



MOIRA ROGERS

RED ROCK PASS
SANCTUARY LOST

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She's ready to fight at his side. He's fighting for the strength to let her go.

Red Rock Pass, Book 2

If there's one thing that Brynn Adler hates, it's feeling helpless and vulnerable in unfamiliar territory. Three weeks ago, life tossed her into just such a world. A world of werewolves she never knew existed—until she found out her sister was one of them.

The pack seems determined to hurry her back to the normal world of humans. But after everything she's witnessed, she's not sure she wants to go—especially if it means leaving not only her sister behind, but the one man who makes her forget her life is falling apart.

Now all she has to do is convince him to agree to a plan to force the pack to let her stay.

Joe Mitchell has been battling his protective instincts since he rescued Brynn from her kidnapper. Getting involved with her is a bad idea for a lot of reasons. She's on shaky emotional ground, and a supernatural war is no place for a human woman. He's not about to let her make a hasty decision, one that will only bring her pain and regret.

Now all he has to do is let her go.

Warning: This book contains violence, a war between werewolf packs, hot, primal sex and sexual power games with a badass ex-Special Forces alpha who will do anything to keep his lover safe.

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Moirra Rogers

Dedication

This is for the Barbaras. It's not Mother's Day, but close. We'd also like to thank Molli for the beta reading and encouragement.

Chapter One

Dead leaves crunched under Brynn's feet, slippery enough that she slid several steps with a muffled curse before catching her balance. Branches snatched at her clothing and tangled in her hair, but she didn't stop running. She deserved every stinging scratch, every bump and bruise, even the trembling pain in her legs and the burning of her lungs. She deserved them all, for running.

It was too dark to see—for a human, anyway—and she stumbled twice more before she caught sight of the faint fluttering light from Joe's cabin. She screamed his name, knowing he'd hear, knowing he'd *know*. It wasn't the first attack in the last three weeks, but it was the first one that had come in the dead of night. The first one where the attacker had found their house, had found Abby—

And I left her. Shame burned inside Brynn, not just shame at running, but a deeper, aching misery at the knowledge she'd had no other option. Her sister could survive a bullet wound to the chest. Brynn might not survive falling down the stairs. Running had been smart. Getting help had been necessary.

It didn't stop her from hating her own helplessness. She crashed past a tree, and the bark caught on her torn shirt and scraped the skin from her arm. She hissed in a sharp breath and let it out on another scream. "Joe!"

The back door slammed open, and Joe rushed out, hopping on one foot as he pulled on his second boot. "Brynn? What is it?" He jumped the steps and caught her with one arm as she stumbled forward. "Is it Abby?"

She fought her way free of his arms and spun back the way she'd come. "Someone's there, she made me run but we have to go back—"

An iron hand wrapped around her arm, and Joe whipped her around to face him. "I've got my orders, sweetheart. Get inside, in the bedroom. If Abby and I aren't back in fifteen minutes, there's a revolver in the nightstand. Take it and haul ass to Gavin's."

If she fought him, it would take longer for him to get to Abby's side. Brynn swore harshly, but didn't struggle. "Fine. Go. *Now.*" *And I'll be right behind you.*

He hesitated and groaned. "You're going to get us both killed." But he let go of her and took off down the hill, back toward the house.

Toward Abby.

Brynn only waited long enough to catch her breath before following him.

It was harder this time. Her legs wouldn't work right and she seemed to catch every branch on her body. Joe disappeared into the night, so fast and silent she couldn't hear him over the harsh sound of her own breathing.

If I were one of them...

It wasn't a new thought. Three attacks in as many weeks, and each left her feeling angrier, helpless. Abby, with her superstrength and near invulnerability, could defend herself. Brynn was a target. A hostage.

Weak.

She broke free of the woods behind Keith's house and hit her knees in relief when Abby shoved open the back door of the house. Brynn thought she saw blood on her sister's clothes, but Abby moved out of the light too quickly to be sure.

Adrenaline faded. Brynn braced her hands on the ground as she gasped for breath and wished, once again, for the speed and stamina werewolves took for granted.

Abby knelt beside her and stroked one shaking hand over her hair. "Are you all right?"

It took her a few seconds to get enough breath to talk. "Of course I'm all right." *I ran.* "Are you?"

Her sister nodded. "Joe's bringing some of our things out, and we're going to his place, okay? Just for tonight."

"Okay." Brynn pushed herself up with a wince and focused on Abby's stained shirt. "That blood... It's not yours, right?"

Abby's eyes hardened as she helped Brynn to her feet. "No. No, it's not mine."

"Good." Brynn tried to brush bark away from the raw, open scratch on her forearm and hissed at the sudden sting. The bruises from her ordeal at the beginning of the month had faded, but she'd earned plenty more to take their place tonight. Her muddy T-shirt hung from one shoulder, and she used an annoyed sigh to cover her fear. "Is he getting me a change of clothes? This is ruined."

"I packed a bag in case we needed to leave quickly." As Abby spoke, Joe came through the door and clomped down the back steps. "Did you get it?"

He hefted a backpack. "This one?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Joe."

"No problem." He hesitated, casting a glance at Brynn. "I called Gavin. He's sending someone."

"Maybe they can learn something useful once he—" Abby cleared her throat. "Once the guy wakes up."

Joe snorted quietly. "They'd better do it before Keith gets back."

Imagining what her sister's new lover would do to the man who'd broken into his home made Brynn queasy. She swallowed and turned resolutely toward Joe's cabin. "Can we go yet? I need to clean up."

A warm hand landed on her shoulder, and she felt Joe's comforting presence beside her. "Do you need to see Cindy about that scratch?"

"I don't need a doctor." The last thing Brynn wanted was more werewolves smothering her with overprotective concern. She summoned a smile for him. "Have you got a first aid kit at your place?"

"Sure." He cocked his head and got that look the werewolves always got when they were listening to things she couldn't hear. "Backup's here. Want a ride, Abby?"

Abby touched Brynn's other arm. "Can you walk?"

"Stop it." Brynn ground the words out between clenched teeth. "I ran through the woods. That's it. I'm fine. You're the one who was attacked, Abby. Stop worrying about me so damn much."

"Okay." But Brynn caught the pointed look her sister gave Joe, and knew he'd be watching her for any sign she was about to collapse, or faint, or trip... *Or stub my toe or break a fingernail.* But there was nothing she could do but set her jaw and walk—unassisted—back to Joe's cabin.

They were almost through the woods when Joe glanced over at Brynn and finally broke the tense silence. "After we get your arm cleaned up, can you help me with something?"

It would give him an excuse to watch over her in an overprotective fashion, which was probably the point, but at least he tried to be subtle about it. "Sure, Joe."

"Gavin and Sam are coming over to talk. I need to make some sandwiches or something, and I could use a hand. Can't let the pack alphas go hungry."

"Okay. I can handle sandwiches." And maybe with Abby out of the way, she could find a way to ask Joe the one question that had been burning in the back of her mind since the last attack.

How do I become one of you?

The angry red scratches on Brynn's face and neck looked worse now that she'd cleaned up, and it didn't help his foul mood. Joe tried not to grind his teeth as he smoothed the last bit of tape over the bandage on her arm. "If it gets swollen or hot, see Cindy about it anyway, okay?"

Brynn seemed unconcerned. She tossed her damp hair over her shoulder and glanced at the bandage. "Thanks. I probably didn't need that, though. It's not that bad."

"I wanted to get it covered before your sister got out of the shower." He gathered the rarely used first aid supplies and replaced them in the cupboard. "She worries. Maybe too much."

Brynn made a rude noise as she began to twist her hair into a tight braid with deft movements of her fingers. "I might have noticed that."

"She can't help it, you know. Really." No more than he could. "It's an instinctive thing." *You need protection.*

"I know, I know." She tied off her hair with a band she'd pulled out of the backpack and turned to study him. "Can I ask you a question? A serious one."

He attempted a smile. "On a night like tonight, I don't think there's any other kind."

He could tell she was nervous when she took a deep breath and braced herself before speaking again. “I always hear Keith talking about the way things go when you choose to become a werewolf. How does it work, if you choose?”

As if anyone could make an informed decision about it. *You can't know*, he thought bitterly. *It's not possible*. “You find out everything you can, you think real damn hard about your reasons, and you take your case to the alpha. Then you wait.”

“How long?”

“Six months is Gavin's minimum.” Surely she couldn't be thinking... “Tell me this is just casual curiosity, Brynn.”

The stubborn set of her jaw told a different story. “Are there ever exceptions? For dangerous circumstances?”

He braced his hands against the edge of the counter. “Your sister's going to have a fit if you so much as bring it up, you know.”

“My sister is *not* in charge of me.” Brynn shifted with a wince that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. “And if I'm going to have werewolves trying to kill me for the rest of my life, maybe it would be nice if I were a little harder to kill.”

“You're not going to have people after you.” His hands tightened into fists, and he took a deep breath to quell the fierce protectiveness that crashed through him. “When we figure this out, find a plan of attack—”

“You can't promise I'll be safe. You *can't*. I listen when Keith tells Abby about the politics, about what's going on out there. I don't want to be their weak spot. I don't want to be a hostage.”

The water in the bathroom stopped running, and Joe arched an eyebrow at Brynn. “If you're serious, you can talk to Gavin about it when he gets here. But Abby is going to shit a brick.”

She hesitated before shaking her head. “She's too upset tonight. I'll ask Gavin tomorrow. Just...don't tell her. Please?”

“I'm not saying a word,” he swore. “Promise me you'll think about it. There are other ways to be safe. Your brother, maybe.”

“Until someone comes after him, too.” She didn't sound scared, just resigned and tired.

“Okay, look—”

“What's going on?” Abby stood in the doorway, her hair hanging in wet tendrils around her head and shoulders. “Brynn?”

Brynn smiled at her sister and, if he hadn't seen exhausted misery in her eyes a moment before, he might have believed the expression was real. “I'm fine. Joe played doctor.”

Joe choked on his beer. “Not like that.”

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Brynn closed her eyes and groaned. “Yes, Abby. Joe and I were out here doing dirty, dirty things.”

He opened his mouth to deny it but remained quiet. Abby thinking he was perving on her kid sister was better than Abby knowing said kid sister wanted to become a werewolf. “Want something to eat or drink, Ab?”

“No, thanks.” Abby wrapped her arms around her body. “Gavin and Sam?”

“On their way. They’re going to keep the guy under guard until...”

“Yeah.” She avoided his gaze. “Until.”

Until Keith gets back. The guy was going to wish he’d died. “You want a beer or something, Brynn?”

Brynn acted as though she hadn’t heard him. Her gaze was focused on her sister, and he could see the guilt in her eyes. “I’m okay, Abby. We’re both okay.”

A knock interrupted Abby’s answer, and she hurried toward the door, yanked it open and greeted the alpha pair.

Gavin rested his hands on Abby’s shoulders. “You’re all right? You and Brynn?”

Joe cleared his throat. “They’re both fine. Brynn came to me, and Abby took care of it.”

As Gavin comforted Abby, his wife slipped past them and fixed her gaze on Brynn. After a few assessing seconds, Sam looked to Joe. “She doesn’t need to see Cindy?”

“A scratch, that’s all. She’s okay.” Her mental state was another matter entirely, but he doubted anything short of an audience with Gavin would make her feel better.

Sam nodded. “We can’t get ahold of Keith. Have you got space for them here, or should they come home with us?”

He tensed. “They can stay here. That was the plan, if anything happened.” Abby he could let go, but she wouldn’t leave without Brynn, and he wasn’t sure how he’d react if she walked out. The protectiveness he’d felt from the moment he’d hauled her out of Matthews’ compound hadn’t faded. If anything, it was stronger than ever.

Gavin steered Abby toward the couch and solved the problem with a short command. “Here will be fine. The ladies can have Joe’s bed, and Joe can take the sofa or the floor.”

Brynn’s gaze found Joe’s, and she smiled at him before rising to follow Abby to the couch. Her earlier annoyance at her sister’s overprotectiveness seemed to be gone—or well hidden. “Thank you, Joe.”

“You’re welcome.” He sat on the edge of the couch as Abby began to talk, relating to the alphas what had happened. He watched Brynn, and only sheer force of will kept him from sliding a comforting hand over hers as she closed her eyes and listened.

Chapter Two

Brynn ground her teeth together and tried to keep Joe's words at the front of her mind as she watched him prepare breakfast. *She can't help it. She can't help it.*

Maybe Abby couldn't help being a bossy, overprotective ass, but knowing that didn't help Brynn deal with it. They'd barely gotten settled back in after Keith's arrival when the alphas had shown up, and Brynn had been banished like a child, only not to her room. No, they'd sent her back to Joe's cabin to sit under his watchful eye like a misbehaving kid under house arrest.

The fact that Joe didn't get to participate in the conversations either was only mildly comforting.

He slid a plate of scrambled eggs and sausage in front of her and dropped into the chair across the table with his own plate. "They're trying to figure out what to do with you. So you'll be safe."

As if *that* made her feel better. "And that's not a conversation anyone thinks I should be a part of?"

Joe snorted. "Your solution to the problem is to change your entire life in a way you can't even begin to understand. You want to dunk a whole house in the ocean to put out a kitchen fire. It's ridiculous."

Anger flooded her, and this time she didn't have to choke it back to avoid upsetting Abby. "A kitchen fire. I was kidnapped out of my home and held hostage for two days while a bunch of creepy fucking werewolves threatened me with just about every disgusting, perverted thing you can imagine. But I'm sorry, I must be overreacting. I must be a hysterical little girl to think that's more than a minor inconvenience."

He chewed his eggs and shook his head. "You seem to think none of that would happen, if only you were a wolf. But you don't get it."

She shoved her plate away and glared. "I don't think anything stupid like that. I think it very well may happen to me. Three people have chased us into the middle of your sacred little sanctuary. If they snatch me again, I want to have a chance of fighting back."

"If you could get away," he argued, "you wouldn't have to fight back at all. You wouldn't have to deal with this shit anymore."

"Until someone else gets mad enough at Keith or Abby and decides to find some leverage. Or am I supposed to *hide*, too?"

He stared at her, a muscle in his jaw jumping, and shrugged again. "It's none of my business. You want to go back while they talk about you? Go."

For a few seconds she considered doing just that, but her anger faded as his resistance did. It left nothing in its place but bone-deep weariness and a sick fear that had gnawed at her since she'd been kidnapped. She covered her face with her hands and tried to push away the fear. "I'm sorry, Joe. You've been really great. You've risked your life for me, for us...and I shouldn't be yelling at you."

He dropped his fork to his plate with a clatter. "What are you really afraid of, Brynn? Of having to be protected?"

The words escaped before she could stop them. "Of not being protected. Of being helpless."

Her admission seemed to pain him. "I can teach you how to take care of yourself. Hell, I could show you a ton of things that wouldn't turn your life upside down." He hesitated. "There's no going back from it. Even if you regret it."

She dropped her hands and opened her eyes, focusing on Joe's face to fight the rising panic. "Abby stabbed Alan Matthews in the throat and shot him, like, five times in the chest. He's still alive. What the hell can I do to protect myself?"

"It only takes one shot, if you do it right."

He sounded so sure, so *confident*. Then again, she supposed he should. Her memories of the rescue were blessedly vague, but she would never forget the look on Joe's face as he killed her captor with three efficient shots, two to the chest and one that blew off half the man's head. At first she'd been almost as afraid of him as she had been her kidnappers, but his gentle protectiveness had soothed her terror.

Joe knew how to kill, but she trusted him anyway. That made it easier to nod. "Okay. I want to learn, then. But I've only shot a gun once."

"I taught Abby how to fire without blowing her foot off. If I'd had more time, I'd have turned her into a crack shot."

The confidence was what did her in. The rigid wall she'd erected cracked, and the terror she'd tried so hard to shove aside bubbled up, bringing tears with it. A year ago she'd been interning under a state senator, doing research to help strengthen gun laws. Now she was going to learn to kill, because if she didn't—

She was going to hyperventilate. She shoved her chair back blindly and rose to her feet. "I—I need to g-go—" A sob ripped free, and not even shame could keep the misery inside this time.

Her chair crashed against the floor, and Joe moved with unbelievable speed. He folded his arms around her and whispered against her hair. "Shh. You're all right."

Brynn gripped his shirt and struggled to bring herself under control, but the words tumbled out without her permission. "I'm not all right, I'm *not*. But I have to pretend so hard because of Abby—because she can't handle it—"

"She can handle it better than you think, sweetie. Because she has to."

She shook her head, kept shaking her head as she clutched at his shoulders and soaked his shirt with the tears she hadn't been able to shed in the three long weeks since her rescue. Joe held her and whispered soothing words until her sobs gave way to soft sniffles. Finally, he pulled away and smoothed her hair back from her face. "Better?"

Her eyes hurt and she felt foolish, but the painful, choking press of emotions had eased. "I guess, a little. Only now I have to go wash my face before Abby shows up. She'll freak if she finds out I was crying."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I'd better change my shirt, then."

She glanced down and found his shirt wet and creased where her fists had bunched the fabric. Warmth filled her cheeks as she tried to stroke out the wrinkles with her fingertips. "Sorry."

Joe caught her hands and smiled. "It's okay. Go wash your face."

For a brief, heart-pounding moment, all she wanted to do was sink into his embrace again. Joe was strong. Hard and dangerous, but gentle with her. He wasn't the sort of man she'd been attracted to before, but he offered her something no one else could now. A chance to feel safe.

And it doesn't hurt that he's handsome as hell. Any woman would be distracted by the hard chest under her hands, or the leashed strength in those fingers. *Biological reaction. No one can blame me.*

She had no idea how much of her sudden interest showed on her face as she carefully pulled her hands away. "Okay. Thanks, Joe."

"You're welcome. Now hurry up. I think I hear your sister and Keith."

There wasn't much she could do about the puffiness of her eyes, but she spent a few minutes in Joe's bathroom rinsing her face with cool water as she gathered the tattered remains of her emotions. If Keith and Abby were already back, it meant they'd made a decision. One they'd expect her to go along with without argument. They'd probably decided to pack her up and send her to stay with her brother. Hell, Abby had probably already called him and made the arrangements.

But she had to stay calm. Pitching a fit might be satisfying, but it was the last thing that would convince Keith and Abby that she could make her own decisions. Neither would recognize she'd been handling things on her own for six years now. Abby, with her vast five-year age advantage, would always remember Brynn as the fourteen-year-old girl she'd been forced to care for after their parents' deaths.

Brynn held on to the edge of countertop and studied her face in the mirror. It didn't help that she looked young. Almost twenty-five, but she still got carded trying to buy wine. The red eyes and scratches on her face wouldn't calm Abby, either. Young and hurt, two things guaranteed to get her sister's back up...and two things she couldn't do a damn thing to change.

Calm and reasonable, she reminded herself as she reached for the bathroom door. Maybe Keith and Abby would actually ask her input, instead of laying down the law. Maybe she wasn't giving them enough credit. *Or maybe I'm giving them too much.*

She knew something was wrong when she stepped into the living room and found not only Abby and Keith, but Gavin and Samantha as well. The alphas looked serious. Keith looked enraged. And Abby...

Abby looked crushed.

Joe walked over as soon as Brynn came in and laid his hand on her arm. "Come and sit down."

He coaxed her in the direction of the couch, but she stumbled, unable to pull her gaze from her sister's face. "Oh God, what happened? Tell me, Abby."

"It's Richard," she whispered, her voice thick with tears. "Richard's dead."

Their brother, the one everyone had assumed would keep her safe. Some part of her had known the minute she'd seen her sister's face. Alan Matthews wanted to punish Abby, and he'd done it by putting her family in danger. Only he'd learned from kidnapping Brynn. He hadn't given anyone a chance to save Richard. It was vengeance, pure and simple.

Brynn was too numb to cry, even as her legs gave out and Joe lowered her to the couch. Richard was dead. *I will never be safe.*

"We tried to call him," Gavin said quietly. "Turns out, his roommate had been trying to get in touch with you and Abby. It—it was quick."

Abby made a small noise and pressed her face to Keith's chest. Brynn felt the heavy weight of Joe's hand on her shoulder.

She ignored him, and ignored Keith when he tried to catch her gaze. Her eyes met Gavin's, and she saw compassion and sympathy there. It gave her the courage to speak. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

"Right this second?" There was an unusual awareness in his dark gaze, and it occurred to Brynn that he already knew what she would ask.

Brynn glanced at Abby, taking in the dejected slump of her trembling shoulders. Abby was strong, but that only made this worse. She'd blame herself for Richard's death. She already blamed herself for Brynn's kidnapping.

If I become a werewolf... She looked back at Gavin and shook her head. "Not this second. But...soon."

"Tomorrow," he said, holding out a hand to Abby. "Is there anything we can do?"

Abby said nothing, so it was Brynn who answered. "No, but thank you."

The door closed softly, leaving them in uncomfortable silence broken only by Abby's quiet tears. Brynn wanted to cross the room to her sister, but her legs wouldn't obey. There was no comfort she could give Abby that Keith wasn't more prepared to offer.

Still, she had to try. "Abby..."

Her sister curled closer to Keith, and the wordless sound she made was more animal than human.

Joe shivered. "This isn't what anyone wants to talk about right now, but how are we going to fix this? What're we going to *do*?"

Keith slid his arm under Abby's legs and lifted her up, cradling her against his chest. "Brynn, are you okay here with Joe for a little bit?"

Abby would struggle to be strong as long as she was in the room, so Brynn nodded, barely feeling the movement. Everything was numb. Everything was *cold*. "I'll be okay."

Joe sighed. "I'll take care of her. Take Abby home."

They departed in silence, and Brynn stared at the door and waited for tears to come. She thought about Richard, the older brother who'd been more absent father than sibling for much of her life, and waited to cry. *What does it say about me that I can't cry?*

Joe swore softly. "Want something to drink? I have whiskey."

"No." The word came out low and hoarse, and she swallowed around the painful lump in her throat. She rose, wrapped her arms around her waist and closed her eyes. "Abby can't take much more. She's the strong one...but everyone has limits."

"Yes, everyone does." His hands landed on her shoulders again, and he pulled her back against his chest. "Even Abby. Even you."

"Even me," she repeated in a whisper. She kept her eyes closed as a shudder claimed her. "You know what I'm going to do."

"Yeah." He pressed his lips to her temple. "So does Gavin."

"Abby won't support me. Keith might not, either."

"She might surprise you." His breath feathered against her cheek. "You won't know unless you talk to her."

She fought a shiver. "What about you? Will you support me?"

His hesitation was slight but definite. "Depends on what you need from me, sweetheart."

She pulled away so she could turn and watch his face. Maybe *he* could sense her mood with subtle hints and magic, but she had to rely on her eyes. "I still don't understand how the Guides work. Do I have to pick someone I want to—to be in a relationship with?"

Joe's eyes hardened. "No, you don't. You can pick anyone you want, Brynn." He took a deep breath, and the tightness in his expression eased. "Some Guides *won't* get involved. It just depends."

"Explain it to me?"

He moved them both into a more comfortable position on the sofa. "Keith and Abby are sort of a special case. Usually, the Guide thing is friendly and that's it. There might be some amount of physical intimacy, but it's not as involved as you might think. It's not *casual*, but it's not really about the sex, either. It's about the control." He stopped rubbing her shoulder and stared at the wall. "Then there are the ones who become wolves because of relationships they already have. That's...a whole different story."

His face looked closed off, tense. She fought a shiver and changed the subject. “Keith said Abby wouldn’t have had many choices when it came to choosing a Guide. Because she’s strong. But he never explained what that meant.” *Or if it applies to me.*

“She needed someone who could match the power inside her. Everyone does.” His hand slipped into her hair. “You have more choices. There are a lot of men—or women—here who could help you through it.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good.” Except for the part where she was pretty sure the Initiation included a psychic magical connection. Her sister’s attempts to explain why she and Keith could sense each other’s emotions tended to be more confusing than enlightening, but the truth of it was obvious enough. She’d seen Keith judge Abby’s mood from another room before.

Which would make it impossible to keep secrets from her Guide. *So asking Joe would be a bad idea. Unless...* “Is the bond thing—the magical psychic part—is that necessary?”

“No.” Some of the tension in him seemed to ease. “It’s recommended, but it’s not necessary. Not usually.”

“So I wouldn’t need to do it?”

“I don’t know. Gavin would know, or Sam. Like I said, it depends on a lot of factors.”

She’d danced around the question enough. Brynn took a breath and met Joe’s eyes. “You’ve done it before, right?”

He looked away. “I’ve done the Guide thing lots of times.”

Something inside her died at the subtle rejection. “But you don’t want to do it now.”

He closed his eyes for a few seconds and sighed. One hand cupped her cheek, the other stroked through her hair, and he opened his eyes and met her gaze. “If you need me, Brynn, I’m here.”

The icy numbness in her limbs thawed, shifted to a tingling warmth as his thumb brushed against her skin. “I—” *Bad idea. Bad, bad idea.* “I don’t know what I need.”

“Mmm.” He barely seemed to hear her. All of his attention had shifted to her mouth, and he licked his bottom lip and leaned toward her. Just before his lips touched hers, he froze. “Bad idea,” he murmured, echoing her thoughts. “You need someone, Brynn, but not me. Someone better.”

“No, not better. But maybe someone I don’t have wildly inappropriate feelings for at wildly inappropriate times.”

His hand tightened in her hair. “I don’t get involved with the women I guide.” His breath tickled her cheek. “I don’t know if I could do it.”

Her heart pounded, but there was no joy, no trembling anticipation. She could move her lips a few inches to the left and fall into the glorious heat of being kissed by a man who, if instinct served, would steal her breath. It would be a distraction from a world of pain and grief and mind-numbing fear, but it would fade.

The grief and pain wouldn't.

She pressed her forehead to his shoulder to remove the temptation. "I can't make choices right now. It's too much. It's all...too much."

"I know." Joe gathered her close against his chest, holding her in the circle of his arms. "I've got you."

The words did what grief couldn't. Cradled in his arms with his heart beating firmly under her cheek, she gave in and cried for the second time that day.

*

Joe leaned his head against a support beam on his front porch and clenched his hands into fists. "I can't do it, Gavin."

"You might have to." The alpha's voice was even, implacable. "Joe, I know you have personal issues with guiding someone you feel close to, but that girl is in a world of hurt right now. If she does this—"

"If," Joe broke in, opening his eyes. "If."

Gavin sighed. "Did she ask you?"

He fidgeted and tried not to remember the look on her face when she'd finally gotten around to it. "Sort of."

Sam spoke for the first time. "There's no 'sort of' here. You're a smart boy. Answer the question."

Fine, damn it. "She asked, but she doesn't know what that means, Sam. The only thing she's seen is Keith and Abby, so she's going to be expecting something..." *Something what, Mitchell?* "Something I can't give her."

Gavin stared at him, and Joe fought the urge to hide. For the tenth time since Brynn had turned those wide gray eyes on him, he wondered if he shouldn't just give in. He could try his best. It might be good enough.

Memories of Tamara rose, and he shoved them down. It wouldn't be right to offer himself to her, to let Brynn depend on him, if he couldn't deliver. "Gavin, please."

The alpha glanced at his wife. "Her state of mind?"

"Better than I'd expected." Sam leaned her hip against the railing. "She's hurt, and she's scared. Worried about her sister, but that's not what's motivating this. Not entirely."

Gavin rubbed his hands over his face. "We've got time, at any rate. She can't do it right away." He leveled a reproachful stare on Joe. "You've been part of this from the start, Mitchell. You went with them when they brought Brynn back. It's not surprising she looked to you."

Guilt flooded him. "I know. I told her I'd be here if she needed me. But she won't."

"She needs someone strong," Sam said flatly. "Someone who can handle things, no matter what happens. If this weren't an emergency, I'd say she couldn't undergo the change at all. Not with the emotional upheaval. But we all know what's coming, and she'll be a target because of Keith and Abby."

Joe's nails dug into his flesh when he clenched his fists again. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Hell, she might have changed her mind by the time she wakes up, anyway."

Sam raised her hand in a placating gesture. "Cindy. Cindy could do it."

Joe clung to her words like a drowning man. "She'd be perfect. Gavin, you know it's true."

The alpha inclined his head. "Maybe. Like I said, we've got time. No one's rushing into anything like this. No way."

"The full moon's in a week," Sam agreed. "Under the circumstances I'd say six months is reckless, but she *has* to wait at least one. In the meantime, Joe, you and Keith make sure she has other methods of defense at her disposal."

Joe chewed his thumbnail. "I told her I'd teach her to shoot. It shouldn't be a problem." If he could keep his hands off her. "I'll start as soon as she's up to it. Keith has a full plate already."

Sam nodded. "Get her a gun, and soon. Something she can handle. The alphas from Green Pond and St. Anthony are supposed to be here in a couple days, and no one's going to have time to worry about gun-safety lessons once the summit starts."

"Tomorrow, if she can," he promised. "I think it'll make her feel better."

Gavin swiveled his head from one side to the other, audibly cracking his neck. "I'll talk to Cindy before Brynn does. If she doesn't have time to do it right now, we're back at square one."

"One more problem." Sam lowered her voice. "Joe, you know what Keith was doing on his trip. If anyone outside of our confidence finds out that we've got a witch in town..."

"It'll get ugly," Joe finished. "Look, Brynn can make it through the full moon. After the summit, we can handle all this...stuff."

"After the summit," Gavin agreed with a glance at Sam. "We'd better get to the bar. People are going to have questions about the preparations and arrivals."

She looked like she was going to disagree, but all three of them heard the soft sound of a door opening inside the cabin, followed by Brynn's footsteps. Sam's jaw tightened. "Take care of her. Call me if you need help."

"We'll be fine." Joe watched them leave and turned back to the cabin.

Brynn stood in the center of his living room, and she looked like hell as she brushed tangled hair back from her face. "Hey."

"Hey. Sleep okay?"

She shrugged one shoulder and didn't quite meet his eyes. "I'm hungry. I don't think I actually got around to eating this morning."

“What do you want?” He headed for the kitchen. “Soup and sandwiches? Want me to grill something?”

“A sandwich is fine.” She glanced toward the door with a slight frown. “Was that Keith? Is Abby okay?”

“It was Gavin and Sam. But I talked to Keith earlier. Abby’s doing all right.”

Her gaze snapped back to his, and the weary fear in her eyes made him want to shield her with his body and his energy. “I don’t think she’d make it if something happened to me.”

“So you want to become a wolf.” He pulled open the refrigerator door. “To stay safe for Abby.”

“Maybe.” Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. “But you’re right. Now’s not the time to think about it. Not when I’m this upset. But...the other thing. Learning how to shoot. How to defend myself.”

He took out sliced cold cuts and cheese. “When do you want to start?”

“Now?” She followed him into the kitchen and reached for the bread on the counter. “I can’t sit here and cry anymore. If I get much more scared, I think I’m going to go crazy.”

“You need a clear head if you’re going to learn.” Joe dropped the food packages on the counter and reached for two plates. “We can go over some stuff this afternoon, but you’re not laying hands on an actual weapon until tomorrow. Consider this the lecture component.”

She leaned against the counter and smiled, the expression wry. “I do have some technical knowledge. Theoretical, anyway. I had to do a lot of research into firearms for a job I had last summer.”

“What kind of research?”

“For anti-gun legislation.”

Joe laughed. “How much of this *research* actually involved touching guns?”

“I’m thorough.” She untwisted the tie on the bread, pulled out a few slices and dropped them on one plate. “The other intern’s brother was a marine. He took us out to the firing range once. I didn’t mind handling the guns, but firing them was a bit much.”

“Not much of a reason to handle a gun if you’re not willing to fire it.”

“Yeah, well. A lot has changed since last summer.”

He had to give her that. “But your focus was mostly on safety in the theoretical sense. Controlling access?”

“Mostly.” Making the sandwiches seemed to calm her, as if the act gave her something to focus on. Her heart rate slowed, and her nervous tension eased slightly. “I spent most of the summer on it. Going out to the firing range wasn’t really part of it, but it was a good excuse to stop staring at pages of statistics.”

Joe retrieved two bottles of beer and opened them. “Our routine is going to be a little more hands-on. After the first day, I want you ready to carry a firearm and willing to use it, if you need to.”

Brynn’s smile was flat and tired. “Trust me. If someone shows up to take me back to Alan Matthews, I’ll shoot first and worry about the moral implications... Well, maybe not at all.”

“Good.” He slid her bottle across the counter and took a deep swallow from his. “Are you going to talk to Abby?”

Brynn finished the sandwiches in silence before reaching for the beer and draining half of it. “Yeah, eventually. I just need some time to think without her trying to make decisions for me. She forgets sometimes that I’m not a kid she needs to take care of anymore.”

“The alpha thing isn’t going to help that,” he pointed out.

This time her smile was real. “You only say that because you never met her *before* she became a werewolf. There was less snarling, but she’s always been bossy with me.”

Joe arranged the plates on his arm and carried them to the table. “Practically raised you, huh?”

“Pretty much.” She followed him, her beer clutched in both hands. “Alan Matthews grabbed me because I was right there in town, but he was lucky. I’m the one person Abby has always felt responsible for. She’d walk into anything if she thought I was in trouble, and that’s a lot of pressure.”

It was a lot of pressure on *both* of them. “Keith can help her now. What about you?”

“What about what?”

Joe arched an eyebrow at her as he slid into his chair. “You going to stop blaming yourself for the way Abby feels?”

Brynn stared at the bottle between her hands as she tilted it back and forth, swirling the amber liquid around. “I blame myself for blaming her. It feels ungrateful and unfair, but the last three weeks have been pretty miserable, and I’m not just talking about the people trying to hurt us.”

Trying to approach what had happened—and what still might—from a rational standpoint would drive her batshit. “Who said your feelings have to be fair? They’re *your* feelings. Be miserable if you want.”

“Yeah?” Her jaw tightened. She drank the rest of her beer and pushed the empty bottle aside. “Well, I’m scared shitless, all the time. The only thing that’s going to help is learning to take care of myself, so why don’t you start lecturing, or whatever?”

He pointed to her plate. “Eat.”

She stiffened. “Don’t you start. I’ve got enough would-be parents.”

It would have been amusing if he hadn’t already spent the better part of the last three weeks trying to fight his protective instincts, which were about as far from parental as you could get. “If I decided to get in on that game, the first thing I’d do would be spank your ass.” He’d mostly meant it as a joke, but the words came out with a bitter, grumbling bite. “You spend half your time bitching about being treated like a little kid, and the other half acting like one. Make up your mind.”

Brynn opened her mouth and snapped it shut again as angry color flooded her cheeks. “I would love to hear what you think I should be doing, then. What amazingly mature and adult actions should I take?”

He bristled. “For one thing, you could listen to me when I warn you that becoming a werewolf isn’t going to magically fix all your problems.”

“And I told you the only problem I think being a werewolf will fix is how easy I am to kill. Besides, I’d rather do it because I want to than because the next person who came after us decided to rip me up and infect me.” She leaned forward, the hot anger in her eyes turning her words into weapons. “That’s what they were going to do, you know. Matthews already had the guy picked out. He’d come into that room and paw at me and talk about how he wanted to turn me. How much he was going to like it.”

He managed to let go of his beer before he shattered the bottle. Her words weren’t surprising; he’d be shocked as hell if that was the *worst* thing they’d done to her. But hearing her say it, seeing the pain on her face... He shook his head. “There are a lot of things about this world that aren’t pretty, Brynn. But would you really be doing it because you *wanted* to?”

It took forever for her to answer. “Maybe not. But I don’t have a lot of options, and this morning made it pretty clear that running away to hide isn’t going to keep me safe.”

“No, it isn’t.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Who are you going to blame if you do it and hate it, Brynn? Abby? Matthews? Or me, because I should have stopped you and didn’t?”

