

Latin Moon

Teigh Lynn



Loose Id

Praise for the writing of Jeigh Lynn

Latin Moon

What do you think of when you hear the words *Latin Moon*? Hot, sexy, steamy werewolf? If you do, you're dead on. Dr. Alex Hernandez is about as hot as they get. The fact that he's a wolf is just icing on the erotic cake!

-- Alicia Sparks, author of *Desert Moon: Ah-ten* (Loose Id)

Doctors, cops, werewolves... oh my! *Latin Moon* is a titillating tale of sexy romance and suspense. Dr. Alex Hernandez is a dreamy alpha male and his desire for Jessica is sincere and breathtaking. Jeigh's take on the werewolf myth is great and made for a fun, intriguing read.

-- Deanna Lee, author of *Still Waters* (Loose Id)

When a dance instructor becomes the target of a paranoid pack of lupine-phobia fanatics, little does she realize that her gorgeous new physician fiancé and his clan are much like *The Sopranos*, redefining family values and issuing their own brand of justice towards anyone who messes with them and theirs. Jeigh Lynn has created a werewolf hero both tender and ferocious, a force with which to be reckoned.

-- Lyn Cash, author of *Mistress Mine* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Latin Moon is a passionate paranormal romance. Jeigh Lynn has written a super cross-genre story. It tugs you into the action, your heart beats along with the heroine and you laugh when she laughs. I'm hopeful for further stories from the intriguing "pack" of characters she has introduced us to.

-- Saskia Walker, author of *Along for the Ride* (coming soon from Loose Id)

LATIN MOON

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LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

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Dedication

To my husband and my best friend. I love and respect you for so many reasons. Unfortunately, it would take a very long time to list them all. So, I'll just say thanks. Thank you for always believing in me, and always standing beside me, no matter what. Thanks for loving me, even when I'm not very lovable. And thank you for being such a wonderful husband and father. I'd be lost without you. I love you, Andre. Thanks for a wonderful twelve years, and happy anniversary. ~J

Special Thanks to: Brenda Bryce, Lori Benson, Lesley Musser, and Olivia Wong. All of you had a part in making LM the best it could be. Thank you!

Prologue

Thanks to understaffing and the arrival of six critical car accident victims, Dr. Alex Hernandez was detained in the ER. The rain had started during his shift, so he hadn't brought an umbrella. By the time he got through traffic and found a parking spot, it was forty-five minutes after curtain time. When he finally arrived at his sister Marisa's dance recital, he was more than a touch irritable.

But once he saw *her*, nothing else had mattered -- not his rain-soaked suit, not the fact that he'd probably missed Marisa's first number ... nothing. The only thing that mattered was meeting *her*, talking to *her*, claiming *her*.

The moment felt surreal. The stage was full of dancers, but Alex could see only her. Before he could gain control, his cock hardened, fully and painfully, and his vision became more acute. His eyes were probably glowing amber in the dark theater, and he could feel both sets of his canines lengthening, forcing him to purse his lips to accommodate and hide them.

Standing in the aisle and staring at her beautiful body moving to the music, he had no doubt that he'd found his mate. She was *his*.

“Down in front!” The angry shout brought Alex to his senses long enough to realize he’d wandered down the aisle. He quickly turned and walked to the back of the theater.

“Son? Are you all right?”

Alex jumped. He hadn’t heard his father approach, hadn’t even smelled him. That was a little disturbing. He was not an easy man to sneak up on. Nodding briskly, he assured his father all was well as his attention went back to the stage.

“We heard someone shout, looked up, and there you were. Son, your eyes ... Are you sure you’re all right?”

Alex covered his mouth with his hand; anyone who might be watching would assume he was being courteous. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Doesn’t Marisa look lovely? This is her favorite number.”

His face flushed; it had never even registered that his only sister and youngest sibling was on stage until their father had pointed her out to him.

Beside him, his father shifted with seeming unease. The corner of Alex’s lips twitched. It wasn’t often he could rattle his old man. He pointed. “Who is *she*?”

“Isn’t she wonderful? That’s Jessica, Marisa’s dance teacher. Why do you ask?”

Tearing his gaze away from the stage, he grinned, allowing a brief glimpse of his elongated teeth to show before he turned his attention back to the stage. “Because she’s *mine*.”

Chapter One

Jessica Ingram tossed her tap shoes into her bag and zipped it. Taking one more look around the empty dressing room, she sighed. She and Kat sure knew how to trash a room. To look at the place, one would never guess that two small women had been the only occupants. There were empty soda cans and candy wrappers all over the place. On the lighted mirror were several different lip prints in various shades, compliments of Kat. Bandage wrappers and empty hose packages littered the floor. And to top it off, the room smelled of sweat and liniment. *Yuck!*

Jess groaned as she picked up her garment and shoe bags and her purse. *What a night!* Thank goodness it was over.

Wiping her sweaty hand on her jeans, she reached for the door, only to have it jerked from her grasp. Kat's red head popped through it and looked around. "Man, is this room trashed, or what? You comin'?"

Jess chuckled and shook her head at her best friend. "Yup, I'm comin'."

"Well, hurry up. Marisa and her parents are still here."

She scooted through the door Kat was holding for her and grinned. She knew what Kat was getting at. Marisa's dad was Hot with a capital H, and Kat was smitten. It was hard to

tell, but Jess thought he had to be in his late forties or early fifties. He had thick black hair that was starting to gray at the temples, which was sexy as hell as far as Jess was concerned. And to top it off, he had a striking bronze complexion that came from his Latino American heritage. All in all, the man was drop-dead gorgeous and had a body that would make a cover model proud. Too bad he was unavailable.

“I saw Diego when I was taking my stuff to your car. He was carrying Marisa’s stuff out.” Kat paused and fanned her face with her hand. “He asked me if I needed him to carry anything for me. I had to bite my tongue, Jess. I almost told him, ‘Yeah, me.’”

“Kat, you have got to get over your infatuation with the man.”

Kat sighed and pouted out her bottom lip. “I know, I know. It’ll never work; he’s old enough to be my father.”

“I hate to break it to you, but he’s also married and has three kids.”

Kat looked her straight in the eye as they reached the stage exit. “Well, you can’t prove it by me. I think the sons are figments of their imaginations. In all the years we’ve taught Marisa, I’ve never seen them.” Kat nodded her head once for emphasis. “So Diego isn’t quite as committed as you make him out to be. He only has one kid.”

“Yeah, well, I think one of the sons is a doctor, and the other is a vet who runs an emergency animal clinic, so that’s why we never see them. Actually, I think Marisa said her brothers were here tonight. Not that it matters, one kid or three ... have you seen the way he looks at Claire? The man is totally and completely in love with his wife.”

“I know; when he looks at her, his eyes practically glow. Wish I could find someone to look at me like that.” This time when Kat sighed, Jess joined in.

Wouldn’t that be nice? A man to dote on her, like Diego did Claire. Of course, one had to date to find a man, and Jess had always been too busy with her dancing. She shook herself out of her reverie. No sense dwelling on her love life or lack thereof. She had *chosen* to put her career first. Besides, she was still young; there was lots of time left.

“Jess, you hungry?”

Her stomach growled. “Yeah, where do you want to eat? And if you say Marisa’s parents’ restaurant, I’m going to hit you.”

Kat’s eyes widened before she burst out laughing.

* * * * *

“This is ridiculous! I can’t believe you made me come here. It’s just a sprain,” Kat exclaimed for the third time in the last half hour.

“Stop being a baby. You can barely walk. I’d rather be safe than sorry. It’s not like I want to spend the night in the emergency room.” Jess arched her back and yawned. She shook her finger at Kat. “I’m tired, so behave.”

Standing, she stretched up on her tiptoes, then dropped her body over and grabbed her ankles. She closed her eyes and sighed. Oh, that felt good after sitting for so long. She leaned over to one leg, then the other. If someone came in the door, her butt would be the first thing they saw, but after an hour and thirty minutes, she’d given up hope that anyone was coming. Her hands were on the floor between her feet when a gasp, followed by Kat’s whispered “Whoa!” proved her wrong.

Jess opened her eyes, and a man’s crotch was the first thing she saw ... a very aroused man. *Oh, my God!* She stood, then spun around, ending up nose-to-chest with a Greek god in green scrubs and a lab coat. As she wobbled, a strong hand clasped her shoulder, steadying her. Her gaze slid back down, and, yes, he was aroused ... and huge. Her inner muscles clenched in response. Jess wondered what was wrong with her. She’d never had that kind of reaction to a man before.

When she finally got her balance, she raised her eyes to the most magnificent face she’d ever seen. He had the most dynamic brown eyes. They practically blazed. His tan face was arresting, his cheekbones high and his lips full. As she watched, those full lips turned into a first-rate smile. And, of course, his teeth were as perfect as the rest of him. What

would those lips and teeth feel like against her skin? A shiver went up her spine at the thought.

He was tall -- really tall -- and big; the top of her head only came to about his chin. His hair was jet black, and his chest was massive; he looked more like a bodybuilder than a doctor. She wasn't big by any stretch of the imagination -- in fact, she was rather petite -- but he made her feel even more tiny, dainty ... feminine. Her stomach got a fluttery, butterfly sensation, and she wondered what those big hands would feel like on her body. Never in her twenty-four years had she felt such an attraction. Would he think her a complete maniac if she laid herself at his feet and begged him to have his way with her?

Oh, man, the need to touch him, to run her hands all over him, was overwhelming.

Kat cleared her throat, and Jess jumped. Not only had this gorgeous man walked in and gotten an unobstructed view of her butt, but she was ogling him like a silly teenager. She wished the floor would swallow her whole.

Stepping back, she realized that he still had ahold of her shoulder. He let go abruptly and held his hand out to her. She took it; instead of shaking it as she expected, he brought it to his lips. Had he just licked her? Nah, couldn't be.

She looked up into his smiling eyes. She had obviously amused him with her earlier scrutiny, but if that erection was any indication, he was as interested in her as she was in him.

"Hello. I'm Alex." His voice was deep and gravelly. Sensual.

"Hi. I'm Je--"

"Oh, my God!" Kat interrupted.

Jess jumped, and turned to face Kat. She raised a questioning eyebrow.

Kat pointed at the man and continued. "It's him! One of the imaginary sons!"

One of the imaginary ... *What?* Jess turned back to him, about to apologize for Kat's outburst, when it hit her. He looked like Diego. A *lot* like Diego. So much, in fact, that he

was probably Diego's son. She chuckled at his puzzled expression. "Are your parents Diego and Claire Hernandez? Do you have a sister named Marisa?"

Alex smiled. He couldn't believe it; he'd been worrying over how to meet her, and here she was. And she knew who he was. "Yes and yes." He offered his hand to the redhead sitting on the bed. "Alex Hernandez. Nice to meet you both."

His mate was so close, he could see the pulse beating in her neck. Her skin was a pale ivory color, flawless. He had the sudden urge to bend down and lick the small, throbbing vein. What would it taste like?

"I'm Jessica Ingram, and this is Katherine Andrews. We're Marisa's dance teachers." Her voice fit her -- it wasn't too deep or high pitched, but smooth, sexy.

"Yes, I know. I was at the recital and saw you dance tonight, but another doctor got sick, so I was called back to work. That's the major drawback to working in a smaller hospital versus one in a big city. Seems like I'm always on call."

Alex sighed and went back to studying her. She was even more beautiful up close than she had been on the stage earlier, and she was smaller than he'd first thought. A petite little thing. Her dark brown hair was slicked back into a ponytail and still had glitter in it. She'd taken off her stage make-up, and her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were big and golden brown and heavy-lidded -- sexy bedroom eyes. Was she tired, or were they always that way? He could imagine those eyes looking into his as he made love to her. The thought almost had him groaning aloud.

He'd been hard due to her scent alone before he'd entered the room. But after seeing her up close, he was painfully erect; the once-over she'd treated him to had triggered it. He had to fight the urge to throw her over his shoulder and take off with her. He knew she had no idea what she was to him, but he'd have had to be blind not to see that she was attracted to him. His acute sense of smell had also picked up her arousal. His cock twitched. She

couldn't get away again tonight. He had to stake some kind of claim, even if it was as simple as getting her number. But first he needed to take care of the patient.

Alex flipped open the chart and glanced at it. "Let's see what you've done to yourself, Katherine ... May I call you Katherine?" She was, after all, his mate's best friend.

She nodded and blushed prettily. She was definitely the shy one of the two. "Oh, yes, please do. Or you can call me Kat. That's what most everyone else calls me."

Alex grinned at her enthusiasm. "Okay. Kat it is." He set the chart on the end of the bed and looked at her swollen foot. "How did you do this?"

"She slid off a curb; I guess it was slick from the rain." Jess leaned in close to him and looked at her friend's foot. God, she smelled good. "When she slipped, it twisted like this." She used her hands to show him which way Kat's foot turned. The image of her little hand wrapped around his cock invaded his thoughts, and he had to take a deep breath to steady himself. Big mistake. Her scent flooded his nose. If he didn't put some distance between them soon, he was going to lose it.

Alex gently moved Kat's ankle back and forth and watched her reactions, then placed a hand against the bottom of her foot. "Kat, I want you to push against my hand using just your ankle." Despite her grimaces, she did as she was told. Her foot still had good mobility, so he decided it was nothing serious. "I think it's a sprain, but I want to have a stress x-ray done, just to make sure. Let me go get one of the nurses to take you."

Even though Alex had other patients to see, he kept up with Jess's whereabouts in the ER. When she stood outside the radiology room waiting for the technician to finish with Kat's x-rays, he strolled up beside her.

"Jessica?"

"Jess," she corrected with a smile.

"Okay. Jess. Would you have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"Oh, boy, I would love to!"

“Thank God!”

Chapter Two

Six months later ...

“So, what made you decide to spend the night?” Alex wasn’t even looking in her direction. How did he do that? she wondered. He was impossible to sneak up on, and he always knew where she was.

Quietly closing the French doors behind her, Jess stepped out onto the covered patio. Looking around the deck, she noticed there were several candles surrounding the hot tub. When had he done that?

A fine steam hovered above the water’s surface, turning to mist as it hit the cool night air. And in the middle of it was Alex, stretched out and relaxing in the bubbling water. His head rested on the edge of the hot tub; his eyes were closed, and his arms were extended on the sides. One hand was idly playing in the water, while the other held a bottle of beer. His black hair was wet and slicked back, revealing the perspiration dotting his forehead and trickling down his temples. Only a small part of his bare chest was visible over the bubbling water, but what a chest it was. “Mmm, mmm, mmm.”

A slow grin curved his lips.

Reaching the side of the hot tub, she sat on the edge and made lazy little circles in the water; with her other hand, she clutched the towel wrapped around her body. She was a nervous wreck. They'd fooled around a little but never actually had sex. She was determined to make tonight different. She was tired of waiting for him to make the first move, so she'd decided to take matters into her own hands. Her stomach was tied in knots, though she'd been planning this encounter all week.

"Well ...? You still haven't answered me. Why were you so adamant about spending the night?" He raised his left eyebrow, barely opening his left eye.

"Mmmm, do you want me to go?"

"No, baby. Why would you think that?"

Shrugging her shoulders and hoping it would be a good enough answer for now, she grinned impishly. She wasn't completely sure of the reason herself; it just felt right.

Tapping his beer bottle, she asked, "I thought you told me not to drink alcohol in the hot tub? Hmm ... 'because the heat is a vasodilator,' I believe were your exact words. Whatever the heck that means."

"It means you'll get drunk faster. And before you start pointing fingers ..."

"Do as I say, not as I do," she mocked a deeper, masculine voice.

He grinned and set the beer on the edge of the hot tub as he reached for her. "*Ven para aca*. Come here, Jess. Or are you going to sit there all night and play with the water?"

She decided there probably wasn't going to be a better time. Nothing was going to make her less nervous, so she stood, squeezed her eyes shut, and dropped her towel to the ground, exposing her naked body to his view.

Alex knocked his beer over.

He'd been expecting the little red bikini she usually wore. Boy, was he surprised! She was incredible. Her hair was pinned on top of her head, giving him an unimpeded view of

her luscious breasts. They weren't large, but she had a generous amount, especially considering how tiny she was everywhere else. Her areolas were small and rose-colored, her nipples already erect. Her waist was small and her hips narrow, with just the right amount of feminine curves; and her stomach was practically as muscled as his was.

Alex had known from their previous petting sessions that her pussy was completely devoid of hair, but he'd never seen her nude. The sight of all that creamy pale skin had his cock stiff as a board in seconds flat. He was desperate to feel her against his own bare skin. Swallowing hard, he pulled her into the hot tub. His lips were on hers before she could even open her eyes to look at him.

He raked his fingers through her hair, knocking out clips, and let her hair glide down her back. His teeth gently scraped and nipped at her bottom lip while his hand slipped behind her neck, holding her still as his tongue plunged into her waiting mouth. When his tongue slid against her top teeth, she shivered, then threaded her fingers through his hair and ardently returned his kiss. He palmed her breast, squeezing gently, then found her nipple. As he rolled the tight little nub between his thumb and finger, she moaned and arched into him. Her enthusiasm was like an aphrodisiac. He couldn't get close enough, so he lifted her to straddle him. In this new position, the heat of her sweet cunt burned right through his bathing suit to his hard cock. He liked how she felt against him. He couldn't wait to feel her skin against his own without barriers.

Dropping his hand off her neck, he cupped her bottom and pulled her hard against his erection. He groaned at the contact. As he plucked at her nipples and ground her against himself, he kissed her jaw and her throat. He couldn't wait to lick those rigid little peaks. Couldn't wait to suck them into his mouth and to nip them with his teeth.

When she tilted her head submissively to the side, giving him better access, he bit down on her shoulder. She tasted so damned good. When she whimpered and started to squirm, he grabbed a handful of hair and held her still. Alex thrust his hips upward; grinding his cock against her, he instinctively held her still with his teeth.

He knew he needed to get control back, but damned if she wasn't as out of control as he was. She was rubbing her pussy on his cock, matching his ardor. In the back of his mind, he knew he had to stop this. He couldn't risk her finding out about him ... not yet. Not until he knew she was completely his. There would be no way to hide what he was if he took her, and he couldn't risk scaring her. Not to mention the fact that she was a virgin. Damn his luck. Just a bit longer, then he'd stop. He was sure he could stop ... after a little bit more.

But for the moment, he had to have one little taste of her. As his mouth traveled to her breast, he placed soft love bites on the underside before abruptly sucking the nipple into his mouth.

Jess had to remind herself to breathe. His suckling sent tingles straight to her core. Deep inside, her inner muscles clenched again and again. She was going to come apart. She'd had no idea that her nipples and her sex were so connected.

When the hand holding her close to him slid around and cupped her mound, she instinctively pressed herself into his palm. His hand brushed over her clit, and pleasure shot through her. His finger found the wet, welcome entrance to her body and pressed in. She gasped at the sudden invasion. No one but Alex had ever touched her in that way. She contracted around him, trying to keep his finger there. It was absolute heaven.

As he began slowly moving his finger in and out in a steady rhythm, a dull, needy ache took hold of her. She needed more ... much, much more than the quick movement of his fingers. Anticipation pooled in her stomach, making her quiver.

When he pulled out of her greedy body, she wanted to protest, but he immediately cut her off with a kiss. His other hand released her hip and fumbled with the strings on his bathing suit. He raised her until her breasts were again in his face; he captured one turgid peak between his teeth. Then she felt it. His cock was resting against the lips of her cunt.

Yes, finally!

He was so big and hard ... and hot. She'd never realized how good a man's cock would feel against her. It was exciting, naughty.

Feeling the tip of him start to enter her, she gave in to her excitement and clutched his shoulders. "Oh, Alex."

"Oh, shit." Alex lifted her and set her on the seat next to him while he tried to catch his breath. He'd almost blown it. He'd been about to take her. Thank God, she'd said his name. It had snapped him out of his daze.

He ran his hands down his face and laid his head back on the edge, trying to ignore her accelerated breathing and her intoxicating scent. He knew she must be startled and confused, but he had to calm down before he could look at her. His eyes were more than likely amber.

"Alex? What ... what's the matter? Did I do something wrong?"

"No. No, Jess, it's just that I need to calm down a little. Things were going too fast. I was about to go, to ..." Alex groaned and took a deep breath. He sat and looked at her without thinking. She gasped and stared at him for several seconds. Shit, his eyes *were* changed. His alarm at her seeing them made his eyes immediately change back to normal. It happened so fast that he could actually feel the change. He had to blink to regain his focus.

Apparently she passed it off to the candlelight, because she went right back into seductress mode. She reached up and ran a finger down the center of his forehead to his nose, trying to smooth his furrowed brows. Her fingers continued their descent to his lips and began to trace them. Ah, that felt good. He loved being petted and stroked. He sighed in response and quickly reached up to still her hand, then brought it down.

"I want to go too far, Alex. I want you to make love to me."

He closed his eyes, sighed, and ran his hands through his hair again. It was so hard to refuse her. His body was aching with need and fighting with his animal instincts. If she became frightened, it would take that much longer to gain her trust and unconditional love.

The wolf in him wanted to take his mate, make her his, in every way. But he knew their relationship was too new, and he didn't want to scare her with his passion and dual nature.

He opened his eyes and dropped his hands. Shaking his head, he whispered a soft, "No, Jess."

To his surprise, as he readjusted his swim trunks, she stood and started to get out of the spa.

She had to leave. Had to save what was left of her dignity. She was embarrassed that she'd thrown herself at him, only to have him refuse her. Talk about a blow to the ego. She'd thought he wanted her. In fact, she *knew* he had; his actions had told her that much. What had gone wrong? Was it that he didn't want to get mixed up with a virgin? Did he not want that kind of commitment? *Well, damn him, anyway!*

Jess threw her leg over the edge to get out of the tub, only to be pulled back into his lap. He caught both her wrists in one large hand and lifted her chin with the other as she tried to get loose.

"Jess, don't leave, baby."

She was so pissed, she couldn't bring herself to vocalize a response, but she did look up at him. He looked worried.

He pulled her into his chest, snuggling her close as she stiffened. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he asked, "Why are you so upset? I'm trying to be good and wait until after we're married. I figure you've waited this long ... we might as well wait until after we're married."

What? Her indignation melted away and her stomach clenched, the butterflies from earlier returning. *Married? Did he say married?* Realizing what he was implying -- or what she hoped he was implying -- she pushed herself away from his chest and looked into his

dark brown eyes. Had he more or less proposed to her, or had she read more into it than there was? “Alex? What exactly are you saying?”

His eyebrow shot up, and he countered, “What exactly do you think I’m saying?”

“I thought you didn’t want me and ... that you were trying to get rid of me. That you didn’t want to see me anymore.”

“How in the world could you think that?” Smiling brightly at her and displaying the dimple in his cheek, he added, “I know it’s too soon. I was going to give you a little more time, but ... will you marry me, Jessica? If you don’t want to answer right away, that’s fine; we can take it slow. It’s just that I’ve never felt this way before. I love you, Jess, and I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She couldn’t believe it! He wanted her ... and only her. He wanted to *marry* her. She was almost giddy. She had dreamed of this moment since the night of their first date.

Biting her bottom lip, fighting to rein in her emotions, she nodded enthusiastically. She finally found her voice. “Yes, oh, yes! I love you, too, Alex. I feel the same way.”

He was visibly relieved when he bent to kiss her nose. “You have no idea how happy that makes me.”

Relaxing into his strong arms, she buried her face in his neck, taking in his scent. The smell and feel of him were overwhelming to her senses. He smelled of chlorinated water, clean sweat, and a faint hint of cologne. He was so big that being held by him was comforting, an extremely secure sensation.

She could feel his chin on her head as his hands began to make slow, soothing circles on her exposed back. She felt, rather than heard, his soft chuckle. Glancing up at him, she could see his amusement. She couldn’t help but smile back and give in to her own giggles before quietly asking, “Alex, what exactly do you find so funny?”

“I can’t believe you would even think that I didn’t want or love you.” He grabbed her hand and wrapped it around his bathing-suit-clad erection. “Does that feel like I don’t want

you?” She gasped and her eyes widened, but he continued like he hadn’t noticed. “I’m totally and hopelessly head-over-heels in love with you, and you know it.” He finally moved her hand and slid his own down her back to cup her bottom. He pressed her forward, into him, grinding his still erect cock against her to further prove his point.

A wicked grin replaced her contented smile. Damn, she loved this man.

Chapter Three

Someone was following her. Jess was sure of it.

The blue minivan had been sitting a few houses down from Alex's when she'd left. It had followed her onto the highway, and she hadn't given it much thought. It wasn't like she was the only person in Alex's neighborhood who had someplace to go, right?

But after she got off the freeway and into the residential area her apartment complex was in, she noticed the van was still behind her. Nah, it had to be her imagination. Why would someone follow her? Maybe if she made a few turns, the van would go on its way and she could put her mind at ease.

Jess made a quick right turn, then a left. Looking in the rearview mirror, she saw the van was still with her. Not a big deal, she told herself. They could still be going to their own destination. It's not like she took a roundabout route anywhere. She decided to circle back to the highway and go way out of her way. If the van was still behind her when she got back to this area, then she'd worry.

Making another left turn, she headed back toward the highway. The whole way, she checked her mirror. The whole way, the van stayed behind her. When the van was still with

her as she reached the service road, and then as she turned toward the dance studio, she was positive it was tailing her.

Knowing she could probably still get ahold of Alex before he went to work, she reached into her purse to get her phone. It wasn't there. She took her eyes off the road and the mirror for a split second to look for it. It still wasn't there. She must have left it on the coffee table at Alex's house after she'd used it last night to call Kat and tell her about her engagement while Alex had called his parents. *Darn!* She'd been so busy trying to convince Alex there was no need to wait until they were married, she'd forgotten to put her phone back in her purse.

She knew she couldn't go home. She didn't want some maniac to know where she lived. Well, they already knew where Alex lived, since that's where they'd trailed her from in the first place. So, Alex's house it was. He would protect her.

Having made the decision, she looked in her rearview mirror one last time. It was gone. *Hmm, that's weird.* It was obvious the van had been following her. Where had it gone, and what did the occupants want?

* * * * *

Jess arrived at the dance studio a little after two o'clock. Her first class wasn't until three-thirty, so she went to the office to check her messages.

When she walked in, Lisa, her boss and the studio's owner, was sitting at the computer with her feet propped up on the counter. Her long blood-red nails were clicking away at the keyboard as her platinum-blonde head looked up periodically from the paper she was working on to the monitor. "Well, well, well ... so you *did* finally go home."

"What? How did you know I wasn't home last night?"

Lisa dropped her feet off the desk and spun around with a smile. "I, uh, tried to call you last night."

Jess smiled and nodded. "I was at Alex's house. Why, what's up?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to see if you wanted to go to dinner with me."

She and Lisa usually got together a couple of times a month, but she didn't remember seeing Lisa's number on her caller ID this morning. Of course, she had still been puzzled over the van and not paying that much attention when she flipped through the list. Jess shrugged it off. "Oh. Sorry, I had already made plans. Thanks for thinking of me, though."

Jess walked over to her box and went through her messages. There was one from Alex, two from Kat, and one from Kat's grandma.

She sat on the edge of the counter beside Lisa's computer and grinned, waiting for Lisa to look at her. "Guess what?"

"Hmmm ..." Lisa typed in something, hit Enter, then looked up. "What?"

"Alex asked me to marry him last night!"

Lisa blinked her eyes several times. "Well, what did you say?"

Jess's mouth fell open. She was a little surprised by Lisa's reaction -- or lack thereof. "Uh, I said yes."

"Do you think that's wise? You've only been dating for six months or thereabouts."

What did one say to that? "Yes, I'm sure. I love him, and he loves me, and, well ... it feels right."

"Okay, if you're sure. Congratulations." She went immediately back to her typing.

Jess's eyes widened for a minute as she digested Lisa's response. It wasn't as enthusiastic as Kat's screaming and immediate wedding planning, but it wasn't exactly discouragement, either. Lisa probably had a lot on her mind. She'd loosen up once Jess started planning the wedding and asked her to help with it.

