



Soul Mates: Deceptions

Jourdan Lane

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Chapter One

"What is the penalty, Adrian? Repeat it back to me so that I know you understand."

"M-master, I—" Adrian's voice was cut off by Lucien's tightening grip around his throat.

"I'm waiting."

Lucien's voice was so full of anger, something I'd heard more and more of in recent months. No matter how much Adrian didn't like me, or me him, I couldn't stand by and watch him be brutally punished for a simple shove. "Damn it, Lucien! Let him go."

Lucien growled in my direction. "Stay out of this, Peter."

"I will not stay out of it!" I stepped toward them both and stood behind Adrian, who was on his knees. I rested my hands on Adrian's shoulders, attempting to reassure him that things would be okay. "It's as much my fault as it is his. He shoved me by accident and I took it the wrong way and shoved back. It was no big deal."

"So now you will lie to me to protect *him*?" Lucien's lips pursed tight. "Since when is lying your forte, Peter?"

"Since when are you an angry, out of control Master who leads his coven by his cock? What are you trying to do, Lucien? Prove the rumors to be true?"

"How *dare* you speak to me like this in company?" Lucien snarled.

I swatted Lucien's hand away from Adrian's throat and pulled Adrian back. "You may go, Adrian, but do not leave here without word from me. Understand?"

Adrian looked from me to Lucien, his eyes wide in fear as he got to his feet. I gave him a look of warning and he nodded once, before retreating. "Y-yes, Master."

Lucien glared at me as the door slammed shut behind Adrian, shaking his head. "I cannot believe that you just did that."

"From what I understand, this is just as much my coven as it is yours. I will not stand by and let you do this over and over again in some misguided attempt to shelter me from the world of which I'm now a part."

"A world that I should have kept you out of."

Oh, Christ. Not again. This argument was exhausting, at best, and if we started it in motion, we'd do nothing but argue in circles for the rest of the night. "You have to stop being the protector who runs after each and every bully that pushes me around on the playground."

"This playground could get you killed."

"Oh, it could—but it won't. Not by our own people."

"Right. *Our* people." He sighed and strode to the desk, pouring himself a Scotch. "Half *our* people hate you. They cannot stand the sight of you, much less the fact that you are to be treated as Master. They would rather kill you and face the consequences than submit to you."

"You truly believe that, don't you?"

"Humans were never meant to take the throne." He downed his Scotch and poured another.

I stalked over and knocked the Scotch from his hand, sending the glass flying across the room to crash against the wall. "And whose fault is it that I am what I am? If *you* had kept your promise months ago, tensions might have eased and they would have realized that I'm a permanent fixture around here. But no... you keep me here, you keep me human—day after day, month after month. I'm starting to wonder if it's not about having a steady fuck and feed rather than a companion."

"So now you question my love for you?" Lucien growled, yanking me closer by my shirt collar.

"I question everything," I said, teeth clenched in anger. "The thing I question most, is that if you truly love me—as you say you do—you would not keep me in limbo. You would do as I asked, begged, and you would turn me."

Lucien let me go so suddenly that I stumbled. He made no attempt to help, just walked right past me to stand at the long window looking out over the club. "And as always, no matter what the argument started out as, it leads back to this."

"You don't understand..." I stared at his back, shaking my head.

He held up a hand to silence me, but didn't look back. "You cannot keep undermining me, Peter."

"I won't let you punish someone on a whim."

"I am Master here; I will decide what warrants punishment." Lucien shook his head. "I cannot have you questioning my authority, or they will do it as well. The Council has already made inquiries as to my *abilities* to maintain the coven in recent months. Every single time you interfere, things only get worse."

"Right," I said softly. "The Master who leads his coven by his cock. The overprotective Master who will punish his own vampires for an angry, or even lustful glance in his companion's direction. The Master who promises one thing, but never really means it."

"Peter—"

"No, that's okay. I'm going." I walked toward the door, but paused as I grasped the knob. "You know? I wish I knew what it was that made you change your mind—made you stop loving me enough to make me your equal. But remember this, Lucien: I'm *not* human anymore. Whatever I am? *You* did this to me."

I walked out the door of the office and started down the stairs. I heard a loud roar followed by a crash when I hit midpoint. I paused for a moment, but the sight of Adrian at the bottom made me keep walking. As I reached him, he ducked his head.

"Might I have a word with you?"

I nodded and pointed to the bar a few feet away from us. "I need a drink right now, Adrian. You're more than welcome to join me."

Jack pushed a glass of Scotch in my direction as soon as I slid onto a stool. "Hey, baby. Everything okay?"

"Not really." I smiled tightly and nodded toward Adrian, who'd taken the stool beside mine. "Get him something while we talk?" Jack nodded and left us alone for a moment. "Start talking, Adrian."

"I-I just wanted to say thank you."

"Hm. You're welcome."

"And that... that I'm sorry."

I raised a brow. "Yeah?"

He nodded. "Look, things have been different since you and Lucien bonded. He's *changed*. And I think a lot of us blame you for it, mistakenly."

"It's not a mistake." I shrugged. "It's all because of me."

"I think we all thought that if we pushed you hard enough, you'd go away." Adrian paused as Jack set his glass of blood before him, waiting until Jack retreated again to continue. "But it's becoming quite clear that you care for the coven, for us, as much as Lucien did."

"Does."

"Hrm." Adrian sighed and picked up his glass. He drank down the liquid and licked at his lips. "Maybe. Really, I just wanted to say thank you for tonight."

"You've said that already."

Adrian stood, but didn't leave. I turned to look at him and he dropped to one knee. "I will never disrespect you again, sir."

"Or Lucien."

He nodded quickly and I reached out, touching his shoulder. "Maybe if you spread the word to play nice?"

"Yes, sir," he said. "I'll do what I can."

"Have a good evening, Adrian."

I turned back to face the bar—and Jack. He reached out and took my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Wanna talk?"

I nodded and he pointed to the door at the end of the bar. I stood and made my way through the growing crowd. As I reached the door, it opened, Jack pulling me inside. It was quieter in the stockroom office, the beat and grind of the music not quite as jarring. I took one look at Jack's sympathetic face and broke into tears.

His arms slid around my back, moving up and down along my spine. "What's the matter, baby?"

So many things. "Oh, Jack... Do you remember when I first met Lucien?"

"How could I forget?"

I clung to him, curling my fingers into his shirt. "Do you remember what you said about how I'd never be first?"

"Peter, I didn't—"

"Sometimes I wish so much that he'd put the coven before me. That he'd be the Lucien I met and fell in love with again." I shook my head, sighing. "I hate this, Jack. I hate the way he treats his people because of me."

"He loves his people—he loves *you*." He held me at arm's length, eyes meeting mine. "This is a hard time for you both, getting settled, getting comfortable in your relationship, *and* dealing with the coven and the Council. It's just going to take time, honey."

"It's been over a year, Jack." I pulled away, moving to sit on a nearby couch. "We hardly even talk anymore because..."

"Because?"

"It always leads back to him not bringing me over. I don't know how much longer I can take it. The cravings are only getting worse and he refuses to broach the subject. I don't know what to do anymore."

"And he knows about the cravings?"

"Oh, yeah, he knows. He's been there."

Jack crouched on the balls of his feet before me. "There's got to be a reason that he hasn't done it yet, Peter. He wouldn't bring you this far and not go all the way."

Regardless of how he'd warned me off him before, Jack loved Lucien. Believed in him. Stood up for him. And mostly took his side when I had doubts or issues. There were times when I hoped he might have some sort of insight into Lucien's actions, but he only pushed me to talk to Lucien. If only it were that easy.

"That's what I always thought," I said.

"I know it, Peter. I see the way he looks at you. There's nothing but love for you in his eyes."

"Mixed with a little contempt and jealousy?"

Jack frowned and stood. "I've got to get back to work."

"Sure." I nodded and stood. "Thanks for the talk, Jack. It's done wonders."

He leaned in and kissed me on the lips. "Don't be that way, baby. Come on, I'll get you another drink."

I rolled my eyes and followed him to the door. In just a few minutes, I was sitting at the same stool I'd been on before, a fresh tumbler of Scotch sitting in front of me. I cradled the tumbler in my hands and stared at the amber liquid for a long while, just letting the beat of the music wash through me.

After a while, heat pressed against my back and an arm snaked around my waist. I shuddered at the touch, my head falling to the side instinctively, neck bared in offering. Lucien kissed along the line of my neck, pausing at my ear.

"I'm sorry, lover."

As tempting as it was to ask him what for, I didn't. I relished the touch, the heat, and the scrape of his fangs along my skin. "Don't stop."

One hand slid beneath my shirt, fingers playing over the rings in my nipples. "Here or upstairs?"

"Upstairs..."

We'd fucked in a packed club before. A few times. At the bar, on a couch, on the dance floor—and every time I'd ended up with more hands on me than I could count. It was nice, but tonight I didn't want anyone but Lucien.

I stood, whimpering as his arms wrapped around me and hands moved low across my belly. I rolled my hips and leaned back into him. "Oh, fuck..."

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

I closed my eyes and reached behind me, fingers curling into the criss-cross openings in the sides of his leather pants. Holding on was always best. I felt the floor slip away, but then it was back moments later, only it was the grated metal of the stairs instead of the marble of the club's flooring. Lucien rocked his hips against me.

"You can let go now."

I opened my eyes, glad that we were now on the landing of the stairs just outside the office. Some of Lucien's powers were just too fucking cool. I relaxed my grip on Lucien and opened the door. The office was spotless; whatever he'd broken when I walked out had been cleaned up.

I started across the room, but Lucien was suddenly before me, blocking my path. At first, I thought he was going to say something, but he grabbed my shirt instead and pulled it up over my head. The way he looked at me, as if it were the very first time, made me smile. I unzipped my pants and pushed them down my hips, biting at my lip as I eased back onto the bed.

Lucien made no move to follow and I ran my hand across my chest, flicking at my rings. "Like what you see?"

"Very much."

I slid my other hand down my belly, rolling my hips suggestively. "Show me how much. Lose the shirt."

Deft fingers worked at the buttons of his burgundy-colored dress shirt and in seconds, it was falling to the floor. "That all you want me to lose?"

"No," I whispered, heart beginning to race as he rolled his nipples with his thumbs. The rings caught just so, glinting in the soft light. "Lose the pants, Lucien."

"Boots, too?"

I groaned. I love him in nothing but boots, but he was wearing those fancy-assed lace-up pants that were tighter than skin. The boots would have to come off before the pants. "Boots, too."

He kicked his boots off gracefully and worked at the enclosure and then the side laces of his pants. He peeled them off and kicked them away, standing before me naked and so fucking beautiful. He wasn't quite hard yet, but he was getting there. I crooked my finger at him. "Come here."

His hand skimmed down his belly, fingers teasing along his length. He stroked himself lazily, shaking his head. "And what do I get if I do?"

Fascinated, I watched his hand as it moved, wanting more than anything to just have him in my arms. I rose up, resting on my elbow. "You get me."

"Why, that's very, very tempting."

"You get my blood."

Lucien inhaled, scenting the air. "So very sweet."

I was damn near shaking. "Come on, Lucien." I fisted my cock, stroking until a bead of precome oozed from the tip. "You know you want it."

He moved toward me then, crawling up over the end of the bed. He paused to kiss the inside of each thigh then gave a teasing lick to my balls. "What do you want me to do, lover?"

"Suck me."

His tongue teased as he took me in. Fangs scraped along my length and I groaned, threading my fingers through his hair to pull him in closer. He grunted as my cock moved further down his throat and swallowed hard a few times before relaxing. My knees bent, thighs and hands holding him in place as I began to thrust in and out of his mouth.

"Beautiful, Lucien. Just fucking beautiful."

He opened his eyes, glancing up at me. What was in that gaze made me smile—a mix of 'don't do that again' and 'oh, fuck, yes'.

"What's the matter? Not enjoying yourself?"

A low, rumbling growl came in response. Seconds later, he bit down, sinking fangs into my most sensitive flesh. I cried out in a mix of pain and pleasure, my cock feeling as if it were on fire. Lucien began to swallow as he fed, and the sensations were just too much. I released my grip on him with my legs and he pulled off slightly, letting my come spurt across his bloodstained tongue.

He swallowed slowly, his gaze locked with mine, and bent, giving the head of my cock a slow, teasing kiss. I whimpered and pushed up toward him instinctively, but he moved away, licking at the two small holes at the base of my dick.

"Christ! You're going to kill me," I panted.

"At least it would be a pleasurable death." Lucien smiled as he crawled up the bed. His tongue teased at my bottom lip as he lay between my legs, pushing his now-hard cock against my hole. I pushed back against him, wanting to feel him inside of me, but he pulled back a fraction of an inch, not giving in.

"Come on, Lucien, please!"

"I don't know what you want. For some reason, you've stopped talking."

"I want you in me. Your cock sliding in and out of my ass. I want you to fuck me, Lucien. Fuck me so hard that every time I move tonight, I'll still feel you deep inside of me."

He pushed against me again, the head of his cock entering me slightly, but then he grinned, only to pull back again. "Is that all?"

"Bite me. Feed from me."

Lucien bent his head and caught one of my nipple rings between his teeth. He gave a harsh tug and when I gasped, his hips surged forward and he pulled me onto his cock. Instinct demands that with pain, you try to get away, but Lucien held me so tight and still that I didn't have a choice but to wait it out.

My fingernails broke the skin on his biceps as I clung to him. My body broke out into a cold sweat and tears burned at my eyes. I had to keep my jaw clenched tight to keep from screaming out. If I screamed, it ended.

Our gazes locked, he began to move. That circular motion he resorted to in order to drive me nuts began and I spread my legs a little farther, trying to take him deeper. His cock rubbed back and forth over my gland and I gasped, unable to hold back.

"Fuck, yes!"

Keeping his rhythm, he leaned down, lips only a fraction of an inch from mine, whispering. "Beau. Dévergondé."

Beautiful. Wanton.

I shuddered, tongue teasing at his lips. "Yours."

"Mine."

His kissed me hungrily, fangs cutting into my lip and tongue, his tongue desperately seeking mine. One hand between us, I pulled at the rings in his nipples, first one, then the other, lingering at the ring over his heart—it was always the most sensitive.

Lucien faltered for a few seconds, whimpering. "You do that on purpose."

"Of course I do," I grinned, giving another tug. "Love to see you weak and needy—knowing that *I* did something to cause it."

"I'm not weak."

"Really?" My hand drifted lower, fingers teasing the barbell in his navel before moving on.

I shifted slightly and brushed my fingertips along his shaft where he entered me. He gasped and met my gaze, his eyes growing darker. The red began to bleed into the pale blue and I smiled.

"Weak," I whispered.

He growled and the sound of it made every hair on my body stand on end. It was a sound I'd grown to love and one that made my body respond in ways I never thought possible.

"You're asking for it, Peter," he warned.

"I've never asked for anything I couldn't handle."

Lucien tensed at my words. They were meant to sound teasing, but instead held an air of challenge. He started to pull out and away and I wrapped my legs around his hips, refusing to let him get away.

"Don't... I didn't mean it like that."

He relented, but the damage had been done. Things were no longer teasing and light, the heavy burden of my mortality stretching like a chasm between us. The coupling was purely physical now, the need to get off overriding the pain and disappointment.

I held him close, biting down on his shoulder as the familiar burn shot down my spine. I felt him nuzzle where my neck and shoulder met, turning my head a little more to give him access. As soon as he bit down, tears flooded my eyes and heat spilled between us.

The orgasm ended long before he stopped feeding. I lay there for a long while, letting him fill himself with me, knowing he'd refuse me the pleasure when it was all over and done with. When he pulled away, he licked at the wound and rolled off me, lying silent at my side.

After a while, he sighed. "That was... bittersweet."

Before I could respond, there was a knock at the door. Caleb entered smiling, but the smile quickly vanished as he came into the room. That was Caleb. Always in tune with how everyone else was feeling.

"What do you want, Caleb?"

"Adam is outside. You had a meeting with him at ten. It's nearly eleven—just thought I'd remind you."

Lucien sat up on the edge of the bed. "Shit. Tell him I'll be right out."

I rolled to the other side of the bed and got up, making my way to the bathroom. I started the shower and stepped in, uncaring that it was just on the verge of being too cold. I showered quickly, knowing that Lucien would want to shower before he met with this *Adam*.

But he never came. I opened the bathroom door to find the office empty. Curious, I walked to the long window at the front of the room that overlooked the rest of the club. Lucien was outside the office door on the

landing of the stairs talking to a young, beautiful boy. Well, maybe not a boy. He was at least eighteen—nineteen, at most—with short blond hair, a thin frame, and dark blue eyes.

I glanced at Lucien. His full concentration was on the boy, listening to him speak with an intensity I hadn't seen in a long while. My gaze rested on the boy's lips, too damned curious for my own good. I couldn't make out everything he said, but one word I recognized without question was 'turned'. Oh, yes, I knew that word well.

It dawned on me then, that the boy was pleading his case to Lucien to be brought over. To be turned. I watched and waited, looking back and forth between the two of them, my heart sinking a little more each time Lucien nodded his head in agreement.

Lucien finally smiled, and placed a kiss on the young man's forehead, saying something to him about the following night. I stumbled back away from the window, my chest tight. I went to the closet and grabbed my clothes, dressing as fast as I could, knowing that I'd never be able to face Lucien feeling like this.

I found my keys and left through the office's private entrance. It was nothing more than a narrow, circular stairwell leading from the back of the closet to the side parking area. I nearly tripped over my boot laces as I ran down the stairs. As I ran out the door to the parking lot, I bumped right into Caleb. He tried to help steady me, but I pushed him away.

"Get the fuck off me, Caleb!"

"Peter, wait!" he called out.

I shot him the finger as I ran across the packed parking lot. A taxi was letting a couple out and I ran in front of the car to make sure the driver saw me. "You on?"

The driver nodded and as the couple exited the car, I climbed in back. The driver tossed me a bored look. "Where to?"

I thought for a moment, realizing I didn't have many choices. I could go home or... "Rave, over on 12th Street."

He shrugged and switched his meter on. As he drove across town, I leaned against the door, half wishing it'd fly open and that I'd be ejected into Friday night traffic. I couldn't get that lucky.

A short time later, he rapped hard on the Plexiglass divider separating us. It was only then that I realized we'd stopped. I looked out the window at Rave. So familiar—yet no longer home.

The driver rapped on the divider again. "Longer you sit there in la-la-land, the longer the meter runs."

I grabbed a few bills and shoved them through the window before getting out. He sped off as soon as I closed the door and I shook my head. "Asshole."

I stood there on the sidewalk, unable to move. The one thing I'd begged for—craved—for months was being given to someone else. My world was slowly but surely falling to pieces.

Someone laughed nearby, getting my attention. "And the prodigal returns!"

Rick, one of the bouncers, smiled at me as I looked up. I forced a smile as I walked toward him. "Heh, you know how it is; sometimes you just need a change of scenery."

"And the scenery is *fine* in there tonight." I started to hand him a few bills for cover, but he pushed them away. "You know Darren would have my ass if I let you pay."

I nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, if anyone asks... I'm not here."

He winked and opened up the door. "Haven't seen you in a long while."

The door shut behind me and I was suddenly swept back to over a year ago. A quick glance at the bar, however, reminded me that things had definitely changed. Jack's friendly face was no longer there. He'd come to work at The Den, doing occasional stints on the flip side at Iniquity. Someone walked by and brushed a hand over my ass.

Okay. So maybe things hadn't changed *that* much.

I followed him to the dance floor, recognizing a few familiar faces along the way. But I wasn't looking for sex. Didn't want a one-night stand. I just wanted to dance, let off some steam, and maybe, even if only for a few moments, forget that I was ready to die.

Chapter Two

The man I'd followed to the dance floor had quickly abandoned me for someone else when I told him I wasn't looking for a fuck. I'd spent a while dancing alone until I spotted a young man at the bar. He was alone, too, looking out into the crowd with a forlorn expression on his face. I wondered if he'd come with someone, only to get left behind when they found whatever fix they were looking for.

He shouldn't have been alone in this crowd. He was too cute for that. I made my way over, smiling as I moved up beside him. "How's it going?"

He looked up shyly, not meeting my eyes. "Um... okay."

"Just okay? You don't look like you're having much fun. Did you come with someone?"

The shrug of his shoulders was slight, but I could tell that he was full of disappointment... and that I'd been right. He'd come with someone—but they'd ventured off to brighter, shinier things and he'd been left to the vultures. He didn't seem the club type. Hell, it was probably a first-time visit.

"Would you like to dance?"

He tensed, shaking his head quickly. "No."

"No? What are you going to do? Stand here and wait while your friends get to have all of the fun?"

"I'm not here to get laid."

"Neither am I."

He looked up at me then, his gaze meeting mine. Such beautiful green eyes. "Seriously?"

I nodded. "I'm just here to dance. So... how 'bout it?"

He hesitated a moment, looked out onto the dance floor, then back at me. "Sure."

There was a flicker of excitement in his eyes that he seemed to be trying to hide. I took his hand, threaded my fingers with his, and led him out onto the floor. The first dance was awkward. He seemed to think that even though I'd told him I didn't want sex, that it was still my motive. The second dance was better, but he was still tense.

I leaned forward, pulling him in close. "Look, when I said I didn't want sex—I meant it. I don't have any ulterior motive in asking you to dance. You're hot and I'd love to dance with you, touch you, tease you even, but I have a man at home that I'm more than satisfied with. I don't need the promise of sex to have fun."

He pulled back slightly to give me a defiant look. His hands slid up my chest, fingers pulling at the nipple rings through my shirt. "So doing this isn't going to flip some switch and make you change your mind?"

"Nope. Only way we're fucking is if you go home and jerk off to memories of us dancing."

He closed the distance between us, his lips finding my ear. His breath made me shudder, but his words made me smile. "A lot of people have said that, but I think you're the only one that's meant it."

"Less talk, more dancing."

It was only then that he let go. That tense posture he'd had just sort of melted and gave way to something so seductive, so beautiful, that I couldn't help but touch him. Unlike before, though, he welcomed my touch. Teased me openly, in fact. Laughed when he'd pull away and leave my hand hanging in midair.

And smiled. God, how he smiled.

It'd been a long time since I'd seen someone filled with such joy and freedom. The music changed to what I had always called 'fucking music'. It inspired you to get close to your partner, get down and dirty, right there on the dance floor. Without thinking, I pulled him close and kissed him.

He let me kiss him chastely, his hands working their way over my hips toward my ass. "You feel so good."

My lips left his and traveled across his jaw, below his ear, down his neck. "And you... *taste* good."

He tasted of sweat and something else I couldn't quite pinpoint. The urge to run my tongue along his shoulder was too strong to ignore. The buttons on his shirt went flying as I pulled it open and back, revealing his bare skin. I bit lightly at his shoulder, then traced the mark with my tongue.

"Don't stop," he whispered.

Oh, no. Not stopping.

Lips and tongue, teasing. Teeth beginning to mark. His moans grew louder and I suddenly felt as if I'd been drugged. And whatever it was that made me feel this good... I wanted more of it.

I nuzzled against his neck, felt his pulse beat against my lips, and it made me shudder. He began to hump against me as I licked and sucked at the skin just above it. Vaguely, I realized that I wasn't hard. But he sure as hell was. The realization made me smile, and I inhaled deeply.

So sweet. So fucking sweet.

The scent became stronger, almost overpowering. It was as if nothing else existed but the man in my arms and that pulsing beat, just beneath the skin. The faster it beat, the stronger the scent.

I growled and set my teeth at that pulse, but before I could bite down, someone else was touching me. Hands grasped my hips from behind and a familiar scent filled the air: earthy, woody, almost pungent; that scent was beginning to overpower the sweet.

"No..." I cried out.

Xander's lips brushed my ear as he spoke, his voice firm, but cautious. "You can't do this, Peter."

"Want it," I whispered back. "*Need* it."

"It's not yours to take."

I came close to a whimper. "Need it so much."

"Look at him. Look in his eyes."

I looked at the man, finally. He might have been looking right back at me, but he wasn't seeing me. I shook my head. "High, that's all."

"On you. On Lucien's power that flows through you."

I leaned forward again and licked at the neck before me, conflicted. I wanted that sweet, sweet taste again. Xander hugged me up tighter then, lips still pressed firmly at my ear. "If you bite him, if you get that blood that you so desperately crave... you will kill him. You will tear him open and his blood will coat the floor like mud. There will be no way to stop it—and he will die in your arms."

I looked at the man again and cursed inwardly. *Fuck*. He wasn't high... and I didn't want to kill him. Not really. Though, the thought of all of that blood...

Xander cleared his throat, as if to remind me that he was still there.

I pushed the man in my arms away and when his eyes met mine, shame washed through me. I'd only wanted to dance and had Xander not showed up, there was no telling what would have happened.

I received a confused look from the guy I'd been dancing with. "What?"

"I think we need to cool down," I said as I pulled some money from my pocket and handed it to him. "Get some water at the bar."

The man looked at the bills, back at me, then stumbled across the floor before regaining his footing. I watched him for a moment, watched as he shook off the sensations. It suddenly reminded me of a dog, shaking off after getting wet. Speaking of dogs... I sighed and turned to face Xander.

"Referring to me as a dog is one way to get your ass kicked," Xander quipped.

"Uh-huh. Haven't we tried that before? You lost, *bitch*."

Xander gave me a warm smile. "Let's get out of here."

I nodded and looked back toward the bar once more. I felt bad for what I'd done. "I should... I don't know. Do *something* for him. Yeah?"

"No," Xander said. "You should go to the car. I'll go talk to your friend and make sure he's okay."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Xander's hand cupped at my cheek. "What's happening to you is out of your control. We just need to make sure this doesn't happen again. Now, the car is out front and Nikolas is waiting."

"Nikolas? Why?"

"I'll be out in a minute."

I grumbled as Xander ignored my question and made his way to the bar. It didn't happen often, but when he turned the tables and started giving me orders, I knew I'd really fucked up.

I didn't see Xander's car as I left the club. But I had no problem finding Nikolas. He was leaning against a black sedan, taking a long drag off a cigarette. His gaze was locked on something down the street and I took the few moments that he wasn't looking at me to appreciate his looks.

He'd cut his hair recently. Gone was his long, dark, silky mane. Now, his hair was short and spiked all over, except for two long, red pieces in the front that framed the length of his face. Lucien hated it, but I thought it fit Nikolas rather well.

I let my gaze roam further. He was wearing a stretchy black T-shirt and purple leather pants. The pants were tight, hugging his legs and crotch in all the right ways, and were tucked into black knee-high lace-up boots. The buckles that ran the length of the boots were worn and tarnished with age, the leather of the straps frayed.

Nikolas turned his head and looked at me, smiling. I returned the smile and walked toward the car. Most people were terrified of him, but I think his reputation preceded him. I'd always found him to be civil—friendly, even.

"What are you doing here, Nikolas?"

He shrugged. "Was just out driving around and happened by here?"

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the pack of cigarettes that was tucked in his shirt sleeve. I'd very nearly quit a year ago, but I had a hard enough time trying to deal with one craving, much less two. The cigarettes won. Nikolas lit my cigarette as I replaced the pack in his sleeve.

"What are you really doing here?"

He shrugged. "Xander was trying to come after you, but his car wouldn't start. I just happened to pull in at the right time. Rough night?"

"You could say that."

"And Xander is?"

"Cleaning up my fucking mess." I sighed and shook my head. "How'd he even know to come looking for me?"

"Do you *really* have to ask? I mean, come on, Peter. The man knows when you take a piss at the wrong time."

I took a long drag on the cigarette. He was right. Xander and I were so in tune with each other, so closely bonded, that he always knew when something was off on my end. I didn't exactly regret it, but it did leave me with less and less privacy.

"Well, that and he saw you run out of the club like your ass was on fire, yelling at Caleb in the process." Nikolas chuckled. "Ass okay?"

I jabbed him with my elbow. "Fuck you."

"In your dreams, princess."

Xander came out of the club then, cell phone at his ear. He didn't look happy, but I could read him well enough to know that it didn't have anything to do with me. That was always nice. I finished my cigarette and waited for Xander to finish his call. As the call ended, Xander let out a long string of curses.

"What's wrong, Xander?"

"A young wolf is in a safe house across town. She was hit by a car and can't shift. I need to..."

"Take the car," Nikolas said. "Peter and I will find another way home."

Xander seemed to realize that he didn't have much time to argue. "You sure?"

Nikolas nodded and tossed a set of keys in the air. Xander snatched them easily and looked to me. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. "Find me when you get home. We'll talk."

He kissed the side of my head. "Oh, yes, we most certainly will. You should eat something."

I pushed him away, "Go; take care of your wolf."

Xander nodded and climbed into the driver's seat, not looking back as he drove away. I watched the tail-lights of the car until he turned a corner and then looked at Nikolas. "Now what?"

"Now? We eat."

The food that covered the table was enough to feed five or six people. At least. As Nikolas would finish with one plate, he'd start in on another. He eyed my steak as I cut into it. "Good?"

"Mine."

"Oh, come, now. Just let me have a bit of the juice on the plate. It's so good when you take your bread and..."

"Nikolas! What's with you?"

He shrugged. "What? I'm fucking hungry!"

"Normal people are finished after one plate of food."

He leaned across the table, stabbing his fork into a piece of my cut steak. "Normal people aren't fighting off the urge to shift. When I can't shift? I eat. It sates a hunger. If you don't like the way I eat, don't fucking eat with me."

"And you can't shift because?"

"Because my wolf is hungry," he said quietly. "I need to be able to hunt. The new shipment isn't coming in until tomorrow night and, I must say, a few rabbits just aren't going to do the trick."

Out behind the mansion, Lucien had dedicated twelve hundred acres for the werewolves—or any other were, for that matter—to hunt on. Shipments of game were brought in on a regular basis, but the most recent shipment had been delayed due to a death in the supplier's family.

"You never know, there could be something still..."

"There's nothing left," Nikolas growled and took another bite of steak from my plate. "Glad you don't like it burnt to a crisp; that would be a real waste of meat."

I had nothing left to say. We finished eating and Nikolas actually ordered coffee and pie to finish off his meal. And the pie looked like a piece of heaven itself. I was waiting on mine when someone walked up to the table.

I followed leather-encased, long, muscular legs up to lean hips. I forced my gaze up farther, groaning as I saw the man's face. He couldn't have been more than thirty, hair as white as snow, and eyes green as grass. Fuck, he was beautiful. So beautiful that it brought tears to my eyes.

Nikolas reached across the table and smacked me hard on the cheek. "Snap out of it, princess."

I glared at him. "Call me princess one more fucking time..."

Nikolas ignored me and shook his head. "Jesus..."

"Flattering, but no," the man said with a chuckle.

"What do you want, Cyril?" Nikolas growled. "Don't you have innocents to lead astray? Demons to fuck?"

"I'm just being polite. Who is your friend?"

"You two know each other?" I asked, looking back and forth between Nikolas and the man he'd called Cyril.

With a huff, Nikolas motioned for the man to sit down. "Peter, meet Cyril—biggest asshole in several worlds. Cyril, meet Peter—Lucien's companion."

Cyril tsked at Nikolas' words. "Must you be so rude?"

"To you? Yes." Nikolas leaned forward, elbows resting on the edge of the table. "What do you want? Who are you looking for this time?"

Cyril ignored Nikolas' question and turned to me. "So... you were the human that caused such an uproar when Lucien declared that you would share his coven."

"I'm still human."

He leaned in close, scenting me. "Is that right? Then tell me: why do you reek of the dead?"

Nikolas growled and reached across the table, hauling Cyril up by the shirt collar. "I think you should leave."

I slid out of the other side of the booth and stood, not wanting to get in the way of a fight. I'd seen Nikolas fight; getting in the way was a very, very bad idea. Another bad idea would be someone shifting in public. I moved in closer, reaching out to touch them both.

"Don't touch him!" Nikolas shouted and pushed my hand away.

"It's a bad idea to do this here," I said firmly.

The moment I said it, I realized that the diner had gone silent. Too silent, even for this. I looked around and it was as if time had stopped. People speaking, eating, walking, talking... everything had just stopped. Oh man, this was bad.

"Nikolas..."

"It's okay, Peter. Cyril was just leaving."

"This isn't over," Cyril spat.

"No," Nikolas growled. "You aren't dead—yet."

A breeze began to blow through the building and Nikolas released his grip on Cyril's shirt. Seconds later, Cyril was gone and the noise of the diner had resumed. People looked up at Nikolas and me where we stood, bored expressions on their faces. I sat down, my legs feeling shaky.

"What the fuck was that?" I whispered as Nikolas sat down across from me again.

"Long, long story." Nikolas shrugged and glanced up.

A long, blue feather floated down toward the table. I let it fall in my hand and shook my head as I studied it. "Let me guess... angel?"

"As much as I hate to admit it? Yes."

The waitress set a plate with my pie down in front of me before moving on. I dropped the feather to the table and sat staring at the pie. After a few moments, Nikolas reached across the table. I glared and picked up my fork, aiming for his hand. "Get the fuck away from my pie."

He huffed, called for the check, and sank down in the booth to finish his coffee. I ate half the piece of pie, but couldn't stand the pout in Nikolas' eyes at me not sharing. I pushed the plate toward him and his eyes brightened a little. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"Tell me about the *angel*."

He considered it for a moment, glanced at the pie, then nodded. "I'll tell you on the way home."

"What do you mean he's a rogue? He's a fucking angel! Isn't he supposed to be all holy and helpful and shit?"

Nikolas snorted. "Hardly. You're subscribing to the biblical version of angels, Peter. Just as any other species, there will be bad seeds."

"Never thought that'd apply to angels."

"It does, unfortunately. All of the angels here have free will. Some of them use it wisely, some of them... don't give a shit. They know their place; they know they can never be condemned."

"Tell that to Lucifer."

We walked in silence for a long while. I couldn't seem to grasp that there were bad angels as well as good ones. Growing up, angels were these holy, untouchable beings. It was like being an eight-year-old kid again and finding out Santa wasn't real. I shook my head.

"That really sucks to know, Nikolas," I said softly.

He threw an arm around my shoulders, nodding. "That it does."

"So... do you hate all angels? Or just that one?"

Nikolas grumbled. "There are quite a few I'm not so fond of. But Cyril? That one's personal."

"If you don't mind me asking..."

"He killed my sister."

I stopped walking. "Oh, Nikolas, I'm sorry."

"Why would you be? You didn't know her."

I frowned at him. "But I know you. And I know how much it hurts to lose someone you love."

Nikolas started walking again, leaving me where I stood. "I didn't tell you that to gain your pity."

"And that's not what this is!" I shook my head, jogging to catch up with him. "Goddamn it! What's wrong with all of you fucking wolves that when someone shows an ounce of compassion you all seem to take it as a pity party? I'm sorry for your loss; sorry that your time with someone you loved was snatched away from you. That's it. Get over it!"

The rest of the walk home was deathly silent. Nikolas refused to even look at me and I wanted nothing more than to whack him over his stupid, pouty head. But something in me apparently knew that it was a very unwise thing to do. Fighting with Xander? Stupid. Fighting with Nikolas? A death sentence.

Nikolas went his own way the moment we stepped foot onto the property. It had been the first time we'd sat and talked alone in the entire year that I'd been at the house. I hated that it had ended on a bad note.

I started to pass on entering through the front door, but realized that if I went through the private entrance, the walk to get to the kitchen would be twice as long. And the kitchen was most likely where I'd find Xander.

But it wasn't. As I was unlocking the front door, he pulled up in the drive. I waited for him in the doorway and when he reached me, he smiled. "Just getting home?"

I nodded. "It took this long for Nikolas to stuff his face."

"Ahh." Xander chuckled. "And he ate like that in front of you? He must have had it bad."

I shrugged and wrapped my arms around Xander's waist, burying my face against his neck. The need to be close to him was almost overwhelming. "Have you eaten?"

"Enough to make a goat sick. You okay?"

I clutched him more tightly, all of the emotions of the night hitting at once. "Just need to let it out."

He kissed the top of my head, and pushed me back gently. "Come on. Let's get a shower and we'll talk. I want to know what happened tonight."

"Goddamn it, Xander," I whispered. "He's turning someone else."

Xander shut the door, locked it, then led me to his bedroom. It was just down the hall from mine and Lucien's. Caleb's was a little farther down. I stopped and shook my head. "Why don't we just use my shower?"

"Because I want privacy."

I let him lead me into the bathroom, undress me, and then pull me into the shower. The water was at the perfect temperature and I instantly let out a sigh of relief. "Man, this feels good."

"Got something better."

A few moments later, he moved my hair out of the way and oil-slick hands began to work at the muscles in my neck and shoulders. I melted into his touch, not realizing how tense I'd been until I started to relax.

"That's it," he said softly. "Let it all go. Down the drain. Let it wash away."

The water had gotten just a tad hotter. Xander had installed some sort of temperature regulator in his bathroom and the water never stayed at a steady temp. It would go from warm, to almost too hot, and then step down to just above warm again. He said the changing temperatures helped relax him more than a steady warm flow of water. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back to rest on Xander's shoulder, enjoying the heat.

"Why's he doing this, Xander?"

"He hasn't given any other reason besides that you're not ready?"

I shook my head. "Six months ago, it didn't seem like a big deal. He was worried about my cravings, knowing we needed to make a decision. But, you know? It's like the moment I made my decision—he backtracked."

"And you've tried to talk to him about this? About why?"

"Oh, God, Xander..." I swallowed hard. "I have begged and pleaded."

"I've noticed that it's affected your relationship."

"Relationship? This isn't a relationship. Not anymore. He's made sure of that. We fuck and it's all good for that little while, but when it's all over and done with... We have nothing."

"No, Peter," Xander rested his chin on my shoulder and turned us a little so that the water wouldn't hit him in the face. "That's not true. He loves you."

"If he truly loved me, he would talk to me. He'd tell me why he did this to me, got me trapped between two fucking worlds, and then just abandoned me. 'Cause that's what it feels like. Like he's changed his mind, like *something's* changed."

Xander was silent for a long while, then kissed below my ear. "You know what? Maybe you need to approach this from a different angle."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he turned me to face him, before continuing, "You've been begging and pleading and letting him know how much it hurts you for him to treat you this way. Change it around. Get pissed. Be unavailable for him. Fuck and run, or don't fuck at all. But be *indifferent*."

I shook my head. "I can't. My cravings are too fucking strong. I mean, you saw what happened tonight."

"Fight them. Show Lucien you are strong enough to have the craving and deal with it—and that it's not the thirst for blood that makes you want to be brought over."

"I don't want to lose him, Xander." I stood there feeling so helpless, so lost. The water rained softly down onto the tile and I silently wished it could wash away all of the hurt and fear and pain. "I love him."

"And you can love him and be pissed with him at the same time. But as it stands right now, he's the only one loving you and getting away with treating you like shit. Fight fire with fire and tip the scales; just work at getting them tipped in your favor."

"I can't do this on my own."

"No one ever said you'd have to. You've always got me, and I know there are a few others that'll be willing to help when things get to be too much."

"If Lucien finds out that any of the vampires have gone behind his back—"

"They will know the consequences of their actions. Trust me, they'd never sign on if they didn't believe in what they were doing."

Part of me knew he was right. I had nothing to lose, really. I could either sit back and watch it all drift away, not doing a damned thing about it, or I could fight back. I nodded, my mind made up.

"Okay."

"Yes?" Xander smiled as I nodded again. He leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead before pushing me under the spray of water. "Then let's get your hair washed and get you in bed."

Chapter Three

Lucien and I sat at the table in the kitchen. I picked at my breakfast, not really hungry yet, and he pretended to skim the newspaper. The silence was almost deafening, but I'd made up my mind that I wouldn't be the first one to speak. I'd been doing too much of that lately.

After Xander and I had showered—and he'd given me the most thorough massage imaginable—he'd given me a couple of sleeping pills. He'd said I looked tired and that if I was going to be fighting Lucien and my cravings, I was going to need my strength. He'd been right on at least one count. I'd slept so hard that I didn't know Lucien had come to bed. I knew he had, as his side of the bed was rumpled and his clothes were over the chair nearby. But when I woke just after sunset, the bed was empty.

Lucien cleared his throat. "I tried to wake you when I came home."

I avoided his eyes, knowing that things would escalate too quickly if I looked up. "Felt like shit." Which wasn't exactly a lie. "Took a few pills."

"What is happening to us?" he whispered softly. "Is it so bad that you cannot even look at me anymore?"

"What's happening to us? I can't believe you actually have the nerve to ask me that." I pushed my plate away, stood, and stalked toward the door. I stopped just before walking out. "I think one of the things that hurts the most is that you promised me that I'd always come first. In some ways, I do. And it irritates the fuck out of me how you treat the coven because of me. But on a more personal level, when it has to do with just you and me? You didn't waste any time in breaking that promise."

"I want you at the club tonight."

I swallowed so hard it hurt, but forced myself not to turn around. "No."

"No?"

"No," I said firmly. "Enjoy your meal tonight. I hear it will be quite *filling*."

"Peter—"

I walked out before he could say anything else. He didn't follow as I walked down the corridor to the bedroom and I wasn't sure whether to be grateful or hurt. Xander was waiting for me outside the bedroom door.

"Hey," he said softly. "You okay?"

I reached out and let my fingertips ghost over his forearm. "I'm so scared."

His hand landed over mine, holding me against him. "This is the hardest part."

"Can I stay in your room for a while? I'll take the couch during the day."

"No, you won't. My bed has plenty of room." He grasped my hand and led me down the hall to his bedroom. As we entered, I walked straight toward the king-sized bed and climbed across it. It occurred to me suddenly, that what had once been black silk sheets were now burgundy-colored cotton.

"Love the sheets."

"They're Egyptian cotton; I would hope so."

"Broken them in yet?" I asked as I kicked off my boots and curled up in the middle of the bed.

"Many, many times." He paused before walking into his closet. "Alone."

"Caleb hasn't been trying to help?"

He poked his head out of the closet. "Baby, when all of this between you and Lucien started? Caleb became a distant memory."

I sat up in the bed, slowly, realizing that it'd been about the same amount of time since Caleb was with me and Lucien. Or, me, at least. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. "You don't think—"

"No." Xander buttoned his faded jeans, shaking his head adamantly. "Lucien is anything but a cheater. You know that."

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

"I'd bet my life on that, and you know how much I value it."

My gut feeling was that he was right. If Lucien wanted to fuck someone else, he'd say so. After all, our relationship was pretty open as far as sex went. It was the sex leading to other relationships and falling for someone else I had issues with. I pushed that shit to the back of my mind, watching as Xander slipped on an old pair of boots. "What's on the agenda tonight?"

"The shipment will be here shortly. I need to do head counts, find out who needs to hunt and feed, and reorder for next week."

"Want some company?"

"And I need to hunt."

"I think I'd like to feel the wolves out there tonight. Feel you hunting."

The words hung in the air and Xander stared at me for a long while. "My wolf knows you."

"I know."

"The others don't."

"I'll be inside of the safety zone with over seven thousand volts between me and them. I think I'll be all right."

"I love that you're not afraid of us anymore." His voice was hushed with emotion. "That you can love me as Xander the person and Xander the wolf."

"Both are beautiful." I smiled, getting off the bed and walking toward him. "And you, more than anyone, made me understand. You took my fear and turned it into something I could face with a new perspective. And I do love you."

He nodded, smiling. "I know."

"Come on, I hear there's a hunt going on."

By the way the drivers had almost run toward the house, it was obvious that something had happened in the past. Maybe they'd seen things never meant for human eyes, or had heard the hunt, or had just been told what the clients wanted the stock for. But trucks be damned, the drivers would be locked safely in their rooms 'til morning.

It wasn't like getting a shipment of cattle. The trailers didn't have little openings where you could actually see what was inside. These were your run-of-the-mill containers. Each animal was in its own box, about two to three foot wide, four foot long, and tall enough for each animal to stand in, but not thrash around and injure themselves.

All of the boxes were stacked two high, on pallets for easy removal. After the trucks had arrived, the pallets had been unloaded and left just at the gated entrance. We'd been lying on a blanket in the grass, staring up at the night sky for nearly two hours, waiting on the stock to quiet down. It was cool for an October evening; a refreshing change from eighty degree temperatures and high humidity during the day.

"Do you think he's doing it now? The boy, I mean—turning him."

"Probably. You can't feel what he's doing? See through his eyes?"

"It's like he's shoved a wall up between us so that I *can't* see."

"Maybe it's best if—"

"I don't know?"

"Yeah..."

"I'm sure. I mean, really, think about it. It's almost like him cheating on me. I'd like to know if he ever did, but I'm not sure I'd want the graphic details."

"Lucien's *not* a cheater."

"I know. I was just trying to make a comparison." I sighed and folded my arms behind my head. I glanced at Xander and he was staring intently at the night sky. "What do you see up there?"

"There's a storm coming," Xander said quietly. "It'll be here by morning."

"Really? It's so clear."

He rolled over to face me, arm bent to support his head. "Really. By morning, there will be thunder and lightning and rain. Lots of rain. I can feel it; taste it."

"What does it taste like?"

He moved even closer, the length of our bodies touching where we lay. "Don't tell me you've never danced in the rain, never just stood in a downpour and let the droplets fall on your tongue?"

I shook my head. "Never."

"Not even as a kid?" He looked truly shocked.

"Especially not as a kid." I turned to look at him and was at once fascinated by the way his eyes were almost glowing in the moonlight. "I had grown-up syndrome back then."

Xander lifted a brow, smile creasing his face. "I think we all went through that—some more than others."

His childhood had been horrible; for most of his childhood, he'd been chained, beaten, starved, and generally, just treated like dirt. He escaped when he was only eleven, spending his teenage years on the streets. I quickly learned that it wasn't an uncommon occurrence for born werewolves to be treated that way. I'd had it so much better, and instantly felt like an ass for whining. I rolled up, supporting myself on my elbow.

Xander shook his head, pressed a finger to my lips. "Don't."

I swallowed the apology and leaned forward to brush my lips against his. "So... you think we should get started?"

He nodded and looked toward the boxes. "My wolf has had it with me keeping him quiet and nonexistent."

I stood and offered him my hand. "Well, show him you love him and feed him."

Xander took my hand and pulled himself up. As we walked toward the unloading area, he moved in close, keeping his voice soft. "We need to do this as quietly as possible. They'll run off into the brush, but they'll still hang close. The first thing they're going to want to do is hide and bed down."

"Won't that make the hunt just a little like walking into a grocery store?"

"Oh, no, don't worry. Once they're all released? I won't have any problems putting fear into their tender little hearts." Xander smiled wickedly. "That's what I do."

They were the words of a predator: confident that he'd make the kill; confident that he'd eat tonight. Long ago, I realized that Xander the wolf and Xander the human were two entirely different personalities: while as human, he was gentle and caring as could be, the wolf was ruthless, calculating, and, at times, even violent.

But no matter what, I was certain of one thing: Xander—in either form—would never hurt me. I was as safe with him as I was with Lucien. Odd, but true. As we made it to the gate, I stopped Xander and pulled him to

face me. His eyes were still that beautiful amber, but they weren't the eyes of a human. His wolf was staring right back at me, daring me to drop my eyes.

"Easy there, Wolf-boy." I leaned forward and brushed my nose against Xander's before kissing him. He growled and clutched me tightly and I wanted nothing more than to strip off his clothes and fuck him into the ground.

"Stop it," Xander snapped, hugging me close even as he attempted to push me away.

I grasped a handful of hair and jerked his head back, licking up the length of his throat until my tongue curved over his chin and teased his bottom lip. "Sorry."

We stared at each other for a long while, neither of us making a move to let the other go. Xander's lip twitched and the start of a smile appeared. "No, you're not."

No, I wasn't. I wanted him; wanted to claim him all over again. To see him on his hands and knees before me, legs spread and ass bared in offering. In human form, wolf form... I could almost visualize shifting and changing and bleeding him with claws as I held him to me and...

Xander cocked his head, studying me. "What was *that*?"

I shook my head, almost dizzy as my breathing became faster and faster. My heart felt as if it could burst through my chest and then...

The boy. The boy from the club. Laid out on a bed. Wearing a white robe, open the length of the front. He was naked, beautiful, even. But, he was dead. Lucien's face appeared before me, as if he was looking into a mirror, but he wasn't happy.

I staggered and fell to my knees in Xander's arms, gasping for breath. The connection between Lucien and me was gone—slammed shut in anger—and there was nothing left but pain. Searing, crushing pain: as if a hand had been shoved through my chest and was trying to rip out my soul.

Xander slapped me across the face, hard. I looked up at him and instantly wanted to tear him to pieces. He pulled me up until my face was level with his and whispered, "Take a deep, deep breath."

"He shut me out!"

"Shh," he crooned. "Don't upset my meal, please."

I remembered the hundred or so animals in boxes just a few feet away—remembered that other werewolves would be here later on to hunt. Remembered that it wasn't all about me. I took a deep breath, resting my head on Xander's shoulder. "Sorry."

"Not your fault, but we'll either have to deal with it later, or you'll need to leave and let me find you when I'm finished here."

I shook my head and pushed away to look at him. The wolf was still there, but it was as if he was waiting, letting Xander calm me. I looked at Xander, at his wolf, and let out a deep breath. "We'll deal later. You need to hunt."

"You sure you're okay?"

"I'm not sure of anything right now." I cleared my throat as I got to my feet. "But it can wait. Let's get started."

Xander eyed me for a few moments before moving to the gate. He motioned for me to stand on the other side and began to give a rundown on what we were going to do and how. When the first wide-eyed doe was released, I felt Xander's wolf lurch after her, then felt Xander rein in his wolf and force him back to that corner to wait his turn.

