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SHIFTERS

Cassandra Moore



TAINT OF
SHADOW
HEART OF DARKNESS
PART ONE

Heart of Darkness: Part One

Taint of Shadow

By

Cassandra Moore

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-300-2

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Leanne Salter

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Chapter One

Howls rose in the air. Full-throated, lusty bays filled the woods and startled sleepy birds from their chosen perches. In the east, the brilliant golden edge of moon peeked above the Cascade Mountains, greeted by several more eerie calls. The energy of the night changed, expectant to exultant. Full moon. Blue moon. Time to hunt.

Beneath the leafy canopy, a white wolf raced between the boles of the trees. She wove in an agile dance as she chased the sound of water. Faster, faster she pushed, ears flattened to her head, tail extended behind her like a banner. Noah had beaten her last time, but not tonight. Tonight, she had him.

A flash of gray fur caught her attention. Somehow, he'd made up ground with more speed than she'd anticipated. Kayla's claws dug into the moist earth beneath her paws, and beneath her fur, her muscles bunched, released. Oh, to run and run, free of the city, the constriction of skin and human ideas! Headlong, full of the moon in her blood, she hurdled through the forest.

He couldn't keep pace with her. No one could. She was moonlight, quick like mercury. She was the wind, unstoppable as it swept over the earth. She was...

She was falling behind. Rotten bastard! He'd come into full view, more than a flash of gray now. A handsome wolf, strong and nimble as he dodged through the trees. From somewhere, she dragged up more speed and, as the trees thinned, passed him by.

Gulping for air, she skidded to a halt on the stream's bank. He pulled up a bare second later, pink tongue flopped out of his mouth. Wolven body language allowed for many expressions, but she'd always liked to gloat with a human voice. It had the best effect.

The fur receded and gave way to pale skin and dishwater blonde hair. After her time on four legs, the tiny denim cutoff shorts chafed, and the tank top constricted. Shifts preserved clothing, which often came in useful, but tonight, it irritated her. Just beneath her human veneer, the wolf shifted restlessly. The moon called to it, made it hungry. *Soon, she promised. Soon. We'll hunt with the pack, once we've gathered. Once we're mated.*

It brought her back to the present, and she smirked at the gray wolf. "I win, slowpoke."

He gave a low, playful growl.

"Oh no, you don't. You get to cook dinner all next week. You lost, fair and square." Unable to stand it any longer, she stripped off her clothes and tossed them onto a nearby tree branch.

Another growl. He licked his chops.

She laughed, even as hot moisture melted over her folds. The run had invigorated her, the competition excited her, and now she wanted to fuck, hard and fast. But the moon would be high before they knew it. "We have to meet the pack. Ugh, I'm sweaty. Suppose I have time for a quick wash? I don't want to show up tonight smelling like—*oof!*"

In a controlled tumble, she hit the ground. He'd thrown himself against her knees and knocked her legs out from under her. As she sprawled on the ground, mossy soil against her back, he prowled around her with slow, deliberate movements. Golden eyes watched her as he circled, head low to take in the scent of her hair, her skin. His breath, warmer than the May evening, gusted over her hip.

She shuddered. Fur brushed against her outer thigh as he wound around her and moved between her thighs. Once there, he didn't touch her, just stood with his nose outside her cunt and breathed. In his wolf shape, he could smell her desire, her need, and he savored it. She could see it in the smolder of his eyes.

His body blurred, and then there he was, on all fours between her legs, smirk curled over his human lips. The fur had barely disappeared before he buried his face in her pussy, tongue lapping over her folds in long, bold strokes. She moaned, a deep, guttural sound, and splayed her legs wide.

Warmth circled her clit as he sucked it into his mouth. He wormed his tongue into her, then out again to circle around the sensitive button of flesh. Flashes of pleasure lit her nerves, magnified by the tides of lunar energy that washed through her. But she wanted more than just his tongue; she wanted his cock to pound into her, over and over, until she couldn't take another thrust.

Just the thought of it sent the shocks of a small climax through her, a tease of an orgasm that only whetted her need. But it drove him beyond control. He lurched to his feet and hauled her with him, the momentum strong enough to press her against his chest. Their lips met, melded, and their tongues twined as his arms wrapped around her.

In the distance, they could hear the howls of the pack. Fierce passion clawed through her, and he tore his mouth from hers with a snarl. The small hairs on her neck rose, and she had to have him inside her. Reaching high, she grabbed a low branch on a nearby tree as he shed his jeans. His thick cock stood up from a nest of dark curls, but she saw it only in shadow as he moved between her legs.

Impatient, she wrapped her legs around his waist. Hard and insistent, his cock pressed against her pussy, slid along the wet slit to nudge her clit. She leveraged herself with her grip on the branch then dropped herself onto his shaft.

They cried out in unison, almost howling with the pleasure of it. He snapped his hips up, drove himself deeper, until she took the length of him. He felt so hot inside her, so wide, and her inner walls gripped him as he pushed her open. With him buried in her wetness, she felt complete even as she thought she could never take him deep enough. Her friend, her lover. After tonight, her mate.

He withdrew until only the flared tip of him stayed within, and then he drove in harder, his body wracked with shudders as the animal

within him fought for control. She couldn't see the moon, but she didn't need to. She could feel it as it rose higher into the sky, not over the treetops, but not far from it. It stoked the burn inside her as much as the thrusts of his cock did, with a sticky, almost painful tingle that made her want to writhe.

Unable to help herself, she gave in and undulated her hips against his. She couldn't get him deep enough, hard enough, but she tried, even as the lunar pull made her want to crawl out of her skin. His hips slammed against her as he pounded his shaft into her cunt over and over again. From behind clenched teeth he grunted, but he never closed his eyes. They stared at each other, gazes locked, even as she pulled herself up and down his cock and he thudded into her.

Release ripped through them as the moon tore free of the horizon and took command of the night. She screamed, every nerve alive, aware of every jerk of his cock in her depths, every jet of seed as it spilled into her. Their climaxes mingled, became one, and they shuddered in unison, linked by the magic that held them, and bound by a love deeper than those who could wear only a human's shape.

Within her, his cock stayed hard, ready. He had too much energy to stop now. Instead, he took her into his arms, catching her as she let go of the branch, then set her on her feet. She whimpered as his shaft slid out of her, but it didn't stay out long.

He spun her around and nudged her feet apart as she braced herself against the trunk of the tree. Behind her, he caressed her ass, grabbed hold of her hips. "Wider," he growled as he leaned over her. His cock slid home, his balls swinging forward to nudge her clit. She groaned then spread her legs more, her hips canted up to receive him.

For a long moment he covered her, shaft deep in her pussy. One hand slid around her waist to stroke her cunt. His fingers explored her stretched folds spread by his girth, stroked around the edges of his shaft to test the taut skin. Alive with need again, she pressed back against him, caught between the urge to take more of him and the burn to rub against his hand.

She moaned with relief as he took her clit between his fingers. Then

he rammed his cock into her with a merciless rhythm, while he pinched and tugged at the sensitive flesh. She backed against him, open and wet, met him thrust for thrust. They'd spent dozens of full moons together, but none had inflamed her this way.

The moon, the long, firm thrusts, scorched through her. Head thrown back, she shouted her climax to the sky, threw herself back to force him in as deep as he could push. A howl echoed from behind her, and he exploded, emptied into her pussy. Her spine tingled, every nerve smoldered, and within her, his cock still twitched. The afterglow was more like a sunrise.

The urge to take him over and over again still gripped her, but the pair of orgasms had dulled it. At the least, she thought as they slowly disengaged, they could get through the pack meeting without a loss of control. After that, it wouldn't matter. The whole gang would have given up to the moon.

A series of summoning howls went up in the distance. "We're late," he said with a laugh as he rescued his jeans from the ground.

She pulled a leaf out of her hair. "We're late, and we're dirty. I can't show up to my own binding like this. I look like I've been fucking in the woods."

"Imagine that." He grinned at her and stepped close enough to give her a deep, tender kiss loaded with promises for later. "You're beautiful, baby. I still can't believe you're mine."

"No one else's. Not ever." Her eyes closed as she nuzzled his nose with hers. "I love you, Noah."

Strong arms enfolded her. "I love you, too. Tonight, you're my wife. I mean, we still have to do the whole city hall thing tomorrow, but the pack's what counts."

He smelled wonderful, forest and wolf and aftershave. "The pack and you are all that really matter to me."

The howl sounded almost reproachful.

"They're going to skin us. Want to take a minute to get the dirt off? I'll run ahead and let them know you're coming." He pulled away to beam at her, the huge, proud grin of a new husband. "I want to make sure

the alpha knows we're doing it tonight. And that Todd's there. He's standing up for us."

She laughed. "I know. You've said that at least fifteen times this week."

"Well, he *is*!" He looked a little sheepish. "He loves you to pieces. That means a lot to me."

"He's your best friend. He wants you to be happy." She gave him a quick kiss. "Go on. I'll be right there."

Fur overtook his skin, and then he was a wolf. With a bark of goodbye, he bolted off into the forest, tail high. Such an amazing animal, and an even more wonderful man.

Humming under her breath, she stepped into the stream. In May, the water ran warm enough, although earlier in the year the mountain's chill would have made this bath unpleasant. The wolves wouldn't care about the dirt, but she did. No girl wanted to show up to her wedding covered in mud, werewolf or no.

Here comes the bride, all dressed in white... When she'd imagined a white wedding as a girl, she hadn't guessed it'd mean fur. She threw on her clothes and donned her wolf shape, a bright shadow among the dim ones. Of course, she'd never anticipated a case of lycanthropy, either.

Her mother had hoped the affliction would pass her over. *Thank goodness my junior prom was the day before the full moon or Jimmy Davidson would have gotten more than a black eye for reaching up my dress.*

Darkness had settled into the trees, but she had no trouble navigating through the woods. Her night vision and sense of smell guided her toward the pack's favored spot. Even while in her wolf form, excited butterflies danced in her stomach. She'd heard so many things about life with a mate.

A foul odor on the air stopped her in her tracks. Ears back, tail down, she lifted her muzzle for a better smell. There it was again, the scent of death without rot, sour blood, and beneath both, the reek of twisted magic. Her hackles went up.

Vampire.

Every undead in the city knew to stay clear of the mountain on the

night of the full moon. A truce kept them safe in the urban confines, but no deal could keep them alive on a night like tonight. Trouble, that's what it meant. Trouble the pack needed to know about. Peter would have a litter of cubs. Any alpha would.

Wedding forgotten, she turned to bolt for the pack, but her ears picked up voices, one of them familiar. Low to the ground, she slunk in the direction of the conversation. Yes, she definitely knew that voice. Regina, the alpha's mate. *What's she doing out here? She should be back with the rest of them. Like I should. They need to know...*

But with a biter in the forest, Regina could be in trouble. Kayla couldn't leave her until she knew. So she stayed close to the forest floor and made her silent way forward.

"We are still short a guest." The vampire, his voice smooth.

Her lip curled at the sound.

"In an hour, there will be wolves all over. That won't be a problem." Regina sounded calm, in control. "We'll have what we need."

Although she could hear more as a wolf, her white fur stood out like a neon sign. She shifted her form and crouched down. Through a thick bush, she could see all she needed to.

They stood beside a tree, sheltered by the thick darkness of a place where light never struck. Too casual for a scared woman, Regina lazed against the rough bark, lips near enough to the man's to brush against them. He leaned close, one hand on either side of her, and even in the gloom, his long teeth glistened.

Kayla's hair stood on end. *That's Paul Kiplinger.* Paul Kiplinger, who had flouted the truce every chance he got. Who ran a city-sponsored home for runaways to feed his coterie of walking corpses. His own kind had almost left him staked out to greet the sun after they'd caught him trying to make his own brood one bitten neck at a time.

The tip of Paul's tongue brushed over Regina's lips. "We need a seventh or we lose our chance until next year."

Playfully, she snapped her teeth at his tongue. "We'll have a seventh. Don't touch me before the meeting or they'll smell you on me."

The implications staggered Kayla. *What was Peter going to do? Shit.*

Time to go.

But she couldn't shift. The wolf wouldn't come.

Frantic, she reached deep inside herself for the power. She could feel it there, in the place where her animal side lived. It waited, as it always did. When she pulled, it stayed where it was, stubborn, intractable. No matter what she did, it wouldn't budge.

Trapped on two legs, she got onto all fours to crawl away from the scene. Fingers, cold, dead, strong, laced into her hair. "What we got 'ere, eh?" asked a loud male voice colored with a gutter-British accent. "Miles, I think we've caught ourselves a stray."

"I do believe you're right, Mason."

He hauled her to her feet, her scalp stretched painfully as he yanked her hair. A face forced itself in front of hers. Long blond hair fell into the man's red eyes. The smell of death clung to him like leeches.

"Maybe we've missed our calling. We should've been dog catchers."

Raucous laughter. "Hey, Paul, look what we found listenin' in on you and the lady." He shoved Kayla forward, his hand still wrapped around a hank of her locks.

"One of yours, Regina?" Paul shoved himself away from the tree. He moved with an unholy agility, each motion smooth, refined. When he drew close, she struggled, but the other two vampires held her fast.

Regina made no move to help. "Mmm. Kayla Schinn. One of the last people I would have expected a problem from. Or perhaps we should just call her number seven."

"Convenient for her to come to us."

Wide-eyed with a suffocating fear, Kayla looked to the other woman, searching for any sign that her pack mate would fight or run for help. Anything at all. Instead, she only found a malicious smirk.

"They'll look for her. I'll have to make excuses. Here..."

Paul turned as Regina touched his arm. "What is it?"

The woman's eyes had turned a lupine gold, but no warmth lit them. "Hurt me." Her words turned Kayla's stomach. "A few scratches will do. I can say Kayla and I were jumped by vampires in the woods. I'll

lead them the other direction and come back with my little puppy when the rest are lost on the wrong trail."

On either side of her, the vampires laughed. "Can we help?" one of them asked.

A red-eyed glare shut them up. They had pushed Paul too far. "You won't touch her. Get that one in place."

Kayla thrashed in their grip, but the one called Miles, Mason's twin in appearance and perversion, pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt. The touch of the metal made her skin crawl and itch.

"Don't change form, cutie," he breathed into her ear, "or you'll cut off your own hands. Those cuffs are magicked against your stupid dog tricks. They won't shift with you."

She screamed with every ounce of strength she had. It echoed through the night, and in answer, she heard howls. Those long, lonely calls made her ache to reply. They sounded so very far away.

Mason punched her in the jaw. "Shut it. Come on, Miles."

As they hauled her away, she could hear Regina's grunts and gasps as Paul left his marks. They sounded closer to orgasm than to pain.

Chapter Two

"Suppose we ought to do 'er?"

Mason's cockney lilt rose over the dull throb in her ears. It had gotten hard to think with the ache in her face to fuel the animal rage that built inside her. The moon had continued its inexorable climb, and soon, she didn't know if she'd have the strength to hold onto her control.

But she had to. Her wrists felt itchy, chafed by whatever magic the cuffs had absorbed. She believed what the vampire had said. If she changed form, the metal would snap closed and sever her hands.

"You daft? Paul wants 'er for the seventh. No good to 'im dead." Miles snorted.

"Not what I meant." His twin pumped his hips in an obscene parody of sex. "I mean, *do 'er*."

He made a face. "Yecch. You can fuck 'er if you want, but I ain't into dogs. Don't know how Paul does it. Besides, she'd probably just hump your leg."

He laughed as she stumbled along doubled at the waist, with a hand in her hair. *Regina has betrayed the pack. I have to tell Peter. I have to get back to Noah. Noah...*

A familiar howl rose in the air. She stood straight, ignoring the pain of her scalp as her hair pulled and the vampire cussed. He was calling for her. Prickles of power, rage, fear shot through her, and her muscles rippled, but the bite of metal into her wrists snapped her out of it. *Noah.*

"Should we use the amulet, you think? Keep 'er from changing?"

“Nah, let ‘er lose ‘er hands if she can’t keep ‘er head.”

So that was how they’d stopped the change before. Someone had supplied these vampires well. Where they’d gotten such magical artifacts, she’d find out later.

The world upended into a red haze. The urge, the *demand*, to shift her shape almost overwhelmed her. Blood trickled down her hands, but she barely noticed.

Peter had given his pack the order to change shape. The alpha shift was a leader’s power and prerogative, the ability to control the shape of his followers. Once a lunar cycle, when the wolves gathered, he called them to the hunt, and they had no choice but to obey. In her mind, she could hear the baying, the sound of wolves as they chased their prey.

Tonight, she was that prey. They searched for her.

With the last of her strength, she wrestled the beast down. It hurt, physically, spiritually. *No, not now. Not now! You can’t get free without hands!* Desperate, she shouted her wolf down. One didn’t reason with the monster. It didn’t listen to logic. It could only hear dominance; she bested it, although it left her covered in sweat.

Only then did she notice that she’d stumbled. The vampires had just continued on and dragged her by the hair. “You got it back under control then, lovey?” Miles asked. “Fucking mutt. Ass up.”

She scrambled to her feet. Better to walk, no matter how much she wanted to run.

The slope had grown steep by the time they arrived at the clearing. A huge stone protruded from the ground here to create a small, rocky cliff outside the trees. On their knees along the far edge, nearest to the unpleasant drop, she saw six other people, hands bound behind their backs by the same type of cuffs she wore.

Werewolves, all of them. She could smell it, see it in their eyes. The vampires had collected werewolves, and Regina had helped.

Miles or Mason, Kayla had lost track of which one had her, pitched her forward hard onto the rock. Sharp edges bit into her unprotected knees and drew blood as she rolled over the ground. One of the wolves edged forward, twisting so she could reach his hands to lever herself up.

"Derek? Is that you?" she asked in surprise.

"Shh." He kept a wary eye on the vampiric twins who, in return, made monkey faces. "Kayla. They got you too, huh?"

Derek Anderson had vanished a month before, after the Army had given him personal leave. The pack had thought he'd gone to lick his wounds after a tragic tour in the Middle East. He'd come back wounded, bent nearly to breaking by the death of half his platoon. His disappearance had surprised no one.

"Just a bit ago. I was going to the meeting, and Regina... Fuck, Derek, Regina..."

"Yeah. The whore." He curled his lip. "At least they're looking for you."

Shocked, she met his gaze. "They've been looking for you, too. Peter's been in daily contact with your commanding officer, and Sonja—"

He looked away, torment in his eyes. "I hope to all hell she stays out of this."

"She can't stay out of anything. You know how she is."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Although grim, his tight smile still showed an affection he couldn't keep down. "That woman drives me around the fucking bend. She's my CO's kid, you know."

Sonja Carter and her big German shepherd, Charlie, had grown next to infamous among the city's werewolf population. As far as they knew, she was the only lone wolf in the area, and she used the fact to everyone's benefit. She'd become the paranormal community's private investigator, peacemaker, and negotiator.

So Kayla did know, but she went along with him. "Yeah?"

"Spoiled commander's brat. Daddy's girl." He looked into the sky, and she could see the gleam of unshed tears in his eyes. "I dumped her years ago. Before she was one of us."

"Why?"

He looked from the stars to the ground. "A lot of reasons. They seem stupid right now."

"Come on. Buck up." A deep breath didn't help settle her nerves. "They'll find us. They have to."

Neither of them believed it.

Silence weighed on them. "Who are the rest?" she asked him, as much to break the tense quiet as to keep him company. It wasn't the question she wanted to ask, but the answer to that one still scared her. It didn't matter that the answer would come too soon. She wasn't ready to know.

"I don't know them. We haven't had much of a chance to get to know each other. They've kept us isolated and—and weak." He changed his answer at the last moment.

What he'd almost said was something else she didn't want to know. "Have they had you all this time?"

"A few weeks. I spent the last full moon by myself, and it must have been about a week after that they grabbed me." He glanced sidelong at the other captives. "They had a couple already by then."

The way he said it, the look in his eyes, disturbed her. But now wasn't the time or place to talk about it. "Where did they grab you from?"

"Backwoods Idaho."

Not far away, but far enough. "Why were you out there?"

Raw emotion sat behind his gaze. Windows into his soul, just like the adage went, and by the display, his spirit still bled. "Looking for answers."

"What was the question?" Her voice was gentle.

"Wish I knew."

Now it sat there, the next logical question. She didn't want to ask, but she had to. Superstition nagged at her. If she asked, the words would make the situation real, the consequences possible. If she acknowledged it, gave it substance, then the pack wouldn't find them. They'd stay here, tortured by the lunar tides, held by the dead until the biters went through with whatever plan they had.

But she had to ask. "Why do they have us?"

He shrugged his shoulders. The chain between his cuffs rattled. "I don't know. They've said they need seven a few times, but I'm not sure why."

"I heard them say that, too." *Or perhaps we should just call her number*

seven. A ball of lead settled into her stomach. *Convenient for her to come to us.* She'd given them what they needed. *I should have just gone with Noah. Then I'd be with him, we could be bound...*

And the vampires would have taken another member of the pack. It was hard to wish she'd taken different actions. It would have meant she'd condemned them to the uncertain fate she faced.

"Seven's never been my lucky number." Derek's voice distracted her. A low growl of an undertone rumbled beneath the words.

She looked up. The moon rapidly approached the zenith. They had half an hour at the most before the change was uncontrollable, and the curse of the wolf would live up to its name.

Fear spiked through her, and her nostrils flared. All around her, eyes had turned to gold. The scent of something primal hovered in the air. She had diverted it, but now it rushed back in full force. On her wrists, the cuffs tightened.

Reckless energy made her bold. "What are you going to do with us?" she demanded.

"Paul wants a little doggie to sit in his lap," Mason said with a sneer. "One isn't enough. Don't you worry, missy, he'll give you a bone."

"You talk too much." Paul's smooth voice cut through the sniggering of the twins. He stepped out of the trees and stood before the prisoners. "Go and retrieve the items from the cache. Be quick."

The vampire unrolled the sleeves of his pressed shirt then rolled them again more neatly as the twin biters scurried off into the forest. "Their manners are unfortunate, but they're very useful," he told her, "and they do have a certain old-world charm. They remind me of the London of my youth."

She didn't reply.

"Do you know what I liked best about those days, Miss Schinn?" He folded his arms across his chest. "Go on. Have a guess."

"The food?"