Ignoring Lisa for the moment, she picked up the cordless phone and paged Alex. She wandered into the big dance room and was flipping through CDs when he called back.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

“Hi, Alex. What’s up? I got a message saying you called.”

“You left your phone again. I swear I’m going to glue it to your hand. What if your car broke down and you needed to call someone?”

Jess groaned into the receiver; she’d been getting the same lecture for months. And, for once, he was right -- she had needed it, but she wasn’t going to tell him that.

“Actually, that isn’t why I called. My mom wants to have a family get-together at the restaurant tonight to announce our engagement. Is that okay with you? Kat and her grandparents are invited, of course.”

Jess smiled so big her face hurt. They were going to make it official! They were going to tell the rest of his family. “That’s fine with me. What time? I get off work at five today.”

“Okay, I’ll pick you up at six. Mom wants us there at six-thirty. I hate to cut this short, babe, but I have someone with a gunshot wound on their way inside. Love you. See you tonight.”

Can life get any better than this? She let out a dreamy sigh. “Love you, too. See you at six.” With a silly grin on her face, she hung up the phone and called Kat.

“Hello?”

“What are you doing tonight at six-thirty?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because Alex’s parents are giving us an engagement party at their restaurant.”

“Really?”

“Yup ...” *Beep*. “Oops. Kat, hold on; there’s someone on the other line.”

Jess hit a button. “Perfect Beat Dance Studio. This is Jess.”

At first she didn't hear anything but raspy breathing. Then a low, masculine voice came on the line. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from Alex Hernandez."

Click.

Chapter Four

After work, Jess went home and immediately jumped into the shower. She had to get ready for the engagement party.

As the water flowed over her, she thought again about the van following her and the strange phone call. All throughout class that afternoon, she had puzzled over the call. She'd checked the caller ID, but the number had been listed as "Unknown." She wasn't sure why, but something had kept her from telling Kat. That same something had kept her from telling Alex about the van. As nervous as she was, she wasn't quite ready to bring anyone else into it. She'd been on her own a long time and was used to handling her own problems.

Jess knew that with a little time and caution, she could find out what was going on. Why would anyone want her away from Alex? Maybe it was just a prank. Could it have been one of Alex's cousins joking around with her? It just didn't make sense that someone would threaten her.

It must be a lark. It was just the sort of thing Alex's adopted brother, Dash, would do. Dash had such a strange sense of humor. But even if it had been him trying to scare her, she couldn't explain away the van. There was something funny going on, and her gut instinct said that she needed to figure out what it was before she started telling everyone about it.

She was suddenly very glad she hadn't had her phone with her to call Alex when the van was following her.

She was going to have to be on her guard, but for now she'd wait and see what developed. Maybe she could find out what was going on without bringing anyone else into it.

After her shower, Jess dressed quickly in a little black summer dress and a pair of black sandals. She was putting on the finishing touches of her make-up when there was a knock on the door. "Be right there!"

Turning out the lights, she grabbed her purse, opened the door, and stepped out.

It wasn't Alex.

Jess jumped back, startled. Right in front of her, in her personal space, stood a big, coarse-looking man. He was frowning at her, so she tried to explain. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

She stuck her hand in the closing door to stop its progress and stepped back inside the doorway just as the man suddenly grabbed her. Instinctively she yanked her arm, but he held on tightly.

His other hand cut off her scream as he covered her mouth and started pushing her down the stairs in front of him. She struggled but couldn't get loose. For a brief moment, she gave in to panic. He was going to rape and kill her -- what else could he possibly want? The thought spurred her into action. She couldn't let him. She had to get away, or she'd never see Alex again.

Her apartment was at the back of the complex, and there was no one about. Biting at his hand was no good -- he had it cupped where she couldn't get at it. She tried to kick at him, but he held her too far in front of him. She waited, gathering her strength. With all her weight and muscle, she jerked herself forward. To her surprise and probably his, she got out of his grip. And tumbled down the stairs head first.

* * * * *

Dr. Jill Rigotti stepped into the examining room, her eyes going immediately to Alex. They had become friends in medical school, and he was the one who had introduced her to her husband, Dash. He was not only her friend, but her brother-in-law through marriage, so she was used to seeing him in all sorts of moods. He was rarely so upset.

Seeing that Dr. Baker and several nurses were working on Jess, she eased into the room and next to Alex, who was quietly standing in the corner, watching. Once there, she noticed his pursed lips and glittering eyes and realized he was having a difficult time hiding his response to Jessica's blood. This could be bad. She gently touched his shoulder. "Alex, are you okay?"

He shook his head as if to clear it, then turned to face her, covering the hand on his shoulder with his own. Bringing her hand in front of his lips as if to kiss it, but really shielding his mouth from everyone but her, he whispered, "Yes, Jill, I'm fine."

She gave him a questioning look, then a brisk nod toward the open door.

Stopping briefly at the end of his unconscious fiancée's gurney, he gently squeezed her foot. He cleared his throat and turned to Dr. Baker. "I'll be right outside."

Alex walked out the door and leaned against the wall.

Jill followed. Hands on hips, she stared up at him with sincerity and understanding, but her voice was stern when she whispered, "Alex, take a couple of deep breaths and get ahold of yourself."

Alex dropped his head and seemed to notice the blood coloring his fingers. Still looking down, he took a deep breath, obviously trying to regain control, and put his bloody fingers to his mouth.

She gasped and quickly jerked his arm down, plucking his fingers from his mouth. Looking around to see if anyone had noticed, she hissed, "Geez, Alex! Get a grip before someone sees you!"

His startled expression said he hadn't realized what he'd done until she pulled his hand away. "I don't know why I feel like this. I've never acted like this at work."

As Alex spoke, his lower canines became visible; they were now as extended as his upper set. Jill grabbed his arm and jerked him into an empty examining room.

Once she was sure they wouldn't be overheard, she spoke again. "It's because it's Jess. Dash acts the same way with me. I cut my hand the other day fixing dinner, and I practically had to lock myself in the bathroom until I stopped the bleeding." Trying to lighten the mood, she grinned and glanced down. Thankfully, his pants were loose enough that she couldn't see what she knew accompanied the bloodlust. "It must have something to do with love, or lust ... or maybe both."

"Do you really think locking the door would have kept him out if he had wanted in badly enough?"

"You're damn right it would. He knew I'd kill him if he busted in that door and messed up my house." She raised her eyebrows for emphasis. When Alex laughed, she was relieved to see his lower canines had gone back to normal and his uppers were slowly receding. "Before I left home, I told Dash to call your parents and let them know what's happened. What can I do to help?"

"Will you find out which orthos are on call and get Adrian on the phone? Tell him to drop whatever he's doing and get up here. My cousin may be a pain in the ass, but he's the best neurosurgeon I know."

Leaving the room, she shook her head and wondered when she had become Alex's personal secretary.

Chapter Five

When Jess woke up, she immediately spotted Alex, asleep in a chair beside her bed. He was almost too big for the chair; his long legs were stretched out in front of him, and he had one arm behind his head and one arm hanging almost to the ground over the side of the chair. His broad shoulders were wider than the chair's back.

His short black hair was disheveled like he'd run his hands through it, something he frequently did when he was stressed. He also had a five o'clock shadow, which was really odd because Alex was usually clean-shaven. His naturally tanned skin was a little on the pale side. How long had he been here?

She was interrupted from her inspection by the arrival of an older woman -- her nurse, presumably.

Noticing that she was awake, the woman smiled. "Well, hello, there. Looks like you might be awake for a while this time. I'm Lana. How are you feeling?"

Jess smiled weakly. "I feel like I've been thrown off a cliff, gathered up, and thrown off again."

Lana chuckled and continued into the room. She tilted her head toward Alex, and her smile widened. "You're a lucky lady to have ER's darling sleeping in your room."

Jess couldn't help herself; she laughed and wished she hadn't. "Oh, that hurt. ER's darling, huh?"

Lana laughed at her pitiful expression. "How do you know Dr. Hernandez?"

Jess looked over at a still sleeping Alex and grinned. "He's my fiancé."

Lana's smile widened. "Do you know that you're the reason for the mass depression of the ER nurses? He's a fine catch."

Jess smiled and nodded as much as her aching head would allow. "Yes, I know."

Alex came awake with a start, sat up, and looked around the room. His gaze rested on Jess, and he realized her eyes were open. He was at the bed in an instant. "Jess? Baby?"

Jess gave him a small grin, probably the best she could do under the circumstances.

He couldn't stop the tears from streaking down his face, nor did he try. He clasped her hand in his. "My God, sweetheart, you scared the hell out of me. Say something."

"Hi."

Alex smiled through his tears. Bending down, he brushed the hair off her forehead. She had a huge gash at her hairline that the plastic surgeon had done a fine job on. He swore if he ever got ahold of the SOB who'd done this to her, there would be hell to pay. He'd been so blinded by fury that if it weren't for his animal instinct to care for his mate, he wasn't sure he could have kept from going after the man. Grinding his back teeth together to keep from growling out his rage, he focused his attention on Jess. "Now, tell me what happened."

Jess shook her head slowly. "It was weird. I opened the door, thinking it was you, and this guy grabbed me and started pulling me out of the apartment and down the stairs. I remember thinking he was going to kill me and I'd never see you again. I knew I had to get away. I pulled my arm out of his grasp, but then I lost my balance."

"I drove up while you were struggling. I tried to get to you, but by the time I got out of the truck, you were already lying at the bottom of the stairs. My God, I've never felt so

helpless in my entire life as when I watched you fall, knowing that I couldn't get to you in time."

He stopped and took a deep breath, reliving the painful event. He'd never forget how crumpled and broken she'd looked lying there. At first he'd feared the fall had killed her. But she'd looked up at him and whispered his name. Then she'd gone in and out of consciousness until now. This was the most lucid she'd been. Being able to hear her and converse with her and know that she was okay ... he felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest.

Unfortunately, he hadn't got a good look or even a good scent of the bastard who'd attacked her. He'd called Brent, his cousin and beta, who was a cop, to investigate. If anyone could get a lead on this, it was he.

"I didn't get a good look at the man; he took off as soon as you fell. Why would anyone want to harm you? What's going on?" He sighed. He'd tried to come up with a motive but to no avail.

Jess shook her head. "I don't know, Alex. I don't know." She looked like she wanted to say more, but didn't.

Before he could question her further, she asked, "What all is wrong with me?"

Alex lowered the rail on the bed and sat next to her. Careful not to bump her, he took her hand in his. "Well, you have a concussion and a cut on your forehead. And judging from the MRI, it looks like you tore some ligaments in your knee. You're going to need surgery on it." He could see the tears starting and knew what she was thinking. "You'll be off your feet for a while, but with surgery, you'll be almost as good as new. You'll still be able to dance."

She swallowed back her tears and nodded her head slowly. "So how long do I have to stay here?"

"You can probably leave the day after tomorrow, if everything continues to look good. Your surgery is scheduled for the morning."

Jess sighed. "Will you make them give me something else for pain? Please?"

“I’ll see what I can do, but I can only ask your doctor. Unfortunately, I can’t beat him up if he doesn’t comply. It isn’t ethical.”

Jess tried to smile but was clearly in too much pain to accomplish more than a twitch of her lips.

“When you get out of here, you’re moving into my house. That way I can take care of you.”

Jess sighed in relief. After today, she’d feel a whole lot safer living with Alex. She was no longer trying to convince herself that the phone call was a prank. And now she was more suspicious than ever about the van. She knew she’d have to tell Alex, but he was so upset over her fall, she couldn’t do it now.

Jess took the blood pressure cuff off her arm, then started to rid herself of anything else she could easily discard.

Alex stared at her like she’d lost her mind, then tried to stop her. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to go to the bathroom, and if you will help ...” She paused when Alex smiled and shook his head.

Jess couldn’t contain her reaction to him. She loved it when he smiled; he had a dimple in his right cheek that gave him a mischievous-little-boy look. “Why are you smiling at me like that? And what do you mean, *no?*”

With a quick kiss on her nose, he put the blood pressure cuff back on and reached for the button to lower the bed.

“I mean no. You are not getting out of this bed, even if your leg would support you, which is highly unlikely.”

All the blood drained from her face as she realized what he was saying.

“No! Alex, I am not using a bedpan. I can hop. I have great balance.” Still smiling, Alex again shook his head. “I’m not going to give in when your health is at stake. You should know that.”

“Fine, then you can carry me into the bathroom.”

“Who said anything about a bathroom? Or a bedpan? You are not in any shape to move around.” That said, he pushed the call button.

“Yes?” Lana’s voice came through the speaker on the bedrail.

“Lana, would you bring me a catheter?”

There was a brief pause, then an almost hesitant “Be right there.”

Eyes widening, Jess gasped. “You jerk!”

* * * * *

Later in the day, Jess lay in bed, smiling to herself. She was going to have to come up with some way to get Alex and Lana back for the trick they’d played on her. She’d already had a catheter in and hadn’t realized it. After Alex had laughed himself silly over her shock and outrage, she’d confessed that she had only used going to the bathroom as an excuse. She’d felt grungy and wanted to clean up and brush her teeth. Jess had figured she would have a better chance of getting out of bed for a bathroom break than to wash up. Of course, her confession earned her what she had been trying to avoid in the first place ... a sponge bath. However, it had been nice to see Alex laugh, even if it was at her expense.

She was brought out of her musings when the door opened. With her eyes closed and the goofy grin still in place, Jessica assumed it was Alex returning from getting her more medicine for her throbbing knee. “Well, did you bring me drugs?”

“No. Is that the price of admission?”

Recognition of the voice made Jess smile as she slowly turned her head to greet Dr. Adriano Garrett, Alex's cousin. Adrian and Alex, along with Brent and Dash, had grown up together. The four of them were closer than most siblings.

Adrian's smile brightened his handsome face as he walked further into the room. He looked so much like Alex that she couldn't help but grin back.

He had the same arrogant swagger, the same broad shoulders and muscular build, thick ebony hair, and fathomless brown eyes. However, he was about half a foot shorter than Alex and rather sensitive about it. He raised his eyebrows in question as he glanced around the room. "Went to get you more pain meds?"

"Umm, how'd ya know?" She giggled at the lopsided grin he gave her.

"Lucky guess. How are you feeling?"

"I've felt better."

"I bet. You knocked the hell out of that hard head of yours." Sitting on her bed, he reached out and ruffled her hair softly in affection.

"Why, thank you, Adrian," she quipped sarcastically.

With a grin, he bent and kissed her hand, then let it drop. "You're very welcome," he said with a sugary voice.

She started to tease him about his bedside manner but was interrupted by Alex's return.

Spotting Adrian, Alex smiled and walked farther into the room, placing his hand on his cousin's shoulder. "Hey, cuz, what's up?"

"Just came to check on you two before I go on my rounds. What's up with you?"

Alex winked at Jess and tilted his head toward her. "I'm trying to protect the good doctors and nurses from this tyrant."

She stuck her tongue out at him and frowned at Adrian for chuckling. Adrian grinned. "That, I believe."

She scoffed and tried to look innocent as she stared at the two men.

Alex returned her gaze with one equally as innocent and teased, “Yeah, not everyone realizes that sweet, innocent, angelic little face of hers is a mask.”

Adrian covered his mouth while pretending to cough and mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, “She isn’t the only one hiding behind masks.”

Alex glared at Adrian, making a low rumbling sound, then slugged him in the shoulder.

Did he growl?

Adrian stood and took a menacing step toward Alex. Jess knew the concussion must be clouding her head, because she could have sworn that when Adrian had gotten up, his eyes had been amber. She gasped and he stopped. He glanced over at her, his eyes their normal, beautiful chocolate brown, then stepped back and quickly apologized to Alex.

Jess was puzzled by their exchange and the tricks her befuddled mind was playing.

“Did I miss something?”

Adrian chuckled and shook his head. “It’s an inside joke, Jess.” He kissed her cheek and said, “I guess I’ll see you after your surgery tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah, later,” she mumbled, still distracted by what she thought she’d seen.

Alex came to her, bent, and kissed her forehead. “I’ll be back. I’m going to walk Adrian out.”

Chapter Six

“Teresa Baker, please. Yes, tell her it’s Alex. Sure, I’ll hold.”

Jess wondered who Teresa Baker was but couldn’t manage to open her eyes, much less find her voice to ask.

Something brushed her brow, moving hair away from the cut on her forehead. There was a warm, gentle brush of air on her cheek, then a warm, wet tongue swept across her stitches. *A tongue?* No. That couldn’t be right; she had to be hallucinating.

“Stop that!” Alex hissed. Jess could almost picture him in her mind, leaning forward, covering the phone with his hand. *Who is he talking to? Who’s sitting on the bed?* If she could only get her eyelids to respond, she could see for herself.

Hearing the low, sexy chuckle in response to Alex’s command, Jess knew immediately that it was Adrian. Why would Alex object to Adrian wiping her forehead with a warm washcloth?

“Hey, beautiful. I called to check in. My mate just got out of surgery.”

Beautiful? Jess tried to focus. *Who?* The brush of Adrian’s fingers on her face was relaxing, distracting.

“She’ll be ok. She had some torn ligaments in her knee, a mild concussion, and a gash on her forehead. And, yes, Adrian will be there. You know I wouldn’t leave you without one of us to help.”

A pair of warm, moist lips caressed her cheek; long fingers twined in her hair. And she felt the washcloth stroke her wound again.

“Hold on, Teresa. Damn it, Adrian! Stop it! If you don’t get away from her, I’m going to beat the shit out of you!”

“Oh, give it a rest, Alex. I care for Jess; she’s become a good friend. I’m not trying to seduce her in front of you, for God’s sake. This will make the wound heal faster, and you know it. It doesn’t mean anything.”

This is a weird dream. They were about to get into a fight over Adrian washing her face. She needed to wake up, but she was so tired.

“Sorry about that. Adrian is over here looking for a fight.”

Again she could hear Adrian’s low, sexy laugh. Yep, he was definitely baiting Alex. The thought made her want to smile. Even in her dreams Alex and Adrian were harassing each other.

“You know, Alex, if anything happened to you ... I’d take her. She’d be mine. *My* mate.” Jess could feel Adrian’s knuckles brush her cheek. There was a low rumbling sound coming from Alex’s direction. *A growl!* Was he really growling again? Jess did a mental eye roll ... Alex, Adrian, and their competitive relationship. Would she ever get used to it?

“What do you mean, my temper is showing? No, Teresa, it’s not that. I’m about to kill my beta. Just a sec.”

What? Beta? Mate? Jess began telling herself over and over to wake up. This was getting weirder and weirder.

“Good grief, Alex. Sit down. It wasn’t meant as a threat ... or a challenge. I meant it as an honor. I was trying to reassure you that if the need should arise, I’ll take care of her; it *is*

my right as your second. You know I hate all those damn rules, and I try my best to disregard them. But I will abide by that one. That's all I was saying. I wasn't trying to insult you. Nor do I have designs on your woman."

Jess could almost feel the tension in the room relax. Whatever Adrian meant, it had calmed and reassured Alex.

"Okay. Now, what were you saying, Teresa?"

Who the heck is Teresa? Was it Diego and Claire's secretary? The one Marisa called "Tree"? Jess really wanted to wake up, but she couldn't open her eyes. Adrian's constant attention to her cut was beginning to get on her nerves, too, because it was making her relax too much, which was not what she wanted. Why couldn't he wipe her face with a *cold* rag? That ought to wake her up.

"I am *not* copping an attitude with you. I know it's your job to find out where everyone will be. I'm a little stressed right now ... I'm sorry, doll. I need to check on Jess; I'll talk to you later. I just wanted to check in."

Jess heard Alex hang up. He let out a long, tired-sounding sigh. She felt Adrian move off the bed. *What now? Wait a minute! Doll? Did he just call some woman doll?*

Jess's eyes snapped open. She turned her head to see Adrian standing behind Alex, massaging his shoulders.

Alex smiled lovingly at her as soon as their eyes met. He leaned forward, Adrian still rubbing his neck, and reached out his hand to her. Grabbing his hand and smiling back, she opened her mouth to speak, but her throat was so dry, she couldn't.

Alex got her a glass of water. He pushed the button to raise the head of her bed and put the cup to her lips, but shook his head when she tried taking it herself. "Little sips. Too much might make you sick."

"You look tired. Go home. I'm a big girl. I can stay here by myself. You don't need to stay and watch me sleep."

Adrian sat in the chair Alex had vacated, drawing Jess's attention to him. "Don't bother. He won't go. I've already tried. Hell, I even offered to stay and be your guardian angel." Adrian shrugged and it looked regal. "Maybe that's the problem -- he doesn't trust *me* to watch after you."

"Don't start! You know damn well that isn't true. Just wait. When you finally find your ma-- uh, the love of your life, you'll be the same way."

That comment earned him a bright smile and a caress on the cheek from the love of *his* life.

"Who is Teresa?"

Alex looked at her like she'd grown two heads. Adrian roared with laughter.

"How long have you been awake?" He turned and glared at Adrian. "*Callate la boca, Adriano. No es chistoso.*"

Adrian's laughter stopped, but a smirk remained on his handsome face. "It isn't nice to tell me to shut up, and it *is* too funny. She is as possessive as you are."

Looking back at Jess, Alex didn't even hesitate with his explanation. "She's Dad's secretary and takes care of a lot. She orders supplies, helps take care of the restaurants, makes sure the cabin is ready for all of us, and keeps track of the family for Mom and Dad. You name it, and Teresa does it."

Now she remembered. Marisa had mentioned Teresa before. But it seemed odd that Alex would check in with his dad's secretary. Diego and Claire already knew she was in the hospital. Jess glanced over at Adrian to gauge his reaction; he was nodding his agreement.

Alex interrupted Jess's speculation. "In fact, Teresa offered to help with wedding arrangements, if you'd like."

Jess started to ask more about Teresa, but the phone rang as she opened her mouth. Alex reached over her and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

Jess and Adrian sat in silence, watching Alex for a hint of who was on the phone.

“Okay, I’ll send Adrian down. Bye.”

Adrian raised his eyebrows and waited.

“It was Mom; she and Dad have too much stuff to carry up, and need help. They’re three cars down from yours.”

Adrian stood up and stretched his back, making his white dress shirt pull tight across his broad chest. “Okay, be back in a few.”

Jess smiled in appreciation of the nicely sculpted torso clearly displayed by the thin material as Adrian stretched. And when he turned and left the room, she couldn’t help but admire his firm backside.

“*Ahem!* Are you quite done?” Alex’s censure was ruined by the amused gleam in his eyes.

Jess couldn’t help it; she knew she was busted, but she tried for innocence anyway. “What?”

“Like what you saw?” Alex grumbled, his tone daring her to deny she’d checked Adrian out.

Jess smiled impishly up at him and shrugged. “Well ... yeah. I’m only human. But Jill is wrong -- you have a better butt.”

He pulled her face toward his and kissed her.

She sighed and leaned into him, putting her arms around his shoulders as he bent and rested his forehead against hers, being careful not to bump her stitches. They stayed like that for several minutes, forehead to forehead, not wanting to give up the contact as their breaths mingled.

Alex raised his head first. Jess looked up into brown eyes shining with love, and smiled seductively.

The look on her face made his heart race, his breath catch, and his loins tighten in response. Placing his hands around her waist, Alex leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. Gently, he nudged them apart, sweeping his tongue slowly across hers, caressing and teasing.

Still sitting on the bed, he moved himself over her, never breaking the intimate contact of their lips, until his chest touched hers. Feeling her nipples harden at the contact, he knew she was aroused, too. He took a deep breath, inhaling her scent and savoring the smell of her excitement. Catching her right hand in his, he brought it to his throbbing erection, telling her without words what she could do to him with a simple kiss.

He relished the feel of her breasts against the hard wall of his chest as she began to rub up and down the length of him through his pants.

Alex entwined one hand in her hair and tugged softly until her neck was arched and accessible. His lips left hers, trailing a line of kisses down the column of her throat. His other hand dropped beneath the sheet and up under her gown to find her breast.

Jess moaned softly when his mouth locked onto the skin at the base of her neck and he suckled and kissed, marking her as his possession. His large hand cupped her swollen breast while his thumb brushed across her sensitive nipple. She arched her back to give him better access as she firmly pressed her palm against his throbbing erection and tried to wrap her fingers around him through his clothing.

Alex was close to exploding. He realized he had to gain control, because Jess wasn't going to. She was so caught up in her passion that she began pulling at his button and tugging at his zipper, trying to free him from the confines of his pants.

Removing his hand from beneath her hospital gown, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away from his straining cock. Taking a deep breath, he tried to take charge of the situation. This was the wrong time and the wrong place. His family was, at this very moment, on their way up.

Rubbing his face against her throat, he whispered, “Jess, we have to stop.”

In response, Jess shook her head and tried to tug her hand free. She clearly disagreed.

Alex held her wrist tightly and lifted his head; eyes still closed, he listened to the ragged breathing that matched his own. Why was it that every time he was near her, things got carried away?

Jess stopped struggling against his hold and relaxed. Resting her arms on his shoulders, she looked at his face.

Alex brought his head up, a sensual smile tugging at his lips. He watched as Jess’s eyes widened in shock, her hand flying to her mouth to cover a gasp. He realized he had opened his eyes.

Chapter Seven

Jess sat on the passenger side of Alex's truck with her head resting against the door, eyes closed, waiting for him to come out of his parents' restaurant.

In thirty minutes she and Alex were supposed to meet Kat, Dash, Adrian, and Brent at her apartment. They were going to move her things out and Kat's in. Since Alex had pretty much ordered everyone there to help, the others said the least he could do was feed them. So, here she sat in the truck, waiting for him to return with the food.

Jess took advantage of the silence to think. She had been released from the hospital over an hour ago, and already it felt like her whole existence was being turned upside down.

The day before yesterday, she had had a very disturbing hallucination. She had looked into Alex's eyes and, instead of beautiful brown, she had seen a glowing yellow-orange. It was like looking into the eyes of a fierce animal. Eyes that were almost feline. *Or canine?* They were not Alex's eyes; nor were they anything human. Fortunately, her future in-laws had chosen that moment to interrupt, saving her from making a fool of herself and from a myriad of psych tests. She knew Alex well enough to know he'd have insisted on another CAT scan, thinking she had brain damage or something.

Yes, hallucination. It had to be. There was no other logical excuse. She had just gone through surgery, so surely it was the aftereffects of the anesthesia. Rationally, her brain knew that was what had happened, but she couldn't shake the surreal feeling it gave her.

However, that was the least of her problems. She was pretty sure the blue minivan and the threatening phone call were related to the attempted abduction and her subsequent fall down the stairs. It was too farfetched to think the bizarre occurrences were unrelated. How often did things like that happen to normal, average people like her? She needed to decide how to tell Alex. He would probably freak and yell at her for not telling him sooner, him being the dominant, male protector that he was. He was so terribly possessive and protective of her, and most of the time she loved it, but this wasn't one of those times. He was definitely going to blow a gasket. She'd have to tell him, because she was in over her head, but she certainly wasn't looking forward to it.

Maybe she could wait until she settled into his house. Maybe she'd get him drunk first ... Or perhaps if she seduced him before she told him? Yes, she'd wait until after she was settled into his house. No one would be so stupid as to accost her with Alex watching her every move. Then, who knew, both intoxication and seduction were possibilities.

Feeling like a weight had lifted from her shoulders, Jess relaxed. She was excited about moving in with him. That fact alone was worth all the other bad things going on in her life right then.

* * * * *

Kat pulled up in front of Jess's apartment. There was a shiny, new luxury SUV backed into the spot directly in front of the stairs leading up to the apartment, so she was forced to park in the spot furthest from the door. She grumbled under her breath about how rude rich people were. Shrugging off her irritation, she got out of her run-down, twenty-year-old car.

"Hi, Kat!"

Kat paused from looking for Jess's apartment key and turned toward the voice. Dash, Alex's brother, sat on the steps, waving to her. She'd met him and his wife, Jill, only recently.

Walking toward the stairs, she smiled and waved back. "Hi, Dash. Is Jill with you?"

"Nope. She's at home in the kitchen, where she belongs." His devilish grin ruined the macho attitude he was trying to pull off, and Kat couldn't help but laugh. Jess had told her all about his propensity for making chauvinistic jokes.

