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Dakotah's Reading

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Carnival Tarot:

Dakotah's Reading

Jory Strong

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Chapter One

It was time to leave. The tightness between Dakotah Flemming's shoulder blades, the sensation of being watched, the faint whiff of wolf she'd smelled on several occasions—all of it was confirmation of what her instincts had been urging for days.

She needed to get moving. Tomorrow. Sooner if she could find Roy and get her cut of the ride receipts. Tonight if she could still catch a bus out of the small town where the carnival had stopped, setting up in

the hopes of drawing from the people coming for the psychic fair.

Fuck. If she'd known about the psychic fair, she would have bolted from the last town.

Her stomach twisted, exposing the lie for what it was. She'd caught faint traces of wolf in that town too, but she'd stuck around anyway, just in case Sarael called, needing help.

Dakotah shivered. Vague images of the man Sarael had been running from pressing in on her. Whatever he was, he wasn't human. He wasn't wolf. His scent was cold and alien even though she'd been aware of the blood rushing through his veins and heard his heart beating with lethal menace.

Her nose wrinkled in a silent snarl of denial as her womb fluttered and desire rippled across her abdomen before settling in her pussy. A lingering reaction to the potent pheromones the man had used to subdue and enthrall her.

She had a vague impression of talking to him, of being led to her trailer, of knowing she was in the presence of a predator more deadly than anything she'd encountered before. A man whose presence had stirred the wolf inside her. *It* wanted a mate like the male who'd claimed Sarael.

Dakotah's lips twisted. The wolf was mistaken in thinking that a mate would solve all their problems. The wolf hadn't seen men like those she'd been forced to service. The wolf hadn't been a part of her during those nightmare years. Hadn't watched through her eyes or experienced things through her body.

The wolf hadn't endured. Hadn't loathed and reviled the men she'd struck with whips and paddles while they pleaded with her in little-boy voices, begging for more punishment. Begging her to do degrading things to them.

Disgust curled in Dakotah's stomach. The wolf hadn't seen men like the ones who'd populated her world before she died—not literally—though maybe it had been like that. Maybe she had died in those dark woods and been reborn into something straight out of a horror film. She couldn't remember very much beyond escaping. Running. Bleeding. Hurting. The pain so intense that if she'd had the strength, she might have killed herself to end it.

Her hands balled into fists. Never. No matter how many men Victor Hale sent after her, she wouldn't die without a fight.

The wolf stirred and she forced herself to relax. If she couldn't get out of this town tonight, then she'd let it run. It might be a while before she could risk it again. She owed that part of herself a chance to escape from the deep cage it was forced to live in.

It had been a struggle at first—controlling the wolf, suppressing it, convincing it that only death would follow if its presence became known—especially to others who also had a second form. But a couple of chance encounters, fights that had left the wolf nearly savaged, lucky to escape, and it no longer believed that finding a pack was the answer.

Now the wolf moved deeper into the darkness of Dakotah's soul when it scented others like itself. Now it tried to contain any trace of itself for fear of triggering an attack. And in return, Dakotah ceded control when the wolf's form replaced her own, let it hunt deer and wallow in the kill, let it run free as long as it didn't threaten *innocent* human life.

Yeah. If she couldn't get out of this town tonight, she'd let the wolf run. It was cold enough outside that even horny teenage lovers would favor the backseat of a car over a blanket in the woods.

Dakotah looked around the small trailer that had been her home for the last year. A tin can on wheels.

But a lump formed in her throat anyway, burning for a second until she swallowed it.

It'd been a good year. The safest she'd known in forever. Though the carnival still attracted its share of predators. Townies usually. Who thought the women would be easy.

But she'd managed to have some fun. To be around boys and men who were...decent. Around people who were decent.

She'd forgotten people could be like that. She'd forgotten that it didn't always come down to either using or being used. Maybe she'd never known it to begin with.

But it was still time to move on. At least she could leave knowing Sarael was okay.

Dakotah reached for the black leather jacket hanging on a hook next to the door and heard the slow, unmistakable gait of Helki, the carnival's ancient fortune-teller, drawing close to the trailer. She tensed. Bracing herself for the rattling of the door as the old woman stopped on the other side of it and knocked.

"You're leaving," Helki said when Dakotah opened the door and stepped back to allow the old woman to enter.

Dakotah shrugged, determined not to feed the fortune-teller any information. Even after a year of traveling with the carnival, of hearing Sarael's tales of Helki's tarot readings, of being around Sarael who actually believed in what the cards foretold—Dakotah remained skeptical. Not that truth couldn't be found in the cards—but that it couldn't be altered.

"You won't find Roy tonight," Helki said, her eyes dancing with mirth when Dakotah stiffened, giving away the fact that she'd been about to seek the carnival owner out.

"Where is he?"

Helki cackled, a sound she seemed to reserve for skeptics and fools. "He's got a couple of lady friends in this town. He'll be catting around all night and most of the morning."

"Thanks for coming by and saving me the trouble of looking for him." Dakotah shifted from one foot to the other before pressing forward, deciding it was better to get it over with than to play head games with the fortune-teller. "Is that all you wanted to tell me? Or did Sarael send a message?"

Helki's face softened at the mention of Sarael, the child she'd raised when Sarael's mother left her behind at the carnival. "No. Though you will see her sooner than you might think and be a part of her world for more years than you can imagine."

A burst of warmth filled Dakotah's heart, and for a moment she let herself believe, but then she ruthlessly pushed it aside. Sarael was already in Italy. And even if she did come back to the United States, there'd be no happy reunion. By tomorrow Dakotah would be gone. In another couple of days, she'd have a new name, a new identity, a new cell number. In a couple of days, Dakotah Flemming would no longer exist, though she had a feeling this name, this identity would be the hardest one she'd ever shed.

She'd adopted the name for the rugged wildness that could be found in the Dakotas. For the wolf. But over the last year, she felt as though she'd *become* Dakotah. It would bother her to... She shrugged the thought away. She couldn't afford to become sentimental over a name.

"So you swung by to save me the trouble of looking for Roy? Thanks," Dakotah said, her body tensing, her mind already guessing the reason behind Helki's visit.

It was a strange tradition at this carnival. A reading by Helki before you were allowed to stay. A reading by Helki before you left—if you intended to leave on good terms. She didn't plan on coming back. But the life she'd led had taught her it was smarter to leave doors open than to slam them shut. "You want to sit down?"

The skin around Helki's dark eyes crinkled with amusement. She answered by taking a seat and pulling a velvet-wrapped deck of tarot cards from the pocket of her coat.

Without being told, Dakotah took the chair opposite the fortune-teller and accepted the deck. Keeping her mind free of all thoughts as she shuffled then cut and restacked the deck, before handing it back to Helki.

For a long moment the old woman held the deck, her eyes closed as though she was listening to a story only she could hear. Dakotah grimaced and shifted in her chair, a tightness forming in her chest despite her desire to ignore what was going on in front of her, to reject the possibility that the reading was significant for *her*.

Helki's eyes snapped open and Dakotah's pulse jumped in response. The fortune-teller's knowing expression leaving Dakotah torn between amusement and irritation. But before she could think of anything to say, Helki placed three cards on the table between them. One after the other. The past. The present. The future.

Death.

Strength.

The Emperor.

Uneasiness moved through Dakotah, surprise. Wariness. But she forced herself to remain motionless, realizing in the instant she did so that it betrayed as much as movement would have.

Helki studied the cards, reaching out and laying her finger on the black-cloaked figure of Death, tracing over the scythe in his hands. "You have died and been reborn into a different person. It was a violent transition and death still stalks you in the form of a man who wants revenge." Her fingers moved to the lion depicted in Strength. "Where others have become monsters as a result of the things you have experienced, you have gained from them, the blending of your will and intellect with the beast within making you stronger." Helki's eyes sought Dakotah's and she gently tapped The Emperor. "The time will come when you will face the enemy who wants you dead, but you will not do so alone. Another change awaits you. This time at the hands of a man unlike any you have known before. A man who wants your life, not your death."

Without another word, Helki gathered the cards and stood, leaving Dakotah to stare at the place where they'd been—the tarot images forever burned into her memory. She shivered despite the warmth of the trailer, longing coiling around in her chest, weaving through her heart, momentarily wrapping her in hope until she tossed it off.

Helki had guessed correctly about the past. Had somehow glimpsed the wolf underneath Dakotah's skin and interpreted what it meant in the present. But the fortune-teller's vision didn't accurately reflect the future.

As much as the wolf might want a mate, Dakotah didn't have any illusion that such a thing was possible. Lovers, yes—though not often and never for longer than it took to gain release. It was foolish to wish for more, to hope for more, to allow herself to believe the future held anything but running and surviving.

* * * * *

Domino Santori watched as the fortune-teller left the trailer and made her way back to her own home on wheels, pausing for a moment to look in his direction, as though sensing him in the darkest shadows of the night.

He grimaced like a small boy caught at mischief and could easily imagine the flash of amusement in Helki's eyes, could very nearly hear her knowing cackle as she disappeared from view. No doubt she would share her thoughts tomorrow.

Within moments, the reason for his presence at the carnival emerged from the trailer Helki had just left. Dakotah.

Her scent reached him first, stirring his lust. Stirring the wolf's lust.

Domino smiled when Dakota headed in the direction of the woods. He already knew them well. Not as a man. But as a wolf.

Anticipation roared through him. He had never run with a human who could shift into wolf form. Had never hunted with one. Never shared the night and the glory of chasing a deer or rabbit, killing it and feeding a hunger of the body and not The Hunger of his race.

He was dhampir. A soldier of the vampire race. A man born to protect his kind. He had the strengths of a vampire—the needs of one—and yet he could move about in the sun, feeding on the enemies he hunted, draining them of all life without sanction—at least until The Transformation, The Change occurred—turning him from dhampir to full vampire, a reproductively mature male who would have to deal with both The Hunger and The Heat.

He would lose his ability to move about in the sun in a human form, a price he was required to pay in order to secure the part of his alien heritage that would make him nearly impossible to kill, that extended his lifespan so it covered centuries instead of decades. He would gain the ability to change into mist and dissipate into the air, the vampire's most effective self-defense mechanism, though unlike most vampires he would still have access to a physical shape—the wolf's—should he need to be out in the sunlight.

It was a shape he enjoyed. A wildness he embraced. One free of the rules that usually governed him—with the exception of one. Neither the dhampir nor the wolf were allowed to attack humans who didn't deserve to die.

He didn't expect to encounter such a human tonight, not when the woods were cold and unwelcoming. A perfect place to run in his other form.

Domino's cock pressed against his jeans, his balls grew heavy, aching to be free of the confining clothing. To hang between his legs in proud display in the presence of a female. *In the presence of a potential mate*, the wolf claimed, and the man laughed. He couldn't imagine craving only one particular cunt when there was such a variety of pleasure to be had among mortal women. He couldn't imagine finding a female whose mind interested him as much as her body, whose strength and courage he could admire, not for just a night but for the centuries that lay ahead for him.

Let others of his kind tie themselves to kadines—the human females created and raised for the purpose of being converted. Let others claim their brides and see them through the changes. Exchanging blood three times so the bodies of their mates were altered enough to enable them to bear a vampire's young, though they weren't fully vampire themselves.

It was a responsibility Domino didn't want. A cleverly disguised trap that led to loss of freedom.

To take a kadine was to be sexually bonded to her for centuries. The connection so deep that her happiness would become his, her sorrow his. Her life his, because without his blood, and his blood alone, she would die.

It was the ultimate insurance against betrayal. The ultimate insurance against one vampire coveting the mate of another. A complex design woven into their cells by ancient, alien ancestors. Ancestors who'd ruthlessly done what was necessary to survive, to adapt, to ensure that they wouldn't become extinct on the hostile, primitive world in which they found themselves.

Domino followed Dakotah as she moved deeper among the trees, each step a freeing of the wolf inside her. It amazed him how well she hid what she was. Fane had made no mention of it and he'd stationed himself at the carnival until Matteo Cabrelli had arrived from Italy in order to claim Sarael. Even Domino's own wolf hadn't been entirely certain until tonight. But as soon as she'd stepped from the trailer and bathed in the light of the moon, her focus on the woods—he'd known.

She stopped in a small clearing, a place that was little more than rocks and the half rotted trunk of a massive tree, lying on its side, a handful of its branches still reaching for the sky in silent supplication. Domino halted as well, making sure he was downwind of her, seeing a wariness in her body as she paused, searching the shadows as though she could feel him there, before relaxing and shedding her jacket, hanging it over a tree branch.

Her scent and clothed body alone had been enough to arouse him, but as the remainder of her clothing followed her jacket, his cock enlarged past the point he could continue to endure. With a silent groan he opened his jeans, taking himself in hand, unable to bear the thought of looking away from Dakotah even long enough to remove his own clothes.

She was magnificent. Stunning. Sleek lines and erotic curves. Dark nipples and dark hair between her thighs.

The wolf wanted to howl, to pounce. To feast on her scent and taste her. To mount her and thrust its penis into her hot, wet channel.

The man wanted the same.

When she moved out of sight again, slipping behind the fallen tree, Domino released his cock and quickly stripped. He crouched, tensing involuntarily, the remembered agony of his first change still present though the pain was no longer a part of each transformation.

When he stood again he was in wolf form, though no *canis lupus* would ever grow to be as massive as he was. Nor would their eyes be obsidian, as black as his coat.

She was wolf now too. The breeze informed him of that.

The majority of what human scent remained in the small clearing resided on the discarded clothing, with only a tiny hint lingering on fur—just enough so that one supernatural being would recognize another.

The wolf wanted to trot right over to her, to thrust its nose against her and wallow in the rich female smell. It wanted to explore her with its tongue. To chase and hunt with her before getting down to the business of covering her body and penetrating her, sending its cock into her wet heat in a frenzy of mating bliss.

But the man held back. Knowing it would be better to let Dakotah get deeper into the forest. To allow

the wolf she kept suppressed to grow stronger before approaching her.

And so they ran together, separately at first, with the huge black wolf being careful to stay downwind of the smaller, lithe brown-gray female. But when a rabbit darted from a bush, its cotton tail a ball that instinct demanded be chased, Domino surged out of the shadows and into Dakotah's awareness.

The female wolf whirled, bracing for an attack, but when the larger male charged past her, intent on the rabbit, his scent carrying the unmistakable whiff of a being who was more than wolf, she raced after him. The wolf's will dominating despite the human soul struggling deep inside, trying to rise to the surface.

But the wolf would not yield. It recognized what the human did not. A mate.

There was no way the wolf was going to be denied. There was no way it was going to be pressed back into the cage it lived in—not until it had been mounted by the large male whose lush scent had sent it into heat, swelling its vulva and making its hormones rage.

She caught up to him easily, yipping in ecstasy, both of them plunging through thickets, immersed in the smell of dark woods and each other as they hunted together, the shared activity bonding them, their forms defining their behavior, so that when the hunt ended in a clearing without a kill, it was the female who approached the male, rubbing her body against his, offering him a chance to inhale her scent, to lick her—the escaped rabbit no longer of interest as they nuzzled and explored, growing more eager to mate with each passing moment.

It was a brief courtship, a hurried affair done before the humans could interfere. The female presenting herself to the male, bracing as he maneuvered into position, mounting her from the back and thrusting inside, his forelegs gripping her tightly as he rutted, the tip of his penis engorging until he could no longer slide in and out of her channel.

He dismounted then, his hind leg passing over her back as he turned to face the opposite direction, the wolf form allowing his penis to flex and twist as the swollen tip remained in her vagina. Ejaculating. The tie lasting until his testicles were empty of seed.

Chapter Two

The sun was attempting to burn through the heavy autumn fog when the large male wolf stirred, the human within waking also, both of them immediately aware of the smaller wolf curled at their back.

The wolf quivered with joy at having a mate, a companion. It whined with excitement, its body ready to nudge the female awake and cover her, tying again as it had done repeatedly throughout the night.

But the man's will prevailed, forcing the wolf to ease away from the female and escape. A denial of the wolf's claim of a mate echoing with each footstep as they returned to the spot where the human clothing lay in a damp pile on the ground. Where the wolf crouched, snarling, its instincts warring with those of the man, its protests absorbed and echoed in the alien cells even as the air shimmered and its form was lost.

Fuck!

Domino stood snarling and hissing. Naked in the cold, wet air, and yet he was unaware of anything beyond The Heat coursing through his body, the burning need to return to the spot he'd just escaped and take Dakotah in her human form, to rut on her as his fangs buried themselves in her flesh and he fed The Hunger.

For long moments he battled his primitive programming, taking his cock in hand and sliding up and

down his shaft, the movement first heightening the need then easing it in a jet of steamy release. But the relief was short-lived, the urge to return to Dakotah a shout from every cell save what small part of him was still human.

The Heat and Hunger were a dual roar now, a demand and a seductive whisper that never relented. He was close to The Transformation. Closer than he'd let himself acknowledge.

With a curse Domino turned his back on the small clearing, on the half rotted tree trunk lying on its side, its branches reaching for the sky and draped with Dakotah's clothing. Despite the blueprint of creation and survival that his alien ancestors had designed for the vampire race, Domino didn't want a mate. And despite what the wolf might claim, he had done nothing more than fuck during the night. Done nothing more than enjoy a good run before finishing his business in Ashberg and leaving.

Frustration moved through him as he dressed. Irritation.

He'd hoped to hunt as a dhampir for a few more years. Hoped to retain the ability to move about during the day in a human shape for a little while longer. But his time of absolute freedom was nearly over.

Like all of his kind, he knew the symptoms well. He was close to changing. Too close to risk staying here much longer.

He needed to finish his business, to gain what remaining information he could and then destroy the last three Believers in the area. Enemies who belonged to a secret society committed to killing both his kind and anyone else not deemed human enough to suit them—though in truth, the men he'd hunted recently had been little more than twisted deviants. Afterward he would return to his parents' home where his father and brother could see him through the change and give him first blood.

Domino skirted the dirt and asphalt lot where the carnival had stopped and set up, preferring to avoid the sharp glance and biting comments of the fortune-teller, the knowing smiles and threats of a tarot reading. He would risk another encounter with her before he returned to his parents' home, but not now.

* * * * *

Dakotah woke alone. The wolf immediately lifting its muzzle to the sky, offering a long sad song of abandonment and pleading. Its howls adding to the eeriness of the fog-enshrouded day, the clearing with its shadow-trees and wet, heavy mist.

They rose as one being, the human and wolf very nearly equal in will, though their desires were divergent. Dakotah's thoughts centered on returning to the trailer, on leaving the carnival, her mind refusing to revisit the night or wonder about the male shapeshifter she'd spent it with. The wolf wanted to track its missing mate, to be by his side night and day. To forever abandon the lonely cage of its current life.

His trail led back to the clearing, his shape changing to that of a human, his scent one both Dakotah and the wolf would recognize again. The wolf yielded its form, accepting that it couldn't hunt for its mate on four legs, but the change of shape didn't reduce its determination to find the male who had claimed it.

Growling, the wolf slunk into the dark recesses where it was forced to hide, reduced to prey instead of living as it was meant to live, as a predator. But even in the darkness of its prison, the wolf's conviction was strong. It had found its mate and they would be together again.

Dakotah stopped at the trailer only long enough to shed her damp clothes and put on a drier version of the same outfit before leaving again. A smile formed on her lips when she spotted the carnival owner trying to slip away from his trailer, a man intent on not being noticed.

Too bad.

She resisted the urge to yell Roy's name, preferring instead to move to his side in the lifting fog. "Hot date?" she asked, catching him near the carousel.

