

nocturne"

Bloodrunners Bundle RHYANNON BYRD

Bloodrunners Bundle By Rhyannon Byrd

Last Wolf Standing Last Wolf Hunting Last Wolf Watching



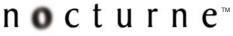


Table of Contents

Last Wolf Standing Last Wolf Hunting Last Wolf Watching Copyright Page

Last Wolf Standing By Rhyannon Byrd





Chapter 1

If not for the bustling noise of the crowd, anyone standing within five feet of Mason Dillinger would have easily heard the two halting, roughly drawled words that slipped slowly past the tightening line of his mouth.

"Oh, shit."

Perhaps not the most erudite of phrases, but what it lacked in eloquence it more than made up for in conviction. In fact, in Mason's opinion it summed the situation up to perfection.

After all, it wasn't every day that one of his kind found his life mate in a throng of jacked-up caffeine addicts. Five seconds ago he'd have sworn that it could never happen—that a woman who had been created as his perfect match, the other half of his self, even existed—but there was no denying what that scent was doing to his head, not to mention his quickly thickening body parts.

"Hell," he muttered under his breath, reaching down with

one hand to rearrange himself, pulling the edge of his flannel shirttail in front of his bulging fly. "I'm screwed."

The second he'd stepped through the doorway into the bustling interior of The Coffee and Croissant, the smell of her had hit him like a fist upside the head, rolling across his tongue like the sweetest sin, the most wicked of temptations. It was something he wanted to sink his teeth into and swallow. Something creamy and entirely *his*. The erotic promise of damp, pink flesh that would be slippery and warm to the lap of his tongue, rich and succulent like a treasure.

He wanted to eat her alive...and he didn't even know who she was.

But he knew *where* she was. She was somewhere in this crowded, pain-in-the-ass, prepped-out joint that his Bloodrunning partner, Jeremy Burns, had insisted they duck into before the entire day had passed them by without eating. With their accelerated metabolisms, it was unhealthy to go too long without sustenance, not to mention dangerous as hell to the general population at large.

Yeah, he knew where she was. And he knew *what* she was, too. She was *his*.

Mason's narrowed eyes quickly scanned his surroundings, taking everything in, and then his head tilted back and he allowed inhuman senses so much sharper than mere sight to take over and read the room. Hot, fresh-baked croissants were just being taken from an industrial oven in the kitchen. To his left, a small, distinct clatter of metal against crockery as a businessman added sugar to his double cappuccino. A toddler fussed in the corner, beside a belligerent, kohl-eyed teenager in black who scowled at her father as he lectured her on the importance of grades. The myriad of sounds and scents assailed him, chaotic and full, and yet she burned through sharp and crisp like a radiant beam of light. Vibrant, breathtaking sunshine on a bone-chilling, cloud-smothered day. Something warm and comforting like home.

Hunger clawed its way up his spine, ripping through his system with such force that he expected to look down and see blood seeping through the thin cotton of his navy T-shirt and dark gray flannel, spreading like death down to the ragged denim of his jeans. Ripping him open quicker than teeth or claws ever could.

His nostrils flared as another soft drift of mouthwatering scent crashed through him. Yes, it was right *there*...lingering on the air, and a hard shudder racked the long length of his body, his skin going hot and damp as a low, unfamiliar burn began in his belly. An animal lust...but different. The unmistakable hunger for hard, grinding, gritty sex, and yet utterly foreign from the driving need he'd known in the past. He'd had his share of women in his lifetime, leaving them quickly, yet always with their well-used bodies heavy with pleasure, steeped in satisfaction—but this was more. Harder. Deeper. A sharp-edged, driving need unlike anything he'd ever experienced, raging and explosive.

He didn't just *want* to bury himself inside her—he *had* to. But first he had to find her.

"You're growling." The deep voice came low and lazy from just behind him, sounding almost bored, though Mason knew his friend well enough to sense that Jeremy had picked up on his tension, even without the telltale growl rumbling up from his chest.

"Shut up," he muttered silkily, and Jeremy snorted in return, nudging him over as he forced his way in through the door, leaving the bitter wind behind them as the glass monstrosity pulled automatically to a close. A few customers turned their heads to look at them, doing double takes as they took in the sight of two hard, well-muscled men who stood over six feet, their casual clothes in no way disguising the brute strength of their battle-honed bodies. The two Bloodrunners reacted to the attention the same way they always did—they ignored it.

Focused on finding the woman, Mason's nostrils flared, the sound of his heart all but filling his ears as it began a hard, purposeful beat like the pulsing chords of a Goth song. "Don't you smell it?"

"What I smell," Jeremy said, exhaustion weighing his words, "is food, which reminds me we skipped breakfast in order to get a head start on our hunt and we still haven't had lunch. Are we going to stand here in the entrance all day, or actually order something before I have to gnaw someone's arm off?"

"You're not scenting her?" he questioned again, ignoring Jeremy's crude sense of humor, and recognizing the increasing gruffness of his own voice as a clear sign that he was losing control.

Bad timing, considering they were surrounded by the flesh and blood of other customers, but there didn't seem to be a damn thing he could do about it. He wasn't leaving until he found her.

"Which one?" Jeremy muttered, scrubbing one sun-darkened hand over the golden stubble covering his chin as he jerked his hazel gaze left to right, scanning the crowded café. "With all the soaps and lotions women drown themselves in nowadays, flowers are all I can smell in this place, other than the food."

Mason shook his head in frustration. No, not flowers. The evocative scent was different—deeper...earthier...and it was getting stronger.

The smell alone had him tied in knots, his body feeling tight and hot and swollen. It was something succulent and rich that sat on the tip of his tongue like a warm drop of honey. He wanted to roll it around for a deeper taste. Draw it into the cavern of his mouth and bite down on it. Hold it. Keep it and fight for it. Harsh, lust-thick images in blazing ambers and reds flashed through his hunt-tired mind, revitalizing him, jamming his system, jacking him up and taking him to a bigger high than any substance he'd ever used. Like most cross-breeds, he'd spent his youth searching for a way to fit in and find a measure of peace, but it hadn't taken him long to learn that life held enough chaos without him screwing with it. By the time he was a man, his innocence had long since vanished. He knew what sin tasted like...and this was it. Wicked and yet as sweet as heaven—the most dangerous kind of pleasure.

His keen eyesight scanned the immediate area again, falling on a lush blonde in a skintight spandex workout suit sucking down a coral-colored smoothie, before quickly moving on. Not her. No...this one was *different*. Something sharp and uncomfortable in his gut, an uneasy trepidation, told him far different than anything he was prepared for.

Give him blood and battle and he was right at home. Give him easy and loose, and he could make a woman scream without even trying. But give him a complicated female and he shut down. Too much work and he didn't have the time, the patience or the inclination. Women had always come too easily for him, so why the hell should he work for one?

And this one smelled...complicated.

"Seriously, man," Jeremy growled. "If you don't want me turning to the dark side, we need to get in line and order. I'm hungry enough to do something that we'll both regret."

"You're sick, you know that."

Heaving an exaggerated sigh, Jeremy placed his hand over his heart. "Keep saying things like that and I'll start thinking you don't love me anymore."

Mason opened his mouth, a smart-ass comeback ready to slip free, suitably biting and caustic, when her scent slammed into him so hard he nearly reeled. He spun toward the line that paralleled the one he now stood in, where customers were picking up their stylishly brown-bagged orders. He knew the instant he set eyes on her, though he never would have guessed she'd be the one, had that intoxicating scent not wrapped around him like a vise. But it was her. The innocent-looking little waif with the long auburn braid, her lunch tray tucked up in front of her and a bulky paperback wedged under her right arm, tortoiseshell glasses perched smartly on the bridge of her small nose. She was wearing a deliciously tight white polo shirt with faded blue jeans, a dark red jacket tied around her waist and braided bracelets circling one delicately boned wrist, a slender silver watch on the other. A simple outfit, nothing too provocative, but on her it looked downright sinful, the way it hugged her delicate curves.

A fierce, possessive wave of heat poured through his veins while his mouth watered, and it was only with a conscious effort that Mason controlled the urge to pant like a randy dog. A nice long howl would have felt damn good at the moment, but hardly appropriate, considering their surroundings. Left with no other choice, the animal inside him grumbled its agitation, curling around itself and settling down to quietly seethe, while his human half struggled against the intense need to grab her and run, as far and fast as he could, until he had her all to himself. Not a bad idea, either, except that he'd probably scare her half to death before they got there.

Left with no other option, he waited.

Time seemed to stand still as she walked toward him, his lungs burning while the top of his head felt about ready to come off. Within seconds she was in front of him, without even having glanced in his direction. With an utterly foreign sense of desperation, he did something that he'd never, in all his thirty-three years, thought he would do.

He tripped her.

One moment she was walking past, minding her own business, and in the next his strategically placed scuffed brown hiking boot had her sprawled over the stylish Italian tiled floor, sputtering and cursing quietly under her breath as she came to her knees and struggled to wipe tomato soup off her lenses.

"Are you okay?" he asked, crouching down beside her, wincing at the gruffness of his tone as she turned to him, the biggest pair of dark green eyes he'd ever seen blinking at him in owlish surprise.

"Um, yeah, I think so," she said slowly, then a spark of mischief began to burn in the deep green of her gaze and she laughed a low, throaty sound that slipped down his spine like a woman's mouth, damn near making his eyes cross. "I've never heard of anyone drowning in soup before, so I think I'm safe," she drawled, still laughing, and he felt himself grinning in return, until something seemed to burst into awareness between them and their gazes locked in a powerfully raw, smoldering stare, both of them caught in its hold.

The connection burned like pure energy, crackling and sharp, as if the air between their bodies had been electrically charged, and he all but expected to see sparks skittering on the strange current. As he gazed upon her fey face, unique details began imprinting themselves upon his memory like the timeless grooves worn into stone by the rushing currents of the sea, washing away the women of his past until there was nothing but her. Nothing but the delicate curve of her jaw. The tiny beauty mark perched impishly on the arc of her right cheekbone; the darker green that rimmed the softer shade of her gaze. And then there was that mouth, with sensual lips that looked velvety soft and sweetly shy, their color a natural, blushing rose that no cosmetic could duplicate. The carnal things he wanted to do to that kissable little mouth should have been illegal—hell, in some states they probably were. And on top of everything, all the erotic little details that made his head feel thick and his groin feel thicker, there was that provocative scent, earthy and addictive, drugging him with lust and oddly enough...tenderness.

Her breath quivered, twin spots of color cresting across her beautiful cheekbones, and then she shivered, wrenching herself free of the potent visual hold. She cast a quick glance down at the soup-splattered mess she had made of the floor as her soft pink mouth twisted into a wry smile. "And lucky for me, being a klutz isn't a crime in Maryland, so I don't think they'll kick me outta here."

A low laugh rumbled in his chest. "If they tried, I'd knock their heads together and you could kick them in the ba—*shins*."

Joining his laughter, she reached for her overturned tray at the same time he made a grab for it, and their heads nearly collided. They both pulled back, chuckling softly, the growing sensual connection between them all but sizzling on the air, enveloping them in their own little world. It was something hazy and soft, wrapping them in an oddly comforting warmth cloudlike and weightless—while the desire twisting through them took on a sharp, dangerous edge, like an animal hunger demanding to be fed. She licked her lower lip in what he strongly suspected was a nervous gesture, though it hit him like a practiced seduction, it was so impossibly sexy. Mason swallowed hard as he tried not to choke on the growl he was fighting down, and then Jeremy, his deep voice rough with surprise, suddenly blurted out, "You tripped her!"

Mason closed his eyes and counted to ten, reminding himself the entire time that he couldn't dismember one of his closest friends, not to mention his Bloodrunning partner, at least not in the middle of a restaurant. The urge to do so was so powerful, however, that he actually felt the tips of his fingers burning as razor-sharp claws pricked impatiently beneath the surface of his skin.

Trying not to snarl, he cut a dark look up at Jeremy, all the while wondering if lightning would strike when he delivered the outright lie. "I think you know me well enough, Burns, to agree that it'd be a cold day in hell before I ever did anything like that." Ten minutes ago that would have been the honest truth, but Mason figured he was smart enough to realize things were rapidly changing on him, and the reason was deliciously wrapped up in white cotton and denim at his side.

"Then hell just froze over," Jeremy snorted, grinning as if he thought it was one of the funniest things he'd ever seen, "because you just did."

"Cut the crap, Jeremy." He gritted through his teeth, not wanting to look at her, wondering with an awful pressure in his chest if she would believe him when he denied it. No way was he actually admitting what he'd done!

"I mean, you normally have women falling all over themselves trying to catch your attention, but I never thought I'd see the day that you actually tripped one to get her on her knees in front of you."

Daring a quick look in her direction, Mason watched as that sparkling laughter faded from her eyes, replaced by a guarded, questioning look. "It was an accident," he muttered, knowing she didn't believe him as she reluctantly let him help her to her feet.

"Yeah, sure," she murmured, looking at the floor, then bending back down for her book.

He wondered if she noticed that he'd copped a feel of one firm, deliciously round breast, letting his hand slide up her side while helping her up the second time, then decided she had when she glared up at him, looking like a pissed-off little librarian with those damn glasses and that braid. That affronted image was all wrong for the molten, fiery passion he could feel bubbling just beneath her smooth surface.

"I swear you smell good enough to eat," he blurted out in a raw, gritty voice, the harsh words all but ripped out of his throat.

He silently cursed, feeling his face go conspicuously hot while she just stared at him in shock. *Where the hell did that come from?*

Jeremy gave him a sharp look, then threw back his head and burst out laughing. "Oh, damn, this is priceless." He wheezed, all but bent over as he struggled to hold in the laughter. "God, Mase, you should see the look on your face."

"Shut. Up. Burns."

"In all the years I've known you, I've never seen you make such an ass of yourself over a broad."

"She isn't a broad," he rasped, his voice sounding husky and thick even to his own ears.

As if a light switch had suddenly been flipped in his head, the humor vanished from Jeremy's face. He cursed roughly under his breath, then cut his sharp hazel gaze from her to him, and back to her again, letting his eyes travel over her in a slow, thorough search from the top of her head down to her cute little sneakercovered feet. His stunned gaze swung back to Mason, hot with accusation. "I don't friggin' believe it. You can't be serious."

"Leave it alone," he warned, not wanting to have this conversation here, in front of her. God only knew what Jeremy would say.

"She doesn't deserve this," Jeremy argued in a low voice, stepping closer. "Not the kind of crap you'll bring down on her head, and all because you wanna get laid."

Wishing he could gag the son of a bitch before he said anything more, Mason growled, "Last warning, Jeremy. Shut up."

Jeremy stepped closer, unwilling to back down. "Don't mess with her, Mason."

"Her does have a name," she suddenly cut in, her slightly husky voice coming through sharp and clear with mounting irritation. Then, as if dismissing them, she turned back to the mess on the floor, crouched down, and began throwing her ruined lunch back onto the tray. She grumbled under her breath about the lack of help from the café's staff, while the growing throng of customers sidestepped the unsightly mess, obviously too rushed or rude to offer any help. Then again, he knew they were probably being given a wide berth on purpose. He'd been told, on more than one occasion, that he and Jeremy were an intimidating pair.

Watching as she finished picking up, Mason felt like an ass when he realized he should have been helping her. She stood up with the trash-laden tray, and looked down at her splattered clothing, shaking her head in disgust, talking to herself as she muttered, "Great, I'm wearing tomato soup. How lovely. Now everyone at work will think I've been ravaged by a bloodsucking vampire."

"You believe in vampires?" Jeremy asked, eyeing her with a skeptical look of suspicion.

"Hardly," she snapped, "but then I'm not the norm around Mic's."

"Who the hell is Mic?" Mason grunted, not liking the questions firing through his brain in rapid succession. Mic, the boyfriend? Mic, the next-door neighbor who tore up her sheets with her on Friday night? Mic, the macho mechanic who made her melt when he smiled at her? Whoever the hell he was, Mason hated him.

"Who's Mic?" she repeated, the corners of her mouth turning down in a tight, irritated frown. "Michaela is my best friend and my boss," she started to explain, before pressing her lips together and shaking her head. "Not that it's any of your business," she added. "I'm making you my business," he growled softly, stepping closer, crowding into her space.

She took a short step back and stopped, pinning him with a hard glare. "One more move and I'm screaming."

God, what was his problem? He was screwing this damn thing up before it even got started. Hell, no one had told him that discovering his life mate would turn him into a blundering, chest-pounding idiot. He was as bad as a gangly teenager high on raging hormones, unable to think past the red-hazed lust and possessiveness clouding his mind.

And to make matters worse, he actually wanted to...get to know this woman. Learn things about her. Her favorite food. Favorite color. Books, movies, pet peeves and things she did for fun. All of which sounded suspiciously like getting to know her on a level that went far beyond physical intimacy, to something deeper and more meaningful.

That was bad, because Mason didn't have a clue how to handle it. He was a Bloodrunner for God's sake—he didn't have time for conversation and "getting to know" people. Not that he had any choice here. The importance of making a good impression on the woman he was *meant* to spend the rest of his life with wasn't lost on him, and here he was screwing it up with every damn word that came out of his mouth. At least if he'd had Hennessey on hand, he could have asked for some advice from the womanizing Irishman. Then again, maybe having that pretty face around his woman wasn't such a good idea. Burns was available, and he knew Jeremy never had any trouble when it came to women. But his social skills were as pathetic as his own, so there'd be no help coming from that quarter.

Looked like he was on his own. Damn.

Taking a deep breath, Mason strove for a calm, nonthreatening, I'm-just-a-nice-guy kind of tone. "Look, I'm sorry. This has been a hell of a day already. How about you take a seat and I'll get you some more food, okay? That way we can sit and talk." There, that was good, he thought with a brief measure of relief. He'd managed to form four sentences without sounding like a jealous ass or mentioning how badly he wanted her.

But the look on her face told him she wasn't buying it.

Christ. This wasn't going to work. He was going to go up in flames, he realized with no small amount of frustration, dragging the back of his wrist over his damp forehead, wondering if the expression in his eyes mirrored the intensity of his need...or if she simply thought he was nuts.

"Is this," she said after a moment, studying him from beneath the thick fringe of long russet lashes, "some kind of setup?"

Another deep breath, slow and easy, while he struggled to stay in control. "Setup? For what?"

"God only knows. Some radio show? Are you DJs?" she asked suspiciously.

Mason folded his arms across his chest and scowled at her, insulted down to his boots. "Do I look like a damn DJ?"

She shrugged the delicate line of her shoulders, blowing a wayward wisp of curling auburn hair out of her eyes. "I have no idea. Really, I think I should just be on my way now."

He opened his mouth to try and convince her to stay, even though he didn't have a clue what he could say at this point. Unfortunately, Jeremy chose that moment to put in another two cents' worth. "I'm telling you, man, she doesn't deserve this. Leave her the hell alone."

Mason didn't even take his eyes off her as he softly replied, "I don't have a choice."

From the corner of his vision, he watched Jeremy's hazel gaze narrow as the meaning and repercussions of what he was saying—and what he wasn't saying—began to seep in. "Christ, Mase. If that means what I think it means, then you *know* you

should walk away. You can't risk it with Simmons more than likely watching us now that we're closing in on him."

"And you should know that walking away isn't an option for me," he shot back, careful to keep his voice low so they didn't draw unwanted attention.

"As fascinating as this is, I'm just going to slink away now myself," she said carefully, obviously freaked out by their conversation and his behavior. Handing her tray to a dour-faced busboy who finally scuffed by, she took several steps away from them. "I'd say thanks for helping me up, but then, you were the one who dumped me on my ass in the first place. Still, thanks."

"Just give me a chance to explain. *Please*. That's all I'm asking. We'll stay right here, at one of the tables," Mason said in a low, urgent rumble, grabbing hold of her arm as she turned, careful not to squeeze too hard. Her bones felt infinitely fragile beneath the inhuman strength of his hand, sending a fierce surge of protectiveness through his blood.

"I need to get back to work," she murmured, trying to break free of his grip, her book tucked up safely under her other arm. "Now let go of me before I pull out my cell phone and call the cops, then start screaming bloody murder."

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you do that," he said quietly, trying to sound reasonable...normal...even though he knew he was going to end up scaring her. "I swear I'm not going to hurt you, okay? But we need to talk, and then I need to get you out of here."

The expression on her face made him wince, an unbearable sense of defeat nearly flooring him as Mason realized she had every intention of ditching him. Not that he blamed her. If their situations were reversed, he'd have thought he sounded crazy, too.

"And just where do you think I'm going to go with you?"

she demanded, the words thick with sarcasm, and he hated the fear he could scent on her—frustrated that he didn't know how to ease it, how to make her understand. You didn't just walk up to a human woman and say, *Hey, I can tell by your scent that you're my life mate, which means we belong to each other for the rest of our lives, and never any other. Oh, and by the way, I'm half werewolf, have a rogue bastard most likely watching me because I'm hunting him down to kill him, and I really, really need to mate with you. Hard. And often. As in damn near all the time.* At least not without getting your face slapped or your balls kicked. From the look in her eyes, he figured both were strong possibilities at this point.

Trying to sound as nonthreatening as possible, Mason kept his voice low as he said, "Anywhere but here. Jeremy's right about this being dangerous. We can't risk keeping you out in the open with him watching us."

She looked at him as if he'd just told her he was Elvis reincarnated by aliens. "Then here's a news flash. Why not try walking away and leaving me alone, before you end up in some serious trouble?"

"Not in this lifetime, sweetheart," he rasped under his breath.

She shook her head in frustration. "Have you recently escaped from a mental institution by chance?"

"Classic," Jeremy snorted under his breath. "As wrong as this is, I can't wait to tell your old man that line. He'll crack a rib from laughing."

"Look, this is just getting too freaky for me. For the last time, you need to let go. Now."

Mason let his hand smooth down her arm, shaken by the softness of her skin, clasping as gently as possible around her wrist. He could feel her pulse racing beneath the pads of his fingers and knew she was scared. He figured she'd have run screaming long before now, if not for the throng of customers filling the café, surrounding them. She'd found a measure of comfort in the crowd, but that feeling was rapidly fading. "I know this sounds weird as hell, but I need you to give me a chance. That's all I'm asking. If you insist on staying here, then at least sit down with me and I'll explain."

"I can't do that." Her green eyes were clear and bright as she tried to pull away from him, the movement jostling the book she'd tucked up under her arm. Mason watched as a small piece of paper fell from between the book's pages, fluttering softly to the floor, and instinct had him covering it with his boot, while he struggled with what to say. There were so many things he wanted to explain, things he needed to make her understand, but all he could come out with was a low, urgent, "Don't run."

"Get your hands off me. *Right now*," she grunted, her voice raised, and the customers closest to them went quiet, all eyes turning toward them. A cold knot of fury...and something that felt strangely like pain twisted Mason's stomach, but he forced his grip to ease, releasing her arm.

She backed away slowly, until she felt the door at her back. Hating the emotions that burned like acid in his gut, Mason watched her turn around and quickly push out into the brisk autumn weather.

She started running the second her feet hit the side-walk...and never looked back.

Chapter 2

Clutching her book to her chest to keep it dry, Torrance Kimberly Watson all but stumbled into the softly lit, subtly incensed interior of Michaela's Muse. Her heart pumped a chaotic beat, while her mind carried on a fierce debate with her grumbling libido—and despite her common sense, it looked as if her sex-deprived inner wild woman was winning.

"Like that should come as a shock," she quietly snickered, groaning at her body's continued reaction to the man she'd left behind in the restaurant. He was certainly a fine specimen of maleness, even if he had been off his rocker. "And not even those last few minutes of rain managed to cool you down, you slut," she jokingly muttered under her breath, slipping out of her damp jacket and tossing it over her arm.

It was a depressing thought, but there was no denying that she'd been a long time without a boyfriend. Heck, she'd been a long time without a simple date. She was in her midtwenties, meant to be living life to its fullest...and instead she'd practically become a nun. Not that a few short-lived relationships counted for much in the way of past experience, but then she knew she had high expectations when it came to that sort of thing. Expectations she doubted any man could ever meet.

No, Torrance understood the male species for what they were—and, more important, for what they weren't. After dating one too many jerks who were as faithless as they were selfcentered and shallow, she'd decided that being alone was better than being used—than settling for something she didn't want and she still stood by her decision. But, God, it wasn't easy when dealing with the kind of temptation she'd had to endure today.

The guy at lunch had been like something out of her dreams. The really, really naughty ones, she thought with a small, crooked smile.

"Hey, Torry," Michaela called out from the front of the store without looking up, absorbed in her current project.

"Oh, uh...hey, Mic," she called back, suddenly realizing she'd been standing in the doorway, lost in her own little world. With a quick look around the store, Torrance saw that Mic had been busy digging into their latest delivery of new merchandise. A box containing paranormal titles and Tarot decks sat on the floor beside an ornate wooden bookshelf, while another that probably contained scented candles had been placed beside an antique display case.

Torrance had met Michaela Doucet five years ago, at a Tarot demonstration the Cajun was holding at a local bookstore, and they'd become instant, inseparable friends. Two years later, when Mic had opened the specialty shop, Torrance had been right by her side, and together they had made Michaela's Muse an area favorite, with business growing every year. She loved her job, and felt at home in the warm, soothing atmosphere, surrounded by friends who had become like family to her.

"Torry!" Michaela suddenly gasped in that slow Southern drawl of hers, making Torrance jump. She looked over to see Mic's big, dark blue eyes blinking with surprise as she glanced up from the new Tarot decks she was organizing, getting her first good look at Torrance's ruined shirt. "What happened? You look like you just came from an orgy with one of the undead!"

"Hah!" Torrance laughed out loud, causing Mic to give her a more critical look. "I told them you were going to say something like that when you saw my shirt," she mumbled, feeling strange, as if her body were hot and cold all at once, her skin suddenly too tight for all the chaos going on inside of it. Man, that gorgeous freak-case at the café had really messed with her mind.

"And it wasn't a *what*," she added with a resigned sigh, suddenly giving a wry grin as she tossed her book and jacket on the beautiful bar that served as the store's checkout counter, then stepped around its corner, moving to her customary place behind the gleaming antique. Knowing her tenacious best friend would pry the lunchtime fiasco out of her one way or another, the sanest course of action was to give in gracefully and save what little of her sanity she still had left. "It was a *who*."

Michaela's delicately sloped brows arched high on the smooth perfection of her brow as she moved around the display table draped with sapphire velvet. "Now *that*," she mused, the black mass of her softly curling hair gleaming a deep, dark, midnightblue, "sounds like something more than just another boring lunch at that corporate zombiefest you can't get enough of."

A steady drizzle of rain began pattering gently upon the roof as the latest storm moved overhead, its pattern soft and fleeting, like the featherlight dance of water fairies. Torrance normally found the sound of early-autumn showers soothing, but today the lilting chorus of raindrops only added to the prickling restlessness shivering beneath the surface of her skin. And it didn't help that she was still reeling from the gorgeous stranger's bizarre effect on her.

Hell, maybe she was coming down with something. Or maybe she was just so desperate for something more out of life, that she was becoming delusional. Had it gotten to the point where she was creating imaginary connections with mouthwatering hunks to make her feel less lonely? How...pathetic.

"Yoohoo, earth to Torry..." Michaela laughed, waving one slim palm in front of her face to get her attention.

"Oh, sorry. Um, I didn't catch that last part."

Mic gave her a quizzical look. "I just said that it sounds like you had an interesting lunch."

"Yeah, it was interesting all right," Torrance softly agreed.

Crossing her slim arms across her bountiful chest, Mic leaned one elbow against the edge of the intricately carved bar. The exquisite piece looked more like it belonged in a high-end antique shop, rather than a mystical haven for lovers of the paranormal. Like several of the store's unusual antiques, the cherrywood bar had come from Mic's grandmother's mysterious Southern estate, buried somewhere deep in the bayou.

It was that bayou upbringing that had given Michaela her comfortable acceptance of the paranormal—an acceptance that Torrance envied. Truth be told, working at the shop had been a test of sorts for her, to see if she could get past her childhood phobias and embrace the paranormal community. And Torrance had done it, kind of like a person with a fear of sharks learning to enjoy the ocean. She loved her job, had a great rapport with their customers, and though it had taken some time, she'd eventually learned not to fear the unknown. Well, *most* of the unknown. She still had a few phobias, brought on by her nightmares, but she was working to get over them. And Mic and her younger brother, Max, were helping.

"So what was he like?" the grinning brunette asked in a deliberately low whisper, probably meant to keep Max from overhearing.

A dreamy sigh escaped her lips before she could stop it, and Torrance suddenly heard herself saying, "Sex."

Mic's blue eyes went wide, and a throaty chuckle slipped smoothly past the Southerner's rouged mouth. "That hot, huh?"

Torrance didn't think her face could get any redder. Sex! Had she really just said that? Plopping down on her padded stool, she shook her head at the memory of the man who had turned her into a blathering idiot. Though she'd read the phrase a thousand times in romance novels, it had never actually happened to her—but he'd literally knocked her off her feet...and apparently knocked her brains out while he was at it. "Let's just say that there should be a freaking law against men looking that good," she groaned.

Mic's mouth twisted into a sly smile. "Oh, honey, they can *never* look *too* good."

"Well, he looked too good to me." She sighed, remembering that dizzying moment of shock when their eyes had first connected. God, she was still feeling the vibrations from the jolt that had zapped her. Instant lust, something so warm and primitive, she'd barely been able to breathe through it. Heck, she could barely breathe now, just thinking about him. All she'd wanted was to slide up closer to him, then just a little closer, until they were pressed up against each other and she was surrounded by his animal heat—the dangerous, predatory wildness that had pulsed around him like a fiery glow while his deep, chocolatebrown gaze had promised things too tender and intimate to accept from any man, much less from a perfect stranger. Only...he hadn't felt like a stranger, and that provocative combination of danger and shelter had been too devastating.

So devastating that it'd scared the hell out of her, sending her running faster than all that crazy talk of his could have ever done.

Michaela laughed softly into the charged silence. "That good, eh?"

Torrance nodded her head distractedly, then gave it a quick shake, determined to stop daydreaming about the tall, dark, wickedly handsome stranger. What had his friend called him? Mase? Mason? That was it! A strong, purely male name that fit him to perfection, just like those well-worn jeans that had so easily hugged his powerful thighs and the faded T-shirt deliciously molded to his muscular chest beneath the darker flannel.

Even his hair had been gorgeous. Not black, but a rich, lustrous brown with reddish streaks that turned auburn in the light. It had fallen somewhat shaggy around the strong, rugged angles of his arresting face, as if he didn't get it cut often enough, but hadn't decided to just let it grow. There was the slightest hint of a curl to it, the kind that meant you would snag your fingers a bit when you ran them through the silky mass. With a fierce compulsion, Torrance had wanted to bury her face in those windblown strands and breathe the scent of him into her lungs. It was hot and heady...and animallike. Full of mystery and the wild outdoors, natural and addictive.

Damn it, she was starting to drool just thinking about him, but then, she'd never been affected by a man like that before. In those first moments, she'd thought he was the most beautiful, mesmerizing thing she'd ever seen. Something hot and thick and deliciously wicked *had* passed between them—something Mic would have called a mystical connection—before his friend rained on the parade. She'd wanted to believe it'd been an accident, but something in his eyes had warned her that he wasn't being totally Well, okay, so that wasn't totally honest, either. On her way back to work, she'd argued with herself about her decision, uneasy over what felt uncomfortably like an irrevocable loss, as if she'd let something indelibly precious and infinitely significant just slip through her fingers. If things hadn't gone so weird there at the end, she strongly suspected she would have followed the stud to the ends of the earth just to investigate that *thing* between them—to find out what it was really all about.

"Yeah, he was that good," she finally said, "which means he was definitely too good to be true."

Dropping her gaze to Torrance's stained polo, Mic grinned. "So what happened?"

A soft laugh fell past her lips, surprising her, but then it had been funny as hell when the blond one had blurted it out. Well, maybe not funny at the time, but looking back on it, Torrance couldn't help but see the humor in the situation. "He...uh, tripped me."

Her best friend's jaw dropped in shock. "He what?"

"He tripped me," she explained with a shrug, knowing it sounded crazy. "I, uh, guess to get my attention."

"Well, I've never heard that one before," Mic admitted dryly, "but I'll give him credit for an original approach."

Feeling the raindrops beaded on her cheeks, Torrance swiped her cool hands over her face, pushing the wayward strands of damp hair back from her forehead. "I didn't know he'd tripped me on purpose until his friend ratted him out. I thought I'd just been clumsy."

"Some friend," Mic snorted, raising her brows.

"Oh, you'd have liked him." Torrance sent the other woman a teasing smile. "He was a total smart-ass."

"Just my kind of guy," the brunette drawled, rolling her eyes.

"Anyway, I swear, Mic, I almost swallowed my tongue when I first set eyes on him. He was..."

Her voice trailed off, and Mic prompted her with an interested, "Yeah?"

She struggled to find the right word, but in the end there was only one that would do. "Beautiful," she said simply.

"As sweet as that is, I need more info," Mic complained with a throaty laugh. "Come on, Shakespeare, and describe him for me. I've got to have a mental picture."

Torrance sent the grinning brunette her best "as if" look. "So you can try to make love dolls of us? Don't think I'm not on to you, Doucet?" she snorted. "I saw you looking through those new voodoo books that came in last week."

Michaela's eyes went wide with a feigned look of innocence. "I wouldn't dream of doing something like that. I'm shocked you could even think it," she muttered, just before she busted up giggling, and Torrance couldn't help but join in with the Cajun's infectious laughter.

"What's all the giggling about?" a deep voice called out. "Did I miss something good?"

Both women looked over to see Max sticking his dark head around the corner of the employees' door, his deep blue eyes dark and hazy, as if they'd disturbed one of his little catnaps. At nineteen, he was determined to pull his weight and help his sister get her fledgling business off the ground. Hurrying back to the shop after morning classes at the nearby community college, he managed the stockroom and updated the accounts in the afternoons, all before working the night shift as a security guard at the local hospital. Torrance got tired just thinking about the poor kid's schedule.

"Hey, Max," she called out over her shoulder, careful to keep her body turned to avoid another round of twenty questions about her clothing. Max took his man-of-the-shop duties seriously, treating Torrance with the same brotherly concern that he showed his sister. "Sorry we woke you up."

"No big." He smiled, running one hand through the rumpled black silk of his hair, his coloring nearly identical to his older sister. "I can catch up on my sleep later. One of the guards at the hospital needed to switch shifts with me, so I've got the night off." He gave them a knowing look, his smile widening. "Guess I'll let you two get back to your gossiping. Later."

"Enjoy your night off," she called back.

Mic waited the five seconds it would take Max to reach the back office, then leaned forward and whispered, "Now back to the gorgeous stud who swept you off your feet." Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she waggled her brows. "Any plans for a hot date tonight?"

Knowing what was coming, Torrance shifted uneasily atop the stool. "Uh, no."

The corners of Mic's mouth turned down. "Why not? I know we have plans to catch that lecture at the museum later, but *please* tell me you didn't let that stop you! I'll wring your little redheaded neck if you told that guy no, Torrance! I swear on my...on my—"

Realizing this was only going to get worse, Torrance blurted out, "He never asked me out."

Mic's brows drew together, her gaze piercing. "Well, why not? And why didn't *you* ask *him* out?" Tilting her head to the side, her stare took on that strange, unsettling quality that always gave Torrance the impression her closest friend was reading her mind—even though the Cajun claimed that wasn't in the realm of her powers. "Exactly what happened, Torry?"

"Hey, I said he was gorgeous, not sane," she mumbled, already feeling defensive.

Mic shook her head. "You didn't even give him a chance, did you?" she groaned, her voice rough with frustration and dis-

appointment. Unfortunately, Michaela knew all too well about her penchant for viewing men as fickle creatures; here today...gone tomorrow. It was a natural, knee-jerk reaction, after growing up with a mother who went through lovers like new outfits, always searching for one who would fit—the one who would finally stick around. Torrance had truly liked a few of them, wanting them to stay, though they never did. And some of them...some of them had simply scared the hell out of her. Her mother had died a few years ago in a car accident before ever finding a man who truly loved her, and Torrance had taken the lesson to heart.

"Give me a break, Mic. First his friend starts griping about him hitting on me, warning him about God only knows what, and then the guy starts giving me this crock about how it wasn't safe there and I needed to leave with him! He's lucky I didn't call the cops," she added roughly, hating that she could all too easily recognize the regret in her voice. He may have been one egg short of a dozen, but something about him had felt so uncomfortably...right.

"Damn it, Torrance," Mic hissed, clearly upset. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."

Trying to dispel the burning image of his slow, sinful smile, that wicked look of interest that had all but smoldered in those chocolate-brown eyes, she moaned, "Not now, Mic. Please."

"I hate to see you drying up and wasting away."

"Maybe I'm just tired of wasting my time on relationships that are never going to go anywhere. Been there, done that," she muttered, hopping off the stool to grab her backpack up off the floor. Picking up the book she'd tossed on the bar, she slipped it into the front pouch, ignoring the knowing stare being drilled into her back. She knew Michaela was trying to get a "read" on her emotions. It was a special talent the Cajun possessed but seldom used, since she considered it an invasion of personal privacy. "And you can stop with your mental snooping right now, Mic." "You do know what's going to happen, don't you, Torry? You're going to end up missing out on the right one, because you're like a little ostrich with your head stuck in the sand. Get up off your rump and get out in the world, *chère*. Because if you don't, life is going to have passed you by and you won't have a clue what happened to it."

"And is that what you're doing?" she demanded, crossing her arms across her soup-splattered chest as she turned back to Michaela. With one hand, she pushed her glasses up on her nose the way a bull might drag his front hooves through the dirt before a charge. "Not to be rude, Mic, but I don't think your social calendar has been any more active than mine recently."

"Our situations are different, Torry, and you know that." The fire slowly faded from Michaela's eyes, her expression all but closing in on itself. "I took a chance on love and it didn't work out," she said flatly, her voice unusually devoid of emotion. "I made a fool of myself, but at least I took the chance. At least I went for what I wanted...or looking back, what I thought I wanted."

"I'm sorry." Torrance sighed, feeling like crap for lashing out at her. "Now I feel like an ass."

"Hey, you're not an ass, you're my best friend." Despite her light tone, Mic's small smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "You know I just want the best for you," she confessed in a soft voice. "If you can find love, then maybe I'll be able to find the courage to give a guy another chance."

"You do know that Ross was an idiot, don't you?" Torrance muttered, experiencing a familiar surge of rage at the thought of what the narcissistic jerk had put Michaela through. "A blind, stupid, raging idiot."

"Of course I do." Mic sent her a playful wink, but Torrance could tell that her friend was still suffering from the humiliat-

ing way things had worked out between her and the prettyfaced social climber.

"He's not still calling you, is he?"

She curled her lip. "I keep telling him to leave me alone, only pretty boy can't understand why I'm no longer interested. But enough about him.

"Since the storms will keep things slow in here this afternoon, why don't you go on and head home so that you have time to shower and change," Michaela said, changing the topic. "You *are* going to that lecture with me tonight, and while we're there you're going to tell me everything...*everything*...that happened today. There just might have been more there than you realize, Torry."

Walking to the Tarot table, Michaela went back to work arranging the packs of cards along with a sparkling array of raw crystals, the shallow, rain-dappled light glinting softly against their uncut surfaces in a vivid display of color. "Jennifer is coming in at four for her shift, so I'll be able to get out of here a little early," she explained while Torrance rounded the bar, pulling her jacket on, then slinging her backpack over her right shoulder. "I'll be by to pick you up at five."

"Thanks, Mic," she called back, heading out the front door, the tinkling of the door chimes following her out into the misty gray of the day. The rain had let up enough that it now resembled more of a refreshing mist, and Torrance set off down the street enjoying the cool, damp breeze against her face, the clean smell of the outdoors lingering beneath the more acrid scents of the city. She walked at a steady, energetic pace, her eyes taking in the beauty of the historical architecture in that part of town, the weathered, yet well-kept facades framed by towering willows and oaks, their ancient roots bulging beneath the sidewalk, as if seeking sunshine through the heavy, cracked concrete.

She used the time to clear her mind-or at least tried to-

but two blocks into her four-block walk, it hit her. A strange, unsettling sense of not being alone, which was odd, seeing as how she wasn't. In the garden ahead, an elderly woman in a sun hat knelt among an assortment of perennials, while on the other side of the street a young boy walked his beagle alongside his dad, both of them holding hands and smiling. The sun was beginning to peek briefly through the rain clouds, and up ahead a rainbow formed across the distant silver-blue of the sky, perfect and pristine in its beauty. And yet, something felt...not right. The feeling grew, oddly disturbing, and she nearly tripped on an uneven bit of sidewalk, even though she knew this path well enough to walk it in her sleep.

Clutching her backpack, Torrance sent a furtive look over her shoulder, but there was nothing there. And yet, the feeling wouldn't go away, reminding her of the nightmares that she'd suffered from since childhood. Vivid, terrifying dreams in which monsters stalked her, their warm breath on the back of her neck...before they caught her. The familiar feelings of helplessness, of vulnerability, coated her skin, sinking in through her pores until she felt steeped in them. By the time she reached her apartment building, her lungs hurt from holding her breath and her pulse beat out a hammering tempo that nearly jarred her brain. Moving quickly, she used her key to open her front door. Once inside her apartment, she immediately slid the chain into place.

Leaning her forehead against the cool wood, Torrance let her backpack slip off her shoulder, all the while struggling to get her lungs working properly again. Straightening up, she turned and looked carefully at her living room, seeking comfort in its soothing atmosphere. Mic had helped her to create the perfect ambience, a relaxing blend of bold wood and soft, inviting fabrics, with an old Persian rug covering the dark hardwood floors and scented candles on nearly every surface. Bookshelves lined the walls, while jewel-colored throw pillows covered the oversize love seat and matching chair. Hidden in an oriental-looking cabinet was a small TV set, which she used to indulge her weakness for all the *CSI* shows as well as *Letterman*, while a low table under the window held her speaker system for her iPod and her new laptop.

This was her space, her little getaway, her private corner of the world, and Torrance took a deep breath through her nose...waiting for the panic to ease. She counted the seconds off slowly, willing that feeling of safety that she always found here to come. But there was nothing. Nothing but that bitter lump of fear sitting in the back of her throat, churning her stomach into a knot.

"Get a grip," she muttered, straightening her spine. Damn it, she wasn't going to let her overactive imagination spook her out of her own apartment! Marching like a zealous militant, she went into the kitchen, poured herself a tall glass of sweetened iced tea, and then crossed back through the living room to the single bedroom. Her slightly slanted blinds allowed a narrow glance at the now swollen sky, a sharp crack of resonating thunder heralding the arrival of another storm. Ah, she'd made it just in time, she thought, forcing a small smile.

Walking to her dresser, she studied her pale reflection in the beveled antique mirror on the wall while slipping the clasps free on her small silver hoops, then unfastened her slim watch and slid off her bracelets. A refrain from one of the Celtic CDs Mic played throughout the day in the store found its way into her mind, and she began humming softly, determined to ignore that lingering unease, until she felt a cold, clammy chill crawl over her skin, her palms going damp and hot.

Something's wrong, she thought dully, experiencing the oddest sense of viewing the situation from afar. The feeling tightened, sharpening, until she feared that she wasn't alone,

even though she'd seen no one when she'd walked into the room. But on the opposite side of her bed, just behind her, was the closet—and she couldn't remember if the door had been open or closed when she'd entered the room...and was suddenly too afraid to look. Had she remembered to lock all the windows earlier? Damn it, living in a quiet neighborhood had made her careless, because she couldn't remember checking them before she'd left for work that morning!

"There's no such thing as monsters," she muttered, determined to stay calm, but every terrifying scene from every nightmare she'd ever suffered began playing through her mind. A deep, bone-jarring tremor shook her body like a frail, fragile leaf caught in the destructive fury of a storm, and she watched in a numb daze as her hand lifted, reaching toward the surface of her dresser where she kept her mail. Her fingers touched the cold, hard metal of the antique letter opener Mic had given her last Christmas, and as they curled around the silver handle, she heard the telltale creak of a floorboard. A sickening feeling slipped through her, like something sticky and wet sliding over her skin, sending her stomach into a roiling spin. Her breath stopped, suspended, held tight in her lungs as she raised her wide eyes and caught the reflection in the mirror above her dresser.

It was behind her, at the foot of her bed, visible over her left shoulder. Tall, over seven feet at least, with fangs and fur—and a head that resembled the terrifying shape of a wolf.

She opened her mouth to scream, but before the bloodcurdling cry had clawed its way out of her throat, the beast was on her, knocking the dagger-shaped opener to the ground. It twisted her easily, taking her to the floor, where it slowly looked her over out of dark, lifeless eyes that shone as blank and black as a doll's. Despite her frantic struggles, long, lethal-tipped claws took possession of her wrists, lifting her arms up high over her head, stretching her out beneath its hard, oppressively heavy body straddling her thighs. An overpowering combination of animal musk, pine-scented forests and a sharp acidic odor filled her head, and Torrance screamed again, if she'd ever stopped screaming—but she couldn't hear anything over the terrified roaring of her heart, unsure if the sounds of her horror were trapped in her throat or shattering against the walls, drowned out by her heartbeat.

"Well, well, aren't you a tasty little piece?" it drawled in a deep, guttural voice, the words awkward as they made their way past the muzzled shape of its mouth, fangs gleaming whitely in the graying light of her bedroom. It almost looked as if it were smiling at her, and for some reason, that scared her more than anything.

"Who the hell are you?" she sobbed, fear making her own voice sound demonic, deep and rasping and raw.

"My sweet, sweet Little Red," it laughed roughly, its warm breath pelting her in the face, humid and hot and sickly. "Didn't your new half-breed warn you about me?"

"Who? Warn me about what?" she cried, paralyzed within its powerful grip. It held her far too easily, and the cold, painful knowledge of imminent death settled heavily into her gut.

"Don't you know the reason for a Bloodrun, little human?"

"A Bloodrun?" she grunted, so sick with fear she felt nauseous. "What are you talking about?"

"Your new boyfriend tracks down my kind and kills us like animals, simply because we accept what nature meant for us. Because we're not afraid to embrace our natural hungers." It leaned closer, the tip of its dark muzzle all but touching her nose, and this time she knew it was smiling as those black, shiny lips pulled back with malicious humor, its mouthful of razor-sharp teeth promising untold horror. "You're not Dillinger's normal taste when it comes to his playthings," it rasped, tilting its massive head to the side as it studied her out of those emotionless eyes. Leaning closer, she felt the wet roughness of its tongue lick up the side of her throat before curling playfully around the shell of her left ear. She whimpered, hating the pitiful sound, and the monster laughed softly as it whispered in her ear, "No, you're not his usual taste at all. But I think I'll enjoy eating you all the same, honey girl."

Chapter 3

They're real...they're real...they're real...

Torrance chanted the silent refrain over and over within the thick, black haze of terror clouding her mind, while the werewolf's oppressive weight held her down. She knew she should fight, struggle, scream...but after hearing those last words, all she could do was lie there beneath the monster, paralyzed by fear. It spread through her limbs like an intravenous drug, numbing her body while her heart pounded to a painful, resonating beat that threatened to rupture her chest. A lifetime of nightmares, of horrific images of blood and pain, fangs and razor-sharp claws, crept over the surface of her body like a spider, tangling her in its insidious web.

"The more I lick right here," that gruff, garbled voice chuckled with malicious pleasure against her throat, the monster's rank breath meaty and humid as it reached her nose, "the richer the scent of your fear grows." No. No. This can't be happening. Can't be happening. Can't be happening.

Its massive head shifted, muscled, heavily-furred shoulders bunching as the creature moved down her body, dragging its mouth against the upper part of her chest revealed in the nowgaping neck of her shirt, torturing her with the teasing slide of its teeth. "I'll tell you what," it taunted, long, lethal claws clicking ominously against the hardwood floor, heavily padded palms damp with sweat where they gripped her wrists in a biting, bruising hold that numbed her fingers. "Why don't we have a little fun and see just how scared we can get you?"

How scared? She was already filled with terror. The realization that she was a coward burned in her belly like acid, but no matter how fiercely her pride raged against it, Torrance couldn't throw off the smothering wave of fear.

And he knew it.

Smiling, the werewolf cocked his head to the side as he studied her, his nostrils flaring as he breathed in her scent. "So timid, little one. That just isn't going to do. I enjoy it so much more when my meals have a little life in them."

He laughed at his own joke...and Torrance squeezed her eyes shut, silent tears tracking across her skin.

Oh yes, they were real. The monsters from the dark recesses of her mind truly did exist. Not just in her head, but in the flesh. She had often wondered—no, worried—after the things she'd seen and heard around Michaela's Muse, but had never *really* believed. Movies...tabloid headlines...books. The legends were everywhere, for anyone paying attention. And her mother had been one of the biggest believers of all, dragging her daughter off to every horror movie that hit the theaters...always rambling on about mankind's inability to accept the existence of something more powerful than themselves.

As she became older, Torrance began to realize that her

mother had looked to the paranormal as a means of escaping the disappointing realities of life. And in the process, she'd raised her daughter on an unusual diet for a child—one that consisted of vampires and werewolves and witches. But instead of Michaela's healthy understanding of the paranormal culture, Torrance had only known the horror, the Hollywood sensationalism. She had learned to fear early on, and though she'd come to understand so much with Mic's help...there were still some issues she just couldn't shake, no matter how hard she tried.

Her nightmares were one of them.

You should have listened to your dreams. They were telling you the truth, Torrance...warning you...just like Mom told you they were.

All those years spent thinking the poor woman was insane...and she'd been right all along. But Torrance had never allowed herself to believe...and now, on the verge of death, she didn't have any other choice.

Mason cast another hard look at the slip of paper, reading the printed name for the hundredth time.

Torrance Watson.

He ran his thumb over the letters, once...twice, then slipped the wrinkled pay stub back into the pocket of his flannel shirt, sounding out the individual syllables beneath his breath. *Torrance.* An unusual name, but then, she was clearly an unusual woman. The kind of woman who could turn a guy's world upside down. Who could destroy him.

If you were smart, you'd get your ass out of here and forget you ever saw her.

True, and considering he wasn't moving, Mason could only assume he wasn't nearly as clever as he'd thought. Either that or he was thinking with the wrong head.

He slumped in the driver's seat of his Tahoe, a cigarette

pinched between his thumb and forefinger of the hand hanging out his open window, and turned his attention back to the quaint Victorian that had been renovated into apartments. After Torrance had run out on him at the restaurant, he'd sent Jeremy to get the SUV and followed her on foot to her work, using that mouthwatering scent to track her, then again as she headed home. Once there, he'd called Jeremy on his cell and told him where to find him. Now they sat in the cab of the Tahoe, parked on her street, watching for any sign of Simmons, while Mason struggled to figure out what the hell to do next.

He didn't know what he'd been thinking, acting the way he had when he found her. But he'd been blindsided by too much...everything. Emotion. Hunger. Possessiveness. The guttwisting need to keep her safe—and the knowledge that Simmons would come after her if he could. All of which had led to him acting like a cross between a mad stalker and a complete asshole. No wonder she'd run from him. That he could understand.

What he couldn't get his head around was why he was here.

If it were simply a matter of safety, Mason knew he could have called in Pallaton and Reyes, another Bloodrunning team, and put them on her for protection. But he hadn't done that. Instead, here he was, playing watchdog for a woman who should have had him running scared for the simple fact that he didn't want her.

Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that, jackass...and maybe you'll start believing it.

Muttering a foul, four-letter word, Mason slammed the heel of his hand against the steering wheel, hating it. All of it. What kind of sick joke was nature playing on his ass? Anyone who knew him *knew* the last thing he wanted was a mate. Especially a small, fragile human one. *Jesus*.

He'd been reminding himself of that fact for the past five

minutes...and yet he couldn't let it go. Couldn't let *her* go. Couldn't make himself turn the bloody key and drive away, while he still had the chance. The past didn't seem to matter. Not the lessons he'd learned or the vows he'd made to never end up in Dean's shoes. Within moments of finding her, the past eight years were obliterated, wiped clean, and Mason found himself as pathetically hooked as the rest of them.

Shit. He scrubbed one hand down his face, then took another long drag on the cigarette while a sharp crack of lightning lit the sky, dark waves of clouds rolling in, smothering out the pale streams of sunlight that had briefly broken through the damp, depressing grayness of the day.

Beside him, Jeremy crossed his arms and let out a loud, jawcracking yawn. "What about lunch?" the blond asked. "We still haven't eaten and I'm starving, man."

Mason stared at the apartment building, quietly cursing the thunder that made it impossible to hear—even with his heightened abilities. And if the rain got heavier, it would ruin his ability to track her scent when she left. "You can take off and grab some fast food," he murmured. "There's got to be something around here within walking distance."

"Great," Jeremy grunted. "Do you know how much fat that stuff contains?"

"We burn more calories than we can ever worry about, so what the hell do you care?"

"It's my arteries I'm thinking about," his partner grumbled. "And what about Simmons? We *are* still on the hunt, man, which means we're supposed to be tracking his sadistic ass down."

Like he needed reminding. They'd been hunting the bastard ever since they found the mutilated body of a young prostitute a few weeks ago, dumped on pack land. Anthony Simmons's foul scent had been all over the victim, and he and Jeremy had been assigned the Bloodrun to kill the Silvercrest werewolf. Now it was a race against the clock to catch him and eliminate the threat, before Simmons chose yet another victim. The thought twisted his insides. Mason had no doubt the rogue would exploit any vulnerability he could find and use it to strike back at the ones hunting him. His kind always did. And if he'd been watching them today, and witnessed his reaction to Torrance, he now had the perfect opportunity.

Mason couldn't let that happen. To make sure Simmons didn't get near her, he and Jeremy would keep an eye on things here, while Pallaton and Reyes watched the shop where she worked.

"We'll find Simmons," Mason rasped, grinding out his cigarette in the ashtray. "But this takes precedence right now. We have to make sure she stays safe."

Jeremy let his head fall back against the headrest, his hands crossed over his stomach, fingers drumming repetitively against his abs. "You do realize you've probably landed her right in the middle of a Bloodrun, don't you?"

"If he touches her," Mason grunted, his voice rough as he lit up a new smoke and took a deep drag, then slowly exhaled, "he dies. He knows that."

"That's why he's got nothing to lose, Mase. His death sentence has already been signed. His last breath may come tonight or a month from now, but one thing Simmons understands with crystal clarity is that he's already dead. Considering how much he hates you he may think it's worth it, just to screw with your mind."

"If he wants her, he's going to have to get through us first."

"So then we're like a coupla white knights, eh?" Jeremy drawled, snuffling a soft laugh under his breath. "Willing to risk our lives to slay the dragons in order to protect a damsel in distress? It's the stuff of legends, Mason, my boy." The irreverent blond shot him a smart-ass grin. "We should be knighted or made saints or whatever the hell they do for selfless heroes." Heroes? Not likely. And he sure as hell wasn't a saint.

With a heavy sigh, Mason hunched his shoulders, cast a cautious glance up at the flickering sky...and waited for the lightning to strike.

Another loud, jarring crack of thunder sounded in the distance, lashing against the oppressive silence of the afternoon, heralding the next storm as the now-muggy air became charged with static. The shadows in Torrance's room deepened, creeping into the corners like watchful eyes, enshrouding their bodies in an ominous, desolate gray, while the werewolf did his best to scare her to death. That is, if he didn't just kill her first.

"You have no idea how badly I've been looking forward to this day, Little Red." The hulking head moved closer, the cold tip of his glossy nose touching her own, those black, bottomless eyes staring from only inches away, so close that Torrance could see the short, individual hairs rimming the blackish skin of his eyelids. It was eerie as hell, the way he looked trapped between a wolf's form and that of a man's, his long, heavily muscled length covered in coarse, black fur; arms, legs and wide torso bulging with brutish strength, while his head had taken on the true shape of the animal, complete with terrifying muzzle and fangs. Where once human hands and feet had been, coarse pads now spread over his palms and soles, fingers and toes elongated into gnarled digits that curved into sinister, deadly claws.

"Now that it's here," he mused, rolling his hips against her lower body, "I just can't decide what I'd like to do first. Rip out your tender little throat? Or should I reward myself with a tempting go at this delicate little body instead? One that rips you apart inside—that leaves you broken and bleeding when I'm done with you." He paused for a moment, silent and still, looking as if he were thinking the repulsive idea through, the way a director might visualize a particularly compelling scene within his mind. "Wouldn't that make for some good storytelling when I get around to ending your half-breed's life? I don't imagine Mason likes to share his playthings."

Torrance felt her eyes go wide, unable to believe what he'd just said.

Mason? Mason! The psycho hunk from the café? Oh, no. No way. My luck can't possibly be this bad!

But it was all clicking into place now. That crazy friend of his had said something about putting her in danger. Damn it, she'd known that gorgeous face was too good to be true. And now look at her. Not even her mother had been this unlucky when it came to men!

A new feeling began seeping into her system—a cool, slowburning fury that filled her from the bottom up, tingling in her fingers and toes, burning at the backs of her eyes. The monster licked a disgusting path up the side of her face, and she jolted, sensation rushing back into her limbs as he pressed his muzzle to her ear. "Yeah, I'm going to enjoy sharing the gory details of our time together with Dillinger," he growled. "Almost as much as I'm going to enjoy making you beg for mercy."

Torrance suddenly heard herself make a tsking sound, her upper lip curling with disgust. "Didn't your mom ever teach you not to play with your food?"

He shifted to stare into her eyes, and grinned at what he found there. "Oh-ho, so there is a little life in her, after all. Goodie."

Oh, God, what the hell was she doing? Before she could figure it out, he leaned closer, pelting her face with his rank breath. "And to answer your question, my mother was a weak bitch who betrayed my father and died in another man's bed." He smiled again, making her cringe as the hazy shafts of light stealing into her room caught the dull gleam of fangs set within pink gums. "The idiots never even saw him coming. Dad told me she was still screaming from her climax when he sliced her throat open."

"Jesus," Torrance croaked hoarsely, knowing the scene he'd just described was going to play front and center in her nightmares from now on—*if* she lived long enough to have another nightmare.

"He took a souvenir to remind him of her, and I'm thinking that maybe I should do the same. Killing Dillinger's new woman is certainly something I'll want to remember. But what should it be?" he murmured, looking her over with slow deliberation. "A lock of hair? A...finger, perhaps? It'll be fun, rubbing it in his smug face that *I* had you. Especially when he wanted you. I could tell. Oh yeah, he wanted you *bad*. But I'm the one who's going to get you."

He lowered his head back over her chest, watching *her* watch *him*, and let his long candy-pink tongue slip toward her breast, swiping at her cloth-covered nipple. Torrance grimaced, squirming, a sickening icy fear fisting in her gut, before settling lower into those deep, inner feminine places, and wrathful frustration surged through her.

She could feel it building...building...and in the next moment a loud, endless roar filled her ears, echoing through her brain...and with a stunning jolt of shock, she realized that it was her! "*Get...off...me!*" she shouted, her rage taking hold, gathering like a coming storm, mounting in her taxed muscles until she felt like she'd explode.

Those black, vapid eyes, empty and cruel like a shark's, narrowed, slick black upper lip curling as he bared long, vicious incisors. "That's it," he whispered with chilling satisfaction, leaning so close that he almost touched her mouth. "But maybe we should keep it down a bit." He stroked the side of her face with one claw-tipped hand, his cold eyes traveling over her features, one by one. "Just think. Even now, he could be out there, watching for a sign of you. He thinks he's so clever, but I got to you first and he doesn't even know it. Now I can have you...then leave you like leftovers for him to find. Sweet, isn't it?"

"You're disgusting." She spat in his face.

"And you're terrified," he said with a soft, guttural laugh. "In case you didn't get it the first time, fear really does it for me, honey. The more frightened you get, the more satisfying this bit of payback is going to be."

"Payback?"

"A long time ago, Dillinger took something from me, and I've been waiting for the chance to return the favor. Now that it's here, I plan to enjoy every moment of it."

Sitting back in a sudden shift of movement, he released her wrists as he straddled her, his brutal claws reaching for her jeans. Rage, sizzling and violent, raced through her blood, and her body instantly went on autopilot as survival instincts finally kicked in. Moving faster than she'd ever thought she could, Torrance bent her knees and planted her feet flat on the ground. Gritting her teeth, she thrust her hips up, hardly moving his solid weight, but jarring him enough to shift his body to the left. She immediately twisted in the opposite direction, lunging to the side as she pulled her right leg free, then struck out, knocking his hips off center. At the same time, Torrance flattened her hand as she slammed it against the floor, frantically searching for the fallen letter opener that he'd knocked from her grip.

Come on...come on... Yes!

The second her fingers touched smooth silver, Torrance grabbed at it, swinging her arm around, aiming for his mangy ruff and sending the cool metal sinking through the tough skin at the side of his throat. An inhuman roar surged up from his chest as she used every ounce of her strength to shove the blade deep. She twisted her wrist, and his body jerked above her, writhing, knocking the breath from her lungs as he fell forward and slammed her back into the hardwood floor. One powerful arm swiped at her face, sending her glasses flying as she jerked to the side, just missing the lethal slash of his claws but smacking the back of her skull hard against the base of her dresser. Stars exploded before her eyes, glittering and bright against the graying edges of her vision.

"Arrrgh," she grunted, gnashing her teeth, using the flat of her palm to push the letter opener deeper, ignoring the impulsive urge to let go when blood began pumping from the wound, pouring over her hand in a slick wash of crimson. Shoving with her leg, Torrance nudged him farther away, the gurgling sounds dripping from his muzzle monstrous and grotesque, like something torn straight from the depths of hell.

"God, just die already," she screamed, the deafening cry drowned out by the harsh, outraged shouts she could suddenly hear coming from the outer hallway.

The wolf's face lifted at the commotion, nostrils flaring as he threw back his head and unleashed an unearthly howl that rattled the doors and windows, the letter opener now fully imbedded in his muscular neck. A crash sounded in the living room, followed by the sound of running feet, heavy and pounding, moving at full speed, and then flashes of a hard, strangely familiar figure as something solid and fast slammed into the beast and sent him hurtling to the side, freeing her. Torrance tried to draw in a huge breath, her lungs burning from lack of oxygen. At the same time she struggled to focus on the chaotic scene, but her head was throbbing and everything was happening too fast.

Curling onto her side, she pulled her legs up into the fetal position and tried again to focus on the blurry shadows crashing around her room. Three twisting figures were fighting with inhuman strength, growling...snarling...biting out virulent curses as they destroyed her furniture. Bodies slammed into one another with preternatural force as they battled for dominance, coarse grunts followed by the sickening sounds of crushed cartilage and tearing flesh. Torrance squinted, certain she had just seen a human arm sporting an amazingly wicked set of claws but couldn't hold the image. A quick, sharp cracking noise, like a snapping bone, came from the other side of her bed, and her stomach churned at the revolting sound.

Then the sound of broken glass hit her ears, followed by a familiar voice shouting into the small alley between her apartment building and the neighboring one. "That's right, run now, but next time we find you, you're dead!"

Torrance blinked against the salty sting of sweat running into her eyes, and for the first time she got a clear look at her rescuer's face as he dropped to his knees beside her, one unsteady, blood-splattered hand reaching out to check her pulse at the side of her throat.

"It's you!" she gasped, sounding groggy, positive she could hear the other one, who had shouted out her window, snickering off somewhere on the other side of the room.

"Shh. Just take it easy," he rasped, staring down at her, his expression fierce and brutally hard with lingering traces of violence and rage, a warm glow burning in his oddly lit gaze. Animal ferocity, predatory and wild, rode the long lines of his body, and there was something different about his eyes, she thought hazily. They seemed more golden than brown, smoldering with a primitive, provocative intensity that made her feel...uncomfortably sensitive—and suddenly Torrance was aware of being cradled against the strongest chest she'd ever felt.

Oh...whoa.

Hot, comforting heat surrounded her, pressing her against solid muscle and strong sinew outlined beneath a sweat-damp

T-shirt. Torrance wanted to moan at the feel of all that hard, unyielding masculinity holding her close, but bit back the sound. Instead, she focused at first on trying not to pass out, and then on the voices, listening to the rich, husky tones, the rhythm and pitch of their speech patterns, so rugged and male. Trying not to groan from the pain in her head, she lay silent as the one named Jeremy spoke to the man holding her within the strong, possessive circle of his arms.

"I took a quick look around the building, but there's not a soul around right now," Jeremy was saying. "Kinda creepy, but at least there won't be any cops on their way, and I've got her door back up on the frame. A good breeze would knock it over, but it will fool anyone who might pass by until we can get outta here."

Strong, infinitely capable fingers pushed her hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ears, her braid a pitiful wreck. "It'll have to do for now," he rasped.

"How's she doing?"

Callused fingertips stroked gently over her forehead, across the tops of her cheekbones, the careful touch so at odds with the raw-edged power she could feel pulsing off him in hot, potent waves. "She's pretty shaken up, but Simmons didn't bite her," he growled, that deep, whispery baritone ragged and hoarse. "The bastard must have been here all along, waiting for her when she got home. How the hell did he track her down so fast?"

"Come on, you know what kind of connections he's got. If she frequents that restaurant often enough, he could have slunk in there after we left and had her name like *that*," the blond argued, snapping his fingers—an unmistakable thread of frustration lacing his words. "Then once Simmons knew who she was, all he'd have to do is hack her information off the Net. The whole thing could have happened in minutes."

Mason made some low, noncommittal sound deep in his

throat, sounding unconvinced as he ran his big, warm hands over her body. Torrance tried to control her shiver and failed, while his delicious scent, like something wicked and sinful that she could almost taste on her tongue, filled her head, crowding out the raw smells of meat and blood and fear.

There was something wrong here, she knew, but she mentally shoved the irritating thought away, her body finding too much enjoyment being in his arms. If she thought too hard about things, she would have to move...and that just wouldn't do.

"There's no such thing as privacy anymore, man." Through her barely parted lashes, Torrance watched Jeremy plant his hands on his hips and glare at Mason. "Who knows what he used. At this point, it doesn't really matter, Mase. We've got a much bigger problem on our hands. It's daylight outside," the blond muttered, gesturing at the pale light beyond the broken window. "He fully changed *without* night. You know what this means?"

"It means this isn't your run-of-the-mill Bloodrun," Mason grunted, still checking her for injuries. A hot, rough palm traveled up her side, feeling her ribs, coming deliciously close to the outer curve of one breast. If it didn't still hurt to breathe, she'd have shifted, just a bit, and gotten that strong hand where she wanted it.

"Yeah, among other things," his friend bit out. "It means there's something a hell of a lot bigger than meat lust going on here, partner. No way in hell should someone Simmons's age be able to dayshift into his full form, even if he is as friggin' pure-blood as they come. And why couldn't we smell him out on the street? If we hadn't heard her scream, we wouldn't have even known he was here and he was practically sitting under our noses."

"I don't know what's going on with his scent. I can smell him in here, but the musk is lighter than it should be and there's something sharp mixed with it that's burning my nose." His hand paused as he turned his head to look toward the blond. "And I don't care when he can change, or how goddamn powerful he is. When we finally get him, he's going to pay for touching her."

Jeremy remained silent for a moment, and then she heard, "Are you going to explain to her what we are?"

What we are? What did that ...

In the next instant, forgotten images came rushing back as Torrance suddenly recalled the forgotten piece of the puzzle.

Before Mason could answer Jeremy's question, Torrance scrambled off his lap, her movements awkward and uncoordinated as terror rushed through her, weakening her limbs.

"I already know what you are." The hoarse words left her lips on a soft whoosh of air, barely more than a whisper—and the realization she'd been trying to push away came roaring back, blindsiding her with the force of a kick to the chest.

Mason watched her with a calm intensity as she scooted away on her hands and feet, crab-crawling until her back pressed up against a corner of the room. "Do you now?" he asked quietly, moving with the sleek power of a predator as he gained his feet.

"How did you find me?" She could hear the panic grabbing at her throat, making her voice sound hollow and husky. "What are you doing here?"

At the sound of her fear, his expression closed, like a veil being pulled over a window, filtering out the light. "I doubt you're going to believe me, but I followed you to keep you safe. I was watching the building when I heard you scream."

"I saw claws," Torrance said shakily, pulling her gaze away from him to cast a quick look around the room, unable to believe the destruction. Her once cozy, comfortable bedroom now resembled a slaughterhouse—her white bedding a gory sea of red, a blood-spattered closet door hanging at an odd angle...like a broken limb, window and blinds broken where the monster had made his escape. "You're a goddamn werewolf, aren't you? Just like him!"

His head tilted a fraction as he studied her, dark eyes impossible to read. "Not exactly like him."

"But those were your claws that I saw, right?" she all but shouted, fisting her blood-covered hands at her sides. "When you were fighting off...whatever his name was."

"Simmons. His name is Anthony Simmons. And they could have been either mine or Jeremy's." His broad shoulders lifted in a casual shrug, as if they were discussing nothing more controversial than the weather, when her entire world had just been turned on its head. "That's about all of the change we can manage when it's still daylight. Not even Simmons is meant to be able to fully shift like that during the day."

"They were yours," she stated flatly, remembering the gray flannel shirt. All but shaking apart inside, she sneered, "You guys normally only change at night? Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Dark heat flared in the rich brown of his eyes as they narrowed, pinning her in place. "I'm not interested in making you feel better. I'm interested in keeping you alive."

A sharp sound of disbelief jerked from her throat. "And I'm supposed to believe that?"

"You would, if you'd just calm down for a moment and listen to what your gut is telling you. I'm not the bad guy here. I'm the only thing that can keep you safe."

"Keep me safe by scaring me to death?" she returned, her voice trembling. "I don't think so."

"I didn't mean to scare you earlier, and it isn't my intention to scare you now, Torrance." He sighed. "I just had to make sure you were going to be okay." With a little start of surprise, she realized what he'd just said. "How did you learn my name?"

Reaching into the pocket on the front of his flannel shirt, Mason pulled out the pay stub she'd been using as a bookmark, holding it up between his first and second fingers.

Torrance looked from the slip of paper to his face.

"It fell out of your book when you pulled away from me at the café." He watched her for a moment, then quietly said, "You felt it, too, didn't you?"

Torrance shook her head, but she couldn't deny that there was a strange truth to his roughly spoken words. Her gut was telling her...something—but she refused to listen.

Mason stepped forward, his expression turning fierce when he saw her flinch. "Damn it, don't do this. I know you feel it, Torrance. Don't goddamn lie about it."

"You're wrong," she whispered, even though she knew the look in her eyes betrayed her, revealing the intense, almost painful longing that she couldn't hide...couldn't explain or rationalize, considering she was terrified of him. "I'm sorry. Believe me, you have no idea how sorry—but I...I just can't do this."

His head fell forward and he seemed to be staring hard at the floor, lost in thought. Several tense moments passed, and when he looked back toward her, he kept his voice gentle, saying, "Everyone's afraid of werewolves, honey. At first."

"No, you don't understand." Her voice shook, despite her efforts to sound strong. "I'm not just afraid. I'm *terrified*. I've...ever since I was a little girl...nightmares...always. I'm... I can't... I can't do this."

Mason took another step closer to her, stopping when he saw the way her body tensed. "You can't go off on your own again," he said quietly, his tone urgent. "He's not going to stop until he's got you." "That's crazy."

"Torrance, please listen to me. There's something going on here...a connection between us that's too damn complicated to explain right now. But if Simmons so much as suspects it, he won't give up. He'll keep coming after you."

She blinked, trying hard not to cry. "Why me?"

He stared at her, his gaze moving softly over her face, before settling back on her eyes. She felt as if he could see straight into her—as if he could get into her head and witness firsthand the chaos going on inside. "Because he'll use you to get to me."

Pulling her knees into her chest, she flicked her gaze between him and Jeremy. "And what the hell does he want with you?"

"It's because of who I am. Because of *what* I am," he explained gruffly, hunching down in front of her, his arm resting on his bent knee. "My job is to hunt down and kill Lycans like Simmons. Rogue werewolves. That's what we do. It's called Bloodrunning, and Jeremy is my partner."

"What do you mean rogue werewolves?" she asked, inching farther away from him. He shot a questioning look toward Jeremy, and she could tell from his harsh expression that he didn't want to explain. "Damn it, you got me into this! I deserve to know what's happening."

"Rogues are wolves who have gone over," he told her, breathing out a rough sigh.

Her stomach flipped, making her queasy. "What do mean 'gone over'?"

"They give in to their darker hungers and hunt humans, using them as food. Once they start, the power...the rush they feel from the kill and the feeding is addictive. They have no conscience and they have no fear. Now that Simmons has set his sights on you, he won't stop until he's got you. That's why we need to get you somewhere safe before he comes back. Next time he attacks, you can bet he won't be alone." Torrance shook her head, a panicked, hysterical laugh bubbling up from her chest. "Somewhere safe? You've got to be joking!"

Mason stood and ran both hands back through his hair, then shoved them deep in his jeans' pockets. Locking his jaw, he said, "Do I look like I'm joking?"

"No, but then you don't look like a...a—"

"Monster?" he supplied helpfully, arching one dark brow at her. Though he tried to cover it, Torrance could see the quick flash of pain that cut through his warm gaze—almost as if she'd somehow hurt him. Leaning against the door frame, Jeremy muttered something foul under his breath, and she felt her cheeks go warm with an uncomfortable wave of shame.

"That's not what I was going to say," she lied, hating the emotional knot in her stomach. "Don't put words in my mouth."

"Why not?" Mason asked, pinning her with a hard, intense stare. "Your thoughts are written plain on your face, Tor. I've never met anyone before who was so easy to read."

She lifted her chin, hating that he could see into her so easily. "You don't know me."

He snorted. "Yeah, and you don't know me. But that isn't stopping you from being judgmental as hell."

He was twisting her words around, confusing her, and it was too hard to think when she was still so terrified. And yet there was something strangely...comforting about the arrogant giant. Again, that odd sense of rightness overtook her, and Torrance struggled to throw off its deceptive allure.

What the hell was wrong with her? Had she lost her mind?

"I need... I think I'm going to be sick," she muttered, pressing her blood-covered hands to her stomach as she surged to her unsteady feet and took off running in the direction of the bathroom. From the corner of her eye, she saw Mason move toward her, but Jeremy reached out and grabbed his arm, holding him back.

"Just give her some time, man. She's been through hell."

"Yeah, fine. Whatever," he grunted, shrugging his arm free of Jeremy's grasp.

Torrance slammed the flimsy bathroom door behind her, flipped the lock...and knew what she had to do.

Chapter 4

Funny, how hard it was to shake off the demons of your past; especially when you'd just discovered they were real. Evening had fallen, the shop had been closed early, and the Doucets had taken Torrance home with them, providing a safe haven in a world that had suddenly become her worst nightmare. Now she sat in their living room, perched on the edge of a love seat, recounting a story that sounded fantastical to her own ears...and she'd just survived it!

God, she could only imagine what they must be thinking.

Without looking at Michaela and Max, who sat across from her on a matching love seat, Torrance stared at the delicate cup of green tea in her hands and finished her explanations. "So I left the water running in the bathroom to cover the sound of the window opening, slipped out into the alley and ran like hell to get back to the shop."

It had taken every ounce of courage Torrance possessed to

climb out of that window. She'd had no idea if Simmons would be waiting for her, but knew she couldn't stay and allow herself to be dragged off to God only knew where with the men who'd chased him off. She'd briefly considered calling the cops as she'd taken the back way to Michaela's Muse, cutting through a maze of alleys and side streets, but quickly decided against it. What would she have told them? That she'd been attacked by a werewolf and then saved by two others? *Right*. She knew customers from Mic's who claimed to have been bitten by vampires and terrorized by Lycanthropes, but she'd never believed them and neither had the authorities. It embarrassed her now to think of how she'd viewed them with equal parts pity and caution, thinking they'd lost their grip on reality.

Now you're one of them, Watson. Welcome to the club.

Stealing a quick look up through her lashes, she saw that both Michaela and Max watched her with expressions that seemed tight with worry, and yet soft with understanding. She took another shaky breath, thankful they hadn't tossed her out on her ear for being off her rocker. Torrance knew their beliefs differed from those of most people—but she still hadn't been sure how they'd take her bizarre accounting of the past few hours.

"I know it sounds impossible," she whispered, "but it's true. Believe me, I wish it wasn't, but it is. Every crazy, psychoticsounding word."

Michaela leaned forward, her slender hands clasped together atop her skirt-covered knees. "You did the right thing coming to us, *chère*. And there's no such thing as the impossible. You should know that by now."

A shaky wave of relief surged through Torrance, piercing and sweet. "You believe me?"

Sitting beside his sister, Max gave her a reassuring nod that sent a lock of his dark hair falling over his brow, his caring blue gaze urging her to relax. "Of course we do, Torry. You're like family to us. And family sticks together, no matter what."

"But...werewolves? It's like something out of one of those horrible movies." Movies that had scared the pants off her when she was little—lingering images and remembered flashes of sound that still had the power to affect her to this day. Had she sensed, subconsciously, the truth behind the Hollywood theatrics? Had she known, deep down, that the monsters really *were* hiding in the shadows?

Beyond the windows and walls of the house, the bitter autumn wind howled with fury, setting her on edge, to the point she feared she would crack. She clenched her teeth together to keep them from chattering, hoping she could hold it together for just a little bit longer.

"Torry," Mic said gently, cutting into her unsettling thoughts. "You know about our life...about where we come from. The bayou is riddled with tales about vampires and werewolves, ghosts and cat people." Michaela's rouged mouth curved in a wry smile. "The way we were raised, there isn't much Max and I don't believe in. Sometimes you just have to open your mind to the possibilities of things you can't explain."

Setting her rattling cup on the small table in front of her, Torrance ran her damp palms over her jeans. "I wish it was that easy. And most of those things I could handle. You know that. *Anything* but werewolves." Wrapping her arms around her middle, she rocked back and forth, shivering despite the warm air filtering into the cozy room from overhead vents. "God, I'll never be able to just live a normal life after this."

"You're not alone, Torry. Max and I aren't going to abandon you."

An ornate grandfather clock began chiming in the far corner of the room, signaling the hour. Realizing the time, Torrance cast a questioning glance at Max. "Aren't you supposed to be at work right now?"

He shook his head, a small grin playing at the corner of his mouth. "Naw. I've got the night off, remember? Good thing, too, because now I can keep an eye on things around here."

"Oh, God," Torrance groaned, shutting her eyes as a wrenching thought suddenly sliced its way through her brain, battering past her fear. What the hell had she been thinking? She couldn't stay here! If Simmons could find her one time, he could find her again. She was putting both of her closest friends' lives in danger by coming to them for help. Why hadn't she realized that when she'd run to them?

Why? Because you weren't thinking, you brainless, stupid, terrified little idiot!

"What? What's wrong?" Mic asked.

Feeling sick inside, Torrance opened her eyes. "I just realized how stupid it was to come to you. I wasn't thinking straight, and now I've put you both in danger. What if he tracks me here?"

"I'd like to see him try," Max growled, making her blink in startled surprise. It seemed that just yesterday Max had been graduating from high school, but the boy sitting across from her had somehow grown up and become a man without her noticing. One who was tall and broad and lean with muscle. One who looked as if he could handle himself, and would relish the opportunity to get his hands on Simmons. Of course, Torrance wasn't about to let it happen.

She knew she needed to leave, and told them so, but the Doucets weren't having it.

"I don't want to hear another word about it," Michaela ordered, her chin set at that stubborn angle that meant she'd made up her mind and was done listening to arguments. She stood and took the empty teacups into the kitchen, then came back a moment later with a glass of water and two small blue pills on a napkin. "You're staying right here. Now come on and let's get you set up in the guest room. You look like you're about to keel over from exhaustion."

After ten minutes of arguing, and another ten minutes of getting settled in, Torrance found herself standing under a hot, steady stream of water in the guest bathroom. The air was heavy with steam while she let the soothing heat run over her body, washing away the grime of the day, if not the strain. But the sedatives Michaela had insisted she swallow were helping with that, easing the tension as a smooth warmth poured through her veins, relaxing her muscles. Leaning her head forward, the water spilling over her neck and shoulders, Torrance finally admitted to the other, more disturbing reason she had run from her apartment. The one she had refused to think about, until now.

She'd wanted to stay with him.

It seemed illogical, *impossible*, considering the sheer force of her terror, but the desire to go with Mason Dillinger had been frighteningly strong. The very depth of her extraordinary reaction to him had sent her running even more than the panic over what he was—and God only knew that she was terrified by the idea of what he could...*become*. She'd seen those lethal claws firsthand, and knew exactly what they were capable of.

You're losing it, woman, she thought, lifting her face to the spray. Completely losing it.

There was no other explanation, because even knowing what he was...Torrance still wanted him.

Hidden within the murky black shadows of the night, Mason rested his back against the rough bark of a giant elm tree and took a deep breath of the crisp autumn air, searching for the scent of Simmons. His keen eyesight zeroed in on the picturesque house before him—the same house he'd been watching ever since Pallaton had called him with the address, after following Torrance from Michaela's Muse. The quaint two-story sat at the end of a secluded, tree-lined street in an older, historic neighborhood of the city of Covington, surrounded by dense forest on three sides.

On the surface Mason remained cool and calm, focused on watching the house to ensure she stayed safe—but on the inside, he still burned with a cold, relentless fury.

He couldn't believe she'd run out on him. Again.

When he discovered that she'd escaped through the bathroom window, they'd taken off after her on foot, until Pallaton had called him and said she'd shown up back at Michaela's Muse. Shortly after that they left the shop, and the Runners had followed her here to her friend's house. He and Jeremy had parked the Tahoe several blocks away, then cut across the woods, until coming up on the back of the house. Then they'd planted themselves just within the cover of the forest and settled in for a long, cold night. Around them the wind surged, brutal and raw, while heavy storm clouds all but blanketed the glow of the moon, lending an ominous atmosphere to accompany his already crappy mood.

"Man, she's good," Jeremy drawled, leaning his shoulder against a nearby tree. The blond whistled softly under his breath as they watched Torrance's silhouette pass a secondstory window in what was probably a guest bedroom. "There she is, all snuggly and warm in the house, while we're out here freezing our asses off."

"I still can't believe she tried to ditch me," Mason grunted, lighting a new cigarette and taking a long drag, welcoming the burn of the smoke in his lungs, its acrid scent filling his nose. Yeah, he was pissed at her for bailing, and even more pissed at himself for ignoring his instincts when he'd allowed her to go off to the bathroom by herself. But he'd been trying not to spook her, and it had turned around and bitten him on the ass. Hard.

"Forget 'tried," Jeremy countered, his grin wry. "Her cute little backside definitely ditched you. Twice in one day. I gotta admit," he confessed with a low chuckle, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his jeans as a brittle breeze whipped through the trees, ruffling their hair, "that I've always wondered what kind of woman would knock you on your arrogant ass."

"Yeah, well," Mason muttered, staring at the window as if he could will her to reappear, "I'm glad I've been able to provide you with some worthy entertainment."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

"Just remember that payback is going to be a bitch, and now the battle lines are drawn."

From the corner of his eye, he watched Jeremy's cocky smirk slip into a scowl. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm no longer going out of my way to help you avoid a certain little fair-haired witch."

His partner cursed softly under his breath. "You're such a bastard, Mase. I always knew you played dirty."

"Just don't forget it," he warned, taking another long drag.

Jeremy bent his knees, propping his back against the neighboring elm. After a few moments of silence, he cocked one tawny brow in Mason's direction. "So what's our next move?"

"We wait to see if he shows."

"It's quiet as hell out here," Jeremy murmured, resting his arms on his knees as he leaned his head back against the trunk. "Not even the crickets are chirping. If he gets close, we'll know it, even if we can't pick up his scent."

Mason nodded, moving his gaze over the back of the house. "If he gets close, he's gonna die."

"You hear from Pallaton again?"

"I talked to him while you were running recon on the street.

He and Reyes are combing over the warehouse district here in Covington, checking it out, but nothing's turned up yet. Brody and Cian are still over in Delaine, working on that second murder."

Jeremy lifted his head, his straight brows pulled together in a scowl. "They still trying to finger the rogue?"

"Yeah, and they've got nothing," Mason muttered, running his hand over his jaw, wincing at the sound of his whiskers against his callused skin. He could've used a shower and a shave, but knew he wasn't getting either. At least not anytime soon.

"Nothing they can trace?"

"Hell, there's no trace of Lycan musk for them to even identify, but they mentioned a sharp odor like vinegar all over the place. They tried to track it at both sites, but it messed with their noses, which reminds me too much of what happened with Simmons today. Anyway, they're heading back up to the Alley tomorrow, said they'll bring us up to speed then."

"Good," Jeremy grunted. "Because the killings are too ritualistic to be your average rogue kill. I'm telling you, man, I've got a bad feeling about it."

"Yeah, me, too." Within the past few weeks, two female bodies had been found in wooded areas, not far from the Silvercrest pack's territory. Both of the human victims had been blond and blue-eyed, both were clearly Lycan kills, and both had suffered the macabre fate of having their hearts eaten out of their chests. So far the Runners had been able to keep the grisly killings contained, but Mason knew they needed to settle the matter quickly, not only to ensure there wasn't another victim, but to keep the pack's existence safe from discovery. It was a challenge they constantly faced as Bloodrunners—one that became harder each year.

And then there was the shocking discovery they'd made that

afternoon, its potential consequences along the lines of earthshattering. Simmons's ability to dayshift was the kind of thing that could prove disastrous not only to the Runners, but the entire Lycan race.

He was making a mental checklist of people he needed to question, when Jeremy suddenly said, "You know, I meant to say something earlier, but everything just started happening and I never got the chance."

Mason sent his partner a wary look. "What is it?"

Jeremy rolled one shoulder in a restless gesture. "I just wanted to make sure that you're handling this okay."

Oh, he knew exactly what Jeremy meant by *this*. Torrance. His mate.

Mason tossed the cigarette on the ground, his voice tight as he asked, "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Come on, Mase," Jeremy snorted, shaking his head. "I'm your partner. Your best friend, man."

"You make it sound like we're going steady," Mason grunted, knowing where this was headed, and not wanting to go there.

"I'm just trying to say that...hell, I know how you've felt about this kind of stuff ever since Dean, and I know you never planned on it happening to you. Now that it has, I just wanted to make sure you were handling it okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine," he stated flatly.

"Are you sure?" Jeremy pressed, clearly unwilling to just let it go.

Blowing out a rough breath of frustration, he growled, "Jesus, Jeremy, what do you want from me?"

A lopsided smile played over Jeremy's mouth, but his eyes burned with a directness that said he was seeing through Mason's bluff. "The truth would be nice."

The truth? Damn, Mason wasn't even sure what the truth

was anymore. All he knew was that he had to keep Torrance safe. After that, he could figure out what the knot in his gut was about. Figure out how to deal with it. Until then he'd keep waiting, watching, making sure she was okay. Didn't matter how long it took, because he knew Simmons. Knew the bastard wouldn't be able to rest until he'd finished what he'd started. And when he made his move, Mason intended to be right there. Torrance Watson was just going to have to learn to deal with it, no matter how she felt about werewolves.

Whether the fiery little redhead wanted him or not—she had him.

"Torry, wake up! Come on, honey. Snap out of it. You're having a dream..."

Torrance could hear the urgent words, their sound muffled as if she were underwater. She struggled to make her way back, thrashing her arms and legs, almost as if swimming up from the sluggish depths of a lake. She could see the distant spark of sunlight, but the dark, grasping shadows of her nightmares still held her with clawing hands that fought to hold her deep beneath the smothering blanket of sleep.

"Should I get some water to throw on her?" she heard Max ask, and she gasped, not sure if the sound managed to make its way past her lips or was still trapped in her throat.

"No, she's coming around," Michaela told her brother, her concern clear in the worried tone of her voice. "That's it, Torry. Come on, honey. Open your eyes for me."

Taking a deep breath, she finally managed to crack one eyelid, wincing when the bright morning sun spilling through the bedroom window nearly split her skull in two. She felt wrecked, her heart racing, mouth dry. But at least she was awake.

"There you are," Mic said softly, smiling down at her, while

Max stared over his sister's shoulder. "We heard you crying out in your sleep, so I'm betting you were having another nightmare. You okay now?"

"Yeah," she croaked, sounding like she'd swallowed a frog.

"I'll be in my room if you need me," Max told them, reaching out to ruffle her tangled hair before heading out of the guest room and giving them some privacy.

"Sorry for being a bother," she mumbled, feeling selfconscious and disoriented, still trying to shake off the heavy layers of sleep. Without her glasses, she couldn't see the clock, but she could tell by the brightness of the sun that she'd slept late. Mic was already dressed, with her long hair curling over her shoulders and wearing a light application of makeup that made her look well rested, even though Torrance knew she had taken turns keeping watch last night with Max. "If you can loan me something to wear, I can hurry and be ready to head into the shop with you in fifteen."

Michaela gave her a startled look of surprise. "Of course I can loan you some stuff, but are you sure you're up for it?"

"Trust me," Torrance said, smoothing her hands over the surface of the quilted comforter, "the last thing I need is to sit around here worrying about everything."

Looking doubtful, Mic crossed her arms over her cappuccino-colored silk shirt. "I really think you should stay here today with Max and take it easy."

"No, that's the last thing I need. The worrying will drive me crazy. Just let me grab a quick shower and I'll head into work with you. It'll do me good," she declared with a grin, trying to sound confident.

"Okay, if you're sure that's what you want," Michaela murmured, still looking concerned as she got up to leave. At the door, she turned back, one hand resting against the frame, her slender silver bangles jangling around her forearm like tiny bells. "You want me to have Max grab a friend and head over to your apartment for some of your things?"

Torrance shook her head, hating the idea of ever having to walk back into her home, knowing the memories would always linger. She loved the building she lived in, loved its character and her colorful neighbors, but she would definitely have to move. When she could finally face going back. And she didn't want Max going anywhere near the place until she knew if it was safe. "Not yet. Let's give it another day or so."

"No worries, honey. But you're staying here with us for as long as you need to, and I don't want to hear anything else about it. You go on and grab your shower, and I'll have some clothes ready for ya when you're done. Oh, and if you're lucky, I'll get Max to whip us up some of his famous French toast before we leave."

With a smile and a wink, Michaela shut the door behind her.

The second Max pushed open the back door to Michaela's Muse, Torrance knew something was wrong. The alarm which should have been beeping persistently, waiting for someone to disengage the system, remained eerily quiet.

"What the hell?" Max muttered, while Michaela pushed past him. Seconds later she rushed into the front room of the shop, a choked sound breaking from her chest that made Torrance feel sick to her stomach.

Sometime in the night, Michaela's Muse had been vandalized.

Bookshelves and display cases covered the floor, broken into pieces, the fine wood finishing marred with long, deep gouges that she was sure had been made by claws. The shop's impressive collection of coffee table books on a variety of paranormal subjects had been shredded, the new shipments of Tarot decks, candles and crystals scattered over the floor, crushed by whoever had stomped over them. Everywhere Torrance looked, something had been mindlessly destroyed. Silent tears slipped down Michaela's face, Max cursed a foul string of words beneath his breath, and Torrance simply closed her eyes, wishing like hell she could just go back to yesterday morning and start over.

"I'll pay you back," she rasped, her voice rough with emotion. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and her stomach churned at the musky scent of animal, ripe and feral, mixing with the rich aroma of perfumed oils whose vials had been smashed to pieces. "I've got some money saved up. We can use it to replace everything that they've ruined."

"Do not make me angry, Torry," Mic snapped, glaring at her. "This is *not* your fault, so don't even start feeling bad about it. You didn't ask that bastard to do this. I will not let you take the blame for it."

"Like hell it isn't," she insisted, furious with herself. "If it weren't for me, this wouldn't have happened!" She gestured at the vengeful destruction that surrounded them.

Crossing her arms, Michaela narrowed her dark blue gaze and in a low, sibilant slide of words, she said, "Did you ask for this to land in your lap?"

"No, but if I had been smart and just left town or something," she groaned, pushing her hair back from her face, "then it wouldn't have landed in yours, as well." God, it would have been so simple! She should have bought a bus ticket and hit the road. The small leather wallet that she used for carrying her check card and ID had been in the pocket of her jeans, so money wouldn't have been a problem. She could have traveled through the night, heading north until she found some sleepy little town with a cozy bed-and-breakfast. No one would have been able to find her...and none of this would have happened!

"Yeah, and you'd probably be dead. Call me crazy," Michaela snorted, "but I'd rather have my best friend alive and breathing and have to deal with a mess, than leave her in the clutches of some psychotic asshole."

"Hey," Max cut in, interrupting them. "I hate to break it up, but you two need to look at this."

Torrance turned toward the sound of his deep voice, painfully aware that what little color was left in her face had just drained away when she saw where he pointed. "Oh, God," she gasped, clutching the edge of the counter with a whiteknuckled grip, feeling lightheaded as she read the message that had been scraped into the far wall.

You can run, Little Red. But you can't hide.

"That's what Simmons called me," she whispered in a hoarse voice. "Little Red."

Too nervous to stand still, Torrance turned to pace, picking her way through the heartbreaking destruction while trying to think what her next move should be. Maybe she should just sneak out in the night, leaving a note saying she'd be in touch when she got settled somewhere. They'd be furious with her, but at least they'd be safe. She hoped. Torrance couldn't help but worry that now that she'd drawn them into this, they were stuck in it, whether she stayed or hit the road.

She had just paced her way back toward the front of the store when she glanced through the front window and nearly stumbled over the broken leg of a display table, falling flat on her face. Rushing forward, Torrance peered out through the glass, shaking her head in shocked surprise. "I don't believe it," she whispered, recognizing that familiar dark head and muscular bod.

"What is it?" Michaela asked, hurrying to her side.

"It's him," she whispered. "Mason. The one who saved me. He's out there." "The guy you ran from?" Max grunted, moving to her other side...and sounding far too protective for her peace of mind as he glared suspiciously outside.

"Um...yeah," she said uncomfortably, feeling her cheeks heat with a telling blush when she realized Mason was staring back at her through the glass, his gaze touching her like a physical caress. He lounged against a black Tahoe, with one shoulder propped against the SUV. His brawny arms were crossed over his chest, biceps bulging beneath the dark cotton of his T-shirt and flannel, a cigarette burning in his right hand, looking every bit the badass.

"Wow," Michaela drawled, "you weren't kidding when you said he was gorgeous."

"I know." Torrance sighed, sounding miserable. She played through a thousand and one scenarios in her mind, then finally said, "I think I should go and talk to him."

"I think so, too," Mic agreed. "But I'm going with you." Turning toward Max, who had fallen into step right behind them, she drawled, "Uh-uh. You stay here and watch through the window. There's already enough testosterone out there. I don't want a fight on my hands."

He scowled, clearly ready to argue, until Michaela added, "It's okay. He's not going to hurt her."

Max cut his sister a sharp, questioning look, muttering, "You're sure?"

"Positive," Torrance thought she heard her best friend say, but she was already pushing through the front door, the silver chimes chattering loudly as the wind caught at the tiny bells. Despite her intention to remain calm, she felt a powerful surge of excitement flutter through her system the moment their eyes connected, dazzling and swift, like a startled school of luminous fish rushing through the water. He stepped away from the Tahoe as she approached, then tossed down the cigarette after taking one last drag, grinding the butt beneath the toe of his boot. Praying that she wouldn't stammer, Torrance said, "You have a bad habit of following me, don't you, Mr. Dillinger?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, but he didn't smile. He did, however, level an intense stare at her that made her breath catch. "Yeah, and you can thank me for it later. You can also call me Mason."

"Do you know who's responsible for this?" she demanded, gesturing toward the shop.

The rugged lines of his handsome face settled into a hard scowl. "You know who it was, Torrance."

She nodded, that sick feeling twisting through her stomach again, and his dark eyes narrowed in concern, the wind blowing the thick strands of his hair across his brow. "Are you holding up okay?" he asked in that whiskey-rough voice she'd spent a good portion of the morning trying to convince herself wasn't nearly as sexy as she'd remembered.

She'd been wrong. It was even better.

Giving another jerky nod in answer to his question, Torrance found herself drowning in rich, velvety brown ringed by the thick border of his ebony lashes. No man had ever looked at her the way *he* did, and it hit her on a level that went beyond the physical, to something deeper, darker...more intimate.

Despite the chill in the air, she felt hot beneath the skin, mesmerized by his presence, even though he looked scruffy as hell. Dark stubble shadowed the strong line of his jaw. His eyes were tired...clothes wrinkled. In fact, he was still in the same jeans and shirt he'd been wearing yesterday, and she suddenly wondered if he'd slept at all since she'd last seen him.

Almost in answer to her unspoken question, he jerked his chin toward the shop. "I was outside your friend's house last night, watching, staying close. That's probably why he decided to come here instead."

"He left her a message inside," Michaela blurted, and

Torrance turned to find the brunette standing near her side, staring at Mason out of narrowed, piercing blue eyes.

"Michaela!" she groaned, wondering what the hell the woman was up to.

"What's it say?" Mason asked in a silky rasp, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. She got the feeling he was trying to look and sound nonthreatening, but she could see the tightening of his jaw, the flare of fury in his eyes, and the telltale pulsing of a vein in his temple.

He was pissed—because she'd been threatened.

"It says that she can run," Michaela told him, "but she can't hide."

His gaze cut back to Torrance, and he squinted against a shaft of late-morning sunlight breaking through the heavy cloud cover, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that only made him look better. As if he needed to look any better. "You know what you have to do, Torrance."

She was beginning to suspect he was right—but that didn't mean she had to like it. "Is that so?"

"If you want to keep your friends safe. If you don't care about dragging them into this, then..." He shrugged his broad shoulders as his voice trailed off, but his meaning came through loud and clear.

Michaela arched one slim brow in his direction. "She's not going to be guilted into going anywhere. You're—"

"Not above doing whatever it takes to keep her alive," he finished in a low, hard tone, cutting her off.

Her best friend watched him for a moment longer in that intense way she had when trying to read someone and then grabbed Torrance's arm, pulling her farther into the parking lot. "Give us a minute, okay?"

He gave her a short nod, and Torrance felt like stamping her foot, feeling like they were having some silent conversation

over her head. They walked about twenty feet, before Michaela released her arm and turned to face her, a small smile playing across her mouth. "Oh, man, honey, that guy is something else."

"I told you," Torrance groaned, flicking a quick look at him over Michaela's shoulder. He was talking to his partner, who she hadn't even noticed until that moment. But then Mason tended to overwhelm her, taking all her attention.

"Could you read him?" she asked Michaela, ripping her gaze away from him.

"You could say that," her best friend offered with a throaty chuckle. "His feelings toward you are incredibly powerful," she murmured, blue eyes shimmering with satisfaction. "The guy wants you bad, Torry. But more than that, he wants to keep you safe."

Torrance sent a second glance over Michaela's shoulder, and found Mason watching her with another dark, breathtaking stare. Softly, with her pulse racing, she said, "I can't stay here, Mic."

Her best friend reached out and gently touched her shoulder. "I'm not trying to get rid of you, Torry. You're welcome to stay if that's what you want. You know that."

"I'm worried about you and Max," she admitted, her voice cracking.

"Hey, Max and I can take care of ourselves. You're the one I'm worried about."

She stared out over the neighboring storefronts, taking comfort from the familiar sights and sounds. It would be so easy to stay, taking refuge in that familiarity, but she knew that it wasn't the road she was meant to travel. For whatever reason, fate had set her on a path that led to something strange and new, with the mystifying...unsettling promise of something...special, and though she was afraid, her instincts told her it was the

right choice. "I'll go with him," she stated quietly, the wind nearly drowning out her huskily spoken words.

A gentle smile played over Michaela's mouth, her blue eyes dark with acceptance and a softer, perceptive look of understanding. "I don't know how to explain it, but it feels right to me, honey. He'll be able to keep you safe. And I think it'll be good for you, too. There's something powerful between the two of you. Something that needs to be looked at more closely, if you know what I'm saying."

"I'm not sure about all of that," she mumbled, unwilling to admit to what she was feeling. "But I think he's my best shot at making it through this without anyone else getting hurt."

"You better promise me you'll be careful." Mic gave her a big, crushing hug, whispering in her ear, "And I expect you to call me every day with all the delicious details, woman. And I mean *all* of them."

"You're crazy," Torrance quietly laughed as Mic released her, and they both sniffled, determined not to get emotional.

"You better not forget to call," Michaela called out, quickly walking back toward the shop. When she had one hand on the door, she turned toward Mason, pointing one slim finger at him, looking like a prim schoolteacher getting ready to reprimand a disobedient student. "And you had better take good care of her."

Michaela disappeared inside, and Torrance watched as Mason said something to Jeremy, then started toward her. When he stood no more than an arm's length away, she asked, "Can you keep them safe?"

He thrust his hands into his front pockets again, his gaze direct, as if he were looking right into her. "I already have a team of Runners assigned to them."

"Knowing Mic and Max," she told him, "they won't like it."

He nodded in understanding, while the breeze swirled around them, carrying his warm, masculine scent to her nose,

and she bit back a telling moan, thinking he already looked far too sure of himself...and her. "They don't have to know. Pallaton and Reyes are good at staying out of sight."

"Where were they last night?" she demanded, sending an angry look toward the shop.

The corner of his mouth twitched at her tone. "Once I had the lot of you under watch at the house, I sent them to search for Simmons."

"Did they find anything?" she asked, pulling her lower lip through her teeth.

"Not yet," he grunted, staring at her mouth, at the precise point where her teeth pressed into her lip, before pulling his gaze back up to her eyes. "But we will. Once I get you settled."

She wrapped her arms over her front, as much to hold herself together as to keep warm. "I can't believe this is happening."

"I swear you'll be safe, Tor." He pulled one hand out of his pocket, rubbing at the back of his neck, and she almost flinched at the flood of awareness that rushed through her, violent and shattering. The image was intoxicating, a purely male stance, with the way he held his tall body, head angled slightly down while he looked at her through his thick lashes, powerful arm bent and lifted so that the muscles bulged, his expression...earnest, strong, *hungry*. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"Safe from Simmons, maybe," she whispered, blinking rapidly as she stared into his warm brown eyes. And in the next moment she heard herself saying, "But what about from you?"

Something silent and powerful passed through his gaze; something that reverberated through her, touching her deep inside, where she felt it in her blood and tissues and organs, pulsing in the very core of her body. "I'd never hurt you, Torrance," he finally said, and there was no mistaking the conviction in those simple words. "And I'm sorry as hell I've landed you in the middle of all this." "It's not like you meant for any of it to happen," she muttered, ignoring what her name on his lips did to her heart rate.

His eyes narrowed, the molten brown barely visible through the thick, lush line of his lashes. "I should have just ignored you in that damn café and walked away. But I couldn't."

Since she didn't know what to say to *that*, she kept silent. Another chilling blast of wind surged around them, whipping her hair around her shoulders, and Torrance shivered as she grasped at the windblown strands, then rubbed her palms together, trying to work some heat back into her numb fingers. She jumped with a start of surprise when he lowered his arm and reached toward her, but he merely grabbed her hand, running his thumb across the fragile bones, warming her skin.

Feeling disoriented and off balance from his unexpected touch, Torrance eyed the powerful width of his chest beneath the flannel shirt and fought the bizarre urge to step closer and nuzzle the strong, tanned column of his throat with her cold nose. He had the warmest skin she'd ever felt, as if he were burning inside with an inner fire that heated his body like a fever. She sighed, watching his large hand engulf her own, his thumb rubbing across the small vein beneath her skin in a soothing gesture that struck her as breathtakingly intimate, though the touch was innocent.

But it didn't feel innocent.

"You're going to have to come with me, Torrance." His dark gaze—full of primitive, provocative intent—was piercingly direct as he stared down at her.

Her throat quivered, tongue flicking nervously at her bottom lip. She was so afraid, and yet, despite her fear, Torrance couldn't deny that she was drawn to him. "I really don't have any choice, do I?"