He expected her to say she wouldn’t blame anybody, but she didn’t. Her jaw tightened stubbornly as she met his eyes. “Damn right I’ll blame Matthews. I blame him for kidnapping me, for hurting my sister, and for sending people after us. I blame him for every damn thing he’s done, and if I make this stupid choice backed into a corner and it goes bad, I’ll blame him for that, too. But at least I’ll be alive to blame him, and right now that’s all I want.”

Joe rose, leaving his food untouched. “Then hold on to that, and we’ll start with the weapons training tomorrow. I promise.”

The fight went out of her with shocking speed. She managed a shaky smile that didn’t reach her eyes before she turned her focus to her sandwich. “Thank you. I’m sorry.”

He’d gotten angry with himself and lost his temper, but it wasn’t fair to let her think it was her fault. “Look, Brynn. You could have talked to a dozen other people about this and nobody would have blinked. I have some issues when it comes to people deciding they want the transformation. But they’re mine, not yours. So don’t listen to me, okay?”

“No, I get it. You want to make sure I don’t have stupid romantic ideas.” She didn’t look at him, and her voice sounded numb. “You said there are a lot of things about this world that aren’t pretty. That’s not news, Joe. Kidnapping, abuse, murder, torture, rape... You want to know why I’m bitching about stupid shit? It’s easier than admitting that last night I tried to decide what would be worse, this life or death...and it took me a few minutes.”

He didn’t know how to tell her it was the most reassuring thing he’d heard her say yet. “Maybe tomorrow I can help you talk to Abby.”

She finally picked up the sandwich and took a bite. She chewed in silence and swallowed without looking at him. “Okay.”

Chapter Three

Brynn held up the battered box and read the faded writing. “Strawberry toaster pastries, huh? Not only are they store brand, but they might be from the eighties. I think you must be trying to poison me.”

“There are better ways. Faster too.” Dylan’s tone was gentle, and so was the look in his brown eyes. “It’s all I could find on short notice.”

She fought the tears she was too stubborn to shed and distracted herself by tilting the box on its side and making a big show of squinting at the bottom. “I can’t even *find* an expiration date. I’d ask you to eat one first, but I don’t know if werewolves get food poisoning.”

“Doubtful. I’m fairly sure I’d have killed myself with my own cooking by now.”

Banter with Dylan was the first normal thing she’d had to cling to in weeks. “Yeah, how are you going to live out here without fast food delivery? I hope Cindy can feed you.”

Most people wouldn’t have noticed his hesitation or the tense set of his shoulders, but Brynn had known Dylan far too long to buy his attempt to be casual as he leaned against the counter. “Cindy’s pretty good in the kitchen.”

Ignoring her supposed reservations, Brynn popped open the box and pulled a crinkly silver package out. Things obviously weren’t going well between Dylan and his new girlfriend. “Trouble in paradise? I thought you were the hero of the hour.”

“Hero?” Dylan’s mouth twisted in a self-deprecating approximation of a smile. “That’s overstating things. I’m just a guy. One who isn’t very good at relationships, I think.”

“Neither of us ever were.” The pastry was broken inside the wrapper, but it didn’t stop her from popping a piece into her mouth. In spite of the beat-up wrapper, it tasted as good as any cold generic boxed snack could be expected to. “I should be crying about Richard instead of eating junk food. I am a crappy, crappy sister. What the hell’s wrong with me, Dylan?”

“You barely knew Richard, that’s what. Besides, you can cry *and* eat junk food.”

Tears burned her eyes again, and she stared at the table. “I barely knew him because he was working and sending us money. He was taking care of me. He and Abby *always* took care of me.”

“Hey.” Dylan grasped her shoulders and turned her to face him. “Brynn, what happened to your brother wasn’t your fault. Blame at a time like this will drive you crazy. I know, because I dealt with it when Matthews turned Abby and then took you.”

Brynn shivered and closed her eyes, unable to take the calm understanding in his expression. “I still should have known, Dylan. I was up close and way too personal with Alan. He’s insane and he’s fixated on Abby in a way that doesn’t even make sense.”

“Because he can’t have her.” Dylan said it matter-of-factly. “You don’t understand, Brynn. No one says no to Alan Matthews. *No one.*”

“You did.”

He tensed again. “Yeah, I did.”

“All those years, Dylan...” Brynn found his gaze and this time she didn’t bother to hide the tears. “Abby doesn’t really know, does she? You got her out before she saw what they’re like. What your life must have been...what hers *would* have been.”

“She never will, and neither will you.” He spoke quietly but vehemently, and she could almost feel the intensity of his determination. “I’m not going to pretend the last ten years of my life haven’t sucked up one side and down the other. But if I manage to do this one thing, Brynn, it’ll be worth it.”

Will it? She couldn’t ask the words, not with that brittle, pained look in his eyes. She recognized it all too well, had seen it a dozen times before when Dylan had shown up on her apartment’s stoop with a bag full of convenience-store junk food and a quiet, tense unhappiness that he tried to hide. She’d clung to him as the big brother she’d never gotten to have, the replacement for Richard, whose monthly checks and bimonthly phone calls might as well have come from a stranger.

But Richard hadn’t been a stranger to Abby. To her, he was a peer, the brother who’d helped her make the safe, comfortable life Brynn had enjoyed after the deaths of their parents.

Guilt burned through her, and she folded her arms on the table and dropped her head with a groan. “I am a horrible person. I should go over there and try to help Abby.”

“Abby’s with Keith,” Dylan reminded her.

Unspoken was what they both understood: even if she was alone, Abby wouldn’t accept support from her baby sister. Abby would fake strength and stability from the second Brynn set foot across the threshold, as if her pain was incidental. And she’d keep dying inside while she took care of everyone but herself.

Abby had Keith now. Someone she could let go with, if only for a short time. Brynn sighed and rubbed her face against the sleeve of the oversized sweatshirt Joe had lent her, trying to scrub away tears. “This sucks, Dylan. This all just...sucks.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” He pulled a chair close to hers and sat, his arm touching hers. “I’m here to help, if I can.”

“Joe’s going to get sick of me.” The words escaped unbidden and were far too revealing for her comfort. Still, if there was one person she could talk to about it... She lifted her head and met Dylan’s eyes. “I think I pissed him off. Because I told him I wanted to know about becoming a werewolf.”

Dylan’s eyes widened, but he covered admirably. “Okay. What did he say about it?”

"That it was stupid and wouldn't solve anything, pretty much. There might have been a few things about turning my life upside-down and acting like a child, but he apologized for those."

"Sounds like you hit a nerve." He retrieved the discarded pastry wrapper and crinkled it absently. "Why do you want to do it? To be safe?"

Trust Dylan to get to the heart of the matter. "Mostly. And maybe if it's going to happen...God, there are bad ways, Dylan. Alan made sure I knew how many bad ways. If I plan for it, at least I'll have control."

"There are bad ways." His hands shook, and he looked haunted. "You can have control, but are you thinking past that? What will you do when you don't belong with humans anymore? When you can't go back to your life?"

"Come on, Dylan. Do you *really* think I belong with humans now, after all this?"

"No, but that doesn't mean you've really got your head around it, either. Now, I know you're not one to bitch and moan, even if you've made a mistake, but does Joe know that?"

"How could he?" She tried to smile, but it felt weak. *She* felt weak. "I'm not exactly playing my top game here."

"There are bad ways," he said again, "but there's no going back. I guess that's what he's upset about."

Nervous energy drove her to her feet. She crossed the small kitchen and braced her hands on the counter in front of the window. The view through the back window was one she might have admired under better circumstances. Even now it was hard not to stare.

Joe stood in the backyard, an axe in one hand, propping a section of log on a tree stump. He stepped back, gripped the axe, and the muscles in his back and shoulders flexed as he swung, splitting the log cleanly down the middle. Then, as if he felt her eyes on him, he glanced toward the window and lifted one hand in a wave.

She wished she could blame her heart for the way breathing suddenly seemed difficult, but the inappropriate feelings plaguing her now had little to do with her heart. Lust was her persistent, inconvenient companion, a companion that provided plenty of embarrassment when everyone around her could recognize the slightest change in breathing or heart rate.

That includes Dylan, dumbass. She returned Joe's wave and turned to level a flat stare on her friend. "Say it. I dare you."

His answering stare was a shade too placid. "Say what? That I can hear your heart going pitter-pat from all the way over here?"

"He's out there chopping wood in a disturbingly manly fashion. No one who likes men wouldn't be a little hot and bothered right now."

"Right." Dylan rubbed his face. "Does Joe think his disturbing manliness is influencing you about the werewolf thing?"

It would explain the awkward tension in his eyes whenever the subject of Guides being involved with their Initiates came up. “Maybe. I don’t know. I guess it depends on how obvious it is. I mean... God, maybe I don’t want to know, but... Is it just my heart or are there other things you can...sense?”

They’d had plenty of blunt conversations about sex over the years, but the tops of his ears turned as red as his hair. “Oh, there’s plenty of stuff. We don’t only have good ears, Brynn. Our sense of smell is superhuman too.”

Which was pretty much what she hadn’t wanted to hear. “Well, shit. So much for subtle.”

“Uh-huh. There’s a reason I never went home alone if I didn’t want to.”

She supposed knowing exactly which women would respond well to some judicious flirting made picking up dates laughably easy. Brynn sighed and resisted the temptation to glance out the window again. “Fine. So Joe knows I want in his pants, and so do you. So does everyone in this godforsaken town, I guess. This *sucks*.”

Dylan arched an eyebrow. “Hey, you’re the one who wants to stay here.”

“I only want to stay here if I get superpowers like the rest of you.”

“That doesn’t stop everyone else from being in your business. Just lets you get up in theirs too.” He broke off a corner of her abandoned toaster pastry and popped it in his mouth. “Can you stand knowing, for instance, that your sister and Keith like to have sex in the morning? A lot?”

“I *already* know that,” she retorted. Then she considered the possibility that a pillow over her ears might not help once she had superhearing. “Though, on second thought...”

“Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide,” he murmured. “Something to consider.”

Brynn rolled her eyes. “No, not really. Not if the alternative is being too dead to care that my sister’s banging a hot werewolf.”

“Your sister *is* a hot werewolf, and you will be, too, if you go through with this. Has that sunk in yet? *You’ll be a werewolf*, Brynn.”

“I know.” She pushed off the counter and reclaimed her junk food. “Trust me, Dylan. I’ve thought about it a lot. Every damn time someone attacks us.”

“Have you talked to Gavin?”

“No. There hasn’t been time, and with Richard...” She fought another stab of guilt as she sank into her chair. “God. Abby’s going to feel like it’s her fault.”

“Don’t think there’s any way around that,” he told her slowly.

“Well maybe there should be.” It came out harsher than she intended, riding on a wave of frustrated temper. “Shouldn’t there be a limit to universal guilt, or are alpha werewolves immune?”

He grimaced and pushed away the rest of the pastry. “If you manage to answer that question, Brynn, let me know.”

The sound of heavy boots on the steps forestalled her answer. Joe had obviously reached his time limit for how long he could go without checking in on her. *At least he has more self-restraint than Abby. Though if he comes in that back door shirtless...*

He stomped through the door and draped his discarded shirt over the back of a chair. "How's it going, Dylan?"

"Not bad, Joe." He was fighting laughter...and losing.

Brynn watched the muscles of Joe's back flex as he pulled open a cabinet and reached for a glass. A tattoo she hadn't seen before decorated one arm, something that reminded her vaguely of a military symbol. It only accented the hard muscles of his upper arm, and she imagined her appreciation of said muscles was painfully obvious to *both* men.

One look at Dylan confirmed it. She rewarded his uplifted eyebrows with a dark scowl and shoved her chair back from the table. "I'm going to go take a nap. I'm beat."

"Want me to wake you when it's time to eat?" Joe asked as he tugged open the refrigerator door.

Not unless you've put some goddamned clothes on first. She fought another wave of purely inappropriate desire and fought not to grind her teeth in frustration. "Sure. Thanks, Joe."

Dylan cleared his throat. "I've got a thing, so I'm going to go. See you, Joe."

"Later, Gennaro."

Brynn watched Dylan flee with another spike of annoyance that overcame her embarrassment. When the door clicked shut behind him, she spun and glared at Joe. "Are you doing this on *purpose*?"

He pulled a head of lettuce from the crisper. "Doing what?"

Either he was amazingly oblivious, or he was used to women getting hot and bothered every time he walked into a room. *If he's walking in sweaty and shirtless, I suppose that's a distinct possibility.* Brynn forced herself to take a breath, then let it out in a rush. "Just...Jesus Christ, Joe. I'm not sure how many more stops my emotional rollercoaster can take, so put your clothes back on, would you?"

He reached for his shirt. "Didn't mean to offend."

The refusal to acknowledge her none-too-subtle arousal forced her temper higher. "Do I look offended?"

"You look like you can't decide whether to kiss me or kill me." His grin was lazy, almost challenging. "Don't worry. I have that effect on women a lot."

Pegging him in the head with something heavy might have seemed mighty appealing, but Brynn settled for a cutting glare and a judicious retreat.

It wasn't until she was in the bedroom with the door shut safely behind her that she realized Joe had neatly maneuvered her back to solid ground, to a place where there were emotions other than fear and helplessness. Maybe not useful emotions...

But it's something.

*

The door shut softly behind Joe, and the porch creaked as Keith moved to stand next to him. His friend held out an opened bottle of beer. “Brynn and Abby are talking to their brother’s roommate about funeral arrangements. He doesn’t really get why they can’t come out there, but he’s rolling with it, I guess.”

Joe accepted the bottle and stared into it. “Did they decide on cremation?”

“I think so.” Keith drained half his beer and closed his eyes. “It’s killing Abby not to be there to handle it.”

“That’s understandable.” Abby had been far closer to Richard’s age, whereas Brynn had barely known him. “I think what upsets Brynn the most is that she’s not as upset as Abby.”

“She was about ten years old when Richard left for college. I got the impression she didn’t see much of him after that, not even when their parents died. He was making too much money where he was, or something like that. Sent home checks, but otherwise it was Abby trying to make a home for both of them.”

“It’s a mess, Keith. Start to finish.”

Keith thumped his beer bottle on the railing so hard the glass cracked. “I’m worried, Joe. I am seriously fucking worried. Alan Matthews is waging goddamned psychological warfare against Abby, and I can’t protect her. I can’t do *anything*.”

And he would keep trying to take Brynn away from Abby. The knowledge burned in Joe’s gut, a knot no amount of preparation or confidence could dissolve. Matthews seemed willing to send—and sacrifice—a steady stream of his people, and it didn’t take a mathematical genius to know he might get lucky sooner or later.

But Joe had known Keith for years, and one look told him his friend was remarkably close to the edge. So he quelled the angry, protective worry. “Okay, let’s look at it. What does Abby have left?”

Keith brought the rage and fear back again with one tight, snarled word. “Brynn.”

“Yes, and you.” He waved his bottle at Keith. “That’s what you can do. You keep yourself and Abby safe, and you leave Brynn to me.”

The beer bottle hit the ground and shattered as Keith spun on him. It wasn’t just his friend staring at him now, but a protective, territorial alpha werewolf. When Keith spoke, it was in the quiet, deadly voice that made most people flee in terror. “Leave her to you?”

It took a concerted effort for him not to bristle in challenge. “You’ve got your hands full.”

“And *you* want *your* hands full?”

Joe choked on his beer. “Not exactly how I’d put it, but all right. Do you have a better solution?”

Keith clenched his fists and dragged in a deep breath. When he let it out, he gave Joe a wry smile. “I think that was me losing my fucking shit.”

It was no wonder, what with everything that had happened to Abby and Brynn both. “I get it. A lot of bad stuff has been going down, and the last thing you want is for anyone else to get hurt.”

“You’re not going to hurt her. I know that.” Keith speared him with another of those pointed looks. “Not on purpose, anyway. Just use your brain. Please.”

“I will, I promise.”

Keith opened his mouth but snapped it shut without a word at the sound of soft footsteps inside the house. A few seconds later the door creaked open and Brynn peered out. “Hey.”

Joe’s heart stuttered, skipping a beat before settling into a strong, fast rhythm. He cursed silently, fully aware Keith could hear the frantic pounding of his pulse. “How’s Abby?” *How are you?*

“All the arrangements are set, but Abby’s...” Her voice hitched. “I think she needs you, Keith.”

Keith nodded and slanted a look at Joe. “Don’t be an idiot, or I’ll shoot you somewhere painful.”

He played it off as a joke out of habit. “Again?”

“Yeah, and this time it’ll be on purpose.”

Brynn’s eyebrows came together as her gaze jumped from Joe to Keith and back. “Do you guys need a moment or something?”

“Nope. Keith has to get inside to Abby.”

Keith turned to look at Brynn. “You can stay here if you want, kiddo.”

“I know.” Brynn’s heart was doing the same thing his had, and Joe could *see* Keith’s jaw clench as she turned him down with casual words that weren’t casual at all. “It’s okay. Abby needs me gone if she’s going to get it out. Joe was going to give me shooting lessons in the morning, anyway.”

“Okay, then. Joe’s got a walkie at his place. Call if you need anything.”

“I will.” Brynn slipped past Joe and held open the door until Keith grudgingly stepped past her. “Take care of Abby.”

“Of course.” Keith caught Joe’s gaze over her head, the warning clear in his eyes. *Keep your hands to yourself.*

Joe lifted one hand in a lazy salute and cursed himself all over again when he saw his hand was shaking. “Come on, Brynn. Let’s go.”

She let the door go, and it bumped into Keith’s hip. Keith heaved a sigh and moved back into the house, letting the door whisper shut after him. Brynn raised one eyebrow. “What’s got him pissy?”

He thinks I’m going to take advantage of you and break your heart. Given Joe’s track record with women, it was hard to fault Keith for the assumption. “Nothing. Typical guy bullshit.”

“Uh-huh. Well, if I’d seen that back home, I’d assume you’d made a pass at Keith’s girlfriend in a drunken stupor or something. I’m going to trust that’s not the case, seeing as everyone’s still alive.”

“I haven’t been hitting on your sister.”

“Obviously.” Brynn took the first two steps, then turned to glance at him. “Like I said, everyone’s still alive. You coming?”

Joe set his bottle on the porch railing. “Yeah, sure. We’ve got a lot to cover before you start shooting.”

“I could use something to think about.” She squinted in the direction of the setting sun, which had already dipped below the tree line. “You guys need a path between your place and his so I don’t keep tripping over branches. Though I guess if I’m going wandering in the woods in the dark, it’s good to have the big bad wolf on my side.”

Screw you, Keith. He looped an arm around her shoulders and dropped a kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll clear one after I teach you how to shoot, yeah?”

She made a noncommittal noise, and her galloping heart wasn’t the only proof of her arousal now. A moment later she acknowledged the fact with what he imagined was supposed to be a joke, even if it came out sounding snappish. “If you’re going to do it with an axe and no shirt, don’t invite me.”

He told himself another joke was the easiest way to change the subject. He almost believed it too. “Nah. This time, I think I’ll leave my pants at home.”

“You’re a smartass, Joe Mitchell.” The words were harsh, but her hand found his, clinging to it as if his presence was the only thing keeping her steady.

He held her hand and ignored the feeling of warmth that overwhelmed the constant arousal he felt in her presence. “That may be. But at least I’m a *cute* smartass.”

“That’d only help if you didn’t *know* you were a cute smartass.”

“For you, Miss Adler, I’ll fake some modesty.”

Her laughter sounded both relieved and guilty. He tightened his fingers around her hand as she leaned into him, her body soft and warm against his side. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, sweetheart.” He inhaled the scent of her hair and wished like hell he didn’t mean the words quite so sincerely.

*

Hope, already a fleeting, faltering thing, gasped its last breaths as Brynn watched two of Alan’s men drag her sister from the room. Two days of emotional torment were coming to an end now, two days spent listening to her captors describe in loving detail the fate that would befall her as soon as they’d captured her sister.

And Abby had walked into their midst.

Brynn pulled her legs closer to her chest and fought a shiver as Pierce closed the door and turned to smile at her. “Just you and me now, sweetie pie.”

No, no, no... It was the only word left in her mind, a broken litany she couldn't stop. Her fingers clenched around the torn fabric of her khaki pants, and she jerked her gaze away from him to fix on a broken desk across the room. Pierce loved it when she flinched, and refusing to do so was the only silent defiance she had left.

"The alpha's going to have fun with your sister," he murmured as he walked around Brynn in a wide circle. "He likes them like that. Strong. Sure."

Guilt flooded her, almost strong enough to drown out her terror, but it didn't last. Blaming herself for this was pointless. Abby had chosen to walk into a trap. It might have made her angry, if only she'd had enough emotion left to feel such things. Now instead of suffering alone, she had to watch her sister break along with her.

Or be used to break her. They'd left her with no illusions as to her relative importance in the grand scheme of things, after all. Brynn was a tool. She was a pawn.

From the way Pierce was looking at her, she was about to be sacrificed.

He knelt in front of her, his smile blossoming into a grin. "She thinks he's going to let you go, doesn't she?"

The last time she'd refused to answer him at all, she'd earned a blow that left half her face bruised and aching. "No. She's not stupid."

He slapped her anyway, snapping her head to one side, though it hardly seemed to cost him any effort at all. "If she knows he's keeping you both, why did she come?"

Brynn choked on a pained whimper and fought back tears. "I don't know."

He leaned in, his breath hot against her stinging cheek. "She's not planning some grand escape, is she? That would sincerely fuck up my plans for you, sweetie pie."

Brynn would have preferred being hit again to listening to the low, pleased cadence of his voice. It was impossible not to flinch now, but she'd already backed against the wall and there was nowhere to go. "I don't know. I don't know anything."

Pierce mocked her as he rose, his fingers freeing the buttons of his shirt as he moved. "*I don't know* if I believe you. Then again, I suppose it doesn't really matter." His shirt fell open, and he shrugged out of it. "Not much does anymore. It'll be too late."

Her first thought was that he meant to rape her. It had been a popular threat over the past two days, delivered by an assortment of men who seemed to be engaged in a competition to see who could get the most terrified reaction out of her. Once she'd stopped reacting at all, most of them had gotten bored.

Not Pierce. The more she refused to respond, the more obsessed he became. But the sick fantasy he whispered in her ear when he had her cornered and sick with dread had nothing to do with sex.

Terror gripped her again, the sort of fear she'd thought beyond her reach. She whimpered and scrambled back until she hit the corner, forgetting that her fear only aroused him. "N-no, you can't. No one's supposed to—to do that—"

"Right," he whispered, kicking off his shoes. "Until he had your sister. And now...he does." Pierce lowered his hands to his pants.

"No. No." The frantic, hysterical words sounded far away, and she wondered if they'd finally succeeded in breaking her. *I'm scared he's going to turn me into a werewolf. I am so far past broken...*

The door exploded in a shower of splintered wood. A man stepped inside and quickly surveyed the room, a pistol in his lowered hand.

Her attacker spun with a confused noise. Before he could say anything, the man raised his arm and shot him twice in the chest, hesitated for a moment, and fired another round at his head.

Brynn watched as time slowed to a crawl. Pierce hit his knees and toppled over. There was blood everywhere, blood and things that were a lot more disturbing than blood, things she couldn't think about too closely. Her civilized brain recoiled in horror, but what was left was intense satisfaction. Glee, and a tiny bit of regret that Pierce hadn't suffered more, hadn't faced death and been forced to stew in it until it made him ill.

The man at the door stepped forward, and the world snapped back into painful, blinding clarity. He held a finger over his lips and knelt to search through Pierce's pockets. "My name is Joe. Your sister brought me."

She tried to think back to what Abby had said. Had there been something about friends? Everything was distorted by that numb detachment she'd cultivated, her only defense against the taunts and threats.

"Joe." Her lips formed the name, and it felt oddly familiar. She studied his face, the firm, handsome features, the short, messy dark hair and the hazel eyes that were somehow fierce and gentle at the same time. "Joe, you're here..."

He lifted a hand to her cheek. "I told you I'd be here if you needed me."

He had. He'd promised, after he'd saved her from Alan Matthews, that he'd never let anyone hurt her again. Except he couldn't have promised her that, because he was rescuing her *now*—

Her brain stumbled over the logical inconsistencies and came to the proper conclusion: this was a dream. Hard on the heels of that realization came a second one—that Joe's hand was warm against her skin and his fingers felt so, so perfect as he stroked her tangled hair back from her face.

Lucidity slipped through her fingers again as she launched herself into his arms with a relieved noise. He caught her with a soft growl and nuzzled her ear as his arm slid around her waist, drawing her closer. His nose grazed her cheek and his mouth landed on hers, demanding and coaxing at the same time. It had to be the first time he'd kissed her, because she never would have forgotten the way her body melted as his tongue urged her lips apart.

But if it was the first time, how could he know everything to do, everything that would make her body come to life? He kissed her within an inch of her sanity, hands roaming her back and hips, finally drifting down to cup her ass and lift her closer.

Warm hands skated over skin as clothing disappeared, but it was the incongruity of being lowered to a soft mattress that tripped her brain this time. Some part of her whimpered in protest as the dream unraveled, dissolving even as she clung desperately to it.

She woke up in Joe's bedroom—in Joe's bed, flushed and confused and breathing too fast. A floorboard creaked and she bolted upright, her gaze landing on Joe. He hovered just inside the room, his fingers still wrapped around the doorknob. *Oh dear God, please don't let me talk in my sleep...*

He stared at her in silence for a moment and tilted his head. "Nightmare?"

"Sort of." She dropped back to the pillow and covered her face with her hands. "Started out that way. But hey, it went away on its own, so that's a sign of progress, right?" She couldn't stop the words from tumbling over her tongue, though she knew her nervous babbling was anything but subtle.

"Want me to sit with you for a while?"

She almost told him *no*, but it would have been a lie. A stupid, pointless lie. Her subconscious, at least, had already decided who made her feel safe, and there was no use fighting it. "That'd be nice, if you don't mind."

He walked in. She could hear the television playing softly in the living room as Joe sat on the edge of the bed. "That guy again? Pierce?"

"Yeah." Joe had saved her, that much of the dream had held truth. But there had been no romance, no joy, just gut-wrenching shock as blood splattered her clothing and Pierce slumped to the floor with half his face missing.

That was the last thing she remembered. On the rare occasion she tried to think back, all she could come up with was the vague impression of Joe's arms around her and the sound of explosions. The next clear memory she had was of being in a motel in Red Rock, cradled against Joe's chest as a doctor tended to Abby's wounds.

Brynn dropped her hands to the bed and met Joe's eyes. "I don't really remember it. What happened, I mean, after you shot him. Some of the stuff up to that point's a little blurry, but after that... It's like a big blank nothing."

"Good." He scooted closer. "Sometimes, your brain figures that's for the best."

"Yeah?" She closed her eyes and rubbed lightly at the side of her head. "Well, tell my brain it's creepy and to stop trying to make up things that happened next."

His hand brushed her leg. "What does it make up?"

"Usually some fairly awful stuff." She managed a half smile and moved her hand to rest over his. "You were very heroic tonight, though. Even more so than usual."

Joe grinned wickedly as he turned his hand and wrapped his fingers around hers. “I must have been. You sounded like you were having fun.”

Of course he could tell. There was no privacy in a town full of werewolves. Maybe she should have blushed, but she was too busy being relieved by the fact that he didn’t seem to mind. *Yes, because what you need right now, in the middle of everything, is a crush.*

Or maybe it was exactly what she needed, if only to keep her from drowning in futile misery. She tightened her fingers and tugged slightly. “It’s rude to use your werewolf superpowers against me, you know. Or rude to admit it.”

“Rude, maybe.” He reached up with his free hand and brushed her hair back. “But I just wanted to see you smile.”

“It’s nice to smile.” Weird, maybe, but her lips curved up. “It’s been a couple weeks since there was much to smile about.”

“Still not much,” he admitted. “But sometimes it’s all you can do.”

She let her thumb play over his fingers as she watched his face. “So if I go through with this, and if I ask Cindy to be my Guide...” She hesitated, then ignored her nervousness and pushed on. “Are there rules about me not getting involved with other people?”

He stared at her for a long moment before answering. “Usually, if a Guide and an Initiate don’t plan on getting intimate or there’s someone else in the picture, they forego the bonding. It’s easier that way, if they can get away with it. So no, nothing to keep you from seeing someone else.”

“Okay. Good.” Sitting brought her so close that she had to tilt back her head to look at him. She didn’t release his hand, just kept her fingers around his as she went for broke. “Because I was thinking...getting involved with someone is a crappy idea right now, but I’m sort of miserable, and you’re sort of hot. I wouldn’t say no to a little bit of irresponsible sex in between lessons in defending myself, if you were willing.”

He didn’t react as though her words surprised him. Instead, his hand tensed under hers. “Brynn, you’ve been through a ton of shit here recently. I’m not going to say that you don’t make a very good point, but I don’t know if I’m the guy for this. I really don’t.”

It was supposed to be casual, so the fact that it *hurt* to be rejected, even gently and obliquely, surprised her. The question escaped before she realized she’d spoken. “Why?”

“Because.” He kissed her fingers, his breath blowing hot over her skin. “I’m already past irresponsible sex here.”

“Oh.” She swallowed and fought the urge to shift closer. *Careful, Brynn. Careful.* She liked Joe. She liked Joe *a lot*, in ways that weren’t casual at all. But she couldn’t tell for sure, not when her life was tumbling end over end. Brynn had spent the last seven years carefully planning everything, researching all possible outcomes and taking action only when she was confident she’d made the right decision.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd done something just because it felt right. Because it would be fun. *Probably the last time I did something stupid and had to watch Abby clean up after it.* Would Abby be cleaning up after this mess?

And do I care?

He leaned closer and feathered his lips over her cheek. "Good night, Brynn." There was no time left. He'd get up and walk out if she didn't stop him.

So she blurted out, "I already like you way too much." The words sounded so much *stupider* out loud than they had in her mind, so she turned her head and caught his lips in an off-center, awkward kiss.

His lips were warm and soft against the corner of her mouth. He slid them over hers, quick and gentle, in a kiss that cajoled rather than dominated. It was nothing like the hip-grinding, tongue-tangling kiss of her dream, but it set her heart to racing just the same.

His hand crept up her arm and slipped around the back of her neck, drawing her closer. He held himself rigidly, almost trembling, as he eased past her lips and touched her tongue with his.

A moan rose in Brynn's throat, and her patience broke. She lifted her hands to the back of his head and whimpered as she curled her tongue around his. Joe growled in answer and kissed her harder, his teeth scoring her lip.

A moment later, he broke the kiss, groaning against her cheek. "Bad. Bad, bad idea."

"Really?" She inhaled his scent, an odd mix of the woods and plain soap and something sharp and metallic that reminded her of the long-ago afternoon she'd spent at the firing range. "It feels good. Great, even."

"Doesn't make it a good idea." His eyes opened slowly as he leaned back to stare at her. "You're going through some stuff right now, Brynn."

"I know." Her hands shook as she dropped them to her lap. "You've got responsibilities that have nothing to do with me. The summit, and the visitors..."

"Just for starters." He started to reach for her hand, but clenched his fingers around the blanket instead. "If we have sex, it wouldn't be simple and uncomplicated. You know that, right?"

She opened her mouth to agree, then shut it again and tilted her head to the side. If it had been a man in front of her—a *normal* man, and not a werewolf—the question would have been easy to answer. But this... She cleared her throat. "Is this something that has to do with you being a werewolf? Because if there are special rules for that..." *Oh Jesus.*

One eyebrow shot up. "Not really. Sometimes there are conflicting instincts, but that wasn't what I meant."

Thank God. "Then yeah. I get it. And I get if you want to wait, or find someone less likely to have an emotional breakdown on you, because I'm still not strictly ruling that out."

Joe frowned. "I'm not explaining myself very well."

Of course he wasn't. She wasn't giving him a *chance* to explain himself, because she didn't want to hear the answer. She didn't want him to leave. Guilt made her choke down another reply. "I'm not helping much."

He answered her weak smile with one of his own and nodded to the bed. "Want me to stick around for a while? In case you start dreaming again?"

Brynn laughed. She couldn't help it. "You really want to be in here if I start dreaming about making out with you again? Because I don't know if that'll make things less complicated."

His cheeks darkened. "I meant if you had another nightmare, but I see your point." He stood, but stopped by the door. "Call if you need me."

She wanted to stop him, to ask him what in hell was going on between them, but he was obviously in full retreat. Whatever intricacies he'd failed to explain would have to remain a mystery. *It's not as if I don't have enough to worry about.*

It didn't make her smile any less wistful as she sank back into the pillows and closed her eyes. "Thanks, Joe."

"You're welcome, Brynn."

Chapter Four

Joe rubbed his hands over his eyes and groaned. “You can’t be *afraid* of them, Brynn. You’re never going to develop any sort of decent accuracy if you close your eyes and flinch every time you fire.”

“I’m not afraid of the guns,” she protested, not for the first time. “It’s just the *noise*.”

“I know it’s loud.” He took the pistol from her hands and ejected the magazine. “For routine target practice, you’d be wearing ear protection. But you need to get used to how loud these things can be.” A fresh magazine slid into the butt of the pistol with a *click*. “Bad guys don’t stop for you to pop in your earplugs.”

For a second he thought she’d protest, but she just rubbed at her wrist and sighed. “Okay. Okay, I’ll try.”

He engaged the safety and laid the gun on the picnic table, then reached for her arm. “Are your wrists getting sore?” He’d suggested a two-handed grip, but even strong muscles needed time to adjust to the repeated abuse of a recoiling handgun. “I think we’re done for today.”

“We passed sore a while back. Now I sort of just hurt.”

“You should have told me.” He rubbed at her hands. “You need to take it easy.”

Brynn curled her fingers toward her palms and sighed. “Not really. I need to learn.”

“Not all of it is shooting at targets, either.” He must have hit a sore spot, because she winced. A wave of protectiveness washed over him, and he gritted his teeth. “I think you might have sprained this wrist.”

“Great.” She sounded like she was squeezing the words out between clenched teeth. “Is that common, or am I just that pathetic?”

It shouldn’t have happened, and probably wouldn’t have, if he’d kept closer watch on her grip and corrected it. “It’s not uncommon.” He glanced at his watch with a grimace. “I have to take you over to Keith and Abby’s now, though. Keith and I have a meeting at Gavin’s.”

She nodded and smiled, but it didn’t take a genius to read the frustration and fear in the dejected set of her shoulders and tight look in her eyes. “I can wrap this and try again tomorrow, right?”

“I have an elastic bandage in the medicine cabinet. I’ll take care of it before I drive you over.” He sat on the closest bench. “Are you going to make it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine.” She looked almost hesitant as she moved to sit next to him. “I just—I want to know I can do this. I think it’ll make it easier.”

“You want to know you can do what? Handle a gun?”

“Shoot it.” Her fingers wrapped around her wrist and she closed her eyes. “I guess shoot someone. The idea still makes me a little sick, but not as sick as the alternative.”

That was what it usually amounted to—you or them. “I met Keith before I became a wolf. Did you know that? We were in the army together.”

“I didn’t. How long were you in the army for?”

“Fifteen years.” It seemed like such a long time ago. “We were Special Forces. We joined up at the same time, and they stuck us in the same training unit.”

That made her eyes pop open, and she studied him with a frown. “You don’t look old enough to have been in the army for fifteen years.”

He nudged her leg with his and grinned to cover his sudden self-consciousness. “I’m forty-five. Try not to make me feel *too* bad about it.”

Brynn blinked at him before her eyes went alarmingly wide. “Wait, wait—Abby said that Gavin was, like, a hundred or something. Was she *serious*?”

“He’s about a hundred and twenty, actually.” Joe rubbed his chin. He needed to shave again. “I’ve been a werewolf for ten years now, and I haven’t aged all that much. I guess you could file that in the ‘pro’ column.”