I had never felt so in tune with Xander and his wolf before. I'd felt them both so many times over the past year, but never like this. Xander watched the second animal we released as it ran toward the trees, but my gaze was on him. His hair, normally loose, was pulled back into a braid, leaving his face exposed. The delicate lines of his face had hardened, giving him a harsher, more intense look.

Still beautiful. God, still so beautiful. But there was something else there that I just couldn't pinpoint. It wasn't until he turned to reach for another box and met my gaze that I realized what it was.

Power.

So much power.

I found myself reaching, wanting to touch him. The moment my hand made contact, the power dissipated. Xander looked at my hand, looked at me, and it was like a candle being snuffed out. That was why I'd never seen or felt his power before. He'd pulled it all back as far into himself as he could.

For so long we'd showered, slept, ate, played together—fucked—and I'd never seen that part of him. Had he held it in because he was afraid of my reaction? Because he was afraid of what I'd do or say? It just *couldn't* be something that I'd overlooked. I met Xander's eyes. His expression was so neutral that it was almost blank.

"I am yours, Peter."

"I know, but—"

"That is why," he said. He then pointed to the next box. "We have a long way to go."

I sighed and began helping him again, more confused than ever. *Because he's mine.* The words played over and over in my head, but Xander was doing his best to keep me busy. When we reached the last box over an hour later, Xander sighed.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Dominant male. Would have been nice if he'd been the first we let out. I'm sure the cows we released earlier have been waiting on him to figure out what to do."

"Cows?"

"Elk, females."

"Oh! Right. Would have made for a better hunt if he'd led them off, I guess."

Xander nodded as we pulled the large box forward. He slid a knife across the opening to break the seal, but hesitated, not opening the box. I reached toward him and brushed his hand. He pulled back sharply, and stood, opening the box and releasing the elk.

I wasn't sure who to gape at more. The elk, standing proud and majestic a few feet away, even without his massive rack of horns, or Xander, who'd just pulled away from me as if my touch wasn't welcome. Fuck the elk. I moved toward Xander, who seemed to be backing away from me.

"What the fuck, Xander?"

"You should go to the safety zone," he said.

"I will. I want to know what's going on."

"I'm about to hunt."

"You won't hunt unless you tell me what the fuck is going on." I stood before him, saw the war going on behind his eyes. He stood defiantly before me, jaw clenched, and I saw a tiny glimpse of that power again. But the longer I looked at him, the more power I saw. It was as if he'd tried to shut it away, but it was too big to contain and power was seeping out from between the cracks.

He'd been hiding this from me on purpose.

"Let it go, Xander," I said evenly.

"No," he growled. "You are my alpha and I will not disrespect you by leaking power all over you."

I closed the distance between us and cupped his cheek. "The only way you've disrespected me is by holding this back. All this time, I thought I knew you—"

Xander's eyes closed and he rubbed his cheek against my palm. "I thought it was enough that you were comfortable with my wolf."

"Oh, that's nice, believe me. But you've made it to where I think of you and your wolf as two separate identities. And that's not true at all, is it?"

"Don't make me do this," he whispered.

"Drop all of your shields, Xander," I growled. "That's an order, not a request."

He stepped back, straightened his shoulders, and took a deep breath. In the next moment, I was struggling to catch my breath as his power crashed over me. It was warm and alive and seemed to be trying to soak into every single pore. I reached for him, but missed. He caught my arm to steady me, but wouldn't meet my eyes. I grabbed his face and looked into his eyes. "How can you keep something like this in?"

"I learned to be less than what I was long, long ago," he said. "Or at least appear to be."

I hated the way he was raised, hated what he'd had to endure to get to where he was today. But no way in hell was I going to let it all continue. I wanted him whole. Power and all. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. Hard. Teeth and tongue fighting for entrance into his mouth. When he finally opened to me, I growled in approval.

The longer we kissed, the more heated it became. He groaned and shoved his hands down the back of my jeans, pulling me against him. "Can't do this now."

"Want to. Love you, love who you are..."

"Everyone who is hunting tonight will be here in just a few minutes. Some have already shifted." He caught my lip between his teeth. "And I'm about to."

The sharpness biting into my ass made me realize that he was already shifting. He slid his hands out of my jeans and brought a razor-sharp claw up to his face. He trailed his tongue up the length of it and it took me a moment to realize that he'd bled me. I shuddered at the thought, my entire body singing with electricity.

But he was right. I needed to get to the safety zone. A howl pierced the quiet night and Xander let his head fall back. "Go, Peter."

I jumped as a crack of thunder sounded, but smiled as Xander began to shift. "Happy hunting, my wolf."

I wanted to run to the safety area—to tease him, to see if he'd follow me instead of hunt—but I wasn't that stupid. If any of the other werewolves were nearby, I ran the risk of being intercepted against my will. Another crack of thunder and a flash of lightning made me quicken my step. Xander had been right: a storm was moving in, but it was far earlier than he'd predicted.

The safety zone was exactly that: a safe place to wait while the werewolves hunted. The building was small, but big enough for at least ten people to comfortably wait, sleep, or watch TV while waiting. There was a bathroom and a small kitchen area with a well-stocked refrigerator, which I fully intended on raiding once I got myself locked in.

The lights were off when I reached the building and I was thankful that I wouldn't be sharing space with anyone else. I flipped the switch as I walked in and immediately switched it back off. After being in the dark with nothing but the light of the moon to see by, I just couldn't take the brightness of the overhead lights.

The moon was shining in through the bulletproof glass, casting a nice, comforting glow around the room. I went right to the refrigerator and opened it, pulling out a tray of fresh lunchmeat and cheeses. I set it and a bottle of water near the couch in front of the glass and double-checked the locks on the door. When I was sure everything was bolted tightly, I switched on the main power for the electric fence surrounding the building. After a few moments, the familiar hum of over seven thousand volts of electricity began to lull me into a sense of security.

If, for some reason, a werewolf decided to take his or her hunt beyond the game enclosure, the high voltage fence would prevent them from making a meal out of the nearest food source. Lightning flashed, drawing my attention to the window. A lone black wolf stood only a few feet away from the fence, looking in through the glass.

I touched at the window and smiled, shaking my head. Xander. Always making sure that I would do exactly as I said I would. One moment he was there, the next he was gone. I could still feel him close by, like there was an invisible cord binding us together. I followed along that cord, just as we'd done in practice sessions, and the scent of dirt suddenly became so strong that I reached up to wipe at my face.

Damp, pungent earth; the scent alone made me want to run my hands through it, crumbling it between my fingers. Something sharp and acrid invaded the clean scent and Xander paused, listening to the sounds of the woods around him: the rustling of leaves; small twigs cracking as vermin scurried about. Something piqued his attention and he scented the air.

Before I knew it, he was moving again, steps quick, but careful. He followed the trail and I could feel the anticipation swell with each step. I could almost feel his heartbeat pounding in my own chest. Xander stopped suddenly and through his eyes, I saw another werewolf a few feet away.

Xander snarled and growled, staring the other werewolf down. In a matter of moments, the other werewolf retreated and left Xander to follow his prey. Xander picked up his pace and before long, an elk cow came into view. Things were different through Xander's eyes in the dark, sharper, more complex, but the colors were never what I thought they should be.

Xander managed to get about a hundred yards from her before she spotted him. As she fled, Xander roared in what I knew was excitement and followed. The anticipation built and I found myself breathing with him as he ran. A sense of joy like I'd never felt before welled up inside me and I cried out, falling to my knees. Xander and I were still linked together and as he neared the cow, I began to shake.

The cow ended up in a clump of trees that blocked her path and as she struggled to get to freedom, Xander lunged for her. He caught her from the side and as they hit the ground, he sank his teeth into her neck, claws into her chest and belly. She fought furiously to get away from him; the more she struggled, the more excited Xander became.

The feelings that shot through me were indescribable. Back bowed, face turned toward the sky, I let out a loud cry—a cry of freedom and total and complete bliss. When Xander's teeth tore into her neck and the blood began to flow, I finally let out a sigh of relief. It was like sex: the anticipation building and building until finally, that release comes and everything else just fades away.

I licked at my lips, tasting blood. It was warm and fresh and I swallowed instinctively. When he ripped at the cow's flesh, however, I had to resist the urge to vomit. Blood I could handle—meat was a different story.

I broke the connection to Xander and looked around the room, still a little disoriented. I made my way to the couch, turned on the TV, and stared at the tray of food on the table before me. There was no way I could eat; no way that I could put any sort of meat into my mouth without it turning my stomach. I put the food back into the refrigerator and returned to the couch, staring out into the trees.

A whitetail doe wandered out from a clearing nearby. I watched her intently, knowing that even with her cautious steps, she'd eventually be found. Once in, there was no way out. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the doe froze, ears pricked and alert. There was movement in the trees near her, but I soon realized that it was only the wind.

The storm was closing in fast and I knew that it wouldn't be long before Xander came for me. I lay back on the couch with a smile, eager to tell him how much I'd enjoyed sharing his hunt. I turned my eyes toward the sky, content as I watched the lightning send electric fingers across an ever-darkening sky.

Chapter Four

I shifted on the couch and groaned, opening my eyes. My clothes were damp with sweat and a bead of it began to fall from my forehead to my eyes. My hair clung to my neck and face and I pushed it away as I sat up. The storm was raging outside: thunder booming, lightning flashing, and wind blowing so hard that the rain sounded like pellets hitting the windows.

I stood and looked at my watch, squinting in the dark.

But it hadn't been this dark when I lay down. The TV had been on. I glanced at the TV, frowning at the dark, blank screen. I walked over and hit the power button. Nothing.

Nothing but darkness and silence.

But... that shouldn't be. Even if the power went out, the backup generators kicked on within seconds. There was nothing now: no lights, no power, no familiar hum of the security fence...

A loud thump against the side of the building sounded, making me jump. The trees just outside the window were rocking and swaying, looking like ominous beasts in the shadows. Just the wind. Branches whapping against the side of the building: that had to be it. I was safe. Right here in the building.

Another loud thump hit the building, hard enough to rattle the floorboards. As much as I tried to shake it off, an undercurrent of fear began to settle over me.

"Fuck... fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

I made my way to the gun cabinet across the room, trying not to make any sudden movements. Whatever was lurking outside knew that I was here. I suddenly felt like one of the animals in the hunting area, hiding from the big, bad monster who wanted to eat it. I frowned as I opened the door to the gun cabinet. The handgun was there, but the shotgun was gone—as were the IRSIL rounds.

"Fucking goddamned shit!"

I took the .45 out of the cabinet and checked the clip. Eight rounds; eight regular rounds. Without any silver, all they'd do was piss off whatever had decided to make me his next meal. But maybe, just maybe, they'd slow it down. Quietly, I put a round in the chamber and took the safety off.

There was another loud thump. Slow, measured footsteps clunked along the ceiling above my head. I clutched the gun tightly, trying like hell to slow my heart and my breathing. Trying like hell not to be scared. I waited for a long while, the silence making my ears ring. I was almost convinced that it was all a combination of wind and me overreacting, but then another loud crash came and I heard the sound of metal groaning and screeching and being torn apart.

Somewhere up above, whatever was outside was trying to come in.

I edged to the window, knowing—hoping—that the bulletproof glass was more resilient than the metal. I peered outside but saw nothing other than a lightning flash, casting eerie shadows through the trees. Another flash came, followed by a loud crack, and the screech of metal again.

This time, there was a whoosh as a tree limb fell from above, scraping the side of the building in the process. My grip began to ease on the gun, breath slowing. Maybe I was projecting some lingering nervousness about being surrounded by hunting werewolves and it *was* just the weather.

There was another thump followed by a sound similar to nails on a chalkboard—only magnified a few dozen times. I turned my attention to the wall where the sound was coming from. It was moving from one edge of the building, getting closer to the glass. My hand tightened around the gun again.

Definitely not my nervousness. Definitely not just the weather.

Something large and black crashed into the glass. The impact made the building groan and my breath caught in my throat. I looked around, trying to find some place inside the building that was safe.

"Shit. Shit. Shit..."

The building was supposed to be safe. Predator-proof.

Another smash against the glass drew my attention. The window was holding, for now, and I narrowed my gaze on the figure as it began battering the glass repeatedly. The werewolf was black. Only two werewolves in the entire coven were black. Xander, and... *Nikolas*.

"Fuck me." Could this get any worse?

Wolf eyes met mine through the glass and at that moment, I didn't know what to do. Drop my eyes or keep his gaze. I went with dropping my eyes. There was no doubt who the fucking alpha was right here and now.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him scent the window and then turn away. I stood frozen in place, waiting. One, two, five minutes, maybe. Nothing but silence. I took a step back and heard something off to my left. Froze. The sound came again and I immediately found the source.

The knob on the door was being wiggled and tried. It was locked – three deadbolts and two safety slides – but I knew it wouldn't hold like the glass had. There was nowhere else in the building to go. If he managed to get in...

With each try of the door, I took a step toward the small window on the opposite side of the room. It would be stupid to run, yes, but it would be stupid to stay put and wait until he got inside. When I finally made it to the wall, I rested my back against it, trying like hell to find my link to Xander. It was always there, just beneath the surface, but I couldn't seem to gather enough concentration.

"Xander," I whispered, knowing he couldn't hear me, but needing to voice my plea anyway. I only hoped he could feel my fear, feel me trying to make that connection. "Please, please hurry..."

A loud bump against the door was followed by an ear-piercing roar. I kept my eyes trained on the door, reaching up to pull back the lock on the window. A loud crash, wood groaning and splintering, followed by

another crash. I was trembling then, my entire body shaking with fear. I gripped the gun so hard that it hurt and I wondered if I'd even be able to fire.

I lifted the window and straddled the ledge cautiously, waiting. If he were to sense me outside before he got inside, then I was well and truly trapped.

And maybe dinner.

Three crashes later, the door flew forward into the room and skidded across the floor, Nikolas in wolf form standing in the middle of it. I dropped to the wet, muddy ground and ran like hell. A roar sounded behind me and it just made me run faster.

I chanted as I ran: "Don't be stupid. Don't look back. Run, run, run..."

But when my foot twisted in a water-filled hole and I scrambled to get back to my feet, I realized I was out of time. The slap-slosh sound of something big and mean and coming straight for me was just too fucking close. I stood, turned to face him, and pointed the gun. Lightning flashed, close, but it wasn't that raising every hair on my body. It was the feral wolf that was charging me. I aimed, dead-center at his chest, and squeezed.

He kept coming toward me, as I knew he would, and I squeezed off round after round in hopes that one of them would hurt him enough to slow him down. He lunged toward me, but instead of firing my last shot, I ducked. Nikolas hit the ground behind me and I turned, shooting him right in the back.

He roared out in pain and went down, mud and water splashing everywhere. I ran, as hard and fast as I could manage. Rain was coming down in sheets now, my clothes heavy, making running difficult. It was dark as far as I could see, and I had no idea whether I was even running in the right direction.

The next thing I knew, I was sliding across the ground. Mud and grass and something sharp raked across my cheek. I dug my hands into the ground to try to stop, but the heaviness at my back only seemed to increase my momentum. When I finally came to a stop, I cried out, "Stop, Nikolas!"

He pinned me to the ground, claws biting hard into my shoulders, and roared in my ear. I fought the scream at my throat and braced myself: for a bite, for him to shred me with those razor-sharp claws—for pain. He grunted and growled at my ear, gravelly sounds leaving his throat in words that I couldn't begin to understand.

I smelled blood, fresh, thick, but knew that even if he'd bled me, it wasn't all mine. *Couldn't* be all mine. I was relieved and scared shitless, all at the same time. He'd already hunted—point in my favor. But that he was finding any means necessary to get to me, to get me in his grasp—this was personal.

A rough tongue licked along the back of my neck, the side of my face, and then along my shoulder. His weight shifted and he raked his claws down my back, shredding the material of my shirt. I didn't think he'd cut into me, but when he began licking along my spine, I realized he probably had.

I glanced around, searching for anything I could use as a weapon against him. Anything to hit him in the head or inflict enough pain to let me get away. A few feet away, there was a piece of a branch. I let him lick at me and began to try to crawl through the mud and muck to get my fingers wrapped around the branch.

He roared in my ear again and this time, through the graveled voice, I clearly heard the word 'no'.

"Get off me, Nikolas!"

Again, the word 'no', followed by one word that I couldn't understand—over and over again. I shook my head and cried out again as large, wolf-like paws encircled my wrists. He licked along my spine, his breath hot against the cooling rain. I shuddered at the combination of heat and cold and more of Nikolas' weight settled over my legs and ass.

He repeated that same phrase and I shook my head. "Goddamn it, I don't understand! I don't know what you want from me!"

The same word again, louder, more insistent.

"No!"

Again, the word, but he released my wrists and began pounding and clawing at the ground beside my head. I cringed, hoping he wouldn't swipe too close and cut me open. He repeated the word over and over again, but each time, it was with more venom, more anger. Finally, he rolled me to my back, grabbed me by my shoulders, and slammed me back onto the ground.

It knocked the breath out of me and as I gasped for air, he licked at my face. I grabbed hold of him, his fur wet and thick and dirty in my hands, and tried like hell to push him away. He grumbled something unintelligible and met my gaze. I stared into those wolf eyes, pleading.

"Let me go. Please, just let me go."

He growled and it vibrated through my entire body. But he didn't do anything else. He stayed there above me, as if he were... waiting. A familiar warmth began to settle through my body and it made me relax just a little. Xander was close.

Nikolas scented the air and roared, rolling me over again and pinning me to the ground. His claws scratched at my sides and when I thought he was about to tear into me, he began to rip my jeans apart. I clawed at the ground desperately, fingernails tearing with each reach for freedom. I felt something warm and wet at my ass and just when I thought he'd try to enter me, he yelled that one word that I couldn't understand.

In the next moment, Nikolas' weight was off me and Xander's angry roar made me breathe a sigh of relief. I clumsily managed to get to my feet, but was unsure of where to go. It had stopped raining at some point, but as I looked around, I couldn't get a bearing on where the house was. I stumbled to a nearby tree, watching as Xander and Nikolas fought, relearning how to breathe.

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to keep from shaking, and realized how injured I was. My forearms and wrists were covered in blood. The cuts were deep and long and I knew instantly that I needed stitches. I leaned back against the tree and hissed when my naked back hit the rough bark.

Fuck. More stitches.

The fight between Xander and Nikolas didn't last long. In fact, by the time I managed to sit down on the ground, it was over. Nikolas limped away, still in wolf form, head hanging low. I looked to Xander, who was on his hands and knees, trying to recover from shifting back so soon. I knew that it had cost him, both the fight and the change, and I sighed heavily in regret. I should have stayed at the house. Should have stayed home alone tonight and just waited.

Xander knelt before me a few minutes later, hand cupping my cheek. "You okay?"

I nodded, leaning into his touch.

He took my hands and began examining my arms. "What happened, Peter?"

"I—" I hissed as he inspected one cut at my shoulder. "Fuck... I don't know. The weather, I guess. One moment I was half asleep and the next, the power was out and Nikolas was working like hell to get into the building."

"The generators didn't kick on?"

I rolled my eyes. "Obviously not. Or, I'd have had all that, you know, *electricity* between me and him."

He sat back on his heels, sighing. "So, you ran?"

"I could either run, or be caught in the building with him." I shrugged. "Should I have just stayed put and let him eat me there?"

"Eating you was the last thing on his mind."

"I sort of noticed that, too." I leaned forward and rested my forehead on Xander's naked shoulder. "He wanted something... kept saying this one word over and over again."

"Yeah... I heard."

When he didn't offer more, I pulled back. "What was it? What did he want me to understand?"

"He didn't want you to understand."

"What *did* he want? What was the word, Xander?"

"Shift."

"Oh." It took a moment for it to sink in. "What? Xander, I—"

"Shh, you need to keep calm."

"Calm? You want me to keep calm? I was just..." A humorless chuckle turned to tears and instead of fighting it, I fell apart. "Fuck, Xander... Nikolas is... he wasn't..."

"Yeah..." Xander was so quiet that there was no doubt this was bad.

Very bad.

After a while, the pain began to outweigh everything else. "Take me home, *please*."

"Can you get up? You think you can walk?"

I was still shaking so badly that as I got up, I stumbled. Xander caught me, one of his fingers digging deep into a cut. I screamed and pushed him back. "Fuck!"

"I'm so sorry, baby."

I gritted my teeth. "Get the truck and pick me up."

"I don't want to leave you."

"I can't walk that far, and you can't carry me." I took a deep breath, trying to settle my nerves. "Just *hurry*."

"Goddamn it!" Xander turned and ran back the way I'd just come from. I watched him for as long as I could in the moonlight, but as fast as he ran, it was only moments. After that I was alone, with nothing but darkness, moonlight, and dozens of werewolves still out and about, hunting for their next meal.

Something rustled in the bushes nearby and I froze. I was afraid to look in the direction of the noise—afraid to even breathe. A small rabbit hopped into my line of view and I breathed a small sigh of relief. It was short-lived, however, when another werewolf appeared a hundred feet or so before me.

I couldn't tell what color it was from where I stood, but as it began to walk slowly toward me, the moonlight shone on tawny-colored fur. Seconds later, another werewolf appeared a little closer. I so didn't need this shit tonight.

The first werewolf walked up to me, bowed its head, and moved a few feet to my right to lie down. The second ducked its head, huffed, and laid down off to my left. I might have been in pain and a little more than shaken up, but the symbolism wasn't lost on me. They were protecting me like one of their own.

I heard the truck before I saw it. The only lights I saw were brake lights as the truck swerved around a tree. This close from shifting, Xander's eyesight was probably better with the lights off, anyway. He pulled up a few minutes later, pausing as he looked from one werewolf beside me to another.

"Everything okay?"

The tawny-colored werewolf growled a response as it got up. Before I knew it, both of the other werewolves were gone, leaving Xander and I alone. "What was that all about?"

Xander began to usher me toward the truck. "They were just in the area, smelled blood, realized who you were."

He opened the door and I climbed into the truck, curling in around myself so nothing could touch me directly. The ride back to the house was bumpy and Xander apologized repeatedly, telling me that we'd be home soon. By the time we reached the house, I was shivering again.

"Shit." Xander led me in the private entrance and we walked down to the treatment room.

I'd been in it dozens of times, removing slugs and helping to sew up werewolves so they'd be strong enough to shift. Shifting is hell when half your intestines are hanging out—or so I hear. My first bullet wound had even been treated here; a .357 slug right through my thigh by a hunter that thought he was just that good. I'd showed him how good he wasn't with a shot between the eyes.

My wound was a clean through-and-through shot, missing bone and ligaments, but it'd hurt like fuck. I'd had to beg Lucien not to heal it with his blood. It was a scar well-earned and I wanted to keep it. He'd eaten my ass out about trophy scars and how unnecessary they were. I'd kissed him stupid while Caleb had cleaned the damned thing and wrapped it up.

Then, I'd limped upstairs, spread myself out on the bed and Lucien had eaten my ass again in a very good way. He'd ended up with my cock up his ass, riding all of his frustrations out hard and fast, cursing me for getting hurt.

I thought about that for a moment. That had only been about five, six months ago. Right about the time when Lucien began to act like such an ass. Surely he...

"Peter, honey? You okay? Still with me?"

I must have zoned out at some point because the pain came flooding back to me. I groaned and swayed on the table, falling back on the flat surface. As my back hit the table, I screamed. There were no rails on either side of the exam tables, and I knew that, but it didn't stop me from flailing and reaching for something to grab onto.

Xander grabbed my hands and pulled me up. "Can't lie down yet; I've got to patch up your back."

My teeth chattered, making tiny clicking sounds through my moans and groans. "Hurts, Xander. Hurts so bad."

"I know, baby. Just a few more minutes."

He entered a code on a keypad near the refrigerated storage, scanned his handprint for security, and two stainless steel doors hissed open. I knew what was stored there: drugs. Damned good drugs. He removed a couple of vials and new syringes, and put them on a rolling cart next to a sterilized emergency kit.

Xander then emptied stored bags of blood into a surgical tray. A few moments later, he set the tray on a cart and pushed it over to rest in front of me. I didn't realize that I was rocking back and forth until he stopped me with his hands on my shoulders. "Easy. You'll make yourself sick."

He slipped on a pair of surgical gloves and filled a syringe with clear liquid from a vial on the cart. He then stepped around to the other side of the exam table, hands touching tentatively against the wounds on my back. "This is going to sting quite a bit. Take a deep breath, hold it for a second, then let it out slowly through your mouth."

I did as he said and on my exhale, I felt the sting. And then the burn. "Oh, goddamn it, that burns!"

"Just keep breathing. You're doing fine."

He repeated the process so many times I lost count. But after a while, the sting and burn lessened and by the time he moved back around to face me, I'd stopped shaking as much. It was warm in the room now. Maybe he'd turned up the thermostat... or maybe it was the drugs. Either way, I didn't care.

He put the cart between us, pulled a stool close, and sat down. As he filled another syringe, he gestured to the cart. "Lean across the cart so I can work on your arms. It's not going anywhere."

"What are you doing with the blood?"

"I need to patch you up enough to stop you from bleeding out until you either start healing on your own, or I can get stitches in you."

"With blood?"

"Lucien's blood." He looked up at me, studying my face. "You sure you're okay? Didn't hit your head or anything?"

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid, Xander."

"Hey, I'm just checking." He paused and began the process of deadening my arms with lidocaine. "You've been patched up with Lucien's blood before. It's not like this is something new to you."

"But that was fresh blood, straight from the source. This is... Will this even work?"

"It won't heal as fast with the reserve, but you're still only looking at about two or three days."

Oh, that would never work. "He can't see me like this, Xander."

"This is going to be cold." He dipped a sponge into the blood before placing it over the wounds and squeezing it back out. The blood was cold and as he cleaned and bathed my arms in it, the slight brush of the sponge moved my skin and tissue beneath this way and that. I couldn't feel it, but it made my ass clench up in an *'oh that's so gross and if I could feel it I'd be screaming'* sort of way. I finally had to close my eyes.

After a long while, Xander let out a heavy sigh. "You're not going to be able to keep this from him. You know that, don't you?"

"And I'm not really trying to, but you know Lucien. If anyone bleeds me—intentional or not—he'll go on a rampage. I just want to be healed, or mostly healed, before he finds out about it."

"As in, 'look, I'm fine, don't be pissed'?"

"Exactly. Ow!" My eyes flew open as he jabbed something into me. He had a long set of tweezers in his hand, buried in my arm, and when he pulled back, there was a rock the size of a pea. I swallowed hard, clenching my eyes closed again. "I don't want to start a war."

"Before, I would have passed it off as no big deal and something easily understood. That we all make mistakes, but... Things have been tense regarding the pack since..."

"I know, baby." I reached out blindly with the arm he wasn't working on and found his hair, petting him. "And I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. He's only concerned with keeping you safe."

At what cost? How many times had Lucien punished one of the wolves—and vampires, even—for a few snide remarks directed at me? Not small punishments, either. Brutal beatings and whippings until they begged out for mercy and offered their balls to Lucien for a bit of relief. I loved him, but could certainly do without that.

The room fell silent as Xander worked. When he finally wrapped my arms in clean, sterile bandages, I was relieved. Until I remembered my back and all the stitches I was going to need. Xander helped me strip the rest of my clothes off and had me lie on my stomach on the table, arms outstretched in front of my head.

I heard him flick at another syringe, but when he touched me, it was a cold, wet sensation at my hip. "What's that?"

"Now that you can lie down, I'm going to put you out."

The stick and sting was quick, but a heaviness settled over me rather quickly. "Oh, Xander... Have I mentioned that I love you?"

"Love you, too. Now close your eyes and dream up something pretty for me: male, naked, and hard."

"Will do..." I attempted a thumbs up, but only managed to bury my face further into the table as everything began to slip away.

Chapter Five

I was in the woods, surrounded by trees so thick that even the light of the moon was held at bay. Something was close... someone, I wasn't sure; whatever it was, was evading me. It was waiting for me to find it, terrified that I would. But I didn't want it waiting. I wanted it running, scared—fear so thick that it made the blood heavy and sweet like syrup.

I didn't see it move, but I heard it. Heard it take off to try to evade me. I threw my head back and roared, before setting off after it. Claws dug into the ground as I ran, the scent and feel of damp earth beneath me pleasant. As I got closer to my prey, I could hear its heart beating furiously. Close. In the same spot, hiding.

It had stopped. There in the bushes, I could smell the oil and sweat emanating from its pores; could smell the breath as it rushed from its lungs. I paused, pricking my ears as I neared the bush. The heart beat faster and faster and I couldn't take it any longer. I crashed through the brush and rolled my prey across the ground.

He looked up at me with wide, human eyes and screamed. My gums ached with the need to bite into something, to sink my fangs into flesh. I wanted blood—wanted it so badly I could almost taste the sweet, coppery liquid flowing over my tongue. Claws ripped at flesh, tearing at muscle and sinew, wanting... *meat*.

I sat bolt-upright in bed, panting, sweating, and so fucking nauseated that I knew I'd never make it to the bathroom, and I wasn't sure I'd even make it off the bed. The moment my feet hit the floor, I fell right on my face. Images from the dream flashed through my mind and I crawled forward, dry heaving every time I moved.

A pain like I'd never known shot through my chest and I curled in on myself. The pain began to spread, like liquid fire surging through every vein and blood vessel in my body. I itched and burned, and just wanted it to stop; wanted my skin to stop feeling as if it were melting off me. But it didn't.

The pain went from bad to worse, and for a moment, I thought my body was trying to turn itself inside out. My chest tightened considerably and I found myself gasping for air. Something in my body snapped, the cracking sound seeming impossibly loud.

Terrified, I screamed.

Hands touched at my shoulders, my arms, and then my face, but every touch just multiplied the pain.

"Peter!" Xander's voice cut through the pain and screams. "You have to breathe, baby!"

"Make it stop! Make it stop..." I panted, grabbing hold of him. "*Please*, Xander...!"

"I can't make it stop. You just have to breathe, relax, and let it happen."

"No!" I didn't want it; I just wanted the pain to go away. Another pain shot down my spine and bowed my back. It continued down into my legs and I screamed again, clutching desperately at Xander. "Please, please..."

"Shit! You're burning up." Xander lifted me and I jerked away from him, falling to my knees.

"Don't touch me!"

"I have to touch you. We need to get you cooled off before your fucking brain fries itself." He lifted me up again, even as I fought to get free.

The next thing I knew, cold water covered my entire body. The pain stopped and I sank against Xander's naked form beneath me. "Oh, God."

"Shh," Xander said, fingers moving gently against my brow. "It's not over, Peter. The cold is only going to give you a little bit of a break before it starts back up again."

I whimpered at the thought of that pain coming back. "What's happening to me?"

"I can't say for certain, but it seems like your wolf is trying to get free."

I buried my face against his neck, sobbing. "I can't do this."

"You don't have a choice." He kissed the side of my head and sighed. "As much as it hurts and as much as you don't want this—you *have* to open yourself up to it."

"It hurts so much." I squeezed my eyes shut as a blinding pain went through my head. "God, it's starting again..."

"It's going to be okay, Peter. I promise."

I cried out as the pain began to travel down my spine and I clutched at Xander with every bit of strength I had. "I don't want this!"

The cycle continued for hours and hours. The pain would rage and I would scream, and then it would suddenly stop, leaving me weak and dazed. Finally, there was another voice in the room. There were more hands to hold me and drizzle cold water over my body. When the pain broke, the worried voices would hush and Xander would comfort me, telling me I was doing just fine.

But I knew he was lying.

Something was wrong.

I should have been furry, already.

"Do you want me to get it?" The voice was hushed, but it wasn't until I turned my head and saw the other person that I realized that it was Simon.

Xander's fingers skated over my brow and I looked over at him. "What's wrong?"

He ignored my question and looked up at Simon, nodding. "Hurry."

Simon's hands were gone a few moments later and Xander leaned down to kiss me on the forehead. "Rest while you can, Peter."

My head began to pound and I knew the pain was coming on again. But I couldn't take it anymore. I clenched my teeth, trembling, tears running down my face. I grabbed hold of Xander's hair and pulled him close. "Xander?"

"I'm right here."

"Shoot me. Just fucking shoot me. Right in the goddamn head. Make it stop!"

"Just a little longer, Peter."

"No! Now..." I screamed as pain ripped through me. It was as if something was trying to claw its way out.

Another set of hands rejoined Xander's and something sharp pushed into my arm. A burning sensation began to spread through me, but this time—this time it was taking away the pain instead of bringing on more.

I turned toward the other set of hands and saw Simon again. He was injecting me with a red substance and a glance down at his lap revealed several more syringes. I didn't care what it was, as long as the pain went away. I looked back at Xander and tried to say thank you, but nothing came out. My eyes grew heavy, and soon everything went black.

Whatever Simon had injected me with had been good. The pain had been taken away and I'd been left deliciously disconnected. But I was thirsty now. My mouth was so dry my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. I tried to get up, but my body felt like lead.

"What do you need?" Xander sat up beside me, rubbing sleepily at his face.

He looked so tired. "Some water, please?"

"Hang on." He rolled to the edge of the bed and was back a few moments later, helping me to sit up. "How're you feeling?"

I gulped down the water, draining the entire bottle in a matter of seconds. "A little numb. Like I'm made of lead. And I'm still thirsty."

"Yeah, those drugs can kick your ass."

"I'd take the drugs over the alternative *any* fucking day." I leaned against him and laid my head on his shoulder. "Did I shift?"

He wrapped his arms around me and laughed. "Trust me. Had you shifted? You would have known about it—drugs or not."

"Thank God."

My relief was short-lived. "To be honest, I'm not sure *what's* happening to you."

"I don't like the way that sounds."

Xander let go of me and took my hand, holding it up as he ran his fingers over my arm. "You see this?"

The bandages were gone. Angry red lines still covered my arm, but the wounds had completely closed. I pulled my hand from his and examined both my arms more closely. "Jesus, Xander... these were deep."

"I know. The stitches I put in your back? I had to cut them out earlier this morning. There's not even a scar." The look on his face was a mixture of sympathy and hesitation. "You're healing at an alarming rate, Peter. You should be seen by one of the Council physicians."

"No!" I shook my head. "It was just Lucien's blood. I always heal faster with—"

"You're healing like a shifter."

I swallowed hard. "But I'm not, right? I just got a little sick; I never shifted."

"A little sick?" Xander shook his head. "Peter, your body just tried to turn itself inside out. I think that goes beyond 'a little sick'."

I met his eyes, hoping my words wouldn't piss him off. "I... Don't take this the wrong way, okay?"

"What—?"

I held a hand up to silence him. Fuck, this was hard to say. "I love you, Xander. I love you in human form and in wolf form..." I took a deep breath. "But I don't want to be a werewolf. That's not what I was supposed to—"

He pulled me into his arms and hugged me tight. "I'm so sorry, Peter."

Not what I was supposed to be at all. But there was still some chance that I wasn't, right? After all, I never shifted. And if I didn't shift—couldn't shift—then there was obviously more human in me than werewolf. And if I was human, I could still be turned. I pushed Xander away and moved off the bed.

"Where's Lucien?"

"He's at the club," Xander said. "Where I'm supposed to be in a little over an hour."

"Does he know what happened?"

Xander shook his head. "Not that I know of. I just did as you said and told him you didn't want to see him when he came by."

I looked at him incredulously. "I never said that."

"Yes, you did." Xander's voice was measured. "I certainly wouldn't lie about it."

Xander was suddenly blurry and I squinted as I looked at him. But the room began to spin and I stumbled, reaching for a table. My hand swiped at empty air and I went down, my head beginning to throb as if it'd split right open.

"Peter!"

"No!" I cried. "No, no, no... I can't do this again..."

"Simon!" Xander's yell sounded more like a roar.

He cradled me in his arms and picked me up. The shift in position turned my stomach and I groaned. "Don't move me, Xander."

"I have to get help."

"Bed," I whispered. "Put me in bed."

He said something in response, but it was muffled and distant. The pain began to lessen almost instantly, but everything soon went dark. When I opened my eyes again, Simon was sitting on the edge of the bed, a worried look on his face. I reached out to touch him, my fingers barely grazing his thigh.

Simon smiled and grasped my hand. "How does the world look now?"

It was clear and there wasn't any pain. It looked much better than it had before. "Better. Confusing."

He grabbed a bottle of water from the nightstand and offered it to me. "Have some water."

I took the bottle and rolled up to rest on my elbow. "How many shots this time?"

"None, actually. You came right out of this episode on your own."

"That's good, isn't it? Maybe my body is ridding itself of the... infection?"

He gave a noncommittal sound. "Xander is right, Peter. You need to be seen by the physician. He can at least run some tests, find out—"

"No," I said. "I've got it figured out, I think."

"Really?" Simon turned to face me a little more. "Share it with me?"

"I'm not shifting. If I were truly infected, I'd be furry. There's at least more human in me right now than there is werewolf."

"And if there's more human in you, you can still be turned?"

I nodded carefully. "I need to see Lucien. Tonight."

"Let's start with getting you something to eat," Simon said. "Xander will be back shortly."

"Where is he?"

"He went to bring Lucien home."

Simon had gone to make me something to eat and I'd curled up with the pillows, trying not to move too much. A sharp knock at Xander's door drew me out of a light sleep. I thought about ignoring it, but another knock sounded.

Whoever was on the other side wasn't going away. I rolled out of bed, grumbling, hoping my world wouldn't fall out from under me again. "I'm fucking coming."

The walk to the door was slow, every muscle in my body aching. As I reached for the knob, there was yet another knock. I pulled the door open, glaring at whoever was on the other side. That glare was a little unsettled, though, when Nikolas' green eyes stared back at me. I shook my head and started to close the door, but Nikolas' hand shot out and stopped it.

"Just five minutes."

"In a room with you? All alone? Gee, wasn't it fun enough the first time?"

"Peter..." Nikolas shook his head. "Please, can we talk?"

I glared at him. "You stay in human form and you don't touch me."

"Okay."

I didn't invite him in, just turned and walked back to the bed, curling up in a ball somewhere in the middle. I watched as he came into the room and shut the door behind him. He was uneasy, that usual arrogance of his gone. He bit at his lip as he walked toward the bed. When he got closer, he pointed to the edge.

"Mind if I sit?"

I just stared at him.

He swallowed hard and knelt beside the bed instead. "I guess asking how you're feeling would be a really shitty thing to do."

"I'm pretty sure you've got an idea of how I feel."

"All too well," he said softly. "Look, I'm sorry."

I grunted. "You know? That just doesn't hold much weight at the moment."

"Well, and I understand that. But I had to say it." He paused and chewed his lip for a moment. "I don't have many friends – and most of that is of my own choosing – but I like you, Peter."

"Oh, now see? That much was obvious. It's not every day I've got some werewolf with his cock out trying to fuck me."

Nikolas held my gaze when I knew others would have looked away. He didn't respond, just continued along with his own sort of apology. "You're the first person I've come across in a long while that I would consider an equal—"

"An equal?" Oh, no, that would never do. I rose up on my hands and knees and crawled across the bed. I leaned down and met Nikolas' eyes from inches away. "You and I? Will never be equal."

Nikolas' eyes widened and he scented the air. "That! That's what I smelled the other night! God, it's so thick I can taste it."

He leaned forward and licked at my throat and I suppressed a groan. "No, what you felt was me, tied to Xander. I was hunting with him..."

"No," Nikolas said adamantly. "This is all you. It's not here because I gave it to you—it's been there all along."

I pushed at his chest and he swayed back, but didn't fall. "Get out."

Nikolas rose up and rested his hands against the edge of the bed. "Here I was, fucking hating myself because I gave you this *thing*..." He crawled up over the edge of the bed, cupping my face in his hands. "But that's not it at all."

I pushed him back, but he didn't budge. "I said no touching."

"That was before," he whispered. "This is now. Now, I want to help you. I want you to see what it is that I saw the other night."

"What you saw was me, running from your stupid ass." I tried to pull away, but his grip was firm. "Nikolas..."

He leaned forward and kissed me. A long, slow, chaste, teasing kiss that made me melt against him. "That's it. Now lay back and let me show you something."

"I don't trust you."

"You've no reason to. But I know, without a doubt, that if it pisses you off, you won't hesitate to shoot me...again." He pulled at his shirt, buttons flying everywhere as he ripped it off. There were several nearly-healed wounds on his chest. "Even though they weren't silver they were still treated with a silver compound. Keeps the wounds open. Hurts just enough to stop what's chasing you."

"Not quite."

"Well, I *was* on a mission." There was a hint of a smile curving at his lips.

When he began to shuck his jeans, I shook my head. "No, Nikolas... I don't—"

His fingers pressed against my lips. "No, no... not sexual. Just a little intimate, just a little touching. Skin on skin. I promise."

"Lucien's on his way."

"Then we should be quick."

"I don't think this is a good idea." I still didn't have a clue what he was up to.

He straddled me and cradled my head in his hands. "I think it's a *fabulous* idea, myself. Now, you just lie there all relaxed and let me take the wheel. Okay?"

Nikolas shifted a little and his warm, naked skin slid against mine. In spite of my better judgment, I reached for him, fingers curling around lean hips. I swallowed a moan as he lay on me. He was so hot, like a living, breathing electric blanket. As much as I hated to admit it, the contact felt good.

"All right, princess." His voice was hushed, but teasing. "All you have to do is look at me."

"Look into my eyes..." I chuckled. "This is beginning to sound like hypnosis. And don't call me princess."

"There's my Peter." Nikolas grinned. "Don't freak on me, you hear?"

Before I could say anything else, Nikolas buried his face against my neck. His hot breath on my skin gave me goose bumps and when his tongue licked just beneath my ear, I moaned and pulled him closer. "More."

"Slow, Peter," he murmured.

Slow? No. Just more. I leaned up and nipped at his shoulder, kissing and nibbling my way to his neck. The faint scent of soap lingered, but beneath that, there was something infinitely richer. Like fresh-turned earth. Oak trees and fur.

Nikolas shuddered and pulled back slightly, looking down at me. But his eyes weren't human. Not even close. My heart sped up and I swallowed hard, frozen beneath him. Where my fingers had touched skin at his hips, fur was now tangled between them. I began to tremble, just a little. In all this time, Xander hadn't even shifted this close to me. Never like this.

"Easy, Peter." His voice was deeper. "Just relax and feel. Smell. Taste."

I pulled him close, running my hands over him. Everywhere there should have been skin was now fur. It was softer than I thought it should be, but I buried my face into that black fur at his neck anyway, and inhaled. My vision began to blur again and I clenched my eyes, fighting it. But the moment I did, my head began to throb.

"No, no... let it come, Peter. It hurts because you fight it."

"I can't see."

"You don't need to see."

"It fucking hurts," I snapped.

"But it doesn't have to." He pushed my face back to his neck. "Just breathe."

He began to lick at my throat, rubbing his furred body against my skin. It made it impossible to think, to do anything other than just feel. The pain began to ease, and when I opened my eyes again, everything looked different. I pushed him back slightly, raising up to survey the room. Where there should have been color, there was none. Everything was a mix of grey and black and soft white.

"What is it?"

"It's like looking through Xander's eyes..."

"But they're your eyes, pretty princess. Your *wolf's* eyes."

He started moving against me again and I groaned, pushing him off me and rolling to pin him to the bed. A deep chuckle escaped his still-human lips and I leaned down and kissed him. He didn't seem intent on kissing me back; just let me kiss him and touch him as I saw fit. I suddenly wanted to rub myself over every part of him, wanted to smell myself on him when I buried my face into his fur again.

When I tried to roll him to his stomach, he balked, grabbing my hand. His claws dug deep into my skin, but I jerked away, pushing him face-first into the bed. He struggled for a moment, but when I pinned his hands with mine, he growled. I laughed and the sound was deep, not sounding like me.

"Bastard!" he growled.

"Pretty bitch," I growled in return, humping at his furry back.

He struggled to get his hands free and when he finally did, I grabbed at his hips, fingers digging deep. I nuzzled into his back as fire began to shoot down my spine. I nipped near his shoulder, moving faster, and when I came, I bit down hard.

Nikolas made a sound somewhere between a howl and a cry and I sank down over him, nipping gently at his shoulder. We'd lain there for a short time when he whispered, "Look at your hands."

I rolled off him and held up a hand. Long, nasty looking claws extended from the tips of my fingers. I curled and uncurled my hand, shaking my head. "What the fuck am I?"

Nikolas grunted. "Right now? My alpha."

I awoke with a start, looking around the dimly lit room. I was alone in bed, covered in sweat, and there was a distinct wet spot beneath my hand. My hands. I pulled them both up and was relieved to see them looking nothing more than human. Fucking hell. Had it all been a dream?

I crawled out of bed and walked to the bathroom, switching on the light. I caught a glimpse of myself as I passed by the mirror. Pale and green didn't suit me at all. I leaned over the sink and turned on the cold water, splashing it over my face. I ended up cupping my hands to fill them with water and drinking straight from the tap.

Even then, my mouth still felt dry. I turned the water off and dried my hands, walking back to the bedroom. My robe was draped over the end of the bed and I grabbed it and slipped it on before walking out the door. I went straight across the hallway and waited impatiently as the security scanner took an imprint of my hand.

The light flashed red and I stared at the screen, pushing the button for it to scan again. It flashed red for a second time and I leaned against my bedroom door, shaking my head. So much for my own bed. My own shower.

I turned and slowly made my way up the long corridor, heading for the kitchen. It seemed to take forever and by the time I reached the kitchen, I had to steady myself with the wall. I just made it to the island before my legs went out from under me and I went crashing to the floor.

"Peter!" I looked up to see Simon's bare, perfect feet coming toward me. As he reached me, he bent over and his hand felt my head. "Well, your fever's broken."

I curled up on the cold marble, sighing. "Just leave me here, yeah?"

"How about we get you to the table and get some food in you?"

"Not hungry."

He picked me up with considerable ease and moved me to the table. I looked over at him, feeling rather boneless. "And what are *you*?"

Simon frowned and retreated across the room. When he returned to the table, he had a large bowl of soup and a sandwich on a small plate. "Come on, Peter. Tomato soup and grilled cheese—your favorite."

"I didn't realize I had favorites."

Simon growled and picked up the spoon, dipping it in the bowl. He held it to my lips, waiting. "Open."

I grumbled and took the spoon. "I'm not a fucking baby."

"No, but you're beat up as hell." He clasped his hands together and leaned against the table. "You seem to be a little better."

I paused between bites. The more I ate, the better it tasted. "I don't hurt. I'm just weak and have no energy whatsoever. *Blinking* takes effort."

"The food will help."

"I tried to go to my own bed, but the damned security scanner is fucked up."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, kept flashing red instead of green."

"You do remember that it also scans body temperature and heart rate?" He smiled. "It really is sensitive and if you have a fever or are the least bit too cold, I'm afraid it's not going to work."

"Well, that just sucks."

"We can work with it and add a few variables. I know it's a pain, but it really is for your own safety."

I ate a few more bites and looked up at him again. "I'm a little lost, Simon. I don't know what day it is, how long I've been in that bed..."

"I left you about fifteen minutes ago to come warm up your soup."

"So you were really there with me?"

He nodded. "Why? What happened?"

"I don't know. Dream, I think. It was... just so fucking *real*." I picked at my sandwich, tearing off a bite. "You ever have dreams like that? Where it's so real and scary while it's happening, yet oddly, you're okay with it, and then you wake up, terrified that it was all true."

Before he could answer, something crashed and broke in the hallway. Glass, by the sound of it. Heavy, quick footsteps sounded on the marble and I realized who it was just before he burst into the room. Lucien was panicked, his face white as a sheet, eyes full of fear. When he saw me at the table, he relaxed a little.

"You're up."

"Yeah."

Simon gave my hand a squeeze. "I'll leave you two alone."

Lucien caught Simon before he could walk away. "What has he had, Simon?"

"I dosed him as a shifter, I just infused it with your blood first." He inclined his head toward Lucien and lowered his voice. "But Lucien, he came right out of..."

The rest of what he said was lost as Simon lowered his voice even more. Lucien looked back at me, as if... looking through me instead of *at* me. Several emotions moved across his face and I was relieved when he smiled and gave Simon a pat on the back, thanking him.

Lucien pulled a chair up next to me, and turned my chair to face his before sitting down. "You look much better than how Xander described you. How are you feeling?"

"Really, really tired."

"Weak?"

I nodded. "But I haven't had another... well, whatever's been happening to me."

"I'm sure it was your body fighting off the infection." He slid his hands beneath the robe, running his palms against my thighs. "But we're going to fix that, baby."

Chapter Six

"Really?"

His fingers lingered at the scar on my thigh, thumb idly tracing circles over the raised imperfection. "You want the blood in a glass or straight from me?"

Right... How could I be so stupid to think he'd turn me now? But it was still Lucien's blood and the knowledge that I would be on the receiving end was more than enough to make me stand and straddle his lap. "From you."

He made a cut in his neck with his thumbnail. "Sure?"

I whimpered at the sight of his blood. It'd been so long since I'd tasted it. I leaned in and licked at the trail of blood. It was like candy on my tongue: sweet, rich. "I'm sorry," I whispered, seconds before sinking my teeth into his flesh.

He gasped in surprise, but instead of pushing me away, growled and held me tight. "Oh, fuck... that's..."

"Mm-hmm." I rolled my hips, rubbing back and forth over him. His leather pants were cool and soft against my skin and I groaned at the sensation.

The wound at Lucien's neck closed, but I couldn't resist sucking and licking at that spot. Each time my tongue rasped over his skin, his grip on me would tighten. After a while, he eased me back and pushed his thumbs between my lips. I closed my teeth around them lightly, and slowly took them in as far in as possible. I sucked his thumbs just as I would his prick, letting my teeth scrape his flesh when I pulled back.

Lucien groaned each time, and finally whispered, "God, Peter, you make me crazy."