Shaking her head at Dash, Kat took a closer look at the SUV, which had both the driver side and back door open. In the front seat was a man with dark hair. By the sounds of it, he was flipping through radio stations.

Passing by, Kat was startled by a shout coming from the back of the vehicle. "Damn it, Brent! Find a station and leave it! You're giving me a headache."

The man in the front seat, presumably Brent, smiled. "Don't make me shoot you, Adrian."

Stepping up on the curb, she could see a pair of white sneakers hanging off the back of the vehicle. Her stomach tied up into knots, and suddenly it was hard to breathe; she wasn't sure why or how, but she knew it was *him*.

She'd caught a glimpse of him leaving Jess's hospital room when she'd gone to visit. She'd been completely, immediately captivated, and Jess had known it. After quizzing Jess, she'd learned that he was Alex's first cousin. Kat had never met Alex's cousins, probably because of their busy schedules -- Adrian was a neurosurgeon, and the other cousin was a cop.

She took a deep breath and made a mental note to yell at Jess for not mentioning Adrian would be there, too. She was going to meet him, and she didn't even have time to check her appearance first. Why, oh, why hadn't Jess mentioned that he was going to help?

As she approached, her gaze followed the shoes up. His socks were cut below the ankle and looked very white from what little of them she could see. His tan legs were powerfully

built, with enough black hair to make them look masculine but not burly. Khaki shorts started about mid-thigh and led to a trim waist. Tucked into the shorts was a white-and-navy-striped polo shirt that stretched tight over his wide chest. His large biceps were flexed since his hands were pillowed behind his head and he lay in the SUV staring at the ceiling.

What Kat could see of his face was perfection. From her angle, she could tell he had full lips, a straight nose, high cheekbones, slashing dark eyebrows, and long, elegant black eyelashes. His hair was short and neatly styled. He wasn't looking at her, but he had his nose in the air and was getting into a sitting position.

Adrian was beginning to get a headache. Where in the hell was Alex? It was hot out here, and he was tired and hungry. He swore if he heard the radio station change one more time, he was going to start contemplating reasonable excuses for murdering his younger cousin.

The radio station was switched yet again. Before he could yell at Brent, the most alluring aroma assailed him. What was that lovely scent?

He began inhaling it as rapidly as he could, trying to judge its source. It was a fresh, clean smell, vanilla, and something else, something very feminine and unique. Was there a hint of fear or apprehension? *It must be a human.*

Pushing to a sitting position, Adrian could tell the source was getting closer. If Brent didn't have the radio so darn loud, he might be able to use his hearing to find the direction. He caught a glimpse of red hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Further examination revealed that the woman was petite, with a pale complexion and the most beautiful head of hair Adrian had ever seen. And she was most definitely the source of that wonderful smell. *Who are you, sweet thing?* He had to talk to her.

Adrian slid out of the SUV and approached her, inhaling her aroma some more as he drew nearer. Walking up to her, he leaned into her neck and breathed in her fragrance.

Startled and appalled by his utter lack of control, he straightened quickly and took in her appearance.

She was smaller than he'd first thought, about Jessica's size. The top of her head only reached his nose. At five-foot-ten, he wasn't all that tall; at least not in his family. Perfectly sculpted dark auburn eyebrows rose above a pair of dark sunglasses that hid her eyes, but he was willing to bet that her eyes were as lovely as the rest of her face. Her nose was small and upturned, her lips full and bow-shaped. Pink cheeks indicated too much sun -- or was that a blush to go with her elevated heart rate? She wore a tight blue tank top that showed off her large breasts and narrow ribcage. A white belt accentuated her tiny waist, and ragged-looking cutoff blue jeans showed off her short but muscular legs. On her dainty feet she wore a pair of scuffed tennis shoes that had seen better days. And though she wasn't wearing any socks -- one of his many pet peeves -- he silently vowed to ignore it for her. After taking in her appearance, his gaze slowly traveled back up to her face and found her examining him with every bit as much interest as he'd shown toward her.

Adrian smiled at the knowledge that she was as attracted to him as he was to her. If her appearance had not been enough to arouse him, the way she was inspecting him would have been. She was openly ogling him, and his body was responding. Adrian shook his head and wondered what he was doing. He had the best control of anyone he knew, but in seconds flat this small red-headed woman had him hard enough to cut diamonds. He didn't even know her name yet, and he was ready to throw her into the back of the SUV and tell Brent and Dash to get lost.

Kat was beginning to get even more flustered, if that were possible. She had known he was attractive, but up close he was fabulous. He had to be the most perfect male specimen ever created, and he wouldn't quit staring at her. She opened her mouth to introduce herself, but the words wouldn't come. Standing there with her mouth open, gawking at him, was about all she could manage.

Kat finally managed to close her mouth. “Hi ... I’m ... umm, I’m ... Katherine!” She winced when she realized that in her nervousness, she’d shouted her name. Lowering her voice, she tried again. “My name is Katherine. I’m Jess’s best friend.” She offered her hand to shake, but due to her preoccupation, she forgot all about the keys in her hand until they landed with a loud clank on the ground.

He bent and reached for her keys at the same time she did, and their heads collided. When Adrian looked up, she realized he was only inches from her face. If he leaned forward an inch, he could kiss her. Then she realized he *had* leaned forward. Their lips met, and, startled, she quickly leaned back and promptly fell on her butt.

Still holding the keys in one hand, Adrian reached down and offered her his other. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to frighten you. I’m Alex’s cousin Adrian. It’s very nice to meet you, Katherine.”

Cautiously, Kat took his hand and let him help her up. She dusted off her rear end and looked around to see if there were any witnesses. Looking up the stairs, she noticed Dash had moved and was now leaning over the rail. His mouth was hanging open, and his eyes were wide with what looked like shock. The man who had been in the front of the SUV, Brent, was now standing next to Dash with an almost identical expression on his face. His eyes were also wide, only he was smiling.

Kat felt like crying. She had made a complete fool of herself. Not only had she done it in front of the most gorgeous man she’d ever met, but two others, as well. And, to make matters worse, Adrian was now glaring at the other men.

Grabbing her arm, Adrian began to pull her up the stairs. To her surprise, he leaned in close to her and sniffed again. Coming even closer, he whispered in her ear, “Katherine, what are you doing tomorrow night?”

Chapter Eight

Still groggy from sleep, Jess quickly took inventory and tried to determine what had awakened her.

Opening her eyes, she found the room was still dark. The digital clock beside the bed glowed a red 1:46 a.m. Clearly, daylight hadn't been the culprit. She swallowed; she didn't have a dry throat, so that wasn't it. Remembering her knee, she knew immediately that her painkillers had not worn off and that pain wasn't the guilty party, either. She didn't have a full bladder, but as soon as her thoughts strayed to that region of her body, she discovered what had awakened her.

There was a large hand down the front of her panties. Every few seconds a smooth, long finger would slide up, then back down her center, teasing and arousing but never actually seeking entrance.

Visually following that hand to its owner, she realized two things. One, she was very aroused and had no desire to move that hand; and two, Alex was still sound asleep.

Alex lay on his stomach with his face turned toward her, one hand under his head, the other on her.

Jess didn't want him to stop, but she did want him awake. "Alex?"

“Umm?”

“Umm is right ... are you awake?”

Alex came awake with a start, realizing instantly where his hand was. Moving his hand and burying his face in the pillow, he mumbled, “Oh, God! Jess, I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? Alex, don’t be sorry. And for goodness’ sakes, don’t stop.”

“What? Jess, we’ve been over this before. We are waiting until we’re married.”

Jess sighed in frustration. Never in a million years would she have guessed she’d have this much trouble losing her virginity. “Alex, it’s not like I saved myself for marriage. It was accidental. I was too busy with dance to worry about dating. I mean, I dated some, but you know I wasn’t particularly interested in having a relationship ... until you.”

Alex turned his head and grinned at her. “Maybe *I’m* saving you for marriage?”

“Why?”

“I have my reasons. Besides, we’ve already tried a few things, but there *are* other things we can do ...” He rolled onto his side, so close they were almost touching. The tip of his cock pressed against her belly, and she realized that he was as aroused as she was. He propped himself up on his elbow and raised his eyebrows in a silent challenge.

Wondering what he had in mind, she whispered, “Show me,” as she reached out and pulled his face to hers.

His tongue caressed her bottom lip, and she opened for him. Pulling her bottom lip into his mouth, he sucked lightly, then nipped her tongue as she tried to deepen their kiss. He sat up abruptly. Jess whimpered at the separation and would have protested, but Alex’s finger on her lips silenced her.

He removed her nightgown, then began to pull off her panties. Jess giggled, but didn’t move to stop him. Once she was naked, he lay back and stripped out of his boxers; she could make out his silhouette in the moonlight coming through the window.

Resuming his original position on his side, he took her hand in his, brought her fingers to his lips, kissed them gently, then lowered her hand and wrapped her fingers around his erection.

Jess gasped but didn't pull away. She had touched him before, but always through his clothes. Maintaining eye contact, she began to explore. She ran her hand up the length of him and became conscious of the fact that he was much larger than she had thought. Realizing that her hand was not completely wrapped around him, she squeezed, trying to make her fingers touch her thumb. Alex groaned, closing his eyes and dropping his head down on his arm. She quickly pulled her hand away and apologized for hurting him.

Alex's laughter was soft and sexy as he leaned in to kiss her. "You didn't hurt me, Jess."

"Oh! I thought ..." Jess blushed and was suddenly very glad it was dark.

Tentatively, she reached out and touched him again, while his lips descended on her neck, and his hand tutored hers. Biting and kissing her throat, Alex showed her how to pleasure him. "Yes, baby, like that. It feels sooo good."

Jess's hand stroked up and down as he continued to kiss a path down her neck to her breast, while her other hand tangled in his hair. It wasn't until his palm cupped her breast, bringing it to his mouth, that she realized he was no longer guiding her hand.

Alex placed teasing bites along the underside of her breast as his hand continued to trail downward. As his fingers slid over her bare mons and found her center, he whispered, "Open for me, Jess." Then his mouth began to pull at her breast, suckling. She gasped at the erotic sensation and tried to spread her legs wider, but her hand never faltered in her quest to satisfy him.

The glide of his finger along her feminine core made her shiver and moan in delight as he kissed his way back up her neck. She could feel herself growing slick with arousal as his finger continued to slide up and down her center, exciting her to unimaginable heights. He'd had his fingers inside her before, so she was anticipating enjoyment in the act. Hearing

Alex's accelerated breathing in her ear as his finger plunged inside only heightened her pleasure. She tried moving her hips to meet his hand.

Whimpering in bliss as another finger joined the first, she heard him mumble against her neck. "So tight."

When his thumb began to rub against the apex of her sex, her whole body shuddered and her grip left his manhood to clutch at his hand. She felt as if she were floating, and she began to tingle all over. Shaking her head, she gasped. "Alex." Her muscles constricted around his fingers as Alex whispered encouragement to her. "That's my girl. Relax, Jess. Let it happen."

The low, sensual tone in his voice and his hot breath on her neck were all she needed to push her over the edge. The world exploded around her as she screamed out his name.

As her breathing returned to normal and her body relaxed, she realized that Alex hadn't joined her in completion.

He was stretched out on his side, his breathing labored, grinning at her. His body glistened with a fine sheen of sweat, and he was still noticeably aroused.

Jess grinned back and stretched up to kiss him. Turning partially on her side, she reached for him. Gripping his cock, she slid her palm along his engorged flesh.

Alex groaned at her ministrations and relaxed, enjoying the building pressure she was creating. The intensity increased under her attention until he knew he could take no more. He tried to still her hand and whispered hoarsely, "You gotta stop now, Jess. I can't hold back any longer."

She pushed his hand away and leaned into him until her lips were brushing against his neck. Continuing to stroke him, she said, "Then don't, Alex. Don't hold back."

Hiding his face in the crook of his arm, he moaned and spilled himself into her hand. Jess gasped as his hot seed splashed against her hand and belly, and she watched as the last shudders of ecstasy left him.

As she pressed her body to his, tears escaped her eyes, and she buried her face in his chest.

Eyes still closed, trying to regain his control, Alex clutched Jess's small frame to him. Running his hand through her hair, he felt the tears dripping down his chest. "Baby, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Pushing away slightly so she could look into his eyes, she hiccupped and tried to explain. "It's just that -- well, that was -- oh, Alex, I love you so much! That was wonderful."

He laughed; he couldn't help it. She was covered in sweat and semen, and she thought it was wonderful.

After washing both of them off, he brought Jess a glass of water and her next dose of medication. Alex lay in bed with Jess snuggled into him, snoring lightly. Rubbing his face in her hair, two things occurred to him.

One, he realized he was going to have to tell her his secret soon. There was no way he'd be able to hide it from her much longer. He'd had to keep his eyes tightly closed so she wouldn't see them, and several times he'd felt his canines stinging his gums and lengthening.

He wasn't surprised by his reaction to her. Dash, his father, and his uncle had all warned him his animal instincts would try to take over when he was with his mate in a sexual situation.

He'd had several lovers, but none had made his body react the way Jess did. Or made him forget to guard his secret so carefully. He couldn't believe that she'd dismissed it the night they'd gotten engaged, and again at the hospital. He'd dodged a bullet both times, but he was certain she'd figure it out sooner or later if he didn't come clean.

And that was what he was afraid of. Which brought him to his second observation. He now knew for sure that she did indeed still have a membrane. He'd felt it briefly the night he'd proposed to her, but had tried to convince himself he'd been mistaken. After tonight, he could no longer delude himself.

He had hoped that, with all her physical activity, it would have ruptured by now, but no such luck. Alex had assumed from the moment he'd learned of her virginity that this would be the case, which was why he had abstained from making love to her. He had a hard enough time controlling himself; he wasn't so sure he'd be able to do so with the smell of blood present.

Sometimes thinking about her was enough to make his eyes turn. There was no doubt that she was his mate, and his body and mind recognized her as such. He hoped she didn't run when she learned the truth.

* * * * *

Two hours later, her bladder woke her up. Alex was no longer snuggled against her, and she turned her head to look for him. He wasn't in bed.

She listened for a sound indicating his direction and heard none. Unable to find the light switch, she reached over the side of the bed and groped for her crutches, then went into the master bathroom.

After relieving her bladder and washing her hands, which took much longer than usual because of the bulky knee brace and crutches, Jess decided to locate Alex. She thought she heard voices from downstairs. He must have turned on the TV.

Reaching the end of the hall, she realized that people were talking and Alex's voice was among them. She stopped and tried to hear what was being said, but it was no use; they were whispering. Who could Alex be talking to at almost four in the morning? Why in the world would someone come over at this time of night? Had something happened to his family?

The last thought had her deeply concerned, and she hurried her pace. Making her way toward the top of the stairs, she was brought up short by the sight of Alex standing with two men who were on their hands and knees at his feet. As quickly as her crutches would allow, Jess ducked back to conceal her presence.

Positive she hadn't been seen, she peeked around the corner. Alex stood in the entranceway in a pair of jeans and nothing else.

One of the strangers was older, about Alex's father's age, probably in his late forties. Alex's left hand was idly stroking the top of the man's head as the man rubbed his face on Alex's leg like a cat.

The other man appeared to be in his early twenties and was nudging Alex's right hand with his face, as if asking to be petted. The man occasionally licked Alex's hand in between nudges, until Alex finally ran his fingers through the man's hair.

Jess blinked several times, then retreated, resting her head on the wall. *What the heck?*

Chapter Nine

Alex knew she was there. He'd heard her as soon as she'd gotten out of bed. He'd hoped she wouldn't leave the bedroom, but now that she had, he needed to decide what to tell her. The truth would be best, or at least part of it. As he locked the door behind his guests and turned away, he saw her head pop back out. He prayed he could pull this off. It was going to be tricky; he didn't want to lie to her, and this was not how he envisioned telling her about his secret.

"Jess? Baby, is that you? Are you up?" Alex could hear her swallow hard. She knew she'd been caught.

"Uh, yeah." She hobbled out from behind the wall with her crutches.

"What are you doing up, sweetheart? I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, I had to go to the bathroom. Alex, who were those people?"

He smiled. That was his girl -- straight to the point, fearless, and absolutely perfect at keeping him on his toes. He had known she wouldn't let him ignore it. "Do you remember Rand and Roman McCoy, the twins? You met them at my uncle Emilio's birthday party."

"Yes." Jess reached Alex at the top of the staircase and had to look up to see his face as he approached the top step.

“Well, Rome is missing. That was Michael, his father, and, of course, Rand, his twin.” He turned and began walking slowly back to the bedroom, allowing plenty of room for Jess to follow. “They came for my help.”

“Michael, your uncle Emilio’s best friend? Rome and Rand are his sons?”

“Yes.”

“How long has Rome been missing?”

Alex heard her hobble along behind him and breathed a sigh of relief. If he could keep her occupied with this, maybe she’d overlook what she had seen. “About eighteen hours.”

His relief was short-lived. “Alex, why did they come to you? Why not go to the police?”

Groaning, Alex turned to face her. “He hasn’t been missing long enough. The police won’t do anything about it until he’s been missing twenty-four hours.”

Jess began to push for answers. “Ok, so why ask for *your* help?”

“Because ... because they thought I might be able to pull some strings with the cops.”

Alex realized she was no longer following him and turned to see what she was doing. He couldn’t help but be amused -- she was so cute with her nose scrunched in confusion, but she was definitely not buying his excuse. He tried to think of other ways to distract her.

“Why not just go to Brent? I mean, Michael and your uncle Emilio are practically inseparable ... *and* ... Brent is Emilio’s son, and he *is* a cop.”

Alex groaned. Why hadn’t he thought of that before he had said it? Anyone else would have let it slide, but not his baby. Oh, no, that would have been too easy.

“My uncle Emilio and aunt Sarah weren’t home.” Well, that sounded good. He hoped she bought it, because he really didn’t want to go into details about the McCoy family history right now. He was tired, and he was liable to get emotional if he did.

“Why didn’t they call Brent’s cell phone?”

“They did. Apparently he doesn’t have it on.” Alex mentally patted his back for his quick response.

“Oh ... Well, why you?”

Alex caught himself before he groaned again in exasperation. In an effort to distract her from her interrogation, he strode toward her and ignored her gasp of surprise as he looped her crutches through his arm and picked her up.

“What are you doing?”

Alex grinned and kissed her on the nose. “You’re too slow.”

“Oh, well, it’s no wonder. You won’t let me practice, and you keep carrying me everywhere.” She smirked and returned his kiss.

Reaching the bed, Alex broke off their kiss and gently laid her on her side of the bed before stripping off his jeans and joining her.

Her eyes widened; then she smiled when she saw that he’d been wearing nothing but jeans. “What, no boxers?”

Alex grinned at the thought of how easily distracted she was by his body. If he’d stripped downstairs, he probably wouldn’t have had to answer any questions now. “No, I was in a hurry and couldn’t find them. Besides, I normally sleep naked. I only had them on earlier because of you. Now, are you going to let me go to sleep, or are you going to badger me with a ton of questions about my sleeping habits?”

She gingerly turned on her side and snuggled her hips into him, feeling his erection press against her bottom. “Well, it doesn’t feel like you want to go to sleep.”

His answer was to swat her bottom and mumble, “Behave.”

* * * * *

Clad only in a pair of jeans, Alex stood at the stove, frying bacon. As was his right as pack alpha, Alex had called a meeting to discuss what he’d learned last night. But how he got

stuck making everyone breakfast wasn't entirely clear. He turned and looked at his subordinates.

Dash leaned against the counter next to him, ankles crossed, and tried to snatch a piece of raw bacon. Adrian sat at the table with his head resting on his arms, still tired from staying up late helping his new-found obsession, Katherine, get settled into Jess's former apartment. Brent sat on the counter in a pair of jeans, a black t-shirt, and a .45 tucked in his shoulder holster. His bare feet were dangling, and he was nursing a cup of hot coffee with a faraway look on his face. Teresa was at the table across from Adrian, going through her papers to see who had and had not checked in with her for this cycle.

After getting his hand slapped for the third time, Dash moved away from the counter and began to pace. Not that that surprised Alex. Dash was not one to stand still very long, hence his nickname.

Dash stopped suddenly. "Let me get this straight ... No one has seen or heard from him in twenty-four hours, not even Rand?" Adrian raised his head off the table and stretched. He shrugged and looked to Brent for confirmation before he put his head back down on the table.

Setting down his coffee, Brent hopped off the bar, swung a chair around backwards, and straddled it. "Yes. If he were going somewhere he wouldn't be able to be reached, he'd tell his brother. You know the whole family has been good at keeping track of each other since Rhett disappeared. Hell, Rome would have come to me if ..." He let the thought trail off and ran his hands over his face and through his hair. He sighed deeply. "She's been gone almost fifteen years now."

Alex frowned. He knew this was tough on Brent, but he needed his help. Brent was a good cop, and his second beta. Alex knew Brent was thinking of the twins' older sister, Rhett, who also had been Brent's mate. She had been affectionately and appropriately known as Hellion. Brent's dad, Emilio, and the twins' dad, Michael, were very close, so Brent and

Hellion had practically been raised together. Heck, she had been like one of the boys. Alex missed her, too.

He sighed and put the last three strips of bacon on to fry, then turned back to his crew. "He's missing. End of story. He wouldn't take off without telling someone, and we found the motorcycle he'd borrowed from Julian in a parking lot two blocks away from the restaurant. It's the night of the full moon. He knows the rules. And as Brent pointed out, because of his sister's disappearance, he would have told someone."

Adrian looked up. "He was on my brother's motorcycle?"

Alex nodded.

Teresa cleared her throat, threw a lock of curly brown hair over her shoulder, and smiled at Alex. "Yes, well ... Have you told anyone where you will be tonight? Because you sure haven't told me. You know the rules; your father made them, and you agreed to them before you took over. If you aren't with pack, then you have to tell the pack secretary -- that would be me -- of your whereabouts."

The three men looked at him, their cousin, brother, and friend, wondering why he himself hadn't followed pack rules about checking in.

Alex gave them all a sheepish look. Hey, he'd had a hellish week. It wasn't like he'd done it on purpose. "Sorry, Teresa, it completely slipped my mind. With all that's happened in the last week with Jessica, I totally forgot about it. I've decided to go to my parents' house; is that answer enough?"

Dash clapped his hands together, bringing everyone's attention to him. "See? Maybe that's what happened to Rome. Maybe he had an out-of-town rendezvous with a hot chick and was so excited with anticipation, he forgot to mention it." The others stared at him like he'd lost his mind, but no one said a thing. Apparently, Dash took that as agreement, nodding for emphasis. "So, that's settled. Let's eat!"

Alex ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head. “How do you explain the abandoned motorcycle?” Walking over to stand behind Brent, Alex kneaded his cousin’s shoulders to comfort him before looking at Teresa. “Speaking of checking in ... did Rome check in before he disappeared? Do you keep track of how everyone checks in?”

She nodded and shifted through some papers. “No, he didn’t check in. Everyone but Rome and you checked in days ago.” She passed the papers to Brent, who handed them to Alex. “Here ... this is a list of the approximate number of days the pack has checked in before the full moon. It’s based on an average. Rome’s average is about a week before the full moon, which is one of the highest averages. Brent has the lowest average, a day and a half.”

Brent glared at her and nudged the hand Alex still had on his shoulder with the side of his face, apparently asking for the massaging to continue, then growled when it didn’t.

Alex ignored him and continued to scan the paper. “Okay, well, this definitely needs investigating, despite Dash’s, uh, explanation. Teresa, call Rand and Julian. They were the last to see him. I want to speak with them today; this afternoon, preferably.”

He turned back to Brent. “See what you can find out. I want to know if this is linked to Jess’s attempted kidnapping. If the pack is being targeted, I want to know about it so I can warn our people. And while you’re at it, use your connections to find out if I need to get a doctor’s note to excuse Rome so he doesn’t get kicked out of the academy. We *will* find him.”

He looked at each of his betas, letting them know he would accept nothing less than finding the young man alive and healthy. “Adrian, if you aren’t going to work, leave your cell phone on.” He walked to the counter to get the food and drinks, placing them on the table. “All of you know that if you find out something and you can’t get ahold of me, call Adrian. Now, since Dash somehow managed to get me to make breakfast ... Let’s eat.”

Jess woke to the sound of dishes clanking and the smell of bacon and eggs. She was desperate for some food so that she could take her pain medication. Dressing as quickly as

her sore body would allow, she ventured down the steps, only to be brought up short by a pair of the prettiest green eyes she'd ever seen. She knew immediately to whom those gorgeous peepers belonged.

Brent Hernandez was every bit as devastating to the opposite sex as his cousins were, but he had by far the nicest eyes of the bunch. With his dark hair and skin, his light eyes didn't seem to fit the rest of him, but they certainly enhanced his dark good looks.

Since she'd been looking down at her feet, she'd failed to notice Brent's approach until his handsome face peered up at her as he'd ducked into her line of sight. She studied him briefly and noticed that he was barefoot, as usual. Brent hated shoes; he only wore them when he had to.

Jess grinned through her pain and straightened so Brent wouldn't have to bend over. He was every bit as tall as Alex, so bending over the way he was couldn't be comfortable for him.

He was also a good friend. Unlike Adrian, Brent was always quiet and very reserved, so when she saw the flicker of sadness on his face, it concerned her. Was he upset? Before she could question him, he smiled, mask back in place, and straightened.

"Well, good morning, sunshine! How are you feeling? I heard you and came to carry you to the kitchen." With that, he took her crutches and swooped her up in his arms before she could protest.

"If I weren't already in pain, I'd tell you to move your gun because it's mashing my arm; but since I hurt all over, don't bother."

Brent laughed down at her, moved her arm out from under his, and brushed the top of her head with his lips. "Alex warned me you weren't a morning person."

Jess grumbled something under her breath about Hernandez men and their perverse fondness for mornings as Brent carried her into the kitchen.

Dash's cheery face was the first thing she saw upon entering the kitchen. He opened his mouth to speak, and she held up her hand, not wanting any of his male chauvinist jokes until she'd at least had her pain medicine. "Get bent, Dash!"

Alex, who was leaning against the counter drinking coffee, spewed it everywhere. "Uh, sweetheart, you okay?" As Brent set her crutches down and deposited her gently in an empty chair at the breakfast table, Alex came toward her.

"No. I need something for pain. Now! Uh, please."

Suddenly there was a plate of food and a drink in front of her. She looked up and behind her to see Alex hurrying out of the room and Adrian grinning at her. "Eat. Alex is going to get your drugs since you can't take them on an empty stomach. Oh, and good morning to you, too."

Having been properly chastised and feeling very childish for her gruff entrance, Jess looked around the kitchen, apologized, and said good morning to everyone. She noticed the woman at the other end of the table and quirked an eyebrow at Brent, who was now standing slightly behind the woman, silently asking for an introduction.

"Jess, this is Teresa. Teresa, this is Jessica, Alex's fiancée."

Jess glanced over the other woman, who was studying her just as intently. She seemed about forty-five, but she held herself with dignity that said she was several years older. She also appeared very tall, though it was hard to tell since she was seated. Her hair was a short, curly brown, and she had a pleasant face. Her most remarkable feature was her smile. It was a dentist's dream of straight and even white teeth. She was dressed in a lavender business suit and had a briefcase in front of her filled with files. After returning Jess's scrutiny, her smile widened with apparent approval. Jess decided that she, too, approved and smiled cheerfully back. "Hello, Teresa. It's nice to finally meet you."

"And you, too, Jess. Alex has told me a lot about you."

Chapter Ten

Jess slowly and gently rolled over on the couch where she had fallen asleep after the house had cleared of guests. Disturbed by a scratching noise, she lifted her head to listen, but when she heard nothing, she lay back down. Where was Alex?

The sound came again, this time a little louder. It was coming from the window by the front door, so she got up to investigate. Hanging on to her crutches, she peeked out the window. Nothing.

A sudden movement outside the window startled her. *Was that Lisa?* The head moved back out of sight before Jess could be sure.

She jumped and stifled a gasp, almost losing her balance when she realized there was another face looking back at her. She didn't recognize the man's face, but she could have sworn she'd seen Lisa seconds ago.

Jess had no more than turned the knob when the man spoke. "Jessica, a friend sent me. We've got to get you out of here. You don't belong here."