"Not if you want to live," he answered in a low, husky rumble that trembled through her system.

She swallowed hard, her words shaky and soft. "Where will you take me?"

That powerful stare, so warm and chocolatey brown, impossibly...vividly sexy, slipped from the top of her head, down to her toes in a long, thorough sweep, then repeated the same path until he was once again staring into her eyes, making her world spin. "We'll go home. Up to the mountains. To my cabin."

Chapter 5

She seemed to take a moment to absorb his answer, then finally nodded. The breath Mason hadn't even realized he'd been holding released on a low, shaky sigh, at the same time a raw, powerful rush of anticipation surged through him. There was no denying that he wanted her—that his body craved her. But it was *more* than that. And the more was making him nervous as hell.

Releasing her hand, Mason reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt, took out her glasses, then handed them to her. "Here, I picked these up for you at your apartment."

"Thanks." She took the glasses, her cheeks flushed as she used the hem of her pale gray sweater to clean the lenses. Finally, after what seemed like a torturous, jaw-grinding eternity, she slipped them on and looked back up at him. "What will happen when we get there?"

Mason tried to control it, but he knew the smile curving his

mouth had more than a little of his wolf in it. "Let's just get you there in one piece," he rasped in a low, uneven tone that had her beautiful, wary eyes going wide. "Then we can figure out what comes next, Tor."

"I like the way you call me that," she murmured, looking surprised by her admission. "Nobody's ever called me Tor before," she added awkwardly, running one hand through her hair in a nervous gesture that drew his eye. Yesterday, her hair had been braided, but today the lustrous tresses fell past her shoulders in a wild, silken mass of deep, dark red. He wanted to see her hair like that when she was under him, the fiery locks flowing over his pillows like a silken wash of crimson that caught every shimmering shift of light, while her eyes went heavy, clouded with pleasure—the image so erotic, it nearly took his breath. His mouth twisted with a wry grin, and Mason shook his head at his unprecedented reaction to her. "You do know that this is going to be hell on me, don't you?"

"What is?"

His gaze rolled down the delicate lines of her body, lingering over the precious, provocative details, while his pulse roared in his ears. "Being near you."

"Oh," she breathed out softly. Mason could hear her fear in that single word, as well as caution...but there was also a touch of satisfaction, of *interest*.

He hoped to God he could control himself, because it was that last part that was going to kill him.

She was on the petite side, making him feel like a damn giant beside her, but for some reason it only upped his excitement. Since the day he'd first satisfied his body's need for sexual release, Mason had adamantly avoided women her size, always feeling clumsy around them, too aware of how much bigger he was, how easy it would be to get too rough with them.

But not this time.

No, the primitive, wild side of his nature was raising its head and howling with feral anticipation, breathtaking fantasies burning like molten, flame-red embers through his mind, until she made a small, nervous sound in the back of her throat.

Before he could say something to reassure her, Jeremy walked over, flicking a quick look at the sturdy silver watch on his wrist. "It's getting late. If you two are ready, we should hit the road."

"Yeah," he agreed, knowing they needed to make the mountains before nightfall. "Let's get out of here."

A minute later they were packed up in a rugged black Tahoe, the mud caked on its bumpers and wheels attesting to the mountain cabin Mason had mentioned. The interior smelled of luxurious leather and warm, male musk, as well as the earthy scents of the forest, making Torrance want to draw the heady mix into her lungs and hold it, enjoying something that was so elementally appealing—and yet so different from anything she'd known in life. Jeremy had offered to drive, snuffling a soft laugh under his breath when Mason readily accepted the offer and climbed into the backseat with her, making the large space seem almost cramped with his long legs and broad shoulders, not to mention the warm, vibrant energy that surrounded him.

"How long will the drive take?" she asked as they headed west, toward the mountains that ran through western Maryland and eastern Virginia. A steady case of nerves jittered through her system, and she found herself rubbing her damp palms across the tops of her thighs, toes curling girlishly within her shoes.

"Shouldn't take more than a couple of hours, but it depends on traffic." Mason sat with one arm braced along the door, dark eyes scanning the street, probably watching to see if they were being followed. He looked dark and dangerous, as if he could handle whatever life threw at him, reminding Torrance of how thoroughly opposite they were from each other. Yet she couldn't deny that being close to him felt impossibly right. The fear was still there, she knew—but her powerful, breathtaking attraction to him continued to battle against it, demanding her focus.

Noticing the dark circles under his eyes, as well as the lines of strain that bracketed his sculpted mouth, she said, "You look tired."

Another wry grin tipped the corner of his lips as he laid his head back against the seat. "Not sleeping for two days will do that to you."

"You stayed up all night watching the house?"

"Yeah," he rumbled, and then, as if he wanted to change the subject, he said, "Do you have any family? Anyone who will want to know where you are?"

"No, my mother died when I was twenty. There's an aunt and uncle somewhere, but we've never kept in touch. I haven't seen them in more than a decade."

"Friends?"

"Only ones through work, and Mic will let them know that I've...gone out of town. What about my apartment?"

"I've sent a crew in to clean up," he explained. "I asked them to pack up some clothes for you, so they should show up sometime tomorrow."

"That'll be good. Michaela loaned me these for today, but they're all I've got." And they obviously didn't fit right. Mic had a killer figure...while the growth spurt Torrance had always hoped would round out her hips and chest had never arrived. Still, she loved the outfit Mic had let her borrow, the flowing skirt and soft cashmere sweater making her feel like a gypsy.

"You should have your stuff tomorrow by noon, at the latest."

She nodded, and a softly charged silence settled between them, while they stared across the short space separating their bodies in the backseat. The country music Jeremy had turned on played softly in the background, and time just seemed to slip away. Torrance didn't know how long she just looked at him, soaking up the mouthwatering, masculine view that made her feel all hot and hectic inside, while his heavy-lidded eyes moved over her face, before finally settling on her mouth. The longer he stared, the more her lips tingled.

"You should get some rest," he finally murmured. The low, scratchy sound of his whiskey-rough voice shivered across her skin, melting through her senses, giving her that hot-beneath-theskin feeling again. "The last two days have been hard on you."

She laid her head against the seat and closed her eyes, willing herself to relax—but she could still feel Mason's dark eyes watching her, taking in the rise of her chest, every slow, calculated breath that she forced herself to take. Knowing that she wouldn't sleep, she finally opened her eyes and said, "Do you mind if I ask some questions?"

Mason lifted his brows, looking somewhat cautious, while Jeremy called out from the front seat, "Let's hear 'em, doll face."

She rolled her eyes at the outrageous nickname, but couldn't help grinning. "Well, you said yesterday that you were different from Simmons. Other than the obvious—I mean, he's a total creep and you guys seem relatively sane—how are you different from him?"

With his elbow propped on the door, Mason rubbed his long, scarred fingers across his mouth and stared out the window as he explained. "We're wolves—werewolves, like him—but we've never been part of our birth pack. Before Simmons went rogue, he was a full-fledged member of the Silvercrest Lycans." Something in his tone warned her that this was...shaky ground, but Torrance didn't back down. No, she needed to get as good a handle as she could on what she was dealing with here. "Why aren't you members?"

Jeremy steered the SUV onto a two-lane highway, then spoke up before Mason could answer. "Because we're halfbreeds, meaning one of our parents is human and one is Lycan, or werewolf. In mine and Mason's case, our mothers are human and our fathers are wolf."

"So your werewolf fathers married human women?"

"Yeah," Mason replied, his voice mild despite the tension riding his big, powerful body.

Shocked by this bit of news, Torrance took a moment to simply watch him, appreciating the way the afternoon sun shone through his shaded window, putting him in a soft, natural spotlight. She liked the way his ragged jeans hugged the hard, thick muscles of his thighs. Liked the way the soft flannel he wore fit across those wide shoulders and the rigid biceps in his powerful arms. Heck, despite her fear of what he was, she'd be lying if she said she didn't like it all, the whole unbelievable package.

Realizing she was staring at him again, she jerked her gaze back to her lap. "Your mothers must be pretty amazing."

"They are definitely that," Jeremy agreed, sending her a lopsided grin in the rearview mirror when she looked up at the sound of his voice.

Glancing at Mason, she asked, "So what are your parents like?"

"Attached at the hip," he snorted, turning his head back toward the window after a fleeting look in her direction. A golden streak of vibrant sunshine cut briefly through the now quiet storm clouds, setting the deep auburn tones of his hair alight. Her fingers tingled with the blossoming desire to reach out and run her fingers through the windblown strands; feel their warm, silken heat against her skin. A heady, erotic vision of wrapping her fingers in that gorgeous hair and pulling him down for a hot, wet, openmouthed kiss burned through her mind, until his next words pulled her back to reality. "They're so wrapped up in each other, so in love, it's damn near disgusting."

Whoa. Something sharp and disturbing skittered through her system at his muttered words—and from the front seat, she heard Jeremy rasp a soft curse under his breath. Carefully, without inflection, she said, "You think love is disgusting?"

"Naw," he grunted, looking frustrated as he cut her a quick look from beneath his lashes, as if he wished he could take back the uncomfortably revealing words. "That's not what I mean."

"Then what is it about your parents' relationship that makes you..." Her voice trailed off, not knowing quite how to phrase her question. Despite the strange connection between them, he was still essentially a stranger to her.

"I love them. I think they're great," he explained quietly, his low voice barely audible over the heavy sound of the tires upon the road. His left hand flexed and fisted where it rested atop the hard-muscled length of his left thigh, revealing his obvious tension. There was something here, something important, but Torrance couldn't put her finger on it. "They're the best parents a kid could have ever had, and believe me, I gave them their share of grief."

Running the tip of her finger over a crease in the natural leather of the seat, Torrance followed the meandering line while trying to follow the path of his thoughts, reading the meaning behind both what he said...and what he didn't say. "So you love them, but something about them makes you uncomfortable?"

"Yeah, I guess it does," he admitted, blowing out a rough breath. "I think if one of them died, the other would just lie down and follow. It's like they...breathe life from each other." She watched his hand slide from his thigh, lying relaxed...and yet somehow expectantly on the seat between them...and her breath held, wondering if he would reach out and clasp her fingers, twining them together. Her heart lurched, feeling tight and heavy in her chest, her pulse fluttering like a schoolgirl's at the thought of holding hands with him—but she was honest enough with herself to admit that she wanted it. That she wanted this hard, rough warrior to reach out for her and simply hold her hand within the strength of his own, sharing his heat, his touch, the way he had in the parking lot. "I imagine growing up and witnessing that kind of commitment could lead to a person feeling one of two ways."

"Yeah?" She could feel his gaze on her finger, watching as she followed the crease in the leather.

"Hmm. You either crave the same kind of connection for yourself...or spend your life swearing that you'll never let yourself become so vulnerable."

He gave a low grunt, which she supposed was all the reply she was going to get, then crossed his arms and turned his attention back to the repetitive line of trees beyond his window.

Wrapping her arms around her middle, Torrance stared out her own window, at her lap, the back of Jeremy's blond head, wondering what to say next, thankful when he hit the indicator and began pulling off the highway.

"We're going to need to stop and fill the tank in this baby before we go any farther."

They pulled into a station attached to a roadside diner, and Mason immediately opened his door, giving the impression he was making an escape. "I'll grab us some coffee. Sit tight." And just like that, he was gone.

Torrance chewed on her lower lip as she thought about their odd conversation, and as if they had a will of their own, her eyes tracked his progress across the small lot, following his long, masculine movements with an avid, hungry absorption. She loved the thick muscles that flexed against his jeans as he moved, the shape of that incredible ass, and the bulge of his bicep as he pulled open the door. Loved the way the wind blew the dark strands of his hair around his head. Loved the rugged cut of his jaw and the sharp profile of his nose.

"If you weren't such a scaredy cat, you'd be throwing yourself at him, enjoying him for as long as you could have him," she whispered under her breath, fully aware that it was true...and hating it. The guy could have *any* woman he wanted—hell, he probably *did* have any woman he wanted—probably had them morning, noon and night. Yet here he was, with her.

It didn't make any sense, because if she'd learned anything in life, it was that a handsome face didn't stay for the long run. With a sharp pang in her chest, she remembered Clint, one of the few men her mom had dated whom she'd liked having around. He'd been so sweet and attentive, playing games with her, taking them on outings—but eventually he'd left, just like the rest of them. No matter how much they'd seemed to enjoy her charismatic mother, in the end they'd all moved on. Every single one of them. And Torrance had learned from the lesson.

Men didn't stay.

If she got past her fear and became involved with Mason Dillinger, there was every chance she'd end up with her heart broken. She knew it. He'd grow bored with her, and then he'd wander. She'd seen it happen so many times as a child, she knew the routine by heart.

It didn't matter that he ignored the perky blondielocks behind the counter of the diner who kept swishing her double Ds in his face. And damn it, why was she even thinking about it? It's not like she...wanted him. Right?

And if you're buying that one, Watson, then you're a gullible idiot...as well as a liar.

Not enjoying that train of thought, Torrance focused on listening to Jeremy hook the nozzle of the pump into the gas tank, then nearly jumped out of her skin when his fingers rapped on the passenger-side window. She reached across the seat, lowered the glass and he crossed his arms inside the frame, one golden brow arching when he caught her strained expression. "Something wrong?"

She made a low sound of disgust, jerking her head toward the diner's front window, where Mason stood waiting for their order while the blonde made eyes at him. "Do women always melt over him like that?"

Jeremy's chest rumbled with a soft laugh. "Yeah, but don't let it bother you, Torry. None of them have ever mattered to him, and Mason isn't the type to fall in love and then wander."

"Jeez, Jeremy," she wheezed, completely stunned. "Who said anything about falling in love? I don't believe in love at first sight. And he doesn't even *know* me."

"Oh, he *knows* you." His hazel gaze sparkled with humor, smile lines crinkling sexily at the corners of those mischieffilled eyes. "If you don't believe in love at first sight, then call it good ol'-fashioned *lust at first sight*. But it's more than that. Finding a mate isn't like being randy or having a bad case of the hots, though there's no doubt that the hunger is there. It's more...*intense* than that. Now that he's found you, it's not a matter of another woman turning his head—because she won't." He paused for a moment, as if carefully weighing his next words. "He could take another woman, but it wouldn't be because he wanted her. He'd have to make himself do it, and in doing so, know that he was destroying the bonds he'd made with you—and that would be like ripping his heart out."

Something in his voice was too personal, as if he spoke from experience, but he didn't offer an explanation...and Torrance wasn't about to pry.

"So, um, what exactly do you mean by 'mate'?" she asked, feeling dazed by his strange words.

He gave her an odd, piercing look, rubbing his hand over his gold-stubbled chin. "I thought Mason might have explained that back at the shop, while you two were chatting in the parking lot."

She shook her head, whispering, "Must have escaped his mind."

The blond's mouth twisted into a boyish smile. "Well, in our world, each male and female has a perfect other half, a life mate, who...completes them, as corny as that sounds. There are still those who believe that humans can't really be mates to wolves, but they're full of shit. I've seen too many successful unions not to believe that species doesn't matter. All that matters is what's inside."

"And you think that Mason believes I'm his...mate?" she croaked, swallowing an uncomfortable lump of surprise.

"I don't *think* it, Torrance. I *know* it. You *are* his—which is why Simmons will be so intent on having you. The bastard suspects you're special, because Mason wouldn't risk putting a woman in the middle of a Bloodrun unless he had no choice. In this case, he doesn't."

Her laugh sounded nervous and fragile even to her own ears. "I guess we'll have to see about that."

"Trust me, honey, he wouldn't have pulled you into all this if he wasn't completely convinced. It'll all work out in the end. Just take a deep breath and take it one step at a time."

"That may be easier said than done," she muttered.

"I don't know," he drawled. "Something tells me you're the kind of woman who can do anything she sets her mind to."

Hah! Little did he know. Right now she felt like a woman who wanted to go and hide under her covers for about the next...say, twenty years. Needing to pull her mind off Mason and mates and masochistic werewolves who were trying to kill her, she said, "Can you tell me more about a Bloodrun?"

Jeremy nodded, the look in his eyes warning that he knew she was changing the subject but was going to let her get away with it for now. "Like Mason told you before, Bloodruns are what we do. If we want the chance to become a part of the Silvercrest pack, we have to kill a given number of rogue Lycans. When we reach that assigned number of kills, we can quit Bloodrunning, or hunting, and become members of the pack."

Her brow furrowed as she asked, "And so you're still trying to reach your given number?"

"Naw." He grinned, flashing her his killer smile. "We both completed our required kills a long time ago." His shoulders lifted in a casual shrug. "This is what we do. We were raised with the pack, so we know exactly what they're like. Even when we were kids, they treated us like something to be ashamed of and swept under the rug. We couldn't care less about becoming a part of Silvercrest."

Torrance wondered if that was true—and despite the terror that filled her at the thought of an actual werewolf pack, her heart broke for the two boys who had been excluded because of some stupid, idiotic prejudice. She wanted to ask more, but Mason came through the door of the diner, carrying a drink holder that held three paper cups of coffee in one hand and a paper bag in the other.

"Nothing fancy," he rasped in his whispery baritone when he reached the Tahoe, climbing into the backseat. "But I grabbed us some doughnuts to go with the coffee since we've missed lunch."

"Thanks." He handed her one of the sticky pastries and a cup, and she took a cautious sip, careful since she knew it was hot. "Oh, man," she moaned. "I really needed this."

"Yeah, me, too," he said, wiping a smear of glaze off his lip with the back of his hand.

Too on edge to sit in silence with him while Jeremy replaced the fuel pump—especially after everything she'd just learned— Torrance searched for something to say. "So, is your cabin near your pack?"

He paused in the middle of taking a bite, saying, "They're *not* my pack."

Despite the mildness of his tone, his bitterness rang through loud and clear. "You really don't like them at all, do you?"

"I'm nothing as far as they're concerned."

"Then why do you keep Bloodrunning for them?"

Raising his brows, he cut her a questioning look. "How do you know that I do?"

Torrance took a bite of the doughnut, surprised at how good it was, the sugary glaze melting over her tongue. "Simmons said as much yesterday, and I had an insightful talk with Jeremy while you were getting the coffee."

"I'll just bet you did," he grunted, making another one of those totally male snorting sounds.

"I can guess he probably has a pretty sordid reputation when it comes to women," she drawled, grinning. "But to be honest, he was a perfect gentleman."

"Especially with you keeping your eagle eye on us," Jeremy laughed, sliding his long body back into the driver's seat. "I'd be willing to bet my favorite body parts that he had one eye on us the whole damn time he was in there, Torry." Jeremy sent her a smug grin in the rearview mirror. "Mason doesn't trust me as far as he could throw me."

"Shut up and drink your coffee, you ass."

The blond snickered, taking a sip of the steaming brew, before changing the radio to a soft rock station.

They merged back onto the highway while "Sweet Home Alabama" played quietly from the speakers, and Torrance waited before saying anything else. They finished up the doughnuts and sipped from the huge cups of coffee for a while, but when the lag in conversation seemed to thicken, a sense of uneasiness overcame her. Was he just the strong, silent type? Or was he irritated over the questions she'd asked about his parents? She didn't know how to read him or his moods, but she wasn't going to just sit there with nothing but her nerves for company.

"So this Simmons guy," she blurted out, more sharply than she meant to. "He really hates you, doesn't he?" Torrance winced a little on the inside, thinking that she really needed to work on her conversational skills. Talk about rusty!

"The feeling's mutual," Mason drawled with a hard smile.

"You're enemies. You're the hunter—he's the one being hunted. I get the whole dynamic, but..."

"But what?"

She shrugged, trying to put her finger on it. "His hatred seemed more personal than that."

"Death is a pretty personal thing, Tor. Simmons knows that Jeremy and I have been hot on his trail. His time's running out. If I hadn't been more concerned with making sure you were okay yesterday, I'd have gone after him then and ended it."

"Still, I think there's more to it."

His head tilted a bit to the side, gaze shadowed by long lashes that most women would have killed for, but looked perfectly masculine on him, giving his gaze a sexy, decadent look. "What are you asking?"

She thought about it for a moment, trying to follow the niggling thread in her mind. "He hated you before this Bloodrun, didn't he?"

He nodded, waiting for her to continue, while Jeremy pulled off the highway, taking the Tahoe onto a rural, private road that cut through the forest, and they started to climb the mountain.

Pulling her lower lip through her teeth, she said, "He told

me that you took something from him, and now he was going to take something from you."

His dark eyes cut back to the window, tension all but pouring off him in waves. "Five years ago, I killed his younger brother."

"Oh." A stupid response, but that wasn't really what she'd been expecting. She'd thought, at the time, that maybe Simmons had been referring to a stolen girlfriend, a job...a prime piece of real estate. She hadn't been expecting a dead family member.

Mason blew out a harsh breath, then explained. "As Bloodrunners, our main focus is on rogues, those who turn dark who begin using humans as a food source. But, we're also charged with keeping the Lycans' existence secret. Simmons had a brother whose tastes ran to the...extreme. He hadn't gone completely rogue, but the bastard started picking up underage humans, boys and girls...and *treating* himself to them. We hunted him, tracked him down, and caught him in the act. He fought back. Resisted our attempts to take him back to the pack for punishment."

"The jackass wasn't willing to take what the pack would've dished out," Jeremy added. "So he attacked Mason."

"And you killed him," she concluded. "In self-defense."

He took another long, slow sip of his coffee. "I sure as hell did, and enjoyed every minute of it. That sadistic asshole had it coming for what he'd done to those kids."

Torrance went over the story in her head, looking at it from different angles. "So," she murmured, "that's probably why Simmons went rogue."

"Huh?" He jerked so hard, his coffee sloshed out onto his thigh, making him curse.

Turning in her seat, Torrance curled her right leg underneath her body as she faced him. "He not only holds you responsible for his brother's death, but he probably blames humans for his brother's weakness, for getting him in trouble to begin with. Over time, that blame turned to hate...and the hate could have led to...what he's become. Not to mention the messed-up stuff he told me about his parents. No wonder he and his brother turned out like they did. That is one messed-up family."

He didn't respond. Just stared at her, like he was trying to figure her out, solve a puzzle, unravel a code.

"Don't you ever question why one of your kind turns?" she asked, unsettled and a bit embarrassed by his intense scrutiny.

"Why?" His broad shoulders lifted in a stiff shrug. "It wouldn't change their fate. They turn, they die."

"But it could help to understand their motivations," she explained in a soft voice. "Even if they're inherently evil, like Simmons. Or insane...like Simmons. It could help to make sense of things, see them for what they really are."

"It could help, yeah—but the end is still the same."

"It can't be easy," she murmured, wanting to keep delving deeper, uncovering his secrets, discovering more as she peeled back the layers one by one. But she knew he wouldn't make it easy. "The constant hunting must wear you down."

Another sip of coffee, followed by a roll of one shoulder. "Most end quickly."

"I imagine they do. You're...intense about your job."

His hand stroked his jaw with a lazy motion as he stared at her from beneath his thick lashes, a strange, dazzling mixture of humor and lust suddenly spreading over his "dark angel" face. "I'm intense about a lot of things." He sent a slow smile to keep company with the provocative words, and Torrance felt that smile deep inside with a physical jolt.

Then he reached out and covered her hand with his, curling his long fingers into her palm and rubbing his callused thumb over her knuckles.

Her breath caught, and something inside her melted at his

touch. She didn't know if she believed in all that mate talk, but she knew she didn't want to turn away from this before seeing exactly where it would lead. She just had to find the courage to see it through.

"You're worrying too much. And you're staring," he said with a boyishly crooked grin, his tone deep and dark and low. He drew in a slow, uneven breath, then another, and she knew he was pulling her scent into his lungs, savoring it. The eroticism of the act made her tremble, while her palm went damp around the heat of the coffee cup she still held in her other hand. "It's going to be okay, Torrance. I won't let anything happen to you. And I won't hurt you."

"It's not that. It's just that...even though I'm a bundle of nerves, I can't deny that I like looking at you." She was surprised at her bold admission, but lifted her left shoulder in a shrug that said *so there*.

It was a nice, warm, fuzzy kind of feeling to see his eyes flare with surprise at her words, his rugged face taking on a hard, hungry cast that told her just how badly he wanted to be alone with her—and she knew she should have been terrified. But she wasn't. Mesmerized? Definitely. But for some reason, she wasn't afraid. The sensual line of his mouth parted the barest fraction for the evocative rush of his breath, and his fingers squeezed hers tighter, drawing her eyes. "You have the most beautiful hands," she murmured, meaning it.

Strong, rugged hands that led into powerful wrists. He'd pushed up the sleeves of his flannel and she could see that even his forearms were beautiful, with thick, healthy veins running between hard muscles and dark, golden, hair-dusted skin.

"They're scarred and used," he muttered roughly, and she couldn't help but smile at the tone of his voice. She'd embarrassed him, the sharp crest of his cheekbones flushed a dull red, and it charmed her clear down to her toes. "That's part of what makes them beautiful," she whispered, setting down her coffee, then running the tip of her index finger along an angry-looking scratch that slashed across the back of his fist, where a heavy vein had thickened, cutting a dark line beneath his sun-darkened skin. She turned his palm over, rubbing her thumb across his lifeline, and his body vibrated with a fine tremor as he sat beside her, the sinew and tendons in his forearm going rigid, as if he were struggling to hold himself in check.

Casting a quick glance from beneath her lashes, Torrance glimpsed a hard expression etched with hunger, his eyes dark... almost wild, lips parted for the harsh force of his breathing.

He was turned on. By the touch of her fingers upon his hand.

A sense of wonder spilled through her, like a comet rushing across the sky, vibrant and shimmering against the infinite blackness of space.

He started to say something, but whatever he would have said was drowned out by some sort of guttural cry. Or had it been a howl? It was eerie...terrifyingly stark. The kind of thing that made your stomach flip and every hair on your body lift in alarm—reminiscent of childhood fears and things that went bump in the night.

Mason tensed at the demonic sound, and from the front seat she heard Jeremy mutter a low, foul, four-letter word.

The same coarse word repeating itself over and over in her mind.

"Mason," she whispered, clutching on to his fingers so hard she imagined them turning white within her grip, and he set down his coffee. "Wh-what the hell was that?"

"Sounds like our pal Simmons is paying us another visit," he rasped in a low, lethal slide of words, at the same time the forest filled with an entire range of those earsplitting, bonechilling cries. "And this time, he's brought friends."

Chapter 6

Jeremy hit the gas and the SUV roared ahead, but they couldn't outrun the guttural, demonic howls. The bestial sounds kept pace with the speeding Tahoe, following from the shelter of the trees bordering the private road as it grew steeper, meandering its way through the thickening, sundappled woods.

Torrance jerked hard to the side, slamming against her door as Jeremy took a bend too fast. Mason cursed hoarsely as he reached out, pinning her back with a rigid, muscled arm, holding her in place. She tried to brace herself, when an earsplitting crash boomed up ahead, and Jeremy slammed on the brakes. They came to a jarring, metal-screeching stop that had her seat belt cutting across her shoulder and abdomen, knocking the air from her lungs as her body lurched forward, then jerked back against the seat.

"Goddamn tree in the road," Jeremy muttered, jamming the

flat of his hand against the steering wheel. He turned in his seat, looking past them, through the back window of the Tahoe. "There's another tree down a few hundred yards behind us," he growled. "We're going to have to fight our way outta here."

"Looks like it," the man sitting at her side agreed, his voice lower, more guttural than before, with something dark and violent roughening the edges of his speech.

Another howl echoed sharply through the dense, enclosing woods, sounding far too close for comfort. The wind surged, blowing low-hanging branches against the roof like sinister claws, scraping Torrance raw with fear—and she knew Mason could scent it. With a low rumble, he pulled her into his side and pressed a hard, quick kiss against her mouth. "I want you to get down on the floor, Tor, and no matter what you hear, you are *not* to get out of this car."

The touch of his mouth left her reeling, but she managed to stammer, "Wh-what... What are those things out there?"

She didn't know what she expected him to say. Torrance *knew* what they were. But in some illogical corner of her mind, she thought maybe she'd hoped he would tell her something like killer bunny rabbits...or even rabid chipmunks. Something small and relatively nonthreatening. Something you could shoo away with your foot if they got too close.

She just wasn't ready to accept the fact that they were being slowly surrounded by howling, meat-eating werewolves ripped straight from her nightmares.

Blowing out a rough breath, Mason brushed back a curling wisp of hair that had stuck to her cheek, the tight smile jerking at the corner of his mouth somehow comforting her, even though she was breaking apart inside. "There's nothing out there that Jeremy and I can't handle, I promise you. I only just found you, Torrance. No way in hell am I going to let anything happen to you." She tried to smile at that, but only managed to wobble her mouth. "What should I do?"

His dark eyes scanned the surrounding trees beyond the windows of the SUV. "Exactly what I said. Stay down and keep quiet."

"Can't you call someone to come and help us?"

"No time for that," he answered grimly.

"C-can I have a gun?"

"I never take guns into the city with me, and it won't do you any good anyway, angel." He looked back at her, rubbing his knuckles under her chin in a tender gesture so at odds with the banked fury etched into the rugged features of his face. "Bullets may slow one of us down, but they can't kill us. We can bleed out if cut up enough, but the only way to really make sure we won't heal from our wounds is to snap our spinal columns or separate our heads from our shoulders. Just in case you were wondering how to get rid of me," he added lightly, giving her a playful wink.

"I'll keep that in mind," she laughed shakily, caught off guard by his unexpected teasing. He turned to open his door then, and she clutched at his arm, grabbing on to the firm bicep beneath the soft flannel of his shirt. "Mase?"

He looked back at her over his broad shoulder. "Yeah?"

The words tumbled past her lips, soft and fast. "Is it too late to go back?"

"Back home?" His dark brows drew together as he stared at her, waiting for an answer.

Torrance shook her head, trying to stay calm, but perfectly aware that she was terrified beyond belief. What was so amazing, though, was that most of her fear centered on the man in front of her, who was about to leave the shelter of the Tahoe and put his life in danger to battle against the monsters. She still didn't understand the connection between them, the unsettling mixture of fear and hunger that drew her to him—but she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she didn't want to lose him. "Back to the beginning," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Before this started happening."

He grunted under his breath. "If not today, it would have landed in your lap sooner or later, Tor. Nature would have brought us together, no matter how hard we tried to fight it or avoid it."

Her fingers tightened, nails biting into rigid muscle. "It's not the two of us finding each other that's bothering me! It's the thought of something happening to you—of you getting out of this damn vehicle and never getting back into it again!"

"You're not going to lose me. Just let me get us home alive," he rasped, leaning over and stamping another hard, searing kiss across her trembling mouth that would have been delicious if she wasn't sick with fear. "Then I'll show you that there *is* something good about all of this. That having me in your life isn't going to be all blood and battle."

She nodded numbly.

"I want you stay down and out of sight." Long fingers grabbed her chin, forcing her to hold his hard stare. "Do you understand me?"

"Okay, okay. Just..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't make me wait too long."

He gave her a hard grin, and then he was gone, the door slamming with a dull thud of finality that made her wince. Then the shivering began deep inside her body, before rushing through her, until her teeth were chattering so hard she sounded like a set of castanets.

The forest had grown eerily quiet, but Torrance knew the monsters were out there, watching them like vipers camouflaged in the leafy floor, lying in wait before striking. Beyond the dark windows of the SUV, she could see the shimmering shades of dusk, streaks of purple and pink splashed like watercolors across the canvas of the sky, and her breath caught at the brilliant display of beauty. How could a moment so aweinspiring be filled with so much terror? How had a week that started out so ordinary, so routine, end up containing the most amazing hours of her life?

She didn't know, didn't understand, didn't have the answers. All she knew was that she wanted the chance to figure it out. To discover the truth of what had happened to her, and what it all meant. What it would take to get over her fear, if such a thing could be done—and what the dark, outrageously intense Mason Dillinger really wanted from her.

And if they made it out of this alive, Torrance had every intention of finding out.

Forcing himself to stay calm, Mason watched through the SUV's window to make sure Torrance followed his orders. Having been through this drill before, he and Jeremy took their stations, Mason on the passenger's side, Jeremy on the driver's. They braced their legs, then flexed their long arms out at their sides, allowing their hands to transform. Bones cracked and snapped into position as they lengthened, skin molding itself to the new structure, while long, lethally sharp claws pierced through their fingertips with a slick, sibilant hiss.

He was ready. Ready to kill. Ready to protect what was his. Then he would get his mate to immediate safety. He knew he needed to stay levelheaded and cool, but the icy claws of fear were digging into his gut, and there didn't seem to be any way to shake the sheer "emotion" of the situation. Always before, he'd operated, functioned, on pure instinct and training. Emotion didn't weigh into his fighting. Emotion didn't weigh into *anything* in his life. And now his goddamn claws were rattling at his sides, fury pounding hard and swift through his system, making him want to tear something apart.

You're screwed, Dillinger.

Yeah, on a personal front, he was in some deep shit. But as the branches began swaying off to his left, he knew he was about to be offered the perfect outlet for his rage.

"Come on, you sons of bitches," he grunted under his breath. "Let's get this over with."

His lips curved in a grim smile of anticipation, as the first one came at him in a blur of dark, midnight-black, leaping from the dense foliage that swallowed the lower portion of the tree trunks. His body relaxed at the same time his instincts sharpened, and he countered the first volley of slashing claws with an ease that told him Simmons's lackeys had yet to be properly trained. They were also young.

It was the lack of training and experience that made them easy takedowns. Even when in human form, the Bloodrunners possessed preternatural strength—and they were trained with deadly skill in physical combat. Without proper training, not even the fully shifted Lycans' impressive height and mass could ensure them victory in battle against the Runners.

Mason took the first wolf down with a hard kick to its gut. It lurched to its knees, and he wasted no time grabbing its furry skull and jerking the beast's head sharply to the right, breaking its neck in a clean, fast strike.

Before the werewolf had even hit the ground, the second assailant rushed him from his right, swiping long, curling claws at his head. He growled as the creature lunged for his throat, its jaws gaping, and spun his body, striking back with a side kick that smashed the wolf's genitals. It was a dirty move, but then so was attacking in full wolf form when the sun had yet to set. Simmons obviously wasn't the only Lycan dayshifting who shouldn't be, and the implications were enough to make Mason's blood run cold.

"These bastards are really starting to piss me off," Jeremy shouted from the other side of the Tahoe, fighting off his own set of attackers, as it became increasingly obvious they were outnumbered. In the past Mason had always thrived on challenges such as this, but not this time. Not today. Not when his human life mate was hiding in the Tahoe, terrified out of her mind.

His eyes scanned the trees, looking for the next attack, and he saw a familiar mangy ruff of ginger fur just before his third assailant rushed him in a head-on assault.

Oh, man, he should have expected this. Alan Curry, one of Simmons's longtime pals and partners in crime.

"Shit," he snarled, knowing damn well that Curry was going to be a bitch to take down.

The werewolf threw his entire body at him, crushing him into the front passenger's side door, and it took every ounce of strength Mason possessed to throw him off. Then the asshole moved in again, landing a round kick to his chest that knocked the wind out of him, really pissing him off. He kicked back, slamming Curry on his hairy ass, and smiled coldly, drawing from the anger burning through his veins. Curry gained his feet quickly, but Mason was already on the offensive, striking with his claws again and again, following him as he retreated toward the back of the SUV. The massive werewolf lunged for his side, but he swiveled on the balls of his feet, and the beast's strike missed its mark, long claws screeching ominously across the sleek black metal of the Tahoe's back door.

"Let's put an end to this thing, Burns!" he roared, disliking the fact that both sets of doors were now unprotected, with his partner fighting at the front of the vehicle and him at the back. Curry made another lunge for his gut, and he countered with a front kick that sent the wolf stumbling back on its hind legs. "What the hell do you think I'm doing? Playing Parcheesi?" Jeremy snarled a moment later, sounding outraged as he came around the back of the Tahoe from the driver's side. "I just put the last of mine out of its misery and ran off two more." Coming to a stop by the left taillight, Jeremy whistled under his breath when he saw who Mason was faced off against. "Well if it isn't Simmons's little gofer boy," his partner snickered. "I should've known that foul odor belonged to you, Alan." Sniffing the air, Jeremy shook his head with disgust. "You bathing in vinegar nowadays to cover your stink or what?"

The ginger werewolf growled in response, watching him with a cold black gaze, its massive chest heaving as it slowly backstepped while Mason advanced. They'd been waiting for Curry to turn rogue for months now, and it looked as if their wait had finally come to an end. He recognized that dead look in the wolf's eyes all too well.

"Did you get Simmons?" he asked his partner, keeping his eyes on Curry.

"Get him? I haven't even seen him," Jeremy grunted, just before a powerful wall of dark red fur sprang from the trees, slamming the blond into the side of the SUV. At the same time, Curry rushed Mason, taking him to the ground. From the corner of his eye, he saw a golden wolf join in the fight against Jeremy, while Curry fought to get his long claws around his neck. Planting his feet in Curry's gut, Mason flipped the massive werewolf over his body, sending him flying through the air.

A low noise came from the Tahoe, and Curry lifted his muzzle in interest as he sluggishly gained his feet, sniffing at the air. He drew in a slow, deep breath, then flashed his signature sadistic smile. "Are you hiding your little bitch in there, Dillinger?" he asked, making a smacking sound of anticipation. "Simmons said she's all mine if I can get my hands on her and I'm gonna make it last, bite by bite." "Come on, Curry," he rasped, flexing his claws at his sides. "I've been waiting to take your head off for years."

The werewolf came at him hard and fast this time, throwing a roundhouse that landed in the center of his chest, sending him flying backward until he slammed into the trunk of a towering pine. Mason hit the ground hard, on his knees, pissed that he'd let the bastard get in such a good shot. Aware that Jeremy still had his hands full with the other two wolves, he knew he needed to work fast and take Curry out of the equation. He took a step forward, planning his attack, when the engine cranked, roaring to life, and the Tahoe reared back. Its wheels screeched as it slammed into Curry's massive body and knocked the Lycan twenty feet through the air, until he finally landed with a dull thud in the middle of the road.

What the...?

For a moment, Mason just stared in shock, unable to believe that Torrance had disobeyed him. He wanted to drag her out from behind the wheel and turn her over his knee, but he didn't have the time. He needed to get to Curry—who lay slumped in the road, silent and still—and break the bastard's neck, but Jeremy was in too much trouble. The wolves had come at him hard, the side of his shirt already covered in blood from where he'd been savagely clawed. Growling low in his throat, Mason lunged for the red wolf, taking him to the ground, then quickly twisted its massive head until he heard the final snap of its spinal column, like a sharp, resonating crack.

Getting back to his feet, he swiped the back of his arm across his forehead, wiping away the salty sting of sweat running into his eyes, and watched the impressive sight of Jeremy striking claws with the remaining golden wolf. Mason was ready to tell his partner to put an end to it, when he heard metal screech, and turned just in time to see a burly charcoalcolored wolf perch on the roof of the Tahoe, one claw-tipped arm battering at the windshield.

"Torrance," he rasped, feeling the angry rush of blood drain from his face.

Everything that happened after that seemed to move in excruciatingly slow motion. With wild eyes, he watched Torrance throw open the driver's door just as the reinforced windshield groaned under the hammering force of the Lycan's fist. She stumbled over one of the fallen bodies, her terrified eyes burning a deep green in the paleness of her face. Mason's legs were already running in her direction, but Jeremy was closer. His partner quickly slammed the golden wolf against the nearest tree, then lunged for Torrance.

They were both within a few feet of reaching her when Curry smashed into Mason's side, at the same time the bastard from the roof leaped onto Jeremy, taking a sharp bite from his throat. Jeremy staggered to his knees, his expression stunned while blood poured down the side of his neck, soaking into his T-shirt.

"Torrance!" Mason roared, fighting off Curry while a terror unlike anything he'd ever known ripped through him, sizzling and sharp, scraping him raw. "Get back in the goddamn truck!"

But she didn't seem to hear him. She stared at the gray wolf standing over Jeremy, and the next thing he knew, she'd picked up a fallen branch near her feet, rushed forward and whacked the Lycan in the back of his skull like a ballplayer swinging at a pitch. Mason shook his head, unable to believe his eyes, and knew he was going to kill her when he got his hands on her if the bastard didn't get to her first.

Fighting off Curry's slashing claws, he bellowed a bloodcurdling sound of fury as he watched the gray wolf turn away from his wounded partner...and leap onto Torrance, catching her in a roll that ended with the mangy beast on top of her, pinning her to the ground. She screamed, bucking beneath the werewolf's body, the branch falling from her hands, and Mason felt the fury of his own beast struggle to break free, despite the golden smear of the sun still hovering low on the horizon.

"No!" he growled in a savage roar, power surging through him like a rising wave building across the surface of the ocean. His fangs burned in his gums as he threw Curry off, wrapping his claws around the bastard's throat and twisting so hard, his head actually ended up parallel to his shoulders. Still roaring, Mason threw off Curry's heavy weight, ready to leap on the gray wolf pinning Torrance to the ground, when the golden Lycan Jeremy had thrown aside sprang forward, taking the gray wolf with him as they rolled end over end across the road.

Mason rushed toward Torrance, who'd already scrambled to her feet, her expression dazed as she stared at his clawtipped hands. "What the hell were you doing?" he snarled, wanting to shake some sense into her at the same time he wanted to kiss her senseless.

"Trying to help," she offered weakly, staring with a mixture of awe and utter terror between the fighting Lycans and his claws. The look of horror on her face was so wrenching, that for a split second he almost allowed his hands to reform. But just as quickly, he squelched the knee-jerk reaction. Protecting her was more important than scaring the hell out of her and deep down, he refused to be ashamed of what he was. If they had any chance at all for a future together, she was going to have to learn to deal with his dual nature, which meant claws and fangs and fur, as well as a vicious need to protect what was his.

Mason wrapped her in his arms, ignoring the way she flinched, going rigid against his body, and lifted her off the ground as the two werewolves rolled over the hard asphalt, slashing and snapping at each other. They were too evenly matched, until the one who'd attacked Torrance reached out for one of the small boulders that lined the rustic road and slammed it into the temple of his golden opponent. The younger wolf slumped to the ground, knocked unconscious, as the other stood up on his hind legs, turning to look at them with a malicious snarl curving his muzzled mouth. Mason lifted his upper lip and growled, backwalking toward the Tahoe, while keeping one eye on their remaining threat. When he felt the door at his back, he set Torrance on the ground, opened it and snarled, "Do not get out of this goddamn car!" as he tossed her up into the backseat.

"I'm going to enjoy having a go at that one, after I tear your head off, Dillinger."

Mason stared at the gray wolf without bothering to make a response. It had been a close call with Torrance—too close and he still didn't know how badly Jeremy had been injured.

This bastard really needed to be dealt with quickly.

Moving with a speed and strength that had come from years of training, he leaped through the air, landing two feet in front of the wolf, then immediately kicked out with his right leg, wiping the beast's legs out from under its towering body. The werewolf landed on its back, but was already springing up when Mason twisted with a powerful roundhouse, knocking his booted heel into the muzzled jaw, grinning with stark satisfaction when he heard the sickening crack of bone. The creature howled, a sharp, garbling sound, its bottom jaw hanging crooked and bleeding, eyes wide with shock as Mason reached for its head and twisted its neck, separating its spinal column and ending its life in the blink of an eye. Before the warm body had even hit the ground, Mason was moving toward Jeremy, who'd managed to prop himself against the bark-covered trunk of a majestic maple. He allowed his claws to transform back to their human shape, and crouched down next to his scowling partner. "What's the damage?"

"I'm more pissed than anything," Jeremy muttered, his voice rough with disgust. Gritting his teeth, he pulled his shredded shirt away from his bleeding ribs. "It was stupid to let that bastard get a bite of me."

"I owe you one," he admitted gruffly, fully aware that Jeremy had risked his own safety in trying to get to Torrance.

"Hell, you owe me more than one," Jeremy drawled with a low, shaky laugh.

Lifting his nose to the wind, Mason took a long, deep breath, searching for that strong vinegar smell that had been on the wolves. "Everything we didn't kill has hightailed it outta here. But we need to clear the scene as quickly as possible."

Wincing, Jeremy pulled his shirt off over his head, revealing ribs that had been slashed on his right side. Balling the ragged fabric into a wad, he pressed it against the bloody wounds in the side of his throat. "Yeah, and then let's get the hell home. I'm in serious need of some of your secret stash of Lagavulin. After this shit, I've earned it."

Mason gave him a long, critical look of assessment. "I guess you're feeling better than you look, if you can be thinking about raiding my best Scotch."

"Aw, it's just a flesh wound," Jeremy shot back in the crisp tones of a proper British accent, repeating the classic line from his favorite Monty Python movie.

Mason's chest rumbled with a rough laugh, his relief sharp that the jackass felt good enough to crack a joke. It was going to take a few days before he was a hundred percent, but with their rapid-healing traits, he knew Jeremy would be back in fighting shape in no time.

Unfortunately, Mason wasn't so sure about Torrance. Won-

dering how he was going to go about soothing his fragile little human life mate, he headed toward the Tahoe.

Mason hadn't taken more than three steps when the back door opened and Torrance slid out of the backseat, her dark green eyes roaming the ground, pinging from one downed body to another. Once dead, a Lycan returned to its human form—and her surprise at seeing naked human corpses in place of the dead werewolves was evident in her stark, stunned expression.

Then she looked their way, and a sharp cry fell from her lips as she started running toward them. Mason opened his arms, ready to catch her, when she sailed right past him, falling to her knees beside a grinning Jeremy. "*Ohmygod*," she gasped, her small hands fluttering in front of her, as if she didn't know where to touch him without hurting him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, honey," Jeremy replied with a warm smile, making Mason roll his eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"If he can flirt with you," Mason muttered dryly, "I'd say that's a pretty good indication that he'll make it, Torrance."

Whispering loudly enough for him to overhear, she leaned closer to his partner and said, "Is he always such a grouch after he wins a fight?"

Hazel eyes glittering with humor, Jeremy somehow managed to both laugh and wince at the same time. "I think he's about to bust a jealousy gasket, so go easy on him, Torry."

She cast a quick look up at his scowling face, giving him a critical once-over, a flash of relief filling her expression when she eyed his human hands. "I think you may be right," she murmured, regaining her feet and moving a little closer to where he stood. "Thanks for—" her hand gestured over the horrific scene "—everything."

Mason studied the hectic color in her cheeks, the way she nibbled at the corner of her lower lip, and just like that, he nearly staggered beneath the torrent of hard, provocative images swimming through his head.

Aw, hell. Wiping at the sweat streaming down the side of his hot face, he wondered what kind of bastard it made him, seeing as how he was rock hard in the middle of so many corpses. Huh. Probably a really a sick one...with a *really* dirty mind.

He cleared his throat, trying to get past the uncomfortable lump of lust that was nearly choking him. "Are you okay?" The growl that rumbled with those words sounded thoroughly pissed, and he winced at the rough sound.

"Yeah, he didn't even scratch me," she told him with a wobbly grin. "So I won't be going furry anytime soon."

He still felt shaken, but managed to smile down at her with a crooked twist of his lips. "That's only if you're bitten, Tor."

"Really?" she asked with obvious surprise.

"Yeah," he drawled, shaking his head at her stunned expression. "Not everything you see in the movies is real, honey."

"Well, even though all of it nearly scared me to death, I'm fine, thanks to you." She gave him a shy smile, then looked him over from head to toe. "I can't believe it, but you don't even look like you got a scratch."

"I'll be feeling it tomorrow," he confessed with a deep sigh, knowing his body would feel battered and bruised. "Trust me."

She took a step forward, looking as if there was something else she wanted to say, when Jeremy pulled himself to his feet and joined them. "Looks like Simmons has been building his own little gang, and now he's got an army of head cases following him," the blond snorted, still pressing the balled up shirt against his neck, the cuts across his side streaming with crimson color, until the warm spill of blood met the waistband of his jeans, darkening the faded denim. "This must have been his goon squad demonstration."

"You sure you're gonna be okay?" Mason asked, eyeing the wash of red running down Jeremy's side. Generally, loss of blood from these kinds of injuries couldn't kill them, but it could make them sick as hell, sapping their strength. "Do you want me to call some meds down from Shadow Peak?"

"Naw, I'll live. Let's just wrap this up, get in the Tahoe, and get the hell outta here."

At the mention of the SUV, everything suddenly came rushing back at him, and Mason turned to stare down at the woman who'd managed to turn his entire life on its head and damn near give him heart failure, all within the mere span of twenty-four hours. God only knew what kind of havoc she'd end up creating by the end of the week, not to mention over the course of his lifetime. Her gaze flicked from him to Jeremy, then back again, and he smiled with grim satisfaction the second she caught his furious expression. "I thought I told you *not* to get out of the Tahoe," he rasped, trying to control the tremor of fury that settled into his throat at the thought of what she'd done.

"You didn't say anything about driving it, Mason," she pointed out calmly, blinking up at him with those big green eyes, making him want to throttle her for putting her life in danger. At the same time he wanted to slide his mouth over hers, tangle his tongue with her own in a deliciously wet, carnal act of dominance and possession, and kiss her rebellious little backside into submission.

He drew in a deep breath, tall body shuddering with anger and the lingering traces of abject terror at the knowledge that something could have happened to her. "At this moment," he stated in a silky murmur, "are you or are you not in the SUV, Torrance?"

Despite the lingering fear he could scent on her skin, her ex-

pression turned mulish and she crossed her arms, all but glaring at him while her toe began to tap against the road. "I didn't get out of the damn thing until they started breaking their way into it! Should I have just stayed there and let them eat me?"

He took a step closer to her, invading her personal space, but she didn't budge—and he couldn't help but admit that he was proud of the way she was standing up to him. Proud...but still pissed. "If you had stayed down, like I told you to do, then I would have gotten to them before they could reach you."

He paused to take a deep breath, getting ready to launch into her about the damn branch and the Lycan she'd used for batting practice, but she made a soft, feminine sound of irritation and muttered, "Why don't you just stop being an ass and say, 'Gee, that was really swell of you to try and help out, Torrance. Without you, I could have had my head chewed off.""

Jeremy wheezed under his breath, trying to stifle his laughter—not out of any sort of loyalty to him, Mason knew, but because it hurt like hell. "I was *not* about to have my head chewed off," he said grittily, insulted that she'd thought Curry and those other runts could get the best of him.

"That wasn't what it looked like from my point of view," she countered, her tone just as grim as his had been. "It looked—"

"Okay, kids, we need to save this delightfully entertaining...disagreement for later," Jeremy cut in, pushing his blond hair off his forehead. "Right now we need to clear as much of this off the road as we can, call for some cleanup, then get the hell home."

"I'll get Brody," Mason grunted, turning away to put in the call.

A few minutes later, when he'd finished on the phone and turned back around, he found Torrance moving in a slow circle, looking over the gruesome scene with a calm strength that astounded him, considering her fears. Then she came to a hard stop as she stared at the human body of the golden wolf who had, for some bizarre reason, apparently tried to save her.

"Ohmygod, I think he's still alive," she gasped in a hoarse rush, moving closer to the long, lean body that lay curled on its side, the chest moving slowly in and out. "He's still breathing!"

"What do we do with him, Mase?" Jeremy muttered under his breath.

"Hell if I know. We don't—"

"You can't do anything but take him back and make sure he's okay," his little redheaded hellion announced with firm conviction, dropping to her knees beside the young Lycan's body and checking his pulse. Her other hand lifted, brushing the thick chestnut locks back from a face that looked too innocent to belong to a killer—but Mason knew better than to take things at face value.

"Get the hell away from him, Torrance."

She cut a sharp look up at him, slim brows pulled together in a frown. "He's just a kid, Mason."

"He's also a killer," he barked, ready to reach out and pull her away. "And a monster, remember? One of the things you hate."

Anger washed over her features in a warm wave of crimson heat. "Hating and fearing are two different things. And he's not a killer," she argued, refusing to back down. "He saved me, and you're going to help him."

Mason snorted a harsh sound of disgust. "Says who?" "Says me."

He arched both brows high on his forehead, wondering how a woman could be so full of contradictions. She was fascinating, obviously—but Mason had a grim feeling she'd spend the rest of her life keeping him on his toes, if not running him through the emotional wringer. "And if I don't?" "Then I'll help him on my own," she vowed, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared back at him.

"I knew it," he rasped, planting his hands on his hips and shooting her a baleful glare through narrowed eyes. "I damn well knew you were going to be trouble. The second I caught your scent in that damn café, I knew you'd end up *complicating* everything!"

"Me?" she gasped in outrage, surging to her feet so that she could poke him in the chest with one pointed finger. "You insufferable jerk! Since meeting you, I've been attacked twice, had my apartment trashed, my workplace vandalized, my friends terrorized and been forced to put up with your mercurial mood swings."

Jeremy made a rough, choking noise at her back, as Mason's irritation escalated. "I do *not* have mood swings."

Torrance snorted. "Hah! Tell that to anyone who knows you!"

"She's got a point, Mase," the blond drawled.

"You want me to leave you out here to bleed to death?" he snarled, glowering at his grinning partner.

"Don't listen to him, Jeremy. He's just...cranky."

"Oh, damn," Jeremy snickered, the low laughter quickly turning into a groaning sound of pain as he clutched at his side. "Stop making me laugh, woman! I'm in shreds over here."

"Will you both just shut up?" he muttered, and then, in a softer tone, he stared down at her and said, "You know, you're awfully lippy for someone who's supposed to be afraid of me, Tor."

Her mouth compressed into a hard line as she continued to glare at him. "I'm too irritated to worry about being afraid right now."

He wanted to say more, but his cell phone began buzzing on his hip. "Dillinger," he clipped out, after flipping open the phone.

"Hello, Mason." The connection was crap, crackling and

weak, but he knew it was Simmons. "Did your little honey girl enjoy her mountain welcoming party?"

"Yeah, it was a blast," he drawled, mouthing the bastard's name to Jeremy and Torrance, who were both watching him closely.

"I just wanted to make sure she knew what she was getting into with you. And, of course, it's fun putting you in my place. How's it feel to be the hunted one?"

"You can only hunt something that runs, Simmons. You want me, you know where to find me. Unlike you, I'm not chickenshit enough to hide like a coward."

"*Ah-ah,*" Simmons scolded. "Make me angry, and I'll do more than just kill your little redheaded plaything the next time I get my hands on her. I'll give her a taste of what a real man is like. Then eat her while she's still warm from coming."

His fingers tightened to the point that the phone made a metallic groaning kind of noise, grinding and sharp, but he forced himself to remain calm. "I'm afraid we've thinned out the numbers of your new little psycho party of assholes. Looks like you've been a busy boy lately, Simmons. What's the problem? Can't find a woman who will put out for a useless piece of dick like yourself, so you've decided to play gang leader?"

Despite the poor connection, he could easily hear the harsh blast of Simmons's angry panting. "My followers embrace the truth, Dillinger."

"And what's that?" he drawled, keeping his tone cocky. "The fact you're a pathetic bastard who tries to make himself feel like a man by preying on those weaker than himself? Yeah, you're some hero," he snorted.

"That we should become what we were destined to be," the rogue snarled, the words tremoring with his rage.

"Monsters?" he laughed, purposefully goading him.

"Gods!" Simmons roared, and there was no mistaking the madness in his maniacal tone. "The deliverers of death."

"We're men, you ignorant jackass. The only one with a God complex is you, and you're screwed in the head."

"We are the beasts," Simmons countered in a calmer tone, obviously striving for control. "The kings. And they are nothing more than a petty food supply. Human nature is weak, Dillinger. How long did you think it would hold us back from realizing *our* true nature? From what we crave?"

"We'll see how kingly you feel when you're tracked down like the dog you've become," Mason promised in a quiet rasp. "And in case you're too thick to fully understand what I'm saying, I'll spell it out for you. I'm coming for you, Simmons, and when I get you, you're dead."

"You may have taken down my foot soldiers, but not even you and Burns together managed to kill me, Dillinger. I'm not afraid of you."

Mason smiled, the hard curve of his mouth almost cruel. His hatred for the rogue was strong enough that he could feel its ugly presence weighing heavily in his gut; the kind of hate that could poison your soul. "Then that's your second mistake."

Simmons chuckled softly. "Oh, yeah? And what's my first?" "Daring to touch my woman."

With those parting words, he disconnected the call.

Chapter 7

After the bodies had been hidden in the woods, where Mason explained a second set of Runners would later deal with the remains, he used a heavy chain and the Tahoe's powerful engine to drag the fallen trees off to the side of the road. Then they'd loaded the unconscious Lycan into the backseat with Jeremy, and Torrance had ridden up front with Mason while he drove the rest of the way up the mountain. It didn't take them long to reach what he called Bloodrunner Alley, where he and the other Runners lived. Mason had described the Alley as a secluded, slightly sloping glade, surrounded by the wild, natural beauty of the forest, housing only the Runners' individual residences, since they lived separately from the Silvercrest. There were ten cabins in all, though not all of them were currently being used. And despite the fact they had to go into human civilization to stock up on goods (refusing to buy them from the pack), they had all the modern amenities, from power

to hot water and high-speed Internet access, just like the Silvercrests' town of Shadow Peak, built higher up the mountain.

According to Mason, to an unsuspecting human eye, Shadow Peak looked like any other small mountain community. Only the inhabitants knew the truth about the locals, and they seldom encountered unwanted visitors. Still, as a precaution, there were scouts posted for the town throughout the forest, to alert them to any humans who came near, traveling the mountain roads. When she'd asked if the Alley had scouts, as well, he'd said no, explaining that they were so well hidden, they didn't need them.

He'd also explained that both the Alley and the town itself were built on private land that had belonged to the eldest pack families for centuries, with access only by private roads that were clearly marked. And even when they left the mountains, the Lycans and Bloodrunners blended well into the human world, complete with driver's licenses and Social Security numbers. Even their genetic makeup cloaked their true identities, as there was nothing in their DNA to alert the medical world of their species. The only real threat to their existence came from the rogue wolves, who threw the laws which kept the Lycan world safe by the wayside in order to satisfy their baser hungers.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, Torrance had hoped for a clear view of the Alley, but by the time they arrived, the sun had long since dropped behind the treetops. All she could make out was the outline of several large, rusticlooking cabins.

They parked in front of the nearest one, and while Mason carried the teenager downstairs, Torrance took the opportunity to look around the spacious, high-ceilinged room.

The inside of the rustic dwelling fit its owner to perfection. Rugged and intensely beautiful, with a masculine flavor that sported two sturdy leather sofas situated before a rock-walled fireplace, and handwoven rugs in deep shades of burgundy and gray scattered over the deep, luminous gleam of hardwood floors so dark, they looked black. Recessed lighting cast a low, golden glow over the warm interior, an invitation to snuggle up on one of the deep sofas before a roaring fire and enjoy the soothing atmosphere. A faint scent of cedar and wood polish hung on the air, combined with the earthier scents of the forest beyond the wide windows.

The cabin spoke of both taste and necessity, rugged and natural like the surrounding woods, but with a rich, masculine edge to it, invoking a comfortable state of luxury.

Bloodrunning was apparently more lucrative than she would have thought. Torrance grimaced a little on the inside at the knowledge that Mason Dillinger had both looks and money which seemed to set an even greater divide between them. Even if things somehow worked out between them, she knew that trying to keep him would be like trying to lasso the moon or reach up and touch the shimmering sparkle of a star. Unattainable, always hovering beyond your reach—and yet something you couldn't keep yourself from wanting.

"It's beautiful," she murmured when she heard the men coming back into the room, their heavy boots thudding against the wooden floor. She ran her fingertips over the rich brown leather of the nearest sofa, enjoying its buttery-soft texture.

"Would you like me to make you something to eat, or grab you a drink?" Mason asked, his deep voice raspy, roughened around the edges, and she could feel the heat of his body at her back. "The tour can wait until tomorrow."

"Wow, be still my heart," Jeremy laughed, and Torrance looked sideways to see the battered blond leaning back against the wall beside an open door, a stairway lying within the shadowed recess. "An offer of both food and drink before you whisk her away. You really know how to lay it on, Mase. I don't think I've ever seen you this charming before, bro."

"This is his charming act?" she gasped, trying to pull off an expression of shocked surprise.

Jeremy winked at her, earning a low, rumbling growl from the man still standing just behind her. "It's sad, I know, but for Mason, damn. Usually he just grunts at a woman and she'll follow after him like an adoring puppy."

"Just what I wanted to know," she drawled, her voice dry.

He lifted his broad shoulders in an unrepentant shrug, hazel eyes shining with laughter. "Like I said, he wasn't exactly Prince Charming before meeting you. I gotta admit that it's refreshing to see the new Mason. Though I'm sure his sense of humor is still warped as hell."

"And yours isn't?" Mason muttered with a sharp snort of disgust.

"Naw." Jeremy grinned, waggling his brows at Torrance. "I'm an angel in disguise. All pleasure...and no bite. Unless, of course, a woman wants me to bite her."

A hard, heavily muscled arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her back against the intense heat and strength of Mason's body. Torrance automatically stiffened at the contact, but he didn't release her. He just held her there, trapped at his front, with his body warm and solid against her back. "Stop flirting with her, you idiot."

Jeremy whistled softly under his breath, eyeing the arm banding her middle with a speculative gleam in those smoky hazel eyes. "I forgot to add *possessive* to that stellar list of personality traits he's acquiring."

Torrance looked over her shoulder to see Mason send his teasing partner a sharp look of warning. "Now that I think about it, Burns, maybe I should give our little Jillian a call. Your neck looks pretty bad." "Who's Jillian?" she asked.

"The pack's Spirit Walker," Mason replied in a lazy drawl. "She's a holy woman of sorts, and their healer."

And something more, she'd be willing to bet, based on the closed look that crept over Jeremy's golden face at the mere mention of the woman's name, leaving his once-laughing countenance hard and shadowed.

"I'll live," the blond grated under his breath.

"You sure about that?"

Ignoring the taunting question, Jeremy moved away from the wall. "I'm heading down to bunk with the boy wonder," he muttered, before his teeth flashed in a teasing smile. "You two little lovebirds have fun." He pulled the door shut behind him, whistling a tune that sounded suspiciously like *The Love Boat*'s theme song.

Torrance stared at the door until the whistling became too faint to hear. "Man, he's subtle, huh?"

"As a freight train," Mason grunted under his breath.

And just like that, they were alone, standing silent and still in the softly lit room, with only the ticking of the clock on the far wall to note the passage of time. A thousand thoughts and emotions swirled through her mind, urgent and soft—strangely, disturbingly intense—but all she could think to say was, "Do they have enough room down there?"

He gave her a quick squeeze, then released her. "When I moved in here, I made the basement into a small guest apartment for out-of-state Runners when they're in the area." He punched in a series of numbers on the illuminated alarm panel beside the front door. A short beep signaled the alarm had set, and he turned toward her, propping his shoulder against the wall, watching her through heavy-lidded eyes. "Jeremy's got restraints in the bag he carried in, so he'll be able to keep the kid where he wants him."

She shifted nervously beneath the intensity of his stare, unsure of what to do with her hands. "I hope he'll be okay."

Mason made a noncommittal gesture with one shoulder, then turned and headed through one of the archways, toward what Torrance assumed would be the kitchen. Before she could decide whether or not to follow him, he'd come back in, carrying two bottles of beer. He handed her one, the bottle cool and damp against her palm, a white frosted vapor rising from the open neck. "Come on," he rumbled, inclining his head toward the shadowed hallway at the far end of the room. "If you're not interested in food right now, I'll go ahead and let you get settled in."

Torrance hesitated, running the tip of one finger over a dogeared copy of Patterson's latest Alex Cross novel that lay on one of the wide, wooden end tables. "I, um...wanted to apologize for losing my temper earlier," she told him. "And if I forgot to say it before, thank you for not letting them have me."

"No thanks required." His mouth kicked up a little at one corner, easing some of the red-tinged rage left over from the fight, the hot emotion still casting that hard, fury-darkened shadow over his features. As if trying to appear nonthreatening, he leaned his shoulders back against the wall and took a long swallow of his beer. With the thumb of his empty hand hooked in the front pocket of his jeans, he made the perfect visual for the ultimate bad boy. Rugged and tough and mean, with a breathtaking edge of masculine beauty, a body that would make any hot-blooded woman melt on sight, and eyes that revealed a dangerous, predatory sexuality. And then, to top it all off, there was that wicked, mischief-made smile that did breathless, naughty little things to her insides.

She shook her head at her contrary, amazing reaction to him. "Well, I meant it. Most men wouldn't have risked their life that way for a stranger." She could see the arguments that he wanted to make in the brown depths of his eyes, the words bitten back, left unsaid: He wasn't most men; he didn't consider her a stranger; and it was because of him that Simmons was after her in the first place. He seemed to struggle for a moment, and then, sending her a devil's grin, he finally said, "Why don't you come a little closer and show me just how *grateful* you feel right now?"

"I'm not *that* grateful," she retorted in a slow drawl, amazed that she could enjoy this easy banter with him, even knowing what he was.

Knowing he was one of the things she feared most.

And yet...she felt safe. Felt as if she was where she was supposed to be, which made no sense at all.

"Can't blame a guy for trying," he replied with a low, husky chuckle, moving to her side and herding her toward the hallway with his warm hand on the small of her back. As if sensing her resistance to go with him, he moved in front of her, taking her empty hand to pull her along behind him.

"Mason..."

He spoke without looking at her. "You're thinking too hard, Torrance."

"I hope you have more than one bedroom back here," she breathed out in a choppy rush, "because I'm not having sex with you. And I'm not sleeping in the same room with you, either."

He stopped in front of her so quickly, she plowed into his back, smacking into a solid wall of warm, firm muscle and sending beer splashing over the rim of the amber bottle.

"Why?" he asked gruffly, his eyes burning oddly bright in the deep shadows of the hallway as he turned toward her. She had a vague impression of closed doors farther along the walls, and a wide bay window at the far end, covered by long, sheer swaths of muslin. "Because of what I am?" Torrance swallowed, her throat dry while her mouth watered at the sight of him standing there, proud and strong in the moonlight, wearing a hard expression that didn't quite manage to conceal a surprising edge of vulnerability. "Th-that's part of it."

"Bullshit."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

He stared at her with a heavy-lidded gaze, then slowly nodded his head, as if coming to some sort of realization. "You heard me," he said, the words soft.

Torrance returned his intense stare with wide eyes, not a clue what to say.

"You know what I think?" he asked silkily, stalking closer to her, his dark eyes burning in the thick shadows. "I think you want me, and that scares you more than knowing what I am. I'm beginning to think you're not all that afraid of me. And even if you're not ready to have sex with me, I think you should get in that bed with me and let me show you just how much you *do* trust me, Tor."

Something trembled through her. Something that felt entirely too much like need—and she struggled to smash it down into submission. "You actually think sl-sleeping in the same b-bed tonight is a good idea?" she stammered.

Mason gave her a slow, arrogant nod, the intense look of determination stamped across his rugged features daring her to argue. "I think it's the best damn idea I've ever had."

Rolling her shoulder, she tried to hide how nervous she was how tempted. She took a deep breath, and his scent enveloped her, like warm, summer sunshine and a deep green forest, all earthy and rugged and clean—even though he was still a little hot and sweaty from the fight with the rogues. "I'm sorry. I...can't."

A rough, quiet sound jerked from his throat. "You know, you weren't this nervous around me on the drive here."

"That's because we were in a car," she muttered under her breath. "Not heading to your bedroom."

His eyes, so dark and rich and full of life, glittered with sinful intensity. "Honey," he rumbled with a low chuckle, "I hate to shatter your illusions, but there's nothing I can do in a bed that can't be done in a car."

Her lips parted, but words seemed to fail her, dissolving on her tongue like snowflakes.

"Stunned you into silence with that, huh?" He laughed, studying her as he rubbed one hand against his whiskery jaw. Finally he blew out a rough breath and said, "Look, believe it or not, I like my bed partners to be a little more willing. You don't wanna have sex? Fine. I can respect that. But you're *still* sleeping with me, in *my* bed. I can't protect you otherwise."

Oh, yeah. Torrance seriously doubted that *willing* was ever a problem for a guy like him. "I just... This is all... It's just that my head is spinning, trying to understand everything that's happened since yesterday," she tried to explain. "I still don't even really know what you want from me."

"All I want is to keep you safe. Come on." He sighed, and she followed him down the hallway and around a corner. They stepped through a door into what was clearly his bedroom, where she caught a shadowed impression of a beautiful, massive sleigh bed and sturdy wooden furniture. He turned on a low light and turned back toward her. "All you need to do is trust me a little, Tor," he said quietly, as if trying not to spook her. "Do you think you can do that?"

The second she stopped fidgeting and nodded her head, Mason took a step closer, feeling a pull from the middle of his chest that made him want to keep going until he had her plastered against him, all warm and soft and willing. He could see the questions in her eyes as her gaze got trapped in his stareand he knew she felt it, too. Knew that she was caught by the same glowing force that wrapped around his heart.

"Are you sure this is just for protection?" she asked softly. "You're not afraid that I'll try to run out on you again, are you?"

"You can try, but it won't work," he told her, fighting back a rough bark of laughter at her disgruntled expression.

"Would you trip me again?" she asked, lifting her brows.

A slow, wry grin tugged at his mouth. "I'll never live that down, will I?"

"Not in this lifetime," she told him with a crooked smile.

He gave a gruff chuckle at her drawled words, then sobered, watching her for a moment—thoroughly enjoying the view. "Yeah, well," he rasped, wondering if she could feel the brutal heat, the sheer savage possessiveness of the hungry stare he spread across her skin, "I wasn't letting you get away." The air between them thickened, swollen with expectation, like the next wave of thunderstorms he could hear building in the distance. "And if you tried to run—"

Exasperation quirked the soft curve of her lips. "Honestly, Mason, do you really think I'm stupid enough to run, now that I know the score?"

"Torrance, you barely even understand the game," he countered, his voice full of gravel and gentle bite, "and I'm not giving you the chance to bail on me again when things get..."

Russet lashes lowered over smoky green. "Scary?"

"I was going to say complicated."

"Oh." She laughed, and he watched as a soft wash of color crept over her face. "Sorry."

Reaching out, unable to help himself, Mason ran the back of his knuckles against the softness of her cheek, wishing he could put her at ease. When she didn't pull away, he brushed his thumb over the crest of pink in her cheeks, marveling at the exquisite silkiness of her skin, the beautiful arc of her cheekbones and that provocative beauty mark that he wanted to touch with his tongue. He breathed deeply and found more of her earthy scent on the air, rising with the heat of her body. It surrounded him, easing into his pores until he felt steeped in her, drunk on the hunger.

Aware that he was shaking apart inside, he lifted his other hand and ran his thumbs over the fine arching slopes of her brows, the fragile skin beneath her eyes, the corners of her trembling mouth, before cradling her throat in his palms. Slowly, giving her time to tell him no, if that's what she wanted, he leaned down and feathered his mouth across hers. And that was all it took. She moaned against his lips, lifting her hands to clutch at the thickness of his wrists, and he was lost. The awareness of just how dangerous this was slammed through him, and he knew one kiss wasn't going to be enough. He needed *more*. Needed all of it. All of her.

"Torrance," he growled, and what started out as a slow, damp slide of lips and shared, soughing breaths, sharpened instantly into something wild and explosive. Her taste hit his system like a life-altering drug, making him tremor as he struggled to stay in control. With a rough sound of craving, Mason thrust his way into the moist, delicate silk of her mouth and tasted. Her palate. The smooth inner curve of her cheeks. Her tongue and the slick enamel of her teeth.

With the need to penetrate her in every possible way crawling up his spine, biting at him with insistence, he claimed her mouth with tender aggression, feasting on the succulent flavor, capturing her tongue when she dipped into his, sucking on it. Raw, scraping sounds of demand vibrated in his throat, while the waves of lust battered through him like the stormy surge of the tide against the fragile shoreline of a beach, reshaping him into something unfamiliar and different. Had any woman ever felt this soft against him? This warm and vibrant and alive? This deliciously addictive, such that he craved her with every cell of his body? As if he'd never get enough of her?

"Son of a bitch," he cursed thickly, his hands still clutching at her throat, holding her in a gentle trap, her body vibrating against his with a low, erotic frequency that nearly brought him to his knees. "It's too good. You taste so sweet, Tor." She moaned in response to his growled words, and he took one last hungry stroke at the slick, inner surface of her lower lip. Then slowly, because it hurt like hell to deny himself something he wanted so badly, Mason put his hands on her shoulders and took a step back. She released his wrists, and his head lowered, hanging forward, while he struggled to get a grip on himself.

Air rushed from his lungs in a jagged rhythm, like he'd just finished a long, grueling run through the forest. Putting a mental chokehold on the hungry need burning in his gut, Mason jerked his head toward the connecting bathroom door. "Why don't you go on and grab the first shower."

She pulled her lower lip through her teeth in that sexy way she had of doing, the look in her eyes warm and mysterious. "Okay. I'll just...um—"

"Hold on a sec." From the top drawer of his dresser, he pulled out an old concert T-shirt that had grown baby soft from countless washings and offered it to her. "Here, you can put this on to sleep in."

"Thank you. I hadn't even thought about that. Are you sure you don't mind?" she asked, sounding cautious, as if he'd just offered her a ring instead of a shirt.

Shaking his head at her hesitation, Mason choked back a laugh. "Go ahead and wear it, Tor. I swear it isn't some secret werewolf ritual that means you're stuck with me forever or anything." Reaching out to take the shirt from him, Torrance grinned at his teasing comment and turned toward the bathroom, only to spin back around, and the question just fell from her lips, surprising her as much as him. "What does it mean, being a life mate?"

He paused in the act of pulling off his T-shirt, a stunned look in his dark eyes. "Where did you hear that?"

She lifted her brows at his disgruntled tone. "Where do you think?"

His breath made a soft, whistling sound through his teeth as he pulled the shirt over his head. "Jesus. I need to muzzle that jackass."

"Don't you think *you* should have told me?" she asked, trying not to drool over the sight of his naked chest—but damn. He was, without a doubt, the most breathtaking thing she'd ever seen. Harshly, ruggedly beautiful, his body reminded her of an ancient Celtic warrior, scarred and bronzed, rippling with muscles and power, formidable in size and strength. He simply stole her breath.

"I was going to tell you," he said through gritted teeth, looking adorably irritated...and maybe even a little bit embarrassed. He lifted one arm to rub at the back of his neck, muscles bunching, and her mouth went dry, while a hazy, sumptuous swirl of desire poured through her belly and limbs, making her all quivery and warm. She was melting inside, like taffy left out in the scorching heat of the noonday sun. "But I'm still trying to figure out how to explain it."

He sounded nervous, which made her want to smile. "Can you at least try? I mean, what are we supposed to do? What happens to us? Is it just based on a physical attraction or is it more than that?" She paused, working up the courage, then softly asked, "Are we meant to fall in love eventually?" "We stay together, forever. Get married, have a family. But it's a chemical thing. Metaphysical. Whatever you want to call it," he muttered, blowing out a harsh breath, clearly uneasy with the conversation as he emptied his pockets, dumping the contents on top of his dresser before sitting down on the side of the bed. "Love has nothing to do with it, which is just as well, since I'm not wired for it, anyway."

Torrance didn't understand why those words held such destructive force for her, but they did, slamming into her stomach with a heavy weight of disappointment. "Right," she murmured, pulling her gaze away from him. "I guess I should have expected that from a guy like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that we're strangers thrown together because our bodies like each other," she offered with a small shrug, wishing she'd never started the conversation. She'd have been better off not knowing. "I don't know why I thought it would get...emotional. Just forget I said it, okay?"

"Not likely," he grunted under his breath.

She ignored that, and though she meant to turn around and get the hell out of there, she heard herself say, "So it's supposed to affect both of us?"

"Are you trying to say you don't feel it?" he snorted, the rude sound grating on her last nerve.

"No." She sighed, wondering why these things kept flying out of her mouth and at the same time trying to ignore the effect of his half-naked bod on her pulse rate. She was trying like hell not to ogle him, but it wasn't easy. "I'm just saying that if it's a Lycan thing, why is it affecting me? I'm not a..."

"Monster?" he supplied, the cut of his mouth grim as she jerked her gaze back to his. He looked hard. A little angry. Vulnerable? Which made no sense, since he had all the power here. Didn't he? "I wasn't going to say that," she whispered, hating the vicious tangle of emotions winding her into knots.

"Just because you're human doesn't give you an escape route," he said, turning his attention to unlacing his boots. "Believe it or not, we're more the same than we're different. The same way it hits me, it hits you. You just don't know how to read the signs as well. Your sense of smell isn't as sensitive or highly developed. But, you're still going to feel the effects, Torrance. And the longer you fight it, the more you'll suffer."

Yeah, she could believe that. She was suffering right now breathtaking swells of desire rolling through her, sizzling and sharp. With wide, avid eyes Torrance gave in and moved her greedy stare down the strong column of his throat, across the broad, beautiful expanse of his chest. Oh, man, talk about a delicious visual exploration. She felt like a glutton seated at a Roman banquet. Her gaze kept going, discovering the rugged scars that slashed across the dark perfection of his skin, hating that he'd been hurt, the pain that he'd suffered...but profoundly proud of the signs of his courage and valor. He led the hard, brutal life of a warrior, and yet, he could be tender, too, and the combination was devastating to her senses.

"So...when you...I mean..." she stammered awkwardly, until she finally just made herself say, "Do you...have sex... like..."

He choked back a coarse laugh under his breath, his broad shoulders shaking. "Like normal people?"

"I didn't mean it like that." She frowned, her frustration mounting as she lifted her gaze from his chest to glare at him. "Stop putting words in my mouth."

He held her stare for a moment, looking as if he was carrying on an internal debate, then finally said, "Sex *can* be dangerous, which is why a Lycan has to learn control. It's hardest for a pure-blood. Their beasts are more...feral. Less easily managed. Not a problem when sleeping with another wolf, but it can be tricky with a human partner. If he's too rough and she bleeds, the beast can awaken...and bad things can happen. So, you learn to control it."

"How did you learn to control yourself?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

"My older brother and my dad," he rumbled with a low laugh, as if he were recalling a funny memory. "I swear they lectured me until I thought my head would explode, but I listened."

He slipped off the boots, bent to pull off his socks, then turned his head to stare at her through the thick fringe of his dark lashes, a reddish brown hank of hair falling over his forehead. She wanted to walk over to him, reach out and brush it back, just so she could touch him. "Have you ever had trouble controlling—"

"Naw, I'm a half-breed, remember?" he cut in. "I have better control than most Lycans."

Control. Right. Torrance figured she could probably use some of that at the moment, since her gaze had fallen back to the mouthwatering territory of his six-pack abs. She licked her bottom lip, spellbound, unable to look away. Bombs could have started falling from the sky, a modern-day blitzkrieg in the mountains, and she'd have still stood right there. Heck, she probably wouldn't have even flinched.

"Torrance."

"Yeah?" she rasped, forcing herself to drag her focus back up to his face. She got there just in time to see the corner of his mouth twitch. "I'm trying to respect your no-sex policy here, but if I'm going to keep my hands off you, then you've gotta stop looking at me like that."

"I'm trying," she whispered honestly, making his shoulders shake with a quiet laugh, followed by a groan that was low and throaty...and sexy as hell. "I'll just go, um, grab my shower."

"You do that," he grunted, falling back to the bed as he

threw one perfectly muscled arm over his eyes...and she could have sworn she heard him chuckling as she hurried toward the bathroom.

Torrance opened her eyes to the moonlit darkness, a stifled scream burning in her throat—and found herself lost in warm, chocolate-brown, a stare so hot, so possessive, her breath caught with a little hitch.

"Why are you holding me?" she demanded hoarsely, aware that she was wrapped up in the unyielding strength of Mason's arms.

"Damn it, don't look at me like that," he growled under his breath. "I'm not going to hurt you. You've been asleep for a few hours but started having a nightmare. When I tried to wake you up, you latched on to me. I wasn't trying to grope you in your sleep."

"Sorry," she whispered, suddenly realizing that she had her nails imbedded in his biceps. His powerful arms, capable of so much strength, held her carefully, his hands stroking softly against her back in an offer of comfort.

"You okay?" he asked, his deep voice gentle with concern.

"I... I don't know," she answered honestly, shivering not from fear, but the slow burn of desire in those mesmerizing eyes. Uncomfortable with precisely *how* comfortable she felt in his arms, she tried to move, shifting away from his body, but he tightened his hold and kept her in place.

"Shh..." he whispered, "don't pull away from me, Tor. I won't hurt you."

"I know. I'm sorry," she said thickly. "It's just an automatic response. The dream..." She closed her eyes, remembering the horror of her nightmare—Simmons's heavy weight holding her trapped, his meaty breath in her face—and her lashes grew damp with silent tears. "Don't cry, baby," Mason groaned, the words rough as he pressed the warmth of his mouth against the corner of her eye, kissing away the tears. "These nightmares of yours, will you tell me why you have them?"

"Why do you want to know?"

He tipped her chin up with the edge of his fist in time for her to see the deep look of tenderness that melted into his eyes. "Because I want to know you. Understand where you're coming from."

"I don't think it's from any one event, just a bunch of things all thrown together," she finally told him after a still moment of silence. "My mom had this thing about dragging her little girl off to gruesome horror movies so that she wouldn't have to go alone, whenever she was in between boyfriends, which was often. All she had to do was flash a smile, and they would let her take me in with her. I started getting easily frightened, and a few of her boyfriends thought it was funny. They got a kick out of trying to scare me. One of them even went so far as to make clawing sounds on my door at night, growling and snarling and making these eerie howling noises. He'd think it was hilarious when I freaked out, and my mom would yell at him. But she never kicked him out for it."

"These boyfriends," he rasped, a savage look of fury etched into his features, "they didn't...I mean none of them ever..."

She gave a little shake of her head. "No. Nothing like that. They just enjoyed scaring me. And I was so jumpy, it was easy to do. By the time I was a teenager, I thought having nightmares was just...normal."

"I'd like to get my hands on them. Give 'em a taste of their own medicine."

"Oh, man, I'd pay to see that." A small bubble of laughter broke free from the tightness in her chest, and he smiled at her. And just like that, Torrance felt a hunger for him unlike anything she'd ever known. There was a distant voice in her head warning her that this wasn't a smart move—but she didn't want to listen. She didn't want to hear any reasons why following through with this piercing urgency to get close to him wasn't a good idea. Shoving that irritating voice into the back of her mind, Torrance slammed a door on it and gave herself up to the desire rushing through her veins.

Feeling as if she was falling into another dream—this one urgent and sweet and intense—Torrance pressed her palms flat against the firm, scorching-hot surface of his chest. His heartbeat vibrated beneath her touch, healthy and strong, while his ribs expanded with his slow, deep breaths. She flexed her fingers, enjoying his sharp intake of air, the way he went silent and still beneath her touch, savoring her effect on him, marveling at its existence. There was hardly any give at all to the resilient muscles under her trembling fingers, and her body hummed with pure feminine appreciation.

Pushing a wavy strand of hair back from her cheek, Mason cuddled the side of her face in his rough palm, a tremor shivering through his hand that made her breath catch. She lifted her gaze and absorbed the stark, masculine beauty of his features in the ethereal beams of moonlight spilling through the bedroom windows—from the sensual, evocative shape of his mouth and the high cut of his cheekbones, to the sexy creases that crinkled at the corners of those mesmerizing eyes.

His body rustled against the soft, sleep-warm sheets as he propped himself up on one forearm and stared down at her, his thick bicep bulging beneath his dark skin, her head cradled in the crook of his arm. "If you don't want me to kiss you again," he warned her in a silken, seductive rasp, rubbing his thumb along the edge of her jaw, "then you need to tell me now, baby."

Torrance curved her hand around the back of his strong neck in answer, his skin hot to the touch, and with a deep, husky moan, his mouth touched hers. Like a match set to gasoline, the attraction between them burst into an explosion of hunger and need.

Mason pressed her back against the bed, covering her with the decadent warmth of his upper body, his mouth hovering over hers, so close...so deliciously close, it made her writhe with the urgent hunger twisting beneath her skin. She wanted him so badly that she ached. Wanted more of his heat—more of the heady, beautiful taste of his mouth that made everything deep inside pull tight...tighter. It was too much—and not nearly enough.

"More," she moaned, blinking in surprise at the breathy demand as it spilled past her lips, urgently aware of the impossibly hard, thick erection pressing against her thigh, the thin cotton boxer shorts he wore all that separated her skin from his.

He lowered his head and his low laugh rumbled against her cotton-covered nipple, sexy and rugged—full of pure raw, male desire. "Don't rush me, Tor. I want to take my time savoring you," he whispered, exploring her ribs as he pushed the shirt out of his way, stroking a thumb over the velvety indentation of her navel.

"Mmm," she purred, rubbing her skin against his, loving the contrasting textures, how hard and hot and big he was. Muscles rippled as he shifted closer, his heat pouring over her, that rich, musky scent filling her head. She gasped, the breathless cry melting into a long, husky moan as he nipped at the tender underside of her breast, his warm breath fanning her skin.

A thin, feathery sound filled her ears, and Torrance realized it was the rapid thread of her breathing, shallow and fast. Then his warm, large hand slid inside her panties, and she forgot to breathe altogether. His callus-tipped fingers dipped between her legs, finding her swollen and hot, embarrassingly wet—and a gruff, animal sound jerked from his throat.

"Th-that's not kissing," she gasped, shivering at the scorching, intimate touch. "Yeah, I know," he whispered with a ghost of a smile, his whiskey-rough voice melting her from the inside out, while the touch of his hand made her burn. "Just go with it, sweetheart. I won't hurt you, I swear."

"Mason," she moaned, whimpering...writhing, undone by the wealth of need pouring through her, hot and relentless.

He cupped her sex in a warm, possessive hold while his breath rushed from his lungs, heavy and rough with lust as he nuzzled the shirt out of his way and lowered his mouth to her breast, flicking his tongue against the swollen tip, making her cry out. "I can't get enough of you," he growled softly, tasting her with long, slow laps and sharp, suckling pulls that arched her back like a bow.

"Mase," she hissed, arching her back higher, pushing her nipple against the velvet roughness of his mouth, his breath warm and evocative against her tingling skin. The texture of his lips undid her, so damp and soft, when the rest of him was so brutally hard.

"Relax," he breathed against her trembling lips as he shifted higher, nibbling at her mouth, his taste filling her with so much hunger, so much craving, Torrance didn't know how to hold it all inside. It felt like it would shatter out of her, breaking her apart, too violent and strong to contain.

She held his stare, loving the dark, savage heat in his eyes as he urged her legs farther apart with his muscular thigh. Torrance made a choked sound in her throat as he teased the rough tip of his middle finger around the tender, slippery entrance to her body. His gaze burned into her, glittering with primitive hunger, his face flushed, lips parted, while that diabolical finger just kept stroking...and stroking. She shivered, twisting against his body, anxious for more...for everything.

One second she was writhing, and in the next, Torrance found herself stunned into a violent stillness as he buried that

thick middle finger deep inside of her. She moaned a low, deep shivery sound, deliciously aware of her body clutching greedily around him.

"Damn." He flexed his finger, and her inner muscles squeezed down on him even harder. "You're so small. Hot and wet and tight." A second finger pushed into her with ruthless insistence, stretching her, making her gasp, and Mason pressed his mouth to hers. "That's it, honey. You can take them," he growled, breathing the words against her lips. Then he pushed deeper, curling the long digits, rubbing against a dark, sweet spot inside of her that made choked sobbing sounds vibrate in her throat.

Fear and danger and nightmares were all forgotten beneath the intensity of such violent, consuming pleasure. Like an erotic master, Mason plied her body, his tongue sweeping hungrily into her mouth, thumb grinding wetly against her swollen, softly pulsing clit, thick fingers thrusting heavily into her slick heat...and she crashed over the edge. Crying out with the swift, molten rush of ecstasy erupting through her, tingling in her fingers and toes, blooming beneath her skin like tiny pinpricks—Torrance felt her world shatter apart. It went on and on, destroying her, until she finally slumped back against the bed, harsh bursts of air jerking painfully from her lungs.

She heard Mason whispering soft, husky, *urgent* words into her hair, but before she could answer, she drifted into sleep, wrapped in his arms...her cheek pressed to the heavy, violent pounding of his heart.

Chapter 8

"Mmm. I thought I smelled coffee."

Jeremy turned away from the bay window, where he'd been staring out at the forest, clearly lost in thought, and grinned at the sound of her voice. "You're so easy, Torry," he teased, those hazel eyes moving over her freshly scrubbed face in a slow, thorough look of male appreciation. "All it takes is the promise of a little caffeine, and you come running."

"You've found my weakness," she sighed, making him laugh as he moved to pour her a cup.

When she'd awakened, alone in the bed, she'd found three suitcases and four boxes full of her personal things stacked in a corner of the bedroom. Glad that her stuff had made it there so quickly, she'd pulled out a pair of faded jeans and a dark blue sweater, gotten dressed and decided to venture out of the bedroom.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee coming from the kitchen had lured her like the promise of honey to a ravenous bear.

"You take cream and sugar?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

Feeling chilled, she curled her sock-covered toes against the warm tiles of the kitchen floor. "A little of both would be great, please."

"Ya know, I'm thinking I won't mention this caffeine addiction of yours to Mason," he told her as he pulled the cream out of the fridge. "Not that I don't love him like a brother, but it'll be more fun watching him figure out his way to your heart all on his own."

Torrance winced at the mention of the man's heart, thankful that Jeremy's back was to her as he moved around the kitchen. She recalled all too clearly Mason's earlier explanation of how things would work between them. He'd made it perfectly clear that he'd share his body...and nothing more.

God, she'd been so stupid.

If she'd listened to the voice of reason whispering in her head last night, she'd have realized that with such a powerful connection between them, she wouldn't be able to separate her emotions from the physical hunger. Having his hands and mouth on her body had only intensified her feelings—and now her lust had already evolved into something *deeper*.

"Is he here?" she asked, trying to keep her tone neutral as Jeremy handed over a heavy mug and she took a seat at the table.

"Yeah, Mason's in his office," he told her, while he went about putting on a fresh pot of coffee, since they'd emptied the old one, "checking to see if we've had any leads come in from Covington. We've got a whole network of informants who're keeping an eye out for Simmons."

She asked about the boy, and Jeremy filled her in while he finished with the coffee. "He's been coming around slowly, so we're keeping a close eye on him. Mason's desperate as hell to get something out of the kid. Something that we can go on." Taking in her troubled expression as he sat down across from her at the gleaming pine breakfast table, he sent her a gentle smile. "Not to be a jerk and stick my nose where it doesn't belong, honey, but I can't help but notice the look on your face every time I mention Mase's name. Why do I get the feeling that things didn't go all that well last night?"

"No, everything's fine," she started to lie, but something in his earnest expression made her say, "That is, I asked him about us being...about that whole mate thing you mentioned. And he explained how it works." *Before blowing my mind with the most breathtaking orgasm I've ever experienced.*

"I'll just bet he did," the blond snorted, shaking his head. "God knows if anyone could butcher a talk like that, it's Mason. I'm not sure I even want to know what he said."

"He actually didn't say much," she admitted with a small smile, finding the laid-back Runner amazingly easy to talk to. "I think the gist of his explanation was that he intends for us to share a physical connection, but I shouldn't go getting my hopes up that he'll ever fall in love with me. According to Mason, he's not *wired* that way."

"Oh, shit," he groaned, flashing her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, honey, but only Mason could screw that speech up so bad. I love the guy like a brother, but he can be such a bullheaded ass."

"Why is he so dead set against caring for someone?" she asked, folding her cold hands around the sturdy mug to capture its warmth. She wanted—no, *needed*—to understand. Needed to understand what was going on in his head, so that maybe it could help her get a grip on her own jumbled, chaotic emotions.

Jeremy's usually carefree grin bled into a small frown at her question, the splash of sunshine beyond the window casting his shaggy hair in a pale-golden glow, his hazel eyes turning thoughtful beneath his straight, tawny brows. "I think a lot of it comes from how we grew up. God knows it affected us all, some in the same ways, some different. I guess we all thumb our noses at the pack for their refusal to accept us for who we are, and that's bled into how we live. We're always on guard. Always wary. Knowing Mase the way I do, I think he's terrified of what he could feel for you, if he gave himself the chance. And that's before you take into account what happened to his brother."

A cold knot of dread settled in the pit of her stomach at his words. "What happened to his brother?"

"Dean committed suicide eight years ago," Jeremy admitted quietly, staring into his coffee.

"Wh-why?"

The Runner blew out a harsh breath, then leaned back in his chair, tipping it back so that he balanced on the rear legs, his hands folded over his hard stomach, the wounds in his throat already showing remarkable signs of healing. "Dean had been mated and married for almost three years when his wife was killed in an accident. When one half of a bonded mating pair is killed, the sudden severing of the connection can drag their mate into a living hell. Usually they simply lose the will to live and slowly fade away—but in some cases, the rage over their loss consumes them, destroying who they were. When Dean lost Lori, he found himself so filled with fury that he worried over what he might become. To keep it from happening, he took his own life."

"He was worried that the grief could turn him, making him go rogue, wasn't he?" she asked, her voice quiet, her head and her heart hurting for what Mason and his family must have gone through. "He didn't want to harm anyone, and he didn't want Mason to have to track him down and kill him."

"Yeah," Jeremy rasped, shaking his head. "And Mason was

the one who found him. Since that day, he's sworn that he'll never end up like Dean did."

"So that's why he's so determined to keep his emotions under lockdown," she said shakily, thankful that Jeremy had shared the story. It made it easier to understand where Mason was coming from, though it was still hard to accept. Especially when she feared she was already falling in love with him. "No matter what, after going through something like that, he'll keep his distance to protect himself."

The same as she intended to do. God, they were such a pair.

"He can try, but it ain't gonna work," Jeremy argued with a husky chuckle. "I have a feeling that if anyone can get under Mason's skin, it's you, Torry. The guy can't keep his eyes or his mind off you. You're just going to have to trust him and give the big dolt some time to sort it all out in his head."

"That may be easier said than done."

His smile was crooked as he tilted his head. "But unfortunately true. You just need to be patient with the man."

"Well, I guess we'll have to see," she said quickly, needing to change the subject before the understanding in those smoky hazel eyes broke her down. She took a slow sip of her coffee, then asked, "So how many Runners live here in the Alley?"

"Including me and Mase, we have six right now. We're a tight group, so you'll get to know everyone really well."

If I'm here long enough. "You sound close, like a family."

"Yeah, I guess we are. God knows we fight like one," he laughed. "You'll like the others when you meet them, but you had better watch out for Hennessey. That womanizing Irishman has worked hard to earn his sordid reputation."

Torrance smiled off his playful warning, finding it hard to believe that all their reputations weren't sordid when it came to the ladies. "Don't you have any female Runners?" "We only have one right now, but she's down in Covington. In fact, she's working with her partner, keeping an eye on your friends."

"Pallaton?" she asked, remembering Mason mentioning that name during their conversation in the parking lot. Was that only yesterday? It seemed impossible, a world away, a lifetime ago.

Jeremy shook his head. "Carla Reyes. We've had others, but they've all mated and settled down."

Torrance took another sip of her coffee, but despite the caffeine hitting her system, she had to cover her mouth when she yawned. "Sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me. Coffee usually wakes me right up."

"You're still exhausted," he told her, grinning. "God knows yesterday was enough to wear anyone down. Why don't you go and grab a bit more sleep, and then I'll throw together an early lunch."

Since she was already yawning again, she didn't argue. "I think that's probably a good idea. And thanks for the talk. It's a lot to take in, but it helps to understand."

"I'm here whenever you need me, sweetheart," he drawled, sending her a teasing wink as she walked out of the room. Torrance shook her head at the guy's irreverent flirting, knowing he didn't mean anything by it. Walking past the room she assumed was the office, she could hear Mason's low voice, probably on a phone call, and a flurry of butterflies took flight in her belly. Oh, man. Not good. For a split second she debated knocking on the door and just getting the embarrassing "morning after" confrontation out of the way, then decided against it as she headed toward the bedroom. She needed time to think over everything Jeremy had told her; but when she walked into the room and saw the massive sleigh bed, memories from the night before poured over her in a warm, breathtaking wave. She'd already made the bed earlier, so she crawled on top of the covers and laid her head against the pillows, recalling how she'd felt waking up that morning—a strange mixture of shock, worry and lingering pleasure that continued to pulse sweetly through her veins. God, the force of her reaction to him had been overwhelming, sweeping her away with a strength that was more powerful than anything she'd ever experienced.

If she were to make love with him, that would be it. Her heart would be lost for good.

Closing her eyes, Torrance snuggled her head into the pillow, knowing that if she was smart, she wouldn't let this thing between them go any further than it already had. If she wanted to keep her heart in one piece, she had to take a step back—but even as she drifted into slumber, she knew it wasn't going to be easy. None of the things that should have mattered seemed to make a difference where Mason Dillinger was concerned. Not the fact that he was a werewolf or how he felt about love and the chaos he'd caused in her life.

Despite all of it—all the logical reasons for keeping her distance—she couldn't deny that she still wanted him.

He shouldn't have touched her.

That was the painful truth pounding its way through his brain as Mason sat behind his desk, staring out his office window at the early-morning breeze blowing through the trees, scattering their leaves. The fragile bits of color performed a wild, glittering dance of chaos as they spiraled through the air, flashes of amber and rust and burnished gold, before settling softly to the forest floor. He'd always found a soothing, calming comfort in their flight, but all he could think of today was Torrance.

Last night, for the first time in his life, he'd watched a woman sleep. Watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed—her features sleep soft and innocent. And it was a good thing she'd fallen asleep after shattering apart in his arms, because his beast had been just beneath the surface, prowling within the confines of his body, eager to claim its mate. Only, it wasn't just sex that it wanted. Even now, his gums burned as his fangs struggled to break free, eager to make the blood bond that would intertwine their lives together until one couldn't live without the other.

Touching her, feeling her pleasure rushing through her with the primal intensity of a summer storm, had been the most satisfying moment of his life—despite the painful fact that he still ached for his own release. Before it happened again, he obviously needed to set some ground rules for himself. Mating with her was one thing, but there wasn't a chance in hell he was going to let himself become some miserable jackass who couldn't breathe without his woman by his side. No matter how badly he wanted it, he was *not* making that bond with her.

And he refused to listen to the little voice in his head that continued to jeer at him, setting him on edge.

You're just afraid that she'll refuse you, Dillinger. Afraid that she'll run if she knows what you really want from her. Afraid of making yourself vulnerable...weak. Afraid of losing her forever—of ending up like your brother.

Christ, he didn't have time for this! He needed to keep his focus. Needed to keep his mind on the hunt for Simmons—and not the woman he'd left behind in his bed. And then maybe, once the threat to her life was removed, this driving urge to make a bond would recede. At least, he hoped it would. He just had to catch the bastard.

At the thought of the rogue, Mason's hands clenched atop the padded leather armrests of his chair, the tips of his fingers burning as his claws pricked beneath the thin barrier of his skin. Simmons had learned how to dayshift, and his followers had learned, as well. Mason kept trying to get his head around it, but every thought led to a new bend in the road, a fresh twist that only led to more questions. How? Why? What was the purpose? Did the strange scent on Simmons connect him to the killings that Brody and Cian were investigating? And why the hell couldn't they track the sharp, acrid aroma?

Something bad was coming. Something ugly. He knew it, deep down in his gut. And he'd trusted that feeling enough times to have faith in his instincts when it came to Bloodrunning.

When it came to Torrance...he was still at a loss.

Damn, he thought, dropping his head back against the soft, supple leather of his desk chair, staring up at the ceiling, the blank nothingness of the sandstone-colored plaster blurring before his dry eyes. His head spun with nothing but a neverending feed of chaos, looping over and over and over.

A knock rattled the door, jerking him from his troubled thoughts, and Mason swiveled around in his chair to find Jeremy sticking his tawny head into the room. "Kid's awake. His name is Elliot Connors, he'll be eighteen next month, and he's Silvercrest. That's all he's spilled. He's pretty quiet, but I'd like to go ahead and see what we can get out of him."

"Yeah, me, too," Mason answered, leaning over to shut down his laptop.

From the doorway, Jeremy asked, "Did you get ahold of Dylan?"

Mason shook his head. "I tried, but no luck."

Dylan Riggs was the youngest member of the League of Elders and one of the few pack members Mason considered a friend. With his warm brown eyes and kind smile, many had thought the Lycan too soft to serve in a leadership role after the passing of his father, until he'd proven them wrong by defeating a string of challengers. Beneath his boyish exterior lived a hard warrior willing to fight for what he believed in. He'd been an ally, as well as a friend to the Bloodrunners from the beginning—fighting for their cause when older members thought they could use the young half-breeds as little more than guard dogs for the pure-blooded members of the pack.

Dylan had spent the past few weeks visiting his younger sister in a remote part of Alaska. She'd moved up the year before as part of some existentialist movement—which meant no telephone. There wasn't even a cell phone tower within a hundred miles of the camp where she lived. Dylan was expected home anyday now, so Mason had given his cell a try—but there was still no answer. He hoped the Elder made it back soon, because he could use his insight, as well as Dylan's close connection to the pack. Simmons's ability to dayshift was worrying enough, but the fact that his followers possessed the ability, as well, struck a chord of terror deep in his gut.

Something was coming all right. And it wasn't good.

"Come on," he rasped, moving past Jeremy and into the hall, "let's see what Elliot Connors has to say."

Minutes later, Mason sat on the edge of the downstairs sofa, his hands clasped loosely between his thighs, while Jeremy stood with his back against the wall, the teenager huddled on one of the beds, his left wrist handcuffed to the heavy wooden headboard. Being a Lycan, he could have smashed the sturdy bed to pieces if he'd wanted, but not without making enough noise to wake the dead.

"You're Dillinger," the teenager stated in a flat, hard voice, his dark eyes cutting between him and Jeremy, as if he were waiting for one of them to attack. "I've heard about both of you. You're like legends. They say you keep Bloodrunning because you *like* to kill."

"If someone deserves to die, we have no problem taking them down," Mason answered honestly, scenting the fear on the boy; a cold, cruel sweat that covered the teenager's skin. "But we're not here to kill you, Elliot. We *do* need you to talk to us, though. Answer some questions."

Elliot's dark gaze grew cautious, narrow with suspicion. "What do you wanna know?"

"We need to know about Simmons. Anything you can tell us about him."

"Don't you already know everything?" he hedged.

"The dayshifting, Elliot." Jeremy's voice came hard with impatience, and the teenager seemed to curl in on himself. Worry and fear were too evident in the tight lines of his expression, making him look older...run-down.

"What about it?"

"We need to know how you learned to dayshift. How Simmons learned it. And why it's screwing with our ability to track him by scent."

The teen shook his head from side to side, mouth grim with something that looked surprisingly like guilt—an uncommon emotion for a rogue Lycan. "I don't know," the boy mumbled, staring at his lap.

"Elliot, if you don't work with us, we can't ... "

His head jerked up, face ruddy with color. "I don't remember. I don't want to remember! It was a freaking nightmare and I don't even wanna think about it!"

There was something here. Something that ran deeper than meat lust and evil. "You seem like a decent kid, Elliot. Why get mixed up with these assholes?"

The teenager's ragged breathing filled the room, harsh and gasping, as if he'd run uphill. "I didn't have a choice."

"We always have a choice," Jeremy countered.

"Whatever," Elliot muttered, his lip curling with attitude. "You gonna kill me now or what?"

"For whatever reason, you saved his mate's life," Jeremy told him, his tone dry, "so no, he's not going to kill you." The boy eyed Jeremy with a bleak, distrustful stare. "What about you?"

"You're safe here," Mason assured him. "Neither one of us wants you dead, but we're going to need your help. You have to cooperate."

"I get it," he snorted. "You're gonna squeeze me for information or else. Right?"

The kid's animosity was blatant, in your face, but Mason couldn't blame him. He remembered exactly how it felt to be Elliot's age. Alone, full of anger, trying to find your place in the world. The teenager was a pure-blood, full pack—with all its rights and privileges. But that didn't mean he didn't have his own set of issues. Learning to deal with the animal half of your nature was difficult under the best of circumstances—traumatic at the worst.