Roy stopped, turning, enabling her to look down into his ancient, wrinkled face. She was curious despite herself as she remembered Helki's cackled, *He's got a couple of lady friends in this town. He'll be catting around all night and most of the morning.*

"Age is all in the mind," he said, his dark eyes gleaming with amusement, his laugh an echo of the fortune-teller's as he tapped his forehead with a gnarled finger. "You don't need pills and potions with the ladies if you know how to give them what they want."

"Then you know what I want?"

Roy's hand reached out and she stiffened automatically, bracing against the contact, willing to accept it even though she preferred not to be touched. Preferred to remain as separate as possible—except during those times when the need for sex became an itch that had to be scratched by someone other than herself.

Understanding flickered in Roy's eyes, along with a hint of something else—knowledge, the same glimmer Dakotah had seen in Helki's expression as she studied the tarot cards of Dakotah's reading. "Stay another day."

"I can't," Dakotah said. Knowing as soon as she said it that it was absolutely true. She could feel the change in the wolf. She was aware of its intention to find the large male and she couldn't allow that to happen.

It had taken her too long to master that part of herself. She couldn't risk losing control of it, though realization had slowly overtaken her as she'd returned to the carnival. The wolf in the woods was like none of the supernatural beings Victor Hale had sent after her. The wolf in the woods held traces of the same alien scent she'd encountered before. On Fane Mercier. And on the man who'd claimed Sarael.

The wolf stirred, savoring its future victory as Helki's words moved through Dakotah's mind. *You will see Sarael sooner than you might think and be a part of her world for more years than you can imagine.* But Dakotah pushed the prediction aside. She had no room for hope or sentiment. "I need to head out," she said, focusing on the carnival owner.

He nodded and pulled a wad of bills from his pocket as if expecting things to unfold just as they had.

* * * * *

Domino found the Believer named Byrd in a hotel room littered with liquor bottles and condoms. It had been a tedious task monitoring Byrd's activities, staying close enough to the Believer so that he could reinforce his commands periodically and gather information. But the sacrifice had been worth it. This trip alone—which had led to the deaths of several dozens of their enemy—had made the investment of Domino's time worthwhile. And yet he was more than happy to see it end.

Left to his own devices, Byrd was a rapist. A man who enjoyed breaking into houses and defiling the women within before stealing their money and jewelry. Domino's compulsions had kept the Believer from returning to his preferred forms of entertainment, but it required constant monitoring and Domino could no longer afford to do it or to take the risk that Byrd would slip his mental leash.

With a grimace, Domino kicked the sagging hotel bed. Repeating the action until Byrd opened bleary,

reddened eyes, only to be immediately trapped in obsidian ones. “Where are the others?” Domino asked, an often repeated question when he dealt with the Believer.

Byrd’s body twitched, as though he was trying to turn his head and look for his companions. “Must have gone after the girl.”

Domino tensed, flashing back to the night Matteo had joined as he and Fane hunted. They’d first heard the Believers were after a female on that night. The confession coming from someone who claimed to have overheard it. But with each of their enemy questioned and then destroyed, no one else knew anything about her. And so Domino had come to believe there was no intended victim—though he had little doubt a woman would be taken and raped.

“What girl?” he asked, cursing himself for not hunting Byrd immediately after learning about the woman. But he’d been distracted by other matters—Sarael’s escape from Matteo. Fane’s conversion from dhampir to vampire. His own hunting, complicated by the closeness of the change and the distraction of Dakotah.

A growl escaped, a low rumble from the wolf at the reminder of the woman it considered its mate. Domino grimaced, suppressing that part of his nature. “What girl?” he asked again, his gaze boring into Byrd’s. The Hunger waking, sliding irritably underneath his skin.

“A girl Chuck’s been looking for. He said she was hotter than the whores we brought back last night. He got the go-ahead this morning to pick her up.” Byrd licked his lips as his hand moved to his crotch, his smile widening. “We’re going to have a good time tonight. As long as we deliver her alive, we can do anything we want with her.”

The Hunger became a roar and Domino fought to keep his fangs from descending until after he’d gained all the useful information he could. It would be a pleasure to kill tonight, to sate The Hunger completely with not only blood but a life.

“Where are you taking the girl?”

Byrd’s eyes went blank. “Chuck didn’t say. Maybe back to Atlantic City.”

“To those Chuck reports to?”

“I don’t know for sure. Maybe not. I heard Chuck talking on his phone about money. Half for finding her. Half for delivering her.”

“What’s the woman’s name?”

“Something weird. The name of a state.”

Rage ripped through Domino. “Dakotah?”

Recognition turned Byrd’s mouth upward in a smile that was his last. The word *yeah* forever trapped on his lips as Domino struck with savage fury, easily subduing the larger, heavier man as he drove his fangs into the Believer’s neck.

It was over too quickly, too painlessly, as far as Domino was concerned. The meal too rushed and the hunt unsatisfying. But there was no time to waste or play. No time even to enjoy the blood which sated The Hunger even as The Heat grew more demanding.

* * * * *

Dakotah was aware of the two men almost as soon as she left the carnival. What few belongings she valued were packed in a knapsack that was slung casually over one shoulder so it wouldn't become a leash to hold her with. Her hands were buried in her jacket pockets, each caressing a knife hidden there—the handles black and the blades clean, though both had been covered in blood many times.

She cursed herself for not going the night before. For not blowing off her pay and leaving when her gut told her to.

Irritation moved along her spine. At herself. At the old fortune-teller. At the wolf—her own and the big male.

Even though *she* was in control, her body didn't feel as though it was completely hers. She felt edgy, restless beyond needing to run. She felt like she was in heat and it pissed her off.

Her lips pulled back in a baring of teeth. The men following her had picked the wrong day to take her on. They were human and she didn't feel remotely human at the moment.

She'd started walking in the direction of a nearby campground, one that had been popular among the psychics who'd come to Ashberg for the psychic fair. The fair was over but a large number of the rigs remained at the site and she felt sure she could hitch a ride, if not to the closest big city, at least to a different city, one where she could begin her disappearance, could begin the process of renaming and remaking herself.

If she ran she could probably get within sight of the campground without the men catching her—unless one of them was smart enough to go back for their car. Even without a breeze, she could smell the sweat and sex that clung to their skin, the stink of beer and cheap liquor. They were no match for her, especially if they could be separated, dealt with one at a time.

She needed to know if they were predators after any female or if they'd come for her in particular. It bothered her that she'd seen others with ornate crosses tattooed on their necks coming and going from the town and the carnival in the last couple of days. Men resembling these, conscienceless specimens of human garbage.

Their deaths would only be a crime if she got caught.

Dakotah veered into the woods when she heard one of the men say, "I'm going back for the car."

There was a curse behind her and she dropped the knapsack in a hidden pocket of shrubs and vine before she began jogging, luring them deeper into the forest of oak and pine, maple and cedar. Birch, the white of the trees like skeletal sentinels in a rapidly darkening land.

The wolf slid along Dakotah's nerve endings, willing her to stop and allow its form to rule. She would if she had to, if it came down to her life or death. But the wolf would end the chase in a flash of teeth, in screams as flesh and muscles parted from bones in a rush of hot blood. The wolf wouldn't stop to question, couldn't press the cold steel of a knife blade to throats and groins in order to demand answers.

Her pursuers had sense enough to be leery in a jungle of narrow trails and wet leaves instead of alleyways and garbage. They stayed together, cursing, their breath coming and going in short pants. When she'd drained them of their strength, Dakotah stopped and turned, facing her prey though they still maintained the illusion that she was theirs.

* * * * *

"Where is she?" Domino growled, whirling as the ancient fortune-teller entered the travel trailer.

“Gone.”

“I can see that, old woman.” He flashed his fangs. “The Believers are hunting her.”

Helki laughed. “What kind of a mate would she be for you if she couldn’t take care of herself, especially against mere humans?”

Obsidian eyes gleamed with menace. “I have no mate.”

“The cards say otherwise.” She nodded to the bed, to what remained of Dakotah’s possessions, left there when the dresser and desk had been emptied. The tarot deck set apart from the rest. Three cards from it laid out on the dark blue comforter. The past, the present, the future.

Death. Strength. The Emperor.

A fourth and fifth, carelessly knocked to the floor when Domino handled her things. The Empress. The World.

“I don’t have time for this foolishness.”

The fortune-teller shrugged and stepped away from the door, her movement closing the distance between the two of them and leaving the exit clear. “Then go.”

Domino snarled. Frustration and rage rippling through him along with unwilling respect. She knew how close he was to turning. He could read it in her eyes, and yet she tested him.

“I could force you to tell me what I want to know,” he said, obsidian eyes meeting equally dark ones.

She reached up, smoothing calloused fingertips over his cheek. “So like your grandfather. Perhaps that’s why I’ve always loved you best. Accept my words. Accept your destiny. Both lead to Dakotah.” A small smile formed. “The wolves have already made their choice.”

Domino scowled, knowing he’d been bested by his mother’s mother. A woman who had managed to raise Sarael, a stolen kadine, without discovery. A woman who’d seen through the veil of his kind and peered into their world when her daughter, his mother, had been claimed and converted by his father.

“I want no mate.”

Helki cackled. “Neither did your father that night he came to the carnival to hunt and discovered my Giselle.” Her eyes danced with remembered amusement. “What a chase she gave him! What a chase she still gives him!”

Domino grimaced, preferring not to be reminded of The Heat that surrounded his parents. No doubt his mother would soon be pregnant, ready to bear and raise a second generation of sons, followed by more, two or three sons for each quarter of a century that she and his father were reproductively fertile.

“Have your say then,” Domino grumbled.

The fortune-teller stroked her calloused fingertips over his cheek again. Her expression going from amused to serious. “I wouldn’t have you spend the future alone, Domino, dependant on the herbs in order to control The Hunger.” She grimaced with distaste. “Nor would I see you go to the padralls and have them create a kadine for you. A female raised with no freedom. No sense of who she really is other than one whose very existence is centered around becoming the perfect mate for a male she didn’t choose. Accept what the cards say. What the wolf has already told you.” She stepped away from him, leaning down to pick up the cards that had fallen to the floor.

Domino stiffened as she separated the third card from those already on the bed, joining it with the two he had brushed against earlier and knocked to the floor, positioning them in the shape of a V—the Emperor and the Empress connected to each other by The World.

“You see it?” Helki asked him, but Domino refused to be drawn into her game.

“I see nothing but the day fading and the night approaching.”

Helki cackled, tapping The Emperor. “Oh, he is a stubborn one! Forceful and dominating. But what a protector he can be, a provider for those he cares about.”

Her finger moved to the corner of The Empress. “An interesting card for your mate. She wouldn’t see herself in it, but it contains her. Her life has been one of famine and drought instead of abundance. Of harsh choices and betrayal, and yet her soul has not been tarnished and her secret heart yearns for a man to prove that all men aren’t like those who have come before him.”

The fortune-teller’s fingertips settled beneath The World, underscoring it. “The circle is complete. Two separate journeys now become one on a path that is lined with fulfillment, enjoyment, unity as it weaves its way into the future and takes form in the next generation of sons, soldiers to follow in their father’s footsteps.” She cackled. “And to give their father the same challenge that their father gave to his! You’ll find your mate and those chasing her in the woods between here and the campground.”

* * * * *

The men chasing Dakotah stopped in their tracks when they saw the knives in her hands. Wary, but not afraid. The one in the lead grinned, broken teeth in a filthy mouth. “This bitch is going to be better than the ones we had last night.” He smacked his lips. “Oh yeah, unwilling women are always more fun.”

“You think the guy who wants her will care if we knock her teeth out, Chuck? She’s the kind that would bite a man’s dick off just for spite.”

“As long as she’s alive, he don’t care,” Chuck said, retrieving a knife from his pocket before taking his jacket off and wrapping it around his arm. “Go around and get behind her on the trail. This place gives me the creeps. I want to be out of here before it gets much darker.”

“What about fucking her?”

“You want to do it while I get the car and move it closer, fine, only she’s got to be tied up. I’ve spent enough time in these shit-hole little towns. And I don’t trust the guy not to figure out where we are and come get her himself—or send someone else—if we don’t deliver soon.”

“He wouldn’t double-cross the order—”

“Bullshit. He’s not a Believer.”

Dakotah laughed, a sound without any true mirth. “Victor Hale isn’t even human,” she said, watching as Chuck’s body jerked in reaction, verifying her suspicion about who had sent him, though the reference to the Believers puzzled her.

She smiled, a baring of teeth, relieved that they’d answered her questions without the necessity of her asking. They were after her and her enemy hadn’t yet arrived. There was no reason to delay over their killing.

As the weaker of the two men slid into the woods, fighting vines and low branches in an attempt to get behind her, she lunged for the one named Chuck, growling in rage when his knife sliced along her

shoulder and upper arm as one of her own drove into his stomach and ripped downward like a wolf's lethal disemboweling of its prey.

Chuck's scream was piercing, his movements violent as he tried to pry her off him. But the wolf was in a frenzy, driven by the hot, metallic smell of blood.

Dakotah barely felt his blows. She didn't hesitate to plunge the second knife into his back in the moment that the first blade ripped through his groin, internal organs emerging from torn clothing, trailing after her hand as she slashed at the inside of his thigh, deep enough to ensure that he would bleed out while she dealt with the other man.

She pulled away from him, turning, bracing for an attack that would never come. The second man lay in a crumpled heap at a dark stranger's feet. A man Dakotah had never seen before but whose scent she knew well.

Chapter Three

"Who are you?" Dakotah asked, knives held in front of her, refusing to give in to the wolf's joy at being reunited with the male from the previous night—even if he was in his human form.

"I am Domino Santori." An eyebrow lifted as his gaze dropped to the knives in her hands then upward, lingering on her breasts and making her nipples tighten and her cunt pulse. "Surely you don't need those. Not after we enjoyed each other's company last night."

Dakotah hesitated for a moment then closed the knives and returned them to her pockets before using her right hand to explore the extent of her injuries on the back of her left arm and shoulder, the touch sending pain rushing through her and making her gasp, her fingers coming away slick with blood.

Rage filled Domino at the sight of her bloody hand. A ferociousness that was beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

In the blink of an eye he was at her side, swamping her with the pheromones of his kind so that he could remove her jacket and shirt without the necessity of physically subduing her. She was mentally strong, but he was stronger, and he had an ally in her wolf.

Domino growled at the sight of her injury, snarled and cursed himself for not arriving soon enough to destroy both of the men who'd been pursuing her. *What had she been thinking to allow the Believers to catch her? Why hadn't she changed into her other form if she wanted them dead?*

He ran his tongue along the deep crevice of the knife wound, healing her even as her blood coated his tongue and fanned the flames of The Hunger. The Heat. And this time it was *his* wolf who worked against him, who joined forces with the alien inclinations of his ancestors so that Domino carried Dakotah deeper into the woods, away from the corpses of their enemy.

He'd had no intention of taking Dakotah again, either as wolf or man, but now Domino finished what he'd begun, stripped her of her remaining clothing before shedding his own, tossing it to the ground to form a rough shield against damp leaves and cold earth. The Heat was a fever in his blood. A pulsing, raging inferno in his cock. Her name the only one in his thoughts, her scent, the feel of her flesh against his the only things that mattered.

He allowed her to surface from the pheromones in the second before his body covered hers, his lips taking hers, his tongue thrusting against her, their skin so hot that steam rose around them.

Desire swamped Dakotah. Primitive. Familiar. Nature's celebration of life over death. Victory.

She'd experienced it each time she'd succeeded in killing one of the werewolves Victor Hale had sent after her—though until this instant she'd never given in to the heady need to mate, to rejoice in a wild thrashing of male joined to female. A tumultuous rutting that had nothing to do with love and everything to do with the continuation of the species, with survival.

Dakotah didn't hesitate, didn't question. She wrapped her legs around Domino's waist and welcomed him into her body. A deep moan vibrating in her throat when his thick cock stretched her, filled her, burned her from the inside out.

His hips pistoned hard, fast, pummeling in and out of her channel as though he wanted to hammer into her most private, untouched parts. His growls of pleasure and satisfaction feeding the frenzy inside her, driving her to take everything he had to offer.

He held her wrists to the ground and she allowed it, something she'd never done before. Where usually restraint triggered a savage need to escape, an almost mindless need to strike out and kill if necessary, it was different with Domino.

He had killed for her. His wolf had already coupled with hers.

Dakotah tightened her legs as orgasm neared, she bucked and writhed, fought for release, and he responded by giving her more of his weight, by thrusting harder, deeper than a human male was capable of doing, slamming against her cervix in a way that blurred the border between pain and pleasure, blended them so that there was no clear point where one ended and the other began.

A red haze filled Domino's mind, a hunger for more than sex, more than blood. But he fought off the programming of his alien cells, determined to fuck her throughout the night as he'd done in his wolf form and then walk away from her in the morning.

He wanted no mate. Needed no mate, despite the way his body craved her, despite the treacherous images going through his mind, the wish that she had fangs in her human form so she could sink them into him.

His gums ached as he kept his canines from descending, from plunging into Dakotah's soft neck in order to gorge on her as he fucked her. She was temptation beyond any he could have imagined. A wolf even in her human skin. A strong, wild creature that would never be completely tamed.

He growled as her legs tightened around his waist, responded by thrusting harder, deeper, her sheath a tight fist around his cock, resisting him even as it welcomed him. Causing the wolf he carried in his cells to rut furiously. To howl in frustration that its seed wasn't yet viable as orgasm roared through Domino's cock in a lava-hot rush to fill Dakotah.

Neither of them moved in the aftermath of release. Instead they remained coupled for long moments, panting, skin slick with sweat, hearts racing in chests pressed tightly together.

Dakotah was the first to stir, the instincts that had kept her alive for so long fighting to the surface, fighting to suppress the wolf, which had escaped its cage and was still shivering with joy at being reunited with the male it thought of as its mate.

Domino might have helped her this night, but she'd learned the hard way that the only person she could count on was herself. She needed to drag the bodies into the woods and be on her way. If she was lucky, she'd be long gone before the corpses were discovered.

She unhitched her legs from around Domino's waist, pulling her wrist from his grip and pressing her hand to his shoulder, urging him to roll off her. He complied with a grunt, disbelief filling him when she

stood, pulling what clothing belonged to her out from under him as she did so.

He'd never had a woman rise from his bed with the intention of leaving unless he'd commanded her to do so. That this one thought she could escape him...

The same savage possessiveness he'd experienced before in her presence brought him to his feet, had him reaching for her, stalking her when she backed away from him. His cock hard and jutting out from his body in a bold display of intention.

A small thrill danced along Dakotah's spine at his show of dominance. At the desire she saw in his face and the way his penis was engorged and leaking, his balls heavy and full underneath it.

Wolf or man, he was a magnificent specimen of masculinity. An incredible example of a male in his prime.

He triggered memories from her past. Dreams and fantasies she'd once held as possibilities. Until she'd learned differently. Until those dreams and fantasies had become too painful a contrast to her reality. To what her life had become. A horror-show where only the strongest and the luckiest emerged alive. Where few emerged unbroken.

Only the flip of a coin had put her under dominatrix supervision and training. Had saved her from repeated rape, from becoming a cheap disposable commodity to the man her self-righteous grandmother and worthless father had turned her over to in order to wipe out her father's debt. If Victor Hale hadn't murdered them in retaliation for Dakotah killing his son, she might have returned one day to kill them herself.

A low growl sounded in her throat, threatening even to her own ears, and she forced her thoughts away from the past and back to the man who was stalking her, who'd tensed at the warning he heard, perhaps understanding there were places inside her so dark and full of fury that it would be a fight to the death if he stumbled into them.

"I want the night with you," Domino said, his voice stroking over her like a wolf's tongue. "Then I'll see to the bodies while you go on your way."

"Why?"