“I guess so.” She sounded dazed. “Wow. Well, Gavin’s the hottest hundred-and-twenty-year-old I’ve ever met.”

Joe laughed. “I’m sure Keith is the hottest fifty-year-old you’ve met too.”

She looked like she was going to choke. “Yeah, I’d say so.”

Brynn sounded more disturbed than anything else, and the thread of jealousy he’d barely been aware of eased. “Don’t knock it. If you decide to really do this thing, you could look like Samantha at sixty.”

“Huh. I hadn’t really thought about it.” She shrugged and leaned against his side, and the bare skin of her arm below her sleeve brushed against him, making the hair on the back of his neck rise. “I’ve been trying not to think until I talk to Gavin later.”

“Makes sense.” He wanted to wrap an arm around her shoulders and draw her closer. Instead, he stood. “Ready to get that wrist taken care of?”

She rose as well. “Yeah. Maybe get a couple ibuprofen.”

It only took him a minute to find the bandage and wind it around her impossibly delicate wrist. It had already started to swell, and Joe dragged his eyes away from the pale column of her throat as she swallowed two tablets from the bottle he’d bought just for her. *Keep your brain out of your pants, Mitchell*, he warned himself silently as he leaned against the tile wall of the bathroom. “It’ll hurt for a few days, if I remember correctly. So we’ll take it easy.”

“Shit. I don’t have time to take it easy, Joe.” Her fingers ghosted over the bandage, and her face looked tight. “Someone could show up again tomorrow. Someone could show up today while you’re all busy. I’m not *safe* like this, and Abby’s going to get herself killed trying to protect her helpless sister.”

“Keith won’t let that happen. He’s going to have other enforcers watching his house today. You’ll be safe.”

“I’ll be safe,” she agreed, though she didn’t sound particularly sure. “Should we go now?”

“Yeah, come on.” Joe led her through the house and his truck. He was getting used to having her around, and he didn’t find the prospect of dropping her off very appealing.

Which just meant he *had* to do it, because he was growing more attached to her every minute.

He didn’t speak again until the truck rumbled to a stop in front of Keith’s house. “Tell Abby I said hi, okay?”

“Sure. Thanks for the lesson, and for everything else.” She pushed the truck door open. “I’ll see you after the meeting?”

“I’ll be back here to drop Keith off and pick you up,” he promised.

“Okay. Good.” She hovered for a few seconds more, then leaned over and brushed her lips over his cheek in a soft kiss that warmed his skin and stole his breath.

He watched as she made her way up the walk. The door opened and Abby stepped out, Keith close at her heels. He smiled down at Brynn and kissed the top of Abby’s head before striding toward the truck.

The women had disappeared inside by the time Keith climbed into the seat Brynn had vacated. He took one look at Joe’s face and groaned. “So much for you not being an idiot.”

“Hey.” Joe fought a snarl. “Shut up. I’ve kept my hands to myself.” *Mostly.*

“Uh-huh.” Keith closed his eyes as he leaned back against the seat. “Gavin says she’s going to petition him to make the transformation. Sam was worried there was something romantic going on, but I told her you were the last person who’d encourage that sort of shit. Please tell me I’m right.”

“You’re right.” Joe pointed the truck toward the alphas’ house, riding the accelerator a little harder than usual. The faster he got out of this conversation, the better. “How’s Abby holding up?”

“She almost isn’t.” Keith sounded exhausted. “The guilt’s eating her alive. But even I didn’t think Matthews was nuts enough to send people halfway across the country to hurt her.”

No one had. “He’s obviously lost what little shit he had left. You and Abby just have the misfortune of being his targets.”

“And Brynn.”

Joe gritted his teeth. “Thanks for pointing that out, Winston. I’m not having a hard enough time keeping the protective crap in check.”

“She’s a lot harder than her sister, you know. Brynn, I mean.” Keith opened his eyes and glanced at Joe. “Abby’s strong, but even with everything that’s happened—even losing her parents and raising her kid sister—she’s not hard. It still surprises her how much people can suck.”

It was all Joe could do not to laugh. “You mean Abby’s like you, and Brynn’s pragmatism freaks you out a little.”

Keith glared. “I’m not exactly naïve.”

“No, you’re not.” He made a face as he slowed for an intersection. “But you want to believe in fairy tales, even when you know you can’t. You always have.”

“Well, she sure the hell doesn’t. If she weren’t so stressed out right now, I’d tell Gavin she should sit in on the meetings. She’s got a pretty keen mind when it comes to weird political shit.”

“Brynn’s sharp,” Joe agreed. “But, right now, she’s flailing.”

Keith remained silent as Joe guided the truck up the hill that led to the alphas’ house. He didn’t speak again until the truck was in park and Joe reached to turn off the engine. “Is she really going to do it? Is she thinking about becoming one of us?”

Joe stared at the steering wheel. “Yeah. She wants to be safe, but she doesn’t want Abby to feel responsible for her. Not anymore. Not after all that’s happened.”

“Shit. What a fucking mess.”

“Yeah.” He saw no reason to share Brynn’s proposition of casual, no-strings sex, especially since it would probably earn him a punch to the jaw. “Hell of a time for it, with all the alphas coming in.”

“Don’t forget the witch.” Keith sighed and rubbed his jaw. “I didn’t even get a chance to tell you about *that* mess. Maritza, the witch I’d made contact with in Europe, was supposed to meet me. Her and her student. But when I got there, it was just the student, and she was scared half out of her mind.”

“Maritza was dead, huh?”

“Ripped to pieces. The girl’s twenty-five, thirty tops. Maybe she’s got power, but she doesn’t have the kind of experience we need in an ally.”

Now she was another person who’d need protection. “The world’s falling apart, my friend. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Keith sighed and yanked the door’s handle. “Let’s go in there before Gavin thinks we’ve chickened out.”

Joe took the steps two at a time and knocked quickly. Gavin opened the door and waved them in. “We were just getting started.”

The alpha’s wife was seated at the long, scarred wooden table with a young redhead. The girl’s face looked pale, and three angry red claw marks cut across her cheek and the line of her jaw. She lifted tired blue eyes when they stepped into the room, but her tension eased when her gaze fell on Keith. “Mr. Winston.”

"I told you, Keith's fine." Keith smiled, the gentle, reassuring one Joe had seen him flash a hundred times. "Sasha, this is Joe."

"Hey there." Instead of stepping forward, which might have scared her, he held his ground and raised a hand in greeting. "Nice to meet you."

She blinked at him and nodded, quick and a little shy. "Hello."

Gavin cleared his throat. "Keith? Why don't you tell us what you had in mind for the summit?"

"First off, Lawrence and Irene had to back out." Keith slid onto the bench next to Sasha, but left a few feet between them. Even with the extra space, Sasha scooted a little closer to Sam, who wrapped a maternal arm around her shoulder.

Keith kept talking as if he hadn't noticed it. "We need to make a pact, decide if we're going to take a stand. What happened with Abby's brother is the final straw."

"We've *been* taking a stand," Joe argued. "What you're talking about is war. That's what we need to decide on."

"Then it needs to be war." Keith sounded nothing like the exhausted, worn-down man who'd come back from Europe a few months ago. The fire was back in his voice. The *conviction*. "Hiding isn't working. They turn men by the hundreds out there. They're making armies full of entitled men who think that their power means they can have whatever they want."

Gavin glanced at Sasha. "You think allying ourselves with the wizards is the answer?"

Sasha winced visibly, and Samantha shot her husband an annoyed look as she spoke. "I think we can't snub allies, no matter *where* we find them. Keith obviously agrees."

"Normally, I'd be inclined to agree with both of you." Gavin reached in his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "But when you start talking about fighting beside the wizards and *against* other wolves, you'd be surprised how quickly your grand idea puts you in the minority. It's a tough fucking sell, Winston."

Keith opened his mouth, but Sam cut him off. "If you light that cigarette in this house, Gavin Hamilton, you'll be digging it out of your chest."

Gavin dropped the pack to the table. "Fine, woman. Have it your way. Doesn't change the conversation any."

Joe cleared his throat. "Maybe we should have Brynn talk to the other alphas."

"Brynn?" Sam's gaze snapped from her husband to Joe. "Explain."

"She knows firsthand what the alphas out there are doing to people," Joe explained. "Her sister was turned against her will, she was kidnapped, and her brother was murdered. They have to listen to her. All the hypotheticals in the world can't match someone who's been there."

"Can she handle that?"

Keith spoke up again. "I think she can. She's strong. She's determined."

“More than that, I think she’d want to do it.” He hoped like hell he wasn’t wrong. “She needs something to do. She feels helpless.”

Gavin scuffed the toe of his boot against the floor. “It couldn’t hurt anything, I suppose, if she can handle it.”

“Abby can’t be there.” Keith’s voice was uncompromising. “The last thing she needs is to hear a litany of all the things that have happened to her family. She still takes responsibility.”

Joe made a face. “Brynn wouldn’t want her there. No way.”

“But can Abby take that?” Sam looked at Keith, who squirmed a little under her unwavering gaze. “Abby’s still learning how to handle her instincts. Can you keep her from feeling like she should protect Brynn from this?”

He looked uncomfortable, but he nodded. “It’ll take a few days for her to get balanced again. But Joe’s been taking care of Brynn, and that helps.”

It was Joe’s turn to squirm as all eyes turned to him. “It’s the helpless thing that’s getting her. I’ve been trying to help, but I don’t know how much good I’m doing.”

Sam’s look was particularly sharp. “I’ve spoken with Cindy. If Brynn makes the decision to follow through with the transformation, Cindy is willing to serve as her Guide.”

He glanced away. He could handle that. Cindy was safe.

Gavin rubbed a hand over his face. “I still don’t like it. I don’t like when people in turmoil try to make this choice.”

“No one likes it, Gavin,” Keith said. “But sometimes there’s no going back to the life you left behind. Sometimes it’s the only way you can get control again.”

For the first time, Sasha spoke up. “Do you still have the training spell?”

Joe’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What’s a training spell?”

“I-I think it was used for new wolves, in the past.” Sasha fidgeted a little under the weight of everyone’s undivided attention, but she pressed on. “It’s simpler than the bonding spell you use, and temporary. Two people are connected, and one experiences everything the other does. Not physically, but like—like a vision. The new wolves panicked less the first time if they already knew what a change felt like.”

“Huh.” Keith leaned forward and braced his elbows on the table. “Is it something like the bonding spell? Something that we can do, I mean?”

“I don’t know. I know how to do it, but I really...don’t have the training to teach others. I’m still an apprentice.”

Samantha’s arm tightened in a comforting hug. “That’s okay, sweetie. If you can do it, it might be useful. It’s something to think about, anyway, though I don’t know if I’d want to try it for the first time on a traumatized girl. Brynn’s been through enough.”

That was putting it mildly. “I can bring her back tomorrow,” Joe offered. “Let her talk to you two, and to Keith and Sasha. We can see if she’s up for meeting with the other alphas.”

“If it works?” Sam asked quietly. “If the other alphas agree? I’m not the military expert, obviously, but it’s an awful lot of fronts to fight a war on.”

Keith shook his head. “We don’t fight on all fronts. Matthews is insane. We have to deal with him and his pack first, because we can’t have him at our backs. But after that...Minneapolis. That’s the key. Most of the alphas in the Midwest answer to Simon Brown in one way or another.”

Joe managed not to choke on his beer, but just barely. “Jesus, you’re not messing around, are you?”

“No. No, I’m really not.”

Gavin straightened and squared his shoulders. “Joe, see if Brynn will help. Keith, you and Sasha can talk to her, as well. Let her know how important this is.” He glanced at his wife. “Whether or not the other alphas join us...we fight.”

Sam frowned. “If the other alphas don’t join us, will there be enough of us left after the fight to make victory worth it?”

“Maybe not,” he admitted. “But if we just sit here...”

Keith glanced at Joe, and Joe saw his own understanding reflected in his friend’s eyes. “We can’t assume we’ll be any safer here, Sam. They attacked Brynn and Abby in our town. In my *house*.”

“I know. I *know*. But that won’t make it easier to watch my pack fight and die.”

“Nothing will, except fighting and *not* dying,” Gavin said resolutely. “So talk to Brynn, and let’s get this shit done. I, for one, am tired of sitting here on my ass while the rest of the world falls apart.”

Joe nodded. “Got it. She’ll do it.” She *had* to.

Brynn watched Abby fit another piece into the gigantic puzzle spread out over the table and wondered, not for the first time in the last hour, if her sister had lost her mind.

Puzzles had never been particularly soothing to Brynn. A few minutes of trying to differentiate between eight different shades of sky blue was enough to frustrate her, so she’d spent the last half hour sorting the pieces by color while Abby quietly turned the disjointed piles of cardboard into a picture of the Rocky Mountains.

Maybe they were *both* losing their minds.

Brynn picked up a purple and blue piece and studied it for a moment before breaking the silence. “I want to tell you something, but you’re going to get mad at me.”

Abby looked up from the solid white puzzle piece in her hand and arched an eyebrow. “Mad enough to kick you out of the house and finish this puzzle by myself?”

“Mad enough to make me finish it myself as punishment.” She tried to make it a joke, but it came out sounding a little desperate.

Her sister fastened a level, serious look on her and waited.

Brynn set the puzzle piece down and took a deep breath as she tried to summon the careful, considered words she'd rehearsed in her head a dozen times. She'd taken classes in public speaking, had studied diplomacy and debate with an eye at getting involved in government. She was coherent. Eloquent.

Except when she opened her mouth, the worst possible words tumbled out. "I want to be a werewolf."

Abby stared at her for what seemed like hours. "You what?"

Shit. "Don't look at me like that, Abby. I'm not saying I think it will be fun and romantic, but it's practical. It's logical. If I do it, it'll make me safer."

Brynn expected her to yell. A month ago, she *would* have. Instead, she picked up two puzzle pieces and studied them. "I'm glad you've given it sufficient thought. What do you think? Are these two part of the rock face or the soil at the base of this foothill?"

"Abby..." She reached out and covered her sister's hand. "Is that it? You're not mad?"

Abby hesitated, then grasped Brynn's hand. "I haven't done a very good job of protecting you lately. The truth is, I don't how anymore." She exhaled a shaky breath. "You've seen the worst of it, I guess. If that didn't make you want to run screaming, I don't know what would."

It made her want to run screaming, but telling Abby that wouldn't make her sister feel better. So she forced a smile and squeezed Abby's hand. "You protected me more than you ever should have had to. You raised me when you were barely more than a kid. You helped me get into college. You walked into a *trap* for me. But I don't need you to protect me. Especially not if you're going to get yourself hurt doing it. You think I can live with that?"

"I think you shouldn't worry so much about me," Abby countered. "I'm not hurt. I'm *fine*."

"You're not fine, Abby. You're sitting here staring at puzzle pieces like they're the most important thing in the world."

She dropped the small pieces of cardboard on the table. "What do you expect me to do, Brynn? Focus on the fact that a crazy werewolf sent someone after us? Someone who's probably dead now, judging from how enraged Keith was?" She bit her lip. "I'd rather put it out of my mind for now. Keith and Joe will be back from Gavin's soon enough, and then we'll all have to talk about what they discussed."

"I'm sorry. I just... God, Abby. I don't know what the hell to do. Everything's fallen apart, and I just—I don't know." She hated herself for the faint tremor in her voice. "I think I freaked Joe out."

Her sister didn't bother to wipe away the tear that slid down her cheek. "How could you possibly have freaked him out?"

The answer wasn't likely to please Abby, but at least it would distract her. "I might have propositioned him a little bit."

Both of Abby's eyebrows shot up. "And here, I thought you'd wait a while longer. What did he say? What'd he *do*?"

“Ran away.” Brynn rolled her eyes. “Okay, he kissed me first. But then he ran away, and we proceeded to pretend it never happened.”

“Mm-hmm.” Abby sighed and rubbed a hand over her forehead. “Brynn, if you’re serious about making the change, you should know that Joe won’t do it. He won’t be your Guide.”

She knew that, but she had no idea why Abby did. “We already talked about it. Joe said that Sam thinks Cindy would be good for me.”

Oddly, Abby laughed a little. “A woman. Of course. Conveniently solves the problem of having to watch you make it with another guy.”

“Uh, is there some unwritten rule I’m missing that I’d have to *make* it with my Guide if it was a guy? Because I asked that pretty specifically.”

“No, but it wouldn’t matter. Seeing you bound to another man would drive Joe up the wall, even if you weren’t sleeping with your Guide.”

Brynn couldn’t keep from frowning as she dropped her gaze to the puzzle pieces again. “I think he thinks that I’m too screwed up to get involved with. That the crap with Matthews unhinged my brain or something.”

“You think it unhinged *mine*,” Abby pointed out a bit uncharitably. “Listen, I’m going to tell you this, because no one else will. Joe had a bad Initiation. A really bad one.”

“Oh.” It explained a lot, even without knowing why it had gone so bad. “Did he...regret it? Because I kind of got the feeling he did.”

Abby didn’t answer at first. Instead, she rose, unfolding her legs slowly. “Keith and Joe met in the army. They were out alone one weekend on some sort of field exercise. Something went wrong, and Keith got hurt. It was...bad.” A shudder wracked her. “He should have died. Would have, if he’d been human.”

“Joe found out what he was.” She’d guessed it had been something of the sort, but it didn’t answer the most important question. “So why did he make the choice to become a werewolf? Did something happen to *him*?”

“He met a woman. Here, in Red Rock.” Abby grimaced. “Tamara. He fell in love with her.”

“Oh.” Brynn watched her sister pace and tried to work through the implications. Joe had fallen in love. He’d made the choice to become a werewolf. His Initiation had gone badly. He didn’t serve as a Guide to women he was interested in.

He’s interested in me.

She could think of half a dozen reasons off the top of her head why Joe might feel the need to run from her, not even taking into consideration the fact that she’d all but told him he’d be nothing but an uncomplicated fuck. It had seemed like a good way to reassure him at the time, to make it clear that she wasn’t a damaged girl looking for a hero, but now it just sounded tawdry. Cheap. *Insulting*.

She braced her elbows on the table and dropped her face to her hands. “God. I sort of messed this up, didn’t I?”

Abby remained silent until Brynn looked up again. Then she nodded toward the kitchen. “I think we need a drink.”

“Yeah.” She dropped her hands back to the table and winced when the impact jarred her wrist. “Shit. This is not my week. Or month.”

“Right there with you.” Abby walked through the doorway and returned a few minutes later with a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. “If it wasn’t for Keith, I’d have already lost my mind.”

“Then I’m glad you’ve got him. I am, Abby. I really like Keith.” *I like that he’s going to take care of you, no matter what.*

“He likes you too.” She poured a healthy splash of the liquor into each glass and handed one to Brynn. “But he’s worried about you and Joe.”

She drank the whiskey without pausing and slammed the glass down with a shudder. “So everyone already knows there’s something going on even though I barely have it figured out?”

Abby smiled a little. “We can hear your hearts pound when you look at each other, sis.”

“Cheater.” She shoved the glass across the table. “I need more booze if I have to consider you being able to hear when I’m attracted to someone.”

Abby drained her glass and refilled them both. “Or nervous or scared. Sometimes it’s hard to tell. But not with the looks you two have been flashing each other.” She lifted her glass again, but hesitated before drinking. “Tamara wanted Joe to go through the transformation. He did, and she ditched him a month in. Said it was too much to handle.”

“Shit.” Brynn reached out for the glass again but didn’t drink. She stared at the amber liquid and tilted the glass from one side to the other. “Was she his Guide?”

“Yeah. They were together, and that’s usually how it works.”

“So what *happened*? Did someone help him?”

She nodded. “Keith and Gavin, mostly. He wouldn’t think about binding himself to anyone else.”

“Yeah. I can see why.” Brynn stared at the glass for another second before tossing the alcohol back. “Damn it, Abby, what am I supposed to do? I could stay away from him...” *Liar.*

Her sister shrugged. “Just take it slow. You’ve got so much crap going on right now, anyway. Just don’t forget that he’s...intrigued.”

She opened her mouth to demand a more explicit definition of “intrigued”, but Abby tilted her head and glanced toward the door in a way Brynn had already grown to recognize. Keith was home. Which meant Joe was here.

Which meant she was out of time, and starting to feel a little warm from the two generous shots of whiskey. *Brilliant, Brynn. This is all amazingly brilliant.*

The front door swung open, and Abby smiled as Keith walked in. “How did it go?”

The look he gave Abby was the kind of thing people wrote poetry about. He looked tired and worn, but his eyes warmed as they found Abby and his smile was just for her. “About as expected. You okay?”

“Mmm. We busted out the booze.” She held the bottle aloft and shook it. “Want some?”

“Shit, yes.” The answer came from Joe as he stepped through the door. His gaze slid immediately to Brynn, and then away again. “Make mine a double.”

The knowledge that every person in the room could *hear* the way her heart skipped a beat was too much. Brynn rose to her feet and forced a smile as she backed toward the kitchen. “I’ll get more glasses.”

“I’ll help.” Joe followed her, and that made it ten times worse. She felt his presence like a tangible warmth against her skin as she crossed to the cupboard and yanked it open. She stared at the glasses and tried to think of something besides how badly she wanted him to cross the room and stand behind her, wrap his arms around her and nuzzle his face against her neck...

It’s all casual. You keep telling yourself that, Brynn.

He did step up behind her, reaching past her to the topmost shelf and the row of tumblers there. “Did you talk to Abby?”

Her body moved without her permission, leaning back just enough to press against his chest. “Yeah. She took it better than I’d expected.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder, and his voice deepened. “I guess she knows you and your reasons better than I do, then. I’m glad she’s not upset with you.”

“Joe?”

His lips brushed her temple. “Yeah?”

Her heart hammered so hard *she* could hear it. “I don’t think I can drink anymore, or I’ll be trying to climb into your pants. I’m actually sort of seriously considering it now.”

She couldn’t see his face, but he choked out a noise that sounded like a cross between a laugh and a groan. “You’re going to get me killed, honey.” He lowered his lips to her ear. “Are you staying here tonight?”

Brynn wasn’t staying here for five more minutes, not if Joe would take her home and take her to his bed. She closed her eyes and rubbed her ass against him, and there was no doubt that he wanted her. “If I go home with you, you’re not sleeping on the couch.”

His hand slid around her stomach and edged under her shirt to stroke her belly. “Not sleeping on the couch,” he rasped. “Let’s go have a drink, and then get the hell out of here.”

It was the best damn idea she’d heard in months.

Chapter Five

Joe ignored everything but the pounding of his heart and Brynn's as he pressed her against the door of his cabin. The moonlight silvered her skin and made her eyes gleam, and all he wanted was to hustle her into his room and keep her there as long as possible.

No one will interrupt us. From the way they'd practically fled the house, their intentions were clear. Keith wouldn't be happy, but Joe didn't particularly care.

Yet another voice, this one of caution, stilled his hands on her shoulders. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She smiled, and it was sweet and gorgeous and not the least bit innocent. "Can't you tell how much?"

He'd been able to tell for weeks. "Doesn't make it okay not to ask," he whispered, reaching behind her for the doorknob. "Have to double check."

"Fair enough." Her hand landed on his, holding it as she reached up with the other and wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck. "Good manners are sexy."

"It's not about manners, honey." *It's about regret.* He shoved the thought away and pressed his lips to her temple. *Cindy will be her Guide, and when she's done with her Initiation...*

Her words echoed his thoughts. "I know I'm going to be asking Cindy all these questions, but I don't feel like running over and asking her anything right now. So you can tell me if there's anything I need to know about sex with hot werewolves."

"Maybe, with a new wolf." He grinned slowly. "But I'm not a new wolf."

The grin worked its magic, and it was hard not to feel smug about the tiny breath she sucked in. Her fingers tightened in his hair a second before she leaned in until her breath fell hot against his ear. "You telling me all that superstrength and stamina and damn unfair senses don't make things different?"

It was his turn to draw in a sharp breath. "Makes it different," he rasped. "But not dangerous." He drew a finger down her cheek to her throat. "You'll see."

He *heard* her swallow. "Manners are sexy, but so is knowing when to throw them out the window."

He turned the knob and backed her into the living room. "Does that mean you want me to drag you off to the bedroom? Or do you want a little seduction? Wine and candles?"

"Candles are nice..." She curled her fingers in the hem of her T-shirt and tugged it up and over her head. Her bra looked like it didn't quite fit and was nothing more than plain white cotton, but he had to

close his eyes for a moment when he saw the way it hugged her breasts. “But I don’t need any more alcohol. So you can seduce me here, or the bedroom...or anywhere you damn well want.”

Joe lifted her, urging her legs up around his hips, and kissed her hard as he headed for his bedroom. He kicked the door open and dropped her back on the high bed, her hips still level with his. “Bed. Definitely.”

Brynn stretched her arms over her head and arched a little. “Perfect.”

He reached for one shoe and then the other, dropping them both on the floor. “You’re not really drunk, are you?”

“On two shots?” She laughed as she propped herself up on her elbows and watched him through the fall of her hair. “I hung out with the business majors in college. Do you have any *idea* how much they can drink?”

He cocked an eyebrow and tossed her socks over his shoulder. “I was a Green Beret, honey. Are you trying to tell me about hard drinkin’?”

“I guess not.” She was breathing faster now, every breath straining her breasts against that ill-fitting bra. She shifted her weight and reached for his shirt. “This needs to go away now.”

He exhaled slowly as he tugged the cotton over his head, then urged her to sit up. “As long as you’re tipsy but not drunk, I feel duty-bound to inform you that this bra is hideous.” He reached for the hooks and snapped them open with one hand. “You need something like...Italian lace. Red, maybe. Or pink.”

“Yeah, I noticed a definite lack of lingerie stores here in Red Rock. Everything I’ve got now is pretty much borrowed, until someone has time to go ransack my apartment...”

Her distraction was obvious and flattering. Joe flexed as he stretched his shoulders, and chuckled when her eyes widened. “Maybe I can get around to that sometime after the full moon.”

“Mmm.” Her hands followed her gaze, sliding over his stomach and up until she could flatten her palms against his chest. “Don’t get distracted by my underwear drawer. I’m not as wholesome as my sister.”

“Thank God for that,” he told her, his voice low and solemn. “I like my women a little kinky.”

He felt her warm breath on his skin a moment before her tongue traced a teasing little circle around a nipple. She scratched her fingernails lightly down his side as she did it again. “What does a Green Beret werewolf think is a little kinky?”

He wove his fingers into her hair. “I’m a wolf, baby. We scratch and bite.” He fought a shiver as she raked her nails over his skin again. “Some of us more than others.”

“Hell, I’m *not* a Green Beret werewolf, and I scratch and bite.” As if to prove the point, her teeth closed on his skin just to the left of his nipple. He stiffened when she bit him, and she laughed and soothed the spot with her tongue. “What else?”

His control wavered. He dragged her head back and growled against her jaw line. “You have to watch the biting, sweetheart. Do it too much, and it’s as good as a brand. You’ll be stuck with me.”

“Stuck with you?” Her voice sounded breathless and unsteady. “I’m not—I don’t think I understand...”

“Everyone will think I belong to you.” He meant the words as a warning, but they came out sounding like a harsh plea.

The silence between them felt heavy and tense, even though Brynn’s fingers never stopped their slow, maddening caress. Finally she pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. “Do you want to?”

Joe swallowed, then let go of her and backed away a step. He’d convinced himself that, if Cindy would be Brynn’s Guide, he could handle everything else she asked of him. “What happened to friendly sex? No big deal?”

Something flashed across her face—pain or vulnerability or maybe even rejection—but she was good at controlling her expression. It was gone a heartbeat later, replaced with a fixed smile that looked strained around the edges. “I’m sorry. I got a little carried away.”

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “Damn it, Brynn. Will you stop trying to be so damn sophisticated and worldly for five minutes and tell me what it is you want?”

That got an honest reaction out of her. Brynn scrambled to her knees and clutched her bra against her chest as she glared at him. “That is some condescending bullshit right there. But if you’d like me to blunt it up for you, sure. I want to have dirty fucking sex with you with an intensity that sort of freaks me out, because guns and muscles and hero shit has never turned me on before, but suddenly now I can’t think of anything but you.”

He steeled himself, tamping down the surge of emotion that rose at her words. “That isn’t what I meant. You just can’t seem to decide whether you want to take me for a tumble, or warn every other woman in town away from me.” He caught her arm as she jerked away. “So which is it?”

“*I don’t know.*” The words were low and desperate, and he knew she was lying. She knew, too; he saw it in her face before she looked away and squeezed her eyes shut. When she spoke, it was in a whisper so soft he almost couldn’t hear her. “I don’t want to share you. I want you to myself.”

He hauled her toward him, catching her when she might have tumbled off the bed. His mouth landed on hers, firm and demanding, opening her lips so his tongue could slip inside. Her hair spilled around them like long threads of silk, and he pulled the cotton bra away so he could smooth his hand over her skin.

She moaned, the sound mostly muffled by his mouth, and for several long minutes she seemed content with nothing more than kissing him. As aggressive as she’d been about initiating sex, she seemed more subdued now. Not submissive, exactly, and certainly not passive, but willing—even eager—to let him take the lead.

Joe climbed on the bed, pressing her back into the pillows, and trailed his lips down the soft curve of her neck. "I'll be careful. I swear it, Brynn."

Her sigh was one of pleasure, and she tangled her fingers in his hair and tilted her head back a little more. "I trust you, and I'm not going to break."

He'd throw himself off the roof before he hurt her physically, but he wasn't sure if that was what he'd meant at all. "I know." He scraped his teeth over her skin and fought a groan when her body jerked under his. "Tonight's just going to be something good, honey. You need that. We both do."

"We both do," she agreed, and the way her voice trembled made his fingers tighten around the button of her jeans. The fingers of her free hand traced over his shoulder and down his arm, following his biceps. "You never did tell me what else you kinky Green Beret werewolves like. Are we talking Discovery Channel and hair pulling? Or, like, whips and chains and leather skirts? I didn't pack any vinyl, just so you know..."

He yanked the button free and nudged her zipper down slowly. "Good thing I have plastic wrap in the kitchen," he joked.

She laughed, low and breathless, and there was something distinctly naughty about the look in her eyes. "I let a guy try to tie me to the bed with plastic wrap once. The idea was much more appealing in theory than practice."

"Do you usually sleep with stupid guys? That's not what the plastic is for." He levered himself up and reached for the drawer in his bedside table. "See, *this* is what you use to tie a woman up." He dragged out several scarves and let them drop to skim over her bare breasts as he moved them to his other hand.

He didn't need his enhanced senses to register her approval of the idea. Her nipples tightened under the teasing brush of silk, and she sucked in a sharp breath as her eyes fluttered shut. "I didn't sleep with stupid men. I slept with overeducated men. Sometimes that's worse."

"Losers come in all shapes, sizes and tax brackets, honey." He reached for her arm and froze when he saw the wrap around her delicate wrist. *Shit*. He'd forgotten about her sprain. "This is a bad idea."

Her eyes popped open again. "What? Why?"

He grinned, his ego soothed by the fact that she'd forgotten, as well. "You're hurt." His thumb stroked over the bandage. "It slipped our minds."

"So don't tie me up." She shifted her other hand and slid it down his back. "Save something for later."

They should be saving it *all* for later, for a time when he could think, when his mind wasn't so scrambled by desire. But he still dropped the silk to the bed and stretched out over her, his lips finding the bare, vulnerable curve where her neck met her shoulder.

She drew in a breath and let it out on a soft sigh as her fingers drifted lower. Her hand dipped under the waistband of his jeans, and she turned her head so her breath tickled against his ear. "I'm thinking the clothes need to be gone."

A sharp, quick tug brought her jeans off her hips, revealing the white cotton panties she wore. “All of them?” he teased as he hooked one finger under the elastic band and pulled gently.

“I was talking about *your* clothing.” But she lifted her hips a little in obvious invitation. “Not that you don’t look absurdly hot in nothing but jeans, but they might get in the way of my plans for the evening.”

Joe drew the cotton down her legs along with her jeans. “I know what you were talking about, honey.” He left his own jeans buttoned and in place. “Plenty of time.”

She braced her elbows on the bed and lifted up a little to watch him. “And what, exactly, are you planning to do to me that’s going to take all this time?”

He laughed and dropped her pants on the floor, then teased the back of her knee with his fingers. “I didn’t know you wanted a formal program for the evening.”

“Mmm, no. I’ve got confidence in your experience.” She shifted her leg and rubbed her calf against his side. “I think we can go forward without an outline.”

“Good to know.” He climbed on the bed, this time stretching out beside her and twisting a lock of her hair around his finger. “I’m better at winging it, anyway.” He used the tip of one curl to tease over her skin, then followed the invisible path with his tongue.

She responded with a shiver and an encouraging noise. Her hands found his back again, more aggressive this time as she dragged her nails lightly over his shoulders. He swallowed the growl that rose in his throat and stroked his hand down her belly and between her thighs as his lips parted over her breast and he sucked her nipple into his mouth.

She arched up to his touch, hot and wet, and his fingers slipped against her. This time, he groaned against her skin and caught her nipple between his teeth.

“Oh, *God...*” Her hand groped at the back of his head, and she choked on another moan as she shifted her legs apart and rocked into his touch with shameless abandon.

He barely brushed her clit, teasing more than anything else, and moved to swirl his tongue around her other nipple. He remained there, touching her without deepening his caresses, and waited for her to come to him.

It didn’t take long. A whimper escaped her and she dug her feet into the bed and arched her hips into his touch. “*Joe!*”

He turned his face to her neck. “What?”

She wiggled a little and somehow worked a hand between them. Her fingers rubbed against his cock through the fabric of his jeans, and she moaned again. “I am way too turned on for teasing.”

He clenched his jaw and moved his hand lower and pressed one finger inside her, rocking the heel of his hand against her. “Better?”

Brynn groaned, and her hand shifted up until her fingers encountered his belt. She swore softly and clutched at it as her hips rocked with his hand. “Fuck! I...can’t—oh *Christ...*”

“That’s right,” he murmured. He drew his finger back and thrust another one in, as well. “You want me naked, you have to come for me.”

It wouldn’t take long to get her there, that was clear from the way her body tightened around his fingers. She moaned, and he felt her teeth close around his ear. “Cocky bastard.”

A shiver ran down his spine, and he turned his head to bite her lower lip. “Are you complaining?” As he spoke, he raised his thumb to rub circles over her clit.

“L-Later—” She hissed in a sharp breath and squeezed her eyes shut. “Complaining later. Think I’m coming now...”

Her hips bucked under his hand, her response shaking his already frayed control. He bit her again, closing his teeth on the soft skin of her shoulder. Her moan turned into a hoarse cry, and her body clenched as climax shook through her.

Joe held her, dropping gentle kisses to her neck and cheek. When she stilled, panting, against him, he moved back and reached for his belt.

She slapped his hand away with a breathless laugh. “My turn.”

He’d slept with enough non-wolves to accept her playful aggression with ease. Instead of bristling, he grinned and held up his hands. “Whatever you say, sweetheart.”

It took her two gratifying tries to get his belt open. Her hands shook as she tugged open the button on his jeans and wrestled with the zipper. “Am I breaking werewolf sex protocol?”

“How?” He helped her lower his zipper before catching her hands. “By undressing me?”

“Mmm. You *are* sort of bossy, you know.”

“I’m an alpha wolf, honey.” He climbed off the bed and tossed her a condom from the nightstand. “They invented the word just for us.”

“How nice of them.” She shoved her hair back from her face as her gaze drifted down his body. “Are you also unnaturally calm? Because I’m about to jump off the bed and tackle you to the floor, and you are far too composed.”

He moved in a flash, pushing her back on the bed and hovering over her. “Staying in control isn’t optional, Brynn. Not with a human. You call it composure. I call it not hurting you.”