He laughed. "Partially correct. You see, that was when my kind knew their place." When he smiled, she could see his fangs, sharp and perfectly white. "On the night my sire made me, he took me up to the top

of the Tower of London, and he told me to look around. 'This is yours,' he said. 'Every soul within it lives at your discretion.'"

Uncomfortable beneath his gaze, knees sore from the stone, she shifted.

"And that is the truth of it, my dear. Now surely, you will think this very cliché, very Bram Stoker indeed, but we have conquered death." He shrugged, as if it were no more than a win at canasta. "The last, true plague of humanity, and my kind has beaten it. We have come out of that victory with superior strength, speed, agility. We are superior."

"You still have a problem with sunlight," she spit at him. Restless, reckless. The wolf wouldn't wait much longer.

He inclined his head. "I concede the point. But in all other things, we remain the cream in a vat of milk, if you like the analogy. Most of us have forgotten that. Some of us have not. And it is high time that all of us remember."

She could hear Mason and Miles chattering at a distance but coming closer. "So you'll start a war?"

"There has always been a war. Some misguided souls have simply forced a very unnatural peace. Tell me, have you never wanted to purge the lot of us from your city?"

"Of course."

He nodded. "We, for our part, consider you road blocks. Speed bumps, really. But you put up an excellent fight. Very respectable. You have proven yourselves worthy to assist in our cause. And that is what this is all about, Miss Schinn."

"Oy, where you want this?" Between them, the twins carried a long wooden box.

"Set it off to the side." Paul glanced around. "Where is Regina? We're on a rather tight schedule here, and we cannot start without her and her friend."

The twins set down the box. From within, she could hear the rattle of ceramic items as they clattered against each other. "Why do we need two of 'em?"

"Four quarters must be covered, and we must have a balance in

energy. Thus, two wolves and two vampires."

The pair exchanged looks. "Ain't there three of us, then?"

Paul gave a long-suffering sigh. "You two count as one. You're twins. If it were just one of you, it'd be a half, now, wouldn't it?"

"Ohh." In unison, they nodded. At any other time, Kayla might have found it funny.

A short scream split the air, followed by a sharp slap. Regina entered the clearing, dragging a woman bound with rope. "The pack took longer to lead off than I thought they would. I'm sorry," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Peter's a noble asshole and wanted to make sure I was all right."

Paul had done a good job with the marks he had made. They were artful wounds, intended to look fierce in the moonlight but cause a minimum of damage. And she would wear them for weeks. Lycanthropic healing wouldn't touch magical injuries, such as those made by a vampire.

I hope they infect and rot off her face, Kayla thought venomously.

"Where did you lead them?" Paul tested the rope around the woman. It wrapped under her breasts, over her arms, and looped around her wrists, savagely tightened to bite into her skin.

"North. They're heading away from us. I told them I thought you'd be heading back toward the city." A smug, self-satisfied sneer distorted Regina's lips, made uglier by the scratches Paul had left along her face and neck. "They're so worried about her. Noah just about turned himself inside out. Didn't he, Todd?"

Sick. Kayla felt sick, nauseous with dread, worry, and lycanthropic energy. Todd, Noah's best friend, almost his brother, stepped out onto the stone platform.

Oh no. They got him, too.

"He loves her." Something was wrong with his voice. It was flat, quiet, unhappy, but not panicked. He had no ropes, no cuffs, and he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Yes, well, he's an idiot." Regina dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. "By next week, he'll be humping another bitch in the pack."

Kayla made herself breathe. "Todd?"

He met her eyes for an instant then looked away once more, but she'd already seen the shame in him. All emotion emptied out of her but the cold, sour charge of betrayal. No, they hadn't caught him or forced him here. He'd come of his own accord.

"Can we please get started?" Paul sounded impatient. "We haven't any more time to dally. Miles, Mason, arrange our guests while I sort the jars."

Even as they hauled her to the center of the rock, she couldn't tear her gaze from Todd. Just last week, he'd come to their apartment for dinner. He'd brought a six pack of beer and some brownies. They'd served him bratwurst. After dinner, they'd all talked about hopes for the future over a friendly game of gin rummy.

They'd never guessed he was in league with vampires. They never would have thought about it, not ever. Loyal to the pack, to his own blood, to Noah. She didn't understand.

The wolves made a tight circle at the center of the stone, still on their knees under a moon that had nearly reached its height. Paul set small ceramic jars in front of the others, the lids shaped like the heads of wolves. They reminded her of canopic jars, the containers the ancient Egyptians had used to hold a mummy's internal organs.

Her stomach rolled. They smelled of spoiled blood, rotten meat. Her human side wanted to gag.

The wolf within growled.

"I have the empty one here, but I'd prefer not to stain my shirt." Paul walked out of her vision. "Todd, if you will..."

"Let me." Regina sounded too eager.

The twins stood behind Derek, positioned across from her in the circle. "Hoo, girl-on-girl action!"

Derek stared behind her, his face half-turned, as if he wanted to look away but couldn't. Muscles twitched in his jaw as his teeth clenched. She could hear the unknown woman crying, sobbing with hysterical fear.

Suddenly, Derek's eyes flew open wide, and then he squeezed them shut as he flinched away from whatever he saw. Kayla smelled rich,

new blood. Meat. Wet, viscid wheezes replaced the sobs. Then only a soggy slither remained.

The body hit the ground.

A gloppy splatter echoed in the jar.

Paul set the last canopic container in front of her, the rim around the lid's seal smeared with crimson fluid. A heavy, narcotic high buzzed in her head. The moon was too high. There was too much blood, adrenaline. Around the circle, she saw the others fighting the same internal battle.

The four captors stood at the cardinal points of the compass. Regina's arm was red to the elbow.

Paul chanted something in a language Kayla didn't understand. She tried to focus on it, to pick out the sounds of words, but they made no sense at all. In chorus, his cohorts responded with a ritual answer.

From his position in the north, Paul chanted. From the east, Regina answered. An almost audible crackle of power arced through the air, through the circle of wolves, and the jar in Regina's quarter began to glow with an unholy indigo hue.

The moon inched higher.

Once more, Paul chanted, phrases measured and even. Together, the twins replied, voices as one from the south. Derek's face, twisted now with his struggle to keep his beast at bay, lit with blue-purple light from the second container.

Her skin tingled with energy.

The moon touched the top of the sky but hadn't reached the center.

Chanting in an unfaltering rhythm, Paul called upon Todd in that strange, awful language. If he would break, he would break now, and she prayed he would. Todd, who liked chocolate chips in his vanilla ice cream. Who helped Noah carry their couch up the stairs when they moved in together. But Todd answered, his voice clear if uncertain. The third jar fluoresced.

The hairs on her arms and neck stood on end.

Closer, closer. The wolf inside her crouched, ready to spring.

As Paul chanted, louder now, strong, confident, the magical charge

in the air built to a painful intensity. A scream strangled and died in her throat. Before her, the jar began to glow, lit by an unknown source from within. Power poured into her and raged, trapped without a conduit out. Her eyes rolled back into her head.

The moon reached its peak.

The wolf went berserk.

Now, she could scream.

Chapter Three

Darkness came late in May. Stars speckled the sky long after young children had gone to bed as the summer sun reigned supreme and darkness retreated to wait for winter. People walked the streets, full of laughter, happy to shop in the diverse little stores that lined the sidewalks. The city loved summer, and it showed.

By the time she arrived at Moon Blessings on the typically busy, downtown Tacoma avenue, the crowds had thinned and most stores had closed their doors. Inside the shop, the incense burners no longer smoked, though the scent still lingered in the air. The door wasn't locked, but the neon Open sign had been turned off. A bell tinkled when she opened the door.

The lights were still on. She didn't remove her sunglasses.

"We're about to close, I'm afraid," came a voice from behind one of the counters, friendly but firm. "We open back up at—"

An older woman, crowned by a silver-shot mane of red hair, stood up, her words faltering as she stared at who had come in. A breathless pause caught in her throat, until at last she forced out one word. "Kayla?"

"Hello, Moira. I guess I could come back tomorrow morning, when you're open..."

"Don't you dare!" Moira laughed, a loud, boisterous sound that said just how happy this visit had made her. She rushed around the counter. "It's been too long already, phone calls or not. Here, just a minute."

Kayla watched as her friend bustled to lock the door. Moira's tiny metaphysical shop hadn't changed at all over the years. How much time she'd spent here, Kayla didn't know, but the distinct smell of the incense soothed her, brought her back to something a lot like home. A place of calm, rest. A spiritual haven where even her battered soul could find peace.

Moira hadn't changed much, either. She'd added a few more pounds, sported a few more gray hairs, but still had the same smiling Irish eyes and merry grin that Kayla had known for fifteen years. After the last year, this woman made her feel normal, sane.

"How's it been?" Kayla asked as the woman pulled the metal security grate down from the ceiling.

"Bad. But all things considered, not as bad as it could have been." The latch on the grate clicked into the floor. "Fights broke out between the fangs and the fur after it all hit the fan, and we nearly had open violence. Come along."

She followed the redhead into the back. "What stopped it?"

Surplus incense, crystals, books, and other odd inventory items lined the metal shelves. Used to the clutter, the older woman wound her way through the stockroom to the back. "Peter got with Vincenzo Pirelli in secret one night. When they came out of the meeting, Peter told the pack to back off, watch and wait. He had to take one challenge that night, and three the next full moon. No one was happy, but he's the alpha, and eventually, everyone agreed that he had to have a reason."

"Pirelli convinced him to call off the attacks? Was he tampered with?" The local vampire lord was known for smooth moves and manipulation.

"I can guarantee he wasn't." Moira reached up and pulled a rope to expose the attic's access stairway. "They met here."

Kayla nodded. Moon Blessings was neutral ground, and Moira could guarantee a magical safe space. If they'd met here, the no-nonsense Irish woman would have made certain both sides played by the rules.

It also spoke volumes for how bad the situation had gotten. Moira kept herself well out of the fray. That she'd let them come here to talk

meant the situation had gotten very dire. "What did Pirelli say?"

"You know I can't tell you that." They walked up the stairs to the furnished upper space. Comfortable armchairs with high backs and rugs in rich colors decorated the small sitting area nearest the hatch. Behind it sat neat piles of wooden chests and crates that dominated the rest of the attic. *The good stuff*, Moira called the contents of those boxes. The things she only sold to the paranormal community.

Kayla grunted. "What *can* you tell me?"

"That his argument convinced even me. The coterie at large had nothing to do with the attack." She gestured for Kayla to sit.

Instead, she leaned over the back of the other chair, supported on her elbows. "That's not much of a surprise to me. What about now?"

"Tense. Very tense. Pirelli may have convinced Peter that his crew had nothing to do with it, but biters are biters, and barkers are barkers, and never the twain shall agree." She shrugged. "The alpha hasn't been open with the pack, so your friends are looking to bring someone down. Your alpha female is the loudest voice for it, against her mate's wishes."

"And the vampires?"

She snorted. "Doing what they do. They're using the hostilities to push for an end to the truce, an end to the moratorium on new progeny, more troublemaking, the usual. It's only Lord Pirelli and the alpha that are keeping things in line."

Kayla took a deep breath, conflicted but unable to stop the next question. "What about Noah?"

"He misses you." Her answer was immediate. "He pushed for war harder than anyone, and almost got it, all by himself. He was the one who challenged Peter the night he met with Lord Pirelli." She paused. "He almost won."

It hit her like a blow to the gut. He'd fought for her, tried to take on a city full of vampires. *I shouldn't have asked. Fuck.* "I'm glad he didn't."

"Me, too. It would have been a free-for-all." Moira stared at her, hard. "You're going to see him, aren't you? Kayla, you have to see him."

"I have to leave him out of it." She shook her head. "He doesn't need to get involved with me again. Not now."

"Why not? He loves you." Her old friend leaned forward. "You can't come back here and not talk to him. That's not right."

Warmth in the cold of her emotions hurt. *He loves me. And that's why he can't know I'm here. Please, drop it; I don't want to think about it.* "It's not right to take him where I have to go. He deserves a life and a future."

The redhead narrowed her eyes. "He won't get either without you. Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Into the abyss. Where they dragged me."

"You're going to break the fight wide open, aren't you?"

Her hands clenched in front of her. "They started it a year ago. I'm just bringing it back to their front."

Quiet stole over them, tense, full of unasked questions. "You can't do this. It's more than you. It's the pack. The city. The people in it. Get Peter involved. Or Sonja Carter. They can talk to Pirelli—"

"I have to do this. You don't understand."

Temper flared in the Irish woman's eyes. "You're damn right, I don't. You haven't said a word to help me understand. Take off your glasses and look at me!"

Angry, riled, Kayla ripped the glasses off her face.

Moira gasped. The color drained from her face. "God in Heaven... What did they do to you?"

"Made the monster that they thought they wanted. They were wrong." The light from the pair of lamps burned. She squinted. "Bad enough that they did this to me, but they know how to do it to other people. They *will* do it to other people. I can't allow that."

"What did they do? What happened that night?" Moira's voice was gentle. "Please. Tell me. Let me try to help you."

Kayla shook her head. "I can't. It would compromise your neutrality. I've already said too much."

She set her lips into a line. "Maybe it's time I took a side."

"Whose side were you going to take? Biters? Wolves?"

"Yours."

Friendship, concern, and affection all gleamed in Moira's eyes. A year of hell had hardened Kayla's heart, but under that look, it began to

soften. More than she ever had, she wanted to kneel down, put her head in the older woman's lap, and cry like a heartbroken child. *Help me. Fix me. I'm so tired of the cold. I'm afraid of the dark.*

But she couldn't. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But definitely not before she'd finished what she had to do. Instead, she put her glasses back on her face. "Where is Paul Kiplinger?"

"I'd be a rich woman if I knew that. Vincenzo Pirelli has put money on his head. He's a wanted man in this city. What, was he involved?"

She clenched her teeth. "Miles and Mason Bristol still in town?"

"Yes, but I don't know where they are, either. But..." She held up a hand to forestall Kayla's frown. "...I do know where a toady of theirs likes to get hookers to snack on. You could ask him."

"Do you suppose he'll tell me?"

"That'll depend on how you ask, I think. He finds his girls by where the Rusty Nail used to be."

Goal in sight, Kayla straightened. The worry in her friend's eyes was almost enough to undo her, but it was too hard to forget the sobs of an innocent woman, or the sound of a heart as it dropped into a jar. Or the lost lives—hers, that woman's, those of six others. "Do you have any stakes?"

For a moment, Moira looked old. Laugh lines around her eyes seemed to deepen. The wrinkles from a million smiles became traces of twice as many frowns. "I don't ever want to get caught between the fangs and the fur," she'd said once over glasses of iced tea. "I can't help anyone if I pick a side."

"What help could you give a vampire?" Kayla had been surprised.

"You'd be surprised," she'd said but never elaborated. "Either way, each would play off me to get to the other. No, better that I stay out of it." She'd looked sober. "Besides, what happens to a fly between the swatter and the wall?"

And now Kayla asked her to violate that rule. Briefly, she felt guilty, even as she knew that the rivalry had taken a more sinister turn. Moira would not be safe from Kiplinger's crew. No one would be.

The redhead stood and walked to a wooden crate. She lifted the lid

to reveal a collection of sharp wooden stakes. "They're blessed," she told Kayla. "Take as many as you need. I started stocking them last year. Just in case."

She moved across the room and picked out half a dozen of the pointed rods. "Thanks, Moira."

"I have plenty if you need more." Green eyes fixed on her. "Revenge doesn't just hurt the people on the receiving end."

"I can't hurt any more than I already do." With a grim smile, she walked to the attic stairs then stopped. "One more thing."

"Hmm?"

"Is Todd still with the pack?"

The older woman canted her head. "Of course. After you disappeared, he was a great friend to Noah."

"I'll just bet." She wanted to go after him. The betrayal still burned like acid in her heart. But his time would come. His death had a greater purpose to serve that went beyond her revenge. "I'll let myself out the back door."

Moira watched her friend descend the stairs. A year ago, she'd seen a happy blonde woman out of her shop after a long talk about love, marriage, and what it meant for wolves to mate. That woman's bright, elated smile had lit the attic like sunshine, as had the obvious love she wore for the man she'd bond with when the moon rose high that evening.

Now, a grim shadow of her friend walked away, tormented, haunted, alone. It made her heart sore to even ponder. *Oh, child, don't walk into the night alone.*

The sound of the closing door sounded ominous, final. *Not if I can help it. I can't go with you, girl, but I know someone that can.* Without a second thought, she pulled the cell phone from her pocket and punched in a number.

Ring. Ring. Ring. "Hello? Moira?"

"Noah." She took a deep breath. "You have to do something for me. I need you to go where I tell you to, and I need you to do it right now."

"I'm about to go out right now, but if you can give me a couple hours—"

"You don't have a couple hours. I need you to go now."

"This is a little strange, Moira."

"It's about Kayla."

Shocked silence held the line. "What about Kayla?"

She gave directions. "Go. Go right now."

The phone went dead, but she knew he'd do as she asked.

* * * * *

Noah flipped on the small lamp in the front room. It didn't shed a lot of light, just enough to show that someone lived here. Someone waited for his love to come home.

He never left the apartment dark. If she was hurt or lonely, she could see the glow from the lamp and know she was still welcome here. Even after a year with no contact, he hoped she might come up the street and see the light, and that it would bring her back to him.

From the table, the paper stared at him. *Lease Renewal Notice* read the large letters across the top. *If you would like to stay with us another year, please sign and return this paper by the end of the month. As a thank you, we'll be glad to offer you a complimentary cleaning of the carpets in your home.*

Had a year really passed since they'd chosen this place together?

"We can stay here a year, maybe two," Kayla had said as she poked in the cupboards and checked the hot water heater. "Save up, and get a house with a view of the mountain. Have the pack over for barbecues."

"They're wolves," he'd said with a laugh. "We can just throw down slabs of beef and pour beer into dog bowls."

She'd laughed with him and looked so beautiful. Another two weeks, and they'd be bound. If they signed the papers that day, it'd be just a few more days before he could chase her around the new place. They could break in those kitchen counters. They were the perfect height for her to sit on, her legs wrapped around him...

Jaw clenched, he forced himself to break off the memory. She'd hardly gotten to live here, but somehow, it remained their place. The sofa she'd picked out still sat where she'd had Todd and him move it. Then

they'd moved it three more times, until she decided that she liked the original place best. Her pictures. Her sock, kicked under the coffee table.

Todd had seen the notice when it arrived the week before. "Noah, you can't stay here. You have to press forward. At least move to a new place so the past doesn't rub you raw."

"What if she comes back? What if she comes here and I'm not here?" He'd been angry at his friend. Press forward? Leave Kayla behind?

"She's not coming back." Todd had looked him square in the eyes. "If she was coming back, she would have by now. It's just— It's just a matter of finding her body so you can have some closure, man."

He had growled. "Then we go kill every last one of those undead sons of bitches until they cough it up."

Todd held up his hands. "Look. Just give it some rational thought, okay? You still have the same cell number. If she's not— If she's looking, she can find you."

"I'd know if you were dead, lover," he said to the lamp. "I'd know."

Todd and a few guys from the pack had talked him into drinks tonight. A good chance to get out, breathe, maybe relax. No talk about biters or fights, just sports, jobs, the human Bren refused to admit he'd fallen for. Even he had to agree that he didn't get out enough.

He needed to strengthen his bond with the wolves. They'd kept him alive and sane when he'd wanted to die or lose his mind. Hours, days, they'd searched with him, turned the city upside-down, endangered themselves to shake down the fangs for any information they had. Friends, the best any man could ask for, closer than humans could imagine. Compatriots. Brothers.

Yes, he needed to bond with them. Then, when he took Peter down, they would follow him without hesitation. Straight into hell, if he had any say in the matter.

Disquiet, he stalked into the bathroom to ruffle his hair into shape. She liked it just this side of sloppy, tousled, wild. Instead he found himself staring at his reflection, the blue eyes that had turned hard and the lips that pressed into a firm line. He hadn't realized how he'd changed, but

tonight, he could see what the others had told him.

Peter had never failed them until last summer, when he'd let the biters off without retaliation. They'd attacked his mate, Kayla had never come back, and what had he done? Talked it over with the king of liars, the lord that watched over the leeches. Of course, he'd said they hadn't done it. He was afraid, and with reason.

A weak alpha had to go.

"I'm doing all that I can do," Peter had said when Noah had lay bruised on the ground at his feet. "Don't suggest that I don't care again, or you'll shed blood for it. I care about every member of my pack, but you will not drag us into a war while I lead. If you kill another vampire, you'll face pack justice, by my word as alpha."

If that was how he wanted to play, so be it.

With a sigh, he splashed his face with cold water. He didn't want leadership of the pack. But if Peter would do nothing, then he would take the power from him. The loss, the insult, was more than the pack could bear. He'd trained since the night the alpha had beaten him. When the full moon rose in two days, Peter would fall.

The phone rang as he finished drying his face. *Probably Todd checking on me, making sure I'm still coming.* He trotted to the table to pick it up. *He's worse than a grandmother.*

But the identification screen said *Moira O'Rourke*.

"Hello? Moira?" What could she want? He hadn't talked to her in an age. Moon Blessings had become painful for him. Kayla had loved it.

"Noah." She took a deep breath, as if to steady herself. "You have to do something for me. I need you to go where I tell you to, and I need you to do it right now."

Tension drew her voice thin. Something was up.

"I'm about to go out right now, but if you can give me a couple hours—"

"You don't have a couple hours. I need you to go now."

"This is a little strange, Moira." More than a little strange. Of course, Moira had lent her place to that unfortunate meeting. Was she setting him up?

Taint of Shadow by Cassandra Moore

Moirra wouldn't do that. She was just trying to keep the peace. I need to ease up... Maybe they're right. I need to get past this.

"It's about Kayla."

Shock flooded him like a bolt from heaven. The name echoed in his ears. "What about Kayla?"

She gave directions to a seedy street in a dangerous district. "Go. Go right now."

Her tone told him more than her words could. Without a second thought, he snapped the phone closed then grabbed his keys as he dashed out the door.

It's about Kayla. At last, someone's speaking my language.