"A test of will." He smiled, a flash of white teeth, of mocking humor that intrigued her. "And because I don't believe in tarot readings given by meddling old fortune-tellers." He moved closer, the smile widening, his scent swirling around Dakotah along with his heat. "What about you? Do you believe?"

She thought about the reading Helki had forced on her. About The Emperor.

The time will come when you will face the enemy who wants you dead, but you will not do so alone. Another change awaits you. This time at the hands of a man unlike any you have known before. A man who wants your life, not your death.

And then her thoughts flashed to the day Helki had insisted on giving Sarael a reading. The day Matteo Cabrelli had come to claim her friend.

"I can feel the truth in them," Sarael had said, looking down at the three cards representing her past, her present and her future.

"You can change that truth," Dakotah had claimed, reaching over, flipping the cards so they lay facedown.

The lessons of Dakotah's past urged her to turn away from Domino and leave now. The wolf told her to stay.

She studied Domino for a long moment, wondering if it was only because their wolves had mated that she craved his touch, had allowed him to pin her down and take her roughly when she might have seriously injured or killed another man for trying it. Whatever the reason, it didn't matter.

In the end it was her secret heart, the place that still harbored forgotten dreams of happy-ever-after that held her in place. It was the knowledge that she couldn't run forever and that ultimately Victor Hale's wolves would find her and she would die in a savage fight, refusing to be hauled back to Atlantic City alive.

Why shouldn't she take what rare pleasure she could find that didn't involve her own hands and fingers or cheap toy substitutes? She couldn't afford to lose the entire night, but she would fuck him again and then walk away.

Dakotah shrugged. "I don't care what the tarot cards say. Once more and then I'm out of here. Take it or leave it."

Domino's nostrils flared as fire burned through his veins. The Heat responding to her challenge. Her taunt.

In his world, females were valued, treasured, cared for, loved, protected. But men ruled. Had always ruled. Would always rule, because only they were nearly indestructible.

The natural order of things was woven into the ancient fabric of vampire cells and Dakotah's words scraped over his nerve endings like sandpaper. Made him want to prove to her how wrong she was, how helpless she was.

It would take no effort at all to swamp her with the pheromones of his kind, to hypnotize her and command that she stay with him until *he* tired of her. Until *he* sent her on her way as he had so many other women. As he intended to do to so many more. She was a passing temptation, a fascination brought on by the nearness of The Transformation.

Domino moved into her, his cock straining to brush against her flat belly, to mark her with some of the seed coating its tip. His testicles were already heavy again, full, though until he became fully vampire there was no possibility of impregnating any female, and even afterward, only a kadine could carry his child, and he would not lose his freedom in such a manner.

Raw pleasure coursed through him at her boldness, the way she met his eyes, held her position, only stepping away from him as he crowded into her, physically forcing her to take one step and then another until her back was pressed against the smooth bark of a birch tree.

"I'll take it. I'll take you," he said, answering her challenge, his voice silky and dangerous, The Heat and The Hunger an incessant hum in his veins, feeding the desire to claim and dominate so that Domino knew a moment of real fear, worried that he was about to step into a carefully laid trap.

He shook it off. Told himself that if he intended to stay free of the responsibility of a mate, if he intended to avoid sexually bonding himself to one female, then he might as well strengthen his control and his will with this one, where the risk was reduced. He hadn't yet been through The Transformation, hadn't given her his blood. But even so, he wouldn't gamble by taking her blood, by leaving her unrestrained.

He took the clothing she'd collected but hadn't yet put on away from her, dropping everything but the bra to the ground before gathering her wrists. She immediately guessed what he was planning, and he

read the intention to resist him in her eyes.

Domino had no choice but to swamp her with pheromones. He couldn't allow her to fight him. Couldn't allow her to become afraid.

Fear was a heady aphrodisiac to his kind. The lure of it, the ease with which it became an addiction in itself was part of the reason laws existed forbidding full vampires from killing their prey by draining them of life, from feeding on both their blood and their fear.

Only the dhampirs, the soldiers, were allowed to drain their enemies completely—a compensation woven into their design perhaps, for the years of service they gave before they became fully vampire. Or maybe it was because they retained their human shape, their ability to be out in the sun. Because The Hunger didn't whisper as loudly in them, wasn't yet as dangerous to them. Still, none of them could afford for their existence to become widely known, especially now, in a world with advanced technology.

If he weren't so close to The Transformation, so close to being ruled by The Heat and Hunger, then he wouldn't feel the need to partially restrain her. But her challenge, the wolf's claim that she was his mate, his own obsession with her—one that had started when he'd arrived in the previous town to hunt the Believers and assist in guarding Sarael—all converged in an emotional flashpoint that put both her life and his freedom at risk.

Domino ruthlessly captured her in obsidian eyes, pushed into her mind and spoke the thoughts he forced on her. "You will allow me to bind you."

The wolf rose within him and insisted that its mate not be treated as prey, insisted that she know the tethering was for her own protection, and Domino added, "You will not fight the restraints. They are for your own safety."

And unbidden, he said, "They are for your pleasure."

He used her bra to lash her unresisting wrists together before lifting her arms over her head and securing them to a limb. Desire rushed through him at the sight of her naked and tethered, a swirl of uneasiness following in its wake at how much it satisfied something inside of him to see her like that when he'd never done it to another female, never thought to do it.

A different hunger rose, the hunger to have her submit to it willingly, and Domino hissed. He stepped back from her, considered freeing Dakotah as the uneasiness gave way to unwelcome realization.

All those created and raised to be kadines were trained to accept being bound and restrained, to expect it, even to welcome it as proof that their mates knew how to keep them safe when The Hunger and Heat became dangerously intense. There were vampires who'd killed their kadines accidentally. Who'd forgotten in their pleasure what lurked in the most primitive parts of their being.

It was a dark ecstasy like no other, to take from a willing partner until their heart stuttered in warning, to know the pleasure they gained from the bite was so great that those they took from would trade their life for it.

It was an unparalleled high to take everything—as their ancestors had once done when they were trying to adapt to the hostile world they found themselves on—when they were experimenting, speeding the evolutionary process by taking the form of their prey, moving into its still warm body and possessing it thoroughly. A possessiveness that had evolved as his species had evolved, had been tweaked and modified until it became focused solely on their mates. And yet at the vampire's core, they retained parts of what they had originated from, ruthless, alien predators. Beings so feared and deadly that they weren't

welcomed on any world.

Domino hissed again, taking his cock in hand and thinking he should free Dakotah. Send her on her way so he could deal with the bodies of the Believers and then return to his parents' home to await The Transformation.

Maybe he would have. Maybe he could have. But a breeze swirled into existence, assaulting him with their mingled scents, filling his nostrils with the smell of sex—and he was lost.

“You will not fight the restraints. They are for your safety, your pleasure,” Domino repeated, stepping into her so their bodies touched, releasing her from his hypnotic gaze.

He slowly reduced the pheromones swamping her senses and leaving her dazed and malleable. Felt his own lust intensify when dark eyes met his, when the hunger he saw there was a reflection of the woman's desire and not enthrallment.

Domino captured her lips and thrust his tongue inside her mouth, taking control of the kiss just as he intended to take control of her body. She fought him, not as prey but as one who considered herself his equal, and he relished the challenge. Anticipated the moment when she would beg for her climax and scream his name when he gave it to her.

His hands slid from her wrists down her immobilized arms, the feel of her sleek muscles and smooth skin a sensory treat. She wasn't as well endowed as the women he usually took, but as his hands covered her breasts with their tight, dark nipples, he found them more desirable than any he had ever caressed.

The wolf approved of her sleek lines. The man echoed that approval, and Domino's lips left Dakotah's in order to trail kisses downward.

She groaned at the first brush of his tongue over her nipple. Jerked at the second. Struggled, arched into him with the third, her voice a husky command as she told him to suck her, to bite her.

He growled in response, wrapped his arms around her, yielded to her demands because it suited him, because suddenly her breasts had become his world and he wanted nothing more than to suckle, to mark her with rough pleasure.

Dakotah threw back her head as hot sensation coursed through her body. She strained against the tether, not remembering the moment when she'd allowed him to tie her but no longer caring. He made her feel alive in a way she'd never felt before.

She wanted him to bite her, to suck. To move lower and do the same to her cunt, her clit.

She wanted to feel his tongue fucking in and out of her body. Wanted to hear his hungry growls and watch his face grow flushed and tense with desire as he gripped his cock to keep from coming.

Dangerous fantasy filled Domino's mind. Images of allowing his fangs to descend so he could truly suckle at Dakotah's breast. He ached with the need for it. With the desire to do it. Until the temptation grew so great he had to force himself to release her nipple, to kiss downward, lingering over her smooth belly before rubbing his cheek against the dark brown pubic hair. He buried his nose in it, the wolf demanding that he inhale her scent, take it deep within his lungs, before the man was free to reach his destination. A clit engorged and erect, made for a man's mouth and tongue, for a woman's pleasure. Cunt lips flushed, opened, begging for him to kiss and suck them.

He was lost with the first taste. The Heat controlling so that for long moments he fed on her cries of pleasure, his cock pulsing and straining with each hoarse plea for him to fuck her, to let her come. The

wolf wallowing in the scent of its mate, working itself into a frenzy that would only be satisfied with mounting her, tying with her, breeding her.

Domino tried to suppress the wolf's desires. But the more he ate Dakotah, the more she writhed against him, begging as he'd longed to hear her do, her voice low and husky, stroking over him like fur, the more insistent the wolf became. Its desires merged completely with The Heat so that fiery talons scraped at Domino's resolve to walk away from this female.

It had started out a challenge. A dare. But from the moment Domino's lips touched her skin, Dakotah was lost in pleasure. A pleasure so intense that all she could do was press against him, arch into him. Demand that he give her more of it.

His lips and tongue had become her world. His scent a heated fragrance that blended perfectly with the night and was more potent than any drug she'd ever been forced to take.

Desire roared through her veins. Not the victory of life over death. Not the wolf's craving for a mate. But the need of her human heart for contact and intimacy.

Each thrust of his tongue sent a jolt of searing heat to her nipples. Each suck on her clit had her pushing against firm masculine lips in a demand that he take more. That he take all.

A tiny part of her mind argued that she should be fighting the restraints. Fighting to keep herself separate. Fighting for release so she could make her escape. But those thoughts, those urges were lost under his sensual assault, under waves of incredible sensation.

She'd never known anything like it. And probably would never experience it again.

She still couldn't believe she'd allowed him to bind her wrists. Allowed him to strip away her freedom. But she was beyond caring.

"Now," she ordered, and without warning, The Hunger flamed to life in Domino and he fought to keep from turning his head and sinking his fangs into her inner thigh. The wild beat of her pulse blending with the sounds of her pleasure to become a chant in Domino's mind. *Mine! Mine! Mine!*

The sheer ferocity of it forced him away from the heaven of Dakotah's slick, wet folds and had him lunging to his feet before the last of his control slipped. He lifted her easily, pressed her back to the smooth bark of the tree and plunged his cock into her channel, rutting on her wildly as she wrapped her legs around him and clung, accepting the wild mating, both of them raising their faces to the moon and bathing in its light in the moment of climax.

It was a dangerous ecstasy. A challenge to fate. To the wolves. To themselves.

And they both retreated when the last tremor subsided. When skin cooled and night sounds closed in on them.

Without a word, Domino freed her and stepped back. Wild emotion and the wolf swirled and seethed inside him as he watched her dress. As he dressed in turn and followed her back to where the bodies of the Believers lay.

"You'll take care of them?" Dakotah asked, retrieving her shirt and jacket and putting them on, the words barely registering as Domino's nostrils flared, the scent of so much blood overwhelming him, making his body shudder as The Hunger snarled and raged like a caged beast.

He gasped and went to his knees as pain racked his body. Realized in that instant that The Transformation was on him, raking like talons through his internal organs and across his skin, the alien

cells finally free to do what they'd been programmed to do, to destroy anything human within him. "Get out of here," he growled when Dakotah crouched at his side.

"What's wrong?"

Obsidian eyes trapped brown ones. The wolf demanding that its mate be sent to safety. "Leave!" Domino hissed before pain drove him the rest of the distance to the ground.

Chapter Four

Dakotah stumbled to a halt at the spot where she'd discarded her backpack when she made the decision to lure her pursuers into the woods. Confusion reigned, disorientation, but a glance down at her clothing, some of it blood-stained, brought memory rushing back, at least to the point where Domino had growled, "Get out of here."

Beyond that there was nothing, only the compulsion to leave. *Her own?* She rubbed her forehead. It's what she'd intended until Domino fell to the ground.

She fought against the nothingness. Remembered staring into obsidian eyes just before everything was lost.

Fear ripped through her. Anger. Disbelief. Rage when she realized that whatever he'd done to send her away, he'd also done when she would have fought him over being tied. And yet...

She snarled, hating the fact that what he'd done to her had led to pleasure beyond anything she'd ever experienced, beyond anything she'd thought she was capable of feeling after what she'd seen and done in order to survive. It would serve him right if she left him writhing in pain.

She knew she wouldn't. She couldn't. Even though it was a weakness. To care. To feel. To not be able to walk away.

Dakotah retrieved her backpack and returned to Domino who'd managed to get to his feet and drag the bodies into the woods, who'd even managed to make it a little way down the trail before going to his hands and knees.

He was sweating, panting, shaking.

And not happy to see her.

"Leave," he growled, lifting his head, but she wasn't about to let him capture her mind again.

"Where's your house? Or your car?" One of them had to be nearby since he'd appeared wearing clothes and not naked from shifting to human form.

Domino forced himself to get to his feet, the wolf urging him to trap her again and give her a more explicit command—knowing that the bloodlust following The Transformation might lead to her death if she was anywhere near the full vampire Domino would soon become. But the man, the dhampir, resisted this time as the pain subsided enough to allow him to think rather than just react.

It was too late now to get to his parents' home. But if he could get to the house he was renting, there was a chance he could survive The Transformation without becoming rogue. Without succumbing to the full force of The Hunger and leaving a trail of bodies behind as he killed the innocent along with the guilty as he fed.

If he could get to a place of safety, then he could contact Fane and Fane would come, if not in time to see

him through the change, then in time to offer first blood.

Domino grimaced at the thought of Fane's presence. Of the jokes and taunts he'd no doubt have to endure in the centuries ahead—payback for those he'd often delivered to Fane. But he trusted Fane with his life. He'd stood with Fane and seen him through The Transformation, given him first blood, and he knew Fane wouldn't hesitate to do the same for him.

If there was time.

Domino could feel the pain building again. Stretching inside him, the alien cells ready for a fresh assault on anything human. He managed to tell Dakotah where he'd parked and gave her directions to the house, allowed her to drape his arm over her shoulder and help him leave the woods, but he was hardly aware of either time or distance as he used what control and will remained in order to keep upright and moving.

He was shifting back and forth between man and wolf, his clothing shredded and hanging off his body by the time Dakotah managed to get Domino into the house and into the bedroom. And as bizarre as the sight was, it was easier for her to deal with than his pain alone.

At first she'd been terrified that he had rabies. But other than panting heavily, the wolf gave no signs of being in distress.

Dakotah shivered as Domino's human form took shape and began writhing on the bed, gasping. His words incoherent. Her stomach tightened, not only at the sight of his suffering but with the worry that what he was experiencing was something she'd have to endure in the future.

He stilled, seemed to be fighting the pain. "Cuffs. In the dresser," he gasped, rolling to his side and spearing her with eyes holding something so alien that only instinct kept her from bolting. "Cuffs. Put them on me." This time it was a hiss.

A chill swept up Dakotah's spine at the sight of his fangs. She braced herself, expecting hair to begin sprouting on his face and hands, a nightmare image of a werewolf caught in the middle of two forms. Instead his eyes filled with flames, as though his very soul was being burned away. And for an instant there was nothing of either the man or the wolf, nothing except a dangerous, inhuman predator whose intent to kill her was a scream in every cell of Dakotah's body.

She remained still, focused, knowing that to turn her back was to accept death. And as she watched, the flames receded, the man gritting his teeth as a wave of agony ripped through his body.

Escape was a fleeting thought, turned aside. Dakotah rushed to the dresser, rapidly tossing the contents of its drawers onto the floor as she looked for the cuffs he'd fought so hard to tell her about.

She found them, but the sight of the cuffs had her trembling, reluctant to touch them. They were silver, studded with some type of gem, bloodstone maybe. But the silver alone was enough to make her break out in a sweat. To make her hands clench and unclench as she steeled herself to touch them.

She shuddered, remembering the red cast of Domino's eyes, then forced herself to take the cuffs from their velvet-lined case, to endure when a burning numbness spread through her as she returned to the bed.

He snarled and hissed as she fumbled to get the first band around his wrist. Tried to escape when she went to do the second, so that she moved to his ankles and secured them, then waited until he was bucking in pain, barely aware of her presence as she secured the last band.

Horror raged through Dakotah with sharp talons, tearing her up on the inside as she watched his suffering, watched as his back arched and spasmed so violently that she thought it would break, his arms and legs paralyzed by the silver and bloodstone.

In the nightmare that was her life before she killed Victor Hale's son and escaped, she'd been paid to inflict pain, had mastered the art of wielding a whip or a paddle, of taking those she was forced to serve to the destination they desired. She'd learned to close her mind to their screams, their suffering, to watch it mechanically and alter her techniques as necessary, to take some of them to the edge of death itself—and feel nothing during the process.

But Domino's suffering tore through her. Frightened her. Made the wolf pace and whine while the woman found tears she wouldn't have believed she still possessed running down her cheeks.

With the bands on he remained in human form, alternating between periods of pain and brief moments when he lay panting, his body coated in sweat, seemingly focused inward, unaware of her presence.

She didn't know whether he'd appreciate her touch or not, but she couldn't remain in the room with him and do nothing. When he stilled again, she moved to the bathroom and wet a hand towel, then returned, wiping the sweat from his chest first though he hissed and jerked, nearly catching her in gleaming obsidian eyes when she looked at his face.

Dakotah managed to break away, her heart thundering in her chest at the reminder of his ability to hypnotize. He'd been unaware of her before, but now she could feel the intensity of his gaze as she retreated to the bathroom. It burned into her, causing primal instinct to roar to the surface and urge her to run. Even the wolf danced nervously inside her, though it insisted she stay.

Just as her own conscience did.

Dakotah closed her eyes for a moment, willing that conscience away. She didn't need this. She didn't owe him anything. And if she did, she'd paid him back by not walking away and leaving him in the woods.

She had her own set of problems. If the men Victor Hale sent after her managed to take her alive...
Fuck.

Dakotah rinsed the cloth and turned, stepping back into the bedroom, her heart thundering as adrenaline surged through her at the sight of the silver bands lying on an empty bed.

She dropped the moistened cloth and took a step toward the bedroom door as the air around her seemed to thicken with deadly menace. The threat so real that even the wolf wanted to flee.

But there was no time to escape.

No time even to react as Domino shimmered into existence and attacked.

There was only The Hunger.

The wild rush as blood poured into starving cells.

There was no man. No wolf.

Only a host form feeding.

A drive to survive, because survival was the only thing that mattered.

The Hunger ruled unchecked, unchallenged, until The Heat rose, reshaping the savagery, allowing the man and the wolf to emerge and take possession of the shell, though both man and wolf burned with the twin flames of Heat and Hunger.

The wolf was the first to react. To recognize that its mate was dying and protest with its entire being and will.

The man acted, using his fangs to rip into his wrist before pressing it against silken lips, his voice a command that had to be obeyed. "Drink." And with each swallow the flames receded, surrendering, leaving the wolf yipping with pleasure and Domino staring down at Dakotah, denying the truth to himself even as she opened her eyes and his cock surged to life so that he could fuck his bride.