I held his wrists and pulled away, licking and teasing at his fingers. "Crazy good or crazy bad?"

"Right now? I want to fuck you, crazy."

"Yeah? How 'bout I just keep doing this?" I ground against him and licked at his lips, teasing and pulling back, making him beg for more. "You like that? My balls and cock rubbing against you through the leather?"

His hands landed on my hips and pulled me hard against him. With each grind, I could feel the hard length of him beneath my balls. "I'd rather have skin."

"Feels too good to stop."

I bit down on his bottom lip and licked at the blood just inside his mouth. One of his hands left my hip and threaded through my hair, making a tight fist. He devoured me in a kiss, tongue fucking my mouth as hard as I was grinding on him. His fangs nipped and cut, and for the first time in a long while, it didn't stop him.

Okay, so maybe I wanted skin. I rose up a little and he growled, pulling me back down. "Skin, need skin."

"Hurry." His voice was tight with need and even as my hands worked the enclosure of his pants, his hips still humped toward me. The moment my hand touched his cock, he growled and pulled me hard against him.

He was so hot, so wet... so fucking hard. I pushed against that heat, gasping. "Oh, fuck, yes!"

Lucien sat forward and yanked my head back, biting down the length of my throat. As much as I wanted to beg – plead – for him to break the skin, I didn't. He bit hard enough that I knew I'd have bruises. The thought shot sparks of pleasure through me and I found his lips again, pushing him back in the chair.

As I devoured his mouth, one of his hands slipped between us. I nearly screamed as he made a fist around us both. He wasn't careful or gentle and each push and pull of our flesh had me gasping for air. I found myself panting into his mouth, thrusting into his hand, as my release threatened.

"Come for me, baby. On me..." He squeezed his hand then, the friction almost tight enough to hurt—but not quite. Fuck, I couldn't take it anymore.

"In me, Lucien. Now, please. Need to feel you stretching me..."

He didn't question, just shifted me up a little and lined the blunt head of his prick against my hole. I blew out a deep breath as I settled down on him, taking that second or two to relish in the exquisite feel of him stretching me—claiming me. His hips arched up, hard and fast, and it stole my breath.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him close, panting out my pleas to him over and over, wanting him to come in me, to mark me, make me his again...

"Always be mine, Peter. Always..."

I was on the verge of exploding, heat surging through me when there was a loud crack. I had seconds to look at Lucien in confusion before the world fell out from under us both. Or, the chair, rather. Lucien and I hit the floor together, hard, and with the impact, I came all over his belly and chest. He held my hips tight, body taut and rigid as he emptied himself inside me.

When the orgasm finally ended, I sank down over him, blinking hard. "God, Lucien..."

He was quiet for a moment, just panting, and then he began to laugh. "We broke the chair."

I rose up enough to kiss him, to look down in those pale blue eyes I loved so much. "You okay? Wood didn't stab you in all the wrong places did it?"

"I think I've got a screw in my left ass cheek, but other than that, I'm fine."

"Funny, my ass got a screw, too."

Lucien smiled up at me, dazed and amused, eyes just dancing. "I've missed this... so much."

The words brought tears to my eyes and I just couldn't come back with something funny. The moment was too precious. I brushed my lips against his, sighing. "Me, too."

We moved from the hard floor of the kitchen to our soft, warm bed. I snuggled up to Lucien nearly an hour later, feeling no pain. I wasn't sure if it was his blood that had helped, or if the effects of fighting off the infection had just worn off. Either way, I was fucking glad. And glad to have Lucien beside me. It'd been months since we'd been this close and I missed it. Maybe I'd been spoiled by all the long walks home from the club, talking and sharing thoughts and ideas.

I missed things being so easy. How there were no thoughts at all about being in the wrong world or being turned. I missed us *connecting*.

Lucien kissed the top of my head. "Penny for your thoughts."

I curled against him more, sighing. "Do you regret anything about us?"

"Regret is a harsh word," he said. "And I'm not sure I have any where we're concerned. I *do* wish we'd have been able to date like normal people. That I didn't have to drag you into another world just to be with you."

"Normal?" I laughed. "Oh, honey, what is normal?"

"This has been my life for so long, this is normal for me. But, I know it's not..."

He broke off and I looked up at him. "Will you tell me how this came to be your life?"

"Haven't we been through this?"

"Not really. I mean, I know when you were born, what you did, who sired you—"

"Sired? Since when do you speak like a Council flunky?"

"Well, it sounds much better than 'brought over' or 'turned'. And really, a sire is like a father: he creates you, takes you under his wing, shows you how to live. Without his blood, you wouldn't exist. Family, in a way."

"I think that's a totally perverse way of thinking." He rolled me to my back and settled between my legs.

"You know that perversity turns me on."

"I'm all yours. Play with me *any* way you want." I groaned as Lucien nipped my throat. God, I fucking loved that, and hated to push him back. "But first, tell me how you came to be."

"All the sordid details?"

I smiled. "Every single one."

"I'm not sure this is the time, Peter. Your body has been through hell and you *do* need to rest."

"No," I said, probably more forcefully than I intended. "It's been over a year, Lucien. There are things I want —*need*— to know."

"Fine." Lucien huffed and rolled off the bed. He stepped over and pushed the intercom. "Simon?"

A few moments passed before Simon answered. "Yes, sir? What can I get for you?"

"Some tea for Peter and a bottle of merlot, please."

"Right away, sir."

Lucien released the button and, without another word, disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. I stared at the bathroom door for a long while, waiting for Lucien to reappear. Ten minutes later, I was convinced that Lucien was throwing a fit. That was fine. Two could play at this game.

I rolled off the bed and found my robe, slipping it on. Just before I reached for the doorknob, the bathroom door opened and Lucien called out to me. "Where are you going?"

"Anywhere but here, I guess." I rested my head against the door. "I'm so tired of fighting, Lucien."

"We're fighting? Usually I'm aware of this, lover."

I turned to see him naked and a soft light illuminating the bathroom behind him. I frowned, swallowing hard. "You just... I thought..."

He held his hand out in offering. "Come, Peter. Lose the robe."

A little embarrassed, I ducked my head and started across the room. As I passed by the chair in the corner, I shrugged off the robe and draped it over the arm. I could feel the weight of Lucien's gaze as I walked toward him. After a moment, I realized that he was examining me as much as he was waiting for me.

I lifted my head and saw where his gaze rested: at my arms, where there were no longer any scars as proof of what had happened to me. As I stepped in front of him, his eyes met mine. I slid my arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. His hands grasped at my hips, pulling me close.

"You've not even a scar," he whispered. "But I can smell where each and every scrape broke your skin."

I bit at his lower lip and soothed the bite with a swipe of my tongue. "But I'm okay, baby. Still alive."

He leaned in and nipped at my throat. "And warm."

"Naked."

Lucien groaned and pulled back. He took my hand and pulled me along with him into the bathroom. I walked into the room and stopped abruptly. Soft candlelight illuminated the entire room. Candles had been placed along the length of the mirrors, on the floor, around the large Jacuzzi tub. The tub was full of water, a layer of bubbles across the top, and steam was rising to coat the mirrors. The room smelled of lavender and vanilla and other spices that I knew were from his special stash of bathing salts.

The man was such a fucking romantic.

"Don't say a word," Lucien said as he moved me toward the tub.

"Does thinking it count?"

"Yes."

He stepped in and held his hand out, waiting for me to step in with him. When I did, he moved to sit and opened his arms for me to sit against his chest. The water was just on the verge of too hot, but I stopped short of complaining. Lucien liked his showers hot and his baths hotter. I'd grown used to them both and I knew that the heat would ease some of my tension.

We sat in silence for a long while, Lucien moving his fingers through the water and across my chest, me tracing the length of his bent thighs cradling me. Simon came in with a tray and set it down on a table next to the tub. Without a word, he poured Lucien a glass of the wine and made my tea. He moved a crystal glass filled with blood to the edge of the tray.

"It's fresh, sir."

"Thank you, Simon."

Simon nodded and stepped aside and I saw another tray filled with fruits: grapes, orange slices, and strawberries. I leaned over and grabbed a few grapes from the bowl, grinning. I loved fruit and it was all Simon could do to keep enough of it in the house to sustain me and everyone else. "Thanks for the fruit."

"You're welcome, Peter." Simon paused and looked to Lucien. "Can I get you anything else?"

Lucien took the crystal glass in hand and shook his head. "That will be all, Simon."

Simon gave a curt nod and left quietly. I leaned my head back and watched as Lucien slowly drank the contents of his glass. A drop of blood landed on my shoulder as he reached to put the empty glass back on the tray. Seconds later, his tongue was sliding along my skin.

I fumbled over the tray and grabbed a few strawberries and orange slices. Instead of eating them right away, I crushed the strawberries between my fingers and rubbed the juices of the fruit where the blood had been moments before. Lucien groaned and lapped at the juice, sighing in contentment.

"You taste good enough without the fruit."

His fangs scraped sharply against my skin. I cried out and looked back to see two rivulets of blood running down my shoulder blade. "Oh, fuck..."

He licked the blood away and pulled me back, resting his chin on my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"God, what for?"

"For trying to put your mind on sex instead of talking."

I jabbed him with my elbow. "Bastard. Quit playing around in my head."

Lucien sighed heavily and kissed below my ear. "It was all so long ago, Peter. I'm afraid my detailed explanations have been long lost with time. But I'll tell you everything I *can* remember."

"Just events, baby; what brought you here."

"Well, you know how I came to be *here*. That Antoine was my... *sire*." He paused. "I'm not sure there's much to tell after that."

"Go back to when you were human."

"I was a knight, as I told you when we met. I assume it wouldn't be a surprise to tell you that I died in battle."

"A valiant warrior."

"A tired one." Lucien's voice became quiet. "We'd fought for about a week when I realized we would need reinforcements, that the opposition had more than double our manpower. My men were already growing tired and I sent out a messenger to request additional men. We had no choice but to continue to defend ourselves, but while we were waiting on reinforcements, no one that mattered knew we even needed them."

"Our messenger was intercepted and killed before he could deliver the message. By chance, a farmer trying to catch his ox found the messenger, recognized his shield, and got word to the lord. Reinforcements were sent out immediately from a neighboring ally, but it would still be a week before they reached us."

"It's so hard to fathom that, you know? Now, we have the cars, the resources... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You weren't."

"Keep going."

Lucien was silent for a few moments. "Our reinforcements arrived late one night, about three weeks in. I was seeing to my injured men and passed out in exhaustion before I could meet the leader of the company. The next morning we were attacked."

"Shit."

"We had no battle plan. No idea who was who. Nothing to do but defend and fight back." Lucien sighed. "I spotted the commander on the battlefield—"

"But you'd never met him, how did you know it was—?"

"His armor," Lucien said. "I recognized his status and his lord's shield and I headed for him. But I wasn't the only one. I reached him just in time to take the sword that was about to be shoved through his back."

I swallowed hard and turned enough to face him. "You died for him?"

"I was tired," he said quietly. "In a choice between me—fighting for weeks and falling over in exhaustion—or him—who only had the weariness of travel..."

"You chose him."

Lucien nodded. "And he and his men went on to defeat the opposing army. It was the right decision."

"So did you live after taking his sword?"

"Not as human, no. Antoine picked me up right off the field and carried me into the woods. He calmed me long enough to attempt to heal the wound, but I'd lost too much blood. The blood loss wasn't as much of a

problem as the sword that had pierced my lung. Antoine realized that by the time I healed from the wound, I would have suffocated in my own blood. So he drained me, instead."

"You never had a choice."

He shook his head. "But I assure you, I was okay with it."

"Really?"

Lucien nodded. "Especially after I fed for the first time. God, Peter, it was like nothing I could have imagined. I was so strong, so full of energy, so... horny."

I couldn't contain the laugh. "Now, see, I don't doubt the horny at all."

He kissed my shoulder and smiled at me. "It was the same as my life before, only I was serving a different lord. One that didn't mind showing me affection, one that took me to his bed and fucked and fed and kissed me like he loved me more than anyone or anything else in the world. For centuries, I was by his side..."

I looked up at him as he broke off. "What happened, baby?"

"Skip forward to about twenty or so years ago. Antoine did a few things he wasn't proud of. He was slightly involved in a scheme to kill Catherine—"

"Christopher's...?" Wife? Partner? Whatever the hell she was.

Lucien nodded. "It was a fight over territory between him and the old Master. Antoine was offered the territory he'd been seeking for decades in exchange for her murder. Antoine refused to do it, but a few of his vampires did it behind his back."

"Involvement by proxy."

"Right. And even though he was innocent, his guilt nearly drove him crazy. It's like... like a father whose son has raped and killed. The father didn't do it, but he cannot stand to know that his son is capable of such horrors. Antoine handed the coven over to Lukas and Christopher and went to ground."

"Wait, what does that mean?"

"He went off to Wyoming, and locked himself in a tomb. He wasn't to be awakened for twenty years. Long enough to kill some of his guilt." Lucien rested his head on my shoulder, sighing. "It nearly killed me when he left, Peter. I'd been with him so long..."

"You loved him, didn't you?"

"He was everything to me for so long. I'd served him willingly, passionately, always knowing my place. But when he left, it was like a slap to the face. That was when I realized that I was just another of his vampires. Special, but not... *special*."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry."

"He came back with a wife, three years later, and no need for me. By that time, I'd made some peace about where I stood, but it still hurt. I did my job as an Enforcer and began seeking out companionship for the first time since I was human."

"So you never fucked anyone else the entire time before that?"

"Oh, no, I did. But it was fuck, feed, and run." Lucien raised his head and met my gaze. "I was slow to realize that my love for Antoine wasn't like the love of a lover. It was a love for my creator—my Master. It wasn't until I met you, that I realized that I'd already been searching centuries before Antoine pushed me away."

"You can stop searching now, lover." I smiled, tracing his jaw with a finger. "You've got me."

"I stopped searching for anyone else the moment I laid eyes on you for the first time. I only wish I'd known how stubborn and hardheaded you could be."

I pushed him back and straddled his hips, rubbing my ass against him as I rolled my hips forward. "If you love me so much, why not keep me? Why not ensure that I'll be with you always?"

Lucien's smile fell. "Is this why I've bared my soul to you? To have you catch me at a weak moment?"

"No! Lucien, I've wanted to know your past since the days of you walking me home from work. I left you alone about it, though, knowing you'd tell me when the time was right."

He tried to push me off him. "Get off me. I will not be your fool."

I pinned his shoulders against the tub, surprised at my own strength. "No, the only fool here is me. For believing that you would eventually be my sire, that you would give us the life together that – I thought – we both wanted."

He pushed me hard and sent me flying across the tub. My back and shoulders hit the edge and I sank down into the water a little, grimacing. But the pain faded as quickly as it came and I moved to get up, back still toward him, bracing myself on the opposite side of the tub. He was behind me in seconds, pushing me further across the ledge.

I looked up into the mirror before me and saw his intent. My ass was spread before him and when I could have stopped him, told him no, I spread my legs further. He licked at me, almost angrily, before pushing two fingers inside me. I bit back a cry and pushed back against him.

"Just fuck me."

He grunted and pulled away, but was back against me in moments, thick prick nudging against my hole. I shifted and he lost his hold on me, cock slipping over my ass. He growled and held me still, pushing into me in one swift thrust. I whimpered at the initial burn, but was grateful he'd at least used lube.

Lucien moved hard and fast and I looked up into the mirror to watch him. Soon, I was more involved in watching the expressions fly across his face than with him fucking me. I'd not noticed it before, but he was hurting, pain and hurt and sorrow that went deep.

Had I done this to him? Had I done something to hurt him so badly? The thought alone was like lead in the pit of my stomach. I found myself reaching back for him, to touch him, to make that look in his eyes go away. But it didn't go away. The pain grew across his face and he finally pulled out and buried his face against my neck, sobbing.

"Don't you understand? I have to *kill* you to give you that. To give us that. It terrifies me beyond belief that something will go wrong. That I won't be able to bring you back." He clutched me tight against him, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry, baby. I just... I have you now and to imagine..."

His confession and tears shocked me and I sank down into the water, back to the tub, pulling Lucien in against my chest. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tight. It all made sense now: his anger at me for pushing him, his reluctance to even talk about it...

"Oh, Lucien, baby... *Why* haven't you told me this before? Why did you keep letting me push and push? Why did—"

"Because I thought I could get a grip, eventually, and just do it." He reached up and moved a strand of hair from my eyes. "I have you now."

"But you could lose me at any moment. I could walk outside right now and be struck down by lightning, get into an accident."

"And be just as dead if I try to turn you—and fail. Things go wrong, Peter; not everyone comes back as they should."

I could see his side of it so easily. If the situation were reversed, I couldn't say that I wouldn't feel the same way. But that didn't change the reality of the here and now. Now, I was – for lack of a better word – infected with his blood. My body had begun to change from the moment his blood mixed with mine. There was no going back.

"Lucien, honey, listen to me." I cupped his face in my hands, meeting those blue eyes. "This is the way it has to be. It's too late for me to be human, do you understand that?"

"I..."

"No, Lucien. Yes or no." I smiled as best I could. "I can't be stuck like this. Not for another week, another month, and certainly not for the rest of my life. I nearly ripped some guy's throat out the other night because I wanted to feed from him. I may be able to sink my teeth into your flesh and bite and feed, but a human?"

"He would have died."

I nodded. "Yes, he would have. And if Xander hadn't gotten there when he did... I'm not exactly stable. Do you get that?"

He pulled away and sat down in the middle of the tub. With a wave of his hand, the room went dark, each and every candle snuffed out. "I will not turn you—"

Chapter Seven

"Lucien!"

"Let me finish!" He held up a hand to silence me. "Too much has changed within your body and I won't take any chances. I will not do this without consulting the Council's physician first."

"But you'll do it?"

Lucien nodded and reached over to pull the drain plug. "The water's cold. Do you want to shower and rest? Or would you like to come back to the club with me for a few hours?"

I offered a hand to help him up. "Actually, I haven't felt this good in a while. I'd be glad to go to the club. Be close to you. But..."

"But?" he asked as he stood.

"I have something to say before we do. Now, it's not a shot at you, so please don't take it that way. I know your reasoning, but I still need to get this off my chest."

"What is it?"

"One of the hardest things I've ever had to deal with is wanting so badly for you to bring me over, and watching you do for others what you refused to do for me. The latest of them probably hurt most of all."

"I know," he said. "And believe me, knowing that it hurt you only made the experience that much harder. I swore I wouldn't bring anyone else over a few months back. But the latest... well, that was a special circumstance."

I rolled my eyes and stepped out of the tub. "I'm sure. Young and—"

Lucien covered my mouth with his palm. "Stage four cancer, inoperable and untreatable; he had weeks to live, at best."

"You could have at least told me about that one. I would have understood."

"Would you?" He wrapped a towel around his waist. "I tried, the night I was to do it, but you'd already come to your own conclusions."

It hit me, then, why he'd wanted me there at the club that night. I felt like such an asshole. "That's why you wanted me with you."

Lucien shrugged and started toward the bedroom. "I just wanted the support, but I managed. He's *alive* and will live much, much longer than he ever intended."

"I'm sorry, Lucien. I just wanted to—"

"I know, Peter. I *know*." He shook his head and pulled me into an embrace. "Do not forget that I have always been able to know your thoughts before you spoke them."

"And what am I thinking now?"

Instead of a smile and him repeating my thoughts of making it up to him *somehow*, he frowned. "I do not know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" I laughed, but when he remained serious, stepped back from him. "Lucien?"

"Something happened when I shut you out of my head that night—"

"Why *did* you shut me out, anyway? That shit hurt."

"Hurt? Physically hurt?"

I nodded. "I can't explain it, but it was a '*fall to my knees, can't breathe*' kind of hurt."

"That shouldn't have happened," he said. "I just wanted to get your thoughts and anger out of my head long enough to perform the ritual. When I tried to get it back a few hours later, it was gone."

I wondered, briefly, if Nikolas' attack had done anything to permanently sever the link between me and Lucien, but wasn't about to voice that. Even though he hadn't mentioned it yet, I was sure he had to be pissed about what had happened. I started for the closet.

"I'm sure we'll get it back. We just need some time together—bonding time. "

Lucien was right on my heels as I grabbed a pair of leather pants. He leaned against the doorframe, watching as I dressed. "Perhaps."

"Oh, come on, you don't think it's permanent...?" I found the lace-up, clunky biker boots that I'd paid way too much money for. When he didn't answer, I looked up at him. "Do you?"

"I don't know."

His answer didn't give me much comfort. I didn't know what I'd do without Lucien in my head for the rest of my days. I liked him there. It was just how things were. "Then you better talk to someone and figure out how to get it back, because I don't want to live like this. I *like* you in my head."

"About as much as I like being there."

I stood and stripped off his towel before planting a kiss against his forehead. "Even though I prefer you naked, you should probably get dressed."

There was a sharp knock on the bedroom door as it opened. Caleb walked in, and I grinned. "Hey, Caleb."

He returned a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Hey."

I frowned and stepped out of the closet. "What's wrong?"

Caleb looked right past me to Lucien, who asked, "Anything yet?"

"No. He's not anywhere on the premises. His quarters have been searched and the only things missing are clothes and money, maybe a few of his favorite toys. No weapons missing, that we've found."

"What's going on?" I asked.

Both of them ignored me. "On sight," Lucien said. "I won't have him back in my house."

"The team has their orders," Caleb replied. "The wolves are... helping, but not happy."

"Fucking dogs," Lucien growled.

His words made me wince, but I realized they were talking about Nikolas. Just knew. "Oh, Lucien, please tell me you're not punishing him."

He looked at me for a moment, shook his head, and then looked back to Caleb. "I want his head—human or otherwise."

The entire room began to spin and I had to grab onto the wall to steady myself. "He's your friend, Lucien."

"Was." Lucien turned and walked back into the closet, putting on a new pair of leather pants.

I managed to stand and stalked over to Caleb. "Don't do this, Caleb."

"He's dangerous, Peter. We can't have *animals* like him in the coven."

"Right. And is he an animal for what he is? Or an animal because you," I poked the center of his chest, "don't like what he does? Too rough for you, Caleb?"

Lucien pulled me back and stood between me and Caleb. "It doesn't matter why to Caleb. He does it because it's a direct order from me."

I clenched my teeth to keep from screaming. "Get out, Caleb!" When he just stood there, I started for him. "I said get the *fuck* out of here!"

When Lucien gave him the nod to leave, I had to take a few deep breaths to keep from following after Caleb and letting him know just how much I hated his loyalty to Lucien. I could have hurt him, easily, at that very moment. As soon as the door shut, I gripped Lucien's shoulder and turned him to face me.

"If you do this, I will never forgive you."

"He hurt you, Peter. Almost fucking killed you."

"But he didn't! He made a mistake."

"Nikolas doesn't make mistakes"

"You can't kill him for this."

"Watch me."

"You'll have to go through me to do it."

Lucien scoffed. "Tell me why it is that you insist on communing with these *dogs*? Look at where it's gotten you. Do you think they'd stand up for you if the situation were reversed?"

"I wish you'd drop this holier-than-thou routine, Lucien. It isn't very becoming."

"Neither is *you* playing below your rank. You want to be seen as my equal around here? You'd damned well better start acting the part. From this point on, you will have no contact with the werewolves."

"You can't be serious! I'm bound to Xander, I—"

"Xander knows his place."

"Where is he?" I demanded, trying like hell to find my link to Xander. I got nothing back from my mental push and I looked up at Lucien, glaring. "Never in my life did I ever think I could hate you. But if you do this..."

"I'm so glad to see you stick by your words of love and commitment," he said. "I should have known it was too good to be true."

"That's not what I said and you know it. I will always love you, but damn it, Lucien... this can't be undone a few months down the road when you cool off about it."

"Won't happen."

"Who are you? Seriously. Because I don't fucking know you anymore."

"I am the vampire you swore to stand beside, no matter what."

"Not like this, Lucien." I shook my head, blinking back tears.

"Then how do you want it? Tell me, Peter! Because this sure as hell isn't a fucking fairy tale. This is the hard, cold truth of a life I didn't want to bring you into."

"No, it's not," I said calmly. "Your people loved you. They adored you and followed you without blinking an eye. But when I came along, things changed. You punish without reason. You accuse and assume the very worst of people. And now, you want to *kill* someone that you've regarded as a friend, because he made a mistake? Tell me, Lucien. Honestly. Would you want him dead if it had happened to anyone but me?"

Lucien sat down in a chair just outside the closet; his shoulders slumped in defeat. "I cannot rescind the order of death."

"Yes, you can."

"I will lose all respect."

"You'll lose their respect if you carry through with it, Lucien. I guarantee you'll lose mine."

I grabbed a shirt from the closet and slipped it on before heading to the door. As I opened it, Lucien stood. "Where are you going?"

"To bring Nikolas home."

* * *

Xander met me halfway down the hall. "You okay?"

I shook my head. "Do you know where Nikolas is? Where he'd go?"

"Not where, but I know who he'd go to." He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tight. "Ask Simon where to find Sabaan."

"Sabaan?"

"He's a friend of Nikolas. Probably his only one."

I pulled back and shook my head. "He has more friends than he realizes."

"You would forgive him this? Even with what happened?" At my nod, Xander smiled. "You know this will change some things."

"I hope it does."

He pressed a set of keys into my palm. "Bring him home. You're probably the only one he'll talk to right now, anyway."

"Guilt does amazing things..."

"Caleb!" Lucien's voice boomed through the corridor. "Call off the order on Nikolas."

"But—"

"Immediately!"

I breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Lucien to give my thanks, but Caleb spoke again, his words paralyzing me in shock. "No! I won't do it!"

The entire corridor went silent. Team members that had been talking and murmuring amongst themselves stilled, all looking to Caleb as if he'd sprouted a third head. The temperature dropped suddenly and a gust of wind swept around me. Pictures on the walls lifted up and slapped back against the walls, furniture shook, and a loud groaning sound filled the air.

"You *dare* disobey a direct order?"

Fear ripped through me, chilling me to the core. Lucien's power swirled through the air. It took a moment to remember that it was one of Lucien's powers, to instill fear in others. He'd told me about it long ago, but I'd never felt the effects of it. I'd never had to. Time seemed to stop as I turned to look back toward Caleb and Lucien.

"You promised he would pay! That he'd be gone!"

"Silence!" Lucien roared and leveled glowing-red eyes on Caleb. "Disarm and follow me."

Caleb took a step toward Lucien, but then turned on his heel to run. Lucien appeared in front of Caleb before I could blink, blocking his way. Caleb tried to push past him, but Lucien grabbed him by the throat and threw him across the hall. He landed against the frame of our bedroom door with a loud crack and acted like he was about to try to crawl away. Lucien shook his head in disgust and leveled his eyes on Silver. "Disarm him."

Lucien waited until Silver relieved Caleb of his weapons before closing the distance between them. He grabbed Caleb up by the neck of his shirt and dragged him into the bedroom, slamming the door behind them. Caleb screamed a few seconds later and I started for the door. Xander caught my arm and pulled me back.

"Just... let it happen."

I knew he was right. That Caleb had been out of line—way out of line. Lucien wouldn't kill him, but still... I attempted to shake off the shock. "Keep me updated?"

He nodded. "Of course. Now go, find Nikolas before someone else does."

I hugged him up tight and hard, kissing him on the side of the head before taking off down the hall. Simon met me just as I barreled into the kitchen. "Peter, what—?"

"I need to know where to find Sabaan."

* * *

The address Simon had given me had been to some old abandoned warehouse. Or, rather, the warehouse was what was closest. The address itself seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. I parked the car and got out, looking around. The moon was full, casting an eerie glow through the trees and over the property, making it look like some haunted place out of the movies.

Damn it. One of these days, I was going to have to ask Lucien about ghosts.

I gave a quick search around the perimeter of the warehouse, but when I didn't find anything but locked fences, I picked one and followed it for a short way. A dead-end alley forced me to turn back, but when I did, I heard something. Not too far off, near the trees. I slowly made my way in the direction of the noise, trying to keep as quiet as possible.

A thin trail of smoke drifted up from the ground. Cigarette smoke.

Walking a little further, I realized that the ground wasn't completely flat. There was a drainage ditch right before me, a huge, cylindrical tube just sort of extending from the ground. It had to have carried runoff from the warehouse at one time. In the curve of the tube, someone lounged, the cherry tip of a cigarette bright against the darkness.

"What are you doing here?"

Nikolas.

"Looking for you."

"Come to kill me, too?"

"Hardly," I said. "I came to talk."

"How the fuck did you find me?" He paused for a moment. "Goddamn Simon..."

I dug my heels in the ground as I made my way down the steep incline, trying not to fall on my face. When I reached the bottom of the ditch, I realized that it was full of water, about ankle deep. I sighed and made my way to the tube Nikolas was lounging in.

"Hey, it's wet down there."

"Thanks for telling me."

"You're welcome."

I jumped up into the tube and sat at Nikolas' feet. After a few moments of silence, Nikolas' hand touched my shoulder. I looked at the offered pack of cigarettes and took one. He scooted forward, putting me between his legs. Nikolas turned my head toward him and leaned in, lighting my cigarette with his. He rested his chin on my shoulder as he exhaled.

"You okay?"

"Who, me? Oh, never better. Why do you ask?"

"Smartass," he grumbled.

I leaned into him, turning my head just enough to see his face. "The last few days have been hell. But I guess you'd already know that, considering you've been through it yourself."

His hand slid low against my belly, beneath my shirt, fingers teasing and playing across my skin. Heat radiated from his touch and I moved into him. His other hand inched up the back of my shirt and I shuddered. He sighed and nuzzled against my shoulder. "I'm afraid I had it much better than you. I got infected, got sick, shifted for the first time, and then it was over. For the most part. You? I think you've got some serious *other* mojo going on that prevented this from being easy for you."

His hand moved completely up the back of my shirt and up through my hair, and I moaned. His touch felt so good, so familiar... "Tell me it was an accident."

Warm breath tickled my ear and I dropped my cigarette. "Yes... and no. Never meant to hurt you, Peter. I need you to know that."

"Then how was it not an accident?"

"Sensed something in you," he whispered. "Still sense it. But I can't say what it is—only that it's pack."

I frowned and attempted to put some distance between us. "It was Xander you sensed. He was hunting and I was linked with him—"

"No!"

He stood so fast it made me dizzy and cold at losing his contact. "Nikolas, I—"

"Don't you fucking tell me what *I* felt that night. Don't you fucking dare!" He huffed and shook his head. "Go home, Peter."

"I'm not leaving until we talk."

"We talked. You can go now."

I got to my feet and walked to him, sliding my arms around his waist. He tried to shrug me off, but I held tight, kissing the back of his neck. "Come home with me? Please?"

He leaned into me after a moment, but still shook his head. "I won't go home to meet my own death. I don't love you *that* much."

His words stilled us both, but I was determined not to make a big deal of it. "The order has been rescinded."

"Yeah? And every single member of the team knows it, too? I'm sorry, but I won't go back until I know..."

"How 'bout we wait until dawn and go back together? The wolves won't touch you—you know that."

"Why do you give a shit? I'm nothing to you."

"You're my friend. That still counts for something in this world, doesn't it?"

Nikolas threw my arms off him and stalked further into the darkness of the tunnel. When I started to turn away and go find a place to wait out the night, he stopped and growled. "You fucking coming or not? Thought you wanted to talk."

"Promise you'll talk?"

He growled in response, but I took it as a yes and followed him.

The tunnel was dark, wet, musty, and just plain gross in places. Rats were everywhere, scurrying along the walls, around our feet, squeaking and screeching as we invaded their domain. One particularly large cockroach landed on my arm and I shook it off in disgust.

Nikolas stopped abruptly, causing me to run right into him. I searched around us for some clue as to why we'd stopped, but saw nothing. "What's wrong?"

"You are." Nikolas shook his head. "If you'd rather go back—"

"No, no," I said as I gave him a gentle push. "I'm fine. You promised to talk."

"Well, given that I'm a guest of a friend, it's not nice for you to be so disgusted with your walk to his home. So, either deal with it or..."

"Dealing." After a few moments, I chuckled. "Guess the rent's cheaper down here, huh?"

"Peter—"

"I know, I know. Dealing."

We continued walking, sloshing through the ankle-deep water. These boots were so fucked. They were waterproof, but no way did I want to keep them when they smelled like... Fuck, what *did* this place smell like?

Stale. Dirty.

There were probably sewage treatment plants nearby that these tunnels fed into. And this guy *lived* down here? I stifled a groan, but obviously not very well because Nikolas let out a soft growl in response. Before he could chastise me for my disgust, I tried to make conversation.

"I never knew these tunnels were here."

"They're utility access tunnels, for the most part. Some of them have been constructed for our convenience over the years."

"Yeah? And the city has a budget for that? Really, I didn't know they cared so much."

"The city doesn't know they're here."

"How can they not know? Don't they have crews that come down here?" I stepped on a rat's tail, causing it to shriek. "Even if it's every few years to blow out the rats?"

Nikolas stopped abruptly and pushed me back into a wall, poking a finger in the middle of my chest. "What is your fucking problem with the rats?"

"What the fuck is with you?" I pushed him back. "So I'm disgusted with the rats and the cockroaches and god-only-knows-what-else down here. Why's it such a big fucking deal?"

Nikolas held my gaze for a few moments, then backed away, turning back the way we'd just come. "I'm not doing this."

"What?" I yelled after him. "Nikolas—"

He just shook his head.

"Goddamn you, asshole."

He stopped then. "Goddamn me?" He turned, head cocked to the side. "Goddamn *me*? Yes, maybe so. Maybe it was wrong of me to bring you down here in the first place. After all, how was I to know you were going to act like a spoiled child?"

"Nikolas, I —"

"Oh wait, maybe I did know, because that's exactly what you've been acting like for the past couple of months. What the fuck has happened to you? Is this what happens when a poor boy finds riches? Suddenly life is just too *dirty* for him?"

"Life?" I gestured around me. "You call *this* life?"

My back hit the wall before I realized that I was moving, head smashing painfully into the concrete of the tunnel. Before I could cry out though, Nikolas' face was in mine. He held a screeching, flailing rat between us.

"Is this not alive?"

I pushed hard at him, but he wouldn't budge. "Get that the fuck away from me!"

"Too dirty for you, princess?"

"Yes!"

Nikolas brought the rat to his lips and I gaped in horror as he bit off its head. He then spit it and blood and other fluids right at my chest. "And now... it's dead. Don't you think it'd rather have been alive, no matter how shitty its life was? Do you think he knew—or *cared*—about the filth? God... just shut the fuck up, okay!"

Moody damned bastard.

He wanted silence? That was fine. Silence was something I did well. After we'd sludged through dirty water for what seemed like hours, we finally found concrete with just about an inch of water above it. Still wet, but not nearly as disgusting. We stopped in front of a metal door and Nikolas opened it, waiting for me to pass before closing it again and locking it.

When Nikolas made no move to keep going, just stood staring at the wall, I spoke up. "So, who's Sabaan?"

"This is his place. Respect it, respect him."

"Nikolas, I'm sor—"

"Don't!"

"You know what? Maybe I should just go. I'm not in the mood for games."

"Too late to go back. The outer door has been locked and it's on a time-release. It won't open 'til dawn."

Great. Stuck down here with Nikolas in a shitty mood. I sure as hell hoped that Sabaan wasn't pissy as well. A section of concrete began to slide away, revealing a very clean tunnel. It was lighted inside, subtly, but the metal walls and floors made it look extremely bright. Nikolas stepped up and inside the tunnel and offered a hand out.

He pulled me up and the concrete wall instantly began to slide back into place. There was a loud clank and hiss and I wondered just what made this high-tech shit necessary. Nikolas started shrugging off his clothes, hanging them on hooks on the opposite wall.

"Strip," he said as he turned back to face me.

"What the fuck for?"

"Sabaan's house; Sabaan's rules. Strip, or spend the night right where you stand."

"You can't be serious..."

Nikolas' pants and boots came off next and as he bent to arrange them, I groaned. Such a pretty, fucking ass...

"Quit staring at my ass, would you?"

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but knew he'd hear the lie. "Fine," I grumbled. "Do I at least get my clothes back?"

"When you leave."

As he stood, my breath caught in my throat. There was a round, puckered scar between his shoulder blades. I'd seen him shirtless many times, but his back had been free of any bullet scars. I reached out without thinking and laid my palm to his back. He growled and jumped, but I moved even closer.

"I did this, didn't I? Why are there scars?"

He leaned against me for a moment. "They were tracers."

Tracers. Not silver rounds, exactly, but rounds dipped in a silver compound so that the bullets would leave traces of silver around and through the wounds. It wouldn't kill a werewolf, but it slowed them down – most of the time – and made it damned hard for them to heal quickly.

I dropped my head to his shoulder, moving my other hand up his chest. Just like in my dream, there were three more scars, two at his chest, dead-center, one to the left of his navel. He grabbed my hand and pushed it lower. Just above his line of pubic hair, there was another scar.

"You almost shot my balls off, princess."

"Any way to remove the scars?"

"Of course," he said. "But you know what? I'd like to keep these. This is was first time that I've been shot by someone who likes me."

"I do like you. Very much." I forced my hand back up instead of farther down, my palm still resting low on his belly because I just couldn't seem to stop touching him. "Feel close to you. Don't know why, but I do... Even dreamed about you."

"What did you dream?"

Images flashed through my head, Nikolas in wolf form and me humping against him, and I swallowed hard. I couldn't bring myself to give him details. "Just... things."

He made an odd sound, somewhere between a groan and a sigh, then turned in my arms to face me. "I'm sorry for being such an asshole. I just... People don't usually get me, you know?"

"I think with you, a lot of them see what you do, rather than you. They can't make the disconnect where it's important."

He shrugged and pulled away. "Come on, shuck the clothes."

Chapter Eight

The main interior of Sabaan's place was just down the hall and around a corner. A metal door was set into the rest of the wall, but you'd never know it was a door unless you really stopped to inspect it. Nikolas knocked on the door, two sharp raps, and a few moments later it opened with a hiss. He gestured for me to go in first.

"After you, princess."

I grabbed his balls and gave them a good squeeze as I edged by him. "One time, and you'd never call me princess again."

He groaned and pushed against my hand. "So sure of that, are we?"

The challenge was there and I was tempted to push it, just to see where it would lead. The fact that I didn't want to fuck him just because I was attracted to him, but because it was also a challenge, made me stop. My sex life was too complicated as it was. I let him go and winked. "Guess we'll never know."

Nikolas frowned and pushed me inside so he could move out of the doorway and I saw the inside of Sabaan's place for the first time. The cold, metallic corridor had given way to a warm, cozy atmosphere. The floors were a dark, polished hardwood, and there were rugs of all different patterns, colors, and textures around the room. Several couches, chairs, and lounges filled the room and there didn't seem to be a shortage of blankets or pillows.

The room was sort of like a studio apartment. The sheer size of it should have made it seem less than home-like, but there were draperies on the walls and wispy, gauzy materials hanging from the ceiling, dividing the room into sections. The place was beautiful.

A curtain moved somewhere off to my left, drawing my attention. I looked over as the satiny material parted and saw who I assumed to be Sabaan. Words left me as this ethereal creature moved toward us. He was far from human, but I was at a loss as to what he was.

His hair was black, but there were streaks of white and gray woven through it. Small, greenish-black horns rose up from his scalp, but if his hair had been completely black, I might have never noticed them. He looked up at me and smiled, and my breath caught.

Eyes, black as onyx, stared back at me. There wasn't a bit of white in those eyes. His pupils were elongated slits that shone a bright yellow. He seemed to notice my reaction and smiled. Tiny fangs showed on his top row of teeth, but I couldn't tell if they were really just that small, or if he was good at hiding them.

I studied him as he moved closer. He was shorter than me by a few inches, body lean and lithe. The tight black shirt he wore stretched over well-toned muscles and the material against his flesh made it seem as if he

were glowing. But on looking closer, it wasn't just the contrast of dark and light. His skin was pearlescent, with undertones of satiny greens and purples.

The nails on his hands were all painted black, as were his toenails. Interesting.

"You must be Peter." Fuck. His voice was like velvet, soft and sensual, yet deep. He extended a hand and I took it, the urge to fall to a knee and kiss the back of it strong. But I didn't get a chance. He pulled my hand up to his face and licked at the inside of my wrist.

Nikolas grunted. "Peter, meet Sabaan."

Sabaan's eyes flicked over to Nikolas in aggravation. "Oh, don't seem so disinterested. This is your favorite part of greeting me."

I smiled over at Nikolas. "Is that right?"

Sabaan licked at my wrist again, but the feel of his tongue was different—odd. It drew my attention immediately back to him and when I saw that dark, forked tongue working over my flesh, I took a step forward unconsciously. Sabaan released my hand slowly and met my gaze.

"Interested, are we?"

Lust was suddenly thick in the air; being around Lucien, it was very much a feeling I'd learned to identify. When the incubus part of him decided to rear its head, things tended to get very, very interesting. My cock was oh-so-very interested, and I wished like hell for my pants to cover it up, but my brain was still mostly engaged.

"Intrigued."

Sabaan licked his lips, but Nikolas moved toward him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I told you: he's Lucien's. Unfuckable. Unavailable."

Some of the heat in Sabaan's gaze dissipated, but the lust was still heavy in the room. "So... unavailable?"

I nodded. "Lucien and I only play together, with the exception of a few partners."

Sabaan grunted, the lust lifting almost instantly. "Make yourselves at home. I've got work to do. Nikolas? You know where the robes are if you want them."

At that, Sabaan turned and walked away, retreating behind the curtain again. As he walked away, I couldn't help but notice the long tail that protruded from the top of his extremely low-slung jeans. I was used to tails, being around the werewolves, but Sabaan's tail didn't seem to have a bit of hair.

I wondered...

"Stop perving, princess, or I'll have to find you a bib."

"Shut. Up."

He swatted me on the ass as he started to walk away. "Hungry?"

I hadn't finished my soup or sandwich earlier, and the fruit had definitely not gone far. I followed after him. "I could eat."

"Well, it won't be anything great. Whatever Sabaan has on hand, which normally consists of things to be fried. But, hey, not like any of us have to worry about clogged arteries anymore."

We walked into a modern kitchen equipped with stainless steel counters and appliances. The only splashes of color were a few hand towels lying about and some very colorful, yet oddly disturbing, abstract paintings on the wall. Nikolas opened the door to the refrigerator; there was a variety of cases of soda on the shelves but nothing else. He opened the freezer compartment and I peered in over his shoulder.

Brown bulk bags were stacked on the shelves; the only thing distinguishing the packages was the black printing on the end of the bag. Nikolas grunted and I laughed. "So... junk food?"

He nodded and pointed off toward the island counter. "There's a built-in fryer; turn it on medium high and hand me the basket."

I walked over the island, and sure enough, there was a custom fryer inset into the counter. The basket was perched on a little hook to keep it out of the oil. I found the knob and turned the fryer on, grabbing the basket before moving back to Nikolas at the freezer.

When I held it out for him, he shook his head and grabbed a bag instead. "You hold, I'll fill."

He then proceeded to fill the basket with different kinds of chicken and other breaded and so-totally-fattening finger foods. With the basket full of frozen food, he grinned and put the bags back into the freezer and shut the door. He then took the basket from me and walked over to the fryer.

The idea of naked boy parts and hot, popping oil in close proximity made me cringe. "Uh... There an apron around here? Or... something?"

"Fraid I'll burn my balls off?"

I rolled my eyes. "Well, the thought *did* cross my mind."

"I'll be fine. Trust me." He pointed to the cabinets. "Be helpful and grab a couple plates. Paper towels are on a hook inside the cabinet near the sink."

I found the plates and lined them with a couple paper towels before setting them on the counter. "You seem to know your way around here pretty well."

Nikolas shrugged. "Been in trouble enough times to consider it a second home."

The basket went into the hot oil and Nikolas turned and walked to the sink, filling a glass of water. He set the glass on the counter when he finished, but didn't turn around. Something was on his mind, but I wasn't about to push it. Balls be damned, I moved to the fryer and checked on the food.

Nikolas pushed me out of the way. "You burn *your* balls and that damned death order'll be right back on my head. If it's been revoked, anyway."

"I told you it was," I said, a little offended that he'd think I'd lie about something so important.

"Oh, don't get your balls in a twist. You know what I mean," he said. "The order might have been rescinded by Lucien, but until that order gets broadcast to every single team member, I still consider it live."

A few minutes later, the food was drained and dumped onto one plate and Nikolas hissed and cursed as he picked through it, attempting to separate everything into neat little piles. "Shit! That's hot!"

"That would have been my guess, you know, the frying and hot oil and all."

"Smart ass." He turned and went to the refrigerator again, pulling out bottles of condiments. After filling a few bowls with different things, he arranged them all on a plate. "Grab the heart attack on a platter and come on."

I grabbed the food and followed after him, admiring his ass along the way.

He pulled back a curtain at the far corner of the main room. There was a queen-sized bed full of pillows and thick, heavy comforters and throw blankets, with a bench seat at the end, an entertainment center equipped with state of the art electronics and a big screen TV, and a couple of chairs. Nikolas set his plate down on the bench. I set my plate next to his and looked around.

It was nice; oddly private.

"So, how 'bout a movie? Action flick or bad B movies? Monsters, aliens... vampires?"

"No werewolves?"

"Well, yeah... but those are really bad B movies. Have you seen the costuming in that shit? I swear to God, I have *never* looked like some of those beasts—even on a bad day."

I laughed. "Just pick something."

Nikolas grinned mischievously and opened a DVD case. After he got everything set up, he pointed to the bed. "Make yourself at home and dig in. Want a beer or something?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

He disappeared behind the curtain and I rolled over, grabbing a remote from the edge of the bench. I turned on the TV and pushed play, watching absently as preview after preview flashed on the screen. Something cold and wet landed right in the crack of my ass and I gasped, reaching behind me and looking up.

Nikolas stood at the edge of the bed, a heated look in his eyes. He crawled onto the bed, slowly, his gaze never leaving mine. I rose up on an elbow, trying to anticipate his actions. That was the thing about Nikolas, though. One could never know exactly what he was thinking—what he was planning on doing.

Probably the reason he did so well in the dungeon. The thought of all the things he did down there flashed in my head and I groaned. "What are you doing, Nikol—"

"It's not about sex. But it's... something." He reached out to hand me a cold, sweating bottle. "Beer."

I swallowed hard and took it from him. "Thanks."

He moved toward me a little more and when he was close enough, he dragged the butt of the ice-cold bottle along my thigh. He paused, just above my cock. "You and Lucien ever get... kinky?"

"Guess it depends on your version of kink."

"Pretty sure *my* version is different from most everyone." He swept the bottle along the length of my cock, which was by now, damn near fully erect. "I have this incredible urge to drink my beer off you—out of you. Tease you with the cold of the bottle, the heat of my mouth... soak that pretty cock with beer and lick you clean. And then fuck you with the bottle. Still half full, letting the beer run out your ass..."

I had absolutely no idea what to say to that, but my ass clenched at the thought, cock bouncing in hope of some attention. Damned thing had a mind of its own.

"You trust me enough to play with me?"

"I think it's pretty clear that I trust you."

"To play my way?"

My breath was coming faster. "It's not that simple. You know I'm committed to—"

"S just a simple yes or no question."

My skin suddenly felt as if it was on fire. Each and every hair on my body stood on end and a bead of sweat trickled from my hairline. When had it gotten so hot in here? Nikolas' beer bottle moved up the center of my belly and when he reached my chest, he rubbed it hard against one of my nipples.

"God, Nikolas," I groaned. "If things were different, maybe. But they're not. And they never will be."

Nikolas heaved a sigh and flopped down on the bed beside me. "You know, you and Lucien are a lot alike. Neither one of you seem to understand that play is play and has nothing to do with your relationship with each other."

"But it does, Nikolas." I reached out and set my beer on the plate with the bowls so it wouldn't fall over, and moved closer to Nikolas, resting my chin on his shoulder. "You want to know something?"

"Probably not."

I ignored him and kept on. "It wasn't so long ago that I worked at Rave and relied on one-night stands from out-of-towners to keep me going. Never wanted to chance some guy getting clingy with me and showing up, hovering every night. But, even though I got off... I wanted more. Then Lucien waltzed in and turned my world on end."

"Never figured you for one-night stands."

"Oh, I played with Jack and Mike, but it was different, you know? I knew there wasn't ever going to be any issues with our relationship. We were true friends with benefits."

"And you can't have that here?"

"That's not really it," I said. "It's just... Hell, I don't know."

"You afraid you might have too many friends who expect something from you?"

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe I'm just... tired."

"Of sex?" He laughed. "Oh, princess, if that's the case, you're in the wrong damned coven."

"Not of sex, really. Tired of fighting the damned cravings that I can't control. Tired of feeling like I'm putting my relationship with Lucien on the line by acting on impulse. Tired of that look I get when I kiss Xander goodnight or goodbye... Tired of feeling like I'm constantly fucking things up."

"The last year's been hard on you, hasn't it?"

"It wasn't what I expected." I reached up and grabbed my beer, taking a long swig. "Maybe I just had visions of grandeur. Thought love was all that was needed to carry things through."

"Don't ask me. I know nothing about... *love*." He turned his head slightly. "The only love I know is loyalty to the pack. I feel something for you, but it's a pack thing: loyalty, respect."

"So, you came after me the other night out of loyalty, respect?"

Nikolas nodded. "I had this urge to... Fuck, it sounds so stupid, now!"

"Just tell me, please."

"Like there was this part of you that was struggling to get free. Like it wanted out, but didn't have a clue as to how." He shook his head. "Thought if I drew blood, tried to be the alpha, that whatever I felt would see the challenge and fight back."

