “There’s got to be another way.”

“I wish there was.” I rested my elbows on my knees. “We’ll be right there, Sash. Adam’s working on putting together a team from the Pack right now, and the general will be there too.” I looked up at her. “Hell, once Fonthill’s in sight you could take him out with one shot.”

“I can’t do this, Aren.” She went to the window, staring down at the lights

below. "I'm supposed to protect her. What if he..."

Her words hung in the silence. I got up and stood behind her, sliding my arms around her waist.

"We'll keep her safe. He'll come for her. He won't be able to resist. Then we'll have him, and this will finally be over."

She rested her head back against my chest. "I've seen well-planned sting operations go south. This is my sister."

"We haven't said anything to Nadya." I paused to kiss her hair. "If you don't want to go through with it, I'll tell Adam we need a different plan."

I took a deep breath and waited. Finally Sasha turned in my arms, lacing her fingers behind my neck as she met my eyes. "I need to talk to Nadya first. And if I get a bad vibe at all, I'm pulling her out of this. We'll have to find another way."

"I'll back you up no matter what." I bent to kiss her lips, then whispered, "No one wants Nadya to get hurt."

Her soft lips caressed mine, lingering as I breathed her in. "Thank you."

"For what?" I loosened my hold on her as she took a step back.

"For understanding why I can't agree to this yet."

"As much as I want to end this mess with Fonthill, I'm not going to let anyone pressure you or Nadya into anything. I remember how it felt to worry about my brother when I followed Adam down to San Antonio..." I stopped myself, but not before I saw her posture tense. She started to turn away from me, and I caught her hand. "Wait. We need to get past this."

When she turned back to face me, I recognized the way she lifted her chin, the calculated expression of indifference in her facial features. "How exactly can we get past the fact that I would have killed you and your brother to get to Lana if I'd had the chance? Explain to me how I can ever make that right?" Her voice trembled, but her face showed no sign of emotion. "Will sacrificing my sister make us even?"

"No one is asking you to sacrifice Nadya." I was doing my best to keep my voice level and calm. Even though I'd been expecting her verbal attack, she still managed to surprise me with her angle. "Is that what you think this is

about? You think we're asking you to put Nadya in harm's way to settle the score?"

She broke eye contact and started pacing the floor, talking with her hands as well as her voice. "I don't know what to think. One minute you've got my back, and the next you're comparing my concern for Nadya with how you felt when I was after Lana. Tough not to believe this is some way to get even."

I brushed my hand down my face trying to find a trace of calm. "I *do* have your back. All I meant was that I'll understand if you tell us we need to come up with another plan to get him out in the open." I shook my head. "Sash, I need to be able to talk about the past without you flipping out on me."

"Flipping out?" She spun around like an agitated jungle cat, her eyes narrowing. "You think I'm flipping out?" Her hands balled into fists at her side, and she took a step closer. "More like I'm pissed, Aren. If you and your Pack have a problem with me, then take it up with me, *not* my sister. She's got nothing to do with any of that shit. She shouldn't have to atone for *my* sins."

"No one is atoning for anything." I held back an expletive that wasn't going to help me in this fight. "You know, if you hadn't come after me that day in San Antonio we never would have met. It doesn't matter to me why you were there. I've gotten past what happened, Sash. Why can't you?"

I could almost see all the anger drain from her body, and pain replaced the fury in her eyes. "Because I care about you, Aren."

Would I ever understand this woman? "That makes no sense."

"Sure, it does." She pressed her lips together and took up her post at the window again. "I watch Nadya holding those babies, and see you with Lana and Adam..." She paused and I ground my teeth together to keep from speaking. "I want Nadya to have a family again. *I* want to be a part of a family again. But I don't know how to forgive myself for the things I did. I keep trying to figure out what I can do to clean the slate, but I can't." She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes meeting mine. "Every time your ankle aches I know it's my fault."

“It’s my fault too.” I went on before she could deny it. “That afternoon we fought in San Antonio, you were in black leather, even gloves. I remember wondering if that was to keep the bodies from having any DNA clues left behind or because it made you look even more deadly. Anyway, I told you that when a werewolf touches his mate, skin to skin, the wolf inside will recognize her. Imprint on her.”

I watched her face as I went on. “I was trying to get you in a hold so I could dislocate your shoulder. Once you were incapable of fighting me, I’d break your neck. I’d beaten other jaguars using that same move, but as I got a grip on your arm— ”

“I head-butted you.”

I nodded and felt a smile start to creep over my features. “Right. And the second you did, something exploded inside of me. I lost the ability to fight you because the wolf inside was trying to memorize every detail of its mate.”

“That’s when Adam found us...”

“And when you ran off, you left me behind in a fog of insanity. I wanted to be sure I hadn’t hurt you, that you were safe.” I shook my head, lost in the memory for a second. “If you hadn’t cracked my skull with your forehead when you did, I would have killed you.” I moved to stand beside her at the window. “When you caught up with me in Las Vegas, I knew you were tailing me.”

She raised a brow. “Are you saying you *let* me catch you?”

“In my head, I planned on letting you get close, and then I was going to talk some sense into you.” The corner of my mouth started to curve up. “I never saw the Taser coming.”

I glanced over at her, encouraged when I saw her trying not to grin.

“You’ve got a hard head.” She gave me a little shrug. “I figured the Taser would help make you more manageable.”

I laughed and pulled her into my arms. “You like your men drooling on the pavement?”

Her eyes sparkled up at me. “I must confess, if I had known what a great kisser you were back then, I might’ve played things a little differently.”

I claimed her lips then, enjoying the way she moaned into the kiss as she welcomed my tongue's exploration. When I drew back, she stared up at me.

"*This* is how we get past what happened." I traced my finger along her jawline. "We just let it be. Without you attacking me, we never would have met."

She stared up into my eyes, her fingers sliding up my chest. "You really are an amazing man."

"You deserve no less." I started to kiss her again, when my cell phone rang.

I knew who it was before I answered it. Adam had the team together. It was time to talk to Nadya.

I put my phone back in my pocket and caught Sasha's hand. "There's something else I probably should have mentioned."

"Uh oh." She gripped my hand a little tighter.

"General Sloan wants this to go down tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" Her eyes widened. "You've got to be kidding me. I haven't even talked to Nadya yet, let alone figured out when and where we could do this and still keep her protected."

"We've got to get Fonthill before he hurts anyone else, Sash. The longer we wait the worse he's going to get." I started leading her toward the dresser. "Adam's got a team together, and they're working on a location now. We need to head over to the ranch and talk to Nadya. You can make any adjustments to the plan you think are necessary."

I waited for her to reply, but she got dressed in silence. Maybe she was already thinking about what to say to her sister, I didn't know, but my stomach knotted with tension.

I'd just assured her we'd keep her only living family safe.

Even though I trusted my Pack with my life, Fonthill was a variable we didn't fully understand. When Sasha turned to face me, I did my best not to let my concern show.

Deep down, part of me wanted to call the whole thing off. Let Nero handle their rabid dog. Then the visceral image of Barry's mutilated body filled my mind, his face frozen in terror. I couldn't turn my back and let that animal kill

another innocent person when I had a way to stop him.

And with Sasha's life being his bounty, I couldn't risk him hurting her.

No fucking way.

She stuffed her guns in her holsters and straightened up. "Let's do this."

Chapter Forty

SASHA

By the time we pulled into Adam's ranch, my nerves were fried. I kept expecting to see Fonthill's psychotic smile lurching out from every shadow. We shouldn't have been rushing into this. None of us had slept, and you could almost smell the adrenaline in the air.

This was how mistakes happened. Deadly mistakes.

Nadya came out of the house with Adam shadowing her. I glanced around for the other wolves, and Adam anticipated my question. "The others are around the dining-room table."

I hugged my sister, closing my eyes and wishing we were back home. When I pulled back I forced a smile. "Good to see you."

"Adam told me you were coming by to talk to me." Concern lined her features. She probably knew something was wrong the moment she hugged me. "You're upset."

"I'll be all right. Can we find a quiet spot to talk?"

Adam nodded. "Nadya's room is downstairs. You can get down there without anyone noticing."

"Works for me."

We went back into the house, and I followed my sister to her downstairs bedroom. Once we were inside, I closed the door and sat beside Nadya on her bed.

A few small paintings of horses hung on the almond-colored walls, and the distressed-wood headboard on the queen-sized bed matched the large dresser that stood like a sentinel beside the door. "This is a nice room they gave

you.”

Nadya started to smile. “It is. But I don’t think you came in here to check out my new digs.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “Sorry.” I forced myself to look at her. “I’m still not used to you knowing what I’m feeling.”

“Nothing’s changed except that now you know about it.” She took my hand. “It’s not like I can read your mind, just your *state* of mind, I guess.” Squeezing my hand, she said, “So tell me what’s going on? I assume by all the muscle upstairs you haven’t caught the stalker yet.”

When did my baby sister grow up? “No, and the truth is he’s much more than just a stalker.”

“Is he a werewolf, too?”

I gave it a little thought. “Sort of. He’s been genetically enhanced, and a side effect of that is mental illness and death.” I met her eyes. “He’s already killed two innocent men, and he’ll kill more if we don’t stop him.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Do you always cut right to the chase?”

She started to smile. “I’ve always wanted to, but until now I had to be careful.”

In that moment I realized that while I’d been keeping my conversion into a jaguar assassin a secret, Nadya had been keeping her own secret for years. How much lonelier had her life become when I pulled her out of the school for the gifted and jammed her into a world that wouldn’t understand her gift?

I could almost hear Aren’s voice telling me to let the past go. Damned wolf.

I told Nadya about Aren’s father having a twin brother and his connections in the military. And finally I couldn’t delay it any longer. “General Sloan thinks he can talk to Fonhill and get him to abandon this mission, but we need to get Fonhill out of hiding to do it.”

“And you think he’ll come after me.”

“I know he will.” I sighed. “This company who experimented on these werewolf military squads has also been experimenting on breeding psychic

human women with shifters in the hopes of producing female shifters who don't have to be bitten like I was."

I paused, giving her a second to absorb the information. "Nero funded your school, Nadya. I don't have solid evidence yet, but think they killed our parents to get custody of you."

Her eyes shined with tears she didn't let fall. "And when this guy found my name in your cell phone..."

"They know where you are now." I swallowed. My throat suddenly felt scratchy and raw. "That's why I'm worried. I've been inside Nero's walls. I can't let them take you there."

She took my hand. "I trust you. If this is the best chance to get him before he gets us, then we should take it."

"If the general can't talk Fonthill down, then I'll take him out, but I need a clear shot. Aren will have a few of the Pack in place just in case I can't get position."

"Sounds like you've got lots of fallback plans."

"Don't be so quick to agree to this." I frowned. "None of us have slept. We're not at our best, and Fonthill is a lunatic trained to kill. If anything happens to you..." I couldn't finish.

Silence embraced us for a minute until Nadya got up.

"I'm not jumping into this blind. You've told me everything, and I know what I'm getting into. This is a way I can help keep you safe, too, you know? You're not the only one who worries about her sister."

Again, I felt like I didn't know my sister as well as I thought I did. "You're willing to walk out of here alone and risk a crazed werewolf trying to take you hostage?"

She turned back to face me. "I won't be alone. You and the wolves will be there." She crossed her arms. "Besides, remember when I was in junior high and you insisted on self-defense classes? I'm not a helpless bunny being tossed out in front of a fox. If I'm in trouble I know how to fight."

"He'll be armed, Nadya. We don't know what he'll do."

She sighed. "If you were convinced this is a good idea, then why are you

trying to talk me out of it?”

I stood up. “Because this *isn't* a good idea. It's a *desperate* idea. We can all hear the clock ticking in the background. If we don't get this guy soon he'll kill someone else, and we won't be able to keep covering it up. Everyone is at risk if shifters are exposed to the rest of the world, especially if they think we're a threat to public safety.”

“I'm not a child anymore, Sasha. I know it's dangerous, but I also know it's a chance to help you. Plus, I could help the Pack who has been protecting me even though they don't owe me a thing.” She raised her chin and reached for the door. “I trust you. You're going to get him, and I'm going to help any way that I can.”

...

After taking a moment to collect myself, I followed Nadya back upstairs where Adam and Aren were seated at the dining room table with Lana and a few other Pack members. I recognized Jason and figured he was an obvious choice for this operation since he was a doctor. If we had any injuries we wouldn't be able to run to the emergency room for treatment.

Beside Jason was his twin, a carbon copy of his tanned skin and fiery hazel eyes. His twin wore his hair back in a ponytail, and where Jason had the manicured hands of a doctor, his twin's hands were rough. A worker's hands. This was the man who'd built the huge doors on the cabin at Lake Tahoe. Aren had told me his name, but I couldn't recall it. He met my eyes, and I realized his shoulders were broader than Jason's too, built up from the physical labor of his job.

I approached with my head up, ready to step into a male-dominated arena. Even though we were around a dining room table, it felt every bit as testosterone-filled as the police station.

I held my hand out to Jason's twin. “I'm Sasha. You must be Jason's brother?”

“I know who you are.” Animosity colored his voice, but he still stood and

took my hand. “Jared.”

“Nice to meet you.” I dropped his hand and turned my attention to Gareth. We hadn’t been formally introduced, but that didn’t matter. I’d never forget him, and I’d bet he wouldn’t let his grudge against me go either. His eyes kept moving between me and Nadya. Our features were too similar when we stood together to hide the fact we were related. There was a good chance all the wolves were making that same connection.

I finally nodded toward Gareth, and he turned away.

Fuck you, too.

I went over to take a seat beside Aren, and Nadya sat next to me. Watching Adam, I tipped my head toward Gareth. “Why is he here?”

Adam’s gaze moved from his wolf to me again. “Gareth volunteered.”

That surprised me. I stared across the table at his dark, unreadable gaze. “You’ve made it plain from the beginning that this isn’t your problem, and since you’ve probably already realized Nadya is my younger sister, I want a team I can trust before we drop her into this mess.”

“Because of *you*, my Pack is in danger.” He leaned forward, resting his tattooed forearms on the table. “*I’m* the only one sitting at this table with nothing to lose when we face this guy. You don’t have to trust me, just stay the fuck out of my way.”

I shot out of my chair ready to rip the asshole a new one, but Nadya took my hand. “I trust Gareth, Sash.”

My brow creased as I struggled to process what she said. Her words sucked all the bravado out of my argument. I lowered slowly to my chair and shook my head. “He doesn’t want to be here. That’s not the kind of backup we need.”

Adam turned toward us. “I didn’t pull rank and make Gareth help us. He volunteered, and *I* trust him.”

Aren’s hand rested on my thigh. “Look, none of us have slept,” he said. “We’re all aware of what’s at stake. Fonthill is the enemy here, not anyone at this table.”

I watched Aren’s gaze glide across every person seated around the table. I

placed my hand over his and gave him a squeeze. This was my mate, my partner. And he even had my back when I probably didn't deserve it.

He cleared his throat. "We all want to end this quickly without drawing any public attention, so let's focus on that for now. All right?"

Everyone started to nod, and Adam laid out his plan. Tomorrow was Sunday. The Sloan building would be closed, making it the perfect place to end Fonthill's game without any unwanted onlookers. Plus, the bastard obviously knew where to find the building. If we were lucky, maybe he'd get there before Nadya, and we could end it without putting her in danger.

The plan would only work if Fonthill was already tracking Nadya. But after my run in with him at the rib place and his threat to take her away with him, my gut told me he'd probably already been watching her, waiting for the Pack to leave her unguarded. Hopefully he'd believe this was the chance he'd been waiting for.

We decided Lana and Nadya would go grocery shopping. It would seem like a normal Sunday activity, and without the Pack nearby, Fonthill might venture out to make contact.