Something told him that Elliot Connors had a good core, but had gone off course somewhere along the way. But until he knew for sure, he was keeping him under lock and key, not taking any chances.

And there was one thing more he still needed to know. "Have you gone over, Elliot?"

Dark eyes slid away, the kid's rangy body shifting nervously on the bed. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Have you fed? Taken down a human?"

Like a fragile flame snuffed out, the teenager's belligerent expression closed in on itself, leaving nothing but smoke in its wake. "I'm done talking," he muttered, barely moving his mouth. "You wanna torture me, go ahead. Otherwise, just leave me the hell alone."

Mason stood as he looked toward Jeremy, who gave a short nod of his head, both of them realizing that they'd gotten all they were going to get out of the boy for the moment. There were times when it was best to leave someone alone with their demons, and this was one of them. Elliot Connors was going to wear himself down faster than either of them could—without getting physical, which Mason wanted to avoid.

"If you'll give us your word not to cause trouble," Jeremy said, "we'll go ahead and take off the restraint."

"I'm not going anywhere," Elliot snorted, and Jeremy walked to the bed, taking a key from his pocket to undo the handcuff. Mason followed behind his partner as Jeremy headed up the stairs, but turned back on the second step, one hand on the rail. "Just one more question."

Elliot met his gaze, then shifted his angry stare to the wrinkled sheets on the bed. "Yeah?"

"Why did you save her life?"

He watched as Elliot swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat, while his eyes squeezed shut. "I didn't know they were going after a girl," he said gruffly, opening his eyes to stare at his lap. His hands shook, and he fisted them, squeezing so tight that his knuckles turned white. "When I saw that creep Duff attack her—I didn't have any choice."

"You had a choice, Elliot. You could have let the bastard have her, but you didn't. And that's why I'm going to let you live," he told him, then headed up the stairs after Jeremy.

"I'm going to see if there's a game on and kick back for a while," his partner said, sounding worn-out, his face tight with strain as he made sure to lock the basement door. "God knows I need it after yesterday."

Feeling awkward, Mason forced himself to say, "I haven't told you thanks for sticking around here and keeping an eye on him."

A slow grin kicked up the corner of Jeremy's mouth. "No problem, man. I know you'd do the same for me. And we can't have you bunking with the boy wonder downstairs, when you've got a hot-blooded woman in your bed up here." A short bark of laughter jerked from his throat, and he eyed the bite marks on Jeremy's neck, knowing the pain must have kept him awake for most of the night. "You sure you don't want to have Jillian take a look at you?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," his partner snorted, shaking his head. "Damn woman would probably get a kick outta torturing me. I'd just as soon save myself the pain."

Mason wanted to argue, but knew it was pointless. "I'm gonna check and see if Torrance is up yet, then take another look at my e-mail, see if anything new came up. I sent out some feelers to a few out-of-state Runners to see if they've ever heard of a Lycan being able to mask his scent the way Simmons did. Maybe someone will know something we don't."

Jeremy nodded, his expression thoughtful. "When Carter and Hennessey get here, we should try to come up with some kind of plan."

Looking at the locked door, Mason blew out a deep breath. "Maybe we'll be able to get some more out of Connors by then."

"I hope so." Jeremy sighed. "Because we've got nothing, and my gut is screaming that he's hiding something."

Like Goldilocks in the three bears' house, Torrance was sleeping in his bed when Mason found her. One touch on her arm, and she jerked awake with a start, pulling away from him the second she realized he was leaning over her, his warm hand brushing her hair back from her face. It wasn't his presence that startled her—but rather the immediate desire to pull him down on the bed with her and pick up where they'd left off in the night.

Jeez, Watson, you've got the willpower of a gnat.

Scooting a bit further away from temptation, she pushed her hair out of her eyes in time to see Mason slowly straighten away

from the bed, then take a single step back, staring down at her with an unreadable expression. She watched as he ran one dark hand back through the reddish-brown waves of his hair, making her own palms itch to stroke the soft, thick strands. To tangle her fingers in their warm heat and pull him down for a scorching, breathtaking kiss.

"I didn't mean to scare you." His voice was hard, the stiff words shattering the heavy stillness that had settled between them. "After last night, I didn't think you would... Hell, not that it matters."

"I'm sorry...it's not that," Torrance whispered, pushing herself up until her back rested against the polished headboard. He didn't believe her, and she knew she was going to have to explain herself. He could have lied to her last night when she'd questioned him about how the mating thing would work, but he hadn't. He'd been honest with her, and now he deserved the same.

"I can smell the fear on you, Torrance," he stated flatly, as if he were working to hide his emotions—and she guessed that he'd had lots of practice at it.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, she pulled them into her chest and shook her head. "I know you think I'm still afraid of you...of what you are, but you're wrong, Mason. I realized this morning that I wouldn't have let you touch me like that if I didn't trust you." The steady sound of her voice amazed her, but she knew her cheeks had heated with a telling flush of color. "But after last night...I think it might be best if we just keep things...if we just stayed...friends. I don't think it'd be such a great idea if we got...involved."

The look he gave her was piercing, as if he were trying to figure her out, get into her head. "If you're not afraid, then what is it?"

Chewing on the corner of her lower lip, she said, "I'm just trying to protect myself from getting hurt."

"You think I'd hurt you?" he gritted through his teeth in a quiet snarl, clearly outraged. His brows lowered over the golden brown of his eyes, lending a fierceness to his expression that made her want to reach out and soothe him. She wanted to rub her thumb over the deep grooves between those thick brows and comfort him—but didn't dare.

"No," she told him, hating the way he was looking at her. "I know you wouldn't physically hurt me, Mason. You're a protector. But this connection between us is powerful, and I refuse to settle for less than..." She struggled for a way to explain, but all she could say was, "I just don't think it would be a good idea for us to take this any further. You're not a safe bet for someone like me."

With a slight nod, he said, "So this is because of what I am."

"No, it isn't," she argued, fisting her hands with frustration. "And I wish you'd stop turning my words around on me. You know what you're...like. I mean you're...you... God, Mason, all you have to do is look at me and I'm...I..."

He gave a rough laugh, the sound kind of cramped, as if he hadn't used the skill in a while. "If there's a compliment in there, Tor, I'm not sure I want to find it."

Pressing one hand to her chest, Torrance tried again. "I'm trying to tell you that this is because of who *I* am. I want more than a life built on good sex, Mason. And, yeah, it'd be good. I admit it. You touch me and I'm destroyed, okay? But that's not going to keep us happy the rest of our lives. That's not enough for me. We're too different."

"You mean you're human and I'm a nightmare?" he sneered, making a rude sound under his breath.

Her chin lifted at his tone. "I mean we want different things out of life. You don't want love, and I do."

"What the..." he muttered, shoving his hands deep in his pockets as he stood there with a poleaxed expression on his

face. "Torrance, we only just met. Why the hell are we already talking about love?"

"Because this connection between us changes all the rules. I'm not trying to fight with you. I'm just trying to be honest about what I want out of life, the same way you were honest with me last night when I asked how this life-mate stuff works."

For a long moment he just stared down at her, a vein pulsing in his temple, and then he suddenly nodded again. "I get it now," he rasped. "You don't take any chances. You always push before you get pushed first. Is that it?"

"If it is," Torrance shot back, wishing she could make him understand, "all it means is that I learned a lesson the hard way. I spent my childhood watching my mother go through one pretty face after another, and when I was old enough to know what I wanted out of life, I made a decision to never settle for less than my dream."

"Your dream? What the hell does that mean?" he demanded, moving toward the foot of the bed, where he proceeded to pace back and forth, a sharp, resonating tension riding the hard length of his body. A white T-shirt stretched across his chest, muscular legs wrapped in a pair of clean, well-worn jeans, a night spent in bed making him look even better than he had yesterday—but then, Torrance was no longer viewing him with a touch of fear. Now, when she looked at him, she didn't want to run. No, all she wanted was to experience the touch of his hands, his mouth...his body.

Giving herself a sharp mental shake, Torrance searched for a way to explain something that was such a private part of her. "I'm talking about the dream of what I want in life. The kind of man that I'm looking for. One who can give me more than a pretty face and pleasure. Michaela blames it on all the romances I love to read, but..." She broke off, a sad smile twisting her mouth as she placed her hand over her heart. "It's more than that. It's something that I feel in here, Mason. Something that I need, and I'm not willing to settle for anything less. I want—"

"What?" he muttered, the word all but jerked out of his chest, brittle and snide. "A fairy tale?"

"I don't want a Prince Charming. I just... I just want my dream man."

"Yeah, and being a werewolf rules me out, no doubt," he grunted with a rough laugh, his tone bitter, while the air in the room all but skittered with the sparks of their argument—like their own little storm in the making.

"It has nothing to do with a man's physical appearance. It's an emotional thing. How he feels about me. I want a man who *loves* me, Mason. A man who...who wants me more than anything else. Not sex. Just...me," she confessed with passionate conviction, willing him to understand. "Who wants to hold me as we watch the sunset. Who drinks coffee with me as we cuddle to watch the sunrise. Who holds me under the moonlight in his arms, because he just wants to be close to me. Who can smile and laugh and share his life with me, because he wants it. Because...because he loves me *most* of all."

He didn't say anything. Just stood there at the foot of the bed, no longer pacing, his hands still shoved deep in his pockets, the look on his rugged face a mixture of anger and frustration and something she couldn't identify.

"Do you understand?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," he breathed out on a rough burst of air, his jaw working. "I understand you want a goddamn paragon. When you grow up and want a man, let me know."

She flinched, his words striking her like a blow. "Well," she whispered, "if I want a man, then that rules you out, doesn't it? A real man isn't afraid to love something, Mason. He isn't

afraid to open himself up and share that part of himself with someone else, no matter what his reasons are."

"Christ," he hissed under his breath, his head falling back as he glared at the ceiling. "I knew it. I knew the second I set eyes on you in that goddamn café that you were going to complicate the hell out of things."

"This is complicated with or without my help," she countered, not wanting things to stay like this between them. "It scares me, the thought of what I feel when I get close to you. This mating thing between us, it's drawing us together, and for you, that's enough. I'm trying to tell you, Mason, that for me, it wouldn't be. I can't disengage my emotions that way. I've tried before, trust me...and it doesn't work. What happened yesterday is proof of that. A few hours with you...and everything changed for me. I went from being terrified of you, to terrified *for* you, to...to what happened last night. It's never been that way for me before. And what we did was—"

"Not nearly enough," he finished in a raspy slide of words, eyes heavy-lidded as he lowered his head to stare back down at her, the sun pouring through the windows setting the auburn threads in his hair afire. "Hell, Torrance, it's never been that way for me before, either. A Lycan only finds one mate. *One.* I may not be wired for this love you're so set on having, but I can promise that I'll be faithful to you. Now that I've found you, I sure as hell wouldn't waste my time screwing around on you."

She would have loved to believe that, but she knew better. "I wish that could be enough for me," she whispered, the caving pain in her chest suddenly making her wonder if she was doing the right thing, "but it isn't. You can make promises, Mason, but without love, nothing will last, no matter how powerful. I'm just trying to save myself the heartache beforehand."

"You know what, Torrance? Life doesn't always come

packaged the way we want it. And no matter what you say, you trust me," he rasped. "You wouldn't have come last night if you didn't."

"I trust you with my body, Mason. Just not my heart. And I didn't want to fight with you. I was just trying to be honest," she said softly, gripping the pillow beside her and pulling it to her chest, as if it could protect her from the chilling look in his eyes. "You don't believe in love, and I won't settle for less. Why get into something when we already know how it's going to end?"

He cursed viciously under his breath as he turned and headed for the door. When he had one hand on the knob, he paused. "You know," he ground out, his back to her as he turned the handle, "between your goddamn dreams and nightmares, Torrance, it's like I can't win for losing."

With those softly snarled words lingering in the air between them, Mason walked out of the room.

Chapter 9

No matter how many ways Torrance ran it through her brain, she couldn't decide if she was doing the right thing by pulling away from Mason—or if she was screwing up her best chance at happiness.

Had she made the right choice, or had she panicked? She didn't know—and the connection between them made it impossible to reason things out, the driving physical need to be close to him destroying her ability to think clearly. Here they were, living in the same house, and yet so much separated them. Fears and hesitations over their pasts, as well their futures.

For the thousandth time that day, she asked herself why she couldn't just live in the present. The question drove her crazy while she whittled the hours away sorting through the boxes and suitcases that had been brought from her apartment. Thankfully, there was plenty of space in Mason's closet and empty drawers in his dresser, so she used those to store her clothes. It took forever, but she finally found her cell phone and its charger, which she plugged in beside the bed. Having nothing else to do to pass the time, she decided she'd had enough of hiding.

A quick run through her hair with her brush and slick application of her favorite lip gloss, and she headed toward the kitchen. When she stood just outside the archway, she found herself blinking in amazement, unable to believe the scene playing out before her. It was like some kind of testosteronefest. On their own, Mason and Jeremy took up more than their fair share of space, both physical and emotional. They were just so big, their personalities so much larger than life. Always there was an air of energy, sharp-edged and powerful pulsing around them. You couldn't be near them and not feel affected... touched.

Bloodrunners were a potent hit on a woman's system—and now she was looking at *four* of them. Sometime during the hours she'd been keeping to herself in the bedroom, two more Runners had arrived.

Taking a deep breath, Torrance rubbed her damp palms against the tops of her thighs and walked into the sunlit kitchen. The intense splash of sunshine pouring in through the window had her lifting one hand to shield her eyes, while the Italian tiles warmed the soles of her feet. The low conversation that had filled the sunny room trailed off, four sets of eyes immediately zeroing in on her. Feeling like a shy, geeky child caught beneath the glaring flood of a spotlight at the annual Christmas pageant, Torrance shifted from foot to foot, managing to murmur a quiet, "Um, hi."

Jeremy flashed her his million-watt smile. "Hey, doll face."

"Torrance," Mason murmured, his tone cautious...and yet, somehow intimate. The connection between them burned electric and tangible on the air, so thick you could taste itand she knew the others noticed. "I'd like to introduce you to Brody Carter and Cian Hennessey. They work with me and Jeremy, and they both live here in the Alley."

She gave a little wave at the Runners, feeling awkward and self-conscious at being the center of attention.

The one named Brody was...intimidating, to say the least. He stood on the far side of the kitchen, leaning his broad shoulders against the wall, thumbs hooked in the front pockets of his blue jeans. A few inches taller than Mason, she knew she'd have to crane her neck at an impossible angle just to stare up at him, not that she was getting that close. His hair was a deep, dark auburn that fell softly to his shoulders, his almond-shaped eyes a beautiful shade of green, shades darker than her own, so that they probably looked black when the lighting was dark. Chiseled features formed a unique face, with a sharp nose and arrogant jawline. But his most distinguishing feature was his scar...or scars. Slashing from his left eyebrow, across the sharp bridge of his nose, down to the corner of his opposite jaw, three thin ridges marred the golden hue of his skin.

He looked...untouchable; and yet there was something about him that drew your eye again and again, a faint thread of vulnerability in those dark green eyes that told her he wasn't as scary as he looked.

His partner, in contrast, was a complete opposite. Lean and dark, with ink-black hair and piercing gray eyes, it was far too easy to believe Cian Hennessey had more than earned his reputation as a womanizing ladies' man. Even sitting in an arrogant slouch at the table, she could tell he was over six feet, like the others. But his body was rangier, roped with long, lean muscles, his cheekbones aristocratically crisp beneath skin a few shades paler than his friends, as if he didn't get out in the sun as often as his fellow Bloodrunners. He wore jeans and black boots, along with a dark gray T-shirt and an expensive-looking black leather jacket. "Well isn't this a tasty little morsel," he drawled, and you could hear a trace of the Irish in his voice, his gray eyes turning smoky as he moved them slowly down her body from head to toe, then right back up again. "You've been holding out on us, boyo. For that sweet smile and innocent blush, I think I'd be willing to ignore the fact that she's your woman." He paused, eyeing her carefully as he drew in a deep breath, then softly added, "Though it seems you still haven't taken the final step. Interesting."

"What final step?" she asked, directing her question to Mason, who stood standing with his back against the counter, watching her through dark eyes that had so much going on behind them.

"Ignore him," he rasped, before turning a warning glare on his grinning friend. "Leave it alone, Hennessey."

"Touchy today, eh, Mase?" Cian murmured, arching one dark brow. "I know a bonded lass when I see one...and I know when one isn't."

Bonded? Torrance searched her brain for why that term sounded familiar, then remembered that Jeremy had used it when telling her about Mason's brother, referring to Dean and his wife Lori as a bonded couple. "What does that mean?" she asked again, noticing the curt shake of Mason's head; a wordless warning to his friends to remain quiet.

"Why don't you—"

"I'll explain it later, Torrance," Mason grunted, clearly wanting the topic dropped. "It isn't a conversation you want to be having right now, trust me."

She frowned at him, then realized that he was probably right. If it was personal, she didn't want to hear the explanation when in the company of three other men.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, she moved closer to Mason, aware that Cian continued to watch her with a heavy-lidded

look in his pale gray eyes. They should have looked cold with such an icy color, but they burned instead with a raw, smoldering heat as he studied her features one by one, lingering on her mouth until she nervously chewed on the corner of her lip. Flashing her a seductive smile that had probably never failed to get him exactly what he wanted, he said, "You know, if you're not Dillinger's yet, sweetheart, then maybe you should be mine."

She should have told him to stuff his cocky arrogance up his backside, but found herself laughing softly instead, unable to hold back a wry smile at his outrageous behavior. "You really do live up to your reputation, don't you, Hennessey?"

He inclined his head with a slight, arrogant nod that should have looked old-fashioned, but somehow fit him perfectly. "Call me Cian, *mo ghrá*."

Mason growled under his breath. "She is *not* your love, you Irish ass."

"She could be if she wanted."

"I'm afraid I'm swearing off men for the moment," she drawled over her shoulder, reaching up to grab a mug from one of the cabinets. When she had her coffee, she settled beside Mason, just in time to see Cian send him a deliberate scowl. He nodded his dark head in understanding, a lock of ink-black hair falling across the smooth perfection of his brow. "Yes, Dillinger does seem to have that effect upon the opposite sex more often than not," he remarked dryly.

Jeremy snorted softly under his breath, Mason made another low growling noise that vibrated in his chest like thunder, and, sensing that things were about to get off track, Brody spoke up for the first time since she'd entered the room. "So what did your houseguest have to say?" he asked, his low voice a little scratchy, but warm and soothing, like a fine French brandy.

Taking a seat on the countertop beside the stainless steel sink,

Jeremy said, "Well, according to the boy wonder downstairs, Simmons has been a busy little bee, recruiting more than his fair share of the brokenhearted, the downtrodden, the hopelessly—"

"Christ, just give us an answer," the Irishman grunted from his seat at the table, growing impatient.

Jeremy snickered, obviously enjoying the buttons he'd deliberately pushed. "It seems our pal Simmons has decided to start his own little gang of friendly neighborhood psychopaths, this one bent on human destruction."

"More like consumption," Torrance murmured, shivering at the thought.

"That, too," Mason added grimly.

"Yeah," Jeremy drawled. "You know what rogues say about humans being the 'other white meat.""

"You're sick and wrong, you know that?" Hennessey muttered with a rough laugh, smiling as he hurled the insult.

"I prefer *twisted* myself," Jeremy said lightly, his head tilted at an arrogant angle, the corner of his mouth raised in an endearingly crooked grin.

"More like screwed," Mason grumbled, sounding irritated as hell.

"I wish," the blond snorted, waggling his tawny brows. "Too much damn hunting lately, and not enough time to bless the ladies with my charming presence."

"So many ladies, so little time." Cian's straight teeth flashed brilliant and white as his mouth curved in a provocative smile. Beneath his breath, he began humming a familiar tune.

"I swear to God, Hennessey, if you start singing Julio Iglesias again," Brody grated, his scowl downright frightening, "I won't be responsible for what I do."

"Looks like I'm getting on Broody Brody's nerves again,"

Cian chuckled, clucking his tongue while his gray eyes glittered with humor.

Shaking her head at their crazy banter, Torrance turned a questioning look toward Jeremy. "Are they always like this?"

"This is a good day. Normally they just don't get along," he told her, his tone dry.

"He sang that damn song for hours last night while we dealt with your mess," Brody grumbled, a menacing look on his face as he shoved one huge hand back through his hair. "I swear I thought I was going to snap."

Cian shrugged his broad shoulders in a "What are you going to do?" gesture. "You know Brody. I'm good for his blood pressure. Keeps him from brooding too much, focusing on the negative."

"Yeah," Mason remarked with a sharp snort of laughter, "you just keep him focusing on ways to kill you."

"What are friends for?" The Runner sighed, that sinful mouth curving in a wicked expression that could have given Lucifer a run for his money. "So, tell me, boyo. Now that you've met your mate, will you keep hunting?"

"Damn right, I will," he replied, shoving one hand into his front pocket, his coffee held in the other, ankles crossed as he rested his weight against the counter. "You guys wouldn't be able to find your asses without me. But Jeremy and I will be sticking close to home from now on."

Cian arched one raven brow. "Leaving us with the wanderers, eh? So that you can stay at home with the little woman. How endearing."

Mason sent him a hard grin. "Just think of it as an opportunity to broaden your bounty of women."

"There is that," the Irishman murmured, saluting Mason as he rocked the chair back on its hind legs, balancing at a precarious angle. "Did anything new come up in Delaine?" Mason asked, brushing her arm as he reached around her to grab a cookie from the pack sitting on the counter, that simple touch leaving chills in its wake. Torrance was so wrapped up in the idea of him wanting to stay close to home now, because of her, that she almost lost the thread of conversation.

"Nothing," Cian replied, drumming the long fingers of his right hand atop the deep luster of the kitchen table. "Not a damn thing. Whatever is going on with the killer's scent, it's impossible to track."

Brody shrugged. "We've both got a bad feeling about it. And after what you told me on the phone about that strange odor Simmons was giving off, we don't know what to think. But there's no trace of rogue musk anywhere at either of our scenes to identify him. Just that noxious vinegar smell."

"It's all connected somehow," Mason said, his dark brows pulled together in a worried frown. "Simmons's scent was muted, almost covered by that acidic odor. But we could still tell it was him when we got close enough. Maybe he's only just learning how to master it."

"And maybe someone else already has," Brody murmured, carrying on with his line of reasoning.

"Yeah," Cian rasped. "And whoever it is, they're our killer."

"If this thing gets too deep, I can always call in another team from one of the neighboring packs to help you out until Jeremy and I are free. There's more than a few who owe us the favor."

"Not yet," Cian told him, shaking his head, his long hair brushing the leather-covered width of his shoulders, the raven strands looking almost blue beneath the bright glare of sunshine pouring over him. "If it gets to the point we need backup, I'll let you know. But the fewer who know about this, I think, the better. And speaking of hunts, what has Simmons had to say?" he asked. "You were telling us about his call when this redheaded little beauty walked in."

"My name is Torrance," she drawled, rolling her eyes when he winked at her. The guy obviously got a kick out of pushing his friends' buttons, but you couldn't help but like him.

"Simmons hasn't spouted anything but bullshit," Mason muttered, shifting closer until his arm pressed against hers. "All he's done is ramble on about becoming some kind of god. His usual narcissistic crap."

"What about his number?" Brody asked. "I suppose he wasn't kind enough to give us something we could use to locate him."

Jeremy shook his head. "It came up as a private listing. He's too smart to make this easy. He's gonna make us work for it."

"What we need is a computer whiz," the redheaded Runner murmured. "You know, one of those pasty fellows who lives in his basement and only comes up for air when he needs a new hard drive."

Cian turned his head toward his partner. "And we need one of those why?"

Brody lifted one shoulder. "If we had a computer genius, maybe we could have traced the call."

"If we're going to start collecting people," Jeremy snorted, "I'd vote for a priest to save Hennessey's immortal soul."

Sharp barks of laughter filled the sunny kitchen, and Torrance couldn't help but get the feeling that she'd missed an inside joke. Still, she felt...at home. It seemed amazing that she felt so comfortable standing there drinking coffee in a roomful of werewolves, but she did. Only two days ago she'd been worrying about whether or not she should start writing the short story she'd been playing around with in her head...or focus on going back to school instead. And now those old worries seemed so insignificant, paling in comparison to this new, vivid, breathtaking reality that had wrapped around her, pulling her in, altering the way she viewed...everything. Life. Love. Friendship.

"So why Simmons?" Brody asked, pulling her out of her thoughts. "Why now?"

Jeremy took a sip of his coffee, cradling the dark blue mug in his palms as he said, "If you're going to declare a war, start at the top—and Mason has been a Bloodrunner longer than any of us. Simmons knew if he went rogue, that Mason would be the one to come after him."

Brody nodded his agreement. "They mean to cut off the head of the snake."

"The head of the snake?" she repeated, unfamiliar with the analogy.

"Military strategy," Jeremy explained. "You want to take a unit down, start at the top and destroy it from there. Mason has been a Bloodrunner the longest, which means he's probably one of the most powerful—"

"Key word there being *probably*," Cian cut in, winking at her again.

"And anyone who's Silvercrest knows that Mase is the one who would be assigned to take him down," Brody added. "They have a...history."

Yeah, she knew all about their history.

"So the idea, then, is to draw Mase into a hunt and eliminate him, weakening our strength, while letting Simmons get his revenge for his brother at the same time. Like killing two birds with one stone. But where exactly does Simmons fit into the grand scheme?" Jeremy mused, scratching the side of his nose. "Is he heading it...or is he just a bottom-feeder?"

Brody rubbed his chin. "I think he's a recruiter. Who better to lure kids like this Elliot than someone who is willing to get them what they want? Women. Drugs. Name your vice, and Simmons can supply it." "So you think he's just one arm of a bigger monster?" Mason grunted.

"Yeah. But then the question becomes how many arms are we looking at?"

Mason nodded, a deadly look of intent in his dark eyes. "And who's at the head?"

"Who knows?" Jeremy muttered. "The walls holding the pack together are crumbling down around us, and here we are, left in the goddamn dark."

"Maybe the boy can shed some more light on things," Cian murmured, linking his muscular arms behind his head.

"We've tried to get him to talk." Jeremy sighed. "He's definitely hiding something, but we can't get any more out of him."

"I bet Cian could," Brody suggested, but Jeremy shook his head.

"Scaring him shitless isn't going to help," the blond snorted.

Torrance didn't know what he meant by *that*, and she wasn't sure she wanted to. The irreverent Irishman was giving her another smoldering stare, and putting Mason in a royal snit, if the look on his face was anything to go by.

"That's enough, Hennessey," he growled in the next moment, obviously losing his patience.

"Not nearly," the other man drawled lightly, earning a low, sinister snarl for his taunting response.

"No fighting until we get this solved," Brody warned, glaring at both men.

Hating feeling useless and wanting to be able to help, Torrance cleared her throat and spoke up. "Why don't you let me talk to Elliot?"

"What?" The word blasted from Mason's grim mouth, as harsh as the cracking sound of his coffee mug slamming onto the kitchen counter.

"No offense," she told him, gesturing toward the others,

"but you're all a pretty intimidating lot. He might feel more comfortable spilling something personal to me than he would to one of you."

Cian nodded thoughtfully, studying her with a piercing gaze. "She has a point. He'd probably find it easier to talk to a woman, and whatever he's hiding has likely been bottled up for so long, it's just waiting to bust out."

"No way," Mason growled.

"Why not?" she asked, her instincts telling her it was the right thing to do, even though she was nervous at the prospect. After all, the kid was a werewolf—but then so were all these men, and she felt perfectly safe with them. Torrance couldn't explain it, but she wasn't going to bother denying it either. She *did* feel safe with them. And Elliot had saved her life.

"Why?" Mason repeated, running one hand through his hair in a blatant act of frustration. "Because I don't want you anywhere near him!"

"He already helped save my life," she argued gently. "What do you think he's going to do?"

He remained silent, glaring, but she didn't back down. "Please, Mason. Just let me talk to him. I'd like to be able to help."

"No way in hell," he muttered, shaking his head...but now that she'd set her mind to it, Torrance wasn't about to give up.

Moments later, Mason was grudgingly taking her down the stairs, the others waiting in the kitchen. Torrance shoved her trembling hands in her front pockets, not wanting to look nervous in front of the young Lycan, but when she walked into the warm, soothing room and he turned a pair of deep brown eyes on her, she couldn't control the small gasp that rushed past her lips. She knew that he was, in essence, one of the bad guys, one of the creatures from her nightmares, but the sight of him broke her heart.

He was...beautiful; a fallen-angel kind of beautiful. Thick,

caramel-colored hair fell to his shoulders, framing a face saved from being too pretty by a hawk nose and square chin. Those brown eyes studied her from beneath heavy lashes, and there was too much pain in that solemn, watchful gaze. Too much grief and regret...too much worry and fear.

He still had the youthful lankiness of his age, hovering there on the cusp of adulthood. No longer really a boy, and yet, not quite a man. But he was obviously carrying a man's guilt, and she wanted to help him, the same way that he'd helped her. There was just something about him that drew her to him.

"Hi, Elliot," she said softly, sitting down at the end of his bed. "My name is Torrance."

"Hey." His voice was quiet, his expression guarded, haunted gaze flicking nervously from her to Mason and back again.

"I wanted to thank you for saving me yesterday. It was an extremely brave thing for you to do."

"Torrance-"

"Be quiet, Mason," she said, cutting him off, "or you can go back upstairs."

He made a low growling noise in response, which she ignored, keeping her attention on the teenager. "I know what it's like to find yourself in the middle of something that overwhelms you, Elliot. Until a few days ago, I thought I had a good grasp on everything—and then in the blink of an eye, all of it changed. Life has a way of doing that to people."

"Yeah," he rasped, the look in his dark eyes so full of pain, she wanted to cry for him—for whatever horror it was that was tearing him apart.

"I know you talked a bit to Mason and Jeremy about Simmons, but I think there's something you're keeping to yourself. There's something more, isn't there?"

He swallowed, his gaze glassy. But he didn't say no.

"Did something happen?" she asked gently. He did a kind

of full-body tremor, but kept quiet, huddling back into the corner, where the bed had been pressed up against the wall. "To someone you care about?"

"No," he said thickly. "I...I didn't even know her."

Torrance curled her leg under her body, folding her hands in her lap. "It might make you feel better, Elliot. To talk about it."

"I can't." His eyes screwed shut, voice full of anguish...and regret. "It was... I can't."

"If you don't let it out and ask for help, how do you know that it won't happen again?"

He lowered his head, cradling it between his palms, his fingers digging into his scalp so hard that she winced. "I don't want to think about it. I...I didn't mean to do it, but he told me that I might end up hurting Marly if I didn't learn control first."

He was talking, which they'd wanted. And yet Torrance knew that she didn't want to hear this—that it was going to tear her up inside. But it had to be done.

Taking a deep breath, she asked, "Who's Marly? Is she a girl you like, Elliot?"

"Yeah. She's— God, what does it matter?" he muttered, looking away, staring at the wall. "She'll never have anything to do with me now."

"Is she part of your pack?"

He swallowed so hard, she could see the movement in his throat. "I don't have a pack anymore."

Torrance waited, giving him time to work it out, watching him fiddle with a hole in the knee of the jeans Jeremy had given him. "She's human. I met her at a concert. She's small, like you," he added, flicking a quick look up at her, before cutting his gaze back to the torn fabric on his knee. "But her hair is blond, almost white, and she has big blue eyes. She's so perfect and tiny, like a little doll. God, I was so afraid of what would happen when I tried to...you know. Afraid that I might want to change in the middle of it." He blew out a rough, shaky breath, and Torrance cast a quick look over at Mason, who was watching them with a closed expression that gave nothing away. She wondered if, like her, he felt the same sense of dread twisting his insides, but turned her attention back to Elliot.

Pulling at one of the frayed edges, he started unraveling the coarsely woven denim. "I didn't know anyone to ask about how to, you know...be with a human girl. So a friend of mine said he knew this guy who could help me." He swallowed, rubbing both palms over his knees, then crossed his arms, hunching deeper into the corner as he muttered, "So I went with him."

Keeping her voice gentle, she asked, "Did he take you to Simmons?"

"Yeah. At this warehouse down in Covington. There were other Lycans there, kids I recognized from both my pack and some of the nearby ones. And this Simmons guy is there, telling us that if we trust him, he can show us how to control our beasts. That he can teach us enough control to take human girls without hurting them—even how to dayshift. All of it. So I went back a few times, and then one night, after we met, he asked me to go with him, told me that he had a surprise for me."

"Where did you go?"

"I don't even know where they took me," he rasped, shaking now. "I can't remember anything about that night except for what happened later."

"It's okay, Elliot. You can tell us, and we'll try to help you through it."

"Simmons had told me that if I joined up with him, he could teach me how to control myself, so that I could be with a girl like Marly. Like an idiot, I'd told him about her, telling him why I wanted to learn more. He said he'd help me, but that I first had to learn how to have sex with a more experienced woman while in control of my wolf."

"And so you tried?"

His cheeks were flushed a brilliant crimson within the ghostly pallor of his face, his breathing rapid and shallow. "Yeah, only..."

The room went silent, nothing but the slow, inexorable ticking of the clock on the wall to mark the passage of time. "What happened?"

He shook his head, his body beginning to rock in a gentle backand-forth motion. "I can't tell you. You'll think I'm a monster."

"Whatever it is, it isn't your fault. I think you were set up by this Simmons jerk. Manipulated by him, Elliot, because he wanted you on his side. If you tell me, it might make you feel better."

"Yeah?" he snorted. "You won't think so after I tell you."

"Try me," she offered.

"I killed her."

The three words blasted into the room with the force of a bullet, jolting her.

"Why?" Torrance kept her voice soft and easy, even while dread twisted her stomach into a painful, churning knot.

He took a deep, trembling breath, and then the words just tumbled out of his mouth, ragged and hoarse with emotion. "She wasn't experienced, like Simmons said. I thought I had all this control, after what he'd shown me. I thought I could keep my wolf under wraps if I wanted, right? I think they must have given her something, because she was really coming on to me. She didn't act innocent. She acted like...like she knew what she was doing. But, she...she bled when I went in...and it was— I don't... I don't know how it happened. All I know is that I lost it and I changed. There was blood everywhere. On the bed, the walls, in my mouth. And she was... Oh, Jesus, it was a nightmare. I totally freaked, and someone knocked me out. Some guy named Curry, I think. When I came to, they told me that I'd killed her and I couldn't go back to the pack. That Simmons had turned rogue and I'd have to join up with them."

Reaching out to him, Torrance took his hand, his fingers cold and damp as they clutched on to her like a lifeline. "Elliot, I'm so sorry."

He flinched at the words, staring at her through red, desolate eyes. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because they used you as much as they used that girl," she told him. And then, as gently as possible, she said, "Where's Marly now?"

His eyes slid closed, fingers pulling away from her hold as he wrapped his arms around his middle. "I don't know. I think they told her something bad about me, because she stopped taking my calls and never called me back."

"Do you think you were in the mountains?" Mason asked. "Or still down in the city?"

"I don't know." He opened his eyes, his gaze haunted as he looked toward Mason. "I don't want to remember."

"So you've been staying with them," she murmured, "because you thought you had no choice."

"They told me I was one of them now. That I'd killed and had to face the consequences. The laws..."

Mason spoke quietly from his place against the wall. "Just forget the laws right now, Elliot."

"Are you going to kill me?"

He made a sharp sound of disgust. "We don't murder children."

The boy's chin lifted, his jaw hard. "I'm not a child."

"What happened, it will take time for you to get over—but it wasn't your fault, Elliot. Simmons played you, and got exactly what he wanted."

"I killed her," Elliot grated, the words raw with anger and loathing. "I murdered her. For that, I *should* die."

"That's not true," Torrance said with firm conviction. "No matter what they did, it didn't change you, Elliot. You're still a good person. You didn't let them hurt me, did you?"

"I couldn't," he groaned, his voice cracking with emotion as he moved his gaze to her face. He stared at her, the look in his eyes making her shiver, and quietly said, "You... You reminded me of Marly."

They came up the stairs a few moments later, understanding that Elliot needed some time alone. Mason had hoped to get her aside so that they could talk, but Torrance immediately headed for the bedroom, murmuring that she wanted a shower. Not that he could blame her. Elliot's horrifying story left an ugly coat of disgust on your skin that made you want to scrub yourself clean. Mason hadn't thought he had any sympathy to give to someone who'd fallen into Simmons's clutches, but something in his gut hurt for the young man who'd been so obviously traumatized by what had happened to him. The guilt was eating Elliot inside out. It was tragic and infuriating—and it made Mason want to get his hands on Simmons and wipe the earth clean of his filth once and for all.

He just had to find him.

Rubbing at the knots of tension in the back of his neck, he found the others waiting for him in the kitchen and filled them in on what Elliot had confessed downstairs. Afterward, he escaped to his office to check his e-mail again, but so far none of his sources had anything to report. He hadn't thought Simmons would head back down to Covington, but he'd wanted to cover his bases just in case. And none of the Runners he'd e-mailed had anything for him, either. He had one call on his cell from Pallaton that he returned, and then, thinking he'd given Torrance enough time alone, he headed toward his bedroom. Before he could open the door, Mason heard her talking and realized two things at once: she was on the phone with someone. And she was upset.

"I don't know what I'm doing here, Mic. It's so confusing. I want him so badly, but I'm afraid of getting too close to him. I mean, there's no way he's going to let himself feel something for me, so I know I should step back and save myself the heartache—but this mating thing between us just keeps pulling on me, making me want to throw myself at him." She paused, probably listening to Michaela on the other end of the connection, then softly said, "I'm glad he was honest about it, too, but it still sucks. And I don't think there's any chance of him changing. It's tearing me apart, not knowing if I'm making the right choice by trying to keep my distance or if I'm just screwing everything up."

"Son of a bitch," he cursed under his breath, her words making him feel like a world-class jackass. Why couldn't she just be satisfied with what he *could* give her. Why did she have to insist on an idiotic ideal that he knew he was never going to be able to offer her? It was like trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole. No matter how hard he tried, the fit just wasn't there—and the knowledge was enough to make him want to turn and slam his fist into the wall.

Why did everything have to be so bloody complicated?

Three days ago his life had been simple. Hunt...and kill. In between, food and the occasional woman when his body needed the release. His friends and his family. Easy and straightforward, he'd known his way through every situation like clockwork. Known what to do...and how to do it to achieve the desired results. And now he couldn't even handle one delicate, beautiful little human, who just so happened to possess a bit of backbone.

With his hands shoved deep in his pockets, Mason forced

himself to walk away, moving silently down the hall. He'd heard enough. Anything else and he'd be throwing open the bedroom door and— Hell, he didn't know what he would do. What else was there to say? No, he couldn't deal with it right now. Until he got Simmons and she was safe, nothing could change. He didn't even want it to, he reminded himself with a surly growl. He didn't want to lose his heart to her. He just wanted to have her, *all of her*, and still be able to protect himself at the same time.

Mason stopped instantly in his tracks, nearly stumbling over his own feet as his mind snagged on that particular phrase.

All of her.

He played it over again, dissecting it, looking at it from every angle, until the truth finally slammed into him so hard he slumped to the side, just like a drunk whose legs wouldn't hold him up. Propped against the wall, Mason stared sightlessly at the floor, his brain buzzing with the stunning, earth-shattering revelation.

He wanted her heart.

Oh, yeah, he thought, shaking his head. He was a contrary bastard, but there was no denying it. He wanted Torrance to love him. Wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything in his entire life—and it scared the holy living hell out of him. Needing something to calm the jittery feeling in his gut, he headed for the kitchen and found Jeremy standing at the sink, sipping from a cup of coffee as he stared out at the forest. "Want a cup?"

"No, thanks," he rasped, wondering when his voice had started sounding like a gravel pit. "Keep going the way you are with that coffee and you're going to end up a caffeine addict. That must be your tenth cup of the day."

"I'm already a caffeine addict." Jeremy laughed without looking away from the idyllic view. "Now I just feed the addiction." "Well, I need something stronger," he muttered, opening the pantry to pull out a bottle of Jack. "Where did Brody and Cian go?"

"They headed home to get a few hours' sleep. I don't think they got much last night after dealing with the mess we left in the woods."

"They better sleep while they can." He poured two fingers into a glass and tossed back a sharp, satisfying swallow of the whiskey as he planted himself in one of the chairs. "I have a feeling things are gonna start happening fast."

Turning away from the window, Jeremy sent a critical glance at the dark amber liquid in his glass. "She driving you to drink already?"

A hard, jagged sound jerked from his throat, and Mason lowered his head, watching the hypnotic swirl of the whiskey as he rolled his glass between his hands, elbows planted on his spread knees. "Driving me outta my ever-loving mind," he muttered, before tossing back another long, satisfying swallow, enjoying the burn as it seared down his throat, settling hot and smooth in his gut.

Hitching himself up on the tiled counter, Jeremy took a slow sip of coffee. "You know what your problem is, Mase?"

Yeah, he knew what his problem was. His problem was five feet, four inches of irresistible, addictive female that had him so tied up in emotional knots, he felt like a friggin' ball of string. "Something tells me you're going to be a pal and spell it out for me," he said, the resignation in his tone unmistakable.

"That's right, because you're like a brother to me. I'm not going to stand by and watch you wreck the best damn thing that's ever happened to you because you're too chickenshit to open your eyes to what's going on." Finishing off his coffee, Jeremy set the empty mug in the sink, scratched at the golden stubble on his chin, then crossed his arms over his chest. "Did you see all those books she had in her apartment?"

"What about 'em?" he drawled, leaning back in his chair, one hand curled around the glass of whiskey as he rested it on the table, the other lying indolently across his stomach.

A small smile hovered at the edge of Jeremy's mouth. "They were all fantasies, dude. Romances."

"Your point?"

"She's a dreamer, Mase."

"Yeah," he grunted, tossing back another deep swallow of the whiskey. "And we're the nightmare."

Jeremy shook his head, his hazel eyes piercing. "That's not what I'm saying, man."

Frustration roiled through his gut, keeping company with the slow burn of the whiskey. "If you're trying to tell me something, then for God's sake, just say it."

"She believes in *love*," his partner shot back in a rough blast of words, clearly losing his patience. "In happily-ever-afters and till death do you part. Stop selling yourself short, because the woman is already nuts for you. Hell, she was *made* for you. You think you can overcome this as easily as you've managed everything else. But guess what? You *can't*. This isn't just another asinine rule that pisses you off. This is something that grabbed you and Torrance by the throat, something deeper and more powerful than any pain-in-the-ass law the pack could ever have come up with. You can't twist it to fit your terms."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know. And at the risk of repeating myself," he growled, "this is pretty rich coming from you."

Jeremy hopped off the counter, angry tension riding the hard lines of his body as he began pacing the length of the kitchen. "Why the hell do you think I know what I'm talking about, Mase? You need to get your head out of your butt and take some advice for a change. Let go of the past, of what happened with Dean, and grab hold of what you've been given. Don't hold yourself back, because it's going to eat you up inside. It's going to sink into your cells like a cancer and never

let you go. You'll lose her, man, and then you're going to be totally screwed."

"Like you?" he sneered, irritated to be put on the spot, even though he knew Jeremy was speaking the truth.

His partner stopped pacing, the look in his hazel stare shadowed and bleak as he nodded his head. "Yeah, like me," he muttered.

"Sooner or later, Burns, you're going to have to—" The metallic tones of Mason's cell phone rang out, interrupting him.

"You better answer that."

A quick look at the screen revealed the caller's name. "Yeah. It's Hennessey. Wonder what the hell he wants." Pressing the call button, Mason lifted the phone to his ear. "Missing us already?"

"If Burns is there with you, you better put the speaker on." The Irishman's tone was grim, all business, putting Mason on instant alert.

Setting the phone on the table, he hit the speaker button. "Okay, what've you got?"

"When we left there, I got a call on my cell from Lydia Clarkson. She's a schoolteacher up in Shadow Peak."

Jeremy moved closer, jerking his chin toward the phone. "Wasn't she the pure-blood you were nailing last year?"

"Six months ago," Cian corrected him. "But believe it or not, we're still friends. Anyway, she was out hiking near the Alley, over on Clausen Ridge, when she came across something she thought we'd want to know about, so Brody and I figured we'd go ahead and come over to check it out."

"What is it?" Mason muttered, not liking the heavy feeling mixing in his gut.

"We've got another body," the Irishman said tightly. "Similar to the case we're already on."

His partner's breath made a sharp, whistling sound between his compressed lips. "Jesus! You mean the heart was eaten out?"

"Yeah, but there's more. It's an ugly scene. We're talking seriously whacked-out stuff. I know you don't want to leave the little woman right now, Dillinger, but you're really going to want to see this for yourself."

"Hell," he rumbled, rubbing the backs of his fists into his eyes so hard that sparks burned against the darkness of his mind. "Okay. I should be there within fifteen."

"We'll be waiting."

Mason disconnected the call, then ran his hands back through his hair, the uneasy weight settling deeper into his gut, warning him that this was going to be bad.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Jeremy muttered, his voice low—seconding his own feelings. "Seriously, man," his partner grunted, his expression hard as he leaned his hip against the edge of the table, hands shoved deep in his pockets. "This is all getting a little too close to home."

"Which is why I need you to stay here, Jeremy." He knew the Runner wasn't going to like it, but there wasn't any other choice. He couldn't—he *wouldn't*—leave Torrance unprotected. And someone needed to keep an eye on Elliot.

"I don't like being the damn watchdog," Jeremy grunted, his expression twisted into a hard scowl.

Mason stood up and took his empty glass to the sink, then grabbed the bottle of Jack, stashing it back in the pantry. "Until you're a hundred percent, you're not setting foot out of the Alley. And you know there's no one else I can trust to watch over them."

"All right, all right. Whatever." He sighed. "But you owe me big-time, you bastard."

Mason arched one brow. "Don't I always?"

"Yeah," Jeremy muttered. "But this time, I'm collecting. Better watch it, or the next thing you know, you're gonna be buying me a new set of tires for my truck. Big, shiny offroaders. Top o' the line."

"You're letting me off easy, Burns," he shot back with a gruff laugh. "You want tires, and here I was thinking of sending you to a tropical-island paradise with some half-naked beach bunnies. Might as well make use of the time you're gonna have off when this crap is over and Torrance and I can finally take our honeymoon."

Jeremy's head jerked up, a satisfied smile kicking up the corner of his mouth. "So you're gonna stop being a jackass and make a blood bond with the girl?"

Snatching up his cell, Mason hooked the phone back on its clip, then walked into the living room, pulling a heavy, brown leather jacket out of the entryway closet. Jeremy followed right on his heels, waiting for an answer. "I don't need to bond with her just to marry her," he said in a low voice. "And even if I wanted to, which I don't, do you really think she'd go for the idea of my fangs sinking into her throat? You know how she feels about Lycans. She'd probably slap my face if I even suggested it."

From the corner of his eye, he watched his partner shake his head in quiet regret. "Man, you really are chickenshit. You know that?"

"Watch it, Jeremy," he snorted, slipping into the jacket. "You know what they say about stones and glass houses."

"Yeah, I know," Jeremy grunted, his tone thick with frustration. "But if you ask me, you're not giving her enough credit. If she loves you, she'll accept a blood bond. Hell, if she loves you, she'll even *want* it."

"And if she doesn't, she'll try to run again." After all, she

hadn't said that she loved him—only that she was afraid of loving him and that love not being returned.

"It'll be a cold day in hell before you let her do that," Jeremy muttered. "Now go on and get the hell outta here. And watch your back."

Mason didn't want to go. On the other hand, the fresh air might do his head some good. Help him sort out the tangled mess screwing with his mind—all of it centered on a tempestuous little redhead he was terrified of losing.

"When you see Torrance, tell her I'll be back later," he called out over his shoulder. Then Mason grabbed up his keys and headed out into the quiet darkness of the night.

Chapter 10

The mountain air was brisk, his breath forming a white mist as Mason moved in a slow circle, studying the scene with a hunter's trained eye—while his human half raged against the injustice of the crime. Like something torn from the pages of a horror novel, complete with the blood and gore and thick, suffocating scent of blood and meat, it was a grizzly scene. And yet, strangely ordered. He'd seen death and destruction so many times, but this was different. Ritualistic, without the normal frenzy of a killing rage. He knew what happened when those of his kind let their beast's hunger for the hunt get the better of them, allowing that dark wall of rage to overcome their morality, their understanding of right and wrong. That wasn't what he and the others were looking at here.

No, this had been planned. Followed through. Executed. This had been about something other than meat lust. Something darker, even more frightening, and it scared the daylights out of him. From Brody and Cian's grim expressions, they weren't faring much better.

Bending his knees, Mason grabbed up a handful of dirt, lifting the humid soil to his nose. He sniffed, and an acrid scent burned his nasal passages, making his eyes water. "Is this the same scent you found with the other bodies?"

Rubbing at the back of his neck with one hand, Brody waved the other toward the ground. "Not quite, but then we're dealing with a whole group here. There are footprints all over the place. All Lycan. I'd guess she's been dead for a few hours, which means she was killed sometime this afternoon."

"And that means they were dayshifters."

"Yeah, but only *one* killer." Cian leaned his long, rangy form back against the rough trunk of a pine, his gray eyes glowing eerily bright in the deepening shadows of the evening. "This wasn't an eating frenzy. This was cold-blooded butchery."

Brody nodded, blowing out a deep breath. "So the others were here for the show?"

"That would be my guess," Cian drawled, uncrossing his arms to reach for his pack of cigarettes. A few moments later he had one lit, its smoldering tip burning with a flickering orange smear of color, like an unblinking eye watching them from the fiery depths of hell. "The question is, was Simmons part of the crowd, or the main event?"

"My gut says it was Simmons." Unbending his knees, Mason pushed back the sides of his jacket, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Have you found any kind of identification? Her purse? Wallet?"

"Nothing," Brody grunted. "I searched the area while we were waiting for you, but I couldn't even find her clothes."

Cian's glittering gaze slipped over the brutalized remains of the woman, the usual sarcastic curve of his mouth replaced by something that looked suspiciously like compassion. "I bet she was a pretty little thing," he said softly, before pulling in another long drag of smoke.

Mason reached for his own pack of cigarettes as Brody said, "I'll get in contact with Monroe...see if he's got any new missing persons. I'm betting she was on the streets. Her arms are covered with track marks."

Monroe was the brother of one of the human women married into the Silvercrest Lycans, and he was also a federal agent with the FBI. Since his sister had opened his eyes to the wilder side of the Eastern Mountains, he'd proven to be a surprisingly helpful resource for the Bloodrunners, exchanging information when he came across a case that he believed would be of interest to them. The victims were all too often those who lived on the fringes of the law, where the rogues could hunt the easiest. Drug users and prostitutes. Easy pickings for a Lycan when he was on the hunt for fresh meat. In return, they kept Monroe apprised of their current hunts, alerting him when a rogue was on the loose. So far the relationship had proven to be highly beneficial.

"I'm going back," Mason muttered, when his cell began buzzing. He unclipped it, reading the word *private* printed across the LED screen. Frowning, he pressed his thumb down to take the call. "Dillinger."

"She was a beautiful girl. You should have seen her when she was still breathing. Breathtaking, really." The caller laughed a cruel, sadistic sound of humor. "Until her breath got taken away."

"This place still stinks of you, Simmons," Mason drawled. "You might consider taking a bath sometime."

"Ah-ah-ah," Simmons scolded. "I know this must be hard for you, but you can't save them all, Dillinger."

"Why run away, you cowardly piece of shit?" he taunted, hoping to push the bastard's buttons. "Too afraid to face me on your own?" "And she was so sweet." Simmons sighed, ignoring the question. "Like honey on my tongue. Made me think of your own honey girl."

Mason's silence gave away more than any scathing retort or casual dismissal could ever have done, and Simmons's low, maniacal laughter filled his ear. "Ah, so she *is* more to you than just a fun piece of ass. I was hoping that was the case. It's going to make killing her that much more satisfying."

"You'll have to get through me first, Simmons. And I promise that if I go down, I'm taking you with me."

"Your confidence is going to be your downfall, Dillinger. You can't control fate, and you certainly can't control me. For all you know, she's already mine. Maybe I'm not even the one responsible for that redheaded little whore at your feet. I could be at your cabin, watching your woman through the windows. She's a tiny thing, but I bet she can act like an animal. There's something...wild about her. You know what I mean?"

The icy fear in his gut shifted, morphing into something too ugly and sharp and destructive for words. Disconnecting the call, Mason shoved his phone in his pocket, then carefully focused on lighting his own smoke, determinedly ignoring the telling shake in his fingers as he cupped his palm around the cigarette's tip, protecting the fragile flame from the wind. The sharp scent of tobacco filled his head, and he drew in a slow, deep breath, letting the smoke fill his lungs, seeking the cool, calm remoteness that he'd always been able to pull down around him. But it was gone. Shattered, ground into dust, replaced by this unstable, incomprehensible chaos of hunger and worry and gnawing uncertainty. Christ, he felt shredded. Scraped raw. And there was no denying the panic clawing at his insides, slashing him into emotional ribbons.

Taking another deep drag of the cigarette, he turned back to the others. "That was Simmons."

Brody jerked his chin at the woman, the moonlight setting the fiery strands of her long auburn hair afire, where they spread into the dark spill of blood beneath her. "Did he claim her?"

"He's playing mind games. You know Simmons—it's always some dramatic production with him. But my gut tells me he's the one."

"Wanna know what my gut tells me?" Hennessey drawled, one knee bent, black boot jammed against the tree, while he lifted his cigarette to his mouth, the filter pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

"You'll tell me one way or another, so spit it out," he growled, impatient to get the hell out of there and back home, where he could keep watch over Torrance.

"I know the significance of this brilliant red hair hasn't been lost on you," the Irishman murmured, his pale gaze sweeping over the victim's fiery tresses with a meaningful glance. "It occurs to me that with Simmons so focused on you, maybe one of us should take the girl off your hands."

Rage, perfect and pure, sparked to life. "Don't go there, Hennessey. Not now."

But the Irishman didn't look in the mood to heed the warning. "I'm just making a helpful, friendly suggestion," he drawled, taking another long, slow pull on his cigarette, before his mouth curled in a knowing smile. "If one of us were to put our mark on her, maybe he'd leave her alone, and you could go back to your lovely existence of hunting the bastard down, without having to worry about her. Isn't that the way you like things? Nice and easy, without any fussy emotional attachments?"

"Cian," Brody muttered in a low tone of warning, obviously seeing where this was headed.

"One more word," Mason rasped, flicking his cigarette into

the damp moss covering the base of the trees, "and you're going to regret it, Hennessey."

"I'm just being a pal, Dillinger. An offer from one friend to another. If you don't want me touching her, I'm sure Brody would be up for the challenge, though God only knows what she might do when she sees that beast of his. And Jeremy's still not in top form." He shrugged as if coming to a decision. "Looks like I'd be the best bet." A slow, devil's smile spread cross his mouth. "Can't say that I mind. She looks like she'd be a fun...handful."

"That's it, you son of a bitch."

Brody lunged to force his way between them, but Mason was already taking the Irishman down. They hit the ground hard, rolling across the damp earth, the silent forest suddenly filled with the brutal, battering sounds of battle.

Nearly an hour later, his body aching and sore, Mason steered the Tahoe to a stop in front of the cabin. The nighttime sky shone clear and endless, illuminated by the giant yellow sphere of the moon as it hung low on the horizon, the surrounding trees resembling giant, swaying swamp monsters beneath the hazy moonlight. It was a beautiful night, and one he'd have preferred to spend with Torrance, rather than studying a brutal crime scene and brawling with Hennessey.

Now that he was home, he'd hoped that some of his tension would ease, but as he opened his door and climbed out of the Tahoe, he still couldn't shake the worry riding across the back of his neck. Couldn't put an end to the churning unease knotting his gut that warned him he'd left something undone, unfinished. That he was selling himself short.

Locking his jaw, he turned his back on it, determined not to get sidetracked by emotion. He didn't have time for emotion. Things were going to start rolling now; he knew it. Simmons was too on edge, his madness controlling him more than his thirst for revenge. The rogue was close to the breaking point, and when he cracked, Mason was going to be there to bring him down.

Bring him down, and put an end to the miserable bastard's existence once and for all.

But he knew that would only be the beginning. No, Simmons was only one arm of this monster. Someone was playing with him, using the rogue as a means to an end that Mason didn't yet completely understand—and he was man enough to admit that he was terrified of what they were dealing with.

Too many open ends. Too many deadly possibilities.

After the ugliness of the night, he needed something clean. Something pure. He needed Torrance. Needed her freshness, that sweet, incandescent spark that lit her up inside. He wanted her. God, did he want her. Wanted to crawl up inside of her and learn everything there was to know. What made her smile...laugh. What turned her on and what made her cry. He wanted to know all of it, every fascinating detail that made her who she was.

And someone wanted to take her away from him.

Not in this lifetime.

He found her curled up on her side in his bed, resting her head in one hand, while she held a book with the other—and the relief he felt at seeing her safe shot through him like a flame, piercing and warm. Her long hair spilled across the ivory white of his pillow, flowing over her shoulder, the soft curls gleaming a deep, dark red in the glowing light from the lamp, and a low, husky moan rumbled in his chest. She glanced up at the sound, and her green eyes went wide with horror as she looked him over. Mason winced, fully aware that Hennessey had left him battered and bruised.

"What happened to you?" she gasped, climbing off the bed

to stand nervously at its side, looking torn between running to him and keeping her distance.

Pulling off his jacket, Mason tossed it toward the wooden chair in the corner. "Had a bit of a disagreement with the Irishman."

Her head tilted at a curious angle. "You were fighting with Cian?"

"Just blowing off steam," he told her, brutally aware of the dark spill of lust rushing through him, just because she was near. Because she was beautiful and strong and his. "No big deal. I'll live."

He felt her warm gaze as it moved over the scrape burning across his left cheekbone, the swelling skin beneath his right eye, the swollen, bloodied corner of his mouth. "You call this blowing off steam?" she asked, her tone dry as she crossed her arms and arched one slim brow. "Are you both crazy?"

"Fighting is just the way we cope," he explained. "It helps keep the tension from getting to the point where we want to kill each other."

"Well at least tell me that he looks as bad as you do."

"I think Brody had to carry him home," he laughed, the words heavy with satisfaction.

"Boys and their macho trips," she drawled, rolling her eyes.

Propping himself against the dresser, Mason leaned over to unlace his boots, choking back a groan of pain from his bruised ribs. "I'm…surprised you're still up."

"Of course I'm still up," she muttered, setting her book on the bedside table, along with her glasses. "I can't sleep when I'm worrying myself to death. You didn't say goodbye and Jeremy didn't know when you'd be back and I was—"

"I'm sorry," he murmured. He could see it now, the strain and nerves she'd been trying hard to hide from him since he'd walked into the room. Something warm and satisfying bloomed in his chest at the idea of her caring about him—about what happened to him. "I didn't mean to worry you. I should've called."

"I'm just glad you made it back in one piece." An impish grin lifted the corner of her mouth. "Well, mostly in one piece, anyway."

"I need a shower," he rasped, and then, *knowing* she would say no but unable to stop himself from asking because he wanted it so badly, he said, "Wanna grab one with me?"

Her eyes went wide, then dark, lips parting the barest fraction. Feeling the heavy beat of his pulse through every inch of his body, Mason waited...and waited, the seconds stretching out like an eternity as a thousand emotions flittered across her face...until she finally gave him a shy smile and said, "Okay."

Okay. One little word that damn near took him to his knees. He blinked, acutely aware that she'd thrown him off balance again. Almost afraid that he'd jump on her like a maniac if he didn't find some control, Mason turned and headed for the bathroom. He flicked on the light, adjusting the control until a warm wave of gold washed away the shadows—painfully aware of her body following behind him, coming closer. He indulged in a brief, carnal smile of anticipation, feeling like the Big Bad Wolf luring in Little Red.

Come closer, little girl...

"I still don't know what Cian could have said that would have made you fight him at a time like this," she murmured, coming up behind him as he moved to turn on the water, setting it to hot. He flinched as her delicate hands found the hem of his T-shirt, pushing the soft cotton up his back, the coolness of her hands against his hot skin making him shiver.

"Don't you?" he asked, turning to face her as he pulled the shirt over his head, satisfaction curling heavily in his gut when her smoky gaze mapped the corded sinew of his raised arms, trailed over his chest, then snagged on the ridged muscles of his abdomen. Suddenly every single grueling hour he spent training and abusing his body seemed worth it. Just for that ravenous look on her face. She trembled, wrenching her gaze back up, until he caught her with his hot stare.

"Did it have something to do with what happened in the kitchen today? What did he mean when he insinuated I wasn't a *bonded* woman?"

"Nothing." He rolled his shoulder. "He just enjoys giving me grief."

Mason knew she wasn't buying it, but she thankfully didn't press him. "Are you sure you're okay with this?" he asked quietly, beginning to unbutton his fly. "It only has to go as far you want it to, Tor. I just want to be close to you."

"Mason," she breathed softly, a torrent of emotion flickering in her eyes.

"I'm not trying to put the make on you. I just... For tonight, I don't want to worry about dreams and nightmares. I just want to be close to you. Just want to hold the heat of your body in my arms and know that you're safe. That you're alive."

"Okay," she said again, and he watched, feeling breathless, as she began to undress.

She held him spellbound as her slim fingers went to work on the button fly of her jeans. With each individual slide of button through denim, his heart kept beat with an odd, jarring cadence, until he thought the damn thing was going to pound its way out of his chest and plop embarrassingly on the floor before her, giving a whole new meaning to the idea of laying your heart at a woman's feet.

Yeah, that'd be so smooth, Dillinger. Keep it together.

But it was impossible. He was breaking apart, breaking open. The intimate act of watching her slip her braided bracelets from her wrist, pulling off her sweater and bra, then slipping off her jeans and pale pink panties, the dark denim skimming her slender feet—they undid him. Made him ache. Made him burn. Even her toes turned him on, the cute little dimples on her ankles, the smooth, pale expanse of her calf, her thigh. He wanted to press his mouth to her everywhere. Take in every texture. Every taste.

She was everything he'd ever wanted, without even realizing it.

And she was his.

With trembling fingers and shallow breaths, Torrance bared her body before him, feeling as if she were baring her soul. She'd had plenty of time to figure out what she wanted as she'd waited for him tonight. Hours to worry about him. To let the fear that something had happened to him rip her to pieces, wondering if he'd make it back home alive.

Not knowing if she would ever see him again had cleared up her confusion with astonishing speed. The possibilities for heartbreak were huge, like a great yawning hole that stretched out across her future—yet she couldn't keep fighting it.

If it had only been this strange, dizzying hunger crawling under her skin, then yeah—Torrance figured she could have waited. It wouldn't have been easy, but she'd have done it. But she couldn't lie to herself and place the blame there. No, there was something deeper than that, stronger, its power rushing through her with the brilliance of a summer storm. It had happened so quickly—and yet it had happened. That breathtaking spark of recognition. The crystallized moment in time when you realize you're falling for another person—falling hard.

It was happening to her. Not because he was beautiful and sexy and protecting her from the bad guys. No, it was just...Mason. He wasn't perfect, but then, she didn't want him to be. She just wanted him. On the outside he was all power and dominance and strength, but on the inside he was hard and hurting...a little lost, lonely, yet strong and funny, both sweet and protective. He was all chaos and life, complex and mystifying, and she couldn't resist him. He'd reached into her chest, wrapped those long, scarred fingers around her heart—and he wasn't letting go.

Now it was up to her to reach out to him, wrap him in her arms and make things right. Taking a step forward, she lifted her hands, smoothing her palms over the rugged beauty of his chest, and with a shaky sound in his deep voice that completely undid her, he said, "I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my entire life. More than anything, *Torrance*."

She stared up at him, mesmerized by the naked hunger he wasn't trying to hide, letting her see just how badly he *did* want her. And suddenly a stream of words was tumbling from that hard, beautiful mouth, each one drawing her closer. "I want to swim around in your head, Tor. Know your thoughts. Know everything about you, and it scares the hell out of me, because I know I'm never going to learn enough to satisfy the craving. It's like an addiction that's never going to end. It just keeps getting stronger. How the hell am I going to handle that?"

The air began to steam from the heat of the shower, and she blinked against the mist as she stared up at him, wondering how any man could look so beautiful and rough at the same time. "Do you think it's the chemistry of this mating thing that's to blame?"

"Forget the chemistry," he rasped. "It's you. You've turned me inside out."

"And you don't like it?" she asked.

"I don't like knowing that you're thinking about bailing on me the first chance you get."

Something like fear flashed through his eyes, jolting her. She would never have thought he would feel vulnerable. He was too strong and dominant and full of authority and confidence, the most self-possessed person she'd ever known. And yet there was no mistaking that sharp slice of emotion she saw in the deep, molten brown of his gaze. Fear that he'd lose her, which meant he *had* to feel something for her, no matter how fleeting. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you know what I am," he whispered roughly, "and sooner or later you'll see it. I don't think a monster's going to fit your ideal too perfectly, do you?"

"Don't do that, Mason," she pleaded softly. "Don't turn my words around on me. You know very well that when I told you about that, I was talking about a man's heart. How he felt about me. How much I meant to him. And his acceptance of that. The fact that he *wants* to love me." She shivered, pulling her lower lip through her teeth. "That he's not afraid to admit it."

Mason swallowed, the movement thick in his throat. "What if I can't be that for you, Torrance?"

His expression was so tortured, that for a moment she had to close her eyes, dangerously afraid she was going to fall all over him in a sobbing mess, melting into some kind of emotional chaos. Everything had been wound so tight inside of her for so long, she was terrified of what was going to happen when it all came unraveled, spiraling out of control. And this man could definitely unravel her. In fact, he already had.

Knowing she was wearing her heart on her sleeve, Torrance lifted her lashes and reached up, cupping his cheek in the palm of her hand. "Then maybe it's enough just knowing that I belong with you. That I'm yours, Mason."

I'm yours.

Mason waited, his chest tight, for her to ask if he was hers...but she didn't. His plan to keep himself locked away from her emotionally was working, but he felt no sense of victory. Instead, a sharp, uncomfortable spike of panic ripped through his gut, leaving him floundering. He'd been so sure this was what he needed, but he felt as if he'd just destroyed something infinitely precious. Like something warm and sweet and beautiful had been laid across his palm, only to have him fist his fingers and crush its tenderness, damaging it beyond repair.

Torrance would let him into her body tonight—but he wanted more. He *needed* more. Hungered for it, craved it, the way an addict felt starved for their next fix. He wanted to break her open, shatter her, until he could find what he needed. Wanted to peel away her own growing defenses, layer by layer, until she was naked and bare before him. Until he could see every thought and emotion, hear her secrets pouring from her lips. Until he could *know* her. Know everything about her.

And more than anything in the world, he wanted to hear her say that she loved him. Wanted it? Damn, he bloody craved it.

"I want to make love to you, Tor," he whispered, the words shaky and rough as he pulled off his jeans and pulled her against his body, wrapping his arms around her, groaning from the feel of her soft skin, her beautiful breasts crushed against his chest. "Want to take you under me and show you how much I...care about you."

A tremulous smile curved her lips, and Mason grabbed at the moment like a snapshot in his mind, never wanting to forget it. "Get close to me, Mason. Please. Just get close to me," she said in a breathless rush, her nails biting into the slick, hard heat of his shoulders, making him growl. She drove him completely insane.

"I'll make it so good for you," he promised, his breath rough against her temple. "I'll always take care of you. I swear it, Torrance." There was so much more to say—but that was all he could give her.

They showered together in trembling haste, eager to finish and make their way to the bed, since he refused to take her against the cold tile wall. Not their first time together. Later, yes. But not tonight.

He needed to make this first time special for her.

They stood beneath the spray of the water, and Mason watched as her russet lashes beaded with glistening drops of water—and with her next blink, one droplet fell from the corner of her eye, tracing a pattern down the side of her face, before trailing over her impudent chin and settling into the sexy hollow at the base of her throat. He swallowed, wanting nothing more than to bury his mouth right there and lick the moisture from her skin. He stared, feeling lost, until the sound of her voice reached him through the thick haze of lust curling heavily around his shoulders, something weighty and real that was pressing down on him.

"What was that?" he asked, shaking his head to clear it of the hungry fog that had settled around his brain.

"I asked if it's always like this between mates."

"I don't know. All I know is that I want you more than I want to breathe. More than I want to live." He tried to be gentle as he turned off the shower and rushed her to bed, wrapping her in a warm, fluffy towel and carrying her in his arms. But it wasn't easy. The hunger was swelling through him, grinding and urgent—the visceral need to pull her beneath him, covering her with his starved body. He wanted to give her so much pleasure. Wanted to watch her go over, her mouth open, face flushed as he thrust into her deeper...then deeper.

"I want to be so close to you," he admitted roughly, laying her down atop the cool, crisp sheets. And it was true—both on an emotional and a physical level. There was an erotic edge to the fragile beauty of her flesh—that darker knowledge that he could so easily hurt her. That her very life had been given into his hands in this precious moment. That she'd surrendered everything to him. "Tor. I promise I'll be careful, but I can't wait." "Good, because I don't want you to." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her body shivering with a fine tremor as he moved over her, settling between her spread thighs, her breasts soft against his chest.

Mason breathed against the small wisps of hair curling at her temple, and with eager, shaking fingers, he reached between their bodies and spread her tender flesh, fitting the wide tip of his cock against the small, swollen opening of her body. Wet, scalding heat covered him, coating him, and the pleasure rolled up from the balls of his feet, settling heavily at the base of his spine, burning around the backs of his ears. Gritting his teeth against the exquisite sensation, he flexed his muscles and pressed inside.

He kept his eyes on her face, watching the pain blend with the pleasure and anticipation as he ground his jaw and kept pressing. He didn't stop until her flesh finally gave up its resistance and swallowed the round, bulging head, clamping down around it so perfectly that his eyes damn near rolled back in his skull. The low, shivering moan that broke past her lips made him shudder. Sweat rolled down his spine, spilling into the small of his back, and he flexed again, pushing in another inch, and the dark, dangerous ecstasy dug its claws into him.

"Torrance."

She heard him gasp her name as she tilted her head back, allowing the vivid sensations to spread through her, hyperaware of every inch that penetrated her, hard and hot and thick. He felt amazing. Huge, yes...but wonderful. And it felt so impossibly right, having him become a part of her, as if she really *had* been made for him—but as incredible as it felt, Torrance could see how hard he was trying to stay in control as she watched him through her lashes. Could see the rigid tension in his face, his shoulders and all those hard, bulging muscles as he strained to hold himself in check, because he was afraid of hurting her.

He was being so careful with her, but that wasn't what she wanted.

With a tremulous curve of her mouth, Torrance smiled, deliciously aware that she was stepping out to the edge of a cliff, something new and wondrous waiting for her on the other side. "Mason," she gasped. "Stop it."

He groaned, holding himself completely still. "What, am I hurting you?" he asked tightly, his arms rigid as he held himself over her. His broad, bronzed shoulders gleamed with a fine sheen of sweat, dark hair damp at his temples, expression grim with restraint.

"No," she said with a watery laugh. "I just want you stop holding back. Just let go. I promise you that I'm not made of glass."

He stared down at her, the rugged planes and angles of his face slowly shifting into an arrested look of raw, savage hunger, making her tremble. "You want more?" he demanded in a low rasp, his hands suddenly fisting into the bedding so viciously, she heard the sharp, sibilant sound of ripping fabric. His hips pulsed, and he thrust into her a little deeper. "Say it, Torrance. *Tell me*."

"Yeah," she whispered shakily, smiling up at him as something warm and golden and bright seemed to burst into awareness beneath her skin, filling her up, spreading through her body in a molten rush of breathtaking emotion. "I want more. I want *you*, Mason. All of you."

His body jerked as he held himself above her. "*Hell*," he said huskily, his voice ragged. "This is so dangerous."

"But..." she panted, the anticipation nearly killing her, "it's gonna feel really, *really* good."

"Damn right it is," he grunted, his dark hair falling over his

brow as his mouth curled into one of those impossibly wicked, slightly crooked grins of his—and he pressed deeper, keeping his eyes on her face, watching every flicker of emotion as he worked more of himself inside of her, stretching her, filling her to the point that the warm glow of pleasure spilled into something darker, deeper. "I knew it was going to be different with you," he groaned, gifting her with a gorgeous, bone-melting smile. He lowered his head and stamped the impression of his mouth against her own, branding her with the force of his hunger. It vibrated through those long, powerful limbs. Tremored through the rigid strength and ropey sinew of his muscles.

She made a low, humming noise of appreciation, running her palms over the hot skin of his shoulders, lifting her hands to run her fingers through the damp strands of his hair, brushing the warm mass back from his brow.

"I'm never letting you go, Tor. *Never*," he vowed harshly, watching her, his stare so hot she could feel its searing heat spread across her skin. His hands took her own, pulled them up high over her head, holding them there, stretching her out beneath him. His thumbs swept over the leaping, erratic pulse in her wrists...and he held her wide-eyed gaze, his jaw grinding as he finally began testing the give of her body, thrusting his hips. She was tight, but so wet that she gave way around him, and he began working her hard...harder, until she'd taken every inch and he'd completely buried himself inside of her.

His head fell forward, arms shaking as he pressed deep, just holding himself there, shoved up into her like a thick, heated pipe, solid and hard but throbbing with life. Then he pulled back, and lunged forward in another brutal, grinding motion that buried every inch of his cock inside of her all over again, slamming against her limit, and she screamed, the pleasure exploding instantaneously, as if he'd hit a switch. His eyes went wide, his expression stunned at the first clenching pull of her climax, and then he growled a feral, rumbling noise in the back of his throat and erupted into action, driving the pleasure into her until she didn't know how to hold it inside.

He kept pushing her, making her come over and over, like a hedonistic gear being revved higher and higher, until the intense, breathtaking spasms bled into one another, forming one huge, explosive swell of sharp, mind-shattering sensation. The relentless, provocative push of his body into hers made her crazed with it, her skin damp and flushed with violent color. Writhing atop the wrecked bedding, Torrance spread her legs wider, wavering between begging for everything he could give her and pleading for him to let her rest, the hard, relentless burn of ecstasy almost too sharp to bear.

"Not yet," he grated, his dark eyes golden, deliciously wild. "Just one more time, Tor. Let me feel it again, just once more."

"I can't," she sobbed, gasping, her back arched while her head tossed restlessly on the pillow, their bodies covered in a glistening sheen of sweat, sex-damp and burning. "*I can't...*"

"Yes, you can." His lips pulled back over his teeth, breath ragged and fast, while his eyes burned down at her with a primitive, savage intensity.

"Mason," she breathed, his name a plea, though Torrance was no longer even sure what she was begging for. She clutched at the powerful muscles in his back, feeling them shift and flex as he powered his rigid body into hers. The low glow of the muted bathroom light burned behind him, setting the bronzed skin of his wide shoulders to a warm gold, like a god come down to pleasure her, while the sensual curve of his wide mouth was pure, unadulterated devil. "*Mason...*"

"I know," he growled. "Don't fight it and just let me give it to you." The pleasure; the dark, almost frightening intensity; his swollen shaft—it didn't matter what he meant, she wanted them all. Her breath caught as he shifted position, slipping his hands behind her knees. He pushed them higher, nearly flattening them against her breasts, the tilted angle of her pelvis allowing him free access to that drenched, pulsing part of her that throbbed like a heartbeat, her sensitive skin stretched wide as he worked more and more of himself inside of her. She had no shelter, nowhere to hide.

Emotions surged, sensation building upon sensation... swelling...deepening layer by layer, like pigment building upon a canvas, creating something brilliant and stunning and new.

Something that was all hers.

Something she was dangerously afraid that she already loved.

"Torrance!" Mason shouted, the word guttural and raw as his own release roared through him, powering through his body in a thundering wave. It surged up from the very depths of his soul, destroying him at the same time all the scattered pieces of his existence seemed to finally snap into place. And when she followed him over, spasming around him in another sweet, crushing release, Mason thought the top of his head would come off. "Damn, that nearly killed me."

She laughed a soft, happy sound, her face and chest flushed a beautiful blushing pink that made him want to howl. "You're incredible," he rasped, thrusting gently into her as the last waves of the most powerful orgasm he'd ever experienced pulsed through him. "God, I think I'm destroyed, but I want it again, Tor."

I want it forever.

He released his hold on her legs and collapsed over her, a hard, exhausted grin lifting his lips as she wrapped her arms around him, holding tight, her face pressed into the hollow of his shoulder. "Just give me a second to catch my breath," he whispered.

A rough, trembling giggle shook her body beneath him, and

the grin playing at his mouth melted into a smile that seemed to bloom from somewhere deep inside of him. The sex had been so insanely good it blew his mind, but it was what happened afterward that broke him down. That destroyed him. He rested his face against her belly, his body wrapped in bliss as she stroked her fingers through the damp tangles of his hair, petting him like an animal, and he loved it. Loved breathing in the sweet, feminine scent of her passion. Loved her hands on him. Loved the sheer beauty of everything that she was, both inside and out.

"What now?" she asked softly, when their breath had returned to normal.

"I need... I need for you to trust me, Tor." He regarded her almost solemnly, lifting his head to stare up at her over the pale line of her body, her skin glowing like a pearl. "You can, you know. You're my mate."

She let her head press back into the downy pillow. "And that means that I should trust you, Mason?"

"I would never betray you," he said gruffly. "Not for anything. Not with anyone."

A small crease formed between her brows. "You mean you'd never hurt me?"

"That's exactly what I mean," he rasped, wishing she could just see inside of him. What she wanted was there—he just couldn't risk letting it out. Hell, he didn't even know how to let it out.

But he could show her. And in those dark, provocative hours, he argued his case with the touch of his skin against hers, the press of his body, the ravenous hunger of his kiss—

Again...and again...and again.

Chapter 11

Mason stood at the bay window in the kitchen, staring out at the pale stream of light struggling to fight its way into the dawn sky. The shadows of night still hung heavily over the forest, nature quiet and still beyond the window in a perfect, suspended state of grace, while chaos reigned within him.

Though Torrance had slept peacefully in his arms, Mason had been the one who'd dreamed.

He couldn't recall exactly how it began. One moment, there'd been nothing but the gently soothing darkness of sleep...and in the next, he'd found himself running through the forest, the ground damp beneath his feet, the air heavy and humid, thick enough to feel against his skin, just the way it is before a violent storm. He was tired, his body battered and bruised...aching as his muscles burned, but he couldn't stop. He had to get *there;* only he didn't know where he was running to. He just kept moving, his feet pounding at the underbrush,

rocks and stones and broken twigs slicing at his soles, his body naked but for the jeans riding low on his hips.

It was night, the forest thick with shadows, his vision glowing as he used his wolf's eyes to find his way in the dark. He ran harder, faster, driven by an insane sense of urgency, until the blinding moment when a hand grasped his shoulder from behind, jerking him to a stunning, stumbling halt.

Whipping around to confront his attacker, he'd come faceto-face with his brother. Dean stood as tall and proud as Mason remembered him, his thick hair brushing his shoulders, a small scar at the corner of his mouth, a souvenir he'd carried since their roughhousing days as kids. He held a small woman in his arms, her face pressed to his chest, ebony hair streaming over his brawny arms. Her feet, so narrow and pale, looked infinitely fragile beneath the hem of her eyelet gown, the white cloth charred in places, stained with streaks of dirt and blood in others. *Christ*, he thought. *It was Lori*. She'd been found wearing that same gown the night the fire had taken her life.

His brother was holding his dead wife in his arms.

Mason squeezed his eyes shut, while anguish burned a raw wound in his chest, his body rigid with pain and fury for the horrors of the past.

"You're losing her, brother," Dean called to him, and though he stood only a few feet away, his voice reached out to Mason like a thin, metallic stream of sound traveling over a great distance.

"What?" he croaked, the word no more than a hoarse whisper, emotion choking his ability to speak as he opened his eyes.

"Mason, listen to me," Dean shouted, his features twisted with concern. "You're losing her!"

"Losing Torrance?" he rasped, shaking his head in confusion, trying to make sense of Dean's words as the forest around them began to spin. At first, it moved in a slow, revolving shuffle, gaining speed second by second, the leaves and limbs and sturdy trunks becoming a blur while Mason stood trapped in its center, as if caught in the eye of a hurricane.

"Don't feel sorry for me," Dean called out to him, the edges of his body blurred, fading into the surrounding, spinning forest. "I have Lori waiting at home, waiting for me. We're together...always. Love doesn't make you weak, Mason. Love makes you strong, and I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Dean," he groaned, wondering how to tell him that his wife was dead in his arms. "Dean," he choked out, his throat trembling.

"Open your eyes before it's too late, Mason," he told him, walking forward. He held the woman in his arms out, offering her to him, and Mason stumbled back, his body quaking. "Open your eyes," Dean growled. "I don't want you to be alone."

Before he could react, the icy weight of the woman's body was thrust into his arms, against his chest, and Mason looked down in horror...only to see a fiery mane of red flowing over his arms, covering her face. His muscles shook as the truth crashed over him, through him, taking him to his knees, the damp earth of the forest soaking into his jeans. His breath caught as she stirred, her face tilting, a breathtaking smile of pure joy curling across the beauty of her mouth.

"I love you, Mason."

No sooner had the stunning words left her lips, than the force of the spinning forest caught hold of her body, wrenching her out of his hold. In a state of horror, Mason watched the ravaging cyclone of wind and trees carrying her away, her arms outstretched, reaching for him, but no matter how violently he struggled, his feet were rooted in place, sinking into the ground beneath him as it gave way like quicksand.

"I love you!" she screamed. "Don't leave me! I love you..." The next thing he'd known, he'd jerked awake with a roar trapped in his chest, skin damp with sweat, sounding like he'd run a marathon. Torrance's small form had been pressed against his side, her soft breath brushing against the curve of his jaw.

Now, standing at the window, Mason watched the sun crest over the tops of the trees in a burning arc of gold, and he headed for his bedroom, needing to check on her. The moment he sat down beside her hip, she stirred.

"Why aren't you in bed?" she asked sleepily, soft morning sunlight shining down on her head, setting the deep red tones of her hair afire in that way that took his breath. Every damn time he saw it.

"I had a bad dream," he said, his mouth twisting with a wry smile.

Her luminous green eyes softened, hazy with the promise of comfort. "I know all about those. If you come back to bed, I'll make you feel better."

"I have no doubt of that," he rumbled, his rough fingertips brushing gently over her temple, tucking the wayward strands of hair behind her ear. "But after last night, you need time to recover. I know you must be tender."

She blushed a brilliant shade of rose, making him chuckle, and she picked up his pillow, whacking him against the side of his head.

"I don't suppose you've put on any coffee?" she asked, the hopeful note in her sleep-husky voice impossible to miss.

"That sounds like a desperate request," he chuckled, forcing the memories of his dream away as they hovered at the edges of his mind. He didn't want to think about Dean and death and the past. He wanted to soak himself in Torrance. Wanted to fill himself up on her laughter and smiles. "I'm almost afraid to admit I haven't made any yet."

"Oh, God," she moaned dramatically. "You're cruel."

Smiling, Mason leaned down and pressed his mouth to her

temple, nuzzling her in a way that made her shiver. "After last night, how can you say that?" he teased, nipping her earlobe, breathing into the sensitive shell of her ear. "You know I only want to take care of you—keep you melting in satisfaction."

And had he ever, Torrance thought with a dreamy sigh.

When she'd seen him battered and bruised, she'd been reminded that life was fragile and fleeting, that fate could turn on you at the drop of a dime. She hadn't wanted to waste whatever time she might have with him. And the night had been perfect.

"You know," she moaned, stretching, "Jeremy was definitely right."

"Jeremy was right about what?" he asked thickly, trailing his fingertips down her side, his thumb stroking low across her sheet-covered belly, making her tremble.

"About this," she murmured, giving him a slumberous, lazy look of fulfillment. She was steeped in it. Could still feel the residual pulses and aches of pleasure humming pleasantly through her well-used body, her muscles shivery and tired from the physical exertion. "There's a heck of a lot to be said for this mate-for-life, love-at-first-sight stuff."

"What?" He squinted down at her, as if staring into a bright light, and against her side his fingers stilled.

For a moment she couldn't figure out what was wrong, and then she suddenly realized what she'd just said. "I didn't mean to say that," she laughed softly, the sound brittle, her heart already breaking at the bizarre look on his face. "I meant to say *lust*, Mason. You know. *Lust* at first sight."

An awkward silence met her words, and she shifted uneasily. She wished he'd just ignore it, pretend it didn't happen, but no such luck. His gaze no longer seemed to be burning quite so warm, as if some arctic wind had swept through him. "I really wish you wouldn't make a big deal about this," she whispered, off balance despite the fact that she was still in bed. She may have been lying down, but her head was spinning. It was ridiculous, but she'd thought, at least for a moment, that last night had changed things. Clearly, it hadn't. At least not for Mason. It hurt. God, there was no denying that it hurt. But she wouldn't regret it.

"It's okay, Mason," she said softly, grabbing at the sheet and pulling it a little higher. "It's a physical thing, you said so yourself. I understand."

"Torrance," he groaned. "I'm sorry. I wish I could be different. I—"

"You were honest with me, so no apologies necessary. Okay?"

"Damn it, don't shut me out like that."

He wasn't the one being shut out—she was. Shaking her head, she said, "Mason, do you even hear what you're saying?"

"Christ, I'm sorry, Torrance." He sighed, rubbing one hand over his face, the bristle on his cheeks and chin making a scratchy sound against his palms.

Those were the *last* words she wanted to hear. Not after last night. Not after the man had systemically stripped her down, ripped her open and shown her exactly what it felt like to give herself to another person, fully surrendering both her body and her heart.

She'd been making *love*, no matter how breathtakingly wild and primitive their mating had been. She had been doing it with her soul—and he…hadn't.

"Last night didn't change anything." It wasn't a question, just a simple statement of fact. The words fell soft and quiet between them, and despite the sick feeling in her stomach, she was relieved at how poised she sounded.

His mouth twisted, the hard cast on his face looking almost like regret.

She'd opened her eyes to the morning, feeling reborn, ready to fling herself into the newness of love and the brilliant, somewhat frightening gift she'd been given. And even with psychotic maniacs out there waiting to take them down, she'd still felt blessed. Had known, after the loneliness of her life, that to have found something this significant was both beautiful and profound. A miracle.

We only met three days ago, she thought with a wry laugh. But this thing between them, it felt...different. Damn it, it was different. Real and beautiful and awe-inspiring. The stuff of dreams and dragons, of magical kingdoms and happily-ever-afters. She didn't want to kill the magic by ripping the foundation out of her dream before it'd even begun. He'd promised to be faithful, to stay by her side—but without love, how could anything last? The life her mother had lived—a life Torrance had witnessed in full detail—answered that question all too well: it wouldn't.

Throwing her legs over the side of the bed, Torrance reached down to the floor for the oversize T-shirt he'd given her last night when they'd raided the kitchen for a midnight snack, and pulled it over her head with shaking arms. The last thing she wanted at this moment was to be naked in front of him. God, she already felt stripped enough as it was, all her emotions laid bare before him, like an insect pinned in a display case.

"I need to grab a shower," she murmured, knowing she had to have some time to herself, to figure things out.

He stood, heading around the bed, but she stopped him before he could reach her, holding out her hand. Her chin lifted, but her eyes had that dry, scratchy feeling that always came before a flood of tears. Mason lifted his hand toward her face, as if he'd cup her cheek, but she stopped him with a single word. "*Don't*."

The air made a harsh sound as he forced out a short breath, and he dropped his arm to his side. "We can work this out, Torrance. I can make you happy. I know I can. What I can't do is lose you," he gritted through his clenched teeth. "I never thought I'd find this. I never even dared to think that there might be someone out there. Someone that was mine and mine alone. This thing between us, it's more than anything I've ever known. More than I knew I was even capable of. Why can't we leave it at that?"

Torrance blinked up at him, trying to fight back the salty flow of tears, wishing she could be happy with what he had to offer. But she couldn't. She was greedy when it came to this man—she wanted it all. "Because," she said softly, wrapping her arms around her middle, "no matter how much I want you, I know that without love, you'd never stay."

"You said last night that you were mine," he rasped, golden eyes blazing. "And I'm not leaving you."

"You'd never stay...*faithful*." She threw the last word down like a gauntlet, and he all but tremored with rage before her, his fury blasting against her like an angry swell of frustration, hot and beastly.

"I told you you were the *only* woman for me now, and you can call me whatever else you like, but I'm not a goddamn liar!" he growled. He turned way from her, stalking toward the door in long, angry strides, but before he got there he slammed to a stop, sending her a sudden look of surprise over his broad shoulder.

"What is it?"

He closed his eyes, cursing a long, foul streak under his breath as he brushed past her on the way to his dresser.

"Damn it, Mason. Will you just tell me what has you looking so-"

"I forgot to tell you about my parents," he muttered, pulling out a sage-green T-shirt and slipping it over his head, the muscles in his arms and chest momentarily distracting her.

A shiver of dread scurried up the back of her neck, making her shiver. "What about them?"

"They're coming over today to meet you," he grunted, avoiding her stare as he pulled on his socks and boots. "In fact, knowing them, they'll probably get here stupid early because they're looking forward to it, which means they could be showing up any minute now with breakfast. They don't live in Shadow Peak, but they're still in the mountains. Only about twenty minutes away."

"Parents?" she whispered, as if she didn't know what to make of the word.

"Yeah, my parents," he drawled, his smile tight as he cut her a knowing look, his brows raised. "You know, as in my mother and father. Believe it or not, I didn't spawn from the devil or anything."

"But why? Why are they coming here?"

"Because if I hadn't called and told them about you, they'd have wrung my bloody neck when they learned that I'd found my life mate and failed to mention the fact. Trust me, it's going to be a lot easier getting it over with now rather than later."

"This is nuts," she groaned, holding her head in her hands as the beginnings of a killer headache started pounding through her skull.

"I'd hurry if I were you," he told her, and without another word, he walked right past her and out of the room.

Feeling like she'd just been blindsided by a truck, Torrance collapsed on the edge of the bed, staring at the dark grain of the floor, wondering what she was going to do.

For a few brief hours hope had burned so sweet...and now it'd just burned out.

A half hour later, Torrance's rioting emotions were still keeping her company as she followed the voices coming from the kitchen. Stepping through the archway, she saw an older couple sitting at the table, while Mason was dishing up freshbaked cinnamon rolls she assumed had been brought by his mother. Jeremy held court at his customary place in front of the sink, while the seated couple laughed at whatever he'd just said.

Mr. and Mrs. Dillinger. Mason's parents. In the flesh.

God, what more was she going to have to deal with today? Already she felt wrung dry, the past several days catching up with her in a way that made her feel wilted, like a bad head of lettuce. Not exactly the image she'd wanted to project when meeting the parents of the man who'd stolen her heart, but with the way her luck had been going lately, she should have expected as much.

She started to move forward, but then froze like a deer in the headlights, realizing that they were all looking at her now. Mason's dark eyes watched her with a cautious wariness, as if he didn't know what to expect from her.

"Mom, Dad," he said in that deep, whispery baritone that always sounded so sexy, "this is Torrance."

"It's...so nice to meet you," she said in a rush, plastering on a smile as they came toward her, his father wrapping her in a huge bear hug, then relinquishing her to his mother, who kissed both her cheeks, her brown eyes—identical to Mason's—bright with genuine warmth and delight. She'd been so worried that the moment would be awkward, but Robert and Olivia Dillinger were so wonderfully warm and accepting, she almost felt completely at ease.

Jeremy pulled in an extra chair from the living room and they all gathered 'round the kitchen table for breakfast and coffee, the conversation lively while both parents did their best to keep her entertained with stories of Mason's juvenile misadventures. There was the time when he'd climbed a thirty-foot pine to play lookout for Jeremy during a game of war, and ended up too scared to make it back down on his own—to an endearing story about the beautiful locket that Olivia wore around her neck. It had been a gift from Mason on her birthday when he was only thirteen, and he'd saved his money for months. Olivia even opened the locket to show her the pictures of Mason and his brother that she carried inside. And though it was heartbreaking to see the photo of Dean, his dark hair and chocolatey brown eyes reminding her of Mason, Torrance couldn't help but smile over the photos. There was something just so wonderfully cute about such a tough guy's mom carrying his picture in a locket.

In fact, Robert and Olivia Dillinger were an adorable couple all the way around. While his father was as handsome as Mason, just an older, slightly more distinguished version, his mother fell more into the category of cute and cuddly, with a wholesome beauty that radiated from her dazzling smile and warm brown eyes. They seemed a mismatched pair, much like her and Mason...and yet Robert Dillinger watched his wife with an avid absorption, as if she were the queen of the universe.

Eventually the plates were cleared, and Jeremy excused himself to go and check on Elliot—and just like that, reality crept back in...reminding Torrance that they were in the midst of a nightmare. Leaning back in his chair, Robert crossed his brawny arms over his gray sweater, his easy grin fading beneath a hard look of concern. "You told us you had more news when we got here, Mason. I think now's the time to tell it."

"Who's Elliot?" Olivia asked, her smooth brow knitted with confusion.

"It's a long story," Mason replied, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

His father gave him a sharp nod. "Then you had better get started."

For the next ten minutes Mason related everything that they'd been through during the past three days. Olivia's big brown eyes remained wide with horror as Mason explained about Simmons and Elliot, while his father's expression took on a grim cast that would have scared the hell out of her, had she not seen for herself how easygoing he'd been during breakfast.

"So they're using kids like this Elliot, all but blackmailing them into joining their ranks. Inflaming their natural meat lust, making them crave it—making them do things they would have never thought they'd do," Mason said darkly. "We're dealing with something that goes against the laws of the pack here. Jeremy and I both fought Simmons in broad daylight, and that bastard had his full wolf form. And he's got a whole little gang of thugs following him, who can dayshift, as well—whose scent can't be tracked. God only knows how he's done it, but—"

"I do," his father stated quietly, the words somehow seeming to hang heavily in the air between them. An uncomfortable feeling settled deeply in Torrance's stomach, making her wish she could get up and leave the room, but she didn't dare move.

Mason's entire body held still as he stared at his father. "What do you mean, you do?"

"I know how it's done," his father said. "How to teach someone the way to dayshift, because it's one of the first secrets revealed to an Elder. When a Lycan is taught the power of dayshifting, rather than coming into the power naturally as he nears the end of his life, as some do, it's for the purpose of using him as a soldier—as a weapon of war. The reason you've never heard of it is because it's been centuries since it was last used. When the Lycan transforms his body in daylight, he no longer produces the wolf's natural musk. Instead, he gives off an acidic odor that deflects the ability of others to track him, giving him a double advantage."

Mason shook his head, a dark look of betrayal washing over his rugged features. "You knew about this, and you're only telling me *now*?"

Robert sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Mason, but it wasn't my place to tell you."

* * *

"No," Mason grumbled, his voice thick with biting sarcasm. "As always your loyalty was to that goddamn League, even after they turned their back on you!" Looking toward Torrance, he explained his meaning. "It's true. The man sitting beside you was once a young, powerful Elder...until the day he fell in love with my mother. Being a man of honor, he informed his peers and they rewarded his honesty by voting him off, believing that no Lycan could faithfully serve the pack when his heart belonged to the human world. And even though he knows it was bullshit, he remains dedicated to the same bastards who stabbed him in the back!"

"And you'd rather I spent my life hating the world?" his father roared, banging one beefy fist on the table so hard that both women jumped in their seats. "Why, Mason? I have love, a family—more than any man deserves. Your anger does me no honor. Not when I consider myself one of the most blessed men, be they human or Lycan, that I've ever known."

"Mason, I know it's difficult for you, but you've got to let the anger go. Enough's enough," his mother said gently. "Look at this wonderful girl. You've been given a gift. Don't waste it."

Mason stared at his mother, understanding what she was trying to tell him—but he couldn't do it. He *wouldn't* do it. "Torrance has nothing to do with this," he rasped, unable to ignore the crushing effect of his words on her.

"Wow," Torrance said with a small, tight smile. "That sounds remarkably like my cue to leave. If you'll excuse me, there's something I need to do."

"No, don't leave," his father rumbled. "Please, Torrance, stay. You're a part of this, and you need to be a part of the conversation."

"Really, Mr. Dillinger," she said awkwardly, "I don't think that's necessary."

"Don't be silly," his mother told her with a gentle smile, patting her arm. "It's obvious you're a mated pair, Torrance." Looking toward her son, she said, "What I want to know is why you're not a bonded pair. After what you've told us about Simmons, knowing her life is in danger, why in God's name haven't you made a blood bond with her, Mason?"

"Mother," he said in a low tone of warning.

But Torrance was already saying, "Blood bond?"

"He hasn't even explained it to you?" His father sighed, sounding weary with disappointment.

She shook her head, and Mason blew out a rough breath. "In the Lycan world, when a man finds his mate, he can permanently bind her to him by making a *blood bond* with her. He...bites her with his fangs, and in doing so, creates a deeper connection, a kind of metaphysical link between them that can never be broken."

"Oh," she whispered, the word heavy with awe. "I...I thought that if you bit someone, it changed them."

"Not between mates. A Lycan male can't change their human partner. But it binds them together forever, Torrance. It deepens their connection until they feel their other half even when they're not with them."

"Were you afraid to tell me, Mason?" she asked, the wounded look in her eyes crushing him. "Because of my nightmares?"

"That's part of it," he told her. "I would never ask you to do something like that, knowing how you feel about wolves."

"How does she—?" his mother started to ask.

But Mason cut her off, saying, "But it's also something I vowed a long time ago to never do, whether I ever found my mate or not. The bond creates an emotional link between the partners, one that—"

"One that's based on love. Am I right?"

He stared at her for a long moment, then quietly said, "Yes."

She made a low sound of understanding in her throat. "So that's it, then?"

"Torrance, you don't know the risk," he growled, willing her to understand. "The connection between mates becomes stronger, but not without a price. If I'm killed, then you could die, too, following me into death. I won't risk you that way. I won't do that to you."

"Jeremy, he told me about what happened to your brother. He called them a bonded pair. I just didn't— I guess I wasn't thinking. I should've figured it out...that there was something more." She looked up at him through a sheen of tears. "That's what Cian meant, wasn't it? He knew you hadn't bonded with me. They all know, don't they?"

Feeling like a total shit, Mason gave her a jerky nod. "Yeah, they know. A Lycan can just...tell."

"Not just a Lycan," Olivia murmured, sending a look of disappointment in his direction. "I'm human, Mason, and it's still clear to me that you're—"

"If you'll excuse me," Torrance suddenly murmured, looking almost ill, "I have to go."

"Torrance," he growled, but she ignored him.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Dillinger," she said with a quiet grace and poise that most women couldn't have managed, considering she was not only hurt but probably furious with him for not explaining things to her sooner.

"Nice going," his father snorted, shaking his head in disgust the second Torrance had fled the room. Mason knew that he'd hurt her again, but she'd still left with her head high, and a warm wave of admiration burned through him at the same time he felt like kicking his own ass—if he could only reach it.

"I've never been so disappointed in my entire life," his mother scolded, as if he were still a child in need of discipline. "I didn't raise you to act like an idiot, Mason. You're breaking that poor girl's heart. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter," he gritted through his teeth, his fingers biting into the edge of the countertop at his back. "Other than the psychotic killer out there who wants to take that woman away from me! I'm scared to death of losing her."

"Fear is sometimes healthy, Mason," his father said with a sigh. "And sometimes it's just an excuse to keep us back from the things we want most in life. Admit to the truth that's in your heart. Bond with her. Make it right, son. Don't be afraid of death. It finds us all in the end. All we can do is make the most of the time we have."

"And love is what gives us the strength to overcome our fears," his mother added. "What happened with Dean was a tragedy, but don't let it hold you back from what you know is right. You're the bravest man I know, Mason, and we're so proud of you. But you have to trust in your love. If you can't learn to do that, then you don't deserve her. Don't take a thing of beauty and turn it into something ugly. The bond can help keep her safe. Love can—"

"Love isn't going to protect her!" he shouted, his hand making a cutting motion through the air, as if he could physically destroy the reality of that statement. "Love isn't going to keep her alive!"

His father stared at him, then slowly gained his feet. "Let's go home, Olivia. There's no talking any sense into him when he's like this."

His mother pressed a kiss to his cheek, her smile sad, and they left, leaving him alone in the kitchen with nothing but his lousy mood and the anxious knot of fear in his gut for company.

He cast a short look at the coffeepot, then decided the situation called for something stronger. Opening the pantry, Mason pulled out the Lagavulin and poured himself two fingers in a glass. The first slow sip hit his mouth like fire, and he enjoyed the rich burn in his eyes and throat as Jeremy walked back into the room, Hennessey and Carter at his back.

"We saw your parents on our way in. What did the old man have to say?" Cian asked, folding his long body into a chair at the table, his left eye swollen and bruised from their late-night brawl. "Any news?"

A sardonic smile twisted his mouth and he turned, propping himself up against the counter, his legs crossed at the ankles. "Oh, he had news all right. Seems that 'Dayshifting 101' is a course taught to *all* members of the League of Elders. Each and every damn one of them. And it's meant to be used as a weapon of war, the lack of a traceable scent caused by that damn acidic odor meant to give the Lycan an advantage as a soldier."

"Holy..." Jeremy whispered, his hazel eyes huge as he considered the ramifications of that statement.

"Yeah."

"Jesus. That means that whoever taught the skill to Simmons-"

"Is most likely someone on the League," Cian finished for him, propping his leather-covered elbows on the gleaming surface of the table. "This just keeps getting deeper and deeper."

"And Robert didn't tell us this a long time ago, why?" Jeremy asked, scowling as he poured himself a drink, offering the bottle to both Cian and Brody, who shook their heads no. "That seems like a helluva piece of information to keep to himself."

"Because he's still loyal to the same assholes who abandoned him," Mason grunted, unable to understand his father's fierce sense of loyalty. "I think he was hoping we'd never learn."

"Yeah, well, we did. The hard way," Jeremy muttered, running his hand over his wounded throat.

"So, did he explain how to do it?" Brody asked, speaking up for the first time.

"No, and I didn't ask. The League can have their secrets as far as I'm concerned. All I want is to track down the son of a bitch behind this and kill him."

"So if it's one of the Elders..." Cian murmured, his pale eyes sharp with thought as he leaned back in his chair, staring intently at the floor, as if he could find the answers there. "Which one?"

It was a good question, and there was no easy answer.

If war was being declared, the Bloodrunners would be all that stood between humanity and those who meant to hunt them down like prey, feeding upon them like cattle. They had to strike first. Had to put an end to this thing before it got too out of hand.

"Graham's my father's best friend," Mason said heavily, speaking of the Lycan who served as the highest-ranking member of the League. "I practically grew up with him, and he's too soft. I can't imagine him being behind it."

"Pippa Stanton is a sour old lemon, though," Jeremy snorted, speaking of the lone female among the Elders. "I could see her playing the dominatrix role of an evil mastermind."

"Watch it, Burns," Cian drawled, giving an exaggerated shudder. "That dominatrix remark about such a foul old crone is going to give me nightmares."

"Come on, Irish. I can't imagine you afraid of a little domination," Jeremy snickered, his hazel eyes glittering with humor.

"I like my women soft and easy," the ebony-haired Runner declared in a slow slide of words, while the corner of his mouth twisted in a wry grin.

Mason snorted under his breath, throwing back his Scotch in one long, burning swallow. "You two mind if we stay on topic?"

"Well, there's always old Clausen and Summers," Brody

murmured, rubbing two fingers against the end point of his scar, where it tapered across his jaw. "They're both so backward in their beliefs, I'm surprised they can even see where they're walking."

"And we can't overlook the obvious," Jeremy added, crossing his arms over his chest. "Stefan Drake is a racist asshole who hates humans. I could too easily see him in the role."