Surprised that the stranger knew her name, it took several seconds for his comment to register. Jess scowled. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Shaking her head over the audacity of some people, she hopped herself back out of the doorway, closing the door as quickly as she could manage.

An eerie feeling skittered down her spine when she heard the man mumble something. Before she had time to react, the door was shoved back open and the man grabbed her. She didn't have the chance to scream. All she managed was a garbled shout before the man clapped a hand over her mouth and hauled her against him and out the door. Another man grabbed her crutches.

She was being abducted, again! And Alex was nowhere in sight. The thought of what might happen had Jess in a panic. *What if no one knows where I am? What if they kill me?* Struggling to no avail, then fighting back her panic, Jess assessed her precarious situation. What she'd been certain wouldn't happen under Alex's roof was happening. *Where in the hell is Alex?*

Well, she'd gotten herself out of this situation once before, albeit with some difficulty, and she could do it again. Jess let her body go limp, hoping to make herself too heavy, but the man was too strong. He struggled with her weight briefly, but it was obvious that her dead weight wasn't much of a deterrent.

She spotted a familiar blue van parked by the curb, and her panic escalated again. She had to get away quick, or Alex would never know what happened to her.

The first thing that came to mind was to bite the guy, but he held her too tightly. He must have taken lessons from the first kidnap guy. Jess tried to kick and squirm with her good leg, aiming her kicks where they'd have the biggest effect, but a sharp pain in her injured knee put a halt to that tactic quickly. Tears of pain and fear streamed down her face.

She heard Kat's screams before she saw her. Adrian's SUV had pulled into the drive. Kat ran in a wide circle around her and the thugs, screaming Alex's name.

She was suddenly ripped from the man's arms and dropped to the grass beside the sidewalk, her injured leg breaking her fall. A sharp pain lanced up the leg, ripping a scream

from her throat. Kat ran back to her side, pulled her into a sitting position, and wrapped her arm over Jess's shoulder. Tears fell unheeded down Jess's cheeks as she struggled through the haze of pain to get a glimpse of her rescuer.

Adrian stood in front of her, body angled sideways in a fighting stance. "Jess, get in the house." He stepped forward, clearly inviting her attackers and keeping them away from her.

Through her tears, she watched in morbid fascination as Adrian bloodied one guy's nose and kicked the other in the stomach in one fluid motion. He returned to his stance and yelled over his shoulder. "I said, get in the house!"

Jess was about to inform him that she couldn't move without her crutches when the goon who had them lifted them over his head and prepared to strike Adrian. The other man wiped the blood from his face with the back of his hand and rushed forward. Kat screamed again.

The scene seemed to play in slow motion as Jess and Kat watched the men time their attack. Adrian sidestepped the rushing man; the women let out huge sighs, then turned their attention back to the other man. Adrian's ease of movement and attentiveness made everything look almost choreographed.

As the crutches were within mere inches of Adrian's head, a hand shot out, stopped them, and ripped them from the assailant's grasp. *Alex!* Relief flooded through Jess, and she let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding until then.

Jess watched as Alex and Adrian faced the two men. From where she sat, she could see the look of fear as the assailants sized up her two rescuers. Alex made a sound somewhere between a growl and a shout, and both men apparently panicked and ran to their van. Jess could admit that Alex and Adrian made a fearsome pair, but she was surprised by the sudden retreat. Neither of those men had looked like cowards, but she was too relieved by their departure to give it much thought. Too bad she'd been in too much shock and pain to think about getting the license plate number. Kat looked pretty shell-shocked, too.

As soon as the van sped away, Adrian turned on Alex. “Where in the hell were you when your mate was being attacked?”

Alex took a deep breath, willing himself not to slug his cousin. He knew Adrian meant well, but right now he was just making him angrier. He was also scared and embarrassed. What if they’d had succeeded in taking Jess? She was his; he was supposed to protect her. He’d made a mistake by letting his guard down, assuming she’d be safe living with him.

He glanced down at her, reassuring himself that she was okay. Her teary-eyed gaze held no blame, just worry and pain. Dropping down to his knees, he skimmed his hands over her briefly, then pulled her away from Kat, who had been clinging to her for dear life. He held her for several minutes, willing his heart to slow back to its normal rhythm.

He hadn’t heard a thing; he’d been in his office trying to solve Rome’s disappearance. He’d already talked to Rand and was going to confer with his father about what he’d learned. His dad had just answered the phone when he’d heard Jess’s muffled scream. His heartbeat had drummed in his ears and his stomach turned over. He’d already been on his way out the door when he heard Kat’s shouts. He’d only caught the words “kidnap” and “Jess,” but it had been enough. It had felt as if someone had twisted a knife in his gut. Outside, he’d immediately seen Adrian confronting two men. His first thought had not been to help his cousin but to find Jessica. As soon as he’d spotted her, he was able to think again and swiftly moved in to help Adrian defend her.

Jess squeezed him, bringing him out of his reflections. “I was afraid no one would know where I went.”

Alex ignored Adrian’s continuing rant about his inability to protect his mate and responded to the worry in her voice. Pursing his lips in what he hoped was a contemplative gesture so he didn’t reveal his extended canines, he looked her in the eye. “Are you okay? What happened, baby?”

Jess plastered a bright, albeit wobbly, smile on her face, in an obvious effort to reassure him. "I'm fine. I just can't believe this could happen again." She shook her head, frowned, and glanced at Kat, who was now kneeling beside her. "I have no idea what this is about. I heard a scratching noise and went to the door to check it out. I thought I saw ..." She shook her head, then continued, deciding to leave her overactive imagination out of it. It hadn't been Lisa she'd seen. "I saw a face in the window and opened the door ..."

"You did what?!" Adrian shouted.

Jess flinched and looked at him as Alex held up a hand, halting his tirade. He turned around and paced the yard, mumbling in Spanish, then motioned for her to continue.

"He said he wanted me to come with him. He even knew my name and said a friend sent him. I told him to leave and tried to shut the door, but he grabbed me." She took a deep breath and clutched at Alex's arms before she continued. "They were going to take me. Why? This is the second time." Jess must have seen his fear for her; she caressed his cheek. "I couldn't do anything; they were so strong. I tried, Alex. I did." She grimaced. "The next thing I knew, Kat was screaming like a maniac and Adrian was there."

Alex released Jess and got to his feet. Sure that his canines had receded, Alex let out a sigh of relief, then ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. It made no sense. Why would someone try to have her kidnapped -- and twice, no less! His instincts said that this was pack related. He swore silently to himself.

Kat draped an arm over Jess's shoulder. "I'm not sure what the heck is going on, but it's spooky. I got a call at the apartment. A man asking for you. I didn't know the voice, so I started to tell him he had the wrong number. But he hung up before I could finish. I got this really creepy feeling and had to check on you. No one answered the phone, so I told Adrian we had to come over here as soon as he got out of the shower." Kat shrugged her shoulders in confusion.

Jess's eyes widened at the realization that Adrian had been at Kat's apartment, in her shower. She grinned at Kat and winked her approval, silently promising to beg for details when they were alone.

Kat blushed and shook her head, leaning close to Jess's ear, whispering, "Nothing happened. You know me better than that."

Thankfully, the women, caught up in their own conversation about what actually *did* happen, missed the byplay between Alex and Adrian.

Adrian caught Alex's attention with a jerk of his head, then glanced over to make sure the women weren't watching. "I asked what you were doing when your fiancée was being abducted." He pushed Alex's shoulder.

Alex pushed back, still trying to rein in his temper. "I was on the phone, and I thought she was safe. I didn't think anyone would have the gall to try to take her right from under my nose. I screwed up, okay? It won't happen again."

Adrian took a menacing step toward him, shoulders back and chin held high. "If you can't protect your mate, it's my job to do so."

Alex knew Adrian had way too much adrenaline pumping through him. His cousin's wolf nature was reluctant to let this go. Heck, he was in the same boat; it was hard to override those animal instincts. The fact that he'd failed to protect his mate was making it even worse. And he tried, but Adrian standing up to him was the last straw. Wrong or right, he gave in to his animal instincts. Alex shoved him with both hands and growled. "Like hell you will!"

Jess and Kat looked up to see Alex and Adrian grappling around the yard. Kat started yelling, and Jess sat there with her mouth ajar. What happened? Alex and Adrian had always had an explosive relationship, but she'd never known them to come to blows before. She had

to stop them before they actually hurt each other; they were really going at it. Turning to Kat to tell her to stop yelling, she spied the water hose. "Katherine! Your screaming isn't helping, so stop it! Bring me the water hose, then go turn on the water."

Kat gasped and looked at her like she was nuts, but got ready to do as she was told. Just then, Jess spotted Diego's dark-blue Cadillac coming down the street, followed by a black car. "Kat, is that Diego?"

Jess heaved a sigh of relief. Not only was it Alex's dad, but Dash and Brent, too. It appeared that Diego had brought the cavalry. Surely the three of them could stop Alex and Adrian from serious harm.

Diego stepped out of the car, his mouth agape with seeming disbelief. Tossing an incredulous look at Dash, who got out of the passenger side, he yelled, "Boys! Enough!"

Brent parked his car, jumped out, and skidded to a halt beside Dash.

Alex and Adrian were still rolling around on the ground when Dash reached into his back pocket and withdrew his billfold. "Twenty bucks says Alex takes him."

Brent shook his head and put his hands on his hips. "I am so not taking that bet. What do I look like? Stupid?"

"Well ..." Dash was cut off by quick look from Diego. "Knock it off, you two; we have enough problems." He gave a quick glance at the women, then looked back at his son and nephew tumbling across the yard. His voice started climbing until it ended in a shout. "And I want to know what in the hell has been going on here! Alejandro! Adriano! *Vastante*. Enough!"

Jess looked up at Diego from her seat on the lawn. "We can use the water hose."

A wide grin spread across his face as he peered down at her. "It doesn't work; Claire's tried it. Are you okay, *mija*? I was on the phone with Alex when I heard Kat screaming that you were being kidnapped."

Her eyes lit up at the endearment and the concern in his voice. Diego had become like a surrogate father to her. “Yes, Dad. My knee has felt better, but I’m in one piece, and I’m still here.”

A quick nod and a smile told her he was relieved. He looked at Dash and Brent. “Don’t stand there. I’ll grab Alex; Brent, get Adrian. Dash, take Jessica and Katherine into the house.”

Dash bent down in front of Jess and Kat and smiled. He wasn’t as handsome as Alex, but he was by no means ugly. Dash was an attractive man by anyone’s standards. “Wrap your arms around my neck, hellion.”

Dash grimaced. “Oops, I didn’t mean to call you that.”

Jess grinned and shook her head.

“Please tell me Brent is still in the front yard and didn’t hear me say that. It’s just that sometimes you remind me of her so much.”

“I remind you of who? Please be careful; my knee is killing me.” Jess looked over his shoulder. “Yes, Brent is still outside.”

“Never mind, brat. It’s a long story.” Dash lifted her effortlessly into his arms and started for the house with Kat following behind.

“Did you just call her ‘brat’?”

Dash and Jess both chuckled.

Jess shook her head again. “Takes one to know one, Dash.”

He grinned.

“Uh, yeah.” Kat’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

Sudden interest lit Dash’s face as he turned his head to Kat, taking in her entire form. “So, you do bite ... and to think I had you pegged for a meek little thing.” Another heart-stopping grin split his face as he nodded approvingly.

Jess looked at the man holding her, then back at Kat. “Why did you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you know something we don’t know.”

Dash chuckled again. “I know lots of things you don’t know, but in this case, I assumed you knew about Adrian’s marked interest in her.”

Jess’s smile widened in delight. “Really? What did he say?”

Kat cleared her throat noisily, interrupting Dash and Jess as she reached for the door handle. Her embarrassment was obvious as she quickly tried to switch topics. “Why is your last name Rigotti instead of Hernandez? I thought Diego and Claire adopted you?”

Uncharacteristically, Dash let her change the subject. “They did, but I chose to keep my mom’s maiden name. She died of cancer when I was eight, and I didn’t have any other family. Because she had been friends with Diego and Claire since she was a teenager, Dad and Mom ... er, Diego and Claire took me in when they knew she was dying and later adopted me. Even though I love them both very much, and I’ve spent most of my life with them, I felt like I needed to honor my mother’s memory. So I kept her name. Dad asked me to take the Hernandez name, but he understood what I wanted to do and was very supportive.”

Dash cleared his throat, clearly embarrassed by sharing something so personal, and blurted out, “Do you need anything? I can call Jill. In fact, I could really use a quickie! She worked late last night. If I wake her up for sex, she gets mad, but if there’s another reason for waking her ...” He smiled.

Jess and Kat stared at him and asked in unison, “What?”

Dash actually blushed. “I can’t believe I said that.”

The room erupted in laughter.

After taking some pain medication and informing Diego, Dash, and Brent of what had occurred, Jess was trying to forget her second near-abduction. Soon after the others' departure, Alex and Adrian stood in the kitchen, covered in grass and dirt and talking out their problems, while Jess enlisted Kat's help in running Alex a bath upstairs.

She knew he much preferred showers, but a hot bubble bath would do wonders for the lousy disposition he had developed in the last hour.

Now that her knee was only slightly aching, she shrugged off her melancholy

Kat turned off the water and went with her to fetch Alex. "Does your knee still hurt?"

"No." She reached out and touched Kat's cheek. "Thank you."

Kat shrugged nonchalantly. "You'd have done the same for me. We're a team, right?"

"Yes, we are. Now, get your man out of here so I can have mine to myself."

A blush crept up Kat's face as she sputtered, trying to form a response. Jess's musical laughter taunted her. "He isn't *my* man! Shh, stop that before they hear you."

Jess stopped laughing and leaned into Kat. "But you want him to be, don't you?"

Kat's blush deepened and she whispered back. "Yes. He's something, isn't he? Do you think I have a chance? I mean, Adrian, he's ... well, he's kind of out of my league. He's used to ... uh, well ..." She lowered her voice another octave, then continued. "He's used to having sex with the women he dates."

Jess quirked an eyebrow. "So?"

Stifling a gasp, Kat's eye's widened. "Jessica Marie! You know I'm saving myself for marriage. I refuse to be a slut like my mother!"

Jess rolled her eyes and leaned heavily on her right crutch. "Katherine Michelle Andrews! You can drop the attitude. You know darn well I'm not telling you to sleep with him. I meant, so what; poor little Adrian will have to do without. It won't kill him."

Kat blushed again and lowered her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have thought you'd suggest that ..."

Jess's laughter cut her off. She hugged Kat and dipped her head toward the kitchen. "Come and drag your man out and take him home."

When Jess entered the kitchen, the conversation came to an abrupt halt. She stopped in the doorway and looked at the men, wondering what they were saying that they didn't want her to hear. They were standing at the counter, each with a glass of water in hand. Alex was smiling brightly at her, and Adrian had eyes only for Kat. She gave herself a mental shrug and decided that recent events had made her paranoid; they were just being gentlemen.

Hobbling over to Alex, she took the glass from his hand as he bent down and gave her a quick kiss on her nose. Placing the water on the counter, she turned to Kat, who now stood next to Adrian, and smiled. Adrian was looking down at Kat with such longing in his face that Jess was soon grinning like a loon. She hopped closer to Adrian, trying to gain his attention. "Thank you for saving me. Now, go home -- unless, of course, you plan on sharing a bath with Alex."

Adrian shook his head and laughed at her impertinence, but Alex gasped, "Jess!"

She turned her head and tried to look innocent. "What? You guys stink. You both smell like a couple of wet dogs."

Alex joined in the laughter. "Okay, okay, I can take a hint."

Adrian chucked her under the chin. "A hint? That wasn't a hint. She insulted us after we rescued her." He made a tsking sound and looked at Alex. "Can you believe the insolence?"

Alex placed his hands on Jess's shoulders and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Of course, I can; this is my Jess we're talking about."

Kat came forward and hugged Jess. "Well, I've got to get home anyway. Call me later, 'k?"

Alex and Adrian hugged briefly and patted each other on the back, saying their goodbyes. Alex hugged Kat and thanked her for speeding to Jess's rescue.

Reaching the front door, Jess stopped Adrian with a hand on his arm as he was leaving. She leaned in and pulled him down to her, kissing his cheek. “Thank you, Adrian.”

“You are very welcome, Jess.” Adrian’s brown eyes twinkled in mischief as he looked over her head at Alex and planted a big, wet, lingering kiss on her lips.

Alex growled at him as Adrian grabbed Kat’s arm and pulled her out the door. “Later!”

Chapter Eleven

The soothing warm water couldn't overcome his uneasiness. Alex lay in the large garden-sized tub with his head resting on the side and a wet washcloth thrown over his eyes. Why would anyone want to kidnap Jess? To ransom her for money? True, his family had money, but that didn't seem to fit. Had those men guessed what he was? Had someone found out about him and his pack? Did they want to use Jess to get to him?

He hadn't been able to control his anger. His teeth and eyes had changed before he'd given them conscious thought. His animal instinct was to protect his mate, and his human nature hadn't been able to override it. What would the repercussions be for letting outsiders see one of his kind like that ... if they didn't already know?

One thing was for certain: he was going to have to tell Jess soon, before she accidentally found out. The decent thing to do would be to tell her before they married so she could see what she was getting into. Not that it really mattered; she was his mate and she'd have to accept it. But she did deserve to know why she was in danger, or at least why he suspected she was in danger.

Alex sighed and stretched his arms over his head. The bubbles ran down his arms, tickling his steam-warmed skin as they went. When was the last time he had soaked in a

tub? He smiled, remembering Jess ushering him upstairs to take a bath. She was a determined little witch when she got something in her head, he'd give her that. Once Adrian and Katherine left, he hadn't wanted to do anything but sit and hold her, reassuring himself that she was safe. He'd told her he didn't need a bath; baths were for chicks. She had swatted at him, proclaimed that "a Dash comment," and threatened to whoop Dash's rear end as well as his if he didn't go bathe. Her strong will and determination were just a couple of the reasons he loved her. He'd never be concerned about running over her nor crushing her will; she wouldn't let him.

Letting the steam finally soothe him, Alex relaxed into the tub a little more, sinking in until he had to bend his knees to fit. He'd known Jess was hurt and scared to death, but after realizing how worried he'd been and how it had eaten him up inside that he'd failed to protect her, she'd forgotten all about her own fears and tried to comfort him.

She was insistent that it had been no one's fault but her own, and that she should have known better than to open the door. Something still wasn't right; he was sure Jess was withholding information. It didn't change anything, of course. It was still his fault that he had failed to protect her, but he needed to know what she was hiding so he could ensure her safety.

A quiet rap at the bathroom door was followed seconds later by Jess's head peeking in. "Alex? You need anything? You've been in here quite a while for a man who doesn't like baths."

He chuckled softly and removed the washcloth from his face, sitting up to look at her. "Nah, I'm fine."

"Alex?"

"Hmm?"

"Why would anyone want to steal me?"

“I don’t know, baby. I don’t know. But it won’t happen again, I promise you. Why don’t you come in here and sit down? We need to talk.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrows shot up in apparent surprise, then quickly lowered in suspicion. “What about?”

Alex smiled and patted the edge of the tub. “I want to know what it is you aren’t telling me about this situation.”

She pushed the door open and came inside, careful not to bang her crutches on the doorframe. “Oh, you caught that, did you? I was going to tell you, but I didn’t want you mad at me.”

He was truly puzzled and knew his face indicated as much. Reaching out to offer assistance with one hand, he pulled his dry towel over with the other for her to sit on, then waited for her to speak.

Jess sighed and lowered herself to the edge of the tub next to Alex. Setting her crutches aside, she faced him. “I thought I saw Lisa at the door; that’s why I opened it.” She held up her hand, warding off his questions and explained. “The morning after you proposed, a van followed me home. I convinced myself that they weren’t following me, but I guess I was wrong. And I got a call at the studio, telling me to stay away from you. I checked the caller ID, but it said unknown. I tried to convince myself it was a prank.”

Alex’s eyes widened. He couldn’t believe that this was the first he’d heard of this. “My God, babe, we might have stopped all this from happening. You could have been taken or ... or killed! You were injured, for crying out loud! God only knows what they were going to do with you after they got you! Have you lost your damned mind?”

She glared down at him and put her hands on her hips. It wasn’t as effective as it would have been had she was standing, but he got the point. She was pissed. Fine, let her be pissed; so was he.

“I knew you were going to act like this. I’ll have you know that I’ve been on my own since I was seventeen, and I’m not accustomed to being accountable to anyone! It is not like I get followed and threatened all the time. Besides, this obviously has to do with you! It is probably some obsessed ex-lover of yours. Obviously someone doesn’t like me being engaged to you! And we’ve already established that I don’t have ex-lovers! So don’t *you* yell at me!”

Alex blinked several times and looked at her red face. She’d worked herself into a fine temper. He was getting there himself. If she weren’t careful, she was going to bite off more than she could chew. He reminded himself to calm down. He didn’t need her mad at him. He had to protect her, not piss her off and send her running.

He reached out and grabbed her hand, tugging her forward slowly. God, she was hot when she was mad. When his mouth was just inches from her lips, he whispered, “The very next time you keep something like this from me, something that threatens your safety, I’m going to spank your ass until you can’t sit down for a week.” Her mouth fell open.

He hadn’t raised his voice, but the anger was there all the same. Arguing with her was very stimulating, he decided. He made a mental note to do it more often. Taking advantage of her surprise, Alex claimed her lips in a simple kiss.

For several seconds, she didn’t respond. She still seemed in shock over his reprimand, but then, to his surprise, she threaded her fingers through the hair at his temples, tilted his head, and deepened the kiss. Slowly, she swept her tongue against his lips until he opened them and allowed her in. His wet hands came up to her sides as his tongue tangled with hers. When he groaned and slowly pulled away, Jess nipped his bottom lip and tried to pull him back. Sitting on the ledge of the tub with a bum leg, she had no leverage and had to let him go.

Chuckling, Alex leaned back in the tub. “Quit teasing me, you little witch.”

Jess pouted; it was both sexy and alluring. “Who says I’m teasing?” She leaned back on the arm she had braced against the tub and pushed her chest out.

Alex groaned at the sultry whisper and seductive pose, then cast his eyes downward. She was not wearing a bra under that thin t-shirt. Her nipples were hard little pebbles, begging for his attention. And apparently she knew what a tempting picture she made, because she looked at him and asked a little breathlessly, “Like that, do you?”

“If you don’t get out of here, you’re going to find out just how much.”

She looked right into his eyes and whispered back, “I dare you.”

Alex grinned at the invitation he saw in her eyes. Good Lord, she went from tease to sex kitten in two seconds flat. Well, if she wanted to play, he wasn’t going to dissuade her. He stood.

The action brought his cock level with her mouth. He looked down and saw her tongue dart out to moisten her lips. He groaned at the images that action provoked. She was going to be the death of him.

Jess blinked several times; though she had felt and caught brief glimpses of him several times before, she’d never actually gotten a good look at his cock. It was long and thick and tan like the rest of him, but had more of a red tint. She could see the veins throbbing in his length and wondered if she’d be able to feel them if she touched him.

A drop of clear fluid leaked out of the big, round head, catching her undivided attention. She leaned forward and swiped her tongue across the tip, tasting him before she raised her curious eyes to his. It was salty and not at all unpleasant.

Alex gasped at her bold move. His right hand reached up and stroked through her hair, grasping it in his fist, and his left wrapped around the base of his cock. “Open your mouth.”

A smile curved her lips as she lowered her gaze back to his cock. Licking her lips again, she opened her mouth and cautiously leaned forward.

Jess couldn’t believe she was actually doing this. It was deliciously naughty. She liked the feel and taste of him on her lips. Her lips tingled where his cock’s head slipped past them

repeatedly. And every time Alex moaned, she felt a little quiver in her sex. It was empowering to make him growl that way. She was becoming more aroused by the minute.

Alex tightened his grip in her hair and gently pulled her away from him. His other hand reached for hers and placed it around his shaft, then reached out to caress her cheek. She looked up at him with questioning eyes. He trailed his thumb across her swollen bottom lip and said, "Take a deep breath and go down as far as you can."

She gave him what she hoped was a seductive smile and did as he asked. To her surprise, she was able to take him all the way to the back of her throat. She'd been afraid to try for fear of gagging. Once she realized she could do it, she tightened her grip around him and eagerly plunged forward ... and promptly gagged. She frowned and looked up at Alex.

He stroked her cheek again and smiled down at her. "Take a deep breath first."

Jess took a deep breath, let it out, and devoured him. She pulled back and repeated the process. It wasn't long before she found a pace that had Alex's big body trembling and both his hands wrapped in her hair.

Alex took a deep breath and watched as her perfect, bow-shaped lips closed around the head of his cock. She pulled back, then slowly closed her mouth around him again, taking him in a little further. Her eyes closed, and she retreated. The next time she took him in, his cock sank halfway into her sweet mouth. It felt incredible. Alex barely stopped himself from pushing further into her mouth, forcing her to take him all the way. He quickly reminded himself that she'd never done this before, and tried to relax and go at her pace.

He pulled her back again, and this time his cock slipped from her mouth with a loud pop. She giggled and tried to pull him back to her.

Alex stepped out of the tub and gently shifted her, placing her hands behind her on the edge of the tub. Kneeling on the rug in front of his abandoned bath, he looped his fingers through the waistband of her panties and shorts and pulled them off.

After dispensing with her bottoms, Alex made short work of her top.

With Jess gloriously naked and spread before him, Alex looked his fill. She was so beautiful. Her breasts were high and firm. Her nipples were tight little buds. Her chest rose and fell with her deepening breaths. He knew she was highly aroused: he could smell her.

His gaze slid down her muscled tummy past her lean hips to the smoothly shaven sex below. Alex had known that she was clean-shaven, but to clearly see her plump pink folds glistening with arousal took his breath away. “Why do you shave?”

Her head snapped up. “Y-- you don’t like it?” Worry was evident in her voice.

Alex caressed her face. He leaned up and brushed his lips over her cheek. “I love it. I was just curious. Seems kind of strange for a virgin.”

He felt her grin and the heat of her blush against his face as he nuzzled her cheek. Shrugging, she answered. “I’ve shaved pretty much since puberty. Seems as my boobs got bigger, my costumes got smaller and smaller.” She shrugged again and ran her hand through his hair. “This way I don’t have to worry about hanging out of my skimpier costumes.”

Alex smiled, and his mouth trailed down her neck and over her collarbone to capture the hard little peak of her nipple between his teeth. He was rewarded with a groan. Trailing his way down her stomach, he stopped long enough to nudge her legs farther apart. She smelled wonderful, musky, feminine, and all his. He couldn’t wait to taste her. He’d dreamt of this from the first moment that he met her. Using his thumbs, he ran them down the engorged lips. Parting her folds, he could see the wetness glistening on the delicate pink skin. Unable to hold back any longer, he slid his tongue into the small opening. She was tangy and sweet, just as he’d known she would be. He felt her quiver around his tongue and groaned deep in his throat, making it sound more like a growl. After plunging in and out several times, savoring the taste of her on his tongue, he moved on to the tight little nub peeking out at him.

Jess was positive she'd died and gone to heaven. Was there anything that felt better than Alex's wonderfully talented tongue? This was even better than last night. And to think she could've sworn there was nothing more amazing than his incredibly skilled fingers. The low, sexy moan he was making only added to her excitement. He stopped, nipped her thigh, and practically growled, "My God, you taste good."

On his next descent, he captured her clit in his mouth. She squealed.

When Alex chuckled, she nearly came apart. The vibrations felt so good, she grabbed two fists of his hair and bit her bottom lip to keep from squealing again. This was too good; she wanted it to go on forever. On second thought, maybe she did want him to laugh again. She didn't get the chance to decide.

Alex untangled her hands from his hair, picked her up, and laid her down on her back on the rug. He leaned over her with his head at the opposite end and mumbled, "Suck me," against her clit as his hips arched toward her face.

Jess needed no other invitation. She ran her tongue along the head of his cock, then grabbed him and led him to her mouth. She began moving her head back and forth, taking him deeper and deeper as his tongue circled her clit.