Adam gestured to his mate. "Lana will be able to catch his scent, and I'll be tailing them nearby, just in case Fonthill decides to make a move sooner than we'd like."

"And I'll be right there with you," I said.

Adam bristled a little, but I didn't give a shit. This was my sister, and I was confident I was a better shot than a werewolf, Alpha or not.

"I can handle it," Adam responded, his gaze demanding obedience.

"I'm not a member of your Pack, and I'm going with you."

I half expected Aren to jump in and defend his brother, but he remained silent beside me. Finally his twin relented. "I still don't think it's a good idea. Fonthill could go after you instead."

I flexed my calf under the table, the holster gripped my leg. "Let him try."

Chapter Forty-One

AREN

I took a swig of my lukewarm coffee, and it plummeted into my gut like a lead weight. I didn't really need the caffeine. Adrenaline was my current drug of choice. Nothing about this plan sat well with me.

We were staked out on the second level of the underground parking garage of Sloan Consulting. There were only two forgotten cars in the lot, leaving us without many places to hide. Jared and Jason were back by the elevator with General Sloan, and Gareth retreated into the shadows. We left Luke and Logan at the ranch to guard the twins with the Pack elders.

It felt like we covered all of our bases, but I hated that Sasha was facing Fonhill without me. She could protect herself, it wasn't that. It was the inability to help her and see what was happening. Worry festered inside my chest.

But she was counting on me to be here when they lured Fonhill in, so I'd be here, and I'd be ready.

The stale air reeked of exhaust, gasoline, and oil. Humans probably wouldn't be bothered, but as a wolf, the stench was stifling.

I was itching for fresh air.

My cell phone signal was spotty at best here, so I found myself checking it often to be sure Sasha and Adam could contact me.

I could almost hear Sash in my head. *"Keep your focus on the ramp from the first level. It's the only entrance for Fonhill."*

I pocketed my phone and kept watch for any sign of movement. No wonder she did yoga. A job like this would drive me insane.

Chapter Forty-Two

SASHA

Slow breaths. It'd been almost an hour since my sister went through the double doors of the grocery store with Lana and still no sign of Fonthill.

"Dammit. The wind is picking up."

I glanced at Adam, keeping my voice down. "Just keep watching for suspicious movement toward the doors."

"You don't get it." Adam took a deep, slow breath and shook his head. "The wind works in his favor. As long as he stays upwind, I won't be able to catch his scent, but he might get mine. By the time I see him it could be too late."

A car door slammed to my left drawing my attention. There should be a car starting up or a person weaving through the parking lot to get to the store, but I didn't see anyone.

"There they are," Adam whispered.

Lana and Nadya walked out the automatic doors, and suddenly Fonthill bolted out from the parking lot. "Oh shit, he's there!"

I motioned Adam forward and hustled through the cars, my heart in my throat. My only hope was that Fonthill didn't know Adam and I were here.

"Fuck." Adam growled beside me, ducked low on the driver's side of a red SUV. "I didn't think he'd risk making his move in such a busy place."

"He's being careful." I watched him from my hiding spot. He walked right behind them, talking like they were friends. His hand was hidden behind my sister's back. "No one else knows they're in danger."

I struggled to keep control of my emotions and dug deep for all my years of

training. Giving in to panic wouldn't help my sister or Lana.

"I never should have let Lana be a part of this." Adam started to move and I grabbed his arm, yanking him back.

"This isn't what we planned, but for now, they're not hurt. If you blow our cover, I can guarantee you this will get physical fast."

He jerked his arm free, but he didn't make a move after Fonthill either. I crept along the side of the cars, keeping my sister in my line of sight. They walked right past Lana's car. Fonthill's had to be close by.

I jogged between cars, keeping low. The parking lights of a silver sedan flashed. Before I could move in that direction, Lana released the cart full of groceries, landed a solid elbow into Fonthill's abdomen, and grunted. "Run, Nadya!"

Go time.

Adam and I bolted toward Lana and my sister. Fonthill shoved Lana to the ground and caught Nadya's arm, dragging her in close.

"Let her go," I yelled, showing my hands. "I'm the one you're after."

At that moment, the free-wheeling grocery cart slammed into a parked car, setting off the car alarm. Others in the lot turned to look, and Fonthill growled. "Too many eyes here, sweetheart."

Oh, shit. No. Adrenaline laced my bloodstream. I couldn't let him take my sister.

I took a step toward him. Just a little closer, and I'd be able to tackle him. There were too many people around for me to pull out my gun and shoot him, but at least Nadya could break free and run. "I won't make a scene. Just let her go."

"Take another step, and I'll blow a hole right through her back." He pushed Nadya toward his car.

Somewhere behind us I heard, "Call 9-1-1." And another person gasping, "That's the man the police are looking for from the gas station attack."

Fonthill opened the back door of the silver sedan. Nadya stomped on his foot and threw her head back to hit him in the chin, but it barely slowed the juiced-up werewolf. He glared at me. "I'd love to pull this trigger. Give me a

reason.”

He forced Nadya inside and slammed the door, clicking the alarm. “Meet me tonight at the abandoned drive-in. Eight o’clock. Alone.”

Fonthill was behind the wheel and peeling out of the parking lot before I could draw my gun. Seeing the car turn the corner made my heart twist.

They were gone.

Chapter Forty-Three

AREN

After another forty-five of the longest damn minutes of my life, I felt my cell phone vibrate in my pocket. Relief shot through me. They were finally on their way here.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, plugging my other ear. The connection sucked, but in spite of the fuzzy reception, the tone of Sasha’s voice made my heart sink.

“He got her when they came out of the store.” She paused a second, collecting herself. “He had a gun to her back. There were too many people in the lot for me to shoot him. They recognized him and called 9-1-1. I flashed my badge and told them I was undercover. Adam gave me his keys. I have to meet the bastard at eight o’clock.”

“Where’s Adam?”

“He and Lana stayed to file a police report. It would look too suspicious if they didn’t.”

I hated that I was relieved even though Nadya had been taken, but Sasha, Adam, and Lana were all safe. And as long as Fonthill planned on trading Nadya for Sasha, then she’d be safe too. For now.

“Meet me at the ranch. We’ll regroup there.”

“I can’t. I have to find her.”

I rubbed my forehead, grappling to remain calm. “Sash, he’s planning to meet you tonight. He’s probably already got her in his home base to wait. You’re not going to find him by driving around.”

“I can’t sit still and do nothing.” Her voice trembled, and I wanted to reach through the phone and hold her.

“We’ll figure out our next move. That’s not doing nothing.” I lowered my voice. “Please, Sash. Meet me there, and let me help you.”

For a second I thought she hung up but finally she responded. “I’ll be there.”

I closed my phone.

“Are they on their way?” Jason asked as the others came out of hiding.

“No.” I met the doctor’s eyes. “He’s got Nadya.”

Jason shook his head, every muscle in his shoulders and neck contracting. “How could this happen? Where was Adam? I thought Sasha was going to shoot him.”

“They were there, but Fonthill was fast, and there were too many people watching for Sasha to fire.”

“Goddammit!”

I stared at Jason. He rarely lost his cool bedside manner. I guess I didn’t realize he cared about Nadya beyond an acquaintance.

“He didn’t hurt her, did he?”

“No.” Then I added what we were all thinking. “Not yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s fucking dead.” We all turned, but Gareth had already walked past us up the ramp toward his Harley.

“Meet us at the ranch.”

The roar of his bike was the only answer.

...

When we got to the ranch Sasha was outside waiting. As I approached her she kept her arms crossed, protecting herself. “I never should have let Nadya get involved. I did everything I could, but I couldn’t get her away from him.”

Adam and Lana pulled in the driveway. He got out and came over to us, his head down. “I’m sorry, Sasha. He must’ve stayed in his car until the wind picked up. I never caught his scent.”

I expected Sasha to rip into him, but she surprised me. “I was there. You did all you could. I should’ve just taken my shot, onlookers be damned.”

Adam shook his head. “The full moon is only a few days away. We’d be screwed if we ended up behind bars. You made the only choice you could.”

I took Sasha’s hand, grateful that she didn’t pull away. “Let’s get inside.”

Chapter Forty-Four

SASHA

The General and Adam headed up the discussion around Adam's dining room table, working on strategies for the meeting with Fonthill tonight, but I barely paid attention. Aren caught my gaze. My heart clenched. I did my best to paste an encouraging half-smile on my face. It must've looked convincing because his attention shifted to planning the exchange again.

The exchange he had no idea I wouldn't be attending.

I rubbed my sweaty palms against my jeans. During the drive back to the ranch, I'd gotten another text from a blocked number:

Sorry to change our plan, kitty, but I'll be seeing you at the lumberyard at 8 instead. No wolves or baby sister dies.

Sister dies? No way.

From the map Adam had laid out across his table, the lumberyard was next door to the abandoned movie theater.

Fonthill had probably planned this from the start. Keep the wolves busy at the drive-in while he conducts his business so close they wouldn't suspect it. I couldn't tell any of them about the venue change or they'd insist on coming along. Their help was appreciated, but this was my problem, not theirs.

I never should have let Nadya get involved, and I needed to make it right. If I could get out alive, I would.

And watching Aren's chiseled profile as he worked alongside his brother... I'd never wanted to live more. I could finally see a future worth fighting for.

But Nadya came first. I got her into this mess, and she was not dying for it.

Aren handed me the keys to the Lotus. "Doesn't matter if he recognizes the

car this time, right?”

If this was my last chance for speed, I couldn't have asked for a better car. “Thank you.”

He bent to kiss my forehead. “I want it back.” His thumb brushed along my jaw. “In case you and Nadya need to make a quick exit, it'll be the best vehicle.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Adam and Lana ordered pizzas, but it was all I could do to finish one piece. I kept mentally running through my options. If I convinced Fonthill let Nadya go, she could take the car and head for the drive-in to get the Pack. I'd take my chances with Fonthill until the others arrived.

Fonthill would probably check me for weapons and confiscate my Glock, but maybe I'd get lucky and he'd stop there. If I he didn't find the Ruger on my calf, I'd just need to keep my head and wait for my shot.

Once Nadya was safe, Aren could lecture me about how I should have confided in him.

If I was still alive.

He leaned over, squeezing my thigh under the table. “You should eat.”

“I had a piece.”

He met my eyes. “I know you're upset, but we're going to get Nadya back. Once she's clear, you'll give us the signal, and we'll take him down from there.”

I nodded, wondering how long they would wait for the signal before they moved in anyway. I hoped it would be long enough for me to get Nadya in the car at the lumberyard.

“I'll feel better when it's over.” Which was true. Either way it went down, dead or alive, would be better than sitting here while my sister was alone with a psychotic werewolf soldier.

...

Twenty minutes until eight o'clock, and I was behind the wheel of the Lotus.

Aren leaned down to kiss me through the driver's-side window. He smelled like a forest at dusk. It wasn't some sort of fancy cologne, just him. Closing my eyes, I breathed him into my lungs as I savored the taste of his lips, the way his teeth brushed against my skin. Memorizing every touch.

He pulled back with a barely there, sexy smile. "We'll have to continue that later."

I rubbed my lips together and nodded.

"Be careful." He sobered as he straightened up. "I've got your back."

"I love you, wolf." I fired up the engine, surprised to find my eyes brimming with tears I refused to let fall. I left the window down, drinking in the night air as I gunned the engine and hoped that wasn't our last kiss.

Chapter Forty-Five

AREN

Something was wrong.

I pulled out the keys to Jason's Lexus and headed for the car.

"Where are you going?" I heard Adam say, following me.

"She said she loved me." I opened the door and sat inside.

Adam leaned on the car. "What's that got to do with you abandoning our plan?"

"I haven't abandoned anything." I looked at my brother. "You guys can make it work without me. Or I'll already be there."

Adam shook his head. "Tell me what's going on."

"I don't think Sasha has any intention of following through with this, and there's no time to explain. I'll call you if anything changes."

I didn't wait for him to reply. I started the car and tore off after Sasha. I'd never be able to find the Lotus if she got on the freeway before I caught up with her.

She finally told me she loved me. And it felt like goodbye.

The past few hours kept replaying in my mind, the way Sasha sat back and let us formulate the plan instead of taking charge like she usually did. The half-hearted smile she gave me at the table. And then a kiss that said me she loved me before I heard her say the words.

I gripped the wheel tighter, sliding through the side-street traffic. When had she made this alternate plan? We had been together the whole time. I mentally retraced our steps, trying to find any point that Sasha wasn't with me.

Then I remembered. Her cell phone.

On the drive back to the ranch, I'd seen her pull it out once. She didn't make a call or receive a call, just pulled it out and then slipped it back into the holder on her belt.

Fonthill must have texted her.

"Goddammit!" I slammed my hand against the wheel. Why hadn't she told me?

Worry and confusion mutated quickly into rage and betrayal. She was just going to give herself up to that bounty hunter without a word. How could I be her partner if she shut me out?

All questions I could ask once she was safe.

I got to the highway, but no sign of the Lotus.

She could be anywhere.

Chapter Forty-Six

SASHA

When I got to the lumberyard, I shut off the headlights. I didn't need them to see in the dark anyway, and I'd take any advantage over Fonthill I could get. No lights were on inside the offices, and the front parking lot was empty.

I turned off the engine, parking the car in the center of the lot, ready for a quick getaway. With the keys in my pocket, I drew my Glock and jogged toward the side of the building. The gate was ajar, a clipped Master Lock dangling lifelessly at the end of the thick chain. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs and forcing my pulse to slow.

Cool head, clear shot. That was all I needed.

Becoming a jaguar had definitely enhanced my police skills. Beyond seeing perfectly in the dark, I was stronger, faster, and virtually silent.

"Here, kitty kitty."

Sadly, Fonthill didn't need to hear me. He could smell me.

The sound of his voice sent a chill down my spine, but I kept moving, gun at the ready. If I could find him before he found me, I might be able to get a shot off.

"Sasha, no!"

My sister's voice was followed by a loud slap that echoed across the deserted yard, and it froze me in my tracks. I took another breath through my nose, biting at my lower lip.

Cool head, clear shot.

"Sister is a sweet little morsel," the bastard crooned. "I'm thinking maybe I don't need the bounty for you, kitty. The way I figure it, I'm dying anyway."

Might as well go out with a nice piece of tail, right?”

Sick twisted son of a bitch. Nadya’s muffled sob made me want to run out in the open and kick his ass.

He was counting on that. I was trained not to take the bait.

But training didn’t make me want to any less. It also made me realize that coming here alone had been a mistake. Who was I kidding? One of the first things they teach you is a lone cop can easily become a dead cop.

I couldn’t help Nadya if he killed me first.

Quickly, I pulled out my cell phone and texted Aren one word: *Lumberyard*. Once the message was sent, I sent up a prayer he’d understand and get the Pack over here without tipping off Fonthill. In the meantime, I’d do my best to keep him busy.

The wood exploded beside my head. Splinters brushed my cheek as I dove for cover. More silent shots followed my every move.

“You’re not the only one who can see in the dark, kitty.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

AREN

I rolled into the abandoned drive-in when I got her text:

Lumberyard.

I stared at the message for a moment before it hit me. Fonthill must've changed the meeting place. Send the Pack to the drive-in while he killed Sasha right next door. The only thing keeping me sane was the first-hand knowledge that Sasha was very hard to kill. The woman was intelligent, well trained, and dangerous in her own right.

But Fonthill had her sister, and that tipped the scales.

Fuck.

I started to turn the car around when Adam pulled up in his Jeep with General Sloan in the passenger seat. He jumped out as Gareth and Jason drove in.

"I guess we're early." Adam scanned the dark parking lot, lifting his head toward the breeze, searching for a scent he wouldn't find.

