



Loose Id

LAST HOPE

Moira Rogers

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Chapter One

Kiara Avery sighed and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear as she climbed out of the ambulance. “Jesus, look at the door.” Bloody handprints marred the beige surface as well as the handle. Someone had obviously scrambled to get inside, probably to call for help.

“Freakin’ bloodbath, Avery.” Bobby Sanchez jumped down from the driver’s seat and jerked his head toward the edge of the brick building and the row of hedges rounding it. Pools and smears of blood covered the concrete walk and disappeared into the grass. The moon hung, round and high, in the sky, and Kiara could just make out a pair of jeans-clad legs behind the shrubs.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, and she shivered in the chilly night air. “I hate ride-alongs,” she whispered, then hefted her emergency bag. “Let’s get a move on.”

The scene was worse than she’d expected. The legs were connected to what had probably been a large man, but most of him was covered by a blanket. *Most* of him. Someone -- or something -- had torn him apart with terrifying ferocity. Sanchez had to step around a hand that lay a few feet from the rest of the arm, and Kiara followed him as he strode toward the small huddle of cops clustered several yards from the body.

A girl huddled on the ground next to them, a rough blanket wrapped around her body. Judging from the torn clothing scattering the ground, she was naked.

She didn’t look dangerous. She looked *young*, with a sweet, round face and dazed blue eyes. The harsh streetlight next to the building washed out the color of her hair, but Kiara could see streaks of blood in it, darkening the light auburn strands. She didn’t look capable of the carnage they’d seen, but it was clear from the nervous way the cops watched her that no one was entirely sure if she was a victim or a suspect.

Kiara ignored the men and knelt on the grass, stripping off her glove. She laid a bare hand on the girl’s cheek, and waves of fear and rage tingled through her, followed by a sense

of shock that left her numb. She had to will her tongue to move as she glanced at the men beside her. "How long ago was she attacked?"

One of the officers shook his head. "The call came in just after eight, but we still don't know what happened."

Kiara did. The stunned terror radiating from the young woman was something she'd felt before, from countless victims of violent crime. "He tried to hurt her," she said flatly. "She fought back."

Another cop, a burly man with wavy blond hair, snorted. "Yeah, looks like self-defense to me. Guy's in about fifteen pieces."

Kiara looked up at him. Her defenses were down, and his emotions rushed in, filling her with revulsion. He was disgusted, full of hate. Scared. "She fought back, Officer Douglas," she said again. "The only way she knew how."

He stared at her for a second, then turned away with a sneer. "Fucking freaks."

Sanchez stepped up to the man, his anger scraping at her already raw nerves. "What did you say?"

"Bobby." She shot him a quelling look. "What do the witnesses say happened?" When her question was met with silence, she glanced back up. "There *were* witnesses, right?"

The officers remained silent, which was answer enough. If there hadn't been, the girl would be in handcuffs already.

Kiara took a deep breath and turned to Sanchez. "Can you get the backboard and gurney? We have to take her in."

The first officer made a noise of protest as her partner jogged toward the ambulance. "We still have to get a statement."

"Get it at the hospital." She ignored the cop's stuttered protest and concentrated on checking the girl's vital signs.

The girl finally moved, her gaze fixing on Kiara. She shuddered and tightened the blanket around her shoulders, pulling away from Kiara's hands. "I don't need to go to the hospital. I'm fine. And my boyfriend will be here in a few minutes."

Kiara pulled the stethoscope from her ears. "You've been through a bad time. You should let us take you in, get yourself checked out."

"I need a shower." Her ragged voice dropped to a whisper, so soft Kiara could barely hear it. "I smell like him."

"I know." She laid her hand on the girl's face again, concentrating on calming her. "My name is Kiara. What's yours?"

Her empathy did the trick, soothing the prickles of energy inside the girl. She closed her large, shocked-looking eyes. When she opened them again, her gaze was much calmer. "Claire. My name is Claire."

“Claire.” Kiara smiled as Sanchez came back with the board. “Are you *sure* we can’t talk you into going to the hospital? You could be hurt and not even feel it because of the adrenaline and shock.”

Claire’s head jerked around, her gaze fixed on some point past Sanchez in the direction of the parking lot. Relief flowed out of her so strongly Kiara was surprised everyone couldn’t feel it. “I need to talk to my boyfriend first. It would be bad if he came here and found my blood but couldn’t find me.”

Kiara glanced back and saw a brown-haired man spring off a motorcycle and hurry toward them. He didn’t slow until he reached them, his worn boots slipping a little on the slick grass. “Claire? Baby...” His nostrils flared as he scooped her into his arms. “Where is he?”

Officer Douglas scowled at them. “You’re standing on part of him.”

The man snarled at the cop, who immediately backed off. “He’s lucky you didn’t leave him for me, baby,” he whispered, stroking his thumb over Claire’s jaw. “Did he hurt you?”

“This doctor thinks I should go to the hospital.” As Kiara watched, Claire’s eyes drifted shut. “Her name is...is...”

“I’m a nurse,” she corrected gently, holding out a hand. “Kiara.”

He shook it briefly. “Lars. Does she really need to go?”

“Yes, she really does. Can you convince her?”

He pulled the girl closer. “She’ll go. Can I come with her?”

Kiara found herself choked by another rolling wave of emotion, so Sanchez answered. “You can ride in the back. Come on.” He hoisted the board under his arm and helped Kiara to her feet. “Can you carry her?”

Lars was already rising to his feet, his girlfriend cradled in his arms. “I’ve got her.”

Claire tucked her face against his neck. “You are such a bossy ass.”

Sanchez shot Kiara a grin. “I think she’ll be all right, Avery.”

She half smiled as she tugged open the doors at the back of the ambulance. “You’re probably right.” She hopped in and beckoned to Lars. “Bring her on in, and we’ll get going.”

He did, and she soothed Claire again as they laid her out on the collapsible gurney. “You’re going to be fine,” she whispered, letting her certainty flow over to the younger woman. “Fine.”

The tense set of Claire’s shoulders eased a little, but she clutched her boyfriend’s hand tightly. “They think it was my fault. Am I going to be arrested?”

“It wasn’t your fault, Claire. No one is arresting you.”

“Hell, no,” Sanchez chimed in from the driver’s seat. “They have witnesses who saw the guy attack you. He got what was coming to him.”

"I didn't mean to kill him." She squeezed her eyes shut and made a low noise. "I think he was one of them. One of the guys who's been on the news. He said the freaks were going to get what they deserved. And he knocked me into the wall, and I just lost it."

"Shh." She knew exactly who Claire meant. Anyone who had turned on a television in the past month had seen the videos and letters played endlessly on the news, videos promising a bright future for humans free from the monsters. *Humanity's Last Hope*. Kiara fought to control her shudder. "I know you only wanted to stop him."

"Did I?" The low, menacing tone of Claire's voice was echoed by the sudden shift in the emotions in the back of the vehicle. "Maybe. Except I want to stop his friends too. I could smell them on him. I could find them..."

Lars's hand tightened around hers. "Don't worry about that right now." The look on his face was easy to read. *Leave that up to me.*

Claire snarled her displeasure, and the emotions in the back of the ambulance ratcheted up another notch. "I will kick your ass if you try to stop me."

Kiara had to stifle a growl as the two shifters fought a silent war for dominance. She attempted to distract Claire as she started an IV. "What breed are you? I had a roommate in college who was a jaguar."

"I'm a coyote." Claire's gaze was still locked with Lars's, but her voice had gone from angry to oddly warm. "He's a territorial jackass."

Kiara smiled. "But you love him anyway, right?"

It was Lars who answered. "Damn right." He kept his fingers wrapped around Claire's even as he watched Kiara closely. "Don't hurt her. She's been hurt enough."

"I'm already done." She reached for the piece of medical tape she'd already torn off the roll and smoothed it down over the port, securing it. "No sweat."

"No sweat," Claire echoed, finally meeting Kiara's eyes. "You're not going to medicate me, are you? I don't want to be out of it."

She shook her head. "IV access is standard for emergent cases. We might have to give you fluids or medications in the ER. But I see no reason for you to be sedated."

"Good." Claire closed her eyes. "Are the police...? Are they going to come to the hospital to talk to me?"

Kiara bit her lip. "Yes."

"You're sure there were witnesses?"

"I'm positive."

"Okay. Okay." For the first time since they'd gotten Claire into the ambulance, the heavy press of emotions eased. A few seconds later, Claire's fingers closed around Kiara's wrist, her grip surprisingly strong. "Watch out for the blond cop. He was talking about you when he knew you couldn't hear anymore. He reeked of fear. Fear and hate."

She swallowed. “I know.” It wasn’t just Douglas. She’d tasted the jagged tang of the other officers’ emotions, as well. Mostly, they’d been scared and disgusted by the carnage. But she’d felt an undercurrent of loathing too. “Some of them hate people like us.”

Lars studied her, his gaze sharp. “Us?”

“Empath.” She reached for several packages of gauze and focused her attention on Claire’s scrapes. She winced a little but sat mostly still as Kiara carefully examined her split lip and the cut on her arm.

Kiara worked quickly, answering the occasional question from Sanchez as he radioed in to the emergency department. Claire made the fourth victim of the HLH she’d seen in the past three weeks, either in the ER or during her paramedic ride-alongs. Perhaps it would all stop now that one of the attackers had been killed. Maybe...

She shook herself and tamped down the fear that welled inside her. If anything, the hate group responsible would retaliate, wanting vengeance. Up until now, the police department’s priorities hadn’t seemed to include stopping them. Why would that change?

Kiara glanced at the blood she’d tracked into the ambulance. It covered the soles of her shoes and had soaked into her pants where she’d knelt in the grass next to Claire. It reminded her that more than assault had happened tonight. Someone had died.

Why, indeed?

Chapter Two

Adrian almost didn't answer his phone when it rang, the high-pitched noise cutting through the sound from the television. He had his first meal of the day in front of him, and he'd *earned* it after spending the last twelve hours chasing down dead-end leads.

And it's probably Katie's parents again. He understood his newest clients were impatient as hell. He probably would be too if he had a daughter who'd ended up in the hospital after a violent mugging. A neighbor had stumbled across sweet little Kathleen Murphy in the hallway outside her tiny one-bedroom apartment, bloodied and beaten, with a Bible verse spray-painted across her door. Just like Travis Simons. Just like Emerson Jacobs.

A submissive shape-shifter, a psychic, and a witch. Three supernaturals in as many weeks, all beaten to within an inch of their lives, but all left alive to tell about the terror of the attacks.

The ringer on his phone sounded again, and Adrian dropped his fork with a sigh. A quick glance at the caller ID made him glad he had. It wasn't the Murphys on the phone, demanding updates, but one of his contacts on the police force. Adrian flipped open the phone and held it to his ear. "Torres here. What's up?"

"Hey, Adrian. It's Collins." The man's voice was hushed, nervous. "Just thought you might be interested to hear about a call we had tonight."

His stomach sank, and he pushed away his food, no longer hungry. "Another one?"

"Yeah. Assault, with a DB."

Dead body. "Shit." Adrian rose and swiped his keys from the table. "So they're escalating?"

"Hardly." Collins snorted. "Guy apparently started roughing a girl up outside the campus library, and she turned the tables on him. Ripped him to pieces, and that isn't a figure of speech."

“*Shit.*” He snatched his jacket and headed for the door. “Shifter, I take it? What type? Did you catch a name?” Most of the weaker shape-shifter women had been careful not to go out alone after dark since Emerson’s attack, which meant the idiots had probably stumbled across one of the relatively rare dominant females in town.

“One witness said wolf, another said coyote.” Adrian could hear Collins shuffling papers. “The only name I got was ‘Franklin,’ but EMS came and picked her up. Took her to the county hospital. Thought you might want to know because they found a can of red spray paint on the guy. Or...*in* him. Whatever. The guys who were there said it was awful.”

“Franklin.” Adrian locked his door as he tried to figure out why that name sounded familiar. “Franklin... Did you see her? Or get a description?” *Please don’t be a redhead.*

“Nah, man, I just came on. Someone you know?”

“I think I know her boyfriend. He could make the situation...ugly. Let’s just hope I’m wrong.” The idea of trying to run an investigation under the radar with Lars Nilsson storming around in a protective, vindictive rage was enough to completely ruin his already shitty week. “Thanks for the heads-up, Collins. I’m on my way over to County now. If you hear anything else, let me know.”

“Yeah. Hey,” he added quickly. “The guy’s at County too. Should still be in the morgue. I’m not sure if they’re going to get an ID off him, but you could take a peek. Just don’t go on a full stomach.”

“She tore him up that bad, huh?”

Collins sighed. “Worse, is what I heard. Some of the guys were ready to cuff the girl and haul her in, but there were too many witness statements corroborating self-defense.”

Adrian could only imagine. If the police in this town were sympathetic to shape-shifters, he’d still be wearing a badge. “Jesus. Does she need a lawyer?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. A couple of the guys who were on scene kept the spray paint and some other evidence from disappearing. She should be all right.”

“Okay. Keep me in the loop. I’ll give you a call later tonight.” Adrian snapped his phone shut and shoved it into his pocket just as he reached his truck.

If the girl in the hospital *was* Lars’s new girlfriend, they were all in a hell of a lot of trouble. An attack on someone like that would ratchet up the tension in a way the previous three attacks hadn’t. Emerson Jacobs was a submissive wolf who stayed away from other shape-shifters for the most part. And, as far as he knew, the psychics and witches didn’t *have* an organized structure.

Attacking a female shifter would have been bad enough. Attacking the girlfriend of the most dominant and aggressive coyote in town was likely to start an all-out war.

Stop borrowing trouble. Maybe it’s not her. Could have been a wolf or someone from out of town. Could have been anyone.

It didn't really matter, though. He acknowledged the truth of the situation as he pulled his truck out onto the highway and headed for the bridge that crossed the river into Mystic Ridge. A female shifter had been attacked, and the male shifters wouldn't care who she was or to whom she belonged. They'd look at their girlfriends and wives, at their friends and family. They'd wonder who would be next.

And when they got done wondering, they'd start killing.

Shit.

* * * * *

It should have been harder to get past the front desk and triage nurse in the emergency department, but all Adrian had to do was flash his private investigator credentials, say the word "shape-shifter," and they waved him back. No one wanted to deal with turning him away, and no one particularly cared if the shifter in question didn't want him there.

The nurses' station was another story. A stone-faced woman sat behind the desk, her pink scrubs clashing with her bright red hair, and all but told him to get lost.

"I just need to ask her a couple of questions," he ventured again, favoring her with a dazzling smile. "It'll only take a few minutes."

"Sorry, honey," she drawled, not looking the slightest bit apologetic. "Friends and family only." She turned her attention back to her computer terminal.

He considered trying to convince her that he *was* a friend, but it would be obvious he'd lied the minute he came face-to-face with Lars. Tolerance was the best he could muster for Lars Nilsson, and that was when the man was behaving himself. *Which is just about never.*

He was saved from having to think up a new plan of approach by the appearance of a second nurse. She looked like she'd recently showered, but he could still smell the unmistakable scent of another shape-shifter. *Coyote.* It *had* to be Lars's girlfriend, then. She was the only female coyote in town who was likely to be tearing up attackers.

Armed with that knowledge, he smiled at the new nurse and flashed his ID again. "I'm looking for Lars Nilsson. Is" -- *Claire? Corinne? I think Claire* -- "Claire...is she all right?"

Let me back. Come on. Adrian held his breath as she stared up at him with eyes that were an odd shade of brown. Light, like watered-down whiskey. Finally, she blinked and glanced down at his license, then tucked a wet strand of hair behind her ear. "Who are you?"

He shoved his ID back into his pocket and offered his hand. "Adrian Torres. I know Mr. Nilsson."

"Kiara Avery." She shook his hand briefly and grabbed a metal clipboard off the desk. "Claire will be fine, Mr. Torres. She probably won't be admitted, so she should be released in a few hours. I'd try calling him then. Have a good night." She turned and started down the hallway.

"Wait." He cast a glance at the nurse at the desk and took his chances, darting past her after Kiara. "I'm a shape-shifter, Ms. Avery. There are things I might be able to pick up on now that I won't in a few hours. I just need a few minutes." By now, the chances were good that Lars could hear him. How he'd react was the question.

She didn't stop walking, just glanced over her shoulder at him. "Is that even real?" she asked, nodding to his pocket. "Or are you a reporter?"

He tried not to growl his frustration. "It's plenty real, sweetheart. If you were older than twenty, you might even remember me. I used to be a cop."

"I'm almost thirty." She stopped and faced him. "I'll go ask Claire if she's up to talking to you. But don't try to weasel your way back there by lying to me. I don't like it when people lie to me."

Adrian was used to people showing him at least a marginal level of respect, but the nurse staring him down seemed unaware of the fact that he could have lifted her with one hand and snapped her in half just as easily. Or she didn't care.

Or she knows better. He stopped a few feet away and finally listened to what his instincts were telling him. It was faint, but definitely there -- the tickle of magic at the edge of his senses. "Psychic," he said flatly, narrowing his eyes at her. "Fine. The truth is Claire may not have a clue who I am. But I still need to talk to her."

She remained silent for a moment, then tilted her head. "I'll see what I can do. Wait here." She disappeared around the corner.

Adrian leaned against the wall, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. Hospitals always set his temper on edge, but he was used to controlling it. Today was the first time he'd ever snapped this fast, and he was more than ready to blame it on the pretty little nurse.

The pretty little *psychic*. It was just what he didn't need -- an attractive woman fucking up his instincts in the middle of a crisis situation.

She reappeared, and he fought a groan as the wolf inside him studied her with renewed interest. She just jerked her head toward the hallway behind her. "Come on."

"Thanks." He pushed off the wall and firmly told himself not to stare at her ass as he swung around the corner and followed her down the hallway. *Let's just hope she's not a mind reader.*

The first person he encountered when he stepped into the room was Lars. The rest of the room faded as he faced the shorter man and fought the urge to curl his hands into fists. "Nilsson."

The coyote looked just as tense, though he grinned lazily. "Torres."

Every instinct in his body screamed for him to stare Lars down, to force him to retreat. When Kiara stepped past him, he had to stop himself from grabbing her and dragging her back until he stood between her and the enemy.

Not the enemy, damn it. He took another deep breath and returned Lars's lazy smile. "We gonna play nice in front of the ladies?"

"I'm not the interloper here," Lars said flatly. "You're the one who --" His words cut off as a small hand slid over his arm.

"It's all right." Kiara had sidled up to Lars, and she kept her hand on him as he looked down at her. "Mr. Torres is here to help."

Adrian fought the urge to growl, but it died in a rush of concern when a low snarl came from the bed. Before anyone else could move, Adrian grabbed Kiara's arm and dragged her away from Lars. "Okay, now, let's keep our hands *off* the injured shape-shifter's boyfriend."

"I-I'm sorry." She looked at Claire. "I was only trying to keep him calm."

"It's not a problem." Lars turned his head toward the bed for just a moment before backing up a step and dropping his hand to cover Claire's. "Why don't you just do whatever it is you came here to do and then get lost, Torres?"

But Adrian was already tugging Kiara toward the door. "Take a few minutes and comfort Claire. I'll be right back."

He didn't wait for Lars to argue, just stepped into the hallway and pulled the door shut before glancing down at Kiara. "Are you all right?"

She returned his stare, looking puzzled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Because you almost got eaten by a jealous, territorial coyote? He shook his head, leaned against the door and shoved his hands in his pockets. "For future reference, sweetheart, you might want to watch the casual touching around shape-shifters. It's never very casual to us."

Kiara bristled and glanced around, then lowered her voice to a husky whisper. "I'm not an idiot. Touching isn't casual for me, either, but it *is* the best way for me to calm someone. I can't help that any more than you can help the whole...concerned thing you have going on right now."

Not a mind reader, but an empath. *Great. Rein in the lust, man.* Adrian cleared his throat and tried to keep his mind on business and not how hot her voice was when she whispered like that. "You've got to be careful with dominant female shape-shifters. The weaker they feel, the more violent they are."

For a moment, her eyes blazed with hot sparks, and he was sure she was going to give him hell. Then she blinked and the expression was gone, replaced by a vaguely polite smile. "Of course. If you don't need anything else...?"

He had to reach out to grab her arm again. "I do. You're an empath, right?"

She sighed and ran her free hand through her drying hair. It had lightened until it was almost the same shade as her eyes. "Yeah, I am."

"Do you have to touch people to project a calming atmosphere, or does it just work better that way?"

Kiara took a moment to answer. "I can do it without touching anyone."

"Good. Because having me in the room with his injured girlfriend isn't going to make Lars happy, even if Claire doesn't mind." Adrian gave her a cocky, confident smile. "It'd help if you could keep everyone calm."

She hesitated long enough that he thought she might refuse, but she finally nodded once. "Okay. Five minutes."

"Five minutes." He narrowed his eyes, studying her strange expression. "Is there anything I need to know?"

Kiara pulled away from his grasp and rubbed her hands over her bare upper arms. "Five minutes is all you have because that's as long as I can keep projecting like that."

"No, I meant --" He stopped, unsure *what* he meant. "Are *you* okay?"

She kept her eyes averted. "Look, let's just get this done. I'll worry about me."

He wanted to argue, but there wasn't time. "Okay."

Adrian pushed the door open again. Lars had moved to sit on the bed with Claire curled in his lap, her head resting on his shoulder. Though he'd heard rumors the Franklin girl had hooked up with Lars, seeing them together was jarring. Lars was the epitome of bad news, and he looked it. Claire, on the other hand, looked sweet and guileless.

Of course, that was how they *looked*. There was nothing jarring about their power. They fit cleanly together, their energy filling the room as they both turned to look at him. The back of Adrian's neck prickled as he stepped just inside the door and stopped, not willing to venture closer. Not when faced with such an impenetrable, united front.

He needed them both to stay calm, so he directed his first question to Lars instead of Claire. "Have the police been here to take a statement yet?"

Lars nodded shortly. "They were right behind the ambulance." His eyes flickered to Kiara. "You don't need the empath."

"Kiara should stay." Claire sounded tired, but her tone brooked no argument. "She can probably describe the blond cop better than I can, and he's trouble."

"Blond cop?" Adrian slid his eyes to Kiara as he pulled a small notebook out of his back pocket. "Do you know his name?"

"Douglas." She leaned against the wall, her shoulders tense. "I don't know his first name."

"He likes to hassle supernaturals." Lars scowled. "Beat on the guys. Rub up against the pretty little girls."

He should have known. He scrawled "Brandon Douglas" on the pad of paper and underlined it. "I'm familiar with him. Did he harass you at all, Claire?"

She didn't answer at first. When Adrian finally looked up at her, she was watching Kiara through narrowed eyes. "He looked like he wanted to, but he was too scared of me. He

tried to get one of the younger guys to pin me down and cuff me, but the other cop wouldn't do it. Said there were too many witnesses."

"Probably Rawlings," Kiara offered. "He's a rookie. Sometimes he hangs out with the paramedic I rode with tonight, Sanchez."

Adrian wrote that down as well. "Did you smell anything on the attacker that might be useful? Anything odd?"

"Incense," Claire answered immediately. "He smelled like church. Like Catholic Mass. And it wasn't faint either. It was as strong as it would be on a priest."

"Huh." Adrian frowned, his pen hovering over the paper. In spite of the religious overtones of the attack, most of the officials he'd talked with seemed convinced the group was playing up the so-called moral crusade for shock value. No one had indicated any links to an *actual* religious organization. "Good, Claire. That's good."

Claire's gaze jerked to his face, and her voice turned deadly serious. "I think someone should keep an eye on Kiara. She shot down Douglas in front of the other cops. Made him look even weaker. He was furious."

The atmosphere in the room went from peaceful to strained in a heartbeat. "I can take care of myself. It's not the first time Officer Douglas and I have had a difference of opinion."

Adrian's pen scratched across the paper so hard he ripped it. "We'll talk about that later," he managed to say, trying to keep his temper under control. He'd never been fond of Douglas, but the sudden urge to rip out the man's throat was surprising. *And unacceptable*. "Lars, did you pick up anything on the scene?"

"Just the incense, like Claire said." He smoothed one hand over her hair, almost petting her. "Cheap aftershave. Motor oil. Blood. That's all."

Kiara cleared her throat. "I may be able to get my hands on the guy's personal effects. You can't take them, but..."

"I understand. That'd be good, thanks." Adrian stuck the notebook back into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He retrieved two business cards and held them out to Lars, choosing his words carefully. "I'm going to find these guys. And I'm going to stop them. If you want to help..."

Claire reached out and plucked the cards from his hand. "I'll call you."

"I need to go." Kiara had gone pale, and she grasped the door handle with a shaking hand. "I have to get out --"

"Okay." Adrian helped her pull the door open, resting one hand at the small of her back as he glanced back over his shoulder. "I'll be in touch."

Lars just waved a hand at him, his attention already back on Claire.

Kiara stumbled, her shoes squeaking on the tile floor as she hit the wall and rested her forehead against it, her breathing heavy. Alarmed, Adrian pulled the door shut and crossed the hallway to lean against the wall next to her. "What is it? Are you all right?"

She dragged in a sharp breath, shaking her head as she slid away from him. “Don’t,” she rasped. “Don’t...touch me right now.”

He blinked at her before shifting his gaze to the closed door. “What is it? Something going on in there? Is there going to be trouble?”

“No.” She rolled away from the wall and pressed her back into his chest, arching against him with a soft noise. Her head fell to one side, hair sliding away, baring the curve of her neck in the perfect gesture of submission, of readiness. “No trouble.”

Oh, shit. Her ass rubbed his cock through his jeans, and he hardened painfully. One hand fell to her hip before he could stop it, and he clutched at her as she rocked back against him. “Kiara.” He meant it as a warning, but it sounded more like a promise. His rational mind screamed that her actions were fueled by her empathy, but he still dropped his nose to nuzzle against her hair.

She clutched at his hand and sighed. “This is what you want.” Her voice was low, another of those soft whispers. “Like this. I tried to block it out, but it’s getting tangled up. You want, I want... It’s all a blur.”

It took an unholy act of willpower to pull away from her, and he wasn’t completely sure he had enough left to *stay* away from her. “I don’t think you want me to take you against the wall in the hospital, Kiara.” As soon as the words left him, the image formed in his head of hefting her up, pinning her to the wall, and listening to her beg for him in that sexy little whisper as he fucked her. *Jesus Christ, that is not helping.*

He stumbled back a few more steps before he could fit thought to action and get a hand inside her underwear. He panted like he’d run a few miles, and he could *smell* her arousal. He clenched his hands into fists and clung to the only thing that wasn’t the least bit arousing -- the fact that Lars sat on the other side of that door, listening to everything they said and did.

Kiara closed her eyes and shoved her hands in her pockets, rocking back and forth against the wall. When she finally looked at him, her eyes were guarded. “I’m sorry. I-I’d better go see about those personal effects before someone from the police department or family comes to claim them.”

Adrian forced himself to nod. He didn’t plan on saying anything, but the words came out anyway. “When do you get off of work?”

“I’m already off.” She tilted her head to the door. “I was staying for Claire.”

Don’t do it. Don’t fucking do it. “Do you want to go find some dinner?”

“It’s a little late for dinner.” Kiara licked the corner of her mouth, her pink tongue barely visible before it was gone again. “We could go to my apartment and have a drink.”

“After I take a look at the guy’s personal effects.” Maybe it would give him time to cool off enough to get back to her place with his clothes still on.

“Okay.” She glanced around. “Come back in five minutes. They’ll be in the suture room at the end of the hall. I have some things to take care of.”

“Okay.” He closed his eyes, waiting until the quiet sound of her footsteps had faded completely. His body still protested, demanding he chase her down, screaming for him to drag her body under his and drive them both crazy.

Get your head in the game, Torres. He shoved down desire with ruthless efficiency and took a deep breath, wishing her scent had faded along with her footsteps. Then he opened his eyes and squared his shoulders, determined to get the job done.

Chapter Three

Kiara's keys rattled in her shaking hand as she unlocked her front door. She could feel the weight of Adrian's gaze on her and was keenly aware of the waves of desire rolling off him. It matched the inexplicable hunger that had clawed at her since she'd looked up at the nurse's station and seen him.

Her cheeks flamed as the lock finally clicked. She had yet to really apologize for the scene she'd made outside Claire's room, and she could only hope Adrian understood. His territorial, almost possessive reaction to Claire's warning about Douglas's feelings toward her had flown past her empathic barriers and mingled with her own attraction to him. The result had been an undeniable need to give him what he wanted, what he *craved*.

Submission.

She'd insisted on driving her own car back to her apartment, though he hadn't seemed to want to let her out of his sight. She needed the space, the distance, to sort through and separate what she wanted from what she'd felt from him. It had been a long time since she'd last let someone else's lust control her own, and she'd vowed it would never happen again, not if she could help it. She had to make sure she knew what she wanted before he touched her again.

Liar. The tiny voice in her head was sure, damning. *You know what you want. You want him to make you scream. What you don't know is if that's what he really wants.*

She shouldn't have invited him home with her. She wasn't frightened of him; she knew he had no interest in hurting her. He only wanted to bring her pleasure, to find his own in the hot depths of her mouth and body. But she also knew it might mean she was *his*. No matter their emotional involvement, even if the human part of him felt only casual fondness for her, the animal inside him might see her as his mate.

She had to be ready for that possibility.

“Come in.” She held the door for him as she tossed her keys onto the hall table with a clatter, then shrugged out of her oversize cardigan. “Are you hungry? I could make something.”

His hand slid over her hip and drew her back against his body. “I don’t know how empathy works.” He leaned down until his breath skated against her neck. “Do you even want me at all? Or is this all my fault?”

Kiara fought a shiver, then sighed and licked her lips. “I want you. My control is good. You don’t have to worry about making me do something. At the hospital, I... It was too much. Trying to keep everyone calm, and then...then...”

She felt his lips against the top of her ear, a soft caress that disappeared too quickly. “Lars doesn’t bring out the best in me.”

He was aroused, and she pushed back against his hardness without thinking. “What does?”

Adrian ran his hand around to her stomach and pinned her body against his with little apparent effort. “Nothing about today. I don’t usually pick up women by molesting them at work.”

“Funny, but I could have sworn it was the other way around.” She turned to face him and his hand caught her scrub top as she twisted in his grasp. She tugged the layer of polyester and cotton over her head, leaving her clad in a thin tank top.