Taking a deep breath, she slid her hand on him and plunged him deep. She could barely concentrate on what she was doing. His mouth felt too good.

Apparently she was concentrating just enough, because Alex groaned and pulled back. "If you want me to stop, you better say something now."

Jess tightened her grip and leaned toward him again. "No, don't stop."

It wasn't long before he was moving his hips with her. The closer he got to orgasm, the better he gave back, so it wasn't long before they were both tense with anticipation.

Alex came with a groan. Jess didn't have long to enjoy his unique taste before she was screaming out her own climax.

They lay side by side for several minutes, Alex's hand lazily stroking her belly, her own arms thrown over her head. Jess was so relaxed she was almost asleep when Alex spoke. "By the way ... you are going to stay at my parents' house tonight. I have to work."

Jess groaned. She'd just been seduced into compliance.

Chapter Twelve

Jess and Alex arrived at the Hernandez household as Diego, along with his nephews and Dash, were leaving for their weekend retreat at the family cabin. Alex waved while Dash stuck his head out of the window and yelled, “Have fun at work, bro.” He winked and rolled up the window, laughing.

For as long as she’d known Dash, she’d always found him slightly peculiar. He seemed to be acting his usual self.

Apparently having heard them arrive, Claire opened the door and smiled. “Jess, you’re here! Come on, I’ll help you get your things up to Alex’s room, and then you can help Marisa and me in the kitchen. I’m making your favorite cookies.”

Glad to feel like part of the family, Jess hobbled into the house, leaving Alex to follow with her overnight bag. “Thanks, Claire. Are you sure it’s all right for me to stay?”

“Of course it is, sweetie. That incident today gave all of us a good scare. Honestly, I wouldn’t want my daughter-in-law staying anywhere else.” She leaned down and gave Jess a kiss on the cheek.

Jess felt her eyes began to water at the lovely gesture and the warm sense of belonging. She looked at Claire, a relieved smile stretching her lips. “Thank you so much.” Reaching up

to dab at her watery eyes, she took a deep breath and continued. "Sorry, I'm not usually so moody. I guess a kidnapping attempt will do that to ya, huh?"

Claire threw her head back and laughed. She hugged Jess around the shoulders, careful not to upset her balance. "You forget, I've known you since Marisa was about six. I know how moody you can get ... but under the circumstances, I'd say you're entitled." She put her hand under Jess's chin and lifted it, breaking the light mood. "We love you, Jess, and you are a part of our family."

At that pronouncement, the tears did fall. Jess whispered, "I love all of you, too," and turned to see where Alex was.

Alex walked up beside her and dropped her bag in the foyer. "Geez, Mom, what did you say to her?" He bent his head and kissed his mother's cheek as Jess playfully swatted at him.

All three of them were standing in the entryway smiling and chuckling softly when Marisa bounded down the stairs, like the happy, energetic fifteen-year-old she was. "Jess!"

Jess struggled to keep her balance as Marisa leapt at her, obviously happy to see her. Feeling Alex's warm hand on her back for support, she wrapped her arms around her protégé while trying to clamp the crutches under her arms. She managed, barely. "Marisa!" She laughed. "Gee, it's nice to see you, too."

Marisa stepped back and looked Jess over. "Sorry, Jess. Didn't mean to tackle you. I'm so glad you're okay."

There was the sound of a throat clearing, followed by Alex's amused voice. "Nice to see you, too, squirt."

Marisa stuck her tongue out, then walked into his arms. "Jealous?"

Alex kissed her forehead. "A little."

Claire shook her head at her children. Chuckling softly to herself, she walked over to pick up Jess's bag and handed it to Marisa. "Go put this in Alex's room and get Jess settled in

while I talk to your brother.” Claire turned back to her son, her expression solemn. “Any news about the twins? Which one is missing? Your father didn’t say.”

Marisa stopped halfway up the stairs and turned around, her face pale. “What? What’s wrong with the twins? Missing? Missing how? Which one? How long? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Jess looked at Alex, then back to Marisa, who had sunk down to sit on the steps. Alex groaned and looked at his mother, who shrugged. “Rome is missing. At this point that’s all I know. He’s been gone for about forty-eight hours.”

Marisa stood up, looked at her mom, and started running up the steps. “Roman is missing?” She clutched her throat like she couldn’t breathe, then mumbled, “I have to call my *tia*,” before she disappeared around the corner.

Jess looked at a crestfallen Claire. “What was that about?”

Claire sighed. “Emilio and his wife, Sarah, are very close to Michael. I’m sure she’s going to call and pester her *tía*, her aunt, into telling her what she knows.” Claire shook her head sadly and continued her explanation. “Marisa’s had a crush on the twins for as long as I can remember. When she was little she used to tell me she was going to marry them both and move to California.”

Jess grinned at the fanciful imagination of a little girl. “Why California?”

Alex answered. “So she could be a movie star.” He leaned in and kissed his mom’s cheek again. “Sorry I’m running off and leaving you to deal with this. Maybe Jess can help cheer Marisa up.”

Jess felt her heart sink. She knew he had to work, but she thought he’d at least stay for a few minutes. “Are you leaving right now?”

Seeing the frown mar Jess's face, Alex ran his finger across her lips before he kissed them. "Yes. It's almost seven o'clock."

"When will you be back?"

Alex grinned at the regret in her voice. He hated to leave her, but it was absolutely necessary. "I'll be back shortly after you wake up in the morning. How's that?"

Jess nodded. "Okay."

"Okay. Don't forget your medicines are in your bag. Set them out on my nightstand along with water before you go to sleep, since I won't be here to help you."

Claire grabbed his arm and started shooing him out the door. "It's almost dark. Go. I can take care of her. I raised you, Dash, and Marisa, not to mention your father. I think I can manage."

Alex leaned in and gave Jess a quick kiss as his mom started dragging him out. "Okay, okay, I'm going. Bye, baby."

"Bye." Jess was already heading for the stairs when Alex yelled, "Bye, squirt."

Claire watched Jess disappear into Alex's old bedroom before she turned back to her son. "Go put your truck away, and I'll meet you in the basement to lock the back door in a few minutes."

God, he hoped this worked. Alex brushed his lips across his mother's cheek and headed out the door. "Thanks, Mom. I owe you."

Chapter Thirteen

“Will you help me with the wedding arrangements?”

After checking on the cookies, Claire shut the oven and turned to face Jess, who was sitting at the kitchen table, picking at the uncooked cookie dough. “Of course I will. I’d love to help. Do you have anything done?”

Jess looked up, let out a breath, and shook her head. “No, not really. Kat and I looked at dresses. She, Jill, and I are supposed to go look again and discuss preparations next week sometime. I always thought my mom ...” Jess dropped her head, but Claire saw her pained expression.

Claire couldn’t help feeling sympathetic; she, too, was without family, or near enough. Her own parents had abandoned her when she’d decided to marry Diego. To this day she didn’t even know if her parents were still alive or not. They’d never even seen her children; for all she knew, they didn’t even know she had children.

Claire reached out and drew Jess’s chin up with her fingers. She smiled and bent forward to kiss her on the nose, making Jess smile in return. “You are like a daughter to Diego and me, Jess. Anything you need, you’ve only to ask. We *are* your family.”

She reached out and wiped the tear from Jessica's eye. "Don't cry, sweetheart. I'm almost in tears myself. If you start, I'll be boo-hooing with you."

Jess nodded and pushed her chair back; she hobbled around the corner of the table and caught Claire in a hug. "Thank you. You and Diego have always been like parents to me, even before I met Alex. You came and helped me change costumes when no one else seemed to care that I had only a dance in between to do so. Diego has always made sure I had food at competitions and conventions. And you both used to come with Marisa to watch me dance, even if Marisa wasn't performing in that particular show. Why? Why have you always been so nice to me?"

With tears in her eyes, Claire pulled back from her and urged her to sit back down. Once Jess was seated again, Claire knelt before her and clasped her hands in her own. "Oh, sweetie, it's always been so painfully obvious to us that you needed someone to love you and take care of you; I know you've always had Kat, but it's not the same as having parents. Katherine is a good girl, and we are very fond of her as well, but she has her grandparents." She paused. "Remind me someday and I'll tell you about my own parents."

Jess wiped the tears away with the back of her hand as Claire dabbed at her own. Her face lit up in a big grin, and she began to giggle.

"What?"

"Well, I was just thinking, I really don't have anything to cry about. I'm getting everything all in one shot: a husband, parents, and a brother and sister. Not to mention cousins and aunts and uncles."

Claire stood and smiled down at her. "There you go, an instant family, even if we are a strange lot."

Jess wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled up at Claire with sincerity. "I think what you and Diego did for Dash, taking him in when he was a kid and giving him a family, is

wonderful.” She shrugged and grinned. “You two seem to make a habit of picking up strays, don’t you?”

Claire nodded seriously. Yes, she and Diego were good at that. “I guess we do. Dash is as much a son to us as Alex is; we love him very much. And we love you, too.” Claire smiled wistfully and continued, “Maybe I always knew you were my son’s mate.”

Before Jess could respond to that odd comment, Claire turned toward the door. “I’ll be right back with some paper and a pen, and we’ll start on those wedding plans, okay?”

“Okay.” Jess shrugged and stuck her finger in the cookie dough as Claire disappeared from the room.

The glob of cookie dough was inches away from her mouth when she heard a muffled clanking noise followed by a barely audible, “Shit.”

The voice was masculine and sounded suspiciously like Alex. Jess plopped the cookie dough in her mouth as she looked around the kitchen. Her eyes rested on a door that probably led down to the cellar, which was where the sound and voice seemed to have come from.

Grabbing her crutches from beneath the table, Jess slid her chair back, pulled herself up, and steadied herself. She maneuvered her way to the door and opened it.

A cool breeze swept in, and the pitch black played havoc with her depth perception, making her dizzy. She recovered and realized no one would be down there in such darkness and had moved back to close the door, when she heard a small whimper. That was odd; why would anyone be down there in the dark?

Jess reached beside the door and flipped the light switch. There was nothing down there. She was about to close the door again when she spotted a shadow on the far wall at the end of the stairs. “Hello? Is anyone down there?”

She heard nothing, but couldn't shake the feeling that someone was there. She could have sworn she'd heard Alex's voice moments ago. She picked her crutches up and placed them down on the top step, used her leverage to lift her leg and put it between the crutches. Slowly she repeated the process, carefully watching her step, until she was standing on the basement floor. She had never been in this part of the house before; so what she saw startled her.

To her right, along the entire length of the wall, were steel bars from floor to ceiling. It was like some sort of jail cell. In the middle of the cage was a door made of the same steel bars, complete with a padlock.

The cell appeared to be for housing large animals, like lions or tigers. Why had no one mentioned an exotic animal? That was a pretty expensive pet. Not that Claire and Diego couldn't afford it, but it was odd they'd never mentioned it.

Her gaze scanned the area, starting at the left. Against the wall, in the back corner of the cell, there was a large metal bowl of water and a huge hunk of raw meat.

The bloody mess on the polished cement floor looked like a large slab of beef, the type seen in movies hanging from meat hooks in butcher shops. Jess covered her mouth in disgust. The smell was horrible.

Her gaze followed a thin trail of blood away from the meat to a metal drain in the middle of the cell. *Oh, gross!*

Jess continued to scan the cage. There was a cot along the right wall, but no animal. Why would there be a cot in an animal's pen?

She shook her head and was about to go back upstairs and find Claire when a slight movement caught her attention.

Jess stared closely at the folding bed. There was a stack of blankets and some clothing folded at the end of it. The cot itself was empty. Looking under the bed, Jess saw a foot, leg,

and hip at the end of it. They were human parts, and bare. Someone was sitting at the end of the bed, their face and upper body concealed by the high stack of linen at the foot.

“Alex? Is that you?”

“Go away, Jessica! Get out now!”

Covering a gasp with her hand, Jess’s crutch clattered to the ground with a loud slap. A dark head popped up over the end of the cot and clothes. Jess stared into amber eyes several seconds before recognition hit. “Oh, my God!”

She stood there, frozen, not believing what she was seeing. Why would Claire lock Alex in a cage? And what was wrong with his eyes?

Chapter Fourteen

Alex winced and caught his breath in pain. Doubling over, he managed to grit out another sharp command at Jess before he felt his canines lengthen. He knew if he didn't get her out now, she'd see him change. He had held it off as long as he'd dared. The change had been initiated just before she came downstairs. When he'd heard her voice and realized she was coming down the steps, he'd fought off the onset of his change, hoping she'd leave. Instead, she'd seen him.

He could normally delay the transformation for a long time, but not once he'd instigated it. He'd once waited until four in the morning to change. That was no small feat; he could possibly hold off all night, but he'd never tried. Most of his people couldn't postpone their shifting; the moon called to them. He, Adrian, and Brent were the only ones he knew of that could.

Alex moaned in pain once more before he fell to his side. He heard Jess gasp and could see her gathering up her dropped crutch and coming closer. Usually, shifting was a little uncomfortable but not painful. However, the pain from trying to resist once he'd already started the change was excruciating.

Alex was conscious of Jess calling out to him even though he couldn't focus enough to understand her. He could hear the confusion and fear in her voice. He realized he could no longer fight it. The pain was too intense. He was beginning to lose consciousness.

Focusing through the foggy haze and on the change, he prayed that Jess would understand. The pain stopped, and all of his senses magnified. He could hear Jess crying, asking if he was okay and where the key to the lock was. He could smell the cookies baking in the kitchen, and, closer, meat. Raw meat.

Fur rippled under his skin, waiting for release. His face lengthened, and his fingers and toes fused together as his nails stretched into long black claws. A tail pushed through his skin, and his muscles contorted. Black fur covered him until his muscular body was completely formed into the powerful body of a large wolf.

Standing in front of a huge black wolf with only bars between them, Jess's disbelief turned to panic. Adrenaline kicked in and she dropped her crutches, scrambling up the stairs as fast as she and her bad leg would allow.

At the moment, nothing mattered more than getting to safety. Banging her knee on the top step, she screamed. The wolf let out a long, mournful howl at her cry.

She stood and heaved the door open, ignoring the pain shooting through her leg. Hobbled inside, she slammed the door shut and leaned against it, then collapsed on the floor.

Jess knew she was breathing, because she could hear the air moving in and out, but she couldn't seem to get enough air. Her chest burned. It felt like someone was squeezing her. Her mind couldn't seem to focus. Her vision blurred and her leg stung. She saw Claire step into her clouded vision before it went black.

Claire came running downstairs when she heard Jess scream. When it was followed by a howl, she knew immediately what had happened. Panic gripped her.

Her heart was beating a mile a minute when she reached the kitchen door. She opened it, and Jess fainted dead away before she could reach her.

Running to her side, she yelled for Marisa. Claire rolled Jess over and cradled her head in her lap. How could she have been so stupid to have let her find Alex this way?

She remembered how shocking it had been the first time she'd seen Diego change; she, at least, had known what he was.

Marisa came clamoring into the kitchen seconds later, and Claire told her to page Jill. Marisa made the call, then rushed to her mother's side.

Marisa began to cry and curse her brother for not telling Jess what he was. Claire reached up and patted her cheek in reassurance. "It will be okay, *mija*. Help me get her to the couch."

Together Claire and Marisa managed to get the unconscious woman off the floor and into the living room. The phone rang as Claire finished placing a pillow under Jess's injured leg. "I've got the phone, Marisa. Go down to the basement and get her crutches."

Marisa stomped off in the direction of the kitchen as Claire picked up the phone off the end table next to Jess's head. She said, "Hold on a sec," into the receiver, then covered it. "Marisa. No berating your brother. Get the crutches and come back."

Turning her attention back to the phone, she lifted her hand. "Hello?"

Jill's voice sounded amused when she asked, "You rang?"

"Yes, I did. Can you get the rest of the night off? We have a situation. Jess knows, and I think she may have reinjured her knee."

Claire could hear Jill's quick breath, and then there was nothing for several seconds. "Jill? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm shocked, that's all. How's Jess? Is she hysterical?"

“No, she’s unconscious. She fainted after making it up the basement stairs without her crutches.”

“Shit!”

Claire decided she couldn’t have said it better. “Exactly.”

“Make her comfortable. I’ll be there ASAP.”

Claire looked down at Jess lying so still and pale on the couch. “Are you sure you can get off?”

“Course I can; it’s a family emergency. Be right there.”

Claire stared at the phone and smiled. She hung up and turned to see Marisa’s worried face. “Everything is going to be okay, honey. Jill is on her way, and we’ll decide what to do together.”

Chapter Fifteen

A cool wetness against her cheek brought Jess's eyes open with a snap. She stared into deep brown eyes until Jill's worried face came into focus. Blinking several times to clear her clouded brain, Jess started to sit, but a warm, gentle hand on her shoulder restrained her. Glancing above her, she saw Claire seated on the arm of the couch, looking equally worried. Taking in her surroundings to try and regain her bearings, she spied Marisa sitting at the end of the couch. It all came back to her.

Alex is a freaking werewolf! Jess popped up into a sitting position, her breath suddenly coming in pants. Jill set the washcloth on the edge of the couch and put a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Jess, if you don't get yourself under control, I'm going to give you a sedative. Calm down. I need to look at your knee, and then we'll talk."

Jess nodded her head, not trusting her voice. She knew she needed to pull it together, but she couldn't help the pounding of her heart or quick gulps of breath. She mentally shook herself. She was a survivor; there was no way she was going to let this do her in. She needed time to think.

Claire propped some pillows behind her as Jill got ready to examine her knee.

Gentle hands stroked her shoulders and urged her back onto the pillows as Jill's icy fingers worked the brace free of her leg.

Jess took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves further; she knew Claire and Jill would never harm her. Another deep, stabilizing breath and she realized that she was in no danger from *anyone* in the house. True, things were not as they appeared, and someone -- namely Alex -- owed her some explanations, but deep down she knew their feelings for her hadn't changed. And to be completely honest, neither had hers. But, damn it, someone had some major explaining to do.

The cool fingers continued to examine her abused knee, and strong, sure hands kneaded her shoulders. The brace fell away, and Jill's cold hands touched her warm, swollen flesh, making her jump. Jill pulled her hands away and rubbed them together, trying to warm them. "Easy, Jess. It's swollen like a son of a bitch." Her slightly warmer hands returned to their task of feeling and prodding.

"Is that a medical term?" Jess tried to lighten the tension in the room, although her voice was slightly unsteady.

Jill's eyes snapped up to meet hers, startled, then eased into what could only be relief. Claire and Marisa's soft chuckles served to further break the tension.

The room fell quiet again; then Jess blurted out, "Why didn't he tell me?"

Claire leaned over her so Jess could see her face and asked, "Would you have believed him?"

Jess sighed and shook her head. No, she wouldn't have. She still wasn't sure she believed it, and she'd seen him with her own two eyes.

A soft sob rent the air, and Jess's eyes snapped toward the sound. Marisa's teary brown eyes met and held her own. "Please don't hate us, Jess."

Jess felt her heart plummet. Her arms stretched out automatically to Marisa.

Marisa stood and came around to her side. Jill whispered a soft, "Be careful of her leg," then moved aside so Marisa could reach her.

Marisa fell into her arms with another sob as Jill and Claire sat quietly watching.

After several long minutes, Jess wiped at Marisa's tears. "I don't hate anyone, Reece. I love you guys, and nothing can change that. I'm just confused; it isn't every day that you find out the man you love is a ... werewolf?" Marisa nodded her head, answering Jess. "Nothing's changed, Reece, I'm ... hell, I don't even believe in werewolves." Her voice trailed off as Marisa reached up to brush at Jess's face. Jess hadn't known she was crying, but the realization made the tears come harder.

Marisa pulled her back into an embrace and squeezed tightly. "Don't hate Alex, either," she pleaded.

Jess straightened up, startled. She'd never considered hating Alex. She wasn't exactly happy with him at the moment, but she still loved him. Hell, she still intended to marry him. The realization made her smile. "Honey, I could never hate Alex."

As the words left her mouth, the other three women let out their breaths, and the tension in the room relaxed back into the camaraderie they usually enjoyed together.

Jess grinned as she witnessed the tears seeping from both Claire and Jill's eyes. Tears of relief? "You guys! Stop it."

Claire leaned in, brushed a kiss across Jess's brow, then Marisa's. She pulled Jill to her and kissed her, too, before she smiled fondly and said, "My girls."

Jess's response was to slug her in the arm. "Cut it out. I don't wanna cry anymore."

Jill laughed and followed suit with a punch to Claire's other arm. "Yeah, knock it off; you're ruining my reputation as a hard-ass."

All four shared a laugh and a quick group hug. Jill sat back and began refastening Jess's knee brace. Marisa stood and stretched her arms over her head, and Jess leaned back into the

pillows. Claire returned to the arm of the chair before she asked, “Well, what’s the diagnosis, Doc?”

As if on command, Jess’s knee started throbbing. She winced a little as Jill propped her knee back on a pillow.

Jill stood, arched her back, and looked down at her. “Swollen, but no major damage as far as I can tell. We’re going to ice it and see what it looks like in the morning.” She shrugged, and looked at Claire. “We may go do another MRI to make sure, but I’ll have Alex look at it in the morning and see what he thinks.”

The mention of Alex brought Jess out of her pain-induced haze. She wondered briefly if he’d be able to “look” at it in the morning, but realized that this was nothing new to Claire, Jill, or Marisa. They’d been dealing with this for years. It occurred to her that the men of the family were on a weekend retreat. “That’s why they go once a month to the cabin, isn’t it?”

Claire looked taken aback at first, but apparently had no problem following Jess’s train of thought. “Yes. They go the night of the full moon and usually come home in the morning.”

Jess tried to remember everything she ever heard about werewolves, but Jill interrupted her thoughts.

“I’m going to go get an ice pack and some pain pills. I’ll be back in a sec. Marisa, come help me.” Marisa followed Jill to the kitchen, leaving Jess alone with Claire.

Claire settled herself on the edge of the couch and grasped Jess’s hand in her own. “What do you want to know, sweetheart?”

Jess closed her eyes, trying to think. Where to start? She had tons of questions, but she was suddenly so overwhelmed that she was having a hard time putting the questions into words. “Are they dangerous? I mean vicious and mean like in the movies and books?”

“No. Not at all. They do not go around attacking people unprovoked. Sometimes their animal instincts get the better of them, but they retain human thought processes. At least, the most powerful of them do.”

Jess nodded, trying to let everything Claire told her soak in. “Diego, Adrian, Brent, and Dash are like Alex?”

“Yes. It’s a hereditary trait in Diego’s family. Some werewolves are made. Some are born. Dash isn’t actually ours, but it was also a gene carried in his family through his mother’s side.”

It was hereditary. Did that mean if she and Alex had kids, they’d have it? Jess’s eyes snapped open. Something occurred to her. “How come Marisa doesn’t have it?”

Claire smiled and brushed Jess’s hair. “It’s a male trait. Diego’s brother, Emilio, has it, too. The women can carry it, but they don’t get it. Take Diego’s sister, Rita, for example. She carries the gene, and one of her sons was a born werewolf, but the other wasn’t.”

“Julian isn’t a werewolf.”

Claire chuckled. “Yes, he is.”

Jess’s eyebrows scrunched together in confusion. “You just said one of her sons was born with it and the other wasn’t.”

“Yes, I did. Adriano was born with it; Julian wasn’t. But Julian is a werewolf, too.”

Now she was really confused. Jess frowned up at Claire.

“When Julian was eight, he was hit by a car while riding his bicycle. We knew the only chance to save him was to turn him.” The ache in Claire’s voice spoke volumes of her love for her nephew and that she was reliving the story as she told it. Jess clutched her hand, offering support, but also urging her to continue. “The other boys were too young to turn him; they hadn’t reached puberty yet. Diego was at the restaurant, and Emilio was out of town. We called Michael, the twins’ dad, but he was further away than Diego.” Claire took a

deep breath and closed her eyes. “We were afraid Diego wouldn’t make it in time. He almost didn’t.”

Squeezing her hand, Jess said, “But he did.”

“Yes, he did. He cut his wrist, mixed his blood with Julian’s, and Julian started to heal his wounds immediately.”

Before Jess could ask about Claire’s cryptic statement about the boys not being able to change Julian because they hadn’t reached puberty, Jill and Marisa came back into the room. Jill arranged the ice pack around Jess’s knee, took the pills from Marisa, and held them out to Jess.

Marisa helped her sit and held a glass of water out for her. Jess swallowed the pills and handed the water back to Marisa.

“What significance does puberty play?” She finally asked Claire.

“They show signs of their heritage at birth. They have more acute senses, and heal faster, but they don’t actually change for the first time until puberty. Therefore, they can’t convert anyone until after they change.”

Jess nodded and stifled a yawn. “So that’s why Alex and Adrian couldn’t help Julian?”

“Yes, nor could Brent or Dash. Or either of the twins, who were both there, for that matter.”

Jess had a ton of questions, but she was also worn out. She was still shocked at her discovery, but Claire, Jill, and Marisa had done a great job at easing her fears. She was no longer afraid, just curious, and a little upset. Okay, a lot upset.

Apparently realizing the toll tonight’s events had taken on her, Jill ordered her to bed. With Claire on one side and Jill on the other, they managed to carry her upstairs to Alex’s old room.

Left alone in the room Alex had grown up in, Jess settled herself down in bed and looked around the room. It was cluttered with memories. Alex’s memories.

On the nightstand next to the bed sat a picture of Alex, Adrian, Dash, and Brent. They were all shirtless in cutoff jeans, their arms slung across each other's shoulders, in front of a lake. Jess smiled in wonder. Who would have thought the four teenagers in that picture shared such a monumental secret?

Next to that picture was another of Alex, Brent, and a girl. Alex and Brent were about sixteen. The girl looked a couple of years younger. The boys were leaning against Brent's classic GTO. They were laughing, looking at each other. The girl was sitting on the hood of the car directly behind Brent, her arms around his neck and her legs wrapped around his waist; her long black hair hung loose over his shoulder. She was looking directly into the camera with a serene smile on her face and had the most beautiful gray eyes Jess had ever seen. She was beautiful, period. Her skin was very light against Brent's, and she was dainty, very petite. The only reason she was able to look over Brent's shoulder was because he was leaning back so far. If she'd been hanging on Alex rather than Brent, Jess would have been very jealous.

Jess looked around the room. Her glance rested on the pictures on the dresser. There was a picture of Dash and Jill on their wedding day, surrounded by Alex, Adrian, and Brent.

Next to the wedding picture was a photo of Adrian and Jill holding beer bottles in a toast by a swimming pool. Both wore sunglasses. Adrian was bare-chested, and Jill had on a black bikini.

On the other end of the dresser was another picture featuring the same gray-eyed girl who was in the picture with Alex and Brent. The picture included the whole group side by side: Alex, Adrian, Dash, Brent, Julian, the twins, and the girl. She stood next to Brent, her head resting against his arm. They were all younger in this picture. The older boys were about twelve; Julian and the twins were toddlers; and the girl was maybe ten, but it was without doubt the same girl. *Who is she?*

Why had Alex never mentioned her? What other secrets did he have?

Closing her eyes, Jess pictured Alex's beloved face this evening. He'd been afraid. Afraid she'd hate him? She could never hate him, but ... her last thought before she drifted off to sleep was that Alex should have told her sooner.

Chapter Sixteen

The cool concrete floor wrung a shiver from Alex's naked body. He opened his eyes, trying to regain his equilibrium. He was in his parents' basement; it was pitch black, but his eyes had no problem focusing in the darkness. Judging by his internal clock, he guessed it was sometime in the early morning. He had lifted his head and pushed himself to a sitting position when the memory of Jess running away from him in fear assailed him.

Lifting his nose in the air, he inhaled deeply. Her scent was there; faint, with a lingering undertone of fear, but there nonetheless. Was the scent lingering? Or was she still in the house? He couldn't tell. But the scent was in the direction of his old room.

His mother's scent was strong. She was close. Alex listened intently and realized she was coming closer. He stood and quickly gathered his clothes off the end of the bunk, not even bothering to retrieve his shoes and socks. Pulling on his pants, then his shirt, he tied the string around the waist of his scrubs as his mother opened the cellar door.

"Alex? Are you awake?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm awake. Hurry and let me out."