"Sasha's at the lumberyard. Fonthill changed the rendezvous point."

Adam spun around. "And she didn't tell us?"

"I'm guessing he told her to come alone."

"She let us work out this plan to back her up, and she knew she wasn't coming here all along?"

I clenched my jaw, caging the "fuck you" that was aching to burst out. "I don't have time for this shit. Come to the lumberyard or don't. Sasha needs me."

Without waiting for a reply, I drove away. Regardless of how pissed my brother was, I knew my Pack would be behind me. Our strength came from being able to count on one another.

They wouldn't be happy about it, but they'd still back me up.

I just hoped we wouldn't be too late.

Chapter Forty-Eight

SASHA

“Come out, pussycat...”

Cool head, clear shot. I kept the mantra repeating in my mind, distancing myself from his taunts.

I braced the barrel of my gun against the top board of a stack of two-by-fours, scanning for the source of his voice.

My sister screamed to my right, and I swung the Glock toward my target.

In a bunker made of stacks of plywood, I caught a glimpse of Nadya. Fonthill stood behind her, twisting her arm while he stared into the darkness with his infrared goggles.

“Let her go, Fonthill.” His head swiveled in my direction. “Let her walk away, and I’ll come out.”

He laughed. “I may be dying, but I’m not stupid.” He jerked Nadya even closer, making her gasp. “Little sister here is my shield. Without her, you’d have a shot. I remember the kill-shot rumors around the precinct. Your nickname was Dead Eye for a reason.”

“Fine.” I threw my Glock out in the clearing in front of him. It clattered into the dirt. “I’m unarmed.”

He stared at the gun, then back toward my hiding place. “You got balls for a kitty. Come out with your hands where I can see them.”

“I’m not coming out until you let my sister go.” I was rapidly running out of moves here. What if Aren never got my text? What if the Pack was still at the drive-in right now?

I couldn’t think about it. I took a breath, repeating my mantra in my head.

I still had the Ruger on my calf. I could still take this asshole down.

I just needed to keep my head.

Fonthill tugged Nadya's arm higher behind her back until she rose up on her tiptoes to keep him from breaking it. With a sick smile, he slid the barrel of his silencer along her cheek. Nadya sobbed, and I clenched my fists. Please let Aren be on his way.

"I make the rules, bitch," Fonthill growled. "Now, get your ass out here, hands where I can see them."

I couldn't delay him any longer. Shit.

"I guess our courtship is over then." I stood, my hands open in front of me. "Now let her go."

His lips curled back from his teeth, sneering below his goggles. He licked his mouth, and I caught the scent of blood. Nadya's lip was cracked at the corner, swollen, but other than that she didn't look injured. A drop of blood hit her shoulder before I realized it came from Fonthill.

His lips weren't wet. They were covered in blood.

He held onto Nadya and waved me over with his Beretta. "Get over here, and stay away from the gun, or I'll put a bullet in you and keep your sister for myself."

"Don't do it, Sash." He smacked Nadya again.

"Shut up, you little cunt!"

"Leave her alone! It's me you want." I hustled away from the safety of the woodpile and into the clearing. He could shoot me now, but I didn't see any other way to play it.

He started to come near the edge of his plywood barrier when something made him stop. He tipped his head and sniffed the air. In one swift movement, his free arm clamped around Nadya's neck, and he pointed his gun at her temple.

"You stupid bitch!" He screamed. "I told you no wolves."

He pushed the slide back on the Beretta, loading a round into the chamber, and my heart sank. Suddenly, Nadya slammed her elbow into him, landing the blow right under his ribcage. At the same time she kicked her heel back

and up, nailing him in the groin.

I heard a bullet ricochet, but he didn't let her go.

Before Fonthill could retaliate, a voice boomed from the darkness.

"This mission is over, soldier." General Sloan stepped into the clearing in full dress uniform. His stature was every bit as commanding as his voice. "Major Fonthill, attacking civilians wasn't what I trained you to do."

Fonthill jerked Nadya in closer, his eyes narrowing. "Fuck you, Sloan. You and your scientists juiced me up, and then when I wasn't your perfect machine, you tossed me aside like garbage." Bloody spittle flew from his lips as he pressed the barrel harder against Nadya's temple. "I was proud of what I was, but you promised you'd make me even better." He licked Nadya's cheek, leaving a bloody trail on her skin as his eyes sparkled. "How do you like your monster now, sir?"

General Sloan opened his hands. I thought he was an idiot to approach this madman unarmed, but if Sloan was here, no doubt Aren and the other wolves were, too.

Somewhere.

"You knew the risks when you volunteered for the Lycan Squad. We did the best we could for you," General Sloan said. "I got you that job with the police department, remember?"

"And *she* fucked it up for me." He glared at me, the corner of his mouth curling into a twisted smile as more blood oozed down from his nose. "She got me kicked off the force. Left me with nothing."

"You beat up a female officer," I said through clenched teeth. "No one did that for you."

"Shut up, bitch!" he screamed, pushing his goggles off his head. They clattered into the dirt, leaving his crazed bloodshot eyes uncovered.

I almost wished he'd kept the goggles on.

His wild gaze swooped back toward the general. "Why are you here anyway? This is none of your fucking business, sir." Bloody spittle showered out of his mouth.

"You shouldn't have attacked a civilian, Major." A deep-seated growl

colored Miller's voice, and his eyes glowed with intensity. I wasn't sure what was happening, but if it helped my sister, I didn't care. "It made the news, and now you're a target with your employer."

"Get out of my head, General." Fonthill winced. "It hurts enough without you inside, too." He gasped and grit his teeth before shaking his head, fresh blood trailing down from his nose. "Nero can go fuck themselves."

I needed to get Nadya away from him.

"I'm already dying. My friends are all dead. You think I don't know that?" He tightened his grip on my sister. "I've been pissing blood for a week. Can't eat, can't sleep."

"Put down your weapon, and let me try to help you." The general held out his hand, his tone calm, more compassionate. "We can find a treatment."

"Treatment?" Fonthill's eyes widened, and his jaw clenched in pain. For a second I thought maybe we'd caught a break, but he regained his equilibrium. "It's too late for that."

"Just let her go. Take me instead." I drew his attention, hoping to get Nadya free from his grasp. "You can collect your bounty money and retire."

"I told you to shut up!"

A muffled whistle and pain flared, stealing my breath away.

I didn't realize I'd been shot until I hit the ground.

Chapter Forty-Nine

AREN

Fonthill swung his gun, and I burst out of hiding, racing to knock Sasha out of harm's way. My ankle seized, pain shooting up my leg. I pushed forward anyway.

But I was too fucking slow.

He pulled the trigger, and Sasha went down.

"No!" I shouted, collapsing beside her, the raw ache in my ankle forgotten.

Fonthill turned the gun on Nadya again. "I said no goddamn wolves!"

I scooped Sasha up, struggling to get her behind the wood barrier while she shifted, trying to see her sister.

"I came alone!" she yelled from my arms.

"Let the girl go, soldier. What good will it do to kill her? She's got nothing to do with this." The general took another step closer to Fonthill.

I laid Sasha down behind the shelter of the lumber pile. The stench of her blood assaulted me, and my heart pounded as I searched for the source.

"Where are you hit?"

She winced. "It's my leg. I'll be fine."

I found the gunshot wound in her thigh, blood seeped out like oil. "You're not fine. We need to find Jason."

"We *need* to save my sister." She met my eyes, determination mixed with the pain.

"Miller is working on it. We've got to stop the bleeding." I pulled my shirt off and pressed it to her wound. She hissed a little, biting her lip, then she took the compress and scooted to the edge of the pile.

We looked out as the general made a move closer to his loose cannon. “Let her go, Major. I give you my word, we’ll get you help.”

“Your word isn’t worth shit. It’s too late for that.” He started to smile, a bloody smile as the tendons of his neck strained. “But you were right about one thing. What good would it do me to kill her?”

My brow furrowed as I squinted to see better in the darkness. It almost looked like his neck was getting thicker. Crazy laughter erupted from his bloodied lips as his facial features cracked and mutated. “Why should I kill her...” His speech was garbled, wet. “When your fucking mutation can do it for me?”

His face juttred forward, changing so fast I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

“Oh shit,” I gasped, pulling in a breath to shout. “He’s shifting!”

Chapter Fifty

SASHA

It wasn't until Aren yelled that my brain registered what was happening. Blood oozed as Fonthill's skin ripped and tore, and then healed again in a process that made the gunshot in my leg look like a scratch. Horrific was an understatement. Somehow he shifted his form at will and without allowing his body to completely take the new shape.

Only his head and neck were changing into a wolf. And he still had his filthy hands on my sister.

I drew the Ruger from my calf holster. Thankfully it was strapped to my uninjured leg. I raised my weapon, taking aim, but the bastard's blood-dripping snout stayed right beside Nadya's face. I couldn't risk hitting her.

I forced a breath through my clenched teeth.

Cool head, clear shot.

Wait for it. Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

This was all my fault. I dangled her out to lure this monster into the open. *I* did this.

Steadying my hand, I took a slow breath.

The monster opened his jaws as I tightened my grip on my gun and waited for my shot. Before I could take it, he buried his teeth deep in Nadya's shoulder.

Her scream pierced my ears, but I willed myself not to move. The second he loosened his grip and moved away, I squeezed the trigger.

Chapter Fifty-One

AREN

When the Pack moved in, time seemed to slow. Nadya screamed, and Sasha fired, nailing Fonthill right between the eyes. His body flew back and hit the ground with a hollow *thud*.

My ears rang with the gunshot, and the smell of gunpowder stung my nostrils. Nadya crumpled, and Sasha scrambled to her sister, wounded leg and all. She cradled Nadya's head in her lap as her sister's entire body seized, floundering in the dirt like a fish out of water. Nadya's eyes rolled back in her head, and the corners of her mouth started to foam.

Jason moved in beside Sasha, tearing Nadya's shirt to get at the wound. I winced. Her flesh was already swollen, the bite oozing with puss and blood, blistering.

"Our bites don't have this effect on humans." Jason looked up at the general. "Is this normal with the enhancement?"

"We've never seen anyone bitten by one of the enhanced soldiers." He frowned, staring down at Nadya's prone form.

Gareth pushed through, his face a mask of deadly intention. If Sasha hadn't just killed Fonthill, Gareth would've. He knelt beside Jason, his dark eyes boring into our Pack doctor. "Help her."

"I'm trying." Jason shook his head. "You hovering isn't making it any easier."

"Let's give them some room to work." Adam pulled Gareth back, forcing him to make eye contact. "We need to get Fonthill's body out of here. If anyone heard the gunfire and called the police, we're screwed. That's how

you can help.”

Gareth nodded, and he and Jared went with Adam and Miller to move Fonthill’s body. Out of the corner of my eye I saw them carrying the man-wolf out toward the truck. Movies might show dead bodies reverting back to their human form, but in reality, once life leaves our body, so does the ability to shift.

Fonthill went out as a monster, and death wasn’t going to change that.

I turned toward Sasha and almost winced at the sight of her sister’s bite wound.

I’d never seen anyone bitten. It was usually a private ritual between mated couples. But this wasn’t a normal werewolf bite. Nadya’s body radiated heat worse than any fever, and the bite area was discolored and spreading. Splotches of gray ran down her arms, following the trails of her veins, almost as if we were watching the poison moving through her body, changing her.

Sasha met my eyes, her face lined with worry. “She’ll survive, right? She’ll be a werewolf, but she’ll still be alive.”

Jason answered while he tended to her wound. “Fonthill’s mutated DNA string is an unknown variable. She’ll be whatever he was.”

“So even if she lives” —Sasha held Nadya a little tighter— “She’ll end up crazy like he was?”

“I’ll do all I can for her.” Jason reached over to rest a hand on Sasha’s shoulder, checking around us before he lowered his voice and added, “I don’t have any idea how this will affect her yet, but Adam told me she has psychic abilities. I have to believe that will help her through this change.”

“How so?” Sasha kept brushing Nadya’s hair off her forehead.

Jason swabbed out the wound and started dressing it. “Nero has been experimenting, and something about a psychic human’s brain makes the body more compatible with the shifter gene. It worked with Lana being able to shift without being converted, and it’s apparently hereditary because she passed the gene to daughter as well. If anyone stands a chance of surviving this mutated shifter DNA it’s someone with psychic abilities.”

Sasha frowned and I froze, unable to stop what was happening.

“How do you know Lana passed the gene to her daughter? I thought you wouldn’t be able to tell if they’re shifters until they’re older,” Sasha said.

I opened my mouth, but Jason beat me to the punch. “They won’t start shifting until they hit puberty, but we recognized their scents right away. Malcolm’s a wolf, and Madeleine is a jaguar.” He finished bandaging the bite and met Sasha’s eyes. “That’s why we can’t let Nero know they exist. Not only did Lana conceive without being converted, but she gave birth to a girl who already carries the shifter gene.”

“They’ll want the babies even more than Lana,” Sasha said quietly, her eyes downcast.

“Exactly.” He stood up and moved around to Sasha’s other side, near her gunshot wound. “Let Aren take care of Nadya for a minute so I can have a look at your leg.”

I moved to Sasha’s side to take over holding her sister. Brushing a kiss to Sasha’s temple, I whispered, “I’ll explain later.”

I closed my eyes, grateful she was still alive, confident we’d find a way to help Nadya, and feeling like a complete and total asshole for lying to her about the twins.

Sasha moved away without a word.

Chapter Fifty-Two

SASHA

Jason cut my pant leg to get to the bullet wound. The pain was a welcome distraction from the worry for my sister and the ache in my heart.

The entire Pack knew about the babies, and Aren lied to me.

More than once.

And why? Because if Nero found out about the babies, they would be in danger.

It was logical. I had worked for Nero; I even came after Lana on their behalf. But it also meant that all the sweet words Aren had been whispering about forgetting the past and being partners, having each other's backs was all bullshit.

Lies.

It hurt worse than the damn gunshot. Against my better judgment, I got mixed up with another man, and this time my poor judgment left my sister with a death sentence. Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them back. Tears wouldn't fix any of this.

"Looks like the bullet has an exit wound," Jason muttered.

"That's good, right?" I winced as he cleaned out the hole.

He shrugged. "It means I won't have to dig a bullet out of you, but I don't like how much blood you're losing. It might have nicked an artery or chipped your bone. We need to get you back to the ranch so I can check it out with better light."

Jason looked over at Aren. "I'll carry Nadya if you can help Sasha back to the cars. When we get them to Adam's I'll be able to set up a treatment plan

for their injuries.”

Nadya’s skin was pale, but her muscles had finally relaxed. Other than the bulky bandage on her shoulder, she looked like she could’ve been sleeping.

“She’ll be all right, won’t she?” I whispered to no one in particular.

Jason scooped Nadya up into his arms. “We’ll take good care of her.”

He carried my sister back toward the parking lot, leaving Aren and me behind in awkward silence. He reached around my waist to help me to my feet. “Can you stand?”

“I think so.” I bit my lip to keep from screaming, but I made it to my feet.

“I could carry you.”

I shook my head. “I think your ankle is unhappy enough as it is.”

“Fuck my ankle. It’s you I’m worried about.”

I couldn’t look into his eyes. How could I have been so stupid? He painted a bright future in front of me, and I sacrificed my own sister to try to reach it. What the hell was wrong with me? I bared my soul to Aren, shared things about myself and my family that I’d never told another person, and in return he never trusted me with the truth.

What else had he lied about? One lie only led to more. Apparently I hadn’t learned anything from my relationship with Sebastian. I shivered, wrapped tight in my blanket of self-loathing.

“I’m fine.” I leaned into Aren, hot flashes of pain licking through my leg with every step.