Chapter Four

Every city in the world has an area where no one who values their safety goes, especially after dark. Unattended cars become carrion, food for the vultures who want the cargo, the stereo, even the wheels. People not tough enough to fight back against three, four, or more become victims and statistics.

Noah drove into one as fast as his truck could navigate the streets.

It's about Kayla. He took a turn so fast the tires squealed. What about her? About her, in this part of town, couldn't mean anything good. *Nothing good, except that it's something about her, finally.* Why hadn't Moira said more? Why hadn't she explained? He had a cell phone; he could talk and drive.

She'd only given him the district to go to, not a specific place within it. Not a bar, or a corner, just a wide area. *What am I supposed to do, walk around one of the worst areas here looking for the unknown?* He had good odds of finding the unknown, too. Unknown muggers, gang members, and whores. All sorts of people that he'd rather *not* know.

He steered the truck next to an open length of curb and killed the engine, deep in the heart of the district. Less than ten seconds passed, as he looked around to decide which way to set out, before a passel of too-interested youths had assembled on the cracked sidewalk. Under do-rags and sideways caps, they craned their heads to check out his vehicle.

"Nice truck, man," one called as he climbed out of the driver's seat.

You want to be alpha? Start with this bunch of puppies. Fearless, he strode over. "Thanks. Keep your hands off it."

"Gonna hurt mah feelings," the tough sneered, displaying teeth covered in a golden grill. "You think we'd touch your ride without your say so?"

"Yes."

The gang laughed. "Nah, no way, man. We'd just get your say so first"

Noah took a step closer and flashed wolf-yellow eyes. "You packing silver to go with that gold bling? Because if you're not, the only thing you'll get is hurt."

"Hey, just friendly talkin'. No threat." Down here, the street rats knew about the predators on the streets. Meals on wheels for the fangs was good business, as good as chopped car parts or illegal drugs, and if you knew the vampires, you knew the werewolves, too. No one wanted to mess with the wolves. Not even the big gangs.

"I hear it. Friendly talking." He smirked then pulled out his wallet and tossed them a couple notes. Kayla's face smiled at him from the clear plastic photo cover. "Hey, have you guys seen this woman tonight?"

One of the smaller members, a scrawny guy with a gold chain, nodded. "Yeah, I seen her. Got out of a cab a couple blocks up. Jeans and a black T-shirt. I 'member 'cause it fits tight on her titties. Sunglasses, too."

He threw the kid a note for himself. "Thanks. Point me the right way, and make sure no one touches my truck."

Gold Chain pointed up the street, and Noah took off at a brisk pace, heart a hammer in his chest. They had seen her. Alive. *Kayla is alive.*

And a needle in a haystack. The bar crowds made it difficult to scan for individual people, let alone smell for them with his wolf's senses. Cheap beer, alcohol-soaked frozen fruit, and a sea of the unwashed masses. No pack member with a functional nose would stay here, but why would she come to this area at all?

Three bartenders hadn't seen her, and they assured him that they would've remembered her. One of the drunken patrons said that he'd help to look for her, although he'd keep her if he found her. He got up,

too, and fell over, unable to stand. The bartender rolled his eyes as if this happened all the damn time.

Noah walked over a street. A single bar promised inebriation by third-rate stock, but that was all the inspiration most people here needed. Still, prostitutes strutted around in high heels, and maybe one of them had seen Kayla.

"Looking for a good time?" The bleached blonde had on a tight red dress that outlined the hard nubs of her nipples in clear bas relief. He could see every crinkle, every bump, even the mole just above where the dark flesh of her areola must meet the light flesh of her breast. Over her hips, he could see the thin, frayed straps of thong underwear, and nappy black stockings clung to her legs.

"For a woman, but not one of the girls," he said, not unkindly. "Have you seen her tonight?"

She'd lost interest already. "Can't help you."

On the corner, though, a youngish brunette in a green dress that looked like a nightgown knew more. "I saw her," she said, tottering a bit on her battered stilettos. "She was over there, talking to Mark—he's a male hooker—but she was really watching this guy."

"What guy?"

The girl couldn't have been more than a new eighteen. *How do they end up out here at that age?* A chemical tang hovered around her, the answer to his question.

"He was...weird." She scrunched up her nose. "Wore really weird clothes. Older style, like in that movie about Jekyll and Hyde, but still made, you know, today. Like a vest, with a gold chain like for a watch, and white shirt under it."

He thought he understood. "Okay, I get you. What did the guy do?"

"He gave Shirlene some money, and she went off with him. Walking, that way." She pointed. "Probably going to fuck in an alley." Her nose wrinkled again. "I hate doing it that way."

His brow furrowed. "How long ago?"

"Fifteen minutes ago? I think."

Not long. He looked around but didn't see her. *She can't be far.*

"What's your name?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Deena."

Glad that he'd hit an ATM earlier, he pulled a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet and pressed it into her hand. "Thank you. Look, are you always out here? This is your spot?"

"Yeah, usually."

"Okay. Thank you again. Really."

He was reluctant to leave her out here. She was too young for the world she'd put herself in, and he wanted to get her somewhere safe to sort out her life. Moira's maybe, or with one of the women in the pack. But he was so close after a year of uncertainty, and he couldn't let up on the search now. Deena, he hoped, would go home with the money he gave her, safe for the night. Another night, he'd come back.

For now, he trotted up the street where the young hooker had indicated. No sign, as the street emptied and turned to closed, run-down shops. He didn't want to think that he'd missed her, or worse, that the girl had made a mistake. The first tip he'd had couldn't turn out to be little more than smoke. It would hurt too much.

But then he heard the whimper as the sharp stabs of nervous instinct crawled over his skin. Soft, afraid, the sound of a woman too terrified to scream. Not Kayla, but that didn't matter. Noah canted his head to listen, strained to pinpoint the sound.

There. A dark alley several yards away.

The woman started pleading. "Just let me go. Just let me go. I won't tell no one. Just let me go," she said over and over again. Worse, he could smell blood, death. Undeath.

Old-style clothes. Weird. A vampire.

He charged the remaining distance. With a skid, he arrived at the mouth of the alley. Only barely did he take in the whore that cowered in the corner, the one who begged for her life. Instead, he saw Kayla. Black shirt. Jeans. Dark blonde hair loose over her shoulders. Hand around the throat of a biter in a white shirt and black vest.

She leaned close to her quarry, her face not even an inch away. Her

lip curled in a snarl as she looked over the top of her sunglasses. While her lips moved, Noah couldn't hear what she said. The vampire did, though, and his eyes widened.

Werewolf and prey heard Noah at the same time. Both turned to face the end of the alley. Her eyes glowed, two eerie, blue-violet points in the darkness.

They glowed. Not reflected. The light came from within her eyes, which looked more wolverine than human. Not the blue he knew from their time before, when the white wolf he loved ran next to him. Unnatural indigo. A shade that sent chills down his spine.

As he stared, stunned by the uncanny light from her eyes, she shoved her glasses up her nose then turned back to the undead she held by the neck. "Where?"

"N-Night Moves," he gibbered. "Th-That's where they go when they w-want to have fun."

Noah found his voice. "Kayla, what are you doing?"

"Hello, Noah," she said, voice even, gaze never leaving the vampire. "I'm just looking up some old friends now that I'm back in town."

The loyal pack member in him knew he should convince her to let the biter go. The rest of him wanted to help rattle the undead's fangs from his head. Torn, he settled for a middle course. "His coterie isn't going to be happy about this."

She snorted. "There are a lot of things I'm not happy about. They can get over it."

"I won't tell them!" the man offered helpfully. "This is just between us. You and me...and the hooker, and your friend, but they won't say nothing."

"You're right. You won't tell them." Fur scurried down her arm, from her elbow to the now sharp claws at the end of her half changed hand. The talons closed like the snap of a jaw, dug deep into the vampire's throat, and ripped it out.

Black ooze poured from the open wound. For a moment, the vampire looked stunned. Then he slid down the wall, covered in his own

vital fluids. The whore screamed, the loud, strangled noise piercing the night.

Kayla ignored the tacky spatter that covered her hand. As the undead fell, she knelt to retrieve several sharpened stakes that rested on the ground. With a smooth movement, she drove one into the biter's chest. His scream joined the woman's for the briefest instant then died, just as he did, a long-delayed end to an unnatural life.

It was not the reunion Noah had hoped for. It looked more like the start of the war he had campaigned for.

At last, she turned to face him, her hand human again and eyes shrouded by the glasses on her face. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to find you. Moira called me, and I came..." He took a step forward. Despite what had just happened, he wanted to touch her, to feel that she was real.

"I told her I didn't want to see you." But it wasn't a dismissal. He could hear the conflict, the pain in her voice.

Another step. "Why would you not want to see me? Kayla, it's me."

She could have backed away, but she didn't. Instead, she looked at the body at her feet. "Why? Isn't that obvious? I don't want you involved in this. Go home. Forget you saw me. It'll be better for you that way."

The meaning of her words was perfectly clear. *I don't want to ruin your life. I've already done something against the rules, and I'm not finished yet.*

"I'm already involved. I always have been."

"Go home, Noah."

"Whatever happened to you that night happened to us both. I'm not leaving."

Her fists clenched, released, clenched again, conflict written in every movement. While she fought with herself, he closed the distance between them, and before she could object, he wrapped her in his arms. She was stiff for only a heartbeat, and then she melted against him. He breathed in the smell of her, different from before but still her, still his mate.

"We're in this together," he murmured into her hair. "We always have been."

"You don't know what you're saying." But she held him tighter.

After too short a time, he let her go to lock gazes with her. "I do. I love you."

The corners of her eyes crinkled, and her brow furrowed with an obscure hurt he didn't understand. Not yet.

"Don't say that now. If you can still say it later, after..."

"After what?"

She turned away from him to face the filthy alley. "We should leave."

As different as her smell, this was not the Kayla he knew. She would never have turned away or shut him out so quickly. But then, the Noah she had known might have taken it to heart. Stung, he would have seen how she had changed, decided she didn't want him now. Would he have wondered if he wanted her now? Would he have questioned it?

Yes. But then again, he'd changed, too. From cub to wolf. Follower to alpha.

"First things first," he said, resolved. In the shock of seeing her and the death of the vampire, he hadn't noticed how his muscles had tensed. Now he could feel the energy that had built in him. "Let me get the girl on her way. Can you get the body into that garbage bin?"

"Yes." She cocked her head and regarded him for a moment then bent to heft the body over her shoulder. Without her werewolf blood, she never could have done it. Even then, she would have struggled with a partial shift, something she had never mastered. But judging by her performance earlier, and the way she hauled the dead vampire up, she no longer had those problems.

Once again, he wondered what had happened. "Shirlene? Hey," he said, voice gentle but firm as he bent down to the panicked woman. "Let's get you out of here, huh? Time to go home."

Her wide eyes said she didn't believe he'd just let her go. Still, she used the hand he offered to get to her feet.

"Noah. Here."

The woman shrieked and cowered, but Noah caught the black object Kayla tossed at him. A wallet. He understood. "There's money in

here," he said to the hooker. "Take it. Maybe it'll make up for a really shitty night."

She wasn't stupid. She took the leather billfold on her way out of the alley, shoes loud against the ground as she ran.

Behind him, Kayla grunted. The body hit the bottom of the empty can with a loud clang. "Do you have any matches?" she asked, wiping her hands on her jeans.

Noah pulled out a disposable plastic lighter. "I always keep a lighter on me these days."

"Why?"

He sparked a flame and dropped it into the can, then quickly moved away. It took no time at all before hot, green-tinted flames shot up from the metal bin. The foul reek of burned vampire had never smelled better. "For that."

The reflection of the fire danced off the lenses of her glasses. "I thought you didn't want a war."

"I said they wouldn't be happy about you killing him. The war's something else. Come on."

Few girls remained on the streets. Shirlene had warned them, or he hoped that she had, to get the hell out of the area because some crazy shit had happened up the street. *It's not safe out here*, he thought to them as he and Kayla blew through. *Some johns want more than what's between your legs*.

"Hey, you found her!" Gold Chain still waited by Noah's truck, although the rest of the gang had dispersed. "See, told you. Shirt's tight on her titties."

"Glad you like them," Kayla told him as she stowed her stakes behind the seat then hopped in the passenger door.

Noah started the engine.

"You've changed," she said as he navigated into the light flow of traffic.

"I've had to." So close to the full moon, the tense energy inside him didn't want to disperse. Adrenaline fed it until he was coiled, hyper-aware.

She flinched at the high beams of an oncoming car. "Moirra said that things had been different."

He snorted. "Moirra doesn't know the half of it. She's not as close in the loop as she thinks she is."

"What are you talking about?" Startled, she looked over to him. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of that eerie glow behind her eyes.

"She's on the fence, Kayla, and no one trusts someone who doesn't swear to either side." He took a deep breath. In the close quarters of the truck's cab, the scent of her, wild, feral, dangerous, was inescapable. It sent an electric charge through him, and his cock swelled against his jeans. Too much excitement, too long without her. He couldn't keep it down.

"I don't understand."

"Look at it this way. You know whose side a vampire is on, or a member of the pack. You know, on an instinctual level, what's going on in their head. Moirra's an enigma, and neither side can predict her. So they give her a minimum of information to placate her then keep the rest of their cards close to their chest."

It startled her, he could tell. Of all the political shifts in the paranormal circles, that was perhaps the largest. "So what's the real story? She said the alpha and Pirelli are holding things together."

"Mm." He changed lanes. "More Pirelli than Peter. We were close to an open break in the truce before it. I'd like to take all the blame for that, because I was pushing hard. They'd taken you, and I was either going to find you or kill every last one of them."

"But Regina screamed louder than I did for it. Two nights after the attack, she was ready to storm Pirelli's estate and rip out his throat. Peter was wearing down and finally decided to ask the vampire lord directly. Otherwise, he wasn't going to be able to keep his pack in line."

The muscles in Kayla's jaw rippled as she clenched her teeth. Venom laced every word. "That doesn't surprise me. What else?"

"The pack is falling apart." Near their apartment, the streets were quiet. "Peter holds power on respect held over from his earlier days. But his control is slipping. Last month, two people didn't go over during the alpha shift."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. It was Regina who told them to change forms."

He didn't mention that he'd been one of the two, and that he had refused to shift. Jaw locked, he'd fought his wolf for dominance until they moved out for the hunt. "No one wants to come out and admit that he's failing us, though. Everyone's complacent, afraid to rock the boat."

"Everyone except you."

"Moirra told you, huh?" He chuckled and turned into the parking lot. "No, I'm not afraid to rock the boat. When I'm done, it'll rock a whole lot harder."

Chapter Five

It was just as she remembered. The pictures on the walls, her sock still under the coffee table. As she stepped into the apartment, it was just like stepping back into a long-dead past. She didn't know if she loved or hated him for it.

"Will you tell me what happened now?" he asked as the door clicked shut behind him.

How would it hurt to tell this story? She'd never recounted it. Not to anyone. There was no desire in her to relive that night, or the months after it, but it wasn't the potential pain that worried her. It was the chance that, if she said the words, she'd lance the festering wound inside her, the one that drove her toward revenge.

She wanted that pain. She *needed* it. If she told him, she would cry, and if she cried, the built-up agony, the rage against those who had thrown her into the darkness, would drain away. Then she would have nothing left to fill her.

You would have him.

"Don't shut me out." The strength in his words surprised her. Sweet, tender Noah, the Noah who only turned animal when the moon showed her full face, had turned into a fierce, dominant male. She could smell his arousal, the mix of sweat and adrenaline that made her want to growl. The rush of the hunt, the kill, had transformed into a heat deep in her belly.

"I don't want to involve you."

"I'm already involved. You can't protect me. I make my own decisions."

Instead of answering, she walked to the lamp at the window, clicked it off. Then she removed her sunglasses and threw them on the table.

He didn't gasp. Superior night vision allowed her to see the set of his jaw, the resolute determination in his eyes. Without any hesitation he moved to her, his chest pressed to hers, and he looked into her face. She knew he saw the luminous purple effulgence, the wolfish shape of her irises, her pupils, but somehow, she knew he saw more.

He didn't look only at her strange, alien eyes. He looked at her, and he didn't flinch from what he saw. Both his hands cupped her face as his lips drew close, touched hers.

Like a flash fire, the passion ignited. Their lips pressed together hard, mouths opening so their tongues could twine. Against his chest, her nipples hardened, and as they kissed, she rubbed them against his muscular front. Her shirt was too tight, her bra was worse.

With a gasp, she pulled back. His eyes smoldered in the darkness as she hauled the garment over her head. But he wasn't so patient with her bra. He grabbed it at the front, between her breasts, and gave it a sharp tug. The snaps ripped loose, setting her breasts free. It landed in the corner.

He pulled off his own shirt next. Muscles rippled across his chest, strong, hard knots of flesh that had grown in her absence. "Shit, Noah," she said, her hand stretched across the bulge of his right pectoral. Under her palm, his nipple hardened.

"I've been working out." His voice, more growl now, betrayed his deep need. "Do you like it?"

In reply, she leaned forward to lick the edge of the muscle in one long, smooth stroke of her tongue. He moaned, deep in his chest, and she did it again, closer to the darkened peak of flesh. Beneath her lips, the muscle quivered, a sign of his tested control.

She hadn't finished her teasing. Wide, slow circles of her tongue left damp trails across his skin in ever smaller spirals as she tasted him. Her

own need ratcheted higher, but she wanted to sample every inch of this new, improved Noah. When the tip of her tongue at last touched home on the puckered nub of skin, he gasped, snarled.

Fingers laced into her hair and pulled her face tight to his flesh. In response, she sucked hard on his nipple, drew it deep into her mouth. Her teeth closed on it just hard enough to evoke another snarl.

“Harder.”

His other hand ripped the button of her jeans open. Fingers dove down the front to caress her clit, swollen and wet with her desire. She groaned into his skin. Her hips thrust forward to rub herself against his hand. Months of torment, moons without satisfaction, kindled the bonfire in her gut. She wanted him to shove into her, hard, fast, merciless, fuck her until the past was nothing but ashes in their flames.

With a tug to her hair, he guided her lapping tongue across his chest to his other nipple. She sucked it into her mouth, and he rewarded her by pinching her clit between his fingers. It was too much to stand still while he touched her; she had to grind, pull him closer, get him closer to the slit between her legs.

“You are so wet,” he moaned as the pads of his fingers slid down to rub against her pussy.

“Put your cock in me and find how wet I am,” she answered, pulling her head back to smirk at him.

He gave a throaty chuckle. “Not yet. I’ve waited too long to feel you.”

To prove his point, he pushed two fingers into the folds of her cunt. A loud groan escaped her as he worked deeper, forced her open but not as far as she wanted. Such a pleasant kind of agony, to have her pussy only a little full when she wanted his thick staff of a cock instead. The denim of her jeans bound her legs too much; she wanted room to move.

In and out, his fingers worked. Her tongue lapped at his nipple in time, roughing the flesh to a tighter peak. The length of his fingers slid against her clit with each thrust, built her toward release. But he was too much of a bastard to let her fall over the edge.

When he withdrew his fingers, she wanted to growl. Need, tight,

edgy desire, thrummed through her, a caged predator in search of freedom. The thought of him on her, his skin on hers, cock deep in her sex, brought a fresh rush of moisture to coat her folds.

He lunged suddenly, and even with her heightened reflexes, she had no time to react. She found herself on her back over the arm of the couch, ass propped up, legs spread open, the signature Noah Ambush that had always made her laugh. In no time he had her jeans off, and his, too. "I can smell the heat of your pussy," he growled, eyes golden in the darkness.

Deliberately, he licked the taste of her from his fingers, one at a time. The sight of it, a dominant, possessive gesture, brought the wolf within to life.

"Yeah?" she said, voice husky.

"It's driving me insane. You know what it smells like?" His face lowered to hover just over her pussy, breath warm on the wet folds.

"What?"

His tongue flickered out, brushed her clit. "My mate."

Then his mouth descended to take the sensitive kernel of flesh inside, tongue rasping over her swollen clitoris. Her hair scattered over the cushions as she thrashed her head, back arched, and she gave a loud, shameless moan. After what he'd seen, he still called her his mate, and the primal core of her responded.

His tongue plunged inside, out again. She threw one leg over his shoulder to coax him in again, but he sucked one of her swollen folds into his mouth instead. Spikes of heat drove through her, and she clutched the upholstery almost hard enough for it to tear. Each suckle, every tug, flashed across her nerves.

Alive with need, she pushed herself to him. "Noah," she groaned. "Fuck me. Please, fuck me."

"Not until you come for me," he said against her. "I want to hear you scream."

Warmth closed over her clit again, and his tongue lapped harder, faster. The climax roared through her, and she did scream, her body wracked with violent shudders. He didn't stop his furious strokes until

he'd pulled the last spasm from her, until her screams turned to almost pained cries.

"Mine." He gave her pussy a final lick.

"You may want to rethink that." She didn't want him to. The way his mouth claimed her, the way his voice sounded when he called her his mate, still resonated with the deepest part of her. Dark magic couldn't touch her love for him, the way she had to have him with her.

But he didn't know what had happened, or what she had to do. She struggled to accept herself. When he knew, he would leave. His plans with the pack would force him to, even if his own opinions didn't.

He stood, leaned over her even as he kept her leg over his shoulder. It left her pussy open, vulnerable, as his cock nudged against it. "Why would I want to do that?"

It was hard to remember the reasons as the length of his shaft slid against her tingling folds. "I'm not what I used to be. I can't ever be *just a wolf* again."

His cock rubbed over her clit, and his balls brushed against her pussy. "You were never *just a wolf*."

"You know what I mean. I'm tainted, warped. A fashion victim. I wear my sunglasses at night."

"So you can see the light that's right before your eyes." He leaned closer, bent her leg further so he could slide his length along her damp sex. The head nudged against her clit then past just as she hoped it would push inside.

The emptiness inside her drove her to distraction. She wanted him to impale her on that thick cock, fill her until she begged him to stop. "You aren't paying attention."

He drew back and rubbed his cock along her cunt again, the other way now, so the flared tip teased at the puckered hole of her ass. She groaned. Later, she could take him there. Now, she wanted him driving, hard and fast, into her pussy.

"I beg to differ. I know exactly what's going on."

"I mean what I'm saying."

"I don't care what else you are, Kayla." His still golden eyes met

hers. "You're the woman I love, no matter what happened, or happens. And I belong right here."

