



THE  
MOON  
SERIES

*"Lisa Kessler is an up and  
coming author to remember"*  
- Sherrilyn Kenyon,  
#1 NYT Best Selling author

# *Blood Moon*

Risk it all...

LISA  
KESSLER

THE  
MOON  
SERIES

*"Lisa Kessler is an up and coming author to remember"*  
- Sherrilyn Kenyon,  
#1 NYT Best Selling author

# Blood Moon

Risk it all...

LISA  
KESSLER

# BLOOD MOON

A MOON SERIES NOVEL

LISA KESSLER

# Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Discover the Moon series...](#)

[Moonlight](#)

[Hunter's Moon](#)

[Night Walker](#)

[Night Thief](#)

[Night Demon](#)

[Night Child](#)

[Beg Me to Slay](#)

[Discover more paranormal Entangled Select titles...](#)

[This Weakness for You](#)

[The Queens Wings](#)

[Temporal Shift](#)

[The Shadows of Stormclyffe Hall](#)

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.

Copyright © 2014 by Lisa Kessler. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means. For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact the Publisher.

Entangled Publishing, LLC  
2614 South Timberline Road  
Suite 109  
Fort Collins, CO 80525  
Visit our website at [www.entangledpublishing.com](http://www.entangledpublishing.com).

Select Otherworld is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Edited by Liz Pelletier  
Cover design by Liz Pelletier and Brittany Marczak  
Photography by Shutterstock

ISBN 978-1-63375-143-9

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition December 2014

*This one is dedicated to my Mom who stared into the abyss twice and always  
came back fighting.  
I love you!*

# 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 tests on the subject before her inevitable demise. The research could 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.

I’d been sedated after I was bitten, my blood infected with mutated werewolf DNA. Jason hoped that by keeping me unconscious, I could avoid the change during my first full moon, buying him a little more time to find a cure. For just over a month now, I’d been struggling with coming to terms with my fate. I went from being curled into a ball of self-pity, to gradually realizing that if I couldn’t change it, I’d do 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 we got to the full moon, the more my anticipation 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 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 the emotions of other 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 heat of his aggression prickling 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 clenched his hands into fists. "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 their emotions 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?" Until Lana and Adam's twins were born, all werewolves had been born as male twins. Lana being the first female-born jaguar shifter seemed to change all the rules. Either way, I guess I'd been so wrapped up in dealing with my new...situation, that I hadn't given it much thought. What had 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, clasping 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 gave me a last squeeze and jogged into the darkness.

Wiping sweat from my forehead, I sought out a boulder to sit on and did my best not to stumble on my way over.

“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, but 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. His strong body was impossible to miss, but underneath his hardened persona, I'd caught a glimpse of a different side of him when he smiled while holding Adam's baby, Malcolm, on his motorcycle. His grin had lit up his face, warming my entire body for a brief moment, before he sobered. I caught myself wishing I knew how to make him smile again.

But I didn't know him. Not really, anyway. 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 your emotions are buried. It's like 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 her body...my body. Her fear swamped me. She planted her front feet farther apart, ready to launch into an attack.

Gareth yawned, unfazed by our aggression, but he never took his eyes off us, always alert. He didn’t return the aggression. I reached out mentally to my 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 language I'd never understood 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, baring 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 snapped gently at my ear and the wolf yipped. He nudged me 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 over 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.

## Chapter Two

GARETH

I half expected Jason to race into the clearing and shove me aside to get to Nadya. It was obvious our Pack doctor had more than a medical interest in her. Who could blame him? She had brains, beauty, and somehow through the whole ordeal with the sadistic psycho who bit her, she still seemed to have hope and a smile that lit up a room. *Crazy.*

Rounding the boulder, I finished buckling my belt and looked up to find Nadya on her feet, staring at me. My gaze ran over every inch of her exposed flesh, and suddenly I was ravenous to touch her. I frowned and shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans, forcing my lungs to pull in some cool air.

“Guess you didn’t get undressed in time, huh?”

She looked down at her ragged clothes and laughed. “You think?”

Deep in the shadows of my damaged soul, an ache festered. I rubbed my chest. “You handled the change pretty well.”

Small talk wasn’t anything I practiced. Ever.

“I survived it. That counts for something, right?”

She took a step closer and I noticed her hard nipples pressing against the remains of her tank top. Remnants of her bra and underwear were discarded on the ground behind her. *Shit.* I met her eyes again and did my best to keep mine from wandering.

This woman had no idea how sexy she was.

“I had the most incredible night. Well, except for the shifting. Childbirth’s got nothing on turning into a wolf. Although I’ve never given birth, so I guess it’s not fair for me to say, but...” She shook her head, her cheeks

flushing with color. “I’m rambling. Sorry about that.”

Strangely, the corners of my mouth started to curve up. What the hell was it with this girl?

Jason and the others finally arrived, interrupting us. Saved by the Pack. Jason swooped in with his doctor questions, but I didn’t miss the way he stumbled when he saw her torn tank top barely covered her breasts.

And it pissed me off.

I frowned again, clenching my fists. Definitely time to go.

“Night everyone.” I tipped my head toward my Alpha, clasped forearms with his brother, Aren, and got the hell out of dodge.

Once I was far enough away that her scent was clear of my nostrils, the fog lifted in my mind. I didn’t want any part of Nadya, no matter what my body might think. I could almost hear the clock ticking her life away every time Jason looked at her.

Darrien Fonhill, the genetically enhanced werewolf that bit her, gave Nadya a death sentence. None of the juiced-up werewolf soldiers had survived Project Moonlight, the Nero Organization’s government experiments, not that they cared. *Sick bastards.*

And Nadya wouldn’t be any different, regardless of how hard Jason tried to save her.

The sunrise lightened the sky, coloring it by the time I reached my bike. I opened the saddlebag. Grabbing the black leather riding gloves, I swung my leg over the seat. Orange and yellow painted the heavens and dimmed the stars. I drank in the growing light and pulled on the gloves. My black helmet hung on the side of the other saddlebag. As long as I was up in the mountains around Lake Tahoe, I could get away without wearing it. No police up here to hassle me.

This was my favorite time of day. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of the clean mountain air. Mornings made the day feel new, unburdened by

reality. No one looked at me with pity lining their faces, or invited me to come by to share a meal as if that would fill the gaping hole inside me. Like some chili and cornbread might right the wrongs in my life.

*Don't think about it.* I growled and slid on Ray-Ban sunglasses.

Tipping the bike up, I kicked the stand out of the way. Time to get the hell out of here. The Harley roared to life, ripping through the silence. I gave it more gas, enjoying the deafening rumble of the engine. With a tight grip on the handlebars, I let out the clutch and took off down the mountain road with a vengeance. Wind in my hair, cold air stinging my face, I opened the throttle on the bike and tried to stay ahead of the ghosts of the past.

Just another fucking day.

• • •

I burned through an entire tank of gas touring the roads around the lake until the weight in my chest finally started to lighten. It didn't matter. Nothing really filled the void. The best I could hope for was a distraction.

When I got back to Takoda Motorcycle Restoration, I still couldn't sleep. I had a one-bedroom apartment behind my garage. Typical bachelor pad, I guess. It had a bed, a big screen television, a little kitchen, and a toilet with a shower. I didn't even bother going back there.

Instead, I settled into work. A 1964 Harley Panhead Duo Glide was my current project. Ever since the X-Men movies decided to put Wolverine on a Harley, my workload restoring old motorcycles had doubled, and it suited me fine. Working on a classic bike kept me focused on something I could actually fix instead of wrestling with hindsight that would never bring my family back together.

This Harley had a sidecar, but the fender was rusted through in two places. The new one was ready, painted a sleek ivory, but the old hex nut was corroded onto the lock washer, so getting the original parts off the sidecar was tricky. Just as the rust started to crumble and the nut moved, the front door chimed, alerting me someone came in the entry of the garage.

Figures. That's what I got for leaving it unlocked.

"Just a sec..." I called out, wiping the grease off my hands as I headed

toward the front.

A familiar scent greeted me as I rounded the corner. “Nadya?”

She smiled. “Sorry to drop by like this. Are you too busy to talk now?”

Yes! But instead I shook my head. “I guess not. Come on back.”

I didn’t wait for her. My heightened werewolf senses aided me even when I was a man. She was following me. Why would she want to talk to me? We’d only spoken a couple of times over at Adam’s horse ranch. Ever since her sister had brought her to Reno to keep her safe from Nero, she’d been helping Adam’s wife, Lana, with the twins. We had nothing in common that I knew of, and since Jason was making it pretty plain he was interested in more than just saving her life, I didn’t want to get involved.

No room in my world for drama, and the last thing I needed was more death. This beautiful woman would bring me both.

“So the doctor let you out on your own?” I kicked out a stool for her and went back to work on the sidecar, but I couldn’t help noticing the way she kept looking around my workroom, strewn with greasy parts and tools. Was she sorry she’d stopped by yet?

“Jason doesn’t know. He dropped me off at my place with strict instructions to rest, but I couldn’t sleep.” She shrugged and leaned forward on the stool.

I raised a brow. “Why’d you come here?” The lock washer finally came loose and I spun it free to set it aside on the workbench.

“Because I have questions, and when I ask Jason or the others anything, their emotions drown me. They’re all worried for me, I get that, but I need to *live* while I can. No sense wasting time worrying about something we may not be able to stop, right?”

I picked up a wrench with a snide smirk. “And I’m the one who doesn’t give a shit.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Her voice got a little softer. “I should go. You’re busy working. Sorry for interrupting you.”

She slid off the stool, and I should've let her walk right out the door, but something about Nadya made it tough for me to be the asshole I wanted to be. "You can stay."

She turned toward me, her green eyes locked on mine. Was she reading my mind?

"I can't read your thoughts."

I tried not to jump. "You sure?"

"I don't need to read your thoughts." Her mouth curved into a sad smile. "I've seen that expression plenty of times before."

"Sorry." I gestured to the stool. "It's pretty obvious I've never known an empath, huh?"

"And I've never known a motorcycle mechanic." Her eyes sparkled with mischief, surprising me. Didn't she remember she was dying?

I smiled in spite of myself. "We're even then." Leaning back against the workbench, I crossed my arms. "So what kind of questions do you have?"

She grinned and I tried not to notice she had a dimple on one cheek. "When you shifted for the first time, could you control the wolf once it took over?"

I kept my eyes on my work, not trusting myself to look at her any longer. All I needed was for her empathic senses to pick up on my true feelings. Well, the ones other than bitter indifference. That was my go-to emotion these days.

"I was fifteen the first time Gabe and I shifted." Just saying his name out loud hurt.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed her frowning, standing to come closer. I put my greasy hands up to ward her off.

"I'm fine."

She stopped. "No, you're not. You're hurting."

"Like I said, I'm fine." Grabbing my pliers, I kept working. "The wolf was just another part of me. My mother grew up as a member of the Paiute Tribe

up at Pyramid Lake. She raised us to recognize our heritage and our connections with the land and the animals. Maybe that helped? I don't know."

I shrugged, bottling up the memories again. This woman was getting in my head somehow. It had been years since I talked about my mother. "Long story short, when I shifted, the wolf and I worked as a team. During the full moon, I let the wolf take the lead."

She settled on the stool again, clasping her hands together. "Who is Gabe?"

"Was." My pliers slammed against the workbench harder than I intended. Grinding my teeth together, I bit back pain and regret I had no intention of sharing. Not with her. Not with anyone. "He's dead."

"I'm sorry."

Thankfully I didn't hear her moving from the stool to give me an unwanted hug.

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault."

*It was mine.*

"How long ago did he die?" she asked.

I spun around to find another part to work on. "I thought your questions were going to be about shifting into a werewolf. I don't have time for a walk down memory lane."

"I didn't mean to upset you." She stood. "I had no idea your brother was dead."

"Now you do." I resisted the urge to look at her and focused on my work. "Any other questions?"

"That's okay, I'd better go." She walked out of the shop area and turned just as I looked over at her. "You know, you're not the only person who has lost someone they love."

The front door opened and closed. Without another word, Nadya was gone. I wiped my hands on a rag, trying to dig up some anger. Anything to cover up the fucking emptiness.

## Chapter Three

NADYA

I jumped in the shower as soon as I got back to the apartment. Every time I closed my eyes, the pain etched into Gareth's face haunted me. What happened to his brother? Whatever it was, the wound was fresh, and I hadn't missed the wave of guilt that escaped him before he put the lid on his bottled-up emotions.

It was none of my business. He had made that perfectly clear.

Hot water massaged my shoulders as I breathed in the steam and stared at my hands. Hard to believe they were paws just a few hours ago. Weird. Deep inside, the wolf growled, sending a rumble through my chest. My pulse jolted. Shouldn't it be resting until the next full moon? Suddenly my palms tingled with heat. Opening and closing my fingers, I winced. My joints ached.

Stumbling out of the shower, I reached for the towel and frowned. The pain vanished. I turned my hand, examining both sides. Everything looked normal.

My heart pounded. Fonhill, the lunatic who bit me, could shift whenever he wanted. He didn't need the full moon. Only his head had changed that night. My sister had offered her life for mine while the Pack moved in for a rescue. But he'd known he was dying one way or the other, and the best way to hurt my sister was to poison me.

The scientists at Nero had juiced up their werewolf soldiers, including Fonhill, with adrenaline to simulate the pull of the moon's gravity, allowing the wolf to come forward at will. It also led to paranoia, aggression, and brain hemorrhages.

Was it happening to me already?

I didn't want to hear the answer. There wasn't anything Jason could do to stop it, short of somehow getting Fonthill's mutation out of my bloodstream. Panicking wouldn't help me.

Talking myself off the ledge, I wrapped the towel under my arms and stared into the mirror at the jagged scar on my shoulder where he'd bitten me. My death sentence. I ground my teeth together, struggling to contain the raw anger and bitterness. It wasn't fair, but knowing that wouldn't make that scar vanish, and it definitely wouldn't cure me.

It would ruin the time I had left.

And I'd never give that sick bastard the satisfaction.

I turned away and headed to the laundry closet. Hopefully the clothes were dry, so I'd have something clean to wear for my date tonight.

If you could call it a date.

Jason had invited me out to dinner. A few weeks ago, it would've been a date. I'd gone out to a movie with him pre-bite, and we had a great time. He was handsome and intelligent, with a charming knack for making me laugh.

Since I'd been bitten, things between us had changed. Now, whenever we were together, the constant undercurrent of his urgency and concern were inescapable. If it was possible to turn off my empathic "gift," it might help, but I couldn't do that, any more than I could get rid of this mutant werewolf blood.

Either way, now Jason seemed more like a concerned doctor than a hot boyfriend. Maybe he sensed the change, too.

I pulled a pair of jeans out of the dryer and tugged them on. The hot denim fabric slid over my skin like a warm embrace. My new heightened senses magnified the pleasure. I closed my eyes and smiled. Lately, I tried to notice everything. To really live. I didn't want to miss a single thing. Plus, feeling grateful made it more difficult to wallow in self-pity.

The doorbell rang, and I glanced at the clock. Jason was early. I opened the door. "Hi, I just need to get my shoes on. Want to come in?"

He flashed me a stunning smile, kissing my cheek as he came inside. When I arrived in Reno, Nevada, Jason was the first member of the Pack I'd met. I didn't know he was a werewolf back then, just a hunky doctor who could've passed for Wolverine minus the hairdo.

When Fonthill had realized Sasha had a sister, I became a target and she'd

bought me a plane ticket to Reno. The Pack took me in while Sasha and Aren did their best to stop Fonhill. I didn't even know werewolves existed.

It seemed like lifetimes ago.

I got busy buckling my sandals while Jason sat on the loveseat, resting his elbows against his knees. "How did you sleep?"

"Great." Lucky for me, Jason *wasn't* psychic.

"That's a good sign." His relief washed over me like a tidal wave.

The truth was, I couldn't sleep anymore. I'd slept a total of twenty minutes over the past three days. I probably should have told him, but being a doctor, he'd prescribe some kind of pill to force me to sleep, and knowing my time in this world was limited, I didn't want to spend what little time I had left feeling lethargic and gross.

Besides, I knew as well as he did that we didn't know what kind of reaction I might have to medication. Now that my blood had...changed.

If I started to feel too bad I'd come clean, but I really felt amazing overall—other than a few minutes ago in the shower. Pushing the thought from my mind, I focused on the positives. My senses were heightened now, like I'd been bitten by Peter Parker's radioactive spider.

Only the guy who bit me was a mutated green beret. And instead of making me into a superhero, he'd doomed me to die of a brain hemorrhage.

Okay, so sometimes it was hard not to wallow in self-pity.

I took a deep breath and smiled at the handsome werewolf on my couch. "Where are we going for dinner?"

"How does a big steak sound?" Jason got up and offered his hand. I looked up into his bright hazel eyes and took it.

"Sounds like heaven."

• • •

We walked into the restaurant, and all eyes turned our way. I could feel gusts of jealousy, curiosity, and lust waft over us like a summer breeze. I should've been used to the attention by now. Jason stood over six feet tall, so even with my high-heeled strappy sandals, he still had a few inches on me. And he smelled like a forest after it rained. Clean and fresh. Who wouldn't want to be

his date?

He took my hand and our fingers twined together naturally as we followed the hostess. Seated at our intimate table for two by the window, I watched the candlelight flicker in Jason's eyes. He started to smile. "Hope you like this place."

"It's beautiful." A wave of his relief swept over me. I wished some emotion would churn inside me. Why did I feel so detached?

We ordered our dinner, and the waitress quickly delivered two glasses of merlot to our table. I glanced out the window at the nearly full moon, and caught myself wondering if Gareth was all right. With a sigh, I reached for my glass, swirling the wine before taking a sip.

Jason leaned in closer, lowering his voice. "Are you all right?"

I nodded and swallowed. "Yeah, I'm fine." After a second's pause, I met his gaze. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He lifted his glass.

"What happened to Gareth's brother?"

Jason almost choked, and his surprise at my question would've been obvious even if I wasn't empathic. As he set the glass down, his eyes narrowed with wariness and...jealousy?

"Did Gareth tell you about Gabe?"

I gave a small shrug. "He mentioned him. I didn't realize his brother died."

Jason pressed his lips together and sat back in his chair. "A jaguar murdered his brother the night Adam met Lana. The jaguar dumped Gabe's body up at Lake Tahoe to make it look like she killed him."

My stomach tightened into a hard knot. "Did you find out who really did it?"

Jason sighed, running his fingers along the base of his wineglass. "I think Adam and Aren know, but they haven't shared the information with the Pack." He looked up at me again. "It's probably for the best. Gareth is a loose

cannon. Adam's doing all he can to keep him from abandoning the Pack. It didn't help that Adam and Aren both took jaguars for their mates."

"It might be easier for Gareth if he had some closure."

"We've known him a little longer than you have." Jason leaned closer again. "Can we talk about something else?"

I nodded. "Sorry, I was just curious."

"That's okay." He poured more wine into our glasses. "Gareth needs some space right now. We all try to stay out of his way and leave the past alone."

We spent the rest of our dinner lost in awkward small talk. The steak was delicious, but I wished I could enjoy the company more. A single doctor, with the body of a Greek god, sat across from me at a candlelit table, and all I could think about was a greasy-fingered motorcycle mechanic.

I refrained from smacking my own forehead.

When we got back to my apartment, Jason walked me to the door and smiled. "I had a nice time tonight."

"Me too." Which was true. Sort of. "Want to come inside?"

He slid his hand around my waist, and I waited for some kind of tingle or spark of desire to light up my bloodstream. He bent closer to me until his breath caressed my skin. Why didn't I feel anything? I tilted my chin up, and he kissed me, long and slow.

I wanted my knees to go weak, my pulse to race, and my skin to ache to be touched. Apparently my body didn't care what I wanted.

Jason broke the kiss, resting his forehead against mine. "We should go inside."

Nodding, I unlocked the door. As soon as it closed behind us, I ran my hands up his chest and our lips fused together. Nothing was slow or soft. Our tongues swirled in a sensual dance that I wished my body would pick up on while I explored his chiseled torso with my fingers. He growled into the kiss and something inside me fluttered.

He stroked my hair, crushing my mouth against his. Walking me backward toward the couch, Jason pushed me down onto it without breaking the kiss. He held me tight with one strong arm, moving the other hand up my body possessively until it slid along my ribs and he cupped my breast.

Another flutter, but that was all.

What was wrong with me? I wanted this. I'd only had sex with one guy in college and that relationship ended over six months ago before I ever came to Reno. Now my days were numbered, and I didn't want that to be the last time I ever made love. Jason cared about me.

Why wouldn't my body respond?

His hips pressed hard against mine, making it plain how badly he wanted me. This was so unfair.

I broke the kiss and shook my head. "I'm sorry."

He opened his eyes while I drowned in the passion that flowed off of him in hot waves. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." *Truth.* "I'm probably just tired." Oh I hoped that was all it was.

Jason sat up, rolling his shoulders back as if he could push away his desire and save it for another day. But his struggle to rein in his lust and hurt was impossible to hide from my empathic powers.

I felt like a total ass. "It's not you, Jason. I just..."

He shook his head and took my hand. "You shifted into a wolf for the first time in your life last night." He pressed a kiss to the back of my fingers. "Your body has probably been through enough in the past twenty-four hours."

His kindness and understanding made me feel even worse. At least if he'd turned into a raging jerk, I could've been angry.

"I didn't mean to lead you on."

He shrugged. "Sorry I came on so strong." Jason brought his hand up to cup my cheek. "You're worth waiting for, Nadya." He stood and started to leave. "I'll call you tomorrow." It looked like he might say something else, but instead he reached for the door. "Sleep well."

The door closed and I flopped back onto the couch. I wasn't sure I'd ever

be able to sleep again.

## Chapter Four

GARETH

“Thanks for coming by so late.”

“I’m a realtor. No regular hours for me.” He added a note into his cell phone. “I’ll set the meeting for five p.m. tomorrow.”

I tried to look like I cared. “Sounds good, Russ.”

He leaned against the workbench and put his legal pad aside. “This buyer is motivated. He’s got a bundle to spend before he owes it to capital gains, and on top of that, he loves motorcycles.”

“I’m not budging on the price.” I looked up from the spokes I was polishing. “And I want a fast escrow.”

Russ started to smile and picked up his pad again. “You’ll be in Colorado before you know it.”

“Perfect.” I wiped my hands and stood to walk him out.

“See you tomorrow.” We shared a firm handshake, and I watched him get in his Mercedes as I locked the front door.

If anyone had told me a year ago that I’d be selling Takoda Motorcycle Restoration, I never would have believed them. Never. Part of me still couldn’t believe it. This was my baby, my everything.

But things changed.

The black Road King gleamed under the track lighting. I didn’t even know if it started anymore. Gabe’s bike. He used to razz me about my ‘65 Electra-Glide. How could I pick up chicks with an antique that only had seating for one?

I grabbed a dust rag and polished the gas tank, while the knot in my chest tightened until I clenched my teeth to keep from shouting about how

unfucking fair the world could be. This was why I needed to get out of Reno. Too many memories. Reminders of my brother lurked around every corner. And guilt wasn't far behind.

I should've been with him that night.

He'd been out patrolling. New moon nights were always dangerous. While we got our power from the wolf and shifted during the full moon, jaguar shifters changed during the moonless new moon, opposite of the Pack.

Over the years, jaguar assassins from Nero had killed humans in Reno just for sport, leaving mutilated bodies in the open. We were left cleaning up the mess in order to keep our existence secret from the human population.

We grew up learning to defend ourselves and protect our territory from outsiders that might threaten to expose our kind to the human world. The Pack was family. We fought and argued sometimes, but when the chips were down, we always had each other's backs.

But I didn't have Gabe's. He'd been alone that night.

*Jesus, I need to get out of this place.* I pushed my bike out into the garage and popped the door open. Some cool night air, the roar of the engine, and a heavy dose of speed were just what the doctor ordered.

The automatic door rolled up slowly as I swung my leg over the bike and pulled on my black leather gloves. Outside, I noticed a pair of tennis shoes and as the door rose higher, shapely legs in skinny jeans came into focus, until Nadya stood in plain sight. So much for escape. *Damn it.*

"Are you on your way out? I can come back later." The breeze tugged at her dark hair and she tried to tame it behind her ear. "I shouldn't have stopped by without calling or something. Sorry about that." She glanced at her shoes. "I'll just go."

I groaned. No doubt this gorgeous empath sensed my annoyance the second the door opened. Running my gloved hand down my face, I wrestled with what came next. Her personal questions were the last thing I needed right now. I should've waited for her to turn around and walk herself back home.

But it was after ten at night. I couldn't let her go alone. It didn't matter that

she was a werewolf now and probably very capable of protecting herself. Bottom line, sending her home alone late at night went against every lesson my father instilled in me as a boy.

I cleared my throat. “Is everything okay?”

She stopped and met my gaze. I’m no psychic, but I didn’t need to be to recognize the sadness and pain on her face. What happened? This was the girl who knew death had her number and smiled anyway. My gut twisted.

“I’m fine.” She shrugged, breaking eye contact. “Just couldn’t sleep and I didn’t want to worry everyone.”

Almost forgot I was her go-to, don’t-give-a-shit wolf. I took a slow breath and rolled my shoulders back. “I’m about to go for a ride. Want to come?”

*Oh shit.* What was happening here? I couldn’t reel the words back in now that I’d witnessed the smile on her face. That damned dimple in her cheek sent my better judgment out the window.

“I’d love to! I haven’t been on a motorcycle since I was a little girl riding behind my dad.” She came closer and stared at my Harley. “There’s nowhere to sit.”

“Can you ride on your own?”

*Was I seriously going to let her anywhere near Gabe’s bike?*

“I’ve never done it before, but I probably could.”

Probably could after some lessons. *Shit.*

I got off my bike and went back inside. Standing in front of Gabe’s Road King, I was grateful my leather gloves were already on, hiding the way my hands trembled. This shouldn’t bother me. My brother was gone. Immortalizing his bike like a museum artifact wouldn’t bring him back.

In fact, Gabe would probably be pissed that his bike hadn’t roared in almost a year.

I turned toward Nadya. “Some ground rules for tonight.”

Wariness shadowed her eyes. “All right.”

“No questions about my family. I’m riding to mellow out, not drudge up memories.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I waited for her answer. Maybe I wouldn’t have to touch Gabe’s bike after all.

“Deal.” She nodded.

“Fine.” I went into my shop and came back with a modular helmet. I hated the damned things, but it would cover her entire head, face, and chin. Safety first. I also brought her a pair of leather gloves and a leather jacket. “Put these on. It’ll be cold at the lake tonight.”

“We’re going up to Tahoe?” She pulled the jacket on and started on the gloves.

“No. Pyramid Lake.”

Tugging on her second glove, she reached for the helmet. “I’ve never heard of it. Is it far?”

“Not really.” Holy shit, she looked amazing in leather. *Damn.* I ground my teeth together to rein in the unwelcome surge of lust. Remembering she was dying turned out to be the cold shower I needed. “It’s on the Paiute Reservation about forty-five minutes away.”

I tipped the Road King up, knocking the kickstand back while I gauged the weight. I’d only ridden Gabe’s bike once, after I fixed the suspension and replaced the shocks. Never thought I’d be rolling it out again.

Never thought I’d be taking anyone to Pyramid Lake, either.

Nadya followed me out of the garage, putting on her helmet. I lowered the door and got on the black Road King. Sitting on the bike, I stared at the key in the ignition. Gabe’s key.

“Ready?”

Her voice broke my fixation on the keys. I was ready for plenty, but a ride to the lake with Nadya on my brother’s bike wasn’t high on that list. Probably should’ve thought about that *before* I invited her along.

“Yeah, climb on.” I offered my gloved hand to steady her while she swung her leg over the back. She slid into place, and even through the damned leather jacket I could feel her soft curves against my back. “All set?”

“Yep.” Her voice was clear and closer to my ear than I expected.

I grabbed my black no-nonsense half helmet and snapped it on. She slid her gloved hands around my waist, and my pulse throbbed below my belt. My body had missed the memo that this wasn’t a date.

Death had his eye on this girl, and I’d already had more than my share of loss.

I turned the key and fired up the engine. The Road King roared to life as if it hadn’t been sitting dormant for months. I glanced up toward the stars, toward my brother. The world had lost a bright light when he was murdered.

And still no justice. No one in the Pack even mentioned Gabe anymore, let alone hunted his killer.

Not that I asked them to. What if killing Gabe’s murderer didn’t make the pain go away? For now, the thought of justice gave me a flicker of hope. I wasn’t willing to give that up. Moving to Colorado would be a new start. No more ghosts around every curve.

“Hang on.” I put the bike in gear and we roared into the darkness.

• • •

The lonely two-lane highway leading to Pyramid Lake was deserted at this hour. I let out the throttle, the cool wind stinging my face. I leaned into the turns, surprised to feel my passenger moving with me. Nadya’s dad had taught her well. We rolled through the reservation bathed in the eerie light of the nearly full moon.

Since I turned fifteen, the lake had always been my personal serenity, the one place that could calm the turbulence inside my soul. After Gabe and I lost our parents, I spent many nights watching the reflection of the moon and stars on the lake’s surface. During the day, I kept a stiff upper lip. As Gabe’s older brother by a half hour or so, it fell to me to look after him. He counted on me to be strong. Child services had come knocking, but Malcolm Sloan, Adam’s dad and our Pack Alpha, offered to “foster” us. He signed documents, and I

made sure my brother went to school, turned in homework, and kept his nose clean. Malcolm used to worry I had to grow up too soon, but what could I do? My father was gone. Responsibility fell to the oldest.

Me.

Coming over the final rise, my passenger yelled over the howling wind. "It's beautiful. Even in the dark."

I nodded, resisting the urge to shout in reply. Without turning to face her, she probably wouldn't hear me anyway, even with her new werewolf hearing. I'd have to wait until we got to my turn off the highway so I could stop.

My mom used to bring us to Pyramid Lake as boys. And after she died, her presence sparkled on the salt water and up in the sky. This was my solitary refuge.

And now I was sharing it.

*What the hell was wrong with me?*

I rode south near the lake's edge toward the tribal museum building, breathing in the clean, cool air, but clearing my head proved impossible with Nadya's arms around me. My heightened sense of smell wasn't helping. Each time I inhaled, her scent teased me. The woman smelled like sunshine and cinnamon. How was that even possible?

On some level it made sense. There wasn't a simple way to describe Nadya. I'd never met another woman like her.

I slowed and pulled off the highway. The gravelly dirt road made it tricky to navigate with the added weight of a passenger behind me. With the bike in neutral, I put my feet down on either side, rolling us closer to the water's edge before popping the kickstand and cutting the engine. Nadya got off first and then I swung my leg over. She pulled her helmet free, letting her long, dark hair fall loose around her face as she stared out at the water. For a second, I forgot to breathe. Her profile in the moonlight, the wind gently pulling at her hair, it all called to me.

She wasn't anything like the women I usually dated.

Not that I dated much.

Not at all since that night.

I ground my teeth together and hung my helmet on the handlebars. “Nice spot, huh?”

She nodded, sliding the leather gloves off and stowing them inside her helmet. “Nice is an understatement. It’s almost...otherworldly.”

I took her helmet and set it on the seat of the bike. “That’s a good description for it. This is a sacred place for my mother’s tribe. My tribe.” I pointed toward the white pyramid, gleaming in the moonlight. “That’s the Stone Mother down there. She created this lake with her tears.”

I watched her face for any sign of judgment. Some people were quick to roll their eyes at the stories of our old ones. Those people pissed me off.

Nadya tucked her hair behind her ear. “Your mother was Paiute?” She cringed and shook her head. “Sorry. I forgot. No questions about your family.”

She almost made me smile. Dangerous territory. But after my meeting tomorrow with the potential buyers for my garage, I’d be making a run for Colorado. Between my impending move and her health situation, there was a better than average chance I’d never see Nadya again after tonight.

I could handle one night.

A flashlight beam cut through the darkness. I spun on my heel, alert and ready. Light blinded me, shining directly in my face. A deep growl rumbled from my throat.

“Gareth?”

Relief washed over my tense shoulders. “Chloe. It’s me.”

She stood all of five feet tall with wiry silver hair and a smile that warmed you all the way to your toes. Her dark eyes sparkled in the moonlight as she wrapped me in a tiny bear hug I had to bend over to receive.

“My little Osa!” She pulled back, clutching my arms. Good grip for a woman in her seventies, and probably the only person left on earth who got away with calling me “little.” “It has been way too long. Where have you

been hiding?”

“Not hiding.” I shrugged. “Just busy.” I tipped my head toward Nadya. “Chloe, this is my friend, Nadya.”

Chloe grinned and took Nadya’s hand in both of hers. “Nice to meet you.” Her eyes darted between us. “My Osa has never brought a woman to meet the Stone Mother.”

I groaned. “I’ve never brought *anyone* out here, Chloe.”

“Actually...” Nadya smiled, her gaze meeting mine over the top of Chloe’s head. “I invited myself along tonight.”

Chloe shook her head. “I am Gareth’s godmother. My little wolf has a nasty habit of keeping everyone at a distance. If he didn’t want your company tonight, you wouldn’t be here.”

I wasn’t sure how true that was. Chloe hadn’t seen the sadness in Nadya’s eyes earlier. Even I wasn’t heartless enough to leave her behind.

Nadya stepped back, glancing toward the pyramid. “Since you’re here, I’d love to hear the story of the Stone Mother. Gareth told me her tears made the lake.”

Chloe practically beamed. I sighed and stared up at the stars. We were going to be here for a while.

# Chapter Five

NADYA

Gareth stepped closer to the water's edge, excusing himself from the story. He'd probably heard it a million times anyway. I tried to keep in mind that he'd only brought me here tonight because I showed up on his doorstep like a lost puppy.

At least this way, he'd get some of the peace he'd been yearning for.

Chloe took my hand, walking me closer to the Stone Mother. Her entire face lit up, animated with the spark of a true storyteller. "The Stone Mother gave birth to Man's children. She loved them very much, but her oldest son fought with the others."

I looked up at the rock formation in the moonlight, the water sparkling around the Stone Mother. Her tears. I glanced at Chloe. "What happened to him?"

Chloe patted her hand. "Just like my little Osa, always wanting the ending before the story has even begun."

Gareth's silhouette stood tall at the water's edge. Anything but little. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rush you."

Chloe grinned, worn lines framed her dark eyes. "Man couldn't bear the constant fighting, so he called his many children together. He spoke to them of peace and harmony, but his eldest son attacked another before he finished talking." She shook her head and pointed toward the mountains. "Frustrated, he split up his family, sending his eldest west with one of the women. Others followed him. They became the Pitt-Rivers and the children who could get along stayed in this valley and became the Paiute tribe."

“Did the Stone Mother ever see him again?”

“Her son?” Chloe sighed. “No. She lost a few of her children that day as the family scattered. Her husband hiked up the mountain and into the stars where he still watches over her.”

“So that’s why she cried.”

“She sat here with her basket and wept for her banished children and her broken family. Her tears continued to fill the valley until she turned to stone.”

I stared up at the Stone Mother’s bowed head, remembering a time when I thought I’d never stop crying. Sasha was still in the police academy the day she met me at the bus stop and whisked me away. Our parents were dead. My world tilted on its axis. I couldn’t remember the actual conversation, but I recalled the pain like it happened yesterday.

I’d been small enough that my parents were still superheroes to me. *How would I live without them?*

“Are you all right?”

Chloe’s voice snapped me back to the present. I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, nodding. “Yeah. I’m just...tired.”

My gaze wandered to Gareth. His arm shot forward, skipping a rock across the smooth surface of the lake. “He’s still hurting for his brother.”

Chloe sighed, turning to watch him. “My poor Osa has many hurts, but he won’t let anyone close enough to heal him.” She took my hand, looking up at me. “There is magic in this place, but you must open yourself up to it. Gareth senses the magic, but it cannot touch him.”

“It’s a risk to open your heart and care when you might find yourself alone in the end.”

Her lips parted, but she hesitated before speaking. “You have a wise heart.”

Her emotions surrounded me, a rich mixture of hope and wonder, and her love for Gareth.

“I don’t know about that...” I chuckled, shaking my head. “I try to keep moving forward. Sometimes that’s the best I can muster.” Swallowing a lump of emotion, I whispered, “I lost my parents when I was young. My older sister raised me.”

Chloe gave my hand a squeeze. “They are proud of you.”

“I hope so.” *I might find out soon.* Clearing my throat, I crossed my arms in front of me, suddenly grateful for Gareth’s leather jacket. At least it provided a little armor. I wasn’t ready to start wondering if I’d see them again on the other side.

“Osa,” Chloe called. “Your friend is cold. You should get her someplace warm, and maybe treat her to some coffee.”

Gareth approached us and my pulse quickened. His dark gaze connected with mine before his trepidation swirled around me. Reading emotions wasn’t an exact science. People were different and their feelings were rarely pure. And when I met someone like Gareth, who kept them repressed, it made deciphering the brief emotional messages even more complex.

He could’ve been worried I was cold, nervous I might be dying right here, or a host of other things. His concern wasn’t the same as Jason’s. Gareth didn’t share the responsibility for my welfare or the doctor’s ego that Jason did.

Usually my gift gave me a leg up with relating to people, but Gareth remained difficult to read.

“You want my jacket? You could double them up.” He started to slide the leather off his shoulder, but I put my hand up.

“That’s okay. I’m fine, really.”

Chloe stood between us and sighed. “Neither of you are fine.” She went to Gareth and pulled him down for another hug. She kept her voice low, but my werewolf hearing made it impossible to avoid eavesdropping. “You be good to this one, Osa. She has a strong spirit. Let her in.”

He didn’t answer her; no doubt well aware I could hear every word.

Gareth straightened and walked back to her Jeep. I followed, wishing for impossible things like a cure for this mutated werewolf DNA coursing through my veins. Giving them a little privacy, I stopped at the motorcycle

and spent some quality time messing with the leather gloves.

I still missed my parents. It wasn't the same raw pain it had been when I was younger. Most days it crept up on me when I least expected it. Would I see them again when I...

"Hey, you ready to go?"

I twisted around as Gareth approached. "Only if you are. I was just tagging along tonight. I don't want you to cut your visit short because of me."

He came up beside me and I swore the heat of his skin warmed me. "Sorry about Chloe. She means well, but she's not good with boundaries sometimes."

"She's sweet." I started to smile. "She's a great storyteller, too."

One corner of his mouth curved up slightly. In the weeks I'd known him, his smiles were precious and few. "She could tell stories about the old ones until your ears bled. Our tribe has kept the legends alive since time began, and she is doing her part to keep them going."

"I admire that kind of passion." He glanced toward me, but I kept my attention on the water. "I planned on being a school teacher."

A strange mixture of anger and kindness swept over me and quickly vanished.

"Jason's a great doctor. He'll find a way to fix this." I wasn't sure if he was trying to convince me or himself. "You'll still be able to teach."

"Hope so." I shrugged. "Let's talk about something less depressing." He didn't offer anything up. Apparently I was on my own. "Do you like to camp?"

*Why did I ask that?* I hated camping. I guess it didn't matter. We weren't going to pitch a tent right now. I glanced at the saddlebags on the Harley. It'd have to be a pretty tiny tent to fit in there.

"Haven't camped since I was a kid. You?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Actually, I hate camping."

He smiled and my breath caught. He had a gorgeous smile and, for just a second, I saw the man he kept hidden from the rest of the world. “Then why’d you ask if I like it?”

“I have no idea.” My cheeks flushed with heat. “It was all I could think of without asking about your family.”

His smile faltered a little, but he didn’t retreat completely. “You never told me why you came to the garage tonight.”

The air sucked out of my lungs. I couldn’t tell him I wanted to have sex with Jason, but my body had other plans.

“Something happened in the shower. My hand tingled. My joints popped like I was shifting again.”

*Oh shit.* I hadn’t meant to let that slip out. His dread slammed into me so hard I almost took a step back.

“Did you tell Jason?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m supposed to meet him at his office tomorrow anyway. I can tell him then. He was so relieved that I shifted with the Pack last night and survived, I didn’t want to ruin it when he came over.”

“You were with him tonight?”

Another interesting jumble of emotions hit me. Concern, confusion, and... before I could place it, he’d bottled everything back up.

“He took me to dinner to celebrate my first shift.” That much was true. “What about you? Were you coming out here for a reason?”

# Chapter Six

GARETH

I considered lying for a second, but what the hell, I wasn't going to see her again anyway. "Needed a little time to reflect." My gaze settled on Gabe's bike. "I'm selling the garage. The buyers are coming tomorrow to check it out and sign paperwork."

She frowned as she turned toward me. "Where are you going?"

"Colorado."

"But the Pack..."

"Will be fine without me. I'm no good to anyone here. Colorado will be a clean start for me."

"Wow." She crossed her arms. "Does Adam know?"

"I think my Alpha suspects, but I don't need his permission." I bent to pick up another rock and skipped it across the lake's surface. "I can't stay here. Everywhere I look I see ghosts."

Silence settled over us while my pulse galloped like a racehorse at the starting bell. *Holy shit*. Had I just told her all that? What now? Nadya missed her calling. She would've made a damned fine shrink.

Her voice sounded tentative. "Will you tell them good-bye?"

That was the million-dollar question. I was running away from pain. Causing more wasn't part of the plan. I'd be kidding myself if I thought turning my back on Adam and Aren would be painless. I grew up with them. Gabe and Adam were best friends, and Aren had been the first one to show up and help me hang the sign over my garage after I finally saved up the

down payment.

And it didn't end there. Hell, I taught Luke and Logan to drive. And although I wasn't as close to Jared and Jason, I had no doubt if I needed them, they'd be right there to back me up.

Could I look all of them in the eye and tell them good-bye?

"Probably not."

Chicken shit of me, but they'd figure it out eventually. It would save all of us an awkward, emotion-filled farewell. I'd ride off into the sunset and we'd go our separate ways. Clean break.

"They don't get any say, then."

I shifted my eyes to her face, my shoulders tight. "No one will notice I'm gone. Adam's busy with his kids, Aren is planning a wedding, and Jason's trying to save your life..." I tipped my head toward the Harley. "We should get you back."

She crossed her arms, a wrinkle creasing the center of her brow. *Not happy? Welcome to my world, sweetheart.*

I pulled the gloves on and straddled the bike. She didn't get on. Grabbing my helmet, I glanced her way. "You coming?"