"And shift?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "And I won't lie to you. What I smelled that night, what I sensed in you? It's still there. But damn it, don't ask me to tell you any more, because I just *can't*. Just know that I'm sorry I hurt you. Never meant to hurt you."

"I know. Just needed to hear it from you, directly. All of it."

"You're more forgiving than you should be."

"I think I've had time to digest it," I said. "Lucien will come around."

"Wasn't Lucien I was worried about; we're friends and if I'd had the chance to talk to him in person, I don't think things would have ended up like this. But goddamned Caleb... Always offering up his fucking opinion."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think Caleb's been put in his place."

Nikolas turned to look at me. "What?"

"When Lucien called off the order and told Caleb to let the rest of the team know? Caleb lost it; defied Lucien, openly, right in front of the rest of the team."

"No shit? He's got more brass than I ever gave him credit for."

"More like an extreme dislike of you."

"Little shit's been trying to get rid of me since Lucien took over the coven." He shifted and grabbed the remote to pause the long-forgotten DVD, then grabbed a bite of something off the plate. "Luckily, Lucien knows I'm not as insane as he paints me to be. Close, but not quite."

"When I first met Caleb, he said you were one step away from being Lycan Master. Is that true?"

He swirled a chicken strip in the bowl of honey mustard. "He tell you *why* I'm not?"

"Your sadist nature..."

"Right." Nikolas snorted and shook his head. "More like Caleb throwing a fit. You want to know a little history there?"

"You know I like history."

He pointed to the plate of food. "You have to eat while I talk, though. Sabaan doesn't give a shit how much food is cooked around here, as long as it's all eaten."

I rooted around the plate and found some stuffed jalapenos. "Start talking."

"When Lucien took over here, the Lycans had been without a leader for four, maybe five months. The whole pack was in chaos because Steven, our old Master, had been killed in a car accident and Malik had claimed control of everything. Our money, our people, our kids... When anyone attempted to put him out of power, someone's kid died. That was a loss we weren't willing to risk, so we made due and sent a messenger to the Council, hoping like hell they'd do something to intervene."

"And in comes Lucien."

"He was so naïve in the beginning. He came in under the radar, so to speak, hiding his powers, making his way through the coven to find out what was really going on."

"I have a hard time with thinking of Lucien as naïve."

"Well, in a sense, the coven he came from was—perfect. He had a Master he loved and respected, it was highly organized, and he was in a pretty powerful position as Lead Enforcer there. But killing rogues and leading covens are *very* different things." He paused and took a sip of his beer. "When it was all said and done, and Malik was out of the picture, Lucien and I had a long talk about the state of the coven and the pack."

He paused again and when he didn't offer any more, I nudged him. "And?"

"We had big plans for the coven as a whole. I had big plans for the future of the pack. But you know what they say, huh? The best laid plans and all that..."

"What happened?"

"Caleb knew about my time in the dungeon—"

"In Malik's dungeon?"

Nikolas sighed. "I did what I had to do. To keep close to him. To be in the know..."

"Friends close, enemies closer," I said quietly. "What about Lucien? Did he know?"

He nodded. "He knew, and he understood the situation. But Caleb? He didn't get it at all. He only saw me, saw my past, and saw a monster. When it came time for me to formally take over the pack, Caleb threw a fit. He ranted and raved so much, scared the pack so much, that it forced Lucien's hand."

"I think I'm starting to see a pattern here."

"There was no way I could take over after that. We staged a challenge with the next alpha in the pack—oddly enough, someone Caleb pointed out—and I threw the fight to make Xander leader instead."

"Damn."

"And now, the pack has a new leader that refuses to step up to the job."

"Excuse me?"

"The pack is yours, Peter. You fought Xander over a year ago and earned your place as alpha. You're so much more of a leader than he'll ever be—"

"I will not take this from him!"

Nikolas sighed and shook his head. "If *you* don't, someone else will. Don't you understand that? He's weak—"

"When will you all get it through your fucking heads that Xander isn't—"

"A submissive leader." Nikolas lowered his voice. "Peter, *come on*, see the situation as everyone else does. The only reason Xander is leader of the pack is because Caleb willed it. He didn't want a monster like me in that position, so he chose a mirror image of himself to put there instead. Weak, submissive, always looking to find a place, always needing someone else to tell him he's doing the right thing..."

"Enough!"

"Just something to think about, okay?"

"No, it's not," I said. "What the pack needs is a *Lycan* as their leader. Not me. Not a human who has no idea of what their best interests are."

Nikolas snorted. "Human, huh? You're more in denial than Lucien is."

"I'm done talking."

"Figured so. Happens when people tell you things you don't want to hear." At that, he huffed and picked up the remote, shifting away from me. "Eat and watch the damned movie."

I grabbed a piece of chicken and took a bite, but it felt like lead when it hit my stomach. I grabbed a pillow and a blanket and pulled it up over me, turning my back to Nikolas. "Enjoy."

Chapter Nine

I awoke with a start to find Sabaan sitting in a chair right next to the bed, feet propped on the edge, legs spread, and his tail flicking the ring in my right nipple back and forth. Politely, I attempted to swat his tail away, but it only drew a bigger grin from him.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. They're pretty."

I blinked hard and looked around. The TV was off, the food was gone. Nikolas was on his stomach, sleeping soundly. I scrubbed a hand over my face. "What time is it?"

"Almost eight."

I groaned. It'd been a long time since I was up before two in the afternoon. "Thanks for letting us crash, Sabaan. I appreciate it."

"Oh, it's no problem. You're welcome any time." He let his tail move down my chest and in seconds, it was brushing my balls. "Just a touch?"

Without a word, I shifted away from Nikolas just enough to give Sabaan room, and his tail immediately wrapped around my cock. The heat of him wrapped around me was so intense that I let out a soft cry. He stroked me a few times and I felt the tip of his tail slide beneath my balls and brush my hole. I gasped and shook my head, reaching down and grabbing his tail.

"No, not that."

Sabaan groaned and his tail pulsed in my hand. "Are you sure I can't talk you into playing?"

I was so very tempted. An image flashed in my head of bending Sabaan's pretty ass over the bed and fucking the hell out of him... with his tail working its magic on my ass, but... Christ. I wished Lucien was here.

"As much as it pains me to say no..." I cleared my throat as his tail stroked me again.

"Lucien is so very lucky." He released me suddenly and as he shifted in the chair, his tail swished back and forth over the arm of the chair. "Pity he's so unavailable."

I pulled the blanket back over me and Nikolas, willing my cock to behave. "He's not all that unavailable, you know."

"For most of the coven? No. But I'm on his *do not associate with* list." The yellow of Sabaan's eyes seemed to glow in the dimly lit room. "So... you're the one Nikolas was beating himself up over. That's kind of funny. I wasn't expecting an alpha."

"An alpha? I don't know what you mean."

"You've got this aura that's just—explosive. So many colors and swirls. Pretty, really, but definitely powerful. Part of me wonders what attracted Lucien to you first. That pretty face... or all that untapped power."

His words hit me hard, but I struggled to remain calm. "It doesn't matter."

"Is that right?" He sighed and twirled a length of hair between his fingers. "Whatever makes you happy."

We needed a change of subject. "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but *what* are you?"

His eyes widened. "Oh, you mean Nikolas didn't tell you?"

I shook my head. "No."

Sabaan stood and bowed. "I... am a demon, of course. A demon of lust and power. An—"

"Incubus." I finished for him, rising up a little in the bed.

He grinned, those tiny fangs becoming a little longer. "I'm impressed."

"Lust is very familiar to me by now. As is the incubus." I gave a soft laugh. "But unlike Lucien, there's not a bit of vampire in you."

"Only when I'm lucky."

I found myself laughing. "Why haven't I met you before now?"

"Lucien isn't exactly fond of me."

I shook my head in confusion. "Why not?"

"Let's just say... he has issues with that whole *incubus* thing. I represent a part of himself that he's not exactly comfortable with." He shrugged. "It was mutually decided that I'd stay out of the way."

Lucien having issues with his incubus side wasn't exactly news to me. He'd worried for the longest time that it was the incubus part of him that had me falling for him. No matter how far we'd come in the past year, it wouldn't surprise me if he still had a few doubts lingering. But to just refuse to be around someone because they reminded you of a certain part of yourself that you didn't like? Hell, that was like a werewolf refusing to be around the rest of the pack for fear it might make him want to shift.

Sabaan crawled onto the bed and rested on his hands and knees above me. "It's been that way for years. I'm used to it."

"And you don't want to be a part of the coven?"

"At this time? No. There's too much of a split where species are concerned. Maybe... if things were different..."

I'd been seeing the split with my own eyes and *knew* that changes needed to be made. "I'm going to work on that, I promise. And when it gets better, will you give it some thought?"

"You trust me enough to invite me into the coven, yet you don't know anything about me." He trailed a long black fingernail down my cheek. "You need to work on not trusting people implicitly just by their word alone—especially in this world."

"The fact that Nikolas trusts you is enough for me."

"You have a way with him," he said, glancing at Nikolas' sleeping form. "He lets his guard down with you more than he ever has with anyone else. If I didn't know better, I might be jealous."

I reached up and poked him playfully in the chest. "You got eyes for Nikolas?"

He looked down at me, amused. "Honey, I've got eyes for everyone."

"I think you're beautiful, Sabaan." The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Sabaan sank down between my legs, the weight of him making my cock jump. He cocked his head to the side. "Humor me with a kiss?"

"Oh, I don't—"

"Just a kiss," he said softly. "My dick might get hard, but I promise to be good."

His hair swept down over his shoulder and the ends brushed my chest. I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair, amazed at how soft it was. Not as soft as Xander's, of course. No one's was that soft. Sabaan's eyes closed and he nuzzled against my hand. I cupped the back of his neck and pulled him toward me, rising up to meet him halfway. The moment our lips met, I knew I was screwed.

Sabaan's moan vibrated through me and his tongue pushed insistently between my lips. I hesitated as that forked tongue swept against mine, not quite knowing how to kiss him back. His arms went around me and he pulled back a little. "Just like you'd kiss anyone else."

I caught his face in my hands and pulled him in close, teasing at his bottom lip. His tongue met mine again and I opened for him, gasping as he kissed me hard and deep, stealing my breath. It could have never been just a kiss. I found myself wanting to touch him everywhere.

My hands moved down his sides and around his back, and when I went to grab his ass to pull him against me, I touched the base of his tail. Sabaan's eyes went wide and hot and wet heat shot between us. He shuddered a few times and shook his head. "Oh my God... I feel like a teenager on his first date. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I moved a palm over his lower back, and was sorely tempted to touch his tail again. "I take it that's a sensitive spot for you."

"Extremely."

I slid my hand lower and touched tentatively at the base of his tail. He gasped and thrust his hips against me. I paused. "Can I?"

He nodded and buried his face into my shoulder. "Please..."

I stroked the base of his tail just as I would if it were a dick. Except the base of his tail was twice as thick as any cock I'd ever laid eyes on. Sabaan humped at me and moaned and keened and it wasn't long before he was coming again and sinking tiny fangs into my shoulder.

"Oh, Sabaan," I whispered. "I look forward to getting to know you better."

"Just don't touch my tail in public. I'd hate people to think I walked around creaming my jeans every few minutes."

Nikolas glared at me as we got dressed and I did my best to ignore the way his gaze was making me want to shove him up against the wall and fuck him 'til he smiled. But I played right against his pouting by pretending that nothing at all was wrong and all I was concerned with was my boot laces.

Surprisingly, my clothes weren't even damp. And they didn't smell like I'd had to walk through over a foot of sewer water, either. I stood as I finished lacing my second boot. "Ready?"

All I got in response was a growl.

"I'll take that as a *you're pissed off and don't want to talk right now*. Nice to know I can still evoke that in you."

He jumped down into the grim, concrete tunnel and started walking. I kept my distance for a while, keeping my mouth shut this time about the rats and the roaches and the smell. But after a while, I walked even with Nikolas, being sure that I brushed against him every now and then. He'd grunt and growl and move away and I'd just smile.

Goading him was probably wrong, but if he wasn't going to tell me what he was pissed about, then he fucking deserved it. But, even through it all, he remained silent until we reached the parking lot. And then, he just sort of exploded.

"I can't fucking believe you!" He blocked my way to the car, snarling. "You refuse to talk about how we can make things better with the pack, totally shoot me down when I want to connect with you a little... And then you fuck around with *him* while I'm sleeping next to you?"

"Are you *jealous*?"

"Fuck you."

"You are, aren't you?" I laughed and stepped toward him. "Why Nikolas, I never thought of you as the jealous type."

He turned and stomped toward the car. "Just unlock the goddamned door and let's go."

I followed him around to the passenger's side and leaned against the door. "Why the *hell* would you be jealous of Sabaan?"

"I swear to God if you don't open this motherfucking door, I'll open it myself and Xander will be *very* pissed that he'll need a new door."

I frowned and hit the button on the key fob before walking around to the driver's side. As I slid into the seat, fear shot through me. Not fear of Nikolas, but fear that I'd done something to damage our still unsteady friendship. I started the car, but didn't put it in gear.

"Look... I'm sorry."

He stared out his window, shaking his head. "I'm not so much jealous as I am *hurt*." He sat forward in his seat, glancing at me for only a few seconds. "You made this big speech about how you were afraid that any more people in your bed might cost you your relationship with Lucien, and then you..."

"I didn't plan on anything happening," I said. "And really, the only thing that happened is that we kissed and Sabaan got off."

"I guess I just thought... Hell, I don't know what I thought."

It dawned on me what this whole thing was about and I realized just what an asshole I'd been. What a shitty thing I'd done. "You thought a little play between us would give us some sort of bond, some sort of connection. Something that was just between you and me?"

He nodded. "Since Sabaan seems to have gotten what I was looking for, I feel like you chose whatever he had to offer instead. And it fucking kills me to admit that."

I leaned over the center console and attempted to wrap my arms around his shoulders. He shrugged away and I let him go. "I'm sorry, Nikolas."

"Don't want your fucking pity, Peter. Just *drive*."

"Pity is the last thing I feel right now. I feel like a real asshole."

"Good."

I sat back in my seat and turned to face him, leaning my head against the headrest. "What I said about my relationship with Lucien wasn't just talk. I do get scared that if I touch one more person he'll say '*okay, I've had enough*'. Yet I seem to be constantly finding myself in someone else's arms on impulse or because I feel a connection. What I do to him isn't fair. I expect him to be monogamous to me—to a point—yet I can't seem to reciprocate. I'm committed to him, want to be with him more than anything, but in this coven—"

"It's impossible, Peter. In this coven, monogamy is only a word, not a practice." Nikolas glanced at me. "Didn't you know how important sex and touch were when you signed on for this?"

"I knew, I saw." I shook my head. "But for some reason I never thought I'd be at the center at some of that. I guess I just thought people would respect my relationship with Lucien enough to not go there."

"It's because they respect you—and him—that they go there. Consider it an offering, of sorts."

"That go for you, too?"

"I know it doesn't seem like it, but I respect the hell out of you."

The look on his face was still so hurt, so dejected. I shifted to my knees and leaned over, kissing his brow. "I'm sorry for what I did, Nikolas. I can't take it back, can't change it, but I can tell you right now that I'd never, ever choose Sabaan over you."

He leaned his head against my shoulder for a moment, but the gesture wasn't lost on me. I'd been forgiven, sort of, but there would still be amends that I'd need to make for things to be right. If it meant having another person in my bed, in my personal circle, then so be it. I'd make Nikolas know exactly how I felt, exactly how much I valued him and his offering. But not now, not tonight. Tonight, we had to go to Lucien and work things out.

"Speaking of Sabaan," he said quietly. "You need to shower and burn those clothes before you see Lucien—preferably before we get to the house."

"Why would I do that?" I sat back in the driver's seat and buckled my seat belt. "I may be scared of losing him, but hiding things from him would just put that on the fast track."

"Trust me, keeping this from him would be in everyone's best interest."

Simon met Nikolas and me as soon as we walked in the door. His look of relief soon turned to worry. "Come on, we'll get you cleaned up."

"No, I'm fine. Where's Lucien?"

"I'll get you fresh clothes. You can—"

I caught him by his shoulders, meeting his gaze. "Where's Lucien?"

He hesitated for a few moments, but finally sighed. "He's in the library."

"Thank you, Simon." I turned to Nikolas, who was leaned up against the wall, twirling a cigarette between his fingers. "Let's get this over with, huh?"

"After you, princess."

We started down the corridor leading to the library, and I glanced at Nikolas. "Wish you'd stop calling me princess."

"Why? It fits."

"It does not."

"I like it."

"I don't."

"Ask me if I care?"

I shut my mouth and kept walking, knowing that Nikolas could go on arguing about nothing for hours. I didn't know which was worse. Having Nikolas back or having him gone. He could be such an asshole when he wanted to be. As we neared the library, Nikolas slowed.

"What's wrong?"

"You should have changed."

"I told you, I'm—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you fucking told me. But goddamn it, Peter, sometimes you just have to do what you have to do."

"And I have to not hide things from him. I know you don't understand that."

Nikolas scrubbed a hand over his face and up through his hair. "And sometimes, it's not all about you."

I raised a brow, turning to face him completely. "What do you mean by that?"

His eyes met mine, the look on his face dreadful. "I broke a promise to Lucien last night. Taking you with me to Sabaan's."

Him wanting me to change my clothes, to rid myself completely of Sabaan's scent... It suddenly made more sense than I wanted it to. "Damn it, Nikolas! Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Would it have made any difference?"

I wanted to throw my hands in the air and just scream. I didn't know—couldn't say. But at that moment, I knew it was too late to do anything, because the library door had opened and Lucien stood staring at the both of us. I didn't know how long he'd been there, what all he'd heard, but I had this sudden urge to wrap my arms around him and apologize for everything I'd ever done to put that look of disappointment on his face.

"Lucien."

I started toward him, but he held a hand up, shaking his head. "Don't even try it."

His voice was so tight, so full of anger. That usually didn't stop me where Lucien was concerned, but tonight it did. There seemed to be so much just hanging by a thread. Lucien looked from me to Nikolas, then turned and disappeared back into the library. Nikolas was soon at my side, urging me to go with him into the library.

The door slammed shut as soon as we were inside, but when I turned to look, no one was there. That Lucien was pissed enough to use his powers was a very, very bad sign. I looked around the room and found Lucien standing in front of the unlit stone fireplace, arms crossed over his chest. He was dressed in full tactical gear and I had a sneaking suspicion that had Nikolas and I not come home when we had, Lucien would've been out searching.

Instead of standing beside me and waiting, Nikolas crossed the room and opened a hidden panel in the bookshelves. He got out something large and round and walked to stand behind Lucien. "My friend..."

Lucien turned his head slightly, but didn't turn to face Nikolas. "Friend?"

Nikolas went to his knees behind Lucien and held up both hands, the large round object balanced in his upturned palms. He let out a deep sigh and bowed his head. "I have sinned against you many times and I am here to make amends. I offer you my flesh, my blood, and my pain as a small token of my apology."

Lucien turned to face him then, looking down at the object in Nikolas' hands. "You do not want me to take that right now."

"Lucien, please..."

"Very well." Lucien took the object from Nikolas and with a flick of his wrist, the large round object became long and thin. Like a whip.

Oh. Shit.

"I don't—"

Nikolas shot me a glare that shut my mouth faster than anything. Just like Lucien fighting Antoine on his own turf for the first time, this was one of those rituals. Something that had been practiced long before I'd ever come along; something that had to be done because an apology just wasn't seen as real without a little bloodshed.

I backed up against the closed door of the library and crossed my arms over my chest, steeling myself for whatever was about to happen. Nikolas rose silently and stripped off his shirt as he walked to the fireplace. The shirt dropped to the floor and Nikolas braced himself against the stone. He spread his legs a little to keep steady, took a deep breath, and blew it out very slowly.

Lucien walked to the bookshelves and slipped on a pair of gloves and something else from the hidden panel, but I couldn't make out what it could be before he put it in his pocket. He moved back to stand behind Nikolas, far enough away that he could wield the whip with ease. Lucien gave the whip a few test swings. Without any sort of warning, the whip sang through the air and connected with Nikolas' flesh. Nikolas didn't flinch and it wasn't until the fifth strike that he let out a sound that was somewhere between a groan and a cry.

And Lucien only struck harder.

On the tenth strike, Nikolas was shaking and blood was running in steady streams down his back, onto his pants, and it looked like there was a small puddle forming on the floor at his feet. Lucien let the whip drop to the floor, dug out whatever he'd put into his pocket, and stepped closer to Nikolas.

I slowly left my spot at the door, moving along the wall until I could see what Lucien was doing. In his hand, there was a small jar and he was smearing a paste over Nikolas' left shoulder. Nikolas grunted and let out a sharp exhale through gritted teeth.

Whatever was in that paste seemed to hurt him more than the damned whipping itself.

Lucien put the jar away and picked up Nikolas' shirt off the floor, wiping his gloved hands on it before handing it to Nikolas. "I'll be down in a little while."

Nikolas nodded absently and turned and walked across the room. The door was opened and closed quietly as he made his exit. Lucien stripped off the gloves and tossed them on a nearby table. He glanced at me before moving to the desk.

"I'm glad you had such a good time last night."

"I'd have rather been home—with you."

"Oh, don't even go there." He growled and spun around to face me. "How *dare* you come into our house covered in that demon's filth?"

"I wasn't going to hide it from you."

"There are some things that I never wish to know. If you insist on fucking every goddamned thing that walks in your path, at least have the decency not to flaunt it in my face."

"I didn't fuck him."

"Right."

"Lucien, I swear! I didn't—"

"You know, I have put up with a lot of shit from you, but this... this I can't." He shook his head, turning away from me. "I'd like you to do some thinking—figure out where you stand. Figure out if you want to be with me or be surrounded by dogs or demons or whatever the fuck else fits your fuck of the moment."

His words hurt, but I knew that I didn't really have a lot of ground to stand on. Everything I'd been worried about—all the times of touching and playing—it was going to cost me dearly. But that one word seemed to hurt the most: *dog*.

My throat was so tight it hurt. "Please stop calling our wolves dogs. *Please*."

Lucien turned to look at me, the anger on his face so damn clear. "And why would I do that? Act like dogs, fuck like dogs...must be dogs." He grabbed something off the desk and started for the door. "I'm done with you right now."

Chapter Ten

The slam of the door seemed to echo throughout the library. I stood in that same spot, hoping, I guess, that maybe Lucien would come right back in. But he didn't. And the longer that door didn't open, the more it settled in how much I'd really, really fucked up.

I walked over to the fireplace and knelt to pick up the whip. Bullwhip, to be precise. I carried the bloodied whip to the table and as I put it down, I noticed the gloves.

What the hell had been in that paste that hurt Nikolas so much?

I picked one of them up and sniffed it. The scent burned my nose and made me sneeze. I dropped the glove and bent to pick it up off the floor. The moment I grabbed hold of it, I hissed and dropped it again. I swept my hand over my shirt to get the paste off, but it only seemed to smear it. And fuck did it burn.

I hurried to the door, down the hall toward the kitchen, hoping that dishwashing liquid would get it off. I nearly knocked Simon over as I burst through the kitchen door. "Simon! Help me get this shit off!"

He grabbed my hand and pulled me to the sink, pouring soap over my hand. "Where did you get this?"

I grit my teeth as he scrubbed my hand. "Off one of Lucien's gloves... Long story."

"Oh, Peter..."

It felt like my skin was coming off with the paste. "Just get it off!"

He scrubbed, rinsed, put on more soap, and repeated the process several times. Finally, he grabbed a towel, wet it, and wrapped it around my hand. "Hold still; I'll get some ice."

My hand throbbed as if all the blood in my body had suddenly rushed to that one damned spot. Simon came back a few moments later with ice and wrapped the towel around my hand so that the ice was secured. "How long do you think *this* will take to heal?"

"At the rate you've been healing? Probably not long. You don't have any other cuts or wounds that the paste could have seeped into? Did you get it anywhere else?"

"No, I don't think so. I got it on my shirt, though, maybe on my jeans."

"Let's get them off," he said. "And then can you tell me where this glove is so I can get it cleaned up?"

I nodded and stood and with Simon's help, I was soon rid of my clothes. He put them in a garbage bag and I raised a brow. "Are you throwing them away?"

"I'll never get the wol...uh, *paste* out enough for you to be able to wear it again. It'll seep right through the fabric." He took me by the arm. "And you got this where?"

"The library."

"I'll take care of it. You should get a shower. Do you need help?"

With my hand still burning like it was, I knew I probably did, but I just wanted to be alone. I shook my head. "I'll manage."

"Just call if you need me." He smiled, handed me my boots, and sent me on my way.

I stood outside the kitchen for the longest time, boots in one hand, the other hand held close to my chest. Someone stopped in front of me a while later and touched my shoulder. I looked up to see Adrian, who had a look of concern on his face.

"Everything okay?"

Nodding, I turned and started down the corridor. Once I got to the bedrooms, I paused again. Xander's on one side, mine and Lucien's on the other. I wasn't sure where Lucien had gone, but I hoped like hell he wasn't in the bedroom. I just couldn't face him, naked... dirty.

After a quick security scan, that thankfully worked on the first pass, I opened the bedroom door to find it empty. Relief settled through me and I dropped my boots and went straight for the bathroom. The shower started, I went to the sink and unwrapped the wet, dripping towel from my hand. The skin was tight and peeling, but it wasn't as raw and sore as it had been only a short time before.

Finally, I made my way to the shower. I washed, rinsed, then sank down onto the floor of the shower. Back against the wall, arms braced on my knees, and my head back, I let the steam and heat wash through me—let the water carry my tears and my stupidity down the drain.

I'd been wandering around the mansion for what seemed like hours. It was getting late and the house was somewhat full of people. Mostly vampires who lived on the property on their way out somewhere, or coming in from somewhere else. I hadn't seen Lucien since the library and I didn't know if he'd gone to the club or what.

One thing that was a constant: every single person I encountered was respectful, yet hesitant. But it didn't matter what I said to them, they were all in a hurry to move on. I was beginning to see a pattern and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"There you are!"

Xander's voice made me turn back toward the library. Thank God. Someone who wouldn't be quick to get rid of me. "Hey, Xander."

"I have been looking for you for nearly an hour. What are you doing? Walking in circles?"

I shrugged and started toward him. "Probably."

He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tight. "It'll be okay, baby. I promise."

"I don't know, Xander. I really, really fucked up."

He held me at arm's length and met my eyes. "We all fuck up at some point. Are you hungry?"

I hadn't even thought of food. Last thing I'd eaten was at Sabaan's and it had not set well. "No, but if you are, go ahead."

Xander threw an arm over my shoulder and urged me to walk with him. "Come on. I'll make you some tea."

When we made it to the kitchen, he set right to work, filling the kettle and putting it on the stove, digging in the refrigerator. He seemed to be in a hurry as he seasoned a steak and dug out a skillet. I watched him for a while, my heart sinking just a little more when I realized he was dressed for going out.

He set my tea in front of me and frowned as he noticed my hand. It was still peeling and a little discolored, but it didn't hurt anymore. "What happened?"

"Got into *something* and it burned."

Xander took my hand and examined it cautiously before bringing it up to smell my palm. He looked up at me in shock. "Where the hell did you come in contact with wolfsbane?"

"Wolf's what?"

"Wolfsbane," he said. "It's a plant... uh, flower, actually. It doesn't bother most people, but it's poisonous to werewo..."

I jerked my hand back from him, realizing the connection he was about to make. "It was nothing."

Xander held my gaze for a long while. "Well, if you get into it again, use gasoline or turpentine to get it off. It'll cut right through the oil in the plant."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, picking up my cup. I took a sip and sighed. "Thanks for the tea. It's good."

"Hard to fuck up tea." He went to the stove and turned on the burner, waiting for the pan to get hot. "You sure you don't want something? There's another steak in the fridge."

"No, I'm fine."

I watched as he stripped off his shirt and draped it across a chair near the bar, then grabbed an odd-shaped clip from a drawer to put his hair up. It amazed me that all that black silk would stay in place, but when a few tendrils of hair slid down in the front, over his shoulder and just over his nipple—the one I'd claimed and pierced—I nearly dropped my cup. He'd trimmed the hair on his chest, thinned some of it out just around the nipples so his piercings would stand out more.

Amber eyes met mine and the corner of Xander's mouth turned up just a little. "You're looking at me like you want to eat me."

I moved off the stool and walked around the island, shoving the pan off the burner before going to him. "You going to the club?"

He hesitated, throat working as he swallowed. "Yeah..."

"But not for work?"

"No."

I crowded him, moved in close enough that he'd have no choice but to move back. Only his back was already to the counter. I laid a hand on his chest and pushed him back, dragging my fingers through that thick black hair from chest to belly as he let me lie him back over the island counter. It dawned on me then, just how close we were, just how much I'd grown used to him being at my side.

How much I truly loved him.

How, no matter who or what he found later on, I'd never let him go completely. Something about that thought made me pause, as if there were more to it that I just couldn't seem to grasp. But instead of making him stay in that awkward position while I thought it all out, I bent down and kissed him. He opened to me so fully, so completely, that it made me ache and wonder what had gone so wrong between me and Lucien that we'd lost this.

I broke the kiss. Gave another to peck to his chin, smiling at the little goatee he'd let start growing beneath his bottom lip. "Have some fun for me, okay?"

His fingers came up to smooth my hair from my face, his expression sympathetic. "You going to be okay?"

I nodded and stood, offering a hand to pull him up. "Yeah, I think I'm going to take my tea to the library, find a book to read. Or something."

"Call me if you need anything," he said. "I mean it."

I started for the door, cup in hand. And then it dawned on me that there was one person I hadn't seen in all my roaming—besides Lucien. "Hey, Xander? What happened with Caleb last night?"

"You know, I'm not real sure because Lucien sort of went all vampy and made us werewolves go away. I'm pretty sure Caleb was hurting for the rest of the night, because he sure as fuck screamed for what seemed like forever."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. "But you haven't seen him since?"

Xander shook his head. "No. And after what he did? Not sure I want to."

"Really?"

"There are some things you just don't do. Some lines you don't dare cross. Caleb? He ran right over all those lines last night. If it'd been one of the wolves, they'd have been gone from the pack."

A flash of lightning drew my attention from the time-weathered pages of one of Lucien's old books to the large bay window that was normally covered in steel. I set the book aside and went to the window, looking out across the sky. Another bolt of lightning flashed, sending electric fingers sprawling in a jagged arch.

So beautiful, yet so dangerous.

The next flash of lightning drew my attention to the trees in the yard and beyond. Old, massive oak trees swayed back and forth as the wind began to pick up. The motion was almost hypnotic. Rain began to pelt against the glass, sounding like tiny pebbles being thrown by the wind. There was an undeniable energy to the storm.

And it damn well fit my mood.

I wondered, vaguely, if things would've been different if on the night of the hunt I'd just kept my ass at home. Waited out the night in solitude as Xander and the wolves hunted, and Lucien breathed eternal life into some young kid on his deathbed. I brought my hand up, studying my palm and fingers by the lightning flashes. I made a fist, opened it, then made a fist again. Things might certainly be different.

But why was it that I was always playing the *what if* game? What kept me so aware of each and every mistake? Made my actions seem like living, breathing monsters so that looking back meant fighting for something I wasn't even sure of.

"Fear." Lucien stood so close at my back I wondered how I didn't sense him. He stepped forward and placed a kiss at my shoulder. "It clouds things. Makes us see things that aren't real. Makes us do... and say very stupid, very hurtful things. It keeps us from moving forward."

I leaned back against him, shaking my head. "Not just fear."

"No." His arms came around my shoulders, holding me tight. "Jealousy seems to be another monster in the closet."

"God, Lucien. I'm so—"

"No, Peter. I am the one that's sorry. Sorry for being such an asshole for so long. For being jealous where there is nothing to be jealous of. I was wrong... So very wrong."

"You weren't the only one." The dam was breaking fast and I knew there was no stopping it this time. "I want to fix this, Lucien. But we're so broken that I don't know where to start. All I know is that it's killing me and the more that goes wrong with us, the more I find myself in someone else's arms just for the few minutes of comfort—a few minutes of forgetting everything else."

"We are not so broken that we can't be fixed."

"I want to believe that."

He began kissing up the line of my jaw, pausing just below my ear. "Feel it."

I shuddered and turned in his arms to meet those pale-blue eyes. As much as I wanted to just let go, I just couldn't. There was too much left unsaid, too much left hanging in the air. "I want to..."

Lucien's slight smile fell. "You don't feel anything with me anymore, do you?"

"No, that's not it."

"Then, please, tell me what it is. Tell me what I can do to make you want me again."

"I've never stopped wanting you, Lucien—not for a moment. I'm just... scared, I think. Scared that sex will put a Band-Aid on all this and we'll be left with something patched, but not made whole."

He reached out and took my hand. "Come on. I'll start a fire and we'll talk. You want a drink?"

"No, thanks. Alcohol and I seem to be having a major disagreement."

"I can call Simon for some fresh water..."

We separated at the couch and as he went to the closet for a blanket, I stripped the pillows off one of the sofas. Lucien spread the blanket out close to the fireplace and a few moments later, the fireplace was lit with a single wave of his hand. Pillows in hand, I stood staring at Lucien's back.

It was hard to describe what I felt for him. My once friend, lover, and soulmate seemed almost a stranger. I wasn't sure we'd ever been this far apart—even when we'd actually been apart—but I was determined to get over this hurdle. I just needed...

Lucien's tactical vest dropped to the floor with a dull thud and his shirt followed. He rolled his shoulders to stretch and the light of the fire flickered along that pale skin. My breath caught in my throat. I needed skin. Needed him naked so that there was nothing at all between us. I crossed the room and dropped the pillows haphazardly in favor of filling my hands with Lucien instead. I moved to stand behind him, arms sliding around his waist, fingers dropping to find the enclosure of his pants.

He sucked in a quick, harsh breath as I pushed his pants down those lean hips. The leather was tight at the thighs, as always, but with his help, the pants pooled at his ankles. He leaned back against me for support and kicked off his boots and the pants.

When I had him naked, I stepped in close and placed a kiss at the back of his neck. He shuddered and groaned as I kissed my way down the entire length of his spine. I turned him around, found that sensitive spot a few inches above his dick, and began kissing my way back up.

Hands landed gently on my head as I tongued the barbell in his navel. By the time I reached his chest and his right nipple, he was panting and my silk pajama pants were damp in the front. I moved to his left nipple and set my teeth around it and the ring. Fingers formed fists in my hair.

"Peter..."

As much as I wanted to sink my teeth into him, to get a taste of him, I didn't. Without the benefit of fangs, I knew it'd hurt more than it would turn him on. Instead, I licked at him, sucked that nipple and ring hard enough to draw the blood to that one perfect spot. I teased that darkened nipple with the tip of my tongue and licked up his chest to his throat.

He still smelled like Lucien. Like leather and that spicy soap that he imported from God-only-knew-where. I smiled against his throat. "Love the way you smell."

"And how do I taste?" His words vibrated against my lips.

I licked at his throat, slowly moving toward the side of his neck. "Mmm... little salty, little coppery, a little spicy, but not like the soap. Clove, maybe. But then again..."

He cupped the back of my neck and brought my face even with his. He studied me for the longest time, eyes just dancing, before he leaned in and kissed my forehead, down my nose. By the time he reached my lips, I was kissing him back. Tender, sweet, gentle. All of that had been missing for the past few months. It had been fuck, fuck, and fuck harder ninety-nine percent of the time.

Lucien's hands slid inside the back of my pants—that I hadn't realized I was still wearing—pulling me against him. He was hard, his long, thick shaft pressed tight against my belly. Two fingers pressed at my hole and my entire body went tight.

"Let me in."

"No... gotta lose the pants first."

Lucien laughed and began pushing my pants down my hips. I stepped out of them and Lucien went to pull me close, but I ducked out of his reach and went to my knees. I moved onto the blanket and stretched out on my back, grinning up at him.

"Come down here, lover."

He sank down between my legs, the weight of his body and the feel of his naked flesh a welcome sensation. For a moment, he just stared down at me, his pale blue gaze fixed on mine. I reached up and cupped my palm over his cheek, thumb brushing his lips. His lips parted and I pushed my thumb into his mouth. He tongued it, teased it, and then sucked it into his mouth, moving up and down as if it were my cock.

I hooked my thumb behind his teeth and pulled him down for a kiss. He moaned as my wet thumb grazed his nipple, hips beginning to rock just a little. My mouth opened in invitation, but instead of kissing me, he began nibbling at my lips. I chuckled and poked him in the ribs.

"Kiss me, damn it."

He squirmed and licked my chin. "Don't start that."

I poked him again, curling my fingers into his ribs. "Don't be a tease."

"Oh, no, not a tease." He placed a kiss at the corner of my mouth. "I have every intention of following through—over and over again."

I locked my legs with his and pulled him against me, arching my hips up. "Promises, promises."

His fingers touched at my lips. "Open."

He didn't wait for me to open before shifting a little and kissing his way down my neck, nipping the skin before soothing it with his tongue. I groaned and reached between us, grasping his cock and stroking lazily. His fingers pressed into my mouth as I relaxed and I sucked and teased, getting them nice and wet.

Lucien was soon kissing me around his own fingers, whispering. "I want to be inside of you."

I pulled his fingers from my mouth and pushed at his hand. "Please, Lucien..."

Those wet fingers quickly found my hole, circling and teasing before slowly filling me. I spread my legs to give him more access and Lucien moaned, fingers going deep. My belly went tight, balls drawing up close. He growled and pulled his fingers out, shoving them back in hard and fast.

Fire shot down my spine and I panted with each thrust of his fingers. His heated gaze held mine as he drove me closer and closer to the edge. "Want you to come before I get inside you, lover. Want that heat to ease the way."

I rolled my hips, just riding those fingers. And then he bent his head, catching one of my nipple rings. He sucked the nipple and ring between his lips and I jerked, spilling heat between us. Lucien rose up, pulling his fingers away, leaving me desperately empty.

But he didn't waste any time, wiping the come from my belly and filling me with those fingers again. I whimpered and clutched at the blanket below me, still needing him so much.

"Please, baby... Need you."

He removed his fingers and smeared some of my come over his cock, lining that thick head against my hole. "Got me, Peter."

I rose up and met him halfway for a kiss, holding him tight as he slowly pushed into me. Every nerve in my body felt as if it were on fire. "Oh... oh God, Lucien..."

"You're so *hot*."

I skipped the joke, because I could feel it myself. I was so hot I was sweating, but feeling too fucking good to even think about stopping. My legs wrapped around his hips and ass, pulling him even deeper. "Just love me..."

He laid me back, lips finding mine in a heated kiss. But a few moments later, he pulled back, the expression on his face serious. "I will *always* love you."

"No matter how stupid I am?"

"Or how stupid *I* am."

I caught his face between my hands and pulled him in close. "I won't break, baby."

"Good, 'cause I'm about to fuck you through the floor."

Chapter Eleven

We lay in front of the fireplace, watching the flames dance, enjoying the heat of the fire. Lucien's fingers were tracing lazy circles over my bicep, down my chest, and over my belly. With each pass, his fingers would tease lower and lower. The man was insatiable. We'd fucked twice in less than an hour and even though I could feel him half-hard at my back, my poor ass needed a little more of a break.

I caught his hand, laughing. "Would you stop?"

He made an odd sound and held my hand up to inspect it. "What happened to your hand?"

I glanced up at my hand. It wasn't real obvious until you touched the skin. Where the paste had burned, the skin was dry and still peeling a little. "I picked up your glove earlier. Got that paste on me."

"And it burned you?"

I nodded. "Hurt like fucking hell."

"Maybe you had a bad reaction to the silver."

"I dunno. It's healing. That's all that matters." I shrugged and hugged his arm close, not daring to mention what Xander had thought about it. "Can't imagine how Nikolas could stand it."

He kissed my shoulder. "I didn't use much on him, but it'll scar in that one spot."

"Why did you use it?"

"I didn't want him to shift and heal the wounds. And I wanted the scar."

"So now we've both scarred him." I shook my head. "Nikolas is a good man, Lucien. What happened the other night was—"

"I know. I've been down talking to him since I walked out of here."

"Really?" I turned and looked up at him. "And he's okay?"

"He's fine. And I've..." Lucien sighed. "I've realized that I've been a real asshole to you and to a lot of other people. I have amends to make that I cannot even begin to grasp where to start. What you asked of me earlier..."

He paused and I squeezed his hand. "I have to admit, I think I was a little too scared to remember what I might have asked."

"Don't ever be scared of me, Peter—"

"No! Not *of* you. Of losing you."

He hugged me up close again, brushing his lips back and forth against my shoulder. "You asked me to stop calling the wolves 'dogs'."

"I see what it does to them. How it makes them feel. I don't know if you've noticed it, but the coven is divided. We're not one big happy family anymore."

"I don't think I've wanted to notice."

"Can I ask you why? What happened that made you think of the werewolves as dogs?"

"That old monster in the closet: jealousy."

"Jealous? Of the Lycans?"

"Of a certain few," he said. "While you and I were getting further and further apart, your relationships with Xander and the other wolves seemed to flourish. I'm not sure that I truly understood your bond with Xander. I mean, after a while, I realized that it was similar to a Master and his human servant, but it didn't make sense to me that you—a human—could bond with a wolf. It still doesn't make sense to me, but I know that the bond you have with each other is real."

I turned in his arms, needing to face him. "Xander is very, very important to me."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes, I do. And I would fight to the death to protect him." I shrugged. "I guess it's a little like you and Caleb."

Lucien frowned. "I hope not."

"What do you mean?"

"I have nothing good to say about Caleb right now. He has..." He huffed and lay back, looking at the ceiling. "I think I've been wrong where Caleb is concerned. I think maybe I've given him far too much freedom. After last night... It took everything I had in me not to send him away."

"What he did was wrong."

"I know. And just between you, me, and Nikolas—he was the reason the order of death went out." Lucien shook his head slowly. "I think I've lost my way, Peter. I think you and the rest of the coven have been paying the price."

"Baby, look at me." When he didn't, I straddled his hips and lay against his chest, looking down into those beautiful blue eyes. "We all lose our way now and then. Nobody's perfect."

"A Master cannot afford to lose his way. His people won't respect him. They'll question him..."

"Then a Master punishes those who go against him and he makes an example of them. Soon, that respect is earned back. A Master is like a father. He loves, he cherishes, but he does not hesitate to punish to keep his children on the right path."

Lucien reached up and toyed with a lock of my hair. "Those are the words of a very smart man."

"Everything I've learned about this world I've learned from you. This can all be fixed: you and me, the issues with the Lycans, the coven... It can all be made whole again."

He rolled me and straddled my hips, nuzzling in close at my neck. "I'm not whole without you."

My fingers found that long line of spine, just touching and teasing from the back of his neck to the base of his spine. His back arched as I slipped a finger feather-lightly into the cleft of his ass. I loved watching the way his body responded to my touch. I slid that finger lower and when I brushed his hole, he moved a little further up my belly.

"Let me ride you."

"S been a long time, baby. Need some lube."

He shook his head and pulled my hand close, putting it beneath him. "Open me."

As my fingers began to work at him, his entire body just seemed to glow. He sat up, tilted his head back, and that bottom lip was sucked up between his teeth. He let out a groan and rose up on his knees, leaning back a little.

"Inside me, Peter... Please..."

I pulled my fingers away, grasping my cock. I rubbed it back and forth against his hole, just teasing. "I could rub against you all fucking night."

A playful growl rumbled from his throat. "Don't tease me."

He lowered himself slowly, gaze locked on mine. The fire reflected in those eyes, making them seem like there were tiny flames flickering in the dark. As his ass came down on my hips, his entire body shuddered. I reached down and massaged up his thighs, over his hips, pulling him down as I thrust up, then working my way back toward his knees.

"Love it when you ride me, baby. Love seeing you let go like this."

He groaned and rolled those hips, stealing my breath. His hands found mine at his hips, fingers twining together. He rose up almost completely off me, head of my cock just inside him, then came down on me hard. "Oh, fuck..."

I thrust up to meet his downward movement the next time and nearly screamed at the sensations searing through me. What had started out as slow and easy became hard and fast and frantic. His cock slapped rhythmically against my lower belly and my eyes became transfixed on that hard, hot length. I wanted him to come over me, wanted to watch as his seed spilled from that slit over my skin.

My balls drew up tight, the friction of him drawing me closer to the edge. Those thighs bunched beneath my fingers and that hole clenched tight around me. He leaned forward and I rose up to meet his lips for a kiss. His tongue pushed right between my lips and I swallowed his moans as his heat began to spread between us.

I pulled back a little and looked down, the sight of his come running over my skin sending me right over the edge. I thrust hard up into him, holding his hips tight as I filled him. Lucien licked at my lips, teasing. "Careful," I said, tightening my belly to make my cock twitch inside him. "You know licking makes me wanna get nasty."

Lucien chuckled and moved off me, but stayed at my side, head resting on my chest. "Damn, I need more of that."

"Give me a little while. My poor balls are already gonna be sore."

He pinched the inside of my thigh. "As is my ass. Not sure I could go again any time soon, myself."

"Some vampire you are."

Lucien laughed and propped himself on his elbow. "Speaking of vampires... I did contact the Council when I rose this afternoon. The physician was out, but I left word with his assistant that we needed to have you seen as soon as possible."

"You did? Oh, Lucien..." I sat up, throwing my arms around him. "Thank you, baby. Thank you..."

He hugged me in return, kissing the side of my head. "I told you I would."

"I know you did. I guess I just wasn't expecting it so soon." I held him tight, all of my anxiety and frustrations of the past year easing considerably. The cravings had eased over the past couple weeks, but they'd done that before. I knew they'd be back and I hoped to have a way to finally sate them. "Thank you, baby."

"You're welcome, lover." He laid back on the pillow and pulled me close. "I won't have you hurting any longer if I can help it."

I couldn't seem to get the grin off my face. "I'd suck you off in thanks, but you know I'm not a big fan of sucking after fucking."

"You know where the sink is."

I took hold of his balls, rolling them gently in my hand. "Yeah, I know. Too lazy to get up."

Lucien hissed and spread his legs. "Lazy can be good."

Blood rushed to his cock and it was soon hard and hot and rubbing against my arm, leaving a trail of pre-come along the inside of my wrist. I slid the palm of my hand along his length, enjoying the way his hips were arching up, seeking more. His thighs tightened as my fingers wrapped around him, muscles bunching with each lazy stroke.

I leaned up and nipped his ear. "I could never get tired of this."

He groaned and sought out a kiss. "Eventually you'd have to stop."

Pulling back just slightly, I made him lean in more for the kiss. "And why's that?"

"Because I'd come all over your fingers, for one..."

"And the other?"

"And two, you'd eventually want me inside you again."

"I'm not adverse to moving this to the bedroom, showering, and letting you soothe me with that tongue. Then, maybe... we could talk about that whole *inside me* thing again." I licked at his fangs, teasing but not giving in to the kiss yet.

His hips rocked a little faster. "A little tighter and I'll get that first one out of the way in just a few seconds."

I tightened my hand, thumb grazing his slit with each stroke. "Oh... I want to watch. Want it on my fingers, in my hand."

Lucien grunted and I looked down the length of that flat, tight belly. He'd planted his feet on the floor, muscles in his thighs bunched up tight. He thrust up hard into my fist, a strangled sound coming from his throat. Heat spilled over my fingers and I watched in awe as he emptied himself in my hand.

He shuddered and relaxed, head falling back against the pillows. Every few seconds, his belly would tighten again and I realized that I was still stroking him. I let him go, gently, laughing when he finally relaxed.

"Oh, baby, that had to be the sexiest thing... ever."

"You've got good hands," he said absently.

I licked at my fingers just as the door of the library came open and Xander walked right on in, before looking around. When he saw me and Lucien on the floor, his eyes went wide.

"Oh, shit! I'm so sorry." He started backing out the door. "I swear, I didn't realize you were... uh, busy..."

Lucien laughed and stretched, eyes half-closed. "Come on in, Xander. Stay a while."

Xander looked at me, shocked. I shrugged and gestured for him to come on over. As he rounded the couch, his eyes went right to Lucien, blazing a hot trail over his entire body. Desire flared over Xander's face and I realized just how much Xander had missed his time with Lucien. They'd been so close before I came along.

When I looked back to Lucien, he was staring up at Xander, a similar look on his face. "I would get up, but..." Lucien shrugged. "But I was just... up."

Xander grinned. "I smell it now. You two have been going at it like bunnies on speed."

Lucien blinked. "Bunnies on speed...?"

"I know—terrible."

"Really terrible." Lucien smiled up at Xander. "I've missed you."

Xander gaped at him, as if he didn't know what to say. "I... I've missed you, too."

"I know I've been an ass. And that I've said some terrible things, but I'd like to say I'm sorry. Do you think we could start over?"

"No," Xander said. "Because then I'd be right back at the beginning and I'd hate to have to vie for your attention all over again. But, we could, maybe... start over right about the time Peter came along."

Lucien laughed. "I think that's doable."

I found my pants nearby and wiped my hand clean before grabbing Xander's hand and pulling him down to eye level. I planted a kiss on his lips, smiling. "Did you need something?"

Xander knelt and made himself comfortable. "I was just checking on you. I looked in the bedroom, but you were gone. Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm good."

Xander winked. "I see that... now."

Lucien shifted and looked up at Xander, curiosity plain on his face. "Tell me something, Xander. Why do you serve Peter as you do? So... willingly? He's not even of your species."

Xander eyed me for a moment before looking to Lucien. "He gives me what I need: friendship, love, some good, hot fucking..."

Lucien laughed and I slugged Xander hard in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Xander pouted, but quickly became serious. "Peter accepts me for who I am. He doesn't expect me to be something I'm not. He sees my good and my bad sides and chooses to love me anyway. There's nothing I can't tell him. And I know that nothing I ever said or did would make him love me any less. There's *nothing* I wouldn't do for him."

