

Atlantic Bridge

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Dedication

To Stephanie, for constantly pushing me to exceed my own expectations.

Chapter One

It was a bad idea. Flanna knew it, could feel the badness of it seeping into her bones, but pushed open the door to the nightclub anyway. She had to blink against the smoke that immediately sucked toward the entrance, as if the outside was eager to gulp it down. It made her wish even more fervently that she could have found a flight back to the UK that night instead of the following day. She'd spent too long in the States; simple things like remembering the smell of her nan's fresh bread instead of the damp and blood that seemed to follow her everywhere were leaving her heartsick. It was more than time to go home again.

Leaving was for tomorrow, though.

Tonight was about forgetting. A few hours of pretending that her body wasn't battered and bruised from the past week of racing along the east coast. Stolen minutes where she was just a tourist looking for a holiday fling, hungry for lean muscles and dark eyes that made promises easily broken by the morning sun. Such a luxury was a rarity, and while this would not be the first time she had sought solace in a stranger's arms, that didn't mean it got any easier. Forgetting meant shedding everything she had ever been taught, everything she had ever believed about her own self-worth, all in favor of a few hours of bliss.

She only did that when she was desperate for the release. She only came to places like this when she needed to be anonymous. To these men, she was just a woman. Nobody at

Rage would ever know that Flanna McRae was a demonhunter.

The music pounded throughout the dimly lit club, all bass and no melody as it made Flanna's skin vibrate in a matching rhythm. The air smelled of cigarettes and stale cologne with a Jack Daniel's chaser, enticing her deeper into the press of people, and she steered toward the long silver bar that lined the side wall. She needed a drink. Badly. As much as she might want this particular abandon, there was no way she could get it without some help. Sleeping around just wasn't in her nature.

Someone pinched her ass along the way to the bar, but Flanna ignored it, not even bothering to turn around to see if the hand was male or female. Either was possible in this particular venue. Deep in the bowels of Manhattan, the nightclub Rage was known for catering to every type, regardless of motive, history, or inclination. It broke more than one law with its very presence, allowing smoking to occur inside its walls and other more tawdry escapades to happen behind closed doors. It was the kind of place you went to when you needed to forget the outside world existed, when you needed it tattooed into your flesh with music and alcohol. Flanna had been here only once before, stopping through on a different trip back to England. She knew of others who rarely left its confines.

The bartender was a bear of a man, face mottled with aging acne and his head shaved clean of the hair that covered the rest of his body. His rheumy eyes caught hers when she approached, and he nodded in silent acknowledgment as he

finished pouring out the line of shooters on the bar in front of him. Knowing she would be served next, Flanna twisted against the bar, leaning back so that her elbows rested along the edge, and surveyed the gyrating crowd on the dance floor.

It was packed tonight, bodies pressed so closely out on the floor that she saw more than one elbow or hand land in places that would have merited getting kicked out at any other club. Ages ran the gamut from the jailbait waif currently shimmying against one of the loud speakers by the stage to the fifty-something biker she could see shouting something into his mate's ear in the corner. These were not people she associated with on a day-to-day basis, but for one week out of every month, Flanna found herself thrust into their world, trying desperately to fit in without getting noticed. Being seen usually led to people other than herself getting hurt, and that was unacceptable.

She barely had time to do a visual sweep of the room before she felt the bartender's presence behind her.

"What'll you have?" he asked, leaning forward to make himself heard as she turned around to face him.

"Give me the darkest beer you've got on draft," she shouted back.

A faint smile ghosted his lips at her accent, but he didn't comment, turning away to grab a mug and pour her drink. That was a relief. Flanna hated having to explain what she was doing in town, but she'd yet to master an American accent to try and blend in with the locals. It was far easier just to keep quiet among strangers.

She passed over her money when he pushed the mug across the bar and turned back toward the crowd without waiting for her change. The glass was icy against her fingertips, a welcome change from the sweltering air. All these bodies crammed into one small space meant no call for a heating system, that was for sure. Already, she could feel beads of sweat trickling down between her full breasts.

Flanna spotted the one she wanted before she finished her beer. Lounging near the narrow corridor that led to the restrooms, he was well over six feet tall with heavy muscles made all that more prominent by the sleeveless black vest he wore. She preferred bigger men. They made her feel small. At five-ten, Flanna didn't have many opportunities to feel dainty.

Draining the rest of her drink, she shifted so that she could check her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. In spite of the heat, her dark red hair was still pulled tightly in its ponytail, long and sleek where it hung halfway down her back. Her blue eyes were bright, most likely from the alcohol, and her cheeks were pink and slightly shiny from the club's warmth. Other than that, the rest looked like it always did—her mouth too full, her nose just a tad too long. She knew she wasn't homely, but just once, she would have liked to be beautiful. Hopefully, what she *did* have was enough to get the guy's attention.

By the time she turned back to walk over to him, the spot he'd been occupying at the wall was empty, leaving Flanna standing and gaping while she tried to figure out where it was he'd disappeared to. There were too many bodies to do it

easily, and she stood on her tiptoes as she scanned for someone matching his height amongst the crowd.

"Lucky guy."

The masculine voice at her ear startled Flanna, and she whipped around to find herself facing the man she'd been looking for. Up close, his features were darker, his hair shaggy against his nape. Thick brows stood out over his black eyes, but his teeth gleamed almost too white against his tanned skin. There was a scar that ran along his jaw, disappearing behind his neck and into his hair, and she couldn't help but wonder what kind of a fight he'd been in to warrant such a vicious reminder.

Once he had her attention, the guy gestured toward the bartender for two more drinks. One beefy hand shoved a twenty across the countertop, while the other reached for Flanna's wrist, pulling her just enough so that she stumbled against his chest.

"I make my own luck," he said with a grin.

Flanna began to seethe. He wasn't letting her go, his strong grip squeezing her tightly enough to make it hurt. Most of the time, she found it easy to fight off such an obvious attack, but the sheer size of this guy—the thing that had attracted her to him in the first place—was working against her. She wasn't interested in the Neanderthal approach; she dealt with enough alphas and caveman attitudes when she was hunting. Somehow, she had to get out of this.

"I didn't catch your name," she said, almost shouting in order to be heard over the din.

"That's because I didn't throw it," he replied. His eyes swept over her hungrily, lingering on her full breasts as he added, "What about you, sweetheart? You don't sound like you're from around here."

"That would be because I'm not." Two could play this game, but she wasn't about to give him the ammunition of her name if he wasn't going to share the same. Thankfully, their drinks arrived, distracting him enough to look away from Flanna's chest. She'd known coming to Rage was going to be a bad idea, but she hadn't been prepared for it turning quite as awful as this.

Once she'd picked up her mug, he began pulling her away from the bar, through the people and toward the corner of the club where he must have seen her watching him. Beer spilled over the rim, splattering across the top of her breasts and down her white blouse, making the fabric go translucent where it got wet. He didn't stop. He didn't even slow down. He just continued his purposeful stride across the room, regardless of the discomfort Flanna was in.

The crowd thinned as they reached the wall, the nearest people a woman straddling a man in a chair a few feet away. A hallway snaked along the side of the stage, leading to the bathrooms and other rooms, but the guy didn't seem interested in taking her further into the club's bowels, setting down his drink on a narrow table as he turned to face her.

"I'll bet you're a wildcat in bed," he said with a smirk. His voice was lower. The noise level wasn't quite as high over here.

"Too bad there isn't a bed around for you to find that out," Flanna shot back.

Her sarcastic dismissal didn't faze him. His grin just widened, exposing canines that seemed slightly longer than the rest of his teeth.

"Come here," he growled. With a sharp yank, he pulled her against him, using the wall behind his back to brace against when her weight pushed him into it.

The power in his muscles began to frighten her, though Flanna did everything in her power to keep it from registering in her face. Pressed into his chest as she was, it was impossible not to feel every stretch of sinew, and what was worse, the guy knew it. It only seemed to amuse him when she stiffened against him.

"You have to play this way to get a girl's attention?" she said, her voice dripping with ice.

He shrugged, though his bulk kept the motion small. "I see what I want, I take it," he said.

"That's what you think."

Flanna's free hand lashed out before the man could react, nails raking down the side of his face. Blood welled in the scratches, but even as his eyes widened at the unexpected attack, she was moving again, twisting in his arms so that she could slam her elbow into his solar plexus.

Though it wouldn't do any lasting damage, the blow served its purpose, surprising him enough to loosen his grip and allow Flanna to break free. Her hand balled into a fist and slammed into his jaw, her silver ring cutting along his chin from the force.

This time, he howled in pain, clutching at his face. "You bitch!" he spat.

She didn't waste time on a reply. She merely whirled on her heel and sped for the narrow corridor that would take her out the back way.

Her heart was pounding. As she ran down the hall, the nearly pitch-black rear of the club made her stumble more than once, forcing Flanna to use the wall as guidance. Her fingers scraped against the rough texture, but in the far distance, she could see the red neon of the exit sign illuminating her escape. It didn't matter, though. The unmistakable roar of the man not too far behind followed her every step.

He was taller, but she was faster, not even slowing as she thrust her hands out in front of her to shove the door open. Wrists aching from the driving force, she gulped at the cooler air of the alley like a woman drowning, her head swiveling from side to side to determine which way would lead her more quickly to freedom.

Never again, she chanted silently as she took off to her left. She'd live with all the tension in the world before she tried again to relieve it with anonymous sex. It just wasn't worth it.

So intent on listening to the sounds behind her, Flanna didn't see the other man rounding the corner of the building in front of her until it was too late. Crashing into his chest, she tangled her long legs with his, sending them both to the ground in a heap.

"Sorry, sorry!" she exclaimed, struggling to get free.

Strong hands settled beneath her armpits, helping Flanna steady herself. She pulled back to see a pair of brilliant blue eyes gazing across at her in worry, and as they each stood up, found they met each other at nearly equal heights.

"Have you got the Devil himself after you?" he asked with a small smile. Before she could reply, however, his gaze slid beyond her shoulder, all mirth vanishing from his face.

Flanna stepped away to see her assailant emerge from the alleyway. Fury darkened his eyes, and his skin was stippled with streaks of blood that he'd tried to wipe away. His nostrils flared, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it was more from the thrill of the chase than the exertion. That was all right, though. He was not the only one who could be a hunter.

"Still interested in finding out what kind of a wildcat I am?" she asked. Without taking her eyes off him, Flanna crouched so that she could reach into her ankle-boot, pulling out the small silver knife she kept sheathed there for emergencies.

Though the malice on his face didn't falter, his step did, his gaze darting from the streetlight reflecting off the blade to the determination in her eyes. His lip curled back into a snarl, and his hands balled into fists at his side.

"This isn't over, bitch," he growled.

She stood unflinching while he cast one last look at her companion and then stalked off into the night. She only relaxed when he disappeared around the corner.

"I always thought the Devil would be a much better dresser," a masculine voice said behind her.

In her preoccupation with the standoff, Flanna had nearly forgotten about the man she'd bumped into. Pivoting, she saw him watching the empty street down which her attacker had gone before sliding his gaze effortlessly back to her, a bemused smile returning to light his eyes. It only took a brief downward flicker of his long lashes for her to remember the weapon poised in her hand, and she hastily bent to slide it back into its sheath.

"It's not what you think," she said quickly.

"Oh? And what is it you think I'm thinking?"

The speed at which he spoke confused her for the briefest of moments, making her hesitate just long enough to elicit a chuckle. "Well, at least you're fast with your knife," he said.

His joke made her splutter in annoyance, and Flanna drew herself up to her full height. It didn't make her taller than him; rather, it made them more even, but the advantage it gave her mood-wise was palpable.

"My apologies for bumping into you, sir," she said stiffly, ignoring the clean scent of his body spray drifting toward her.

When she attempted to go around him, however, she was forced to an abrupt halt. At the last moment, he slid sideways to bar her passage.

"We're not going to end it like that, are we?" he asked. His smile broadened as he stuck out his hand. "I'm Jason Randolph."

The movement put him directly into a circle of light, illuminating his face clearly for the first time. Besides the blue eyes, he had light brown hair, cropped close in a stylish cut that accented his angular features. Everything about him was

lean—sharply defined bone structure, limbs looking deceptively long in his khakis and jacket—with the lone exception of his mouth. That was full and sensual, evoking inappropriate fancies of what it would feel like against hers, and Flanna stiffened when she realized the path her thoughts had taken. He was attractive, yes, but likely knew it and probably treated women accordingly. No amount of stirring inside her skin was worth making a second mistake tonight.

When she didn't move or answer right away, Jason took a step toward her, lowering his hand but not hiding it away. "At least let me walk you to the police station," he said. "You're obviously not from around here, and yeah, I know you could probably hold your own, but it'll make me feel a hell of a lot better knowing you're not alone."

She shook her head. "I'm not going to the police."

"You're not actually going to let your boyfriend get away with acting like that, are you?"

It took a second for her to realize just what he meant.
"He's not my boyfriend," Flanna said. "But it doesn't matter anyway. I fly back to England tomorrow. The police are hardly going to follow through with any investigation if the so-called victim isn't even in the country, now are they?"

That seemed to appease Jason, but as she tried to leave again, he again blocked her path. "It would still make me feel better if you let me walk you back to your hotel or wherever it is you're staying," he pressed.

"There's really no need..."

"Because that *isn't* some psychotic caveman who just threatened you?"

"Because, as you've already admitted, I can take care of myself." Out of the corner of her eye, Flanna saw the yellow of a cab appear at the corner and stepped to the curb to grab its attention. "Thank you for the offer, Mr. Randolph, but it's really not necessary. I'll get door-to-door service and everyone can sleep easy tonight."

She didn't look back as the cab coasted to a stop, though she could feel Jason hovering just behind her. Sliding into the back seat, she gave the driver the address of her hotel, waiting until they pulled away before giving in to the desire to glance at the man she had left behind on the walk. The persistent Mr. Randolph stood in the same spot on the curb, his hands stuffed into his pockets as he regarded the moving car. When he caught her looking at him, he smiled, sending an unexpected shiver along her skin, and nodded to her in a silent good-bye.

Flanna whipped back around, staring out the front of the cab as she silently chastised herself for her poor judgment in going to Rage in the first place. As much as she might want to, forgetting who she was, even for a few hours, was a dangerous thing. There was no escaping the reality of what she had spent the past week doing, the blood she had shed, the creatures she had destroyed. Believing she could pretend to be normal was foolhardy at best.

For this pivotal week every month, Flanna was a hunter through and through. Like her father had been. Like her grandfather. If she wanted any sort of normal affection, it couldn't happen while she was working. It couldn't come from a stranger, either tall and threatening or amiable and

attentive. It had to wait until she was safe back in the haven of her home.

It had to wait until tomorrow.

Chapter Two

She was relieved that the events at Rage were a singular occurrence during her brief stay in New York. The flight out of JFK was late to depart but thankfully boring once in the air, with a half-empty plane making it simple for Flanna to sleep most of the journey. By the time she landed at Gatwick the next morning, she was groggy but feeling more like her normal self, shedding the demonhunter skin she'd been wearing for the easier smile she kept reserved for her family.

Her father greeted her with open arms, blustering on about the shop before he could even take her bags, continuing his chatter all the way out to where he'd parked the delivery van. Flanna made the necessary responses, but let him go on without interruption, every minute spent in his company relaxing her even further. It felt so good to be home, or at least, on the way to it. When the scent of sugar and yeast drifted out from the rear of the van when she opened it to stow her bags, she paused just for a moment to breathe it in. Every time she came back, it got harder and harder to think about leaving the following month.

After the brilliant clarity of American skies, the more somber Kent County horizon greeted Flanna without apology, the lush countryside stretching for miles around as the van wound along the narrow roads leading home. Forests like those she had spent the past week battling came in patches along the way, but she had no desire to go exploring them. She already knew most of them by heart, and they were

harmless. Demons had long given up Kent's borders, choosing instead to make their homes elsewhere. It was why Flanna was forced to leave every month.

Colin McRae circumvented town to head straight for the house, navigating the ring road before pulling into the country lane that led away from Birley's town center. It was mildly disappointing. Though she was tired, Flanna would have loved to get straight to work in her family's bakery, burying the last vestiges of what had happened abroad in the normality of selling buns to the Birley populace.

"You'll fancy some sleep," her father said. "And I'll be back to the shop in time to help your nan with the lunch crowd. No need for you to fuss."

She didn't argue. There was no point. Once her father made up his mind about something, there was no changing it.

The late morning sun brought the house into sharp relief as they pulled into the drive. Colin had purchased the two-story chalet bungalow over twenty years earlier before property pricing started going mad in southeast England, and while she had grown up to stories about how it couldn't hold a candle to Scottish housing, it was the only home Flanna could remember. She still had the tiny upstairs bedroom that she'd been given when they had first moved in. Occasionally, curiosity struck and she wondered what it would be like to live on her own, but those desires dissipated every time she was reminded of her duty. The McRaes had been demonhunters for over a millennia. She couldn't turn her back on that, even if she wanted to.

Colin had her bags in hand before Flanna could get out of the van. "No problems with bringing the guns back then?" he asked, hefting the case holding her weapons.

"Not a one."

"What about the new bullets? How'd they work out?"

He'd refrained from talking about her purpose in the States on the trip home, as if there was no place safe for such a discussion except on their own soil. Flanna regretted that he felt the need to talk about it at all, but since he had been the one to insist on taking the new ammunition with her to test it out, she knew she owed him the satisfaction of knowing how they'd worked.

"Clean kills," she said. "One shot apiece. The first night was one of the easiest hunts I've ever had."

She was halfway to the front door when he asked the question she'd been fearing.

"So, the three wolves are dead?"

It took every ounce of strength she had to admit to the truth. If she lied, he'd find out about it anyway.

"Just two," Flanna said without looking back. "The third one ... got away."

She retreated to her bedroom then, unwilling to face the disappointment she knew she would see in his eyes if she waited to talk to him about it. He wouldn't press; it wasn't in his nature. He would just say, "Aye, well, better luck with the next time," which was almost worse. Though he'd never said a word out loud about it, Flanna was more than aware that he much would have preferred passing along the family legacy to a son rather than a daughter. He would let her get by with

failing until the time came for her to pass her hunting mantle along to her own child.

Of course, that meant having a relationship with someone other than her father or grandmother, and Flanna was fairly certain that would never happen. No man had ever stuck around after discovering the truth about what she did. It was wishful thinking to believe that might ever change.

* * * *

She fell back into her routine with the ease she always did. Sleeping through that first day and then through the night, Flanna woke up just before dawn to the sounds of her nan bustling around in the kitchen downstairs. The faint click of the kettle turning itself off made her mouth water, and before she could stop to think, she was pushing the blankets back and padding down the narrow steps.

Time was only just starting to catch up to Helen McRae. With her back still strong and straight, she nearly matched Flanna in height, her steel-gray hair pulled back into a braid that fell between her shoulder blades. Only her hands revealed the truth of her nearly seventy years. Decades of working with them had left her knuckles gnarled and the skin dry. These were the hands of a woman who'd labored with them nearly every day of her life. Helen bared them with pride.

"Your father's gone down to the shop already," Helen said before Flanna had even crossed the kitchen threshold. "He said you're to sleep as much as you need to get back to sorts."

"I sleep any more and I'll have skin ulcers," Flanna joked. She stood behind her grandmother and watched the older woman stir the mushrooms in the frying pan, the enticing smell of breakfast cooking making her stomach rumble. "Do we have sausage, too?" she asked.

"Already done."

Flanna stepped out of the way as Helen turned off the flame, then grabbed a towel before crouching down to the oven below. She pulled out two plates, already heaped with sausage, beans, eggs, and fried bread, and set them on the counter, dishing out the mushrooms without a glance back at her granddaughter.

"Don't hover," Helen scolded. "Pour the tea so we can have a proper breakfast."

As the two women settled down to eat, it occurred to Flanna that nothing had been said yet about her latest trip. Usually when she returned, Helen was quick to quiz her on everything that happened, checking to find out what injuries she might have sustained, what interesting places she might have seen along the way. This morning, though ... nothing. She wasn't entirely sure if that was a blessing or not.

Regardless, they fell into their familiar patterns. Flanna washed up, while Helen set about gathering what would be necessary for business that day at the bakery the family ran in Birley's town center. Then they were out the door, trundling down the country lane, before the sun could even think of peeking over the horizon. The comfort of the routine lulled her into forgetting, albeit temporarily, the events of the past week.

* * * *

Sometimes, when she was chatting with Mrs. Lange while filling her café's daily roll order, or when she was helping old Mr. Simmons carry his parcels to his beat-up Skoda, Flanna forgot about what pulled her away from her home and family one week out of every month. Life was simple in Birley. Its citizens were more concerned about whether or not TV licenses were going to be more expensive in the coming year than if there were werewolves roaming the countryside. They still closed their shop doors on Wednesday afternoons, and they still looked down their noses at their neighbors north across the river. Little had changed in the twenty-plus years Flanna had lived there, and most of the time, she liked it that way.

It was harder to forget when she was at home. Beyond the bakery's walls, there were other issues to contend with, weapons to be made, reports to be taken about monsters that walked amongst the human population. Colin's network of contacts throughout the world had him busy well into the wee hours of the morning. Though it had been over five years since he'd last gone on a hunt, he was still a nocturnal animal. He kept Flanna updated about what needed to be done, told her anecdotes shared by others that were like themselves. She knew more about strangers on the other side of the world than she did about some of the people in her own town.

At home, she trained as well. While some demonhunters focused their energies on vampires or other creatures of the

night, the McRaes had become specialists in werewolves. That didn't mean Flanna didn't fight other kinds of monsters, but when she was sent out specifically on her monthly missions, it was always with reports of werewolves in hand. They were the heart of her hunts, and it was for them that she spent so many hours making sure she was ready.

Her favorite weapon was the pistol her father had given her when she turned eighteen. She had the eye of a true marksman, rarely missing even in the throes of a heated fight. It also carried with it the advantage of being a long-range weapon. Shooting from a distance increased Flanna's odds of returning home alive, which, as she'd been taught from an early age, was the most important part of what they did. You couldn't fight evil if you were dead.

The days slipped into their regular patterns. Get up, go into the shop, work all day, and then come home to train. Repeat as necessary. A week had gone by before Flanna even realized it, and Colin started making noises about where she would need to go during the next full moon.

"Hong says there was a sighting on Paektu Mountain," he said one night at the dinner table.

Flanna wrinkled her nose. "Isn't this the rainy season in North Korea?" she asked.

"You think evil has issues with getting wet?" His joke fell flat, and Colin set down his knife and fork in order to rest his hand on his daughter's arm. "Hong wouldn't send you on a wild goose chase," he said.

"I know, but..."

"Don't think about it." He returned to his meal, the issue already settled in his mind. "When the time comes, we'll know where you need to go."

She escaped the house as quickly as she could, waiting until her nan had gone to bed before changing into sweats and a T-shirt for a run. Her father stopped Flanna at the door, pressing a sheathed silver blade into her hand without saying a word, and then went back to where he'd been poring over maps at the kitchen table. Even though there had been no reports of demonic activity in Kent for years, he still refused to let her go out at night without being prepared for a fight. It was, perhaps, the one thing that infuriated Flanna the most about him.

Her steps were a rhythmic pounding against the earth, the weight of the blade strapped to her calf a nagging reminder that this wasn't completely a pleasure run. The sky was uncharacteristically clear for this time of year, and in spite of the chill, Flanna warmed quickly, her skin taking on a sweaty sheen that made her gleam in the moonlight. If she concentrated, she could pretend that the world didn't exist, that it was just her and the stars and the damp grass beneath her feet.

Then she heard the snap of a branch. Stopping in her tracks was pure instinct.

Flanna scanned her surroundings, noting the gentle sway of the leaves caught in the night's breeze. The road was nearby, but it led nowhere, with the only house along its stretch her own. Had her father come out for some reason? Unlikely. Since his retirement, he didn't venture beyond his

safe borders unless he was forced, and there had been no indication prior to her departure that anything out of the ordinary was going on.

There was always the possibility that it was a stray animal. A fox maybe, or a squirrel. But the sound had been loud enough to catch her attention. Any animal in this part of the country wouldn't be heavy enough to create such a noise.

She was beginning to wish she had her gun instead of just a knife.

Flanna began the walk back to the house, her gaze always moving, on the alert for any type of movement. Twenty yards from the road, she saw the glint of moonlight off metal and froze at the sight of the car parked along the side. It *had* been a person. Normally that would relieve her worry, but she didn't recognize the Nissan as belonging to anyone from town. Why would someone be out here? The only people in the near vicinity were her family.

Another crack came from behind her, this time even louder, and Flanna whirled to see a man walking toward her through the night shadows. He was lean and barely taller than she, but it wasn't until he came out from beneath the curtain of trees that she could discern his features.

"You're a hard woman to find, Flanna McRae," he said, coming to a halt. Her eyes widened when Jason Randolph raised his hands as if in surrender. "And I'm really hoping you're not planning on shooting me before I get a chance to talk to you."

Chapter Three

She recognized his face long before she remembered his name. More specifically, she remembered those vivid eyes, the engaging curve of those full lips, the very wrong thoughts of what kissing him would feel like. What she couldn't remember was if she'd somehow managed to give him *her* name in those few minutes they'd talked to each other in front of Rage. She didn't think so. Yet he called her by it, knew she carried a gun.

More importantly, he was *here*. He'd been looking for her. That couldn't be good.

He wasn't moving from where he'd stopped, eyes intense as he regarded her. "I would've liked to do this at your house," he said. "But I saw you leaving for your run and thought that maybe it might be better if we were alone."

"Is this a fight?" Her voice was clipped and cold, her muscles already preparing for the worst.

Jason looked pointedly at where his hands were still up in the air before looking back to her, his smile widening. "It would be an awfully short one if it was."

Flanna frowned. No fight then. But ... why was he here?
"Did you hear the part where I said I wanted to talk?" he said when she didn't reply right away. "I couldn't tell if you were actually listening to me or too busy trying to figure out who the hell I was." He paused, and his head cocked to the side. "You do know who I am, right?"

"I know your name," she said. "And I know you don't belong in this country."

"Well, that's awfully Colonial of you."

She remembered this, this quickness of tongue. It had pissed her off in New York, and it was beginning to piss her off here.

"What is it you want to talk about, Mr. Randolph?"

Addressing him by his last name seemed to amuse him further, and his teeth gleamed white under the moonlight. "Why I'm here, of course. You're not in the least bit curious?"

"That depends on your motive. My enemies don't last long in my presence."

The threat she put into her voice seemed to sober him. "I'm not your enemy," Jason said.

He took a small, tentative step closer to her, making all her nerves race to attention. There was an athletic grace to his movements, as if he'd spent years training at some racing type of sport. A swimmer maybe, judging by his build. Or a runner. Forced to choose, Flanna would select the latter.

"I would've done this in New York if you'd given me the chance," he said. "That was why I was at the club. I was looking for you."

His voice was low and soothing, like someone trying to gentle a wild animal, but she refused to acknowledge her ebbing trepidation. "If you're hoping to make your case sound better," she said, "you should probably know you're failing miserably. You sound like a stalker."

"That's because you left the country. You didn't give me a choice."

None of this was telling her what it was he wanted. But the longer Jason talked, the more Flanna felt the easy allure of his charm. She wasn't sure yet if that was a good thing.

"So, if you're not my enemy, then you're ... what? My friend?" She shook her head. "Friends don't slink around in the middle of the night. They show up on your doorstep and you offer them a cup of tea."

"Well, I'm more of a coffee drinker myself, but tea will do in a pinch." When he took another step toward her, Flanna retreated the same distance, unwilling to allow him any closer until she knew what was going on. Jason immediately stopped, though he lowered his hands until they hung at his sides. "I know what you do," he said, his tone all serious again. "I'm here because you missed that third wolf in Connecticut. You killed his pack, which now puts you at the top of his most wanted list. You can bet he'll be wherever you are, come the next full moon."

She felt the color leech from her cheeks. "How do you know about that?" she asked.

A trick of the moonlight made his eyes gleam silver. "Because I was there," Jason said. "I've been hunting the Romm brothers for four months now. You just beat me to the kill."

* * * *

Against her better judgment, she let him follow her back to the house, leaving his car where it was parked on the side of the road. He chattered a good part of the way; Flanna wondered if it was a nervous reaction or merely part of his

personality that he had to talk so much. But, apart from the occasional joke that seemed especially designed to provoke her, he had a natural ease that relaxed her further by the time they reached her front door. She was even smiling slightly as she invited him inside.

The front room was dim. Only the light spilling through the slightly ajar door to the kitchen gave them any illumination at all. With a slight tilt of her head, Flanna had Jason follow her through the lounge, stopping when she reached the doorway and her father looked up from his maps.

"You're back early," he began, but his good mood hardened when he saw the stranger hovering behind her shoulder. "Who's this?"

She didn't get the opportunity to answer.

"Jason Randolph," Jason said, stepping around Flanna to offer his hand in greeting. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. McRae."

Colin took the hand with a small frown, his gaze jumping between his daughter and Jason. "You're not bringing home strays now, are you?" he asked her lightly, though the undercurrent of severity in his tone told her just how serious he found this.

"No, he's a..."

"Hunter," Jason finished for her. He ignored the furious look she shot him for cutting her off. "Like your daughter, sir. Like you were, I hear, before she took over the family responsibility."

If Flanna was a private person, her father was doubly so, and the fact that a young man that he'd obviously never seen

before knew what they did made Colin's skin flush, his nostrils flare, as he fought not to rise to his feet.

"The family responsibility is the shop in town center," he said, turning back to his maps. "Surely Flanna told you that."

She slid into the chair next to her father, pushing aside his books so that he was forced to look at her. "He was there when I killed the Romms," she said. "He came looking for me because of the one that got away."

His lips thinned as he regarded her with a heavy stare. "You never said you were working with someone in the States."

"I wasn't."

"Your daughter is in grave danger," Jason said. He didn't sit at the table, though he did position himself so that he stood opposite Colin. "I've been hunting the Romms for months now. I know how they work. How they think. What drives them. With his brothers dead, Dominic is going to come after Flanna to avenge what she did. He won't stop. He doesn't stop. That's the kind of monster he is."

The announcement shifted Colin's hostility into something more wary, concern for his daughter clearly taking over. "And you came here out of the goodness of your heart to protect her?" he asked, disbelieving.

"No, I came out of my own selfishness to find Romm and finish the job."

His tone was so matter-of-fact that Flanna had no doubts that it was true. Part of her was a little disappointed that his motives hadn't been more altruistic.

"If this is true, Romm won't attack until the next full moon," her father said. "He's human now. He would have no interest in harming Flanna."

"No offense, sir, but that kind of thinking is going to get your daughter dead before any of you can cry wolf." Setting his hands against the table, Jason leaned forward as he addressed Colin, blue eyes flashing into a brilliant midnight. "I know you have a strict policy about who and what you kill, and I would never ask you to consider hunting an innocent. But being a werewolf didn't change the kind of man Dominic Romm was. It enhanced it. He was evil before he was bitten, and he's going to be evil until the day someone finally gets some silver into him. He won't wait to come after her. In fact, I'll lay odds he's on his way now."

There was no denying the passion behind Jason's words. Even Colin seemed impressed by it, and that, more than the actual threat, caused a frisson of fear to ripple down Flanna's spine.

"What did you say your name was again, young man?"
Colin asked, reaching for a pen. He scribbled it down when
Jason said it, his writing like chicken scratch across the top of
the map he'd used for paper. "If you're a hunter as you say,
people will know. You can't lie about such things to a McRae."

"Dig all you want," Jason said. "I'm telling you the truth."

Colin just grunted, pushing back from the table and rising to his feet. "Escort Mr. Randolph off the property, Flanna," he instructed. "We have work to do tonight."

When it was just the two of them in the kitchen, Jason finally turned his attention back to her. "I thought I'd heard

everything, but background checks for demonhunters is a new one to me."

She rose, uncomfortable beneath his steady gaze. "My father is nothing if not thorough, Mr. Randolph."

He trotted after her as she walked back to the front of the house. "At least call me Jason," he said. "I have a feeling that your dad's going to have a monopoly on my last name."

Flanna didn't reply. Stepping out into the cool night air, she waited for him to join her on the front step, trying to ignore how closely he stood next to her when he emerged. Deliberately, she locked the door behind him, but as she was pocketing the key, she glanced up and saw the curious light in his eye.

"What?" she demanded.

"Are you keeping him in or locking me out?" he asked.

In such proximity, their nearly matched heights meant she couldn't avoid the intensity of his gaze. The scents of his sweat and fading cologne mingled to tickle her nose, but it was the way his eyes had darkened so noticeably since they'd stepped outside that captured her attention. Though common sense told her it was in response to the shift in lighting, Flanna wondered if maybe some other physical need hadn't contributed to his dilated pupils.

Before the images could run away on her, though, she shoved them aside. He's an attractive man, she thought. Handsome in an almost pretty way. He was probably accustomed to lots of women going all warm and silly in his presence, which perhaps explained why she amused him so.

She wasn't going to be one of those women. Even if the impulse to be so lurked at the periphery of her awareness.

"Where are you staying?" she asked, ignoring the question he'd posed. She pushed past him to start the trek back to his car, keeping her neck stiff as she fought the urge to look back at him.

"That depends." He matched her stride all too easily, his arm brushing up against hers as they walked. "Where's the nearest hotel?"

She came to a dead halt. Jason walked a few more feet before realizing she wasn't keeping up, and then turned quizzically to see where she had gone.

"You don't have a hotel?" Flanna asked in disbelief.

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"What were you thinking?"

His head tilted as he considered her question. "I was thinking," he said, "that I had to find you. I thought that was a little more important than looking for the local Holiday Inn."

"You could've found me in the morning. *After* you'd checked in somewhere."

Something in his face steeled. "Romm works at night. Just because there isn't a full moon for another three weeks doesn't make him any less dangerous."

"You keep saying that." Her brows drew together, and she took a step closer, wishing she could read him better in the dim light. "Why? What's he done?"

"The better question is, what hasn't he done?" Ticking them off on his fingers, his eyes never left hers as he spoke.

"Extortion. Rape. Murder. All under police radar. I don't think he's ever been caught."

The words were chilling. Flanna couldn't suppress the shiver that made her hug her arms close to her body.

Before she realized it, Jason had closed the distance between them, a strong hand reaching to rub her shoulder in comfort. It took a moment for her to realize just how soothing his touch really was, and even longer to pull away. "You're used to hunting monsters," he said. His voice was low but firm, affording no brook of his assertions. "But I think you and your father forget that sometimes those monsters can wear human faces, too."

Her skin prickled at the weight of his words. "What if you hadn't found me?"

Jason shook his head. "That wasn't an option."

They stood there, facing each other, two sets of shoulders equally squared. Frankly, it shocked the hell out of Flanna that he'd been that single-minded in this so-called search of his. There had to be more to why he was going to such lengths to find Romm; even though she was as dedicated as any to what they did, she wasn't entirely sure she would try to search for a werewolf outside of a full moon.

Only one thing could convince her to do something so foolhardy.

"Who did he kill?" she asked, deliberately softening her tone.

Her words startled him, but Jason recovered from his almost imperceptible flinch to smile at her widely. "Romm's

killed a lot of people," he said. "I hope you're a better shot with your weapons than you are with your interrogations."

"You're emotionally invested in this," Flanna continued.
"That makes you weak."

As quickly as it had appeared, all humor vanished. The hardness of the man now standing before her took her breath away.

"It makes me *determined*," he corrected. "So before you start judging how effective I am at what I do, I suggest you wait and see me in action. If you're alive enough at the time to do that, that is."

He whirled on his heel and marched down the drive, his shoes making the gravel crunch beneath his soles. Flanna was left gaping, watching as the night swallowed up his lean form. Before he disappeared completely, she called out, "Where are you going?"

"Away from here."

"And where are you going to sleep?"

The sound of his footsteps died out, and she thought she caught a silvery glint of moonlight off his eyes as he glanced back at her.

"Some of us don't actually sleep at night," Jason said. "Some of us are too busy to."

This time when he walked away, he didn't stop.

Chapter Four

She slept fitfully, with dreams both thrilling and terrifying accompanying her every moment. In them, Flanna was back at Rage, leaning against the bar while the music pulsated around her. This time, however, the man she sighted across the room was not the Neanderthal who wouldn't take no for an answer. It was Jason Randolph, clad in blood-stained jeans and a black button-down shirt left open to expose his ravaged chest.

She went to him, drawn by the fact that he didn't seem to be in pain despite his obvious injuries. There was something else she couldn't put a finger on, something that dared her to approach, and when she stood before him, he took her hand in his and kissed her palm, their eyes never wavering from each other.

"When did you get hurt?" she asked, though speech seemed the most ridiculous thing to try right then. Her thighs were tingling from the contact of his lips, and she couldn't resist squeezing them together to exert just a touch more pressure on her clit.

"Last night was the full moon," he replied. His tongue darted out to trace the outline of her fingers, lingering a fraction of a second too long in the sensitive creases at their base before beginning the long slide up the next one. "The blood always flows on the full moon."

She could only nod in agreement. Her mouth had gone too dry to speak.

"You should've killed him," he murmured. Gently, he tugged her closer, letting her fall onto him where he leaned against the wall. "You shouldn't have missed."

"I know," Flanna managed to say. "I'll get him next time."
"There won't be a next time."

Their mouths were already moving together, each hungry for the other's kiss. But as Jason's features grew closer, Flanna watched them change, shift, his teeth lengthening while his eyes went black. In seconds, he bore the mask of a werewolf, smothering her startled scream with a ferocious lunge.

She jerked awake, her hair sticking in sweaty clumps to her cheeks. The oversize T-shirt she wore had ridden up and was twisted uncomfortably around her waist. Her breath had returned to a natural rhythm by the time she pushed the duvet off, but the memory of how aroused she had been remained much, much longer. Where that had come from, Flanna had no idea. Though she'd clearly thought him attractive, not once had she consciously entertained doing anything remotely resembling sexual in his presence. Well, except for imagining a kiss that first night at Rage. But that didn't count. Obviously, however, her subconscious thought it did.

Thankfully, her nan didn't ask any uncomfortable questions or comment on what might be the cause of Flanna's distraction while they got ready to go to the bakery. Knowledge of Jason's visit would come out sooner or later, and the longer Flanna escaped Helen's inquiries, the happier she would be.

It turned out to be sooner. Courtesy of a dark Nissan parked directly in front of the shop. And the slender man leaning against the driver's side door.

Under her breath, Flanna cursed Jason's name.

He wore sunglasses, which marked him as an out-of-towner before he'd even said a word aloud, and his lean legs looked remarkably long in his faded blue jeans. His windbreaker covered the pullover he wore, and she realized with surprise that she was mildly disappointed that it wasn't a button-down shirt beneath the jacket. Still, he looked put together, as usual, no evidence in his composure betraying whether or not he'd been able to find a place to spend the night.

He smiled as they walked up to the front door. "Being this early guarantees me a fresh hot donut straight out of the oven, right?" Jason said.

"If you have the money to pay for it," Flanna replied. She turned on her heel and stepped between him and Helen, blocking the older woman's inquisitive view. "Tell Dad I'll be inside in a second, OK?"

"Do you know this young man?"

Flanna sighed as she glanced over her shoulder to see Jason's smug grin. "Unfortunately."

The bell over the door jingled in the crisp morning air as Helen went inside. "Well, that wasn't a very nice introduction," Jason scolded once it was just the two of them on the walk.

She folded her arms across her chest, catching the slight flicker of his gaze down to her full breasts before he met her

eyes again. A flare of heat rose to her cheeks at the obvious appreciation. "Is there a reason you've decided to bother me at work, too, or do you just take particular pleasure in torment?"

"Can I say both? You get this adorable little line between your eyes when you get all pissed off."

His fingertip was brushing across her brow before she could move out of his way, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Flanna was left staring at him in surprise when he let his hand drop back down to his side.

"Look," he said. "We got off to a rocky start last night. I'll be the first to admit that. I'm interested in making this partnership as smooth as possible. I think we can be a pretty good team, if you'll just get over this lone rider mentality you have."

His word choice startled her, eyes going wide. "We're partners now?"

When he smiled and ducked his head in mild embarrassment, some of her irritation began to dissipate until she realized that it was very likely a practiced move on his part to gain sympathy. "I was hoping we could be," Jason said. "Did your dad get the confirmations he wanted about me?"

"I don't know." Flanna had fallen asleep on the couch while they'd been waiting for responses from the feelers Colin had put out. He'd already been off to work in the morning by the time she had woken up.

"Can you at least refrain from judgment until he does?" He held up his fingers in a mock scout salute. "I promise that if

your dad hears one bad thing about me, I'll slink away with my tail between my legs and you won't hear another thing from me until Romm is dead. Maybe not even then."

It was hard to continue being so stubborn on the issue when he was conceding everything to her father's decision. Reluctantly, Flanna pushed aside her annoyance and relaxed her stance, though when Jason's smile widened as he watched her arms uncross, she felt like smacking him.

"I have to work," she said, nodding toward the shop behind her. "Why don't you go off and come back tonight? We can talk then."

"Love to, but there's really not a whole hell of a lot to do in this town, now is there?"

"You can sightsee. Or go get some more sleep. Or anything, really, that doesn't involve being around me."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Her temper flared again. "And methinks..."

She was cut off by the door opening behind her and her father stepping out into the morning light. When he frowned, his gaze scrutinizing them closely, Flanna realized with a start that Jason was still standing just inches away from her, and instinctively leapt back to create the illusion of more distance. She wasn't sure if her father heard Jason's amused chuckle or not.

"A bit early for you, isn't it, Mr. Randolph?" Colin said.

It was a question not meant to be answered; Flanna had been on the receiving end of those all her life. Jason, however, didn't get that.

"Depends on how you look at it," he replied. "Could be late if I never made it to sleep in the first place."

With a twinge of satisfaction, she realized she didn't need to say anything at all about Jason. He was going to dig his own grave all too neatly if he kept up the flippant attitude with her father.

"I think you'll find Kent's not quite as exciting as some of the other places you've been to."

Flanna's head whipped around to stare in shock at her father. Was he ... *joking* with Jason? That could even be a smile ghosting across his mouth. Where on earth had *this* come from?

The astonishment must have been all too evident on her face because Colin reached out and patted her shoulder in reassurance. "Mr. Randolph here has put together quite an impressive resume over the past two years," he said. "A bit ... unorthodox, maybe, but even Guillaume has heard of him and we both know it takes a bit of news to reach him all the way in the Yukon."

So that was it. Jason had passed her father's inspection with flying colors. Her stomach sank. There was going to be no getting rid of him now.

"I'm giving you the day off, Flanna," Colin was saying.
"Take Mr. Randolph back to the house and show him around a bit. He's going to be staying with us until this Romm business is sorted."

"But ... but..." Coherency had given up on her, and all she could do was stand there, gaping at both men in disbelief.

"There's no place for him to sleep!" she finally managed to get out.

"I can curl up just about anywhere," Jason said. He stuck his hand out in gratitude toward Colin. "Thank you, Mr. McRae. I'm sure you'll find this will make everything easier in the long run."

They shook hands, Colin nodding his head almost in a matching rhythm. "I'll let Flanna tell you how things work around here," he said. "These are good, simple folk who don't know about the real evil in this world, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Of course."

All too quickly, they were left alone in front of the shop. "Now are you going to believe me?" Jason asked.

Any trace of amusement had vanished from his face. When he looked at her now, Flanna saw only the sincerity of his intent reflected in his blue eyes. How was she supposed to hate this arrangement when he looked for all purposes that it was the most important thing in the world to him?

"You really think Dominic Romm wants me dead?" she finally asked.

There was no hesitation in his reply. "I'm as sure of that as I am that you're going to give him hell when he tries."

Her lips twitched. She had to turn away from him, back to where she'd parked her car, so that he couldn't see the beginnings of her smile.

* * * *

With his new Nissan parked in the drive, the house looked older somehow, more worn around the eaves. Flanna saw the way he looked at everything, not missing a single detail, and yet, Jason never commented on the property, choosing instead to continue with his light gibes that kept her slightly on edge. She took him around the side of the house and showed him the range she used for shooting practice, and then trekked further onto the grounds to take him to the old barn that had been converted into her training room.

"Nice," he said, standing in the doorway.

The entire space was devoted to the hunt, whether it was weapons preparation or fitness-related. Her father did all his metalworks in the far corner, and most of his silvers were arrayed along the wall behind it, sparking against the aged brick. There was a boxing ring in the opposite corner, and various ropes and punching bags were scattered throughout the barn, giving Flanna ample opportunity to hone any one of her skills.

She watched Jason carefully, trying to best gauge his reaction. He sounded like he meant it, but she got the distinct impression that he was used to more affluent ventures. He probably saw their whole set-up as antiquated, but then again, he hadn't made a joke about the space either. Knowing what she knew of him already, that said a lot.

"Did your father train you?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "He picked this house especially because it had the barn he could use for his weapons and the like. What about you? Is hunting a family thing for you, too?"

Jason chuckled. "Only if it's got money at the end of the trail." He was suddenly standing right in front of her, blocking the way out of the barn. "I've gotta ask because I'm dying to know, and it's probably going to make things worse, but what the hell. Why is it you don't like me?"

Nobody could leave her speechless quite like Jason Randolph. Her mouth opened, closed, open again as her mind searched desperately for some kind of response that didn't make her sound even more foolish than she already felt. In the end, the best she the best she could manage was, "Excuse me?"

"It's not that that's not OK," he went on. His eyes were twinkling, and his mouth was twisted into a half-smile, but underlying his joviality was a note of disappointment. "It's just ... well, that's kind of a new one for me. I mean, people don't usually start disliking me until they've had a chance to really get to know what a jerk I can be, and I haven't been around here long enough for that to happen with you. So, I'm asking. What is it about me that rubs you the wrong way? My devilish good looks, or my sparkling personality maybe?"

The question bothered her. Not because he was asking, but because she suddenly felt like she'd been caught out on something, a child with a shameful secret forced to share it when she really didn't want to. Her cheeks blazed in embarrassment, and her hair seemed suddenly too heavy down her back. But Jason wasn't moving from her path. If she wanted to get by him, she would have to resort to being physical, and that would just be wrong on far too many

levels. She didn't have much of a choice but to give him some kind of answer.

"You joke too much," she said bluntly.

His head cocked in amusement, his eyes narrowing slightly as they regarded her. "So ... you have a phobia for funny?"

Her flush deepened. "I just don't think it's always appropriate," Flanna said. "You make light of things that I wouldn't. What we do ... it's serious business, and it looks like you treat it like it's not. I don't care if my father or Guillaume or Tony Blair himself thinks you're God's gift, but *I* think you're going to get yourself killed. And ... enough people die already."