"I agree about Drake," Mason grunted. "As for the other Elders, they're too new for any of us to know much about."

"Mason's right," Cian muttered. "We don't know these people. I mean *really* know them enough to be able to determine if they'd be capable of something like this. We're too disengaged from the pack."

"You guys could always ask your precious Dylan what he thinks," Brody interjected, his voice snide. The year before, Dylan's sister had run Brody's heart through the wringer, and it was no secret that there was no love lost between the Runner and the Elder. Not that Mason could blame the man who was like his brother. Having your heart ripped out tended to make a guy kinda bitter, and Brody had already been dealt enough shit to deal with in life.

"I'm picking up your sarcasm," Jeremy drawled, "but you're right, Brody. Dylan *could* help us."

"Unfortunately, Dylan is still unreachable. And no matter how loyal he is to us, his first loyalty is still to the League," Mason said grimly. "We need another plan." He knew the reaction his suggestion was going to get, but it had to be said. "Maybe we should call in Jillian."

Just as he'd expected, Jeremy whipped around, pinning him with a hard, incredulous glare. "Over my dead body."

"If we don't get some help here, it just might come to that, Jeremy. We need to talk to someone who has their pulse on the pack as well as the League. Who knows them better than Jillian?"

"She'd never do it," his partner argued, while his face went

dark, the healing wounds on the side of his throat standing out in stark contrast against the violent color of his anger. "She couldn't give a damn about helping us."

"I disagree," he countered. "Jillian has always wanted what was best for her people. There's no way she hasn't picked up on the trouble within the Silvercrest, and she's the most unprejudiced member of the pack I know, aside from Dylan. If we ask her, she *will* help us. And we need it."

Jeremy shook his head from side to side, his fingers clenched around his glass so fiercely it was a wonder it didn't shatter. "I don't like it."

"Yeah, and while you're fuming about it, why don't you think about why the idea of being near her, of having her working with us, pisses you off so badly?"

"It. Won't. Work."

"You got a better idea?" he growled.

Jeremy opened his mouth, but Cian's lazy drawl broke into the argument. "Maybe one of us should return to Shadow Peak ourselves, accept our place within the pack and hunt the traitor from within?"

Silence followed his words, thick and heavy, like something you could sink into. The three standing Runners stared at one another while the idea ran its way through their minds, arguments and affirmations battling against one another. Casting a curious glance at their hard expressions, Cian rocked back on the chair's rear legs and quietly laughed. "If you three could only see your faces. Priceless."

Brody's scowl deepened, making him look even scarier than usual. "Son of a bitch," he grunted. "That's diabolical."

"But brilliant," the Irishman drawled, his white teeth flashing in a wide smile.

Jeremy studied him through narrowed eyes. "You volunteering for the job, Hennessey?" "Hell, no!" he barked, shaking his dark head. "I'm not *that* insane. We'd have to make it fair somehow."

Brody thought it over, nodding as an idea occurred to him. "We could draw straws for it."

"I don't like it," Jeremy argued, slamming his glass down on the counter.

"I don't like it, either," Mason agreed. "But...it might be our best shot, Jeremy. Whoever was on the inside would have complete access to the pack—to everything. They could work with Jillian, and we could get to the bottom of this thing before it explodes in our faces."

Jeremy scrubbed his hands down his face, muttering, "Oh, Christ," under his breath. "And I thought *your* plan was insane."

"It could—" Brody started to say, when a loud banging noise sounded from the living room.

"That's Elliot," Jeremy grunted, his voice grim.

Together, the group rushed into the other room, fanning out around the locked door that led downstairs, the teenager's pounding growing louder against the wood. "Dillinger! Burns!" he called out hoarsely, and Mason unlocked the door, whipping it open.

The light spilled into the shadowed stairway, revealing Elliot's slumped, sweat-drenched form curled up on the top stair, his dark eyes wild with emotion. "I—" He swallowed thickly, unable to get the words out. "I... I was asleep. Dreaming," he panted, the words ragged, "about, about that...night. I know where we were," he growled, running the back of his hand over his mouth, his upper lip dotted with beads of sweat. "There was a cliff. Water. The sound of a waterfall."

"Flat Rock," Jeremy muttered. "On the western ridge."

"Let's check it out," Brody rumbled, already moving toward the door. "There's a north and a south side that we'll need to search." Cian nodded, heading after his partner. "Well take the north first," he called back over his shoulder, "then—"

"I'll take the south," Mason cut in.

The two Runners stopped in their tracks, turning back. "You can't go it alone, Dillinger."

"Jeremy can't go, and I need him to stay here anyway. If I run into anything, I'll give you a call before I get myself into something I can't handle."

Brody scowled. "You *better* call us," he muttered, stalking out the door with his partner.

"You did good, Elliot," Mason said gruffly, watching as Jeremy helped the trembling kid to his feet, one arm slung around the young Lycan's shoulders.

Elliot nodded numbly, his expression blank, as if he were trapped within some kind of internal nightmare, and Mason knew the teen was thinking about his dream. If Elliot remembered where he'd killed the girl, then he'd most likely *relived* the killing, as well.

"He's gonna be okay," Jeremy grunted in answer to Mason's unspoken concern. "Just get on outta here and see what you can find."

"I'll go let Torrance know that I'm leaving."

"Sounds good, man. And whatever you do, stay frosty," Jeremy called out, taking Elliot down the stairs.

Mason had just shut the door when he heard a voice say, "You're leaving?"

He turned to find Torrance standing at the edge of the living room, the hallway at her back. "We may have a lead on where Simmons is," he told her, "but I have to hurry. When Jeremy comes back up, he can fill you in on everything."

She nodded, and even across the length of the room, he could see her face go pale. "Be careful, Mason."

"I will," he promised, her concern for him evident, and that

strange sense of belonging pierced through him again, making him want to pull her into his arms, take her to the floor and bury himself inside of her sweet warmth until she could thaw out the cold fear that filled him up inside. "If this wasn't so important, I wouldn't be going."

She nodded, but remained silent, slender arms wrapped around her middle.

"Elliot is pretty shaken up," he added. "It might make him feel better if you could talk to him again. Maybe even keep him company."

"Of course I will," she said, her own worry for the young man creasing her brow.

For a moment Mason just stood there, caught in indecision as his eyes moved over her face, settling on every precious feature, committing them to memory. There was so much he needed to say, but now wasn't the time. "Wait up for me?" he asked.

She hesitated for only a moment, then softly said, "Okay."

Chapter 12

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Torrance watched the hands of the sleek, modern clock hanging upon the wall tick away the seconds, one by one, their sluggish pace as slow and thick as molasses. God, she couldn't take this. The waiting was going to destroy her sanity. Mason had been gone for hours, and with each minute that passed, her worry and fear multiplied at an exponential rate.

She sat at one end of the leather sofa in the basement—Elliot at the other, watching the MTV countdown—while her mind chewed over her troubling thoughts, trying to make sense of the chaos that had become her life. She didn't find any answers, but her head now hurt like hell.

Then the downstairs phone rang out on Jeremy's bedside table, and she looked over her shoulder to watch him set his Clive Cussler novel aside. He answered the call, and seconds later his brow pulled into a tight grimace. "Okay, hold on just a sec. I've got him right here, honey."

"Yo, Elliot," he called out over the music, putting one hand over the receiver. "This one's for you."

The teenager looked up, reluctantly taking his dark eyes from the half-naked girls dancing in one the latest hip-hop videos. "It's for me?" he asked, frowning.

Jeremy shrugged, holding his hand over the mouthpiece. "It's some girl. No idea how she knows you're here, but she sounds pretty upset. I think you should take it."

At the mention of a girl, Elliot rushed across the room, snatching the phone out of Jeremy's hand. Wanting to give him as much privacy as possible, Torrance stood up and headed toward the stairs, thinking she'd try to find some aspirin for her head, when a loud *thwump* from the other side of the room stopped her. She spun back around, unable to believe the horrific scene playing out before her eyes. Jeremy lay slumped on the floor, blood oozing from a gash on his temple, while Elliot stood over him, the phone still clutched in his fingers...dripping with blood.

"Ohmygod! What happened?" she shouted, rushing to Jeremy and dropping to her knees beside him. She grabbed a discarded T-shirt from where it lay on the foot of his bed and pressed the soft cotton against the gash in his head.

"He's fine," Elliot panted, staring down at her. "I didn't hit him too hard. Just enough to knock him out. I didn't hurt him."

"How do you know if you hurt him?" she growled, glaring up at the pale-faced teenager. "You bashed his head in, Elliot! Of course he's hurt!"

Torrance watched as he walked to his bed and picked up the sweatshirt that Mason had loaned him, pulling it on over his T-shirt. He ran his palms up and down his thighs, then turned back toward her, his eyes all but glowing within the paleness of his face. "You've got to come with me, Torrance." "What the hell's going on, Elliot? Who was on the phone?"

Moving slowly, she reached toward the cell phone hooked on Jeremy's belt, but Elliot rushed forward, unclipping it and hurling it toward the wall on the opposite side of the room. It hit with a sharp, metallic sound, tumbling to the floor in scattered pieces. "You can't call him!" he shouted, shoving his hands into his hair, his arms curled over his head, panic riding him hard. "You can't call anyone!"

Just stay calm, Torrance. Do not freak out.

Taking a deep breath, she went back to applying pressure to Jeremy's temple, trying to make sense out of what was happening—but it was too bizarre, like something out of a dream. "Why are you doing this?" she asked as calmly as possible, when what she really wanted to do was scream. "Was it Simmons?"

"It was Marly. Simmons has her," Elliot said huskily, looking ill. "And...and Mason's mother."

"Oh, God," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut as she tried to think over the pounding in her head. She tried to stay calm, but panic was sinking too deeply into her system, Jeremy's warm blood seeping through the thin cotton, wetting her fingers. "God, Elliot. If that's true, Jeremy could have helped us!"

"No!" he shouted. "You don't understand. She said they're going to kill them both if we don't go to him. *Now*."

"Like hell," she cried, lunging for the blood-covered phone that he'd tossed on the bed. Before she could touch it, Elliot had her trapped against him, her back to his front, one lean but impossibly strong arm locked around her waist.

"Please," he rasped against her ear. "Don't make me hurt you, Torrance. I swear I'm telling you the truth."

She wanted to struggle but took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to reason with him. "Are you sure it was Marly? Maybe he was just trying to trick you, Elliot."

"I'm sure. And he said to tell you that he has the bitch's necklace and her...her pictures of her boys. What's he talking about?"

"This can't be happening," she groaned, her head falling forward as the enormity of the situation pressed in on her, like a crushing pain in her chest, making it difficult to breathe. "He's talking about Olivia Dillinger's locket. She has Mason's picture in it, along with his brother's. We need to wait for them to get back, Elliot. We can't do this alone."

"No," he argued. "We've got to go now. I c-can't leave her up there with him."

"Elliot," she said numbly, reluctantly accepting what she had to do. He was too terrified for Marly's safety to listen to reason, and she couldn't leave Olivia on her own with that monster. But, God, Mason was going to *kill* her when he got his hands on her. *Furious* wasn't even going to begin to cover how he'd react when he learned that she'd allowed herself to end up in Simmons's clutches, but there didn't seem to be any other choice. She only hoped he got back in time to help Jeremy. She didn't think the wound would be serious for a Lycan, but she still hated to leave him alone.

Shoving her own terror at the thought of facing Simmons again to the back of her mind, knowing it would only make her hysterical, she said, "Okay, Elliot. Okay. I'll go with you."

"Come on," he said, his voice cracking. He released his hold on her body, but grabbed hold of her wrist, pulling her along behind him. "We've got to hurry."

They stepped out under a cloud-smothered sky, the thick covering blocking out the warmth of the late-afternoon sun, and Torrance shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. She hadn't even had time to grab her jacket, and the dark green sweater she wore was too thin for the freezing wind that made her teeth chatter. Or maybe that was just the biting cut of fear slicing through her system. Torrance knew Elliot wouldn't hurt her—but she also knew better than to think that Simmons was going to just let her walk away. No, he was going to play with her, use her and Olivia to lure Mason onto his turf, and then she was going to be forced to watch the man she loved fight for his life.

Torrance knew Mason would win. She *knew* it. But she didn't trust Simmons to fight fair. And what of Elliot? She couldn't imagine Simmons letting the young man go. No. He was too much of a liability. "Did you set them up?" she asked, dreading his answer as they hiked their way through the dense forest, the wind whistling through the higher branches, splashes of thin light making the shadows deep.

"What?" he asked, his voice gruff with fear.

"Did you lie to Mason and the others about what you remembered today? Just tell me the truth."

"You think I lied to Mason?" he rasped, cutting her a sharp look.

"Did you?"

"No," he growled. "God, Torrance, I have no desire to be torn limb from limb, even though that's what will happen now that...I've done this."

"Elliot, I know you're scared, but you've got to talk to me. I can't help you if you don't."

"Help me? Hell, Torrance," he snorted, shaking his head. "Only you would talk about helping someone who was kidnapping you."

"I know you wouldn't hurt me, Elliot. But you're going to have to work with me, or we're both going to end up dead."

"Don't waste your time worrying about me," he grunted, holding a low-hanging limb out of her way. "We both know Mason is going to kill me one way or another now."

"Elliot," she said, the sound hollow...because she believed

the same thing. "You should have just trusted them. They would have helped you."

"It doesn't matter." He hunched his shoulders, his expression bleak. "I can't— I have to do what I can to make sure nothing happens to Marly." His throat worked, and she knew he was choking back tears, the expression in his brown eyes a mixture of fury, helplessness and despair. "It's because of me that he went after her. Now it's up to me to get her out of there."

"No," Torrance murmured, determined to do whatever she could to make things right—even though they'd all gone terribly, terribly wrong. But she wouldn't abandon him. Not with Marly and Olivia's lives at stake. "It's up to *us*, Elliot. You're not in this alone."

Before Mason had reached the south side of Flat Rock, Brody called to say that they'd found evidence of another feeding in a cave on the north ridge. He'd driven straight there, and they'd picked up a faint scent trail in the surrounding woods, which they'd been tracking for hours, but the gusting easterly wind slowed their progress. In an effort to keep quiet, he'd set his phone to vibrate—nearly jumping out of his skin when it began buzzing on his hip.

"Yeah?" he rasped, lifting the phone to his ear.

"Do you know how I catch them, Dillinger? I strip away their humanity and tempt the beast with blood, with the beauty of the ultimate kill. All it takes is once, that one first sweet taste of ultimate power, and they're hooked, tighter than a junkie at a heroin banquet. It's *that* intoxicating. They never stand a chance against me...and neither will you."

"Wanna bet?"

"I'll give you a bet...but I don't think you're going to like the odds."

Something in the bastard's voice was too smug, and Mason felt the icy claws of panic dig painfully into his gut.

"You know what I like best about her, Dillinger? This fiery hair of hers. Is she that red everywhere? No, don't tell me," he laughed. "I'm looking forward to finding out all on my own. Bet she tastes like strawberries."

"Is this your new game?" Mason grunted, his heart pounding hard and fast. "Because I hate like hell to tell ya that I ain't buying it."

"You will," the rogue whispered. "See ya soon, Dillinger."

The line went dead, and Mason stood there in the middle of the woods, paralyzed while his mind raced, all chaos and emotion, instinct and reaction. The pain in his chest was so sharp, so cutting, that for a moment he couldn't breathe... couldn't move. Then he exploded into action, calling the others, ordering them to meet him back at the Tahoe. Within minutes they were speeding through the forest, while he drove like a thing possessed, nearly overturning them twice as the sky broke open with a heavy downpour.

By the time they reached the Alley, Mason was nearly out of his mind. He'd called home over and over, but there was no answer. The same went for Jeremy's cell phone, and he didn't even know Torrance's number. The Tahoe was still grinding to a slippery stop when he threw open the door and ran for the cabin, shoving the front door open so hard that it bounced three times against the wall.

"Torrance!" he shouted. "Jeremy! Goddamn it, somebody answer me!"

There were no signs of a struggle, nor was there any sign of his woman or his partner...or Elliot. A primal roar of fury surged up from his chest, but he choked it down, determined to use his head and not let the panic take hold of him. But, God, it wasn't easy.

Where the hell are they?

The door to the basement was open, and he rushed down the stairway, nearly dying when he found Jeremy sprawled on the floor, a dark pool of blood under his head, a wicked-looking gash on his temple.

"Jesus Christ," Mason growled, dropping down beside his slowly stirring partner. "Jeremy, damn it, wake up! Where's Torrance?"

Jeremy groaned, the sound rough with pain, and turned his head toward Mason, squinting up at him. "Mase? Oh shit...gotta go...get her."

"What the hell happened?"

"Phone call...for Elliot. Some girl. Don't know who," Jeremy muttered, wincing as his fingers probed around the edges of his wound. "He freaked...hit me when I wasn't looking. I can't remember anything more, man."

"It's got to be Simmons," Mason grunted, his breathing loud and harsh. "They... God, that bastard must have her. Did you hear anything about where they might have gone?"

"I wish I had, Mase," Jeremy hissed, his features pulled into a tight grimace as he sat up. "But he was only on the phone for a few seconds before he lost it."

Cian's low voice came from the other side of the room. "I hope you got smart and bonded with her while you had the chance, Dillinger. The rain is already letting up, but any trace of her scent is gone by now. Your only chance is to use the blood bond connection to find her."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he rasped, the dread in his gut turning into something ugly and dark. His beast paced within the confines of his body, restless with fury, ready to break free then and there. "I thought that only worked with emotions or feelings or whatever the hell you call it."

Cian nodded. "Yeah, but I know of Lycans who claim that

the blood bond can be used for physical locations, too. If you open up the link, you should be able to pick up her signal like some kind of metaphysical radio beacon. Just stop panicking and focus. You'll know where she's gone."

A sickening wave of guilt and shame slammed through him; so strong it would have taken him to his knees—if he wasn't already on them.

"Now, there's a thought," Jeremy grunted, holding the bloodsoaked T-shirt against his head as he glared at him. Unlike Cian, who hadn't seen Torrance since yesterday, Jeremy had spent the day with her. His partner knew damn well that he still hadn't bitten her. "Use the bond. Why don't you do that, Mase?"

The admission stuck in his throat like a boulder. "I...can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?" Brody scowled, standing beside his partner. "Don't tell us you still haven't made a blood bond with her," he muttered with disbelief. "She's had a goddamn rogue after her and you didn't bond with her?"

"Of course he hasn't. Because he's too afraid. Isn't that right, Mason?" his father called out from the bottom of the stairway, looking as if he'd been through hell and back. His salt-and-pepper hair was matted on the left side of his head, gray sweater torn on his right shoulder.

Moving to his feet, Mason shook his head in disbelief. "What the hell happened to you? Where's Mom?"

"I'm betting the same place they have your woman," his father growled. "You going with me to get them back?"

"You know where they are?" he asked, feeling like the one who'd been knocked on the head.

"One of us isn't too afraid to follow his heart. Of course I know where they are!"

Ripping his hands through his hair, Mason struggled to control his temper. "Do you want to explain what happened— or just keep shouting at me?"

"Your mother had some things she wanted to bring Torrance, so we were on our way back to the Alley when they shot out the tires on my truck," his father muttered. "Damn thing rolled over on its side, and by the time I made my way out, they'd already taken her away. And that's enough with the bloody questions. Right now we need to get our women!"

"So where are they?" he growled, the fear in his gut so vicious, he felt ill.

"I'll tell you as soon as somebody gets me a map."

"I'll grab the one out of the Tahoe," Brody called out, already heading up the stairs. Mason offered a hand to Jeremy, helping his partner to his feet, and Brody came running back in with the map. They laid it out over the end of Jeremy's bed, his father's dark eyes roaming...searching...and then he jabbed his forefinger at a specific point, nearly ripping the paper. "There. That's it. That's where he's got them."

"Holy shit," Jeremy rasped. "I'd heard, like Cian, that a blood bond could be used like this, like some kind of internal tracking system, but never really believed that it would work."

"Of course it works," his father grunted, shaking his head at their stunned expressions.

Looking at Jeremy, Mason asked, "Can you make it?"

His partner sent him a dirty look. "I'd like to see you try and stop me," he muttered.

"Then let's move out."

"We can drive part of the way," his father grunted, studying the map. "But then we're going to have to make the last bit on foot."

"I don't care how we get there," Mason snarled, already heading for the door. "Let's just make it fast."

The air sighed through the trees, soft and silent, like a whisper weaving quietly through a room. The fear that had been riding Mason since Simmons's phone call had a chokehold on him, churning his insides into a mass of rage and stark, shredding terror. Sweat dripped from his face, slipping down his spine, palms damp as he clenched and unclenched his fists while they hiked their way through the woods. His father led the way, as he'd earned the right, considering it was his instincts that had led them this far. And they knew they were on the right path. A couple hundred meters back, they'd found one of Torrance's colorfully braided bracelets among the leaves scattered over the damp forest floor. The sight of the woven hemp had damn near brought Mason to his knees in anguish, as well as relief.

She was still alive...but for how long? Christ, if anything happened to her, he wasn't going to be able to deal with it. And suddenly he understood the depth of his stupidity with perfect clarity.

He'd wasted all this time struggling with his fears, battling his hungers, blind to the fact that his heart was already hers.

He loved her.

God, he was such a blind, raging idiot for not realizing it. And now that he had, all he wanted was to take her in his arms and bind them together for always. He wanted to sink his teeth into the fragile column of her throat, drink from the rich spill of her blood, and complete what was already an unbreakable claim on his heart.

He was willing to lay down his life to keep her safe—but what he wasn't willing to do was lose her.

Not now. Not ever.

The group stopped at the exact point where the dense forest tapered into tall grass, just before meeting the rocky face of a sheer wall of granite. There was a shadowed entrance carved out like a gaping mouth into the stone facade, the warm glow of a fire flickering inside, like a dragon preparing to expel his fiery breath.

Mason lifted his head, nostrils flaring as the wind rushed

over him, and there, on the air, was the most beautiful scent in the world. It was perfect and sweet, because she was *his*—and yet, heartbreaking in its revelation of his failures. Torrance was terrified. He could scent her fear, her sheer horror, and the wolf inside of him snarled a sinister sound of outrage, ready to charge ahead and storm the entrance.

As if reading his mind, his father shot out his arm, blocking his path as he surged forward. "Not yet, Mason. We're going to do this according to the laws of our people."

"Like hell we are. They're your people, Dad. Not mine."

"Mason, let it go," his father rasped, his deep voice urgent and low, one powerful hand clutching at his arm. "The longer you harbor the anger, the longer your heart will remain locked up in that miserable knot you've created. Let it go...and accept that you've been blessed."

"And what about Torrance?" he hissed, jerking free of his father's grip. "What about her? This is some blessing, isn't it, Dad? I promised her that I'd keep her safe from the monsters and look what's happened. Thanks to me, she's in there with that bastard!"

Cian moved beside them, his gray eyes burning like twin pale flames of fire in the lavender twilight. "Simmons and the boy are the only Lycans I can scent on the air. He's in there alone, with the women and Elliot."

"Not for long he isn't." Unable to wait any longer, Mason rushed forward, breaking through the line of the trees at the exact moment the sun dipped to the edge of the horizon, the sky a mesmerizing smear of pink and purple and gold. The rushing wind surged around his body, bitter and cool against his face, catching at his scent.

"Don't bother to knock," Simmons called out when he reached the dark mouth of the cave. "We've been waiting for you, Dillinger. Come in and join our little party." With his heart in his throat, he stalked forward, his wolf's eyes adjusting to the darker, firelit interior of the dank cave, his father and the Runners at his back, fanning out at his sides. An unbelievable rush of relief nearly floored him at the sight of Torrance wrapped in his mother's arms to their right. Her skin shone as pale and luminous as a ghost, head buried in his mother's shoulder, but she was whole and dressed and, amazingly, untouched.

Thank God.

His mother appeared just as shaken as his mate, her dark eyes hollow with fear. Elliot lay slumped against the ground, unmoving, a few feet away from the women, and on the far side of the cave, Simmons sat upon a massive boulder, his elbows resting on his bent knees. The rogue's arms and face and bare torso were covered in blood, his jeans streaked with more of the dark crimson, the tangled length of his long brown hair slicked back from his narrow face. Beneath his sharp brows, his eyes were sunken, lifeless hollows.

Keeping one eye on the Lycan, Mason moved toward the women, pulling Torrance into his arms, cradling her head to his chest, aware of his father embracing his mother beside them. He wanted to crush her in his arms and tell her that everything was going to be okay, but he couldn't get the words out.

"Just look at them, Mason," the rogue called out, a satisfied smile curling the sinister line of his blood-smeared mouth. More blood dripped down his chin, matting in the thick pelt of hair covering his chest. "The two things you care about most in this world, and they're all mine."

"Like hell they are," he snarled, tightening his arms around Torrance until she groaned softly against his chest, her face buried against him, and he forced himself to relax his hold.

"Oh, I'll fight you for them," the Lycan laughed. "And then, while you lie dying, I'll enjoy them both...while you watch." "You've overstepped the bounds of depravity, Simmons," his father growled, his deep voice guttural with rage. He had said they were going to handle this "according to the laws of their people," and Mason knew that meant a proper, ceremonial Challenge fight—or, in simpler terms, a fight to the death. Before Robert Dillinger could utter the words Mason knew were coming, he said, "Consider yourself Challenged, Simmons."

"Oh, goodie," the Lycan laughed with a smile, rubbing his bloodstained hands together. "This is going to be fun."

Mason grunted, then pulled Torrance with him as he moved toward the wall of the cave, wanting her as far from the rogue as possible. He was aware of the others following behind them, while Brody stayed in place, keeping a careful eye on Simmons, who watched them with an amused expression. "You're both...unharmed?" he asked hoarsely, barely able to force the words past the tightness in his throat, his gaze moving swiftly between the two women.

His mother nodded, while Torrance stared up at him, their terror so stark and raw it made him want to rush at Simmons and tear the bastard's throat out with his fangs. The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that his father would hold him back, demanding he handle the situation according to the rules. "What happened to Elliot?"

"Your woman happened to him, Mason," his mother told them with a small, sad smile. "He was ready to Challenge that monster himself, so she brained him with a rock. She saved the boy's life."

"Not for long," he muttered. "I'm killing him for this, as soon as he's awake to fight me."

"You can't do that," Torrance whispered brokenly, sagging against the rough wall at her back. "None of this is his fault, Mase. He only wanted to save Marly, but when we got here, Simmons was—" She swallowed convulsively, her face too pale, and he knew what she couldn't say.

A deep, guttural slash of sound rumbled in his chest, full of anguish and pain. "*He killed the girl?*"

Torrance nodded, blinking slowly, her green eyes red and swollen with her grief. "I had...I had to stop Elliot. He was going to get himself killed, so I did the only thing I could think of."

"You knocked him out?"

"Yeah," she said shakily, wrapping her arms around her slender body, as if she were trying to hold herself together.

"You're amazing," he breathed out on a husky groan, so proud of her that it hurt.

Crouching down beside the teenager, Jeremy pushed the thick caramel locks back from Elliot's temple, checking the injury. "Looks like the night for getting your brains bashed in. But who knows? Maybe she knocked some sense back into him," he muttered. "I still can't believe he was stupid enough to try this on his own."

"He didn't have a choice," she whispered, trembling, staring at Jeremy with tear-drenched eyes. "It was Marly on the phone. She told him that Simmons had her and Olivia, and that he was going to kill them if Jeremy didn't bring me to him. Then we found Simmons...and he...he..."

"Don't think about it," Mason grunted, hating that she'd witnessed something so terrifying and evil—something straight out of her nightmares—and he hadn't been able to stop it.

Torrance rolled her lips inward, lifting one shoulder. "I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I hit him. It wasn't even that hard a blow, but I think I might have struck where he got hit before."

Moving to Mason's side, Cian cast a long, heavy look toward the rogue waiting across the cave, watching them with feral anticipation. "He's going to be damn near impossible to take down, Dillinger. He's still riding high on the rush." "What do you mean?" Torrance asked.

"For a Lycan," the Runner explained, "eating human flesh is almost the ultimate high. It jacks you up like pure adrenaline."

"Then he'll be even harder to defeat," she gasped, panting as she began to panic. "You said it was almost the ultimate high, Cian. Wh-what's better?"

"Bond blood," Jeremy muttered grimly, glaring at his partner.

"Bond blood?" she repeated, grabbing on to Mason's arm with a biting grip. "If that's all you need to make yourself stronger, then do it, Mason. My God, you *have* to do it!"

He shook his head, cupping her face in his hands, catching at one glistening tear with his thumb as it slipped from the corner of her eye. "I won't do this to you, not after what you've been through tonight. I won't use you, Torrance."

"Damn it, don't do this," she cried, gripping his wrists, her lips trembling as her voice cracked. "You have to do it, Mason! I don't want to lose you. *Please*."

"I can't," he growled, the irony of the situation not lost on him. He'd been so sure that she would refuse his bite out of fear if the moment ever came where he found the courage to ask her, and now that he'd finally stopped being such a blind jackass and realized he was head over heels, crazy in love with her—now that she was standing before him, proud and courageous, willing to accept the most primal act of his beast—he couldn't. After what she'd been through tonight, seeing a young girl consumed by Simmons, there was no way Mason was going to make her stand there and take his fangs in her throat. No way was he going to risk binding her to him, then leaving her to follow him into death if he couldn't defeat the bastard.

He had everything he wanted standing before him, and he couldn't take it.

Because he loved her.

"I know you don't love me," she whispered, her heartbreaking words husky with pain as she stared at his throat, "but don't do this, Mason. Don't let him kill you. *Please*. I'll release you afterward, I swear it. We'll find some way to have it reversed, canceled, anything. Just don't...don't let him kill you. I can't watch that, Mason. I can't live through that."

"Torrance, baby, look at me." She lifted tear-drenched eyes the color of the forest in the height of spring, and his heart rolled over, filling him with so much love, he couldn't hold it all inside. "I love you," he said on a harsh breath of air, grinning at the vision of her eyes going completely round, her mouth opening into a perfect *O* of surprise.

"Wh-what?" she gasped, tears spilling down her cheeks like tiny rivers, wetting his hands as they cradled her face.

"I love you," he said fervently. "Love you so much that I don't even know how to explain it. All I know is that you're in my heart, my mind, the air that I breathe, every part of me. *I love you*."

"Then you'll do it? You'll make the bond with me?"

He shook his head, leaning forward to press a tender kiss to the corner of her eye. "I won't do it, sweetheart. Not like this. Not after what you've been through, not—"

"Who cares what I've been through?" she cried, gripping handfuls of his shirt in her hands. "I'm alive, Mason. But if you die—"

"If I died, you'd die, too," he growled, pressing a hot, hungry kiss against her trembling mouth. "And there's no way I'm letting that happen."

Mason released his hold on the woman he loved, and turned toward Simmons. As he walked to the middle of the cave, the bloody remains of the girl became visible on the far side of the boulder where the Lycan remained sitting. The closer he moved toward the rogue, the thicker the scent of blood and sex grew, making him ill at the thought of what his mother and Torrance had witnessed. And yet, Torrance hadn't faltered. If ever he were given proof that his little human was a warrior, it was now. She was all fire and strength and courage. A woman who would stand by his side as an equal, and help him meet any challenges that life threw at them.

Cian moved to his side, placing a cigarette between his lips, then dug deep in his pocket for a lighter. "Robert," he said around the slim roll of tobacco clasped within his white teeth, "it should be your honor to make the circle."

His father moved to stand before them, reaching down to dig his right hand into the moist earth, clutching a handful of soil. He stood, calling out the ancient ritual words of Challenge as he sprinkled the dirt upon the ground at four points—north, east, south and west. The points served as markers for the wide circle he then proceeded to draw in the ground with his hand in four connecting arcs. As he closed the circle, he completed the ritual with the words, "So the Challenge is raised. May justice be done when victory falls to the last wolf standing."

Waiting at the circle's edge, Mason pulled off his shirt and dropped it to the ground. He shook his arms out at his sides, bouncing lightly on the soles of his boot-covered feet as he watched Simmons move to the opposite side, across from him. "Shall we go whole or half forms?" the rogue drawled, a hard, ruthless energy all but burning from his body, pulsing around him like a fiery glow.

"Half," he grunted, wondering how Torrance was going to react to his change—and half-terrified that she'd never want to come near him again if he survived.

"I thought you might say that," Simmons laughed, looking past him to wink at the women.

His father placed a hand on his shoulder, giving an affec-

tionate squeeze, his dark blue eyes full of pride and concern. "Any words of advice?" Mason asked roughly.

"Yeah. Torrance may be scared of our world, but what woman in her right mind wouldn't be? She's also strong and fiery and protective as hell of you. If you're in love with her, she deserves your faith."

"She's my mate."

"Which takes care of nature. But sometimes a union comes along that truly sets the metaphysical world on its ass. I was lucky enough to find it with your mother. It's time you completed the bond. Don't blow your chance, son. Life's too short."

He snorted, shaking his head at the old man's audacity. "I promise you that if I make it out of this cave alive, sinking my teeth into her is going to be at the top of my list. But I'm not doing it now."

Those dark eyes narrowed with a hard truth. "You may not win otherwise, Mason."

"But if I do, I've got a helluva good thing to look forward to."

Cian snuffled a quiet chuckle at his side and then he felt her heat at his back, followed by the soft touch of her palm against his spine. Spinning around, Mason pulled her against him, kissing his way into her mouth.

"I won't risk you that way," he growled against her lips, kissing her deeper...harder, before gently pushing her away. He sent a silent message to Jeremy, who came forward and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, securing her at his side.

"I love you, Torrance. Whatever happens, don't forget that," he said in a low rasp, and before she could respond, he turned back around, trusting his partner to watch over her. Taking a deep breath, Mason bowed his head, then stepped within the circle, ready for the battle to begin.

Chapter 13

With her heart in her throat, Torrance watched the man she loved and the murderer who'd made their lives a living hell face off against each other. Her breath caught, a hard, painful knot churning in her chest...because she knew what was coming.

Oh, God...oh, God...oh, God.

His mother grabbed her right hand, holding it tightly, his father flanking Olivia's other side. Jeremy stood at her left, and Brody moved into place beside him, while Cian stood beside Robert. It was a show of support, for both her and Mason, as well as a sign of strength.

If Mason died, they weren't going to let Simmons have her without a fight.

Oh, God, please. Please don't let him die.

Torrance forced herself to take a deep breath, then another, the sound whistling past her compressed lips as she watched both men throw back their heads, arms held out at their sides, feet braced firmly against the damp, fetid ground of the cave.

And then it began.

Like an earthquake riding under the earth's crust, Mason's wolf rolled beneath the surface of his skin. His muscles flexed, skin dark and damp with sweat, the air humid and sharp with animal musk—and it broke through. One second he was her lover, her mate, the man who possessed her heart—and then he wasn't.

He became something she didn't know, didn't recognize, foreign and unfamiliar. Thick, chestnut fur covered the upper half of his body, his hard musculature expanding, bulging with power and strength. Gnarled, deadly claws formed at the end of his powerful arms, while his head took on the hulking shape of a wolf. Only his lower half remained unchanged, the fur tapering, blending into golden skin at his waist.

Ohmygod, she thought, knowing that she should be terrified, but she wasn't. His massive head turned, glowing golden eyes finding her, holding her with the intensity of his gaze, and a smooth, melting warmth poured through her. She'd been wrong. This was no stranger. It was *Mason*, and he was beautiful, no matter what form he wore. She could see the traces of the man in those mesmerizing eyes, the worry and fear that she would reject this side of him. She wanted to run to him and hold him, tell him what a fool he was for thinking she could ever think of him as anything less than perfect. She tried to express her emotions with a warm, tender smile of love, her breath catching when the heat in that golden stare blazed, fiery and bright.

Time held, silent and heavy, and then he slowly turned back toward Simmons, and in the next breath they exploded into action. They came together with a harsh, meaty sound, their bodies slamming into one another with preternatural power, snarling and gnashing at each other with white, gleaming fangs. Torrance pumped her fist in the air when Mason knocked Simmons onto his back, then winced as the black wolf countered with a roundhouse that whipped Mason's head to the side, blood spurting from his nose.

The two combatants moved apart, dancing on the balls of their feet the same way she'd seen boxers do, their movements light despite the muscular, bulky forms of their wolves.

"Finish him quickly, Mase!" Jeremy called out, his deep voice guttural and raw.

"Yeah," Cian rasped around the cigarette wedged between his lips. "Kick his ugly ass and make it hurt. The pathetic bastard deserves the pain."

They went at each other again in a volley of slashes and kicks, the choreography of their movements oddly beautiful, at the same time it horrified her with its violence. Biting and sharp, their rage radiated through the moist, firelit cave like a noxious vapor that coated the skin. Torrance rubbed her chilled palms against her arms, as if she could rub off that thick, cloying film of hatred, but it was too strong.

She'd never truly understood how powerful the vile emotion could be until now. And it made her admire Mason all the more, for the fact that he could face such evil and survive without the encounter blackening his soul.

The fight escalated, and she watched as Mason landed a powerful side kick that made Simmons stumble, but the rogue countered with a slash of his claws that ripped across her lover's chest, making him snarl with pain. "Come on, Mase," she whispered beneath her breath, but Simmons kept coming. Harder. Faster. Like something impossible to take down.

And her fear nearly choked her.

Simmons landed another powerful roundhouse, and Mason's head spun, the edges of his vision going dark, and in that stark, vivid moment, he realized the rogue was almost too powerful to beat.

*Almost...*but Mason had something the rogue didn't have. *Torrance*.

He had the promise of a future with the most amazing woman who wanted to share her life with him. Who would grow old with him; give him a family and a lifetime of love and laughter and smiles.

Simmons's claws slashed at his left shoulder, ripping through skin in a scalding flash of pain, the rush the rogue had gained from killing Marly making him too fast, too powerful. When another kick came at the right side of his head, he went down, his knees slamming into the ground with a bone-jarring impact. Sweat and blood streamed into his eyes, while relentless waves of pain rolled through him, threatening to take him under, sucking him down into that crushing state of darkness.

"Get up, you ass," he snarled at himself, and he could hear Simmons circling him, feel the suffocating blackness of the rogue's hatred and rage lashing against him.

He shook his head, struggling to gain his feet, when a sweet, perfect sound broke through the disorienting haze of pain that surrounded him. It seemed so far away, like someone shouting at him through water, and he couldn't make out the words. Then it came at him again, louder this time, battering against his consciousness with a blinding urgency—and suddenly he heard Torrance calling out to him, the sound of her voice making his blood surge. "Kick him back, Mason! Damn it, don't you dare die on me! You have to fight. You have to, because I love you, Mason! I love you!"

"Torrance!" he hissed, blinking his eyes as he tried to find her through that blanketing fog of pain. He lifted his head, searching through the faces at the edge of the circle, and the moment their gazes connected—her eyes tear-drenched and so full of love—an intense, explosive energy surged through him, charging him up, revitalizing him, hitting him like an emotional shock to his system. Mason drew on it, on the love and life that he wanted to share with her, feeling the magnificence of it pour through his body.

God, he'd been such a fool. All the time he'd wasted thinking he'd be sucking wind, incapacitated by fear if he gave in to this emotion, when he couldn't have been more wrong. It wasn't fear that filled him; it was love—its power more potent than anything he'd ever known. Loving her didn't make him vulnerable. That's what Dean had been trying to tell him. It made him strong, and hearing her say she loved him only intensified that power until it was rushing through his veins like a life-giving force, making him all but invincible.

"I've been waiting for this day," Simmons growled at his back, the garbled words dripping with satisfaction, and he thought, *Finish it, Dillinger. Finish it now.*

Swiftly twisting to his feet, Mason turned and immediately went on the attack, his claws striking, ripping through fur and skin and muscle, and he watched as the rogue's eyes went wide with fear. With a roaring battle cry, Mason kept advancing, swiping at Simmons's head with one set of claws, slashing at his furred gut with the other, landing blow after blow, while the rogue tried to retreat. But Mason was too fast, too strong. With a husky, bellowing shout, he swung his right leg into a powerful roundhouse that slammed into the side of Simmons's skull, breaking his upper jaw and sending him crashing to the floor of the cave.

The Lycan lay facedown in the dirt, until Mason nudged him over onto his back with one booted foot.

Simmons was still alive...but not for long. Blood bubbled on the rogue's black lips, even as he motioned Mason closer. "You can't stop it, Dillinger." Mason stared down at him, and the rogue smiled, his teeth smeared with streaks of crimson. "You're going to find more bodies. Like the redhead. Like the pretty little blondes your friends keep finding. It's never going to end."

"It'll end," he grunted. "Just like this."

"Won't matter." The rogue laughed, sputtering as blood filled his mouth. "You'll see. There'll be...more killings. More rogues. There are so many pieces of this puzzle that you don't even know about. But it was fun making that kill. I knew it would screw with your head, seeing all that pretty red hair." Simmons's mouth twisted, eyes red with the glittering burn of hate. "You can't win."

"I already did," Mason rasped, his chest heaving. "I'm the last wolf standing, you miserable son of a bitch, and you're out of time."

"My death is only the beginning," Simmons gasped. "You have no idea what you're up against. When they make their move, you *will* die, Dillinger. All of you will."

"Not if they die first." And bending down beside the body, he took Simmons's head into his claws, and ended the Challenge once and for all.

Mason had no so sooner turned away from Simmons's body than he found Torrance launching herself into his arms. With a choking sob, she buried her nose in his thick fur, clutching at him, her body shaking with a fine tremor of relief, and something vibrant exploded in his chest, the searing emotion nearly bringing him to his knees.

Though he was more wolf than man, she embraced him. Accepted him. And she'd told him that she loved him.

Oh, God, please. Let it be true.

Drawing a deep breath into his lungs, he allowed his wolf to pull back into his body, the change spilling over him like a warm, smooth wave of water, and he lifted her into his arms, crushing her against his chest. Catching Jeremy's eye, he said, "I'll buy you a whole case of Lagavulin if you'll take Elliot home with you tonight."

His partner gave him a two-fingered salute and a smile. "Not a problem, man."

Nodding a goodbye toward his parents and friends, Mason walked out of the cave, heading into the autumn night, carrying his mate into the dense forest, driven by the need to get her home before he lost the tenuous hold on his control.

"Mason," she said quietly, her voice still husky from the tears she'd cried. "Are you sure you're okay to carry me? I know you must be in pain." Her head rested on his uninjured shoulder as she gently brushed her fingertips over the pounding of his heart, carefully avoiding the angry-looking wounds left from Simmons's claws.

He pressed a kiss to her temple, urging his legs to move faster. "I don't feel a thing," he told her, and it was true. Though his body should have been steeped in agony, he felt amazingly good, riding an emotional high that blocked out any discomfort from his injuries. And for the first time in years his heart was at peace. The wind blew through the trees, shaking the fall leaves from their branches until they fell gently to the ground, crunching beneath the soles of his boots as he navigated his way through the moonlit woods. After the evil they'd survived, it felt so good, so right, to be surrounded by the peaceful sounds of the forest, holding the woman he loved in his arms.

"I meant every word, Mason. I *do* love you, and I'm so proud of you," she told him in an aching whisper, lifting her head from his shoulder. With her raised hand, she brushed his damp hair back from his temple in a tender gesture of caring. His arms trembled, holding her tighter, and she grinned, a spark of wicked excitement burning in her eyes. "Now that it's over, where are you taking me?"

"Home," he grunted, wincing at the primitive hunger rough-

ening the edges of his speech. "Then I'm taking your sweet little backside straight to bed, and I'm not letting you out of it for at least a week."

"I'm good with that." Her gaze lowered, following the movement of her fingers as they stroked against the warm skin of his throat. "Are you going to make a bond with me?" she asked.

Hanging on the verge of something feral and violent something beyond his control—his gaze dropped to her mouth. "You believe that I won't hurt you, Tor?"

It made Mason's heart do some weird skipping thing, the way her tender smile bloomed like a promise—something fragile and sweet and beautiful. When she lifted her gaze, her eyes glistened with breathtaking emotion. "I believe you're the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me. Of course you won't hurt me."

"Torrance, I'm sorry for being such a blind jackass these past few days," he muttered in a rough, breathless rush of words, his heart pounding in his chest to a violent, thudding rhythm. "I just couldn't let go of the fear, sweetheart, like it was locked up inside of me. And then, when I thought I'd lost you, everything broke open. I...I knew then that I loved you, that I'd been falling in love with you from the moment I found you, and I couldn't stop it. I didn't want to stop it."

"I wanted you to make the bond in the cave," she admitted, her voice velvet-soft as it stroked his senses. "I still do."

Mason closed his eyes as the hunger swept through him like a hot wind, bringing with it the piercing eagerness for what was to come. "I *need* it, Tor. I need that connection to you."

She pressed her mouth to the corner of his jaw, the touch of her lips so innocent and yet wildly evocative. "I need it, too, Mason." Then she shifted in his arms, tilting her head to the side, away from his body, and with trembling fingers she pulled the long waves of her hair over her shoulder, exposing the delicate line of her throat. With burning eyes, Mason stared at the tender vein pulsing sweetly beneath the fragile skin...the most tempting thing he'd ever seen. His human half raged at him to keep walking, to get her home and into his bed, where she belonged—but the dominant hunger of the wolf could no longer be denied. "Torrance," he breathed against her temple, halting beneath the silvery moonlight, the swaying trees and rustling wind coming to a strange stillness, like captivated spectators. "I... I can't wait any longer."

"I don't want you to wait, Mase." She turned to look up at him, staring deeply into his eyes as she cupped the hot side of his face in her palm, her fingers cool against the burning heat of his skin.

"Do you know how I won tonight, Tor?"

"You kicked his ass," she said, giving him a mischievous grin.

"I thought of *you*," he told her, smiling with the joy of everything that he held in his arms. "Of everything I want with you. Want to be for you. Of the life I want to share with you. Thinking about how much I love you, regretting like hell that I hadn't told you sooner. And then you gave me the words, and it was like something coming to life inside of me. After that, there was no way I could lose."

"Mason..."

He kissed the corner of her mouth, the smooth arc of her cheekbone, the delicate line of her jaw. "I love you, Tor. The human half of my soul loves you. The wolf half loves you just as strongly. I love you because you're my heart, and simply because you're you, so beautiful and perfect and strong, inside and out. I know you deserve more than a nighttime forest," he growled, even as he panted against the delicate, milk-white length of her throat, his gums burning as razor-sharp canines began to slip free—the need to bite her pulsing through him like a raw, angry wound. "But I *can't* wait." "Haven't we already waited long enough?" she asked, and he could have sworn there was a smile in her voice.

"I needed you to see what I'm capable of becoming," he grated, his chest heaving. "I needed you to see that, before you accepted this."

"Mason..." She sighed, and he could hear the desire thickening her words. "Don't you know I think you're beautiful, no matter what skin you wear?"

Groaning deep in his throat, he let her feet slip to the ground, his hands shaking as he ran them down the front of her body, her back to his chest. She shivered when his head lowered, his tongue flicking out to taste her skin—and, unable to wait a second longer, he sank the sharp points of his teeth into her sweetly yielding, vulnerable flesh.

Torrance cried out a sharp, sobbing sound of excitement, and his arms clutched at her with desperation, one wrapped around her hips, the other across her chest, his fingers cupping the perfect weight of her breast in his hand, her nipple swollen and hard against his palm. He stiffened against her, shuddering with pleasure as the breathtaking sensations rolled down his spine. It was too good, the rush of ecstasy so dark and sweet as her taste filled his mouth, warm and wildly exciting, and he pulled her hips tighter against him, his hardened shaft thickening to the point that he ached. He drank her in for as long as he dared, then pulled his fangs free with a gasping breath, nuzzling the small marks he'd made in her tender skin.

"I love you," he whispered, his voice shaking as he put the words into the warm curve of her throat. "God, Torrance, I'll love you forever."

She made a soft sound of satisfaction, and he lifted his head, watching the hard, evocative pleasure she'd experienced from the bite slowly drain away, leaving her drowsy and replete. "It felt so right," she murmured, a small smile of wonder on her lips. "And perfect," he rasped, pressing a tender, reverent kiss to the hollow of her throat, the trembling curve of her jaw—and then he was cradling her against his chest again, his long legs eating up ground, aware of the need to get her home... *now*...before he ended up taking her right there in the forest. He carried her straight to the bathroom when they reached the cabin, stripping her before pulling her into the shower with him, quickly washing away the evidence of the nightmarish evening they'd survived.

And then finally...*finally* he was laying her down on his bed, covering her with the heat of his body—and everything in his world was right.

Lying on the cool, crisp sheets, Torrance gasped, lost in a heightened state of pleasure as Mason pressed a damp kiss to the curve of her breast, just before he took the nipple into the scorching, vivid heat of his mouth, suckling her with strong, deep pulls that made her writhe. He laughed a low, sexy rumble of sound as he moved to the other breast, pressing a kiss to the sensitive tip before sliding lower, his fingers biting into her hips—and she squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that brilliant, glittering sparks of crimson burned on the backs of her eyelids.

When his wicked tongue flicked against the tender indentation between her hip and thigh, she fisted her hands in the sheets, a low moan shivering in her throat as the rough slide of his palms pressed her thighs wide.

For one heart-stopping moment, she could feel the hungry, provocative press of his gaze—and then he touched her with his tongue.

"Your taste is unreal," he groaned in a broken rumble, his voice guttural and raw with unmistakable lust...and something darker. Deeper. Something surging from the animal side of his

nature that called to her fragile humanity and made it melt. "I can't get enough of you."

"Please," she sobbed, begging, not even sure what she was begging for, but knowing that only Mason could give it to her. "*Please*."

"Come for me," he growled, the deliciously graphic words spoken against her tender flesh, pulling the pleasure up out of her. "I want to feel it, taste it. Come on, angel," he whispered, the erotic tickle of his breath adding to the overwhelming sensations rushing through her, making her crazed. "Come for me."

She couldn't have stopped it even if she'd wanted to. One second she was strung out on the painful, desperate edge of need, and then everything pulled tighter...closing in on her, hard and hot and brutal, and she went crashing over. The harsh, aggressive rush of ecstasy pushed her into a star-kissed, pulsing, blinding unknown, where nothing existed but the perfect, beautiful spasms rolling through her with vicious intensity. Deep and hungry and erotically intimate, his tongue thrust into her with carnal demand, taking everything he wanted—everything she had to give.

"Mason!" she gasped, arching and crying out as the pleasure consumed her, drowning her in wave after wave, until everything went black and still and warm in her mind.

When she came back, strands of hair stuck to her damp cheeks, her lips raw from the bite of her teeth as she'd tried to keep from screaming the roof down. She was destroyed, both inside and out, and yet he stared down at her as if he thought she were the most beautiful thing in the world. Gone was the dark, delicious brown of his sexy gaze—his eyes shining the golden color of his wolf once more.

She licked her swollen lips, blinking up at him while her body hummed, tingling sweetly from her temples down to her toes. "*Wow*. I hate to say it, but that was so amazing, I don't think there's any way you'll be able to top it," she taunted him playfully, her voice husky with satisfaction.

The warm line of his lips curled the barest fraction, making him appear endearingly boyish for a moment. "We'll see about that," he whispered against her mouth...and then there was no more breath for speaking. No more air. Nothing but Mason. He was everywhere. In her reeling senses, in the thoughts spinning deliciously through her head. The animal wildness of him slipped beneath her skin, intoxicating her, making her feverish with renewed desire. She groaned as his tongue stroked deep, conquering her mouth, his breathing violent and harsh as his hands clutched at her, their bodies damp with sweat, writhing against each other, unable to lie silent and still.

"Torrance," he whispered, and there was no mistaking the aching emotion in the roughness of his voice. "How do you do this to me?"

"Because you do the same to me. You know, all this time I thought I was waiting for a man who could match my ideal," she panted, working to get the words out over the thundering of her heart, wanting him to understand. "Someone who existed only in my mind, because it was safer that way. That way no one could let me down and drag me down with them. But really, all along, I was just waiting for *you*. Dreams are nothing but a way of passing the time until we find what we really want, Mase, until we realize where we're really meant to be. For me, that's here with you, and trust me when I say you're so much better than any dream I could have ever had."

Mason groaned from the surge of emotion that rushed through him at her words and lowered his head, sharing the air between their parted lips, aware of every decadent point of contact between their naked bodies. With a smile on his lips, he kissed his way into her mouth, and it was too good, too hotdeliciously wicked and yet poignantly reverent. He wanted to worship her, love her, take care of her. Cherish her. He wanted to make a life with her—and he wanted to make a life *inside* of her. Plant his seed and make a baby that had her fiery hair and beautiful green eyes. Hell, he wanted a whole horde of them. He wanted the warmth and love and miracle of being surrounded by the ones he loved—more than anything in the world.

He smiled, knowing she could see his wolf in it. The sharp points of his teeth. "I love you, Tor." Her lips formed the words as he braced his weight on one arm, watching her eyes as he pushed inside of her, loving that sharp flair of awareness, as if he were reaching into her soul.

"It's gonna be hard this time," he warned huskily...and it was. His body powered into her, deep and thick and hot, pushing the pleasure up into her until she was sobbing out raw, choking cries of ecstasy, pliant and flushed, his to do with whatever he pleased. And when the star-studded darkness of release crashed over them, they clutched at each other, their hands slipping across the damp heat of their skin, struggling for a hold.

The hours flowed together in an endless whirl of pleasure, their limbs tangled, bodies coming together again...and again. They twisted and turned, investigating every angle, rolling across the bed, shoving at each other in a battle for pleasure that had them sweat-slick and panting, the intensity so much greater for the love that bound them together. And when they finally collapsed in exhaustion, their bodies drowsy with satisfaction, Torrance snuggled against his side. "Hold me," she whispered, laying her hand over his heart.

With loving reverence, Mason wrapped her in the possessive hold of his arms...and pressed his mouth to the tender marks on the column of her throat. *"Forever.*" The cry of a hawk pulled him from sleep, or maybe it was simply his internal alarm that warned him his mate was no longer by his side. Rolling to his right, Mason ran his palm down the empty space beside him and closed his eyes in quiet regret. He had hoped that being held in his arms would keep her nightmares at bay—and he couldn't help the twinge of regret in his gut that she hadn't turned to him in need. He knew he was being unfair, but old doubts prickled at the back of his neck, making him swear foully under his breath. He rolled out of bed and grabbed his jeans, hitching them up over his hips as he set off toward the door.

* * *

With one hand on the knob, Mason found himself wondering if he could actually use the blood bond they'd made to find her. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply in and out, then reached out for Torrance with his mind, with his heart...and realized he *knew* exactly where she was.

"Cool," he laughed under his breath, a foolish smile playing at his lips as he set off for the kitchen. Seconds later he found her perched on the counter, a bowl of Neapolitan ice cream in one hand, a spoon in the other.

"Hey, there," she said the moment she set eyes on him. Grinning, she scooped up a heaping spoonful of chocolate ice cream and held it out to him. "Wanna share with me?"

Moving toward her, Mason placed his hands on her knees and opened his mouth for the spoon, enjoying the sugary burst of flavor on his tongue as he swallowed. "I was afraid that you'd had another nightmare," he told her as she set the bowl on the counter, one of the straps of her cotton tank top slipping off her shoulder.

"No, I was just hungry." She laughed softly, a mischievous twinkle in her big green eyes. "I think all this physical activity must be good for my appetite." Lifting her hand, she touched the heat of his face with cool fingertips as her expression turned gentle. "And I doubt I'll be having any more nightmares. I think they've been put to rest, Mase. Thanks to you."

"In that case," he rasped, forcing the words past the lump of emotion in his throat as he scooped up a dollop of the threeflavored dessert on his fingers, "I think we should celebrate, sweetheart."

Then he dribbled the ice cream onto her shoulder.

"You fiend," Torrance gasped, the breathless sound turning into a shivering moan as Mason leaned down and lapped the freezing cream from her skin with his tongue. "I can't believe you did that!"

"Are you really going to complain about it?" he asked, his dark eyes glittering with laughter as he licked a bit of chocolate from his bottom lip, then stepped between her legs, his big hands resting on her bare thighs.

She narrowed her eyes at him, but the corners of her mouth were twitching with humor. "I guess there's not much point," she admitted. "After the way we met, I should have known you'd turn out to be a devil."

"I'll show you devilish," he whispered in her ear, his long fingers curving over her hips as he pulled her against him, the evidence of his arousal impossible to miss.

Torrance trembled, moving restlessly against him, amazed that desire could burn again so quickly. "D-did I mention insatiable?"

"I'll show you insatiable," he growled playfully, nipping her throat, making her gasp at the same time he pushed forward, thrusting against her, the rough denim of his jeans creating a decadent friction against the soft cotton panties she'd slipped on before heading out of the bedroom.

"And sinful," she moaned, her breath catching, deliberately egging him on.

He grunted a provocative sound of hunger against her shoulder, teasing her with his teeth. "I'll show you sinful, woman."

"And delicious," she giggled, thoroughly enjoying their game.

"I'll show you how delicious *you* are," he warned, one hand pulling down her tank top while the other smeared strawberry ice cream over the swollen tip of her breast, the cold shocking against her sensitive nipple. When he closed his warm mouth around the chilled tip, Torrance screamed, arching her back, the intensity of the sensations shooting straight to her core.

"Grab the bowl," he rumbled moments later, in a slow, wicked slide of words. When she had it clutched in her fingers, Mason pulled her off the counter, his hands under her bottom, her legs wrapped around his lean hips, and to their mutual delight, they spent the remainder of the night in playful, erotic splendor...discovering that ice cream is so much sweeter when enjoyed by two.

By the time they opened their eyes the following day, the noontime sun was climbing on the horizon, bathing the glade in saffron shades of sunshine beyond the high windows. Squinting against the brilliant light, Torrance lifted her face from the warmth of Mason's shoulder and tried to make out the blurry numbers on his digital alarm clock.

"What time is it?" he asked, his deep voice still scratchy from sleep.

"Heck if I know," she laughed tiredly, dropping her head back onto his firm shoulder, nuzzling closer so that she could press a kiss to the warm column of his throat. Drawing in a deep breath, Torrance wanted to purr like a jungle cat, his scent was so delicious. So masculine and warm, going straight to her head. There was a sense of rightness, of peace, in her heart that had never been there before. A sense of completion, heightened by a breathtaking feeling of hope for the future. "You know I'm blind without my glasses, and I'm too comfy to look for them." Stretching the long, lean lines of his beautifully muscled body, he asked, "No nightmares last night?"

"Nope, not a single one." She lifted her right leg, pressing her bent knee against the swollen, steel-hard length of his erection, smiling against the curve of his whiskered jaw when a low, rumbling growl of arousal vibrated in his chest. The moment was perfect and warm, lackadaisical...while at the same time sweetly provocative, knowing that he wanted her. That all she had to do was say the word, and he'd be on her in a heartbeat. "I think we've found a cure for what ails me," she teased.

"I like the sound of that." He pulled her closer, against the hardness and heat of his body, sounding endearingly nervous as he said, "So, how do you feel about spending the day together...planning?"

"Planning what?" she asked, still drifting in that dreamy state of haziness that came after a deep, exhausted sleep.

He lifted his dark head from the pillow to gaze down at her, managing to look entirely too sexy, with his shaggy hair and dark whiskers. Watching her through heavy-lidded eyes that glittered with a mix of lust and love, he said, "I was thinking about a wedding."

"A wedding?" Suddenly wide-awake, she sat straight up in bed, completely stunned.

"Yeah," he said, cupping her cheek in his warm hand. "I love you, Tor. As far as the Lycan world is concerned, we're already married. But I want to have a wedding with you, sweetheart. See you in a beautiful white gown, your hair flowing over your shoulders like a flame, holding flowers in your hands. No way in hell am I gonna miss out on that. Whaddya say?"

"I say yes," she practically squealed, throwing herself into his arms, pressing playful kisses over his face and his chest, both of them shaking with happiness and laughter. "Yes and yes and yes!"

"Thank God," he rumbled, pulling her fully on top of him, his big hands on her bottom, anchoring her in place. "Let's try to make it happen this weekend."

"This weekend?" Torrance stared at him in shock. "That's impossible! Nobody can plan a wedding in four days. We'll need a few weeks at least."

"I'm not waiting *weeks* to make you my wife," he grumbled, holding her tighter.

"Mason!" she laughed. "There's no possible way to organize anything faster than that."

"We'll see," he murmured silkily, giving her a pirate's smile as he pulled her down for a hungry, eating kiss...

And they were married four days later.

Epilogue

Despite the fact that the bride and maid of honor had only a handful of days to prepare, it was a storybook wedding worthy of any magical fairy tale. The ceremony and reception were held outdoors, in the center of the Alley, as was tradition when a Bloodrunner married. There was thankfully no rain, but to compensate for the chilly autumn weather, the Runners had gone into the city and purchased some beautiful stone fire pits. They'd been placed among the tables, the towering blazes adding to the romantic atmosphere while providing necessary warmth.

Torrance was radiant in the ivory sheath that Michaela bought for her in Covington, the groom so in love, there was no doubt in anyone's eyes that they were meant to be together. And Dylan had arrived back home in time to help celebrate the momentous occasion, graciously offering to give away the bride.

Sitting beside his wife, who was busily chatting with her

best friend, Mason took a sip of his champagne, conversing quietly with the Elder. "It's time to keep your friends close and your enemies closer," Dylan told him. "It's someone who's pack, Mason. You can't trust anyone."

"It's someone *you* work with," he replied in a low rasp, looking out over the dancing, laughing guests. "It's someone on the League."

Dylan breathed out a heavy sigh. "Whoever it is, I have no doubt that you'll find him."

"Damn straight we will," Mason grunted. And then, shaking off his unwanted tension, he turned to smile at his friend, knowing there was one more order of business to take care of before he could whisk his new bride away to the privacy of their cabin. The day after Simmons's death, the Runners had drawn straws, choosing the one who would return to the pack to hunt the traitor from within. "I think it's time we made our announcement."

"This should be entertaining," the Elder drawled with a grin, though his eyes revealed the strain he was under. As a member of the League and friend of the Runners, Dylan was trapped between opposing sides of what was sure to turn into a bitter conflict.

Standing, Mason picked up a spoon to clink against the side of his champagne glass, careful not to hit too hard and shatter his mother's favorite crystal. "Excuse me," he called out. "If I could have everyone's attention for a moment. It's my honor and privilege to be the first to tell you that our own Jeremy Burns has gone before the Silvercrest's League of Elders and submitted his count."

As expected, the Alley, which had been transformed into a flower-filled paradise, fell completely quiet, even the natural sounds of the forest and the gentle breeze of the wind falling into an eerie state of silence.

"And now," he continued, lifting his glass in a toast to his best man, who sat at the end of the table beside a smirking Cian, "my partner will be accepting his place among the pack. To Jeremy, a braver man than I."

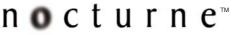
Cheers went up from every guest, every glass lifted in salute to the tawny-haired Runner who reluctantly grinned, bowing his head in thanks.

Every glass-except for one.

On the far side of the crowd, Mason watched as a lone blond female slipped quietly into the shadowed forest.

Last Wolf Hunting By Rhyannon Byrd





Chapter 1

A bitter mountain breeze wrapped around his long frame, whipping his shaggy hair against the furrowed ridges of his brow as Jeremy Burns hiked through the Maryland forest. Like a wrathful banshee, the relentless autumn winds howled with fury, while his fellow Bloodrunner, Cian Hennessey, quietly kept pace at his side.

They'd been working their way through the woods for a good fifteen minutes now, each step taking Jeremy closer to the last place on earth that he wanted to be. His muscles were hard with tension, biceps bulging against the seams of his shirt, his skin fever-hot despite the chill of the air. Blood pumped through his veins in a powerful, heavy rhythm, his heart hammering like a drum, senses honed to a razor's edge, sharp and precise.

And it was all because of a girl. All because of a woman. That was the relentless, infuriating thought burning its way through his tired mind as he hiked, the silvery moonlight glinting against the ravaged limbs of the trees, making them look like gnarled monsters in the shadowed darkness. But monsters didn't scare him. Hell, he *was* one of the monsters, complete with fangs and fur and a deadly appetite that could get him into trouble should he fail to exercise fierce control—which was why he always kept a white-knuckled grip on the animal side of his nature. For a Bloodrunner, losing control was never an option, but then neither was fear. And Jeremy had done a damn good job of mastering both—until it came to *her*.

He hated to admit it, but he was terrified by the growing knot of anticipation inside of him. The one that kept sniffing at the nighttime air, eager for a whiff of that lone, perfect fragrance that never failed to drive him out of his mind. Honeyed and womanly warm. Earthy and rich. It'd been woven into the very fabric of his soul, imprinted upon his senses like a tattoo needled into his skin. Just the thought of that mouthwatering scent made him hard and aching, not to mention irritable as hell.

"Do you think she'll be there?" he muttered in a gritty rasp, slanting a look toward the man at his side.

"Who?" Cian pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and flicked a sharp glance toward Jeremy, his pale gray eyes shadowed beneath the thick veil of his lashes. "The Murphy witch?"

"Who else?" he grunted impatiently. Jillian Murphy was the *only* woman on his mind—and the Irishman damn well knew it.

Taking a long drag from his now smoldering cigarette, Cian lifted his right brow in a cynical arch. "What? I'm psychic now, as well as irresistible?"

"Trust me, I have no problem resisting you," Jeremy quietly snarled, narrowing his eyes on the grinning bastard. Normally he enjoyed trading barbs with the Irishman, but not tonight. Tonight he was too tense, too bitter to have a sense of humor.

As if impervious to the thread of warning in his words, Cian barked a rich, husky laugh. "Aw, there it is. I knew your inner smart-ass was hiding in there somewhere, Burns. And to answer your question, yes, I think she'll be there. Why else do you think I decided to tag along?" His white teeth flashed in a taunting smile. "I'm here for moral support, you know."

"Moral support my ass. More like you're here so that you can run back to the Alley with some juicy gossip for the others." Jeremy knew his partner, Mason Dillinger, and the other Bloodrunners would be champing at the bit to hear the details of his first night back. "Face it, Hennessey. I'm on...to...you."

The soft words trailed off as the mountain winds suddenly surged from a new direction, swelling with power. Jeremy inhaled with a sharp, deep breath, and his head immediately shot back as if he'd been clipped under the chin.

Oh, god. There it was. Like a messenger in the night, the shivering breeze carried the fertile scents of the forest...and something more. Something lush and achingly familiar. Something that goddamn belonged to him.

With no choice but to follow the primal, ruthless dictates of his beast—of his wolf—Jeremy found himself staring up at the starry canopy of the bruise-colored sky. His feet were no longer moving, his entire being focused on taking in more of that decadent, head-spinning scent, so richly spiced that he could actually *taste* it.

That is so damn good, he thought with a low growl, wanting to roll the evocative flavor around on his tongue, savoring it like some strange, illicit pleasure. All it took was that instant flash of recognition, and the sweetly addictive scent melted into his skin, into his bones and blood and the violent, erratic pounding of his heart.

Jesus, he was so screwed. He had to be stronger than this, dammit.

Shaking his head to clear it, Jeremy silently cursed himself for being so easily seduced. He pushed his shaking hands back through the windblown strands of his hair, then shoved them deep in the pockets of his weathered jeans and forced himself to keep hiking.

It still amazed him that this was actually happening. That he was on his way back to the pack of werewolves who looked on his half-human heritage as a stain, an aberrationsomething that made him less than worthy. Because of his past, he knew it was a mistake to tempt fate by going back to the mountaintop town of Shadow Peak, the place the Silvercrest called home. But he didn't have a choice. He'd drawn the shortest straw among the Runners, making it his mission to catch the traitor who was tempting Lycans to turn rogue, to hunt innocent humans as prey, and teaching them how to dayshift. Rogues were dangerous enough bastards on the best of days, but show them how to take the shape of their beasts beneath the heat of the sun and they became that much more difficult to hunt down...not to mention kill. Jeremy figured he should know, considering his scars were still healing from his last run in with a group of them.

And now he could sense that Jillian was near. The woman who was meant to be his lifemate. The woman who was meant to make him complete.

As *if*, he silently snarled. Instead, this dark, seething need for her only made him feel hollow and raw, as if a part of him had been peeled away and amputated. He wanted so badly to ignore her existence, to forget, but it was impossible. And god only knew that he'd tried. For a long time, he'd mistakenly thought he could bury his memories and anger and bitterness in a warm, willing body. But no matter how eager or solicitous his bed partners were, he'd never been able to move past the fact that they weren't *the one* he truly wanted.

Pathetic. And now look at him, practically panting as he tried to breathe Jillian into his system like a drowning man gulping at air.

Maybe he'd have been able to handle it better if he'd had more time to prepare, but the chain of events that set this night in motion had come hard and fast. A mere seven days ago, Mason had defeated the rogue werewolf Anthony Simmons in a challenge to the death. The Bloodrunners had gathered that next evening at Mason's cabin and drawn straws to determine who would return to the pack to track down the traitorthe one who had been controlling Simmons. Like a bad joke, Jeremy's straw had been the shortest, and in a nightmarish daze, he'd found himself going before the Silvercrest's governing body, the League of Elders. He'd submitted his rogue kills, claiming his right to rejoin the pack as a full-fledged member, then served as best man at Mason's wedding. That had been two days ago-and here he was, on his way home. He'd barely had time to pack and settle things at his cabin, much less get his head in order.

Rubbing one hand against the back of his neck, Jeremy shuddered as a soft current of air suddenly slithered across his skin, leaving a spray of goose bumps in its wake. The cool eastern breeze snaked its way through the swaying trees, ruffling his hair as the wind caressed his face and arms with another eerie stroke of warning. *Go back*, it seemed to whisper within his ear. *Go back, while you still can*.

Pine needles crackled beneath his booted feet as he shook off the unsettling sensation and navigated his way through the last thick fringes of the forest. They were getting close. Up ahead, his keen eyesight allowed him to make out the hazy glow of the torch-lit clearing where the Silvercrest werewolves conducted business better suited to the wild than the civilized atmosphere of their secluded town, built on private land a few miles up the mountain.

A half minute later, the sounds from the clearing reached their ears. It was obviously a Challenge Night, just as Dylan Riggs, the youngest Silvercrest Elder and unlikely friend to the Runners, had informed them that afternoon.

"We're almost at the clearing," Cian muttered at his side, lighting another cigarette by pressing the end to the glowing orange tip of the first. "I'm not ashamed to say that I always hated this place when I was younger. It gives me the creeps."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Jeremy lifted his head and sniffed the air. It was thick and heavy with tension, all but cloying against his skin. Tonight's fight must be an unusual one, he thought with a wondering frown. Male agitation rose sharply on the wind, but with the women it was sizzling and swift, like a burning fuse.

It was imperative that he stay alert and concentrate, but Jillian's scent grew more intense the higher they hiked, revealing her explosive emotions at the same time it messed with his head. She was scared tonight, on edge, filled with an overwhelming sense of dread, but Jeremy knew she'd be putting on a brave face for the pack she considered hers, though she was witch, not wolf.

The women of her bloodline had served the Silvercrest werewolves for centuries, gifting them with their powers. When her mother, Constance, stepped down from her place as Spirit Walker, Jillian had assumed the vital role of healer and spiritual leader of the pack. He knew they loved her, respected her and looked up to her, though she was still a young woman of twenty-eight. And why shouldn't they? She'd given her entire life to them. Hell, she'd even turned her back on him for the sake of her precious pack of werewolves.

"That sounds like one hell of a fight," Cian murmured.

He grunted in agreement, his sense of foreboding growing stronger, edgier.

Low grumblings from the onlookers now provided a steady background of sound, layered beneath the harsh breaths of the opponents as they battled against one another, the occasional howl belted out by the crowd scraping across the calming sounds of the forest like sharp blasts of a weapon.

"Give up, bitch," a woman's guttural voice sneered, "and I just might let you die easy, instead of ripping you apart, piece by piece."

Jeremy's eyes went wide at the realization that the opponents were female. It wasn't unheard of for one woman to challenge another, but then it wasn't exactly common, either.

"What a delightful-sounding shrew," Cian snickered, his lips twisting into a wry smile as he pretended to shudder. "Reminds me why I've vowed to remain eternally single."

A high-pitched cry rent the air in the next instant, echoing through the forest, and that same voice snarled, "Oh, yeah, you're mine now."

He bit back a curse, thinking that voice sounded suspiciously familiar. "It's Danna Gibson," he stated flatly.

Cian sent him a comical look of disbelief, then chuckled softly under his breath. "Christ, your luck just can't get any worse."

Jeremy had to agree. This night was going to be awkward enough without running in to one of his old girlfriends, especially Danna. Not that he and the Lycan had ever had anything serious. He'd dated her a handful of times when he was younger, before Jillian had come home from school and he'd felt the call of a lifemate for the little witch. After that, Jillian had been the only woman he was interested in. But his reputation as a young man who enjoyed his sexual variety had been hard to shake. The girls he'd had flings with in the past, like Danna, had been jealous of his sudden, possessive interest in Jillian, and her parents had simply hated his guts. Rumors about his so-called continued sexual conquests had kept the gossipmongers busy, but he'd tried to ignore them, focusing all his attention on getting the shy Jillian to give him a chance.

Instead, it'd all blown up in his face, and in the end, it'd been Danna who Jillian had accused him of fooling around with the same day he and the little witch had shared their first and *only* kiss. The same day Jillian had told him she was finally ready to give a relationship between them a chance, after having fought what was between them for months.

Months that had felt like goddamn years, Jeremy had wanted her so badly.

After he'd left the pack, he'd heard that Danna had gone on to marry a small-brained, chauvinistic jerk, and been miserable ever since. Tonight wasn't the first time she'd challenged another female—and if her husband's track record was anything to go by, it wouldn't be the last. Magnus Gibson was like a dog in heat, slobbering after anything with a pulse.

Jeremy shook his head in disgust. If it was a true match based on love, the males of his kind were never tempted to stray from the loyalty pledged to their wives...but when couples were married without belonging to one another both in heart and soul, well, the rules of nature changed. Sad, but all too true.

"I wonder what the hell's going on up there." He cut Cian a questioning look from the corner of his eye, but the Irishman lifted one shoulder in a hell-if-I-know gesture, his attention warily focused on the warm glow of light up ahead. "Whatever it is, I've got a bad feeling about it," the Runner grunted, a deep crease seated between his ebony brows.

"Yeah. Me, too."

When a new voice, soft and smoky and lilting, rang out through the night, Jeremy nearly tripped over the gnarled root of a sprawling oak tree. "For the last time, Danna, I did *not* touch your mate."

Oh, hell. The voice behind those words knocked the air from his lungs like a vicious kick to the chest. Jeremy slammed to a jarring stop, while senses already sharpened to precision revved into overdrive. His mind didn't want to accept it, but his body knew the truth.

It was her.

Jillian.

He was close enough to scent the damning details now, everything narrowing into a concentrated focus that had him pulling in angry gulps of air, greedy for every drop he could take in. The sensory intake was shocking and almost painful in its intensity, the heat of her lush little body, all hot and angry from battle, nearly doubling him over, while panic suddenly had him exploding into action.

He shoved a low-hanging branch out of his way, wondering what the hell she'd gotten herself into this time. Even though Jillian had the blood of a wolf flowing through her veins, the fact she was witch made it impossible for her to shape-shift. Danna was twice Jillian's size and as vicious as a pit bull, not to mention underhanded—no doubt the Lycan was cheating like hell.

And what in god's name was Jillian doing fighting one of her own wolves?

Vaguely aware of Cian at his side, Jeremy's booted feet moved faster with the speed of his thoughts, until he finally broke through the last yards of the forest at a full run, erupting onto the edge of the clearing in a blur of movement. Then he nearly staggered to his knees, his legs all but crumpling beneath him as he took in the scene playing out before him like some kind of macabre nightmare.

Jillian Murphy stood in the center of the Challenge Circle—beautiful, brave and bleeding.

And she was about to die.

Chapter 2

J illian glanced his way for a startled second, before jerking her attention back to Danna. Jeremy realized that although shock had dried up his ability for speech—leaving a gaping hole of cold, jarring disbelief in its place—he'd made a sound. A dry, choking kind of noise, like a wounded animal. It didn't matter that she was covered in dirt and sweat, her temple bloodied and her left cheek scraped raw. She was perfect and sexy and a part of him. Hate. Hurt. Pain. In that moment, none of the injustices of the past mattered.

My mate, he thought with a possessive snarl, realizing that he was growling low in his throat, drawing curious stares from the members of the pack who had gathered to watch. "Did you know about this?" he growled, cutting an accusing look at Cian. "Did you know Jillian was fighting?"

The Irishman arched one dark brow. "Do you think I'd have been late getting to the Alley and almost missed seeing

something like this if I did?" the Runner drawled with a slow smile. "Not bloody likely, boyo."

"Just keep your damn eyes off her. I don't want you looking at her."

"And how do you plan on stopping me?" Cian laughed, clearly goading him.

"Don't push me," he warned in a deadly rasp, working his jaw. "Not tonight, Hennessey."

No, tonight he had no control. It'd just been stripped away by the sight of Jillian Murphy engaged in mortal combat with a Lycan.

It was painfully obvious he was going to lose her—but he couldn't grasp the concept, like something slippery and slick that kept wriggling through his fingers. He struggled to get his mind around it, but he might as well have tried to grasp an ethereal trail of smoke, or the puffy white confection of a cumulus summer cloud set within the deep rich blue of the sky.

None of this was right! Had everyone in the pack lost their goddamn minds? Spirit Walkers did *not* fight their own wolves. To challenge a witch was one of the greatest taboos throughout all of Lycan culture, right up there along with eating your neighbors and shape-shifting in the middle of Time's Square on New Year's Eve. If the wolves were expected to survive in the modern world, rules had to be followed. If they weren't, their way of life would come crashing down around them faster than a house of cards.

No, Lycans didn't challenge their own Spirit Walkers. Jillian might be wolf in spirit, but her body was all too vulnerable when it came to physical demands. Even in her human shape, Danna towered over Jillian's lithe five-five frame. And Jeremy had no doubt that Danna would press her physical advantage. As if spurred by his thoughts, the Lycan's hands shed their human shape, transforming into lethal, claw-tipped weapons. Danna pulled back one powerful arm, then lurched forward, her claws cutting through the air like a scythe, aiming straight for the vulnerable flesh of Jillian's pale throat. Jeremy felt his heart drop, a primal shout of outrage trapped in his chest as he waited for the fatal blow he was helpless to stop. But the death strike never came. At the last second, Jillian dropped to the ground and rolled, avoiding the vicious slash of Danna's long, deadly claws.

Danna quickly lunged, leaping for Jillian before she could scramble to her feet. Again, Jeremy expected to see her ripped by the Lycan's claws, but Jillian threw up her arms, palms out, as if to hold off her attacker...and Danna's body slammed to a jarring halt. The air between the two women sparked with a pale blue electrical charge that sizzled, crackling like oil in a pan, while the air filled with the scent of burnt ozone.

Feeling as if he'd been cracked across the forehead with a two-by-four, Jeremy stared, stunned to witness how Jillian's powers had grown since she was a girl of eighteen.

"Well, now. She looks like a right handful," Cian murmured, slapping him on the shoulder, his wide mouth curled in a devil's smile. "I almost envy you," he added, the words softened by the Irishman's low, lyrical laughter.

"Piss off," Jeremy grunted, which only made the Runner laugh harder.

In the circle, Danna flexed her claws at her sides, shoulders hunched, her tangled hair all but standing on end in her rage. "Using your powers is cheating!" she snarled.

"And shifting your hands isn't?" Jillian panted, rolling to her feet, her wary gaze fixed on the woman determined to kill her. Danna made a low, chuffing noise and stepped slowly to the side, her movements mirrored by Jillian, who Jeremy noticed was carefully keeping the Lycan in front of her. She couldn't afford to let Danna catch her unawares. Already, blood trickled down her left arm from an ugly gash that slashed across her bicep. Impatiently, Jillian wiped at the wound, smearing the crimson color over her pale skin. From there, Jeremy's gaze traveled over her body, lingering on the sexy strip of glistening bare abdomen revealed between the low waistband of her shorts and the hem of her black sports bra.

Despite being in the midst of a fight for survival, she looked...incredible. The tight workout shorts fit her firm backside like a glove, making his mouth water even though his throat remained dry with fear. And he didn't even trust himself to take a longer look at her chest. Seeing her firm breasts squeezed into that skintight top would only be asking for trouble he didn't need, seeing as how he was already hard and anxious and hurting.

His gaze lifted against his will, proving he had the willpower of a gnat.

Nice going, Burns.

When he was a young man of twenty-two, Jillian's breasts had never failed to fascinate him. High. Round. Firm and fine and just shy of being too much for her slight frame, they'd driven him out of his mind with lust. And now that she was grown, her sleek little body pulled him like a lodestone...too tempting to resist. There was no choice but to let his gaze roam, eyes hot with appreciation as he took in the smooth texture of her skin, all damp and warm from exertion. She was so sweet and pale and feminine...and yet, so strong, so powerful.

The human half of him knew it was a primitive reaction, but he couldn't ignore the animal part of his nature that *liked* her like that: sexy and sweaty, with the intimate scent of blood on her skin. He wanted to nuzzle against the scratches on her arm and take her taste into his body, before trailing his mouth down the damp perfection of her flesh, greedy for the warmth and textures, until he got to what he wanted most. And once he spread those sleek, muscular thighs, opening her like a secret that'd been meant for no one but him, he'd lean forward, his breath held hot in his chest, muscles rigid with anticipation and the sharpest edge of excitement he'd ever known, and he'd touch her with his tongue.

He knew what would happen then. The pleasure of it—of her—would be so intense, it'd crash through him harder than anything he'd ever experienced, like a shockwave that shook him to his core. Something reverent and spiritual and sexual all at once. Something that changed him. That ripped him apart and then put him back together again. On the outside, he'd look the same—but on the inside, he'd be...different. Changed.

And you're veering off course again, you idiot. Focus!

Right. He needed to find someone who could give him some answers. Jeremy quickly scanned the crowd, half of whom were staring at him with avid interest, the other half glued to the sight of Danna prowling around Jillian's body as the witch stood her ground, keeping a wary eye on her opponent.

A few yards away, Jeremy spotted Magnus Gibson. The tall, rangy Lycan slumped against the weathered trunk of a towering pine, complexion waxen as he watched his wife stalk his...*lover*? The word stuck in Jeremy's throat like a stone, nearly choking him.

Hell. He so didn't want to board that repulsive train of thought right now. The idea of Magnus slipping into Jillian's firm little body made him nauseous. Gritting his teeth, while keeping one eye on Jillian and Danna, he moved toward the Lycan and fisted his hand in Magnus's sweaty, beer-stained T-shirt, then jerked the drunken ass to his feet, shaking him to get his attention.

He had to do something, because the inability to take immediate action burned in his gut like acid. He hated the restrictions that kept him from doing what he wanted, on his own terms, which would be to charge into the clearing, grab Jillian up and take her to immediate safety.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple.

By accepting Danna's challenge, Jillian had entered a sacred Challenge Circle. No one could enter, not without being slammed onto their backs with a metaphysical sledge-hammer, their head left ringing with a migraine reported to last for days. The circle served as a nonlethal means of keeping fights even and fair, but right now, it stood between him and the woman who had been created as his other half. Didn't matter that they couldn't stand one another—he wanted to save her, *needed to*, and it pissed him off that he couldn't.

He also needed to pound something, dammit, and Magnus seemed as good a place to start as any. Lifting the heavy jerk off of his feet, Jeremy smacked him against the trunk of the pine. "Why the hell can't you control your woman, Gibson?"

"Control Danna?" the hulking Lycan slurred, his pale blue eyes blurry and bloodshot. "You've gotta be outta your mind."

Jeremy ground his teeth together so hard, it amazed him they didn't turn to chalk in his mouth. "Then why not try keeping your pants zipped for a change?"

Magnus's eyes went round, making him look like an owl. "I didn't touch the bloody little witch! You think I want this? Do I look crazy to you? If anything happens to that woman," he sneered, jerking his shaggy head of coal-colored hair toward the clearing and the two opponents, "do you know what kind of curse those crazy Murphy bitches might bring down on my head?"

Stepping closer, Jeremy fought the urge to gag when the stench of stale whiskey and sweat smacked him in the face.

"If you didn't want trouble," he ground out through his teeth, "then you shouldn't have cheated with the pack's Spirit Walker to begin with."

"I just told you that I didn't!" the Lycan sputtered. "Are you deaf? I've never laid a hand on Jillian. I was having some fun with Carrie, the new little waitress who works over at the coffee shop."

"Jesus," Jeremy muttered with disgust. "You ever thought of being faithful?"

"To that shrew?" Magnus's color shifted to a sickly shade of green. "I repeat, do I look crazy to you?"

Jeremy was clearly talking to a brick wall—and he stubbornly refused to look too closely at the relief he felt at knowing Jillian hadn't let Magnus touch her. Not that he should care, but dammit, he did.

Still, something wasn't adding up here.

"If you've never touched Jillian, then why is Danna trying to kill her?"

Magnus made a gruff, snorting sound of disgust. "Danna found one of Carrie's pale blond hairs on my shorts and assumed it was one of Jillian's."

Jeremy's hand clenched, and the collar of the foul-smelling shirt pulled tight enough to make Magnus gasp. "And why would she think Jillian Murphy would be interested in you?"

The Lycan looked at him as if he were daft. "To get back at Danna for what happened with you!" he wheezed, trying to suck enough air into his lungs. "Geez, man, you're not as sharp as you look, are you? Danna has always worried about Jillian, because of her...uh, *complicity* in your breakup."

Jeremy stared, unable to believe such a word had just slipped from Magnus Gibson's mouth. "Complicity?" he snorted, shaking his head in disbelief. "Since when did you start using words like *complicity*?" "Word of the day calendar," Magnus muttered, his tone daring Jeremy to make fun of him.

But he wasn't in a teasing mood. Instead, he snarled, "Well, you can inform your bloodthirsty wife that her *complicity* is a moot point."

He wanted to argue that you couldn't break up a relationship that had never started, but bit his tongue. Jillian hadn't dumped him because of rumors—that had only been an excuse. No, he'd always suspected the real reason was her fear of the Elders, or more importantly, of disappointing them. Not that he was explaining any of it to Magnus. It wasn't any of the bastard's business.

Ever mindful of the battle taking place just a few yards away, Jeremy kept one eye on Jillian, watching as she maneuvered to avoid Danna's strikes. The witch was quick on her feet, he'd give her that. Danna might have the advantage of size and strength, not to mention razor-sharp claws, but she was no match for Jillian's speed.

Jeremy set Magnus back down on his feet, but kept a firm grip on his shirt. "You're going to have to explain this one to me, Gibson. Why the hell would Danna's challenge have anything to do with what happened ten years ago?"

Magnus rubbed at his throat. "You really don't get it, do you? I never knew you were such a thickheaded ass."

"Keep pushing him," Cian murmured from behind Jeremy's left shoulder, obviously listening in, "and you're not going to like where it leads. Trust me."

The Lycan glared a quick look at Hennessey, swallowed so hard that his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat like a buoy and quickly shifted his bleary gaze back to Jeremy. "Danna's not the only one, but she worries the most, because she's the one you were rumored to be with that night. But ever since all that crap went down between you and Jillian, a lot of your old girlfriends have been waiting for her to take her revenge."

"How? By stealing their men? You're joking, right?"

Magnus shrugged. "Not exactly Jillian's style, I know, but who knows how a woman's mind works. All I know is that the witch has been fighting off challengers for longer than I can remember, and every damn one of them has been a woman you dated back before you left."

Aw, hell. If that were true, Jillian would have been fighting off more than a few. God only knew he'd been reckless back then, bedding the members of the pack as a way to thumb his nose at the laws that kept him excluded from its inner workings. That is, until the summer when Jillian had come home from boarding school and he'd finally met the girl who would one day become the pack's Spirit Walker. After that, Jeremy had never touched a pack female again—not that Jillian had ever believed him.

He didn't want to believe what Magnus claimed. "It's a nice story, but I'm not buying it, Gibson."

"Well, you should," someone drawled from the thick shadows darkening the edge of the forest, "because it's the truth."

The husky words came from the tall, built-like-a-brickhouse female walking slowly toward them, her red hair gleaming a vivid copper in the hazy light of the torches as she came to stand at his side. Elise Drake, daughter of the man at the top of the Bloodrunners' list of possible suspects. *Son of a bitch*.

Part of the reason Jeremy had returned to Shadow Peak was so he could keep a close eye on Stefan Drake, the pack's most notorious Elder. If things worked out, he'd be able to uncover the proof the Bloodrunners needed to nail Drake's sadistic ass, putting an end to his plans. But it wouldn't be easy. If he *was* the traitor, there was no way in hell Drake would go down easy.

"You really have no idea what her life's been like, do

you?" Elise smirked at him, the look in her dark blue eyes saying she knew something he didn't—but that he should and it pissed him off. Not that he wasn't already angry. Hell, at this rate he was going to choke on rage before the night ended.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

The redhead's gaze flickered briefly to Cian, who had propped his shoulder against a nearby tree. The Irishman stood with his arms crossed, a small grin playing at the corner of his mouth, as if he found the unfolding drama fascinating entertainment and had decided to just step back and watch. He winked at Elise, earning him an angry sneer, and she quickly turned her attention back to Jeremy.

"It means that she's lived with what went down between the two of you for ten years, while you got to leave and pretend it never happened. More than a few of your old girlfriends have challenged Jillian over the years, thinking she'll go after their men because she wants to get back at them for having had you, when she never got the chance herself. As if she'd be driven by envy or jealousy or some kind of twisted revenge. They seem to think she's still tearing her heart out over losing you."

Her lip curled, blue eyes moving slowly over his body, from the top of his blond head down to the scuffed toes of his hiking boots. "God only knows why they'd think she cared. You never brought her anything but trouble."

Ten years ago, Elise had been a stuck-up snob who made it her business to act like the prima donna pack bitch. Her attitude had always matched her appearance, fiery and cool all at once. When had she become friendly with Jillian? The two women were as different as night and day.

"I still think this is bullshit," he muttered.

"Don't believe me, ask around." She shrugged, as if to say

she didn't care what he decided to do. "The League gave her no choice. Though she refuses to kill any of them, if it weren't for her powers, she'd have died by the hand of one of your exes long ago. I suppose the Elders feel it's just punishment for the fact she ever allowed you to get close to her, when they'd warned her repeatedly to stay away from you."

The coolness of her tone told him she was speaking the truth, and he scowled as the implications sank in.

All this time, she'd been fighting in life-and-death situations...and he hadn't even known. Despite the fact Bloodrunner Alley and Shadow Peak were separated by mere miles, the powerful racial conflict that existed between the half-breeds and the Lycans was what truly created distance between the two. Located south of the town, on the mountain, within a secluded glade, the Alley provided Jeremy and his friends with the privacy and isolation they preferred. Since they weren't members of the pack, they didn't travel into the Silvercrest town of Shadow Peak...and the Lycans stayed clear of the Alley. In fact, the name itself had come from a derogatory slur made by one Lycan years ago, who had referred to the Runners as half-breeds who were no better than "back-alley mongrels."

And suddenly Jeremy felt like the outsider he'd been his entire life—even when he'd lived in Shadow Peak. He hadn't known about the challenges Jillian had fought over the years, simply because he wasn't pack. Because he and the Runners weren't part of their social structure. She could have died, and he wouldn't have been there...wouldn't have even known it was happening. Rage at the entire situation poured through him in a fierce, steady flow, but there was pain, as well. A churning bitterness at the social chasm that existed between his world and hers.

"If she was ordered to fight a Lycan, why doesn't she have

a weapon?" he asked, determined to get what answers he could.

A slow smile spread across Elise's mouth, her dark eyes gleaming with what he could have sworn was pride. "Says it isn't honorable."

Yeah, that sounded like Jillian. Stubborn to a fault. "She had to have known Danna would cheat by shifting."

"Oh, she knew," Elise murmured, turning to watch the fight. "The rules of the Challenge Circle say no weapons. That's all that matters to her. Our Jillian is too set on doing what she believes in, too freaking honest for her own good."

Not your Jillian. My Jillian.

Jeremy had to bite back the telling words before they slipped off his tongue, like something that was his right to say. But they were there, crowding into the corners of his mouth, making him sick and angry and riding the hard edge of explosive.

Within the Challenge Circle, Danna charged, swiping at Jillian, catching her in the side with a vicious strike that would have proven mortal, if Jillian hadn't been quick enough to avoid the brunt of the blow. As it was, five thin streams of blood appeared on her skin, just over her ribs.

"You can slip in now, Jilly," Elise called out suddenly from his side. "She's wearing herself down."

"Slip in?" Jeremy echoed, cutting her a sharp look.

Elise flashed him a sly smile. "Shh...just watch."

In the circle, Jillian nodded, the only acknowledgment she made to Elise, but the next time Danna made a move for her, she closed her eyes, lifted her arms again and this time she pushed them forward with a hard, thick shoving motion. The fey lines of her face became etched with strain, while her skin flushed a deep, brilliant rose, and her hair whipped around her face, as if caught in a violent breeze. Danna slammed to a halt, howling with fury as she gripped her head between her claws, screaming...and then she hit the ground. Hard.

And once she fell, she stayed down, knocked out cold.

A roar went up from the pack—long, curling howls breaking the heavy silence that had held everyone in its grip during the fight's final moments.

Looking around, Jeremy spotted Cian at the edge of the crowd. The Irishman saluted him with two fingers against his temple, before he slipped into the shadows, heading back the same way they'd come.

Jeremy wasn't surprised to see the Runner leaving. Hell, he knew Cian would be hightailing it back to the Alley, eager to tell everyone about his reaction to Jillian's fight. Mason wouldn't ever let him live it down, considering he'd spent the past decade swearing that he couldn't care less about the little witch.

When he looked back toward the circle, Jillian was checking the unconscious Lycan for a pulse. Apparently satisfied that Danna was merely metaphysically coldcocked, and not seriously injured, she stepped from the circle, heading straight toward Jeremy as someone from the crowd of bystanders handed her a small towel.

His blood surged, palms damp and heart hammering as he watched her walk toward him, blotting her face with the towel, her body silhouetted against the glowing light of the moon. It hung there in the sky like a pearl, iridescent and bright, leaving her expression in shadow until she stood only a few feet away. "I thought you swore you'd never come back," she whispered, her eyes glittering with emotion. "And a promise is a promise, Jeremy."

He mentally bit his tongue, not wanting to have this argument with her here, for everyone's ears. "And some promises," he countered in a husky rasp, remembering to let go of Magnus, who remained propped precariously against the trunk, "are made to be broken."

"Yeah, that's one thing everyone knows about you, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised." Then, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary going on, she said, "I'll talk to you later, Elise," and turned to walk away.

Just. Like. That.

Oh, no. No bloody way. She was out of her ever-loving mind if she thought she was getting away that easily. Gripping her shoulder, Jeremy spun her around, the movement throwing her off balance and slamming the front of her body into his.

The anger was crashing through him now faster than he could control it. For too long he'd been the easygoing womanizer, going through life without a care in the world, nothing more important than tracking down the next rogue and sending him back to hell. Only now was Jeremy starting to realize just how much of an act it'd all been—like a fault line under pressure, full of tension, ready to explode, his anger had seethed beneath his surface. And every time he'd seen her and couldn't touch her—it had grown.

The bookish-looking girl had blossomed into a woman who, if not classically beautiful, was the most attractive thing he'd ever set eyes on. Flaxen hair that nearly shone white in the sunlight, so bright it hurt your eyes. Bee-stung lips and an impish nose decorated with a jaunty spray of pale freckles. She was so... Christ, he didn't even know how to describe it. Everything she did, whether it was talking, walking or just taking a bloody breath, held an innate sensuality that made his body hurt like a toothache, pulsing and raw and angry certain *parts* significantly more than others.

The problem was that no matter what he'd sworn or vowed

or claimed, no matter how irritated or furious she made him, touching Jillian Murphy was something he wanted...and wanted badly.

Jeremy wrapped one arm around her lower back, the other lifting to fist in the silken mass of her hair, and lowered his face. He was so close, he could see the intensity of his expression reflected in the clear black depths of her pupils, her velvety brown eyes gone big and round as she stared up at him in shock. Their breath mingled, panting and soft, and then suddenly the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood up in warning. At the same time, Jillian stiffened in his arms, while a low, menacing growl sounded behind him.

Releasing Jillian, he whipped around, watching as Danna Gibson slowly pulled herself to her feet within the circle. She threw back her head and howled at the moon while the change washed over her, cloth shredding as fur rippled over her expanding body, transforming into the shape of her beast: a sixfoot, slathering werewolf covered in golden brown fur. Danna lowered her wolf-shaped head, her fangs shining silvery white in the moonlight, and smiled at him.

"She going to hide behind you now?" the werewolf sneered, swaying on her feet.

"I'm not hiding," Jillian rasped, her face ashen as she stepped to Jeremy's side. Danna watched her for a moment, then charged, moving at full speed as she fell to all fours and leapt from the circle, launching an illegal attack.

Jeremy shoved Jillian behind him, shielding her with his tall body. He was prepared to take the werewolf out, when Magnus leapt on his wife, taking her to the ground. They rolled across the damp grass of the clearing, struggling for dominance, until Magnus finally pinned her beneath him, pressing her face-first into the ground.

"Dammit, Danna! Enough!" her husband shouted. "If you

kill her outside the circle, you'll be put to death! What are you even thinking?"

"I want her blood," the Lycan snarled, bucking against her husband's weight, but for once it seemed Magnus was intent on doing what was right. He held her tightly, even as she howled like a demon, her long claws digging into the damp, giving earth. "I'm tired of you making me look like a fool!"

"Get her out of here," Magnus grunted, jerking his head toward Jillian.

Jeremy stared down at the wrestling pair, the crowd riveted as they watched the bizarre events that resembled some kind of twisted soap opera. "Learn to control your woman," he said softly, the low words firm with conviction, "or I'll do it for you. If she comes within a foot of Jillian again, I'll consider it a threat."

An odd, choking sound of outrage rattled in Jillian's throat. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "This isn't your fight, Jeremy, and I'm *not* your responsibility. I'm not your anything!"

As if she hadn't even spoken, Jeremy kept his stare on Danna. Her eyes were black, bottomless pools, and he realized that whatever spirit she'd possessed when younger had been slowly eaten away by hatred. Hatred for her life, her husband, her choices.

Quietly, he said, "Don't make me kill you, Danna, because if I so much as see you looking in Jillian's direction, I'll do it."

Then he turned, nudging Jillian ahead of him as he headed for the line of trees. He hadn't taken two steps before she whipped around so fast that her long tangle of hair fanned out around her shoulders, looking beautiful and silky and warm in the pale moonlight. He wanted to sink his fingers into the golden strands, wanted to feel them against his skin, his face, his body.

"I'm going to say this once, Burns. Do. Not. Touch. Me."

Not touch her? Not likely. In a flash of movement, Jeremy had her arms secured behind her, holding her immobile as he pressed his hard body into the lush softness of her own, keeping her trapped there against him. Lowering his head, he whispered his words into the delicate shell of her ear. "Stop fighting it, Jillian. I don't like it any more than you do, but it seems that this little war is over."

"Like hell it is," she hissed, beginning to struggle, only to stop when she realized she was merely wasting her strength. "Danna isn't just going to stop because *you* told her to!"

"I was talking about *our* war, Jillian. The one between you and me. But you might as well know that I won't have you fighting."

She made a rude sound, telling him what she thought of his arrogance. "And that matters how?"

He moved closer, nuzzling his nose against the silken skin at the side of her throat. "It should matter to you, little witch. Unlike the other pack males, I don't cower before your authority. If I have to drag you kicking and screaming from this clearing, I'll do it."

Her body vibrated against his. "Why?" she whispered, her voice nearly soundless with disbelief. "What is it to you if she beats me to death?"

So many answers sat on his tongue, lying in wait, but there was only so much Jeremy was willing to admit—even to himself. "I'm pack now, which means I have a respect for the lives within it."

"Even mine?" she scoffed, and he could feel her battle to hold herself rigid in his arms. "You've grown soft in your old age, Jeremy."

A low, gruff laugh rumbled in his chest. "You know what your problem is, Jillian?"

"Which one? I have several," she huffed. "And one of

them is sticking his nose into things that are none of his concern."

"You've always been my concern," he admitted in a husky rasp—but he certainly didn't sound happy about it.

"Don't," she warned softly, glaring up at him. "Let me go, Jeremy. I need to deal with Danna. I don't have time to play games with you."

"Like I was saying. Your problem," he drawled, enjoying the shiver that trembled through her when he nudged his rigid, denim-covered erection against her bare belly, "is that you just never know when to quit fighting."

He could almost hear her teeth grinding. "If you think I actually want to fight her, then that just goes to show how little you know me. I don't have a death wish, and I don't need you stepping in and acting as if I'm your responsibility. I've managed to survive the last ten years without you, and I'm not about to beg you for help now. I can take care of myself."

"Not hardly," he muttered. She jerked away from him, unsteady on her feet, and he suddenly realized that she was close to collapsing. "Jillian?"

She blinked at the odd, husky note of concern in his voice. "I'm okay," she said thickly, as he resettled his hands at her waist, his palms rough against the softness of her skin.

"Like hell you are."

She pushed back the wisps of hair that had fallen over her brow, wiped the back of one delicate wrist across her upper lip. "Really, I'm fine. It's just that using the power takes a lot out of me."

He didn't like hearing that, knowing that she'd have only been able to hold Danna off for *so long*.

"You can let me go now," she said quietly, breaking the heavy silence that had settled between them.

Jeremy shook his head at her stubbornness. "I don't think so. You look ready to fall on your face."

She gave a soft, tired laugh. "Such a charmer, Burns."

"I'm not interested in charming you," he muttered under his breath.

"If I didn't know better—" she sighed "—I'd think you sound as if you actually care. But we both know that isn't true, don't we, Jeremy?"

He grunted, and in the next instant she was off her feet, landing with a soft whoosh against his shoulder.

Stalking into the forest with a purposeful stride, Jeremy allowed his mouth to curl with a slow, wicked smile of satisfaction. He still didn't trust her, and no way on god's green earth was he going allow himself to feel anything for her. But he was tired of denying himself the thing he wanted most in this world. For whatever time he was back, he planned on having her. *She* belonged to him, and after tonight, his wicked little witch was going to know it.

Chapter 3

J illian had the uncomfortable feeling her world had just been shifted off its axis, and it wasn't only because she was hanging upside down over the shoulder of a gorgeous Neander-thal. No, it was the emotional meltdown going on inside of her, rioting and out of control. The farther Jeremy carried her into the moonlit woods, where the shadows thickened and the intoxicating, purely masculine scent of his body surrounded her, the more urgent that feeling became, until she was panting harder than she had during the challenge.

You are so in trouble, Jillian.

She shouted and threatened and seethed the entire way up the mountain, but it didn't make any difference. The bastard just kept going, ignoring her as if she weren't even there, hanging over his broad shoulder like a sack of flour. She knew she could use her power to trip him or knock him on his arrogant backside, but she couldn't guarantee she wouldn't brain herself in the process. Nor did she relish the idea of rolling around on the ground with him. Resisting her body's instinctual impulse to get as close as possible to him was hard enough—she didn't want to test her willpower by finding herself sprawled over him...or under him.

A telling shiver slipped through her system, and it wasn't from the cold.

"What did you do, walk here?" she finally snapped, sounding waspish, hating herself for the fact that she'd have rather been running her palms over the hard, sleek muscles down his back, instead of pounding them with her fists. She could feel his heavy obliques shift as he moved, her mouth watering at the prospect of having so much raw power and strength beneath her hands.

"Partly," he grunted, shifting his hold on her legs, one of those big, rough hands too close to her bottom. Too close, yet not close enough. A part of her wanted to wiggle a bit to the side, until she got it right where she wanted it. And man, did she resent that part.