His words were so pure, so from the heart. Lucien rose up and tugged at Xander's shirt. "You have somewhere to be?"

Xander's shirt came off in an instant, hands working at his zipper, heat flashing in those amber eyes. "I do now."

Lucien pulled him between us, growling as Xander's naked skin made contact. The three of us had never done anything together, and I was suddenly shaking with excitement. I moved in and brushed that black silky hair from Xander's neck, licking along his shoulder.

"We're messy."

"Very messy," Lucien added.

Xander whimpered. "Good sex is messy. And I'm clean, so I obviously haven't gotten..." Xander gasped as Lucien tongued at the barbell in his right nipple. "...*lucky*."

Lucien laid Xander back, running his hands over his chest and belly, just touching and exploring. I moved between Xander's legs and spread him open. That thick prick of his was already hard as I nuzzled against him, breathing in that clean, musky scent. His legs were shaking against my shoulders and I turned my head, kissing at the inside of one thigh.

I looked up to tell him to breathe, but Lucien was kissing him so deep, so hard, that I expected to see blood. For a moment, I just watched. Mesmerized. Lucien's fingers were working at Xander's rings, and from expe-

rience, I knew that'd send Xander over quick. I turned my attention to the cock before me and gave a teasing lick to the head and then swallowed him down.

Xander's hips shot up, fucking my mouth with hard, quick thrusts. "Oh, fuck, yes!"

I glanced up at Xander's cries to see Lucien kissing along the line of perfectly manicured pubes. He kept his voice low. "Take his ass, baby."

I pulled off Xander and kissed Lucien, sucking his tongue into my mouth. He groaned and threaded his fingers through my hair, holding me tight. When I pulled away, Lucien licked at my lip, eyes damn near glazed over. There was blood on his tongue and I wasn't sure if it was mine or Xander's.

Fuck.

I shifted a little and pushed Xander's legs forward, licking a line up the cleft of his ass. When my tongue grazed his hole, Xander's body went tight and he keened. "Oh, yes, oh, God... too much."

"Beg, baby." I spread his ass with my fingers, close enough for him to feel the heat of my breath, but not giving him anything more.

Lucien was moving up and down on that cock, and two small rivulets of blood were running down Xander's balls. I moved up and licked the blood away, the taste rich and sweet. Xander panted, spreading his legs further apart.

"Peter, please... I need..."

"Need what?" *My pretty bitch.* I blinked. Where the fuck had that come from? "What do you need, Xander?"

"Fuck my ass... please. Fuck me with your tongue, your fingers... *anything*..."

I sucked two fingers into my mouth, got them wet, and pushed them right into his hole. He growled and went silent and I grinned, licking around that stretched skin. He gasped and ground down on my fingers before thrusting up into Lucien's mouth. Lucien sucked him and bled him and I fucked him with my fingers and my tongue, taking extreme joy in the drops of blood that hit my tongue from time to time.

Xander shook and let out a long string of unintelligible curses. I added a third finger, pushing deep, and Xander's body went taut, ass clamping down around my fingers. Lucien moaned appreciatively and I knew that he was getting his first taste of Xander in a very, very long time. He pulled off Xander's spent prick slowly and leaned down, kissing me and sharing.

Xander's fingers brushed my head and I pulled my fingers away and wiped them on the blanket beneath. Lucien pulled me up, kissed me again, then moved back toward the pillows. I followed him, pausing to kiss Xander before lying beside him. But Xander pulled Lucien in to share the kiss and it became so much more than chaste.

I finally collapsed at Xander's side, laying my head on his shoulder. "I don't think I can move."

"I know I can't."

Lucien laughed. "Give me a few minutes."

We lay talking and touching for a long while, and I was just about to doze off when my skin prickled. I opened my eyes and looked around, expecting to see someone else in the room with us. I sat up slowly, trying not to disturb Lucien and Xander who were passed out beside me. The door to the library was still open. I frowned and got up, walking over to close it.

I guess we'd fucked Xander for anyone else to see.

I closed the door quietly and walked back to the blanket. Anger filled the air and I looked at Lucien and Xander, who both seemed as peaceful as ever. Great. Now I was imagining things. I shook my head and lay back down beside Xander, snuggling up close. He sighed and turned his head toward me, but didn't open his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, honey. Just closed the door."

"Okay."

I listened to Xander's quiet snoring, the pop and crackle of the fire in the fireplace, and the tick-tock of the grandfather clock in the corner for a long time, trying to convince myself that the queasy feeling in my stomach was just my imagination. And then I remembered that I hadn't had a damned thing to eat in over a day and realized it was finally getting to my head.

Sleep was slow in coming, so I lay there beside the two most important people in my life and just closed my eyes, thankful for a thing called forgiveness. My eyes flew open a little while later, and I stared up, expecting to see someone hovering over me. That weird fucking sensation of someone else being in the room was strong and I just *knew* someone was watching us.

I nudged Xander with my elbow. "Xander?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there someone else in here?"

He opened his eyes and looked at me, brow creased with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Just a bad feeling."

Xander sat up slowly, scenting the air. "Someone's been here, but they're not here now."

"Who?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "Vampire or *something*; not human, not a wolf."

My stomach turned and I leaned over, shaking Lucien's shoulder gently. "Lucien, baby, wake up."

His eyes fluttered open and he sat up quickly. "What's wrong, Peter?"

"Someone was in here with us while we were sleeping," I said. "They're not here now, but Xander says it wasn't a wolf or a human. And..."

Lucien reached across Xander's lap to touch me. "What is it, lover?"

"I think whoever it was, was pissed off about something. You two were sleeping and this... this anger just filled the air. Figured it was all in my head, but now?" I shook my head. "I'm not so sure."

"No one in their right mind would come in here right now," Xander said softly.

Lucien growled and stood, looking around the room. "Everything seems in its place."

I ran a hand through my hair, sighing. "Let's just get out of here. I'd rather be in bed, anyway."

Xander and Lucien both agreed and started gathering up their clothes. I found my pants, but they were too dirty to put back on. Lucien kicked a few pillows around and hunted for something on the floor.

"Son of a bitch!"

"What are you looking for?" Xander asked.

"My shirt," Lucien said. "It's not here."

I awoke to Lucien hovering over me, a concerned look on his face as he toyed with my hair. I leaned into his touch. "Everything okay?"

"That's what I was going to ask you. You've been restless, moaning in your sleep."

I pulled him down for a kiss, ignoring the huge knot that seemed to be in my stomach. "I'm fine. Just a dream, I'm sure."

Lucien smiled. "If it was a dream, it couldn't have been a good one."

"Love it when *you* are in my dreams."

He hugged me up close, relaxing a little. "All my dreams are right here in my arms."

"Flatterer."

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, and I shifted until I found a position that didn't make my stomach ache. The door opened a little while later and Xander came in, carrying a large tray. By the domed cover that was visible, I knew he'd come bearing food. I suppressed a groan as he set the tray at the end of the bed.

He crawled up with a bright, happy smile. "Breakfast for us... and *me* for you."

Lucien laughed and pulled Xander close. "That's very generous of you."

"I'm a generous person," he teased. "Just ask Peter."

I nodded. "He's *very* generous."

Lucien kissed him and pushed him back. "Eat first. Don't let your food get cold."

Xander grinned and moved back down, lifting the domed lid off the tray. My stomach turned as I got a whiff of the food and I tried to pretend like I just wasn't interested yet. Xander then held a bite of bacon to my lips. I started to refuse, but realized that my recent lack of food was probably why my stomach was misbehaving in the first place.

I sighed and took the bite, but the moment the food touched my tongue, I gagged. I rolled off the bed and ran to the bathroom, losing that bite of bacon before dry-heaving. Two sets of hands moved along my back but I stayed hovering over the toilet for a moment longer.

"You okay?"

"Just... Just haven't eaten much lately. Think it's offended my stomach."

"He's right. Simon said he's refused several meals."

"I'm fine," I said. I stood and blew out a quick breath. "I just need some water to wash my face. I'll be out in a minute."

Lucien frowned. "You sure?"

I nodded and pushed him on. "I'm sure, baby. I'll be right out."

Xander opened the door and Lucien followed after him. They left the door cracked, but I didn't care enough to actually walk across the room to close it. I turned the water on, filling a glass, taking a small sip. My stomach revolted, but I managed to keep the water down. Bending down, I filled my hands with water and splashed it over my face. The cold was a shock to my warm skin, but after a few quick splashes, I felt a little better. I grabbed a towel, dried my face and hands, and turned to head back to the bedroom.

The door blurred as I neared it and I reached out to steady myself. Pain shot through my chest and I suddenly couldn't breathe, couldn't seem to stop myself from falling to the floor—couldn't even scream as the pain became pure fire. Blinding pain shot through my head as I hit the marble floor. Darkness began seeping into my line of vision and I felt the pain start to ebb. A blurred, shadowed figure appeared, then another, and then everything went black.

Chapter Twelve

I woke alone in my soft, comfortable bed. I turned my head to see if anyone else was in the room, but all I could see were the curtains around the bed. It made the area of the bed dark and I attempted to sit up. But my body was just entirely too heavy, as were my eyes, and I settled for waiting until someone came to check on me.

The next time I woke, it was still dark. I didn't hurt at all, and my body wasn't as heavy, but I was feeling just a little too lazy to get up any time soon. There were quiet voices beyond the curtains. I wasn't sure how many people were in the room, but I immediately recognized Lucien and Nikolas' voices.

"Did Xander feed you?" Nikolas' voice was kind, concerned—completely at ease.

"He offered earlier, but after Peter's... Goddamn it, Nikolas! What is happening to him?"

"Before tonight, I would have bet my life that he was turning. But if that were the case, he'd have shifted long before now. Xander would have been able to help him."

Nikolas' words made me pause. Could it be that there were things I *didn't* know about Xander? I didn't think it was possible, but then again...

"Come on. Let me feed you."

A heavy sigh and then the creak of Lucien's chair at the desk. "If Xander had not already offered, I would be more inclined to accept. But we are just now making amends and I won't risk hurting him."

"Whatever you think is best."

The disappointment in Nikolas' voice was clear, and I had a moment of guilt at listening to them talk. I rolled onto my side, and reached for the cord to draw the curtains back. "Lucien?"

There was a loud thunk and then Lucien pulled the curtains back a second later. His hair was all mussed and his lounge pants were rumpled. He looked like hell, but I didn't think I'd ever seen him so relieved. "Hey, lover," he said with a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Lazy."

He crawled across the bed and sat beside me, dragging his fingers along my brow. "No pain?"

I smiled. "Don't jinx me, okay?"

Lucien lay down and pulled me into his arms. "You scared the hell out of me. Out of Xander. Hell, you even scared the unshakable Nikolas."

Nikolas knelt at the foot of the bed, his feet bare, but dressed in a pair of black jogging pants and a blood-red T-shirt. "Me? Scared?" He started to laugh it off, but then just sort of crumbled a little. "Scared the shit out of me, princess."

"I must be fine. He's calling me *princess* again."

Lucien's hand went straight to my crotch, cupping my balls. "Nothing *princess* here."

Nikolas crawled up the bed a little further, eyeing Lucien's hand. "Is his fever gone, Lucien?"

Lucien frowned. "I can't say. He's as hot as he was last night."

Nikolas reached out and felt my brow. "He's still pretty warm, but the drugs raise his metabolism and that could raise his temperature. We'll know for sure when Xander comes back."

"Where *is* Xander?"

Lucien's lips brushed my hair. "He's down in the treatment room. We've run low on the drug combination that stops your episodes and he's making up more. We cannot afford to be without it at this point."

"How bad was it?"

"Bad," Nikolas answered.

"We couldn't get you to breathe, at first."

Nikolas nodded. "Lucien nearly ripped Xander a new ass when he punched you in the chest."

"And then when you finally did breathe... you screamed."

I sank against Lucien, shaking my head. With everything my body had been through, I should have been dead. I was thankful to still be around, of course, but I worried that whatever was keeping me going might soon be coming to an end. That the train I was on was running full steam ahead, but the tracks at the edge of the cliff just stopped. No bridge, no brakes. Just a sharp, painful descent into nothing. And that scared the piss out of me.

"I'm so scared," I whispered into Lucien's chest.

"I've left word with the physician's assistant again, letting him know just how important it is that he contact us soon. Until then, all we can do is treat the episodes as they occur. The only other option..."

I looked up at Lucien as he broke off. "What?"

"Christopher," Nikolas said.

I shook my head adamantly. "No. We will not go there."

"He might be able to help," Nikolas offered.

"We will *not* be indebted to him," I growled. "I'd rather take my chances with the Council's physician."

We fell into an uncomfortable silence. Sure, there might be a quicker answer if we contacted Christopher, but there was no way I wanted anyone to think that we needed help from him or Antoine or anyone else in that coven to run ours. And I knew Lucien agreed—even if his emotions were clouding his judgment and making it seem like a viable option.

Nikolas lay down on the other side of me, huffing. "Stubborn fucking fools. I could beat you both."

"How long has it been?" Lucien sounded amused.

"Too fucking long, my friend." Nikolas said with a sigh. "Too. Fucking. Long."

I looked up at Lucien with a raised eyebrow. Obviously, there were things about *Lucien* that I still didn't know. But instead of pissing me off, it amused me no end and I started laughing. "So... Let me get this straight. You had Nikolas here, who is pure alpha and totally your equal—yet you never let him fuck you?"

Lucien shrugged. "We could not decide."

"On what?"

"On who'd be nice and spread out, begging for a cock up his ass." Nikolas leaned in and licked just below my ear. "We were both convinced that whoever resorted to begging first would lose the respect of the other."

"You were both stupid."

"Yep." Lucien and Nikolas answered at the same time. Nikolas reached across me and flicked at the barbell in Lucien's navel. "And just about the time I start giving in, he finds you. And now *both* of you turn me down."

All I could do was shake my head. I wasn't sure we wanted to get into the why and how of me turning Nikolas down. Lucien tilted my head back with a finger beneath my chin, meeting my gaze in question. "You turned him down?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I was more than tempted."

"You should have seen him, Lucien. He was so turned on, but so *scared*."

I jabbed my elbow into Nikolas' belly. "I wasn't scared."

"But you were turned on," Lucien said. It wasn't a question, but a statement. "Tell me, Peter, what did Nikolas wish to do to you?"

My heart thudded in my chest, mouth gaping at Lucien's words. "I... Uh, he..." Heat washed through my face and ears and I knew I was blushing. "Aw, hell..."

Lucien grinned and looked up at Nikolas. "I'm not saying no, but I'm not saying yes, either. Let us get him fixed before we try to do anything that leaves a *lasting* impression."

Nikolas rubbed against my hip and I expected that hard, thick length to burst through the thin fabric of his pants. He hugged me up tight, and a wicked, mischievous laugh tickled at my ear. "Oh, *princess*, the things we're going to do to you..."

I didn't bother to suppress the whimper. Both of them were close enough, touching me enough that I knew very well that they were aware of the stiff, leaking prick poking up obscenely between us. Lucien's mouth covered mine, his kiss hard and insistent. He rolled away a few minutes later, leaving me breathless and dizzy. When he returned, he kissed me again, then rolled me to my side to face away from him.

I felt him struggling behind me, but when I turned to investigate, his lips and tongue teased and nipped at the bend of my neck. Slick, warm fingers pushed between my ass cheeks and I gasped, lifting a leg to give him more access. A single finger slid into my hole and I sort of melted around him, skin beginning to burn.

Another finger joined the first and I opened my eyes to meet Nikolas' heated gaze in front of me. I didn't think, didn't question, just cupped my hand to the back of his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. Just before my lips touched his, he balked. "Don't kiss."

Stunned, I let him go. But he moved back toward me, tongue finding the hollow of my throat. I threaded my fingers through his hair, holding him tight against me. My other hand slid up through Lucien's hair, holding him tight at my neck. Lucien shifted behind me, lifted my leg a little higher, then that thick cock was pushing at my hole. I ground my hips, seeking him out.

When he slid inside me, it was like time just stopped. My body felt like it was on fire, and instead of fighting it, I sank down into the feeling and let it ride me. Lucien's moan vibrated at my neck and he clutched my thigh, pulling my leg back over his hip. He fucked me slow and deliberate, each push and pull of his length a delicious torture.

Nikolas licked down my throat, my chest, stopping to tease the rings in my nipples. His breath was even hotter against my skin. Teeth nipped and bit down hard, and I gasped, loving the feeling of the metal inside my flesh.

"Suck him," Lucien whispered, but he'd paused and was looking at Nikolas at the time.

Nikolas glanced up, letting go of my nipple for only a moment. "Don't suck, either."

Lucien and I both paused, staring down at Nikolas. I shook my head, confused. "That makes *no* sense to me. Sucking is as much fun as getting sucked."

Nikolas started to roll away, but I tightened my grip in his hair again. "Move back up there, I'll show you."

His eyes widened, flashed to Lucien, then back to me before he shimmied up the bed. He pushed his pants off, tossed his shirt aside, then moved into position where I could reach him. Nikolas' cock jutted up proudly from a thick nest of black curls. I took my time, stroking from head to base, relishing the feel of his silky skin in my palm.

Nikolas leaned back against the headboard with a contented sigh, hips rocking lazily. Lucien's palm rubbed over my cock and balls before settling low on my belly and holding me as he moved. He kissed along my jaw and I turned for a kiss. But he only licked at my lips and grinned. "Suck him dry, lover."

I turned back to Nikolas, who still had his head back and eyes closed. One lick from the base to the tip of his cock got his attention, but I didn't give him any time to ponder it before I took him in completely. My nose buried in those coarse black curls, I swallowed. Nikolas' hips shot up out of instinct, but I was ready for it and grabbed hold of him, pinning those lean hips to the bed. I sucked him hard, fast, and deep, determined to fry his brain.

And I guess Lucien had the same thought, because he shoved hard into me, grunting and growling. I moaned and cried out around the thick length in my mouth, down my throat. Nikolas' hands found my head, but he didn't push, didn't force. For some reason, that touched me. And I found myself letting go of him, urging him on. He seemed hesitant, so I pulled off him with a wet pop.

"Fuck my mouth."

His fingers made a fist in my hair and he pulled me back to him, one hand on his cock, guiding it between my lips. "Take it, princess. Show me how good that mouth is."

And Lucien groaned.

I was so fucked.

Literally.

Lucien's tongue and fangs worked along my neck and shoulder as he thrust into me, fingers alternating between stroking my cock and balls, to teasing my hole where he stretched me. He shifted a little and that thick head pegged my gland dead-on. I screamed around Nikolas' cock, which only made him shove harder into my mouth.

Vaguely, I thought I heard the door, but when neither Lucien or Nikolas slowed, I figured it was nothing. Until I felt silk brush against the length of my leg and hot, wet heat surround my cock. I reached down and touched Xander's hair, whimpering as all three of them tried to drive me insane.

Xander's legs wrapped around my shin and he started humping against me, just seeking some sort of contact—friction. We became a writhing mass of nothing but grunts, thrusts, and muffled cries. I lay there in the center, letting them fill me, take their pleasure as I took mine. And I relished in it. I didn't want it to stop, even though Lucien's cock and Xander's mouth were quickly sending me spiraling toward the abyss.

The pleasure ratcheted higher and higher and when I thought it couldn't get any better, time slowed. I floated on that plane of pleasure and looked into the abyss. Then something in the darkness smiled back. Before I could react, however, Xander's heat washed through me, like warm, thick fur. I could smell him; smell the dirt and the earth as I had when I'd hunted with him that night. Nikolas' heat matched his and it was suddenly too hot, like standing before a roaring fire.

The taste of Nikolas began to fill my mouth and I drank it down, wanting—needing—more. Heat splashed against my leg and it was as if every drop of Xander's essence was seeping into me. Lucien shoved in and out of me frantically, then froze, his cock throbbing deep inside me. And if I hadn't been in the midst of filling Xander's mouth with my own release, I might have realized that even after they came, none of their cries had stopped.

They just kept on and on and finally, Nikolas screamed. "Oh, fuck, he's feeding!"

My eyes rolled back into my head as the most exquisite feeling washed through me. It was better than sex, better than even the taste of blood. It bowed my back, filled me so completely that it was like tiny explosions going off in my head. I held on to that feeling and rode it, until it finally began to dissipate.

I lay flat on my back, panting, trying like hell to catch my breath. I licked at my lips, tasted a lingering drop of Nikolas' come, and an aftershock went through my entire body. I laughed, the sound of it deep and not really my own. A second later, I realized no one was touching me. I opened my eyes to see the three of them hovering over me.

It startled me, because they all looked a little scared as well as shocked. "What?"

"Are you feeling okay, lover?"

I reached out to touch Lucien's face, but he pulled back to avoid my touch. I frowned. "I *was* until just this second."

"No, no," Xander said. "Don't get that look on your face. We're just being careful."

"Of what? Of me? Why would...?" Man, this was so not the way to relax after good, hard sex.

Lucien reached forward, laying his palm against my cheek. I moved into his touch, placing my hand over his to hold him close. He sighed in relief. "It's passed."

"Passed? What... What's wrong with y'all?"

All three of them relaxed considerably and lay back down on the bed. Lucien pulled me into his arms and Nikolas sort of made a pillow of himself at our heads. Xander snuggled up to my left side, laying his head on my chest. They were all quiet for a moment, but Lucien finally spoke. "You fed from us, lover. All three of us, at the same time."

I blinked. "I don't know what you mean. I didn't take blood from any of you."

Nikolas snorted. "Tell that to my cock."

"Not blood, Peter," Lucien said. "You fed from us as I've been able to feed at the club—from a distance."

"Except we were all touching so it was like..." Xander paused. "Like can we fucking do it again right now? *Please.*"

Lucien thumped Xander on the head. "This does not leave the room."

I still didn't understand. "Someone please explain this to me in a way I can understand it at this very moment."

Nikolas shifted and looked down at me. "All right, cupcake—"

I reached up and slapped him.

He grinned. "You fed from us. Not blood—except a little from me—but energy. You drank it down, riding that buzz as hard and fast as you could. But you know nothing about control at this point and just kept going. We thought if we broke our connection to you, stopped touching you, it'd end." He shrugged. "It seems to have worked."

It slowly sank in what had happened and I swallowed hard. "Like an incu—"

Lucien nodded.

Nikolas rubbed at my shoulder with a thumb, over the spot where... where Sabaan had sunk his fangs when he came. "Just like an incubus."

That would teach me to play with strange demons and their tails. "Fuck."

Xander and Lucien were at the desk, going over some sort of file on the laptop. They were deep in discussion on cells and genes and blood when Nikolas nudged me with his elbow. "Come to the kitchen with me?"

I shook my head. "Last place I want to be right now."

"I'd *like* some company." His words drew my attention and the look in his eyes said he wanted privacy more than anything else.

I tossed the sheet off and rolled out of bed. Lucien turned as I neared his chair, smiling. I leaned down and kissed him, which led to me straddling him in the chair, grinding slowly. Xander's hand skimmed my shoulder, fingers trailing lightly down my back. I broke the kiss with Lucien and tilted my head back to look at Xander.

"Nikolas and I are going to the kitchen. Do you want anything?"

"Ice. Water." Xander licked his lips. "You."

Lucien brought me back up for a kiss before sliding his arms around my waist. "Poor thing, I think his brain is still shorting out."

"You want anything, baby?"

"Bring back a bottle of red if there's any in the kitchen. I think Simon said he was going to bring a bottle up from the cellar." He winked. "Then we'll kick these two out of here and call it an early night."

"I should be offended," Xander huffed.

I slid off Lucien's lap and shrugged. "Hey, I'm sure you and Nikolas could find *something* to do with your time."

"Yeah, right."

Nikolas cleared his throat. "I might even be convinced to be gentle. Maybe. Yeah, okay. Probably not."

Xander swallowed hard and I took that as my cue to leave. I grabbed my robe and Lucien's and tossed mine to Nikolas. As we shut the bedroom door behind us, a small smile turned the corner of his mouth. "He does have a very pretty ass."

"Oh, yes, he does." I wrapped Lucien's robe around me and started down the hall.

"Perfect for marking up." Nikolas lagged behind a little as he shrugged on my robe. "Christ. I think I'm still flying from earlier. It's making me think stupid, stupid things."

When we neared the kitchen, I nudged Nikolas. "Okay, out with it."

"Does Lucien know that Sabaan bit you?"

It occurred to me that Nikolas shouldn't have known that. "Why would you think he bit me?"

"I was there, remember?"

"But you were... sleeping." I shook my head. "Why didn't you say something?"

"There was nothing *to* say," he growled. "But all that's beside the point. I know he sank those pretty little fangs into you when he came on you. So did he draw blood?"

"I don't know. I didn't have any marks on my shoulder when we left there. You don't think..."

"I think that's probably the assumption Lucien's going to make should he find out about it. After all, that's the theory your mind automatically jumped on. Personally, I think whatever you've got going on inside that whacked out body of yours, is mostly Lucien's influence." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Though, we probably shouldn't mention that either."

I just stared at him. "Did you actually want something from the kitchen or were you just trying to fuck with my head?"

"I wanted food."

"Then let's get it and be done." I walked on ahead into the kitchen and immediately found the bottle of red wine Lucien had wanted. I grabbed two glasses and set them beside the bottle.

"Company would be nice, too," Nikolas said from in front of the refrigerator. "Kinda getting used to it, you know?"

Yeah. I knew. I hadn't spent much time alone since I'd come here. It just sort of ended up that way—especially with my bond with Xander. Even if he wasn't physically with me, he was usually far enough into my head that it seemed like it.

I sat at the island counter and watched as Nikolas made a couple of sandwiches and proceeded to inhale them. "So tell me. How'd you end up in the bedroom tonight?"

He got up and went to the sink, filling a glass of water. "Lucien called me. He and Xander were having a hard time getting you back. I think they thought that since I infected you, I could fix you."

"If only it were that easy."

He set his glass on the counter and sighed. "I swear, I'd fix you if I could."

"I know you would."

"Do you?"

I rose from the chair and crossed the room. As I moved up behind him, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. "I do. And, you know, that whole tough-guy thing is lost on me now. "

"Fuck you."

I laughed and rested my chin on his shoulder. "I don't think we want to go there."

Nikolas let out an uneasy breath. "I find myself wanting to tell you things I should damn well keep to myself. I can't remember a time when I've talked so fucking much."

"There's nothing wrong with talking."

"You scared me before, but I think it just hadn't really sunk in until what happened in the bedroom. No one has ever gotten under my skin the way you do. Hell, look at me now, here I am babbling about feelings and shit. That's just not me."

"Nikolas, everyone comes to a point where they need someone else. Maybe it's time you stopped trying to piss everyone off and accept the fact that people would actually like to be your friend. Accept that you're part of a pack and not standing outside of it."

"I hate you."

"I know. Being my friend comes with a price." I kissed the back of his neck. "And I promise that all of this will stay between us. No one will ever know that you actually have *feelings*."

Chapter Thirteen

Lucien was sitting behind the desk in the library, attempting to read through some papers. I sat on the desk in front of him, my bare feet tucked between his legs, toes teasing the fabric of his jeans over his balls. Lucien shifted and groaned, glaring up at me.

"Would you stop?"

I shook my head. "Just want to touch you. You almost finished?"

"I would be if you'd stop trying to distract me." He leaned back in the chair and removed my feet from where they rested. "You could always file the papers here on the desk. They are beginning to pile up."

Caleb was the one who normally took care of things like that. But he'd been really, really scarce lately. I'd run into him the day before as he was on his way out the door, tried to keep things light, but he just huffed and continued on. I'd stood at the doorway watching him get into a cab, knowing that things would never be the same.

I grabbed a stack of papers and moved off the desk. The filing cabinet was built in with the bookshelves and I pulled a chair over to sit in while I sorted. Bills, invoices, invites, order forms, club papers that should have been in the office at the club. Things were a mess. If Caleb didn't stop his pouting, we'd have to find an assistant. Which was already sounding like a good idea.

It'd been a little over a week since everything had hit the fan and then been made right again. Lucien and I were closer than ever, but our connection still wasn't right and he couldn't get into my head, or me his. It was frustrating as hell, but we hoped that the physician would be able to help with that, too.

Provided that he ever contacted us.

Three episodes in a week was the current count. The week was almost over, though, and it'd been several days since my last one. I wasn't stupid. I knew another lurked just around the corner, waiting 'til it was inconvenient to take hold. The last one had been in the bath and I'd nearly drowned. If Lucien hadn't been on his way to join me, I had no doubt I wouldn't have been found in time.

After that, it was decided that I wasn't to do anything *dangerous* alone. Who the hell would have thought a long, hot bath could be dangerous. Xander was my shadow when Lucien wasn't around and Lucien had even asked him to sleep at my side during the day just in case one hit when Lucien was dead to the world. Xander had happily obliged, of course.

Nikolas had taken to spending more time in his chambers, but he made it a point to check on me at least once a day. When others were around, I'd make it seem like I called him to me, that I needed something

from him. Alone, I teased him about caring. I'd almost gotten a kiss out of him the night before, but then he got all growly and stormed out.

It amused me more than it probably should have.

I stared at a letter that seemed to be directly from the Council. It was dated a little over a week ago; something about a problem that they needed Lucien to address. It involved him going away, a possibility which I'd heard nothing about. I held up the paper. "What's this from the Council?"

He waved it off, not looking up from what he was writing. "It's nothing. Just file it with the rest of the Council papers."

"But it says you have to go—"

"No." He glanced up at me. "It says I *may* need to go and that they'd contact me within a few days if it were necessary. Nothing else has come, so I assume they've worked it out."

I read through the letter again, relaxing a little. "Still hate that they think they can call you when they've got *issues* somewhere else."

He turned his attention back to his papers. "They are the Council; they can do as they wish."

I watched him for a long while, wanting nothing more than to crawl in his lap, wrap my arms around him, and bury my face against his neck. But he was being short with me and I knew I was bothering him. The papers he was working on were important, some sort of zoning issue with the city. I resumed my task of sorting the papers and finally filing them, working 'til every last one of them was put away and Lucien's desk was clean.

I stood at the filing cabinet, reading over the notes for tomorrow night's coven meeting. There wasn't anything in the way of problems, but Lucien had stressed that it was imperative for everyone to show up. There hadn't been a coven meeting in months and he was sure that some needed to be reminded about a little thing called respect. After Caleb's blow up, I didn't doubt it.

Lucien wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me into his chest. "I'm sorry. There's just all of this work that needs to be caught up on. I'm anxious as hell because the physician has *still* not been in contact. We also need to be at the club in just a few short hours."

"I think we should make some changes."

"What sort of changes?"

"Hire an accountant. Hire someone to manage the club." I turned to face him. "Close the club on one or two of our slowest nights to give us some time off."

"Oh, I don't know. Closing the club is like shutting my door to the coven completely."

"No, it's not. People always come here when they need something and you aren't at the club. Trust me; everyone knows where to find you."

"And that's part of it, too. Coven members know to find me here. But I don't want a hunter or another Master following someone to get to me."

"I understand that," I said. "Really, I do. But look at how full our house is, babe. Anyone would be able to figure out that the sprawling mansion—with tons of acreage and numerous people that live there and keep odd hours—is more than it seems. Come on, two nights out of seven."

"One."

"Mondays?"

He nodded. "We'll announce it tomorrow night and let them have a week to let it sink in."

One night off a week was better than none. Though, I shouldn't complain. I really didn't do all that much to begin with. "So what do you think about the accountant and the manager?"

"I think you're trying to get rid of that work that you so desperately begged me for."

I frowned. "That hurt."

"You're good at taking care of inventory and the books at the club. I don't ever have to worry that something will be wrong—and even if it does, I know you can handle it. But... if you can find someone that you trust *implicitly*, I'll consider the manager."

I couldn't help but smile. "It amazes me that you always know how to avoid a fight."

"Oh, not always." Lucien laughed. "Shall I remind you of the days before this week?"

"That was because we weren't talking," I said quietly. "Not like we should have been. We kept so much buried that it was bound to start adding up."

"Never again, lover." He took my hand and started for the desk. "Come here, I want to show you something."

He pushed me against the desk when we reached it, teasing me with a kiss. "Showing me how you want a kiss?"

"No," he growled and flipped me over on my belly on the desk. His hips were flush against my ass and I could feel him hard and heavy, even through the fabric of our jeans. He pointed at a spot in the wood as he sucked the skin at my neck and shoulder. "See that spot?"

The words were muttered against my flesh, making me shudder. I nodded, eyes locked on that irregularly-shaped spot. "Yes."

"See how long you can watch that spot."

He unzipped my jeans and pushed them down my thighs. He spread my ass with his fingers and licked along the crack of my ass, tongue pushing deep with each pass over my hole. Fingers shoved hard into me and I gasped as I slid over the top of the desk, dick pressed between my heated body and the cool wood.

He finger-fucked me with quick, hard jabs, tongue and teeth burning a line down my back. Soon, that blunt head was rubbing at my hole and he slammed into me, cock sliding deep. He pegged my gland with the very first thrust and I fought like hell not to look back at him.

I grunted and moaned as he plunged in and out of me, my dick leaving a slick, wet trail over the polished wood. I realized my dick was rubbing right where he worked, right in front of where he sat, and it turned me on even more, knowing he'd be able to smell me later on.

Spot forgotten, I turned my head to look over my shoulder. His weight became heavier at my back as he stretched over me for a kiss. But as hard and fast as he was moving, the kiss was more along the lines of a few harsh licks and bites. He growled and his fist found my cock, strokes matching his thrusts.

"Oh, fuck, Lucien..."

"Come for me, lover. Right there, right on my desk."

"Smell me later..."

"Fuck, yes. Press my face into that spot and jerk myself off."

I came without so much as a warning, no tingle, no fire, just an orgasm ripping right through me. Lucien's teeth set against my shoulder and he bit down as he thrust one last time, filling me with his heat.

I panted, forehead resting against the wood. Lucien licked between my shoulder blades and he tsked. "You suck at following orders."

"Mm-hmm. Found you much more interesting than that fucking spot in the wood."

"You flatter me, lover."

"And you know exactly what I need."

"The club's packed for a Monday night," Lucien said as he stood at the window in the office.

I didn't have to see his face to know he was smiling. "Oh, shut up."

Lucien laughed quietly and leaned against the wall framing the window. "Have you seen Caleb lately?"

"I saw him a couple of days ago. Why?"

"Just curious. It's not like him to stay away for so long."

"I'm sure he's still brooding. I mean, look at it this way. You knocked him right off his pedestal and put him in his place. It might be a while before he comes crawling back with an apology."

"No matter how he's acted, I still miss him."

"Don't you dare seek him out first, Lucien."

He let out a heavy sigh. "If I do that, it will undermine everything I've done as punishment."

Which included shutting Caleb out of his head. Letting Caleb feel the distance of not having his connection with Lucien. Though nothing had been said publicly, Lucien had told Caleb his days of leading the team were over. In my opinion, it was an announcement that couldn't come soon enough.

"Since we'll have everyone gathered for the coven meeting, we might as well make everyone aware of his change of leadership for the team."

"I don't want to say anything until I find someone to take his place." Lucien turned back to look at me. "If you have any ideas on who, other than Nikolas or Xander, I'd love to hear them."

"Why not Xander or Nikolas?"

"While they are both excellent leaders, I would prefer someone that wasn't tied so closely to us."

I realized what he wanted: someone who would take orders without question; someone who didn't have that added emotional connection with us that they could take advantage of. He was right. We needed someone to take orders well, yet have the ability to lead the team efficiently.

"I'll give it some thought. Where are the files on the team members?"

Lucien shook his head in confusion. "What files?"

"There are no files on each of the team members?"

"No..."

"I think there should be, babe. These are the guys—"

"And girl, don't forget Lilly."

"And girl... that put their lives on the line for us and the rest of the coven's safety. They're also the ones whose hands we put weapons and power in. I think having some basic files on their backgrounds and their connections would be a good idea. In fact, I think it'd be a good idea to have that for the entire coven."

He seemed to think it over for a moment. "That is a lot of work, but it could be a good thing."

"I'll figure out the best way to do it and make up a few test files."

There was a knock at the door, but it didn't open right away. Lucien reached over and turned the lock and then the knob. Xander poked his head in and looked at Lucien. "We've got a situation downstairs."

"What's wrong?"

"It seems a donor is dead on the dance floor. A few people recognize him as a regular, but his contract holder isn't anywhere to be found."

"Then what the hell was he doing here?" Lucien grumbled.

Xander shrugged. "Can you just come take a look and see if you recognize him so we can figure out what to do with him?"

"Is he over at Iniquity?"

At Xander's nod, Lucien sighed. "I'll be right down. Cordon off the area and don't let anyone touch him. We'll also need anyone who witnessed what might have happened to him."

"Should I call the police now?"

"No, let me check him first." Lucien started for the door, but as he reached it, he looked back at me. "Do us a favor, lover. Gather the files that are here in the office, save accounting and inventory, and take them home."

"Do you think we'll have problems with the police?"

"There's a human dead on the dance floor. I think it's entirely possible." I stood and crossed the room. Lucien met me halfway with a tight hug and a soft kiss. "I love you and I'll be home as soon as possible."

"Love you, too," I said. "Keys?"

Lucien frowned. "I'll send someone up to help you with the files—"

I finished for him. "And drive me home."

Two vampires came up to help me carry the boxes of files—mostly contracts between donors and vampires—down to a car. One was Reid, who I'd seen often at the club, yet hadn't really spoken with much. He was around my height, but was much more slender. He had short, soft brown hair, brown eyes, and didn't look one bit like any of the other vampires I'd met. More often than not, he wore jeans and a long-sleeved black or—like tonight—forest green shirt.

The other was Eric, who talked the entire time we packed boxes and carried them downstairs, asking me this and that, telling me of what he and Gino, his lover, had come across on some clubbing excursion.

When we reached the car, Reid smiled at Eric and patted him on the back before sending him back into the club. "I think we've got it from here. I'm sure Gino's waiting for you."

Eric grinned and rushed back into the club, everything else forgotten. I shook my head. "As much as I like Eric—thank you."

Reid shook his head. "One more word and I think I'd have tried to have him for dinner."

"Into junk food, are we?"

I got into the car and Reid got in beside me, putting the key into the ignition. He waited until I had my seat belt on before putting the car in gear. "Where to, sir?"

"To the mansion, please. I need to get the boxes put away until we find out what happened to our friend at the club."

We fell silent as he pulled out onto the main highway. After a few moments, I shifted uncomfortably. The air in the car seemed thick with tension, but whenever I'd look over to Reid, he'd seem perfectly relaxed. My

skin prickled and burned and the anger level rose about ten notches. It made me sick to my stomach and I clutched at the door.

"Pull over."

"Huh?"

"Pull over, now!"

Reid weaved his way through traffic before coming to a screeching halt on the shoulder of the road. I flung the door open and jumped out, just pacing. My stomach settled a little with the cool air, but not completely. I glared up at Reid. "You got a problem?"

His eyes widened. "No, sir, I don't."

"Then what's with the shit you're pulling in the car? Were you in the library, too?"

Reid gaped, shaking his head. "I... I don't know what you mean. Sir, if you'll just get in the car and let me get you home..."

Cool fingers touched at my neck and I jumped, swinging around to find nothing but air. The sensation lifted, but then I felt them down my arms. I swatted at air and swiped up and down my arms. Reid ran to me and took me by the shoulders, forcing me to look at him. "We need to go."

"I won't—" But by the sudden panicked look on his face, by his prodding, yet hesitant touch, I realized that he wasn't the one fucking with me. "There's something else—"

"Yes!"

I ran to the car, Reid following right behind me. He blocked the door as I climbed in. When my door was shut, he ran around to the driver's side. Before he could get his door open, I watched in horror as his body was picked up and slammed against the hood of the car. His head bounced on the windshield, face-first, stunning him. I went to open my door to help him into the car, but the moment my hand hit the door-catch, Reid's voice screamed through my head.

"Glove compartment, Peter!"

I fumbled around until I got it open, finding a stash of guns and liquid-filled vials. The vials made me pause, but Reid pounded on the window, reminding me that something was out there with him. I checked to make sure the gun was loaded and Reid's fist came crashing through the windshield to grab it from me. He flipped onto his back, firing round after round at thin air. A scream pierced the air and Reid cleared more of the glass out of the way to slide inside the car.

The gun was tossed to me as he put the car in gear. "Reload it, will you? I think I hit whatever that was... but I probably didn't kill it."

I reloaded the gun, put the safety on, and placed it in my lap. Picking up one of the vials, I rolled it between my fingers. "Should I even bother to ask?"

"Old habits die hard," he said. "I may not be the biggest and baddest out there, you know. It never hurts to be prepared."

"Does Lucien know?"

"I guess he will now." Reid sighed. "But I'd like you to know the whole truth before you do tell him."

I slammed the glove compartment closed and sank back against the seat, tucking my chin to my chest to try to avoid the wind coming through the massive hole where the windshield used to be. I held the reloaded gun in my hand, safety off now, and kept it pointed right at Reid. No, it hadn't been Reid toying with my fucking head—because Reid was still human.

And a hunter.

Reid pulled into the driveway at the mansion and turned off the car. He didn't seem to want to get out, but I wiggled the gun in my hand as I leaned down from outside the passenger side door. "Safety's off, Reid. Get out of the car."

He got out slowly and walked to the trunk. He grabbed a box of files and turned to face me. "I'm no threat."

"You're certainly not the biggest and baddest," I snarled and pressed the gun to the side of his head. "Right now, that's me. Right now I'm the baddest motherfucker on this entire property. You wanna know why?"

Reid bristled and he looked at me from the corner of his eye. "Why?"

"Because you're a lying sack of shit! And you *dare* to pass yourself off as something you're not. I will tell you this—you even *think* about harming anyone in this coven, I will personally put a bullet in your brain!" Reid's breathing didn't even hitch and I shoved him forward. "Inside."

He stumbled, but then righted himself and walked calmly to the front door. The door opened as we stood before it and Simon looked at me with an odd expression. "Is something wrong, Peter?"

"Yes. Get me Nikolas, please."

"Aw, shit," Reid muttered.

Simon hurried off and I pushed at Reid's shoulder. "Put the box down and sit on it."

"You should close the door," he said quietly. "Whatever we came across out there on the highway could be following us."

"I think I'm more concerned with you at the moment," I said. But just in case, I kicked the door closed. No sense in dealing with more monsters than necessary.

"You rang?" Nikolas walked into the room and promptly paused with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. He chewed slowly, eyeing Reid and me with curiosity. "Hey, Reid."

"So you know him?"

Nikolas grinned. "I know he gives one hell of a blow job, even when he's drunk, but he's still too uptight for my tastes."

"So you know he's human?"

"That's pretty obvious."

"And that he's a hunter?"

"Was," Reid added.

Nikolas' grin quickly disappeared. "I'd say shoot him, but playing with hunters is one of my favorite pastimes." Nikolas looked up at me. "Where's Lucien?"

"Dead donor on the dance floor. Pretty sure he's going to be dealing with the cops here in a bit."

Reid cleared his throat. "The boxes need to be gotten from the car."

"Why? You got someone out there waiting for us?" Nikolas shook his head. "*We trusted* you."

"And I'd never betray that trust, Nikolas. You know Paul would have never brought me in if he doubted me."

"Who's Paul?" I asked.

Nikolas relaxed a little. "Reid's lover. He was killed a couple years ago by a team of hunters. We took Reid in after that, gave him a home, a coven that understood. We vowed—and executed—vengeance on the team that killed Paul. But now I'm left to wonder... was it all for show to get someone on the inside?"

Reid was in tears. "This was Paul's coven. You were the people he loved."

"So why, in all this time, have you not become a *real* part of this coven? There's nothing to hold you here but your word. Imagine how that looks to us."

"Paul was going to," Reid sat back against the wall. "But after he died, I didn't really have much to live for. I swear it on my life—I would die serving Lucien... and you."

I lowered the gun, put the safety on, then tucked it in the waist of my pants. "I'd really like to believe you."

Nikolas sighed. "What's with the boxes in the car? Why's he so hard up to get them in here?"

"Something..." I shook my head. "I think *someone* is fucking with me. I've been feeling like someone's watching me at weird times, lately. I can feel that they're pissed off about something, but I never see anyone."

"It happened in the car," Reid said. "Made him sick. I pulled over and he got out, thinking it was me. But I felt it, too."

"See anything?"

Reid shook his head. "Sure as fuck felt it, but no, didn't see it. Might have shot it, but I can't be sure."

It was only then, that I remembered how hard Reid had been slammed against the car. His face had a nasty bruise along one side and his hand... "Oh, Reid, let's get your hand wrapped up before you bleed out all over the floor."

He glanced at his hand. "I'll live."

How he'd put his hand through the windshield without breaking it, I'd never know. "Help me get the boxes out of the car and carried into the library. Then we're going to have to lock you up downstairs."

Simon had taken care of Reid's hand, given him a pain killer, and served him dinner after we'd locked him into one of the private rooms near the dungeon. It was a comfortable room, with a bed, sink, and private bath, so Reid wouldn't be hurting for much. Nikolas and I had moved the boxes of files into the vault and then retreated to the bedroom.

After what had happened earlier, the last place I wanted to be was the library—where I'd first had the feeling of being watched. Nikolas had his feet propped on the desk, eating from a large bag of chips. "So, what's this about someone fucking with you—and why am I just now hearing about it?"

I kicked my boots off and moved to the bed. I grabbed a pillow and lay on my belly as I looked up at him. "There's not really much to tell."

"Humor me anyway."

I started a week before with the night in the library, told him of the few instances I'd had in the past week of feeling like someone was with me in the room when I was alone, then told him what had happened on the side of the road. When I finished, Nikolas was visibly upset.

"I find out someone's fucking with you, there won't be anything left for Lucien to kill."

"Maybe it's all in my head."

"Right," Nikolas said. "And your imagination fucked up Reid's face and hand?"

He had a point. "You know what sucks though?"

"Hmm?"

"Can't fight what you can't see."

Chapter Fourteen

Someone shook my shoulder gently, startling the hell out of me. I sat up in bed, instantly relieved to see Lucien unbuttoning his shirt. "Tired?"

I blinked and looked around the room. Nikolas was still at the desk, feet propped up as he watched TV. I yawned and rubbed at my eyes. "I didn't think so. What time is it?"

"It's only three." I started to get up, but Lucien frowned. "You're fine, lover. Just wanted you to know I was home."

"No, no," I said. "We have things to talk about. But first, what happened at the club?"

"We're shut down until they finish collecting evidence from the scene. I'm not worried about it. The most they'll find is that he was full of drugs. I think he and his contract holder might have been having issues. The contract was up and his holder didn't want to renew it."

I shook my head. "That's sad."

"Unrequited love always is." He leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. "Did you give Reid a room for the night?"

"Uh... sort of. Lucien, honey, we need to talk about Reid."

He tossed his shirt over the back of the chair and started on his pants. "Reid's a nice guy."

God, I hated to break this to him. I glanced at Nikolas, who was in turn stealing glances at us, pretending he wasn't listening. "Reid was a hunter."

Lucien's hands stopped and his gaze flashed up to meet mine. "Say that again?"

"A hunter."

He sat down on the bed beside me. "How did you find this out?"

I told him what had happened on the way home from the club, and about finding the vials and guns in Reid's glove compartment. He was quiet for a long while. "Do not go anywhere alone until we figure this out."

"I don't—"

"Please, Peter... Do not fight me on this."

Leaning over, I wrapped my arms around him, resting my head on his shoulder. "I don't *want* to be alone after this. I'm all about fighting back, but that's kind of hard when I can't see what I'm fighting."

Lucien sighed. "I need to speak with Reid."

"Want me to come?"

He nodded. "If you don't mind."

"How 'bout me?" Nikolas asked without looking at us.

"No, I think the two of us will be quite enough," Lucien said. "Do you have something you need to be doing?"

"Nope."

"Find something—or someone—to fill your time. I would appreciate it if you would come back at dawn and stay until Xander makes it home."

"Oh, *I* see." Nikolas snorted. "You want me to vanish and not be here when you two get back. Not a problem."

Lucien rolled his eyes and started for the door. I followed him out, not bothering with shoes. As soon as the door shut, Lucien smiled a little. "I don't think Nikolas has ever been so... relaxed."

"He does seem to be making himself quite cozy, doesn't he?" I hooked my arm through Lucien's as we walked, just enjoying the closeness. "But cozy is good, I think. I like having those I care about close."

"Nikolas has become very special to you, hasn't he?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Nikolas *is* very special. I hope one day he finds someone that he's able to let go with completely."

"He's got nearly seventy years of cynical under his belt. That might take some time for the right someone to break through. God help whoever falls for Nikolas."

True. Thankfully, Xander was a little younger, a little less cynical. Okay, a lot less cynical. All Xander had ever wanted was to be loved. "And Xander," I added quietly. "Because whoever he finds will have to go through me first."

Lucien's arm came around me, hugging me tight. "They will both have to be very special, indeed."

Soon, we stood before the door to Reid's room. Lucien scanned his hand on the security screen and opened the door. Reid was curled up on the bed, sleeping. The moment the door closed, Reid shot up, blinking. When he realized who he was looking at, he bowed his head. Lucien stared at the top of his head for a long while, before crossing his arms and leaning back against the door.

"It seems there's something we need to discuss."

Reid nodded his head solemnly and slid off the bed and onto his knees. "Yes, sir."

"I think my first question is why. Not so much why you hunted, but why you ended up in my coven."

"Paul," Reid almost whispered. "I tried to kill him and he fought back. I got hurt, but instead of killing me, he healed me. That was so far out of the scope of what I thought about vampires—what I'd been taught—that I sought him out."