He hissed in a breath, and the world spun as his arm wrapped around her waist. He lifted her up and pushed her back against the wall, then trailed a hot line of kisses over her neck before nipping lightly at her collarbone. “I was molesting you in my head. That’s pretty much the same thing when it comes to psychics, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes.” Kiara braced her hands on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his thighs as excitement thrummed in her veins. “It would have been hard to tell, since I was busy mentally undressing you.” She bent her head and traced her tongue around the edge of his ear.

He groaned. “How about *actually* undressing me now?”

A tiny flicker of sensation so foreign it must have been his edged past her shields and into her consciousness, arching her off the wall. “Second door on the right,” she breathed, her voice hoarse, her fingers already curling into his T-shirt. “Take me to my bedroom.”

“Bedroom.” The word left him just before his lips seized hers in a blinding, sizzling kiss. His tongue swept across her lips once in imperious command before he forced her mouth open and set about a thorough exploration that left her shaking, gasping for breath, as he made his way down the hall, one hand feeling along the wall as the other held her easily, her hips crushed to his.

When they reached the bedroom, Kiara raised her head. Her own lips tingled as she lifted her hand to his and brushed her thumb over his mouth. "There's something you should know."

His lips closed over her thumb, and he swiped his tongue over it before letting go. "What?"

She whimpered, unable to help herself. "If I lose control, so will you."

"Okay." He dropped to the bed and fell backward, pulling her down on top of him. "How out of control will it get? I don't want to hurt you."

Her cheeks flamed with heat. "I don't know. I've never had sex with a shifter before, but it...it isn't usually a problem." She wiggled back and pulled at the hem of his shirt, revealing a taut, muscled stomach. Her mouth went dry. "I don't always lose it. When I do, it's because I'm coming. And then...so will you, I guess."

Adrian made a sound that was half laugh, half groan. His hands tangled in her tank top, dragging it up her body and over her head. "I guess I'll live with that."

Kiara rolled away and climbed off the bed, kicking at her shoes. He watched her, his eyes dark, as she removed her socks and then pushed her pants and panties over her hips. He said nothing, and she fought the urge to make a self-conscious, self-deprecating remark when she reached for the front clasp of her white lace bra. "You're quiet."

"Uh-huh." Even that simple noise was low and hoarse. "I'm trying not to tackle you to the floor and fuck you senseless. That seems like more of a second date kind of thing."

She took several slow steps back to the bed and leaned over him, her fingers brushing his belly and then pulling at the straining denim of his jeans. Lust hit her, burning under her skin, and she moaned even as her brow furrowed. "You're worried. Why?"

He freed the first few buttons on his shirt and sat up, pulling the garment over his head at the same time. The movement gave her a mouthwatering view of the flexing muscles of his chest and shoulders. "Because I don't want to hurt you. I've never had sex with an empath before."

The metal buttons yielded under Kiara's hands. She licked his shoulder and took a deep, shaky breath. "I could open it up. You'd know if you were hurting me. But the sex... It wouldn't last long." She dropped her head again and bit him. "I don't think it's going to anyway, though. Not this time."

She didn't see him move, but suddenly her back was against the bed, and Adrian had his hands braced on either side of her head. He ground his hips down against her, a low, rumbling growl working its way up from deep inside his chest. "Do it," he commanded in a hoarse whisper. "Let me feel what you feel."

Need flooded her. She made a soft, breathless noise and thrust her hips up to meet his. "D-do you want it to go both ways?"

“Only if you want to...” His head dipped, and he dragged his tongue up the side of one breast until he reached her nipple. His teeth scraped lightly against her skin before he drew the tight bud between his lips.

Kiara choked back a cry and sank her fingers into his hair, holding his mouth to her breast as she let go, opening her mind, her body, to his. The tingle of magic that zipped through her was gone in a moment, but she shook as pleasure rushed in, filling her senses and stealing her breath. “Adrian...”

He lifted his head with a groan and squeezed his eyes shut. The strong muscles of his arms stood out in stark, trembling relief as he fought an obvious battle above her. She felt his overwhelming need to claim her, to take her hard and fast until she belonged to him. He dragged in a shuddering breath and let it out.

Then he was gone.

She cried out again, this time in protest, and raised her head. Adrian stood at the end of the bed, stripping off the rest of his clothes. She blinked for a moment, admiring the muscled lines of his naked body, then turned and scrambled up the bed, reaching out for her nightstand drawer and the condoms she kept there.

The only warning she had was the dip of the bed behind her. She felt his hot breath against her hip just before he bit her, hard. His chest rubbed against her back as he moved up until he was covering her, his hands braced on either side of her body. “Are you *trying* to break me, woman?”

“No.” Kiara barely managed to grind out the word as she fumbled inside the drawer, finally wrapping her fingers around one of the small foil packages. She burned where his skin touched hers, empathic feedback amplifying her reaction. She growled and curled up into him, then twisted until she was on her back, staring up at his face. “Hurry. You have to *hurry*.”

His hand closed over hers where she held the condom, and heat raced between them. Adrian’s eyes were wild, and she *felt* the moment when his self-control snapped. Primal need raced through her, chasing away everything but the blind urge to possess and mate.

One hand tightened around hers as his other raced down her body to clutch at one of her thighs. He dragged her leg up and thrust into her in one powerful movement, growling his satisfaction as he slid all the way inside her.

Kiara tried to pull it back, to close the connection between them, but pleasure thundered through her, dissolving what was left of her shields. It was so *good*, taking and being taken, feeling the searing clench of her own body along with the hard thrust of his cock inside her. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry --” Then words, thought, fled. She came silently, her teeth dug into her lower lip, barely aware of the sting of her own fingernails piercing the smooth skin of Adrian’s shoulders.

“Fuck!” He roared the word as his elbows dug into the bed on either side of her head. He panted roughly, his body tense and trembling. The pleasure of her orgasm faded slowly,

and Kiara realized his cock was still hard, ready. He grinned, the expression tight and arrogant. "We're not done yet."

She whimpered, amazed that he'd managed to hold on to his sanity when hers had disappeared. "I can lock it down now," she rasped. "I can." Her legs tightened around him, urging him closer.

Adrian lowered his mouth and licked along the side of her neck. "Stop wiggling, damn it. Give me a few seconds."

"Sorry." Kiara fought a wince; she'd apologized too many times already. Instead of saying something else ridiculous, she focused on his tongue, on the wet slide of it over her skin and not the primitive thrill that suffused him at the taste of her. In moments, she had the empathy under control, and the only thing she felt was her own excitement. "Better?"

"Mmm." He dragged his tongue up to her jaw as he withdrew from her slowly. When he surged forward again, he closed his teeth around her earlobe and groaned in her ear. "Perfect. You're fucking perfect."

All she could do was cling to him, a harsh moan slipping out of her when he moved again. "Jesus, Adrian." She tugged at his hair, pulling his head back until she could capture his lips in a kiss. Another helpless moan disappeared into his mouth as she rocked up to meet his next thrust.

"Perfect," he groaned again. His hands fisted in the comforter as he pushed himself up, changing the angle. His cock went even deeper this time, and a rumbling growl of approval rolled up out of his chest as he lowered his mouth to her breast again.

Kiara gripped the wrought iron of her headboard as he sucked her nipple into his mouth, a desperate cry wrenching out of her. The rigid control she thought she'd regained slipped a little, and she tightened around him again. "*God, I'm*" -- *I'm going to lose it again* -- "Adrian!"

"Come." His hips withdrew and snapped forward again, dragging a low cry from both of them. He lifted his head and stared down at her, his gaze untamed and powerful and the tiniest bit out of control as the rhythm of his thrusts slipped from steady to desperate. "Come for me."

She couldn't have stopped if she'd wanted to. She cried his name again as she hurtled headfirst into ecstasy, shaking with the force of her climax. The pleasure crested, and she heard his groan a moment later as he thrust into her one final time. Her control shattered as his release slammed into her, intense enough to make her come again. She barely heard his hoarse curse or felt the sting of his teeth against her shoulder; everything was lost in the tangle of feeling filling the space between them.

Kiara locked her legs around his hips as she drifted back down, nuzzling his cheek and ear, whispering things that didn't make sense, even to her own ears. She sighed and bit his earlobe, then soothed it with tiny licks of her tongue. That earned her a low chuckle as Adrian lowered himself slowly to the bed beside her.

He pulled her against him as soon as they were settled, his breath tickling the back of her neck as he curled possessively around her. "You all right?"

She smiled, her eyes drifting shut. Sleepy warmth coiled through her, and she wiggled in the circle of his arms. "I'm okay. What about you?"

"Fucking perfect." His lips brushed the nape of her neck softly as he pulled her closer. "Though I almost made a fool of myself for the first time in about fifteen years."

"That isn't true." Kiara twisted her head around to look at him. "You'll get used to it, to the magic. I mean, if we...if we keep..." She felt her face flush, and she turned her cheek back to her pillow. "Most supernaturals get a little bit immune to it after a while. They attune to the energy, and then it...doesn't work as well."

"Good." His hand moved from her hip to her stomach, stroking in long, teasing circles. "Plenty of things I'd like to do to you that'd take lots and lots of time." His fingers inched lower, moving over her abdomen. "And would make you all sorts of crazy. Not as much fun if I can't stay sane enough to enjoy it."

Kiara shifted with a sharp gasp, then went still when something dug into her shoulder. She reached up and pulled the unopened condom from under her. "I have... I'm on birth control."

"Shit." He rose up behind her, taking the condom gently from her fingers before coaxing her over onto her back. "I'm sorry, Kiara."

"No, it wasn't your fault." She bit her lip, then shrugged. "It was mine."

His eyebrows came together, and she got the feeling he wasn't used to having people disagree with him. "No, Kiara. I'm a shape-shifter, and sometimes we have problems keeping all the human concerns front and center when baser instincts get the better of us. But I swear, usually I'm better about it."

"Okay." She leaned up and kissed him, touching his face lightly. "Do you want to stay?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "A lot. But I need to put a few things in motion tonight with the case..." He sighed and leaned down to brush his lips over hers. "This isn't really how I do things, you know."

"Neither of us planned for this to happen. Next time, we will."

He smiled, and it lit up his face. "I still get a next time, even if I leave to go chase bad guys?"

Kiara's heart stuttered, then beat faster as she returned his smile. "Only if you promise to be careful."

"You be careful too." He hesitated, his expression growing serious. "I mean it. Douglas is an ass, and he's petty. If Claire thinks you're in trouble, you could be."

She wanted to deny it, even opened her mouth to do so. Finally, she sighed. "I have to work a half shift tomorrow. But I'll come straight home, give things a chance to cool down."

“Good.” He relaxed back onto the bed and curled around her again. “I’ll leave you my cell phone number. If anything’s odd or unusual, call me, okay?”

She sat up and leaned over Adrian, searching the floor for her underwear. “I really think it’ll be all right.” He seemed perfectly at ease telling her what to do, but she wasn’t quite as comfortable taking orders from him. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Claire’s young, but I’d trust her instincts, Kiara.” He didn’t move, just tucked one hand behind his head and watched her. “There’s likely to be retaliation, and they might not stop at beating people up this time.”

She gave up on the lingerie and climbed off the bed, reaching out for the silk robe draped over the chair by the window. “I said I’d hide out here,” she reminded him as she shrugged into it. “And I didn’t need Claire to tell me Douglas hates me. It’s nothing new.”

“Probably because he’s an asshole. The fact that he’s still on the force shows how screwed up this town is.”

“No argument here,” Kiara agreed. She’d thought life would be better in Mystic Ridge than it had been in Phoenix, but she was starting to regret her move. At least Phoenix didn’t have brothels full of empaths down by the river or cops who were blatantly interested in harassing her.

She tied her robe with a sharp tug and sat on the edge of the bed, trying not to stare at Adrian. He seemed comfortable lying naked on her bed, and she trailed her thumb over the faint line of dark hair that arched down his belly. “How about this? I promise to be careful if you promise you’ll try to phrase your suggestions as suggestions and not *orders*.”

One of his eyebrows rose. “Was I doing that? I thought I was being good.”

“Oh, Jesus.” She tried -- and failed -- not to laugh. “Maybe I’m being overly sensitive, then.” She stretched out over him, her breasts rubbing his chest through her robe. “Can you come over tomorrow night? I could make us dinner.”

A low noise of approval rumbled out of him as he leaned up to catch her lips. “Dinner would be great. What time?”

“Eight?” Kiara nipped at Adrian’s lower lip. “Bring wine. Something red.”

“Mmm.” He lifted a hand to tangle in her hair, then rolled her over, bringing her body under his. “So. Wine. Anything else?”

She moaned as her robe slithered open and his bare flesh brushed hers again. Her mouth landed on his shoulder, and she licked and bit her way up his neck to his ear. “I thought you had to go.”

“I do.” He pulled back and flashed her a grin, his teeth standing out against his well-tanned skin. “Just making sure you *really* want me to come back, sweetheart.”

Kiara laughed, then dropped her voice to a whisper as she spoke close to his ear. “If you don’t stop, we’re going to spend the next half hour fucking in my shower.” Her tongue darted out to tease his earlobe. “That’s how long it takes the hot water to run out.”

His laugh was low and sensual, tickling against her neck before he rolled away and rose gracefully to his feet. "We could put that on our list for tomorrow. Somewhere between dinner and wine."

She propped herself up on her elbows and watched him gather his clothes. "There's a list? What else is on it?"

"Learning more about each other than names, for starters."

"Good." Kiara relaxed back into the pillows with a grin and toyed absently with the belt of her robe. "I was starting to think this was just going to be about great sex."

Adrian buttoned his jeans before flashing her a smile. "As hot as the sex was, that's not usually my style. Now you *are* going to call me if anything odd happens tomorrow, right?"

"Nope," she told him gaily. "I'm going to call my neighbor, the buff, badass firefighter. She'll protect me." Suppressed laughter shook her shoulders as she sat up and cocked her head. "Then I'll call you."

He pulled his shirt over his shoulders and buttoned the first two buttons. "Fine. Buff firefighter and then me."

"I promise." She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, nibbling her bottom lip. "Do you really think I'm in danger?"

Adrian hesitated just long enough to worry her. "Maybe. I don't think Douglas has the balls to be attacking people, but he's probably friends with every last one of the bastards involved. Just seems like a good idea to lay low until we know for sure."

She hadn't really considered that Adrian's concern over Douglas might be connected to the attacks on the Valley's supernaturals. She swallowed hard and forced a smile. "Lay low. I can do that."

"Hey." He left the last few buttons of his shirt undone and moved to touch her chin gently. "You'll be fine."

The last thing he needed was to be worried about her when he had a job to do. Kiara's smile faded on a sigh, but she nodded as she reached for his shirt. "I like merlot," she told him as she fastened the rest of the buttons. "But I'm not picky."

"Merlot. Got it."

She eased off the bed as Adrian finished dressing and crossed to her desk, where she scribbled down her number. "Why are you working on the attacks, anyway? Is it a case, or something personal?"

"The third victim's parents are getting frustrated with the police and how they're not doing anything. She was just a kid. Turned nineteen a few months ago."

"Katie Murphy." Kiara nodded. "I remember her." She'd been beaten so badly that the attending physician in the emergency department had called for a plastic surgery consult before moving her to the Magical Care Unit. "How is she doing?"

“Scared shitless, but better, physically. Her mother’s a pretty decent hedge witch. She helped out the doctors.”

“That’s good.” It was too bad hedge magic couldn’t help heal the emotional scars from the attack. “I didn’t treat her, but I remember how frightened she was.”

Adrian dropped to the edge of her bed to tug on his heavy hiking boots. “What about Claire? Did you get a sense of how she was? If she was scared or mad?”

“Disgusted,” Kiara answered immediately. “And...worried. She thought she might get arrested for killing that man.”

“Yeah...” He tied his boots and rose easily to his feet, his expression serious. “And we both know she could have. The police aren’t exactly sympathetic to supernaturals in this town.”

Kiara leaned back against the wall. “There were witnesses. I could see if Sanchez can find out who they were, if you want.”

He hesitated only a moment before shaking his head. “I’ve still got a few friends on the force. Shouldn’t be any problem.”

“Okay. Then...I guess I’ll see you tomorrow night.” She didn’t want him to go, but there was nothing to be done about it. He had work to do. “Eight o’clock.”

“Eight,” he agreed, moving to stand in front of her. He lowered his mouth to hers and spoke against her lips. “Wine, dinner, sex, and getting to know each other. It’s a date.”

She kissed him back for a brief moment and then smiled. “Maybe not in that order, but close.” She stroked a hand over his cheek. “Be careful.”

“I will.” He stole one more kiss, then smiled at her as he tucked her phone number into his pocket. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She walked him to the door so she could lock the chain and deadbolt behind him. Her eyes drifted shut as she leaned back against the door, trying to calm her racing thoughts.

She hadn’t been on a real date since moving to Texas. She’d been on a few group outings with her coworkers, and she’d gone bowling with Bobby Sanchez and his fiancée, but dating had been the last thing on her mind after ending her last long-term relationship.

Then she’d met Adrian.

She opened her eyes and touched her mouth. She hadn’t planned to have sex with him, at least not yet, but her attraction to him had been instant, compelling. The kind of thing she couldn’t ignore. And when she’d realized he wanted her just as much...

It hadn’t been a difficult decision to make.

He seemed like her type -- strong, smart, and serious. He’d shown glimpses of a wicked sense of humor, and he didn’t seem to care that she was likely to ruin every sexual encounter by rushing them along. He seemed perfect.

But so had George.

Kiara grimaced and shoved away from the door, shaking her head as she made her way back through her bedroom and into the bathroom. She didn't want to think about her ex-fiancé, and she wouldn't insult Adrian by comparing them. He'd done nothing to deserve that.

She turned on the shower and tested it with her hand as she untied her robe. She didn't know if she and Adrian would end up dating or not, but her entire body still tingled as she stepped into the shower. She smiled softly and turned her face up to the warm spray.

She supposed she'd find out soon enough.

* * * * *

A cool night breeze blew up from the river, bringing with it the assorted scents of the Valley's riverfront district. The west side of the river was lined with businesses that catered to the humans brave enough to set foot across the invisible line that divided the world between mortals and monsters.

He had never been a fan of the riverfront. The people who worked there prostituted themselves and their supernatural natures, sometimes literally. More than one enterprising entrepreneur had taken advantage of the lack of police presence and opened honest-to-God brothels stocked full of exotic offerings.

And women like Kiara were in high demand. There was at least one whorehouse a few miles downriver that employed nothing but psychics. Telepaths who could pluck your deepest, darkest fantasy from your mind. Empaths who could magnify your pleasure until you got off from the slightest touch.

It was tawdry and exploitative and had always made him vaguely ill. Now, remembering how nervous and self-conscious Kiara had seemed about the way her abilities influenced sex...

He shuddered as he tried not to think of the girls who weren't as lucky as Kiara. The girls who ended up in those shitholes, selling their bodies and their souls little by little for people who got off on being with the freaks.

The wind shifted while he pulled his keys from his pocket, and a familiar scent made every muscle in his body tense at once. He spun around and stepped toward his truck, instinct putting his back against a solid object as he reached for the gun that wasn't there. The one he hadn't worn into Kiara's apartment.

There were plenty of cars on the street, most parked along the side of the road or in the small lot next to Kiara's apartment building. His eyes scanned them one by one, trying to catch sight of a familiar profile or anything to explain why he could *smell* Douglas.

Several frustrating minutes passed as he tried to track the scent to its source. Every time he thought he'd found the elusive trail, the wind shifted, burying Douglas's scent in the smells from across the river or the residential area around him. After he lost the trail for the

third time, he bit back an angry growl and stalked back to his truck. He hauled open the door and climbed inside, then wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel and swore bitterly.

Douglas had been outside Kiara's apartment. Probably sitting in his car and watching the place. Probably for hours. *Probably long enough to see me go inside with her.*

As if the bastard hadn't had enough reason to make Kiara a target. Douglas would jump at a chance to hurt Adrian by finding a weak spot, some way to get to him without having to actually face him like a man. Someone he cared about, who could be hurt.

And it didn't matter if he barely knew Kiara. Douglas would make the wrong assumption, would assume he could get to Adrian through her.

And he can. Damn it.

Sighing, Adrian dragged his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through his phone book until he came across the number of one of the younger wolves who sometimes helped him out when he needed backup. Kyle was a strong beta, but he was more comfortable taking commands from someone else than challenging for leadership. Not only could Adrian trust him to watch Kiara's apartment and keep her safe, but having him around wouldn't arouse Adrian's all-too-rapidly forming possessive feelings.

He hit the button to dial and held the phone up to his ear. Barely a single ring sounded before a voice answered. "Barnes."

"Kyle. It's Adrian. I need a favor."

He heard a rustle and a quiet protest in a distinctly feminine voice. Kyle spoke away from the phone, then returned. "Yeah?"

Kyle's wife was going to give him hell the next time he saw her. "The bastards in the HLH hit again tonight. They tried to take out Lars Nilsson's girlfriend."

"Champion already told me. That's going to set off a shitstorm of epic proportions."

That was as succinct a way of putting it as Adrian could think of. "Yeah, well. An empathic nurse got up in the middle of it. Slapped Douglas down and now he's staking out her house. I'm pretty damn sure she's in trouble, and I need someone to watch her house while I try to keep Lars from slaughtering people at random."

Kyle's only answer was a grunt followed by sigh. Adrian heard more movement and the click of a pen. "What's the address?"

Adrian didn't *know* the address. He swore again and yanked the truck door open. "Just a second, let me check the building. I'm on Washington Avenue, though."

"If you're already there, why don't you just stay and let me go keep tabs on Nilsson?"

"You really want to face off against him and his angry lady if they decide they don't want you in their way?"

“Do *you*? At least, when it got right down to it, we wouldn’t have to deal with the alpha bullshit.” He could practically hear Kyle bristling over the line.

He didn’t particularly want to deal with a dominance struggle with Lars, but he was more likely to be able to restrain him than Kyle was. He strode back across the street and squinted at the building number. “Four fifteen. It’s an apartment building, not all that far from the river, but it’s a pretty good neighborhood.”

“Four fifteen Washington, not far from the river. That’s up in the Ridge, right?”

“Yeah. Tell Gina I’m sorry to be dragging you out, but it’s sort of life or death here. Nilsson’s girl ripped her attacker into tiny pieces. That’s going to have a lot of people looking for supernatural blood.”

He heard a door close and the jangling of keys. “Gina’s not talking to either one of us right now. But she’ll get over it.” Kyle sighed again. “How come you never threw me empathic nurse babysitting duty when I was single? That’s a porno waiting to happen.”

The growl escaped him before he could stop himself, and Adrian closed his eyes for a moment and fought back a groan. *Subtle. Real fucking subtle.*

This time, the sound the younger man made was closer to a snort. “You’ll have to explain that part to Gina, then. It’ll make her feel better about me sitting outside the lady’s place all night.” A car engine purred to life, and Kyle laughed a little. “I’m on my way. And don’t worry, Torres. I won’t let anything happen to your girlfriend.”

“Fuck you, Kyle.” Adrian hauled open the truck door and slid inside, slamming it shut behind him. “Call me if anything happens.”

Chapter Four

Someone had planted roses outside of Nilsson's trailer.

Adrian blinked at them as he shut off his truck's engine. They were out of season, but the bare, thorny bushes were there, resting in a bed of dark, carefully tended soil that bore no resemblance to the hard-packed earth separated from it by a tiny picket border.

A *white* picket border.

The Airstream's door slammed open and Lars appeared, bare chested with a pair of worn jeans hanging low on his hips. The coyote gave him a disgusted look. "What do you want, Torres?"

It was almost friendly compared to the greeting he'd been expecting, considering their dislike of one another and the early hour. Adrian closed the door of his truck and shoved his keys in his pocket before giving Lars an even look. "I want your help. I want to catch these bastards before the city explodes."

"Not my problem. Not yours, either." Lars almost sneered at him. "Last time I checked, you weren't a cop anymore." He started to close the door, making the pretty, handmade curtain in the window flutter.

Adrian crossed the intervening space in a few steps and snatched the door just before it closed. "Sell your shit to someone else, Nilsson. I know you're going after them."

Lars stared down at him with narrowed eyes. "Never said I wasn't. You want to take your fucking hand off my door, or do you want to lose it? Either one's fine by me."

"Lars?" The sleepy voice came from somewhere within the trailer. Adrian tensed, knowing Claire's presence in this conversation wasn't likely to make Lars feel calmer.

She appeared before he could do anything about it. When Adrian caught sight of the angry bruise marring the pale skin of her cheek, he felt an unexpected surge of sympathy. He

let go of the door with a sigh as he shifted his gaze from Claire back to Lars. "Please, just hear me out."

Lars stepped back, closer to Claire. "Five minutes. But I can tell you right now I'm not interested in your heroic cowboy shit."

"Lars." Claire's voice was chiding this time, and she offered Adrian a gentle smile that held the slightest teasing edge. "Thank you for keeping an eye on Kiara last night."

Adrian had taken a damn shower before he'd come over here, but it would take a few days for Kiara's scent to fade completely. He rolled his eyes as he stepped inside. "I'm glad you're so amused."

"Very," she agreed. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Sure."

Claire's gaze went to Lars. "Coffee, baby? Or would you rather pout?"

"Pouting sounds real good right now, doll." Lars sat down on the arm of the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest. "You've got four and a half minutes left. Why should I fight the good fight, or whatever?"

Adrian sighed and leaned his hip against the kitchen counter. "I'm not asking you to play good cop, Lars. I know damn well how you'll probably want to handle this shit, and I don't have any particular argument with killing a few people who need it. I was just hoping we could do it fast and quietlike, and maybe with a minimum of accidental carnage."

Lars gave him another disgusted look. "I know you think I'm an idiot and a criminal, and who the hell knows? You may not be far off the mark with either of those opinions. But I wasn't planning on going around town, ripping out throats at random."

He had to fight the urge to groan again. "I don't think you're an idiot." He was proud he managed to say it without gritting his teeth. "I don't even think you're a criminal. I think you're my best bet for getting this done fast. If this drags out, they'll hit again." He paused and then told Lars the truth. "Douglas was staking out Kiara's apartment."

Lars's expression cleared a little, and he scratched his head. "Now, that's too bad. She seems like a nice lady. Did he see you there?"

"Yeah. I have someone watching her place. I'm about to call someone else to relieve the guy who spent the night outside."

"No." Claire smacked a coffee mug down on the counter. "I'll go over there."

Lars's jaw tightened, but his eyes stayed on Adrian as he lifted a brow. "I'd offer to go myself, but it's too early in the morning for a fight." He raised a hand and beckoned Claire. "Have you made up your mind to do this?"

Adrian wisely kept his mouth shut as Claire moved past him, stopping in front of Lars. "Yes. And you're going to put up with it, because it's better than wondering if I'm out behind your back, chasing them down on my own."

"You can take care of yourself. I just don't think you should *have* to."

"I'm not. I'm taking care of her. You're going with Adrian to take care of me."

For a moment, Adrian thought Lars would argue. Then his tense face softened, and he squinted at Claire. "She helped you last night, and this'll put you even. But if anything happens --"

"Then I'll tear them apart and call you." Claire leaned against him, burying her face in the crook of his neck. The quiet, gentle intimacy was so violently contrary to his experiences with Lars that Adrian wasn't sure *what* to think.

Lars murmured something unintelligible against her ear, then glanced up at Adrian. "I've got to get my shit together. You can wait outside."

"Thank you." He meant it for Claire, but he addressed it to both of them before he opened the door and stepped out.

He didn't try to stay close enough to hear what they were saying inside. Instead, he pulled out his phone and called Kyle. "Reinforcements are coming," he said when the younger man answered. "You should be able to get back home soon."

"Good," Kyle retorted. "Because I'm starving, I have to pee, and I think I'm making your lady nervous."

Adrian winced. "I'll call her. Why don't you just take off? I should warn her that Claire Franklin's about to show up on her doorstep."

He hesitated for a moment. "I can stay until someone else gets here."

The hint of wariness in Kyle's voice made him tense. "What's going on?"

"Maybe nothing." Leather creaked as Kyle shifted in his seat. "The same truck has driven by three times. Tinted windows, mud all over the plates. Your typical recipe for trouble." He cleared his throat. "There's a decal on the back window. Fraternal Order of Police."

"Shit. Okay. Stay until Claire shows up. I probably won't be too far behind. Call me if they come by again."

"Yeah, sure."

The trailer door slammed open again, and Lars stomped down the wooden steps, tugging a T-shirt down over his torso. "We need to make a stop."

"Gotta go, Kyle." He snapped his phone shut and met Lars's gaze. "That was the guy I've got sitting on Kiara's apartment. He thinks someone's been driving by, casing the place."

"Making sure you're not around. We can use that." At Adrian's raised eyebrow, he explained. "People may not be in much of a mood to listen to reason right now, but the shifters will respect that there are two alphas who want to handle a personal matter personally. It should buy us some time."

After a moment, Adrian nodded grudgingly. "We can make a stop, but I don't want to leave the women over there by themselves for too long. Not if someone's waiting for a chance."

"Won't take long to get the word out if we stop by Dos Culebras."

Adrian snorted and opened the door to his truck. "Bringing me in there's not going to make you popular."

Lars shook his head. "You keep your ID in your pocket. You're not going in there as a PI. You're going in as a guy who's worried about his girlfriend."

"Yeah, I get it. But she's not my girlfriend." And if everyone kept talking about her like she was before he had a chance to *get* to that stage, she was going to run screaming.

The younger man just shot him a disbelieving look. "I don't give a fuck what she is. This isn't the girls' locker room, Torres. You want people to listen to a goddamn word you say about this shit, you pretend *real hard* that she's yours. That's what these guys'll pay attention to. That's what they know."

Adrian waited until Lars climbed into the truck and then started it, using the pause to gather the fraying edges of his temper. *He's right, damn it.* Which meant ignoring the urge to disagree with Lars just because he didn't want the other man telling him what to do.

He shifted his truck into gear and pulled out onto the dirt road. "Okay. Is Claire going to be all right over there until we get there?"

"She'll be fine." Lars's tone was confident, fond. "She's tough. She'll get it done."

It was odd to think of a soft-spoken, twenty-one-year-old student as adequate protection, but Adrian had to trust Lars wouldn't let her anywhere near anything she couldn't handle. No matter how much of an asshole the man was, there was no mistaking the tender way he'd looked at Claire. "Fine. Then let's start spreading the word. Our women, our job."