"What you're saying, then, is that you'd miss me if I wasn't around."

"What? No! Stop twisting my words!" Whirling away, Flanna began to pace the length of the wall, doing everything she could to keep from looking at him. "This is *exactly* why I don't like you. You always say just the wrong thing, and it's ... it's..."

"Sexy as hell?"

"Infuriating!"

She hadn't realized she was moving so close to him until his hand shot out and curled around her bicep, forcing her to a halt.

"You accused me last night of being emotionally invested in getting Romm," he said. Something dark flickered behind his eyes. "You were right. But if I went at all this with the same seriousness you do, I would've slit my wrists a long time ago. This is who I am, Flanna. This is how I don't

explode." He paused, and she felt the slightest of caresses along her arm where his thumb began to stroke it. "Kind of like how you go to places like Rage."

Her skin was burning beneath her sleeve where he was touching her, and her throat was dry, refusing to work properly in the face of his casual reference to her night in New York. "You don't know anything about why I went there," she whispered.

Jason shook his head, the strokes along her bicep growing stronger in tiny, almost imperceptible fractions. "I think I know a lot more than you're willing to admit."

When he let her go and took a step away, Flanna stumbled, not expecting to lose the balance he'd been giving her. Already he was heading back up to the house, whistling under his breath. Apparently their conversation was over. Part of her wanted to thank him for dropping it, but another, almost equally vocal part wanted to chase after Jason and make him finish what he'd started. She wanted to know why he cared so much about getting Romm, and she needed him to understand that he wasn't nearly as astute as he seemed to think he was.

"I'm hungry," she heard him call out. She glanced up to see him looking back at her over his shoulder, that damnable grin on his face again. "What does a guy have to do to get a hot breakfast around here?"

Chapter Five

He surprised her by taking matters into his own hands once they were in the kitchen.

"I'm in the mood for pancakes," Jason said, heading straight for the nearest cupboard. "Do you have any Bisquick?"

She bit back her smile. "You're asking a family of bakers if they have some cheap, American excuse for a baking product?" Flanna pushed past him and pulled out the canisters she would need to make them from scratch, all too aware of him hovering just behind her shoulder. "Just be glad my father didn't hear you ask that. He might've revoked his good opinion of you."

His breath was warm as it tickled near her ear. "These aren't going to be those flat things you English try to pass off as pancakes, are they?"

"Only if you continue to annoy me." She slapped at his hand when he tried to reach past her and touch her ingredients. "I need eggs. And you can forget having maple syrup on them. You'll just have to do with golden syrup or use sugar and lemon juice like my nan does."

Flanna felt surprisingly chilled when Jason moved away and risked glancing back to see him retrieving the items she'd requested. He looked oddly at home in her house, opening doors without hesitation, not bothering to ask when he didn't find what he was looking for right away. She knew without having to wonder that this bravado filtered through into other

aspects of his life. He hadn't backed off on her at Rage until she'd walked away, and he hadn't given up on approaching her here. It probably made him a formidable opponent when he was hunting.

"How does a woman like your nan go from hunting werewolves to running a bakery?" Jason asked. He leaned against the counter, watching as she worked. "Not that I can't see her doing it. It's more than obvious you got that gorgeous Xena, Warrior Princess vibe from her."

His unabashed admiration made Flanna wonder how much of the fresh heat in her body was from the flame on the nearby stovetop or from his frank gaze, but she couldn't be entirely sure whether the compliment was directed toward her or her grandmother. "She didn't," she said. It shocked her to hear her voice sound so calm when her mind was anything but. "My father inherited the responsibility from his father, and so on and so on. There hasn't been a female demonhunter in the McRae family since the early nineteenth century."

"And now there's you."

It was said so softly that it raised goose bumps along her arms. She stirred the batter even more vigorously in order to try and make them go away.

"How did you find me?" she asked, desperate to change the subject.

Jason shrugged. "Just had to grease a few palms," he said. "It's funny. Sometimes I forget that money can be used as a weapon just as much as a gun can."

"Is that your preferred weapon of choice? A gun?"

"No, I'll pretty much use just about anything I can reach. You, though..." He shifted, turning so that he faced her full on. "The things I've heard about your marksmanship. You're going to have to show me how much of an Annie Oakley you really are."

"Do I get to use you for target practice?"

His smile was anything but coy. "You've got to catch me first."

Her mouth was open to retort when the sharp realization that she was *flirting* made Flanna pause. It wasn't so bad that the tone of their conversation had shifted. It was the fact that she had been *enjoying* it—a lot—that was the most horrifying.

Abruptly, Flanna shifted her attention to the griddle, her back deliberately to Jason as she focused on making the pancakes. She didn't do this. Not here. Not when she wasn't hunting. And she definitely didn't do it with annoying know-it-alls convinced they were the hottest thing since sliced bread. Even annoying know-it-alls who had tracked her down in order to save her life.

The pan sizzled, ready for Flanna to start. As she poured out a portion of the batter, however, the oil crackled and danced, hot beads splattering upwards and onto her hand. The suddenness made her cry out, and she jerked her arm back away from the griddle.

"Here."

Before she could think, Jason was taking the bowl and scoop from her tight grips, then leading her over to the sink. His fingers were strong against hers as he ran them under lukewarm water, soothing the sting on her skin, but what she

felt more than anything else was the long hard line of his body pressed lightly along hers.

"Remind me not to have you do any cooking over an open flame if we're ever out for an all-night hunt," he said.

"This is why Nan does the baking and I just wait on customers," Flanna complained.

"Well, I'm not a customer." Turning off the tap, Jason kept a light grip on her hands as he reached for a kitchen towel. He dabbed at her damp skin before wrapping the towel gently around her fingers. "I'm also not too keen on having your dad kick me out on my first day for letting his little girl get hurt," he added with a smile. "So, you sit while I finish these up. I might not know my biz from my quick, but this part, I can do."

Seated at the kitchen table, she watched him with growing astonishment, listening to him chatter much like he had the night before, talking about various restaurants he'd visited over the years and who made the best breakfasts. It was frivolous and inane and completely unrelated to any purpose he might have with her or his presence in Birley, but it did more for putting Flanna at ease than if he'd spent an hour discussing his CV. She was roused from the pleasure of listening to him speak when she noticed him pulling two plates out of the cupboard.

"I've already eaten," she said.

That didn't stop him from flipping pancakes onto both of the dishes. "I don't eat alone," Jason said. "It makes me nervous being the only one in the room chewing."

When he kept pulling bottles and jars out of the refrigerator, loading his arms with anything that might possibly taste good on the pancakes, Flanna actually laughed.

"You're just trying to fatten me up so that I'm slower than you," she said.

"Maybe." His eyes were twinkling as he began setting down his prizes on the table. "Or maybe I'm just giving you a really good incentive to want to work it all off."

Her skin warmed at the way his gaze flickered over her body, and abruptly Flanna turned her attention to her second breakfast of the day. Jason Randolph was a dangerous man. He had the power to make her forget things. One glance from those brilliant blue eyes combined with one all-too-smooth compliment from that mouth that had likely known way too many women, and she seemed to lose all her perspective.

For a minute, she flashed on the question of what she would have done if she'd seen Jason at Rage before the Neanderthal. Would she have used him in the same way she'd been planning on using the other guy?

It was something she didn't really want to answer. As frustrating as Jason could be, her respect for him was growing, albeit begrudgingly. It was hard to dislike someone with as much passion for the value of life as he had. Flanna didn't want to think that she could have been so shallow with someone who clearly deserved better.

"I don't think you're so fast anyway," Jason was saying. She glanced up to meet his mischievous gaze. "Maybe you're a gun girl because you know you're too slow to run away in time if you got closer and things went south."

Then again, maybe not.

* * * *

After breakfast, Jason dragged her back outside, eager for her to show him her shooting skills. It had been a long time since Flanna had had to do any sort of display; not since her father had tested her prior to letting her hunt on her own had she used her weapons in front of anybody other than prey. But he seemed hungry to watch, falling uncharacteristically quiet as she readied her tools, and remained so while she fired off round after round.

As soon as the gun was out of her hand, he was striding forward, passing her by and heading straight for the targets at the end of the track. Flanna was slow to follow, knowing already what he was going to see, but when she reached his side, prepared for the comment she was sure to come, she was surprised even more by his silence. His fingers traced over the holes in the paper, and she watched his lips move as he counted them over and over again.

Finally, it got to be too much.

"Just say it," she demanded. Her jaw set when he raised darkened eyes to meet hers. "There's got to be some kind of remark you can make that will make me feel utterly useless, even though I know I didn't miss a shot."

Jason just shook his head. "You have got to be one of the most amazing women I have ever met," he said. He gestured toward the target in his hand. "Some of these shots are so on top of each other, you can barely see the new holes."

The genuine awe in his voice rattled her. "It's ... better to be consistent."

"Still. That kind of accuracy? How the hell did you miss Romm?"

The images his question evoked flooded over Flanna.

The brisk Connecticut wind, autumn leaves rustling overhead while she tracked the werewolves through the wood.

The high-pitched squeal of the first wolf going down when she shot at it.

The coppery scent of blood mingling with the damp, distracting her just long enough for the second wolf to leap at her from behind and send them both down to the wet earth. She'd barely had time to pull her silver knife from its sheath and rip it across its throat.

Then, rising to her feet, shaky, bleeding from where she'd hit her head in the fall, listening to the approaching howl of the third Romm wolf in the distance.

She'd missed because she never took the shot. She'd been too busy running away, needing to lick her wounds before trying again. Needing to feel sure again before daring to put her life back on the line.

Slowly, Flanna took the target away from Jason. "I thought you said you were there," she asked carefully.

"'There,'" he said, using air quotes to mock the word, "was a pretty big place. By the time I found the two dead werewolves, the blood was already cold."

"Then how did you know it was me?"

He hesitated a fraction of a second too long before replying. "I followed the trail away until I found where you were staying. It wasn't hard to figure out after that." He flashed his trademark smile. "There aren't that many Flanna McRaes in the world."

Jason began walking away before she could press the issue. She had the nagging feeling that there was more he wasn't telling, but the opportunity for sharing had passed, leaving her with the lingering question of what his motives were in pursuing Romm halfway across the world. One of these times when he was in a more serious mood, she was going to have to ask again. Only then did she think he'd be willing to tell.

* * * *

His late night and traveling finally caught up with him by mid-afternoon, leaving Jason sound asleep on the couch when Flanna heard the delivery van pull up in the drive. She was out the front door, waiting at the bottom step, before her father could even get out of the truck.

"You haven't scared him away already, have you?" Colin said with a smile.

Her eyes flickered to where her grandmother was heading around the side of the house. "Does Nan know?"

"About Mr. Randolph? Of course. You think I'd let a stranger stay in our house without telling her?" His eyes narrowed, thick brows drawing together in speculation. "Where is he? Not run off, I hope."

Briefly Flanna described the events of the day. "And it's not that I don't trust your opinion, Dad," she said, "but it would be kind of nice to know what you found out that's made you think of this guy as the second coming."

"Come," he said, taking the same path around the house as Helen had. "I'll tell you what I know."

Instead of going into the rear of the house, Colin continued through the back garden, staying mute until they reached the barn. He didn't speak until the door was bolted firmly shut behind them, and Flanna was poised in expectation by the workout mats.

"According to the numbers I've been given," he began,
"Mr. Randolph has killed more demons in the past two years
than you have in the past five. Vampires, werewolves, beasts
too hideous to describe ... he's killed them all, Flanna.
Guillaume said he has the reputation for being quite
tenacious. Once, he tracked a vampire back to its nest and
had at least two broken ribs and a nicked lung by the time he
finally managed to kill the bastard. Even then, he was out of
the hospital within days, against doctor's orders, tracking
another beast. That's why if he says he's followed this Romm
fella to you, I'm inclined to believe him. He's known for going
to whatever lengths necessary for a kill."

"But..." She was at a loss for words. It was one thing to know Jason had a reputation, but to hear that it was as extensive as all that left her head spinning. "We've never even heard of him before," she argued. "How can he be so prolific and not come to our attention?"

"Because he rarely leaves the States," came the reply.

"They've got enough demon activity to keep him busy. You know that."

Questions finally started to crystallize, and she fired them at her father as quickly as they appeared.

"What about his family?"

"They're not involved."

"But they would have to know. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who likes to be alone."

"That's a matter you'll have to discuss with him, then, I think."

"And Romm? Did you find out what his grudge is with Romm?"

Colin shook his head. "That one remains a mystery. We'll just have to hope that he eventually chooses to trust us with that information. In the meantime, I want you to work with him. Train with him. Try and learn as much from him as you can. It will only make you a better fighter in the long run."

She lifted her chin in defiance. "I'm a better shot than he is. He told me so."

"Ah, yes, well, it would appear that guns are not Mr. Randolph's favored method of execution," Colin said. "He tends to coordinate his battles a little more ... intimately."

Remembering his word choice from that morning unorthodox, he'd called Jason—sparked a whole new whirlwind of questions. However, Colin seemed to be done with the matter, turning away and heading for his workbench in the back of the room.

"Tell Nan I'll be having my tea out here," he instructed.
"I've got work to be done tonight."

She had to bite her tongue not to argue with him on the spot; she knew it would be a pointless endeavor. Still, the one question that nagged at her the strongest tumbled from her lips before she could stop it.

"Why do you trust him so much?" she asked. To her annoyance, her voice had taken on that little girl pleading tone that she detested, but her father had a way of provoking it in her.

The corner of Colin's mouth lifted, his eyes soft and sad. "Because, in spite of what he might say to the contrary, he's here to do what he can to save your life, lassie. When it comes to protecting my greatest treasure, I want a man like Jason Randolph on my side." He nodded toward the door behind her. "Now, go. Your nan will be wanting you to set the table for tea. Just because I won't be joining you, doesn't mean I'll have you acting uncivilized around our guest."

She turned on her heel and, unbolting the door, ran away, letting the door slam shut behind her. There was nothing left for her to say.

Chapter Six

By the time tea was over, Helen had fallen for Jason's charms hook, line, and sinker, leaving Flanna feeling like the odd woman out as they retired to the lounge to watch the telly and continue their conversation. She cleared the dishes, listening to them laugh and chat in the next room, all the while wondering how it was possible for a veritable stranger to just show up on the McRae doorstep and throw everyone off-kilter. It just wasn't ... right.

When she was done, Flanna hung in the doorway and watched the pair for a long moment. Helen was sparkling, laughter rich and hands dancing as she spoke, while Jason seemed to have a permanent smile etched on his face. Watching him interact with her nan, Flanna was reminded yet again of just what an attractive man he really was. It wasn't just the sharply drawn features or his sensual mouth. It was the way he seemed so animated, like he'd seen the worst life had to offer and laughed in its face. Something lived beneath his skin, an energy that was almost infectious, and it sucked in those surrounding him until they had no choice but to enjoy the ride with him.

She was still standing there when he glanced at the doorway during one of Helen's stories. Their eyes met, held, and something in his smile softened. For a second, Flanna thought he was going to say something to her, but when his gaze flickered over her body, returning to her face warmer, darker, she turned on her heel and fled, through the kitchen

and into the back garden, the door slamming shut behind her. She wasn't convinced of what she'd seen. She couldn't be.

* * * *

It was over two hours later before he showed up in the door of the barn.

"Who feels like a run?" he said brightly.

Flanna paused to look at him, the knife she'd been about to throw for practice still poised between her fingers. He wore an aged gray T-shirt, stretched tissue-thin across his muscled chest, with heavy sweats and running shoes completing the ensemble. It was obvious he meant to do as he said, but something in the way he leaned against the jamb suggested it could be even more, under the right circumstances.

She tore her gaze away, ignoring the flaming of her cheeks. "It would look like you do."

"Don't want to join me?"

"Can't." The blade she was holding went sailing through the air, embedding itself in the wooden target against the wall. "I need to focus on other skills tonight."

"You can't let the man go out on his own, Flanna."

Her father's voice from his workbench made her stop in mid-step from retrieving her knife, and she turned a bewildered stare in his direction. "It doesn't take two to run," she argued.

"True, and it only takes one to get lost as well."

"Yeah, you wouldn't want me getting lost, now, would vou?"

Her head whipped back toward the door. Jason's tone had been all innocence, but the gleam in his eye said otherwise.

"It'll help you learn the lay of the land," she said tightly. "I can give you a map, if you really think you'll get lost."

Jason shook his head. "You'd be wasting a perfectly good map. I'm more of a hands-on kind of learner."

Yeah, I bet, she thought.

"Just go, lassie. You've done enough for the night."

She should've known she wasn't going to be able to get out of it. Holding her chin high, Flanna marched to the doorway of the barn, refusing to completely meet Jason's eyes. "I need to change," she said. "Give me ten minutes."

His voice drifted out to her as she stepped into the brisk night air. "I'll be waiting."

* * * *

Thick dark clouds blanketed the sky, blocking out most of the night's ambient light. In the middle of nowhere Kent with the earth shrouded in an unnavigable velvet fog, the only aids Jason and Flanna had for moving across the countryside were their own eyes and her sense of home.

Still, it was more than enough. Together they cut through the bracing air with matching grace, their breath forming gossamer clouds that floated along behind them.

They didn't speak. When she had first come out of the house and found Jason doing stretches in the damp grass, Flanna had been sure that he was using this as yet another opportunity to goad her. She'd taken off at a dead run, much

faster than she would normally start, and pretended not to notice when he very quickly showed up at her side.

But he never said a word. He just matched her pace, regardless of whether she sped up or slowed down. Every step took them farther away from home, every meter traveled calmed the anxiety knotting Flanna's stomach. She let the wind whipping past her ears carry with it the questions of the past few days, and just reveled in the freedom.

Her initial intent was to take him on the most arduous path she knew to try and discourage him from asking her to come along on his next run. But when Jason cleared the small creek without catching his ankle on the rocks that lined the edges of the bed and didn't complain about the route she had chosen, Flanna let even more of her anger go and angled him away from the steeper hills. Instead, she chose the path that took them through the nearby meadows. Though it was dark, the earth was softer, easier on the instep. He might not appreciate the pretty view, but he'd at least like the softer run.

The cloud cover began to break when she turned them back toward home, allowing patches of midnight blue to start peeking through by the time they were a mile away. Flanna slowed to a walk, lifting her eyes in order to savor the simple beauty rolling above. At her side, Jason did the same.

"Did I mention this was my first trip to England?" he said quietly. "It's a lot more like home than I thought it would be." "Oh? And where's that?"

His eyes were black when he turned them toward her, and Flanna wished that there could have been just a little more light so that she could see their expression.

"These days," he said, "I move around too much to really have anyplace to call home. But what I meant was from before. Where I grew up in Florida."

Her brows shot up in surprise. "You did *not* just compare *Florida* to the southeast of England."

"What?" His teeth gleamed, exposed by his half-smile.
"They're both wet, they both have humidity up the wazoo, and they're both filled with tourists." He chuckled when she pointedly looked around at the empty field surrounding them.
"Well, maybe not here," he amended. "But in London. I hear they show up in droves there."

Flanna shook her head. "You're a very odd man." But she said it with a small smile, and she accompanied it with a small kick of dirt across his path to let him know she was teasing.

They fell quiet again, though they kept their pace slow. In spite of being sweaty and desperate for a shower, Flanna wasn't all that eager to be quit of his company just yet. It had been comfortable having someone running at her side, even if it was only for recreational purposes. It almost reminded her of when she used to go hunting with her father, though the feelings she had for Jason were far from familial. She wasn't sure exactly what those feelings were, but they were growing, and they weren't as terrifying as she'd originally feared.

"So, Florida?" she asked, curious now that the door to his past had been opened. "Is that where your family is?"

"According to the Christmas card I got last year, it is."

"My father said ... they're not demonhunters as well."
This took longer for him to respond to. "No," Jason said.
"They're not. Dad's in real estate development and Mom's in how-to-spend-his-money development. The only demons they see are the sharks who swim the proverbial waters."

He didn't want to talk about it; that much she could tell. But until he outright stopped answering her questions, Flanna was going to keep on trying to get the information she wanted. If this man was going to insinuate himself into her life like this, she needed to understand what made him tick.

"How did you get involved with hunting, then?" she asked. This time, she looked into his face as she spoke, fervently wishing again for more light.

At least he looked back at her, though the solemnity she saw made her wonder if that was really what she had wanted.

"I met a woman at Mardi Gras two years ago who changed my life," he said simply. "I haven't looked back since."

A woman. Something squeezed around Flanna's stomach at the mention, but she shook it off and pressed on. "She must not be thrilled with you traveling around so much."

"Who?"

"Your girlfriend in New Orleans."

He laughed, shattering the calm. "She's not my girlfriend. That would just be ... scary."

"Oh."

Before she could ask another question, Jason's hand curled around her arm and gently pulled her to a halt.

"You can trust me, you know." His thumb had started that stroking thing again. She wondered if he was even aware that

he did it. "I'll answer anything you want me to, but you're not going to hear anything that isn't going to come back to the simple fact that I'm here for one reason only. To kill Dominic Romm before he kills you. I'm not sure what your father found out about me, but hopefully his sources told him that I don't give up. Ever. I did it once, and ... someone I cared about died. So, now I bulldog it. You can count on that."

She believed him. This wasn't one of his lines to get her to like him. He made his declaration with such conviction, such sincerity, so little of his usual flippant nature that it was impossible not to trust every single word he said.

"I want to apologize for my attitude before," Flanna said.
"I don't react well to strangers. I've been fighting on my own for so long now that I forget ... well, I'm not used to being on the peril side of the danger. Usually, I'm the one saving everybody else. It's weird being the one needing to be saved this time."

"Funny, but I have this distinct feeling that you're not going to need too much of my help."

"Then why stick around?"

His tongue darted across his lips, his gaze falling for a fraction of a second to her mouth before he replied. "I told you. I don't give up. Even when I know the damsel in distress can probably kick my ass."

Letting her go, he began walking again, glancing back with a small smile when she didn't follow right away. Flanna shook herself from the daze he'd managed to create and raced to catch up, staying at his side for the remaining mile back to the house.

"Do you want the shower first?" she asked at the front door.

Jason stood at the top edge of the drive, head tilted back as he stared up at the sky. "You go on," he said without looking at her. "I'm probably going to be up for hours yet."

"The jet lag can be awful, but really, you should try and get onto a normal schedule."

This time, he shot her a wide grin. "This is my normal schedule." Thrusting his hands into his sweats pockets, he began wandering off through the garden, inhaling the crisp night air while resuming his survey of the sky. "Good night, Flanna," he said. "Sleep well."

Her murmured good night floated on the wind, and she wondered as she let herself back into the house whether or not he had actually heard her. A bridge had been crossed during their run. She was still unsure of what to make of Jason Randolph, but she no longer had any lingering doubts about whether she could trust him with her life. At least she had that.

A small, secret smile curved her lips as she climbed the stairs to her room. In a world as closed as hers could be, it was good to have another person who understood even part of what she was going through.

* * * *

He went back to Rage every night for a week, hoping she would dare to show her face there again. Every night, he searched the pulsing crowds for Flanna McRae, and every night, he walked back to his shithole hotel room disappointed

that he hadn't found her. He wasn't overlooking her; there was no way he could miss a six-foot redhead with a body that made women go scattering for plastic surgery to look even half as good. She just wasn't there. Which meant, if she wasn't in New York, she'd likely gone home to lick her wounds until the next full moon.

Well, fuck if he was going to wait for her to come to him. The bitch had killed his brothers without batting an eyelash. Dominic was going to make her hurt for stripping him of his pack.

He'd meant to do it in the back of Rage. When he had caught her scoping him out, Dominic couldn't resist the idea of fucking the bitch's brains out before slitting her open from neck to cunt. Then she'd gone and hit him, and that silver ring of hers had sliced open his face. The pain, even from such a small wound, was staggering, and she'd gotten away before he could finish the job.

If she had been alone out on the sidewalk, he would've tried again. He wasn't scared. Being bigger and stronger gave him an advantage, and he would use anything he could to win.

But she hadn't been alone. She'd been with Randolph. And seeing the bastard's knowing eyes almost glowing as he stood behind the McRae bitch had forced Dominic to reconsider his plan.

He wasn't stupid. There was no way in hell he could take both of them. Separately, sure. Hell, he'd come close to killing Randolph more than once. Dominic still didn't know how the bastard had walked away from the fall in Toronto.

This time, though, with McRae all riled up and Randolph poised to toss his hat into the ring, he did the only thing he could. He walked away. This was a fight for another day.

Another day was fast approaching. If the bitch was gone, it was time to go after her. It might be her territory, but he'd fought and won outside of his own turf before. He could do it again. After all, he had vengeance on his side.

And a full moon not too far away.

Chapter Seven

Jason had been telling her the truth. The man was a night owl through and through, and dead to the world on the couch when Flanna crept down the stairs the next morning. At her father's insistence, she let him sleep, resuming her daily schedule at the shop with only trace doubts about leaving Jason alone in their home. She felt foolish when he showed up mid-afternoon, carrying a message that had been left on their answering machine. Apparently, he didn't feel right picking up a ringing phone that wasn't his, he said. It was more of an invasion of their privacy than he was willing to currently breach.

Over the next few days, they fell into an easy routine. Flanna worked her usual shifts at the bakery, while Jason slept most of the day through. He rose mid-afternoon and proceeded to look for Dominic Romm, utilizing Colin's resources and computer in order to do so.

"I'd rather not be surprised when he shows up on your doorstep," Jason said the first night, when Flanna came home and found him on hold with someone he knew at British Airways. "Or, you know, tearing your door down. It kind of puts a crimp in self-defense."

His searches came up with nothing, though. In spite of all Jason's assertions that Romm was a threat, it looked like the man wasn't even in the country yet.

While their days remained separate, their nights were a different matter entirely. After dinner, he settled with Helen

on the couch to watch telly, just as he had the first night. But once she'd gone to bed, he was in the bathroom, changing his clothes, ready for what had become his nightly run with Flanna.

She would never tell him, but Flanna looked forward to those times every night with growing anticipation. They didn't speak during the run itself, but a mile from the house, they slowed to a walk, using those last few minutes for conversation. He told her what progress he'd made during the day, and she related anecdotes about what happened at the shop. The first time he laughed at one of her stories, Flanna nearly stopped in her tracks. It had never occurred to her that he could enjoy just being around her, could laugh with her instead of at her. Everything shifted after that.

The fifth night after his arrival started the exact same way. Flanna took him down through her favorite paths, enjoying the exhilarating burn along her muscles as her legs and arms pumped up and down. At her side, his breathing was almost a metronome for her, giving her a steady counter to balance their pace, and the few times she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, it took only seconds for him to glance back. She hadn't felt this safe—or this connected—in a very long time.

At the bottom of the trail that led into town center, however, Jason ground to a halt, frowning as he stared off in the direction of town.

"I knew I'd break you one of these days," Flanna started to tease, but then stopped when he didn't even react to the small gibe. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer. His jaw was tight, muscles more rigid than she had ever seen. At his sides, his hands had balled into fists, prompting Flanna to automatically take a step away, and the breathing that had been so rhythmic during their run seemed to have slowed to a dangerous level.

She scanned the horizon, trying to see what had spooked him so badly, but other than the familiar whisper of the wind across the long grasses, she could sense nothing out of order. Except for Jason.

"What's wrong?" she repeated.

He tore his gaze away from the distance, but the man who looked at her now was not the man she had come to know over the past week. This one sent shivers down her spine from the coldness of his eyes. Flanna finally understood how the reports could label him as dangerous.

Then, within moments of looking at her, his gaze softened, allowing the Jason she recognized to return to the fore. "Did you bring your knife tonight?" he asked.

Flanna stiffened and looked off toward town again. "But we don't have werewolves in Birley," she said, confused. "And the full moon isn't for another two weeks."

"You don't need a full moon to have a monster on your hands."

"But..." She turned to face him again. "How can you tell? Is it nearby? It would have to be. We're at least three miles from town here."

"Instinct." The reply was swift, but he took a step toward her, his eyes intent on hers. "I just know, Flanna. You're

going to have to trust me on this. Now, do you have the knife or not?"

Without looking away, she bent and lifted the leg of her sweats, pulling out the knife she had strapped to her calf. When Jason reached to take it away from her, however, she pulled her hand back.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"No."

She started. It wasn't the response she'd expected. "You can't stop me."

"I'd rather not have to try."

She was half-convinced he was doing it deliberately to piss her off. "Have you forgotten who I am?" she demanded, her voice rising. "I knew what a werewolf looked like before I could pick a cow out of a picture of barnyard animals. I'm not some dilettante you have to humor..."

"It's not a werewolf." He sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know what it is, which is why I'd rather you didn't come along this time."

"Why?"

"When was the last time you fought anything other than a werewolf?" Jason asked. When she didn't respond right away, he went on. "I don't doubt your abilities, Flanna, but you go out once a month, during the full moon, and hunt one kind of demon. I do this all day, every day. Who's the equal opportunity killer here? Just face it. I'm better equipped than you are to take care of this."

Her eyes were hard as she twirled the knife between her fingers. "I'd say you're not equipped at all."

Though his mouth opened to argue, it snapped shut again when a shrill scream split the country air. They broke into a run at the same time, their impulse to help greater than their need to fight about it, and together they raced in the sound's direction. Jason quickly outdistanced her, and Flanna wondered as she pushed her body even faster how much he had been holding back on her.

They didn't have to run far. Cresting over the nearest hill, he took a sharp left, racing down toward the small cottage at its foot. She followed, but her skin was already crawling with alarm. That was Mrs. Lange's house. The screams had come from there. With an extra burst of speed, Flanna swallowed down her fear for the other woman. She had to be strong for what might lie ahead.

The metallic scent of blood assaulted her nose long before they reached the front door. In front of her, Jason faltered for the first time since stopping on the other side of the hill, and Flanna passed him, glancing back with a frown. He'd gone pale, and he was swallowing convulsively. But just as quickly as he'd halted, he started again, though his pace now had slowed.

The blood started at the stone wall that lined the front garden. A smeared handprint trailed along the rounded rock, and Flanna saw Mrs. Lange's unconscious body sprawled around the corner. "Help her!" she shouted to Jason.

For a second, she thought he was going to argue. Then he angled his path to the hurt woman, crouching down when he reached her to inspect her vital signs.

The front door hung broken from its hinges. From inside the house, she heard the sound of snuffles and breaking glass, harsh and unrelenting in its constant flow. Whatever had attacked Mrs. Lange was still in there. She had no choice but to go in after it.

With the knife cradled in her palm, Flanna crept up to the entrance, peering around the jamb to try and see what might be going on inside. The noises were coming from deeper within the house, the sharp clatters, both glass and metallic, hinting that the thing was likely in the kitchen. Searching for something to eat? Had it taken what it wanted from Mrs. Lange and then moved on to other foodstuffs?

Her shirt stuck to her back, damp from sweat and chilled from the night air. She could feel every beat of her heart, every frisson along her skin, every centimeter of her shirt adhering to her back as she edged through the house. That was new. When it came to fighting, Flanna was typically more in control. But then again, she'd never fought demons near her home before.

The snarls grew in volume a split second before something heavy leapt onto her chest. Flanna fell backwards against the cherry sideboard, a sharp pain ricocheting through her lower back, but reacted with sheer instinct, the silver blade in her hand coming up and slicing across the back of the attacking creature. It howled in protest, and fell away, but her freedom only lasted for moments before it rushed her again.

She threw herself sideways, and heard the sickening crunch of the demon slamming headfirst into the wooden

sideboard. Only then did she have the time to risk giving it more than a cursory glance.

Jason had been right; it wasn't a werewolf. Whatever it was, it was the size of a young teenager, slim and svelte, with a body that seemed to twist impossibly right before her eyes. It was covered with iridescent scales that shimmered almost hypnotically as it rolled over to stare at Flanna. Reptilian eyes, black and beady, met her blue ones. Intelligence lurked within their depths.

Flanna saw the creature move just before it jumped again, diving low when it vaulted at her head. Her blade cut across the top of its legs, fresh blood spilling to the polished wooden floor, and she slipped in the viscous fluid, falling hard onto her ass. The fall jarred the dull pain already in her back, but she lashed out with a swift kick when she heard the demon approach again. Her heel connected with its chest, knocking it away, and she rolled toward it, plunging her knife one more time into its flesh.

Strong hands pulled her away from the creature's dead body, tugging her to her feet and turning her around. On reflex, her arm came up, but before she could strike, Jason caught her wrist, his fingers strong where it held her still. His eyes weren't on her face, however; they scanned expertly over her body, searching for any obvious injuries.

She took a deep breath. It served to help steady her racing nerves, but she had a strong suspicion that Jason's touch was doing just as much. "I'm fine," Flanna said, shrugging his hands from her shoulders.

"You're bleeding."

"I'm not..." She stopped when he turned her arm over to expose the long cut that ran from the inside of her elbow to her wrist. She didn't remember getting it. "It's just a scratch."

Jason didn't seem to care. When he stepped closer, Flanna stepped backwards, feeling the sideboard block her from going any further. His hands traveled up her arms, gentle and probing as he checked for more wounds, then cupped her face to turn her head from one side to the other.

Though her back throbbed and the scratch was stinging now that the adrenaline had slowed, Flanna couldn't feel anything but the heat of his palms against her cheeks. Her eyes never left his face as he scrutinized her neck and shoulders, and her throat was suddenly too dry. When he finally lifted his gaze to hers, she fully expected him to drop his hands.

He didn't.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly.

His voice was silken, drawing the thudding of her heart closer to her skin's surface so that she was sure he could see every pulse. She reached up to pull his hands away before her body betrayed her even more.

"I'm fine," she repeated. "How's Mrs. Lange?"

A ghost of confusion passed behind his brilliant blue eyes, and then Jason seemed to snap from whatever worried fugue he'd been in when he found her. Stepping back, he began to move around the room, almost tripping over his feet to get away from her.

"She's alive," he said. "She needs medical attention, though. She's lost a lot of blood, and ... where's the damn telephone?"

He stormed off into the kitchen, his tread uncharacteristically heavy. Seconds later, Flanna heard him requesting an ambulance and realized he must've found what he was looking for.

She was still rooted to her spot when he came back. With her senses finally ebbing from the overdrive they'd been in ever since hearing the scream, it was easier to see the tension in Jason's arms, the way he seemed to be purposely skirting her presence, how he couldn't quite meet her eyes now. There was blood staining the bottom of his tee, as if he'd got it onto his hands and wiped it off on his shirt, but otherwise, he was clean.

"We have to get rid of it," he was saying as he circled the demon that lay dead on the floor. "Paramedics usually don't react too well if the body they find isn't human."

Her mind raced. "Mrs. Lange has a big storage building out back for stuff for the café," she said. "We can hide it there for now, and then tomorrow we can bring the delivery van down so that we can get it out of here."

He'd bent to toss the body over his shoulder before she'd finished speaking, but as she saw the blood drip from the demon onto the floor, Flanna frowned.

"How are we going to explain all this blood?" she asked.

"We're not. We're not going to be here when they show up."

She grabbed his arm, yanking him to a halt. "The police will have questions. Someone has to be here to answer them."

"And those someones will not be us. Think, Flanna. Your life here is sheltered. By your own father's admission, these people have no idea about what kind of evil is really out there in the world. How in hell are you going to be able to explain anything that will make sense to them?" He didn't wait for an answer, but continued on his path to the front door. "You can't. All you can do is clean up the mess and move on."

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving Flanna stunned into silence. This didn't sound like the lighthearted demonhunter she'd spent the last week of her life with. This sounded like a man all too accustomed to a complicated world. She was surprisingly hurt to hear such jaded words come from his mouth.

She took his intent literally, though, and set about cleaning up the blood that had drained onto the floor. It didn't take long. By the time Jason appeared in the doorway again, Flanna was putting the last blood-soaked tea towel into a plastic bag.

"We can get rid of these at home," she said as she tied it off. "I wiped down everything I could think of. Birley police don't get that many violent crimes, so maybe they won't be prepared to do a search that'll catch something I missed."

"How's your arm?"

She'd forgotten about her injury. "It doesn't hurt," she said, turning her wrist to check. "And look. It's stopped bleeding."

"Good. Let's go."

Neither spoke as they ducked back out into the cool night. Breaking into the pace of their earlier run, they took off in the direction of Flanna's home, the crinkling of the heavy plastic bag echoing throughout the empty fields with every step. By the time they reached her front door, her lungs were burning, her muscles screaming in protest. All she wanted was to stand underneath a hot shower and forget that she'd just found a demon a few miles from her home.

Jason didn't follow her inside. He sat down on the front step and stared up at the velvet sky, his shoulders hunched beneath his worn T-shirt.

Biting her lip, Flanna debated if she should say something. His emotional distance was confusing; he wasn't the sort to just close off. At least, she didn't think he was. She'd been wrong about men before. More than once.

In the end, her need for a shower won out over her desire to try to talk to him. She'd probably just say the wrong thing anyway, she thought as she climbed the stairs to get clean clothes. It was better to err on the side of silence.

* * * *

There wasn't a sound in the entire house when Flanna finally turned off the shower and stepped out of the tub. Scrubbing at her pinked skin with a faded towel, she tried to listen for anything that might indicate Jason was still awake—the TV, voices, anything—but all she could hear was the quiet drip from the shower head behind her. He can't be asleep

already, she thought with a frown. It had just been one demon, and he hadn't even done any fighting.

Dressing quickly, Flanna stepped into the lounge and looked around. The room was empty, the lights off. There wasn't even a light on in the kitchen where Jason normally spent his nights, looking through her father's books. When she glanced toward her father's bedroom, though, she saw that room was dark as well, the door slightly ajar. He was still awake, too. If he wasn't in the house, that left only one other place for him to be.

She ran into Colin in the back garden. He was walking back up to the house, his broad shoulders bowed by an unseen weight. Dark circles rimmed his eyes, and the furrows around his mouth looked even deeper than normal. For the first time, Flanna realized just how old her father was getting.

"Jason's in the barn," Colin said before she could speak.

Her eyes widened. Somewhere along the line, "Mr. Randolph" had been dropped. "Did he tell you what happened?" she asked.

"He did. You took a great risk."

In the darkness, it was hard to tell if he meant that as a scolding or something else. Flanna decided to let it go for now. "Do you think it's just a coincidence? We haven't had demons in Kent for years, and now one shows up when Romm might be after me? That can't be an accident."

Colin sighed, and the breath sounded just as leaden as his muscles appeared. "There is no such thing as coincidence, lassie," he said. "It's just the word cowards hide behind when they can't accept the consequences of their actions."

"Then what does it mean?"

One of his large hands came up and awkwardly patted her shoulder. "Go talk to Jason. The man's worried about you."

"He's ... huh?"

But Colin had already brushed his way past her, his head bent as he disappeared inside the house.

Flanna shifted her attention to the looming barn. Light scattered in slivers across the ground where the door wasn't completely closed, and soft thuds echoed from its interior. Slowly, she walked up to it, pushing the door open just enough to slip inside as inconspicuously as possible, then stopping as soon as she crossed the threshold.

He was using her exercise bar to do chin-ups, moving up and down with liquid ease. Flanna's breath caught in her throat. Before working out, Jason had stripped to the waist, his discarded shirt on the ground beneath him, and now his sweat-slicked chest was exposed for her inspection. She'd originally thought he had a runner's body, but with his muscles so clearly etched in his arms and abdomen, there was no doubt in her mind that he'd been a swimmer instead. Everything about him was taut, controlled, flexing with unexpected power on every stretch, and his swift movements on the bar had his sweats riding so low on his hips that she could see the start of his pelvis before it vanished beneath the cotton.

She tore her eyes away from his hips when she realized he'd stopped moving. Her gaze slid upward, along his tight stomach, across his flat nipples, past his strong jaw and sensuous mouth, finding him staring back at her with equal

intensity. Releasing his hold on the bar, Jason dropped to the ground, never looking away from her. His eyes were so dark they didn't even look blue any more.

"My dad said..." she began, but it choked in her throat when he began walking determinedly toward her.

Her feet wanted to run away, but her head was commanding them to stay rooted in their spot, giving Jason a stationary target as he got ever closer. Her heart was another matter entirely, suddenly thundering inside her ribcage, and Flanna could barely breathe by the time he came to a stop in front of her.

"Dad said..." she started again. This time, the words were stopped by his mouth coming down to hers, his hands scooping beneath her wet hair to curl around the back of her neck while he proceeded to kiss her.

She hadn't expected it. Not really. Wanted, yes, in those seconds that stretched to eternity when she'd been entranced by the sight of his lean body working on the bar. Even before then, on the odd occasion when he would look at her just so during their runs, or when he laughed at one of her stories, sending the heat straight to her cheeks in delight. But now, feeling his mouth on hers, his tongue stroking along her lower lip, teasing her until she could feel her jaw start to quiver from the need for more, Flanna couldn't think of anything else but the heat that emanated from his body, or the way his thumbs began slowly caressing the delicate curve of her skull.

Her lips parted, and the subtle invitation was all it took for his gentle claim to grow more demanding. His hold tightened, and Jason took a step forward, pressing their bodies so

closely together that she could feel the bulge of his arousal jutting against her hip. Flanna slid her arms around his back, clinging to him as the world tilted around them. She'd always preferred larger men, men who towered over her, men who could make her feel small and feminine. But in Jason's arms, something was different. Maybe it was because he did more than any of that, accepting who she was, admiring it even. Or maybe it was because of the way they seemed to match, hip to hip, mouth to mouth. Whatever it was, Flanna felt beautiful, in ways she'd thought were impossible. That was probably the true magic of Jason's charm.

He broke away, though just like at Mrs. Lange's, his hands never left her head. Flanna opened her eyes to see him staring at her, the brilliant blue swallowed by the black of his pupils, and his tongue darted out to lick at his swollen lips, as if he was trying to capture the lingering taste of her one more time.

"You..." he said, and his breath was coming in short, shallow gasps that made his voice husky and deep, "...have got to be the bravest, most tantalizing, most *frustrating* woman I have ever met, Flanna McRae. When I saw that thing jump at you..."

His words trailed away as he slammed his mouth back to hers for a short but searing kiss. This time, Flanna was the one to stop it, loosing her hold on him so that she could put her hands flat to his chest and push.

She didn't push hard, but it forced Jason to back off, his hands falling away from her face. Confusion drew his brows

together for a single beat before his lips began to twitch into a smile.

"Stop laughing at me!" she demanded.

"I'm not," he said. He lifted a hand to brush his thumb across her swollen mouth, tender and slow. "You have to know I've wanted to kiss you ever since you bumped into me at Rage. God, the dreams I had before I actually found you again. Hell, you'd probably blush like a schoolgirl if you knew about the dreams I've had sleeping on your..."

"Enough!" Suddenly, the image of him lying on her couch, naked and with his fingers curled around his stiff erection, filled her head. Flanna had to squeeze her eyes shut to try to block it out. Unfortunately, that tactic failed miserably. It was even worse when she opened them again and saw him standing there, bare-chested and delectably muscled, watching her with an unabashed grin.

"One of these days," he said, "you're going to realize you're a beautiful, sexy woman, Flanna. I know you've got these ideas about duty to your family and everything, and that's admirable. Really. But there's more to life than that. There's more to *you* than that. I just hope I'm still around when you finally see it for yourself."

When he turned and started walking back to where he'd left his shirt, Flanna was left standing there alone, mouth agape, eyes wide at his candid declaration. She hadn't thought—no, she hadn't dared to let herself think—that he'd ever say such a thing. Did he really see her like that? There was no way she could deny the physical attraction; she'd felt that one all too clearly. But it boggled the mind that he'd

given enough thought on the matter to see her situation and then lay it out so simply. There was truth there. Life *should* be about more than duty. She'd just never thought anybody would be willing to be around when she ever got the chance to explore that for herself.

"Jason..." She took a hesitant step toward him, her hands trembling both from fear and the residual hungers still coursing through her system.

He glanced back at her as he bent to pick up his shirt. "If you're going to tell me to apologize for kissing you, you should know right now I'm not going to do it. There's a lot of shit in my life I'm sorry for, but that will never make that list."

"No, it's..." Flanna swallowed. Now or never, she told herself. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have jumped to the conclusion I did. I didn't expect ... I mean, why should I? Nobody's ever ... but, never mind. That's not important."

"See, now, that's where you're wrong." With his shirt dangling from his fingers, Jason came purposefully back to her until they stood toe to toe. There was nothing angry in his face, nothing hostile in his demeanor. He just regarded her with a small smile and a light dancing in his eyes. "It is important. It pisses me off that you've gotten this far in your life without anybody convincing you how amazing you really are. It's not as much fun flirting with you when I know you don't realize that's what I'm doing." He stopped, pretending to think about what he'd just said. "Well, most of the time, it's not as much fun. Sometimes getting you all riled up

because you take something I said the wrong way is worth it."

She was like a deer caught in headlights as he brushed a quick kiss across her lips and then walked past her toward the door.

"And I'm not apologizing for that one, either," Jason said.
"Now, come on. I'm starved, and we've got some planning to do if we want to figure out what tonight has to do with Romm." When she twisted to look back at him, he was stopped in the exit, watching her with a mischievous smile. "You can make us pancakes while I shower. Unless you feel like taking another one, in which case, I'll gladly forego eating..."

"Pancakes it is," Flanna said quickly.

His smile broadened. "A woman after my own heart," he murmured, and then turned to head up to the house.

Chapter Eight

Her back was to the door when she heard Jason return from his shower. "There's a stack keeping warm," Flanna said, gesturing with her spatula toward the built-in oven. She blew upward in an attempt to dislodge the hair that was stuck to her sweaty brow. "You know where everything else is."

The oven door opened and closed, followed quickly by Jason's deep, satisfied inhalation. "I am never going to be able to make myself pancakes again."

Flanna hid a small smile by ducking her head. She watched the air bubbles start to appear in the batter, nudging the firming edges to loosen them from the bottom of the pan. It was nice to be appreciated, even if it was only for putting food in his stomach.

"Did your father say anything to you before he went to bed?" Jason asked.

She didn't expect him to sound so near. Glancing over her shoulder, Flanna nearly dropped her spatula when she saw him leaning casually against the counter just a foot away, eating a pancake with his fingers. He hadn't completely dressed after his shower. All he wore was a pair of low-slung faded jeans, leaving his muscled chest deliciously bare. Even his hair was damp and slightly mussed, as if he didn't want to waste time getting back to the kitchen.

Or it was all a deliberate effect. Knowing Jason, that was a definite possibility.

Averting her eyes again, Flanna said, "Just that I needed to talk to you."

"You kept saying, 'Dad said,' out in the barn, but you never actually told me what it was."

