

Changeling Press

She's the One

Riley Ashford

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by Riley Ashford

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Assassin Cass Rogers has a single mission: kill Queen Isolde's cousin to prevent his claim to her throne. She tracks Kirk Raynard to his crappy mansion on the outskirts of a Midwestern town, and she finds him happily ensconced with his werewolf lover, Jaron, and their mate: a pregnant human named Leann.

Even though Cass isn't a fan of the antiquated vampire court or its crazy queen, the payment for her services will be immortal life. Better to live as a bloodsucker than to die at twenty-six, all because her stupid human heart is giving out on her.

Erick and Tarn are warriors sent by their pack's Tribunal to take out Jaron and the woman carrying his abomination. Erick and Tarn are also lovers, both looking for the female mate who will breed with them and keep their warrior lines going.

Cass attacks them as they try to enter the vampire's lair, and she nearly kicks both their asses. They realize they've found a worthy candidate—if she's willing to become werewolf. When Cass suggests they work together to complete the assignment, they agree on one condition: share a night in their bed ... and survive it.

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Chapter One

Cass Rogers peered through the thick branches of the pine tree that hid her presence. She was twenty feet up clinging to the trunk, her feet lightly resting on a limb not quite as thick as her arm. Below her was the dilapidated old mansion that belonged to Kirk Raynard.

In the whole house, only two rooms showed evidence of occupation—upstairs on the right, the master suite with its elaborate, leaf-strewn balcony, and downstairs on the left, the smaller space once used as a parlor. Given the fragrant smoke rising from the chimneys and the flickering colors that painted the windows, it was safe to say the only sources of heat and light were the wood-burning fireplaces.

Sheesh. You'd think a vampire could pay his electric bill. And hello? Summer was not the time for cozy fires in hearths.

The wind kicked up, the first volley from the threatening storm. The branches rattled and the top of the tree swayed. Cass readjusted her grip, inhaling the sharp sting of pine. Here in this Midwestern cesspit, August meant it was unbearably hot and humid. Sweat popped out on her forehead and dribbled down her temples. Usually she wore a jacket to hide her Walther PPK snug in its shoulder holster, but she couldn't add another layer to her long-sleeved knit shirt, jeans, and boots—all black. Her knives were hidden in their usual spots.

The unseasonable clothing, including the gloves, was necessary for her concealment. Her skin was too pale, more a

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result of her declining health than lack of sunshine. Though she didn't particularly enjoy daylight activities.

Good thing, too.

Cass continued to study the mansion for what seemed like the fiftieth time in two days. Without electricity or any obvious security system, getting into the house would be easy. Especially if she entered through the broken attic window. It was small, but even though she was tall, she was slender. She'd fit through, so long as she held her breath and sucked in her stomach.

No, the house wasn't a prob.

The werewolves were.

She'd counted three, not including the one already in the house with Kirk and the human woman. She hadn't seen the girl with her own eyes. The audio bug she'd placed on the bedroom window yesterday confirmed her presence. Cass's stomach clenched. She couldn't imagine being a bloodsucker's pet. A couple of the vampires lounging around Queen Isolde's sumptuous throne room had had humans sitting next to them like dogs on leashes. It made her sick, the way that asshole Carlos kept nibbling the neck of his female slave. She was naked, and pale from blood loss. And the look in her eyes...

Cass shuddered. She'd rather be dead.

The biggest werewolf she'd ever seen, though her paranormal education had only begun a month ago, padded through the open front door of the house. She saw shadows pass in the bottom floor window, so that wolfie was hanging out in there.

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"Fuck," she muttered. She'd had bad odds before, but dealing with four werewolves, a vampire, and a potential mental case? And even if she managed to complete her objective and live, she still had to worry about whether or not the vampire queen would keep her word.

Queen Isolde was pissed off at her cousin for missing the annual tribute in June. Not only had he dissed her by not presenting a juicy human morsel, he'd screwed up her plans to assassinate him. He was the last link to the royal family, the only vampire with any real shot of icing the queen and getting away with it.

"And that's why I have to kill you, buddy." Her gaze flicked to the top floor. The French doors were closed. The frosted glass on the panes prevented her from a direct look into the room, though it didn't hide the dancing firelight. The audio bug confirmed all three were in there, the vampire, his werewolf lover, and the woman. And they were having fun.

It had been a while since she'd had that kind of fun.

Getting laid was the least of her worries right now. And besides, the human might be glamoured or too scared to protest the bedroom games. Though she giggled an awful lot. Not that Cass was opposed to a little bondage, a little forced seduction, or a little spanking.

Her panties got wet.

Snap out of it!

She needed to survive, and that meant pulling off this job for the vampire queen. Cass didn't belong to the antiquated world of the vampire court. Actually, she wasn't a

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bloodsucker. Not yet. All she had to do was stake this Kirk dude, and Isolde would change her.

She hoped that was where her obligation ended, though she suspected she'd made a deal with the devil. The queen was not the beneficent type. Either she'd sent Cass to her death because she loved to cause pain and misery, or she wanted to utilize Cass's skills as an assassin. Screw that. No way was she gonna spend her new eternity offing the queen's enemies. After she was changed, all she had to do was keep out of Queen Isolde's range. She was one scary bitch and crazy, too.

Cass studied the area surrounding the mansion. Thickly wooded, embedded at the top of a hill with a steep drive, the place was isolated. And it wasn't exactly well protected, which would usually make it perfect for a hit. Dealing with the werewolves would be a pain in the ass.

If she could incapacitate them, she could probably drive the oak stake through Kirk's heart, which was the only surefire way to kill vamps, and rescue the girl. She hoped this Leann wanted to be rescued. Otherwise...

It wasn't that Cass was opposed to killing women. Putting down any living thing because death was the better option, well, that made her stomach cramp. Hey, even she'd cried at the end of "Old Yeller." If Leann was broken, if Kirk and that werewolf of his had killed her spirit; then taking the girl out would be a mercy.

Jesus. She'd thought humans were the biggest assholes on the planet. Then she'd met Queen Isolde and entered a whole new world of cruelty.

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The wind was getting stronger, and in the distance, thunder cracked. The tree shook, harder this time, and Cass's booted feet scraped against the limb.

Okay. Time to go.

As she climbed down, she solidified her plans. She'd wait for the storm, which would make good cover. So would the old manse with its many creaks and groans. No one would think twice if she hit a squeaky stair, especially with rain pounding the exterior.

Before entering the house, she'd take out the two wolves she'd spotted pacing the wooded area abutting the untamed backyard. At some point, it had been fenced, but not much was left of the wrought iron. They hadn't come near the house, choosing to watch it from their hidden locations.

After dispatching them, she would sneak into the house and get to Kirk before anyone got to her. She was good at hand-to-hand combat and knife fights; her father had made sure of that. Still, her Walther PPK with its suppressor was a far better tool for murder.

Unless the target was a vampire.

Yeah, silver hurt vampires, but not even silver bullets would kill them instantly. She'd heard about some new kind of poison mixed with silver flakes that was fatal to vamps, but she didn't know how to get hold of it or how it was administered. She preferred more foolproof methods. Poison had too many variables, not least of which was the quality of the death. She killed people, yeah. Honestly, most of her targets deserved killing. But that didn't mean she made them suffer. Quick. Clean. Done.

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Cutting off a vampire's head wasn't even a surety. If the head came in contact with the neck, it could suture back together. Yeah. That info had freaked her. But whack through the neck with a pure silver blade ... then the fanged one was toast.

She'd procured two pure silver daggers. Expensive as hell, and the only insurance she had for incapacitating wolves. Granted, they reacted more violently to the substance, but it took a lot of silver to kill them. And silver had to stay in contact with the wolf for a long time.

At least that's what her sources had told her. She'd never killed vampires or werewolves, so she didn't have firsthand knowledge of the weaknesses, much less the death knells, of either species. She wasn't exactly feeling her best, not with her ticker failing, and going into a new situation with this much risk ... well, it was no wonder she felt foreboding lining her guts like lead.

She stopped lollygagging on the last limb, and jumped to the ground. Her arsenal included her usual weaponry, along with the silver daggers, and the bullets Carlos had given her.

She grimaced. He was Queen Isolde's consort, but it was easier to get out of the queen's favor than to gain it. The fact that Carlos had held Isolde's attention for more than a month was impressive—at least according to the gossips at court. Her last lover had been stupid enough to take another woman into his bed. The pair had been dismembered with a silver sword, their heads stuck on pikes and kept in the queen's bedroom.