"Damn straight."

There was something less than comforting about being in perfect agreement with Lars Nilsson.

* * * * *

Adrian drove past Dos Culebras at least once a week on the way out to his favorite steak house. The bar was on the worst side of town, situated between a worn-down, empty warehouse and an abandoned office building that mostly catered to squatters and drug dealers.

It wasn't the sort of place that welcomed cops. Or ex-cops.

Lars nodded to the bartender and glanced at Adrian. "Just gonna make a general announcement or call some sort of town meeting?"

Adrian snorted. "This is your hangout, Lars. If I start getting in people's faces, you know it'll start a fight." Not that he didn't welcome the idea at the moment, as loath as he was to admit it. Blowing off steam through pure physical aggression wasn't particularly civilized, but it could be damn satisfying.

Lars rolled his eyes. "Shit, Torres. How do you expect to get 'em to listen if you're going to be polite?" He headed for a back table and stopped beside it. Four burly men stared back. "My friend here wants to talk."

One of the men scoffed and sipped his beer. "Your friend'll be lucky to make it out of here without someone kicking his ass." His gaze was insolent.

The energy Adrian usually kept tightly leashed prickled along his skin, and for once, he didn't stop it. He let it flow out, filling the space around him and beyond. It was a warning. A reminder.

Two of the wolves at the table dropped their gazes. The third looked hesitant. Adrian stared at the fourth, the one who'd challenged him. "You going to kick my ass?" he asked in a low, easy voice.

"Any reason I shouldn't?" The man rose from the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. His flannel shirt strained at the seams as he peered down at Adrian. "You don't belong here."

He didn't bother to reply. He snatched the front of the man's shirt and pivoted, sending him stumbling toward the pool table. Before the larger man could recover, Adrian planted a hand on the back of his neck and smashed his face into the edge of the pool table so hard the wood splintered.

Silence fell over the bar as he turned back, letting his challenger slump unconscious to the floor. Adrian's gaze swept over the men at the table, and he waited until they'd all dropped their eyes before speaking. "Nilsson and I are taking care of the HLH."

The bartender came around to check on the fallen man. One of the men at the table spoke, though he kept his gaze down. "Nilsson's girlfriend got attacked. But it's just a job to you. The witch's parents, right?"

Adrian whispered a silent apology to Kiara for what he was about to say. "Everyone knows I'm on the job. And now they're after *my* girlfriend. It's personal."

Everyone in the bar looked at Lars, who shrugged. "It's true. Why do you think he's so pissed?"

"Everyone needs to stay the fuck out of it. We're taking care of it."

Another man walked up and eyed them appraisingly. He looked vaguely familiar, though Adrian couldn't remember his name. "And what if you can't?"

"One week. Give us one week." *And if I can't fix it in that time, it's out of my hands.*

“We’re working together, Bernie,” Lars said. For once, he sounded serious. “Claire’s been hurt. She killed the guy, but the fact that it happened in the first place is bullshit. I want them.”

Bernie glanced at Adrian and shrugged. “Can’t say as I speak for the wolves, but the coyotes’ll hang back for a while.”

Adrian hesitated. He could make a blanket declaration for the wolves, but it would mean something he wasn’t sure he was ready for. Pack structure had always been all but nonexistent in Mystic Valley, with most of the packs consisting of extended families. Some unrelated wolves ran in small groups, but there was no firm leader, no one person who tied the groups together. No Alpha.

“If any wolves have a problem, send them to me.” *I’ll deal with what that means later.*

The wolves gathered at the table murmured, but apparently decided they didn’t want to end up like their friend, unconscious on the floor. Lars bumped his fist against Bernie’s. “Get the word out, okay? This is our hunt.”

“You got it.”

Adrian spun on his heel, turning his back on the angry shifters in a blatant show of arrogance. He strode to the door confidently, but by the time he got outside to his truck, he was already wondering if he’d made a mistake.

It didn’t matter. There was no taking it back now. He’d claimed dominance and used violence to put a challenger in his place.

He’d just declared himself the fucking Alpha.

Lars followed him outside. Instead of getting in the truck, he lit a cigarette and kicked at the gravel beneath his feet. “Your old lady know you’re gonna be the big dog around here?”

Adrian choked on a laugh. “Jesus Christ, Lars. That’s at the top of a very long list of things she doesn’t know.”

He shrugged and opened the truck door. “You think it’s gonna be worth it? Just so some people don’t die?”

“Maybe.” He took a deep breath, wishing the air smelled less like stale beer and cigarette smoke. Whether it would be worth it depended on how quickly the word spread and what people expected him to do about it. He’d always been near the top of Mystic Valley’s informal pecking order, but that was a far cry from being a self-declared leader.

One problem at a time. Fighting a sigh, he pulled open the driver’s-side door and slid into the seat. “Let’s go check on the women. Then I guess we need to get to work.”

* * * * *

Kiara approached the door cautiously, standing slightly on her tiptoes to peer through the security hole. When she saw who stood on the other side, she pulled it open immediately. "Claire."

Claire's face sported an ugly bruise, but she looked otherwise recovered from her ordeal. "Hey. Did Adrian call you?"

"He did." She moved aside and waved Claire in. "He said you were going to hang out for a while. How are you feeling?"

"Better. I heal pretty fast." Claire stepped inside, looking around in interest as she fiddled with the strap on the bag over her shoulder. "So did Adrian even bother to tell you he was staking out your place and putting you under surveillance?"

"No. I got the feeling it wasn't a plan so much as something that just happened." And had scared her half to death. She'd first noticed the man in the late-model import outside her building early that morning, and it hadn't taken long for paranoia to set in. "Sit. Would you like something? A soda, maybe?"

Claire tugged her bag over her head and dropped it to the floor next to a chair before sitting with a slight wince. "I'm fine, thanks. I don't want to get in your way too much."

Kiara stood there for a second, one bare foot rubbing the back of her other leg. "Actually, I was going to run errands today before work, but now I'm stuck here, being nervous and weird."

"Bossy men." Claire sounded sympathetic. "Normally I don't put up with it, but in this case I think they're right, Kiara. There's some bad shit going down."

"Bossy men," Kiara echoed, trying to suppress a shiver. She dropped onto the love seat, curled her legs under her, and worried the cream-and-rose-striped fabric with her fingernail. It was hard to wrap her brain around the fact that someone might want to *hurt* her. She hadn't done anything wrong.

She shuddered but forced a smile. "My father was a military man. I'm used to bossy."

"Well, I wasn't." Claire sank a little lower in the chair, stretching her legs out in front of her. "My father's...not bossy. He does everything my mother says, all the time."

"Well, that's a given," Kiara acknowledged, relaxing into the overstuffed throw pillows behind her. "My mother was a master at getting him to do what she wanted, but making him think it was his idea."

Claire shook her head. "No, it's not that. I mean my mother *tells* him what to do. She's a dominant shifter. He's...not."

Kiara smiled. She'd figured Claire wasn't talking about typical gender dominance games. "I was under the impression that most dominant women chose mates who were stronger."

"I-I don't know." She acted as though the admission was hard for her. "My mom was pretty brutal when it came to trying to keep me from knowing anything about what other

shifters do. I barely even knew any other ones until I came to college here. And she hasn't spoken to me since I did."

"I'm sorry. That sounds difficult." Her own parents asked her to move back to San Diego on a regular basis. If they knew she was holed up in her apartment because a hate group might be targeting her, they'd be on the first plane out to drag her back to California with them. "What about your father? Do you still talk to him?"

"He calls me sometimes. Sends me money to help out when he can. They haven't come to visit, though. Which I guess is good. My mother would probably have a heart attack if she met Lars."

Kiara could sympathize. If the thing with Adrian turned out to be more than crazy sex... She laughed wryly. "My parents liked the last guy I dated, and he turned out to be a terrible jackass. They don't trust their own judgment anymore."

"Well, Adrian's a nice guy. I mean, I don't *know* him, know him, but I know *of* him." Claire grinned at her suddenly. "He's pretty good parent material. Much as I love Lars, he's sort of...the opposite."

Kiara laughed. "Well, I barely know Adrian at all. But I can already tell you he and my dad would have serious discussions about serious things, and my mom would pinch his cheeks and feed him homemade fudge."

Claire hesitated, then bit her lip. "You're probably going to hear some things. About Adrian going around town and telling people that you're his and that this is personal. Don't get too freaked out about it, okay? He's not having some sort of macho seizure or anything. He and Lars are just going to try to keep all the shifters in town from getting riled up over what happened to me."

"I see," Kiara said slowly. "That makes sense, I guess. I mean, I'm still not sure what, if anything, I really have to do with this, but... Well, as long as he's not going psycho on me, what's the harm, right?"

Claire's smile faded a little. "He didn't tell you."

She drew in a slow breath, then released it, willing herself to speak normally. "Tell me what?"

"Someone's been driving by, Kiara. That's why I'm here. Inside, with you."

"Oh." Fear welled inside her, making her hands shake. She'd mostly been humoring Adrian when she'd agreed to do as he asked, dismissing his concerns as the result of paranoia. "Do...do I need to go somewhere?"

"No." The word was firm and absolutely confident, and sounded nothing like the young woman she'd been talking to a few moments ago. When she looked at Claire, that girl was gone. There was something almost frightening in Claire's blue eyes, the knowledge of her own strength and her willingness to use it. "That's why I'm here, Kiara. A human's not going to get past me."

“Excellent.” Her voice sounded brittle, frightened. “Want to watch some TV?”

“Kiara.” Claire rose to her feet, more graceful than she’d seemed before. She crossed the space between them and knelt next to the love seat. “You’re going to be fine. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you, and Adrian and Lars are going to make sure there’s no one *left* to hurt you.”

“Sure.” Kiara shivered. “I think I’m going to make some breakfast. What do you like?”

Claire stood again, this time holding out a hand to Kiara to help her up. “Do you have a waffle iron? I’ve been dying for some decent waffles, but I haven’t bought one to keep over at Lars’s yet.”

“Yeah. I’m not the world’s greatest cook, but I can swing waffles.” She started for the kitchen. “Want to hang out with me while I cook?”

“I’ll even help, if you want.” Claire smiled and rolled her eyes. “I’m a perfectly trained little domestic goddess. My mother made sure of that.”

Kiara set the waffle iron to warm as she pulled ingredients out of the refrigerator and cabinets. “How did you and Lars meet, anyway?”

“It was...complicated.” Claire pulled the flour toward her and tapped a measuring cup absently against the counter. “I was somewhere I really shouldn’t have been. Looking for trouble, I guess. Found him.”

“At least it worked out.” Kiara cracked an egg into a bowl. “I keep meeting guys at work. Reserving judgment on Adrian for the moment, it’s been nothing but epic failure.”

Claire snorted. “Yeah, well... Going into Dos Culebras was *not* exactly my crowning moment of brilliance. I’m lucky as hell, and I know it.”

Both of Kiara’s eyebrows shot up. She was familiar with the bar. “We had a guy come into the ER one night who had his ear ripped off in a fight there.”

“Only his ear?”

Kiara snorted. “Give me time, I guess. I’m still pretty new in town.”

Claire smiled sympathetically. “It’s crazy, huh? I spent most of my time on the Ridge until I started dating Lars. The Valley is sort of a whole different world.”

“It’s all different to me.” Kiara beat the eggs briefly, then added a bit of vanilla, milk, and some sugar. “I grew up in San Diego, and I spent the last ten years in Phoenix. This whole place is...something else.”

“Were your parents psychic?”

“Goodness, no. They both had a family history of magic, but not much between them. I was a bit of an anomaly.” She reached for the flour and grinned at Claire. “Of course, considering I was conceived *after* they retired, they should have known nothing about me would be normal.”

Claire returned the smile as she handed over the measuring cup. "So is it just you? Or do you have brothers or sisters?"

"Just me. I'm spoiled as hell." She finished mixing the batter and tested the waffle iron. "Perfect. Now, what else do we want? Oh, and do we know when Lars and Adrian are going to be here?"

"Probably won't be long." Claire wrinkled her nose. "Lars knows I can take care of myself, but he's feeling a little riled up at the moment."

Kiara had figured as much. "I know what you mean. I just wish Adrian had told me I shouldn't be alone here. I could have found someplace else to go."

"Welcome to the world of bossy fucking alphas." Claire rolled her eyes. "It's their way...or their way while you yell at them."

The first scoop of batter hit the waffle iron with a sizzle. "There are times, like now, when I'm just going to have to trust Adrian, because I have no damn idea what's going on. But I'm not really in favor of a big, bad alpha male running my life." Kiara arched an eyebrow at Claire as she leaned a hip against the counter. "Does that mean I should cut and run now?"

"I don't really know Adrian, so I can't say for sure. And I don't let Lars run my life." Claire flashed a sudden wicked smile at her. "It's just damn fun kicking his ass when he tries."

She returned the smile, feeling somewhat relieved. It was surprising how much she really *didn't* want to let go of Adrian already. She was looking forward to seeing him again, to learning more about him.

To touching him.

She blushed and avoided Claire's gaze. "I'm sure things will work out."

"Mmm. I'm sure they will." Claire waited a few seconds and then cleared her throat. "Might wanna check the waffle iron."

"Jesus!" Tendrils of smoke wafted up from it, and Kiara snatched it open with a pot holder. *Terrific*, she thought. *Blackened waffles*. "I guess that's what I get for letting my mind wander."

"It's okay. We should..." Claire tilted her head to the side and fell silent. Then she laughed. "Damn, they must have broken the speed limit the whole way."

Kiara pried the charred waffle out of the appliance and dropped it on the counter with a disgusted snort. Then she followed Claire's gaze in the direction of the front door. "I'll get it. Maybe you can *not* burn a couple of these, yeah?"

"Sure."

She reached the door just as a heavy knock rattled the wood. A quick peek confirmed Claire's words, and Kiara dragged open the door. "Morning. Want some waffles?"

Adrian sniffed the air, then raised one eyebrow. "Are you so mad at me that you're burning them on purpose?"

She stepped back, willing her heart not to pound at the sight of him. "I'm not quite *that* angry," she assured him with a tiny smile. "But give me time. Hi, Lars."

"Hi." His eyes flickered over the living room. "Is Claire in the kitchen?"

Kiara nodded. "I think maybe she's going to handle breakfast. Bacon or sausage?" But Lars was already heading for the kitchen, and she gave Adrian a sheepish look as he closed and locked the front door. "What about you?"

"Either's fine." He hesitated only a moment before leaning down and kissing her softly. "I'm sorry. About everything. The stakeout and the less-than-full disclosure. I didn't want to worry you until I knew there was something wrong."

"Mmm, it's okay." She bit her lip, fighting the urge to curl around him in welcome. "Luckily, I already knew calling the police about the weird guy hanging out in front of my building would be a bad idea."

He glanced toward the kitchen, then tilted his head in the direction of the couch. "Want to sit down and I'll tell you what's going on? You probably don't want to go in the kitchen for a little bit."

Kiara considered reaching out to test the mood in the kitchen, but thought better of it. "I'll take your word for that." She tugged on his hand as she headed for the sofa. "Tell me."

Adrian dropped to the couch and stretched his arm across the back, his fingers brushing her shoulder when she sat down. "When I left last night, I could tell Douglas had been here. I could smell him. So I sent Kyle to keep an eye on the place while I followed leads and tried to get a couple hours of sleep."

Kiara tucked her legs under her and took a deep breath. "He was here. Okay." She fiddled with the hem of her denim shorts. "I guess that removes 'paranoid' as a descriptor for both of us, then. Wh-what do we do?"

His fingers rubbed the back of her neck, moving in soothing circles. "You stay with one of us at all times. Lars and I have put out the word that everyone else needs to stay the hell out of this. That won't last for long, but it'll keep people from acting right away. And I've got someone chasing down connections between Catholic churches and suspected members of the HLH. We're going to find them."

She shivered. "I have to work this afternoon." The bastards had already scared the hell out of her, trapped her in her own home. She wasn't going to let them disrupt her entire life.

"I'll drop you off. If I can't, Claire can. And one of us will pick you up. You'll be safe in the hospital, I'm sure."

"I can drive myself, Adrian."

"Yeah, you can." He smiled gently. "But I thought it would be nicer for you to have me in the car than following you."

She resisted the urge to argue further. Her feminist principles were far outweighed by her desire to remain alive and unmolested. “The only thing saving me from pitching a knee-jerk fit is the knowledge that you’d do the same thing if it were some random guy in danger. Right?”

He hesitated for just a moment too long.

Kiara sighed. “At least tell me this is because we had fantastic sex last night, and not just because I happen to be a woman.”

“If you were a guy, I probably wouldn’t have offered to drive you,” he said after a pause, his mouth curling up into a wicked grin. “I would have just followed you without asking. I’m *trying* to be polite about my domineering asshole behavior.”

“Domineering, I can deal with. It’s chauvinistic that makes me squirm.”

Adrian’s smile didn’t fade. If anything, it grew wider. “Trust me, sweetheart. The fact that I’m being a bossy asshole has nothing to do with the fact that you’re a woman. And the fact that I’m trying to be polite about it has everything to do with me hoping you’ll have fantastic sex with me again.”

Kiara grinned, unable to help herself. Not only were those intoxicating smiles of his addictive, they were contagious. “If you have to ask...”

He leaned closer, and the fingers that had been rubbing at her neck cupped the back of her head. “I thought you wanted me to ask, not assume.”

“It’s not an assumption if I’m throwing myself at you.” Her mouth brushed over his and retreated. “If I’m begging you.”

His tongue swept along her lower lip. “You should beg me when there aren’t two shape-shifters with really, really good hearing in the other room.”

Desire rushed through her, and she pulled in a slow, shaky breath. “I’ll have to remember that.” She tugged free of his grasp and straightened the neckline of her white peasant blouse. “Think Lars will want to stay for breakfast?”

Adrian didn’t have to answer. Claire’s voice drifted in from the kitchen. “We already ate. Now I’m just cooking the rest for you.”

Kiara closed her eyes and laughed, trying not to blush. “Thanks.” She stood and looked down at Adrian, holding out her hand. “You coming?”

“Sure.” His hand was warm and strong, curling around hers with protective gentleness as he rose from the couch. “We can figure out the plan of attack. I thought you might feel a little better if you got some say in it.”

“Beats sitting around here, waiting for the big, strong men to tell me what to do,” she teased with a wink as they headed for the kitchen. “As much as I *love* house arrest...”

“It’s only a day,” he protested. “Just to be safe.”

"I know," Kiara said, stopping to slide her arm around his waist. "But if it's that dangerous, why don't I just go? Get out of town while you and Lars handle this stuff?"

He froze, a silent battle waging clearly in his eyes. "I --"

"He'll feel better if you're nearby." When Kiara glanced over, she found Claire hovering in the kitchen doorway. "They can't help it. He just needs to know you're safe."

Adrian's expression was anything but friendly. "Butt out, Claire."

"Fuck you, Adrian. You're demanding a lot of her, and she deserves to know why."

Lars walked over and rested a hand on Claire's shoulder. It was clearly an unconscious gesture, one Kiara had seen before. *This is what Adrian was talking about at the hospital*, she realized. He'd said no touch was casual for a shape-shifter, and this was why. It wasn't desire or even possessiveness that drove Lars to have his hands on Claire every moment he could; it was *need*. He needed to know she was safe, and he couldn't *know* that if he couldn't touch her.

Her eyes met Lars's, and he nodded once. "I get it," she said quietly, leaning closer to Adrian. "Today. If it gets worse, we'll see."

"Thank you." His hand tightened on her hip for just a moment; then he smiled. "We'll talk about the plans over breakfast. I think Lars and I have managed to make it clear that people need to hold off on the random violence, but there's no guarantee that'll last."

"Okay," she agreed. "We'll make it quick, then, so you two can get back out there." The words almost stuck in her throat. She didn't *want* Adrian to be running around town, trying to stop the HLH. But someone had to.

Chapter Five

Lars rubbed his face as Adrian brought the truck to a careful stop. “Last church on the list,” he noted. “If this is a bust...”

Then it meant they went back and started from scratch. The church lead had been a lucky break in any case, and Adrian had known from the start that there could have been a lot of reasons that Claire’s attacker had smelled like a church.

But it was the closest thing to a real lead he had. He put the truck in park and glanced over at Lars. “If this is a bust, we keep going. This has to end before the entire city blows up.”

“Damn. I was hoping you’d say beer and tacos.”

Adrian snorted. “You’re a fucking smart-ass, Nilsson. God knows why Claire puts up with you.”

Lars grinned as he pulled his door open. “I’m hot shit, Torres. Why does your chick put up with you?”

Good fucking question. He climbed from the truck and slammed the door. “Save it for the girls’ locker room, buddy. Let’s just get this shit over with.”

Lars’s only answer was a short laugh as he followed. He stopped outside the door and inhaled deeply, his expression turning serious. “That’s it. The same incense.”

Adrian nodded shortly. “I was at the second crime scene. I didn’t get enough to be useful, but if we run into the guys who did it...I’ll recognize them. And if we find them --”

“*Tell* me the next words out of your mouth are going to be, ‘We’ll kill them a lot.’”

There it was again, that sick, almost guilty feeling that came from being in perfect agreement with Lars. “Yeah. The police aren’t going to stop it. So we will.” Part of him acknowledged that killing them now would save more lives in the long run, but that wasn’t

why he was doing it. Kiara was in danger, and the animal inside him demanded that he protect her.

Even if he had to do things he didn't want to do.

Just think of Katie Murphy, he told himself firmly as he opened the door to the church. He called up her face, her terrified eyes, and the pictures he'd seen of the way they'd found her. He remembered her trembling voice when she tried to describe her two assailants, men who had taunted her and spit on her as they'd beaten her to within an inch of her life.

He'd do what needed to be done. Somehow.

The inside of the church was quiet and dark. It was an old mission, with scarred adobe walls and only a few windows. The light that filtered through the colorful stained glass gave the place an eerie feel, and Adrian resisted the urge to pull his gun. It was far too obvious, and he had better weapons at his disposal.

Lars moved silently, gesturing toward a door at the back of the sanctuary. Adrian nodded, and they made their way toward it. It barely squeaked as Lars pushed it open, revealing a narrow staircase. "Who's on first?" Lars whispered, his voice barely audible even to Adrian's ears.

"Me." Adrian stepped forward, pausing on the top step to close his eyes and focus on what his other senses were telling him. The stairs held a tangle of scents from the many people who went up and down them every day, making it impossible to tell if any were a match from the crime scene. He tilted his head to the side, then glanced back at Lars. "I don't hear anyone. Do you?"

Lars closed his eyes and shrugged. "Maybe. Could be background noise."

Adrian stepped down, moving silently as he made his way down the curving steps. Before he was halfway down, the smell of bleach overpowered the smell of the incense upstairs, and he knew in his gut what they'd find.

His instincts weren't wrong. He opened the door to find an empty room, scrubbed and reeking of harsh cleansers. Adrian scanned the room quickly and then stepped aside, letting Lars inside. "Shit."

Lars grimaced and covered his nose. "Chlorine. Bleach?"

Adrian crossed to the heavy wooden table in the corner and ran his fingers across a wet streak left there. "Fuck. It's still *wet*. Someone cleaned the hell out of this place."

"Getting rid of evidence." Lars closed his eyes again and swore. "I can't smell a goddamned thing with all these fumes."

Fury rose up in him, and Adrian gave in to temper and knocked the table over. "Fuck. *Fuck*. An hour earlier and we would have *had* them!"

Lars looked surprisingly calm. "Then screw the tacos. We keep looking. We keep looking, and we don't stop." He righted the table and shook his head. "Damn it."

Adrian snarled and braced his hands against the wall. "Okay. Fuck, okay." He dragged in a breath and let it out, then did it again. "Okay. We knew it was a long shot. Let's go to the university. I have a friend there who helps me with this shit."

"Some academic type?" Lars looked skeptical. "We should go see my friend Lena."

He pushed off the wall and turned. "No. The University first. Adam's the dean of the School of Paranormal Studies. He's got access to hundreds of contacts." And none of them were likely to be as shady as any friend of Lars. But he couldn't *say* it, not when Lars had been so helpful. "After that...we'll see your friend."

For a moment, Adrian thought Lars might argue. Instead, he sighed impatiently. "All right. Fine. Your way first, then mine."

* * * * *

Lars studied the plaque by the door as Adrian knocked. "Is this guy really a doctor, or is he one of those fake ones?"

Before he could answer, the door swung open. Adam stood there, looking ruffled and bemused. "Completely fake." He nodded at Lars. "New protégé, Adrian?"

Adrian barely managed to avoid snorting. "Lars Nilsson, meet Dr. Adam Kendrick, dean of the School of Paranormal Studies."

Lars nodded, unembarrassed. "How's it going?"

"Better before I heard about this latest attack." Adam waved them inside and crossed the room to sit on the edge of his desk. It was made of native stone and heavy as hell; Adrian had helped him move it into the office. "Claire Franklin is a nice kid."

"Claire Franklin is his girlfriend," Adrian replied, tilting his head toward Lars. He met Adam's eyes and hoped his friend would understand the silent warning. "That's why we're here."

No one had ever called Adam Kendrick slow. He rubbed his chin. "Well, since she's obviously well taken care of, the next step is making sure it doesn't happen again." He reached back and pulled a notepad off his desk. "What do you have so far?"

"Not a lot." Adrian pulled his own notebook out of his back pocket and flipped it open. "Possible connection to some sort church, but that turned out to be a bust. Claire smelled incense on one of the attackers. Really heavy incense. Like someone's been spending a lot of time there."

"Or maybe a kid who's trying to hide his pot habit from Mom and Dad." Adam scribbled some notes on the pad and scratched his head. "A couple of my students are doing a postgrad workshop on the practical applications of psychic ability. Mostly clairvoyance, clairsentience, that sort of thing. If you've got some sort of psychometric focal object... Clothing, maybe. DNA works better for some."

Which would be perfect if he thought he'd be able to convince his former brothers-in-arms to hand over evidence in an ongoing investigation, one they'd been doing their best to ignore. "Short of busting into the station to abscond with evidence, I'm not sure that's possible. The best I can do is this." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a plastic bag with a movie rental card in it. "I borrowed it from the wallet of the dead guy. Figured no one would notice. But I don't need to find him. We all know where he is, so I don't know what you could do."

Adam took the bag with a snort. "If you don't have anything else, we might need to look into other forms of anomalous cognition. A medium, maybe." He stared at the card for a moment, then shrugged one shoulder. "Want me to call my brother? He has contacts with similar groups. He might have heard something useful."

Adrian hesitated, his gaze sliding to Lars. Adam's younger brother was a bounty hunter every bit as psychotically dominant as Lars. If Blake showed up in town, the best case scenario would involve the two of them in some sort of crazed battle for dominance. The worst... *Jesus Christ. They could tear Mystic Ridge up if they decided to work together.*

He glanced back at Adam and shook his head slightly. "Let's save him for a last resort."

Adam may as well have been able to read his mind. He chuckled and tossed the plastic bag onto his desk. "I wasn't going to invite him to the party, Adrian." He rose and walked to a file cabinet by the window. "Natasha and Ralph aren't going to be any help, but I'll do some checking. Maybe someone in the department has developed adequate token-object focus."

Whatever that means. Adrian shrugged and smiled wanly at Adam. "You're the expert. Let me know if you find anything."

"Hmm? Oh, right. I'll call as soon as I find someone," he answered absently, already engrossed in a file he'd pulled from a drawer. "Maybe Nick Bailey. He owes me one for that research grant..."

Adrian knew from experience no one would be able to get Adam's full attention until he'd followed whatever thought had captivated him to its conclusion. He caught Lars's gaze and jerked his head toward the door. "We'll catch up with you later, then, Adam. Thanks."

Lars shot him a look and didn't move. "Is that it?"

"Adam will call us." He was unable to stop the hint of challenge from creeping into his voice. He could handle Lars's attitude when it was directed at other dominants, but Adam wasn't a threat. *And I will put you through the window if you try to fuck with him.*

Lars opened the door and walked out, shaking his head. Adrian spared Adam one last look, but his friend was lost in his files and didn't even notice. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he stepped into the hallway and pulled the door shut. "Let's go."

* * * * *

“Look, all I’m saying is that I *know* Lena. She’s bound to be more helpful than your absentminded professor.” Lars opened the truck door and sighed as his booted feet thumped on the ground. “We’ve been at this all day, and we’re getting nowhere.”

Adrian studied the gaudy storefront and then glanced down the street, his eyes taking in the beginning of the brothel district he hated so much. The store Lars had directed him to sat squarely in the middle of the riverfront, surrounded by other businesses that catered exclusively to the brave tourists who crossed the river looking for a little excitement.

It was hardly encouraging.

He glanced at Lars and raised an eyebrow. “You think a fortune teller who cheats humans out of money is going to be able to help us?”

Lars snarled. “Hey, you didn’t want me giving *your* guy shit. If you’re rude to Lena, I’ll kick your ass.”

Adrian rocked back on his heels, his eyes narrowing as he studied Lars’s reaction. A little too violent for a casual acquaintance, though only an idiot would think Lars was involved with any woman other than Claire. *Doesn’t mean he wasn’t involved with her in the past, though.*

An ex-lover, then, or a close friend. Someone Lars felt the need to protect. Adrian held up both hands in a placating gesture and smiled easily. “Hey, I’m not the rude one. Especially not to ladies.”

“Keep it that way.” He led the way to the entrance.

A bell above the door chimed as Lars pushed it open. Adrian followed him, blinking twice as his eyes adjusted to dim light of the shop.

Madame Magdalena Nicolescu, teller of fortunes and maker of charms, looked every bit as ostentatious as her name implied. A tight, bloodred bodice displayed her ample cleavage to maximum effect, and her breasts were impressive enough that Adrian couldn’t quite help but admire them -- they *were* on display, after all. She was bedecked and bejeweled, the entire ensemble topped off by dozens of bracelets that clinked together every time she moved.

She looked absurd. Only the magic that vibrated off her in waves kept Adrian from turning back around and stalking back out the door.

“Lars!” She spoke in a low, husky voice with just a hint of some sort of exotic accent. “How is Claire? I called this morning when I heard, but you weren’t at home.”

“She’s okay. We got an early start this morning, is all.” He crossed the room and dropped a kiss to her cheek. “This is Adrian Torres. He’s investigating the attacks.”