Her mouth dropped open and she stared up at him in wide-eyed silence for several heartbeats. “Oh. Oh.”

He ground against her, groaning when he felt the heat of her even through his pants. “If it makes you feel better, I’m having the devil’s own time holding back here.” He bit her chin. “Maybe you should tie *me* up.”

“Take your pants off and lie down, and I will.”

He laughed and gathered the silk in one hand as he climbed past her onto the bed. “Do your worst, lady. I can take it.” *I hope.*

Brynn had seen few things in her life quite as hot as Joe stretched out on his bed, shirtless and cocky as hell even while he was waiting for her to tie him to the bed.

She curled her fingers in the waistband of his jeans and fought the urge to laugh at her own silliness. *Of course he's cocky. Silk's not going to hold him if he wants to get out.* She wasn't sure what *would* be strong enough to keep a werewolf restrained, but pretty little silk scarves weren't going to do it.

The desire to analyze his motivations disappeared as soon as she managed to get his pants over his hips. Her mouth dry, she tore her gaze from the hard length of his cock and focused on his face as she dragged his clothing down his legs. "That is a lot of self-control you've got there."

He arched a little, his smile faltering. "Not enough control," he corrected. "Awful lot of lust, though."

"Yeah?" She dropped his pants on the floor and crawled up the bed until she was straddling his knees. "I've decided tying you up is sort of silly, since you can get free if you want to anyway. So you just have to behave on your own. Grab the headboard."

He followed her instructions with a low laugh. "You're relying on that self-control I just told you was in short supply?"

She tore open the condom wrapper. "I trust you."

"You can trust me," he whispered, his voice suddenly fierce. "You can, Brynn. I swear it."

"I know." It only took a few seconds to smooth the condom on, and she planted her hands on either side of his arms. His muscles flexed as his fingers tightened around the headboard, and she let her hair tickle over his skin as she leaned down to kiss him, slow and deep.

Joe's tongue slicked over hers, hot and greedy, and he freed one hand from the headboard to cradle the back of her head. His muscles flexed again as he arched up, rubbing his body under hers, testing hard against soft. So she shifted her body until the next arch of his hips pushed his cock inside her.

He made a harsh noise in the back of his throat and slid his hand down to the flare of her ass to press her closer. "*Fuck*, Brynn."

Pleasure made her giddy. She rocked down, hard and fast, and took him all the way in. "I knew you wouldn't behave. But you can help if you want."

His chest heaved, but he shook his head and gripped the headboard again. "It's all you, baby." Even as he spoke, he thrust up into her with a sharp flex of his hips.

It felt so good she forgot about her sprained wrist until she tried to put weight on it. She hissed and forced herself upright, bracing her good hand against his chest. "*Fuck*, you are all kinds of distracting."

He murmured something too low for her to hear and sat up easily, the muscles of his stomach rippling. "I should have thought." He tugged her arms over his shoulders and wrapped his own hands around her waist to guide her movements. "I'm an idiot."

"Or you're brilliant..." She kissed his chin and the line of his jaw before parting her lips and biting him softly. "This is perfect."

He caught her lips with another low growl, his hands urging her to match the rhythm he set, a lazy rocking that hit every spot just right. It was slow and intense and still the most perfect thing she'd ever felt. *So much for a casual romp...*

She wanted it to last, but her body had other ideas. She tore her lips from his and let her head fall back as the trembling pleasure inside her reached its peak, too fast but too good to deny. His name left her lips in a hoarse whisper. She came, slow and languid as she ground her hips down against his in a desperate attempt to feel as much of him as she could.

Joe muffled a groan on her damp skin, his teeth pressing into her shoulder. This time, when his hands moved her away and back to him, it was faster, deeper. More intense. "Again," he murmured, before the aftershocks of her pleasure had even faded.

"I—I can't—"

Brynn half expected some cocky response, but he just bit her shoulder and demanded, "*Now.*"

He thrust up into her once more, his fingers tightening on her hips as he dragged her into the movement, and this time she came with a startled cry. Her fingernails raked down his back as white-hot pleasure drove his name from her lips.

His own head fell back on a strangled moan, the muscles of his back taut under her hands, and he clutched her to him as he jerked. He rocked into her for several moments and lowered his face to her neck with a soft, hoarse sigh.

"Christ." Brynn closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against his head as she panted for breath. "Jesus, Joe."

He raised his head and glanced over his shoulder. "Did we hurt your wrist?"

It made her laugh. She nestled her face into his neck and curled tighter around him. "God, no. Nothing hurts right now."

Joe hummed a little and lay back on the pillows, bringing her with him. "At the risk of my pillow talk being deemed unsuitable, I have a question."

"Mmm?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. "Hang on. I'll be right back." He shifted her carefully onto the bed before climbing off and walking from the room.

Brynn stretched her arms over her head and stared at the ceiling, basking in the quiet afterglow as she listened to Joe moving around in the other room. For a brief moment before they'd started she'd been worried, worried that enjoyment of sex would be one more thing that Alan Matthews had stolen from her.

No one would have been surprised. Cindy and Sam had seemed politely disbelieving when she tried to tell them rape wasn't an issue. Not that Matthews' people hadn't seemed to take great delight in terrorizing her with the possibility, but even the most creatively horrific threat hadn't scared her half as much as Pierce and his sick plan to make her one of them. To make her his.

She shivered, unaware that Joe had returned until he nudged her lightly and pulled the blankets back. “Do you need anything besides sleep?”

“A hug.” She let him tug the covers over them both. “A hug would be good.”

His laugh vibrated through her even as his arms surrounded her, strong and comforting. “I wasn’t running.”

“I know. I just...” She pressed her forehead to his shoulder. “Maybe I’ll actually sleep tonight.”

His lips brushed the top of her head softly. “I hope so. Tomorrow might be a big day.” Joe took a deep breath. “We need your help, Brynn. With the summit.”

He sounded too tense to be talking about organizing chairs or helping Sam with the cooking. “Okay. What sort of help do you need?”

“Keith has a plan for how to handle taking back the packs that have fallen to people like Alan Matthews, but it’s pretty out there. A lot of the alphas might not go along with it.” He stroked his fingers up and down her back. “But if they got a first-hand account—a reminder, maybe—of how bad it’s getting...”

“You want me to tell them about what happened to me?”

“If you can.” He stared down at her, the gold flecks in his hazel eyes brighter than usual. “If you’re up to it, it could help a lot.”

She opened her mouth to agree without question, then thought better of it. “Abby can’t be there, and I don’t know if I can do it with Keith sitting in the corner looking all outraged and murderous. Or you, either, for that matter.”

Joe seemed to consider that for a moment. “Abby won’t be there. I’ll make sure of it. You might just have to ignore Keith, and you couldn’t keep me away, honey. But I think I can handle it.”

Brynn didn’t feel nearly as confident. “It’s pretty outrageous, Joe. If you want me to make them understand how bad it is, if it’s *important*, then I’d have to tell them everything.”

“Sweetheart, nothing you could say in there would be worse than what I’ve imagined. Trust me on that.”

“Yeah, but you’ve never had to listen to me talk, either. I mean, not like this. It’s—” She sighed and rubbed absent circles against his back. “How important is this? How serious? Because...this is something I’m good at. Making people care about the things I care about.”

“Important,” he muttered. “Could mean the difference between having the support of the other alphas, or being completely fucked.”

“I can do it. I can make them understand.” She cupped his cheek as she held his gaze. “I’m one hell of a public speaker, baby. I’m going to let them see the pain, but if you turn around and start treating me like some damaged little victim, I will murder you. In your sleep.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Will you warn me if I start doing it? You know, before you kill me?”

She grabbed a fistful of his hair and tried to glare at him. “It’s not funny, Joe. I’ve got plenty of trauma to deal with, but I am *not* broken, so I’m not going to put up with any faux-chivalrous, chauvinistic bullshit from you. I get enough of that shit from Keith with his freaked-out big-brother act.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked entirely unperturbed by her tirade. “But have a little faith, honey. If I thought you were broken, you wouldn’t be naked in my bed.”

It was impossible not to smile. “That would be a pity, because you are without a doubt the hottest forty-five-year-old I have ever seen.”

“Hell yeah, I am.” He stretched out one arm and turned off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. “Good night, Brynn.”

The dark wasn’t nearly as threatening with Joe’s solid presence next to her. She shifted her head and kissed his shoulder softly before settling against him. “Good night, Joe.”

Chapter Six

Brynn had been in the alphas' house once before, but a casual dinner with Keith and Abby hadn't prepared her for this. Abby talked about power all the time, about feeling other people's strength as if it was something tangible. Before now, Brynn had found the idea a little amusing. Some people had presence—anyone who worked in politics knew *that*—but charisma and confidence were the secret, not magic.

When she walked into Gavin's kitchen, she felt the power. The huge wooden table was full today, and every gaze turned to her when she crossed the threshold. The sheer weight of it might have sent her back a step if Joe hadn't been behind her.

But he was, and he urged her forward with a hand between her shoulder blades. "It's okay. You'll get used to it."

Sam rose from her seat with a smile. "Brynn. Thank you for coming, sweetie. We're just finishing up some business here. Joe, why don't you take her out on the porch until I come fetch you?"

"Sure, Sam." He led Brynn through the kitchen and out onto a wide, sturdy porch. He indicated the swing with a nod. "Want to sit?"

"Yeah." The wooden swing creaked a little as she sat, and she clenched her hand around the chain and stared out at the dense forest beyond the porch. "Nice view. Peaceful."

"Mmm." Joe kept his eyes on Brynn. "I couldn't keep Keith away tonight. But it's his gig, you know."

She'd figured as much, but it would make it harder. The speech floating half-formed in her head would be difficult enough to deliver to complete strangers, much less Keith. *And Joe*. Her fingers tightened around the cool metal chain and she nodded. "The two of you just have to promise not to get all growly and upset."

"I already told Keith that was part of the deal." He sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I'll keep it under control."

Brynn nodded and let herself lean into his side a little. "Are you going to get creeped out watching me do the politician-speech thing? Some people think it's manipulative and sort of sleazy." She tried to keep her tone light, but it seemed a pointless task. Even if she controlled her voice, Joe would read her nervousness in any of a dozen other signals she wasn't even aware of. *Which means it's a good thing I believe what I'm saying. I don't think lying for the sake of politics works on werewolves.*

“‘Sleazy’ is the last thing I’d call you, sweetheart,” he murmured. “You haven’t finished law school yet.”

She gave in and laughed. “Yeah, I suppose even being kidnapped by insane werewolves has a silver lining.”

“I think maybe so.”

A gentle breeze set the branches to swaying and teased at a few stray pieces of her hair. Brynn planted her foot against the ground and rocked the swing gently. “So what happens after this? If they listen to you and Keith and...and me?”

“Then we go to war.” He stared out at the trees. “To Helena first. There are too many personal scores to settle to go anywhere else. They can tell themselves it’s about the closest threat...but it’s about Alan Matthews.”

She thought of the Helena alpha. She thought of his deceptive good looks and charm, of the way he seemed able to switch between civilized manners and terrifying rage. She remembered the way he’d touched her when he’d filmed the video to lure Abby, bored and uninterested as he licked her face. It should have been sexually charged, threatening, but the minute the camera was off she may as well have been invisible. She’d found his lack of interest comforting until she realized it was something far more chilling—an absolute lack of feeling.

Alan Matthews had looked at her and seen a mildly useful accessory, something to be used, if possible, or gifted for good behavior. His sick obsession with Abby might have been preferable to being a *thing*, forgettable and unremarkable. Disposable.

She shivered and pressed closer to Joe, turning her face to his shoulder. “Promise me. Promise me I’ll never end up with him again.”

Joe started a little, as if the idea hadn’t occurred to him. “No way. *Fuck*, no.”

“If it comes down to it—if I’m going to end up turned—I don’t want them to do it.” It was a struggle to keep the stark terror out of her voice. “The rest of them talked about raping me, but not Pierce. He’d sit there for hours and talk about ripping me up and watching me change. I think he was some sort of serial killer or something. He said I’d be perfect because I looked just like his girls, but he could do me a hundred times and I’d always get better.”

Joe’s hand tightened around the swing’s chain until his knuckles turned white and the metal creaked. “You’re making me wish I hadn’t shot him.”

“If you hadn’t shot him, I might not have slept again. Ever.”

He turned to look at her, his eyes almost golden in the slanting sunlight. “I meant I wouldn’t have made it so fast. So easy. He would have suffered, Brynn.”

Part of her felt shame at the thrill his words brought. The part of her that had interned under a senator to promote gun control, that had argued against capital punishment and scoffed at vigilante justice. Everything had been black and white, two months ago. Right and wrong.

She squeezed her hands into fists to hide their shaking. "I don't know who I am anymore, because I wish he'd suffered. I wish it had been slow."

"It doesn't make you a bad person, you know."

Maybe not, but it felt like it. Brynn fought another of those horrible shivers and squeezed her eyes shut to block out his face. "I know. But it takes a lot of getting used to. At least Abby can blame her murderous feelings on her new instincts."

"It's not something I learned from being a wolf," he admitted, covering her hand with his. "I learned a long time ago, Brynn. Some people are just...bad. Wishing anything good or fair for them is useless."

It made her laugh, though the sound was edged with hysteria. "Christ, Joe. I wanted to work in politics. I saw greed and corruption and some seriously fucked-up skeletons in closets. I thought I was past feeling naïve about how fucking bad the world can be."

He didn't offer any more platitudes, just drew her closer. The swing squeaked softly as they rocked in silence. The only other sounds were of the wind playing through the heavy pine branches and the murmur of voices from inside the house.

It was soothing enough that she felt disappointed when the door opened and Samantha's soft voice floated out. "We're ready."

Joe stood and helped her up. When he guided her through the back door, there were even more people seated at and around the table in the kitchen.

Gavin raised his hand. "Over here, Brynn."

He gestured to a large chair at the head of the table, the chair he'd occupied the last time she'd been here. He pulled it back and held it for her with an encouraging smile, and she lowered herself gingerly.

Samantha took the seat directly to Brynn's right, and smiled as she reached out to cover her hand. "No one expects you to get all the names straight, but let me introduce you to our guests."

Brynn had long since learned the trick of matching names to faces, one that had proved useful in her chosen profession. She studied the werewolves as Sam introduced them, picking out their defining characteristics out of habit and committing them to memory.

Bobby and Anna, from Green Pond, Alabama, were a young couple, both with bright blue eyes and cheerful, relaxed smiles. Anna gave her an encouraging wink, and Bobby nodded and welcomed her with a Southern drawl that seemed a tad too overdone to be real.

Next came Paul and Hazel, the alphas from Dutch Harbor, Alaska. Paul was massive, with a face that looked carved from granite and shoulders that might as well have been. Beside him, Hazel looked tiny,

though she was probably taller than Brynn herself. While Paul greeted her with a curt nod, Hazel simply studied Brynn with exotically tilted brown eyes and remained silent.

Albert and Mary were from nearby St. Anthony, Idaho, and proved to be the first real surprise. Though Sam introduced them as the alpha pair, she mentioned that Albert's wife, Sally, had remained home to take care of a sick child. Brynn had always assumed alphas were all couples, but Mary seemed completely oblivious to the quiet, reserved man at her side.

In fact, Mary spent most of the introduction staring at Joe with a look that was *far* too familiar for Brynn's liking.

The final couple was Cameron and Evelyn, the alphas from Arcadia, Kansas. Evelyn had gorgeous blonde hair and a perfect smile that looked a little condescending, but Brynn didn't sense malice in the woman as much as a gentle doubt that a girl Brynn's age could have anything useful to say. Cameron greeted her with a weary smile as he ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair.

Sam reached the end of her introductions and nodded to Keith, who was leaning against the counter behind Paul and Hazel. "Keith's already told them the basics of what happened, sweetheart. You can tell us as much as you're able about what happened to you."

Brynn nodded and closed her eyes for a few seconds to find that quiet place inside her where nervousness faded and left her clear-headed and confident.

Then she told her story.

He wanted to destroy something.

For the tenth time in as many minutes, Joe searched out Keith, catching his gaze. Keith stood there, stone-faced, eyes blank, and Joe knew his rage found a mirror in his friend and mentor.

His short nails bit into his palms hard enough to draw blood, and Brynn's voice faded. Though she kept speaking and Joe heard her words, he no longer associated them with her. They were just words, a third-person account of something that had once happened to someone he knew.

If he thought about the things she said happened to *her*, he'd slip into blind rage.

The assembled alphas had no reason to hide their reactions. Shock and outrage seemed to be the prevailing mood of the room, though Anna had tears in her eyes and looked like she was holding herself back from swooping down on Brynn and folding her into her arms by sheer force of will.

Mary was the only one who seemed mostly unaffected, but Mary barely seemed to be paying attention. She was too busy trying to catch his eye.

He ignored her. She'd never made any secret of her desire for him to come to St. Anthony and challenge Albert for his position. Hell, Al might have even welcomed the chance to step down and spend more time with his wife and kids. But the last thing Joe wanted was to make himself miserable just to fulfill

an instinctive need to rule and protect. He'd rather stay in Red Rock and let Gavin and maybe Keith boss him around forever.

Murmurs rose around the table, and Joe gritted his teeth as Brynn told them about the type of men Matthews had chosen to bring to his cause. As she told them about Pierce.

Joe lowered his eyes to the floor when Gavin began asking Brynn questions, the scene with Pierce replaying in his mind. If he'd had the slightest idea why Pierce had *really* been shucking his clothes when he busted through the door, they'd all be dead. Every single one of them.

Movement caught his attention as Keith eased over to stand next to him. "You okay?"

"Yes," he grated. "No."

Mary tried to catch his eyes again, but this time Keith intercepted the look and scowled. She blinked, looking shocked, then her eyes narrowed and she turned to look at Brynn, something calculating in her expression.

"Shit." It was a soft whisper, barely loud enough for Joe to hear.

"Trouble," Joe murmured back. "Hell hath no fury, and all."

"Hell may not, but I sure do."

Joe squinted at Mary. "If she doesn't stop looking at Brynn like that, I might have to change my personal rule about hitting alphas."

From across the room, Sam shot them both a quelling look, her eyes commanding. Keith fidgeted and tilted his head toward the porch. "Come on, Brynn doesn't want us here anyway, and I stole Gavin's cigarettes."

Keith smoking would normally signal the beginning of the apocalypse. Joe just sighed and turned for the door.

Outside, he inhaled deeply and held the smoke in his lungs for a moment before exhaling. "I think I love you a little bit right now, Winston."

"Yeah." Keith took a deep breath and scuffed his foot against the wooden slats of the porch. "Shit. Did you know it was that bad?"

Joe considered that for a moment. "Well, she's told me some stuff she wouldn't tell you because of Abby. Not to mention there was a guy getting naked in the room with her when I busted in there to fetch her." He took another drag from the cigarette. "I figured some of it out. Doesn't make it easier to hear, though."

"Shit," Keith said again. "Shit, Abby would have a fucking fit. She'd march back to Helena and try to strangle Matthews with her bare fucking hands."

It didn't sound like a bad idea to him. "Terrible idea."

Keith snarled and dropped his cigarette to the deck so he could stomp it out with one booted toe. "Fuck, I wish she'd told me before. It was bad enough when Matthews was changing the power-hungry,

selfish assholes, but changing sick fucking serial-killing freaks is a different level of deranged. Least there's not a lot of question about what the other alphas will decide."

For the hundredth time, Joe wished he'd been able to hold off Matthews' men long enough for Keith to finish the alpha off. "We almost had him. I fucked it up."

"It wasn't the objective. Getting the girls safe was the only thing that mattered." Keith leaned back against the side of the house and closed his eyes. "Now the only thing that matters is *keeping* them safe."

"Yeah, and it's turned out to be easier said than done."

"You slept with her."

Joe had been waiting for the accusation all day. He finished his cigarette and flashed Keith a bland look. "You gonna get in my face about that now?"

"Honestly? I don't know *what* to say. I had no damn idea how much she'd been through, and she's got to be screwed up by it. Jesus, Joe. Just tell me you know what you're doing."

"I do." At least, he'd had himself mostly convinced that he did. Now, he wasn't so sure. "I think."

"Damn it. I wish we were going to have time for things to settle down. Abby and Brynn deserve a chance to deal with the shit that's happened to them before we drag them into a war."

"I think we all do, Keith," Joe answered heavily. "But we're not going to get it."

"No, we're not. Please tell me Brynn's at least decent with a gun."

Joe held out his hand for another cigarette. "She could use some more practice, but she did okay."

"Abby said she was anti-gun or something, so I was worried." Keith shook two more cigarettes free from the battered pack and handed one to Joe.

"Politics." Joe snorted as he rolled the cigarette between his fingers. People had all sorts of ideas about the world and how it should work, how *they* would do things. Those ideas were usually shot to hell and back when it came down to survival. "Brynn can get it done, if she has to."

"Good." Keith lit his cigarette and took a long drag before blowing the smoke up into the air above his head. "Because, at this rate, she may have to."

Joe pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "How do you deal with this shit, Keith? With people coming after Abby?"

"I kill them." Keith's voice sounded flat. "At least you have one thing going for you. Brynn doesn't seem like the type to go running into the middle of a fight. I'm still trying to convince Abby she's got to learn how to fight before she goes warrior princess on me. She says she will, but her damn instincts override everything else."

"Abby does all right." He could still see the man who'd come for them while Keith was out of town, broken and beaten. "She wields a mean fireplace poker."

"Yeah, well, she's going to be wielding one professionally now. She's been getting lessons on using makeshift weapons."

"You ever think we'll lose?" Though they were his own words, the question stunned him. "I mean, it's like you said. They're building *armies*. Armies of people like Pierce."

Keith shook his head. "That's why we won't lose. Yeah, the fact that they're all nuts and self-obsessed means they'll do things we can't predict but, in the long run, we're smarter. We're saner. We've got more riding on this shit. And if all goes well, we'll have magic. *Real* magic."

Which meant so much was riding on Brynn and how much the other alphas sympathized with her. "What do you think? She has Bobby and Anna already. Maybe Paul."

"Albert will sympathize because of what Sally went through, if Mary doesn't railroad him just out of spite. He looks like he's getting tired of trying to keep her under control."

"She's definitely looking to trade *him* in."

"Yeah." Keith shot him a look. "Might be easier for Brynn if you let me run Mary off. She's a jealous type."

Joe met Keith's look with a cheeky grin. "I can handle it."

His friend rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know it won't be the first time a couple girls have fought over you, you egotistical ass."

"Not by a long shot." It would be the first time an alpha fought with a human, though. "Mary seriously needs to back off. If she starts hassling Brynn..."

"That's why you should let me deal with her. Mary, I mean." Keith snorted. "Brynn is all yours."

The words shouldn't have sent a thrill of satisfaction shooting through him. He glanced in the window to where Brynn sat, Gavin's hand wrapped around hers. "After Matthews is gone, she can go back to Helena."

"If she wants to," Keith agreed quietly. "I know Gavin would be happy if she didn't make the choice to become one of us out of terror. Hell, we'd all be happy."

If she wasn't scared when she made the choice, it could mean she was thinking of being with him. Both options terrified him. "It would be better."

Joe heard the sound of soft footsteps and turned in time to see Sam ushering Brynn toward the door. Keith pulled it open, cursing softly when Brynn glanced up. Her eyes looked red, and Joe could smell the salty tang of tears.

He dropped the unlit cigarette and held open his arms, helpless to do anything else. "Come here."

Brynn stepped into his arms and pressed her forehead against his chest. Sam caught Joe's gaze over her head. "Keith can probably fill you in on everything else later, if you want to take her home now."

"Thanks, Sam." Joe lifted Brynn to his chest and headed down the steps and around the house.

When he reached the truck, he kissed her temple as he opened the door for her. "Bad?"

“Mostly just the questions. One or two were a little...aggressive, but the ones who were sympathetic were worse.” She shifted slightly on the truck seat and leveled a flat look at him. “You should go back, Joe. You said this stuff was important. I’m a little shaken up, but I’m fine.”

“This is Keith’s baby,” he reasoned. “They don’t need me.”

“Oh, bullshit. They need you, and you need to know what’s going on.”

He tapped the top of the truck and pulled his keys from his pocket. “Can you make it to Keith and Abby’s all right?”

She rewarded him with a relieved smile as she slipped from the truck. “Is it okay if I just walk? It’s not that far, and I could use the fresh air.”

He hesitated. “Brynn, if there are people coming into town, into Keith’s *house*, then I don’t know if you should be walking around alone.”

“Okay.” She didn’t argue, just smiled at him and reached out to take the keys from his hand. “If anyone jumps out at me, I’ll run them over.”

It was a better idea than walking. “Too bad I traded the armored tank.” He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and kissed her quickly. “I’ll be back later. Be safe.”

“I will be.”

He watched as she slid into the driver’s seat, started the truck, and lifted her hand to wave. A crunch of gravel sounded behind him as Brynn backed the truck up slowly, and he heard Keith’s quiet voice. “She’ll be okay.”

Joe blinked, cursing the setting sun as it stung his eyes. “What’s it like in there? Anyone thrown anything yet?”

“Anna’s going to knock Mary’s teeth down her throat in about twenty seconds, and I didn’t want you to miss that.”

“Well, hell. Let’s get in there before we miss the show.”

It was after midnight when they climbed into Keith’s Jeep. “I feel like I just babysat a bunch of kids,” Joe grumbled.

“Half of those kids are over a century old.”

“Doesn’t matter. They still bicker like they’re all in grammar school.”

Keith laughed as he shifted the Jeep into gear. “Yeah, but it was sort of worth it to see cute little Anna almost punch Mary.”

“Highlight of the evening.” Joe rubbed the side of his face wearily. “Brynn’s going to be disappointed.”

“I don’t know. You saw her face when she came out. I think maybe she already knows.”

“Maybe.” He stared out the window, his mood blackening. “It sets us back. Makes it harder to fight.”

“We’ve got a few more days. People will talk tonight, and tomorrow before the moon rises. Maybe Bobby and Anna and Paul will be persuasive enough.”

Joe didn’t speak again until they stopped in front of Keith’s house. “Do you ever wish you’d been born human?”

Keith turned off the Jeep and pulled the keys from the ignition. He stared at them, turning them absently in his hand. “I don’t know. Sometimes it makes it harder. I’ll never understand what you went through, much less what Abby went through. But I don’t hate the human world like some wolves who are born to it. I went out and tried to become a part of it.”

Joe closed his hand around the door handle. “I don’t want Brynn to regret any of the choices she makes.” Not the way he had.

“I’m sorry, Joe.” Keith’s voice was quiet and filled with regret. “I’m sorry I dragged you into this life to begin with.”

“You didn’t. I dragged myself into it because I couldn’t keep my brain out of my pants.” Even as he spoke the words, Joe knew they were unfair. Good or bad, he’d loved Tamara. For all her faults, he was pretty sure she’d loved him, too. “Anyway, I made my own choices, and they’re on me. Couldn’t blame anyone else, even if I wanted. Which I don’t, because it’s a pretty good life.”

“Except for times like this.” Keith scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. “You know what visiting alphas means. Formal introductions and the whole full moon shebang. Sometimes I hate the old ways.”

It would keep him away from Brynn longer than strictly necessary, but it had to be done. “It’s been a while since we had a really good howl. Besides, you’d better get used to it. You’ll be hosting things like this yourself soon enough.”

If anything, Keith looked more miserable. “Thanks. That makes it all better.”

“It’s not so bad. Usually.”

“Yeah. Talk to me again when Gavin puts me in charge and *you* have to do all the second-in-command shit.”

Joe snorted. “If I weren’t helping you with it already, I’d stay with Brynn tomorrow night.”

“Traitor.”

“We’ll both help Gavin,” Joe reminded him. “We’ll do it because he’s the alpha and it’s our job, but also because he needs us, especially with all the visitors. So quit your bitching. They’ll be gone soon enough.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Keith climbed out of the truck. “You want me to tell Brynn?”

“I think I’d better handle this one. Thanks, though.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t you two come over for lunch tomorrow? I want Brynn to meet Sasha. Figured maybe they could spend tomorrow night together until we get back.”

"I think she'd like that."

Joe watched as Keith jogged up the steps to his house. A few minutes later, Brynn stepped out onto the porch, looking sleepy and disheveled. She pulled Joe's truck keys out of her pocket and smiled at him. "Hey. Guess they had a lot of talking to do."

"Quite a bit." His stomach clenched at her apparent exhaustion. "Lot of yelling, actually."

She rested her forehead on his shoulder and sighed quietly. "I figured there would be."

He listened to her heartbeat for several moments. "Let's go home."

They could have reached his cabin in minutes through the woods, but driving took them over a more circuitous route. When they stopped in the gravel drive, he opened the truck door for Brynn and kicked it shut behind her. "You did everything you could. They're just a bunch of old coots. Set in their ways."

She didn't argue as they walked up the steps and to the door. They were almost to the bedroom when she finally spoke. "Cameron disagreed with me. So did Hazel. But Mary will be trouble. She wants you."

"You're not going to get Hazel," Joe told her. "Her parents were killed by a rogue wizard. Who knows about Cameron?" When Brynn lay on the bed, he sat at the end to pull off her shoes. "Mary is...a long story. A long, unrequited story."

Brynn frowned slightly, her eyes still fixed on the ceiling. "Her...partner, Albert. He'll do whatever she says. I think Paul and Hazel will fight over it, but he loves her too much. He'll give in. Evelyn thinks I'm a poor traumatized child who doesn't understand what she's saying, and Cameron..." The bed creaked as she moved, and Brynn tugged his shirt from his pants. "I'm sorry I couldn't convince them. I thought if I tried hard enough..."

"It wasn't your job to convince them. Just to tell your story. The rest is out of our hands." He dropped a kiss to her forehead. "You did a damn good job."

"I guess so." She dragged his shirt up and stared expectantly until he let her pull it over his head. Then she dropped her hands to his belt. "Now get in this bed and cuddle with me. I earned it."

"Yes, you did." He nudged off his shoes and dropped his jeans. The bed was cool, so he curled around Brynn. "Want to meet Sasha tomorrow?"

"She's the witch, right?"

"Right. We figured you two could hang out while the rest of us are howling at the moon."

He heard her quiet laugh as she wiggled closer to his chest. "Is that what you do?"

"Sometimes," he admitted. "What did you think we did?"

"I don't know. I'm not up on my werewolf lore. My roommate made me watch the *Underworld* movies, though, so if I were going off of that, I'd say you fight vampires or have dirty sex with them. Possibly both. Concurrently."

Joe laughed. "Sorry, but it's been a while since I saw a vampire."

"Good. All that tight leather is hard for us normal girls to compete with."

He didn't have the heart to tell her the last vampire he'd met had been unfashionably stuck in the seventies. "Get some rest, honey. Tomorrow is going to be one damn long day."

Chapter Seven

Sasha was a pretty redhead who looked traumatized in all the ways people expected Brynn to be. A livid claw mark on Sasha's cheek made it clear that her run-in with angry werewolves had been far more violent than Brynn's, even if it had been blessedly shorter in duration.

Of course, Abby had already won the girl over. Maybe having *someone* who would submit to her need to protect was good for her sister, because she seemed steadier today. Brynn found her in the kitchen with Sasha, rolling out pastry dough.

Abby inspected the flattened slab of dough. "Just a little thinner. Then I'll show you how to roll it onto the pin."

Sasha bit her lip in concentration. "All right."

Abby looked up and beckoned to Brynn. "We're making pie."

She moved to the sink to wash her hands. "So I see. Do you have anything for me to help with that I won't ruin?"

Her sister waved a hand toward the backyard. "Keith's grilling."

Which would usually be her preference, but the whole point of coming over had been to get to know Sasha. Brynn smiled and slid into the chair across from the witch. "Nah, I'll stay in here with you guys. Joe said Sasha and I get to hold down the non-werewolf fort tonight."

Sasha offered her a shy smile. Abby tossed a peeler at her and pointed to the vegetable rack. "Potatoes."

"Yes, ma'am." She plucked up a potato and set to work. "Sasha, I heard you've got some sort of...spell or something. That will let me see what it's like to be a werewolf."

"My mentor taught me. She said it was old magic, from before the rift." She kept speaking even as Abby helped her roll her pastry onto the rolling pin. "So that the change isn't so terrifying, I think."

Brynn watched, remembering a hundred times Abby had done the same thing with her, patiently teaching her all the things their parents would have, if they'd lived. "I don't know much about magic. Or, you know, anything. A month ago I didn't even know it was real."

"I found out I had the gift when I was a child." Sasha handed the pin to Abby, who moved to fit it carefully into a pie pan. "I guess you could say it runs in my family."

She didn't look like she was up to a round of twenty questions, so Brynn bit back the urge and settled for another smile. "Well, I can tell you that baking doesn't run in our family. I can't touch the pie or it will come out inedible."

Abby brought over a bowl for the potatoes. "She's exaggerating, Sasha."

But Sasha blushed and dipped her head. "I think maybe we're in the same boat then, Brynn."

Poor thing. "Too bad we can't order pizza out here. It could be a pizza and movie night."

"Maybe next time," Sasha suggested.

"Keith has lots of movies, if you guys want to take a look at his DVD collection."

It was tacit permission to flee the kitchen, and Brynn grabbed at the chance. "Want to go look, Sasha? Abby will yell at us if she needs us to come back. She's bossy like that."

Abby only laughed. "Yes, I am."

Sasha followed Brynn quietly. "They seem to be doing a lot of work on the house. Did they just move in?"

"Yeah, just a week or two ago..." Brynn skirted the couch and went to the large bookshelf against the wall where Keith's DVD collection had been haphazardly stacked to await organization. "It's sort of been a crazy month."

"That's what Samantha said." Sasha picked up a handful of DVDs and flipped through them. "She and Gavin are nice."

"They are. So's Keith." Brynn hesitated, her gaze tracing the ugly red marks on Sasha's cheek. "If you ever want to talk about what happened... I know everyone must be saying that to you. They're still all saying it to me."

"My mentor died. I almost did." Sasha raised her hand, not quite touching the livid marks before she lowered it again. "It was frightening."

"They kidnapped me. Not because they wanted me, but because they wanted to hurt my sister." Brynn stared at the stacks of DVDs without really seeing them. "I was useful. It was...terrifying."

"At least they only wanted to kill me." The words weren't at all ironic, and Brynn didn't blame her. Maybe someday the thought of Pierce's sick whispers wouldn't make her stomach clench. *Maybe.*

"Keith won't let anything happen to you," she whispered, and the reminder wasn't just for Sasha.

"So Abby keeps telling me." She flashed Brynn a wan smile.

The look in Sasha's eyes made Brynn's chest tight. Tired, scared. Brittle. Everything Brynn fought against when the dreams woke her in the night. *I don't want to be broken.*

But watching Sasha as she picked through the movies made one thing clear to Brynn. She wasn't broken. Whatever Pierce and Matthews had done, whatever they'd *tried* to do, she'd been stronger. She'd survived.

And now all I have to do is keep surviving.

After dinner, Joe pulled Brynn out onto the front porch and handed her a pistol. "This is the same handgun you trained with," he murmured. "Keep it on you tonight."

She stared at the gun, then glanced back up at him. "Is something going on that I need to be worried about?"

He shook his head. "Even Alan Matthews isn't crazy enough to come here while the alphas are gathered, but I won't be around. Always prepared, sweetheart."

Brynn swallowed and checked the pistol like he'd taught her, fighting the urge to shiver. "Sasha might freak out if she sees this. She's still upset."

"She'll have to get over it." His eyes went hard. "If you don't carry it, make sure you can get to it. Fast."

Her borrowed hoodie had huge pockets. She slipped the handgun into the right pocket and ignored the way it hung a little crooked. "I'll keep it on me."

"Don't worry about a kill shot," he advised. "If something happens, get them down and run like hell for the center of town. And scream. I'll hear you."