"These people are your family." She pressed her lips together, then huffed out a pent-up breath. "I can't believe you're going to leave them without even saying good-bye."

I slouched, doing my best to rein in the emotions she churned up. With her psychic gift, she probably already knew plenty that I didn't intend to say. "My family is dead, Nadya."

"Oh spare me." She snatched her helmet off the back of the seat, her voice rising in volume with each word. "Family isn't just your blood. Chloe loves you like family, so does the Pack, and you're tossing them aside like garbage."

Every muscle in my body tensed. "You don't know what the hell you're

talking about.” I gripped the handlebars tight to keep a tenuous hold on my emotions. “Are you getting on the bike or not?”

Her eyes narrowed as she yanked on her helmet. Sliding onto the seat behind me, her body molded perfectly against mine. She leaned forward, close to my ear as I fired up the engine.

“My parents were murdered when I was in elementary school. I know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

I revved the engine. The Harley roared, breaking the silence of the night. When Sasha came to us and needed the Pack to hide Nadya, it never occurred to me that their parents were out of the picture. The Pack could fight Nero. Human parents wouldn’t stand a chance.

But Nadya had been even younger than I was when the collision stole mine.

I rolled us onto the two-lane highway and gunned it. The wind stung my face and I welcomed the ache. I’d been a self-righteous, dismissive asshole.

And I shouldn’t care. I was leaving tomorrow anyway. She could hate my guts. No sweat off my back.

But the warmth of her soft body against mine made it tough to keep my distance. I’d hurt her and she didn’t deserve it. I was far from perfect, and no one would ever accuse me of being a gentleman, but cruel didn’t sit well with me.

Coming over the rise, I leaned to the left and killed the headlight as we swung onto a narrow driveway. I cut the engine, coasting into the dirt parking area. Knickering and the shuffle of unshod hooves grew to the right of us.

“Why are we stopping?” She turned her head toward the noise. “Is this a stable?”

I patted her thigh. “Hop off.”

She got out from behind me and I swung my leg over. “This is a wild horse round-up. The Bureau of Land Management culls the Mustang herds and

brings them here to get adopted.”

“Okay.” She turned from the horses to face me. “But why are we here?”

Good question. I wasn’t sure myself yet. I hung my helmet from the handlebars. “I was an ass earlier. I didn’t know about your parents. Anyway. Guess this is my peace offering.”

She watched me for a second like she didn’t believe a word I said, but finally she lifted her helmet and slipped off her gloves. “Are we allowed to be here?”

I shrugged. “It’s after visiting hours.”

“So I should be ready to run to the bike if we see a flashlight?”

I almost laughed. “Bet you can’t say you’ve ever been arrested for trespassing.”

“It’s okay, I know a police detective who could probably help us out.” Her smile revealed that dimple in her cheek that drove me to distraction. I’d never wanted to kiss a woman so badly. Shit, I needed to get a grip. Fast.

“Sasha would help *you* out, but *I’d* be left to rot in jail.”

“For trespassing?” She grinned. “Nah, the jails are overcrowded. Maybe they’d send you home with one of those shock collars on your ankle.”

I chuckled before I could stop myself. “You’re making me think this after hours visit to the Mustangs might be a bad idea.”

“You’ve got a great smile. You should use it more often.” She turned and walked to the horses, leaving me behind to remind myself that I was moving to Colorado, she was Jason’s girl, and the big one...

She was dying.

Grounded again, I followed her, stopping at her side. Nadya reached her slender hand through the fence, scratching muzzles and necks. The horses muscled their way closer to get to her. Watching her smile, cooing at the Mustangs, I understood their eagerness. There was something addictive about her.

Her hair flipped over her shoulder as she turned toward me, surrounding me in her scent for a moment. “You’re not going to pet them?”

I held up a gloved hand. “Nah, I have to be ready to drive our getaway

car.”

The moonlight sparkled in her eyes. “Good thinking.” Her features softened. “Thanks for bringing me with you tonight. I know you’d rather be alone, but I really appreciate the company.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” I glanced over at my brother’s bike. “I’m pretty sure you could’ve found better company than me anyway.”

She reached over and gave my forearm a squeeze. Even through my jacket, her touch warmed my skin. I turned to find her a step closer, her new friends pressing against the fence to get her attention again.

“Other than that last dig, I actually had a pretty nice time tonight.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry you’re leaving.”

Staring down at her, I wanted to pull her close and taste her lips. But kissing her wouldn’t change her fate, or mine.

I moved away and her fingers slipped free of my leather jacket. Disappointment shone in her eyes for a second, or that might’ve been my wishful thinking. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Looks like the horses want more of your attention.”

She went back to the fence, giving each muzzle affection, her smile returning. I kept my distance. The world was full of assholes, wastes of skin no one would miss. Why did this amazing woman get handed a death sentence?

I’d been asking the same question about Gabe for over six months. Why couldn’t it have been me?

A scuff of boots broke me out of my thoughts. Nadya’s eyes met mine. She’d heard it, too. I’d never been with a woman who shared my heightened senses. I tilted my head toward the Harley. She nodded, following my lead.

A beam of light sliced through the night about a quarter of a mile away, outside the caretaker’s house.

“Time to hit the road,” I whispered.

Nadya jogged behind me. I climbed on the bike, retracting the kickstand while she slid in behind me.

“Stop right there. This is government property. You’re trespassing!”

I glanced over my shoulder. The guy was way too far back to attempt a shot in the dark. He was bluffing.

“You ready?”

Nadya's arms slid tight around my waist. "Ready."

I rolled the bike forward with my feet to get on level ground. Once I started the engine, we'd need to gun it. I couldn't risk losing traction on loose gravel.

"I said stop!" The flashlight beam bobbed behind us. He was running.

"We're outta here." The Harley roared to life and I let out the throttle. The rear wheel spun a couple times before we rocketed forward. I leaned left, leading us back out onto the open highway, dusting our pursuer.

Behind me, Nadya laughed. The sound infected me until I chuckled right along with her. She leaned closer to me. "You really know how to show a girl a good time."

I grinned and patted her clasped hands at my waist. When I glanced down I noticed her gloves were missing. Probably a casualty of our visit to the Mustangs. No biggie. I had replacements at the garage. I was glad I left mine on. This was my favorite pair.

When I pulled up to her apartment, I turned the bike off and rolled it to the curb. I glanced at the dark windows. "Sasha's not home?"

Nadya shook her head and pulled her helmet free. "She's working tonight."

"Are you moving in with her and Aren after the wedding?"

Nadya shrugged. "She thinks I am, but I'm trying to find a plan B. The last thing I want is to be a roommate with newlyweds, but I realize between my health issue and being on Nero's interest list, no one is going to sign off on me living alone."

I walked her up the steps to her front door. Sure I was leaving the Pack tomorrow night, but I still had a duty to be certain her place was secure. "Adam and Lana would probably be happy to have you at their house. They've got a spare bedroom and Madeleine and Malcolm are crazy about you."

"Maybe." She unlocked the door. "Thanks again for tonight."

"I'm not going anywhere yet." I moved past her into her dark apartment

while she punched the code into the alarm. “Just want to be sure you don’t have any uninvited guests in here.”

“The alarm was on.”

I shrugged, stalking through the rooms. So far, I only caught the scents of Nadya, her sister Sasha, and Jason. My leather gloves groaned as I balled my hands into fists. Why was I surprised to find Jason’s scent here? It shouldn’t bother me. Still.

I circled around to the door. Nadya raised a brow. “All clear?”

The corner of her mouth curved up into a lopsided smile. Most likely she smelled that her place was empty, too.

“Yeah. It’s all clear.” I reached for the doorknob and hesitated. I’d probably never see her again. So what the hell was I supposed to say?

Her gaze locked on mine. “Good luck in Colorado.”

I took a step closer. Too close. Her scent intoxicated me, reminding me it had been way too long since I held a woman in my arms. Her lips parted as she looked up at me. I traced my gloved finger along the edge of her jaw. “I wish things could be different.”

Her gaze never left mine. “Me, too.”

I tilted her chin up, her breath teasing my lips. “I need to go.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed. “No, you don’t...”

My will cracked, I pulled her close and kissed her.

# Chapter Seven

NADYA

The second his lips brushed mine, my pulse raced, and somewhere deep inside of me the wolf growled. I wasn't sure how I understood her, but she made her intent crystal clear.

Gareth was ours.

A tidal wave of passion, shock, and possession swamped my senses as I ran my hands up his chest and around his neck. He held me tight, but it still wasn't close enough. I parted my lips, my tongue twining urgently with his. Any fear I'd had earlier about my body not responding evaporated. Every part of me wanted him. Now.

My fingers tightened in the back of his hair and he moaned into the kiss. My pulse skyrocketed, heat smoldering low in my belly. We had on way too many clothes. This was the passion I yearned for. If my time on earth came to a close soon, I wanted to wallow in desire, to feel as alive as possible.

Gareth made me feel invincible.

He pressed me against the wall, parting my legs with his knee, bringing our bodies even closer together. His erection rubbed me, rock hard through his jeans. I slid my hand down his chest and around his waist, then lower, encouraging his hips forward, closer.

Suddenly he broke the kiss, resting his forehead on mine while we gasped for air. His pupils dilated and narrowed, his nostrils flared, and I started to

smile. “Wow... That was amazing.”

Gareth shook his head like he was just waking up, and then he backed away. His emotions were gone, boxed up so far from me that my empathic abilities were no help.

“This can’t be happening.”

“Excuse me?” I straightened, hoping my rubbery legs would hold me up.

He raked his fingers through his black hair, pulling it back from his face. “I can’t do this.”

“What?” Talk about a cold shower. “You lost me. What just happened?”

He finally met my eyes and although his feelings were hidden, the raw pain in his gaze was impossible to miss. “You are so damned beautiful, Nadya.” He yanked off one leather glove and caressed my cheek with his warm hand. His touch was tender, in stark contrast to the tense line of his jaw, the agony in his eyes. “Promise me something.”

I swallowed my own knotted emotions. “Okay.”

“Don’t keep secrets from Jason. He’s your best chance to beat the poison in your veins.” His hand dropped from my skin and already I yearned for his touch. “This is so fucking unfair.”

He hurled his leather glove across the room like a missile, and it collided with a picture on top of the television. The frame toppled over. I flinched as the glass shattered, but the noise didn’t even phase him. Gareth paced the room, snatching his glove up off the floor without righting the picture. Every few seconds I’d get a glimpse of emotions I didn’t understand. Rage, passion, worry, yearning, and fear. Lots of fear.

“Gareth, talk to me. You’re not making any sense.”

He rubbed his hands down his face and turned toward the window. “I thought I had a chance to start over with a clean slate.”

“You still do.”

He glanced over his shoulder with a sad smirk. “I wish.”

He took a deep breath and slowly turned around. I stared into his eyes, wishing he'd open his heart to me. His passion had been there. He'd wanted me as much as I'd wanted him. Did he worry he'd hurt me? My gift was no help to me at the moment. Being clueless sucked.

Gareth came closer and brushed a chaste kiss to my forehead. "I've lost everyone, sweetheart. I can't stay here and lose you, too. I wish I was strong enough, but losing Gabe broke me. I can't do this again. I won't." He went to the door and stopped. His voice lowered, gravelly with emotions he refused to share. "You should have a mate who can stare into the abyss and tell it to fuck off. Stay with Jason and stay alive. You don't deserve this. Any of it. And you definitely deserve better than me."

He closed the door behind him and I sank onto the couch, trying to figure out why my heart tore in half. Tears spilled down my cheeks, and my mind reeled. I'd only known Gareth for a couple of months. Tonight was the most we'd ever spoken, and the first time we'd ever touched.

So why did it feel like my whole world just collapsed?

...

The door opened behind me. I didn't even look to see who came in.

"Why is the door unlocked?"

Sasha.

"Nadya, you're still up? Are you all right?"

I nodded, my voice nowhere to be found.

She sat beside me, her concern and worry flooding my already raw nerves.

"You are not."

Pulling me into her arms, her comfort broke the dam on another wave of tears. I sobbed.

Sasha ran her hand down the back of my hair. "Are you injured?"

"No." My voice hiccupped.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

I sniffled, struggling to find words. What could I say? None of this made sense. “Gareth.”

She stiffened and then pulled away, brushing my hair back from my face. “Was he here? Did he hurt you?”

“He’s gone.”

She glanced around and nodded. “I can see that. Did you get in a fight?”

“I don’t know what it was.” I wiped my nose. “But he’s gone, and I can’t...” More tears spilled down my cheeks and I rolled my eyes. “Something inside me is off. Or broken. It shouldn’t hurt like this, but I can’t make it stop.”

“I’ll get you some tea and we can talk, okay?”

“He said...” I struggled to keep my voice from hitching with sobs. “He said I deserve better than him. A mate. I don’t know...”

Sasha froze and turned around slowly. “Did he touch you? Like skin-to-skin touching.”

Even though I was hysterical and unable to stop crying, her question seemed odd to me. “Why?”

“I don’t believe this.” She tone hardened. “He touched you and he ran.”

“What?” I swallowed and took a breath. “It wasn’t like that.”

Sasha sighed, her expression softening. “Nadya, you’re a werewolf now. You’ve got a new instinct humans don’t have.”

“The rip-your-heart-in-two instinct?” I wiped my eyes.

“No.” She pulled out her cell phone. “I’m calling Aren. He’ll explain it better than I can. Just try to rest and I’ll make tea.”

Aren showed up a few minutes later. My sister’s fiance was like the big brother I’d never had. He was overprotective and usually pretty good at making me smile, but tonight that seemed like an impossible quest.

The second he came through the door, I read his worry and his anger. If

someone didn't start explaining what was happening soon, my head was going to explode. He sat in the chair across from me, resting his forearms on his thighs as he leaned in close.

"Hey, Nadya. Sash said Gareth was here and maybe you touched him..."

I laughed through my tears. Apparently I'd been wrong about the impossible quest after all. "Why does it feel like you're trying to give me the awkward birds and the bees talk?"

He shifted in his chair and leaned back. "Not birds and the bees. We're talking werewolves and mates."

"Like you and Sasha."

He gave me a half-hearted nod. "Sorta. Sash isn't a werewolf so she doesn't have the same instincts as we do."

I sniffled and wiped my nose. "Please speak English."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "When you touched his skin, did you feel anything?"

*Did I ever.* I cleared my throat. "Like..."

"It's hard for me to put into words, but when you touch your mate, you just know. Your body comes alive and the wolf inside will tell you. The moment your skin comes into contact with theirs, your wolf imprints on its mate. And although the human in you might think it knows better, I'm learning the wolf's instinct is smarter than we think."

Sasha came up behind his chair, rubbing his shoulders. "Even when your wolf chooses someone who shot and Tazed you."

He smiled up at her. "Water under the bridge." Both of them looked at me and Aren asked again. "Did you feel anything when you touched Gareth?"

I nodded slowly. "Pupils dilating, heart palpitating, and somehow I thought the wolf inside me told me he was ours."

Aren shot out of his seat. A muscle in his cheek jumped with tension. "He felt it too and instead of explaining it, he ran. I'll drag him back here by his

damned ear if I have to.”

My mind reeled. My mate. Wolves mated for life. That meant I was Gareth’s one love.

And I was dying.

Finally I understood the rage and pain and worry I’d seen in his eyes. The knowledge didn’t ease the physical ache, but at least the weeping and my heart wrenching in two weren’t signs of my impending insanity. My wolf was mourning.

Rejected by her one mate for life.

Aren got up, but I caught his wrist. “He’s gone.” Saying the words out loud was like jamming another dagger into my heart. “He’s left the Pack.”

His eyes widened. “What? Since when?”

“He has a buyer for Takoda. He’s moving to Colorado. His plan was to leave tomorrow night, but after this fiasco, I’d bet money he’s halfway to the Rockies by now.”

“He was just going to leave town without saying anything?” Aren stared out the window. “I’m getting married next week. He told me he’d be there.”

“He’s been hurting since Gabe’s murder.” For some reason I couldn’t stop myself from protecting the man who just broke my heart. Wolf instincts were stronger than I’d ever realized. “He thinks you know who did it, and you’re letting them get away with it.”

Aren didn’t say anything, but the wave of guilt was all the answer I needed. “Oh God.” I stood up, relieved my legs had regained some strength. “You *do* know who killed Gabe.”

Sasha looked at her feet. My jaw went slack. “You both know and you’re not going to do anything about it.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Gabe was a member of the Pack. I thought you were supposed to be there for each other. How can you look the other way when Gareth has lost the last member of his family?”

Sasha shook her head, but didn't meet my eyes. "It's complicated. When Gabe was killed, things were different. The guy who did it is our best intel on Nero. Without him on the inside, the Pack would be vulnerable."

"Must be some incredible secrets to be worth a member of the family." I crossed my arms, grateful to feel anger instead of heartbreak.

Aren sat down and looked up at me, giving me the dominant position, pleading to the wolf inside me. "Believe me, I'd kill that bastard in a heartbeat if it would bring Gabe back, but it wouldn't, and we'd also have a tougher time protecting Malcolm and Madeleine from Nero. Adam and Lana's children are the first ever born to an unbitten female. Lana's parents were part of a breeding experiment at Nero. She carries the shifter gene just like males. Her daughter inherited it, too. Madeleine is a female shifter without being bitten. This makes them valuable." He sighed. "Gabe is gone. We need to be sure we don't lose anyone else."

My head swam with the new information about the twins, but my heart was doing the talking. "Too late. Now you've lost Gareth." Saying his name hurt all over again, but no tsunami of tears. Progress. Sort of.

"I'll bring his ass back to Reno. He knew what was happening. You're his mate and he left you here like this. Not okay."

"No." For the first time since Gareth walked out the door, my voice didn't crack or waver. "You didn't see his eyes." Tears welled up again and I cleared my throat. "I'm dying, Aren. He's *my* mate, too, and *I* won't put him through that."

Sasha pressed her lips together hard, but her tidal wave of denial was inescapable.

"You're not dying. You already survived your first shift. Jason's going to figure this out."

"How long until I'm shifting without the full moon?" I clenched my fists, keeping my resolve. "Not long after that I'll be fighting bouts of paranoia and

rage until my brain finally hemorrhages. That will hurt him.”

Sasha wiped a stray tear and came to me, taking my hands in hers. “Then you know what you should do?” She squeezed my fingers. “Fight like hell to live. I’ll be right beside you holding you up when you need a shoulder to lean on.”

Aren sighed, shaking his head. “Your *mate* should be beside you.”

My hackles went up. “His Pack shouldn’t keep secrets from him.”

“If he knew the identity of Gabe’s murderer, Gareth would kill him.” Aren finally met my eyes. “It sucks, but we need this guy alive right now.”

“Well before you start judging my mate, you should take a long hard look in the mirror.”

Aren raised a brow. “Gareth doesn’t deserve you.”

“You’re right.” Another tear rolled down my cheek. “He deserves someone he can grow old with.”

# Chapter Eight

GARETH

I arrived at the garage without any idea how I got there. My mind looped from the surge of passion to the painful realization I couldn't stand by her while she faded away. Each time I replayed the night in my head, the bitterness grew.

*Hadn't I lost enough loved ones for one lifetime?*

Nadya was my mate. The wolf inside of me recognized her immediately, the second my lips touched hers, my one love, the other half of my soul. She was the most beautiful, fun, intelligent, and interesting woman I'd ever met. Jesus, she even made me smile a couple times. Other than Gabe, no one else had ever had that kind of effect on me. And that kiss. Shit, I'd been with plenty of women over the years, and not a single one rocked my world like Nadya just did, and we had all our clothes on.

She was also dying. Un-fucking-believable. Every instinct inside of me demanded I run back to her side, to protect her. But my instincts didn't understand. I'd never be able to save her from the mutated werewolf DNA already ravaging her body.

And if fate thought she could stab me in the heart one more time, she had another thing coming.

I rolled Gabe's bike inside the garage and went into the office for my duffle. I'd text Russ to let him know that there was a change in my plans. He could FedEx the escrow docs to me. I couldn't stick around. It was only a matter of time before Adam heard I was leaving. Walking away from Nadya had been the toughest thing I'd ever done. I didn't have the strength left to

deny my Alpha.

After a final look around my garage, I swung my leg over my '65 Electra Glide and started the engine. If I hit the road now, I could grab a few hours' sleep in a hotel room in Utah and be in Durango by tomorrow night.

Colorado would be a new start. I had enough savings to make it for a few months until the escrow closed and then I'd open a new shop in Durango. I ground my teeth to keep from screaming. I couldn't get Nadya out of my head and concern for her safety made it tough for me to focus on anything else. The wolf didn't want me to run without a fight.

But if there was one thing I excelled at, it was fighting, and right now, I was fighting my wolf with everything I had.

• • •

I rolled into Salt Lake City just after the sunrise, exhausted and punchy. The wolf did not enjoy riding several hours in the wrong direction from my mate. He didn't understand Nadya was far from mine. Besides, after my exit last night, it was safe to say she probably never wanted to see me again.

Motel 6 left a light on for me. I sat on the edge of the bed, my head pounding. It was hard to tell if the pain was from my wolf aching for his mate, the onslaught of lingering scents of previous guests in this room, or exhaustion. Maybe it was all of the above.

I welcomed the pain. It gave me something to focus on instead of wondering if Nadya was safe, and hating myself for hurting her. Hopefully, she called Jason and told him about her episode in the shower. He'd let Adam know someone needed to watch her. He'd better.

Maybe the pain wasn't distracting me as much as I thought.

Russ sent a text saying the deal was moving forward. I'd have documents to sign by the end of the week. The news should have lifted my spirits. One step closer to a new life in Colorado.

But kissing Nadya, tasting her lips and feeling her body respond to mine, recognizing her as my mate, it all scrambled everything I thought I had worked out. I'd been so close to escaping my past, but the sadness in her eyes had been my undoing. I took her to Pyramid Lake, told her things I'd never

shared with another person.

Any man would be lucky to have her in his life. But I didn't deserve her. She should be with someone like Jason. He had his act together, made a good living, and he was pretty even tempered most of the time. However, the thought of Jason touching her had the wolf growling inside me.

Jealousy didn't change the fact that Nadya should have a man who could open his heart and love her. Deep down, I was broken. Something shut down the day I got the call my parents had been killed by a drunk driver. Gabe mourned. He went through all the stages.

But not me. I couldn't face the pain. I started building an emotional barrier to be sure nothing ever wounded me like that again. If I never cared about anyone else, I couldn't get hurt.

Then I lost Gabe. My last tie to my family, my Pack, my heart. It didn't help that I'd let him go out hunting without me that night.

*Shit. I'm not going down that road. Not now.*

Clicking on the television, I laid back on the bed, hoping for a distraction, but my eyes drifted closed and the second the darkness surrounded me, I saw Nadya, her full lips parted, asking me not to go.

And in my dream, I stayed.

• • •

*From the Journal of Dr. M. Granger – Journal Entry 524*

I consulted with Dr. Jason Ayers today regarding the female subject, Nadya Dalca. He is hesitant to accept my input, but on General Miller Sloan's recommendation, Dr. Ayers finally agreed to share her case file. His concern for the female seems to overstep the professional boundary of a physician, but that could further our cause.

She has survived her first full moon and successfully shifted into a wolf. As of yet, she has not exhibited the ability to take the form of a wolf without help of the full moon. Perhaps the mutation in Fonthill's DNA did not pass through his bite. I will need blood samples to study and compare.

I stressed the importance of gaining access to the subject to make my own assessment. She is meeting with Dr. Ayers tomorrow morning and I am hopeful I will be able to examine her as well. If her blood is lacking the mutation, I will introduce the serum and document any changes.

## Chapter Nine

NADYA

Jason's office was in the medical tower adjacent to the hospital. Since I'd been bitten, the combined odors of disinfectant, blood, and urine turned my stomach. How Jason tolerated it on a daily basis was beyond me. I couldn't imagine ever getting used to the nasty assault on my heightened senses.

His nurse assistant, Becky, opened the door to the waiting room. "Nadya?"

I got up and followed her inside. She took my pulse and blood pressure. In the silence of the exam room, I realized I could hear her heartbeat, and a second, faster pulse.

"Are you expecting?"

Her eyes widened. "How did you... Did Dr. Ayers tell you?"

I cringed inwardly. Sometimes, I was still so surprised by my new werewolf skills I forgot to hide my abilities as well as I should. Hated to blame Jason, but he'd understand.

"He may have let it slip." I smiled. "How far along are you?"

"Ten weeks." Her features lit up. "We'll start telling everyone in a couple more weeks once I'm out of the first trimester."

"Congratulations." She hung up the blood pressure cuff and I rolled my sleeve back down. "Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you." She typed some numbers into the computer and headed for the door. "Dr. Ayers will be right in."

I pulled my phone out of my purse, knowing there wouldn't be a message from Gareth, but I couldn't help checking. I hadn't slept more than ten minutes last night. Lying in bed for hours in the dark gave me plenty of time to think. Although I didn't know my mate very well, the wolf inside of me accepted him and loved him unconditionally. And that protective streak carried over to my human heart as well.

The only way to protect Gareth, to keep from hurting him, was to fight this and to live. I hadn't exactly been excited about my prognosis before, but until I kissed Gareth, part of me had accepted my fate. I'd been gradually making peace with the fact my life wasn't going to be as long as I'd always imagined it would be.

Now it was more than just my life in the balance. If I died, Gareth would be alone. Forever. As insane as it sounded to the human part of my brain, the thought of abandoning him and leaving him to hurt for the rest of his life was unthinkable.

I had a whole new reason for living, and every intention of fighting for every breath.

It was time to stop hiding my symptoms and come clean to Jason.

"Hey, Nadya."

Speak of the devil. I slipped my phone back into my purse and forced a smile. "Hi, Jason."

He washed his hands and turned to face me. His expression sobered. "What happened?"

Apparently, crying all night hadn't done wonders for my complexion, but Becky had been kind enough not to mention it.

"Plenty, actually." Would I be able to say the words without tears? "Last night I found out Gareth is my mate."

"There's no way." Jason stepped back, puffing out a breath like I'd just sucker punched him in the gut. "Is that what he told you?" He shook his head

and reached for my hand. The wolf inside me went very still. “Those are old wives’ tales. The Pack has been telling us since we were kids that we’ll know our mate when we touch them. It’s a romantic notion, but trust me, there is no physical way you can touch someone and suddenly they’re your one-and-only-for-life.” He smiled, but it never reached his eyes. “I’m a doctor. I would know.”

“Aren told me he knew Sasha was his mate as soon as their skin touched.”

“He also had head trauma at the time.” He released my hand and went to the cart with the computer on it. “Your blood pressure is a little elevated, but nothing alarming for our kind.”

Apparently we were done talking about the mate issue. I cleared my throat. “Jason, I can’t sleep.”

His eyes met mine. “That’s normal under the circumstances. You’ve been going through a lot of changes—”

“In the past week I’ve slept maybe two hours total.”

A muscle in his cheek clenched and the energy from his concern raised goose bumps on my arms. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. We all know the path I’m on, and we don’t have any idea how to stop it. But we need to find a way.” Gareth’s pained eyes flashed through my head. I fought another wave of tears. “I need to beat this, Jason. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

He rolled his stool over and pulled out his iPad. He didn’t keep my real medical records anywhere public. Humans didn’t know werewolves existed and the Pack had no intention of changing that.

After typing in some notes, he looked up at me. His expression was all business, the calm bedside manner he’d mastered over the years, but his worry didn’t escape my senses.

“Besides not sleeping, have you noticed any erratic mood swings or paranoia?”

“In the shower last night, my hand tingled. My joints popped and ached like I was going to shift again.”

His shoulders tensed, but his face didn't betray the sinking feeling coming off him in waves. “You should have told me.”

“I'm telling you now.”

“Did your hand physically change?”

“No.” My gaze fell to my lap. “I got out of the shower and it all went away.”

He made some notes and set the tablet aside. “I care about you too much to be objective in making a strategy for treatment. If you were anyone else, I'd refer you to another doctor.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “But we both know I can't do that.” His gaze locked on mine. “There is an option, though, but it's risky.”

At this point I'd do just about anything if it meant I'd live. “Options are good.”

“I don't know how good this one is, but it's the only one I have at the moment.” He lowered his voice. “What I'm about to tell you can't leave this room. Adam can't find out, which means you won't even be able to tell your sister.”

“Okay.”

“Adam's uncle, General Sloan, contacted me after you were bitten to let me know he'd talked to one of the scientists at Nero who treated Fonthill and the others during Project Moonlight. His name is Dr. Granger. Adam would kill me if he knew I brought someone from the Nero Organization to Reno, but this guy is the only person who might be able to come up with an antidote. I discussed your case with him, but he'd like to examine you and get a blood sample.”

“You trust him?”

Jason shook his head. “Not really, but we don't have a lot of choices.”

“And the clock is ticking.”

He sighed, grabbing the stethoscope dangling from around his neck. “Especially if you start shifting without the full moon’s influence. Fonthill had massive levels of adrenaline in his system in order to shift at will, and if you’re not sleeping, there’s a good chance it’s because the adrenaline in your bloodstream is heightened.”

“If I agree to let him examine me, how will we know if we can trust him?”

“General Sloan vouched for him, but that doesn’t hold much weight with me. Sloan works for the military, not Nero, so he wouldn’t know what they’re really working on. We can set some protocols. I won’t leave you alone with him, and if either of us gets a bad feeling, I’ll send him packing.”

“You think he’s our best chance for a cure.”

He picked up his iPad, his gaze fixed on the screen instead of my face. Not looking at me didn’t dull the thick fog of frustration surrounding us. “Sadly, yes. I don’t know what they used to mutate Fonthill’s DNA, and by the time I run enough tests to make any progress, it might be too late.”

“And he won’t just tell us what they did?”

“It was a top secret government project. It’s classified.”

I glanced up at the ceiling tiles, wishing I had some better options. Rubbing the spot on my shoulder where Fonthill changed my life, I sighed. “When do I meet him?”

...

Jason took a blood sample for Dr. Granger and then we went to lunch, but every time he caught my hand or touched my arm, the wolf growled inside of me. Whatever he thought about one mate for life, he was wrong. As much as I’d wanted to feel my body react with him a few days ago, I’d had an instant connection physically and emotionally with Gareth on a primal level.

And something happened when Gareth kissed me, binding us together. It

was obvious my wolf had no interest in breaking that bond.

Dr. Granger met us at Jason's office after hours. Jason wanted to keep my situation off the radar with his staff, and bringing in a second opinion would raise suspicions. I'd expected Dr. Granger to be a pencil-thin man with a comb-over and a pocket protector, but when he walked through the exam room door, I couldn't have been more surprised.

His hair was silver, with a well-groomed beard to match. Instead of a doctor's smock and a pocket protector, he wore non-descript blue scrubs revealing wide shoulders and a trim waist. Not what I'd pictured a DNA researcher to look like, but as long as he could find a way to reverse what was happening to me, I wouldn't have cared if he turned out to be an alien.

He pulled out his stethoscope, warming it in his other hand. "Hello, Ms. Dalca. I'm Dr. Granger. I assume Dr. Ayers briefed you on my background?"

I nodded. "And you think you can make an antidote or something so I can avoid paranoia and death, right?"

"There is no antidote." His gray-blue eyes met mine. "I will do all I can to see if we can keep your levels from rising. You won't be like the others in Dr. Ayers' Pack, but we might be able to lessen the side effects."

He moved to the other side of the exam table I sat on. Jason stayed in front of me.

"I'm going to take a listen to your heart and lungs." Dr. Granger slid his cool hand under the back of my shirt and my entire body went rigid. The wolf inside me snarled. I did my best to make her understand this male was not encroaching on her mate's territory.

"Take a slow, deep breath for me."

I followed directions, my gaze on Jason's face.

Dr. Granger moved his hand. "And another."

He finally looped his stethoscope around his neck and came to the front of the table again. "Your heart and lungs sound clean."

I let out a sigh of relief, but Dr. Granger didn't make eye contact as he jotted some notes on his legal pad.

"I'm more concerned about the blood sample Dr. Ayers provided for me earlier today. Your DNA has definitely modified from what we consider typical within your species." Okay, I wasn't enjoying being referred to as a different species, but I kept my thoughts to myself as he went on. "Your adrenal glands are already secreting substantially more adrenaline than we typically see with Lycan subjects."

"We're people."

"Well technically your DNA has—"

I interrupted him, raising my voice. "I don't care what my DNA has, I'm still a person. I'm still *me*."

My pulse pounded in my temples. I shouldn't let this researcher with no bedside manner get under my skin. Usually I had a good relationship with patience, but it seemed to have flown out the window when Dr. Granger started referring to me as a species and a subject.

"You may believe that, but on a molecular level you are no longer the person you were a few weeks ago." He glanced up from his notepad. "Are you sleeping at all?"

I gripped the edge of the table tighter. "Not really. Maybe two hours total in the past week."

He nodded, making more notes. "Dr. Ayers told me you shifted during the full moon. Have you experienced a shift any other time?"

"Not yet, but last night I thought my hand was...changing."

He raised his brow as he wrote and his anticipation stoked my nerves. The bastard was excited. "Excellent. Isolated shifts in one area of the body are more difficult to achieve. Only a few of our unit ever mastered it."

"I *didn't* shift."

He made another notation and I reminded myself that ripping his head off

would ruin my chances at finding a way to live with this...mutation.

“I have more tests to run on your blood samples, but I’d like to see you again in forty-eight hours. That should give me enough time to formulate a serum to counteract the adrenaline. Hopefully it will help you sleep.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

He tapped his pen on the paper. “General Sloan mentioned to me that you might be psychic. Can you provide me with more information?”

My pulse kicked up a notch as my gaze flicked toward Jason. Ever since I was small, my mother insisted I keep my gifts hidden. There were always those looking to exploit and destroy. The Pack knew my secret, but Dr. Granger was far from being part of the Pack.

Jason’s jaw tightened. I shifted my focus to Dr. Granger. Eagerness and curiosity oozed off of him, probably typical for a researcher, and then I caught a glimpse of something else. Lies. He was trying to deceive us somehow, but reading minds wasn’t part of my gift. Maybe that was what he was testing?

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what the general was referring to.”

The light faded in his eyes. “That’s unfortunate. Our research proved that subjects with psychic abilities could withstand the alterations to their DNA longer than our non-psychic test subjects.” He made one last note and met my gaze. “I will do the best I can to help you.”

He turned to Jason. “I’ll be in touch. Please have her here in two days, and I’d like sonogram equipment next time. If I can develop a serum to help her, I need to see how her organs are responding to the treatment regimen.”

Jason nodded. “I’ll have the equipment, but you’re going to need to fill me in on all the ingredients and side effects before I’ll let you inject her with anything.”

I caught a flare of annoyance, but Dr. Granger nodded with a weak smile. “Of course, doctor.”

He turned toward me. “Ms. Dalca, try to rest and drink plenty of fluids.”

The door closed behind him and Jason rubbed my thigh. My muscles contracted in response and my wolf growled.

“What do you think?”

I released a pent-up breath. “I think he’s got an agenda, but he’s also probably my only hope, right?”

Jason started to open his mouth to answer when a *knock* came on the door. I recognized the scent from our Pack before the door opened.

“Come in, Dad.” Jason stood up, pushing his stool back

Wyatt Ayers came through the door with a puzzled expression, but it faded into a grin as he gave his son a tight hug before turning my way.

Jason’s father had a hard edge to him. Outsiders gave him a wide berth, but I was Pack, family, and Wyatt had taken me under his wing. Since being taken in by the Pack, I’d learned that Malcolm, Adam’s father, had been killed in the firefight against Nero at Lake Tahoe almost a year ago. Now Wyatt and Nick were the only remaining male elders in the Pack.

As Malcolm’s eldest son, Adam ascended to Alpha, but Wyatt and Nick were right there to back him up, offering advice and encouragement when he needed it. I didn’t know Nick as well as Wyatt. Since Jason and I had dated a few times before I was bitten, I’d met Wyatt first.

It didn’t hurt that he gave amazing dad hugs. If I wasn’t always so busy helping with Adam’s little twins, I’d probably try to spend more time with Wyatt. I hadn’t had a father figure since I was a little girl, and being in his embrace made me believe nothing in the world could touch me.

Wyatt wrapped me in his arms and lifted me free from the examination table, placing my feet on the floor. My wolf didn’t seem to recognize his touch as a threat. In fact, since Gareth walked out, this was the most relaxed she’d been. I drank in the comfort of his hug and smiled as he released me.

“Nice surprise. I didn’t expect to see you here.” He glanced at his son. “You told me to meet you for dinner. Has the plan changed?”

Jason shook his head. “No, I was just checking Nadya’s vitals.”

Wyatt took a slow breath, frowning. “You and who else?”

He must’ve caught Granger’s scent. Jason met my eyes. No one in the Pack

could know about the researcher from Nero. I piped up. “There was a pharmaceutical vendor restocking late so we had to wait for him to leave.”

Jason nodded, his relief brushing over my skin. Hopefully his dad would be more likely to accept a lie from me than his son. “He left just before you got here.”

Wyatt sat down. He looked between us and raised a brow. Maybe I wasn’t such a good liar after all.

“So Dr. Granger is selling pharmaceuticals now?”

I tried to keep my jaw off the floor. Thankfully Jason spoke up.

“You know Dr. Granger?”

Wyatt nodded. “That bastard was fresh out of college last time I saw him, but I’d never forget that smug face.” His gaze grew distant as he focused on the exam table. “We were young and thought we were invincible. Malcolm convinced all of us we could serve our country, and then the military loaned our unit to a company named Nero. You know this story.” He sat back in his chair, shifting his attention to Jason. “We’re not people to that man. You can’t trust him, son.”

“I don’t trust him, but he’s our only chance to help Nadya.”

“And what’s in it for him?”

“Nadya is the first person bitten by one of their mutated squad that lived.” Jason crossed his arms over his chest. “They’re hungry for the data and blood samples. She’s no good to them dead.”

Wyatt pressed his lips together and looked up at his son from under his strong brow. “You sure about that? Willing to bet her life on it?”

“I made the decision, Wyatt.” I sighed. “This isn’t Jason’s fault.”

He shifted his gaze toward me. “But my son should know better. Bringing Nero into Reno is too risky.”

“It’s one researcher, Dad. He knows we could kill him before he heard us coming. I’m keeping the Pack out of this. Adam doesn’t know, and I intend

to keep it that way. Once Dr. Granger has a serum that works, we'll get him out of Reno for good. He can take all his research data back with him and Nadya avoids Fonhill's fate. It's a win-win."

"Only if her life is as valuable to him as it is to you, and I can tell you from experience Nero doesn't value our lives like they should."

"Please Wyatt. Don't say anything to Adam." I tried not to wring my hands. "Jason's keeping a close eye on Granger. This is my only chance."

I held his gaze, staring him down. His concern and trepidation made my stomach cramp up. What had Nero done to him while he was there? I waited him out and finally he bowed his head, shaking it slowly. "I don't like this."

"I don't, either, but we don't have many options." Jason gripped his shoulder.

Wyatt sighed and stood up. "I'll keep quiet for now, but I see anything that might hurt the Pack and I'll step in. No discussion."

Jason nodded. "Fair enough."

"Thanks, Wyatt."

"Don't thank me." His bright hazel eyes met mine. "If something happens to you because of that little prick, I'll never forgive myself."

Without another word, he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

# Chapter Ten

GARETH

I rolled into Durango as the sun was setting. My cousin, Brendan, was from my Mom's side of the family. They weren't werewolves and had no idea the Pack existed. I'd be on my own in Colorado, but being a lone wolf was part of the allure of making the move.

Or at least it used to be.

I couldn't get Nadya out of my head. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her smile or the tears on her cheeks as I walked out the door. Both hurt in different ways. With all of my precautions to keep from caring about anyone, she'd gotten past every barrier.

I'd done the right thing when I left. Mate or not, I didn't have anything to offer her. She deserved so much more than I could ever give her. I was dead inside.

Or I had been. I wasn't sure what I was anymore, except sick as shit of fate and her habit of inviting death into my life and then leaving me behind.

No, Nadya was better off without me, regardless of what my wolf thought. With every mile taking me farther from her side, my chest got tighter until I wanted to howl to release the ache. My wolf didn't understand.

I gave the Harley one last sip of gas, the rumble vibrating through my body before I turned off the engine. Brendan came out of his house with a grin. I saw my mother in his smile, but for once it didn't trigger a wave of bitterness.

“Gareth.” I reached for his forearms, the traditional greeting within our Pack, but Brendan pulled me into a tight hug. “It’s been too long, cousin.”

I clapped his shoulder and stepped back, uncomfortable with the affection. “Yeah, good to see you too, Dan.” His youngest sister couldn’t say his full name and shortened it to Dan. The rest of the family followed. He’d been Dan ever since. I looked up at his cabin-style house. “Where’s the family?”

“The boys had a Little League game. Marina should be home with them any minute.” He turned for the house. “Come on, I was just firing up the grill.”

I sat on a rock in Dan’s backyard near the grill. The smell of the steak awakened my lost appetite. When was the last time I ate? I had no clue.

“Can I get you a beer?”

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

He lifted the lid of the cooler next to the sliding glass door and held up a bottle. “Heineken okay?”

“As long as it’s wet, I’m good.”

He grinned and opened the bottle before handing it over. “You look beat, man.”

I shrugged. “It was a long ride.”

“So you’re really leaving Reno for good? That’s a big move.”

Gabe’s death sat between us like a gigantic elephant neither of us wanted to see. I sighed and shook my head. “Too many memories there. I’m ready for a new chapter.”

“Well I’m glad you headed my way.” He took a swig from his bottle. “The boys are already asking if they can ride on your motorcycle.”

I smirked. “Marina would kick my ass if she found them on my bike.”

“That doesn’t stop an eight and ten-year-old from dreaming.” He chuckled. “You’re the cool cousin with a tattoo and a Harley.”

The sliding glass door opened and Dustin and Noah raced out in their full

baseball uniforms. I stood up just as they wrapped themselves around my legs. They were so much bigger than I remembered. Kids had never been on my radar, but the wolf inside me mellowed out a notch as I mussed their hair.

Marina came out and hugged Dan at the grill, kissing his cheek. “Need anything?”