“Mr. Torres.” Dark brown eyes studied his face, and he had the sudden feeling she saw far more than he wanted her to. His suspicions were confirmed when the corner of her mouth quirked up into a smile -- or maybe she was used to other people doubting her ability. “Don’t be taken in by the show. Under the makeup and corsets, I’m actually a rather skilled witch.”

As if the way the air around her trembled with power wouldn't have been proof enough. He smiled and offered his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. Nisca -- Nico..." His cheeks heated as he stumbled a little over her last name.

She just laughed. "Call me Lena."

Lars touched her arm. "We're getting nowhere with the traditional shit. Can you help us?"

Her smile faded a little. "If you need a protection or healing charm for Claire, yes. But you know how I am with finding people. I need a focus, and even then the spell doesn't always work. But I'll try if you have something."

He sighed heavily. "What we have belonged to the dead guy, and we all know where he is. I just thought..." He shook his head. "Never mind. It's not a big deal. We'll figure it out."

Adrian watched, surprised by the almost tender look in the woman's eyes as she lifted her hands to frame Lars's face. "How important is it?" she whispered, her voice so low Adrian wouldn't have heard if he'd been human. "There might be a way, but it would be hard on Claire."

"Not *that* important," he answered at once, his voice gruff. "No fucking way." Lars glared at Adrian, as if daring him to contradict his words.

He stayed silent.

Lena nodded and dropped her hands. "I'll ask around. There are a few other people I know who have been trying to track down the HLH since Katie's attack. Maybe someone has a lead. And if you find anything that I could use as a focus..."

"We'll bring it to you," Adrian promised. *If Adam's people can't find anything.*

"We'll keep looking, Lena," Lars said quietly. He kissed her again and ran a hand over her hair. "Stay safe. Call if you need us."

"Bring that girl around so I can give her a decent protection charm. And no chickening out just because you think I'm a bad influence."

"Shit, woman, you *are*," he retorted with a grin. "You're evil."

Lena's smile widened and she shooed Lars away, setting all her bracelets to jangling again. "Go do your work. It was nice to meet you, Adrian."

"Same to you." He nodded politely and tried not to feel frustrated as he stepped back out onto the sidewalk.

Lars followed and studied the sky as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "Getting late."

And the last thing Adrian wanted was to be standing in the middle of the riverfront once the brothels opened their doors. Despair might not have a tangible scent, but he always imagined it would smell like the riverfront. "Yeah. I've got to pick Kiara up from work, anyway. Go home. Get some rest."

“Guess we’ll be at it again tomorrow,” Lars grumbled, then took a drag from his cigarette and exhaled lustily. “You know you’re paying me for this shit, right?”

Adrian snorted. “Yes. I’m paying you for this shit. Want me to drop you back off at your truck?”

He shook his head. “Nah, that’s okay. I’ll hang out here with Lena and get Claire to pick me up.” He drew on the cigarette again, long and deep, and then crushed it out on the sidewalk. “Maybe your professor friend will come up with something tomorrow. This investigating thing sucks when you don’t know where to start.”

“Welcome to the glorious life of a private detective. Just be glad we’re not staking anyone out.” *Yet.* At this rate, sitting outside of Kiara’s place and following the next suspicious car that drove by seemed like a good bet.

Lars made a face and reached for the door again. “Later, Torres.” Adrian watched him disappear into Lena’s shop before turning to walk back to his truck. Kiara would be getting off work soon, which gave him just enough time to get out to the county hospital to pick her up. *At least tonight won’t be as frustrating as today.*

Chapter Six

Kiara stretched and checked the time on the computer screen. "Hallelujah."

Madeleine, the head nurse, slammed a chart shut and made a rude noise. "You've been entirely too chipper today, and now this. Have you joined a cult?"

Kiara laughed. "Nope. No cult."

"Then it must be a man." Madeleine tapped a pen against her chin and arched one auburn eyebrow. "Let me guess. The PI from last night."

She choked on her diet soda. "Maddy --"

The older woman continued as if Kiara hadn't spoken. "Yep. I saw you two. You were giving him the sex eyes." She pushed her glasses up her nose and winked. "So, how was he? He looked...athletic."

"Does pool count?" It was Adrian's voice. Kiara turned her head to find him leaning against the wall, a grin on his face. "I'm great at pool."

She expected Madeleine to be embarrassed, but she just laughed. "Well, speak of the devil, and he appears. You two have a hot date?"

"Maybe." Adrian pushed off the wall and strode toward them, his face showing none of the tension she could feel around him. "That's mostly up to Kiara."

"Sounds like a plan." She gave him an encouraging smile, then bit her lip and turned to Madeleine. "I handed my patients off to Libby. I'll see you guys later."

"Have fun...playing pool." Madeleine smirked and waved them away.

Kiara looped the strap of her bag over her neck and smiled softly again as she slid her hand into Adrian's. If she'd had any doubt about the frustration he felt, it disappeared when her skin touched his. "Are you all right?"

He nodded tightly as his fingers curled around hers. "Yeah, I'll make it. Are we making dinner or going out?"

"Neither." She hesitated, then rubbed his arm. "We can pick something up on the way to my apartment."

For a moment she thought he'd protest, but he just nodded again. "That'd be good. I'm feeling a little tired, I admit. Lars isn't a low-stress partner."

She almost questioned him about it, but decided to change the subject. There would be plenty of time to talk about the investigation when they were alone. "I like staying in," she assured him. "Chinese? Pizza?"

"How about a pizza? What kind do you like?"

"Anything except anchovies and onions." At his look, she teased, "Tiny fish are gross, and I might want to kiss you later. Maybe."

"Only maybe?" His arm slipped around her waist as he guided her toward the front entrance. "Guess I'll have to be on my best behavior."

"Guess so." Kiara grinned as she dug her phone out of her purse. "I'll call in the order, and we can pick it up on the way."

* * * * *

"Watch the -- Hang on." Kiara nudged the door open and laughed when Adrian had to turn the pizza box sideways to fit it through the doorway. "See, *that* is why you can't grope me while I'm on the phone. I had no idea I ordered the biggest pizza in Texas."

"This isn't the biggest pizza," he scoffed. "We got it into the apartment, after all."

"I stand corrected." She tossed her keys on the hall table and pulled her scrub top over her head. "Take it into the kitchen, okay? I'll be right back out."

His voice followed her down the hallway. "Hey, if you don't want me following you, keep your clothing on until you're out of sight."

"I'm still clothed," she called. In the bedroom, she kicked off her shoes and tugged off her long-sleeved T-shirt. "You stay in there. If you starve to death in my bed, there's bound to be an inquest."

The phone on the nightstand began to peal, and she flopped across the bed and snagged it. "Hello?"

"Pink bra, huh?" The voice was low and rough. "Always figured you for a white lace sort of girl."

Kiara froze, then glanced at the windows. The blinds were drawn on both, though one set was levered open. She lunged for the rod and twisted them closed. "Who is this?"

"What sort of pizza is that?"

Douglas. He was still whispering, but she recognized the cadence of his voice, the mocking tone. Shivering, she snatched up a pillow and held it against her body. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you’re a freak who fucks freaks. And the freaks are going to get what’s coming to them.”

The sharp click of the line disconnecting made her jump, and she threw the pillow aside and scrambled off the bed. She checked the front door first, flipping the deadbolt home with trembling hands. “Adrian?”

He strode in from the kitchen, eyes tense, as she dropped the blinds on the windows in the living room. “What happened?”

She looked down at the cordless receiver in her hand. “That was Douglas.” Anger washed through her, and she slammed the phone down on the coffee table. “He’s watching us. The bastard is *watching us*.”

Adrian went from tense to dangerous between one step and the next. He dragged Kiara away from the window. “Bathroom. Get in the bathroom and lock the door.”

“No.” She grabbed his arm. “Don’t go out there, Adrian. He might not be alone.”

“Shh.” He pulled her in the direction of the hall, steady and implacable. “I’ll be able to tell. I’m not going to look for them, just try to catch a scent. And I’m calling for backup as soon as you’re in the damn bathroom, Kiara. But you need to get away from the windows.”

“Okay.” She let him lead her down the hallway, nearly stumbling. “Check the back.” She shivered again. She should have been inundated with Adrian’s emotions, but she mostly felt nothing from him, though he still gripped her arm. “H-he could see me. In the bedroom.”

“I’ll be careful.” He pushed open the door with one hand and released her arm to reach into his pocket and pull out his cell phone. “Find Kyle Barnes in here. Call him and tell him what happened. And don’t open this door again for anyone but me.”

She scrolled through the stored numbers and dialed the phone as she locked the door behind him. It started ringing, and she slid down to the floor as a low voice answered, “What is it this time, Torres?”

“K-Kyle?”

“Who is this?”

She stared at the door and tried to still her shaking. “My name is Kiara Avery. There’s someone outside my apartment. Adrian went to check, and he said --”

A harsh curse interrupted her. “I’m on my way.”

“Do you know the address?”

“I got it. Are you someplace safe?”

"I'm locked in the bathroom." Kiara swallowed and closed her eyes. "Hurry." She closed the phone and gripped it in one hand as she wrapped her arms around her knees.

She must have waited only minutes, but it felt like hours before she heard footsteps in the hallway again. "Kiara?" It was Adrian, his voice filled with the same roiling frustration she could feel even through the door.

She scrambled up and unlocked the door, then yanked it open. "Nothing?"

Her relief almost overshadowed his tension. His eyes were hard as he held out her clothing. "We're going over to my place. What do you need from here?"

She took the T-shirt from him and blinked dumbly. "For the night?"

"At least." He reached out a hand for his phone. "He hasn't been outside, so if he's watching us, he's paying someone to use magic to do it."

She handed over his cell phone and pulled her shirt on with trembling hands. "But he hates people like us. He...he called us freaks."

"Sure he hates us." Adrian held his phone up to his ear. "Doesn't mean he won't use us."

Kiara nodded and pushed past him. "I just need a few things..."

She pulled a bag out of the closet and chewed her lip. She had a few personal days she could take, plus the vacation time she'd already accrued. If she needed to, she could get out of town for the next few days. "I could still go to San Diego --"

"No." The word came out sharp, and he sighed and closed his eyes. "Sorry, Kiara. Maybe you should. But not tonight."

"Right. You'll feel better if I'm nearby." She slammed her dresser drawer shut and threw some underwear in the bag, then sank down to the bed. "He said I'm going to get what's coming to me, Adrian." She stared at the tight line of his jaw and lowered her voice to a whisper. "What if you can't stop him?"

"Just tonight, Kiara," he repeated. "There are wards around my apartment. You'll be safe there. If you still want to leave tomorrow..." He took a breath and let it out. "I'm just asking for tonight."

She stared at him for a moment longer. "Okay. Tonight, to start. Then we'll see." She rose, and a few small steps brought her to his side. "I trust you. I do. But you shouldn't have to be responsible for me."

"Yes, I should. It's who I am. It's what I am." He spoke quietly, but with perfect confidence. "It's what I am, Kiara."

It felt like a warning, and Kiara suppressed another shiver. "I can be ready to leave in five minutes."

* * * * *

Adrian called Adam on his way across the river. "Sorry, Kendrick. I know it's late, but I've got a problem."

"What do you need?" He was alert and calm.

"Information on magical surveillance."

"Theoretical, or -- No, no. Practical." There was a rustle of what sounded like bedding. "Spells or psychic monitoring?"

Adrian hesitated. "Both, I guess. Someone was spying on Kiara, but I couldn't smell anyone outside her apartment."

Kiara huddled closer to the seat and shuddered.

"Local practitioners of remote viewing," Adam confirmed. "I can have an official list for you by midmorning."

"Thanks." Adrian looked at Kiara. "I've got to go. Just...call my cell."

"Of course."

Kiara glanced over at him as he flipped his phone shut. "You didn't have to hang up. I'm fine."

He took in her red eyes and the stiff set of her shoulders and forced a reassuring smile. "If I hadn't hung up, he could have talked for the next three hours about this stuff."

She smiled weakly and took a deep breath. "I think the biggest pizza in Texas just flew out of the back of the truck."

Adrian jerked his eyes to the rearview mirror and swore viciously as he watched the car behind him dodge the flying white box. The driver laid on the horn, and Adrian swore again. "Shit, you know I have nothing in my fridge but three-day-old leftovers, right?"

This time, her smile was real. She reached over and laid her hand on his leg. "It's okay. We'll figure something out."

He checked his rearview mirror again as he slid his hand over hers. "Okay. You can look through the cupboards, but you're going to find out I'm pretty useless without a grill."

"I'm not really hungry, anyway." She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. "I just want to rest."

"We'll be safe in my place. There are some pretty serious wards around it."

"Good." She turned her hand up and closed her fingers around his. "I don't have to worry about you, then."

"You don't have to worry about me," he agreed, squeezing her hand lightly. "Adam makes sure I have all of the best in magical protections. Have you ever met him?"

"Once," she confirmed. "At a fundraising dinner for the hospital. He seemed nice."

Adrian smiled. "He is. When this is all over, maybe we can have dinner with him. I think you'd really like him...as long as you don't get him talking about something you're not interested in. Sometimes I think that man knows *everything*."

"You know a lot of interesting people."

"Yeah, I guess." He checked the mirror before turning on his blinker and switching lanes. The traffic had thinned out once they'd gotten a mile or two away from the river, making it easier to concentrate on the conversation. "There are a lot of interesting people in Mystic Valley. It's nice to be in a place where you don't have to pretend. People are used to shape-shifters around here, even the ones who aren't comfortable around them."

Kiara made a soft noise of agreement. "My dad was in the navy, so I grew up with the segregation. There were psychics and witches on my dad's consulting team, but no shifters."

It wasn't surprising, considering the military still separated shape-shifters into their own units. "My family wasn't one of the ones that stuck together. My parents passed as human for a long time." He shrugged one shoulder. "I moved here just when Mystic Valley was starting to get overrun. Some of the last humans were still clinging to their gated communities by the river back then, thinking they could lock the paranormal out."

He felt her eyes studying his profile. "What made you decide to become a cop?"

He almost gave her the pat answer, the one about his father being a cop and sticking to family tradition, but it felt wrong, somehow. He wanted Kiara to know him, who he really was. To know *what* he was. *To know what she's getting into.*

"It's hard," he said finally. "Being a dominant shape-shifter. Knowing that you have the power to make people do what you want. You wouldn't believe how many people I've seen misuse that power."

"So you wanted to be there to stop them?"

"No. I wanted..." He sighed and shook his head. "I thought if I had an outlet. A way to help people, to protect people...that it would be enough. Maybe it would be easier if I could say I didn't want the power, but it's not true. I love it. I love it too damn much."

She didn't look surprised, just smiled a little. "I don't really want my empathy, and I still use it. Misuse it, even, sometimes."

"Yeah." He squeezed her hand again as he turned off the main road, headed for his small apartment building. He cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Do you come over into the Valley much?"

Kiara shook her head. "Hardly ever. Most everyone I know in town lives up on the Ridge." She flashed him a self-conscious smile. "I don't get out a lot."

He nodded. "It's not as bad as everyone says, you know. Not as dangerous. I mean, not for someone like you."

She stared out the window and rubbed her arms. "Someone like me?"

He tried to think of a way to describe it. "You're not human. But you're...not a threat. Challenging you wouldn't gain anyone any power."

"You mean I'm insignificant," she clarified with another tiny smile. "Not worth the bother?"

"Maybe a little of that." Admitting it made him feel oddly embarrassed. "But humans aren't significant, either, if you think about it that way. And humans aren't safe in the Valley. Especially not now."

Her smile faded. "No. Especially not now." She fell silent for a moment, then fidgeted in the seat. "Why me? What did I do to him?"

It was the one question he didn't know if he wanted to answer, but he owed it to her. "He hates me. We weren't friends on the squad. He was part of the group that ousted me. I don't know if it's about that, but if he thinks you're with me now, it won't help."

"Oh." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "That makes sense. He said I'm a freak who...who fucks freaks." The words were soft and tired. "So he hates both of us, and now we're dating. That must be like Christmas come early to someone like Douglas."

"Yeah." He sighed as he scanned the street in front of his building, finally finding a parking spot in front of a large black SUV. Once he'd put his truck in park, he turned to look at Kiara. "Maybe you shouldn't see me for a while." Saying the words hurt, but he forced them out anyway. "Maybe it'd be safer for you, and I'm being selfish."

She opened her eyes slowly. When she moved, it was to lean over and raise her hand to his cheek. "I don't know if I could, now. Not see you, I mean." Her soft whisper sounded like a realization.

He shouldn't have smiled. He shouldn't have felt so damn *happy*. It didn't stop him from turning his face and kissing her hand. "I'm sort of glad to hear that."

"Only sort of?" Her eyes were oddly bright under the faint glow of the streetlights. "Then I guess I'll have to be on my best behavior."

The gesture was pure instinct, and he did it without thought. His tongue swept out against the heel of her thumb before he bit her, a gentle but firm gesture. One of possession. The quiet growl that rumbled out of his chest filled the truck.

A shiver ran through her, and he heard her heart speed up. "We should go inside."

"Yes." He had to fight for the self-control to pull back. "Yes, you -- we -- need to go inside."

They made it into his apartment, barely. Kiara's overnight bag hit the floor as her back hit the wall, and she moaned his name as one of his thighs pushed between hers. "Adrian --"

"Tell me to stop." He braced his hands against the wall on either side of her head with a low groan. "You should tell me to stop."

She made a sharp sound of protest and bit his jaw. "Why?"

Pleasure roared through him, and he dropped his mouth to hover just above hers. "Because I'm going to fuck you against the wall in about two seconds, I swear to God."

Kiara moaned again and licked his lower lip. "Better make it one." She jerked his shirt free of his jeans. "I'm impatient."

The words undid him. He tore at her loose scrub bottoms until he could get a hand in her underwear. A groan tore free of him when his fingers found wet heat, proof that she wanted him as badly as he needed her.

He kept one hand next to her head as he stared down at her and circled his finger around her clit in a firm, demanding caress. "Come for me first," he whispered, the words a hoarse command he couldn't soften. "Come for me, then beg me to fuck you."

She gripped his shoulders and arched against his hand with a cry. When she opened her eyes, their amber depths were hot and unfocused. "I'm trying to stay in control. You don't --" The words cut off with a whimper as her hips jerked and her head hit the wall.

"Lose control." He slid his hand lower and worked two fingers into her slick channel before sliding his thumb back up to stroke her clit. "Lose it. Make us both come if you want. I'll be hard again before I get you to the bed, Kiara. Smelling you, feeling you..." He pulled his fingers out and thrust them back in with another growl. "Feeling how wet you are..."

Her fingernails dug into his skin even through his shirt, and she spoke in a strangled whisper. "I want to. I want you to feel how good it is..." Her voice trailed off, and she took another shaky breath and groaned. "Are you sure?"

His jeans were uncomfortable and getting worse by the second. "Yes. *Fuck*, yes. God, you're tight, baby. It is going to feel so fucking good inside you."

Kiara pulled his head down and kissed him as magic flared and then pleasure, tearing through him in a hot rush. She broke the kiss and hid her face in his neck as she rode his hand, her hips rolling and bucking, blindly seeking release. Her desperate, needy moans blew hot across his skin, making him shake.

He eased a third finger into her, groaning when he *felt* the tension in her body increase. He gritted his teeth and shifted his fingers, searching until pleasure spiked through both of them with such blinding intensity that he nearly lost it.

"Now," he growled, the word a harsh command. He used the magic strung out between them to find that perfect spot again, not caring that it would drive him over the edge, make him come in his fucking jeans like a teenager. "Now, baby, come *now*."

She did, her teeth sinking into the sensitive skin of his neck as she shook apart. Her body gripped his hand, convulsing around his fingers, and he threw his head back with a snarl of triumph as release thundered through him. Hot pleasure poured over him in a scalding wave, amplified when her empathy fed off his release and caused her to cry out again.

He had no idea how long it lasted, only knew that at some point he sank to his knees and brought her with him. She ended up straddling his legs, her back pressed against the wall. Adrian slumped forward and dropped his forehead to her shoulder with a soft groan as he pulled his hand away from her body. "God. You okay?"

She raised a shaking hand to brush a lock of damp hair back from her forehead. “‘Okay’ doesn’t really cover it.” Then she looked around, blinked, and laughed. “We’re on the floor.”

“Better than the sidewalk outside.” He tilted his head a little to kiss her neck. “Or the seat of my truck.”

“I don’t know...” She shivered and nipped at his ear. “I think the truck has definite possibilities.”

“Later,” he promised. Rising to his feet was more difficult than it had any right to be, but he dragged Kiara up after him and reached out with one hand to lock the door. “First we’re going to get to the damn bed.”

She didn’t look any steadier than he felt, but she clung to his hand as he pulled her down the hallway. “One of these days, I’m going to break out the sexy lingerie and silk scarves.”

That was a mental image guaranteed to make him lose his fucking mind. He groaned and tugged her into his room. “You’re going to give me heart failure is what you’re going to do.”

“You seem pretty healthy to me.” She kicked off her shoes and wiggled out of her pants. “Even my middle-aged coworkers have been ogling you.”

“Oh yeah?” Adrian struggled for a second with his boots. “Well, I guess I’ll be hot while my heart’s giving out.”

Kiara tossed her T-shirt on the floor, then crawled on the bed and stretched out on her stomach to watch him. “I suppose your continued good health is of tantamount importance,” she teased, lazily kicking her legs. “No more sex, then.”

He ripped at his belt, desperate to get out of his increasingly uncomfortable jeans. They ended up in a heap at the top of his dirty laundry hamper, along with his shirt. He stood at the end of the bed, naked and already half aroused again, and eyed her. “No sex? None at all?”

Kiara fought a moan and rolled over. She’d never seen anything as intoxicating as the look on Adrian’s face as he stared down at her. She sat up slowly, then patted the bed beside her. “Lie down.”

“Bossy.” He grinned and obeyed, stretching out next to her with his hands tucked behind his head. “Are you taking charge now?”

“Mmm.” She slid a leg over him and settled on his stomach. Then she arched her back as she reached to unhook her bra. “I’ll seize my chances when they come along.”

His hands rose to rest on her thighs, and he rubbed slow circles against her skin with his thumbs. “I heartily encourage that.”

“Do you?” Kiara eased the thin cotton from her shoulders and dropped it beside the bed. She leaned forward until her hair fell around them and her nipples brushed his bare chest. “It doesn’t offend your manly alpha sensibilities, does it?”

His soft growl made his chest vibrate under hers. “I think I’m secure enough to lie back and enjoy the view.”

She traced his collarbone with her tongue and then moved, trailing kisses down the middle of his chest. “Do we need to find some handcuffs?”

His fingers slipped through her hair, tangling around the strands. “If you’d like it. But you’d have to let me return the favor.”

She hummed in answer and licked tiny circles over his hard, flat belly. The thought of being shackled and at Adrian’s mercy had its appeal, and heat pulsed between her thighs. “Hell, yes.”

“Good.” He hissed in a breath and arched up a little. “Fucking *great*.”

Kiara rubbed her breasts against his cock as she knelt over one of his thighs and rocked. “Keep talking.” She scratched her fingernails lightly down his side to his hip, relishing the way his muscles tightened under her touch.

“You like that, huh?” He tugged her mouth back to his stomach. “You like listening to all the things I want to do to you?”

“Yes.” She opened her emotions for a moment, just enough to let him feel the yearning inside her, and moaned when his cock jerked against her skin. She wrapped her hand around its hard, erect length, then slowly drew her tongue along the underside of the shaft. “I like it.”

His hips pushed up a little and he groaned. “And I like that. God, you are so fucking good at that.”

She’d had plenty of practice. It had been one of her fiancé’s favorite things, her sucking him to a shared orgasm. She’d always felt a little used afterward, and she expected the thought to bother her now. Instead, her breathing quickened and heat washed through her. “Can I feel it? I mean --”

“Wait.” His other hand wrapped around her arm, tugging at her. “Come up here for a second.”

Confusion furrowed her brow as he coaxed her higher on the bed. “Did I do something wrong?”

He kissed her soundly and then laughed. “God, no. But I was thinking maybe I could reciprocate a little.” His grin was downright naughty. “Give you a little something to feel other than how damn crazy you’re making me.”

She bit her lip and laughed a little as she crawled off him and eased her panties down her legs. “You’re going to ruin my concentration, but it’ll be worth every second.” When she slipped her leg over him again, she faced his feet and stretched her body over his.

Strong hands wrapped around her legs and tugged her back a little. "I can never concentrate when you're naked," he whispered, and she felt the brush of his fingers sliding up her inner thigh. "Welcome to my world, baby."

"I like the view so far." Kiara snaked her tongue around the head of his cock, then licked her lips and pulled him into her mouth as she stroked him with her hand.

"Fuck, baby." She could feel his breath against the inside of her leg, the only warning before he turned his head and gently bit the soft skin of her thigh. Two fingers slid into her at the same time, and he groaned against her skin.

She moaned around him and rocked back. She tried to focus on Adrian as she hummed with every advance of her lips over his cock and fluttered her tongue over him with each slow retreat. His fingers were hard and capable, and she shuddered when he thrust them into her again.

"Tell me what you want." His fingers withdrew slightly before twisting into her again. "I could fuck you with my tongue." Another thrust of his fingers, and her body shook as he found the perfect spot this time. "Or I could do this and keep talking."

Kiara raised her head and gasped. "Talk. Fuck, *please*..." She took him in her mouth again and trembled, sucking harder.

His fingers slid out of her and shifted to rub slowly against her clit. His voice sounded hoarse and breathless when he spoke again. "There is nothing as hot as watching you come, baby. The look you get on your face."

His words, strained and passionate, were the last straw of sensation. Her shaking grew worse as she tensed and then came, drawing him deep into her mouth. The pleasure clawed at her, stripping her control, and she clutched his thigh and moaned.

"Kiara, *fuck!*" His hips thrust up, his cock slid deeper, and he growled his approval as her moans vibrated against him. "Fuck, fuck, you need to stop, or I'm gonna come."

Her hand tightened on his thigh, and she made a desperate sound. Stopping was the last thing on her mind. She wanted everything, every part of him, so she moved her mouth faster and whimpered with need.

He swore, his hips jerking under her hand and mouth. Pleasure flooded the room, so intense it overwhelmed what was left of her barriers. She fought the bliss that threatened to make her scream and coaxed him through his release, only raising her head when his movements subsided. She rested her forehead on his thigh and panted. "Jesus Christ."

"Come here." It was a hoarse whisper, and Adrian tugged at her hips. "Come up here and let me hold you."

Kiara hurried to stretch out beside him, sighing a little when he folded his arms around her. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder and grinned. "Still concerned about the state of your heart?"

“More so than ever,” he retorted in a sleepy voice. “I know I should be hungry, but I’m sort of thinking I want to lose consciousness for a little while.”

“It’s been a long day.” She should have been more afraid after Douglas’s phone call, but the only thing she felt in Adrian’s arms was safe. “Sleep.”

“Sleep.” His fingers slid through her hair, the gesture soothing and a little possessive. “You gonna sleep too?”

“Mmm.” She rubbed her cheek against his chest. “Halfway there already.”

He made a contented noise. His fingers slowed until they rested against the back of her head. “Good,” he whispered, and she could tell he was half asleep. “Good.”

“Good.”

Chapter Seven

Lars scratched the back of his head and consulted the paper in his hand. “Apartment two twenty.” He peered around at the apartment complex and delivered what Adrian was starting to recognize as a trademark snort. “What’d Kendrick do, send us to one of his students?”

Fucking hypocrite. Adrian knocked on the door and cast Lars an amused look. “I thought you liked college kids.”

Lars didn’t seem offended. “My girlfriend’s fucking hot, and not all that much younger than yours, Torres. Fucking hypocrite.”

He wasn’t sure what was more frightening -- the idea that Lars honestly thought Kiara and Claire were the same age, or the fact that he’d echoed Adrian’s own thoughts so closely. *Great. Contamination through association.*

The door opened, still chained, revealing a nervous-looking young man with red hair and a rough-looking beard who peered at them through the tiny gap with obvious suspicion. “You the PI?”

“Yeah.” Adrian tried to sound friendly. “I’m Adrian Torres. This is Lars Nilsson.”

“I need ID. From both of you.”

Lars mumbled something about fruitcakes that Adrian hoped the nervous man couldn’t hear, but he dug his wallet out of his pocket and held it open. “Happy now?”

“Uh-uh.” The guy cleared his throat. “Hand it over.”

Adrian stifled a laugh as he passed his ID through the door. “C’mon, Lars. Play nice.”

Lars handed over his driver’s license. The guy didn’t even look at them, just held them, one in each hand, and tapped them against the door frame. “Okay.” He disappeared, and the door slammed shut. The chain rattled, and the door reopened. “Come on in.”

Adrian stepped through the door first, his gaze taking in the room out of habit. The apartment was starkly bare except through an open archway to his left, which looked like a study. Papers covered the walls, and precarious stacks of books lined the floor near the walls and beside the desk. A whiteboard on one wall held a scribbled flowchart of some kind, and empty soda cans littered every surface.

"Don't mind the mess." The guy cackled. "Maid's day off."

Lars snorted again. "Fruitcake." This time he didn't mumble.

"I'm Proctor. Linus Proctor." He scratched his chin and handed over Adrian's identification. "Surprised you can walk upright after the last couple of days, stud muffin. And you" -- he pointed at Lars -- "you don't touch anything. I don't want my stuff growing legs and walking out."

Adrian raised an eyebrow. "So, what's your trick? Some kind of clairvoyance?"

"Psychometry." Linus scurried into the study and beckoned for them to follow. "The dean just had this dropped off. I haven't even opened it yet." He slid his hand slowly over the lid of a cardboard file box and smiled, his eyes drifting closed. "Damn. That assistant of his is a stone fox, man."

It was the truth, but that didn't make the look on Linus's face any less creepy. "So. Psychometry. I have no idea what that means."

Linus arched an eyebrow at him. "Token-object reading is what they call it these days. I know things -- see things, hear things -- when I touch people's belongings. That's why the Dean sent you to me."

"So what's in the box?" It seemed like overkill for one movie rental card...unless Adam had been pulling strings again and managed to get something more substantial.

"Don't know." Linus waggled his eyebrows and tugged the lid free, then tossed it over his shoulder. "Hmm. Property of the Mystic Ridge Police Department, maybe?"