"Leave," he growled, ignoring what both the wolf and his body told him. Determined not to fall into the neatly laid out trap beneath him. One fuck was all it would take to bind himself to her sexually.

Too late, the wolf claimed but Domino refused to believe it. He rolled off Dakotah, eyes narrowing and nostrils flaring when he saw the mark on her neck where he'd bitten her.

A howl of denial formed in his mind, blending with the wolf's howl of joy, the chorus bringing The Heat to life so only sheer force of will kept him from pouncing on Dakotah, from pulling her down and underneath his body when she scrambled to her feet and backed away from him, intent on doing as he'd commanded and leaving.

Dakotah was beyond fear. Beyond even shock.

Vampire.

The single word ricocheted around and around in her thoughts. Even his scent had changed, reminding her of the man who'd claimed Sarel, though the wolf's familiar presence was blended with the cold, alien taint that now identified Domino.

Fire burned through Dakotah's veins. Need, despite the fact he'd very nearly killed her.

But she had no intention of giving in to the wolf's yearning or her own body's demands. She had no intention of taking a chance and becoming vampire. The wolf she could accept, had learned to accept, but she wouldn't lose the rest of her humanity. She wouldn't lose what little control she had over her life. His command echoed through her, this time done without hypnotism, and yet she *had* to obey, knew instinctively that if they shared more blood, his will would rule. He would become The Emperor of the cards.

Bile rose in Dakotah's throat as the fortune-teller's words rang with finality. *Another change awaits you. This time at the hands of a man unlike any you have known before. A man who wants your life, not your death.* But just as she'd counseled Sarel, Dakotah refused to believe the reading held the *only* truth. She grabbed her knapsack from where she'd dropped it just inside the front door and rushed into the night, determined to put as much distance between herself and Domino as she could.

She headed in the direction of the campground, memories pressing in on her as she loped along the edge of the woods. Memories of another night, another man who'd attacked her—changed her—dying in the process.

A growl escaped. Her lips pulling back in a snarl as feral hatred filled her.

Not for Domino.

The wolf wouldn't allow that, and Dakotah wouldn't lie to herself.

Domino had commanded her to leave when they were in the woods but she'd gone back. She'd chosen to involve herself—forgotten a lifetime of painful lessons—and paid a price for it. Though she couldn't guess what the true cost was yet.

Her blood burned. Her body burned.

Each step away from Domino was an act of will. A test of resolve. Making her push herself until finally she halted, lungs burning and sides aching from running.

Fuck! What was she going to do now?

The wolf was rioting inside her. Fighting her as it hadn't fought since those early days. The days after she'd been taken from her prison in Atlantic City and delivered to Anthony Hale's estate at the edge of the Pine Barrens.

Despite her value, the money she brought in for services rendered, men didn't say no to the Hale family. Men didn't ask questions about the women taken to Anthony's estate and never seen again.

The feral hatred for Anthony Hale—and his father—was a wildness inside Dakotah. A living thing, fed by something alien...something she'd gained from Domino's blood.

Not a thirst for revenge. Anthony Hale was dead. But a primordial *need* to hunt her enemy, to invade his home and destroy him. To kill Victor Hale.

Dakotah forced the thoughts away. Attacking Victor Hale would be suicide. She'd been running since she was taken to his son's home.

She'd thought Anthony was just another sick pervert when he'd shown her into the den, his smile vicious as he'd said, "I've got a little entertainment planned. You can take off your clothing or leave it on. Either way, you're going to get fucked in a way you've never been fucked before."

When he left her alone, she'd found the hidden cameras and more—a weapon for herself in the pokers next to the fireplace.

She'd braced herself for anything. Except for the sight of the door being opened and a wolf entering the room, its penis extending beyond its foreskin.

It attacked without hesitation, ripping at her clothing and leaving her bleeding, fighting to keep from becoming someone else's sick entertainment. The drive to not only save herself but to escape had been the sole focus, the years of "disciplining" clients giving her the strength and knowledge—the rage—to wield the fireplace poker with deadly efficiency and aim.

The wolf collapsed, blood and bone and brain oozing onto the carpet as its form altered and Anthony Hale lay at her feet.

She'd escaped. Or thought she had.

You have died and been reborn into a different person.

A grim smile settled on Dakotah's face. Death, the card of her past. The fortune-teller got that one right.

She forced herself to straighten and keep walking. Forward. Toward the campground, though it was a struggle to keep from turning around, from going back, from giving in to the voice that said there was no

changing the truth of what had happened between Domino and her. What had happened between their wolves.

Dakotah hoped Domino was suffering as much as she was.

* * * * *

The wine glass shattered as Domino slammed it against the kitchen counter in frustration. The herbs weren't helping to still the clamoring. To silence the insidious whisper of The Hunger urging him to leave the house and hunt as it tried to regain what it had lost when The Heat rose in Domino.

But Domino wasn't so arrogant in his confidence that he would risk becoming rogue. If he hunted this night, it would end in death. A human's first, but perhaps his own in the end.

He knew the sweet ecstasy of killing as he fed, he knew how hard it was to resist the temptation to take everything. How the beat of any human heart would beckon and tempt. Tonight, it would be nearly impossible to resist The Hunger.

The Transformation had left him vulnerable. Dakotah's absence made it worse. If he left the house, the herbs he'd ingested wouldn't hold against the bloodlust.

Wild emotion raged through Domino, stripping him of his ability to deny the truth. Whether it was the mating of their wolves or the fact that he'd taken her in the woods immediately before The Transformation and the sharing of blood—it didn't matter. What shouldn't be—was. The very trap he'd planned to avoid had caught him unprepared.

He'd bound himself to her sexually.

A hiss escaped as he thought about her out in the night—drawing men to her with the pheromone lure she would gain from his blood. Free to fuck them if she wanted to while his cock would now fill only for her.

He hadn't wanted the responsibility of a kadine, had thought he'd rather enjoy the pleasures to be found in a thousand different pussies, but now... The Heat made him crave and ache for only one. It promised fulfillment beyond anything he could imagine as the blueprint designed by his alien ancestors unfolded and Dakotah was at its center.

Fuck!

A snarl escaped as his cock responded to the word. As his mind flooded with images of what they'd already done, what he still wanted to do.

Domino pushed away from the counter and reached for his cell phone. Irritation scraping along every nerve ending at the necessity of asking for help.

* * * * *

Dakotah probably shouldn't have been surprised to see Fane's sleek black sports car at the campground. He and Cable had been a fixture around the carnival in the days before Sarael left. She'd even teased Sarael about them, though she knew Sarael wouldn't pursue either man and she wasn't entirely certain that the men were interested in women. They always smelled of wild sex and darkness. Of each other.

She paused in the shadows, wary as she remembered what else they smelled like. Or at least what Fane's scent reminded her of. Domino's. As well as the man who'd hunted for and claimed Sarael.

Dakotah didn't trust many people, but she trusted Cable. She wasn't drawn to the pain of others and yet Fane's was a darkness that filled his soul, reminding her of her own. There'd been times when she'd wondered if Fane's scent meant he could shift forms, the contrast between the hot beat of a human's heart and the coldly alien aura making her speculate that if he had another shape, it was something reptile.

She didn't know the details of either of their lives. She hadn't asked. The carnival was a refuge, a place to hide, the men and women there all running from something, hiding from something, even if it was just themselves.

As she watched, Fane and Cable emerged from a travel trailer. Laughing, the sight of Fane's animated face a shock. But not nearly as much of one as seeing the blonde woman between them, her hands held in theirs.

Longing filled Dakotah and she tried to squelch it. Automatically. Ruthlessly. As she'd done for most of her life.

But the longing wouldn't yield. The fortune-teller's prophecy and the wolf's claim pressed in on her with the image of Domino, filled her mind and heart with thoughts and dreams she'd put away long ago. Even before she'd gone to live with her father and his mother. Even before the first of her mother's never ending string of "boyfriends" tried to molest her.

The door to the travel trailer closed, leaving the others in the yellow glow of a porch light. And as if sensing her presence, Fane's face turned in Dakotah's direction. He said something then nuzzled against the woman's neck before letting her hand go. Rather than climb into the sports car, she slid into the passenger seat of a Suburban while Fane and Cable moved toward Dakotah.

Dakotah's hands went instinctively to her jacket pockets, curling around the handles of the knives there. The move making Fane's lips pull back in a flash of teeth that reminded her of Domino.

Surprise rippled through her when the very knives she held concealed in her jacket became an invisible leash, pulling her toward Fane. She knew he was skilled with knives, they'd thrown them at targets, challenging each other in fun as the carnies had gathered to unwind when their booths were closed and their rides shut down for the night.

"We're all born with talents beyond what's necessary to survive," Fane said when she was standing in front of him, reeling with the knowledge that like Domino, Fane's scent had changed since the last time she saw him, making her guess that he was now a vampire.

"Let me guess, yours is knives."

"Yes."

She took her hands out of her pockets and included Cable in her glance. "What are you two doing here?"

Fane's eyes danced with amusement. "Our bride wished to visit with her friends and the timing was right. Domino called. Apparently he allowed his own bride to escape then thought better of it."

Dakotah took a step backward but was halted by Cable's hand on her arm and his sympathetic, caring expression. "You can't run from this," he said and she heard the absolute certainty and truth in his voice.

"I can try."

He shrugged. Smiled slightly, deflating her resolve before it had formed, piercing it with words. “He needs you. Right now he can’t even leave the house for fear of what he might do before he finds you.”

Fane grinned. “A sight I can hardly wait to see for myself.”

“Come back with us, Dakotah,” Cable said. “It’s not safe for you to be away from him.”

“It hasn’t been safe for me for a long time, Cable.”

“It’ll be worse now. His blood has changed you.” Cable grimaced. “Men won’t see the No Trespassing signs you’ve got posted. You’ll be fighting them off wherever you go.”

She frowned in disbelief. “Like I’m doing now?”

“I’m already bound to Fane. Come back to the house with us. There are things you need to know.” Cable squeezed her arm. “Don’t turn this into a fight. You won’t win. You can’t. Not against what Fane and Domino are.”

Fuck. She could hear Cable’s sincerity.

“Just roll over?” she asked, but there was no heat in her words. One of the lessons she’d learned early on was the importance of adapting, compartmentalizing. You didn’t survive otherwise. And sometimes you didn’t survive anyway.

She knew Cable was telling the truth. Her blood burned and with each step she’d taken away from Domino, a knot had formed in her chest, tightening to the point of pain and panic. But what really scared her was that part of her wanted to go back—and not just the part that was wolf.

She’d made it this far by sheer force of will. She believed she could make it even further. She could make it alone. And that was a salve to her pride, along with the knowledge that whatever she and Domino had done to themselves and each other—or more accurately, whatever their wolves had set into motion—he hadn’t asked for it any more than she had.

“I’ll go back with you, but Fane is wrong. I’m not Domino’s bride.”

Chapter Five

Joy rushed through Domino when Dakotah walked into the house of her own free will. The sight of her loosened the tight knot of rage and frustration that had been a leaden weight in his chest. The sight of her sent his cock jerking to attention in a rush of blood that left him dizzy—until he saw Fane’s mocking smile. “If you’re smart, you won’t say anything,” Domino said.

Fane’s smile widened. “What’s to be said? Other than, *He who laughs last, laughs best.*”

Domino hissed, flashing his fangs though he knew it would have no effect on Fane. He shifted his attention to Dakotah and his nostrils flared when he became aware of Cable’s scent on her arm. He wanted to rip her jacket off her, to get rid of the smell of another man, but her wary expression warned him against giving in to the primitive impulse.

Dakotah took the last step and closed the distance between them. Their bodies touched. Relief soaked in even without the feel of skin against skin. And still it wasn’t enough for Domino. He pulled her into his arms, covered her lips with his and thrust his tongue against hers.

She tasted of woman and darkness.

Of blood.

And courage.

And him.

He plundered her mouth and she responded by softening, her body molding itself to his as her tongue tangled and battled, rubbed and enticed in a greeting that made his heart race and his cock throb.

Anticipation rose. The Heat burning more intensely than The Hunger and Domino embraced its fiery flame. Envisioned taking her into the bedroom and fucking her as he should have done earlier instead of sending her away. Envisioned taking her as his bride and seeing the truth of it in her eyes.

But as quickly as he thought it, she stiffened and tried to pull away, and in the process stirred the need to dominate, to claim. To be what he was designed to be.

His fangs elongated and he forced himself to end the kiss. The Heat ruled for the moment, but The Hunger was a deadly presence just underneath the surface of his skin. One taste of her blood... He lifted his mouth from hers and stepped away, his eyes traveling over her, his gaze possessive and hot as realization dawned.

He still saw sleek lines and a body that made him want to cover it with his own. To rut like a wolf and make love like a man. But now he also saw her strength of will and found a courage he could admire. There was no fear in her despite the fact he'd very nearly killed her.

She was a woman he could easily imagine at his side, at his back in the centuries that lay ahead. She was what he'd never imagined he might have. Even if the wariness in her eyes warned him she didn't truly understand or accept what they already were to each other, what they would soon be to one another.

"You need to feed," Fane said, drawing Domino's attention away from Dakotah, his words striking against The Hunger like a match and causing it to roar through Domino's veins.

Domino couldn't resist shooting a glance in Cable's direction and then Kiziah's, his eyes lingering over her blonde beauty in a way guaranteed to scrape over Fane's nerve endings. "You're offering your kadine? Your companion?"

This time it was Fane who hissed, flashing his fangs. "You know better."

Dakotah caught the look of amusement Cable and Kiziah shared before Cable said, "Zia and I are going to go camp out in front of the fireplace."

The rest of them followed, going deeper into the house. Dakotah acutely aware of the man walking behind her.

Without even touching, the lust was there. The need. Not just the wolf's, but Dakotah's own desire. Without a word the anticipation was building. As though the night could be spent in only one way. Sating a hunger that transcended the body. A hunger of the soul. The heart.

Cable and Kiziah settled on the thick carpeting in front of the fireplace, their attention fixed on one another. Dakotah took a seat at the end of the couch and Domino sat next to her, crowding against her so that they were once again touching.

Fane surprised her, sitting on Domino's other side and unbuttoning the sleeve of his shirt then pulling it back. "You need blood, Domino, to fully sate The Hunger." His eyes met Dakotah's, dark and serious. "If you weren't important to him, he would have killed you to sate the bloodlust that rides us with The

Transformation. It's almost impossible to stop. It's a miracle that he did."

"It was a close thing," she said, remembering how she hadn't even put up a fight, how good it had felt, even when she knew he was killing her.

There were men she'd been forced to service who required erotic asphyxiation—men willing to skate the edge of death for their sexual pleasure. She'd hated them, hated what they forced her to do to them. It revolted her. They revolted her.

She got to her feet and moved to stand behind the chair. Torn. Confused by her own reaction to Domino. The fact that she didn't hate him, wasn't even sickened by what had happened between them after his Transformation. He watched her through hooded eyes as he lifted Fane's wrist to his mouth and fed.

Dakotah responded to the sight of it, her labia swelling, her breasts growing full and heavy. It was an act of communion, primitive and sacred at the same time. Sexual and yet not sexual.

Her womb fluttered and her nipples hardened. Desire moved through her. To be what Domino needed. To have him take *her* blood instead of Fane's.

Domino released Fane's wrist and stood, his focus on Dakotah. His eyes reflecting the heat that was burning through her.

Fane rose from the sofa and joined Cable and Kiziah on the rug in front of the fireplace, Kiziah's soft, embarrassed laughter causing Dakotah to look away from Domino, to watch as Cable and Fane positioned Kiziah between them, their hands and mouths roaming over her body, turning her laughter into weak protests, and then into sighs and whimpers and muted pleas.

"Does it turn you on to watch them?" Domino asked, trapping Dakotah between his body and the back of the chair. His hands sliding around, cupping her breasts, tweaking her nipples through clothing that was suddenly too restrictive. Making her folds grow slippery with the feel of his erection pressed against her ass.

"I've seen shows like this before," she said. *I've been in them.* And yet even as she said the words, thought them, she knew they weren't completely true. If it was only sex, she would have turned away by now. But it was more than sex, more than pleasure. The love she saw on their faces was a seduction of her senses, a torment to her heart.

"Have you really?" he whispered against her neck. "Have you really seen *this* show before? Once we've formed a bond, it's impossible for us to have sex outside of it. But among close friends and family, we sometimes share the pleasure that we take in those who have become our world. The kadines—or male companions—whose blood sates us, whose bodies succor us, whose existence gives deeper meaning to our own. It's not a trap I thought to find myself in, but here I am." His fingers tightened on her nipples, becoming almost painful as he warned, "Don't fight me, Dakotah. You can't win and neither of us can change what's happened between us."

Dakotah shivered as his words slid through her. In that moment she believed. In that moment she allowed herself to be caught up in the dream.

She didn't protest when his fingers replicated Fane's and Cable's movements, stripping her of her jacket and shirt and bra as they were doing to Kiziah. She whimpered as Kiziah whimpered, longed to feel Domino's mouth suckling at her breasts, hungrily eating her as Fane and Cable were doing to Kiziah.

"You're aroused," Domino said, smoothing over the tight crowns of her breasts, tugging at her nipples before moving lower, his hands hot against her belly, their nearness to her cunt making her suck in her

breath, making her want to open her jeans so that he could cup her mound. “Admit it. Admit that you’re aroused.”

“You know I am. You can smell it.”

His hand stroked over her stomach. Teased along the waistband of her pants. And she pushed against his erection, ground against it, needing more as Cable stripped Kiziah of her skirt and panties and pressed his face to her cunt. Kiziah’s cry of pleasure scraping over Dakotah with razor-sharp talons of need.

“You liked the feel of my mouth on you in the woods,” Domino said, tormenting Dakotah by unzipping her jeans, his fingertips sliding inside her panties, tracing the line of her pubic hair.

She tried to turn in his arms, to turn the tables on him, but he held her in place with his superior strength. Buried his face in her neck, seducing her with the feel of lips and fangs, so that she very nearly begged him to bite her.

Lust burned through Domino. Sparked by the sight of Fane with Kiziah and Cable, fed by Dakotah’s willing participation.

The scent of her arousal inflamed him, tested his control. Both The Heat and the wolf urged him to take her, to bury his cock in her, to spend the rest of the night fucking her. But the man wanted to savor these moments. To use them to ease Dakotah into his world. To get better acquainted with his bride.

The word no longer felt awkward on his lips or unexpected in his thoughts. Domino grimaced—no doubt his grandmother would chortle with pleasure that her predictions had come true.

But there was nothing to be done about it and he wouldn’t change it if he could. Dakotah was his bride, she would be his kadine. Already he craved it as much as he’d once craved his freedom. The desire for it was hardwired into him, but her earlier actions had made it more than what he’d always imagined it would be. He’s seen it as a trap. Now he saw it as a doorway. And the need to go through it was overwhelming. She was already everything to him.

He kissed along her spine. Inhaled her scent as he smoothed his hands over her hips and down her legs, pushing her clothing in front of them. Following with his mouth, licking the base of her spine, gently biting a sleek buttock before moving lower, to torment the back of her knees with his tongue as he removed her shoes so that her jeans and panties could fall to the floor.

She was muscle and tawny skin, lean and feminine. Her lines like the wolf’s, beautiful to him. Arousing.

Domino stood, shimmering into mist in order to shed his clothing, returning to human form in the blink of an eye so he could press against Dakotah. So he could drink her in through his skin.

In front of them Cable was scrambling out of his jeans, the firelight dancing off his flesh. Stark need written on his face as he took his cock in hand, its tip glistening with arousal.

With a groan Domino rubbed his cock against Dakotah, covered her mound with his fingers and rejoiced in her wetness, in the stab of her clit against his palm. She pushed back against him, spreading her legs and leaning forward, trying to draw him into her depths.