"Partly? What does that mean?" Jillian tried to make her tone as annoying as possible, thinking that if she could just keep fighting with him, she wouldn't have time to pay attention to those *other thoughts* swimming through her head. Naughty, provocative thoughts complete with writhing bodies, keening cries and warm, sweat-slick skin. Thoughts too dangerous for her peace of mind on the best of days, but when she was alone with this particular Bloodrunner in a remote part of the mountains, surrounded by the primal forest and not a hell of a lot else, they were damn near lethal.

The pack was at least a half mile behind them now, Jeremy's long legs making quick work of the sloping terrain, taking them farther into seclusion with every second that passed by—each moment taking her deeper into treacherous emotional territory that could too easily crush her. Trying to ignore that unsettling bit of knowledge, Jillian pulled her mind back to what she'd been saying. "I don't get it, Jeremy. How can you 'partly' walk somewhere?"

They entered a small glade surrounded by eight majestic pines interspersed with fledgling red and white oaks, and Jeremy stopped, moving in a slow circle as he surveyed their surroundings. When he seemed satisfied with what he found, he set her on her feet as easily as he'd lifted her.

"I'm going to need my truck in Shadow Peak, but I felt like walking tonight, so I parked down below the rise and hiked with Cian the rest of the way to the clearing, instead of going into town first. Dylan called earlier to let me know there would be a challenge tonight," he explained, slanting her a dark look, "but he didn't mention who'd be fighting."

She arched one brow, determined to ignore the frustrating way the silvery moonlight glinted so perfectly off the burnished gold of his hair, making her want to reach out and bury her fingers in the warm, silken threads. "He probably thought you wouldn't care."

"*Right.*" He snuffled a soft laugh under his breath, as if she'd said something funny, and Jillian struggled not to flinch from the provocative heat of his stare. His eyes had always been too mesmerizing for his own good—not to mention hers. The one time she'd allowed herself to be conned by those hazy swirls of green surrounded by thick, ambercolored lashes, she'd paid the price of a broken heart. But now she knew better. Knew better than to trust the promises swimming in their glowing depths.

He stepped closer, grinning a little when she took a hasty step back, as if he knew what it cost her to be near him. The way he moved should have been outlawed. All long muscles and masculine grace, like a predator—like something on the hunt for its prey. His head tilted the tiniest fraction as he watched her, and it was a heady sensation, standing at the focus of all that blistering male intensity. For a brief moment, Jillian wondered just how close his wolf was to the surface, how close to the edge he'd been pushed.

"Do I make you nervous?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, acutely aware of just how little clothing she was wearing. "Why would you make me nervous?" she drawled sarcastically, arching her brows. "It's not like you've brought me here against my will or anything."

A slow, crooked kind of smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "You can keep trying to taunt me, but it won't matter." He blew out a slow breath, looking like a wicked, golden god of a man as he just stood there, staring down at her. "I hadn't planned on any of this, but tonight seems to have knocked some sense into me. Now that I'm back, we've got to deal with what's between us." He paused, rubbing one hand over his stubbled jaw, the gently rasping sound easily heard against the soft quiet of the forest. "We're not leaving here until we've talked this out, Jillian. But first, I want to know why you agreed to fight those challenges."

She hated that she had to control the urge to stomp her foot like a frustrated child. "Why? Because I didn't have a choice. I've never wanted to fight the stupid things, but your neverending list of past lovers just pushed and pushed, until the Elders ordered me to accept!"

"So it's true then, that the League made you fight. Elise thinks they're punishing you."

Her gaze skittered away. "Maybe."

"Because of one kiss?" he asked, his tone skeptical.

"It seems they knew me well enough to know what that kiss signified." She jerked her gaze back to his face, hoping he could see just how angry he made her. "They knew I'd decided to put my trust in you, despite their warnings and threats. And it took all but a few hours for you to go running off with Danna, proving just how stupid I'd been to believe in you!"

"So they make you accept those ridiculous challenges, risking your life." She watched him work to master his emotions. After a moment, he quietly said, "That's some punishment, Jillian. I'm surprised you just lie down and take it, or are you still terrified of disappointing them?"

"I have no choice in the matter. Whenever I try to refuse, they consider it a show of weakness." She sighed, still rankled over the League's insistence that she meet the challenges. "And we can't have any weak links in the chain of power, Jeremy."

"God forbid you actually stand up to them," he said with soft menace.

Her chin lifted a notch higher. "Unlike you, I have respect for the League."

He brushed that frustrating topic to the side with the sweep of his hand, and chose another argument. "Why do you suppose no one ever told me you were fighting? I can understand the pack's silence, since I avoid them like the plague and they probably wouldn't waste their breath talking to me, but what about Dylan? What about my parents?"

Jillian shook her head, wondering why he didn't get it. "There's no conspiracy, Jeremy. Your parents have spent so much time away, I doubt they even know. And like I said, Dylan probably didn't say anything because he knows you couldn't care less about what happens to me."

His jaw locked, and a cutting flash of frustration ripped across his rugged features, before quickly disappearing, as if he'd thrown the emotion into some mental vault and slammed the door. "This argument is going nowhere," he rasped, looking away to stare up at the star-studded sky. A moment of silence deepened between them as he gazed at the stars, his expression intent, as if looking for answers in their shimmering lights, and Jillian seized the opportunity to study him, to soak in all the breathtaking details that made her tremble with physical awareness. In the decade since he'd left Shadow Peak, he'd grown from someone with boyish charm and golden good looks, to a man who overshadowed everyone around him. He was *that* dynamic, his aura blinding and burning with intensity. A man who drew your eye and trapped it, with that blond, sun-bleached hair, dark golden skin and those smoky hazel eyes, his body battlehardened and beautiful, the chiseled features of his face too masculine to be called anything but rugged. She even loved the strong column of his throat, with its fading scars, and the blond stubble on his cheeks and chin.

"We should have hashed this out between us before I came back, Jillian."

The deep, provocative timbre of his voice hit her as heavily as the breathtaking power of his scent, making her burn from the inside out, as if she'd swallowed a smoldering ball of fire that now glowed in her belly, shooting like incandescent sparks through her fingers and her toes. Lighting her up. Turning her on.

She swallowed, struggling for her voice. "And just when were we supposed to do that?" she asked, mentally wincing at the husky sound of lust rounding out the edges of her speech.

His gaze lowered, those enigmatic eyes going dark, filled with thickening shadows. "We could have done it at the reception."

Jillian knew he was referring to his partner's wedding, which had taken place just days before—and where his return to the pack had first been announced. They'd spent the entire night avoiding one another, though she'd snuck glances at him as often as possible, unable to help herself. And it still irritated her that no one in the League had thought to inform her of what was coming that night, leaving her to learn of his return in a crowd of people, all of whom had watched her with avid interest when the news was announced. "Yeah, that would have been swell, but I really thought I'd had enough good news that day," she replied with a small, tight laugh, terrified at the knowledge that every moment she spent with him was breaking her down, weakening her resolve. He was like Kryptonite to her Superman, that one fatal weakness that could change her life forever by systemically stripping her defenses.

"Jillian..." he sighed, sounding as if she was trying his patience "...whether we want it or not, I'm back. I'm here and we have to face the facts."

"Somehow," she muttered, "I don't think my facts are the same as yours."

He shook his head as he studied her. "You know, you always were stubborn, but I don't remember you enjoying a fight this much before."

"I don't want to fight you, Jeremy." She lifted one shoulder and blew a wisp of hair out of her eyes—casual gestures meant to disguise the dizzying confusion going on inside of her. "I just want you to leave me alone."

"Won't happen. Not today. And not tomorrow. I've come to a decision tonight, little witch. One that's been a helluva long time coming." His eyes went hotter, the sexy, smoky green swirling with a primitive violence and hunger that made heat crawl its way up her spine, melting over her skin like liquid fire, leaving her seething in a need too sharp to contain. Any moment now, the dam would burst—and god help her when it did. "I mean to have you, Jillian."

Her eyes went wide. "Wow. Just like that? Jeremy says he

wants me and *poof*, I'm his?" she drawled, desperately clinging to an illusion of indifference. "I hate to rain on the parade here, but I just don't feel the same way anymore."

"Like hell you don't." He laughed, daring to flash her an arrogant, predatory smile. She had the feeling he could see right through her, as if by looking into her eyes, he could see into her very soul and the dangerous truths that she'd buried there. "You're lying, and we both know it."

"And you read minds now?" She snorted, hoping he didn't know how he affected her, but it was a stupid wish. All he had to do was breathe, and he could tell just how hungry she was for him.

He arched one tawny brow. "I don't have to read your mind," he said lightly. "Not when I can scent your body."

Jillian opened her mouth, but nothing came out, as if the denial had simply dissolved on her tongue.

"Kinda intimate, isn't it?" he whispered, the words silky, seductive, scratchy and a little raw. "Knowing that I can smell the need, the hunger, growing in you. That it affects me more strongly than any other male, whether he's human or as bloody purebred Lycan as they come. That you were made for me. That you're *mine*."

Jillian took another step backward, ready to flee, even though she knew she couldn't outrun him. "I was never yours," she argued, breathless as she swallowed the lump of panic caught in her throat. "Thankfully I got smart and opened my eyes to what you really are before it was too late."

"You didn't open your eyes to jack," he shot back in a soft growl. "And you sure didn't trust me."

"With good reason!"

"You gave up your future, your destiny, for a title," he sneered, his contempt for the pack and what it stood for evident in his tone. "You jumped on the first excuse you could find to get rid of me, because deep down inside, you were terrified of having to choose between a life with me and your precious wolves."

"I didn't give up my destiny!" she shouted. "The pack *is* my destiny, Jeremy. I was born for this, but I've no doubt you would have expected me to just up and walk away from it all, because of your hatred. That is, if the League didn't strip me of my position first, for making what they considered an 'irresponsible choice,' whether nature meant for us to be together or not!"

They were both breathing hard, their bodies tremoring with anger as emotion tore through them. "And does your job make for a lonely bed partner at night, Jillian? Does it stay faithful to you?" His voice lowered, becoming more intimate...more dangerous. "Does it keep you satisfied? Make you happy?"

His husky words cut straight to her core, as if he knew just how to wound her, the way a fighter knows instinctively where to place his next blow. "My position calls for sacrifice," she said softly. "It's not anything I'd expect you to understand."

"You have no idea what sacrifices I would have been willing to make for you." Shoving his hands in his pockets, Jeremy hardened his jaw. "You never even gave me a chance to prove myself, so forgive me if I still seem a little pissed about it."

"You didn't leave me any choice," she whispered, her throat shaking.

"Like hell. I couldn't do anything about my reputation before you came home from school, but from the day I realized what was between us, I never, *never*, gave you any reason to distrust me."

Jillian stared at him, stunned. "You still deny you were with Danna that night, after our first...our *only* kiss? After I

told you that I was ready to give a relationship between us a chance?"

His nostrils flared as he drew in a deep breath, the arc of his cheekbones flushed the dull red of anger. "If you had ever taken the time to ask me yourself, I could have told you that I didn't lay a hand on Danna Gibson that night. I hadn't touched anyone but you since you came home from school," he growled, his voice like gravel. "And after you threatened to sic your mother and your precious League on me if I ever came near you again, I was too furious to even think about sex. It took me months before I cooled down enough to go around another woman, Jillian, much less take her to bed."

"That's—"

"Pathetic? Sad? Embarrassing?" he sneered, cutting her off. "Yeah, I know. But like I said, I was crazy about you. I'd have given you anything you wanted, but it wasn't good enough for you. No, you were just waiting for me to screw up," he continued, his anger mounting again like a great, swelling wave skimming the surface of the blackest ocean. "The second someone came running to you with some bullshit story about me, you jumped at the chance to believe them. And we both know why that was. You were afraid of more than just trusting me to be faithful, Jillian. You were terrified of what you knew we could have, of how powerful it could be. You ran from that like a frightened little girl, because you were scared that it'd mean you would have to make that choice between our relationship and your position. But that would have been a choice forced on you by them, not me."

Despite his conviction, she didn't truly believe him. It was one thing for him to make such a claim now, when a relationship between them was impossible, but back then, Jillian knew he wouldn't have been so accepting of the path her life was meant to follow. No, he'd have never been willing to live in Shadow Peak or understand her loyalty to the League. And living in the Alley would have presented its own problems. He would have resented the time she spent in town, with people he despised, and the pack would have been furious at the idea of their Spirit Walker living with the Runners. She had no doubt they would have demanded her resignation.

"What do you want from me, Jeremy?" she asked in confusion, fighting not to fall apart as all the pain from the past decade crashed down on her, smothering and dark. "I know you no longer want to bond with me, so then what are you after?"

He made a rough, sarcastic sound in the back of his throat. "You're right. No one said a damn thing about bonding, and I'm no longer a starry-eyed kid who hopes for things he's never going to have."

"You were never starry-eyed."

His voice went lower, barely human beneath the seething emotion in his words. "Where you were concerned, I always had my head in the clouds. You let me down, Jillian. Changed me."

"Don't you dare turn this back on me!"

"I'll do whatever I want to you, because *this*—" his feral gaze moved slowly down her body, affecting her like a physical touch "—belongs to me. It's *mine*." The husky words were rough with lust...and something deeper. Something so dark and emotional that she had no frame of reference for it. "You want to know what I want? I want you *under* me. Pure and simple."

The way he looked at her made Jillian feel as if he could see right into her, all her secrets exposed before him, laid out in a shocking display of intimacy. He was waiting. Waiting for a sign, for the briefest glimpse of weakness or a crack in her armor. Slips she couldn't afford to make, not when her very soul was on the line. She knew she needed to keep her focus...but it was happening again. She couldn't think when too close to this man, not when she kept getting tripped up in the details. Everything about him pulled her in, controlled her like the most hypnotic of drugs. Like smooth, thick syrup, he invaded her mind, slowing down time, until she was caught. Trapped. Held prisoner by a need to reach out and learn, firsthand, if he was as warm and hard as he looked. As silken and rugged and coarse.

"You want me, Jillian. Lie about everything else, but don't try to lie to me about this. I can feel it," he argued in a gritty whisper, his voice hitting her like the warm spill of fine wine into her blood, making her limbs feel heavy, her heartbeat swift and deep and pounding. "I can see it written on your face. See it in the pulse of your throat. The tight little tips of your breasts. I can tell by the warm, sweet scent of need pouring off you."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" She hated that her voice sounded desperate even to her own ears. "You don't really want me. You despise me, Jeremy."

"Sure I do." He laughed, the warm sound dark and wicked and rich, and he smiled just a little at her. "I've been angry at you for years, Jillian, but it doesn't seem to matter. I still want to rip your clothes off and go at you right here." He slammed one wide palm against the thick trunk behind her. "Just press your back against this pine, hold your sweet little ass in my hands and get a taste of what you were always too afraid to let me near before."

Her chin trembled as she said, "I was never afraid of you," even while her conscience screamed, *Liar!* She'd been afraid of making herself vulnerable to him—of discovering that he didn't love her the way she'd loved him. Afraid of him breaking her heart. Afraid of choosing him over what was expected of her. Afraid of standing up to her parents and the League and making her own decisions, controlling her own destiny. "Do us both a favor and stop wasting our time with lies," he said sharply, "because you never were any good at it. You're even worse now."

She opened her mouth, but didn't know what to say, the words lodging in her throat until it felt as if she'd choke on them.

Jeremy pressed closer, a dark, dangerous force that made something hot and tight and achy unfurl in her belly, a warm glow of sensation slowly spreading like liquid heat through her veins. "Just out of curiosity, who was it that came to you with that story about me and Danna? One of your so-called friends? The same ones who used to hit on me every time you weren't looking? I never touched them, but that didn't stop them from offering what I didn't want."

"No. It wasn't-"

"Forget it," he muttered, moving away from her. "What the hell does it matter now? What's done is done. I don't need your trust anymore. Don't need it, and don't want it. But I'll take what I didn't get before."

She wrapped her arms tighter around her body, struggling to hold herself together. "You're out of your mind, Jeremy."

He laughed, just staring at her, the look in his hazel eyes too piercing and beautiful to hold. Even in a rage, he called to her, that brutal, intense energy reaching out, grabbing at her. "So Mason is always telling me."

"Then maybe you should listen to him!"

"Maybe I should," he murmured, staring intently at her mouth, a provocative glint in his smoky eyes that made her shiver.

"At any rate—" he sighed, sounding drained but focused "—I'm home and I'm here for a reason. You know that, Jillian. I know you want what's best for your wolves, and you're too connected with the Silvercrest not to realize that something bad is coming. The pack is going to crumble from within if the one responsible isn't stopped. I can help you."

"I don't need your help," she argued in a trembling rush, knowing very well it was a lie. She loved her wolves, but she also accepted that a select few were capable of bringing down the entire pack, their narrow, close-minded, inherently hateful view of the world threatening to choke off life for the rest, like a blood clot slowly working its way to the brain. Once it struck, the effects would be terminal...and the Silvercrest would be lost.

She knew Jeremy's words rang of truth, but selfpreservation demanded she argue. It was the only sane thing to do! She couldn't work beside him, no matter how tempting it would be to have his broad shoulder to lean on and his keen intellect to offer guidance. Facts were facts, and she knew her limitations. If she were forced to be near him, she would give in, fall victim to the wild, raging rush of pleasure that called their bodies to one another...and in doing so, hand him the power to destroy her.

It was times like this when she actually hated being a witch, hated the limitations it put on her life. "I appreciate the offer, but I can handle this on my own."

"Like hell you can."

Her chin lifted, driven high by pride. "The League can offer me guidance."

His eyes darkened as he moved back into her personal space, the brackets around his mouth tight with frustration, his voice low, full of gravel and bite. "If we're going to make this work, we have to get past our history and try to trust one another. Your precious League isn't going to be able to help with this one, which is why I'm going to tell you something that no one but the Runners and Dylan know. The rogues who were following Simmons knew how to dayshift." Jillian blinked, swallowing against the lump of surprise in her throat. "Th-that's impossible. I heard rumors, but I thought it was just panic talking."

His right hand lifted, rubbing at the pale scars on the side of his throat, gifts from a run-in with the rogue wolves. "Trust me, it's true. Simmons taught them how...and someone taught him. We learned from Robert that it's a power held by—"

"Those who serve on the League of Elders," she cut in, her voice hollow with fear. Anthony Simmons was the rogue Lycan that Jeremy's partner, Mason, had defeated in a fight to the death just days before. Obviously Robert Dillinger, Mason's father and a Lycan who had been denounced from the League itself when he took a human wife, had shared what he knew with the Runners—that only those who served on the League possessed the ability to teach another how to dayshift.

"I know about it," she admitted in a hoarse whisper. "I was told about dayshifting when I formally accepted my position, after my mother stepped down. It's a defense mechanism a weapon of war, meant to be used in the event our way of life is threatened. To teach it to a rogue would be punishable by death, their only intent to make it easy for the rogues to kill humans. And their own kind. It even masks their scent, so that they're impossible to track."

Jeremy nodded, his expression bleak. "Yeah. You getting the picture?"

She shook her head, unable to get her mind around it. "You think we have a traitor on the Silvercrest League? That one of the Elders has turned and...what? That they want to turn our wolves rogue and set them free on the humans and the Bloodrunners? For what purpose?"

"We're still working on that," he murmured, and she could

tell there was more he wasn't telling her. Apparently his exchange of trust only went so far. "But no matter what their motive, you're in over your head here and you need me. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"Why?" she asked, her confusion genuine, not coy.

"Why? Why? Why?" Jeremy laughed, the rough sound lacking any real humor. "Can't you ever say anything else, woman?"

"I just don't understand why you want to help me. I really think it'd be best for both of us if you just...kept your distance and stayed away from me."

"That's going to be pretty hard to manage," he said with another one of those slow, easy smiles, "considering I'm going to be *inside* of you."

Panic clawed at her now, biting and sharp, her mind too aware of the fact that her body wanted nothing more than to take him. All of him. Every hot, hard, incredibly thick inch and never let him go. Her voice shivered when she spoke. "Not in a million years, Jeremy."

"Don't," he rasped softly, lifting his hand to touch his thumb to the corner of her mouth. Her lips trembled from the light, calloused touch, making her want to turn away at the same time she wanted to turn her head and nuzzle the warmth of his palm. "Don't say something that's going to embarrass you later on, after I prove you wrong."

His words slapped her in the face like a dousing of ice water. "You arrogant bastard," she choked out, jerking her mouth away from his touch. "It's amazing one man can have such a high opinion of himself. I wouldn't tou—"

"Stop," he grunted, cutting her off. His eyes narrowed, holding her, making it impossible to look away. "We have a connection, Jillian. You can pretend all you want that it doesn't exist, but it isn't going to just disappear." "No. You're wrong, Jeremy. There is no connection. Whatever we had," she said coldly, "you killed it a long time ago. I'm not a naive little girl anymore. I've learned how to take care of myself. I don't need you. Not now. Not ever."

He leaned close, curling his rough hands over her shoulders, and she turned her face away...but he merely whispered into the sensitive shell of her ear, as if he was telling a secret. "You just keep saying it enough times, and maybe you'll start believing it. But we both know the truth. I'll hunt you down if I have to, Jillian, but we both know how badly you'll want me to catch you in the end."

"You can hunt me," she gasped, struggling to jerk out of his hold, away from the dangerous, evocative heat of his mouth, "but you'll have to chase me to hell and back before you ever catch me."

With the touch of his calloused fingertips upon her chin, Jeremy slowly pulled her face back to him, staring down at her through thick, honey-colored lashes. The intensity of his gaze made her heart lurch, his hazel eyes dark and heavy with possession, as if he owned her.

"I know what hell's like," he told her, the huskiness of his voice like an intimate caress, shivering across her skin. "The threat of it won't scare me off."

His soft breath felt warm and sweet and wonderful against her trembling mouth, teasing her with the heady, erotic promise of a kiss that Jillian knew she shouldn't want—but did. Badly. And the slow, crooked grin kicking up the corner of his mouth said he knew it, knew just how sharply the keen edge of anticipation was cutting into her.

"So I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that."

"Do better than what? What are you talking about?" she asked thickly. She was stalling, because she knew very well where he was going with his seduction routine. "You're gonna have to convince me, little witch." Jeremy laughed softly, kissing the corner of one eye, trailing the rough-silk texture of his lips across her cheek, before nipping playfully at her tender lobe.

"C-convince you of wh-what?" she stammered. "That you're crazy?"

"Feels like it. Feels like I've been crazy since the day I set eyes on you." He shifted a fraction closer, overwhelming her with his heat, his scent—with the intense, rugged masculinity that was so much a part of him. "You're going to have to convince me of the one thing that we both know you don't have a damn chance in hell of doing."

She breathed in too sharply, trapped by the possessive power of his gaze.

"You're going to have to convince me that you don't crave me the same way that I crave you—and you're going to have to make it good, Jillian, because I can promise that I won't make it easy on you."

She shivered. He smiled in response. And before she could draw her next breath, his mouth claimed hard, deliberate possession of her own.

Chapter 4

The seeking touch of his lips against hers was a provocative answer to the churning want that had raged through Jillian's body for so long. Through so many sleepless nights, and so many frustratingly empty days, when she'd found herself surrounded by people...and yet, utterly alone.

"Jeremy, please," she whispered, tearing her mouth away. "Don't do this."

He kissed the fragile skin beneath her eye, the sharp edge of her jaw. "Do what?"

"I won't give in," she gasped, feeling him nip the sensitive tendon at the side of her throat. "*I can't*." She could hear the desperation in her voice, and knew he could, as well.

His lips moved in a soft, deliciously erotic caress against her skin as he spoke. "You're letting your fear control you, Jillian."

"What do you know about fear?" she demanded, her voice cracking, bleak with emotion.

"I know it scares the hell out of me," he confessed in a gritty rasp, his breath warm and damp, "thinking that I might have lost you during one of those challenges."

"Damn you, Jeremy." She tried to stumble back, but was caged in by the thick trunk of the tree, his hard body pressed against her front. He was a dark, raging presence before her, trapping her.

"I'm going to make it hard as hell for you to deny me," he warned in a ragged tumble of words. Then his mouth claimed hers again, angry and hot and hungry.

Sweet Jesus. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. But who cared? He made it so much more than a mere kiss. It felt too intimate, too carnal, like the decadent, provocative things he did to her in her dreams.

Jillian knew she should push him away, but more than that, she wanted to pull him closer. The details, so shocking and electric, overwhelmed her. The sexy, slightly rough texture of his lips. The silken stroke of his talented tongue. She could taste his hunger, his heat, and it was like going under...falling into him. Everything pulsed through her with a sharp, shattering awareness. And yet, she was lost, floating, her head fuzzy with the rioting sensations as his tongue claimed her mouth more deeply, the kiss slow and eating and deliciously sweet, like warm, melting honey.

She moaned, giving up, rubbing her tongue against his, and everything changed.

With a low, hoarse curse, Jeremy crushed her breasts with the muscular wall of his chest, while taking deeper possession of her mouth. It was something decadent, hungry and invasive, the way he penetrated her, shoving past any resistance, smashing it beneath his dark, persuasive need... Only, she wasn't resisting. Not anymore.

Jillian trembled, gasping. He growled low in his throat,

moving against her, and she could feel the hard proof of his erection, long and thick enough to make her breath catch. Her hands lifted, the cool tips of her fingers touching in a butterfly caress against the scorching heat of his cheekbones, and she flinched from the warmth of his skin.

"Touch me," Jeremy groaned against the corner of her mouth, nipping at her bottom lip, then diving back into the kiss with a breathtaking intensity that made her toes curl. "Put your goddamn hands on me, Jillian."

The shaken, guttural words slipped through her system like a dizzying rush of pleasure, all but making her purr. God, yes, she wanted to. Wanted to put her hands on the hard, lean lines of his magnificent body and learn him by touch, taking him in the way someone who'd lost their sight could lose themselves in another world through Braille. He was an unknown landscape she wanted to explore until she was privy to all its secrets, until it was so much a part of her she knew it better than she knew herself.

Jillian slipped her tongue past his lips, lost in the dark, honeyed sweetness of his taste, and took the aggressive sound he made into her mouth at the same time she pressed the flat of her palms against his ribs, fingers splayed, wanting to touch as much of him as possible. His body communicated its hunger through his skin, burning her, even with the barrier of his shirt between them. But she wanted flesh. Wanted to feel the silken texture of his skin, the blond whirl of hair that circled his navel, then trailed in a daring arrow toward the blatant, rigid proof of his lust.

Moaning deep in her throat, Jillian slipped her hands under the hem of his shirt and clasped his hot skin at his sides, just above the waistband of his jeans. His breath shuddered in his chest and he panted against her lips as he pulled away from the kiss, pressing his forehead against hers. The hunger and chaotic mix of emotion Jillian had always carried for this one man surged through her, filling her up, giving her the courage to do what she'd never done before.

Now, she didn't have a choice. Her body wouldn't let her fight what her heart knew was going to hurt her in the end. Biting her lower lip, she trailed her fingertips to the waistband of his jeans, then slowly stroked them inward. Any second now she was going to touch that intimate, powerful part of him that she'd never explored when younger. A fine sheen of sweat coated his skin, his flesh burning hotter. His lips pulled back over his teeth and he stopped breathing.

Her fingers pulled closer...closer...and then she heard her name being called out over the eerie silence of the forest.

"Jillian? Are you out there?"

She wrenched her hands away and shoved against his chest. "Sayre?" she tried to shout, breathless, wondering how she'd let herself get into this situation. She lifted her wide gaze and almost jumped from the searing look of lust darkening his eyes. His jaw locked, and he finally reacted to her pushing hands, taking a step away, the front of her body left chilled at the loss of his incredible heat.

It terrified her, how badly she wanted to pull him back to her.

Taking her hands from the firm muscles of his chest, Jillian pressed them to her sides, and tried to find a measure of calm, even while her heart hammered out a vicious tempo beneath her ribs. "Sayre?" she called out again. "Where are you?"

"Right here," her sister answered, the last word trailing off as the young woman stepped into the small glade and caught sight of them. "Oops," she whispered, blushing, her blue-gray eyes wide with surprise. The ends of her curly, strawberryblond hair just grazed her jaw, completing the fey look created by her unique features. Her nose was delicate, her chin sharp, jawline almost fragile. Her skin was as luminous as a pearl, the arc of her cheekbones always flushed with a wild color of rose because Sayre could never move at a normal pace. She was boundless energy and exuberance, like a hummingbird always flitting from one spot to another. But she was wise beyond her years, her big eyes steady and calm within the thick fringe of her lashes. She was a wild spirit with a pure heart who never let others down, and she was the closest friend Jillian had ever had.

"Um, sorry," Sayre murmured, her curious gaze moving from one to the other. Jillian tried to avoid blushing, but knew her face was crimson. "I was so focused on finding you, I didn't pick up on the fact that you aren't alone."

"It's okay," Jillian said firmly, stepping out from between the tree and Jeremy's body, needing the space to breathe. "Jeremy and I were just—"

Before she could finish the thought, Jeremy took a step toward her sister, his green eyes full of startled surprise. "Sayre?" he whispered, while a slow grin curved his mouth. "I don't believe it. Is that really you?"

A wry smile curled across Sayre's mouth, and she ducked her head shyly. "Hi, Jeremy."

"You were just a scrawny little runt the last time I saw you."

Sayre's musical laughter filled the glade, and it made Jillian's heart hurt to think of how her sister had always followed Jeremy around when she was little, as worshipful as an adoring puppy. Sayre had been crushed when he'd left Shadow Peak, and it'd been so hard to explain to the little girl why he wasn't coming back. "Yeah, well, that was a long time ago," she said with an easy grace, obviously trying to put them at ease. "Not that I've ever managed to outgrow the scrawny thing. I may be taller, but I still look like a toothpick." "Naw. You've grown into a beautiful young woman. I bet you have all the boys chasing after you."

"Hardly." She laughed. "But it's sweet of you to say so."

"Is everything okay?" Jillian asked, irritated with herself for the tiny flair of jealousy she felt at their easy camaraderie. "You know I don't like you leaving Shadow Peak on Challenge Nights. It isn't safe."

Sayre nodded. "Yeah, I know. But I had to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine. How did you find me?"

Sayre's cheeks flushed, and she ducked her chin. "It wasn't hard, Jilly. You were broadcasting pretty loudly."

Jeremy arched a questioning brow in Jillian's direction. "Sayre's still growing into her powers," she explained quietly, "but they're already very strong."

"Obviously," he murmured, staring, and Jillian knew he was wondering just how strong her own powers had grown in the past decade.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Sayre said cautiously, flicking a nervous glance toward Jeremy, "but I wanted to let you know that Eric was waiting at your house. He heard about what happened at the clearing and wanted to come looking for you. It wasn't easy, but I, um, convinced him to head home and let me check on things. I told him you'd call him later."

"Eric who?" Jeremy questioned, at the same time Jillian whispered, "Hell."

"Eric who?" he repeated, the words sharper this time.

"Um, Eric Drake," Sayre said too brightly, wincing when she caught sight of Jillian's glare.

Jeremy's eyes narrowed to slits. "Why would Drake be waiting at your house for you?"

Jillian opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. "Not to sound rude, but that really isn't any of your business."

"Wrong answer," he said silkily. "I'm making it my business."

"I'm not doing this in front of Sayre," she warned him in a quiet voice.

"All I want is an answer to my question." Jillian could hear the silent *for now* tacked onto the end of his statement.

"We're...friends."

"You and Drake?" he rasped, his tone full of disbelief and the hard, biting edge of anger. "Since when?"

"A few months now," she explained awkwardly, alarmed at the way he stumbled back a step, his expression little more than a hard mask, giving nothing away. But his eyes were like a window into his soul, and she knew the idea of her with Eric caused him pain. For years, she'd thought she'd take satisfaction in seeing him hurt, but she'd been wrong. Instead, his pain cut at her like a knife, jabbing and sharp, while shame pooled thickly in her belly.

"Why?" He didn't need to say more. She knew exactly what he meant.

Her hands fluttered nervously at her sides, and she wished she was wearing jeans so that she could hide them in her pockets. "We started working together on a few of the new reform committees for education and housing. We ended up spending so much time together that we've become...close—"

"If you two are so close," he interrupted, taking a step forward, hands planted on his hips, "why wasn't he there tonight?" His lip curled in cruel sneer, but she could see the burn of a darker emotion in the deep, smoky green of his eyes. Jealousy burned harder than anger or fear or arrogance, blurring the edges so that only the source flared through, sizzling and sharp.

Jillian lifted her chin. "I asked him not to come. And he respects my wishes."

"I'll bet he does," he snorted, the rude sound making her teeth grind.

She shot a meaningful look at her little sister. "Maybe it would be better if we finished this argument some other time, Jeremy."

"Yeah." He grunted under his breath and started to move away, then paused, his expression intent as he stepped closer and leaned down to whisper in her ear. Then he pulled away, gave Sayre a friendly nod of goodbye, and headed back into the forest.

Sayre walked quietly by Jillian's side as they made their way back to Shadow Peak, until the silence finally became unbearable. "You want to say something?" Jillian huffed, too on edge to be reasonable. "If so, please just spit it out and get it over with."

Her sister's slender shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Not really."

"Come on," Jillian groaned. "I can feel it, Sayre. After the night I've had, I don't have the energy to drag it out of you."

"I just... You're fighting it, aren't you?" Sayre turned her head, staring at her with solemn eyes that saw too much for a seventeen-year-old. "You love him, Jilly, but you don't want to. I think you want to give him another chance, but you're too afraid."

"It doesn't matter what I want. There's too much history between me and Jeremy. A future between us would be impossible, so it's best if we just stay away from each other." Though avoiding him was going to be hard to do, considering it looked as if they were going to be working together, but she kept that thought to herself.

"But he's your mate," Sayre murmured, lifting one delicate hand to drag softly through the changing leaves on the lowhanging branches, sending them tumbling from their perches. They fell a short distance, before being swept up in the chilly wind and carried away...and Jillian wished her troubles could be dealt with so easily. Just brushed off and swept away, floating out of existence like a cloud. "That means you're meant to be together," Sayre added. "Nothing good can come of fighting it."

"And one of the things you'll learn as you get older is that things don't always turn out the way they're meant to."

Sayre made a soft sound of frustration under her breath. "Maybe they would, if we were brave enough to fight for what we wanted."

Despite the headache pounding through her skull, Jillian grinned. "You sound like an idealist, Sayre. I hope you never grow out of it."

It took her a moment to realize that her sister was no longer keeping pace at her side. When she stopped and turned around, she found Sayre standing beneath an ethereal beam of moonlight, her slender frame vibrating with tension. Her usual easygoing smile had been replaced by a pinched look of temper that had Jillian blinking in surprise.

"Stop talking to me as if I'm a child, because I'm not one anymore. I know you don't want to admit it, but I'm growing up, Jillian. I'm growing up and I have a brain that's fully capable of functioning. I can form my own opinions and beliefs, and I can see *more* than others. I can see what's really happening between you and Jeremy, even if you won't admit it. And I know why. I—I know about mother."

A soft breath jerked out of her lungs, and Jillian shook her head as if to clear it. "What?"

"Mother told me, when I turned sixteen. She wanted me to understand what had happened to her so that I would know to be careful."

"What did she tell you?" Jillian asked, wondering what

strange cosmic event had occurred in the universe tonight to throw her world into such chaos. She'd been on a steady, even keel for so long, allowing herself to feel so little—and now she felt battered by emotional waves, struggling to stay afloat in an endless, surging sea of commotion.

"All of it, Jillian. About the Lycan she fell in love with while away at school, about giving her virginity to him and about how he turned away from her even though he *knew* she loved him. Even though he knew how she felt, he used her and then abandoned her, because he'd only been looking to have some fun. He *didn't* love her in return. She told me that he was your father, and that after he left, she didn't think she'd ever love again. And then she came back to the pack and set eyes on Dad, and that was all it took. She not only found her lifemate, but a man who returned her love and one who was more than happy to accept you and love you like his own daughter. She told me...everything."

The center of Jillian's chest hurt as if she'd been kicked, and her hand pressed against it in an instinctual move to hold in the rapid pounding of her heart. "I didn't know that you knew," she whispered, wincing at the scratchy sound of her voice. "You never said anything."

"Mother asked me not to tell you that she'd told me, but I think it's something that needs to be discussed."

"Why?" she asked bitterly. "What good is going to come from it?"

"Because it's affecting your life, Jillian." Sayre tilted her head to the side, her blue-gray eyes luminous and bright in the silvery moonlight. "I think you're taking Mother's warnings to heart, aren't you? Because of what happened to her, you're afraid of following your heart. You've always been afraid."

She frowned, knowing it wasn't that simple. "There's more

to it than that, Sayre. I have my responsibility to the pack, which isn't one to take lightly. The League has never made any secret about their feelings on the subject, and I have to agree with them. Jeremy isn't the type to make a sacrifice for others. He would have demanded I stay away from Shadow Peak and abandon those who rely on me. And you know what kind of reputation he has. Any woman foolish enough to trust him is just that. A fool."

Sayre gave her a sad smile. "You don't believe in the power of love? In its strength?"

"You sound like a romantic," she muttered, feeling too old and worn-out, as if her youth had been dried up in heartbreak and bitterness.

"I am, Jillian. I've seen love. I've seen commitment and fidelity and a metaphysical union of the souls." Sayre gave a little grin. "However you want to describe it, it *does* exist. All you have to do is look at Mother and Father to see th—"

"He's not my father."

For the first time in her life, Jillian watched her sister's face flush with anger. "Don't ever let me hear you say that again, because it makes you sound like an idiot. He loves you like his own. Anyone can see that."

"I'm sorry," she breathed out, the shaky timbre of the words betraying her real emotions. "You're right. He does love me. I know that. I'm just...upset tonight, Sayre. This really isn't a good time for me."

"Jillian, the one who protects her heart from fear of loss ends up with no heart at all. Just an empty chest, because she has nothing to lose. I love you too much to see that happen to you. Look inside yourself. Jeremy may be bold and arrogant, but he's a good person. I think you've let the warnings and fears of the League bleed into your heart and have judged him unfairly. How could you know what he's willing to sacrifice for you, when you've never given him the chance? And you're already in pain from being near him and not having him. What could be worse?"

"What could be worse?" Jillian repeated, wiping angrily at the hot, stinging wash of tears she could feel gathering at the corners of her eyes. "How about loving him and discovering that he doesn't love me the same way?"

Sayre shook her head sadly, while the wind caught at her pale curls and tousled them around her fey face. "I've always thought you were the bravest person I know," she said sadly, "but you sound like a coward, Jillian."

Her mouth twisted into a wry expression that felt more like a grimace than a smile. "You're probably right." She took a deep breath, then jerked her head toward the direction of home. "Now, come on and let me walk you back. Mother is going to freak if you stay out past your curfew."

When they reached their parents' house, Sayre unlatched the gate, walked through and then closed it behind her. "He wants you, Jillian. And he doesn't seem like the kind of guy to give up once he sets his mind on something."

"I know," she murmured, recalling his earlier words. He wanted her for sex—nothing more. And he'd reminded her of the fact he meant to have her with those last whispered words in her ear.

Taking a deep breath, Jillian lifted her face to stare at the moon, as had become her habit over the years. She could lose herself in its soothing light, imagine she was some other woman...in some other life...with a heart that didn't belong to a man she could never have. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"No, it's not," Sayre said softly. "What you're afraid of is that you won't be able to resist him forever."

Jillian closed her eyes as the truth of those words spread

through her. By the time she opened them, she stood alone under the milky glow of the moon, the only sound that of the front door closing softly behind her sister.

Chapter 5

Home.

Jeremy pulled his truck in to the familiar gravel driveway, the sight of the two-story house nestled among the autumncolored trees sending him into a reeling tumble of memories. The massive weeping willow that he'd played in as a child still swayed like a giant swamp monster at the back corner, its long, leafy arms twisting wildly in the breeze. Even the fall of the curtains in the windows looked the same, the cedar facade as well kept as the day he'd left. The place hadn't changed at all in the past decade, as if time had stood still. Maybe it had. Damn, the wounds that had been inflicted here still felt as fresh as if it had all happened yesterday.

Without a doubt, his pride still stung.

Amazing now to think that he hadn't been back since things had gone south with Jillian, when he'd finally accepted the fact that she'd never choose him over her beloved pack... that she'd never trust him with her heart and her happiness. That night he'd moved his things to the Alley, and he'd never set foot in Shadow Peak again. Not until he'd gone before the League and submitted his Bloodrunning numbers. It had been late then, just like now, and the town had looked eerily the same after a decade, any changes softened by the concealing shadows of night.

Time to go inside, he thought, and yet, he didn't move.

He swallowed the shaky feeling in his throat, and rested his hands on the steering wheel, amused at himself for being so emotional. He was a Bloodrunner, a hunter of killers, for god's sake. He couldn't afford to be sentimental and nostalgic, but damn if his chest didn't feel tight at the thought of setting foot in the house again after all these years. His parents were at their beach property down in Florida, where they'd spent more and more time over the past decade, visiting with Jeremy at the Alley whenever they were home. When it'd been decided that he would be the one returning to the pack, he'd wanted to rent a cabin on the outskirts of town, but his mother wouldn't hear of it. She'd wanted him home, in his own room, where she said he belonged, and refused to take no for an answer.

They'd always had faith in him, unlike some people, and for that Jeremy knew he was unquestionably lucky. But even after everything that had gone down, he didn't hate Jillian. He'd wanted to, and he'd given it a hell of an effort—but the part of him that belonged to her, that linked them together, wouldn't let him.

Instead, his hatred had latched on to the pack itself, on to the archaic laws that set the Runners apart because they weren't what the others considered "perfect." That created the social divide between the Alley and Shadow Peak, one based on racism and hatred, bitterness and distrust. A timeless, enduring fury surged through his veins, swift and brutal and vivid in its intensity, just like it had the day his father had first explained to him why he was considered "different" from the other children he knew. Why he and his small group of friends were picked on and called names by the residents of the Lycan town that was supposed to be their home...their family...their rock and their strength.

Purist bastards.

No, he'd never planned on coming back.

Instead, he'd planned to keep hunting, satisfied that his life held a purpose, proud of his choices, determined to ignore the little voice in his head that continually reminded him something was missing. Something vital and important. Something meaningful. Something he *needed*. And it wasn't the pack or a place that his life lacked, but a woman. *One* woman. One who at this very moment was probably snuggling up in front of a roaring fire with Eric Drake.

Son of a bitch.

From the moment she'd come home from school, Jeremy had known Jillian was meant to be his. But she'd stubbornly refused to let a relationship develop between them, until that one afternoon when she'd finally given in and allowed him to kiss her. Despite its innocence when compared to his sexual history, that kiss had floored him, affecting him more powerfully than anything he'd ever experienced. He could still remember the way she'd felt against him, in his arms, and how badly he'd wanted to take her out into the fields, lay her down into the soft green grass, strip her clothes from her body and make love to her until neither one of them could move. He could remember how her skin had felt beneath his hands as he'd touched her sun-warmed shoulders, the petal-soft sweetness of her mouth, the mind-drugging scent of her body.

"Kiss me again," she'd whispered when he'd finally

walked her to her door, so she wouldn't be late for dinner. He remembered the way his hands had shaken when he'd held her face and pressed his mouth to hers. Could still hear his own fractured groan when he'd lost control and driven the chaste kiss into something dark and hungry and lust-flavored. Wild with craving, he'd been ready to press her against the door and claim her then and there, but the sudden brightness of the porch light being flipped on had wrenched them both back to sanity. As it was, he'd had to cover his erection with his jacket when her mother had opened the door...and she'd known. He'd never been able to get anything past Constance Murphy.

Considering the warnings her mother had probably delivered about his character, Jeremy could have forgiven Jillian for being wary. Damn, he knew what his reputation had been, what it still was. But what he couldn't forgive was that she'd never even given him the chance. If she had, she'd have known how ridiculous it was to worry about him straying. He hadn't wanted other women—he'd only wanted Jillian.

Christ, he still did. He always had. Like his crooked bottom tooth, this insatiable hunger for her was always there...always with him.

And every woman he'd had since that kiss—since leaving the pack—had paled in comparison. That was why he was always left hungry, never satisfied. He could grasp at temporary relief, but true satisfaction—true peace—always hovered just beyond his reach.

Of course, the question of his fidelity had only been part of the problem. Even if he'd gained her trust, the pack would have still stood between them.

The pack, it seemed, would always stand between them. His fingers tightened on the steering wheel to the point that it groaned, a fraction away from cracking, and Jeremy forced himself to release it, flexing his fingers one by one.

"God, you just need to get her out of your system." He thrust his hands back through his hair, shoving the thick mass off his forehead, then reached for the door and climbed out of the truck. Deciding he needed to walk out his tension, he left his bags in the cab and headed down the sidewalk, the night silent but for his heavy footfalls.

He made a left, then took a right at the next cross street, heading toward the softly glowing lights on Main Street.

He could hear the twang of country music coming from the pub that sat on the upcoming corner, and he debated whether or not to go in and have a drink. He could have used the steadying burn of whiskey in his gut at the moment, but it was a given that he wouldn't be welcomed as a customer there. Not that he cared.

As he neared the entrance to the pub, the front door swung open, letting out a stream of smoke and the grinding blare of music. A tall, broad man stepped onto the sidewalk, leaning down to light the cigarette hanging from his lips, his hands cupped around the fragile flame. The tip of the cigarette sparked, glowing a dark orange, and he shifted under the streetlamp as he tucked a silver lighter into his back pocket. The milky glow of light illuminated the distinguished angles of his face and short, dark brown hair clipped close to his head...and Jeremy's wolf stirred beneath his skin. The blast of energy from his animal drew the man's gaze as he lifted his head, his dark gray eyes glowing with a preternatural fire in the shadowed darkness.

Eric Drake. Just the bastard he wanted to see.

Jealousy crept up in him like a huge, ugly beast, hungry for confrontation. Wearing a feral smile, he braced his feet and planted himself right in the Lycan's path. Drawing a deep drag off his smoke, Eric inclined his head toward the shadowy stretch of sidewalk at Jeremy's back. "You're in my way, Burns."

Jeremy arched one brow, his voice a silken, rasping taunt. "And here I thought maybe you were in mine."

A slow smile curled the other man's mouth. "Are we talking about the sidewalk...or a woman?"

Jeremy cocked his head. "I know everyone around here thinks you're the golden boy of Shadow Peak, but I'm not buying it, Drake. Apples never fall far from the tree, and your old man's as rotten as they come."

"Now see, that's where you're wrong." He paused, taking another slow, satisfying drag. "If that were the case, you'd be like your old man. Reliable. Worthy. Devoted. And instead, look how you treated the woman nature created for you."

"What's between Jillian and me is none of your business," he snarled, aware that his fangs were burning in his gums, just waiting to slip free.

"Wrong again. Jillian's my friend-"

"And she's my mate."

"And I care about her," Drake grunted, his metallic gray eyes narrowed. "I'd hate to see her get hurt because of some arrogant jackass who doesn't know how to leave well enough alone."

Jeremy took a step forward, vibrating with a lowfrequency rage as he spread his arms wide. "You got a problem with me, help yourself."

Eric eyed him from beneath his lashes, then took another slow, deliberate drag on his cigarette. "Ya know, if I didn't know better," he drawled, grinning as he exhaled an ethereal stream of smoke, "I'd say you stink of jealousy, Burns."

"And if I didn't know better," he growled, taking a step closer, "I'd say you were just begging to get your ass kicked."

74

Shaking his head, Drake laughed softly under his breath. "God, this is going to be fun, having you back in town," he murmured, and the cell phone on his hip started buzzing. After taking a quick look at the number, he sent Jeremy a hard smile. "As fun as this has been, I'm afraid we'll have to finish it later."

Then he answered the phone with a low, "Hey, you okay?" and set off down the street in the other direction. Jeremy stared after him, unable to get the sick feeling out of his gut that Drake was talking to Jillian.

Goddamn it. Had she called the bastard for comfort? To tell him she was okay? Or for something more?

With that infuriating thought eating its way through his mind, Jeremy stalked off into the shadows, nothing more than the possessive burn of jealousy keeping him company along the way.

After a restless night's sleep, the morning sun was still a distant promise on the horizon when Jeremy reached the house leased by Dylan Riggs. The thirty-nine-year-old Elder lived in a single story cedar cabin, his small front yard immaculately landscaped, blooming with a cascade of colorful, vivid blooms despite the fact that it was fall. Jeremy jumped onto the front porch, knocked, waited, then knocked again. He heard shuffling from inside, and then a bleary-eyed Dylan opened up, wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts. His light brown hair hung over his forehead, upper lip curled in a snarl until his eyes focused on Jeremy.

"Morning, sunshine. Late night?" Propping his shoulder against the door frame, Jeremy crossed his arms and arched one brow as he took in Dylan's haggard appearance. Normally looking like something that had stepped off the cover of GQ, it was a shock to see him like this. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Only my sleep," Dylan muttered. He pushed his hair back with one hand and scratched at his chest with the other. "Come on in. I need coffee."

Jeremy smothered a soft laugh as he walked inside, shutting the door behind him while his gaze scanned the room, taking everything in. It was strange to see how Dylan lived, after knowing him all these years. The house was surprisingly clean for a bachelor. Either Dylan was severely domesticated, in which case he planned to rib him mercilessly like any good pal would, or the guy had a bevy of women looking after him. He was leaning toward the latter. "So who was she?"

Dylan went still for a beat of three seconds, then sent him a sharp look over his shoulder. "Who was who?"

"The woman who kept you up all night."

"Like I'd tell your sorry ass," Dylan snorted.

"Come on." Jeremy sighed, hooking a chair with his foot and plopping down at the round kitchen table. "You know you can trust me."

"Yeah, right." Dylan's drawl was wry, his tone light, but there was something around the Elder's eyes that caught Jeremy's attention.

Shaking off the uncomfortable sensation, thinking this whole town was just screwing with his head, he watched Dylan open a cupboard and pull down a fresh bag of coffee beans. "So I know why I look like hell," the Elder grunted, "but why do you?"

"Didn't sleep much last night," he said, slowly releasing the air from his lungs, willing his tension to flow out just as easily, like water slipping smoothly down a drain.

"Which means I can't, either?" Dylan grouched, flipping the coffeepot on and turning around, bracing himself against the counter. He scratched at his chest again, then at the dark shadows on his cheeks and chin. Jeremy gave a gritty laugh. "The rock being hurled through my mom's front window had me up at dawn. I'm not surprised I look like death warmed over, since I feel like it, too."

"Son of a bitch." Dylan's posture went rigid, while the coffeepot sputtered and steamed at his side, filling the air with the rich, smoky scent of fresh-brewed French roast. "You already have rocks being thrown at you? What'll be next? I knew this was a shitty plan, just like I told you before. Things are too unstable right now, and you're walking right into the middle of it."

Jeremy shrugged one shoulder. "Has to be done, Dylan." "Why? You know I'm here to help—"

"We know that." He sighed. "But you've got to be careful or you're going to find yourself out of a job. If anyone on the League suspects you're trying to finger one of them as a traitor, your ass will be banished in a heartbeat. None of the Runners want to see that happen. You're one of the last voices of sanity left in this place."

"I still think this is too dangerous," the Elder muttered, his dark eyes hooded beneath a frustrated scowl that reminded Jeremy of when they were younger. Dylan's mother had come from a werewolf pack in upstate Virginia, and after his parents' separation, he and his sister had split their time between the two packs. Despite the fact that his father was an Elder, Dylan had been treated as an outsider by the Silvercrest, which had precipitated his friendship with the Runners. When his father passed away, Dylan had claimed the hereditary right of succession to take his father's place. There were many within the pack who had believed he was too soft to serve in a leadership role, until he'd proven them wrong by defeating a string of challengers.

To this day, he remained a friend, as well as a supporter, of the Bloodrunners.

"I know you want to help us," Jeremy told him, "but you're already walking a fine enough line as it is, Dylan. Be careful or Stefan Drake will demand your removal. And if not him, then one of the others. They already think you're too radical in your beliefs."

Dylan cursed under his breath and poured the coffee, then handed a mug to Jeremy and took a seat at the table. After a few blissful sips of the rich brew that fed the caffeine addiction his friends continuously ribbed him about, Jeremy got to the point of his visit. "I need some answers about Jillian."

Dylan took one look at his expression over the rim of his mug, and knew exactly what was coming. Blowing out a rough breath, he took a quick sip, then set his coffee on the table. Pushing both hands back through his hair, he said, "Hell, I knew this was gonna happen."

"You should have told me," Jeremy said in an even tone, curling his fingers around the thick handle of his mug, careful not to squeeze too hard lest he shatter it. "I had a right to know."

"She asked me not to." The Elder sighed.

He'd suspected as much, but it still pissed him off to hear it. His fingers tightened, and he forced himself to loosen his hold. "You should have told me anyway."

Dylan sent him an impatient look. "Jillian's my friend, Jeremy, same as you. Do you want me spilling all of *your* secrets?"

He spread his arms wide, while his mouth curled into a cocky smirk. "Hey, I've got nothing to hide. I'm an open book."

"Oh, yeah?" Dylan slouched in the kitchen chair, brows lifting in a skeptical arch. "Then you won't mind if I tell her you only date brown-eyed, petite blondes who look a helluva lot like her...and only for one night? You won't mind her knowing that I've never seen you with the same woman twice? That you're known for having a ruthless sex drive, but end your involvement there, never letting any of them get close to you, almost as if you were saving yourself for someone? As if your heart already belonged to another?"

There were times when Jeremy really wanted to tell Dylan Riggs to go to hell, friends or not. This was one of them. "Your point?" he challenged, his voice reminding him of the crushed glass he'd cleaned up just that morning.

"My point," Dylan shot back, a sharp sound of frustration in his throat, "is that you had better think long and hard before you decide on the rules here. Fair is fair. If I go spilling Jillian's secrets, yours are gonna get spilled, as well."

Irritation had him surging to his feet, pacing the cozy kitchen from one end to the other. "Don't give me that *fair is fair* bullshit," he growled. "Gossiping about my sex life and Jillian's fighting are two completely different things. She could have been killed, Dylan. She could have goddamn died in one of those fights! You should have told me what was happening."

Slumping back in his chair, Dylan eyed him with a fascinated mixture of surprise and humor. "And how was I supposed to know you even cared, Jeremy?"

He ground his jaw, refusing to touch that one. There was nothing he could say that wouldn't incriminate him—and the bastard knew it.

Dylan sighed, scrubbing his hands down his face...and that strange look was in his eyes again, as if he were somehow in pain. He rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes, then dropped them into his lap, his gaze focused on the window, some distant point in the early morning sky. "Look, I'm sorry. I know it's hell on you, the way things turned out. I guess that's one of the reasons I've kept things to myself. Whether you like it or not, Jillian has had to deal with a lot of fallout from her involvement with you, and that isn't going to change. Not unless you're ready to make your return here permanent and claim her as your own. And somehow I don't think that's what you've got in mind."

Jeremy rolled his shoulders and shoved his hands deep into the front pockets of his jeans. "Why do I suddenly get the feeling there's a lecture on the way here?"

"Seriously, man. Jillian's been through a lot because of you—"

"Uh-uh," he muttered, shaking his head. "I'll take responsibility for my screwups, but I'm innocent in this one. She threw any chance we would have had away because she chose to believe one of her jealous little friends over me. Because she was too afraid to stand up to the League. Any hell she's had to live with was her own creation. I'm not taking the rap for it." He paused, focusing on getting his breathing back to normal, aware that he was losing his control. "Not that it makes any difference. You'll all believe what you want to believe. You always have."

"Cut the crap," Dylan rasped, glaring at him. "We've never talked about it before, but if you say you never strayed, then I believe you. But what I believe isn't important. Jillian's the one you need to convince."

"And why would I want to go and do that?" he grunted, working his jaw.

Dylan threw back his head and let out a deep, rumbling crack of laughter. Standing up, he walked to Jeremy and clapped him on the shoulder, a wry grin tilting the curve of his mouth. "You're my friend and I admire you, Jeremy. I really do. But if you think how you feel about Jillian Murphy isn't written all over your face, then you really are a dumb-ass."

"Gee, thanks." He grimaced, hating that Dylan was right.

"I'm not the only one who'll notice. You need to be careful."

"Yeah," he drawled with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "I'll be sure to keep my eye out for the bogeyman hiding under my bed at night."

Dylan's eyes narrowed as they stared each other down. "That's the problem with you Runners," he muttered in a quiet rasp, shaking his head. "You all think you're so goddamn invincible. I'm serious, man. Don't laugh this off. It's dangerous, you being back here. Whoever's behind this knows you're closing in. That's going to make them act."

Something in the guy's tone caught Jeremy's attention, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "What are you saying?"

"You're here to do a job, Jeremy. Don't draw Jillian into the middle of it."

The line of his mouth went hard, and his brows pulled together in a dark scowl. "I'm not looking to get her hurt. You should know me better than that."

"I know you lose your head where she's concerned," Dylan argued. "I know you're so on edge at the idea of being near her again that you're all but buzzing with the vibes."

"You getting metaphysical on me?" he snorted, wondering when he's become so transparent. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask Dylan about Jillian's relationship with Eric Drake, but the idea of hearing anything he might have to say put a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Fine, be a smart-ass." Dylan sighed, propping his hip against the kitchen counter. "But I'm giving you good advice, Jeremy. Watch your back, trust no one and, for god's sake, watch Jillian's. She's too trusting by far, and the one you're after won't hesitate to hurt her to get to you."

"If I could do this without involving her, I would," he said after a heavy pause. "But you know I need her help. She knows the Silvercrest better than anyone, even better than you." Dylan scowled. "Like I said, just don't trust anyone."

"You been watching old *X-Files* episodes again?" He laughed roughly. "You sound as paranoid as Mulder."

"That's because I *am* paranoid. We're hanging together by a thread here, man. Pull things too far in one direction, screw with the tension and the whole damn thing is going to snap."

"Warning taken," he said easily, heading for the door. "And I promise to be the soul of discretion. I won't step on any toes or tweak any noses. I'll be a goddamn Boy Scout."

"You don't even know the meaning," Dylan grumbled to his back.

He pulled the front door open, but turned back before heading out. "One more thing."

"Yeah?"

A wry smile curved his mouth. "Where does she live?"

Dylan shook his head, his expression heavy. "In the white cottage over on Lassiter Avenue."

He nodded. "Thanks. I'll keep in touch. "

"You do that. And be careful," Dylan called out as Jeremy headed down the porch steps.

"You know me," Jeremy answered over his shoulder. "Careful's practically my middle name."

Chapter 6

J illian blinked against the brilliant shafts of early morning sunlight burning at Jeremy's back, setting his big body alight, as if he were glowing. God, she needed more sleep if she was expected to deal with him this early in the day. She hadn't even had her first cup of coffee or a shower yet.

But Jeremy looked as if he'd been up for hours. Scarred brown hiking boots covered his big feet, and she worked her way up from there. He wore jeans and an untucked white Irish linen shirt with thin green stripes, its sleeves rolled back on his dark forearms, the masculine tracery of thick veins and ropey sinew visible beneath his golden, hair-dusted skin. His throat was muscled and tanned, his jaw strong, chin firm...and the curve of his mouth warned her that he was going to be a handful. The warm glow in his hazel eyes only confirmed it.

"You shouldn't be here," she said huskily, surprised at

how thick her voice sounded. "If you needed to see me, you could have called and I would have met up with you somewhere."

"What's the problem?" he asked, trying to pull off a look of innocence, while his aura was all but buzzing with sharpedged, predatory energy. He was on the hunt. And she felt like the prey.

Jillian only wished she didn't like the feeling quite as much as she did.

"I didn't say there was a problem. But—"

"Then what are we doing that's so wrong?" he asked with an easygoing smile, looking too sexy for his own good. "We're just two people who are going to work together to try and solve a mystery, find a bad guy, save the day. Heroic stuff. So where's the harm in that? Unless your loverboy doesn't like the idea of you spending time with me," he added silkily.

She clenched her teeth, then forced herself to relax. If she let him, he'd have her wound up in so many knots, she'd never unwind again. "Eric has nothing to do with me and you."

"Is that so?" he asked lightly, arching one tawny brow. Wearing a crooked grin, he looked her over, making her shiver despite the thick terrycloth robe she'd pulled on over her panties and tank top. "You and Eric Drake," he murmured thoughtfully, staring at the base of her throat, where she knew her pulse was fluttering wildly, revealing her reaction to him. And she *was* reacting. Jillian couldn't be near him, assaulted by that warm, crisp male scent and gorgeous body without suffering a meltdown. "Is he still here?"

Looking over her head, his dark eyes raked the shadowed interior of her home, sharp and suspicious. She knew, without even asking, what he was thinking. "No, he isn't hiding, Jeremy."

His gaze reconnected with hers, and she sucked in a

startled breath at the blatant burn of possession glittering in his eyes. "Then now's as good a time as any for you to explain what's going on between the two of you," he rasped, stepping closer, until she could feel the heat of his body. His scent was everywhere, surrounding her, seeping into her pores until she felt light-headed. "No little sisters, no jealous boyfriends lurking around the corner. Come on, Jillian, and enlighten me. I'm all ears."

Blowing out a deep breath, she suddenly didn't have the energy to keep butting heads with him on something he was going to learn for himself before long, anyway. "Listen, I think you got the wrong idea last night. Eric and I aren't a couple. Not like you're thinking. We really are just friends."

"Right," he drawled.

"It's true. But I'm in a complicated situation right now, and our parents..."

Her voice trailed off uncomfortably, and he filled in the rest. "Oh, yeah, I can see that," he supplied in a bitter tone, rocking back on his heels, hands shoved deep in his front pockets. "I bet your parents would cream over having his pure-blooded offspring perched on the branches of their family tree, even if his father is a sadistic bastard."

"It isn't like that, Jeremy. Eric has been helping me buy some time with the League," she explained gruffly. "It's nothing more than that."

His green eyes narrowed, as bright and intense as rainsplashed leaves in the spring. "What the hell does that mean?"

A sound caught her attention, and Jillian glanced to her right, seeing her elderly neighbor, Gloria, dressed in a floral housecoat and galoshes, getting ready to water her front yard. The old woman pretended absorption in her task, but Jillian knew Gloria would be struggling to hear their every word. "Look, we really shouldn't be having this conversation outside for all the world to hear. I like to protect my privacy."

"Then invite me in," he offered silkily...tempting her to trust the devil.

Jillian rolled her lips together, and shook her head. "That wouldn't be smart."

A low, husky laugh rumbled up from his chest, the provocative sound making her toes curl. "Since when has anything we've ever done been smart?" he drawled, the corner of his sensuous mouth lifting the tiniest fraction. "Come on, I promise I won't bite."

Rolling her eyes, she stepped aside to let him in. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

"Only because it's the truth." The heat of his big body brushed hers as he moved past, making her muscles clench, while deep pulses of sexual tension invaded her system like a drug. God, it made her dizzy, the constant push and pull when they were together. "There's only ever been one woman I've wanted to sink my teeth into," he added in a seductive murmur.

"Poor woman," she snorted, trying to keep things light, when inside she was nothing but a chaotic jumble of destructive needs and dreams and desires.

His deep laughter made her grin, even while her belly fluttered at the sight of his head tilted back, the muscular line of his throat begging for the press of her lips. Giving herself a mental kick in the backside, Jillian struggled to pull herself out of the sensual haze engulfing her, and searched for something mundane to say as she shut her front door. "So, um, how's your first morning back in town been?"

A wry grin twisted his mouth, green eyes glittering with humor as he glanced her way. "Peachy. The welcoming committee around here is just swell." "Don't tell me you're already causing trouble," she said with a frown, while her fingers fiddled with the knotted belt at her waist. He prowled the room at a slow, casual pace, but Jillian could feel the tension he kept under wraps. It reminded her of a rattler coiling its long body around...and around... and around, waiting for the moment to strike.

"Hey, it's not like I started it." His shoulders lifted in a careless shrug. "Haven't thrown a rock at a single window, I swear."

He stopped by her DVD shelf, running his finger over the various titles, and flashed her a boyish smile that made her go *still*. Everywhere. Inside and out. One smile, and Jillian was completely frozen, simply because of how much it reminded her of the twenty-two-year-old Jeremy she used to know. Swallowing, she struggled for her voice. "S-someone threw a rock at your parents' house?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yep." He moved on to study one of her many bookshelves that lined the walls. "Shattered the front window in the living room. Mom's gonna be pissed."

"God, this is a nightmare," she groaned, shoving her tangled hair off her forehead. "I have to grab a shower and get dressed. Have a seat or whatever. I'll be right back."

"Take your time," Jeremy murmured, wanting a few minutes to himself so that he could study her house without the distraction of her presence. Jillian headed down the hallway, leaving him alone in the living room. Whistling an old Metallica song under his breath, he stood in the center of the floor, his hands itching at his sides. He wanted to run them over the surface of her belongings, as if he could take in a part of her *learn her*—simply by touching her things. A plush sofa in full-grain leather sat against the far wall, its rich chestnut color enhanced by the eggshell hue of the wall at its back, with a black-and-white Ansel Adams print hanging above it. In front sat a low coffee table in dark mahogany, and on the opposite wall stood an armoire with expanding shelves that were packed with books, its center doors pulled shut so that the TV couldn't be seen.

The corners of his eyes crinkled with a grin as he remembered how much Jillian hated television. She'd always preferred a good book to watching TV. Still whistling, he headed down the hallway, walking past the door to the bathroom, the muffled sound of Jillian's shower making him sweat. Needing a distraction from the thought of her naked body standing beneath the warm spray of water, he kept going until he found her bedroom at the end of the hall. Propping his shoulder against the door frame, Jeremy looked around, soaking up the intimate details like a flower soaking in sunlight and rain. They nurtured his soul in the same way, filling the empty hollows that had been starved for the details of her life.

Shadows painted the rich gray of the back wall as watery morning sunlight crept past the sheer white drapes covering the windows. A classic iron bed with footboard and headboard sat catty-corner, facing the door, its white sheets sleeprumpled, probably still warm from her body, and in another lifetime, he would have wanted to go and roll around in them, soaking in her scent. Would have wanted to lie on those soft sheets and open his eyes to the early morning rays of light spilling onto the warm nickel finish of the bed, watching it wash over the delicate features of the woman lying wrapped in his arms, her expression relaxed in sleep, a satisfied smile on her lips, the provocative mark of his teeth on her throat.

"But you're smarter than that now," he huffed under his breath, hoping like hell it was true. Now, he just wanted to get as much of her as he could, for as long as he was there. Then he'd leave and get the hell on with his life. He'd find a way to"Jeremy?"

He jerked at the sound of her voice behind him, and felt his ears go hot, a muffled curse on his lips as she waited for him to turn around. The little daydream had left him rigid with arousal, and there was no way she'd fail to notice. Wearing a crooked grin, Jeremy turned and repositioned his shoulder against the frame, his long arms crossed over his chest.

"You caught me," he confessed in a husky rasp, the corner of his mouth twitching as he stared down at her. "I saw that bed and the moment got away from me."

She shivered, and he reached out and caught a drop of water that clung to an eyelash, careful not to hurt her. She was wrapped up in her grannie robe again, but underneath he knew she was warm and soft and naked, her skin still damp from the shower. He wanted to take her down to the floor so badly that he shook, his insides tremoring like a groundbreaking quake. "So," he said softly, wondering if his smile looked as wolfish as he felt, "you wanna go to bed with me?"

Did she want to go to bed with him?

Jillian placed one hand over her heart, the other across her lower abdomen, as if to protect herself, though she didn't fear him physically. No, that had never been the problem. But there was something infinitely fragile inside of her, something breakable, that only he could destroy. In truth, she feared the things he could do to her. Things he could make her feel, make her crave. The way he could shatter her into pieces and leave her broken. And he could.

Her heart was so very vulnerable to him, just like a slip of green breaking through the rugged ground to seek sustenance from the sun and rain, blooming with the heat and vitality of life, so fragile and easily ground into dust if not treated with care.

But she was her own worst enemy-because everything deep inside of her, all those secret places and organs and churning depths of desire, they all burned for him, eager and willing to sacrifice the sense and rightness of protecting herself. They wanted to lunge forward and lay down in offering at his feet. Wanted to spread her thighs and beg to take him into her, make him a part of her, whether he destroyed her or not. Just to have him close. The musky, male scent of his skin, its heat and silken texture stretched hard over powerful muscles that could so easily break her if he forgot to be careful. All of it leading to the ultimate moment when her walls were lowered and he would discover one of the most closely guarded secrets of being a Spirit Walker. A secret that had kept her from acting on her powerful desires all those years ago-one that would guite simply reveal her heart to Jeremy in the most intimate way.

No, she couldn't risk it. She wouldn't risk it.

"You think we should hop into bed together, just like that?" She tried to keep her tone light, though it was virtually impossible.

The heat in his eyes deepened, turning them a darker green, the skin stretched over his cheekbones flushed with color. "Yeah, just like that. The offer may sound casual, but I promise that once I get you there, there won't be anything casual about it."

"God, Jeremy." Her eyes closed, tears that she couldn't hold in leaking from the corners. They were hot with emotion, with starved desires that were so tired of being hungry. Of being denied. "Why do you have to be so provoking?"

"I haven't even started." He laughed softly under his breath, the sound rigid and strained, like his body. She felt his heat shift closer, and opened her eyes as she took a quick step back, needing to keep whatever distance between them she could. His dark gaze smoldered, a kaleidoscope of questions shifting through their depths, as he stared down at her. "Dammit, Jillian, stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Scurrying away like a frightened little mouse whenever I get near you." He stepped even closer, until she could feel the physical heat of his body, the warmth of his breath...salty sweet, like his taste. So close she could see the golden shadow of stubble on his chin, the sexy crinkles at the corners of his hazel eyes. "I know I don't scare you. Not physically. Not like that."

"You're right," she conceded. Her skin felt damp in intimate places, and she knew it wasn't from her shower. She wet her bottom lip with her tongue, aware that her breath was coming faster, panting. "This is called self-preservation."

"You don't want to let yourself get too close to me, and I can't help but wonder why that is." His voice lowered, deepened, while the look in his eyes went darker, his lids heavy as he held her stare, daring her to look away. "You don't have to protect yourself from me, Jillian."

She found herself swaying toward him, when the memory of his words from the night before slammed into her, cutting through the haze of lust clouding her judgment. It hit with the jarring impact of a lightning strike, jolting her back to reality. He wanted her for sex—only for the moment, not forever. And if she gave in, when he left he would take a part of her with him. A part of her she could never get back.

"No. I won't do this," she whispered, reaching up to press against his chest.

"Do what?" he demanded, covering her hands with his own, the touch of his palms rough, warm. He flattened her hands against his chest, until she could feel the heavy, thundering beat of his heart. "What won't you do? Sex? Me?" He gave a low, sinful laugh. "If ever there was a time to be specific, Jillian, it's now."

"This...us..." she panted, trembling. "It isn't going to happen."

One of his hands settled at her waist, the other curling around the back of her neck, supporting her head as she stared up at him. His lips parted slightly, eyes glowing with the visceral hunger of his wolf, the intense need carved into his hard expression making her breathless. When he spoke, the velvet-rough timbre of his voice was mesmerizing, deliciously seductive. "Do you know how hard I've tried to forget you?"

She tried to respond, but couldn't get the words past the tightness of her throat.

Sensing his advantage, Jeremy moved closer still, and she found herself caught, trapped between his hard muscled length and the unyielding wall at her back. His chest pressed against the hard tips of her breasts, the shockingly thick bulge behind his fly lodged intimately against the hollow of her stomach, emotions churning in her belly like birds that had just been frightened into flight. "But every day your memory's just grown stronger, sharper," he murmured, that evocative voice deep and rich and rumbling...making her liquid and soft. "I've dreamed about you so many nights. Imagined having you under me. More times than I can count."

A choked sound vibrated in her throat, her eyes damp... hot. "God, Jeremy, don't do this to me."

"It's not me, it's you. You're the one who won't stop tormenting me. Who won't leave me in peace." He lifted his hand from her waist, running the back of his knuckles along the curve of her cheek, stroking her skin with a tender, reverent touch that made her chest hurt, her heart pound. "I've seen it happen so many times in my dreams. Watched your eyes go hazy, these smooth cheeks flush with color. Heard your breath catch in the back of your throat. Felt you spill over my hand, around my fingers, while your screams filled my head. Felt your body take me in, squeezing me, so tight and hot and sweet I thought I'd go out of my mind."

She drew an unsteady breath. "It isn't going to happen."

A sexy, irresistible smile played at his lips. "Yes, it will. As many times as I want it to. However many ways you can take it. I want them all, Jillian. Every goddamn one of them."

"Are you deaf," she said shakily, "or just stubborn?"

He leaned in close, and his lips touched her ear as he said, "I'm a realist, honey. It *will* happen, because it's what we both want—what we both need. And when I'm buried deep inside you—heavy, hot, thick—you're going to break so hard that you'll scream. So hard that I'll be able to taste your cries in my mouth. You can believe that, Jillian, even if you won't believe anything else."

"Who do you think you are?" she whispered, hating the way her voice trembled...and not with anger. Oh, no. It was like some kind of switch had been flipped in her head...and now she was being sucked in...all her struggles surging against an ever-growing current that rendered them useless, destroyed. "You think I don't know how good you are in bed? Ha! You think women haven't relished shoving your reputation in my face over the years, every chance they got? I'm sure you can make a woman scream just by looking at her, Jeremy, but it isn't going to work on me."

He didn't get angry, didn't smile. He just stared down at her, his expression hard, rigid with lust. "You're panicking."

"I'm not—"

"You're panicking because of what's happening here between us, and instead of giving it a chance, you want to run," he went on, clearly warming to his theory. He pressed closer, bracing his left forearm against the wall, his other hand settling like a hot, heavy brand against her hip. "You can tell yourself you want Eric, but it'll never happen... never stick. For one simple reason, Jillian. He. Isn't. Me."

A sharp, hoarse sound jerked from her throat. "Do you even know how arrog—"

"I know what I'm talking about," he rasped, cutting her off in a dark, provocative drawl, long fingers squeezing her hip, caressing her through the fabric of her robe as he watched her beneath heavy lashes. "Do you think I haven't tried to find a woman who could make me forget you?" He laughed, and the sound was scratchy, coarse...somehow damaged.

"But they were never enough," he added in a husky whisper, trailing his rough palm up her side, until it curved around the outer swell of her breast, his thumb sweeping out to stroke over her tight, sensitive nipple. "So you can keep telling yourself that it won't happen, but you know it's a lie. You want me, Jillian. You want what we have between us. You want to get it out of your system as badly as I do."

She closed her eyes, letting her head fall back until it banged against the wall. "God, Jeremy," she pleaded. "Please. Please don't do this to me."

The seconds stretched out as he stood staring down at her, holding her there, and then he slowly stepped away. "Okay," he rumbled in a dark, graveled voice, running one hand back through his hair, hunger all but pulsing off him in harsh, potent waves. "If you're going to insist on avoiding the inevitable—"

"It isn't—"

He went on as if she'd never interrupted. "Then let's get the hell out of here. This whole place smells like you and it's screwing with my head." She blinked up at him, wondering if he would forever throw her off balance. "You want to leave? Now?"

"You go throw some clothes on, and then we can take a walk through town together. I was serious about us working together. I need to take a look around and get a feel for this place."

The change in focus was so sudden, Jillian felt dizzy. And looking at him now, she couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't planned it that way all along. It would be just like him. Because now the seed had been planted. No matter what she did, she wouldn't be able to *not* think about what had happened, about the deliciously wicked things he'd said to her, and how badly she wanted them.

Chapter 7

While Jeremy waited in the living room, Jillian rushed to get dressed. Her hands shook, heart racing as she searched for something to wear. Finally, after throwing on some jeans and a sweater, then ripping her brush through her hair, she was ready to go.

She met Jeremy in the living room, and ten minutes later, they were walking down the sidewalk together, side-by-side, enjoying the morning sunshine as it struggled to burn its way through the storm clouds that had settled like a shroud over the skyline.

When they turned at the end of the street, heading north, he spoke for the first time since leaving her house. "That little trick with Danna last night was pretty cool. How did you take her down like that?"

"When I heal someone, their natural shields are low and I'm able to ease their pain and promote healing by slipping into their minds and enlisting the help of their bodies. It saved my life when I discovered that the same theory applies to fighting. So long as I'm able to dodge their attack long enough that they grow tired, like Danna had, I can slip in and order their body to stop fighting, slamming a mental brake on their rage."

"But it comes with a price." At her look of surprise, he said, "You nearly collapsed on me after the fight, remember?"

Tearing her gaze away from the tender concern in his eyes, Jillian explained. "Using that kind of power takes a lot out of me, whether I'm using it to stop an opponent or healing an injury."

"That makes sense." He slanted her a curious look, and the corner of his mouth twitched with a boyish grin. "So what else can you do now that you're all grown up?"

"Just so you know, my powers are *not* sexual," she drawled, chuckling under her breath at his hopeful tone. At least not that she knew of. But how could she tell him how her powers affected her sexuality, when she didn't even know herself? In that regard, they were as yet untapped, like doors in a house that had never been opened. Until they were unlocked—until someone had possession of the key—there was no way of knowing what waited inside.

Jeremy rubbed his palm against his whiskered jaw. "Not sexual? Dunno about that." He shook his hand out as if he'd touched something hot and been burned. "That kiss last night damn near fried my circuits."

Jillian shot him an *as if* look and gave a feminine snort. "I would think something as simple as a kiss would be pretty boring for a man of your reputation, Burns."

A deep chuckle rumbled up from his chest, but there was an intense heat smoldering in his eyes as he said, "Normally, I'd agree. But that was before I got reminded that kissing you *isn't* like kissing other women." "Time to change the subject," she murmured, forcing herself to look away from him.

"All right," he said after they passed an elderly couple out taking their morning stroll. "So where *is* Eric?"

"I have no idea." She sighed. "I hardly keep him on a leash, Jeremy."

He rolled his shoulder in that way that men do when they didn't want to look as if they cared one way or the other, but the look he cut her from beneath his lashes smoldered with intensity. "He isn't acting the way he should, you know."

"Oh, yeah? And just how should he be acting?"

He rolled his shoulder again, flashing her a crooked smile. "It's simple. If he really wanted you, he should have planted his fist in my face the second I got within two feet of you. It's what any reasonable guy would have done," he delivered, so deadpan, she couldn't help but laugh.

Jillian was still grinning when they turned the next corner, but her smile fell the second she set eyes on the group ahead of them. A ragtag gang of teenagers lounged in front of Harris's convenience store, their expressions dramatically indolent, full of angst and anger. Coal-black eyeliner rimmed their bloodshot eyes, and their scraggly heads were wreathed in clouds of smoke from the hand-rolled cigarettes they clenched between their stained fingers. She was trying to lead Jeremy across the street, when one of the boys turned their way and he caught sight of the words emblazoned across the front of the kid's T-shirt.

"Son of a bitch. Look at that."

"Simmons Rules," she read aloud. Feeling desperate, knowing a confrontation was inevitable, Jillian tugged on his bicep, trying to pull him in the other direction. "Come on, Jeremy. There's no need to go looking for trouble."

"Sorry," he murmured, staring intently at the group, "but trouble's exactly what I've come looking for." "Jer—"

"Just wait here for me," he rasped, pulling away from her. "All I want to do is say hello."

"Right," Jillian muttered under her breath, watching as he headed back toward the teenagers. Whether his actions were borne from bravery or stupidity, she couldn't decide. When he stood a few yards away, the group separated, revealing a Lycan in his early twenties. Jillian recognized him instantly as Dustin Sheffield. She didn't know the young man well, but she knew *of* him. His father, Cooper Sheffield, was considered Drake's right-hand man here in town, handling the Elder's dirty work. Ironically, Sheffield also held the title of security chief for the pack. Like his father, Dustin was tall and dark, with golden eyes continually shadowed by a thin veil of hate. He was also brawnier than his group of friends, and clearly considered the alpha of their ragtag gang.

Jerking his chin toward where she stood, Dustin flashed Jeremy a cocky grin and drawled, "That's a pretty piece you have waiting on you there, Runner. She's always seemed kinda shy to me, but today..." His voice trailed off and he lifted one shoulder in a casual gesture, while his golden eyes moved down her body in a slow, sexual caress that made her stomach turn. "I dunno, there's something about her. She just has that look that says she'd like to get f—"

Jeremy's sharp growl cut him off. "Don't even think about it," he warned in a lethal tone that had the younger Lycans stiffening with aggression as they spread out behind their leader.

Dustin's smile flashed, sharp and bright and brittle. "Aw, come on, man. You can't blame a guy for following his instincts."

Jillian watched as Jeremy took an aggressive step forward. "Your instincts are going to land you in something you can't handle."

* * *

"You have no idea what I'm capable of handling," the Lycan drawled, tempting Jeremy to knock the cocky look off his face then and there. "And you can't touch me. In case you aren't aware, seeing as how this is your first day back home and all, I'll be nice and explain the situation," he added with a challenging smirk, and at that moment, Jeremy would've bet his favorite body parts that the young man had already gone rogue. "My name is Dustin Sheffield. Cooper Sheffield, the pack's security chief, is my father. My dad and Drake are close, real close—which means the League would have your balls in a sling if you even look at me the wrong way."

"Let me give you little piece of advice, Dustin." Jeremy stepped closer, his mouth curled in a wry smile. "Your daddy and Drake don't scare me. The League doesn't scare me. And you and your scrawny little group of pals sure as hell don't scare me."

"Then we'll just have to try harder, won't we?" Dustin murmured, winking at Jillian. Jeremy's fingertips stung with the need to slip his claws, but he held himself in check. Now wasn't the time to go head-to-head with the punk, no matter how badly his beast wanted a piece of the bastard for daring to even look at Jillian.

"I'd be careful, if I were you," he said, slipping his hands into his pockets, his stance as carefree and easy as if they'd been discussing nothing more interesting than the weather. "After all, I'd hate to have to embarrass you in front of all your little friends here." He grinned then, and turned his back on the group as he headed back toward Jillian. She stood right where he'd left her, eyes wide as she kept a wary watch over Dustin and the others.

"Jeremy, how could you just turn your back on them?" she

snapped as soon as he reached her side. "Do you have a death wish?"

"Don't worry, Jillian. They're not going to attack me in the back, for everyone to see." He nodded his head toward the other side of the street. "So let's get out of here before I forget my good intentions not to fight in front of you and go back to kick Sheffield's cocky little ass."

She glared at him, clearly upset, but started across the street. "That was the stupidest thing I've ever seen," she practically growled. "What the hell do you think you were doing?"

"My job," he said in a low slide of words. "So why don't you try to be helpful and explain what's up with the shirts. Since when are rogues considered heroes around here?"

She hunched her shoulders, crossing her arms again, her cheeks pale beneath the rosy burn of the cold. "There's been a lot of talk lately by some of the older members of the pack about the necessity of the Bloodrunners," she began to explain, her tone grim as she rubbed at her arms. "They say that you do more harm than good, blaming the Runners for allowing what they call the 'oppression of the human world' over our own way of life. Stefan Drake and his followers are responsible for a lot of it, but I don't know why the others are so quick to buy in to his rantings." She lifted her shoulders in a baffled shrug. "I wish I did, Jeremy. I've talked it over with Dylan, but we're both at a loss. And Dylan's hands are tied by his position. I think he's afraid. He has to be careful what he says or Stefan will have him voted off the League."

She came to a stop and turned slowly toward him, her face tilted up, eyes shadowed with troubles she'd carried alone for far too long. "Despite how much we argue, the truth is that I really could use your help," she admitted softly.

Such simple words, and yet, the way they affected him were far from simple. "We need to work together, Jillian. We

need to find the answers before things get so screwed up they can't ever be put back in order again."

She shot him a searching look, surprise molding her expression.

"What?" he asked, arching one brow.

The corner of her mouth twitched, while a surge of wind caught at her hair. "I just didn't think you, of all people, would want to see things put back to the way they *were*."

Jeremy reached out to hook a wayward lock of gold-spun silk behind her ear as the wind howled around them, scurrying leaves about their feet from the decorative trees that lined the street. "Are you accusing me of being an anarchist?" he asked with a ghost of a smile.

"No." She blinked up at him, velvety brown eyes soft and bright. "But the way things were...and still are, isn't exactly fair, Jeremy. You were right to want to see changes when you lived here. The Silvercrest have to learn to adapt, to change, or we're going to die out because we've buried ourselves in the past."

"Spoken like a true reformist," he teased, following beside her as she set off walking once more.

Her mouth twisted with a small grin, and then she changed the subject by saying, "I never did ask when your indoctrination ceremony is supposed to take place."

He gave a grim bark of laughter. "I decided to skip that bit of hypocrisy. No sense—"

"It's not hypo—"

"Excuse me," said an elderly voice from behind them, "but aren't you Jeremy Burns?"

Together, they turned to find Mrs. Swanson standing before them, a shawl wrapped around her slim shoulders, her cloudy blue eyes troubled beneath her wrinkled brow.

Jillian could feel Jeremy's tension, and knew he was ex-

pecting the little old woman to hurl insults at him. Hoping Mrs. Swanson wasn't there to cause trouble, Jillian sent the elderly Lycan an easy smile. "Yes, this is Jeremy."

The woman gave a sharp nod, while the scent of talcum powder lifted to their noses, combined with tea and hair dye. "Good." She shifted her pale blue eyes to Jeremy. "I need to talk to you about my granddaughter Melissa."

"Is Melissa in trouble?" Jillian asked, before Jeremy could respond to the old woman's comment.

Mrs. Swanson's chin trembled as she explained. "She's been missing for over a week now. Along with some of her friends. If she's run off with some human boy," she groaned, "I don't know what I'll do. I couldn't stand to lose my Melissa to one of them. It would be too awful."

A quick glance at Jeremy's expression revealed nothing. He was wearing his "closed" mask, keeping his reactions under lock and key. But Jillian couldn't help but wonder how long it would last in the face of such blatant ignorance and bias. "I'll come to talk with you about Melissa this afternoon," she murmured, "but if you'll excuse us, there's somewhere we need to be."

"You'll let me know if you find anything?" Mrs. Swanson demanded, calling after them as Jillian all but yanked Jeremy down the sidewalk.

"Of course he will," she snapped through her terse smile. "Goodbye."

When they were out of hearing distance, Jeremy slid her a bemused look. "Just where is it that we need to be?"

"Anywhere she *isn't*," Jillian muttered under her breath.

"And what are you going to do when I'm out on my own?" he teased. "Won't be so easy to keep me out of harm's way then, little witch."

Despite the cold, she could feel the heat in her cheeks. She

cleared her throat, aware that her heart was pounding, that her blood was throbbing in tender, delicate places that always felt hot when she was around this particular man. "I wasn't...I just... I think you're going to have enough to deal with without getting caught up in all of that." She sighed, jerking her head back behind them, where Mrs. Swanson scuffled herself down the sidewalk.

"We knew Simmons was targeting the teenagers, tempting them to turn rogue. In some cases, even forcing them. But how many do you think are missing from town?"

"Enough for me to worry," she answered honestly, "but not enough yet to be able to make the League take action. Dylan has tried, but Graham and the others take so long to come to any sort of decision. And rebellion in the Lycan community isn't exactly unheard of. Puberty is rough enough to manage without having a wolf to deal with. You know we have a high rate of teenage runaways, but they all come home sooner rather than later. Of course, now that the number of rogues seems to be growing, it's unsettling, to say the least, when one of the teens goes missing, not to mention entire groups of them."

"And here that woman would probably rather her granddaughter be keeping company with those Lycans who have already turned than a human," he murmured, his voice thick with disgust. "Unbelievable. How do you live with these people?"

"Not all of them feel that way," she argued, feeling as if she stood at the top of a towering precipice, with a deep ravine on either side, flanked by craggy cliffs just a leap away. All she had to do was decide in which direction she would jump...and she'd be on solid ground. But instead, she stubbornly refused to move, while the rock beneath her feet tumbled away bit by bit.

Giving herself a mental shake, she finished her argument. "You can't judge us all by a few, Jeremy. That isn't fair."

"Fair? What isn't fair is that their kids are missing, and all

they're worried about is that they've run off with a human, when in reality they're probably somewhere doing something that's going to land them in some serious trouble, if not killed. How asinine is that?"

She started to respond, when her cell phone suddenly vibrated in her pocket, signaling a text message. Pulling out her phone, Jillian quickly read the few lines of script and grimaced. "I'm going to have to go. Graham says he needs to see me."

"And just what does ol' Graham want this early?" Jeremy grunted, possession biting at his ass like a mangy dog. Not that he was jealous of the old guy, but he was bitter as hell, knowing that Graham had always been against a relationship between them. The Lead Elder may have been the best friend of Mason's father, Robert Dillinger, but he was still as narrow-minded as the rest of the League. "Is he ready to slap your hand for being seen in public with me?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "I hardly think he even knows yet, Jeremy."

"Graham knows," he drawled. "Trust me, this whole place is on pins and needles, waiting to see what their Spirit Walker will do now that I'm back."

"I'm not going to *do* anything." She blew out a rough breath, not quite meeting his eyes as she said, "To be honest, I've been having problems with the League for a while now, long before they knew you were coming home."

"What kind of problems?"

Her gaze found his then nervously skittered away, focusing on something over his left shoulder. "They've decided that I've gone single long enough. According to the Elders, it's past time I went about the business of producing them a new Spirit Walker." He made a rude sound in his throat. "Jesus, Jillian. Why don't you tell them to go to hell?"

"It's not that simple," she murmured, and her eyes moved back to his, as if pulled there by the force of his will.

Jeremy arched one brow and moved closer. "Isn't it? Or are you still letting the League call the shots for you? Still letting them control your life?"

"And who should I let control it?" she demanded, her tone as defensive as her body language. She crossed her arms over her middle, shoulders hunched as she nibbled on the corner of that lush, pansy-soft mouth, its pink stain matching the vibrant color in her cheeks. "You?"

"I've never wanted to control you. I've just wanted to f—"

"Don't even say it!" she warned, and he couldn't help but chuckle at the expression on her face.

"What?" He grinned as he held his hands up in innocent surrender. "I was just going to say that I've wanted to *find* a way for us to be friends."

"Yeah, sure you were." She sighed, shaking her head, and he could see the glimmer of laughter lurking in those big brown eyes. Softly, she said, "I don't know how long this is going to take with Graham, but if you're going to snoop around without me today, promise that you'll be careful."

"Worried about me?" he asked, teasing her with a wink.

The corner of her mouth twitched, creating an adorable little dimple that he wanted to press his mouth against. "I worry about *all* my wolves."

"So you *are* worried about me," he rumbled with cocky satisfaction, waggling his brows. He enjoyed teasing her, even when they were going head-to-head with each other.

Jillian rolled her eyes again. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Yeah, I know. Go on and see what Graham needs. I'll catch up with you later."

She gave him a doubtful look. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't look so worried." He chuckled. "I promise to stay out of trouble. Scout's honor."

"Right," Jillian snickered, too aware of the fact that she did *not* want to leave him. "You were never a Scout."

"Not for lack of trying." His voice lowered, eyes smoky beneath the golden fringe of his lashes. "I've been known to act like a saint on occasion. You should know that more than anyone."

She blushed, remembering the heated embrace he'd tried so hard to keep from going too far when they'd shared that one earthshaking, unforgettable kiss. He'd been so mindful of her age...of her innocence. She'd taken it for granted then, but now, as a woman, she realized just what that restraint had cost him.

Unsure of what to say, she started to walk away, when he touched her arm. "Jillian?"

"Yes?" She turned back to meet his gaze.

"Don't let Sheffield anywhere near you," he warned her. "And be careful around Drake."

"Around Eric?" she asked, frowning.

Jillian watched as his mouth flattened into a grim line. "Around all of them, but especially his father. Until we know more about what's going on, you can't be too cautious."

She sucked in a sharp breath of air, eyes wide. "Oh, my god, you think it's—"

"Shh," he whispered, leaning down to press a chaste kiss to her temple, his breath warm in her ear. "Just promise me that you'll be on guard."

She nodded mutely, the idea that had burst into her brain

spreading like a brilliant ink stain, consuming her mind. Stefan Drake had the hatred; there was no doubt of that. But was it really possible that he was crazy enough to think he could use rogues to...what? What would be his goal? His aim?

Jeremy stared into her eyes and lifted his hand to brush her hair back from her brow, his rough calluses making her shiver with awareness. "We can argue later. Just promise me that you'll be careful."

She wet her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue. "You say that like you really care."

The glowing burn of tenderness in his hazel eyes made her chest feel tight. "I don't want to see you get hurt in all of this, Jillian."

"No, I think you're trying to seduce me," she whispered, her voice thick as she shook her head in silent wonder. It was a statement—one he didn't bother to deny.

He pushed his hands deep in his pockets, all traces of tenderness gone from his gaze as the primitive burn of hunger bled through. "I made it clear what I want last night," he told her, the words gritty and raw with intent.

"Yes, you did." Frustration roared through her, swift and urgent and hot. "And if you'll recall, I told you it wasn't going to happen."

"Then it looks like we're at a standoff." He grinned at her, but the lines around his eyes betrayed the gravity behind his words. He had no intention of backing down. Not until he'd got what he wanted. "We'll just have to see who breaks first, won't we?"

His white teeth flashed in a sharp smile, and he stepped back, her cue to turn and leave.

But as Jillian walked away, it bothered her—how reluctant she was to take it. * * *

The second Jillian turned the corner, Jeremy leaned back against the brick wall of a street-side shop, gritting his teeth against the dull ache in his lower body. God, he was so on edge, just from being near her, that he knew one touch of her soft little hand on his shaft and he'd have gone over into sweet, mindless oblivion.

Pushing away from the wall, he headed in the opposite direction from which they'd come. At the end of the block, he'd just started around the corner of a building, when he found himself face-to-face with Constance Murphy, Jillian's mother.

Damn.

"Jeremy," she murmured, sounding calm, despite the fact she looked surprised to have run in to him. Maybe she'd thought he'd be skulking around in the shadows...or maybe she hadn't even given a thought to his return. God only knew she'd never had much to say to him before. Some of the most awkward moments of his life had been when he was forced to interact with this woman. "I heard you were back in town."

Yeah, and she sounded less than thrilled with the news. No shock there.

"Mrs. Murphy," he replied, trying to hide his grimace behind a smile, but knowing he failed.

"You don't have to call me Mrs. Murphy, Jeremy. We're both adults. Obviously we should be capable of acting like them, in a civilized manner."

"Yes, ma'am," he murmured, feeling like a boy about to get his ears boxed.

"I heard about last night," she stated, his displeasure evident.

He reached up and tugged at his earlobe. "Yeah, I...uh, figured you would."

Her slender hands clutched at the strap of the brown leather purse hanging over her shoulder, the rouged line of her mouth tight with restraint. "Surely you can understand why it's important for you to stay away from my daughter. You've already caused enough chaos in her life."

"With all due respect, ma'am, Jillian's a grown woman."

Bright flags of color flared in her cheeks, her skin still amazingly smooth for her age, making her look much younger than she was. "Yes, she is a grown woman. One with a soft spot for something that isn't good for her."

"So you think her and Drake are a bad match, too?" he drawled, struggling to keep his face straight. "Glad to hear it."

Her gaze flashed with fire, her expression so brittle, he was surprised she didn't crack. "Don't get smart with me, Jeremy," she snapped. "I want you to stay away from my daughter."

Raw emotion burned through him, making him curse under his breath as he felt the restless shift of his beast. It didn't like being told to stay away from the thing it craved most, any more than his human half did. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Can't or won't?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "What does it matter when the answer's the same?"

Her eyes narrowed to slits, mouth pinched, and he felt the chill of her fury rush through him like an angry wind. Locking his jaw, he stood his ground, knowing that if he backed down now she'd take it for weakness and press her advantage. Witches grew more powerful with age, their abilities dependent upon each individual bloodline, and Jeremy knew that Jillian's line was considered one of the strongest. Constance Murphy could become a serious enemy if she chose to, but he hated to be at odds with the mother of the woman he—

Damn it. How about we not go there right now.

He wasn't ready to look too closely at how he felt about Jillian, primarily because he was still trying to figure it out. So much had happened between them since last night...or so little, depending on how you looked at it. But one thing he knew for sure was that something *was* going to happen. And soon.

"This isn't over," she said angrily, and with a cold look, she turned her back on him and hurried away, her movements wooden with fury as her low heels clicked ominously against the sidewalk. Jeremy watched her until she turned and disappeared at the next block, then heaved a sigh of relief before heading in the opposite direction, thinking that if this was the beginning of his day...he wasn't sure he wanted to see how it ended.

Chapter 8

The late afternoon sun was hanging heavily in the sky as Jeremy glanced at his phone for the hundredth time. He kept waiting for word from Jillian, wondering what she was doing. After the unsettling run-in with Constance Murphy, he'd spent the rest of the day snooping around, refamiliarizing himself with the town, aware of the tension hanging over Shadow Peak, as if everyone was just waiting for something bad to happen.

When he'd neared the high school, he caught sight of some more of the controversial T-shirts that he and Jillian had seen that morning. One particular version that caught his eye had read Authority Bites...and So Do I. He'd laughed when he saw it, thinking he'd actually like to own one with that particular saying. Mason would be annoyed as hell by it, but then irritating Mase was too much fun to resist.

For the most part, people made it a point to avoid him, but there were a few who surprisingly made an effort to engage him in conversation. The most interesting bit of news he'd heard had been about the shirts; or rather, the Lycans wearing them. According to one of his father's friends, the teenagers sporting the controversial slogans were part of Stefan Drake's new youth awareness movement. From what Jeremy could gather, the purpose of the movement was the promotion of purity among the Lycans, like a fledgling sect of little neo-Nazis who believed anything less than a pureblooded wolf shouldn't be allowed to live.

Jeremy wasn't surprised by the news, considering the Bloodrunners already knew Drake was twisted in the head. But it still made his blood run cold to think that the bastard's racist beliefs were gaining such momentum among the younger members of the pack. And he wasn't surprised that Jillian hadn't said anything to him about the movement that morning, considering how badly she'd wanted to get him away from Sheffield and his gang.

Apparently Drake claimed he had nothing to do with the shirts the teens were wearing, but that didn't mean anything. If he was the traitor they were hunting, he'd be a fool to openly associate himself with any pro-rogue propaganda. And they knew he wasn't a fool.

Jeremy was nearing the end of Main Street when he finally caught sight of none other than Stefan Drake himself coming out of town hall, the Elder's gray hair shining silver in the weak shafts of sunlight burning through the low cloud covering. For a moment, Jeremy almost didn't recognize him, but then it'd been a while since their paths had crossed—since Drake had been conveniently absent when he'd presented his Bloodrunning numbers to the League. Drake looked leaner than Jeremy remembered him, as if his features had been carved out of stone, his skin stretched over bones with nothing to soften the severity of his expression. Hatred was probably eating away at the old bastard from the inside out.

Curious to see how the Elder would react to his presence, Jeremy decided to stir the pot. Drake stood at the top of the wide steps set between white painted banisters that matched the stately building's shingled facade. He had his head bent in conversation with Dustin's father, Cooper Sheffield, the League-appointed town security chief, which was really nothing more than a glorified title. In reality, Sheffield was the Elders' muscle when they needed to deal with a pack disturbance and didn't want to dirty their own hands.

As Jeremy approached, he spotted another surly-looking group of teens lounging against the front window of the floral shop, halfway up the block, a cloud of smoke surrounding them as they took dramatic puffs on their cigarettes. One of the thugs caught sight of him, nudging his buddy with his elbow. Keeping the group in his peripheral vision, Jeremy hitched his hip against the base of the nearest banister.

"Hey, Stefan," he called out, smiling when the Elder's shoulders went rigid, his head whipping around to pin Jeremy with a sharp, hawklike gaze. "Throw any good rocks lately?"

For a moment, the Elder vibrated with rage. Then he brought himself under control as he calmly turned toward Jeremy, shot the cuffs on his immaculate white dress shirt and smoothed back the silver at his temples, a thin smile curving his mouth. "Having trouble already, Runner? What a shame."

"So what's next?" Jeremy asked around a grin, mindful of the group of teens beginning to skulk closer. "You gonna get really creative and maybe TP my house? Leave a stink bomb on my front porch? Make crank calls?"

Cooper Sheffield snorted a soft bark of laughter, until Drake's glare choked him silent. Returning his attention to Jeremy, the Elder considered him with a cool look of sinister anticipation. "I don't need to play games, half-breed. When I want you gone, you'll be gone."

"Yeah?" Jeremy murmured, rubbing his hand over his chin as he considered the warning, his afternoon stubble scraping his palm. "I dunno. I gotta say that I think I could take you. And you know why? 'Cause you look old, Drake. I'm guessing that playing the role of an evil mastermind is harder work than you'd thought it would be. Plotting the destruction of this pack wearing you down?"

"Your arrogance is going to be your downfall," the Elder remarked with a knowing smile, the corners of his pale eyes creasing with malevolence. "After all, we each have a weakness, do we not? That one thing we feel we cannot live without."

Jeremy jerked his chin toward the approaching gang of young punks. "Is that why you need your little goon squad over there? Do they keep you safe at night?"

"There's so many ways for accidents to happen," Drake continued, ignoring Jeremy's taunting. "Especially for someone, say, in Jillian's position. The Spirit Walker may have Lycan blood in her veins, but her body is so much weaker than ours. One little misstep, one wrong move," he purred, snapping the fingers of his right hand, "and she could so easily die—just like a pathetic little human."

Hearing Jillian's name on Drake's lips put a fury unlike anything Jeremy had ever known in his blood, violent and raging, seething just beneath the surface of his skin—though it was going to be a cold day in hell before he gave the bastard the satisfaction of seeing it. Relaxing his stance and tilting his head slightly to the side, Jeremy stroked the corner of his brow, careful to keep his anger under tight control. "If you think she's weak," he remarked, his tone mellow and calm, "then you're even thicker than I thought. Jillian Murphy has more power in her little finger than you could ever hope to possess, Drake." He paused, allowing a hard smile to curve the corners of his mouth before adding, "And if you ever threaten her again, I'll make it my number one priority in life to see you dead."

Drake lifted his chin and stared at Jeremy down the thin blade of his nose. "Threatening an Elder is a crime punishable by—"

"Oh, I'm not threatening," he drawled with a smug grin, enjoying the look of outrage slowly reddening Drake's gaunt face. "I'm making a promise. Lay one hand on her, and it'll be the last thing you ever do."

At that moment, Sheffield took an aggressive step forward, his right arm reaching across his bulging abdomen, beneath his jacket, fingers curled around the butt of an automatic handgun. Jeremy arched his brows and gave a low whistle. "That's a fancy-looking piece you've got there, Cooper. Too bad you can't kill me with bullets."

Sheffield's thin lips twisted in a cold smile, his golden eyes burning with malice. "But they hurt like hell, Runner."

The front doors of the town hall opened just then, catching his attention, and the next thing Jeremy knew, a fist with tattooed knuckles went sailing past his face, barely missing his nose, followed by a solid punch to his kidneys from behind. With a laughing snarl, Jeremy grabbed the fist of the first teenager and twisted the punk's wrist until it snapped, then spun with a side kick that knocked the one behind him onto the ground, the guy's body curling into a ball as he clutched at his broken ribs. With their friends incapacitated, four more of the thugs moved in. Fists were flying and bones crunching as the Lycans attacked together, too confident and brash in their youthful arrogance, thinking they could easily take him simply because they outnumbered him. But they hadn't spent their lives training as a Bloodrunner. Jeremy had had Mase as a sparring partner for years now, and Mason liked to fight dirty—which meant Jeremy had learned long ago how to handle himself in a good ol'-fashioned street fight.

He'd already sent two more to the ground with minor injuries and was just preparing to take out the last two, when someone grabbed him from behind, wrapping their arms around his upper body and dragging him away. He knew from the male's scent that it was Dylan, which was the only reason he hadn't thrown the guy over his head and slammed him into the concrete sidewalk.