I should’ve pulled away and taken care of myself, but Aren’s body still felt like home, a rock in a storm. He kept his arm tight around my waist, holding me up as we both hobbled toward the cars.

At the gate, he stopped. “I had every intention of telling you about the twins. I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” I still didn’t look at him. His fingers brushed my chin, but I shook him off. “Don’t.”

“At least let me explain.”

“No.” I grabbed the fence and slipped through the opening. “Trust me. I get it.”

Before he could say anything else I called over to Jason. “Got a crutch in there?”

The doctor rushed over, helping me. I got inside with Nadya as Aren stood, stoic, watching the van.

Jason turned around from the front seat. “Be sure to keep her head elevated, and let me know if she starts to seize again.”

I nodded, but my attention was focused through the back window.

There was Aren, shirtless in the center of the parking lot, his eyes locked on mine as we drove away. I watched until I couldn’t see him any longer.

With a sigh, I dropped my head, looking down at my sister’s sleeping face. Her life was going to be cut short because of me. In the back of the van, I finally let myself cry.

Chapter Fifty-Three

AREN

Someone clasped my shoulder, and I spun around ready for an attack only to find Gareth, raising his hands. “Easy, dude.”

“Sorry.” I shook my head. “Still a little tense, I guess.”

Gareth nodded. “We all are.” He watched the van disappearing in the distance. “Jason’s going to be able to help Nadya, right?”

“Hope so.” The truth was none of us knew, least of all me. All I knew for sure was that I’d convinced Sasha we could protect her sister, and now they were both injured. Most likely, Nadya would never recover fully. Even with her psychic abilities, the flawed DNA would eventually ruin her like it had Fonthill.

The worry for Sasha’s sister was only part of the rabid guilt eating away at my insides. Seeing the betrayal in my mate’s eyes and knowing it was because of me made me want to scream and turn back time. I’d fucked up and hurt with the woman I loved.

After being with that lying sack of shit Sebastian, she must’ve thought I wasn’t much better. I didn’t mean for it to happen. I’d wanted to tell her, but it was never the right time.

Goddamn excuses. Was that the best I could do? That would only piss Sasha off more.

“Jared and I will meet you at the ranch,” Gareth said, interrupting my mental beat down. “Can you drive Miller back?”

I’d forgotten all about the general. “Yeah.” I looked at the cars and frowned. “We’ll have to come back for the Lotus. Sasha still has the keys.”

“I can push it out into the street just in case the police come poking around.” Gareth tipped his head toward Jared. “We’ll bring you back for it before morning.”

“All right.” I walked toward the Lexus, grinding my teeth together and struggling not to limp. Before I got the key in the ignition, the passenger door opened and Miller got in.

He fastened his seat belt and then turned toward me. “I should have been able to stop him. I was the Alpha of the Lycan Squad. We even built in hypnotic protocols with each soldier. When I gave him a mental push, he should have obeyed.”

“A lot of things *should have* gone differently tonight.” I pulled out of the parking lot, not knowing what else to say. This was my father’s brother, but I didn’t know anything about him. He stood by and let his werewolf soldiers be mutated into madmen.

I didn’t understand him, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

I pressed the accelerator, ignoring the ache creeping up my leg.

“It never should have been like this.” He stared out the window. “The research seemed promising.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself, okay?” I glanced at the rearview mirror and back to the highway. “I’m taking you to the ranch, and you can get back in that Hummer and pretend like we never met.”

He was silent, and for a second I thought maybe I’d shut him down.

“I’ve scheduled a debriefing meeting at Nero regarding Fonthill and the Lycan Squad. I want to know why they hired him for a mission when they knew the other soldiers had...not made it.” He spoke with so much authority that for a moment, I almost thought I gave a shit about what he was planning to do in the future. “I’m also going to request full disclosure on the attack that killed Malcolm.”

My eyes shifted toward him for a second. “Good luck with that.”

I could feel him staring at me, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction of looking his way again.

“I did love my brother. We didn’t always see eye to eye, but I never

stopped caring about him.” He cleared his throat. “I thought eventually we’d get together and put the past behind us.”

“He must not have felt the same way. He never mentioned you.” I kept my gaze straight ahead.

“I don’t know. Maybe he was waiting for me to make the first move.”

I took the freeway exit a little too fast. “Maybe he was worried you would.”

I saw the general raise a brow out of the corner of my eye. “Malcolm wasn’t hiding from me. I’ve always known he and the others formed their own Pack in Reno.”

“I’m not going to argue about the past with you.” I waited at the light. “I’ve got enough on my plate as it is.”

“You want me to get in my government vehicle and never look back again.”

I thought about it and finally nodded. “Yeah. I don’t see why not.”

“Family means nothing to you?”

I rolled my eyes, wishing there were fewer traffic lights on the way to the ranch. “My *family* doesn’t work with a dirty, corrupt organization like Nero.”

“Nothing is as black or white as you’d like to think.”

“They sent killers to my territory and murdered a Pack brother and our Alpha all in an attempt to kidnap a civilian woman. Then they hired a psychotic bounty hunter to take out one of their own.” I glanced over at him. “Did you know they also fund schools for the gifted so they can steal little girls with psychic gifts for a jaguar-shifter breeding program?” I got my answer by the look on his face. “They’ve got a lot more cooking in their facility than government defense contracts, General, so excuse me for disagreeing, but deciding they’re dishonest, evil sons of bitches doesn’t seem like much of a gray area to me.”

He kept quiet for the remainder of the drive. When I parked in Adam’s driveway he broke the silence.

“I appreciate the opportunity to try to talk my soldier down. I’m sorry we didn’t get a better outcome.”

I nodded and got out. The general came around and offered his hand. I gave him a firm handshake. “Do us a favor and stay away from Reno.”

I walked away before he could respond.

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Inside the house, I found my brother with a stack of clean towels. He glanced around me. “Is the general gone?”

“Yeah. I recommended he never come back.”

In spite of the stress, Adam started to smile. “Sounds good to me.” He sobered. “I’ve got to get these to Jason.”

I followed him into their spare room. Sasha was propped up on one bed, intent on watching Nadya in the other. Even being scraped, bruised, and shot, Sasha was still the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

I was sure she was in pain, but she didn’t show it. All of her attention was on her sister.

Jason took the towels and went back to work on cleaning Nadya’s wound. Her skin was pale and glistening with perspiration. But she was alive.

I settled on the edge of Sasha’s bed and took her hand, half expecting her to smack me. But instead she gripped it. Tight. We sat like that for over an hour until Jason straightened up and wiped his brow.

“I gave her a sedative. Once she regains consciousness, I’ll be able to run more tests and assess her conversion.” He looked at Sasha. “I wish I had better news for you, but I don’t want to give you false hope. Until I get more test results, I don’t know how to counteract the gene mutation Fonthill passed on through the bite.” His voice dropped a notch, almost a growl. “But I damned well plan on finding a way.”

“I appreciate all you’re doing for us,” Sasha whispered.

He leaned over to check her bandages and straightened up. “I left Aren’s crutches at the end of your bed if you need to get up tonight, but you should really try to stay in bed, okay?”

Sasha nodded.

After the room cleared, I lifted Sasha's hand toward my lips, but she pulled it away.

"I can't do this with you right now." Her eyes were on Nadya.

I frowned. "Do what with me?"

Her gaze cut up to my face. "Break up."

Chapter Fifty-Four

SASHA

My injured leg hurt, but the pain in my heart overshadowed any physical aches.

“Break up?” Aren’s brow furrowed as he shook his head. “This was just a mistake. I don’t even get to explain?”

“This is about more than a lie, Aren.” I swallowed the lump of emotion threatening to steal my voice. If I kept staring into the forest of his green eyes, I’d fall apart. I gestured toward Nadya, motionless on the other bed. “My sister is infected with some kind of werewolf mutation because of me. I knew we were rushing into that plan. My gut told me not to dangle my sister out like a carrot, but I wanted to get Fonthill and move on with my life. I let you convince me that we could have a future together, and I wanted it so badly that I was willing to risk my sister.” My voice cracked, and I clenched my jaw. “I can’t talk about this right now.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and took my hand. My whole body ached for his touch. Part of me wanted him to hold me and tell me everything would be all right.

When did I get so weak?

“I love you, Sash. I’m sorry this didn’t turn out the way we planned, and I’m an ass for lying about Malcolm and Madeleine. When you asked me about them at first, I felt like it was Adam’s secret to share, not mine. They’re his kids. I know it’s a stupid excuse, but it’s the truth. And I should have come clean, but everything happened so fast that I didn’t get a chance.”

He kissed my hand, and it was all I could do to keep the tears in my eyes

from rolling down my cheeks.

“We can still have a life together,” he said. “Let me help you and Nadya. We’re a team.”

“No,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “You don’t get it. You talk a good game about how I need to trust you and let the past go, but it was all talk. I trusted you and your Pack with my sister’s life and look where that got her? And the joke is on me because in the end *you* never trusted *me*.”

He got up from the bed. “I do trust you.” He sighed. “Can you at least look at me?”

I pressed my lips together, fighting to stay strong, and slowly tilted my chin up to meet his eyes. “I know you want to work this out, but trust isn’t negotiable.”

“I had every intention of keeping your sister safe. This isn’t your fault or my fault. A crazed madman threw all our plans out the window. I never meant for this to happen, and you know I planned on telling you about the twins.”

“When?” I felt a spark of rage erupt in my belly, and I clung to it with both hands, anything to escape the pain and heartache. “When exactly were you going to decide I’d proven myself worthy to know your Pack secrets?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Do I?” I raised a brow. “Because you like to say we’re a team, but in the end I bared my soul to you, and in return, you lied to me because you thought I might not be on the same team after all.”

He stood up, eyes narrowed. “Don’t put words in my mouth. I never believed you were spying for Nero.”

“Then why lie about the twins?” He hesitated, and I clenched my fists. “That’s what I thought. Just go.”

Aren reached for the door but stopped and turned around. “I love you, Sasha. I’m sorry I made a mistake, but I’m going to make them sometimes. I’m not perfect.” He lowered his voice and added, “But at least I’m not throwing away our relationship now that we have a real chance to make it work. You can blame me for this, but at the end of the day, you’re the one

who was afraid to take a chance.”

He slammed the door behind him as my pillow went flying.

Chapter Fifty-Five

AREN

My hands were shaking, my body numb as I stormed through Adam's house. I needed fresh air and time to digest what had just happened.

Leaning against the railing of Adam's deck I stared up at the stars like I might find some answers hidden up there. My apology hadn't gone the way I planned. In my head, Sasha was supposed to understand and forgive me, we'd kiss, and later we'd laugh about it.

But according to her, there wasn't going to be a later.

I rubbed my chest, wishing I could soothe the gut-wrenching pain growing there, like she'd taken a hot stake and jammed it between my ribs. The burning radiated out until I could hardly breathe.

"How's she doing?"

I almost jumped at Lana's voice and glanced back over my shoulder. "They're both resting."

"You don't look so good." She came to stand beside me. "Are you injured, too?"

"Not physically." I looked down at my brother's wife. "She doesn't want to see me anymore."

Lana frowned. "Is it because of Nadya?"

"She blames herself for Nadya being infected." I struggled to keep my voice even. "Now she's bundled me into the same group of bad decisions with Sebastian. It didn't help that I lied to her about the twins."

"About the twins? Why?"

"I wish I had a good answer." I rubbed my forehead, and stared into the

darkness. “When I got to Los Angeles we were talking about you, and then the babies came up. Sasha asked me if they were jaguars like you, and something inside of me hesitated. It wasn’t that I thought she’d tell Nero.” I fumbled for the right words. “I knew Adam didn’t trust her yet, and he wouldn’t want me to share information about Malcolm and Madeleine.”

I sighed, resting on my elbows on the railing. “I told her we wouldn’t be able to tell if they were jaguars or werewolves until they were older and started shifting. It seemed like a small thing at the time. I figured I’d be able to tell her the truth once things settled down and the others accepted her.”

Lana was quiet for a moment before placing her hand on my forearm. “I’m sure she’ll come around eventually. Just give her some space.”

“You don’t get it.” I wheeled on her without meaning to. “She’s *my* mate. But it doesn’t go both ways. Jaguars don’t mate for life like we do. She can walk away, and maybe someday she’ll forget me, but the wolf inside me will never let go. There will never be someone else for me. How am I supposed to let her walk out of my life?”

“That’s not what I said. She just needs time.”

“What if time doesn’t fix this one?” I straightened up, every muscle in my body tense and edgy. “Jesus, Lana, I can’t lose her.”

Adam stepped out onto the deck, taking Lana’s hand. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” I brushed past him and back through the house. “Gareth, can we go back to the lumberyard for the Lotus tonight instead?”

He nodded and got up, but I didn’t wait. I couldn’t risk blowing up at anyone else. Gareth got in the passenger seat of the Lexus without a word. That’s why I asked him to come with me. He was the least likely to speak. With Gareth in the car I could brood in peace.

Once we hit the highway, Gareth finally broke the silence. “The women are going to be all right?”

“Looks like it. We got lucky.”

Gareth nodded and looked out the window. “I’ve never seen anyone shift like he did.”

“Nero really messed him up. We’re not meant to shift so fast.”

“And only his head shifted into a wolf. Not his body.” He shook his head. “Crazy.”

“Yeah.” I tried to block the image of Fonthill’s face jutting forward into a snout from my mind. “Maybe the Green Berets trained to control the shift. Who knows...”

“Your uncle would.”

I glanced over at Gareth. “Miller Sloan may have been my dad’s brother, but he’s not part of my family.” My gaze shifted back onto the highway. “He’s already gone anyway.”

“You think that’s smart with Nadya bitten by that...mutation?”

“I think we’re better off on our own. Jason will do everything he can for her, and we can trust him. If we let the general be involved we’d have no idea if he was helping or hurting her.”

Gareth stayed quiet the rest of the drive, and I sank back into the mental instant replay of Sasha telling me our relationship was over. My chest ached as the shock and numbness faded.

How was I going to live without her?

I pulled the car into the lumberyard parking lot and struggled to bury my emotions. We still had work to do. “I guess we better finish with the cleanup before we take the cars back.”

“You have the supplies?”

“Luke loaded them up at the ranch.” I popped the trunk.

We got out and pulled the gate open to go around the back of the lumberyard, but as we rounded the corner, we both froze. The scent was strong and undeniable.

Gasoline. Lots of it.

“You smell that?” I asked.

Gareth nodded. The fumes obliterated any other scents I might normally pick up. Losing my heightened sense of smell left me feeling blind. For once I wished I had a gun.

“We’ve gotta get out of here,” Gareth whispered.

“What if someone found evidence? No one cleared the site yet.” I couldn’t

just walk away.

“This place is going to go up like bomb.” Gareth grabbed my shoulder, holding me back. “We can’t stay.”

Before I could answer, I heard the gust of air igniting into flame. Too late.

“Run!” I shouted, doing my best to keep up with Gareth.

My ankle was still weak from the fight with Fonhill, so my wobbly gait wasn’t nearly as fast as I needed with a fireball on my tail. Ahead, Gareth didn’t bother slowing to slip through the gate. Instead he grabbed the chain link and vaulted his legs up over the top of the fence, dropping free on the other side without missing a step.

I’d never make that jump with my leg in this condition. Fuck.

Glancing over my shoulder, the heat of the hungry blaze made my eyes water. Survival instincts kicked in, blessing me with another wave of adrenaline. I pumped my legs harder toward the fence. By the time I got to the gate my back blistered, burning. I yanked myself through and stumbled forward. The fire didn’t cross the gate.

I coughed, my lungs aching from the fumes and smoke.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Gareth snarled.

I frowned and glanced up to find he wasn’t talking to me.