He resisted. Pressed her more firmly against the back of the chair so he could withstand the temptation she presented for a few moments longer. “Have you really seen this show before?” he asked, returning to their earlier conversation, his lips pulling back in a silent snarl. “Have you experienced it?”

Dakotah’s cunt clinched as Cable pulled Kiziah on top of him. She whimpered when Cable thrust

upward, his face a mask of pleasure as his cock slid home. And then Fane joined them, forging into Kiziah's back entrance, the three of them going still, as though they were savoring the instant when they first joined, as though they were so closely bound together that they were one person.

"No," Dakotah said, answering Domino's question. Longing filling her as she looked at the three people making love in front of the fireplace. "No, I've never seen this show before."

Domino brushed his fangs against her neck, the need to dominate pressing in on him along with the wolf's urge to cover its mate. The desire to erase any memory she had of other men, other lovers, was a burning ache in his gut. "I will kill any man who tries to take you from me."

"You already have," Dakotah said, thinking about the two men who'd followed her into the woods. Shuddering as she thought about Victor Hale—a man she'd never met but who was determined to see her dead. "There will be more of them."

"And they will die too," Domino said, his voice without inflection. His absolute confidence filling her with a security she'd never known before. A shimmering vision of safety that she was hesitant to believe in.

Already Domino could sense something of her emotions, and already it wasn't enough. He found himself longing for the second blood exchange and then the third—so he could touch her thoughts at will, so he could know who she was.

He kissed her shoulder, cupped her breast while the fingers of his other hand pushed into her sheath. He gloried in how wet and slick she was, how the muscles of her channel clamped down on him, tried to hold him inside of her. "Do you want me to take you now?" he asked, his cock full, pulsing, leaking as both Fane and Cable began moving in and out of their bride's body.

Dakotah had never wanted anything so badly. Never thought that anything sexual could touch the deepest parts of her—that she'd allow it to reach her. But seeing Fane and Cable and Kiziah, being with Domino...

She hungered like a beggar at the edge of a feast. Felt starved as though she'd lived through a lifetime of famine. The pain of her need was soul-deep, wrenching, squeezing her chest so the only thing she could say was yes. Her voice whisper-soft, her answer triggering a fierce possessiveness in Domino, a driving desire to see to her safety and happiness.

He positioned her so her hands were braced on the back of the chair, teased her by sliding his cock back and forth along her cunt lips, stroking over her clit as he coated himself with her arousal.

When she would have impaled herself on him, he resisted, tormenting them both by delaying. Pushing the need higher until her skin was coated with a fine sheen of sweat, until his testicles ached for release and his cock screamed for the feel of her wet channel and feminine heat.

Only then did he give in to what nature demanded, thrusting all the way into her in a forceful stroke meant to claim, to dominate, to reach her heart and take her soul. She moaned, a husky sound that had his nostrils flaring, his muscles tensing, fighting against the urge to piston in and out and spew his seed within seconds of mounting her.

"Watch them," he growled, subduing the fierce urge to rut by focusing on the rhythm in front of him, by matching what Cable and Fane were doing with their bride.

And Dakotah watched, soaking in the raw emotion and passion as she breathed the heavy musk of arousal, became consumed by it. Wanted it for herself. And Domino.

She looked away, tilted her head so that dark eyes met obsidian ones, in challenge, in demand, and he answered her call, snarling with need as his thrusts became more aggressive, as their awareness of what the others were doing faded until the only thing that mattered was finding release and pleasure in each other.

Domino took her to the ground with his penis still embedded in her, the wolf demanding a closer contact, a true covering of its mate. Dakotah's wolf wanting the same, so that she readily went to her hands and knees, readily lowered her upper body, enabling Domino's cock to thrust deeper.

He wanted to sink his fangs into her as they fucked, but settled for gripping her shoulder with his teeth, pressing his chest against her back and pinning her with his weight, taking her as a man though the movements and instincts were those of the wolf. He wanted to consume her, to be so closely melded that they were one body, one mind, one being, the ancient stamp of his ancestors so strong that there was no thought to resist. No point in denying it.

Domino settled more heavily on her, a show of strength and dominance, and she responded by yielding more of herself. Accepting all that he had to give, letting him take her as no man ever had, letting him touch her heart and soul where the others had gotten a body devoid of feeling, a hollow vessel to sate their needs with.

He didn't allow either of them a release until they were both panting, writhing, burning, the sweat pouring off them, their bodies closely attuned, his thoughts pressing into hers. Pounding into her with each thrust. *Mine! Mine! Mine!* The presence and fierceness of his words as overwhelming as the rush of orgasm that took her, leaving her dizzy, shaken, trying to pull back, to retreat to safer ground.

Domino wouldn't allow it.

He scooped her up and carried her from the room, though not before Dakotah saw Fane and Cable and Kiziah wrapped in a cocoon of love, holding one another tightly as they basked in the afterglow of their own pleasure. The flames in the fireplace not nearly as bright or as hot as what they found in each other.

She expected Domino to toss her onto the bed, but instead he moved through the bedroom and into the bathroom, depositing her in the shower stall and joining her there, making her scream then laugh when a blast of cold water hit them both before steamy hot water followed in a soothing caress. He pressed her against the wall, eyes dancing, lips trailing wet, sucking kisses along her neck and shoulders, her breasts, playful now where only moments before he'd been intense.

It was a welcome relief to Dakotah. A different type of seduction. And she responded to it, petting him in return, nipping and kissing as she slid down his body. His mock growls making her smile against his slick skin, filling her heart with a lightness she'd never associated with sex.

She stopped to torture tight male nipples, reveled in his honest moans of pleasure, in the way his body shuddered, pressing and rubbing against hers, enticing her to lick and suck, his cock already hard again, thick and full and waiting for her attention.

But she refused to be hurried despite its pulsing insistence. She grasped his nipple between her teeth, tugging as he'd done to her earlier, teasing it with her tongue as his fingers clenched and unclenched in her hair.

Only when his head was thrown back, his body arched, tense, did she slip lower, cupping his testicles in her hand, measuring their fullness and weight as she nuzzled his cock, inhaled his scent, the wolf inside shivering with joy, urging her to taste him, to know him through all her senses.

Domino's growls turned into moans, and then became her name. Repeated over and over again as she let him press through her lips. Her hands and mouth controlling the depth of his pleasure, the length of it, driving him higher and higher, until there was no hint of their earlier playfulness. Until there was only fevered need and the satisfaction of giving and receiving beyond anything ever experienced with another partner.

She was a heady addiction for Domino. The end result hardwired into him. Each taking fed The Heat and erased the memory of those who had come before her. Bound him more tightly to Dakotah until his reality centered on her. On what she would become for him. His kadine. His mate. The mother of his children. And he rejoiced in her presence in his life.

He took her to the floor of the shower stall, pinned her there, testing his control by burying his face between her thighs, the hot rush of her arousal warring for his attention with the wild thundering of her blood. He wanted to sink his fangs into her inner thigh but thrust his tongue into her cunt instead, fucking in and out, consuming her, lifting his head only to suck her clit, to attack it with his tongue as she writhed and strained against him, her voice husky then hoarse as she begged him for more, and he savored the sound, enjoyed the erotic retribution for what she'd done to him. Ignored her pleas as she'd ignored his until his own needs matched hers. Only then did he swallow her release—jerking away when the temptation to take her blood became too great—and with a growl he levered himself over her, his eyes capturing and holding hers as he pierced her with his cock, fucked her as the hot water rained down on them.

Chapter Six

Dakotah woke up with Domino pressed tightly against her back, his arm draped over her side, insurance that she'd stay put.

Or maybe she woke up pressed tightly against his chest, snuggled close as though needing Domino's warmth and intimacy.

Either way, it was a first. To wake up in someone's arms.

She lay still for long moments, savoring it, thinking about it, wondering if it was an illusion. Wondering if the night before had really been about more than sex.

It was daytime now. She could feel it even though heavy drapes covered the windows.

Dakotah turned in Domino's arms, surprise filling her when she realized that she could see him as clearly as if the room had been flooded with sunlight. The knowledge that she'd gained another edge, one she might need to survive, pleased her, but it also made her wonder what other changes had occurred from taking his blood.

Uneasiness skittered along her spine when she thought about how difficult it had been for her to leave him and go to the campground. How she'd almost felt relieved when it became obvious that Fane and Cable intended to take her back to Domino, whether she was willing or not.

And yet despite her misgivings, her doubts, Dakotah's womb fluttered as she looked at Domino's ultramasculine features. Her body grew heavy as need and lust gathered, pulsing through her veins in thick, slow waves, like blood-red water pulled from a deep internal well.

She had so many questions. Questions she needed answers to.

Dakotah shivered, remembering the nightmare days after surviving Anthony Hale's attack. The lost memories. The lost periods of time. Waking up naked and covered in blood. The terror she'd

experienced, wondering if she'd learn that the wolf had killed a child or an innocent. The relief each time there'd been no whisper of lives lost.

There was so much blood on her hands. But none of it coated her conscience.

There were so many things she'd had to do in order to survive. Choices forced on her and she could live with them, burying them in the darkness of the past as she kept moving into the future.

She'd made the decision to return to the clearing, to help Domino back to the house. And yet she still had no idea what that decision had cost her.

She needed to know. Needed to deal with it.

The smell of bacon and coffee drifted in, diverting her thoughts, drawing her attention away from the man next her. Her sense of smell and her hearing expanded so that she knew there was only one person in the kitchen. Kiziah. The footsteps were light, and there was a faint, feminine smell underneath that of the bacon and coffee.

Dakotah slipped from the bed and dressed, taking her backpack with her as she left the bedroom. Kiziah looked up from the stove when she walked in, her face turning pink with embarrassment before she ducked her head and mumbled, "There's enough for two if you want something to eat."

It took Dakotah a second to realize what was causing the other woman's face to flame with color. She almost laughed. Though the sound of it would have held more pain than amusement.

Fuck. There'd been no room in her life for shyness or sensibilities when it came to sex. No room for shame unless she wanted it to destroy her.

Dakotah moved to the counter and retrieved a coffee mug from the cabinet, feeling suddenly awkward, her mind scrambling for something to say to put Kiziah at ease. Finally deciding to part with a measure of truth, even if the words tasted bitter on her tongue. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. At least what you've got with them is real. Most of what I've seen and done isn't."

Kiziah's head jerked up, her face flushing again, though her eyes widened with surprise and a measure of confusion. "You're Domino's...you're going to be his kadine. I think it doesn't get any more real than that."

Dakotah's heart raced at the words but she shrugged. "I don't know what I am to him yet. I helped him out when he was in a jam and he almost killed me in return."

"You're not terrified of him, or of Fane," Kiziah said and there was a wealth of curiosity in her voice.

"I've seen a lot scarier things."

Kiziah's mouth gaped slightly. She reached for a couple of plates, filling them both with bacon, eggs and toast before handing one of them to Dakotah. "I know it's closer to dinnertime. I'm still adjusting to being up during the night and sleeping during the day."

They moved to the kitchen table. Dakotah said, "So they sleep during the day?"

"If they stay in their human form." Kiziah buttered her toast, hesitating. "They...evaporate...for lack of a better word in sunlight, though I guess Domino has a choice between changing into a wolf or turning into tiny particles."

Dakotah stilled, surprised Kiziah knew Domino could shift his form, though she probably shouldn't have

been. “What about Fane?”

Kiziah shook her head. “Fane’s just Fane. Cable told me there are certain lines of vampires and dhampirs who have other shapes. You’re either born with the ability or you’re not.”

Dakotah remembered Fane’s words. She remembered the pull he had on her knives. She’d already guessed what Domino’s special ability was, but she wanted to hear it confirmed. “Fane’s talent is knives. Domino’s is hypnotism, isn’t it?”

Kiziah shuddered. “Oh yeah.”

“He’s done it to you?”

“The first time I encountered him. Then a second time, the night I met Fane.”

Dakotah picked up a piece of bacon. After she’d finally gained control of the wolf, she’d haunted libraries and bookstores, reading everything she could about the supernatural, though not believing most of it. “I thought dhampirs were supposed to be vampire hunters.”

“They can be. But mainly they’re soldiers for the vampire race until they go through The Transformation and become vampires themselves. Fane and Domino were both dhampir. Cable was—is—well, I’m not sure what his status is now. Before Fane made him a companion, Cable was a padrall, a member of an order that has served vampires since the very beginning. He was born into it.” Kiziah took a sip of coffee. “I guess it’s no surprise that if vampires and dhampirs and padralls exist then there are also secret societies like the Believers that try and kill them—or anyone associated with them.” She shuddered. “But you already know that. While I was visiting some of my friends at the campground, Cable and Fane were getting rid of the bodies of the two men who attacked you in the woods.”

Dakotah frowned as worry filled her. Even though she’d heard them use the word *Believers*, she’d thought they were ordinary scum trying to earn fast money by turning her over to Victor Hale. But if there were more of them... She clamped down on her fear before it could grow and paralyze her. “You’re sure they were members of some secret society?”

“Did they have elaborate crosses tattooed on their necks?”

Dakota nodded and remembered the other men she’d seen hanging around the carnival, not just in Ashberg but in the town before, Kenton, men who’d had the same tattoo.

“Fane says that the Believers in the United States favor the cross tattoos.” Kiziah smiled tentatively. “You don’t have to worry about them, at least for a while. Supposedly those are the last of them in the area.”

Dakotah shrugged. The last of the Believers maybe. But she had a feeling the place would soon be overrun with werewolves.

Her nostrils flared slightly, taking in Kiziah’s scent. Human and something else. Just as Cable’s was now. She had no way of knowing whether they were strong enough to survive a werewolf attack, and yet if her trail led to them, Victor Hale or his men wouldn’t think twice about killing them or trying to use them to find her.

“You should leave Ashberg and stay away from the carnival,” Dakotah said. “I’ve got enemies hunting me.”

Kiziah’s coffee cup wobbled slightly. “What kind of enemies?”

Dakotah hesitated, not used to sharing information about herself. But she didn't know yet what she was going to do. Whether she was going to stay or go. If she left, she wanted a clear conscience, or as much of one as she could manage. "Werewolves."

"They exist too?" Kiziah put the coffee cup down quickly, as though she was worried about dropping it, then laughed softly. "I shouldn't be surprised. I guess I've still got a lot to get used to." Heat rushed to her face. "Fane and Cable have been a big adjustment."

Curiosity got the better of Dakotah. The need to understand her own situation along with the sense that Kiziah was willing to talk opened a door Dakotah rarely allowed herself to acknowledge, much less touch. Even before she'd killed Anthony Hale and started running, she'd learned the hard way not to ask others about their lives or to share the details of her own.

"Fane and Cable hung out at the carnival for a while," Dakotah said. "I was surprised to see them with a woman."

Kiziah's color heightened. "*I* was a surprise to them too. Especially to Fane." She met Dakotah's eyes. "Has Madame Helki ever given you a reading?"

Dakotah grimaced and Kiziah laughed. "Did she predict Domino? I think she saw Cable and Fane in my cards. And the reading she did for Cable led him to me."

"She's a meddlesome old woman," Dakotah said without heat, uncomfortable at how accurate the fortune-teller's predictions had become.

Kiziah cocked her head and grinned. "So she gave you a reading?"

"Yes."

"And you don't want to talk about it."

Dakotah couldn't help but laugh. Kiziah reminded her of Sarael. Both of them openhearted, willing to talk or listen but also willing to back off.

She relented, touching the bite mark on her neck. "Yeah, I think it's safe to say that Helki predicted Domino."

"Well, good luck with him. I'm just glad I have Cable to help me with Fane. If you haven't already guessed, vampires are hard-wired to...control their women. And it doesn't help that they can read your thoughts, shuffle through your memories and freeze you in place with a command." Kiziah laughed, flushing with color, before adding, "But there are compensations."

Dakotah reached for her coffee cup as she tried to still the riot of emotion and thought swirling inside her. Her gut churned at the idea of Domino—or anyone—seeing her memories, seeing the things she'd had to do to survive. "Can you read Fane's thoughts?"

"Yes. And Cable's. We're all connected now." She hesitated then added, "It happens after the third exchange."

Dakotah frowned, myth and reality at odds in her mind. Her senses told her Kiziah and Cable were still partially human while Fane and Domino weren't human at all. "You're not a vampire."

"No. I'm different than I was. Fane's blood changed me. But I'll never be vampire. Neither will Cable. They can't fully convert humans, though they can adapt us." Kiziah grimaced. "And they can give us a major headache. At least that's what a certain vampire who claims it's Domino's responsibility to tell

you what you need to know is doing right now.”

“Fane’s wrong. I’m not Domino’s responsibility. He helped me out, I helped him out. We’re even and free to go our separate ways.”

Kiziah’s eyebrows drew together. “It’s not safe to do that. He’s sexually bonded to you. And you’ll attract a lot of unwanted attention until you’ve made the second exchange and can control the pheromones. Even then they can get out of hand. At least with the third it becomes more natural, so you don’t have to think about it.” Kiziah sighed. “Not that I ever go anywhere alone anymore.” She stood and gathered her dishes, carrying them to the sink.

Dakotah did the same, thinking about what she’d learned, mad at herself for feeling...hollow inside at the prospect of Domino wanting her only because he’d sexually bonded himself to her. He hadn’t meant to—she wasn’t going to lie to herself about it. He didn’t know her. Though he would—all too well if he could see her memories. And then what? She guessed there was no such thing as an amicable divorce from a vampire. “I’m going to head out for a while,” she said, and felt both the wolf’s and Domino’s protest.

The silverware Kiziah was washing clattered to the bottom of the sink. “Don’t. I mean, if you need to get out of the house for awhile, at least let Cable and I go with you.”

Dakotah pushed away from the counter. “Thanks for the offer, but I need some space.” She could feel Domino struggling, concentrating, and she guessed he was trying to take his wolf form. If he succeeded, he’d have her pinned before she could get out of the front door. If she left on foot, he’d just track her down.

She grabbed her backpack and delayed long enough to take his car keys. The wolf howling in protest as she drove away, the first hints of Domino’s will pressing in on her, demanding that she return.

She fought the wolf. She fought him. She fought herself and kept going, driving to the beach. Glad for the cold and the fog that was already starting to form as it got closer to sunset. It was weather guaranteed to keep people inside.

She hadn’t been lying. She needed space, time.

For a long while she just sat in Domino’s car, surrounded by his scent. Taking comfort in it though she saw it as a weakness in herself—a weakness she didn’t have the energy to fight.

In her mind’s eye she replayed events and conversations, analyzed them. Once again saw the spread of tarot cards. Death. Strength. The Emperor. Heard her challenge to Domino in the woods. *I don’t care what the tarot cards say.* And she hadn’t.

They only give one possibility, she’d once told Sarael. *You can change that truth.* And she’d believed her own words. Ignored both the promise and the warning that The Emperor card presented.

And in the end she had not only walked right into the future Helki predicted but escaped it and then willingly returned—twice.

Dakotah rubbed her heart. The tight knot returning when she thought about Kiziah’s revelations. About Domino having access to her memories. Memories she never visited.

A cold shiver slid up her spine at the idea of his gaining control to the point he could freeze her in place with a thought. That was more threatening than his ability to hypnotize—something she’d avoided thinking about.

Dakotah forced herself from the car. Forced herself to leave the warmth and security, the comfort. To step out into the cold. The act a physical reminder of her reality.

She walked. Not far. Just far enough to come to a decision.

Both Cable and Kiziah had told her she'd be fighting men off wherever she went. She had no reason to doubt them and every reason to believe them. Her blood burned, her body felt different, was different. And yet there had to be a way to turn it to her advantage—just as she'd done with the wolf. To use what she'd gained from Domino to help her survive. To help her do more than just survive.