"Come on, Jeremy," Dylan muttered in his ear, still dragging him away from the scene. "That's enough!"

"All right, all right," he growled, jerking out of Dylan's hold. Cutting an irritated look at his friend, he wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. "And it was just getting fun," he complained with a rough laugh.

Sending a furious look at the battered teenagers, Dylan snarled, "Get out of here. Now!"

They sent quick glances at each other, then took off down the street, leaving their broken buddies to crawl after them. When Jeremy glanced up at the steps, he saw that Drake and Sheffield had slithered back inside the town hall.

"Cowards," he muttered under his breath. Turning his gaze back on Dylan, who stood glowering at his side, he leveled a look of accusation on his friend. "What the hell is going on around here?"

"Don't give me that look," the Elder muttered, knowing exactly what he was talking about. "You and the Runners knew what was going down."

"Like hell we did," Jeremy growled. "Yeah, we've known a traitor was targeting the younger Lycans, tempting them to turn rogue. That was Simmons's specialty. But this is out of control. The teenagers in this town, the ones who are still around, are acting as if they've been turned into a bunch of brainwashed Stepford brats."

"Jeremy, we've got it under control," Dylan argued, his face flushed with anger. "Until we have proof they've gone rogue, which we don't at this point, you and the Runners *can't* go after them. Unless you're fighting them in self-defense, you can't even touch them until a kill has been discovered and a Bloodrun assigned. Drake and the rest of the League will have your ass if you do."

"So then this is all for our sake?" he asked with a rough burst of laughter. "You're just trying to protect the Bloodrunners by keeping us in the dark?"

"I'm trying to hold things together around here," Dylan growled through his clenched teeth, taking a step closer, going nose-to-nose with him. Jeremy had never seen the Elder lose his control, but Dylan's face was flushed with anger, his eyes wild as they began to glow an unearthly shade of gold. "You focus on finding the asshole responsible for the rogues and let me deal with the kids."

Jeremy matched Dylan's challenging stare, then rolled his shoulder, wiping at his busted bottom lip again. "Yeah, fine. Whatever," he muttered, turning to leave.

"Where are you going?" the Elder demanded.

Shooting a belligerent look over his shoulder, he snarled, "What's with the inquisition?"

Dylan opened his mouth, bit back whatever he'd been about to say, and blew out a rough breath of air. "Look, I'm on your side, Jeremy. Just promise me that you'll stay out of trouble."

"Sure thing, Mom," he drawled, his tone thick with sarcasm as he walked away, shaking his hands out at his sides. Beneath his fingertips, his claws still burned with the urge to slip his skin, which was about all of the change he could manage during the day, other than the lengthening of his fangs. It'd been hard as hell to keep from killing the little bastards while fighting them, but he'd made allowances for their youth. God only knew he'd been a pain-in-the-ass at nineteen. True, he'd never been *quite* that bad, but he knew what it was like to want to rebel against authority.

As long as they hadn't gone rogue and hadn't hurt anyone, he'd let them live. Jeremy still thought they were twisted little jerks who didn't know right from wrong, but as Mason was always telling him, you couldn't kill people for being idiots.

Drake, on the other hand, needed to be dealt with. And fast.

As far as Jeremy was concerned, the second the bastard had dared to threaten Jillian, he'd sealed his fate. Pulling his cell out of his back pocket, he punched in Mason's number and filled him in on everything that had gone down that day, starting with the broken window and ending with Drake's threat against Jillian.

Recognizing that he needed to see for himself that Jillian was unharmed and safe, Jeremy headed toward her house, assuring Mason he'd check in with him later. His hair was probably standing on end, he was covered in dust and dirt and blood, not to mention sweat, but he couldn't take the time to go home and clean up. He needed to see her—*now*—because he had the strangest feeling that if he didn't get close to her, he wouldn't be able to breathe.

He couldn't shake the fear that something was going to happen to her.

Drawing a deep breath into his lungs, he concentrated on taking the focus off himself and, instead, worked to pull in the details of his surroundings, like an artist reaching for color with his brush. Hell, he needed something fresh to wipe away the ugliness of Drake's hatred.

He needed something clean—and the second he turned onto Lassiter Avenue, Jeremy found it.

The wind surged past him, and he caught her scent. Fresh. Sweet. Almost innocent, though Jeremy knew that was too much to hope for. A woman as desirable as Jillian Murphy didn't reach the age of twenty-eight as a virgin. He didn't blame her for being a woman...but that didn't mean he didn't want to take every man who'd ever touched her apart with his bare hands.

He could see her in the small driveway at the side of her house, leaning into her car as she took a leather satchel out of the backseat.

Shoving his hands deep in his front pockets to keep from grabbing her, Jeremy managed to scrape a few words out of his dry throat. "I need to talk to you."

She jumped, startled, and spun around to face him. Her eyes went wide as she stared, mouth slack with surprise. "Wh-what happened? What have you been doing?"

His lips twisted with an embarrassed grimace. "Sorry," he grunted, reaching forward to take the heavy satchel from her arms. "I'm grimy and smell like hell."

"No." Her voice was soft, her cheeks flushed. "You just look as if you've been fighting."

"Huh," he snorted, heading for her front door. "Go figure."

Groaning, she followed behind him. "Please tell me you haven't been in a fight."

At his telling silence, Jillian moved past him and unlocked her door, mumbling under her breath. "Come on inside," she said wearily. "You look as if you're about to drop."

"Thanks," he said tightly, his male pride irritated that she thought a little scuffle with some street thugs could leave him sapped. "At least I was able to walk away," he muttered, setting the satchel on her coffee table. "Can't say the same for Drake's goons."

She paused in the act of taking off her jacket, her face pale. "You were fighting with Stefan?"

"Not really." Jeremy lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "Just some of the thugs from his little 'youth movement' I heard about today. And they started it."

Jillian closed her eyes. "Of course they did," she agreed, though her tone was wry. "God knows you'd never try to provoke someone into a fight."

Jeremy watched her hang the jacket on a peg behind the door, the tension in his gut easing with every second he spent near her. "So where have you been?" He could see the shadows under her eyes, sense the underlying fatigue in her movements.

"After my meeting with Graham, who expected a full accounting of the fight with Danna last night," she told him, rolling her head over her shoulders as she braced her hands against the back of a chair, "I had to go out to the Harvey farm. Mrs. Harvey delivered her fourth child this afternoon."

Damn, no wonder she looked exhausted. Jeremy knew that as the pack's Spirit Walker, it was Jillian's duty to assist in all births, lending her powers to the mothers, easing their way through the labor. Then once the infant was born, she had to give the ceremonial birth rites of protection and health to the newborn child.

"Did it go well?" he asked, perching himself on the edge of the sofa.

A small smile played at her lips as she took a seat in the chair. "It was tough there for a bit, but they're both fine."

"That's good, then." He ran his hands back through his

hair, then exhaled a shaky breath. "Look, I came by because I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay," she said softly. She must have sensed his tension because she stood up and moved to stand in front of the window, the pale shafts of light spilling through the muslin curtains painting her with iridescent stripes of color.

Jeremy braced his elbows on his spread knees, staring at his hands clasped loosely together. His jaw locked, the vein in his temple throbbing with worry. Drake's threats were echoing in his head, and she needed to be warned.

Feeling as if he had a frog stuck in his throat, he finally said, "I'd stay away from you, but it wouldn't matter at this point. They all know that we're..."

"That we're what?" Jillian asked when his voice trailed off, while a swift jolt of panic stabbed through her middle.

His head shot up, eyes swirling with a glowing blend of colors as he stared at her, daring her to stop being a coward. "They all know that we're *mates*. Not saying it out loud doesn't make it any less true. And the fact we've never had sex doesn't change it. We *are* mates, Jillian. Which means the second I set foot back in this town, your life and the way they look at you changed."

Oh, yeah, something bad had happened. "What are you talking about, Jeremy?"

"Drake threatened you," he admitted in a low, almost silent rasp, "as a way to get to me."

"That's impossible," she whispered. "He couldn't possibly get away with—"

"He did and he could. Dylan was there with me, as well as others, and that didn't stop him. He's arrogant enough not to care who heard him. If he thinks it will hurt me, he'll hurt you." He made a gruff sound of frustration that wasn't quite a growl or a laugh, but caught somehow in between. "I guess using you to get to me is more important to him than seeing you matched up with his son."

Jillian wrapped her arms around her middle, hating the cold, slithering sensation of fear slipping between her shoulder blades, inching its way down her spine. "Great," she muttered through stiffened lips. "What am I supposed to do about it? What do you want from me, Jeremy?"

His mouth tightened. "I want you to be careful."

"I always am," she said unsteadily.

"And I want *you*." His expression became fierce, the angles sharpened by a vicious, visceral intensity and purpose as the guttural words seemed to just pour out of him. "I've barely been back in town a day and I'm already burning, Jillian. I can't be near you like this and not ache inside with the need to touch you. To have you under my hands, my mouth, my body. I want to lay you down and lose myself in you until we're so exhausted we can't even walk."

"Jeremy," she rasped, the sound of his name thick in her throat, crowded by the same impossible lust he'd spoken of. "We—we can't."

"Why?" he demanded, his brows pulling together over the masculine line of his nose. "We're both adults. We both know the score. Why the hell shouldn't we take what we *both* want?"

Jillian pressed her hands against the heat in her face, wondering what she could say to make him understand...without having to spill the truth. Because once out, it would reveal far more than she was willing to give him. "Dammit, Jeremy, it isn't that simple!"

He started to stand, when her cell phone began buzzing. Glaring at her pocket, he growled, "I'm really starting to hate that thing." Turning her back on him, Jillian pulled out the phone and read the text message from Graham. Groaning, she shook her head in disbelief.

"What is it?" he asked, rolling to his feet as she looked at him over her shoulder.

"Drake's got some kind of rally going on in town." She turned, slanting him a hard look of frustration. "You really got him stirred up today, didn't you?"

Jeremy shoved his hands in his pockets, his gaze sharp beneath lowered brows. "I'm not here to sit and twiddle my thumbs, Jillian. Stirring up Drake is going to be the least of my plans. I have no doubt he's the traitor, and once I can prove it, I'm taking his ass down."

"Yeah, well, I've been ordered to make an appearance at the rally," she told him, heading toward her jacket. "Graham doesn't want me giving the pack any reason to be suspicious of my loyalty right now."

"And why would they question that?" he asked in a quiet drawl.

Pulling on the dark blue jacket, she said, "You know damn well why."

"If they'd asked me," he muttered bitterly, "I could have told them that nothing was more important to you than your duty to this pack."

She paused for a moment, just staring at him, then ripped opened the front door. "I don't have time to argue with you about this right now, Jeremy. I have to go."

"Not without me you don't," he growled, following her outside.

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself," Jillian warned through her clenched teeth, clearly irritated with him as she locked her front door. "Whatever you did before is in the past," he explained in a soft voice as he waited behind her. "That's what I'm trying to get through to you, Jillian. I'm home now, which means everything is different, for both of us."

"No, it isn't," she argued, whipping around. "It's not as if you'll be staying. The second you have your madman or traitor or whatever the hell he is, you'll be back at the Alley. Everyone knows it, Jeremy."

"They don't know jack," he grunted, sliding her an irritated look as they set off down the sidewalk together. "You want an answer about my intentions, then ask *me* the questions. But don't waste your time listening to small-town gossip. I would've thought you'd learned that lesson by now."

She pressed her lips together, but remained silent, and he locked his jaw, unwilling to back down. The tension between them remained strong, combustible, until they approached the end of the block and a little girl in pigtails ran from the front yard on their right, her tiny legs hurtling her toward them. "Jilly!" she squealed, throwing her arms around Jillian's leg and offering up her chubby cheek for a kiss.

"Hey, sweet pea," Jillian said with a smile as she knelt down, giving the little girl a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. "Are you being a good girl for your mommy today?"

The child gave a gap-toothed grin, her baby blue eyes shining with mischief. "Uh-huh. Mommy even let me ride my bike again!"

Jillian laughed, and the happy sound made something in Jeremy's chest clench *hard*, the burning sense of tension in his body replaced by something softer...sweeter, and yet, infinitely more powerful.

"That's wonderful," Jillian told her, straightening one of the child's lopsided hair bows. "I'll have to come and watch you as soon as I can." 126

"Promise?" the little girl squealed, deep dimples showing in both cheeks as she smiled and clapped her hands together.

"I promise." A dark-haired woman waved from the front yard, smiling at them, and Jillian waved back. "See ya later, sweet pea."

"Bye," the cherub-faced child called out, sending a shy smile at Jeremy before she turned and ran back to her mother.

Jeremy chuckled softly under his breath as they set off back down the sidewalk. "Looks like you've got a fan there."

Waving goodbye one last time, Jillian glanced at Jeremy as she explained. "Kelsey broke her arm last week and I helped it heal. She'll be eternally grateful," she added wryly, "since riding her bike is her favorite thing to do."

They'd just turned onto Mitchell Lane when she realized he was staring at her strangely. "What?"

His gaze slid away, focusing on the cracked sidewalk. "They rely on you," he offered in a low, husky voice, "more than I had imagined. You belong here."

"You belong here, too," she stated softly.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a lopsided grin, but she could see the shadow of bitterness in his eyes as he met her gaze. "No, I don't. And that's always going to stand between us, isn't it?"

"I...I don't know, Jeremy," she said after a moment, wishing she knew what was going on behind those mesmerizing eyes.

He blew out a hard breath, pulling his gaze from hers once again, hands still shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans. "Maybe the fact that we never got together was for the best. I mean, let's face it. You were never going to give up all of this for me."

She was painfully aware of the butterflies taking flight in her belly. "Would you have asked me to?"

His shoulders shifted, jaw working as he stared at the butter-yellow sun sitting low on the horizon. Finally, he said, "I don't know how you could have been married to us both me and the pack."

Despite the fact he was only voicing her own thoughts, Jillian felt a flare of frustration at his words. "Is there never any middle ground with you, Jeremy?"

The sensuous line of his mouth curved in a wry smile as he glanced her way. "Not where you were concerned. But then you didn't have any middle ground, either. Did you, Jillian?"

She wanted to disagree, but he was right. She'd been so immature, expecting him to make all the sacrifices, and tensions had been so strong between him and the pack. He'd already begun training to become a Bloodrunner and his days in Shadow Peak had been numbered.

Had she jumped at the chance to rid herself of an uncomfortable situation? Because she'd been a coward?

And if so, had anything changed?

No, she admitted, because she was still afraid. Terrified, actually, of having sex with him and making herself so vulnerable. Of allowing him to see in to her heart and know just how much he meant to her.

Like it or not, she couldn't get over the fear that he would take that love and use it to destroy her. Not in an evil way, no. Just by being himself. Jillian knew he didn't love her, and without that bond, her own emotions wouldn't be enough to hold him. All it would take was one woman—one slip—and her heart would be crushed.

And what of the pack? Even though he was home now, Jillian understood that it was only temporary. He'd be back in the Alley as soon as he could, once again avoiding the town and the pack, and what then? Jeremy wouldn't want her involved with the Lycans any more than the Silvercrest would tolerate their Spirit Walker living in the Alley with a Bloodrunner.

No, she couldn't take the risk. No matter how badly she wanted to.

Frustrated with the entire situation, she shook her head, saying, "I may have had unrealistic expectations, but I was young."

"That you were." He sighed, sounding tired. He squinted toward the setting sun again, the brilliant spectrum of colors painting his hair and face in an ethereal glow that made him look like some primeval creature escaped from the forest. "But even now, your life is still tied to them."

She wanted to argue, but he was right.

They turned at the next corner, and the town hall loomed in the distance like a symbol of everything that stood between them. "We probably shouldn't head in together," he rumbled, motioning for her to go on ahead. "I'll come in after a minute or two."

Jillian wanted to tell him that she didn't care what people thought, but she knew everyone would be waiting for the opportunity to set the gossip wheel rolling. "I'll wait for you afterward," she said huskily, and not looking at him, Jillian headed toward the steps.

The instant Jeremy walked into the rally, Jillian could feel the energy in the room crank higher.

As if he didn't notice the rabid attention of the townspeople focused on his tall form, he took up position by the wide double doors, propping his shoulder against the wall, his heavily muscled arms crossed casually over his chest. It was a relaxed pose, but the way he immediately found her, watching her from beneath his lashes, made her breathless. The intensity of his stare made her feel exposed, as if he could see all her secrets. Did he know how close she was to giving in? How badly she wanted to?

God, she hoped not.

Graham had motioned her toward the stage when she'd come in, but Jillian had refused to take a seat beside the Elders, choosing instead to remain on the small stairs that led up the side of the raised platform. She'd wanted to be able to see Jeremy when he came in, but now she tore her gaze away from his unsettling stare and looked out over the crowd, stopping suddenly when she spotted Elise standing in the back corner.

Even with the length of the room between them, Jillian could read her friend's troubled expression. She made a move to head toward her, but Elise shook her head, a shuddered look of warning firing out of her deep blue eyes. Frowning, Jillian wondered what was going on, when she realized Elise's reaction had been noted by a group of middle-aged women standing close by. They were gossiping about Jeremy and Elise supposedly having a late-morning tryst in her office that day, their painful words reaching Jillian's ears as they raised their voices to be heard over the others, while everyone waited for Drake himself to take the podium.

Leaning heavily against the wall, Jillian felt her stomach go hollow, while her pulse began to roar in her ears like a great, monstrous freight train speeding down the tracks. There had to be some explanation, but she couldn't stop the decadeold scene from playing through her mind. As if it'd happened only yesterday, she could hear that deep, trusting voice as it said, "I saw it with my own eyes, Jillian. He was with Danna, and the embrace was hardly a platonic one. We tried to warn you, but you just wouldn't listen."

She wanted to argue with herself that Elise was her friend, but she knew more than anyone how hard it was to resist Jeremy. And suddenly she knew that she had to get out of there. Shaking, she rushed down the stairs, struggling to make her way through the crowd as the noise level reached deafening proportions. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that Drake had finally taken the stage, his eyes burning with maniacal hatred as he began speaking into the microphone. He wasted no time, but went straight to the heart of his argument, raging over the dangers that human society posed to the Lycan way of life.

"We are forced to their limits and restrictions, like dogs being collared by their owners! How long are we going to live in fear, hiding what we really are? How long will our way of life here in our sleepy little town survive while we allow them to control our existence?"

A round of applause went up from the room, only making the sick feeling in her stomach intensify as Jillian wondered just how many of the pack members actually believed his nonsense, and how many were simply caught up in the mob mentality of the moment. While she struggled to make her way toward the exit, Drake continued to incite the crowd, referring to what he called "Bloodrunner Propaganda," claiming that Anthony Simmons had been framed by the Runners to further their own conspiracy theory that rogue Lycans were growing in numbers.

Just as she reached the door, Jillian felt a hand close around her elbow. Lifting her gaze, she found Jeremy watching her with a questioning expression. "I've heard enough," she mouthed, unable to scream loud enough to be heard over the crowd.

Drawing his brows together with an unspoken question, he gave her a sharp nod, then pushed open the door and followed her into the comforting silence of the night.

Chapter 9

The metallic sound of pans banging together in her kitchen pulled Jillian from a restless, exhausting sleep. Rubbing her eyes, she stretched to a drowsy wakefulness, a deep breath of air allowing her heightened senses to identify the source of the god-awful racket.

Jeremy.

Snuggling deeper into her pillow, she thought about the conversation they'd had the night before. They'd walked home beneath an oppressive veil of silence, but when she'd opened her front door and he'd followed her inside, she'd heard herself say, "There was talk tonight at the meeting. About you and Elise."

He'd slanted her a hard look, knowing from her tone what the talk had been. "It wasn't like that, Jillian."

She'd shrugged, as if it didn't matter, and a coarse sound of frustration had rumbled deep in his throat. "I'd ask you to trust me, but we both know that isn't going to happen, don't we?"

Her voice had come as little more than a whisper. "That's not true."

"Like hell it isn't." His tone had been grim, belligerent. Then he'd sighed, running one hand back through his hair. "Jesus, Jillian. Give me more credit than that. If I wanted to screw Elise, I'd hardly go waltzing into her real estate office in the middle of the morning, for everyone to see."

"Then why were you there?"

"For the same reason I've come back to the pack. I'm here to find answers, and Drake is at the top of my list, just like I told you. I figured Elise was as good a place to start as any."

"And will you question Eric, too?"

His mouth had thinned. "Eventually."

"Did you learn anything from Elise?"

"Only that she's terrified of her father," he'd admitted with a scowl.

"He's not...very kind to her," she'd told him, "which isn't hard to believe, considering he's not only racist, but misogynistic, as well. He calls her weak, because she's refused to shift ever since her attack."

The dark spill of anger and surprise spreading over his features had been genuine. "What attack?"

"Elise was raped by a group of wolves. It happened three years ago, and she almost died."

Jeremy had stared at her, his look so intense, she'd felt as if he were peering in to her soul. "You healed her, didn't you?" he'd finally rasped. "That's how the two of you became friends."

She'd nodded, and he'd asked, "Why weren't the Runners told about the attack?"

"It was considered best handled in-house, but Sheffield botched the investigation from beginning to end."

"Why the hell didn't Eric do anything about it?"

"He tried, but Eli, their older brother, made Eric promise to let him handle it on his own. Eli was able to track down and kill one of them, but it was without the League's permission and that's why he was banished from the pack."

For a moment, he'd just stared at her, his eyes dark and bright all at once, his gaze moving slowly over her features, one by one, until he'd quietly said, "When you healed her, did you..."

She'd nodded, shivering with the memory. "Yes, I saw it in her mind. But I couldn't tell who they were."

He'd cursed hotly under his breath at her admission, pacing from one side of her living room to the other. Then they'd argued over her safety. He'd wanted to stay, even if it meant sleeping on her sofa, but she'd been adamant about him going home. He'd been furious, but he'd finally left, and she'd tried to get some sleep.

Not that it had worked worth a damn.

Blearily, she pulled on her robe and scuffled out of her bedroom, following the thick, enticing aroma of coffee. "Am I still sleeping?" she asked in a throaty rasp when she stood in the kitchen archway. "Because I don't remember inviting you in."

He sent her a cautious grin over his broad shoulder, the long, ropey muscles in his arms flexing as he moved a frying pan to one of the back burners, the cotton of his T-shirt clinging to the mouthwatering line of muscles down his back. "That's probably because I don't remember asking. Yesterday, I helped myself to the spare house key you keep on that little hook by your phone over there," he told her, nodding toward the white phone mounted on her kitchen wall.

Sure enough, her spare key was missing.

Too tired to get angry, Jillian settled herself into one of the white kitchen chairs at her small table, propping the side of

her face up on her hand. Enjoying the fine view of his tight backside wrapped up in soft denim, she gave a loud, jawcracking yawn that had those broad shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Trouble sleeping?" he asked, while the early morning sunlight slanting through the blinds set his golden head alight, turning his blond hair the warm, gleaming color of honey.

"Don't you know?" she mumbled around the edges of another yawn.

"Wouldn't have a clue," he remarked easily, bending to pull something out of the oven. "I left you, remember? Just like you wanted."

Softly, she said, "I won't be spied on, Jeremy."

He paused in the act of taking down a coffee cup, having obviously already familiarized himself with her cupboards, and muttered a low curse under his breath. "How did you know?"

"That you were watching my house last night? I just...*felt* you. The sensation was so strong that it pulled me out of sleep. When I peeked around my curtains in the living room, I saw your truck parked out on the street."

"I went home and tried to sleep, but it wasn't happening. So I went out for a drive, just to take a look around," he said after a moment, moving to pour her coffee.

"Right," she snorted, before saying, "I lay in bed listening for you to drive away. It was hours before I fell asleep and you were *still* out there."

He blew out a rough breath. "Okay, truth?"

"That would be nice," she replied drolly, starting when he glanced over his shoulder and caught her staring at his perfectly muscled backside. She blushed, and with a ghost of a smile, Jeremy turned back to stir cream and sugar into her coffee, then brought it to the table. She took it with a murmured thanks and lifted her gaze to his face. "Maybe I just wanted to make sure Eric didn't stop by for a late night tryst," he told her in a gravelly voice. "When I was sure that he wasn't heading over to crawl into bed with you, I took my tired butt home to my lonely bed and grabbed some z's. Satisfied?"

She couldn't look away from the greedy, smoldering look of hunger in his eyes, his irises glowing with a warm, swirling blend of green and gold, the way they did when his wolf was lurking beneath the surface, taking an interest in his surroundings. "You may have been jealous, but that wasn't the only reason."

He nodded slowly, watching her with that same predatory awareness that never failed to ramp up her heart rate. "You're right," he said quietly, his voice little more than a low, warm murmur. "That wasn't the only reason. I was worried about you, Jillian. I wanted to make sure Dustin and his pals didn't try to get anywhere near you, acting on Drake's orders."

"Thanks for telling me the truth," she whispered, as if afraid of breaking the spell, even though she didn't know *what* the spell was. She just knew that when he stared at her like that, she wanted it to last forever.

His head listed to the side as he studied her, thumbs hooked in the front pockets of his jeans. "There's been enough lying in our lives, Jillian. I don't think we need to add to it now."

Before she could think of what to say in response, he turned back toward the stove and started filling two plates. Minutes later, he'd nearly finished his breakfast while she was still staring down at the heaping mound of food he'd placed before her, a bemused expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked when he realized she hadn't touched her breakfast. "Don't you like it?"

Jillian shook her head, her tone one of baffled amazement. "I'm sure it's wonderful. I mean, it smells delicious. I just..." She paused, shrugging her shoulders. "I guess I'm just surprised that you can cook like this. It seems too domestic for a guy like you."

"A guy's gotta eat, you know." He wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned back in his chair, giving her a warm, knowing look. "And contrary to what you seem to think about me, there's no harem of love slaves stashed away at my cabin waiting on my beck and call." His white teeth flashed in a slow, sexy smile. "If I want to eat, I have to make it."

"How surprising." Grinning, she reached for her fork and scooped up a mouthful of fluffy scrambled eggs. "And here I thought they probably ran around in little French maid outfits, with names like Fifi and Lola."

His deep chest rumbled with laughter. "Damn, woman. You must think I'm pretty impressive, to warrant a whole harem of Fifis and Lolas."

"Oh, I've never doubted your virility," she murmured dryly, before taking a bite of toast. Had she doubted his feelings for her? Yes. His willingness to accept the importance of her job? Yes. His ability to be faithful? Oh, yeah. But never, ever had she doubted his sexuality. Jeremy Burns was one of those men who wore his potent masculinity and rugged good looks with such an easy grace, women couldn't help but be drawn to him, herself included.

And fighting him was only getting harder with every second she spent in his company.

"So you've never doubted my...uh, virility," he drawled with a boyish grin, his hazel eyes glittering with humor. "Good to hear. And just to let you know, in case you wanted to check out my virility firsthand, I'm free for a sleepover whenever you feel up to asking me."

She almost choked on her second bite of toast, but took a quick sip of coffee to wash it down, then sent him a narrow

look. "Call me crazy, but something tells me that inviting you to a sleepover wouldn't guarantee much sleep."

"On the contrary," he countered, hooking his hands behind his head, his pose one of indolent leisure, as if he had all the time in the world to sit there with nothing better to do than keep her off balance. She tried to keep her admiring gaze off the round perfection of his bulging biceps, so prominently displayed by the raised position of his arms, but knew she failed.

Arching one golden brow, his voice lowered to a deep, smoky rasp as he continued his seductive torment. "When you invite me to your bed, I'll promise to restrain myself to a few hours at the most, and by the time I'm ready to wrap you up in my arms and snuggle under the covers, you'll be syrupy and soft, your muscles like noodles. All those knots of tension you've been carrying around reduced to a state of hot, liquid bliss. You'll sleep like a baby, Jillian, and then I'll wake you up in the morning with my head buried between your legs. Nothing but slow, sweet torture, until you're ready to beg for..."

His voice trailed off in a deliberate tease, and she swallowed dryly, knowing her face was cherry red. She was so turned on she was panting, her throat tight, muscles locked against the need to jump over the table and tackle him to the kitchen floor. "B-beg for what?" she heard a voice that sounded suspiciously like hers ask, while her body temperature spiked, her robe too warm and heavy against her skin.

Jeremy leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, eyes smoky with desire. "Uh-uh," he whispered, grinning like the wicked bastard that he was, confident in his power over her, in his ability to wear her down until she gave in. He didn't have to worry about *making* her want him—he was already sure of it. "That's part of the magic. Part of the mystery. I've got to keep you guessing." "Jerk," she muttered under her breath, and he gave another deep, rough laugh that made her shiver with awareness. Wetting her bottom lip with her tongue, Jillian turned her attention back to her plate and picked up a crisp piece of bacon. "So what's on the agenda today, or did you just come over to make me breakfast because you missed me?"

"I always miss you," he said softly, leaning back in his chair again. When she glanced at his expression, all traces of humor and teasing had fled, the look in his eyes one of pure, unadulterated purpose and intent. But instead of pushing, he picked up his coffee cup and said, "I want to take a look at the records room before they open, which means we still have a few hours."

Jillian took a bite of the bacon, enjoying the salty burst of flavor. "And how were you planning on doing that? Pack records aren't available to the public."

Jeremy met her stare over the rim of his mug. "I know."

"So we're going to break in, then?"

"Looks like it." He grinned before taking another drink. "Nothing like a little B and E to get the day started, eh?"

"If you want to visit," she said, after thinking about it for a moment, "you could just ask my mother. She's friends with Carolyn, the record's clerk. It wouldn't be easy, but she could probably get permission for us to look around."

He snorted, a half-smile playing at his mouth as he gave a dramatic shiver. "Thanks, but no thanks, sweetheart. Your mother still scares the bejesus out of me."

Jillian couldn't help but laugh at his expression. "You're a grown man now, Jeremy. Twice her size."

"Doesn't matter," he murmured, his tone wry, cheekbones flushed with a dull shade of embarrassment. "When she looks at me, I feel like she can see straight into me."

"Hmm...she probably can," she teased, enjoying watching him squirm.

He closed his eyes, holding up one hand. "Oh, god. *Don't* tell me that. I'd rather not know."

"Don't worry." She laughed, taking mercy on him. "I don't *think* she can. Not just by passing you on the street. If she touched you—" her shoulders lifted in a shrug "—maybe."

He gave another dramatic shiver. "Then remind me never to let her touch me. That woman would kill me for the things I've fantasized about doing to her beloved daughter."

Snuffling a soft laugh under her breath, Jillian perched her chin on her fist as she studied him. "You really are afraid of her, aren't you?"

"Not nearly as afraid as I am of you." He gave her a slow, sexy wink as he stood up and reached for her plate. "Now, go get ready, and I'll clean up in here. I want to get an early start, before the town is crawling with people."

"I'm still not sure why you need me there," she said around another yawn.

"To save my ass in case we *do* end up getting caught," he offered with a cocky grin, somehow managing to look ruggedly masculine with a sponge in one hand and bottle of dish soap in the other.

"I'm not buying it," she murmured. "I think it has to do with everything that happened yesterday. I think you want to keep an eye on me."

"No argument there," he said lightly, flashing her a killer smile over his broad shoulder. "God knows I like having my eyes on you."

With a delicious shiver warming her body from head to toe, Jillian grabbed her coffee and hurried out of the room.

"I can't believe I let you talk me in to this," Jillian huffed, twisting her body through the oblong window that sat five inches above street level, opening into the basement storage room of the hall of records. Luckily, the window was located on the backside of the building that faced an alley, so they were relatively hidden from view.

Her legs cleared the window first, and Jeremy grabbed her waist, helping her to the floor, trailing his hands up her sides until they settled at the outer curves of her breasts. "Give me an inch and I'll take a mile," he murmured, pulling her closer to his hard length.

"I'll remember the warning," she muttered, jerking out of his hold.

"You do that," he drawled, giving her a slow smile. "Course, it won't do you any good," he added with a lift of one shoulder. "I'm not above taking advantage of the situation whenever I get the chance."

Jillian tried to ignore the way he was looking at her, but it wasn't easy. Since the moment she'd found him in her kitchen, he seemed to be in full seduction mode. His gaze traveled over her with such delicious intensity, it made her feel stripped down to nothing, even though she wore a pair of low-slung jeans, a thick worn leather belt and a thin boat neck sweater in a rich, golden green that reminded her of Jeremy's eyes when he was turned on. She'd been the recipient of that look too often when she was younger—and finding herself caught in that deliciously smoldering stare again had her feeling restless and on edge.

Of course, that restless feeling of unease *could* have been attributed to the fact they'd just broken in to a private building. What the hell was she thinking?

Shifting her gaze away from him, Jillian took a deep breath and tried to settle her thoughts. "Do you want me to find the lights?" she asked, thinking that the sooner they got what they'd come for, the sooner they could get out.

"Naw," he drawled, moving behind her to lift the blinds

on the second basement window. "We should have enough sunlight to be able to read."

Looking out over the rows and rows of filing cabinets, Jillian shook her head at the daunting task ahead of them. "So where do you want to start?"

"Let's see if we can find files for the League members."

"Even Dylan?" she asked, sending him a surprised look over her shoulder.

"Everyone," he said in a low voice, his attention already on his task as he pulled open the nearest cabinet to see how the files were organized. "Looks as if everything is in alphabetical order according to last names, so we should be able to move pretty quickly. You start with Graham and Clausen on the far side of the room, and I'll pull Dylan's, Pippa's and old Summers's."

"What about Drake and the others?" she asked, moving two rows over, before opening a drawer to see where she was in the alphabet.

"We'll work our way through all of them, but I'm saving ol' Drake for last," he grunted.

Forty minutes later, they'd been through the files of every member on the League, save Drake, and had nothing. "One more to go," she said, watching as Jeremy pulled the last file from its drawer. Since it also contained documents dealing with his wife and children, Drake's file was the thickest of all, a musty smell rising up from its yellowed pages as Jeremy dropped it on top of the filing cabinet. "What are you hoping to find here?" she asked, when he started thumbing through the thick stack of pages.

His eyes narrowed, and he pressed the file flat, his focus on a pale blue page that sat about halfway through the hefty volume. "I'm looking for motive," he answered in a low voice. "Motive?" she echoed. "But we already know how he feels about humans. Rogues hunt humans, and the traitor you're trying to find has been enabling the rogues to grow in number, even encouraging wolves to turn. What better motive do we need than that?"

"But we don't know why," he responded, turning another page. "And that could be the key to all of it. We know he hates humans. And if he *is* the Elder behind this surge in rogue wolves, if he's the one who's teaching them how to dayshift, then we can assume that he hates humans enough to want them dead. But why? That's the part of the puzzle that still needs to be solved."

"So you want the motive for his motives?"

"Exactly." He lifted his head and sent her a flash of a smile, before turning his attention back to the file. "If we can get to the bottom of his hatred, maybe we can understand where he's coming from. Maybe we can..." His voice trailed off, and he quickly turned the page he'd been reading, then flipped back a few pages before it. "Son of a bitch," he rasped under his breath. "Could it really be that simple?"

"What?" she asked, trying to see what had caught his interest. "What'd you find?"

"It's not what I found," he drawled, shaking his head while a slow grin spread across the sensual line of his mouth, "but what I *didn't* find."

"Which would be?" she growled, glaring when he arched one brow at her disgruntled tone.

"There's no death certificate for his wife," he told her, his grin melting into a smile at the look of surprise on her face.

"That's impossible," she whispered, grabbing the file and turning it toward her. "There has to be one in here. Helen Drake died in some kind of accident when the kids were still little." "Not according to the file, she didn't. You know what this means, don't you?" he asked, reaching out to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear as she flipped through the pages of the file, backward and forward. But sure enough, it wasn't there.

"No death certificate could mean she isn't dead," Jillian whispered, lifting her gaze to his, "but if that's the case, then where is she? What happened to her?"

"That's what we need to find out."

She watched him return the file to its proper place in the drawer, while a cold knot of dread settled into her stomach. She didn't know what would come of everything, but whatever it was, Jillian had no doubt that it was going to be bad. They needed answers, and she knew the best place to find them. "I think we should talk to Pippa."

His eyes went wide. "Pippa Stanton? The Elder?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out. Pippa and Drake have been going head-to-head lately. And she's one of the oldest members of the pack. If anyone around here knows what really happened to Helen, Pippa will."

Jeremy held her stare for a long, hard moment, then finally said, "Not that I think there's a chance in hell she'll talk to us, but do you trust her?"

"As much as I trust any of them. But Pippa's the only one who didn't support Graham when he first threatened me with a Mate Hunt." Jillian shivered at the memory, remembering her horror when she'd been called before the League and told they were growing impatient with her, reminding her that it was her duty to provide the pack with their future Spirit Walker. If a Mate Hunt were voted into action, the unwed male wolves would be given the chance to hunt her down, and she would be wed and bonded to whomever caught her first.

"What do you mean, she was the only one?" Jeremy

demanded, his brows pulled together in a deep V over the golden-green of his eyes. "There's no way in hell Dylan would've agreed to something like that."

She shrugged. "I didn't think so, either, but Pippa was the only one who made an argument that the Mate Hunt was an arcane tradition that should be abolished."

He started to respond, when a sudden noise had them both freezing, breaths held tight in their lungs.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Jeremy rasped, lifting the window.

"Good idea," she whispered, and he hoisted her up to the street.

The quiet house was as quaint as the woman who lived within its antique white walls. Pippa Stanton took the chair across from the love seat where Jillian and Jeremy sat, her long, signature silver plait of hair coiled around the top of her head like a crown, her posture equally regal as she made herself comfortable. After making it out of the records room undetected, they'd headed straight to her house on the outskirts of town, careful to make sure they weren't seen walking to her door.

To Jillian's infinite relief, the Elder had been more than happy to invite them in. "Tell me," Pippa said in a soft, husky voice that had ripened like a fine wine, "what did you think of Drake's rally, Mr. Burns?"

With his hands clasped between his knees, Jeremy sent her a charming, lopsided grin. "I thought it was the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard."

Jillian poked him in the ribs, glaring, but the Elder threw back her head and chuckled. "And if you don't agree with Drake," she said a moment later, when her laughter had died down, "then what's your answer to the tensions rising within the Silvercrest?" Jeremy shook his head. "I don't claim to have the answers. I only know what I see. The pack's insistence on defining itself by what it is and what it isn't gives power to those who seek their own personal ambition. Is there an easy answer? An easy solution? Of course not," he rumbled. "But focusing on the differences between your race and the humans will never lead to either. It will only bring bloodshed and destruction to this town and to the pack itself."

"I agree, Mr. Burns. We are not human, and yet, we are not monsters. We are, in fact, charged with a greater purpose. If we chose, we could do wonderful things. Instead, we focus on bitterness and differences...when in fact, we are more alike than different. We want to be safe. We want love, protection and happiness for our families. Things that hate will never produce."

Jillian was aware of Jeremy's expression mirroring her own surprise at the Elder's words. She had expected Pippa to be civil, but she'd never dreamed that the woman would actually share such opinions with them. "But that's a discussion for another day," the elderly Lycan murmured, inclining her head in a graceful gesture. "I assume you've come for information."

"You're right," Jeremy told her. "It's about Helen Drake. We've seen the family's file in the hall of records and there's no death certificate for Stefan's wife."

Slim gray brows lifted over piercingly sharp eyes the color of a mountain lake. "Uncovered that particular little tidbit, did you?" she remarked. "It's one thing to see something that's there—and quite another to see something that isn't. I'm impressed."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

Pippa leaned back in her chair. "Oh, there's not much to tell. Helen fell in love with another man and left Drake and the children, which was bad enough in Drake's opinion. But the fact she abandoned them all for a man who was human was intolerable. That was the beginning of the end for Drake. The Lycan he was has been lost to hatred as virulent as a disease."

Jeremy's golden brows drew together in a deep ridge. "What happened to Helen?"

"I don't know, but I imagine she got as far from here as possible. Drake asked us for permission to have her assassinated, but the League refused." She paused, the corners of her mouth turning in a thoughtful frown. "You know, he's never forgiven us for what he called our 'desertion in his quest for justice.' He was furious, accusing us of turning our backs on him in his time of need."

"How is it that nobody knows the truth?" Jillian asked, hyperaware of Jeremy pressed against her side on the small love seat—of his heat and hardness and the heady scent of his skin filling her head.

"Oh, there are those who know, but they're forbidden to tell. Drake refused to let the children even speak her name, but they know what really happened. As for the League, we supported his story that she'd been killed in an accident because it served our purpose to do so. We wanted the whole sordid affair forgotten, though Drake has never been able to get past it." She rose out of the floral-printed chair, an unspoken signal that the visit had come to an end. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I'm expected at Graham's in fifteen minutes, and he's a crotchety ol' bastard when forced to wait."

Rolling to his feet, Jeremy gave a quiet laugh. "We understand, and we appreciate your talking to us."

"You've been more than helpful," Jillian added. "Thank you."

The Elder gave them a wondering smile, looking from one to the other. "You know, I always thought it was a shame you two couldn't see past the nonsense that tore you apart." Jillian blinked in surprise, aware of her face going hot. She'd always assumed that Pippa supported the League's ultimatum that she break things off with Jeremy, that the decision had been unanimous. Had she been wrong? If she'd spoken up and fought for the right to make her own choices, for what she'd wanted, would she have had an ally in this woman?

And not for the first time since Jeremy had returned, she questioned her decision ten years ago. Had she grabbed at the ready answer, at the easy way out, allowing fear to rule her actions? Is that why she'd let rumors and the League's disapproval tear them apart?

Rumors? Her own thoughts surprised her. Was that what she now believed? That his cheating with Danna *had* been a lie? And if so, why? To keep them apart?

Regret twisted her insides and Jillian tore her gaze away from Pippa's knowing stare. "Again," she said quietly, "thank you for talking to us."

"If Drake learns what I've told you," Pippa drawled airily, moving toward the door, "he'll have my head."

"Don't worry," Jeremy assured her. "We have no intention of involving you."

"Oh, that's a thin promise, Mr. Burns," the Elder commented with a wry smile. "We're all involved, are we not? At any rate, my soul is at peace with my choice. I've done the right thing today, and at this point in my years, that's all that matters."

She opened the door, giving an uncharacteristic wave goodbye, and Jillian shook her head in wonder as she and Jeremy headed down the sidewalk. "I can hardly believe she was so willing to talk to us," she whispered, when the Elder had closed her front door.

Pushing his hands into his pockets, Jeremy rolled one shoulder, his tone thoughtful, as if the wheels in his brain

were going at full speed. "You know, I used to think she was a scary old crone, but she's really not so bad. And I think she talked because her conscience was weighing on her. She knows Drake's rotten, and she knows the League has let him get away with murder lately. Hell, he's been wreaking havoc in Shadow Peak for years."

"I can't believe what she told us about Helen," Jillian murmured. "It explains so much. Why he's such a misogynistic bastard. Why he blames humans for all the troubles in our world. He's never gotten over the humiliation of being abandoned for another man."

Jeremy nodded toward the thick line of trees at their right, saying, "Let's take a shortcut through the woods."

A few minutes later, they were following one of the worn footpaths that wove through the forest, the autumn wind whistling through the trees while the damp scent of the earth filled their heads. "So what now?" Jillian asked as she followed behind him on the narrow pathway, the thin shafts of pale sunshine muted by the towering trees overhead.

"I need to go to the Alley and talk to Mason," Jeremy said in his deep, husky baritone. "I don't want to risk putting this out over the phone."

Jillian narrowed her eyes on his back. "You mean, we need to talk to Mason, right?"

He stopped so suddenly that she nearly plowed right into him. "Are you sure you want to do that?" he rasped, turning and pinning her with a heavy-lidded look, his eyes suddenly burning the golden-green of his wolf. "The pack isn't going to like you hanging out at the Alley, Jillian. You can bet they'll have something to say about it."

"I don't care," she whispered shakily, wetting her bottom lip as she stared up at him, acutely aware of just how alone they were in the secluded woods, surrounded by nothing but the primal pulse of the forest and its rich, earthy heat. "I—I know that's probably hard for you to believe, Jeremy, but you're just going to have to trust me."

Chapter 10

Jeremy exhaled a shaky breath of air, then another, and the next thing Jillian knew, he was pushing her across the forest floor, his hands gripping her upper arms, her feet barely touching the ground. Wearing a visceral, urgent look of craving, he pressed her against the smooth bark of a tree, trapping her with his muscled strength at her front. She opened her mouth, only to lose her words on a throaty gasp as he grabbed her wrists, stretching her arms up high over her head, pinning her there. "You want my trust, Jillian?" he whispered, the velvet-rough timbre of his voice melting into her like the smooth, sweet burn of whiskey. "Fine. But it works both ways, sweetheart."

Jillian drew in a deep breath of his dark, rich scent, and the stab of desire that shot through her was instantaneous and hot, so intense she nearly screamed. It was as if she'd been left in a constant state of anticipation, just waiting for him to make a move and flip her switch. "Wh-what are you talking about?" she stammered, while her body struggled with a mind of its own, her hips rolling against the brutal shape of his cock as he pressed his lower body against her. She needed to be higher, dammit. Needed to be able to feel that breathtaking ridge where she needed it most.

"Why don't you read my mind and tell me? Let's see you put those powers of yours to good use."

"I would never-"

"What's the problem?" he whispered, his breath hot against the sensitive shell of her ear, making her shiver as each husky word curled against her skin. "Scared of what you might find?"

"You know I can't just crawl into your head," she snapped with frustration. "My powers don't work that way!"

Jeremy shifted back just enough to be able stare into her eyes. He didn't need to hold her with his hands and the hard press of his body—that look alone could have trapped her. It was *that* powerful...*that* compelling. "But you want to get inside my head," he whispered in a dark, smoky rasp. "You'd love to be able look inside and snoop around, discovering for yourself whether or not I'm worthy of your trust."

Unable to deny it, she asked instead, "Wh-what is it with you and pushing me against trees?"

"I don't know. Must be the animal in me," he drawled, his eyes bright with laughter, triumph and the savage burn of lust. He leaned down, nuzzling the softness of her throat, sending tingles over her skin, while a smooth warmth coursed just beneath her surface, setting her on fire. "I've spent so many years wanting you," he confessed in a low, wicked slide of words. "Wanting to touch you, taste you. You're all grown up now, Jillian. I don't have to be careful anymore."

His open mouth pressed against the base of her throat, his tongue flicking in a slow, carnal caress against the fluttering of

her pulse, and she gasped, her breath catching at the pure eroticism of the act. "I don't have to watch what I say. Don't have to worry about going too far. You're no longer that innocent little eighteen-year-old who the boys were afraid to kiss."

"You weren't afraid to kiss me," she moaned, arching her neck to give him better access.

"That's because I wanted you so badly, I was willing to risk your mother's fury," he admitted with a gritty laugh, nipping the tender tendon that ran down the side of her neck to her shoulder.

"Jeremy," she breathed out unsteadily, searching for the arguments she knew she had to make, but her own hunger was making her crazed. Then he shifted her wrists to one big hand, and the other settled at her waist. Her heart beat so furiously, Jillian thought it would explode. And before she could draw her next breath, Jeremy shoved her sweater up to her chin, baring her belly and chest to the blistering heat of his gaze.

"God, you're beautiful," Jeremy breathed, staring in a hazy state of lust at her lace-covered breasts, the sound of his pulse roaring in his ears, vicious and violent. Before Jillian could protest, he leaned down and captured the tip of her left nipple in his mouth, wetting her through the delicate French lace, desperate to get to the even softer flesh beneath. Her back arched at the touch of his tongue, and she cried out, the shaky sound of his name on her lips the sweetest thing he'd ever heard.

"Want you," he groaned, panting, aware of his beast growing restless as her lush, sweet scent filled his head. "All of you, Jillian. Everywhere."

"Yes," she gasped, her petal-soft skin hot, slick beneath his tongue as she vibrated with arousal, the fine tremors telling him just how badly she needed him. Satisfaction pooled hot and thick in his blood, making him want to howl...because finally, after all this time, he had her.

The thought spun deliciously through Jeremy's mind with stunning, headspinning force, nearly bringing him to his knees. Sensations flooded in on him, provocative and rich and warm, overwhelming him with the need to get close to this woman...and stay there.

Wanting to imprint the moment on his memory forever, he took a handful of seconds just to stare at her, to soak in every detail, every soft, delicate curve and shade. Studying her face, he could see the dark, rosy flush on her cheeks that betrayed her desire, mesmerized by the way her teeth sank into the damp cushion of her lower lip. Curious to see what she'd do, he released her wrists, and watched as she blinked her eyes open and slowly...shyly drew her arms over her breasts, while her blond hair fell around the shadows of her face like a veil.

"Don't cover them," he rasped, leaning down to nuzzle her arms away, pressing tender kisses along her skin. "I want to look at you, Jillian. You're so beautiful like this, in nothing but watery sunlight. Just let me look at you, sweetheart."

Taking a deep, trembling breath for courage, Jillian forced her arms to fall gently to her sides, her fingers fluttering, restless with nerves. Jeremy pressed his face closer to her chest, until his teeth caught the edge of her lacy cup and tugged, releasing her breast. His lips closed around the hard ache of her nipple like a wet, liquid heat, suckling at her, pulling that warm, pulsing glow of pleasure in her belly up closer and closer to the surface, and then he pulled back to stare again, as if fascinated by the sight of her.

"Oh, god," she panted, and she didn't even recognize the ragged sound of her voice.

His lips were damp, slightly parted for the rush of his breath, eyes burning so bright, they were almost more golden than green—and the way he stared at her breasts made everything inside of her pull tight. He made her feel like a siren, like a goddess, her body the instrument with which she could tame the beast. She liked the feeling, liked the power...but then, it worked both ways. The more she took from him, the greater his power over her.

With hurried movements that betrayed his urgency, he unhooked the front clasp of her bra and pushed the open cups out of his way. Then he ran his tongue over her nipple with a slow, tasting rasp, before shifting to the other, pressing the swollen tip to the roof of his mouth, rubbing at her with his tongue while a rough, animal sound vibrated in his chest. His right hand found her hip...and moved lower, pressing possessively between her thighs, cupping her sex.

"God, Jillian. You're so hot I can feel you through your jeans," he growled, and then he was ripping at the buttons, his big, warm hand slipping beneath the top of her panties, pressing low, until he was touching tender flesh, so sensitive she couldn't hold back the sharp cry that surged up from her lungs. "You're swollen...*wet*," he said in a guttural, nearly soundless voice, while his fingertips stroked, learning her by touch, before working one thick finger into the clenching tightness of her body.

Jillian stiffened, sensations rushing over one another in a brilliant, chaotic jumble, too fast to catch or control, and she could have sworn that there were stars at the backs of her eyes, blinding her to everything but the breathless, provocative feel of his finger thrusting in shallow movements. "Damn, you're so tight," he rasped, pressing the damp heat of his forehead to hers, before leaning away, and she could feel the press of his eyes on her face. "Look at me, Jillian. I want your eyes open." Lifting her lashes, she saw that his own eyes gleamed, the smoky green burning like a dark fire, jewel-toned and mesmerizing.

She wanted to scream from frustration when he pulled his hand away—wanted to demand he put it back and finish what he'd started—until she realized he was lifting his glistening finger to his mouth. Wearing a hard, savage look of hunger, he closed his lips around the slippery digit and his eyes drifted shut, a low moan of pleasure rumbling deep in his chest.

Jillian panted harder, unable to draw in enough air, everything in her body feeling heavy and hot, until she burned with sensation from the top of her head down to her toes. Staring at her through the thick, golden fringe of his lashes as he opened his eyes, he pulled his finger free and cupped her jaw with the damp heat of his palm, stroking the pad of his thumb against the corner of her mouth. "You taste incredible, Jillian. Hot, sweet, like goddamn honey."

She made a murmur of embarrassment, but he was already thrusting his finger back into her, going deeper as he added another, her muscles clenching around him as if to hold him inside. Fitting his mouth over hers, he kissed her deeper, as well...*harder*, his tongue mastering hers with destructive skill.

"I want to make you come," he groaned against her lips, the words gritty and breathless. "I want you to spill into my hand...want those sharp little cries in my head as you go over."

She gasped, feeling disoriented, like someone who'd been spinning in a circle, going faster...and faster...and faster. He was ragingly beautiful in his lust, the angles of his face sharpened by hunger. Suddenly, she heard herself saying, "J-just do it."

"What?" he rasped, his gaze questioning as he stared into her eyes. "What do you want, Jillian?" "You. Us. Now," she panted...pleading. "I can't think straight anymore, Jeremy. Please...just do it."

His eyes narrowed, the crest of his cheekbones marked with violent color. Slowly, he shook his head. "No."

Jillian blinked, stunned by his refusal.

"No," he repeated, the word shaky and raw. "Not here, like this, because once I have you, you're *mine*. I'm not going to bang you against a tree and then watch you walk away from me. From the moment I get you under me, Jillian, you're going to stay there until I've had my goddamn fill of you."

She wanted to scream at him, to yell and shout and demand that he give in, but he took her mouth in a ravaging kiss, stealing her breath, her mind. She pressed her fists against the solid wall of his chest, and his fingers flexed deeper inside of her, thrusting, making her cry out. He swallowed the sound as he pressed his thumb through her slick, tender folds, until he was touching that most sensitive part of her, stroking her with the callused pad, while using his fingers to rub a place deep inside of her that made her stiffen in shock. She saw nothing but a stunning, infinite darkness that seemed to overtake her mind, everything inside of her pulling tighter...and tighter...until that perfect, shattering moment when she crashed over the edge.

Jillian went wild...and the forest erupted into chaos around them.

Breaking her mouth from his, she threw back her head and screamed in the violent wash of ecstasy as a churning, roaring whirlwind surged up from the leaf-covered ground. She opened her eyes to see Jeremy staring at her in stunned awareness, while the ground beneath their feet began shaking, the wind whirring faster...and faster. The pleasure in her built higher, stronger, until they were caught in a maelstrom of wind and leaves and the dark, rich scents of the forest. The dry leaves prickled against their skin, lashing at them, the pine needles stinging and sharp. It went on...and on, until finally the last ripple faded and she went boneless in his arms, while the leaves and needles fluttered quietly back to the ground.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded, breathless, his hand still buried between her legs, cupping the liquid soft heat of her sex. His eyes were glowing within the darkness of his face, the hazel green edged by a dark ring of molten gold, and Jillian knew his wolf had awakened.

"I—I don't know," she panted, running her tongue along her lower lip. He stared intently, as if he were trying to decide whether or not to believe her. "Honestly. I—I don't know what that was, Jeremy. I swear."

"In that case, we should see if we can make it happen again," he whispered huskily, smiling, lifting his hands to cradle her face. Jeremy knew he shouldn't tempt fate by touching her, not unless he wanted their first time to be against that goddamn tree, but he couldn't stop. His cock was so hard he could barely see straight, much less think. Her orgasm had been explosive...breathtaking...awesome, and he wanted to experience it again...and again. Right now. That very second. Pressing a tender, searching kiss to her mouth, he reached for her jeans, ready to push them down her thighs, when the quiet of the forest suddenly exploded with a sharp crack of sound. The air around them sizzled with a blinding strip of heat and something smashed into the trunk behind her, sending shards of bark skittering into the air.

His brain had two seconds to register the fact they'd just been shot at, and then he was wrapping himself around her, protecting her with his body. The second bullet ripped into his shoulder at an angle, coming out the front in a clean strike that felt like liquid fire. They stumbled from the impact, and Jeremy used every ounce of his strength to shove her behind the massive trunk of a nearby oak, before landing on top of her, her small body squished between his full weight and the prickly floor of the forest.

Through a fog of pain, Jeremy was dimly aware of Jillian shoving his heavy weight to the side, her small, cool hands moving frantically over his body. "Oh, my god, Jeremy, someone shot you! Can you hear me? Jeremy, say something!"

He let out a groan, gritting his teeth against the black burn of pain searing across the landscape of his consciousness. The sound of his heartbeat pounded in his ears like the roar of a fighter jet, endless and excruciating, and he ground his jaw, refusing to pass out. If he could just breathe his way through the worst of it, he knew he'd be okay.

And then, through the thick cover of darkness spreading over him, he felt her hands on his temples, the coolness of her skin giving way to the blistering wave of heat that seemed to be radiating out from the bullet wound, engulfing him and he suddenly realized what she was doing. Gripping her wrists, he jerked her hands away. "*No!*"

"What? Why?" she demanded.

"That nifty little slipping-into-someone's-brain thing that you do when you're healing them," he rasped, his words roughened by pain as he released his hold on her. "You told me you can read their minds when you do it. See into their heads."

"Only to get what I need to help them," she said in a choked voice, "or to get information about their injury. But I don't go snooping, Jeremy. That would be wrong and an abuse of my power."

He managed to crack his eyes open and give her a lopsided smile. "But too much to resist if you were given the chance to poke around in my head. Just think of the things you could go looking for." Her eyes glistened with tears as she reached under him, grasped a handful of fabric, and applied pressure to the bleeding wound, before duplicating the process to the front of his shoulder. "Jeremy, you're not thinking straight. Let me help you."

"No way, Jillian." He lifted his left hand, rubbing his thumb over the damp, dewy softness of her lower lip, wishing she hadn't pulled down her sweater, missing the breathtaking view. "You wanna ease my pain, go to bed with me. But until then, stay the hell outta my head, sweetheart."

"Of all the stupid, stubb—"

He grasped her wrist, his grip controlled, careful not to hurt her. "No cheating," he murmured, snagging her shimmering stare and holding it, unwilling to let her look away. "When you decide to trust me, I'll be more than happy to give you what you want and let you look around in my head. I've got nothing to hide. But I'll be damned if I'll let you do it so that you can test the waters."

Her mouth thinned, and she gave a frustrated shake of her head, sending her hair cascading over her shoulders. "I can't stand to see you in pain," she said thickly.

"I'll be fine," he grunted. "It stings like a son of a bitch, but I'll live."

"Fine, have it your way." She sighed, her eyes bright within the paleness of her face, damp with tears. "Do you think you can move?"

His lips pulled back over his teeth in a grimace, and his brow was covered with beads of sweat that trailed down the sides of his face. "Not yet. Just give me a second for my stomach to settle."

"Okay," she whispered, pulling her wrist from his hold to wipe his forehead for him, careful to keep the stinging trails of sweat out of his eyes. Staring at the dark stain of blood seeping through the fabric of his shirt, she gave a weary shake of her head. "God, Jeremy, how many enemies do you have? You've been back in Shadow Peak for little more than a day and already they're trying to kill you."

"They?"

"Who do you think it was?"

"Hell if I know," he rumbled, unable to pick up anything other than Jillian's mouthwatering scent and the coppery smell of his blood. "But I've already had my share of threats since yesterday, including one from your mother."

She gasped, suddenly looking as if she wanted to hit him, her concern giving way beneath a wave of indignation. "My mother did not shoot you, you idiot!"

"Don't go getting all prickly," he wheezed, trying not to laugh. "It's the honest to god's truth that she hates me enough to shoot me."

"She doesn't hate you," she argued, pushing the words through her clenched teeth.

He didn't even bother responding to that one.

"And even if she did," she huffed, "she's powerful enough just to fry your circuits. She wouldn't need to resort to a bullet."

"Jillian, a bullet isn't going to kill me." His breath hissed through his teeth, the pain in his shoulder burning like fire. "Not unless I bleed out, but that isn't going to happen from one shot. This was a warning."

"So then we can add Drake to the list?"

"Stefan and Eric."

"What is it with you and Eric?" she practically growled. "He does *not* want you dead!"

"But he does want me *gone*," Jeremy grunted, putting the emphasis on the last word. "And come to think of it, maybe he *does* want me dead. I know I wouldn't mind seeing *him* dead and buried."

She gave him a priceless look of confusion. "For god's sake, why?"

His own look said the answer to that question should be obvious. "For touching what belongs to me."

"You can be so thickheaded sometimes," she muttered. "I already told you that there's nothing serious going on between Eric and me. *We. Are. Friends.* Nothing more."

"Well, if that's true, Mommy's gonna be crushed to hear it."

Jillian sighed at his stubbornness. "You still don't believe me, do you?"

"Irritating, isn't it?" he asked, arching one brow. "Not having the trust of those you care about."

"Who says I care about you?" she grumbled out the side of her mouth.

He managed a low rumble of laughter, though the sound was strained. "I do," he said lightly. "Which is why you're going to help me home and take care of me, because this thing is starting to hurt like hell."

Sending a furtive glance in the direction the shots had come from, she said, "Do you think it's safe now?"

"Yeah, it's getting late enough in the morning that the pack's going to be moving around. Whoever it was got what they wanted. They're long gone by now."

"Can you walk if I help you?" she asked, putting her arm around his shoulders as he struggled to sit up, his shirt saturated with a fresh surge of blood.

"Just get me to your place. It's closer," Jeremy told her... and for once, she didn't argue.

Chapter 11

The walk to her house was painfully slow, but thankfully uneventful. Jillian sat him down in one of her kitchen chairs, cleaned and dressed his wound while he sipped on some "medicinal" Scotch to dull the pain, then helped him to her bed. If his shoulder hadn't been burning so badly, he'd have taken the time to tease her about helping him out of his clothes, but by the time he was stripped down to his black cotton boxers, Jeremy was done for. The second his head hit the pillow, exhaustion swept over him, but he struggled to stay awake long enough to call his partner.

Mason picked up on the second ring, and Jeremy quickly filled him in on the shooting, as well as the fact that he had information that he didn't want to share over the phone. His partner was furious that he'd been shot, but he assured Mason that it wasn't serious. He was going to be back in working order within hours, a day at the most, since the bullet had gone clean through. Their Lycan genes allowed the Runners to heal at a far greater rate than humans, which was a convenient genetic bonus, considering the physical demands of their jobs.

While he finished up with Mason, Jillian closed the blinds behind her sheer bedroom curtains, casting the room in deep, dusky violet shadows. Jeremy set his phone on the bedside table, and his gaze moved back to where she stood by the window, her arms crossed over her middle. With the pale streaks of light sneaking around the edges of the blinds at her back, it was hard to read her expression, but he knew she was upset, maybe even a little bit afraid.

"You okay?" he rasped.

"It's all related, isn't it?" she asked unsteadily, her voice a whispery thread of sound as she moved slowly toward the bed. "The rogues, the dayshifting, the teenagers, Drake's wife, you being shot. All of it, everything, it's all tied together. Someone's trying to destroy us, aren't they?"

He reached out with his good arm and grabbed hold of her hand, her fingers cool within the feverish heat of his grip. "If it is Drake, and I don't see how it can't be, we're going to find the proof we need to nail his ass and put a stop to all of this once and for all. The Runners won't quit until that happens."

"I know. I'm just worried about you," she whispered, staring at their joined hands while she made that telling confession, before daring a shy glance up at his face.

"I like the sound of that," Jeremy teased in a deep, suggestive rumble, waggling his brows at her, glad when he saw her lips twitch with a small smile. "And I promise nothing's going to happen to me. I'm not going to give the bastard the satisfaction of taking me down."

She nodded, and took a step back, pulling her hand from

his. "You should rest now," she told him. "I'll check back in on you in a little while."

"Don't be too long," he murmured, closing his eyes, reopening them a moment later when she walked back into the room, carrying a tall glass of iced water. Jillian set it on the bedside table, and turned to leave as silently as she'd entered. But when she reached the door, she stopped, one hand on the frame, and looked back at him, her velvety brown eyes full of questions.

Jeremy watched as she wet her bottom lip with a quick swipe of her small, pink tongue, and softly said, "Why is it still..."

Her voice trailed off, but he picked up the question for her, knowing instinctively what she'd wanted to say. "You mean, why do our bodies still scream that we belong together, even though we've both been with other people?"

A strange look darkened her eyes, but she only said, "Yeah."

"I don't know for sure, but I assume it's because we never completed the bond. We never had sex...and I never took your blood. You know as well as I do that when a true lifemate takes a lover who isn't his or hers, it can sever the connection. But our connection was never made, Jillian—we've just put it on hold for all these years."

She nodded, but didn't say anything as her gaze slipped away from his, and he wondered if she was thinking about the forest. About the way she'd begged him to take her when she'd been wild with need, too hungry to fight what her body so desperately craved.

"But I wish I'd made love to you that afternoon when you kissed me," he confessed in a sudden rush, driven by a sharp sense of urgency to get the guttural words out before she turned and left. "I could have made you give in to me, Jillian, but I went easy on you. But if I had, if I'd pushed for what I

wanted, we'd have made it. I'd have had that bond to fight with, to make you believe in me when everyone else was working to keep us apart."

She blinked, the movement rapid, as if trying to hold back tears. "Maybe believing in *you* was never the problem," she whispered brokenly, and before he could respond, she pulled the door shut behind her.

Before Jeremy had so much as opened his eyes, he knew that Jillian was close. He drew in a deep breath, and savored the sweetness of her; that lush, provocative scent that called to every part of him and made him burn.

Cracking his eyes open, he found her lying beside him in the bed, her head cushioned on her folded hands, her eyes open, but hazy with the remnants of slumber, as if she, too, had only just awakened. "What time is it?" he asked, his voice scratchy from sleep.

"Late afternoon. I hope I didn't bother you. I came in to check on how you were doing, and you looked so peaceful, I couldn't resist lying down for a nap."

"It hardly bothers me to wake up next to a beautiful woman," he told her with a lopsided smile, reaching out to thread his fingers through the soft, silken tresses of her hair, enjoying the way it caught the shimmering sunlight that edged its way around the blinds. "You know, I've always wondered what you would look like if I were able to wake up next to you, when my eyes were still sleepy."

"Pretty scary, huh?" she joked, obviously trying to lighten the moment.

"No," he confessed with a grin. "To be honest, you're more beautiful than ever like this, with your hair falling around your face, eyes soft, mouth softer. I've always thought you were the most beautiful thing in the world." He drew in a deep, Jillian-scented breath, and lifted his thumb to the corner of her mouth, watching as he stroked the seductive swell of her lower lip. The curve of her mouth was too petal-soft to resist, moist and pink and delicious. "I never forgot you, Jillian." His words were hushed...solemn. "God knows I wanted to, but I couldn't."

Her eyes blinked slowly closed, cheeks turning a soft shade of rose. "*Jeremy*..."

"No, let me get it said," he rasped, cutting her off. "I know you're scared, but—"

The ringing of his cell phone on the bedside table interrupted his words, and she sat up, quickly handing him the phone.

"Burns," he growled, ready to howl with frustration as Jillian slipped off the bed and padded softly from the room.

Mason's low laugh rumbled over the line. "I see your sunny disposition hasn't suffered any."

"Piss off," he grunted, dropping his head back on the pillow, half wishing he could strangle his best friend for interrupting what had been leading up to be...*a moment*. He didn't know what "kind" of moment, dammit, but he'd sensed that something powerful was about to happen.

"I know you're not feeling too hot," Mason rumbled, "but I wanted to let you know that we've got a new development. I don't want to get in to details on the phone, either, but it's one that's related to the case Cian and Brody are on."

"Shit," he groaned, scrubbing his hand down his face, knowing that another human victim had been found. There'd been two other murders in the past few weeks, both blond, blue-eyed human females whose hearts had been eaten out of their chests, and at both crime scenes, no traceable Lycan scent had been found, only a sharp acidic odor that was produced when a wolf dayshifted. Anthony Simmons had known about the killings and had even staged a similar murder of a woman whose hair had resembled Torrance's, trying to mess with Mason's mind. Before Simmons's death, he'd told Mason that the deaths would continue, and that the Runners wouldn't be able to stop the Lycan responsible.

And now they had a third victim. "I have a really bad feeling about this."

"Me, too." Mason sighed. "I'll give you a call back when I have all the info, okay?"

"I'll be waiting," he said, then disconnected the call. Jeremy thought about his options for a moment, and then, making sure to move as carefully as possible, he rolled to his side, relieved when his shoulder didn't flare up with a fresh surge of pain. Instead, there was a low, annoying ache, but it was definitely manageable. Reaching for his jeans at the foot of the bed, he pulled them on, and had just stood up to finish buttoning his fly when Jillian came back into the room.

Her eyes went wide when she saw him. "What are doing? You need to be in bed."

"Something's come up and I can't discuss it on the phone," he told her, realizing he didn't have a shirt to wear. "I need to head down to the Alley for a bit to see Mase, and since I'm not leaving you alone after what happened this morning, I guess you're coming with me."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and glared at him. "Jeremy, you're not going anywhere. You need to give your body time to heal."

"I can heal later," he countered, "when we don't have this shit breathing down our necks." He pushed his fingers back through his hair, hopefully dealing with any bed-head he might have. "You don't happen to have an extra large T-shirt I could borrow, do you?"

She moved stiffly to her dresser, rummaging through the

bottom drawer while growling, "You've been shot, dammit. You may be an almighty Runner, but you're not invincible!"

He waited until she'd turned around to face him, tossing a wash-softened Pearl Jam concert shirt at his chest, before saying, "The only way I'm staying in that bed is if you're in it with me. *Under me*, Jillian. Your sweet little body laid out, wide-open, with me buried deep inside of you. Got it?"

"God, you're impossible," she huffed, but he could see that the image he'd created fascinated her. Bright flags of color burned in her cheeks, and her eyes had that hazy glow of hunger again.

"Not really," he shot back, the sound muffled as he carefully pulled on the shirt. "I just know my own limitations. Trust me, dragging my ass to the Alley is going to be a hell of a lot easier on me than lying here the rest of the day, driving myself crazy thinking about you."

"Impossible...*and* oversexed," she muttered, grabbing her brush off the top of her dresser and ripping it through her hair so viciously, he actually winced for her poor scalp.

"Can't be oversexed when I'm not getting any," he drawled, the corner of his mouth kicking up in a crooked grin when she stopped and cut him a sharp look from beneath her lashes.

"Oh, and by the way," he remarked casually, sitting down on the bed so that he could slip on his boots, "we'll need to take your car. The truck is out of commission. Can't get anyone out to fix it until tomorrow."

"What's wrong with it?" she asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

He sent her an innocent look as he tied up his right boot, determined to ignore the pain in his shoulder. "Nothing's wrong with the truck itself, but the tires aren't doing so hot."

"What happened to them?" she demanded.

"Someone slashed them up a bit last night." He reached for his other boot, careful to hide his smile, since for some reason he was taking perverse enjoyment at seeing her so bent out of shape on his behalf. Maybe it meant she *did* care. God, he hoped so.

"A bit?"

He lifted his good shoulder. "That's one way of putting it."

Jillian closed her eyes, shaking her head. "You've had rocks thrown at your parents' house—"

"That was probably just Drake's little thugs," he interrupted.

"Had your tires slashed," she went on, clearly on a roll.

"Thugs again."

"And been shot at," she growled through her clenched teeth, opening her eyes to glare at him.

"That I'm still trying to figure out," he murmured, enjoying the fire blazing in her eyes. "But I'm placing my money on Drake again, or Cooper Sheffield. So that's three for three for the psychotic headjob. Guess he's in the lead, then."

She stood completely still for a beat of ten seconds, breathing slowly in...then out. "Fine, I'll drive you to the bloody Alley," she finally said, her menacing tone making him want to smile as she prowled forward, poking him in the chest with her finger, "And in exchange, how about you just try not to get yourself killed?"

"Will do," Jeremy agreed, unable to hold in his grin any longer...but she was already walking out of the room.

Despite its unusual name, Bloodrunner Alley was a picturesque, gently sloping glade located on Silvercrest pack land, several miles down the mountain from Shadow Peak, with the ceremonial clearing sitting equidistance between the two. The only structures it boasted were the fully modernized cabins where the Runners lived, the rugged homes surrounded by the wild, natural beauty of the forest, perfectly suited to their environment.

As they made their way down the private roads that connected Shadow Peak to the Alley, Jeremy finally told Jillian about the latest human victim, and the ones who'd come before. At first he'd tried to convince himself that he hadn't told her about the gruesome, ritualistic murders because he didn't trust her enough to tell her *everything* about the Runners' investigation—but he knew that'd only been a lie to cover the real reason.

The truth was that he'd kept this last bit of information to himself for the simple fact that he'd known it would upset her. Stupid, but there it was.

And it *did* upset her. At first, she got pissed that he'd kept the killings to himself, considering they were supposed to be working together, but then she'd admitted that she'd known there was a last piece of the puzzle he hadn't shared with her yet. She could have pressed him about it, but she'd been waiting for him to tell her himself, which he'd just done. Then, the reality of what they were dealing with sank in, and she went quiet, a strange, unsettling stillness settling over her body that made him want to take her into his arms and crush her in his embrace.

Unfortunately, when they pulled in to the Alley, Mason and his wife, Torrance, came outside to see who was there and he never got the chance. Mason gave him a hard time for getting out of bed after he'd been shot, and Torrance fussed over him, which only irritated his partner even more. But once inside, the four of them settled into the kitchen, and Jeremy went over what he and Jillian had learned at the hall of records, as well as from Pippa. While he talked, the other three worked together to make some cold-cut sandwiches, which they paired with chips and beer for an impromptu dinner. Taking a long swig of an ice-cold Corona, Jeremy nodded his bottle toward Mason before setting it down. "So now that Jillian and I have shared our news, what did Brody have to say?"

Mason placed his sandwich on his plate, then leaned back in his chair with a tired sigh. "It isn't good. We found out about the body from a member of the pack. Dawson's youngest daughter, Sophia. She's been hanging around down in Covington for kicks, mixing in with the rave scene. Enjoying the sex, drugs and rock'n'roll."

"Christ," he muttered under his breath. "The more Lycans we have prowling around down there, the greater the risk of discovery. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before everything blows up in our faces."

"Yeah, well, you'll get no argument from me on that score," Mason grunted. "Anyway, Sophia dropped by the vic's house to score some weed and found the body. She's pretty much a mess right now, but was able to keep it together enough to know that she should call us. Brody and Cian were already down in Covington, following some possible leads on where the rogues might be hiding, so they were able to act quickly. Once they arrived on the scene, they got Sophia calmed down and took her to the Doucets. Michaela's going to let her hang out with them for a while, until she's ready to head back up to Shadow Peak."

Michaela Doucet was Torrance's best friend, and Jeremy knew that Jillian had met the friendly Cajun at the Dillingers' wedding, since Mic had been the maid of honor. She and her brother Max had been put under Bloodrunner protection after Simmons had made his first attempt on Torrance's life, and later trashed Michaela's business. Jeremy's friends Wyatt Pallaton and Carla Reyes were the Bloodrunning team who had been assigned to the Doucets' protection, and they would remain with them in the city until the threat had been eliminated. "So the vic was found in her home?" he asked Mason.

"An old Victorian house that's been renovated into studio apartments, all artists and musicians. Brody said the music's so loud, it's not surprising the cops weren't called. You wouldn't have been able to hear her scream, and he probably took her throat out first."

From the corner of his eye, Jeremy watched as Jillian and Torrance both turned green, pushing their plates away. With a sigh, he shoved his partner in the arm. "Watch it, you idiot. They're trying to eat."

Mason glanced at the women, and immediately apologized. "Damn, sorry about that."

"That's okay," Torrance murmured. "We know this is important."

"Uh, so that's all we have so far." Mason picked up his beer, but he didn't take a drink. Instead, he turned the bottle around in his hand, and Jeremy knew he was thinking about the killing and what it meant. "Last I heard, Brody was on his way to the Alley with the body. He left Cian down at the scene until we get a unit in to clean up. Last thing we need is one of her neighbors stumbling into her apartment and finding all that blood."

"So then the killer left her body to be found by...anyone," Jeremy said quietly, not liking where his own thoughts were taking him. "He had no way of knowing that the vic would be found by a Lycan. That had to have been pure coincidence, which means that the killer doesn't give a crap if the humans discover our existence. He's playing with us, screwing with our heads."

"Either that," Mason muttered, "or he's so messed up he doesn't realize what he's doing."

Blowing out a hard breath, Jeremy said, "Whichever one it is, we're screwed."

"No shit."

Jeremy lifted his beer, then paused with the bottle halfway to his mouth, cocking his head to the side. "I think I hear Brody's truck."

Without a word, everyone pushed away from the table and headed out of the kitchen. Mason opened the front door and they all filed outside, waiting for Brody's truck to make the last bend and come in to view. No one said anything, but then, there didn't seem to be anything to say.

Moments later, the dark blue Ford appeared, pulling to a slow stop in front of the Dillingers' cabin. "Drive seemed as if it took forever," Brody grunted, climbing out of the cab, "but I didn't wanna push my luck and go over the speed limit." Wearing a grim look that only made the childhood scars slashing across his face seem more prominent, he jerked his chin toward the tarp-covered bed of his truck, where the victim's body had been placed. "Can you imagine coming up with a good excuse for something like that if a state trooper pulled me over?"

Jeremy moved forward to give the giant auburn-haired Runner a welcoming slap on the shoulder. "That took some balls, man."

"Didn't have much of a choice," Brody explained, beginning to undo the hooks that secured the tarp. "We had to get her out of there so that the clean-up crew could get in before anyone gets suspicious and goes to check up on her."

Taking a step toward the bed of the truck, Jillian asked, "What are you going to do with the body?"

"We burn them," Jeremy said as gently as possible, noticing how pale she was, but it didn't help. She still flinched, looking as if she'd been slapped. And suddenly, he realized just what it was costing her to be there, coming face-to-face with the ugliness of his world. He wanted to pull her into his arms and take her away, shelter her...protect her... But as Brody peeled back the tarp, revealing the bloodied remains of the victim, he knew it was too late.

The smell of death hung over the body with the darkness of a shadow, close and damp, like a slick palm clasping the back of your neck. It made Jillian shiver from somewhere deep inside of her, the trembling slowly spreading outward, until her skin was covered with chill bumps, her teeth chattering from the frigid sensation of cold.

"Are you okay?" Jeremy asked by her side, his voice soft while Brody stepped away from the group, one finger stuck in his ear while he answered a call on his cell.

The sharp scent of marijuana still lingered on what was left of the girl's clothes, mixing with the thick smell of blood, and her stomach roiled.

"I'm fine. I'm just not..."

She'd been about to say that she wasn't used to seeing death, but that wasn't true. As the pack's Spirit Walker, she knew death well, from illness, injury and old age. It was part of her job to know death—to use her powers to prevent it—and when unable to heal her patients, to give them the proper rites that would lead them into the afterlife. She even knew violence and bloodshed. No one living within a Lycan pack could be shielded from the more physical side of their natures.

But she didn't know murder. She didn't know coldblooded butchery; the kind that made your skin crawl. And now she stood beside blatant proof that such evil existed, that it had reveled in this poor girl's violent death.

"I didn't mean for you to have to see this," Jeremy said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, while his dark gaze studied the blond victim, taking in every detail. "I'm sorry." "It's not your fault," she whispered, the words shaky, since she couldn't seem to keep her chin from trembling. "And as much as I hate it, maybe it's something that I needed to see. I don't think I would have truly understood how this was affecting you, if I hadn't seen for myself what this monster is capable of."

Brody rejoined the group then, flipping his phone closed. "Sorry about that," he rumbled, shaking his head, the sun-lit strands of his auburn hair shifting across his shoulders. "We found a flyer from one of the local raves, and Cian went to check it out once the cleaning crew showed up."

Jeremy sent him a sharp look. "Find anything?"

"It's in the warehouse district," Brody told them, rolling his shoulder. "That's all we've got so far."

"The warehouse district? Isn't that where you suspected Simmons was hiding out while he was in Covington?" Torrance asked.

"Yeah." Glancing at the body, Brody's expression turned to one of barely restrained fury. "Her living room was covered with bongs and beer bottles. Drunk and stoned makes for one hell of an easy victim."

"She never even stood a chance, did she?" Torrance whispered, while her husband pulled her into his side, pressing a tender kiss to the top of her head.

"We're going to get him, sweetheart," he told her. "I promise you."

"I'm worried about Michaela," the petite redhead murmured, and Jillian didn't blame her. If she'd had a human best friend living in the city that was slowly becoming a killing ground, she'd have been concerned, too.

"Don't worry about Mic and Max," Mason murmured, his deep voice lowered to a warm, gentle rasp. "Pallaton and Reyes aren't going to let anything happen to them. I promise, baby." Torrance nodded, and put her arms around her husband's middle, and it was like watching a miracle, seeing the look of love on the imposing Runner's face as he cuddled his wife, offering her his comfort.

It made Jillian feel...alone. Bereft.

"Jeremy," she said unsteadily, taking a step back from the truck. She couldn't do this, not now. Her emotional reserves had been sapped from the constant push and pull with Jeremy since he'd walked back into her life—and now she was caving in on herself.

"Jillian?" he rasped, his voice cut with concern. One big, capable hand curved around the back of her neck, as she struggled to draw in a deep breath of air.

But she was choking on the scent of death...of madness.

"I'd like to go home now," she croaked, and without a word, he pulled her into his chest, one strong arm wrapped around her shoulders, and led her away.

Chapter 12

He was an idiot.

That was his only excuse. Jeremy knew he should have considered what it might do to her to see something like that. Jillian dealt with hope and healing. Yes, she knew how to deal with loss, but for the most part, the darkness of his world didn't touch her.

And that was as it should be; protecting those within the pack was the true reason for the existence of the Bloodrunners.

Opening the passenger side door of Jillian's car, he tucked her into the seat and pushed her hair back from her face, giving her a small smile. "Hold tight for a few seconds and let me go grab some things from my cabin, okay?"

"No prob," she said with a wobbly attempt at a grin, but he knew she was freaked out. Her brown eyes were huge within the hollows of her face, lips trembling, skin as pale as the silvery moon now slowly rising in the evening sky, the blood-orange sun finally vanishing on the distant horizon. "I'll be fast, I promise," he told her. Shutting the door, he lifted his hand to Brody as the Runner drove by. Brody would take the truck onto one of their private dirt roads, until he found a good spot to burn the body, then return to the city to help his partner look for clues. Jeremy made a mental note to call them tomorrow, just to make sure they were doing okay. They were both tough bastards, but they'd had to deal with some really messed up shit in the past few weeks. He knew too well how easy it was for stuff like that to screw with your head.

Jogging up to his front door, he was fishing his keys out of his pocket, when something made him pause. He lifted his head, eyes closed, and drew in a deep breath of air, searching for the faint trace that had snagged his attention. The wind had shifted for just a brief second, and then resumed its strong westerly flow, but he knew he hadn't imagined it.

Lycan musk. Thick and rich. Which meant only one thing. A wolf was near.

He was already yelling at Mason as he ran back toward the car. "Someone's in the woods. Get the women inside. Now!"

Ripping open the door, he yanked Jillian out of the car, practically shoving her toward Mason as his partner shouted for Torrance to get the hell inside of the cabin.

"What's happening?" Jillian demanded breathlessly, at the same time Mason muttered, "You've been shot, Jeremy. You should let me go."

"The shift will do me good," he grunted in a hard scrape of words, the anticipation of the hunt already burning through his veins, roughening his speech. "This bastard is mine."

Mason must have agreed, because instead of arguing, he gave him a sharp nod, then grabbed on to Jillian and began pulling her back toward his cabin, where Torrance stood in the doorway. "Just watch your back and don't do anything stupid," his partner growled. "Stupid? This whole idea is stupid! Jesus, Jeremy, you can't face a rogue on your own!" Jillian shouted, struggling against Mason's hold, but unable to break away. She stared at Jeremy with a wild look of outrage, as if she wanted to get her delicate little hands around his throat and throttle him. "You're still healing, you idiot!"

"It isn't a rogue," he told her, and then he forced himself to rip his gaze away from her ravaged expression, knowing that he had to trust the man he loved like a brother to keep her safe.

"You're crazy!" Jillian shouted after him as he set off at a loping run toward the woods, relying on his instincts to lead him to his prey. The late afternoon had already given way to early evening, darkening the forest with long, purple shadows as the moon climbed its way into the stormy, cloud-mottled chaos of the sky, and the wind shifted again, just for a second, but it was enough. Jeremy raced into the trees, and let the primal, visceral surge of energy riding beneath his skin break free. Denim and cotton ripped with a hissing wail of sound as muscle and bone expanded, the surface of his skin prickling as thick, golden fur rippled over his body. The smells of the forest exploded into sharper focus as he took the powerful shape of his beast, his senses heightened in full Lycan form. He could hear the heartbeat of the forest; feel its movement, its breath.

His prey was running about two hundred yards to the east, already slowing from fatigue. With a burst of speed, Jeremy sprinted ahead to the north, the heavy muscles in his thighs and calves flexing and pumping as he sped over the forest floor, then cut back, bursting through a copse of birch trees and taking the lumbering Lycan in a head-on attack, pinning its body to the moss-covered ground.

"Son of a bitch!" he snarled, shaking his hulking head with disbelief, his words guttural within the muzzled shape of his

mouth. "I thought that beer-soaked scent was yours. What the hell are you doing at the Alley?"

Magnus Gibson stared back at him through a pair of glowing, bloodshot eyes. His breath rattled in his chest, and like the air being slowly released from a balloon, the mangy body of his beast melted away. Knowing the heavy weight of his wolf would crush the idiot in his human form, Jeremy lurched to his feet.

"Don't freak out," Magnus croaked, shifting himself into a sitting position, his dark hair tangled around his ashen face, eyes so bleary and red, they looked painful. "I c-can explain," he mumbled, wiping the back of his wrist under his nose, reminding Jeremy of a petulant two-year-old.

"Explain when we get back to the Alley," Jeremy growled, reaching down to curl his claws around Magnus's thick arm and hauling him to his feet. Whatever explanations the guy had to make could wait until they got back, since he knew Jillian would be going out of her mind with worry.

He allowed his own wolf to slip away as they walked, retaking his human shape, and snuffled a soft laugh when he thought of what Jillian's reaction would be to two naked men walking out of the woods. He figured it'd be funny as hell, but couldn't embarrass her that way, especially not in front of others. So when they came across the clothes he'd shredded when he'd shifted, Jeremy reluctantly snatched them up. He was able to wrap the tattered remnants of Jillian's Pearl Jam shirt around his waist, ordering Magnus to hold what was left of his jeans over his groin.

It wasn't much, he thought with a crooked smile, knowing they looked like idiots, but at least they were more or less covered. He only hoped Jillian appreciated the gesture.

As they broke through the edge of the forest, Mason

opened his front door, a sardonic smile twisting his hard mouth while Jeremy dragged Magnus toward the Dillingers' cabin. "Well, well," his partner drawled, "what do we have here?"

Jillian shoved her way past Mason, then immediately came to a screeching halt on the porch the second she set eyes on him. "What happened to your clothes?" she demanded, pointing a finger at the ruined remains of her shirt.

A gruff laugh broke from his chest, and he shared a smile with Mase. "After everything that's happened, Jillian, you're worried about my clothes?"

"What clothes?" she hissed, waving her hand at his bare torso and legs. "You're practically naked! And you destroyed my favorite shirt!"

"You act as if you've never seen a naked man before." He chuckled, clucking his tongue.

She glared a blistering look at him that would have shriveled most men, but Jeremy prided himself on being made of sterner stuff than most. "I've never seen *you* naked, you oaf!"

The corner of his mouth tipped in another smile. "In that case, I guess I understand," he rumbled with a dose of wry, velvety arrogance. "But in my defense, I *did* try to conceal the more shocking parts."

"Stop teasing her and just cover yourself," Torrance called out as she came through the front door and tossed a towel in his direction.

"Yes, ma'am." Jeremy laughed, releasing Magnus so that he could tie the length of soft, white cotton around his hips. His chest and calves were still bare, but at least he no longer looked like some demented version of Tarzan in a loin cloth.

"So," Mason rasped with a hard smile, "what's his story?"

Crossing his arms over his bare chest, Jeremy looked at the man standing beside him, who was quickly covering himself with the towel Torrance had just tossed his way. "I wasn't gonna hurt anyone," the Lycan grumbled, sending him a belligerent glance from beneath his heavy brows. "I was just supposed to keep tabs on you and the witch."

Jeremy's eyes narrowed. "And just who were you supposed to keep tabs on us for? Drake?"

Magnus rolled his shoulder, then gave a reluctant nod, sending his hair back into his eyes. "I owe Cooper Sheffield some money, and he said I could clear the debt by keeping an eye on you for Drake."

"So you're Sheffield's little gopher boy," Jeremy murmured with disgust. "And do your duties go beyond spying?"

Magnus's bleary gaze skittered away. "I don't know what you mean," he muttered, chewing on the corner of his mouth.

Jeremy took a step closer. "I mean, the bullet," he drawled with pure menace.

Magnus' shaggy head shot up with a hard snap, as if he'd been clipped on the chin with a solid undercut. "*What bullet*?"

Holding the Lycan's wide-eyed stare, Jeremy pointed at his healing bullet wound. "The one that went clean through my shoulder this morning."

"It wasn't me," Magnus gasped, while fresh beads of sweat broke out across his forehead. "I swear to God. What do you think I have, a death wish? I messed with your parents' house and slashed your tires, but I swear, I haven't hurt anyone!"

"And what about Danna?" Mason asked. "Maybe Sheffield pressed your wife for a little favor. Does she have a gun?"

Magnus lifted his watery gaze up to Mason, blinking with stunned outrage. "You think I'd let that woman have a gun?" he shouted, his horrified expression making Mason chuckle under his breath. "She could have gotten one without you knowing about it," his partner drawled.

"Dammit, it wasn't Danna!" Magnus argued. "I know she's crazy, but she's got her hands full with family stuff right now."

"Even if one of you didn't shoot me," Jeremy grunted, "the fact remains that you've been a real pain in the ass, so here's how it's gonna be. First, you're going to pay for my mother's front window."

The Lycan's shoulders fell, but he nodded his agreement. "I'll pay for it."

"And my tires."

At that, Magnus's complexion started to look a little green, but he mumbled, "Yeah, the tires, too. And I guess you'll want your parents' house cleaned, as well."

Jillian groaned, while Mason just shook his head. "What the hell is wrong with my parents' house?" Jeremy demanded.

Magnus flicked him another quick look from the corner of his eye. "I kind of egged it this morning, after you left."

"You egged my parents' house?" he shouted, aware of a vein throbbing angrily in his temple.

"Not by choice. I'm telling you, it was all on Sheffield's orders. I think he got the idea from that kid of his."

He started to take a step forward, his muscles flexing, hands fisted, when Mason casually said, "Jeremy."

"Yeah?"

"I know it's tempting, but you can't kill him."

He took a deep breath, and slowly forced himself to relax. Mason was right, of course, but that didn't mean the urge to knock some sense into Magnus wasn't any less of a temptation. "I wanna give you some advice," he said in a low, deadly rasp.

Magnus shuffled a step away. "What is it?"

"Grow some goddamn balls."

"That's what Danna's always telling me," the Lycan grumbled.

"Yeah? Then maybe you should listen to her."

"That's easy for you to say," Magnus huffed. "You don't have to live with her."

"Yeah, well, neither do you tonight," Mason rumbled. "Because you'll be spending it in lockup."

"That's what I figured." The Lycan sighed, then rubbed his chin. "Won't be so bad, I guess, though. At least that way Danna can't get to me."

"I know it's a pain in the ass, but can you take him up for me?" Jeremy asked, glancing at Mason.

His partner nodded, a slow grin curving his mouth. "No problem. Torrance and I will run him up to Shadow Peak and deliver him to Dylan."

"Thanks, man. I owe you."

"That's what you always say." Mason laughed.

Shifting his gaze to Jillian, he said, "Do you mind coming up to my cabin with me while I get cleaned up?"

She murmured her agreement, stepping into place beside him as they waved goodbye to Torrance and Mason, but didn't say anything more until he was opening his front door. "Do you think Magnus followed us to Pippa's house this morning?"

"Damn," he muttered, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I'll give her a call when we get back to town and warn her to be careful. If he didn't know about the shooting, I doubt he knows about Pippa. But it's better to be safe than sorry. She needs to be on guard."

"I think you're probably right." She sighed, tucking her hair behind her ears.

Jeremy moved to turn on a light, and the living room filled with a low, mellow glow. Nodding toward the black leather sofa that sat against the back wall, he said, "Just chill out for a bit, make yourself comfortable, and I'll go grab a quick shower."

Jillian sat with her bottom perched on the edge of the soft leather sofa in Jeremy's living room, her hands clasped between her knees, while her pulse drummed a heavy, thundering beat through her head. She breathed deeply, slowly releasing the air from her lungs, but it wasn't helping her to relax. Too much had happened since that morning, and her emotions were in a constant shift from one extreme to the other. Suddenly, it was all catching up with her, and she felt ready to crawl out of her skin.

Glancing toward the bathroom door that she could see just down the shadowed hallway, she knew what she wanted...what she needed. So far today, she'd known fear, anger and passion, and this evening she'd seen death. Now she wanted to feel alive.

She wanted Jeremy.

As if answering her unspoken call, he came out of the bathroom in nothing but a well-worn pair of faded jeans, droplets of water still glistening on his skin, muscles rippling in his arms as he ran a dark gray towel over his head.

Lust hit her so hard that her knees nearly gave out, and with a soft gasp of surprise, she realized that she'd rushed to her feet and was no longer sitting.

Wetting her bottom lip with a nervous flick of her tongue, she stared at the dark, golden beauty of his chest, the satiny skin stretched tight over hard, firm muscles, the wound in his shoulder little more than a raw, pinkish mark that would fade within a week. On his ribs, paler scars from his last run-in with the rogue wolves shone faintly against the deeper tan of his skin, the bite on the side of his throat all but healed. He was so perfectly, ruggedly beautiful that it took her breath away, and she blinked against the hot wash of tears she felt at the backs of her eyes, even though she knew she wasn't crying. It was just excess emotion, everything welling up inside of her, growing harder and harder to contain.

"Jesus. Do you know how long I've waited to see you look at me like that?" he asked with a slow, sexy smile, watching her as he propped his bare shoulder against the wall, the flexing of muscles across the broad expanse of his chest and rippling abdomen making her light-headed.

She drew in an unsteady breath, her voice a husky whisper of sound as she said, "Do you know how long I've waited to see you like *this*?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, eyes bright with sensual awareness. "Like what?" he asked softly, staring at her with a possessive intensity that made her feel completely... wanted. Needed.

She wanted that. Wanted him to need her, crave her... *hunger for her.*

She wanted to push him to the edge, push him until he forgot to be careful, until he lost his control. She wanted his guttural growl in her ear, his body wild for her.

Jillian found herself standing in front of him, with no recollection of stepping around the low coffee table and moving across the room. Reaching out, she pressed her hand to the smooth skin of his chest, right over the pounding of his heart. "You're so beautiful, Jeremy."

"You're the beautiful one, sweetheart."

"I can't compare to you," she said dreamily, her voice thick. Oh, yes, she knew what she wanted; and she was going to take it. She might be too cowardly to let him make love to her, but that didn't mean that she couldn't sate her own hungers. That she couldn't touch and taste and feast, drawing him into her, taking as much of him as she could. Savoring him. Even loving him.

Her fingertips grazed his chest with the teasing lightness of a feather, the firm muscles beneath his dark skin so hard and warm, vibrating with a fine tremor. His breath came slightly faster, almost panting, the press of his stare hot against her face...warming her like a physical source of heat, though she kept her gaze focused on the path of her fingers. If she looked up, she'd lose her nerve, and she wanted this so badly. Had to have it, or she was going to go out of her mind, all this raging, tumultuous need breaking her down, leaving her wrecked and damaged.

She lost herself to the exploration of his body, smiling inside when his breath hitched as she grazed his right nipple. Pulling her lower lip through her teeth, she pressed both hands over his chest, the small tips of his nipples hard against her palms, then trailed them lower, across his ribs. Her thumbs skimmed over the silky, honey-colored hair that arrowed down the center of his abdomen, whorling around his navel, before it disappeared beneath the faded denim of his jeans, the top button left undone, while a thick ridge distended the fly.

"Jesus," he moaned under his breath, his lips pulling back over his teeth. "What are you doing, Jillian?"

"Touching you," she told him, proud that her voice didn't shake apart like the trembling feeling inside of her. "You're so warm, Jeremy. So hot. Hard."

A rough laugh jerked from his throat. "Yeah, you've got no idea."

Her mouth twitched into a smile, and she lowered her gaze to the stunning bulge at the front of his jeans. "You have a problem inside your Levi's, Mr. Burns."

"If you're wondering what to do about it, I have some *really* good ideas," he volunteered with a low, rumbling chuckle, casting a wry look down at his groin.

She shook her head as silent laughter bubbled up from the warm, churning glow of excitement in her belly. "I'll just bet you do," she murmured, her shoulders shaking. "It's just that...well, it's a little on the *extreme* side," she pointed out, wondering just who the playful tease was that had commandeered her body.

"Don't know about that, but I've never had any complaints before. I think it may even be a bit bigger than usual," he added with a dark laugh, "but then I've never wanted anyone this badly before, either."

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she said softly, shaking her head.

He tipped her chin up with the edge of his fist in time for her to see the deep look of tenderness that melted into his eyes, and her knees shook. God, she was so easy when it came to this man.

"I've never said anything even close to that to a woman," he admitted gently, curving his palm along her jaw, so that he could rub his thumb against the corner of her mouth. "And I wouldn't lie about it, either. You...affect me, Jillian. In ways that I can't even explain. You always have."

He touched his thumb to her lower lip, then leaned forward and the heat of his breath, of his mouth, touched hers, shaking her apart inside. Everything roiled and tumbled together, a chaos of emotion and craving and raw, overwhelming need.

Her trembling, shivering hands struggled with the stubborn buttons on his jeans, while his hands cupped her face, his mouth claiming instant, carnal possession of her own with a blistering kiss that made her toes curl. With a throaty groan, Jillian broke away from the kiss to shove his jeans over his lean hips, her groan growing deeper as she watched him take himself in hand, gripping himself so tightly that the veins on the back of his hand thickened beneath his skin, like the swollen, distended veins pulsing beneath the velvety skin of his cock. She licked her lips as she dropped to her knees, a purring sound of pleasure vibrating in her throat as she caught the richer, heavier source of his scent, salty and sweet and warm. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips against the violent heat of his skin, moaning at the decadent taste of him.

"Oh, god," he growled, breathless, trembling. "This is gonna kill me."

He placed both hands on either side of her head and pushed past her lips, sinking into the damp silk of her mouth, and she stroked him with her tongue. He pushed deeper, and she made a quick sound of panic. "Don't be afraid," he gasped, baring his teeth. "I won't push too far. Just...harder, Jillian. Like that, baby. You won't hurt me."

His legs tremored, muscles rigid and hard, as her mouth worked over him, her tongue stroking his skin as if she couldn't get enough of him. And she couldn't. It was too good, too hot...the perfection of him in her mouth and the possessive way he watched her pleasuring him made her feel too much. Everything about him intoxicated her. The sinewy tension in his neck and shoulders. The way his head lowered as he watched her, his fingers clenched in her hair. She loved it. Loved the power of him throbbing against her tongue. Loved the trust implicit in such a blistering, provocative act of intimacy. Loved his salty-sweet taste, the musky, masculine smells of his skin and sweat and the dominant strength in his long, hard body that he tried so hard to control. His eyes drifted shut for a moment, and then he lifted the dark smudges of his lashes, revealing a gaze that was bright with fever, glittering with lust and hunger and tender, breathtaking emotion.

"Can't hold it," he growled, and his head fell back, spine arching as the dark wave of energy roared through him. His muscles jerked as he came, a rough shout breaking from his throat, back arched, his rich flavor too sexy to resist. And then his body was moving, his hands pulling at her until he lay on the hallway floor and she was spread out over him like a blanket. Jillian struggled to get her bearings, but his hands were everywhere, stroking her backside, dipping under her sweater to stroke the shivering skin of her stomach, the backs of her thighs, his urgency tugging at her heart.

"I'm going to make love to you all night long," he growled, and then his hands reached between them, attacking the button at the top of her jeans, and the reality of how close she was to giving in suddenly crashed through the sensual haze clouding her mind, shocking her into instant awareness. In that moment, she couldn't get past the knowledge that he could make her whole world come apart, destroying her, without even meaning to.

Her muscles tensed, and Jillian grabbed at his wrists. "Stop," she whispered.

His hands instantly lifted away, eyes shadowed beneath the heavy veil of his lashes. "What's wrong?"

She swallowed the thick feeling in her throat, and struggled to get the words out. "I...can't."

He went completely still beneath her, not even breathing, just watching her, waiting for her to explain. "What the hell's going on, Jillian?"

"I—I didn't mean for things to go so far," she said shakily, slipping off of him. "I just wanted to make you feel good."

The golden line of his eyebrows pulled together in a deadly scowl, his mouth hard, savage. "You went down on me because you felt it was owed, like some kind of goddamn payment?"

"No!"

A gritty, sarcastic sound rumbled in his throat. "Then explain it, honey, because I'm having a helluva time figuring you out."

Jillian closed her eyes, wanting to block out his presence, but she couldn't. The loss of sight only made her other senses that much more attuned to him. He vibrated with a sexual frequency that pulled on her, made her want to throw caution to the wind and dive on him, ravenous for each hard, mindshattering, delicious detail.

She scooted away until her back hit the wall, opening her eyes as she wrapped her arms around her knees. With greedy fascination, she watched the muscles in his abdomen ripple and flex as he sat up, his skin burnished a deep, golden brown in the low light spilling from the living room. Clearing her throat, she said, "I—I just need more time, Jeremy."

He thrust both hands back through his hair, so hard that she winced. "God, Jillian, every time I think we're moving forward, it's like slamming into a brick wall. Just one more obstacle shoved in my path. What do I have to do?" he demanded in a gritty rasp, his expression ravaged, his eyes wild. "Just tell me and I'll do it, but don't keep shutting me out."

She blinked rapidly, rolling her lips together. "I'm sorry. I—I just can't do this."

"Because of Eric? Christ, Jillian, he's wrong for you and you know it!"

"It has nothing to with Eric," she insisted in a low voice, wishing she could feel hollow inside. She wanted to welcome that comforting nothingness that had been her companion for so many years, but it seemed impossible to go back and find that steady, lifeless state of existence. Jeremy had destroyed the calm, like a violent storm sweeping across a dead sea, stirring chaos in his wake. Now all she could do was try to survive and stay intact, without being crushed beneath the force of the waves. If she stopped struggling, she would be pulled under the surface, taken down deeper...and deeper.

"Is it me, then?" She flinched, the hurt underlining his rough words cutting her to the quick. "Is that it? Can't have damaged goods touching the pack's little angel?" "No!" she gasped, hating that he could even think that of her. "I admire you more than any other man I know, Jeremy, no matter what his bloodline. But I *can't* take what you're offering. It's too dangerous for me."

"What the hell does that mean?" he demanded, his voice raw, his eyes glittering and bright. "Dammit, Jillian, I'm trying so hard to understand but you won't give me anything." He was silent for a moment, the only sound that of their breathing and the howling wind rushing against the roof of the cabin, and then he quietly said, "I *need* you, Jillian."

She understood what he was trying to say—but it wasn't enough. "Lust is not love, Jeremy."

She watched the muscles in his face tighten, his golden brows pulling close as he worked over her words. "And if I told you that it was more than lust?" he rasped, the hoarse words thick with emotion.

"It wouldn't matter," she whispered, shaking her head, "because it's not."

"So now you're the expert on how I feel?" he shot back, the brackets around his mouth deep with frustration.

"No...it's just that... God, I'm sorry." Pulling a tissue out of her pocket, Jillian shoved it under her nose. "I wish...I wish things could be different, but they can't."

"Things can always be different," he grunted, staring at her with such intensity, she felt as if he were trying to see right in to her. "If we think they're important enough to fight for, we find a way to *make* them different."

A choked sob escaped her throat, tears streaming from her eyes, leaving salty trails over her skin. "I wish that was true, but it isn't. Not this time."

He didn't respond...didn't argue...didn't even look at her.

With his expression cast in stone, he just pulled himself to his feet, buttoned his jeans and headed into his bedroom.

When he came back, he was dressed and Jillian was waiting for him in the living room. "Come on, I'll drive you home," he rumbled. She nodded, unable to meet his eyes, and followed him outside.