“Just you, baby.” He grinned.

Marina laughed and rolled her eyes. “Well you’ve got me.”

Watching them turned the beer in my stomach to vinegar. Nadya telling me I should smile more often echoed through my head. And that damned dimple in her cheek. Did I seriously miss her? We hardly knew each other. It had to be the wolf instincts. They’d wear off eventually.

I hoped.

Marina headed my way. My cousin was dark skinned with black hair like me, but his wife was the opposite. Blond and fair with a contagious smile and eyes that hinted at a warm heart.

“Good to see you, Gareth.” She gave me a quick hug and frowned. “You look like you could use a bed.”

“I’m okay. Just a long ride.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself so hard.” She smiled. “You’re not on the run or something, are you?”

Oh I was on the run all right, but not in the sense she meant.

“I’ll be fine. Thanks for letting me crash in your guest room tonight.”

She waved her hand as she opened the sliding glass door. “You’re family, even if we never get to see you.” With a wink she disappeared inside the house.

I sat on the rock again, watching Dan at the grill and the boys wrestling in the grass. Did any of them have any idea how lucky they were? Probably not. That was the kicker. You never really understood what a gift someone was until they were gone.

• • •

After two days in Durango, I still ached to hear her voice. Twice today I almost picked up my phone to call Aren and be sure Nadya got in touch with Jason, to be certain she was safe. But I didn't dial his number. It was better this way. This was the fresh start I needed. Wanted.

Too bad I was still miserable. I had signed the escrow papers and paid Office Depot to overnight the docs back to Russ. Takoda Motorcycle Restoration would belong to someone else in thirty days. That gave me some time to look for a new garage here in Durango. When I'd plotted this move, the thought of finding a new garage seemed exciting, but now...

Everything felt wrong.

I still hadn't hired movers. For the time being, I was living out of my duffel in a fully furnished efficiency apartment. Instead of enjoying the peace of a new place, I couldn't seem to stop looking back at what I'd left behind.

Reclining on the king-sized bed, I clicked on the television. I flipped channels until someone knocked on my door. I got up and leaned in close to the doorframe, taking a slow breath to check for a scent. Aren?

I opened the door to find my Alpha's brother in the hall with a garment bag tossed over his shoulder. He didn't smile.

"Are you going to invite me in?"

I hated to admit how good it was to see him. Opening the door, we clasped forearms and I stepped back to let him inside. He laid the garment bag over the tiny table and sat in the chair.

"How did you find me?"

He crossed his legs and leaned back. "Nadya said you were going to Colorado. I helped your cousin, Dan, find investors to open his new restaurant, remember?"

"Dan told you."

Aren nodded. "You left so fast, you forgot your tux for my wedding this weekend."

I shook my head. "Sorry, but I can't make it."

"Unacceptable." He leaned forward in his chair. "The situation with Nadya aside, this is my wedding, Gareth. We've been friends our whole lives.

You've got to be there."

I rubbed my hands down my face. "It'll just ruin the day for Sasha and Nadya if I'm there. It's better this way."

"Better how? For who, exactly?"

"Does Nadya know you're here?"

"Nope." Aren shook his head, straightening in the chair. "I didn't come all this way to tell you how fucked up it is that you found your mate and you ran. I also didn't come to tell you that having Nadya crying in my arms ripped my heart out. And I'm not here to knock sense into you, although I'd love to." He sighed, his piercing green eyes locked on mine. "I came here because you've been my friend for as long as I can remember, and I can't imagine getting married and not having you there with me. That's all. It's up to you, but I hope when I'm about to make my vows, I'll have you at my side."

"Sorry you had to waste a trip."

His entire body tensed, ready to strike, and I wished he would. I was pretty sure I could take him, and a fight would feel good right about now. A welcome distraction from the mental anguish I'd been living with.

"Me, too. You're skipping out on my wedding. I never would have believed it." He got up shaking his head. "I would've laid down my life for you."

"But not for Gabe." Guilt festered inside me, but rage was close behind. I clung to it with both hands. "He died protecting our Pack from a jaguar and how do you honor his memory? By marrying one." I took a step closer to him, invading his personal space. "Forgive me, *brother*, but I don't owe you anything."

"Sasha had nothing to do with Gabe's death," he growled.

"So why not hunt for his killer? The Pack has already forgotten him. No one even says Gabe's name anymore." I wanted him to attack me, but he didn't take my bait.

Aren sighed and shook his head. "I wish I could bring Gabe back. There are lots of things from the past few months I'd change if I could, but I can't. I don't want you to leave the Pack, either, but I can't force you to come back."

"The Pack is better off without me. Nadya will be, too. I'm too fucked up for someone as amazing as she is. My wolf was greedy or something. Jason will take good care of her."

“Jason will, but he’s not her mate.” He reached for the door and stopped.  
“In case you care, Nadya’s a fighter. You should be, too.”

# Chapter Eleven

NADYA

I opened my eyes, disoriented and wincing at the late afternoon sun on my face. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever get used to my heightened werewolf senses. Glancing at the clock, I smiled. Four hours. I'd slept four hours in a row. Last night, Dr. Granger met with us to show Jason his treatment plan for me. He concocted a serum he believed would help slow the adrenaline creation in my system. The side effect would be sleep.

While Sasha was at work, Jason came by the condo with Dr. Granger to administer the first injection. Less than an hour later, my body finally relaxed. I must've fallen asleep.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

I sat up on the couch and stretched. "Hey, Sash. Did Jason take off?"

She nodded. "Yeah, he was here when I got home, but he needed to get back to the office."

He didn't want to leave me alone. A pang of guilt weighed on me. Jason was a great guy. Even though he didn't believe in mates, I hoped he'd find his soon. Until then, he wouldn't understand the power or depth of the connection between mates when the wolves inside of us find one another. And he deserved to experience this intensity in his life. It'd probably throw him and his analytical-doctor-brain for a loop. The thought made me smile.

"You're up just in time to come with me for the final fitting on my dress."

I blinked. Her wedding dress. I'd been so wrapped up in the drama of my medical treatment and the heartbreak of losing my mate that my big sister's wedding slipped my mind. This weekend she'd be marrying Aren Sloan. I couldn't have picked a better match for her.

Sasha was a born protector. When our parents were murdered, she didn't have a thought for herself. Even though she'd just entered the police academy, she swooped in and raised me on her own. I never heard her complain about not dating, or not being able to hang out with her police buddies. She protected the innocent with the police force, and then protected me when I needed her most.

And for the first time since our parents passed away, she had someone to watch her back. A worthy man who respected her and her abilities, but wouldn't hesitate to lay down his life to protect hers.

They'd had a rocky beginning, but without Aren's wolf instincts recognizing Sasha on a primal level, my sister might be dead. Safe to say, I loved my new brother-in-law-to-be, and my happiness and joy for them lightened the gloom festering in my heart.

No one talked about it out loud, but everyone in the Pack realized the speedy nuptials were for me. Sasha wanted me to be her maid of honor, and my days were numbered.

I pushed the dark thoughts away and stood up. The room spun for a second. "I wouldn't miss it."

...

Sasha's dress was a soft ivory. Simple with spaghetti straps and a slit up one side. It fit her perfectly, not corseted or tight, and it caressed her curves. It looked natural on her body, allowing Sasha to take center stage instead of her dress.

She stood in front of me. "Well? How does it look?"

“You’re gorgeous.” Tears welled in my eyes as I nodded. “It’s perfect.”

The bridal consultant came around the corner with a veil. “Not yet.”

She settled the filmy veil over Sasha’s dark hair and turned her to look in the mirror. My hard-as-nails sister struggled to keep from crying. I got up and came to her side, taking her hand. “I’m so happy for you.”

“I love you, Nadya.” She hugged me tight, her voice soft against my ear. “I can’t lose you. I won’t.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I shook my head. “You raised me to be strong and fight.”

She held me a moment longer before pulling back and swiping a tear away. “So you like the dress?”

I laughed, sniffled, and nodded. “Love it.”

Sasha changed and we carried the garment bag with her dress to the car. I held it while she opened the door. “Aren is a lucky guy.”

She grinned, taking the garment bag and sliding it across the backseat. “I’m pretty sure I’m the lucky one.”

“Maybe you both are.” We got in the car, but she didn’t turn the key. “Jason told me he’s been doing everything he can to figure out a way to slow the changes from Fonthill’s bite.”

I shifted my focus out the front windshield. How much had Jason revealed? Obviously he hadn’t mentioned getting some help from a Nero researcher, but I didn’t want to contradict whatever he’d said.

Until now, I’d never kept such a huge secret from my sister. “He thinks it’s promising.” True enough. I glanced her way. “I haven’t been able to sleep much, so the four-hour nap seems like a step in the right direction.”

I reached over for my seat belt.

“Ouch. What’s that?”

I followed her gaze. My short sleeve had risen up to reveal the injection site in my shoulder. The skin was red, swollen, and angry. I tugged the sleeve

down.

“I’m okay, just got stung by a bee.”

Her eyes narrowed, but I didn’t change my story. “Did you get Jason to take a look? It could be infected.”

“It doesn’t hurt.” And it didn’t. I’d been stunned to see the skin so irritated. “I’ll show it to him if it gets any worse.”

“You better.” She started the car and we drove back to the condo in silence.

• • •

My stomach growled the second we opened the door. The pot roast in the slow cooker had the whole place smelling like heaven. Sasha took her dress upstairs while I boiled some water on the stove. When the water bubbled, I tore the top off of one of the bags of powdered mashed potatoes. I didn’t have the patience to wait for real ones.

I stirred the pot slowly. The potatoes thickened and my vision tunneled. A furnace lit somewhere inside of me as I dropped onto a chair and lowered my head to my knees to keep from passing out. Sweat ran down my forehead. I lifted my sleeve—the injection site was still a little red, but the swelling had vanished.

So what was wrong?

Sasha came in and rushed to my side. “Nadya? Are you okay?”

“Not sure.” I gasped for another breath. “Can’t breathe.”

My pulse raced erratically, but the second she reached for my shirt sleeve, I caught her wrist in a tight grip.

The tone of my voice lowered. Threatening. “Don’t.”

Sasha resisted, pushing toward my shoulder, but I didn’t give an inch. Instead, I shoved her a couple steps backward. Surprise and worry crawled up my over-stimulated skin. I bit back the urge to scream.

“Call Jason.” I hardly recognized my own voice.

She nodded and ran for her cell phone while I struggled to cage whatever seemed to have come unleashed. Opening and closing my hands, the joints

popped. Pain mixed with panic as I stared at them.

*Please, no. Stop. Please.*

My head throbbed like my skull was being crushed by a vise, cracking a little more with each turn. I closed my eyes, trying to slow my heartbeat and calm my breathing. Suddenly I saw Gareth's dark eyes. He touched my cheek and leaned in to kiss my lips. I clung to the vision, losing myself in the alternate reality.

"Jason's on his way." Sasha's voice was distant. "I have some cool water here. He thought fluids might help."

In Gareth's arms, I nuzzled into his neck, his scent soothing the anger and fear inside of me. His kisses traced my shoulder, his voice humming against my skin. "Mine."

I surrendered to my mate, giving myself to him instead of the poison in my veins. He ran his strong hand over my hair, holding me close. My breathing slowed, my body temperature leveled, and gradually I noticed the pain subside.

When I opened my eyes, it was Sasha stroking my hair. Not Gareth. Not my mate. Disappointment hovered around the edges of my consciousness, but it was no match for the relief that swamped me as I noticed my hands were not paws.

Stretching out my fingers, I tried to speak, but a whisper was all my throat could muster. "I'm all right now."

Sasha stepped back, her panic battering my raw nerves. "Jason should be here any minute."

Jason wasn't who I wanted. "Good." I swallowed hard and lifted my gaze to her face. "I need a minute. Can you wait for him in the other room?"

She sighed. "I'm trying to calm down."

"Yeah, I can tell."

"But I'm doing a piss poor job?" Her lips curved, almost smiling.

"It's not you." Sometimes I wished the others could walk a mile in my shoes just so they'd understand how powerful their emotions were when they assaulted me. "I'm having a hard time blocking your emotions right now while my own are riding so high."

She bent to kiss the top of my head. "Give me a shout if you need anything."

Jason arrived ten minutes later. Thankfully, his calm medical practitioner

demeanor was firmly in place. He knelt beside my chair, opening his medical bag. “Sorry I wasn’t here. You were sleeping...”

“Nothing to apologize for.” I watched my hands like they belonged to someone else. “It hurt so bad that I might’ve overreacted when I told Sasha to call you.”

He pumped the blood pressure cup. “We’re a team here. I need to know if you have an episode, and then we can adjust the treatment.”

“I slept for four hours straight, so that’s something, right?”

He released the pressure on the cuff, silent while he listened to my pulse. When he yanked the Velcro, he nodded. “Four hours of sleep is a big step in the right direction for sure.” He punched some notes into his iPad. “Sasha told me you were in pain, your hands again?”

“Both hands this time and...” I hesitated, bracing myself for his emotional reaction. “...and my voice changed or something. I was stronger. When Sasha tried to touch me, I grabbed her.” I wet my lips as his concern swelled. “For some reason it made me angry that she reached for me. I have no idea why, but while my hands tried to shift, my aggression rose until I told her to call you.”

He took a deep breath, struggling to keep his bedside manner in place. “There are plenty of reasons for agitation. You’re still sleep-deprived, and pain can give anyone a short fuse. This doesn’t necessarily mean your condition is deteriorating.”

I wished I could buy into his diagnosis, but his concern betrayed his words. The sudden aggression was a symptom of my new body chemistry. The elevated adrenaline would continue to hammer at me until my control over my emotions started slipping.

“Should we tell Dr. Granger?”

“Probably. We can let him know you slept, but had another episode when you woke up.”

While Jason checked my eyes, ears, and throat, my mind wandered back to the vision I’d had. Gareth. His arms had comforted me. It seemed so real. His scent filled my lungs. I hadn’t imagined it.

But no other explanation made sense.

Was this the insanity of my mutated DNA?

“Nadya?” Jason took my hand. “Feeling okay?”

I blinked and nodded, jerked out of my thoughts. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I’ll contact Dr. Granger and bring him up to speed. Once we have some treatment decisions, I’ll give you a call.”

“Sounds good.” I stood up and the room tilted for a second.

Jason steadied me, his arm tight around my waist. My wolf growled, but I sensed its weariness. We’d both been through the wringer tonight.

I straightened, shifting away from Jason. “No more treatments until after Sasha’s wedding on Saturday. I can’t risk getting any worse.”

He took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’m right here if you need me.”

My chest tightened. Jason wasn’t the man I needed.

• • •

*From the Journal of Dr. M. Granger – Journal Entry 528*

I had a late phone call from Dr. Ayers. Ms. Dalca had another episode tonight. The serum appears to be working. Both hands were affected in an attempt at concentrated shifting, but the transformation still did not reach completion. Perhaps with another injection she will be able to complete the transformation.

Dr. Ayers reported that the subject slept for four consecutive hours. Both he and the subject were encouraged by her restful slumber. The sedative I added to the serum provided the desired effect. With larger doses of the sedative, I should be able to blind them with hope until her body finally achieves the change without the power of the full moon.

While the subject did experience aggression, she did not harm anyone or herself. Perhaps her psychic ability will strengthen her mind against the paranoia and rage we experienced with the non-psychic male werewolves during Project Moonlight.

Our next injection will take place on Sunday.

# Chapter Twelve

GARETH

I bolted out of bed and hit the carpeted hotel floor ready for a fight. My body still ached as I glanced around the room. Empty. Adrenaline arced through my muscles, my fingers twitching with unused power.

Inside the bathroom I turned on the light, surprised to see sweat running down my face. Staring into my own eyes, I gripped the sides of the sink basin, struggling to remember the dream.

Nadya.

She'd been terrified, angry, and in pain. So much pain. I'd taken some into myself, shared it, to give her relief. Impossible, and yet...I looked down at my arms. I held her, her body against mine. I smelled her damned hair. It seemed so real. What the hell was happening?

My wolf stirred, recognizing the concern for our mate. The red numbers on the clock read 1:20 a.m. Too late to call someone about a nightmare. By now, the whole Pack probably knew I'd left for good. A few of them might even be aware I ran out on my mate. Pretty safe to say none of them would be thrilled to hear from me.

My gaze landed on the garment bag still draped over the table. I wasn't seriously contemplating going back to Reno for the wedding. Bad idea.

But it would make Aren happy, and I could check on Nadya. Even if she wanted nothing to do with me, at least I'd be sure she was safe. Maybe then

I'd be able to grab this new life with both hands without looking back over my shoulder.

The bed tempted me closer, but after the crazy dream, no way would I be willing to sleep again anytime soon. I opted for a shower instead. If I got on the road before daybreak, I could make the trip to Reno in time for the wedding on Saturday, and be back in Colorado by Monday.

Who the hell was I fooling? I'd never be able to walk away from Nadya for a second time.

...

Even the brisk wind on my face couldn't keep me alert. I needed a nap.

After rolling past the Salt Lake City limits, I found a motel. The place had seen better days, but shit, so had I. I wouldn't be there long, anyway.

I parked the Harley and went inside to pay for the room. With a key in hand, I retrieved the garment bag before heading to my temporary sleeping quarters.

Sleep. The past few hours I couldn't stop thinking about it. The dream kept playing in my head. Feeling Nadya in my arms, her scent filling my lungs, made my whole body and soul ache for her. And at the same time, concern laced my bloodstream. If the dream held any truth, then Nadya had been in pain. In fact, pain didn't cover the depth of agony I'd experienced with her.

Was the dream a premonition? It couldn't have been real.

I braced myself for the onslaught of scents that assaulted me the second I opened the door. The faded bedspread draped over the double bed matched the blackout drapes on the window. I noticed a tear at the bottom corner, but no stains. It would work. I just needed a few hours of sleep. After peeling back the blankets, I collapsed on the lumpy mattress. My feet dangled off the end, and a chuckle rumbled past my lips. I couldn't remember the last time I slept in such a tiny bed.

Closing my eyes, I saw Nadya. She walked down the barn aisle at Adam's ranch as the horses pawed, nickering at her. She carried Adam's children, one on each hip, while the little ones stretched their hands toward the horses. Nadya went over to Bubbles's stall. The bay mare came forward, resting her head over the stall door. Malcolm and Madeleine squealed with joy as the horse lowered her head so they could touch her.

Nadya pressed a tender kiss to the mare's forehead. "Good to see you too, Bubbles."

The sound of her voice pierced my heart. I hadn't even been gone a week yet, but I missed her. In the dream, I struggled to see where I stood. Maybe I'd be able to touch her somehow like I had last night.

But she didn't see me. I couldn't tell if any of this was real. It all had to be in my head. Dreams, nothing more.

She set the toddlers down and Madeleine sat while her brother wobbled off toward a wheelbarrow. I didn't know the little guys were walking yet. They were only about eight months old, but because of our shifter genes we matured from infancy at an accelerated rate. They'd level out around three years old. But until then it was great that Nadya was around to help Lana watch them. It wasn't like they could go to daycare. Human babies didn't walk and start to talk before they were a year old.

I guess I'd be missing a lot more once I got settled in Colorado.

It shouldn't bother me.

Nadya watched them as she patted Bubbles's neck. Adam came around the corner and smiled. He clasped Nadya's forearms before pulling her into a hug. "Good to see you. Aren told me you weren't feeling well last night."

Nadya nodded. "Yeah, my hands hurt like they were changing, but something happened. The pain eased up somehow, enough for me to focus and repress the change."

Adam sobered. "That's a good sign, right? If you can control it, you can

beat this thing.”

“I don’t know what to think.” She paused. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He scratched the other side of Bubbles’s neck until her upper lip started to quiver. “What is it?”

“Can you find Lana from a long distance?”

“I’m assuming you mean without a cell phone, right?”

“Yeah.” She smiled and nodded. “Like if Lana was in trouble, could you sense it?”

“As the Alpha, I can usually tell when any Pack member is in danger, but it’s a general unease, not an exact location or anything really helpful.”

I sat up in bed, wide awake, the connection broken. I glanced at the clock. I only slept three hours, but the exhaustion was gone. My senses were on high alert.

Nadya had noticed me near her. This went beyond a werewolf mate connection. What the hell was happening to me?

With the garment bag in hand, I left the room. I needed to talk to Chloe.

• • •

I rode over the rise to Pyramid Lake just as the sun dipped below the mountaintops. The painted sky reflected on the smooth surface of the water, as if one masterpiece wasn’t enough. The wash of colors made it tough to keep my eyes on the highway. I headed for the Stone Mother first. Since the tribe had found some graffiti on the sacred stone, they closed the road to the public, but the tribe often visited.

No sign of her Jeep.

Dropping my foot, I pivoted the Harley back toward the highway. I’d try her house next. Again, I caught myself wishing I could get her to use a cell phone. She had one, but it was never on. She treated it like a one-way walkie-talkie. Unless she needed to call you, that sucker might as well have been a useless brick in her purse.

I rolled up the dirt drive to her two-bedroom cottage, breathing a sigh of relief when I noticed her car in the driveway. I turned off the engine, pulled my helmet and gloves free, and made my way to her porch. She opened the screen before I could knock.

“Osa!” She peered around me and frowned. “Where is your lady?”

“She’s not mine.” I tipped my head toward her living room. “Can I come in?”

“Of course.” She moved to the side, welcoming me inside. “You didn’t chase her off, did you? She was worth keeping.”

“It’s me who’s not worthy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Pshhh...”

“I need to ask you something.” I sat on her loveseat.

She took the armchair. “All right.”

“Has anyone in our tribe ever had dreams connected to other people?”

She crossed her legs. “We all dream about others, Osa, especially those we care about.”

“Not like a normal dream, but actually connecting with someone. I think she noticed me there, too.”

She leaned forward. “Like a Dream Walker?”

I frowned. “What’s that?”

“Dream Walkers were able to journey while they dreamed. They were healers.”

“How so?”

“First...” She raised a brow. “My turn to ask something.”

*Shit.* I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Nadya is special. I saw how you watched over her. Why do you insist on being alone? This is not what your parents or your brother would want for you.”

“May not be what they wanted, but it’s what I need.” I bit back a wave of emotion and stared at her ceiling. “Nadya is *very* special.” Chloe called me “little wolf” because she recognized my connection to the spirit of the wolf, but my parents never told the tribe about my father’s genetics. They didn’t know werewolves existed and it wasn’t my place to change that.

With my emotions bottled up tight, I met her dark eyes, forcing the words out. “She’s dying, Chloe.”

She pressed her lips together and sighed. “We all are, Osa.”

“Really? You’re going to toss that at me? You are one of the few people who know how close I came to losing my mind when I lost Gabe.” I got up, raking my hair back in frustration. “I can’t let myself care about someone and watch them die. Not again.” I glared in her direction. “I won’t.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

I started for her door, tempted to blast right out of it. But I needed to know about the Dream Walkers.

Before I could ask again, Chloe went on, her voice softening. “Look at me.”

As an elder of the tribe, I couldn’t refuse her request, but I took my time, rebuilding what remained of the battered wall around the rising tide of emotions. Slowly, I turned her way.

“Our Stone Mother shed enough tears to fill a lake for her lost children.” She stood up and placed a bony hand on my forearm. “If she awoke today with the choice to go back in time knowing she would lose them, do you think for one minute she would choose not to have children at all?”

I pondered her question and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You are as stubborn as a mule.” She groaned. “She would give them life all over again, because never loving them is worse than loving and losing them. We don’t know how much time one spirit will spend in our lives, but love is too precious to hide from it. A chance at real love is worth the risk.”

“That sounds noble, but the reality is she’ll cross over, and I’ll be left behind, alone, only this time I might not be able to claw my way out of the pit.” I sat down again. “Fate has a vicious sense of humor.”

Chloe came and settled beside me. “Fate gave you a gift by placing this woman in your path. Even if you won’t get the chance to grow old together,

not everyone finds the one who will make them whole. Feeling complete, even for a short time, is worth treasuring.”

“Why are you so convinced Nadya is the one to make me whole?”

She took my hand, her expression softening. “Because you brought her to the Stone Mother. You let her believe she invited herself, but she doesn’t know you as well as I do. No one on earth could convince you to share this place. You *wanted* her to see it.”

Did I? I’d brought Nadya to Pyramid Lake before I discovered she was my mate. It hadn’t been instinct. I just couldn’t bear the thought of sending her away when she looked so lost.

Would I have cared if she were anyone else? Probably not. I gave Chloe’s hand a squeeze. “Tell me about the Dream Walkers.”

Her eyes brightened. Any chance to talk about our ancestors lit her up like a lighthouse. “They mastered the art of journeying through their dream state, to comfort and heal another person. Their spirit travels without their body. Our tribe hasn’t had a Dream Walker in generations. Why?”

“I don’t have time to explain.” I stood and went to the door before she could pin me down with more questions. “I’ve gotta ride over to the garage and get some sleep. Aren’s getting married tomorrow.”

She came over and gave me a hug, her voice soft against my ear. “Be open, Osa. It is the only way to heal.”

I rode over to the Stone Mother and turned off the Harley. Sitting in the silence, I looked up at her bowed head. Loving someone enough to weep a lake’s worth of tears was something I understood, even though I’d never allowed myself to cry.

When our parents were killed by the drunk driver, Gabe wept, and I closed my heart. I told myself I had to be strong for my brother. For the rest of his life, I stood tall, holding him up as best I could.

And when Adam told me a jaguar murdered Gabe, my heart shriveled up and died in my chest. I tried to cry for him, but I didn’t remember how. Maybe I never knew.

I walked closer and sat at the water’s edge, staring up at her. “Chloe says I

need to open myself, but I don't know how."

The lake lapped against the stone of her legs. This was nuts. Did I seriously think she'd answer me? I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. When I opened them, I kept my focus on the smooth water.

"I felt her pain, Mother. She needed me and somehow I went to her in my dreams. Will I be able to help her again?"

I paused and glanced up. A hawk circled above us and finally came to land on the natural rock pyramid beside the Stone Mother. Hawks were a sign from the other side, bringing messages from our ancestors.

As a child, I never questioned the omens and animal guides, but losing everyone I cared about blotted out faith in anything except the reality that death waited for all of us.

"Gabe, if you're there, I'm sorry. I should've been with you that night. We were too cocky and sure of ourselves." The hawk launched itself back into the air, gliding just above the water. For once, mentioning his name didn't make me angry or tense. Maybe there was healing here after all.

I didn't know what any of it meant. Could I be a Dream Walker, or was it a one-time miracle? Did the hawk show up as a sign that Gabe still walked beside me, or was it just a reminder to trust my intuition?

*Hell if I knew.*

I got up and went back to my bike. My mind buzzed with unanswerable questions on the drive home. When I rolled up to the garage, I unlocked the door and rode the bike inside. The familiarity of my place embraced me, easing my frayed nerves. Tossing the keys on the counter, I headed for my studio apartment in the back.

Being in my own bed was a luxury. I rubbed my hands down my face, still a little stunned to find myself back in Reno. I was seriously considering going to Aren's wedding. Nadya would be there. Would she hate me? Would everyone else?

Did I give a crap?

I closed my eyes and her beautiful face filled my mind. I could love that woman in a heartbeat. Maybe I already did. It would be the easiest thing I'd ever done. And strangely enough, I didn't think my feelings had anything to

do with my wolf. I'd been drawn to her before I ever touched her and discovered she was my mate.

Being near her made me want to see her smile, to hear her laugh. Not something I'd ever experienced before. And I'd never known another woman who could look death in the eye and still move forward. She was fearless. And the moment we kissed, she'd given me a glimpse of the passion brewing inside of her.

I growled and rolled over, burying my head under a pillow. *I must be insane.*

Losing her would be the most agonizing thing I'd ever faced. I didn't have the strength to allow her life to slip through my fingers.

But knowing I walked away and left her to fight alone would be worse.

In the end, giving up the chance to hear her laugh, see her smile, and taste her lips because I was afraid... It would eat me alive. Nadya deserved a better mate than me, but I would do my best to step up and be the man she needed.

*If she still wanted me.*

# Chapter Thirteen

NADYA

The alarm went off early in the morning. For a second, I stared at the numbers while I counted the days of the week in my head. This was Saturday...

Sasha's wedding.

With a busy day ahead, I dashed into the shower, eager to get started on the wedding to-do list. The hot water loosened my muscles and my mind wandered. Part of me had hoped I'd see Gareth again in my dreams. I tried not to think about him, but so far I was failing pretty miserably. I understood his pain and even a little bit of his anger. He'd lost all his family members, so I could imagine discovering your mate was also dying seemed pretty unfair.

But in spite of clear, rational thought, it still stung. My mate kissed me and then ran for the hills. Tough not to take that personally. We didn't know each other very well. Another great excuse that I did my best to cling to, but the moment we kissed, a jolt of awareness ran through every fiber of my body, all the way into my soul. Hadn't he felt it, too?

I'd replayed that night in my head countless times over the past few days, and I kept tripping over the same thing. Nothing could have made me walk out that door.

But Gareth did.

He never looked back, hadn't called or texted. Maybe he hadn't shared the

connection I did. I probably wouldn't ever find out, and that hurt, too.

I rinsed my hair and washed the fresh tears from my cheeks. His face was still clear in my mind, every angle of his jaw, his dark eyes, and that rare smile he shared with me and very few others. The warm water embraced me, and for a moment, I caught Gareth's masculine scent as if I were back in his arms. My lips tingled with his kiss as I ran my hands up his tanned, muscled chest.

His rough hands slid down my back, firm and possessive over my butt, pressing my hips tight against him. His erection throbbed, rubbing me until my body ached for more. I wanted to feel our bodies united. I wanted to forget where I ended and he began.

The sound of my own moan echoed through the bathroom, snapping me out of the fantasy. I opened my eyes, reality cooling the smoldering heat gathering low in my abdomen. Gareth wasn't here. He'd never be here.

Somewhere deep inside, the wolf let out a longing howl.

...

This was my first visit to Sloan Consulting's cabin in Lake Tahoe, and as soon as Sasha turned the car into the driveway, my jaw went slack. "This is a *cabin*?"

"That was my reaction, too." Sasha grinned, turning off the engine. "I was expecting a log cabin like Little House on the Prairie the first time Aren brought me here. Apparently Sloan Consulting has a different definition of roughing it in the mountains than we do."

We got out of the car and I couldn't help gawking up at the massive stained wood structure. It had two stories, complete with three gables on the roof, and the double entry doors were full of leaded glass.

"It's gorgeous."

"Wait until you see the back." Sasha tugged my arm and headed for the

trunk. “Let’s get all this stuff inside and I’ll give you a tour.”

I carried the garment bags with our dresses, and Sasha handled the plastic tub we’d loaded with makeup and hair supplies. At the top of the stone entry stairs, the door opened and Lana smiled at us.

“Need any help?”

Sasha shook her head. “I think we’ve got it. Thanks for grabbing the door, though.”

Lana opened the oak door all the way, then closed it behind us.

I glanced around. “Are Madeleine and Malcolm here?” The cabin was impossibly quiet, unless the little ones were asleep.

“Adam’s in charge of keeping them entertained until right before the ceremony. Two rough-and-tumble toddlers wouldn’t be much help while we’re setting up.”

Those two rough-and-tumble toddlers always listed my spirits, but it was probably for the best that Lana had them occupied and out from under our feet today. “Where should I put the dresses?”

Lana pointed toward the stairs. “There’s a master bedroom with a private bathroom up the stairs to your right.”

“Sounds perfect.” Sasha headed for the staircase.

I started to follow, but Lana caught my arm. She placed her finger over her lips. I nodded and called to my sister. “I’ll be right up.”

“Okay.” Sasha disappeared upstairs.

I turned to Lana. “Everything okay?”

“That’s what I was going to ask you. I’ve heard things from Aren, but I wanted to talk to you directly.”

I laid the garment bags over the back of the couch and glanced up toward the hall where Sasha had gone before I met Lana’s eyes. I kept my voice low. “I’m all right.”

“We heard about Gareth.”

Just hearing her say his name stirred up a tempest of pain. I pressed my lips together, rejecting the ache for my mate. If I was going to cry today, they were going to be happy tears for Sasha.

Her eyes softened and her compassion embraced me like a mother's hug. "I just wanted to give you a heads-up that we're not expecting him to show up, so we shifted the wedding party around. Jason will walk with you." She took my hand. "I wish there was something I could do to help. You don't deserve any of this."

A humorless laugh escaped my lips. "I've heard that before." I gave her hand a squeeze. "I'll be fine. Thanks for letting me know about Jason."

"He really cares about you."

"That's the kicker. He's handsome, smart, and any woman would be lucky to catch his eye, but this wolf inside me made her choice and I wish I could say I wanted to convince her to choose someone else but..." My voice wobbled as I dabbed a tear from my eye. "But before I was even bitten, I wanted to get to know Gareth, to understand the man underneath that tough exterior. Bad boys aren't usually my type, but..." I shook my head and reached for the dresses. "I better take these up."

I hustled for the stairs before Lana could say anything else. With each stair, I envisioned tightening the lid on my feelings and rebuilding the wall around myself to keep the emotions of the others at a distance.

"There you are." Sasha took the garment bags and hung them in the closet. The view of Lake Tahoe out the bedroom window stole my breath.

"It's gorgeous."

She turned, following my gaze. "Isn't it? Come on, we've got a few minutes before we need to get ready. I'll show you around."

After peering in at the three other bedrooms upstairs, we made our way down to the main living room. The sand-colored Berber carpet blended perfectly with the rustic furnishings to give the cabin a warm, masculine feel.

Through the French doors, the lake shimmered in the sunlight as if magic danced on the water.

Lana walked past the window, setting up chairs outside. Sasha went to the door and opened it. “Hey Lana, need any help out here?”

I followed and noticed Luke and Logan at the other end of the huge deck, plugging in wires and setting up microphones.

“We’ve got it.” Lana smiled at both of us. “Jared should be here soon with the wedding arch, and Jason is bringing the flowers.”

I wandered over to the corner where Luke and his twin, Logan, were duct-taping wires together. Leaning against the wooden railing, I stared out at the lake, drinking in the beauty. This was a perfect place for a lifelong commitment with all of nature witnessing the union.

“Hey, Nadya, can you hold this for a second?”

I turned around to find Logan holding up a bundle of cords. “Sure.”

He wrapped them in red duct tape while I did my best to keep the wires steady. Logan was a couple of years younger than me with a velvety voice that melted audiences all over the state. He and his band, The Howlers, would be playing later tonight. The rest of his band wouldn’t be here until after the ceremony.

The wedding was for Pack only.

His shoulder-length hair was tied back in a ponytail, accentuating the strong line of his jaw. He raised his ice blue eyes to meet mine. “Thanks.”

He took the bundled cords from me, and I forgot to speak. Rock star mystique clung to Logan like a second skin. I’d been introduced to him when I first arrived in Reno and I’d even talked with him a few times, but I didn’t feel like I really knew him. Strange sensation for me. Even with my empathic talents, all I usually got from him was a sense of a cool breeze, a mellow old spirit dwelling inside the body of a hot lead singer.

I sensed that very few people knew the real Logan. Maybe that was how he

liked it.

He started to turn away and my brain finally kicked back in. “No problem.”

Oh yeah, I was cool.

Sasha walked over and leaned on the railing beside me. “We should probably go up and get ready.” She glanced my way. “You all right?”

“I’m better when everyone stops asking me that.”

“After the other night—”

“I feel fine now. That’s enough for me.” I bit back the swell of aggression. She was my big sister, of course she worried about me, but the poison in my veins that boosted my adrenaline levels also shortened a temper that I’d never had before. Staring at the lake, I imagined it cooling my nerves. Finally I added, “Today is your day. Your attention should be on Aren, not me.”

She smiled, easing the tension in my muscles. “Okay, you win. No worries today.” She draped her arm around my shoulders. “Let’s get this show started.”

• • •

Doors opened and closed downstairs as the rest of the Pack arrived. I lifted the veil from the garment bag and helped my sister place it in her hair. Seeing Sasha in her dress and veil filled my heart to bursting. She stared in the mirror and dabbed a tear. My sister wasn’t much of a crier, but her emotions were deep, palpable as they surrounded me.

“I wish Mom and Dad were here.” Her voice hitched and I handed her a tissue. “I guess I never really thought I’d get married, but now that I am...”

I stood beside her, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She’d never looked more stunning. “I think they’re with us right now. We can’t see them, but their love is here.” I rested my hand over my heart. “I bet they’re both so proud of you. You took care of me when I needed you most and put your own needs second. And now you finally found a worthy partner to take care of

you.”

She nodded and looked my way. “I love you, Nadya. You were never a burden.”

Sasha embraced me. Tight. I clung to my sister, closing my eyes and wishing all the love between us could heal me. Where was my fairy godmother when I needed her?

I took a step back, grabbing a tissue for myself. “We’re going to smear all our makeup.”

“Yeah, no more crying.” She dried her eyes and tossed the tissue in the wastebasket. “So you’ll go down and let Adam know I’m ready?”

“I will.” I gave her hand one last squeeze and headed downstairs.

Since our father wasn’t here to walk Sasha down the aisle, Adam volunteered. He was the Pack Alpha and Aren’s twin brother, so it seemed like the right choice. He’d bring Sasha downstairs and out onto the deck at the rear of the cabin for the ceremony.

The whole downstairs bustled with activity. The second my feet hit the hardwood floor, I heard the familiar squeals of Lana and Adam’s twins. I knelt down just as they scrambled toward me and hugged me around the neck. They smelled like baby shampoo and Honey Nut Cheerios, their favorite snack. I held Malcolm out and marveled at how adorable he looked in his tiny tuxedo.

“You look so handsome.”

Even with his pudgy cheeks, his light green eyes betrayed an older soul. He grinned and spouted off his new favorite word. “No!”

Lana came around the corner and scooped him up. “They escaped their daddy.”

Adam stepped up, smiling. “They heard Nadya come downstairs and the Hulk himself couldn’t have stopped them from getting to her.”

Madeleine loosened her grip and pulled away, fanning out her lace dress.

“Pretty!”

I nodded, unable to hold back a chuckle. “You’re beautiful.”

“Pretty!” She corrected me and leaned in to place a wet kiss on my cheek.

I straightened up, taking Madeleine’s hand. “Sasha’s ready whenever you are.”

Adam glanced around at the controlled chaos of last-minute preparations. “We might need a little more time.”

The door opened behind us and Jason filled the doorway, carrying a box full of flowers. Seeing him in a perfectly cut tuxedo should’ve made my knees weak. He was gorgeous. But my body didn’t care. So weird.

His gaze swept the room. “There’s another box in my car.” His eyes met mine as he came in. “You look incredible,” he murmured as he passed by to go out onto the deck.

I gave Madeleine’s hand a squeeze. “Should we go outside?”

“Outside!” She squealed.

How could I resist? Once she and her brother mastered speaking in full sentences, the Pack was going to be in for trouble.

We walked outside and found Jason setting the flower arrangements on either side of the gorgeous wedding arch his brother had built. He turned my way and grinned. “You brought me some help.”

Madeleine tugged at my hand and bolted toward Jason’s open arms. He swooped her up and gave her a loose rose bloom. “Here ya go, princess.”

She wrapped her fingers around the stem, already twisting in his arms. “Mommy!”

“You want to show your mom?”

She nodded and Jason placed her back on the ground. We watched her toddle back inside and he crossed to stand beside me. “Can we talk?”

His emotions weren’t encroaching on me, so I hoped I wouldn’t regret my answer. “Sure.”

He walked me over to a bench overlooking the lake. My wolf growled at his touch, light on the small of my back. We sat down, and he turned toward me. “You’re stunning, Nadya.”

“Thank you.” Heat flushed my cheeks. “Maybe it was the four hours of sleep in a row.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re beautiful.” He paused and shifted his gaze out to the water. “You think Gareth is your mate, but you deserve someone who doesn’t turn tail and run when the road gets rough. I know life’s thrown him some curves recently. I’m not trying to bash him, it’s just that...” He caught my chin, turning me to meet his eyes. “I’m here for you. If you’ll let me in, I’ll be by your side. You can count on me.”

My chest tightened and tears burned my eyes. “You’re an incredible man, but it wouldn’t be fair to you. Even if I could let you in my heart, you’d be stuck wondering if you were a fallback plan.” I squeezed his hand, blinking back tears. “Jason, you need your mate. The other half of your soul. Even though I only experienced it for a brief moment, that intensity will haunt me forever. And you deserve no less.”

He shook his head. “Gareth is a lucky bastard.”

“Not really.” I stood up. “His mate is on borrowed time.”

Aren stepped out, saving me from crying away my mascara. “Hey, Nadya.”

I smiled and rushed over to his waiting arms. “Congratulations.”

He pulled back, practically beaming. Being in love looked great on him. “This is your last chance to trade me in for a better brother.”

“No such person exists.” I rolled my eyes. “Besides, Sasha would kill me.”

He chucked my chin, his expression softening. “Thanks for all your help today.”

“You don’t have to thank me. Just make my sister happy.”

“That’s definitely my plan.”

# Chapter Fourteen

GARETH

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, almost wishing I'd decide the monkey suit looked like shit so I could convince myself to blow off the wedding.

But the tux didn't look bad. In fact, I cleaned up pretty well.

My bike sat beside the two-seater. Gabe's Harley. Since I'd taken Nadya out on it, I had new memories for the Road King. My heart didn't ache when I looked at it anymore. Instead of mourning, I caught myself remembering the feel of Nadya's arms tight around my waist as we road toward Pyramid Lake.

This morning, I'd dreamed of her. We were in the shower, her slick body in my arms as she ran her hands up my chest. I almost lost it right there, pulling her tighter against me. I'd never wanted a woman so badly.

Her scent was still in my lungs when I woke up. So real. Just remembering it sent blood pulsing below my belt. No one had ever had this kind of primal effect on me. I wasn't a nineteen-year-old in a constant state of arousal anymore. It took more than a memory of a sexy dream to make me hard enough to pound nails.

I shifted myself in my slacks. At least it used to take more than a dream.

The clock on the wall reminded me I needed to get my ass on the road or I'd miss the whole thing. I walked past my bike and swung my leg over the Road King. If I managed to convince Nadya to forgive me, I couldn't steal

her away on my bike. I'd need the two-seater.