On the street, Sebastian leaned against the back of my Lotus.

Chapter Fifty-Six

SASHA

I wiped my eyes. This was the second time I'd cried in one night. Enough sniffing.

"Sash?" Nadya stirred on the other bed.

Without thinking about it, I swung my legs over the side of the bed to get up. Red-hot pain flared from my wound, stealing my breath. I gritted my teeth and carefully let my feet rest on the floor. So far so good. I gently pushed up from the bed, trying to shift my weight to my uninjured leg. Dark spots clouded the edges of my vision, but I was not about to let myself pass out.

I reached for the crutch Jason had supplied and hobbled over. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I touched her cheek. "I'm here, Nadya."

Her lashes fluttered, and I stared into her green eyes. She looked up at me and gradually the corners of her mouth tugged into a frown. "You're sad."

Had she always known these things about me and I never noticed? I sighed. "Just worried about you. I'm so sorry. I never should have let you put yourself in danger. I knew that guy was insane." I shook my head. "We were rushing into it." My hand gripped the sheets tighter. "I knew better."

My sister winced, struggling to prop herself up a little.

I touched her uninjured shoulder. "Jason said you need to stay put."

"He bit me." She reached up with her other hand to touch the bandage on her shoulder.

"I know." I brushed her hair back from her forehead. "Jason thinks you're psychic abilities are helping you with this..."

Nadya pressed her lips together. "I heard you talking. I know I'm infected." Infected. My gut twisted with guilt.

"It's not your fault, Sash."

I stifled a gasp and met my sister's eyes. "You're reading my mind."

"Not really." She managed to get to a forty-five degree angle and settled against the pillows. "I can feel your guilt, and I've known you long enough to know you probably think you put me up to this or that you failed me somehow."

"I did both those things." I sat on the edge of her bed, straightening out my wounded leg across the mattress.

"You did not." She shook her head. "Don't take credit for what that psychopath did." She paused. "Is he..."

I nodded. "I got him. I'm just sorry I didn't get a clean shot until after he bit you."

"At least he's gone now."

She closed her eyes, and a tremor shot through her body. This wasn't something she could go see a crisis counselor about. No psychiatrist was equipped for werewolf post-traumatic stress therapy.

"I'm okay, Sash."

I glanced down to find Nadya staring up at me. The words "for now" hovered unspoken between us. Jason said her DNA was already mutating. He also told us he had no idea if that meant she'd eventually end up like Fonhill. He'd taken blood samples and would do his best to find a way to control the infection if he couldn't find a way to reverse the mutation.

My baby sister had a bomb ticking inside of her and we had no idea how much time she had left.

Why couldn't it have been me?

Nadya laid her hand over mine, interrupting my thoughts. "Tell me about Aren. Now that the stalker is out of the picture, are you going to stay in Reno for a while?"

The drastic change in subject told me my sister didn't want to think about her condition right now. I didn't blame her, but I wasn't ready to think about

the hurt I saw in Aren's eyes, or the way he set his jaw and slammed the door.

"I'm staying until you're feeling better."

"I guess I won't be able to get to Massachusetts to finish the semester."

"Probably not, but maybe you can transfer to a school here in Reno. Close to the Pack."

"Finishing my degree is probably the least of my worries right now." Her lips curved into a weak smile. "There's no cure for a werewolf bite, is there?"

I shook my head slowly. "No. But if Jason can find a way to control the mutation or reverse it to keep the adrenaline levels down, then you could live a normal life." I shrugged. "Well as normal as you can for someone who changes into a wolf during a full moon."

Full moon. Two days from now. I stared at my wounded sister trying not to panic. How could she shift in this condition?

"I'm sure I'll be fine." She rested her hand over mine. "I bet that's going to be amazing."

My brow creased. She didn't sound like she was being sarcastic. "What?"

I felt her forehead. Hot, but nothing like it was right after the bite. She didn't look delirious.

"I can't change what's happened. It seems like a waste of energy to mourn for what I can't control. It's easier to see it as a new adventure, right?" She took a deep breath, and her voice softened. "I don't want to die, Sash, but if it's coming sooner than later, then I want to really live the time I have left." A tear spilled down her cheek, and she wiped it away quickly, forcing a brave smile. "How many people get the opportunity to see the night like a wolf?"

"Not many," I whispered, bending down to hug Nadya.

We clung to each other for a moment until I felt her sink back into the pillows. Pride swelled inside of me. I'd been so petulant and angry after I was bitten. And yet, Nadya chose to see it as an adventure, an opportunity.

I shook my head. "When did you grow into such a strong lady?"

She sniffled and grinned. "Well, my sister is a hard-nosed cop. I copied her while she was out catching criminals."

“I wish I could take the credit.” I glanced over at the door and back at Nadya. “Aren and I are over.”

Nadya frowned. “Lana told me you’re his mate.”

I raised a brow. “What else did she tell you?”

“She was only answering my questions.” Nadya gripped my hand. “I wanted to know who this guy was that my sister was so crazy about. I liked the way he stayed close enough to you to be protective but far enough away that it didn’t piss you off.”

I laughed despite the way my heart clenched in my chest. “He’s one in a million for sure.”

“Then why is it over?”

“Because this never would have happened to you if I hadn’t met him. I never would have allowed you into such a risky situation, but apparently I’m stupid when it comes to love.”

She squeezed my hand. “You love him?”

“It doesn’t really matter. It was all a mistake.” I blinked my eyes hard, doing my best to tamp back the pain. I reached up to brush her hair back from her face. “I’ll get over him. I’ll never get over what’s happened to you because of my poor judgment.”

A sob choked my voice. I squeezed the bridge of my nose forcing the tears to retreat, and cleared my throat. “Once my leg is a little steadier I’ll see about openings on the force here in Reno. You and I can find an apartment and work through all of this together.”

I bent to kiss her forehead and silently prayed I wouldn’t lose her.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

AREN

Sebastian barely glanced at Gareth before his dark eyes met mine. “General Miller made a call to let us know that Fonthill had been neutralized. I came to clean up your mess.”

“Our mess?” Gareth started toward the jaguar, but I caught his arm. Thankfully, Gareth didn’t know Sebastian was the jaguar that murdered his brother. If he had, I never would have been able to keep Gareth from killing him.

For a split second I thought about telling him.

“Burning down a lumberyard is a hell of a cleanup.” I glared at Sebastian.

He took a step toward me. “Sasha was injured. I caught the scent of her blood on the bullet casings.”

I bristled just hearing the bastard saying her name. “Sasha’s fine.”

“Please thank her for taking out my target.”

“How do you know she was the one who killed him?” Gareth asked.

Finally Sebastian acknowledged his existence. “Because I found wolf blood and brain matter. Sasha is the only one of your group who could make that kind of shot with a pistol.”

I heard the horns and sirens of the fire department in the distance. “Shit. We’ve got to get out of here.” I tossed the second set of keys to Gareth. “My ankle is jacked up. You’re going to have to drive the Lotus home.”

When I turned around again, Sebastian was already gone.

...

My swollen ankle, the burns across my back, and my smoke-filled lungs ceased to exist the moment I opened the door to Adam's guest room. Sasha was sound asleep beside Nadya, her arm draped across her sister's waist. No trace of the anger or hurt lined her sleeping features as I crossed the room to her side.

My heart twisted in my chest. I'd never loved anyone like I loved her. She was intelligent, strong, sexy, and impossible for me to completely understand. I wanted a lifetime to try to figure her out.

Until I met her, my life had gone according to plan. I'd set goals and achieved them. But I'd never wanted anything as badly as I wanted her in my entire life. And for the first time, I was afraid I might be denied. My destiny was completely out of my hands.

Our relationship couldn't be over.

Carefully I slid one arm under her knees and my other under her neck and scooped her up to carry her back to her bed. Once I was upright, she woke with a gasp, her arms clasping around my neck, digging into the burned skin.

"Damn. Let go," I growled, struggling to keep quiet so we didn't wake Nadya.

She released my neck, and I turned to take her back to her bed, proud of myself for not limping. I laid her down, and she frowned.

"You smell like smoke."

I nodded. "Sebastian beat me back to the lumberyard and set it on fire."

"With you inside?" She looked up at me with concern in her eyes that buoyed my hope that maybe she'd forgive me.

"I think he thought he was alone at the time, but who really knows with that guy?" I stroked my thumb along her soft cheek. "Apparently Sloan sent word to Nero that Fonthill was dead, and they sent Sebastian out to clean it up."

She nuzzled into my hand. "I'm glad you're all right."

Without thinking, I bent to kiss her, drinking in the electricity her soft lips sent through my body. I closed my eyes, losing the rest of the world. Her fingers slid back into my hair as her mouth softened, our kiss sensual and

slow. I never wanted it to end. Gradually, she drew back, her lips barely caressing mine.

I stared down at her as she brought her hand up to cup my cheek. She ran her trigger finger across my lips with a tenderness I knew she never let others see.

She let me in.

A single tear spilled down her cheek. I kissed it away and whispered, "I love you, Sasha."

"Love won't save my sister." She shook her head. "And lies aren't love."

Another tear. I almost wished I could make her pissed at me again. Seeing her cry broke me worse than calling me names ever could. I caught the tear with the pad of my thumb. "I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"I know." She nodded. "But it doesn't change where we are."

"Please..." My gut tightened, my voice cracked with emotion. "Don't do this."

She shushed me, teardrops rolling down both cheeks. "How can I be with you, knowing I sacrificed my sister? I put her in danger's path because I wanted to lure Fonthill out and have a future with you. I thought I *learned* from Sebastian's betrayal and lies... But this time my sister will pay the price." She shook her head slowly. "Please go."

I gripped the blankets while my heart ripped in two. If I stayed it hurt her, but if I walked out that door... I couldn't finish the thought.

"I don't want this," I whispered. "Tell me how to make this right, and I'll do it. Anything."

She muffled a sob and closed her eyes. "I want you to go."

I raked my fingers back through my hair, trying not to lose my mind. "Sash, please. Don't."

"Just go." She turned her head away from me.

My gut knotted. I had to honor her wishes or I'd be just as bad as Sebastian. I breathed in her scent one last time.

The other half of my soul and she wanted nothing to do with me.

I ground my teeth together and did what she asked. I got up and walked out

of the room without looking back.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

SASHA

Last week, I spent the full moon, watching over my sister. Jason pumped her full of sedatives before the Pack went to run. Since he didn't understand how the mutation worked yet, he didn't feel good about allowing Nadya to shift. For all we knew, she'd be shifting without the moon anyway. I was just glad her wounds could heal first without worrying about her tearing things open when she shifted.

Nightmares of Fonthill's freakish wolf head still tormented me.

Nadya slept through the full moon without any issues, and I toyed with the thought of keeping her sedated once a month, but Jason claimed it would be cruel to the wolf inside of her and eventually lead to depression. I wouldn't be able to protect her next month. She'd shift with the Pack. I didn't want to think about it. Since the attack, her physical wounds had healed, but no one could predict what kind of changes she would be facing in the future.

For now, she kept helping Adam and Lana with the twins, although they insisted on paying her now, and I'd found us a house for rent. Since we weren't sure about the progression of her conversion, she couldn't go back to college yet. Jason stopped by after his hospital shifts to check her vitals, watching for any sign of psychosis. So far, knock on wood, she'd been fine.

Wish I could say the same for me.

I couldn't keep thoughts of Aren from creeping into my head. I missed him, which left me angry with myself. I should've been focusing on Nadya. Thinking about Aren sent me diving into the bottomless pit of regret and guilt. I couldn't change the past, but I could try to control my future.

Caring about another man who lied to me made everything I'd endured since I was bitten meaningless. I learned nothing.

I did the right thing, ending the relationship, but I wished it didn't feel so wrong.

Most days I caught myself struggling to keep from quizzing Nadya when she got home to see if Aren had come by the ranch. When did I get so pathetic?

I rolled my eyes and went to the closet for my yoga mat. The forget-about-the-man-you-love pose still eluded me, but that didn't mean I wouldn't keep trying.

I tied my hair back in a ponytail. My dark roots had grown out a couple of inches. I decided I wasn't going to color it anymore. My hair had always been dark brown, not auburn. I was through pretending to be someone else. No more running and hiding from Nero. They knew who I was and where I was, but I wasn't alone anymore.

Whether I was Aren's mate or not, I was still in Reno, the Pack's territory, so if Severino wanted me, he'd have to deal with the Pack. He had the resources of course, but it would be tough to keep the story out of the headlines if he took on an upstanding family like the Sloans and the rest of the Pack. It would be impossible to avoid investigations, even for a powerful man like Severino.

We might not be safe here forever, but it felt good not to live on the run any longer. It was starting to feel like home. Almost.

The doorbell rescued me from my thoughts. I grabbed my Glock and cracked the door open. I couldn't be too careful.

My eyes widened a little when Lana stood on the other side.

"Can I come in?"

I nodded and opened the door for her. "Sorry. I wasn't expecting you."

But maybe I should have been. Suddenly I remembered our conversation when Aren and I first arrived in Reno. Lana had threatened me if I hurt Aren again.

"I brought you this." She handed me an envelope.

I took it, perplexed. “Nadya could have brought this to me.”

“I know,” she said. I braced myself, preparing for Lana to give me a piece of her mind. “But I wanted to talk to you myself.”

“Is this the part where you tell me what a horrible person I am for hurting your brother-in-law? Because I think I’ve got feeling horrible covered already.”

She sighed. “You and Aren both.” Lana gnawed at her lower lip, glancing around at my boxes before meeting my eyes again. “Aren doesn’t know I’m here. In fact, I didn’t tell Adam or Nadya either, so whatever you decide, it’ll stay between us.”

“Fine.” I eyed the envelope, wishing I had some clue what was going on.

“Aren told me you said it was a mistake to trust him, and that he lied to you about the babies being shifters.” That caught my attention, but I didn’t look up. Lana plopped down on the sofa again and sighed. “Okay I’m not going to sugarcoat this. Aren is by far the best most genuine, caring man you will ever meet. I know it’s killing him to be apart from his mate, but he loves you enough to leave you alone because it’s what you told him wanted.”

“It’s no party for me either.” I rubbed my chest, wishing my heart would stop aching.

“I think you’re being a stubborn idiot, and if you let Aren slip away you will never forgive yourself.”

I shot Lana a glare. “Thanks for the tip.”

“I’m trying to help you.”

I shook my head. “How can you possibly help me? You don’t know anything about me.”

“Maybe not, but I do know about the Pack, and I know Aren. It wasn’t his place to tell you about Malcolm’s and Madeleine’s abilities. His brother is the Alpha. Aren and the other wolves would lay down their lives for Adam. Protecting him and his offspring goes beyond honor and duty—it’s an animal instinct.”

“I don’t care if it’s an instinct.” I lifted my left wrist and popped off the leather band to expose the Nero operative tattoo on my wrist. “This insignia

is a constant reminder to me not to forget what happened when I trusted the wrong man. Now my sister is infected, and we're all holding our breath watching for any sign of psychosis. You and I both saw the pictures from the experiments." I rubbed my forehead wishing I could wipe the images from my mind. "None of this would be happening if I hadn't agreed to use her as bait."

"Are you so sure? What if the Pack hadn't agreed to protect her? She might be dead already. Hate to break it to you, but you don't rule the universe and you don't get to take all the credit for what happened to Nadya. We all feel horrible that she was bitten. No one wanted it to happen. We thought she'd be safe."

"I should have known better, but Aren made me feel invincible. I'd never had a partner before. We talked about a future." I looked at my hands, unable to meet her eyes. "But he never really trusted me. It was all a lie, and I can't trust another man who lies to me."

Lana stared at my wrist. She didn't like Nero any more than I did.