It was casual. Almost offhand. Joe's easy-going nature made her forget, sometimes, just what he was capable of. The memory rose before she could stop it, the image of Joe dressed in black and covered in weapons, his eyes cold as he pointed his gun at Pierce and blew off the top of his head.

It should have terrified her. The fact that it comforted her instead might have been the scariest part of all.

She ignored that nagging voice and leaned into Joe, resting her cheek against his chest so she could hear the slow, steady beat of his heart. "Okay."

"I'll see you later tonight, honey."

Rocking up on her toes brought her close enough to kiss him. She nipped his lower lip teasingly and smiled against his mouth. "I'll be waiting."

His mouth descended on hers in a hard kiss, hot and wet and barely controlled. He dragged her to his chest and explored her mouth for a long, heady moment before releasing her. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

It took a second to catch her breath, and even then her cheeks felt heated. "Too bad I can't be waiting in your bed naked."

"Later," he murmured. "Count on it."

When she returned to the living room, she found Sasha still curled up on the couch, her eyes fixed on the small TV screen. Brynn dropped down on the other end of the couch and adjusted the gun in her pocket. "How's the movie?"

"You haven't missed much." Sasha glanced over. "You're dating Joe?"

Dating seemed like such a normal word, but she supposed it applied as well as anything. "Yeah. I guess I am."

"He seems nice." She turned back to the television, but she fidgeted nervously with the edge of a woven throw. "Are you going to do it? Become one of them? Is that why you were asking about the training spell?"

"I think so." Brynn watched Sasha's fingers as she worried at the fringe of yarn. "I don't have a lot of options right now. But Gavin and Sam are going to make me wait."

"Why? If it's what you want?"

"Because there's no going back, I guess."

"Mmm. I guess not." Sasha stared at the television. "Why do you want to do it? If you don't mind me asking, I mean. You can tell me to shut up. It won't hurt my feelings."

Abby had asked. Joe and Keith and Sam and Gavin had asked. By now she had the answer down. "Because I don't think I'll ever be safe as a human again."

Sasha's eyes were huge as she studied Brynn. "What makes you think you'll be safe as a wolf?"

"I'll be harder to kill." She tried not to hear Pierce's voice, but it drifted up anyway. *I could do you over and over again...* She fought a shudder and slipped her hand into her pocket to seek the comforting weight of the gun. "I'll be safer. Alan Matthews turned my sister, kidnapped me and killed my brother. I need to be safer."

It took the other woman a while to say anything. "I like Abby, and I was sorry to hear about your brother."

The fact that she hadn't thought of Richard in over a day made guilt twist in her stomach. "Thank you."

Sasha nodded. "Maritza—my mentor. She practically raised me."

"I'm sorry. That must have been..." Brynn couldn't even think of a word to describe it. "I'm sorry."

"Yes." Sasha leaned against the back of the couch and closed her eyes. "Yes, it was."

Silence stretched out, interrupted only by the soft sounds from the television, and there was nothing to do but wait.

Brynn woke with a start, disoriented by the sound of Sasha's gentle breathing and the blue glow from the television. The movie had probably gone off hours ago, judging by the time showing on the DVD player.

Something had woken her, but now she couldn't figure out what. The house was silent. Brynn rose to her feet and stretched before moving toward the TV.

A noise behind her stopped her cold. When she turned, Sasha's entire body had gone taut, trembling. She stared sightlessly at the ceiling. "Brynn—"

The soft click of nails on wood chilled her blood. Brynn thrust her hand into the pocket of her sweatshirt and groped for the gun, Joe's instructions running through her head in an endless refrain. *Don't worry about a kill shot. Get them down and run like hell for the center of town. Don't worry about a kill shot.*

Another click of nails, this time to her left. Two wolves, approaching quietly from opposite directions. Cornering them.

Brynn put her back to the TV and eased the gun from her sweatshirt pocket as she squinted into the darkness. "Sasha, get over—"

One of the wolves launched itself over the couch, and Sasha backed away with a startled cry, her eyes wild. "Go, Brynn. Hurry." Her voice dropped to a harsh whisper, and she began to chant under her breath.

The air felt charged, like just before a lightning storm. The wolf sniffed at Sasha, snarled, and the darkness exploded in a flash of light. The animal dropped, writhing on its back and pawing at its face.

Brynn didn't hesitate. She raised the gun, thumbed off the safety and sighted along her arm. Time slowed and she heard Joe's low voice telling her to hold steady and trust her instincts. She squeezed the trigger, just like she'd done dozens of times with Joe watching, but the shot echoed loudly in the enclosed space of the house.

Her aim was true. The wolf on the floor jerked and stilled, and his companion howled.

Sasha screamed as the second wolf launched himself at Brynn, knocking her to the floor. Her head hit the hardwood with a painful crack as powerful teeth bit into her shoulder.

Pain ripped through her, but Joe had made her practice handling the damn gun until her fingers were numb. The gun came up again, this time out of instinct. Sharp teeth closed on her shoulder so hard she heard bone snap, and she screamed and fired without thought.

The wolf yelped in pain and released her. Relief had barely registered before those jaws closed on her again, this time on her neck. She couldn't feel her fingers anymore, couldn't feel her hands or anything but pain, but the gun went off again, then a third time, so she had to be shooting. She had to be, because otherwise...

The thought faded. The *world* faded. Her last thought was giddy. *At least Sasha was smart enough to scream.*

Joe's heart stopped with the first scream.

He shot toward Keith's house with a growl, still on four legs because it was faster, with Keith and Abby on his heels. The fact that he hadn't heard Brynn didn't mean anything, he reasoned desperately.

Then she *did* scream, and he almost faltered. A shot rang out, then two more, and they were still too goddamned far away—

He didn't shift back, even when he hit the porch and shouldered through the open door. Blood assailed his nostrils, metallic and nauseating, and his paws skidded over the floor.

Sasha knelt next to Brynn, shivering violently. She squeaked and bent close when she saw them, her hand reaching for the gun still in Brynn's limp hand.

With the moon high and still calling to him, his shift took longer than usual. "Stop," he croaked, still moving across the floor toward the two women, naked and human now, and slipping through the blood on the floor. *Brynn's blood*. "Christ. Shit."

Keith shot past him, still in wolf form, and a terrified howl rose up from the back of the house, followed by Keith's enraged snarl.

Sasha's voice trembled. "I stopped most of the bleeding, but I can feel it. The wolf's taken hold."

Joe shivered even as he reached for Brynn's hand. "It can't." If she changed for the first time tonight, on the full moon, she'd never survive it. The sheer power of it would rip her apart. "She'll die."

"The wolf can keep her alive." Sasha slid a hand over his. "If she has a bond. Someone to help her."

Brynn had already gone pale except for the dark lines of rent flesh on her neck and shoulder. He swallowed and hesitated, her words coming back to him. *Last night I tried to decide what would be worse, this life or death...*

"Do it." Abby spoke behind him, her voice thick with pain. She'd resumed her human form, but she sat huddled against the side of the staircase, her knees drawn up to her chest, eyes unseeing. "Will you help her, Joe?"

He nodded shortly. Whatever his own issues, they were nothing when weighed against Brynn's life. "Go ahead, Sasha."

Joe could hear more people approaching, could *feel* the flood of angry power converging on the house from all directions. Most of the pack had ranged farther from town to hunt and run, but the shots would have been audible to the wolves for miles.

Keith appeared at the door again, human this time. Blood slicked his arms and chest, even his face. "He's alive," Keith snarled, his voice holding the same rage and fear Joe struggled against. "Bobby and Anna are watching him. The rest are coming, but Cindy and Dylan ran so far—"

"It's too late for Cindy to help." His own voice sounded far away. When Sasha sat there, unmoving, he whispered again, "Hurry."

"Shh." She closed her eyes and swayed a little, then murmured a few unintelligible words.

Power ripped through Joe, followed by searing agony that dropped him to the floor. *Brynn*. He struggled back to his knees, blotting out her pain. Then he felt it, the final connection between Guide and Initiate.

When Gavin and Sam performed the ceremony, it required an elaborate ritual of candles and chanting. But he didn't have time to question Sasha. She laid her hands on Brynn's face and uttered a single word he didn't understand.

Power filled the air and Brynn's back arched sharply. She screamed once, low and pained, and the change began.

The change was never gentle. Bodies contorted, twisted. Flesh melted as bones rearranged. In time, the strongest wolves learned to control it, learned to breathe through it and suffer a minimal amount of discomfort.

Brynn had no such advantages. Her torn body twisted as her eyes flew open, nothing human left in her gaze. Just pain and terror and something feral that reminded him of the stories they told about humans who managed to suffer through the change on the night of the full moon.

He closed his eyes for a moment, fighting the wave of helpless protectiveness that rose in him. When he looked again, a small gray wolf stood in the midst of the blood Brynn had shed, flesh and fur already growing closed over her wounds.

She growled, and he barely had time to catch her as she barreled toward Sasha.

The witch shrank back toward the cold fireplace as he struggled to contain Brynn. If he let go long enough to change, she would attack. Sasha, certainly, and maybe Keith. The only person he knew Brynn wouldn't attack—

Brynn snapped at him a second before he heard a low, commanding howl. The wolf he recognized as Abby walked closer and growled. Brynn snarled and tried to twist out of his grip, her front paws scraping his bare chest.

His breath caught in a painful hiss, and he whispered to the wriggling wolf. His words didn't seem to calm her, so he reached down and gathered the power inside him, willing her to submit.

She whined once and stilled her struggles, though her tense body trembled with pain and the need to run from it. He stroked a hand through her fur and nodded once to Keith. "Get Sasha out of here. Abby too."

His friend was silent for several seconds as his dark eyes watched Brynn shake. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and hoarse. "Do you want me to keep everyone else out?"

Joe could *feel* Brynn. She'd attack, out of pain and panic and confusion. "We'll be all right." He kept his voice steady and level, though he wanted to echo Keith's fear and anger. "Just for a while."

"Yell if you need us." Keith herded Abby and Sasha from the room, leaving Joe kneeling on the bloody floor with a terrified wolf whining her distress.

He released her when he heard the door shut. She skittered back, slipping once on the bloody floor before she got her footing and darted across the room. Her paws slid against the slick wooden floor and she thumped softly against the wall and backed into the corner with another low, terrified whimper.

With the fullness of the moon still racing in his blood, it took only moments for Joe to begin his own change again. When he stood on four paws, he padded toward Brynn and answered her whining with a soft noise. When he reached her, he nuzzled her lightly and backed away.

It worked. She took one trembling step forward, ears flattened against her head and her tail low. Nervous tension echoed through the bond between them, though pain had given way to fear.

It's all right, Brynn. It's me.

She was small, even compared to some of the other female wolves. Another shaking step brought her to him, and the top of her head fit easily under his chin. She nuzzled her nose into the fur at his neck, and curiosity joined the jumbled mix of emotions clouding the air between them.

He let instinct take over and bumped his muzzle against hers. Then he growled, a low invitation that held no menace. *Mine.*

Finally, *finally* the tense feelings radiating from her eased. Her trembling legs gave out and she dropped to the floor in front of him. He followed, coiling around her to lick at her jaw. He felt and heard her heart, still racing and wild, but he could also feel her exhaustion. He rested his head on her shoulder, closed his eyes, and waited for her to sleep.

Joe woke with Brynn's head pillowed on his belly, her matted hair scratching his skin. The smell of cleansers assaulted him, and he vaguely remembered Keith coming in during the night. He hadn't wanted to let Abby clean up her sister's blood.

He eased into a sitting position and studied Brynn, cataloguing her for injuries or distress. She seemed fine under the cracked patches of dried blood, though she bore deep shadows under her eyes. "Brynn. Wake up."

Her eyes drifted open, and she didn't look fine anymore. Blank eyes stared up at him, hard-edged and distant, as she lifted one hand to the dried blood on her neck. "I thought he killed me."

"Sasha." He touched Brynn's cheek. "She bonded us. It bore you through your change."

"Oh." Her fingernails scraped at her neck and left streaks in the blood. "He tore out my throat. I remember it. I—"

He grasped her hand. "Shh. There'll be time to wrap your head around it." The strange blankness he sensed in her frightened him almost as much as seeing her broken and bloodied had.

She stared up at him for several tense seconds, then jerked her gaze away from his face. "I need a shower."

He rose immediately and gathered her into his arms. "Upstairs."

"Where's Abby? Sasha? Is she okay?"

Keith would have taken them to Gavin's. "I imagine they're fine. We can go check after your shower."

"Okay." She turned her face into his neck as he started up the stairs, and he could hear her heartbeat quicken. "You feel different," she whispered hoarsely.

He knew exactly what she meant, because the awareness burned in him too. Before, his wolf had all but ignored her, taken a calm survey of her and noted that Joe's attraction to her had nothing to do with him. Now, he could feel that instinctive part of him studying everything about her, the way she moved and breathed. The way she looked at him.

She shuddered in his arms and he felt cracks form in the wall of blankness. "I want things I shouldn't want. Everything's so loud and bright and you smell so good."

The wolf rose up, his interest piqued. "Shower, Brynn."

"Shower." Her breath skittered hot against his neck. "I feel weird."

Having hard, instinct-fueled sex in Keith's shower wasn't an option. "Do we need to go home?"

"I don't know. I don't—" Her rigid control slipped again, and he got a taste of the tangled mix of emotions just under the surface. She might cling to the numb shock that kept the world in focus, but the wolf paced impatiently inside, waiting for her chance. She was strong, not in the way Abby was, not dominant, but the call of the moon or the brutal way she'd been changed had smothered Brynn's humanity under something dark and primal.

When he got to the bathroom, he set her down and twisted the knob to turn on the shower. "How warm?"

She didn't answer. When he glanced back he found her studying her hands as if she didn't recognize them, both held out in front of her and shaking a little. Her gaze jumped up to meet his, and she closed her hands into fists. "I'm not human."

Even though his own circumstances had been vastly different, he still remembered the feeling of not belonging in your own skin anymore. "No, sweetheart. You're not."

Brynn tilted her head back and screamed, and an overwhelming wave of pain and fear hit him, followed by blinding, uncontrolled *rage*.

He caught her face between his hands and kissed her hard. It was the only thing he could think of, the only way to distract her from her terrifying loss of control. It was possible to stop her change with his own energy, but he was exhausted after the events of the previous night. "Stay with me, Brynn," he whispered against her lips. "Fight it."

The snarl that left her lips raised the hair on the back of his neck. Her teeth caught his lower lip and she bit him as she raked her nails down his chest, a flirtatious challenge from the wolf inside her.

The scratches burned, but he barely noticed it as his instincts took over. Her back hit the tile wall, and he growled low in his throat, his mouth hovering a mere inch over hers.

Her eyes fluttered open. “I want you to do things to me that would have scared me yesterday.” Emotion clogged her voice, made it husky, and because of the bond he knew it was a mixture of confusion and lust.

He knew what she wanted. Strength, domination... All the things she’d only flirted with as a woman would be things the wolf inside her craved. “Not now.” His words were forceful because he knew her wolf would listen. “Right now, we’re taking a shower.”

“Shower.” She shivered and closed her eyes again, and it didn’t matter that she didn’t seem to know *why* she agreed. Her wolf obeyed, so she obeyed. “Let’s take a shower.”

He managed to get her under the warm spray. His soapy hands slicked over her skin, washing away the blood she’d shed. She stood quietly under his touch, even when her careful obedience began to shift toward arousal again.

Her quick, shallow breaths tripped something inside him, and he turned her away and lowered his teeth to her shoulder with a quick nip. “Just a few minutes, baby, and I’ll take you home.”

“Home.” It seemed to encourage her, and she reached out for the shampoo against the wall and started to help him, struggling with the tangled mess of her hair.

Finally, he urged her under the water to rinse her hair. It took less than a minute for him to bathe, and her hair was mostly clean by the time he finished. “Let’s get you out of here.” He reached for a fluffy white towel hanging next to the shower and wrapped it around Brynn, then squeezed excess water from her hair. “My clothes are downstairs. You can steal Abby’s bathrobe.”

She nodded and stepped out of the tub, still looking more than a little wobbly but determined to do it herself. “I’m going to go find her robe. Keith was going to buy me one...”

He lifted her in his arms again. “I don’t want you pitching headfirst down the stairs.”

“Nothing feels right. My arms and legs don’t fit. I don’t *fit*. I don’t want clothes.”

With the sort of shock she’d taken, it would be a while before everything felt right again. *If it ever does*, a small voice inside him whispered, and he shoved it down. She’d be fine.

He walked into Keith and Abby’s bedroom. A terrycloth robe lay over the back of a chair. “Here.” He snatched it up with one hand as he set her down. “Put it on and we’ll drive back to my place.”

She slipped the robe on and tied it around her waist. “Okay. I’m okay.”

He’d get his own clothes later. He pulled a pair of sweatpants from a stack of folded laundry on the bed and stepped into them. “Come on.”

He didn’t pick her up again, just guided her gently down the stairs. Her fingers clenched around his arm hard enough to bruise before they hit the landing, but she stubbornly refused to let him pick her up

even when her legs shook. Not until they reached the front stoop, when she realized she had no shoes and the gravel walk was littered with branches and sharp stones.

He put her in his truck through the driver's side door and paused before climbing in after her. As soon as he got her home and calmed down, he'd call everyone. They'd figure it out.

They had to.

Chapter Eight

Brynn awoke in a tangle of bedding that smelled like Joe. Her stomach rumbled and the sound of soft voices filled her ears. The fact that she could hear anyone talking in the other room was almost as alarming as the strength of Joe's scent—and how much it comforted her.

So this is what it's like to be a werewolf. It felt strange. Strange inside her head, and strange inside her skin. Everything was loud and bright, from the sun creeping through the blinds to the sound of her own heart. The only thing she didn't mind was the sharp, masculine smell in the bed, something she'd faintly associated with Joe before but now...

Now she could pick out the individual scents. Something metallic that might be oil, and tangy sweat and something dark and musky that she had no words for, even though it felt familiar and enticing. That was the scent that made her body warm and flushed, that made her want to roll onto her back and offer herself.

Brynn scrambled out of the bed, nearly tripping as her unsteady legs hit a floor that seemed to roll under her feet. Her muscles didn't move quite right, everything felt too fast and too strong. When her fingers curled around the headboard to steady herself she felt wood creak softly, a reminder that strength rested in her body now.

This is what you wanted, she reminded herself harshly as she took a steadying breath. *This is what you asked for.* Maybe not this fast, not like this, but she was alive. She had survived.

So keep surviving.

Silence fell in the other room, and she realized they must have heard her moving about in the bedroom. By the third step across the floor she'd stopped weaving so dangerously, and by the time she reached the door she was almost steady.

Keith and Abby were in the living room with Joe, though it looked like Abby had spent most of the last twelve hours crying. Her sister's face was puffy, her eyes painfully red, and Brynn ached to reassure her, to be able to find some words to soothe the guilt Abby always took on herself.

Her sister rose. "Do you need some help getting dressed?"

Heat flooded Brynn's cheeks as she realized she'd forgotten about something as basic and human as clothing. She saw understanding in Keith's eyes and concerned sympathy in Abby's, but Joe's face was carefully neutral. Brynn shivered and stepped backward, her hand groping for the door handle. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"I've got it." Joe walked forward, his coffee mug forgotten. She could smell the pungent brew inside, could hear the whisper of his bare feet across the wooden floor. "I scrounged up a few more things for you, Brynn," he said softly as he backed her into the bedroom.

She heard Abby take a hitching breath as Joe shut the door and realized that her sister was crying. "She shouldn't be here," Brynn whispered, surprised when the words came out flat and unemotional. She didn't *feel* flat and empty. She was full of everything, sights and sounds and smells and emotions so wild and foreign she couldn't begin to keep them straight.

"If it's too much, Keith will take her home. But I wasn't going to tell her not to come." He lifted a folded stack of clothing from the chair beside his bed. "Are you hungry?"

He'd coaxed her to eat before she'd fallen asleep, which couldn't have been more than a few hours ago, and yet her stomach growled audibly at the mention of food. "I guess so."

The clothes turned out to be sweatpants and a T-shirt. "They're loose," he told her. "It'll help at first."

It still felt strange, but Brynn forced herself to ignore it as she tugged on the sweatpants. The T-shirt proved to be one of his, though, and somehow the slide of fabric against her skin bothered her less when she could still smell Joe on it, even under the bland detergent it had been washed with.

He watched her. "Are you going to be okay with Abby and Keith here?"

"I don't know. Not if Abby feels this bad." She forced down guilt and lifted her gaze to his. "I don't think I can handle trying to make her feel better about this, Joe. I just—I can't. I can't handle it. Not right now."

"Then don't worry about her. Worry about you." He smiled and rubbed his thumb over her jaw. "Keith will know when enough's enough for her."

She barely heard him. The wolf rose at his touch, hungry for him and desperate for something Brynn couldn't even name. Approval wasn't quite the right word, but it was as close as her human mind could come. A throaty whimper escaped her as she turned her head into his hand and bit his finger.

His eyes went dark with desire, and he wrapped a quick hand around the back of her neck. "Your sister and my best friend are in the next room."

The stranger inside her didn't recognize words like *sister* and *friend*. She recognized power, and the heat of his body, and the strength in those fingers cupped around the vulnerable base of her neck. Brynn struggled for something human, something familiar, but the human part of her felt nothing but nervous fear and a desire to lean into Joe until it passed.

He stared down at her, his gaze riveted on her lips. Then he blinked and let go of her. "Ready for lunch?"

She wanted to say yes, but the wolf forced her forward, unable to relinquish his touch. This time she didn't whimper. She snarled softly and buried her face in the crook of his neck, where she could taste his skin and hear the soft beat of his heart.

He bent his head to her ear and whispered her name. As he spoke, something welled up in the scant space between them. Something comforting and oddly right. The wild feeling faded until she could breathe again.

It took ten of his slow, even heartbeats before she felt steady enough to lift her head again. “What was that?”

“Why you needed a Guide,” he answered simply and brushed her hair back from her face. “Magic, sweetheart. You’ve got it inside you now, remember?”

“Oh.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Don’t let me try to jump you in front of my sister, please.”

“Not a chance.”

It took more courage than she wanted to admit to step back into the living room. Abby looked calmer, and there were no traces of tears on her face. “Are you feeling okay?” she asked evenly, her hand wrapped tight around Keith’s.

Brynn tried for a smile. “Honestly, I don’t know. But nothing hurts or anything.”

“That’s good.” Abby hesitated. “Honey, I’m so s—”

“Okay, then,” Joe interrupted, rubbing his hands together. “Mac dropped off some barbecue earlier. Who wants to eat?”

Brynn shot him a grateful look. “Food would be good. I’m really hungry.”

As Joe sliced a pork roast, Abby pulled plastic dishes of food out of the refrigerator. She pried the lid off a bowl of potato salad and murmured, “Can you and Brynn set the table, baby?”

Keith smiled at Brynn and moved to grab plates from the cupboard. “Why don’t you take a seat, kiddo. I bet the ground’s feeling a little unsteady.”

It was, but not as badly as before. Still, it was nice to sink into a chair and not have to think so much about every movement. “Thanks, Keith.”

“You got it, sweetie. Here.” He set a stack of paper plates and a tangled heap of silverware on the table in front of her. “Sort those out and I’ll get us something to drink. If Joe’s got anything other than beer in his fridge.”

“Some mixers, I think.” Joe winked at Brynn. “And some soda.”

A beer sounded really, really nice. Something requiring mixers sounded even better. Then she envisioned the scene in the bedroom, and what would happen if her control slipped again while her sister and Keith were at the table with them. “Soda’s good.”

Abby pulled a two-liter bottle from the refrigerator and handed it to Keith. “Gavin and Sam said they hope you’ll come visit them, Brynn. As soon as you feel up to it.”

Talking helped. Her mind still felt sluggish, but talking was a *human* thing, and she needed it right now. “What about the other alphas? Are they still here?”

Joe tossed his carving knife into the sink and placed the platter on the table. “They’re here. Not too happy at the moment, though.”

“Did what happened...help? Did it change anyone’s mind?”

Abby answered. “I don’t know, Brynn. Maybe. It’s got to be uncomfortable for all of them, knowing the same sort of thing could happen in their towns.”

Brynn separated the knives from the forks to give her time to steady her voice again. “If they could sneak into town to turn me, they could probably do worse, I guess.”

She barely looked up in time to see the look that passed between Keith and Joe, or Abby’s own tightly set, careful expression. The tense silence made it easy to hear the subtle changes in their bodies, the way heart rates increased or breathing became just the tiniest bit harsher.

Her mind flashed back to the attack. She could still remember sharp teeth closing on her throat, the way it felt to die...

The knife in her hand bit into her fingers as they clenched convulsively, but the pain was faint compared to the panic that gripped her. “They weren’t trying to change me. They were trying to kill me.”

“Shh.” Joe rested his hand on her shoulder. “They didn’t get it done. That’s all that matters.”

I wish they had. Guilt came hard on the heels of the thought, and she dropped the knife to the table and tried to take deep, slow breaths. She didn’t mean it. She would never mean it. *I just need time.*

Or that was what she told herself as she settled down to the most stilted and surreal lunch of her life. *I survived. Now all I have to do is keep surviving.*

She found it especially ironic that survival seemed so much more daunting a prospect today, when she was virtually invulnerable, than it had yesterday when she’d been nothing more than a fragile, breakable human.

Brynn kept her face pressed against her knees as she listened to Joe’s footsteps coming back up the steps. The front door opened and shut softly, and something tense in her body relaxed. “They’re gone?” she asked quietly without looking up.

“Yeah.” He crawled onto the couch beside her and pulled her into his lap. “That was...exhausting. You holding up?”

She opened her mouth to lie, but the truth came out. “No. God, no. The clothes are driving me crazy and talking is *hard* and I want things I can’t begin to understand.”

He stood again and held out his hand. “Come on.”

It was a sign of how much the wolf trusted him that her fingers touched his before she realized she’d moved.

He led her into the bedroom and dragged his T-shirt over his head. “Lie down.”

Blood roared in her ears as her gaze dropped to the broad shoulders and lower to his well-muscled chest. Arousal rose fast, set her heart to racing, and the wolf howled silent satisfaction that finally they both wanted the same thing.

The back of her legs hit the edge of the bed, and she realized that she'd moved without noticing again. *Because he told me to.*

He pulled off her oversized shirt as she climbed on the bed. When she was naked to the waist, he eased her back and tugged off the sweatpants she wore. "We're going to get rid of that twitchy feeling."

She licked her lips and inched backward, struggling against the sudden urge to slide off the bed and run. Not to get away from him, but to make him chase her. To make him *catch* her. "Are you going to touch me soon? Because I think I'm sort of losing it."

Joe picked her up, pressing his chest to her back as he stretched them both out on the bed. "Do you want me to show you what she wants?" he asked before teasing her shoulder with a gentle bite.

"Yes. God, yes." She squirmed a little, trying to get closer to the strong warmth of his body. "As long as it involves some seriously dirty fucking, because I sort of can't think past that—"

He growled and bit her harder as he gripped her bare hip with one strong hand. "Shh."

Hot, heavy pleasure exploded from somewhere inside her, and she groaned and rubbed her legs together in an attempt to ease the aching need. "Please. *Please.*"

His hand slid toward the juncture of her thighs. He moved slowly, but his breathing turned ragged. "Do you feel how much I want you, Brynn?"

She could, and at first she couldn't remember why. Then she didn't care why, because his fingers were still obscenely clever and he was touching her, and it felt so damn good. She shifted her legs apart and tried to push into his touch.

She heard Joe grind his teeth. "Not too fast, sweetheart."

As if there were such a thing as too fast. She snarled and reached for him, more than willing to show him how ready she was. How badly she wanted—*needed*—him.

He caught her with an arm around her waist and urged her onto her belly. His teeth scraped the back of her neck as he pulled her hips up and froze, obviously waiting for her reaction. It drove another desperate noise from her as she struggled against his grip, trying to push back against him. "Joe, please!"

"This...is what you want," he rasped. Then he thrust into her with a low, almost tortured groan.

Brynn didn't just moan. She screamed, tangled up between the sharp physical pleasure and the overwhelming instinctive satisfaction. Her much-valued control, as well as that carefully cultivated sophistication Joe had mocked so roundly, were gone. She could only remember one word, and she ground it out as she clutched the blankets. "*Fuck.*"

He murmured something unintelligible against her back and drove into her again, his movements hard and fast, one arm braced on the bed beside her and the other wrapped around her hip. The words bubbled

up from inside her, from someplace dark and dirty. “Fuck, you feel so good, I need it...need you, need your cock—”

“Jesus Christ, Brynn.” He straightened and drew her hips back to meet his advances, driving his cock deeper, harder. “I want to hear you scream when you come around me.”

“Make me,” she whimpered, and it felt like begging. She wanted to beg, to arch her back and give herself over to him completely. If it hadn’t felt so damn *good*, she might have been scared.

He slowed to a stop, his cock buried inside her. “I will. I’ll make you come so hard you can’t breathe.”

She groaned in protest and squirmed under his hands, confused by the way her body tightened in pleasure when his fingers dug into her hips to still her. “Tell me what I want,” she whispered, voice hoarse and shaking. “Tell me—”

Joe bent to bite her shoulder again and glided his hands under her body, up to her breasts. “You want to give in,” he whispered. “You want to trust me with everything.”

“I already do.” She twisted her head and found his cheek with her lips. “I feel like I’m yours.”

“We’re bonded.” His lips met hers. “We belong to each other right now.”

Right now. She moaned and kissed him, hard and clumsy until he bit her lip and sucked in a sudden breath. Her body tightened and she panted and rocked against him. “I can’t take much more.”

“I know. I feel it...” He resumed his fast-paced thrusts with a low, desperate growl.

That was when she remembered that all of her feelings weren’t her own. Instinct forced her head back, and the possessive satisfaction that flooded her when his teeth nipped at her neck had to be his. She felt his pleasure at the hot, tight grip of her body and the way she writhed for him with every thrust, and an odd thread of determined concentration as his fingers tightened on her hip.

He lifted her body a little more, and she figured out he was using the bond between them to find the perfect angle when his next thrust made her scream. He held her there and thrust again, his low rumbling growl of encouragement vibrating against her back.

When he thrust into her the third time, her body spasmed and she came. The rush of ecstasy that seized her was echoed when Joe choked out her name and rocked against her, his cock pulsing with the force of his orgasm.

She collapsed to the bed with Joe half on top of her and her body still humming from shared pleasure. Their hearts raced, hers a little faster than his, and the sound filled her ears along with their shallow breaths.

He moved a little and bit the back of her neck. He didn’t say anything.

He didn’t have to.

Brynn shivered. “Do it again.”

He did, with more force, and a quiet growl rumbled out of him. Her body tightened and she moaned softly, overwhelmed by a sleepy, sated satisfaction that she realized belatedly was coming from him. “God,” she whispered. “That was...”

“Mm-hmm.” He rolled to his side, his arm still around her. “Sleep.”

“I’m not...” Her protest died when she realized she *was* tired, even though she’d spent twelve of the last fifteen hours asleep. *Eat, sleep and fuck. Maybe that’s all I can do now.* It wasn’t the most encouraging thought.

His lips brushed her ear. “Your body expended a lot of energy healing you up, not to mention the change and the bonding. We both need rest.”

“Wake me up if I dream,” she whispered. “I don’t want to dream.”

“Dream of me.” The words blew against her skin, making her shiver. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on him, on the heat of his skin and the strength in his body as he sheltered her. She focused on his steady heartbeat and the tickle of his breath against the back of her neck, and the way the room smelled of him, and safety.

She focused on the hand on her stomach, and the way it rubbed tiny circles against her skin as he murmured something too low to understand. Quiet. Strong. Soothing.

Something worth dreaming about.

Dylan arrived on Joe’s doorstep toting a massive basket that Joe recognized as the alpha’s. The younger man smiled a little half-heartedly as he hefted it. “Food. Some of it’s from Sam, some of it’s stuff Cindy had. I guess the town gives her more food than she can eat most weeks.”

“Only way some of them can pay her.” Joe slung his damp towel over his shoulder and took the basket. “Brynn’s asleep. Come in.”

“Is she...” Dylan trailed off, seeming almost afraid to finish the question. He stepped across the threshold and closed the door before taking a deep breath. “She’s not okay. It’s a dumb thing to ask. How could she be?”

“No, she’s not. But she will be.” If he said the words enough, Joe might start to believe them himself. He set the basket on the counter and opened it. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m fine.” The words sounded forced, with an edge of jagged guilt Joe had no problem recognizing.

“I have two legs,” he murmured. At Dylan’s confused look, Joe sighed. “Pull the other one, I mean.” He aligned two casseroles on the countertop. “You feel guilty?”

“Well, yeah.” Dylan leaned back against the front door and closed his eyes, his entire posture defeated. “I’ve got a pretty solid track record of not being around to keep Alan from hurting the people I care about.”

“Bullshit.”

His voice was bland, but Dylan still stiffened. For a few moments Joe thought he might argue, but in the end Dylan slumped back against the door, brittle resignation in every line of his body. “If you say so.”

“No, not because I say so.” Joe stacked the covered dishes and slipped them into the refrigerator. “Because it’s true. You did everything you could to protect Abby, and none of us saw this shit with Brynn coming.”

“I knew better, Joe. I knew it wasn’t safe to have friends. I was selfish and stupid and thought I could keep Abby separate from my crappy fucking life, and now this is what they get for knowing me.”

“Uh-huh.” The look on the younger wolf’s face was heartbreaking, but Joe steeled himself against any overt display of sympathy and kept his expression neutral. “You keep hogging all the blame, kid, and there’s not going to be any left over for Alan Matthews.”

Defiance flashed in Dylan’s eyes for the first time. “I don’t think my share is putting much of a dent in it. Not compared to the alpha-werewolf parade.”

“Maybe not. We’re a demanding lot.” Joe opened the refrigerator again. “Want a beer?”

“Sure.” Dylan pushed off the door. “If you don’t mind company. You must be tired.”

He was exhausted, both from worry and from keeping Brynn on an even keel. But he was also antsy, on edge. “I could use some quiet time.”

Dylan hesitated. “I don’t know if that was an invitation to stay or a request to leave. I’m not really used to other wolves wanting me around though, so...”

Joe clarified his statement by pulling two beers from the refrigerator and offering one to Dylan. “Have a seat. If you want.”

“Thanks.” Dylan twisted the cap off the beer but didn’t sit. “I want to help Brynn, but I don’t know how. All Keith keeps saying is that she needs time, and that you need time with her.”

“That’s about the long and short of it, as far as I can tell.” Unease prickled over Joe’s skin. *He* didn’t even know how to help Brynn, not really, but Dylan was looking to him for reassurance about his friend. “As long as we keep fighting, she’ll make it through this.”

“I don’t know what it means.” The admission was reluctant, and tinged with an edge of annoyance that seemed directed inward. “I’ve been a werewolf almost ten years, and I don’t—I don’t even really understand what happened to her, and why it’s so bad.”

“Moon madness,” Joe whispered. “Lunatics, Dylan. They called crazy people that because they thought the full moon made them lose their shit. I don’t know how true that is for humans, but...” He

gulped his beer and rubbed the bottle across his forehead. “You know that pull inside you? The way the wolf rises when the moon waxes close to full and makes you more animal than anything else?”

The chair scraped across the wooden floor, and Dylan sank into it with a whispered curse. “Is that what...” His gaze jumped to the door. “All the time?”

“I think so. That’s what it feels like through the bond, anyway.”

“Christ.” Dylan’s hands shook so badly the bottle rattled against the table as he put it down. “Do you know what Brynn hates more than anything in the world?”

He thought of the sophisticated mien she fought so hard to maintain. “I don’t know. Looking foolish, I guess.”