I caught my reflection in the glass. Never in a million years did I think I'd be one of those guys wearing a tux on his Harley, but it wasn't every day a lifelong friend got married, and I had bigger things to worry about than how idiotic I looked.

Somehow I had to figure out how to make things right with my mate. I pressed the button and the garage door rose as the Road King roared to life. The late afternoon sun blinded me for a second before I rolled out and closed the door behind me.

No turning back now.

• • •

When I arrived at the Sloan cabin, I slalomed through the cars and trucks parked in the driveway and turned off the bike. Pulling off my helmet, I stared up at the double doors, bracing myself for what lay on the other side. After combing my hair and tying it back into a ponytail again, I got off the Harley and made my way up the front steps.

My keen hearing picked up the acoustic guitar playing out back. *Shit*. It already started. I hadn't told anyone I was coming. Was I more of an asshole for slinking in late, or for hanging outside and missing Aren's big day? Hell if I knew.

"Damn it." I grumbled and reached for the door.

If I stayed out here, it'd be way too simple to sneak away and pretend I'd never come. I'd visited with the Stone Mother and asked for healing, but she didn't promise me an easy journey. It'd be work and most likely painful, but Nadya might not have much time left. I didn't want to waste another minute.

I opened the door quietly, doing my best not to attract any attention, but the second I saw Nadya walking away from me, down the aisle on Jason's arm, the wolf inside me snarled, a dangerous warning. I'd told her to stay close to

him, that he was her best chance to beat the mutated DNA in her veins, so I had no right to be pissed.

But knowing that changed nothing. My instincts were in overdrive. This was my mate and he didn't have any claim on her.

Something moved on the stairs and my attention shifted in that direction. Adam came down with Sasha on his arm. His green eyes locked on mine and I lowered my gaze. He was my Alpha and the wolf inside of me respected his role. Without speaking a word, I was well aware of his order. Do not interfere in Aren's big day.

His silent admonition resonated with my wolf and the surge of aggression that hit me the moment I opened the door receded a little bit. I could breathe. It was better than making a scene and decking the shit out of Jason.

I followed behind Adam and Sasha at a distance, trying not to draw attention to myself. Seeing Aren's face light up when his bride walked through the French doors onto the deck made me glad I came. I'd never seen him so happy. In that moment, I realized that while I'd been so blinded by my bitterness over him and Adam choosing jaguars for mates, I hadn't noticed the changes in either of them.

Lana and Sasha brought out the best in Adam and Aren, an inner strength and peace I'd never realized they were lacking. Maybe it was all part of maturing from single guys to married men. Hell, Adam was a father now.

I took a chair in the back row of the ceremony. The same minister who married Adam stood before Aren and Sasha, reminding them of the sanctity of their union and helping them with their vows, but my gaze was fixed on the maid of honor.

Nadya had her hair up in some kind of sleek knot or bun, or whatever it was. One stray, silky lock of her dark hair trailed down her long slender neck, enticing me to reach out and touch her skin. Her dress was simple in the same style as her sister's wedding dress. The deep rich green fabric caressed her

curves without being tight. I'd never seen her look more beautiful.

She didn't appear to be pale or sick. Maybe my dream had been just that, a dream. Relief loosened my shoulders and I relaxed back in my chair and did my best to calm the wolf inside me. It didn't understand why we weren't walking down that aisle and claiming what was ours.

I had no clue how to explain that our mate may not welcome us with open arms.

She handed her sister a ring and whispered, "I love you."

Even though it was meant for Sasha alone, no one in the Pack could have missed it. Secrets were hard to keep in a family of werewolves.

Hearing her voice made my heart race. How had I walked away from her? And I hadn't walked. Hell no, I ran for the hills, all the way to Colorado. I glanced at my shoes, shaking my head. I didn't deserve a second chance.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Aren dipped Sasha, enjoying a long, slow kiss before righting his bride and turning toward all of us. His eyes met mine and I froze, but instead of judgment, he smiled, tipping his head in my direction. I nodded in return, standing with the rest of the wedding party.

Nadya turned around slowly and all the air blew out of my lungs. Our gazes locked and her cheeks paled. Aren and Sasha made their way down the center aisle, and Jason blocked my view of Nadya as he came over to take her arm. Her eyes never left mine as they walked toward me. My hands balled into fists at my sides. Struggling to keep my aggressive wolf in check, I followed them back into the house.

Once we were inside, I stopped Jason. "Could I get a minute with Nadya?"

"Nice of you to show up." Jason didn't release her arm. "Don't you think you've hurt her enough?"

Adam chose that moment to step up beside me. Having my Alpha at my side was the only thing keeping me from clocking Jason.

“Good to see you, Gareth.” Adam clasped my forearms and glanced at Jason. “Aren was hoping you’d make it back in time for the ceremony.”

Jason leaned closer to Nadya. “Want to get out of here?”

Her beautiful eyes stayed on me as she shook her head. “No. I’m fine.” She shifted her gaze to the doctor on her arm as she slid her hand free. “Thank you.”

A muscle jumped in Jason’s cheek and his eyes narrowed in my direction. “If you care about anyone other than yourself, don’t do this.” Jason’s voice became a growl. “Leave her alone.”

Adam tensed beside me, but Nadya took a step forward, snapping the tension and bringing all the focus on her. “I’ve got a few things I’d like to say to Gareth. Would you excuse us?”

Adam nodded and grabbed Jason’s elbow as he turned to walk away. “Come on, Jason, let’s go congratulate the groom.”

Jason didn’t look happy, but he went with Adam. Nadya’s eyes brimmed with tears. My gut twisted. I opened my mouth, but she shook her head and took my hand, sending heat coursing through my body. The effect she had on me made the earth shift under my feet.

“Outside.” She went to the French doors and I followed. “Close the doors.”

I wasn’t used to taking orders, but I complied. Anything to ease the pain that lined her features. She went to the railing and walked to the opposite end of the deck, away from the wedding arch and the corner where Logan’s band would play.

When she stopped and turned toward me, the last remaining light of dusk shone on her face, robbing her skin of color, reminding me that her light was dimming as well. “Jason hasn’t cured me. I had another attack.”

*Shit.* The dream had been real. “I’m sorry. I should’ve been here.” I wasn’t ready to try to explain that I might’ve been with her in a dream state. For now it still felt nuts. “I missed you.”

She shook her head, swiping a tear before it could fall. "I'm still dying."

Hearing her say the words hurt. I ground my teeth to keep hold of my emotions as I reached up to cup her cheek. Her skin was soft under my rough fingers.

"We all are." I cleared my throat to find my voice again. "You deserve so much better than me, but if you'll give me the chance, I want to be worthy of being called your mate."

"You kissed me and something woke up that I've never felt before." Another tear rolled from the corner of her eye. I caught it with the pad of my thumb. "The wolf inside me saw you, recognized you, and on some weird level we would have done anything to protect you. But you walked out the door and left the state of Nevada." Her voice wobbled. "The rational part of me gets why, but the wolf can't understand how you didn't feel the connection. How could you walk out that door?"

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done." I took both her hands in mine, my heart ripping in two. "And it was the biggest mistake I've ever made. This had nothing to do with you. I was surprised and angry." My eyes started burning. "I wanted to prove to the universe that it couldn't hurt me anymore because I wasn't going to feel anymore. It doesn't make it right. I'm a selfish asshole, and I wouldn't blame you if you decide to kick me to the curb, but I'm standing here, praying you'll give me one more chance."

My vision blurred. I reached up, wiping my eyes. "I don't care if we only have a few days together, I want to spend every second by your side. I want to memorize every curve of your face, and I want to see you smile and kiss that dimple in your cheek."

She sobbed and laughed all at once, revealing the sexy dent I'd mentioned. I couldn't resist. My lips caressed her skin and she turned, her mouth meeting mine, kissing me with a tenderness that nearly brought me to my knees. I embraced her, pressing her body tightly against mine. Her tongue twined

slowly, seducing me until my pulse raced with desire.

I broke the kiss, resting my forehead to hers. “I’m a moody bastard and I’ll fight with every ounce of spirit I have to keep you here with me. But whatever time we get, I give you my word, I will *never* leave you again. Never.”

“These wolf instincts are a crazy thing.” She brushed her lips to mine again. I could kiss her for hours and still want more. “I’m not giving up without a fight, but there are no guarantees I’ll beat this. If my days are numbered, I plan on living them to the fullest. I don’t want to waste any time on a broken heart. If I let you in, there’s no walking out that door again.”

I stared into the lush green of her eyes and wondered how much of this connection actually was the wolf instincts. Before I kissed her and discovered she was my mate, the attraction had already been there. It grew in spite of my efforts to keep my distance. I enjoyed her company. And as much as it would tear me apart to see her fade away, if it came to that, I’d dig deep and hold her hand until her last breath.

I cupped her cheek, my lips almost touching hers. “Sweetheart, I’m not going anywhere.”

# Chapter Fifteen

NADYA

My head spun like I'd been zapped on an electric fence. Gareth was really here, offering to stand by me whatever the future might hold. I would've pinched myself to be sure I wasn't dreaming, but that would require taking a hand off of him and right now nothing could pull me away.

Except small children.

"Gareff!" Madeleine squealed seconds before she clamped onto his calf. Her twin brother claimed the other leg and I had to take a step back before we all toppled over.

Adam and Lana's babies had already started walking and talking and they hadn't quite reached their first birthday yet. I had no idea if this was a normal side effect of being born a shifter, or if they were just precocious, but it made them a handful to keep up with.

The corner of Gareth's mouth curved up as he mussed their hair and scooped one up in each arm. He lifted them to his eye level. "Who told you two you could grow while I was gone?"

Malcolm patted his hand on Gareth's chest. "No bye-bye."

His dark eyes met mine and my pulse throbbed. "I'm home for good." His gaze shifted to the little boy perched in the crook of his arm. "No more bye-bye."

Malcolm's face lit up. "No bye-bye!"

He wriggled around and Gareth finally set his feet on the ground. My heart flipped in my chest. Seeing this big, gruff, Harley-riding, tattooed man all dressed up in a tuxedo and entertaining little ones made my knees weak. He

was mine.

Or would be. I wanted him to be.

I wanted him.

Malcolm patted my leg. “Up, Ya, up!”

He and his sister had shortened my name to Ya. I answered to it, wrapped tight around their fingers. I picked him up. “Have a kiss for me?”

He grinned and rubbed his face back and forth, our noses brushing until he squealed. After a bout of giggles, I set him down and a dark shadow blew through me. Would I be here to celebrate their first birthday?

I tamped the thought down, reassuring myself that Dr. Granger’s serum had worked. I’d slept for hours for the first time since I’d been bitten. Tomorrow I’d get my next injection. We were fighting this.

Gareth took my hand, breaking me free of my thoughts. He still held Madeleine up in his arm. He kissed her forehead, and she stared at him with dark doe eyes, so much like her mother’s.

She reached up to touch his cheek. “Gareff.” Bringing her other hand up, she pressed both sides of his face, pulling him close to her until they were nose to nose. “Be good.”

He smiled, and in that moment I caught a rare, unguarded glimpse of him. The real Gareth he fought so desperately to protect.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She grinned and planted a wet kiss on his cheek before she started kicking her feet. “Down!”

Gareth lowered her until her black Mary Jane’s were steady on the deck. He watched her vanish through the door before he pulled me close again. I stared into his eyes, bewildered and grateful that the wolf inside me had chosen him to be our mate.

“Is something wrong?”

I shook my head. “No.” Rising up on my toes, I kissed him. “Everything is just right.”

He slid his hand into the back of my hair and I hummed into his mouth, parting my lips as our tongues swirled slowly together.

“Ummm...” My sister cleared her throat. “There you are.”

I sighed, breaking the kiss. I wanted much more. We needed to get home.

“Sorry.” She came closer. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Heat bloomed in my face, but Gareth’s rough hand distracted me, sliding

down my arm until his fingers entwined with mine.

“Is everything okay?” I glanced inside the cabin. “Need any help?”

Sasha was focused on Gareth, but I didn’t sense the anger I was expecting. And he wasn’t giving off any defensiveness, either. *Interesting.*

“I’m glad you made it today.”

Gareth nodded. “Me, too.”

Her gaze shifted toward me. “Logan’s band photographer came early to snap some wedding photos. Can I borrow you for a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Gareth squeezed my hand and slid his fingers free of mine. I looked at him over my shoulder as I walked away. “I’ll be right back.”

He nodded and turned toward the lake. His loneliness, the ache for his lost family slammed into me for a moment before he bottled up his emotions again. My hand trembled and I struggled to keep from running to his side. This was my sister’s day. Gareth would be all right. He gave me his word he wasn’t going anywhere.

The trick would be getting myself to believe it.

After all the pictures were finished, Logan’s band started playing, wrapping everyone in a cocoon of sound. I wandered onto the deck and my pulse raced. Gareth was gone. I tried not to spin around in panic. The wolf inside me pushed forward, reminding me I had new tools at my disposal if I stayed calm and focused. Pulling in a slow breath, I realized Gareth’s scent still lingered, a single strand within a tapestry of others, family, friends, food, cake.

Gradually my heartbeat slowed. I couldn’t see him yet, but he was here. Somewhere.

I leaned on the railing of the deck overlooking the lake. The final moments of sunset ignited the sky with orange and red behind the mountaintop. Strong arms rested beside mine and I smiled before glancing his way. “There you are.”

Gareth handed me a flute of champagne. “Just getting ready for the toast.”

I took the glass, hating myself for doubting him. While my wolf seemed anxious to bond and claim her mate, apparently trust was coming slower for the rest of me.

“Thank you.”

He started to reply when Adam’s voice came through the speakers. “Can I get everyone out on the deck for the toast?”

The rest of the Pack joined us while Logan’s bandmates stepped back from the microphones. Jared wandered out with his parents, elders in the Pack. Wyatt held hands with his beautiful silver-haired wife, Sarah. He raised his glass in my direction and I smiled in response.

Jason followed them out, but crossed the deck and stood on my other side, his aggression, bitterness, and pain making the hairs on my arm rise on end.

Gareth’s emotions remained sealed from me, although the heat from his hand at the small of my back almost burned my skin right through the fabric. His fingers splayed, pulling me a little closer to him. I didn’t need to be empathic to know he wasn’t happy about having Jason standing so close to me.

I kept my attention on Adam, wishing I could send him a mental transmission to make his toast fast.

He lifted his glass toward Aren and Sasha and smiled. “Here’s to my baby brother.” A chuckle echoed through the crowd and Aren rolled his eyes. Adam wasn’t quite an hour older than his brother. “Congratulations on finding your mate.” He tipped his head toward my sister. “And to the bride, take care of him even when he’s too hard-headed to let you.” More laughter swelled as he held the glass a little higher. “Sasha Sloan, welcome to the family.”

My sister practically beamed as she hooked her arm with Aren’s and they each sipped their champagne. I clinked my glass against Gareth’s and before

I could take a sip, Jason's glass toasted mine.

He leaned in close. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

*Oh crap.* I took a sip, glancing his way. His bright hazel eyes were locked on mine. My heart sank. I'd been with the Pack long enough to know the aggression of the wolves was never far from the surface, and it didn't take much to stir them up. But deep down they were family. They'd risk their lives for their Pack brother.

Right now I'd settle for not punching each other.

"Okay. Meet me in the kitchen."

Jason nodded and walked away without sparing a glance at Gareth as he passed by. I felt Gareth's stare before I even met his eyes. He'd heard Jason and me. We'd kept our voices down, but it didn't do much good in a roomful of werewolves.

"I'll be right back."

He caught my hand. "I'll go with you."

"You know that's a bad idea." I shook my head. "I can handle this. He probably just wants to tell me what time to come into the office for another dose of the serum we're trying."

"Serum?" He raised a brow. "Jason found something to help?"

"Sort of." I gave his hand a squeeze and tried to let go, but he didn't release me. "I'll explain everything, but right now, he's hurt and seeing us together isn't going to make it any easier."

"It's also not going to go away, so he'd better get used to it."

I rolled my eyes. "While you ran to another state, that man in there has been helping me. I owe him and I'm not about to walk into that kitchen and hurt him on purpose."

A flash of pain washed over his features for a second. Gareth loosened his hold on my hand. "If I could take back the past week, I would."

"I know." Did I? One problem at a time.

I walked away from Gareth and into the cabin. The kitchen was to the right, and like everything else in here, it was much bigger than the word “cabin” suggested. All the appliances were professional grade stainless steel, and the countertops were solid granite. Jason leaned against the stove, arms crossed, jaw tight.

“Jason, I—”

He held up his hand. “I didn’t ask you in here to try to talk sense into you about your relationship choices.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he went on before I could make a sound.

“My office is usually closed on Sundays, so I can open up and have Dr. Granger in any time. When is good for you?”

“Maybe afternoon?” The tension around him choked me. “Jason I’m sorry. I wish... I know there is someone out there for you.”

His eyes narrowed, his practiced bedside manner slipping. “If he hurts you, I’ll kick his ass until he *wishes* I’d kill him. Tell him that.” He pushed off the stove, straightening to his full height. “Be at my office at three.”

He walked past me without another word. I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding and went to the sink. As I filled a glass with water, I caught Gareth’s scent.

“Are you all right?”

I took a sip and nodded without turning around. “Yeah.”

He came up beside me. “I saw Jason leave.”

I set the glass in the sink and met his eyes. “He deserves better than all this.”

He tensed. “What are you saying?”

Jealousy. Wariness. And then it was gone.

“I’m saying he’s done nothing but help me, and care about me, and he wants more, but I don’t have anything to give. What I feel when I’m with you, that’s what he deserves, but he doesn’t believe it exists.”

“He still thinks you could be his mate.”

“Probably.” I shrugged. “It doesn’t change the fact that I’m not, and I never

will be.”

“But you wish you were.”

My jaw went slack. “What? No.”

He turned toward the sink, gripping the granite so tight I worried his biceps might split the seams in his sleeves. “If you could take your wolf out of the equation, you’d rather be with him.”

“Taking my wolf out of the equation isn’t an option.” I put my hand over his and that bond seemed to tighten with every touch, pulling me closer to him. “And even if it were, before I was bitten, I used to look forward to your visits to Adam’s ranch. And before you kissed me, before my wolf recognized yours, you were the one I wanted to be with.”

He stared into my eyes and I struggled to read his emotions. I wasn’t used to being so “blind” with someone. He ran the back of his fingers down my cheek.

“It wasn’t instinct that brought me back. Usually I’m a loner, but I like having you around.” He took a breath, his voice lowering. “I’m trying to let down my guard and let you in even though it scares the shit out of me.”

“I’d like that.” I kissed his fingers. “You letting me in your heart, not that it scares the shit out of you.”

Gareth laughed, the deep sound like a balm to all the emotional wounds I’d suffered when he walked away. He shook his head slowly. “I’m such an ass. I was so busy being pissed at fate that I almost missed the amazing gift I’d been given.” He bent to kiss my lips and whispered, “I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I’m going to do my best to make sure you never regret it.”

I took his hand. “How about starting with a dance?”

## Chapter Sixteen

GARETH

I led Nadya through the cabin and out to the deck. Logan gripped the mic, singing one of his original songs, “Madness in the Moonlight,” one of his slower tempo tunes with a melody line that reached inside your chest to tug your heart. He sang about staring at the moon, wondering if she’s looking at the same moon, and doubting he’ll ever find her.

Somehow I had and I hadn’t even been trying.

Nadya laced her fingers behind my neck as I slid my hands around her waist. Holding her in my arms, her body pressed against mine, made me wish we were alone. I didn’t want to share her. Our time was precious. If I paid attention, I could almost hear that damned clock ticking, reminding me our days together were limited.

I stared into her eyes, doing my best to stay in the moment and not think about the future. She smiled up at me and pulled me closer until my forehead rested against hers. Her scent, like lavender and fresh rain, intoxicated me.

“You are so damned beautiful, Nadya.”

She rubbed her nose slowly along mine. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

The woman had a knack for making me smile. “I clean up pretty well, huh?”

“I don’t know...” She shrugged her shoulders a little. “I think you’re pretty hot when you’re working in the garage with grease on your hands, too.”

I held her tighter, her hips moving slowly with mine. No doubt she could feel the effect she had on me, but instead of distancing herself she tilted her head and kissed me. Her lips were soft, warm and inviting. The wolf inside of me stirred, adding to the urgency to claim much more than a kiss.

I caught her lower lip with my teeth and the sound of her moan nearly undid me. Shit, I'd never wanted a woman this bad in my life. "Wish we were alone."

She nodded, breaking the kiss. Her heavy lids lifted, and her bedroom eyes sent another powerful jolt of lust through my body. "Me, too."

I scanned the crowd. "Think they'd miss us?"

"We already took the pictures of the wedding party."

"There'd be more cake for everyone else..."

Her lips curved into a sensual, tempting smile. "Did you bring me a helmet?"

"I did... Just in case."

She glanced down at her dress. "Should I change?"

"No time." The slit reached to her upper thigh, so she wouldn't have any trouble straddling the bike. The image of her straddling me flashed through my mind.

I took her hand. "We need to go. Now."

She gave it a squeeze. "Let me tell Sash good-bye."

I followed her over to Mr. and Mrs. Sloan. Standing close behind her, I let go of her hand and made a quick adjustment to my raging erection.

She embraced Sasha and I went over to clasp Aren's forearms. "Congratulations."

He smiled and tugged me in for a tight hug. "I'm glad you came tonight."

"Me, too." I pulled back and glanced toward Nadya.

Aren nudged my shoulder, and I shifted my attention back to him. "You stickin' around for a while or heading to Colorado?"

“I’m not going anywhere.” Until that moment it hadn’t seemed real, but here I was. I’d stay with Nadya. Come what may.

She came over and hugged Aren, leaving me standing with her sister. Sasha and I stared at each other. She used to work for Nero, a jaguar shifter like the killer who murdered my brother. She’d abducted Aren and tried to attack Adam all in an effort to steal Lana and bring her to the Nero headquarters to be studied.

How did Aren forgive that? I wasn’t sure I could.

But without Sasha, I never would have met Nadya. Maybe I could keep that in mind.

Sasha extended her hand. “Thanks for coming.”

I shook it with a firm grip and nodded. “Congratulations.”

She didn’t let go of my hand. “I know we haven’t gotten along, but my sister isn’t one to toss her heart around. I trust her judgment, so I’m trusting you.”

I rolled my shoulders back, ready to tell her I didn’t give a shit if she trusted me or not, when Nadya turned toward me. Her smile disarmed me, and seeing the way she looked at her sister reminded me they were family, their own tiny Pack. If I rejected Sasha, in a way, I’d be rejecting part of my mate. Part of her heart would always belong to her sister.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I tugged Sasha’s hand and hugged her. Her body stiffened for a second, and I questioned my judgment, but gradually her arms wrapped around me.

“Welcome to the Pack.”

She stepped back, staring up at me with a stunned expression that gave way to a genuine smile. Moving to Aren’s side, she glanced at both of us and took a breath. “You take good care of my sister.”

“Absolutely.”

Nadya embraced her sister once more and grabbed my hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

I didn’t waste any time heading for the front door. Nodding my good-bye to Adam and Lana, we slipped out the door. As we neared the Harley, Nadya moved between me and the bike and rose on her toes to kiss me. I wrapped an

arm around her, pulling her in tight against me. Passion like I'd never known before sent my pulse into overdrive. If I didn't get a grip, I'd take her right here in the driveway.

I broke the kiss, my voice more of a growl than a whisper. "Let's get someplace private."

"Okay." She nodded, chest heaving. "Let's get there fast."

I reached around her to hand her the helmet. She stared at the giant globe for a second before she took it from me. "This puts too much distance between us."

Knowing my mate wanted me... Shit, I felt like a goddamned god. I grabbed my helmet and flashed her a smile. "Trust me, if you could get close enough to put those lips on my neck while I'm riding, I'd kill us both."

Her mouth curved into a sensual, playful grin. "Guess I'd better put this helmet on then."

She pulled it over her head, and I got on the Harley. I waited while she hiked up her dress and her shapely tanned leg slid around behind me. I shifted my hips forward on the seat, giving me a little more room for the hard-as-nails erection she inspired.

I didn't notice I'd forgotten to put on my leather riding gloves until I reached back to pat her thigh to be sure she was ready before I started the engine. Her bare thigh. I ran my hand up her smooth skin.

She leaned in closer to me, her hands sliding up my chest. Although the helmet kept her lips from making contact with my skin, I had no trouble hearing her voice. "How fast can we get back to your place?"

*Not fast enough.*

I fired up the engine and rolled out to the street. Luckily the Mt. Rose highway wasn't too busy. I rounded a couple of curves faster than I should have, but Nadya didn't seem to notice. Her body leaned into the turns with mine like we were one. My pulse throbbed below my belt. Good thing I could make the drive home without thinking, because at the moment all my decisions weren't being made by the head above my shoulders.

Once we were down the mountain and heading toward Reno, I released one hand from the grip and reached back to touch the cool skin of her thigh. Even with the wind on my face and blowing past my ears, I heard the moan deep in her throat. Having the hearing of a werewolf didn't suck. I tightened my hold on her leg, wishing like hell my arm was longer so I could slide my hand

even higher.

Suddenly her cool fingers brushed the skin on my abdomen. My grip tensed on the one handlebar. She freed another button on my tux shirt and slid her whole hand inside.

My entire body ignited with desire.

I released her leg, putting both hands on the grips, and gave the Harley more gas. We needed to be back at my place. Now.

By the time I rolled into the garage, Nadya's nimble fingers had my shirt untucked and completely unbuttoned. The only casualty of the night was my bow tie. I could buy another one.

As the big door closed behind us, Nadya dropped her helmet to the ground, her lips teasing my earlobe as her hands explored my bare chest. I pulled off my half-bucket helmet, tossing it aside as I twisted to kiss her. She opened her mouth, welcoming my exploration as my tongue found hers. I growled at the spicy taste of her.

She hooked her leg over my thigh, and I ran my hand higher, under her skirt. Her fingers wandered lower, stroking me right through my pants. I rocked my hips forward, groaning into the kiss.

Enough with having her behind me.

Planting my feet on either side of the Harley, I was grateful for the added werewolf strength in my legs. I kept the heavy bike steady between my thighs as I grabbed her knee, moving her leg around my waist before I reached back to her hip and shifted her all the way around until she was facing me. Nadya sat on the flathead tank of the bike, in front of me, her long legs tight around me, dress hiked up to her waist.

Oh yeah, this was much better.

Holding her tight, I deepened the kiss, my tongue demanding hers. Nadya stopped stroking me just long enough to unfasten and unzip my pants. She reached inside, her soft hands freeing me of the confines of the fabric.

I growled against her lips. "Better slow down or I'll take you right here on the bike."

# Chapter Seventeen

NADYA

Heat coiled low in my body at the sound of his deep gravelly voice near my ear. As I stroked my fingers along his erection, he responded instantly, pressing closer, pulsing against my hand. He wanted me just as urgently as I wanted him. This passion, this raw desire, was something I'd never experienced before. I didn't recognize myself.

And I didn't care. Right now, I felt powerful, sexy, alive. So alive.

Before I realized what I was going to say, I caught his lower lip in my teeth and whispered against his mouth. "I hope that's a promise."

Gareth kissed me. Hard. He slid his rough hands up slow and firm from my hips to my breasts, kneading them through the fabric. I freed my arms from the spaghetti straps of my dress and he pushed it lower, his lips trailing down my neck.

I wished I had the power to make our clothes vanish. Right now I needed to feel his skin on mine, our bodies united. His teeth skimmed over my collarbone as he reached around me to unclasp my strapless bra. He tossed it aside, his large hands caressing my newly bared skin, his thumbs teasing my nipples until I cried out.

His hips rocked toward me as I stroked him. Underneath us, the Harley tilted slightly, but his strong legs steadied us and kept the bike from toppling over. Never in my life had I even contemplated making love on a motorcycle,

but there was no way Gareth would let me fall. I understood this on a primal level. He would keep me from harm, protect me... No matter how much I distracted and pleased him.

He pulled gently at the sensitive tip of my breast with his lips, soothing and teasing all at once. I reached behind to brace myself on the handlebars, my back arching toward him, offering myself as I watched his mouth on my skin, his tongue circling my nipple. He moved his other hand lower, pushing the bottom of my dress up. Moving his fingers up the soft skin of my inner thigh, he rubbed and teased me through the thin fabric of my thong underwear.

“I need you,” I gasped. “Now.”

He ripped my thong like it'd been made of tissue paper, and slid his fingers deep inside of me. His growl made me shiver with desire as he discovered just how ready I was for him. I gripped the handlebars tighter and leaned back a little, breaking the kiss as I stared into his eyes. Gareth took hold of my hips and pulled me closer, guiding me onto him. Every rock hard inch slid into me so slowly, my entire body shuddered with pleasure.

He reached forward, taking my hands from the grips and putting them around his neck. Nose to nose, his dark eyes locked on mine as he thrust deeper inside of me. “You're mine. I'm yours.”

I wasn't sure what was happening, but my wolf came alive in my soul and I whispered, “I claim my mate.”

Gareth held me even tighter, kissing me with a passion I didn't understand, but at the same time hungered for. Keeping the bike level meant we had to move slowly and savor the union of our bodies. I fought the urge to rock my hips faster. Oh but I wanted to. He filled me so completely I ached, but falling over on the Harley would be a huge mood breaker. I tightened my fists in his hair as he stoked the passion brewing inside me. He brought one hand between us, his finger teasing me until I broke the kiss and called out his name.

His lips caressed my ear as he growled, “You’re mine, Nadya. Come for me.”

My hands came out of his thick hair, and I dug my fingernails into his shoulders, bracing myself as my inner muscles throbbed. His hips rocked into me one last time, just as my entire body shuddered in his arms. The aftershocks of my orgasm pulsed around him until he finally erupted deep inside me, holding me so tight he could’ve cracked a rib.

And I didn’t care. I couldn’t get close enough to him. Gareth. My mate.

I struggled to catch my breath, clinging to him. I wasn’t sure how much of the off-the-chart desire had been me, and how much had been werewolf instinct, but whatever it had been, I had just had sex on a Harley. Really amazing, mind-blowing sex.

Gareth smoothed the back of my hair. “I never want to move, but I don’t think I can keep us upright much longer.”

I lifted my head, legs still tight around his waist. “Okay. How can I get untangled without taking us both down?”

“You’re not going anywhere. Just hold on to me.” He held me with one arm at my waist while he tipped the bike and nudged the kickstand down. Carefully he let the eight-hundred-pound motorcycle settle onto the stand before he leaned forward and slid his other leg over the seat.

“Do you need me to walk?” I clung to him, knowing his legs had to be tired.

“Not yet.” He carried me deeper into his shop to his studio apartment in the back.

He laid me on the bed, our bodies finally separating. Gareth kicked off his pants and got in beside me. I stared at him, trying to memorize every angle of his face. “I’ve never...”

He ran his finger along my jawline. “Me neither.”

We hadn’t used a condom. I wasn’t sure why that popped in my head right

at that moment, but I decided it didn't matter. At this point, I probably wouldn't live long enough to get pregnant. But I needed to live.

For him.

Gareth stared into my eyes, and my heart hurt.

"I'm going with you tomorrow."

I blinked, struggling to follow. "Tomorrow?"

He nodded. "To Jason's."

My stomach clenched. Nero had killed his brother. He wouldn't be thrilled to hear Jason had brought in a scientist who genetically engineered the wolf who bit me.

Keeping this secret from my sister was hard enough. Could I keep it from my mate?

Sensing my hesitation, he brushed a kiss to my forehead. "You're a warrior fighting this thing, but you're not alone. Not anymore. We'll be stronger together."

"It'll upset Jason."

"He'll get over it. Someday he'll find his mate and he'll understand."

"But he hasn't found her yet."

"Not my problem." He shook his head. "If it will make you uncomfortable to have me there then I'll wait outside..."

Here was my chance to keep Dr. Granger a secret, but if I agreed I'd be lying. Not just withholding the truth, but outright lying. Because having Gareth with me when Dr. Granger injected the serum would be a huge comfort.

Gareth rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling. "You don't want me in the room with you."

"That's not it." I ran my hand up his chest, watching my fingers slide over his tan skin. "It's the serum. I can't let Adam find out or I won't be able to get it anymore."

The muscles on his chest tightened. "You think I'd say something to Adam?"

"He's the Alpha, and the fewer members of the Pack who know, the better."

He grabbed my wrist and removed my hand from his skin. “Let me explain this to you. The Pack is my family, but you’re my mate. I hold you above all else. Even the Pack.”

“You might not agree with my choice.”

“I still won’t go to Adam to settle it. This is between you and me.”

“And Jason.”

He growled and got up from the bed. “Damn it. You’re worried about hurting Jason? Seriously?”

Anger coiled in my belly. I sat up, my head throbbing and my nerves shot. “You know, twelve hours ago Jason was all I had.”

My words hit like I’d smacked him across the face with a two by four. Gareth stared at me with cold eyes. He turned for the door. “I need some space.”

I watched his broad shoulders as he walked out and into the garage. Half of me wanted to take my words back, and the other half wanted to scream. What was happening to me? My pulse raced, my fingers tingled. *Oh crap.*

My body was trying to shift again. Already.

I stood and the room tilted. Blinking hard, I took a step toward the bathroom, the surge of rage replaced with trepidation as I opened and closed my hand. Sweat slid down my spine. Maybe a cold shower would help.

Metallic tools clanked in the garage and the image of Gareth working on something in his unbuttoned tux shirt and nothing else filled my mind. If my knees hadn’t buckled, I might’ve smiled.

I hit the ground hard. Gareth’s scent filled my lungs before he knelt beside me. He helped me up from the floor and lifted me into his arms. Tremors wracked my hands, and I grit my teeth to bite back the pain in my joints. He sat on the edge of the bed, holding me close. I rested my head on his chest and realized he was humming something deep and low. I focused on the sound, forcing the fear and the flares of agony into the background.

Gareth took my hand, rubbing at the joints with a tenderness I never would have guessed he possessed. “Should I call Jason?”

I shook my head, staring at my steadied hands. “I’ll get another injection tomorrow. Hopefully that’ll slow this down.” I looked up so I could see his face. “Whatever you were singing, that helped.”

“My Mom used to hum it to me and Gabe when we were scared. It’s a wolf

song.” He swallowed and held me a little tighter. “Not sure if I was chanting it for you or for me.”

His fear and sadness seeped into me before he could bury the emotions. I laced my fingers with his. “I’m not going to give up.”

He sighed, his gaze distant. “I wish I could take this from you.”

I reached up, bringing his attention back to me. “I’m sorry about what I said. Whenever the change surges inside, so does this vicious temper I never knew I had.”

“But what you said... You were right. I should’ve been here, and if you don’t want me with you tomorrow I’ll deal with it.”

“I want you with me, but I don’t want to upset you.”

He frowned. “How will holding your hand while you get an injection upset me?”

I stared into his eyes, and my decision was made. Gareth was my mate. No secrets. “Because the man giving me the serum is a scientist from Nero.”

## Chapter Eighteen

GARETH

“Nero?” Was she insane? I ground my teeth together to keep from saying something I’d regret later. “Has Jason forgotten these are the same bastards that *created* the psycho who bit you? Damn it, Nadya, he could be making you worse. *This* is the secret you’re keeping from Adam?”

She nodded. “We know this is risky, but it’s my only hope. Dr. Granger has all the research from Nero. He knows how the DNA was modified. By the time Jason caught up with their research, I’d be...”

She didn’t finish. She didn’t have to. I set her beside me on the bed and stood up. Jason was lucky he wasn’t here right now. The urge to beat the shit out of him was overwhelming. “I can’t believe Jason talked you into this.”

“He didn’t. I agreed because I want to live and this is my best chance.” She stared up at me. “Since I was bitten, I haven’t been able to sleep, but after the first injection of Dr. Granger’s serum, I slept for four hours straight.”

“And when you woke up you almost attacked your sister and your hand started shifting.”

Her jaw went slack for a second. “How could you possibly know that?”

I didn’t understand it myself; how in the hell could I explain it to her? “Since I touched you, things have been changing inside of me.”

She got up and came closer to me. “I had a dream that you held me in your arms. Your scent surrounded me. You were really there with me. How?”

“I’m not sure.” I took her hand. “I dreamed about you, that you needed me, and then I was at your side. Chloe thinks it’s a gift, that I’m a Dream Walker.”

“And what do you think?”

I shrugged. "I don't know what to think, I'm just glad it helped you." I lifted her hand to my lips, kissing the back. "This doesn't change the fact that working with Nero is a bad idea."

She sighed. "Jason is keeping tabs on Dr. Granger, and the first injection did help me sleep."

"If he finds a way to cure you, what's in it for him? Nero has the manpower to send a jaguar assassin for him if they found out. He knows that."

"Jason's letting Dr. Granger keep my lab results. He'll be able to enhance his Nero research with them."

"Wouldn't it be better for his project to juice you up even more and see how long you live before the mutation affects your brain?"

She pondered my words and slowly shook her head. "He wouldn't dare. He's well aware Jason can and would kill him."

"Maybe so." Jason would be the least of that asshole's worries. "But Nero has the manpower to execute Dr. Granger's entire family."

"We don't know if he even has a family." She sighed and went back to the bed. "You don't like this. I understand why, but if we do nothing, I'd be surrendering to whatever poison is in my veins. I can't let it win. I won't."

She set her jaw, fire in her eyes, and I blew out my frustrations. This argument was over. If she believed the serum was helping, I'd need to prove otherwise, and right now, I wanted to believe she could be cured as much as she did. "I want to meet this guy."

Nadya reached behind her back to unzip her dress. "Jason and Dr. Granger won't be happy."

"They'll live." I sat down beside her and helped her with the zipper.

She slid the dress off and got under the sheets, while I took off my tux shirt and lay down beside her. I watched her index finger trace the barbed wire tattoo that wrapped around my bicep. "Was this to signify anything?"

"Not really." Even a gentle touch from her made my pulse jump. "I got it after I graduated high school. I was so pissed that my parents were gone. Thought I was badass."

She smiled and kissed my chest. "You just made love to me on a Harley. You are *totally* badass."

And just like that, she made me laugh. I rolled her under me, kissing her,

my body already hungry for hers. “I don’t want to miss a second with you.”

She hummed against my lips, teasing my back with her fingernails. “Sleep is highly overrated.”

• • •

I woke to the smell of bacon and an empty bed. My legs ached, the muscles screaming when I stood and reached for a pair of sweat pants. Memories of making love with Nadya all night filled my head. Holding her, seeing her smile, hearing her moan my name, everything about her called to me.

It almost drowned out the sound of the clock ticking her life away. Almost.

I wandered out toward my little kitchen and found her standing at the stove with her back to me, wearing my tux shirt and nothing else. In spite of my sore legs, another part of me was ready for more.

“Morning. Hope you don’t mind, but I found bacon and eggs in your fridge.”

I moved up behind her, sliding my arms around her waist as I kissed her neck. “Thanks for making breakfast.”

We put everything on my workbench and pulled up a couple of stools. I didn’t own a dining set. No company and no family, it seemed like a waste of space. She made bacon and eggs to feed a small army, which was just enough for the two of us and our werewolf appetites.

I finished another piece of bacon. “Did you sleep at all last night?”

She kept her gaze on her eggs. “A little, I think.”

“*I* only slept a little. *You* were already up and cooking breakfast.”

She sighed and raised her gaze. “I’m sure I’ll sleep like a log after I get another dose of the serum.”

I nodded, but I had my doubts. We cleaned up breakfast, grabbed showers, and got dressed for her appointment. It was all I could do to keep a lid on the conflicting emotions brewing in my gut. Nadya had enough to worry about without having to handle an assault of my feelings on top of it.

“We need to stop by my condo so I can change.”

She was still wearing her dress from the wedding, and the memory of

hiking it up reminded me I'd ripped her underwear off. There was nothing under that dress. Suddenly my jeans were tighter.

"We'd better get going then." I found her helmet on the floor a few feet from the Road King and scooped it up. "And we can pick up your things, too."

She didn't answer me. I turned around and she stared at me with her arms crossed. No sign of the dimple in her cheek, either.

"Last night didn't mean I'm moving in with you." She pressed her lips together, then added, "You didn't even bother to ask me."

"Will you move in with me?"

"No."

"No?" Her answer took a second to register. My mate just refused to move in with me. I rubbed my forehead like it might help her response make sense. "You're my mate. Last night we—"

"Had amazing sex. That doesn't entitle you to make life decisions for me."

"Last night was just sex?"

"Amazing sex," she corrected.

Holy shit. She used me. Maybe this was payback for me walking out on her. I had no fucking clue. I thought we'd had some sort of crazy spiritual connection, my wolf claimed her, she'd claimed me. Apparently I was wrong. The irony wasn't lost on me. I'd never been on this side of the bed. Damn, it sucked.

"Fine." I handed her the helmet. "I'm sorry I misunderstood."

I swung my leg over the seat and a dull ache pulled at my thigh. The memory of keeping the Harley from falling over while I slid into her filled my head. She got on behind me, her body pressing tight against my back.

She scooted up as close to my ear as the helmet would allow. "My wolf has made her choice, and she's got great taste, but for me, the human part of me, I need to know you better before I invade your space."

I digested her words and the hurt ebbed slightly as she slid her arms around my waist. She said no to moving in *right now*, but not forever.

I wished I had forever to spend with her. Maybe I should have said it out loud.

We stopped at her condo, and she changed into some worn blue jeans and a form-fitting red T-shirt. “Ready?”

I nodded and followed her back out to the Harley. The view was outstanding.

When we pulled into the parking lot of Jason’s medical building, I lowered the stand and turned off the bike. Nadya led the way. Most of the offices were closed. The lobby was unnaturally silent. Not helping me calm the agitated wolf that paced inside of me. Our mate was taking a huge chance, and instead of stopping her, we brought her here.

The elevator doors closed and her gaze finally met mine. “Are you sure you want to meet Dr. Granger?”

“Without a doubt.”

“All right.” She leaned on the railing, watching the red numbers change.

I watched her, wishing I was better at small talk. What could I say besides, *let’s get out of here, and I don’t want them touching you?*

“Have you ever been to Virginia City?” The ghost town was about forty minutes from downtown Reno. The opposite direction of Pyramid Lake, but the ride up the mountainside was one of my favorites.