He drove his cock into her. Suddenly, she was spread wide, stretched around the girth of him. She cried out, pushed down onto him until his balls rested against her.

"You'll feel different tomorrow."

He pulled out of her. "Bet me."

Again, he thrust inside, cored her with his shaft. As long as he stayed inside her, stretched her cunt time after time, filled her with his hot seed, she didn't care about tomorrow. Now mattered. Coming repeatedly, until the sun came up and drove her into hiding. That was all that mattered.

His eyes didn't close as he drove slowly into her. Golden eyes watched her as she writhed and ground her clit against his pelvis. She had no shame; it heightened the charge of each thrust to see his pleasure echoed in his eyes. As his lunges sped up, the hunger behind his gaze turned less thoughtful, more untamed.

The wolf had gotten loose. And she wanted more of it.

Long thrusts turned shorter, faster. His cock stayed deep as he stroked into her, the hand on her thigh clenched tight. Grunts came through gritted teeth, and their eyes locked. The wave built, rose, washed higher each time he drove in. She'd almost forgotten how well he fit in her, how his hips snapped as he got close to orgasm.

Wailing, head back, her eyes rolled back into her head as the climax broke from her core. His own shouts joined hers as his cock jerked, then emptied, flooding her with molten heat. Once, twice, he drove in again, then held himself buried as the final bursts eased.

Spent for now, she slithered fully onto the couch to recline on her side. He joined her after he'd regained his balance, his thigh a warm, familiar pillow under her head.

"I missed you," he said quietly.

"I missed you, too." She couldn't lie to him. Not now. And she didn't want to lie to herself.

"Tell me what happened." His strong hand stroked her hair. The

pads of his fingers brushed her cheek.

He loved her. Through it all, he hadn't forgotten her, hadn't shunned her when she came back a twisted version of her previous self. For this and so many other things, he deserved some explanation.

"There were vampires in the forest that night," she said. "You knew that."

"Regina told us. They attacked her."

How much should she say? By his own admission, he'd turned into a fighter, someone who went after those who had wronged him or those he cared about. If she told him about the other wolves, about his best friend, what would he do? Go to Peter? Worse, go to Todd himself?

She couldn't take the chance. Not yet. "They'd been kidnapping werewolves. Seven of us. I didn't know five of the others, but the sixth was Derek Anderson."

Beneath her, his muscles tensed. "Derek? I thought he ran off."

"They had him. We couldn't have known." She wondered what had happened to Derek. The transformation had nearly broken the last of his sanity.

"What did they want you for?"

The deep breath did little to ease the tightness in her chest. "A ritual. The vampires wanted their own breed of lycanthrope. Shadow wolves, they called us. Ones who are loyal to the biter cause."

Noah snarled. "And we made a deal with Pirelli?"

"That's the thing. Pirelli doesn't know. These vampires work outside the hierarchy."

"Pirelli didn't know? Are you sure?"

She glanced up at him. "I'm pretty sure Vincenzo Pirelli wants them gone as much as we do. They're a threat. Their plan isn't a bad one. Vampires and werewolves together? It's two halves of a whole."

"How do you mean?"

"Think about it. What are the two largest forces in the paranormal sphere?"

"Vampires and werewolves."

With a nod, she continued. "And we're enemies. The truce keeps us

from destroying everything around us with our aggressions. And it's an uneasy truce. If one side starts to outpace the other in power, the truce won't stand. The power gets checked and rebalanced by the other side. But if both sides worked together, that wouldn't happen."

"There'd be no natural balance." Comprehension dawned. "If that kind of third faction took hold..."

"Now you get it. Paul Kiplinger is very clever."

Thoughts chased through his eyes. "Kiplinger's in on this?"

"It's his game. He researched this ritual and all the pieces for it. Seven wolves on the blue moon, performed by both halves of the whole, vampires and werewolves, hearts of the innocent..." She let the thought trail off.

His hand trembled on her hair. "There are seven of you?"

"Possibly eight. I know that one's bitten someone, but I don't know if the new wolf survived his first moon."

"Why didn't you come back sooner?"

Magic cuffs, nights of starvation, days in the painful light. She shoved all those back down. "They kept us with them. Four went over to their side, either immediately or after some...convincing. Three of us escaped."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't know where you were. I should have looked harder."

"Don't start down that road." She gave her voice an edge, unwilling to let him blame himself. "They had us well hidden. You couldn't have done more than you did. I know you."

"But I should have." Before she could say more, though, he continued past it. "It doesn't matter now. You're back."

Yes, he'd changed. She found that she loved the new Noah even more. "Kiplinger and the others have to be stopped."

"Revenge?"

"Not just that. They're a threat to me, to the pack, to humans. He believes that the humans are his cattle, sort of a walking buffet for his taking." In her home, with him to protect her, she should have felt safe. But Kiplinger's words would never leave her.

But in all other things, we remain the cream in a vat of milk, if you like the analogy. Most of us have forgotten that. Some of us have not. And it is high time that all of them remember.

"Maybe we should go to the pack, Kayla. This is a lot bigger than we are."

She locked eyes with him. "No. They can't know that I'm back. I don't want to hear that Peter's dealt this away. You don't trust him, do you? You want his position."

The words hit home. "I don't want it. But he's weak. He's gotten soft."

"He can't be soft on this." *Not with Regina's hand around his balls and Todd's submissive lies. They're already pulling the pack apart.* "I'm going after the people who did this to me. Afterward, we can think about involving others. But Noah, please... I need this."

Brow furrowed, he stared down at her. Then he nodded. "All right. Who's first?"

Relief washed through her. She didn't know what she would have done if he hadn't cooperated, but she didn't like to ponder it. "Miles and Mason Bristol. The vampire I killed tonight told me where they like to party. We can go tomorrow night."

Deep lines remained on his forehead as he watched her. One soft fingertip smoothed away a loose hair then traced her eyebrow and followed up the curve of her cheekbone. He was looking at her eyes, she knew, not into them. "What did the ritual do to you?"

"Don't ask," she said, a heartfelt answer, not a dismissal. "Not yet. I'm not ready to talk about it. Someday, I promise, you'll know all the truth."

After a moment he looked away, and his hand returned to comforting strokes on her hair. She didn't say that she feared the time when that truth came to light. It would break his heart to hear that his best friend had betrayed him.

What will you do when you find out that he watched and did nothing? That he's had your answers all this time? No friendship could survive that blow. She only hoped he would forgive her for keeping the secret until it

was too late for him to stop her.

Chapter Six

Noah opened his eyes, and Kayla was still there. He couldn't help but smile. When they'd crawled into bed as the first rays of dawn streaked through the sky, he'd wondered if he'd wake up and find her gone.

She's so skittish. He reached up to brush his fingers over her hair. Driven and flighty, like a shadow in the light.

Which, he thought, described just what she was.

Even now, she curled deep into the bed, back to the dim sunshine that found its way around the bedroom curtains. His gentle strokes didn't rouse her. She didn't move, she barely breathed, and he realized, with his heart in his throat, that she didn't look unlike a sleeping vampire he'd once seen.

What have they done to you?

It made him sick to think about. She'd told him very little, but the very loud, unspoken details gnawed at him. What he didn't know, he had to make up. A fertile imagination gave him dark, awful pictures to see in his mind. Did they even come close to what had actually happened? That thought was the worst; of all he could dream up, it might not touch the reality.

How can I help you if I don't understand? He gently touched fingertips to the skin of her shoulder. *How can I understand if you don't let me in?*

Though reluctant to leave her, he pulled himself out of the bed. No matter how nice it felt to spoon against her and pretend he could protect her, it did no good at all. If she wouldn't tell him, he'd have to find out

another way.

She'd seen Moira last night. He'd start there.

Kayla had always looked on Moira like a second mother or a wise, favored aunt. When the wolf had come howling up to turn Kayla's life upside down, her mother had done little to explain it. She'd married a werewolf but had hoped her daughter wouldn't inherit the "problem". Kayla's father had left years before, unable to stand the harpy of a woman his wife had become.

So she'd taken the bus to Moon Blessings on the chance she could find a book to read. Instead, she'd found Moira, then the pack. And Noah.

Quietly, he pulled clothes out of the dresser. The rattle of the drawer didn't disturb her, which was unusual. Before, she'd been a light sleeper, and he'd awakened her hundreds of times in the past. For a moment, he watched her to make certain she still breathed. He couldn't help it.

He dressed in the living room. While he was out, he'd get a black shower curtain, or a thick blanket to put over the bedroom window. Light hurt her eyes, she'd said, and he wanted to make her comfortable. Maybe then, she'd sleep less like the dead.

It took him a moment to locate his cell phone. He'd left it in his jeans last night, which still hid against the wall where he'd thrown them. A red light blinked on the front, a silent accusation that someone had called and he'd slept late.

"Noah? It's Todd. Hey, buddy, where are you? We're all here. Don't stand us up. Call me. Or better yet, show up."

Once Moira had called, he'd forgotten the get-together.

"Noah? Come on, answer your phone. It's okay if you didn't feel like coming out. We can do it next time. Just give me a call, all right?" Todd again. Noah grabbed his keys and headed out the door while he listened.

"Hey, it's Todd. Look, I'm worried. I'm here at your place. Your truck's not here, you're not answering the door or the phone, and your light's on in the living room. You're somewhere, but it wasn't with us. Just call, all right?" His best friend worried way too much. Todd had kept

close tabs on him since the shit hit the fan, afraid he'd do something stupid.

"Dave just called me. There was a garbage bin fire over in a really shitty part of town. Blowing piece of burning paper caught an awning on fire. Unknown accelerants. That where you were tonight? Barbecued biters? Come on, man, you're not supposed to do that anymore. Call me."

Dave was a firefighter. And a tattletale of a lower echelon wolf.

As usual, the bell chimed when he opened the door of Moon Blessings. Moira, however, had seen him coming.

"Did you find her?" she asked before the sound faded.

"Yes. She's back at my place now." He'd never seen Moira like this. She looked anxious, uneasy. Dark circles bagged under her eyes, and frazzled strings of hair hung in wisps around her face. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not." With an irritable gesture, she rubbed at her face. "How is she?"

Her behavior worried him, but the prickle at the back of his neck outright disturbed him. It reminded him of last night, outside the alley, when he'd heard the woman's sobs. "Different. Changed. Moira, what's going on?"

She began to pace. "I wasn't sure if I should call you. She was adamant about not seeing you, but I know her. She needs you. So I called you anyway. Don't make me sorry that I did."

"Did she tell you what happened?" He rubbed the back of his neck. The pin-prick sensation didn't increase, nor did it decrease, but remained a constant itch.

"No. She wouldn't say. Didn't she tell you anything?" The woman sounded annoyed. Something had gotten into her.

To counteract the nervous energy she radiated, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Today, the shop wasn't a haven of peace; it was more like a dynamo, building energy, storing it, until everyone inside lost their mind. Heavy incense choked instead of soothed. Even the mood rings had turned black.

"She did. Something about a ritual performed by both halves of the whole, with seven wolves on a blue moon and the hearts of innocents. Do

you know anything about that?" He followed her with his gaze, back and forth across the room. If she didn't hold still soon, he was going to have to stop her. Inside, the wolf paced with her, caged, off-balance. It wanted to chase her, run her down—

Stop. Now.

"I can guess. They're twisting the power that makes wolves what they are, turning it dark. It would completely unbalance things." She clutched large handfuls of skirt in her fists. "Until she gets her revenge and makes sure that no one else can get hurt, she won't stop. That was why I called you. Someone has to protect her from herself."

"What do you mean?"

A customer opened the door to the shop. Before he had taken two steps inside, he turned around and left again. Noah wanted to follow but couldn't. Nervous energy ran riot through him, but he had questions that needed answers.

She paced to the counter and took a swig from her coffee cup. He hoped it was decaf. "I don't think she understands herself or how dangerous she is. She's a time bomb. You need to defuse her before she explodes."

Such a happy thought. "Right. Look, what the hell is up with you?" His patience had fled with the customer.

"You've got enough to deal with. I'll be fine."

"Bullshit."

She scrubbed at her face again. "I was followed last night on the way home from the shop. I could feel them pick up my trail. Right around my house, they circled. They can't get on the property, but they walked around it, all night."

He blinked. "Who?"

"I don't know. They felt...evil. Malevolent. Vampires, I think." Worry warped her face. "I think they were after her. They must have known she'd come here, and they're following me."

"Still?"

"No. They left just before dawn. But I feel something. I don't know what it is, or where, but it's close."

So he wasn't imagining it. "Maybe you should go home. I can take you there."

She shook her head. "No. I need to stay. Someone might need me. The back door is barred, and I can see everyone before they get in. I'll be fine."

"Moir—"

"I have never failed to open this shop in thirty years, and I am not going to let them bully me into closing now!" she shouted. "I will not be intimidated by dead people and hairy bastards who don't know how to leave well enough alone!"

Time to go. "If you need anything, call."

On the heels of a confused customer and his frayed patience, he fled the building. Fresh air surrounded him. Sweet, clean air that didn't taste of smoke and insanity. The hairs on the back of his neck slowly eased down, although a nagging sense he'd missed something remained.

What he knew for certain was that he didn't want to go straight to the apartment. If someone had followed Moira home, they might have followed her back and kept a watch. Vampires didn't come out during the day, but their human servants often did.

As he climbed into the cab of his truck, he punched in Todd's number. "Hey, it's Noah."

"Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to get hold of you all night!"

"Something came up. Look, meet me for lunch? The brewery."

"Yeah, I can do that. Now?"

"Uh-huh. Table inside, if you beat me."

"But it's nice outside."

"Inside today."

"You all right?"

"Just fine. Catch you then." He snapped the cell closed. A personal explanation worked best with Todd. On the phone, he could ramble like a gossipy teenager.

His friend had arrived before he got there. He saw Todd Mayhew's sandy blond mop over the booth tops, and when he approached, his

friend waved. "Hey, look, you do exist!" he said as he stood up to clasp Noah's arm.

He grinned and slid into the booth opposite Todd. "Yeah. Sorry about last night. I got caught up in something."

"Like roasting biters?"

"That was me. But it's more than that." Kayla had said not to tell the pack, but they could trust Todd. Noah was sure she hadn't meant for him to keep their friend in the dark. "You can't say anything to anyone else, but... She's back, Todd. Kayla's back."

The color drained out of the other man's face. "What? When?"

"House dark lager," he told the waitress, who hurried off. "You okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm—I'm shocked, Noah. I thought she was...you know. When did she get back? Why didn't you call me?" Todd chafed one hand with the other, a nervous habit.

He canted his head. "It got a little crazy. Something happened to her, man. Vampires did some ritual on her, and she's different. She's after the bastards that did it to her."

His friend's eyes dilated, and he licked his lips as if they'd abruptly gone dry. "Wh-what? Did she say who?"

Noah had known Todd for years. The man was agitated, even scared, not excited like Noah had expected. He had the sudden thought that Todd didn't need to know more. "No. She didn't want to talk about it."

"Where is she? I mean, I'd love to see her." The reply was quick, too eager.

"Our place. Where the hell else would she be?" He regretted it the moment it came out of his mouth. "She's a little off right now. Maybe in a day or two we can get together."

Todd's head bobbed. "That'd be great. Really, it's great she's back. Really great."

Everyone he knew had gotten freakish today. First Moira, now Todd. But that reminded him. "Someone's after her. They even followed Moira last night. I was afraid they'd followed me; that's why I wanted to

meet you inside."

"Like who?"

His beer arrived, but he didn't touch it. He'd lost his taste for it. "Local fang squad, I think. I think I'm being paranoid, though. Just thought I'd mention it, in case you hear anything or something happens."

"Sure you don't want me to come by tonight? Help you keep an eye out? Or maybe you should come to my place. You and Kayla." A fine sheen of sweat had broken out on Todd's upper lip.

I've said too much. Shit. I shouldn't have said anything at all. The sudden regret left a lump in his gut. He and Todd had always been open, honest. Now he wanted to take back everything he'd said today.

He didn't understand it. Maybe Kayla *had* meant Todd, too. But why? "We'll see what she feels up to. Speaking of, I'm sorry to bail on you, but the more I think about it, the more I wish I hadn't left her by herself. I'm gonna go."

"You sure? You didn't eat anything. Hell, you didn't even drink your beer." His friend looked relieved.

Noah couldn't wait to get home. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I'll owe you one. I'll call you later."

Blankets blocked out the late afternoon sun, tacked over every window in the apartment. Kayla winced when he opened the door, eyes squeezed shut against the light he let in.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, and quickly closed the door behind him. "I didn't know you were up."

"It's okay," she said, blinking and rubbing at her eyes. "I just got up a little bit ago."

"Lazy." He grinned. She hadn't bothered to put clothes on. The sight of her curled up naked on her couch, feet tucked beneath her as she watched the television, warmed his heart while his cock swelled in his pants.

She chuckled. "We all sleep late. We have some vampire habits, like the need to crawl off and sleep at dawn. No internal clock to wake us up when the sun goes down, though, so it tends to be late afternoon."

The television, he noticed, had the brightness turned way down.

"And now I know. We'll have to buy some shades so we can take the comforter off the glass doors."

"It was *bright*," she said, a bit sheepishly. Then she wrinkled her nose. "Gah, you stink. Moon Blessings? Moira must have been burning enough incense to choke an elephant. Not her usual pick, either."

"Yeah. She was a little weird today." If she could smell him from here, then her nose had gotten very sensitive.

Her lips pursed. "Weird? How?"

Purple light flared in her eyes. He didn't know what that meant, but he didn't think it was good. "She was tired, jumpy. Someone, or someones, followed her home last night and staked out her house 'til the sun came up."

"Fuck." Anger hardened her features. "I should have guessed that would happen."

"Her place felt strange. People avoided it. Hell, even I left as quick as I could."

She nodded. "They've thrown her off balance. When she loses her center, her magic and protections go pear shaped, too."

That made sense. "I offered to take her home, but she got really upset at me. Said she'd never closed the shop in thirty years and wouldn't be intimidated now."

"Mph. The Irish in her makes her stubborn. She offered to take sides, when I went in." The glow flickered out, reappeared as she blinked. "I'd like to go by, but if they're following her, I'd just make it worse if I showed up."

"We can call her." As he watched, he found he didn't dislike her eyes, now that he'd gotten used to them. The radiance had its own forms of expression, bright or broody with her moods. They had an appeal all their own. "You're beautiful, you know that?"

The indigo ran more to purple as she blushed. "You're biased."

He shook his head. "No, really. I like to watch your eyes. They show me what you're thinking. It's not *normal*, but who cares? It's still gorgeous."

For the first time, he caught a true glimpse of the old Kayla. The

smile on her lips was happy, without any hint of the grim determination that she carried. When she self-consciously ducked her head and looked at him through her lashes, it reminded him of times gone by. Tragedy had evolved her but not destroyed her.

It also made his erection throb against the confines of his jeans. Her legs didn't block his glimpses of soft, pink folds crowned by dark gold curls. Soft, curved breasts peeked out from behind her drawn-up knees. The whole graceful package begged for him to cover it in soft strokes of his tongue.

And yet... "You really do stink. I think your clothes soaked up all the incense smoke."

"Maybe it would help if I took them off." He gave her a wolfish smirk and pulled his shirt over his head.

"It might," she told him, leaning forward to get a better view. "Now, you only half stink."

His smirk broadened into a grin. "I half stink. That won't work." He tossed his cell phone onto a nearby table then pushed his pants down his legs. "Is that better?"

"Come closer and I'll tell you." The tip of her tongue traced the length of one sharp canine.

"All right." His cock bobbed as he walked to stand before her. "Well?"

Those blue-purple eyes stared up at him as she leaned her face closer. Her soft breath brushed against his cock before her lips closed around the head. The tip of her tongue felt along the seam, traced the gathered line of sensitive flesh. Her mouth was hot, wet; he needed to feel it take in his whole shaft.

But she had decided to tease him. She took in only the head then let it slide out of her mouth before she sucked it in again. A groan escaped him. Oh, she was good with her mouth, and she knew what she could do to him. It made her dangerous to his restraint, but that was what she liked.

The shaft of his cock pleaded for attention. In the low light of the television, the head was a deep plum color, and it glistened with moisture. She didn't even close her hands around the body of his girth, only took

the flared head in slow, deliberate movements.

He couldn't help it. His hips undulated forward as he tried to push himself farther into her mouth. "Kayla..." he growled when she denied him his full thrust.

"Mmm?" The vibrations of sound tingled over the taut flesh she held between her lips.

Shit, but he wanted her. "You're going to drive me crazy."

"Mm-hmm." She didn't bother to remove her mouth. Her tongue circled the tip of his cock, and she got another growl for her effort.

"Bitch." His hands clutched into fists at his sides.

"Mm-hmm."

She was going to get it, and he was going to give it to her. If he had his way, he thought as she sucked hard on just that tip of shaft, she would beg him to let her rest, and he would, after he turned her over and fucked her again, brought it out of her with an exhausted, pleased scream. When she wanted to walk, she would change her mind. This is what she would get for this torture.

An open-mouthed groan tore from him as she suddenly pulled his cock into her mouth as far as she could. The intense jolt was almost more than he could take. She let it slide out, flicked the tip of her tongue across the head, then plunged him into her mouth again. So hot, so tight. Her mouth was almost as good as her pussy.

The scent of her filled his nose whenever he breathed, moaned. Tomorrow's full moon had heightened his senses today, and the wolf inside smelled the sweet musk of his mate. It tested his control. He wanted to roll her onto the floor, mount her from behind, and pound into her until she howled, and he did, too.

Instead, he put his hands around her head. She didn't stop him. "I'm not going to stop until I come," he snarled. Her answer was to pull him in deeper, faster.

His hips snapped as he drove between her lips. Every nerve was on fire, and when his balls tightened, his fingers tightened in her hair. Then the seed poured out of him as his climax thundered through his body. He didn't realize it when he threw his head back and howled until the last

flash of heat had died down.

Next door, the neighbor thumped on the wall.

Kayla licked her lips. "The verdict's in."

He could see the mischief dance in her eyes. "Oh yeah?"

"You stink like incense smoke."

He laughed. "So I'll shower. I'd hate to offend your delicate schnoz."

Chapter Seven

They didn't make it to the shower.