Chapter 13

J illian spent the rest of the night and following day with her emotions careening between frustration and the churning, aching feeling in her gut that she'd screwed something up. Just let it slip right through her fingers.

She knew she'd made the wrong choice. And why? The answer to that was easy—the only easy answer she had.

She was a coward. Too chicken to take a chance, to make the leap.

It reminded her pitifully of a nature show she'd watched on TV the week before, when she'd been trying to fall asleep. It had been all about these arctic birds that were born on the side of a craggy, towering cliff. When old enough, they had to jump off the ledge and soar to the water below, without ever having learned how to fly. If they wanted to survive, they had to take that blind leap of faith and trust their instincts to get them safely to the sea. It was beyond depressing to know that if she'd been one of those birds, she'd have died of starvation up on that rocky cliff, never taking that breathtaking leap toward her destiny.

And that's what life felt like without Jeremy. She was starving. Starving for the emotional connection, the physical contact, that exhilarating rush and piercing sensation of being *alive* that she felt whenever she was with him. Colors were more intense, smells sweeter, food richer.

He simply made her life better. Made it whole. Complete. Made *her* complete. And like a cowardly fool, she'd pushed him away. Again. She hated how pathetic that made her, but she didn't know how to fix it.

She couldn't change what she was.

So while the storm that had been building for days finally unleashed its wrath upon the mountains, she moved around her house in a daze, putting in a load of laundry, vacuuming, dusting, anything to keep her body busy, desperately trying to keep her mind blank. But it wasn't working. She kept replaying the scene from the night before over and over, wishing she'd handled it differently. Wishing she were brave enough to reach out for what she wanted and hold on to it. Fight for it. Gnash her teeth and challenge anyone who tried to take it away from her.

But the thing she wanted was Jeremy's heart, and how could she *make* someone love her? She didn't have to be a genius to know the answer to that timeless question: she couldn't. Love was either there or it wasn't. She couldn't "make" it do anything.

When her house was so clean it would have made Martha Stewart proud, she popped a bowl of popcorn and curled up in front of an old Cary Grant movie, needing something to keep her mind off the mess she'd made of her life. She'd just started to doze off, when she heard a knock on her front door, and her heart leapt into her throat. Was it Jeremy? She could feel her pulse hammering, her cheeks going hot as she wondered what to do.

Oh, god. You coward! How long are you going to keep running?

Taking a deep breath, Jillian wrenched open the door and came face-to-face with Eric. "Oh," she breathed out on a sharp stab of relief that felt suspiciously like disappointment.

His dark gray eyes glittered with humor, and the corner of his mouth twisted into a knowing smile. "Let me guess. You were expecting someone else?"

"No." She sighed, moving aside to let him in. "I'm not expecting anyone."

He took a moment to glance at the movie, then the halfeaten bowl of popcorn sitting beside a box of tissues, and turned back to give her a slow once-over. "Not that the bunny slippers aren't adorable, honey, but you look wrung out."

"Thanks. It's been an eventful few days," she muttered, flopping down on the sofa. "At this rate, I can only imagine what kind of shape I'll be in by next week."

"That bad, huh?" he asked, taking a seat in the matching leather chair.

Jillian arched a brow in his direction. "If you're going to try and tell me you haven't heard all about it, I should warn you now that I won't believe you."

A low, husky chuckle rumbled deep in his chest. "Yeah, I heard. The whole town is gossiping about you helping a blood-covered Burns to your house yesterday morning, then traipsing off to the Alley with him in the afternoon. Just what the hell were you two up to?" Her gaze slid away from his, and his laughter deepened. "I'd say from the look on your face that you were definitely up to something."

Jillian lifted her chin, trying to figure out how much to tell

him. She trusted Eric...but she knew what Jeremy would want her to do. Giving him a tense, half-hearted grin, she finally said, "It seems that Jeremy is always up to something. Life is certainly never boring around him."

Eric watched her with a wondering stare, gray eyes dark beneath the heavy fringe of his lashes, and it was as if he knew she was keeping something from him. For a moment, it looked as if he'd press her, but then he leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. "Look, there's a reason I came by."

Dread settled like a weight in her belly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm worried about you," he told her, his expression suddenly a concerned mixture of anger and frustration. "I want you to stay sharp and keep your eyes open, Jillian. Something bad is coming, and I have a feeling my father is going to be right at the center of it. I want you stay on guard around him, always."

"I will," she whispered, her thoughts racing, "but what about you? And Elise?"

His mouth twisted. "Don't worry about us. We'll be okay."

"I want your promise that you'll be careful, too," she told him. "And I'm here if you need anything, Eric. Whatever happens, I know this isn't going to be easy on your family. I want to be able to help."

He shook his head, while another soft, wry laugh rumbled deep in his chest. "You're something else, you know that, Murphy? I come to warn you that your life could be in danger from my own father, and all you're worried about is how you can help my family."

"We're friends, Eric. I care about what happens to you and Elise."

"I'm worried about her," he admitted, his tone becoming grim. "You know I can't stand him, but I put up with his bullshit to protect her. The more I argue with him, the harder it is for her. She puts on this act of being so tough, but on the inside she's still hurting from what happened to her."

"I know she is," Jillian whispered. "I can feel the rage inside of her. And the fear."

Eric's jaw worked, his lip curling with anger. "And my father does everything he can to grind her into the ground. He's done his best to systematically strip her pride. The fact that Elise refuses to stand up to him only incites his cruelty. When she was raped, he told her it was her fault for being weaker than they were. I nearly killed him, but that only upset her more because she was worried about what would happen to me. Now I just keep my distance. She may be our little sister, but Elise is militant about protecting me and Eli, and he uses that to manipulate her."

"He's good at manipulating others," she pointed out, thinking of his followers. "You've seen what's happening, Eric. The fear and animosity is spreading through the pack. It's like a sickness. And if it keeps growing, not even the Runners will be enough to stop him," she added softly, staring at her lap as she thought of Jeremy. "That's what scares me the most."

Reaching out, Eric lifted her chin with the edge of his fist. "You love him, don't you?"

She blinked, her mouth twisting with a wry smile. "It doesn't matter if I do or I don't. Jeremy and I don't have a future."

He ran his thumb over her chin in a gentle caress, then pulled his hand away. "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure," she murmured. "I think I've blown any chance by being a coward."

"Look, god knows I'm no expert on relationships," he drawled, lifting his dark brows at the vastness of that understatement. "But I know enough to believe that when you find love, it's worth taking a risk or two. Don't run away from it because you're afraid, Jillian."

Her smile fell, and she pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. "I wish it were that simple, Eric."

"Well, if you need a friend to talk it over with, you know where to find me." He rolled to his feet with an easy grace for a guy his height, and reached for his jacket.

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, he stepped out the door and headed toward his truck. Jillian waved to him as he drove away, then shut the door and made her way to the kitchen to put on the kettle for some tea. She'd just turned on the stove, when her phone rang.

"We need to talk, Jillian," her mother said in a low, suffering tone, before she'd even had the chance to say hello.

"About what?" she asked, knowing very well what her mother was calling to gripe about.

There was a stifled pause, and then her mother said, "I heard that you were at the Alley last night. What were you thinking?"

"I know this may come as a surprise to you—" she sighed "—but I know what I'm doing."

"Is it worth it, Jillian?"

She sniffed and reached for a crumpled tissue in the pocket of her robe. "A broken heart won't kill me, Mother."

"I was lucky, Jillian. I found your father just before I dried up inside, but who will you find? My mate was still out there, waiting for me to find him. But Jeremy *is* your mate, no matter how unfair—"

"It's not unfair," she argued.

Her mother made a brittle sound of frustration, then took a deep breath. "What I'm trying to say is that I was able to recover in a way that you may not be able to."

"And if I never take the risk?" she asked in a soft voice, star-

ing down at her pink bunny slippers that Sayre had given her as a joke the year before on her birthday. "What do I do then?"

"You and Eric are good together," her mother murmured.

A sharp crack of laughter burst from her chest, taking her by surprise. "Oh, god. And is that fair to Eric? Is it fair to me? I don't love him, Mother. And he doesn't love me. His mate is out there somewhere, waiting to be found. Would that be fair to either one of us?"

"I don't care if it's fair!" her mother snapped, obviously losing her tenuous hold on her temper. She was angry, but Jillian knew her anger was self-directed for the mistakes she had made...and couldn't let go of. Despite the happiness in her life, Constance Murphy had never figured out how to forgive herself for falling in love with the wrong man. Her mother's voice cracked, and she said, "I don't want to see you hurt, Jillian."

"I've been hurting for the last ten years," she said tiredly, surprised to hear herself admit it. "So enough already. Maybe it's time I just get on with my life and stop hiding from what I want."

"He'll never be there for you," her mother rasped. "He'll break you and then he'll leave. If he doesn't get you killed first."

Jillian gripped the phone so tightly, she was amazed the plastic didn't crack apart. "You should have more faith, Mother."

Whoa...and isn't that like the pot calling the kettle black?

"Jillian, what happened with your biological father nearly killed me, and he wasn't even my lifemate. Think how much more painful it will be for you with Jeremy. Do you really want to put yourself through that?"

Pushing her hair up from her forehead, she muttered, "I'm not a masochist."

"Be sarcastic if you want, but before you decide what to do, ask yourself this, Jillian. Do you trust him enough to give him the keys to your soul, to hand him that kind of power? Because he'll see it all. Do you trust him enough for that—do you trust yourself to be able to handle it when he breaks your heart?"

"I don't know," she whispered, shoving the tissue under her nose again, wondering how long it was going to take before the blasted tears dried up. "But I know that he doesn't want to hurt me," she heard herself say, the words welling up from some unknown source buried deep inside of her, taking her by surprise again.

"You're going to destroy your life, Jillian."

"But it's my decision to make, Mother. Not yours," she whispered, hanging up the phone. It rang again almost immediately, and she snatched up the receiver, snapping, "What?" into the plastic mouthpiece.

"Jillian," a deep, craggy voice rumbled from the other end of the connection, "this is Graham. I realize it's late, but I wanted to warn you that the League is aware of your whereabouts last night."

Clutching the phone to her ear, she was conscious of her heartbeat steadily gaining speed, like a train barreling its way down a track. And yet, she didn't sound afraid as she said, "Is that so?"

Silence greeted her firm tone, and then Graham cleared his throat, sounding a bit uncertain, and she almost smiled at the thought that she'd rattled the powerful Lead Elder. "Yes, well...er, what do you have to say for yourself, young lady?"

Jillian rolled her eyes, while an airy sensation seemed to expand in her chest, bringing the strangest feeling of freedom. "With all due respect, Graham, I'm a grown woman. One who doesn't answer to you or to the League. Which begs the question of why exactly we're having this discussion." "I'd be careful of the stand you take on this issue, Jillian," the Elder grunted. "It's been called to our attention that your actions of the past few days have been...questionable, at best."

"I've done nothing I'm ashamed of," she stated with firm conviction.

"Jillian, you have a great deal to lose if you follow this course."

She narrowed her eyes on her kitchen window, where her reflection stared back at her in shocked astonishment. "Are you threatening my position, Graham?"

"You know we're impatient to see you mated and married," he replied carefully.

"You've made your position clear, yes."

Graham's sigh traveled heavily over the line. "You've left us no choice, Jillian, but to invoke the Spring Rites. Come the Spring Equinox, a Mate Hunt will be called, and you *will* be awarded to the one who hunts you down."

Fury poured through her veins at his words, moving with the swiftness of a ravaging storm, raging and violent. Suddenly, things became so clear, as if Jillian had finally put on a pair of glasses that set the world into a clearer, sharper focus—one that propelled her into a blinding awareness.

All her life, she'd been the outsider. The one who was Lycan in blood, and yet had no wolf. She was Silvercrest, and yet, she was different, set apart by her power as much as Jeremy was by his bloodline. But where he had the strength to stand up to the pack, she'd been a coward. She'd let fear and feelings of inadequacy color her perception, until she only now realized she'd been trying to earn the approval of the League for all these years to prove that she was worthy.

But she didn't need their approval, dammit.

She was so tired of it. Tired of everything. Tired of fighting her feelings for the powerful Runner. Tired of her parents and the pack trying to control her life. Tired of feeling as if she was lacking, of always putting everyone else's needs before her own. Dammit, wanting fulfillment in her life didn't make her a bad person...or a bad Spirit Walker. It meant she was alive! That she had a heart and a mind, that she had a soul hungry for connection.

She *was* worthy, whether they approved of her or not, and if she had half a brain, she was going to do everything she could to set things right. And she needed to start by standing up for herself and telling the arrogant browbeaters what they could do with their archaic threats.

"Well," Graham snapped impatiently. "What do you have to say?"

Taking a deep breath, Jillian smiled at her reflection in the window. "I say you can all take your ridiculous threat and shove it, Graham. And you can quote that to the rest of the League when you tell them that it will be a cold day in hell before I ever again allow them to tell me what to do with my life!"

She hung up then, surprised to feel her legs were steady beneath her. She'd expected her knees to be knocking, she was so full of nerves and excitement, but somehow, she felt amazingly at peace, as if a cool, calm cloud had wrapped around her, sheltering her from the storm.

She'd never, in all her life, been brave enough to take a chance and go after what she wanted. She'd always played it safe. She'd always done what was expected of her.

But now, finally...after all this time, all of that was about to change.

Early morning mist curled lazily around her ankles as Jillian knocked upon the side door of the Burns's house,

while soft, featherlight raindrops gathered on her lashes like shimmering jewels.

She listened to the metallic sound of a lock being turned, then the door pulled open, and her breath froze in her lungs.

Ohmygod. He was so impossibly gorgeous, and she wanted him so very badly—wanted him with every fiber of her being. If she'd had a white flag, she'd have waved it in surrender.

Jeremy's hazel eyes darkened when he saw her, the grooves around his mouth tight with strain. "What's wrong, Jillian? Is everything okay?"

She opened her mouth, but her throat wouldn't move. She barely managed a nod, the grin playing at the corners of her mouth feeling shaky and off balance. God, she was so pathetic. Why couldn't she just grab him and demand he put an end to it?

Reaching out, Jeremy grabbed her upper arm and pulled her into the small entryway as he kicked the door shut with his foot. "Jillian, say something," he commanded, the corners of his eyes crinkling in that way that she found so sexy, so intense. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to talk to you." She licked her bottom lip, flinching from the chill of her skin, so at odds with the hot burn of anticipation in her cheeks. "I'm sorry for what happened before, at the cabin. I'm just... I mean I... The only thing I know is that I need to be close to you, Jeremy. I'm so tired of being alone. I don't want to keep fighting it—I don't want to be afraid anymore."

His eyes narrowed, the hazel all but lost in the glittering darkness of desire...in the savage burn of a decade spent in hunger. "Are you sure?" he demanded, the set of his mouth grim, determined. "I can't do this if you're going to turn away from me again. You have to be sure, Jillian."

"I am," she promised, her voice breathless. "I'm so nervous, Jeremy, but I won't run. Not again."

"It's about damn time," he groaned in a ragged tumble of words, sounding like a man who'd been tortured for far too long, and then his strong, powerful arms wrapped around her back, pulling her into the shocking heat and hardness of his body with an urgency that made her cry out. "Shhh," he crooned, pressing soft, tender, reverent kisses to her lips, her cheekbones, her tear-damp lashes. "I swear, I won't hurt you, Jillian."

The scratchy stubble of his morning beard teased her skin with every word that he spoke, and she lifted her arms, winding them around his strong neck as she tried to climb her way up his body.

"Shh..." he told her again, when a low, husky moan broke from her throat.

She blinked up at him. "Wh—"

"I don't know if they've bugged the house," he whispered, nipping her chin, the fragile line of her jaw. "And I don't want anyone but me hearing those sexy little sounds you make."

She blushed, and he buried his nose in the curve of her throat, breathing deeply. "God, you smell good."

Jillian shook with silent laughter, her eyes hot with tears that surged up from that warm, liquid glow pouring through her, until their surroundings were nothing but a hazy, buzzing nothing. The only point of reference in the world was Jeremy. Her anchor. The thing she kept swimming toward, like a beacon, a light. The source of everything that could make her feel alive. "I t-took a shower before I came over," she breathed out, the words almost soundless. "It's my soap. My shampoo."

"Uh-uh," he growled huskily, taking a playful, provocative lick of the sensitive skin beneath her ear. "It's you. Your skin, your hair, that creamy piece of heaven melting between your thighs. It gets me so hard, I feel dizzy from lack of blood to my brain."

She smiled, trembling as a breathtaking burst of happiness welled up inside of her, like the rising of a phoenix from his ashes, making her feel reborn. Jeremy pressed his mouth to hers, kissing his way into her, his tongue wicked and hungry and bold, and then he pulled away with a low, fractured groan. "I don't want to leave," he panted, his breathing ragged, "but if I don't go now, Dylan is going to show up looking for me and I don't want you to be embarrassed."

Shaking her head with confusion, she struggled to make sense out of what he was saying. "You're leaving? Now? But I thought we could... I mean, I thought we were..."

"I'm meeting Dylan in town and we're heading to the Alley for a meeting with Mason," he whispered in her ear. "I think Mase intends to pressure Dylan about getting more involved with the investigation."

"I just... I can't believe you have to go."

"I know, but...maybe it's for the best." His voice was rough with lust, and yet soft with tenderness, his lips even softer against her ear. "I'm not taking you like this our first time, up against a goddamn door. I need hours with you, Jillian. Days. Go back home and wait for me. I promise I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Okay," she said shakily, wondering if she looked as disappointed as she felt. She lowered her gaze and finally noticed that he was wearing a jacket, his long legs already wrapped up in jeans, scarred hiking boots on his feet. If her head hadn't been in the clouds when he'd opened the door, she would have realized he'd been getting ready to head out.

His fingers speared into her hair, cradling her skull, and she lifted her gaze to his, trapped by the searing intensity of his stare. "I won't let you change your mind," he warned her in a deep, sexy rasp. "Not this time, Jillian. I'm not letting you run away from me anymore."

"In case it escaped your notice," she whispered back, "I ran to *you* this morning."

His dark eyes practically glittered with victory as he stared down at her, the primitive look as possessive as it was male. "And don't think I'll ever forget it." He pressed another tender kiss to her mouth, then lifted his head, a pained expression settling over the rugged beauty of his face. "God, they owe me for this big-time."

"Yeah, and you owe me," she teased.

Jeremy went completely still, his breath suspended, and the look he gave her all but buckled her knees. His eyes... *burned*. There was no other word for it. "You better be ready to back those words up when I get back."

She didn't even bother playing coy. "Don't worry. I will be."

He moved in to kiss her again, when a low knock rattled against the door, making her jump. "Do you think that's Dylan?" she asked, blushing as she slipped to the side so that he could open it.

"Probably," he said with a grin, winking at her as he reached for the door.

Standing so that she would be behind the door when it opened, Jillian quickly combed her fingers through her hair, trying to restore it to some kind of order. A wry smile began to curl across her mouth as she thought of what Dylan's expression would be when he found her at Jeremy's house so early in the morning, until she heard someone say, "Are you happy to see me?" The words were spoken in a soft, sultry voice, and Jillian froze, blinking in surprise.

"Happy to see you?" Jeremy repeated, sounding confused. "I know you said to call first," the woman murmured, "but I couldn't wait to be alone with you again. What we had the other day was too good not to repeat." Her voice lowered, and she said, "Don't worry. I made sure no one saw me, since I know you don't want Jillian to know about us."

A shiver slipped down her spine. She *knew* that voice.

"*Elise*," Jeremy growled, "what the *hell* are you talking about?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" she stammered. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"Looks like it," Jillian said tightly, stepping out from around the door.

Elise's eyes went wide the second she saw her. "Oh god, Jillian, I'm so sorry," she mumbled, her face so pale, she looked like a ghost. "I didn't know you were there."

Elise pressed her hand to her mouth, turned around and ran away from the house, the morning fog swallowing her form by the time she'd reached the end of the drive.

Jillian stared after her, feeling dead inside. Elise was gone, and now she was left to deal with the man who'd destroyed her for the last time. Her hand pressed over her heart, as if she could will it to keep beating, despite breaking apart.

"Jillian, it's not what you think," Jeremy said in a low, urgent voice, touching her shoulder.

"Oh, that's a good one." She laughed, hating the thickness of tears she could hear in her throat. She didn't want to cry in front of him. Didn't want to let him see how damaged she was. But she was caving in on herself.

His eyes narrowed, skin tight over his cheekbones. "Just what the hell do you think is going on here?"

"I don't have to think anything, Jeremy." She lifted her arm and pointed at the spot where Elise had disappeared into the fog, and the heavens opened, the rain coming down in a hard, vicious downpour. "I saw it with my own eyes. Heard it with my own ears!"

"Did you now? And what exactly did you see? A woman I barely know standing at my door, putting on one of the worst acts I've ever seen? Jesus," he growled, ripping his hands through his hair. "Tell me you weren't buying that load of bullshit."

"It didn't sound like bullshit," she shot back. "It sounded as if she came here expecting some action."

"Yeah, that's me," he rasped bitterly, something dark and ugly and painful flashing through his eyes that made her cringe. "Just the neighborhood stud, at your service. If you have an itch, I'm the faithless half-breed who'll be more than ready to scratch it."

"I think I should go now," she said, the words so soft, they could barely be heard over the slashing rain hammering away at the side of the house.

"Don't do this, Jillian." His voice was low, rough, stripped down to raw emotion.

"I'm not doing anything, Jeremy. I'm just leaving."

His jaw locked, hands fisting at his sides. "Ten years ago, I asked you to believe in me, to have faith, not to turn your back on me, and you did it anyway. I won't ask you again, Jillian. If you walk out that door, I'm leaving. And this time, I'm *never* coming back. Are you sure that's what you want?"

She could feel the salty sting of tears spilling down her face, but couldn't stop them. His urgency tugged at her heart, but she didn't trust herself. And obviously, she didn't trust *him.* "There isn't any other way."

"When you realize how wrong you are, it'll be too late." His words rang with solid, uncompromising finality, making her flinch. "When you learn the truth and want to come after me, don't."

She nodded and stepped out the door, the first drop of rain

settling on her cheek like a tear. "Do me a favor and be careful," he said to her back, his tone brittle and cold. "Until this nightmare is over, Shadow Peak isn't safe, not even for you."

"I can take care of myself."

A bitter sound jerked past his lips, angry and hard. "Yeah, you do that."

Jillian walked down his drive, down the street, making her way home cocooned within a thick, impenetrable bubble, not even feeling the rain that soaked through her clothes, drenching her. She walked up her front steps, opened her front door and locked it behind her.

Then she slipped to the floor in a wet, sodden puddle, and buried her face in her hands.

Chapter 14

Dragging her wilted body through her front door the following afternoon, Jillian dropped her jacket on the living-room floor, not even bothering with the peg on the wall. Not wanting any interruptions, she managed to make it to the kitchen so that she could take her phone off the hook, then powered off her cell and tossed it onto the table along with her keys. After that, she kicked off her rain-soaked shoes, stumbled into the living room and collapsed on her sofa. Staring at the blank screen of her television set, she shook her head in amazement at the day she'd already had.

She'd awakened that morning feeling like death warmed over. After standing beneath the burning spray of the shower until the hot water ran cold, she'd wrapped herself up in her robe and cuddled up on her sofa, staring at nothing...while her mind tortured her by running through yesterday's wrenching scene, over and over and over. She didn't know how long she might have stayed like that, if Sayre hadn't come knocking at her door. She hadn't seen her little sister since the night of the challenge fight, and it seemed like a lifetime ago. So much had happened since then, so much had changed, and yet, so much had remained exactly the same.

Jillian had no doubt that rumors were flying around town about what had happened the morning before, so she guessed she should have been expecting her sister to stop by and check up on her. Like a merciful angel, Sayre had come bearing fresh baked cinnamon rolls, steaming cups of coffee and a friendly face to take her mind off Jeremy.

Of course, once they'd finished their breakfast, she'd learned that Jeremy was *exactly* what Sayre had wanted to talk about. Amazingly, her sister refused to believe that Jeremy Burns wasn't madly in love with her, and argued her case with the same boundless energy that she did everything in life.

By the time Sayre had left, Jillian had felt more confused than ever. She'd just gotten dressed and cuddled up on her sofa again when another round of knocking, this one pounding and hard, had rattled her door. Praying it wasn't her mother, she'd shuffled to the door, blinking in stunned surprise at the sight of Danna Gibson standing on her front porch.

"If you're here to try and kill me again—" she'd sighed "—can it wait 'til tomorrow?"

"I know you have every right to hate me, and I don't blame you," Danna had said in a low, ragged voice, and Jillian had suddenly realized how devastated the other woman looked. "But...I need your help."

Jillian had blinked, unable to believe what she was hearing. "You need *my* help?" Danna had given a jerky nod, her expression strained while dark circles gave her eyes a hollow appearance. "It's about Carly, my little sister. She's been missing for over a week. We didn't tell anyone, because we...we didn't know what she was doing and we figured she was with a friend of hers named Melissa who went missing at the same time." She'd rolled her shoulder in an angry gesture, and pushed both hands back through the tangled mess of her hair. "Melissa brought Carly home last night, and she's hurt. I can't get the bleeding to stop and I don't know what to do. I know I've been a bitch to you and that you must hate me, but I need you to come and help her. *Please*."

"Where's she bleeding?" she'd asked, already grabbing her sneakers from beside the front door and pulling them on her bare feet.

"I think she's been raped," Danna had said, her voice breaking as a dry, choking sob broke from her throat. "She says she was with some human guys down in Covington, but I think it was... I think she was with some of the rogues everyone's whispering about. The guy she was dating, he got in tight with Simmons before Simmons turned. I warned her to stay away from him, but you know how well teenagers listen," she'd groaned, while Jillian grabbed her jacket and pulled it on.

"Did you drive here?" she'd asked, grabbing her house keys. Danna had nodded, and Jillian had locked her front door behind her, the brutal chill of the morning freezing her to the bone as they'd run to Danna's car parked on the side of the road. They'd made it to Danna's parents' house within minutes, and the rest of the morning had gone by in a gruesome, nightmarish blur. Carly had been in bad shape, but Jillian had finally been able to stop the bleeding and get the teenager's condition stabilized. She'd tried, while healing her, to get an idea of who was behind the crime, but the details had been fragmented in Carly's mind, nothing but a chaotic jumble of brutal, horrifying images.

The young Lycan was going to be weak for a while, but her body would heal, and with the support of her family, hopefully her spirit would, as well.

Since the rain was coming down hard again, Danna had driven her back home. After they'd pulled to the curb in front her house, she'd reached for the door handle, ready to climb out, when Danna had leaned over and grabbed hold of her elbow.

Casting a questioning look back at the Lycan, Jillian had listened with a wary sense of caution as Danna had said, "There's something I want to tell you."

Hoping like hell the woman wasn't about to challenge her to a fight on her front lawn, she'd asked, "What is it, Danna?"

The other woman had swallowed, her complexion turning a sickly shade of green, before croaking, "I didn't...I've never... Hell, this isn't easy. I've never been much good at apologizing, but I want you to know that I'm sorry for the way I've acted."

Jillian knew she couldn't have been more shocked in that moment if she'd been whacked upside the head with a shovel. "Uhh...thanks."

"There's more," Danna had muttered, taking her hand from Jillian's elbow and crossing her arms over her bountiful chest.

"Okay."

Her mouth grim, Danna had growled, "Burns never touched me once you came back to town."

Jillian had blinked, shaking her head in confusion.

"Not once, and believe me, I used to try everything to get him to break. We all did, even most of your so-called friends. But after you came home from school, he wouldn't even look twice at any of us. I just thought it might help for you to know that. You deserve the truth, after everything you did for Carly."

Somehow, Jillian had managed to struggle past her shock long enough to stammer, "I—I don't know what to say."

Danna had given a weary laugh. "Hey, like I said, I owe you the truth after what you did today. And who knows. Maybe your boy is one of the few exceptions to the golden rule that *men are pigs*." A wistful look had entered her weary eyes, and the corner of her wide mouth had actually tipped in a smile. "God knows it'd give me hope to think that there's at least one man out there who knows how to keep his pants zipped when away from home."

"Thank you, Danna, for telling me the truth," Jillian had murmured numbly, and finally climbed out of the truck.

Now, as she sat on her sofa, exhausted from the long hours spent healing Carly, Jillian accepted that she didn't know with any certainty if Danna's story was true—and if it was, then she had to accept that the person who'd told her about Danna and Jeremy all those years ago had lied. For all she knew, Danna felt guilty and was simply trying to ease her conscience. She had no proof, no evidence. No, the only way she would ever truly know the truth was if she looked into Jeremy's mind, but that was never going to happen.

God, the thought of Jeremy made her chest hurt, and she pressed her hand between her breasts, as if she could stop the ache. But this was a wound that she couldn't heal—one she wasn't even sure she could survive.

Pulling her tired body from her sofa, Jillian had just turned toward the hall, thinking she'd lie down for a while, when her door rattled with yet *another* knock. For a split second, she was sorely tempted just to ignore it.

But the knocking came again, louder this time, and she quietly muttered, "I'm coming, dammit. Hold your horses."

Yanking open the door, Jillian almost slammed it shut again when she found Elise Drake's big blue eyes blinking back at her. Chewing on the corner of her lower lip, Elise said, "Can I come in?"

Jillian crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you here because of what happened yesterday?"

"I need to talk to you. Please, Jillian," she begged, the Lycan's eyes glistening with a sheen of tears as she held her cold gaze. "It's important, but I can't talk about it out here. I need to explain what happened."

"You're welcome to try—" she sighed, stepping aside to let her in "—but it won't change anything, Elise. I thought you were my friend."

Elise came inside and stopped with her back to the front window, arms wrapped around her middle, her sleek silver leggings and long charcoal-gray tunic giving her a wraithlike appearance. "I *am* your friend, Jilly. Which is why I'm going to tell you what happened. All of it."

With a frown tugging at the corners of her mouth, Jillian closed the door.

Eighty-nine. Ninety. Ninety-one.

Jeremy's knuckles were bruised from the endless beating they'd taken as he pounded the hell out of his punching bag, but he kept going, kept pushing. He didn't have a choice. He needed the physical burn of pain to keep his mind blank. The second he slowed down and gave himself time to think, he knew he was going to fall apart, and this time he didn't know if he'd be able to pull himself back together again—or if the rage would simply overtake him, destroying who he was.

Too much of a risk. And so he kept pounding away at the bag.

Mason had dropped by earlier, wanting an explanation for

his return to the Alley, but he hadn't been able to deal. Thankfully his partner knew him well enough to understand when to leave him alone, and had gone back home to his wife. Probably losing himself in married bliss, Jeremy thought with a sneer, switching to his right leg for high kicks. It was unfair of him to be snide, but he couldn't help it.

Finally, his muscles demanded a break from the relentless torture. Exchanging his drenched sweats for a pair of jeans and T-shirt, Jeremy slipped on his boots, wrapped a towel around his neck and headed into the kitchen. Standing at his sink, he watched the weak threads of sunlight struggle against the heavy storm clouds scarring the horizon. The promise of more foul weather matched his mood, irritable and on edge, with an uneasy heaviness in his gut...as if he were waiting for a hammer to fall.

And it was headed straight for his head.

He wanted to pace from one side of his cabin to the other, but the key to control was remaining still, reining in the driving, visceral urges of his beast. Like heat building from the bottom of a pan set over flame, it roiled beneath the surface of his hot skin, eager for the chance to prowl...to rage...to seethe. It wanted to rip itself from the confines of his flesh and sink its claws into something. Wanted to experience that rich, drugging rush of pleasure that came with the savage act of pure, mindless destruction. But he was a man, as well as a wolf; he'd learned long ago to control that darker side of his nature and temper it with reason.

Unfortunately, his reserves of reason and restraint were already running low.

When he heard a knock on his front door, he wondered if Mason was back for another shot at getting the sordid story out of him, but found Sayre Murphy standing on his doorstep instead. "Sayre?" he rumbled, shaking his head with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Jeremy," she said shyly, her pale cheeks tinged with a soft flush of color. "I hate to bother you at home, but I really need to talk to you."

His muscles cramped, and Jeremy knew it wasn't from his work out. No, it was the thought of having to sit here and talk about Jillian, but he couldn't be a bastard to Sayre and send her walking. The kid was just looking out for her sister; she didn't deserve his anger. "Do your folks know you're here?" he asked her, stepping out of the way so that she could come inside.

"No..." she sighed, while he grabbed the end of the towel, rubbing the remaining drops of sweat from his face "...and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Just promise me you're going to be careful," he lectured, making his voice stern. "You shouldn't be out by yourself. There's too much weird stuff going on in the mountains right now. It isn't safe."

"I know," she said with a small shiver. "I was careful, I promise. I just really needed to see you," she told him, the look in her big eyes too solemn for his peace of mind.

"It's good to see you, Sayre," he breathed out on a soft burst of air, "but if this is about Jillian, I don't wanna hear it."

"Please, Jeremy," she implored. "She doesn't know that I'm here. In fact, she's probably going to kill me for interfering, but I really need to talk to you."

He cursed a silent string of words in his head, then jerked his chin toward the kitchen. "Come and take a seat at the table. I'll put on some coffee."

Sayre followed him into the kitchen and folded herself into a chair while he went about putting on a fresh pot. When the machine began to gurgle and hiss, steam rushing from its top, Jeremy propped his hip against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, I'm listening."

She shifted nervously, her hands folded together on the tabletop—to keep them from shaking, he suspected. "Um, has Jillian ever told you about our mother?"

He arched one brow, wondering where this was going. "What about her?"

"If you have to ask," Sayre murmured, a crooked smile on her lips while that sad look still lingered in her eyes, "then she hasn't told you. I'm also guessing that she hasn't told you about the way of a witch and her heart."

The way of a witch and her heart? What the hell did that mean?

"I'm trying to keep it together, Sayre, but if you don't just spit it out, I'm gonna lose what little of my sanity is actually left. Have mercy and just say whatever it is that has you grinning like a little urchin."

For the next few minutes, Jeremy found himself listening, stunned, as Sayre told him the story of the man Constance Murphy had fallen in love with while away at school; the Lycan who was Jillian's biological father.

"You see, Jeremy, when a witch opens herself sexually to a man," she explained in a low, soft voice, her face burning with embarrassment, "he's given insight into her soul...into her very heart, right down to every emotion, every private thought and feeling that she holds for him. All of it, every intimate detail, is shared through their connection. When Jillian's father realized how thoroughly our mother cared for him, he used that love against her, because he didn't love her in return. He didn't cherish the gift he'd been given, and though she's happy with my father, there's a part of her that's never healed."

Silence settled between them, followed only by the cracks

of thunder rolling in hard and fast, heralding the sudden arrival of another violent storm. Jeremy stared at the gleaming finish on his kitchen floor, his mind taking him back over a decade ago, to the time when he'd fallen in love with a golden-haired imp who made his heart soft and his body hard; who turned his entire world on its ear. "So all this time, Jillian has pushed me away because she was afraid of me seeing..."

"How much she loves you," Sayre finished for him, her voice watery with the silent tears rolling down her cheeks. "All her life, our mother has been warning Jillian of what would happen if she gave her love and her body to a man who didn't return that love."

Oh, god, he thought, while a searing pain crushed through his head...through his heart.

Christ, it all made such perfect sense now that he could see the pieces that had been missing. He'd been so intent on protecting himself, that he'd never opened himself up to her, never revealed his feelings. Not then. And not in the past few days.

He'd told her that he wanted her, that he needed her. Hell, dozens of times. But he'd never—not once—admitted that he felt something more for her than lust.

"I've got to talk to her," he rasped, taking the towel from around his neck. He'd just tossed it on the table when Sayre suddenly reached out, grasping his right wrist with both hands as he moved past her.

"Jilly is in trouble," she whispered, her eyes shocked wide in fear, voice so soft he could barely hear her.

"What?" he grunted, staring down at her, but she was... gone, her eyes glazed...her mind in another place. "Sayre," he barked, taking her shoulders and giving her a gentle shake. "Sayre, come back, honey. What are you talking about? What's wrong with Jillian?" Blinking rapidly, she lifted her gaze, staring up at him while a cold look of horror spread over her fey face. "I—I don't know how to explain it, Jeremy. I just...feel things... sometimes. I can't control it. But something in my head is screaming that she needs you. That she's in danger!"

"Goddamn it," he growled, grabbing his keys and cell phone off the nearby counter, cursing a foul streak of words when he saw that his battery was completely dead. Tossing the useless piece of technology back on the counter, he rushed out of the kitchen as Sayre followed beside him, her eyes huge in the paleness of her face. "I want you to get Mason and tell him to meet me at Jillian's as fast as he can," he told her, pulling open the front door as he gave her a hard look. "Then you stay at the cabin with Torrance, Sayre. No matter what, you're not to head off into the woods alone. You understand?"

She nodded, trembling, clearly terrified for her sister, and Jeremy's heart turned over in his chest. "It's going to be okay, honey." He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but knew it looked strained by his own fear. "You just do what I said, and then start trying to get through to Jillian on the phone. If you can get her, tell her I'm on my way."

"I don't expect you to forgive me," Elise rasped, glancing nervously out the front window, while Jillian settled back on the sofa. "But I want to explain the reason I went to Jeremy's house yesterday."

Turning away from the window, she said, "My father is having both this house, and Jeremy's house, watched. When he saw you leave yesterday morning, he waited to see if you would go to Jeremy. When you did, he called me and told me that I was going to help him get the Runner out of town once and for all. Said he had important plans and that Jeremy couldn't be around to get in his way." "And you agreed?" Jillian asked, shaking her head in confusion.

A wry sound that was too brittle to be laughter fell from Elise's lips. "At first? No, I told him to go to hell. But he's lost his grip on reality, Jillian. He told me that if I didn't do as he said, he'd make sure the Runners turned their sights on Eric, said he'd fix it so that evidence turned up that would incriminate my brother and make it look as if he was in league with the rogues. I panicked, and so I...I did it. I only live around the corner from the Burns's house. Like a puppet," she sneered, curling her lip with disgust, "I jumped to do his bidding and put on that stupid, horrible act."

Jillian wet her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue, a strange tingling sensation surging through her limbs, her skin feeling shivery and hot at the same time, while ideas tumbled over themselves, one after the other in her tired mind. "So then...it was all an act? It was a setup, because Drake wanted Jeremy out of Shadow Peak?"

Elise nodded, looking miserable, and lifted one shaking hand to tuck the burgundy fall of her hair behind her ear. "Think about it, Jilly. I may not shape-shift, but I'm still a Lycan. I could scent you the second he opened the door. I knew you were there, even though I couldn't see you. I'm so sorry," she sniffed, and Jillian held up the box of tissues. Elise took one with an unsteady smile, then collapsed into the chair beside the sofa. "Anyway, I panicked and didn't know what else to do," she confessed in a low, broken voice. "I couldn't let my father do that to Eric, and he would have. I know he would. He'll use any of us, any way he chooses, so long as it gets him what he wants, and he's angry at Eric for refusing to support him.

"Then, this afternoon," Elise rasped, a fresh surge of tears spilling from her eyes, "I heard him talking to Cooper Sheffield, and I knew it was about you. You're in danger, Jillian. I don't know what they have planned, but they said something about using you as an example of what happens to those who befriend the Runners. I think—"

A jarring burst of laughter came from the street, and Elise flinched, the slim line of her brows pulling together in a frown as she glanced toward the front window. Standing, she went and looked around the edge of the sheer curtains. "I guess there's a challenge tonight," she murmured. "There's a crowd out on the street, heading toward the woods."

It was nearly impossible to pull her mind off Jeremy and Drake and what she'd just learned, but Jillian closed her eyes, trying to remember. "This whole week has been a blur, but now that I think about it, I think there *is* a challenge planned for tonight." She opened her eyes, frowning. "I should be there, but I'm not up for it."

Elise slanted her a weary look. "Me, either." She sighed, rubbing at her forehead. "And we need—" In the next instant, she screamed, stumbling forward, and then she went down hard on her hands and knees, her body jerking as if she were having a violent seizure.

"Elise!" Jillian shouted, rushing forward, but Elise's head shot up, her top lip pulled back over teeth that were slowly lengthening into fangs. "Don't!" she moaned, while tears poured from her eyes, drenching her face. "Oh, god, Jillian. Don't come near me. I don't... I don't know what's happening."

A raw, wrenching sound of pain ripped out of Elise's throat, another hard wave of spasms racking her body, and Jillian could see the ridges of her spine shifting beneath the thin cotton of her shirt. Elise whimpered, her words garbled as the delicate bones in her jaw began cracking... lengthening. Blood poured out of her nose, and trickled from

her left ear in a thin, meandering trail. "Jillian, get out! I c-can't...can't control it. It's coming. Get out of here!" she growled, her voice growing deeper, more guttural, and Jillian finally registered the danger she was in.

If Elise couldn't control the change, there was every chance she wouldn't be able to control her wolf, either. Which meant that the second her shift was complete, Jillian would become her prey. Squeezing her eyes shut, Jillian hesitated. She wanted to help her friend, but she knew she would be no match for a feral werewolf. Elise could rip to her shreds within seconds, and Jillian would die without ever getting the chance to set things right with Jeremy.

Oh, God...Jeremy. She didn't want to die without seeing him again—without ever telling him how much she had always loved him. How sorry she was that she'd allowed so many things to stand between them.

A crackling surge of lightning struck the top of her house, jarring the walls, at the same time Elise let out a sharp, sinister howl...and Jillian suddenly realized she was already too late.

Her time had just run out.

Chapter 15

Knowing her only chance for survival lay in a sprint for the door, Jillian opened her eyes and found a fully formed werewolf blocking the exit, its long claws flexing sinisterly at its sides, reddish gold fur rippling as it drew in each deep, bellowing breath. Above the muzzled length of its snout, blue eyes glowed like the inside of a flame, its upper lip curling to reveal the long, deadly length of its fangs.

Now she was going to have to fight her way out, when she knew she was still too weak from healing Carly to win, and hope she could make it to her car before Elise caught her. Jillian knew she didn't stand a chance, but for Jeremy, she was willing to try.

"Elise?" she whispered, but there was no flash of recognition in the beast's eyes, only the steady, relentless burn of savage aggression, its nostrils flaring as it scented her fear. Jillian shook her hands out at her sides, searching for every last ounce of power she could scrounge up from the depths of her soul, when suddenly there was a terrible banging against her front door. The wolf lurched at the sound, and Jillian nearly collapsed with relief as a deep voice roared her name.

"Jillian! Are you in there?" Jeremy shouted, and the door rattled so hard that the frame began to crack. "Open the god-damn door!"

She cried out at the sound of his voice, the pour of relief flooding through her veins so intense, she felt light-headed. The wolf snarled in reaction, then threw back its head and let out an unearthly howl that shook the glass in her front window...and had Jeremy shouting even louder, his deep voice stark with terror.

"What the hell is going on in there?" he roared, and something solid and heavy hit her door, like his shoulder, and she knew he was breaking it down.

The werewolf's head lowered at the noise, a coarse chuffing sound surging from its chest, and Jillian took a step back, sensing that it was only a matter of time before it attacked. "Hurry!" she called out, and the seething beast instantly lunged for her, taking her to the ground with its overpowering weight, slamming her into the floor. Screaming, Jillian watched as its long, deadly fangs flashed toward her throat, glinting silvery white in the pale light of the room. She called up every ounce of power she could find lingering in her body and mentally pushed at the wolf, at the same time she lifted her arms, sinking her fingers into its warm fur as she fought to hold it at bay...but she wasn't strong enough to throw it off.

Searching deeper, Jillian shoved with everything she had, feeling as if she were turning her body inside out. Blood began trickling from her nose while a dull roar filled her head, the pressure intense, as if her skull would crack in two. She had no idea how many seconds her power bought her, but suddenly Jeremy was crashing through her door, the splintering wood cracking with a sickening wail. With a single, piercing glance, he took in the situation, and without any hesitation, he threw himself at the crouching wolf. His hands transformed into deadly claws as he slammed into the beast, and together they crashed to the side, rolling over her livingroom floor, while the sky broke open again with another thundering strike of lightning. Rain began coming down like a great, roaring waterfall beyond the open doorway, drumming against the roof, its fresh, crisp scent washing over the nightmarish scene with the surging breeze, while Jeremy and the wolf battled in a vicious, violent striking of claws and gnashing fangs.

Tears filled her eyes when she saw the werewolf's sharp claws slash across Jeremy's chest and his arm. She pressed her hand to her trembling mouth, torn between the need to help him and the fear that she'd only get in his way, when a blur of movement brushed past her from the doorway, and Mason joined his partner. Together, the two Bloodrunners quickly subdued the rage-filled wolf, shoving it face-first against the floor and pinning its powerful arms behind its back.

With a low snarl, Mason's claws reached for the beast's neck, and Jillian shook herself out of her stupor. "No, don't kill it!" she screamed, and the Bloodrunner sent her a sharp look of surprise. "It's Elise," she gasped, struggling to draw in enough air for her explanation. "Something's wrong. She d-didn't want to change. I d-don't know what happened, but this isn't her. I mean, it's her...but she can't control it! It just...overtook her. One minute we were talking, and in the next she was...changing."

The Runners shared a dark look, but neither said a word. Pulling back his right arm, Mason's claws shifted into a clenched human fist. Jillian knew he meant to knock the snarling, bucking wolf unconscious with a blow to the temple, but just before he struck, the beast's shape bled away and Elise regained her human form. Releasing her arms, the men shifted away from her shivering body, and Jillian grabbed the babysoft afghan from the end of her sofa, wrapping it around Elise's trembling shoulders as her friend curled onto her side, keening like a creature in pain. "It's okay," Jillian murmured in a low, soothing voice. "It's okay now, honey. Everything's okay."

Lifting her gaze, she found Jeremy staring down at her with an arrested expression on his face. His terror and concern for her were evident in his shattered appearance—his mouth grim, a torrent of emotions flashing through the glowing depths of his eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked, pulling her into his arms and holding her so tightly, she could barely breathe in his crushing embrace.

"I'm fine," she assured him, gazing up into his ruggedly handsome face, while everything that had happened, everything that she'd learned and experienced that day, crashed through her mind in a dizzying, chaotic jumble of details. "God, Jeremy, I have so much to tell you. Elise...she came here to confess that it was all a set-up, that scene at your house. Her father put her up to it, because Drake wanted you out of town."

His eyes narrowed with anger, but before he could comment, she said, "And before Elise got here, I had a visit from Danna Gibson."

"Danna?" he croaked, his hazel gaze going wide in surprise.

"I'll have to tell you about Carly, her little sister, later. What I want to tell you now is that Danna apologized for... everything. She told me that you never touched her after I came home from school." "Did you believe her?" he asked, his expression guarded, and yet somehow tender, without any trace of the anger or bitterness she had expected.

"I wanted to believe her," she told him, "but I knew that the only way I was ever really going to learn the truth about what had happened was if I looked inside of you. And then, when I thought I was going to die, I finally realized that—"

Suddenly, her confession was interrupted by a series of unearthly cries coming from the street, spilling in through the open doorway, making her heart clench with terror all over again. Jeremy moved to slam the broken door shut, while Mason peered through the front window. "I don't believe it. We have more Lycans shifting in the street," the Runner growled.

"Wh-what do we do?" Jillian stammered, her jaw shaking so badly she could barely control it.

"We get the hell out of here," Jeremy muttered, cutting a sharp look at his partner.

"I've got Elise," Mason grunted, bending down to lift the trembling woman into his arms.

"Stay behind me," Jeremy ordered, opening the door, one hand clenched around Jillian's wrist, holding her close to his back. The Lycans were still contorting in the street, their changes not yet complete, tortured bodies straining in agony as they writhed upon the rain-drenched asphalt. "Your truck's closer, Mase. We need to make a run for it. Now!" Jeremy shouted, and Jillian struggled to keep her footing on the slippery sidewalk as they ran out into the rain, sprinting for the truck. Jeremy pulled open the driver's side door and shoved her up into the front, while Mason laid Elise out over the backseat. Jumping in behind the wheel, Jeremy caught the keys that his partner tossed his way and cranked the engine. Mason jumped in on the passenger's side, slamming his door as the first werewolf charged the truck. Through the windows, Jillian could see her neighbors opening their doors to those who were searching for a safe place to hide, while the feral wolves began closing in. Jeremy floored the gas pedal, sending the tires squealing while the end fishtailed, and then they finally found purchase and the truck surged forward. The driving sheets of rain made it impossible to see clearly, even with the windshield wipers on high, but Jeremy kept the accelerator down. A powerful set of claws scratched at Mason's window, making a bloodcurdling sound, until Jeremy dropped a gear and the truck sped away with a roaring burst of speed.

While Jeremy drove like a demon down the rain-soaked residential streets, his partner pulled out his cell phone. "I'm gonna try to get through to Dylan, if the storm hasn't wiped out the network."

It took several tries, but Mason finally gave a soft grunt of satisfaction.

"You have a problem on Lassiter Avenue," he growled into the wafer-thin phone. "I don't know what's going on, but Lycans are having their wolves... Hell, it's like they're being ripped out against their will and the goddamn things are feral. Jeremy and I have Jillian and Elise Drake, but you need to get on the scene before somebody gets killed."

Jillian could hear Dylan's furious reaction to the disturbing news, and then Mason said, "Just let us know when it's over. We'll be waiting for an explanation."

Shaking her head, Jillian was struggling to make sense out of everything that had happened when Elise's frail whisper reached her ears. "*Jilly*."

Twisting around, Jillian reached over the front seat and grabbed Elise's hand as her friend struggled to get out a broken, stammering string of apologies.

"Hey, it's okay," she murmured, trying to calm her down.

"No one's angry at you, Elise. You didn't do anything wrong. Everything's going to be fine."

"I need...I n-need to tell you what happened," Elise croaked, tears leaking from her eyes, leaving salty trails down her cheeks. "I have to t-tell you, Jilly."

"It can wait," she said gently, squeezing Elise's hand. "Right now, you need to rest and save your strength."

"But it was my f-father," she whispered, her mouth quivering.

"Oh, god," Jillian gasped, and at the same time Jeremy slammed on the brakes, jerking the truck to a screeching, jarring stop that nearly sent them skidding off the side of the rain-slick road.

"I could feel him in my h-head," Elise stammered, shaking like a leaf caught in the savage grasp of a storm. "Somehow, he made me change, and I c-could hear his voice telling me to k-kill you. And I think th-there was an-another one, but I couldn't tell who it was. It was only my father's voice that kept ordering me, t-telling me what to do. I couldn't couldn't control it."

Finally, Elise's eyes slid closed, and she slumped against the back of the seat, overtaken with exhaustion.

"Son of a bitch," Jeremy snarled, his expression savage as he shoved open his door and jumped out of the truck.

"Where the hell are you going?" Mason demanded, rushing out the passenger's side as Jillian scrambled out of the driver's.

"Jeremy!" she screamed, terror sinking deep as she suddenly realized what he was doing, watching as he headed north, cutting across a field of tall grass that led back into the forest. He was going back to Shadow Peak, toward the northwest side of town that bordered Stefan Drake's property. Jillian rushed after him, but her bare feet slipped the moment she hit the rain-drenched grass and she fell on her hands and knees, sinking into the muddy soil. "Jeremy!" she screamed again.

Turning, Jeremy kept moving, walking backward as he yelled, "Get her back to the Alley, Mase, and keep her there!"

Strong arms suddenly banded her middle, pulling her to her feet. Jillian kicked and screamed, struggling to break free of Mason's hold, but he wouldn't budge.

"Dammit, Jeremy!" Mason shouted over her head, as the rain began coming down even harder, blurring the lines of Jeremy's body. His partner obviously knew, just as Jillian did, that Jeremy was heading back to Shadow Peak. After hearing Elise's confession, he was going after Drake for making an attempt on her life. "Wait for backup!" Mason snarled with fury. "That's an order!"

"Oh, god. You can't let him go!" she sobbed, hysterical, terrified that she was never going to see him again—that she was going to lose him. "What the hell is wrong with you? Go after him!" she cried, watching through rain and tears as Jeremy disappeared into the heavy line of trees. "He's going to get himself killed facing Drake on his own!"

"Jillian, calm down," Mason grunted, his chest heaving as he finally turned and carried her back to the truck. "Jeremy won't do anything stupid. He's too smart to—"

"He isn't thinking straight!" she seethed, wanting to scratch and claw at him, if only it would make him listen to reason. "You have to help him!"

"I'm going after him, as soon as I get you and Elise to the Alley," he barked, pushing her across the front seat of the truck as he climbed behind the wheel and immediately floored the gas pedal. She cast a swift glance at the passenger's side door, wondering... But knew she'd never catch up to Jeremy in time. Pulling his phone back out, Mason tried to calm her down. "He won't be alone, Jillian. I'm going to call Dylan back and tell him to head to Drake's."

"By the time you drive us to the Alley, you'll be too late," she croaked, knowing there was only one hope—if she could just convince the Runner to trust her judgment. "And Dylan doesn't have the guts to stand up to Drake. You know that! You've got to call Eric, Mase. He'll help, I swear."

Mason slanted her a grim look, then cut his gaze back to the winding road. "You want me to call the son of the man Jeremy intends to kill for help?"

"Eric isn't like his father. Please, Mason," she whispered, clutching on to his arm with her muddy fingers, feeling as she were grasping at a lifeline. "Trust me. If you ask for his help, Eric will do the right thing. I know he will."

Mason worked his jaw, cursing something foul under his breath, then finally let out a harsh sigh. "You had better not be wrong," he muttered, handing her the phone. "Go ahead. Dial his goddamn number. But let me do the talking."

By the time Jeremy broke out of the forest at the edge of Stefan Drake's property, evening had fallen. The rain had finally eased to a light mist, but his clothes were soaked with water, as well as the blood that seeped from the shallow wounds Elise's claws had slashed across his arms and abdomen. And yet he didn't feel the pain from his injuries. All he felt was the hot, scalding burn of anger, his wolf prowling just beneath the surface of his skin—the savagery of the rumbling thunder the perfect complement to his murderous rage.

The second he'd heard Elise's whispered words, he'd known what he had to do.

Drake's house sat in silent darkness to his left, but there

was an eerie glow of light coming from the ancient barn at the back of the property, off to his right. Lowering his head, Jeremy sniffed at the air, catching what he wanted.

Drake.

The wind was on his side, and he sniffed at the air again. His prey wasn't alone. He could just catch Cooper Sheffield's foul stench, and wondered with a low snarl if Drake had felt he needed his muscle for protection, now that his attack on Jillian's life had failed.

Flexing his hands at his sides, his flesh burned as his claws pricked the tips of his fingers. Blood trickled from his hands, mixing with the rainwater on the soft grass beneath his feet, his gums burning as his fangs struggled to break free. And yet, he resisted the shift, knowing he needed to retain as much of his humanity as he could, before the seething darkness in him overshadowed the reason of the man.

The wolf wanted blood—but the Bloodrunner wanted justice.

Careful to stay downwind, Jeremy traveled the edge of the property, until he came around the far side of the barn. Sheffield's burgundy Avalanche had been left idling near the barn's entrance, the metallic scent of the engine thick in the evening air. They were obviously in a hurry...but Jeremy had no intention of letting Drake escape. He could hear them inside, their voices raised in anger. Moving with the stealth skill of a hunter, he'd just reached for the heavy wooden door when a sound off to his left had him spinning around, his muscles tensed, ready to strike.

Jeremy blinked, unable to believe what he was seeing. Eric Drake stood no more than five feet away, his hands lifted in a gesture of peace, his clothes as rain-soaked as his own. "What the hell are you doing here?" Jeremy snarled in a stifled rasp, while lightning crackled across the sky and thunder rumbled like a monstrous bellow of rage.

Eric's gray eyes burned with a hard, steely purpose. "Your partner called me. He told me about Jillian and my sister. Then he asked for a favor."

It was on the tip of Jeremy's tongue to tell the Lycan there was no way in hell Mason would have asked him for help, when he suddenly realized just whose idea calling Eric must have been. "Jillian was wrong to involve you. I can handle this on my own."

"I'm sure you can." The Lycan took a step closer, his face set in an expression of pure, ruthless determination. "But the good news is that you won't have to."

"Just stay the hell out of my way," Jeremy grunted. Turning back to the door, he kicked it open, grinning with cold satisfaction when Drake and Sheffield spun around in startled surprise. They'd both been so engrossed in their argument, neither had noticed they had company.

"Well, imagine that," Jeremy remarked with deceptive calm, his voice soft as he stepped into the dank structure, aware of Eric following just behind him. "You two actually look surprised to see me."

The barn was completely open inside, with exposed beams, a rustic plank floor and an assortment of tables and chairs clustered together in groups. Jeremy guessed the building was used as a headquarters for Drake's "pure-blooded" movement, and it was almost as if he could smell the thick scent of hatred in the stale air, the taste rotten and sharp against his tongue.

Drake and Sheffield stood in the center of the floor, before a massive oak table littered with a variety of automatic handguns and rifles, reminding Jeremy of the healing bullet wound in his shoulder. He had no doubt, now, that the shots in the forest that day had come from the pack's security chief. Sheffield took a step forward, his expression carved with sneering malice, but Drake stayed his second-in-command with a touch on his arm. "It's all right, Cooper," he murmured, stepping around him. "We have nothing to fear. After all, he's here because he wishes to do the honorable thing and challenge me for daring to rid the world of that pathetic little mate of his. Isn't that right, Runner?"

"I'm challenging you, all right," Jeremy offered in a gritty rasp, allowing a hard smile to curl the edges of his mouth. "And I'm going to enjoy watching you die when I'm done with you."

"And I see you've brought my son along for help," the Elder drawled, throwing back his head with a faint, hoarse cackle. "How pathetically fitting, considering Eric never could choose the winning side. He's always been one to champion the underdog, like that worthless sister of his."

Jeremy could sense the cold burn of fury pouring through the Lycan, though Eric refused to rise to the bait. Instead, he crossed his arms over his broad chest, his attention focused on Sheffield, just daring the bastard to make a move, and Jeremy couldn't help but admire his restraint. He could only assume that Eric Drake had mastered the art of ignoring his psychotic father a long time ago.

Keeping his own attention focused on Drake, Jeremy allowed his claws to fully slip his skin, the razor-sharp weapons piercing through the tips of his fingers with a sinister hiss of sound. "Are you ready, Drake? Any last words before Eric does the honors and draws the sacred Challenge Circle?"

"I'm afraid you've come all this way for nothing," the Elder murmured, his pewter brows lifted high on his wrinkled brow. "I'd enjoy nothing more than tearing into you, Runner, but the League no longer allows the challenge of an Elder." Jeremy stalked closer, enjoying the shadow of panic that darkened Drake's eyes with each step that he took. "Then forget the challenge," he suggested, the guttural sound of his voice more animal than human as his wolf struggled for control...for dominance. "Let's deal with this the oldfashioned way, without any rules and regulations. Just two enemies going at one another, hungry for the kill."

Drake's eyes went wide, his lip curling as he snarled, "You wouldn't dare kill me without the authority of a proper challenge fight!"

"See, that's where you're wrong." Jeremy gave him another slow, arrogant smile. "If my partner were here, he could tell you I have a bad reputation for being a rule breaker." He paused, letting his words sink in, while taking another step closer, then another, each movement countered by Drake until the Elder's thighs were plastered against the heavy edge of the table at his back. "So what's it gonna be? If you're too chicken to fight me like a man, I can only assume you're ready to die like an animal."

Drake's body vibrated with outrage, but there was a pale cast beneath his skin, and Jeremy could smell the acrid scent of the bastard's fear. "I would never lower myself to fight you. You're not even worth the effort, when I can just have you killed off instead." The thin line of his mouth twisted into a grotesque semblance of a smile, his eyes glowing with the maniacal burn of insanity. "And I'll send my rogues after your little bitch, too. You, they'll take down fast—but they'll do Jillian slowly. She deserves to suffer for allowing something as filthy as you to touch her," he snarled. "She deserves to die for daring to turn her back on the pack—for choosing a half-breed like you over her duty to her wolves!"

It only took a fraction of a second for Jeremy to have the monster's throat in his grip, then slam him down backward on the cluttered surface of the table with a jarring thud. Sheffield started to lunge forward, when Eric whipped a gun from the waistband of his jeans at the center of his lower back. He aimed the intimidating weapon point-blank between the Lycan's eyes, and Sheffield lifted his arms, while a screeching, furious roar poured from Drake's throat, his damp hands pulling ineffectually at Jeremy's wrists.

Smiling down into the Elder's terror-filled face, Jeremy slowly shook his head. "You've truly lost your mind, haven't you, Drake?"

"I've lost my humanity!" the Elder croaked. "And gladly! Unlike you and your sniveling friends, I've accepted the true nature of my beast. I've embraced the purity of what I am, of what the Silvercrest are *meant* to be. You and your Runners can't stop what I've set in motion. Not even the combined forces of hell can stop me now!"

Jeremy leaned closer, going nose-to-nose with the Elder. "That's what all the sick sons of bitches say, just before they take their last breath." His fingers tightened, nearly cutting off the Lycan's air, and in a soft, almost silent whisper, Jeremy said, "All I have to do is twist."

"My s-son would n-never let you do it," Drake stammered, spittle spraying from his thin lips as his face turned dark with a violent wash of color.

"Eric?" A rough laugh burst from Jeremy's chest. "You just used his little sister like a puppet on a string. Do you really think he cares what I do with you?"

"Elise got exactly what she deserved! I set her up today, knowing damn well she would go running off and tattle to her friend, convinced she was doing the right thing. It was so easy it was pathetic. And there's nothing you can do about it, because the League would never let you get away with killing me. Do it, and they'll demand your life for mine—and Jillian will be left at the mercy of those who will avenge me. No matter what you do, in the end, her blood will be on your hands, Runner. Jillian's blood will be on *your* hands!"

"On second thought," Jeremy growled, allowing his fangs to finally slip free, "I think I'll go ahead and rip your throat out, you psychotic piece of—"

"Burns!" Eric shouted, the Lycan's gun still aimed at Sheffield while he caught Jeremy's wild-eyed gaze, demanding he listen. "Don't do it!"

Jeremy's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Whose side are you on, Eric?"

"I couldn't care less what happens to him," Eric grunted, jerking his chin toward his father, "but he's right. If you kill him in cold blood, the League will demand your execution. He isn't worth it."

"And maybe I don't give a shit," Jeremy growled, aware of his wolf's primal, visceral need for retribution overshadowing what he knew was right. "Maybe it's worth it," he panted, cutting his eyes back to Drake, "so long as I'm taking this bastard with me."

"And what about Jillian?" Eric demanded in a harsh shout, urging him to listen to reason. "She's going to need you now more than ever, Jeremy. Are you willing to leave her on her own? Are you willing to give up the chance for a life with her?"

He ground his teeth while the man in him struggled to regain control, but the beast was still seething, hungry for blood. "He deserves to die!" he snarled in a stifled roar.

"I know he does," Eric grated, "but *not* like this. That's what separates you from him. That's what makes you different, Burns. You're stronger than the animal, goddamn it. You're stronger than the need to kill."

Jeremy squeezed his eyes closed, his heart pounding, chest heaving as he fought a violent internal battle that would determine the rest of his life. Kill the bastard in cold blood...or let him go, saving his punishment for another day in order to have a life with the woman he loved.

And in the end, it was the purity—*the power*—of that love that tipped the balance. It was Jillian that brought him back from the edge.

Heaving a deep, shuddering sigh, Jeremy released his hold on Drake's throat and slowly eased away, his beast howling in outrage, while a burning spark of hope began to slowly ease the knots of fury twisting him up inside. With each backward step, he moved that little bit closer to the chance of having a life with Jillian—closer to the one thing he'd always wanted most in this godforsaken world.

"This isn't over," he rasped, taking another step away, followed by another, watching as the Elder sluggishly pushed himself up from the table. "I'll be waiting for you to make your move, and when you do, you're mine. I'll be the last wolf hunting you down, Drake—and in the end, you *are* going to pay for your crimes. Every single goddamn one of them."

Pulling the shreds of his dignity around him like a cloak, Drake straightened his shirt, then ran his hands through his hair. Jerking his chin toward Jeremy, he curled his lip and addressed his second-in-command. "Stop standing there and do your job, Cooper. I want this half-breed out of my presence."

Sheffield reached for him, but Jeremy cut the Lycan a hard smile and jerked his arm away. "Touch me just once, Sheffield, and it'll be the last thing you do."

"Burns, come on," Eric called out, already waiting by the door. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Nodding, Jeremy turned and began making his way toward the door, eager to get back to Jillian and hold her in his arms, assuring himself that she was okay...that she was safe and unharmed. He'd just reached the entrance when he caught Eric's outraged expression from the corner of his eye, the Lycan's dark gray stare narrowing with fury as he started to shout out a warning. But Jeremy was already reacting. Knowing he had only seconds, he pivoted on the balls of his feet and whipped around, just in time to see a fully shifted Sheffield hurtling toward him. He tried to counter the attack at the same moment Eric fired off a shot, but the wolf was moving too quickly, its distended claws sinking into Jeremy's abdomen with a sickening burst of pain that threatened to consume him in a dark, smothering wave. The only thing that kept him on his feet was the knowledge that Jillian was waiting for him—that she needed him.

With the bastard's claws buried deep in his belly, Jeremy lifted his hands and quickly wrapped them around the wolf's thick neck, twisting until he heard a sharp crack of sound, snapping Sheffield's spinal column. "Nice try," he rasped, "but you lose."

The werewolf's heavy body sagged to the floor, a hoarse cry breaking out of Jeremy's throat as Sheffield's claws pulled free. Nausea rolled through him like a poison, while his blood poured from the deep wounds in a warm, wet spill that soaked his shirt and jeans. He staggered, light-headed, only to find Eric's arm wrapped around his side, holding him upright.

Glancing back at Drake, Jeremy shook his head with mock pity. "Is that best that you've got?" he taunted, lifting his brows.

Drake refused to remark, his sinister features rigid with fury. Only the dark tinge of rage cresting his cheekbones kept him from looking like a statue that'd been carved from granite, lifeless and cold.

"Come on, Burns," Eric muttered, shifting toward the door. "You have something a lot better than this waiting for you." "Just take his truck," Jeremy grunted through clenched teeth when they were outside, fighting the rolling waves of agony ripping his insides to shreds. He closed his eyes, hoping like hell he could make it long enough to see Jillian before he lost consciousness. If he hadn't lost so much blood from the bullet wound just days before and from the run-in with the rogues before that, he probably would have had a fighting chance—but the past few weeks had been hell on his body. He knew the odds weren't in his favor, but he also knew he was a stubborn son of a bitch who wouldn't give up without a fight.

"Hold on, Burns," he heard Eric mutter through the roaring pain in his head, his shredded abdominal muscles screaming in protest as the Lycan got him into the truck's backseat. "Just hold on and I'll get you to Jillian."

He tried to say thanks, only his lips were too numb to form the words. He struggled, fighting it, but the darkness kept pulling him deeper, as if he were falling to the bottom of a steep, dark lake. He kicked and screamed and raged against the cold, stark burn of reality that told him he was dying. Goddamn it, he wasn't going to let it happen. Not before he'd told her how he felt. Not before he'd had the chance to hold her in his arms and tell her he loved her. That he was sorry for being proud...sorry he hadn't fought for her all those years ago. That he never wanted to spend another second of his life without her.

Jeremy struggled...and seethed...and raged, but no matter how hard he fought against it, he just kept sinking deeper.

Chapter 16

Tossing restlessly atop a cool, comfortable bed, a light sheet tangled around his legs, Jeremy struggled to pull himself back to a lucid state of consciousness. His eyes felt gritty as he forced them open, his lids heavy...weighted. He braced himself for a sickening wave of pain that lingered at the edges of his memory, but it never came. Squinting, he stared into the shadowed room, wondering where he was.

"There you are," a deep voice rumbled at his side. "You've been out for a few hours. I was starting to wonder when you'd come around."

"Mason?" he croaked.

"Yeah, I'm here." A small lamp on the bedside table turned on, sending a warm wash of mellow gold through the room that didn't quite reach into the dusky corners. Jeremy instantly recognized the basement apartment in Mason's cabin. He was lying on one of the twin beds, his partner sitting in a chair that had been placed near his bedside.

Licking his dry lips, he said, "What happened? Where's Jillian?" He winced at the scratchy sound of his voice, but as bad as he sounded, his body felt unusually good. No aches. No pains. Just this sluggish climb back from the depths of wherever he'd been...floating or sleeping or whatever the hell he'd been doing.

"Do you remember what happened with Sheffield?" Mason asked.

"Yeah. I remember breaking the bastard's neck, and then Eric shoving me into the backseat of a truck. But...it's all a blank after that." Again, he said, "Where's Jillian?"

Instead of answering the question, his partner gave him a lopsided smile. "That's one hell of a woman you've got there, Jeremy. I hope you know how lucky you are."

This time, his words grated with impatience. "Where the hell is she?"

Mason chuckled softly under his breath. "She's here, in the Alley. There's no need to worry. I just want to talk to you a minute before you go barging off after her."

Impatient to do just that, Jeremy tested his body by tightening his abs and pulling himself into a sitting position, amazed when he didn't experience so much as a twinge of discomfort. And suddenly, as the cobwebs cleared from his mind, he realized why. "She healed me," he stated, his flat monotone devoid of emotion, while inside he experienced a deep, piercing twinge of regret. She knew the truth now, about everything.

Jeremy knew it shouldn't bother him-but it did.

Dammit, he'd wanted her to believe in him, only...not like this. He'd wanted to earn her faith on his own, not because of what she learned in his head. "Before you get maudlin on me," Mason drawled, "you might be interested to know that she kept herself out of your head, even though it about killed her to do it without the aid of your mind, considering how badly you were hurt."

He whipped his head to the side so quickly, he damn near gave himself whiplash. "What?"

Mason gave him a small, knowing smile, understanding his demons. "It's true. She did the healing without peeking into that thick head of yours, but she suffered because of it. The process took so much out of her, I thought she was going to collapse when it was finally over."

"Is she okay?" he rasped, his voice roughened by concern as he threw his legs over the side of the bed.

"Sayre was able to use her own power to boost Jillian's energy afterward, and it helped get her back to normal. But it was rough there for a while," Mason told him. "She looked like someone who'd had their life sucked right out of them, but I guess she poured everything she had into making sure you lived. And she even called Graham and demanded he come down here to see your injuries for himself, so that there could be no doubt you had killed Sheffield in self-defense."

"Was she...upset, when she saw me?" he asked, flicking a quick look at his partner.

Mason rolled his eyes, a low chuckle rumbling in his throat. "Upset doesn't even begin to cover it. I think my ears are still ringing from the lashing she gave me for allowing you to go off and almost get yourself killed."

Jeremy glanced toward the stairs, keenly aware of the urgent, driving need to get to her as quickly as possible. "Is she still here?" he asked thickly.

Standing, Mason said, "She left Sayre here and headed back to your cabin about fifteen minutes ago. I think she was going to try and get some more rest." "I need some clothes," he grunted, anxious to get the hell out of there.

Mason shot him a hard grin and jerked his chin toward the foot of the bed. "You've got jeans and a T-shirt waiting for you right there."

"Thanks, man. For everything."

"No problem," Mason replied with a low laugh. "Just don't scare the hell out of me like that again. I think I lost ten years when I saw how bad he'd gotten you."

"Trust me, I have every intention of living a very long, very healthy life from this point on," Jeremy drawled, running his hand over the pink, puckered scars scattered across his abdomen, before pulling on the borrowed shirt and jeans. He'd just reached the bottom stair, when Mason said his name. Looking back over his shoulder, Jeremy asked, "Yeah?"

His partner's mouth twitched with humor. "I just wanted you to know that if you make Hennessey your best man instead of me, I'll kill you myself."

"Idiot," he snickered, while his shoulders shook with silent laughter. Then he set off up the stairs...taking them two at a time.

When he found her, she was taking her bath.

As Jeremy stood just outside the closed bathroom door, he clutched the handle in a death grip and rested his forehead against the door's cool wood grain, ruefully aware of his heart thundering like a drum in his chest. He was so hard he could barely see straight, so excited his breath jerked from his lungs in a harsh, erratic rhythm.

He couldn't believe that after all these years, it was finally going to happen—and he couldn't wait one single second more.

Jillian gasped the instant he swung the door open, her brown eyes shocked wide with surprise. She sat up so quickly that the bathwater sloshed over the edge of the tub, spilling out over the floor. "What are you doing out of bed?"

He tried to answer, but his throat wouldn't cooperate. Instead, he found himself grabbing her up out of the water, swallowing her soft shriek with his mouth as he set her sleek, wet body on the counter. He pressed between her legs, urging her knees wide with his hands, and against her mouth, he groaned, "Why did you do it, Jillian?"

He knew she would understand what he was asking, that he wanted...*needed* to know why she'd healed him the way that she had.

"Do you remember what I told you the night you came back, after the challenge fight?" she asked, her skin rosy and damp from the bathwater, so beautiful that she took his breath away. "About my destiny?"

Jeremy lifted his hands, cradling her precious face in his palms, staring into the warm depths of her eyes, feeling as if he could see his every emotion—his love and hope and the burning, white-hot glow of hunger—mirrored right there, gazing back at him. "I remember," he told her in a voice gritty with emotion. "You said that the pack was your destiny."

"I was wrong," she whispered, velvety brown eyes glistening with tears—and it was a kind of magic, the way her eyes revealed her soul. "You're my destiny. I stayed out of your head tonight because I want a future with you, Jeremy. One that isn't trapped in the past." She lifted her hand, stroking the cool tips of her fingers against the heat of his cheek in a way that felt as spiritual as it did sexual, the look in her eyes tender and soft, melting his heart. "I did it because I trust you, with everything that I am. But most of all, I did it because I love you."

In that moment, he was completely undone by her-by

every precious, exquisite detail, from her mind-drugging scent to the soft, silken feel of her body beneath his hands as he explored the feminine curve of her shoulder, the delicate line of her spine. But more than anything, he'd been undone by those three little words on her lips. Words he felt as if he'd waited a lifetime to hear.

There was so much he needed to say in return, so much he needed to explain, but first, he needed to make sure she understood exactly where they went from here. That he was in this for keeps...for forever. That he didn't want a night... but an endless eternity. "There isn't going to be any Mate Hunt—*ever*—because I'm going to be the *last* wolf hunting you down, Jillian. I'm not letting you run from me anymore."

"That's good, because I'm done running," Jillian whispered, while her head spun with a sweet, dizzying swirl of excitement. He watched her with a predatory expression of searing, savage sensuality, of barely restrained animal need, that made her painfully aware of every inch of her body, her skin tingling and warm. Stroking her fingertips across the sensual perfection of his mouth, his softly panting breath warm against her skin, she said, "I realized today that we could have lost everything without ever having given it a chance, and I can't live with that. I've been so afraid of losing you someday that I almost let you get away forever. I'm not going to let that happen, Jeremy. I can't. I need you too much."

He breathed deeply as their stare lengthened into a tangible, physical thing, the air between them swollen with lust and love, thick in her lungs, and he said, "You're trembling."

"I'm nervous," she admitted breathlessly.

He lifted one big, warm hand, and cradled her jaw. "You don't have to be afraid with me, Jillian."

"It's not that," she told him. "I just want you so badly. I feel as if I'm going to scream."

A low, husky chuckle rumbled in his chest. Lifting his other hand, he cupped her face in his palms once again, and in a ragged, groaning rush, he said, "God, I thought I had lost you tonight, sweetheart. Never again. I can't go through that again."

He held her tear-drenched stare, and she sensed that there was something more he wanted to tell her. "What? What is it?"

"Sayre came to see me today," he confessed in a quiet rasp.

"I know," she whispered, and she could sense his relief when she gave him a watery smile. "I'm so sorry, Jeremy. I should have told you myself, about the way of a witch and her heart, but I wasn't brave enough."

A rough sound burst from his throat, his green eyes glittering beneath the heavy weight of amber lashes. "I wish I could have made you understand how much you meant to me all those years ago. I wish I'd had the guts to tell you before how much I love you, because I do, Jillian. *I love you*. So much that it's terrified me for years, thinking we might never get this chance to make things right."

She gave a glad, shivery cry, and turned her face to press a tender kiss against the heat of his palm. Then, taking a deep breath for courage, she said, "Before we do this, there's something I need to tell you."

He caught a teardrop with his thumb, his own eyes damp as he asked, "What is it, angel?"

"I've never...that is, I mean..." She drew in another trembling breath, and forced the embarrassing words out. "I've never done this before."

"Done what?" he murmured, his glowing eyes blistering a greedy trail of possession over her face, her breasts, her belly...then lower. "I'm still a virgin," she blurted out in a rush.

His gaze jerked instantly back to her face, green eyes wide with shock. "You're...what?" he asked thickly, his voice hoarse...strained.

"You heard me," she murmured, grinning at his stunned expression. "I only ever wanted you, Jeremy. No one else has ever touched me."

His cheekbones went dark with a hot rush of color, chest heaving as he drew in a deep, ragged gulp of air, before groaning a certain coarse four letter word.

When his powerful body began to tremble, she said, "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okay," he said between his clenched teeth, running both hands back through his hair, the golden strands sifting between his long, tanned fingers. "How *the hell* am I going to control this? I have ten years' worth of hunger stored up, ready to unleash on you, and you—"

"Want the same thing," she cut in, *wanting* him to lose his control...to lose himself in their mating.

"How would you know what you want? You're a *virgin*," he groaned with a raspy sound of awe, the deep, velvet-rough timbre of his voice vibrating with emotion. If she hadn't already known she loved him, Jillian knew she would have tumbled at that sweet, shivery sound.

Hoping to soothe him, to put him at ease, she said, "I know you, Jeremy. I'm not afraid of you losing control. I don't have to get inside your head to know that I trust you, with my body and my heart. I'm sorry it took me so long, but if you're willing to give me the chance, I'll spend the rest of my life proving it to you."

"Proving it to me?" Jeremy stared down at the woman who owned his heart, his very soul, and prayed for the strength to make this *right*—to make this *good* for her. "Christ, Jillian. You don't need to prove anything to me, sweetheart."

A fresh wave of tears glistened in her eyes as she stared up at him, and he felt her love move through him like a wondrous, awe-inspiring miracle, nearly bringing him to his knees.

"Are you sure you're strong enough for this right now?" he asked, his concern obvious in the huskily spoken words, as well as his hunger.

"More than strong enough," she told him. "Sayre boosted my energy—and your touch doesn't weaken me. It makes me feel powerful, Jeremy. Makes me feel as if I could take on the world."

Wondering how he was going to hold himself together, he lifted her hands to his mouth and pressed a tender kiss to her delicate knuckles. "Then come to bed with me," he rasped in a dark, lust-thickened voice. "Let me show you how much you mean to me. Let me prove to you that I can't go on without you. I need you to breathe, Jillian. I need you to make me feel alive."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a shy smile. Sweeping her up into his arms, Jeremy carried her to his unmade bed, where he laid her out over the soft sheets, his throat tight with a deep, shattering wave of emotion at the sight of her lying in his bed. Finally, after all these years, *she was in his bed*, and he planned on keeping her there forever.

Half-terrified that he was moving too quickly for her, he struggled to keep the beast within him under tight control, but the sharp, cutting edge of craving was too much. And knowing she was all his—damn, he could barely take it. Too hungry to wait, his breath panting, pulse roaring in his ears, he tore off the borrowed shirt and moved over her, straddling her hips. Growling low in his throat, he cradled her breasts in his hands, so cool and soft and perfect, and then he was taking her into his mouth, desperate for every sweet, silken discovery. Her nipples, so pink and swollen, were exquisitely soft against the flat of his tongue, like ripe, succulent berries. Jeremy closed his mouth around one lush, delicate tip, suckling at its velvety thickness, a dark, primitive groan rumbling deep in his chest.

When he heard her cry out in passion, he lost it. Cursing the clinging denim of his jeans, Jeremy rolled to the side and fought them down his legs, then moved back over her, settling between her shyly parted thighs. A quick glance up at her face revealed eyes so dark, they looked midnight black beneath the shadowed veil of her lashes, her pale hair floating around her face, spread out across his pillow like a shimmering wave of summer sunshine. Her lips were parted, damp, her cheeks flushed with the rosy heat of desire.

A slow, wicked smile curled over his mouth, and Jeremy held her stare as he smoothed his hands up the petal-soft skin of her thighs, pressing them farther apart. Then he leaned forward and put his mouth on that most intimate, exquisite part of her.

She made a stunned sound in her throat, her white teeth sinking into the plump swell of her lower lip, and Jeremy kissed her deeper, the intoxicating taste of her rushing through his system with the scorching intensity of a flame, burning him alive. He opened her with his thumbs and lowered his gaze, while a harsh, erotic slide of words fell from his lips, the vision before him the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Moaning, he put his mouth to her again—and this time he kissed the damp, pink beauty of her sex hungrily, greedily...pushing his tongue into the silken depths of her body with a slow, rasping thrust.

"Jeremy," she sobbed, arching against him as he made

love to her with his mouth. His eyes stung from where she pulled his hair, but he didn't care. He loved her like this, so open and yielding before him. Her limbs trembled, restless with energy and need, her soft hands stroking him wherever she could reach, bathing his body with such a sweet, searing pleasure that his breath caught, his own need raging past the bounds of his control. He wanted to be everywhere at once. Wanted his mouth on her, his hands. Wanted his body buried deep inside her, their flesh sealed together, heart against heart. But most of all he wanted to give her pleasure. The most earth-shattering pleasure she'd ever known—and he wanted her to take it now.

Poised on the edge of something explosive, Jillian tangled her hands back in the cool silk of Jeremy's hair; his mouth hungry and hot and relentless between her thighs. One second she was climbing...and climbing, everything in her body pulling exquisitely tight, and then she was crashing over the edge, the orgasm melting through her in a shivering, incandescent rush of warm, liquid light, setting her on fire.

And just like the time in the forest, her power escaped in a violent burst of energy, shuddering through the room like a dizzying maelstrom. A picture fell off the far wall, the newspaper on his dresser scattering through the air in a flurry of pages. She didn't know how much time passed, how long she lay there trembling while the endless waves of ecstasy roared through her, but suddenly she was aware of drawing in deep, panting breaths of air, and Jeremy was whispering to her...his voice urgent and soft.

"You came so hard I thought you were going to pass out," he breathed against the tear-drenched corner of her eye, his powerful body shaking. "So beautiful," he murmured, smiling at her as she lifted the heavy weight of her lashes. "God, you should see your eyes, Jillian. They're like fire. You look like you're lit up inside."

She blinked at him lazily, her body boneless, muscles like candy that'd been left out in the summer sun. "I feel as if I'm melting."

"Mmm, you are," he moaned, reaching between her legs and slipping one thick finger into her. "Like sweet, sticky taffy, all honeyed and soft. I can't get enough of you."

His finger thrust deeper, hitting that tender sweet spot that set her ablaze, pushing her relentlessly toward another overwhelming burst of chaos before she'd even found her way back from the first one. Then he added a second finger, working them into her body, and she knew he was stretching her because she was small...and he wasn't.

"Jeremy," she gasped, her body buzzing, alive with another shocking current of pleasure. She was hot and slick and slippery, soaking his hand, years' worth of lust and hunger and craving rushing through her, unstoppable and overwhelming. "I can't think..."

"Good," he growled against the sensitive shell of her ear. "I don't want you thinking. I only want you feeling. I don't want anything in your head except what it feels like to have my hands on you, pushing you over the edge. What it feels like to have my body moving inside of yours, making you scream because it feels so damn good."

And then his strong, work-roughened hands were holding her face, and he was kissing her mouth in a tender, breathless, coaxing caress, pulling the emotion from her, until her cheeks were damp, her throat shaking, and at the same time she felt that hard, huge part of him pushing into her.

Jillian cried out in shock, arching beneath him. He held her down, anchoring her with his strength, and drove himself into her, heavy and strong, going deeper...deeper, working himself into her until she didn't think she could take any more of him. "Too much," she gasped, staring up at him in dazed amazement, shocked at the feel of him inside her, so thick and hot and deliciously hard.

A low, wicked rumble of laughter vibrated in his chest as he lowered his mouth back to hers. He nipped her bottom lip in an act that was as provocative as it was possessive, then licked away the sting, the heat between their bodies burning and damp. "Take all of me," he groaned, his eyes glowing golden as he held her stare, the smoky green completely eclipsed by the visceral sexuality of his beast. She shifted beneath him, spreading her legs wider, and he sank deeper into her, shuddering. "Jillian, I can feel it," he confessed in a dark, savage rasp. Threading their fingers together, his body a strong, beautiful shelter, he watched her through eyes that were bright with emotion. "All of it…"

He was struggling to explain, but she knew. He didn't have to say what he was feeling with words. She could see everything, every thought and emotion written on his beautiful face, carved into the intensity of his expression. The tendons in his neck were rigid with strain, the sharp points of his fangs glittering beneath the sensual curve of his upper lip.

He pressed his face into the hollow of her throat, his teeth scraping across her skin in a carnal act that only made her burn hotter, before returning to her lips, kissing her tongueto-tongue. Taking her throaty cries into his mouth, he began moving over her, inside of her, the powerful muscles beneath his hot, slick skin flexing as he drove the pleasure up into her until it was impossible to breathe...to think...to hold it inside. All she could do was surrender to his body's relentless, breathtaking demand, and let the white-hot bliss sweep her away.

* * *

Grinding his jaw against the indescribable heaven of Jillian clenching around him in an endless, heart-stopping climax that once again sent chaos crashing through the room, Jeremy took her fragile wrists in his hands and pulled them over her head, stretching her out beneath him. He closed his eyes as sensations almost too good to bear poured through him, and struggled against the blistering need to come. He didn't want it to end too quickly. He wanted to drag it out, make it last forever, but it was too good. Good? Hell, it was blowing his goddamn mind.

He'd never lost himself in a woman—until now. Until this moment—until this woman who was everything to him. Always before, he'd held a part of himself back. He'd shared pieces of himself as he chose, but *never* his emotions. Sex had been a physical release, and though he could say with confidence that his past had left him damn good at it, nothing in his experience had prepared him for this—for being with Jillian. It left him feeling shaken and powerful all in the same breath; a constant, whirring explosion of ecstasy and hunger and tenderness.

With Jillian, everything slid into that perfect focus. He lost himself in his little witch, hyperaware of her slender body beneath his, so fragile and yet capable of so much strength. He opened his eyes to stare at her in wonder, the power she carried inside of her shimmering beneath her skin, lighting her up, her beauty so intense it almost hurt his eyes. He felt each breath she drew in, the way those breaths hitched when he pulled back and stroked back into her, thrusting his body harder, shafting her, stretching her deep inside. Felt the damp heat of her silken skin, his head hazy with the intoxicating scent of her flesh, her arousal, watching as the pleasure burned in her gaze like a hot, smoldering glow. And most of all, he felt the love that burned inside of her. It rushed through him like a warm, gusting breeze, and his beast seethed with the need to stake its claim by sinking its teeth into her throat and making the bond that would join them forever. His gums burned from the heat of his fangs, his muscles cramping, needing to make that connection and cement the claim he was making on her body.

But not yet. Not this first time. This first time he wanted it to be about nothing but what burned between them, about the love that tied their hearts and lives and souls together for all eternity.

"I love you, Jillian," he gasped in a rough, shaken voice. He buried his face in the curve of her throat, his words hot against the silk of her skin. "I've always loved you. Always."

"I love you, too," she cried out softly, tangling her hands in his hair and pulling him to her, so that she could press kiss after kiss against his chin, his eyes, his throat.

He stiffened above her then, his body held hard and tight, buried deep inside of her, and Jillian felt the dark energy and restless power of him blast through her as he came, beautiful and raging. His eyes burned, the intensity of his stare holding her so that she couldn't look away. "Only you," he groaned, pressing his mouth to hers, spilling into her in a jawgrinding climax that went on...and on...and on. "No one but you."

And as she followed him over, she knew that he meant every word.

With the soft warmth of sunlight on her face, Jillian opened her eyes to the sweetest feeling she'd ever known, as if everything bright and wonderful was hers for the taking, just waiting for her to stretch her arms and grab it. She pressed her fingertips to the bite marks in the side of her throat, evidence of the *blood bond* Jeremy had made with her during

the beautiful, provocative, passion-drenched hours of the night, feeling so happy she didn't know how she held it all inside. Butterflies filled her stomach, her heart pounding a wild, wonderful cadence. She'd never imagined that making love could be so overwhelming and earth shattering, endlessly beautiful and intimate.

She longed to hold him in her arms, but remembered him pressing a lingering kiss to her lips when he'd climbed from bed, whispering for her to keep resting, explaining that Mason had called and he'd be back as soon as he could.

After borrowing his toothbrush, she washed her face, combed her hair with her fingers and slipped back into her clothes. She'd hung them up over the shower rod, so at least they were dry and warm, though she planned on sending him up to her house as soon as possible to get some of her clothes and makeup.

Opening the front door, she stepped out onto his front porch, squinting against the bright glare of sunshine, and found him standing beside his truck, his arm wrapped around Elise's shoulders. Elise had obviously borrowed some of Torrance's things, because the jeans were too short, as well as the sleeves of the thick cable-knit sweater she was wearing, her feet bare against the damp grass as she stood within Jeremy's embrace.

The wind picked up, surging around Jillian's body, and Jeremy lifted his gaze, his nostrils flaring as he scented her on the morning air. She smiled at him and waved, but her smile fell as she watched him frown and say something to Elise. The other woman nodded, turned and waved at Jillian, then strolled across the grass toward the Dillingers' cabin.

Wondering what was wrong, Jillian waited as he walked toward her, and suddenly she knew. She could see the shadow of worry in his eyes, but he had no reason to be alarmed. She trusted him, with all her heart. "Hey," she said softly, blushing at the thought of all the scintillating, intimate things they'd done to each other through the long, wonderful night.

He stared at her soft smile, and then an answering grin began to curl across his mouth. "You—"

"Didn't jump to the wrong conclusion when I saw you with Elise?" she finished for him. She gave a quiet laugh, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I love you. I believe in you. That means that I trust you, Jeremy."

He pulled her to him, crushing her against his chest. "I don't deserve you, Jillian," he whispered gruffly against her hair.

"I feel the same way about you," she admitted with a soft laugh, and turning her head as she returned his hug, she finally noticed that Eric's truck was parked down beside Mason's cabin. "Is Eric here?" she asked.

"Yeah, he showed up about twenty minutes ago to pick up Elise, since she wasn't in any shape to go home with him last night. We talked for a bit, and then he headed inside to see Mason. That's when Elise came outside to talk to me."

Jillian gave him a narrow look. "You didn't fight with him, did you?"

"Naw," he drawled, rolling his shoulder. "I wanted to hate him, but he's actually kind of okay. And it's hard to hold a grudge against a guy who helped save your life."

Her own shoulders shook with silent laughter. "I told you there was no reason for you to dislike him. We're just friends."

Looking sheepish, he said, "I know that now."

"You know *everything* now," she whispered in a sultry drawl—and he stiffened against her, in more ways than one.

Shaking his head, his mouth curved in a wry smile. "Before I lose the small shred of control that's enabling me to stand here and act civilized, I wanted to tell you that Eric said

everything's okay in town. I know you've probably been worried," he told her, running one palm down her spine in a soothing gesture. "But I want you to try and take it easy today. You've been through enough, Jillian. You need to give yourself a break."

Lowering her lashes, she murmured, "Then come back to bed with me."

His hand went still. "If I come back to bed with you, I'm going to make love to you," he warned in a soft growl.

She rolled her eyes, laughing. "Well, geez, that's what I was kinda hoping for."

He gave a rich, sexy chuckle, and they moved together to head back inside, when her father's Jeep pulled into the Alley, rolling to a slow stop in front of Jeremy's cabin. Unfolding his stocky body from the cab, Bill Murphy stepped around his front bumper, coming to a stop at the bottom of the porch steps.

"You okay?" he asked, giving her a pointed look of fatherly concern, his hands rubbing together in an unexpected show of nerves.

"I'm wonderful," Jillian said with a smile, and Jeremy hugged her closer to his side, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head.

Her father watched the tender exchange, his gray eyes narrowed, and shoved his restless hands into his front pockets. "I've come to pick up Sayre from Dillinger's place, but figured I ought to use the time to go ahead and do what's right. I know you may hate me because of this, Jilly, but considering how things have worked out, there's something I need to tell you. The record needs to be set straight, and I like to think that I'm man enough to own up to my mistakes."

She nodded, her throat too tight for words.

"I let rumors poison my opinion," her father said in a gritty voice, "and so I lied to you, Jillian. I never saw Jeremy with that Danna girl all those years ago. Your mom, she'd seen you kissing him that day. We did what we thought was right at the time, and told you I'd seen him with her. It was a lie, honey. Far as I know, he hadn't been involved with anyone since you came home from school."

Jeremy stiffened beside her, and she knew the news had shocked him, since he'd always believed one of her friends had told her he'd been messing around with Danna. "Mother I would have been suspicious of," she said unsteadily, "but you knew I would believe it if it came from you."

"I'm sorry," he replied, his tone solemn with regret. "I thought I was doing the right thing at the time, saving you from heartbreak, but I made a mistake. I hope...I hope one day that you'll forgive me. I was only trying to do what I thought was right for you."

She nodded again, swallowing at the tears gathering in her throat, not knowing what to say. Finally, he gave a deep sigh. "I should be going now, but your mother and I would like to invite you both to dinner tonight."

At those gruff words, she felt the blood drain from her face. "Oh...uh, we can't pos—"

"We'd love to," Jeremy interrupted, giving her hip a slow, encouraging caress. "What time should we be there?"

"Bout seven," her father called out, heading back to his Jeep. He stopped in front of the Dillingers' cabin, where Sayre stood waiting for him. She waved goodbye to them, climbed into the Jeep, and a moment later, they drove away, while Jillian shook her head in slow amazement. "Jeremy," she whispered, "you don't have to do this for me—"

"I have to do this for *us*," he told her, lifting her chin with the edge of his knuckles. "I want a family, Jillian. I want our kids to have two sets of grandparents who spoil them rotten."

"It isn't fair," she argued. "After everything that's happened, *they* should come to *you*."

"If you're worried about my pride, beautiful, don't be. I have you, and that's all that matters. Everything else pales in comparison. I want to make things right with your parents." Pulling her against his chest, he nuzzled her throat as he said, "Your dad finally did the right thing, but I'm glad you found faith in me without his confession."

Giving him a trembling smile, Jillian swiped at the tears glistening on her cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Jeremy. Will you ever forgive me for all the years we've wasted?"

"I've been in your heart," he whispered, holding her close; a beautiful look of love in his hazel eyes that dazzled her that made her believe in miracles. "I know what you feel for me, Jillian. I know everything. And I love you more now than ever before, as impossible as that sounds, since I've been half mad for you for what feels like forever."

Then he kissed her, his hands slipping up her sides, and Jillian gave herself up to the wonder of having everything she wanted in the world right at her fingertips.

Chapter 17

Later that afternoon, everyone had gathered in the Dillingers' kitchen, while Jeremy relayed the harrowing tale of Elise's attack, and his subsequent confrontation with Stefan Drake. Carla Reyes and Wyatt Pallaton had driven up from Covington with the Doucets, so the Runners were all there to hear the accounting.

Even Dylan had come for the meeting, standing with his back to the stove, a visible tension seeming to ride the rigid lines of his lean body. Brody stood in brooding silence by the bay window, his dark gaze fixed belligerently on the Elder, while Cian lounged with his shoulder propped against the archway leading into the living room. Everyone else sat in chairs around the large breakfast table, its polished surface littered with steaming cups of coffee and tea.

And though Jeremy had shared with them the information he and Jillian had learned about Helen Drake, he'd admitted only that it came from a "reliable source." Not that he didn't trust Dylan, but he'd told Pippa he wouldn't involve her and he intended to keep his word.

Now, as he finished his account, the room was so still...so quiet, you could hear the gurgle of water in the pipes buried deep within the walls of the cabin. It was into this heavy, thought-filled silence that Mason finally said, "You've done good, man."

"Yeah, right," Jeremy snorted, his tone thick with disgust. "I was sent back to Shadow Peak to hunt down the traitor. Last I checked, we still didn't have him, because I let him go."

"You did the right thing," Mason argued. "I'd rather have you both alive, than Drake dead and you facing your own execution. And you got us exactly what we needed. Hell, it's because of you that we're now certain Drake's the one we want, and we've got a clearer understanding of what we're dealing with."

"So we know Drake's behind the rogues, but do we still think he's responsible for the human kills?" Reyes asked, folding her hands around the warmth of her coffee mug, her brow furrowed beneath the pale fringe of her bangs.

"Directly...indirectly." Jeremy released a harsh sigh. "Who knows? At this point, nothing that bastard does could surprise me."

"If he isn't the one," Brody rumbled in a deep, scratchy baritone, "we said before that it could be one of his followers."

"Hell, one of his followers," Mason muttered, "or his accomplice."

A strange energy filled the room as everyone—with the exclusion of himself, Jillian and Torrance, who had already been told the news before the others had arrived—narrowed their eyes on his partner.

"His accomplice?" Wyatt grunted, the Runner's normally stoic expression creased in a scowl. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I have some new information to share with you," Mason told them, his tone as grim as the dark look in his eyes. "Which brings us to the second reason for this meeting. I had a call from my father today."

"And what good news does Robert have to share with us this time?" Cian drawled, arching one raven brow in a cynical lift. It had been Robert Dillinger who told the Runners of an Elder's ability to teach another to dayshift. Until that time, they'd been unaware of the carefully guarded secret, and it was this discovery that had first pointed them toward Stefan Drake in their search for the traitor. Scanning the faces of his friends and colleagues, Jeremy realized that no one looked happy at the prospect of a new twist in an investigation that was already frustrating them at every turn.

"You're not going to like it," Mason warned them, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"Now why doesn't that surprise us?" Brody snorted.

Leaning back in his chair, Mason's golden-brown gaze moved from Runner to Runner as he began to explain. "After what happened in Shadow Peak yesterday, Graham asked my father for some help searching the library of ancient texts that belong to the League. Together, they poured over every volume, and found an archaic reference to an interesting legend."

"A legend?" Dylan repeated, the corners of his mouth pulled in a skeptical frown.

"I know it sounds crazy," Mason sighed, "but they just might be on to something. According to the archives, a Lycan from one of the European packs named Azakiel discovered a way to combine his 'inner power,' or whatever you want to call it, with another Elder. Together, they were strong enough to pull another's beast—one that he could then command to do as he chose. It was considered the ultimate dark art, enabling Azakiel to control his followers, forcing them to commit unspeakable crimes at his bidding, until the day they finally banded together and rebelled, murdering him for his cruelty."

"Happy story," Reyes murmured dryly, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as if to ward off a chill.

"Are you trying to tell us that Graham believes Drake learned about this dark art, and now there's another Elder who's helping him perform some kind of ancient hocus pocus?" Cian questioned, stroking his jaw.

"It makes sense that there was someone with him," Jillian murmured, and Jeremy knew she was thinking of Elise's whispered confession in the truck. "Elise told us that she felt another's presence in her mind, but couldn't identify them. Her father's voice was the only one controlling her, telling her what to do."

"Having one psychotic Elder bent on destruction was bad enough," Brody muttered, his scarred features hardened with worry. "If we're hunting two... Christ, we're going to be in some serious trouble."

"And why would anyone be willing to help Drake?" Wyatt snorted, leaning back in his chair. "The guy's a total asshole."

"Who knows." Jeremy sighed, wishing he'd been able to uncover the answers they still needed. "Maybe they're as evil as he is. Maybe they're insane. Or maybe he's got something on them and they don't have a choice."

Cian's brows lifted with interest. "You mean, like black-mail?"

"Maybe," he said, rolling his shoulder. "I don't think we can rule out anything yet. This could turn out to be—"

"This could turn out to be a crock," Dylan cut in, his words

sharp with the biting edge of impatience. "I can't believe you're all actually buying in to this legend crap. What's next? Are we going to hold a séance? Buy silver bullets and hang garlic over our doors?"

"Garlic's to ward off vampires, not werewolves," Cian murmured. "But it doesn't work."

"My point," Dylan snarled, glaring at the grinning Irishman, "is that we need to ground ourselves in reality—*not* fantasy."

"Whether you believe the legend or not, Dylan, Drake *was* pulling the wolves out of those Lycans," Jillian whispered. "We know this puts you in a terrible position, but you're going to have to watch your back and be careful. The League *is* being affected by his corruption, which means your life is in danger as much as ours. No matter how you look at it, this is a sound threat."

"This is bullshit."

"Watch it," Jeremy growled.

Dylan worked his jaw, his chest rising and falling, hands clenched against the edge of the stove so tightly his knuckles had turned white. "Look, I know Drake's a psychotic son of a bitch who needs to be dealt with, but if you keep pointing fingers at the League, pretty soon there won't be anything left of us. I don't know how to explain what happened yesterday, but I *do* know that I'm not ready to see the entire structure that holds the Silvercrest together fall apart. Believe that Drake has this damn power if you want—but don't keep hurling accusations at the rest of us. If there *is* an accomplice, maybe he's found a way to use one of his minions. Hell, maybe it was Sheffield himself. I just don't think we should jump to conclusions until—"

"Until what?" Brody rasped, his personal dislike for the Elder evident in his aggressive tone. "Until we're all dead?"

"Until we know more!" Dylan shouted, his tenuous hold

on his temper fraying before their eyes in an uncharacteristic burst of fury. "We need facts. Not a goddamn bedtime story!"

"That's enough," Jeremy grunted, not liking where this conversation was headed. Dylan was their closest link to the League and they needed his cooperation—not his resentment. "We know you're under a lot of pressure, but you're either with us in this or you're not. Things are getting too complicated for there to be any middle ground or indecision."

Glaring at Jeremy, Dylan leaned back against the stove, his arms crossed over his chest. "Am I getting a slap on the wrist for not playing nice with the other kids?"

"We're not asking you to agree with us on everything," Mason murmured, his tone calm as he eyed his friend with a mixture of frustration and concern. "You're an Elder, not a Runner, which means that although we're friends, we stand on different sides of the fence. We understand that, and we've never asked you to do anything that would compromise your job. But we need to know that you're at least willing to work with us."

"You know I am, Mase." Dylan scrubbed his hands down his face, sounding as haggard as he looked. "But these are delicate times for the Silvercrest. We can't go making blind accusations without some solid proof to back them up. The pack would have your throats if you did. Too many of them are being pulled in by Drake's 'pure-blood' propaganda, looking up to him as if he's some kind of god."

"Solid proof?" Jeremy said roughly. "Exactly how much proof are you after? We have more than enough on Drake for you to make a formal accusation to the League. Hell, we have motive and a goddamn confession!"

"If I'm going to take this before the League," Dylan argued, "I need more than a runaway wife and hatred. More than the word of a Runner who threatened to kill the very Elder he's accusing. I need cold, hard facts. And you don't have any!"

"What about Elise?" Jillian offered.

"You know what he'd say." Dylan sighed. "Drake would just make Elise look like a fool, claiming her story was the paranoid ranting of an emotionally scarred young woman."

"Then nothing's going to be done," Jillian said in a low, shaken voice. "I can't believe he's going to get away with this, after what he did to her."

"He isn't going to get away with anything," Jeremy promised, squeezing her hand while slanting a sharp look of warning at Dylan to keep quiet. The Elder narrowed his eyes, his mouth pressed into a hard, flat line, and then he pushed away from the stove, stalking out of the room. A few seconds later, the front door slammed shut behind him.

"Well, that was fun," Cian muttered under his breath.

"I think now would be a good time to let our tempers cool," Mason stated quietly, "and give the information we've learned a chance to sink in. We can meet back here in the morning."

Weary nods of agreement went around the room, but before anyone could make a move to leave, Jeremy stood and said, "Hold up, guys. Just stay put for a minute."