Her face burned from more than just the stove's heat. "It wasn't important."

"You tried telling me twice." His words were slightly garbled and she realized he was probably talking with his mouth full. "Sounds important to me."

"He just said..." She waited to time it with flipping over the pancakes, hoping the batter hitting the sizzling oil would be enough to hide what she admitted, "...you were worried about me."

The silence was palpable behind her. Gratitude almost made her sigh in relief.

"I am," Jason said. His voice was closer now, and she froze as his hand reached past her body to take the spatula away, turning the flame down on the pan so that the pancakes could cook with less of her attention. "Look at me."

She had no choice but to turn when he tugged at her shoulders. His eyes were uncharacteristically dark, flickering over her flushed face, and her breath caught when he reached up and brushed aside the lock of hair that had been stuck to her forehead. Only the tips of his fingers touched her skin, but it was enough to make her shiver.

"That thing you killed tonight..." His voice was low and modulated, while he searched for the words he wanted, "There was a second when I walked into the house, and I saw it jumping at you, and I ... I wasn't convinced you were going

to take care of it in time to save yourself. I could see it ripping into you like it had with Mrs. Lange, and the thought of you getting that hurt..."

"But I'm fine," Flanna assured him. So this was what her father had meant. It was somehow larger than she'd imagined. "I've been fighting since I was small. I know how to take care of myself."

"You still got hurt."

"A scratch."

"A scratch is still too much." His fingers curled around her wrist, turning her arm to expose the long red line that slithered from the inside of her elbow into her palm. "I promised myself nobody would get hurt at all," he said, tracing his fingers along the cut. He spoke so quietly, it was almost as if he was talking to himself.

"Nobody will." Tentatively, she lifted her other hand and pressed it to his chest, nearly losing her nerve when he finally looked up at her again. "Mrs. Lange would be dead right now if it wasn't for you. Don't forget that. And we're warned now. We won't be surprised again."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I think you'll always be surprising," he murmured.

His chest felt hot beneath her palm, and the fingers he had wrapped around her wrist had started to caress the tender skin there. "What is this?" Flanna blurted. "Am I just some sort of diversion for you while you wait to kill Romm?"

Something shuttered behind his eyes, though he didn't pull away. "Is that what you think of me?"

"I don't know what to think. Do you realize just how little I know about you? I don't even know why it is you're so eager to get Romm. Every time you start to get serious about things, you either get angry, tell a joke, or walk away. You think I'm frustrating?" She poked him in the chest. "You're infuriating."

"And your pancakes are starting to burn."

He released his hold on her as she whipped around, scrambling to turn off the gas before the rest of the pancakes were ruined. He'd avoided her questions again, though perhaps this time his interruption was merited.

"Ask me anything you want," Jason said behind her. "I'll answer it."

"No, you won't." Flanna grabbed his plate before he could pick it up and piled the rest of the pancakes on top, not caring when the stack grew crooked with her increasing agitation. "You're just like my father. You think I can't take care of myself, that I'll crack at the first sign of honesty." She gestured with the spatula as she spoke. "I'm a big girl, and I just so happen to be bloody good at what I do. I took out both of Romm's brothers on my own, didn't I? There's absolutely nothing wrong with two out of three. So, if you think you need to protect me, think again. I've been doing this all my life."

"I'm not here to protect you. I'm here to help. That doesn't mean I can't kick myself for not being able to stop you from getting hurt, though."

His even manner smoothed some of the edges of her temper, and she set down the spatula as she took a deep,

steadying breath. "Why did you kiss me?" she asked in a rush.

When she dared to look at him, he'd resumed leaning against the counter with a smile back on his face. "I seem to remember somebody kissing me back," Jason replied, more than a hint of a laugh in his voice.

"See?" She had the uncontrollable urge to stamp her foot in frustration. "There you go doing it again!"

"Doing what?"

"Avoiding answering my question."

"That's because it's a stupid question." He grabbed her arm as she tried to flounce past, pulling her against him so that her back was cradled against his bare chest. One arm snaked around her waist to hold her firmly in place, while the other began toying with her hair. "You already know the answer to that one, Flanna."

She could barely hear him over the roaring in her blood. "No, I don't."

His hand slid beneath her top, fingers splaying across her abdomen to push her back against his hips. Flanna's eyes widened. There was no denying the erection now pressed into her bottom, or the soft stroking of his fingers across her stomach, the tips dipping dangerously low and under her waistband. Her hand fluttered down to where he held her, intent on making him stop, but instead it settled across his powerful fingers, following the simple motions with evergrowing excitement.

"You're so beautiful," Jason murmured. His lips found the line of her shoulder, nipping at the sinew through the thin

cotton of her T-shirt. "You're smart, and you're strong, and when I see you running in the moonlight, you look like the most perfect creature ever created. I'd be a fool for not wanting to kiss you. Hell, if anything, I'm a fool for waiting so long."

The trembling had started before he'd bitten her shoulder, but hearing his words, whispered with such reverence and such passion, made the world dip and sway around Flanna so that she had to close her eyes in order to keep her balance. Men only told her these kinds of things before they got to know what she really was; she couldn't remember a single instance where they'd been uttered afterward. Jason seemed to like her more because of it all. It was almost too good to be true.

"You can have any woman you want," Flanna said, her voice much stronger than she thought she could have mustered under the circumstances.

With his mouth so close to her ear, his chuckle reverberated along her skin. "It's nice to know you think so much of me," he teased. "But whether that's true or not, what does it matter? I want you."

She gasped when his tongue traced a path around the sensitive skin beneath her ear, ending with Jason capturing her lobe between his teeth. Her head tilted automatically to allow him clearer access, and she swallowed convulsively as the hand on her stomach reversed direction to begin skating upward, still beneath her shirt. It tickled across her ribs, and when he brushed the underside of her bare breast with a single knuckle, Flanna moaned out loud.

"Ssshhh..." His breath was hot against her ear. "Keep that up and your father will be out here with one of his guns to see who's attacking his precious daughter. We wouldn't want that, would we?"

The reminder of her father in the next room was a dash of cold water on Flanna's raging flesh. Stiffening in Jason's arms, she grabbed his wrist and this time pulled it free from her clothing, twisting in his embrace so that she could see his face. His cheeks were as flushed as she felt, his eyes nearly black with desire. She had to fight not to reach up and touch him, to see if his reaction was real.

"Please tell me I didn't just spoil everything by bringing up your father," Jason said. "My seduction skills must be seriously out of practice."

"We have to discuss what our next step regarding Romm is going to be," she said, managing to make her voice calm.

Her attempts to gracefully extricate herself from his arms were thwarted when he clasped his hands together at the small of her back. "You're the one who brought up kissing."

"Only because..."

"You wanted to do it some more?"

She took the twinkle in his eye for what it was worth and quelled the retort that sprang automatically to her lips. "Romm?" she prompted.

For a moment, he regarded her, his head tilting in that puppy dog way he had. His erection was still firmly against her pelvis, and he still had that delicious fresh smell from coming out of the shower, but Flanna kept her gaze as cool as she could. One inch of capitulation on her part and any

chances of talking about the potential danger would go out the window.

Jason sighed melodramatically. "Fine," he said, letting her go. "But only because I know this isn't over." His gaze strayed to the plate at his side. "And because my pancakes are getting cold."

She bustled with putting on a pot of tea while Jason settled at the table with his food. In the absence of maple syrup, he'd settled on the lemon juice and sugar combination she'd suggested, digging into the pancakes like he hadn't had a square meal in weeks. Flanna couldn't help but wonder if it was one passion's energy being diverted into another and bit back a smile. However, by the time she sat down to join him, they were both more composed.

"Your father recognized the demon you killed when I described it to him," Jason said, taking one of the steaming cups of tea she offered. "They're mercenaries. They don't even feed on human flesh unless they're paid to. Normally, they scavenge sweetmeats from smaller prey."

Flanna tried not to grimace. "So do you think Romm paid it to attack Mrs. Lange?" she asked. When he nodded, she added, "But why? That doesn't make any sense at all."

"To let you know he's here." He paused. "To let you know nobody's safe."

Nobody's safe. Her blood chilled in her veins, any remaining vestiges of the pleasure she'd felt in Jason's arms vanishing with the sudden panic for her family. The demon could have attacked her house while she was out; her father

or her grandmother could've been the body outside the front gate. That just wasn't acceptable.

"We have to get my family out of here," Flanna said. She was oblivious to how tightly she was holding her teacup until Jason reached across the table and gently unfolded her white-knuckled fingers from around the ceramic.

"Your father and I were talking about that."

His voice was gentle, as if he'd known she would react this way. Of course he knew, she chided. He's been ahead of me every step of the way so far.

"Romm won't attack during the day," Jason continued.
"He's still human and he's not going to want to risk possible exposure to the police."

"That doesn't stop him from hiring more of these mercenaries."

"No, you're right there. But we don't think he'll try that trick again any time soon. By morning, he's going to know we're on to him..."

"We?"

Jason sipped at his tea, his eyes somber. "My scent's all over the Lange place," he said. "There's no way Romm won't know I'm here. It's pointless to pretend we're not full-fledged partners on this anymore."

Flanna chewed at her lip. She was no nearer to knowing what Jason's motive was in going after Romm, but frankly, right then, she couldn't be bothered to find out. All that mattered was keeping her family safe; the more help she had with that, the happier she was going to be.

"The full moon is less than two weeks away," she said.
"He'll be at his strongest then."

"That means we have to act before that happens." Pushing aside his empty plate, Jason leaned closer, stroking the hand of hers he'd never let go. "We'll get him, Flanna. There is no way I'm going to let him hurt you or your family. Not while I'm here."

She believed him.

That didn't mean she worried any less.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight," she said, pulling her hands away to rise to her feet. Carrying her empty cup to the counter, she poured out more tea, swallowing it down before it had time to cool. The scalding on her tongue made her eyes sting, but the pain was welcome. It would help to keep her focused in the hours to come.

"I know you want to protect your family." Jason was suddenly behind her, hands on either side of her body to pin her in place at the counter. She hadn't even heard him stand up, and the fear that she would miss something else that night began to gnaw at her gut. "But I'm going to be up anyway. I'll stand guard. You get some sleep."

Flanna shook her head. Blindly, she turned and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his neck. "I'm glad you're here," she whispered. There was more she wished she could admit to him, but for now, that would do.

He didn't hesitate to return the embrace. "Me, too," Jason replied, brushing his lips across her temple. His arms were warm and powerful, holding her strong when she felt she might falter. Without even having to be asked, he'd offered

everything he had to her, and she suspected that if there was more he could give, he would do so. Nobody had ever done that for her before.

She squeezed a little tighter. In spite of whatever muddle he made of her head, Jason was going to leave a hole in her life when this nightmare was over. Because he *would* leave. She had no doubt about that. Once Romm was dead, there would be no more reason for him to stick around.

Chapter Nine

The moon hung low in the sky, distorted to gigantic proportions by the atmosphere. Its golden light illuminated the Kent countryside almost as if it were day, warming the night beyond temperatures Flanna could expect, making it simpler to navigate over the rolling hills. She ran, though the purpose of her flight eluded her at the moment. She only knew the thudding of her heartbeat inside her chest and the soft whisper of the grass beneath her feet.

Rounding the crest of a familiar hill, she saw lights at its base, beckoning her to look closer. Here, the air was cooler. The valley blocked the ambience from the moon behind her, and its high slopes kept the earth blanketed in its autumn chill. Flanna started to shiver as she made her way down the hill, but she attributed it merely to the weather conditions. It didn't occur to her to blame it on anything else until she neared the lights.

It was a house, small even by British standards, with a thatched roof in sore disrepair. A stone fence surrounded the property, but time had not been kind to it, chipping away at the edifice so that rubble lay all around. Over the gate was an arched web of dead flowers and vines, just as forgotten as the rest of the place. As Flanna passed below it, a bird flew off from its perch, sending a shower of tiny twigs and leaves into her hair.

The lights came from the front windows. There were no curtains covering the glass, nothing to even partially obscure

the interior. A lamp with a fringed shade stood at its center, casting its luminance through the panes so that yellow squares littered the garden. Beyond that, Flanna could see her grandmother puttering around, the television flickering silently from the far wall. She frowned. This wasn't her house. Why was Nan here?

A low baying suddenly filled the night air. Whirling around, Flanna raced to the wall, eyes scanning the horizon in search of the sound's source, but the valley appeared just as it had when she'd descended. But she knew that sound, knew it from nightmares made real once a month. That was a werewolf. And it was very, very close.

Without thought, she ran for the front door, only to find it locked firmly against her push. "Nan!" she shouted, pounding at the aged wood. Splinters drove themselves beneath her skin, but she was oblivious to the pain as she tried desperately to get her grandmother's attention. "Nan!" she repeated. "Open the door! Please! It's me. Flanna! Please, open the door!"

Her cries went unheeded. No footsteps approached to let her in, no voice called out to give her other instruction.

Another howl split the night. It was louder now, closer, and true fear began to leak through Flanna's reserves. Ignoring the voice of her father inside her head ordering her to go off in search of the wolf, she ran around the side of the building, looking for another door or a window that would allow her to get in. There was nothing until she reached the rear, where the back door lay broken on the ground.

Something had torn it from its hinges, but Flanna didn't wait to see what could have caused it. Drawing the knife she had strapped to her calf, she slowed down and crept to the open entrance, peering around the jamb to see what she might find inside.

Oddly, she still couldn't hear the television. All that she could make out was the soft clink of a spoon inside a teacup. Nan must be sitting down for her nightly shows, she thought.

Flanna stepped inside the decrepit kitchen. In spite of the scent of tea in the air, it looked just as unused as the rest of the house. There wasn't even a hum from the small refrigerator in the corner. But something had broken in. Something was still here. She just had to find it before it found her nan.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of dark fur disappearing around the edge of the wall. There was no doubt in her mind that it was the werewolf, though how it could prove so stealthy under the influence of a full moon, she had no idea. This wasn't the time for ruminations, though. This was a time for action. Taking a deep breath, she made a dash for the other room.

She skidded in a pool of blood just on the other side of the doorway. Catching herself with the edge of the wall before she fell onto her bottom, Flanna's eyes widened when she saw the hulking creature crouched over her grandmother's body on the floor. Though its back was to her, there was no mistaking that it was a werewolf, the largest she'd ever seen. Well over six feet tall, it had sable-colored fur rippling across its muscled back, each haunch as thick around as her entire

body. Paws as long as her forearm ended with deadly claws, but it was the flash of its canines that truly terrified her. Though she couldn't see its face from where she was at its right, she could see its teeth, too-white and then too-red, as the monster began to tear into her grandmother's torso, blood spattering across the wooden floor.

She tried to move, but couldn't. Her muscles refused to act, though she desperately wanted to get up and save her nan while she could.

Another wolf's howl echoed from outside, and the tympani of Flanna's heart doubled as her head whipped around to stare at the gaping hole of the back door. That wasn't possible. The monster was already inside the house; it couldn't be outside baying at the moon at the same time.

Which meant there were two of them.

She screamed. In the vacuum of her immobility, it was all she could do.

* * * *

Strong hands were on her shoulders, shaking her awake. Through her fog, Flanna heard Jason's voice calling her name, worry in his tone. Panic still made her muscles leaden, but as she pushed her way back into consciousness, she slowly gained more control.

Her lashes fluttered open. Jason's face filled her vision, his eyes catching the stray moonbeams and gleaming silver, his brows drawn together in obvious unease. One of the hands he'd had on her shoulders came up to push her hair off her

face, and when she felt the wet trail his fingertips left behind, she realized she must have been crying.

"It's OK," he murmured when their eyes met. "Whatever it was, it was just a dream. It's not real."

Her lips felt dry. Running the tip of her tongue across them, Flanna struggled to sit up. "I don't remember falling asleep," she said groggily. "What time is it?"

"Almost five." His arm scooped around her back, guiding her upward until she could see that she was in the barn. Jason noticed her slow scan of her environment. "You fell asleep on my shoulder about an hour ago," he explained. "I brought you in here because I didn't think I'd get you up that narrow staircase to your room without bumping your head and waking you up."

It came back to her then, real memory forcing its way past the fake images of her dream, driving down the fear that still surged through her veins. They'd been sitting on the bench in the back garden, taking a break from one of the patrols Flanna insisted on conducting around the house every so often. Jason had been talking about growing up in Florida, and the sound of his voice had lulled her into relaxing when she didn't want to. She must have fallen asleep in the middle of one of his stories.

His arm was still around her, warm and heavy. Sighing, Flanna leaned against the brace he offered, her eyes closing again. "I dreamt we failed," she whispered. "I dreamt..."

"Don't think about it," Jason interrupted. "That's just your fear talking. It's not going to happen."

Burrowing deeper into his embrace, she breathed in his warm scent. "You don't know that."

"I know you. And I know me. And I think we make a pretty good team. Romm doesn't stand a chance."

She didn't believe him, but she was fairly certain that he believed every word he said. It was reassuring in a way. Not even her father put that kind of trust in her.

Gradually, as the last vestiges of sleep fell away, Flanna became increasingly aware of his lean body beneath her cheek. She was almost afraid of opening her eyes; he'd see that she was all right now and pull away, which, she realized with alarm, was exactly what she didn't want him to do. He smelled like heaven, and the hard press of his chest was reminding her what it felt like to have other hard parts of his body pressed to her. Would it be so bad to let happen what he obviously wanted?

Carefully she shifted, bringing her right hand to rest on his stomach. For a moment, Jason tensed, his muscles growing even more taut beneath her palm. She almost thought he was going to pull away. But then his fingers began drawing lazy circles at the small of her back, sending shivers up and down her spine, and his free hand came up to cover hers on his abdomen.

"You should probably go inside and get some real sleep," he said quietly. "It's going to be time to talk to your father before you know it."

"No more sleep," Flanna insisted.

"It was just..."

She peeled herself away, already missing the scent of his skin, and sat up to gaze at him with her pulse starting to throb in her throat. "No more," she repeated.

A frown flickered behind those brilliant blue eyes, but before Jason could open his mouth to argue with her, Flanna leaned forward and kissed him.

She liked his lips. They were softer than any others she had kissed, and they danced across hers with an assured desire that she found impossible to resist. She liked that he had tiny laugh lines at the corners, the proof that he was more accustomed to smiling than not. But most of all, she liked how hungry they were, reacting to her touch with an eagerness she'd never before experienced.

Before either could think about it, both mouths parted, allowing tongues to search and explore, tasting and sucking as the heat between them rose. Jason's hand at her back tightened, held her more firmly as she got more comfortable and straddled his lap. Even through his jeans, his arousal pressed against her pussy, the denim adding extra force, and Flanna caught herself grinding against him in an attempt to strengthen the friction.

"Jason..." she murmured. Her nails raked up his arms, drawing a sharp hiss of pleasure from him, but before she could dive in for a second kiss, he was pushing her away, keeping her at arms' length.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His eyes were dark with desire, but there was also hesitation, an uncertainty that surprised her. "This isn't what you want. Not like this."

"This time you're wrong," she said.

But he was having none of it. "You want this to try and forget your nightmare. I get that. I just ... if you and I ever happen, I don't want it to be some mindless fuck, Flanna, and that's what this would be for you."

Her skin was humming from the anticipation of touching him, but Flanna knew she was going to have to do some heavy persuading to convince him he was mistaken. "You think I don't want you?" she asked. "You kiss me, and ... I forget about everything but you. You said it yourself. I kissed you back. There was a reason for that." Her fingers fluttered over his chest, brushing across the hard, flat nipples but as they started to dip lower where their pelvises were still touching, he grabbed her wrists in a tight grip.

"I'm not like those guys you pick up at Rage," Jason said, his voice suddenly hard.

For a split second, she'd forgotten he knew about that. "No, no, you're not. The difference is, I *like* you." She leaned forward, desperate for him to see just how serious she was about this. "You help me remember why I do all this in the first place. I trust you for ... well, for everything, which doesn't happen a whole hell of a lot, let me tell you. The difference is, Jason ... I don't want you to be gone in the morning."

He was silent for so long that she was sure that she'd lost her opportunity. Then, his grasp on her relaxed, his thumb stroking the delicate veins inside her wrist.

"You do know you could've saved us a whole lot of grief if you'd just come to this conclusion a few hours ago, don't you?" he said. The twinkle in his eye told her he was teasing,

but before Flanna could voice her own comeback, Jason was tugging her forward again.

One hand curled around the back of her neck as his mouth returned to plunder hers. This time, there was no holding back, his tongue sweeping over hers to demand what she had earlier offered, long fingers digging into her soft flesh to pull her ever closer. In the back of her throat, Flanna moaned as his hand slid around to cup her ass, pulling her more firmly against his erection, imperceptibly thrusting upward to nudge against her sensitive clit. She hadn't been lying. She wanted him more than she could remember ever wanting any man. And if he'd been gone in the morning, she was certain her heart would have been in tatters.

Panting, Jason broke free of her mouth to begin a trail of wet, hungry kisses down the side of her neck, alternating teeth and tongue to craft an insurgence of sensations in Flanna's skin. When he reached her shoulder, his hand left her nape to pull aside the neck of her cotton tee so that he could continue a direct path, but the fabric would only stretch so far, frustrating both of them when more of her body wasn't available to his touch.

"Here," Flanna said. Reaching down, she grabbed the bottom hem of her shirt, leaning away from him so that she had room to pull it up and over her head. The arch of her back thrust her breasts out even further, and before she'd taken the shirt completely off, Jason was already bent toward them, running his tongue around a puckered aureole.

"Such a naughty girl," he murmured. For the briefest of moments, his teeth caught the tip of her nipple and bit down,

while he looked up at her through his long lashes. "I'd think you were deliberately trying to entice me by not wearing a bra."

She propped herself up on her hands, keeping her back angled so that it gave her torso the best exposure to Jason. "They're not comfortable to sleep in," she said.

"Likely story." While he continued to lick and nip at one breast, his hand came up and held the other, testing the weight before taking the nipple between his thumb and index finger and pinching until she gasped. "I think you wanted me to notice just how gorgeous your body really is. I think ... you wanted to drive me crazy for it so that when you finally did cave in to my good looks and devilish charm, I'd do this."

Flanna shrieked in surprise when Jason wrapped his arm around her waist and rolled both of them sideways, continuing on past where she was sprawled on top of him to the point where he stretched out atop her. His strong grip twisted her arms above her head, pulling her breasts taut again, while his lean legs pinned her effectively to the ground.

His eyes were dancing when their gazes met, and his tongue was running along the edges of his upper teeth. "This was in one of my dreams, you know." His voice was low and husky; just the sound of it made her shiver with anticipation. "Of course, in my dream, we're both sweaty from working out and wearing slightly less clothing, but I'm sure we'll get to that point yet."

"I should've known you'd be a talker," Flanna said with more than a hint of amusement. "If I'd been thinking about it, I'd've gone to the bookmaker and placed a wager."

Jason's head bent until his mouth hovered just millimeters above hers. His breath was hot and sweet, and that close, Flanna thought she could drown in the blue sea of his eyes. All it would take to get the contact of another kiss was a slight lift of her head, but something in the intensity of his gaze when it lifted from her mouth to her eyes kept her still.

"And what kind of sounds do you make?" he whispered. "Do you moan? Whimper? Do you lie there in silence so that all I can hear is the way you gasp for air when I make you come?" Without touching, his mouth skimmed over her cheek, along her jaw, until his nose nudged her hair away so that nothing more came between his lips and her ear. This time when he spoke, the words echoed through her head, his warm breath drawing the heat straight from her flesh until she was trembling from the potency of it. "Or are you a screamer? Tell me, Flanna, because I can't make up my mind which possibility excites me more. The thought of you screaming out my name as I'm slamming into you? Or the thought that I can make you come so hard that you can't even manage coherent speech?"

She had to squeeze her eyes shut when he started to trace the delicate shell of her outer ear with the tip of his tongue. "You've got an ego the size of Greenland," she managed to say.

He chuckled, and his lower half pushed noticeably harder into her hips. "You're sure it's my ego you're interested in?"

Flanna had never realized just how strong Jason really was. As a tall woman trained to the peak of physical conditioning, she had come to assume that men had to be

much larger than she to be powerful, but feeling her wrists bound tight by his fingers, the unmoving length of him holding her against the exercise mat, there was no denying how much power was housed in his lean frame. Sinewy muscles trapped her softer ones so effectively that she wasn't entirely sure she could get away if she decided to put up a struggle.

Struggling, however, was the last thing currently on her mind.

"I wish you could see yourself the way I see you," Jason was saying. At some point, he'd taken both of her wrists into one hand so that his other drifted down the tender skin of her arm, a single finger tracing the outer curve of her breast. "I'd heard so many things about the great Flanna McRae. What a fighter she was. How strong." His breath fanned across her cheek as he lifted his head away to gaze directly into her eyes. "Nobody said a word about how beautiful you are."

In spite of the dim light inside the barn, she could see herself reflected in his dilated pupils, her skin a shimmering sheen while her hair pooled out around her head. "That's because..."

He cut her off with a swift kiss, his tongue tangling with hers just long enough to leave her dizzy. "Don't you dare say it's because you're not," he panted when they broke apart.

"But..."

Another kiss, this one hungrier than the previous, sucked the air from her lungs. Jason's hand left its soft exploration of her breast to dig almost painfully into her ass, tugging and rolling just enough so that they ended lying on their sides.

There were no more attempts to pin her, but the thought of escape was the last thing Flanna wanted.

This time when they parted, they were both gasping, leaving each staring at the other with something akin to amazement. "Are you going to stop that now?" Jason asked, his voice rough with desire.

"That depends." She brought her arm down to run a fingernail around his hardened nipple. "Are you going to keep kissing me to stop me from arguing with you?"

A growl rumbled in the back of his throat, sending tiny frissons of electricity shooting straight to Flanna's clit. "I'm going to keep kissing you anyway," he said. "And then I've got other plans for my mouth."

Her eyes widened in the split second before he pulled her back to his lips. There was no room for argument any longer; all rational thought was being burned from her flesh with his every touch, his every lick, his every bite. Unbidden, Flanna's nails curled into his chest, eliciting another growl from Jason that made her clench her thighs together in an effort to stop the tremors the sound triggered, but he didn't pull away. Instead, he pulled her even closer, his hand slipping around to the small of her back so that it could slide beneath the waistband of her jeans.

"Take these off," he murmured into her neck. "Let me see you."

She acted without hesitation, hands leaving his body to fumble at her waist with the button and zipper. The denim was stretched by Jason's hand cupping her ass, but

eventually the fastenings gave way, and his chest rumbled with delight as she pushed the fabric down past her hips.

"Lie back," he ordered.

Flanna was left feeling cold when he pulled away, kneeling by her feet so that he could tug at the offending jeans. When he saw the cotton bikinis still clinging to her hips, he tsked in mock reproof. "Women wear too much clothing," he said, hooking his fingers through the waistband and pulling those down as well. When she was finally naked before him, though, he went completely still, his eyes riveted to her form.

"What?" she asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

Her hands started to go to her breasts, but before she could blink, Jason had grabbed her wrists again. "Don't," he rasped. "How many times am I going to have tell you that you're beautiful? This..." His free hand skated along her side, dipping into the defined curve of her waist before traveling further down her toned hip and thigh. "God, Flanna, you just don't have any idea, do you?"

She gasped, her eyes squeezing shut, when his strong fingers slid across her lower abdomen and tangled in the coarse curls covering her mound. "Well, at least I know you're a natural redhead," she heard him say with a chuckle. "But do you taste as good as you look? I'm going to bet yes."

Her body temperature flamed when she felt him gently pry her thighs apart, the cooler air hitting her wet pussy for the split second before Jason blocked it with his touch. Rubbing the heel of his hand along her outer lips, he repositioned himself between her legs, his breath coming in heated jags as he ran his tongue along the inner crook of her knee. Her

muscles quivered, tensing from the slight tickling, but she was spared from those particular onslaughts when his mouth continued upward, nipping at her inner thigh before stopping just before her pussy.

"Do you want this?"

Flanna glanced down to see him staring at her, his eyes so dark that she would never have guessed they were blue. "What?" she whispered.

"Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me."

There was almost a possessive tone in his voice, and she reached down to touch his cheek, her fingers surprising her by trembling. "Please, Jason," she said. "You know I do."

"Say it."

She couldn't look away, couldn't tear her eyes from his when she whispered, "I want you. This. Please..."

His tongue darted out and brushed over her mound, hinting at more when it skimmed across her clit. "Please what?" Jason prompted.

"Touch me."

The corner of his mouth lifted, and he rested his cheek against her inner thigh, never looking away from her. "But I'm already doing that. If that's all you want, I'll just..."

"With your mouth," she interrupted in a rush. "Please. I need..."

"You need what?" His voice seemed to have dropped an octave, his body suddenly tense. "There's nothing wrong in asking for what you want, Flanna. If I don't show you anything else before this is all over, I'm going to prove to you that it's OK to say what you're thinking. How can you expect

to get any kind of happiness if nobody knows how to give it to you?"

"You've always known."

The simple declaration spilled from her lips before she could stop it, taking both of them by surprise. Jason's tongue darted over his lips, and then he was moving up, climbing her body, his mouth adoring her flesh along the way. A kiss here, a nip there, and then his teeth caught the puckered tip of her nipple, sucking it into his mouth and hard against the roof before continuing his oral trek upward. By the time their mouths were level again, Flanna's flesh felt on fire, her hands roaming down his muscled back.

"What about...?"

"Next time," he said before kissing the corner of her mouth. "Right now, I just want to feel you all around me."

His hands fumbled between their bodies, impatient now with his own jeans. She was quick to help him, but when he pushed down the denim, Flanna chose instead to grasp his throbbing cock in her hand.

"Christ," Jason muttered, tensing as she began to slowly stroke him. "I'm not going to last long at all if you keep that up."

Curling her arm around his shoulders, she slowly pulled him down so that her mouth hovered at his ear. "Tell me you want this," she whispered. She could feel how hot her breath was as it filled the space between them. "Tell me you want me."

He answered with a hungry snarl, his arm knocking away her hand as his knees forced her legs further apart. Their

mouths slammed together as the tip of his cock nudged against her folds, and in a clean, swift thrust, Jason sheathed himself deep inside her wet heat.

Neither moved for a long, suspended moment after he entered her, the only motion the slowing exploration of their mouths. When Jason finally started pulling out, it was unhurried, more leisurely than the slide in, drawing shivers from Flanna as she clung to him in desperation. Her fingers clawed into his back, as if that was the only way to draw him closer, and when he began thrusting in long, languid strokes, she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his slim hips, guiding him in ways that were pleasurable for both of them.

He started speaking almost immediately, murmuring words of endearment on every downstroke, telling her how tight she was, how beautiful, on the up. The words tattooed themselves across her skin, making her clench and writhe as she fought against believing them. But Jason was relentless, his tongue and teeth joining in the praises of her flesh. He didn't give up, even when he began to speed up his thrusts, filling her so deep and hard on every stroke that she could feel his balls slapping against her ass. He didn't even stop when she came, crying out his name almost incoherently as her back arched away from the mat.

"I still think you might be a screamer," he murmured against her neck. "Next time. You can show me next time."

Just his suggestion that this would hardly be the last of their intimacy was enough for Flanna to come again, her inner muscles constricting around his hard length as the world dipped and swayed around her. She heard Jason grunt, the

muscles in his back going rigid as he shot deep inside her, his hips and thighs spasming within the circle of her legs. While her body ebbed, his mouth found hers again, capturing it in another of those hungry kisses at which he seemed to excel.

All she could hear was the roar of her racing heart when he finally broke away.

His lips brushed across her brow, tasting the salt of her skin as he carefully disengaged from her body. Flanna's legs were cramped as she uncoiled them, but it was an ache she was grateful for, almost smiling when the muscles began to burn when she straightened them out.

"Please tell me you're just thinking of something funny," Jason commented as he rolled onto his side.

He lay beside her, his head propped up on his left hand while his right gently stroked her fluttering stomach. His eyes had gone back to their normal brilliant blue, and his full mouth was soft and inviting. In that moment, Flanna decided she had never seen anything so amazing as this man.

"Just ... happy," she murmured. "Which is weird because ... with everything going on, I shouldn't be."

"Never apologize for being happy." When she glanced up at him, he gave her his most impudent grin. "Especially when I'm the reason for it."

Laughing, she spooned against him, taking silent pleasure in the heavy weight of his arm as it settled around her waist, the possessive way he bent his head to inhale the scent of her hair. It was hard to believe that she'd been so unsure about their ability to defeat Romm just a little while earlier, but now, here in the circle of Jason's embrace, Flanna was

convinced they could do just about anything. He was right about one thing for sure. They made a pretty good team.

Chapter Ten

She must have dozed. The next thing she knew, Jason was rocking her slowly awake, his mouth at her ear.

"Your father's up," he murmured. "The lights are on in the kitchen."

Flanna stiffened in his arms, her eyes flying open. Colin had a definite routine to his mornings; after he'd had his cup of tea, he would come straight out to the barn to organize his work for when he got home from the shop. If he did that, the first thing he was going to see was his daughter lying naked with their houseguest.

Scrambling away from Jason's warm body, Flanna grabbed her nearby jeans while she looked around frantically for her shirt. "Get dressed," she ordered when she saw him stretch out on his back. Her gaze lingered for a second on the long length of his hard cock lying on his lower abdomen, remembering how it had felt both nestled in the crack of her bottom and sliding in and out of her pussy, and faltered as heat rushed to her hips.

He must have seen the momentary desire in her face. "I don't have anything to hide," he said with a smirk. "And besides, your father likes me. I don't think he'll have a problem if he finds out what happened between us."

"He might have a problem that we did it in the workroom," she shot back. Scooping up his clothes, she dropped them unceremoniously onto his bare chest, spying her shirt just a

few feet away. "Show the man a little respect. He's the reason you got to stay here in the first place, remember."

That seemed to do the trick. By the time Flanna felt like she was presentable enough to go into the house, Jason had pulled his jeans on and run his fingers through his hair. She still thought he looked too self-satisfied not to give away what they'd done, but his appearance could also be attributed to just waking up. She would just have to trust her father's blind spot when it came to her personal life.

She reached the back door as her father was stepping into the back garden. His brows shot up in surprise when he saw Flanna, then drew together in a frown when Jason ambled up behind her.

"Were there more troubles?" Colin asked, his eyes jumping between the two.

"Quiet as a church mouse," Jason said before she could speak up. "I tried to convince Flanna that she didn't need to stay up, but you know what it's like trying to tell her not to do something."

That seemed to satisfy Colin's initial curiosity, and he jerked his head back toward the house. "Let's talk."

* * * *

In spite of Flanna's arguments, Colin refused to budge on the subject of leaving. "We're safest here," he said. "If you want to protect us, you can't do it if we're scattered to the four winds."

When she turned to Jason to back her up, though, he merely shrugged.

"Your father's right," he said. "You're familiar with this area. That gives you the advantage. You don't want to just throw that away."

She couldn't argue with any of it, and in the end, gave up on trying to convince her father to go away for a few weeks. There was a part of her that wondered if Colin wanted a piece of this fight as well, but she refrained from even hinting at the possibility in front of him. If he wished to be there when the time came, she wouldn't stop him. She just hoped he realized that he wasn't as young as he used to be and let her and Jason take care of the actual killing.

"That doesn't mean we're not going to be prepared, though," Colin said. "After this morning, Flanna will take time off work to focus on finding Romm before the full moon. Our odds are better if you're both searching for him, and her nan and I can cover at the shop just as we do when she's off on her hunts."

"Why not this morning?" she asked.

"Because I want you to come into town and find out what you can about Mrs. Lange," he explained. "Talk to the police, the hospital, whatever you need to do to get details. Then, you're to bring what you find out back here for Jason to help you sort after lunch." He looked to the younger man. "I know you tend to sleep a spot longer, but we can't afford that today, I'm afraid. There's too much to be done. Hopefully, we'll be able to prevent anybody else from getting hurt."

That settled the matter for him. Flanna could only sit back and smile while he kissed the top of her head before heading out to the bakery.

"It won't be that bad," Jason said when it was just the two of them. Standing, he stifled a yawn while he stretched, his back arching like some kind of feral cat. "Your father has complete faith in you, or else he wouldn't be leaving your nan in this sort of risk." He grinned, coming around the table to pull her to her feet. "And just think of the added bonus. You get to spend all that time with me without parental interference. I think that's worth the price of admission alone."

In spite of her fears, Flanna relaxed in his arms, allowing herself the luxury of smiling at his teasing. "I'll take as much time in town as I can," she said. "That'll give you more time to sleep." She paused, gnawing her lip. "If you want ... well, it's ridiculous for you to sleep on the couch when there are three perfectly good beds. If you want..."

She stopped, feeling her cheeks flush bright red with embarrassment. She didn't know why this was so hard to say out loud.

Jason wasn't making it any easier. "Why, Ms. McRae," he drawled, putting on his best innocent act. "Are you inviting me into your bed?" When she tried to pull away, he laughed and locked his hands behind her waist, keeping her firmly against him. "I definitely want," he said, leaning in for a warm kiss. "Thank you for the offer."

For the briefest of moments, she melted into the caress, clinging to him as his mouth worked over hers. When the sound of her nan's door opening and closing drifted from the outer room, however, Jason was the one to pull away, stepping back with a smile that said he understood her need

to keep the moment private. It made the kiss even better. It meant he knew just what her family meant to her.

It meant he honestly cared.

* * * *

The morning passed in a whirlwind. All of Birley was abuzz with what had happened to Mrs. Lange, and speculation abounded about the mysterious American who'd reported the attack. Flanna learned that in spite of the animal nature of the injuries, the police suspected the American was involved somehow in the violent crime, and were currently tracking down any new visitors to the area. Mrs. Lange was alive, but doing poorly, and her vague descriptions of her attacker didn't help to exonerate Jason. Flanna made a mental note to remind him to steer clear of public places until the issue was better explained. Well, closed. There was no way the Birley police would be able to resolve a demon attacking the local café owner. Not without looking crazy.

She left town just before one laden with a bag full of sandwiches that Helen insisted she take home to Jason. Her father had been unnaturally quiet most of the morning, but when she announced she was leaving, he followed her out to the car, holding the door open and then leaning into the window after it was shut.

"Did you and Jason get a chance to ... talk last night?" he asked.

Flanna frowned, perplexed. This was an unexpected topic. Colin hadn't uttered a word about his request from the previous night all day today. "Yes," she said warily.

"Did you ... come to an understanding?"

She had the sudden fear that this was more than wanting her to get along with Jason. "What did he say to you?

"Nothing you need to be fussed about for now, lassie. But he's a good man. You can trust him."

Then it dawned on her just what her he was doing, and some of the fear began to dissipate. "I know, Dad," Flanna said, a half-smile softening her features.

With a nod, Colin pushed away from the car and turned to head back to the shop. She watched his retreating back, emotion swelling up inside her. Outside of her demonhunting, he would never overtly step in and tell her how to run her life. The few times she'd dated, he'd kept his silence, letting her make her own mistakes. But she knew he wanted the best for her. He wanted her to be happy. This was his way of telling her that he considered Jason someone who could fill that role.

The drive back to the house gave Flanna the time she needed to come to a decision. As long as they were discreet, there was no reason for her to hide her feelings for Jason from her family. Her nan loved him, and her father approved, so the only real hang-up had to come from her. And she didn't want to be hung up. She wanted to take what he was offering and enjoy herself like she'd never enjoyed herself before. She had no illusions that it would last beyond this trouble with Romm, but ultimately, she and Jason were in the same business. Their paths would likely cross again at some point. Those encounters could always be pleasant ones.

By the time she got home, Flanna's mood had lifted from the sobriety of the morning. She unlocked the front door, the

bag of rolls swinging from her hand, and then froze when she heard a muffled voice. It was obscured by the sound of water. Running water. Her lips twitched. Jason was singing in the shower.

Shutting the door quietly, Flanna set down the bag and crept toward the closed bathroom door. He was singing some American pop song that had been a hit a few years earlier, the lyrics something about the size or shape of the singer's heart. A boy band, she thought with growing amusement. She wasn't sure whether she should be charmed or repulsed by that.

Her hand hovered over the handle for only a moment. It wasn't like she hadn't already seen everything anyway, she reasoned as she turned it.

The tiny bathroom was filled with steam, thick and scented of the Marks and Spencer shower gel she'd bought for her father the previous Christmas. Through the white shower curtain around the tub, she could see the vague form of Jason's nude body, his arms stretched over his head as he washed his hair. His singing was louder in here, but the second Flanna stepped inside, it stopped.

"Knew I'd get you to take me up on my shower offer one of these days," he said, his tone mischievous.

Her eyes were wide as his head appeared around the edge of the curtain. His hair was plastered to his head, still shiny from the not-quite rinsed out shampoo, and he sported a grin too infectious not to respond to. "You heard me come in?" she asked.

"Never sneak up on a hunter," Jason warned with a waggle of his finger.

"I wasn't sneaking."

"You didn't knock."

"It's my house."

"Technically, it's your father's. So are you joining me or not?"

The proposal automatically drew her gaze to his blurred outline, tracing over the slope of his shoulder down to the taut curve of his ass, just visible by his half-twisted stance. Memories of his defined muscles merged with fantasies of Jason standing beneath an open spray, water rolling down his body in lazy rivulets, clinging to dips and swells that begged her to catch them on her tongue. Flanna's mouth went dry as all the heat centered between her thighs.

Jason chuckled. "I'm going to take that lovely little blush as a yes." The curtain fell back into place, and he raised his voice slightly in order to be heard over the driving shower. "Now get your clothes off and get that luscious ass of yours in here. It's going to be messy if I have to come out there and get you myself."

Her fingers were fumbling with her clothes before he'd finished speaking, and Flanna flushed even deeper when she realized how eager she was to do as he said. It was freeing knowing she didn't have to worry about anybody walking in, or that she didn't have to deny the attraction to Jason any longer. She could just enjoy what he had to offer, knowing he wanted her just as much.

His head suddenly appeared around the edge of the curtain again. "You're taking too long. The water's going to be cold by the time you get in here."

Kicking off her pants, Flanna grabbed an extra towel from the cupboard and set it within reaching distance of the tub. When she turned around to climb in, though, she found Jason's eyes sweeping hungrily over her.

"We really should've done this last night," he said. He held his hand out to assist her, then grabbed Flanna around the waist and dragged her against him as soon as she'd pulled the curtain shut behind her. "One of these days, you're just going to have accept that I have good ideas and go with them instead of giving me grief and arguing."

He cut her off with a smile and a kiss, devouring her mouth while he turned her around so that she was the one under the shower's stream. The hot water pelted her skin, drawing goose bumps to the surface. Those could have been from the expert way Jason's hands molded over her hips, though. It was hard to tell which sensations were caused by what.

Her body was singing when Jason finally stepped back. His arousal nudged her stomach and when she saw him start to turn to reach for the shower gel, Flanna decided to take matters into her own hands. Literally.

"I want to wash you," she announced, curling her fingers around his cock.

He froze, a groan escaping his lips. "You know there is no way I can say no to that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty much counting on that." She pumped his cock once and then twice before letting it go and picking up the gel. "Back first," Flanna said, pouring some of the soap into her hands.

The look on his face was priceless. "What happened to washing me?" he complained, prodding her with his erection.

"I am. And I'm starting with your back. Now turn around." Enjoying his slight disappointment, she watched him do as he was told, her breath catching in her throat when she finally caught sight of his back up close. Each muscle was carved from his flesh, glistening in damp glory. This perspective made his shoulders look broader, tapering down to his slim hips and the delectable curve of his ass, and Flanna's mouth watered as she lifted trembling fingers to begin lathering him up.

Jason shuddered at the first touch, leaning forward to brace himself against the tiled wall. As she ran her palms over his back, the muscles twitched and flexed, visible testimony to how she affected him. Above the sound of the water, she heard his breath grow ragged, and when he spoke, his voice was gruff with desire.

"Remind me never to shower alone again," he said.

Biting her lip, Flanna pressed against him and slipped her soapy hands around his waist to find his hard cock. "You're just going to have to make sure we both get dirty at the same time," she replied, resting her chin on his shoulder.

He turned his head to capture her mouth in a quick kiss. "Now I *know* that's something I can arrange."

The soap eased the friction between them as Flanna's breasts flattened against his back. As her hand slowly pumped up and down his cock, she reached lower to start lathering his balls, rolling their heavy weight around her fingers and enjoying the rumblings that emanated from his chest.

When she began nibbling at his shoulder, traveling upward toward his nape, Jason bowed his head, shuddering as he gripped the wall more tightly. "Harder," she heard him whisper. Whether he meant the biting or the stroking, Flanna had no idea, so she chose both, sinking her teeth into the sinew at the base of his neck while her nails raked across his ball sac.

The response was electric. Jason began thrusting into her hand, forcing her to speed up. It lasted only seconds, though, before he must have decided it wasn't enough, twisting beneath the shower spray to grab Flanna and push her into his place. Before she realized what had happened, they had swapped positions and now it was his hands on the front of her thighs, his chest pinning her to the wall.

"What are you...?" she started to ask, but the question was choked in her throat when Jason lifted her right leg just enough to slide his throbbing cock into her wet channel.

He began thrusting right away, hard and fast, not bothering with the niceties that had predicated their lovemaking the night before. One hand found her clit while the other came up to her breast, and when he pinched both simultaneously, Flanna cried out, the electric shock running through her veins like wildfire.

With her back to him, it was difficult to tell over the spray of the shower when and if he was speaking to her. Her head was spinning, her pussy tightening and constricting around his cock as he slammed into her over and over again, and she could've sworn she heard him growling as he bent his mouth to her neck. The moment she started to thrash in the throes of the violent orgasm ripping through her pelvis, though, Jason pushed her head to the side and sank his teeth into her shoulder.

The biting succeeded both in forcing her still and making her body shudder uncontrollably from her orgasm. Her head was reeling when she became aware of his hands tightening, his cock pistoning harder and faster into her soaking slit. When he came, he tore his teeth away from her, calling out her name in a guttural cry that echoed between the tiled walls. She had to lean against the wall in order to bear his weight when he finally slumped in exhaustion.

A minute passed where neither moved. The water continued to beat down on them, cooler now than she remembered it being when she'd first stepped beneath the spray. Flanna moved only because she didn't want to get caught out without any hot water, straightening in tiny increments until Jason took the hint and eased his hold on her.

"Oddly enough, I don't feel any cleaner," she joked as she twisted around to look at him.

Something dark lingered in his eyes, and she followed their path to see him gazing at the mark he'd left on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Jason said. His voice was faint, and his fingers

trembled as he lifted them to ghost over the bite. "The last thing I meant was to hurt you."