Her attention shifted toward me. “No.”

“Are you free tonight?”

There was the dimple. “Yes.”

I crossed the elevator, closing the distance between us. She brought her hand up and touched my chest as I bent to kiss her. I kept my weight off of her, my hands pressed against the wall on either side of her head. She massaged across my shoulders, searching out all the stress in my muscles.

Her touch tempted me to hit the stop button on the elevator.

The doors opened behind us. *Too late.*

Taking her hand, we walked into Jason's office. The doctor frowned as we approached. "What is he doing here?"

Nadya jumped in before I got a chance. "Gareth is my mate. He knows what we're doing."

Jason's eyes narrowed. "I thought we agreed no one else would know."

"That was before I found my mate." Nadya stood firm and I smiled.

"This is a bad idea." Jason glared at me.

I raised a brow, daring him to make a move. "Not as bad as allowing a scientist from Nero to inject her with something."

Jason stepped up closer, chest out, hands fisted. "I'm trying to save her."

I let go of Nadya's hand and gave the doctor a nudge out of my face. "Bringing in the enemy isn't the way to do it."

"So are you a doctor now?"

Nadya moved between us. "Stop it. This is hard enough without getting slammed by all your anger and fear. Jason, I brought Gareth because I want him here, and Gareth, I trust Jason. He's doing the best he can to help me."

I walked to the window, fighting the urge to knock the smirk off Jason's face. Another set of footsteps caught my attention. I turned to find an older guy wearing a doctor's smock. He had gray hair, light eyes, and an aura of superiority.

"Is anyone going to introduce me to our guest?" He held out his hand, exposing a tattoo on the inside of his wrist. The lion's head with an "N" in the center. The same tattoo Nadya's sister had on the inside of her wrist.

Nero.

• • •

*From the Journal of Dr. M. Granger – Journal Entry 532*

The new formulation of the serum is complete. By my calculations, the subject will rest peacefully for four to six hours while her body metabolizes the higher dosage. The blood samples collected after her most recent injection

reveal the increased adrenaline levels we experienced during Operation Moonlight, but she has still resisted the shift. I am unaware if this is due to her body metabolizing the serum too quickly, or if her brain functions are more tolerant of the formula than the werewolf subjects had been due to her psychic abilities.

In order to study her further, I will encourage the subject to remain under my care so that I can monitor the progression. The data we compile here could change everything.

There is a risk. After our first injection, Wyatt Ayers, a subject from our original test group, recognized me. I am not certain how long I will be able to remain hidden from the Pack. I will escalate testing as necessary in order to gain the data we need before I'm forced out.

# Chapter Nineteen

NADYA

“Is anyone going to introduce me to our guest?”

The werewolf aggression coming from Gareth and Jason filled the room, suffocating me. I did my best to shield myself from their emotions and turned around. “Hi, Dr. Granger. This is my...”

Gareth met my eyes and for a second I wished I could read minds. Obviously, Dr. Granger had worked with werewolves before, but only males. Did he know they had mates? Would it matter?

He saved me from making that call. Crossing the room, he slid his arm around my waist, his hand resting on my hip. “I’m her boyfriend.”

Dr. Granger cocked his brow, his gaze flicking toward Jason. “Oh, I assumed Dr. Ayers...” He cleared his throat and wisely dropped the subject. Holding out his hand he asked, “Your name was?”

“I’m Gareth.”

He made no move to shake Dr. Granger’s extended hand. The doctor reached up for a pen from his pocket instead, his attention shifting toward me. “He understands the importance of keeping our treatments secret? My employer has been kind to allow me the time to assist in this situation, but with your Pack nearby, I’m also risking my own personal safety on behalf of Ms. Dalca.”

“Your *employer* is the reason Nadya is here in the first place, so spare me your self-righteous bullshit.” The doctor flinched as if Gareth’s words had reached out and smacked him. “You’re not making any sacrifices on Nadya’s behalf. Getting the chance to study someone who survived being bitten by

one of your juiced-up freaks is every Nero lab tech's wet dream."

I almost laughed. However, Jason and Dr. Granger didn't seem nearly as amused by Gareth's comments.

"Back off, Gareth." Jason took the blood pressure cuff off the wall and I sat down on the exam table. "If I had a better way to get her the appropriate treatment, believe me, I'd take it."

I hardly noticed the cuff squeezing my arm. All my attention was focused on Dr. Granger. Doctors were always tough for me to read. They had a well-practiced calm that often shielded their true feelings, but Gareth's verbal jabs had flustered him. For a moment, a flash of fear shot off Dr. Granger. He jotted notes on his tablet while Jason called out numbers, avoiding any chance of eye contact with me or Gareth.

What if Gareth was right? Could the doctor be pushing more poison in my veins, hoping I'd live longer than his soldiers did? Sounded like something straight out of a sci-fi movie. He was probably just afraid of my big boyfriend.

"Your temp is slightly elevated, but werewolves run a little hot sometimes, anyway. The rest of your vitals are within the normal range." He rolled his stool over and sat down in front of me. "Any nose bleeds or shifting episodes we should know about?"

Gareth's stare was heavy on my shoulders. If I didn't tell them, he would.

"My hands started shifting again last night." I circled my fingers at the top of my head like an invisible laurel wreath. "It felt like something was crushing my skull all the way around until I collapsed."

Jason looked over his shoulder at Gareth. "You didn't call me? She could have died."

"She asked me not to call." Gareth's shoulders tensed. "We were coming in today anyway." His gaze met mine for a moment. Again I caught myself wishing I could read minds. He broke contact with me, focusing on Jason. "We stopped the shift. She felt better."

"You *stopped* it?" A crease marred Jason's brow. "How exactly did you do

that?”

I held my breath. Gareth’s native chant had reached into my soul, calling to the wolf, healing her. Magic that Jason wouldn’t believe any more than he believed in finding your one true mate.

Gareth shrugged. “We cooled her off with ice packs and the pain eased up.”

“Perhaps you should allow the shift to come.”

We all turned toward Dr. Granger.

Jason got up from his stool. “You can’t be serious.”

“On the contrary, I think it’s reasonable to postulate that the pain is related to her resistance to the shifting of her body. We won’t know unless she allows the change to happen.”

“You’re insane.” Gareth’s anger and fear flooded the tiny exam room. He blocked my view of the doctor, putting himself between me and Dr. Granger. “Jason and I were there that night, when your creature bit her. We watched his head change. That wasn’t a beautiful wolf. You made him into a monster. Every shift cost him and his mind paid the price. Not that anyone at Nero gave a shit.”

“He was no longer in our care. Maybe we could have helped him like we’re doing for Ms. Dalca.”

“He was useless to you. You knew if you juiced him up anymore, he’d die just like the others did.”

Dr. Granger peered around Gareth’s broad torso. “Ms. Dalca, did the last injection make you ill in any way?”

“No, but...”

“Were you able to sleep?”

“Yes, but...”

He nodded. “Then the serum is working. This is not a cure, it’s a treatment. Nothing is going to stop the new genetic makeup in your DNA, Ms. Dalca.”

Gareth turned toward Jason. “So, what’s the point? Why put her through this?”

Jason answered, but all his attention was on me. “Because if we can manage the mutated DNA, maybe we can keep her with us.”

Maybe I wouldn’t die. Close enough for me.

Dr. Granger moved around Gareth and pressed a cool alcohol swab to the muscle in my shoulder. “I believe we’re getting closer to a formulation that

would allow Ms. Dalca to avoid the hemorrhages we documented within the Lycan Squad.”

He jabbed the needle into my arm before Gareth could respond, pushing the plunger down and withdrawing the tip in one smooth movement. Dabbing the injection site with another alcohol pad, he nearly smiled. “Let me know if there are any new side effects, and consider what I suggested about allowing yourself to change.”

Fonthill’s misshapen wolf face with the body of a man flashed though my head. Yeah, there was no way I would welcome that.

Dr. Granger turned to Jason. “I need to see her again in three days. We can check her vitals and I’ll have another dose of the serum ready.”

“Is that really necessary?” Gareth stared at one doctor, and then the other. “Far as I can tell, neither one of you know if these shots are even helping her.”

Dr. Granger tightened his grip on the chart and his bedside manner slipped, allowing a bit of anger and frustration to escape. “I already explained, the fact she is alive at all, is proof it’s working. The mutated DNA should have killed her, but she survived. Our Lycan Squad test subjects were strong young werewolves and, in the end, their bodies couldn’t withstand the enhancements. Seeing that Ms. Dalca is still with us tells me the serum is helping her adjust.”

Jason pinned Gareth with a look and turned slowly toward Dr. Granger. “If you make any adjustments to the formula, I expect to see the chemical breakdown before her next visit.”

Dr. Granger nodded. “I’ll email everything.” He glanced at Gareth. “I can’t say it’s been a pleasure.” He reached for the door while he met my eyes. “Rest, Ms. Dalca. I think you’ll see a big change in the next few days.”

He left the room, but his words lingered.

Jason took a seat on his stool again, my medical chart on his lap. “I wish I had a better recommendation, but rest is probably best.”

I nodded, my gaze shifting toward Gareth. He stared at the door as it closed behind Dr. Granger, his muscles pulling at the thin material of his T-shirt, ready to take action at any sign of a threat.

But he’d never be able to protect me from the invisible enemy inside my

bloodstream. I wasn't going to fade away without a fight. With every last second I had, I intended to live fully with my mate, and before I left this earth, I wanted to love him and feel his love in return. Real love.

The mate bond between us was strong, passionate and instinctual, but if I had to leave him behind in the end, I didn't want Gareth to second-guess my true feelings. He came back to me the other night, knowing he'd be hurt in the end. Alone again.

And I wanted to protect him from that.

I met Jason's eyes. "I'll do whatever I have to if it'll give me more time."

He got up, chart in hand. "Keep me posted if you have another episode. If we can fine-tune the serum, we might be able to beat this thing."

Gareth caressed my back, easing tension I didn't realize had built up. "I'm all for that."

My eyes met his, and a rare wave of hope brushed my skin. Hope from Gareth. My chest tightened. If there was a way to survive this, I was going to find it.

## Chapter Twenty

GARETH

Although we'd planned to head up to Virginia City after the appointment with Jason, by the time we rolled into Nadya's condo, she was already lethargic. I helped her inside, doing my best to keep a lid on the panic brewing in my gut.

"I'll be fine," she mumbled. "Let me grab some clean clothes and my toothbrush for the trip."

I shook my head, lowering her to the bed. "You gotta sleep when you can. If you're tired now, just rest. We can ride up the mountain in the morning."

She stared up at me. "Will you stay with me?"

I ran the back of my fingers down her cheek. Even exhausted she was so beautiful I could hardly breathe. "No place I'd rather be."

"Good." A relieved smile curved her lips as her eyes drifted closed.

I sat on the other side of the bed and unlaced my boots. Pulling them off, I watched her chest slowly rise and fall. Moments like this, when the world was quiet, that goddamned clock ticked so loud I couldn't drown it out. The damned thing marked her every breath, the beat of her heart, until there was no escaping, no forgetting she was slipping through my fingers. I got up and pulled my hair back from my face. The urge to run pulsed inside me like a drug, tempting me to walk away, to escape the pain to come. If I didn't see her die, she could live forever as a bright memory.

Instead of being haunted by her final breath, I'd remember making love to her on the Harley.

At the door to her bedroom, I glanced back. She looked peaceful, sleeping.

Maybe the doctor was right and the serum was working. Maybe she'd be able to withstand the mutated DNA with the help of drugs.

*Damn it.* I couldn't sit here counting each breath or I'd drive myself batshit crazy.

I needed to talk to someone.

Now that was something I never thought I'd say. If I wasn't so fucking terrified I might've found it funny.

I pulled out my cell phone and stared at the touchscreen. Who would I call? Not Adam. I couldn't risk letting it slip that a scientist from Nero was helping Nadya. Aren was on his honeymoon with Sasha. I sure as hell wasn't going to call Jason.

Flipping around my contacts, I stopped on Chloe. It'd be some kind of miracle if I called her while her cell phone was actually on. I glanced through the door at Nadya and back at my phone. At this point, it was worth a try.

I pressed call. The phone rang. Unbelievable.

"Little Osa?"

I closed my eyes. "You had your phone on."

"You needed me."

"How could you possibly know that?" I leaned back against the couch.

"Do you forget my stories, or just refuse to believe them?"

I let out a half-hearted chuckle. "I remember them."

"Then you know our spirits are connected. Your mother asked me to watch over you and I will until I follow her up to the stars." She paused. "What's bothering you?"

"I'm trying to take your advice, to open up and let her in..." My voice cracked with emotion, surprising me for a second. "I'm not strong enough. She deserves so much better than me."

"You are with her." As impossible as it seemed, I could hear her smiling.

"I am." I nodded. "And I promised her I'd stay until the end." Clearing my throat, I clutched the phone tighter. "She's amazing, everything I'm not. She

makes me smile, laugh. I didn't think I'd ever feel this way. When I'm with her..." I struggled for words, my fingers tight on the bridge of my nose like I could pinch off the emotions. "I'm so damned scared. And I could love her, I know I could, and to lose her... I thought being without her was worse, but now I'm here and..."

I couldn't finish.

She took a deep breath on the other end of the line. "I wish I had a story to give you the answers you seek, but I don't."

"Then make me stronger." The honesty in my words shocked me. There was no way she could give me what I asked for, but it was exactly what I wanted.

"You have a deep well of courage and strength, Osa. Stop running and drink from it. Your life has prepared you for this path."

"I never asked for this path. What in the hell did I ever do to deserve this? What did she do? You call the creator wise; I call him a heartless bastard."

Chloe hissed at my outburst. "We cannot understand the reasons, but that does not mean they do not exist. Stop thinking about yourself, and think about her. Put her needs first in your heart. You want to be stronger? Then stop worrying about how much pain you will face when she *dies*, and start thinking about her and how you can make her *life* better. This isn't an easy task, but you must embrace the time you have."

"I'm trying." I punched my frustration into the sofa cushion. "She should have a partner as fearless as she is."

"Pshhhh." In my mind, I saw her dismissive wave in my direction. "You are a strong man. A good man. Stubborn as a mule, but worthy, Osa. Worthy. Fear makes you human." Her voice softened. "I love you. I will send up prayers for your woman."

"I love you, too. Thanks."

I slid my phone back in my pocket, mulling over the conversation. Stop thinking about the future. Focus on the present. Sounded great on paper, but

sitting here, alone, watching Nadya breathe made it tough to avoid hearing the clock ticking her life away.

After checking the locks on the doors, I went back into the bedroom and lay down beside her. She rolled over, snuggling in close to my chest. I kissed her hair, breathing her scent into my lungs. Put her first. She wanted to ride up to Virginia City in the morning. I needed to rest so I could get us there in one piece.

I closed my eyes, holding her close. Live in the present. Don't think about the future.

• • •

Nadya flinched, her body tight against me. Holding her close, I realized we were beside the Stone Mother. I scanned the area for my Harley, but the bike wasn't around. The rising sun tipped me off. This was a dream. Her dream.

"It's happening," she gasped.

Her jaw clenched, her features tight with pain. I reached for her hand but she recoiled from my touch.

"No. I'm a monster."

I shook my head. "You're no monster."

"Look again." She raised her hand, her fingers lengthening, her joints popping as the flesh darkened with fine hair. "I can't stop it."

"You can." The wolf chant started soft and grew from my lips as I opened my arms to her. She allowed me to embrace her. My song called to her wolf. Its spirit was strong, and confused to find itself stirring without the moon overhead. Had the rest of the wolves Nero "enhanced" experienced the same sensation?

I stared up at the Stone Mother, praying for a miracle to save my mate, praying I might be able to comfort her. I wasn't even sure the Stone Mother could help, but I was willing to try. My chant continued until my throat ached. Gradually, Nadya's body relaxed, her weight pressing against me.

"You did it."

I glanced down at her. "Did what?"

She lifted her hands. “The change stopped.”

“Good.” I kissed the back of each hand and tipped my head toward Pyramid Lake. “Why here?”

She looked around. “This is a dream, isn’t it?”

“I think so.”

“I remember wanting to be closer to you when I drifted off. This is where I ended up.”

I tipped her chin up. The dreamlike morning sun shone in her dark green eyes. “I want to be closer to you, too. I want to know everything. Did you have a place like this? Someplace you could escape to when you needed a break?”

She paused, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. “After I moved with Sasha, I found an old pepper tree. The branches reached all the way to the ground like walls. I pretended it was a cabin. I’d find rocks and crystals and build castles. I imagined my parents were inside.”

“I was raised believing that our loved ones leave their bodies and become spirit. They walk to the stars and watch over us.”

She rose up on her toes, and I swore her soft lips caressed mine. I held her tighter, sliding my hand down her back. She hummed, and I opened my eyes.

Nadya smiled, resting her forehead against mine. “Good morning.”

A quick glance at the clock grounded me back into the present. My throat still ached a little and my voice sounded strained. “Until the sun comes up, it’s still night in my book.”

“Five a.m. is definitely morning.” She grinned, no trace of the exhaustion that had weighed her down a few hours ago. “Can we still run up to Virginia City? I’d love to see it.”

“Think you’re up for a ride already?”

She rolled her eyes. “I slept almost eight hours. That hasn’t happened in weeks. The serum is working.”

I still wasn’t convinced. I kissed the dimple on her cheek and nuzzled close to her ear. “Do you remember your dream?”

She held me a little tighter. “You were with me. We were at Pyramid Lake.”

I pulled her back so I could see her face. “You started shifting.”

“But I stopped.”

“I chanted until I almost lost my voice.” I caressed her cheek. “We should

call Jason before we go.”

Nadya sighed. “We both know he can’t do anything for me and I can’t get another shot for two more days.” Her gaze searched mine. “Please, Gareth. Let’s go have an adventure. Sitting around thinking and worrying is going to make me crazy.”

Chloe’s words echoed in my head. *I would feel better having a doctor close by. But this was about Nadya. She wanted to ride and put the future out of her head. Who was I to deny her that?*

“Okay.” I nodded. “Let’s get out of here.”

• • •

*From the Journal of Dr. M. Granger – Journal Entry 535*

I administered the serum to Ms. Dalca at three p.m. The dosage of both the sedative and the adrenal enhancement were increased. I encouraged the subject to cease fighting the change. If she can shift her form without the help of the moon, we can move forward with phase two of the testing.

If she survives and reaches the second phase, her value to the project increases exponentially. I believe it would warrant Nero’s intervention to bring the subject to our labs for further testing. I have reported my findings directly to Mr. Severino, hoping he will support my decision to relocate the subject even if it requires bringing in a team from Nero to assist in relocating her to headquarters.

My time is running short in Reno. Ms. Dalca brought another werewolf Pack member to her last appointment, insisting he be present. If the Pack Alpha discovers me, I will need to return before my research is completed. I am prepared for this, but remain hopeful that I will see this project to its finish.

## Chapter Twenty-One

NADYA

I closed my eyes and pulled in a deep breath as the Harley roared up the mountain toward Virginia City. We had made a quick stop at Gareth's garage on our way so he could grab some clothes, and for a second, I worried he'd try to convince me to see Jason again, but he didn't.

He did leave a message for his realtor about delaying the sale of Takoda Motorcycle Restoration. I wanted to believe the serum was working and that between the injections and Gareth's dream walking, I'd escape the death sentence hanging over my head. But even if things didn't go my way, I hoped Gareth would keep his garage. The more I got to know him, the more I understood this business, the bikes—all of it was a part of him. He'd already lost so much of himself when his parents were killed, and then his twin brother.

This was his refuge, whether he knew it or not. If he gave it up, he'd be losing a piece of himself, too.

We crested the mountain and followed the windy road down the other side. Big pine trees dotted the landscape. It wasn't a dense forest like Mt. Rose and Lake Tahoe had been. This was sparse, more desert climate, but equally beautiful in its own right.

Finally the town came into view and Gareth slowed, calling to me over his shoulder. "I'll roll you through town, then you can tell me where you want to go first."

"Okay!" I shouted into the wind.

He downshifted the Harley, slowing us as we approached Virginia City. Just before the city limits we passed the Silver Terrace Cemeteries. I caught a glimpse of a hillside covered in lives remembered. Headstones, obelisks, and iron lace fences embellished the landscape. Usually I enjoyed visiting old cemeteries, but at the moment, seeing those headstones hit a little too close to home. I tightened my grip around Gareth's waist.

One hand came down to cover mine. He didn't consider himself psychic at all, but he sure seemed to sense when I needed him.

We rode down C Street in the center of town and I gawked at all the old buildings lining both sides of the road. The parked cars were the only proof we hadn't traveled back in time nearly two hundred years. Each new block we passed afforded us peeks at the ornate churches and even Piper's Opera House. Where would I start?

My head swam with choices, but a jolt of concern coming from Gareth yanked the world back into focus. He pulled into a tiny parking area behind a saloon and turned off the Harley.

I lifted my helmet. "What is it?"

Gareth's was already off. He stuffed his gloves inside, without ceasing his visual scan of our surroundings. "Do you smell it?"

"It?" I took a slow breath. I was still new to my enhanced werewolf senses, but if he noticed something, I should've been able to catch it, too.

"Yeah." He patted my leg, signaling me off the bike. After I slid off, he swung his leg over, still keeping watch. "The wind is swirling up here. I can't figure out which direction it's coming from, but we've got company."

"Someone from the Pack?" Dumb question. I would've noticed the scent of anyone from our Pack. But I wasn't sure... Then I smelled it. "A jaguar."

Identifying scents reminded me of recognizing voices. You usually noticed an accent first, then if you listened further, you could figure out if you recognized the tone of the voice. This "accent" was a similar scent to my sister Sasha, Lana, and little Madeleine. But when I studied it more, I realized it wasn't any of the three jaguars I knew.

Gareth took my hand, tension coming off of him in waves. For once, he wasn't bottling his emotions. His focus was elsewhere.

"Do we need to go back to Reno?" I was pretty sure I knew what his answer would be, and I didn't want to hear it. We just got here and there was so much to see. For the moment, I was even feeling good. The last thing I

wanted was to go home and wait to see if I'd survive the night.

He stopped scanning, his gaze meeting mine. "We should."

My heart sank.

"But there's only one scent here. So far. And I recognize it." A muscle in his cheek jumped and suddenly his emotions pulled back. Controlled.

"This is a jaguar you know?"

"I don't *know* him, but he helped Aren after you were bitten. I have no idea why he showed up that night, but I'd like to find out."

My pulse thrummed in anticipation. "You want to lure him closer?"

"No. Your safety comes first." He pulled his attention from the street to meet my eyes. "I should take you back."

"So you can come up here alone?" I shook my head, crossing my arms. "No way."

"I can take a jaguar."

That was probably exactly what his twin brother thought, but I kept it to myself and went for another angle.

"You can still take him, and I'll be your backup. No reason we need to go to Reno. Besides, you wouldn't leave me home alone, so you'd either lose this jaguar, or you'd have to drop me off at Jason's while you came back up here to find him."

He frowned and shook his head, staring up at the sky. "This could be the one who killed Gabe."

"Why would the jaguar who murdered your brother have helped Aren?"

His dark eyes met mine. "Did your sister tell you she worked for Nero?"

I nodded.

"This guy might be a friend of hers on the inside." He shrugged and took my hand. "He's been here more than once and no one in the Pack is talking. I want to know why."

He deserved that much. "Why is he following us?"

"He works for Nero just like Dr. Granger. I don't think that's a

coincidence.”

“Maybe they sent him to watch over their scientist, to be sure the Pack didn’t keep his research?”

“Could be.” He stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. “If we don’t go back to Reno, I need you to stay close, and no second-guessing my instructions. I can’t focus on him if I’m worried about you.”

I bristled, tightening my grip on him. “Sasha sent me to plenty of self-defense classes when I started college. I’m not a princess in a tower for you to protect.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, but he didn’t smile. Not quite. “I’m not saying you’re weak. Hell, you’re a werewolf now. But this guy is a trained assassin, and if he followed us up here, then you are probably his target. Nero wouldn’t kill you, but I wouldn’t put abduction out of the picture. They could take you and study you.” His shoulders tensed. “No way I’m going to let that happen.”

The strong set of his jaw said more than words could. They’d have to kill him to take me. My pulse pounded. “I won’t put myself in jeopardy.”

“You’ll run if I tell you to, and you won’t look back.”

I couldn’t agree to that, especially not if he was in danger. But his expression made it clear if I didn’t give him my word, we’d be riding back down that mountain to Reno.

“I’ll stay safe.”

“That wasn’t what I said.”

My hip jutted out, my hand resting on it. “I won’t agree to blindly following orders like you’re my lord and master. I still get a say, and you have my word I won’t take any risks with my safety.”

He tried to stare me down, but I stared right back. The heat of his frustration singed my empathic senses. But I wasn’t giving in on this one, and I wasn’t going to lie to him, either.

Life was too short for lies. Especially now.

He growled, and in two paces he had me in his arms. His lips claimed mine. Passion, fear, and frustration flavored his kiss with a gruff dominance that heated my body against his. When he pulled back, we were both breathless.

He demanded my attention as his gaze wandered over my face, searching—for what, I couldn't be sure. "I need to tell you something."

I hoped my rubbery legs would hold me up. I'd never been kissed so ferociously. I liked it. A lot. "Okay."

He hung his helmet on the handlebars and jammed his gloves in the saddlebag. I waited for him to speak, but I didn't need to be empathic to see his agitation. Finally he put his fists on the black leather seat of the Harley, leaning into it. His biceps pulled at the sleeves of his T-shirt, and the muscles in his forearms tensed. Every line of his body called to me. I wanted to be closer, tracing every inch of him with my fingers, my lips.

"I want you, too, but I need to get this out first."

I almost blushed when I realized he knew exactly what I was thinking. *Was I that obvious?* "All right."

I resisted apologizing for finding my mate sexy. *Go me.*

"I need you to understand where I'm coming from. It's my fault Gabe is dead. And if anything happens to you on my watch..." He ground his teeth. "I can't fail you, too."

I frowned. "You didn't kill Gabe. It wasn't your fault."

His pain made my temples ache. "Gabe and I patrolled for jaguars together. Always. It's safer with someone else watching your back. But that new moon night..." He shook his head and cleared his throat. "That night Gabe talked me into meeting a woman from his construction office."

Jealousy spiked through me as suddenly as a bolt of lightning. I prayed it didn't show on my face quite as plainly as my lust had. I didn't want to think about Gareth touching another woman. Ever.

He sighed and pushed off the Harley. "We hadn't seen a jaguar for the past few new moons. We were starting to think word had gotten around to stay out

of our territory. I told him I could meet her the next week, but he had a feeling about her. He thought she was the one. He just wanted me to be happy again.”

“That doesn’t make you responsible for his death.”

“While my brother was fighting for his life, I was with a woman who meant nothing to me.” He looked my way. “If I had skipped the date, he would be alive.”

“Or maybe you’d both be gone.” The thought made my chest tight.

He let out a humorless chuckle and danger colored his voice. “No jaguar could take me and my brother together. No way.”

I went to him, sliding my hand up his broad chest to cover his heart. “This guilt you carry isn’t fair. You and Gabe couldn’t have known what would happen. You didn’t abandon him. He wanted you to go.”

“I wish I could believe you, sweetheart.” He reached up, covering my hand with his. “But every night when I can’t talk to him, it reminds me that he would still be here if I had been with him that night.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you should know when the chips were down I wasn’t there for my brother.”

I rose up on my toes to brush my lips against his. “Since my parents were murdered, I thought I’d never feel safe again. But I do when I’m with you.”

He wrapped me in his arms and I breathed him in, closing my eyes. The stubble along his jaw mussed my hair as he nuzzled close.

“I’d give up everything to keep you safe.”

I pressed a kiss over his heart. “I’d settle for feeding me.”

“I can do that.” An unguarded laugh escaped him. Such a great sound. I wanted a lifetime to enjoy it.

Some days it was tougher to fight the bitterness than others.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

GARETH

The damned wind kept spinning around us. I'd catch the jaguar's scent, but I had no way to track which direction it came from. I held Nadya's hand, walking on the wooden sidewalk, trying to contain my worry so I didn't ruin her day with it. She looked over the menu in the window of the Silver Queen Saloon while I continued scanning the area for anyone watching us too closely.

All I saw were tourists. But he was here. Somewhere.

"Does this look good to you?"

I glanced at the menu without reading it. "Sure."

We walked through the door and a stout bulldog raced toward us. He jumped up on me, his tongue curling at the end as he panted and wagged his stump of a tail. Animals always gravitated to us, maybe sensing the wolf inside? On some level they knew we could relate to them.

I scratched behind his ears while he sniffed my shirt.

"Ulysses!" A woman called from behind the bar. "You get down and let them come inside."

I massaged his jowly cheeks and glanced over. "It's all right." Back to my new friend, I lowered my voice. "You're a good boy, Ulysses."

Nadya pulled out her camera and the big guy got bashful, turning away and hopping to the floor.

"He's shy about cameras." The barkeep smiled at us. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"A cold beer. And lunch would be great, too."

Nadya ordered an iced tea, and the woman behind the bar handed me two menus. “Sit any place you like.”

We found a table in the back corner. I sat facing the door so no jaguars would surprise me from behind. Ulysses came over shortly after our food arrived. He flirted with Nadya, wooing a couple of fries off her plate, and then he moved on to me. Laying his big head on my lap, he stared up at me like he hadn’t been fed in months. *Liar*.

With only one guy sitting at the bar, the barkeep wandered over and shared some of the history of the place with Nadya. I only half listened, although I did catch that they had a vacancy in the hotel upstairs if we needed a room.

I kept replaying my confession about Gabe. Before she placed her trust in me for her safety, I’d wanted her to understand that the last person who did that had been killed. I’d expected judgment or at the least, disappointment. She listened to my worst moment, my darkest secret, and somehow made me laugh. Me.

This woman was pure magic. She made me want to be worthy of her love.

“Ready to go?”

Her voice jarred me from my thoughts. I glanced at my empty plate and hers and smiled at my new best friend. “Sorry, Ulysses.” I rubbed his ears and leaned close to whisper, “Werewolves are a bad choice to beg from. We’d eat the plates, too, if they tasted better.”

Nadya laughed and my heart swelled. I could get used to making her happy.

After we paid the check and stepped outside, the afternoon sun hung low on the horizon, the shadows stretching out along the worn wooden sidewalks. I took a few slow breaths, but the wind didn’t hold a trace of the jaguar. If I had smelled him, he had to know we were here, too. He wouldn’t have left. So where was he?

A few doors down I noticed a rock shop and gave Nadya’s hand a squeeze. I tipped my head toward the sign. “Want to go in?”

“Sure.” She smiled and hustled for the door.

I pulled it open and followed her inside. Crystals and rocks never did much for me, but seeing her light up when she showed me a clear quartz, and listening to her explain to me that if I carried a little amethyst in my pocket it could bring me peace and help with my spiritual awakening, was worth it. I assumed she meant the dream walking, but before I could reply she was gasping over some kind of green rock.

Last night her hands almost shifted into paws, a jaguar was following us, and somehow she set all the concern for the things we couldn't control aside and lost herself in her passion for the refracted light in the stones. How did she do it? How did she keep from wallowing in the unfairness of the fate she'd been handed? She was amazing. I watched her discover new rocks, her face bright while she chatted with the storekeeper. Nadya was her own light.

And somewhere inside my soul, my wolf stirred. Our mate. Pride swelled. *How the hell did I ever get so lucky?*

She turned my way with a smile that stole my breath. “What?”

I raised a brow. “I didn't say anything.”

“I know.” She came closer. “But you looked...happy.”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her forehead. “You have that effect on me.”

She tipped her head back, brushing a soft kiss to my lips. “Best news I've heard all day.”

I bought her a bag of rocks and a few postcards, and followed her outside. No sign of the jaguar's scent. I couldn't help scanning the streets, but no one looked suspicious.

“Can we go up and see if Piper's Opera House is open?”

“This is your day.” I nodded and tried not to smile. “I'm just your arm candy.”

She grinned with a sparkle in her eyes. “I do like candy.”

*Holy shit.* We were flirting.

• • •

In spite of my lack of interest in classical music, Piper's Opera House ended up being enjoyable. A docent walked us through the interior explaining how it burned down not once, but twice. The current building had been up since 1885 and was one of the most famous opera houses west of the Mississippi for most of the 1800s. Not bad.

Like the main drag through town, seeing the stage and the balcony seats of the opera house was like we'd slipped back in time two hundred years. Pretty cool, but it was nothing in comparison with the joy and life on Nadya's face. Her smile silenced the ticking of the damned clock.

After the opera house, we toured our way through a couple of churches and visited the Mark Twain museum. My personal highlight was the toilet labeled "Mark Twain sat here." With still no trace of the jaguar's scent, I stayed alert, but some of the tightness in my muscles eased a notch. We ended up in the Bucket of Blood Saloon for dinner. The live bluegrass band was tough on my heightened sense of hearing, so we found a table as far from the stage as possible.

Nadya rested her hand on my thigh. "Thanks for a wonderful day."

I leaned in and kissed her temple. "You don't need to thank me." I stared into her eyes, wishing I could bottle the day and keep it forever.

"You could've taken me to Reno when we realized a jaguar was snooping around."

"I probably should have. We could've come back another day."

She gave my leg a squeeze. "I'm sort of in an if-not-now-then-when pattern these days."

"No reality yet. I'm not ready to go back there."

She rested her head against my shoulder. "Me neither."

We ate our burgers in silence, watching the band and the folks dancing in front of the stage. After the server cleared our plates, I ran my hand up her leg. "Would you like to dance?"

She grinned, the dimple in her cheek coaxing me to smile. "I'd love to."

We found a clear spot and I pulled her close. I was no Fred Astaire, but in spite of the grease that was usually under my nails, I could cut a rug all right. Half of dancing was being able to lead. If you led the dance right, the woman could trust you and rely on you to let her shine.

I kept one hand at the small of her back while I held the other and led her in a slow waltz, swaying around the floor. Giving her hip a little push, I guided her out in a smooth turn before pulling her in close again. The soft curves of her body teased me, making me want to explore and memorize every inch of her.

Resting my forehead to hers, our eyes locked. Gradually her lips curved into a soft, sexy smile meant only for me. "Let's stay here tonight."

I wet my lips. "The Silver Queen had rooms across the street."

"We could be in bed in minutes."

Now *I* was smiling. "Let's get out of here."

• • •

It seemed like it took forever to get checked in, but once we were safe in our room with the door locked behind us, I pressed her back against it, my lips fusing to hers. Her mouth opened, her tongue tangling with mine the way I wanted our limbs to be. Nadya dropped her bags from the day's shopping and slid her soft hands up under the back of my shirt, her touch sending fire through my veins.

My teeth skimmed her neck. "I want you naked. Now."

I didn't wait for an answer. I unbuttoned her pants and she pulled her shirt over her head. I reached around her, unclasping her bra and tossing it aside. My lips marked her skin with possessive, hungry kisses down her chest as I knelt down to slide her jeans and underwear over her hips. She gripped my shoulders for balance, kicked off her shoes, and stepped out of her pants. I rose up a little and caught her nipple in my mouth, swirling my tongue around the firm tip, flicking it until she gasped my name.

She slid her fingers into my hair as I cupped her other breast in my hand.

When I opened my eyes to see her face, she watched me, her lips parted, breaths ragged. I'd never seen a sexier woman in all my life. Hunger burned in her eyes as I slid my other hand up the inside of her thigh until my fingers brushed her folds. She widened her stance and I smiled, kissing my way over to her other breast.

My finger stroked her slowly at first. Making love on my Harley was hot, but this time I wanted to savor her until she begged me to make her come. Just thinking about it made my erection jump in my jeans.

My lips trailed down her body, my tongue tracing her naval before moving even lower. Looking up at her, I moved between her legs, my breath caressing her skin. "Put your leg on my shoulder."

She wet her lips and complied, opening herself to me. I kissed her inner thigh, moaning at her scent. This was my mate, my Nadya. Mine. Unable to wait a second longer, I teased her folds open with my tongue, finding the sweet spot that made her balance wobble. She tightened her fists in my hair, pulling it as her hips tilted toward me. While I supported her with one hand, I brought the other lower, sliding a finger inside of her. I groaned against her when I realized how wet she was for me.

Taking it slow and savoring the experience was going to be tougher than I thought. I wanted to rip my clothes off and bury myself inside her.

She worked her hips into me. "Don't stop..."

Nothing could make me stop. I stroked her faster with my tongue, sliding another finger inside of her as her inner muscles clenched. "Let go for me. I want to taste you..."

Her entire body shuddered against the door. I pulled my fingers free and slid my tongue inside her, my thumb pressing her core, feeling it pulse. She cried out loud enough for the other rooms to hear. As the aftershocks ran through her, I kissed the soft skin of her inner thigh and moved her leg off my shoulder so I could stand up.

I lifted her into my arms and carried her to the bed while she tried to catch her breath. She stretched out, cheeks flushed with color and smiled up at me. “Your turn to get naked.”

“Okay.” I took a step back and waited. “Are you going to help me?”

She grinned and shook her head. “No, I’m going to watch.”

I chuckled. “All right.”

Truth was, I’d never had a real relationship before. My life was a patchwork quilt of one-night stands with dry spells in between. When I had sex with a woman, it was fast and furious—sometimes we didn’t even get all our clothes off.

Long story short, I’d never stripped for anyone before. Sure I’d been naked with them, I’d been naked with Nadya, but actually stripping for a woman... that was something completely different. I wasn’t shy. Hell, I got naked in the forest once a month during the full moon. But I’d never had an audience. An audience I wanted to please. Damn, had I ever given a shit what anyone thought? Not until Nadya. She held the key to my heart. A heart I thought died years ago.

No pressure.

I started with my shirt, forcing myself to take it a little slower than I normally would. When I pulled it over my head, her gaze moved over me slowly before she met my eyes again. She wet her lips and my pulse raced. Knowing my mate wanted me was a huge turn on. I dropped my shirt and reached for the button on my jeans.

“What, no shirt toss?”

I laughed. “Would it make you hot?”

She grinned and nodded.

I snatched my shirt off the floor and spun it around once before it went flying across the room. Her laughter made it more than worth the extra effort and inspired me to go even slower with my jeans. I popped the top button and

bent over to unlace my boots. I almost chuckled when she sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. Holy shit, I was having fun teasing her. I pulled my boots off and set them aside.

I slid my hand in my pants to adjust myself. I was way too hard to risk catching myself in the zipper.

“Come here.” Her voice was breathy, laced with desire, and I could deny her nothing. My instincts screamed at me to wake up, to protect myself. Every second I spent with her, she got deeper inside of me. I shoved the caution aside and crossed to Nadya.

Standing inches from her, I stared down into her eyes as she ran her soft hands down my abdomen to my naval. She traced her index finger along the fine line of hair to the edge of my pants and slowly grasped the zipper. Carefully she lowered it, every click of the metal bringing me closer to her. Finally she opened my jeans to find my erection aching to break free of my boxers.

She ran her fingers up to my hips and under the elastic on my boxers. She helped lift the waistband over my raging hard-on and pushed the pants down a little farther before she looked up at me from underneath her dark lashes.

I held my breath as her lips parted. She moved forward and took me in. I dropped my head back, burying my hands in her silky hair. The second her warm mouth surrounded me, my entire body tensed, alive with passion. She sucked gently, circling the tip with her tongue.

I growled her name and stared down at her lips on my skin. Working my hips into her slowly, the pressure built as the pleasure intensified. It would be so easy to lose myself, but I wasn't ready for it to be over. Not yet.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

NADYA

“No more.” He tightened his fingers in my hair. “I’m on the edge.”

Hearing the raw desire in his voice was a heady aphrodisiac. I hummed around him, sending vibrations along his length as I pulled back. He stepped out of his pants and laid over me. My pulse pounded, feeling his bare skin against mine. I wanted to be one with him, to forget where I ended and he began.

I parted my legs and he sank even closer. The tip of his erection teased me but he made no move to plunge forward. I writhed under him, aching for more. Gareth took my hands in his, our fingers lacing together, and brought them up over my head, opening me to him completely.

“You are so beautiful, Nadya.”

My heart flipped. I’d never been so turned on physically and emotionally all at once. “I feel beautiful.”

He bent to kiss me, moaning as he finally drove my hips forward and sank into me. He fit my body perfectly, made for me, every inch of him mine. I pulled my hands free and clung to him. I couldn’t hold him tight enough. My nails dug into his back as his thrusts drove the passion even higher. Claiming each other over and over.

Without any warning, emotion swamped me, like a floodgate had opened all at once. I stared up into Gareth’s eyes but he didn’t say a word. His

feelings jumbled together, fear, joy, lust, happiness, pride, all blending until I recognized one strong, pure emotion. He'd opened his emotions fully to me. Shared himself completely, laying his battered heart bare before me.

Tears swam in my eyes. I cupped his face in my hands. "I love you, too."

He kissed me again, hard and urgent. I wished he could feel emotions like I did. I wanted to give him that, for him to experience them and know without question, how I felt. I broke the kiss gasping against his lips, "I love you."

He moaned, kissing me again and again as our bodies collided, consumed by pleasure and passion. My orgasm rocked through my entire body, taking Gareth with me. He broke the kiss, calling out my name as he erupted deep inside of me.

We kissed, breathless, desperate kisses, as a tear spilled down my cheek. My fingers slid back into his hair as he parted my lips with his tongue. I could still taste myself in his mouth, and my wolf stirred inside of me. Possessive. Gareth was ours.

Finally he pulled back and whispered, "You felt it."

"I did." I nodded. "All of it."

"And you feel the same."

"I do." I smiled, my eyes brimming with tears. "I wish you could sense it the way I do so I could give you more than just words."

He shrugged. The corner of his lips curved into a crooked smile, I'd never seen on him before. "The words were pretty fucking awesome."

I laughed, wrapping my legs around his waist so he couldn't get away.

He kissed me. "I love hearing you laugh." He sobered, staring directly into my soul. "I love you, Nadya. It doesn't fix anything, but it's honest."

"It doesn't have to fix anything."

Another tear slid down my cheek and he kissed it away. "In our haste to get a room, we left all our clothes and toothbrushes in the saddlebag."