Yuck.

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It was one thing to kill, and another to bask in the aftermath of murder. That was the difference between Cass and a serial killer. That, and the money. She never did a hit for free. And never, ever for jollies. Some people were just sick.

So, yeah. Carlos had given her the silver bullets, not because the queen told him to, but because he wanted Cass to owe him. She leaned against the tree, and took a moment to gather her thoughts. Instead, her mind opened the door to the night she'd left New Orleans. She'd been in her hotel room, packing, and Carlos had just ... appeared.

There was something off about the vampire. He was creepily charismatic. He was good-looking, even if he was soulless. Definitely a drink-the-Kool-Aid kind of guy. That made him dangerous, and not only to her.

He wore leather gloves to protect his skin from the effects of the silver. He dropped the bullets into her open palm. "Bring me back six," he said, "and you'll owe me nothing."

"And if I use them?"

He cupped her cheek with his gloved hand, his eyes going black. "For every bullet used, I will ask one favor. It's a fair trade."

Cass had thought about handing them back, and maybe even putting the oak stake into the bastard's heart, but tamped down the impulse. If her father had taught her nothing else, it was to think before she acted.

"You think you can buy real silver bullets?" His voice had gone soft, seductive. "Who do you think cornered the silver market? Werewolves. They control silver because it's the one

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substance that can harm them." He let her go and stepped back. "It doesn't stop peddlers from selling fakes. Sometimes, there's actual silver in them, but that hardly matters. Only pure silver rounds will affect werewolves ... or vampires."

He knew she'd purchased silver rounds. Or thought she had. He'd either followed her to the specialty shop, or had her followed, and she didn't know why. Other than he was a nosy bastard. "You want me to owe you?" she'd asked.

"I want everyone to owe me," he said. "That's how you survive in this world. Remember that." He'd flickered like an image on a bad film reel, and disappeared.

Cass had packed the bullets.

Maybe it wasn't weird that Carlos had the rounds. But it was mondo weird that they were .320 caliber, which fit her PPK perfectly. It could be a coincidence. Or he could've had them specially made. And if he had, that begged all sorts of questions she didn't want to answer.

Eight bullets, which were usually six more than she needed. Firing the one in the chamber was enough to kill, especially when it hit the forehead or the temple. But she always put another round in the heart.

One round in the chamber, and seven more in the magazine. The first two were her own bullets, the other six were the silver. She hoped to hell she didn't use them because she didn't want to owe Carlos.

Although the fact she'd even borrowed them probably constituted a favor. She shuddered.

Humph. She could always stake him.

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Oh, what was she worried about? He could be a fleshy Popsicle in Isolde's room by now, as far as she knew. Even if the queen was besotted by Carlos's looks and charms, Isolde wasn't stupid. She hadn't reigned for the last four centuries by sheer luck. She had to know he was angling for more than just sitting at her right hand. Cass had killed enough dictators to know a power monger when she saw one. She bet the queen did, too.

Cass shook off thoughts of Carlos.

She inhaled a cleansing breath then blew it out slowly. After a minute of deep breathing and focusing on the first task of the job, she used the trees for cover and started walking around to the back of the house.

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Chapter Two

"Maybe we should shift back," said Erick Kragen. "Sitting here naked is kinda stupid."

"It was your idea to go human for a while. Besides, I like the view just fine." Tarn Ladreau leaned against another tree, taking in everything around them, including Erick's dick. "We agreed no clothes until the mission is over. We've destroyed enough of our wardrobe during shifts."

"Not just during shifts." Erick grinned.

Tarn laughed, and it was good to hear the sound. Not that Tarn was ever the life of the party. He didn't find much humor in life; in fact, Erick was one of the few people who could get the man to crack a smile. Anyway, there had been little occasion for joy, or sex, during the trip out here. He missed northern California, especially the forests there, and couldn't wait to get home.

They'd been roaming the area in their wolf forms waiting for the storm to let loose. Erick had gotten bored, and shifted into his human form. After Tarn shifted, too, and had bitched about him breaking cover, he decided that maybe it would be all right to hang out naked in the forest. Tarn wouldn't admit it, but Erick's more relaxed attitude occasionally rubbed off on him. Besides, they were alone out here except for some woodland rodents, and nobody in the house had a clue that assassins were waiting for an opportunity to off them.

He re-positioned himself against the wide base of the oak tree. The bark made his skin itch. From their vantage point,

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they could see the back of the creepy old house. The brewing storm was rumbling louder now, and he could smell the change in the air. It would rain soon, and then, they would sneak inside and do their duty as warriors. As members of the pack.

Still, killing their friend sucked ass.

"The Tribunal will be pissed when we tell 'em that we tore out his throat."

"They did not forbid us," said Tarn, though his voice was edged in worry. "And no matter what the Tribunal says about Jaron, he should be killed honorably."

The fact that Tarn was going against the spirit of the Tribunal's orders obviously bothered him. But at the end of the day, Tarn stuck by his own principles, even if they clashed with the elders. It was a quality that Erick admired, when it wasn't irritating the fuck out of him.

His gaze wandered over Tarn. His lover was ten years older, thirty-one to his twenty-one. He was 6'6", built like a goddamned ancient oak. Thick with muscles, and those shoulders ... those thighs ... that cock.

He felt his own cock stir. It had been a week since they'd had sex. A week! In all the time they'd been together, they'd never gone that long without fucking—unless they'd been dispatched to different missions. Ever since they'd proclaimed their relationship, it was rare to get opposing assignments. The Tribunal might look askance at their mating, but they couldn't deny Erick and Tarn made one helluva team.

Erick was horny. If he thought Tarn would give in to a quickie, he'd go over there right now and suck his cock.

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He licked his lips, thinking about how Tarn tasted, about the feel of his shaft pumping in and out of his mouth. Oh, yeah. His cock hardened, and his nipples pebbled.

Slow down there, idiot. It's not gonna happen. This is Tarn, remember?

Erick sighed. Tarn had been distant lately, and had rebuffed Erick's attempts to get him into bed. Tenderly delivered rejection was still rejection. And Tarn wasn't exactly a talker. His emotions were fully owned by him. No sharing. Erick didn't go around spouting poetry or reading self-help books, but he also wasn't as internal as Tarn. He didn't stew. He blew up. Anyway, something big was bothering the T-man and Erick knew from experience there was no getting it out of him until he was ready to spill.

"We don't have time," said Tarn, though his voice had gone hoarse. Erick noticed Tarn's penis had gotten a little hitch in its giddy-up. That was a relief. At least Tarn still wanted him.

"We don't have time for what?" Erick asked innocently. His cock twitched and he gripped it, giving it a solid yank.

"You gonna jerk off?"

Erick let go of his shaft. "I was hoping you might do the honors."

"Later. Don't lose focus." Tarn's gaze returned to searching the perimeter.

Damn. The man was all about principles, always had been. Tarn wouldn't indulge in a woodland quickie, not if there was a Tribunal-sanctioned duty to fulfill.

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Erick picked up a rock and tossed it from hand to hand. He was getting antsy again. They'd checked out the place last night, figured out how to get in, gone over the plan a billion times. Booooring.

"Why not just ban Jaron?" he asked idly. "He'd already left."

"If he hadn't put his seed into a human, he'd still be waking up tomorrow morning. And he'd still be able to return to the pack."

Erick dropped the pebble he'd been messing with. Yeah, yeah. What did the Tribunal know? They were a bunch of old farts with nothing better to do than boss around pack members. "Before he left, Jaron wouldn't even consider taking a female to his bed. He said he wouldn't be forced into breeding."

"He's been gone for almost a year. Who knows what happened to him." Tarn shook his head. "He was the last of his line. The Celtic wolves die with him."

"No," said Erick, his voice quiet. "They die with his child."

He wanted to hit something: the tree, the ground, the smug face of Elder Roderick. He'd been the one to deliver the Tribunal's decree. They'd invited them to the cavern, the very place where the first wolf shape-shifters slept and ate and lived, and assigned them the task of killing Jaron Dunmore. The Tribunal still did their business in the cavern of their ancestors, though its members seemed much more concerned about politics and nonsensical dictates than the welfare of the pack. Or so it seemed to Erick.

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But not to Tarn. Tarn, who followed the regs every single day of his life. Erick had been drawn to him, not only because he was older, but also because he offered the kind of security Erick never had. Tarn was consistent. He was steady. He was thoughtful. He *planned*.

Erick ... not so much.