It was a clear evidence bag containing a bloodstained pair of brass knuckles. Linus pulled it out of the box and grimaced. "I hate blood. It smells."

Anger churned through Adrian, and his hands tightened into fists. "Yeah, well, chances are that blood came from some scared kid, so deal with it."

His eyes widened, and he shrugged one shoulder. "Hey, no offense, man. You can't tell me you love it, either, not with that sniffer." He grabbed a pair of scissors and slit open the bag. The weapon fell into his palm, and he shuddered. "Some people are just bad."

Lars growled a little. "That better not be Claire's blood."

"No." Adrian took the evidence bag away from Linus and glanced at the date. "Katie. It's Katie Murphy. Fuck."

Linus wrapped his fingers around the brass knuckles and shuddered again, dropping heavily to his office chair. "Bad. Just a few. Mostly scared. Stupid, scared bastards."

"A place. We need a place, or a description." *Something to keep this from happening again. From happening to Kiara.*

"Hang on." He opened his eyes and stared at the blood-smudged brass. "It's low. Deep. They have to go down to get there. A basement or cellar."

That narrows it down to...anywhere. "What else?"

Linus's brow furrowed. "It's a church."

"No shit." Lars growled again. "We *found* where they'd been. Where are they *now*?"

"No, another... Different...different ones. But definitely churches," Linus confirmed. "There's a man in a collar, and candles... Everything looks Catholic. There..." He fell silent and took a deep breath. "Some of the men are cops."

It was the only thing that made sense, but hearing it still felt like getting punched in the gut. "Do you know them?" Adrian asked, his voice sounding flat even to his own ears.

He shook his head. "No. No, they're..." He frowned again. "They have a list."

Adrian froze. "A list of what?"

Linus's fingers clenched around the brass knuckles. "Targets." His hand began to shake, and he laughed, a sick, malevolent perversion of sound. "Fucking freaks and their whores."

"Shit. Can you *read* it?"

His eyes snapped open. "No." He tossed the weapon back in the box and took a few deep breaths. "The churches I saw were both adobe. Like missions, almost."

Adrian fought a snarl of frustration. "Catholic church, mission, cops..." He glanced at Lars. "There were two on the list like that, right?"

He nodded. "We'll haunt them like motherfucking ghosts."

For once, being in agreement with Lars didn't seem so bad.

* * * * *

Adrian hung up his phone and glanced over at Lars. "Still no news. Kyle's going to hang out for another couple hours, then have someone take over. His wife's getting testy."

"She's not the only one." His companion stifled a yawn. "This stakeout shit is for the birds. My ass is actually asleep."

"Told you it was boring as hell." Adrian plugged his phone into the charger and sank lower in his seat. "Kyle's going to call someone else to come take over for us too, if nothing happens before seven. There are enough wolves who'll help out that we can cover both of these places around the clock, I hope. Something's got to happen sooner or later."

"Yeah. Unless they're not meeting because they're out trolling for someone to beat on."

He tried not to think about that. "They're on the run. They know someone's after them. Let's hope they're too scared to go out and attack someone else."

“Yeah.” Lars fidgeted and leaned his head back against the seat. “So, what’s up with you and the nurse, anyway, *stud muffin*?” He laughed. “Are you two gonna be an item now, or something?”

Just when I think life can’t get any more fucking surreal... “I did tell the whole town that she’s mine. I guess we’ll see if she can handle that.”

Lars made a skeptical noise. “If she couldn’t, she’d have already hit the road. You’ve been pretty damn bossy.”

“Jesus, Lars. That’s downright scary coming from you.”

“Well, *I* get why you’ve been doing it. I’m just saying she might not, is all.” He moved around again, obviously trying to find a comfortable position in the seat. “She seems to be taking it in stride, though.”

“Yeah. Let’s hope she keeps taking it in stride.” A truck with an extended cab rumbled up the street toward the church, and Adrian sat up, eyes narrowing. *Tinted windows, mud on the plates...* Kyle’s words came back to him as he watched the vehicle slow. “Oh come on, we have fucking *earned* a little luck.”

Lars sat up straighter. “Is that...?”

“Come on, come on.” Adrian tensed when the truck turned into the church’s parking lot. He caught a flash of the sticker in the window -- FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE -- and breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay. Let’s let them get inside. I don’t want to have to chase them all over town.”

The younger man’s shoulders tensed, and his hand curled around the dash, fingers pressing grooves into the plastic. “Torres...”

“Stop.” Adrian reached out and grabbed Lars’s arm. “We have to do this right, Lars.”

He took a deep, shaky breath, but he didn’t relax. “Right. Right, I know.”

Adrian kept talking, mostly to give Lars something to concentrate on. “As soon as we’ve got the situation under control, I’ll call my friend in the FBI. There’s nothing she hates more than dirty cops, so she’ll bring everything she has down on the MRPD.” *And none of them will forgive me for it anytime soon.*

Lars let go of the dash. “Even the clean ones won’t be too fond of you then,” he noted with a surprising insight.

“Yeah.” Adrian dropped his hand with a sigh. “That’s an understatement. But I don’t care. Three people nearly died. Claire got hurt. If they’re not going to stop it, then they deserve it.”

“They don’t like me, anyway, so I don’t give a shit.”

He started to respond but froze when the truck’s doors opened. Five men piled out, all dressed in plain clothes, though Adrian recognized at least two of them. They both looked around furtively as a third pulled something out of the back of their truck, and Adrian nearly

groaned as they bustled their way inside, every paranoid movement screaming guilt. “*That’s* the brain trust that eluded us for two days? Jesus Christ.”

“I’d feel worse, but even idiots have their good days.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Adrian snatched up his phone and shoved it into his pocket. “Okay. Let’s give them five minutes to settle down and think they’re safe.” He flashed Lars a look and grinned. “And let’s forget to tell Isabel we sat here and waited patiently before going inside to rough them up. She’ll be pissed enough I didn’t call her first.”

Lars wrapped a hand around the door handle. “You’re not going to, are you? Because I’ll kick *your* ass.”

“Chill, Nilsson. You’re not the only one who wants a little vigilante justice.” He dropped his smile and gave Lars a stern look. “A *little*. You hear me?”

“Sure, I hear you.” His leg bounced impatiently. Finally, after several minutes, he glanced at Adrian. “Now?”

Isabel would pin his balls to the wall if she found out what he’d done. And he didn’t care. He’d been willing to kill them and take care of it quietly before he’d realized how deep into it the police were. The department would have to clean up their act, but it wouldn’t satisfy the alphas.

It wouldn’t satisfy *him*.

It wasn’t something he liked to admit, not even to himself, but he wanted blood. He wanted the men in the basement of that church to be as terrified as Katie Murphy, as Emerson Jacobs and Travis Simons.

As terrified as Claire and Kiara.

He met Lars’s eyes and saw that same need echoed back. But Lars wasn’t disturbed or unsettled by the desire. Lars knew what he was and didn’t make excuses to anyone. Not even himself. Maybe *especially* not himself.

Maybe it was time he stopped pretending. He nodded and reached for the door. “Let’s scare the piss out of some bad guys.”

Lars moved ahead of him, stalking toward the Spanish-style structure. Inside, the vestibule and sanctuary were empty. He halted, casting a questioning look at Adrian. “The back?”

Adrian nodded and moved past Lars, his eyes focused on a small door on the left corner of the church. “And down. I can almost hear them...”

“Yeah.” Lars followed him, peering over his shoulder when he turned the doorknob. It swung open with a quiet creak, and Adrian winced.

He moved silently down the first three steps and then paused again when he caught the faint sound of voices coming from somewhere below them. He held up a hand, then frowned as he tried to distinguish the number. “Just the five we saw, I think,” he whispered after a moment, glancing back at Lars with a questioning look.

“How many left for you?” Lars shot back. “Just go.”

Adrian didn’t waste time arguing. He slipped down the rest of the steps, pausing in front of the door at the bottom only long enough to get a rough idea of where the men on the other side were standing.

Then he kicked it in.

Six men stood in the small room, mostly clustered around a folding table, looking at photographs and papers. The door crashed to the floor, and for one tense moment the men stared at them in unmoving shock.

Lars growled, and the men began to scramble.

Two of them rushed at Lars, but he shoved them aside and stomped toward a stocky, dark-haired man by the table. He snatched him up by the front of his shirt and grinned. “I think this is our guy, Torres. *El jefe*. Boss man.”

Adrian dodged an inept punch thrown by one of the men Lars had brushed aside. His body reacted on instinct, moving him out of the way and catching the back of the man’s shirt as he stumbled past. Without hesitating, Adrian used the man’s momentum to throw him against the wall. He dispatched the second man just as easily, leaving both of them slumped unconscious on either side of the doorway.

It was only then that he got a good look at the pictures and newspaper clippings taped to the walls. They’d turned this basement room into an altar to their own hate, with graphic pictures of their victims plastered over the walls and surrounded by articles about the attacks.

His resolve to turn the men over to the FBI mostly unscathed disappeared. Adrian turned to look at Lars, then shifted his attention to the man he held. Cold blue eyes stared back at him, full of as much loathing as terror. Adrian felt a chilling smile form on his own lips. “You can rough him up a little if you want, but don’t kill him.”

Lars barely seemed to be paying attention as he shoved the man’s face against the newspaper-covered wall. “I’m sorry, what was that? Don’t *what*?”

“Don’t kill him,” Adrian repeated. “I meant what I said. We’re handing them over to the FBI.”

Lars gritted his teeth and slammed the man against the wall harder. “I thought we were coming here to *end* this, Torres.”

“The Feds *will* end it.” Adrian caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye and thrust out his hand, catching the neck of one of the remaining men. He slanted a look at him and resisted the urge to squeeze when he recognized one of his former coworkers.

A cop. A cop who had been beating the shit out of innocent kids.

Adrian’s fingers tightened a little in spite of himself. “Johnson. Fancy meeting you here.”

“Torres.” The man spat the word. “Should have known you’d be along eventually.”

Lars grunted. "Who's this asshole?"

"A really fucking sorry excuse for a cop." Adrian didn't take his eyes away from Johnson's face. "Where's Douglas? Too chickenshit to come play with you?"

"Maybe he's busy with your woman," Johnson shot back, hate blazing from his dark eyes.

A snarl filled the room, low and angry. Adrian didn't even realize at first that it had come from him. "If anyone touches her, you'll all die. Every last fucking one of you."

"Now, that just makes you a damn hypocrite." Lars jerked the leader away from the wall. "I can't kill them, even though they hurt Claire, but if they mess with Kiara --"

"You hear that, Johnson? I'm a hypocrite. Maybe I should go upstairs and leave you down here for him. He's not too happy about what you bastards did to his girlfriend, and if you think what *she* did was bad..."

"Hey, fuck you, freak."

Lars rolled his eyes. "Is that why you morons started beating people? You couldn't think of anything snappier to yell at us when we walked by on the street?"

"We could kill you," Adrian continued as if neither had spoken. "It'd be easy. We wouldn't get caught. But then how many of you would be left, waiting? How many of my old friends from the force are out there, waiting for their next chance to prove they're big fucking men by beating the shit out of some helpless kid?"

"More than you know." The quiet words didn't come from Johnson, but from the man beside Lars. "More than you'll *ever* know."

Lars sighed and smashed the guy's face down on the table, then flashed Adrian a pissed-off look. "Call the fucking FBI already, would you? Normally, I'd be all for eating these bastards, but the last thing I want to do is make them martyrs to their cause, or whatever."

The surprisingly apt assessment made him wonder -- not for the first time -- if he'd underestimated Lars. Adrian dragged Johnson over to the table and shoved him down in a seat next to his terrified friend. "Keep an eye on them." Isabel had been sitting at the top of his speed dial since this whole mess had started, so he only had to look away for a second to dial the phone.

He caught a blur of movement in the corner of his eye and heard a sharp crack. A gun slid across the table, and Adrian caught it before it tumbled to the floor. Johnson clutched his wrist as Lars growled again. "Try something else. That only made me feel a *little* better."

Adrian checked the safety on the gun before tucking it into the back of his pants with one hand. The phone was already ringing, and he slapped it to his ear as a female voice answered. "Hutchins."

"Hey, sweetheart. How'd you like to come on down to Texas and solve a hate crime or three?"

“Depends.” He heard the sound of leather creaking and the snap of a holster. “You cooking?”

“If you raise enough of a fuss, I’ll cook any damn thing you want. Might even have a nice lady friend who’ll put up with me long enough to help out.”

Delighted laughter spilled over the line. “If you busted up the HLH all by your lonesome, Adrian, you deserve a little lovin’. You tell her I said so. You’re in Mystic Ridge?”

“Yep. At the old mission off Sixth Avenue. Can’t say as I got all the bastards, but at least two of the men here are members of the good ol’ MRPD.”

“Makes it a potential color of law investigation. Civil rights infringement. That’s a clear case of overriding federal jurisdiction.” A door slammed. “It’ll take me and my team a while to get there, but I can have some agents from the San Antonio field office crawling the place within the hour.”

Adrian could almost hear her glee. Her passion for protecting supernaturals in spite of the fact that she was a human was one of the reasons he trusted her. “That’d be nice, Isabel. I’ve sort of got other plans for the afternoon that don’t involve babysitting bigots.”

“I’m sure you do.” This time, when she spoke, a small laugh confirmed her amusement. “Tell her I said hello.”

“Funny, Hutchins. You’re a riot, as always. Give the guys in San Antonio my cell number.”

“I know how to do my job, Torres. And hey, don’t be surprised if the Special Agent in Charge out in San An tries to woo you away from the PI life after this bust hits. It’s big-time shit, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. See you in a few, sweetheart.”

He hung up with Isabel’s laughter still ringing in his ear. As long as Kiara was in one unharmed piece when Isabel got here, his old friend could laugh herself sick. He shoved the phone back in his pocket and smiled at Lars. “We should have company soon.” His gaze jumped to Johnson, and he smiled. “Company who really wants to know why the cops around here aren’t interested in closing this case.”

Lars brightened considerably. “I can see how that would hurt a lot worse than killing them. At least killing’s quick.”

Adrian snorted. “Trust me, Lars. There’s nothing that’ll piss off a bunch of dirty cops more than having the Feds crawling up their asses. Especially if one of them’s Isabel Hutchins.”

* * * * *

Lars was a great deal less cheerful three hours later when they were finally allowed to leave the old church. “I thought you said your friend was going to smooth things out.”

“She did.” His truck purred to life, and he cast Lars an amused look. “You have no damn idea how smooth that was. We’re not going to be too popular with the local police for a while, though.”

Lars just shrugged. “Like I said before...I never have been.”

“Yeah. Well, hopefully they’ll be too busy dealing with Hutchins and her team to worry about us. Any trouble they were going to give Claire should disappear now, at least. And I told Hutchins that Douglas was involved in this somehow. She’ll be on his ass like white on rice.”

“Guess everything’s under control.” He sounded almost skeptical.

“For now, at least.” He eased his truck out onto the street and turned toward his apartment. “Let’s go tell the ladies that we’re big fucking heroes. You might like the attention it gets you.”

Chapter Eight

Kiara sucked in a breath as soon as Claire looked up from the Scrabble board and toward the door. “Back?”

“Mmm.” Claire tilted her head to the side and her eyebrows drew together. “And...annoyed. Oh, God. I bet they’ve been fighting the whole day. *Again.*”

“Let’s hope not.” Kiara scrambled off the floor and unlocked Adrian’s door before he had a chance to get out his keys. The tightness in her chest eased when she saw them both unharmed. “How’d it go?”

Lars nodded at her, looking amused. “We got it done. Claire?”

Claire stayed where she was, sitting cross-legged on the other side of the Scrabble board. “Did you play nice with the other kids, baby?”

“Nicer than I wanted to. Torres said we had to hand the bastards over to the proper authorities.” He rolled his eyes and made a face at her.

Kiara furrowed her brow as she looked up at Adrian. “You caught them?”

Adrian nodded as he dropped a brown grocery bag by the door. “Maybe not all of them...but we’ve got a good start.”

“That’s terrific.” Kiara smiled up at him and laid her hands on his arms. “Are you okay?”

Lars snorted. “Doll, we gotta go.”

Kiara heard Claire’s amused laugh. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you tomorrow, Kiara. What time should I pick you up from work?”

“Seven thirty would be good.” She turned and grinned at Claire. “That’ll give me time to shower and change after my shift, and we can just go straight from the hospital.”

“Great. I’ll call ahead and make sure we can get a table.” Claire’s gaze slid past Kiara to Adrian. “And no. Boys are *not* invited.”

Adrian’s hands tightened a little on Kiara’s waist, but he said nothing. She instinctively leaned against him, resting her head on his chest for a moment before lifting her eyes to his. “Girls’ night out.”

Lars hefted Claire’s bag onto his shoulder and held out his hand to her. “Come on. Let’s get a pizza.”

“Have a good night, Kiara.” There was amusement in Claire’s eyes as she took Lars’s hand. “And remember what I said.”

After Claire and Lars left, Adrian looked down at her. “I’m not sure I want to know what she said.”

Kiara laughed. “She told me the most expedient way to deal with an out-of-line alpha is to grab the nearest heavy object and give you a good whack to the head. I don’t think that’s a good idea, though, and not just because I kind of like you. That would *hurt*.”

Adrian actually winced. “Let’s just hope I deserve it less than Lars does.”

“I don’t think you deserve it at all.” She stretched up on her toes and brushed her lips over his. “Even if you did, I’d rather use my words to make you stop.”

“Good. Lars might like living in a war zone, but I prefer a slightly more peaceful existence.” Adrian bent down and kissed her again, brushing his tongue lightly over her lips. “I brought home wine and some actual food,” he murmured against her mouth. “Just like you asked. Lars was thrilled that we had to stop for groceries, by the way.”

“Mmm.” She slid her hand between them and kneaded the muscles of his chest through his shirt. “Want to open the wine while I start dinner?”

His eyes drifted closed, a low rumble of approval working its way up from the depths of his chest. “Okay.” His reply was contradicted by the way his fingers dragged her closer, pressing her against his body.

The carefully banked desire that had burned in Kiara since that morning flared to life. She clutched his shirt and took a deep breath. “Adrian. Did you even eat lunch?”

“No.” He whispered the word against her hair before his lips found her temple. “I should eat.”

She couldn’t quite bring herself to pull free of his arms. “We both should. I skipped lunch too.”

“Mmm. That’s not good.” His nose had nuzzled lower, teasing at her ear. His next murmur sent shivers through her. “I’m having trouble letting go of you.”

She shuddered again and stepped back, pushing gently at his chest. “Getting to know each other, right?” It was tempting as hell to forget they’d spent most of the short tenure of their acquaintance naked. She wanted him, and she knew he could tell, knew he wanted her

just as badly. "I was going to roast that lamb. Claire brought some things over, and I already made the glaze."

His eyes held something feral and almost dangerous, but he nodded. "I'll come into the kitchen with you. We can eat. And talk."

Kiara had to fight to control herself as she started preparing dinner. Adrian took off his boots and lounged against the wall, watching her as she moved around his kitchen. She handed him plates and silverware to set the table, but what she wanted to do was push him down on it. She wanted to climb on top of him and feel his warm, callused hands on her skin as she --

"How long does that need to cook?" She hadn't heard him move, but he suddenly stood behind her, his breath tickling her ear.

"About an hour." Instinct drove her to arch back against him. "Do you think you can hear the timer from another room?"

"Something wrong with this one?" His hands moved from her hips, skating up over her stomach and leaving fire in their wake, even through the fabric of her shirt. "You should put that damn thing in the oven, because I'm not sure how much longer I can wait."

Kiara slid the pan into the oven and set the timer with hands that trembled so badly it took her three tries to press the right buttons. She hesitated for only a moment before turning in his arms and staring up at him. "There's no reason we can't talk while we're naked," she observed, then pulled his head down to hers.

Adrian had always prided himself on being a reasonable sort of man, at least when it came to dominant male shape-shifters. Some of the other dominant men in town were incapable of controlling their instincts. He'd always thought he was different. Better. Able to harness his instincts and use them when he had to, but not let them use him. That was what being dominant -- being *strong* -- was about. Being in control.

Except there was nothing in control about the way Kiara made him feel when she tilted her head back in that careful little way that bared her neck to him in a perfect submissive arch. Everything calm and rational and human inside him fled, leaving him with the urge to take and possess. To shelter and protect. To own.

He buried his nose in her hair, inhaling the scent that was oddly intoxicating, considering it was nothing more exotic than shampoo and that subtle, clean scent unique to Kiara. He'd been fighting a state of persistent arousal since she'd first touched him, but her scent wrapping around him made his cock painfully hard.

She pulled his shirt from his jeans, her hands gentle and soft on his skin. "Please," she whispered into his neck. "Take me."

"Yes." The word escaped him as a groan. He dragged his shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. Hers followed just as quickly, and he brought his hands up to cup her

breasts through the thin bra, pinching her nipples lightly. "It's not going to be slow," he warned. "Slow can happen the second time."

"I don't care." Her hands scrambled to unbutton her shorts. "I need you, Adrian." The denim hit the floor, and she kicked the fabric aside. She reached for his belt, then stopped and closed her eyes. Instead of helping him, she turned slowly, stepping away until her hands came to rest on the counter. When she looked back over her shoulder, her gaze was dark, hungry.

It nearly undid him. He jerked his belt open with a violent movement, his gaze tracing down her spine to the curve of her ass, hugged by her sweet little panties. His fingers clenched painfully around his belt as he dragged it free of his pants, so tightly he had indentations in his palm from the buckle when he dropped it to the floor.

Seeing her bent over his kitchen counter, all but begging him to fuck her, made his hands shake as he crossed the kitchen to her in two hasty steps. He dropped them to the counter on either side of hers, trapping her body as he leaned down and found her ear with his lips. "Why?" he whispered hoarsely. "Why are you doing this? Do you even want it, or am I *making* you want it?"

"That hasn't happened to me in a long time. I'm in control. I just -- I want to give you what you want. This."

It was tempting, but it wasn't enough. "Don't do it because I want it. I only want it if you do. If you feel it." He nudged her hair aside with his nose and licked her neck. "If you trust me enough to want to surrender."

Kiara shivered and reached up, threading her fingers through his hair. "I've spent the last decade dodging men who only want me because I'm a fun toy to play with." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I trust you. I want you. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here."

He dragged in another breath, filling his nose with the scent of her skin. Then he stepped back and lowered his hands to his pants. "Turn around."

She did, letting her hands fall by her sides. Her gaze traveled over his chest, down to his hands, and her nipples hardened even further under the silk of her bra. "Sometimes I'm not good with words, with explaining how I feel."

"Me either." He undid the button on his pants and then smiled lazily as he paused with his hands hovering over the zipper. "So show me. Take off your cute lacy panties and show me how you feel."

Kiara bit her lip and then smiled as she reached back and unhooked her bra. It hit him in the chest as she reached down, edged her thumbs under her panties, and started slowly pulling them down. "Like this?"

The rasp of his zipper sounded loud in his kitchen. He left his pants hanging open and watched her as she wiggled and worked the scrap of fabric down her legs. "Like that. Fuck, just like that."

When she was naked, he wet his lower lip with his tongue and let his gaze drift back up her body, admiring the full curves and soft skin. Need made it hard to concentrate, so he focused on each tiny movement as he dropped his hands in the top of his jeans and stripped off his remaining clothing. He straightened and gave her a few moments to look at him before whispering his next hoarse instruction. "Move your legs apart."

She braced her hands on the counter again, this time behind her, and obeyed. Her chest rose and fell with shallow breaths, and her heart beat fast enough to be flattering. "I thought you said it wasn't going to be slow."

"It won't be, once I touch you." He resisted the urge to close his fist around his aching cock, promising himself instead that he'd sheathe it in the tight, wet heat of Kiara's body soon enough. "That's why you're going to touch yourself."

She laughed low in her throat and stroked a hand over her breast before trailing it slowly down her belly. "You think I can't make you come from all the way over here?"

Adrian's own laugh sounded closer to a growl than he meant it to be. "Sure you could. And that's *without* the damn empathy."

"Mmm." Kiara's hand slipped between her legs and she closed her eyes with a tiny whimper. "God, if you were doing this..." Her back arched as her fingers, glistening with wetness, parted slick flesh, teasing. Taunting.

He growled, taking a step toward her before he could stop himself. *So much for control*. He couldn't wait any longer, not when he could smell her desire, when he could imagine how good she would feel. How good she would *taste*.

He took a step closer, so close he could feel the heat from her body. "Lady's choice, Kiara. I can do it. Get on my knees and fuck you with my fingers, my tongue. I'll make you come so many times you won't know your own name. Or..." He trailed off, waiting.

She started to shake. Her eyes snapped open and locked on to his. "...I want you to fuck me." She cried out, her head falling back, her knees buckling. He caught her before she could fall, and fire roared through him as the aftershocks of her climax hit him.

Adrian wasn't sure how it happened. One second he was holding her, his head thrown back as he struggled against the wave of shared pleasure. The next they were on the floor, Kiara shaking on her hands and knees in front of him as he stroked his hands up her legs and wrapped his fingers around her thighs. He thrust into her fast and hard, pulling her hips back against his and snarling in pleasure.

Her hands skidded against the tile as she pushed back, murmuring in a low, hoarse whisper. "Please, don't stop. Don't...don't stop --" Her pleas were broken by short, harsh cries every time he sank in, every time his cock drove past the sensitive spot inside her that bathed them both in ecstasy.

There was nothing graceful or calculated about the act. It was fucking -- *mating* -- and a growl worked out of his chest with every thrust. He tried to slow down, tried to regain

control, but there was nothing but her voice in his ears as he plunged into the perfect, clenching depths of her body. She filled his senses as he filled her, and when she came a second time, the world melted around the edges as her orgasm shivered along his spine.

His hands hit the floor on either side of her body, and he roared as his own release seized him. His hips slammed into hers so hard he bore her to the floor, and the last thing he remembered was the salty taste of her skin as he bit the back of her shoulder, muffling another hoarse shout against her skin as he finally stilled.

When he raised his head, her eyes were open, her cheek resting against the tile as she panted. "This is the best date I've ever had."

It took more effort than he wanted to admit to shift off her and collapse at her side. His arms and legs were more than a little shaky from the aftermath of their psychically amplified orgasms. "You're not letting me make a good impression," he managed to say, still breathless. "So much for my manly alpha control."

The half smile curling her lips disappeared, and she looked away. "I'm sorry."

It wasn't the reaction he'd expected, and a moment later he cursed himself, remembering the first night in bed and the way she'd constantly apologized. "Hey." Tired as he was, she was light and easy to move. He drew her against him and slipped his fingers into her hair so he could tilt her head back and force her to look at him. "If you think you need to apologize for being so fucking irresistible that I gave up my attempts to be a gentleman and fucked you on my kitchen floor..." He trailed off and kissed her softly. "You really were dating some bastards, huh?"

Kiara kissed him back and sighed. "I was engaged. And all I ever heard was how my empathy was bad, was messing things up." She rubbed her thumb over his cheek. "How it was a *violation*."

Adrian rolled over onto his back and dragged her with him, protecting her body from the cool floor. Her hair spread out around them, and he laughed as he blew a strand of it away from his face. "Then he was an idiot. It's part of you. And compared to the supernatural baggage I come with...it's really not that big a deal."

"Actually, it was a rather impressive bit of passive-aggressive misdirection," she corrected with a laugh that sounded more bitter than amused. "It took him four years to build a resistance to my empathy. When he finally did, he dumped me. I was just another boring piece of ass then." She bent her head and licked the hollow of his throat. "What's your supernatural baggage?"

"You're kidding, right?"

She hummed against his skin and bit him gently. "Kidding about what?"

Adrian laughed. "I walked in and tried to take over your life after..." He checked his watch. "Oh, look. It's only just seventy-two hours. And you're asking what the baggage is?"

Kiara sat up and braced her hands on his chest, squinting down at him. "Which you absolutely wouldn't have done if I hadn't potentially been in danger, right?"

He winced. "Uh...probably not?" When she just looked at him, he sighed. "Maybe not. I don't know. I think I'm fairly reasonable most of the time...but sometimes it just gets the better of me."

"I'm not really interested in some constant push-pull struggle, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let you control me. I mean, I did *this* time, but only because I don't have the faintest idea how to deal with things like the HLH. But it's not going to be a habit, Adrian."

He nodded and smoothed his hands up to rest on her hips. "It's okay, Kiara. It's not about controlling you. It's about..." As always, the words failed him. Explaining his possessive, protective urges was impossible. "I'd never tell you to do anything unless I thought you or someone else was going to get hurt if you didn't. But you might have figured out that this is a dangerous time to be anything but human in Mystic Ridge."

She nodded. "I thought about leaving, but..."

"But?"

Kiara lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I don't want to *move* just because some bigoted jackasses think I shouldn't be there."

"Have you ever thought about moving here? Into the Valley?"

She leaned forward, her hair falling over his shoulders. "Maybe I'll check it out." She kissed the corner of his mouth and licked his lower lip. "Is the 'getting to know you' stuff supposed to be an activity involving nakedness and your kitchen floor? Because I kind of like it."

"I'll hang out here all the time." He caught her lips for a brief kiss, then smiled. "I'd offer to take you out for dinner tomorrow, but it seems you already have a date. You and Claire have really hit it off, huh?" It would have been a lot easier to be enthusiastic about Kiara's new friend if the girl had better taste in boyfriends, but he tried to sound encouraging.

"She's nice." Kiara rested her arm on his chest and propped her chin in her hand. "We're going to Otelo's for passion fruit margaritas. Then we're going to see a chick flick." Her eyes twinkled.

Adrian laughed. "Something I'm having a hard time imagining Lars doing with her."

"That's because it's girl time," she whispered as she sat up again, stretching slowly. "Want to take a shower?"

He let his gaze drift down her body, and a slow smile curved his lips. "How long have we got left on that timer?"

She glanced up at the display, moving her hips against his in a slow, sensuous roll. "Long enough."

Oh, yeah. He wanted to take a shower. Or at least get in the shower, maybe chase the drops of water down her body with his tongue. Or hoist her up against the wall...

His cock stirred between them, and he slid his hands down to cup her ass, grinding up against her. "Yeah. A shower sounds good."

Kiara laughed, the sound turning into a moan when he arched up again. "I might have to call in *exhausted* tomorrow."