We both knew he was changing the subject, but I'd never been more

grateful. I didn't want to think about our problems right now. This day had been a miraculous gift. Why ruin everything with reality?

"I guess we'd better get dressed and go get them."

He kissed my forehead and rolled over beside me, separating our bodies. "I'll go grab our stuff. You can stay here and rest."

I laid my head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating. "What about the jaguar following us?"

"I think he's gone." He caressed my back, his fingers sliding up my spine. "I haven't caught his scent in a few hours."

I propped my chin on his chest. "Why would he leave?"

"I don't know." Gareth sighed, tipping his head to look down at me. "But I'd rather have you here, safe in the room. I'll come right back."

I didn't like it. If the jaguar shifter was still in Virginia City, he could attack Gareth and I'd never know. He'd be safer with someone else on the lookout. Maybe we could wait on our stuff until morning. I laid my head on his chest again and noticed another tattoo right over his heart. I'd seen it briefly the night before, but in the dim light, I'd thought it was a full moon. Now I realized inside the small circle was the silhouette of a howling wolf. When I took a closer look, there were actually three wolves, overlapped. His family.

Unlike the barbed wire around his bicep, this tattoo seemed more personal. More Gareth. I brushed my lips over it, kissing tenderly. "I like this one."

He smoothed the back of my hair with his large hand. "I got that one a few years ago on the anniversary of the accident that took our folks." His voice softened. "I added Gabe's wolf a few weeks ago."

Would I end up as another wolf over his heart? I didn't want to think about it. I rested my head on his chest. "Why don't we go get the stuff in the morning?"

"Because my saddlebags don't lock. Our stuff could be gone by morning."

Good point. I sighed. “Okay, I’ll put my clothes on and come with you.”

He rolled over so I was underneath him, his dark eyes pinning me. “The jaguar is gone. This will take me five or ten minutes, tops. Let me do this.”

I stared up at his chiseled face, his sober features. His broad shoulders made me feel small in comparison. This was my mate. Strong and bull-headed.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.” I reached up to caress his cheek. “I’m a werewolf, too. If there’s a jaguar outside, I could help.”

He turned and kissed my palm, his gaze never leaving mine. “If I thought he was still in Virginia City I might take you up on that, but he’s gone.” He kissed me and murmured, “Please, sweetheart. Rest for me.”

He said “please,” and hearing my big tough mate call me sweetheart left me defenseless. “Fine.” I pulled him in for one more kiss. “You’ll come right back?”

“I will.” He nodded. “You’ll keep the bed warm?”

“I can do that.” I grinned.

He pushed up and got out of bed. I watched him get dressed, warming up all over again. Every muscle in his body tempted me.

Gareth came over to give me a kiss. “I’ll be right back.”

I caught his lower lip in my teeth, enjoying the deep growl in his throat. “You better.”

He crossed to the door and turned back. “I’ve got a key. Keep this door locked and don’t open it for anyone. Just in case.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. The door closed behind him and I glanced at the clock. Ten minutes and counting.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

GARETH

Out in the hallway, I had to stop and shift myself in my jeans. I already wanted her again. No woman had ever affected me like this. Made it tough to think straight.

I slid the room key into my pocket and went down the stairs leading to the bar below. As soon as I pushed through the door, his scent slammed into me. The jaguar was back. I didn't know where he'd gone to earlier to cover his scent, but now he was here. In the saloon. Right under our room.

*Fuck.* Adrenaline shot into my bloodstream, heightening my senses. I had to keep a cool head. He wouldn't blow his cover in a public place. Which one was he? Two older guys sat at the bar chatting while I scanned the room. My eyes stopped on a slender guy sitting alone in the shadows at the other end.

I headed in that direction, wishing I had my Buck Knife on me. It was stowed in the leather sheath, resting at the bottom of my saddlebag on the Harley. No way in hell was I going out to get it now. Not with Nadya right upstairs.

I approached him cautiously, half expecting him to bolt from the bar. He knocked back his drink and met my eyes. This was the same guy I'd seen briefly after Nadya was bitten. He blew up the lumberyard, destroying any chance of police discovering evidence of Fonthill and his condition.

I stopped a few feet from him. "Why are you following me?"

He glanced my way. "Not you. Her." He set the empty glass on the bar and

noded to the woman behind the counter. “Another.”

She brought a whisky bottle over, but she didn’t pour. “I think you’ve had enough.”

His nostrils flared slightly. “Pour another.”

The bartender shifted her attention toward me. “You a friend of his?”

“No.”

He kicked the stool next to him out. “Sit, wolf.”

“Screw you, asshole. I’m not your damned dog.”

The bartender backed away without refilling his glass. He rolled his eyes and turned to face me. “Perhaps we should take this outside.”

“Fine.” Outside would get him farther away from Nadya. Worked for me.

I waited for him to go first. I wasn’t going to give the slick bastard a chance to race upstairs. Once we were out on the wooden sidewalk, he turned and walked toward the corner. I followed, scanning the area for any other unwelcome guests. He was the only shifter scent I picked up, but that didn’t mean there weren’t Nero agents around. Besides having trained jaguar shifter assassins at their disposal, they also employed well-trained mercenary units of humans.

He stopped in a dimly lit parking lot and faced me. His posture wobbled. Being shifters, our bodies metabolized liquor faster than humans, but even so, this guy was impaired. In his condition, I might be able to break his neck and end this without my knife. He had to know that. So why risk it?

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

“Age old questions I have no answers for.”

Maybe I’d just kill him. Did it really matter why this drunk jaguar was following Nadya? “I’m not here to play games.”

“Neither am I, wolf.” His eyes narrowed. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“Should I?”

He shrugged. "I'm impressed. Your precious Pack has secrets."

My patience was wearing thin. "Who are you?"

"Sebastian." He straightened up, suddenly not as inebriated as I suspected. "Sebastian Severino."

I chewed on the information for a second. This guy wasn't old enough to be the psychopath heading up the Nero Organization. "You want me to believe Severino sent his own blood out here for my mate?"

"Your mate?" He raised a brow. "Interesting." Clearing his throat, he went on. "If you care about her, you will find her a new doctor. I can assure you Dr. Granger has one mission alone, and it's ours."

A growl rumbled deep in my chest. "Why should I believe anything that comes out of your mouth?"

"Because today is your lucky day, wolf." For a moment, the streetlight shone in his eyes. He squeezed them shut, opening himself to attack, and I had to wonder if he had a death wish. I'd be happy to grant it, but first I wanted to find out what he knew about Dr. Granger and the serum he'd been pumping into Nadya.

He finally met my gaze again. "Today my father eliminated someone I cared about."

"What does that have to do with Nadya?"

"Nothing directly." He tipped his head, cracking his neck. "Dr. Granger is reporting her progress to us. He believes this last dosage of his serum will allow her to complete at least a partial shift without the moon. I was sent to collect her and bring her back to our headquarters for further study."

"You expect me to believe you're Severino's son, and instead of following his orders and abducting my mate, you're out here in a ghost town...helping us?" I clenched my fists, readying for a fight as I pulled in a slow breath, checking for any scents surrounding us. "And no backup either..."

"I also drank most of the bottle of whiskey."

I shook my head. “Are you suicidal?”

“No. Not really.” He tipped his head to the other side, the joints in his neck popping again. “I was just leveling the playing field.”

I laughed, circling him. “You think you’re that much better than me? Fatal mistake, asshole.”

“I arrived here with a mission, but…” His jaw clenched. “He’s gone too far this time.”

“Stop talking in god damn riddles and tell me what the hell is going on before I kick your ass all the way back to Nero.”

“You would already be dead if I wished it.” He shook his head. “I’ve decided not to complete this mission.”

I rushed him, slamming him in the chest and sending him flying backward. He hit the brick wall hard and slumped to the ground. I pinned him against the pavement, my forearm pressed against his windpipe. “You’d be dead if *I* wished it, asshole.”

He smiled, his bright white teeth smeared with blood. “You have the same technique.”

Would this guy ever make any sense? “What the hell are you talking about?”

His smile faded. “I already killed you once.”

*Gabe.*

I picked him up by the neck and held him up, his back to the brick wall, then buried my other fist into his gut over and over. Hot blood dripped from his mouth onto my arm before he finally sprang to life, landing an upper cut into my jaw. Stunned, I stumbled back, freeing him.

Sebastian gasped for air, spitting up blood between wheezes. I advanced on him again, punching his temple. “You ambushed my brother, but you’re not so tough without your jaguar claws.”

He glared at me, keeping my attention on his eyes. Suddenly he kicked my

leg like a fucking truck hit it. I fell to the pavement, knocking the air from my lungs.

He stumbled backward. “I didn’t come here to kill you, or to be killed, wolf.”

“You murdered my brother.” I scrambled to my feet, favoring the leg he attacked. My calf muscle cramped. I ground my teeth, biting back the pain. “You’ll never be safe again unless you kill me.”

He spat blood on the cracked pavement without taking his eyes off of me. “Your brother crossed my path during a new moon while I was in jaguar form. Even so, he cracked my ribs. If I hadn’t ended him, I have no doubt he would have ended me. I defended myself.”

I started toward him, hoping I was masking my injured leg. “You never should have been in our territory.”

“I had a job to do.”

“Not good enough.” I lumbered forward, but he spun out of the way. My momentum almost sent me to the pavement again. I turned around to face him, hungry for vengeance. “Why did you even admit it? You had to know I’d make things right.”

“Will killing me bring him back?”

I didn’t want to think, I wanted to fight. I wanted to kill.

I wanted my brother back.

But that was never going to happen. Even if I killed this jaguar. Even if I killed a hundred jaguars.

Footsteps plunked up the hollow wooden sidewalk. Running. I smelled her before she turned the corner. *Shit.*

Nadya skidded to a stop. The streetlight glinted off the silver blade of my big hunting knife. She clenched the handle tight in both hands, moving between me and Sebastian. “Get away.”

Sebastian frowned and took a step in Nadya’s direction. I lunged in front, shoving her behind me. Pain screamed up my wounded leg. I didn’t fucking

care.

“Leave her alone.”

He didn't even look at me. His full attention was on Nadya standing behind me. “You look just like her, like Sasha.”

“How do you know my sister?”

He shook his head. “She can explain everything. There's no time for that now.” He finally noticed I was close enough to wring his neck and put his hands up. “Wolf, your mate is in grave danger. The doctor has been lacing his serum with sedatives so it would appear that she is resting and getting better.”

“Why would we believe you?” Nadya asked.

“Because a few hours ago, my father ordered the elimination of an innocent woman I cared about. He made the decision without a discussion or a business purpose. He wanted to punish me, pure and simple, and so tonight, I want him to pay.” A muscle in his cheek flinched. He cared more about the woman than he wanted to let on.

I knew the feeling.

This jaguar killed my brother, the same jaguar who helped Aren, who knew Sasha. Did Sasha and Aren know he killed Gabe? Had my Pack been keeping secrets?

“Have you been giving my Pack information about Nero?”

“I'm no one's informant.” The corner of Sebastian's swollen mouth curved up. “I'm also far too intelligent to be my father's mindless guard dog.”

“Are you telling me you play both sides of the field?”

“I'm telling you the only 'game' I care about is my own.” He wiped his mouth. “Do not let Dr. Granger inject your mate again. I tell you this in honor of your fallen brother. When I report back to Nero that I have not located her, my father will send another team to claim his prize. Be prepared.”

He turned and walked away, leaving his back exposed for attack. Maybe he was more suicidal than he realized. I couldn't let him vanish knowing what he did to Gabe. I got two steps in before Nadya grabbed my wrist. “Gareth, wait.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “He killed Gabe.”

“I know but...”

Her hands trembled and she lost her grip on me. I spun around, catching Nadya before her legs buckled, the jaguar all but forgotten. Tremors wracked her body, her jaw clenched to bite back a scream. I scooped her into my arms, my pulse pounding in my ears. Rushing for the safety of our room, I did my best to keep from jarring her.

Once I had her inside, I laid her down on the bed and knelt beside her head, stroking her hair back. She didn't move or speak, but her chest rose and fell with each breath. Unconscious, not gone.

Her fingers lengthened and my dread increased. Would she live through this? I had no fucking clue, all I knew was I wasn't about to let death take her from me.

I reached for her hand and the wolf song rumbled in my chest. I chanted, closing my eyes. Watching her in pain stifled the peace in the repeated melody, and right now I needed all the calm I could muster. With her psychic gifts, my panic probably hurt her even more than it incapacitated me.

Claws cut into my hand, but my voice remained level, my eyes closed, my focus unshaken. I called to her wolf, singing in my mother's native language, telling the wolf's story of love and strength, each repetition cooling the fire of desperation smoldering in my gut.

Gradually I noticed my surroundings changing. We were on the deck of Sloan Consulting's cabin at Lake Tahoe. She was wearing the same dress she'd worn for Aren's wedding. And her skin almost burned my hands right through the fabric.

We were dancing, but no one else was around. The corner of the deck overlooking the lake where Logan's band had performed during the wedding was empty now. The only music came from my lips.

Nadya looked up at me with tears in her eyes. "I'm not leaving you."

"No, you're not." I kissed her forehead. Way too hot. "Stay with me."

Her hands were normal again, but I couldn't be sure if it was because this

was only a dream, or if my dream walking was helping her. As I chanted, an idea formed. It might not work, but it was all I had.

I dipped her slowly. “Let’s go upstairs.”

She nodded in spite of her puzzled gaze. “All right.”

We went inside the cabin and up the stairs. My wolf chant continued somehow, like my body might still be chanting, but we were walking in the dream realm, in our minds. In the master bedroom, I led her into the bathroom. Aren’s company built the cabin with every luxury, including a Jacuzzi tub big enough for two.

I turned on the faucet, filling the bath with cool water. Once I had the jets on, I straightened. “The cool water might help, and hopefully the jets can massage your muscles and relax them.”

And stop the change, I hoped.

She nodded and turned so I could unzip the dress for her. After kicking off her shoes, she let the dress slide off, the fabric pooling around her feet. She wore nothing underneath. I took her hand and steadied her as she stepped into the tub.

Nadya gasped. “It’s cold.”

“It’s going to feel good once you get in. You’ll see.” The chanting continued around us as I coaxed her to sit.

She moaned, a shiver wracking her body, but she didn’t claw her way out, or shriek. Resting against the Jacuzzi jets, her eyes drifted closed. I watched her, and chanted. Her features softened, relaxation smoothing away the lines of pain. She appeared to be sleeping. I leaned forward to caress her forehead with my lips, relieved to find her temperature had dropped a bit. It was working.

My throat ached, raw, pulling me away from the dream. I blinked my eyes open and we were back in the hotel room. Nadya slept on top of the bed, her hands no longer wolf paws. Maybe I imagined it.

I got up from the floor, tentatively ceasing the chant. Nadya still rested. Perfect. I went into the bathroom and closed the door, but something made me stop. Blood dripped off the door knob onto the white tiled floor. Frowning, I lifted my hand. My palm was pierced in four places, each one with a deep bloody line following up my forearm.

Nadya's hand had shifted fully into a wolf paw.

She was getting worse.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

NADYA

Watching Gareth pace around my condo was doing nothing to ease the tension. Between his stress weighing on me and choking on my own dread, I wanted to scream. The bandage on his hand swung into my line of sight with each stride he took. He'd heal, no permanent damage. Werewolves were a tough bunch, but far from immortal. A nasty infection could kill them just as easily as any human.

It wasn't the injury that bothered me so much as *how* he got it. My hands had finally shifted without the aid of the full moon. I'd slept the next twelve hours, but in spite of the rest, the dense fog of exhaustion hung over me.

"We should call Jason."

I glanced up at Gareth. "We will, but I need to talk to my sister first." I gnawed at my lower lip. "How are you holding up?"

"My hand is fine."

"I was asking about you, not your hand."

He sat down beside me, his energy as frenetic as a caged wolf. "Your sister worked with the guy who murdered my brother. She had to know it was him. And no one said anything. No one did anything." He clenched his injured hand, popping some of the tape on his bandage. "Gabe's life meant something. He deserves justice."

I slowly ran my hand up his thigh, wishing I could draw out some of his

pain. “Do you want justice or revenge?”

His inner turmoil lined the corners of his eyes. “Sebastian was right when he said my brother was a good fighter. Gabe would’ve killed him if Sebastian didn’t get him first. But Sebastian never should have been in our territory. Gabe was protecting what was ours.”

“Regardless of who is to blame, it won’t bring Gabe back.” I paused, waiting to see if he’d consider my words. “Sebastian didn’t have to give us the information about Dr. Granger. He gave it to you because of Gabe.”

“If it turns out to be true, I’m going to rip the doctor’s arms off and then not allow him the peace of death.”

“If Sebastian was telling the truth, I might let you.” I shook my head, squeezing his leg. “There’s a chance if we confront him, we might be able to force him to give us his research. Jason could go over it and find a treatment that will really work.”

“Sebastian is the heir to the whole Nero machine. What’s in it for him to help us?”

Before I answered, the door opened and Sasha came inside with Aren right behind her. I got up to greet her, blinking back a wave of dizziness. She wrapped me in her arms, holding me tight. Quiet tears spilled down my cheeks as I lost my grip on my bottled-up emotions and clung to my big sister.

“I came back as soon as I heard.”

“No.” Her guilt smacked me upside the head. “This isn’t your fault. I wanted you to at least get a couple of days for a honeymoon. There was nothing you could have done anyway.”

Aren clasped Gareth’s forearms in the traditional Pack greeting. “Thanks for taking care of her.” His gaze moved to the bandage. “You all right?”

Gareth nodded. “I’m fine.” He straightened and stepped back from Aren. “Had the pleasure of meeting my brother’s murderer. His name is Sebastian.

Heard of him? He tracked us up at Virginia City.”

Aren froze for a second. You didn’t need to be empathic to see his shock and guilt.

“Holy shit.” Gareth shook his head. “You *did* know. Does Adam know, too?”

Gareth’s pain and aggression swamped me. I moved to stand at his side and slid my hand into one of his, grounding him.

“I’m sorry. For everything.” Sasha pressed her lips together for a moment. “Sebastian’s our only link inside Nero. We needed his intel.”

“Adam was worried you were leaving the Pack.” Aren put a hand on Gareth’s shoulder. “We didn’t want to give you one more reason.”

Gareth grabbed Aren’s hand and shoved it off. “Be honest, Aren. You all kept this a secret from me so I wouldn’t kill your inside man.” His tone darkened, almost a growl. “My brother’s life wasn’t as valuable to you as this asshole’s information.”

“This isn’t getting us anywhere.” Sasha looked up at Gareth. “Did you kill Sebastian?”

“No. You can rest easy.” Gareth shook his head. “It wouldn’t have been hard though. I almost got the feeling he wanted me to. He was drinking, a lot...”

“Sebastian?” Sasha frowned.

“Yeah.” He glanced at me for a second, then back to my sister. “He knocked back whiskey like he needed some instant amnesia.”

“And he *told* you he killed Gabe?”

Gareth nodded. “Yep. He walked away with his back to me. It would’ve been simple to even the score, but Nadya had an attack before I could go after him.”

“Sebastian is one of Nero’s best.” Sasha pondered everything and shook her head. “He’d never leave himself open and vulnerable with his back to the

enemy. None of this makes any sense.”

“Maybe not, but he’s lucky Nadya needed me when she did.”

I gave his hand a squeeze. We’d decided not to share the information Sebastian told us about Dr. Granger. No point in getting Jason in trouble with Adam. We could handle him.

“Why was Sebastian following you?” Sasha’s eyes narrowed in my direction.

My sister was an excellent detective, and her emotions made it clear she sensed deception. I hated lying to her, but if she and Aren found out about Dr. Granger, then Adam would, too. I’d gone into this treatment with my eyes wide open. I didn’t want Jason to take the fall for bringing Nero into our backyard.

“I don’t know. Nero knows I was bitten.” All true. “And since I’m still alive, I assume they’d like a closer look.”

“They sent Sebastian to take you back to their headquarters for scientists to study you?” Sasha opened and closed her hands, pacing the room. Tomorrow night was the new moon. My sister would shift into a jaguar. She finally stopped and looked up at Gareth. “Thank you for protecting Nadya.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” He tipped his head. “Tell me something about Sebastian. Do you trust him?”

She paused and glanced at Aren, then back to us. “Sometimes... Maybe? Sebastian only cares about himself, never forget that. As long as what you need serves him in some way, then he’ll see it through to the end.”

“I’m not sure how not abducting me helped him.” I rubbed my forehead, wishing I could turn down the emotions in the room. “He said his father killed someone to punish him, so Sebastian abandoned the mission to bring me back to Nero in retaliation.” The steady hum of disbelief wafted off my sister. *Interesting*. “Is this unusual? He’s never disobeyed his father?”

Sasha shrugged. “His father wouldn’t be happy if he discovered Sebastian

helped me evade them after the confrontation at Lake Tahoe, but blatantly disobeying an order... I'd be surprised he'd go that far."

"He'd get in a lot of trouble?"

Sasha sighed. "Sebastian is Severino's *eldest* son, not his only one. If he was caught botching a mission on purpose, there is a good chance he wouldn't be reprimanded. He'd be eliminated."

Gareth met my eyes as my sister's words sank in. Maybe Sebastian had a death wish after all. Either way, his life was on the line the moment he walked away, so why would he have lied about Dr. Granger? Although Adam's uncle, General Miller Sloan, had reached out to request Nero's assistance on my behalf, Nero had their own plans, and curing me wasn't part of them.

...

Aren and Sasha finally left. Convincing Sasha I was stable proved to be difficult, especially when Gareth's bandaged hand kept reminding everyone that I shifted two weeks before the full moon.

Once their car rolled out of the parking lot, I turned to Gareth. "You heard what she said. Sebastian put his life in jeopardy by leaving me behind to retaliate against his father, but he told us about Dr. Granger out of respect for Gabe. He was handing you an olive branch."

"Or he wants us to think that. We can't be sure anything he said was true."

"I don't see how lying to us would serve Sebastian."

Gareth shrugged. "I guess we'll know soon. You called Jason?"

"Yeah. Dr. Granger is coming. Jason told him about my hands shifting. There's no way he'd pass up the chance to take my vitals and see what I can do."

"Perfect." He lifted my hand to his lips. "We're going to force him to make this right for you. He boosted your levels; he can bring them back down again."

I nodded, but inside I had doubts. If they knew how to reverse the process, wouldn't they have saved some of their werewolf soldiers? They must've been worth more alive than dead, right? I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Riding on the back of the Harley, I closed my eyes, drinking in the warm breeze on my face as we rode to Jason's office. A smile curved my lips. The freedom of the breeze demanded my full attention and enjoyment. I treasured moments like this, moments when I could forget what the future held for me, when I was just another part of the world around me. It made my problems seem small.

Gareth pulled the bike into the lot of the medical center. I opened my eyes, reality settling in heavy on my shoulders. We put our helmets and gloves away and Gareth took my hand.

"This is all going to work out. We'll make him help us."

I smiled, hopefully masking my doubts. "I'm ready if you are."

We walked through the automatic doors and straight to the elevator. The sky was colored as the sun dipped below the mountains. Most of the medical offices were closed for the day, leaving the building fairly empty. Inside the elevator, my stomach roiled. I rubbed my middle like I could massage the cramps away.

"You okay?"

A flash of Gareth's concern hit me before he pulled his emotions back.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You sure?" He came to my side of the elevator. "You're sweating."

I wiped my forehead, surprised to find it wet. "My stomach's upset. Maybe I ate something bad."

The doors opened and Jason was waiting. He came to my other side. "I thought you were feeling better?" He looked over me at Gareth. "You should have brought her sooner."

"Contrary to what you might think, Nadya isn't a huge fan of me taking her to the doctor against her will."

They helped me into an exam room and onto a table. I vacillated between being cold and so hot I wanted to strip my clothes off. My pulse thrummed faster as my worries increased. What if I shifted into a wolf here? Would I hurt Gareth and Jason? Gareth hadn't completely healed from my last unexpected shift.

Jason brought over the blood pressure cuff, but I shoved his hand away. "Not now."

He frowned. "I need to know what's happening right now."

"I don't feel good. That's what happening."

My instincts were running the show now, and other than my mate, I didn't want anyone else touching me. At this point my wolf was much too close to the surface. I couldn't quiet her or coax her back. Maybe this was what insanity felt like. I couldn't trust myself not to hurt Jason. Not right now.

Thankfully he backed off, putting the cuff away. "All right. How about describing to me what happened while I check out Gareth's hand?"

"I was pretty out of it. It hurt my head and my joints until I blacked out." I left out meeting Gareth in a dream state and his chanting bringing me back.

He unwrapped Gareth's hand and I winced. Seeing the bruising, the four angry red scabs, and the lines scratching up his arm made me want to scream. I did that. Me. I was a monster. I'd told him I loved him, and an hour later an animal inside me attacked him.

"Looks worse than it is." Gareth looked over at me. "It's my own fault for holding your hand like I had the power to make the shifting stop."

My eyes welled with tears. I couldn't stay here. What if I hurt him again? I was a danger to anyone near me. What if I attacked Sasha, or the little ones? Malcolm and Madeleine's faces filled my head and a tear spilled down my cheek. I swiped it away as the door opened.

Dr. Granger walked into the room wearing his scrubs and a smock like he actually gave a damn about curing and helping people. My breathing grew ragged as I gripped the sides of the exam table, fighting the urge to rip his face off. I may have growled. I couldn't be sure anymore. All eyes turned toward me, but my voice was gone.

Apparently Gareth and Jason would need to convince him to work with us, because I was fading as the wolf inside me came forward, and she had one intent.

*Kill the enemy.*

## Chapter Twenty-Six

GARETH

Nadya's nostrils flared, her pupils dilating as her muscles strained. *Shit*. She was going to shift right here in the exam room. I wheeled on the Nero weasel. Grabbing the lapels of his smock, I slammed him into the wall.

"We know you've been juicing her up, asshole. Then you called Nero to collect her for you." A bead of sweat rolled down his face. "Your life depends on how you answer the next question."

The paper on the exam table ripped behind me. I didn't turn around to check on Nadya, but judging by the pride glowing in the sick doctor's eyes, she was barely clinging to her human form.

"You need to reverse whatever it was you put in her veins. Can you do that?"

His attention shifted back to me. Jason came up, blocking the doctor's view of his handiwork.

"This science could change the world." Spittle flew from Dr. Ganger's lips as he babbled. "Her psychic abilities alter the nerve centers of her brain. She can tolerate much more than the werewolf soldiers we studied. We could learn..."

I let go with one hand and punched him in his disgusting mouth. He squealed, and the scent of blood assaulted me.

But apparently I wasn't the only one.

Nadya cried out behind me, a strangled scream somewhere between a shriek and a howl. I released the doctor and spun around to help my mate. Behind us the door opened, and Dr. Granger raced out with Jason on his tail.

Outside Jason shouted, “Stop him!”

Another man let out a pained scream, followed by a heavy thud and then silence.

It wasn't Dr. Granger or Jason's screaming, but I did recognize the voice. Jason's father. I should've gone to check it out, but right now my mate needed me. Nadya writhed on the floor, her hands fully shifted into wolf paws. Her ears stretched, hair sprouting on her cheeks. Blood trickled down from her nose and a heavy dose of panic slammed into my gut. Jason's warnings about brain hemorrhages echoed in my head without any details to fill in the blank spots.

Bottom line, if I couldn't bring her back, I might lose her.

No fucking way. Death was not winning. Not today.

I sat on the floor, pulling her into my lap. One of her paws swiped at my face, catching my chin as I started to chant, singing to her wolf. My mate. I closed my eyes, and in my mind Nadya was two, a woman and a wolf. I called to her wolf in the language of my ancestors. My voice started a little tentative, but the repetition of the words, the growing intention behind them bolstered me, strengthening my chant, my love for her coloring the tone.

Nadya was strong. Death wouldn't come between us. Not yet.

In my vision, her wolf came to me. I brought my face close to hers as I chanted, convincing her this was not her time. The doctor made her confused. The moon was not calling to her yet.

Gradually, the wolf calmed and lay down at my feet, her head heavy. I continued the chant with my eyes closed, almost afraid to look. I blindly ran my hand down Nadya's arm. When my fingers found hers, I opened my eyes. She was Nadya again. Whole. Human.

I stopped chanting and held her tight, kissing her hair. “You’re back.”

“Not leaving you,” she whispered.

I’d never been so relieved to hear someone’s voice. I kissed her forehead.  
“I need to find that maniac doctor.”

She nodded.

I lifted her up in my arms and laid her on the exam table. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’ll be fine. Catch that bastard.”

I lifted her hand to my lips, kissing it. “I love you, sweetheart.”

Her lips curved into an exhausted smile, but she didn’t speak.

“I’ll be right back.”

Her eyes drifted closed and I slipped out the door. I jogged around the corner and froze. Jason was on the ground doing chest compressions.

On his father.

I rushed to his side. “What happened?”

“The bastard shot him up with a syringe full of potassium chloride. I need you go next door to the hospital and bring me injections of glucose and insulin. Now.”

Seeing Wyatt Ayers dead on the floor shocked me into action. I sprinted down the hall. We were in the medical office building standing on the south side of the medical center. An atrium connected the two. I slalomed through people standing on the moving walkway, shouting apologies over my shoulder to the ones I bumped.

Bursting through the door to the medical center, I caught the arm of a nurse.

She jumped, gasping. “Let go of...”

Her voice faded, probably reading the panic on my face. “I need glucose and...”

*Shit!* I couldn’t remember.

“Insulin.” She finished my sentence and was already hustling down the hall. Behind the nurses’ counter, she vanished into a locked room. She came back out with a pouch of full syringes.

“Do I need more than one?”

“I think so.” She nodded. “Which way?”

Although this nurse was over a foot shorter than me, her presence commanded as much respect as any werewolf. If she wanted to come with me to help Jason, I was happy to have her with us. Jason would probably be pissed about a medical professional working on a werewolf, and I realized it was a risk, but he could bitch at me later.

Right now, I was grateful for another set of hands to help.

We ran across the moving walkway, through the atrium, and into the empty medical office building. Jason looked up from his chest compressions, sweat dripping down his face.

“Who’s this?” His eyes narrowed at me.

“I’m Kilani.” She knelt on the ground on the opposite side of Wyatt’s lifeless body. She withdrew one of the syringes with her latex-gloved hands.

“He’s asystole.” Jason grunted. “Potassium chloride injection.” He panted between compressions. “He needs...”

“Alternating injections of glucose and insulin to flush it out.” She was inspecting the syringe, pushing the plunger just enough to get a bead of liquid on the end of the needle before injecting it into Wyatt.

She turned toward me. “You should take over compressions. He’s exhausted.”

Jason shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“You’re far from fine.” She pulled out the next syringe, frowning at Jason. “I’m assuming you’re a doctor. There’s a strong guy right here who can count compressions. You make the call.”

This little slip of a woman didn’t hesitate to put Jason in his place. Tough not to like her. I settled down on my knees next to Jason. “I can do this.”

He got up while I took over. Kilani helped me keep count. Jason came back with a manual respirator and started pumping air into Wyatt’s lungs.

He glanced at our assistant. “What’d you give him?”

“10ccs of glucose and I followed up with 10ccs of insulin.”

“Good.” He squeezed the bag. “We’ll probably need a few more.”

She nodded, already preparing the next syringe. “I think I brought enough to flush his system.” She glanced at Jason. “How did this happen?”

She pulled a stethoscope from her pocket and motioned for me to move. She pressed it to his chest in a couple different places and then shook her head. I got started on compressions again.

“Well?”

Jason sighed. “He was attacked. Injected with 10ccs of potassium chloride.”

“Here in the hallway?” Her eyes widened.

“Long story, but yes.”

I ground my teeth, pressing against Wyatt’s chest, hoping his heart would start pumping blood again. That little bastard had a lethal syringe on him the whole time. His contingency plan must’ve been to make someone’s heart stop if he needed a quick getaway. Dr. Granger never had any intention of helping us save Nadya. We’d have to find another way.

Fast.

Kilani gave Wyatt another injection and his hands moved. We all stopped.

The nurse frowned. “He couldn’t have recovered that quickly. I’ve only given him three injections so far.”

Our high-powered werewolf metabolism may have just saved Wyatt’s life.

Jason leaned close to his mouth, listening. “He’s breathing. Dad? Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand.”

Nothing. Kilani pressed her stethoscope to his chest. “Sinus heart rate.”

Jason took his father’s hand, waiting for a second before he laid it on the floor again. “Not responsive.”

“He’s just suffered cardiac arrest. The lack of oxygen to the brain...”

“Anoxic encephalopathy.” Jason pulled his hair back from his face.

I looked between them. “What’s that?”

Kilani answered, “Oxygen deprivation... Brain injury.” She patted Jason’s hand with her gloved one. “You should get your father admitted. His heart started faster than most. Maybe he’ll be all right.”

“Thanks for your help.”

She nodded with an empathetic smile. “Thank your friend here for grabbing me. I’m glad we got him back. I hope he’ll come out of it all right.”

She stood up and collected her pouch of syringes. “Let me know once he’s admitted so I can add the glucose and insulin injections to his chart.”

Jason tipped his head up toward her. “Thanks, Kilani.”

She nodded. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.” She glanced my way. “You should come over with me and I’ll grab a gurney for you to transport him.”

There was no way Jason would admit anyone from our Pack into the hospital. Too many chances our tissue and blood samples might end up under a microscope. But if I didn’t accept her help, this nurse would be suspicious. Besides, we couldn’t leave Wyatt on the floor.

“Good idea.” I got to my feet. “I’ll be right back.”

• • •

Jason lowered the gurney so we could shift Wyatt onto it. I helped him lift his father onto the thin mattress and we pulled up the rails before raising the bed.

“I better go check on Nadya.”

Jason nodded, but all his attention stayed on Wyatt.

I jogged back to the exam room and opened the door. She was still asleep on the table where I left her, and still human. The tension drained from my muscles watching her chest rise and fall, breathing peacefully like she hadn’t just partially shifted into a wolf in my arms.

I’d wake her soon enough. For now, I returned to the hallway to check on Jason. He leaned against the rail, holding Wyatt’s hand. I stood beside him, unsure what to say. I’d lost my father. I understood the pain, but I had no clue how to offer any comfort.

Nothing I said could fix it.

“You’re not going to admit him to the hospital, are you?”

He shook his head. “No, we can’t risk that.” Jason glanced my way. “When we set the appointment today with Granger, I forgot my dad was coming by to meet me for dinner. He saw Granger running from me and caught him. Granger injected him right in the chest.” His attention shifted to his dad’s still form. “This is my fault.”

“You didn’t know Granger was going to pump him full of potassium.”

“But he warned me not to trust him. I didn’t listen. I was desperate to save Nadya. Now I’ve doomed her, too.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, wishing like hell that Adam or Aren were here to talk some sense into him. “Nadya’s fate was sealed when Fonthill bit her. She wanted the serum as much as you did.”

Did I believe that? Casting blame on Jason would be easy, but would it help anyone? It certainly wouldn’t change what was happening. Jason squeezed Wyatt’s hand and placed it back down on the gurney. Everything happened so fast.

And Sebastian had been telling the truth.

Dr. Granger had been juicing her up and reporting back to Nero. He’d ordered her to be picked up for research. The guy who killed my brother may have helped me save my mate, or at least given me more time with her. In a twisted way, I was grateful to him. When did the world get so damned crazy?

“How’s Nadya?”

Jason snapped me back into the moment. “She’s sleeping. Probably will be for hours. These shifts without the moon zap her strength.”

“It’s not going to get better.”

I did *not* want to hear this. “I know.”

His gaze met mine. “I’m really sorry, Gareth.”

“I am, too.” My eyes burned. I swallowed a ball of emotion and nodded. “But I’m not giving up on her. Whatever time we have left, I’m going to make it count.”

He gripped my shoulder. “I never gave you enough credit.”

“I have asshole tendencies.”

“I’ll give you that.” He almost smiled. He pulled in a slow breath and let it out. “I need to get him out of here.”

“Want me to help you?”

Jason nodded. “Let’s move him down to the ground floor and I’ll go pull my car around.”

We rolled Wyatt off the elevator and Jason walked out the glass doors, leaving me behind with his father. I pushed the gurney closer to the door and waited. Jason’s dad looked peaceful, like he was just taking a nap.

“Hey, Wyatt. I don’t know if you can hear me, but you’ve gotta hang on and get better. Jason’s going to take you home to Sarah.” My voice wobbled and I cleared my throat. “She’ll help you until your head is healed.” I cleared my throat. “She needs you. Jason and Jared need you, too.”

He never moved. I didn’t expect a response, but I hoped he heard me. He and Sarah had been together for almost forty years. I couldn’t imagine one without the other, and I didn’t want to think about how tough it was going to be for Jason to bring his father to her in a coma.

Jason pulled up outside and I put the rail down on the gurney. I scooped Wyatt into my arms and lifted him out. Even though he was in his sixties now, he was still a big strong guy. Heavy. If I hadn’t been a werewolf, I probably couldn’t have carried him all the way down the front stairs to the car.

Jason had the passenger door of his Lexus open with the seat reclined. “Can you lay him there?”

“I think so.” I leaned in, my arms shaking as I struggled to keep Wyatt steady. Jason was on the other side, stabilizing his head and shoulders as we placed him on the seat. Once Wyatt was in, Jason pulled the seat belt down and snapped it around Wyatt.

He looked up at me. “Do you need help with Nadya?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“Set the alarm when you leave.”

Everyone in our Pack had the code to Jason’s office in case we ever needed medical attention after hours. “Got it.”

He drove away and I jogged back up to Nadya. Reality sinking in more and more with each step I climbed.

There wasn’t going to be a cure. And I had no idea how I’d survive without

her.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

NADYA

I woke up in Gareth's bed. He slept beside me, his arm around my middle. I smiled, drinking in the feel of his muscular body molded against my back. This was how I wanted to wake up every day. Or as many as I had left. I took his hand, careful of the scratches. His skin was nearly healed. Tracing the veins on the front of his wrist and up his forearm, I admired the miracle of my mate.

The unexpected shift in Jason's office drained me, and reminded me my time was limited. I wanted to spend all of it memorizing every part of Gareth, learning every memory.

Although we'd had a bumpy start, Gareth had kept his word. As my body continued to morph and change, he'd been at my side each step of the way, fully aware the outcome wouldn't be in our favor. Love only took you so far, but his was braided with loyalty, honor, passion, and duty. Together they made a rope that had pulled me back from the edge of oblivion.

Few people had that kind of fortitude.

I tried to remember what happened. I'd started feeling sick on the elevator ride up to Jason's floor of the medical building. We'd been in the exam room when the wolf came forward, instinctive and aggressive. She sensed my weakened state. The moment Jason brought over the blood pressure cuff, I realized my wolf was present. Fully. If he had touched me, I couldn't be sure

I wouldn't have attacked him.

A little jolt of fear shot through me.

Dr. Granger had come in and argued with Gareth. Blood. I had smelled blood. My memory ended there. My wolf took over, clawing her way forward without the moon's help. Protecting her mate.

Gareth's lips caressed the tender skin below my ear. "Good morning."

I reached back to run my fingers through his hair, grounding myself in the present. "I'll move in with you."

"Works for me." He chuckled, his chest vibrating against my back. I turned over to face him and he ran his thumb along my jawline. "What brought this on?"

"Simple answer?" I nuzzled into the gentle touch of his rough fingertips. "I don't want to waste any time away from you."

He smiled and tipped his head up to kiss my forehead. Underneath his chin were four angry red scratches. "Did I do that?"

He froze and reached up to inspect his chin with his fingers. "It didn't hurt. I didn't even realize it left a mark."

Tears welled in my eyes. "I'm turning into a monster. Just like Fonthill. I was so angry at Jason for trying to touch me, I worried I'd attack him if he tried." A hot tear rolled down my cheek. "I can't trust myself anymore."

He shook his head. "You're no more a monster than any of us in the Pack. You weren't feeling well, it makes sense your wolf would step up to protect you. If I'd been thinking straight, I never would've punched Dr. Granger while he was in the room with you. As soon as I smelled his blood I knew I fucked up. That's when you started shifting."

"I can't remember. She took over."

He nodded and kissed the tear stain on my cheek. "I called you back. That's all that matters."

"How long until that doesn't work anymore?"

“Come on...” Gareth sighed, meeting my eyes. “If you lose hope, we’ll be lost. You’re our sunshine and rainbows. Don’t count on me for that.”

“I don’t want sunshine and rainbows. I need reality.”

He broke down the dam on his emotions, leaving me to tread through the churning anger, fear, and rage. “Granger is gone. I tried to track his scent, but there’s nothing. It’s like he was never in Reno. We’re not going to get a cure. The bastard shot up Jason’s dad with enough potassium chloride to stop his heart. Now Wyatt’s in a coma, and Adam is pissed to high heaven at all of us for bringing Nero in without telling him. To top off that shit heap, your nose was bleeding and I’m fucking petrified that the next time you shift, I might lose you for good.”

He ground his teeth together, boxing his emotions up again, but his eyes shone with tears he’d never let fall. “But you’re here. You’re with me. And I’m with you. I’m doing the best I can to appreciate every second of time we have. So this fear and anger can fuck off. All I’m going to concentrate on is loving you, sweetheart. You’re all that matters to me.”

I clung to him, kissing him with all the passion and love in my heart. I didn’t want to think about Wyatt in a coma, or Adam being upset with us, or even that my next shift might be my last. Gareth was the only thing that mattered to me. I was alive and I was in love. Some people who lived twice as long as me would never experience this. A gift.

He rolled over me, my nails sliding down his back as he entered me slowly. I moaned into the kiss. Yeah, I definitely wanted to wake up like this every day.

...

I held Madeleine on the mare’s back and Lana had Malcolm right behind her. Bubbles stood, patiently waiting for Luke’s signal to move. The Morgan mare was the most docile and sweet in Adam’s barn, and the little ones loved

riding her bareback.

“Ready?” Luke held the lead rope, looking up at the kids.

Madeleine squealed, “Ready!”

Malcolm was more reserved than his sister, his pudgy hands grabbing her shoulders to keep him steady.

Luke eased Bubbles forward. The mare walked very slowly, sensing her precious cargo. We stayed beside her, each of us steadying the little ones at the waist, ready to pull them off and into our arms if Bubbles spooked at anything. The kids giggled in delight, and I glanced up at the house. Gareth was up there facing the music with Adam. I tried to stay with him, but both Gareth and Lana plotted to have me help with the twins. *Diabolical*.