"I'll throw some clothes on when you get clean and get some food started," she said as they headed for the bedroom. "We can eat and make some plans for later."

"Much later." He grabbed her arm and pushed her against the wall, then pressed his body along hers. "I'm not done with you yet."

She looked amused. "Now I'll smell like incense smoke."

The quirk of her lips roused his passion again. Quick and firm, he leaned down to kiss her. "Then you'll have to shower with me."

Her skin tasted wonderful, soft, rich with her essence and spiced with a hint of salt from last night's sweat. His lips trailed down her cheek, over her jaw. She gasped when he suckled her earlobe into his mouth, goose bumps rippling over her skin. Against his chest, her nipples hardened.

It awakened the alpha in him when he kissed down her neck. Her head tilted back, to the side, left her throat bare. That vulnerable place, the naked place that showed submission. She gave it to him as his mouth warmed her skin. His cock came up with a sudden rush of need, no matter that he'd just come into her sweet mouth.

He kissed that spot. His teeth closed on it, trembled as he felt her body soften against his.

"Yours," she whispered, and triumphant energy bristled through him. Needing to taste her, he lapped at the skin, letting the perfume of her

flesh fill his head.

She hooked one leg over his hip. Her slick pussy caressed the length of his cock as she offered herself to him. *His*. That feverish cunt, every swollen, puffy fold of it, and he'd have it. His lips locked onto hers as he took hold of her leg. Then with one, long stroke, he buried into her.

Her body jolted with his thrust. She moaned into his mouth, her hands clasped around the back of his neck for support. With a final caress of her tongue, he broke off the kiss to look into her eyes. "Say it again."

She grunted as he shoved into her again. "Yours!"

Animal instinct took over. No long, tender moment. He wanted a savage, fast fuck to sate the hunger that one word raised. *Mine*. He plunged into her. "Mine." He said it out loud.

"Come inside me," she groaned. "Make me yours."

Pictures rattled on the wall, but he didn't care. He drove in, each thrust forcing a loud cry out of her. Her cries grew in strength, higher and higher, until she wailed his name. She threw herself onto him, her entire body rocked by shaking waves. It pushed him over the edge, and he growled, loud and long, as he emptied into her.

For a long moment, they stood, trying to find their breath. "Did you mean it?" he asked, his voice quiet.

Her eyes smoldered. "Yes."

Overcome, he cradled her head to his chest. *I won't let anything else happen to you.*

Her arms wound around him to pull him tight.

No one hurts you. Not ever again.

Someone knocked on the door. He ignored it.

Whoever it was knocked again. "I know you're in there," said the peevish voice of their accountant neighbor.

"Rabinski's still next door, huh?" she asked, laughter in her voice.

Determined not to rip the poor man's head off, he let her go. "Watch your eyes, baby."

Naked, dick half-hard, he opened the door. "Yes, Mr. Rabinski?"

The balding man's jaw dropped. "You're— Um. You're making— You're making a lot of noise."

Noah nodded. "I'm very sorry. I was just screwing my wife. She just got back, and I'm very happy to see her."

From behind him, Kayla snickered.

"Ah." He hadn't expected that answer. He obviously hadn't expected a nude man, either, and he did his level best to keep his eyes off Noah's rather prominent package. "Could you keep it down?"

"Sure. We'll take it into the shower. Is that okay?"

Eyes still averted, the man nodded. "Um. Sure. That'd be...great. Have, um. Have a good time."

Gales of laughter broke out as soon as the door closed. "How many times did he ask us to keep it down in the first week that we lived here?"

"Ten. He came over twice a couple days."

"Nice to see that some things don't change."

He moved back to her. Gently, he cupped her face in his hands then leaned down for a kiss. Her lips pressed to his then parted so the tips of their tongues could meet. Long, tender caresses between their mouths made his breath catch.

It was a damn shame they couldn't stay in tonight, order Chinese, then spend the night with him to the hilt inside her. Soon enough, he told himself as they sank deeper into that prolonged kiss. *Just a couple nights until the rest of our lives.*

"You still have a wonderful laugh," he whispered when their lips finally parted.

"You still bring out the best in me." That one sentence carried so many layers, but mostly, it carried hope for her salvation.

He lost himself in that purple glow. "I promise to try to. Always." Their lips brushed. "Come on. I'm told that I stink. Let's hit the shower."

"Yes, because now I stink, too."

Steam billowed out from behind the shower curtain before she decided the water had warmed up enough. She had never believed in cold showers, a preference that seemed to have survived dark rituals and perverted magic. "You still have my shampoo," she said over the patter of water against the tub.

"Of course, I do. I've got all your stuff." He lit a small votive candle

on the sink to give himself a bit of light.

“Don’t you think that’s a little obsessive?”

He’d heard it a thousand times from various pack mates, especially Todd. It hadn’t been funny then, but it was hysterical from her.

He chuckled. “I knew you would come back. Care to deny it?”

She poked her soapy head around the curtain and stuck out her tongue. “Yes. I’m not coming back. Ever.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

It occurred to him, as the light scent of her conditioner wafted up on the steam, that she was naked in there. He, on the other hand, was naked out here. A great injustice occurred right here, in his bathroom. As a good citizen, he couldn’t allow this to continue.

Her head tilted back, eyes closed, as she rinsed her hair. The way she lifted her arms to work out the last of the cream from her locks pushed her breasts forward, her nipples pointed high. Streams of water hugged to her body, washed over the flat of her stomach to detour into her navel.

No man could withstand that sight. He leaned forward and took one of her nipples into his mouth. She gasped, hands in her hair, too off-balance to do anything but push forward into him. The nub of flesh felt good on his tongue, even if it tasted a bit like hair product. He could live with the flavor of conditioner for this.

She moaned. In his mind, he could hear the cries of her climax, and decided that he wanted to hear them again. Careful to support her so she didn’t slip, he turned her around, his cock snug against her ass. “You’re very dirty,” he murmured into her ear.

“Whose fault is that?” Another gasp rushed out of her as he spread her folds wide.

“Mine, completely. I take full responsibility.” The pad of his finger flicked over her clit. “And I’m going to fix it for you.”

Still spreading her pussy, he reached past her with the other hand to take down the hand-held shower head. It had several settings, including a fast pulse of the jets. With his thumb, he turned the dial to pulsate, then held it to spray against her clitoris.

The effect was immediate. She moaned and leaned back against him while the water did its work. Her hips shifted, rubbed against him, coaxed his cock up again. It nudged against her ass and parted her cheeks to slip into the tight valley.

Her head leaned against his shoulder, her face tilted up to him. Those curved lips parted, a clear invitation that he accepted. Never could he get enough of her kisses or the way her tongue danced with his.

She lifted her leg and rested it on the lip of the tub. Now, he could spread her properly, so his cock could slide inside. Warm water splashed onto his balls as he pumped into her, an added bonus to the gratification he gave her. He had to go slow, or else they would lose their footing, and it tormented them both.

In, out, a protracted series of thrusts as they groaned into each other's mouths. She struggled to take more of him until she found a rhythm that worked in counterpoint to his. No brushfire now, but a build of pressure, magma waiting until it could explode from deep within.

Their thrusts became more impassioned, more reckless. Moans and loud cries echoed against the shower walls. He couldn't get enough of her, couldn't move fast enough, until the molten heat burst from him and into her. She shuddered violently, calling his name as her climax took over. All he could do was try to keep his balance as tremors shot through him.

It faded slowly. He withdrew from her and hung the shower head back in its holder. Then she turned to nuzzle against him, and in the warm rain they stood together until the water started to lose heat.

From the bedroom, he could hear his phone ring. It stopped as he got a clean pair of jeans over his legs, but started again right away. "Someone really wants to talk to you," Kayla noted as she pulled a shirt over her head.

He tugged on his own shirt as he walked into the living room to grab it. "It's Todd," he said, a nervous flutter in his gut. "I told him I'd call him later."

"When did you do that?" The question was sharp.

"Earlier, when we went to lunch." Her eyes flared again. "I told him you were back. I thought it was safe. I mean, it's Todd."

But he now knew for certain that he'd done the wrong thing.

"Fuck. I told you, no one can know. Especially not him. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"I'm sorry," he told her. "I just thought—"

"It's okay." She took a deep breath. "My fault as much as yours. I should have been more specific. I assumed— Nevermind. I'm not mad. But I think we're in trouble."

The phone rang again.

"What do you want me to do with this?"

For a moment, she pondered. "Answer it. Find out what he wants."

He opened the phone. "Hey, what's up?" he said as casually as possible. Kayla moved close so that she could listen in when he held the phone away from his ear.

"I've been trying to call you forever. Why didn't you pick up?" Todd's nerves were evident in his voice.

"I was in the shower," he answered. "You okay?"

"No, not really. I need you to meet me at my place right away. It's an emergency."

He glanced at her and saw the same thoughts in her eyes that raced through his head. This was suspicious. "Kayla and I can come right away. What's the emergency?"

"Not Kayla. Just you, Noah. It's really important that it's just you."

"I don't know if I like that. What's going on?"

"Pack business. You said you didn't want anyone else to know, and they'd find out if she came along."

She mouthed the word *bullshit*. A series of concerned lines furrowed her forehead, but she flashed one finger, then five.

Noah understood. "All right, but I'll need at least fifteen minutes. That good enough?"

"Just hurry. Fuck, just hurry, okay?"

The connection dropped.

"We have to get out of here," she said.

"Yeah, I think you're right." He stuffed the phone into his pocket. "I think we'll want to grab a few things, too."

They found backpacks in the closet. Clothes and an odd assortment of necessities bulged at the sides before they'd finished. As they hurried through the front room, she pulled several pictures off the walls and crammed them into her pack.

"Get that blanket off the window," she told him as she slid on her shades, "and let's roll."

Twilight kept the sky bright, but the last trace of the sun had dipped below the horizon. Still early for vampires, although the ones that strode through the parking lot hadn't gotten that message. They glanced to the west, time and again, as if worried the sun would jump back above the horizon.

Sharp stabs of energy danced over his neck. "Kayla—"

"It's one of us," she said, voice low. "One of them. We have to move."

The shadow wolf lead the group, dark glasses on her face to protect her eyes from the dying light. Her hair was a vibrant gold, her lips a shade of crimson. Beautiful, with a dangerous aura that made him wonder if he wanted to fight her or pin her down and fuck her.

"She's a real psycho," Kayla told him. "She likes to kill for the hell of it. Let's hop over the railing. The drop's not too far. They'll see us if we use the stairs."

One biter carried a plastic gallon jug filled with an amber liquid. "Gasoline," Noah whispered.

"Go."

Not for the first time, he blessed his wolfish blood. His knees complained about the shock, but they made it over the edge and onto the ground. The vampires, behind their feral leader, rounded the corner just as Noah and Kayla dodged around the other side.

Without another word, the two of them made for the truck. "Go any direction that's away," she told him as the engine turned over. He slammed it into reverse.

Smoke had started to billow from the open apartment door as they pulled out into traffic. "Kayla, you have to explain," he said as he wove around a slower car to gain speed. "Because if I didn't know better, I'd say

that Todd just tried to warn me."

"He did." She looked out the window, unable to meet his gaze. "He knew that was coming."

"How? How could he know?" But he wasn't sure he wanted the answer.

She didn't want to give it. Regret wrote itself in every line of her face. "Because he probably caused it. Todd's not what you think."

"Tell me."

"He was there, Noah. That night, he was there. He watched. *He participated*. He was one of the werewolves in the ritual."

The steering wheel creaked under his white-knuckled grip. "No."

Finally, she looked at him. "He's Regina's dog. He showed up with her for Kiplinger's little party. He's been lying to you the whole time."

No words would come out. Anger rolled in his gut, fueled by an acute pain in his heart. It made a horrible sense, when he looked back at the past year. Todd's insistence that Kayla was dead. The way he looked at Regina when the pack gathered, the subtle signals she gave him that now seemed very clear. He and she had played opposition to each other, two different opinions to divide the pack and keep it impotent.

Then his reaction at lunch today. No wonder he'd looked nervous. He hadn't known if Kayla had divulged his involvement.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He forced the sound out of his throat. It sounded harsh, raw.

"I was wrong," she began. "I should have said—"

"Tell me."

Again, she looked out the window. "Because I thought you'd try to stop me. He's dangerous, but he's your best friend, and I thought you'd defend him. And I just..." She sighed. "I wanted to put off hurting you. I knew it had to happen, but I wasn't ready to see it. I'm sorry."

For a moment, he was horribly alone. His world had upended itself, and he clung to the hull of it, desperate to put it right again. But too much had changed for his life to ever go back to the way he had known it. He had lost his friend, his old love, the last vestiges of trust he had in his pack and his alpha. No place was safe from this new, hellish threat.

A warm hand rested on his thigh. "Noah. Please. Say something."

"You should have trusted me." He took his eyes off the road long enough to lock with her gaze. "I'm your mate. We are in this *together*."

"But he's—"

"A fucking traitorous bastard. He hurt you. And that's all there is to it."

Silence again over the hum of the engine and the rattle of passing cars. "I'm hungry."

"Me, too. Let's get something to eat before we go hunting." Their plans for the night had a distinct appeal after the revelations of the last few minutes. Killing vampires would do his soul good. "When do you want to take care of Todd and Regina?"

"Tomorrow night. I'd thought about showing up for the pack meeting."

"Why?"

She squeezed his leg. "To take her down in front of everyone. To make her confess. When I thought that Peter still had control, I thought he might have to hear it from her to believe it."

He nodded. "It won't matter what he believes after tomorrow night. But I think it's a good idea. If they hear for themselves, maybe the pack can pull itself back together in time to meet this threat."

Nearly full, the moon shone down on them. The wolf paced and waited impatiently for blood.

Chapter Eight

"No more secrets."

As they drove, she talked. About the ritual, about the months of starvation, deprivation, indoctrination. Personal details and horrors stayed hidden for now, but he understood she wasn't withholding them out of a lack of trust. It was still too raw for her to relive.

But he could see it in the tension of her jaw, hear it in the clipped tone of her words. All that terror, all the torture and darkness, sat just out of sight, still as palpable as the charge from an electric coil or the rattle of an angry snake. Unpredictable at best, he knew it would lash out when they least expected it.

He didn't care if it hurt him. It was Kayla he worried about. They grew closer to a piece of her revenge with every light that turned green. When she got it, would she lose her soul in the process?

It was just as Moira had said. *I don't think she understands herself, or how dangerous she is. She's a time bomb. You need to defuse her before she explodes.*

Not that Moira had even understood how to defuse herself. She'd either not known, or not cared, that her own energy had started to spin out of control. Which made no sense at all, now that he thought about it.

"Do you suppose Moira's all right?" he asked after they had lapsed into silence.

"I'll call her and find out. She ought to know what happened, anyway." She dug into his pocket for his phone.

Disquiet grew in his mind as she dialed the numbers. She'd listened for far too long without a word. "Anything?"

She shook her head. "No, no one's picking up the shop line. She should still be open. It's not that late."

"Try her personal line." He shifted his grip on the steering wheel.

"Nothing. That's odd. Maybe she's in the bathroom. I'll give it a minute."

Thoughts ran in circles in his mind. When he forced them into order, one question fell out of the mental rubble. "You said that when she lost her center, her magic went off-kilter, too."

"Uh-huh."

"So why would she be off-center now? Vampires following her home should be small potatoes to someone like her." He'd dismissed it too easily before, but it bothered him now.

By the downward quirk of her lips, he could tell it bothered her, too. "Moirá's really capable. I'd kind of assumed she'd just gotten too little sleep, and the whole thing had startled her. I startle people." He could hear the unspoken guilt in the thought: *I thought I'd shoved her off center by showing up.*

Frantic theories raced through his mind, spurred by her words. She startled people; she'd even startled him when he saw her in the alley. That prickly, edgy sense of intuition had warned him but hadn't prepared him.

Wait. The pins-and-needles crawl that had alerted him to the shadow wolf in the parking lot. The same sharp itch that he'd felt in Moirá's shop.

The truck's tires shrieked against the pavement as he jerked the wheel hard to the left. He stomped on the brakes, and blue smoke rolled up from the streaks of rubber on the road. Horns blared, but he ignored them. His foot hit the floor with the accelerator pedal. More screams as the tires spun, caught.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"There's a dark wolf at Moon Blessings." Adrenaline, necessity gave him iron control over his beast. He grabbed his inner wolf by the neck and demanded its power. It gave, submissive to his will, and he felt

his eyes shift. The night took on new colors, sharper edges, better depth. With inhuman reflexes, he wove through the traffic, heedless of stares and angry gestures.

"What? How do—"

The back of his truck fishtailed as he took a turn at breakneck speed. "I felt it there. I just now realized it. It's inside. That's what drove her so batshit today. She can feel it but doesn't know what it is."

"But she felt me."

"Not for very long. It took me this long to figure it out. I've been with you the whole time."

"And she thinks the shop is safe. Turn there!"

They slid, wheels whirling for purchase, as he hauled to the right. "She said it left just before dawn. And you sleep during the day."

"Oh fuck, Noah. It's awake."

"And she isn't answering the phone."

* * * * *

Kayla sprang out of the truck before it fully stopped. Passive mystic protections kept the energy of the shop bottled inside, but errant arcs of it leaked through the unseen barrier. Wild, uncontrolled magical voltage spun out, dissipated, lashed again, contaminated by that black, foul aura she knew so well.

Loud clanging bounced off the walls as she ripped the door open. The bell fell from its hook and onto the floor. Chaotic power hit her like a wall. Control wavered, almost broke, as the discord ran riot through her senses.

Kill. Shift. Kill, hurt, break. Howl-smash-kill-blood...killkillkill.

No.

A growl set her hair on end, and she barely realized she'd made the noise herself. Noah's hand rested on her shoulder.

Kill!

No!

"Kayla?"

"Don't. Touch. Me."

Incense smoke like ashes on her tongue. Smells had tastes, tastes tempted. Ashes, sharp ozone, fear. Darkness. Blood.

Blood. Thick. Sticky. Fresh.

Primal desire clawed through her. With blood came meat to rend and tear in her teeth. Her muzzle would drip with it as she gorged. Could she find the meat? It still lived. The blood still flowed through it. She could snap the bones in her teeth, suck the marrow out.

"Back down, Kayla."

An alpha wolf gave an order. His voice snapped with command. She fought free of the thick haze that fogged her mind, given traction by that mandate.

The smoking censer fouled her nose. She pitched it out the door. It crashed through the window of a car parked across the street. But now she could find the scent she wanted. A musky shadow smell. "Not in here."

On silent feet, they edged around the counter to the back of the store. The shelves stood upright, undisturbed. "The ladder's down," he whispered.

"Where are Kayla Schinn and Derek Anderson?" a male voice snarled.

"Go to hell." Female. Pained. Familiar.

Air gusted down the stairs, laden with the smell of *him*. She knew him. He had gone over to the vampires, the last of all those who had broken, but he'd surrendered all the same. Moira's distinct perfume mingled with his scent. And blood.

"Kayla Schinn is right here," she called as she walked up the steps. The scene didn't encourage her. The shadow wolf knelt over Moira, his hand around her throat. A partial change had given him mass, had lent his face a strange, alien cast.

It had also given him claws. Gashes stood out against Moira's pale skin. Brutal, deep swipes that didn't bleed as freely as they should. The unnatural coagulation came from the werewolf's curse, an evolutionary measure to keep the contagion inside the body. There it could spread until

it took hold and showed itself with the moon's first fullness. Most werewolves survived the change.

But Moira was not young, and this wolf was not like the others.

The wolf smiled, a feral expression that did not belong on a human face. "You like to show up at the wrong times, don't you, Kayla?"

"It's a habit I need to break," she answered while she edged up the steps. "Kiplinger finally let you off your leash?"

"He wants you on it instead."

"I'll just bet." All of her wolfish nature told her to bare her teeth and start the fray. She did her best to ignore them. In both size and experience, the man had the advantage. But the thought of his blood on her hands persisted.

He grinned, more a vicious display of teeth than a facial expression. "How's it feel to have your friends hurt for you? Should have just stayed, and none of this would have happened."

Blatant provocation, but it almost worked. "Fuck off."

"The city's ours. The world. Why not? Kiplinger's right." He let go of Moira's throat and stalked toward Kayla. "It's our time."

"You remember what they did to us, right?" Where was Noah? There were too many possibilities here, too many ways for this to go straight to hell. Could normal werewolves get infected when bitten by someone like her? Until they knew for certain, she couldn't risk him in a fight. That left her.

"They did us a favor."

Now or never. A roar of a growl tore from Kayla as she rushed him, white fur sprouting over her body. The wood of the ladder creaked under her weight, for she had gained height, mass. A howl answered her, and she could see a blur of her enemy's gray pelt before they collided.

Crates rained down on them, the corners like knives, but she barely noticed. Her opponent tried to roll her onto her back. She scrambled to gain the momentum to turn over on him again, claws shearing into the fur on his back. He was big, with plenty of muscle to spare. For a heartbeat, she was beneath him, his nails in her shoulders.

Her powerful back legs wedged between them. She dug with her

claws, shredded his hide, shoved him away. He flew into a stack of boxes.

Blood trickled down her arm. It didn't matter. She lunged up and bounded across the room. His impact with the boxes stunned him for just a second, long enough for her to slash her knife-like claws across his face.

An ear-splitting howl rent the air. Red fluid poured down his muzzle from his eye. Now, he was really mad.

From somewhere, a voice shouted. Rage drowned it out. Her enemy burst suddenly up, missing her jugular by a narrow margin as she fell back. Strong, heavy wolf fell onto her, all teeth and claws, but she was faster. He landed on the wooden floor.

"Kayla! Drop!"

Because he was her mate, she heard him. Because he was her alpha, she obeyed.

Sharp cracks hurt her ears. Her opponent gave a terrible howl and made a mad scramble for the stairs. More shots split the air, but he moved too quickly. Shelves from below crashed to the ground as he careened away, wounded but in full flight.

She wanted to give chase. Before she realized it, she had feet on the steps. What ran got hunted down, and he was prey on the run.

"No! Stay with me! Moira needs you!" Noah yelled, the words cutting through the predator's drive.

She crouched down, forced herself to stop.

Glass shattered. He had gotten away.