"I get that. I do." She met my eyes. "But I've also seen how protective you are of Nadya. You're every bit as territorial about your family as Aren is. He was protecting the youngest members of his family."

"Maybe so, but I told him everything about my sister. I trusted him with secrets I'd never share with another person."

"I'm not saying what he did was right." Lana got up and looked back at me. "What I'm asking you to do is look past all this guilt and anger and ask yourself something... Would you respect a man who spills his brother's secrets?"

I stared at her, feeling like she just slapped me.

Lana went on, lowering her voice. "Tomorrow night is Adam and Aren's thirtieth birthday so we're going all out with a private party downtown at Harrah's Hotel. Logan's band is playing, and the whole Pack will be there." She pointed at the envelope in my hand. "That invitation will get you inside. I hope you'll consider coming."

She walked toward the door before I realized she was leaving. I couldn't

stop pondering her question. Would I have respected him less if he hadn't protected his brother's children?

His voice echoed through my mind. *You can blame me for this, but at the end of the day, you're the one who was afraid to take a chance.*

Was I so scared to trust someone again that I jumped on the first chance to push him away?

I followed Lana to the door, still clasping the envelope in my hand.

She stopped at the door and turned around. "I hope I see you tomorrow night."

My voice pinched. "What if he doesn't want me there?"

Lana started to smile. "I'm pretty sure you're *all* he's wanted since you left the ranch."

I closed the door behind Lana and carefully opened the invitation. I ran my finger over the raised lettering of Aren's name like a lovesick teen. *Get a grip, Sash.*

Tossing the card on the kitchen counter, I walked out onto the balcony and stared at the mountains in the distance. The wind teased its way through my hair, and I closed my eyes. Aren filled the canvas of my mind. The way he smiled and laughed, the way he touched my skin before he kissed me until the rest of the world faded away.

But he'd lied to me. Just like Sebastian had baffled me with bullshit until he ruined my life. I opened my eyes, rubbing absently over the scar at my collarbone. The bite. My constant reminder that love without honesty wasn't love.

I went back inside and laid out my yoga mat. I couldn't think anymore.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

AREN

“I’m heading home, Aren.” Maggie poked her head in his office. “Don’t stay too late.”

I looked up at the sound of her voice. “Thanks for your help today. Goodnight.”

The desk clock read five-thirty p.m. as she closed the door behind her. Time had ceased to have much meaning for me. Most nights I worked through dinner and into the night. Since Barry’s death, I’d been shouldering the extra work, but instead of hiring a replacement I stayed later, grateful for the added distraction. In my office, buried in business deals, construction plans, and mergers, I could keep my mind occupied. The moment I walked out of the building, the wolf inside of me searched for Sasha.

There was no explaining to raw animal instinct that she was never coming back.

It was crazy. I missed walking into a stifling hot room and knowing Sasha was meditating. I missed the way she always had me guessing. I missed holding her, the taste of her mouth. I even missed her guns. How many times had I dreamed of disarming her and making love until dawn, only to wake up alone?

Too many.

I stopped by my brother’s place a couple of times under the guise of visiting my niece and nephew, but in reality I wanted to talk to Nadya. She was the only remaining link to my mate.

Lana kept inviting me over for meals, filling me with advice about time

healing all wounds, that if Sasha didn't come to her senses, I'd find someone else. Someone better. While that might be true for Sasha, for a wolf like me, I was through. Sasha was my mate. There wouldn't be another.

I ground my teeth together and pressed the remote for the stereo. Elvis's voice filled my office while I struggled to lose myself in my work.

Unable to ignore my stomach any longer, I locked up the office just after ten p.m. and headed to my car. My cell phone buzzed as I got in:

Don't forget the birthday party tomorrow night. 8 pm at Harrah's.

Lana's text made me grumble as I jammed my phone back into my pocket. The last thing I wanted was a fucking birthday party. In fact, I couldn't imagine being any less interested in a party.

They'll have a better time if I don't go anyway.

But it wasn't just my birthday. It was Adam's day, too. We'd always celebrated our birthday together, and this would be our first celebration without Dad. I had to go.

Shit.

I still didn't have to be happy about it, which was a good thing. I was having a tough time remembering what happy felt like.

Chapter Sixty

SASHA

When Nadya got home I made some pork chops and showed her the invitation over dinner.

“Lana brought this by. Do you think I should go?”

She glanced at the invitation and back over to me with a shrug. “It’s up to you. I thought you were through with Aren.”

I poked at the potatoes on my plate. “I should be.” I lifted my gaze to meet hers. “I should be stronger than this. I hate myself for even considering working things out with him. It’s like I can’t help loving him. I can’t make myself stop.”

“You want my honest opinion?”

I took a sip of iced tea and nodded.

“He and Adam never would have suggested I get involved with catching your stalker if they didn’t believe they could keep me safe. They took me in and did their best to protect me. I don’t blame them or you. I blame *Fonthill*.” She stabbed her potatoes with her fork. “And as far as comparing Aren to Sebastian, it seems pretty obvious to me that if Aren was anything like your ex, he would’ve already been over here with flowers begging for another chance. Aren’s only staying away because you asked him to. He’s respecting your wishes even though he doesn’t agree with them. Pretty honorable if you ask me.”

I sighed and rested back into my chair. “Or we butted heads one time too many times and he’s glad I’m finally gone.”

Nadya almost choked on her pork chop and took a drink of her tea, shaking

her head. "Oh, please. He's far from happy."

I shot forward, resting my arms on the table before I could stop myself. "You've seen him?"

"Yeah, a few times actually." Her voice got softer. "He looks empty."

My heart melted a little. Of course I had secretly hoped he was thinking about me as much as I had been thinking about him, but hearing it confirmed made me ache. I missed him more than I'd ever missed anyone.

I swallowed the ball of emotion lodged in my throat. "If I decided to go to the party, would you think less of me?"

"What?" Nadya had that same look on her face that Aren used to get. "Why would I think less of you?"

"Because I should be stronger. I should be able to walk away."

Nadya took another sip of her drink, and met my eyes. "Anyone can hold a grudge. It takes strength to forgive. And Sash...maybe it's not Aren you need to forgive."

...

I brushed my teeth and stood in the bathroom, staring at the tattoo on my wrist. Nadya might've been on to something. All this time I thought I couldn't give Aren a second chance, but the longer I stared at the reminder of my mistake, emblazoned on my wrist, the more I realized it was myself I couldn't forgive.

Staring into my own eyes I made a quiet decision. I was going to the party.

I came out of the bathroom and sat in front of the television beside my sister as an idea lit up inside of me. Just thinking about it made my stomach churn, but I was through being careful. Careful was hurting both of us.

"I'm going to the party, and I think I know what I want to give him for his birthday. But I'm going to need your help."

"I'd be happy to." Nadya grinned. "Where are we going shopping?"

"We're not shopping. I'm going to..." Could I say it out loud? "I'm going to sing."

Her jaw dropped. “Oh-kay. But you don’t sing.”

“I know but...” I could almost feel Aren’s lips against my ear, singing to me before he told me he loved me. “But I think I need to start.”

Chapter Sixty-One

AREN

The tie tack popped through my green tie, and I slid the bar through the dress shirt's button hole. I didn't want to go to the party, but here I was dressing up anyway. It was my thirtieth birthday and Lana's first party with the Pack. She'd grown on me, and I had come to love my new sister. Since she never had a family, birthdays, holidays, any excuse for a gathering made her so happy it was infectious.

And when she announced she wanted to have a fancy party at Harrah's downtown, we all found ourselves agreeing.

Even Gareth committed to attending, and he wasn't one to wear a suit.

Logan volunteered his band for the evening, and his mom was already at the hotel decorating the ballroom with Lana. Our Pack hadn't been this close-knit since my mother passed away.

Once I had my dinner jacket on, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I didn't look a year older. Did I?

Did it even matter?

I ran my fingers over the five-o'clock shadow on my cheek. I was becoming a ghost of myself. Was I really going to allow my life to turn into this empty shell? Since when did I ever back down from a deal?

Love was worth fighting for. Sasha was worth dying for. I owed it to both of us to try to work things out. She might shut me down again, but at least I'd be able to look in the mirror and know I tried.

I slipped my phone and my wallet into my pocket and grabbed the keys to the Lotus. With any luck, maybe I could get out of the party early.

Chapter Sixty-Two

SASHA

My hands were slick with sweat while I struggled to tuck my Ruger into the little holster at the small of my back. I was tempted to leave the gun at home. I couldn't wear it on my calf because I had on my short pencil skirt, and my red blouse was too formfitting for the bulky shoulder holster. My Glock would stay home locked in the gun safe. I felt naked without at least one weapon, so my petite Ruger was now stashed at the back of the waist of my skirt.

I gave myself a last once-over in the mirror.

"Wow! You look amazing, Sash."

I glanced over at Nadya. She wore a dark green, silk dress that hugged her in all the right places. I turned all the way around to face her and smiled. "Talk about amazing."

She grinned smoothing the fabric. "You like it?"

I nodded. "Love it."

I took a deep breath. "Maybe singing was a bad idea." I bit my lip. "I must've been insane."

Nadya took my hand tugging me toward the door. "Aren will love it, and everything's all set already." She handed me my slim black clutch. "No turning back now."

"I was afraid you might say that."

...

Once we found the ballroom on the second floor, Nadya took me around to the service entrance and gave me a hug. “It’s going to be great, you’ll see. Are you sure about missing the dinner?”

“Yeah, I don’t want him to see me until the song.” My stomach churned. “Besides, if I eat I’ll just be nauseated when I take the microphone.”

“You’ll be great. I’ll save you some food. See you soon!” Nadya vanished around the corner.

“Great.” I turned toward the service entrance, dodging the wait staff.

Please, God, don’t let me vomit.

Chapter Sixty-Three

AREN

I made it through the birthday dinner, doing my best not to ruin it for my brother and Lana. It was difficult not to be bitter watching Adam smiling, laughing, and stealing kisses from his mate. I needed to find a way to get my mate back into my life. Somehow.

I swirled the brandy around my glass and took another swig. Once we had cake I could excuse myself and go home.

Home. Ever since I'd lost Sasha, my home was just a house. In the time we spent together I'd imagined our future. We could renovate one of the guest rooms into a yoga room for her. Now I felt like an idiot, and my house was an empty structure haunted by unfulfilled dreams.

Where was the fucking cake?

I downed the last of the brandy, savoring the burn in my gut as Logan and his band came on stage. They rocked "They say it's your birthday," while all I could think about was how much I wished Sasha was here to celebrate with me. I wished she could be part of our Pack family like Lana.

But all the wishes in the world weren't going to change the fact that I was alone at my own birthday party.

Chapter Sixty-Four

SASHA

The clinking of silverware interrupted the sea of conversation as I waited in the shadows. Logan's band wrapped up a wild version of a Beatles song and had the party in good spirits. All except me. My throat felt dry. My head spun. I couldn't do this.

I started to slip back through the door when I heard Logan at the mic. "Now, before we have cake, we have a special gift for Aren."

He put the microphone into the stand and walked off the stage. Toward me. My heart pounded. I was going to pass out.

He took my hand, leading me out into the bright spotlight. "He's gonna love this," he whispered.

My knees felt like Jell-O.

The moment I stepped into the spotlight the room went absolutely silent. I could almost feel the weight of everyone's stares. As my eyes adjusted, my gaze found Aren's. He was seated beside Adam at a round table in the center of the room.

He didn't smile or even move.

My heart sank, and my pulse raced. I could make a kill shot on an armed perp from thirty feet but having the microphone in my face left me incapacitated.

I vaguely realized the band had started playing. With shaky hands, I fumbled with the microphone and freed it from the stand. Keeping my gaze on Aren's I imagined the rest of the room was empty. It was just the two of us.

Dancing in our hotel bathrobes.

“Wise men say...” Was I doing it? This was the cheesiest most fearless thing I’d ever done in my life. “Only fools rush in.” My voice wavered a little, but the band kept playing. “But I can’t help falling in love with you.”

Aren still wasn’t moving. In my mind he should have already come up on stage and saved me this embarrassment by now. Logan’s band kept playing but I stopped singing. My eyes welled with tears. I never should have come. I dropped the microphone and did my best to walk offstage with my head held high like I had a tiny shred of my dignity still intact.

Chapter Sixty-Five

AREN

My heart stopped the moment Sasha stepped into the spotlight. For a split second I thought I must be imagining her up there. Birthday wishes only came true in dreams.

But there she was. The ass-kicking detective who beat the shit out of me the first time we met was standing up on stage looking terrified.

The moment the music started I understood what she was doing. It was the song that we danced to the night I told her I loved her.

Elvis. This was her birthday gift.

Another chance.

She stared right into my eyes, into my soul, and sang to me in front of my entire family. Emotion swamped me as I watched her. I couldn't move. Suddenly she stopped looking at me and walked off the stage, breaking the spell I'd been under.

Logan and the band played on, watching her, then looked at me and I finally stood up, forgetting about the others around me, and picked up the second verse for her. "Take my hand. Take my whole life too..."

Sasha stopped and slowly turned toward me. Time slowed for a moment when our eyes met. I mouthed the words, "I love you."

She started to smile and rushed into my arms. I held her so tight her feet left the ground as we kissed.

"I love you, too," she gasped between kisses.

Everyone started applauding around us, but I didn't care. I couldn't get enough of her.

As Logan finished the song, I finally placed her feet back on the ground.

Sasha smiled up at me. "Happy birthday."

I kissed her again with a crooked grin. "Best damned birthday present ever." I pulled back and rested my forehead against hers. "I'm so sorry about..."

She pressed her finger to my lips, shaking her head slowly. "It's behind us." She added with a sparkle in her eyes, "But lie to me again and..."

I whispered, "Never again." And sealed it with a kiss.

...

I inhaled a piece of birthday cake, eager to get out of the party. It turned out Nadya had made arrangements to stay at Whispering Pines with Adam and Lana for the night. Between the effects of her bite and Sasha's leeriness about Nero knowing she'd been bitten, no one felt comfortable leaving Nadya unguarded. But with her staying at my brother's it left Sasha free to continue the birthday celebration back at my place.

The moment the door closed, our lips came together. I walked her backward to the living room until she tapped up against the leather couch. She shoved my jacket off my shoulders, and her fingers made quick work of my shirt and tie.

I ran my hands up her back and frowned a little. I kissed down her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of her shoulder holster. "Where's your—"

"Too bulky. The Ruger is in my waistband." She opened my shirt, pressing hot kisses along my collarbone.

I slid my hands underneath her shirt, unfastening the holster. Her skin felt so soft. With the gun on the back of the couch, I scooped her up into my arms.

"Your ankle..."

"My ankle's fine." I kissed her again, our tongues tangling the way our bodies would soon.

I laid her on the bed and quickly undressed her, anxious to reacquaint

myself with every inch of her sexy body, but before I could explore, she stopped me.

“You’re way too overdressed.” She wet her lips and added, “Only birthday suits allowed.”

I got up and pulled my tie over my head, never taking my eyes off her. Seeing Sasha naked across my bed made me so hard I ached. Her gaze was hungry as I freed the last couple buttons on my dress shirt before pulling it off.

She hummed softly and shook her head. “You are one handsome wolf.”

I started to smile and carefully unfastened my pants. “And you are the sexiest jaguar I’ve ever seen.”

Once I was naked, she sat up on the bed. Scooting to the edge, she ran her hands up the back of my legs, her nails grazing my skin until I growled deep in my throat. She looked up at me with a smile and then wrapped her lips around me.

My hips rocked forward as my head fell back, and for a moment I was lost. I felt her tongue teasing me, her fingers sliding up the backs of my thighs. She moaned around me, and I shuddered, finally drawing her up to me.