For the first time since she'd learned that Victor Hale was determined to make her pay for killing his son, Dakotah let herself believe she could do more than just run and hide, do more than fight to the death when cornered. If she could gain control of the pheromones, use the vampire lure to get through the men Victor had guarding him, then she could end it once and for all.

One more death, just a little more blood on her hands and it'd be settled.

Or maybe she'd be dead.

Either way, she could stop running—at least from Victor Hale.

Domino was a different story. He may have ordered her to leave once and allowed her to leave a second time, inadvertently let her escape this time, but she doubted he would let her get away from him again.

Their wolves might claim to be mated. Domino himself may have come to accept it—but right now he was operating on the physical level, doing what nature had programmed him to do. She wished it was more than that. And for an instant, longing coiled around in her chest, wrapping her in hope—just as it had when Helki read the cards. But just like then, she tossed it off.

She wasn't ready to trust in the cards. She wasn't going to roll over and expose her belly and neck. To risk her heart.

Dakotah got in the car, grimacing at the thought of encountering Helki. But the carnival was the safest place to go, at least for what she had in mind. She couldn't gain control over the pheromones by walking into a bar. The situation would be too unpredictable, too dangerous. Not that it would be fun fighting off carnies she'd come to think of as friends. But she thought she could subdue them without killing them. And though the prospect of asking Helki for help made Dakotah grind her teeth, she would ask for it if she had to.

If she could find the old fortune-teller and the carnival.

Dakotah got out of the car and looked around at the empty, moonlit field where only a day before the carnival had been set up.

The scent of it remained. Hot dogs and cotton candy. Metal and fuel. The unique smells of hundreds of strangers mixed with those of the carnies Dakotah had traveled with for the last year.

It got to her. Made her feel raw. The unexpectedness of seeing emptiness where her world had been solid and real was like a chilling glimpse into the future. And she turned away from it, had only a fleeting second to become aware of sound and movement before the sharp sting of a dart slammed into her chest, the tranquilizer taking effect, pulling her into darkness even as she ripped it from her body.

* * * * *

Domino came out of the bedroom growling, bristling, ready to bite when Fane shimmered into place in

front of Kiziah, his eyes alight with amusement.

Cable walked in a second later. “We’ll help you find her,” he said, skirting Domino and Fane in order to kiss Kiziah.

Fane grinned. “We’ll help you *after* you drink your herbs. And while you do it, I’ll regale you with advice on the claiming and taming of a kadine so that you’ll be more successful the next time we return her to you.”

Kiziah reached over and pinched Fane’s naked ass cheek. “Or better yet, you’ll go get dressed before you make Domino mad enough to castrate you while I cheer him on. *The claiming and taming of a kadine*. That’s *not* a story *you’re* going to be telling anytime soon.”

Cable laughed, hugging Kiziah’s back to his chest as he curled his hand around Fane’s forearm, pulling him into the embrace, teasing Fane by saying, “We’re still on our honeymoon. It’s not a good thing to upset your wife when you’re on your honeymoon.” He glanced down at Fane’s erection. “Unless you plan on going back to same-sex-only encounters.”

Fane growled, kissing both Cable and Kiziah, then shimmered out of sight.

Kiziah sighed. “I’m sorry, Domino. I…”

Domino shook his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t say anything wrong. I’m grateful to you for telling her what you did. And for learning something about her enemies.”

Cable rubbed his cheek against Kiziah’s hair. “I can make enquiries. She’s got your mark on her neck. The Weres don’t want a war with the vampires. I can get the word out that she belongs to you.”

Domino grimaced. “No doubt the story of my failure to hold on to my bride will grow with each telling.”

Fane strolled in, zipping his jeans. “Or you could simply let her go and endure the herbs. You have long claimed you don’t want a kadine. Her lifespan is short against our own. With her death you’d be a free man again.”

Domino’s eyes flashed to red. His lips pulled back to reveal deadly fangs. “She is mine and she won’t escape that fate.”

Fane grinned, stopping next to Domino and offering his wrist in a gesture of trust. “Then perhaps you’d better feed so we won’t need a leash when we go out in public with you.”

Chapter Seven

Domino followed the scent to the edge of the woods, rage burning through him with each step. He stopped just inside the tree line, crouched, inhaled deeply. The Were who’d waited here was a dead man.

Behind him Cable stopped talking into his cell phone, the tiny click signaling that he’d closed it. “Fane says there was a man asking about Dakotah at the campground. His scent is Were. So far no one noticed what he was driving, but Kiziah’s still talking to the people she knows there.”

Domino nodded and stood. Turning so the field where the carnival had been was spread out in front of him, empty except for Fane’s sports car and his own. It surprised him that Dakotah had come back here. It gave him reason to hope that maybe she hadn’t decided to run. A grim smile settled on his face. Maybe she’d even decided to consult with the fortune-teller. That would have made his grandmother’s day.

“Just one of them?” Cable asked. “Male?”

“Yeah. Here for several hours. Long enough to piss on a lot of trees.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t take your car.”

Domino shrugged. “For all he knew, it was stolen.”

Cable nodded and they left the woods, heading to the cars. Domino tight with anger and worry. The scent was fresh. The picture it presented a movie he could easily view.

A lone hunter had waited in the woods. Fired when Dakotah arrived.

The dart had struck her but she’d had the strength and intelligence to remove it quickly. But then she’d fallen next to the car, the dart rolling underneath. The ground absorbing her scent, her heat. Telling him she’d lain there for awhile.

The hunter had made a phone call probably. To the man at the campground maybe. Or perhaps to another. That man had come, had stood next to Dakotah.

Domino knelt beside the tire again, hissing, reacting to the scent of fear lingering near where Dakotah had lain. They’d seen his mark on her. They’d known what it meant. And yet they’d taken her all the same.

They’d invited their own deaths.

* * * * *

Dakotah fought through the drug-induced darkness. Its cloying presence sickening her, reminding her of things she’d long ago forced herself to forget.

Nausea rolled over her and she closed her eyes. Held her breath. Willed herself not to heave. Not to let on that she was waking up.

The first wave passed, followed by long moments of choppiness, clarity and confusion, dizziness, of pulsing gray and black bursts of color at the edge of her consciousness, by heat, as though her blood was burning away the foreign substance in her body. When it was done she was panting silently, coated in a light sheen of sweat. But she was alert. Strong. Though not strong enough to escape the duct tape that bound her wrists behind her, then bound them again to ankles that had been similarly taped, her knees bent so that her ankles and wrists met in the center of her back.

Dakotah clenched her teeth to keep from growling and snarling in rage. From opening her mouth and howling with frustration. The wolf inside echoing her own horror and anger at being caught and rendered helpless by Victor Hale’s men.

Werewolves. The car reeked of human perspiration and flesh overlaid on the wolf’s scent. It smelled of steak and beer, cheap cologne and fear.

“I don’t like this,” the driver whined and Dakotah zeroed in on him, tasted his nervousness, knew he was afraid.

“You’re not paid to like it. You’re paid to forget about it.”

“The vampires—”

“Are Victor’s problem. We told him she was marked and he said bring her anyway. For all we know, he’s going to tell her that he forgives her for killing his son.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“That’s my story. And by the time Victor is done with her, there won’t be enough of her left to identify.” The man laughed. “Even if someone decided they wanted to analyze a lot of wolf shit. Nothing like a group hunt followed by a group fuck and a nice group feast to keep things in the pack so to speak.”

“Count me out.”

“You get invited. You participate. Or else you join her. There are guys who are horny enough to fuck a log when they change. You’ll do if they can’t get a turn at her. I’m hoping Victor invites me. She’s going to be a fighter. Has to have been to take out Anthony. He spent most of his time thinking with his dick, but he wasn’t a lightweight when it came to breaking bones and ripping fur.”

The two men lapsed into silence, their scents deepening in opposite directions, becoming more pronounced. One with greater fear. One growing heavy with lust.

Dakotah’s lips pulled back in a snarl. A silent, fleeting rebellion. But she was a fighter. And she knew better than most how sex could equal survival.

Kiziah and Cable had both said that men would be drawn to her. They’d made it sound as though it would happen whether she invited the attention or not. But she wasn’t going to waste time waiting for the pheromones to build.

She closed her eyes and thought of Domino. Pictured the scene in the woods, her hands bound as he knelt before her, worshipping her with his mouth. His tongue wicked as he slid it in and out of her channel, then up and over her clit. His lips and teeth tormenting the swollen knob until she was trying to fuck him with it, to shove herself down his throat as arousal seeped from her slit and coated her inner thighs.

Now that she knew what he was, she wanted him to bite her there. To take her to heights of ecstasy she would never experience elsewhere. She wanted—

The car screeched to a halt, jarring Dakotah from her fantasy and into a sauna of pheromones and lust. Car doors opened then rough hands were jerking her from the back seat, pawing at her clothing.

Fear came with the cold air. Not her own, but the weaker man’s. And yet there was arousal where there hadn’t been before. “We can’t do her by the side of the road.”

His companion grunted. “Take her legs then.”

She let them take her to the woods. Let them think she wasn’t fully aware of what they were doing. But with each step, she could feel some of the mad haze of lust leaving under the burden of carrying her and the fresh air.

She thought about Domino again, imagined his cock sliding back and forth across her cunt lips as they’d watched Cable and Fane make love to Kiziah. As Domino’s words had seduced her.

The fantasy played out in one part of her mind, compartmentalized this time, so she would be ready when opportunity presented itself.

The two men stopped just inside the woods, in a small patch of wet pine needles and trampled grass. A

place that smelled of deer and rabbits.

Pain seared through Dakotah's shoulders and thighs when they dropped her on her back, her arms and legs trapped and bound underneath her. The more aggressive of the two leaned over her, his breath hot and rank, his hands and fingers rough as he tore at her clothing.

She opened her eyes and trapped him with her gaze. Watched as his eyes grew more glazed, as mindless lust consumed him.

The wolf rose inside her, pressing against her skin. Urging her to free it, to let it rip their enemy's throat out.

She'd thought to wait, suspected they'd free her ankles before they tried to rape her. She'd wondered if she could enthrall the men and then command them with her voice, guessed it was part of a vampire's arsenal. But the wolf's solution was simple. Efficient. Brutal.

Adrenaline surged through her. The same wild rush that preceded the change and yet the energy raced to her face, tingling, burning, the wolf prepared to claim only a part of her.

She'd never changed partially, never believed she could or been tempted to try it. But she felt the wolf's determination. Its resolve. None but its mate would claim the body it lived in.

Dakotah licked her lips, watched as the man's face went slack. As his tongue duplicated her movement, wetting his own. The stench of his arousal burning her nose. Adding to the pressure, the sense of impending change, the elongation into a snout, a muzzle full of deadly teeth.

The wolf drew itself into a crouch. Its focus entirely on their enemy as his face lowered. As his throat got close enough for an attack. When it sprang, Dakotah ceded control, her face burning first with the fury of the change and then from the hot rush of blood that poured over her.

It was over within seconds. Leaving her ribs and chest and abdomen sore from where his fists and knees had landed. Leaving her coated with blood and covered by death. The body heavy where it lay on top of her.

Leaving her alone. Still bound. But alone. The sight of the attack and the blood ridding the fearful man of his lust and sending him running.

Dakotah wriggled out from underneath the dead man and turned on her side to relieve the pressure on her shoulders. For a brief instant she contemplated changing. But the wolf's body wasn't flexible enough to endure the position she was bound in, and the pain would be excruciating unless the duct tape gave with the wolf's struggles. Instead she wriggled and squirmed, moved along the body next to her and smiled with feral pleasure when she explored his jacket, using her nose and cheek and finding the outline of a knife. Using her teeth to work it upward until it dropped to the blood-soaked ground.

Savage victory filled her at the sight of the black-handled knife. At the sight of one of *her* knives.

She rolled over, working herself into position. The movements slow and painful, awkward. The effort to grasp the knife, to open it, to cut the tape, excruciating.

But she succeeded.

Dakotah stood and lifted her face to the sky. To the moon. The wolf inside howling. The woman reveling in the moment, in the fierce satisfaction of surviving.

When the wild emotion settled, she turned her attention to the corpse at her feet and went through the

dead man's pockets. Finding her second knife along with her cell phone. The sight of it bringing the question, *What now?*

The wolf's answer was simple. Return to their mate.

Dakotah hesitated for only a second before agreeing. Before calling Cable, knowing as she did that it would be Domino who came.

* * * * *

It humbled Domino that she'd called. Sent an uncomfortable, unstable mix of emotions cascading through him. Instinct and alien heritage demanded that he assert his dominance and punish her for leaving the safety of the house when she knew he didn't want her to go. And yet his heart demanded that he hold back. That he recognize the progress he'd made with her. She didn't yet *need* him, not as he needed her, but she'd called Cable anyway, knowing that Cable would turn the information over to him.

He didn't know what her life had been like before arriving at the carnival, but his grandmother's words offered a clue. They rang through his mind and made his heart ache.

Her life has been one of famine and drought instead of abundance. Of harsh choices and betrayal.

That Dakotah had sought refuge in the carnival told him much. That she'd survived the last attack as well as this one, by her own courage and intelligence, told him more.

Resolve stiffened his spine. Anticipation stiffened his cock. She would no longer fight her battles alone. She was his. And he would let nothing threaten or harm her.

* * * * *

Dakotah stepped out of the trees when Domino entered the clearing. The wolf whined and quivered inside her, wanting to race to him. To rub against him. To lick at his lips in greeting. The woman stood her ground despite the tightening of her body, the slick swell of her vulva.

Domino's nostrils flared. His fangs elongated.

She was covered in blood. The clearing reeked of it. And yet it wasn't The Hunger that compelled him to close the distance between them, it was The Heat.

A hundred hearts could have thundered around them, but it was only hers that could hold his interest. He wanted to drive his fangs into her. To feed, not to sate a hunger of the body, but to sate one of the soul. He wanted to take her to the edge of human death and then fill her with his own blood, his own existence.

He'd never imagined how desperately he could want it, crave it, need it. "Never again, Dakotah," he growled. "Never again will you be unguarded, unprotected."

She licked her lips and he leaned in, duplicating her action, tracing the path her tongue had taken. Taking her scent and taste and leaving his own.

Dakotah shivered. The men she'd been forced to service, the ones she'd known even before then, the life she'd led—none of them had prepared her for Domino.

There were parts of her that argued against trusting him, against believing what he offered was real and not an illusion. But the wolf was stronger and the hum of the blood they shared too loud to ignore.

She licked her lips again, tasting him as she'd done on other occasions. Her heart expanding in her chest,

the secret places inside spilling out, flooding her with a happiness she couldn't deal with.

She stepped back, put some distance between them. Buried her hands in her pockets and took comfort in the cool feel of the knives.

His nostrils flared slightly, as though he could smell the steel, as if her retreat bothered him.

She tensed and met his eyes, knowing what she was risking and yet offering a challenge all the same. He surprised her by smiling. A flash of lethal fangs. "Do you think I want a mate with no mind of her own? No courage of her own?"

Dakotah rubbed her thumb over the handle of one blade, remembering how she'd woken up in the clearing alone after they'd run together as wolves. "Did you want a mate at all?"

"No. But now that I have one, I find that I want to keep her." He took a step forward, his eyes daring her to retreat as he once again closed the distance between the two of them. "Now that I have one, I find I'm consumed with thoughts of her, with the need to know she's safe." His voice was low and husky, seductive. "I crave her in ways I never imagined possible." His eyes flashed with amusement. "She's The Empress to my Emperor. My World if the tarot cards are to be believed."

Dakotah laughed. She couldn't help herself. "You really did let Helki read for you."

"I came back when I learned you were being hunted by the Believers and found you'd left the carnival. She's a stubborn old woman. She wouldn't tell me where you'd gone until I submitted to a reading."

"You could have hypnotized her."

"I could have. But to do so in that circumstance would have been a breach of trust and a great show of disrespect." He leaned down, brushed a feather-soft kiss across Dakotah's lips. "Another time, in a different situation, I wouldn't have hesitated despite my ties to her. My...nature demands certain things of me."

"So there are no promises?"

"What promises would you have?"

Dakotah turned away from him. Feeling lost. Confused.

Her thoughts went to those moments when she'd been braced against the chair. When she'd watched Fane and Cable with Kiziah, when she'd seen pleasure that was an expression of love, passion that sprung from the heart. When she'd hungered like a beggar at the edge of a feast. Felt starved as though she'd lived through a lifetime of famine.

What promises did she want? What promises would she believe?

Her life was full of lies and deceit. Betrayal and loneliness.

Only in the last year had she found it possible to trust even a little bit—though she'd held her secrets close.

"Who is behind these attacks on you?" Domino asked, surprised at how the play of her emotions stirred his own, caused his heart to ache and tempered his behavior. From the moment he'd learned that she'd been taken, he'd resolved to find her, to reclaim her. To not allow her out of his sight until the second and third exchanges had been made. And yet now... His grandmother's words rang in his mind and echoed through every cell.

Her secret heart yearns for a man to prove that all men aren't like those who have come before him.

It shocked him how desperately he wanted to be the man who proved himself to be different from the rest. How much he wanted her to come to him willingly. Not because of the wolf. Not because of the blood-tie. But because he was her choice.

"Tell me who's behind the attacks," he repeated, "and I will see that they end."

"In exchange for what?"

He grimaced, realizing he should have seen the question coming. But he didn't want to bargain with her. He couldn't. It would be a lie if he told her she could leave him now.

"I will do it because I can and I must, Dakotah."

He moved into her personal space and curled his hands around her forearms. Relief surging through him when she didn't stiffen or pull away.

She licked her lips and he wanted to lean in and cover them. To savor her taste and explore her mouth with his tongue.

The night was melting away and despite the tension between them, he was hard, hungry. Aching.

Dakotah closed her eyes. Hearing Helki's words.

The time will come when you will face the enemy who wants you dead, but you will not do so alone. Another change awaits you. This time at the hands of a man unlike any you have known before. A man who wants your life, not your death.

And like Sarael before her, she could feel the truth in them. A truth she couldn't run from. A truth she wasn't sure she wanted to run from.

"Victor Hale. His pack is in Atlantic City." She opened her eyes and met Domino's. "I killed his son and ended up a werewolf in the process."

Domino shrugged. "What matters is whether or not he wants to join his son in death. The choice will be his."

"And us?"

This time Domino did lean in and cover her mouth, his lips gently sucking at hers until she willingly opened them and invited his tongue into her mouth. "You have seen the effects of what you gained from ingesting my blood?" he asked when the kiss ended.

"Yes."

"It will get worse until the second exchange is made. I will leave the choice of when the exchange is done up to you despite the fact that every instinct I possess demands we do it tonight." He lifted his hand and stroked her cheek. "I can allow you that choice, but not the choice of whether or not you will remain with me."

Dakotah nodded, admitting to herself that she wanted to be with him. She was tired of running. Tired of fighting. At least for tonight. "We can't leave the body here," she said just as Fane appeared.

He flashed a smile as his gaze swept over the dead man, then Dakotah's blood-soaked clothing, before

landing on Domino. “The trail of your courtship seems to be littered with corpses. How many more nights will I have to spend disposing of them rather than attending to the needs of my own kadine?”

“Don’t bother with this one at all,” Domino said. “Send for the padralls and have them deliver it to the wolves in Atlantic City, along with a message. Dakotah is mine. Regardless of whose blood changed her into a Were, it is only mine that matters now. Victor Hale’s hunt stops now with a blood pledge or a challenge.”

Chapter Eight

Fane’s eyes widened slightly. “And if he is foolish enough to choose a challenge? Or those around him make the choice for him?”