They knew I couldn't turn down the little guys. Would they even remember me when I was gone? I struggled to reel in the emotions and stay focused on today, right now. On Gareth, accepting the wrath in my place.

“It'll be okay,” Lana murmured behind me. “Adam's just worried about everyone. He's gotta blow off some steam, and Gareth is the only one close by.”

“Am I that obvious?”

She smiled. Lana had grown up in foster care, dreaming of a family, and now that she had a big werewolf Pack, she'd blossomed into a strong, beautiful matriarch, grounding the hotheaded wolves around her.

“You keep watching the house, like Adam might throw him out any minute.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I just feel bad that Gareth's taking the heat when I was the one pushing everyone to help me fight this bite.”

Luke turned around to walk the kids back down the barn aisle. “Adam's no angel, either.” We both glanced his way and he shrugged. “Adam dated a jaguar that Nero was hunting, and he kept it a secret from the Pack.”

I glanced at Lana. “You?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “Adam was convinced they'd kill me first and ask questions later, so we tried to get rid of Nero on our own. I'll remind him of that if he doesn't let this go soon.”

Tonight was the new moon. My sister and Lana would both shift into jaguars. The Pack used to kill jaguar shifters who trespassed on their territory on sight, but things were different now. Adam and Aren would be out

watching over their jaguar mates to be sure they didn't cross paths with humans, protecting them instead of hunting them.

"I'm really sorry I got everyone involved in this mess. When I realized Gareth was my mate, I wanted to live for him. He's lost too many people already. I didn't want to be one more. I pushed way too hard and it ended up putting everyone in jeopardy."

"Luke, stop for a second."

He pulled on Bubbles's halter. "Whoa, girl."

Lana placed a hand on my shoulder. "The whole Pack feels responsible for you being bitten in the first place. We all want to make this right. None of this is your fault."

I reached up with my free hand to cover hers. "Thank you."

"Move, horsey!" Madeleine wriggled, trying to make the clicking noises her dad made when he was out training the horses.

We laughed and I tried not to focus on the milestones I would miss in their young lives.

Yeah, it was getting tougher not to be bitter.

...

*From the Journal of Dr. M. Granger – Journal Entry 537*

I am back on Nero property with my experiment results. I regret that the Pack discovered my intentions. The subject was on the verge of achieving a full body shift. My employer is dispatching another team to Reno to attempt to procure Ms. Dalca for further study and testing.

The Lycan Project subjects could not tolerate the higher levels of adrenaline in their bodies, but Ms. Dalca has had twice the amount of treatments in half the time, and no sign of the brain hemorrhaging yet.

Due to the research collected during the past two weeks, we are very close to a new treatment plan utilizing subjects who exhibit psychic abilities. One question remains unanswered; is the success due to Ms. Dalca being bitten?

Once we have collected her, we will have her bite one of our subjects and

chart the progress of the serum in a bitten and unbiten subject. Mr. Severino assures me I will have the answers I seek. Until then, I await Ms. Dalca's arrival.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

GARETH

I sat still and shut the hell up for the better part of the last hour, allowing my Alpha to blow his stack even though we both knew I wasn't a primary target. Jason and Nadya had brought Dr. Granger to Reno.

But when I found out, I kept it secret. Since Jason was busy with Wyatt, and there was no way I'd let Adam rage at my mate, that left me. I could take it. Besides, we deserved it. Inviting Nero to Reno was stupid, but we were out of options and Nadya was running out of time.

Adam stopped pacing the room and finally took a seat across the table from me. "Tell me again what Sebastian said when he left?"

"He told us when he didn't complete the mission to bring Nadya back, his father would send more men."

Adam growled, raking his fingers through his hair. "Shit."

"I have a plan if you care to hear it."

"Does it involve getting in bed with Nero?"

I clenched my fists under the table. "Screw you, Adam."

He shook his head. "What's your plan?"

"It's a new moon tonight. Perfect night for Nero to send in a couple of jaguars to keep us on our toes, and while we're busy fighting them, their human mercenaries can make the grab for Nadya."

Adam crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair.

“You and Aren will be out tonight watching over Lana and Sasha, Jason and Jared are with Wyatt, and that leaves me and Nadya to watch the kids. We can take them up to the Sloan cabin at the lake. Nero won’t know to look for us there.”

Adam dropped all four legs of his chair to the floor and shook his head. “Your hand, arm, and chin have wolf scratches on them. I’m assuming that’s from Nadya. Malcolm and Madeleine wouldn’t stand a chance if she went after them.”

“You think I’d let anything happen to them?” I got up, gripping the chair back. Hard. “Nadya isn’t a monster and she’s not dangerous. I got cut because I tried to restrain her wolf. I had it coming. You have my word if she starts shifting I’ll have the little ones locked in a bedroom before they see anything.”

“Sorry, Gareth. I can’t take the risk.”

“The risk?” I shook my head, pushing off of the chair. “What are you going to do with your kids tonight, Adam? I don’t see you have many options. You and Aren will be out protecting your mates, watching for Nero’s jaguars. Jason and Jared are helping Sarah with Wyatt, Logan has a rock concert tonight, and Luke has told anyone who will listen that he doesn’t enjoy babies.”

I watched his eyes, daring him to look away. “So your move. You’ve got a safer place for those kids than with me? They love Nadya and she loves them. She’d never hurt them.”

“Nadya loves you, too, and you’ve got wounds anyway. How can you expect me to agree to this? I love Nadya. We all do, but this wolf that emerges without the full moon—that’s not Nadya, it’s a Nero synthetic creation.”

“Nadya is *not* a monster.” It took all the strength I possessed to keep from attacking him. My voice lowered to a gravelly growl. “And if you make her feel like one, I will kick your ass, Alpha or not.”

The door opened. We both turned and in came Lana with Malcolm on her

hip. Nadya followed behind with a giggling Madeleine as they rubbed noses. She looked so beautiful, beaming with the little girl in her arms. My gut twisted. Never in my life had I considered a family, but seeing her with the afternoon sun in her hair and Madeleine in her arms, I suddenly ached to see her holding our children.

“Are you through lashing into Gareth?” Lana perched on Adam’s leg while Malcolm leaned in to give his dad a wet kiss.

Adam rolled his eyes. “Tough to take me seriously when I’ve got a big wet one on my cheek.”

Lana smiled at me. “It’s been a rough couple of weeks. How’re you holding up?”

I shrugged, staring at Nadya. “We’re okay.” She met my eyes and my pulse thrummed. I shifted in my chair and focused my attention on Lana. “I was telling Adam that Nadya and I could take the kids up to the cabin for the new moon tonight. Keep them out of trouble while you’re on the prowl.”

She grinned at Malcolm. “Want to play with Nadya and Gareth tonight?”

He nodded. “Play Gareff!”

She glanced at Adam and grimaced. “What? Did you have other plans?”

“I’d rather discuss it with you in private.”

My hackles rose, and deep inside my wolf growled. If he said one word that wiped the smile from Nadya’s face, forget kicking his ass, I’d kill him.

Lana’s gaze moved to Nadya, then me, before landing on Adam again. “Are you worried about Nadya’s condition?”

I narrowed my eyes, willing Adam to think hard before he spoke.

Nadya disrupted my death stare by handing me Madeleine. She looked over at Lana. “After yesterday’s episode, Adam’s right to be concerned.”

Lana sighed and met my eyes. “Do you think it’s too dangerous?”

“I never would have offered if I thought I’d be putting the twins in harm’s way.” I took Nadya’s hand, pulling her closer. “I gave Adam my word, if there is any sign of a change coming on, I’ll have the kids in the playpen in the bedroom.”

Nadya squeezed my hand. “I’d die if I ever hurt them.”

“That’s why you’d never hurt them. Your wolf is still part of you. She protects her own.”

Adam let out a frustrated breath and kissed Lana’s cheek. “I defer to you. If you’re comfortable, then I am, too.”

Lana got up and handed Malcolm to his dad. She crossed to Nadya and gave her a tight hug. “Thank you for keeping them safe.”

• • •

We left my bike at Adam’s ranch and took Lana’s new sedan up to the cabin. It came with two car seats and a full tank of gas, not too shabby at all. After a stop at the Tahoe market, we had steak for us and a fresh box of dry Cheerios for the twins. Lana packed juice and sandwiches, and I had permission to fill them up with donuts on our way back down in the morning.

I rounded the corner into the kitchen, a twin dragging from each ankle, giggling like little maniacs. “Need any help with dinner?”

Nadya turned and busted up laughing. I smiled. This was exactly what I’d been hoping for. After the mess with Dr. Granger and Wyatt and the scratch on my face, I wanted to give Nadya a night of normal. Or as normal as werewolves could achieve.

“You look like you’ve got your hands full already.”

“I better go find Malcolm and Madeleine.” I walked in a circle around the island in the center of the kitchen. “I wonder where they went.”

The twins laughed themselves silly all over again while their bellies polished the tile floor. I made my way over to Nadya. Standing behind her, I slid my arms around her waist. “Thanks for cooking.”

She covered my hand with hers. “Thanks for the mini getaway. This is nice.”

The twins scrambled to their feet, tugging at my jeans.

“The natives are getting restless.” I bent down and hoisted up the wigglers, one in each arm. “Superman arms, ready?”

Malcolm was just starting to notice superheroes, and Madeleine played along because she was fun that way. We zoomed back into the living room. I landed them on the big sofa and blew raspberries on their bellies until they

couldn't breathe.

By the time Nadya called us for dinner, I wasn't sure who was more winded—me, or the twins. We made the wise choice to eat in the breakfast nook of the kitchen. The toddlers' table manners were not yet ready for the light sand-colored wool carpet.

After dinner, Nadya started to clear the plates and I caught her wrist. "You cooked. I'll clean up."

She grinned and tipped her head toward our messy-faced dinner guests. "You're trying to get out of cleaning them up for bed."

"Just because I work as a grease monkey doesn't mean I'm stupid." I winked and grabbed the plates.

"No one would ever accuse you of that." She kissed my cheek and wrangled the sticky-handed little ones up to the bathtub.

Outside the kitchen window, the stars sparkled on the surface of Lake Tahoe. Without the moon to dim them, millions of pinpricks of lights twinkled overhead. I cracked the window, still on alert, checking for any scents I didn't recognize. We didn't think Nero was aware of the cabin yet, but with my mate and the two little ones nearby, I wasn't taking any chances. If Nero sent another team that included a shifter like Sebastian, I'd have my hands full.

Once I closed the dishwasher, I heard Nadya call my name. She probably only spoke it. No need to shout when you've got werewolf hearing. I jogged up the stairs and I turned the corner to the guest room we'd planned for the kids to sleep in. Nadya sat on the edge of the bed, Malcolm already asleep in her arms.

She smiled up at me and my chest tightened. Damn she was beautiful, and most of the time her beauty had little to do with her perfect lips and green eyes. Or the dimple I'd never get tired of kissing when she laughed.

Madeleine sat on the floor, but as soon as she saw me, she stretched out her

arms. “Uncle Gareff... Up.”

I scooped her into my arms, and the little rug rat snuggled in close to my chest. I kissed her damp hair and looked over at Nadya. “Need me to set up the portable cribs?”

“Please.” She nodded. “I would’ve done it, but I didn’t want to wake Malcolm.” She grinned. “You wore these two out.”

“All part of my plan.” I laid Madeleine on the bed beside Nadya and went to work on the cribs. Once we had them up, and the kids sleeping inside, we crept out, leaving the door cracked just in case.

Downstairs, I took Nadya’s hand, our fingers instinctively twining together. “The stars are really bright tonight. Want to pull up a couple chairs and have a drink on the deck?”

“Sounds wonderful.”

The fire pit on the deck sat dormant. It would’ve been romantic to have a fire, but jaguars had amazing night vision. The last thing we needed was to attract one to us. Carrying two chairs, she followed me to the railing and took a seat. I rubbed her shoulders, the sound of her moan warming my blood.

“Thirsty?” I asked.

She dropped her head back, smiling at me. “Sounds great.”

I went back inside and returned with two cold beers. Taking the seat beside her, I handed one bottle to Nadya. “Hope beer is all right. It was the only alcohol I could find in there.”

“It’s fine.” She tipped the neck of the bottle toward me and I clinked mine to hers. “Here’s to a fun, exhausting night of babysitting.”

“Got that right.” I took a swig and glanced her way. “When we were in Virginia City and you started shifting, do you remember me dream walking, or whatever the hell it is I’ve been doing?”

She nodded, sipping the beer. “It’s hazy but I think we danced on this deck.”

“I don’t know how the magic works, but hearing that you saw it, too, makes me feel less insane.”

She rested her head against my shoulder. “Thank you for tonight. This was exactly what I needed.”

I slid my arm around her shoulders and she settled her head against my chest. We watched the stars and finished our beers. Usually, sitting in silence was my thing, but having Nadya with me, and knowing that clock was still ticking, I found myself struggling to keep quiet.

Yeah, the creator had a fucking hilarious sense of humor.

“Remember at the wedding, we stood against this railing and you told me how you didn’t want to waste a minute of the time you had left being sad.” She nodded and I kissed her hair. “I think you should add: no time spent calling yourself a monster. You’re Nadya, my mate, my lover ,and the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. No room in there for monsters.”

She smiled up at me. “I love you.”

I kissed her, tender and slow, drinking her in before resting my forehead against her and whispering, “Come here.”

She got out of her chair and settled in my lap. I buried my fingers in the back of her hair, my tongue parting her lips. She moaned and my pulse pounded below my belt. She made me crazy on so many levels.

I rested my forehead on hers, staring into her eyes. “We should get inside.”

She nodded and started to move, but I stood up, taking her with me as I cradled her in my arms. Nadya laughed, nuzzling into my neck. “I can walk.”

“And I can carry you.”

She teased my earlobe with her teeth. “I should warn you, if you take me upstairs, I’ll probably throw myself at you.”

I laughed. “Is that a threat or a promise?”

“What do you want it to be?” She teased the base of my neck with her warm lips, and the sensual tone of her voice had me rock hard in seconds.

“Definitely a promise.” I opened the French door and carried her inside, closing and locking the door behind us. “And I plan to collect.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

NADYA

We pulled into Adam's ranch just before noon. Lana was out of the house before we had Malcolm and Madeleine freed from their car seats. Adam followed her out and clasped Gareth's forearms. "How'd it go? Were the little monsters well behaved?"

"No monsters, Daddy!" Madeleine pointed at Adam from her perch on her mom's hip.

Adam put his hands up in mock surrender.

"They were angels." I handed Malcolm to his dad.

Adam tossed him in the air, eliciting joyful squeals from his son and narrowed eyes from his wife. "Adam!"

He boosted Malcolm up on top of his shoulders, holding his ankles. "What?"

Gareth came around and took my hand. "Any sign of Nero last night?"

Adam shook his head. "Not yet. The only jaguars out were ours." He bumped his hip against Lana's.

Lana kissed Madeleine's forehead, making eye contact with me. "How are you feeling?"

I shrugged. "I'm fine for now."

Gareth squeezed my hand and glanced at Adam. "Any word from Jason?"

Our Alpha sobered. "Wyatt's still not responsive. Jason brought all the

home health equipment to Sarah and Jared is helping with his care, too.”

I didn’t push the plunger on the potassium chloride, but I was painfully aware that Dr. Granger had only been in Reno to get to me. I couldn’t help but feel completely responsible for Wyatt’s condition. And if Nero still wanted me, I was putting the rest of the Pack in danger, too.

“Does the rest of the Pack know what Sebastian told us? Nero is probably sending another team to Reno to try to take me back there.”

Adam nodded. “Everyone is in the loop. They understand the threat, and we’re all being cautious.”

A note of censure colored Adam’s voice, but I deserved it. In hindsight, Jason and I never should have convinced Gareth and Wyatt to stay quiet about Dr. Granger. Wyatt had tried to warn us about the doctor after my first visit, but Jason had been confident he had the situation under control, and I’d been too desperate for a cure to question it.

“I’m really sorry...about everything.”

Lana nudged him and Adam sighed. “You’re not the first one to think you could handle Nero on your own. I hope we’ve all learned that we’re stronger as a Pack than as lone wolves.”

Gareth tugged my hand. “Let’s grab some lunch.”

I almost smiled. Small talk and changing the subject were still not Gareth’s strong suit. I embraced Lana and Madeleine. “See you soon.”

Lana and Madeleine waved good-bye. “Soon for sure.”

Adam and Gareth got in a quick man-hug before Adam turned my way and held me tight. Against my ear he whispered, “I’ve never seen Gareth so human. You’re magic.”

“I can hear every word.” Gareth crossed his arms over his chest, but his gruff tone didn’t match the light in his eyes.

Adam pulled back, chuckling as he turned to face Gareth. “Good. She is magic, isn’t she?”

Gareth nodded, his gaze locked on mine. “She sure is.”

My cheeks heated up. I nudged Adam with my shoulder. “Okay enough.”

Gareth grinned and my body tingled with warmth. He definitely needed to smile more.

He took my hand. “See you guys soon.”

I waved to them as we headed for the Harley. On our way back from Lake Tahoe, we’d called Jason and planned to visit Wyatt. Now that we were putting on our helmets and getting on the bike, the sadness seeped into my skin.

Gareth patted my thigh with his gloved hand. “Ready?”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever be ready to see Wyatt Ayers in a coma. I slid my arms around Gareth’s waist, my body pressed tight against his. “Yeah.”

The engine started. No turning back now.

...

We stopped for sandwiches on the way. Since I’d been bitten and converted into a werewolf, my appetite had multiplied until I was pretty sure I could out-eat a lumberjack. But I didn’t seem to be gaining any weight, so there was a little perk.

I’d never been to Wyatt and Sarah’s house before. The few times we’d met it had been at Adam’s horse ranch. They lived on the edge of Lake Stanley, their sprawling home nestled within the shade of mature pine and oak trees. We rolled up their brick driveway and I did my best not to get slack jawed.

“I thought Wyatt was an animal vet.”

Gareth turned off the Harley and nodded as he pulled off his helmet. “He still is, but Sarah owns a commercial real estate firm. She makes the big bucks.”

I got off the bike and laid my helmet on the seat. “They have a beautiful home.”

He nodded. "Wait until you see the inside."

I hesitated.

"What's wrong?" He frowned, coming closer.

While my mate had gotten better about controlling his emotions around me so my empathic abilities didn't have me climbing the walls, Sarah and Jared had not.

"Just give me a second to collect myself. I've gotta keep a clear head or I won't be able to shield myself from their emotions. They're already hitting me and we're still outside."

Gareth glanced at the front door and back to me. "If this is too much, I can tell Jason you aren't feeling well."

"No. I owe it to Jason to see how his father is doing and apologize to his family."

"This wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not directly. But still..."

The door opened. We both turned. Jason jogged down the steps toward us. Being a doctor by profession, his feelings were buried under a blanket of calm. He walked past Gareth and pulled me into his arms. My wolf stirred, but I wrapped my arms around him anyway, reminding my wolf that he was a member of our Pack.

A brother. Nothing more.

He stepped back, searching my eyes. "How are you feeling? Gareth told me you had a nosebleed this last time. Any headaches?"

"Not really." I shook my head. "But there was more going on than just the nosebleed. When I snapped at you, if you hadn't backed off, I think I would've attacked you."

"Aggression is one of the side effects, too. It's safe to surmise that the last shift was triggered by fear. Your wolf recognized doctors as a threat, especially when Gareth fought with Dr. Granger."

I nodded slowly. “I started shifting in Virginia City after I found Gareth and Sebastian fighting. You could be on to something.”

“This makes sense.” He glanced at Gareth and back to me. “The small dose of natural adrenaline that your body secretes when you’re upset ends up being all it takes to send your wolf forward.”

Gareth came to stand beside me, sliding his hand up my back slowly in support. “So we need to keep you happy and calm.”

I looked up at him, a smile creeping up on me. “Happy works for me.”

He bent to kiss my forehead. “I’ll do my best.”

Jason glanced over his shoulder at the open front door. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” I walked past both of them, having no clue if I was really ready or not.

Jason and Gareth followed. With my acute wolf hearing, I overheard Jason murmuring more details to Gareth about the link between my shifting and my emotional state. He was probably on to something, but the fact remained that my empathic abilities made it impossible for me to live in a bubble. Even if *I* wasn’t the one upset, my strongest mental shields couldn’t protect me from the emotions of others.

Jared met me inside the door. I didn’t know him very well, but the pain and sadness coming off of him in waves hurt my heart.

“I’m so sorry, Jared.”

“Thanks.” He stepped back to let me pass. “Dad’s in the downstairs guest room. I’ll show you the way.”

I wanted to hug him, but I’d learned over the years that just because I sensed someone’s emotions, many times it was an intrusion for me to console them. If he needed my comfort, he’d make the first move.

The interior of the house was rustic, like the Sloan Consulting cabin in Lake Tahoe, but on a grander scale. After growing up in New York and New Jersey, the southwestern feel of the room should have been foreign to me, but

something about the joining of the outdoor climate with the interior worked for me. Maybe it was the wolf inside of me, but the more time I spent in Reno, the more I wanted to settle in.

The living room had a vaulted ceiling going two stories up with a large stone fireplace on the far wall. Hardwood floor covered the lower level with Navajo throw rugs adding some color, and the staircase had a custom banister, natural rugged Manzanita wood buffed until it shone a deep brick red. I caught myself wishing we were heading upstairs so I could run my fingertips along the gnarled banister.

Instead of being cavernous and opulent, as the exterior suggested, Wyatt and Sarah's home seemed warm and spacious. I followed Jared down a hallway lined with artwork depicting wild animals.

Jared stopped and called through the door. "Mom, Nadya and Gareth are here."

"Come on in," Sarah murmured from inside.

I nodded to Jared and moved past him into the room. Wyatt lay motionless on the bed, a couple of IV stands near his head. At least he was breathing on his own.

"Have a seat, Nadya." She patted the chair next to her. Her other hand clasped Wyatt's.

Sarah had hazel eyes that radiated life. She'd passed them on to her twin sons as well. They both had Wyatt's bone structure, but their mother got all the credit for their stunning eyes.

I sat down beside her. "How is he doing?"

"He's resting. Go ahead and talk to him."

"Can he hear me?"

She shrugged, tilting her head slightly. "Jason says some patients report being able to hear everything people say." Cautious hope emanated from her, tingling against my skin. "For now, I talk to him as much as possible. He

could wake up and run screaming from this room at any moment.” She winked at me and then focused on her husband again. “And you’ll have me to thank for it, right Wy?”

She squeezed his hand and I noticed a scar on the outside edge of hers. It had to be from Wyatt converting her years ago. Did the Pack usually bite the hand of their mate? Like a werewolf version of a wedding ring? My scar was jagged and unwanted, marring my shoulder. A constant reminder of being attacked instead of loved. I pulled in a controlled breath, boxing up the anger that swelled inside me. If my emotions were the key to these shifts, wallowing in the unfairness of my situation wasn’t going to help.

I couldn’t ask my sister about the Pack converting their mates. Lana and Sasha were jaguars already, so Jason cautioned both Adam and Aren against it. Humans became werewolves. No one could be sure what would happen to a jaguar if they were bitten.

But Sarah had been human...

I shut down my curiosity. This was not the place for a bunch of personal questions. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

“We all are, but if anyone can recover, it’s my Wyatt. He’s the most stubborn person I’ve ever known.”

“I don’t know what Jason told you, but I was the one—”

“No, honey.” She shook her head, glancing my way. “Neither you nor Jason could have guessed this was going to happen. And if it had to happen to someone, I’m sure Wyatt would’ve wanted it to be him. He and Nick are the only Pack elders left who were studied by that Granger character, so hopefully that giant chip on Wyatt’s shoulder will pull him back to us. Bottom line, he wouldn’t blame you, and I won’t either.”

Gareth settled his hands heavy on my shoulders. I tipped my head back to look at him. “I wondered if we lost you.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Just talking to Jason.”

He bent over to brush a kiss on Sarah's cheek. "Sorry about Wyatt."

She nodded, watching her husband's face. "Thanks for coming by, Gareth. I know he'd appreciate the visit."

"He's a good man. He deserves better." Gareth rubbed my shoulders, gently easing the tension bunching there. "We'll make Nero pay for this."

Sarah shot him a disapproving glare. "Hasn't this Pack sparred with them enough? Nothing will make this right, Gareth. It's not worth putting any of you in danger."

Sarah was a smart woman. Before I could agree, Gareth tightened his grip on my shoulders. "If we let them get away with this, they'll never leave us alone. Nadya was their target. And they'll keep coming until they have her."

Sarah sighed and stared at her husband's sleeping face. "The casualties of this war have already been too high. We lost Gabe and Malcolm, now Wyatt is fighting for his life. This Pack is my family. I can't bear to lose anyone else."

"We're on alert, and we'll be ready."

"You'd better be." She released Wyatt's hand and patted my leg. "You're in good hands."

I rested back against Gareth's firm abdomen. "I'm very lucky."

We chatted with Sarah until Jason finally came in to add a bag of fluid to the IV stand.

"We'll get out of your hair." I stood up and moved beside Gareth. "I'm keeping Wyatt in my thoughts. If you need anything..."

"...Jason and Jared are taking good care of us. I'm sure Wyatt will wake up soon."

Gareth led me toward the door. "See you soon, Sarah."

Jared passed us to go back inside, carrying a bottle of water and a sandwich in for his mother.

"Take care, Jared," Gareth said.

Jared nodded, briefly making eye contact with us. “You, too. Thanks for coming by.”

With the Ayers family busy caring for Wyatt, we let ourselves out and walked back to the Harley in silence. Gareth got on the bike and shook his head. “This isn’t right.”

I slid onto the seat behind him. “Jason thinks he’ll wake up and be okay eventually, though.”

“He’s not sure of anything.” Gareth pulled on his gloves. “Apparently there’s no way to tell if he has permanent brain damage from the lack of oxygen to his brain until he wakes up. He said Wyatt could be like this for a few days or a few months, and even if he regains consciousness, he might not be the Wyatt we all knew.”

I rubbed at the dull ache in my chest and cleared my throat to find my voice. “I wish there was something we could do.”

“Me, too.” Gareth started the Harley and I grabbed his waist as he rolled forward. I didn’t know where we were going.

And I didn’t really care.

Seeing Wyatt lifeless in bed made it tough to keep hiding from the reality of what was happening to me. Gareth was my mate. I needed him to know my wishes.

Even though he wouldn’t want to hear them.

We rode in silence. I did my best to calm my thoughts and enjoy the wind against my skin. Gareth leaned into the final turn, and I opened my eyes as we pulled into his place. Luke was waiting out front with his pickup.

I moved close to Gareth’s ear as the door to his garage started to open. “What’s Luke doing here?”

He kept the Harley steady while I got off. He swung his leg over and stood up, removing his helmet and gloves. “I called him from Jason’s place. He’s going to help us get your stuff moved over.”

“Wow.” A laugh bubbled on my lips, surprising me after the heartbreak I’d experienced at Wyatt’s house. “You don’t waste any time.”

“Nope.” He tipped his head with a cocky grin that launched butterflies in my stomach. “Don’t want to wait for you to come to your senses.”

Luke came over with a chuckle. “Last chance to run, Nadya.”

I grinned and went to give Luke a hug. Before I was bitten, Luke was one of my first friends in the Pack.

Like his twin brother, Logan, Luke had rock star good looks, but their similarities ended there. Luke enjoyed working with his hands. His emotions ruled him and tended to be more polarizing, while Logan, the older of the two by a few minutes, kept his feelings close to his vest and channeled any frustrations into his music.

Lana confided in me that Adam brought Luke to work at Whispering Pines after he’d been sent to reform school during high school. He’d been getting in fights, and a werewolf in human form was stronger than most men. There was a real possibility he could hurt or kill another student. The hard labor on the ranch seemed to be the ticket. From the interactions I had with him, and even reaching out with my empathic powers, it was clear that Luke had grown into a good man.

I gave him a hug and pulled back with a smile. “Nah, I’ve got no regrets.”

We piled in the cab of his truck, me pinned between the broad shoulders of two chiseled werewolves. Today was getting better all the time. After a couple hours of packing, we hauled all my things out of the condo in one load. I hadn’t been in Reno long enough to amass much stuff.

Luke drove into the parking lot at Gareth’s place and then helped us unload. I paid him with a meat lover’s pizza.

After we were finally alone again, Gareth and I relaxed on the sofa. I rested on his chest while the television droned on. I wasn’t paying much attention. Too busy trying to figure out how to say what needed to be said.

“Sarah had a scar on her hand. Was that where Wyatt converted her?”  
Okay, so I had to *ease* into what I had to tell him.

“Yeah.” Gareth’s arms were around me, his large hands covering my abdomen. “Our parents’ Pack tradition was you court your mate and finally trust her with our secret, then it’s her choice to be converted. If she wants children, she’s got to become a werewolf.”

“But Adam didn’t bite Lana.”

“Yeah, that surprised everyone. Jason thinks she got pregnant because she was born a shifter. She didn’t need to be converted.”

I sank into a thoughtful silence. “Did they get married first?”

“Who?” Gareth clicked the television off.

“Wyatt and Sarah.” I shifted, rolling over so my chest was on his abdomen and I could see his face.

“No werewolf with any balls would trick a woman into marrying him first and then tell her what he really was.” He raised a brow. “What’s with all these questions?”

This was it. My stomach knotted. “I love you, and you’re my mate, so you need to know my wishes.”

“Your wishes?” He tilted his head slightly, confusion lining his features.

“There’s no cure, Gareth. We can’t keep ignoring what’s coming.” I swallowed a sob I wouldn’t let escape my throat. His pain stabbed into me and part of me wanted to change the subject, wanted to protect him. But this was too big. Too important. And god it hurt so bad. A tear rolled down my cheek as I whispered, “I don’t want to be trapped in a bed like Wyatt.”

# Chapter Thirty

GARETH

“I can’t do this now.” I lifted her off me and got up from the couch. A knife in the chest would’ve been less painful than her words.

The urge to get on my motorcycle and ride off without ever looking back slammed into me. My hair hung loose around my face, shielding me from the sadness in her eyes. I pulled it back and went to the fridge. There wasn’t enough beer in the world to keep this conversation from beating the shit out of me.

I turned around again and found Nadya leaning against the counter, swiping at a stray tear. “If not now, then when?”

“When we’re ninety.” I popped the cap off the bottle and took a long swallow.

“I wish we had that kind of time.” She came to stand in front of me, sliding her soft hands around my waist and underneath my T-shirt. “This hurts me, too.”

I set the bottle on the counter and wrapped her up safe in my arms. Closing my eyes, I breathed in the scent of her hair. Her body pressed tight against mine, where she belonged. My mind wandered toward despair, imagining her already gone, when Chloe’s voice whispered. My pain would be faced later. Right now, Nadya’s needs came first.

But there was no way in hell I was strong enough for this. I pulled in a slow breath. Maybe if I didn’t have to look in her eyes. “I’m trying, but...” I ground my teeth together, struggling to keep my voice even. “But the thought of telling you good-bye...”

I shook my head, unable to finish.

She didn't move or try to look up at me. We held each other in my tiny kitchen, clinging together tight like we could keep death from coming between us.

"I hope you won't sell the garage and move away." Her voice was so soft I'm not sure I would've been able to make out the words if I hadn't been a werewolf. "I know it'll have memories, but this place is a big part of who you are, and the Pack needs you."

I stared up at the ceiling, willing the burning in my eyes to stop. "Anything else?"

"If I start..."

I shushed her, frowning.

Something metallic clicked outside. I let go of her with one hand and turned off the light switch. In the dark, I kept her close, breathing slowly. This wasn't unexpected. I'd been on alert ever since Sebastian's warning, but being inside my garage handicapped my sense of smell. The scent of grease, oil, and gasoline made it impossible to tell if the noise I'd heard had come from someone I knew, or if it signaled danger.

Nero wanted my mate. I'd assume it was danger until I found out otherwise.

Slowly I released her, motioning for her to stay put while I ventured into my workspace. I silently lifted my forty-eight-inch steel pipe wrench from the hook on my tool wall. It weighed about twenty-three pounds and I could swing it hard enough to crack a skull.

As I reached for the front door, the glass in the top windows of the garage door exploded inward, followed by canisters of tear gas.

*Damn it.*

Nadya rushed to my side with her shirt over her mouth and nose. "We've got to get out of here."

"Yeah." I leaned in close to her ear. The gas already stung my eyes. "I need to tell you something first. This is going to be as helpful as cow shit, but here it is anyway. They're waiting for us out there, but I need you to try to stay calm. Jason thinks your natural production of adrenaline is what's triggering the shifts."

"I'm supposed to stay calm? Seriously?"

I nodded.

She shook her head. “Cow shit might be *more* helpful than that advice.”

I tugged her shirt down and kissed her lips quickly. “I’m going to distract them. You’re going to get the hell out of here. Understand?”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“I can take care of myself, but not if I’m worried about you.”

“I’ll stay out of the firing lines.”

I kissed her forehead. “Let’s get these bastards.”

I threw the door open and rushed the man nearest to us. They were all dressed alike in dark gray riot gear. I cracked the first one in the head with the steel pipe wrench. He crumpled onto the ground, a lifeless heap.

Nadya moved around the corner of the building as I rushed toward the next squad member. This one saw me coming and bent forward, ducking under my swing. I brought my hand down and my knee up, slamming his jaws together. He fell over just as something stung my back.

I reached around and plucked out a dart. *Fuck*. My vision wavered.

I kept swinging the wrench, keeping them away while I whispered, “Run, Nadya.”

She’d hear me. I blinked hard. Sometimes there were four guys left and then they would swell to six. My limbs were like giant Sequoias weighing me down. The edges of my vision darkened. Someone knocked me to the ground and grappled for my wrists. Two more jumped on me. I elbowed one in the Adam’s apple just as another guy kicked me in the stomach. All the air whooshed out of my lungs, stealing the last of my consciousness.

My eyes drifted closed and my spirit prayed Nadya was far from here.

# Chapter Thirty-One

NADYA

Around the side of the building my legs gave out. Pain radiated through my joints, but this time I didn't fight the change. I welcomed it. Embraced it.

I'd heard Gareth. *Run*. But where? Death was coming for me no matter where I went. How I left this world was my choice. My *only* choice.

They'd kill Gareth to get to me. I had to protect him and I needed my wolf to do that.

In a fraction of the time it had taken for my first shift, she burst to life, complete and deadly. Unlike the full moon nearly a month ago, this wasn't a gradual change of form. This was tendons tearing, bones cracking, and a pain in my head so gut-wrenching that brain surgery sounded appealing.

And this time I couldn't seem to guide her like I did before. All her attention focused on the scent of blood filling her nostrils.

I recognized it, too. *Gareth*.

She shook her body and leaped forward toward our mate. He lay on the ground, motionless, while four men in matching gray gear kicked and punched him. Anger, rage, and fear exploded through me.

Instinct took over. My wolf launched into the air toward the man closest to us. She sank her sharp fangs into the back of the man's neck, dragging him to the pitted pavement. Her powerful jaws crunched against bone until he stopped moving.

The others were shouting. I made out words like *rifle*, *capture*, and *darts*. My wolf didn't understand anything but protecting her mate.

Inside, I struggled to see through her eyes, to find the man with the rifle, but all I saw was blood and gore. She jumped onto another member of the Nero team, knocking him to the ground before tearing out his throat. Her stomach growled, encouraging her to finish her meal, but there was still danger.

She turned, spotting the next threat. The man scrambled to pick up Gareth's wrench, waving it erratically. Fear spiked through me until I remembered Gareth's advice to me after my first shift. Let the wolf take the lead. I stopped fighting her and joined, my will surrendering to her instinct.

With hackles raised, we pursued our quarry. We watched the weapon swing back and forth as the man tired. He gave one slow swipe and we dove at his legs, biting and tearing. Once he fell, we went for his neck, ripping into the soft flesh with our fangs.

Something impacted our hindquarters, knocking us off our attacker. Spinning around, we snapped our jaws, snarling. Two men were left standing, the one in front of us and another one we hadn't seen yet. A man with a rifle.

I recognized this man approaching us. Gareth had knocked him unconscious when we came out. He was plenty conscious now. Blood ran down the side of his face, out the corner of his mouth.

"Here puppy..." He kept glancing to his right.

I struggled inside, trying to gain my wolf's attention, but anger and adrenaline ruled her completely now. She pushed off her injured hind legs, pummeling the man in front of her. Her claws tore through his suit until blood soaked the fabric on his chest. Her jaw snapped closed on the exposed skin of his neck. He gurgled and went still.

A noise drew her attention. She swung her head toward the sound, and finally we saw the last Nero agent standing, the man with the rifle. Unlike the

others, he showed no fear. He stood his ground, calm and patient. Even united with my wolf, his emotions were plain to me. He enjoyed his work, relished the adrenaline, fed on the fear. We snarled as he raised the barrel.

*No. No.* I fought for control, but she was too far gone. We jogged forward, pursuing the final threat to our mate. He fired the dart, stinging us right between our shoulders, but it barely slowed our pace. The confidence faltered in the man's eyes. He cocked the rifle for another shot, but not soon enough. We sank our teeth into the flesh of his calf.

He slammed the butt of the rifle into our side. Pain flared. The wolf released him just long enough to fire one more time, and a sting burned our back. Our jaws snapped again. This time the man stumbled, and we were on him.

I insulated myself from the carnage, sensing our strength fading.

The tranquilizer impaired us, but it didn't stop us.

The blinding pain in our head did.

Inside I screamed. There was no escape from it, the sensation like claws tearing into our brain, ripping it slowly into pieces. Whining, the wolf dropped to her belly, no longer able to stand. The gut-wrenching agony stole my will to live. I just wanted the pain to stop.

Gareth still lay quiet on the gravel driveway. With the last of our strength, the wolf dragged her body to his side. We licked his face, whimpering and panting.

We couldn't get enough air.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

GARETH

Something wet brushed my cheek. Over and over. Hot air blew my hair back. I blinked and then blinked again, hard. My heart stuttered. A large dark brown wolf with bright green eyes lay beside me. Blood dripped from both her nostrils, and the pained mewling noises that escaped between pants made my gut twist.

*Nadya.*

I rolled to face her, touching the soft cheek of her muzzle. She leaned into my touch as tears stung my eyes. I didn't fight them. Didn't even try.

"No." I strangled on a sob. "Oh god, sweetheart. Not yet. Please. I'm not ready."

Sliding my hand down her back, my fingers found the end of a dart. I plucked it free. She didn't flinch. I discovered another fucking dart and yanked it out, too. Her panting grew even shallower until she fell listlessly over onto her side.

"Nadya. No!" I sat up, growling in pain as my cracked ribs pushed into my lung. I held her head up to look directly into her eyes. "Stay with me. Please."

I got to my knees and carefully slid my arms underneath to lift her. Her head lolled. She didn't struggle or move. I prayed it was the tranquilizers and not her brain hemorrhaging.

Blood dripped from her muzzle in a foreboding trail behind us.

Once I had her inside, I laid her on the cool cement floor of the garage. The whimpers silenced, and her eyes drifted closed. Her flanks bobbed up and down much too fast, her only sign of life.

I was losing her.

Lying on the floor beside her, my busted ribs screaming in pain, I prayed to whoever might be listening to save Nadya. I closed my eyes and my heart poured into my voice. I couldn't get a good breath into my injured lungs, but I chanted anyway. Over and over. I kept trying to find her in my mind, to see her and separate her from her wolf, but there was only fog. I was surrounded, lost.

My lips chanted and my mind shouted, "I'll follow you, Nadya. Don't leave me behind."

No answer.

I kept chanting. The coppery taste of blood stung the back of my throat, but it didn't stop me from calling her wolf. The fog billowed, gradually thinning. And finally I found her. Too weak to stand.

I approached slowly, begging the wolf to sleep, to let Nadya come forward. Her green eyes met mine and somehow I understood. She worried for Nadya. The pain was too much.

My song continued, breathless to my own ears, as my mind whispered, "Brave wolf. Protector. Let me care for Nadya while you heal. Let me love my mate."

Her wolf stared at me and slowly relaxed onto her side. Behind her lay Nadya, naked, shivering, and covered in blood.

My eyes snapped open, another tear leaking down my cheek. Nadya was back in her human form again, but blood oozed from her nose and ears. I reached out to touch her forehead. Her skin was hot, too hot. But she was still alive. Unconscious, but alive.

I needed to call Jason and get her some help. My pulse raced as I started to stand, but before I could pull out my phone, her words echoed in my head.

She didn't want to be trapped in a bed, in a coma like Wyatt. If I called Jason, would he respect her wishes? Maybe I was over-thinking. She could still wake up on her own anytime. I hoped.

I lifted her into my arms, growling at the pain in my chest. Those assholes had cracked my ribs and maybe punctured a lung. But Nadya's wolf had made certain they'd never hurt anyone again.

Slowly I carried her through the shop and into my studio, gritting my teeth to keep from wheezing. Inside the bathroom, I started the bath and lowered her into the tub. The lukewarm water didn't wake her, but it did seem to lower her body temperature.

Once I cleaned off all the blood and dirt, I checked for more injuries. Her nose still oozed a little, but nothing like it had been. I chose to take that as a good sign.

A car pulled up outside, and I recognized the engine. Adam's Jeep. He'd had Cheney since he turned sixteen. Over the years, I'd helped him replace the head gasket, a clutch, brakes, and we even rebuilt an engine. I'd know that rumble anywhere.

I grabbed a towel and lifted Nadya, wrapping her up and trying not to obsess that she was still unconscious. Adam's muffled curses echoed outside as my Alpha surveyed the carnage in my driveway.

Finally he knocked on the door. "Gareth. Are you in there?"

"Yeah." Carrying Nadya wasn't getting any easier. I needed to wrap my ribs, but I didn't have time for that now. "Be right there."

I put her down, still wrapped in the towel, on the couch and grabbed the blanket off the bed to drape over her, too. Hopefully she was comfortable. I wished she would open her eyes.

I wished for lots of things I wasn't going to get.

"Is Nadya with you? Is she okay?"

Adam's voice jarred me back to reality. There were five dead Nero agents in front of my garage. I crossed the room, rubbing my hand down my face, and opened the door.