"The Elders forget we had human ancestors." Erick glanced at Tarn, who was staring at him and frowning. Well, he could frown all he wanted. He had doubts about this course of action, too.

Jaron was their friend. They'd fought beside him, laughed with him, and helped him mourn his sister, Grelde. Erick felt as though a hot brick had landed on his chest and then slid onto his stomach. He'd known her, of course. She'd only been a couple years older. He hadn't yet revealed his preference for males; in fact, he'd dated around just to give everyone the impression he liked girls.

Tarn had courted the young Grelde. The Tribunal had approved their match, but Tarn had admitted they were not in love. Still, they were devoted to each other, and both deeply respected their duties to the pack. She'd conceived on their wedding night, but she and the baby died during childbirth.

Erick had been seventeen, and only just named warrior of his father's line. He'd trained with Tarn, and genuinely liked the man. He wasn't sure when he'd started crushing on him. After Tarn married Grelde, Erick had requested another mentor.

A year passed.

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The night of his eighteenth birthday, Erick got stupid drunk. He decided the only birthday present he wanted was a night with Tarn. So, he stumbled up to the man's house, knocked on the door, and when the warrior answered wearing only a pair of jeans and a pissed-off expression, Erick had kissed him.

Tarn hadn't protested. He simply dragged Erick into the house, threw him onto the couch, and fucked him senseless. Erick knew right then and there, he was in love.

It took Tarn a little longer to come to the same realization.

Still, here they were, a couple looking for their female mate. The Tribunal usually ignored gay relationships so long they didn't interfere with anyone's duties. Erick wasn't sure about adding a female into the mix. Tarn wouldn't mind, but even though Erick had slept with women—okay, *two* women—it wasn't the same kind of thrill as fucking a guy. He didn't like the idea of sharing Tarn. And he really didn't like the idea of mating with a female just to please those Tribunal jerks.

Jaron had felt the same way. The elders told Jaron they expected him to mate, and if he did not, they couldn't see the point of him sticking around. Basically it was a polite way of saying he either married a girl or he should get lost.

So, Jaron got lost.

And now, after giving up his friends and his status in the pack, he'd found a female he was willing to sleep with. A human, but who cared? He was gonna be a father. Erick thought about Jaron's child growing in his mate's womb. She was nearly at term. The pack had only recently become aware of the pregnancy, and the Tribunal had acted quickly. Hybrid

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breeding was an intolerable sin against the purebloods. Jaron had committed treason, which was an automatic death sentence. He would die, and so would the woman carrying his abomination.

Erick's stomach squeezed with dread. He didn't want to kill his friend. And he sure as hell didn't want to hurt a mother-to-be. "Tarn ... what right do we have to kill someone not of the pack?"

"What she carries in her womb is of the pack." Tarn stood up and walked to Erick, holding out his hand. Erick took it and allowed Tarn to pull him up into his embrace. "I know what this is about," said Tarn, smoothing back Erick's shaggy blond locks. "We will find a mate we both enjoy. She will have our children. I promise we'll be a real family."

"Unless the Tribunal does to us what they're doing to Jaron. Maybe he wouldn't have left or hooked up with a human if they hadn't tried to force him to mate."

"Stop it, Erick." Tarn sighed and though Erick was only a couple inches shorter than him, he still tucked Erick's head under his chin and held him close. As annoyed as Erick was with his partner, he couldn't help but wrap his arms around Tarn and press close to his muscled chest. His heartbeat kicked up a notch.

"The Tribunal must sometimes make unpopular choices for the benefit of the pack. What if others starting producing children with humans?"

"We'd have more shape-shifters."

"Erick..."

Erick knew that tone. It was Tarn's you'll-understand-when-you're-older Dad voice. Argh!

"Don't patronize me! You never fucking listen. And you know what? That pisses me off." He pushed out of Tarn's arms and glared at him. He wanted to be heard, and he was tired of Tarn ignoring his opinions. "What's duty without honor? I don't care how we kill Jaron. It's wrong."

Tarn grabbed Erick by the forearms and slammed him against the oak. He pressed against Erick, chest to chest, thighs to thighs, cock rubbing against cock, his massive strength leashed by his ever-present patience. Erick wished he were capable of that kind of control. But he was impulsive, and he knew it. He hated to wait around, not when he could take action and get things going.

"You think I'm more a boy than a man," he said bitterly. His chin jutted out, an act of petulance. He knew that he was being childish, which didn't exactly help his boy vs. man case. But he was angry, damn it.

Tarn reached between them and grabbed Erick's cock, his gaze icy as a glacier. "I don't fuck boys."

"Is that what you're going to do?" Erick laughed derisively. "Yeah, right."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Erick thrust into Tarn's loose grip. The feel of Tarn's calloused palm against his sensitive flesh felt good. "It means you wouldn't let sex, or love, get in the way of doing your duty."

"Did you ever think that I follow duty because I love you, and our pack?"

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Erick hadn't thought about the motivations for Tarn's decisions. He'd never really considered the emotional drive the man might have to complete his tasks. He was a machine, in bed, in life. Erick knew Tarn loved him; he just wasn't exactly verbal about it. And he held his emotions in check. Erick blurted his out. He couldn't keep shit to himself.

"Leave Jaron to his life," he said. "Let's just go home."

"If we don't abide by the pack's ruling, we won't have a home," responded Tarn softly. He began stroking Erick's cock in earnest. "Do you ever think before you act?"

"Maybe I don't think enough," said Erick, "but you think too much." He pressed his mouth against Tarn's, parted the seam of his lover's lip, and thrust his tongue inside.

Tarn aggressively returned the kiss, his hand working Erick's cock. He freed his mouth, panting, and managed to say, "You are my partner in every way. Just because we disagree about the Tribunal's decisions—"

"Shut up already." Erick ran his hands down Tarn's back and grabbed his phenomenal ass.

Tarn let Erick go, and disappeared around the tree. When he returned, he had the mini-lube. Erick's mouth dropped open. "Seriously?"

"Turn around."

Erick's heart went thumpety-thump. Tarn was gonna do him, right in the middle of a mission? What the fuck? He turned and braced himself against the tree, offering his ass to Tarn. The gel was thick, and a little cold. Tarn massaged his anus, piercing it with a finger, widening and circling.

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Erick couldn't catch his breath. Tarn turned him on. His strength. His fierceness. One look from the man and Erick was a pile of fucking goo. He felt Tarn push the tip of his cock inside, and his knees nearly buckled. "More," he rasped.

Slowly, Tarn worked his cock inside Erick's quivering channel. For a moment he lay against Erick's back, sucking in air. Erick felt the frantic beat of Tarn's heart, and that made him even hotter for the man. *He loves me. He wants me.*

Erick reached down and fisted his shaft with a trembling hand. As Tarn began to fuck him, he matched the rhythm. Stroking his cock. He wasn't gonna last long. It had been more than a week since Tarn had touched him, much less taken him.

"Tarn. Oh, God. Tarn!" The orgasm blasted through him, and Erick gripped his cock as his seed splashed the tree.

Tarn fucked him harder. Flesh slapped against flesh. His thighs quivered, and then, Tarn howled, shoving deep, and came.

Erick felt a sense of satisfaction. He was happy Tarn had given into impulse, and he wished like hell they could just go back to the hotel and forget about Jaron.

Seconds ticked by. After both men caught their breath and their heartbeats returned to normal, Tarn released Erick. When Erick turned, he found Tarn cleaning himself off with a tissue. Of course. That was his lover, all right. Always prepared. He gave Erick some clean tissues, and he did the same.

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When they were through, Tarn backed him against the tree and kissed him stupid. Then he leaned away and said, "I love you."

There was something tremulous in the words, something that made foreboding stab at Erick. "I love you, too."

Tarn's mouth curled into a rare smile. Then his eyes went wide. A pained gasp escaped as he staggered sideways.

What the—

A woman stood there, silent, practically a shadow despite her height.

She moved fast. She yanked the silver dagger from Tarn's back, and tossed the other glinting blade toward Erick's throat.

He caught it. "You little bitch!"

She kicked him in the solar plexus. Hard. His lungs nearly collapsed and he bent over, dropping the second knife. She scooped it up, and plunged both blades into Tarn's kidneys as she double-kicked behind his knees.

Tarn collapsed. He was too much of a warrior to scream, but the silver was doing its job. He was shaking, obviously in excruciating pain.

She jerked out the knives and went for Tarn's carotid artery.

Erick snarled and dove at her.