“I need you. Now.”

On her feet, she kissed me as I pulled her leg up, hooking it around my hip. I pressed against her. She was already wet for me, welcoming, and I plunged into her. She brought her other leg up around me. I slid my hands under her cheeks, holding her tight while I worked my hips up into her.

We were slick with sweat when I laid her back onto the bed, holding her tight as aftershocks burned through my body. I kissed her, and she gave me the most beautiful smile.

She was back in my arms. I never wanted the night to end.

“Marry me.” I blurted out the words before I realized what was happening. Sasha started to roll her eyes, but I shook my head. “I’m not kidding. Be my wife.”

Her smile melted away. I could almost see her weighing all the pros and cons. I kissed her again, relieved when she responded, her fingers tightening

in the back of my hair.

I growled against her lips, “Let me be your mate like you’re mine.”

“Mrs. Wolf...” Sasha looked at me with a playful grin. “I kinda like it.”

I laughed and she rolled over so that she was on top of me. I was already hungry for her again as she smiled down at me, her hair falling all around us.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Best birthday ever.

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*Keep reading for a sneak peek
at the next book in
the addictive Moon series*

Blood Moon

by

Lisa Kessler

Prologue

FROM THE JOURNAL OF DR. M. GRANGER - JOURNAL ENTRY 522

Today during General Miller Sloan's debriefing, he revealed that a female human subject was bitten by the last surviving member of the second Lycan Green Beret Squad. The General reported the female survived the initial attack, and we have confirmed through outside sources that she displays psychic abilities and subsequently survived the conversion.

According to our primary research, a human mind cannot metabolize the sudden adrenal gland stimulation. Yet this woman is still alive. I am anxious to run thorough testing on the subject before her inevitable demise. The research would prove to be priceless to our mission.

Unfortunately, the female subject is under the protection of a werewolf Pack in Reno. Delivering her to our research center is currently impossible without attracting police attention. In order to study the effects of the altered werewolf DNA, I will be traveling to Reno, Nevada to "assist" in her treatment. Nero is arranging the details with the General's assistance.

Project Moonlight is alive once more.

Chapter One

NADYA

“How come I don’t feel anything yet?” I held my hand up toward the moon, waiting for the silver light to work its magic. For the past three weeks—since the night my blood had been tainted. I’d been coming to terms with my fate and because I couldn’t change it, I’d done my best to embrace it. I could wallow in terror and be a victim, or I could do my best to really live with whatever time I had left. I chose to live.

The closer the full moon got, the more my excitement grew. How many people would ever experience becoming a wolf? I could worry about the consequences later.

“You will,” Jason replied, but he gave off waves of concern. In fact, almost all the Pack members present were full of worry, tense and uncertain.

I sighed and dropped my hand to my side. “Why don’t you guys go on ahead? You’re making me nervous.”

Jason shook his head. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Let’s be honest. If something goes wrong, you don’t know how to help me anyway.” Hearing me say the words out loud would ruffle Jason, but it was true. Even though he was the Pack’s doctor, no one knew how my body would react to the change since I’d been bitten by a genetically mutated werewolf.

My throat started to burn. Was I finally shifting? “Please go. I don’t want to do this with an audience.”

Jason ground his teeth together and looked over at Adam, the Pack’s alpha. “You take the Pack. I’ll stay with her.”

“No.” I shook my head and stared at each handsome male face until my gaze locked onto a pair of dark eyes set in a chiseled emotionless face. Perfect. “Gareth. He can stay with me and signal you if I have any trouble.”

I’ve been able to sense and experience others’ emotions since childhood, my “gift” as my mother called it. After years of practice, hiding my reactions to people around me usually came as second nature. But I almost laughed when waves of surprise and shock slammed into me from Jason and the rest of the Pack.

“Is there a problem?” I did my best to keep my expression neutral.

Jason opened his mouth to say something a couple of times before he gestured in Gareth’s direction. “Yes, there’s a problem. I’m the doctor in this Pack.”

Gareth walked toward Jason and crossed his arms. “You don’t think I’m capable of letting you know if she sprouts two heads?”

Jason straightened, the hot feel of his aggression prickled along my skin. At least it took his mind off being concerned about me dying during my first full moon.

“It’s not that simple.” Jason’s voice was low and menacing, not like the quick thinking doctor I’d spent time with over the past few weeks. “We don’t know how Fonthill’s bite will affect her. She could suffer a brain hemorrhage or an outburst of paranoia. I’m pretty sure you’re not equipped to handle that.”

“Give me a little credit.” Gareth’s jaw twitched as he ground his teeth. “You’d be surprised what I can handle.”

“All right, stop it.” I winced as an invisible vise tightened on my head. “If I do have some strange reaction, we don’t even know if you can treat it with medicine. If this is going to be my one and only shift, I don’t want to do it with a bunch of guys who are so worried about me that I can’t tune it out. Is that too much to ask?”

“Sorry.” Jason met my eyes. “I was just... Why him?”

“Why not? Are you surprised I chose the only one of you that isn’t part of a matched set?” All werewolves were born as male twins. I guess I’d been so

wrapped up in dealing with my new...situation, that I hadn't given it much thought. What happened to Gareth's twin?

Adam stepped up beside me, interrupting my thoughts. "Your sister will kill us all, *literally*, if anything happens to you."

"I know but standing around watching me isn't going to keep me safe, either. Go do your wolf thing." I lifted my head a little, hoping they wouldn't notice my knees were starting to tremble. Something was happening to me.

After a tense moment, Adam scanned the rest of the Pack. "Go ahead to the lake. I'll be right behind you." He turned to Gareth, claspings his forearms in the traditional greeting of the Pack. "If there's any sign of trouble, howl, and we'll haul our asses back here in a heartbeat."

Gareth nodded. Adam walked over and pulled me into a hug. I closed my eyes, grateful for the comfort. He and his twin Aren were quickly becoming the big brothers I'd never had. He whispered against my ear. "It hurts like hell, but there's no better rush on earth than running with the wolves."

"I'll be fine." My skin started to itch. "See you soon." I left off the *I hope*. He nodded and jogged into the darkness.

Wiping sweat from my forehead, I did my best not to stumble on my way over to a nearby boulder to sit.

"Why me? That twin excuse is bogus and you know it," Gareth said.

For a moment I had forgotten I wasn't alone. I looked up at him, unsure how to answer his question. Gareth was everything I wasn't. My eyes were green; his were as black as a moonless night. My fair skin practically glowed in contrast to his, and tattoos wound around his biceps. I usually enjoyed the company of others, and Gareth seemed happy to stay in the shadows and keep his distance.

He looked dangerous, but in the short time I'd known him, he'd always made me feel safe. I'd even caught him smiling once when I held Adam's baby, Malcolm, on his motorcycle. He had a surprising smile that had warmed me for a brief moment before he sobered again.

But I didn't know him. Maybe no one did.

He towered above me, waiting for my answer. His broad shoulders blocked

the moonlight, but I could still see him perfectly. One perk to being bitten? I had amazing heightened senses now.

So why *did* I choose Gareth to stay with me?

“Because you care the least.”

His brow furrowed. “I don’t get it.”

“The others are making me crazy with their worrying. This is tough enough without feeling the fears of six other werewolves pressing on me. I’m an empath, remember?” I gasped and fell to my knees. It felt like someone jammed a hot poker into my abdomen.

Gareth knelt beside me in a flash, but he made no attempt to touch or try to help me to my feet. “If you want to wear those clothes again in the morning, you’d better get them off now.”

If I wasn’t in so much gut-wrenching pain, I might’ve been shocked he just told me to get naked.

“I’ll give you some privacy.” Gareth straightened and took a step back. “I’ll be on the other side of these rocks, waiting for you.”

I couldn’t read people’s thoughts, only emotions, so I didn’t know what my wolf chaperone was thinking but what I felt coming off him surprised me. Almost like he cared. But at the same time, he walked away without even checking over his shoulder to see if I was all right.

Maybe I should’ve let Jason stay behind.

I tried to stand so I could remove my clothes, but my back gave out and I fell on all fours. The pits of Hell couldn’t possibly hurt this much. If I lived through this, I was definitely going to kick a few werewolves, just out of spite.

Bile burned the back of my throat when I heard the wet sound of my joints popping and mutating. *So gross.* I tried to pant like they teach pregnant women in Lamaze class, but it turned into a silent scream as my jaw jutted forward. I couldn’t imagine myself with a snout lined with sharp teeth.

Consumed by the shift, the pain swelled inside of me, so intense I could no longer tell where it came from. I hurt everywhere. My body trembled until I finally toppled over. Lost in the haze of agony, I had no idea how much time

had passed. Gradually, the pain stopped. Was I a wolf now? I wanted to look myself over, but my new form wasn't cooperating. Inside, I frowned. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to control my body.

The wolf got to her feet and shook out her fur. I felt like a prisoner.

The more I panicked, the more the wolf paced back and forth, tail swishing.

Suddenly it stopped, sniffing the night wind. Deep within the beast, I realized she recognized the scent. Gareth. The wolf turned, and through its eyes I saw a large jet-black male. The moonlight sparkled in his dark eyes.

Her hackles rose, lips pulled back and a growl vibrated through my body... her body. Her fear swamped me. She planted her front feet further apart, ready to launch into an attack.

Gareth yawned, unfazed by our aggression, but he never took his eyes off of us, always alert. He didn't return the aggression. I reached out mentally to the wolf. I wasn't sure what I was doing but somehow she relaxed her stance. With a tentative step forward she...we...dipped our head.

I wasn't a prisoner. We were connecting.

The male wolf chuffed and spun on his heel to run. I took off after him, following his scent even when I couldn't see him with my eyes. The wolf was fast and agile. I leaped over rocks and dove under the thick brush.

All the scents around me told a story and somehow I could translate it. Like a new instinct I'd never had before. I tracked Gareth with ease.

Okay, Adam was right, this was pretty amazing.

This experience was worth every bit of the pain. I chuckled inwardly. Now I sounded like a new mother who'd just given birth.

Maybe I wouldn't kick the werewolves after all.

I skidded to a stop when we reached a clearing. Standing at the water's edge were six more wolves. Big wolves. My beast growled, barring her fangs. Inside, I

tried to communicate with the wolf, to tell her this was our Pack. These weren't enemies.

Gradually her fear dissipated like she understood and trusted my instinct. A large, brown wolf with bright green eyes approached. A silver bullet hung from a leather cord around his neck. It had to be Adam. I stood my ground as the Alpha circled me, sniffing and studying my scent. Witnessing the ritual, I realized I was trying to hold my breath as if I had any control over my lungs. The wolf was in charge now.

Adam came all the way around until he faced me. His ears pricked forward and I lowered my head in a submissive position. He nipped gently at my ear and the wolf yipped. He nudged us with his body toward the Pack behind him. We'd been accepted.

The wolves ran into the forest, and I raced after them. As a team, the Pack hunted rabbits and a deer. My wolf tackled a bunny sending the fluffy furball into shock. I pawed at it, curious, but it remained still, its belly rising and falling rapidly.

Inside, I nudged the wolf forward, relieved when she gave up her quarry and ran. Mental note: be sure not to have an empty stomach on full moon nights.

If I even got another one.

We ran, sniffed and hunted for hours, stopped once in the trees to howl. As the evening waned, the Pack

scattered. For a moment, I was confused, but the black wolf with dark eyes woofed, trotting and stopping to look for me. I followed him back to a boulder that looked vaguely familiar. Then I caught a very familiar human scent.

My own.

We were back at the spot where I'd left my clothes. Or what was left of them.

I sniffed, pacing the area for any sign of danger. Finally, my wolf heaved a sigh and collapsed onto the ground. My flesh heated up, and I panted, bracing myself for more horrific pain.

Here it comes.

I writhed as my skin swallowed the dark fur, and my bones shifted. But the hurts-worse-than-chewing-off-my-own-legs pain never surfaced. It hurt, for sure, but nothing near as intense as when I contorted into a four-legged nocturnal hunter.

The pre-dawn chill stung my sensitive skin as I shivered and opened my eyes. I couldn't resist reaching up to touch my face. The snout was definitely gone. I started to let out a sigh of relief when I remembered I was naked.

Covering my breasts with my forearm, I cautiously got to my feet. The world spun for a moment, but I didn't fall over. *Go me.*

Once my vision cleared, I made a beeline for my clothes. My poor, ripped-up clothes. I held up the circle of elastic that used to be my underwear and sighed before tossing it over my shoulder. Other than what looked like blood stains on the thighs, my jeans appeared to have only sustained minor damage.

Sadly, my bra and tank top weren't so lucky. What were once hooks at the back of my bra were now pulled out straight, making clasping impossible. Perfect. I threw it behind me with the remnants of my underwear and slipped back into my shredded tank.

Talk about peek-a-boo. Crap.

I tried to cover myself as best I could by tying a couple of strategically placed strips down to the front belt loops of my jeans like homemade suspenders. Classy. Oh well, it would have to do until I got back to my place.

Right now I was too elated to be brought down by fashion. Tonight, I ran in the wilderness as a wolf.

And I lived through it.

So far.

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Chapter One

Burning the midnight oil was nothing new for Tegan Ashton, but tonight something sinister lingered in the air. *It's all in my head.* She rubbed the back of her neck, wishing she could release the unwarranted dread. Anxiety coaxed her pulse, teasing her senses with its false promise of danger.

It pissed her off. The ghosts of the past were uninvited guests in her life.

Regardless, she could almost hear her father's voice in her head whispering in Welsh Gaelic, "*Perygl ar mae'r gwynt.*" Danger on the wind. She forced her attention back on her work. The only thing in any real danger at the moment was her bank account.

Tegan's fingers flew across the keyboard, filling in the databases, entering the codes. Brainless, tedious work, but it paid the bills. Sort of. Her new dojo in Leucadia, just north of San Diego, teetered into the red every month, so she picked up as many Internet data-entry jobs as she could.

Late nights and mainlining caffeine, the glamorous life of a black-belt businesswoman.

Hoping to calm her nerves, she took a long slow sip of her iced tea and pulled up her "favorites" tab on her computer. Although she lived in a beach town, she couldn't afford the rent on anything with an ocean view. Her compromise was an hourly treat of a five-minute break to watch the moonlight on the ocean, courtesy of the Starlight Beach Inn's twenty-four hour webcam.

The hotel was just a few miles away from her studio apartment over her dojo, and they kept a floodlight dimly illuminating the shoreline. Once she fired up her iTunes track of ocean waves, it was instant relaxation. In San

Diego's North County, 2:00 a.m. was just about the only time you could stare at the waves on the beach without a bunch of people in the way. Perfect.

She double-clicked the link, grabbed her tea, and leaned back in the chair while the webcam loaded. Now all she needed was the smell of sea air and she'd be good to go. Her shoulders started to relax, and Tegan grinned, taking a swallow of her tea. Anxiety attacks didn't stand a chance against the calming power of the Pacific Ocean.

The grainy picture came up, and she stretched out her cramped fingers. She frowned and leaned forward in her chair. Someone was on her beach.

A man and a woman. He shoveled sand while his date reclined on the shore. What were they doing building sandcastles at this time of night?

She sighed and set her tea aside. So much for her beach break. Being a Peeping Tom during someone else's late-night date wasn't part of her calming respite. Tegan poised the mouse over the *X* to close the webcam when the guy scooped his date up and dropped her into the hole.

"What the hell?" She rubbed her eyes, leaning closer to the screen.

Goosebumps lined her arms when the first shovel of sand covered the woman. "Holy shit." She reached for her cordless phone. "Shit, shit, shit."

"911. How can we help?"

Two more shovels of sand into the hole. "There's a man burying a woman in the sand outside of the Starlight Beach Inn."