Adam clasped my forearms, his gaze moving to the sofa. "Nadya shifted?"

I nodded. "Completely."

His eyes met mine. "Shit."

"Yeah." I cleared my throat to find my voice again. "She's breathing, but she hasn't opened her eyes."

“Did you call Jason?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I wanted to make sure Nadya was...” My words drifted off as mental puzzle pieces came together. “I didn’t call *you*, either. What are you doing here?”

Adam pulled out his cell phone. “Since I became Alpha, I get these feelings when the Pack is in trouble. Tonight they woke me up and involved you, so I got dressed and came over.”

I should’ve asked more questions, but I didn’t have it in me. “The danger’s gone now. I made a dent in their team, but they shot me with a tranquilizer dart and when I woke up they were dead and Nadya was a wolf.”

“We’ve gotta move the bodies before daylight. All we need is for the police to get a call.”

I kept watch over Nadya. “I need to stay with her... Until she wakes up.”

Adam’s gaze met mine and we left the “if she wakes up” unspoken. “Yeah, you take care of her. I’ll have Lana call the Pack. If Jared brings his truck, we should be able to get the bodies up to the ranch where we can dispose of them.”

Adam’s ranch was rural enough that we could burn or bury the bodies without anyone noticing. No neighbors for miles.

“Thanks, Adam.”

He pulled me in for a hug and I growled in pain. Adam stepped back, frowning. “Jason needs to take a look at you, too.”

“Just some cracked ribs. I’ll be all right.”

Adam nodded, but his expression made it clear Jason would be checking me over soon.

• • •

My Pack took care of the mess outside. Jared, Luke, and Logan never came inside, and Adam and Aren kept it short. I was grateful for the privacy. Watching Sasha weep over Nadya, stroking her hair and reliving childhood memories gutted me. I didn’t know Sasha that well, but I’d dished plenty of shit her way, and she always came back fighting.

Seeing her hands tremble and hearing her voice break only made what was

happening more real.

I was losing the only woman I would ever love.

I'd known this day would come. I understood when I left Colorado what awaited me, but I thought I'd get more time. She'd just moved in with me. I hadn't made her breakfast in bed, or taught her to ride a Harley on her own, hell, we'd barely scratched the surface of what our life together could have been.

This was fucking unfair.

Jason came in, a welcome distraction from watching Sasha mourn her sister. "How's she doing?"

I got up and met him by the door to give Sasha a little more privacy. "She's sleeping."

He shifted his focus to meet my eyes as he clasped my forearms. "Jared just left to take the bodies to Adam's ranch, and the others are washing down your driveway out there." He lowered his voice. "The full moon is tomorrow night."

"Yeah." I nodded. "So what?"

"So if Nadya wakes up from this shift, she's not going to be strong enough to face another one in less than twenty-four hours."

Shit, I did *not* want to hear this. "What are you suggesting?"

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. "I think we should sedate her and keep her from shifting. It'll at least buy her some more time."

"You don't have any leads on anything that can reverse this?"

"Sorry." He shook his head slowly. "I wish I did."

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to figure out what Nadya would want in all this. "Tonight she shifted *without* the full moon, and got shot with two tranquilizer darts, and if she wakes up from all that, you're going to turn around and sedate her again so she *doesn't* shift with the moon? And this is supposed to help her somehow?"

"She's already lost a lot of blood and hasn't regained consciousness.

Without a CAT scan, I can't tell how close she is to a brain hemorrhage, but I don't need a scan to see her body is breaking down. Her body wasn't made for this. None of us are. She's exhausted." He paused, collecting himself. "We're not going to be able to cure this. The next step in treatment will be to prolong the time she has left. That means no more shifting."

Prolong the time she had left. I was all for that plan.

Sasha came over to us, her arms wrapped around her middle in a protective embrace. "Is she going to wake up?"

Jason started to open his mouth to speak, stopped, and then tried again. "I wish I knew. Gareth said she was shot with two tranquilizer darts so I hope that's the reason she's not waking up. With any luck, she'll sleep it off and be alert in the morning."

"What's the worst case scenario?" I held my breath, waiting for his answer.

Jason sighed. "Worst case, she's already suffered some hemorrhaging in her brain and her organs will start shutting down."

Not the answer I'd hoped for. I ground my teeth to keep my emotions in check.

Sasha wiped her eyes and nose. "How soon will we know?"

"Probably within the next ten hours or so." His gaze met mine. "Try to get some sleep. Call me in the morning if she's not awake and I'll bring over an IV to keep her hydrated."

"Thanks, Jason." Sasha's breath hitched and I prayed she wouldn't ask to stay with her sister. This was my mate. I was a selfish bastard, and I didn't care. Sasha touched my forearm. "Please let me know if she gets any worse."

I nodded. She sniffed and headed for the door.

After she slipped out, Jason focused on me again. "You should let me have a look at your ribs."

"Maybe later." I shook my head. "I can wrap them."

My answer obviously didn't satisfy him, but we'd been Pack brothers long enough for him to know there was no changing my mind. "You sure you're all right here? I could stay with you if you need me."

"Nah." I jammed my fists into the pockets of my jeans. "I'll be fine."

Jesus, I was thousands of miles from fine.

"Okay. Call my cell if anything changes."

He left and I went back to Nadya's side. I didn't bother going outside to thank Adam or my Pack mates for cleaning up the mess. They'd understand.

After all the motors vanished in the distance, I scooped her into my arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

“Damn it,” I groaned as I laid her down on the mattress. My ribs were getting worse, not better. “I’m a real prize, sweetheart.”

She didn’t move. I got into bed, spooning her in front of me. Pulling her close against my chest, my breath hitched. I pushed the pain back and closed my eyes. If I could sleep, I might be able to find her in her dreams. If she dreamed. It was all I had.

My lips brushed her ear as I whispered, “I don’t know if you can hear me, but I’m alive because of you. We’re safe now. You take all the time you need. Just get better and come back to me. I love you, Nadya.”

• • •

Falling asleep took an eternity, but it must’ve happened because suddenly I was at Pyramid Lake. About a hundred yards away, I noticed a woman sitting at the water’s edge near the Stone Mother. Nadya.

I ran toward her, grateful that my dream lungs seemed to be unharmed. She looked up at me and smiled. “You found me.”

I sat beside her and leaned over to steal a kiss. “I hoped you’d wait for me.”

Her eyes fluttered open as our lips parted. “You’re safe.”

I nodded. “Your wolf saved us both.”

She stared out at the water. “I’m not ready to leave you.”

“Good.” My pulse raced. For a second, I worried I might wake up. Slow breaths. “I’ll never be ready to let you go.”

“My body won’t respond. I tried to open my eyes, but...”

“They shot your wolf with two tranquilizer darts. I hope that’s all it is.”

“My head hurt so bad.” She found my hand, clasping it tight. “If my body doesn’t wake up... I have no regrets. I love you.”

“Don’t be making your good-byes.” I squeezed her hand. “This isn’t over. I

know you're tired and sore, but don't give up. Not yet."

She turned my way, her green eyes shiny with tears. I kissed her. Hard. I slid my free hand into her hair, holding her tight as our tongues tangled slowly. I still didn't understand dream walking or the native magic that made it possible, but every part of my soul wanted to give her strength, to give her more time, even if it shortened my own.

I growled into the kiss, envisioning my spirit feeding hers. Behind us, her wolf and mine approached. They watched, silent sentinels...to what, I had no real clue, but my body tingled, almost tiny stings from head to toe. As the prickling sensation eased, our wolves howled together beneath a bright moon.

Nadya coughed, waking me instantly. I sat up too fast.

"Damn it." Pain screamed through my torso. She rolled over and looked up at me. My heart stuttered. "Nadya?"

"You brought me back."

Her voice was barely a whisper, but it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. I bent to kiss her. We were on borrowed time, but I'd treasure every second we got.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

NADYA

The scent of bacon enticed me away from my dreams. Gradually my eyes cracked open. Tentatively, I blinked and the room came into focus, along with my handsome mate. Gareth stood in the doorway, barefoot, in nothing but a pair of low-slung blue jeans and an ace bandage wrapped around his chest. His black hair was tied back at the base of his neck, and he held a platter piled high with scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, and two forks.

“Good morning.” He smiled and my heart fluttered. “I figured you’d be hungry.”

My stomach growled in answer as he brought the food over to the bed. I pulled myself up, leaning back against the headboard, and he sat beside me.

“No one’s ever made me breakfast in bed before.” I took a fork and poked at the scrambled eggs.

“I’m happy to be your first.” He winked and scooped up a forkful of eggs.

His lower lip was swollen, and he had a bruise over his right eye. And his hair... I blinked my eyes again, frowning. I reached out to run my finger along a patch of silver hair over his ear. “What’s this?”

“I’m not sure.” Gareth shrugged. “Just noticed it this morning.”

I struggled to remember my dream. I’d been so tired, drifting. And then Gareth had come. Kissed me. And... “You really did bring me back. What happened?”

“I don’t know. You were fading and I tried to channel some of my energy into you.” He took a bite of a piece of bacon. “Whatever it was, you’re here and I’m grateful. That’s enough for me.”

I watched him for a moment, unsure of what to say. He saved my life, or gave it back to me somehow, and he acted like it was no big deal. "Thank you," I whispered.

His gaze met mine, his voice deep and quiet. "You're my mate, Nadya. One soul, one love. You don't have to thank me." He picked up another piece of bacon. "You should eat."

My appetite took over. I devoured the mound of eggs and way too much bacon before I munched at the hash browns. Once my belly was appeased, I set my fork on the platter and basked in the afterglow. "That was delicious."

Gareth put the plate on the side table and took my hand. "I should call your sister and Jason and let them know you're awake, but I'm too damned selfish to share you."

I leaned in close to kiss the base of his neck. "I'm okay with that."

He lifted my chin, his lips brushing mine slowly, warming me. Sliding his hand around my waist, he drew me in closer. Suddenly he pulled away, growling. "Damn it." He winced, clutching at his ribs.

"You should have Jason take a look and be sure your ribs are where they're supposed to be."

"He'll just want me to come in for X-rays and wrap me up again. I've got that taken care of already. I'm not wasting any of the time we have left sitting in the doctor's office."

I didn't fight him on it. He was right. Last night made it crystal clear that my body couldn't take much more. I had no clue how Gareth had brought me back, but judging by the new streak in his hair, it came at a price.

I ran my index finger down from the bottom of his ace bandage, around his naval, to the button on his jeans. "So what else did you want to do today?"

He lifted my wandering hand to his lips, kissing my finger with passion in his eyes. "If my ribs didn't hurt so bad, I'd never let you out of this bed." Lowering my hand he started to smile. "If you're feeling up to it, I thought I'd show you how to ride a Harley on your own before Jason gets here."

"Jason's coming here? You said you didn't want to call..."

"I don't, but he was planning on coming by later this afternoon anyway. Tonight's the full moon."

He paused like I should understand what he was talking about. I frowned. "Okay?"

Gareth sighed, rubbing the back of my hand with the pad of his thumb.

“You shifted last night and I almost lost you.”

“Jason doesn’t want me to run with you tonight.” It made sense. But it didn’t make it feel any better.

“He thinks you’ll be safer if you stay inside. He’ll give you a sedative so you won’t shift.”

I pulled my hand back into my lap. “Do I get a say in any of this?” His anxiety prickled along my skin, but I went on anyway. “I don’t want to die, but it’s coming whether we want it to or not.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose like he could rub the ache in his head away and got up from the bed. “Nadya, one more day isn’t enough.” He lifted his gaze, and the pain in his beaten features twisted my heart in a knot. “Fifty years wouldn’t be enough time to love you. Please. Just rest tonight.”

I stood up, grabbed one of his folded work T-shirts off the dresser, and pulled it on. It fell to the middle of my thighs, covering me just enough that I could concentrate. When I turned around, his gaze ran slowly up from my ankles to the top of my head, and I realized I probably still didn’t have enough clothes on. I pushed desire aside and tried to focus.

“I got bitten and instantly lost control over my future.”

He shook his head, one hand fisting in the blanket. “If I could turn back time, I would.”

“So would I, but we can’t.” I blinked to keep the tears in check. “The only thing I *can* control is how I’ll go out, and after we visited with Wyatt and Sarah yesterday, I know what I want.”

He stared at me like I’d grown a second head. “I thought you said you don’t want to be in a coma trapped on a bed.”

“No.” I crossed over to sit on the edge of the mattress and rested my hand on his thigh. “Tonight is the full moon. You’ll be a wolf. We don’t know if I’ll live to see the next one, so this is my only chance to be your true mate.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Let your wolf bite me tonight.”

“You *are* my mate, Nadya.” He pressed his lips together, his emotions spilling over to me although he fought to keep them back. “You don’t need a bite or a scar on your hand to make it any more real or true. I’d rather have more time together.” He covered my hand on his leg.

“Please don’t fight me on this.” A tear rolled down my cheek and my

determination wavered. I wanted more time with him, too. I cleared my throat and whispered, “I don’t want to leave this world as the monster Fonthill made me. Tonight you can convert me and my wolf into a true werewolf—like you are and your father was before you.”

He pulled me close, groaning in pain as he kissed my hair, but in spite of his sore ribs, he didn’t loosen his hold on me. “If I do this for you, if you shift tonight, I’ll lose you, sweetheart.”

His words weighed on my shoulders, the truth of them threatening to sway me. God, I didn’t want to lose him. I didn’t want to die. None of this was what I would wish for. Ever.

But it was coming either way. I had no choices, no decisions in this matter except one. I steeled my broken heart and I pulled back to meet his eyes. “You can’t save me. No one can. All I’m asking is that you give me the chance to leave this world on my own terms.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four

GARETH

I got up from the bed, pacing the room. “This is so fucking unfair.”

I knocked the clean work shirts and alarm clock off my dresser, ripping the cord from the wall as it tumbled to the ground. Anger was my armor. And I needed every bit I could muster. Staring into her green eyes, it was clear her decision was made, and who was I to deny her?

Nero had taken her life. She wanted to control her death.

But holy shit I could *not* help her die. No way. No fucking way in hell.

I turned to tell her so and found her standing up. My old oil stained white T-shirt had never looked so good. My gut clenched. Tomorrow she could be gone. Bitterness choked me.

“This is what I’ve been thinking...”

The knife in my chest twisted. “You’ve been planning this?”

“Not really, but last night when I was fading, I went to Pyramid Lake.”

“That’s where I found you in the dream.”

She nodded, crossing her arms. “I thought we should go there tonight while the rest of the Pack is up at Lake Tahoe. I don’t want all of their emotions involved in this, just you and me.”

I choked down a concrete ball of emotion to find my voice. “We go to Pyramid Lake, I shift and bite you.” I cleared my throat. “Even if I agreed to this, how would we keep you from shifting before my wolf can get to you? This is crazy. We could have more time if you sleep—”

“The Stone Mother’s basket.”

“What?”

“I’ll climb in the Stone Mother’s basket while you shift.”

The Stone Mother’s basket was open on one side, like a big cave. “Climbing in there and hiding from the moon is not going to stop you from shifting.”

“Lana told me that when Sasha kidnapped her and took her up to Lake Tahoe during the full moon, Adam resisted the moon’s pull to search for her. He held off his shift for at least an hour.”

“Adam also wasn’t juiced up by Nero with mutated DNA that makes shifting in broad daylight possible.” I crossed to her, cupping her face in my hands. “What if you can’t hold off the wolf? What if I shift and your body gives out? By the time I get there, you could already be...”

I couldn’t finish the words.

Her eyes stayed locked on mine. “Then I still went out on *my* terms.”

Somewhere deep in the pit of panic, fear, anger, and despair brewing inside me, a surge of love and admiration swelled. My mate was fearless, courageous, and stubborn. *Perfect*. I bent to kiss her lips, struggling to memorize every touch.

I pulled back, holding her gaze. “If this is what you really want, I’ll do it for you.”

She nodded. “There’s something else I want.” She rose up on her toes, her lips meeting mine and a dam broke inside of me. I didn’t care about my ribs, or worry about flooding her with my feelings. My love, my pain, my anger, and my need to keep her close weren’t secrets. Not between us.

I backed her toward the bed, sliding my hands under the shirt to caress her warm curves. She popped open the button on my jeans and lowered the zipper. As she pushed my jeans lower, she teased my skin with her nails.

Breaking the kiss she whispered, “Lie down.”

I settled onto the mattress, careful not to move too fast and tweak my ribs. Nadya tugged the bottom of my jeans until they came free of my legs. She dropped them on the ground and crawled over me. I moved my hands up her

firm thighs, over the curve of her ass, and up her waist underneath the loose shirt. I cupped her breasts, teasing the hard tips of her nipples.

Her moans sent my blood pumping. Good thing she had my pants off or I would've busted the damned zipper I wanted her so bad. She bent her arms, kissing me slowly, sliding her tongue against mine, the same way I needed to slide into her body.

I brought one hand along her taut abdomen, my fingers gliding lower, between her folds, until her hips worked into me. I rubbed faster, watching her face, drinking in the passion.

"Take off the damned shirt," I growled. I needed to see her. All of her. Now.

She rose up onto her knees over me while I slid my finger inside of her. She gasped, rocking into me as she lifted the shirt over her head and tossed it across the room. Her body shuddered and her breath caught as she came against my fingers.

She took my wrist and brought my hand up to her lips. "I need you."

She guided the wet tip of my finger around her mouth, tracing her lower lip as she tilted her hips over me until my erection brushed her opening. My finger slid into her mouth, and at the same time, she settled over me. I sank into her completely, losing myself in our passion.

"You're incredible." I growled. "Open your eyes." She did as I asked and stared down at me. "You're mine. No regrets."

I gripped her hips with my hands, but I couldn't thrust up into her like I wanted to without hurting my ribs. Holding her tighter, I guided her, sliding her along my erection faster. She took the rhythm and drove me over the edge.

"Slower. I don't want it to be over yet."

She leaned over me, resting on her elbows to keep her weight off my chest as our lips met. Her steady thrusts drew me almost out before taking me back in completely. "No regrets," she whispered.

I slid one hand between us, teasing her until her hips writhed into me of their own volition. Her teeth brushed my lips as she gasped, gaze locked on mine. "I thought you didn't want...it...to be over...yet."

“Plan’s changed.” I smiled, growling in the back of my throat. “Come for me.”

Her laughter mixed with her moans, creating a sound of pure unfiltered joy and love. My pulse raced and I pulled her to me, claiming her lips as I erupted deep inside of her. I was so lost in her, I didn’t even notice my damned ribs.

• • •

Nadya dozed in my arms. I stroked her hair back from her forehead, trying to memorize every beautiful inch of my mate. If I had the power, I’d freeze time and just stay in this moment, basking in the afterglow and keeping her safe. In a few hours the moon would be full and...

I didn’t want to think about it. Chloe was right. Nadya’s wishes had to come first. I even understood Nadya’s reasoning, but that didn’t mean I had to like it.

She shifted and her lashes fluttered. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Just for a minute.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Every minute counts.”

Huge understatement.

“Feel up to a ride before we tell your sister and Jason that you’re awake?”

She grinned. “I’d love it.”

We got dressed and I went into the storage area of my workshop. I pulled a drop cloth off the old 1977 Low Rider and pushed over to her. Nadya’s face lit up. Again I tried to take a mental snapshot of that dimple in her cheek.

“Wow! You’re going to trust me with that?”

The Low Rider had a fresh coat of cherry red metallic paint and the chrome was polished and buffed. I leaned it onto the stand in front of her. “Yes. This is a 1977 Low Rider. It’s about two hundred pounds lighter than my old 1964 Panhead, and a little lower to the ground, too.”

She came over to my side of the Harley and tentatively grabbed the handlebars.

“Go ahead and get on. I’ll show you how it all works.”

Nadya was a quick study and after I followed her around the block a couple of times, she pointed toward downtown Reno. I pulled up beside her. “Ready to give it some gas?”

She nodded. “For sure.”

“Stay beside me. We ride side by side and we have a better chance of being seen by cars.”

“All right.”

We put the bikes in gear and roared down the street like this was our last day on earth.

...

After lunch we rode home and Nadya called Sasha. She and Aren came over, then Adam and Lana, and finally Jason pulled up. Word traveled fast through the Pack. I tried not to obsess over the clock. They deserved some time with her. They loved Nadya, too.

But the clock was ticking, marking the minutes of her life, and it’d never been louder than today. Greedily, I wanted to keep every second for myself.

Adam and Lana left first to go get ready for the full moon. The Pack met at Adam’s ranch before each full moon and carpooled up to Lake Tahoe to go shift in the woods. Lana would stay behind with the twins, and Sasha would keep watch over them until the Pack came back.

Everyone assumed I’d be with them at Lake Tahoe. I didn’t tell them any different.

“We should get going.” Aren rubbed Sasha’s shoulders. “We’re supposed to be at the ranch soon.”

She stood and embraced Nadya. I turned and stared out the window. She

had no idea this was good-bye, and it wasn't my place to say anything. This was Nadya's final wish. I'd pay the price later.

Jason came over and slipped me a full syringe. "This can be injected into any muscle, shoulder or thigh. It'll keep her down for the night."

I put it in my pocket and clasped his forearms. "Thanks, Jason."

He went over to hug Nadya and then he, Aren, and Sasha headed out. After the door shut behind them, Nadya rushed into my arms, her cheeks wet with tears. "That was harder than I imagined," she whispered.

I held her close, ignoring the soreness in my ribs. I closed my eyes tight. "Jason gave me the sedative. If you change your mind..."

"No." She sniffled and pulled back enough to see my face. "I want to do this on my terms."

I nodded. "That doesn't make this suck any less."

She almost smiled, wiping her eyes. "You got that right." Nadya glanced at the window. The shadows lengthened outside. "I guess we'd better get going."

My stomach roiled, twisting with dread. "I need to tell you something first." I caught her chin, turning her face up toward me. "I hate this plan. But I understand..." I cleared my throat, struggling to keep my voice even. "We'll do this your way. But I'm bringing the sedative, and if you change your mind I'm pumping you with drugs and keeping you with me for however many days we have left."

She rested a hand over my heart. "Remember how you told me I deserved a stronger mate?" She shook her head slowly. "There is no one in this world stronger than you, Gareth Takoda. Thank you for helping me keep control over something in this crazy tailspin I'm in."

"Don't thank me. Not for this." My voice caught. I shook my head. "Enough. Let's ride."

## Chapter Thirty-Five

NADYA

I kept my arms low on Gareth's waist, trying not to hurt his ribs as we roared down the highway toward Pyramid Lake. Sitting behind him with the wind pulling at my clothes, it was surreal to realize I hadn't even hit twenty-five yet, and here I was wondering if he'd get his ribs looked at after I was gone.

After I was gone.

*Crazy.*

I'd tried so hard to face this twist of fate on my own terms, to stay engaged and not sink into despair. Why waste tears and time over an event I couldn't change? But as the minutes ticked away and the landscape darkened around us, I started second-guessing myself. If I let Gareth give me the sedative, would we have another week together?

Or would I get upset and shift tomorrow, dying as a deformed creature the way Fonthill had the night he bit me? This was my chance to leave this world not as a victim of Nero, but marked as Gareth's mate. I needed to be strong and see this through. There wasn't going to be a happy ending either way.

We crested the ridge and the sunset reflected on the smooth water of the lake. Stunning. My eyes brimmed with tears. I couldn't imagine anything more beautiful. Above us the full moon hung low, waiting for the final remnant of the day to pass so she could shine in all her glory. My skin was already starting to itch.

Gareth turned onto the road that circled the lake and gunned the engine. I closed my eyes, memorizing the crisp feel of the air stinging my cheeks. Alive. He parked the Harley outside the metal gate meant to keep the tourists

away from the Stone Mother, and we walked hand in hand toward her. Her salty tears filled a lake, and now mine would join hers.

Gareth stopped at the base of the basket and pulled me into his arms, kissing my lips hard and urgent. A warm teardrop hit my cheek, and my heart crumbled. None of this was fair or right. We should have had our whole lives ahead of us, our own children to bounce on our knees as we passed on the stories of the Stone Mother to them. We should've been able to tell them about the grandparents they would never meet.

He stepped back, holding my face in both his hands. The soft glow of the moon shone on the single tear on my mate's cheek. He whispered through gritted teeth. "I can't fight the moon much longer. Please, Nadya." He withdrew the syringe. "Take this. I can't lose you, sweetheart. Do this for me."

"Go shift." I took the sedative from him and climbed up into the basket. "I love you."

"I love you, too." His voice already had a raspy tone, his wolf aching to come forward.

I sat deep in the shadows with the syringe. It would be simple. I might even wake up in his arms in the morning.

Maybe.

I could also be partially shifted and bleed out from my nose and ears like the other members of Nero's Lycan Project.

This was better.

I stuffed the sedative into the pocket of my jacket and waited in the dark. Even without being able to see the moon, its pull was there. My bones ached, my skin tingled, and my throat went dry. I wrapped my arms around my middle and closed my eyes, rocking and begging my wolf to stay back. Our mate was coming to us. We had to be patient.

A lone howl cut through my inner dialogue. My eyes popped open and I held my breath, waiting. Outside pebbles fell as he came closer. Finally the solid black wolf with dark eyes leapt into the opening of the Stone Mother's basket. I stood and the wolf dropped his head and looked at the water.

He was hoping I'd be asleep.

I swallowed hard and took a step closer. "Thank you for loving me enough to do this." He still wouldn't look at me. "I know it's unfair and it sucks." I knelt beside him and buried my face in his neck. "Think of it as the closest

we'll get to a wedding.”

When I pulled back, the wolf tilted his head, leaving me wondering if Gareth could understand me. He licked my cheek and met my eyes, then his pain and regret slammed into me. I shook my head as the tears fell, holding out my trembling hand. “Gareth, please. I want to be your mate. Completely. Forever. I love you.”

The wolf shifted his weight like he might bolt away at any second. Finally, he lunged toward me. His jaws snapped down on my hand, the pain stealing my breath. He released me and I stumbled backward, clutching my wound. It burned. My pupils dilated and then contracted so fast I couldn't see. My gut twisted, my joints ached. I fought the shift. My body couldn't take it.

My instinct to live took over. I clenched my jaw, panting, struggling to maintain my form. My entire body tensed up, seizing, and then peace.

My light faded into darkness.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

GARETH

I bit her. Trapped inside my wolf, I screamed. Until tonight I'd had no clue of the strength of my wolf's instincts. It recognized its mate and claimed her. In spite of how hard I tried to force my wolf to leave her behind, it caught Nadya's scent and instinct took over.

The wolf howled, not realizing his mate was lost. My wolf believed our life together was just beginning. When I finally got him to turn, Nadya lay still on the cool rock. My wolf moved forward, nudging her with his muzzle. He chuffed and licked her cheek.

Nothing.

Inside I pushed my will, struggled against my nature, forcing my wolf back. Shifting into my human form while the moon was still high in the sky hurt—in fact, hurt didn't begin to describe the agony. I had to envision every major joint from my ankles up and force my body to match that human vision. It was mentally and physically taxing.

But Nadya needed me.

By the time I stood as a man, every part of me ached and my lungs wheezed, crushed by my cracked ribs. I rushed to Nadya's side and pulled her into my lap. "No. Damn it. No."

A primal cry erupted from my throat. Trembling, I held her closer, breathing in her scent. Her arm dangled lifelessly. I reached for it, lifting her hand to my lips.

Her healed hand.

Had I been confused? This was the hand the wolf bit... I found her other hand. No bite. My pulse raced. I stood up, lifting Nadya with me, all the pain in my body forgotten. I carried her out and climbed down from the Stone Mother's basket into the moonlight so I could get a better view. I turned her hand over in the silvery light. All that remained of the bite was the scar.

A unique, permanent bond between mates.

Tremors ran through my fingers. I reached to touch her neck, feeling for a pulse, afraid to hope. Nothing. I moved my fingertips, pressing harder. Then I found it. Faint. But there.

Nadya was still alive. Somehow. For now.

I stared up at the moon, unsure what to do. Should I find the sedative and give it to her? Was she too weak? I considered taking her back into the shade of the basket rock, but I wasn't sure that would matter with all the mutations Nero had made to her DNA.

My whole Pack was at Lake Tahoe. Wolves. There was no one I could call.

Suddenly I was bathed in headlights. I'd been so distracted with Nadya, I hadn't noticed the engine. And I was standing in the light, naked with an unconscious woman in my arms. *Shit.*

Blinded, I heard the door swing open. "Little Osa?"

Chloe. Relief and panic ran through me all at once. "It's me."

"Where are your clothes?" She came closer, the lights behind her kept her face in the shadows. "What are you doing out here?" She made a hissing noise. "No, don't tell me. I can guess. I raised you to respect the Stone Mother not to..."

"It's not what you think. Nadya's..." I stared down at her pale face, imagining her smile, and that dimple in her cheek. "Nadya's really sick, Chloe. I thought if I brought her here the magic might heal her."

Chloe crossed her arms and nodded. "Well, if healing is what you came for, then you're doing it all wrong. Get her in the water."

I didn't ask questions. I turned and carried her down to the lake while Chloe bitched about my bare backside.

“You could grab my pants. They’re around the back of the Stone Mother.”

“Later, Osa. Float her on the water.”

I walked out until the cool water reached my armpits. Nadya’s body floated naturally on the surface, but I kept my hands under her back and neck for support. “Now what?”

She didn’t answer. She sang. Chloe turned her palms up toward the moon and chanted soft and rhythmic, her voice bouncing off the Stone Mother and the surface of the water. Suddenly Nadya gasped in a big breath, her arms starting to flail as her eyes popped open.

“Shhhh.” I whispered. “Just float.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure, but Chloe thinks she’s healing you.”

Nadya relaxed again, but she kept her eyes open, looking up at me. My heart pounded so hard, she could probably hear it. We watched each other in the moonlight while Chloe chanted on the shore, and I stood naked in Pyramid Lake.

*Perfect.*

“How is she, Osa?”

Chloe snapped us out of the moment, and Nadya smiled. I bent my knees in the water to kiss that dimple in her cheek. “I think it worked.”

“Bring her out to me.”

I carried Nadya until the water just barely reached my waist. “You want to walk from here and toss me my pants?”

She nodded and walked over to Chloe for inspection. The older woman stared up at my beautiful mate. “He told me you were dying, then I found him carrying you around naked and I thought my Little Osa’s cheese slipped right off the cracker.”

“Thanks, Chloe,” I grumbled.

She shushed me with a wave of her hand. “How do you feel?”

“Other than soaking wet.” Nadya took a slow breath. “Much better.”

Chloe smiled and patted her hand. “Wait here, my house isn’t far, I’ll bring towels.” She called toward the water. “And put some pants on, Osa!”

I waited for her to drive away before I ran out of the water and caught Nadya around the waist. She squealed with laughter as I spun her in a circle, ignoring the sharp pain in my ribs. “God, it’s great to hear you laugh.”

Nadya smiled as I lowered her feet to the ground. “What happened?” She raised her hand, turning it over and inspecting it. “My hand is healed.”

“I’ve never asked anyone about converting their mate. It always seemed too private. But I’m guessing if it healed that fast, it must be part of our mate bond.”

“And that means?”

I shrugged. “We’ll have to have Jason check tomorrow, but I think...” I thought somehow our mate bond had fixed whatever mutated poison Fonhill’s bite had caused, but it sounded crazy and I was too fucking terrified to get my hopes up. “I think we got lucky.”

She tipped her head back to look at the moon. “It’s still full. Shouldn’t we be shifting into wolves?”

“We shift once a month with the moon. I already shifted tonight, so I won’t get another chance until the next full moon.” I kissed her forehead, trying to reassure myself she was really here, that this wasn’t a dream.

“And why aren’t I shifting?”

“When someone is bitten, they don’t shift until the next full moon.”

“But I was already a werewolf.”

“You were whatever Fonhill was, modified werewolf DNA. Different. And now...” I lifted her hand to kiss over her new mark. “I better get my jeans on before Chloe gets back.”

We walked around the back of the Stone Mother. I got dressed and started rewrapping my ribs.

“Could you understand me when you were a wolf?”

“Yeah.” I glanced up at Nadya and went back to my ace bandage. “But my wolf can’t, so it’s not quite the same.”

“I’m sorry I put you in that position. Thank you for following through on my wishes even though you didn’t agree.”

I finished my wrap and pulled on my shirt. “I’m not sure what you want me to say. Truth is, I was pissed when I saw you didn’t take that sedative. My wolf caught the scent of his mate and no matter how hard I fought to get him to leave you there, he refused.” The last remnants of anger and fear stoked a fire in my gut. “Don’t thank me. *He* bit you. *I* didn’t want to risk it.”

She stepped forward, brushing her hand down my forearm. “That risk might’ve saved my life.”

I wanted that to be true with every fiber of my being. Before I could respond, we were bathed in headlights again. A door opened and Chloe wandered into the light with two towels in hand. “Oh good, you found your pants.”

“Nice to see you too, Chloe.”

She ignored me and handed the towels to Nadya. “You look better.”

Nadya wrapped a towel around her hair. “Thank you for everything.”

“No trouble.” Chloe tipped her chin, staring up at me. “Did you hear the wolf howling tonight? He sounded lonely.”

Nadya slid the towel free from her hair, her bright eyes locked on mine, and my lips curved into an unexpected smile. The clock was silent. Stopped. The ticking was replaced by the sound of my heart beating.

“I don’t think he’s going to be lonely anymore.”

My godmother turned, staring at Nadya, and then back to me with a knowing glint in her wise old eyes. “It’s about damned time.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

NADYA

“That was an insane risk you two took, but it seems to have paid off.” Jason shook his head. “Your adrenaline levels have normalized, and as far as I can tell, Gareth’s bite converted you just like it would any human.” He set his chart aside and crossed his arms. “I thought since you were already bitten, there was no undoing what was done.”

“I didn’t think it would change me, either.” Gareth slid his hand up and down my back, soothing me as I sat on the edge of the examination table. “But if I was dying anyway, I was going to choose how it would end. After sitting with your mom and dad, I saw her hand, the scar from Wyatt’s bite, and with the full moon right around the corner, I wanted that connection with my mate. It never occurred to me it could save my life.”

“I went ahead and forwarded your blood test results to the last email address I had for Dr. Granger, along with my promise that I will kill him if I ever see him again. As long as Nero realizes you’re no longer of use to them for their research project, we probably won’t have any more unexpected visits.”

“Let’s hope.” I nodded.

“How’s Wyatt? Any change yet?” Gareth asked.

Jason leaned against the wall. “No.”

Jason’s pain suffocated me. “But he could still get better and wake up

anytime, right?”

He shrugged. “Technically, yes, but it gets less likely with each passing day.”

I didn’t want to think about what would happen if he didn’t recover. “If there’s anything we can do...”

“Thank you.” Jason straightened and opened the door. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

I stood and embraced him tight. “Thanks for everything.”

“Welcome to the rest of your life, Nadya.” Jason stepped back, his gaze shifting to Gareth. “Make it count.”

Gareth nodded. “Definitely.”

We left the office and got on the Road King. I had my own Harley now, but I still enjoyed riding with Gareth. I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of having my arms around him. We’d planned to ride up to Virginia City tonight since our last trip had been cut short. The moon was still large and bright in the star-filled sky as we leaned into the turns of the winding mountain highway.

He parked outside Piper’s Opera House and I pulled off my helmet, breathing in the fresh mountain air. I sniffed again.

“It’s weird, I almost thought I smelled the...”

“Naaaa-dyaaa!” Madeleine and Malcolm burst out the double doors and ran toward us, hugging my legs.

I glanced up at Gareth. He was sporting a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin. “What are they doing here?”

He lifted Malcolm onto his shoulders. “The whole Pack is here.”

Madeleine tugged me toward the doors. “Come see!”

We walked inside and my sister, along with the rest of my Pack, greeted me at the door. The only ones missing were Sarah, Wyatt, and Jason. Even Jared was here. Luke and Logan were setting up on the stage with their folks.

“What’s going on?”

Adam stepped up and led me further inside. “When one of our Pack finds his mate and brings her in as one of us, we celebrate. We’re all family, and like any family we don’t always agree, but if you ever need us, we’ll be right there standing beside you.”

I smiled up at Gareth. “You didn’t tell me this was happening...”

He handed Malcolm to his dad and Lana took Madeleine from me. Staring into my eyes, Gareth held both my hands. “Nadya Dalca, I give you my heart, my protection, and my life. Welcome to the Pack.”

He kissed me slow and tender as cheers erupted around us. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too.” I answered with tears in my eyes.

Logan started to play and Gareth walked me out into the center of the dance floor. He was a strong lead, which was good because I wasn’t usually a very confident dance partner, but in Gareth’s arms anything was possible.

As the song slowed, he scooped me up and carried me through the crowd. I stayed focused on his smile as the rest of the world faded around us.

Gareth stood by me through the darkest of places, and we came through to the other side even stronger than before. My mate, who had lost to death so many times, had finally triumphed, and now I had a lifetime ahead to love him. I almost pinched myself to be sure I wasn’t dreaming.

Instead of facing the end under a full moon, somehow, we found a new beginning.

## The End



*Did you love this Entangled Select? Check out more of our titles [here!](#)*

*And for exclusive sneak peeks at our upcoming books, excerpts, contests,  
chats with our authors and editors, and more...*

*Be sure to like us on [Facebook](#)*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#)*

# Acknowledgments

This was a tough book for me to write. My Mom fought cancer twice while I was growing up, and the shadow of that horrible disease, and the fear that I might lose her, tormented me. During that battle, she set goals to make it to a horseshow, to eat crab for her birthday, and see me graduate from high school. Any further into the future was uncertain. But through it all, she taught me to treasure your days and laugh more than you cry. In the end, she won that war.

Then while I was writing this book, we lost a young person in our extended family unexpectedly. The pain and shock reminded all of us that life is precious, and it's so important to enjoy each day, appreciate the small moments, and cherish those you love.

There are many people I need to thank for helping me make this book a reality. First off, thanks to my Dad and his love of Harley Davidson motorcycles. We made my grandparents cringe more than once when he let me ride on the back of his chopper with him when I was in elementary school.

I also need to thank Dr. D.P. Lyle for helping me with all the medical scenes in this book. He patiently answered my questions about medications and cardiac issues. I tried to make it as accurate as possible, but any mistakes are my own.

Big thanks to Liz Pelletier for jumping in to edit this book. You rock! Thanks to my amazing agent, Laurie McLean for all your support for the

wolf pack, and to Katie Clapsadl and the entire Entangled team for your help promoting the series.

I also need to thank my fabulous beta readers: Denise Fluhr, Heather Cox, and Panda Wilson. Your love and passion for this book kept me writing even when the road got rough. And thanks so much to my Night Angel Legion street team for all their support in spreading the word about the Moon Series. You guys are the best!

And finally thank you to my kids, Panda and Reno, and my amazing husband, Ken, who support me and believe in me, and even give me hugs when I cry over fictional characters. You mean the world to me. I love you!

# About the Author

[Lisa Kessler](#) is an Amazon Best Selling and award winning author of dark paranormal fiction. Her debut novel, *Night Walker*, won a San Diego Book Award for Best Published Fantasy-Sci-fi-Horror as well as the Romance Through the Ages Award for Best Paranormal and Best First Book. 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. When she's not writing, Lisa is a professional vocalist, performing with the San Diego Opera as well as other musical theater companies in San Diego. You can learn more at <http://Lisa-Kessler.com> She loves hearing from readers - [LdyDisney@aol.com](mailto:LdyDisney@aol.com)

*Sign up for our [Steals & Deals newsletter](#) and be the first to hear about 99¢ releases from Lisa Kessler and other fantastic Entangled authors!*

*Reviews help other readers find books. We appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative. Thank you for reading!*

*Discover the Moon series...*

[MOONLIGHT](#)

[HUNTER'S MOON](#)

*Discover the Night series...*

[NIGHT WALKER](#)

[NIGHT THIEF](#)

[NIGHT DEMON](#)

[NIGHT CHILD](#)

*Also by Lisa Kessler*

[BEG ME TO SLAY](#)

*Discover more paranormal Entangled Select titles...*

[THIS WEAKNESS FOR YOU](#)

a *Taming the Pack* novel by [Wendy Sparrow](#)

Jordan is his pack's Alpha. The Big Bad Wolf. When his rival's little sister—a human—comes to his door, Jordan's tasty little snack turns out to be something much, much more. To Christa, the dark shifter smells irresistibly like forever. But falling for a wolf who tried to kill her brother—twice—is bad news. Especially when in the unforgiving, shadowed world of shifters, there is no room for weakness...

[THE QUEENS WINGS](#)

an *Emerging Queens* novel by [Jaime Schmidt](#)

FBI dragon Reed's disdain for humans can't mask the magnetic attraction he has for Carolyn, but when she tells him she's going to shift into a dragon he thinks she's crazy. A female hasn't been hatched, or shape shifted, in over a thousand years. He's proven wrong after Carolyn shifts and is named the new Queen on the block. When the Cult of Humanity kidnaps Carolyn to sacrifice her, Reed must face his fears—and feelings, racing to save the woman he realizes he can't live without.

[TEMPORAL SHIFT](#)

a *Dark Desires* novel by [Nina Croft](#)

Saffira Lourdes has a destiny: to save humanity and lead her exiled people to the Promised Land. Haunted by visions of the past and future, she's been sustained through the years by a dream lover. Unfortunately, Devlin Stark doesn't believe in fate. But it's obvious there's a connection between them, one that will soon be tested by the limits of time and space. Saffira is about to make the crew of The Blood Hunter an offer they'll find impossible to refuse. They're heading back to Earth and they're going back in time...

[THE SHADOWS OF STORMCLYFFE HALL](#)

a *Dark Seductions* novel by [Lauren Smith](#)

Despite its mysterious hauntings, Bastian Carlisle is determined to restore his ancestral home, Stormclyffe Hall, to its former glory. His plans are disrupted when stubborn American grad student Jane Seyton shows up, prying into his family's dark history. Jane is determined to uncover Stormclyffe Hall's secrets, even if it means putting up with the arrogant, yet sexy, Bastian. But something evil is in the house...and it's targeting Jane and Bastian. Now they must purge the ghosts of Stormclyffe Hall, even as they try to fight the attraction growing between them...