She whirled away, sheathing the blades. Then she turned and ran, not away into the woods where he could scent and catch her, but to the nearest tree. She grabbed the lowest branch and swung up, catching another limb with gloved hands and using it to climb further into the tree. He heard her

thrashing, the scrape of her boots against the trunk, and then she jumped into a nearby oak.

And she kept going.

Even as fury pounded through him, he was damned impressed by her skills. She wouldn't get away, no matter how fancy her moves. And when he caught her, she was getting a throat full of his teeth.

Unfortunately, that wouldn't be tonight. Not with Tarn injured.

Heart hammering, both pissed and worried, Erick knelt next to his lover. "C'mon. I'll get you to safety."

"Get. Her."

"I'm not leaving you." Erick was gonna take Tarn back to the rental car. It was a clusterfuck now. The Tribunal couldn't be mad at their failure if some crazy bitch had tried to off them first. Why had she attacked them? Was she protecting Jaron? That didn't make any sense. Jaron was more than capable of kicking ass, and he'd never give the job of protecting himself and his mate to someone else.

What the fuck was going on here?

Tarn gripped his arms and used Erick's strength to help him sit up. "Can't. Leave." He struggled to take breaths and Erick felt panic well. Tarn sucked in a breath. "I'm healing. Go ... g-get her."

"I'll kill her."

"No!" Tarn shook his head. His teeth were chattering and his lips turning blue. It felt like a hundred degrees out here even with the storm brewing, so it was bad that Tarn had taken a chill. "Just restrain her."

Erick wanted to argue. Instead, he zipped his lips. Tarn was in pain, his body trying to heal the effects of the silver. She'd jabbed three times, deeply. The wounds on Tarn's back were blackened—one of the results of silver touching werewolf skin.

"I'll stay here. Need t-to heal."

"Dude. You look like shit." He didn't want to leave Tarn. What if his body didn't detox the silver?

"Been through this before." He gulped in air. "Can't let her go. Might warn Jaron."

"All right, already." Erick could give two shits about whether or not Jaron knew they were there. Maybe he could talk some sense into Tarn. But right now, he just wanted Tarn to feel better because Erick was seriously freaking out.

He helped Tarn to the same tree where he'd been sitting earlier. Tarn leaned against the trunk. He was taking deep breaths, and he'd stopped shaking. He really was healing. Okay, that was good.

"You're w-wasting time."

Erick grabbed Tarn's hand, turned it upright, and kissed the roughened palm. "I'll get her."

"Alive," reminded Tarn. He grasped Erick's wrist and drew him in for a quick kiss. "Got it?"

Erick nodded. When he caught the woman, he'd keep her alive, but that didn't mean he wouldn't punish her for what she'd done. Still breathing constituted alive, right?

You can run, he thought as he stood up and began the change from human to wolf, *but you can't hide*.

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Chapter Three

Cass paused at the top of a pine tree, and sucked in steadying breaths. Her heart hammered, skipping its beats, letting her know it was gonna fail her ... maybe right now.

That so hadn't gone well. She'd severely underestimated the werewolves. Freaking paranormals. Those dagger wounds would've killed a human. Not to mention she would've been able to deliver the killing blow.

The other guy had moved fast. He'd snatched the dagger right out of the air and if he hadn't been distracted by his partner's injuries, he might've actually gotten her. She'd seen the animal glinting in his eyes. She'd seen her death in those eyes, too.

Before that, though, she'd seen the two of them kissing and touching. And then fucking. She'd waited, just to see how far they would take it. Watching them together had made her hot. She told herself it was because if they had sex, they'd be relaxed and less likely to pay attention to her movements. She'd been right.

But if she was honest, she'd been a total voyeur. Holy fuck, it had been a really long time since she'd had sex. She'd always harbored a fantasy of getting freaky between the sheets with two guys. Even now, as she contemplated her failure, her panties were getting soaked just thinking about what it would be like with those werewolves. Inappropriate as hell. They were targets. This whole thing was too jacked up.

What to do? Complete the assignment? Or bail?

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There was no way to tell if she could get to the house, kill Kirk, and get out before the wolfies caught up to her. In this day of iPhones and Blackberries, they'd probably already dialed in.

Still...

If Kirk Raynard was into any kind of technology, it sure as hell didn't show. Her brief immersion into the vampire court revealed a big reluctance to adapt to modern times. Most vamps dressed and acted as they had during the time period they'd lived as humans. Queen Isolde encouraged such behavior, not because she wished to honor the desires of her subjects, but as a way to control them.

Queen Isolde had an iPhone. But she still dressed like she was freaking Marie Antoinette—with the powdered wig and everything.

Cass's heartbeat was still erratic, and panic was threatening. It probably hadn't helped to think about doing those two hotties. She took calming breaths, and imagined that the organ was steadily beating, that it was healthy and whole. After a long moment, the rate stabilized. It was getting harder and harder to use that technique. Her heart had stopped listening to her Jedi mind tricks.

If she didn't complete her assignment she was dead. Queen Isolde would send someone to finish Kirk *and* Cass. Even if she did manage to kill Kirk, Cass's heart could fail before she could get back to the court and go through the change.

She chewed her bottom lip as she looked at the house. Inside was death for Kirk and redemption for her. Only she

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wasn't sure she wanted it anymore. Squatting in a tree, listening to the thunder roar as the air thickened with rainy intent, she was just tired.

Her father had been black ops, part of a small group of agents who were in the deepest of the deep within the CIA. He'd demonstrated how she should protect herself, trained her to kill quickly and efficiently, and helped her shape perspective not only about the job but also about her own life. He showed her that mercy wasn't a weakness. Bradley Rogers had also explained one of the most important rules in the world of assassins: know when to get out.

"Okay, Dad," she said, blowing out a breath. "I'm out."

The choice was clear now. The choice she should've made when the cardiologist gave her the bad news. *I'm not meant to be here anymore.*

She still didn't know how Queen Isolde had found her. New Orleans had been one of her bases of operation, and that was where she'd gotten the diagnosis. The next night, the queen herself showed up and spouted off ridiculous crap like "I'm a vampire."

Then she'd proven it. The queen had opened the door into a whole new world—a world in which Cass could live. And she had badly wanted to live.

After a month of hanging out in the court, even with its occasional atrocities, she hadn't been turned off enough by the lifestyle to chuck it as an option. Just because other vampires acted like they owned the afterlife didn't mean she had to do the same. There were ways to ingest blood that didn't include killing innocents. She'd spent a good deal of her

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time putting bullets into skulls, but she'd chosen her jobs, and could say that most of her targets had been real dickheads.

So thirty days with the vamps, and she'd figured she knew enough about them and werewolves to get the job done. It wasn't like she had forever to plan and execute. The doc hadn't been able to pinpoint exactly how long she had to keep breathing. *Three months, if you're lucky*, he'd said. *I'm sorry*.

Now, that meant two months. Maybe. Probably less.

She'd go somewhere with a beach, gorgeous men in Speedos, and fruity umbrella-laden drinks. Definitely someplace where sunshine was so plentiful, no vampire would even think of hanging out there. She'd soak in every moment until her heart gave out.

She'd wasted enough time, damn it.

The rental car was parked all the way down the hilly drive, and around the corner, tucked into a fast food lot. It seemed a hundred miles away, especially with the werewolves tracking her.

Maybe they weren't. She'd injured the big dude badly. And his lover, angry as he was at her, seemed like the loyal type. He wouldn't leave his bedmate to chase after her.

At least she hoped so.

She'd stick to the trees until she got to the road. Then she'd run for it. Despite the doc's advice about exercising, she'd kept up her workouts. Her heart had survived the weight training and runs up till now, right?

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Rain burst from the thick morass of gray clouds, and she grinned. That would definitely help mask her scent. She climbed out on the branch, gauged the distance, and leapt.

* * * *

Erick loped back to the tree where Tarn still rested, and shifted into his human form. "Fucking rain."

"You're not a pup," rasped Tarn. "You know how to find prey during storms."

"Yeah, if they're on the ground. She's in the goddamned trees." Despite Tarn's protests, Erick helped the older man to his feet. "She's some kind of ninja gymnast."

Tarn chuckled. "We need to find her."

"We're going to the rental car and back to the hotel," said Erick. He was mad. Mad that some chick had gotten the drop on them. Mad that Tarn had gotten hurt. Mad that he hadn't been able to find Miss Stab-and-Run. "Don't give me any shit about it."