"And you what? Fell in love?"

"Oh, not at first. He berated me for being such an ignorant asshole. I apologized, though I didn't even know what for at the time. Another team rolled through and saw us together and I had to make a choice—Paul or my job. I chose Paul."

"And yet when Paul was tortured and murdered and we vowed to seek vengeance, you never once mentioned that you might be the very cause of his death. You never once came forward to admit the truth about yourself."

"I was scared, sir. Scared that everyone would think I did it to him, that—"

"Did you?" I asked.

"No! I loved him. He was my life!"

"Feed me." Lucien's voice was calm, even though I could see that he was clearly aggravated.

Reid quieted instantly. "Sir?"

"I would know your head and your heart. Feed me."

Reid rose quietly and began stripping his clothes off. He was clearly shaken and I glanced at Lucien, wondering what he was up to. But Lucien seemed totally relaxed, totally confident in what he was doing. It wasn't until Reid was completely naked that I realized that he wasn't just slender. He was thin—too thin for it to be healthy.

He seemed unsure of what to do with his clothes off. Lucien stepped forward. "Tell me where you wish me to feed from."

"Anywhere you wish, sir."

"Anywhere?"

Oh, that was dangerous. That was one of the keys to self-preservation when feeding a vampire. You *always* tell them where to feed from. Reid had been around long enough to know that. He was either playing stupid, or he had a death wish.

At Reid's nod, Lucien pushed him back over the bed, spread his legs, and struck right at the femoral artery. He fed for a few moments, but when Reid just lay there passively, he pulled away and moved to Reid's throat. There was a wince of pain as Lucien struck again, but he just lay there and let Lucien feed.

Soon, Reid was shaking beneath Lucien and I thought he might have actually been getting off. But when I stepped more to the side, I realized he was sobbing, tears streaming down his cheeks. Why I felt sorry for him, I couldn't say. Only that I did. I placed my hand on Lucien's shoulder and he pulled away a few moments later, wiping at the corner of his mouth.

"Go clean yourself, Reid."

Reid shakily got out of bed and went into the bathroom. As soon as the water came on, Lucien turned to me. "I don't think I've ever felt such pain and despair."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Give him a choice."

I considered that for a bit, but Reid came back in before I could ask any more. He had bandages over his bite marks, a tiny spot of blood showing through at his neck. Lucien pointed toward the bed. "Lie down."

Reid did as he was instructed and Lucien walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. "You have a choice, Reid. I will allow you to stay here, to remain a part of the coven—but I can't allow you to do that while human. You pose too much of a risk."

He looked at Lucien, eyes full of sadness. "Would you do it?"

Lucien nodded.

Reid swallowed hard and wiped at his eyes. "It's what I wanted—what Paul wanted."

"What about what you want?" I asked. "Paul is dead."

"This coven is all I've got left. There's no going back for me."

Lucien stood. "There will be a room prepared for you upstairs. You will be on a specialized diet to put back on the weight that you've lost and you will use the gym on a regular basis to regain your strength. Simon will meet with you to discuss your meals and your supplements. If there is anything you need, you come straight to me or Peter. Do you understand?"

Reid nodded quickly and sat up, but swayed a little. "Yes, sir, I do."

"Do not cross me, Reid. There will be no third chance." Lucien turned on his heel and I followed behind him. "Get some rest."

The door shut behind us and I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans. "So... What did you see?"

Lucien's arm came around me as we began to walk. "He's definitely telling the truth about his relationship with Paul. He loved him very much."

"And he gave up being a hunter out of love for him?"

Lucien nodded. "Reid comes from a long line of hunters. He turned his back on everything in the human world just to be with the man he loved. And he stayed here, even after Paul was gone."

"I don't understand why he never came clean."

"Put yourself in his shoes and then ask that question." Lucien shook his head. "Fear, Peter. It fucks with our heads."

I stopped walking. "I held a gun to his head tonight. I told him that—"

"I saw." Lucien pulled me into his arms. "Everything, in fact. Why didn't you tell me that you'd had more feelings of being watched?"

"Because I was starting to think it was all in my head."

"We will get to the bottom of this." He kissed the side of my head and we started walking back up the corridor. "I think we need to talk to Simon about your diet as well."

My stomach churned at the thought of food. I'd gotten by on junk food, for the most part. Nothing too rich, nothing too sweet. Plain potato chips were about all I could handle. I knew, though, that with over two weeks passing and me not eating, something was definitely wrong.

"I'll talk to him, see if we can figure out something light to start with."

"And hope the physician has more answers for us."

"I haven't even met him and I'm starting not to like him," I grumbled. "I could wither away and die before he decides to show his face."

Lucien growled. "No, we would see Christopher before I let *that* happen."

Lucien moved up behind me as I started the shower, lips pressing softly against my neck, hands and fingers ghosting down my sides. He moved my hair aside and nibbled just at my hairline, working his way slowly down my spine. He hit every damned sensitive spot, one right after the other.

Goose bumps rose on my skin and he slowly pushed me into the shower. When the warm water hit me, I let out a heavy sigh, totally relaxed. Lucien moved in behind me and pushed me against the wall, continuing the light touches and kisses. I pressed my forehead against the still-cool tile, knowing that Lucien and I had truly connected again.

Not in our minds—which I so desperately missed—but in our hearts. Our love was a living, breathing thing; so real I almost felt I could reach out and touch it. He pulled me back into his arms, chin on my shoulder, arms wrapped around my belly. We swayed beneath that warm spray of water, enjoying the closeness.

"What are you thinking, lover?"

"That I love you. That I'm glad to have this back."

He sighed and it sounded more like a moan. "I don't think we've had this before..."

Confused, I started to turn around. "What do you mean?"

His arms held me in place and he hugged me tight, lips pressing soundly against my neck. "What we have now, we've fought for."

"Literally."

"And it has made us stronger, made us better—together and apart."

He turned and grabbed the soap and soon his hands were moving over my skin, fingers slipping and sliding easily. I turned and leaned back against the tile wall, the coolness making me hiss. We traded the soap back and forth, washing and touching each other so slowly, as if nothing else in the world mattered.

The soap dropped to the bottom of the shower with a dull splat and I looked down, then up at Lucien. I started to tease him about dropping the soap, but he was moving toward me, an intense expression over his face. His lips met mine and he pulled back a little, hands framing my face. His eyes showed so much love, so much tenderness, that it made me tremble a little.

I slid my hands over his hips and pressed my palms low against his back, pulling him close, leaning in for the next kiss. His tongue pushed between my lips and I opened for him, moaning as his taste invaded my senses. Hips rocked and slid together, slowly, the need and the want just building and building.

He reached down and grabbed my thighs, wrapping my legs around his hips. I could feel him hard against my ass and I shifted just a little, trying to get that thick cock between my ass cheeks.

But Lucien just kept kissing me, teasing me, continuing that gentle rocking of his hips. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, pulling myself almost completely up into his arms. The only part of me touching the wall was the space between my shoulders. Lucien's kiss trailed down my chin, torturously working his way down my throat. Lips and tongue teased and sucked where my neck and shoulder met and I tightened around him, crying out.

"Oh, God... need you so much."

The water went off, though I didn't think he'd let go of me. He held me tight in his arms and stepped out of the shower, still kissing, still teasing me as he walked us into the bedroom. He laid me on the bed and my wet skin and hair stuck to the sheets, preventing him from sliding me up to the pillows. He lifted my weight from the bed, pulled me up beneath him, and settled his weight between my legs.

When I felt the thick head of his cock against my hole, I pushed down against him. For the longest time, we rocked and pushed until Lucien's hips pressed fully against my ass.

Lucien's head dropped to mine and for a moment we both went still, just breathing—feeling. And instead of picking up with a harsh thrusts and grunts, we kept rocking, kept pushing, kept touching. Lips met and teased and whispered promises passed between us. Lucien's heat began to fill me and I pulled him in tight with my legs around his hips. I slipped over the edge right behind him, melting into the bed beneath.

His head rested against my shoulder and he let out a contented sigh. Before long, his body went heavy and still. I lay there, half asleep, with him still over me, still filling me. After a while, a cramp in my thigh made me push him off and back on the bed. I got out of bed, and walked off the cramp, getting a warm cloth in the process.

After I'd cleaned us both, I moved his arm so I could lie in the crook between it and his body. I pulled the comforter up and snuggled down, content, loved... treasured.

Fingers brushed against my belly and I opened my eyes to see that Lucien was still sleeping. Only then did I realize that Xander had climbed into bed with us sometime after I'd fallen asleep. I rolled onto my back and looked at Xander.

"What time is it?"

"Still pretty early," he said with a yawn. "But I've got to go get Reid's stuff moved."

"And you're waking me up because?"

"Because I can't leave you alone and you know that."

I groaned and rolled back to face Lucien, sliding my arms around him, burying my face against his chest. "Find Nikolas. Don't wanna go."

He rolled up and kissed my shoulder before getting out of bed. "I'll call him, you sleep."

I pulled the comforter up around Lucien and me and settled in with a sigh. I'd *just* dozed off again when Xander whispered in my ear. "Nikolas is out. I need you to throw some clothes on and come with me."

"Son of a bitch!"

Xander moved back as I threw off the blankets and got out of bed. I grabbed a pair of jeans and a shirt from the closet and slipped them on before finding my boots. I slipped those on, too, but didn't bother to lace them. "Happy now? Let's go!"

We started for the door, but I paused, going back to the bed. I pulled the comforter back up around Lucien and leaned in, giving him a kiss. "Love you, baby. Be back soon."

I closed the door to the bedroom and reset the security lock. When I turned, Xander was standing in front of me. "I'm sorry. I didn't want you mad."

"I'm not mad." I huffed and ran my hands through unruly, unbrushed hair. "I'm just... tired. And I wanted to be lazy and just wake up with nowhere to go, nothing to do right away."

"We'll hurry, I promise. Lucien won't be awake for hours and we should be done and back by then."

I leaned in and kissed him. "And here we are standing in the hall and wasting time."

Once in the truck, I grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the glove-box and turned away from the window, as if I could keep the afternoon sun off me. It had been weeks since I'd seen the light of day and I'd forgotten just how bright it could be. "Why are we going during the day?"

"Because we have a coven meeting tonight."

"It couldn't wait?"

"Lucien's note insisted that Reid have his personal belongings as soon as possible." Xander looked at me. "Nikolas told me what happened."

"Which part?"

"All of it. Do you think whatever it was on the side of the road could possibly be the same thing that was in the library that night? I mean, something that nasty, more people would have felt it than just you."

"I don't know. Maybe it's not just one... whatever the fuck it is. Maybe I've pissed off several of them."

Xander grumbled, but didn't actually say anything. A little while later, we pulled into an apartment building that was so rundown I wondered why it hadn't been condemned. The brick was crumbling and boards were nailed over the windows. I looked at Xander. "You've *got* to be kidding me."

He looked at the paper in his hand again. "No, this is the right address."

I grimaced and opened the door. "Then let's get this over with."

Rats scurried back and forth as we opened the main door to the complex. Xander shook his head. "There's no one else here."

"Tell me he's on the first floor..."

"Fourth."

"Fuck."

I started up the stairs, holding lightly to the rickety banister, hoping with each step, that the old, rotted boards would hold our weight. It seemed to take hours to reach the top floor and when we finally stood before Reid's door, Xander scented the air. "I don't think he's been here in a while."

The door was cracked open and I gave it a little push. The smell of rotted food and dead rats hit me and I had to pull my shirt up over my nose and mouth. "He can't *possibly* be living here—no matter how depressed he might be."

Xander walked on ahead, looking for some sign that we were in the right place. I wandered the living and kitchen area, grimacing at a refrigerator that stood wide open with long-rotten food containers turned this way and that. I looked up as Xander walked into the room.

"Call Simon and see if he can get another address from Reid. He hasn't lived here in years."

"He hasn't lived here, but he's *been* here." Xander gestured to the bedroom. "Come here, let me show you."

I followed Xander to the bedroom and when I stepped inside all I could do was shake my head. The bedroom was littered with old paint cans and brushes, broken easels, and paint-smeared rags. There were a few empty canvases scattered about, but no actual artwork. Xander took me by the shoulders and turned me to face the wall behind me.

On the wall, was a beautiful portrait of two men: one of them had medium-length, sandy-blond hair and green eyes, with a kind and playful expression on his face; the other—was Reid. A much happier, much more vibrant Reid than I'd ever seen so far.

"I didn't take Reid for a painter."

"He wasn't. Paul was."

It slowly sank in why Reid had been in this room and not in any of the others. "Oh, God, Xander... Is this what it's like to lose your soul mate?"

He hugged me tight and I found myself hugging him in return, tears burning at my eyes. I hurt for Reid and for what he'd lost. The one person in his life that made everything else work, that made life not only bear-

able, but enjoyable. It was a hurt I couldn't fathom. I let go of Xander and walked to the wall, feeling for a seam. The portrait was right in the middle of the sheetrock, just between a line of nails in the studs.

"Do we have tools, Xander?"

"A few, I think," he answered, hesitating a bit. "Why?"

"Because we're going to bring this painting home and we're going to find *someone* who can get the top layer of paper off the sheetrock and make it into a something Reid can put in a frame."

We quickly found out that the tools we had just weren't right and ended up hitting a hardware store before coming back to the complex. Removing that one piece of sheetrock without it crumbling took forever. But we managed and put it on a board to carry it down the stairs. Tools gathered and loaded, Xander and I headed a few miles up the road to the second address Simon had given us.

The address led to a small motel room with a tiny kitchenette. The place was clean, Reid's belongings neatly in place. There were several pictures on the bedside table and I picked one of them up and then put it back down, feeling like I was invading some sort of sacred space. The room was packed up and cleaned out in short time and Xander and I got everything loaded and secured in the back of the truck.

He pulled the truck into the garage and smiled over at me. "I think, except for the picture, we can leave this to someone else to unload."

"Sounds good to me."

We managed to get the picture out and carried to one of the storage rooms in the garage. He turned off the lights and then locked the door. "Thanks for the help."

"I'm glad I went. Kind of reminded me just what I have, you know?"

He nodded. "I'm going to go grab something to eat."

"Don't forget the coven meeting at ten," I said. "I'm going to shower and see if Lucien's fed yet."

We parted ways at the private entrance, me going to the bedroom, Xander heading for the kitchen. I swiped my hand over the security scanner and it flashed green. I opened the door, fully expecting to see Lucien lounging in bed or at the desk. But the room was empty. Then again, knowing him, he was probably already dressed and in the library making sure his notes for the coven meeting were complete.

I stripped in the doorway and hurried to the shower, anxious to wash the dust and grime of the sheetrock away. I towed off and found my clothes for the night, a pair of soft, brown leather pants and a long-sleeved black dress shirt. As I put on a pair of boots, I noticed Lucien's at the foot of the closet.

Apparently he hadn't bothered to dress yet. Which meant... *I* could get him dressed. I ran a brush through my hair, mostly to get rid of the tangles. I left it damp and headed out the door for the library. I ran into Caleb just outside the bedroom door. He glared and when I reached for him, he backed away.

"Caleb... Come on, I don't want things to be this way."

"Why do you care?"

"Because I miss what we used to have. I miss *you*, Caleb."

He snorted. "I think your bed's a little full, even for my taste."

At that, he moved on down the hall and went into his room, slamming the door behind him. I turned on my heel, a little pissed that there wasn't much I could do about his attitude, other than send him to Nikolas. Which, in turn, would just cause all sorts of other problems.

I entered the library, disappointed to find that Lucien wasn't there either. I walked to the desk, running my hand along the wood. My gaze settled on an envelope in the middle of my desk with my name on it. I picked it up, smiling and running my fingers over Lucien's flowing script. As I opened and began to read the letter inside, my smile quickly faded.

Peter,

The Council has called regarding the letter they sent. The situation seems to have worsened and it seems I'm the only one available. I'm not sure when I'll return, but I'll try to call. Take care of the coven while I'm away, and proceed with the meeting as we planned.

Lucien.

I read and reread the letter, aggravation settling deep. By the way the letter was scratched out, I could tell he'd been in a hurry. But goddamn it, he could have at least called to let me know he was going instead of leaving me some short, not even sweet, letter. The thought of having the coven meeting without him irked me no end, and I barely resisted the urge to crumple the letter and toss it in the trash. Instead, I put it in a drawer and picked up the phone.

Chapter Fifteen

"What do you mean he *left*?"

"I mean he left to go handle *Council* business and left me here to deal with the coven and the meeting tonight. Just meet me in the library when you finish with your shower."

"You want me to dress?"

"Goddamn it, Xander, I'm not in the mood."

"Sorry," Xander mumbled into the phone. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

I hung up the phone and pounded my fist on the desk, determined to make Lucien pay for leaving me holding the ball. Which, consisted of... well, I didn't know. But surely it had something to do with yelling and screaming and an extreme lack of sex.

There was a knock at the door and I looked up to find Simon, a grim look on his face. "I see you've found the note."

"Did he tell you how long he was going to be gone?"

Simon shook his head. "I'm afraid I got a note, too. It appears he left as soon as he rose."

I sighed and leaned back in the chair. "I can't do this tonight, Simon."

"That's what I was coming to see you about. I know you are nervous and angry with him for leaving this in your hands, but you must preside over the meeting. It would look far worse for you to cancel the meeting than for you to go up there and be nervous."

"Oh, thanks..."

"When the Master calls, the coven comes together. You need to show them that you are capable of holding the reins."

"This better not be some sort of test—or I'll kill him myself."

"I doubt it is, sir. Lucien would never leave you unless he had no choice."

"Do we have anything to offer them? I'm afraid my blood's kinda shitty at the moment for donating to even one vampire, much less hundreds."

"The donation should be here at any time," he said. "There will be plenty to go around."

"Thank you, Simon."

Simon turned and left the library with a smile and Nikolas walked in just a few seconds later. "So, the big man is gone, huh?"

"Word travels fast."

Nikolas shrugged. "Not really. I overheard Xander talking to you."

I raised a brow. "What were you doing in Xander's room?"

"Do you *really* want to know?"

"No." But the longer he stood there, smirking, the more curious I got. "Yes."

He rested his hands on the arm of the chair and bent down so close I thought he'd kiss me. But I knew better than that. He grinned. "I was licking him, sucking at that spot just below his ear, fucking his ass with my fingers, getting him ready... And then you called. Your timing sucks, you know that?"

"You're lying."

"Okay, so that's what I was *wanting* to do. He was sucking me off, though, and had to stop to answer when you called."

There was more truth to that one and it made me smile. "What the fuck is up with you and your sudden interest in Xander?"

"I'm horny; he's available. What's so wrong about that?"

"You do know that he was fucking Caleb not so long ago."

"Yeah... I remember. But it looks like Caleb's out, so..." He shrugged. "I just want to be in."

I laughed and shook my head. "Don't break him, okay? I'm rather attached to both Xander *and* his ass."

"Hey, I'm careful with my toys. They may bend, but they don't break."

I reached up and touched at his stubbled cheek with the tips of my fingers. His eyes danced happily as they met mine. His gaze slid down to my lips and I leaned forward, touching my lips to his. He didn't move, his expression didn't change; he just stayed there in place before me—frozen. "Kiss me, Nikolas..."

"Why?"

"Because I want to taste you," I whispered. "I want to share something with you that no one else has."

"Think you can cure me, princess?"

"I think I'll never stop trying."

Nikolas' heart was racing so fast I could see his pulse in the hollow of his throat. He shook his head and started to move away, but before I could even blink, his lips crushed against mine. I opened to him and the moment his tongue slid against mine, I knew I was fucked.

We both were.

His picked me up out of the chair like I didn't weigh nearly two hundred pounds and lifted me up onto the desk. I grabbed at his shirt and pants as he shoved at mine, nearly ripping my pants in two. My pants were pushed down and Nikolas' thick, hot length pressed hard against my belly. He reached between us and grasped my cock, moaning as our pricks slid together in his hand.

He finally broke the kiss and licked and bit down my throat. "Don't you dare tell anyone."

"Between you and me," I panted, thrusting into his hand. He faltered for a moment and I arched up against him. "Don't stop."

"I..." He kissed me again, tongue-fucking my mouth as hard as I wanted to be humping against him.

I pushed him off me and when I got to my feet, I bent him back over the desk, one fist in his hair, the other between us. I kissed him over and over again, hard, rough, drawing blood as teeth met and clicked and bit. Nikolas growled and I felt something sharp dig into my ass cheeks as he pulled me closer.

"Harder," I ordered.

He pulled me in harder, and I had a quick realization that the sharp pricks at my ass were claws. It was as if a switch flipped somewhere. I grabbed Nikolas up and pushed him face first onto the desk. He struggled for a moment, but when I began pushing my cock between his ass cheeks, he shook his head adamantly. "Not that... not yet."

I relented, and slid my cock along the crack of his ass instead, just humping him. With my weight adding to the friction, the sensation was almost as good as being inside him. I dropped my head to Nikolas' shoulder and licked and bit at that smooth skin. My hands held him tight and soon skin became fur, thick around my fingers. Fur surrounded my cock and I humped at him faster and harder, hardly able to breathe.

Something else was between us besides my cock, something thick and furry and I looked down to see a black, furry tail. Oh, fuck... He was shifting as I humped him and I suddenly thought that was one of the hottest fucking things ever. Fire shot up through my groin and I could feel my orgasm right there. Right. Fucking. There.

"Now!" Nikolas was shaking in my arms, baring and spreading his ass for me.

I entered him in one harsh movement and as soon as my hips hit that furred ass, I came, filling him over and over. The sensation seemed to last forever and by the time the aftershocks had worn off, I realized there was a fully-shifted werewolf beneath me—and that I'd just fucked him.

I rested my head against his back, breathing in deeply the scent of fur and earth and wolf. His breathing was harsh, a steady rumble coming from his lungs, as I pulled out of him slowly. Nikolas stayed where he was and I couldn't help but glance at his hole, dripping with my come.

"Nikolas..."

He turned his great head to look at me, that mouth full of razor sharp teeth, lips just parted. He reached for me, cupped the back of my neck with a paw, and drew me in. That wolf-like mouth shifted, leaving his face oddly half-wolf, half-human. "You are... my... alpha."

The kiss that followed was gentle and I found myself licking at the corner of his mouth. "Thank you for giving me this, Nikolas. Thank you."

He ducked his head, rubbing it against my chest. That mouth shifted into a muzzle and he proceeded to lick at my belly. I sighed in contentment and just let him. He finally moved away and sat back on his haunches. He said something that I couldn't understand, grabbed up his clothes, and rose to stand on two legs. It made him impossibly tall and I had to look up at him.

"Are you coming back?"

He nodded curtly and crossed the room in a few strides. I watched him go and blinked, the whole incident not quite sinking in yet. I glanced at the clock and realized that it was already getting close to nine. Xander should have been up here before now and I started to wonder if I needed to go find him. But as I looked down at my spent cock, jutting obscenely from my pants, I realized I needed to at least wash up before going anywhere.

I went into the private bathroom and started washing up. I heard someone come into the office, moving things around, but I wanted to get as much of Nikolas' scent off me as I could before I opened the door. That didn't do much for the rest of the room, but... Well, there wouldn't be any easy way of hiding this, anyway.

When I opened the door, I was surprised to see that the library was empty. I grabbed another wet cloth and wiped the desk where Nikolas had come. And had come quite a lot, by the look of it. After cleaning everything I could think of, I sat down in the chair and picked up the phone. The door opened just as I began to dial.

"Sorry!" Xander said quickly. "I helped Simon carry that..." He scented the air. "What is that smell?"

"Nothing," I answered. "I was just about to call you."

"Who did you fuck?" Xander's grin was so big it was obscene. "A werewolf...?" He gasped. "Not just any werewolf—a shifted wolf... Now *who* would you be able to get that close to tonight?"

"Shut up, Xander."

"I wondered where Nikolas went."

"I swear, Xander, if you say a fucking word—"

"Fuck me, too?"

"I fuck you all the time."

He huffed in playful disappointment. "But you've never fucked me furry."

I sighed and sat back in the chair. "Come here." He crossed the room and stood in front of me. I pointed to the floor and he bit at his lip and knelt. I pulled his face into my crotch. "Can you smell him on me?"

Xander groaned. "Fuck yes."

"Then go soap up a cloth and wash me off, will you?"

He sat back on his heels. "Why would you want that?"

"Because he doesn't want anyone to know," I said. "Do this for me, please?"

He shook his head. "No."

I raised a brow, not quite believing he'd just told me no. But before I could manage to formulate a response, he spoke again.

"This is a bond between you and Nikolas. He knew very well going into it that his scent would linger for days. It can't be washed off. I could scrub you raw and his scent would still be deep inside you. Much like yours is on him."

"It wasn't planned. It just sort of happened."

Xander smiled. "The upside of this is that vampires will never be able to pick out a certain werewolf's scent. They'll all assume it's mine."

"You think so?"

"I know so. And I have no issues with letting them think that." He winked. "They all know about us anyway."

I leaned forward and kissed him. "I love you, my wolf."

"I know."

Over two hundred faces stared up at me expectantly as I climbed the stairs to the landing. The ballroom was as full as it was the night Lucien and I had our bonding ceremony and my thoughts went roaring back to sex on the balcony. Images of Lucien fucking me in front of everyone flashed before my eyes and I felt my cock twitch in response.

A warm hand at my back pulled me out of those thoughts and I looked over at Xander with a raised brow. "I could fuck all night," I whispered.

He mouthed the word 'incubus' and it suddenly hit me why sex was on the brain. Lots of it. Lucien had passed that down into every vampire he'd created and standing in a packed room full of them, without Lucien as a buffer, suddenly seemed very dangerous. The meeting could quickly turn into a gangbang—with me as the star—if I didn't get a grip.

Something about that thought made me pause. Why would Lucien insist on the meeting when he knew this? It didn't matter that I shared the coven with Lucien; with Lucien gone, they all saw me as fresh meat. Or blood...

I clutched the notes in my hand and rested my elbows on the balcony. "First, thank you all for showing up. I know Lucien would be very happy to see the majority of the coven here tonight."

"Where is he?" someone asked.

"I'm getting to that."

"Oh, don't tell me we came just for you..."

"Maybe it's a test and we're supposed to bang him..."

"A gift!"

"Oh, yeah, fuck him and bleed him..."

Anger flared and I growled, the sound coming from somewhere deep inside of me. It startled the fuck out of me, but it seemed to stop the taunting. "We will have a short meeting tonight because Lucien was called away on Council business."

A rumbling and groaning went through the crowd. "Due to the police having declared the club a crime scene, the club has been shut down until they finish their investigation. It should only be a few days, but I want you all to be aware of it. Until then, find somewhere else to haunt or stay home."

"Can we come here?"

I shook my head. "You will live without the club for a few days. And, to continue on that note, we've decided to shut the club down every Monday night, starting next week."

"So what? We get shafted on hours now?" one of the bouncers asked.

"No, your pay will be adjusted and you won't lose anything." Lucien and I hadn't talked about that, but it was only fair.

"What about feeding?" someone asked.

"Have you forgotten how to work for your food?" I asked. "Really, I think that's a non-issue."

"No shit," someone agreed. "Hanging in the club, waiting to get fed, is just... lazy."

"There really isn't much else for me to announce to you all tonight, so if anyone has any questions later, please do find me." Movement at the stairs drew my attention and I looked over to see several of the team members walking up the stairs, Silver leading the way. I looked back to the crowd. "I appreciate the sacrifice you all have made in coming tonight; I know some of you took time off from your jobs on the outside in order to be here."

Simon entered the room below, pushing a cart with a several large punchbowls full of blood. I pointed down to Simon with a smile. "Feel free to have a drink, mingle, fuck... whatever. But be sure you are all back here in two weeks for the next meeting."

As the crowd began to work its way to the front of the room, all eyes and attention turned to the treat being offered, I turned to look at Silver. "Something wrong?"

"We thought it best to shadow you while you are outside the locked wing. With Lucien away, it's probably best."

"You afraid someone might pull me into a dark corner and ravish me?"

"Not so much ravish you," Eric said softly. "Kill you, maybe."

Xander was suddenly at my side. "Boys, I think he has enough of a shadow. The offer was made and now it's kindly being refused. Anything happens to him, and you've at least covered your ass. I'll take it from here."

One of the team members chuffed, spewing something to the effect that dogs and vampires didn't mix. Another team member reminded him that I was human. A third team member hissed and said I wasn't worth the energy. Silver tossed a glance in Xander's direction and I knew that he approved of Xander's loyalty.

Silver leaned in close and whispered in my ear. "I will protect you at all costs. If you need me, you will call me?"

I nodded.

He sighed and his breath was cool against my ear. "A brave thing you have done tonight, sir."

At that, he turned and gave an order for the team to sweep the premises. He followed them down, one hand resting on the gun in his hip holster. Xander leaned close, watching Silver's back as he retreated. "I'm never sure what to think of him."

"I think he's probably one of the only ones qualified for the job."

Xander nudged me. "Hey, we've got wolves on the team and they're qualified."

"Yeah, but where are they?" I asked, looking out over the room. I saw a few of the werewolves gathered in one spot near the door and gestured with a nod of my head. "See them? They're nowhere near the rest of the team. And I don't think it's by choice."

"Vampire against werewolf," he said with a sigh.

"And I don't like it."

I flopped back against the pillows and huffed. TV was shit, reading had lost its charm, and Simon had bailed on me in favor of a pork roast. I was safely locked in my own bedroom, with a damned baby monitor open between my bedroom and the kitchen. Xander and Nikolas were out helping a couple werewolves move, and even though I'd offered to help they'd told me they had it covered.

I felt useless.

And bored.

I rolled across the bed and picked Lucien's cell phone up from the bedside table. I'd found it after the coven meeting when I tried to call him and only ended up scaring myself when the phone rang. He'd only been gone two days, but I missed him like crazy and every moment of the day that went by that he didn't call, my heart sank just a little more.

A knock at the door perked me up. "Come in," I said, situating myself at the edge of the bed. No reason to look completely lazy.

The door opened and Silver stepped in. He was dressed in full tactical gear, but he was clean. Not a drop of blood – his or anyone else's – on him at all. Whatever trouble he'd been looking for tonight either hadn't been found, or was being handled by someone else. As quiet as things had been lately, I was willing to bet it was the lack of things to kill.

"Hey, Silver."

He dropped to one knee and respectfully bowed his head. "Sir."

No matter how much I tried for casual with him, the *sir* had always stuck. I'd learned to be somewhat flattered by it. "What brings you here tonight?"

"There's a rogue in the area," he said as he stood. "And he might be tailed by a hunter. We're not as concerned about the rogue—Eric and Gino are keeping an eye on him."

"A single hunter? Not a team?"

"It looks that way..."

I knew where this was going, but I'd never been the one to give the order. Not that I had a problem with it. Hunters were too dangerous for us to let them move on. They had to be handled just as the rogues were. I picked up the monitor and clicked it off for a moment. "Be sure he's not part of a bigger team—and bring him to the dungeon."

Silver raised an eyebrow, curious. "The dungeon?"

I nodded. "A gift... for Nikolas. Something he can play with before he kills it."

"As long as he kills it and I don't have to go out hunting down a pissed off hunter-turned-werewolf."

"Oh, don't worry." I smiled wryly. "He'll kill it."

Silver opened his mouth to say something, but closed it almost immediately. Looking at him, so strong and so confident in his duties, I knew he was probably the strongest member of the team; the one with the most fighting and weapons experience. Suddenly, my conversation with Nikolas about the team was in my mind again and I had the perfect opportunity to get some feedback.

"Are you on your way to do something, or do you have time to talk for a while?"

"Talk, sir?"

"Yeah, you know. You losing the *sir* and me asking you some questions. You then answering them with brutal honesty." Silver's normally calm, calculated demeanor shifted a little to the side of panic. "Hey, whatever we talk about is between you and me. Not us and Lucien, or Xander, or anyone else on the team."

"D-do you mind if I disarm?"

"No," I said. "Disarm, get naked. Whatever you want."

"I think I'll keep the clothes," he said, his deep voice rumbling. "Wouldn't want you to get distracted."

Oh, man. Getting a joke out of Silver was like digging diamonds out of potting soil. "Oh, I see. Funny man now, are we?"

Silver chuckled and began dropping weapons on the floor. At about the tenth one, I raised a brow. He laughed and held his hands up in defense. "I swear, all I've got left is my sword and it doesn't leave my back."

I didn't doubt that. Lucien was the same way when he had the opportunity to carry his sword. Spine sheath in place, his sword became a part of him. I gestured to the many chairs and couches filling the room. "Have a seat... somewhere, anywhere."

He sat in a chair directly across from the bed, crossing his arm over his chest, legs spread casually. "What's on your mind?"

"How do you feel about the covenant?"

Silver's eyes widened and he just sort of stared at me, gaping. "I'm not sure I understand what you're asking."

"Sure you do, which is why you're looking at me like that."

"Maybe this isn't a good idea."

"What? You don't like my first question so you're just going to bail?"

"That is the sort of question that could easily get me beheaded. I won't spill my soul and risk everything just to sate whatever curiosity you've got playing in your head."

He started to rise from the chair.

"What if I could address your concerns? Make changes where necessary?"

Silver sat back down instantly, but didn't quite relax. "And it's only between you and me?"

"Just between us. I'll talk to Lucien about some things when he gets back, but your name will never come up." He still didn't look quite convinced. I sat up completely and met his gaze. "I swear it on my life, Silver."

He relaxed considerably then, sighing. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Uh, yes. If you light up, I'll want you to share. And if I light up in the bedroom, Lucien will have a fucking fit." I got out of bed and went to the closet, grabbing an old pair of jeans. After I slipped them on, I walked out to find Silver pacing. I picked up the monitor, and turned it back on. "Simon, going outside. Let's take a walk, Silver."

He grabbed a few weapons and holstered them as we walked out. We ended up near the pool that was put in at the beginning of the summer. I dipped my foot in as we walked toward a patio table. The water was warm and I made a note to drag *someone* out to swim with me soon.

Silver lit up a hand-rolled cigarette and offered me one. After I selected one from his nice, silver case, he lit it for me and moved to sit at a table. "So, you want my *honest* opinion, huh?"

Chapter Sixteen

I took a deep drag, then blinked hard as everything around me seemed to tilt. Damn, it hadn't been *that* long since I'd had a fucking cigarette. I sat down across from Silver, rolling the cigarette between my fingers. "Can't make changes if I don't know where they're needed."

"Everywhere," he said, sighing a little.

My body relaxed almost completely with my second drag and I looked from the cigarette to Silver. "You have good cigarettes."

He grinned. "Can't buy these in any store. You like them, I'll fix you up."

"Like them? Oh man..." I groaned, slouching in the chair. "What's in them?"

"A mix of things: tobacco, opium, a few other secret ingredients that make the recipe mine."

"This is the first time I've truly relaxed since Lucien left." I took another drag, relishing the effects. "So. What do you mean by *everywhere*? Let's start with one thing at a time. What are your thoughts on the team?"

"I'm not so sure it's much of a team. I mean, come on, have you seen some of those... kids?"

"Those *kids* are all older than I am, with the exception of Eric. They may look young, but—"

"That's not what I mean. Take me, for example. You know where I came from, what my background is."

"Not really," I said. "I know you're from Brazil. I know you've had some military experience. That's the extent of my knowledge."

"That's all there is to know," he said, taking a long drag. "But you tell me why the hell Caleb is team leader. Tell me what the hell kind of experience he has—in anything—other than spreading his legs for whoever fucking comes along?"

"Caleb is..."

"Spoiled. He's Lucien's pet. He has no business leading a team of vampires and werewolves out hunting. He waffles on decisions, hesitates. Things that can get members of the team killed. And after his display with Lucien?" Silver shook his head. "That's not good leadership."

"Do you think the rest of the team members feel this way about Caleb?"

He shrugged. "I can't speak for them, but I've seen the way they react to his commands. They don't take him seriously. And truthfully, neither can I."

"Must be hard, with your background, taking orders from someone like Caleb."

"I do my job."

"I know you do," I said. "Just making a statement. Keep going, I'm listening."

"The team is divided. The vampires are on one side and the Lycans are on the other. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but... This didn't start until after your fight with Xander. Werewolves know when the term *dog* is used to reference them, and I can assure you, they don't like it."

I nodded slowly. "Believe me, no matter what I may or may not have inside me, I don't like the term either. But I don't know how to fix that."

"I don't think it's something *you* have to fix."

"But sooner or later, it'll have to be addressed. If not, I'm afraid of what it might lead to."

"It would be very, very bad. The Lycans are breeding again, most managing to carry their young to term. Their offspring seems to have about a fifty percent chance of carrying the virus and passing it on. New werewolves are moving through here every week. There are vampires and Lycans in relationships and hiding it. A war between species, even now, would be devastating. And it would spread."

I was slowly starting to realize that my bond to the wolves went much deeper than just my bond with Xander. "There won't be a war if I can help it."

"You *are* in a position to make things better."

I watched him take a drag and stare off into the darkness. His body seemed relaxed, but his facial expressions gave away the fact that his mind was working overtime.

"Come on, Silver. Talk to me."

He seemed at war with whether he wanted to speak what was going through his head. Finally, he met my eyes with determination. "I intend to challenge for his position."

I didn't bother to state that we were already looking for a replacement. "Yeah? And what are you going to do when you get it? Put the rest of the team through... boot camp?" I leaned forward quickly. "That's it!"

"Boot camp?"

"No..." I shook my head, laughing at the brilliance of my brain on Silver smokes. "Not just boot camp. Guys with know-how *and* experience: soldiers, mercs, ex-military, law enforcement. Just think of the fucking team we'd have with a little creative *recruiting*."

Silver stared at me for a few seconds before standing and pulling me to my feet. "Come on, I want to show you something."

He then threw his smoke to the ground and reached for mine. I jerked away, growling. "Fuck you, man! Just lead the way and let me finish."

Silver laughed, the sound so deep and rumbling that it sounded more like a growl. "I'll set you up. Just go easy on them until after... well, you know."

"Not sure I do."

"The human brain can only take so much goodness before your brain cells start turning to mush. You're a smart guy; we'd like to keep you that way. That, and Lucien would kill me for turning you into a vegetable."

Silver's room was more like a small arsenal than a place of rest. There were guns and knives and swords and other weapons I couldn't quite name hanging on the walls, leaned in corners, on tables, on the bed... I shook my head. "Damn, you may need one or two more weapons before you become a one-man war machine."

He smiled at that. "You can never have too many."

"I think you're a dangerous weapon, even without the toys."

Silver nodded. "Yes, but I know how to *use* my toys to make them efficient and useful. While hand-to-hand combat is great fun every once in a while, there are vampires that I'd rather shoot than touch."

"Man, I know that. Those revenants Eric and I fought last year? That was gross."

"You haven't seen gross 'til you come across a rotter. Punch them and your hand just slips and slides through all the slime." He picked up a sword and sliced it through the air. "One swing of this baby, though, and all you have to do is bag up the pieces."

"Lucien likes his sword."

"And he's better with his than I am with mine," he said. "Look around, Peter. I think you'll find it easy to believe that I love what I do."

It was the first time he'd ever used my name. "We need more guys like you on the team."

"It'll really suck for those guys that have to be let go, but maybe... maybe there are other things they can do that are useful."

"So what are you thinking?"

"I like what you said about recruiting. I know of other covens that seek out ex-military guys to run their enforcement teams." He thought on it for a moment. "These guys have been taking orders all their lives. I can't see that they'd have a problem serving."

"Might be a good idea for a psych evaluation before we turn these guys into more powerful weapons, though."

"That's a good point," he said.

"I can't help but think that we need more than one team. I think the werewolves wouldn't mind some day-time duties—sentry work, maybe. A house team, an enforcement team, a clean-up and disposal team."

"Experience will cost more money."

"I know," I said. "As will more weapons. But... maybe the difference can be made up by hiring the team out to the Council. I'm tired of them targeting Lucien for their quick fixes."

There was a moment of silence and Silver walked over and put his sword back on the rack. "All of this will take time and some heavy planning. But it's a start. And I really respect the fact that you are willing to go the distance to make some changes."

"The coven and its people must be safe. And we have to be prepared. I think the team's done a pretty good job of holding things together—"

"But there's a difference in holding it together and doing it efficiently."

"Hey, do we know anyone good with computers?"

Silver sighed and shook his head. "There was one guy that used to have a reputation of being *more* than good with them, but I can't think of his name at the moment: Randy, Reese..."

"Reid?"

"Yeah, that's it. His lover died, though, and he kinda went silent. He's at the club a lot."

"I know exactly where to find him." I chuckled. "He's actually staying here at the moment."

"Well, there you go," he said with a grin. "Anything else you're worried about?"

"Actually... I'd like to get some security cameras put up and installed. But I don't want them visible." When Silver raised an eyebrow, I proceeded to tell him about the odd things that had been going on whenever I was alone. "I want to know when someone breathes wrong."

"And you don't want anyone to know they're being watched."

I nodded. "If they know, they'll hide."

Silver seemed to think about it for a moment. "It'd have to be an outside job. I could mark up where the cams would need to go, lay out the wiring plans, and figure out which room to secure. I could have it done by morning. But, that said, even if you don't have vampires awake during the day, you'll still have the werewolves."

"I don't think whoever is doing this is a werewolf, but all the same, I don't want anyone to know about it."

"Simon would have to know," Silver said. "But I know he's more than able to keep his mouth shut."

"Do it. Get it drawn up and get it in place—inside and out. I don't care how you work it, just do it quietly. I want an encrypted feed in my bedroom for all cameras and I'll let you know who I want to have authorized access to the system."

"Consider it done." He scratched at his head for a moment. "I think it'd be a good idea for the club, too."

"Fine. Whatever you think is necessary."

"And while we're on the subject of security... I really think we should come up with some new protocols on you and Lucien."

"What do you mean?"

"You two are top dogs around here, but you don't have your own security team. Lucien still insists on going out hunting when he's in the mood. Let's put it this way: you're both targets and there's a bright red circle painted on your ass."

When I left Silver's room, I had so many ideas buzzing through my head I was almost dizzy. But damn, these were things that could make the coven a much better place. And as leaders, Lucien and I owed it to our people. I figured that since I was out and about, roaming the halls, I'd check in on Reid. I hadn't seen him since Lucien and I left him that night and I was really curious about his ability with computers.

A short time later, I stood in front of his door and knocked. I waited and then knocked again, but there was still no answer. It was odd, but not alarming. Lucien hadn't restricted him to his chambers. My stomach made a rumbling noise as I turned to walk away and it stopped me in my tracks. For a moment, I thought I was going to be sick, but after another rumble, I realized exactly what it was.

I was hungry.

For the first time in weeks my stomach was actually asking for food. I turned on my heel and damn near ran for the kitchen. As I passed in front of one of the corridors leading down toward the library, I thought I saw movement from the corner of my eye. Not the usual movement of someone walking, but a weird flit of color that quickly disappeared when I looked in that direction.

Instead of checking it out, I continued on toward the kitchen. Simon looked up at me with concern when I walked in. "Peter! What are you doing?"

I planted a kiss on his forehead. "Coming to see you, of course."

"You shouldn't be alone."

"Eh... I'm *hungry*. You got anything good cooked?"

A throat cleared behind me and I realized that someone was sitting at the bar. I turned to see Reid, who was eating something that looked like mashed potatoes and fried steak. "Hey, Reid," I said absently, unable to tear my eyes from his plate.

"Hi," he said with a smile. "Steak's good, nice and tender. Easy on the stomach."

I turned to Simon, almost begging. "Tell me you have more."

Simon nodded and pointed to the bar. "Sit. I'll make you a plate."

"Oh, thank you." I sat at the bar, though after a few minutes, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from jumping the bar and stuffing my face from Reid's plate. I got up and wandered to the refrigerator. I rumbled through the shelves and came upon a square box. "Oh, damn..."

I carried the box to the bar, dug out a knife, and removed the cheese that Lucien had first introduced me to. There was a loaf of fresh bread between Reid and me and I tore a hunk off it before smearing a dab of cheese over it. That first bite, I didn't taste. Hell, I wasn't even sure I tasted any of it until the fourth or fifth bite.

A plate was set in front of me and the bread was taken from my hands. "Peter—"

"Oh, it looks so good..."

"Peter, look at me."

I looked up at Simon, pulling my hands away. "What?"

"You have to start slow. You haven't eaten much of anything in the last few weeks and if you overdo it, you'll be sick."

That cut right through my euphoria and I took a deep breath before stabbing at the tiny pieces of meat that Simon had cut up. "You cut my meat."

"I was afraid you'd choke."

Reid chuckled and I glared. "Not one word."

Once the edge had been taken off my hunger, I ate very, very slowly. Reid was finished before I was, but he and Simon were doing some meal planning so I just sat and listened. Simon disappeared to go check on something, leaving Reid and me alone. I figured now was as good a time as any to talk to him about his work with computers.

"So, Reid. Someone recently told me that you're good with computers. What exactly can you do?"

He nearly choked on his water. "Oh, I...uh, I haven't messed with them for a long time."

"Not what I asked. See, I'm looking for someone who knows more than a little about computers. Your name is the only one I've got so far. So, tell me what you can do. Tell me what you *can't* do. Or, tell me a name of someone in this coven that can do the job that you're about to refuse."

"There *isn't* anything I can't do."

"That's more like it, Reid."

I ate until Simon warned me to stop. And then I ate a little more. As my food began to settle, I felt the need to lie down and let it digest very slowly. I was on my way back to the bedroom when I caught a glimpse of color near the library door. Curious, I walked to the door and looked inside. There was no one there.

My book that I'd been reading off and on for the past few weeks was on the arm of the couch and I walked in to grab it. I had no sooner picked up the book when the door to the library slammed shut. I jerked around, not seeing anyone. I swallowed hard and tucked my book under my arm, heading for the door.

I turned the knob and pulled, but the door wouldn't open. It was as if someone was holding it closed. I growled and jerked at the door, cursing whoever was on the other side, threatening them with their lives. The next pull of the door opened it and I rushed out, looking down the hall. A flash of blue disappeared around the corner leading to the front door and I took off running to follow.

But when I came to a stop in the entry way, there was no one there. Simon and Reid were across the hall, both looking at me like I'd lost my mind. Simon was the only one with the balls to speak. "Everything okay?"

I huffed. "See anyone come by here?"

They both shook their heads.

"Thought I saw someone down the hall," I said. "Simon? I'm going to lie down for a while. Send Xander or Nikolas to me if you see either one of them."

"Will do, sir."

"And Simon?"

"Yes?"

"There's been *no* word from Lucien today?"

"No, I'm sorry."

I hugged the book tight to my chest and headed for the bedroom. I scanned my hand and waited for the light to turn green. But it didn't. It just sat there, red light blinking. I scanned again and again and just when I was about to give up, the light finally turned green. I closed the door and leaned against it a moment, looking at the small pile of weaponry still on my bedroom floor.

I grabbed the phone and looked for Silver's extension on the laminated sheet. His line rang until a machine picked up, his familiar voice on the recording. I reminded him of his weapons that were littering my floor and teased him about coming to get them before I claimed them and charged a finder's fee.

My phone rang back almost instantly and he said he'd be by to get them in a few minutes—he had questions for me anyway. There was a knock at my door only a few seconds later and I opened it, only to find an empty corridor. "Silver?"

I waited and waited, but no one answered. Almost as soon as I closed the door, I heard heavy footfalls echoing on the marble floor. I cracked the door open, relieved to see Silver coming toward me. He cocked his head to the side, an eyebrow raised. "What are you doing?"

"I swear, someone knocked on my door right after you called."

Silver's brow furrowed as I closed the door behind him. "I don't like this."

"You?" I snorted. "I think I'm losing my mind."

"I'm going to find a couple of guards to post at your door. Do you have a preference? Vampire or Lycan?"

I shook my head. "One of each?"

Silver thought for a moment. "I can put Caleb on guard duty—"

"No, absolutely not," I said. "He's far too wrapped up in... whatever the hell's wrong with him. I'd spend the entire time breaking up a fight. Which kind of defeats the purpose of them protecting me and preventing access to my room."

He shrugged. "Just a thought, to keep him busy. But don't worry, I'll find someone tonight and get a rotation set up."

"I'd appreciate that."

He bent and started picking up his weapons, tucking them into various places in his clothing. "You don't want cameras in here, do you?"

"No, that's way too dangerous. If anything said in private in here were to get recorded and then get out to either the coven or the public? That would be a disaster."

"I didn't think so, but I wanted to be sure. And you *do* want both audio and visuals. Time stamps?"

I grinned. "You are so making my night."

"I'll have it done before morning and will bring the file and plans to you for a once-over. I'll give Simon my contact's information and let him schedule the install. Because, let's face it; no one knows this house and how it runs like Simon does."

I made a mental note to figure out something we could do for Simon to show him just how much we appreciated him. Without him around, I had no doubt that we'd always be scrambling to get even the minor things accomplished. After Silver left, I made my way to the bed, grabbed my book, and found where I'd left off.

I awoke slowly, eyes still incredibly heavy. Someone was in the room, moving around, and I turned my head enough to catch a glimpse of Lucien. He was undressing as he walked from the bedroom to the bathroom and I smiled, closing my eyes again. A few minutes later, I felt him crawl up over the foot of the bed and move my legs apart. He lay down over me and nuzzled at my neck.

"I'm so glad you're home."

"Are you now?"

But the voice was gravelly and wrong and it so wasn't Lucien's. My eyes flew open and I struggled like hell to get up. I was alone in the room, gasping for air, goose bumps covering my entire body. I wasn't sure if I'd been dreaming or awake and that was what freaked me out the most. Dreams I could handle. But if someone were in my room—our sacred space...

There was a knock at the door, followed by Simon's voice. "Peter?"

"Come in, please!"