One fight had ended. The other raged inside her, that drive to move to the next kill, the urges of a rabid wolf caught in the throes of its curse. Outside, the moon was high and bright, and she hadn't tasted blood yet to quench that dark thirst.

Do you remember why you're here? What you have to do? No eyes to slash here, no stomach to claw, just a fight for dominance in her own head. She pushed until the wolf retreated, until the fur receded and the thirst for blood faded away.

Wood bit into her hands and knees. The back of her shirt stuck to her, pasted by the blood from her wounds. Hair fell across her face as she looked up.

Noah knelt next to Moira. The woman's bleeding had stopped far too soon, and she looked sick, weak. Angry black tinged the ragged edges of her wounds, a sure sign the lacerations had infections of the worst sort. Kayla still didn't know if the man bitten by a shadow wolf had survived his first full moon.

"The first aid kit has wolfsbane in it," Moira told him weakly. "Just bring the box."

Noah hurried downstairs. Behind where he'd sat, Kayla could see a pistol, the slide back, chamber open. *Silver bullets. Moira's protection gun.*

"Are you okay?" she asked as she moved to take her friend's hand into hers.

"We'll hope so," came the breathy answer. "They're looking for you, girl."

"I'm so sorry, Moira."

The older woman shook her head. "No. I told you it was time to make a choice. Choices come with consequences."

"But—"

"Shh. Listen to me. He got in the back door and hid here until I came to the attic. He wanted to know about you and Derek Anderson." Her friend groaned. "Augh, I can already feel it. How do you live with this day after day...?"

Noah thudded up the stairs, a metal box in his hands. "You have to let me call 911," he said as he knelt next to the women. "You need medical help."

"And tell them what? I had a feral dog in my attic?" She wheezed half a chuckle. "Too many questions to answer. They don't need to know about werewolves."

"Then we call someone from the pack. Dave. He knows first aid."

She grunted in disagreement. "Dave will call Peter."

Tears stung Kayla's eyes, but she forced them down, froze them into the block of ice that held all her worst memories. Now was not the time to break down. It would serve no purpose. "We're burning time, Noah. We have to hurry. If the police don't show up from reports of gunshots, then Kiplinger's people will."

He wracked his brain. "Then we get her out of here. Moira, where are your keys? We'll get on the road and decide where to go from there."

"Take me to Vincenzo Pirelli."

Moira's words shocked them both. "What?"

The Irishwoman fumbled into the box until she found a dark brown glass bottle. "Drops of this into the wounds, please. Then I'll give you directions as we drive. The keys are on that table."

"We are not leaving you for vampires!" Noah protested as Kayla took the bottle and unscrewed the lid. The liquid inside smelled vile.

"I understand now, Noah." Moira cried out as the clear elixir hit the wounds and foamed. "Hellfire and damnation, that hurts. But I can feel it, and I haven't even changed. *This has to be stopped.*"

Noah's brow furrowed. "Not Pirelli."

She nodded. "He has resources you can't imagine, and if those don't work, he'll know what to do."

Neither liked the finality in the statement.

"I'll bring the car around the back," Noah told them. "Wait here."

Kayla stroked her friend's hand while he grabbed the keys and dashed out. "You look like shit."

"I feel like shit, thank you. That man is stubborn." A ghost of a smile flickered over her lips.

"I like him that way."

Her friend hissed as Kayla dropped more wolfsbane into the wounds. "If you had told me how this felt, I never would have believed you."

She knew to what Moira referred. Not the change of lycanthropy, but the horrible darkness of the shadow wolf's infection. "It's worse, I think, when you've been an untainted wolf first." No words of comfort came to her lips, only honesty. "You can feel it now as it spreads through you and changes everything it touches. But when you've felt free, clean, and you're trapped by the filth inside you..."

Moira squeezed her hand. "I believe in you, Kayla. You and Noah. Stop them before this spreads further."

Breathless, guilty, wracked with turmoil, she nodded. *I never meant*

for it to come to this. It was supposed to be so simple. Come into town, kill the people responsible, leave. No one but me would be hurt. Of course, it never would have happened that way; she knew it, but the pain of remorse kept her immune to the true wounds she couldn't salve away right now.

Black streaks discolored the veins that lead from her friend's slashes. Born in corruption, the shadow wolves defiled all they touched. How could she stop it before it spread further? She was part of the problem.

"He'll be a good alpha," Moira said.

Kayla's heart was in her throat. "He already is."

* * * * *

Moira called Pirelli from the car as Kayla sat with her in the back seat. The gate to his driveway was open when they arrived, and the man himself stood in front of the door. She had never seen the lord of the local vampires, and she was not disappointed.

Long black hair spilled, unbound, down his broad back. Smooth, perfect skin still kept its Italian tan, and dark brown eyes held the slightest trace of a vampire's usual red tone. They had caught him on the way out somewhere, for he wore leather pants that hugged without binding and a black shirt that outlined a perfect chest.

More powerful than his flawless form, however, was the aura of charisma that surrounded him. He carried himself with an undeniable command, a self-assurance that few men possessed but many imitated without success. If vampirism had a poster boy, it was Vincenzo Pirelli.

"Get her inside," he told a waiting trio of vampires, his accent thick with concern. "A medic is on the way."

"Thank you for your help," Noah said as the three lifted Moira with a surprisingly gentle strength and carried her through the door. "If we can help at all..."

The vampire's eyes met Kayla's, deep red-brown to her indigo. "She has the help I need, I believe. I do not know what it is that we fight, Miss Schinn, and we have no time for long explanations."

Her skin crawled with revulsion, but worse, with a need she had hoped to forget. The sharp sting of fangs, the delicate draw of blood from a punctured vein. Paul had made certain all his creations knew the rapture that came with a vampire's bite. After the conditioning he'd forced on her, she understood why humans bared their necks for the touch of teeth.

"What do you mean?" Noah asked, eyes narrowed.

"He means he needs a drink of my blood," she answered. "He can't cure Moira unless he knows what the problem is."

His expression hardened. "I understand," he said through clenched teeth, "but you won't mind if I watch."

Neither expected Pirelli's gentle smile. "So this is the woman who nearly brought you to war against us? I have never cared for your methods, but I have always respected your motives. I will not harm her. I need only a drop."

He's good, Kayla thought to herself, as some of the tension eased out of Noah's posture. *No wonder he's lived so long. He's a silver-tongued devil.*

With a gentleman's manner, Lord Pirelli took her hand into his. Although undead, his skin remained warm to the touch. Kiplinger had felt warm, as well, but never held the radiant quality that the lord's fingers did. He was more than alive; he was vibrant.

He was dangerous.

Heat enveloped the tip of her finger as he took it into his mouth. She hardly noticed the prick of his fang but felt the feather-light stroke as the tip of his tongue touched the wound. His eyes slid closed as the smallest shudder passed through his body, and he savored that drop of blood with all the pleasure of a connoisseur.

Reluctantly, she removed her finger. Even after she'd put her hand into her pocket, she could feel the phantom warmth of his tongue.

"We must speak again," Pirelli told them when at last he opened his eyes. "This is something which concerns both your people and mine. I will do all that I can for her. I vow that to you."

"I know you will," Noah told him with more confidence than she knew he felt. "I'd like to offer you my apology, Lord Pirelli. I thought your people had taken Kayla, and I was wrong."

Pirelli inclined his head. "I understand. I cannot hold it against you. If you will excuse me?"

"One more thing."

Both men turned to look at Kayla.

It galled her to ask for permission. Even if he refused, she knew what she would do, but Noah's example made good political sense. He was right; Kiplinger's threat involved both their people. They would have to cooperate.

She would follow the protocol. "Two vampires have wronged me. I ask your blessing to hunt them down and see to it that they do not rise with the sunset tomorrow night."

"Who are these that you would kill?" He answered the traditional question with his own.

"Miles and Mason Bristol."

He should have asked what they had done, by the old ways. But he didn't. Like the silver-tongued devil he was, he drew from a werewolf ritual instead.

"Kill them both, and may the moon bless your hunt."

Chapter Nine

She needed to run.

High in the sky, the moon turned its near-full face down upon the city. To Kayla, it felt as if it watched her, but not in benediction. Werewolves had always talked about the blessing, or curse, of the moon, and which their power fell under. Now, Kayla knew for certain.

Adrenaline had turned into restless energy. Warmth still tingled over her finger where Vincenzo Pirelli's tongue had brushed her skin. She could almost smell the moonlight, taste it, a sure sign she'd almost reached the end of her ability to rein in the beast.

What was I thinking? Riding back into town like some gunslinger at high noon, looking to shoot down the man in the black hat right there in the middle of town. Her confidence had evaporated in the face of Moira's black-edged wounds. In its wake came an edgy, nervous agitation, the kind that made even placid dogs bite. *You got someone hurt, cowboy.*

The need built at the core of her, rode along her spine and centered low in her belly. What had begun with the fight in the attic now blazed full-force in her in answer to the pull of the lunar tides. Within her lived a creature of need, dark and primal, and it howled as it battered the cage of her mind to break free. The cab of Moira's car closed in around her, a prison of its own.

She couldn't help it. At their best, werewolves were sexual creatures. The kind of energy the moon gave them when it waxed full translated to violence or sex, the basest of all instincts. It was why they

secreted themselves away from humans when they lost all hold on their beasts, why they kept that edge of danger in their human lives. Out of necessity, they came to love the release, sometimes too well.

Noah could feel it. He looked straight ahead, eyes focused too hard on the road, but they had turned gold again, and his nostrils flared when he breathed. An erection strained against his jeans. Through the bonds they shared, she could sense his need, his own fight with the wolf inside. It fed into the chaos of her desire, which flowed back into him in an endless upward spiral.

She needed to run.

Emotions churned through her like choppy seas, each wave threatening to crest and wash away the thin wall she held them behind. Fear, self-loathing, that awful black drive for revenge. And love. Antidote to the blackness, so bright as to blind her. In it, she could see them together, even after Kiplinger and Regina and the twins had gone back to the dust that had spawned them. She could see happiness, a future, a place where someone loved the horrible things inside her.

It scared her. She couldn't love what she had become, but he would. Noah would love the thing that may have gotten Moira killed, or worse, changed. The thing that had gotten their apartment burned down. Had taken them to the doorstep of the city's most powerful vampire. Who had tasted her blood. Which she had liked.

It all made her dizzy.

Fight or flight. And she needed to run before the other option was the only one left.

"Pull over," she growled.

He didn't ask why, just whipped the car into the parking lot of the waterfront park. They jumped out and she shed her clothes as fast as she could. Too tight, too rough, all she wanted was her skin. Or better, her fur, as her feet became paws. She ran into the wooded land, toward the sound of the sea, a white ghost in the trees.

Soon, she would run out of land. Then she would go into Puget Sound, swim into the sea until the salt water had washed it all from her. If she swam long enough, she would catch up to the sun, and it could burn

everything away. Sea air, laden with smells, filled her nostrils.

Human smells, nature smells. Noah smells. The fur on her back stood up, and her lip curled. He chased her. Why? Didn't he know what she was? Why would he pursue someone's shadow? Waves rolled higher against that battered wall. All she could offer him was pain. Unrest. Danger. But he still chased.

She whirled with an agile turn that kicked up a spray of dirt then charged the gray wolf behind her. They collided with a snarl, a ball of teeth and fur until she sprang away to growl. It was a warning, a plea, not to come closer. To turn around and leave. But his golden eyes stared back as his hackles bristled up along the back of his neck. In them, she saw stubborn resolve.

He was her mate. He would not leave.

Anger flared. Why did he make her face this? If he left, she could continue alone. No one else had to get hurt, and she could drown the ache in her heart with blood. A snarl ripped from her as she charged him, slammed into him, writhed to put her teeth around his throat. But he protected himself too well, and he was too strong, too smart.

The fur retreated with a shocking suddenness. She found herself on the ground, human, vulnerable beneath his naked body. *The alpha shift.* He'd caged her wolf.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she demanded, trapped under him.

"I won't leave you alone," he answered, hands tight around her wrists. "I made that mistake once. Never again."

She thrashed, fought against his grip, but he held firm. "Let me up. Let me go."

His golden eyes burned like coals. Need, love, and worry warred in his gaze. "I won't ever let you go."

"You should! Damn it, Noah, did you see Moira? That could happen to anyone close to me." On her back, neck open, belly against his, she couldn't protect that soft underside. "I can't live with that!"

"You heard her. We make our choices. Sometimes, there are consequences." He lowered his face to within inches of hers. "I'm

prepared to accept those."

"I'm not. I couldn't take it." Desperately, she tried to shore up that wall that held her emotions at bay. "Go back to the car. Forget me. Let me forget about you."

His lips dipped down to kiss the hollow of her throat. The tip of his tongue traced hot circles over that tender skin. "Is that what you want?"

Against his chest, her nipples hardened, and a rush of moisture warmed her pussy. Her back arched so she could run those awakened nubs over the patch of hair on his chest. "Yes. I have to forget about you."

"What if I can't forget about you?" Teeth closed over the soft skin on her neck, nipped at it, reminded her who he was. Alpha male, in control, and she was at his mercy.

With his teeth on her neck, she couldn't thrash. Her body bowed against his, strained upward and got nowhere. One knee nudged the inside of her leg to part her thighs. "You have to. Fuck you, Noah. You have to let me go."

He shifted to look down into her eyes. "No. I have to love you. That's all I have to do."

"Do you know what I am? What I'm capable of?" Now she could toss her head, yank with all her strength against his steel grip, although it got her nowhere.

Then he put his lips to her ear. "Do you?" he murmured.

The way he said it disarmed her. She didn't. Since the ritual, she had huddled in the darkness but never accepted it.

"Let me go."

His tongue traced the edge of her ear. "Not ever."

"I have to get away."

Lips suckled her earlobe into his mouth. She groaned. "I'm not going to let you run away from yourself, or from me, anymore."

"You don't have a choice."

He chuckled, a rich, deep sound that brought goose bumps up on her skin. "Don't I?"

Anger. Desire. They chased through her, fought, but neither won. "I'll hurt you. I don't want to."

"How will you do that? Do you have purple laser eye beams now?" The head of his cock nudged against her pussy. She shifted her hips forward to rub it against her, let it scrape over her clit, her wet folds.

"The wolf will get loose."

Another chuckle as he dipped his head to take her nipple into his mouth. Sharp suction made her growl as spikes of pleasure jolted through her nerves to meet at her clit. "The wolf isn't going anywhere, is she?"

It wasn't. He had her right where he wanted her. She struggled but only pushed her breast harder against his mouth. "Why can't you understand? I can't stay."

He lifted his head. "You can, and you will. You are my mate. No matter what happens, I love you."

All her inner turmoil had built to a critical pitch. She all but vibrated with the effort to keep the upheaval in check. If she broke, what then? The same question had haunted her since Noah found her in that alley. *I cannot break. I will not break.*

Fight or flight, kill or run. Love was not an option, but it wouldn't let her take either choice.

Golden eyes stared down at her as his cock rubbed against her. "Tell me that you don't love me, and I'll let you up right now."

Her mouth opened to say the words. *I don't love you. I can't love you. I won't love you.* No sound came out. She couldn't lie about this, no matter how she wanted to. To protect him, to guard her heart. And she couldn't say four untrue words to save them.

"You can't, can you?" His knees pushed her legs wider. "You love me. You need me."

"I don't need anyone."

His cock slipped between her folds to rest just inside her pussy. She shuddered, desperate for more.

"Don't you?"

Damn him. "No." With a growl, she strained to take more of him in, but he wouldn't let her.

"Say it."

A low growl escaped her as he withdrew himself then pushed in

again, only as far as the ridge.

"No." She wouldn't give him the victory or break down the last of the wall. But the wetness between her legs betrayed her desire.

Slide out, slide in. Her cunt had never felt so empty, so painfully keen for a thick shaft inside it. His dominance gave her permission to want, and his control... She hadn't realized that his control had restored hers.

Damn him to hell, right to the bottom. "You son of a bitch."

A smirk curled over his lips. "Say it."

"I need you."

"What else?"

"I want you, you fucking bastard."

"Anything else?"

"Take me, damn it! Please!"

His cock thrust in, a long, forceful plunge that made her grunt. Her pussy stretched around him, and finally, she was filled. "Tell me you love me, Kayla."

They locked eyes. He loved her so much; she could see it in that wolfish gaze. Tears stung at the corners of her eyes.

"I love you."

He released her arms. She wrapped them around him, clung to him as he took up a forceful, inspired rhythm. Large hands hooked under her shoulders to better pull her down against him, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. With each thrust, her chest slid against his, nipples roughed by the thatch of hair.

Panting gaps became throaty, lusty moans. He pounded into her, lost to the same frenzy that gripped her. As one, their bodies writhed under the trees, strained to push closer, deeper. She was full, complete with him in her.

Their groans grew louder, unrestrained. His hips worked against hers in frantic strokes, and the waves lashed higher in her belly. When he threw his head back to howl his climax at the moon, her orgasm crashed over her, rocked her to the core so that all she could do was ride the shockwaves that slammed through her body.

Profound release, from the deepest fathoms of her body, claimed her. As he rolled to cradle her against his chest, the first sob broke free from her chest. She tried to swallow it, but a second burst out from the dammed heartbreak she had kept for so long. He held her tightly to him, stroked her hair, and at last, she let go.

Tears wet his skin, her face. Wracked by the heaving sobs, she clung to him as if he were anchor in the storm. It hurt, and she felt broken, splintered by the weight of her fear and sorrow. But his arms held her together, kept her above the waves of her internal storm.

She thought it would never end. She wasn't sure she wanted it to, as the worst of the poison in her soul poured out of her. Eventually, the tears slowed, her breath returned. Then she was still, and he hadn't let go, just as he had promised.

"I'm a monster," she said at last. "God, Noah, what have I become?"

"You are not a monster." His voice rumbled in his chest. "There's darkness in you now, sure. You aren't what you were. But I think that, in the end, you're whatever you make yourself into."

Her breath shuddered as she drew it in. "You saw me. You've felt me. I'm dangerous to be around."

Strong fingers passed over her hair. "What werewolf isn't? It's worse for you, but you can learn to control it. To use it. You'll have help."

"What if I don't want to? How can I accept this? How can I not hate myself?"

A gentle hand touched under her chin, and she lifted her eyes to meet his. "I've accepted you. And I love you. Are you telling me that I'm wrong about you? Because that's something *I* won't accept."

She tried to tear her gaze away, but he wouldn't let her. "Noah—"

"Listen to me. I believe in you." His gaze burned bright, fierce. "More, I believe in us. You and I can beat this. When it gets away from you, I'll help you get it back. I'll protect you from yourself. If you can't go on, I'll carry you until you can."

And she believed him. For the first time since the change, a tiny, fragile hope rose out of the ashes.

"Please, Kayla. Please give me the chance. Trust in me. In yourself."

"Don't leave me alone in the dark." The words choked out of her.

He cupped her face in both hands. "Not ever."

All her tears had run dry. Emptiness echoed in her heart in the place where they had pooled, toxic and hidden, until he had broken through. But not for long, not with his love rushing in to take its place.

From here, she could hear the sea. Waves lapped against the shore, an eternal, sibilant lullaby. The moon loved the sea and called to it, or so the werewolf legend went. Trapped in its bed, the sea could do no more than reach for her lover, never to touch or hold the silvery orb that spun so far away.

She had thought of the moon as a harsh mistress. A vindictive spirit filled with whimsy and curses. But as she listened to the whisper of the waves, as each stretched toward the moon then fell back again, she realized that she was the moon. She had become what she hated the most, and had almost left Noah, trapped in a place he could not leave, to reach for her and never touch.

"What now?" he asked.

Since her return, she had feared this moment, but now that she had arrived at it, she didn't know why. Even though she had broken, she was stronger than ever. "Miles and Mason should be at Night Moves by now, unless that other shadow wolf has scared them off."

"He's probably licking his wounds. The silver should have poisoned his blood by now."

Confident. Unafraid. *And I almost pushed him away.*

"I hope no one's in the parking lot." Leaves fell out of her hair as she stood and shook it out.

He laughed and got to his feet. "Me, too. Otherwise, they'll get an eyeful."

"Vampires, I can handle. Gawkers, though..."

But that wasn't true. His fingers sought hers, and as they walked hand-in-hand toward the car, she knew she could handle anything.

She had Noah.

Chapter Ten

Loud music thumped through the air, a trance-like electronic bump-and-grind drum loop. Windowless brick walls did little to keep the rhythm inside Night Moves; the pavement vibrated on the downbeat, and two car alarms screamed empty warnings. No one paid any attention.

To her sensitive nose, the parking lot reeked of human excess. Everything smelled like alcohol, from broken bottles to a puddle of vomit to the place where someone had taken a leak in the dirt that edged the pavement. Most of the people who swaggered by were half in the bag, boisterous, obnoxious partiers with shiny PVC pants and vodka breath. One wore an X of electrical tape over each of his nipples, another a mesh shirt with huge holes.

Perfect, clueless prey. The vampire who wove through the cars seemed to think so, too. By the set of her lips, her fangs had already extended in anticipation of a midnight snack.

"What a bunch of cattle." Noah's disdain was apparent. "How can they not know?"

"I bet some of them do," she told him. "It's probably why they come here."

He made a face and dug into a backpack. They'd grabbed their things from his truck, including the blessed stakes, before they'd taken Moira to Lord Pirelli's. "I threw my leather jacket in here. I think I can put a couple of these along my spine and get them in that way."

Stakes would make their job easier. She nodded. "All right. But it's

May. We're going to have to do something about it."

"Something about it—*hey!*" Pain for his expensive black coat twisted his face as her hand grew claws and she shredded the sleeves. "You're cruel, you know this? Aw, shit, haven't you done enough to it?"

"Not even the fashion victims here wear jackets in May, so we have to dress it up." The bottom hem tattered easily, and the front plackets looked good with ragged slices. "There. Take off your shirt."

Grousing, he pulled off his shirt and put on his ruined semi-vest. "I'm rethinking our relationship, Kayla."

With a chuckle, she ran her claws through her shirt to leave a bare minimum of ripped material. "I'll buy you a new one. Moira have any electrical tape in here?"

"Don't you even think about it."