They'd wrapped their clothes in plastic, but still had to get dressed in the pouring rain. They were soaked to the skin by the time they'd made it to the road.

"Why'd we park at McDonald's?" Tarn asked. He'd kept up the hurried pace Erick set, but it was obvious he was still dragging ass.

"Can you make it, grandpa?" asked Erick.

Tarn's dark eyebrows winged upward. "Grandpa?"

"The way you're moving? Yeah. You kinda remind me of my gramps." He glanced over. "You want me to go get you a walker? Maybe a cane?"

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"Fuck you." Tarn started to run.

Erick caught up easily. He knew that Tarn was still in pain; he was running to prove he could. Good. Erick needed his partner strong because they were going to find ninja girl ... and deliver some payback.

When they jogged into the parking lot, Erick grabbed the car keys from Tarn and slid into the driver's seat. It said a lot about how his lover was feeling that he didn't even offer a token protest. The storm had definitely cooled things off, but the mix of heat and wet was making him itch for a shower and a beer.

"Do you think she contacted Jaron?" he asked, half-hoping she had so that they could drop this insane mission.

"We won't know her purpose for being there, or for trying to kill us, until we catch her." Tarn took Erick's hand.

Erick blinked at the rare sign of affection.

"There's something I must tell you."

Shit, shit, shit. Here was the moment when Tarn finally told him what was going on. The big something he'd been grappling with for the last week. Erick's stomach cramped. He had a feeling he wasn't gonna like the news.

"The Tribunal has chosen a mate for us."

"*What?*" Erick sucked in a steadying breath. "Who?"

Tarn shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I went to Leona."

"The mumbo jumbo lady? She's crazy."

"She's our pack's shaman, and she has the sight. She told me you and I would find our mate when we went to kill the outcast."

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Erick felt like he'd been punched. "You knew? Even before the Tribunal made the decree?"

Tarn's eyes begged for understanding. That was so weird, Erick could barely fathom it. T-man never asked Erick to understand anything. He just did whatever, and Erick followed along because he'd learned Tarn was nearly always right. He trusted him without question. Then a few pieces of this whole strange puzzle clicked into place. "You asked them for the job, didn't you?"

Tarn nodded. "The Tribunal knew none of us would willingly kill Jaron. But I agreed only on the condition that you and I could choose our own mate."

"This mystery woman?" Erick tried to yank his hand out of Tarn's, but his lover held on, refusing to release his grip. No wonder he'd been so moody. The motherfucker felt guilty. "We're supposed to be partners. *Mates*. You shouldn't have made this decision without me. You should've told me. Damn it, Tarn! We could've come up with a plan together."

"I know. I didn't want..." Tarn swallowed. "I was afraid you would leave."

Shock blasted through Erick's anger. "Leave? You thought I would leave you, and the pack, because the Tribunal assigned us a mate?" He gaped at him. "Are you on crack?"

"You admired what Jaron did," he said softly. "You said you were glad he told the Tribunal to go fuck themselves. You've made it clear that you hate the idea of bringing a female into our relationship, even though it's pack law. We must breed."

"I'm not Jaron," said Erick. Had he really made *Tarn* feel insecure? He'd just been mouthing off, which he did all the

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time about everything, for fuck's sake. Maybe this time, he'd somehow struck a nerve. He'd never thought in a million years Tarn would be afraid of losing him.

Of the two of them, Erick was the one who needed affection and reassurance. He wasn't a wimp; he just liked to know he was loved. Tarn never seemed to need confirmation about Erick's feelings. And because the jackass had feared the worst, he'd gone off and made the decision he thought would make Erick happy.

Erick was caught between being really pissed off, and utterly amazed. He turned in the seat and looked at Tarn. "I love you, you stupid prick. I wouldn't leave you. I never want to leave you."

"Okay." Tarn looked relieved. "I suck, all right? But I didn't want us to marry Anea."

"Anea? They paired us with her?" Erick blanched. Anea was the black widow of the pack. She'd had three husbands, all of whom had died. None at her hand; it was just weird that none of them had lived a year past their wedding dates. No one would mate with her, though some had taken her into their beds.

Erick never considered himself the superstitious kind, but she still gave him the heebie-jeebies. Aside from the propensity of her husbands to kick the bucket, Anea also seemed to be barren. She'd never gotten pregnant, either within a marriage or during her bedroom romps.

"She can have kids," said Tarn, apparently following Erick's line of thinking. "She admitted to the Tribunal she used several birth control methods to prevent conception."

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"So, they want her to have two husbands? That way at least one of us will live and she'll have double the chance of breeding?" Disgust edged his voice. Anea was the last living child of the Delgato wolves. The warrior blood of her father flowing through her veins in combo with another warrior's bloodline would make strong children. And strong children meant a strong pack. Her bloodline, not to mention her beauty, was the reason three men had married her.

"Had you *asked* me, I would've agreed that she's not our mate."

"I'm sorry. I should've consulted you."

Erick's eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. "Did you just apologize? You never apologize."

Tarn struggled to respond. Finally, he offered, "I'm sorry. Really damned sorry."

"Shut up, pussy." He leaned forward and kissed Tarn.

"I know I don't say it, but you've made me the happiest I've ever been."

"Okay. You're freaking me out. Enough with mush." But he kissed Tarn again, and his whole body caught fire with need. He wanted to fuck him again, and then they'd both know for sure who loved whom.

"Get in the back," growled Tarn.

Erick wasted no time climbing over the console and into the SUV's huge bench seat, but as he ripped off his T-shirt, he asked, "What about your injuries?"

"Gone," said Tarn as he settled next to Erick and took off his own T-shirt.

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Erick didn't have a chance to say another word. Now that Tarn had confessed his sins, his guilt—and his sexual reluctance—was gone. He shoved Erick down and covered him, kissing him roughly as he unbuttoned his jeans and freed his cock. Erick wriggled down his pants, not so easy since they were wet, and his damp ass squeaked across the leather seat.

They laughed.

"I missed you," Erick breathed against Tarn's throat. He kissed his warm skin, flicking his tongue along the rough underside of his jaw.

"I missed you, too." Tarn tried to adjust his position. "God, this is uncomfortable."

"You wanna go to the hotel to finish?"

"Hell, no."

Erick snorted. He ran his hands over the taut muscles of Tarn's back. Desire burned through him. It was so good to be in Tarn's arms, to feel his mouth raining kisses on his neck. "By the way, how are we supposed to meet her—this mate of ours? Do you think Jaron will introduce us before we rip out his throat?"

"Don't be facetious. We've already met her."

"Impossible. We haven't—" Erick grabbed Tarn's head and lifted it. Tarn's eyes narrowed. "The woman who tried to murder us? Are you fucking kidding me?"

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Chapter Four

"I think she's our mate." Tarn sighed, loosening his grip on Erick's cock.

"She's human," said Erick, wishing he could let it go and get back to the business of fucking. But damn, Tarn had lost his mind. He wanted to mate with the chick who'd tried to kill him.

"We'll bring her to Leona."

Erick's cock was totally flaccid now, and the mood had all but fizzled. Why had he opened his fat mouth? "Leona has the bite?"

"It's not common knowledge," said Tarn. "Not many wolves have the ability, and females are almost never born with the gift."

"So. You want to track down our would-be murderer. Talk her into mating with both of us. Then take her to Looney Leona and turn her into a werewolf."

Tarn nodded. "Yeah. That about sums it up."

Erick stared at him for so long, he made Tarn uncomfortable enough to look away. His lover's gaze flickered toward the window; his eyes widened and he flattened against Erick.

"Hey!" With Tarn's full weight on him it was hard to take a breath.

"It's her," Tarn whispered. "She's unlocking that green car a few spaces away." He lifted his head and peered out the window again. "It's a Prius."

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"Quit digging your elbows into my chest." Erick paused. "Prius? One of those hybrid cars? Our killer has an eco-conscience?"

"Apparently." Tarn looked down at Erick. "We'll go out on the left, circle our car from the back, and surprise her."

Erick was all in. He hoped they were able to freak her the way she'd freaked them. He was a trained warrior, a fucking Kragen for wolf's sake, and it chapped his fur that a human female had gotten the drop on him. Frankly, if Tarn hadn't been so caught up in his own emotional angst, he would've never let Erick distract him. Erick was awesome in battle so long as someone else took the lead, and Tarn was a born leader.

Tarn quietly popped open the door and slid out to the ground, crouching as he used the SUV for cover. Erick followed, shutting the door, and meeting Tarn at the bumper. They peered around. Three spaces down he saw the back end of the Prius. Only one car was parked between theirs and hers. It was a rusted Toyota, and not exactly big enough to hide them.