"I show your location on Pacific Highway."

Tegan nodded, only half listening. "Yeah, I'm watching him on the hotel's webcam. Someone needs to help her."

"Ma'am, you realize you can be held accountable for falsifying calls to 911."

The man on the beach chose that moment to look over his shoulder, wiping his chin and exposing a bold tattoo on his forearm. She didn't need a close up to recognize what it said. *Aeternum Ardebit*. "Everlasting burning" in Latin. His eyes glowed like a cat's in a picture using a bright flash, but this was only the dim light of the webcam.

Tegan's heart lurched in her chest. "It's him."

She instinctively clicked the “off” button on her phone, her lungs constricting and fingers tingling with the beginnings of an anxiety attack. Painful memories swamped her. Even with the grainy webcam view, she recognized every angle of his face. The same face still haunted her nightmares.

The man who attacked her in Los Angeles, the man the police had failed to catch, had just traveled south into her sleepy beach town. In fact, he was only a few miles away from her bedroom.

• • •

Tegan left the sheriff’s department exhausted mentally and physically, but there was no way she was going to fall asleep. The looks on the uniformed officers’ faces told her all she needed to know. They didn’t believe her. Apparently a black and white did visit the Starlight Beach Inn at 2:45 a.m. to find the beach deserted with no signs of disturbed earth. They claimed the hotel was requesting the webcam footage from their service provider, but it would be at least a week. Without any evidence of a crime, they couldn’t force the issue and subpoena records.

All it took was pulling up her case file for the officers to get that familiar look of pity in their eyes and assure her the search for her attacker was still ongoing. It was no secret she’d had a mental breakdown after the attack, and although she’d given them a full physical description of the man, she’d been unable to tell them about her injury. They told her he’d stabbed her with an acid-dipped blade of some sort.

But she knew the unbelievable truth.

She’d been bitten, and as crazy as it sounded, no human man had pointed teeth like she’d seen that night when he smiled and his forehead contorted, cracked to expose something inhuman beneath.

This was information that would’ve kept her locked in a psych ward, so she remained silent. As the months passed into years, she started to wonder if maybe she was crazy after all.

Tegan leaned back in her La-Z-Boy reading chair, peppering herself with questions. Could her mind have been playing tricks on her when she fired up the webcam? It was late, and she'd felt uneasy before the picture ever came up.

But she'd watched that beach hundreds of times in the middle of the night and never saw anyone. Definitely never saw a man bury a body.

If you could call that sick sack of shit a man.

Her fingertips traced the line of the fish-hook shaped scar on her shoulder near the base of her neck wishing she could erase the memories and rehabilitate her mind the way she had with her body. She thought she'd put that night behind her.

Until the bastard showed up on the webcam and ripped the wound wide open again.

Yeah, sleep was definitely not going to happen. The threat of seeing him again in her dreams kept her too amped up to sleep. She got up and pulled the small card table to the side of the room. Controlling her breathing, she moved through her martial arts katas. Her focus on each fighting position calmed her, defusing the bomb of panic brewing inside. By the time she reclaimed her peace, sweat soaked the back of her T-shirt.

She wasn't the same college student from four years ago. She wasn't a victim, not anymore. And she never would be again.

Tegan pulled her hair back into a ponytail and reached for her laptop. If the police didn't believe her, she'd hire someone who would. Sitting around hiding was *not* an option.

...

Multiple Google searches, several hours, and ten calls later, she chucked her hair tie across the room in frustration. She either couldn't afford the PIs she was finding, or they'd heard there was an open case number involved and didn't want to get anywhere near it. Her gaze drifted to the picture of her folks at the country club. They'd loan her the money in a heartbeat.

But then they'd worry. It wasn't until a few months ago that her Mom and Dad finally started traveling again. They were supposed to be enjoying retirement, not babysitting their only daughter. If they found out she thought she'd seen her attacker, they'd swoop in and try to take over. Unacceptable. She could handle this. Somehow.

She grabbed the phone again. Another search and she scanned the names until one caught her eye: *Gabriel V.H. Smith. Licensed PI and paranormal investigator.*

Paranormal Investigator? She stroked the mouse key lightly, not ready to commit to clicking. What kind of private investigator admitted to paranormal investigations? Did he think he was some kind of Ghostbuster? People couldn't possibly hire him to check their house for the dead and haunting, could they?

She leaned back in her chair. This guy could be a waste of time. But she'd already placed more calls than she'd intended—and she was running out of viable options. What did she have to lose?

She made the call, relieved when a receptionist answered. He had a secretary. That had to mean that he took his business seriously—or at least she hoped so—and Tegan did her best not to judge him by the fact he had time in his schedule to meet her that same day. No harm done driving up the coast to San Clemente for a meeting. She didn't have to hire him. San Clemente was probably a perfect PI location, too, right between San Diego and Los Angeles. He could spy on cheating husbands and wives in either big city.

She closed her computer and got up. If she hurried she could get a shower before she made the forty-five minute drive up the freeway.

...

The building wasn't what she'd expected. Instead of an office inside a law firm or strip mall, she parked her car in front of a small converted church. At least she assumed that's what it was by the stained glass windows. There

wasn't a steeple or a bell.

She opened the carved oak door and stepped into the shadowed office. A stylish woman with short black hair chomped her gum behind a desk, stapling papers into manila folders. Glancing Tegan's way, she stopped stapling for a moment. "Are you Megan?"

"It's actually Tegan. Like Megan with a *T*."

The receptionist popped her gum and shrugged. "Suit yourself. Gabe will be back in a few minutes."

Stapling recommenced, the pound and grind of bending metal snapping through the space. Tegan glanced up at the high ceilings and took a seat on the long pew opposite the woman's desk. Time slowed, the rhythmic stapling lulling her into a comfortable trance. Maybe she was more exhausted than she'd realized.

The large door burst open. Tegan shot up from her seat, her feet instinctively moving into a fighting stance. A tall man with broad shoulders, brown hair, and sunglasses blew through the narthex toward the chapel area. His features were striking even though she couldn't see his eyes behind the dark lenses of his shades. The strong angle of his jaw and the way his hair brushed the collar of his black coat made her pulse jump. He was perfectly mussed somehow, like he'd just rolled out of bed looking like that.

For some reason she'd been imagining him much older. The whole paranormal thing sounded like an old man chasing a silly superstition. This guy was also a little less polished than she'd expected. Judging by the swollen lip and the scrape at the corner of his mouth, he'd had a recent job that had gotten physical.

Her pulse thrummed in an inappropriate response. The fact this guy might know how to fight should *not* excite her. Obviously her hormones were aching for some male contact.

Screw that. The last thing she had time for was a man.

"Martie is my five o'clock here yet?" His voice was deep and a little hoarse. Rough and sexy.

The stapling came to an abrupt halt, and Martie pointed a red, perfectly

manicured finger. “That’s her.”

He spun around and tipped his head, peering at Tegan from over his sunglasses. “You’re Megan?”

His light green eyes almost made her forget her own name. “It’s Tegan. Tegan Ashton.”

“Like Megan with a *T*.”

She nodded, an unexpected smile curving her lips. “Exactly.”

He held out a large hand. She stared at it for a second. This was a business meeting, nothing more. Other than her karate classes, she hadn’t touched a man since the attack.

I won’t be a victim. I’m not a victim.

She forced herself to place her hand inside of his, and he squeezed, giving her a firm handshake. “Nice to meet you. I’m Gabe.”

His fingers brushed her wrist, sliding across her palm as he released her. Almost tender. She’d forgotten how a simple touch could calm instead of threaten. Pressing her lips together, she reminded herself to breathe.

He gestured toward his office. “Come on back.”

...

Gabe took off his coat, doing his best not to wince as the right sleeve skimmed his dislocated elbow. It would heal of course, but it would hurt a helluva lot less if he’d taken the time to reset the joint.

But he didn’t want to be late. Hopefully she wouldn’t notice the odd angle of his elbow.

Offering her a chair, he stepped around his desk to hang his coat, but he kept his dark glasses on. Easier to give his clients the once over if they didn’t know where he was looking.

All part of the job. Although today was more enjoyable than usual.

When Martie had told him his new potential client thought she witnessed a murder, Tegan had his full attention. Now that she sat in his office, it was clear even if she didn’t have a big case, she would’ve caught his attention.

Her thick auburn hair fell just past her shoulders, and her dark brown eyes and pouty lips teased him. They had a softness that contrasted with the rest of her body.

Which was toned and tempting, even through her clothes. Hard and tense like she was ready to take on the world at a moment's notice. Her face looked a little pale, shadows lingering under her eyes. No sleep, and judging by the way her fingers trembled when he released her hand, she probably needed to eat too. Her fighting stance the second he entered the office hadn't escaped him, either. What turned this angel into a warrior?

None of his business. Giving a damn would only get her killed. He'd been down that road before, and he refused to lose another person he cared about. Best not to care at all.

He pulled his sunglasses off, and his potential new client gasped.

"You should put some ice on that eye."

"I'll be all right." He sat behind his desk, chastising himself for not checking the mirror in the car before he came in. Damn. He knew that hit was going to leave a mark. "So, tell me why you're talking to me instead of the police."

"Because they don't believe me." Her doe eyes pleaded with him. He'd seen the look before.

Gabe rolled his head slightly, snapping his vertebrae back into alignment. "Why not?"

She wrung her hands in front of her for a moment before shooting up from her seat and leaning against his desk.

"You know what? Let's cut the crap. I have money, and after calling every PI in SoCal, you're my last shot. I need you to find the guy who gave me this."

She caught her finger in the neckline of her T-shirt and tugged it back to reveal a jagged hook-shaped scar on her collarbone, with a raised edge all the way around it. The center of the wounded flesh was discolored, almost gray. His pulse raced. He'd seen these scars before, but never on a living person. No human had given her that scar.

Releasing the shirt she met his eyes. “It’s been four years since he attacked me, and last night I saw him on a webcam in my neighborhood.”

Gabe stood up, resting his hands on his side of the desk and leaning closer to her. This close, he could see the flecks of green in her dark eyes. No sign of a fine outer ring of gold—the first sign of a demon incognito.

Good. This woman was human.

And somehow she’d done the impossible by surviving a Hingo demon attack. It was unheard of in his line of work.

“I’m on the case.”

“Same price I was quoted on the phone?” Her eyes narrowed, her gaze searching his.

“Yeah.” Gabe nodded. For a chance to send another Hingo demon straight back to Hell, he’d almost take the case for free, but he kept that to himself. A guy had to eat.

He reached for his coat without thinking, his arm tweaked, unable to straighten. “Damn it.”

She came around his desk, frowning. “Somebody beat the crap out of you.”

“You should see the other guy.” He smirked. “Do me a favor and—”

She grabbed his wrist and already had her other hand ready to lever his elbow back into place.

“You’ve done this before.” He gripped the desk with his freehand.

“And it hurts like a son of a bitch.” She tugged hard.

Sparks lit around the edge of his vision while he cursed under his breath. Finally a loud pop echoed through the room, and she let go of his arm.

Gabe moved it a little, tentative.

“You need to ice it.”

“I’ll be fine.” And he would. He glanced at his new client, impressed. “You’ve got skills.”

She almost smiled. And he caught himself waiting for it, wanting it. Something about this woman was intriguing as hell.

“I’m a black belt, and I own my own dojo.” She walked around to the other side of his desk. “This isn’t my first dislocated elbow.”

He opened and closed his hand. The pain already receded, his body healing itself. Sunglasses in hand, Gabe snatched his jacket with his good arm. "Let's hit the road. I want you to show me exactly where you saw him."

"Okay. You can follow me down to my place in—"

"Nope." He took her elbow.

Tegan yanked it free, stepping away from him. "Excuse me?"

"You hired me to help you find this guy. Until I do, I don't want him finding you first." He gestured toward the door, but his new client remained frozen in place.

"It's been four years. I doubt he's still looking for me."

"He came to San Diego, right?" He leaned against the doorframe.

She shrugged. "Coincidence."

Gabe straightened, struggling to keep a grip on his patience. This woman obviously had no clue how dangerous a Hingo demon could be. They were similar to incubi, but instead of impregnating a woman with a bastard half demon, her body became a living cocoon for another demon. Women didn't survive Hingo attacks. They became demons. At least, until now.

He shook his head. "I don't buy it. You wouldn't be here if you did, either. Come on. I'll drive."

Her jaw went slack for a second, her hands balling into fists at her sides. "Last time I checked, *I* am hiring *you*. You don't get to order me around."

Gabe sighed, glancing down before meeting her eyes again. "You hired me because the police don't believe you. *I* do. Let me do my job."

He waited her out, watching her frustration settle into wariness. Seeing the shadow of fear creep back into her beautiful eyes pained him. He caught himself wanting to protect her, to make the damned demon pay for what he did.

But this couldn't get personal. This was just another job. Plain and simple. He shoved the unwanted emotions aside and allowed an easy smile to curve his lips. "You're not going to make me say please, are you?"

Tegan rubbed her hands down her face. She couldn't be seriously considering

getting in a car with this guy. “I can’t just leave my car an hour away from home.”

“It’s locked, right? I’ll make sure Martie keeps an eye on it for you.” He walked over to her and held out his hand. “You came here for a reason. Let me help you, Tegan.”

He said her name. Correctly. Her knees did their best to give out at the small gesture of attention, but her will was stronger. She walked past him without making any contact. Gabe met her in front of Martie’s desk in the lobby.

She followed him outside, still promising herself she wouldn’t get in the car with him.

“Are you a meat-eater?”

Tegan’s jaw dropped, her eyes narrowing. Did he just...?

“Excuse me? But that’s not—”

“Burgers? We need to get you some food before we get started. You look like hell.”

“You’re one to talk.” She clenched her hands into fists but followed him outside anyway.

He walked to a shiny black ’69 Mustang and opened the door for her. “Consider this a business meeting. You can fill me in on your case while we eat.”

Her conviction wavered. He was right. They did need to talk.

Tegan took a breath and gave him a single nod before scooting past him... into the passenger seat.

Gabe shut the door, slid his shades into place, and came around to the driver’s side. “There’s a great burger joint on the beach. And it looks like the marine layer is going to give us a break and let us watch the sunset. Can’t pass that up.”

His new client shook her head. “I watched this guy bury a woman’s body on the beach last night. Forgive me for not feeling like a burger. We should just get back to San Diego so you can find this guy. We can talk on the way.”

He should do it her way. The customer was always right. But he could see the exhaustion in her eyes. It wasn't his place to take care of this woman, in fact, she'd obviously rather that he didn't. But he couldn't have his clients fainting on him, especially not when they were this fascinating.

Shit.

He turned the key and the Mustang's V-8 roared to life. He revved the engine and glanced over at her. "Won't do either of us any good if you pass out. When was the last time you slept or ate?"

She rolled her eyes and stared out the passenger-side window. "I'm fine."

He slammed the clutch to the floor and slid the gearshift into reverse. "Yeah, well, I need food, so you might as well have some, too."

On the drive, she told him about the webcam and the morning visit to the Sheriff. But the moment he asked about her attack, she shut him out, glaring out the passenger window. He wasn't going to coax it out of her. She'd share when she was ready.

Right now, his top priority was finding the Hingo demon. And the first step would be keeping his only eyewitness alive.

About the Author

Lisa Kessler is an award-winning author of dark paranormal fiction. Her debut novel, *Night Walker*, won a San Diego Book Award for best Fantasy-Sci-fi-Horror, and many other awards. Her short stories have been published in print anthologies and magazines, and her vampire story, *Immortal Beloved*, was a finalist for a Bram Stoker award. Lisa lives in southern California with her husband and two amazing kids. Visit her at <http://Lisa-Kessler.com>.

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