"You didn't." She cupped his face and forced him to look away from it. "That was amazing."

"I bit you."

"Yeah. I seem to remember being the first one to do any biting, though."

"But..."

"It doesn't hurt," Flanna assured him. Her voice was gentle, smoother than the rampaging aftereffects of her orgasm should have allowed. "You didn't even break the skin. Don't worry about it."

She gasped when he bundled her against him, burying his face in her wet shoulder as he rained soft kisses over the bite mark. His tongue traced the oval shape, soothing whatever imaginary sting he thought it had. When he finally pulled away, the darkness was gone from his eyes, replaced with something warmer that was almost as frightening.

"You make me forget myself," he said with a half-smile.
"That hasn't happened to me in a long time."

She kissed him instead of answering. She had no idea how to give voice to the burgeoning feelings she had for this man, and the question of just what he felt for her were just as overwhelming. It was easier to simply slide into his embrace and enjoy the moments he had to offer her.

In the end, Flanna knew there would be too few of them.

Chapter Eleven

She told him about the police's discoveries while they were eating their sandwiches in the kitchen. Jason didn't seem bothered by the details until she said that he was considered a prime suspect. Then he visibly bristled.

"You know, doing good deeds isn't supposed to come around and bite you in the ass afterward," he complained, tossing his crust back to his plate in disgust. "I knew you should've made the phone call."

"Because they wouldn't recognize my voice at all," Flanna said with more than a little sarcasm. "Relax. Nobody knows you're in town, and once Mrs. Lange is strong enough to give them a better description, they'll take you off the hook."

"And put that demon on it?" Jason shook his head. "We both know that's not going to happen. Damn it, I hate having to hide."

"You're not hiding. You're ... visiting. Undercover." When his scowl didn't go away, she added playfully, "Under *my* covers."

His blue eyes regarded her for a long moment, and slowly, the tension began to unwind from his muscles. "Don't forget the shower," he teased, but when he reached for her hand across the table, Flanna skittered away.

"We still have to go get the rid of the demon's body," she said, tidying up the remains of their lunch. "You can't expect me to be of any use to you with that if you keep demanding sexual favors."

"I keep demanding?" He was behind her at the sink in a flash, his hips pushing hers into the edge of the counter. Leaning in, he buried his nose in the hair that still hung loose down her back, inhaling deeply. "You're the minx who walked in on the middle of my shower," Jason murmured. "How the hell do you expect any red-blooded male to resist that?"

"I was fully clothed at the time."

"Like that makes any difference to how delicious you are."

This was new to her, this light-hearted bantering, going back and forth knowing there would be no intentional malice from the other side. Thinking on it now, she realized it closely resembled Jason's behavior since he'd first arrived, only she'd been too blind to see or appreciate it then. But she liked it. A lot. It was incredibly liberating.

His hands came around her waist, slipping beneath her shirt to glide across the taut skin of her stomach. Though she could feel his rising erection against her bottom, there was nothing sexual about the way his fingers stroked her quivering abdomen. It was simple appreciation, as if Jason couldn't quite believe she was real. It was warm, and it was gentle, and it was everything Flanna could have asked for in that moment, without feeling like she was demanding too much. It made both of them sigh in contentment.

"You need a bigger bed," Jason suddenly announced.

She glanced back at him, a curious frown wrinkling her brow. "Didn't you sleep well in it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Well enough. But it's not the sleeping part it's not big enough for."

It was the twinkle in his eye and the wicked grin twisting his mouth that made her shove him back in protest, shaking her head as his laughter filled the kitchen. "Let's go, Casanova," Flanna said. "We have work to do."

"Ooo," Jason said. He made a grab for her as she walked past him to the back door, but was thwarted by her swatting at his hands. "Boss me around again."

"Are you going to keep this up all afternoon?" "Probably."

She kept staring straight ahead, refusing to give him the satisfaction of bowing to his charms. She couldn't help the smile that softened her features, though. "You're incorrigible."

His hand finally found her hip and tugged her against his side. "And don't you love it," Jason growled, nuzzling the side of her neck.

It was said in jest, but something about his choice of words resonated deeply in Flanna, stopping her from pushing him away. They weren't true, she firmly told herself, but there was more than an ounce of potential in them, as if the feelings she did have could blossom into what he expressed. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, noting the utter relaxation in the set of his shoulders, the possessive bend of his head as he settled for nudging at her hair with his nose. He was the most affectionate man she had ever met, and that was definitely going to take some getting used to.

Would they even have the time to get used to it? she wondered. Would they have time for anything more than the stolen moments they had now?

She didn't know. She honestly didn't know.

* * * *

"It's too bad we don't know where Romm is right now," Flanna said as she leaned onto her shovel. They'd managed to get the dead demon away from Mrs. Lange's without detection, the police long gone from their investigation. Returning to her house, she and Jason found a spot at the edge of the property to dismember and then bury it. Now, she was sticky with sweat and her muscles ached from having to dig up the hard-packed earth. It was time to take another shower.

Taking her shovel, Jason fell into step beside her as she began her way back up to the house. "Other than the obvious," he said, "why do you say that?"

"He's American," she explained. "We could let the authorities think he's the one who attacked Mrs. Lange."

He snorted. "Nice idea, but there's no way in hell they'd ever confuse him with her description."

She stopped in her tracks, staring at him with a frown. "You know what Dominic Romm looks like?" she asked.

Her question seemed to perplex him just as much, the lines slowly appearing in his brow as he stopped to stare at her. "You ... don't?"

"No. I never saw him. And Dad didn't have any pictures that he could show me. I went by the information I had on the brothers mostly."

Jason was still obviously confused by her response. "But then..." He stopped, his gaze sliding sideways as he seemed

to be remembering something. A long moment passed, and then ... "Oh."

When he started walking again, she had to scurry to catch up. "What does that mean, 'oh'?" she asked.

"Nothing. It's just ... nothing."

"No, it sounded very much like something to me. What aren't you telling me? Why did you think I knew what Romm looked like?"

"Because I can't imagine chasing someone down without," came the easy reply.

It made sense, but something tickled Flanna's instincts to disbelieve him. "A werewolf's a werewolf," she said. "And I know what those look like."

"Your father's slacking on your education if you really think that."

"Are you saying I don't know what a werewolf looks like?"
He stopped at the back door, his features solemn. "No, I'm saying that all werewolves aren't the same. Romm's just one particular kind."

He left her standing on the back step, her mind whirling from the questions his odd statements raised. When it came to werewolves, she'd always considered herself an expert. Colin taught her everything there was to know about them, so that when she went out on her monthly hunts, she'd know what was necessary to take them down. How could Jason be saying that education was now faulty?

"So, what kind is he?" Flanna asked, going into the house.

Jason was at the sink, filling the kettle with water. "The kind you kill."

Water splashed over his hand when she marched up to his side and yanked at his arm to force him to face her. "Why are you holding back on me?" she demanded. "I thought we were partners on this."

Carefully, he pulled away from Flanna, not saying a word while he put the kettle on its base and turned it on. "I'm sorry," he said when he turned back to her. The apology was evident in his eyes and in the way he tried to reach for her. She, however, wasn't ready for his kind of distraction and stepped beyond his range, making him lean heavily back against the counter.

"I guess I asked for that." His smile was wry. "Romm just pushes all the wrong buttons in me. I ... I don't think too clearly, where he's concerned."

"What did you mean when you said there are different kinds of werewolves?" she prompted. Though his words showed her yet again that she didn't know what his history was with Romm, Flanna figured that those answers would come out soon enough. She had to get him talking about other things before that would happen.

"Do you know how werewolves are made?" Jason asked.

"Of course. One wolf bites another. Like an infection that spreads."

"That's true for most of them. That's the way Romm came about. You know about that?"

She did. Ten years earlier, Dominic Romm and his brothers had been on a hunting trip in northern Maine when they'd been attacked by what was reported to be a rabid wolf. The

next full moon had been a bloodbath in their small hometown in Connecticut. They'd been on the rampage ever since.

"Some werewolves don't get bitten," Jason went on.
"Some ... get made. Well, *cursed* is a better word. There are some old magics that allow very powerful practitioners to curse people into werewolves."

This, she didn't know about. "Why wouldn't my father have told me about this?"

"Probably because he thought it would confuse the issue for you. In the end, a werewolf is just a werewolf for a hunter, right?"

He seemed to be waiting for some kind of response, his head tilted as his bright eyes regarded her intently. Flanna didn't know what to say to him. There was no doubt he was telling her the truth, but at the same time, she would feel much more comfortable getting it confirmed by her father when he got home from the shop.

"Are you ever going to tell me what Romm did to you?" she asked instead.

Some of the strength in his shoulders seemed to deflate, and Jason turned his back to her to tend to the whistling kettle behind him. "I went after the Romm pack on a whim." His voice was low and too evenly modulated not to betray just how much he was holding himself in check. "I lost, and ... people got killed." There was silence as he busied his hands gathering the tea implements. "I don't like losing."

Or talking about it, she thought, but kept that particular sentiment to herself. She'd known there had to have been innocent victims involved; all he'd really done was confirm

that. But the look on his face as he handed her a steaming cup of tea said that the issue was closed.

For now.

* * * *

Flanna was disappointed when Jason said he was going to take a nap, but seeing the exhaustion around the corners of his mouth kept her from arguing with him. He didn't just walk away from her, though. While she made awkward noises about his skewed sleeping schedule, Jason stepped forward and took Flanna in his arms, cutting her off with a soft, gentle kiss. She relaxed almost instantly, molding to his lean form as her arms came up around his neck. When she tried to deepen the caress, however, he broke it off, pulling away to gaze at her with darkened eyes.

"Do you like me?" he asked out of the blue.

She stiffened with surprise. "Of course I do," she replied. "Last night would never have happened if I didn't."

He was already shaking his head halfway through her affirmation. "No, I know you're attracted to me," Jason said. "What I'm asking is ... do you *like* me? If we'd never had sex ... if it was just you and me working together platonically to catch Romm, would you still be happy about just being with me?"

The elaboration of his question made her uneasy, and she laughed nervously as she tried to cover up her growing fear. "This isn't your version of the 'let's just be friends' speech, is it?"

There was a split second where his features didn't change. Then, alarm filled his widening blue eyes. "Oh, god no!" he rushed. "Shit! I didn't think ... no. Definitely not. That's not what I meant."

Her worry vanished in the face of his obvious fear that he'd said the wrong thing. "So ... you just want to know if I like you ... as a person? Forgetting the sex for right now?"

"Yeah."

She chose her words carefully. "If you'd asked me that a couple days ago, I would've told you no without hesitation," Flanna said. "But a lot's happened, and ... and I've had the opportunity to get to know you better now. I still think you treat some things far too lightly, and I haven't quite figured out why it is you seem to be able to wrap everyone around your little finger, but ... yes. I do like you." The corner of her mouth lifted. "You make me laugh, and you treat me with respect. Most of the time. You don't play games ... well, again, most of the time. I like that you're not afraid to say what you think, but that could just be the American in you coming out. And you seem to genuinely enjoy my company, which, frankly, I don't quite understand either." She looked at him expectantly. "Does that answer your question?"

Something had softened inside him while she spoke, and relief now filled his gaze. "Yeah, it does." He chuckled, a low sound that warmed her gut. "You don't do anything by halves, do you?"

"Not really. I guess that's something we have in common."

After brushing another kiss across her lips, Jason stepped away, ineffectively stifling another yawn. "I am *not* used to this day shift," he said.

Flanna gave him a gentle push toward the lounge. "Go sleep," she ordered. "I'll wake you up at teatime."

The time flew by faster than she imagined. Taking another shower elicited heated memories that had her lingering too long beneath the spray, her hands straying to her hard nipples while she recalled Jason's hands doing the exact same thing, his cock sliding in and out of her wet slit. For a second, her fingers strayed to her clit, flicking the sensitive tip once or twice while she debated the advantages to masturbating. It would take the edge of her desire off, but the thought of doing it alone wasn't quite as appealing as the notion of doing it in front of Jason. As she finished rinsing her hair, she wondered if that was something he would like. She'd picked up a guy in Orlando once who'd only wanted to watch her play with herself. She'd thought it odd, but he'd ended up coming at the same time she did. Maybe Jason would be the same way.

Taking extra care not to wake Jason when she was done, Flanna retreated to the kitchen, cleaning up the mess from lunch and starting preparations for a rudimentary dinner. Lulled by distracting thoughts of how he looked sprawled in her bed, she barely heard the car pull into the drive, and when the back door opened to let her nan and father come in, Flanna nearly dropped the spoon she'd been using to stir the Bolognese.

"Where's Jason?" Colin asked, his eyes straying to the closed door that led to the lounge.

"Taking a nap." She glanced at Helen. "Nan, do you mind finishing the spaghetti? I need to talk to Dad for a minute."

Handing the spoon over when her nan agreed, Flanna wiped her hands off on a tea towel before going out into the back garden. Her father followed, and once the door was closed behind him, she sat down on the bench, leaving enough room for him to join her.

"You talked to Jason," he commented once he was settled.

She glanced at him curiously. He wasn't even looking at her. Instead, his attention was directed above, at the sky already deep blue with wisps of pale clouds streaking to the horizon, the moon a ghostly crescent barely visible. "You're not surprised," she said.

"It needed to happen."

"So, it's true then?"

"I haven't found a reason not to trust Jason yet."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

With a sigh, Colin sat up straighter and patted Flanna's knee. "Where you start on your journey isn't nearly as important as the path you take or the place you end up," he said. "You hunt those that deserve to die, lassie. That's the only difference that matters."

She stayed on the bench long after he'd gone inside, mulling over what he had said. For whatever reason, there seemed to be more to his words than just confirming Jason's assertions about curses. With all his talk about trust, Flanna could almost believe that her father was grooming Jason to

fulfill a very different role in her life than was already being played. He was willing to concede her education to a man he'd only just met; that had to mean something significant. She just couldn't be sure why.

Chapter Twelve

Flanna found it difficult to join in on the dinner conversation, twirling her spaghetti around her fork in mindless patterns while Jason and her father discussed the events surrounding Mrs. Lange. At one point, Helen attempted to steer the topic toward a less grisly subject, but Colin's quiet explanation that this would lend clarity in finding Romm quickly silenced her. There was more work to be done. Their dedication to the task at hand was all too clear.

She made sure she was the first to rise, scraping her plate clean before anybody could comment on her lack of appetite. It always managed to disappear when she had a lot on her mind. In spite of the newfound shift in her relationship with Jason, the information he'd shared, combined with her father's cryptic attitude, left her floundering. The one part of her duty that she had most trusted had been her education, and now it appeared that even *that* wasn't as reliable as she would have wished. Hunting werewolves was not a *relaxing* activity.

Flanna hated being unsure. It was difficult enough to do what she did, to risk her life and sacrifice what she wanted in order to fulfill her family responsibility. The last thing she needed right now was to be second-guessing her every move.

Jason and her father seemed completely at ease, however. When she returned to the table to clear the rest of the dishes, they were joking about Jason's sleeping patterns, still

oblivious to her distraction. Even Helen seemed too absorbed in the plans they made to give her much notice.

"Maybe tomorrow won't be so bad," Jason was saying. "I'll just make sure that Flanna pushes me extra hard when we go out."

His words made her freeze in mid-reach for the empty plates. "Where are we going?" she asked.

Shifting sideways, Jason was smiling until he saw that her spot at the table was already empty. His gaze flickered past her shoulder toward the bin in the kitchen, then danced to where she was about to take the rest of the dishes away. Without specifically commenting, he rose to his feet and proceeded to do it for her, all the while answering her question.

"I want to check on your other neighbors," he said. "I don't think Romm's ready to show his face yet, but that doesn't mean he won't try pulling the same attention-getting stunt he did last night."

"But that would be foolish on his part," Flanna argued, trailing after him as he carried the plates to the sink.

"Everyone in town is terrified. They'll be on full alert."

"Exactly. Romm eats fear up for breakfast. He won't be able to resist."

She glanced back at where her father was listening intently to their conversation. "I don't want to leave my family unsafe."

"They won't be."

"I think I can hold my own, lassie." She flushed at the stern tone of Colin's voice. "It's best if the pair of you see to

those who aren't as fortunate as we are. You don't want innocents to die, do you?"

Only the sudden firmness of Jason's hand on her elbow kept her from fleeing the room like a castigated child. "Of course she doesn't," he said smoothly. "She just has the strongest protective instincts I've seen in a very long time."

"As do I." Colin's face softened slightly, his eyes still on Flanna. "Duty takes many forms. A wise warrior learns how to recognize it before it's too late."

Turning toward Flanna, Jason met her distressed gaze with a soothing directness. "Why don't you go change? I'll get this cleaned up and meet you out back to pick out weapons when I'm done."

Flanna nodded, grateful for the opportunity he'd opened for her. Dropping a kiss on her nan's cheek, she bolted for the sanctuary of her bedroom. It took all her energy not to cry as she changed into a warmer top, and she consciously chose not to dwell on her father's words as she considered the night ahead. By the time she went back downstairs, she could look at Colin without feeling like a child again and merely gave him a small smile as she hurried out to the barn.

Jason was already there, standing before the wall of knives. "A guy could get a serious complex being around you and all your pointy things," he said with a grin when she entered. "I guess it's a good thing I'm a cocky bastard with an inflated sense of self-worth, huh?"

The smile came before she could stop it. Sometimes his way of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time worked its mysterious magic to make it exactly right.

"Do you have a specific plan?" she asked, striding forward to his side. She plucked her favorite silver blade from the display and propped her heel waist-high against the wall so that she could strap the sheath to her calf. "Other than Mrs. Lange, there really aren't that many people nearby. That's one reason why Dad picked our house when we moved here. We're fairly isolated."

Jason's gaze lingered on the curve of her exposed calf. She saw his fingers twitch at his sides, but where Flanna expected him to reach forward and touch her, he surprised her by stuffing them deep inside his pockets. "Nothing specific. I just thought if we're out there, Romm will catch our scents and know we're on the lookout for him. It's not much of an advantage, but at this point, I'll take whatever I can get."

She straightened, letting her sweats slip back down to cover her leg. "Do you want me to drive? We'll cover more ground that way and get back home faster."

"Honestly? No." His grin was crooked as he stepped closer to her, invading the small circle of personal space she'd kept since walking into the barn. "I kind of like the idea of having a little more alone time with you if we walk. Or run. But if it'll make you feel better, driving's OK, too."

"You and I alone in a car means alone time, too, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah." He ducked his head in that embarrassed little boy thing he did occasionally, and she could've sworn she saw a blush steal across his cheeks. "But it's not the same."

She left the car keys hanging on the hook by the door. They wouldn't be necessary that night.

* * * *

They ran at first, a gentle, loping pace that was more therapeutic than purposeful. The air was warmer than was normal for this time of year, caressing any and all exposed skin, tempting that which wasn't to come out and play. The only breeze was that which they created, every step like dancing through the softest of clouds.

For all of Jason's hints, they didn't talk. Flanna led the way to the nearest neighbors, a narrow path that led over relatively flat ground, and he followed, a half-step behind but still visible out of the corner of her eye. She kept waiting for him to speak up. His talk of alone time had intimated that was his reason behind wanting to go for a run. But he remained silent, even for the twenty minutes they scoured the property surrounding the Tabb house. It wasn't until they were jogging toward their second destination that she finally cracked and broke the quiet.

"Dad confirmed what you said about the curses," Flanna said.

"Did you really expect otherwise?"

She was glad they were having this conversation nearly side by side. It meant he didn't see the embarrassment in her eyes for her distrust. "He said something else. He said it wasn't how you start on your path that was important. It was how you got to where you were going. Where that path stopped."

Jason didn't reply right away. They'd gone another several hundred feet before he did.

"Is that what you think?" he asked.

His tone was so low that for a minute she thought she'd misunderstood. "I've never thought about it before," she admitted. "Dad's the philosopher in the family. I just ... do as I'm told. It's easier."

The soft touch of his hand on her arm diverted her attention to her side. "Let's walk," Jason said, slowing his own pace.

She was ready to joke about his lack of stamina when his warm hand slid down to clasp hers, tugging her to match his strides. He didn't let go. They merely continued to walk side by side.

"What happened to your mother?" he asked out of the blue.

Her fingers must have reflexively tightened around his, because his thumb starting stroking the side of her palm as if to calm her down. "Why do you ask?" Flanna said, desperately trying to keep her voice even.

"Because I'm curious. And I see the way your father looks at you. And I'm curious."

She took a deep breath before answering. It had been a long time since she'd spoken aloud about this, and the first time since she'd started hunting on her own. "She died. When I was two. We still lived in Scotland at the time." As if naming the place would make a difference. As if they'd left all their pain behind when her father had moved them away.

"I'm sorry." His thumb never stopped its gentle strokes. "What happened?"

"A werewolf attack. Dad says he never even knew there was one in the vicinity. He was in Rome, hunting down a wolf that had assaulted someone at the Vatican."

"And you survived? How in hell did that happen?"

"Because I wasn't there." The admission made the breath hitch in her chest. "He left me with Nan because he didn't want my mother to have to worry about me, too. He didn't want to leave her alone, but he didn't have a choice."

Jason shook his head in confusion. "Why?"

"She couldn't travel. She was eight and a half months pregnant."

She hadn't realized she was crying until Jason reached up to wipe the dampness from her cheek. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean to dredge up bad memories. I should really learn to step on that curiosity of mine."

Disengaging her hand from his, Flanna brushed off the rest of the tears. "No, no, it's all right. Honest. I just ... I don't think of her very much anymore. I should probably change that."

He didn't let her continue walking. Wrapping his fingers around her wrist, Jason pulled her up against his chest before settling his arms around her waist. His mouth found the hollow beneath her ear, pressing a soft kiss there that made her stomach quiver, but it was his breath and the words they carried that had her clinging to him as if he were a life preserver.

"He loves you, you know. You think he's disappointed, and he's not. He's just scared. And proud. Really proud. You should hear some of the stories he tells about you. I know

you think differently, but ... why shouldn't he be? You're an amazing woman, Flanna. You've got exactly zero reason not to own that."

The angles of his cheek ghosted over hers as he spoke, the promise of its warmth inviting her to turn her head to kiss him. She didn't, though. It was enough to stand pressed against him, hip to hip, chest to breast, the circle of his arms more satisfactory than anything else she could have imagined at that point. The only temptation she succumbed to was the desire to tighten her grip; she wasn't willing to let him go before she was ready to.

When she felt him harden against her hip, Flanna actually smiled. She should've expected it. Though she'd not considered the consequence of being in such close proximity to each other, the fact that he freely admitted to being so attracted to her should have been enough for her to realize that he'd get aroused simply from holding her. She even said so out loud.

Jason chuckled. "You really don't want to know what I'm thinking, then," he said.

The sentiment behind his words sent a small thrill through her veins. Biting her lower lip, Flanna slowly trailed her hand upward along his spine, until the bend of her arm made it impossible to go further. She felt him tremble, and his arms tightened almost imperceptibly.

"This isn't..." he started to say.

"I know." This time, she did move her head, though her mouth caught only the corner of his before sliding downward to the strong line of his chin. Her tongue darted out to rasp

along the slight stubble, the rough texture making her mouth water involuntarily, and she felt rather than heard him groan when she nipped at his neck just above his Adam's apple.

"You're asking for trouble if you keep that up," he whispered.

She pulled away, feeling coquettish as she ran her tongue over her lower lip. "Maybe that's what I'm hoping for," she replied.

A responding gleam appeared in Jason's eyes, catching the light from the stars overhead. Before she could react, his hands had coiled through her hair, yanking her forward, yanking her so hard that she lost her balance and tripped, pushing both of them down to the hard ground. She landed atop him with his mouth already working over hers, fingers so tightly wrapped in her hair that every shift of their bodies brought tiny prickles of pain along her scalp. When she tried to move off, though, he just held her closer, going so far as to curl his leg around the back of her knee in order to make her stop.

"Don't," he managed between kisses. "Want you like this."

"Like what?" Speaking was nearly impossible. Her pulse had skyrocketed at the urgency of his touch, and it stole what little breath he hadn't.

"There." He finally tore his mouth away from hers, gazing up at her with naked admiration. "Here. Don't go."

"I'll smother you.'

His lips twisted into a half-smile. "Hardly." When she shifted against his pelvis, he groaned at the new pressure, his

hips thrusting just enough for his rock-hard cock to grind against her mound. "Ride me."

The suggestion was both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Using her strength, Flanna pushed away, back, sitting up so that she could look around at the deserted horizon. It also served to nestle his cock firmly between her thighs, but that was almost secondary to her sudden need to make sure they weren't being watched.

"You want to do it here?" she breathed.

Already his hands had left her hair, skimming down her arms and to the bottom hem of her shirt. "Yeah," Jason replied. It was almost a growl, low and husky, and the look in his eyes left no doubt as to how badly he wanted it. "You were made for the moonlight, Flanna," he went on. He was pushing up her top, fingertips leaving insistent trails across her flaming skin. "This is how I want to see you."

It sounded like he'd been about to say something else, but Flanna dismissed it as a figment of her imagination. If this was what he wanted, this was what he was going to get. She was squirming simply at the thought of it.

Grabbing her shirt's hem, she pulled it over her head in a quick, fluid motion, eager to be shed of her clothes now that the decision was made. Jason's hands were at her breasts before she was free of it, tweaking the hard nipples through the lacy bra before roughly pulling at the front fastening. She gasped when the first blast of air hit her bare skin; it had seemed much warmer when she was clothed. But the cold was quickly masked by the heat of his hands, and if there was

any doubt that this wasn't what he wanted, it was stamped into dust with the hungry pull of his fingers along her breasts.

"Your turn," she said. The statement seemed to take Jason by surprise, but he didn't fight her as she sat back further on his thighs, pulling his shirttails free so that she could unbutton it without hindrance. Her nails caught on his taut abdomen, but his sharp intake of breath made her hesitate.

"Do you like that?" she asked cautiously. Her eyes never left his face as she deliberately curled her hand into a claw and scratched along his side, up beneath his shirt until her index finger scraped across his flat nipple. There was no mistaking the quivering of his muscles, or the way his jaw dropped, or the way his eyes fluttered closed for the briefest of moments. When they opened again, any trace of blue was gone.

"I don't want to hurt you," he rasped.

"Shouldn't that be my line?"

Jason hissed as her fingers flew to unbutton the rest of his shirt. "If you push, I'll push back. You have to know that."

"I know." Without warning, she fell forward, forcing him to move his hands from between their bodies. Brushing her hard nipples across his exposed chest, Flanna shuddered at the slight contact, her breath coming quicker. "Maybe I want to be pushed."

His hands dropped to her waist, nails rough against her skin as he forced them between their pelvises to reach the waistband of her sweats. He didn't bother responding to her dare, silencing anything more from Flanna by drowning her in kisses again. That was all right. She didn't feel like talking

anyway. She wanted to be rid of the clothing that insisted on separating them, that kept her from feeling his sinewy muscles against her, in her, everywhere.

Somehow, her sweats came off, though afterward she was fairly certain that she was at least half responsible for them landing over six feet away. She even had enough focus to get the knife off, unwilling to risk hurting him in case it slipped from its sheath on her calf. That left only Jason's jeans, and when she slithered down his body, her tongue trailing across hot skin the entire way, following his request and riding him was the furthest thing from her mind.

"Flanna..." His voice whispered in the wind, and she felt his muscles shift beneath her cheek as he propped himself up on his elbows. She didn't risk looking up at him, though. There would be no staving the swell of desire once she saw it mirrored in his face.

She continued what she was doing, sliding her hands beneath the waistband of his jeans, cupping his ass as she forced him to lift his hips from the ground. His cock jutted hard and long from the shadows between his thighs, and Flanna licked her lips as she pushed the denim out of her way. God, she wanted to taste him, wanted to feel him sliding in and out of her, wanted to hear Jason try to speak as she sucked him off. His queries about whether or not she was a screamer came drifting back. He was. There was no doubt about that.

"Flanna..." he tried again.

This time, when he tried to pull her back on top of him, she pushed back, knocking him off-balance so that his elbows roughed against the grass.

"Not yet," she warned. She took his erection in her hand, pumped it once while keeping her eyes on his face. "You said you wanted me on top. Is that still true?"

"'Course it's true."

That was all she needed to hear. Leaning in, Flanna flicked her tongue across the tip of his cock, tasting the drop of fluid that was already welling there. When Jason bucked at the contact, she threw her leg over his chest and then slid down so that her exposed pussy hovered just inches above his mouth.

She froze. As a general rule, she didn't sixty-nine, for the very reasons she'd first struggled about being on top. She wasn't a small woman. No matter how big the guy she was with, there was always that lingering fear that she'd smother him, which she recognized as completely irrational but utterly uncontrollable. Just as there was a part of her that was terrified about what she was instigating, another part of her feared that Jason would reject her in this position. He wanted to be fucked. This could very well be a poor substitute.

"God, Flanna..." His hot breath across her pussy made her legs tremble, but the reverential tone of his voice drew the shivers through the rest of her body. Though she couldn't see what he was doing, she could feel his shoulders shifting, arms moving, and then the lightest of touches across her outer lips. "You're beautiful, you know that?"

The long sweep of his tongue tracing her opening shattered the last of her fear, and Flanna bent her head to suck the head of his cock between her lips, closing her eyes as she lost herself to the double-ended sensations. He wasn't just using his mouth. Jason's declaration the previous night about all his plans for his mouth on her body had only been half right. He was using his hands, too, fingers following the path his tongue took, around her pussy, then in and out when he shifted his focus to her clit.

The first catch of her clit between his teeth made Flanna cry out, and she jerked away from where she'd been swallowing his cock down as deeply as she could manage. The arching of her back ground her pussy against his face, but his hands held her firm, fingers sliding out of her passage to grasp the firm curve of her ass and keep her steady.

"Is that the best you can do?" he taunted. He was back to lapping at the fluids coating her slit, teasing her with more than just his words. "C'mon, Flanna. I know you can scream louder than that."

Her breath was heavy in her chest, making it difficult to bow back down and grasp his cock at the base. Tilting it back toward his legs, she made a show of licking up and down the shaft, trying not to let the quivering in her thighs get the better of her. Two could play this game.

Jason thrust his pelvis upwards, brushing the wet head of his cock across her lips. "There are words for women like you," he said between breaths.

She rubbed her cheek along his length. "If the word 'tease' comes out of your mouth," she replied with a smile, "you can say good-bye to coming."

"Now would I say something like that?"

"Certainly not because it's true," she murmured. Savoring the last velvet touch of him against her skin, Flanna shifted until his cock was poised at her mouth again, her tongue darting out to trace around the head. The tang of his salty skin mingled with that dripping from the slit. The temptation was too much. In a swift motion, she lowered her mouth, feeling him slide in until the head nudged at the back of her throat, and then swallowed in order to take even more of him inside her.

His attack on her pussy was ferocious, all tongue and teeth and fingers. Though her sucking remained slow and deep, out of necessity more than anything else, Jason's attentions grew increasingly vigorous. Fingers slid in and out of her while he exerted more and more pressure on her clit. When she thought she couldn't be filled any more, something began rubbing around the tight bud of her ass, lubricating it with her own juices until that too was being filled, fucked just as thoroughly as her pussy.

Her nails sank into the sinew of his thighs as her climax surged inside her. Every time she thought it was going to crest and crash, Jason would alter his rhythm, dust a feathery kiss across her opening while his tongue took a vague detour. She knew his own orgasm was building as well; she could feel it in the twitch of his cock, the uncontrollable thrusting of his hips as he sought to get even deeper into her mouth. She

complied, though his length made it impossible to get it all in. She had to satisfy herself with long, hard swallows and her hand gripped tightly at the base to keep him steady.

Jason surprised her with a thick groan, and she felt the first hot splashes spilling at the back of her mouth. She swallowed on instinct, holding him still while his body vibrated beneath her. His hands froze while he came, but the moment it began to ebb, his teeth returned, clamping down on her sensitive clit with a sudden pressure that made her pussy spasm, made her body bow and threaten to break, made her scream unintelligible cries that left her drained and shaking.

Her skin was slick where it adhered to his, and it took all her power to peel away from him, to lose the hot power of his muscles beneath her, but she had to, had to turn, to face him, kiss him, wrap her arms around his neck while she rolled them onto their sides. She had to.

They kissed for what felt like forever, the taste of her on his lips just as she knew he could taste himself with every sweep of his tongue. Neither spoke when they broke apart. She just burrowed into his shoulder and closed her eyes as his fingers sketched plush designs along her back. They would talk later.

* * * *

He watched them from a distance, surprised that Randolph didn't notice his presence. He hadn't expected to find them out; Romm knew that they'd found the old lady in time to save her life. The cops were on the lookout for an American, so he figured that Randolph would stay holed up until it was

safer to emerge from hiding. He should have known better. Randolph wasn't the type to stay away from risks; hell, fucking the demonhunter proved he had balls of steel.

It wouldn't be enough to save him in the long run.

Though Flanna's scent made him hard and horny, Romm didn't stick around for the show after he saw her straddle Randolph's face. Wrong view for the potential risk. Given the choice, he would rather watch the bitch get her cunt eaten out, not see her blow Randolph. Of course, he'd much rather be fucking her, but the odds of that happening were slim to none now. Dominic knew a losing proposition when he saw it.

Still, killing her would be satisfaction enough. There was less than two weeks until the full moon. By the time it was all over, she would die after having seen everybody she cared about torn limb from limb.

Jason Randolph just got added to the list.

Chapter Thirteen

The house was silent when Flanna and Jason crept in just before four. There had been no further signs of disturbances, and though Jason had stopped at one point to scan the horizon, he'd shaken off her questions with denials anything was wrong.

"I thought I could..." he'd started, but then hesitated, eyes narrowed as he looked again around them. "It's nothing. Let's go home."

Home. It had always been one of her favorite words, but now it seemed to hold extra meaning, as if Jason's being there gave it added warmth. He held her hand the entire walk back, though the light touch of his fingers on hers, the barely there way he tangled them together, made it feel like a purely unconscious gesture. And they talked, well, continued talking, moving beyond the topics of mothers and fathers and histories to wishes and desires and futures. When they crossed the threshold of the back door, she couldn't even remember everything that had been said, but the ache of smiling too much and the furtive touch of his hand in the small of her back was all she cared about anyway. It had been a good night all around.

He tugged her into his arms as she closed the door behind them. "Guess sleeping in your bed tonight's out of the question, huh?" he asked, nuzzling his nose into her hair.

Flanna sighed, leaning back against him. Her body was still humming from her orgasm, though she suspected that his

company alone would set off this verve within her skin just as easily. "You could ... come upstairs when they leave for the shop," she suggested hesitantly.

"You expect me to stay awake that long?" When she tensed, annoyed with her brief descent into what was obviously madness, Jason chuckled, tightening his hold on her to prevent her from escaping. "For you, it's easy." She shivered when his lips found her ear and whispered, "As long as you're not expecting me to sleep once I'm there. I'm not sure I could be so close to you and keep my hands in non-naughty places."

The hands in question were already slipping to regions not exactly conducive to maintaining their distance with her family in the house. Reluctantly pulling away, Flanna hazarded a soft kiss across his mouth before scurrying to the stairs. "Good night," she called back quietly. The last thing she saw was Jason's pleased smile.

Fatigue took over once her bed loomed in such close quarters. Struggling out of her clothes, Flanna slipped beneath the duvet in just her bra and panties, the thick down of slumber quickly overtaking her. Her sleep was deep and dreamless. She didn't even hear her family rise or the car leave from the drive. She wasn't aware of anything until a familiar touch grazed across her cheek.

She blinked at the figure crouching by her bed. For a moment, she forgot the offer she'd extended and the promise that had been issued in response, but when it came rushing back, it was impossible not to smile up at his expectant face.

"You came," she murmured sleepily.

He wore only a pair of sweats hanging dangerously low on his slim hips, and while she could clearly see his arousal through the fabric, there was no mistaking the gentleness in his touch when he brushed her hair away from her face.

"I should go back down," Jason said. "You need to sleep."

"No, no." Sliding over as far as the narrow mattress would allow, Flanna pushed back the blanket to make sure her offer wasn't misunderstood. "Stay."

For a moment, his gaze slid over her exposed shoulder, falling to the full curve of her breasts and lingering hungrily before returning to her face. "Roll over," he instructed.

She did as he said and felt the bed shift behind her, his legs matching up to hers, his cock nestling against her ass. As she snuggled back into him, Jason slipped his arm around her waist, holding her gently against his chest.

"Go back to sleep," he whispered. Her temple tickled where he brushed a kiss over her hair.

Flanna deliberately pushed her bottom against his arousal. "But you don't want to," she said.

"I don't want you exhausted either."

There was a deliberate laziness to the way his long fingers splayed across her stomach, relaxing her in spite of the excitement of his touch. Against her better wishes, her eyelids drifted shut, the even rhythm of his breathing lulling her back into sleep before she could stop herself. The last thing she was aware of was Jason's soft sigh warming her cheek.

She woke up alone, the autumn sun doing its feeble best to filter past her closed blinds. Yawning, Flanna rolled onto her back, aware all of a sudden of the low murmur of a man's voice. Jason. He was awake. Who was he talking to?

Just as quickly as she became aware of it, however, the conversation ended, and the stairs creaked as someone ascended them. She was pushing back the duvet to get up when the slightly ajar door was pushed open further, and Jason appeared in the entrance.

"You're awake," he said with a smile.

He hadn't dressed, and his short hair stood up in disarrayed tufts. He looked like he'd just risen himself, she realized, and wondered again who it was he'd been talking to downstairs.

"What time is it?" she asked instead.

"Something obscenely early. I was hoping the phone wouldn't wake you up."

So that was it. "Who called?"

Closing the door behind him, Jason came back to the bed, sitting on the edge instead of choosing to slide back beneath the blankets. Some of the light shadowed in his eyes, and when he began stroking the back of her hand without meeting her gaze, Flanna's stomach tightened.

"That was your father," he said carefully. "He wanted to give us some news."

The knot started to burn. "What happened?" she demanded, now fully awake. Sitting up broke the contact between them, and she suddenly became all too conscious of

her near nudity. Tugging the duvet up to cover her breasts, Flanna repeated, "What happened?"

Jason sighed. "The police in Kesbury found the body of a young woman this morning." He ran his fingers through his hair. "She was raped and murdered."

Kesbury. That was the next village south. All the color drained from Flanna's face.

"There's a lot of physical evidence," Jason went on.

"Apparently, whoever did it, wasn't too concerned about covering his tracks. The police have DNA, prints." He paused, unable to meet her eyes. "Teeth marks."

"Do you think it was Romm?" she whispered. She already knew the answer to that. She needed to hear him say it.

"The physical description matches." At her curious frown, he clarified, "Someone saw the girl get into his car around dawn. What they've got is vague, but it's enough for me to be sure."

She didn't realize she was shaking until Jason took her hand in his. Even then, the warm steadiness of his fingers did little to quell the tumult in her gut.

"I'm putting all these people in danger," she said. "He's here for me. I should've..."

"There was nothing you could've done to stop him," Jason interrupted. "She didn't even live in Birley."

"We should've done a wider sweep. We might've been able to..."

"No." This time, he took her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. "This is what Romm does. Full moon, half moon, no moon at all. The man is a killer, and it wouldn't

make a difference if he was here after you or in New York City picking up some girl in a bar. There are still going to be victims and that has *nothing* to do with you."

He made sense. She hated it, but he was right. Something he said, though, niggled at the back of her mind. "Why did you say New York?" Flanna asked. "Was he there, too?"

"He's been everywhere," came the smooth reply. "I was just using it as an alternative to here. The point is, location means squat. Blood is blood to him."

"And he wants mine." With a heavy sigh, Flanna eased out of his grip, standing and reaching for her robe tossed over the nearby chair. "At least we've confirmed that he's in the vicinity and not just sending long-distance envoys out to do his killing. It gives us something to work with today."

Jason trailed after her, down the stairs and into the kitchen where she immediately put the kettle on to boil. "You have a plan?"

She nodded. "I'm going into Kesbury as soon as I feel human again." The clock on the wall said ten-forty. Jason had been right; it was obscenely early considering how late they got into bed. "He's got to be staying somewhere. People have seen him, I know it."

"The police are looking for him already."

"And now I will be, too."

"We, you mean."

She stopped scooping the tea into the pot to shoot a frown at him. "You can't go," Flanna said. "You're an American. You'll create suspicion."

"Trust me. They're not going to mistake me for Romm."

"It's too dangerous."

"It's more dangerous for you to be out there on your own." He closed the gap between them, slipping his arm around her waist while resting his chin on her shoulder to watch her finish the tea preparations. "I've done this kind of thing before," he said. "You can trust me not to do anything stupid."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's the police. One wrong move..."

"Won't happen. I promise."

She was too tired to argue with him. The tone of his voice made it clear that he was ready to fight the issue if she pressed, but frankly, Flanna was grateful that she wouldn't have to go about this alone. When it came to her normal hunting duties, working as a lone agent was freeing. It made it easier to focus if she didn't have to worry about anyone else.

But this wasn't normal. This was vengeance, through and through. Personal. Directed specifically at her. She hadn't felt this vulnerable in a very long time, and the outside possibility that there would be nobody there to support her in case something went wrong was terrifying.

Her thoughts jumped forward to when this ordeal would be over. Once Romm was dead, Jason would leave. Move on to his next hunt. Leave her behind for her own. It was always possible that their paths would cross, but the world was a very big place. There was also the chance that they'd continually miss each other.

To her astonishment, the latter made her heart sink. Maybe it was just because she was still caught in the first throes of ... whatever this relationship she was developing with him was, but at that moment in time, the last thing Flanna wanted was for him to go. Ever.

"All right," she said, acquiescing to his argument. Twisting in his arms, she leaned away as she waved a warning finger in his face. "But if you get in trouble, I'm telling my father that this was all your idea."

Jason grinned. "And you know, I don't think he's going to have any problems buying that. Especially since it's the truth."

Fighting back her smile, Flanna shook her head in mock disapproval and broke free from his embrace. "Watch the kettle," she said. "I'm going to get dressed and write Dad a note. We'll go after we've had a cup of tea."

"The English and their damn tea," she heard him mutter as she left the kitchen.

"The Americans and their awful coffee!" she yelled back.

The sound of his laughter warmed her as she climbed the stairs to her room.

* * * *

Kesbury was very similar to Birley. Small and self-contained, it looked much like it had for centuries, low-roofed buildings crammed into winding roads, tiny roundabouts made lethal by locals. Only the shops that lined town center had changed names over the years. Boots, the local fish and chips shop, a small Marks and Spencer's ... Flanna could have

been walking through her hometown, smiling at and greeting the familiar faces that passed. Images of Romm stalking through the village, searching for a victim, kept her from enjoying the simple stroll, though. She was there with a purpose; she had to focus.

She and Jason had separated at the parking lot near the train station, agreeing to meet up at four to go over what they'd found. She held little expectation that he'd come up with anything. Even if his American accent didn't raise suspicions, the fact that he was an outsider would automatically lock people's lips. This was going to fall completely onto her shoulders.

Her first stop was the small pub at the edge of town center. Any local gossip would originate there.

The Crown and Anchor looked like any other pub, heavy tables scattered near the windows, worn beams hanging so low overhead that Flanna had to fight the urge to duck as she slipped inside. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting, but that time gave her the opportunity to look around and assess where she could start. The lunch crowd was in full swing, which in Kesbury apparently constituted half a dozen patrons, most of whom sat at the bar watching the midday news on the television mounted above the taps. Not a single person was under the age of fifty. She chewed her lip. That could work either for or against her.

The bartender glanced in her direction when she slid onto a stool in the middle of the bar. His bushy brows lifted for a split second in surprise, but quickly fell back into his stoic expression, stepping down to stand in front of her.

"Chips and a diet Coke," she said before he could speak.

The bartender nodded and moved away without another curious glance. She'd passed the first hurdle; they didn't see her as anyone other than a passerby stopping in for a bite to eat.

The man nearest her was two stools to her left, a wizened pensioner with so many age spots on his bald head that it looked like someone had splattered brown paint at him. He was nursing a Guinness, and a half-eaten cheese roll sat forgotten in front of him. The news was of more fascination.

"Shame, that," the man said out of the blue.

Flanna looked around, but nobody else seemed to be paying him any attention. "Pardon?"

He shifted on his seat, his humped back less in her face as he turned toward her a little. "The girl that was killed. That's why you're here, isn't it? To see what you can dig up on her? Bet you're one of those London spies, looking for a bit of country gossip to catch the boss' attention." The finger he waggled at her had gnarled knuckles that made his hands look like fragile twigs. "Can't pull the wool over these eyes, miss. They've seen too much."

She was torn between going with the pretense and feigning ignorance. She wasn't sure which would yield greater results.

"Leave the girl alone, George," the bartender warned as he set a plate of hot chips in front of her. "There's been enough nastiness about town today. We don't need you mucking it up more."

That made her decision for her. "What's he talking about?" she asked, reaching for the vinegar.

The bartender shook his head. "Nothing worth repeating."
George snorted. "That's the kind of thinking that's going to let the bastard strike again."

"That's not going to happen."

"It is. Just you wait."

"There's no way a bloke like that can just walk free without being noticed," the bartender argued.

Flanna ate her chips in silence as she listened to the two men bicker back and forth on the merits of the local police. A few other men at the bar contributed occasionally, but George and the bartender carried the bulk of the discussion. It appeared that this was a familiar method of conversation between the two.

The locals didn't know what the attacker looked like. Though the rough details of the rape/murder had already been leaked, the police were keeping a tight rein on any physical description, only going so far as to warn people about being wary of male strangers. This left mixed impressions with the town's citizens, but one thing was certain. Everybody was shaken by the events; this kind of violence didn't normally darken Kesbury doorsteps.

Flanna left the pub confident that Romm had never been there. It was a tightly knit group; there was no way a stranger could wander in without provoking some type of interest. She tried the fish and chip shop next, but only heard more of the same. That could only mean that Romm was

subsisting on the local McDonald's or foodstuffs that didn't require cooking.

Tesco's was closer, so Flanna opted to go there next. It was a small shop with a tiny café and minimal housewares. Kesbury citizens obviously weren't interested in the superstore experience, she thought as she wandered the aisles. She wasn't exactly clear on what she was doing. Without knowing the town's residents, everybody was a stranger to her. Romm could have been any one of them for as much as she knew.

She saw Jason when she rounded the corner from the meat counter to the dairy products. Halting in her place, her eyes widened as she watched him chatting with a pretty, young blonde, a block of cheddar in one of his hands and a wedge of stilton in the other. A basket half-filled with digestives and rolls dangled from his arm.