"What's she doing?"

Tarn shot an annoyed look over his shoulder. "Putting on lipstick? Shining her silver daggers? How the fuck do I know?"

Erick rolled his eyes. "She should've taken off by now."

"Let's take advantage of it. We'll go in fast," said Tarn. "I'll take the back. You take the front."

"She has a gun," warned Erick. "Probably silver bullets, too."

"Noted." Tarn sent Erick one last look. "Go!"

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They took off. Tarn ran behind the parked cars, and Erick rounded the Toyota, and skidded to the side of the Prius. The woman looked up at him, her mouth rounded in an "O" of surprise.

Naturally the doors were locked, so he bashed in the window. Glass shattered; his knuckles bloodied. He bared his teeth and growled. "Remember me?"

He reached in and unlocked the passenger side door. He moved to restrain her, but she wasn't trying to fight. He realized then something was wrong. Her face was gray. Her shaking hand clenched a prescription bottle.

"Erick!" Tarn waited on the driver's side, his gaze impatient. Erick unlocked the door. Tarn threw it open, reached in and pulled out the woman.

"What the hell is wrong with her?" asked Erick. This wasn't the way he'd expected for things to go down.

"I don't know." Tarn pried the bottle from her hand and read the label. Then he opened the cap and poured out a pill, sticking it between the woman's blue lips.

"Swallow," commanded Tarn.

Her eyes went wild, rolling into the back of her head, and she convulsed once before going limp.

"That went well." Erick exited the car. "Is she dead?" He squatted on the other side of her and looked down, more surprised than worried. He hadn't forgotten she'd stabbed Tarn and tried to slice open his own throat.

"Unconscious." Tarn pried her mouth open and looked inside. "She managed to swallow the meds before she passed out."

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"What now?"

"I'll put her in the SUV. You follow me back to the motel in the Prius."

"Why do I have to drive the pussy car?"

Tarn slanted him a look, but obviously decided the insult was too easy. He scooped up the girl and stood. "Get going, princess. Your sparkly green chariot awaits."

"Oh, fuck you."

* * * *

Cass felt like she was swimming in black gelatin. From far away, she heard voices. Snatches of conversation filtered through the viscous darkness.

"We should drop her off at the emergency room."

"This is our woman, Erick. The gods won't take her from us."

"Come on!" A pause. "How bad can Anea be?"

"Shut up."

* * * *

Cass awoke in a cave. What the hell? She felt strange, as if she were as substantive as shadows. Lounging by the pit fire were two wolves. One was big and black, its dark eyes serious. The other was gray, its blue eyes filled with mischief.

"They are yours," intoned an elderly female voice. It bounced off the craggy walls, straight into Cass. Of course, she thought, I've been waiting for them.

The wolves got up and padded to her, one settling on each side of her. She lay with them, their soft fur tickling her

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naked flesh. She sank her hands into their luxurious coats. Her body rippled with sensual awareness.

Then each wolf gave a low, possessive growl, and licked her breasts.

"No," said Cass. But they wouldn't be denied. The black one put his paw on her rib cage, and his companion followed suit.

Their broad, flat tongues tortured her breasts and nipples, making her tingle and ache.

Then she felt a tongue lick up her neck, to her ear, and a male voice said, "You're beautiful."

The black wolf was no more. Deliciously naked, the man's long, thick cock pressed against her thigh. His skin was the color of coffee with too much cream, and his tousled hair was black, as dark as his eyes.

"Hmm," said another male voice. "She tastes good, too."

This man, as corded with muscle as his friend, had the mischievous gaze of the gray wolf.

They took turns kissing her, their hands stroking every inch of her heated skin. And when one of them parted the slick inner folds of her pussy and stroked her clit, she moaned, and closed her eyes, and fell down, down, down...

* * * *

Cass sucked in a breath, and tried to shake off the miasma. "W-what happened?"

"She survived," said a male voice, laden with sarcasm. "Yay."

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She pried open her eyes and had barely realized she was lying in the middle of a comfortable bed when she felt the mattress dip. She looked at the man sitting inches from her.

Fuck.

It was Hottie No. 1, the dude she'd tried to off. Her gaze flicked beyond him, to the guy leaning against the hotel room wall. His glare clearly indicated that he wished she'd explode. Yeah. He'd been the one attempting to track her. Hard to do when she was in the trees with the battering rain washing away her scent and masking her movements.

She smirked.

He pushed himself off the wall and stalked toward the bed.

"Relax, Erick."

Blue Eyes stopped, pivoted, and threw himself into a chair tucked into the corner of the room. He crossed his arms and glared at her some more. Nice.

"I'm Tarn." He studied her face. "We've got you. So cooperate."

"Or what?" Her voice sounded like rusty hinges. She tried to clear her throat, but the effort hurt. It felt like she'd swallowed a whole bag of cotton balls. Tarn helped her to a sitting position and handed her a glass of water. It had the metallic taste of tap water. What? She didn't rate the ten-dollar bottled water? Still, she sucked down every drop. She toyed with the idea of slamming the glass against Tarn's gorgeous head, but he plucked it out of her hands. Oh well, it wasn't like she could take them both down, not without weapons or in her weakened state.

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Her traitorous heart beat steadily, not revealing its weakness. She'd been so close to getting on that beach. Now, she was gonna bite it in a hotel room. Heh. Bite it. Yeah, that was probably the literal interpretation of how she would breathe her last. What a way to end an otherwise stellar career.

"Thanks for the water." Her voice sounded normal, and she was feeling a smidge better. She looked down at herself, and her lips quirked. "And thanks for leaving on my bra and panties. I usually like to get to know my killers personally before going nude."

"You must be naked a lot," Erick said.

"No one's ever gotten the drop on me," she replied. "How about you?"

Tarn chuckled, but it wasn't a nice sound. "You have the distinction of nearly besting werewolves of the two strongest warrior clans."

"Had you not been so busy," she said, "you might have noticed."

Tarn's eyes shuttered and he got up. She knew it wasn't the idea she'd seen him macking on the boy over there. It was that she'd wounded him and his pride. Warrior werewolves? Like the regular kind weren't badass enough. Wow. She sure could pick 'em.

Cass sat up. Then she heard a rattle and something flew at her. She snatched the prescription bottle out of mid-air.

"What are they for?" asked Tarn.

She stared at the label. Tarn had given her the meds. He could've let her die, right there in the parking lot, and gotten

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his revenge. Why had he saved her? So he could kill her himself? If that was true, the dude's ego was way too big. She didn't get that vibe, though. What a waste of energy and resources. If a target died of a heart attack instead of a bullet headache so much the better.

She put the bottle on the nightstand. She was gonna die. What was the point of lying? "My name is Cassandra Rogers, but everyone calls me Cass. I'm twenty-six. I've been a paid assassin, trained by my father, since I was seventeen. I'm dying. My heart's giving out, and I have maybe, a couple months to live."

"Why were you at Jaron Dunmore's residence?"

Cass absorbed this information, and realized these guys hadn't been protecting the house. "Jaron's the wolfie. And you're not his friends, are you?"

Tarn and Erick exchanged a glance. Then Tarn said, "As a matter of fact, we are."

"Yeah. Sure." She shrugged. "I was there to take out Kirk Raynard. The vampire queen offered to change me if I killed her cousin." She laughed, a bitter sound. "I wanted to live so bad." Sighing, she flopped back to the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "I wonder if that's what people think right before I put a bullet in their skulls. *I want to live.*"

"These people you killed," said Tarn. "They deserved it?"

"Yeah. I choose my jobs carefully. All but this one." She turned her head. Tarn was leaning against the wall now, his eyes on her. Erick's baby blues glittered with an emotion she couldn't define, but at least he looked less hostile. "So what's

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going on here, boys? 'Cause if you ain't gonna do me, then I have a beach chair and a mai tai with my name on it."

"Do you?" asked Tarn with a sexy growl that made her scramble off the other side of the bed.

"Whoa there. *Do*. As in kill." Cass had nowhere to go. She'd fight like a rabid bitch, but she knew her odds. They'd get what they wanted. She planted her hands on her hips and glared at them. Her heart skipped a beat then started fluttering like a trapped bird.

"I prefer the alternative definition," said Tarn.

"You saved me so you could fuck me?" Her voice was a mixture of outrage and astonishment.