"Mmm, tempting." He sat up and scraped his teeth along the edge of her jaw before licking a path to her ear. "Too bad I have so much crap to deal with tomorrow with the fallout from this HLH shit."

"That's okay." She kissed his cheek and hissed in a breath when he licked the spot just below her ear. "I have you tonight, anyway."

"You have me tonight," he agreed. He shifted her weight and rose to his feet slowly with her still cradled against his chest. "Let's make the most of it."

Chapter Nine

Adrian stifled a yawn behind one hand as he used the other to hold the door to his favorite breakfast diner open for Kiara. The spacious restaurant was situated on the bottom floor of one of the large converted warehouses one street over from his office. The tables were spaced far enough apart to leave plenty of room to move between them...and to keep territorial shape-shifters from picking fights.

It was usually a quiet spot to have breakfast. That was why he'd chosen it, hoping to give Kiara a taste of the less terrifying side of Mystic Valley. An easy breakfast before he dropped her off at work and went to deal with the mess waiting for him.

He'd forgotten that his fondness for Jade Patel's homemade waffles wasn't much of a secret.

Four wolves waited at his usual table, their presence a deliberate challenge made obvious by the way every eye in the room turned to the door as he stepped inside.

Kiara responded to the blatant hostility in the room by pressing closer to his side. "Adrian?"

He didn't look away from the challengers as he stepped forward and to the side, placing his body squarely in front of hers. Her presence honed his already sharp temper, a temper that would likely find an outlet in physical violence before long.

So much for showing her the less terrifying side of life in the Valley.

One of the wolves stood, a man he vaguely recognized. Simon or Sam -- a rough, unpleasant dominant who had a taste for vulnerable young women. He was the oldest of the men gathered at the table, the de facto leader of their ragtag little pack.

Not anymore. Adrian stared him down, acutely aware of Kiara's presence at his back. "You have something to say to me?"

The man ignored the question and craned his head slightly, his gaze on Kiara.

Protective rage roared through Adrian, and he covered the space between them in four long strides that put him chest to chest with the enemy. "Leave," he whispered, amazed that his voice sounded so calm when his fingers twitched with the urge to curl around the man's neck. "Leave, or I'll put you outside in pieces."

Doubt flickered in the man's eyes, but he didn't move or look away. "No one died and made you boss, Torres. Words don't cut it."

The woman behind him was a nurse. A healer and an empath. A good woman who tried to ease suffering in others, who took away people's pain. Adrian whispered a silent prayer that he wasn't about to lose her. "Kiara, there's a hallway to your right. Step back into it for a few minutes, please."

He didn't wait to see if she'd obey before sweeping his challenger's feet out from under him with one vicious kick and planting his hand in the center of the man's chest at the same time.

Sam -- or Simon or whoever -- went flying backward onto the table where Adrian ate breakfast most mornings. The napkin holder and salt and pepper shakers skidded off the table and crashed to the floor, and Adrian added a silent apology to the Patels to his mental prayer as he curled his fingers around the edge of the table and flipped it over on to his attacker.

The solid wood splintered down the middle, and the man fell still.

Adrian turned his eyes on the three remaining wolves. "Pick him up and get your asses out of here."

Silence reigned in the dining area as Jade rushed out of the back. "What's going on out here?"

"A palace coup." He chanced a look at her and tried to smile, mostly because he didn't want to get locked out of his favorite breakfast spot. "Sorry, Jade. I'll pay for the dam --"

One of the other men punched him, a hard right that rattled his jaw and snapped his head to the side. A second man jumped him as well, and Jade shouted something unintelligible as a fist drove into Adrian's stomach.

Instinct overrode everything else, everything except the stabbing knowledge that two men had jumped him and a third lay prone, but the fourth was missing, and Kiara was behind him somewhere, vulnerable and the perfect target.

It turned the fight short and vicious. With Kiara in danger, he didn't have time for grand gestures that wounded pride more than bodies. He dispatched the first attacker with a punch that clipped his jaw and distracted him enough for Adrian to follow through with an elbow to the temple.

The wolf hit the ground in a daze just as pain slashed across Adrian's arm. He caught the dull flash of a steak knife as the remaining wolf pulled back his arm for a better angle. The sound of dishes breaking behind him ratcheted Adrian's worry up another notch, and he

caught the man's arm and disarmed him by the simple, expedient method of crushing his wrist.

His howl of pain filled the room as Adrian kicked the man's feet out from under him and dropped him to the floor on top of his friend. The sound wasn't loud enough to cover Kiara's noise of protest, and rage clouded Adrian's vision as he spun to find the final wolf curling his fingers around Kiara's arm.

The fear etched on her face was clear and breathtaking. Before Adrian could react, Kiara laid her other hand over the man's and whispered, "Stop."

Her attacker began to shake. His trembling only worsened as he dropped to his knees and stared up at her, his expression one of abject, gut-churning terror.

Adrian stepped over his fallen challengers and crossed the room to Kiara's side. "Are you all right?"

She had to pry the man's fingers from her arm, but she nodded, her jaw tight. "I'm fine." Her skin bore an angry red ring, one that would probably bruise, but Kiara ignored it and touched the kneeling man's face. "You should go."

The sharp stink of urine filled the air. Adrian stared in shock as the man on the floor skittered backward away from Kiara. He crawled until he bumped into the wall and then lurched to his feet and plowed out the door without a backward glance, leaving the stench of fear in his wake.

Adrian looked back to Kiara. "Guess fear makes a useful weapon."

She rubbed her arm absently. "I just gave him -- I don't know. Sometimes I forget how focused it is when I'm touching someone and...and *trying*."

Protectiveness nearly drowned in a fresh wave of anger as he watched her fingers brush over reddened flesh. He jerked his gaze away from her arm, focusing on the angry witch bearing down on him as a distraction from the need to stalk outside and break every finger that had touched Kiara's arm.

Jade stopped in front of him, hands on her hips. "Of all the boneheaded --" Her words cut off with a sigh, and some of the fury melted out of her expression. "You're bleeding, Adrian."

It was so far down his list of concerns it didn't even rate. "My office is a block away and my lady's a nurse. I'm not going to bleed to death in the next ten minutes."

"No, but you and your friends did a hell of a job thinning out my breakfast crowd."

Adrian winced. "Sorry, Jade. Like I said, I'll pay for the damage." He shifted his attention to the three wolves still tangled up in a pile on the floor. "Want me to drag them out?"

She glanced at Kiara and shook her head. "Stay out of trouble, if you can manage it. I'll take care of those morons. This time."

Which was Jade's way of saying, *Take care of your woman, you insensitive lout*. If it had been any other witch, Adrian would have felt the need to stay until the wolves had dragged themselves away to lick their wounds. But Jade knew how to hold her own with shape-shifters, most of whom bore a healthy respect for her brand of earth magic.

And her sex magic, Adrian thought cynically as he watched the three men struggle to untangle themselves. Rumor had it the last man to piss Jade off had spent three months completely impotent.

Hell, right now his life might be a lot easier if she cursed *him* with a little bit of impotence. Kiara's presence scraped at his self-control, along with a completely irrational -- and unacceptable -- urge to reclaim her. To erase any lingering scent left from another wolf's touch by covering her completely in his own. And those desires were tame compared to the darker ones that stirred, still restless from the abortive challenge.

But being alpha meant having control. Adrian shoved the need aside and nodded acknowledgment to Jade. "Call me if you need anything. There will probably be a few more scuffles before things settle down, but I'll try to take care of them outside of your restaurant."

She waved him away with another small scowl. "Go on before I change my mind."

Outside, Kiara's hand trembled in his. "Are you in pain?"

"The shoulder?" He fought to keep from squeezing her hand too hard in a possessive grip. "I don't think it's too bad."

"Do you have a first-aid kit at your office?"

"Yeah." He nodded to a small alley that cut between two warehouses. "Come on, shortcut. My office's just on the other side of the street."

She followed him with quick steps to keep up, still clinging to his hand. A bolt of heat shot up his arm, and Kiara cleared her throat. "Sorry."

He almost staggered when the implication of her apology struck him on another wave of heat. He'd assumed the twisting need inside him had been entirely his own, arousal brought on by the challenge and the need to slake the thrill of victory in the heat of his mate's body. Of all the reactions he'd expected from her -- reactions ranging from shocked horror to disgust -- the one he hadn't anticipated was a desire that matched his own.

They broke free of the alley, and he measured the ten steps it would take to get them across the street and to his door and almost judged them to be too far. His so-called self-control unraveled as he dragged in a deep breath and caught the growing scent of arousal.

Adrian dropped Kiara's hand and dug in his pocket for his keys. He held them out and let every dirty intention show in his eyes as the heavy key ring fell into her hand. "You've got fifteen seconds. And then I'm going to take you where I catch you. If you don't want that to be in the middle of the street, you should run."

* * * * *

Kiara managed to cross the street at a walk instead of a run despite his words, and she felt Adrian's eyes on her as she fumbled through the keys, looking for a logo that matched the deadbolt on the door.

The knob turned in her hand, though, and she pushed through the door to find a vaguely familiar man sitting next to a potted fern. He waved awkwardly, and she glanced back at Adrian.

He stood on the other side of the street still, his gaze fixed on her with an intensity that was almost tangible. His eyebrows came together, and she felt a wave of worry as he strode across the street. "Kiara, what's --"

"I'm Kyle Barnes," the man offered, standing. "I work with Adrian."

"Oh, right." Recognition snapped into place. "The one outside my apartment."

"One and the same."

"Barnes." Adrian stepped up behind Kiara, close enough that his body brushed hers. "I didn't give you a key so you could come hang out here when your wife gets pissed. Do you need something?"

"My phone's been ringing off the hook." Kyle dragged a hand through his hair. "Everybody who's anybody -- or at least thinks he is -- wants to bend your ear. You know, feel out where you stand on the issues, Mr. President."

Adrian made a low, amused noise, and she felt his hand creep around to splay across her stomach. Then he nudged her toward a door at the back of the room. "Start calling them back. Use the phone on the table over there. Tell them to get their concerns together, and find out when they can meet."

Kiara's knees went weak, and she covered Adrian's hand with hers as they crossed the office lobby. "You have work to do."

He let go of her. "Five seconds."

His predatory expression made his meaning clear. Another shiver of desire shook her, and she hurried through the door to his office. "I should look at that cut, Adrian..."

"Torres --"

"Make the calls, Barnes." Adrian slammed the door and cut off any further protest, his gaze never leaving Kiara. "So. Watching me defend my territory gets you hot, does it?"

It had, and it was useless to lie. She'd felt his reluctance to fight, knew he'd taken no pleasure in it, but the challenge had left him no choice. Even the satisfaction he'd exuded was nothing but an instinctive reaction to victory. "You're strong." Her voice had gone husky. "I like that."

"Are you going to like it when I've got you bent over my desk, begging? When Kyle's out there trying to pretend he can't hear every goddamn dirty thing I'm going to do to you?"

Fighting the need welling inside her was futile, so she eased her shirt over her head. “I can be quiet. Can you?”

“Fuck quiet.” His gaze traced the lines of her body then rose to her face again as he reached for his belt. “I don’t care if everyone in Mystic Valley lines up outside my office to listen to how hard I’m going to make you come.”

“You *want* Kyle to hear.” Realization raised the hair on the back of her neck and hardened her nipples. “You want someone, anyone, to know how much I belong to you.”

He drew in a ragged breath, and the possessiveness filling the air around him spiked. “Still think you can handle my baggage, sweetheart?”

She moved without thinking, drawn by his hunger and her own, stepping forward until their bodies touched. “I can handle everything.” She pushed his hands aside and gripped the leather of his belt as she dropped to her knees.

Adrian tugged his shirt over his head. “Guess my cock in your mouth is one way to keep quiet.”

She bit his stomach with a soft growl while her hands worked at his jeans. “Fuck quiet.”

Strong fingers curled in her hair, the grip almost too tight. “I think you’re a little kinky, sweetheart.”

“I think I want you.” Kiara eased his cock free and watched his face as she curled her fingers around him. “I need you.”

“I can feel it.” The words were hardly more than a growl. “You going to suck my cock or just stare at me? Because I’m not feeling patient right now.”

She wanted to tease him, to make him tremble with anticipation as much as pleasure. That desire drove her to move slowly, feathering her lips over the head of his cock before parting them slightly.

Adrian closed his eyes and groaned before tugging on her hair again. “You want me to turn you over my desk and spank your ass, don’t you? Don’t think I’m not considering it anyway, for not getting the hell out of there when I told you to.”

“Uh-huh.” Her wet lips slipped easily down his shaft, and she hummed around him.

Another groan and his hips rocked toward her in a tiny, jerky movement. “This is what it’s like,” he rasped. “You can feel it now. This is what it feels like to know you’re the strongest.”

Kiara *did* feel it, an overwhelming, intoxicating *power* that flooded her with heat. She was flush with excitement, giddy. Needy. But, more than anything, she felt *alive*.

It was easy to loosen the tight reins on her empathy, to give Adrian the slightest taste of what it felt like to be on her knees before him, dominated but still powerful. Still strong. He threw back his head and moaned, loud enough that the man in the lobby would have easily heard even if he *hadn’t* been a shape-shifter.

A heartbeat later, Adrian moved. Kiara's knees left the ground as he swept her up and carried her the four short steps to his desk. The phone and a stack of files hit the floor as he swiped it clear with one arm before setting her down in front of him. "Plant your hands on the desk," he whispered, the words a hoarse command.

Her palms slid over the wood, and she bit her lip when he pushed her pants and underwear off her hips. "What else?"

Strong fingers stroked down her back and traced the curve of her ass. "The next time a wolf comes looking to give me trouble, you get the hell out of the way. I'm glad you can take care of yourself if they lay hands on you, but by the time they're that close it takes everything in me not to tear them to pieces for touching you."

She looked back over her shoulder at him. "I'll try, but I don't know if I can, Adrian."

His fingers tightened, and a growl rumbled out of his chest. "Why?"

The answer made her feel exposed, vulnerable, but she gave it to him anyway. "Could you get the hell out of the way and leave me alone and in danger?"

He leaned forward and braced his hands on either side of hers, covering her back with his chest. His cock rubbed against her ass as he found her ear and bit it. "Apples and oranges, sweetheart. I'm an alpha. I'm *the* Alpha. No one hurts what's mine."

"No one," she agreed absently, arching under him. She'd already forgotten what they were talking about, could only focus on the hot press of his body against hers. "Yes."

Adrian shifted, and the head of his cock teased against her. "And you want to be mine."

Though she could barely hear the pleading note in the growled demand, she felt it full force when she eased open the connection between them. "Yours." She shook, and her hands edged out until her fingers touched his. "I want to be yours."

"You are." He proved it with one thrust, sliding home with a satisfied groan that made it clear he didn't care *what* Kyle had to listen to.

But Kiara sank her teeth into her lip, determined not to cry out...yet. She rocked her hips gently and sucked in a harsh breath. "Tell me what you're going to do to make me scream."

"I'm going to feel." His teeth scraped the back of her shoulder, and primal possession flooded her on a wave of pure need. He bit her and rocked into her again, deeper this time. "I'm going to feel *everything*."

The depth of his possession swept away her control. Pleasure ripped through her, and she struggled to separate hers from his. He didn't give her a chance. Careful rocking gave way to hard, short thrusts, just enough to push her higher without giving her what she needed to find release.

Her nails scratched over wood, and a helpless moan escaped her. The hard thrust of his cock was exactly what she needed, but the shallow strokes frustrated her. "Adrian, please..."

"Louder."

The need to challenge him, to make him earn what he wanted, overwhelmed her. She bit her lip again, this time until it hurt. "Make me."

His warm laughter shivered up her spine as he reached down and teased his fingers against her clit. When her hips jerked toward the touch, he moved his hand again and stilled his thrusts. "I could do this for a long time. Fuck you slow, until you can't remember anything but what it feels like to need my cock more than you need to breathe."

Breathing was the last thing on Kiara's mind as she wiggled against him. "Promise to do that later? I already can't remember anything else."

"Easy way to fix that, sweetheart." He rocked into her. "Tell me."

"Deep. Hard, but not fast." She kept her voice at a whisper. "Take me."

Lust surged, though to whom it belonged was impossible to tell. Even Adrian's control couldn't overcome the magic, the need that tangled them together as he pulled back and gave her what she'd asked for, a hard thrust that slid her hands several inches across the desk.

The rest of her tattered control dissolved, and Kiara gave him what *he* wanted -- a loud, unmistakable cry of pleasure that gave rise to a sharp swell of satisfaction and hunger. "Hard," she said again, this time in a shaky rasp. "T-take me."

"Yes." One word, and it might not have even *been* a word, just a possessive growl as he straightened up and twisted his hand in her hair.

It should have hurt. It *did* hurt, except that the pain melted into an ecstasy that arched her back and curled her toes. Kiara moaned, a low, keening wail, and shoved off the desk and back toward him.

A strong hand landed between her shoulder blades and urged her toward the desk again as his pace quickened. "You're *mine*."

She barely felt the sharp bite of the desk against her thighs as he drove into her. He'd pinned her down, adding to the primitive domination inherent in their positions, but she could feel the tenderness behind his passion. "Yes."

The satisfaction that roared through him overwhelmed even the pleasure, and he growled his triumph as he bent over her again and found her ear with his mouth. "Give me everything. Come with me."

"Everything," she whispered. Every cell in her body was alert and on edge, straining for completion. His voice in her ear distracted her, and the wave of blistering heat that accompanied his next thrust surprised her. She came with a shocked cry, her hands skittering across the desktop and finally curling around the edge. "Yes, yes."

His climax felt almost as good as her own. Fire danced along her skin as he sank into her one last time and froze, his mouth pressed against the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. A groan tore free of him and he bit her. Marked her.

Claimed her.

Kiara rested her forehead on the desk and shuddered under the warm weight of Adrian's chest, intoxicated by the pleasure still swelling inside her. "Everything," she rasped again.

"Everything." His hands turned gentle, stroking over her skin as he rose slowly and brought her with him. One step took him to a chair, and he dropped into it and dragged her into his arms. "God, Kiara."

When she could breathe again, she laughed in his ear. "I can recommend a good therapist. Your friend might need one."

A tiny thread of uncertainty crept into the sated satisfaction curled around her. "As long as you don't. I lost control."

"Adrian." Kiara caught his face between her hands. "If I weren't okay with this -- if I didn't *want* it -- I would have said so."

He nuzzled his nose against her hand. "You promise?"

"I swear it."

"Shit. Kiara, we did it again." Her confusion must have shown on her face, because he sighed and closed his eyes. "Condoms. I've even got them in my damn wallet this time, but I just didn't think --"

"Shh," she whispered against his temple. "Is there a reason we need them, besides birth control?"

He shook his head a tiny bit. "No. One of the advantages of near-invulnerable immune systems."

She swallowed hard. "It's okay, then, unless you're worried about it."

A tiny hint of very primal satisfaction twisted up inside him, but his face showed only relief. "It's up to you."

The satisfaction shivered up her spine, and she stifled a gasp. "We keep forgetting, anyway, and it seems stupid to get worked up over it if it doesn't matter."

"Okay." She felt the soft brush of his lips over her thumb before he lifted his head. "Want me to go chase Kyle out? There's a bathroom on the other side of the office if you want to straighten up, and I could grab some bagels next door. I don't want you to be late for work and hungry."

She'd taken up so much of his time already, but she wanted to hold on to the moment, at least a little longer. "Please."

He started to shift forward, but she stopped him. "Adrian, wait. You..." Finding words always seemed harder when she didn't need them to know how someone felt. "You didn't scare me. You know that, right?"

His smile looked strained. “Maybe I’d feel better if I had. This is what I was talking about the other day, Kiara. When I said the problem with the power is how much I love to use it. It makes me dangerous.”

“If you’d loved what happened back there, I’d know,” she countered. “You loved prevailing, being stronger, even knowing you could protect me. But you didn’t love hurting those men.”

“No, I didn’t.” He lifted a hand and stroked it over her hair, smoothing the tangled strands. “But I think I liked the part that came after a little too much. We need to try to avoid dominance challenges while you’re on your way to work, obviously.”

Kiara laughed. “Good idea.” His mouth was close, irresistible. She touched her lips to his and shivered when heat arced through her again. “I liked the part that came after too. I like *you*.”

His tongue teased at her lower lip as he laughed. “Maybe we have a few minutes for me to kiss the living hell out of you before I fetch bagels. After all, Claire’s hogging you tonight. Gotta remind you what you’re missing.”

“Mmm.” She bit him. “You could call me later and tell me *exactly* what I’ll be missing.”

“Oh, maybe I will.”

Chapter Ten

Kiara finished making notes on one metal clipboard and slid another from the pile beside her. Charting was probably her least favorite part of her job, but it was unavoidable. She checked her watch and rubbed her temples; she had half an hour until shift change, and she wanted to be able to hand her patients off to the oncoming nurses as quickly as possible so Claire wouldn't have to wait.

Movement in the corner of her eye drew her attention, and her heart skipped a beat before she realized why. A patrol officer who vaguely resembled Douglas had rounded the corner, and she forced herself to give him a smile as he walked past the nurses' station. Adrian had told her that Douglas would probably be too busy with the authorities to cause trouble, but to keep an eye out anyway. He hadn't said so, specifically, but Kiara knew why.

Desperate men sometimes did desperate things.

"Hey, Avery." The clattering of a gurney startled her, and she looked up to find Bobby Sanchez grinning at her. "You look like hell."

She barely suppressed an amused snort. "Didn't get much sleep last night."

He hooted with laughter. "All right. Anybody I know?"

"God, I hope not." She slammed the last chart shut and made a face at him. "I've met your friends, Bobby."

"*You're* one of my friends."

"Exactly."

He leaned against the counter as she began sorting the charts back into the holding rack. "Hey, what time are you knocking off? Mary Ann wants you to come over for ribs and beer."

"Can't tonight. I've got plans."

“Hell, Avery, bring him with you.” He waggled his eyebrows. “We’re bound to meet him eventually, if you keep him around.”

She tossed a paper clip at him. “I’m going to the movies with a friend, smart-ass.”

Bobby dodged the paper clip, his grin widening. “Another friend? How many have you got dangling on the line, anyway?”

Kiara swatted at him as she walked around the edge of the counter. “It’s Claire Franklin, the girl from the other night. We’re doing the girls’ night out thing tonight.” She hesitated and then smiled. She hadn’t told Bobby anything about Douglas or the HLH, and she didn’t plan to. He’d flip out, and the last thing she needed was two overprotective men shadowing her every step.

“Oh yeah?” His grin turned wicked. “She was a cute little number, too. Pity about that boyfriend.”

Kiara snorted. “That boyfriend would eat your head if you looked twice at her. And that’s *if* he managed to get to you before Mary Ann did.” She’d have to warn Adrian that Bobby was a notorious and completely ineffectual flirt. He was far too devoted to his fiancée to *do* anything about his advances, but he liked to make them just the same.

She saw Claire before Bobby did. He was still laughing when she pushed through the door, one corner of her mouth quirked up in a smile that made it clear she’d heard every word. “Why do they always call me *cute*?”

“Consider it your curse, sweetie.” Kiara winked at her, then nodded to Bobby. “Don’t know if you remember Don Juan here. Roberto Sanchez.”

Bobby recovered with admirable speed, offering his hand to Claire with an irrepressible smile. “Ms. Franklin. I’d tell you how ravishing you look, but I wouldn’t want your boyfriend to eat my head.”

Claire smiled, and the slightly nervous aura that surrounded her changed to one of cautious pleasure. “It’s nice to meet you officially, Mr. Sanchez.”

Considering the circumstances under which they’d all initially met, it made sense for Claire to be nervous around Bobby. Kiara elbowed him in the side. “We’ll all have to get together and grill some night, if Lars and Adrian can manage not to beat each other up.”

Before Claire could answer, Bobby made a disbelieving noise. “Wait, Adrian Torres? He’s your new flame?”

“Bobby...” Kiara folded her arms over her chest.

He grimaced. “Fine, just... That guy is alpha as *hell*, Kiara. Do you have any *idea* what you’re getting yourself into?”

“Yes, I do.” The last few days had given her a firsthand look at a riled-up alpha. “He’s a nice guy and I like him. So stop with the big brother thing.”

Claire leaned against the counter and studied Bobby slowly. “Adrian’s not so bad. At least he can control it.”

"Sure, he can," he said quietly. "Until something sets him off, and he loses his shit."

Kiara glanced at her watch again. "Can we do this on my next ride-along? I have to hand my patients off to the next shift, and then Claire and I need to get gone."

He touched Kiara's arm briefly and nodded. "Hey, congratulations. And I meant what I said, okay? You bring him over sometime soon." He nodded to Claire again, then walked back up the hall.

Claire's eyebrows were drawn together. She watched Bobby until he reached the end of the hallway and turned a corner, then turned her gaze back to Kiara. "Does he think Adrian would hurt you?"

Kiara shook her head. "No. He thinks Adrian might hurt someone *over* me, and that I won't be able to handle that."

"Oh." Claire relaxed a little, her smile returning. "Sorry. I've been feeling a little defensive. Even before what happened."

"That's understandable." She glanced down the hallway, then snorted. "If Bobby thought, in a million years, that Adrian might hurt me... Well, he wouldn't have been shy about forbidding me to see him again." Kiara rolled her eyes. "I wasn't kidding about the big brother thing."

"Hey, at least he cares."

"Yeah." She tucked her hair behind her ears and sighed. "I've got to finish up. Do you want to wait in the lobby? It won't take long."

Claire shifted her bag to her other shoulder. "Sure."

It took Kiara about twenty minutes to run through shift change and shower. She didn't bother to dry her hair before hurrying back out to meet Claire, still grinning. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah. I'm excited." Claire pushed away from the counter, but her grin was a little forced. "Lars is sorta pissed at me, though. I think he'd be happier if I didn't go outside again unsupervised for a few weeks."

"Adrian expressed a similar sentiment. Of course, he was very careful to make sure I knew he wasn't oppressing me by trying to make me *not* go."

"I'm sure he even *almost* meant it." Her tone was light, but the pain and confusion just under the surface would have been obvious even if Kiara couldn't feel it. As they walked toward the exit, Claire admitted what Kiara had already deduced. "It was a pretty bad fight. I don't know if he'll want to see me again for a while."

Kiara pulled her ID and debit card out of her wallet and slid them both into the back pocket of her jeans. "I doubt it was as bad as all that. If there's one thing I'm good with, it's third-party observation of people's emotions. Lars didn't strike me as the type to hold a grudge, especially not against you."

"You think so?" Claire opened the door to the stairs and followed Kiara down to the parking garage. "I don't know. I mean, I know he...cares about me. But we've never fought like this before."

"Well, how long have you been dating?" she asked reasonably. "It's bound to happen sometime."

"Since August...so I guess three months, now."

"Not long at all." Kiara pushed open the heavy door at the bottom of the echoing stairwell and grinned back at Claire. "If you give him a chance to cool down, I bet he'll realize what a jackass he was being."

"Maybe." Claire didn't sound convinced, but she stepped through the door with a laugh. "No more talk about guys. Let's --"

The door had just clicked shut behind Kiara when Claire froze, her eyes widening slightly. Her head whipped around, and she raised an arm to shove Kiara back against the wall. The sweet, confused young girl was gone, replaced by a frighteningly intense woman who studied the dim parking garage like a predator on the scent of prey.

"Claire." Rough brick bit into Kiara's shoulders through her shirt as the younger woman's emotions hit her. She felt instinctively that someone was *there*, someone dangerous. A threat to be stalked and neutralized. Tendrils of dread shot through her and coalesced into a hard knot in her belly. "Is it --"

"Douglas." Claire spoke softly, her eyes still surveying the area around them. She slipped her bag off over her head and dropped it to the ground. "Go back inside. Now."

"No." She fumbled in her purse for her cell phone, though she knew she'd get no reception in the cavernous structure. "Damn it, we'll both --"

Claire knocked the phone from her hands and pushed her toward the door, backing up a step. "His scent is everywhere. I can't track him. Go *now*."

She couldn't leave Claire in the garage. "No." Instead, she headed for the red security alarm by the elevators. "Security is just --" She felt a strange motion, like a breeze moving past her cheek, and heard the report of a gun as a bullet dented the security console with a sharp metallic clang.

Kiara whirled. Douglas was about twenty feet away and moving closer. He stared at her with bloodshot eyes and a muscle ticked in his unshaven jaw, but his arm was steady as he stood with his gun smoking and trained on Claire.

A low, hair-raising growl sounded, and then Claire moved. She was fast, unbelievably fast, but Douglas anticipated her charge. The gun went off again, and Claire stumbled two more steps before hitting the ground with a soft grunt.

He didn't even look at her. His gun swung back to Kiara, and he smiled as he walked toward her. "Took your damn sweet time getting off work, didn't you?"

She fought against the need to rush to Claire's side. Only summoning help would accomplish anything, so she said nothing. Instead, she backed toward the wall, reaching out with one hand to feel for the alarm.

He pointed the gun at Claire again. "You move one hair closer to that alarm, and the next one goes in her head. Maybe two, just to be sure the bitch dies."

Kiara froze. "You don't have to hurt Claire. You don't have to hurt anyone else."

"Step away from the wall."

Her heart pounded painfully in her chest, but she did as he instructed. "What happens now?"

He gestured for her to take another step, the gun still trained on Claire but his eyes on her. "You're gonna come with me. And we're going to go and wait for your new boyfriend to show up."

She stopped again. *Adrian*. He'd come for her, no matter the danger. "No. You do whatever you're going to do, but you do it here. I'm not going."

The gun wavered as he took a frustrated step forward. Out of the corner of her eye, Kiara caught a blur of movement. Time seemed to slow as several things happened at once. Douglas reached out and grabbed at her arm. Claire rose from the ground and flung herself at him, knocking into him hard enough to drag them both off balance.

In the split second his attention was distracted, Kiara lunged for the alarm again and slapped her hand against it hard enough to leave an imprint on her palm. The piercing shriek of the alarm sounded quiet in comparison to the sound of Douglas's gun going off a second time. Kiara jerked around in time to see the coyote crumple to the ground as Douglas crossed the space between them in three quick steps.

Douglas's arm wrapped around Kiara's throat so tightly she could barely breathe, and she felt the press of the gun against her temple. It seared her flesh, made her eyes water, and she dragged in a rough, sobbing breath as her control slipped, spilling her emotions.