“She hates that all right, but that’s just a symptom. The one thing Brynn can’t stand is not being in control of herself. She never gets drunk, she never did drugs. No one ever saw what Brynn was feeling unless she wanted them to.” Dylan’s sudden laugh sounded strained. “Or they had superhearing. Why do you think she’s been so freaked out about everyone being able to read her emotions?”

If he tried, Joe could still remember the sense of invasion, the loss of privacy. “That might seem like a tiny problem now.” He sat down in the chair opposite Dylan’s and braced his elbows on the table. “I don’t think anyone knows what her life is going to be like. Most wolves turned during the full moon don’t make it.”

Dylan’s gaze drifted to the bedroom door again. “Can I see her?”

“She’s not ready to see anyone yet. You get that, right?”

“Yeah.” It sounded more defeated than surprised, and Dylan closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. “I get it. I just... Jesus, there’s got to be *something* I can do other than sit in Cindy’s house.”

Even an idiot could see how unappealing that was to Dylan at the moment. “Why don’t you see if Gavin and Sam need help with the witch? She...” Joe cleared his throat. “She was pretty shaken up, and you seem good at calming people down.”

Tension raced through the room before Dylan clenched his eyes shut. His hand shook as he lifted his beer and drained half of it. “Practice,” he whispered finally. “Anyone who’s spent time in the Helena pack knows how to calm down traumatized victims. Unless you’re one of the ones traumatizing them to begin with.”

Joe was so tired that he wasn’t prepared for the vicious surge of anger Dylan’s words evoked. “We’ll get him, Dylan, and we’ll stop him. I swear.”

Dylan finished his beer and rose to his feet, his expression still tight. “I need to do something before I lose my mind, so I’m going over to Gavin’s. But if Brynn needs something...”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.” Dylan moved toward the door, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. “Some of Brynn’s asshole boyfriends used to get jealous of me. Everyone thought she had a big crush on me or

something. But she didn't. She just liked having me around because I paid attention to the little things that made her happy."

"Maybe, once I get a chance to figure all those things out, we can compare notes." Joe studied Dylan and sighed. "I'm not one of those bastards who doesn't care about that stuff, you know. When she's out of danger..."

"You'll take care of her." Dylan's smile looked forced, but at least the confidence in his voice wasn't feigned. "I haven't spent a lot of time trusting my instincts, but right now they say that she's safe with you. I guess I need to learn how to listen."

"You don't have to worry so much about Brynn anymore." Dylan seemed reluctant to give up his role as Brynn's protector, but he also seemed weary, and Joe wanted to put him at ease. "You're her friend, so you're not going to stop worrying completely. I get that. But you don't need to beat yourself down over it, either."

"Yeah. Guess not." Dylan jerked the door open with another fake smile that made it clear Joe had said the wrong fucking thing. "See you around."

Trying to explain would just make it worse, so Joe nodded. "Yeah, Dylan. See you around."

The door had barely clicked shut behind Dylan when Joe heard noise from his bedroom, the rustle of sheets followed by Brynn's bare feet against the hardwood floor.

He made it to the bedroom door and steeled himself against the wide, lost look in her eyes. "Are you hungry?" He just had to focus on getting through the days one step at a time. He could do that for her, and a regular interval of meals could help. "Dylan brought some food."

"He was here? I thought I heard..." She tilted her head to the side. "It wasn't a sound. It was...a feeling?"

Joe nodded. "You'll learn to recognize people that way. You'll pick it up fast."

"It felt weird." Her stomach rumbled, and she sighed and wrapped her hands around her body. "I'm hungry. Again."

"Come here." He held out one hand.

She came into his arms slowly, almost shyly, but her body melted against his with a perfect trust that was alarming, if only because of the tenderness it evoked. "The fridge is stuffed with casseroles."

"This is the Midwest." Her voice was a sleepy mumble, half-muffled by his T-shirt. "The fridge is stuffed with hotdishes."

"Sorry, but I'm not saying that word."

"Don't care if you say it as long as I get to eat."

I can help her through this. The words echoed in his head, a mantra, as if the repetition alone could make them truth. *I can do this.*

Chapter Nine

Joe tossed the last of the marinated meat onto the grill. “That’s it. We finish these up, and we’ll have enough to feed an army.” *Or Brynn, at least.*

Keith leaned back against the old picnic table next to the sizable stack of food that had already finished cooking. “Sam said she’d drop off some more stuff anyway. I don’t think she trusts us to provide Brynn with a balanced diet.”

Joe managed a laugh, even through his haze of exhaustion. Just keeping Brynn functional over the last few days had drained him. “I don’t blame her. We just keep throwing steak at her.”

“How is she, Joe? The human part, I mean?”

“Getting better.” The words sounded bleak, he knew, but he couldn’t help it. “I don’t know. A transformation on the night of the full moon? Christ. I didn’t know it could happen.”

“Because it’s not *supposed* to happen.” Keith sounded every bit as weary, and he looked it. He rubbed at his stubbled chin and sighed. “I saw it a couple times in Europe. A witch tried to explain it to me, once. Something about the changes taking place over time, and the longer a person has between their exposure and the first change, the easier it goes. I guess that’s why we always do the ritual on the night after the full moon for people making the change. I just...never thought about it before.”

“I asked Gavin about it a long time ago.” Joe dropped the tongs on the table beside his barbecue pit. “He said no one could survive the trauma of it.”

“Well, hate to disparage our fearless leader, but he was obviously wrong.”

Joe closed his eyes and fought for breath. “I don’t think he meant death, Keith. There are worse—” *There are worse things.*

Keith’s hand landed on Joe’s shoulder. “She’s strong, Joe, but not so strong that she’ll fight the wolf, and maybe that’s good for her. She may be a little wild for a few weeks, but if she couldn’t submit, the wolf would break her.”

He could only hope that keeping her on an even keel wouldn’t kill him. “How’s Abby making out?”

“Better, I guess.” Keith didn’t have to point out that *better* didn’t mean much. “The alphas met again last night, and I brought her with me this time.”

Joe’s heart skipped painfully. “How many of them have changed their minds since the attack?” *Since Brynn became one of you and finally worthy of notice, you hypocritical bastards?*

It took too long for Keith to answer. When he did, his voice sounded carefully flat. “Everyone but Mary.”

Joe should have been angry. Instead, his exhaustion sharpened. “Figures. Now Brynn’s real competition. Mary wouldn’t like that.”

“Mary’s going to have to live with it. Even she’s not stupid enough to go up against Gavin and Sam, so Brynn’s safe from challenges as long as she’s in her Initiation.”

Keith didn’t seem to realize that *crazy*, not stupid, was Mary’s problem. “How’d Abby handle Mary’s dissent?”

“Jesus.” Keith rubbed his hand over his face again. “For a second I thought I was going to have to haul her off Mary. Abby doesn’t seem concerned with the fact that the crazy bitch has been a wolf for fifty years and change. My sweet little girlfriend made it pretty clear that if Mary so much as looks at Brynn funny, shit is going down.”

“I’ve said it before, and it still stands. You’ve got your hands full there.” But Mary wouldn’t hurt Brynn, even without Abby’s interference. She wouldn’t dare. “I’m not worried about the physical shit anyway. She’s...fragile.”

“Fragile?”

Barely hanging on to her humanity. “She’s had a hard time.”

“How are *you* doing?” Keith asked quietly. “Do you need some help? My energy’s running low with Abby to contend with, but there are others who can help you. Sam and Gavin. They could try to ease some of the strain for a few hours so this shit doesn’t kill you.”

Joe found himself loath to let anyone else shoulder Brynn’s burden. “She’s my responsibility, Keith. I’ll take care of her.”

Keith’s quiet growl held more than a little challenge. “Yeah, you’ll be all sorts of useful to her if you’re dead from exhaustion.”

The challenge didn’t faze him, which scared him. Drawing away the worst of Brynn’s panic and stress had left him weaker than he wanted to admit. “I promise I’ll let you know if it gets too bad, Dad.”

His friend just grunted and jerked his head toward the grill. “Your steaks are going to burn.”

“Well-done’s not so bad.” Joe flipped them over and drained his beer. “How’s Sasha?”

“Afraid to poke her head out of Sam and Gavin’s house.” Keith sounded resigned. “I don’t know if she’ll be able to get over what’s happened, honestly. And a town full of werewolves isn’t where she needs to be, but what the fuck else can we do with her?”

“Nothing.” The coals flamed up, and Joe grabbed Keith’s beer and poured it over the grill rack. “I think Dylan was going to see if he could help out. Might be good for both of them.”

"Yeah, maybe. Sasha likes Sam, but Sam's got stuff to do. She can't babysit all day." Keith pushed off the table and reached out. "Why don't you let me finish this up. Go curl up with Brynn and relax while she's still sleeping."

His cabin was dark and silent as Joe walked to the bedroom, but he didn't need to see to find his way. Brynn was already stirring under the covers, and he lay down behind her, one arm around her waist as he leaned in to her warmth. "Go back to sleep."

She mumbled something unintelligible and snuggled into his embrace. "I was dreaming about you."

He smiled against her hair. "Something good, I hope, and really dirty."

"Mmm. So dirty I don't think I can say it out loud without blushing." She slid her hand over his and twined their fingers together. "It's easier tonight. Thinking like a person, I mean."

Relief washed through him. "Good. I'm glad."

"Yeah." She rubbed her thumb along his finger in a nervous gesture. "I have to ask you something, Joe. Something kind of serious."

It might have concerned him if the last week hadn't been so insane already. "What is it?"

It seemed to take forever for her to find the words. "It's the power stuff. The domination in bed I can handle. The urge might be a little more extreme now, but it's always been something I kind of liked..."

"But you're worried about everything else. Outside of the bedroom."

"I do everything you say. *Everything*, Joe. It's not like...I'm scared, or I do it because I think I should." Her fingers tightened on his hand. "I don't even think, and that's the scary part."

"It'll get better when the bond is released," he assured her. "But it won't ever go away, Brynn. Not really. It's instinct. It'll happen with Gavin and Sam, and with Keith and Abby. The stronger wolves."

"So I'm...weak?"

There was no more delicate way to put it. "You're in the middle, I guess. Kind of like Dylan."

Brynn rolled away from him and lifted her head, and fear trembled down the bond between them. "I'm not sure I'm okay with having no will of my own."

"I didn't say that," he protested. "I said instinct is going to tell you to submit. You don't *have* to. Hell, Keith and I buck Gavin's orders all the time."

"But you just said you and Keith are strong."

"Not as strong as Gavin." He lifted himself on one elbow and stared at Brynn. "Everything about this is relative. Around some wolves, you're going to feel strong. You're going to know you're alpha. Around others, not so much."

He could feel her wolf, sleepy but interested, and she barely seemed to notice the way her body shifted closer to him again. "So I'll be able to fight it, later?"

"It depends, some. On who you're fighting, and what it's about."

She reached out and traced her fingers over his stomach, her touch warm even through his shirt. “What if it’s you?”

I don’t know. “It should get better after a while. Maybe even more once the bond is dissolved.”

She grasped his shirt as she shifted and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. “I’ve been playing the game for so long I’d almost forgotten it was all an act.”

Joe felt like he should have known what she meant, but he had no clue. “The submissive thing, you mean?”

“Being tough. Being a leader.” She turned her face until her words were muffled against his chest. “I got so good at pretending. At faking it. Now I can’t hide it anymore, and I feel sort of naked.”

“Nothing like the change to strip all that stuff away.” He stroked her hair. “But the truth will be good too. It’ll be *you*.”

“Whoever that is.” Her laugh sounded a little scared. “Let’s hope you still like her. From the way Mary was staring me down, I’m pretty sure she’s convinced I don’t deserve you already.”

Telling Brynn the truth about Mary didn’t seem like such a good idea. “That’s a long, stupid story. I’ll tell you sometime over beers.”

He could tell he’d said the wrong thing when she stiffened slightly. With her face hidden, all he had to go on was the tense fear echoing through the magic between them. But her response was bland and toneless. “Okay.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” He wasn’t sure what *that* was, but it couldn’t be good.

She rolled away from him, coming to her knees with an easy grace she hadn’t possessed a few days ago. For several moments she stared at him, looking wild with nothing but her tousled hair covering her naked body.

When she finally spoke, her voice was a low, hoarse whisper. “Do you want someone like her? Someone strong?”

“God, no. Christ, Brynn, Mary is the *last* thing I would want. She’s strong, but she gets off on bossing people around. It’s a power trip for her.”

The fear in her eyes didn’t clear. “Gavin and Keith have strong women.”

“Gavin and Keith have chosen mates.” The words slipped out before he could stop them. “Shit, I didn’t mean that, either—”

“Yes, you did.” Her gaze dropped to his chest as she inched back and slipped from the bed, every movement careful, a terrified, submissive wolf trying to escape.

Chasing would only make her bolt. “Look, you’ve got to give me a few days to wrap my head around it. That’s all I meant.”

She shook her head and continued to back up until she hit the wall. “It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have—I don’t know why I said that.”

“Hey.” He patted the bed. “Come on. Don’t run off.”

“I can’t move,” she whispered, sounding torn between fear and embarrassment. “She won’t let me.”

Joe sighed. “*Brynn*. Come here.”

She made it two steps forward before her body went rigid. A low, terrified whimper escaped her, and it sounded more wolf than human.

He couldn’t *make* her come to him, not when she seemed truly petrified, so he rolled off the bed. “I’m going back out to help Keith.”

He was almost to the door when she turned her head to look at him, her gaze falling somewhere near his shoulder. “I just need a little bit. Could you—could you stay inside? In case I need help?”

He barely bit back a snarl. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

She didn’t move as he walked out and closed the door carefully behind him. Then again, he hadn’t expected her to.

Brynn had never felt anything as awful as having the wolf inside her fight tooth and nail against what the woman wanted. Tears stung her eyes as she heard Joe’s footsteps in the kitchen, but the wolf wouldn’t let her go after him. All the wolf wanted to do was hide.

She ended up in the corner behind the bed, huddled with her back against the wall and her arms wrapped around her legs. Joe’s scent, which had been such a comfort before, now made her fidget uncomfortably.

It was almost impossible to decipher where the wolf’s feelings began and hers ended. The embarrassment—*humiliation*—that had to be hers. After a week of casual flirting and a few rounds of sex, she’d compared their relationship to that of a husband and wife married forty years or more. It took crazy stalker girlfriend to a level she wasn’t entirely comfortable with.

But the wolf...

Brynn still didn’t know how to interpret the wild feelings coming from the intruder inside her. Fear was too simple a descriptor. The wolf wasn’t scared of Joe. She was just scared. Scared because the world that had been safe and secure had turned cold and hostile when the strong mate she’d chosen had rejected her.

Which was stupid. Joe hadn’t rejected her. Them. He hadn’t rejected the wolf, and he certainly hadn’t rejected the woman. But while Brynn understood Joe’s calm, rational words as the only sensible thing he could have said, the wolf had taken them as a withdrawal of his affection. Of his *protection*.

Trapped between conflicting reactions, she’d made a fool of herself and probably enraged Joe in the process. His words hadn’t been a rejection, but she wouldn’t blame him if he wanted to distance himself from her.

Except he wouldn't. She knew that as clearly as she knew anything. After what his Guide had done to him, Joe would suffer whatever insanity she put him through. He might hate her by the time it was over, but he'd help her anyway.

She didn't want him to hate her. As uncomfortable as she was with her sudden urge to submit to him out of bed, the sex they'd had since her change had been addictive in its giddy pleasure. It was the only time the wolf rested inside her, the only time she wanted the same things that her crazy new instincts demanded.

Almost the only time. Sleeping in his arms soothed her too. The warmth and safety, the *peace*—she needed them now. She needed *him* now.

The wolf cringed and whimpered at the thought. Brynn closed her eyes, dragged in a deep breath, and told the wolf to go to hell.

Silence from the wolf. Feeling a little more confident, she uncurled her body and rose, first to her knees and then to her feet. The wolf whimpered again, and Brynn hissed as the urge to drop back to the floor washed over her.

No. She ignored the increasing discomfort from her angry instincts, suddenly pleased that her wolf wasn't as strong as Abby's. She could vaguely recall Keith talking about how hard it had been for Abby at first, with so much strength inside her that controlling it had been nearly impossible.

So she wasn't as strong. But she was stubborn. Three steps took her to the end of the bed, and she found one of Joe's discarded T-shirts that smelled strongly of him. The wolf grew edgy as she pulled it over her head, tense and nervous as yearning battled with fear. The fear would do her no good, but the yearning... *I can work with that.*

Stubbornness carried her out into the kitchen, where she found Joe putting together a salad. He looked up, his expression guarded. "Hi."

"Hi." She made it to within arm's reach of him before the wolf's nervousness overrode her ability to ignore it. She stopped and fought the instinctive urge to keep her eyes lowered, instead lifting her gaze to his. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to control her."

Joe wiped his hands on a kitchen towel and opened his arms to her. "Come here, Brynn."

It was gentle, and she used the wolf's quiet longing to close the distance between them. "She's so scared. I don't know how to make it stop."

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he folded his arms around her. "I wish I knew."

She closed her eyes and let her forehead rest against his shoulder. "I know this isn't a fair thing to ask, but I need to know where I stand. Because the wolf thing... It's new to me. And all the possessive, hot sex is obviously giving me confusing feelings that I shouldn't have. So maybe I shouldn't be having it anymore until I can keep her separate from me."

He snorted. "Doesn't quite work that way, sweetheart. She *is* you."

The thought hadn't even occurred to her. The wolf felt like such a stranger that it was hard to imagine they would ever coexist peacefully, much less be one creature. "I guess this is why you don't guide people you're involved with, huh?" She meant it as a calm observation, but it came out trembling and hopeless.

"I don't do it because it's hard as hell," he said softly. "No matter how much you want to do it."

She shivered and pressed closer to him. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to do this. It's the one thing you didn't want to do."

"Nothing has gone quite like we planned, Brynn, but I guess that's life."

"Is it?" Brynn tilted her head back and lifted her gaze to his. "Is this life now? Fighting everything inside me because it's wrong?"

His eyes darkened. "You'll figure out the answer to that, maybe, when you stop fighting yourself."

Oh, that's rich. She jerked away from him, battling her sudden rise of anger. "Well, that's not exactly going to work, is it? Because everything I'm fighting is everything you said you couldn't handle."

Her own anger was reflected in him. "Maybe by the time you get it figured out, I'll have *my* shit figured out. Did that occur to you?"

The wolf begged her to stop, show submission in the face of an angry alpha who could snap her in two without thought. Her knees started to buckle under the force of the need, but she backed up until she hit the table and reached back to brace her hands against it. "Fine. So how am I supposed to give you space?"

"You're not." Some of his anger faded and he looked a little lost. "Just don't expect me to have all the answers. This is a crazy situation, and I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"So just leave," she whispered. "Go take a break. Go help Keith or...go to the bar. Or anything." She put every scrap of practice into the lie that followed. "I'll be fine."

"Right." He walked out the back door without a backward glance, leaving the half-prepared salad on the counter.

Putting the food away gave her something to do to try to quell the frantic fear hammering at her self-control. The world felt out of focus, the colors too sharp and bright and even the sound of the rumbling fridge motor was too loud. She hadn't realized how much Joe's presence had helped until it was gone.

The first hint of pain twisted inside her abdomen, and she remembered Abby's description of how it felt when the change tried to claim her against her will.

"No," she whispered, addressing the wolf who struggled to break free. The pain intensified, and she heard the faint sound of the bowl in her hand hitting the counter. She ignored it, backing up until she bumped into the fridge and letting her body slide to the floor.

She could call for Joe and he'd be back in a heartbeat. He might come back anyway if he felt her pain. But she didn't *want* him to come back. She didn't want to need him—not for this. Not if she wanted to be something more than a burden he couldn't handle.

She wanted that. She could pretend all day that the wolf was the only one wounded by his quick denial of what was happening between them, but it would be a lie. It *had* been a lie, one she'd told herself and one she'd told him.

So stop lying and pull yourself together.

Oddly enough, the pain eased when she admitted the truth to herself. She tried it again, out loud. "I want Joe in a creepily permanent fashion."

No longer alone in her craving, the wolf settled. It gave Brynn a chance to close her eyes and focus on breathing, on calming the wild anger inside her.

She wanted Joe. But she didn't want a twisted relationship where she cringed in fear every time he was angry, or had to fight the urge to roll over submissively and do whatever he wanted.

Somehow she had to accept the wild creature inside her as a part of her, another facet of who she was. Fighting with herself made her weak, but embracing the wolf...

Now I just have to figure out how.

Chapter Ten

Gavin lit his cigarette and flashed Joe a sympathetic look. “Sam’ll be out as soon as she gets Abby settled in with Sasha.”

“It’ll be good for Abby to have something to do,” Keith murmured. “She’s been fretting, but I don’t think it’d be good for Brynn to have her around. Or good for Abby to be around.”

Joe rubbed a hand over his face. “All I know is I’m exhausted, and I have no idea how to help Brynn right now.”

Gavin looked pensive. “Neither do I. The only wolves like her I’ve ever seen were accidents. Flukes who all went moon-mad.”

“It happens without a witch.” Keith hesitated, his eyes focused on something past Joe. “Not all of the wolves in Europe run with the packs. Some of them are humans who were turned on the night of the full moon. Not on purpose, because the wolves never expected them to survive. But the witches can save some of them. It’s where I got the idea for the alliance—the wolves who live with the witches.”

Joe’s hands tightened into fists, and he concentrated on relaxing them. “Does that mean Sasha will have to help me, or Brynn will end up feral no matter what I do?”

“No! No, they just need the witch to get through the change. But afterwards... Brynn’s already doing better than I’d expected, but both of the wolves I met in Europe were subordinates. Weak. Brynn’s tough.”

“She’s just so goddamned worried about everything, and I can’t seem to say the right thing.”

Gavin clapped Joe on the shoulder. “All you have to do is get through it. You and Brynn will both be stronger.”

“Talk to the wolf,” Keith said suddenly, the words typically cryptic. His gaze jerked to Joe’s face, and he elaborated. “She may not be feral, but that’s only because she learned how to be stubborn from Abby. If she’s anything like the other ones, the wolf’s a heartbeat away from taking control all the time.”

He knew as much from his own experience. It took every bit of his energy just to keep Brynn’s wolf in check most of the time. “Gavin, if I can’t—”

“You will,” his alpha interrupted. “You will for *Brynn*.”

For Brynn. “Okay.”

Gravel crunched under a booted foot, the only noise that signaled Sam’s arrival. She strode past her husband and past Keith, stopping instead in front of Joe. She lifted her hands and caught his face between them, her eyes studying his for several seconds. “You can do this, Joe. I’ve seen what’s inside you.”

What was inside him at the moment felt like a scared, damaged young wolf and a man who'd spent too long alone. "Yes, ma'am."

"No, not 'yes, ma'am'." Her fingers tightened a little. "We understand what they don't, Joe. We understand what it's like to come into this life the hard way. That's why we're so damn scrappy, sweetie."

He swallowed convulsively. "I don't feel so scrappy right now, Sam. I'm just *tired*."

"I know, honey." She pulled back and braced her hands on her hips. "Have you been taking care of yourself at all? When's the last time you ate?"

He'd been very careful about not skipping meals, mostly because preparing them was one of the few things left that still grounded him. "I had lunch earlier this afternoon. I'm sleeping too."

"He's a big boy, Sam," Keith drawled, earning a sharp look. "Well, he is."

"I don't think there's anything to be done about it," Gavin observed, his face somber. "You just have to make it through this, Joe. Hopefully, it'll get easier."

"I'll talk to Sasha tonight," Sam promised. "Maybe there's something else she can do to help."

Joe had thought of it, but remembering the girl's shocked, scared eyes had kept him from talking to her. "How's she doing?"

"Honestly? I keep expecting to find her barricaded in my closet."

The guilt that assailed him was ridiculous, and he knew it. "I shouldn't have run that night. I should have stayed with them."

"Oh, is that the way it is?" Sam leaned forward again, her face close to his. "Then shovel that blame where it belongs, kiddo. Because I should have killed him back when you were still in diapers."

"Sammie." Gavin's face hardened, and he stepped forward. "Stop it. We all feel that way."

Joe chanced a look and saw Sam's guilt reflected in Keith's eyes. "I wasn't even talking about Matthews," he asserted. "I just meant... Hell, I don't know what I meant."

"It's insane," Sam said. "It's fucking insane to imagine someone would risk violating our borders on the night of the full moon, with some of the strongest alphas in the country here. No one can predict madness, Joe."

Keith nodded. "He's been smart until now, or he'd never have survived this long. There was no reason to assume he'd do something like this. But now we know..." His friend's expression looked frighteningly fierce. "He's got to be put down. I doubt anyone will disagree."

Joe rubbed his eyes again. "The question is how."

"No, the question is *when*." Keith's hand fell on his shoulder, a warm, comforting weight that came with the feeling of *pack*.

Sam nodded her agreement. "Go get some rest. You boys are starting to look a little ragged around the edges. Pretty soon Brynn and Abby won't *want* you in their beds."

Joe forced a smile. Sam had no way of knowing Brynn already wanted him as far away from her as possible. “We wouldn’t want that.”

She studied him for a moment, looking as if she didn’t quite buy his words. Then she jerked her head toward the porch door. “I cooked some food for you two. Why don’t you come get it before you leave?”

“Thanks, Sam.”

He and Keith headed for the house, but Gavin stopped Joe with a hand on his arm. “You know what you need to do, Joe.”

He did, but still he hesitated. “I don’t know if I can. I really don’t.”

“You will,” Gavin insisted, echoing his earlier words. “You will, because you’re not going to bail on Brynn when things get tough. You’re not going to do to her what Tamara did to you.”

Joe’s chest ached at the thought. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” Gavin’s expression grew dark. “You’re not going to do it because I tell you to. You’re going to do it because you love her.”

Keith nearly choked. Sam just sighed and gave her husband an annoyed look. “I was going to do that in the kitchen, Gavin. With a little more subtlety and without the audience.”

“No time for subtlety, Sammie. I’m getting too old for it, anyway.”

Joe finally found his voice, but he chose to ignore Gavin’s words. “I’ll handle things. You can both count on me.”

“We know.” Sam looked at Keith, and something in her eyes brought him to his feet without hesitation. “Round up Abby and take her home to rest. There’s a picnic basket on the table for you two, too. Olivia even made cookies.”

Keith’s smile was wan. “Tell her thanks, Sam.”

Joe followed Sam and Gavin into the kitchen, but his thoughts were centered on Brynn. He had to find a way to get past her confusion and fear as well as his own anxieties, or he was going to lose her.

He found Brynn dozing on the couch, still wearing one of his discarded T-shirts and nothing else. He tried to shut the door without waking her, but her head jerked up and she turned to look at him with naked relief. “Hi.”

The pain and guilt that had gripped him earlier rushed back. “Hi. Did you get some rest?”

“A little.” She rose to her knees and held on to the back of the couch. “I was worried about you.”

“No need to be. Just met up at Gavin and Sam’s to talk over some stuff. Mostly about finding someone to help Sasha.”

“Oh.” Her gaze dropped, down and a bit to the side, but she didn’t seem aware of the subtle show of submission. “Is she okay?”

“Still scared.” He walked into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of beer from the refrigerator. “Want one?”

She settled back against the couch. “I don’t think I should.”

It obviously hadn’t yet occurred to her that the change could have affected her alcohol tolerance. “You could probably drink a frat house under the table now, Brynn. Do you want a beer?”

“Okay.”

He popped the top of a bottle for her, as well, and handed it to her as he dropped beside her. “They’re going to ask Dylan to help Sasha. Maybe he won’t be as intimidating as your sister.”

“Dylan’s really good at being soothing.” She picked at the edge of the label on her beer and didn’t look at him. “I’m sorry. For upsetting you. I’m trying.”

His stomach twisted, but he resisted the urge to reach out to her. “No. It wasn’t your fault, Brynn. You—hell, you’ve been through some drastic shit these last few weeks. I don’t even have an excuse.”

She didn’t even seem to hear him. “My whole life it’s been about control. I always know what to say and when to say it, but now everything I think and feel comes tumbling out of my mouth. I’m sort of scared shitless of that.”

“Can’t say I really know what that’s like. I started off pretty crass, and none of that has really changed.”

Her nail scratched against the glass bottle as she continued to worry at the label. “I just wish there was one thing that hadn’t changed. One thing I could hold on to.”

“You’ll find something.” He didn’t even know if it was true, but it was all he could say. “Everything can’t be different.”

“I guess not.” She finally looked at him with a wary, tired smile. “I mean, I still want to do kinky things to you.”

She sounded like she was trying too hard to make it a joke. Instead, her words brought Gavin’s declaration rushing back. *Did* he love her? He wanted her to be happy, safe. His. He wanted it in a way that was new to him. Now she was testing him, and he knew he was closer than he thought to losing her.

But love? He didn’t have the slightest damn idea what that was. Tamara had made sure to inform him of that when she’d left. He couldn’t really chalk her words up to anger or hurt, because she’d left her pack, her *life*, just to be free of him as soon as possible, and none of the women he’d had since had wanted anything more than a convenient night in his bed.

He could take Gavin’s words as truth and tell Brynn he loved her. But he didn’t want to say that to her unless he *knew*. So he leaned over and slid his hand around the back of her neck. “I don’t want anything kinky. I just want you.”

She tensed under his hand, so nervous she trembled a little. “If I give in to her, it won’t just be sex, Joe. I don’t know what it is, but I know it’s not just sex.”

She didn't move, so he lifted her over onto his lap. Her knees dug into the couch as he framed her face and kissed her forehead, her nose and finally her mouth. "Not just sex, Brynn. I know. Me either."

Her lips crushed against his, her teeth scoring his lower lip as she kissed him hard. Power rose around them, a tingle of magic, and Brynn groaned into his mouth and bit his lip again.

Some of the strain inside him eased as she stopped fighting and gave in. Her need raged across the bond between them, driving his own desire higher. Joe pushed his hands under the T-shirt she wore as his tongue pushed into her mouth, and he groaned when she rocked down against him, her hips settling in to a slow, taunting grind.

Brynn grabbed his shirt as she tore her lips from his. The fabric ripped easily under her hands and she let out a breathless laugh as she dragged her fingernails down his chest. "Oh, she *likes* you."

"You knew that already," Joe whispered hoarsely. He dragged the T-shirt over her head and slid one hand up her back, pressing her close to his chest. "Show me how much."

She yanked his head back, and he felt her breath on his neck as her other hand squirmed between them. She licked his pulse with a moan and worked her hand lower until her fingers brushed his cock.

Her body tensed, then rocked as she ground down against her own hand. "I want you so much I'm going to get myself off in about ten seconds just thinking about it, unless you stop me." Then her teeth closed on his neck.

He shuddered and gritted his teeth as pleasure shot through him. "Why would I want to stop you?" His arms held her tightly as he rose from the sofa and headed for the bedroom. "Go ahead and get yourself off. I'll watch and help."

"Yeah?" She bit him again and dragged her tongue over the spot with a soft growl. "Maybe I want you to stop me."

"Do you?" He pressed her to the wall just inside the bedroom door and angled his hips until he could grasp her wrists and drag them up over her head. "Like that?"

"Hot," she whispered, her tone hoarse and breathless. She wiggled her hips a little, grinding against his cock, and her body felt hot even through the rough denim of his jeans. "So *now* do I get to see what you kinky Special Forces werewolves like?"

The idea seemed to excite her, so he turned and dropped her on the bed. "Yeah." His bedside drawer stuck, and a quick yank pulled it free of the table and sent silk and condoms flying across the floor. "Shit."

She was on her knees before the sound of the drawer hitting the hardwood floor had faded, her fingers around his belt-buckle. "Naked. You need to be naked."

"I was getting around to it." He caught her hands. "Get back on the bed."

It was an order, and she followed it without question. She stretched out on her back and ran one hand over her stomach as she watched him. "You're missing out. That would have been a hell of a blowjob."

Joe flashed her a slow grin. "Plenty of time for hot blowjobs later." He snagged a few of the scarves and lifted her arms over her head. "You'll be able to tear through these, so you'll have to be careful not to."

Her breathing turned unsteady as he secured her wrists. "You like your women tied down, huh?"

"Sometimes." He dipped his head and drew her earlobe between his lips. "Right now, I'm just finishing what we started."

She moaned for him, all breathless and needy, but her words were low and hoarse. "I hope that involves fucking me hard. Soon."

"Not at all," Joe countered. "Soon. But not hard." *And not fast*, he promised himself as he tied the scarves and dropped his hands to his belt.

That made her whimper as her gaze dropped to his hands. "Then what are you going to do?"

The buckle of his belt yielded under his shaking fingers, and he left it hanging open as he answered her in a low whisper. "Slow. And very, very careful."

Brynn had expected fast. Over the couch, maybe, or against the wall. Hell, even on the floor. She'd wanted something hard and hurried to satisfy the wolf and her craving for strength. That would have been simple. Purely physical and easy to rationalize away. She could forgive herself a great deal in the name of hot sex, but the odd urges were supposed to end at the bedroom door.

In the rush of relief following Joe's return, she'd almost forgotten the thing that had set off their fight to begin with.

She had to struggle to drag her gaze up to his again, every instinct screaming for perfect, absolute submission. She licked lips gone suddenly dry and focused on his face. "You don't need to be careful of me anymore."

The top button of his jeans popped open. "I didn't say anything about *need to*."

Brynn knew by now that it was pointless, but she tried to lie anyway. "I need it, Joe. Hard and fast." *So I don't have time to think.*

"No." He stared at her, his eyes dark in the dim room. "It's not what you need, Brynn. It's what you want to hide behind."

It turned out he was right, and one sharp jerk of her wrists tore the scarves from the headboard. She scrambled to her knees in the middle of the bed and stared at him. "What do I need?"

Joe knelt in front of her and cupped her face in his hands. "You need to belong to me. And you do, Brynn. You're mine."

It wasn't a magical cure, but it helped. The wolf was pleased. Elated. The tense fear inside her had vanished, replaced with a contented feeling of safety.

For now, it was enough. She reached up to mirror his gesture, smiling a little when the silk scarves dangling from her wrists tickled along her skin. "The wolf's okay with belonging to you, but I'm not happy unless it goes both ways."

The look he flashed her was tender. “I don’t do anything half-assed, doll. It goes both ways.”

“Good.” She dropped her fingers to his shoulders and tugged, coaxing him back on to the bed. “Sorry I ripped your scarves.”

“Just have to get something sturdier.” He stretched out beside her and covered one of her breasts with his hand. “Unless you don’t care if I tie you up, anyway.”

She felt the warmth flood her cheeks as she squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m a little embarrassed by how hot the idea gets me.”

“Mmm. Later, then.” He nuzzled her cheek and nibbled her earlobe. “You could tie me up too, you know. If you wanted.”

“Maybe I will. After all...” She turned her head and bit the line of his jaw. “You’re mine now.” *At least in the bedroom.*

Joe coaxed her hands up above her head and bent his mouth to her nipple, kissing and retreating, his breath hot on her skin. “You can do whatever you want.”

She gripped his hand and groaned as she pushed up, trying to reclaim the heat of his lips. “This is way hotter than tying me down, for the record.”

“You really want me to pin you down. Got it.” He moved, slipping one knee between her legs, but kept his mouth on her breast, teasing. “Tell me more.”

Brynn shuddered and closed her eyes as her body reacted with alarming speed. Even her voice trembled slightly. “I like long walks on the beach, classic movies and oral sex.”

She felt his teeth as he grinned. “You sound like Miss January.”

“She better keep her hands off of you.” Brynn arched up, rubbing against his jean-clad thigh. “God damn it, Joe, take off your fucking pants already.”

“I said ‘slow’, remember?” His teeth closed gently on her nipple.