Armed and dressed to kill, they headed for the door. The bouncers didn't give Noah a second look, but Kayla could feel their eyes on her as she put her hand out for the black ink hand stamp that said she'd paid her cover. One inhaled as if to ask a question, then shrugged and went back to his watch over the door.

What's one more freak in a freak show? she thought as they let the ebb of the crowd carry them into the throbbing heart of the club. Dented, rusted cages hung from stout chains throughout the warehouse-like establishment, rocked by the almost naked dancers inside them. Both men and women gyrated behind the bars, unconcerned that they could fall, or too inebriated to care.

Bright, colored lights flashed through the foggy dimness in time with the beat the DJ spun. Waves of people rippled over the dirty concrete floor, an interior sea pulled by a musical tide. Others sat at the tables on the shore, sipping drinks as they violated the city's no smoking ordinance.

Sharks swam in this ocean and followed the scent of blood. As she and Noah found a position on a small dais along a wall, she watched as a man glided up to a woman who danced with her eyes closed, caught up in the pulse of the music. He cupped his body along hers and moved with his prey, crotch against her ass, hands smooth as they slid over her stomach to her breasts.

Languid and lost, she reached back to run her hands through his hair. His cheek brushed hers, nudged her head to the side. For an instant, Kayla could see the flash of his fangs before they sank into the dancer's neck. She didn't break rhythm, just opened her mouth in a gasp and ground back harder against him.

Noah's nudge caught her attention. She followed his gaze to the edge of the dance floor, where the lights didn't touch. There, the cages slid on tracks in the ceiling, pushed and pulled at will by the patrons. Some tables had dragged dancers over for a private show.

In the corner, she saw them. The twins stood to either side, identical leers on their faces as they watched the frightened young woman whose cage they had trapped. She danced, but her eyes rolled wildly between the vampires that surrounded her. From experience, Kayla knew how they enjoyed fear. Adrenaline tasted good when it saturated the blood.

Angry, she started forward, but Noah's hand on her shoulder stopped her. One strong arm pulled her against him, and he started to move, as the vampire had, spooned to her back. At another moment, it would have turned her on, but she had to force herself to sway with him tonight.

"Not while they're together," he said in her ear. "Easier when they're alone."

He was right. But she hated to watch as Miles reached through the bars to stroke the woman's bare calves and thighs. When she squealed and pressed backward, Mason's hand slid over her skin, up toward the junction of her legs. She reeled forward, back into Miles' touch, a bird trapped between two hungry cats.

Mason grabbed the dancer's ankle. She slipped and fell as the vampire pulled her leg through the bars, and she tried to lean back for leverage to free herself, but Miles grabbed her arm. While Mason ran his tongue up the inside of her leg, Miles flicked his tongue over her wrist. One found a vein at the inside of her thigh, and his lips closed around it.

She shuddered. His brother bit into her wrist. Her body stiffened, and then she relaxed despite her obvious fear. After a moment, her eyes rolled back into her head, and she went slack in the cage.

A bouncer detached himself from the wall, key ring in hand. As the pair moved away, he hauled the unconscious dancer out of the cage to take her into the back. Another woman took her place, hesitant after what she had seen, but the bouncer returned and locked her in.

Kayla's jaw clenched.

Together, the twins wound through the crowd. Front and back, they pressed to a drunken blonde, who opened her mouth in a gasp as she felt two men surround her. Each lifted one of her wrists to his mouth, taking a taste of her blood before they moved on to the next free meal.

"It's like some kind of fucking people buffet," Noah murmured from behind her.

At last, the pair split. A woman with deep green hair caught Mason's fancy, while Miles spotted a redhead at the edge of the floor. Kayla put her hands over Noah's and laced her fingers into his, and they stepped into the throng.

Over the uneven waves of dancers, she could just see the top of Miles' head. If they did it right, they could move in, stake him, and move the body out with none the wiser. Mason was sure to know when his brother died; twin vampires had a bond forged at birth and strengthened by undeath. One did nothing without the other.

Mason would follow, and they could dispatch him, too. Then they could get out of this dive before the flashing lights and noxious smells made her sick.

Closer, closer, they pushed their way through the writhe of bodies. He had started to lead the unsteady redhead away to the darker reaches of the club. Even better.

The skin on the back of her neck crawled. Startled, she snapped her head toward the door and saw that Miles and Noah had done the same. Regina stepped into the club, obvious in her neat clothes. But behind her walked a face that Kayla knew well.

He had tied a cloth over his missing eye. The cut extended out from under the material, still an angry red. His skin was an unhealthy pale despite the poor light, and from where she stood, she could see a fine sheen of sweat on his face. He held his midsection as he glared around the

dance floor.

Another shadow wolf pushed out from behind him, this one familiar, too. She had led the vampires to burn the apartment. Then a third shadow wolf, a brunette who had all but licked Kiplinger's designer shoes, came to stand next to Regina. And another. The black-haired beauty.

All four shadow wolves who remained loyal to the vampires blocked the way out.

Just as Kayla could feel them, they could feel her. She ducked into the crowd as four pairs of hidden indigo eyes scanned over where she stood. Noah had turned his back to them as soon as he'd spotted them, and now, he shifted himself to stand behind her, blocking their view.

"This is not good," he said into her ear. "Go over there. Next to the bank of lights."

The brilliant spotlights and hyperactive strobes hurt her eyes even through her sunglasses. But the other wolves would have the same problem. Over here, they had as much chance to remain unseen as they did anywhere. "He must have gone straight to Regina," she said loudly.

"That makes this a little harder." He flashed a grimace. "We have a Plan B?"

"I kind of hoped you did."

"I left it in the truck."

"That was stupid."

Quickly, he darted his gaze around. "Two choices. We head out the back and run like hell, or we punt. I vote punting."

An idea had formed behind his eyes. "What are you thinking?"

"Trust me. And get ready for all hell to break loose."

* * * * *

When Kayla had told him about Regina's betrayal, Noah had believed her. Over the past year, he'd seen enough evidence to prove it. But the sight of her in the doorway, surrounded by dark werewolves who would kill him and his mate if they got the chance, chilled him to the soul.

And they would kill him. He had no illusions otherwise. Regina certainly wouldn't stop them; she'd brought them for just that purpose, he expected. It wouldn't matter what she told Peter. She'd expect forgiveness and not bother to ask permission. Knowing Peter, he'd give it without thought. It had become his *modus operandi*.

Noah took in his surroundings as they dodged dancers to stand beside the lights. It made him wince to think of how the brightness had to hurt her eyes, but they had to hide while they decided what to do.

He'd underestimated how long it would take that one-eyed bastard to get back on his feet. It would have taken another werewolf days to crawl out of whatever hole he'd dug into. Now his miscalculation could cost them both their lives. How to fix this? Or better, how to turn it to their advantage?

"He must have gone straight to Regina," Kayla said over the thud of the bass line.

"That makes this a little harder." He grinned, although it felt more like a grimace, in the hope it would bolster her confidence. *I won't let you down, baby*. "We have a Plan B?"

"I kind of hoped you did."

Not yet, but I'm working on it. "I left it in the truck."

"That was stupid."

Another glance around him confirmed his thought. They had no good way out. Regina was a bitch, but she wasn't a stupid bitch. There would be guards at the back door, Kiplinger's vampires maybe. They could try it, but he thought he saw a better way. "Two choices. We head out the back and run like hell, or we punt. I vote punting."

"What are you thinking?"

"Trust me. And get ready for all hell to break loose." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit a number on the speed dial.

Cameron Roswell, second in command and enforcer of the pack, answered the phone in a sleepy voice. "Noah?"

"Sorry to wake you up, Cam, but there's a problem you're going to want to hear about."

Kayla gave him a confused look.

"Hm? Noah, where are you?"

Two of the shadow wolves moved out into the horde of people. He didn't have much time. "Night Moves. It's a vampire hangout."

"I know what it is." Pause. "Oh, shit. Not again."

"Two of them."

"You know what Peter said. Are you drunk? High?"

He'd lost track of Miles, but he could see Mason at the edge of the room. The vampire had lured the green haired girl with him. "No, just fed up. I know what position this puts you in. But I'm not going to stop this time."

The shadow wolves had started to circle in on their position. He had very little time left.

"Why are you doing this? You know what I have to do."

"Time to take a stand. Bring all your boys, Cameron. Tonight's the beginning of the end."

He clicked the phone closed.

"Want to fill me in?" Kayla sounded baffled, worried.

"That's our ride out, if he moves his ass. Which twin is that?"

"Mason. The pack heavies are our ride out? How does that work?"

Careful not to stab himself, he took one of the stakes from under his vest. "It'll take too long to explain. Take this."

Without further questions, she took the sharpened length of wood. Together, they worked their way to where Mason Bristol leaned on the wall, the woman against him. He had his lips against her neck but hadn't yet punctured the vein.

Noah grabbed her by the shoulder and threw her to the side. "Wot the—" was all the vampire got out before Kayla drove the stake up into his chest and through his heart.

There was a scream from across the floor, high pitched with pain and fury. As Mason slumped to the floor, his brother all but flew toward them, shoving the crowd out of his way with preternatural strength. His eyes glowed a terrible red, and his fangs extended over his bottom lip. The death of his brother had sent him into a killing rage.

Regina and her shadow wolves turned their heads to follow the

berserk vampire's charge. Her eyes met Noah's then widened with recognition. Time had run out.

From the nearest table, Noah grabbed a glass of clear alcohol.

Miles cleared the last of the crowd just in time for the drink to explode across his chest and soak his clothes.

Noah didn't pull the stake. He pulled his lighter.

Another scream cut through the music as flames burst over the vampire's clothes, his skin, and burned with an almost white heat. Panicked, he ran through the crowd, whose shrieks rose over the agonized shrill of the burning undead. Chaos erupted as the herd began to stampede. At first, they ran in all directions. Then the flow turned toward the door, toward Regina and her wolves.

"Let's go!" Noah shouted and grabbed Kayla's hand.

Miles threw himself at the bar. Fire danced up from where he touched, fed by the bottles of alcohol. A pathetic dribble came out of the sprinkler system, not nearly enough to douse the inferno.

The shadow wolves drew closer. Noah wedged himself and Kayla deeper into the press. He caught Regina's eyes as the crowd shoved him by. She would follow, he knew, but by then, he hoped it wouldn't matter.

Hysterical shouting came from all directions. Patrons of the club shoved him from all sides in desperate attempts to funnel through the narrow doors. His grip on Kayla's hand broke, and he tried to turn, but the forward momentum of the frightened club-goers stopped him.

Then the night air, fresh and cool compared to the suffocation of the inside. He shouldered out to the side of the exodus. Kayla saw him and shoved through the human stream to get to him. Regina wasn't far behind her, almost within arm's reach. And so were the four shadow wolves.

They stared at each other, tension thick as Regina's wolves fanned out to either side of them. Outnumbered, outmatched, Noah hoped he could stall long enough for the cavalry to arrive. *Not that the cavalry isn't a gamble. Fuck, I hope I've pegged Cameron right.*

"Fancy meeting you here, Regina. Friends of yours?" Noah asked.

"Cut the shit, Noah," she snarled. "That was a stupid, stupid

move."

"Was it? I thought it was a great show." He kept his tone light, amiable. It would piss her off.

Her eyes narrowed. "I've been waiting for you to screw up. It was inevitable. You've been trying to self-destruct since your bitch came to play."

It took discipline not to growl. "Peter know what you're into? I think he'd be very interested."

"Fuck Peter." She didn't see the blue SUV pull up, but he did. Three more cars pulled in behind it. "He'll say that he hated to lose a good pack mate, but that you just couldn't abide by the rules. Danger to us all, he'll say, and no one will say a fucking word."

Eight werewolves disgorged from the cars. Only when the doors slammed did she notice, but by then, her dark wolves couldn't disappear.

"I wonder what Cameron will think," Noah said with a smile.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded as the square-jawed wall of wolf strode up to the group.

"I might ask you the same question," Cameron answered, face hostile and voice hard.

Good. This was exactly what Noah had hoped for. "Cameron, you remember Kayla?"

Kayla gave a small smile. "Hi, Cam. It's good to see you again."

"Kayla? Holy shit, you're alive." A happy look crossed his face, but clouded quickly. "You're in on this, too, I suppose."

"I staked one of the two," she offered. "Noah lit the other one on fire."

He ran a hand through his black hair. "You're both going to have to come with me, then."

Regina fumed. "They aren't going anywhere. We have to take care of this tonight. Do you hear me?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to keep out of it," Cameron told her in a tone that brooked no dissent. "This is my job to do. You can have your say tomorrow night, when Peter passes judgement."

"I am Peter's mate. You do what I tell you," she hissed. The shadow

wolves shifted. Cameron's heavies moved in tight behind their leader, a warning clear in the way they stood. Their loyalty was not in question. What the enforcer said was their law.

Her words hung between them. Cameron looked from Regina to Kayla, then to Noah. Their eyes met for an instant.

Then Cameron looked back to Regina. "I do what's best for the pack, and you'd do well to remember your place."

A snarl ripped from her, and her eyes flashed gold. "How dare you talk to me like that? I'll have Peter flay you alive."

"You do that." He turned back to Noah. "Will you and your mate come with us quietly? I don't want a scene."

"We'll do whatever you say." Obediently, he held out his arms, wrists crossed. "Cuffs?"

No one took their gazes from Regina and her wolves. "I don't think we need them just now. Let's move out."

Six of the silent men stood, watchful, as Noah and Kayla walked toward Cameron's vehicle. The other two stayed with the prisoners as they settled into the seats.

"You've just made a mistake," Noah heard Regina growl.

"One of us has, that's for sure," Cameron answered.

Then the door slammed closed. "I hope we didn't," Kayla murmured.

Noah sighed. "Me, too."

Chapter Eleven

"Cameron, can I have a word with you?"

Kayla still slept in the spare bedroom, dead to the world as usual. Cameron had given them a blanket to put over the window so she could rest easy in the dark. But Noah had opened his eyes long before she would, which he thought was just as well. He had some business to attend.

One of the enforcer's wolves had escorted him down the hall to the living room where Cameron sat, television tuned to the local news. Noah was a friend, but he was also in pack custody, and the guards took their jobs seriously.

"Sure, Noah. Take a seat."

The news droned on about the fire. "Firefighters say the blaze took hours to get under control because of serious safety violations, including a non-functional sprinkler system, inadequate access to the club, and building code violations. No official word is being given on the cause of the fire, but witnesses tell us that one of the patrons burst into flames, and that he was responsible for the blaze that gutted the Night Moves club late last—"

Cameron clicked the Mute button on the remote, and the reporter's voice fell silent. "Well, that was a hell of a mess you made."

"Sorry about that." And he was. He'd hoped not to involve anyone.

"Doesn't bother me much. That place was a shit hole." The big man shrugged his shoulders. "No one got hurt except the biters you offed. You

probably did the city a favor."

He chuckled. "Maybe so. Still, it really put a kink in your night."

With a sigh, the enforcer leaned back and regarded Noah, thoughts evident behind his eyes. "That's what I'm curious about. You called me before you did it. You wanted me to come, didn't you?"

"I was counting on it."

"That's what I thought. It isn't any of my business to ask this, so you don't have to answer. It had something to do with Regina and those people she was with, didn't it?"

Noah nodded.

Cameron was a brute of a wolf, tall, wide, and strong. He looked as smart as the average brick, but it was an act, a play for people to underestimate him. "Whatever happened to Kayla happened to them, and Regina was ass deep in it."

Again, Noah nodded.

"You know, before that night, I suspected she was up to something. I told Peter, but he blew me off." He scrubbed at his face, looking frustrated. "I shouldn't tell you this, you know, but... I've got this feeling that something's about to change. Am I right?"

"Do you really want the answer to that?" The question was a calculated move designed to make Cameron show his hand.

"Nope, but I think I need to." Glasses on the coffee table clinked as he put his feet up. No one had ever called him a neat housekeeper. "My job's not to listen to the alpha but to protect the pack. Know why that is?"

That pack loyalty was what Noah had banked on. "Because if the alpha threatens the good of the pack, it's your job to stand up for the rest of them. You're the balance part of a check and balance."

"Uh-huh. And if I've got the right of it..." He let the thought trail off. "I've been on Peter for months about what's going on with the pack. Regina's doing a damn good job of picking it apart. No one wants to come to gatherings, no one wants to get together, and most of all, no one wants to see the alpha. And it's because his mate's running the show."

"Mm-hmm."

"Last night, I see her with a bunch of werewolves that I don't know,

and they're *not right*. Sorry, I know Kayla's the same way, but it's true. It didn't take me long to figure out that you'd called me as protection from Regina. Wish you'd just told me that, but I see why you didn't. Maybe your way was better." He shrugged again.

Noah leaned forward. "I know your position, Cam. I didn't want to involve you if you didn't want to be involved."

The big man flashed a grin. "And you didn't know which side of the fence I was on. It's okay, man. But between you, me, and Dale back there, I think Peter's got to go, or the pack's going to hell in a handbasket."

"Hell's already here. Do you want to know this, or do you want to keep out of it until it's all headed for the fan?" Another loaded question. Noah had to know that the security forces would get involved.

"Tell me."

So he talked. He told Cameron everything he knew, all that Kayla had told him, what had happened with Moira and Vincenzo Pirelli, and what had really happened in the club. The raven-haired man listened, mouth pressed into a tight line, more unhappy by the word.

"How much do you think Peter knows?" Cameron asked after a long moment of heavy quiet.

"The scariest thing is, I think he knows more than he lets on, but he's let Regina get away with it out of love, or duty, or both." Noah had respected Peter for years. He didn't want to believe that he hadn't seen what had happened under his nose. But the alternative didn't sit any better.

Cameron took a deep breath and held it, then let it out in one explosive burst. "Dale?"

The guard stepped forward. "Yeah?"

"I want you to call the rest of the boys. Tell them to be ready tonight. You and Matt back there come with me when we go, but I want the rest up to secure the area now. One way or another, we have a new alpha by moonset." As the guard walked away, cell phone in hand, his boss stared at Noah. "You're going for it, aren't you?"

"I'm going to try."

The big man snorted. "Do better than try. I don't want the job.

There's a load of shit coming down this pipe, and I don't want it."

Someone pounded on the door. Noah glanced at the enforcer, who looked annoyed and stood up. The moment he opened the door, Regina pushed inside, unwilling to wait for an invitation. "I see that you're taking pack security very seriously," she said, tone viperous, as she saw Noah on the couch. "That man violated a directive from the alpha, and you've just made him comfortable."

"I handle my business the way it needs handling," Cameron answered. "Did you need something, or are you just here to complain?"

"I'm here on Peter's request. He wants those two taken care of before the meeting. I'll take custody now."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "When I called him last night, he said to bring them to the meeting. I haven't gotten any new orders."

The corner of her lip curled up in a derisive sneer. "Now you have. I'm here to give them. It's obvious you've chosen not to do your job. Tell your men to get them into my car, or I'll do it myself."

"You and what army?" White teeth showed in a mockery of his good-natured smile. "Pack law's clear. Sentences get passed in front of everyone."

"Why are you making this so difficult?" Condescension was her strong suit, and she had a full hand today. "They've admitted what they've done. Everyone knows that Peter said there'd be consequences if it happened again."

He didn't budge. "That's true."

"So let's take care of this."

"Not gonna happen."

She glanced around him to Dale, who'd returned to the living room. "Get the prisoners into my car."

Dale inclined his head. "Sure. When Cameron tells me to."

Anger twisted her lips. "What the hell is wrong with you people? The alpha's given you an order."

"When the alpha himself makes the request, we'll talk about it." Cameron leaned down and put his face inches from hers. "I don't care what you think, Regina. You aren't the alpha. You just fuck him."

In a flash, she had her hand up to strike, but he was faster. Before she could touch him, he had his hand around her wrist.

"You'll pay for that," she warned.

"Not by your hand, I won't."

Despite her anger, Noah could see her re-evaluate the position she'd taken up. "We don't have to work against each other." An oily quality coated her voice. "Why are we at opposite sides on this issue? We both want the same thing."

Cameron released her arm but didn't back away. "You could have fooled me."

"How good do you think this will be for the pack, to see someone punished? They all like Noah. This will be a huge blow." So smooth. So false. "Hard times are coming, Cameron. Clear leadership is needed. You have to take some initiative."

"Oh, I am. That much I can guarantee." Cameron's chin jerked toward the door. "I think you'd better go."

"This is your last chance. Just send them with me and walk away." Her voice held a deadly note.

"Lady, you are something else." Unflinching eyes met hers, and Noah could feel the tension, the tug-of-war for power that Regina lost. "You'd better head out. We'll be right behind you."

Defeated, she turned on her heel and stalked out.

Cameron slammed the door behind her. "That ups the stakes just a little," he said after several deep breaths. "If you don't beat Peter tonight, we're all dead."

"Noah will win."

Both of them turned to see Kayla at the mouth of the hallway. She'd dressed in all black; jeans, shirt, sneakers, her sunglasses perched on her nose. Noah stood and moved to her, enfolding her in his arms. After last night, he recognized the frailty in her, the fragile quality of a crystal sculpture that looked strong but could just as easily break.

He couldn't shelter her from what had to happen tonight, couldn't carry the burden of what she had to do. But he wanted to. He wanted to protect her, find another way that didn't blacken her humanity further.

Last night, they'd killed vampires. Tonight, other wolves had to die, and one of them had been their friend. He would take that from her if he could, give her peace while he marked his own soul.

But he couldn't. It hurt.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, love," he murmured into her hair.

"The pack's counting on you. If you let them down, they'll be worse than dead. They'll belong to Kiplinger." Kayla was full of reassurance and support.

With a grim smile, he held her away from him to look into her face. "You couldn't just say something romantic, could you? Like, 'I believe in you, Noah. You'll be the best alpha ever.'"

She gave a faint smirk. "You'll at least be better than Peter."

"You did it again."

"Sorry."

Cameron chuckled. "Mother help me if I ever take up with a mate. Let's saddle up, you two. We'll grab some burgers on the way to the mountain. Just in case Kayla's wrong, I don't want to die on an empty gut."

* * * * *

The road wound up the mountain, a long, curved blacktop serpent stretched out in the last of the day's sunlight. Already, Kayla could see the bright glow of the moon as it approached the lip of the horizon. More, she could feel it as the beast within her grew hungrier, more restless.