Simon came in, looking concerned when he saw me sitting up in the middle of the bed. "I thought I heard you having trouble breathing on the monitor. Are you feeling okay?"

I shook my head, biting hard at my lip. "I don't think so."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and took my hand. I calmed almost instantly and he scooted closer. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Someone was here," I whispered. "I think... Or I was dreaming. I couldn't tell."

"Do you want me to stay here until Xander or Nikolas get home?"

I nodded, feeling like a fucking child. "I just want to sleep in peace."

Simon crawled up onto the bed. "Lie down."

I did, and for the first time ever, Simon wrapped his arms around me. I settled almost instantly, feeling like I'd been wrapped in some sort of cocoon of protection. He began to hum a song and I hung on every note, the cadence almost hypnotizing.

Chapter Seventeen

Simon left me with Nikolas, who snored in my ear for several hours before I finally elbowed him in the gut. He'd grumbled and growled and buried his face into a pillow. I didn't give a shit if he smothered himself—at least he was quiet. The next time I woke, Nikolas was throwing clothes onto the bed, telling me to get ready so we could get to the club and get it opened.

Apparently, someone from the police department had left a message on my phone—and his, and Xander's, and the house phone—to say that they were releasing the club back to us and also wanting to know if we'd take possession of the body. The family had refused it, saying it was an abomination. Poor Xander spent most of the day at the crematorium, tired as hell from being up all night.

I dressed slowly, aggravating Nikolas no end. But I was exhausted as hell and my stomach hurt. I sat on the bed to put my boots on and found a file right beside me. I picked it up and flipped through the pages, smiling at the tiny details Silver had marked up.

Nikolas gestured to the file. "I think that's a damn good idea."

"Yeah?"

He nodded. "A lot more secure than nothing at all."

"Let's keep it quiet, okay? I don't want anyone to know they're there."

"Who am I going to tell, princess? There are about five people who *willingly* talk to me, and I can guarantee you those five will know all about it. Now come on, get those boots laced."

I stared down at my boots for a moment, then fell back onto the bed. "Too tired."

Nikolas crawled up and straddled me. As he stared down at me, some of his aggravation seemed to ease. "You're not just being lazy, are you?"

I shook my head, hardly able to keep my eyes open. "Not trying to be a pain."

He leaned in and kissed me before pulling back. "No, that's my job. I'll lace your boots, but you've got to get up after that. Moving around will help."

I groaned and whined and huffed as he finished lacing my boots and hauled me up off the bed. One arm around his shoulder, I just sort of hung on him. "I'm sorry."

"Come on, princess, wake up."

Simon opened the door as Nikolas and I started out of it. He looked at me like he'd forgotten something and grimaced. "Set him down for a minute, Nikolas. Let me give him his supplements."

"No," I said as I was put into a chair. "My stomach hurts too much for pills."

"You had an episode last night while you were sleeping and I'm sure you're feeling the lingering effects of the drugs. I've got a nausea pill, too, if you're interested."

That was news to me. Great. Now I was having episodes and not remembering them. But the idea of a nausea pill perked me up a little and I watched as Simon sorted each pill and recapped the bottles. Nikolas was huffing and pacing and I couldn't help but laugh at how irritated he was. The man hated to be late.

Simon didn't put the pills in my hand. Instead, he fed them to me, one by one, with small sips of water in between. His hands took my face, gently. "Now, look at me."

I blinked and met his gaze, startled by clear-blue eyes. I hadn't noticed Simon's eyes being so dramatic before. "You have pretty eyes, Simon."

"Are you feeling better now?"

I nodded and stood, that sleepy, hazy feeling quickly fading. "Yeah, actually... I am."

"Good, great. Now that you're awake, can we go?" Nikolas asked.

I glared at Nikolas, but wrapped my arms around Simon. "You always seem to make everything better. Thanks."

"I do my best."

I was parked at the bar, nursing a glass of water with lemon. I'd been upstairs in the office for a while, but had to come down to find the stack of distributor catalogs so I could look for a better deal on our vodka. Our normal distributor's price had recently doubled, and that was just unacceptable. Instead of carrying it all back upstairs, I'd slid onto a corner bar stool and tried to ignore the mass of people behind me on the dance floor.

The club was filling rather quickly, news of the reopening having spread like wildfire. But packed was good. Humans got thirsty, vampires got thirsty and wanted privacy, cover charge was lowered temporarily to bring in more people... At the rate things were going, we'd make up our loss from being shut down in only a night or two.

Jack stopped in front of me, offering a bowl of peanuts. I shook my head and he continued on, busting his ass to keep up with drink orders. A little while later, he offered me a bowl of pretzels. I shook my head again and he frowned.

"Come on, you used to eat all my pretzels." He had to yell to be heard over the music.

"Not hungry," I said, not bothering to yell.

He stared at me for a while before someone started banging a shot glass on the other bar. I wasn't sure if he thought I was aggravated or what, but he huffed and turned toward the other side of the bar. I rolled my eyes and looked back down at the page. Jack had gotten better after we'd made up, but it hadn't been long before he'd started his damned pouting and grumbling again.

Even Lucien had noticed his attitude and had called him out on it a couple of times. Lucien was patient, but his patience with Jack had been wearing thin. Just like mine was. As much as I loved him, there was only so much of that I could take.

"Well, look at the pretty cock on his roost," someone said as they slid onto a stool beside me.

The voice was familiar and male, but I couldn't place it. I pretended to be disinterested in whatever they were trying to start, but truth was, anyone that dared start anything with me like this was either stupid—or was badass enough not to care.

Jack stopped before us and the man beside me leaned over the bar. "Absinthe, please."

No one really asked for absinthe much. Older vampires loved it; most of the werewolves hated it. I had a moment of panic, thinking some old fucking Master had blown through town. That made me look up at the man beside me. But when I saw who it was, I heaved a sigh of... well, not quite relief. Cyril was a jerk.

"What are you doing here, Cyril?"

"Ah, so you *do* remember my name. Pity, I thought I'd have to fuck you for that." He turned on his stool to face me. "I've heard your ass is *sweet*."

Snow-white hair cascaded down around his face, green eyes so bright they almost glowed. The first time I'd met him, I thought he was beautiful. But now I knew better. Whatever was in his heart was dark and ugly. "Keep dreaming."

"Oh, and dream I have." He moved in closer. "I wish to tell you my dreams."

I moved closer to the wall and turned back to the catalog. "Not interested, Cyril. Find some other..." I hesitated to say victim, although I was sure that was the perfect word.

"Other?"

"Just *other* and get the fuck away from me."

"Oh, such language." He tsked. "And in front of an *angel*."

I snorted. "You are so far from what an angel should be, it's pathetic."

"Pathetic?" He leaned forward, breath grazing my cheek. "I think that's the pot calling the kettle black, is it not? Do you not wait day in and day out for your lover to call? Can you just not seem to function without your beloved vampire?"

"You're about to get your ass thrown out of here."

"They could try." He moved even closer and I froze, not wanting him to touch me. I was already plastered to the wall on one side. But one wrong breath would make us touch. "I would tell you of my dreams for you, Peter."

"Cyril—"

"I want to see your vampire's face as I use you. I want to see him in utter despair because I have your pain and he has but to watch. I want his last visions of you to be in my arms, begging for more, begging me not to stop."

He licked at my cheek and I turned to punch the fuck out of him, but he was being pulled away by both vampires and werewolves. Silver glanced at me. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Get that piece of shit out of my face and don't let him back into the club."

They pulled him toward the door and I hated the thought that came to mind: he wasn't being thrown out. He was *letting* them throw him out. I had no doubt that he was powerful, but I'd sell my soul to never experience a bit of that dark, depraved bastard.

A twisted laugh echoed through the club, over the volume of the music. Those that hadn't seen what had happened, hadn't witnessed Cyril being thrown out, stopped and looked around them—looking up for the perpetrator.

"My dreams always come true!"

Nikolas was beside me in an instant, forcing me to meet his gaze. "You okay? What'd he say?"

"Just some shit," I said offhand. "Trying to get me riled up."

"Did it work?"

I nodded. "Tell me Cyril's no threat."

"That, princess, is something that I cannot do."

I'd gone from catalogs to inventory lists, feeling much better after Cyril had been tossed to the curb. His words still lingered, though, and every once in a while I'd find myself trying to decipher our conversation. But as twisted as he was, I wasn't sure there was any meaning to it at all. Jack set a fresh glass of water before me and paused.

"Do you miss the Scotch?"

I nodded and looked up from the papers. "Like crazy sometimes. I keep hoping that my stomach's alcohol strike will end soon. Because really? I could use a drink."

He grabbed a lemon and started slicing it up. One piece was dropped into my water and he continued cutting and slicing. "Have you tried something besides Scotch to see if it'd go down easier?"

"Vodka, gin, rum..." I shook my head. "All of it's like liquid fire in the pit of my stomach. And that's just not a feeling I really want to have all night long."

At the moment, my stomach was rearing its ugly head, reminding me that it wasn't happy. I knew that the gnawing, burning pain would soon be damn near overwhelming. If I could just make it through the night

without falling to the floor in front of everyone, I'd be doing well. Jack eventually turned his attention to filling orders and cutting more fruit.

The noise of the club faded and after a few moments of not hearing anyone near me talking, I looked up. Every head in the room was turned toward the front door. I turned to see what had shut everyone up so quickly.

A man stood near the entrance. Tall, with short, blond hair, nice, black dress pants, and a dark dress shirt, though I couldn't tell its color in this light. I wondered why everyone seemed so curious about him. And then the man looked up and I saw his face. Oh, no, not just a man. A vampire.

There was an air of unease behind that confident façade. Maybe it was because all eyes were on him. I got up from the stool and crossed the room to introduce myself and welcome him to the club. The vampire looked at me with confusion as I neared him, but smiled.

"They said I'd find the Master of the Coven at the bar. I just never expected him to be... *human*."

I held out my hand in offering. "I'm Peter. Welcome to The Den. Or, Iniquity, if it suits your tastes."

"Logan," he replied, stepping in close enough to whisper. "What do you recommend? See, I like things up close and... *personal*."

Oh, a flirt. This could be fun. "Can I get you a drink, Logan?"

"I think I'd let you get me almost anything." He turned my hand in his and ran his tongue over the inside of my wrist. "Do you play?"

"Not without Lucien." Which wasn't exactly a lie.

He let my hand go easily. "So the rumors are true, huh? Two Masters, one coven."

"I guess they are."

"They left out the part where you're not quite human." He winked at me, blue eyes just shining. There wasn't a hint of sarcasm or threat. "Do you have a good brandy?"

"The best. Let me—"

Xander moved up beside me, cutting me off. "Can I get you anything, Master?"

My body tightened almost instantly and I had to fight to suppress the groan. It was rare that Xander called me anything close to that, but on the rare occasion he did, he usually dropped and spread his ass for me seconds later. "Actually, you can get Logan here some of our best brandy and get me some—"

"Ice water with lemon." Xander looked at me then, eyes betraying that calm exterior.

That look always meant trouble from Xander. I looked around and spotted an empty leather chair near the bar. "Logan, I'm sorry. There's something I need to check on right away. Would you mind waiting? There's a chair here near the bar and I'll make sure you get your brandy."

"Not a problem at all." His gaze traveled from Xander back to me. "Take your time."

Logan started toward the chair and I grabbed Xander by the arm, almost dragging him behind me. When we passed the bar, I got Jack's attention. "Jack! Brandy to the blond in the leather chair, please. The best we've got."

Jack looked to the man, eyes going wide. "Y-yes, sir."

Sir? What the fuck was up with everyone tonight?

I pulled Xander into the storage room, clicked the lock on the door, and pushed him up against the wall. My mouth crushed against his and he groaned, hands going straight to the enclosure of my pants. "God, Xander... need you. Right now. Right fucking now..."

Whatever the hell was wrong would have to wait. I suddenly needed his mouth like I needed air; wrapped tight around me, tongue teasing. And he knew. Fucking loved that about Xander. He always knew what I needed most. Even when I didn't have a clue.

"Master," he whispered, and dropped to his knees.

I grasped the base of my dick before he could take me in and moved back slightly. "Close your mouth, pretty."

He did as I said and I rubbed the head of my cock against his lips, spreading precome over them like a fine lip gloss. "Now, open just a little."

Xander opened his mouth slightly and I rubbed my slit over the tip of his tongue. He looked up at me, eyes no longer worried, mouth hanging open as instructed. I bent and took his mouth again, licking at his lips, tongue sweeping against his. He whimpered and caught my face between his hands, kissing me back fervently. I reached out and found his left nipple beneath his shirt, pulling at the ring as I broke the kiss.

"Who do you belong to?"

He cried out. "You!"

"Who loves you best?"

"You, sir."

"Then show me, pretty boy, how much you appreciate that."

"Master..." He whimpered and sucked me in, taking me deep in his throat.

My hands clutched at his head, fingers curling in that soft, black hair. I rested against the wall with one shoulder, hoping like hell my legs wouldn't buckle. Before long, Xander was moaning and shuddering and I smiled, knowing he'd be coming before me. I pulled him up, hands still tight in his hair.

"Let me go." When he did, I growled. "Pants down."

His hands shook as he worked at his pants. "Yes, sir. Anything for you, sir."

"Anything?"

He cried out as his dick was released. "Yes, God... anything."

I kissed him hard, tongue sliding deep against his as I took his prick in my hand. I jerked him as I kissed him, hard and fast, thumb rubbing repeatedly over his slit. "Come."

Xander cried out, heat spilling over my fingers. I pushed him over to a stack of boxes and bent him over them, face first. I spread him open and licked at his hole, before working two fingers into him. I finger-fucked him, using his own come as lube, getting him ready. He bucked and squirmed and finally reached back, fingers digging into my shoulder.

"What do you want?"

"You, please!"

"You have me."

"No, need you to..."

"Yes?"

"Fuck me, oh, God, please just fuck me," Xander cried out. "Need to feel you inside me."

Oh, that was much better. I stood and pressed my cock to his hole, rubbing the head back and forth, teasing before pushing into him. Xander let out a long, loud cry as I slid into him, and when my hips finally pressed against his ass, his knees buckled. I almost went down with him, the searing heat of his body clouding my ability to function.

"Floor, floor... can't stand..."

I lowered us to the floor and pushed his shirt up over his back, licking at skin and sweat and warm flesh. He kicked at his pants and boots frantically, trying to free his legs a little more. When he got one leg free, he spread his legs open wide. I took it for the invitation it was, and with a hand on one of his shoulders, the other at his hip, began to fuck him again.

He met each and every thrust, ass gripping me tight. He turned his head and looked back over his shoulder at me, eyes nearly rolling back in his head. "Anything for you."

I pulled his head to the side more and caught his lips in a kiss. He panted and moaned his pleasure into the kiss and when I broke away, he offered his neck. I licked at the juncture of his neck and shoulder and nipped him hard.

"Oh, fuck, gonna..."

And I was right behind him. "Come for me, Xander. I want to feel you come on my cock, to know I've given pleasure to what's mine."

He cried out and pressed my face against his neck. "Please..."

That he knew what I wanted, what I needed... I was suddenly overwhelmed at just how much he loved me. How much of himself he gave to me willingly each and every day. And the truth of it was: I loved him back. The bond between us helped, brought us closer, but it wasn't the bond that made me love him. It was just... him.

I held him close and bit down, teeth breaking through skin. Hot, rich blood flowed over my tongue and Xander bucked beneath me, his orgasm sounding like a mix between a scream and a groan. His body held me tight as each tremor racked his body and it wasn't long before I was coming, filling him with my own heat.

Finally, I licked at the bite mark, soothing it as best I could. I leaned up and pressed a kiss beneath his ear. "Love you, Alexandre."

Xander shook a little, body still trembling with aftershocks of good, hard sex as he attempted to get his pants back on. I laughed and sat him down in a nearby chair. "Come on, sit down and get a grip."

He leaned forward and kissed me, arms going 'round my neck. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

"It's not something you have to worry about," I said with a smile as I pulled away. "Now, get your pants on and tell me what was going on in your head before..."

"Before I called you *Master* and all the blood in your head went to your dick?"

I slugged him on the shoulder. "Shut up."

"I swear I was only trying to get your attention without being overly obvious." He pulled his pants back on and started on his boots. "That vampire you were talking to out there? He's not just a regular vampire."

"And what is he? Special?"

"He's a Master vampire, Peter. Each and every thing you tell him or reveal to him has to be done with caution. He can use it all to turn the tables and gain favor around here."

"He seems nice."

"So does Lucien when he's trying to make a good impression." Xander sat up after finishing with the last buckle. "Only difference is? Lucien really *is* a good guy. The vibe I get from this... What's his name?"

"Logan."

"Right. The only thing I get from him is...well, nothing. He's shielding so hard it's got to hurt. Not to mention, difficult."

I leaned forward and propped my elbows on Xander's knees. "Okay, so how do I handle this? How would Lucien handle this?"

"Before or after you came along?" I glared at him and he cupped my cheek. "Sorry. Couldn't resist."

"You know Lucien will have your ass when he gets back if you don't behave."

"I'm counting on it." He sat back and sighed. "Seriously, though. Lucien would give him a shot. He'd find out all he could about Logan's past: where he came from, what coven. And most especially, *why* he's seeking another coven. A Master vampire hitting a new coven unannounced and without permission before arriving has really bad manners."

"Or he's desperate."

"Then you'll have to narrow it down to find out what he's seeking so desperately: safety or power. My guess is power, but then again, I'm cynical." He stood and pulled me up. "But either way, he's still out there waiting and we've probably been in here long enough that everyone knows what we've been up to."

"Or heard," I said with a smirk. "You're not exactly quiet."

"Hey, I have a hard time keeping my mouth shut and grunting through what can only be described as mind-blowing, earth-moving sex. That's like me telling you not to scream as you come when Lucien's got his fangs buried in your cock."

"Good point." I pulled him close and kissed him one last time. "But it's not just sex, Xander. I hope you know that by now."

"Of course I do, but fuck, Peter. If anyone hears me talking bonds and connections and about just how much I love you and need you and how I'd drop and spread for you in the middle of ... Well, you get my drift, right? I've got a reputation to uphold."

I swatted him on the ass and pushed him toward the door. "Take a case of vodka out so it at least looks like you were working, then spend some time with Jack."

"I don't want to spend time with Jack. He hates me."

"He does not."

"He does, too! I swear, Peter, sometimes you're blind to the most obvious things." He picked up a case of vodka and huffed. "Okay, but you just watch."

"Fine. I'll watch." I rolled my eyes and opened the door, forcing Xander to walk out before me. I made sure my dick was tucked away, my shirt was straight, and that I didn't have any blood on my face before following.

And sure as fucking hell, when I walked out of the room, Jack was giving Xander a go-to-hell look as Xander set down the case. I made a mental note to find out what that was all about, and made my way back to where Logan was sitting, nursing his brandy. He was also nursing one of our donors, talking and touching, but not too much, nothing deliberate about his actions.

Logan looked up as I stopped before him. "Ah, Peter. Is everything okay?"

I nodded, unsure of what to do with our visitor. I'd offered him drinks; maybe offering him food would make us look like good little hosts. I wondered why I cared. "I see you've met Lee. We have an *assortment* of donors, if you would like to dine."

I did remember that Lucien said it was bad manners to say 'feed'. The nobles dined; the peasants fed. I preferred fed, but whatever. Lucien was convinced that nobles were the ones to watch out for. He firmly believed that they were continually searching for more power.

Logan smiled. "That's a very generous offer. If it pleases Lee, here, I..."

"We have private rooms," I offered.

"Really? Oh, that would be wonderful. I've not..." He leaned forward and whispered, "I've not *fed* in a while."

I covered a laugh with a cough. So. A peasant it was. I felt better about him already. "We are a no-kill coven, just so that's clear."

"Oh, of course!"

I looked to Lee. "Lee?"

Lee grinned and stretched, showing off his long, lean body. "I like him."

"Take the last room on the right," I said. "And, Logan, if you'd like to come up to the office when you're finished, I'd be glad of the company."

"Thank you, Peter." Logan extended his hand. "You've been more than generous."

I shook his hand and when Lee leaned up and whispered something in Logan's ear, I took that as my cue to walk away. This had to be the queerest coven in history.

Chapter Eighteen

Xander was behind the bar, arms crossed over his chest and pouting. I veered off toward him as I left Logan and Lee, but a pretty young girl bumped into me.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she said, wiping at my arm with her napkin. "It's just water, but..."

"It's okay." I looked at her more closely. "I'm sorry, honey, but do you have ID?"

Her eyes widened, but she dug into a small purse at her hip. "I just turned eighteen last week."

I took her card and mentally subtracted the dates. Damn, what were we doing letting kids like this in here? Lucien and I were seriously going to have to talk about this. "You here with someone?"

She nodded and pointed to the door leading to Iniquity. "My brother's a bouncer. I'm here with him."

I thought her last name sounded familiar. "Jeffrey?"

She smiled and nodded as she took her card back. "I just wanted to... Well, it's my first time in a club. All the others are twenty-one and up."

"Yeah, I know. And I hate to break the news to you, but we're considering it for this one, too. You do know what kind of club this is, don't you?"

She laughed, innocent and happy. "Well, duh, that's why I'm here. Like my parents would ever let me near a vampire?"

Okay, then. Innocent and... odd. I gave her a pat on the shoulder as I went to move past her. "Happy belated birthday, Mandy. I hope you have a good time."

"Thank you!" she called out from behind me.

As I neared the bar, Jack was pointing at Xander and it was clear that he was ranting about something. I moved closer and what I heard sent anger flaring through me.

"You're just a fucking dog with a pretty face and a nice ass, Xander."

"Jack!"

Jack jerked around, looking right at me. "Peter, I—"

"Save it!" I growled and looked Xander. "Xander, baby, would you mind covering the bar for the rest of the night?"

Xander shook his head. "I don't mind."

"Thank you." I turned my attention to Jack, who had apparently found something really interesting about the floor at his feet. "Jack? Come with me."

I didn't wait to see if he would follow, just expected that he'd be on my heels as we walked across the floor. Instead of going up to the office, though, I led him to the front door. Silver gave me a courteous nod as he opened the door leading outside. I waited for the door to close completely before turning to face Jack.

Jack stood with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking everywhere but at me. I sighed and shook my head. "What seems to be the problem?"

"No problem."

"Don't lie to me, Jack. I swear to God, if you lie to me again..."

"He pisses me off, okay? Fuck! He's always there, hanging onto you like some fucking puppy."

"Xander doesn't hang on me at all."

He snorted. "Whatever."

"Let me tell you a little something, *Jack*." He looked at me when I said his name. "I can't even begin to tell you what Xander is to me. For one, I don't think it's any of your business. And for another, I don't think you'd understand, even if I were able to draw it all out. Xander is important to me and I would expect you to show him the same respect that you show me or Lucien."

"He's just a d—"

"You say it and I swear I'll knock you on your fucking ass!"

Jack huffed and shook his head. "You know, I figured with you and Lucien getting together, it was the end of your playing the field. But that's not it at all. You've just found different people to play with."

"What's the matter? You jealous that it's Xander in my bed and not you?"

He was silent for a moment. "Maybe. Goddamn it, Peter. I—I miss you, sometimes. You know?"

"If I slept with everyone that missed me, I'd never get any rest."

"And I'm just everyone now? Is that it? Ten fucking years..."

"I'm not doing this," I growled. "Not going to stand here and defend my sex life to you. You don't like it or like who I'm fucking? You're just going to have to deal with it. But you will not disrespect Xander the way you have been."

"So, the leader of the Lycans can't even defend himself."

"No, the leader of the Lycans respects the fact that you were my friend long before he came along." I stepped close and poked Jack in the center of the chest. "Maybe *you* should take a lesson from him. But to-night? You go home. I don't want you here."

"You can't just send me home!"

"At this very moment, I am Master of this coven. I believe I can do *anything* I wish."

I'd been staring at the computer screen for nearly an hour, trying to figure out why we were having to order more gin. I would have sworn that we'd gotten a large shipment in to cover both bars for the next three months, but the on-hand inventory just wasn't matching up with the ordering schedule. I rubbed at my neck and sat back in the chair with a huff.

A sharp knock sounded at the door just before it opened. Xander stepped in and shut the door behind him. He set a fresh glass of ice water down and leaned his hip against the desk. "What's wrong?"

"Damned inventory isn't matching up."

He frowned. "And I assume it's a big enough discrepancy to be a problem?"

"Not so much a problem but an annoyance. I *know* what I ordered; know that it had to have been cleared on delivery. Hell, even the accounting is going to be off if this isn't right."

"Want me to go do some checking?"

"Who's watching the bar?"

"Adrian and Silver."

I cringed. "Adrian I can understand, but Silver? Damn it, Xander, he'll scare everyone away."

Xander smiled and shook his head. "Actually? I think people are intrigued by his grunts and growls. I don't think we'll lose any sales on his account."

"All right, then. Would you mind checking?" I sat up and grabbed a pen, writing down the numbers from the invoice. "We don't uncrate everything at once, so the crate should still be in the storage room. There should be an invoice or a packing slip on there somewhere and the numbers on that should match with this."

He took the slip of paper from me with a smile. "I think I can manage. In the meantime, our new friend Logan is outside waiting to see you."

"Cool. Send him in, would you?"

He gave a curt nod and made his way to the door. He opened it and poked his head out, calling Logan's name before opening the door all the way. Logan stepped in with a smile, but I couldn't be sure whether he looked better since he'd fed... or worse.

"Xander?" Xander paused in shutting the door. "Could you bring our guest another drink?" I looked to Logan. "Brandy?"

Logan nodded. "That would be fine, yes."

"I'll be back in a moment, sir," Xander said.

After the door closed, I gestured to the large leather chairs near the fireplace. "Have a seat, Logan. Please, make yourself comfortable."

He made his way across the room and sat in my favorite chair, legs spread, slouching just a little. "Forgive me if I'm out of line here, but could we drop the formalities? It gives me the creeps."

I felt the blush in my ears and cheeks. "Am I that bad at it?"

"No, on the contrary, you're damned good." He chuckled. "Especially for a human. You seem to know what's important to say, and even more, what's important *not* to say."

"Lucien's taught me well, so far."

"Indeed he has. Forgive me again, Peter." He started to speak, then paused before saying, "Will Lucien be back soon?"

I sat down in the chair opposite Logan, sighing. "I'm not really sure when he'll be back. He's away on Council business."

"Right," Logan said quietly.

"Why do you ask?"

He studied me for a moment before answering. "I would like to petition for residency here in the city."

"I see."

"And, possibly to... Well, to become a part of the coven."

I didn't respond to his statement, moving to change the subject. I wasn't sure I was prepared to deal with another Master vampire wanting to come in and set up house. "Where are you from, Logan?"

"Atlanta."

"Why did you leave the coven there?"

"My answer or theirs?"

"So you didn't leave your old coven voluntarily?"

Logan's gaze met mine, unflinching. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that. I chose to leave rather than be continually subjected to humiliation for who I like to have in my bed. Things were getting out of hand."

"How's that?" I cleared my throat, feeling like I'd swallowed a feather.

He shrugged off my question. "It's not important."

"You are a Master vampire coming into an established coven without prior warning or permission. I think we have every right to ask these questions, as well as to determine what is or isn't important. I'm quite sure you know the penalties—"

"Penalties?" He looked horrified. "I didn't mean... never meant to..." He sighed and hung his head. "We had a lot of young vampires in our coven. Reckless, impulsive. A few of them took it upon themselves to burn down my house—with me still in it."

"So you were forced out."

Logan nodded. "I went to my Master for help in finding another place to rest, but he was as homophobic as the rest of them. I'm *not* looking for sympathy, just some peace."

Xander came in quietly and handed Logan his brandy before retrieving my water from the desk. I thanked him and he smiled and headed for the bathroom. I took a sip of the water, then another, trying to get that damned tickle out of the back of my throat. I finally had to clear my throat, but it still lingered.

"Safety, we can offer you. Peace? Well, we can attempt to offer you that, too. I'm afraid that lies more in your own hands than in ours. I am the only Master here until Lucien returns and if that's a problem—"

"No, no problem at all." He sat forward a little. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I stood and went to the desk, downing my entire glass of water in the process. "We have guest quarters at the mansion and you are more than welcome to stay there until you find your own place."

"That's very generous of you," he said. "I have to admit, sleeping in the bathtub at the hotel does have its downside."

I pointed to a book on the coffee table in front of him. "If you'd like to look through that book, we maintain listings of residences that are available for coven members only. There are also job listings, if that's something that... is... necessary."

What had begun as a tickle was now starting to burn and I slowly sat down in the chair behind the desk before my legs gave out. I knew what this was, but by Simon's account, I'd already had one today. Two in one day was getting on the dangerous side. Each time now, they started out differently, as if whatever was inside of me was trying to find a different way out. I jerked open the desk drawer in search of the emergency kit and blinked when I found it gone.

My chest was growing tight and it felt like my heart was beating incredibly fast. I sucked in a quick breath and called out for Xander. He opened the door within seconds, dropping the towel in his hands when he saw me. "Shit!"

"No kit."

He turned and disappeared into the bathroom again and when he reemerged, he had the kit in his hands. "I just finished putting the damned stuff into syringes."

"We've used the other already?"

"Yeah." He set the kit on the desk, opened it, and then looked over at Logan. "Uh, I'm sorry, but could you give us a few moments?"

Logan looked worried as he stepped over. "Is there anything I can do?"

I shook my head, gritting my teeth. This was great. I so didn't need him to see me as weak. "Just give me five minutes, Logan. Please."

He backed away slowly and I waited until he shut the door behind him before letting out a cry. The pain was moving into my stomach and I reached out and grabbed hold of Xander's thigh. "I'm so tired of this shit."

He frowned. "I know. And if I could do anything to help you..."

I stripped off my shirt and grunted as the needle went into my upper arm. The liquid was still cold and it burned like hell going in. But in only a matter of seconds, the cold burn at my arm was the only pain I felt. Xander's fingers skimmed my brow and ghosted across my cheek.

"Better?"

I nodded. "Give me another."

"I... no, Peter. It's too soon for another."

"Goddamn it! You know I'll need another in an hour."

"Right," Xander said. "In an hour, when you've already metabolized most of this. If I give it to you now, it'll knock you on your ass."

I grumbled and leaned forward, lying across the desk. The wood was cool against my cheek and I sighed, a flood of emotion trying to break free. "This is the second episode today. What are we going to do when the drug stops working? Why the *fuck* hasn't the physician called yet? And goddamn it... I want to talk to Lucien so badly it hurts."

"Oh, I don't even know how to thank you," Logan said, gesturing around the room. "I'm honored, truly."

"The numbers for different lines in the house are on the laminated sheet next to the phone. You are more than welcome to request a donor up to twice a week. Any more than that, I'm afraid you'll need to find your own. We do have a house staff, though I doubt you'll see any of them. I've been here for over a year and have only seen them twice."

Logan laughed a little. "It's like a five-star hotel without the sunlight."

"You are a guest. It should be comfortable." On that note, I started for the door.

"I know it's none of my business..."

I stopped, but didn't turn around.

"What happened to you earlier... Are you ill?"

"Let's just say I'm dealing with some rather unfortunate side effects."

"Of what?" I could tell he wasn't really asking, but thinking it out for himself. Very odd for a Master.

"A werewolf." I continued on to the door and opened it. "Goodnight, Logan."

Simon was standing out in the hall, leaned against the wall, a basket of wine bottles in his arms. "If you wait a moment, I'll walk you to the bedroom and keep you company."

"I guess asking if you've heard from Lucien would be really stupid."

"I'm sorry; there's been no word yet."

"He *is* coming back, right? At least tell me that."

Simon smiled. "It would take a hell of a lot to keep him from you. I'm sure he walked right into a mess wherever they sent him and he's trying like hell to get it straight to get back home to you."

I nodded, knowing I was being incredibly childish about Lucien being gone. But it was the first time we'd ever been so physically apart. I felt like I was missing a part of myself and I wanted it back.

"I know you're probably right. I just... I miss him." I managed a weak smile. "I'm going to head on to bed. My monitor will be on."

"I'll be right on the other end," he said. "Right after I give this to our guest, of course."

I left Simon and headed for the bedroom. The house was quiet. Every once in a while I'd see a shadow or a flit of movement, but I recognized them all. Vampires that lived on the premises were doing their last minute things before retiring to their chambers before dawn. I stripped as soon as I was in the bedroom and crawled up into bed, forgoing a shower on the principle that I didn't want to fall and drown myself.

Yeah, it was a shaky excuse, but I was too tired to care. The plans for the security cameras were still on the bed and I picked them up and flipped through them again. There was only one thing missing: something I'd forgotten to mention to Silver. Even though I didn't want cameras *in* the bedroom, I wanted them mounted outside the door. I wanted to know exactly who was at the door before I opened it.

I made a few extra notes and signed off on it, suddenly more at ease, knowing that we'd have a little more security around the house. I set the file on the side table and grabbed Lucien's pillow, holding it close as I drifted off to sleep.

Two nights later, I stood at the front doors of the club and gave one last tug on the door to make sure it was locked and the security system was set. Only when the tiny green light on the panel flashed, did I feel things were secure enough. We'd put too much work into the club to run off without checking these things.

Thunder rumbled close by, shaking the ground as if in warning. Lightning flashed in rapid succession and I turned away from the doors, lifting my head toward the sky, inhaling deeply.

The night was humid—even in mid October—the air almost too thick to breathe. But beneath that, it was as if I could sense the ground opening up, getting ready to accept the life-giving rain before it even started to fall. Lightning flashed again, the nearness putting every hair on my body on end.

Xander pulled the car up right in front of me, waiting, but I kept my face turned toward the sky. If I didn't acknowledge him, I wouldn't have to get in—yet.

I didn't want to go home, didn't want to sleep in that huge empty bed again, didn't want to wake up to another night without Lucien being home. Seven days and counting—but it had felt like weeks. Why Lucien had been chosen for this job was beyond me, but for every moment that he was gone, I began to hate the Council just a little more.

"Peter?" Xander's voice was gentle, yet prodding.

Reluctantly, I lowered my gaze to the open passenger-side window. Xander's amber eyes almost glowed in the reflection of the console. He leaned over and opened the door. "Come on, Peter. Let's go home."

I got into the car and closed the door with a huff. "So, tomorrow's Monday, right? Just a night off with nothing to do?"

"Well, it might have been, but I think Logan has been wanting to talk to you."

"He can wait until I've slept in," I said.

Xander pulled the car out onto the highway. He was quiet for a moment, but I could tell he was just itching to talk. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer. "Do you really think it was a good idea to let him stay at the house?"

"What am I supposed to do? Send him back to his hotel?"

"Other covens have done worse."

"We're not other covens. I'd like to think we're just a little bit better than everyone else."

"Oh, yeah, that's all great and fine..."

"But?"

He looked over, shaking his head. "But Peter, it can be a huge weakness, too. With Lucien gone—"

"Oh, yeah, remind me some more that *he's not here!* Damn, Xander." I turned back to face the road and lights appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. They were right in front of us and I grabbed at Xander, screaming out his name.

His eyes went wide and he swerved, but it was too late.

The horrible sound of metal screeching and groaning filled the air. Glass exploded around me and time seemed to slow as the car flipped end over end, throwing me against doors and more glass. We came to a stop and there was a moment of silence before the pain hit. And then I screamed.

Chapter Nineteen

I woke to blinding white lights and dark shapes. Quiet voices filled the air, but I couldn't make out actual words. My head was pounding and my stomach roiling as if someone had shoved their fist into me. My skin burned all over, but it was worse at my ankles and wrists. I tried to move, to sit up, but realized that there was something across my head and throat, restricting my movements.

Struggling, I pulled at the restraints. I didn't know where I was, but I sure as hell wasn't at home and there was no way this seemed like a hospital. Since when did they start tying down patients? A sharp sting pierced my arm and there were suddenly strong hands at my arms, my chest, my legs—holding me steady. I screamed out to be let go and a dark shape hovered above my face before my entire world went black.

The next time I awoke, there was a wet roughness beneath my face. I opened my eyes slowly, afraid that those dark shapes would stab me again and put me back out. It took a moment to realize that I was on the sidewalk of a wet, grimy street corner. I attempted to get up, but my body protested.

I was sore in places I didn't have muscles. As I dragged myself up, I realized that whoever had such fun with me had left me naked. Lovely. Slowly, I managed to get to my feet. I blinked up at the street signs, but didn't recognize the street or the neighborhood. I could, however, hear the sounds of traffic on a highway, maybe a freeway, somewhere nearby. I sighed in resignation as I realized that if I was going to get home, I was going to have to do some walking.

When I took a step, something smooth and silky broke the contrast of the gritty concrete. I looked down to find a bright blue feather beneath my toe. I growled and clutched the feather in my fist, determined to get home and find out just what the fuck had happened. With no clothes, no phone, and no money, I figured it was best to keep to the shadows. I headed for the sounds of traffic, hoping that a taxi would eventually happen along.

Five blocks and several disgusted looks from vagrants later, I managed to hail an off-duty taxi. The driver cracked the window as he pulled up beside me. "Hey, man, you need me to call the cops?"

The first time I opened my mouth, nothing happened. The second time around wasn't much better. My voice was graveled and strained. "No, I just need a ride home."

The driver laughed. "I'm not into charity."

"Look... Drive me home and I'll make it worth it." I opened the door and the driver looked back in shock as if he thought it had been locked. I slid into the seat and slammed the door. "121 Forrest Drive."

"Okay, get out. You've amused me enough for the night."

I stared at him through the rearview mirror. "Drive."

The doors locked and the car started to move, but a few moments later, the driver shoved a pistol through the small money window. "If I don't get paid—you don't get out."

I rolled my eyes and curled against the door, twirling the feather angrily between my fingers. I closed my eyes and images from the crash filled my head. My throat tightened and I reached out to Xander, but there was nothing but silence. Just how it'd been with Lucien. All of my connections with the most important people in my life had been troubled since the attack. Surely it couldn't be all my doing. All my fault. Either way, I was determined to get to the bottom of it.

We arrived at the house a short while later, but the driver refused to let me out. I started to ask him how he thought he was going to get paid, since I obviously didn't have it on me, but at that moment, Simon came running out the front door, a mix of horror and relief on his face. I'd never seen him without his calm demeanor and it brought on a sudden sting of tears.

The driver rolled down the window. "Sir, this guy says he lives here."

Simon pressed his hands to the window between us, eyes closing. "Let him out and I'll get your money."

"No can do. He gets out when I get my money."

"Pay the man, Simon."

Simon expression was conflicted, as if he thought that by going back into the house for cash, I wouldn't be there when he came back out. He was back in a matter of moments, though, thrusting a wad of folded bills through the front passenger window. The driver's eyes widened and he unlocked the door, stuttering his thanks.

I didn't bother with an answer as I climbed out of the car. I had to steady myself against Simon as I stood, my legs feeling like Jell-o. When we reached the front door, I had to pause for a moment. "What happened to Xander? Is he—?"

"He was found last night by the team. He was in pretty bad shape: beaten, bloody, and drugged. There were horrible burns at his wrists—"

"Ankles and neck?" I asked, showing him mine. But there wasn't much to show, the burns were already healing.

Simon nodded. "We've had to keep him drugged because he went crazy when we told him we hadn't found you... And he couldn't feel anything of the bond between you and him."

"And Lucien?"

Simon shook his head slowly.

So many emotions washed through me—hurt, rage, confusion... But I couldn't seem to settle on one, so I figured anger and determination were the two most likely to do any good. Crawling into bed and crying over it all wouldn't accomplish shit.

"How are you feeling, other than like shit?"

"I think I'm going to settle on pissed." I opened my hand, showing Simon the feather. "I want this fucker in my dungeon."

Simon gasped and grasped the feather, shaking his head. "Cyril?"

"You know him?"

He ducked his head, eyes still on the feather. "He was my brother and my partner."

After all of the wondering, it finally dawned on me just what Simon was. It would have probably set better if I hadn't met Cyril first. I stared at him, shaking my head. "Why didn't I know this?"

"It's not something I'm proud of."

I wondered why, but wasn't in the mood and I wasn't having the best of days. We'd have to talk about this another time. But soon. "We're going to talk later. There is no way around this. Okay?"

Simon bowed his head. "Yes, Master."

"Now. Where is Xander?"

"In his bed, sleeping rather fitfully."

"Do me a favor and make me something to eat, nothing too heavy. Xander, too, if he hasn't eaten in a while. I'm going to check on him and get a shower. What time is it?"

"Almost midnight."

"Call Silver and have him gather the team here in an hour. And please get me Nikolas. Right now."

Simon nodded and left me standing in the entryway. I shut and locked the front door and headed for Xander's room. I paused at the door, realizing that I was still naked and beyond dirty. As much as I wanted to check on Xander, it would have to wait until I'd at least jumped in the shower.

My shower was quick and I'd had to cut a few inches off my hair because it'd been so tangled with glass and grime and blood. I threw on a pair of jeans and headed across to Xander's room again. I left the door open, hoping Nikolas would show up soon. Xander was curled up in the bed, asleep, but he didn't seem to be resting comfortably.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and trailed my fingers along his brow. His expression softened instantly and I sighed. "Xander, baby, can you hear me?" He moaned and moved toward me, the movement seeming almost instinctual. I bent down and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I'm so glad you're okay. But I need you. I need you by my side and I need your help."

Xander sucked in a quick breath and his eyes fluttered open. "Peter!"

"Right here. How're you doing?"

"Oh. Oh, God." He sat up and threw his arms around me, burying his face against my neck. "I thought... Oh shit, you're right here." He scented me and pulled back. "Are you okay? What did they do to you? You smell... different."

"Different, how?"

"Sterile. Like... drugs... something."

"Yeah. I have a feeling that someone had a field day with us."

"I don't think our accident... was an accident."

"Me either, baby. And I'm starting to think that Lucien's absence and him not calling isn't because he's too busy."

Xander nodded. "I think you're right."

I caught Xander's face between my hands, forcing him to look at me. "What do you need to shake off the drugs?"

"Need to shift."

"Then do it. Right now." I pressed another kiss to his lips. "Simon is calling the team in and Nikolas should be up here soon."

"I'm here," Nikolas said, appearing in the doorway. "Where have you been?"

"Playing pincushion, I think. Come on in, Nikolas; talk to me."

Nikolas shut the door behind him and walked over to the bed, sitting opposite me and beside Xander. "No offense, princess, but you look like hell."

It was good to be home. I didn't even mind being called 'princess'. "How long have I been gone?"

"Four days," Nikolas said. "We've been sweeping the city, day and night. Goddamn it, when I find out who did this..."

"I think I already know. But we've got a much bigger issue right now than just revenge. Lucien has been gone for over a week now. He hasn't called, hasn't sent word, and my connection with him is as blank as it's ever been."

"You think this is some sort of set up? But for what? His vampires are alive, which means *he's* still alive."

"I know, but... It just doesn't *feel* right."

"So he could be anywhere." Nikolas raised a brow. "Or not..."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we need to contact someone close to the Council, but not the Council itself. Find out if Lucien was really sent away, and if so, see if they can tell us where to. That's what we need to do to start."

I looked to Xander who was being especially quiet. He was staring at me like he wasn't quite sure who I was. I reached out for him, but he backed away a little. My heart felt like lead. "Xander?"

He shook his head and crawled off the bed, muttering. "Need to shift."

Xander stumbled to the bathroom and I looked to Nikolas. "I'm so tired of things being fucked up around here."

"I think he's smelled you for the first time in a while."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember what I told you? How you smelled different to me that night? How you smelled like the pack?"

I nodded.

"Xander's always with you, never really been separated for any length of time. Now that there's been some distance, he can smell the changes in you." I sighed and started to get up, but Nikolas caught my arm. "No, Peter. Let him work it out on his own."

"But I'm no different than I was before!"

"In your head? No. But your body doesn't lie. Maybe it's time for your head and your body to have a little talk... and come to some conclusions. You've been infected, Peter. And no amount of drugs can change that."

"Infected, maybe. But I haven't shifted."

"Drugs, maybe?"

"You didn't bite me that night. Maybe it's just a slight infection—"

Nikolas' deep laugh cut me off. "Always reaching, always trying to think it through from every angle, wondering how you can fight this off." He sighed and shook his head. "It's too bad. You'd make a great leader."

I glared at him and kept my voice low. "The pack already has a leader, and he's not twenty feet away from you. Shut it, Nikolas."

He crawled toward me and forced me back on the bed as he straddled my body. "There's a big difference in leading by default—and being born to lead."

I growled and shoved at him. "Nikolas, this is not the time."

"The entire pack knows that it is *you* that he bows down to."

"Nikolas!" Xander's words were growled from his canine mouth. "Mind your place."

Nikolas swung his head around to look at Xander, pinning him with an intense stare. After a while, he moved off me, sighing in resignation. "I don't—"

"If Peter chooses to lead the pack, then the position is open to him. But for the time being, I am still leader. You will still show me the respect I'm due."

"Just because I disagree doesn't mean I don't respect you."

It was a shock, of sorts, to have them getting along so well. I guess sex did that for some people. But what was more shocking to me, was the fact that I could understand each and every word from Xander in wolf form, just as if he were speaking as human. Sure, I'd been able to discern his words before, but they'd been guttural and gravelly and never quite this clear. I sat up slowly, looking back and forth between them. I didn't know what the hell was going on, but it was creeping me out.

"Guys... Arguing will not get us anywhere and will certainly not help us find Lucien."

They both looked at me and Xander's amber-colored wolf eyes went wide. "You understand me?"

"Clearly."

Nikolas touched my hand, hesitantly. "Are you certain you haven't shifted?"

If the past four days hadn't been a complete blank, I could have said no without question. Was it possible that I'd been drugged enough to wipe the entire thing from my memory? "I'm not sure of anything. But this isn't about me."

Xander and Nikolas shared a look and I slid off the bed. "Whatever you're thinking—stop it!"

"Peter's right," Xander said.

Nikolas' hand shot out toward me, and in a blur of speed, I caught his wrist before he could touch me. Something warm trickled down the base of my thumb toward my wrist and I looked over to see long claws – my claws – digging into his flesh. Nikolas winked. "My point has been made."

I let him go and held my hand up in a mix of disbelief and morbid curiosity. I carefully licked along one of the sharp claws, groaning at the taste of Nikolas' rich, sweet blood. Without a thought, I swiped my hand against Xander's bed, the burgundy-colored material parting like water. Xander let out a pained cry and I looked over at him in surprise.

"Egyptian cotton."

"Sorry." I brought my hand back up and wiggled my fingers. In moments, my hand shifted back to normal. I walked to Xander and threaded my fingers through his thick, black fur. "I'll buy you more. *And* I'll help you break them in."

He grunted and leaned into me, but it was Nikolas who spoke next. "I think it's safe to assume that you're *some* kind of shifter."

Nikolas pulled a knife from his pocket and grabbed my arm. Before I could pull away, he sliced right through my forearm. Blood poured from the wound, but slowed quickly. In only a matter of moments, the wound was closing up. I gaped at my arm and then up to Nikolas. "That's some wicked shit."

"We could have so much fun together. I could bleed you, watch you heal, then do it all over again."

I rolled my eyes. "Let's not get carried away. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Xander padded across the room, pacing. "You can't feel Lucien at all?"

"No. It's just blank."

"And me?"

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on the link between me and Xander. Nothing. "The same."

"Take some of his blood," Nikolas offered.

Xander sat at my feet, nuzzling against my legs. Without warning, his muzzle brushed my crotch and my dick stood up at attention. He continued to rub against me and I unbuttoned my jeans, pushing them down my hips. His long, thick tongue lapped at my balls and I stumbled back, grabbing for the bedpost to steady me. He was relentless in his attentions and it wasn't long before I felt that familiar shock traveling down the base of my spine. He stood and took my cock in his clawed hands, jacking me, as his face and neck went from fur to smooth flesh.

"Feed..." I drew him in and set my teeth against his neck. It always amazed me that he could take my bite, even without the benefit of fangs. He shuddered and tightened his hand. "Oh, fuck yes. Do it."

I bit down hard, moaning as his blood flowed over my tongue. Images flashed in my head, times with Xander and me together, the accident, his pain... I gasped when I saw images of him being tortured and beaten.

"No, no..." He wrapped both his arms around me. "Good thoughts."

Wet heat replaced Xander's hand and it suddenly felt as if my balls were about to be sucked through my cock. With Xander's arms holding me close, it could only be Nikolas. I dropped a hand between us to Nikolas' head, making a fist in those short, black spikes. He took me in deep and swallowed repeatedly, a finger massaging behind my balls.

I bit into Xander's newly healed flesh again, and this time when the blood rushed over my tongue, it was pure elation that I felt. The sensations and emotions that surged through me buckled my knees. To know he'd been that relieved to have me home...

Nikolas' finger slid into my ass and my eyes rolled back into my head, my scream becoming a howl.

It was as if I'd exploded into tiny bits and all the pieces of me hadn't quite come back together yet. I blinked hard, looking down at Xander and Nikolas. Both of them were rubbing their faces –Xander in wolf form again – against my bare thighs. I cleared my throat a few times before actual words came out.

"That was..." I shook my head, not knowing *what* the fuck that was.

"You are pack," Nikolas said softly. "Lycan."

Oddly, it didn't bother me. Much. At least I was *something*.

"He's not full Lycan," Xander added. "Part of him is of Lucien."

Nikolas rose up, met my gaze. "How's your bond with Xander, princess?"

"Right there, at the surface, so easy to touch." It gave me hope. More hope than I'd had in a long time. "I need Lucien's blood from the emergency supply—and someone recently brought over by him. The boy, what was his name? Aiden? Adam?"

"Adam." Nikolas got to his feet. "I'll find him. And I'll call Sabaan. He should be able to hack into the Council's system."