The alarm echoed in the parking deck, painfully loud. Douglas muttered a rough curse, and the gun disappeared. A moment later something hard crashed against her temple, and the world disappeared into darkness.

* * * * *

Adrian had to hand it to Isabel; she certainly knew how to handle herself around a cadre of disgruntled, good ol' boy Texas cops. She charmed and cajoled, threatened and persuaded, and just generally walked over every one of them, leaving them fairly equally divided over whether they wanted to kiss her or kill her.

It was a damn sight better than the FBI usually did in a place like Mystic Ridge.

A uniformed officer brought her an insulated cup of coffee, and she grimaced at its contents. Then she turned to Adrian and lowered her voice until it was barely audible over

the clicking of computer keys and ringing of telephones. "Tell me there's a Starbucks somewhere in this town."

Adrian snorted. "Over on the college campus, but the line is usually about twenty-five bitchy college kids deep. When we get through with this, I'll take you over to Joe's Cuppa. It's a cute little place run by a psychic. He always knows exactly what you want to drink."

"Creepy," she declared. "But useful. Let's see..." She snatched up a clipboard from the desk and sighed as she consulted it. "So far, we've managed to interview just about everyone in the department, including officers and support staff. There are a couple of people on vacation, some with the day off -- though we've managed to locate most of them -- and this guy. The one you put on your short list." Her gray eyes were sharp as she handed him a personnel printout. "He's MIA."

"Fuck." The paper crumpled in his hand, and he reached for his phone. He dialed Kiara's number and swore again when it went straight to voice mail. "I need to find my girlfriend. Douglas has a fucking grudge against her."

Isabel cocked an eyebrow at him as one of the agents from her team rushed into the break room. "How much of a grudge are we talking here, Adrian?"

He found Claire's number in his phone book and dialed it before answering. "I don't know. It doesn't help that he hates my guts too."

Isabel scanned the report the agent handed her and swore. "Enough to shoot someone and snatch her?"

Claire's voice drifted out of the speaker, telling him that she couldn't answer the phone right now. He snapped the phone shut and stared at Isabel. "Claire Franklin?"

She waved the agent away, holding her tongue until he was gone. "She's stable, but the lady she was with is missing."

Adrian was already on his feet. "I'm going to go talk to her. Then I'm going to find my damn girlfriend." *And I will kill anyone who gets in my way, whether you like it or not.*

"Shit, wait. You can't --" Isabel caught up with him at the door, and she had to wrap both of her hands around his arm to even slow him down. "Douglas is already wanted for questioning. Now, there are about four different ways I can officially snatch this from the cops --"

The growl left him before he could stop it. "Isabel, don't test me. I don't give a fuck about jurisdiction or anything else at this point. I need to know what Claire knows."

She let go and held up her hands, but her voice was harsh. "Fine. I can sit here with my thumb up my ass. And the cops who are already at the hospital can follow you, fuck everything up, and get you and your lady killed. Sounds like the best damn plan ever."

He took a deep breath and forced himself to think calmly. He wasn't popular right now, even with the cops who usually liked him. No one was going to be willing to look the

other way, not when he'd dragged one of the FBI's most demanding agents down on their heads.

But as much as Isabel liked him, he doubted she would welcome his impending vigilante justice.

There wasn't *time* to make a decision. Every second that ticked by was one with Kiara missing. One where she could be hurting. Dying.

Isabel watched him with knowing eyes. She knew what he was going to do. She knew him. And with Claire in the hospital and Lars bound to be glued to her side, Isabel was the only ally he had.

"Fine," he said shortly. "But I need to get over there *now* and find out what Claire knows. Can you keep the police off my ass?"

"I can do better than that." She grabbed her jacket from the rack by the door. "I'm going with you."

* * * * *

Even if Lars's scent hadn't been everywhere, Adrian would have known the other man had already arrived by the wary, guarded look on the face of the nurse who directed him to the high-risk end of the Magical Care Unit. "High risk" was a nice way of saying "secure," which meant Claire or Lars -- *or both* -- had been distraught enough they'd needed to separate them from the rest of the hospital.

The MCU-HR was at the end of a long hallway, divided from the rest of the hospital by a pair of magically warded doors at least six inches thick. The wrinkled old witch who sat at the doors looked askance at Isabel when they stopped, her eyebrows coming together. "Humans are strongly discouraged from going any farther, ma'am. You'll have to sign a waiver if you want to go inside."

Isabel snorted quietly and pulled her credentials out of her jacket, giving the woman a moment to read them. "I'll sign whatever you like."

Adrian fought the urge to snarl his impatience as the witch pulled out a form and fiddled with the pen at the top of her desk. "You might want to think twice. It's been an exciting day in --"

The door slammed open with a crash, and Adrian dragged Isabel back so quickly she stumbled. Lars shot out of the room and snatched Adrian up by his collar before slamming him into wall. "You son of a bitch."

His temper snapped. All his self-control, all his supposed calm... A growl ripped free of him as he pushed off the wall hard enough to slam Lars back against the other side of the hallway. "I don't have time for your shit, Lars."

“Don’t you mean *your* shit?” Lars wrapped a hand around Adrian’s throat and snarled. “What the fuck did I waste my week helping you for? So you could let your bitch go off and get mine *shot* by some guy *you* were supposed to stop?”

Adrian dragged Lars away from the wall, then slammed him back into it. He opened his mouth to scream at Lars --

-- and cursed in surprise as he flew back across the hallway, ending up pinned against the wall. Lars hadn’t moved; he was pinned to the opposite side of the hallway with a look of murderous rage on his face.

The little old lady stood between them, steel in her gaze and a faint glow of power around her. “Enough.” Her gaze swung to Lars, and she leveled a finger at him. “You have worn out your welcome, young man. When you want to comfort your lady instead of terrorizing everyone around her, maybe you can come back in and make yourself useful.”

Lars said nothing.

She huffed and turned to glare at Adrian. “And you’re no kind of alpha if you don’t know better than to provoke a man whose woman is injured. If you want to go roll around with him outside and tear each other’s hair out, fine. But not in the hospital.”

Adrian snarled.

The witch turned to Isabel. “What in heaven’s name is going on here?”

She just shrugged. “I’m here to question a witness to a federal crime. If Mr. Nilsson and Mr. Torres are going to cause you problems, I can have the police remove them.”

“Please do.”

Betrayal burned through him, and Adrian struggled against the invisible force holding him immobile. It was futile. Nothing he did would let him budge. Across the hallway he could see Lars’s frustration level rising just as quickly.

He slanted a look at his friend, a look that wasn’t friendly at all. Isabel just met his look with a bland smile and calmly asked the police to escort them out.

Chapter Eleven

Adrian was shaking with rage by the time the police dumped him and Lars outside the hospital doors. The little old witch had followed them, murmuring some sort of spell as soon as they were outside. She waved a hand and the paralysis holding him disappeared.

He charged the door and hit a blank wall of magic. "Fuck!"

Lars bent, his hands braced against his legs, his shoulders shaking with helpless, mirthless laughter. "I swear to Christ Almighty, Torres, whatever the opposite of the Midas touch is, you got it. Every damn thing you get your hands on turns to shit." He straightened, his anger almost palpable. "I'm going to kill you."

Adrian scowled at him. "Yeah, well, if Kiara ends up dead because of this, I just might let you."

"Oh, boo-fucking-hoo. You're breaking my heart." He paced by the entrance, barely leashed energy seeping out of him. "If you're so goddamn worried, what are you still doing here?"

"And where the hell am I supposed to go?" Adrian roared. "The only person who has any fucking clue what happened is Claire!"

"She's been shot twice, and they have her so pumped full of drugs she's babbling things that don't even make sense." Oddly, Adrian's anxiety seemed to calm Lars. "She said Douglas broke Kiara's bracelet. She was...talking crazy. Like that was important."

"Shit. *Shit.*" Panic threatened, and Adrian fought it back as he pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. "So I have no idea where he took her, no idea what the hell happened. Jesus Christ, Lars. Help me find this bastard." He dropped his hands from his eyes and met the other man's gaze squarely. "Help me get Kiara back in one piece, and his ass is yours. I'll make sure the Feds don't find out."

Lars studied him for a moment, then looked around as he blew out a breath. "Lena. She couldn't find the guys, but you've got something of Kiara's. She can find her." He stuck his hands in his pockets. "I can't believe you didn't think of it. You must be one shitty PI." The words were harsh but held no heat.

"Says the bastard who thought it was a good idea to strangle me instead of staying with his girlfriend," Adrian retorted. It was weak, as lacking in heat as Lars's insult had been.

Probably because Lars was right. He was acting like a boyfriend -- he was acting like *Lars* -- and right now that was the last thing Kiara needed. He dragged in a breath, ignoring the scents of the hospital, of pain and death. He took his worry and guilt and pain and shoved it aside, leaving nothing but steely resolve.

When he looked at Lars again, he was calm. Composed. Professional. "That bracelet. Do you know what happened to it? It'll save time if I don't have to go back to her place and find something."

Lars pulled his hand out of his pocket and held out a frayed braided leather strap with several small wooden beads. It was nothing he'd ever seen on Kiara.

What was more, it reeked of Douglas.

He opened his hand and let Lars drop the bracelet onto his palm. "It's his," he said quietly, keeping any hint of accusation from his voice. "And it's magic. It's weak, but I can feel it."

Lars looked defensive. "I've been a little distracted. Anyway, it should get the job done. I want him. Alive."

Adrian closed his fingers around the bracelet and nodded. "Go see if they'll let you back in now that I'm leaving. And if Isabel gets pissy that I left, tell her to call me."

"If she wants to keep you from nabbing Douglas and turning him over to me, I'll tie her up and stick her in the trunk of Claire's car."

Oh, *that* would go over well. "Yeah...maybe start with telling her to call me."

"I was joking, Torres." Lars leveled a reproachful look at him. "Not an idiot, remember?"

Adrian nodded and turned on his heel. It would take ten minutes, fifteen at the most to get across the river, but every second that ticked by was one more Kiara might not have.

He swore and broke into a run.

* * * * *

The bell above the door rang, and Adrian heard Lena's low, husky voice as she informed a pair of college-aged boys busily staring at her breasts that they would have to pay an additional eighty dollars if they wanted another consultation. Neither boy seemed

particularly eager to leave, but neither looked like they were about to pull out the money either.

Which was good, because Adrian wasn't in a patient mood. He met Lena's eyes over the boys' heads and cleared his throat as he held up the bracelet. "Someone else is missing."

She blinked, sharp intelligence flashing behind her gaze as she studied him for a brief moment. Then she turned her attention back to the two young men.

Within a minute they were gone, and Lena locked the door behind them before turning to face him, her entire demeanor changed. "Is it Claire? Is something wrong?"

"She's hurt, but she's okay." Adrian offered her the bracelet. "The man who shot her took my girlfriend. I think this belonged to him. Can you use it?"

She reached out and picked up the bracelet, curling her fingers around it as she closed her eyes. "It's a charm," she said after a few tense moments. "Created to mask power. Magical power." Her eyes opened, and she tilted her head toward the back of the shop before turning on her heel. As soon as he moved to follow her, she continued her explanation. "It wouldn't hide someone through whom magic flows strongly. A weak witch, perhaps. More likely a psychic."

Which meant Douglas had something to hide. *Jesus Christ. Just once I wish these guys full of self-loathing would get a fucking therapist.*

Lena led him through a small door at the back of her shop. It opened into a short hallway with a staircase on the left and a door on the right. "This is my workroom," she explained as she pulled a key from a pocket in her skirts and slipped it into the lock. From the looks of the rest of her shop, he'd half expected a rusty old brass key, but she'd installed a nice, modern deadbolt.

He jerked his head in the direction of the front of the store. "I thought *that* was your workroom."

She grinned and opened the door. "That's my stage. I put on quite a show, don't I? This is where the *real* magic takes place."

The room looked like a modern science lab. A shining, stainless steel table filled the center of the room, surrounded by stools that looked comfortable but mundane. A large, industrial refrigerator rested in one corner of the room, next to two large sinks. On the other side sat a modern range stove. Sturdy wooden cupboards lined the walls, and through the glass doors he could see shelf after shelf of neatly organized and labeled containers.

Lena dropped the bracelet on one side of the table, reached up to the pot rack and pulled down a small saucepan. "Disappointed?"

He *was*, at least a little. The outside of the store had been all chipped wood and mystical decorations, with candles and strategically placed lanterns providing most of the light. It might have been a little on the gaudy side, but at least it had looked like the home of a powerful witch.

This looked like a brainy scientist's lab. Or Martha Stewart's kitchen.

She laughed when he didn't reply. "It's okay. You're not the first one to get whiplash. I put on the show because the humans get pretty bored by how unshowy magic usually is. At least the kind I do."

Adrian watched as Lena dumped the bracelet into the pan. She pulled a stool over so she could sit, and tension built in Adrian again as the seconds ticked by. "Are you going to cook something? I'm not sure I've got a lot of time."

"No, the pan's in case it catches fire." When he blinked, she smiled and set the pan in front of her on the table. "With a normal scrying spell, it wouldn't happen. But the magic in this charm is fundamentally different than mine. A different type of power. Usually I'd just work around it, but you're in a hurry so I'm just going to shove my way through. That could cause a bit of a backlash. Now give me a second..."

Considering the threat of imminent combustion, Adrian expected something a little more ostentatious. Instead she whispered a few unintelligible words under her breath, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. The level of power in the room rose considerably, but nothing *visible* happened.

Two minutes ticked past with Adrian's frustration and worry growing with every heartbeat before Lena exhaled, her eyes still closed. "Got him. He's an angry-looking bastard, isn't he?"

"Yeah." His fists clenched so tightly he felt his nails break the skin on his palms. "Is Kiara --"

"Just a second. I need to -- there she is. She's unconscious, but she's breathing. Let me get you a street address, and then I'll..."

She fell silent again, and Adrian fought the urge to grind his teeth. A tiny tendril of smoke curled up out of the pan, along with the faint scent of smoldering leather.

Another minute passed before Lena exhaled. "Okay. It's an apartment building. Four fifteen, on Washington."

It was Kiara's address. The bastard had taken her back to her apartment. It was suicidal, considering the fact that he *had* to know it would be one of the first places Adrian looked.

Of course he does, if he's psychic. Which makes this a big fucking trap.

Which begged the question of how, exactly, he was supposed to manage to get in there without getting Kiara -- or himself -- killed.

"Okay, going back into the --" Flames erupted from the saucepan, towering a foot above the rim. Adrian lunged for Lena and dragged her back before her hair could catch fire.

"Shit." She was breathing too fast, but she pulled away from him and moved back to the table. "Thanks for the quick reflexes. I think I'd look pretty awful without eyebrows."

"What happened?"

The flame had already died out. Lena picked up the pan and tipped it over, spilling ashes onto the table. "Too much, too fast." Her expression turned guilty. "I'm sorry, I must have underestimated how strong it was. I just assumed... The charms I make to block magic are so much --"

Of course. He cut her off with a gesture, not caring that it was rude. "You have charms like this? Strong enough to hide my presence?"

Lena nodded without hesitating. "Yes."

"What about blocking other people's magic?"

"Yes," she said again. "But you'd need two different ones. One to contain your magic, and one to repel other people's."

"But I can use them together?"

She nodded.

For the first time in hours, Adrian felt hopeful. "Have you got them both ready? I don't have the money now, but I can get it."

Lena hurried across the room to one of the cabinets. "Rescue your girlfriend first. Pay me later." She slanted a look at him as she opened one of the glass doors. "I heard you and Lars shut down the HLH and got the cops in trouble for looking the other way."

He nodded cautiously. "I don't think we shut them down for good, but we kicked 'em pretty hard."

"Good." She pulled out two simple amulets, both no more than wooden discs strung on long strips of leather. "Kathleen Murphy is a friend. A sweet girl who comes to me for lessons in binding charms sometimes."

Adrian nodded again, unsure where the conversation was going until Lena crossed the room and pressed both amulets into his hand. "I could get fifty thousand dollars for these on the black market. I'm the only person in Mystic Valley who can make charms this strong. I'm giving them to you because you're going to use them to finish this. But you need to bring them back when it's over."

It seemed absurd that the cool wooden discs in his hand were worth fifty grand, but he could only imagine the sort of power they could grant the wearer. Immunity from magic, invisibility from psychics...

In the hands of someone like Douglas, they could cause a lot of pain.

He slipped both over his head and tucked them inside his shirt. "It's a deal. I'll bring them back when Kiara's safe."

"Good." She smiled and rested her hand on his chest. Power crashed into him for just a moment, intense enough to make him sway. When it faded, both amulets felt slightly warm against his chest.

Lena smiled. "Go save your lady."

He didn't need to be told twice.

* * * * *

The cold bite of metal against her wrists woke Kiara. It was confusing, since she was pretty sure the rest of her was nestled into the soft comforter on her bed. She moved and the metal clinked, so she opened her eyes.

It took a moment to focus her gaze, and she recognized the ceiling fan in her bedroom. When she looked up to her wrists, which were shackled to the headboard with handcuffs, the sudden movement made her wince. Her head throbbed with pain, and the pain helped her remember.

Douglas.

She found him sitting at the foot of her bed in a chair she recognized as one from the living room. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and he watched her with a blank, disinterested expression. Cool. Emotionless. He could have been staring at the wall.

Kiara fought tears. "Claire. Did you kill her?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?" His smile was tiny and looked fake. "Nothing much matters at this point."

A wave of hopelessness hit her, stealing her breath. It took her a moment to realize the emotion wasn't hers. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to do anything. You can walk away."

"Boyfriend doesn't tell you much, does he? Asshole pulled the fucking Feds down on our asses. Not just the Feds, but the goddamn queen bitch of the freak squad. My life is worth squat now."

She swallowed. "Who, Adrian? He's not my boyfriend." She could barely force out the words, but they were Adrian's only chance. "He's just a guy. I only met him a couple of days ago."

"Too bad for you." His gun sat on her dresser a few feet away, and he picked it up, studying it. "This is why you shouldn't get involved with freaks. You may not think he's your boyfriend, but he's nothing but an animal. He fucked you, so now you're his personal piece of ass. That's how animals are. Twisted."

Kiara could feel the magic wafting off him. It curled around her battered senses with the heaviness of a cloying perfume. "You think I'm twisted too, though. Don't you? Isn't that why you hate me so much?"

"I think you're an uppity bitch who should stay in her own damn head." He leaned forward, the gun still cradled in his hand. "Don't try 'n' play me. If I get one hint that you're trying to fuck with me with your magic, I'll knock you the hell out again."

"I don't *want* to be in your head." She forced herself not to flinch. "Just do whatever you're going to do. He's not coming for me." If she could touch him, she could focus her

power like she had in the diner. But broadcasting anything would just be enough to piss him off. "So there's no need to wait."

Douglas made a rude noise. "Typical fucking woman. It's not all about you."

Anger and frustration knotted inside her and forced out, seeping from her in cold tendrils. She was running out of time, and dealing with the man in front of her was like being caught in a funhouse. Every time she thought she knew what motivated him, what he wanted, something inside him shifted, confusing her. "Killing me won't hurt him."

"Now you just sound like an idiot. A self-absorbed idiot." Douglas smiled at her, a chilling expression that made her skin crawl. "If you don't shut up, I might knock you out just to spare myself a migraine."

She made a face at him. "It's really hard to believe I'm self-absorbed for thinking you might be using me to get at Adrian. I'm the one handcuffed to a bed. Then again, maybe you're too crazy to have remembered that *you put me here*."

"You're self-absorbed for thinking I'd be using you for anything else," he retorted, refusing to rise to her bait. "You're an idiot for thinking it's not going to kill him if I hurt you."

What he was suggesting hadn't even occurred to her. "I meant you should go ahead and kill me, you sick bastard. As for whether he gives a shit, why don't you call him and ask?" It was a calculated risk, but one she had to take. The fact that they were in her apartment, a place Adrian was at least marginally familiar with, could give him an advantage. At the very least, he'd have time to prepare.

Douglas tilted his head to the side, his eyes going slightly blank. The magical feeling she'd gotten from him earlier flared again, and for the first time she realized what it was.

He was psychic.

His eyes cleared suddenly and he laughed. "Okay. That will work perfectly. Let's call him."

Fuck. Kiara struggled against the cuffs around her wrists, but he'd fastened them tightly. There was no way she was going to be able to free herself. "If you hurt him..."

"If?" Douglas tapped the side of his head. "There's no if. I'll know before he gets within a hundred feet of this apartment."

Even as he spoke, a shadow darkened the open doorway behind him. Adrian appeared, giving lie to the words. Kiara choked back a relieved, terrified sob as he moved slowly, carefully, into the room.

She dragged her eyes back to Douglas, meeting his smug gaze with a concern she didn't have to fake. "What are you planning to do to him?"

"Is this the part where I tell you my evil plan like a fucking moron?" Douglas tightened his fingers on the gun and swung it up, aiming it at her. Behind him, Adrian froze. "Jesus,

woman. If you don't shut the hell up, I'll just shoot you a couple of times and hope he gets here before you bleed to death."

She knew she had to *do something*, but she couldn't focus her abilities without touch. If she tried to broadcast a strong emotion to hurt or distract Douglas, it would have the same effect on Adrian, and she couldn't risk that. "I-I guess it would depend on where you shot me."

For a second, she thought she'd miscalculated. He aimed the gun at her left leg and started to rise. His other hand went to his belt, reaching for his cell phone. "How about we call him, and I shoot you in the leg. See if that hurries him up." His eyes only left her for a second, just long enough to flip open his phone.

That second was enough.

Adrian moved silently. He grabbed Douglas's gun arm and jerked it to the side. The gun went off once, hitting the lamp on her bedside table, and Kiara barely managed to turn her head quickly enough to avoid the shards of pottery that flew at her.

The gun sounded a second time before she'd looked back, and her heart froze when she heard Adrian's grunt of pain. Then the gun was away from Douglas, skittering across the floor to the other side of the room.

Adrian snarled low in his throat as he wrestled with Douglas before slamming the other man into the wall. Douglas grunted and closed his fingers around a vase sitting on her dresser. He smashed it into the side of Adrian's face, and the sound of breaking glass filled the room as Adrian stumbled back.

She should have been able to feel his pain. Several long cuts on his face began to bleed sluggishly, and she *knew* he'd been shot somewhere. But he was blank, emotionless, even when he roared in rage.

Adrian lifted a hand to wipe blood from his eyes, and Douglas seized his chance and dived across the room toward the gun. Adrian took off after him, disappearing from her field of vision when he hit the floor.

It made the fight more terrifying. She could hear them struggling, hear Adrian's heavy, pained breathing. Another shot fired, this one hitting the wall a few feet to the left of her, and Kiara struggled against the handcuffs again.

Douglas rose to his feet a second later, a sick smile on his face as he raised the gun and pointed it at her. Before she could panic, before she could do *anything*, Adrian lurched to his feet and tore the man's arm back so fast she heard bones snap. Douglas howled in pain as the gun hit the floor, and Adrian tossed him against the wall again. This time he slid down it, ending up in a heap on the floor.

Silence filled the apartment, broken only by Adrian's harsh, shallow breaths. Then he turned to her, and she could see the blood running down his face and soaking his gray T-

shirt. He'd been shot in the chest and was bleeding, but he didn't seem aware of it as he crossed the floor in three short steps, stopping next to the bed. "Are you okay?"

She could barely speak past the lump in her throat, and her hands shook so badly the handcuffs rattled against the headboard. "You're hurt." She reached out, trying to get an idea of his condition, but she could only find Douglas's vague aura. "I can't feel you."

"Shh, just a second." He moved away again, bending over Douglas. A moment later, he came up with a set of keys. He unlocked her wrists, coughing a little as he moved.

As soon as she was free, she pulled the Egyptian cotton case free from her pillow. "Adrian." There was blood on the back of his shirt, as well, and she fought tears as she folded the pillowcase. "We need to call an ambulance."

"Wait. You need to cuff Douglas..." He trailed off into another coughing fit. "Kyle is going to come and get him."

She handed him the pillowcase, snatched the cuffs from the comforter, and hurried across the room on shaky legs. With quick movements, she closed one cuff and then looped the short chain through the radiator by the wall before fastening the second cuff around the unconscious man's wrist. "Not the police or your friend from the FBI?"

He didn't answer. Kiara looked back to find him slumped to the bed, and fear exploded in her. "Adrian? Adrian!"

A short curse escaped her, and she scrambled back to his side. His breaths still came in short, hard pants, and she pressed the pillowcase to the wound on his back and rolled him as gently as she could. His T-shirt gave way under her hands, revealing the ugly wound on the right side of his chest. Blood bubbled from it with every labored breath, and she swore again.

Collapsed lung, no tracheal deviation. Open pneumothorax. Even as her brain supplied the diagnosis, she trembled. He needed a chest tube, but she could keep him stable until he reached the hospital, as long as he didn't bleed to death on her. What really scared her was the fact that she could still feel nothing from him, no pain or fear.

You've shut down, that's all. Get over it and get to work, Kiara. She depended on her empathic faculties in trauma situations, used them to assess her patients just like she used a heart monitor or pulse oximetry. But this wasn't a *patient*; this was Adrian, and her empathy would only get in the way.

He stirred, and she shushed him as she reached for the phone on her bedside table. "You're going to be okay. Just lie still."

He grabbed her hand and rasped, "Kyle will be here soon. Tell him...tell..."

"I will. I have to call an ambulance first."

Even glazed with pain, his eyes blazed. "He'll keep you safe."

Her blood chilled, and she leaned closer to him. "Stop it. You're going to okay, so *you* can keep me safe. Don't move."

Kiara took the phone with her to the kitchen. When the emergency operator answered, she said calmly, "I need an ambulance." She rattled off her address and left the phone on the counter, with the operator still asking questions.

She needed to block the flow of air through the bullet hole in Adrian's chest, so she grabbed a roll of plastic wrap from the cupboard and ran back into the bedroom. He hadn't moved, but he'd gone pale, and sweat beaded on his skin.

"Damn. Adrian?" She had tape and scissors in her medical kit, and she cut a square of plastic to cover his wound. "Talk to me."

He murmured something unintelligible, and Kiara blinked away tears. She talked to calm herself more than him. "I'm going to tape the plastic now, but only on three sides. The open side will act as what they call a flutter valve. You'll need to --" The words hung in her throat. "Sit up now, baby. It'll be easier to breathe."

She slid an arm under him. He tried to sit, then groaned with effort and went limp, sinking back to the bed. "Shit. Adrian, no." Her fingers shook on his neck. His pulse was too fast and thready, but there was nothing else Kiara could do. She could only whisper to him and listen for the sirens she hoped would come soon.

Chapter Twelve

Adrian dragged in a breath and told himself it was unfitting for the new Alpha wolf of Mystic Valley to get caught whimpering like a baby just because of one little sucking chest wound.

Kyle snorted in derision. “*Now* do you believe this is a bad fucking idea?”

“Shut up and hand me my shirt.”

“If you bleed all over the floor, Kiara’s going to freak out.”

Pain erupted in his chest again, but not the kind that came from a barely healed gunshot wound. Kiara had gone home for a few hours of much needed rest and would return to find him gone. She’d be hurt. Confused. A better man would wait for her, explain things to her.

But Adrian had finally found the one thing he wasn’t strong enough to handle. He couldn’t take Kiara’s big brown eyes staring up at him as if he were some sort of hero. Not today. Not with what he was about to do.

It hurt to stretch out his hand, but he accepted the shirt from Kyle and embraced the pain as he dragged his shirt over his head. “Did any of the dominant wolves decline their invitation to the afternoon’s festivities?”

Kyle cocked an eyebrow at his tone, harsh and self-loathing. “Some put on a good front, made like they couldn’t be bothered to take time out from their busy schedules.” He looked away and shoved his hands into his pockets. “A few of them... Well, it’s not important right now.”

“No, I suppose it’s not.” The meeting this afternoon wasn’t for the wolves in any case. As the new de facto leader, he was all the representative they needed, though he’d extended the invitation both as a courtesy and as a way of finding out who his enemies would be in the months to come.

The healing scar on his chest tugged painfully as he leaned down to tie his boots, but this time he didn't give any indication. Showing weakness in front of Kyle was one thing, but once he stepped over the hospital's threshold, the slightest sign of vulnerability would be asking for death.

The tall nurse who'd handled his care for the last shift knocked on the open door and came in, an uncharacteristically serious look on her face. "Mr. Torres, I really have to insist you reconsider leaving against medical advice. Even one more day of observation could be critical to your recovery."

He straightened and forced himself to smile. "I'm fine. Another week and there won't even be a scar. Do you have paperwork you needed me to sign?"

She sighed and shook her head, though she flipped open the clipboard in her hand and shuffled through papers. "I can't believe Kiara hasn't talked you out of this."

Another stab of guilt, and it took effort not to let it show as he signed where she indicated. Kiara didn't know. And in spite of all of his manly, chauvinistic attempts to convince himself that perhaps it was for the best, he knew that he wasn't just pushing her away out of a misguided attempt to keep her safe.

Looking in her eyes and seeing horror instead of adoration might be worse than being dead.

The nurse looked over the forms and began to rattle off an obviously memorized speech about his departure and the legal absolution his signature offered the hospital should he drop dead in the parking lot. Lars sauntered in behind her and lounged against the wall, though he didn't speak until the nurse gathered her papers and brushed past him. "Limo's here, Torres."

Adrian spared Kyle one last look. "Could you take my things back to my office? I'll meet you there once this...thing is done."

Kyle had gone tense in Lars's presence, but he only nodded. "Sure. Good luck."

"If Kiara calls..." Adrian lifted his jacket from the edge of the bed and steeled his emotions. "Tell her something came up, and I'll call her tonight."

"If she wants to hear it," Kyle agreed. "I'll see you later." He cast an almost nervous glance at Lars and walked out.

Lars raised both eyebrows. "Got your boy doing your dirty work now?"

"You want to sit here while she tries to argue me out of leaving?" Once he was on his feet, the pain seemed bearable -- or his adrenaline had finally kicked in. "Let's just get this shit done, and you can bitch at me later."

"Or I could bitch at you while we get this shit done." Lars seemed unconcerned with his condition. He tossed a set of keys into the air and caught them before nodding to the door. "Better get moving before our cargo wakes up, though."

Adrian took one last look at the bed, but his gaze caught on the chair pulled close to the other side. Kiara had slept there the first night, her scent strong enough to counteract the uncomfortable smell of sterile chemicals and his own blood.