Claire strolled down the stairs, fumbling with the keys in her hand. She reached the cage door and slid the key into the lock. Before she managed to get out of the way

completely, Alex began pushing the door open, narrowly missing her. Once freed, he paused long enough to brush a light kiss across his mother's cheek, then turned for the stairs.

Pale fingers wrapped around his hard, tanned forearm. "Alex, Marisa and I are going to the cabin. Dash and your father have decided we should have a family barbecue."

Alex nodded once and turned back toward the stairs, impatient to see Jess, if she was even there.

The fingers tightened on his arm again, before his mother's calm, even voice broke the silence. "Son ... take a shower first; she's not going anywhere."

Alex looked into the smiling eyes and smiled back, silently thanking his mother for the information. He nodded his head, kissed her cheek again, and hurried up the stairs.

Jess was still in the house; she hadn't fled as he'd expected. Alex willed himself to take a deep breath and relax.

He followed his sense of smell to his room. Opening the door, he realized the reason her scent was so faint.

His scent enveloped hers. She was snuggled so far down into his bed that only the top of her dark head was visible. She was on her side, her back to him. He thought briefly about waking her, but remembered his mother's words.

Walking further into the room, closing the door behind him, he went to his closet. Not many of his clothes remained, but he always kept a couple pairs of pants and a spare shirt or two there. Selecting faded blue jeans and a black t-shirt, Alex walked into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and quickly disrobed.

Emerging from the shower, he wrapped a white towel around his lean hips. He caught sight of himself in the vanity mirror and realized he needed a shave, but he didn't want to waste another minute. He didn't even want to bother with the clothes he'd brought in with him. He needed to talk to Jess, needed to know that she was okay, and needed her to tell him that everything was still okay with them.

When he opened the bathroom door, he realized two things: she was awake and she was smiling. He let out the breath he'd been holding and offered her a tentative smile of his own.

"Hey." Jess's voice was a little hoarse but otherwise sounded fine.

"Hey, yourself."

Jess pushed herself a bit further up on her elbows and winced a little. Apparently her leg didn't want to cooperate. She leaned over to the nightstand and snagged the glass of water and her pain medication.

He hurried to her side. Grabbing the pills from her hand, he opened the bottle and shook one out. He closed the lid, sat down on the edge of the bed, and held his hand open, offering it to her. She leaned on her elbow and took the proffered pill, her hand lingering above his for a minute before she popped the pill into her mouth and swallowed some water.

She set the water on the bedside table and pushed herself to a sitting position as Alex pulled her pillow out from under her and propped it against the headboard. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He reached slowly for the covers, giving her plenty of time to protest. When she didn't, he pulled them back.

He made a small hissing sound at the sight of her bare thighs and felt his blood rush south. She wore one of his t-shirts, bunched around her hips, and a pair of pink, silky panties. Alex stared for a few seconds, then lowered his gaze to her knee.

Carefully undoing her brace, he examined her knee, and groaned. "Damn, Jess, it's swollen all to hell."

Apparently she felt censure in his comment, because she went on the defensive. "Well, if you'd told me what you were, maybe I wouldn't have felt the need to scramble up the stairs, scared to death, without my crutches ... dumb shit!"

Alex made eye contact with her and blinked several times, then threw his head back and roared with laughter. She was so unpredictable. He'd expected her to be a little scared of

him or still disbelieving. He hadn't expected irritation over the fact that he'd kept the secret of his nature from her. "Did ..." He shook his head, finally getting his amusement under control, and tried again. "Did you call me a dumb shit?"

"Yes!" She smiled. But he could tell she was still annoyed, if not a little angry.

He leaned in to kiss her, but she put a hand up, holding him off. "Why didn't you tell me, Alex? I might not have believed it -- hell, I saw you, and I still don't believe it -- but that is beside the point. You should have told me!"

Alex busied himself refastening her brace, then looked into her accusing eyes. "I would have told you. I didn't want you to find out like that. I'm sorry."

"Were you even going to tell me before the wedding?"

"Yes. I would have. I swear I would have, Jess. You have to believe me; I'd have never married you without telling you." Alex dropped his head and tried to get his emotions under control. He needed to know if she was going to leave him. He'd never allow that, of course, but he needed to try and stop her from *wanting* to leave, if he could. He felt compelled to reassure her, but he wasn't sure where to start. He was taking his cues from her.

A small sound broke into his thoughts. It sounded like ... a giggle? He glanced up in time to see Jess, a huge grin on her face, scoot closer to him. She wrapped her arms around his bare shoulders and dropped her forehead to his chest before her small giggles erupted into full-fledged laughter.

Feeling his heart soar, Alex wrapped his arms around her small shoulders and nuzzled her cheek with his forehead. "What's so funny?"

Jess shook her head and laughed harder. When she finally managed to quiet down, she looked up, tears of glee in her eyes. "I'm sitting here, my knee hurting like hell, my fingers itching to rip that towel off of you, and the only thing I can think about is Kat."

Alex smiled warily. "What?"

Jess gave him a quick kiss on the lips and started laughing again.

Alex knew he wasn't going to get any answers until she stopped laughing, so he concentrated instead on what she'd said. Did she say she wanted to rip the towel off?

His cock twitched in growing excitement. He'd had a semi since he'd pulled the covers off to reveal her toned thighs and those barely there panties. He looked down and saw her pert breasts jiggle with her laughter, and grew harder still. Reaching down and gathering the hem of her shirt in his hands, he pulled it up and quickly over her head.

Jess's laughter stopped, and her gasp echoed through the room.

Alex reached up and cupped her breasts, his thumbs rubbing her nipples. He continued to rub until her nipples stood erect against his thumbs and she groaned with pleasure. Pinching the hard little pebbles, he rolled them back and forth. Leaning forward, he sucked a tight nub into his mouth while kneading the other with his large, skilled hand. He pulled back breathlessly and asked, in a panting whisper, "What is so funny about Kat?"

"Huh?"

His tongue rasped across her nipple twice, then stopped. "What were you laughing at?"

"Huh?" Jess gasped again.

"You said you were thinking about Kat; then you started laughing." Alex took advantage of her daze and pushed her toward the middle of the bed and into a prone position. He pulled the towel free from his hips and scooted in next to her, throwing the covers over their lower bodies before he lavished attention once again on her lovely breasts.

Jess groaned when his mouth moved back to her sensitive nipple. He suckled deeply for several seconds before he rose on his elbow and cocked an eyebrow at her. Knowing he wouldn't continue his intimate assault until he had the answer he sought, she explained. "I was just thinking about how she'd react to me telling her that you're a werewolf. And Adrian, for that matter. She'd think I was certifiable. It's probably best if we don't tell her, or anyone."

He smiled and buried his face in her hair, breathing in her scent. His thumb brushing lightly across her nipple, he asked, "So, you forgive me for not telling you?" When she didn't answer immediately, he raised himself and stared down into her heavy-lidded eyes.

"Well, I'm not exactly thrilled about you not telling me, but ... oooh, that feels good, pinch harder ..."

Alex released the pebbled nub and raised his eyebrow.

"Oh, darn it, don't stop; we can talk later."

"I want to talk now." He bent his head and flicked his tongue over her nipple, then looked back up at her face. "Well?"

Jess opened her eyes, realizing he needed to hear the words. She ran her fingers through his thick black hair and pulled his head down to hers. "I wish you would have told me, but I can see why you didn't. It's a little hard to digest, but nothing has changed. I love you, Alex, and I'll always love you. And, more than anything in the world, I want to be Mrs. Alejandro Hernandez. Now, will you stop talking and kiss --"

His skilled lips cut off the rest of her sentence. Alex ravaged her mouth. The kiss was hard and hungry. His tongue swept in, caressing her teeth, her tongue.

Jess returned his kiss, her hands running through his hair to rest on his shoulders. She pulled at him frantically, trying to pull him atop her.

Alex chuckled softly into her mouth. He slid his weight between her legs, being careful of her injured knee, but still she clutched at him, trying to hurry him. "Slow down, baby."

Pulling her mouth away from his, she squeezed her eyes shut and pleaded. "Alex, please don't stop this time, please ... I need you."

He brushed the hair off her forehead and dropped a kiss on her nose. "I won't, baby, but we have to slow down. Relax. There's no hurry."

Chapter Seventeen

Jess lay beneath the weight of Alex's body, reveling in the feel of him. It felt like she'd waited for this moment for years.

The prickly whiskers on his chin scraped across her distended nipple, making her squirm. The pleasure/pain was so intense, she could feel the involuntary contraction of her vaginal walls.

Wiggling her hips, she tried again to persuade Alex to do her bidding. He evaded her efforts with ease and continued his assault on her chest.

"I love your breasts. You have the most sensitive nipples." To demonstrate, he raised himself on his elbows and blew on the erect peaks, making them pucker even higher. Rewarding him with a soft moan, Jess tried to pull his head back to the aching tips. Alex quickly avoided her hands with a chuckle. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that patience is a virtue?"

Groaning, she glared at him. "I'm trying to lose one virtue; what do I care about gaining another?"

Alex's smile widened, and he shook his head at her annoyance, kissing his way down her stomach as his thumbs slid into the waistband of her panties and worked them down her

legs and off. His tongue swirled into her belly button, and she let out a nervous little laugh as Alex tossed the satin panties to the floor. When he trailed further down to nip small bites on her hipbones, she began to giggle and squirm in earnest. "Alex, stop, you're killing me here."

Brown eyes twinkled up at her in amusement. "Doesn't sound like you're in pain to me. What is it you think you need, dear?"

In answer, Jess sucked in a breath, placed her hands on his head, and pushed.

With his shoulders wedged between her legs, Jess could feel his silent laughter. She chuckled to herself and blushed at her own boldness.

Before she could ponder her actions any further, his hot, wet mouth covered her. Their groans of pleasure were simultaneous.

Cool fingers found her labia and spread her open. Alex inhaled deeply and let out a small moan before his tongue swept a slow, lingering trail from her perineum all the way up to her clit. When he reached the top, he pulled his mouth away and repeated the process. Jess shivered in response, the slow languorous licks driving her higher and higher.

The familiar tingling began in her abdomen and spread outward as Alex began to devour her. Her fingers twined into his thick hair, massaging his scalp.

Seconds before her orgasm, he pulled away and slithered back up her body; she grumbled her displeasure. Before she realized what he was doing, the blunt head of his shaft pressed against her entrance. *Please don't let him stop this time.*

Wiggling her hips to try and accelerate his entrance, Jess managed to work the head into her body before Alex grabbed her hips in a firm grip, stopping her. The feeling was exquisite; her inner muscles contracted around him, making them both shiver.

Jess relaxed, trying to absorb the moment. After pushing steadily in, Alex stopped.

Unsure of the sudden pressure, Jess tried to wiggle backward. His hands tightened on her hips. "Shhhh, easy, this might hurt a little."

"How much is a li-- yeow!" Alex surged forward, burying himself to the hilt.

That had smarted; sharp and quick, but the pain was there nonetheless. Gasping for breath and willing the aftereffects of the sting to subside, Jess realized that Alex was having the same difficulty catching his breath.

His lips were pursed and his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Studying his face, Jess realized he was fighting for control. Control of what? Was he trying to let her adjust to the feel of him? Or was it something else entirely?

She took a deep breath and calmed herself. The pain had dissipated to a dull ache, but Alex hadn't noticed; his face was still a study in concentration. Reaching out a shaky hand, Jess brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "Are you okay?"

His head nodded briskly, but his eyes remained glued shut.

"Are you sure?"

Again he nodded.

"Alex? Open your eyes," she asked, afraid to see what his eyes might reveal.

Slowly, the long dark lashes rose. Jess gasped and began to struggle, trying to wiggle out from underneath him.

His eyes were gold; there was very little white visible. He held her firmly, fingers clamping on to her pale skin. "It's okay, baby; it'll go away in a minute."

Jess caught a glimpse of elongated canines, and his whispered plea went unheeded. *Oh, God. Please don't change on top of me.* She struggled vigorously, her discomfort of moments ago forgotten, replaced by her fear and the ache in her injured leg.

Alex's head dropped to the pillow beside her, and his hand came up to caress her face. "Shhh, it's all right, I promise. I'm not going to change. It's just the smell of blood. Give me a minute, baby."

The soft caresses on her cheek and the calm, even voice managed to reach her. She stopped struggling and turned her head to stare into Alex's face. As she watched, his irises

shrank back to normal and darkened into a deep brown. He smiled, and his teeth were once again the straight, even picture of perfection she always associated with his smile.

“Now you know why I wanted to wait.”

Not knowing whether to sigh in relief, laugh in nervousness, or cry in fear, Jess settled on slugging him in the arm. “Did you ever consider informing me that this might happen beforehand?”

In answer, Alex chuckled and moved his hips back slightly, then forward again.

That felt wonderful! Jess gasped, and her eyes widened in delight. “Ooh, you’re forgiven if you’ll do that again.”

Alex grinned wickedly and raised himself on his elbow. He slowly pulled out, then pushed back into her in leisurely, shallow movements. He continued his slow, sensual assault for several seconds before he pushed her legs further apart and pushed himself to his knees. Swiping the pillow next to her, he positioned it under her hips and doubled it over to raise her up.

“Alex, what are ...?”

“Shhh. Lean on your elbows.” He dipped his head toward where they were joined and breathlessly whispered, “Watch.”

The glistening dark shaft of his cock slid smoothly out as Jess stared. She shivered at the sight of the wide, bulbous head emerging slowly from her labia. Almost all the way out, he pushed back in bit by bit. Tingling contractions raced through her as he glided slowly in and out, each time emerging with more wetness on him. A slow, soft hiss from Alex spoke of his gratification at the sight.

Again and again he moved as they both looked, mesmerized, his breaths coming in short pants. With sweat dotting his forehead, Alex stopped.

Their eyes met briefly. Alex mouthed the words “I love you,” then went back to the task of pleasuring his mate.

Using one hand to push her labia apart and lift the hood covering her clit, he brought his other hand to her mouth. Two long fingers pushed between her lips as his gaze held hers.

His cock jumped as her tongue slowly laved his fingers, and her pussy tightened in response. Groaning softly, Alex pulled his fingers free. His fingers gently found her distended clit and made slow, sensual circles. He applied more pressure, and the leisurely circles on her clit became brisk, rough movements.

The tingles started in her spine and spread out. Jess knew the feeling; Alex had made her feel this way before, but somehow it was more intense. Stiffening her body to try to freeze the moment, she felt Alex pump harder. Relentlessly he plunged in and out of her, his buttocks flexing with each thrust. The last thing Jess was aware of before the stars burst behind her eyes and she collapsed flat on her back was Alex's ragged groan above her.

* * * * *

Gray eyes snapped open in alarm, taking in the cool, somber room. The sound of voices carried from above as Rome tried to regain his equilibrium. How long had he been unconscious? Where was he?

Lifting his head hurt like hell, but he managed to glance around the room. He was in a ... basement? That was odd; basements were rare in this part of the country. Only a few people he knew had them, and they were members of his pack. Was he among friend or foe?

He lay on his side in a tall, narrow cage on a stand of some kind. The dull concrete floor was about three feet below.

Rome pushed himself up on his hands slowly, trying to dispel the urge to vomit, and looked completely around the room.

The walls were cement, with two narrow windows high up, in front and behind him. There was a small lab table with assorted beakers and flasks filled with liquids of varying colors. A Bunsen burner and several syringes lay scattered on the table, as well. A flight of stairs led up to a closed door. Above his head there was a single light bulb, but it was off.

Judging from the light shining through the small slit of a window in front of him, he thought it was sometime between early morning and mid-afternoon. Had he changed last night?

Rome sat slowly and became aware of two things: he was naked, and there were several Band-Aids up and down his arms.

Running his hand through his closely cropped hair, he racked his brain trying to remember what had happened to him.

His last memory started with Rand reminding him to call Teresa and tell her he'd be with the pack on the night of the full moon. He'd gone for a long lunch at the restaurant where his twin worked part time, before heading back to the police academy. He'd met Julian at the restaurant and persuaded his best friend to let him borrow his motorcycle. Tossing his truck keys to Julian, he'd put on Julian's helmet and set off toward the academy for his evening classes. When he'd stopped at a traffic light, a sharp, piercing pain had hit him in the arm. He'd look down to see a dart in his bicep, and that was where his memory ended.

The snick of a lock turning brought Rome out of his musings. An older blonde woman flipped on a switch by the door and started down the steps, her shoes clicking faintly on the concrete. She looked vaguely familiar, but Rome couldn't place her.

"Well, well, it looks like my new pet is awake."

Chapter Eighteen

After their lovemaking, Jess lay on her side, facing the window, while Alex lay behind her, brushing his fingers through her long dark hair. The stroking stopped, and Alex's breath touched her lower back. Sighing in delight as his lips gently touched the base of her spine and large hands began kneading her back, Jess turned her head to look at him.

"Alex?"

"Hmmm?"

"What if I'm not able to walk by the wedding?"

Alex continued to massage her back. "Well, then, I guess for the bachelor party, the guys and I will go on a reconnaissance mission and steal a wheelchair for you to use."

Jess giggled. "Alex, I'm serious."

"So am I. It will be fun." His hand stilled on her back as if he were thinking. "Of course, we may have to steal more than one wheelchair."

Jess rolled over to look at him. Seeing his grin, she couldn't help but play along. "Okay, why? Why will we need more than one?"

"You've obviously never seen the guys drunk."

She tried to conceal her smile. "Why would they be drunk?"

“Well, because it’s a bachelor party, of course.”

This time she couldn’t help it -- she grinned at him. “Okay, so you all will be drunk. Why will we need more wheelchairs?”

“Like I said, you’ve never seen the guys drunk. Adrian will complain about the black face paint; then Brent will threaten to shoot him for complaining.”

Jess tried unsuccessfully not to giggle. “Black face paint?”

“Oh, definitely. We’ll have to be sneaky, or we’ll get thrown in jail.” Alex shook his head and furrowed his eyebrows. “Of course, with Dash shouting ‘the coast is clear’ every five seconds, we might get caught anyway.”

“Well ... why will we need more wheelchairs?”

“Because I only have so much patience. I’ll either have to give them all sedatives to shut them up, or knock them out. Either way, I’ll need more than one wheelchair to get the three of them back to the getaway car.”

They both laughed at the picture Alex painted. Jess finally quieted enough to say, “I’d offer my bachelorette party’s assistance, but I doubt that I could be inconspicuous on crutches, especially if I were drunk. Kat would sit around staring at Adrian, giggling. Marisa is too young to drink, and Jill would go around stuffing dollar bills in all the guys’ pants, shouting ‘Take it off!’ since it would be a bachelorette party.”

This imagery had them laughing even harder.

When their amusement finally subsided, Alex closed his eyes. Jess ran her fingers through his hair, and he snuggled closer, wanting her touch.

Caressing his head and tenderly brushing his hair behind his ear, Jess bent over and pressed a kiss to his temple. When she moved to pull her hand away, Alex grabbed it and placed it back on his head. She grinned and resumed her movements. He really loved to be stroked and petted. Now that she knew what he was, she thought of it as a canine quirk. She

could remember other occasions when she'd caressed his hair or arm and how much he enjoyed it ... more than most humans would. He never let her stop easily.

Sighing contently, Alex opened his eyes. "Jess, it doesn't matter to me one bit whether you walk down the aisle or have to be carried. And I'm not relenting on the wedding date, either ... unless it's to move it closer."

She leaned down to look at him, perplexed and a little irritated by his statement. He had said almost immediately after giving her the engagement ring that he wanted the wedding to be in three months' time. She hadn't really debated it, but she had assumed it would take a little longer than that to plan and that he would concede to however long it took.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath like he was reliving a painful memory. When his eyes finally opened again, Jess noticed that they were a little shinier than they had been only seconds ago.

"Jess, you scared the hell out of me. I really thought I was going to lose you, baby. Please don't make me wait more than three months. I doubt you'll have any trouble walking by then. I'll do whatever you want, and I'll help as much as I can with the arrangements. It can be as big a wedding as you want; just make it soon ... please."

Alex reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek. From the very beginning of their relationship, he had made her feel treasured and loved. She smiled, ran her hand across his face, and tried to be funny, knowing if she didn't, she'd get sentimental on him. "Gee, Alex, when you put it that way ..."

* * * * *

After another round of lovemaking, they'd cleaned up, then locked up his parents' house and started home. Despite such a hectic night, she was having a wonderful morning. She'd basked in the aftermath of their lovemaking. She was also still a little in awe of the whole werewolf thing, but now that she knew his secret, she felt much closer to him.

“Are you hungry?”

Jess glanced over at Alex from the passenger side of his truck and then looked down at their linked hands. She hadn't even realized that she was hungry until Alex asked. She squeezed his hand. “I could eat.”

Almost immediately, he turned into a local diner and cut the engine. He came around to her side and helped her from the truck. His hand rested on her back as he continued to look back and forth across the parking lot. He was taking his role as her bodyguard seriously. He'd always been attentive, but this was different. It felt really possessive. On the way inside, he was so close she actually had a hard time not setting her crutch down on his foot.

After they were seated in a booth and had ordered their food, Jess reflected on some of the things that had seemed peculiar to her but that she'd shrugged off. His glowing eyes hadn't been a trick of the light or her imagination; his growling, and aggression toward Adrian ... they had all been signs. How could she not have seen all that before? *Duh, Jess! How could you have known it was because he's a werewolf? Hello?* Jess chuckled.

“What was that for?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about last night.”

She reached for the creamer for her coffee. Alex grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Why is that funny?”

She squeezed his hand and smiled. “Because it's impossible ... only it's not. You know what I mean?”

Alex chuckled. “I know exactly what you mean.”

She grinned and shook her head at him. “You know, Alex, I've always wanted a unicorn. Do you think you can arrange that?”

His chuckling stopped abruptly. He became serious as he stared into her eyes. “No.”

Oops! Before she could apologize for her teasing, the waitress arrived with their breakfast. Jess dropped her head and stared into her lap, ashamed. How could she have been

so insensitive? It looked like she'd just found the one thing she couldn't joke about with him. Did he think she was making fun of him?

After the waitress set down her pancakes and his steak and eggs, she looked up. Alex leaned forward. "I don't think I can afford a unicorn. But I know where I can get a pegasus pretty cheap."

They both laughed. Relief washed over her. The jerk. He'd been playing with her. She should've known that he wouldn't take offense.

She started to ask him if he was serious about the pegasus, when she felt a presence at her side.

"Jess?" Lisa stood beside their table, a middle-aged balding man standing behind her. Was Lisa finally dating again?

Alex stood and offered his hand to Lisa. "Ms. Redding, I don't believe we've met. I'm Jess's fiancé, Alex Hernandez."

Lisa looked at Alex's hand, then at Jess. Finally, she shook Alex's hand. "Yes, your sister has taken classes with us for ... what, about ten years now?"

Alex looked down at Jess and smiled. "Yes, I believe that's correct."

Abruptly, Lisa dropped his hand and turned to her. "Jess, how do you feel?"

Jess smiled up at her boss. "I'm fine. A little sore, but fine." Jess gave a pointed glance back at the man, who was fidgeting with his keys, then back at Lisa, hoping she'd take the hint and introduce him.

Lisa ignored her look. Instead, she sat down on the bench next to Jess and grabbed her hand. "Honey, I'm so sorry about your knee. I feel just terrible. It shouldn't have happened."

Jess grinned at her. She was relieved that her boss was acting more normal than the last time she'd seen her. "Thank you. I'll be good as new in no time. If you change your mind and want me to come in and do office work while I'm recovering, let me know."

“I will, honey. Maybe you can come to work in a couple of weeks and teach the competition groups from a chair. Perhaps we can get Kat to demonstrate, while you conduct class.” She patted Jess’s hand, gave Alex one last glance, and stood up. “I’ll talk to you later, okay? I saw you sitting here, and I just wanted to come and check on you. I’ve been meaning to call you, but it’s been super busy at the studio. Have a nice breakfast.”

As Lisa walked off, Jess looked at Alex, who had regained his seat. “That was weird. She didn’t even introduce him.”

“Yeah, he reeked of nervousness, too.”

Jess frowned; she’d been talking about running into Lisa. “You mean the guy she was with? How do you know?”

Alex nodded as he cut into his steak. “Because of his scent ... and did you notice how restless he was? Who was he?”

She stared at him for a few seconds. *His scent?* Would she ever get used to statements like that? “Yeah, I noticed. I don’t know; I’ve never seen him before.” Could Alex smell when she was nervous? Or mad? She grinned. His wolfishness added a whole new dimension to their relationship. *Speaking of wolfishness ...* Jess wrinkled up her face at the sight of Alex’s rare steak. “You know, Alex, even though I understand now why you like your steaks cooked so rare ... it’s still disgusting.”

Alex stopped with the fork halfway to his mouth and laughed.

Chapter Nineteen

After returning home and making love again, Jess had sponged herself down while Alex had gone to his office. An hour later, Jess hobbled into his office. “Have you heard anything about Rome?”

Alex looked up from the latest note from Teresa regarding the pack activities during the past full moon. “No, unfortunately, not a word. Brent has spent most of the last few days investigating.”

Jess stood propped on her crutches in nothing but one of his t-shirts. “Ah ... this is hard on him, isn’t it? I get the impression that he’s very close to the twins.”

Alex’s gaze drank her in, his body coming to immediate attention. Rising from his chair, he started around the desk, ignoring her smirk. His focus was on getting Jess naked; although it had only been a short while since he’d last made love to her, he could never get enough. *What had she asked?* “Yes, it has been difficult for him. He took the twins under his wing after his mate disappeared. He’s always been sort of a surrogate older sibling to them.” He advanced on her.

Jess gasped as Alex swept her into his arms and growled against her throat. Erupting into a fit of giggles as he nipped at her shoulder, she wrapped her arms around his neck and

her crutches clattered to the floor. “That’s the girl in the pictures with Brent in your old room?”

Alex raised his head from her neck. “Yes, that’s Hellion.”

“That’s what Dash called me yesterday. Why do you call her Hellion?”

“Her given name was actually Rhett, but I don’t want to talk about her right now. It depresses me, and I’d much rather concentrate on my own mate, rather than Brent’s.” He punctuated the statement by nipping her neck.

Alex started up the stairs, nuzzling her throat. He wobbled twice and almost tripped. At the top, he stopped and looked down at her as he wagged his eyebrow. “Have you ever made love on stairs?”

Jess grinned up at him and shook her head. “Well, since I’ve only made love with you at your parents’ house and here ... I’m going to have to say no.”

Alex grinned. He liked that “our bedroom.” She was settling in nicely. Now, if he could get her leg back to normal and them married, everything would be perfect. Well, that, and finding out who was trying to take her from him. And finding Rome, of course. Heck, finding Rhett would go a long way in making things perfect, as well. “In that case, this will be a new experience for both of us.” Alex kissed her on the forehead and set her down on the landing. “I’ll be right back.”

Before Jess could ask where he was going, he took off toward their bedroom. He was back in less than a minute, completely naked, carrying a bottle and a towel. Goodness, he was sexy. “What is that?” Jess asked as he sat down on the landing beside her.

He grinned mischievously and whisked her shirt over her head. “You’ll see.”

Alex eased her down on the floor and straddled her stomach. Never looking away from his magnificently erect penis, Jess said, “I thought we were going to do it on the stairs.”

Alex chuckled and squirted something cold between her breasts. She flinched and let her breath out in a hiss.

“We are. Be patient.”

Jess looked down at her chest. *What in the world?* “Alex, what on earth are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” He closed the lid on what Jess now realized was a bottle of lubricant and set it beside the towel. He grabbed her hands and placed them on each side of her breasts. “Squeeze.”

He scooted forward and slid his cock between her breasts. Jess’s could feel her eyebrows practically shoot up to her hairline. She’d never in her wildest dreams imagined that people did such a thing. It was positively wicked.

He found her nipples and rolled them between his fingers and thumbs as he began to slide his cock back and forth between the valley of her breasts.

His plucking on her nipples made her pussy contract. Jess gasped at the pleasant sensation. She looked down to see the head of Alex’s cock peak through her breasts. It was one of the most erotic things she’d ever witnessed. She could feel the wetness growing between her thighs.