“I’m taking Dakotah to the house Matteo rented for his claiming of Sarael.”

Fane nodded. “Cable, Kiziah and I will return to Kenton as well. There are more than enough dhampirs and vampires still in the area should their presence become necessary.”

“What does it mean, a blood pledge or a challenge?” Dakotah asked.

Fane’s gaze shifted to her. “A challenge is a fight to the death. Domino in your place against your enemy. Wolf against wolf. Or man against man.”

“And the other?”

“A blood pledge in this case means the wolves guarantee that Victor Hale will no longer hunt or have you hunted. It is a promise made with the lives of every member of his pack—along with any related to them who are in the generation before or after—put up as collateral. If the pledge is broken, then we will call their debt and exact retribution.”

Horror washed through Dakotah. “So the innocent die with the guilty?”

Fane shrugged. “For the most part we leave each other alone, but when their business interferes with ours, we are the masters. We’re alive long after they become dust and ash underneath our feet. Over the centuries they have learned to police their own or we will do it for them.”

Dakotah shivered, unable to pull her eyes away from Fane as she remembered the times they’d joked when he and Cable hung around the carnival. It had been an easy camaraderie, though she’d sensed he wasn’t an enemy she’d want. But now, looking at him, hearing his words, she realized just how ruthless, how alien he was.

Her gaze moved to Domino, who was watching her intently, whose expression gave away nothing, who had the power to take her mind if he desired. She should be terrified of him, but instead her secret heart, the place that still harbored forgotten dreams of happy-ever-after, of a prince charming who would rescue her and take her to safety, kept her fear at bay, just as it had the last time they were in the woods with the body of her enemy nearby.

He was a dark, alien prince. And she was capable of rescuing herself.

Their lives could just as easily be a nightmare as a fairytale.

But she trusted him. With her life.

And that realization *did* scare her.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said, afraid that if too much more time passed, doubts and panic would rush

in and push her into running.

Domino took her arm as though sensing how close she was to bolting. “We will stop by the house here in Ashberg so Dakotah can get cleaned up. Cable and Kiziah are there?”

Fane grinned. “I will call ahead and send them back to Kenton, in case you and Dakotah want to linger long enough to enjoy the fireplace as we did last night.”

* * * * *

And after she’d taken a shower and gotten dressed, that’s where Dakotah found Domino, standing next to the fireplace, its heat filling the room, its flames reflecting off him. He took a swallow from a wine glass and set it on the mantel. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of the pungent herbs mixed with wine. Even from across the room, the odor offended her, burning her nostrils as she moved to stand opposite him. “What’s that?” she asked, tilting her head toward the glass.

“Something to keep The Hunger at bay.” His eyes darkened and his face tightened as his gaze slid over her, the scent of arousal joining the mix of wine and herbs. “Though it does nothing for The Heat.”

Dakotah reached for the glass, grimacing as she brought it closer to her mouth. He smiled slightly but didn’t stop her from taking a sip, though in truth, she barely wet her lips before putting the glass back down on the mantel. “What happens if you don’t drink it?”

“Eventually the whisper of The Hunger becomes a temptation and a command that can’t be ignored. Then we kill. And are declared rogue and hunted depending on the circumstances and whether or not rehabilitation is possible.” He reached over and cupped her face, stroked her mouth with his thumb. “Only the taking of a mate frees us from the necessity of using the herbs. The sharing and mixing of blood changes us so The Hunger is completely sated when we feed from our chosen one.”

Dakotah turned her face so that her lips rubbed against his palm. Her tongue darted out, tasting him. “Kiziah said you’re sexually bonded to me.”

His nostrils flared slightly and something primitive moved through his eyes. “I am.”

Dakotah had no desire to have sex with anyone else. The wolf bristled at the thought of it, and yet she *could* if she wanted to. “I’m not sexually bonded to you.”

“Yet.” His hand moved to her hair, his fingers grasped the dark strands, trapping her as he leaned in, stopping when his lips hovered over hers. “There is no escape, Dakotah, only the choice as to when the second and third exchanges are made.”

He closed the distance, covered her mouth with his. The strength of his hands, the hardness of his body, the fierceness of the need pouring off him all contrasting sharply with the gentleness of his kiss, the slow, seductive dance of his tongue against hers.

Her heart jerked and raced when his fangs extended, tempting her curiosity just as the smell of the herbs and wine had. He groaned when she traced the deadly canines with her tongue, pressed his lower body more tightly to hers so that she could feel the rigid length of his erection.

Of their own accord her hands went to the front of his shirt, trailed down the center of it, releasing the buttons one at a time, not stopping until she’d undone the sole button at the waistband of his jeans. “Dakotah,” he warned and she laughed softly.

It was exhilarating playing with him, dangerous. Like teasing a wolf.

But then she wasn't afraid of wolves.

She unzipped him, catching his gasp in her mouth and his cock in her hand as she became the aggressor, as she rubbed her tongue against his and explored his straining shaft and heavy balls with her fingers.

He let her, though she knew he could easily take control. And she marveled at how much pleasure it gave her to command his body.

She'd dominated hundreds of men because it meant her continued survival. She'd controlled them. Reduced them to pleading and begging. Been the embodiment of their sexual fantasies. And it had left her cold. Compartmentalized. Wishing only to escape from the hell she found herself in.

But now she found herself in a sensual heaven. Where her blood burned and her body ached.

She knelt, pulling his jeans down with her, pausing to take off his shoes and socks before removing his pants and looking up his body. Marveling at his masculine beauty. He was firm muscle and hard male. Enthralling even without the pheromones of his kind.

The wolf quivered with joy and anticipation, the woman mimicked the movement, shivering, suddenly sorry she'd bothered dressing. The feel of her clothing was an irritation against her skin, a confining presence that needed to be shed.

She stood and stripped. Boldly meeting Domino's gaze. Her breasts swelling and her nipples tightening as his eyes traveled over her body. His nostrils flaring and his lips parting.

She spread her legs when he got to the dark pubic hair, let him see her flushed, swollen cunt lips and the moisture that was gathered there. A wet, silent summons.

When he dropped to his knees, she buried her fingers in his hair and draped one thigh over his shoulder. Nearly howled with pleasure when his tongue went to her slit, his hungry bites and licks and sucks making her grind herself against his face.

The Heat roared through Domino. The taste of her arousal was almost as addicting as that of her blood.

He wanted to drive his fangs into her thigh, to mix pleasure with pain and find ecstasy. He wanted to consume her. To feast. To fuck. To claim.

But he forced himself to please her instead. To thrust his tongue deep into her channel then retreat to swirl it over her erect clit. To press his lips to her lower ones in an erotic kiss meant to capture then leave that nectar-covered flesh in order to suck on her engorged knob.

She fought the pleasure even as she writhed against him in order to gain more of it. The sound of his name in between her whimpers and deep-throated moans rewarding him and holding him in check.

She would beg for his bite. Beg for the second exchange of blood.

He wanted it to be her choice. He needed it to be her choice. The words he'd said in the woods had come from his heart. He wanted a mate with a mind of her own. With courage of her own.

Domino ate at her until her back bowed and she convulsed with orgasm, flooding his senses with her release. His cock bobbed in warning and only the tight fist of his hand around his penis kept him from spewing his seed across his own stomach. He groaned and looked up, his mouth still buried between her thighs, his lips and tongue pressed to her wet flesh.

The wildness he saw in her eyes rushed through him like a lightning bolt, stripping away the man and the

wolf, so that only the vampire remained, a creature of Heat and Hunger.

“Bite me,” she said.

Domino turned his face into her thigh, knowing he was damning himself. But there was no way to ignore her command. No way to ignore the temptation she presented.

His fangs slid through her skin, hitting the artery there with easy accuracy. The hot rush of her blood intoxicating, an addiction he had no hope of curing. It fed The Hunger while The Heat drove him to slide his hand up and down his cock, to palm the head as his tongue lapped at her silky flesh, to resume pumping in time to the movement of his throat as he swallowed. Until Heat and Hunger once again merged, blending together into a single flame that burned with Dakotah’s name, danced in time to her heartbeat. Thundering, racing, spiking with orgasm as jets of semen rushed through his cock. Slowing, stuttering, nearly extinguishing as he sealed the bite and pulled his mouth away, catching her easily as she collapsed.

Every instinct demanded he open a vein and force her to drink, that he make the second exchange when she was too weak and dazed to fight the choice. Domino stood instead, pausing to ensure she wasn’t in danger of dying before retrieving a hand-stitched quilt from the sofa.

He wrapped her in it and settled her on the couch, then dressed himself and doused the fire in the fireplace. It took only a moment to gather her clothes and pick her up. To take her to the car.

He trapped her in obsidian when she stirred and opened her eyes, commanded her to sleep. They were hours away from Matteo’s house. And she was too great a distraction. Too great a temptation.

He wasn’t sure he could fight the demands of his nature if they stayed here. And if she gave in, accepted his blood, asked for it, then they would fuck the rest of the night. His cock would fill time and time again in order to sate the need a second exchange would generate, in order to cement the bond that tied them together sexually until one of them died.

“Sleep,” he whispered, brushing his fingers over her cheek, her lips, kissing her softly before bringing the engine of the powerful sports car to life and leaving Ashberg, his thoughts going to the edict he’d issued. He would know by sunrise whether there was to be a challenge or a pledge.

* * * * *

Dakotah woke to a fantasyscape. Flickering candles and scented air. The crackle of logs burning in the fireplace. A dark prince offering her a goblet of wine.

“Drink,” Domino said, pressing the ornate cup to her hand, its warmth seeping into her palm as the smell of heated wine mixed with some type of herb wafted upward.

She drank. Not even stopping to question.

When she was done she handed the heavy cup back to him, noticing for the first time that she was naked underneath the sheets and propped up against a mound of pillows in a bed made for carnal pleasure.

She shivered when she saw the cuffs dangling from the post at the foot of the bed. Domino laughed, setting the cup on the nightstand before rolling to his side, his cock a hard, heated presence against her thigh and hip. “For kadines who need to be disciplined,” he said, splaying his fingers over her belly and making her cunt clench and flare in reaction.

Dakotah remembered the conversation he’d had with Fane. “We’re back in Kenton? This is where Sarael

was taken?"

"Yes."

It felt strange to end up here. A circle closing.

By the time she stumbled into the carnival, she had almost become a feral animal. Intent only on running, on surviving. On staying one step ahead of Victor Hale.

But as she'd traveled with the carnival, shared a home on wheels with Sarael, she'd slowly become human again. Found that it didn't have to hurt to care about someone. And she'd cared about Sarael. She'd worried for her.

Dakotah's gaze went to the cuffs dangling from the post and she frowned. Domino laughed again, leaned in so that his face blocked her view. "She was created for Matteo. From the moment of her birth, Sarael belonged to him. You will see her again and you can judge her happiness for yourself."

His hand moved from Dakotah's abdomen to her breast, his fingers tracing over a hardened, puckered nipple, his expression serious. "There is little separation between a kadine and the one who claims her. Her misery becomes his. Her joy is his as well."

"Along with her thoughts and memories," Dakotah said, the wine which had soothed only seconds before now churning in her stomach.

Domino stilled, her emotions battering him, warning him they were moving into dangerous, treacherous territory. It would be so easy to calm her, to remove her worries. To smooth them over so nothing stood in the way of his claiming her completely.

"It works both ways," he said, closing the distance between their faces, his tongue lightly tracing her lips before his mouth sucked at hers in a gentle kiss. "There are no secrets between a male and his kadine."

When she would have turned her head, his hand left her breast and cupped her cheek. Holding her in position, deepening the kiss, though it remained soft, persuasive. A heated rub of slick heat and wet desire. "There is nothing you can't know about me," he whispered, his gaze meeting hers. "The good and the bad."

Dakotah closed her eyes, tried to close her mind and her heart, but it was useless. She'd come this far. She'd pushed the boundaries of her trust further than she would have thought possible.

"I've been with a lot of men," she said, hating the starkness of her voice. "Not by choice, but it doesn't matter. You'll see everything I've done."

His nostrils flared. Rage roared through him. Flashing red in his eyes and causing her to flinch and try to pull away.

Domino was on her in an instant. His weight holding her to the mattress and pillows as his eyes bored into hers. "If it wasn't your choice, Dakotah, then I will kill any man who has touched you." He leaned in, his mouth hovering over hers once again. "And I will enjoy every kill."

Shock rippled through her, holding her as motionless as his eyes and will. She knew he spoke the truth. She felt it in every cell of her body. And for a second she filled with hate and the savage need for revenge. Allowed old, violent fantasies to resurface. "How?" she asked and this time her voice sounded hard, brittle, even to her own ears.

Domino smiled, a flash of fangs and ruthlessness. Alien despite the human flesh, despite the candles

with their dancing flames, the trappings of romance he'd provided before waking her and offering her herbs and wine.

"Easily, Dakotah. I could have them hunt and kill each other if it would please you. I could command them to kill themselves."

She shivered at just how powerful he was. "You wouldn't end up being hunted by vampires and dhampirs for doing that?"

"Only if I risked exposing us by killing while feeding." He pressed his mouth to hers briefly. "Shall I pledge to kill all those who have hurt or used you? Make it my gift to you for becoming my kadine?"

She licked her lips and his eyes darkened, desire moving through them. She knew he was serious. His offer genuine. His intent to free her from the demons of her past, not to enslave her.

He could make her his kadine without her consent. He could make her want to belong to him. But instead he was trying to give her a choice even though there really was no choice. Their wolves had decided that first night in the forest. Their blood had already mixed and mingled.

He was her future. She was his.

The Emperor to her Empress.

Dakotah wriggled her hand and he freed her wrist. She smoothed her knuckles over his cheek. When his sensual lips tilted upward in response to her touch, she smiled and allowed a lightness to fill her heart and chase away the old hatred and pain. "No," she said. "Let the past stay in the past. I don't want to spend my future revisiting it. Reliving it. Killing because of it." She tangled her fingers in his hair, rubbed her mouth against his. "The night will be over soon, isn't there something we have to do before that happens?"

Joy filled Domino. Intense and overwhelming. He rolled, startling her and making her laugh as he shifted her to the dominant position, forcing her to straddle him.

Her eyes widened when he reached over and lifted a small dagger from the nightstand, handing it to her with a teasing smile. "You have already demonstrated how handy you are with a blade. Choose a spot and take what I have to offer."

Dakotah took the knife and leaned down, bracing herself on one elbow, her wet slit rubbing and sliding against his cock, her nipple aligned to his, two hard tight points pressed to one another. "Aren't you worried what I might decide to cut?" she teased.

He laughed, looking fully human. A confident male sure of his woman. "And cheat yourself of the pleasure you'll soon get only from me?"

She put the tip of the blade against his throat, lightly traced the pulse beating there in a steady, unhurried rhythm, then moved downward, following the trail of his blood until the blade was poised above his nipple. Only his cock reacted, jerking, striking her clit, the head leaking against her belly, causing more of her arousal to escape, to coat his shaft and roll down to his testicles.

His eyes were molten stone, dark temptation in a face she could spend a lifetime looking at. He hissed when she cut him. Then threw back his head with a groan when her mouth covered both the wound and the nipple.

Ecstasy tore through Domino as she fed. A wild rush that had him writhing underneath her, his hands

spearing through her hair, holding her to his chest.

He nearly came when her fingers reached for his cock, when they guided him to her entrance and she impaled herself on him.

It took all of his control not to roll her to her back, to become the aggressor as his ancestors had programmed him to be. But the gift she was giving him was one he would treasure always. And so he let her feed. Let *her* take him. Control him. Ride him to a dizzying, all-encompassing climax, her mouth finally leaving his chest as her own pleasure crested.

Only then did he give in to ancient instincts. Become what the blueprint of his cells demanded. What The Heat coursing through them both demanded, his body taking hers time and time again, leading hers in a dance of pleasure, need and release, until they were both weak, sated, ready to welcome The Sleep as the first rays of the sun breached the darkness.

It was a peace beyond anything Domino had ever known. A happiness he could find no words for. Broken only by the sound of his cell phone ringing, its demand muted by the jeans encasing it. The sound of it jarring him from the warmth of Dakotah's arms and body.

With a groan he rolled to the edge of the bed and fished through the clothing on the floor until he retrieved the phone. Fane. Which meant the wolves in Atlantic City had reached a decision on whether there was to be a challenge or a blood pledge.

Chapter Nine

"Even Victor Hale's allies don't trust him with their lives," Fane said as soon as Domino answered the phone. "They didn't allow him a choice. They elected to throw him into the ring with you. The padralls accepted on your behalf and agreed to a challenge after sunset—tonight. I could have changed it but then thought better of it." There was a hint of amusement in Fane's voice that immediately grated on Domino's nerves. "It gives you the choice as to whether or not you want to make the third exchange with Dakotah before fighting her enemy. After all, her life would be forfeit as well should you bind her to you and then lose."

Domino's nostril flared. "Perhaps I will rip out two throats tonight."

Fane laughed. "I see you still harbor delusions that you could best me."

"It's no delusion," Domino growled.

"Dementia then. But on a serious note, I have asked Cable to assist with the arrangements and ensure there is no opportunity for mischief or deceit—though the presence of so many dhampirs and vampires will drive the point home to the wolves that we are prepared to slaughter them all."

"It's no less than the truth."

"And it's good they're reminded of it. For the sake of my bride, who claims we are on our honeymoon and begs for my attention, I hope we're not delayed here any longer. I'll see you tonight."

Domino closed the phone and dropped it onto the pile of clothing next to the bed before repositioning himself beside Dakotah and pulling her into his arms. She was tense and he could feel the wild mix of her emotions. "Don't think to leave me," he said. "Don't think to take Victor Hale on by yourself."

"It's not your fight."

He laughed. Warm despite the way her heart raced against his chest and her body vibrated with

concern. He didn't need the third exchange to know what she was thinking. What she was contemplating.

"It will hardly be a fight at all. Do you have so little faith in my abilities?" He rolled, trapping her underneath him. Her gaze caught in his. "From the time we are children we are trained in the use of restraints. Will you force me to bind you in order to keep you from doing something foolish? Or would you rather I simply command you not to leave the bed during the day?"

Dakotah opened her mouth to challenge him, to dare him, to insist he let her fight her own battles, but the words didn't come. The wolf held them back until they dissolved on her tongue, replaced by a different demand. "I want to be there when you fight."

He snarled in response. A gut reaction. A need to know she was safe. That her enemy couldn't reach her.

Her face tightened. The eyes that moments before had been soft and yielding became polished stones, reflections of the wall she was prepared to build between them.

"Only if you stand with Fane," Domino said, forcing the words out, hating that his heart thrilled at the sight of her satisfaction, at the way her body relaxed underneath his. He tightened his grip on her, wanting to meld them into one being. "Do I tether you to the bed or command you? Or will you give me your promise to stay by my side while The Sleep holds me? To be next to me when I wake?"

Her eyebrow lifted in amused challenge and happiness uncurled in his chest and belly. "I assume any promise will exclude bathroom breaks and trips to the kitchen?"

He growled softly. "Say the words, Dakotah."

"I'll stay."

He resettled them, spooning her back to his chest and curling his arm around her, holding her tightly to him in a gesture that made her feel cherished rather than imprisoned.

Outside, beyond the heavy drapes, the sun rose higher. She was aware of it though she couldn't see it. Just as she was acutely aware of Domino's skin pressed to hers, his heart beating, slowing as a heavy lethargy descended, pulling her under, The Sleep taking her as it took him.

* * * * *

Domino knew the moment she left the bed. It was nearing sunset. The lethargy clung to him, but because of the wolf, The Sleep didn't hold him as mercilessly as it did other vampires. He followed her movements by sound, smiled when she went into the bathroom and filled the old-fashioned tub Matteo had insisted be installed.