What he was about to do would show strength. It would provoke fear. It would help keep her safe.

And it might be terrifying enough to drive her away from him.

He cleared his throat and avoided Lars's gaze as he strode past him. "On to the show."

* * * * *

Forty-five minutes of driving led to a dirt road that jarred Adrian's aching body as Lars steered the car around potholes and over branches that had fallen from the towering trees on either side of them. Adrian closed his eyes and took steady breaths. "If we're going to be meeting out here again, I'm sending someone out here to clean up this damn drive."

"Fucking crappy ranch roads," Lars agreed absently.

The borrowed -- or maybe even stolen -- car cleared the small wooded area and coasted to a stop beside a dilapidated barn. A small ring of cars, trucks, and motorcycles surrounded the structure, and men and women milled about the parked vehicles.

The power gathered here was enough to terrify the humans of Mystic Ridge. All dominant shape-shifters, all alphas. Some of them led small groups of like-minded individuals, but none of them had ever declared themselves the undisputed ruler of their kind.

Not before him.

Adrian watched the milling shifters and marveled at just how much hatred Brandon Douglas must have engendered in his years on the MRPD. This many dominant personalities in one place rarely ended in anything but violence, but for once the tension in the air wasn't directed at each other. Heavy anticipation filled the clearing, the magic so strong he could feel it from the passenger seat.

"You going to join the hunt?" Adrian asked Lars, trying to keep his voice neutral.

"Prime suspect like myself?" He cut the engine and dragged a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "Not getting any blood on *my* hands. I think I'll go have a drink instead."

"Good." Adrian tugged at the seatbelt and tried not to wince. "Does Claire know what's happening tonight?"

"If she did, she'd be out here. I'll tell her when it's done."

"You don't think that's going to piss her off?"

"Sure, it will. But she'll understand, and she'll get over it." Lars's lighter clicked, and the scent of cigarette smoke filled the car. "What about you? You didn't sneak your ass out of the hospital because Kiara's on board with what's going down."

Which was the crux of the matter. Adrian sighed and stared out the window, not ready to face his fellow shape-shifters. “You think a human *can* be on board with this? Or a nurse? A fucking *empath*?”

“You want to know what I think? I think your cute little nurse has felt darker shit than you’ve got in you, Torres, and probably from regular old people down at the bank or grocery store.” Lars tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “And I think if you scared her half as bad as you scare yourself, she’d be gone already.”

Resentment stiffened his spine, and he curled his fingers around the door handle. “Yeah, well, cut me some slack. We can’t all embrace our inner asshole whenever it suits us.” He popped open the door and held out his hand. “Keys.”

Lars handed them over as he took a drag from his cigarette. “You’re welcome.”

It was hard to acknowledge help when his vulnerability made everything around him a threatening challenge, but Adrian grated out the words anyway. “Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

Heads turned as Adrian climbed from the car, but no one approached him. The murmur of voices fell silent, and he felt the heavy weight of a dozen stares as he strode to the back of the car and found the key that would open the trunk.

The rusty trunk opened with a creak, and Adrian stared down at the bound and gagged man inside. He was alive and in better shape than he had any right to be. Dark eyes opened, and Douglas stared up at him with hate and a hint of fear.

Adrian left the trunk open and stepped back, turning his attention to the shifters gathered in a rough half circle to his right. “I speak for the wolves of Mystic Valley, and I protect this territory now. From *all* threats. But Brandon Douglas has wronged more than the wolves.”

His chest burned from the effort, but he dragged Douglas out of the trunk and dumped him on the ground. Any sympathy he might have felt died when he remembered the gun pointed at Kiara, the hatred in Douglas’s face as the man considered using her death as another sick lesson. He rolled the man onto his back with one foot and looked up again. Anticipation tightened, melted into excitement and predatory glee.

Please be right, Lars. Please be fucking right. He closed his eyes and gathered the strength inside him as he whispered the words that would make him a killer, even if he did nothing more than sit in a bar with Lars and drink for the rest of the night. “As Alpha of the Valley’s wolves, I’m inviting you to the hunt.”

Chapter Thirteen

Kiara folded the last T-shirt. She laid it on the bed, propped her hands on her hips, and cocked her head at Claire. “More socks and stuff?”

“Ha. You think Lars is going to let me outside the damn cabin, don’t you?” Claire was sitting upright for a change, but she still looked deathly pale, her freckles standing out against her skin. “You’re probably wasting time packing shoes at all.”

She smiled. “I think he’ll probably be carrying you, but we wouldn’t want your feet to get cold.” She surveyed the case and then flipped it closed. “Have you ever been down to Big Bend?”

“No.” Claire made a rude noise. “My parents’ idea of rustic is Martha’s Vineyard.”

Kiara smiled and shook her head. “Sounds like Mom. Dad and I were always up for an outdoor adventure, but she preferred spas on vacation.”

Claire’s laugh turned into a hiss, and for a brief moment, Kiara was treated to an uncomfortable flash of the younger girl’s pain. While the first bullet had gone cleanly through her shoulder, the second shot had shattered her arm. Claire had complained bitterly at being held in the hospital after her surgery, but Kiara knew how lucky she was. A human suffering Claire’s injuries could have spent up to a month under doctor’s supervision before being released.

Not that any of the doctors had been eager to let her leave, especially when it became clear that the first thing she planned to do was disappear into the mountains for a week. The nurses and hospital staff who had been forced to deal with Lars during Claire’s stay at the hospital, however, were more than willing to encourage a compromise.

In the end, Adrian had called in a favor from Katie Murphy’s mother. Trisha Murphy was so thrilled with Adrian for bringing the HLH to justice that she’d spent two straight days at Claire’s bedside, layering spells of healing and strength to augment her natural

regenerative powers. Tucked into the suitcase Kiara had just packed was a week's worth of tonics, potions, and teas, all of which Trisha had assured Adrian would have Claire on her feet in no time.

Which was assuming Lars would let her *get* on her feet. He'd had to make himself scarce while Mrs. Murphy was working with Claire, but when he'd come back, he'd exuded so much self-satisfied pleasure, Kiara had known something horrible had happened to Douglas.

She sighed and sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. "Did Lars tell you what happened to him?" she asked, not bothering to clarify who she meant. "Adrian just said it had been taken care of."

Claire's expression turned serious. "He didn't do it," she replied at last. "Adrian, I mean. Adrian and Lars knew they'd be the main suspects, so they gave Douglas to the other alphas."

Kiara nodded and tried to ignore the cold feeling in her midsection. It was roughly the same thing Adrian had told her. When she'd asked him when the alphas in town had started working so well together, he'd only said dealing with Douglas was a "special circumstance."

Aside from those terse words, most of their conversations in the days since he'd checked himself out of the hospital against doctor's orders had revolved around the weather and other inane subjects. Actually, if she was going to be honest with herself, they hadn't had many conversations at all. She'd only spoken to him on the phone a few times, and she hadn't seen him at all since he'd left the hospital without telling her.

She opened her mouth to tell Claire about his avoidance, but one look at Claire's face told her she already knew. "You've talked to Adrian."

Claire winced. "I...talked at him. Actually, I sort of yelled at him, I think. The details are a little fuzzy. There were lots of painkillers."

Kiara shrugged one shoulder and tried to smile. "Hey, it's not like we had some grand affair, you know. It was...a few days." A few days of feeling closer to Adrian than she'd felt to anyone. A few days of the barest whisper or touch sending her spiraling into pleasure. Her eyes stung, and she cleared her throat. "It's just... If it's over, I'd rather just have it be over."

"He's scared. Scared of himself, just like I'm a little scared of myself and what I can do. But it's easier for me. I'm young, and I'm still getting used to what I'm capable of. And I have Lars. No matter how scared of myself I get, I always know that he's strong enough to stop me. But Adrian's got to face the fact that there aren't a lot of people out there who can stop him."

"Surely he already knew that," Kiara protested. "What's changed? Why do I make that worse?"

"Knowing it isn't the same as doing it. I *knew* I could kill a man. I just...didn't know if I would." Claire's expression was haunted, and Kiara caught a twinge of that same odd mix of

discomfort and satisfaction that had plagued Adrian after the confrontation in the diner. "Now I know. And maybe I wish I didn't."

"I can understand that." She could even understand Adrian blaming her for the upheaval in his life. What she couldn't take was the silence. "I just wish he'd talk to me about it."

"Yeah, if you figure out how to convince big bad alphas how to talk about their insecurities, let me know." Claire managed a weak smile. "We'll write a book and make millions."

"I'll keep that in mind." Her phone began to vibrate on the nightstand. She glanced at the display and gave Claire a rueful look before answering it. "Hello, Adrian."

"Kiara." Adrian cleared his throat. "Isabel left town this morning."

He sounded nervous. "What does that mean? About the investigation?"

"It's over for now. I'm free to go about my business. So is Lars."

Kiara sighed with relief. "That's good, Adrian. That...that's great."

He was silent for a few seconds. Then, "You're not at your apartment. I came here. Do you think you'll be home soon?"

She closed her eyes as her stomach knotted with anxiety. She needed closure, but it didn't make it any easier to face. "I just came over to help Claire pack for her trip, but we're done. I can be home in ten minutes."

A hand slid over her arm, and she felt Claire's gentle, silent encouragement as Adrian replied, "Sure. I brought some dinner for us. Just takeout. I'll wait out front."

"That's fine. I'll see you soon." She snapped the phone shut and gave Claire a wry smile. "Well. Here goes nothing, I guess."

"Hey." Claire's fingers tightened for a moment. "Don't go over there thinking it's all going to go to hell, okay? Adrian's a good guy. If he weren't a good guy... Well, he wouldn't be losing sleep over what he had to do."

Kiara bent to retrieve her purse and slid the strap over her neck. "I know that. But he doesn't have to be a bad guy for..." *For this not to be worth it.* "Call me before you guys head down to Terlingua, okay?"

"I will. Thanks for helping out." She wrinkled her nose. "Lars probably would have given me a couple pairs of underwear and a T-shirt or two *if* I was lucky."

She rolled her eyes and kissed Claire's cheek. "Tell him I said to have a nice trip, and call me if he starts being insufferable."

"I'll see you in a week. Don't worry about locking the door behind you. I told him to get lost for a few hours, but he's probably sitting down on the stoop anyway."

Kiara thought Claire might be joking, but Lars was on the steps, smoking a cigarette, when she headed for her car. "Hi, Lars." He nodded and said nothing, so she fidgeted with her purse strap for a moment. "Adrian said his friend from the FBI left town today."

"He called me." He reached for the beer bottle sitting next to him on the stoop and finished it, then rose.

"Of course he did." She cleared her throat. "Claire's all packed, so...have a nice time."

"Thanks." His cigarette hit the sidewalk, and he ground it out beneath the scuffed toe of his boot. "He lost his shit, you know."

Kiara's hand tightened around her purse strap. "Excuse me?"

"When Douglas took you," he explained, shoving the extinguished butt into his empty bottle. "It messed him up so bad he couldn't think. Not weird, but...I don't know." He shrugged and scratched the back of his head. "He acted like that had never happened to him before."

Kiara lowered her gaze, a thousand questions whirling through her mind. Before she could ask any of them, the door slammed. She looked up and Lars was gone.

* * * * *

Adrian was standing outside her door when she got home, a box on the ground next to him. Her hand shook as she fumbled for her key, but she smiled anyway. "Hi."

"Hey." His voice sounded easy enough, but she could feel his nervousness filling the air between them. "I should have called first."

"No, it's okay." She pushed the door open with her hip as he picked up the box. "I was coming home anyway. What did you bring for dinner?"

"Lasagna. There's a couple that runs a tiny Italian restaurant a couple of doors down from my office."

"Sounds terrific." She dropped her keys and purse on the table in the hall and took the surprisingly heavy box from him. Claire's words echoed in her ears, and she tried to remain hopeful. "We can open that bottle of merlot you brought last week. If you want."

"Sure." He was silent as he followed her into the kitchen, accepting the bottle of wine and the corkscrew from her with a murmur of thanks. The nervousness she felt from him didn't decrease; if anything, it grew stronger.

She pulled the metal container of lasagna from the bag and set it on the counter. There were foil-wrapped garlic rolls and a white box of tiramisu. She stuck the box in the fridge and pulled a couple of glasses from the cabinet. "Are you all right, Adrian?" His anxiety coupled with her own made her stomach tighten.

The wine hit the table with a thump, and he turned and braced his hands against the counter. "Can you deal with what happened?" he said abruptly.

It was the last thing she'd expected, and it took her a moment to answer. "Which part?"

His hands clenched so hard around the edge of the counter she was afraid it might break. "What happened with Douglas."

Kiara caught herself before she could reach out to him. "You did what you had to do," she whispered, watching him carefully. "I can't fault you for that."

Adrian closed his eyes. "The wolves in Mystic Valley have never had one leader before. I could still step down. Let someone else take my place as Alpha. But if I don't, this won't be the last time I have to make a choice like that. It won't be the last time I have to take care of someone like Douglas, and next time I may have to do it with my own two hands."

His pain, his conflict, would have been plain even if she hadn't been able to feel it. He had a job to do, a duty to the other shifters and to himself, but he couldn't do it if he always had to be worried that his actions would upset or frighten her.

Could she handle it? If not, she'd have to walk away. He might try to stay out of the politics, to let leadership fall to others, but the laws of nature existed for a reason. Sooner or later, Adrian would be the Alpha.

"Would it be easier for you? With the others?" Her voice was quiet, raw. "If I wasn't in the picture?"

"No." He opened his eyes and found her gaze. "But being with me could put you in danger. I'm not the only dominant wolf in this town. Douglas made you a target because he hated me. And you've already seen what the dominance challenges can be like. It's not fair to ask you to put yourself in danger." He let out a short, harsh laugh. "But Claire tells me that it's also the twenty-first fucking century, and you have a right to decide for yourself."

So that was part of why he'd avoided her. She fought tears as she stared at him. She could walk away if it would make his life less complicated, but she couldn't do it to save herself trouble. She'd only make herself miserable without him because, sometime in the last two weeks, she'd fallen in love with him. The realization stole her breath and then made her laugh as she reached out for his hand. "I can handle it."

The tension in his body disappeared, replaced by overwhelming relief. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." She twined her fingers with his, and he reacted by straightening and tugging her into his arms. His free arm slipped around her waist, pulling her tight against his body as he lowered his face to her hair.

For several endless moments he stood like that, holding her snug against his chest as he let his emotions say what he obviously couldn't put into words. Along with his relief was a distinct current of desire, amplified by the fierce satisfaction that flooded him when he inhaled the scent of her hair.

And underneath it all was something stronger, a possessiveness and affection that went far past mere fondness. Whatever else he struggled with, there was no doubt he felt as deeply for her as she did for him.

Kiara clutched his shirt and relished the solid, comforting warmth of his chest, of his arms around her. Finally, she lifted her face to his. “Are *you* going to be able to handle things? With me?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I know how important control is for an alpha, but I don’t how long it’ll take you to get used to the empathy,” she confessed. “It could be a while.”

“Oh.” His fingers rubbed slow, soothing circles against her lower back as he paused, obviously considering her words. Finally, he sighed. “I’m not going to lie and say it’s easy. But the only thing that really bothers me is worrying that I’ll hurt you by mistake.”

“If you hurt me, you’d know. You’d always know, Adrian, even if the empathy didn’t usually affect you anymore.”

“And you could stop me? Like you did in the diner?”

“I don’t think I’d *have* to, but yes. I could.”

“Then I don’t care, Kiara.”

She could barely force out the words. “Even if it stops? The empathy, the...the sex?”

Adrian pulled back a little, slid his hand into his pocket, and pulled out one of the amulets she’d seen around his neck the week before. He held it between them for a moment before tossing it to the counter. “I brought that with me. I was wearing it when I fought with Douglas. It blocks magic, and I thought... Well, I thought it might be easier to talk if we were on equal footing. But then I thought that might just make you feel like a freak. And that’s the last thing I want.”

She stared at it. “I worry, Adrian. That the empathy is the only reason it’s good for you.” She trailed her fingers across the cool counter before grasping the leather. It was still warm from his body, and she wrapped it around her fingers. “You worry too, don’t you? That what you want influences me, makes me want you.”

He cleared his throat and then nodded once, the gesture short and jerky.

Kiara pressed the charm into his hand, then tugged his shirt free and started unbuttoning it. “Put it on.”

Adrian waited until she’d undone the last button, then let the shirt slide from his shoulders. The tight white T-shirt underneath showed off the way the strong muscles of his shoulders and chest flexed as he gathered the fabric up and pulled it over his head. He slipped the thin leather cord over his head, and magic flared briefly as the wooden disk touched the skin of his chest.

When it faded, so did any perception she had of him. She pushed aside the vague sense of loss and focused on Adrian. His skin was hot under her mouth as she kissed his chest, her hands sliding around his waist to tease at the small of his back, just above his belt. She felt only the vibrations of his approving moan under her lips.

Adrian moved his hands to her hips, pulling her closer until there was no hiding how hard he was already. “No empathy,” he whispered, echoing the realization. “I want you this much, and it has nothing to do with your empathy.”

She hissed in a breath and arched closer, need flaring inside her. Her teeth scraped his shoulder and neck before she turned her mouth to his, claimed it in an open, searching kiss. She drove her hands into his hair, drawing him down and deeper into her mouth as his tongue swiped against hers.

The growl that welled between them wasn’t his but hers. Kiara dropped her hands to grip his shoulders as she slid onto one of his thighs. She knew he could feel the heat of her arousal even through their clothes, and she broke the kiss and stared up into his dark eyes. “I want you this much.” She rocked against the hardness of his thigh as she spoke. “More. I need you.”

He slid his hands under her ass and lifted her, barely giving her time to wrap her legs around his waist before he moved. “Bedroom,” he gasped out, but her back hit the wall in the hallway and knocked a picture to the floor as he seized her mouth again.

She whimpered and bit his lip, shivered when the press of his chest made her nipples harden painfully inside the confines of her bra. Though she’d known her lust for him wasn’t a mere reflection of his own feelings, she hadn’t discounted the possibility that their mutual desire was amplified by feedback, a psychic phenomenon turned physical. Yet here they were, on fire and burning even hotter than before.

They stumbled down the hallway, lost in each other. Adrian arched against her, the hardness of his cock grinding against her clit, and Kiara cried out at the sudden thrill of pleasure that shook her. By the time they reached her bedroom, she was hanging on to him with one hand and tearing at her shirt with the other, desperate to feel him.

He dropped her to the bed, stepping back as she bounced a little on the mattress. The slow smile that curled his lips as he lowered his hands to his belt was hot enough to set the sheets on fire. “So much for my self-control,” he drawled. “Guess I can’t blame that on anything other than how damn hot you are.”

She threw her shirt on the floor and grinned as she unhooked the clasp between her breasts. “I will admit to being a little relieved.” She shed her bra, then stretched out and waited for him. “And *really* turned on.”

Adrian laughed and dropped his belt to the floor, then leaned over to tug off his boots. When he straightened again, he gave her a friendly leer. “I know. I can tell.”

“*Now* who has the unfair advantage?” Kiara arched an eyebrow and ran a hand down to her jeans, giving him a wicked look as she pulled the button free. “You’re supposed to pretend you can’t tell I’m over here, aching for you to fuck me.”

“Not unfair,” he countered as he kicked his pants off. He stood at the foot of the bed, naked and gorgeous, and grinned at her as he lowered his hand and curled it around his impressive erection. “Pretty impossible to hide how badly I want you.”

She suppressed another whimper and met his eyes again. Her hands shook, but she managed to unzip her jeans and push them off her hips. "Help me?"

He hovered over her before she finished speaking, his fingers dragging hot pleasure down her legs along with the denim. When her jeans were gone, he knelt next to the bed and trailed his hands back up, inching her legs apart until he could wedge his torso between them. He traced his fingers along the edge of her panties, and he grinned again. "Guess I get a chance to explore a little this time, huh?"

"Mmm." His smile was so beautiful it made her chest ache. "Better make the most of it, I guess."

Adrian lowered his mouth to kiss the inside of her thigh, the soft brush of his lips a sharp contrast to the scrape of his beard against sensitive skin. He chuckled before sweeping his tongue out in a teasing lick. "As long as I can take my time."

"You can take all the time you want." Her voice was breathless, and she groaned as his tongue touched her skin again. "Don't mind me. I'll just be up here, screaming."

"Yeah. You will be." His hand moved between her legs, and he knew how to use the fabric of her underwear in a way no manufacturer had ever intended. The fabric heightened the friction as his thumb found her clit and rubbed with slow intent.

Heat blazed through her, stealing her breath and making her hips buck in his hands. "Jesus Christ. How slow are we talking about here?"

He just rubbed a little harder, his breath hot against her inner thigh as he chuckled again. "Depends on how much you can take before you start begging. Don't know if I could handle the begging."

Kiara whimpered and clutched the comforter. The knot of need inside her wound tighter as he kept up the slow, firm stroking that made her tremble. "Is that your goal? To make me beg?"

"Maybe a little." He kissed his way back down the inside of her thigh a few inches and then caught the soft skin between his teeth in time with his next stroke. "Maybe a lot. How attached to these are you?" His fingers traced the edge of her panties again.

The thought was enough to send another rush of heat through her, so she licked the corner of her mouth and arched into his touch. "Do it."

She felt a moment of loss when his thumb paused in its tantalizing caress, but then he curled his fingers under the waistband of her underwear. The fabric gave way beneath his hands as if it were nothing more than tissue paper, and he growled his triumph even as he lowered his mouth to bite her hip.

Her breath left her in a ragged moan when his teeth closed gently on her skin. "Adrian, baby --"

He didn't give her a chance to say anything else, just slid his hands under her ass and lifted her hips off the bed. He held her suspended, helpless to do anything but squirm as the tip of his tongue brushed around her clit in tiny, maddening circles.

Kiara shrieked at the contact, her feet scrambling against his back as she tried to twist away from his mouth. He held her tightly as he shifted his attentions, stroking her with soft, leisurely licks that slowly lured her up to the edge of release. Her entire body tensed, waiting, *wanting*, as he paused to lift his head.

She barely recognized her own voice. "Please," she rasped. "Fuck, Adrian, make me come."

He dipped his head, groaning as he swiped his tongue across her clit again. The same demanding onslaught that had been too much before now sent her spiraling, her limbs shaking. A low, hoarse scream tore out of her throat as blinding pleasure swept through her, eclipsing everything but Adrian.

His moans of encouragement were half growl, vibrating against her as he coaxed her through the pleasure, dragging the sensations out with a skill that verged on intimidating.

Even when he pulled away, there was no respite. The world spun crazily, leaving her nothing but the impression of his intense face and flexing chest as he lifted her and dragged her off the bed. She ended up half in his lap, her chest pressed against the edge of the mattress and her knees barely brushing the floor on either side of his. Strong fingers skated up along her sides and guided her arms to the bed, urging her to reach up and curl her fingers into the covers.

She shivered as his hands moved again, the slow, gentle movements a sharp contrast to the leashed, trembling desire he evidenced. His body shook, and his cock pressed against her back, so hard she was surprised he was still sane.

He swept his fingers back down along her sides, growling a slight protest when she tried to move. His fingers wrapped around her hips and lifted slightly, and she groaned when she felt the head of his cock tease against her entrance without sliding inside. "No moving," he commanded, his lips so close to her ear that the tiny puffs of air tickled at her skin.

She couldn't help it. Her body moved of its own accord, hips rocking down to take him inside her. His fingers tightened, holding her hips steady, and she groaned in desperation as he held her there, hovering just short of bliss.

Then he bit the back of her shoulder, his teeth closing almost hard enough to hurt. Before she could fully register the sensation, he thrust up into her, crashing their hips together with a roar of triumph.

Kiara choked on another cry and fell back against him, her head on his shoulder. "Fuck." She still held the comforter in her clenched fists, and she let go, reaching back to hold on to Adrian. "Again."

His hands caressed up her hips and around to cup her breasts as he bent his mouth to her ear again. "No," he said, his voice low and hot. He pinched both of her nipples at the same time, laughing when she cried out. "That's not begging. That's ordering."

"Adrian --" Her words cut off with a hiss when he did it again, shooting fire through her. She shifted again, but was barely able to move at all, and certainly not enough to assuage the ache deep inside her. She turned her head and whimpered against his mouth. "Fuck me. Please fuck me."

One hand stayed over her breast and the other traced down over her stomach to dip between her legs again. He teased over her clit in a slippery caress as he panted against her lips. "Bend over the bed again."

She bit her lip and obeyed, stretching out over the end of the bed. She hissed again when her nipples brushed the comforter, but she forced herself to stay still as Adrian grasped her hips. "Please," she whispered again. "Please."

They were too close together and joined at too sharp an angle for him to pull all the way back. Instead he started a rocking grind, his cock never leaving her completely as he thrust in and out with short, powerful strokes. She felt his chest against her back, felt the strong muscles of his arms alongside hers as he gathered the bedspread in his fists.

It went on like that forever. The room filled with the sounds of fucking, his groans and her sharp, needy whimpers and the sound of their bodies coming together over and over again. He spoke, low words punctuated by curses, telling her how hot she was, how tight she was clenched around his cock, how he could fuck her all day long and not get tired of the way she begged.

Just when she thought it couldn't get any more intense, when she thought she might die if he didn't let her come, he reared upright. Cold air hit her back as the heat of his body disappeared, and one of his hands slipped away. She heard a tearing noise and then the sound of wood clattering against the wall. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the amulet he'd been wearing, now lying on the floor a few feet from the bed.

The world exploded in primal satisfaction as he wrapped his fingers around her hips and drove her over the edge. She screamed as his pleasure mingled with hers, the feelings so intertwined Kiara knew one could not exist without the other. She was more than his lover. She was *his*, to hold, to protect. To love. She shook under his hands, and he groaned as he thrust into her one last time. His climax burned through her, burned through them both.

She had no idea how long she panted against the bed with his body stretched out over hers, his breath hot on her shoulder. Finally, she felt him lift her onto the bed. She crawled up it slowly, her legs still weak, and pulled the covers back. He climbed in beside her and drew her to his chest. They didn't speak, just curled together, sated.

Exhaustion dragged at her, the uncertainty of the last week finally catching up to her, making her eyelids drop. But it didn't matter, not with Adrian's body strong and warm against hers.

Things would change in the coming days, probably more than she could even begin to comprehend. By choosing to be with Adrian, she'd picked a side. The side of the so-called monsters, the unnatural creatures humanity feared.

Life would be hard, even dangerous. But her empathy gave her confidence in one thing: no matter how terrible things became, she could trust Adrian to do everything in his power to keep her safe. And she could make sure there was always someone to share the burden he'd accepted, without complaint or hesitation. She could make sure someone saved him.

"I love you," she whispered, then smiled when he pressed a soft kiss to the back of her neck.

Epilogue

Adrian was waiting on the sidewalk when Lena unlocked her shop for the evening. She pulled open the door and held it for him, inviting him into the store with a short wave that made her bracelets jingle.

The store smelled strongly of earthy scents, something he hadn't noticed the last two times he'd been here. Then again, he'd been preoccupied with his case the first time and gripped by panic the second, unable to think of anything beyond getting Kiara back safely. Now he could take the time to admire how carefully she'd set the stage for her nightly performance.

She met his gaze and smiled, nodding once. She wore that ridiculous getup again, the tight red bodice and voluminous skirts, her dark hair swept up in an elaborate crown of braids around her head. The hint of humor in her eyes as she closed the door behind him made him like her more. She knew how absurd she looked, and she didn't care. She enjoyed the game.

Adrian tugged the amulet from his pocket and held it out. "Thanks for letting me keep it another couple of days."

Lena tilted her head to the side and studied him, making no move to accept the charm. "I thought we agreed you'd keep it for the rest of the month. Enough time for you to build up a resistance to her psychic ability."

That *had* been the plan. When he'd come in a few days ago, it had seemed like the only thing he could do. He'd been desperate to find something to offer Kiara that was equal to the price she would pay for being with him. By accepting him into her life she was accepting the problems that were sure to come with him, especially now that he faced the challenge of leadership. He wanted to give her a gift in return, and the chance to feel normal was the best he could come up with.

What he hadn't realized was how much better it would be to give her himself. A man who wanted her, no matter what, just the way she was.

So he smiled and reached down to take Lena's hand. He pressed the amulet into her palm and curled her fingers around it. "Turns out I don't really need it."

"No, you don't." The smile she flashed him was sweet and a tiny bit lonely, but it disappeared before he could say anything. She covered his hand and squeezed it lightly, then stepped away and dropped the amulet onto a small table behind her. "Thank you, Adrian. I went to visit Katie yesterday. She's doing much better. Your friend from the FBI had been to see her, and she managed to identify her attacker from some of the photos Agent Hutchins brought."

"Good. I'm glad. And thank you for helping out with the scene at Kiara's apartment. You got that place cleaned up pretty fast."

Lena's sudden grin was wicked. "I could make a good living erasing crime scenes, I imagine. Must come from the countless hours of watching *CSI*."

Adrian tried not to snort. Whatever the reason, the police had found no trace of Brandon Douglas in Kiara's apartment, in spite of the detailed report from the EMT who had shown up to save Adrian's life. With Isabel climbing all over the police department, they'd had better things to do than chase down leads that might end up in Mystic Valley.

And he had Lena to thank for that reprieve. "Well, hopefully I won't be leading you any further down the path of a life of crime. Thanks for getting over there either way. I owe you."

"A favor from the new Alpha of the Valley's wolves?" Her rich, earthy laugh filled the shop. "You may regret that. I get into plenty of trouble all on my own."

"Then I'll help you get out of it next time." He nodded to the door. "I should get going. I've got to pick Kiara up from work."

Lena nodded and held out both of her hands to him, palms up. Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "Would you like me to tell you your fortune before you leave, Adrian Torres? This one's on the house."

He took her hands and turned them over, kissing the back of each one in a gallant gesture before winking at her. "No need, Madame Magdalena. I'm pretty sure I know what it is."

 THE END 

Moira Rogers

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. Toss in a dash of whimsy and a lot of caffeine, and enjoy with a side of chocolate by the light of the full moon.

By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their husbands and children are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more about this romance writing, crime fighting duo, visit their webpage at <http://www.moirarogers.com>. Stay updated by joining their announcement list: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moirarogers/>

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