They hadn't told each other where they'd be going, but the last thing she'd expected was for him to show up in the same spot as she. Yes, it was a small town, and yes, he was a seasoned hunter, but ... she frowned. Was he flirting with the girl?

Before she realized what she was doing, Flanna was marching toward him, boot heels clicking against the tiled floor. The woman's giggle drifted back to her first, which only served to irritate her for some reason, so that by the time Jason looked up and saw her approaching, her temper was frayed whippet-thin.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. She did her best to ignore the woman, pulling herself straighter even though it made her feel like an Amazon compared to the petite blonde.

Jason was unperturbed by her barked question, smiling at her with the same easy charm he always did. "Looks like shopping," he said lightly.

With a sideways glance at the young woman, Flanna snatched the cheese out of his hands and tossed it back into the display. "We're leaving."

He didn't say a word as he followed her down the aisle, setting aside the basket at the first opportunity. He didn't say a word until she whirled on him in front of the store.

"You don't have to be jealous, you know."

She gaped at him, unsure whether to be more outraged at his bald declaration or his jovial tone. "I'm *not*."

"Then this temper tantrum is because I picked out the wrong cheese?"

"I'm ... this ... I'm..." Words failed her, and she could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, especially when a woman exiting the store stared at them in curiosity.

Jason stepped closer, blocking Flanna from the customers' view. As his smile softened, his gaze dropped to her mouth, his hand rising so that his thumb could brush across her lower lip. "You had the same thought I did," he said. His voice was almost a whisper. "Brilliant girl. Romm has to eat but he needs a low profile. Of course he'd shop for his own food."

The feather of his touch was making her mouth quiver, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek in order to get it to stop. "You were flirting with that girl," she managed to say.

"Only because she's seen Romm," he replied. His eyes were still transfixed by her mouth. "Why does it bother you?"

She didn't know the answer to that question. She wasn't entirely sure she could recite her address if he kept up with the seductive tone and touching. Then his first statement sank in.

"Wait." Flanna took a step away. It was the only way to clear her head. "She saw Romm? How do you know that?"

He only smiled. Taking her hand in his, he pulled her away from the store, across the street and toward the station where they were parked. Where he was going with this, she had no idea, but for now she shoved aside her mistrust and followed his lead without question. It was easier to believe in his desire to get Romm than it was to consider why she'd reacted so badly at seeing Jason with another woman. The first was almost calculable.

There was nothing at all sensible about the prospect that she was falling head over heels for Jason Randolph.

Chapter Fourteen

It was when he told her to drive home that Flanna lost it again.

"If Romm's in Kesbury," she said, twisting the keys so viciously in the ignition that the ring rattled, "home is the last place we should be. We should be finding him, not sitting on our hands or making small talk with pretty blondes. It's probably not even natural, you know. Her roots were starting to show."

Jason grinned, twisting sideways to face her. Though she would have chosen to avoid meeting his gaze, his adjusted position meant that his knee came up to block the gear shift, thwarting her from even putting the car into reverse yet. She had no choice but to look at him and carefully kept her wrist twisted to avoid touching his leg.

"Romm's not here," he said, his tone light. "The girl works at the gas station. If anybody is going to recognize a new car in the area, it's going to be a gas attendant. She was able to tell me that he's been in a couple times, but both times were for fill-ups. That means he's doing a lot of driving. And since there isn't a hotel or bed-and-breakfast in town, he has to be using Kesbury just as a base of operations."

She frowned. "Why were you at Tesco's, then?"

"Emma and I were still chatting when she went off shift. She asked if I wanted to tag along while she picked up a few things."

"You do realize you can't trust anything she said, don't you?"

His lighthearted demeanor faltered. "Why's that?"

"Because she was chatting you up so that you'd ask her out," Flanna snapped. "She'd say anything to keep your attention."

He was shaking his head before she'd finished speaking. She decided it was very annoying the way he so often started disagreeing with her before she was allowed the chance to say her piece.

"She knew that wasn't going to happen," Jason said. "As a source, she's reliable."

"You can't know that."

"I can. I told her up front I was unavailable. She knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell I was going to ask her out."

His response flummoxed her at the same time it made her stomach do flip-flops. "Unavailable? What did you say to her?"

With an easy grin, Jason rested his hand over hers on the gear stick, stroking the back of her fingers with a feather touch. "That I'd met a girl back in New York who so intrigued me that I traveled halfway across the world just to find her. That we hadn't said anything directly to each other but she was all I saw even when she wasn't around. And that if there was a monster around hurting beautiful young women, I needed to know everything I could about him so that I could do what I can to keep her safe. So ... unavailable."

Her heart was pounding in her ears by the time he was done. As a cover story, it was brilliant. A good-looking American professing romantic notions? There was no way a small-town English girl would be able to resist.

As a confession of some sort, though, it left Flanna terrified. Was he referring to her? Was this his way of admitting to stronger feelings than just attraction? Or was it all just a story to get the information he wanted? Was all of this part of some master game she wasn't privy to?

Her thoughts must have been visible in her face. Shaking his head, Jason let go of her hand. "You think too much," he said, cupping his hand around the back of her neck and tugging her forward. He leaned at the same time so that by the end of his announcement, his mouth was on hers, firm, determined, kissing her with an assured hunger that banished her traitorous thoughts. She tumbled into the kiss without pause, her hands coming up to his chest to brace herself, her mind lost to anything but the fire he was stoking deep inside her. Even when he finally broke away, all she was aware of was the maelstrom winding its way through her body and emotions.

"You're cute when you're jealous," he said, though the huskiness of his voice kept it from being as light as he must have intended. "And I know what it looked like, but that's not the kind of man I am, Flanna. Maybe I was at one point, but ... those days are over. I don't mess around because people can get hurt. People I care about. So if you see me being friendly with someone, it's just because it's all part of the job.

Right now, the only woman I'm interested in being available for is you."

It was the *right now* that dampened the effect of his words. There was no doubting his sincerity; the way he looked at her made it all too clear that he meant every word he said. But his time stamp only served to remind Flanna that this relationship they were cultivating came with an expiration date. Falling for him, more so than she already had, was going to lead to heartache when he took off in a few weeks. It was going to be up to her to keep a level head about it, appreciate the good sex while it lasted, hope that their friendship would find feet again at some point later on down the line. If she wasn't interested in completely losing her head, she had to pretend she didn't see his affection in every touch or feel the spark when he stated yet again that he was interested in her. It was the only way not to get hurt.

"I'll remember that for next time," Flanna said. She kept her tone deliberately light, even going so far as to brush a friendly kiss across his swollen lips. It was hard not to deepen it; the mere taste of him was enough to set her mouth to watering. But she pulled back with great care, waiting for him to move out of the way so that she could shift into reverse.

"The way I see it," Jason said as she pulled out, "Romm's found a place to hole up in the middle of nowhere. Probably something between here and Birley. That way, he can keep an eye on you *and* keep himself stocked with gas and food without running the chance of being noticed by someone you know."

Flanna nodded, relieved to be back onto the safe subject of the hunt as opposed to the more volcanic topic of their socalled relationship. "I guess that means I'll be hanging out in Kesbury until the full moon," she said.

"We'll be hanging out there," he corrected. "And if we get lucky and the police actually catch him before then, we'll be in a prime position to take him out."

He changed the subject then, as if all their questions were now resolved. As she listened to him go on about the cost of gas in England, Flanna's mind drifted back to Jason's earlier assertions, to the way he'd cut her off from thinking when she'd begun to overanalyze his motivations. Part of her wanted to believe that it really could be that simple. It really could be just about a guy seeing a girl he fancied, and then single-mindedly doing what was necessary to keep that girl safe.

But life was never that simple. There were always complications. Secrets had a way of rearing their ugly heads at the most inopportune moments, driving away lovers, killing innocents, isolating those who longed for more. This was what life had taught Flanna. This was why she couldn't fully believe.

Even though Jason made her want that more than almost anything else. Only her desire to find Romm and protect her family was greater, and even then, it was difficult to separate him from the larger picture. He was part of all of it, the reason she even knew that there was a threat in the first place. To excise his influence right now would be the same as cutting off her left hand. She needed him. For now, that

would have to be a fair substitute for believing in anything more.

* * * *

The rest of the day played out as it had the previous day, though they both managed to sneak in a nap before Colin and Helen returned home. In spite of the news about the murdered girl, dinner was a more comfortable affair simply because this time, Flanna felt like she had more of the situation under her control. Romm was loose, but they were tightening their net. It would only be a matter of time before they caught him.

"Did you two have specific plans for tonight?" Colin asked as Flanna rose to begin clearing the table.

Jason was quick to join her, and even quicker to respond. "It's time to start looking for hidey-holes," he said. "We know where Romm isn't. Now we need to find where Romm is."

"Maybe you should have a word with Neil. I'd wager he could tell you if there was anything unusual spotted out and about."

Flanna stared at her father in disbelief. Neil Carrey owned the local pub and a good portion of the surrounding countryside. His family had been in Birley since King James I, and while they were esteemed as one of the cornerstones of local society, he'd stayed true to his roots by still running the taps at the pub five nights a week. Very little happened that he wasn't aware of, but talking to him meant going into town and risking exposure. It seemed much more dangerous than

anything Colin would generally allow, let alone suggest himself.

"Well, Flanna can do that," Jason was saying. "I can still scout around..."

"No." Something in Colin's tone commanded everybody's attention. Even Helen looked startled by it. "What I mean is," he tried again, this time a bit quieter, "I think the both of you should go into town. Spend the evening at the pub. You can always go out afterward if you learn anything useful."

"But ... the police," Flanna stammered. "Jason's American. I thought..."

Colin waved her silent. "Taken care of. I've let people know we have a visitor and that he's American. There won't be any impromptu visits from the police unless you two start a fight at the pub."

The last was said with a smile, but the attempt at levity failed to dispel her confusion. "What exactly have you told people?" she asked carefully.

"Nothing that isn't true." Rising to his feet, Colin came to stand in front of her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Since when have I steered you wrong, lassie? Jason's our guest. I wouldn't put him in any more jeopardy than I would you. Everything will be fine. Trust me."

She regarded him, noting the warmth in the blue, the hint of a smile curving his mouth. None of it masked the weight of his age, and it saddened her to think that this was one mantle he wouldn't be able to pass along. This was a burden he would wear with quiet pride, even when time conspired

against him. That was when she finally understood, and the simplicity of his needs made her eyes widen.

He didn't want her to be alone. More importantly, he trusted and respected Jason enough to consider him a suitable partner for her. That had never happened before, not even with the casual dating she'd done as a teenager.

She searched Colin's face. Didn't he realize that Jason would likely leave as soon as Romm was killed?

"Are you sure?" Jason asked from behind her. "I don't want to make things difficult for you or your family."

Colin stepped away, breaking the spell between him and Flanna. "If I thought for a second you were a threat," he said, "you wouldn't be sleeping under my roof. Go." He waved a hand toward the other room. "Enjoy yourself. You two deserve an easier night. Mum and I will see to the clean-up."

"Sounds like the best offer I've had all day." Taking the plates from her hands, Jason pulled Flanna out of the way, leading her into the lounge before she could voice any more protest. When the door slipped shut behind them, he tugged her against his hard chest and curled his arms around her waist.

"If you'd rather I didn't go," he said, keeping his voice low so that it couldn't be heard in the kitchen, "I can drop you off at the pub and look around for Romm's hideaway instead. All you have to do is say the word."

As pleasurable as it was to feel his body against hers, she couldn't completely relax with her father just a few feet away, her eyes casting a furtive glance toward the closed door. "Do you not want to go?" she asked.

"I'd love to go. I just don't want to make you uncomfortable."

That dragged her attention back to him. "Why would I be uncomfortable?"

His mouth twitched, and he scanned her face for a long moment before answering. "You realize what he told everyone, right?"

"That you're a guest."

"I'd bet my right arm he said a little more than that."
When she continued to stare at him in confusion, he chuckled.
"Your old man's not blind," Jason elaborated. "And I haven't exactly been hiding how I feel about you. If we show up at that pub together, everybody in this town is going to know the truth, Flanna. Is that what you want?"

The world tunneled around her. Any worry about being seen by her father was eclipsed by the sudden urgency to know just what it was Jason was saying. "I don't know," she said, her voice unexpectedly small. "What exactly is the truth?"

Everything about him softened, and time seemed to stop as those brilliant blue eyes just drank her in. He eased his hold around her waist in order to lift a hand to her cheek, a touch so tender that it made her heart leap into her throat. Flanna turned into it instinctively, and Jason closed the scant inches separating them to brush a kiss along her tremulous jaw.

"The truth is I traveled halfway across the world to find you," he whispered. "It started out as needing to take care of Romm, but now it's personal. Now it's about making sure I

don't lose you when I've only just got here." His breath skimmed along the side of her neck, his mouth following so closely in its wake that the sensations overlapped, leaving her nerve endings desperate for more. "I know it terrifies you. I can see it every time you look at me. I can see you trying to explain it all away, but really, the truth is a lot simpler than what you're trying to turn it into."

She fought for some measure of control. "I know you're attracted to me..." she started, but when his hand slid from her cheek to coil almost painfully in her hair, she gasped, shocks of pleasure shooting down her spine as he turned her to meet his eyes.

"It's more than that." He took a deep, unsteady breath as if to calm his nerves. "I want you, yes. A man would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to. But stop trying to find a reason not to believe what's right in front of your face, Flanna. I'm saying this here and now so that there's no more misunderstanding between us. What your father is seeing—what people down at the pub are going to see if we show up there together—is that I'm half a step away from being knockdown crazy in love with you."

Chapter Fifteen

She blinked. He hadn't just said what she thought he said. It wasn't possible. It was too soon. It was—

"We really have to work on your turnaround time in conversations." The amused tone of his voice interrupted her racing thoughts. She blinked again, trying to let it process, and this time he laughed out loud, a warm, rumbling sound that vibrated through both of them. "Oh, this is going to be good," Jason said.

"What is?" she managed to ask. Her heart felt like it was skipping every other beat; she had no idea how she was getting anything resembling coherent speech out at all.

"Whatever explanation you come up with to try to not believe me this time."

The implication of his words made her eyes widen, but when Flanna began to struggle to step free, Jason merely shifted so that he was pressing her to the wall.

"Don't deny it," he said. "It was written all over your face. I can say the words out loud and you still don't believe me."

"Well, technically, you didn't. You said you were ... a half step away."

"Which, if you were paying attention, you'd realize was a euphemism for, 'I'm scared shitless you're going to reject me so let's make this look as sane as I can.'" Loosening his hold on her hair, Jason traced his fingertips across her strong jaw as if he could memorize her face through touch. "It's all right if you don't believe me right now. But this way, it's out there.

It's not how I wanted to tell you, but you keep making me have to improvise."

The speed at which the conversation was tripping along made her dizzy. "I can't imagine you being scared of anything," she said. "You're the most fearless man I've ever met."

"And yet, you still don't believe me, do you?"

He posed the question with a curious mixture of hope and resignation, his eyes surprisingly dark as he gazed at her through his lashes. The effect tugged at something in Flanna's chest, making her want to reach out to him and assure him he was wrong. But she couldn't.

"But like I said," Jason was saying, filling the uncomfortable silence, "that's all right. It doesn't answer the other question, though."

"Wh-what question is that?"

"If you still want me to come to the pub with you." He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering to trace the small shell before drifting back to his side. "If I go, I'm probably going to embarrass you by trying to hold your hand or some other public display of affection you find horribly inappropriate." His tone took on a definitive tease, the sobriety in his aspect fading as his eyes began to twinkle again. "I might even do something as risqué as make you dance with me."

The lighter treatment of the topic made it easier for her to think, collecting her thoughts just enough to resume the conversation with a modicum of intelligence. "We're supposed to be going to gather information on Romm," she reminded.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. And the fact that your father nearly blew a gasket insisting we *both* go when it's *really* not necessary doesn't mean at all that he wants you to have a little fun in your life. Ever considered investing in bridges, Flanna?"

Her mouth twitched into a small smile in spite of herself. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of playing along, though, and held up a warning finger as she spoke. "This is not a date," she said. "This is work. Important work."

"Conducted together while we're dancing and having drinks? Sounds like a date to me."

Slapping at his chest, Flanna pushed him away and began to head upstairs. This was infinitely more comfortable. She knew how to deal with Jason when he got like this.

"The pub doesn't even have a dance floor," she said when she reached the top. She looked down to see him leaning on the banister, his eyes riveted on her. "You'll have to make do with a snooker table instead."

"Oh, I like that. Sounds kinky."

"It's a game."

"Even better."

Though she turned her back on him to go into her room, the imprint of his smiling face stayed on her mind long after she closed the door behind her. Flanna sagged against the wall, all the words and all the declarations of the past few minutes returning to sing through her confused thoughts, creating tumult with every verse. The depth of Jason's feelings startled her; the full moon was eleven days away, which meant he would be gone in two weeks at the outside.

Why would he tell her that he cared for her, knowing it would leave her at such loose ends?

Did it matter?

Did it mean she could stop trying so hard not to fall for him? She wanted to think yes. She wanted to believe it all so desperately because then she wouldn't be alone anymore.

Until he left. In two weeks.

She closed her eyes. There would be no easy answers any time soon.

* * * *

She knew she was taking too long. It had been ten minutes since Jason had called up the stairs that he'd be waiting outside, and still Flanna fussed with her appearance. She knew it was silly, and she wasn't entirely sure why she was bothering, especially when she'd been the one to insist it wasn't a date. That didn't stop her from pulling half her clothes out of the wardrobe, however, searching for something that she thought Jason might like without drawing unnecessary attention from anyone in Birley.

In the end, she settled for a long denim skirt paired with her favorite boots and a simple white blouse, left open at the neckline. It was functional yet feminine, she told herself as she looked over the ensemble in the mirror. Nobody in town could accuse her of trying too hard, either. She left her hair down, hanging in thick red waves around her shoulders, as memories of how many times Jason had tangled his fingers in it flooded her with heat. Shoving the treacherous thoughts

aside, she fled the safety of her room, grabbing her leather jacket as soon as she was downstairs.

"Have fun," her father said from the couch.

Flanna stopped, staring at him. He hadn't moved to look at her when he spoke, instead watching Helen's program on the telly with just as much attention as she was. Jason had been right. She had even known that, but the knowledge had been overshadowed by Jason's unexpected declaration.

"I won't be too late," she said, continuing on to the door.

There was no response, and she slipped outside, taking a deep breath of the cool night air once she was out of the house. Her reprieve was short-lived, however, when she saw Jason waiting for her a few feet away.

He was leaning against his rental, hands supporting his weight as he bent back to stare up into the night sky. Faded jeans clung to his lean legs, and a blue button-down she'd never seen before accentuated the broad set of his shoulders. Unlike her, he'd foregone a coat, but he seemed oblivious to the chill that hung thickly in the air, too rapt with the stars above. Every angle of his face was highlighted; the shadows cast by both the dim light above and the golden ambience from the curtained windows made him alternately appear both wicked and innocent.

"I'll drive," she announced, pulling her keys from her coat pocket.

Jason was startled by her sudden appearance, but when he straightened, his mouth opening for some smart rejoinder, he froze, his gaze sweeping over her body. There was no mistaking the hunger in his eyes or the way they lingered at

her breasts on the way back up. By the time he looked into her face, Flanna's heart was pounding, her flesh eager for more than just his heated gaze.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Jason murmured. He took a few steps closer, but stopped just far enough away so that he could look her over again. "Please tell me this is for my benefit."

She flushed and wondered if he could see that as well. "It's nothing special," she protested. "It's ... comfortable."

"Actually, I was thinking accessible." A slow grin creased his features. "Planning on accosting me in public again? Because I have to say ... I really didn't mind when you did it last night."

"When I...?" Oh god, he was referring to their liaison while they were out checking on the neighbors. "That was hardly public," Flanna spluttered.

Jason shrugged, took another step. "It wasn't the privacy of your house. Anybody could've seen us. It doesn't get more public than that."

She held her hand to his chest, preventing him from coming any closer and driving the last of her rational thought from her mind. "This is not a date," she reminded him.

His grin widened, all boyish charm unleashed. "I'll remember that when you're trying to get me to pay for your drinks," he said. Before she could react, his hand shot out and took hers, entwining their fingers as he tugged her to his side. "Now let's get out of here."

Flanna had never been so grateful for a stick shift before. It kept their bodies separate, and though she could still feel

the heat of Jason's leg every time she changed gears, it was easier to think clearly without the added distraction. For his part, Jason acted as he always did, chattering about this and that with no references to his earlier admissions, every other glance in her direction laced with desire. Though it took the extent of the trip into town, all his efforts—intentional or not—served to relax Flanna, making her laugh, making her forget. It made it all seem like it had before anybody had talked about love.

She was laughing at one of his jokes when she pulled into the small car park by the pub, still smiling when she eased into the last spot. There was a healthy crowd tonight; that boded well in several regards. More people inside meant fewer potential victims for Romm. It also meant more people she and Jason could question. Neil Carrey didn't have to be their only source for information.

Jason was unbuckled and out of the car before she could turn off the engine, coming around the bonnet to her side. Her eyes widened when he opened her door for her, but she didn't refuse the hand he offered her nor did she fight him when he kept her fingers clasped in his.

"I know it's not a date," he said, casually tossing her words from earlier back at her. He gestured toward the rest of the parked cars as he led her to the front of the pub. "I'm just not interested in losing you in the crowd of what's obviously the Birley hotspot."

It was impossible not to be smiling when they walked into the pub.

The Green had been the lone pub in Birley for decades. Over the years, there had been attempts by any number of chains to move in and steal some of the local business, but residents were markedly more loyal than corporate businessmen estimated. Franchise after franchise failed, leaving The Green thriving and standing tall. It even expanded, purchasing adjoining properties to accommodate the growing population. Unlike the Crown and Anchor in nearby Kesbury, it was brightly lit and open plan, with several adjoining rooms for private parties and a wing specifically housing a prosperous restaurant. Flanna always enjoyed coming in when she had the opportunity.

This was the first time she'd ever walked in with someone who wasn't her father, though, and while she'd spent a lot of time trying to convince herself that this wasn't the date Jason wanted it to be, she knew that walking in holding his hand, dressed as she was, made it look like that to everybody who happened to notice. Which, as it turned out, was pretty much everybody.

Jason was oblivious to the raised eyebrows on the people near the door as he maneuvered Flanna toward the bar. "You like your beer dark, don't you?" he asked, scanning the taps.

She wasn't sure how he knew that, but the opportunity to ask fled when Neil suddenly appeared to serve them. He was the same age as her father, though not in nearly the same physical shape, with a silvery beard and round belly that she'd always thought made him look like St. Nick. His smile was warm as he met her gaze, and one of the knots in her stomach began to unwind. This didn't have to be awkward,

she realized. This was her home; these were her friends. Jason might be a newcomer, but the fact that he was there with her meant something.

"Guinness, Flanna?" Neil asked.

He did it for Jason's sake, she knew. Flanna had been drinking the same thing at The Green ever since it had been legal for her to do so.

"Make that two," Jason said when she nodded her assent.

She fidgeted with the hem of her coat while they waited for their drinks to come out. The primary purpose of their visit was to talk to Neil, but with the pub so busy, she didn't see how she could do that without drawing attention to herself. It would likely have to wait until the crowd thinned down, nearer to closing time.

Jason caught her careful scan of the various people scattered throughout the pub. "Anybody you want to talk to?" he asked, leaning in so that only she could hear his query.

Flanna shook her head. "I don't see anybody else who might be able to help us," she replied, her voice just as low as his. "They're all people who stay in town primarily."

She glanced over when she felt him shift and saw Jason pull his wallet out to pay for the two drinks that now sat on the countertop. Neil caught her eye, but his gaze was inscrutable as it slid back to Jason.

"You must be the young man Colin's been talking about,"
Neil said. He took the outstretched bills but set them aside so
that he could extend a fleshy hand across the counter. "Neil
Carrey."

"Jason Randolph."

The two men shook hands, and while there was nothing adversarial in their postures, Flanna stiffened anyway. What was Neil doing?

"You're the first young man I've seen Flanna bring in here," he was saying. "Are you the reason she keeps gallivanting around the world?"

She ducked her head to hide the flush creeping across her cheeks. Nobody talked about her monthly departures, at least not to her face. The usual explanation was that she was either visiting family or not feeling well, but she knew that most people saw straight through them. In a town like Birley, though, nobody asked questions. The McRaes were solid citizens, and what they did with their private lives was nobody's business but their own. That had always worked to their advantage in the past. Now, it looked like her disappearances would be credited to more personal reasons.

"I guess I can stop being jealous of every other guy I see then," Jason joked, adeptly deflecting the question. He coiled a possessive arm around her waist and drew her toward him. "They can be jealous of me instead."

She didn't pull away, but she couldn't stop her nervous gaze from flickering between the two men. Though she knew Jason would never betray what they were doing or what she really did on her trips away, she wasn't so sure how much he would reveal under Neil's cross-examination. Because that's what it was. Even if she hadn't consciously acknowledged that it could happen, she wasn't in the least bit surprised to see it occur in front of her.

"And what is it you do, Mr. Randolph?"

"Acquisitions." The lie came so easily to him that she knew it was his normal cover story. She wondered what other details he volunteered to hide his more violent lifestyle.

"Must mean you move around a fair bit."

"I did." His fingers tightened almost imperceptibly at Flanna's waist, and the glance he cast her through his lashes was dark with hidden promises. "I'm hoping that Flanna's going to convince me to take a little break from it all."

Behind the counter, Neil harrumphed at the answer, but all she could hear was the sudden hammering of her heart as she lifted wide eyes to Jason's. The promise she saw there had firmed, and when he leaned toward her, there was no way she could deny her response, the ensuing kiss slow and almost chaste. It resolved questions she hadn't voiced yet, and by the time they parted, a slow burn had started in her chest, spreading through her torso and flooding her body with warmth.

He wouldn't necessarily be leaving after the full moon. He was just looking for her to ask him to stay. Her relief was almost palpable.

"I guess that means we'd be seeing you around town a bit more," Neil said. There was something almost accusatory in his tone, and this time, Flanna knew she had to speak up.

"Jason's been nagging me about getting into town since he got here," she said. "I'm the one who keeps wanting to hide him away." She flashed Neil her best smile. "Only child syndrome. I don't like to share."

"Well, I'm here now, and I plan on having fun." Jason scanned the interior of the pub. "Flanna said something about a snooker table?"

"You play?"

"Once Flanna teaches me."

Some of Neil's gruff demeanor was softening. "Don't play her for money," he warned. "There's enough blokes around here already that have fallen for her act. She knows her way around a cue, and don't let her tell you any different."

"Is the private room available?" Flanna asked. "That way when Jason loses, nobody has to watch him cry."

"I don't cry," he protested good-naturedly.

"But you're still going to lose," she shot back.

Chuckling, Neil reached beneath the counter and pulled a key ring attached to a paddle with the word "snooker" burned into the wood. "Just let me know what the final score is," he said, passing the key over to her. "That's always good for a laugh."

She was smiling as Jason picked up their drinks and followed her through the bar. She hadn't really given much thought to how they'd be spending their time, but playing snooker was as good a distraction as any. The added privacy of being separate from the other patrons also meant that they could talk relatively freely about Romm without fear of being overheard. This was turning into a good decision after all.

Plus, she got to show Jason that demonhunting wasn't the only thing she was good at. She hid her smile as she slipped the key into the lock of the snooker room. By the time she was done showing him how to play, he wouldn't know what

had hit him.

Chapter Sixteen

There were two snooker tables at The Green. Years earlier, Neil's nephew had fallen in love with the game and thrown himself headfirst into the atmosphere, learning how to play, following around the big-name players as they competed around the country. Neil had the first table put in to help his nephew practice when he was home, figuring it couldn't hurt having diversion for his patrons, either. The second came when said nephew started bringing around the occasional celebrity for a game. Though the attention was good for business, Neil didn't like the idea of someone not having privacy if they wanted it and converted one of the special engagement rooms into a snooker room instead.

That was where Flanna took Jason. The room was rarely open to the public without a cost involved, but Neil had always made special accommodations for her, as a favor to her father, she'd always thought. The reason didn't matter; now, she was glad that she and Jason could have someplace private to hang out while the nighttime crowd thinned. The room was probably too big for just the two of them, but maybe a little distance could be a good thing. It would help to keep her head clear.

Jason was circling the six by twelve table, tilting his head as he looked down the long expanse of green. "Why is it," he said, his tone speculative, "that in a country where space is a premium and the national goal is to see just how tiny you can

make something and still keep it useful, your pool tables are absolutely enormous?"

She smiled. "It's not a pool table. It's a snooker table. And we like to keep the rest of the world on its toes by being contrary. You'd almost think we were American in that regard."

Her gibe was answered with a devilish grin. "Is that what this is, then?" Jason picked up one of the red balls and sent it rolling down the table. "A battle of nationality? American prowess versus British experience?"

"Hardly." Turning her back to him, Flanna crossed to the wall where the cue rack was mounted, pulling down two sticks. "Everybody knows the Americans are absolute rubbish when it comes to snooker. The best players are always British."

"Them sounds like fighting words to me."

She handed him one of the sticks, then laid hers down across the table so that she could slip out of her coat. "Would you care to make a little wager, then?" she said lightly. "You can prove your superiority and win some spare dosh at the same time."

Jason shook his head, though his grin remained wide as ever. "There's so much wrong with that, I don't even know where to start," he said. He proceeded to tick his list off on his fingers. "I don't know how to play the game, I'm not even that good at *real* pool, and the English Inquisition out there already warned me that you were a shark. You must think I'm really stupid to fall for a little bit of goading."

"I don't think you're stupid at all." Picking up her cue, she deliberately crossed in front of him to get to the end of the table, her bottom brushing across his crotch. Placing the white ball on the table, Flanna leaned forward to line up her shot, very well aware that the angle gave anyone in Jason's position the perfect view down the front of her blouse. "I think you're highly competitive," she went on. "And I think you'd jump at the chance to beat me at anything."

The sharp crack of the cue split the room, and Flanna straightened to watch the white ball roll down the table, barely touch one of the outlying reds, and then come back to a dead stop on the cushion nearest her, the green ball effectively standing in its path.

Jason frowned, looking over the table. Beyond three red balls moving just scant inches, the tableau was completely unchanged. "You didn't sink anything," he said.

"I know." It was hard not to sound smug. "Your turn."

He came up to her side, but the vertical angle of his stick betrayed his hesitancy. "I have no idea what I'm doing," he admitted.

"And you have no idea how much I love being the one in the know for a change." Setting down her cue, Flanna came up to stand directly behind Jason. She was having far too much fun with this, but it was impossible not to be floating on a high. This was the first time since his arrival that she was completely in command, and to top it all off, her fears that her feelings would be unreciprocated were finally eroding under his constant attentions and declarations. How could she not revel in the moment?

"There's a specific order to the game," Flanna said, leaning in so that she could murmur the words directly into his ear. It made her breasts brush against his back, and she felt his muscles twitch at the contact, but Jason didn't break the spell by turning around. He just stood there while she reached around and helped him position his cue.

"First you pot a red, and then a color," she continued. The heat of his body was distracting her, the thin fabric of their shirts barely enough to keep it contained. "And you keep that up until all the reds are gone."

"But you didn't sink anything."

Her fingers curled around his on the stick, matching the smooth motion of his arm as she helped him with the follow-through for contact. "Snooker's a game of strategy. It's very difficult to pot anything on the opening break, so the smart move is to do what you need to put your opponent in the most untenable position possible." When she straightened and pulled away, she let her fingers trail across his lower back before dropping her hand to the table. "It's very difficult to line a shot up when the ball is hugging the cushion, so your best plan is to keep it as far away from the reds and as close to the cushion as you possibly can."

She'd helped him get around the green, using the side cushions to send the cue ball down toward the pack of reds. It broke them apart, but then didn't come back, eliciting a frown from Jason as he surveyed the table.

"You're setting me up, aren't you?" he asked warily.

"I'm showing you how to play the game."

She barely looked as she sank the first red, and she didn't even need to move to then pot the black. It was hard not to laugh at the look on Jason's face when she stepped back to scrutinize the positioning.

"Maybe it's best if you just watch me," Flanna said. "That way, you can get the flow of it and we can worry about how to score later."

Without waiting for a response, she went to work, assessing the various balls before choosing which red to aim for, moving with a quick grace around the table that left her body humming. Jason's eyes followed her every step, heavy and potent as it lingered on more than the angle of her cue. She deliberately started choosing balls that would put her opposite him, force him to look at her face, to see the full thrust of her breasts at the open neck of her blouse. He never said a word. His eyes just got darker and darker, while her body got warmer and warmer, until the slightest brush of her breasts against the table when she leaned over had her stifling groans of pleasure.

There was a slight sheen of perspiration on her forehead when she sank the last red, and Flanna had to fight the impulse to wipe it away when she straightened to smile at Jason. "Are you learning anything?" she asked, more than aware of the double meaning of her query.

"Yeah," came the husky reply.

She was riveted to her spot as he rounded the table, unwilling to back away though she had a very good idea what sort of thoughts were going through his head. There was no mistaking the hunger in his eyes as they met hers or the

compulsive sweep of his tongue along the edge of his teeth. She risked a glance downwards as he neared. The bulge in the front of his jeans was impossible to deny as well.

He didn't say another word, just scooped his hands around the sides of her face before taking her mouth in a ravenous kiss. It wasn't a request, and it wasn't a command. It was an incontestable need, his body straining to get closer to hers, his fingers trembling where they held her firmly in place. Every sweep of his tongue past her parted lips sucked another ounce of air from her lungs, leaving her light-headed and breathless when he finally pulled away.

"You didn't learn that from watching me," she whispered.
"No," he said. "I learned a hell of a lot more."

The table pressed into the back of her thighs as Flanna braced against his second approach. Determination made his touch more firm, left trails of fire where his hands skimmed down her arms. He wasn't wasting time by dallying with foreplay. As his mouth plundered hers again, Jason gripped the fabric of her blouse at her waist and tugged, pulling it free from her skirt. A blast of cooler air hit her sides, but it quickly vanished when he slid his hands up beneath her shirt, wrapping around her back to pull her flush against his hard chest.

She moaned into the kiss, lifting her arms to cling to him as the world tilted around her. This wasn't the reaction she'd intended. Though she'd wanted to tease, it had never occurred to her that he would act on his desire in such a public place. Outside was one thing; the back room at the pub was another.

"The door," she panted, breaking away from his mouth.

"It's locked." He growled in frustration at her turned head, and one of his hands left the smooth skin of her back to grab her chin and force her to look at him again. Something impudent twinkled in the dark blue depths of his eyes. "No screaming for you tonight unless you want everyone in Birley to know just what I'm doing to you in here," he warned.

She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. "And what is it you're going to be doing?"

This time, he smiled, a wicked smirk made more dangerous by the knowing touch of his hand. "A snooker lesson, of course. Now turn around."

His hands fell to his sides as he took a step away, giving her ample room to do as he'd instructed. The cue stick rolled off the side of the table as Flanna turned to face it, and she frowned when Jason bent to pick it up. "What're you doing?" she asked, starting to twist back.

She was stopped by his strong hand in the small of her back. "You're going to play," Jason murmured, leaning against her while he set the stick down on the table. His arousal pressed firmly into her ass, making her squirm. "And I'm going to continue my lesson."

By that point, she was pretty sure he wasn't talking about snooker anymore.

Still, Flanna picked up the stick, doing her best to ignore the heat raging through her body. The control she'd been enjoying had been ripped from her hands with his first kiss, and now she could only wait while her pulse raced in

anticipation of what he was going to do with the gauntlet he'd picked up.

She was aiming for the black when she felt the tickle at her knees. "Don't you dare stop," Jason said. His voice was no longer at her ear. Instead, it was coming from near the floor, directly behind her. "You have no idea how luscious you look from this angle."

The tickle grew into a firmer stroke, and the folds of her skirt lifted away from her legs. Tamping down the desire to give up on the game, Flanna hit the cue ball as she'd planned, and then gasped when she felt Jason's mouth begin a path up the back of her thigh.

"What're you doing?" she breathed.

His voice was muffled when he replied, dampened by the denim. "You're not the only one who can tease and teach at the same time."

She squeaked when he bit at the back of her leg, but the firm grasp of his hands on her hips kept her from moving. "I can't play from here anymore," Flanna said. "The cue ball's on the other side of the table."

"Then I guess it's my turn."

The bite turned into a series of nibbles, strong but tiny reminders of his presence as he continued up and up her leg. Slumping forward against the cloth, Flanna pressed her cheek to the rough surface, grateful for the texture to distract her from the growing sensations down below. The contact, however, crushed her breasts to the table, coaxed her already sensitive nipples into hardening further. She couldn't stifle the moan that escaped her throat.

"I can smell you, you know," Jason murmured. His hands were cupping the lower curve of her ass, his breath hot even through the cotton of her underpants. "Last night, out under the moon ... you were everywhere. Even when we were done, and we were walking back to the house, all I could see and smell and feel was you."

She shivered when the fabric covering her legs disappeared, pooling at her waist as Jason shoved her skirt up and out of his way. His mouth was back on her skin, sucking and licking along her upper thigh, and his hands slid beneath the elastic of her panties to skate along the outer edges of her pussy. Without warning, he pushed at her knees, forcing her to spread her legs further apart, and she began to grind back against his mouth, wondering how far he was going to take this.

"The thing is," there was a sudden rip, and she felt her underwear flutter down her legs to land in shreds on the floor, "you taste as good as you smell. I dreamed about it this morning, waiting for your old man to leave so that I could go upstairs and join you. I couldn't get it out of my head. But holding you while you slept was better than all of that. I'd trade just about anything to get that to happen again."

Her legs were quivering. It wasn't just his touch, though that was more than enough to be the root of the pleasure washing through her. It was his words as well, the solemn sincerity in his tone as he spoke to her that weakened every foundation she'd laid in defense. Biting her lip, Flanna took a deep breath before saying in a tiny voice, "You have to be around for that, Jason."

His hands stilled. "Is that what you're so afraid of? Is that why you don't believe me?"

She hated not being able to see him, but when she started to twist, Jason bolted to his feet and pressed into her back, pinning her to the table. Without her skirt as a barrier, she could feel the definite bulge in his jeans, the coarse edge of the denim as it raked along between the cheeks of her ass. She couldn't help but whimper when he began to slowly grind against her bottom.

"Tell me how I could possibly walk away from you," Jason murmured. "Tell me how it's possible for me to pretend that meeting you wasn't the luckiest thing to ever happen to me." His mouth descended to kiss the back of her neck, nuzzling past her hair so that his breath warmed her ear. "Christ, Flanna, the last thing I want is to leave. The only way I can see that happening is if you ask me to."

Before he'd finished speaking, his hands had started moving again, this time slithering up her sides, around her front, pulling her up just enough so that he could cup the soft fullness of her breasts through her lacy bra. Flanna propped herself up on her elbows to allow him the room he needed, groaning when his fingers found the hard tips of her nipples.

"If it takes my last breath," he said against her skin, "I'm going to convince you that I mean this. Show you just what a spectacular woman you really are. I know you think I joke too much, that I don't take life or any of this seriously enough. But when I tell you that you're beautiful, that I love how passionate you are, I mean every single word. And I'm going to do my damnedest to prove that to you."

By the time he finished, she was trembling in his arms like the last leaf left on an autumn tree. She didn't know how he did it. He looked at her, and he saw through all the walls and all the pretenses, and he pushed them aside like a flimsy net that was barely worth his bother. He said what she needed to hear and even when she knew she shouldn't believe him, that she didn't know him well enough to put such trust in what he had to offer, she also knew there was no way she could deny the sincerity in every word. What was worse, she wanted to take what he said and hold it so close that nobody could rip it away from her. She was just afraid of taking the risk.

One of his hands disappeared from her breast, and the press of his pelvis eased against her ass. The sound of a zipper filled the room, and then she felt the hard slap of his cock as it sprang free from its confinement.

"Are you wet for me?" he asked, his voice a silken whisper. Fingers skated along the inside of her thigh to dip between the outer lips of her pussy. A rumble of satisfaction emanated from Jason when he felt how slick she already was, sliding two and then three fingers into her depths. "You have no idea how hard it is for me not to drop to my knees and just eat you out," he continued. "Knowing you're this wet ... remembering how you tasted. I can't decide which I want more." He paused, though his hand never stopped moving. "So you choose. Tell me how you want to come, Flanna."

Though the memory of his tongue on her clit, the way he nibbled and sucked at her pussy, was vivid and fresh, the feel of his heavy cock against her ass was more so, taunting her with the promise of filling her up if she only said the word.

"Fuck me," she breathed. She twisted enough to look at him over her shoulder as she said it and saw the dark hunger sparking in his eyes. "Show me that you mean it."

There was no need for elaboration. Understanding of what she wanted flickered in his face, and his fingers stilled in their thrusting. Taking a small step backward, Jason reached for her hand, helped her straighten, turn around. Her skirt fell back into place around her legs, but it was there only briefly before he gathered the denim up in his hand. He held it out of the way while she hopped back up onto the edge of the snooker table.

Their eyes remained locked as Flanna reached down and grasped his cock, hard and throbbing against the palm of her hand. For a moment, Jason's lashes fluttered at the sensations she knew were overwhelming him, but when his gaze returned to hers, it was even more ravenous, the overhead lights making his eyes seem to gleam silver. Gently, she pulled him forward, guiding the tip of his cock to her wet slit before finally letting her grip drop away.

"Is this the point when I'm supposed to tell you how much I love you?" Jason said, settling his hands lightly on her hips.

She shook her head. "This is when you show me."

His mouth was on hers almost before the words were out. Before she could get lost in the powerful kiss, Flanna wrapped her legs around Jason's slim hips and helped coax him forward, moaning with satisfaction as his hard cock slid into her tight channel. He didn't stop, or slow, or tease. He merely followed through on her guidance, pressing deeper and deeper into her pussy until she felt the heavy swing of his

balls against her ass. Then he held himself there and abandoned his hold on her hips to pull her so tightly against his chest that Flanna had to break away from the kiss, gasping for breath.

"I can still tell you too, though, right?" he asked.

The corner of her mouth lifted. "Didn't you say I need a lot of convincing?"

He started then, setting the rhythm of his words to that of his cock sliding in and out of her wet heat. Some of it was lost when his mouth returned to hers, sentiment strangled away by their overwhelming need to taste and devour the other. Some of it was drowned out by the roar of her blood when he began to speed up his strokes, the angle of their hips making contact with her clit a fiery reality with every thrust. But most of it, she heard. Most of it found its way through her defenses, left her just as breathless as his endless kisses.

And when she came, when the sensations of the rough cloth beneath her bottom and the heat pouring off Jason's body and the infinite force of every slam of his cock got to be too much, it was his name that he had to smother with another kiss, swallowing down her scream so that she could have what remained of her dignity when they walked out of the room afterward.

He didn't slow after her orgasm, though. When she broke away, still clinging to his shoulders, panting as the world began to settle again around her, there was still hunger darkening his eyes. Flanna ran her tongue along a path to his ear, the tang of his sweat prickling her taste buds. "Come for me," she whispered. She tightened her legs around his hips,

reveling in each hard thrust of his cock. "Let it go. I can take it." Her nails raked along his back, sending shudders of pleasure along his flesh. "I want it, Jason. I want you."

His body tensed at the last, a final slam into her pussy making his muscles go rigid, his head fall back. She squeezed tighter around his twitching cock, sinking into their shared heat, and watched the pleasure wash over him, delighting in the fact that this was all because of her. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to believe. Trust. Love. Maybe she could give him what he really wanted after all.

It took only seconds for him to bundle her back against his chest, his face buried in her neck. "Don't move," she heard him murmur. "I just want to make this last a little bit longer."

Flanna smiled as her fingers played with the damp hair at his nape. Moving was the last thing she had in mind. Nothing had ever felt so much like coming home.

Chapter Seventeen

When they walked out of the snooker room at close to eleven, they were holding hands, fingers loosely entwined as they paced leisurely to the bar. Flanna felt exposed to the few people who were still in the pub, though it wasn't just the fact that Jason's destruction of her underwear meant walking around with nothing on beneath her skirt. For the first time in his presence, she felt stripped of the pretenses that had been between them, the truth lying out there for anyone to see. Just as Jason had predicted. One of these days, she was going to learn that a lot of what Jason said wasn't just joking around.

Neil was still behind the bar, washing pint glasses before putting them away. When Flanna placed the room key onto the counter, he took it without word, his gaze flickering over them with only a hint of inspection.

She blushed, but when she tried to extricate herself from Jason's side, his grip on her tightened. He stopped her from making a fuss about it by speaking up first.

"I still can't get over how quiet it is around here," he said to Neil.

The publican shrugged. "We're a small town, Mr. Randolph. If you're looking for big city business, you've come to the wrong place."

"I never said there was anything wrong it. It just takes a little getting used to." He slid onto one of the high stools, tugging Flanna so that she was forced to stand between his

legs. It was a completely territorial move, she knew, and one she would've fought even the day before. Now, though, the possessiveness of his hold warmed her from the inside out, and she allowed herself to relax against the strong curve of his arm.

"Flanna said all these attacks recently are something new, though." Jason's tone was casual, and it shocked her how he could make it sound just like any normal, day-to-day conversation. "It'll be good when they catch the guys who did 'em."

He was good. He was really good. He'd even remembered to make it sound like there were multiple attackers when he knew full well they all had the same guy behind them.

"Whoever they are," Neil said, "they're not local. The police said Mrs. Lange's attackers have an American in the bunch. Someone from your side of the world, it would look like, Mr. Randolph."

"My side of the world's a pretty big place. It's just a shame someone's showed up to mess up your backyard, too."

"We've been trying to figure out where people like that could be hiding out," Flanna said. She didn't like the tension that was starting to rise between the two men. It was better to get what they needed and get out before Neil started casting aspersion on all Americans. She didn't know how Jason would react to that. "If they're not local, where are they staying? Wouldn't somebody have seen a stranger hanging around?"

"I don't know," Neil admitted. "I went out with the police this morning to check on some of my properties. Places we

thought could serve to hide someone who didn't want to be found. But we didn't see anything amiss. It's possible that they've moved on."

Flanna knew that wasn't true, but nodded anyway, settling back into silence as Neil and Jason continued to talk. This was all she needed to know. Though Neil wouldn't be as thorough as she could be in a sweep, he was smart enough to spot something wrong with his own holdings. Wherever Romm was hiding, it was likely closer to Kesbury than here.

The clock struck eleven behind the bar. "Time to go," Flanna said, pulling away from Jason's embrace.