"Good. Bring Adam to me when you find him." I tucked myself back into my jeans and zipped up. "I'll be in the library."

Xander started to follow, but I paused, shaking my head. "I need a few minutes, Xander. Just... Help Nikolas as best you can and come to the library when the rest of the team gets here."

I didn't give him time to answer as I shut the door behind me. He reached out to me, tentatively, and I was so goddamned glad to have that back, I just stopped in the middle of the corridor and opened myself to him completely. I hoped he understood what I was feeling and didn't take any of it personally.

When I felt the sensation of fur rubbing against my skin, I knew that he did understand. Or, at least he understood that what I was feeling was more about me and what I was and where I stood than anything else. He broke his connection with me and I continued toward the library, hoping like hell that some time in Lucien's space would trigger... something.

The library was Lucien's sacred space: a quiet place filled with books and couches and chairs, with reading lamps beside each one. There was a large desk at the far wall, facing the double doors. A new Oriental rug carpeted the floor in place of the one that had been ruined a year ago. But I knew that beneath that rug, there was a dark spot in the hardwood floor.

In Lucien's fight to break the tie with his former Master, he'd bled through the former carpet and his blood had seeped into the flooring. It was a defect in the varnish that had allowed the blood through. The boards had soaked his blood up like a sponge, but instead of letting the floor be cleaned and those boards replaced, Lucien had insisted that it be varnished over. That the stain of his blood remain permanently sealed into the floor as a mark of ownership.

I walked over to the rug and grabbed at a corner, pulling the heavy thing back until I found that spot. And then I knelt, with my face to the floor, and promptly fell apart. God, I'd been so stupid over the past week. I'd been mourning Lucien's absence, angry that he'd not told me he was going, that he'd never called after he'd left. My emotions had clouded my judgment, my reasoning. Had they clouded or tarnished my bond with Lucien, too?

The thought of him hurt somewhere and trying to reach out to me, only to find me angry or weak, or... fucking... I shook my head, choking back tears. How could I have done this to him? How could I have not felt him? Not realized *long* before now, deep in my soul that he would have called. Maybe not the first or the second day. But he would have called.

"I'm so sorry, Lucien. So sorry," I whispered through the tears.

A hand on my shoulder startled me and I sat up in horror as Logan's sympathetic gaze met mine. He knelt beside me, tissues in hand, and I wondered how long he'd been in the room. "Is there anything I can do, Peter?"

I sucked my emotions back so fast it hurt, trying to lock them down into my own private place. To have him see me this way... I stood, grumbling. "What are you doing in here?"

He stayed where he was, not bothered at all at my gruffness. "I thought I could help with the situation."

"There is no situation."

"I know that you and the leader of the Lycans both went missing after an extremely bad accident. He was found beaten and bloody in a back alley and now you've just returned, a day later. I won't presume to say what happened to you in the four days that your coven members searched for you, but please don't treat me like I'm stupid." He reached out with the tissues to wipe the floor where I'd cried and left tears in a puddle in the center of the stain.

I rushed over and pushed him back. "No!"

He landed on his ass, dumbfounded, and the look in his eyes held a little more fear than I'd expected. "I was only going to wipe the floor."

"I'd rather let the tears of my pain and sorrow seep into the carpet to dry and lie upon the stain of Lucien's blood." I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. "Because that is as close as I can get to him right here and now."

Chapter Twenty

Logan stood and tried to pull me into an embrace. I pushed him away, but he was stronger than I was, pulling me into his chest and crushing me tight. The gesture was too much and the dam broke again, my tears becoming sobs. I knew that I would pay for this – for showing this much weakness to another vampire, especially one not of our coven – but at the moment, I couldn't really give a damn.

After I'd calmed, I pushed away from him. "I'm sorry. That never should have happened."

"Nonsense. I interrupted you in a time of mourning. I should have stayed outside until it was done. It was my fault—entirely."

"If you speak of this, I swear, I'll—"

"It is between you and me," he said before I finished the threat. "I swear it to you on my own life."

Good enough.

I took the tissues he offered me and walked over to the desk, sitting down in Lucien's chair. The leather was cold, and it was only then that I realized I still wasn't wearing a shirt. I leaned forward over the desk and scrubbed my face with my hands. "What do you want, Logan?"

"I can help, sir."

"Sir? I thought we got rid of all that formal shit."

"I'm sorry. I'm tiptoeing right now." He shifted uneasily. "I'm out of line and I know it, but I can't just sit back and not do anything."

"What is it that you think *you* can do that my team members can't?"

"Well... for one, I can see things. Visions, if you will."

"Have you—?"

"No, no, I've not seen anything. But—"

"Well, why don't you come back when you *do* have a vision? *Then*... we'll talk."

"Sometimes it's more than a vision. If you have something of Lucien's that I can hold in my hand, then maybe I can get a sense of where he is. It doesn't always work, but it's worth a shot."

I sighed. "I'm Lucien's. I was just in your arms. Didn't you feel anything then?"

"Honestly?"

I shrugged. "That would help."

"Touching you is like stepping in the middle of two trains on the same track, barreling toward each other." He walked over and leaned his hip against the desk. "I can't imagine what it's like to be in your own head twenty-four hours a day."

"Do you read people, too?"

"Not usually without permission. Though, there are times that to *not* read them? Would require me to blow off my own head. I take the information that I'm granted and I keep it to myself. But not to worry, my secrets die with me."

He was different from the vampires in the coven. Those, I had to watch my way around and try not to let any sort of weakness show. Logan seemed to take it as a part of life and didn't dwell on it. I liked him. God, how I liked him. Master vampire or not.

"I hope you stay, Logan." The words were out before I could stop them. "Here, I mean. In the coven."

He chuckled and patted my shoulder. "I know what you meant. Now. Tell me, Peter. How did Lucien leave here?"

"I don't know. I wasn't here when he left."

"He was going to be gone for an extended amount of time. How would he travel? Does he have a coffin?"

"Of course, down in the coffin room..." The coffin had never bothered me, but it was so little used that it never even dawned on me to check if it had gone.

Logan stood. "Would you take me to his coffin room? Where his coffin has rested when not in use?"

"Now? No, I'm expecting the team to be here any time now. And a boy," I said a little more softly. "The last person Lucien brought over."

"If that doesn't help, we can take a short walk. Surely it's not far?"

I looked up at him, shaking my head. "Why are you doing this?"

"If I'm going to serve two masters? I'd at least like to meet the other." He smiled and moved away from the desk. "Your team is coming down the hall."

As he started for the door, I called out to him. "Stay, Logan. Please."

"Where do you want me?"

"Anywhere is fine, really." When he floundered, I pointed to a large, black leather chair. "Pull up a chair and sit beside me."

"That's going to look bad."

"I don't mean *right* beside me."

"Still going to look bad; I'm not of your coven."

I gestured to where I wanted his chair. "Yes, you are."

His eyes closed in a moment of relief and gratitude and he pushed the chair over and sat down, just as the double doors opened. Team members filed in by two, but as they all began to take a spot against the wall, I still noticed a pattern: vampires on one side, werewolves on the other.

Xander paused in the doorway and seemed to be waiting on someone. A few moments later, Nikolas squeezed by Xander almost dragging the boy behind him. The boy didn't look particularly pleased about being dragged in by the collar of his shirt.

"Easy, Nikolas."

After Nikolas released him, the boy cowered in the center of the room. I moved from behind the desk and walked to stand in front of him. "Your name is Adam. Is that correct?"

"Y-yes."

Nikolas grabbed him up by the scruff of the neck. "Yes, *what*, boy? Do you need lessons on how to properly address your Master? Because I can give them to you. Would enjoy it, in fact."

The boy cowered even more and it dawned on me that Lucien had left shortly after turning him. Had the boy even had anyone to guide him through his transition? Surely... Guilt settled like lead in my stomach. "Let him go, Nikolas. I don't think he *knows* how to address me. Probably doesn't have a clue on how much of anything works."

As he was released, the boy winced and stuttered. "My name is Adam and Lucien is my Master."

Nikolas' hand shot out again, but I caught it before it could touch the kid. A gasp echoed through the room and I didn't dare look at my claws in awe this time. No. I would follow this through, and be the Master that I needed the vampires and wolves to respect. "He's fine."

"Very well, my lord," Nikolas said with a slight bow of his head.

I released Nikolas and reached out to grasp Adam beneath the chin. "Do you know why you're here?"

"N-no, sir."

"I need something from you. You see, you are the last person that Lucien transitioned before he left. His blood should still run strong in your veins."

"I don't understand."

"We believe that Lucien may be in trouble." I released him, speaking as I walked back to the desk. I sat down in the chair and looked at Adam again. "I'm hoping that your blood will help me find him. Will you gift me your blood voluntarily?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think—"

"Think very, very carefully before you finish that sentence," I said. "Whether or not you provide it voluntarily is entirely up to you. But make no mistake. You *will* provide it."

Nikolas' pleasure in my words washed through me and I swayed a little before looking at him. "Will you keep that to yourself?"

He bit hard at his lip, trying not to smirk. "I'm sorry, my lord. You please me with your words and I am more than ready to provide the boy with any discipline he might require."

Adam's head snapped up. "I'm not a boy!"

"Looks like a boy, acts like a boy..." Xander stalked toward Adam and paused beside him. He ran his fingers through Adam's short, blond hair, the smile on his face menacing. "So why shouldn't you be called *boy*? You cannot even address your Master."

"My name is Adam."

"His name is Adam." Xander rolled his eyes and started toward me. When he reached the desk, he leaned across, brushing his lips against mine. "I understand what you're doing, but we're losing time."

I held his face in my hands, glad for the bond between us. "*They don't respect me. Any of them.*"

"*Make them. Take the boy's blood. Now.*"

I dropped my hands and stood so suddenly that Xander fell forward. I then turned my attention to the vampires, singling out the ones I thought would give me the least problems. "Silver, Eric, Gino? Bring Adam to me, please."

Silver stepped forward without a moment's hesitation followed by Eric and Gino. The moment they took hold of Adam, Adam screamed. And screamed. As they laid him over the desk, Silver clamped a hand over Adam's mouth. "This coven has two Masters and you knew that before you were transitioned. You will serve them *both* or you will pay the consequences. Now shut up and offer your arm."

Adam's arm extended toward me, trembling. I sat down in the chair and took his arm, willing my thumbnail to shift into a claw. It took several attempts for it to happen, but when it did, I didn't waste any time in slicing through Adam's flesh. Xander passed me a goblet as the blood began to flow. I waited until the goblet was full before releasing Adam's arm.

Silver caught Adam by the wrist and started to pull him off the desk, but paused in a moment of indecision. "Is that all you require at the moment, my lord?"

I nodded. "But don't let him leave."

Silver hauled Adam up from the desk and guided him across the room. At my nod, Eric and Gino both resumed their place against the wall with the rest of the vampires. I grasped the goblet tightly in my hand and swiveled around in the chair to face the wall. It wasn't exactly private, but I was pretty sure this was as close to that as I was going to get.

I brought the goblet to my lips and the moment I smelled the blood, my stomach lurched. Drinking from Lucien was never like this. And the times that I'd sunk my teeth into Xander's flesh had been exquisite. So why I was having trouble just turning the damned thing up and drinking was beyond me.

A hand rested confidently on my shoulder and the hesitation was suddenly gone, replaced by a gnawing, aching thirst. I raised the goblet before the sensation could fade and downed the warm, thick contents. I closed my eyes, ignoring the tangy, coppery taste, and concentrated on what I felt as the power in his blood washed through me.

That cord that tied Lucien and me together flickered to life. It wasn't strong, by any means, but it was there. I settled deeper in the chair and let my entire body relax. Carefully, I followed that tie to Lucien. It was probably too much to hope for, to be able to see through his eyes, but it was worth a shot.

Darkness: black as pitch without even a glimmer of light. I opened my eyes and the darkness remained. It took a moment to realize that I was no longer looking through my own eyes.

"Keep going," Logan whispered. "Anything you can sense. What you smell, what you feel..."

The smell. It was damp, woody. Dirt... Freshly turned dirt, as if I was working in a garden. But just beyond that clean scent was the faint scent of death. I didn't want to go any further. I didn't want to know...

"Anything that you can feel—*any* sensations?" Logan's voice was prodding, yet gentle. "Just open yourself up, they will come to you."

Fear of what I'd find was making me hesitate and I think it was keeping me from opening myself completely. When I did, pain hit me head-on. It flung me back in the chair, bowing my body, muscles taut. I couldn't seem to digest it and figure it all out.

"Hurts, oh, fuck, it hurts... Wood... Something sharp—and it burns. It's everywhere. Hungry, oh so hungry... Cold."

The pain eased, but the cold remained. I wanted to pour all my heat into him, to take that cold away... Nothing should ever be that cold—nothing alive.

"Oh, Lucien, help me out here, baby. Help me find you."

I felt myself being pulled back into my own body. But just as the connection began to fade, Lucien's voice rang clear. *"With the dead."*

My eyes flew open and I replayed everything over and over again in my head. Everything I'd seen and smelled and felt... And it dawned on me: the dead were pretty easy to find.

"He's in a cemetery." I stood and had to hold onto the desk to steady myself. "We start now and we search every one."

Silver cleared his throat. "You are our best beacon for finding him. Do you realize just how many cemeteries there are in and around the city? If, he's even still in the city? If we start now and comb every one, it could still take days."

Logan moved up beside me. "We don't have that kind of time. Might I have a word with you in private, sir?"

I nodded. The room was entirely too crowded at the moment anyway. "If you will all wait in the hall, I'll be out in a moment." The team was the first to start heading out, but there were a few I wanted with me. "Silver, Xander, Nikolas—please stay."

Logan frowned. "With all due respect..."

"These are the people I trust implicitly," I said. "They don't leave my side."

Silver looked pleased and the other two—well, it wasn't any news to them. They hadn't even moved. Logan sighed and walked to the door and closed it. When he turned around, his expression was grim. "Lucien has to be found by morning. By now, word has at least traveled through the coven that the Master has gone missing."

"One of them," Xander added.

Logan shook his head. "That may be, but the other Master is human, or close enough to it. Word will travel fast. If Lucien is not returned to his coven by morning, by nightfall, I can assure you that there will be rogue Masters, looking for a vacant throne to ease into."

Silver growled. "But you aren't one of those? You do seem to have impeccable timing."

"I have no desire to lead," Logan answered. "I have told Peter of my background, where I came from, and what I desire. You are more than welcome to verify any of that, but please, do not let my former Master know where I have landed."

"I trust him, Silver. He has done nothing but help." I turned my attention to Nikolas. "Anything from Sabaan?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't get through, but I left Simon with it to go find Adam."

I scrubbed my hands over my face, sighing. "Tell me we can do this by morning."

The door to the library flew open and Simon ran in, phone in his hand. "I've got Sabaan on the line. The Council hasn't contacted Lucien in months."

I took the phone and held it to my ear. "Sabaan?"

"I'm right here."

"Are you sure? There should have at least been messages from us for the Council's physician."

Sabaan hummed for a moment and I could hear him typing away in the background. "I'm not finding anything. Wait a minute... There's an encrypted folder here, but it'll take me a bit to break through."

"Call me back as soon as you get something. I've got to get the team out so that we can start searching cemeteries. I know Lucien's buried in one, but I have absolutely no idea *which* one."

"Do you have any ideas who is responsible for this?" I flashed back to the feather, Cyril's taunting... "Peter? Anything you have, concrete or just a thought."

"When I woke up after the accident—"

"What accident?"

I sighed and shook my head. "I don't have time to explain it all, Sabaan. But when I woke up, there was a blue feather beside me on the concrete."

"Cyril," Sabaan whispered.

"That's my guess."

"Get your team out and start searching. I have a file on that bastard somewhere. I'll call you back as soon as I find it."

The line went dead and I turned to Silver. "I need a map."

In a short time, we had the team split up in pairs, most of them a pairing of vampire and werewolf. My phone rang and I flipped it open, hoping it was Sabaan. "What do you have?"

"Cyril is a member of the Council, which I knew, but I'm not sure you did."

"You're shitting me..."

"Nope. Hang on..."

I dug in the desk for the wireless earpiece that went to both mine and Lucien's phones and activated it, glad to have my hands free.

"It looks like the Council *did* request that you be brought in several weeks ago for some kind of testing."

"We didn't contact them until last week."

"Bear with me, baby, I'm skimming."

I looked at my watch. I didn't have all night to sit on the phone with Sabaan and wait for him to tell me what seemed important. "Skim faster. We're burning darkness here."

"Uh, okay. I am... hmm..." He broke off, making an odd noise. "Okay. I'm in a real-time system here. And *you* are about to have some company—a lot of it."

I didn't even have time to ask before there was a loud pounding. Even for the front door, the sound was incredibly loud. I took off without a thought, leaving everyone else in the library behind. I heard footsteps following me and was pretty sure Xander was right at my heel. I opened the front door to find a crowd in the front drive.

A vampire stood at the door, dressed all in black except for a gold and purple insignia on his chest. I recognized the design and color immediately as the mark of the Council. "I have to go."

"No! Don't go," Sabaan said quickly. "I'm going to keep working, and I won't bother you. Just keep the line open."

The vampire stepped forward and knelt. "We have been sent to assist in your search."

"And how long has the wonderful Council known that we would need assistance?"

The vampire cocked his head, as if listening to someone else speak. I noticed the black piece in his ear and grabbed it, putting it to my other free ear. The voice on the other end went silent and I growled. "Repeat that for *me*, now."

A throat cleared on the other end. "Do you want the why and how—or do you want to find Lucien?"

I had a moment of indecision about whether or not I could actually trust them if I accepted their help. But then I thought of how stretched the team was, how long it was going to take us to search, and how much time we'd already burned. We could use the manpower, if nothing else.

I turned and found Silver in the crowd behind me. "Silver? Would you bring the maps outside so that we can break this down again? Make the splits, give them their orders."

"Yes, my lord."

Silver turned and headed back toward the library and I turned to face the vampire before me. "Do you have a name?"

"Tomas, sir."

"Silver will point out where we need to start. You will follow his orders and you will maintain open communication with him. If you need something, you go through him first. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

Silver returned with the maps rolled into his hand. I grasped his shoulder as he started by me. "Silver? You are in charge."

"I will keep in touch, my lord," he said, then looked back. "Everyone outside so we can break this up again."

As the door closed, I turned back to face Xander, Logan, and Nikolas—who had a tight grasp on Adam. Damn it, I didn't know what to do with the boy. If I let him go, he might run far and fast to get away from us and the coven. The kid was going to need some instruction and some reassuring.

Simon walked into the room with a shirt over his arm and my boots in one hand. He smiled. "I thought you might want to dress before you left."

I walked over and took them from him. "Thank you, Simon."

"Leave the boy with me. I'll make sure he stays here."

At my nod, Simon took Adam by the arm and led him off down a corridor. I sat and started putting on my socks and boots. Sabaan's voice startled me. "Peter?"

"Yeah?"

"I've got the file on Cyril and I've narrowed it down to four or five places you might want to search."

"Go ahead."

As he started listing addresses, I recognized one of them. We passed it all the time on the way to the club. It was a huge cemetery, full of crypts and monuments and decorative statues. "Oh, Sabaan, it couldn't be that easy... Could it?"

"I'm gong to keep digging."

"Thank you. I'm keeping the line open." I looked up at Xander and Nikolas. "You know the cemetery we pass on the way to the club? We need to start there."

That first cemetery we tried was a bomb, as were the second and third. We were on the fourth, a small cemetery with headstones so old some of them were crumbling. Xander, Nikolas, and Logan had each taken a far corner to start with, making their way back to me from the outside in. As I walked the plots, Sabaan spoke quietly in my ear.

"Do you remember anything after the accident before you woke up on that curb?"

"Not really," I said, pausing at a fresh grave. I knelt and picked up the dirt, smelled it, but it didn't smell fresh like it had in my connection with Lucien. The headstone also had a name with a recent date on it. I kept walking. "I know I was restrained. I can remember bright, bright lights... But not much else."

"From what I can tell, the Council didn't find you until last night. Xander was found the night before and they ordered him to be returned *safely* to the coven."

"Safe? They beat the shit out of him!"

"No, *they* didn't." Sabaan paused. "You want me to shut up so you can concentrate?"

"No, you're actually keeping me calm, I think." It was true. Without him talking, I'd probably be clawing at each and every grave. "What's going on?"

"Cyril was assigned to watch over you and the rest of the coven over a year ago. They were curious about your bond with Xander, wondered how it happened, and wanted to keep an eye on you for any problems. Cyril has some notes that he turned in here and there, and I got into the files, but I can't read them."

"Encrypted?"

"No, language barrier is more like it. Anyway, it looks like there's a lag of a few months where he didn't turn anything in. His last report, though, is right about the time the Council requested that he bring you in for an evaluation."

"So they wanted to kidnap me then?"

"It appears that they just wanted to talk with you. Cyril, however, seems to have taken great pleasure in both hurting you and going against the Council's orders. They have contacted Cyril's superior, which is a very good sign that they're pissed off."

I grumbled and Sabaan continued. "Cyril had you for nearly four days. You don't remember anything?"

"No." I shook my head, even though he couldn't see me. "And really, I'm not sure I *want* to remember them if I was at his mercy."

"Cyril has mercy on no one. The Council did intervene, but they did some tests on you while they had you in their custody. A lot of results here, but it'll take me hours, if not days, to decipher them all."

"It was nice of them to put me back at home, too. I'm telling you, waking up naked on a filthy sidewalk in a strange part of town is just the epitome of kindness."

"Actually, that was part of Cyril's punishment—to deliver you and Xander back to the coven. I'm not sure the Council is aware of *where or how* he left you."

I turned a corner and stared at the last row of plots. We had one more cemetery to check after this, and if we didn't find him, I wasn't sure where we'd even start looking. I started walking, pausing at each one before moving on. As I stepped before the very last plot, the one before made me pause and take a step back.

Sabaan went quiet as I knelt down at the foot of the plot. The grass was thick and undisturbed, but something just seemed off. I looked up at the old, weathered headstone. The man buried here had died in 1893. But like most of the other headstones in that time period, this one stood straight at the head of the grave. It wasn't kicked back or forward or turned a little to the left or right. No. It looked like it had been perfectly placed.

I leaned into the thick, lush grass and worked my fingers into the dirt. I concentrated on that weak connection I had with Lucien before, sending everything I had into one, hard push. Nothing happened, no one pushed back. I knew that I had to get up, I had to move on, but I just sat there, unable to just get up.

Finally, I pulled my hands from the dirt and wiped them on my jeans. I started to get up and there was a faint, familiar push. I followed the link to the push, heart racing. I sank down over the grave and started digging, screaming for help. Xander, Nikolas, and Logan were suddenly all there, digging with me. When my dirty, bleeding fingers hit wood, I knew we'd finally found him.

Chapter Twenty One

When we'd found Caleb in the club, cut open from one end to the other and strung up like some sort of target, I'd thought that was the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't have been more wrong. Once we managed to dig the makeshift coffin out of the ground, Logan stopped me as I tried to wrench it open.

I tossed him aside like a rag doll, opened it anyway, and promptly threw up.

Lucien's eyes had been sewn shut with heavy, black thread and that once beautiful mouth was slack. His body had been placed over a bed of silver spikes and whatever blood that had been in his body had drained from the wounds they'd inflicted. But since the spikes had been pure silver, he hadn't been able to heal. He was, quite literally, a rotting corpse.

Xander and Nikolas pulled me away as the Council's team truck arrived and started loading the coffin, with Lucien still in it. I screamed and raged that I wanted to be with Lucien, but they told me it was too late. That there was nothing left of him to save. I fought tooth and nail to get out of their grasp, knowing that there was *something*—that the mental push I'd gotten back had been real.

That my reason for living wasn't gone.

The team members all respectfully ducked their heads on the ride back to the mansion, avoiding my eyes, and when we arrived, the Council's physician was waiting outside. He took one look at Lucien's body and shook his head. I grabbed him up by the scruff of the shirt and ordered the wiry-haired old man to *fix* him.

And fix him he did. Well, sort of.

He started with Lucien's eyes, which were probably the easiest thing on him to fix. The stitches were removed and the physician—who'd finally told me to stop calling him "the physician" and either call him Doc or Markus—placed blood-soaked patches over Lucien's eyes and secured them with a wrap around his head.

For hours, even on into the day, Doc worked. I wasn't sure how he was able to keep working, but I didn't care as long as he was fixing Lucien. After he managed to clean each and every one of Lucien's wounds, he then began the painstaking process of seeing if they would heal. He put a drop of his own blood over several places and waited to see if there was any response. For a moment, his face was grim.

Nothing was happening.

And then a smile slowly began to grow over his face. "In time, he will be good as new."

After giving Lucien a huge infusion of blood, Doc had left to go find food. I wasn't sure that he was a vampire, as he'd been awake so long during the day, but I didn't care what he was, as long as he didn't stop working his magic. I checked the patches over Lucien's eyes as soon as Doc left. While they weren't healed, they did look better. I replaced the old patches with new ones, secured them, and turned his head to the side so I could see his face. Lucien was still on his stomach so that the Doc could check a few lingering wounds at the back of Lucien's thigh.

I was half-asleep, half-awake, head rested right next to Lucien's when Doc came back in. I blinked and sat up, yawning as my gaze went to the bags of blood in his hands. "What's that?"

"Your wolves are donating. And..." He shook his head. "Do you have a werewolf in the coven?"

I raised a brow. "Uh... no."

"I think you do now. He's offered to donate his blood to Lucien's recovery, as well." Doc shrugged. "He *can* give a lot of blood."

"Hey, whatever it takes," I said.

He nodded. "How are you doing, Peter?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

Doc frowned. "You're exhausted. You should get some rest while you can."

"I'm not leaving him."

He pointed to a couch against the wall. "I promise I will wake you if there are any changes—"

"Or if he wakes up."

When Doc nodded, I bent and pressed a kiss to Lucien's forehead. I collapsed onto the couch below and the moment my head hit the arm, everything went dark.

I awoke to Doc gently shaking my shoulders. Worried that something was wrong—or that Lucien was awake—I shot to my feet. "What's wrong?"

He chuckled. "Lucien's fine. There's someone out in the hall to see you, though. He says it's important."

I ran my fingers through Lucien's hair as I passed the table and headed for the door. I walked out to see Silver leaning against the opposite wall. I smiled. "Hey, Silver."

"How's he doing?"

"He's doing good. Healing."

"I hate to drag you away, but I really need you to come look at something."

"What's wrong?" I asked as we started walking.

"Well..." He scratched his head. "I got to thinking this morning about just *how* Cyril could have gotten Lucien into that box. I mean, I talked with Xander and Nikolas and Simon... and things just don't add up."

"How so?"

We turned the corner and Silver stopped at a storage room. But, apparently, it was much more than that now because he had to scan his hand and his eye to open the door. "The security system was installed while you and Xander were gone. When things calm down, Reid and I will get you authorized for the system."

"Thanks for taking care of that, Silver."

"I hate for it to seem like while you were missing, we just went on with business, but..."

"Hey, no... You don't have to explain it to me. The faster it was put in, the better."

He opened the door for me and when I walked in, I didn't quite expect everything that I saw. There were dozens of monitors: some showing loops, some showing a continuous feed from a certain camera. Computers lined one wall and there were a few desks, each monitor busy with a different task.

"How's it working so far?"

"A few glitches here and there, but Reid is good—really good."

"I had hoped that he'd settle in and feel useful."

Silver pointed to the desk. "Have a seat."

This didn't sound promising. I sat down and Silver sat right beside me, pulling the keyboard close and logging in. He clicked around with the mouse until he found the right file and opened it up. "I went back to the day that Lucien went missing. Like I said, some things just didn't add up..."

"What did you find?"

He pointed to the screen. "This is the log from the security system that controls access to your and Lucien's bedroom."

"Okay..." I read through the names, starting from the dawn, when Lucien and I were sleeping. "Simon, Xander, Simon again, Caleb..." I looked at Silver, shaking my head. "That can't be right. Look at the time-stamp."

"Uh-huh. But the time stamp isn't wrong. You are the next one to go in at a little before eight."

"That's just *not* possible."

"My thoughts exactly. But, here's something else." He minimized the window and opened another file. "Benefits of our new and improved audio-visual monitoring. But before I play it, I want you to know that it's not going to be something good."

"Just play it."

He clicked the mouse and for a moment, I watched an empty hallway. Seconds ticked by into a minute and finally, two people appeared on screen, one shoving the other into the wall. I sat forward as the one against the wall tilted his head back, offering his throat to the other. My heart sank as I watched Caleb offer himself up to a blue-winged angel.

"Turn it off."

"Keep watching," Silver said softly.

As Cyril shoved himself into Caleb, he whispered promises of change. He told Caleb he'd get everything he wanted. Told him that I'd be gone and he'd get his vampire back.

"Forever," Caleb had whispered.

"Yes, pretty boy... forever."

I stared at the screen in shock, unable to tear my eyes away from the disaster playing out before my eyes. Lucien had loved Caleb so completely, had given him so much. For Caleb to do something so monstrous... I shook my head. I had seen enough.

"When was this recorded? While I was gone?"

He nodded.

Thoughts of all the times I'd felt like I'd been watched flashed through my head. "Do me a favor. Pull up the log for the security system again—for the bedroom."

Silver's fingers flew over the keyboard and he reached over and clicked on the log. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Yes. Do you remember what I said about feeling like someone was fucking with my head? Me waking up and not being able to breathe?" I shook my head in disgust. "Maybe it *wasn't* all in my head."

I tried skimming along the lines, looking for certain days and times, but finally had to grab a notepad and pen and put my head down and think about it all. It took a while, but I wrote down everything I remembered and guessed at the times. Silver went through and compared days and times and when he looked over at me, he shook his head in disbelief.

I sat back in the chair, head in my hands. "I think I'm getting an idea of why, but *how*?"

"Cyril's an angel. They have powers that we can't even begin to imagine. With Cyril's help, Caleb probably could have walked right into the sunlight without so much as a flinch. It's probably safe to assume that Caleb's head was fucked with a little—or even more than a little."

"Are you taking up for him?"

"Oh, no," he said quickly. "Even if his head was fucked with, there was still something there for Cyril to start with. There had to be anger or... something... Cyril promised him changes. Now, I won't presume to say what those changes might be, but I would bet my life that it started out as pure jealousy."

It made sense. In a sick, twisted way.

"What do you want me to do?"

What *did* I want? Hell, this would have to be a decision for Lucien and me to make together. But in the meantime, we couldn't afford to let Caleb slip through our fingers. "Has he been here?"

Silver nodded. "I set up an alarm for his ID when he scans into the security system. He's been in and out a couple of times just since sunset."

"Gather the team and—"

"Just ours?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's right. You haven't left Lucien's side since you found him." Silver chuckled. "Man, there is a shitload of guys from the Council's team, as well as a few of the lords."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. They're all waiting for Lucien to wake up." He shook his head, grinning. "Everyone in our coven is going out of their way to be nice and accommodating."

I smiled a little. "Well, tell them to stop it."

"Really, though. Simon and Xander—and even Nikolas—are upstairs, making sure everything's going smoothly. You just worry about Lucien and getting him back on his feet again."

On that note, I decided I needed to get back. I stood, then remembered I hadn't finished telling Silver what I wanted to have done with Caleb. "As for Caleb: gather our team, find him, and bring him to the dungeon. Not the nice, swank rooms we put those guests we want to watch, but don't want to get away in either. A real cell. Chain him and withhold his feedings for the next twenty-four hours. Hopefully, Lucien will be awake by then and we can figure out something that will leave a longer-lasting impression."

Lucien was on his back when I walked into the treatment room. Doc was checking the progress of the trans-fusion and jotting down notes. I walked over to stand beside the table, thrilled to see Lucien's color had almost returned to normal. "How's he doing?"

"Much better, actually. I finally managed to get the wound at the back of his thigh to close. But his muscle in that spot could be damaged. I could open him back up and start over, but at this point, I think it's better to concentrate on the rest of him. Get him awake and moving around, first."

"If it is damaged, could you fix it later on?"

"If there were anything to be done to fix it, it would more than likely heal itself after a few weeks. If he feeds well, I don't foresee any problems." He turned and pointed to a basket on the counter. "Simon sent down Lucien's soaps while you were gone. If you'd like to bathe him..."

"Oh, yes. It's okay?"

Doc nodded. "Right now, we're just waiting for him to wake up."

I went right over and retrieved the basket. I found a large container and began filling it with warm water at one of the sinks. When I returned to the table, Doc started to walk away. "Hey, Doc? Do you think he's going to have any problems after this?"

"I'm sure there will be quite a bit of fatigue. That doesn't mean that he's weak, just that he doesn't have all of the poison out of his system yet. I neutralized it the best I could, but it might take a week or two to leave his body. Make him take it easy. Make him feed, every day, even if he doesn't feel like it. He could also have a few problems with his eyes when he first comes around; whoever sewed them shut went through more than his lids."

I ran my fingers through Lucien's hair, realizing for the first time that the eye patches were gone and his lids only had faint lines of scarring. "I just want to do things right. Be prepared."

"I think you and Lucien have all you need, right here in this room."

Doc put his papers away and left, shutting the door behind him. I got Lucien's soap and a cloth and slowly began washing away any trace of that nasty box he'd been buried in. Guilt weighed heavily on my mind as my fingers slid along his skin. Here I'd been, whining about his absence. I'd fucked Xander, which wasn't anything new. But I'd also fucked Nikolas—which still didn't seem quite real.

And the love of my life lay trapped in a crude wooden box, rotting away as he waited for *someone* to find him. "I'm so sorry, lover."

He moaned and I looked down at him through tear-blurred eyes. His eyes fluttered and opened a little and he moaned again before trying to say something. He seemed frustrated, though, when no words came out.

"Shh, it's okay. I'm right here. Do you know where you are?"

He nodded slowly and jerkily reached for me. "H-home."

"Yes, baby, you're home."

He turned his head toward me, eyebrows knitted in either pain or panic—or both. "I can't."

"Can't?" I held his face between my hands, searching his face. "Can't what, Lucien?"

"See. I can't see you."

"Your eyes were hurt and we've had patches on them, letting the blood heal you." I took his hand and brought it up to my face. "You'll have to feel me until it passes."

His fingers danced across my brow, down over my eyes, nose, and lips. "But it will pass?"

"It will."

He sighed and cupped the back of my neck, pulling me close. "Don't be sorry, lover."

"I've been a selfish asshole."

He tried to look up at me, but his eyes were looking here and there, not seeing anything. His voice was coming back quickly, though. "Did you do anything while I was away that you would not have done while I was here?"

Well, put that way? "No. Not really. I hung out with Silver and smoked one of his special cigarettes and plotted ways for our coven to dominate the world... Probably wouldn't have done *that* if you'd been here."

Lucien laughed softly. "Stop fretting over small things and just kiss me. Breathe life back into me."

"You want me to start at the top or the bottom?"

"Hm..." He pretended to think about it a moment. "The top. I'd like the taste of you to replace the taste of whatever was used to clean out my mouth."

"I'm pretty sure I taste nasty by now. I've been with you since-"

"I know how long you've been here. Now kiss me, please."

I pressed my lips to his and just stayed there for a moment, breathing him in, before sighing. He parted his lips as I did, moaning as my sighs filled him. He smelled sterile and even though I knew he'd had to have every part of his body cleaned, I guess I hadn't expected for Doc to drown him in antiseptic.

But antiseptic or not, I kissed him, pushing my tongue between his lips. He clutched at me as our tongues slid together, as if trying to pull me in even more. I poured everything I had into that one kiss, wanting him to know how very much I loved him and needed him. When I pulled away, there were pinkish-colored tears sliding down his temples. I sat back and wiped them away, shaking my head.

"You okay?"

"I am now." He turned his head toward me. "I want to get up. I want a bath. I want our bed."

"Okay, wait just a minute and let me make sure you aren't hooked up to anything."

"Something on my ankle," he said.

"We've had you strapped onto the table in case you woke up and just tried to bail while our backs were turned. The table is really narrow."

"I know. Any more and it'd be up the crack of my ass."

I laughed and started undoing the straps. When I had them all off, I blew out a quick breath of anxiety. "I think we need to get you sitting up first. I pulled a set of steps close and locked the wheels. Can you move anything?"

He nodded.

"All right. I've got a set of steps here right in front of me. We're going to swing your legs off the table, rest your feet on them, then get the rest of your body sitting up. Don't try to sit up until we get your feet on the steps, okay?"

He grasped the table beneath him and tried to move his legs, but that one leg locked and he cursed. I moved down to his feet and helped him move, all the while telling him to relax, telling him he was doing well.

When his feet finally rested on the steps, I moved back to the head of the table. He reached out and grasped my shoulder. I pulled and he pushed and in minutes, he was sitting up on the edge of the table.

"Sit for just a minute."

"I'm fine. How many steps are there?"

"Two," I said. "Third step down is the floor. But they're big steps."

He nodded, still holding onto my shoulders, and stood. He was shaky with each step, growling and cursing each time he put weight on his right leg. "What's wrong with my leg?" he asked as he made it to the floor.

"Your muscle in your thigh is damaged from the poison. Doc said that it might take a couple of weeks for it to heal. But you have to feed well."

"I haven't hurt like this since I was *human*."

"It's the silver. He neutralized it the best he could, but it's going to take a little while to leave your body. The fatigue and muscle weakness is normal and the more you feed..."

"The better I'll feel?"

I grabbed a sheet and wrapped it around his hips to give him some sort of privacy as we walked the halls. "Yep."

"We'd better start lining up donors now."

There was a bit of humor to his words and we made our way slowly, painstakingly, to the bedroom. I brought Lucien right into the bathroom and turned on the water, getting it nice and warm. I leaned him against the wall and started kicking off my boots. It was only then that I realized I was still wearing the same clothes, same boots...

"I stink, don't I?"

"No."

"Got to by now."

"You smell alive, lover." He looked right into my eyes, even though I knew he couldn't see me. "At this moment, that is a smell I cherish."

I framed his face in my hands and kissed him. "Come on. Let's get you warm."

I led him to the bath and managed to get him in. He stood in the middle of the tub, waiting as I quickly stripped off my pants and shirt. Getting him lowered into a sitting position wasn't easy, but he was already stronger, already starting to take more of his weight. I knelt between his legs and grabbed the soap. Slowly, tenderly, I finished the bath that I'd started on that cold, sterile table.

As I rinsed his hair, he grabbed me and pulled me close. "Trust me to wash your hair when I can't see it?"

"Oh, you don't have to. I'll—"

"I want to."

I took his hand and gave him the shampoo. I grabbed the pitcher and filled it, wetting my hair for him. When his fingers slid through my hair, my breath caught and I tilted my head back, enjoying his touch, his strong fingers as they worked.

Chapter Twenty Two

We'd been in bed for a while, talking and touching. Lucien had cracked a few dead guy jokes that made me want to beat him. He was laughing at me when there was a light knock at the door. Lucien frowned. "Knocking visitors are never good."

"Come in," I said.

Nikolas and Xander both poked their heads in the door. Xander smiled. "We won't stay long."

"Why are you knocking?" Lucien asked. "Come on over here, sit with us. Who's with you? Is that Nikolas?"

Xander and Nikolas both looked at me with raised brows. "His eyes haven't healed yet. He can't see you."

"Oh..." Xander made a strangled noise as he climbed up onto the foot of the bed to sit. "But he'll be able to see later, right?"

I nodded. "He'll be fine."

Nikolas was hanging back a few feet away from the bed and Lucien scanned the room, seeking him out. "Why do you stand so far away, Nikolas?"

"I..." Nikolas shook his head and moved toward the bed. As he sat down, he looked at me, but spoke to Lucien. "I'm just glad to see you well. This isn't what I pictured."

"Ahh," Lucien sighed. "You expected to see me half-alive?"

"With all honesty, my friend, after I saw you last night, I didn't know how it was *possible* for you to even be alive."

"A vampire's body is an amazing thing," Xander said.

I leaned into Lucien, gazing up at him. "Oh, it sure is."

Nikolas groaned. "Have you already molested the poor man?"

"No, I swear. I have been very good."

"My cock is broken anyway." Lucien said it with such sincerity that my heart stopped a little. But when he turned his head and faced me, a slow smile began to curve at his lips. "That scare you?"

Xander and Nikolas and Lucien all had a laugh at my expense. I grumbled and snuggled up close, not bothering to mention that I didn't care if he couldn't ever use that beautiful thing ever again as long as he was here. That would lead to mushy moments and a mushy moment would lead to big-time tears.

"Oh!" Xander said. "Sabaan called to..." And then he seemed to remember that topics having to do with Sabaan at all were forbidden. "Uh..."

But he'd already started and I wanted to know. "To what?"

"To check on Lucien. He was worried."

Lucien raised a brow and looked in my direction. I looked up at him, memories flooding back at some of the last things Sabaan had heard from me. "If it hadn't been for Sabaan, we might not have found you in time. He really did so much for us..."

For a long, uncomfortable moment, Lucien was quiet. Xander ducked his head, horrified that he'd blurted it out at all. Nikolas picked at the comforter. Lucien finally sighed and found my hand on his thigh. "Peter's always been a good judge of character. I may have to extend my thanks to him... personally."

He seemed sincere and the rest of us shared a look of panic at the very thought of Lucien and Sabaan anywhere near each other. And on that note, Nikolas got off the bed. "We're going to go. Just wanted to check in. Either of you need anything, we're here."

Xander gave Lucien a gentle pat on the leg and followed Nikolas. As he started out the door, Nikolas popped him on the ass. Lucien cocked his head. "What was that?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Nikolas has a new toy to play with for a while."

"Oh, no..." Lucien groaned. "You know it'll only lead to disaster when they part ways."

"I don't think so," I said thoughtfully. "Neither of them is really looking for love with the other. I think they are just enjoying the playing and the companionship."

Lucien shook his head and shifted to lie down. Moving made him grunt and groan and curse, but he seemed determined to manage on his own. He wrapped an arm over my belly and rested his head on my chest. After a long stretch of silence, Lucien cleared his throat.

"What have you done with Caleb?"

I threaded my fingers through Lucien's hair, let them trail down his shoulders, unsure of just where to start. At the beginning was probably the best, but... "Do you know who took you?"

Lucien nodded. "Caleb."

"I'm so sorry, baby," I said as I kissed the top of his head. "I'm so very sorry."

After a while, Lucien's shoulders shook with quiet sobs. I petted his hair, holding him close, knowing I couldn't do anything to make it better. Lucien finally sighed, relaxing. "I gave him everything and this is what he does. I just don't understand."

I embraced him tighter. "I've got the one thing he can't have. And I think that maybe it was too much for him."

"The sentence for anyone else would be death..."

"He's locked up for now. I think we should let some time pass before we start figuring out what to do with him. He was influenced by Cyril, so I think we should... *maybe*... take that into consideration."

Lucien went silent and I figured he was probably running things over and over in his head. After a while, he nudged me. "So, you and Nikolas, huh?"

"How did you—"

"It's back, lover."

I gasped and grinned and clutched him tight, making him groan in pain. I eased my hold on him and kissed him. *"Oh my God, it's been so long. I've missed this so fucking much. How--?"*

"I'm not sure how, yet. Not sure I care, as long as it's back. All I know is that you were sleeping beside me and I couldn't quite wake up, but needed to know what all had happened."

No wonder he hadn't really been surprised by much. *"Except the Sabaan part."*

I laughed. *"I love you."*

He looked up, but his eyes went off somewhere past my head. "I love you, too."

We were silent for a few minutes and I laughed. "Nikolas is *amazing*—especially while furry."

"I fast-forwarded through most of it in trying to figure everything else out, but that was my guess. You won't mind if I settle into your head and watch it again, do you?"

"Not at all."

I opened my eyes and looked right into Lucien's. Apparently, I'd fallen asleep and he'd been watching me. My eyes widened... "You can see me?"

Lucien grinned. "Oh, yeah, I can see."

I leaned up and gave him a peck on the lips. Lucien rolled over me and settled between my legs. Our lips met and his kiss was more insistent than it had been since he'd woken up. Which woke my cock right up. I skimmed my hands up and down his sides, opening for him.

He gently rocked against me, hips rolling, heavy cock dragging against me. He bent and whispered in my ear. "Want you, but I don't think I can do anything."

"Let me do the work."

I rolled him over and straddled him, stroking him in my fist, so glad to feel him in my hand again. Precome wet my fingers and I sucked them into my mouth, moaning at the salty-sweet taste of Lucien—just like the old Lucien. Fingers wet, I worked my hole a little then grasped the base of Lucien's cock in my hand, slowly sinking down over him. I groaned and shuddered as that familiar length stretched and filled me.

We took it slow, not worrying about the need to get off. Kisses here, touches there, just barely rocking and moving. And when I thought I was ready to explode, soft moans escaped Lucien's throat. I leaned forward and grasped his hands, putting them above his head. Our fingers twined together as I moved and bent to kiss him, to taste those moans and cries. It wasn't long before I came, coating his belly with my heat. My rocking got a little harder, a little faster, and Lucien's body went taut as he filled me.

Lucien's arms came around my back and he sighed. "I think that just set my world back on track."

I slid off him and got out of bed for a cloth. When I returned, I cleaned his belly and his chest, smiling at him. "Feeling better?"

He nodded. "Would you mind helping me get dressed? The noise in the rest of the house is grating on me and I want everyone who doesn't belong here gone."

I couldn't have agreed more. Cleaned up, I went to the closet and found us both some clothes. I went for comfort rather than impressions and dressed us both in our silk pajama pants. I slipped on a red T-shirt instead of a black one, though, when Lucien teased me about dressing us in matching clothes.

"Honey, I hate to break it to you, but we pretty much own the same things."

"I'm just playing," he said. "We could wear matching pink tutus and I wouldn't give a damn."

"Oh, no." I gave him a playful nudge. "Pink is so out. Purple is the new thing. You want shoes?"

He shook his head and stood, holding on to the bedpost. I tried to help him, to keep him steady, but he pushed me back gently. "I'm fine, lover."

"You sure?"

He nodded as he paced back and forth in the room. The grunts and groans and curses made me smile, though. He had a limp, but when he really got mad over the way it hurt, the limp wasn't so visible.

The few Council members that lingered had been reluctant to leave, as had Doc. The Council's team members, however, had nearly stampeded each other to get out the front door. Doc pulled me aside and said he had things that he needed to speak with me about—things about my own health.

I told him that right now wasn't the time. That since I'd waited this long, my health could wait for another week or so. He started to argue, but when Lucien limped over and thanked Doc for everything he'd done for him, Doc eased off. He gave Lucien words of encouragement, but before he turned to leave, he said that he'd be back in a week.

Lucien frowned after Doc as he walked away. "Does he think I'm going to relapse or what?"

"It's about me," I said.

He turned and looked at me then, eyes searching my face. His hands framed my face and smoothed my hair, everything else falling away for a few short moments. I wasn't sure if he'd seen my partial shifts in my

memories or not, but hoped that if he had, we could work through it. Lucien smiled, finally, and pulled me into an embrace. "Whatever it is, baby, we *will* work through it."

And that was all I needed to know.

We ended up in the kitchen, somehow. Simon had cooked a large meal and even though Lucien and I weren't partaking, we sat at the head of the table to enjoy their company. Nikolas, Reid, Xander, and Simon—who kept getting up and down to bring more food—sat at spots around the long, wide table. I sat back and watched all of the talking and laughing and teasing that was taking place.

Things would go back to normal. And by the looks of it, they were on a course to be better than normal. It amazed me how everyone had come together and hadn't gone their separate ways yet. Maybe it was too early to tell. Hell, it had only been a day; two days? I didn't even know. Time had no meaning while in the treatment room.

Silver walked in, holding a box close to him. When he saw me, he headed straight for me. "Hey, Silver. How's it going?"

"Good," he answered. "I just wanted to drop something off for you."

"For me?"

He nodded and set a large box down before me. I ran my hands over it, admiring its beauty. I'd never seen anything like it. It was made of dark wood and a silver-colored metal... I pulled my hand away. "Not silver, is it?"

"No, unfortunately." He laughed. "Polished steel was the best I could do."

"Thank you!" I started to stand, but he put his hands on my shoulders, keeping me seated. He leaned over me and opened the box. Inside, the box was full of his special, hand-rolled cigarettes. "Damn, Silver... thank you!"

He grinned. "Simon said you came in here hungrier than hell that night. I thought maybe these would help get you through. They should last a few months, at the very least. Just... take it easy."

Simon looked up at me and winked. "There's plenty of food..."

I closed the box and ran my fingers over the metal, before looking up at Silver. "Sit with us for a while?"

He hesitated, but when Simon pointed out a chair, he sat down. Silver just watched everyone, laughing every once in a while at a stupid joke. Lucien's hand eased over my back and he leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"Go ahead and smoke. It would make me happy for you to be able to eat something."

"Yeah?" I glanced around the table as I pulled a cigarette from the box. "Anyone mind?" A resounding 'no' filled the room and I laughed. "Anyone got a *light*?"

Silver dug in his pocket and leaned forward, lighting me up. With the first drag, my world tilted. I blinked and sat back and noticed Logan come to an abrupt stop at the doorway. He turned and started out of the room.

"Logan?" Lucien called out. He grasped my shoulder and stood. "Join us, please?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"No, you're not," Lucien said.

Logan walked into the room and bowed his head. "I'm pleased to meet you, my lord."

Lucien leaned forward and offered him a hand. "At home, it's just Lucien."

After shaking Lucien's hand, Logan found a place at the table and Lucien sat back down beside me. Lucien was right. At home, there was no master or sir or lord; there was just—family. A family that we had created. A family that I would fight to the death to protect. Lucien's hand eased along my shoulder and he gave me a knowing squeeze.

"We have been blessed."