"Not quite." He hadn't moved, but she got the distinct impression that both he and Erick were fully prepared to leap from their positions. The energy of the room had changed. Tension was so thick that she was nearly breathing it.

"I swear to God if you touch me, at least one of you will die."

Both men's expressions turned to shock.

"You think we would force you?" Erick rose from the chair and stared at her. The fury was back, although for a different reason. "It's not like we need you."

"Erick," said Tarn softly. His gaze hadn't left Cass's face, and he was making her nervous.

"I'm a prisoner," she pointed out, feeling unaccountably defensive. "You could've let me die, but you didn't. And apparently, you're not trying to kill me. What am I supposed to think?"

"We have a proposal," said Tarn.

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Erick snorted and plopped back into the chair. He crossed his arms and took a supreme interest in the ceiling.

"I'm listening." Cass stayed where she was, between the wall and the king-sized bed. Wary didn't begin to cover how she was feeling. What the hell did these guys want?

"We were sent by our pack to kill Jaron."

"Your friend?" Cass was horrified. "You'd do that?"

"That's what I'm sayin'," muttered Erick.

"Jaron refused to breed with our females, and left the pack. Because Jaron comes from a respected bloodline, the Elders ignored his ... rebellion." Tarn sighed. "Then Jaron met Kirk Raynard and Leann Hayes. Jaron is the third in their relationship. It is his child that Leann carries in her womb."

"Vampires can't have kids," she said slowly. The woman was pregnant. And if Tarn was right, this Leann wasn't the vampire's pet. She was in a threesome with a werewolf and a vampire. Hmm. Maybe she was a little crazy. Well, she would've been safe from Cass. No kids. Ever. And that included pregnant women.

But maybe the werewolves didn't have the same policy. Her gaze flicked over Tarn, who looked as stoic as a statue. She didn't understand werewolf politics any better than she did the machinations of the vampire court. "So, you're gonna kill Jaron for knocking up a girl? That's harsh."

"She's a human," said Erick. "Apparently not fit to carry our spawn." Erick sounded disgusted with the whole enterprise. Her respect for him went up a notch. Then she realized what he was implying.

"You're supposed to kill her, too?"

"She carries a half-werewolf," said Tarn. He didn't sound too sure about this part of the plan.

"And I thought the vampires were fucked up."

"We're not doing it." Tarn's sudden, fierce declaration made Erick's gaze swing toward him.

"Tarn? Are you screwing with me?"

"Our true purpose has been accomplished," said Tarn. "We found her."

Cass's eyebrows went up, but the men weren't paying attention to her. Erick stood up and put his hand on Tarn's arm. "What about the Elders? They're gonna be pissed."

"We'll warn Jaron. He can take his lovers somewhere safe. We'll tell the Elders they were gone when we arrived."

"They'll be in hiding forever." Erick's expression wavered between relief and worry. "And with the half-breed alive, the Elders will never stop looking for them."

"Unless Kirk kills the vampire queen." Both men turned to her. Cass realized she should've kept her trap shut. Even though she'd been plotting to kill Kirk, she'd never met the guy. She had no investment in his life or the lives of those he loved. Still, she couldn't stop herself from outlining the idea.

"Queen Isolde is freaking crazy and she's surrounded herself with a bunch of blood-sucking psychos. It's probably why so many vampires like Kirk just stay out of her way. No one defies her because she's vicious and vengeful." Cass shrugged. The room was cold, and her nipples poked through the thin material of her bra. Tarn's eyes dipped to her breasts. She crossed her arms over her chest. "If Kirk gets rid of his cousin, he'll be king. Jaron and Leann would have

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protection out the wazoo. No way would your Elders risk an all-out war with the vampires. And the vampires would probably be stoked to get a leader who wasn't nutso."

"That may solve our problem," said Tarn. He took Erick by the shoulders. "If we return to the pack and the Elders discover our treachery, at the worst, we'll lose our lives, and the least, our home."

"I don't care if we're banned. As long as I'm with you," said Erick, "I am home."

Cass felt a catch in her throat. She'd never been in love. In brief relationships, sure, and maybe a crush or two as a teenager before her first kill, but she'd never had the opportunity to fall in stars-in-the-eyes love. Just another regret she added to the "wish I had done this" list.

"Well, if we've decided everyone's going to live," she said, "then I'd like my clothes." She paused. "And my gun."

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Chapter Five

"You haven't heard our proposal." Tarn looked at her, his expression suddenly thoughtful. "You'd already decided not to kill Kirk. That's why you left after you attacked us."

"I decided it was time to listen to fate. I'd rather go have some fun before the ol' ticker gives out." She tapped her wrist as if it held a watch. "And now, you're wasting what little time I have left. So ... clothes?"

"I like you better without them on," Tarn said. He put his arm around Erick, who leaned against his shoulder and studied her.

Once again, the atmosphere in the room shifted. The tension was there, but it was definitely the lustful kind. Cass felt vulnerable. And though she'd spent every waking second being decisive, she found herself waffling. Were they offering a night in their bed? Was she insane for even thinking about how awesome fucking two werewolves would be?

"If we openly help Jaron and his friends," said Erick, "then the Elders *will* ban us." He sounded uncertain. "If they do, they cannot force us to take a female."

Tarn looked down at his lover, a frown marring his handsome face. "You don't want this?"

Erick's gaze flicked to Cass, who watched the byplay with narrowed eyes. Then he sighed. "I want her," he admitted. "I want the one who can make us better warriors, men, wolves. She won't put up with shit. She's fast and strong." He grunted. "And, you know, pretty."

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"Yeah. Um ... hello? I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm not afraid to walk outta this hotel in my bra."

"You said you'd decided to follow fate," said Tarn. "So have we. You don't have to die, Cassandra. We can make you werewolf."

Cass looked at Tarn, at the desire glittering in his eyes. Apprehension warred with hope. "What's the price of this gift?"

"You must agree to be our mate."

"Mate?" asked Cass, flabbergasted. "Is that wolf talk for wife?"

"Yeah," said Erick. "But not in a human sense. There is no divorce. If a mate dies, the surviving spouse can marry again, but other than that ... it's practically forever."

"So, I'd be married to both of you? Forever?"

"Yes," said Tarn.

"Will I be expected to do housework or cook? Because I don't do that kind of crap. Or knit. Or garden. Or grocery shop."

"It's not a subservient role," said Tarn. "You would be our partner in all ways."

Cass couldn't believe she was even considering this crazy proposal. She shook her head. "I guess being a werewolf is better than being a bloodsucker, but I was sorta resolved to the whole dying thing."

"Give us a chance. Maybe you'll find we're a better alternative to death." Tarn took Erick's hand and led him to the bed.

Cass's eyes widened. "You want me to sleep with you?"

"Not sleep," said Erick. "Fuck."

Tarn let out a long-suffering sigh. "Stay the night. Willingly. In the morning, if you decide not to mate with us, we'll let you go."

"What, exactly, does mating involve?"

"You have to be a werewolf for it to count," said Erick. He shucked his Nikes and socks, and then pulled off his shirt.

"So, right now, it's just fucking."

Cass got a gander at his body, which she'd seen in the darkened forest, and in the glare of the hotel room lights it was even better. Her gaze flipped to Tarn. He, too, was getting undressed. He was broader in the shoulders and chest than Erick, and probably a couple inches taller. Both of them were handsome and muscled. And when she mentally put herself in the middle of that particularly tasty sandwich, her body went hot and tingly.

Hoo-boy.

"What about your heart?" asked Tarn. "Will it fail if we ... um, push it?"

"I exercise all the time and it's held so far. And if it fails during—" Aw, crap. Had she just admitted she was gonna do the wild thing with them? "—er, during, you know, then hey, what a way to go."

"We go gentle," he told Erick. "After she becomes werewolf, we'll play hard."

Cass's stomach flipped. Play hard? Ooooh. These were her kind of boys. But she hadn't necessarily decided to hitch herself to them for all eternity. So, they'd just have to play hard now, while she could enjoy it.

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They took off their jeans and both climbed onto the bed.

Without another word of protest, she wiggled off her panties and unsnapped her bra. Then, naked, she crawled into the bed between them. Tarn was the first to skim his palm down her side, splaying his long fingers over her abdomen. His hand was warm, and her skin contracted from the light contact.

Erick was obviously the impatient one. He kissed her. He was aggressive, plundering her mouth with his tongue and nipping at her lips. She cupped his face and gave back as good as she got, sucking on his lower lip before ravaging his throat. And when she found that vulnerable spot beneath his throat, she bit him.