When she slid into the water, Domino forced himself to stand, the wolf aiding him against The Sleep. The Heat and Hunger also rising, allies instead of adversaries. Wanting him to be close to Dakotah in order to make the third exchange.

He halted in the bathroom doorway, his cock going to rigid attention at the sight of her in the tub, her head thrown back, her eyes closed as her hands smoothed soap over slick female curves.

The scent of her filled his nostrils. The desire for her filled his soul.

She tilted her head and opened eyes dark with need and lust. "Join me?"

His cock led the way, jutting out in front of him as he moved to the tub.

She laughed, a husky sound that added to his torment. He groaned when she took his shaft in her hand and brushed her thumb over the engorged head, stroking until the tip was wet. Then she used his cock to guide him into the tub and position him where she wanted him, at the other end, so that she could rise onto her knees and straddle him.

The blood burned through Dakotah's veins. Whispered and hinted of an ecstasy yet to be experienced, an ecstasy beyond what she'd already had with Domino.

There was no fighting the call of blood to blood. Of body to body. The yearning of the soul and heart.

There was no denying the truth of what they were to each other. The wolf's truth. The truth revealed in the tarot cards. The truth she and Domino had both come to accept.

They belonged together.

Her fingers speared through his hair, holding him still for her kiss, an exploration of lips and tongue, a savoring, a taste of desire found in wet heated darkness and the smooth glide of female against male. He let her control the kiss though his hands moved to her back, his fingers traced her spine and sent shivers of delight along her nerve endings, then moved to her sides, her hips as his cock stroked her folds, her clit. Sending heat spiraling through her.

She groaned and rose higher in the tub, rubbed her nipple back and forth across his lips. Taunting him by not allowing him to latch on and feast despite his growls of frustration.

He retaliated by filling her channel with his cock, by securing her so she couldn't fuck herself on him as his fingers went to her clit, stroking, teasing, making her sheath fist and unfist around a thick, pulsing shaft that remained stationary.

Dakotah relented, stilled, brought him to her breast and held him there as he suckled, the pull of his mouth sending ice-hot shards of need straight to her engorged knob so that it strained against his fingers, jerked under his caress. So that she whispered, "Please."

He took control then. Shifting, plundering her body with his cock as his fangs sank into her breast. Dark urges filling him, whispering for him to take her to the edge of human death, to the point where her heart stuttered in warning. But he resisted, wanting more than a single fuck in the tub before finishing what they had started.

And so he fed, holding her tightly to him, their thrashing sending water cascading over the edge of the tub. Her scream of release echoing off the walls of the bathroom. His own muffled against her flesh.

Domino rose from the tub, his mouth still pressed to her breast, his cock still embedded in her cunt. The strength he'd gained from his alien ancestors allowed him to take her to the bedroom, to settle them both on the thick pile of rugs in front of the fireplace.

Only then did he lift his head, sealing the puncture marks above her nipple with his tongue before kissing up her body, stopping when his mouth was above hers, his eyes locked with hers. There wasn't much time left before they'd have to leave. Fane or Cable or both of them would arrive shortly to escort them to the place where the challenge would be met and answered in death.

Victor Hale's death.

Domino didn't doubt for an instant that Dakotah's enemy would die tonight.

He understood her need to be present. And was reconciled to it.

It was his own reluctance to make the third exchange without ensuring himself that she understood what it meant that surprised him.

The Heat and Hunger, the alien stamp of his ancestors, had no conscience when it came to the taking of a kadine. Even the wolf felt nothing beyond the rightness of its claim to Dakotah's wolf as its mate.

But the man needed more.

Domino brushed his lips against Dakotah's, groaning when the movement slid his cock deeper into her body and her slick muscles clamped down on him, tightened as though afraid he would try to leave.

Dakotah could feel his hesitation, his uncertainty and if she'd been in doubt as to where her future lay, then his delay, his desire that she accept him without the thrall of pheromones or the instinct of the wolf, would have allayed her fears. His concern was a wedge driven into a heart that had been locked shut, forcing it open, so the love held there for the future could finally be freed.

"We'll have to leave soon," he said, but made no attempt to escape from her body or her arms.

"Then we'll have to hurry and finish what we started."

He settled more heavily on her. "There'll be pain."

"I assumed there would be."

"My death would trigger your own."

She laughed. "What happened to your assertion that taking on Victor Hale would hardly be a fight at all?"

Domino growled, a playful sound echoing the joy cascading through him, flooding him with happiness before The Heat and The Hunger moved in, asserting its claim.

With a groan he pulled from her body and flipped her to her stomach. His hands and mouth, the sharp nip of his teeth driving her to her elbows and knees, positioning her so that her nipples pressed against the heavy fiber of the carpet. Her thighs spread, exposing wet pubic hair and folds pulled back to reveal a rosy cleft, flushed and parted, seeping with desire. He traced the glistening skin with his tongue, rubbed over her erect clit, tortured them both with the brush of fangs against the flesh of her inner thigh.

She whimpered, a nearly wolf-like sound that made his cock jerk and leak. That made him taste her arousal again, growl with frustration. The urge to lick and suck, to bathe his face in her need warring with the necessity of finishing what they'd started.

He lingered between her thighs as long as he could. Until his cock was flexing, bobbing, smearing liquid heat on his abdomen. Until his balls burned and ached. Then he mounted her in a smooth motion, shoved all the way into her in one thrust, stopping only when his testicles were pressed tightly to her body, trapped between her hot mound and his muscled thighs.

There was no thought beyond that point. There was only The Hunger and The Heat. Driving him to slash his wrist and press it to her mouth. To pierce her shoulder with his fangs and feed. To fuck. Endless moments of dark ecstasy. Of sharing so profound that life and death blended into exquisite release.

Followed by pain so searing that it seemed to last an eternity. A physical pain for Dakotah. An agony of the heart and soul, the mind for Domino, who could only hold her, his strength keeping her from hurting

herself as her cells attacked one another, savagely and forever altering what she was, turning her into something not human or wolf, or completely alien, but the perfect blending of the three.

She was panting, exhausted, shaking by the time it was over. But it was the sight of her tears that very nearly undid Domino. "It's over now," he whispered, kissing her, nuzzling her as a wolf comforts its mate. Absorbing her tears, sharing them. Baring his throat and pressing it to her mouth. A promise. A show of trust.

Take my blood, Dakotah, he said, the command so clear that for a moment she thought he'd spoken it out loud. But when he repeated the words in her mind, she knew she hadn't imagined them. And then he shifted, spearing his fingers through her hair, controlling the range of her movement as he rubbed his neck against her mouth.

In an instant the pain and trauma of the transformation was forgotten. Her sole reality became the beat of his pulse against her lips. She cried out, arched as her canine teeth elongated into fangs.

She burned.

With Heat. With Hunger.

A scorching wave that made her struggle wildly in his arms until it passed. Then he once again offered his throat. This time as his penis slid into her channel in a gentle homecoming.

Now, Dakotah.

And she bit. Fed as they made love. Both of them gaining strength from the intimacy of their joining. The sacredness of the mixing and sharing of blood.

When it was done they lay together, limbs entangled. Two still joined into one. Content. Until the first tendril of doubt, the first tug of a heartstring, the first brush of mind against mind. A tentative exploration. Domino wanting to know what she felt for him, why she'd made the second and third exchanges—even though he knew he should accept her gift without question. Domino seeing glimpses of her past. Of the men. Of the things she'd been forced to do and endure.

She jerked as though he'd slapped her and tried to close her mind. He tightened his grip on her, rolled so she was trapped underneath him, captured by his body and his eyes. "I will kill all of them," he said, letting her feel the extent of his rage at what had been done to her, his desire for revenge and retribution. Letting her feel too his awe at her courage, her endurance, her intelligence. His amazement that she'd survived where few would have, grown stronger where others would have been broken and crushed.

That she'd been willing to trust and give herself to him nearly reduced him to tears, and he allowed her to feel that as well, though he repeated his comment, not holding back his lethal nature, what he was capable of. "I will kill all of them."

Dakotah's heart stuttered in her chest, not from a brush with death this time but from the immensity of the life now shimmering in front of her. *There is little separation between a kadine and the one who claims her. There are no secrets between a male and his kadine.*

Domino had told her as much and she'd believed him, and yet the reality was so much more. It was very nearly overwhelming.

With a thought she could know anything about him. See anything of his past. Read his intentions for the future.

But it was his emotions that held her enthralled. The intensity of what he felt for her. Admiration and

respect where a part of her had feared there would be disgust, contempt. A turning away. The banquet replaced by famine.

“Forget about them,” Dakota said as she tugged, freeing her wrists from where he held them pinned to the thick rugs, tangling her fingers in his hair, and guiding his mouth to hers, pressing her lips to him, kissing him. Letting her actions speak for her, letting the carefully guarded secret place in her heart open, letting him see how he’d become the dream she’d locked away and not dared to look at again until he’d come into her life.

The kiss was like the sharing of their blood. A primitive and sacred communion. A starting point.

Soon tenderness gave way to desire. The past to the present. And Domino rose above her, but not before he’d stumbled upon a cold shiver of fear over his gaining control to the point where he could freeze her in place with a thought.

He sent a warning in the instant before he commanded her body, pinning her wrists to her sides and her ankles to the carpet, her legs spread so that he could kneel between them.

Her heart raced in reaction, her pulse jumped and made him fight to keep his fangs from descending. And even though she fought the restraint, she didn’t demand that he let her go as he lowered his mouth and captured a dark nipple. Pulling and sucking on it until the thundering in her veins was a molten fire fueled by The Heat.

He took her to the edge with his lips at her breast, his fingers on her clit, tugging and stroking, gripping and releasing. Brought her close to climax repeatedly but didn’t allow her a release.

Dakota thrashed and arched, held in place by his thoughts alone. She felt the full measure of his power over her but also his desire to do what was right, to never abuse her. She felt his need to dominate, to protect, to possess. To be everything to her. And she accepted it. Even reveled in it. Though it didn’t make her submissive.

“Now,” she demanded, meeting his gaze in challenge, watching as his face tightened and his nostrils flared. As something alien moved through his eyes.

He hissed, letting her see his fangs, but she saw it as a victory, an acknowledgement of her own power, an indication of how aroused he was that some of his control had slipped.

The wild urges of his ancestors screamed in Domino’s cock. Demanding that he subdue her, answer her challenge in a way that would prove his mastery. That would make her as submissive as the kadines created and raised for his race.

But as quickly as the thought came, the wolf bristled and the man laughed silently—all in the second before The Heat made it impossible to delay, to play, even to tease.

With a thought he freed one of her hands, erotic images pressing in on him as he said, “Pleasure yourself. Let me see you come from the touch of your own hand.”

And satisfaction rushed through him when her fingers went to her slit, her clit—not because he’d commanded it of her, but because he’d asked it, because she could read his fantasies and was willing to make them his reality.

He had to take his cock in hand in order to stave off orgasm as she manipulated her engorged knob and drove her fingers into her channel, sliding in and out as the smell of her arousal invaded his senses, enflamed him. Made him want to cover her and thrust into her. To surround himself with her wet heat

and slick feminine flesh.

He resisted the temptation. Hissed when he saw her knowing smile. Waited until she jerked under her own hand, her cunt burning against her fingers, clenching and unclenching. And then he fell on her. Freed her so that she could wrap her arms and legs around him and hold him tight as he fucked her, loved her, became one with her.

They were still naked in front of the fire when Fane arrived. His amusement as he plopped down in a chair as though he intended to watch them grated over Domino's nerves and made Dakotah smile.

Domino rose to his feet, flashing his fangs when Fane's gaze traveled over Dakotah's body as she stood.

She slipped her arm through Domino's, laughing, her heart light, the bond with Domino allowing her to see that beneath their outward sparring, the two men had a history, a deep loyalty to one another. "Don't waste yourself on him," she joked, leading Domino back to the bedroom. "You can't afford to let him weaken you before the challenge."

Her comment earned her a flash of fangs and a growl while Fane laughed in the other room. But all too soon the humor was gone, replaced by somber watchfulness as they left the house and arrived at the site of the challenge. The lightheartedness replaced by the unmistakable smell of nervousness as a handful of wolves gathered at the edge of a small moonlit patch of bare earth surrounded by a dense forest of trees.

Even without the deepening of her senses that Dakotah had gained with Domino's blood, she was aware of vampires and dhampirs in the woods around them. The cold, alien presence they projected made chill bumps rise along her arms. And though she couldn't see them or count them, she knew they greatly outnumbered the wolves.

The wolves knew it too. They huddled together in a defensive pack. Separating themselves from the naked man who waited at the center of the clearing. Their positioning a silent statement that Victor Hale stood on his own. That his fate was his own.

Dakotah squeezed Domino's hand. A thousand thoughts tumbling through her mind. Including the belief that it should be her going into the clearing.

Don't even consider it, Dakotah, he said. Obsidian eyes meeting hers, warning her with a look that he would take complete control if she pushed him.

Hurry up and get it over with then, she said. Confident he would win, though her heart raced with the fear that something would go wrong and he would die because of her.

Domino pulled her to him, poured love and the promise of a future together into her with a kiss, then set her aside. His gaze meeting Fane's in a silent communication that had Fane moving closer, his shoulder against Dakotah's, as Domino stripped and entered the clearing.

The wolves moved forward in a tight knot and Dakotah tensed. Fane took her arm and said, "Don't worry. The pack elders are only going to state the terms agreed on by the padralls and hear Domino's formal acceptance of them before the challenge begins."

It was done in a second and the wolves retreated. Then Victor Hale shifted into a grey wolf. Attacked. No doubt hoping to catch Domino as he changed form.

But where Domino had been, the black wolf shimmered into existence. Its bulk larger than the grey wolf's. Its speed and savagery stunning. The product of an evolution far more intricate and ruthless than the one that had created Victor Hale.

It was over in a fury of movement, of breaking bones and torn flesh, of blood loss and spilled internal organs. The grey wolf's life pouring into the dirt, its body changing for a final time, becoming a human corpse to be disposed of.

Domino trotted over to where Dakotah stood. The wolf not wanting to relinquish its form when the moon was out and the forest called. *Run with me.* And Dakotah's wolf shivered with joy, pressed against her skin in remembered pleasure.

She laughed, thinking about what had happened the last time they ran. *You mean mate with you.*

He play-bowed, obsidian eyes dancing with joy. *That too.*

Next to her Fane laughed and said, "Oh how the mighty have fallen." But Dakotah couldn't resist Domino's call. She stripped and handed her clothes to Fane, then changed and darted for the trees, the black wolf bounding after her.

Epilogue

Palazzo dei Venti Oscuri . Palace of Dark Winds.

One look at it and Dakotah could see how Matteo Cabrelli's home got its name. It loomed high above the ocean as though daring the sea and air and earth to challenge it. To try and topple it from its perch along the cliffs.

Dakotah's stomach tightened, though her heart raced with anticipation. She even managed a smile when she remembered Helki's assertion that she would see Sarael again sooner than she might think and be a part of Sarael's world for more years than she could imagine.

Next to her, Domino laughed softly, pulling Dakotah more tightly against him in the backseat of the limousine that was now making the slow climb upward. *It's a good thing my mother's mother is so sure of her readings and her visions that she never needs to say "I told you so."*

He picked Dakotah's left hand up and brought it to his mouth, kissing the jeweled and scripted band he'd given her. *The Empress to my Emperor, with The World before us.*

She pressed her forehead to his, bathing in the wash of his emotions. The love she felt there. The respect. The acceptance.

It still felt like a fairytale. A dream. An impossible reality.

Where she'd once been alone, now her life was full. Not just with him, but with his family. With Cable and Fane and Kiziah, who were waiting above, in Matteo's home, along with Sarael and the man Dakotah could only vaguely remember.

"I was there that night," Domino said and she instantly saw his memory of it. Felt the relief he'd experienced knowing Matteo was already sexually bonded to Sarael.

She laughed when she saw Domino's resolve to both feed from and fuck her before leaving the area, and she couldn't resist lowering her hand and tracing over the erection pressed against the fabric of his jeans. Couldn't stop herself from nuzzling his neck, from letting her fangs descend so she could torment him by brushing them over a pulse that was suddenly dancing.

Dakotah smiled against his skin, feminine satisfaction roaring through her at the way he was tense, his breath coming faster, his desire merging with her own, The Heat flaring hot and bright, a single flame contained in separate bodies. *You got more than you bargained for when you fucked and fed from me,*

she teased.

His hand moved to her breast, his fingers going to her nipple with deadly precision, making her gasp as her cunt clenched. *Do you hear me complaining?*

She laughed and closed her eyes, savoring the scent and feel of him, wondering if there was time to make love before they got to Matteo's estate.

Only if you intend to greet our host and hostess with the sight of your naked ass, Domino teased, flashing her an image that had her pulling away from him. Brown eyes meeting amused obsidian ones.

"I love you," she said, the words coming easier now. Though there were still days when she caught herself probing his thoughts, ensuring herself that he loved her in return. That it was more than a sexual bonding, more than a mating of their wolves.

Domino pulled her into his lap as the heavy gates of Matteo's estate swung open, his heart aching for all the pain she'd endured during her life.

Once he couldn't have imagined finding a female whose mind interested him as much as her body, whose strength and courage he could admire, not for just a night but for the centuries that lay ahead for him. But now he couldn't imagine life without her. "You're my world, Dakotah. Everything I could want not only in a kadine but in a companion."

The limousine stopped and the door swung open, making Dakotah blink in momentary confusion at the man standing there. A man who looked like Cable and yet wasn't. Domino shifted, his movement propelling her out of the limo but not before she felt his curiosity.

"What are you doing here, Levant?" Domino asked as he exited the car, his thoughts informing Dakotah that the man in front of them was Cable's brother.

Levant's face tightened. "We've come to work among the *espantral*."

He refers to the padrall order responsible for creating the kadines and molding them into what their mates desire, Domino sent to Dakotah, though to Levant he said, "Is that the royal *we*, or did your brothers come with you?"

"Priest and Deacon are also here." Levant tilted his head. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you to where Matteo and the others are waiting."

"You've been reduced to servant?" Domino asked and Dakotah frowned at his needling of Cable's brother.

But Levant took it in stride. "Hardly. Though being Matteo's servant would be preferable to what awaits."

The wealth displayed in Matteo's home was breathtaking and more than once Domino caught Dakotah when she stumbled, distracted by the view and the art, the sheer beauty and glitter of the scene around her as they climbed elegant staircases and walked down hallways that seemed as though they belonged in another era.

They do, Domino said. *As Matteo does. He is not like Fane or me. He was never dhampir. He marked his life in centuries from the moment of his birth.* Domino laughed. *So you don't need to worry about watching as he pleasures his kadine or having Sarael see you in the same situation. He's much too old-fashioned for that.* Domino nuzzled the side of Dakotah's face. *But later, after they've retired...no*

doubt Fane and Cable would enjoy a night in front of the fireplace with their woman.

And Dakotah laughed in spite of herself. Shivered at the images his words brought to mind. The play of them in her thoughts holding her attention until they entered the room where the others were waiting.

She took in Fane and Kiziah, standing with Cable and two men who could only be Deacon and Priest. But then she found Sarael. Smiling. Hurrying toward her. Matteo following in her wake.

There was a hesitation on Sarael's part when she reached Dakotah, a small barrier that belonged in the past, and Dakotah disposed of it by pulling Sarael into a hug. The need to keep others separate no longer necessary for her survival.

When they moved apart, Matteo positioned Sarael so her back was to his front, his arms around her waist in a possessive display that had her blushing and laughing, exchanging a glance with Dakotah. The happiness there easy for Dakotah to see. To recognize. Because it was a happiness echoed in her own heart.

About the Author

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

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