It shouldn’t have bothered her. The passage of time felt fuzzy, but it couldn’t have been more than a few weeks—*one week? It can’t have just been one*—since the first time they’d had sex, and Joe had taken his time then, too.

But she hadn’t felt this vulnerable. Every touch, every soft nip, every time his tongue rasped across her skin and drove a moan from her, Brynn felt her grasp slipping little more. Fast, hard sex would have satisfied the wolf. Joe’s slow seduction satisfied the wolf *and* the woman, and with every touch it was harder to tell where she ended and the wolf began.

Pleasure rose slow and steady with every touch, until she was twisting under his mouth and panting too hard to even talk. That was when he slid lower, eased his shoulders between her legs, and tongued a hot, wet line down her inner thigh.

“Joe.” She wove her fingers into his hair and fought back a desperate whimper. “You don’t have to—”

“There you go again,” he whispered, amused. “*Have* to. I know I don’t have to. But I want to, sweetheart.” He stroked her with his fingers, his movements lazy and firm, and dropped his mouth to tease at her clit.

He was so damn good at it. She didn’t know why she was surprised; Joe had certainly proven himself adept in the bedroom. Maybe she’d assumed that sex would be nothing but primal, animalistic fucking now that she was a werewolf.

Instead she got skillful strokes of his tongue and fingers that knew just how to tease her, coaxing her up until her entire body felt like it was burning from the inside out. She whimpered his name and clutched at the back of his head, torn between embracing the rising pleasure and fighting the loss of control.

Joe lifted his head, but kept thrusting his fingers into her. “Would it help if you were riding me? Could you lose it then?”

She didn’t know if she wanted to lose it at all, but the choice was slipping away. “Talk to me.”

He climbed up until he could lie beside her, his mouth by her ear, his hand still caressing her. “I want you, Brynn. I want you with me.”

The wolf whispered for her to give in, to take everything he offered and be content, and she was so *tired* of fighting. She let go, and pleasure bowed her spine as she let Joe have everything, her submission and her trust and maybe even her heart.

He murmured to her, his lips against her cheek, as she rode out her release. When she stilled, he drew away and shed the rest of his clothes. He joined her again, sliding into the cradle of her hips as he braced his elbows by her head.

She was the wolf. The wolf was her. The only thing she could think about was losing herself in his touch, in his scent and the feel of his skin and his body inside her. She dragged his mouth to hers.

His kiss managed to be gentle and demanding at the same time, as did the hard thrust of his cock against and then into her body. Joe hissed in a breath and groaned her name as he froze above her, unmoving. “This,” he told her. “With me.”

“Yes.” She met his eyes and the passion and tenderness there almost swept away her fear. Almost.

Brynn trailed her hands down his back and dug her fingers into his hips. “Come on, baby. Move.”

He did, his eyes locked with hers. Slowly at first, and then faster, as he grasped her hands and pulled them back over her head and pressed them into the pillows. “I need you.”

This time she knew exactly what to do. She tilted her head back as his next thrust drove a hoarse moan from her lips. “You have me. I’m yours.”

He buried his face in her neck with a growl, biting hard enough to hurt as his hips moved relentlessly, driving her higher. When he released her neck, a rumbling groan shook him. “Brynn—”

Her body clenched and she clutched at his hands and cried out as the pleasure became too much to bear. Release smashed into her and washed away everything but Joe. Release took him, as well, and he lost the hard, fast rhythm, muffling a shout against her shoulder. He slowed and stilled, but didn't move away.

Brynn slid her hands up his back and rubbed at his shoulders as she struggled to catch her breath. The world felt sharp, as if everything had been just the tiniest bit out of focus and she hadn't realized it until it snapped into place.

Her wolf grumbled sleepily that it was time to rest.

Not *the* wolf. *Her* wolf. *So much for keeping control.*

"What's wrong?" he asked in a whisper of breath that stirred her hair. "Something's wrong."

She shivered. "I think I stopped fighting."

Joe propped his head on his hand and stared at her. "And that makes you feel worse?"

"It feels wonderful," she whispered, staring past his shoulder. "That's what's so scary."

"I think I know what you mean."

She made a quiet noise of agreement, even though she didn't agree at all. Fighting was in Joe's nature. He'd never have to worry about giving in, about letting someone else dictate the course of his life. He could talk all night about relative strength and instincts, because when push came to shove, he'd make his own choices.

Then he'd make hers, too. Because it felt so good to stop fighting, and eventually she'd forget that she'd ever wanted to. She'd be safe and cherished, but she'd be kept.

Just keep surviving. As a mantra, it had never failed her, and now was no exception. It made it possible to smile at Joe as she reached up to brush her fingers along his cheek. "I'm just getting used to it all, still. But maybe I won't wear you out as much now."

He finally rolled to one side, taking her with him. "It'll all get better, sweetheart. I'll make sure of it."

"I know you will." In the end, it was the only way she could face surviving. At least she could trust Joe not to abuse the instincts she didn't know how to ignore. He'd help her. He'd teach her. And if he couldn't show her how to stand up for herself—

Surviving. You're surviving.

—at least he'd stand up for her.

That will have to be enough.

Chapter Eleven

The howl of warning split the night and woke Joe from a sound sleep. The hair on the back of his neck rose, and he reached out for Brynn. “Wake up. Hurry.”

She made a sleepy noise of protest but sat up. “What’s that howling?”

He slid from the bed and grabbed his pants. “It’s Gavin. Something’s—” He bit off the words that would soothe her and told her the truth. “He’s calling us to fight.”

“To fight?” She followed his example, wiggling into the borrowed sweatpants that had ended up in a wrinkled heap at the foot of the bed. “Is this—is this normal?”

“No.” He pulled on a T-shirt, praying the full truth wouldn’t send her into a tailspin of fear. “It means we’re under attack.”

Panic spiked briefly in the bond between them, but it disappeared as he felt her wolf surge to the surface, angry and protective. She pulled on one of his discarded T-shirts and turned. “What do we do?”

“Get you to the bar. You’ll be safe there.” Joe went to the closet and pulled out one of his nine-millimeter semiautomatics. “Then I’ll go join the others.”

“Who else is going to the bar?”

She wouldn’t understand, but he didn’t have time to be delicate with her feelings. “The ones who shouldn’t be fighting. Humans, kids. New wolves.”

“And someone’s going to be there with us?”

He didn’t bother with his boots. They’d just prove a hindrance when he had to disrobe again. “There will be guards. A last line of defense, to make sure no one gets to you guys upstairs.”

Brynn moved to his side, her eyes wide in the dark, but the hand that she dropped on his arm was steady. “Can I have a gun?”

“I keep a revolver in the nightstand.” It would be less likely to jam on her, at least. “We have to run. How steady are you feeling?”

She was already tugging the drawer open. “I’ll be okay.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

Outside, the clear night air carried the faraway sounds of howls, snarls and gunshots. “It sounds like they’re on the other side of town. Come on. We have to hurry.”

They ran, with Brynn keeping pace easily, and Joe tried not to think about leaving her. *She can handle herself. You’ve taught her things, and she’s stronger now. She’ll be fine.*

“Brynn!” Dylan appeared from between two buildings, clad in only jeans, a gun in one hand. “Joe! Keith needs you.”

Joe hauled her to him and kissed her quickly. “I’ll find you.” He glanced at Dylan as he released her. “Where is he?”

“Out by the road coming in. They’re everywhere.” Dylan subtly placed himself at Brynn’s back, where he could keep her safe. His gaze found Joe’s as he spoke. “C’mon, Brynn. I’m going to the bar to help protect it. You can come with me.”

Brynn reached for Joe again, kissing him this time, hard. “Stay safe.”

“You too.” He wanted to say something more profound, but his mind was a blank, the way it always was before a fight. So he took off down the street, following the sounds of battle.

He found Keith near the edge of town, firing at three wolves who were attacking Mac. Abby stood at his back, reloading a pistol. She glanced up, her eyes blazing. “Where’s Brynn?”

“With Dylan. Is it—?”

“Matthews,” she confirmed. “This time, I’m fucking *killing* him, I swear to God.”

“Which is why she’s not in the bar where she belongs,” Keith ground out without turning. “I’m spanking her damn ass after we kill these assholes, so get to it, Joe.”

It was hard to tell the intruders from the visitors, at least in wolf form. A wolf snapped his jaws shut on one of Mac’s hind legs, and he howled in protest. Joe shot the attacker and turned in time to see a small black wolf fly at Abby.

Joe knocked her toward Keith and emptied his gun, then tossed it aside and tore at his shirt as Gavin howled again.

The first thing Brynn noticed when they reached the bar was that Abby wasn’t there.

She ignored the nervous voices of children coming from upstairs and grabbed Dylan’s arm. “Where’s Abby?”

He avoided her eyes. “Safe. She’s with Keith.”

Her fingers tightened until Dylan yelped. “Keith’s in the middle of a *fight*, Dylan! How is that safe?”

“Because he’s not going to let anything happen to her,” he reasoned. “If he’d tried to make her stay, she’d have run off alone. This way, he can look out for her.”

It had never even occurred to her to argue with Joe, a fact that made her jaw clench as she released Dylan’s arm. “So we just sit here and wait?”

“No.” He glanced around, taking stock of the people in the room. “We make sure everyone here is safe too.”

She glanced at the gun in her hand, and then around at the people who were shoving tables against the walls and doors with grim-faced determination. All of the adult humans held weapons in tense grips, and two of the five werewolves in the bar had already shifted forms.

Brynn only recognized one of the humans, the woman who'd spent the last full moon watching over her while she cowered in Abby's motel room and tried to come to grips with her new life. Erin stood next to one of the windows holding a rifle with an ease that spoke of long familiarity. She nodded shortly when her eyes met Brynn's, but a moment later her gaze dropped to the floor in that odd gesture Brynn was starting to recognize as respect and submission—something all the humans in Red Rock seemed to show their werewolf neighbors as a matter of course.

But you're a werewolf now. It was time to start acting like it.

Brynn checked the safety on the gun and tucked it in her pants. "Okay, so I guess we need to—"

"Has anyone seen Samantha?" The voice came from the stairs, and Brynn turned to see an older woman searching the room in clear panic. "She was supposed to bring Sasha here."

Erin shook her head, but didn't look particularly concerned. "She might have gotten waylaid, but I'm sure she's fine. She can look after herself."

The werewolf standing a few paces from Brynn scowled. "Unless the witch betrayed her. Winston should have left her to die."

Brynn didn't realize she was going to react until she'd closed the distance between them. Fury filled her as she slammed the man back against the wall. "What did you say?"

"Brynn." Dylan laid a hand on her shoulder. "Don't."

Fear flared in his eyes, but the man's chin rose a notch. "The magic-users aren't to be trusted. Look what's happened since he brought her here."

Look what's happened since they brought my family here. She got a good taste of the guilt Abby had been wallowing in, and it made her reply harsher than she'd intended. "Sasha is a terrified girl who saved my life, and if anyone touches her or hurts her, I will tear them apart."

"Brynn, back off." Dylan walked to a table in the center of the room and shook some extra bullets from one of the many boxes piled there. "I'm going after Sam and Sasha. They have to be somewhere between here and the house, and it's not much ground to cover. Who's going with me?"

The werewolves traded uncomfortable glances before the one in front of Brynn cleared his throat. "Even if we wanted to, we can't. Strict orders from the alpha to stay here, no matter what."

Joe's words came back to her. *Keith and I buck Gavin's orders all the time.* Maybe it would have been harder if the alpha had issued that order directly to her, but as it was...

She stepped back from the werewolf and felt an odd thrill when his gaze dropped to the floor. Her wolf recognized the gesture—submission. From a man half again her size who could probably beat her into the ground without breaking a sweat.

It gave her a tiny bit of confidence, and she needed it for what she was about to do. “I’m coming with you.”

Dylan sighed. “Joe’ll have my ass.” But it sounded more like an observation than a denial, and he confirmed it when he eyed the gun in her waistband. “Need to reload?”

Joe wouldn’t have given it to her if it had been empty. Then again, he’d never forgive her for not checking. She pulled out the revolver, pushed open the chamber and clicked it back into place before shaking her head. “I’m good.”

“Olivia.” Dylan approached the older woman who’d asked about Sam and laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll find her. We’ll find them both,” he added, raising his voice and glancing at the man who’d complained. “Everyone else, just...get ready.”

“Thank you,” Olivia whispered, her fingers curling around Dylan’s hand for a brief moment. Her gaze shifted to Brynn. “Thank you.”

The fear in her eyes stirred something dark inside Brynn, and suddenly she understood that tight look Joe got whenever she felt scared. Olivia was weak and terrified, and Brynn...

She heard Joe’s voice in her head again. *Everything about this is relative.* Around Joe and Keith, around Abby and the alphas, she’d been the one who was weak. The one who needed protection.

Brynn tightened her fingers around the gun and nodded to Dylan, suddenly confident. “Let’s go.”

There are too many.

Joe cursed himself for even thinking it as he ducked a burly man and flipped him over his back. It took him only seconds to eject the spent magazine from his semiautomatic and shove in a fresh one, but it gave the man time to recover and rush him again.

His assailant didn’t have time to avoid Joe’s shot, and one bullet to the forehead took him down.

Out of the corner of his eye, Joe caught a glint of delicate steel as Mary stepped out of the shadows near Abby, a murderous gleam in her eye.

“Abby!” Even as he shouted her name, he knew there wasn’t time. Keith was too far away, and Abby hadn’t had time to hone her reflexes for this kind of fight.

She didn’t hear him, but his voice drew Mary’s attention. Cold, angry eyes focused on his face, and she snarled at him. “Where’s your little bitch? Hiding under the bed like a good puppy?”

Distract her. “Believe whatever you want, Mary. I don’t care.”

The knife caught the moonlight as she flipped it from side to side in a chiding gesture. “You’re a fool. You’re all fools. Sitting in your mountains with your tame little women, hiding from the world. The world should be hiding from *us*.”

“Now you sound like Matthews.” Cold realization hit him, and he took an unconscious step toward her. “But you would, wouldn’t you? What did he promise you? And what did you tell him?”

She moved so damn fast, and Abby didn't have a chance. Mary's hand twisted in her hair and the knife pressed into the skin of her throat. "Alan needs an alpha to keep the women in line, and I need a man who wants to do something a little more ambitious than hide in his town and have babies with his weak little submissive bitch."

Joe could have shot her—if only Mary had been a little taller, or if Abby hadn't been struggling so much. If only she wasn't his best friend's mate, and his own—

His own mate's sister.

But he didn't have time to do more than blink anyway before Keith appeared at Mary's side, the barrel of his gun inches from her head and his finger already squeezing the trigger.

The world slowed. Mary released Abby abruptly, shallowly slashing the knife along the side of her neck and sending her spinning toward Joe. Keith roared his fury and fired at the spot Mary's head had been a moment before.

Joe caught Abby and pressed his hand to her wound. Too late, he saw Mary swing her arm in an arc. The knife disappeared into Keith's gut, and she howled in triumph as she jerked the hilt. Abby screamed just as Keith fired at Mary, hitting her in the throat.

The woman staggered back, dragging the knife with her, though it slipped from her blood-slicked hands. Abby dove from Joe's arms and snatched up the knife. Mary hit the ground at the same time as Keith, both hands pressed to her throat.

Abby kicked Mary onto her back and barely paused before stabbing the knife into her chest. Mary went limp, and Abby crawled over her and toward Keith.

Joe reached him just as she did, and he pried Keith's hands away from his stomach, exposing the wounds. A moment later, he wished he hadn't.

Abby paled and began to tremble as she laid her hand on Keith's cheek. "Baby..."

"Magic—" The word died in a groan of pain, and Keith's glazed eyes locked on Joe. "Get the knife... Need Sasha—"

Enchanted. It explained why the superficial slash across Abby's neck still bled, and why the stab wounds pained Keith so much when he should have been able to shake them off. Joe rose and walked over to Mary's body to jerk the knife from her heart. "We have to hurry," he told Abby. "You feel steady enough to help me?"

She didn't look away from Keith. "I'll do anything."

Together, they helped Keith to his feet and braced him upright. Then they headed for the bar.

Brynn knew there was something wrong fifteen yards from the alphas' house. She just didn't know *how*.

Her hand snapped out to grab at Dylan's arm as she stopped and tried to figure out what was bothering her.

"Shit," he muttered, looking around. "*Fuck*. It's Matthews." His chest heaved as he stared up at a single light in a second-story window of the alphas' house. "He's here."

Her newfound confidence faltered. "What about Sam? Can you tell?"

"No," Dylan whispered. "I should...but I can't." He shook himself and gripped her hand. "Come on. Be careful."

They made it two more steps before she stopped him again. "He's an alpha, Dylan. What if I can't fight him? The instincts are so damn *strong* and I don't know how to control them. What if he tells me to do something and I just *do* it?"

He grasped her upper arms, bent to meet her eyes, and whispered hoarsely, "You try like hell, Brynn. That's all either of us can do."

She stared at him for an endless moment, and her terror gave way under the fierce determination in his eyes. Dylan was like her, and he'd risked everything to defy Alan Matthews and keep Abby safe. "Okay. Okay. Let's do it."

The front door creaked, and so did the stairs. Halfway up, mocking laughter rang out. "Come on up. We've been expecting you."

Dylan hesitated, but only for a moment. Then he dragged Brynn up the rest of the stairs and ran for the sound of Alan's voice, his gun at the ready.

Sam's voice cut through a second before they hit the door, a pained, muffled scream that sounded like a denial. Then a sound Brynn recognized all too well—a fist hitting flesh.

They spilled through the door into a nightmare. Alan sat on the bed with Sasha at his feet, his hand wrapped tightly in her hair. On the other side of the room, three men were attempting to restrain Sam. Someone had bound her hands behind her back with brutal efficiency, but judging from the awkward angle of one of their arms and the blood and rising bruises on their faces, getting her under control had cost them.

A pleased grin spread over Alan's face. "This is my best day ever," he murmured, jerking Sasha's hair a little as he watched Dylan and Brynn. "If Abigail dropped out of the sky and landed in my lap right now, life would truly be complete." He winked at Brynn. "You made that happen once. Surely you can do it again."

"No." One word, but she put everything she had into it, everything she could summon up with the wolf howling a warning inside her, screaming at her to run.

Dylan twitched and raised his gun, ignoring the warning snarls from the men in the corner. "Let her go."

"The witch?" Alan questioned with a laugh. "No. No, I don't think so. They can do such interesting things." He picked up a knife from the bed beside him. "Like this, for instance. If she tries, I'll bet

Samantha over there will recognize it. This”—he thumbed the blade lovingly—“will hurt even the strongest wolf. But the magic fades eventually. You have to...recharge them.” He tossed the knife behind him, and one of the three men with Sam caught it.

Alan turned his attention to Sasha. “So beautiful.” He pulled her head back and hit her across the mouth, chuckling when she recoiled with a cry. “I forgot how beautiful some humans can be.” His thumb traced her split lower lip. “So wounded.” Then he shrugged and licked his thumb clean. “And useful.”

Sam’s snarl of rage filled the room, and the ropes holding her arms snapped as she surged to her feet—

—and stopped again when Alan’s fingers closed around Sasha’s throat. “I can tear it out with my bare fingers,” he whispered, his eyes fixed on Sam’s face. “You remember, don’t you?”

Furious, helpless power raged through the room as the werewolves forced Sam to her knees again, and Brynn recognized the horrifying truth of Sam’s existence in one moment of insight. Left to her own devices, she could tear every man in this room apart—but the protective instincts that came with her power left her trapped in the face of someone else’s pain.

Alan knew it. He laughed, a sound that shredded Brynn’s already raw nerves like broken glass, and nodded to one of the wolves. “Take her downstairs. If she tries to get away...” Alan’s gaze flickered briefly to Brynn. “What do you think, Samantha? I’ve never fucked a moon-crazed wolf. Just wild enough to struggle, but I bet she submits so pretty. Would you like to watch?”

It should have terrified Brynn, but instead it enraged her. Alan was using her, again. Using her to force Sam to submit, using her as leverage and pain.

It worked. Sam’s struggles ceased. The werewolves hauled her from the room, leaving Dylan and Brynn facing Alan, who kept his fingers wrapped so tightly around Sasha’s windpipe that shooting him might kill her anyway.

Sasha began to struggle and claw at Alan’s arms. He made a soft, almost soothing noise, but didn’t release her.

Dylan’s arm shook, and it was easy to read the impotent fury etched on his face as he slowly lowered his gun. “You won’t make it out of here. Not with all the alphas gathered.”

He stifled a yawn and loosened his hand from Sasha’s throat. “You underestimate me, Gennaro. That’s a mistake.”

Sudden certainty seized Brynn, along with terror for Joe. “Which one is it? Mary? Someone else?”

“Smart.” Alan tapped his temple. “Mary’s tired of being a good girl. So I told her she could come to Helena with me...and be bad.” His nose wrinkled in disgust. “But I think I’ll kill her anyway. She’s wholly unpleasant, and not in an entertaining way.”

Sasha whimpered, and Brynn swayed forward, fighting the instinctive need to go to her. To protect her. “Let her go. She’s not dangerous.”

“On the contrary. I’m sitting here with my fingers around her neck because she’s more dangerous than both of you combined. I mean, *really*.” His blue eyes gleamed with fascination. “She made you, didn’t she? Saved you from death?”

Magic surged when Brynn refused to answer, Alan using the weight of his power to smother her ability to resist. The word came out before she could stop it. “Yes.”

“Yes.” He released Sasha. She tried to scramble away, but he jerked her back with one hand and struck her on the cheek. He winced as she crumpled to the floor. “Hope I didn’t hit her too hard.”

“Bastard.” Dylan choked out the word.

“Mmm, yeah.” Alan stood and focused on Brynn. “Come here.”

Joe kicked open the front door of the bar and ignored the upset murmur that ran through the people congregated in the main room. “Sasha,” he said, then cursed impatiently when they stared blankly at him. “The witch! Where is she?”

The wolves all lowered their eyes, and he *knew* something was wrong. It was Erin who finally spoke, her voice tired. “Sam and Sasha never showed up. Dylan and Brynn went after them.”

Abby squeezed her eyes shut and screamed.

Joe’s breakdown would have to wait. Blood pounded in his ears, and he trembled from the effort it cost him not to dash out and find Brynn. “Olivia!” He and Abby walked to the stage at one end of the bar and eased Keith onto it.

Olivia appeared at his side a few moments later, breathless and pale. “No one could stop her, Joe,” she whispered as she reached for Keith’s shirt. “None of the wolves were strong enough to stop both of them.”

“I’ll take care of it.” He started to help her, but Abby knocked his hands away. “Let me help.”

“No,” she grated. “Go find Sasha and Brynn. Please. Hurry.”

Joe glanced at Olivia and nodded. “Just keep him stable. If you can find Cindy—”

“I know. Go.”

He caught Abby’s hand. “Just hold on.” She nodded tightly, and Joe hit the door at a dead run. He didn’t think about what could be happening to Brynn, what could have *already* happened. He couldn’t, not if he wanted to stay sane enough to help her.

This time Brynn was ready for the heavy press of the command against her willpower. She’d expected to have to fight against her wolf, but the wolf wanted nothing to do with Alan Matthews. The urge to submit to his will grew from fear, not trust, and that gave her the strength to resist.

She lifted her gaze to his and let the reply tear free from her lips, a snarled challenge. “No.”

His face hardened, and he stepped toward her. “What did you say to me?”

Power crashed in on her, painful in its intensity. Brynn ground her teeth and summoned the stubbornness that had gotten her through cut-throat internships, through political machination and competitiveness. “No.”

Alan’s face reddened. “You bitch—” A shot cut off his words and he stumbled back, his angry expression melting into one of disbelief as red bloomed across the shoulder of his shirt. “You’ve got to be—”

Dylan squeezed the trigger again and hit Alan in the chest. He advanced, still firing, until he stood over the fallen alpha.

It was nothing like the last time, when Joe had shot Pierce. That had been violent but brief, over in less than an instant. Alan struggled, growling and gnashing even as his blood sprayed the bed, the floor and Dylan’s clothes.

And me. Brynn shivered and stared, riveted to the spot.

Alan gripped Dylan’s leg and snapped his jaws, his canine teeth elongating into fangs. Her friend raised the pistol and fired again, this time into the man’s forehead.

His struggles ceased, and Brynn shuddered. He was dead. The man who’d taken and threatened her, who’d killed her brother.

Dead.

Dylan sighed shakily. “Go. Get Sam.” When she didn’t move, he growled. “I said, *get Sam.*”

He’d see after Sasha. Brynn bolted out the door toward the stairs, not bothering to hide the sound of her footsteps. Instead, she made as much noise as possible. “Sam, *start fighting.*”

One of the men was already at the top of the stairs, and he came at her. “Where’s the alpha?” he demanded.

He was strong, but not as strong as Alan. Maybe not even as strong as she was. Brynn had no problem lifting the revolver this time, and she aimed it at his chest before squeezing the trigger.

He went tumbling down the stairs, thumping to a stop on the first landing. Then the screaming started downstairs.

Brynn made it halfway down the stairs before the man stirred again, even with a bullet in him. She braced herself and shot again, this time hitting him in the shoulder. The third bullet went into his head, and he finally went still.

She hopped over him and made it to the ground floor a second before a werewolf went flying toward the wall in front of her. Sam appeared, looking like something out of a nightmare in torn, bloody clothing and eyes glazed with rage.

The man hit the wall and staggered back, knocking the alpha to the ground underneath him. Before he could recover, Sam snapped his neck.

The third man, half of his face battered and bloodied, rushed them both. Brynn fired, but she managed only three wild shots before the revolver in her hand clicked, empty.

The man laughed at her and advanced again, seemingly unconcerned by the one bullet she'd managed to lodge in his shoulder. Sam was still on the floor, fighting to untangle herself from the dead weight on top of her.

The door slammed open, and a wave of power she trusted instinctively flooded the room. She hit the ground a second before the final attacker's head exploded in a shower of blood.

Joe hurried over and dragged her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." It was hard to breathe through the relief she felt. "But Sasha's upstairs with Dylan, and she's unconscious—"

"Shit, we need her. Keith's hurt."

They all started at the sound of a gunshot upstairs, but it was a matter of seconds before Dylan appeared, carrying Sasha down the stairs.

"Joe." Sam's voice was hoarse but steady. "Have you got this? I need to rejoin the fight."

"Be careful." She disappeared out the front door, and Joe gripped Brynn's hand. "What happened upstairs, Dylan?"

"Matthews is dead." Sasha stirred in his arms and whimpered. He held her tighter.

"We need her. Mary stabbed Keith. He's at the bar now."

Howls still split the night, but they sounded different now. Triumphant. Brynn shivered as she moved to pull open the door and hold it for Dylan. "Will they know Alan's dead?"

Joe didn't answer her until they were out of the door and running across the yard. "They'll know."

The battle was winding down as they made their way to the bar, but Joe's tension ratcheted higher. *What if we took too long? What if the others couldn't find Cindy? What if—*

More people, wounded and otherwise, had gathered, but they parted for Joe and the others. Keith still lay on the stage, with Olivia pressing kitchen towels to his stomach and Abby, pale and drawn, whispering in his ear.

Brynn moved to her sister's side at once, leaving Dylan standing next to him with Sasha cradled against his chest. The girl was awake and bleary-eyed, and the scent of fear hung heavy around her. Dylan's arms tightened as he paused short of the stage. "I know you're hurting, Sasha, but Keith needs you."

She nodded, and her eyes darted around wildly. "I-I might need a minute. There are so many people..."

Joe helped Dylan set her on the stage beside Keith. "Ignore them, okay? They're not here."

The fragile-looking redhead held her hands over the bloody towels covering Keith's wounds and swayed. "Where is it? The weapon?" Her voice had taken on an edge of power. Authority. She might live in their world, amongst the wolves, but *this* was her domain.

Brynn shifted away from Abby and picked up the knife. She held it out in silence.

Sasha took the dagger and wrapped her hand around the blade. Her eyes drifted shut, and she shuddered. "It's old but strong. I think I can break it."

She began to chant, and power swirled through the room. Keith fidgeted under her hands, restlessly at first and then with growing unease, as she continued the incantation.

"You're hurting him," Abby whispered hoarsely. "I can feel it. You—you're hurting him. Stop." Sasha didn't react, and Abby lunged at her. "Stop it!"

Brynn caught her sister around the shoulder and dragged her back. "Abby!" Brynn's eyes shot to Joe. "Can you stop the bond from hurting her?"

The only way was to break it, and both of them were likely to kill him for it—if they made it through this. Abby screamed and bent double as Sasha's incantation grew in speed and volume, and Joe dragged out his pocketknife and thumbed it open. One quick slice and the woven leather bracelet around her wrist dropped into his hand. He tossed the knife to Dylan. "Get the cord from Keith's wrist."

Dylan didn't waste time with questions. He jerked the blade through the leather cord and threw it back to Joe. Then he rose to his feet and found Olivia with his gaze. "Go get Sam or Gavin. Someone's going to have to help Abby when the bond breaks."

Olivia didn't even pause to wipe Keith's blood from her hands before she turned and bolted from the bar.

Joe looked at the woven cords in his hand. "If I break it now, Brynn, we'll both have to help keep Abby calm until one of them gets here. Can you do that?"

Her answer was honest, if not encouraging. "I don't know, but I'll try."

A bottle of vodka sat on the bar, and he tossed the bracelets in an ashtray and soaked them with liquor. One of the men from the crowd slid a lighter down the bar. Joe struck it, and flames surged up out of the glass tray.

The explosion of power he'd come to expect at the dissolution of a bond ripped through the room. Keith didn't react beyond the whimpers of pain Sasha's spell had already drawn, and Abby didn't make a sound as she dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Brynn hit her knees and gathered Abby into her arms. She started to feel for a pulse but stopped. Her eyes drifted shut and the tense set of her features eased slightly. "She's okay."

Sasha stopped chanting abruptly, and her hands fell to her sides as Gavin burst through the door. "I've done everything I can do," she rasped, swaying. Dylan caught her before she could collapse and eased her onto the stage.

“Is Keith—” It was Brynn’s voice, soft and shaking. He could feel her through their bond, could feel her numb shock and fear and the faint, almost guilty relief that rose every time she looked at him.

Gavin glanced from Keith to Abby. “The bond?”

“Broke it.” Keith had a pulse, though he’d fallen silent, as well. “How’re things out there?”

“They’ve scattered.” The alpha lifted Abby easily into his arms. “Matthews is dead. Without their leader, they don’t know what to do.”

Brynn rose to her feet, so gingerly she seemed to be in pain. “What do *we* do?”

Gavin looked tired. Old. “We pick up the pieces.”

Chapter Twelve

Even with his eyes closed, Joe could feel Brynn's sharp tension flooding the room. Her footsteps had formed a hypnotic rhythm as she paced, her path taking her from the door to the couch to the fireplace and back in a never-ending triangle.

A soft moan of pain drifted in from Cindy's makeshift trauma room, and Brynn's footsteps faltered just short of the couch. "Abby shouldn't be in there. She shouldn't."

"You couldn't drag her out if you tried, sweetheart."

"Then we should find someone who can!" The words came out as an angry growl and rode on a wave of frustrated anger that echoed over their bond.

He blocked her path and wrapped his hands around her upper arms. Leaning down afforded him the chance to catch her gaze, and he whispered, "No one's getting your sister out of there, Brynn. Even if I thought she wouldn't tear me up, I'd leave her be."

Brynn's eyes were more gold than gray. Her body trembled under his hands, and if he hadn't known better he would have sworn he was looking at a new wolf fighting the call of her first full moon.

"You're going to go crazy in here." He took her hand and dragged her toward the door. "Come on."

This time her snarl tore through the room and raised the hair on the back of his neck. "*No.*"

The door opened, and Cindy came out. Her expression was grave, but she tried to smile. "I think he's going to make it."

Brynn's gaze snapped to the blood on Cindy's clothing, and the harsh sound of her ragged breathing filled the room. Joe could feel the effort it took for her to focus enough to speak, and even then her words came out rough. "Abby? Is she..."

"Gavin's helping her." Cindy leaned against the wall and dragged her hands through her disheveled blonde hair. "I think Keith'll be okay, but he's not out of the woods yet. Abby won't leave him."

"I don't—" Brynn closed her eyes with a wild sound that was more animal than human. "I shouldn't leave her, but I can't—I can't *think*."

Pain flashed through Joe like flash fire, fleeting and intense. If he stood and did nothing, Brynn would lose control. He grasped her hand more tightly. "We'll be out back," he told Cindy. "Yell if you need us."

Brynn stumbled once as he pulled her toward the door, her movements as clumsy as they'd been the first day she'd woken up as a wolf. "What are we doing?"

"We're going to get you out of your skin before you rip yourself apart."

She froze, and terror zipped between them, the kind of maddening, overwhelming fear that made it hard to believe she was still on her feet. “Will it hurt like last time?”

“Christ, no.” He brought her hand to his lips and focused on comforting her. “I’m here. I’ll help you. This time, *you’ll* control the change, not the other way around.”

Her gaze locked on to his as the desperation in her eyes slowly gave way to trust. “Okay. I’ll try.”

He raised his hands to her shoulders and held her steady. “You feel her inside you, don’t you? Trapped, trying to claw her way out?”

“Yes. It hurts.”

He could feel it, and he hummed soothingly. “It’s you, Brynn. The wolf is yours. Make her do what you want. Bring her under control before you set her free.”

Brynn’s hands landed on his chest, then slid up and circled around his neck. “Kiss me.”

It wouldn’t help her focus, but he couldn’t deny her. He cupped the back of her neck and tilted her head back for a deep, short kiss that made both their pulses race. “I know it’s hard to concentrate, Brynn, but you have to trust me. It won’t be like last time.”

She nodded and closed her eyes, and after a moment the fear and rage trembling just inside her began to bleed away, to shift focus until the wolf inside her radiated sharp anticipation. Her fingernails dug into his neck as she sucked in a breath and let it out on a soft sigh. “I think... I think I have it.”

“Good.” He tugged at the hem of the oversize T-shirt she wore and pulled the garment over her head. “Get your shoes, baby.”

Her fingers fumbled with the laces, but she jerked them off without untying them. Her socks followed, and she straightened and reached for the waistband on her poorly fitted sweatpants. “I don’t know how long I can hold her. She wants to run.”

Joe finished shucking his boots and reached for his belt. It took reserves of energy he didn’t really have to spare, but he urged a tiny bit of extra strength through the bond. “She’ll run when you let her.” His jeans and underwear hit the grass. “Ready?”

The wind teased at Brynn’s disheveled hair, pulling strands in front of her face and across her bare shoulders. Her hands tightened into fists and she nodded once, a sharp, nervous gesture. “I’m ready.”

His fingers brushed her face, and he stepped back. “Just let her go. You’ve kept her under control for this long, but now you can set her free.”

“I don’t—” Her words cut off as her back went rigid. She hit the ground on her hands and knees, but the magic strung painfully tight inside her didn’t snap. A whimper escaped her as she dug her fingers into the grass and huddled in on herself. “I’m scared.”

Joe knelt in front of her, one hand on her shoulder. The terror faded a little, and he whispered, “You can do this, honey. I know you can.”

Another tiny little nod, and she trembled under his hand.

Then the magic exploded.

He'd never seen anyone change so fast before. Strong alphas could learn to master the change, but there was nothing controlled in the power that tore through her. Brynn disappeared in a ripple of flesh and fur, and in the space of three heartbeats was replaced by a small, trembling wolf who crowded against his side with a confused whine.

Magic rebounded and ripped through him, so he took a deep breath and gave in to the pull. By the time he stood solidly on four paws, Brynn was almost under him, her whining louder. He nudged her like he had the night of her change and trotted toward the dense line of trees behind the house.