"Could I have a word with your young man?" Neil asked as Jason stood to join her. "In private."

They met each other's eyes for the briefest of seconds before Jason slipped on his easiest smile. "I'll be right out," he said, leaning in to brush a kiss across her mouth.

Reluctantly, Flanna walked away, wary of the conversation that was about to take place behind her. It was most likely just more of Neil's protective instincts coming out, but she didn't like the idea that people didn't trust Jason. She had to keep reminding herself that he was still a newcomer to them; such faith was going to take time. After all, she hadn't trusted him from the beginning, either.

The night had chilled only slightly in the hours they'd been inside. Pulling her coat tighter around her body, Flanna paused in front of the pub, tilting her head back to stare up into the sky. The half-moon was nearly hidden by clouds, the threat of more inclement weather close on the horizon. If Jason had been by her side, he would have had some

comment about the night's beauty. She'd never known anyone to be as enamored with the moon and nighttime as he was.

The lot was still half-full as Flanna crossed it to her car, absently humming beneath her breath. At the nearby roundabout, the red glow from the streetlights scattered its illumination across the deserted road, brightening the world to amber before switching to green. Nothing else moved. Birley's residents had long taken to their beds.

The gravel crunched beneath her boots as she closed the distance, her fingers slipping into her pocket for her keys. They were tangled with the torn fabric of her underwear, and she paused beside her door as she pulled both out of her coat, remembering the smirk on Jason's face as he'd leaned over to pick them up from the snooker room floor.

"I should keep these," he'd said, and then laughed when she snatched them away.

"A single snooker lesson hardly merits getting souvenirs," she'd replied.

His hands had grabbed her hips then, dragging her back against him so that he could kiss the side of her neck. "As long as I get to go home with the teacher, that's all I need."

Her body warmed with the memory, her fingers slowing as they worked to get her keys free from the underwear. She was going to have to change her clothes when they got back to the house. Though Neil had nixed the idea of Romm being somewhere easily accessible around town, they still needed to be alert. A sweep was smart. And if they didn't find anything,

maybe Jason could be persuaded for an encore performance to their last encounter under the moon.

So lost in her thoughts, she heard the crunch too late.

Something heavy shoved into Flanna's back, slamming her into the car at the same time as it crushed her hand against the window. She cried out in pain, but it was quickly silenced by a large hand slapping across her mouth.

"You reek of Randolph, do you know that?"

The words were a harsh whisper in her ear, breath hot and clammy as it blew across her cheek. Flanna's blood chilled, not at the surprise of the attack but at something far more frightening.

She knew that voice.

Another scream was stifled when he grabbed her wrist and slammed her fist into the window again, her fingers uncurling reflexively to let her keys fall to the ground. The force of the contact created spidery cracks through the glass, but Flanna was far more concerned with the very large male body pressing into her from behind.

It shifted as it bent to pick up her key ring, but its displacement wasn't nearly great enough for her to fight back or squirm free. She saw a flash of white out of the corner of her eye and realized with growing horror that it was her underwear still attached to the keys.

"Did you let him fuck you inside the pub, too?" He laughed, but there was nothing light about the sound. "There's a real little exhibitionist inside that English schoolgirl, isn't there? I knew you'd be a wildcat in the sack."

If she'd had any doubts about who it was behind her, they were banished with his deliberate choice of words. She didn't need to be facing him to know that his dark hair would be shaggy and long, his eyes as black as the night around them. She only wondered if he'd still have marks on his face from where she'd scratched him at Rage.

He started dragging her along the side of the car, never moving far enough away to allow her leverage to fight back. "I'm not really one for sloppy seconds, but for you, sweetheart, I'm making an exception. I only wish I could see Randolph's face when he realizes that all those noble intentions of his have gone straight to hell. It's going to be priceless."

"Take a look for yourself, Romm."

She'd never been so glad to hear Jason's voice, but with her face still pressed against the car, it was impossible for Flanna to see him. Now she just had to wait for an opening to fight back.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to show your face," Romm said. "What's wrong? Wasn't she a good enough fuck to distract you from the other bitches inside?"

"Let her go."

"Because you said so?" Another laugh rumbled through Romm's chest. "Please. I didn't listen to you when you were actually interesting. Why in hell would I listen to you now?"

He must have looked back over his shoulder. Flanna didn't care. All of a sudden, he wasn't bearing all his weight against her upper body. That was the only opportunity she needed.

Slamming her head backwards, she winced when it connected with his jaw with a sharp crack. It left her spinning, but it was enough of a surprise to startle Romm into loosening his grip, allowing Flanna to twist to the side and shove her elbow into his solar plexus.

I can't believe he fell for that twice, she thought when he gasped in pain and stumbled backwards.

Jason leapt forward, tackling Romm around the waist so that the pair went flying back against the car. The door bowed under their weight, but Flanna didn't waste the time to watch, wishing that she'd not foregone wearing a weapon that night. Her only option was to get something from the car. She could only hope that Jason kept him distracted long enough for her to get into it.

She scanned the area in search of her keys, but it took a tilt of her head to spot where they had been kicked beneath the car. They weren't far from the men's feet, but the only way she was going to get to them was by circling the vehicle the long way around. Shedding her coat as she dashed around the front, Flanna threw herself to the ground and shimmied along the gravel to get underneath, ignoring the rough texture scraping along her stomach. The fight had moved slightly away from the side, but the lack of light made it hard to see where exactly the keys had landed. She had no choice but to grope around blindly until she found them.

She heard a grunt and looked up to see a body hit the ground several feet away from the car. The dark made it hard to discern who it was until he lifted his head and she saw the moonlight catch against the blue of Jason's eyes. Blood

dripped from a gash on his temple, but the feral curl of his lip frightened her even more.

A powerful hand wrapped around her wrist and dragged Flanna out from beneath the car. Gravel scratched along her cheek, and the sharp edge of the undercarriage sliced across the back of her head before she was free. Though she began hitting and kicking at Romm as soon as she was able, he was still stronger than she was and slammed her against the driver's side window yet again.

The force shattered the glass even further, and Flanna squeezed her eyes shut when she felt the glass slice into her skin. She had already been dizzy from headbutting Romm, but this was a thousand times worse, the pitching world around her making her crumple to the ground. Her dead weight threw Romm off-balance, and he let her go to stop from falling as well. He couldn't turn in time to dodge Jason, however. The two men crashed into the car yet again, snarling with unrestrained rage.

Distantly, Flanna became aware of a man's shout. Not Jason's. Not Romm's. When it came a second time, closer, it occurred to her it was Neil's, and she managed to lift her head to watch blearily as he lumbered toward them with a baseball bat hefted over his shoulder.

Romm saw him, too, and broke free from Jason's hold to take off into the darkness. It took only seconds for the night to swallow him up, and only a few more than that for Jason to reach her side.

"Don't," she said, pushing at his questing hands. "Go. Get Romm."

"You're bleeding! You're crazy if you think I'm leaving you like this."

"I'll be fine. You can't let him get away, Jason."

Neil's wheezing drew close, his broad face appearing suddenly over Jason's shoulder. "The police are on their way," he said. "I called when I heard the commotion."

"We're going to need an ambulance, too." Jason was fighting her efforts to sit up, pushing back against her shoulders to keep her on the ground. "Damn it, Flanna! Will you just stay still?"

She opened her mouth to argue, but the sudden rush to be sick stopped her from speaking. Twisting sideways, she vomited onto the gravel, her stomach heaving while the pounding in her head grew steadily worse.

"I'll ring 999 again," she heard Neil say, though his voice sounded fainter and farther away this time.

"I don't need emergency," Flanna insisted. She wanted to look at him, to convince him of her condition, but the best she could manage was a wobbly lift of her head that made her pitch to her right.

His strong hands came up to steady her. "He almost put your head through the window," Jason snapped. "You're bleeding, you're throwing up, and you can't even sit up straight without toppling sideways."

"I'm..."

But her assertions about being fine were interrupted by another bout of vomiting.

Jason kept her hair pulled out of the way, using a tissue to wipe her mouth when she was done. Settling again on her

back, she blinked up at him and saw the fear etched in his face. "You should've gone after him," she said. Her voice was barely a croak this time, and a sudden lethargy seemed to be spreading through her limbs. "We're going to lose him now."

"As long as I don't lose you, too. God, I'm so sorry, Flanna."

"Sorry? What do you have to be sorry about?"

"For not being there sooner. It won't happen again. I swear to you."

She was about to say that there was nothing for him to apologize for when the world went dark.

Chapter Eighteen

Time became a weird, viscous thing, slowing and speeding up at the oddest intervals. Flanna remembered waking up when the ambulance arrived, and she remembered hearing Jason answer their hurried questions as she was bundled safely into the back of the vehicle. She felt him at her side for the duration of the jostling trip, but beyond that, things became a little shaky. There were doctors and the smell of disinfectant and something warm on her head. She was pretty sure someone said something about a concussion at one point, though the fact that she could've sworn she heard someone else talking about party hats at the same time led her to doubt the veracity of that memory.

The first time she opened her eyes and was sure that it was the real world and not a dream, the morning sun was streaming in through her hospital room window.

She was lying in a private room, small and antiseptic with lemon-colored walls and crooked blinds. Her hand felt oddly heavy, and when she glanced down to see what the problem was, Flanna saw an IV needle taped securely below the joint of her middle finger, steadily pumping a clear fluid into her veins. Her head was killing her, but closing her eyes against the sunshine did little to ease the ache. That didn't last long, anyway. With her eyes closed, it made it easier to feel the hurts elsewhere on her body, so Flanna opened them up again, determined to brave the pain.

The door opened, and she found just enough strength to glance over and see the nurse push a cart inside. "You're awake," the nurse said with a broad smile. "That's a good sign."

"Did I..." Flanna had to stop and lick her lips, swallow hard in order to wet her mouth enough to speak clearly. "Was I out all night?"

The nurse chuckled, busying herself with the equipment on the cart. "All night, all day, and all night again. That was a nasty blow you took. Your family's been quite worried about you."

Almost two days. She'd been unconscious for nearly two days. Her head ached a little bit more with that knowledge.

"I'm just going to look you over and then I'll let your grandmother know you've woken up." The front of Flanna's gown was pushed to the side as the nurse slipped the end of her stethoscope inside. "She's going to be very relieved, I think."

Flanna closed her eyes while she waited out the poking and prodding. By the time the nurse was done, she'd fallen asleep again.

* * * *

When she woke again, the light filtering through the blind had deepened to a rich amber hue, angled differently to cast stripes along the opposite wall. Her mouth was dry, but when she turned her head to see if there was water on her nightstand, she found herself meeting her father's worried gaze.

"How's my favorite lassie?" he asked softly.

"Thirsty," she managed to croak. Instantly, Colin was standing, turning around to pick up a water pitcher from the bureau behind him. After pouring out a glass, he held it steady for her while she sipped at the refreshing liquid.

"Where's Nan?" she asked when he sat back down.

"Off to get tea."

"And Jason? Is he all right?"

"Worried about you, mostly. It's fortunate he came out of The Green when he did."

His gentle reminder of the events of the attack led Flanna to ask the question she so desperately needed answered. "Did the police catch Romm this time?"

Colin's long silence was far more telling than the *no* that finally fell from his lips. Squeezing her eyes shut, Flanna tamped down the disappointment that swelled inside her. She didn't mind getting hurt, but they'd been so close to finishing it. If Jason had only gone after Romm instead of sticking around, maybe this entire nightmare could have been over already.

"He did the right thing." She opened her eyes again to see Colin watching her in solemn appraisal. "Don't be criticizing the man for seeing that you're all right."

"He let Romm get away."

"And he's been out the past two nights, hunting like a man possessed. He made a choice, Flanna, and I, for one, am grateful for that. That wasn't just a mild concussion you got. There were stitches and talk of spinal cord damage as well. I

won't have you making a fuss because he chose you over the hunt."

She didn't have the strength to argue with him. He wasn't going to listen to a word she said anyway.

"When do I get to go home?" she asked instead.

"When the doctors think you're strong enough," he replied.
"There's talk of it being a week or so."

"A week?"

Alarm made her try to sit up, and she winced as the IV pulled on the back of her hand. Colin was up in a flash, pressing her back down onto the mattress, all paternal worry evident on his face.

"You're to lie still, do you understand me?" His voice was stern, sending her back to her childhood when he'd call up the stairs and chastise her for getting out of her bed. Beneath it, though, was something else. It almost sounded like fear, but Flanna knew her senses couldn't currently be trusted.

"You'll do nobody any good at all if you push yourself too soon," Colin continued. "The doctors say you need rest, so rest you're going to get. Even if Jason and I have to spell each other in guarding you."

Flanna sagged back into the bed, exhausted from the brief fight. "I'm just worried about Romm going after you and Nan," she said. "I don't want anybody else getting hurt."

"That's not going to happen. The police have a good description of Romm now, both here and in Kesbury. The man's been forced even further underground, which means it's just a matter of time before Jason finds him."

There was nothing more to be said for that. Though it made her feel worthless, she knew there was logic in her father's statements. But this was her problem to fix, her fight to face. Romm was only alive because she'd failed to kill him when she had the opportunity. She only wished she'd known it was him at Rage so that she could have done it then, regardless of the fact that he was in human form. None of this would've ever happened then.

But then Jason would never have come, either. And as frustrated as she was with her current situation, she was even more grateful that Jason was now a part of her life. She would never feel like it was a worthwhile trade, but her feelings for him most definitely tempered the worst of it.

She fell asleep again wondering when Jason would come around to see her.

* * * *

It was on the morning of the fourth day that he finally came.

Flanna was picking at the fruit salad in her breakfast when a light rap came at the door. She glanced up in time to see the morning duty nurse poke her head in and smile.

"You have a visitor," she said. "Would you like to finish eating first or may I send him in now?"

The clock on her nightstand said eight-thirty. Visiting hours didn't start for another half hour.

"Can you do that?" she asked with a small frown.

"I think we can bend the rules this one time. If you feel up to it."

Upon Flanna's agreement, the nurse disappeared, the door whispering closed behind her. Flanna had barely pushed aside her breakfast tray when it opened again and Jason slipped inside.

Her heart jumped when she saw him. Fading bruises peppered his jaw and left temple, already such a pale green that she wondered if someone would notice them if they didn't know he'd been in a fight. His normally bright eyes were shadowed with exhaustion, but his smile was warm and earnest as he hovered near the doorway.

"Why are you standing all the way over there?" she asked. She grimaced, lifting a hand to her hair. "Do I really look that bad?"

"You look beautiful." The rush of his voice more than revealed he thought it truth. "I just wasn't sure if you'd want to see me. That's why I pulled out all the charm stops on the nurse to get me in here without telling you it was me."

"Why would I...?" She stopped the question as soon as she remembered some of the things she'd said to her father over the past couple days. Undoubtedly, he'd repeated them to Jason. Her cheeks flamed in embarrassment. "I'm glad you're here," she said instead. "I've missed you."

Tension she hadn't even realized had been winding through him suddenly vanished from the hard set of his shoulders, and he was at the side of the bed, perching on the edge of the mattress, before she could react. He reached, then hesitated, as if he wasn't sure what her response to physical contact would be, settling instead to ghost his fingers along the back of her hand and along her forearm.

"I'm sorry." It was barely above a breath; if she hadn't seen his lips move, she would have thought it was a figment of her imagination. "I know you're angry that I didn't go after Romm, and it's not that I'm sorry that I didn't. I'm sorry that he hurt you at all. I should've told Neil to go to hell and gone out to the car with you. Romm would never have jumped you if it had been the both of us."

"You couldn't have known," Flanna said. "And it's my fault for being distracted. I should've been more alert."

When his eyes scanned her face, there was no mistaking the ferocity of his search. "I'm not going to let you blame yourself."

"Then maybe we should stop talking about blame at all. It happened. There's nothing either of us can do to change that now." She chewed at the inside of her lip, reluctant to ask what she knew she had to. "Were you ever going to tell me that it was Romm in New York?"

Guilt made him duck his gaze. "Until you said differently when we were burying the demon, I thought you knew," Jason said. "I thought that's why you'd been with him in the first place. Trying to take him out when you'd missed your chance at the full moon." He paused. "I didn't say anything later because I didn't like thinking what you two were doing, if you didn't realize he was Romm. You're not the only one who can get jealous, you know."

She snorted. It was so far from the truth, it was almost funny.

"Why were you running from him?"

All amusement fled. "I wasn't with him," she said too quickly. "He tried picking me up and wouldn't take no for an answer."

There was no point in telling Jason that she'd had every intention of picking Romm up first, that the man had just picked up on the signals she'd been sending all too clearly before approaching her. It didn't matter now. And she really didn't like how it made her look.

"Well, at least you know now," he was saying. "So do the cops. I gave them a full description." He grinned. "And the plus side to all this is that now there's absolutely zero suspicion on me. I've been able to help out with the searches without anybody thinking I have an ulterior motive. They all know I'm doing this for you now."

His eyes softened, and his hand lifted up to touch the side of her face. "Does it hurt?" he asked. "Your father's said that you're recovering well, but ... god, Flanna, what Romm did to you..."

She could feel his fingertips hovering over the stitches at her hairline. It looked worse than it felt, and if it wasn't for the doctors' orders that she stay in hospital for a few more days, Flanna would have already checked out. Still, seeing the concern on Jason's face just cemented for her the truth of what he'd told her. He really did care about her that much.

"It's nothing compared to what I'm going to do to Romm when we finally catch him," she joked. She was rewarded with a small smile and reached up to take his hand in hers. "I know how hard you've been looking for him. Thank you for that."

"I just wish I had better news." He sighed, his fingers absently stroking hers. "No offense, but your local police are idiots. They have absolutely no idea how to track him. I've been doing most of the legwork on my own at night."

"They're just not used to this kind of violent crime. You shouldn't hold that against them. We're not blaming, remember?"

"I thought that was just each other." His attempt at levity was interrupted by a wide yawn, after which he colored in embarrassment. "God, I'm more tired than I thought I was. You guys seriously need to get a Starbucks in this town. It makes these all-night hunts a hell of a lot easier."

"Go home." Letting go of his hand, Flanna pushed at his leg, trying to get him to stand up. "The last thing we need is you falling asleep at the wheel driving back to the house."

Jason stood, though reluctantly. "So is this the point where I admit to sneaking into your bed to sleep?" he said with a half-smile. "Your sheets still smell like you. As it turns out, that's both a good and a bad thing."

"I don't think I want to know."

"Probably not." All of a sudden, he was leaning over, his lips brushing across her brow before sliding down to capture her mouth in a gentle kiss. She forgot all her aches as his tongue traced her lower lip, coaxed the moan from deep in her throat. Before she could deepen it, however, he had pulled back, gazing down at her with his heart burning in his eyes.

"In case the concussion has killed your short-term memory," Jason murmured, "I think it's probably a good idea

to remind you just how crazy I am about you. Being in your bed without you ... knowing just where you are and why ... it's eating me alive. I want you out of here, at my side, in my arms, as soon as the doctors give you the okay. Because everything else just isn't good enough."

Another kiss, this one harder though just as fleeting, and Flanna was left breathless as Jason headed back to the door. "I'll be back this afternoon," he promised, and then he was gone, leaving her feeling more at peace than she had yet in her entire hospital stay.

They'd get through this. Any doubts she'd had were now completely vanquished. As soon as Romm was dead, Flanna was going to tell Jason exactly how she felt, and then they'd sit down and figure out exactly what their future looked like.

It was going to be a good one.

Chapter Nineteen

She was in the hospital for a full week before the doctors would agree to let her go home. Every day that passed made Flanna all that much more anxious, every striking of the hour a reminder that the full moon was growing closer and closer. With Romm still on the loose, Jason's mood grew increasingly irritable, and he shortened his visits to the hospital while he doubled his efforts in the search. By the time Flanna was discharged, it had been a full day since she had last seen him.

Colin was quiet for most of the trip home, his eyes steady on the road ahead. In the distance, the afternoon sun was a dull yellow, mostly hidden by the thick, patchy cloud cover. She was grateful for that. Bright light still gave her headaches. The nights were going to be more welcome than ever before.

"I'm sending your nan away until after the full moon," he said when they were just a mile from the house.

"Because Romm's still on the loose?" she asked warily.

He nodded. "There are only two days left. Romm won't have time to go after her and still get back here before it happens."

The rest of it went unspoken. They both knew Flanna was Romm's primary target; he wasn't going to lose sight of that this close to the change. She wondered if this had been strategy on her father's part all along. Cut it as close as possible to minimize the risk to his family.

"But you're not going." It was a matter of fact. She already knew the answer to that one.

Another nod, and a frown began to darken his brow. "Have you spoken to Jason yet about what's going to happen?"

Maybe it was the careful way he phrased his question, but warning bells began to peal in Flanna's head. "I haven't seen Jason since yesterday morning," she said. "Why? Do you know something I don't? He's all right, isn't he?"

"No, no, he's fine." But it was obvious he didn't want to say anything more by the way his lips thinned. That was unsettling. Colin always had something to say.

"You might as well tell me," she pressed. "It's best just to get it out there, right?"

He sighed and spun the wheel to turn into the drive. Through the windshield, Flanna saw Jason emerge from the house, hands stuffed into his pockets as he waited for the car to come to a stop.

"Talk to Jason," Colin said. "And remember, he cares for you."

His words sent a chill down Flanna's spine, leaving her sitting in her seat, speechless, long after he'd climbed out. Jason's smiling face appeared at her window, but before he could tap on the glass to get her attention, she opened the door, waiting for him to move out of her way.

His mirth disappeared, to be replaced by genuine concern. "Are you all right?" he asked.

When he tried to reach for her, Flanna waved him away. "I have this awful feeling you're about to tell me something I very much don't want to hear," she said as she got out of the

car. "Because it's enough to make my dad go tongue-tied.

And if he has to remind me not to forget that you care about me..."

Jason grimaced, glancing up at the house where her father had already disappeared. "I knew I should've come by the hospital this morning," he muttered.

He hooked his arm around her elbow, stopping her from passing him to follow Colin's path. "Come for a walk with me," he asked. When she looked back, she saw the plea of his words echoed in his bright eyes. "We won't go far. I know you're going to be tired, but ... we can talk at the same time. Please?"

Even if she was upset, there was no way she was going to refuse him. It had been far too long since she'd had the opportunity to have some time just with Jason and she found herself aching for it.

Slipping her hand into his, Jason led her away from the house, down to the path that cut through the nearby field. He didn't say a word until the house had disappeared behind the swell.

"You get to sleep in your own bed tonight," he commented. "And no worries, I washed the sheets. They're all fresh and spring-smelling for you to get a good night's rest in."

She was almost disappointed. Knowing he'd been using her bed had given her a silent thrill. She'd even imagined she'd be able to smell him on them.

"It's just a shame you have to go back to the couch," she said. "It can't be comfortable."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." She heard him take a deep breath. "I'm not staying at the house anymore."

Jerking to a halt, Flanna stared at him in confusion. For a moment, she thought he was joking, but it took only a single glance at his face to see the solemnity there. Even his normally bright eyes were darkened.

"What?" She felt ridiculous being so astonished and struggled to form just a bit more coherency. "I thought ... but you said ... Where are you staying then?"

"In Kesbury. Neil has a small cottage over there that's empty right now. He said I could use it for the next week or so." When he tried to take a step closer to her, she instinctively backed off, pulling her hand free from his at the same time. "Tomorrow night's the full moon, Flanna. Our time's run out, and if we want to stop Romm..."

"We stick together," she finished. "That's what a team does. That's what I thought ... we were."

"We *are*."

"Not if you run away. Not if you're not there when he shows up." Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away. Now was not the time for disappointed crying.

"Your father and I have been talking..."

"Is this *his* idea?" Her voice was louder, and she imagined that someone passing by on the road would easily be able to hear her, but frankly, Flanna no longer cared. "Tell him it's a mistake. Tell him I need you *here*. I can't be everywhere at once..."

"Which is exactly why I need to be in Kesbury." Moving more quickly than she could imagine, he grabbed her wrist,

tugging her against him to keep her from running away any further. That made it even harder to keep the tears away. The hard crush of his body only served to remind her of more pleasant memories, as well as the new ones she'd been hoping to create with her return home.

"Nobody's been able to find a single track of Romm's," Jason continued. "That girl at the gas station said he hasn't even been back to fill up his car. We have no idea where the bastard is, and as of tomorrow night, the police are going to be less than useless in stopping him. If he's in Kesbury, or anywhere near, I'm going to know, and I'm going to be able to follow him. It's the only way we can ensure nobody gets hurts. Especially you."

She struggled in his arms, trying to gather what little strength she had to break the bands of his grip. When the hell did he get so strong? "If you can't find him now, how in hell do you think you're going to be able to tomorrow?" she raged. Her nails caught the side of his face, and she caught the scent of blood as they left narrow furrows along his cheek. Still, though, he didn't let her go.

"Because tomorrow's the full moon," Jason said. The muscle in his jaw twitched from how tightly he was clenching it. "Trust me. That's going to make all the difference."

She wanted to hate him. He threw these words out so easily, bandied them about like they were ping pong balls, light and disposable but oh so true to their mark. But looking at him, seeing the fervor of his belief gleaming in his eyes, she knew Jason was only saying what he honestly believed. That made it even worse.

"This has nothing and everything to do with how I feel about you," he said. "Nothing, because it changes absolutely zip. I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning in a strange bed and the first thing that's going to come to mind is that I'm not with you, just like it has every day since you went into the hospital. And then I'm going to kick myself for what I know has to be done because I would much rather be walking out in the moonlight with you than looking for this misogynistic bastard."

Her father said to remember. *He cares for you*. Jason seemed to be going to great lengths to ensure that he said it enough so that she wouldn't forget.

"You said ... it has everything to do with it, too."

His eyes softened. "Of course it does. Why do you think I want him dead so badly? I don't want you getting hurt any more than you already have been."

Though her anger still ripped through her like gales off the Channel, Flanna forced herself to relax under his arm, letting her hands fall back down to her sides and her fingers to uncurl from the fists she'd clenched. "I think you're wrong," she said, her voice a hushed murmur in the cooling afternoon air. "But obviously I'm not going to be able to change your mind."

His bruising hold eased and his thumbs began to absently stroke the soft curve of her upper arm. "Do you at least believe me?" he asked. "This is hard enough for me to do without having you think I'm using this as an excuse to get away from you."

"Can you promise me that this is temporary?"

For a moment, he hesitated, and Flanna's heart sank. "I can promise you that when this is over," Jason said, "you and I are going to sit down and have a long talk about our futures. Because I want you in mine. Is that good enough?"

It would have to be.

* * * *

Dinner was remarkably somber considering they were celebrating Flanna's return home. Helen had even baked a cake, and though Jason and Colin attempted to keep the conversation light, there were still uncomfortable lulls and awkward silences they were unable to fill. Flanna was quick to escape once the dishes were cleared away.

She hid in her bedroom, watching from the window as Jason and her father loaded the two cars. When the knock came at her closed door, she didn't bother to pretend she wasn't looking before calling out, "Come in."

"Aren't you even going to say good-bye?" Helen asked from the doorway.

Flanna flew to her arms, burying her face in Helen's neck as if she were ten years old again. Helen's hands came up to stroke the hair that hung down Flanna's back, cooing soothing sounds that only a grandmother could make without sounding ridiculous.

"It's not as if you don't do this every month," Helen teased. "It's about time I get to be the one to go off for a vacation."

Flanna fought her smile. "Hunting is hardly a vacation. And I'm so sorry it's come to this."

"It's hardly the first time. If you think your father is overprotective, you should've seen your grandfather. That man would have locked me in the loft if I'd let him."

They parted, and Flanna wrapped her arms around her torso to keep from flinging them back around Helen. "You'll be able to come home soon. I promise."

She followed her down the stairs, stopping at the bottom when she saw Jason hovering at the front door. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments before she scurried off to the kitchen, her chest tight and painful. She didn't want to watch them leave. She just wanted to think of them coming home again.

It took everything she had not to turn around and look at him when she heard him stop in the doorway.

"Will you spend the night with me?" Jason asked softly. The unexpectedness of the question made her drop the cup she'd been rinsing out, and she turned around to see him lounging against the jamb. There was a shy tilt to his head as he watched her through his lashes. "Your father's going to stay at a hotel near Gatwick. He's not going to be back until morning. You're going to be all alone here."

Oh. So that was it. "I can take care of myself," Flanna said, turning back to the sink.

"I know. I just wanted the chance for a peaceful night's sleep with you before we're stuck in the middle of the hunt for the next few days." His soles scuffed along the tiled floor as he came up to her side. "Let's take a night off, Flanna," he murmured, risking a touch to the small of her back. "Before everything goes to hell. Let's just forget about Romm and

forget about the full moon, and focus on you and me. Let me show you how much I missed you this past week."

Her skin was tingling at his closeness, and all she could smell was the clean scent of his body spray. "I've missed you, too, you know," she whispered.

She sighed in satisfaction when he leaned in and nuzzled her ear, his tongue darting out to map the whorls. "All the more reason for you to come with me," he said. His warm breath made her shiver, and before she realized what he was doing, he'd turned her to face him, his hands rising to gently cup her face.

His kiss was soft, undemanding, lingering for seconds that stretched beyond rational limits. He was so careful not to touch where she'd been injured, keeping his fingers still where she knew normally he would be stroking her skin, but the heat from his hands merged with hers to cause her cheeks to flame red-hot. By the time he pulled back, she could hear the blood rushing through her veins and gazed at him with unabashed desire.

"So?" he prompted. "Are you coming?"

"Like I can turn a kiss like that down," Flanna breathed.

Jason smiled. "That was kind of my intention."

"You have to give me a couple minutes. I'll have to pack a bag."

"You just need something to wear for tomorrow." His grin grew wicked. "I don't plan on letting something as silly as clothes get between you and me tonight."

She scurried past him, feeling lighter than she had since getting home. It only took a few minutes before she was

locking the front door behind her, a backpack dangling from her fingers.

* * * *

The cottage wasn't what she was expecting. Located a half-mile out of Kesbury, it sat neglected and forgotten a hundred yards from the road, hidden by the high shrubs that lined the narrow, winding drive. An old realtor's sign lay broken in the grass where Jason finally came to a stop. Tiny windows were on either side of the low front door, but in the dark, it was impossible for Flanna to see any other distinguishing features other than the thatched roof.

"I know it doesn't look like much," Jason said as he unlocked the front door. "But Neil promised he was sending someone out to give it a thorough cleaning this morning, and it's still got the water and gas hooked up so we won't be completely roughing it."

To prove his point, he flicked the switch in the foyer, casting a dim light through the narrow entryway. It was old-fashioned with heavily flowered wallpaper and a faded Axminster carpet, but there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen, and the lemon scent of cleaner still hung in the air. A tiny lounge was off to the left and the kitchen straight ahead, which meant the closed door to Flanna's right had to be the bedroom. This was living at its simplest.

"You didn't want to be in Kesbury proper?" she asked, dropping her pack to the floor before following him into the kitchen.

"I'll have more accessibility from here," Jason replied. He smiled when he saw the supplies for a pot of tea already on the counter. "I have no idea why that surprises me."

"You never told me what Neil wanted to talk to you about."

"Just the usual 'mess with Flanna and we'll mess with you' chat. It was pretty close to the chat your dad had with me the day after I showed up." He hooked a thumb at the tea. "Do you actually want any of this or can we cut straight to the making out on the bed part of the night?"

Her response was to back out of the room, a coy smile curling her lips. Jason caught up to her as she was pushing open the bedroom door and pulled her to a halt by grabbing her hips.

"No games tonight," he said. A single hand slid up her stomach to cup a heavy breast as his mouth began a gentle rain of caresses along her shoulder to her neck. "I just want to make love to you until you finally believe everything I've ever told you. Are you going to let me do that, Flanna?" His thumb flicked over her hard nipple, making her gasp. "It's not so hard to do. All it takes is a little bit of trust."

The temptation was too great. His words, his body, the sheer pull of his promises. Twisting in his embrace, Flanna stared at his darkened eyes for long moments as her fingers came up to trace the hollows of his face, exploring and caressing the gold and black shadows as if it were the first time she'd ever seen him. Just touching him, even in such an innocent manner, brought a flood of heat rushing to the surface of her skin. Trust was a powerful aphrodisiac.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know how hard you're trying. I'm just ... it's a little new to me. This ... attention without expectation."

"I know." A careful hand came up and pushed the hair off her brow, tucking it behind her ear. His gaze lingered for a long moment on the cut she still bore, though her stitches had been removed the day before, and when his eyes met hers again, they glittered from suppressed anger as much as they did from desire. "I'd say I wish even one of them could've seen how amazing you are, but then I wouldn't be the one standing here getting to touch you like this."

Her hands fell to his chest. She'd thought the heat was all because of her, but the thin fabric of his shirt did little to hide just how warm Jason was as well. "You don't look like you're touching me now," she taunted. Deliberately, she took a step away, melting into the darkness of the room. "It's not my bed. Does that matter?"

"Never," came his rough reply.

She lost sight of his face when he followed her into the bedroom, and when he closed the door behind him, Flanna was barely able to discern his outline against the darker wall. Slowly, she inched her way backward until her legs touched the edge of the bed, and she used the iron footboard to guide her way around to the side.

He didn't speak again. Flanna thought he was probably done with words, especially when his hand appeared from nowhere and curled around her waist. She let him drag her closer, felt the searing tips of his fingers trail along her sides as he tugged her top up and over her head. The cooler air

made her expel the air from her lungs in a short gasp, but all too quickly it was warm again, his mouth kissing and nibbling along the line of her neck.

She wanted to taste him. Turning her head, she peppered kisses along his jaw, dragging her tongue along his stubbled skin, feeling her mouth prickle at the added texture. No rush, no assault, and when she found his lips with her own, she intentionally swept over them with leisure, forcing him to keep it slow.

A low rumble reverberated through Jason's chest as he undid the clasp of her bra, deft fingers pulling it away from her body before she could think to stop him. Without stopping the kiss, she did the same for him until their clothes were lying in a pool somewhere off in the darkness of the room.

"Jason..." she said, and though she whispered, the single word seemed to boom inside her ears. His heavy arousal nudged against her hip, but it wasn't enough, not for her, not for now. "Please..."

"Ssshhh..." And then it wasn't his words silencing her but his mouth, their kisses hungrier this time, more insistent. Together, they tumbled back onto the bed, sinking into the thick duvet before stretching out side by side. They were pressed limb to limb, leg to leg, chest to breast, the seconds stretching into minutes. Without the encumbrance of clothes, Jason let his hands roam, alternating gentle with rough, skimming hard nipples, coasting over smooth curves, never settling in any one place on her body for more than fleeting glances. By the time he eased Flanna onto her back, every

inch of her burned, as much from the seduction of his touch as from the assurance of more.

Her thighs parted, a single leg hooking around his hip. For the first time since entering the room, Jason pushed away, propping himself up on his knuckles to gaze down at her in the dark. She could see faint glints of light reflecting off his eyes, and when she lifted a hand to stroke his cheek, he turned his head brush a kiss across her palm.

"I believe you," she murmured. The tip of his cock was teasing her where it kept nudging against her clit. "I believe you."

That was when he smiled. Slow. Delighted. And with a slight angle of his hips, he was poised at her entrance, pressing forward to sheathe himself in her heat, inch by inch.

He never quickened. Even when he was buried deep inside her, Jason never let his desire for more take him over. He kept it slow, every thrust, every stroke, gliding in and out until her flesh was maddened from the incessant rhythm. His mouth soon took part in adoring her, licking and kissing along every available patch of skin, until Flanna was begging him to do it harder, faster, harder again. But those pleas were only accommodated in fractions, a little bit here, a little more there, so that when she finally came, her screams of release seemed to rattle the walls.

When her orgasm began to ebb, she felt Jason's sweatslicked body peel away from hers, allowing him more freedom to begin pounding in more vigorously. His eyes were still open, still gazing down upon hers, and she reached up to run her fingers over his mouth.

"I'm the one who should be amazed," she murmured. "I don't know how you do it."

He didn't reply but chose instead to suck two of her fingers into his mouth, running the tip of his tongue along their lengths before releasing them. Immediately, she reached around to grab his ass, nails digging into the soft flesh to coax him even more, skimming along the edge of a second crest before she felt his body tighten, jerk, slam into her hips with a force that drove his pelvis directly onto her clit.

Flanna cried out from the unexpected pleasure, arching away from the bed as Jason emptied himself inside her. By the time she came down from coming the second time, he was already bundling her into his arms and rolling them over so that she was sprawled out on top of him, his cock still deep within her pussy.

"That's another reason not to be in the heart of Kesbury," he said, his voice hoarse.

She nuzzled her cheek against his slick chest and listened to his heart pound away beneath his skin. "Why's that?"

"Then everybody would know you're a screamer." He chuckled when she slapped half-heartedly at his shoulder. "I guess we finally settled that question, though, huh?"

"I guess," Flanna murmured.

But she was already slipping into sleep. Feeling loved made that effortless.

Chapter Twenty

The night passed all too quickly. They slept entangled in each other, making love one more time before the sun came up. She'd woken to his hard cock pressing against her inner thigh, and it took only a slight shift to roll on top of him and take him deep inside. A few slow strokes later, Jason woke up, alert and completely devoid of any of the usual vestiges of sleep, and grabbed her hips to quicken her pace, making the entire act more frenetic than the night before. He came with her name on his lips; she came with restored hope in her heart.

Neither spoke of the night to come as they set about getting ready for the day. Jason surprised her with an omelet when she got out of the shower, and they spent their breakfast in near silence punctuated with shy glances and shyer touches. There was nothing shy about the way he pressed up behind her when she was washing off her plate, though. With his arms firmly around her waist and his face buried in the crook of her neck, the possessiveness of Jason's posture made it impossible for Flanna to misconstrue just what the previous night had meant for him.

The subject of the full moon wasn't broached until they were on their way back to Birley. "Do you have weapons for tonight?" Flanna asked, studying his profile as he drove.

Jason smiled. "Like your father's going to let me go out unprepared." His hand reached over the gap between the seats to rest on her thigh. "Just don't let yourself get caught

out," he warned. "Go long range, but don't forget something for direct contact in case he gets too close."

"You act like I'm some kind of novice. I do know what I'm doing."

His fingers squeezed. "I know. But you only got out of the hospital yesterday. You have to be extra smart."

"Yes, Dad."

And that was that. Though she worried about his safety as well as her own, Flanna knew that talking about it any further was pointless. Jason's reputation was impeccable, and while she would have felt safer with him close at hand, she had to trust that he and her father knew what they were doing. Neither wanted her getting hurt; they would never do anything that would put her more at risk. It was up to her to get control of her fears instead of letting them run rampant.

He didn't linger after they reached her house. Colin's delivery van was already parked in the drive, and the open doors to the barn were visible from where Jason came to a stop. Her quick kiss good-bye wasn't enough for him, however. Grabbing her wrist, Jason pulled her across the gear stick to slam his mouth to hers, kissing her with a fervency that betrayed the seriousness of their situation.

His eyes were dark when she pulled away.

"Be safe," he said, his voice firm. "The important thing is that you get out of all this alive."

"That goes double for you," Flanna teased. "If either of us is the rash one, it would be you."

But he didn't rise to her bait. "I'll do what I have to. Just like I expect you'll do whatever you have to." Letting her go,

he settled back in his seat, gesturing toward the barn with a half-smile. "Now get going before your old man comes out here and kicks my ass for corrupting his little girl."

She stood back from the car and watched Jason drive away. Something was off with him, but she couldn't put her finger on what exactly it was. Maybe it's just worry about the upcoming full moon, she mused as she headed around the house. Whatever it was, though, would have to wait until she'd finished the business with Romm. Jason had been right when he'd said that the important thing was to still be alive on the other side of the full moon. He'd just forgotten the part where it was just as vital that he was, too.

* * * *

If the night with Jason had been quick, the day moved by even more swiftly. Flanna spent the morning cleaning and organizing what weapons would be necessary when the attack came, while Colin stowed those that were superfluous. It wouldn't do for Romm to get hold of one and then use it against them. Even if he was in werewolf form, they still had to minimize all potential risks and take the necessary precautions to give him as little advantage as possible.

That included the traps Colin spent the afternoon placing around the property. While Flanna napped, resting to ensure she'd be strong enough to last the night, her father hid traps both at the perimeter of their land and closer to the house. These were his own design, hunting traps that he'd modified with silver-tipped teeth in their sturdy jaws. Unless Romm had some freak accident and landed neck-first into one of

them, the traps wouldn't kill the werewolf, but they would severely injure him, the silver leaking into his blood stream to weaken him. If he got out of a trap, that made a fight with him easier to win. If he didn't, then it didn't really matter. Neither McRae held any hopes that the traps would do more than slow Romm down, though. The monster was determined. Flanna suspected he'd chew off his own foot to get to her.

She dressed with care. Slim black pants that allowed maximum flexibility, a form-fitting black T-shirt to meld into the darkness, low boots that were sturdy enough for hand-to-hand fighting but light enough to run in if she had to. She had no plans to wait in her house like a sitting duck. Though she suspected that Jason would argue against it, Flanna had every intention of hunting Romm down before he came to her. She didn't want him near her home. This was her sanctuary. She planned on keeping it like that.

Colin merely nodded at her as she strapped on her gun holster. He knew what her plans were, and though she could see the faint disapproval in his eyes, he held his tongue in voicing it. Today was not a day to waste energy arguing about that which would not change. They were both well aware that she was going to go out whether he liked it or not.

Thoughts of Jason threatened to intrude when she finally left the house. Though it was still an hour before sunset, the skies were already dark. The weather had turned midday, bringing winds that whipped around her in stinging lashes, and clouds roiling overhead in turbulent fury. It was difficult not to wonder how Jason was faring, how he was protecting

himself from the elements, what means he had beyond his instincts to be so sure he could find Romm before she, but Flanna shoved her musings aside. They were a distraction. Distractions would get her killed. More importantly, distractions could kill her loved ones as well.

She didn't travel far. Though she didn't want Romm in her home, she didn't want to fight him without a back-up, either. Distance put her at a disadvantage, so Flanna stalked the perimeter of the property, skirting the traps her father had left, her senses alert to any and all things moving.

It was hard. The wind kept throwing objects in her path, catching her attention out of the corner of her eye. Every sound was enough to make her jump, whether it was a whistle from the gusting winds or the scratching of a branch. Twice, she pulled her knife because she could have sworn she felt someone at her shoulder. Twice, it proved to be a false alarm.

Still, through all of it, there was no sign of Dominic Romm.

The first hour slowly melted away. The second hour crawled. In the third hour, Flanna began to wonder if she was placing too much stock in Romm's resourcefulness. Would he come straight for her? Or would he wait until the third night of the full moon, draw out her nerves until they were frayed so thin, she would snap before he could close his jaws around her neck? She wanted to believe the former. He'd already proven his impatience by coming after her in the middle of town. She had no reason not to believe he wouldn't show up.

Except for the fact that she'd been out for nearly four hours already and there was neither hide nor hair of him to be seen.

Maybe Jason had already caught him. Maybe it was over already. Maybe he'd tried calling to tell her to relax and was furious that she'd left the house. Maybe maybe maybe. Too many maybes.

And still, Romm was nowhere to be found.

That's it, Flanna decided. With one last scan of the horizon, watching the trees bend with the force of the winds, she turned on her heel and headed back to the house.

She saw the first marker near the mouth of the drive. If her senses hadn't been so taut, she might have missed it. The wind had picked it up and dragged it along the road until it tangled in a bush too tightly to blow free. But the fluttering fabric caught her eye, made her stop to bend down and look at it.

The blood that stained it was still fresh. So were the jagged rips and teeth marks along the edge.

Without thinking, Flanna broke into a run, arms pumping, heart racing, heedless of the slapping sounds her boots made on the concrete. She saw the second scrap abandoned near the van, but beyond noting the slashed tires, she didn't stop. She ran straight for the front of her house, her gun already cocked and ready in her hand, and only paused when she pressed her ear to the door.

The house was completely quiet.

Not a sound. Not a whisper.

No indication of any life. Only the whistling wind around her ears.

Cautiously, she tested the doorknob. It was supposed to be locked after she left. Neither father nor daughter believed it would keep a werewolf out of their home, but it was yet another means of slowing him down should he show. It would also tell Flanna when she got home whether the front of the house had been disturbed.

It hadn't. The door was still firmly locked from the inside.

But Romm was here. She was sure of it. It was the only explanation for the bloody crumbs left for her to trail.

Keeping as close to the house as she could, Flanna crept around the corner, her pace excruciatingly slow. She wanted to run. She wanted to race toward the barn and warn her father. But she didn't. To do so would be foolhardy and if Romm was still around—and god, she hoped he was because the alternative was too gut-wrenching to consider—it would alert him to her presence. She had to take it slow.

Step. By step.

Foot. By foot.

Getting closer only made her heart pound more loudly in her chest.

She saw the open door to the barn then, the slices of golden light bleeding into the darkness as if to offer her a path for entry. Flanna stopped, suddenly desperate to be anywhere but there. This was a bad sign. Everything was still eerily quiet, as if the house was holding its breath, waiting for her to make the next move. But Colin would never leave the barn door open in this kind of a situation. It was inviting

trouble, and when trouble was already looking for you, that was the last thing you did.

At least now she knew where Romm was. She could only pray that her father was still alive. There was no way she would consider any other possibility.

Her palms were sweaty, and the grip of the gun was beginning to slip within her hand. Though it cost her valuable seconds, Flanna switched the gun into her left hand, wiping her right on her pants so that her palm was dry. All the while, her gaze never left the barn. When she started moving again, ready to shoot as soon as she had a target, not a single thing had shifted in the tableau. The world was waiting for her to arrive.

At the edge of the light cast along the ground, Flanna hesitated, assessing where she could go without being forced to step into the illumination. Her sole option for completely avoiding it would be to go around the building to approach from the opposite side, but that would waste precious time. Time she already didn't have, and that she couldn't afford to squander. She took a deep breath. That left only one other real choice. She hated Romm a little bit more for forcing her to take it.

She ran for the door. Long legs could sometimes come in handy.

The snarls started almost as soon as she started running, growing louder and louder with every step. She had her sights trained on the open entrance, and while her body was ready for an attack from elsewhere, it didn't come. The beast

was already inside, waiting for her. She just needed a single spot of it and then she would shoot.

When she reached the door, Flanna ducked and rolled to the side, curling herself into as small a target as possible as she got out of the line of direct fire. The smell of fresh blood was pungent, even in the wide open space, and by the time she came to a stop, her back firmly against the wall, she felt like she was swimming in it, the coppery scent making her mouth feel thick. That was when she spotted them. Though she didn't visibly react, everything inside her shut down.