The low growl sent chills straight through her. Excitement coiled. Oh, he was gonna hold back until Tarn let him loose. She raked her nails down his back and licked the bruised skin. She turned more fully toward Erick, pressing against him, while Tarn stroked the skin of her back, buttocks, thighs.

Erick's fingers tangled in her hair and he drew her up for another brutal kiss. She loved it. Heat streaked through her, leaving her flushed and yearning.

And when he put his teeth against her throat and growled, her womb contracted.

"God, you're wet," said Tarn as he slipped his hand over her hips and delved into her swollen pussy. "She likes it."

Erick reached across her to touch Tarn, and she turned, giving Erick her backside, and kissed Tarn. Erick shifted so that his thick cock slid between her ass cheeks. She wrapped

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a leg around Tarn, and he teased her weeping pussy with his sizable cock.

He bent to lave at her aching nipples, lightly biting the distended peaks. Pleasure shuddered through her.

Her senses whirled as the men worshipped her with hands and mouths. She could barely breathe. Barely think. She rolled again to face Erick and slid between his thighs so she could taste his cock.

He moaned, grabbing the bed covers in his fists, his eyes closing as she sucked his length into her mouth. She relaxed her throat, and took him all the way down to his balls.

"Damn," he managed. "Damn."

And as she sucked and licked on Erick's yummy cock, Tarn positioned himself behind her, lifting her hips until she was kneeling with her ass up, and he—thank the ever-loving gods—pierced her swollen cunt. His penis filled her, stretching her to the limit.

"Oh, hell," she murmured.

It was an interesting rhythm. Tarn plunging into her from behind, and Erick thrusting into her mouth. Nothing had ever felt so good. It was like she'd been searching for a place to belong her whole life, and she'd found it. Here, with them.

"I'm going to come," cried Erick. "Cass, baby. Please."

She grabbed his shaft at the base and suckled his quivering head. Then he was groaning, shouting, and shooting hot seed down her throat. She swallowed and swallowed, and sucked on him until he was dry.

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And still Tarn pounded into her. He'd forgotten gentle, thank heavens. Erick scooted out from underneath her, and she planted her hands on the bed, and closed her eyes.

Sparkling pleasure coiled in her womb. She could hardly draw in a breath. Then Tarn cried out, and pierced her deeply. Damn. She felt his spasms as his come filled her.

Sweat dripped from her neck and splashed the coverlet. As Tarn withdrew from her she collapsed to the bed, and rolled over. Before she could even complain—*hello, where's my orgasm*—Erick slid on top of her. He was as hard as a fucking steel rod.

Her surprised gaze met his smug one.

"Werewolves are a lusty bunch," he said. "Doesn't take long to recover. Plus, seeing Tarn plow you really turned me on."

"Yeah, me, too," she said, yanking on his shoulders. "Now shut up and fuck me."

He wasted no time slipping inside her and stroking her into a frenzied rhythm. He tugged a nipple into his mouth and sucked on it, and pleasure made her gasp. She dug her nails into his ass and met his thrusts, and then stars exploded, and she felt like the whole world was spinning.

And then it was.

She felt her heart stall as her body seized.

Erick's face went white and then Tarn was there, too, and she couldn't tell them thank you because it was getting dark.

Then there was nothing.

* * * *

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"She's alive," said Kirk, "but her heart has an irregular beat."

"She's gonna die unless you change her," said Erick. He looked at Tarn. They were both standing next to the dusty old couch, staring down at their mate. She was breathing erratically, her skin gray, and her lips tinged blue. He might not have wanted her in the beginning, but he did now.

"If I change her, she will lose the baby."

"And if you don't, she'll—" Erick gaped at the vampire. When Cass had collapsed they could think of nothing else to do but go to Kirk and Jaron and admit their duplicity. Jaron had expected the Elders to come after him eventually, but he seemed less worried about their confession than he did about protecting Leann. She was upstairs packing. Erick and Tarn had not told them about Cass or the vampire queen's assassination plot. First, they had to save Cass. Then they would figure out what to do next.

"She's with child?"

"Very recent," said the vampire, giving Tarn a pointed look.

"That's impossible. It's too soon to know."

"Trust me," said Jaron. "He speaks the truth."

"I will give her the bite." Another werewolf strode into the living room, flipping shut a cell phone. "My grandmother Leona says I must do this for you."

They'd smelled another werewolf around the perimeter, but hadn't seen him. Erick didn't know him at all. And neither, apparently, did Tarn.

"You're Leona's grandson?"

He nodded, but offered no other information. "My magic gets its strength from sex."

"You're not having sex with her," said Erick, moving to block the wolf.

"It doesn't have to be with her," he responded. "And I'm not particularly attracted to females." He let his black gaze slide over Erick.

Tarn growled.

"Stop," said Erick. He reached back and took Tarn's hand. "Look, I'll suck your dick if it means you can save her."

"What about the baby?" asked Tarn. Erick could tell Tarn wasn't in the sharing mood. He'd claimed his mates, and watching Erick suck another werewolf's cock while he bit Cass wasn't setting well with his alpha tendencies.

The werewolf shrugged. "Werewolves are strong, there is a good chance the baby will survive the change. But I cannot guarantee it."

"I suggest y'all do something," said a honeyed voice from the doorway. The blonde practically glowed with vitality. And she was nearly full term. Her small hands rested on her rounded tummy. "C'mon," she said to Kirk and Jaron. "Let's give them their privacy."

The werewolf undid the buttons to his jeans and pulled out his cock. Erick looked at him. "You mind if I know your name before I suck your dick?"

"Rolf," he said. "And your woman is dying."

Tarn lifted Cass to a seated position. Rolf sat on the edge of the couch and brought her close, so that his mouth rested on the point between her neck and shoulder blade. Erick got

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to his knees and sucked on the flaccid penis protruding from Rolf's jeans.

It hardened in his mouth, and Rolf moaned, shifting so Erick could take even more. Erick worked his shaft with hands and mouth, using every damned skill he had.

As Rolf ejaculated into his mouth, he glowed gold. Sparks danced in the air, the man's face elongated into a snout, and then he sprouted sharp teeth. He leaned down and bit Cass.

The magic flowed between Rolf and Cass, and when Rolf finally let her go, her skin was bleeding and bruised. And she was still gray and limp.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" yelled Tarn.

"Now, we wait," said Rolf, as if the two males weren't pissed off at him. Erick moved away, sitting near Tarn, who put a hand on his shoulder.

Rolf rose and straightened himself up, re-buttoning his jeans. He slanted a look at Erick. "Thanks for the blow job. You're really good."

"And you're really an asshole."

Rolf laughed and sauntered out of the room.

* * * *

When Cass woke up, she was pinned between two men on a really comfortable bed. Erick and Tarn held her as though she were fragile, but she felt the opposite. She felt strong. Wonderful. Something felt different about her.

She could smell them. Her boys. Not unpleasant scents. Tarn was sandalwood, and Erick ... his scent was a little like pine.

"Hey," she said. She couldn't move, and she was starving. "Hey! Is there an IHOP or what around here?"

"Cass." Erick's blue gaze caressed her face. "You're okay."

He put a hand against her heart, and she realized it was beating strong and steady. She felt healthy. That was the difference. Holy shit.

"Cassandra." Tarn put his hand over Erick's and Cass felt some serious warm fuzzies.

"What happened?"

"You're werewolf now," said Tarn. "We made the choice because..."

"We didn't want to lose you."

"Okay," she said. "I guess it worked."

"Yes. And it appears that you are with child."

She stared at Tarn for so long, he blushed. "Excuse me?"

"Preggers," confirmed Erick. "But not mated. Not yet. Unless you want to."

Cass couldn't even think for a minute. Then it hit. She was gonna be a freaking mommy. And these two men wanted her. She had love blossoming right here, right now. From death to second chance ... damn, she was lucky. "Well, I'm not raising a baby alone," she said primly. "So we're doing the mating thing."

Their relief was palpable. "There's more to talk about," said Tarn. "We must tell Kirk about Queen Isolde."

"And decide if we should return to the pack or stand with Jaron," added Erick.

She grabbed their chins. "First, we mate. Then, we eat. And then, we plot."

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Tarn kissed her. When he was done turning her to Jell-O, Erick took his turn. As they made love to her, Cass thought about the future, a real future with two men, and a baby, and ... well, werewolf stuff.

Her heart was beating because of these two men.

And her heart was beating for them, too.

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