On his next thrust forward, Jess licked the tip of his cock. Alex groaned and let go of her sensitized nipples, falling forward onto his hands. He began to thrust harder. “Oh, baby! Do that again.”

Jess didn’t disappoint; this time she lifted her head and took his cock into her mouth. She was rewarded with a low, guttural groan. His breathing grew ragged, and he made little growling sounds in the back of his throat every time her lips closed around him.

Her arousal was growing swiftly, but she missed the lovely pull on her nipples. She moved her hands up and began to play with them herself as she squeezed her breasts

together. Oh, yeah, they were extremely sensitive. The tugs on the hard little pebbles shot thrills all the way to her pussy. She moaned, and immediately Alex stopped.

It was clear that he knew exactly what she was doing and that the thought of her playing with herself was bringing him to the edge. He took a deep breath and another; she knew he had every intention of being buried deep inside her when he finally came.

He sat back on his heels and looked down at her. "My God, you're sexy." Before she could question him, he grabbed the towel and wiped the lube off her chest. He stood, picked her up, and moved her to the top step of the landing. He slid himself down several steps until his face was even with the top of the landing and her.

Jess knew exactly what he was going to do. Just the thought of it had her growing wetter. She leaned on her elbows and watched as Alex gently laid her injured leg over his shoulder and bent the other leg to rest on the step below her butt. They locked gazes as his head descended and his tongue slowly flicked her clit. Jess groaned and threw her head back. She was overwhelmed with pleasure. If she watched that gorgeous dark head buried between her legs for any length of time, she'd go over the edge. She wanted it to last ... forever.

She felt something slide inside her. Her muscles clamped down on it involuntarily. Oh, it felt good. She lifted her head and watched as Alex added another finger to the first. He raised his eyes, which had turned that eerie deep gold, to hers as he covered her clit and sucked. Jess knew now that his eyes indicated his excitement, which only added to her own. She gave up the fight and laid her head back down, concentrating on the pleasure he was giving. His fingers slid in and out, making soft, wet sounds, and he was groaning softly. He sounded as if he were having as much fun as she was.

She tightened around his sopping digits and arched her back. Any second now she was going to climax. She felt him twist his wrist over. Then he did the most amazing thing -- he hooked his fingers up toward her belly. She screamed as her body convulsed around his fingers. Through her orgasmic daze, she was vaguely aware of being very, very wet. In fact, she felt as though she was now lying in a puddle.

Alex was so hard, he ached. His mate was the sexiest woman on the face of the earth; he was sure of it. He scooted up and grabbed the towel off the landing. He lifted Jess's bottom and put the towel under her to sop up the mess he'd made. He knew he was grinning like an idiot, but that had been amazing. He slid her down the steps, past the towel-covered puddle. She was so relaxed, she was practically dead weight. *Oh, please don't be asleep, baby. I'm dying here.*

Alex slid into her sopping pussy. Ah, yes, much better. He brushed his lips across hers, and her eyelids fluttered open. She gave him a satisfied little smile, a lazy grin that said everything was right with the world. Alex chuckled and kissed her nose.

"What in the hell was that?"

Alex chuckled again. "G-spot."

Jess raised her eyebrows at the smug look on his face. "I thought that was a myth."

He dropped his head to her neck and bit lightly as he set a smooth, steady rhythm with his hips. "Well, what do you think now?"

"I think I died."

Alex grinned against her neck. God, this felt good. He was so close. The sloshing sounds were driving him wild. What had she said? Oh, yeah. "You don't feel dead to me."

"Mmm."

He continued to thrust into her, harder and faster. He was so very close. The smell of her sweat-soaked skin and her recent orgasm was an aphrodisiac urging him higher. He wanted her to come again, but he wasn't sure he was going to make it.

"Oh, my gosh, Alex. I think I'm ... OH!"

Alex wasn't sure what she'd said; he was beyond reason. He felt her muscles clamp down on his cock and her body stiffen under him. Her moan of ecstasy was the last thing he was aware of. He thrust forward one last time and groaned out his own orgasm.

Jess wasn't sure how long they lay there on the stairs, but something had pulled her out of her orgasm-induced slumber.

Alex lay on top of her, snoring lightly. They were covered in sweat and various other bodily fluids. She'd never felt so relaxed in her life. Good lord, if the sex kept getting better every time, she'd never survive until their wedding. The man was going to kill her with pleasure. Could a person die of too many intense orgasms?

While she was pondering that, the phone rang ... again.

"Alex? That's either the phone ringing or you've got me so light-headed my ears are ringing."

Alex's only response was to grunt.

"Alex?"

He lifted his head and looked down at her cheeky grin. "Uh?"

Jess laughed as his head dropped back to her shoulder. "It could be important. What if it's about Rome?"

"Well, sheeit." Alex jumped up, gloriously naked and cock bobbing, and sprinted a little clumsily to the phone. "Hello?"

Jess pushed herself up on her elbows and tilted her head, watching him for any clue of who was on the other end of the phone. He looked so good nude.

"Yup, she's here. Are you okay? You don't sound so good, babe." Alex covered the receiver with his hand and mouthed, "Kat."

Jess pushed herself up and started to stand. Alex stayed her by saying, "Hold on, Kat; let me go get her the cordless."

She sat patiently, still sprawled out on the stairs, waiting for Alex to return from the kitchen with the cordless phone, shaking her head at her disarray. Thank goodness Kat could only hear her.

Trying to locate her shirt, Jess stifled a groan at seeing it was not within reaching distance. Alex returned with the phone just as she had motivated herself into crawling for her shirt.

Handing her the phone, Alex saw her intent and reached down with an impish grin, tossing her shirt further out of reach.

Jess groaned and rolled her eyes before she answered. "Hey, Kat. What's up?"

It was immediately obvious to Jess that Kat was upset. "I need help on this stupid dance." Kat stifled a sob and sniffled a couple of times.

"Okay, hon, you're at the studio?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'll have Alex run me up there. You want to tell me what else is bothering you?"

Kat burst into tears on the other end of the phone. Jess pulled the phone away from her ear in surprise.

Alex, having heard the exchange, lifted Jess in his arms and started up the stairs with her. Reaching his room, he set her on the bed and went about getting himself dressed while Jess tried to calm Kat.

Rifling through the dresser trying to find Jess's panties and bra, it suddenly occurred to him that this might have something to do with his cousin. *Oh, God, please don't let this be Adrian's fault.*

Jess hung up the phone and dressed swiftly, with his help.

Hauling her up in his arms again and heading down the stairs, Alex sighed. He just *knew* it was Adrian's fault. Damn him!

In the truck on the way over, Alex fished for answers. "Do you know what's wrong?"

Jess looked at him as they pulled into the parking lot. "I'm not sure; she said she'd tell me when I got here."

Alex held her gaze for a few moments, then opened the door and got out. Before Jess could get her door completely opened, he was there with her crutches. "Do I have to go in?"

Alex realized he was whining when Jess raised her eyebrows and grinned. He frowned at her, but instead of being intimidated, she giggled. "Yes, you have to go in."

"I shouldn't have to deal with more than one hysterical woman in a week's time. It's a doctor's rule." When she looked skeptical, he added, "Well, I'm making it a rule. Maybe they'll even let me put a sign up in the ER. 'No food, no smoking, no hysterical women.'" He gave her his most hopeful look.

Jess laughed and shook her head. "Come on."

When Jessica and Alex arrived, Kat was sitting on the floor beside the stereo with papers, a bottle of water, and the cordless phone littering the area around her. Hearing the door open, she raised her tear-streaked face to Alex and Jess. "Hi." She gave them a wobbly smile and wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. "I can't get this damn thing to work. I have four eight counts and a break that are stupid. They don't make sense!"

Alex grimaced. Jess grinned and lowered herself to the floor with Alex's help. "Want to talk about it?"

"What's to talk about? The music is stupid!"

"What's really bothering you, Kat?"

Kat looked up, making eye contact with her best friend, and more silent tears streaked down her face. She gave a quick glance toward Alex, then back to Jess, before she started dabbing at her cheeks again.

Alex took the hint. He bent down in front of Kat and tipped her face up to meet his. Gently kissing her forehead, he released her and stood. "As the closest thing to family Jessica

has besides my own, you know I'd do anything to help you, don't you?" When Kat nodded, he continued. "I'm going to leave the two of you alone and get lunch. What do you want?"

Jess glanced at Alex from her spot on the floor and mouthed, "I love you." Then she cleared her throat and said, "How about hamburgers? You know how I like mine. Kat wants a cheeseburger with no tomatoes, onion rings, and an iced tea."

Alex gave a brisk nod and headed for the door, vowing to call Adrian once he was in the car.

"Alex ..."

Never breaking his stride, he shook his head and grinned. He pushed the door open and said, "I know, Jess ... lots of ketchup."

As soon as the door closed behind Alex, Kat said, "We did it. And then he told me he didn't want to see me anymore."

Jess stared at her, flabbergasted. She knew Kat had had a real hangup about premarital sex. She blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Oh, my God! Did he force you?"

"No!" Kat shook her head adamantly.

"Then what happened?"

"I love him. I thought he was the one, you know? But then, this morning he came to take me to lunch and said he didn't want to see me again."

"Damn him!" Jess shouted as she grabbed for her cell phone in her bag.

"Wait! Who are you calling?"

"Alex! I'm going to tell him to go beat the hell out of his asshole cousin."

As she jabbed at the first number, Kat snatched the phone out of Jess's hand. "No, Jess, don't. Please. I mean, of course you can tell Alex, but I don't want anyone saying anything to Adrian."

Jess started to argue when Kat burst into tears again. "I'm like my mother."

Scooting closer, Jess pulled Kat into a hug. "Shh, it's okay. You aren't anything like your mother. This isn't your fault, hon."

Between Kat's crying and Jess trying to comfort her, they missed the sound of the front door opening. Lisa's voice startled them. "Kat, can I see you in the office?"

Both women jumped and turned their heads to face her. She smiled and waved at Jess before she went into the office.

"Well, that's weird. I thought she was out of town until next week." Kat shrugged and stood, wiping at her tears. "Will you be okay while I go see what she wants?"

Jess nodded and reached for Kat's choreography notes. "I'll see if I can figure out this song for you."

As soon as Kat left, Jess started the music and listened while she read the notes Kat had made. So far it made sense, and Jess acknowledged that the choreography was first class.

Reaching for the pencil to make some minor changes to the counts Kat had written, Jess felt a sharp pain, and everything went black.

* * * * *

Marisa sat in her friend's new sports car, gazing out at the passing traffic. Her friend had gotten her license and car a week ago and volunteered to take Marisa to the studio after school. Since they were in the same dance class, Marisa agreed, thinking not only would it save her mother a trip, but that she might be able to persuade her friend to drive by the cooking school. With any luck, she might catch a glimpse of Rand coming out of class.

When they drove by the School of Culinary Arts, Rand's car was absent from the lot. Was he out looking for his brother? Or had he left for the restaurant already?

Marisa sighed. She prayed Rome would be found unharmed. He'd been missing three days already. With each day, she became more and more depressed, so Rand had to be

miserable. How would she go on if something happened to Rome? Rand wouldn't be the only one desolate if anything happened to his twin.

When they stopped, Marisa pulled herself out of her depressing thoughts and reached for her dance bag. That's when she saw two men shoving a limp Jess into a van.

"Oh, my God! Did you see that? That's Jess!"

"What? Where?" her friend sputtered, looking around, trying to find what Marisa was so focused on.

Marisa pointed to the navy blue minivan with dark-tinted windows, and shouted, "Follow that van!"

Chapter Twenty

“Jess? Jessica Marie! You better answer me right now! I’m not playing! It isn’t funny anymore. Where are you?” Kat stalked around the studio, looking in the storage closet, behind the stereo, the bathroom, everywhere she could think of. Where in the heck was Jess?

Lisa had left immediately after informing Kat that she was going out of town on personal business and leaving her in charge. Like she hadn’t already known that. And Jess was nowhere in sight, while her crutches were still lying on the floor. In the short time Kat was in the back office with Lisa, Jess couldn’t have gotten that far without support; she’d have had to scoot or crawl. Kat’s breath hitched in her throat, and her heart started pounding. As realization set in, she became frantic. Someone had already tried to kidnap Jess twice, and this time they’d succeeded. She felt the panic start to set in when she heard “I’m back” coming from the doorway.

Kat snapped around at the deep voice to find Alex with drinks in one hand and bags of food in the other.

Alex became immediately aware of Kat’s pale, terror-stricken face.

“Where’s Jess?” He asked in a near shout.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?!” He was practically growling at her. Dropping the contents of his arms, he rushed forward, then took a deep breath. The scent of one or more people teased his nostrils.

He grabbed Kat by the shoulders and asked what happened. She told him Lisa had come in, and Alex immediately sorted out Lisa’s scent. Kat continued her story as Alex tried to distinguish the other smells. He soon realized that there were two fresh, unknown scents in the studio. Pulling out his cell phone, he called Brent.

* * * * *

Marisa grabbed her phone out of her backpack, keeping a careful eye on the van in front of her. They were doing a great job keeping up with the van. Of course, the van wasn’t exactly speeding, but it was definitely driving aggressively.

She autodialed Alex’s cell phone as they turned onto a residential street. “Slow down. Don’t let them know we’re following them.” Marisa raised the phone to her ear and got Alex’s voicemail. “Damn it! He’s on the phone!” Marisa left a message, hoping he’d get it after he got off the phone. She hung up and tried Brent’s number.

“Marisa, they’re pulling into that driveway.”

“Park in front of this house so that they don’t know we’re here. Let’s see what they do.”

Marisa held her breath as the van pulled into another driveway. She made an impatient sound when she got Brent’s voicemail, too, and opened the door. “You have to go find my brother; he’ll know what to do.” She held up her phone. “My cousin is a cop; keep trying to get ahold of him. His number is memory number five.” She tossed the phone to her friend. “I’m going to stay here so I don’t lose Jess. Go to the studio first and bring Alex back to this

house; if you don't see him there, go to my parents' restaurant and tell my dad." She shut the door, leaving no time for her friend to protest, and headed toward the house.

* * * * *

"Hey, are you awake?"

Jess tried to reach up and rub her aching head, but her arms were stuck to her sides. She tried to focus. Alex had teased that he was going to tie her up. *Surely not, and where is Kat? What the heck?*

"Pssst, Jessica ... Are you awake?"

That was definitely not Alex. Jess turned her head toward the voice. It was soft, masculine, husky, and sexy as sin, but it didn't sound familiar. She tried opening her eyes, but as soon as the light hit them, she squeezed them shut again.

"Jessica, if you're awake, I need you to talk to me. We have to try and figure a way out of here."

Figure a way out of here? Alarm bells went off in Jess's already throbbing head. Suddenly the migraine made sense. She'd been knocked out. She tried to answer the voice, but all she could manage was a croak. Goodness, her throat was dry. She swallowed and tried again. "Who are you?" Her voice sounded as if she had been strangled.

"Rome. Roman McCoy. We met briefly at Alex's Uncle Emilio and Aunt Sarah's house. My father is good friends with them."

Apparently Rome knew who she was and her relationship to Alex. Jess nodded, indicating she'd heard and understood. She'd found the missing twin -- or had he found her? "Where are we?"

"In a basement somewhere. Three men, one woman have kept me here." Rome paused, clearly hesitant to ask her something. "Jessica, has Alex told you ...?" He let the sentence trail off, obviously not sure how to ask such a question without giving anything away.

“About his ... er, heredity?”

Rome sighed in relief. “Yes. You know, thank God. Listen, these people know, too, but they aren’t part of our pack. I’m not sure who the hell they are, but I know they’re definitely not our friends. You’ve got to try and get yourself out of those ropes.”

Jess squeezed her eyes open a little at a time to adjust to the light. Piercing gray eyes stared back at her. Goodness, he was handsome; no wonder Marisa had such a crush on him. She blinked several times before her eyes focused and opened all the way. Rome was in a cage about three feet away from her, and he was ... “Oh, my God,” she gasped. Lowering her voice into a softer whisper, she did not, however, close her eyes. “Rome, you’re naked.” Boy, Marisa had great taste. What a bod! Jess gave herself a mental head slap. She was tied up in a basement, and she was checking out Marisa’s crush. She was obviously delirious.

“I’m very well aware of that fact, thank you. They’ve been drawing my blood and giving me some shots that make me change.”

Before Jess could question him, the cellar door opened. Jess tried to angle her head to see the door, but was unable to turn her head that far. “Well, well, well, the princess is awake.”

Jess froze. She knew that voice. *Oh, my God. No!*

* * * * *

Those three words were Marisa’s sentiments exactly, as she crouched down in some bushes and peered through a small, narrow window. She held her breath as she watched. The relief she’d felt upon seeing Rome alive had suddenly vanished as she caught a glimpse of his and Jess’s jailer. *Why?*

Marisa blinked back tears as she watched three men enter the room and two of them untie Jess. What were they going to do to her?

She didn't have long to wait. One man held a gun on Rome while another opened the cage door; the third none-too-gently threw Jess into the cage. If Rome hadn't caught her, she'd have fallen.

For the first time, it registered in Marisa's brain that Rome was completely naked, and she felt a fleeting rage of jealousy toward Jess until her rational brain overruled it. She had to get Rome and Jess safely out of there.

While Marisa racked her brain, trying to come up with a plan, one man grabbed a hypodermic needle and injected Rome with a clear blue fluid; another gave Jess a similar injection. *What the heck?*

She got her answer soon enough. Lisa's voice carried enough that Marisa could hear it through the closed window. "You see, darling, I've thought for some time that there was something off about that family. I was only going to get you away to keep you from making a big mistake by marrying him. But when your darling fiancé fought with my boys, they saw him for what he is."

Jess stared at Lisa like she'd seen a ghost. Finally she found her voice. Marisa couldn't make out what Jess said, but from Lisa's answer, she assumed it was about Rome. Marisa winced as Lisa spoke again.

"Let me enlighten you, my dear; you sound puzzled. I'm part of a group who has discovered their little secret. I'm even the president of my chapter. We're growing, and eventually we'll be able to rid the world of these freaks. We have people everywhere, even one in the police academy. He noticed your friend here because his reflexes are too fast and he runs quicker than any human should; it's obvious what he is to someone who knows what to look for. And we are all trained in what to look for. We'll be going after his twin next. But first we'd like to conduct a few experiments ..."

Oh, my God! A whole organization of these whack jobs? As Marisa watched, horrified, Rome dropped to the cell floor and began to change, and Jess became violently ill.

Thinking fast, Marisa scurried out of the bushes and ran to the front door. Miraculously, the door was unlocked, and she eased it open to slip inside, surveying her surroundings quickly.

On the table beside the door were car keys, complete with remote to open the doors, a pack of cigarettes, and a lighter. She gathered the keys and the lighter as quietly as she could.

Tiptoeing into the kitchen, she heard voices and saw the opened door leading to the basement. She left the kitchen and headed down a hall going toward the other side of the house. She found a bedroom. What now?

Before the plan completely formed in her mind, she bent down and lit the bedspread on fire. She rushed over to the window, which was at the front of the house. It wouldn't take long for the smoke to start coming out the window and be visible from the outside. Quickly, she locked and shut the door and sneaked back to the kitchen, careful to listen for sounds confirming the quad of jailers were still downstairs.

When she reached the kitchen, she looked around for a hiding spot. Ducking into the pantry, she cracked the door open. Feeling secure that once she freed Rome he'd be able to protect her, Jess, and himself, especially in wolf form, she raised her arm and pointed the car remote toward the front of the house and pushed the panic button.

Chapter Twenty-One

The honking minivan had the desired effect. Lisa and her henchmen went running past the barely opened pantry door.

Marisa waited a few seconds until she was sure they were completely outside, then made haste to get down the basement stairs. As she fumbled with the keys she'd snagged, she was immediately greeted with a low bark that sounded more like a yip, and a hoarse, "Marisa?"

"Hey! Let's get out of here before they get back, I don't know how long my diversion will hold them." She started trying different keys in the cage lock. Rome whined at her and started flipping his head to the right.

"What? I don't understand." He became agitated and turned to the right, staring at something as he flipped his head up and whined again.

Jess pulled herself to her feet, using the bars to brace herself; she cleared her throat and pointed. "Oh, the key! He's telling you about the key; it's on that table over there!"

As Marisa grabbed the key, Jess asked, "Marisa? Why hasn't he attacked me? Alex was in a cage for a reason, right?"

Marisa retrieved the key, then came back to the cage and unlocked it. "Because as Alex's mate, you are the alpha female. And besides, they don't generally attack without a good reason. But at the house, they go to the cage because when their mate is around, it can get a little scary."

She opened the door. Rome jumped down and ran to the bottom of the stairs, clearly playing watchdog. Marisa caught Jess's arm and helped her out of the cage. Once Jess got out, she looked at Marisa. "What do you mean, scary?"

Marisa listened carefully for the sound of the honking van. Once she heard it and what sounded like sirens, she looped her arm around Jess's waist and headed for the stairs. "Well, because they will protect their mates at all cost, and they don't like other males of any age or relationship around their mates."

Jess grimaced and tried to take as much of her own weight as possible.

Marisa knew Jess's leg must be throbbing, and who knew what else she was feeling from the shot she'd been given. She saw her wince again, and decided that if she could keep Jess's mind occupied, it would help take her mind off the pain. So she continued her explanation in a hushed tone. "Before Alex was born, my dad used to sleep at the foot of his and mom's bed on a full moon. One night when Alex was about three, he had a nightmare and came to crawl in bed with my mom. Dad woke up and started growling at him."

Jess glanced up at her as they made it to the bottom of the steps. Rome started up the steps in front of them. "What happened?"

"Mom woke up and caught Dad before he could attack Alex. After that, Dad insisted everyone either be caged or go to the cabin, where they can hunt in the woods as a pack."

They started up the steps slowly, with Rome looking back at them occasionally to check their progress. They could hear shouting from outside, but so far it didn't seem that anyone had come back into the house.

Jess was so pale she looked like she was going to faint. Marisa could see how hard she was concentrating on going up the stairs, but it didn't seem to be helping. If she passed out, they were both going to tumble down.

Seeing the blood drain from Jess's face, Marisa slowed their ascent. "Jess, you okay? Don't pass out on me, sis. Concentrate. If we can get up the stairs and outside, we can cause enough of a commotion that we can get out of here. I set the house on fire and set off the panic button on their van. Surely that's drawn a crowd."

Finally making it to the top of the stairs, Marisa took a deep breath and looked down at Rome. "Lead the way."

He started out the door and turned toward the back of the house.

"Wait, Rome! Where are you going?"

He ran back and grabbed Marisa's pant leg in his mouth, tugging her toward the back door. Marisa started to argue. She wanted out front ... in view of witnesses. But Rome was persistent. She finally decided his senses were way better than hers and he probably sensed trouble the other way.

Pushing the door open, Marisa managed to get Jess out and into the backyard. She didn't bother shutting it before she and Jess followed Rome.

There was a chain-linked fence around the yard. Fortunately, it was a corner lot.

"How in the heck am I going to get over that fence?" Jess managed to grit out.

Rome barked and ran toward the side of the yard closest to the street. There, next to a large rosebush, was an unlocked gate. Marisa and Jess both let out big sighs and followed Rome as quickly as they could manage.

When they got to the gate, Jess had had enough. She had to rest. "Marisa, stop." She looked into Marisa's worried brown eyes and instantly thought of Alex. She had to tell Alex about that serum. It could be used against Alex and his pack. Unable to go any farther, she

lowered herself to the ground between the gate and rosebush for a short rest. She squeezed her eyes shut against the pain and nausea and took a deep breath.

Marisa's voice broke into her thoughts. "Jess, we can't leave that stuff they gave you and Rome. It can be used against my family. I have got to go destroy it."

Jess blinked several times. She had thought the same thing, but she didn't want Marisa going back in there.

Before Jess could argue, Marisa looked at Rome and said, "Stay here and watch Jess. I'll go light the basement on fire."

She ran back toward the open door and turned around briefly to check that Jess was mostly concealed by the bush. Letting out a sigh of relief, she went toward the door and almost tripped over Rome. "Damn it, Rome! Go protect Jess!" He ignored her and headed into the house.

Marisa knew arguing was a wasted effort, so she followed him in and went down the basement stairs with Rome hot on her heels.

Marisa looked for something to ignite. She spotted a bundle of clothes and ran toward them. Picking up a blue shirt, she revealed a pair of jeans and shoes beneath it. She'd found Rome's clothes. She dug into his jeans pocket and located his wallet. Quickly stashing it in her own back pocket, she bundled up the jeans. "Your clothes! Say bye to your shirt. Hope it isn't a favorite."

Rome cocked his head, but before he could wonder what she was about, she ripped the shirt into several strips, then used the lighter, tossing the burning cloth onto the tables over the various beakers and flasks. Almost immediately, the containers and the table went up in flames.

When Marisa and Rome were nearly at the top the stairs, something exploded. She jumped and squealed. Rome nudged her from behind, trying to get her to hurry. Stumbling,

she grabbed for the rail. A leg of the jeans she held came loose from her grip, and when she tried to right herself, she stepped on it and lost her footing.

Rome tried to block her from falling but only managed to fall with her. By the time they lay in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, the fire had spread to the floor and walls.

Rome got to his feet and shook off the ache in his hip where Marisa had landed on him. He immediately realized she wasn't moving. He nudged her, barked at her, licked her face -- nothing made her respond.

His desperate howl echoed through the basement.

* * * * *

Alex's truck came slamming to a halt behind one of the fire trucks that had just pulled up. He told both Kat and Marisa's friend to stay put. As soon as he had the door open, he saw Brent's car pull to a halt behind him. Brent and Rand rushed out.

Dash's car came squealing around the corner. Adrian jumped out before the car came to a complete halt, and Dash followed shortly after.

They all met in the middle of the street and headed toward the house. Brent pulled out his badge as they made their way up to the yard. He stopped and conversed with some of the firemen while Alex, Dash, Rand, and Adrian spread out and looked around.

With his nose in the air, Alex caught a familiar scent. *Jess*. It was very faint and hard to detect over the smoke, but it was there. Walking over to Dash and Adrian, who were huddled together, he spoke. "I smell her. Can you smell Jess?"

Both men inhaled deeply. Dash nodded while Adrian kept sniffing the air. "I smell her scent beneath the smoke. She's outside somewhere. I don't smell Marisa, though."

Alex took another deep breath, as did Dash. Fortunately, the firemen and police had just arrived and didn't see them start around to the side of the house. As the scent became stronger, Alex hurried his pace, finally calling out. "Jess?"

A faint, hoarse voice answered his call. "Here. I'm here in the backyard."

Alex took off at a run, with Dash and Adrian right on his heels.

Alex threw open the gate and stopped abruptly. There she was, sagging against the fence, pale as death, sweat running down her forehead like she'd run a marathon. He dropped down to his knees and hauled her against him hard.

She struggled and pushed him away, frantic to get his attention. "Alex! Marisa! Marisa and Rome! They went back in to destroy the serum."

"What? Rome? Rome is here? What serum?"

Jess shook her head wildly. "No time! Go! Through the back door, go left and down the basement stairs. Go!"

Alex looked up at Adrian and Dash, who'd already taken off toward the door. Seeing them on the move, he turned back to his haggard mate, trying to reassure himself of her safety, but now deeply concerned over his sister's. Pulling Jess into his arms again, he kissed her forehead.

Jess squirmed and groaned at the rough embrace, but finally settled into his arms. "God, let Marisa and Rome be okay. They've been gone too long. Please let them be okay, please."

Alex was going to ask for more details, when all hell broke loose.

Dash came running out of the house with Marisa cradled in his arms. Adrian came out right behind him with a clawing, snarling Rome in wolf form sliding out of his arms.

Adrian dropped him as soon as he cleared the door, and Rome ran toward Dash, growling and nipping. Finally, Dash, with great difficulty, made it to about five feet in front of Alex and Jess and carefully laid the unconscious teenager on the grass.

Rome stopped biting at Dash and put himself between Dash and Marisa.

Alex came to his feet to check on his sister. Rome turned and bared his teeth at him, then stood over her, guarding her.