Romm had her father pinned in the opposite corner of the barn. As a man, Romm had been imposing, but as a beast, he was literally the largest werewolf she had ever seen. With a coat so black that it seemed to swallow light, his crouched form was nearly as tall as she was, each haunch as thick around as her hips. He bared his long, white canines in a fierce snarl, and the scar that disfigured his jaw during the day now became a shadowed line along his fur. Saliva dripped from his jowls. She almost thought it looked red from the blood that stained his muzzle.

Some of it was her father's blood. His shirt was hanging from his upper body, obviously caught in the werewolf's powerful jaws and torn in a struggle. Slash marks across his chest were from Romm's front paws, but it was the pallor of his skin next to the scarlet that scared Flanna the most. Colin had already lost a lot of blood; there was no telling how long Romm had been waiting for her to return. She kicked herself for leaving in the first place.

Her first shot rang out as instinct. She aimed low; any higher and she risked hitting her father instead. At the same time, Romm leapt with a vicious snarl, an ebony blur as he closed the distance between them. He was fast, faster than she, but Flanna had the rush of adrenaline to fuel her jump out of his way, hearing him slam into the wall behind her as she skittered beyond his reach.

The barn shook from the force. A shelf off to her side was jarred enough to send a shower of tools crashing to the floor, the end of a trowel gouging along her bicep on its path downward. Flanna hissed from the sudden sting, but she ignored it, moving again, twisting to aim her gun at the werewolf that lurked behind her.

Her second shot went wide, the bullet embedding in the doorframe with a splintering of wood. She was already swinging for her third when a long howl echoed from outside the barn, splitting the night air with its melancholy fury.

Both she and Romm froze. There was no mistaking the source. It was another werewolf.

Her mind raced. It wasn't possible, unless ... had Romm brought along a cohort? Had she missed part of his pack back in Connecticut? But she knew the answer to that. There were only the three Romm brothers; all the intelligence had been very clear on that.

What was also clear, however, was that another wolf was about to descend on the barn. When she met Romm's snarling visage, she would have sworn the beast was smiling at her.

He charged her again. There was no time for a shot, but this time, when she attempted to dodge out of his way, Romm anticipated her move, crashing into her legs with a twist of claws and snapping teeth.

Flanna screamed at the same time Romm howled in pain. His weight immediately fell away, and she looked down to see her shredded trousers, her leg bared and bloody. His claws had torn through the fabric, but she'd been saved from his bite when his powerful jaws met the silver of the knife she had strapped to her calf. As she hurled herself away from where she'd fallen, she saw him using his paws to brush at the gash that marred his muzzle, blood and saliva dripping to the floor. He was trying to brush away the effects of the silver; it must have only been a surface injury, she realized.

Her gun had been knocked from her hands, and the knife Romm had bit into lay forgotten on the ground between them. She needed to find another weapon. Fast.

Another howl came from outside the barn. It was closer, and this time, Romm seemed frightened of the sound, pausing at tending his wound to glance warily toward the open door. Flanna barely had time to move further from the entrance when a large shape came sailing through, passing her completely to barrel into Romm.

It was the second werewolf. This one was smaller, with a sleek ashen coat and lithe limbs that made it appear more graceful as it leapt through the air. It was dwarfed by the other animal, but as the two beasts went down in a heap, it was Romm's yelps that Flanna was able to discern from the fray. Each attacked with far more savagery than Romm had

shown her, and she took advantage of their distraction to go scrambling for her gun again.

She fired at the fighting werewolves, not caring which one she hit. Her bullet slammed into one of Romm's rear paws, and he roared in pain, tearing away from the battle to make a beeline for the door. Flanna squeezed out another round, trying to stop him from reaching the exit, but he was just too fast, disappearing into the darkness with a trail of blood dragging behind.

She wanted to go after him, but the matter of the second werewolf prevented her from doing so. Shifting to face it, she didn't wait to aim. She just fired.

"Flanna!"

Her father's voice startled her, jerking her arm. The bullet went wider than she'd hoped, grazing along the werewolf's shoulder, but it was enough to make the beast yelp, its head bowing to the floor.

It gave her time to place herself between the wolf and the door, time to steady her nerves against the pain in her leg and arm. When she lifted her gun, however, Colin called out to her again.

"Don't do it, lassie."

His breathing was labored and wet, and it ripped at her gut that he'd been hurt so badly in her absence. But she didn't dare look away, not with a werewolf ten feet in front of her.

"I need to go after Romm," she said, her voice low and even. "But I can't do that with this thing still here. It's going to kill you."

"No, he's not. Look at him, Flanna. You'll know I'm right."

She didn't understand his choice of words, but somehow it was impossible not to do as he instructed. Without lowering her gun, Flanna watched the werewolf push up on its paws, a thin line of blood marring its sleek fur. Slowly, it lifted its muzzle, and for the first time, she met its gaze with her own.

It didn't look away from her, but neither did it advance. It just watched.

And waited.

Behind the pain, behind the wariness, intelligence lurked within its silvery eyes. Flanna frowned. The tip of her gun wavered.

Around the silver corneas was a ring of brilliant blue. It was barely visible, but the longer she stared, the more noticeable it became. She couldn't ignore it, and she couldn't pretend it wasn't there. It was as indisputable as her father referring to the werewolf as *he* instead of *it*.

It was Jason.

Chapter Twenty-One

Her throat constricted too tightly to breathe. The trembling in her hand that made the gun waver became stronger, until she was forced to grasp her right wrist with her left hand in order to steady it. Her brain was screaming at her to pull the trigger and finish what she'd started, but her hand was stayed by her hammering heart, each deafening beat bleeding with his name.

JasonJasonJason...

"Let him go."

There was a small crash, and both werewolf and hunter turned their heads to see Colin stumbling forward from where he'd been pressed against the wall. Flanna automatically took a few steps toward him, but brought herself short when the reminder of the wolf loomed before her, wary of the danger it presented.

Not it. He. Jason.

"Let him finish the job, lassie," Colin continued. His knuckles were white where he gripped the table edge he was using to keep himself upright. "It's what he's here to do."

"No. You ... you can't know that."

"I can. I *do*. Stop being stubborn. You have eyes, Flanna. You can see it's him."

That was what stabbed deepest. She could. The level gaze of the werewolf made it impossible to deny.

Slowly, it rose, never taking its eyes off her. The hunter in Flanna went on alert, limbs stiffening, chin lifting. But it was

the woman in her that kept tight control on her actions, even though she still cowered from the force of the truth. She was unable to do anything but stand there as it began to pad toward the door behind her.

It passed within inches, the scent of its freshly spilled blood growing stronger with every step. Its pace remained slow and sure until it reached the doorway, and then she heard the swift whisper as it shot off like a bullet, resuming the chase. Only then did she turn around to stare at the yawning exit.

"It's the right thing," Colin said from the corner of the barn. "You did the right thing."

She wasn't convinced of that. Now there were two monsters roaming the night. And she had just let them get away.

"Lassie..."

The growing faintness of her father's voice broke through Flanna's fugue, and she whipped around to race to his side. Up close, the slash marks were even deeper than she'd thought, and the fear that Romm had ripped something internally made her blood run cold. Tearing off the remnants of his shirt, she began pressing them to the wounds, wincing when he blanched at the pain.

"I have to call 999," she said. "Romm slashed the tires of the car, and you need to get to emergency."

"Call Neil," Colin rasped. "He'll..."

He stopped, his breath broken by a coughing fit that left him shaking afterward.

"He knows, too, doesn't he?" She asked the question even though she was already sure of the answer. "Damn it, Dad! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought ... I thought you knew. You spoke of ... the curse..."

His fading voice snatched away any desire to question him. "I have to make that call," she said, leaping to her feet and running for the door. She didn't stop until she was inside the house and gripping the phone tightly in her hand.

The conversation with Neil was a blur. Somehow, she managed to convey what she needed, confirming that he'd be there as soon as humanly possible before hanging up. She wasn't even aware that she'd grabbed the first aid kit until she was back at her father's side, tending to his injuries with the quick efficiency of an automaton.

"Don't you dare give up," she kept repeating. She wasn't sure if she was saying it for his or her sake. She just knew it needed to be said.

Flanna was still murmuring it when Neil arrived, rushing to help her get Colin to his car. Neither spoke as they carried him out, but once the back door was shut, Neil turned his worried gaze to her and broke his silence.

"Where's Randolph?" he asked. "Is the other one dead?"

Her eyes blazed as she snapped her attention away from the car. "Gone. Both of them. But not dead." She took a step closer, pulling herself to her full height. "Did Jason tell you?" she demanded. "Or was it Dad? Does everybody know?"

Neil shook his head, unperturbed by her outburst. "It's just me and Colin. What you do ... it's a heavy load to bear,

Flanna. And Birley is not a big town. Your father needed a friend who understood what it is you are, what all of you do."

"Friends don't keep secrets from each other."

"That was your father's choice. He didn't want you to think that you could just confide in anyone about your duties."

"I was talking about Jason. You know ... what he is. If you've known about werewolves all along, how can you be OK with that?"

Neil sighed, and when he spoke, his voice was kindly. "I'm not. That's why I wanted to speak to him when you came to the pub the other night. But your father trusts him, and if there's one thing I know about Colin McRae, it's that he's an excellent judge of character. If he said Jason was to be trusted, then I'm inclined to believe him. Regardless of what happens to the young man during the full moon."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Everything she'd been taught, everything she'd been told ... how could these men just ignore all that? How could they expect her to?

"Get in the car, Flanna," Neil said. He opened the passenger door and held it there while he waited for her. "Your father needs emergency, and you should have those cuts looked at."

She'd forgotten about her own injuries, but there were things to be done, werewolves to find. She shook her head and stepped away.

"I'll be fine," she said. "See to Dad, will you? Tell him..." Her eyes strayed to the back seat windows, but it was too dark for her to see anything more than a misshapen lump.

"Tell him I'll take care of everything. I'll call you in the morning to find out how he's doing."

"Flanna..." She thought for a moment he was going to try and force her into the car, but then his shoulders slumped and he gestured toward the van and its two slashed tires. "You don't have a way to get out of here if you need to," he said. "Come now and worry about the rest in the morning."

"I know how to change a tire. I just need another spare."

She looked at him expectantly. In the face of her resolution, Neil had no choice but to concede. "I'll get mine out of the boot. Just promise you'll be careful."

"I promise."

It felt like she'd been saying that, in one way or another, all day.

* * * *

It took an hour to change the tires and bandage her injuries. By the time Flanna had changed her clothes, it was too far on the wrong side of midnight for her to be pleased with her odds for success. She took to the trail of Romm's blood with extra vigor, almost running as she followed it down to the road and over into the adjoining fields. There was a lot of time to make up.

The blood dried up two miles from the house. Though it had slowed to a thin line and then faint dribbles, Flanna had held hopes that she'd stumble across a body or a fresh trail to track. A careful sweep in widening circles led her a few hundred more feet away from the blood's end, but hitting a road stopped the trampled grass from helping her any longer.

She had no choice but to come up with a different plan of attack.

Her mind was made up by the time she got home again. She might not be able to find Romm, but there was another wolf out there who'd gone to great measures to let her know where he was going to be holing up for the full moon. If she was lucky...

She almost laughed out loud. Lucky was not how she'd characterize getting this latest tidbit of information about Jason. This was something she would either have liked up front or not at all. Right now, she was leaning toward not at all.

It was almost dawn by the time she pulled up in front of the tiny cottage. Jason's rented Nissan was still parked in the drive, and the house looked completely unperturbed. She had to swallow down the lump in her throat. It was impossible to think that less than twenty-four hours before, she'd been inside, in his arms, happier than she could ever remember. It all made sense now, of course. Why Neil had offered Jason the use of the house. Why Jason had been so insistent on staying elsewhere for the duration of the full moon. How he'd known about the demon at Mrs. Lange's.

What didn't make sense was how her father thought he could be trusted in this form. If nothing else, Flanna was determined to find out the story behind *that* little tidbit.

She wasn't all that surprised to find the front door unlocked. Studiously ignoring the front rooms, Flanna headed straight for the kitchen, flicking on the lights to start a pot of tea. The kettle was boiling before she realized that she'd

automatically taken two cups out. Blinking back the sudden tears, she returned one to the cupboard, then went through the motions to finish the tea.

She waited at the small table for him to return. The gun she'd reloaded before leaving her house sat in front of her, and every once in a while, Flanna would pick it up and check the barrel, ensure that it was primed and ready for use just in case. She had no idea if she would. Honestly, she wasn't even sure if she could. The shot she'd fired at Jason the first time had been without the knowledge of who he was. She wasn't convinced she could repeat it, especially if he stood before her in his human form.

Weak morning sunlight was filtering through the kitchen curtains when she heard the front door open and close. The cup in her hand started to shake, forcing her to set it down so that he wouldn't see the way her body was trembling. She didn't look away from the door, though, and when the footsteps neared and then stopped, she didn't look away from Jason, either.

He looked like hell. Dressed only in a pair of low-slung jeans and Birkenstocks, Jason looked more like a wartime refugee than the polished, charming man she'd known over the past few weeks. His normally perfectly styled hair was in disarray, while dirt and blood smeared his lean torso. Both hands and feet were filthy, too, the nails ragged. There was even an angry red gash along the top of his shoulder. Flanna realized with a start that that was where she'd shot him.

The eyes were the same, though. Warm and brilliant blue, currently sweeping thoroughly over her.

"For some reason, I thought they were worse," he murmured.

Flanna frowned. "You thought what were worse?"

He jerked his chin toward her arm and then her leg.
"Those cuts. Romm didn't bite you, did he?"

"No. It was the claws."

"And your father? Is he all right?"

"He's alive. All right is relative." She paused. "What about Romm? Is he ... did you kill him?"

Jason's eyes fell to the floor, and the shake of his head was barely noticeable. "I never caught him. I was on the trail, and then ... I passed out. Blood loss, probably. I woke up a little before dawn and realized I was going to get caught out if I didn't start heading back." She saw him try to smile and fail. "I wasn't really in the mood to get arrested for indecent exposure today. Things might've got a little sticky tonight if I got thrown into jail."

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Every instinct inside Flanna was shouting at her to get up and help him. It was hard to remember that he'd just spent the night as a werewolf when he looked like this. But when Jason took a tentative step toward her, her hand shot out and curled around the gun, aiming it with record speed at his head.

He immediately stopped.

"You don't need that," he said softly. "I didn't hurt you when I was changed. I'm hardly going to hurt you now."

She didn't lower the gun. "Pardon me if I'm just a tad wary at the moment."

His eyes darted sideways, and slowly, he held up his hands, palms facing her. "Can I at least wash up? And I need to get something for my shoulder. It's going to be a bitch to heal as it is."

Guilt lanced through her yet again, and she couldn't help another glance at his injury. "Do you have a first aid kit?" she asked.

He regarded her curiously before saying, "In my bag. In the bedroom. But it needs to be washed more than anything else. I was planning on taking a shower, but..."

"I'm here," she finished when it became apparent he wasn't going to say it out loud.

"I thought you'd want to talk," came his simple explanation.

This was hurting far more than Flanna had thought it would. With each passing second, it was harder and harder to remember the beast that had leapt through the barn doors, attacked Romm right before her eyes. Instead, this was the man who always had a smile to offer, who couldn't or wouldn't sweep things under the rug. This was the man who'd nearly convinced her that he could be in love with her, who'd talked about futures and feelings as if they actually meant something. This was *Jason*. And he was foregoing his own well-being to give her the answers he knew she needed.

"You can take a shower if you want," she said. As if to make her point, she hesitantly lowered the gun, resting it on the table between them. "I've waited this long. I can wait a few more minutes."

She thought for a moment that he was going to argue with her. His pain won out, however, and he nodded at her in gratitude.

"I'll be quick," he promised, backing out of the room.

Then he was gone. And Flanna was left wondering just what in hell she was doing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was impossible to just sit there doing nothing, knowing Jason was just in the next room. The muffled sound of the shower created the sort of white noise that Flanna usually found comforting. Now, though, it was a reminder of everything that had been and everything that was going to be, and listening to it put the last of her nerves on edge. Leaving the gun on the table, she worked at cleaning up the mess she had made fixing the tea, and when that didn't fill nearly enough time, she started going through the cupboards looking for something to eat.

She rationalized making breakfast by asserting she was hungry. The fact that she fixed enough scrambled eggs and sausage for two had nothing to do with the knowledge that Jason had had a rough night, too. She was hungry. End of discussion.

By the time the shower had stopped, Flanna was back at her seat, picking at the eggs with her gun cradled in her lap. She forced herself not to look up when he came to the doorway, but when he just stood there instead of going to the counter to get the plate she'd left for him, she risked a glance through her lashes.

He was watching her, a rolled bandage hanging forgotten in his hand. "What did you do?" he asked, his voice low.

"It's called breakfast." She deliberately took a large bite of her eggs, chewing in silence while she waited for him to do or say something. It didn't come. "Stop hovering. It's annoying."

He surprised her by advancing to the edge of the table and dropping the bandage to its surface, pushing it closer to her without drawing nearer himself. "Can you help me wrap my shoulder?" he asked. "I'd do it myself, but I'm not my usual flexible self this morning."

The words were light, but the tone was not. She could get angry for him about mistimed levity, but what would be the point? There were so many other, more worthy things for Flanna to be mad about.

Standing up, Flanna deliberately laid the gun next to her plate, the barrel aimed at Jason. "Sit down," she said. Waiting until he was in the other chair, she picked up the bandage and walked around him, positioning herself behind his shoulder in order to do as he asked. She didn't want to look at him while they spoke.

Though now it was clean, the injury was still as red as when he'd walked in. The edges looked as if they'd been cauterized, peeling back from the narrow furrow in his flesh. Flanna realized it was an effect of the silver bullet.

"How are we going to do this?" Jason asked.

"I think I'm just going to cover it," she replied. "Unless you're planning on going to hospital for stitches."

"I'm not, but that's not what I meant." He didn't flinch when she pinched the edges of the wound together in preparation of wrapping it. "I'm sure you have questions..."

Her snort of derision was an inelegant sound, but it cut him off more effectively than if she'd spoken. He remained silent while she worked on his shoulder. She was grateful for

the reprieve while she tried to formulate the words that would do the most good.

"You're one of those cursed werewolves, aren't you?"
Flanna finally asked. She put the tape on the last of the gauze and stepped away, circuiting him widely to get back to her seat. "That's why you started telling me about them."

Jason's nod was solemn. "New Orleans, two years ago. I pissed off the wrong voodoo woman."

"And my father knew."

"He found out about it when he did his background check. I've never been that secretive about what I am." He chuckled, a dry, mirthless sound that didn't seem right coming from his mouth. "Most of my kills are during the full moon. Considering I'm not very good at pretending to be something I'm not, it didn't take long for the major players to put the right pieces together."

"You fooled me," Flanna muttered.

He immediately leaned forward. "That was never my intention," Jason said. "I hated the fact that you didn't know."

"So much that you were forced to tell me the truth?" She shook her head. "You had more than ample opportunity to tell me, Jason, and you didn't. You let me believe that you cared about me..."

"That wasn't a lie." His vehemence was startling, his eyes blazing. "I *love* you, Flanna. Why the hell do you think it was so hard for me to tell you? If I didn't care, it wouldn't have bothered me one way or another whether or not you knew the truth. It's *because* I love you that I never had the guts to come clean. I didn't want to risk losing what I'd finally found."

Though it was the first time he'd stated his feelings so clearly, not couching them in the veiled aphorisms about being crazy about her or the like, Flanna couldn't take comfort in it. "You can't do that," she argued. "You can't use your feelings as an excuse to lie to people."

"I never lied. If you'd ever asked, I would've told you the truth."

"Oh, because quizzing the man you're sleeping with about whether or not he turns into a drooling, murderous beast during the full moon always pops up in conversation."

"Considering the men you pick out? It might not be a bad idea for you to start."

She felt like she'd been hit in the stomach. The look on Jason's face changed as soon as the words were out of his mouth, as if he couldn't believe he'd said it out loud either, but the moment he rose to try and come to her, Flanna shot out of her chair and bolted around it, keeping the table very much between them.

"Oh, god, Flanna, I didn't mean..."

"Don't." She held up a warning finger. "You might not have wanted to say it, but you don't say things you don't mean. I do know that much about you."

Though he didn't attempt to get any nearer, she could tell by the way he gripped the back of the chair that he was struggling to maintain his control. "This isn't how I want to do this," Jason said. "The last thing I want is to hurt you."

"You're a werewolf! How can you not?"

"Believe it or not, there wasn't a second last night where I didn't have complete control over my actions." He began

ticking things off on his fingers, starting with his thumb. "I changed, I found Romm's scent, I tracked him to your house, and I chased him after again, not once hurting you or anybody else. I didn't even *think* about hurting you, even when all I could smell was how much you were bleeding."

"You're right. I don't believe you."

His mood snapped. Pushing away from the chair so roughly that it skittered sideways and fell to the floor, Jason began pacing the length of the kitchen, making sure that the table was always between them. "Damn it, Flanna! Is there anything you don't try to complicate? You heard what your father said. You saw me. What's it going to take to get it through to you that I am not a danger to you? Your father would never have let me stay under his roof if he thought I'd hurt you in any way. You know that. And you're still refusing to believe me?"

She'd never seen him this agitated before. Even under the worst of the circumstances over the past few weeks, Jason had always been easygoing and jovial, though that had been strained the last few days she'd been in hospital. Part of Flanna wanted to go to him and smooth away the anger, but another part was just as frustrated as he. She deserved to have the answers she wanted.

"You're asking me to forget everything I've ever learned about werewolves," she said. "If you didn't think I'd have a hard time with it, you would've come clean right from the beginning, so stop trying to turn this around on me. It's not fair."

"I'm not asking you to forget. I'm asking you to keep an open mind. You didn't know about the curses, now, did you?" His eyes blazed as he regarded her, and she had no choice but to shake her head. "I'm not like Romm. I never was. Part of the curse was that I would always be completely aware of what I was. When I change, I'm still me, Flanna. I remember everything, before, during, and after. The bloodlust is still there, yeah, but I've learned to redirect it. It was the only way I could live with myself."

"Why would she do that? Why not make you like the others?"

Jason sighed, running his long fingers through his hair. "Because being able to ... distance myself from the change meant I wouldn't be able to feel remorse for anything I might do. And she wanted to punish me. Before ... let's just say, I wasn't always the charming do-gooder who showed up on your doorstep. I used to be more of a charming do-nothing who didn't realize people got hurt when he left them behind."

She flushed. The latter description was exactly how she'd thought of him when she'd first seen him at Rage. While she was pleased her instincts weren't completely gone, it mildly shamed her that she'd jumped to that conclusion, considering everything Jason had done afterward to disprove it. "But Romm remembers," she said, eager to shift the focus of the conversation. "It's how he knew to come after me."

"Werewolves don't really forget when they've changed. They just lose the ability to care about their actions which is why they turn into such killing machines." All of a sudden, he looked tired, leaning back against the counter's edge and

picking up one of the sausages from the plate at his side. Flanna wondered if it was having to relive his past that was draining him so quickly. "That's what I mean by remembering," he continued, taking a bite of the sausage. "I can't just switch it off like Romm and others do. It's always there for me."

For some inexplicable reason, she felt the need to assuage some of the grief in his voice. "There's another reason," she said. "You said it yourself. Dominic Romm is evil, no matter what he looks like. At heart, you're a good man."

Jason stopped in mid-chew, eyes lifting to fix on her again. "If you believe that," he finally said, keeping his tone tightly neutral, "why is it you can't trust me about all the other?"

She didn't answer. To do so would be admitting that the impetus of her anger was fuelled by her hurt feelings. He scared her, yes, but he'd done that in one way or another ever since she'd met him. This was more than that.

Her silence elicited a soft exhalation from Jason, almost a sigh but not quite. Picking up his plate, he carried it to the table, carefully righting the chair and sitting down in it to eat. Flanna felt awkward hovering there, especially since Jason was now closer to her gun than she was. But he never even looked at it. He just continued eating, every once in a while glancing up at her through his lashes.

"Will you answer a question for me?" she said, sliding into her chair.

"Anything."

She took a deep breath. "You say you can redirect the bloodlust, but ... have you ever killed someone when you were a werewolf? Someone you shouldn't have?"

When his lips thinned, she thought he was going to find some way to avoid giving her a straight answer. But then he nodded, and his gaze fell to his nearly empty plate, lingering there for a long moment before he pushed it away.

"Twice," he said. "The first time happened the first full moon after the curse. Before I realized what was going on. That isn't an excuse, but ... you know. To give you perspective, I suppose. The second was a few months ago. When I met Romm. I found him a day early. Confronted him. He just laughed at me, and the next night..." His face twisted into an angry grimace. "The bastard set me up. He masked the girl's scent with his own, practically drowned her in his blood. He raped her first, of course, because that just makes the scent that much stronger, and the way he left her..."

His hand was shaking. Flanna saw Jason realize it at the same time she did, leaping to his feet to cross to the sink. Grabbing a glass, he filled it from the tap, then emptied it in long, thirsty gulps, all the while leaning heavily against the counter.

"That's why you want Romm dead so badly," Flanna said gently.

"He thought the whole thing was a big joke." Jason's voice was bitter, more bitter than she'd ever heard from him. "So, yeah, that's why I kept on the hunt. Then when I got to know you..."

The end of his thought was more than obvious, but she couldn't help speaking up anyway.

"I can take care of myself," she said. "I never asked you to be my protector or defender or anything like that."

"I know. But I'm not the kind of man who can just sit back and do nothing, either. You should know that by now."

She did. God help her, in spite of everything that had happened, she did.

"We'll probably have an easier time of it tonight, anyway," he was saying. He still wasn't looking at her. "You shot Romm in the foot, and there's no way he got that bullet out before he changed back this morning. He's going to be slow. Easier to track."

"We?" she asked. "If you think I'm letting you..."

"You can't stop me," Jason interrupted. "But if it'll make things easier for you, I'll hunt him on my own. This isn't over until he's dead."

"But you've been hurt."

"So has he, and worse than me." Finally, he seemed to have control of himself again and came back to the table to face her. Lines at the corners of his eyes made him look tired, and there was a noticeable stoop to his shoulders. "I need to get some sleep," he said. "But I hate the idea of leaving you here if you've still got questions for me."

Flanna shook her head. For the first time since recognizing Jason in the barn, the furor inside her head was quiet.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a halfhearted attempt to lighten the mood. "I'd ask you to join me, but I'm not sure I'm up to the rejection right now. Unless, of course, you're

planning on surprising me, in which case..." The look on her face must've said it all because his smile disappeared and he started backing toward the door. "Right. What did you have in mind, then? Are you going back home, or to the hospital maybe?"

"I don't know." It was the truth.

"If you see your father..." He'd reached the doorway now, and his hand found the jamb, his slim fingers absently stroking the dark wood as he contemplated his words. "Tell him not to worry. I'm not going to disappoint him."

With one last caressing glance, he was gone.

Flanna sagged in her chair. She was exhausted, mentally, physically. Emotionally drained. She knew the smart thing would be to pick up her gun, go home, and get a good day's rest. She was going to need all her strength to go after Romm that night, even if Jason was right about Romm's injury.

The noises of him getting ready to sleep filtered from the other room. When the squeak of the bedsprings reached her ear, Flanna laid her head on the table and closed her eyes. Without his penetrating gaze on her, it was suddenly too much to try and pretend anymore.

She loved Jason.

She just didn't know if that was enough.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She didn't remember falling asleep. She'd only meant to try and clear her head for a moment by resting it on her arms. But the next thing Flanna was aware of was the weight of soft cotton around her shoulders and the comforting scent of hot tea in the air.

Her lashes fluttered open. Just a few inches from her face was a steaming cup and beyond that, she saw Jason lounging in the other chair, his slim fingers playing with his own drink. He looked rested, his eyes their usual bright blue, the shadows gone from his face. His hair was still damp, probably from another shower, she reasoned, and he wore a plain T-shirt, masking his bandaged shoulder.

Flanna started to sit up. Immediately, a sharp pain shot down her neck into her spine, complaining against the change in position, and she winced as she reached back to rub the stiff muscles.

"What time is it?" she asked, her voice rough from sleep.

"Noon. Ish." Carefully, Jason slid her cup closer to her, waiting until she'd cradled it between her palms before speaking again. "I thought you would've gone home."

The heat from the tea permeated her hands. Flanna held the cup beneath her nose, inhaling the warm scent, letting it soothe her system. "I didn't know what I was going to do," she said softly. "I told you that, remember?"

"You should've at least moved to the couch or something. It would have been more comfortable."

"And if I'd realized I was going to fall asleep as soon as I closed my eyes, I probably would've done that." She sighed, then sipped at her tea. She didn't have the strength yet to argue with him about where she'd spent the morning. She didn't have the strength to argue, period.

It quickly dawned on her that the soft cotton weighing around her shoulders was the afghan from the foot of his bed. After setting down her cup, her hands fell to play with the blanket's edge, rolling the downy tassels between her fingertips.

"How do you feel?" she asked, keeping her tone neutral.

"Better. Getting shot's never been my favorite thing, but it's barely a surface wound. If the bullet hadn't been silver, I wouldn't have noticed it at all."

This stiff sort of conversation made her heart ache. Even when they'd barely known each other, there had been a spark between them, the way he joked and frustrated her and made her smile. Then later, when it became so much more and talking became less important than just being together, hearing him speak was like finding an old friend and drawing him into an embrace. It was warm. Soothing. It was so different from what was happening now that Flanna wanted to cry.

"Hey."

The single, softly spoken word drew her gaze to him, and she could only stare as he reached across the distance between them, his index finger swiping gently across her cheek. It came away wet.

"Please don't." Jason's voice was an anguished plea, and she only had to look at his eyes to see the entreaty repeated there. "Yell at me, hit me, walk away. Do *anything* but cry. You've got no idea what it does to me to see you like this, knowing I'm the reason for it."

"I wish you'd told me," she whispered. "Then this wouldn't hurt so much."

"I know."

Roughly, Flanna wiped away the rest of her tears before Jason attempted to touch her again. Even that brief caress had set her skin to tingling.

"I don't know what you're expecting me to do," she said, pushing away from the table and rising to her feet. The blanket slipped to the floor and her muscles screamed in protest, but Flanna couldn't sit there any longer under his soft gaze. Grabbing her tea cup, she drained it in a scalding gulp as she walked over to the counter to pour another.

"Yesterday, you kept talking about our futures, like we could actually have one. Do you honestly think that's possible, Jason? Or was all that just wishful thinking?"

The chair scraped across the floor as he stood up. With her back to the table, she couldn't see him approach, but she heard every step, stiffening when he came to a stop right behind her. She kept still while his hands came up and pushed her hair gently over her shoulder, then returned to start massaging the knots in her neck.

"The answer to both questions is the same, Flanna," he murmured. It was impossible for her not to soften beneath his touch, the burn spreading through her sore muscles with

every firm pass of his fingers. "I think anything's pretty much possible. But I also think that unless you decide you can trust me, that it's just wishful thinking on my part. It doesn't matter how badly I want to be in your life. The choice on whether or not I can be is yours."

"It's not that simple."

"Isn't it?" Those same strong hands settled on her shoulders, guiding her to turn around and face him. "How do you feel about me?" he asked. "Outside of the anger and the hurt, I mean. Before last night ... I would've said that you cared. Even this morning ... you stayed. You made breakfast. You helped me wrap my injuries. If I didn't mean *something* to you, you would never have done any of that."

"I ... care." She couldn't admit to anything stronger, not now. She couldn't give him that much power.

"So can't we start with that?"

His fingers slid from her shoulder to reach up and stroke her cheek. The tiny gesture shattered her resolve.

"I wish we could," Flanna said. "You have no idea how badly I wish it. But it still comes down to one thing. I can't trust you."

"Yes, you can."

"You keep saying that, but they're just words, Jason. And I know how easily they come to you."

"Then don't listen to them. Look at last night. Look at me right now." His tenderness disappeared to be replaced by a fervency that had Jason cupping her face, leaning in and kissing her before she could stop him. The caress lasted long

enough to set her mouth on fire, and when he pulled back, she was left panting and gasping for breath.

"I love you," he said. "And I'm going to keep at you to get you to believe me, to *trust* me, until you kick me to the curb." He suddenly froze. "Are you going to do that? Or are you going to give me the chance to prove all of this to you?"

Somewhere, deep in her belly, Flanna couldn't stop trembling. She was fine on the surface; though her skin burned from his proximity, she knew that none of the turbulence roiling around inside was visible to the naked eye. But she could see it in his face that he knew. He'd always known. From the first night he'd walked into her life, Jason had seen through her facades and loved her all the more.

"I'm still here, aren't I?" she said quietly. "Even with all this ... I haven't been able to walk away."

He watched for the space of a single breath, and then Jason was bundling her into his arms, burying his face in her hair as he held her tightly against his chest. She felt the quivering in his muscles as she slowly slid her arms around his waist to return the embrace.

It was a step. A small one, but a step, nonetheless. She'd never been more terrified in her entire life.

* * * *

A scalding shower finished the job on her aching muscles that Jason's hands had started, leaving her limp and sluggish by the time she stepped out. It wasn't the time for lethargy, though. She only had a few hours before sunset and enough things to do to fill all of them. After re-bandaging the

scratches on her arm and legs, Flanna slipped her clothes back on, wondering if she was making her night harder by wearing clothes that carried her scent so strongly. She was half-tempted to ask Jason his opinion, but then thought better of it. She would just have to make do with what she'd been dealt.

He was waiting for her when she emerged from the bathroom. "We haven't talked about tonight yet," he said, following her into the kitchen.

"Why does that sound like you want to talk about it now?" she asked.

"Because I have an idea." Careful of her scratch, Jason grabbed her elbow and pulled her to a stop, forcing her to turn and look at him. "I meant what I said earlier. I'm still going after Romm. But I think we'll have better odds if we go after him together. Two against one. I'm pretty sure that's why he backed off at Rage, and why he didn't stick around last night."

"He ran away last night because I shot him."

"Well, that too." He gave her a lopsided smile, almost as if he wasn't sure he could fully relax around her yet. "Are you going to lose what little respect you have for me if I tell you I was scared shitless last night? Romm, I could deal with. But seeing you with that gun in your hand ... remembering when you showed me what a good shot you are ... I was lucky all you did was graze my shoulder. Remind me to thank your father for distracting you."

Mentioning her father was all the change of subject that Flanna needed. "I need to go check on Dad before I do

anything else," she said. Hesitantly, she extracted herself from his hold and stepped back. "If you want ... you can come with me. He'll probably be glad to see I haven't killed you. He's stubborn that way."

"I'd like that," Jason said quietly. "I'll just follow you..."

"Or you can come with." She tore her eyes away from him before she lost her nerve. "It'll save us time after. So that we're ready to get Romm once the sun goes down."

"Only if that's what you want."

"It was my suggestion, wasn't it?"

There was a pause. "OK, then." His hand touched her shoulder briefly before disappearing again. "Thank you, Flanna."

She listened to him retreat from the kitchen to start gathering his things, exhaling the pent-up air she'd had in her lungs as quietly as she could. His gratitude was expected; she was giving him the chance to trust him that he'd requested.

What wasn't expected was how glad she was that he was going to be at her side that night. Injured or not, Romm had already seriously hurt her once and put her father in the hospital. Knowing that she didn't have to face him alone, even if it was a werewolf helping her out, gave her the added strength not to crumble. They could do this.

She hoped.

* * * *

Jason talked her into taking his rented Nissan. "I've got better insurance," he said with a grin. "There's also the fact that if we get a flat, I actually have a spare."

She couldn't argue with that. It was all too true.

By the time they reached the hospital, it was nearly three o'clock. The winds from the night before had abated only slightly, and already the skies were darkening overhead. Her time for a visit was going to be even more limited, she realized. There was no doubt in her mind that Colin would understand, though. If anyone knew the seriousness of the situation, he did.

They hurried through the front lobby toward the elevator. Ten feet inside, however, Jason ground to a halt.

"Wait," he ordered.

The terseness of the command set her on edge, and Flanna swiveled to see what was wrong. The sight that greeted her was a familiar one.

Jason had gone completely rigid, the veins in his neck standing out as he slowly turned in a wide circle. At his sides, his hands had balled into fists, and his breathing had slowed so dangerously low that she almost thought he'd stopped completely.

She didn't need to ask what was spooking him. She'd seen it before. Right before he'd led the way to the demon at Mrs. Lange's house.

She approached him slowly. In his heightened state, Flanna wasn't sure he wouldn't lash out at any sudden movement, even from her. "What is it?" she asked, her voice a whisper. "Is it another of those demons?"

He shook his head. When his eyes returned to hers, his pupils had almost completely swallowed the irises, leaving only a sliver of blue around the black. For a second, she

flashed on the face of the werewolf she'd seen the night before. "Romm," Jason said. "He's here."

Alarm surged through Flanna's veins. It took all her control not to whip around and look for Romm herself.

"You're sure?" she asked.

His lips thinned. "Positive."

"I left my gun in the car."

His hand curled around her wrist before she could race for the front doors of the hospital. "It's still daylight," he said when she turned to look at him. "He's still human."

"And I've got the stitches to prove that doesn't make him any less dangerous."

He didn't relax his grip. "Let's find him first. Then I can keep guard while you go back and get your gun."

She didn't believe for a second that he was just going to keep guard. The danger glinting in his eyes was a hundred times harsher than it had been the night of Mrs. Lange's attack. It wasn't hard to figure out why. This time, it was about protecting Flanna and not some unknown old lady.

Neither said a word as he led her through the antiseptic hallways. The path he chose was an odd one, but Flanna knew better than to question him. He'd found the way to Mrs. Lange's with unerring accuracy; if he said Romm was here, she had no choice but to believe him.

By the time he came to a stop before a closed door, a fine sheen of sweat glistened on his brow. Letting go of her wrist, Jason stepped to the door's edge, leaning in to sniff along the hinges. "Here," he whispered.

Flanna frowned. They were in critical care; even if Romm had sought medical treatment for his foot, there was no reason for him to be in this department. His injury would hardly be considered life-threatening.

"Ms. McRae?"

They both jumped at the woman's voice, spinning to face its owner. A young nurse stood behind them, a confused smile curving her lips. Flanna recognized her from around Birley. She'd been a few years behind Flanna in school.

"Mr. Carrey said you'd probably be in to see your father," the nurse went on. "But I think he's sleeping right now."

Flanna glanced back at the door, a frown creasing her forehead. "This is his room?"

"Well, yes." She paused. "You're here to see him, right?"
"Of course. I just..." Searching for Jason's eyes, Flanna
struggled to find the right words. "I wasn't sure if we were in
the right wing or not."

With a knowing nod, the nurse brushed past them to the door. "This place can be a maze sometimes," she agreed. Quietly, she turned the handle, opening the door enough for Jason and Flanna to see her father asleep on the lone bed inside. "I can let you in for a few minutes," she went on, lowering her voice so as not to disturb Colin. "But after that, you'll have to go. Your father really needs his rest."

She left them then, her soft-soled shoes muffled against the tiled floor as she walked away. Flanna waited until she was out of earshot before leaning in to murmur in Jason's ear.

"It's not Romm. It's just the residual scents from the fight last night."

Jason's eyes were still dark as they darted beyond her to gaze at the unconscious man inside. Finally, he nodded.

"Do you want privacy?" he asked. "I can wait out here." "Don't you want to see him?"

The tension was beginning to uncoil from his body. "I don't want to steal what little time they're giving you," he said.

When it looked like he was going to move away, Flanna impulsively reached down and clasped her hand in his. She didn't say a word. She just led him into the room.

A call to Neil before leaving Jason's had told her what to expect. But when Flanna saw her father lying pale and weak in the hospital bed, her gut twisted into a furious knot. It wasn't just that he was hooked up to every conceivable machine under the sun. It was how small he looked on the narrow mattress. He looked fallible. Old. The possibility that she might lose him made her want to burst into tears.

Jason's hand squeezed hers. When she glanced at him, he smiled in reassurance. "He'll be OK," he said. "Your old man's a tough nut to crack."

She decided that was one assertion Jason could make that she would trust without question.

* * * *

He waited until he heard the voices disappear inside the room, body taut as he listened to the quiet humming of the hospital. This was not what he'd expected, though he wasn't going to argue his good fortune. He'd merely meant to get his foot taken care of, but when he had learned that the bitch's father was there as well, Dominic couldn't resist finding him.

The plan that had formulated as he'd watched the old man sleep had been simple. Use the second night of the full moon to kill McRae and then go after the daughter on the third. She'd be so shaken from her father's death that it would give Romm an edge.

Her presence here now, though, gave him a new idea. Especially since Randolph was with her.

Slipping out of the supply closet in which he'd hidden, Romm hurried to the stairwell. The nurse had said they could only stay for a few minutes, so he only had a tiny window in which to work.

And if for some reason he ran out of time, he'd just revert to his original plan. No reason to be hasty if he didn't need to be. The bitch would be dead before the full moon was over either way he did it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She knew it was silly, but Flanna was disappointed that her father didn't wake up while they were there. All she wanted was a few minutes, time to tell him that she was sorry about everything and that she was going to do everything in her power to put a stop to it, once and for all. She really didn't think that was much to ask for in the grand scheme of things.

It wasn't to be. After ten minutes of sitting there, listening to the machines beep and hum, the door opened and the nurse poked her head in.

"The doctors are making rounds," the nurse said quietly.
"It's probably best if you leave now."

Jason held her hand as they exited the room. He hadn't said much of anything while they'd been inside, but she could sense his distraction. She didn't know if he was still thinking of everything that had happened overnight or whether his quiet was due to ruminations about her father. She didn't really care. Having him there at all was frighteningly reassuring.

They were only a few feet away from her father's room when Jason stiffened again. His fingers curled painfully around hers, and Flanna winced as she glanced over.

"What's wrong now?" she asked.

"You mean, what's wrong *still*." Slowly, his head turned, looking back over his shoulder at Colin's closed door. When she winced again at his grip, Jason let her go, though he didn't return his gaze to her face. "I'm still smelling Romm."

"I told you. It's from the..."

"No. This is fresh."

All the calm she'd found in the past few minutes vanished. "Why would he come back here, though?" she protested. "The police know who he is now. He can't get medical treatment without them being told."

"Unless he killed the doctor." He started walking very quickly down the hall, poised and alert as he followed the scent. "Go tell the nurse you've spotted the man who attacked you," he said when she followed on his heels. "That'll get the cops here. I don't think he's stupid enough to do something with so many witnesses, but if nothing else, it's going to protect your father while we go after Romm."

When he headed for the stairwell, Flanna darted in front of him, blocking his path. "And what are you going to do?" she demanded.

Everything in his body had gone hard, including the anger in his eyes. "I'm going to find him," Jason said. "And if I don't have an audience, I'm going to kill him."

"While you make me sit back and play the damsel in distress? I don't think so."

"Then I suggest you hurry up and get the police here so you can catch up."

If they'd had more time, she would have argued with him. But sunset was less than two hours away and her father was lying in a hospital bed with absolutely zero protection against the monster who wanted her and her loved ones dead. Flanna had little choice. She got out of Jason's way.

She didn't look back as she rushed to the nurses' station. There was a moment when she thought the young nurse was going to kick her out, but when Flanna spotted one of the doctors who had tended her during her own admission, she grabbed him to get him to corroborate her story. It took only a few words from him for the nurse to get the police on the phone. It took even fewer for Flanna to make sure that her father was the first person protected.

She raced away as soon as she could, frantically glancing at the clocks she passed to see how much of a head start Jason had on her. Eight minutes. A lot could happen in eight minutes. Day could disappear into night, men could die, everything she'd thought to be true could turn upside down and leave her dangling in confusion. In the end, eight minutes was enough time to do just about anything. She had to fight to ensure that just about anything never happened.

There was no sign of Jason or Romm when she reached the lobby. Jason had gone downstairs in his pursuit, and with nothing apparent on the ground floor, she had to assume that he'd stopped off at the first. Her gaze drifted back to the stairwell, unsure of her next step. Even if she found Romm, what was she going to do? Jason would be unlikely to hesitate from a physical altercation, but Flanna knew that even though he was injured, she wasn't a match for Romm at hand-to-hand. She needed a weapon.

The weapon that was still in the car.

Ignoring the odd looks from the elderly woman just entering, Flanna flew out the front doors of the hospital, sprinting for the car park. Her heart was pumping wildly, but

the rush of adrenaline served as it always did during a hunt. It gave her focus, something upon which to center while she did what needed to be done. It was the line she forced herself to walk, disregarding everything else that might divert her from the task at hand. It was a welcome friend.

Darting between a parked Skoda and a bike in a handicapped space, Flanna skidded to a halt when she saw the Nissan at the end of the aisle. The keys she'd been gripping dug painfully into her palm, but she was oblivious to the sting as she absorbed the sight of Romm perched on the hood of the car. Behind him, the driver's side window was smashed. He had her gun nestled comfortably in his large hand.

The gun's muzzle was currently pressed into the small of Jason's back.

She met Jason's eyes as she slowly approached the car. They contained far more than anything she might have anticipated. In their blue depths lurked frustration, fear, anger, but most of all, a silent plea. He wanted her to walk away.

Too bad. He might want to keep her safe, but there was no way Flanna was going to comply.

"I almost didn't think you'd find us," Romm said goodnaturedly. His dark eyes danced with vicious glee. "Welcome to the party, sweetheart."

"Let him go." Her voice was tight and controlled; she refused to let him see her break. "He's not the one you want."

"Well, isn't that nice and clichéd?" Romm sneered.

"Though I do love the accent. Do you know I can hear it when you scream, too?"

The casual mention of Flanna's pain made Jason visibly flinch. Romm didn't like that reaction at all. He clapped a hand down on Jason's injured shoulder, gripping it with a talon-like grasp, then shoved to force Jason to his knees. Though he never made a sound, the fleeting grimace on Jason's face betrayed his pain.

The gun now nuzzled the back of Jason's skull. "Go ahead, bitch," Romm said. "Keep on talking. Your boyfriend did so much of that already that I'm this close to saying to hell with it and killing both of you right now."

She pressed her lips together. She didn't know what had happened to put Jason in the submissive position, but she wasn't willing to stand there while Romm scattered his brains across the pavement.

Romm jerked his chin toward her closed hand. "Those the car keys?" he asked.

Flanna figured direct questions fell outside his command for silence. "Yes."

"Pop the trunk."

Hesitating for only a moment, she started to walk toward the rear of the car. Immediately, Romm stiffened, knocking Jason's head forward with the force of the gun being pushed into his skull.