She was clumsy at first. She bounded after him and slipped on the wet leaves near the edge of the trees. A moment later she was on her feet again, excitement and curiosity echoing between them. Her nose butted his side, a teasing challenge, and she nipped at his shoulder before taking off again, diving between two trees and into the woods.

Joe watched her frolic through the dark woods, for all intents and purposes newly born. There were plenty of things she needed to learn. Some he could handle, and others were part of being a pack, of being surrounded by other wolves there to help and protect.

For now, what she needed was to satisfy, even exhaust the wolf. She needed to run.

He ran after her.

*

It should have been too cold to be naked on the ground, but Joe's body folded around hers, generating plenty of warmth. The grass beneath them was soft enough, and she'd kicked the one offending branch out of the way before she'd collapsed and resumed her human form.

She felt better than she had in days. Her wolf rested easily within her, and for the first time since the full moon Brynn felt almost human. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against the muscular arm pillowing her head. "This is what it's supposed to feel like, isn't it? When the wolf's quiet?"

"It should feel like that most of the time." Joe sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Brynn."

His breath tickled against the back of her neck, and she shivered and turned her face to kiss his arm. "It's not your fault. At least now I know it doesn't really hurt to change. Maybe I just...need to do it more often than I thought."

"It won't be so bad once Keith is better, and Abby, and things settle down."

It was almost surprising to realize she could sense the lie beneath his words. "You don't believe that."

He cursed. "I want to believe it. But I don't know. No one does."

"Then don't lie to me." She slid her hand down his arm and twined her fingers with his. "Abby said new wolves can't get pregnant. I hadn't really thought about it before now, but we've been having a lot of unprotected sex."

Joe rubbed his cheek against her hair. “You can’t get pregnant right after the change because the wolf is so volatile. It becomes a possibility again once you settle down and gain some control. That’s the quick and dirty version, anyway.”

That same instinct prompted her to turn his words over in her head, looking for the truth he didn’t want to speak. “Because the wolf is volatile. Like mine will be all the time.”

She hadn’t realized how adept he was at hiding his emotions. Though she felt his discomfort and sympathy, his expression didn’t change. “Maybe, sweetheart, but we don’t know.”

“So if it doesn’t go away...” She closed her eyes. Children had been a distant concern, something to be considered in that nebulous *someday* when she’d satisfied her career goals and had time for a family. Knowing it might never happen shouldn’t have hurt so much. She swallowed hard and turned to face Joe, curling her arm around his waist. “I’m glad that bastard’s dead.”

His arms tightened around her. “He’s dead, and you’re safe. You’re *mine*. The rest will work out.” He kissed her forehead and closed eyelids. “I love you.”

Not even exhaustion could blunt the power of those words, not when the truth of them echoed in their bond, echoed in her *bones*. “I love you too.”

He was silent for a while. “The next few weeks will be hard on Abby,” he finally whispered. “Will you be all right to help her out? I know you’d hate not to be able to, so if you need me...”

“Does it hurt you to change too often? I don’t know how soon it will build up again, but if I can feel like this...I can help her.”

“You can change as often as you like. It’s good practice, actually, for keeping the wolf at bay when you need to.”

“Okay. Then I can help her, I guess. I can try.” She pressed her forehead to his shoulder and tried to take a steadying breath. “I’m sorry, Joe. I didn’t want to be something you had to deal with. If...if you need to transfer my bond to someone else, if that would make it easier for us to be together—”

“Shh.” His hand crept up to smooth over her hair. “It wouldn’t be easier, Brynn. It’d be hell.”

“Because you love me.” She had to echo his words, just to remind herself. And because the statement meant nothing to the wolf, she groped for the one that did. “Because I’m yours.”

“Because you’re mine.”

The utter peace that came with those words didn’t scare her anymore.

*

Abby was cooking again.

A mountain of food covered the table, row after row of tinfoil-wrapped hotdishes and loaves of bread, along with pans of dessert bars and every side dish Brynn could imagine. There was enough food to feed all

four of them for a week, even taking into account Brynn's still enormous appetite and the amount of food Keith would need to heal.

And Abby was cooking.

Brynn rubbed at the side of her face and watched as Abby sliced potatoes. "Come on, Abby. Stopping for five minutes isn't going to hurt anything. You look exhausted."

Tension vibrated off her. "I'm fine."

It didn't take her newly awakened supersenses to find the lie. "You're not. You're really not, Abby."

"Of course I'm not." She laughed. "The man I love damn near died trying to protect me. I'm not fine. I want to scream." The peeler hit the counter with a clatter. "I can't breathe, and I just want to *scream*."

The chair scraped against the wooden floor as Brynn rose to her feet and crossed the room to grab her sister's hands. "Abby. Look at me."

Abby's eyes were wild, and her hands shook. "I'm okay. I can do this for Keith, I can be okay."

Brynn's wolf shivered in fear, but Brynn held her ground as well as she could in the face of her sister's nervous power. "Do you need me to go get Gavin? I think he's on the back porch."

It seemed like an eternity before Abby shuddered. "No. I don't need him. I just need..." She pulled her hands free and reached for the peeler again. "I'm going to stay busy, that's all."

It had only been two days since Joe had taken her running in the woods, but the feral, edgy feelings had already begun to return. The overwhelming press of Abby's misery made it worse. It took all the self-control Brynn could muster to open a drawer and find a knife. "Well, then I'm going to help you. What are you making?"

"Mashed potatoes, maybe. Or potato salad. I don't know yet."

Brynn dropped the knife and went for a pot instead. "Have you seen Dylan lately?" she asked, mostly in an attempt to distract Abby. "Cindy's been over here pretty much all the time, but he hasn't. Which seems kind of weird."

"He's busy." Abby finished peeling another potato and dropped it into the colander on the counter. "After what happened to you and Keith, Sasha's petrified. Dylan's had to help her a lot."

She thought about the way Dylan had hovered over Sasha the night of the fight, the way he'd seemed so relieved to be useful. To be *needed*. That same feeling stirred inside her, but Abby wouldn't be taken care of so easily. Or at all.

Brynn filled the pot with water and set it on the stove before turning to face Abby again. "A few weeks ago I'd have been able to talk my way around you, but I'm not sure I can do that sort of shit ever again. So I'm just going to say it. I want to help you, but I can't even trust myself to remember how to be human from one minute to the next. So tell me what to do. Please."

Abby shook her head, and her miserable, confused expression reminded Brynn that Abby didn't have much more experience with this life than she had. "I don't *know*. Everything is so complicated, and I feel so helpless. I don't know."

"Abby." This time Brynn took the peeler from her sister's hand before tugging her gently toward the doorway. "You're exhausted, and so am I. Let's go lie down and talk about what we're going to do when this is all over, and you and Dylan and I are hot and young with superpowers."

She laughed a little and let Brynn lead her toward the bedroom. "I'm exhausted, all right. But I'm worried about Keith *and* you."

"Cindy's going to patch Keith up." Brynn nudged open the door to the downstairs bedroom that had been hers for a few short weeks. Most of her few belongings had already made their way over to Joe's cabin in the past few days. She eyed the empty closet as she gave Abby a tiny push in the direction of the bed. "You don't get to worry about me right now, Miss Bossy. I'm allowing one overbearing alpha up in my business at a time, and right now Joe's got it covered."

"Does he?" Abby's face brightened. "I'm glad it's working out for you two, sweetie. Joe is a good guy."

Brynn dropped to the edge of the bed and let her fingers trace the pattern of the quilt as she tried to find the right words. "Joe is more than working out. He's just..." *Mine*. Easy to say to him while the wolf sang in her blood, but saying it out loud to her sister was harder. "It's not a very human thing, is it?"

"No, it isn't." Abby stretched out on the bed. "I know exactly what you mean."

"I guess you do." She shifted her hand to cover Abby's and smiled. "Sometimes life sucks, Ab...but sometimes it's okay too. Keith makes things worth it for you, and I'm pretty sure Joe's going to make things worth it for me."

"Mmm, I hope so." Abby's eyes fluttered shut, and she grasped Brynn's hand. "Do you think Joe will be okay sitting with Keith for a while?"

"Of course." Not so long ago their positions had been reversed. Brynn rubbed her thumb over the back of her sister's hand and tried to find the same soothing words that Abby had summoned for her. "It's going to be okay, Abby. I know it's hard to see it now, but you and me and even Dylan... We're going to be okay here."

She was already asleep.

Brynn smiled and closed her eyes. It felt different, being curled up with her sister now. The sense of family had always been there, but something else floated just beneath the surface. A sameness that had been lacking before, or that had been so subtle she'd never noticed it. Abby was her blood, but more than that, she was...

The wolf whispered the answer. *Pack*.

Brynn tightened her fingers around her sister's hand and let sleep take her, content in the knowledge that everything *would* be okay.

Keith looked like hell. Pale and drawn, his brow creased with pain, he was in the worst shape Joe had ever seen. Even the accident that had outed Keith as a werewolf, way back when Joe was still human, hadn't left his friend looking this weak.

He looked uncomfortable in sleep, though his restlessness had started after Brynn had coaxed Abby from his bedside in an attempt to get her to sleep. Even so, nearly an hour passed before Keith's hand shifted to the empty spot next to him. His eyes fluttered open, and he frowned as his gaze landed on Joe. "Is Abby okay?"

"She's fine. Downstairs with her sister." Joe sat up straight in his chair. He kept his expression neutral, though his words were honest. "I was just thinking you look like hell."

"Feel like hell." Keith's smile was as weak as the rest of him. "Is Brynn steady enough to deal with Abby?"

"She'll manage. What about you?"

"Cindy says I'll make it. Says maybe I'll wish I hadn't for a few days, though..." Keith winced and shifted positions. "If Sasha hadn't been here, I'd be dead."

It was unthinkable. "But she *was* here, and we all owe her."

"You know that. I know that." Keith's eyes drifted shut. "Fuck. This isn't the time for me to be stuck in bed. We don't know who will take control in Helena or what they'll do if they're backed into a corner, and everyone in town knows we've got a witch here now..."

There were few wolves who trusted witches, and many of the residents of Red Rock had last encountered magic like Sasha's being misused by their abusive alphas in other cities. "Gavin will find a way to protect her, and I'll help him." Joe forced a smile, though Keith still had his eyes closed. "Shit, man, we all will. It's not like this whole thing scrambled your brains."

"Might as well have." Keith drew in a shallow breath and let it out on a pained sigh. "No one's saying it, but I'm not stupid. We've all seen the kinds of scars those damned magical weapons leave behind. No one knows if I'll heal completely, and you know what that means, Joe."

"Bullshit. You're going to be plenty fine."

"Maybe. But I need rest, and I'm not going to get any if I'm worrying about what'll happen if I *don't* get better."

People had been depending on Keith since he was a kid, expecting that someday he'd take Gavin's place as alpha. It was the sort of pressure that transcended anything Joe had ever faced before. Could he take Keith's place if he had to? He thought of Tamara, and of Brynn, and waited for the fear to come.

It didn't.

"I can do it," he told Keith quietly. "I'll step up."

The quiet tension in Keith's face eased. "Thank you."

"You got it." Joe rubbed his hands over his face. "Abby's pissed at me for breaking your bond."

"Abby will get over it. If you'd let her suffer through this with me, I would have stabbed *you*." Keith managed a laugh that looked like it hurt. "Though when I tried to suggest she let Sasha bind her to someone else temporarily, she just about stabbed me again."

"She won't have anybody but you."

"Comforting to my ego, but I'm more worried about her."

"I'm not concerned with your ego." Joe rose and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm just reminding you why you have to get better."

"Wait—" Keith leveled a serious look on him. "Brynn. Is that... Is she okay? Are *you* okay?"

"You mean with Brynn?" Joe glanced at the door. "It's not going to be easy. She's having a rough time, but I'm in this, Keith. I love her."

Keith closed his eyes and smiled. "Good. Now get your ass out of my bedroom and let my woman back in. I'm not going to be able to sleep without her here."

Joe knew better than to think it was an exaggeration. "I'll send her up, but I think Brynn and I are going to hang around a little while longer, if that's okay."

"Long as you keep your hands to yourself. I'm not listening to you play Casanova while I've got a gut wound."

"Sex is the last thing on my mind right now, man. Well, okay, maybe not the *last* thing. But it's still damn low on the list."

"Uh-huh." Keith's voice had begun to grow drowsy. "If you do leave, take some of that damn food with you."

"We'll see."

Brynn knew before she opened her eyes that Abby was gone, just as she knew that the person sliding onto the bed next to her was Joe. The room had grown dark, but the clock on the bedside table was facing the wrong direction to see how much time had passed. She rolled over and snuggled against his side, nuzzling her face into his shoulder. "What time is it?"

He brushed her hair away from her face. "Almost eight."

"Abby went back upstairs?"

"They may not be bonded anymore, but he still feels better with her close by."

"I guess I can relate." She traced slow circles across his chest and smiled a little. "I feel a lot better now."

His hand slid over hers. "Not so worried about your sister, I hope."

“She’ll make it if Keith makes it.” That, at least, she had perfect confidence in. “Keith’s doing better, isn’t he? I mean...he’s stable now. No one’s worrying that he’s going to die anymore, right?”

“He’s not going to die. Don’t know how long it’ll take him to heal completely, or if he even will. But he’ll live.” Joe rolled to his back and pulled her closer. “Gavin talked to Sasha, and she thinks there are a few more things she can do to help his recovery.”

“What about Abby? Gavin said something about Cindy helping...but I thought Abby was too strong to make it without a bond.”

“It would be best, but she already said no.”

Brynn closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to his chest. “I suppose I understand *that* now, too. You’re stuck with me.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He drew back and framed her face with his hands. “It’s not, sweetheart. I love you.”

A gentle warmth washed through her at the words, calming her anxieties and making it hard to remember that so many battles still lay ahead of them. She turned her head just enough to kiss his hand, and a tiny hint of desire unfurled as she bit the tip of his thumb softly. “You’re mine.”

“I fought it.” Joe kissed her jaw and the curve of her cheek, his breath warm on her skin. “Not as hard as I thought I would, and it didn’t do any good. We belong to each other.”

The truth of the words made her shiver—or maybe it was the hot breath against her skin and the memory of how good it would feel to lose herself in his touch, in the absolute belonging of being with the man who was hers as surely as she was his.

She turned her head and caught his lower lip between her teeth in a teasing nip. “We belong together. Naked.”

“Then we belong at home.” He flashed her a rueful grin. “Keith’s injuries haven’t affected his hearing, and we’ve already been warned.”

Home. This bedroom had been set up for her with the love and affection of her sister and Keith, but it wasn’t home. Home had always been her apartment in Helena, the place she’d rented with the money from her first job and decorated after hours spent watching home-improvement shows.

Except it wouldn’t be home anymore. Joe was home, and his tiny little cabin where he’d held her and loved her, where he’d taken care of her while she tried to remember how to be human.

She’d never been sentimental, but she had to swallow twice before she could get the words out, and even then they sounded husky. Husky, but filled with love. Filled with *hope*. “Let’s go home.”

About the Author

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. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at www.moirarogers.com, or drop them an email at moira@moirarogers.com. (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

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He is tired of fighting. She has nowhere to run.

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Red Rock Pass series, Book 1

Keith Winston is tired of fighting. The war between werewolves and wizards rages on in Europe, but he's come home to Red Rock, Montana in hopes of finding a bit of peace. Instead he finds more strife as he struggles against the pack's dictates that he resume his place as the alpha's right-hand man.

When he rescues a new wolf on the run, he knows his instant attraction to her could cause trouble. What he doesn't expect is to find himself embroiled in another battle that goes against all his instincts—and his heart.

Abigail Adler learned about the existence of werewolves only when she became one. With her life threatened by a corrupt alpha, she flees to the only sanctuary she knows: Red Rock. While she's grateful for the pack's protection, she chafes under its unbreakable rules of conduct—except when it comes to submitting to the passion Keith stirs in her.

Then her tormentor kidnaps her sister in an attempt to lure her out of hiding. To save her, Abby and Keith must be willing to do the very thing that could get them all killed—break all of the rules.

Warning: Hot werewolf sex, violence, explosions, and a heroine wielding a makeshift implement of destruction.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Cry Sanctuary:

"Oh, God." Abby tried not to whimper, but the sound escaped her anyway. The animal inside surged forward again, ready—*desperate*—to be claimed, and she rose from the table, almost knocking her chair over. For a moment, she didn't know what to do. Then she took a deep breath and walked from the tiny kitchenette to Keith's bed.

She gathered every bit of courage she had and turned her back to him. "Can you unzip me? I can't reach."

Even though she heard him move, feeling his hands slide around her waist was a shock. Strong fingers stroked across her stomach before moving up to cup her breasts, and he drew her back against him. "When I get around to it."

Fire streaked through her. Abby rocked back, whimpering again when she felt the hardness of his cock press against her ass. "Isn't that the dangerous part?" she asked on a moan. "Getting me so excited?"

"Maybe for someone else." His voice was cocky, almost arrogant. He pinched her nipples and rocked against her ass at the same time, his voice low and sensual. "But I can handle you no matter how excited you get, and it's good practice for you."

She cried out and covered his hands with hers, wishing the layers of cloth between his fingers and her breasts were gone. "Practice for what?" For going insane? For dying of frustration?

His breath heated the sensitive skin of her neck, and he bit her earlobe and tugged at her nipples. "For losing control without *losing* control. I can show you how."

Abby shuddered and batted his hands away. She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. The heels she wore afforded her easy reach of his mouth, and she bit his lip. "Sounds like a ton of work. We might need to practice a *lot*." She skated her lips over his cheek and closed her teeth on his ear, growling softly.

His growl was louder, lower. He caught her lips in a bruising kiss as he grasped her hands and tugged them from around his neck. He guided her arms down, behind her back, and bit her lower lip in return as he caught her wrists in one hand. "We do need a lot of practice."

One hand held her wrists trapped, but the other moved to the neckline of her dress. He tugged it down, revealing the thin fabric of the bra underneath, and made a low noise of approval. "And you need practice in letting me take my sweet time." He caught her nipple between his thumb and finger and tweaked it again.

"Bossy bastard." She tried to free her hands, but he held them tight. Desire clashed with defiance, and Abby growled even as heat flooded her. "Fine. Just let me know when you've caught up."

He jerked her forward, crushing her hips against his. "Oh, I was hard before we got through the door. But I'm not a kid who can't control himself." His fingers inched under the fabric of her bra and tugged it down, baring one breast.

Her head spun, and the ache inside her grew. She wanted to cry out again, to beg him to go faster, make her come. Instead, she clamped her lips together, muffling the moan that welled up in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her body stiffly against his. She wouldn't let him win, wouldn't let him see how close to the edge she was already.

His breath tickled her ear. "All through dinner, Abby. The whole time, I was imagining how it would feel to be inside you. To bend you over and show you how fucking good it can be when the person and the wolf want the same thing."

When she opened her eyes, she could barely focus on his face. "Why didn't you?" she rasped, pressing closer, sucking in a breath when her nerve endings screamed at the contact. "Why *don't* you?"

"Oh, I will." He left her breast bare and moved his hand down her body, caressing her stomach over the fabric of the dress. His fingers pressed lower, sneaking under her dress to rub at her clit through her underwear. "Maybe more than once."

Abby forgot to be stoic, forgot everything but the searing heat that engulfed her when Keith stroked her. "Fuck—" Her head fell back, her hair brushing her hands where he still held them. She couldn't control her own body as her hips bucked against his hand, once and then again. The tension inside her

stretched tighter and snapped, and the accompanying wave of pleasure wrenched a hoarse cry from her throat.

His fingers kept stroking and his lips returned to her ear. “Is that how you want it? Bent over, your ass in the air?”

Her knees buckled, and she sagged against the broad wall of his chest. “Please,” she whispered. “Please, God—please—”

Keith released her hands and plunged his fingers into her hair. His mouth came down on hers, but the brutal domination in his kiss had faded. He kissed her slowly this time, teasing at her lips without pressing past them. His hands moved to the zipper at the back of her dress and slowly pulled the tab, parting the teeth.

Abby licked his lips and urged his shirt up. “When is it my turn?” she asked against his mouth, the twisting need to make him gasp her name overriding everything else.

“What do you want to do?” The dress came undone and he tugged it down.

“Make you crazy.” She let him peel the dress over her hips and kicked it away when it fell to the floor. “I want to make you beg.”

Keith grinned at her as he slowly turned her to face away from him. His hands smoothed up her arms and to her shoulders, and he nudged her upper body toward the bed. “Sounds tempting as hell, sweetheart, but that’s not how it works. Until you’re in control of yourself, you can’t be in control of anyone else.”

Her hands hit the bed and curled into the covers. She looked back at him, her brow furrowed. “That doesn’t sound very fair. I’m doing all right so far.” Except for the fact that her arms and legs were trembling, and she couldn’t quite seem to catch her breath.

One eyebrow went up as he slipped his fingers under the hem of her underwear and dragged it off of her ass. “You think we’ve even gotten *started*?”

One scorching lesson in seduction...

Teacher's Guide to Wildlife

© 2009 Kaye Sykes

Finally free of her stalker ex-husband, Faith Cahill has a lot to celebrate. It doesn't take much prodding from her best friend to throw caution to the wind and kiss a perfect stranger. And Dean is perfect, indeed: darkly handsome, tattooed, wicked smile, talented with his hands—and he cooks!

The last thing she needs is to get involved again, especially with a guy who's hiding something. Despite her vow to avoid him, though, her resolve is shredded every time he crosses her path.

One night with Faith leaves Dean hungry for more, and he senses the feeling is mutual. His instincts tell him Faith won't be satisfied until she's unearthed all his secrets. He'd like nothing more than to reveal every last part of himself to her. The question isn't whether she can handle it. The question is, once she knows everything, will she back away and return to a normal existence.

Or join him in a fight against the evil that threatens their small New England town—and their newfound passion.

Warning: This book contains searing sex, violence, an ex who gets what's coming to him, chick fights, inappropriate gifting of dog biscuits, and a ménage à trois.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Teacher's Guide to Wildlife:

The October night air felt cool compared to the temperature of the bar. She lifted the hair off her neck to catch the slight breeze. She happened to glance at Dean and saw him watching her. He caught himself and pointed toward the back of the parking lot. "I'm over there."

They walked in silence until Faith couldn't stand the deception anymore. "I live really close by. You don't need to drive me. In fact, it'd be ridiculous if you did."

"I can walk you home." By now, he'd stopped at a muscle car parked by the rear of the restaurant. Mom had always warned her about taking rides from strangers. Especially strangers with fancy cars who cooked for her and made her want to tear off their clothes at first glance. On the other hand, her mother had liked Craig.

"You don't need to." He was harmless, but Faith didn't want him to know where she lived yet. If she let him walk her home, she'd invite him in. If she invited him in, she'd sleep with him. No doubt about it. If she stayed here, her underwear would stay on.

"Suit yourself." He leaned against the side of the car and waited.

This moment was her moment to act, but she was too nervous to do anything except talk. "Thanks for the food. I might ask you to cook for me again."

"You know where I work." The moonlight on the tar brightened as the cloud cover passed over. Dean directed his gaze upward and his exposed neck tempted Faith's newly surfaced predator. She closed the distance between them and brought her lips to his neck. He smelled of food and man, a spiciness that begged to be tasted. Her tongue licked his skin and the flavor of him was even better than his scent. A sigh breathed in her ear and his arms were around her, pulling her against his hard form. The motion increased her hunger.

She devoured his neck, savoring the salty sweetness of his flesh. When she reached his lips, he growled in the back of his throat and opened his mouth. Her tongue intertwined with his, twisting and stroking inside him. The kiss generated a charge that brought every cell in her body to attention. While thought was available, she knew she didn't want to break contact, wanted to keep delving with her tongue. Then thinking was gone, replaced by the physical.

Her hands slipped across his shoulders and down, tracing the muscles of his arms before sliding to his chest. She pushed up his shirt, running her fingers through his soft hair and her nails across his nipples. She skimmed his ribs and lightly touched his flat stomach. His intake of breath rose beneath her kiss.

His hands slid down her ass and pressed her against him. She could feel his hardness on her stomach. The sign of his desire split her mind into the one part that didn't allow one-night stands and the other that wanted him. Choosing a side, her hand didn't hesitate at the barrier of his waistband and brushed over the curls of his hair, grasping the length of him before she could lose her nerve or talk herself into stopping. His erection thickened in her hand and she stroked him, the entire length of his cock, drawing his moans into her mouth.

He ended the kiss and stared into her eyes. "I want to be inside you."

Her hand pumped him faster. "You want me?" The murmured words, unfamiliar yet right at home in her mouth, made her want to take him home and let him obliterate any trace of insecurity or control inside her. Caution asserted itself. Out of the question. He wasn't going to her house. She'd give him hand job in return for that molten kiss and be on her merry way.

"My car's more comfortable." His fingers dug into her shoulders and his breath quickened. She took this as a sign he was close. She didn't alter her stroke, concentrating on the smoothness of his skin and ignoring the need in the center of her, a pressure building and pleading to be released. He whispered her name in her ear, a small sound that betrayed his want.

"We'll stay out here." Control was the game. She could derive pleasure from his enjoyment without giving more of herself. As it was, her body begged to be taken. She wanted to climb in the backseat and ride him until she was sore. The whole of her swayed in that direction before she gave herself a mental slap.

Dean didn't cooperate. As if understanding her tactics, he grabbed her hand mid-stroke and brought it behind her back. In a quick move, he reversed their positions, pinning her against the side of his car. He

freed her hand but she couldn't move beneath his weight. Her control flew away on wings of panic and her body went rigid. The powerlessness of her situation beat against her chest. "Don't hurt me."

Bracing his arms on the car, he lifted his body off her, still in contact but no longer pinning her. The lights of the moon and parking lot revealed the concern in his eyes and expression. "Never."

His lips were feather soft, tracing the line of her chin and neck. Her body relaxed and the blood in her veins slowed. His tongue took the place of his lips and drew a line from the base of her neck to her shoulder. "You taste so sweet."

Using only his mouth, he caressed her shoulder, licking the curve of her neckline. Entranced by his kisses, she didn't notice her unbuttoned sweater until he pushed aside the silk of her camisole and exposed her breast. His thumb circled her nipple bringing it to aching attention before his mouth found it. He sucked on the piece of flesh and she encircled his head with her arms, pushing her breast into his mouth, urging him to suck harder. He closed his teeth, biting her hardened nipple while his hand curved around her other breast, gently squeezing that nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Alternating between her breasts and never breaking the contact between mouth and skin, he pushed her camisole over her chest. She rolled her head against the car window, letting him expose her to the moon. Her legs spread open for balance, she looked down and the center of her clenched at the sight of his mouth on her.

When he drew his mouth away to kiss her, the air breathed cold on her swollen flesh. His hand burned on her thigh and blazed a trail that ended with him cupping her. His fingers caressed her over the material of her stockings and underwear. When he raised her skirt to slip his hand beneath the fabric, the jolt of his touch against her pubic hair, then against her lips, brought a moan out of her. He deepened the kiss, his tongue in her mouth as his fingers slid inside her. She arched to his hand, needing him. Two fingers stroked her passage and around the center of her, teasing in a circle before brushing her clit. The motion of his hand sped up and her nails dug into his shoulders. She rode his touch—seeking satisfaction, clasping his fingers with urgent muscles and begging him in a whisper to keep touching her.

He withdrew his hand and disappointment threatened to overtake desire. Her frustration made her hiss and open her eyes. He smiled at her and put his wet fingers in his mouth. "I want to taste you, all of you."

Romeo and Juliet never had to worry about being skinned alive

Howling for My Baby

© 2009 Beverly Rae

Sydney Skeller's father is spitting bullets over her reluctance to join the family business as a shifter hunter. The last thing Daddy needs to know is why—she yearns for a lover who's man enough for a relationship but animal enough to give her the wild ride of her dreams. After a treadmill mishap lands her in a tangled heap with Jason Cannon, she wonders if she's finally found her beast, er, man. One session in bed and one bite later, she's sure. Now if only she can keep her father from mounting Jason's head on a wall...

Jason is all man on the surface, but wolf shifter down to the bone. He's more than ready to stop "playing the pack" and find his one true mate, and Sydney of the luscious curves is the woman of his dreams. Finding out that she comes from a family sworn to eradicate his kind isn't a deal-breaker. But her outrageous plan for him to masquerade as the wolf in hunter's clothing, right under her father's very nose, could be asking more than he ever expected to give.

Warning: Readers, be aware of stranger side effects. These side effects may include but aren't limited to biting strangers, asking furry strangers to bite you, purposely falling off treadmills to collide with handsome strangers, enjoying hot sex with wild strangers, and baying at the moon to meet other moon-influenced strangers. If you notice any of these side effects, contact the author immediately. You may be in her next book!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Howling for My Baby:

Benjy whipped out a cosmetic mirror and checked his reflection. "Jason, dog, what's up with you? You've been in a foul mood all day."

Jason groaned every time he thought about last night. The girl he'd hooked up with had barfed all over his bed. He'd cleaned her up and gotten her home safe and sound, but the bar thing was getting old. Besides, he was fed up with those when-will-you-stop-bringing-home-a-bimbo scowls from the maid. Maybe he should sell his condo and retire to his pack home in the mountains—with or without a mate.

Not for the first time, he wondered what it would be like to have a permanent woman, his destined mate, in his life. The one who could talk to him, laugh with him—and give him a wild ride in bed. He let his mind wander to the curly-headed woman of his dreams and knew with absolute certainty he'd recognize her when they met. But with the pack's personal fitness business finally taking off, who had the time to search for Ms. Right?

"When are you going to admit you prefer me over some miniskirt-wearing, silicone-injected bitch?" Benjy sidled closer.

Jason shoved him away. Annoyed when two men coming out of the gym snickered, he gagged on his coffee. “Damn it, man, if you weren’t the best accountant the pack has, I’d wrap a choke collar around your neck so tight you’d have to breathe through your ass.”

“Oooh, goody.” Benjy ran his eyes down his frame. “You like it rough, huh, Jay-Jay?”

“I promise you, you shit, if you don’t at least try to act normal, I’m going to tear your heart out.”

“Gay *is* normal, you politically incorrect beast.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Idiot here.” Yet when Benjy tried to hug him in a gesture of forgiveness, he jumped out of reach. “But you know what I mean. And don’t call me Jay-Jay.”

“What you mean is...you want me to act like a straight man, right? Okay, if that’s what my hunky macho leader wants, that’s what my hunky macho leader gets.” Benjy pulled his tangerine polo shirt out of his perfectly ironed khakis, ruffled his hair, and slouched. Shoving his thumbs into his pockets, he sauntered ahead of Jason and deepened his voice. “How’s this, dude?”

Jason laughed and followed his friend through the automatic sliding doors of the gym. “You’re acting like John Wayne on hormone replacement therapy. Yet, as sad as your act is, it’s still an improvement. Keep it up.”

“Urgh, you beast.” Benjy rolled his eyes, returned to his usual perfectly put-together self and let Jason lead the way to the office. They quickly located the gym’s newest manager.

“Steve Wilson? I’m Jason Cannon and this is Benjy Boudoir. Welcome to the company. I believe the previous manager, Rob Manger, told you we’d be stopping by?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Manger told me.” Steve offered his hand to first Jason, then Benjy. “I’m very happy to be one of the team.”

After shaking hands, they followed Steve into the office.

Steve took a seat in front of a computer resting on a mahogany desk and pulled up the gym’s financial records. “Before he left, Mr. Manger filled me in on what reports you’d need. I compiled everything into this software for easier viewing.” Spinning around to face them, he frowned, the lines furrowing his forehead making the twenty-five year-old appear ten years older. “I keep an excellent record of all transactions.”

Jason patted him on the shoulder, both to reassure him and to nudge him out of the chair. He motioned to Benjy to take his place. “I’m sure you do. This is simply a routine check and nothing for you to worry about.”

Benjy’s fingers flew over the keyboard. “Now if you two will excuse me, I’ll put on my accountant’s hat and play with some numbers. Although I’d much rather play with somebody else’s numbers.” He winked at Steve, causing the young man to stumble sideways in his haste to put distance between them.

“Uh, would you like to look around while Mr. Boudoir goes over the records?” Steve moved toward the door, ready, willing and obviously anxious to get away from Benjy.

Jason gestured for Steve to exit first. “Lead the way.” He followed the eager manager around the outskirts of the workout area, letting him drone on about the new equipment. But his mind couldn’t concentrate on the young man’s words. Instead, his thoughts kept drifting to last night’s dream. Clearer than ever before, he’d seen a picture-perfect image of the woman with brown hair with red highlights. What’s more, he’d heard her howl—hearing the call within his heart along with his dream, and he knew what it meant. His mate was close.

“Sir, we’re coming around to the treadmill area. We’ve added several rows of treadmills because those are our most popular machines. They’re the best in the industry with programmable settings...”

Jason stopped behind one of the whirring machines, missing the rest of the manager’s description. A woman clad in black bike shorts and a neon pink workout top ran on the belt, her short curly hair glinting copper fire from the bright lights above her. He tilted his head to one side and examined the full roundness of her bottom. *Now there’s a target any man would want to aim his shaft at. I do like the junk in her trunk.*

Suddenly, she twisted toward him and their gazes met and held. Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Hey, sweetheart, you’d better watch out—”

Her big beautiful eyes grew large and she let out a yelp. In one awkward motion, her feet flew out from under her and she crashed on her side on the still-moving belt. She slid with the conveyor, headed quickly toward the end, and slammed into his legs.

“Argh!” Jason went down hard, landing on top of the woman, whose upper torso bumped up and down with the off-center glide of the belt. Yet, even though she pushed on his chest to get him off her, he couldn’t help but enjoy the soft pressure of her breasts against him.

“Ow! This thing’s got me!”

The panic on her face erased the lust-filled ideas spreading through his body and mind. Gripping her bra-like top, he pulled her off the treadmill. Or at least he attempted to. Trying to ignore the spectacular view of her ample cleavage, he peeked behind her. “Shit. The back of your top’s caught in the mechanism.” He looked around to see where the young manager was. “Steve, don’t just stand there. Turn this thing off.”

Steve scrambled past them to the control panel and pushed the red emergency button. Amazingly, the treadmill continued to run. “I can’t get it to stop. Hang on while I get in front and pull the plug.”

“Hurry! It hurts!”

Frightened eyes captured Jason and he could think of only one thing to do. Shifting enough to change his fingernails into claws, he punctured through the fabric of her workout top and pulled. The garment ripped, tearing away from her body, and the woman screamed louder. Freed from the monster machine, Jason and the woman scrambled apart. She clutched her arms in front of her generous breasts while he tried not to gawk in wonder. Stare, hell, yes—but not gawk.

“Are you crazy?”

She stood, arms crossed, protecting precious little of her chest—*How lucky can a man get?*—and glared at the crowd surrounding them. Several men whistled and hooted, bumping against each other for a better view of the half-naked woman.

“Why are you yelling at me? I helped you, remember?” He licked his lips and tried to keep his focus on her face. Her mouth worked, searching for the right words and giving him time to notice the fullness of her lips.

“Give me your shirt, you jerk.” She widened her eyes more, indicating the people around them. “Right now.”

Quickly, he whipped off his denim shirt and held it out to her, silently chastising himself for not thinking of it first. Holding it open, he held it in front of her, hoping to shield her from not only his wandering eyes, but the rest of the club’s patrons. She inched closer to grab the shirt. With a final scowl at him, she dashed for the locker rooms.

“I got it!”

Jason turned to Steve, who stood holding the power cord high like an Olympic gold medal. At last, the treadmill ground to a stop. “Great, man. Good work.” The memory of luscious breasts tickled his mind, yet he couldn’t let go of the sight of her angry eyes.

Turning to stare after her, he knew he’d found his mate.



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