Alex, Dash, and Adrian backed off, and he calmed. He circled Marisa's prone figure, alternately nudging and licking her, all the while whining.

The three men exchanged looks. Alex slowly started closer to his little sister, holding his hand out to Rome. Immediately, Rome turned and growled a warning.

Alex was truly puzzled. Rome had never challenged a more dominant pack member before, especially not his alpha. Alex knew that between himself, Dash, and Adrian, they could deal with Rome, but he didn't want to risk hurting the younger werewolf. He clearly thought he was protecting Marisa. "Adrian, go get Rand."

Adrian took off as the others stayed silent, worried over Marisa's unconsciousness.

Within a few minutes, Adrian came back with Rand and Brent. Alex looked up at the new arrivals.

Brent stopped inside the gate and looked down at Jess, his relief clearly visible.

Rand ran through the gate to his brother, dropping to the ground and grabbing him by the neck. Rome didn't so much as snarl at his twin. He whined and brought Rand's attention to Marisa.

Quickly, Rand let go of his twin and bent over Marisa. Rome hurried to her other side across Rand and began licking her face. Rand reached out and slapped her face lightly. "Reece? Marisa?" When he failed to get a response, he slapped a little harder. "Come on, squirt, answer me. Time to wake up now."

When he still got no response, he looked over at Alex. "Alex, she isn't getting up! You need to come check on her." He sounded as if he couldn't believe that Alex hadn't already checked on his sister.

"I've tried. Get ahold of your brother; he won't let any of us near her."

Rand looked at his twin and stood, nodding his head to the side and stepping away from Marisa.

Rome followed hesitantly, looking back at Marisa every few steps, then growling again as Alex approached Marisa.

Rand bent down and put his arm around his brother, restraining him.

After several seconds, Alex scooped his sister into his arms and straightened to his full height.

Rome tried to charge him, but Rand held on.

Alex laid her back down gently. "Rand, pick her up and carry her to Dash's Bronco. I don't want to wait for an ambulance." He walked back to Jess and lifted her into his arms.

As soon as Alex stood with Jess cradled in his arms, she began to ask questions about Marisa's health.

Alex quieted her long enough to talk to Brent. "Before you press charges and everything else, will you go tell Katherine to drive my truck and take Marisa's friend home, then meet us at the hospital?"

"Will do, cuz." Brent glanced at Rome as he followed Rand, who was carrying Marisa out the gate. "I'll swing by and get Rome some clothes on my way to the hospital."

* * * * *

Rome walked into the waiting area and was greeted with an enthusiastic welcome. It was clear that everyone was glad to have him back. He said a quick hello to everyone and asked after Marisa and Jess. The best anyone could tell him was that Marisa had been rushed to surgery to have an emergency splenectomy and that Jess was asleep in the ER. It appeared both women would be fine.

"Son." His father stood up and opened his arms. Rome stepped into them and then was quickly pulled back out of them and into the arms of Emilio and Sarah Hernandez. Michael pulled Rome back to him. "I'm so glad you're safe. We were worried to death."

Rome looked around and was not a bit surprised to find one person missing. "Where's Mother?"

Michael looked away, obviously embarrassed, and cleared his throat. He seemed to have no idea how to tell his son that she had not come to check on her son, who had finally been found.

Before Rome could ease his father's discomfort, Sarah quickly stepped in front of Michael. "She didn't feel well, honey." She hesitated, then added, "I'm so glad you're okay. Now I know all three of my boys are safe." Her eyes shone with tears as she leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

Rome grinned down at the woman who'd always been more of a mother to him than the woman who'd borne him, and whispered, "I'm mistaken ... my mother is right here." He kissed her cheek. "Don't fret, Sarah. I was merely curious. Besides, I do have a wonderful mom and *two* dads." He turned and slugged Emilio's and his father's arms. He promised to find out the latest news and let them all know what happened.

He hugged Marisa's mother, Claire, and his twin again, then hurried over to where Brent sat.

Brent came to his feet immediately and wrapped him in a big bear hug. "God, I'm glad you're okay."

"You and me both. For a while there, I wasn't exactly sure what the hell they were going to do with me. What do you need from me as far as a statement?"

"Nothing. I've already taken care of it. What's this Jess was saying about a serum?"

Rome reached up and rubbed his temple. His head was still aching from the induced change. "They gave me a shot that made me change. I couldn't control it at all. Marisa set in all on fire, but they drew my blood several times. They must have it stashed somewhere."

Brent nodded. He'd been one of the first people in the house after the fires were extinguished, and hadn't found any evidence of blood samples or serum. "I didn't find much.

Most everything was destroyed in the fire. That's not to say they don't have it somewhere else, but there's no trace of you having been there. Did you leave anything that could reveal your presences? Anything at all to indicate that you were there?"

Rome shook his head. "No, they all burned in the fire. Wait ... actually, Marisa had my wallet in her back pocket."

"Then it's here at the hospital; we'll find it. I'm going to press kidnapping charges and get a statement from Jess. That should be enough to put them away for awhile."

"So, we don't want anyone to know where I've been? There's a snitch in the academy. That's how they found me."

"We need to find out who it is. You're going to have to be careful and keep your eyes and ears open."

Rome nodded. "How was my absence explained at the academy?"

"I called you in sick, and Alex wrote you a doctor's note. I don't want there to be any suspicion regarding you if they claim there are werewolves. Not that they could prove it, but still ..."

He was glad Brent had thought to do that. Brent knew how important being a cop was to Rome. He'd decided to be a cop as soon as Brent had graduated from the academy eleven years ago. He and Rand had always looked up to Brent.

Brent had become a cop because of what had happened to Rhett, and Rome had followed in his footsteps for the same reason. He missed his older sister, but she was Brent's mate, so it was worse for Brent. Wolves mated for life; there would never be another for Brent. He knew that feeling all too well, because he'd never have a mate of his own, either.

Apparently, his thoughts were etched on his face, because Brent interrupted them by asking, "What's up with Marisa? Why the protectiveness?"

Before he could answer, Brent gave him a look that said he already knew and dared him to deny it. So, he didn't; he just didn't tell him the whole truth. "She's Rand's mate."

Brent clearly hadn't expected that answer. He patted Rome's leg. "Oh, I thought ... one of these days, you'll have your own mate."

Rome made a snorting sound, then shook his head. "No, I won't, big brother. No, I won't. I'm in the same boat as you."

"Don't say that! You have no way of knowing that. You'll have a mate someday," Brent assured him.

"No, I won't. Because she's better off with only Rand."

Chapter Twenty-Two

After a thorough exam, Alex decided that her knee had not been reinjured. They'd left the hospital as soon as Marisa had been settled into a room. She'd come through surgery fine, and they'd even been allowed to see her briefly before they'd headed home.

Alex carried Jess, who was sound asleep, into the house and locked the door behind him. Halfway up the stairs, Jess awoke. "Alex, I'm hungry."

He kissed her forehead and headed back down the stairs. "Okay, let me see what I can whip up."

Once he had Jess settled at the table, he went rummaging through the fridge. "How's left-over pizza sound?"

"Fine. Give me two pieces. Alex, what happened with Lisa?"

He stuck two pieces in the microwave and leaned against the counter, facing Jess while the slices heated. "She was arrested on kidnapping charges, as were the men working with her. So Brent is going to need a statement from you. You may have to testify."

"What if she tells what she knows?"

"They'll think she's insane. She has no proof. We aren't mentioning Rome was there, and Brent's pretty sure he took everything that might be harmful to the pack."

Jess let out a breath. "Then you got the serum?"

Alex nodded on his way back to the refrigerator. "It burned up in the fire."

"Thank god!" Jess gasped, and her eyes widened. "Alex, she said there was a whole organization trying to rid the world of werewolves. We have to find them."

Alex placed a can of soda in front of her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He couldn't help but grin at her obvious worry over his family and his pack. She was quite a trooper. She'd been through a rough ordeal, yet she still thought of others and how she could help out. "We will, sweetheart. Brent took everything that could be traced back to us and back to them. To the police it looks like a simple case of kidnapping. I also had someone go swipe Lisa's computer from her house. It's been delivered to Michael, and he's already looking into it. If there's an electronic trail to these people, Michael will find it."

The microwave beeped, and Alex took the pizza out and put it in front of her. She took a bite, then looked up at him with her eyebrows raised. He chuckled at the comical look on her face. She was trying to chew faster so she could talk.

When she finally swallowed and washed it down with her drink, she said, "Whose house was that? It wasn't Lisa's. But I guess you know that, since you had someone steal her computer."

"Yes, I knew that. Kat showed us where she lived. Brent is checking into the property. It appears to be a rental that was used specifically to hold Rome. I'm sure Brent will find out soon enough. Now, finish your pizza, then you can ask questions 'til your little heart is content."

Jess ate her pizza and allowed Alex to carry her upstairs. She sat on the bed while Alex gathered fresh clothes. After laying them out, Alex stripped. He was such a study in

contrasts: a doctor, but built like an athlete. An alpha male, yet sensitive and caring. Brainy, but not a nerd. He was human, yet he wasn't.

"Alex?"

"Huh?"

"What's it like to be a wolf? I mean, to be in wolf form?"

"It's different. Invigorating, actually. Being in wolf form is very freeing. Everything is so much more ... more vibrant. Your hearing is better; your sense of smell is better. You can see in the dark better. The only disadvantage is that you don't see color. But it's a small price to pay for all the other incredible things that come with it."

Jess watched him get caught up in his excitement as he told her about being a werewolf. It was obvious from listening to him that he loved that aspect of his life. He was very comfortable with who and what he was. "Does it hurt when you change?"

Alex sat down on the dresser and smiled. He really was enjoying talking about this. "No, not at all."

"It seemed like you were in pain when I saw you."

"It was somewhat painful because I was trying not to change after the process had begun. It's like going into labor and then stopping just as the baby's head is coming out. I ... didn't want you to see."

Jess nodded. "Can you change anytime? Or does it have to do with the moon?"

"Any time. But the pull of the full moon calls to us, makes it hard to resist changing. Most of us can't even hold off the change on the night of a full moon. The moon goes up, and that's it. The stronger wolves can hold it off until they want to change."

Interesting. She'd heard that he was pack alpha. Didn't that mean he was one of the stronger ones? Or did it have to do with age? "Can you hold it off?"

He grinned. "What, don't you think I'm strong?"

She shrugged. Sure she thought he was strong, but she was clueless about werewolf stuff.

Alex laughed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know it had to do with physical strength. I thought it might be age or something that determined strength to a werewolf.”

He nodded, obviously impressed with her comeback. “Actually, you’re correct; it doesn’t have to do with physical strength ... well, not entirely. It isn’t necessarily age, either. I think it’s inherent in one’s genes. For example, I’ve gotten stronger with age, as have Adrian and Brent. But not all werewolves do. Adrian, Brent, my dad, uncle, and Michael are all very powerful. They can control their change, and they’re also stronger physically than a lot of wolves. It’s more than just holding off the call of the moon, though. Those who can control when they shift also seem to retain human thought processes when in wolf form. Dash can’t hold off his change, nor does he retain a lot of human thought processes; the morning after his change, he doesn’t remember a lot of what he did as a wolf the night before.”

“That is why all of you go to the cabin or get locked up?”

“Yes. Even those of us who can reason and see things as a human can get caught up in ... being a wolf. It gets a little complicated. Take the rules ... My dad made the rules after he tried to attack me one night. He knew I was his son and that I was no threat to my mother, but he could also sense that I would be a dominant wolf. I wasn’t hurt, but it bothered him enough to make the rule. So now everyone has to check in with the pack secretary and let them know where they’ll be. Only those of us who have no children or anyone but a mate around are allowed to stay at home.”

Jess smiled. She could just picture herself and Alex on the night of a full moon, with him in wolf form. It would be like having a dog. “So, that means that you can stay home with me sometimes?”

Alex got off the dresser and came to kneel in front of her. He took her hands in his. “You mean you’d want me to?”

Would she ... really? Saying she would and actually being in that situation were different. Could she handle him being in wolf form? Would it be too ... weird? She nodded. “I think so. Can you change for me ... now? I want to see you in wolf form.”

Alex leaned in and kissed her. “I’d be honored.” He stood up and went around the foot of the bed.

Jess had to resist the urge to touch him. If she did, they’d get sidetracked, and she really needed to see if she could deal with him being in wolf form. She wanted to be as comfortable with this as he was.

He bent down to eye level. “Remember, it’s me, and I’ll be able to hear and understand everything you say. Try not to freak out on me, okay?” He glanced down at her knee, then pulled back, almost reluctantly.

She grinned and made an X over her heart. “Promise.”

He stepped back and let out a breath. “All right. Let’s do it.”

There was a faraway look on his face. His body tensed, then relaxed. Jess stared at his hands, which fused together as she watched. She looked up to see his face lengthen into a snout. He dropped to his hands and knees as a tail pushed through his skin and his muscles contorted. Suddenly, black fur covered him all over. Then ... he was a large black wolf.

Jess sat there in awe. It was one thing to know he was a werewolf; it was another entirely to watch him change into one. It was still so hard to grasp.

Alex sat down in front of her, his tongue hanging out, his tail wagging. He looked happy. She supposed he was glad she hadn’t screamed bloody murder and tried to make a hasty exit without her crutches again. She chuckled. Boy, she must have looked like a goober the other night.

She sat there studying him for a moment. He didn't seem dangerous. In fact, he still seemed like ... well, like Alex. He still had that comforting-but-commanding air about him. She held out her hand, and he slowly advanced toward her. He licked her hand, and she giggled. She ran her hand over his fur, petting his head. He leaned into her palm, like he always did. He sure loved her caresses. Yes, it was still Alex; even in this shape, it was him. "Oh, Alex, this is amazing!"

He jumped up on the bed next to her and licked her cheek.

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him hard. Tears of joy sprang to her eyes. She knew that no matter what, she'd be a part of his life ... all aspects of it.

Epilogue

Three months later ...

Alex helped Jess take off her wedding dress in the silence of their bedroom. He could tell she had something on her mind.

The wedding had gone beautifully. Jess had made the most beautiful bride in the history of brides. She had even walked down the aisle on her own two feet. The day had gone off without a hitch.

As a wedding present, Alex had gifted Jess with her very own dance studio. At her request, he'd added Kat's name to the company, making her a partner. However, for a woman who had everything she'd ever wanted, she looked a little brooding.

Alex unbuttoned the last button and looked at her in the full-length mirror. "Penny for your thoughts. Do you regret not leaving for our honeymoon right after the ceremony?"

Jess jerked her head up. Apparently he'd startled her out of her thoughts. She caught his gaze in the mirror and smiled. "No, tomorrow is fine. I was thinking about Kat."

Alex eased the sleeve of her gown off her shoulder and replaced it with a kiss. "What about Kat, sweetheart? Do you want her to move in with us?"

She turned her head to the side and kissed his hand. “No ... Well, maybe. But that’s not what’s worrying me.”

“Then what is it, honey?”

“Well, I’m wondering if we’re doing the right thing by not telling Adrian?”

Alex turned her to face him and slid her other sleeve down and off. As her dress dropped to the floor, he kissed her other shoulder and answered. “I’m not sure. But with her crying like that, it was a little difficult not to promise Kat anything she wanted. Besides, he’s bound to figure it out once she starts showing.”

“You’re right. Let Kat hang on to her anger for a little while. Adrian will find out eventually.” Jess smiled and tugged his head down. “Now, give me a kiss.”

“Gladly,” he muttered against her lips.

She forgot all about Kat and her worries as Alex pulled her into his arms and deepened the kiss. His tongue invaded her mouth, and his hands stroked her shoulders and back. He pressed his body close to hers, his erection throbbing against her belly. Gently caressing her, he unhooked her bra. Soon it joined the dress at her feet. He picked her up out of the puddle of her silk dress, sat her down, sank to his knees, and gently pushed her legs a little wider.

Jess quivered in delight as he leaned forward and covered her with his mouth. She felt the warm moisture of her own excitement all the way through the satin of her thong. She bucked her hips forward and felt him chuckle against her. “Oh, Alex. More. Take the panties off.”

He leaned away from her and slid them down her legs, caressing as he went. He stared at her for several seconds. His eyes had changed to what she affectionately called his “wolf eyes.” She could practically feel his lust as his gaze raked over her pussy.

When he made no move to continue, she reached out and pulled his head forward. She felt him smile against her bare skin. His tongue snaked out, and he worked his way slowly

up, then back down, her slit. The soft little grunts coming from the back of his throat proved that he was enjoying it almost as much as she was. He pulled back, placing a kiss above her pussy. "Baby, you taste so good."

Jess groaned. God, he was sexy! Did all men enjoy this intimate act as much as he did, or was she just lucky? He would lick her and tease her for hours if she'd let him.

She bucked her hips forward again, only to have him grin up at her mischievously, then blow softly across her sensitized flesh. She shivered. Her inner muscles clinched tight.

When his tongue finally found her clit, she threw her head back. "Oh, god, yes!" His hands spread her labia wide. He took her clit into his mouth and suckled. Jess fisted his hair in her hands and held him to her. It felt so good, and she was so close. His tongue plunged into her opening, and she let out a ragged moan as her orgasm approached. But before she could go over the edge, he pulled back and stood up.

She blinked at the abrupt departure. *Argh!* She had been right there! One more thrust of his tongue and she'd have come. She opened her mouth to protest, until she saw that he was stripping out of his tuxedo.

Alex knew she'd been about to complain, but as soon as he began to disrobe, she'd snapped her mouth shut. He watched her expression go from outrage to lust as his cock sprang free from his pants. She licked her lips as she watched him. Before he got his pants completely off, she was in front of him and on her knees.

He laughed and pushed her back. "Cut it out, you piranha."

Her eyes twinkled up at him, and she slowly leaned forward. She was daring him to stop her. *You little siren.* Her tongue darted out, sliding across the tip of his cock. He groaned and pulled her up by the hand.

Kicking his pants free, he lay down on the floor and pulled her on top of him. He didn't need to coach her further -- she grabbed him and positioned him at her entrance. With her

on her knees above him, he had an unimpeded view of her impaling herself on his cock. He groaned. The sight and wet sound of her labia sinking down his shaft were his undoing. His patience snapped. He grabbed her hips and showed her how he wanted her to move. “That’s it, Jess. Ride me.”

She did ... she ground herself into him hard and fast, her breasts bouncing with every thrust. He held her hips and thrust upward into her, increasing the depth of penetration. It felt so good.

Her hard nipples were begging for attention. As Alex pulled her forward to taste the erect little peaks, her inner muscles tensed around him. He watched her face and knew the instant she climaxed.

“Oh, God! Oh, Alex! Oh, yessss!”

That was all it took. She looked so incredibly sexy with her head thrown back and her nipples stabbing out at him that Alex followed her into orgasm. He let out a ragged moan and spilled himself into her as she collapsed on his chest.

Minutes later, Jess still lay on top of Alex, her hands running across his chest. “Alex?”

“Umm?”

“If Kat is moving in with us, it might be a little difficult for you to take care of the babies by yourself while she and I are at the studio.”

Alex sat up so abruptly that she slid off of him. “Are you pregnant?”

She laughed and sat up next to him. “Yes, about six weeks along. I went to the doctor to confirm it, but my first prenatal appointment isn’t for another four weeks.”

His smile had grown wider and wider with every word she’d spoken. After several seconds passed with him sitting perfectly still and beaming at her, he did the most unexpected thing. He laughed. He hugged her. Then he threw back his head and howled.

THE END

Jeigh Lynn

Jeigh Lynn lives with, her real life hero, her husband and their two rowdy sons. She is an ex-dance instructor and dancer of over twenty-five years. She lays claim to several National and Regional Dance Competition trophies, including Showstoppers, Stars of Tomorrow and Star Power. She was also featured twice on a variety show for the BBC. Currently, Jeigh is a stay at home mom and a writer, not to mention an avid reader of Romance and Mystery. When she's not fetching Kool-Aid and swapping out video games, she can usually be found enjoying the decadence of chocolate, in between her workouts and writing. Her hobbies include, gardening, practicing her marksmanship, art, typing email to her critique partners and, of course, reading.

Visit Jeigh on the Web at www.jeighlynn.com.

* * * * *

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I smiled back, feeling more comfortable with him. “You know, when you first came in the ER, I thought you were wearing some kind of aftershave because of how you smelled. But you don't, do you? Wear aftershave?” I looked at him out of the corner of my eye.

Connor rubbed his hand over his whiskers. “No, darlin'. Where would I get it?”

I could taste his amusement, tart and sweet, not bitter like his embarrassment, in my mouth. I rolled it over my tongue.

He grinned and asked, “Why? What did I smell like?”

“Good. Well, you always smell good. Like leather and some kind of spice. Sometimes I think it's citrus, or pine or, I don't know. Something wild. I can't quite put my finger on it ...” Suddenly I became shy. “I guess it's just your natural smell,” I finished, my voice almost too low to hear. I hugged my knees tighter against my chest.

“Glad you like it.” The heat was back in his voice, rushing over my skin in a burning wave and making the step we were sitting on feel much too small.

I stood and faced him, putting some distance between us. I crossed my arms over my chest again, hugging myself and wanting both to touch him and to be as far away as possible from him. I tried to think of some way to get the conversation back on track. “So, if I was a perfume, what notes would I have?” To my relief, I felt the heat ease down like a banked fire, and he looked thoughtful.

“Hmm. The middle notes are easy.” He counted on his fingers, ticking them off, still slouching comfortably on the bottom step. “Vanilla, cinnamon, warm honey.”

“You make me sound like a sugar cookie,” I protested, half laughing.

“Yeah, but that's just the middle. Now your top note, that's hard to describe.” He was silent for a moment, concentrating. “Remember that last night at the hospital, sitting on the bench outside by the bushes?”

“Yeah.” What I remembered was the warm feeling of his wet tongue on my knee. My whole body flushed at once, and I tried not to look at him.

“There was this bush out there by the bench, it had these delicate, white flowers, and I remember thinking that was what you smelled like. Soft and pretty and sweet.” His green eyes were unreadable as he straightened up a little on the step, raising his head to look at me.

I remembered smelling the fragrance of the bush that night and thinking that my great-grandmother had a bush in her yard when I was small that smelled like that ... “Jasmine! Night-blooming jasmine,” I said triumphantly. “So that's it? Sugar cookie and jasmine?”

“Nah. You're forgettin' the base note,” he said, seriously.

“Sorry. Can't forget that. So what's my base note?” I expected him to say something else about flowers or cookie ingredients, but he surprised me.

“Musk,” he said simply.

“Musk? Like a good musk, or a bad musk?” It didn't sound like a good thing to me.

“Good, definitely. Delicate and feminine, but it's there. It's the base that all the rest is built on. Totally and uniquely you, Red. I could live to be a thousand and never see you again, and I'd never forget your scent. You could be in a roomful of people, and even if I was blindfolded, I could still pick you out by your sweet aroma. It's like nothing else in the world.”

Connor stood up with unnerving speed, suddenly right in front of me, so close I could feel his body as if we were connected. He took my left arm, unfolding it from across my chest and held it up to his face. He rubbed the tender underside of my forearm across the scratchiness of his cheek and the softness of that full mouth and then inhaled deeply. His eyes got a faraway look in them, as though he was remembering the best meal he'd ever eaten ... or the most erotic experience he'd ever had.

I let him smell me for a moment, mesmerized by the feeling of his cheek and mouth against my arm and the deep hunger that was coming from him. It reached inside my body

and stroked things he shouldn't have been able to reach, making my breath catch in my throat. Reluctantly I pulled my hand away, afraid of being burned by his heat, consumed by that hunger.

“What else can you tell about people by their smell?” I asked, desperate to change the subject, which seemed to be getting too personal again.

Connor shook himself, and his eyes cleared as though he were coming out of a trance.

“Sorry, Red. It's just that you smell so damn good.” He took a deep breath. “What else can I tell about people by their smell? Hmm. Where they've been, who they've been with, what they've been doing. Like that.” His eyes still had a little of that far-away look, and, hoping to keep the conversation impersonal, I continued to lead him.

“Give me an example. What about ... um ... Sylvie? You could smell her when she came in, right?”

He nodded.

“Well, where had she been?” I asked.

Connor grinned, showing sharp, white teeth and looking extremely feral for a moment. “Well, she's mostly been in bed, as far as I can smell, darlin'.” Amusement was thick in his voice. I felt myself blush once again at his words even as I tasted that now familiar sweet-tart flavor like orange candy.

“You can smell that?” I asked, not daring to meet his vivid eyes. If he could smell sex, then could he also smell desire? I fervently hoped not.

“Sex? Oh, yeah, darlin'. I can't miss it. Your little friend there has got the mark of another man all over her. It's like a ‘Keep Out, Private Property’ sign. I'd never bother her, smelling like that. Even if I wasn't already interested in someone else.” The conversation was getting onto dangerous ground yet again.

I tried to keep going. “How can you do that? Smell all those things and interpret the smells accurately?”

Connor shrugged. "I don't know. How can I hear better than most people or see in the dark? I don't remember much of anything about myself, but I know most people can't see, hear or smell what I can. I know I'm different. How can you feel what other people are feeling?"

"I don't know," I said softly, wrapping my arms tightly around myself and looking down. "I still don't understand how you could tell that about me when no else but my great-grandmother ever knew. She warned me not to tell anyone until I found someone else like me. But I didn't even have to tell you. You just knew."

Connor grinned at me. "Did you know I was different right away? 'Cause I certainly sensed something different about you right off the bat, though it took me a while to figure out what it was exactly."

"I knew the minute I touched you in the ER that you weren't like anyone else I'd ever met," I said, still unable to meet his eyes. "I think that's the reason I went after you last night. All my life I've been waiting to meet someone as different as I am, and when I found you, I wasn't ready to let you go." It surprised me to hear myself admitting this, but Connor's next words surprised me more.

"But you're not ready to let me in yet, either? Isn't that right?" He lifted my chin gently, his large hand warm and sure, forcing me to look at him. His eyes searched mine. I felt my face color for what seemed like the thousandth time that day.

I was at a loss for words. Connor put one large hand on my waist and pulled me close to him, so close I could feel every hard angle of his body pressing along the length of mine. Heat rushed over me in a stinging, devouring wave, and I gasped, unable to help myself. I braced my hands against his broad chest and tried to push away, but he wouldn't let me.

Holding me tightly, he buried his face in my hair. His warm breath, blowing over the nape of my neck, sent me into a helpless spasm of goose bumps and caused my nipples to

become hot little pebbles at the tips of my breasts. I knew Connor must be feeling them press against his chest where I was crushed against him.

Panic, like dry cotton, was at the back of my throat, and I stiffened against him, trying to let him know I wasn't interested. But he continued to hold me until I relaxed, going almost limp in his arms, his uniquely masculine scent of leather and spice filling my nose.

My hands were trembling helplessly, and I couldn't get a deep enough breath. I tasted the salt of his need like sweat or blood in my mouth, and my heart was beating so hard I could feel it in every part of my body at once. Could hear it drumming in my ears.

“Connor ...” I whispered. “Connor, please ...” I had no idea what exactly I was begging him for. My body wanted his, pressed so warm and hard against me. I was almost shaking with desire, an urgency I had never felt before I met him, and yet ... I just couldn't. I couldn't get Douglas 's parting words out of my mind. I felt frightened, helpless, lost.

“Please what, darlin'?” Connor's voice was low, almost a snarl in my ear. Hot waves of desire-hunger-wanting washed over me again, stroking my body, burning me up. I felt his mouth, hot and slow along the length of my throat and his sharp teeth biting me lightly as he kissed and sucked the sensitive curve where my neck and shoulder met. I shivered helplessly against him, digging my fingernails into his heavily muscled shoulders, gouging him through the plain white T-shirt.

“Please don't. Don't ... don't do this to me. Not now.”

“Which should I listen to, Red? Your words or your body? They're sending me two different messages,” he growled, his words drenched in crimson.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

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Ms. Anderson and Mr. Douglas did a wonderful job of creating a great suspenseful read with *Marked*. I was truly glued to my seat eagerly reading until I could unravel the mystery of who was trying to kill Janine and hoping Connor would regain his memory. The many sexual encounters between Connor and Janine were very powerful and passionate in nature.

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