"Remotely!" he barked. She halted. "And don't try telling me you can't. Brand-new rental like this is going to have automatic everything."

Opening her hand, she looked down at the keys, finding the button as he described. However, there was another button that he had probably forgotten about. Otherwise, he never would have forced her attention to the ring.

She glanced up through her lashes. Jason was watching her intently. When their eyes met, she saw the plea still reflected in his, and she prayed that he could read her as easily as she could him.

Be ready.

Her fingertip settled over the button for the boot, depressing it before sliding imperceptibly over to the other. When the trunk opened, a grin creased Romm's features.

"Now that's more like..."

The wail of the car's alarm pierced the still air. Startled, Romm jerked from his eased position, the gun slipping a bare inch from where he'd held it. Jason took advantage of the distraction to slam his head backwards so that it shoved the butt of the gun into Romm's groin, making him crumple in pain. Dropping to the ground, Jason then scissored his legs around Romm's ankles so that he fell face forward to the pavement.

The gun went flying out of Romm's hand. Flanna reacted immediately, leaping to get it, but the weapon had gone off in the opposite direction, leaving the two men directly in her path. Before she could skirt around Romm's head, his meaty hand shot out in a fist, slamming into her calf muscle to knock her off-balance.

It was the same leg he'd attacked the night before. Pain lanced past her knee, making it buckle under her. Flanna's

palms scraped against the cement as she caught herself, but when he tried to hit her again, she lashed out instinctively with the hand still holding the keys.

Romm roared, though she suspected it was more from fury than pain. Beneath all the noise they were making, though, the car alarm was still ringing, and out of the corner of her eye, Flanna saw the elderly woman she'd seen in the hospital lobby appear at the end of the aisle with a large orderly in tow.

Romm saw them, too.

He took advantage of the momentary distraction to scoop up the gun again and begin running away, his gait fast but lopsided from his injured foot. Jason started to go after him, but Romm was prepared for that and aimed the gun toward Flanna. Her eyes widened. Before she could roll out of the way, however, Jason was smothering her body with his own, shielding her from the blast of the gun.

By the time she looked up, Romm was gone.

"Oh my god, are you all right?"

The deep baritone of the approaching orderly shifted Flanna's attention, but the sight of the large man running toward them was nothing compared to the sticky warmth soaking into her shoulder. Her breath caught in her chest.

"Jason?"

"Yeah?"

His voice was hoarse, and the fear clenching her heart began to turn into panic. "Can you get up?" she asked.

Slowly, his weight eased away. Remembering the keys in her hand, Flanna turned off the car alarm before rising to her feet, wary of what she was going to see.

The reality was as bad as she envisioned. A crimson stain was spreading through the cotton of Jason's shirt, blossoming outward from his shoulder and upper torso. Without a word, she dropped her keys and flew forward to search for the bullet hole. After only a moment, though, Jason captured her hand in his and pulled it close against his abdomen.

"I'm OK," he said quietly. "Romm missed."

"But you're bleeding."

"Step aside, miss." The orderly had finally reached them, placing himself between the pair. Flanna had no choice but to do as instructed. She watched helplessly as the orderly ripped the thin cotton to expose the source of the blood.

It was flowing again from the injury on his shoulder. The bandage that she'd wrapped around it was soaked scarlet, and blood was dripping down Jason's muscled chest. There were no other wounds in sight.

Grabbing the two-way radio hanging from his waistband, the orderly barked out a request for a gurney in the car park. Jason was shaking his head before the command was complete.

"I'm fine," he insisted. He took a step back, only to come into the contact with the hood of the car. "Slap a new Band-Aid on, and I'll be as good as new."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid it's more serious than that. You're going to need stitches."

Jason's eyes sought hers. "Tell him, Flanna. Tell him I can't stay here."

She knew why he was making the request. Time was running out on them. Romm was getting away, and the sun would set in less than two hours. If he stayed for treatment, odds were good he'd make the change with an audience. And potential victims.

His gaze was unwavering. At her side, Flanna could feel the eyes of the orderly boring into her, as if she was going to offer some sort of insight into why a man in such obvious need of medical attention shouldn't get it. The choice was completely in her hands.

"Can he get stitched up right away?" she asked, her eyes never leaving Jason's.

"It's a clean cut," the orderly replied. "Should be an in and out. Forty-five minutes. An hour tops."

That made up her mind. Stooping to pick up the keys, Flanna stepped back to Jason's side, keeping her back to the orderly and her voice low. "We can't afford to lose Romm at this point," she said. "And the police are going to be here any second."

"I don't want you going after him on your own!"

"I won't be." She rested a tentative hand on his arm. "Get the stitches and then catch up. We'll face him together."

Indecision flickered across his face, and he glanced up at the darkening sky. "It'll be close," he warned.

"I know."

With a sigh, Jason looked past her at the new orderly that had just arrived with the gurney. "Don't do anything rash," he said. "I'll find you as soon as I can."

He slipped from her fingers as he allowed himself to be led to gurney. Flanna could only watch as the orderlies worked quickly and efficiently to get him positioned without exacerbating his injury, and when they started to wheel him back toward the hospital, she turned her attention to the direction in which Romm had fled.

She had a werewolf to find. She didn't have time to worry about whether or not Jason was going to make it before the sun went down.

She was just going to have to trust that he would.

* * * *

She only cleared the glass away from the dash and steering wheel, grabbing a blanket from the boot to cover the seat. Passing the police on the way out of the parking lot, Flanna began driving up and down the streets nearby, looking for signs of Romm's flight.

An overturned rubbish bin.

A broken fence.

The teenaged girl sobbing at the side of the road.

Flanna pulled to the curb, but the girl looked at the broken window with trepidation and scurried even further from the street. "Are you all right?" Flanna asked. "Do you need the hospital or the police or something?"

"I need my fucking car back," the girl spat. "Some jerk just threatened me with a gun if I didn't give him my keys."

Her heart quickened. "Was he tall? Dark hair? Walking with a limp?"

"Yeah. How'd you know that?"

"The police are looking for him," she explained. She gestured toward her broken window. "He just tried stealing my car, too."

The attempt at camaraderie seemed to do the trick. "Such a jerk," the girl repeated.

"What kind of car is it?"

"My dad's Mondeo. Blue." She pointed down the street.

"He took off that way, and then turned out of town onto the ring road."

Flanna's eyes followed the line the girl drew and felt her mood plummet even further. Out of town. That could mean any number of things.

"Do you have a mobile phone?" When the girl nodded, Flanna instructed, "Call the police. Tell them what you've told me. The man who stole your car is named Dominic Romm, but they're going to know that already."

"What are you going to do?"

Her mouth was grim as she settled back into her seat. "Find him."

* * * *

In the end, it wasn't that difficult. She spotted the blue Mondeo at the very first place she checked. She just wished that she could have been wrong this time.

He had driven to her house.

Idling on the road, Flanna stared at the car parked in the drive. The front door was closed, but Romm already knew where all the weapons were kept. He was going to be out back in the barn, just as he had the night before. It was very likely he meant to wait her out there, but the upshot of his presence meant one, very dangerous fact for Flanna.

She didn't have a single weapon on her. Everything she had was in the barn.

In the worst possible scenario, the car could be considered a weapon, but the likelihood of it just hurting Romm instead of killing him made it unreliable. She could always go back into town and buy something, but that was also less than ideal.

Then it struck her. Jason's cottage. She'd left weapons in the delivery van. She'd only taken the gun as a precaution until they got to her house and restocked.

Flanna glanced at the shadowed sky. Though sunset was breathing down their necks, she didn't see where she had a choice. Romm had a gun. If she approached him without a weapon before he changed, she knew he wouldn't hesitate to use it. She didn't need Jason's warning to know that would be a rash move.

She turned the car around. If she floored it, it was possible she could get back in time.

* * * *

Time was not her friend. Horses on the road slowed her trip to Kesbury, so that by the time she left the cottage, the sun had already gone down. Speeding helped her gain some

precious minutes, but even then, fear was starting to creep into her psyche. She kept it at bay, though. She had to. It was the only way not to fail.

The fine prickle of night crawled along her skin as Flanna gripped the steering wheel. Though she'd turned on the car's heating, cold wind blasted through the open window, chapping her cheeks and making her eyes sting every time a fresh blast found its way inside. It did keep her alert and ready, though, so that when she finally pulled up in front of her house, she felt like she was ready for anything.

The only problem was, she couldn't go in. Not yet.

That had been her mistake the previous night. Though she'd been as stealthy as she could manage, Romm had been waiting for her inside the barn. He'd been tuned for an attack, and she had stepped right into it. Tonight was going to be no different. If anything, he would be even more anxious for a kill now. The confrontation at the hospital was sure to have angered him even further.

Unless she came up with a brilliant plan that would kill him long distance without putting herself in harm's way, she needed someone to help her.

She needed Jason.

Though it went against every fighting instinct in her body, Flanna stayed in the car while she watched the house. The front was still devoid of light, but the faint glimmer of illumination drifted around the corners of the building. It was entirely possible that Romm had left, that the barn would be deserted and he'd be on his way back into town to kill whoever got in his path to her father. She doubted it, though.

This was likely to be a waiting game, much as any hunt was. This was stalking the prey and then waiting for it to spring your trap.

It made her nervous being the one on the other side of that particular line.

Every shadow made her jump. To avoid the possibility of a direct attack through the broken window, Flanna sat on the passenger side of the car, head bowed in order to keep her line of sight unobstructed. While it was safer, it made it easier for her to see in other directions, to catch the bend of a branch as the wind picked up speed, to witness the fireflies dancing near the ground by the headlights, and more. That was worse. Her spare pistol waited in her lap, with her fingers coiled around its weight to spring it upwards at any given moment. All she needed was the tiniest of triggers and she was sure she'd explode.

When she saw the movement out of the corner of her eye, Flanna's heart leapt into her throat. She didn't move her head, but instead focused her attention sideways, watching the black move against the black, creeping ever closer to the side of the car. It disappeared beneath her view, and she held her breath as she waited to see what would pop its head up, hoping against hope that it wasn't Romm opting to surprise her.

A scratching against the back of the car made her head whip around.

She couldn't see anything through the rear window but the dark road stretched out behind her.

Another scratch. Same place.

She held her breath. Waited.

The black returned. Shadows shifted against the nothingness of the earth, dancing and re-forming until they finally came to a stop. Part of it lifted, elongated, and then she saw the unmistakable gleam of silver staring back at her.

Silver rimmed in vivid blue.

Jason.

Flanna exhaled, her lashes fluttering closed for the briefest of moments while she thanked any god that might be listening for this necessary aid. He'd said he would come, and while part of Flanna had believed him, a larger part had not. It couldn't. It meant trusting the wolf, and she wasn't sure she was there yet.

He didn't move. He just watched her and waited.

Carefully, Flanna slid back across the seat, her fingers searching for the door handle in the dark. The gun still weighed against her palm, and the familiar weight of a blade was strapped to her leg. There was an extra knife tucked into her boot, but it was barely two inches long; it would only serve as a last resort.

The bracing air slammed into her lungs as she climbed slowly from the Nissan. It was eerie how still Jason was, crouched amongst the shadows along the road like some kind of wraith. She could almost feel the control he was exerting, the wound tension spiraling around his lean limbs to keep him from bolting forward. It had been there the night before, when her father had tried to convince her of Jason's identity, but here, in such close proximity, it breathed with a different kind of life.

Danger. Panic. Wrapped so closely with the command of his will that it could have been a cloak around Flanna instead.

She didn't speak. She wasn't sure he'd understand her in that form anyway. She merely waited for him to take the lead.

His gaze swiveled toward the house. Wiry muscles bunched beneath his shoulders, and he bounded into the darkness, merging with shadows to become the same sleek illusion that had first caught her attention. Flanna rushed after, but her step wasn't as silent as his and it took only seconds for him to slow to a pace that kept her from loudly proclaiming their arrival.

Pausing at the corner of the house, Jason lifted his head and sniffed at the air. His long snout was outlined against the faint gold that filtered from the barn, and Flanna had to tamp down the swell of fear that rose in her throat. He said to trust him, she kept repeating to herself. He's not going to hurt me. He loves me.

Did the wolf remember that?

Jason said yes.

Jason said he remembered everything in this form.

Did the wolf remember she didn't trust him?

It didn't matter. Nothing the creature was doing suggested that he didn't implicitly trust *her*.

She was still locked in place when his head turned toward her. He continued to stare for a long minute and then began loping around the edge of the house. When she followed, he immediately stopped.

Looked at her again.

She had no idea what he was doing. Her fear returned with a rush, but this time, it wasn't for Jason. It was for their situation. How did they think they could do this together if she couldn't understand him?

This time when he moved, it was toward her. Flanna stiffened, the gun at her side automatically coming up.

Jason stopped, but she got the distinct feeling it wasn't because of the weapon now aimed at his head. His eyes were trained past her, over her shoulder. That was all it took for her to understand.

They were splitting up. Going in opposite directions. Attack from two different sides so that they doubled their odds at getting Romm.

She almost smiled in her relief at finally getting it.

Flanna turned first, showing Jason that she understood. Once she'd reached the opposite corner of the house, she looked back to see him still poised against the skyline, eyes steadily watching her. She could've sworn she saw him nod before he slunk off toward the barn.

Every step steeled her nerves. Let the muscles take over, give the training the lead. It was better to be coldly efficient than to listen to the clamor of her emotions. That kind of noise would get somebody killed.

At the corner of the house, Flanna paused, searching the distance for Jason's familiar shape. It took her nearly two minutes to find it. By the time she did, the taste of panic was rising like bile in the back of her throat. Knowing where he was, though, did little to lessen the fear.

He wasn't at the house. Jason had moved much more quickly than she had and had leapt to the flat roof of the barn instead of waiting for her to join him. She spotted him when his outline blotted out the stars.

Flanna frowned. What was he trying to do? It looked like he was searching for roof access, prowling around its perimeter. He wasn't even being quiet about it, growls emanating so loudly from his throat that even she could hear them. It didn't make sense.

Until an answering growl came from within.

Jason was trying to draw him out. She lifted her gun in preparation for Romm's appearance in the open doorway.

A minute passed. While the growls never abated, Romm never appeared.

He's too smart for that, she realized. He's not going to fall for it.

Another minute went by. Jason's circles didn't cease. With each additional revolution, Flanna grew more certain that Romm wasn't going to come out. He could smell them both. She had fresh scabs on her leg from her fall at the hospital, and Jason's shoulder was newly stitched. There was no way he wasn't completely aware of what they were attempting.

Well, she thought grimly, if Mohammed won't come to the mountain, then the mountain must go to Mohammed.

Her father would have called it a suicide run. Jason would've called it rash. Flanna wasn't calling it anything. She was expelling all conscious thought from her head and operating purely on instinct.

She ran for the door at breakneck speed. This had been her method the night before, just as it had been Jason's. Run. Jump. Attack. It had served well then; they'd wounded Romm. She had to believe that it would serve well again. Because this time, it wasn't just her.

This time, Flanna was trusting Jason to attack as well.

Running meant her gun wasn't at the ready. She reached the doorway and immediately tripped over the weights Romm had placed half-hidden by the entrance. The force of falling on her hip knocked the gun from her hand, but she barely had time to register the pain shooting through her pelvis before she heard a furious snarl behind her shoulder.

She was pretty sure it wasn't Jason. Funny, but she could already tell the difference between them.

With so many obstacles scattered across the floor, Flanna couldn't roll away. She tried to scuttle instead, reaching down to her leg to pull out her silver knife, but the sudden weight of Romm on top of her caught her in an awkward twist. His breath was hot in his ear, and she felt saliva drip onto her neck. Bracing against the floor, Flanna attempted to throw him off, but his strength was too much for her.

Then, suddenly, his weight was gone.

She didn't stop to consider what had happened. She knew. Grabbing her blade, Flanna scrambled to her feet, whirling to see Romm cornering Jason against the wall. She'd hoped that it would be the other way around; she had no idea how Romm had managed to reverse their positions in just a matter of seconds. The one good thing about it, though, was that Romm's back was to her. She had a clear shot.

The knife flew out of her fingers, whistling through the air with deadly accuracy. At the last second, Romm lunged for Jason. Instead of the blade burying itself between his shoulders, it caught his thigh, slicing through his thick pelt and into the muscle.

It wasn't a killing blow, but it served to drop Romm in midleap. Jason was on him before Flanna could move. Powerful jaws opened; long canines sank into Romm's jugular. Blood spurted from the fresh wounds and drenched the wolves' fur. The sight rooted her to her spot.

Romm struggled against the other werewolf, but this was one instance where his larger size didn't help. His maimed leg and injured foot put him at a disadvantage against Jason's ferocity, and it took only a couple minutes of struggling for him to slump and then cease moving altogether. Jason didn't break his hold. His teeth sank in even deeper and he dragged the body to within a few feet of Flanna.

When he backed off and met her eyes, there was no doubt about what he wanted her to do. Two steps toward the door and her gun was back in her hand. The retort of a single bullet rang throughout the barn, and a blossom of blood began spreading across Romm's chest. There was no more movement.

Dominic Romm was finally dead.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Having a dead werewolf at her feet put Flanna into efficiency mode.

She had to get rid of the body. Though she would have loved to hand him over to the police, there was no way Flanna could justify the nasty bite marks that had torn apart Romm's throat. A bullet could be explained; the stab wound on top of it was less so, but still fell within the realm of self-defense. Even her father would struggle to find some way to account for teeth marks two inches deep that left a man's neck looking like chopped liver.

She moved with a quick competence developed by years of experience. While she worked, she felt Jason's gaze on her every step, watching from the corner of the barn to which he'd retreated. He never made a sound or ventured to get into her way. He let her do her job, even though she knew the smell of the blood was probably killing him.

The only part of the clean-up that gave her pause was the stolen car. It couldn't stay at the house; the police would know then that Romm had been there and start looking around. But the girl would already have told them what she'd said to Flanna, that Romm had been headed out of town. Combine that with his interest in Flanna, and there was no way they wouldn't come around looking for him. She had to arrange it so that they found the car somewhere else.

Putting up her hair and tucking it beneath a cap, she grabbed a pair of work gloves before rooting around in the

pile of clothes that Romm had left. Eventually, she found the keys tucked in his jeans pocket. That only left actually moving the car.

Flanna hesitated in the doorway. Jason was still lingering in the corner, and while he hadn't made a move to come with her, she could sense his confusion. She had worked in silence. As far as he knew, she wasn't coming back.

"I have to make it look like Romm got into an accident," she said, glancing back at him over her shoulder. She felt a little ridiculous. It was one thing to try and coordinate their attack through visual cues; it was another to actually talk to a wolf. She wasn't even completely certain he understood her. "I'll ... be back."

* * * *

She found the spot between her house and Birley that best suited her needs, and she set the car up to crash through the fence along the roadside. With everything now done and over, the two-mile walk back to the house afterward gave her far too much time to think.

Not one event of the night countermanded Jason's assertions about his control in his werewolf form. He'd shown up at the house, he'd helped in killing Romm, and not once had he made any sort of dangerous move toward her. If anything, it seemed like he was holding himself back.

Just like he said he could.

She arrived back at the house with a headache.

Tempting as it was, Flanna didn't immediately head to the barn. Instead, she let herself in the front door, grabbing clean

clothes and hiding away in the bathroom. Within minutes, it was filled with steam, and she was standing beneath the scalding spray, head bent against the heat, muscles turning to jelly. It was the most relaxed she'd been in forty-eight hours. It vanished as soon as she stepped out of the shower.

She forced herself to make a pot of tea. Waiting was a nightmare. Her eyes kept straying to the curtains, wondering if Jason was still out in the barn, both hoping and dreading that she would find him when she went to look. With Romm dead, there was no reason for her to avoid the talk that Jason wanted. He was going to expect her to make sort of choice about his presence in her life, and she still had little clue about what to do.

Armed with a thick blanket and a steaming thermos, Flanna finally ventured from the house, approaching the barn with trepidation. The door was still ajar, and she hesitated before poking her head inside. Her eyes adjusted to the light that filtered more softly from within. No telltale signs of the earlier fight were obvious, no metallic scents of blood, no splatterings or snags of fur. Part of the brick near the jamb was broken, but that could be attributed to just about anything, she rationalized. There was nothing that would make the police think Romm was ever there.

Taking a deep breath, Flanna hugged her comfort items closer to her body as she stepped inside the barn. Her eyes automatically went to the corner Jason had occupied when she left, but he was no longer there.

He was sniffing around the part of the room where her father had been hurt.

Flanna's eyes widened. She'd completely forgotten about the mess that had been left behind. She'd only cleaned up the detritus of tonight's fight. If for some reason the police came back, there was no way they wouldn't notice Colin's blood staining the far wall. Her work wasn't yet done.

Jason backed away when she approached, crouching to the floor while she finished cleaning up. It was almost a subservient position, like a dog at its master's feet. The sudden implication of that made Flanna's heart skip a few beats.

Her throat went dry. Trying to find the right words with Jason was hard enough when she was certain he could understand her. In this form, she was even more at a loss. In the end, she settled for, "Thank you."

* * * *

She stayed awake, even though it took four pots of tea and multiple trips to the bathroom. Jason never strayed from the barn—not that she really expected him to—and when dawn began to creep over the horizon in slivers of pink and purple along the cirrus, Flanna sat up in order to better see him change.

It wasn't the first time she'd seen a werewolf shift back into its human form. When she was twelve, her father had taken her on her first trip overseas, letting her come along on a hunt in northern Canada one sultry July. The night had been short and the chase long. By the time the werewolf was downed, dawn was on the break and Flanna watched the monster dissolve into the bruised face of a man older than

her father as it died. She'd had nightmares for two weeks afterward.

In spite of everything that had happened and everything that she now knew, this wasn't a nightmare. She watched the fur melt away into nothing, exposing Jason's lithe muscles and skin cast sallow in the barn light. She saw the long, dangerous canines shrink beneath his lips again, so that she was left staring at his sensuous mouth. She witnessed his body re-form into something she recognized as readily as she knew the werewolf's. And when his blue gaze lifted from its downward angle, his eyes were full with every soft declaration he'd ever uttered to her.

"Good morning," she said quietly.

He glanced toward the small windows near the rafters, the brightening sky already peeking through the glass. "That came sooner than I expected," he commented.

"Werewolf internal body clock?"

"No." His gaze slid back to her. He didn't bother to hide its caress as he drank her in. "Time's got this funny way of flying by too quickly when I'm with you. It's never quite enough."

She ducked her head to hide the flush of her cheeks. "I'll go grab your bag from the car," she said, untangling her long limbs in order to stand up.

"Flanna..."

It was the weary ache in her legs that made her hesitate, not the gentle whisper of his voice. At least, that's what she tried to tell herself. "Yes?"

Silence. It stretched so long that she started to move again.

"You were magnificent last night," Jason said.

His words caught her in the doorway, and she had to grip the jamb so that he couldn't see the way her hands were shaking. "We make a good team," she admitted without looking back. That was when she fled. The air was suddenly too close.

The lights came on in the house when she was rummaging in the trunk of the car. It was oddly domestic, and when she walked through the front door with his backpack dangling from her fingers, Flanna's step was lighter, her heart not quite as heavy.

The shower was running, but the bathroom door was ajar. "Flanna?" Jason called out. "Can you come here for a sec?" Only because she knew he wouldn't call if he didn't need something did Flanna go to the bathroom door.

He stood with his back to the sink, a towel wrapped loosely around his slim hips. From where she stood, she could see the vivid stitching along his shoulder, made brighter by the bruising that stained his back. "I'm not supposed to get it wet," he said in explanation. That's when she saw the bandage in his hand. "Can you help me cover it?"

Her gaze jumped between the shower and his shoulder. "Why don't you just take a bath?"

"A shower's quicker. I figured you probably wanted me out of here as soon as possible."

He couldn't meet her eyes. That, more than anything else, made up Flanna's mind.

Crossing the distance between them, she dropped the bag to his feet before reaching for the bandage. She didn't start

wrapping his injury, though. She set it on the counter before walking over to the bathtub.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked, confused.

Pushing the button on the tap, Flanna dragged her fingers through the flowing water to test its temperature as the tub slowly began to fill. "There's no reason for you to go," she said. "You might as well do this right. A bath will help you relax without aggravating your stitches."

She heard the soft shuffle of his feet across the tile, and then felt the undeniable pull of his fingers beneath her arm. Gently, he turned her around, but even when he met her gaze this time, there lingered a definite uncertainty in his eyes.

"I know you still have doubts," he said. "You really don't have to do this."

"Who said anything about have to?"

"But..." He searched her face. She wasn't sure what he found. "What about everything you said?"

"I said a lot of things." She offered a ghost of a smile.
"You'll have to be more specific, I'm afraid."

His hand fell to his side, and Jason took a step back, as if the space was necessary for them to speak. "I hurt you. And nothing else I've done can make that go away. I know I said I'd fight to convince you of my feelings and everything, but ... I won't do it by playing dirty, Flanna. This is all still raw for you, and I'm not so stupid in love not to know that. You want time to let it heal over some? I can give that to you. I want to give that to you. The last thing I want is for you to hurt any more because of me."

"Let me be the judge of what hurts and what doesn't, Jason. And I'm perfectly all right with you spending today here. I'm going to sleep this morning and then I'm going to go see my Dad. You'll have all the privacy you want."

"Oh." Her response seemed to disappoint him a little, and he turned away to pick up his backpack, opening it to pull out his toiletries bag. "Thanks."

She stopped him from turning his back on her, taking the shampoo he'd removed and setting it on the side of the tub. "Do you want to come with me?"

There was a brief flare in his eyes when he glanced at her, but Jason quickly hid it away. "You know I do."

"Then come. Dad will be glad to see you. Hopefully he'll even be awake this time."

Her attempt at levity didn't go unnoticed. The corner of his mouth lifted, and he nodded in shy gratitude as he stepped around her to the tub. "Thanks."

The warmth of the room was starting to get to her, the swell of emotion even more so. With a quick smile, Flanna headed for the door, listening to the water splash behind her as Jason slid into the tub. She was almost out of the room when his voice stopped her.

"What're we doing?"

She glanced back. The towel was strewn haphazardly on the floor where he'd dropped it, while Jason was twisted in the tub in order to look at her. His hand gripped the edge, as if he was readying to jump out at any given moment, but it was the fervent desire in his face that made Flanna's skin erupt in goose bumps.

"You and me," he continued. "This. What is it?"

"A step," she said softly. "You've had two years to get used to this, Jason. I've had less than two days. A step is the best I can give you right now."

The color came back to his fingertips as he loosened his hold on the tub. "It's a step forward, though, right? I'm not crazy in seeing it like that?"

"You're not crazy."

This time, he grinned. "Well, not about this, at least." He eased back into the water, stopping just short of submerging his shoulder. "Go get some sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

The relief suddenly flooding her with warmth surprised her. As she left the room, Flanna realized it was the happiest she'd felt since the advent of the full moon.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jason excused himself early from the visit with her father.

"You two deserve some alone time," he said as he backed toward the doorway. "And I've got stuff I'd like to get done before sunset."

Flanna knew that was a lie. Though it was mid-afternoon, they had already gone and exchanged his rental for another, and with Romm dead, Jason had little other purpose in Birley. She was actually disappointed that he was leaving; while they hadn't reached their earlier levels of closeness, relations had definitely been easier.

Her father spoke before she could stop Jason. "We'll see you tomorrow then," he said with a warm smile.

Jason nodded, but as he turned the door handle, his eyes caught Flanna's. For a moment, it looked like he was going to ask her something, but it quickly passed, and he gave a curt wave before disappearing into the hall. She was left staring at the closed door, wondering if she should have been more assertive about wanting him around.

"Have you two ... talked?"

Colin's voice was low, but whether that was a response to his growing weariness or consideration for her feelings, Flanna had no idea.

"Some," she admitted. With a sigh, she sat down on the edge of the bed, long fingers tracing abstract patterns across the hospital-issue blanket. "Probably not as much as he would've liked."

"He loves you, you know."

She could only nod.

Colin stretched an arm to rest his hand over hers, stilling the restless motions. "He's a good man, lassie. You could do far worse in this world than to have a young man like that at your side."

She risked looking up at him through her lashes. Though he was more alert than he had been, the events of the past few weeks seemed to have taken their toll on Colin, making him appear more tired and aged than she remembered ever seeing him before. It made her wonder if he was lending his support to Jason for fear of leaving Flanna alone. He had always been so vigilant about seeing that she was taken care of, the possibility didn't seem that farfetched.

"What about the fact that he's a werewolf?" she asked quietly. "Why doesn't that bother you?"

"It did," Colin admitted. "When I first heard about the curse, I wanted to shoot the boy myself for daring to come to our home. But the more I found out about him, the more I learned that he'd taken the curse and changed his life around. He took what could have been a certain death sentence and made his life mean something. That says all I need to know about the man's character."

"Jason said ... he was a do-nothing, whatever that means."

"It means he lived off his parents' money. From what I could gather, Jason used to be quite the ladies' man, which is how he got cursed in the first place."

"And you're not worried about him still being a ladies' man?"

Colin's smile was kind, but slightly condescending. "After seeing the way he trails after you, lassie? I find that highly unlikely."

Frankly, so did Flanna. But it meant something more hearing it from her father.

"Do you love him?"

There it was. The question Jason had never found the nerve to voice. Oh sure, he'd danced around the issue, asking her what her feelings were. And she'd matched him step for step, telling him she *cared* when in fact, it was eating her alive that she could love something she'd been taught her entire life to hate. The only part that still left her confused was how much of the power of her feelings was because of her anger and how much was the force of her love. That would take a little more time to sort out.

She lifted her chin to meet her father's gaze. "Yes," she said. "I do."

His hand on hers tightened. "You should tell him." "It's not that easy."

"Most any other time, I'd be inclined to agree with you. It's a gray world we live in. You've seen that firsthand now. But this time ... maybe it *is* that easy. Maybe the only thing standing in your way is you. You can be a tad stubborn, Flanna."

She couldn't help but grin. "I can't imagine where I get that from."

"Your mother," he answered without hesitation. "You should've seen how long it took me to convince her to marry me. I was about to tie her up and kidnap her in order to get

her to agree." With one last pat of her hand, Colin pulled away, settling back against his pillows. "You should catch up to him while you can. There's not much time before sunset, you know."

She knew. And suddenly, the desire to be there while he prowled through the night, to see just what Jason did when it was just him without a mission or an audience, consumed her. When she rose to her feet, her eyes were grateful.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Flanna promised, bending to kiss his cheek.

"Bring me some decent food when you come. The stuff here could kill me."

She was laughing as she left. For whatever reason, the world suddenly seemed a whole lot simpler to her.

* * * *

Jason's car was gone from the hospital lot, and Flanna sped through Birley in hopes of catching up to him. When she didn't overtake him, she continued on to her house, even more disappointed when his rental wasn't there, either. That left only one more place for him to go. A quick glance at the sun on the horizon told her she didn't have much time before talking with Jason ceased to be an option.

She almost smiled when she saw the car parked in front of the Kesbury cottage. At least she'd finally caught up, she thought as she knocked on the door. Her good mood faded, however, when nobody came to answer. A peek through the window revealed an empty interior, and a scout around the rear found the back door locked as well.

With a frown, Flanna returned to her car, driving away slowly while she tried to decide what to do. Obviously, Jason wanted to be alone. Maybe when he was in werewolf form, she mused, he found it easier to be solitary than around other people. It could be how he helped control his baser instincts as well. Without an enemy to hunt, it was likely he just needed to be someplace where he wouldn't have to worry about how he might inflict harm on someone.

She knew then where it was he was going. Her foot pressed a little bit harder on the accelerator as she raced to get home.

* * * *

She wore her usual running gear, armed only with a silver blade strapped to her leg. While the moon hanging low on the horizon meant Jason had already changed, there would be no point for any other weapons. If it turned out that that assumption was wrong, she would have her answer, once and for all.

Even at a light jog, her body protested. Too much had happened in the last forty-eight hours for it to enjoy any exercise. Let me rest, it screamed at her, but Flanna forced those thoughts aside as she ran toward the path Jason had always favored. There would be time enough for rest later. After the full moon. After she'd seen Jason. After.

She saw him when she crested the first hill. The moonlight was a cold wash of silver across the green, laying bare the field for anyone to see. At its center was Jason, tearing across the grass as if abandoning everything behind. Her breath

caught at the power in his lithe frame. As a rule, werewolves were not attractive creatures, but the feral grace of his gait was too compelling to ignore. She was mesmerized by the rippling of his muscles beneath his sleek pelt as he raced toward the far horizon.

Then he came to a halt so abruptly that she thought he'd hurt himself.

When his head swung around to face her, Flanna realized she'd been foolish to think she could go undetected for long. Waiting for him to approach, though, stretched her nerves taut. Because he didn't. He just stared in her direction. She imagined she could see the silver in his eyes, but she knew that was just romantic thinking on her part. He was too far away for such nonsense.

He started to run again, continuing on the path he'd chosen when she'd arrived. This time, his pace was slower, more controlled, allowing her to keep up without losing ground. She didn't gain either. There stayed a constant length between them, two shadows creeping across the earth as they chased the ever-moving moon.

When Jason slowed to a walk, so did she. There was no need to shatter the spell that was wound between them. All she wanted was to feel what he did, see what he saw. He seemed to know just how long she needed to catch her wind, picking up his pace again scant seconds before she would have made the decision for herself. They continued like this for hours, until the protests of Flanna's body grew too clamorous to ignore, and she stopped for the first time since sighting him.

He ran for only a few more steps before noticing she was no longer moving. Flanna waited until he looked back to her before turning away, deliberately choosing the direction she needed to return home. She didn't glance back. There was no need. Within moments, she heard the soft whisper of the grass as Jason resumed his path, this time choosing hers as his compass.

She smiled against the slight breeze.

Exhaustion was winning by the time she reached home, and it took all of her remaining strength to struggle with the lock on the front door. Crossing the threshold, she groaned as her skin prickled, the heat from the foyer's radiators awakening her chilled flesh almost painfully. Flanna let the warmth work its magic for a moment, and then glanced back through the doorway, tired eyes searching the front garden for his familiar shadow.

She found it at the mouth of the drive. Jason made no move to approach the house, but neither did he turn and run away. He seemed content to sit and watch, and astonishingly, Flanna found that comforting.

"Good night," she murmured, and closed the door.

* * * *

Pale light slivering through her blinds woke her up just after dawn. Though her body was sore and begging for more rest, Flanna pushed back the duvet and rose to her feet, stretching to alleviate the tightness of her muscles. They burned with the satisfaction of a good night's sleep. She

might not have slept long, but those precious hours had been worth their weight in gold.

The smell of tea drew her downstairs. At the kitchen door, she hesitated, her heart beating just a fraction faster. But when she went in, the room was vacant. Only the warm pot was there to greet her.

She was pouring herself a cup when the back door opened and Jason came inside. His eyes immediately flew to hers, and the wariness that had been there the previous morning returned.

"Good morning," he said, his voice oddly neutral.

"You made tea," she replied with a smile. "I'm going to Anglicize you yet."

"That's because you don't have any decent coffee in this country." His joke was soft, his gaze dark, but while he perceptibly relaxed, Jason remained on the opposite end of the room. "I didn't think you'd be up this early. You were ... up late last night."

"I guess my mind decided it had enough rest." When it looked like he might edge toward the door, she rushed to add, "Do you remember?"

She didn't have to elaborate. She could see in the way his lashes lowered for the briefest of moments that he understood what she meant.

"I always said you looked beautiful in the moonlight," he said. His tone was clear, unabashed, and when he looked at her, it felt like rough silk being dragged across her heated skin. "I just ... I guess I don't understand why you followed me. You made it clear..."

"That I needed time," she finished for him. "Nothing else."
"Was last night another step?"

"I hadn't meant it to be. But ... yes. It was."

He moved to the end of the counter, closer but still beyond her reach if she chose to try and touch him. "I didn't kill anybody last night," he said, suddenly vehement. "After you went to sleep, I stayed out front and watched the moon go down. I never left the property."

Flanna nodded. "I believe you."

Those three words caught him off guard, leaving him staring at her in wide-eyed astonishment for the space of several pounding heartbeats. Then he was moving, standing in front of her, strong hands reaching up, cupping her face, pulling her to him so that his hot mouth could devour hers.

She didn't hesitate to respond, leaning into his lean frame as her arms went around his back. His muscles twitched beneath his T-shirt, as if he was struggling to control himself, and Flanna felt the growing hardness of his arousal pressing against her pelvis. All the while, his tongue was sweeping over hers, so hungry and demanding that she was left panting when he stopped just long enough to murmur her name. All she could think of was that she'd missed this. Missed him. It felt too right to be in his arms.

He was the one who broke the kiss, and it was Jason who stepped out of the circle of her embrace. His breath was shaky, his cheeks flushed, and he couldn't quite meet her eyes as he raked his lean fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want to push it like that. I know it's too soon for you."

Watching him pace around the room brought back the ghosts of the previous night. She could see the animal grace in his movements now, knew just what the source of his power was. And now, it didn't seem to matter.

"I kissed you, too," Flanna said.

That made him stop, and his head jerked up so that his electric gaze bored into her. "That's right. You did."

"You're not going to ask me why?"

"Would it do me any good?"

"That never seemed to stop you before."

Jason paused, eyes narrowing as he seemed to consider what she said. "Nobody can say I don't like to live dangerously, so I guess I'll bite. Why did you kiss me back, Flanna?"

"Because I love you." She said it softly, almost a rush of air more than actual speech. Confession hadn't been her goal when she'd awakened, but after everything, it seemed like the natural step to take. "Because ... I think I can trust you."

The effect on him was the same as when she said she believed him. One moment he was gaping in shock. The next, she was pinned to the counter behind her, his hands knotted in the hair at the back of her neck while Jason lost himself in another kiss.

His arousal was unmistakable, and as soon as he'd eased enough away from her, Flanna slipped her hand between their bodies to stroke him beneath his sweats. Jason growled at the contact, the rumbles vibrating through both of them, and when he grasped her shoulders to push away, she feared for a moment that she'd gone too far.

"Not here," he said, his voice rough. "I want to do this right."

Suddenly, so did she. Taking his hand, Flanna brushed past Jason to lead him out of the room, heading straight for the stairs and up to her bedroom. Her duvet was still mussed, the sheets twisted, but Jason didn't seem to care as he pushed her onto the mattress, sliding up the length of her body until she was covered with his.

"We still haven't talked about what's going to happen," he murmured.

She smiled, catching her bottom lip coquettishly between her teeth. "You really feel like talking right now?" As if to prove her point, her hands slid around to cup his ass, pushing his cock harder into the cleft between her thighs.

He groaned, and though she could see the desire in his eyes, he remained motionless above her. "I don't want this to be an excuse not to."

"It's not. It's me showing you how much I want you as a part of my life." Before he could fight her, Flanna rolled him to the side, straddling his hips as she pinned him against the bed. "We'll talk afterward," she whispered, her mouth trailing hot kisses along his jaw. "Right now, I want to love you."

He didn't fight her when she sat up. With their eyes locked, Flanna grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head, the cooler air pebbling her nipples even more than they already were. Jason licked his lips, watching with rabid attention as she cupped her breasts, ran feathery strokes along the underside of the curves.

"You make me feel beautiful, you know," she said.

His gaze flew to her face. "That's because you are."

Her hands slid lower, dipping beneath the waistband of her sleep shorts to begin pushing them down. She had to lift herself up to a kneeling position, and the bed shifted precariously below her as she balanced first on one knee and then the other while she stripped, but quickly, the shorts were gone, allowing her to lower herself back down to his hips.

"We have to take it a little easier," she said. His T-shirt was riding up, exposing his hard stomach, and she pushed at the cotton in order to be able to touch him without hindrance. Her fingertips burned where they came into contact with his skin, tiny flames that made her tremble, tempting her to do more than the simple caressing.

"I'm going to have to buy you a new bed, then." Though he was smiling, there was a hungry gleam in his bright eyes. "Easy's OK this time, but there's going to come a day when I'm not going to want to worry about running out of room or breaking the box spring."

Her lips twitched, and she tugged the shirt up to his shoulders, forcing him to lift enough in order to slide it off. "Actually, I was referring to your stitches," Flanna said. Her gaze drifted to the scarlet line, fingers skimming over the sutures. "I'd rather not have to explain to the doctor how you managed to tear them. I still have to live in this town, you know."

"For now." When she looked at him in confusion, he clarified, "There's a whole world out there for us to explore. You've spent your life doing everything for your duty and your

family. I think even your father would agree that you deserve a little time for yourself."

That prospect had offered itself once but she had quickly turned away from it, too much else taking precedence for consideration. Hearing Jason make the suggestion filled her both with excitement and fear, and she leaned over to brush a soft kiss across his mouth.

"That sounds like a topic for later," she said. "After I have you screaming my name."

His chuckle made her skin vibrate. "I think we've already proven that's what I do when I come."

"Experiments must be repeatable in order to be taken as fact."

"Then I guess we better stop talking and get to work." His hands buried themselves in the thick tangle of her hair, guiding her back for another kiss. This one was slower, though just as hungry, coaxing her to respond with every silken glide of his tongue.

Flanna shivered against his skin. Being careful not to touch his shoulders, she skimmed her palms down his sides, noting the faint squirm when she reached a particularly sensitive spot and then continuing onward until she reached the band of his sweats. The outline of his erection was nestled firmly against her pussy, and she was sure there would be a wet spot when she peeled his pants away. After everything they'd been through, she was loath to break contact with him even for a second, but she had no choice if she wanted to get the impeding garment out of her way.

She moved without breaking the kiss. Hips up, knees bracing her weight, Flanna pushed and prodded at the sweats until they were far enough down his legs for Jason to take over. The sound of his cock slapping against his abdomen when it sprang free was muffled by her body pressing down to his once again, and she nearly groaned out loud when his warm length slid back between the outer lips of her pussy.

Jason groaned then, and he tore away from her mouth, only to sink his teeth into her shoulder. "God," he muttered. "Do you have any idea how delicious you smell? It always killed me before, because I knew if I said anything, you'd start asking questions about how I could tell. But ... god, Flanna..." His eyes were black with desire as he turned them back to her face. "I don't think there's a single part of you that I don't love. I never would've expected that, not with my history, but damn if it isn't true. And I'm going to spend every second proving it to you."

With nothing more separating them, the heat emanating from his skin was saturating her, heightening the slightest of touches into something much, much more. "You already are," she whispered. Bending to kiss him again, she reached between their bodies to grasp his throbbing cock, angling it just enough to rest the tip at her wet opening.

She shivered when he entered her, a combination of his thick shaft stretching her pussy and her sensitive nipples brushing against his chest. Jason's arms came around her, holding her close while she completed the stroke, murmuring words she couldn't quite make out into her neck. For a long moment, she held still, luxuriating in the way he filled her,

breathing in the heady scent of his skin. When she finally began moving, sliding slowly up and down his length, they both sighed with satisfaction.

"I love you," she said, and repeated it over and over until the words took form between them, growing with every thrust, every beat, every pulse. Now there was no holding back. The last of the walls was down, pulled apart and thrown aside to lie abandoned in their need for each other, and they were oblivious to everything but the rising frenzy of their bodies, the slick glide of skin against skin as their hunger grew more desperate.

Jason's groans of pleasure became growls, his nails digging deeper into her hips as he pushed her faster, her answering thrusts growing deliberately stronger. When he began nibbling at her breast, working his way down the upper curve to find her nipple taut and ready for his mouth, shocks too numerous to count began shooting straight to her clit, electric and startling. Then he bit into the hard tip, and the world shattered around her.

Flanna screamed, arching up and away so that the length of him was driven even deeper into her pussy. Though she never broke her rhythm, her internal muscles spasmed and clenched, squeezing him tighter as she rode him through the crest of her orgasm. Each stroke became its own fractured universe, separate and enough on its own, crushing and bearing her back down as they tumbled one upon another until she fell forward again, desperate to feel his mouth back on hers, hungry for the taste of his tongue.

He came with his arms around her. Through their kisses, she felt him tense, then shudder before he shot deep inside, continuing to pump with ever-slowing strokes until finally he stilled. All she could feel then was the ferocious pounding of his heart, his pulse so vivid that it made his skin vibrate. The knowledge that she could do that to him made her smile.

Jason used his hold on her to roll her to the side, slipping his arm free so that he could prop his head up and look at her. "What's so funny?" he asked. His voice was honeyed, relaxed from the force of his orgasm. She loved how even that could warm her so completely.

"Nothing," she replied. "I'm just ... happy, I guess."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "You guess? What's it going to take to make you sure?" He nudged his hips against hers, his semi-hard cock nuzzling against her mound. "There's no way you can deny how good that was. Even if I didn't get to be on top."

She traced a finger along the line of his shoulder, dipping down to his chest before coming to his stitches. "And here I thought you'd be all keen to try it from behind," she said, straining for nonchalance.

His eyes went wide at her unexpected levity. "Do my ears deceive me? Did you actually just make a joke about doing it doggy-style?"

Flanna slapped playfully at his chest. "Oh, please. Like the thought hasn't crossed your mind."

"Well, yeah, but that's because you've got a gorgeous ass..." He laughed when she tried to push him away in protest, lying back so that he could pull her against his side.

"We've got all the time in the world to try things out," he said. "Right now, I just want to feel you in my arms. Yesterday this time, I wasn't so sure I'd ever get that again."

"You've got it," she murmured. Her lashes drifted closed as the warmth of their bodies began to overtake her. "For always."

Somewhere in the ether, she heard Jason whisper his love for her, a simple caress of words that almost did more to drive away her doubts than even their lovemaking had. Through the gentle stroking of his hand along her spine, she whispered it back, taking great satisfaction when his hold tightened almost compulsively around her.

"I love you," she repeated. She was learning that she wasn't the only one who needed the verbal reminder, but then again, Jason was taking her headfirst into a world where she strongly suspected she was going to learn something new on a daily basis. It was terrifying, exhilarating, all too alarming in how badly she wanted it. For the first time in her life, she was getting the chance to be both woman and hunter, loved and lover.

Flanna smiled.

Nothing had ever sounded so good.

The End

About the Author:

Vivien was born in a house very familiar with the written word. The daughter of an author and sportswriter, she fell in love early on with the stories that played inside her head, transcribing the first of those at the age of five. She moved

on to explore other formats, including acting and film production, but always came back to her storytelling roots.

Currently, Vivien resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children. She's thrilled to be back to her romantic roots, and looks forward to sharing with you some of the voices that have been living inside her head. Under a Rogue Moon is Vivien's second book; her first, Chains of Jericho is a 2006 EPPIE finalist. Visit Vivien online at www.viviendean.com

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