She watched out the window with shaded eyes, but didn't see the scenery. Neither did she listen to the too-casual conversation of the other four werewolves in the SUV. In her mind, she saw Regina face her from the other side of a circle made by wolves. A circle the bitch wouldn't leave alive.

She hadn't forgotten Todd. Sometimes, the worst sin was that of inaction. He'd allowed so many things to happen, even aside from what he had participated in. To Kayla, the deplorable actions and active

deceptions hadn't compared to the submissive silence. And he would pay for what he had not done.

But she wanted Regina worst of all. The betrayer. The whore. Because of her, a great alpha had fallen from grace. A strong pack had become shadows of what they had been.

Just like I have. We're all shadows now.

Not far to go now. One more crook-backed turn would take them to the turnoff. A few miles of rough road lead to the place they'd leave their car. Then the earth beneath her paws, with Regina at the end of the hunt.

Lost in her thoughts, she felt them too late to do more than shout an incoherent warning. Noah yelled something, too, but the truck had already slammed into the back of their vehicle. They lurched forward, the tires protesting with a squeal.

The truck rammed them again, harder.

"What the fuck?" Cameron barked as he stomped the accelerator to the floor.

"It's them!" Kayla wrenched herself around to see behind them. "Two of them. The blonde's driving, and she's got the brunette riding shotgun. The truck's got one of those metal pipe front guards. It's not going to take much damage."

Their SUV already looked worse for the wear. Air rushed in through gaps where the hatch met the body, and she could hear the scrape of the bumper against the pavement.

"Shit!" Cameron dodged into the opposite lane, nearest the face of the mountain, as the truck powered forward again. He almost lost control as the truck clipped the rear corner of the SUV.

A horn blared as an oncoming car sped toward them. He yanked the vehicle back into his own lane with not a foot to spare. The shadow wolves pressed the advantage and darted over the double yellow line.

"They're going to try to force us off!" A sheer drop lined their side of the road, straight down into a bed of jagged rocks far below. "Cam!"

He jumped on the brakes. Metal shrieked as the cars swiped sides, the truck's bed along the front quarter of their car. Shunted by the truck and propelled by momentum, the SUV skidded toward the guardrail.

Jaw clenched, Cameron fought the wheel. A tooth-rattling grind came from the gear box as he threw it into reverse. Smoke billowed up from the road as the back tires spun, caught, pulled them back just as they hit the concrete barrier.

Gravity favored the shadow wolves. Their truck flew at the SUV in reverse. Kayla watched him jam the shift lever into first gear, but knew he had no time. The vehicles collided with a sound like thunder.

White powder filled the car. The air bags had deployed. Half-blind, it took them a moment to realize they'd turned to face down the mountain. As the truck pushed backward, tried to force them off the drop, Cameron found a gear and stood on the accelerator.

They could barely hear the sound of a horn. He limped the car to the other lane just as the van sped past. The shadow wolves had moved just in time, but had no angle to ram them. "Let's go!" Dale shouted.

Kayla had to half-shift to kick her door open. The first sliver of moon had come over the horizon. Rage flooded her. She would rush the truck, rip the door off, pull the driver out...

No.

Blood across the road. The smell of flesh. Revenge for the attack. She'd kill them both...

Pull yourself together.

Matt limped, one leg gashed open. Already, his lycanthropic metabolism worked to heal the wound, but it slowed him down. Noah and Cameron put arms around him. From the other side of the road, tires squealed. The shadow wolves had gotten the truck turned around.

As a group, they ran. "Move!" Kayla shouted, and they flattened against the mountain face.

Too close, the truck sped by. Their enemies were trying to hit them.

"The exit's just over there!" Dale yelled. Gears crunched as the truck ground into reverse.

"Get your paws and run like hell!" Noah ordered.

Everyone shifted. Nails scrabbled against the pavement as they flattened their ears and sprinted. The dirt road opened not far away. As the truck took a final swipe, they dashed off the road, into the trees that

lined the unpaved trail.

Noah took point, his sleek gray form bunching and lunging as he opened his stride for a long run. They filed in behind him, Kayla to his left, Cameron to his right, Dale and Matt behind them. The moon rose, stirred their blood, gave them strength and stamina to spare. It made them swift, gave them vision in the gloom, reflexes to act on what they saw.

She couldn't feel the shadow wolves anymore. Perhaps they would come after their prey in the woods, but now, the odds had shifted. Five wolves to two, the attackers would find themselves outnumbered.

Unless the other two shadow wolves stalked nearby, or vampires hid in the darkness. She couldn't feel them now, but they still had a long way to run.

Time had become their enemy. The attack had left them miles behind. Even as fast as they sped through the trees, the moon would have risen high in to the sky before they arrived at the pack's favored place. Howls to announce their arrival would only give away their position to anyone between here and there.

Regina would have ample time to spread her lies. Kayla wondered if, tonight, the pack would hunt them.

Chapter Twelve

Howls had announced the start of the meeting twenty minutes before. Among them, Regina's had risen up in a triumphant crescendo. Notes of victory, of warning, warred in the long, full-throated call. Its meaning was clear: *If you are dead, I have won. If you live, stay away. Tonight is mine.*

They ran faster.

Raised voices carried. Kayla could hear the argument at a distance from the place downwind where the five of them hid in the shadows.

"I've already told you, they aren't coming." Regina sounded testy, impatient. "Noah killed two vampires after Peter's direct order not to, and in the process, he set fire to a known biter establishment. We'll be lucky if the truce lasts through tonight."

"They'll be here." Kayla hadn't known Cameron's guard well, but she remembered his voice. "I talked to him earlier. Cameron is bringing both Kayla and Noah. Matt and Dale are coming with them."

"Cameron has been compromised." Regina's voice cracked like a whip. "I spoke to him earlier myself. He is no longer loyal to the pack."

A murmur rippled through those gathered. So much had happened since she'd seen them a year ago, when they would have met that charge with arguments and skepticism. Now, they simply agreed. It was easier, or so they thought.

The guards stayed true to their duty. "Not true! Cam wouldn't do that, and you know it."

"I know what I heard." It was said with a sneer. "You are out of line. Peter, it's time to do something."

"We've given them plenty of time. They haven't come." It wasn't a pronouncement, but a weary capitulation. Peter had all but accepted his place as powerless figurehead. "I made it clear to Noah, in front of the pack, that he wasn't to kill any more undead. Do you all agree?"

Hesitant mumbles.

Ears flat, sides heaving, Noah put on a burst of speed. Kayla reached inside for moon-given strength to keep up, and knew the rest did the same.

Peter heaved a sigh. "Then I have no choice but to—"

"What if something has happened to them? I'm telling you, they'll come!" The guard was still pushing hard to give them time.

"Do not interrupt the alpha! Peter, do it!"

"I have no choice but to declare Noah Craig—"

"Declare me what?" Noah reached the edge of the small clearing and shifted form. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his chest rose and fell like a bellows, but he stood with an unmistakable confidence. All heads turned to look at him, and Kayla could see hope on more than a few faces as she pulled short just behind him.

At the back of the pack, Todd turned pale. This time, however, he didn't look away when she caught his gaze. His regret was plain as he bowed his head, the sorrow of a man who sees the noose as it dangles from the tree.

Regina had murder in her eyes. "It's too late. You've been found guilty. No one will believe anything you have to say."

Noah ignored her. He locked gazes with Peter, shoulders square, every inch the alpha. "Is this how you want to go out? How you want the pack to remember your time as their leader?"

"What are you talking about? You've broken the laws! Endangered everyone here!" Regina fumed as she paced forward to stand in front of her silent mate. "You have no place here!"

"You know what you need to do." Noah didn't look away from the older, dark haired man. Kayla saw more gray in Peter's hair, more lines in

his face, the struggle behind that brown-eyed gaze. He did know. The knowledge obviously cut like a jagged blade. "This is the last chance you'll have to set it right."

The muscles in Peter's jaw twitched. His shoulders drew straighter. "I want to hear what he has to say," he said quietly. "It seems you were wrong, Regina."

Somewhere, a night bird chirped. Leaves rustled as a breeze blew through them. The gathered wolves watched in profound quiet.

Peter's words had left her with no voice. Her jaw gaped open, but no sound came out as her mouth worked. "Then tell us," she forced out in a snarl at last. "Did you kill two vampires last night? Against the alpha's orders?"

"I had Lord Vincenzo Pirelli's permission. I did not violate the truce." Now Noah turned his attention to the infuriated woman before him. "They were killed for their involvement in an offense against one of our members."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Regina bit out a raw laugh. "Is this about your little vendetta? Your personal war? No one cares anymore. The pack is tired of hearing about this!"

Someone cleared her throat. "I care. I think the pack deserves to know more."

Regina whirled, hands curled into claws. "No one asked you."

"That's enough." Peter stopped her cold.

She inhaled a sharp breath but somehow kept her temper under control. "What offense? What could they have done? The whole reason for your—your *disobedience*—is right there with you. Did you two plan this?"

Attention focused on Kayla. Part of her wanted to hide from their keen scrutiny, but the time for that had passed. No known force could make her anything but what she was, and the pack would have to accept it. So she stood before them, unflinching, and pulled her glasses from her face.

Several werewolves gasped. Peter frowned. "Kayla? What happened?"

"Regina lied to you." She didn't know how many times she'd

rehearsed this moment in her head, gone over the words again and again until she was satisfied. Now that she had arrived here, all her careful planning flew away. "Ask her. Ask her about the ritual. About Paul Kiplinger."

"I don't know what she's talking about." Regina lied well. She had plenty of practice.

The moon drew higher. Kayla's inner wolf had little patience for these games. She'd waited too long already. "Did you tell them how you moaned when Kiplinger left those marks on you? While Miles and Mason Bristol dragged me off to where you kept the other werewolves, how you ran back to lie about how you'd been attacked? How you *gave me to them*, you lying bitch?"

She sneered. "You've gone too far. What do you think you'll accomplish with this story? I'm the alpha's mate. Who are they going to believe? You or me?"

"It's true."

Startled, Kayla watched as Todd stepped forward. Whether he had broken under the strain of expired lies or had found his tarnished honor, she couldn't say. Somewhere beneath his stooped shoulders and shamed demeanor, perhaps the man they had known still lived.

"Of course you would say so!" Regina's laugh had the edge of hysteria. "You're Noah's best friend."

"I was there. I helped. And I called you last night, when you sent the vampires to burn down their apartment. I told you Kayla had come back, and I told you where she was." He turned to face them. "I'm so sorry."

Behind Kayla, Cameron and his men shifted to close ranks. Their support was clear to all who watched.

"I saw you with those strange wolves last night, Regina," Cameron said.

Regina turned to Peter. "You can't believe any of this."

Hurt showed in every line of Peter's face, deep, profound pain that cut to his soul. All that he had tried not to see, he could no longer ignore. He had loved his mate. He mourned the woman he had bound himself to

so long ago. "No more lies," he said hoarsely.

"Peter—"

"No." His chuckle had no humor in it. "Do you even know how to tell the truth anymore? I'd ask you why, but I don't know that it would matter. The pack has suffered... How many people have you hurt? God, you have made such a fool out of me."

Contempt oozed from her look. "You've always been a fool."

"Not anymore. You've cured me." He turned to Kayla. "I've allowed this to happen. As alpha of this pack, as her mate, she was my responsibility. I can't take back anything that happened. But I'll do what I can to repay what you've lost."

"Then give her to me for justice."

It was a challenge. A demand. And he obviously knew what it meant; he closed his eyes against it. Kayla had asked for a fight to the death.

"Does the pack have any objections?" he asked after a moment, opening his eyes and looking around the gathered pack.

Regina's eyes had gone cold. "You fucking coward," she growled. "You can't even deal with me yourself. What did I ever see in you? Spineless bastard."

No one voiced an objection. Peter looked torn, unsure if he wished they had or not. "You know the rules. You fight in a circle of your peers. We will let only one of you leave."

"These are not my peers. You want to know why I did it? *Because we are wolves.* We're not dogs, living in the backyards of humans and taking whatever scraps they give us." She shouted at Peter's back as he turned to take his place in the circle. "You aren't an alpha. You're a mutt in a pound, just waiting for them to put you down."

Noah said nothing. Instead, he cupped Kayla's face in his hands. Blue eyes met hers, searched them, before he leaned down to give her a long, warm kiss. She saw no doubt in him, despite the tension in his muscles. To him, only one outcome was possible.

Then he walked away to stand beside Peter. Cameron and his enforcers stood outside the circle, the final line in the sand. Cameron

patted her shoulder as she stepped into the ring.

Wolves smell fear. They also smell arousal, sadness, excitement. The scent of anticipation hung thickly in her nose, thick enough to taste. She couldn't remember the last time a call for justice had ended in a death, and it seemed no one else could, either. Tomorrow, they would feel the loss of the pack's relative innocence. Tonight, it was catharsis, an end to the misery of the previous year.

The circle closed the moment Kayla stepped into it. Regina wasted no time, taking her half-form before the last spectator had taken their position. Still human, Kayla rolled to the side and dodged the massive brown-furred form that flew toward her. Her opponent landed hard on the ground but found her feet without hesitation.

For hours, the wolf had paced, demanded its freedom. She let it loose at last and felt her bones shift, her body bulk, her skin stretch as fur covered it. Power coursed through her, wild, untamed energy gifted by the full moon that shone overhead. In this ring, she didn't have to fear herself or her killer's instincts. The shadows roiled within her, and she rejoiced in them. *Take me. Give me strength. Win me peace or earn me death, but let it end tonight.*

They circled, growling deep in their throats as they sought a weakness in the other. Regina left herself open. A feint proved her speed. It was a deception, a ploy to lure her opponent in. She played her strengths.

But Kayla was the monster Regina had helped make. And she couldn't wait any longer.

She bunched her muscles then uncoiled like a spring. Their bodies collided in a tangle of limbs. Teeth bit into her arm, but she didn't care. Her own jaw closed around Regina's shoulder. As her teeth bit in, she thrashed her head with vicious shakes. Flesh tore free. A yelp split the air.

Blooded, Regina flailed her limbs until Kayla flew free. She didn't pause but launched back into the fray. Momentum rolled them over once, again while their claws raked blindly over each other's skin.

She expected pain, the burn of cut muscle. It fed her rage, each wound more fuel for the uncontrolled blaze within. But she didn't expect

the unnatural numbness that touched the edges of each claw slice. Her mouth tasted sour, stale. Dead.

Regina had drunk blood from a vampire.

It was the vampire's defense against the werewolf. Pain riled the beast inside, so the undead left a lack of sensation instead. Kayla's dark nature conferred some immunity to it, but another wolf couldn't say the same. Another plot, another betrayal. Anger exploded inside her.

All the world disappeared but for the enemy. Gore dripped down Regina's arm from her torn shoulder. She didn't seem to notice. Instead, she launched herself at Kayla, aiming low, and hit her in the midsection. In her distraction, the white wolf saw the leap but too late.

She had no traction. A turtle out of its shell, she had gotten trapped on her back. Claws raked down her sides, first with a white-hot burst of pain. Then the numbness, cold and flat. Teeth tore at her thigh. She kicked Regina in the head, hard, again and again, until she disengaged.

One arm tingled. Her sides itched with dribbles of crimson. And the blood in her mouth did not taste like victory, but ashes.

Her opponent leaped. Kayla saw it this time and drew her knees up at the last moment. Her hands closed around Regina's upper arms. Kayla held fast as she raked her clawed feet down Regina's midsection in a brutal rabbit kick. Flesh ripped away with each successive tear. Like a rag doll, Regina flew as the white wolf shoved her away, and she landed in a heap of limbs.

Regina tried to stand. She struggled to regain her feet, but her ruined torso had taken too much damage. On one knee, she tried to fend the shadow wolf off, but her injured arm had grown too weak. Kayla beat her down, pummeled her with merciless blows until the brown pelt had turned red. Then the fur receded and Regina lay broken, barely breathing, on the ground.

Kayla threw her head back and howled, the signal that alerted the pack to a kill. With the moon so high and the roar of her own pulse in her ears, it took all her strength to rein in the beast. She wanted death, the crunch of a neck in her jaws, but she pulled her back, held her down. She had questions that needed answers.

A wet wheeze came with each breath Regina took. Blood trickled out of her mouth and nose. Her eyes rolled right, then left, but seemed to see nothing around her. Kayla knelt next to her, and she could see the violent purple glow of her eyes reflected in that empty gaze. "Where is Kiplinger?"

Heinous laughter turned into soggy coughs. "Far away. Safe— Safe from you."

Wrath gripped her. Her jaw ached as she clenched it too hard. "Where is he?"

"Ungrateful. We gave you..." Pink foam flecked the corner of her mouth as she coughed again. "...power. More than you know."

"I didn't want it." Kayla shook with unreleased tension. The moon did not stop its climb to watch its children fight and die. Soon, she would lose what control she had.

Regina's eyes rolled again. "So close. The pack... Almost mine. In my hand. The city. In my hand. My time. Our time. Should have...known your place."

"Where is he? Damn you, *where is Kiplinger?*" Unable to hold back, Kayla gripped the woman by the arms and shook. She battered against the ground, unable to fight back.

"Back..." She gasped. "...where it all started."

Regina's muscles seized, and her back bowed. A moan, blank but terrible, escaped her lips, then she dropped back to the ground. Tremors shook her body, but somehow, she lifted her arm to reach toward Peter.

Then she went slack. The soft whistling from her lungs quieted. She was dead.

For the span of a heartbeat, no one moved. Noah shifted, half-wolf, and lifted his head to give a long, mournful howl. The pack followed suit, until melancholy notes haunted the night and echoed from the mountainsides. Betrayer or traitor, Regina had once served the pack, and they would give their fallen comrade one final lament.

Noah took his human form again when the last howl died away. The time had come. He wished he could give Peter longer to grieve, to pull himself together, but the moon's relentless climb gave him no choice.

Regret smothered the triumph he had thought he would feel. He had imagined wresting control from a strong, determined alpha, not a broken man who stood before his disgraced mate's body.

"Peter," he said as Kayla came to stand next to him.

Peter looked up, expression somewhere beyond sorrow. "I know," was all he said.

No, this wasn't how he had envisioned it. "Then I challenge you for leadership of the pack."

The wolves had not dissipated from the previous fight. With a sigh, Peter stepped into the circle next to the imploring hand of his dead lover. "I accept your challenge. Enforcer, it is your duty to declare the new alpha, by the traditions of our kind."

"I will do so." Cameron looked grim.

Noah stroked Kayla's hair once, for luck, for strength. Then he stepped into the circle. At another time, he would have pressed the attack right away, but tonight, it seemed disrespectful.

And Peter had no fight left in him. Instead, he went to one knee and bared his throat to Noah.

"The alpha yields," came Cameron's voice. "Noah is our leader."

No cheers, no howls, no barks of anger or celebration. Only a solemn silence, and the breath of wind through the leaves of the trees.

"War has come," Noah said when he couldn't bear the weight of it any longer, "but not from the vampires we know. This is a new enemy. A new fight. Everything that we've known will change. It has to."

"More than ever, we have to come together. Stand with each other. In the coming weeks, we'll meet again, when the full moon isn't over our heads and in our spirits. We'll try to understand what has happened and decide what we need to do. But tonight, we hunt together, as a pack, and we remember who we should be."

Someone called out, "We're with you, alpha," and Noah smiled.

"Cameron. Bring Todd to me."

The big enforcer grabbed Todd's arm in an iron grip. Dale grabbed the other arm, and together, they hauled him forward, trapped so he couldn't run.

Noah didn't think he would. Like Peter, Todd had no resistance left. He shuffled forward between the men that held him, and Noah saw in his eyes that he expected to die.

Kayla's eyes met Noah's, indigo depths filled with trust. His heart swelled as he brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips. Days ago, she would have ripped Todd to shreds with her own hands. Now, she left the decision with her alpha. Her mate.

He knew what he had to do. "By all rights, I should kill you," he said to the man who had been his best friend. "You helped the enemy. Because of this, two pack members, Kayla Schinn and Derek Anderson, were caused harm that we can't undo."

Someone gasped. They hadn't known about Derek.

"Because of you, our apartment was burned down by vampires, and by the shadow wolves you helped to create. You helped to create this war, and you ought to be its first casualty. Instead, I'm going to give you a chance at life."

Todd blinked. "What?"

Noah took a deep breath. "Now's your chance to make up for what you've done. You'll tell us everything you know. Every piece of the ritual, what you heard, what you saw. Who else is involved. Arm us with information, and you'll earn exile. But decide now."

He'd never know why Todd made his choice, whether out of the remains of a friendship or fear for his own skin. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

Deliberately, Noah reached forward with a furred hand. He dragged his claws over Todd's face, leaving four ragged gashes from his forehead to the opposite side of his jaw. The enforcers held him still as he cried out, writhed, then drooped into their grasp. Even in wolf form, the mark of the exile would show, and once they saw it, no pack would accept him, no werewolf would help him. Now, he was truly alone.

"Tie him to a tree. We'll come back for him when the hunt is over." Noah turned his attention to those gathered, the sad, uncertain faces who looked to him for hope. That was all he had to give them. They didn't know what threatened them, and he wished he could keep it that way.

Overhead, the silver moon lit the sky. It called to him, as it called to them all. In its glow, he lost his worry for the future. It comforted the sadness of the past. The wolf inside didn't know regret. It only knew that it wanted to run, to chase, and feel the moonlight on its fur.

He looked to Kayla. "Run with me," he told her, and her answering smile recalled a night one year ago when two wolves, one white, one gray, raced through the trees, happy, in love, and free.

Power waited inside him. He tapped it, and around him forms shifted, once human, now lupine, always children of the night. Howls rose in the air, full-throated, lusty bays that filled the woods and startled sleepy birds from their chosen perches. The moon reached its zenith.

Together, they ran.

The End

Author Bio

Cassandra Moore is an eccentric, thirty-something insomniac with an overactive imagination and a deep lust for words. Writing is her preferred vice, and has proved more addicting than even chocolate. Usually, she is found at the computer, headphones on, interrogating her Muse until the poor thing sings.

If she is not absorbed in her word processor, you might also find her reading, working with her aquarium, or playing with yarn and pointed sticks. She lives in Arizona with her husband, two children, two cats and pair of spoiled guinea pigs.

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