With a wry smile curving his mouth, he shot a quick wink at Jillian before turning back to the roomful of curious faces. "Before we head out, I wanted to go ahead and let you all know that I'm going to be staying in Shadow Peak. Permanently."

Stunned silence met the outrageous announcement, until Jillian shook herself out of her stupor, saying, "Ooh, no, you're not."

"Ooh, yes, I am," Jeremy countered with a slow, deliciously warm smile. "Shadow Peak is where you belong, and wherever you are, that's where I'll be."

"Jeremy," she whispered, pressing her hand to her heart, its rhythm rapid and urgent beneath her palm. "What are you thinking? Anyone who knows you *knows* that you wouldn't be happy in town."

Pulling her to her feet, Jeremy lifted his hand and cupped her jaw, rubbing his thumb against her trembling lower lip. "I'll be happy wherever you are, honey. I'll still work with these jackasses," he snorted, cutting a cocky smirk at his fellow Runners—who were watching them with rapt fascination—before focusing that breathtaking hazel gaze back on her. "But I'll *live* with you."

"I know you don't want this," she said in a shivery rush, her eyes hot with the threat of tears. There was no way she was going to let him make that kind of sacrifice for her.

"Just because you own my heart," he admitted in a warm, sexy drawl, "doesn't mean you can tell me what I want, sweetheart. What I want more than anything is for you to be happy."

"But you're a Bloodrunner!"

His smile fell, replaced by a dark look of determination. "I'm a man," he said firmly, gripping her chin, demanding she hold his brilliant stare. "One who's tired of being put in a box. I'll always be a Bloodrunner, but I'll also be the Spirit Walker's mate." His expression shifted, the devilish, wicked grin playing softly at his mouth again, and then he was cradling her face in his warm, rough palms. "Trust me, baby. I know what I want."

"But I'm tired of being put in a box, too," she argued, grasping on to his muscled wrists. "If this is going to work, we compromise. Because while I may be the pack's Spirit Walker, I'm *also* a Bloodrunner's mate. So we'll split our time between Shadow Peak *and* the Alley. And th-that's my final offer. Take it or leave it."

He held her gaze with a vivid intensity that stole her breath, and then he laughed—the rich, warm sound of happiness rumbling up from deep within his chest—and pulled her into his arms. She could feel the uneasy tension in the warm, cinnamon-scented kitchen begin to lessen, the Runners releasing quiet sighs of relief as Jeremy said, "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I want," she told him, thinking that it didn't matter where they lived, so long as they were together. But she was awed by the depth of his love, stunned that he'd been willing to stay in Shadow Peak with her permanently, even though he hated it there, simply because he thought it would make her happy.

Sensing his sudden tension, Jillian watched as a shadow fell over the heat in his eyes, his grip tightening as he said, "Drake could demand you step down for this, Jillian."

"Let Drake do his worst," she murmured, smiling, having already come to a decision on that front. "Even if he has my title rescinded, I can still continue to help people. Being Spirit Walker isn't something they can take away from me so easily, and I'm not going to let fear of the League affect my decision. I've done enough of that. This is our life, Jeremy. Not theirs."

"I don't want you to regret this," he said in a low voice, searching her eyes.

"Jeremy, this is what I want," she asserted with a soft laugh, feeling as if her smile, her happiness, were blooming up from the depths of her soul. "As a matter of fact, I already talked to Graham about it yesterday, when he was here, and told him to set up a meeting. Tomorrow I'll go before the League and declare my intention to live wherever you are." His eyes went wide. "You already told him?"

Jillian snuffled a giggle under her breath at his stunned expression, and threw her arms around his neck. "Sure did."

"Christ, you're incredible," he rumbled in a deep sexy rasp, running his hands down her back in a touch that spoke of possession and tenderness, as well as hunger and need. "And I love you so damn much."

"I bet I love you more," she teased.

"Hmm... Not possible," Jeremy growled, already lowering his lips to hers. He'd just found the heat of her mouth, when Cian's laughing voice suddenly drawled, "I'm happy as hell you two sorted that all out, but you need to take this somewhere private before I get jealous."

A short bark of laughter jerked from his throat, but Jillian made a strangled sound of mortification, obviously having forgotten their audience, and buried her face against his chest. Knowing she was embarrassed, Jeremy winked at his grinning friends, swept her up into his arms, and headed for the door, while she hid her face in the curve of his shoulder, her skin warm with what he suspected was a killer blush.

"Good luck at dinner tonight," Mason called out, just before they disappeared into the living room.

"Thanks," he drawled, his tone dry. "I'll take all the luck I can get."

A moment later, he was carrying her through the front door and out into the lavender twilight. Jeremy took a deep, refreshing breath, enjoying the spray of rain that had mellowed to a fine, thin mist, while Jillian made a muffled protest about being carried. Grinning to himself, he hugged her closer to his chest. "I know you're not weak, and I know you're a tough little thing, but...just let me hold you," he murmured. "I still haven't gotten over the fear that I'd never be able to do this again." "You'll always be able to hold me," she whispered, and his body tensed at the erotic feel of her lips moving against his skin. "Because I'll always be with you, Jeremy."

It was harder than he'd thought it would be, swallowing the lump of emotion that settled into his throat at the sweetness of her words. When they reached his front door, he carefully set her on her feet, the top of her head not even coming to his chin, and fished his keys out of his back pocket.

Once the door was open, Jeremy ushered her inside, shutting the door behind him with his foot, ruefully aware that he was as nervous as a teenager on his first date, if not more. He gathered her close, gave a soft, wanting kiss to the corner of her mouth, then buried his nose in the silken fall of her hair, breathing in her warm, sweet scent. Taking her face in his hands, he smoothed his thumbs over her delicate skin as he said, "There's something I want to ask you."

She shivered, her eyes going big and wide.

Dropping to his knees, Jeremy clutched her narrow hips and pressed his face into the giving softness of her belly, then reached into his front pocket. Catching her left hand, he pulled it to his mouth, pressing his lips against the fragile skin, then turned it over and laid a glittering sapphire and diamond ring in her palm.

"Ohmygod," she gasped, and tears overflowed her eyes, the rich, velvety brown shimmering and bright, like sunshine.

"This was my grandmother's," he told her, holding her glistening stare. "I wanted to give this to you a long time ago, but things went wrong. If you let me, Jillian, I promise I'll spend the rest of my life making them go right."

"*Jeremy*," she whispered, and a fine, delicate vibration tremored through her, her lips parted for the excited rush of her breath.

"I love you, Jillian Louise Murphy," he said huskily. "For

always and forever. Will you be my wife? Grow old with me? Let me cherish you for the rest of our lives?"

Her mouth trembled, dewy and soft and too tempting to resist, and then she gave him a blinding, breathtaking smile. "Yes! God, yes. A million yeses!"

"Thank god," he groaned, smiling as he pulled her to the floor with him, his heart so full it felt as if it would burst from his chest. Jeremy slipped the ring on her finger, then sealed the poignant act by taking her mouth in a searing, head spinning kiss as he laid her across the floor. Then he took it again, as he covered her with his body...and again as he thrust inside of her...

Then again...and again...and again.

Last Wolf Watching By Rhyannon Byrd





Prologue

The Bloodrunner stood on the sidewalk, staring through narrowed eyes at the silent house nestled among a bevy of trees at the end of the picturesque neighborhood street. His mood was dark, edged with impatience, muscles coiled with tension that wound tighter...and tighter with each passing second.

"Just get in, tell her and get the hell out," he muttered in a husky rasp, the nearly silent words lost in the gusting Maryland breeze, the heavy chill of autumn wrapping its arms around his shoulders like a coldhearted lover.

It was a simple enough plan—and yet, Brody Carter knew there would be nothing *simple* about it. With any other woman, yes. But not with this one.

Letting out a slow, measured breath, he stepped beneath the ivy-laden trellis sheltering the front porch. The golden glow of an old-fashioned streetlamp softly illuminated the deep shadows of the night, heavy storm clouds smothering the silvery rays of the moon, until only a few, pale streams of ethereal light filtered through. He concentrated on forcing the aggressive blend of rage and hunger that coursed steadily through his blood beneath a cool, untouched surface of indifference, and finally lifted his hand. With a sharp movement, he rapped his knuckles against the front door, his tanned skin dark against the antique white finish of the wood.

With the rational part of his mind, Brody accepted the fact that he'd rather be anywhere in the world than standing there, on Michaela Doucet's doorstep.

Unfortunately, the dangerous, animal side of his nature had other ideas, relishing the thought of being near the provocative Cajun once again. He'd had his first look at the mysterious human nearly two weeks ago, at the wedding of a fellow Bloodrunner, Mason Dillinger. And though Brody could appreciate physical beauty as much as the next guy, it seemed this woman was almost *too* beautiful, with that lush body, long black hair that fell in soft curls to the middle of her back, perfect features and dark blue eyes so big a man could get lost in them.

Still, a pretty face he could have forgotten—but it was her scent that wouldn't leave him in peace.

The autumn winds surged with a vicious fury, bitterly cold in the dead of night—and his nostrils flared as he caught a trace of that warm, peaches-and-cream fragrance that no store-bought product could duplicate. Suddenly, the cool air of indifference he'd struggled to maintain bled away like the last flecks of snow down the sides of a mountain, replaced by a blistering wave of heat. He imagined his features must look twisted with the madness of his emotions, his expression one of equal parts hunger and disgust for his weakness—and knew he'd be lucky if she didn't run screaming in the other direction the second she set eyes on him.

"Not that I'd blame her," he grunted under his breath. While his partner Cian was most often described as the pretty boy of their group, Brody figured he was the equivalent of the intimidating guard dog. Big, mean and scary-as-hell were the adjectives most suited to his appearance, and he'd learned to live with them. He'd never wished to be anything different than what he was—he only wished he'd never set eyes on the sexy Cajun with a siren's smile, who was perfect enough to have any man that she wanted.

Look, there's no need to make it complicated. Just get in, deliver the news and get the hell away from her before that scent has time to screw with your head.

He rubbed uneasily at the back of his neck, and a scowl twisted the scarred corner of his mouth, while he wondered what was taking her so long to answer the door. A dog barked down the street, and his gaze slid across the row of neighboring houses, his frown deepening with unease. This pristine world of white picket fences and quaint, family homes was as alien to him as any make-believe landscape, making him feel like the horrifying monster trespassing within a storybook fantasyland. The uncomfortable feeling had Brody struggling for calm, and he locked his jaw, just wanting to get back to the peaceful quiet of the forest.

Being in the city always set him on edge. The man in him hated the constant grind of the noise and crowds and irritating stares, preferring the isolation of the mountains where he and the other Bloodrunners lived. The wolf in him found the endless sensory overload a constant source of frustration. It felt constrained, tethered, when all it wanted to do was throw off his human mantle and howl beneath the comforting, seductive pull of the moon. The continual fight against his primal, instinctual urges whenever a hunt took him into civilization made him restless, wearing him thin.

And now he had to deal with Michaela. Not good. Not good at all.

"You're tempting fate, just like your old man," he quietly grunted to himself. "The last thing in the world you need is to be close to her."

As if to confirm what he already knew, his beast lifted its nose to search for a deeper source of that heady, mouthwatering scent that seemed to destroy him a little more with each breath. He wanted to moan, it was so good. Wanted to claw his way into her house, take her beneath his body and pretend that he'd forgotten the reasons why he couldn't touch her. Claim her. Search out her delicate pulse and *bite her*. He wanted to sink his fangs into her slender throat, her warm flesh damp and deliciously tender beneath his mouth, and lose himself in the hot, carnal rush of her blood at the same time as he buried himself hard and thick and deep between her silken thighs. His hands fisted at the dizzying thought, muscles locked in a paroxysm of agony, while he choked back a low, rumbling growl of frustration.

He was a Bloodrunner, the offspring of his human mother and Lycan father. A hunter of rogue werewolves. A protector of the Lycan way of life for the Silvercrest pack. But unlike his fellow Runners, Brody knew that in some ways he was more monster than man. He walked a delicate balance between the two opposing worlds, and the woman inside this house upped the stakes to a dangerous, deadly level. For too many months, his beast had been denied the physical pleasures that fed its soul, not unlike the way a wild kill fed his animal appetites. By the time he'd understood the dangerous effects of his self-imposed celibacy—it was too late. He hadn't dared to seek out a woman, even a Lycan one, because he didn't trust his human half to be able to master the savage urges of his beast.

Then Michaela Doucet had walked into his life, and Brody discovered what it was like to live in true fear—what it was like to live in hell. Every moment spent in her company took him one step closer to the crumbling edge of his control, until he could all but feel the fires of damnation licking at his skin.

"You need to go home, grab a bottle of Jack and find a way to forget she even exists," he muttered to himself, squeezing his eyes tight as he lifted his fist and knocked harder, all but shaking the sturdy door within its frame, nearly cracking the wood. The wind grew savage, riffling through his hair, pulling the dark auburn strands across his face until he had to swipe at them with his hand. Drawing in another deep, ragged breath, Brody hammered at the door again...and again, feeling every bit the part of the Big Bad Wolf getting ready to huff, and puff and blow her picture-perfect world to pieces.

Finally, the lock on the front door clicked, the handle turning, and Brody shoved his shaky hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, steeling himself to get what needed to be said over and done with as fast as possible. After all, he'd come tonight to tell the woman who'd become his secret obsession that she'd lost her brother—or rather, the brother she'd always known.

The boy she'd raised was gone. Forever.

"And you get to be the lucky bastard who tells her," he snarled, the whispered words so guttural, they barely sounded human. Brody muttered a foul word under his breath, and with the rasping ease of an old, comfortable house, the front door quietly opened...

Chapter 1

Eighteen hours later...

Fear sat on the tip on Michaela Doucet's tongue, as bitter as an aspirin waiting to be swallowed. It possessed a sharp, acidic flavor that made her mouth water in the way that it does when you're about to be sick, while her eyes burned with a stinging wash of gathering tears. She willed them back with the sheer stubborn force of her will, reminding herself again and again that Doucets weren't ones to cower. Raised in the superstition-rich environment of the Louisiana Bayou, she'd grown up on whispered tales of ghosts and goblins, vampires and werewolves.

Yes, she'd always been a believer, even if she'd never seen proof of the paranormal creatures most humans consigned to the realm of fantasy and fiction. But now the veil between the two worlds had been lifted. Two weeks ago, she and her brother Max had learned the truth about the secret that resided in the eastern mountains just a few hours' drive west of their home in Covington, Maryland. Werewolves did indeed live among us. Some good. Some bad. Some so evil, they were more monsters than men.

And then there were others who were truly heroes. Dark, dangerous and tortured ones, yes—but undoubtedly heroic.

Michaela's best friend, Torrance Watson, had fallen in love with one such hero: Mason Dillinger, a man who was half human-half Lycan. Mason was one of a select breed of hunters known as Bloodrunners who were committed to hunting down and exterminating the rogue Lycans who'd begun murdering humans. Because of their half-human bloodlines, the Runners lived separately from the Silvercrest werewolf pack they protected, in a place named Bloodrunner Alley.

The Doucets had been under Bloodrunner protection ever since a rogue werewolf had made a move on Torrance's life. And while Michaela didn't care for the lack of privacy, Wyatt Pallaton and Carla Reyes—the Bloodrunning team assigned to their protection—had become friends to both her and Max. She had been thankful for their watchful eye, especially for her brother's sake.

Yes, she could accept the existence of werewolves. She'd even begun to embrace a few of them as part of her family. But tonight, terror consumed her.

Beneath the wraithlike streams of silvery moonlight, the autumn wind whistled past her ears, reminding her of a specter imparting secrets, the cool frost of its voice chilling against her skin. Shivering, she inhaled deeply through her nose, searching for the fresh scents of the surrounding forest, for pinesap and juniper and the moist smell of the soil. Like a frightened child grasping at a frayed security blanket, she needed the familiarity of those things to ground her in a world that had tilted on its axis, knocking her off balance—but all she could find was the acrid stench of aggression. Feral and thick, the heavy scent closed around her like a physical vise, banding her chest, making it difficult to draw enough air into her lungs.

Even as an outsider in this ominous setting, she understood instinctively what the menacing energy permeating the night signified. They were ready—the Silvercrest pack's anticipation ripe for the ceremony that would soon begin.

Hold it together, she silently scolded. Do not fall apart.

Willing her backbone to keep her upright, Michaela focused on the towering blaze of a roaring bonfire that rose from the far side of the clearing, its orange flames burning with maniacal zeal against the ink-black curtain of night. Not even the stars shone in the eastern sky. Only the moon burned in the stygian darkness of the heavens, its yellowed mass seeming to reflect the fiery glow of the sinister flames.

The mountains were silent but for the low, nearby noises that filled her ears, more animal-like than human. This was Silvercrest pack land, and the werewolves were tired of waiting. Michaela kept her gaze fixed on the fire, aware that many of the Lycans had already shifted into their preternatural shapes, their fur-covered bodies standing like monstrous shadows at the edges of the forest as they waited with restless expectancy.

If not for her friends, she'd have thought she was in hell. But she wasn't alone, thank God. Mason stood on her left, while Torrance moved in closer to her right side and grabbed her hand, squeezing her icy fingers in support as the wind surged around them, rattling the autumn leaves upon the gnarled branches of the trees, scattering others in the ravaging gusts. It still seemed astonishing that her best friend, who'd always been wary of the supernatural, had married a man who could howl at the moon, but Michaela liked Mason, as well as respected him. And there was no denying that the gorgeous half-breed was head over heels in love with his redheaded wife.

"Everything's going to be okay," Torrance murmured, the tone of her voice soothing, as if gentling a cornered animal. "Mason won't let anything happen to Max, I promise."

Okay? she thought, blinking rapidly as tears threatened to spill once more from her raw, swollen eyes. How was that even possible? Her nineteen-year-old brother had been attacked by a rogue werewolf—a Lycan who preyed upon humans for food. Max had been bitten in the attack, which meant he was no longer human, but a breed of creature that existed between the two worlds of man and beast, much like the Bloodrunners themselves.

Last night, it had been Carla Reyes's turn to wait at the hospital while Max worked his shift as a security guard. Michaela had been enjoying a relaxing evening at home after a long day at her store, when Reyes called to let her and Wyatt know that Max had taken his car and disappeared in the middle of making his rounds. Michaela couldn't think of any possible reason that Max would do such a thing—unless it had something to do with Sophia Dawson. And she'd been right.

Sophia was an eighteen-year-old Lycan who'd discovered the gruesome murder of a human female the week before. She'd spent a few days at their home, before returning to her parents' house in Shadow Peak, the mountaintop town that was home to the Silvercrest pack. Max and Sophia had become fast friends, despite Michaela's warnings that her brother should be cautious. Sophia was mixed up with a wild party crowd down in Covington, and the last thing Michaela had wanted was to see her brother become involved in an unhealthy relationship. She didn't care that Sophia was a werewolf—but she *did* care that the teenager was heavily involved in the local drug scene.

In fact, she suspected it was Sophia's troubled lifestyle that had drawn Max to her in the first place. He'd always been a champion of the underdog, willing to take on everyone's worries as his own. Michaela loved that his heart was so generous, but she'd also worried that it would eventually land him in trouble—which was exactly what had happened.

After Carla's call, Wyatt had contacted the other Runners and a search of the city had been immediately set into action. Then Brody Carter had arrived on her doorstep with his heartbreaking news.

"Max is still alive," the Bloodrunner had explained to her and Wyatt in gritty, clipped tones. "Sophia Dawson showed up in Shadow Peak with him about a half hour ago. They're trying to get the story out of her, but she's pretty hysterical. Seems she'd called Max from a concert, scared that she and her girlfriends were being followed. Says Max told her he knew Reyes wouldn't let him into that part of town, so he slipped out a back entrance at the hospital, grabbed his car and met up with them. He talked Sophia into coming back home with him, but before they could make it back to his car, they were attacked. The only thing that saved their lives was an accident that happened up the street. When he heard the approaching sirens, the rogue fled and the girls were able to get Max in his car. Sophia panicked and drove him straight to her parents' house. They notified the Elders and he was taken into custody."

Michaela had stood there feeling dead inside, a great roaring wave of pain ripping through her body, while Wyatt had talked with the scowling Runner. Then Brody had left as quickly as he'd come, leaving Wyatt to explain that Max would be kept in a holding cell in Shadow Peak, where he would be watched by guards until his first shift into a werewolf, which usually came the second night after an attack. Once the signs of impending change were noted, a *Novitiates* ceremony would be called.

Wyatt had driven her up to Bloodrunner Alley, a picturesque glade that sat several miles south of Shadow Peak on the mountain. The Alley held cabins where the Runners lived, and she'd spent the rest of the night with Torrance and Mason.

The wait for nightfall during the long, torturous day had been a living hell—but the call warning them that the ceremony would soon begin had finally come. They'd immediately set off for the clearing, which sat equidistant between Shadow Peak and the Alley.

And now it was time.

The muscles in her throat quivered, and Michaela wondered if she was about to lose the tea Torrance had forced into her before they'd left. The fear threatened to overtake her, too huge and monstrous to evade, swallowing her like Jonah in his story of the whale. The kind of fear that covered your skin after a nightmare, sticky and cold and wet. She knew they could scent it. From the shadowed edges of the clearing, the Lycans' glowing eyes burned like embers as they watched her through the moonlit darkness. They're waiting for you to show your weakness, but right now you have to be strong for Max's sake.

At the thought of her brother, a devastating sense of helplessness pierced through her, making her flinch—and it was at that moment that Michaela felt his gaze. Her breath caught, and without realizing it, she found herself searching the nightmarish scene for the man, the Bloodrunner, who sparked an uncomfortable awareness in her every time she saw him.

Brody. Her mouth formed the words, though she didn't make a sound.

He watched her from the corner of his eye, as if he didn't want her to know. But there was no way she could have missed him. All he had to do was enter a room, and her senses kicked into high alert, her equilibrium taking a spin that left her reeling, same as it had last night. He had the scarred body of a warrior, but in Michaela's opinion, he was one of the most magnificent men she'd ever known. Not pretty, but so utterly hard and masculine that he all but bled testosterone. Everything about the rugged Bloodrunner screamed dark, intense intrigue, and despite her efforts, she'd been unable to stop thinking about him. The effect was even worse when he was near, like being struck by lightning, her nerves left revving and raw. A total and complete meltdown. Not even Ross Holland had affected her like that—and she'd thought she loved her ex-boyfriend...until the day he'd ripped her heart out.

Hah! Shows how much you know. When it comes to love, you're as blind as a hawk beneath its hood.

Sad, but true.

Now Ross was nothing more than a first-class pain—and one she couldn't get rid of. No matter how many different ways she explained it, he could *not* get it through his head that she never wanted to see him again.

It was strange, but with Brody near, she could barely recall what Ross even looked like. The Runner stood to her left, no more than a yard away from Mason, and her stare snagged on his powerful form, unable to look away. Though his muscular frame had been wrapped in a stylish tuxedo the first time she'd met him at Torrance and Mason's wedding, tonight he wore his standard dark jeans, black boots and black T-shirt. The soft cotton of the shirt molded itself to the broad width of his shoulders and that beautifully carved chest, his thighs rigid beneath the worn denim of his jeans. His auburn hair burned a deep, dark red before the flames of the fire, lying soft and thick on his shoulders. Against the darkness of his skin, his scars shone like silvery pale rivers of pain, echoing the mysteries of his past as they slashed across his face in three thin diagonal lines.

After the "*I can't get out of here fast enough*" way that he'd acted the night before, when he'd brought her and Wyatt the news of what had happened to Max, she hadn't thought he'd even show for the ceremony. But here he was. His normally brooding expression burned with a cold, calculating fury—a charged energy buzzing around him that suggested the rigid control he always held over himself could crack at any moment. Though the calmest, quietest of the Runners, he struggled to master, even hide, an underlying violence. But it was always there, lying in wait of its escape, and she experienced a flutter of relief in her belly that he was on their side.

Brody Carter was not a man you wanted for an enemy.

She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, aware that it quivered, and found herself fighting a physical urge to move

closer to him, wanting to soothe that angry burn of pain he carried inside—when suddenly the restless movements of the pack ceased. Mason lifted his face, sniffing at the cool, brisk air. "The Elders are almost here," he announced in a quiet rasp.

Across the clearing, the eerie, demonic glow of torches could be seen drawing nearer, and Michaela stared unblinkingly at the shadow-thick edge of the forest.

The light grew brighter, burning against her eyes as she watched a dark-haired Lycan with distinctive golden eyes walk forward, bearing one of the torches, his lip curled in a belligerent sneer. Then the first Elder stepped from the shadows, into the clearing, his stature one of blunt, stocky strength; light brown hair shot with silver at his temples; deep-set eyes sharp beneath bushy silver brows.

"That's Graham Fuller," Torrance whispered. "He's the Lead Elder and Mason's father's best friend." Another figure stepped out of the trees, this one considerably younger than Fuller, his rich brown hair and dark eyes familiar. "You know that one," Torrance told her. "You met Dylan at our wedding."

Despite the fact that he was a member of the League, Dylan Riggs had always been a friend, as well as a supporter of the Bloodrunners. In fact, it had been Dylan who walked Torrance down the aisle at her wedding. Though his friendship with the Runners was strong, the past few weeks had put Dylan in a difficult position, as tension between the Bloodrunners and the pack increased.

More Elders entered the clearing, alternately taking their places on either side of Fuller, until the last one emerged. Michaela had yet to meet the notorious Lycan known for his purist views and hatred of humans and Bloodrunners alike, but she recognized him immediately from the description she'd been given. Stefan Drake, the one whom the Runners believed was responsible for the growing number of rogue werewolves and other horrifying crimes, and the reason she and Max had remained under Bloodrunner protection, even after the death of Anthony Simmons, the rogue who had threatened Torrance's life. Mason and the others had believed that if afforded the opportunity, Drake would use the Doucets as a way to strike out against the Runners, and they'd been right.

Drake stood tall and lean, with sharp, aristocratic features made severe by the burning light of the torches and bonfire. Deep grooves of discontent lined the raw-boned features of his face, as if hate itself had worn him down. At one time, he had probably shared the same arresting looks as his children, until years of bitterness had finally left its destructive mark. His sharp, pewter-colored eyes found her and held, staring with a burning contempt that made Michaela recoil, despite her earlier determination to conceal her fear.

In the next moment, the Elders parted, and two hulking shapes emerged from the trees. In their wolf forms, the Lycans stood over seven feet tall, their legs bent at an odd angle as they stalked forward. Each held a thick chain that had been wound around their inside wrist, the twin lengths leading back into the shadows. Michaela's throat constricted the second she realized what was happening.

She swayed. Her vision blurred. "Oh God, they haven't."

"Be strong, Michaela," Mason grunted. "Max is going to need your strength."

Strength! She didn't have any left. Her knees sagged, and both Mason and Torrance caught at her waist as the Lycans

walked forward. They had taken no more than a few steps, when they jerked on the chains and her brother appeared, emerging from the thick line of trees.

Bound like an animal.

Fury roared through her, jerking her upright as if she'd been jolted with an electric current, every muscle in her body screaming for movement while she watched Max stumble into the clearing, his long, lanky body dressed in nothing more than tattered boxer shorts, his dark skin smeared with blood and grime. His thick, ebony hair hung over his brow, obscuring his eyes, his battered hands fisted around the two lengths of chain that looped his neck like a collar. His chest and legs were bloodied with deep, rawlooking wounds, which she knew had come from painful claw swipes; his left shoulder was a mangled, bloodied mess from where a rogue werewolf had latched on with its jaws, ripping into the skin and muscles with its lethally sharp fangs.

Oh God, Max. This can't be happening.

The sheer depth of her horror paralyzed her, freezing her muscles until not even her lungs were moving. "I swear it's going to be *okay*, Mic," her best friend promised in an urgent whisper. "Look around you. We have enough support to demand that they let him live, no matter the outcome of the ceremony."

Support? Biting at her trembling lower lip, she glanced left, then right, surprised to see that others had joined them. She hadn't noticed anyone beyond Brody. But Jeremy Burns, Mason's partner, and his fiancée, Jillian, had moved to Torrance's other side, and she watched as Jillian's father stepped forward to the place beside his daughter, his wife there with her arm around his waist. Michaela turned her head

to the left and blinked in surprise to see Eric and Elise Drake, the Elder's children, standing next to Mason, as well as two other couples she couldn't identify standing just behind Brody.

To the Bloodrunner's left stood his partner, Cian Hennessey, his dark head angled toward Brody, lips moving as he spoke. Michaela struggled to hear what he said, but the wind carried away his words like smoke. While they talked, Carla Reyes and Wyatt Pallaton came to stand beside Cian. There was no denying that the dark-eyed, loose-limbed Wyatt was certainly attractive, but Michaela shared an easy friendship with the Runner and nothing more, her private desires obstinately focused on the man who seemed determined to keep his distance.

Now the Bloodrunners and their family and friends stood as a united force against the Silvercrest pack that had yet to accept the fact that something sinister was eating away at its foundation, rotting it from the inside out, like a cancer. Something that would rip down the protective walls that separated their world from the humans. In the back of her mind, it occurred to Michaela that loyalties were being announced tonight—a separation made between those who would stand with the Runners in their fight against the rogues and those who blindly supported the pack's refusal to face reality and see Drake for what he really was—but all she could focus on was Max. He looked so hurt…so terrified.

When one of the guards jerked on his end of the chain, sending Max stumbling forward so fast that he fell hard on his knees, she snapped. One second she was holding Torrance's hand, all but squeezing the life out of her fingers, and in the next she was flying forward.

"Leave him alone!" she screamed, her soft-soled, black satin slip-ons struggling for purchase in the damp earth as she rushed toward Max, only to find herself lifted off the ground when a hard, heavily muscled arm clamped around her waist from behind, pulling her clear off her feet. "Damn it, let me down!" she snarled, unable to take her eyes off her brother as the golden-eyed Lycan who'd first entered the clearing kicked him, yelling for Max to get back on his feet. On his hands and knees, Max's head hung forward, the gaping wound in his shoulder seeping fresh blood until a pool began to form beneath him.

Mindless with heartache and rage, Michaela clawed at the arm holding her, kicking her heels against whatever part of her captor's legs she could reach. "Stop it," a deep, husky voice grunted in her ear. "You're not helping him by losing it. I give you my word he'll survive the ceremony, but you have to keep it together."

"*Nooooo!*" she screamed, too hysterical to listen to reason. "You're monsters! All of you! Look what you've done to him! How dare you! *How dare you!*"

The arm tightened with a powerful flex of muscle, cinching her waist, and her breath sucked in on a sharp, wailing gasp. "Shut up before you get both yourself *and* your brother killed. I will *not* let that happen. Do you understand me?" he growled, shaking her so hard that her teeth clicked together. "Do you understand me, Doucet?"

"Damn it!" she cried, stricken as she watched one of the guards grab Max by his hair and jerk him to his feet. Around them, Lycans huffed and growled as they watched the spectacle, while others outright howled for the show to begin. "Put me down! I'm going to kill them for touching him!"

"That's enough!" the voice seethed in her ear. "They'll tear

you apart before you even reach him, and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here and watch you die."

Suddenly, through the haze of fear and agony and outrage in her mind, she finally recognized who'd caught her. *Brody*.

He held her in his arms, her body locked against his powerful form, her back to the burning heat of his chest. Held her so high that her toes didn't even touch the ground. A low, keening sound of anguish tore through her, and her head dropped forward as hoarse sobs of pain ripped from her throat. "Let me go. I have to help him. *Please*," she begged brokenly, knowing only that she needed to get to Max. "Let me go, Brody."

He muttered something against her hair, his breath warm against her scalp, and Michaela could have sworn it was a single word...but she must have heard wrong. She was too upset. Too furious. Too terrified. She must be out of her mind.

Because it had sounded as if he'd quietly snarled the word *never*.

Chapter 2

Silently cursing his lack of control where this particular woman was concerned, Brody wondered just what he was doing. He'd sworn to himself that he'd stay home tonight and yet, when Cian had come knocking at his door, on his way to the ceremony, he couldn't do it. His fear over what might happen to her had been too great, and he'd found himself following his partner up to the clearing where the Silvercrest pack conducted its business—business that was better suited to the wild than the civilized streets of its town.

He hadn't been able to stay away from her—he hadn't even lasted a day.

But nothing had changed, because the facts remained the same. It didn't matter what *he* wanted. The truth of the matter was that women like Michaela Doucet *never* took interest in guys like him—ones who were scarred and used and bitter

enough not to care what the world thought about them. Sure, they may have used him for a raunchy one-night stand. One of those "look at brave little me making it with the big scary guy" situations, turned on by his scars because of the violence they represented. But even then, they still feared him because of his sheer physical size and power. And they got off on that fear, using it as a twisted means of sharpening the thrill when they found themselves beneath a man who could too easily break them if he wanted.

Users, each and every one of them, and they'd used him until Brody had just grown tired of it all and said to hell with it—to hell with women—no matter how badly his body ached for one.

And you're being an asshole. Michaela isn't like that, and you damn well know it.

He ground his jaw down until his teeth ached, soaking in the pain, knowing he deserved it. He was being an idiot, because truth be told, Michaela Doucet scared the ever-loving hell out of him. Despite his determination to stay away from her, he'd known, deep down, that he'd come tonight. Known, instinctively, that it was where he belonged.

He hated it—but there was no sense denying that he needed to be here to protect her. The entire time he'd hiked through the woods, he'd sworn to himself that he'd watch from the sidelines. Simply ensure she didn't get herself into more trouble than she could handle, and he had no doubt she could cause trouble. The woman lived up to her fiery Cajun heritage like a pro, whipping men into a frenzy of lust wherever she went.

Even now, when she was an emotional wreck, he could sense the unmated males' interest as the Lycans watched her with a dark, feral hunger, the edgy scent of their lust thick on the air, making him want to snap at them with his jaws. She was just too beautiful for her own good. And too damn fearless! He still couldn't believe the depth of her anger toward the pack, or her willingness to confront them over the treatment of her brother. He wondered if the Doucet kid knew how lucky he was to have someone who cared that much about him, who was willing to risk her life because she wanted to keep him safe.

There was obviously a lot more to Michaela Doucet than a pretty face and a body most men would die for the chance to cover—and the uncomfortable knowledge made Brody want to let go of her, turn around and never come within a God-given mile of her again.

But his arms wouldn't cooperate. If anything, his grip tightened, the sensation of her soft curves plastered down the front of his body enough to make his teeth gnash. He'd known she'd feel incredible if he ever had the chance to be this close to her, to touch her, burying his face in her hair and letting her rich, seductive scent sink into him—but he hadn't realized her effect would actually make his knees shake...or his mouth water for a slow, deep, intimate taste of her.

He wanted her on his tongue. All of her. Everywhere. His face lowered, lips rubbing against the smooth silk of her hair, and he was a breath away from sliding lower, nuzzling behind her ear, when he suddenly realized where they were...and what he was doing.

Goddamn it! He'd worked so hard to master control of himself—there was no damned way he planned on letting her strip it away so easily. But holding her...it was even more dangerous than he'd imagined. Richer. Sweeter. Every cell of his body ached with the need to claim, to accept the dark truth he refused to even consider.

"Brody?" The sound of his name jerked him out of his internal hell, and he realized Mason was standing just a little to his left, a few feet behind him. He could hear his friend's confusion, as well as his surprise that Brody had been the one to grab hold of Michaela. Around them, the pack's energy grew sharper with the promise of confrontation between the Elders and the indomitable human he held in his arms, and Brody understood the need to retreat back to the safety of the other Runners.

"It's okay, Mase," he grated under his breath, carrying her with him as he backed up a few steps until flanked by their supporters. "We're under control here. I've got her."

She'd grown quiet, but trembled in his arms even as she lifted her head high, too fragile for such strength, a contradiction that set his teeth on edge at the same time she sent his pulse rate soaring. He gently lowered her body until her feet touched the ground, but didn't release his hold on her—and she didn't try to pull away. She just stood there, pressed against his length, and stared soundlessly at her brother, the rapid panting of her breath making a quiet rasp through her parted lips.

With a knot in his gut, Brody wondered if they had explained to her exactly what the *Novitiate's* ceremony entailed. Any moment now, Max Doucet would experience his first shift as a Lycan. Under close watch, his guards would have alerted the Elders when it was time to begin, recognizing the signs. Fever. Sweating. Cramping. The initial change was always the hardest, both mentally and physically, and only the strongest humans survived. Brody hoped the kid had it in him, because if his body failed to completely accept the shape of his wolf, yet he still lived, the rules of the ceremony were that he'd be killed—and then he and the others would have a battle on their hands, with Drake inciting the pack into a vicious frenzy.

With a cruel smile, the Elder's cold gray stare traveled over their united force, lingering with bitter disapproval on his offspring, Eric and Elise, before cutting to Jillian Murphy. "It's clear where your loyalties now lie," he sneered, curling his lip as he addressed the pack's Spirit Walker. Through her maternal bloodline, Jillian held the sacred position of holy woman, or witch, for the Silvercrest pack. She was also the mate and fiancée of Brody's fellow Bloodrunner, Jeremy Burns. Beneath Drake's scornful stare, Jillian didn't so much as bat a lash, but beside her, Jeremy bristled with outrage.

"Rest assured, Jillian, that I'll be demanding your resignation," Drake continued with malicious pleasure. "Silvercrest will no doubt be better off without you. We can't have you marring the purity of our young through your association with ones who are so repulsively impure. To be honest, I'm surprised you have the gall to face us."

"And after last week, I'm surprised you don't know any better than to watch what you say to my mate," Jeremy snarled as he took an aggressive step forward, looking more than ready to knock the racist Elder on his ass. Brody knew just how badly Jeremy wanted to take Drake apart, piece by satisfying piece, and he didn't blame him. Under the Elder's orchestration, an attempt had been made on Jillian's life the previous week, and it was only by some clever thinking on the part of Eric Drake that Jeremy hadn't killed the bastard in a murderous rage. If he had, the Silvercrest penalty would have been death, and Brody and the Runners would have lost a man who was more like a brother to them than a mere friend. "Are you threatening me?" the Elder demanded of Jeremy, the sinister gleam of triumph in his chilling gaze revealing his ploy. He wanted Jeremy to make a move on him tonight, so that he could retaliate with the full force of the pack, using his position to strike out against the Runners.

Before Jeremy could react, Mason placed a cautioning hand on his partner's shoulder and Jillian stepped into his side, putting her arms around his waist. The group held their collective breath as they waited to see what he would do. Finally, Jeremy shook his fisted hands out at his sides, and draped his arm around his fiancée's shoulders. "I don't make threats," he said in a quiet drawl, flashing the Elder a contemptuous smile. "I make promises. I'd tell you to speak to my mate with respect, but the truth is that you're not good enough to speak to her at all."

Drake looked round at the pack. "Are you going to allow him to address his betters with such lack of respect?"

"Stefan," Dylan Riggs softly muttered, speaking for the first time, while the other Elders remained silent, their expressions tight with concern.

"The pack knows who deals with its trash so that it can sleep in peace at night," Cian called out, his words crisp with the lilting notes of his Irish accent. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his black leather jacket, placed one between his lips, and cupped his hand over the tip as he flicked open a silver butane lighter. After the first long drag, he lifted his head and sent the Elder a lazy grin. "If I were you, I'd worry about keeping on our good side, Drake."

"You're not a member of this pack," the Elder spat, glaring at Brody's partner. "None of you are."

"By choice," Mason rasped in a low slide of words, which

were true. Nearly all of the Bloodrunners had achieved their required number of kills to rejoin the Silvercrest pack, though they chose not to. "It'd be wise of you to remember that."

"It's time now," Fuller announced, stepping forward, sending an apologetic look in their direction. Graham Fuller may have been the best friend of Mason's father, Robert, but he still held the position of Lead Elder among the Silvercrest League. As such, he carefully walked the line of neutrality when dealing with the ancient bad blood that existed between the purists, like Drake, and the crossbreeds. Even Dylan, who Brody personally didn't like, but was a close friend of the other Runners, had his hands tied when dealing with his fellow Elders. If he showed too much support for the Bloodrunners, Drake would demand a vote on his removal—and there was too much prejudice among the Silvercrest leaders to think Dylan's position was secure.

Which meant the Runners were left on their own, same as always.

Wishing like hell that there was something he could do, Brody watched the guards pull Max to the center of the clearing. The boy stood silent and still, his head bent toward the ground, but Brody could see the thick sheen of sweat covering the young man's skin. The veins in Max's arms thickened with the heavy flow of his blood, the tendons at the side of his neck, leading into his shoulders, rigid with strain, while his hands fisted at his sides, his chest rising and falling as he took each breath harder...and harder.

"Do you know what's happening?" he asked in a rough whisper, brushing his lips against Michaela's ear. The enthralling scent of her skin filled his head, and he clenched his jaw, determined to ignore its devastating effect. "Did Wyatt or Mason explain to you what will happen?" She nodded mutely, and then quietly whispered, "He's terrified."

Taking his gaze from Max, Brody looked down to see her pulse rushing beneath the fragile column of her throat, so slender and pale and delicate. His tongue felt thick against the roof of his mouth, and in his head, he could hear the beating of her heart in perfect tempo with that wild rush beneath her milky-white skin. Then suddenly, like a blast hitting from out of nowhere, her words sank in...and he remembered a crucial element that had somehow slipped his mind during the chaos of the evening.

Michaela Doucet was *not* your average, everyday human female. No, she held powers, talents that had yet to be completely explained to him, but which suddenly seemed like a massive tactical error on his part to have forgotten. She could *read* people she was physically close to, he recalled Torrance telling them one night over dinner. Like peering through a window, she could sense their emotions, their feelings.

He was a goddamn idiot! The last thing in the world he needed was to be here, holding her, giving her the opportunity to nose around inside his head! His fingers released their hold on her hip, the muscles in his arm flexing, ready to pull away from her—when in the next instant Max Doucet threw back his head and let out a bloodcurdling scream of horror that echoed through the quiet night like a sound torn straight from the bowels of hell.

"It hurts," she gasped, her voice cracking, and with a surge of fury at his inability to help, Brody realized it wasn't *his* head she was in. No, it was Max's. She was sharing her brother's terror...his pain!

"He...he feels like something's trying to claw its way out

of him," she stammered, the words husky and broken, while her body arched against him, her lean muscles rigid as agony tore through her. "Like it's going to—"

"Stop it," he growled in her ear, gripping onto her side with his free hand, his other arm still wrapped across her front. "Get out of his head, Doucet! I don't want you in there. Get out of it!"

She jerked, her head shooting back to slam against his collarbone, and Max fell to the ground, his expression ravaged, a broken scream pouring from his throat as his body contorted, seizing, spasm after torturous spasm clenching his strained muscles. The change rolled through him, rippling beneath the dark gleam of his skin, while blood pooled beneath his hands and razor-sharp claws pierced their way through the tips of his fingers. He threw back his head, his back arching as a throaty chuffing sound surged up from his thickening chest, through the muzzled shape of his mouth.

In Brody's arms, Michaela trembled, silent tears streaming down her face, and something sharp and agonizing slashed through him like remembered pain, making him grimace.

Son of a bitch. He couldn't stand watching her cry.

The night had turned brutal, the wind angry and vicious as it ripped through the trees with a snarling vengeance, lashing against the flames of the fires. Her long hair whipped across his face, and he couldn't hold it—the devastating combination of her scent and those tears screwing with his head.

Against his better judgment, knowing it was going to land him in hell, Brody found himself wrapping his other arm across her middle, until he was cradling her against his chest, his body pulled around her as if he could shield her from the world. She turned her head to the side and buried her face in the warm hollow between his shoulder and neck, her damp breaths panting against his throat, and he couldn't stop the heavy surge of blood rushing to his groin, making him feel like a sick bastard, considering the circumstances. She went strangely still the second she felt his rigid erection pressing against her spine, and he bit back the guttural groan that rumbled deep in his chest.

Flicking his gaze away from the dangerous terrain of her body, he looked up and experienced an overwhelming wave of relief when he saw that Max Doucet's change was complete. "It's over now," he whispered.

Despite the softness of his words, she flinched, her body trembling with an excess of emotion. She let out a slow, shaky exhalation of air, then turned her face back toward the clearing, her breath catching on a hoarse cry the instant she saw her brother.

The newly formed wolf rose on his hind legs, his massive chest rising and falling as he panted through parted jaws that revealed long, sinister fangs. Glowing blue eyes that burned like the center of a flame searched the crowd of spectators, until he found the one he was looking for. Brody's hold tightened as the wolf made a sluggish move toward Michaela, but the Lycan guards were already yanking on the thick chains that wrapped his throat, keeping him in place.

"The change has been taken and the human breed has survived," Fuller announced, his brown hair whipping around his face as the wind surged, playing havoc with the towering flames of the fire as they licked at the darkness of the sky. "Who will take responsibility for the *Novitiate's* training?"

"The honor will be mine," a deep voice called out from behind them, and Brody turned his head to see Eric Drake step forward to stand beside Cian. A collective rumble of shock reverberated through the pack at this blatant, stunning show of support for the Runners from the Elder's son.

"Eric?" Drake's silver brows pulled together in a deepseated scowl, his sharp cheekbones slashed with a vivid streak of ruddy color.

Crossing his brawny arms across his chest, the youngest son of the most pure-blooded line in the Silvercrest pack repeated his intention. "For too long this pack has benefited from the courage and sacrifice of the Runners, giving nothing in return except the offer to join a community that treats them as inferiors. Enough's enough. It's time we make things right and give something back. The boy will pass his *Novitiate's* training, and when he does, he'll become a Runner and hold a position that demands our respect. To see that it happens, I'm taking on the training of Max Doucet as my own."

"Like hell you are," his father hissed, baring his teeth as he jabbed one long finger in his son's direction. "It's bad enough that you and your sister have actually befriended them, but I will not allow my son to disgrace our family by aligning with these aberrations and taking responsibility for a human breed, the foulest creature of all!"

"You can't stop him," Elise Drake argued, stepping forward to stand by her brother's side in a show of support against their father, though her nerves revealed themselves in the tremor of her husky voice and the violent trembling of her hands. Not that Brody blamed her. Elise had been through a hell of her own the week before when her father had used her in the attack on Jillian's life, and now she had to deal with this.

For a moment, the misogynistic Drake stood rigid with fury in the face of his daughter's defiance, and then a soft gleam slowly began to burn in the wintry depths of his eyes. "You're right," he murmured, straightening his cuffs in a purposeful act of indolence. "I can't stop Eric should he choose to malign his honor in such a fashion. But I *can* enjoy his failure." He all but purred with malicious satisfaction. "Fate has a way of righting all wrongs. It's been many years since we've taken the responsibility for a *Novitiate* in this pack, but the rules remain the same. If the human breed fails to pass judgment at the end of his training, which I've no doubt he will, the punishment still stands and Max Doucet *will* be executed."

"You bastard!" Michaela hissed, suddenly jerking forward, but Brody was already tightening his hold on her. She strained against his arms, but couldn't break away as she shouted at the Elder, the horror she'd just endured pouring out of her in an uncontrollable flash of fury and pain. "If you hurt my brother, I'll see that each and every one of you dies. Your town, your way of life. I'll bring the entire world breathing down your neck. Just see if I don't! And I'll be damned if he's staying here! I'll do whatever it takes to get him away from you! I'll get the goddamn army up here, and we'll see how power—"

Cursing foully under his breath, Brody pressed his palm over her mouth, silencing the words he knew were only going to land her in deeper trouble. Muffled sounds of outrage vibrated in her throat, but it was already too late. The damage had been done. Drake hated all humans with a passion that went beyond obsessive—and because of their close association with the Runners, they'd known the Doucets would garner special attention from the unstable Elder and his followers. And now that Michaela had openly challenged him, Drake wouldn't stop until he made her pay for the insult.

"The human is too unstable to be allowed her freedom,"

Stefan Drake announced with a gloating smile, spreading his arms in a gesture of entreaty. "Surely the pack realizes what must be done. She cannot be allowed to interfere with our dealings."

"Your so-called dealings sought out her family," Mason growled, "not the other way around. We know you're the one behind the rogues, Drake, and it won't be long before we've caught you—along with the bastard working with you—and brought the both of you down."

"Despite the slanderous accusations you and your kind have been tossing around like confetti," the Elder argued, his hateful stare burning with maniacal triumph while whispered words traveled among the members of the pack, "my guilt remains unproven. The truth is that you have no evidence to back your claims. They're all based on nothing more than hearsay and conjecture. And regardless of how it happened, her brother is now here and the fact remains that she *is* a threat to our well-being. I call for an—"

"There's no need to call for anything," Dylan growled, cutting Drake off. "She can be assigned a guard and the problem is solved."

"I agree," Fuller called out before Drake could argue, the Lead Elder's relief to have ended the disagreement without bloodshed obvious in the softened lines of his expression. "The only question is who. Who is willing to accept accountability for her actions and watch over the human while her brother completes his training?"

Brody narrowed his eyes, his chest aching as he prepared to say the words he knew were going to change his entire life. It was insanity. Madness. The action of a fool. And yet, he didn't have any other choice. He never had.

"I am." The two roughly spoken words echoed through the

clearing with the force of a cannon blast, and Michaela instantly stilled, stiffening against him as all eyes turned toward them. "Until this is over," he growled, "the human is *mine*."

Chapter 3

The human is mine...

The unbelievable words echoed through Michaela's head, the evocative warmth of Brody's breath against the sensitive shell of her ear enough to make her tremble with something sharper, darker, more visceral than shock or fear. She struggled for the source of her reaction to the possessive words then realized it was hunger, urgent and sweet, spreading hypnotically through her system. A craving—a primal, instinctive need—that moved like warm, thick honey in her veins, settling deep within her like an intimate, pulsing glow of heat that she wanted to curl herself around. And it centered on the Bloodrunner who held her in his hard-muscled arms, the resonating beat of his heart banging out a powerful rhythm against her back.

Oh God, this can't be happening.

"If you promise to behave," he whispered in a low, husky rumble, his lips moving against her hair, "I'll take my hand away from your mouth. Do you promise, Doucet?"

She gave a jerky nod, and sensation pierced through her like a physical jolt as her lips rubbed against the masculine roughness of his palm; the musky, outdoors scent of his skin filling her head.

Shocked murmurs continued to work their way through the surrounding pack, marked by low snarls and grumblings of disapproval, but a strange buzzing noise, like static, started to fill her ears as everything she'd experienced in the last few moments crashed down on her. She shook her head, trying to clear the confusion, but couldn't escape the growing feeling of unreality. Through a hot sheen of tears, she watched as the Elders huddled into a tight circle. Only Dylan Riggs cast a sharp glance in her direction, before lowering his head and joining the other Elders in a heated conversation while the pack clustered together in groups of their own. She could see a few human mouths, as well as Lycan jaws moving, but couldn't hear the words they produced over the frenzied noise thudding against her skull.

When a nearby group of Lycans suddenly stepped toward them, Brody moved with whipcord strength, shoving her behind his back before she even knew what was happening. "Mason, get her back to the Alley," he grated, and she almost sighed with relief as the words sank into her system, the static whir slowly fading away. "The others can help me deal with things here. We'll meet back up with you at the cabin when we're done."

Vaguely aware of Torrance grabbing on to her wrist and pulling her away, Michaela stumbled, looking back over her shoulder toward the clearing, watching as Eric Drake walked toward the incredible creature her brother had become, his dark fur gleaming like black satin in the moonlight. Eric began talking with Max's guards, reaching for the chains that bound him, when his father broke away from the Elders and advanced on them. She struggled to see what was happening, but everyone was moving around and too many bodies blocked her view.

Looking back to the spot where Brody had stood, her muscles clenched with panic when she found him gone, lost somewhere in that swarming chaos of activity. What if something happened to him? It would be her fault, wouldn't it? Male voices, raised in anger, reached her, and she knew instantly that it was Brody arguing with Stefan Drake. They both sounded furious, but she knew the Runner would win. And then he'd come to the Alley, where he expected to find her waiting.

Michaela had never considered herself a coward, but after the crushing experience with her last relationship, she'd grown wary of putting her trust in the opposite sex. And more importantly, she no longer trusted her judgment—or her body's physical desires. And God only knew the powerful way she reacted to Brody Carter was enough to make any sane woman cautious. It was too much. Too...everything.

No, she wasn't a coward, but she sent a sharp look toward the trees, wondering...

"Don't even think about it," Mason warned her with a gruff chuckle, the corner of his mouth edging up into a strained grin. "You wouldn't make it more than ten feet before he had you down."

Had her down? A hazy image of being trapped beneath

Brody's long, hard, muscular body flashed through her mind, and she trembled. God, talk about emotional overload. She was shaking so hard she could barely see straight.

"I don't understand," she whispered, turning a dazed stare toward her best friend. "What just happened, Torry?"

Arching one slim red brow, Torrance shot a questioning look toward her husband. "If I had to guess, I'd say you'd just been given a personal bodyguard."

Mason nodded, his handsome face carved into a cautious expression of concern. With a strange bubble of emotion in her throat that felt as if it could end in either laughter or tears, Michaela wondered who that concern was for. Was he worried how well she'd deal with his brooding friend? Or was that hard expression that looked as if it'd been chiseled from granite for Brody? Did he think she'd lead a reign of terror over the quiet Runner's life?

"And I get *him?*" she groaned, knowing it couldn't be true. There was no way in hell Brody Carter had just volunteered himself...to what? The job had sounded more like a watchdog than a bodyguard. "When he said that I'm his, he meant his to *watch over*, right?"

Mason snorted a low, purely male sound under his breath, and led them deeper into the forest.

It took an hour of sitting there in the Dillingers' cozy kitchen, with Torrance pouring another pot of herbal tea into her system, before Brody finally came to collect her. Michaela heard the commotion at the front door as he and his partner arrived. For a moment, she felt torn between the strangely opposing urges of running into the living room and demanding he comfort her, and sneaking out through the cabin's back door, disappearing into the darkness...as if she could run away from the ugly reality of the night.

But she couldn't move.

She waited, her breath held tight in her chest, until his broad-shouldered body filled the archway that led into the kitchen. His shadowed, dark green gaze trapped her the second he set eyes on her, refusing to let her look away, holding her with the sheer force of his will. The lines around his mouth were tight with strain, and at his sides, his hands were fisted, his knuckles bruised and a little swollen. His auburn hair was damp at the temples, his shirt torn at the shoulder and the sharp line of his left cheekbone had been scraped raw. Her brows pulled together in a tight frown as she added the details together and came to an unsettling conclusion. "You...you didn't fight after I left, did you?"

"Are you kidding?" Cian snorted, edging past his partner as he walked into the kitchen. "It was just a playful scuffle. Hell, there were only ten of them, hardly enough to call it a fight. And none of them were brave enough to battle against Brooding Brody," he drawled, hitching his hip against the counter. He crossed his arms over his chest, a cynical smile twisting the hard curve of his devil's mouth, but Michaela couldn't tell if he was teasing or not.

"And Max was okay?" she asked, her attention focused on Brody while Torrance filled the sink with hot, lemon-scented dishwater and Mason finished off the sandwich he'd made while waiting.

Brody nodded in response to her question, but didn't move away from the archway. Instead, he crossed his own arms and propped his right shoulder against the wall, the recessed kitchen lighting glinting off the burnished stubble on his square chin, softening the stark lines of his scars. "Eric took him away before we left. He'll take good care of him, Doucet. No harm will come to your brother during his training."

Michaela worked to ignore the devastating effect of his deep voice—that husky, intoxicating baritone that slipped into her with a sweet, provocative slide and made her hot beneath the skin—but it didn't work worth a damn. The tight, black cashmere sweater that had kept her warm outside now sat too heavy over her damp skin, filling her face with heat. Lowering her gaze to the steam rising from her tea, the china cup fragile within the straining hold of her hands, she asked, "And after that? After the training?"

"If he doesn't pass, then we'd all stand together to ensure his safety, if it comes to that," Mason told her. She flicked her gaze up to see his easy grin as he added, "But if he's anything like you, that's not going to be a concern. If there's one thing I know about the Doucets, it's that they're tough as nails."

"Thanks," she murmured with a wry twist of her mouth. "I think."

"Don't worry," Torrance laughed, sending her husband a teasing look. "Mase's compliments are still a little rough around the edges, but he means well."

The Runner flashed his wife a wicked, hard-edged smile and playfully wagged his brows. "Face it, Tor. You *love* my rough side."

"Behave," Torrance admonished under her breath, but her green eyes glittered with excitement, her cheeks flushed a warm shade of rose. The love the two shared was so potent, so rich and heady and intense, that it seemed to fill the room, making Michaela painfully aware of how...alone she was. All she'd had was Max, and now even he had been taken from her. "Max *will* pass his training," Brody rumbled, breaking the awkward silence. "And until all of this is over, I'll...*be with you.*" It almost sounded as if that last bit had stuck in his throat, and she wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

"If you're not up to the task," his partner drawled, reaching behind him to snatch up one of the cookies out of the perpetually stocked cookie jar, "I could always be a pal and step in for you, partner."

Brody didn't so much as twitch, but she could see the vein that began throbbing in his temple, pulsing beneath the dark sheen of his skin as he tilted his head and glared at the smirking Irishman. Energy, red-hot and raging, surged around him like a fiery glow, so real Michaela almost flinched from the burn. "Like hell you will."

"Why not me?" Cian laughed, sending her a teasing wink. The irreverent Runner obviously loved goading his partner and friend, but Michaela could sense something deeper than mere irritation in Brody's reaction, and she didn't need any of her so-called powers to see it.

"Why not you?" he softly snarled. "Because you'd be too busy bedding her instead of protecting her, that's why!"

Cian choked on another sharp bark of laughter, while Michaela made a soft sound of surprise, thoroughly insulted to think that he'd lumped her into the same class as all the other women who willingly fell into Hennessey's arms simply because of his looks. "I'm going to assume you're letting your irritation talk," she murmured, "and that you didn't mean that to sound as insulting as it did."

"Don't bet on it," Cian snickered, just before Mason elbowed him in the side on his way to the sink with his plate. The Irishman rubbed at his ribs, but couldn't stop his soft chuckling, and the frustration in Brody seemed to coil like a viper.

All it took was a woman's keen intuition to realize that he thought she'd rather have the pretty-faced Irishman watching over her than him. And while it was one thing for *other* women to prefer his dark-haired partner, something inside of Michaela compelled her to say, "As charming as you are, Hennessey, I'm...that is, I think the current arrangement will work just fine."

"Wow," Cian drawled, gifting her with a boyish smile as he rubbed one hand against the sharp angle of his shadowed jaw. "I don't think I've ever been turned down so nicely before." He looked toward his partner, arching one midnightblack brow. "Seems the lady is happy with *you* after all, boyo. Congratulations."

Brody's scowl deepened and a charged silence settled over the room, the only sound that of the running faucet as Torrance worked her way through the dishes. Too restless to sit still, Michaela shifted to her feet, pushing her chair back in at the table before taking her cup to the sink. "I'll finish up, Torry. I need something to keep me busy."

Torrance gave Michaela a quick hug, then slipped into a chair beside her husband. Together, they began talking with Cian about Jeremy and Jillian's wedding, which would take place later that week in the Alley. Michaela began to lose some of her tension as she listened to their easy, quiet chatter, when she suddenly became aware of Brody standing beside her. His left hip rested against the counter, long arms crossed back over his chest, and she felt that little catch in her breath again. She tried to act natural, but his strangely seductive presence speared through her system like the residual traces of a fine wine, making her senses hum. From the corner of her vision, she watched his gaze settle on her mouth, before lifting to her eyes. "I know you're probably afraid of me," he stated in a quiet rasp.

"Afraid of you?" Michaela shook her head as she looked toward him, wondering where he'd gotten such an idea. "Why would I be afraid of you?"

He arched one auburn brow in an expression that reminded her of his partner, wearing a cynical look of disbelief, as if the answer should be obvious. But the truth was that she didn't fear him, at least not in a physical sense. No...her caution came from a different source—a basis more intimate than mere intimidation. It came from one that played his scarred, seductive image across the darkness of her mind when she closed her eyes at night; that made her pulse flutter whenever he was near. That reminded her time and again that men weren't to be trusted.

Not that she was going to explain any of that to him.

"I mean it, Brody," she told him in a soft voice, the armor around her heart breaking a little at the shadow of vulnerability she could see there in that dark gaze. "I'm *not* afraid of you."

For several moments, he looked as if he'd argue, those compelling green eyes narrowed on her profile as she turned her attention back to the dishes. Finally, he sighed and said, "This isn't going to work the same as it did with Pallaton and Reyes. I'm not going to waste time watching you from the outside looking in."

A shiver slipped down her spine, but she managed to keep her voice steady. "How do you mean?"

"From what Wyatt told me, they tried to keep a reasonable distance, but I'm going to be on the *inside* with you at all times.

If something happens, I need to be close enough to make a difference. Like it or not, I'm going to be like your shadow."

She slanted him a sideways look as she asked, "You didn't agree to watch over me just to keep me from causing trouble for the pack?"

He shook his head, and she watched, mesmerized, as the auburn tips of his thick hair shifted over the soft cotton of his black T-shirt, the material hugging the firm muscles beneath. "There's more going on here, Doucet, and you know it. I'm doing this for you, not them."

"My name is Michaela," she sighed, shifting her gaze back to his, irrationally irritated by the way he continually called her by her last name. It was so impersonal, which was exactly why she figured he did it—and it occurred to her that they were like two opponents circling one another, wary of the other's motives.

"I know your name," he muttered, his tone dry.

Michaela lifted one shoulder. "Couldn't prove it to me, since you never use it," she countered, noting the strange blend of exasperation and wariness in his sexy, almondshaped eyes. "So you plan to protect me while keeping me in line, then?"

"I doubt anyone could keep you in line," he snorted, the corner of his mouth twitching in a reluctant grin. "What I *am* going to do is keep you safe."

"That's not what-"

The green of his eyes flashed with emotion. "Forgot what they said at the clearing, okay? As much as I don't care for Riggs, he knew that one of the Runners would accept responsibility for you so that we could keep you alive. There isn't a goddamn chance that Drake plans to let you live," he rasped, the softness of the words in no way lessening their impact. "Not when he knows he can use you to get to us, just like they did with Max. The only problem is that Max lived. Now I think they'll come after you even harder, or turn it into a game and play with us."

"By keeping me scared?"

"Yeah."

Grabbing at another plate, she ignored the shaking in her hands. "Drake really is the one behind all the trouble, then, isn't he? The one Anthony Simmons was working for, who's tempting Lycans to turn rogue, teaching them how to shift during the daytime?"

Michaela knew the past few weeks had been chaotic for the Runners. On top of learning that a traitor was working to expand the number of rogue wolves in the area, they'd discovered that those who had turned had been taught how to dayshift. That was the first clue that had pointed the Runners toward an Elder, once they'd learned that the ability to teach a wolf how to take his shape beneath the sun was a power possessed only by those who served on the League, meant to be used as a defensive weapon during times of war.

After the Runners had realized they were hunting a traitorous Elder, Stefan Drake had become their obvious suspect. Drake and his followers made no secret of their fanatical hatred for humans and Bloodrunners alike, but it wasn't until Jeremy had accepted his place within the Silvercrest pack and returned to Shadow Peak that they were truly able to investigate Drake.

Thanks to Pippa Stanton, the lone female Elder, Jeremy had learned about Drake's grudge against the League itself. According to Pippa, Drake had never forgiven his peers for forbidding the assassination of his wife after she left him for a human. They also knew Drake was responsible for the recent attack on Jillian's life. Using his own daughter as a weapon, Drake, along with the help of an unknown Elder, had performed a task believed impossible by most Lycans, pulling Elise's wolf from her body against her will. Once the change was complete, Elise's beast was controlled by Drake, and would have killed Jillian if it weren't for Jeremy and Mason's intervention. When Jeremy later confronted the Elder, accusing him of the crime, one of Drake's followers, a man named Cooper Sheffield, had tried to kill him, dying instead by the Bloodrunner's hand.

To make matters worse, Drake wasn't the Runners' only problem. Over the course of the past month, Michaela knew that Brody and Cian had been investigating a series of gruesome killings. Four human females had been found murdered, three in the mountains and one in the city. At each scene, there had been no trace of Lycan musk—only the acidic scent produced by a Lycan who had dayshifted, which was untraceable. Each of the victims had clearly been a rogue kill, their hearts eaten from their chests in some kind of psychotic, symbolic gesture. Only one of the victims had clearly been the work of Anthony Simmons, the rogue who had targeted Torrance's life, and who had been killed by Mason in a Challenge Fight shortly afterward. The other three crimes were still unsolved, and the Runners couldn't be sure that Drake himself was behind them, his accomplice on the League...or one of his twisted followers.

"Drake all but admitted his guilt to Jeremy after the attack on Jillian's life," Brody rumbled, his deep voice suddenly pulling her from her troubling thoughts and back to their conversation. "He already hated us before, but now he has a reason to risk taking us out. It's either get rid of the Runners, or accept that we're going to destroy him and whatever he has planned." He shrugged, and Michaela found herself momentarily fascinated by the way the casual gesture traveled across the broad width of his shoulders, his muscles flexing beneath the thin cotton of his shirt.

She tried to keep her focus, but damn, she couldn't get enough of those shoulders. Hoping she didn't sound dazed with lust, she managed to say, "So what happens now?"

"Would you like me to take you home tonight? We can stay in Covington for a day or two so that you can get your things together, close up your shop, then head back up."

"Close up my shop?" Her hands went still beneath the running water as she rinsed the suds away from a mug. She'd already made arrangements with one of her employees to run things at Michaela's Muse, her paranormal specialty shop, for a few days—but she hadn't considered that she might be away longer than that.

As if following her train of thought, Brody said, "I want you in the Alley, Doucet. In my cabin." The dark sound of his voice shivered across her senses, but his expression remained unreadable, as if they were discussing nothing more interesting than the weather. "I don't trust what's happening in the pack and we're too vulnerable in town."

She wanted to argue. She had a life, a business in the city. And yet, none of that would ever be the same again. Max wouldn't be coming back home with her. Working with her. Living with her. The pain crushed down on her again, but she battled against the tears. "Let's go down tonight," she said shakily, hoping he didn't hear the tremor in her words. "I can get what I need from home, then go by the shop and close things down. My customers will just…have to understand." "You don't have to close. David would be more than happy to keep it open for you," Torrance suggested from the table, having obviously been listening in on their conversation. David Sharp was a loyal, longtime employee who had worked at Michaela's Muse while getting his degree in advertising and had recently returned home to Covington.

"I don't know," she murmured, picking up a coffee mug. "He's a sweetheart, but I couldn't ask him to—"

"Sure you could," Torrance said softly. "It shouldn't take you more than a day to go down and get the accounts all settled. You can even show David how to do the payroll, then leave everything in his hands until it's safe for you to go back."

Michaela gave a wary nod, knowing she had little choice if she wanted to remain in business, and turned back toward the sink, moving on to the last dish. "So what time do you want to leave?"

Brody didn't answer—just stood there watching her with a strange, intense expression hardening the grooves that bracketed his mouth. "What?" she whispered, wondering what was bothering him.

"Nothing," he muttered. Then he uncrossed his arms and started to shift away from the counter, only to stop. Shoving his hands deep into the front pockets of his jeans, he suddenly asked, "Can you use it on me?"

Michaela blinked at him in confusion. "Use it? Use what?"

He jerked his chin at her, his dark eyes narrowed and heavy-lidded. "That witchy thing that you do."

"Witchy thing?" she repeated, trying to stifle a laugh when she realized he was deadly serious. "I can assure you, Brody, that I'm not a witch." "I want to know, Doucet."

"Know what?" she pressed, finding some perverse pleasure in pushing his buttons. And he was still calling her Doucet, which just made her feel ornery.

He stepped closer, invading her personal space, and the moonlight spilling in through the open kitchen window played across his face, revealing the stark angles and hollows. His nostrils flared, as if he were breathing in her scent, and she realized that from this close, she could see his scars in vivid detail as they cut over his face, slashing from his left eyebrow, across the bridge of his nose, down to his opposite jaw. Her fingers itched to reach out and stroke them, wishing she could wipe away the deep-seated pain that lingered in his eyes. He tried to hide so much behind his angry scowls, but she saw through them. The liquid depths of his bottle-green eyes were like a window into his soul, beautiful...and yet, so filled with hurt, as scarred within as he was without.

"Just ask me, Brody," she whispered softly, trying to tell him with her gaze that he could trust her. "I promise I'll be honest with you."

Something wild and hot and primitive flared in those mysterious green depths, lost as quickly as it appeared beneath the lowering of his lashes—and in a husky, silken slide of words, he said, "I want to know if you can you read me."

Chapter 4

They made the drive down to the city in relative silence, the radio delivering a quiet string of blues, the sensual tenor of an alto sax keeping rhythm with the steady beat of the tires upon the road. The second Brody had cranked the powerful V-8 engine, a quiet, exhausted lassitude had poured through her like warm, rich honey. Even now, it melted Michaela into the seat of the truck, while Brody's scent filled her head, surrounding her in the smooth, intimate darkness.

She took a deep breath, and savored it. God, he smelled good. Not pretty or flowery, but like a man. His scent was as crisp and rich as the outdoors, as the forest itself. Woodsy with traces of musk and salt. Completely delicious.

Sitting there beside him in the midnight dark, Michaela was uncomfortably aware that she'd never known a man whom she found more attractive, more compelling. The more time she spent with him, the more she felt inexplicably drawn to the quiet Runner, as if she wanted to wrap her arms around those broad shoulders and simply hold on to him. Comfort him, easing the hard tension she didn't need mystical powers to feel pouring off him in waves. And take comfort from him in return, drawing on his strength until she didn't feel so hollow inside, so broken and barren and wrecked. If he'd only show her a little warmth, she knew she'd be in serious danger of letting her emotions get the better of her. But he remained as cold and remote as ever.

And the fact you're upset about it proves that you're losing your mind.

She scowled at her know-it-all conscience and turned to stare back out her own window. Beyond the cozy confines of the truck, a light drizzle began to fall, adding to the strange feeling of intimacy. When his deep, whispery baritone intruded into the soft monotony of sound, she jumped, startled.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to spook you," he murmured, sliding her an uneasy look, as if he expected her to cringe away from him in terror, now that they were alone.

She gave him a small, self-conscious grin and tucked a curl behind her ear. "You didn't. I guess I'm just jumpy...still on edge after everything that's happened. I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't hear what you said."

He made a subtle gesture with his shoulders that did something wonderfully wicked to those hard muscles beneath the clinging cotton of his shirt. "I just wondered how you got that little gift of yours. The one you said doesn't work on me."

Her grin bled into a soft burst of laughter that she tried to hide under her breath, half watching her fingers play in the folds of her skirt while soaking up as much of him as she could from the corner of her eye. Sorting through her explanation in her head, she decided to start at the beginning. "My maternal grandmother, who lived in the bayou, was a gifted seer, and I guess I was lucky enough to have some of her powers make their way to me, though I'm nowhere near as strong as she was. I have a really good sixth sense about things, and sometimes I'm able to read people."

"Read them how?" he asked, sounding curious.

"I'm not quite sure how to explain." She shrugged, nervous under the force of his attention, even as he kept his hands and eyes on the road. But he was focused on her, every part of him. She knew it, felt it, and it was a heady, breathtaking sensation that made her want to scoot closer to him. He looked so strong and solid sitting beside her, so invincible and tough. It made her want to just crawl inside of him and pull him around her like a fortress, like the most amazing security blanket she could ever find.

Blinking in surprise, Michaela winced, startled by the discomfiting thought. She wasn't the kind of woman who went looking for a man to take care of her or to hide behind. She was a woman who prided herself on her independence and sensibility, but then, the last few weeks had been anything but normal.

Maybe you're due for a little comforting.

Another dangerous thought, that, and she shook it off, pulling her mind back to her explanation. "Sometimes, if a person is experiencing powerful emotions, I can sense them. It's like being able to see into their heart. I can't read their minds like my *grandmère* could, but I can...I can read their *will*, I guess."

"But not everyone's?" he asked, rubbing one hand against the scratchy surface of his jaw. "No. Only some people. If a person wants to hide their feelings strongly enough, it's hard for me to pick up anything. And at times, the harder I want to see, the more difficult it is for me. Some are like a wall—others easier. Mason's feelings for Torrance are so strong, I had no problem picking up on them the first time I met him. But sometimes, the closer I am to a situation, the harder it is to see anything. It's almost as if my interest crowds the power."

He slanted her another quick, questioning look, then turned his attention back to the road. "You said you can't read me at all, but what about Cian?"

She rolled her eyes at his boyishly hopeful tone, snickering softly. "If I could, I wouldn't tell you. It wouldn't be fair, because you'd just use whatever I said to torment the poor guy."

A crooked grin played briefly at his mouth, making him look entirely too sexy. "Picked up on that, did you?"

"It's uh, kinda hard to miss. You two go at each other like brothers. It's ruthless."

"The bastard likes to push my buttons," he sighed with good-natured humor, the light sound warming her heart. It was surprising to see him like this, the corners of his eyes crinkled with laugh lines and a small smile playing at his beautiful mouth. Michaela didn't know what had brought it on, but she enjoyed the effect. An easygoing Brody was even more devastating than a brooding one, and she shivered with awareness, crossing her arms over the painful thudding of her heart.

Mistaking her reaction for cold, he reached out with his right hand to adjust the vents, making sure the warm air was blowing in her direction. A strange, electrified silence settled between them, and though she was staring at her lap, Michaela could feel the press of his eyes on her as he cast another look in her direction, this one lingering, briefly, on her profile, her mouth. Her lips tingled, and she rolled them inward as his left hand tightened on the steering wheel. The silence grew, thickening like a roux set over the simmering heat of a pan—and she watched the softened lines of his expression slowly slip away, replaced by his customary brooding darkness.

"So you own and run your own business," he finally said in a low, gravelly voice.

Whoa. As quickly as that shivering sense of awareness had come, it disappeared, like a rainbow bleeding back into the misty, rain-dappled beauty of the sky. And it wasn't the words themselves that chilled her. No, Michaela could tell from the sudden change in his tone that there was something behind the innocuous statement, and her stomach clenched with all-too-familiar disappointment. "And?" she murmured, silently berating herself for being such a nitwit, knowing her reaction was foolish. With everything going on in her life, she didn't have time to be sensitive over the moody Runner's opinions, but damn if she wasn't. For some stupid reason, she'd wanted him to be...different. To see her in a way that others didn't.

He shrugged his shoulders at her sharp tone. "Nothing."

Oh no. She wasn't letting him off the hook that easy. "Uhhuh. You brought it up, so you might as well go ahead and spit it out, Brody."

And she had a good idea of what it would be, aware of how most people pegged her as an eccentric basket case, walking around with her head in the clouds, once they learned that she owned a paranormal specialty shop. But the truth was that she had a good head for business and had simply chosen a market that she found fascinating as well as financially promising. She had her feet planted firmly on the ground, even if her mind was open to the world beyond what most humans considered normal.

"You just don't look like the business type." The look he cut her way said so much more than his words, and heat rose in her face that had nothing to do with the hot air gusting toward her. Oh yeah, she didn't need to read minds to know what "type" he thought she was. Her entire life, her looks had never given her anything but trouble, affecting how people treated her, judged her, thinking she was nothing but a pretty face with fluff for brains. Thinking she was good for some fun, but nothing serious. Her last boyfriend, Ross Holland, had enjoyed her body, but when it came to his blue-blooded public image and budding political aspirations, he hadn't wanted a woman whose sensuality was so blatant—so "in your face" as he'd put it. In Ross's eyes, her business had only been another strike against her.

She didn't want to admit it, but it hurt to realize that Brody apparently looked at her in the same, narrow-minded light. "Believe it or not, I don't sleep to dream, Brody. You shouldn't make assumptions about me based on physical appearances or what I do for a living."

"Sleep to dream?" he repeated, his brow furrowed over the deep green of his eyes. "What does that mean?"

Michaela struggled to keep her voice even. "It means that I don't have my head stuck in the clouds, worrying about when my next pedicure's gonna be and who'll buy me dinner on Friday night. When I sleep, I sleep hard because I work hard. I don't live in a fantasy world, playing dress up. My business takes up all of my time and I've worked my backside off to make it successful."

"I didn't mean to offend you," he grunted in a low rasp, sur-

prising her. "And I imagine I'll get to see firsthand just how hard you work, since we'll be spending the next day or so at your shop."

"I guess you will," she muttered, looking down to realize her knuckles had gone white, she was fisting her hands together so tightly. She hadn't realized she was so touchy on the subject, but apparently she was. Or maybe she was just touchy about Brody's opinion. An unsettling thought, and another one she didn't want to look at too closely.

Without glancing in her direction, he went on to say, "And seeing as how we're going to be in the city for the next few days, are there any boyfriends I should know about? I don't want to have to deal with some jealous bastard who gets his nose bent out of shape because we're staying together."

"No," she sighed, squeezing her eyes shut, wondering how the hell this was going to work. The guy had her twisted up in knots and they'd only been together for a few hours. How was she going to endure days, if not weeks? She was too aware of him, too on edge.

"No what?"

Her mouth thinned and she opened her eyes, staring at the dark stretch of road through the front windshield. "No boyfriends."

A rude sound vibrated in the back of his throat. "Right."

Michaela shook her head in baffled amazement. She wasn't easily flustered, damn it, but something about Brody Carter made her feel stripped down to the raw, vulnerable, as if she were vibrating with energy, tension and anticipation. "I'm not sure what you mean by that."

He lifted one hand off the wheel, shoving his long, scarred fingers back through the auburn threads of his hair in an

utterly male gesture of frustration. "If you want to lie about it, fine, but women like you always have a line of guys waiting in the wings, six or seven deep at least. I'd bet my life savings on the fact that you're involved with *someone*, Doucet."

"Then you're an idiot," she snorted, "and if you took that bet, you'd be a broke one at that."

He grunted in response, and she turned her head to glare back out her window. She kept quiet the remainder of the drive, not even giving him directions, since he already knew where she lived. But when they pulled to a slow stop behind the dark Mercedes parked in front of her house, she couldn't stop the low groan that fell from her lips, unable to believe her rotten, miserable luck. "*Merde*," she cursed. "That's all this day needs."

"A friend of yours?" Brody asked with a smirk, eyeing the shadow of the man lurking on her front porch.

Michaela konked her forehead against the cool glass of her window once, then twice, and turned to send him her best glare. "I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a liar. There *is* no boyfriend."

He jerked his chin toward the waiting man. "Then who the hell is he?"

"Nobody. He's a big ol' nobody," she muttered, undoing her seat belt.

"I'm still waiting for a straight answer." His eyes narrowed as his face became etched with some unnamed emotion that was fierce and dark.

"He's my ex," she sighed, wondering how she could have ever been so stupid as to believe herself in love with a jerk like Ross Holland.

"Ex-what?" he grunted, his shock evident in his expression. "Husband?" "Thank God, no," she supplied with a low, husky laugh.

"Ex-*boyfriend*. But it's been over for...too long to count." "Count it anyway."

The look she slanted him was equal parts surprise and exasperation. "Last year, okay?"

"And he's still coming around?" He shifted that dark stare back to Ross. "Hasn't he gotten the hint?"

"No," she replied dryly. "He doesn't seem to grasp the concept that he can't have his old girlfriend *and* his new wife at the same time."

He absorbed that for a moment, taking his eyes from Ross and watching her again with that deep green stare, making her feel as though he could see beneath her skin, beneath her guard, and take an intimate stroll through her mind. "He's married?"

It was obvious he wanted the story, and wasn't going to let it drop until he had it. "You're going to make me spill all the gory details, huh? Fine, here goes. It's not like this day could get any worse, so what do I have to lose? We'd been dating for about six months, when little Miss Sunshine Socialite made it clear she was available. His family loved her, and she had the pedigree and prestige they'd been looking for, while I was something he was ashamed of, like a secret from the carnival freak show. Ross is one of those whom I can't read, but once I saw him for what he really was, I told him never to come near me again. He married little Miss Sunshine, but won't give up on the fact that he can't have her *and* me."

After delivering the embarrassing account of her colossal stupidity, she reached to open the door, but Brody grabbed hold of her arm, his fingers fever warm against her skin, reminding her that he was so much more than human. As a Lycan, his core body temperature ran much higher than normal, even hotter when it was closer to a full moon. "Where do you think you're going?" he rasped, immediately releasing her arm, and as she held his stare, she noticed a warm glow beginning to seep through the deep, dark green of his eyes, as if backlit by the searing flames of a fire.

She wet her bottom lip, wishing she could get a read on him, but as always, whenever she threw out the soft, diaphanous net of her power, she met the hard resistance of his will, catching nothing. Taking a deep breath, she explained, "I'm just going to tell Mr. Nobody that he needs to get lost."

He shook his head, that oddly lit gaze cutting from her back to Ross's distant figure on her porch, and she was aware of his right hand clenching into a tight fist against his hardmuscled thigh. "I'll tell him," he said silkily. "You stay here."

Oh, no. Not in this lifetime. The last thing she was up to dealing with tonight was a fight between those two, and she knew from the hard cast of Brody's expression that he was looking forward to it. For a fleeting moment, Michaela actually wondered if he was jealous, before reminding herself that he couldn't care less about her personal life. No, he probably just needed to work off the frustration of getting stuck with her until Max's training was complete and her life could get back to some kind of semblance of normalcy. Brody didn't care anything about her personally. He was just a good guy who didn't want to see another innocent person get hurt.

But if that's the case, then why did he sound so possessive at the clearing?

To be honest, she didn't know, and wasn't even sure that she wanted to. After having her heart trampled, she didn't think she was up for another round, no matter how incredible her hormones thought he was. At worst, he just felt sorry for her. At best, he probably figured they could have some fun between the sheets while he was stuck with her. Michaela knew better than to think that anything more than that could come from something between them—just as she knew she couldn't risk it. No, something told her that the damage Brody could inflict on her would be devastating compared to the stupidity she felt at allowing herself to get used by Ross Holland.

She now viewed her involvement with Ross as an attempt to grasp at something she was worried she'd been missing, but Brody...God, this strange, unsettling interest searing through her system felt more like a necessity. Something that pulled on her, drawing her in, and that made him more dangerous to her sanity than her ex could ever be.

In the end, Ross had left her feeling used—but Brody Carter could leave her in pieces.

"Look, Brody, I appreciate what you did tonight. I know you only did it because you're friends with Torrance and Mason, and because you probably feel bad for me, after what happened to Max, and I appreciate it. Really, I do. But I don't need you to worry about Ross. A sleazy lowlife like him I can deal with. If anyone comes at me with claws and fangs, howling at the moon, then by all means, they're yours. I promise."

Despite the hot burn of frustration in his gut, Brody found himself biting the inside of his cheek as he fought the urge to grin at her words, thinking she was a lippy little package. She tried to hold his stare, until succumbing to an adorable yawn, ruining the "I can handle everything on my own" image she was going for. He admired her spunk, but there was no denying that he liked the fact she needed him.

What he didn't like was liking it.

You're not making any sense, you jackass. She's screwing with your head.

He wanted to deny it, but there was no point. Every part of him, every cell, every thought, had centered on her since he'd first seen her at the clearing earlier that night. And if he were honest, even before that.

"Come on," he murmured, reaching for the door handle. "You're all but dead on your feet. Let's get rid of pretty boy there so you can get some rest."

"This isn't what you signed up for," she argued, her gaze narrowed on her ex through the windshield. "Really, Brody, I can deal with this."

It was on the tip of his tongue to point out the obvious fact that if that was true, the prick wouldn't still be bothering her. But he kept quiet. She looked exhausted. So beautiful that it hurt a part of him deep inside to even look at her, but weary. Gray smudges darkened her big eyes, her mouth tight, skin pale. And the slow, melodic drawl of her accent had grown thicker, which, he'd noticed, happened when she was upset. She'd been to hell and back tonight, and he had no intention of letting some jackass give her a hard time. "My job is to keep you safe, so there's no point in arguing about it. Let's just get this over with," he muttered, opening his door.

Reaching across the cab, she latched on to his forearm, the touch of her hands on his body sending a tremor of shock through his system. "Damn it, Brody. What do you think you're doing?"

"Calm down, Doucet. I'm not doing anything. Just gonna walk you to your door. You can tell him to get lost all on your own," he told her, trying to sound relaxed while deep inside, in a part of him he'd thought he'd buried, he was burning with a cold, steady fury that he refused to look at too closely. But he couldn't forget it was there, just as he couldn't stop thinking of the many different ways he'd like to take Ross Holland apart, piece by piece.

And the hell of it was that he couldn't blame his anger simply on the fact that the creep wasn't getting the hint about Michaela wanting to be left alone. No, he knew better. He hated him because the bastard had had her. Didn't matter that Brody had no intention of letting himself fall victim to her considerable charms. He still hated every man who'd ever known the sweetness of her mouth, the softness of her skin. Who'd ever pressed his lips beneath the fragile edge of her jaw, drawing her delicate, milky-white flesh against his teeth, and marked her as he thrust himself into the slick, hot depths of her body.

Something ugly and vile and vicious ripped at his insides with the thought, and he realized with a silent snarl of frustration that hate was too light a word for his reaction. No, what he felt was deeper than hate, deeper than jealousy. It was something primal, visceral. Something base and primeval, bleeding both from the possessive nature of the beast and the man.

Irritated by the track of his thoughts, he ripped his gaze away from her soul-deep blue eyes and stared at the human. He stood just beyond the soft glow of the porch light, but Brody's keen vision allowed him to see clearly. His gut twisted as he took in the guy's appearance. He was tall and broad, on the lean side, not bulky. And he was...pretty, for God's sake. Cover model handsome, with thick brown hair and crystal blue eyes, features as even and perfect as a Hollywood sex symbol.

Brody wondered how a guy like that got down and dirty

in the sack. Ross Holland looked like the stiff-lipped type who probably folded his clothes and brushed his teeth, rolling his socks up neatly in his shoes before he slid beneath designer sheets, every hair in place as he flashed his signature smile. If that was the kind of man Michaela Doucet went for, Brody figured he'd probably scare her half to death with nothing more than a kiss. Because once he had her mouth, it wouldn't be sweet and easy and polished. It wouldn't be pretty or refined. His beast was too hungry for that—too focused on wanting this one wild, willful woman.

What it *would* be was raw. Consuming. Taking and drawing and demanding from her everything that he could take from the erotic slide of his tongue against hers, from the warm, lush sweetness of her inner mouth. And there was no damn way it would stop there. Brody couldn't imagine touching her and not losing himself to the animal craving lurking beneath his skin, the hunger of his beast letting loose in a vicious, violent taking. Which was why he needed to get the fact that it was never going to happen through his thick skull, there and then.

Never. Going. To. Happen.

"Please, Brody," she whispered, cutting into his private lecture. Her fingers grasped his arm tighter, and he could feel the tremor that moved through her, the slight vibration of emotion echoing against his bare skin. It was pathetic, how her simple touch unmanned him. "I...I can't handle any more fighting tonight. Wait here and I'll get rid of him, okay?"

He ground his jaw, furious with himself and her and the entire goddamn world, but finally nodded, jerking his chin toward her door. "Go on, then."

"Thanks," she whispered with a shivery smile, turning

quickly to climb out of the truck, while he leaned back in his seat, feeling like an idiot.

It went against every instinct he possessed to let her get out and walk toward another man. But as Brody watched her approach the porch, Holland moving into the light as they spoke, he reminded himself that no matter how he looked at it, it wasn't his right to dictate her personal life. No, that was a privilege that went beyond bodyguard, into emotional territory that was none of his business. It sucked, but he had to face the facts.

Despite how badly he wanted her, Michaela Doucet wasn't—and would never be—*his* woman.

Chapter 5

Rubbing at his gritty eyes as he leaned against the back wall of Michaela's Muse, Brody took another deep gulp of coffee, wondering if he'd ever had a worse night's sleep. It had been hell—no, worse than hell—being tortured with the slow burn of temptation.

After Michaela had climbed out of his truck last night, it hadn't taken her long to get rid of the ex. He'd hated letting her handle the jerk on her own, but he'd known it was for the best. The guy had met her on the steps, and they'd talked for no more than a minute, the human's pale eyes cutting from Michaela to his truck again and again, narrowed with suspicious jealousy. Just when he'd had enough and was reaching for his door handle, the bastard had turned and stalked away from her, heading to his car and screeching down the street in what he'd probably thought was a macho display of speed, which had just made him look ridiculous. Brody had grabbed the bag he always kept in his backseat then and met her on the porch.

Unwilling to let her out of his sight, he'd planned on taking the floor in her bedroom for the night, but she'd surprised him, once he'd made his intentions clear, with a spare bedroom that housed a pair of twin beds. Thinking about it now, he almost laughed, knowing they must have looked like something out of an episode of *I Love Lucy*. The corner of his mouth kicked up at the thought, and he shook his head.

With everything he had on his plate—the hunt for the rogues and the search for a way to bring Drake down, trying to find the psychotic maniac responsible for killing the blond humans, and his duty to keep Michaela safe—he didn't know why he kept having this bizarre urge to grin. It wasn't like him, damn it, and he didn't like it, same as he hadn't liked the way he'd relaxed around her during the drive into the city, before he'd realized what was happening.

And he definitely didn't care for the burn of desire in his gut—the one that kept growing tighter, harder, hotter the more time he spent with her.

What worried him even more than how much he wanted her, though, was how much he was beginning to actually *like* her. He'd been prepared to have to fight his hunger, but he hadn't expected to simply *enjoy* her so much. But with every passing moment, it became more and more evident that Michaela Doucet was unlike any other woman he'd ever known. There was so much more to her than what met the eye, layers upon layers that he wanted to uncover, peel away, until he could get to the juicy center of her heart, her very soul, that lay within. Needing to keep himself occupied, he set his coffee aside and went back to work. While Michaela was busily getting things squared away for her absence, Brody had offered to make himself useful, even though he felt uncomfortable as hell around the fragile, delicate merchandise, like a bull in a china shop. Thankfully, she'd found the perfect job for him in the form of boxed bookshelves in the back corner, waiting to be assembled.

The units were needed to replace the ones destroyed by Anthony Simmons and his flunkies a few weeks ago, when the rogue had vandalized her shop as a way to strike out against Torrance and Mason. The mess had been cleaned up and the store reopened for business, but there were still odds and ends that needed to be finished. The shelves were one of them. While Michaela was buried in paperwork at the counter behind him, sorting out schedules and payroll, Brody kept himself busy assembling the units.

He'd just finished the first one, and was tearing into the tall cardboard box housing the second, when he heard her say, "Do you want something that will hold back your hair?" The soft, husky sound of her voice stroked his senses like a lover's touch, slipping across the surface of his skin, beneath it, trailing down the length of his spine with the damp heat of an openmouthed caress. He squeezed his eyes shut against the blistering need she so carelessly invoked. All she had to do was talk to him and he went hard, his body hot, muscles tight, every cell actually hurting with the need to touch her.

"No thanks," he murmured, pissed that he could feel the beginning warmth of a blush staining his cheeks as he looked over his shoulder to see her offering him a soft leather strip to tie around his hair. Jesus, he hadn't blushed since...hell, he couldn't even remember the last time. Smiling, her head tilted slightly to the side, she said, "But isn't it hard to see with your hair hanging in your face?"

His eyes snagged on the sensual curve of her mouth, provocative and innocent all at once, and he blinked, unable to look away.

Son of a bitch. When she smiled at him like that, it made him start thinking impossible things that he had no business thinking about. Even if she was offering what that deliciously tempting smile suggested she was offering, he knew it wouldn't work and the last thing in the world he wanted to see was that sweet smile melt into horror once she'd finished with him in bed.

"I don't want the goddamn tie," he suddenly growled, making her jump at the savageness of his tone.

"Okay," she whispered softly, still smiling at him, as if he hadn't just barked at her.

Damn it, why was she being so nice to him? What did he have to do to make her stop? And why did he feel like such a complete and utter ass? "Trust me," he grunted, turning back to the tall cardboard box he'd propped against the wall. "It's better this way. You don't want me scaring away your customers."

From the corner of his eye, he watched as she moved a little to his right. "Why would you scare away my customers?"

He snorted under his breath. "You need glasses?"

"Um, no."

"Then you've seen what I look like," he muttered, slanting her a hard glare, as if daring her to keep the little-Miss-Innocent act going.

But she didn't flinch. She just held his stare, her confusion evident in the soft crinkling of her nose. "Yes," she said simply. "I'm more than aware of what you look like, Brody, but what does that have to do with anything?" "Christ," he hissed, wanting to grab hold of the feminine curve of her shoulders and shake some sense into her. "What the hell is it with you?"

The corners of her mouth slipped into a frown. "Am I missing something?"

Clenching his jaw, he jerked his gaze back to the sleek piece of shelving he'd grabbed from inside the open box, the honey-colored wood beneath his fingers beginning to give. Forcing himself to relax his hold, he ground his explanation out through gritted teeth. "My scars, Doucet. They tend to scare the hell out of people. The more I can cover them when around humans, the better. So just drop it."

"I'm sorry," she murmured in a quick rush, rolling her lips inward. "I didn't think...I just..." She shook her head, looking frustrated. "I didn't know you were sensitive about them."

"I'm not," he snapped, feeling like an idiot, aware of the heat slashing across his cheekbones burning hotter, completely humiliating him. "I just don't like drawing attention to myself," he added gruffly, pulling the next piece of shelving from the box.

"For what it's worth, I think...I think maybe you're wrong, Brody."

He turned his head, staring down into her big blue eyes, her lashes so thick they cast a shadow against the creamy paleness of her skin. "About what?"

"If people stare at you, it's probably not because of your scars," she admitted in a soft, tremulous voice that shivered with some unnamed emotion fluttering beyond his grasp, like the rapid flight of a butterfly. "It's because you're...well, you must know that you're...I mean, how..."

"Doucet," he growled, ready to tell her to spit it out.

At the same time she said, "How attractive you are."

The words landed between them with the explosive force of a nuclear weapon, thudding into the cloudy space of misconception, until all he could do was blink at her blushing face, wondering what kind of game she was playing. He searched for a flicker of amusement in her eyes, but could see nothing more than the slow, steady warmth of a desire that nearly made him combust then and there.

His muscles tightened, a trickle of sweat slipping down the searing heat of his temple, stinging the corner of his eye, while he clawed onto his self-control with every shred of sanity he could find. The hazy details of the store faded-the dim voices of a crowd in the next-door café, the dulcet notes of a Celtic CD playing on a stereo, the low burr of electricity coming from the cash register-until there was nothing but Michaela. Those big, beautiful eyes staring up at him with such wrenching emotion. Her intoxicating scent making his mouth water, his gums burning with the prickling sting of his fangs just waiting to slip free. She wet her lips-her tongue tiny, pink and delicate—and he wanted to take control of it. Wanted to grab hold of her and ravage the sweet, inner well of her mouth and that kittenish little tongue until she was sobbing and begging and pleading for more, for everything he could give her.

His fingers released the wood, flexing with impatience, his lungs heaving as he slowly turned toward her, the air between their bodies feeling thick, heavy, the tension building, growing, expanding, her luminous eyes shocked wide, as if she felt it, too. Brody took a step closer to the heat of her body, towering over her, both of them softly panting, his blood boiling with the hunger scorching its way through his veins. He'd just started to lift his right hand toward the silken fall of hair spilling over her shoulder, one long, midnight curl sweeping provocatively across the voluptuous swell of her nipple—when a shrill sound echoed through the store, instantly fracturing the moment. They both flinched, jarred by the sharp, intrusive ringing, and he immediately turned away from her, giving her his back, wondering what in God's name he'd been thinking.

"Th-that's the phone," she stammered in a low, breathless voice, and he listened as she moved away, heading through a doorway and into her back office to answer the call. She'd already sent David home for the day, after going over everything he'd need to handle while she was gone, and now it was just the two of them.

The seconds ticked by, stretching out, until Brody completely lost count of how much time had passed. He just stood there, eyes squeezed tight, body aching as he struggled to force himself to relax, drawing the air in and out of his lungs in a concentrated rhythm that should have started calming him down, any damn second now. Shuddering, Brody finally cracked his eyes open and ran his upper arm over his forehead, his T-shirt clinging to the damp heat of his skin. He was on fire and he hadn't even touched her!

The churning, uncomfortable sense of awareness she incited seemed to have taken on a new skin, a new shape. The more time he spent with her, the more he wanted her. Before, when he'd first met her, he'd been afraid of getting too close to her. Now he didn't know how he would survive without the feel of Michaela Doucet under his hands, under his body.

It'd never been that way for him before. He'd needed sex, wanted it, and he'd slaked his hunger with women whose faces were forgotten the moment he left their beds, which was just the way they wanted it. The last time he'd allowed himself to get close to a woman, it had ended badly. He'd do well to remember the lesson, but damn, he didn't want to think about Jenny Riggs, the Elder's younger sister, right now. Still, it was with a small jolt of awareness that Brody realized the thought of her name no longer made him clench with frustration. That was...different, as if the Cajun's presence had wiped his mind clean of other women, replacing the tainted memories with a fresh, untarnished slate. But even if he couldn't recall what it felt like to have another woman under him, he remembered the bitter taste of rejection in his mouth, the shame of feeling like a used piece of meat when it was over.

The memory settled over him like a heavy, oppressive cloud, until like a breath of sunshine, Michaela walked back into the room. Brody groaned under his breath, the soft sound like that of a man being tormented, pushed to the edge of his sanity, the visceral craving evoked by her particular scent affecting him like an all-too-real pain within his body. He could feel his desire for her, lust-thick and heavy, lying in wait beneath the surface of his skin, keeping company with his prowling beast and knew it was a hunger that would never be satisfied.

And never was a hell of a long time.

Drawing in a deep breath of impatience, he growled low in his throat as she drew nearer. Suddenly the room felt like a prison, the hunger in his veins a noose that he couldn't shake.

"Brody, you're trembling. What's wrong?" she asked in a soft voice, standing behind him again, her concern evident. He'd assumed she'd do the smart thing and avoid him when she returned, but he was quickly learning that Michaela Doucet was not an easy woman to predict. "Nothing's wrong," he grunted, shifting away from her, toward the tall pieces of the bookshelf still lying within the open box propped against the wall.

"You're lying."

Whipping around, he towered over her, trying to ignore how the soft, dark blue wraparound cotton dress clung to the voluptuous, feminine lines of her body. "How the hell would you know?" he growled, feeling like a man pushed beyond endurance.

She blinked up at him, the pansy-soft curve of her lips, so luscious and pink, trembling with emotion, the look in her eyes liquid and tender. "I...I don't mean to pry, but there's a kind of pain in your eyes today. I think you're hurting inside."

Of all the things she could have said, he figured that was the one that could piss him off the most. Curling his lip, he snarled, "Let's make one thing perfectly clear, here, Doucet. I didn't ask for a goddamn reading."

With a soft hint of hesitation, she took a step closer to him, tilting her head back in order to hold his stare. "I told you that I can't read you, and I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't upset me," he growled under his breath, careful to keep his voice low so that they didn't draw attention from any of the people walking past the store. "And nothing's wrong. In fact, my only problem is a woman who won't keep her nose out of my damn business."

For a moment, she looked hurt, stricken, before taking a deep breath and shaking off that bleak expression. Damn it, what was wrong with him? She'd been through an emotional wringer in the past twenty-four hours, and here he was lashing out at her, biting her head off when she tried to be nice. It took everything he had not to reach out and touch her...comfort her.

He was on the verge of doing just that when the chimes attached to the front door sounded, and as Brody watched her pull herself together, then turn and walk away, all he could think was *saved by the bell*.

At the sound of the door, Michaela buried the hurt she'd felt at Brody's words and plastered on a bright smile that turned genuine the moment she spotted one of her favorite customers shuffling in, Meredith Shelby's pale gray hair wound in a tight knot on the top of her petite head. Rushing forward, she gave the local psychic a hug, kissing both her cool cheeks, before stepping aside to allow Meredith a clear view of Brody. She knew better than to try and shield him from the woman's view. Nothing and no one got past the eighty-year-old's eagle eye.

"Oh my. And who might this lovely be?" Meredith asked, her voice still holding a trace of her English heritage as she gave Brody a slow, thorough once-over.

Placing her hand on Meredith's arm, Michaela led the woman to Brody. "I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine, Meredith. This is Mr. Brody Carter."

Giving him no chance to object, unless he wanted to get physical with her, Meredith reached out and snatched hold of Brody's right hand, clasping it within her fragile grasp. He flushed, his eyes wide as he stared down at the little grayhaired woman. Meredith bent over his palm, tsking and murmuring to herself, until she finally lifted her head.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Mr. Carter."

He opened his mouth, then promptly shut it, obviously having no idea what to say in response, and Michaela had to stifle a giggle.

As if there were nothing unusual about her scolding a

perfect stranger, Meredith held his hand and went on. "You're fighting your natural instincts, acting as stubborn-headed as a mule, and that just won't do. You're smarter than that, boy, but you're letting fear control you, holding you back from the thing you want most in this world."

He swallowed, the movement visible in his throat, and managed to say, "What's that?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I can't tell you," Meredith replied with a slow smile. "That would ruin the fun."

Brody's face hardened to the point that he looked as if he might crack, a low sound of restraint vibrating in his chest.

Undaunted, Meredith patted his chest in a comforting gesture. "There, there. It's all right. You're guarded now, but you're going to make a fine husband and father one day."

Shaking his head, he made a rude sound of disbelief in the back of his throat. "No disrespect, ma'am, but there's not a chance in hell of that happening."

The elderly woman arched one perfectly refined brow. "No?"

"I'm not the marrying kind," he stated, his mouth a hard, flat line.

Meredith winked at him, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "No man is, lovey, until he meets the woman who finally opens his eyes."

"I can assure you that my eyes are opened just fine."

"Oh, I do like you, Brody," she announced, her smile widening. Turning to Michaela, she said, "He's a wild one, this young buck you've landed. Do well and hold on to him, Mickey girl."

Blushing, Michaela knew the only way to deal with Meredith was to let her run right over you, and simply try to survive the experience. "Er, I'll, um, do my best, ma'am." "I'm sure you will. Now show me that latest shipment of tea leaves you called me about." Patting her bun, she explained her hurry. "I have an appointment with the stylist in a half hour and want to be on time."

Helping Meredith make her choices, Michaela handled the transaction, aware of Brody keeping a cautious eye on them as he began fitting the bookshelves together.

At the door, Meredith turned back, pinning Brody with a pointed look of concern. "And call your grandmother, young man. She misses you something fierce."

The second the door slid closed behind the little grayhaired spitfire, Brody shook his head in wonder and exhaled a deep breath of relief. Waving to her friend one last time through the window, Michaela turned toward him, the corner of her mouth twitching with a grin. "So what did you think of our Meredith?"

"Charming," he muttered. "I feel like I've been run over by a tank."

A soft laugh fell from her lips. "She liked you."

"Yay for me," he drawled, rolling his eyes.

"Brody! Was that a joke?" she gasped with feigned surprise.

He grunted at her playfulness and turned back toward the shelves. When she moved closer, her mouthwatering fragrance blocking out the subtle blend of incense in the air, and voiced the question he'd seen in her eyes, he wasn't surprised. He'd known it was coming.

"What did Meredith mean, about your grandmother missing you?"

Aligning the side panel with the back of the shelving unit,

he slotted the screws into their grooves and picked up the screwdriver. "Nothing."

"Come on, Brody," she murmured. From the corner of his eye, he watched her perch one shapely hip against a display case full of intricate Celtic jewelry. "Why is it you get to know all my secrets, but won't tell me anything about yourself?"

Twisting the first screw into place, he tried to focus on anything but how good she smelled, how right it felt to be near her, calm and chaotic all at once. "Because I need to know about your life so that I can protect you."

"And I don't need to know anything about you in return?"

Finishing with the last screw, he moved to the other panel, muttering, "That's right."

He could feel the heat of her gaze as it slipped down his profile, over the bridge of his nose, lower, lingering on his mouth. "You really don't like me much, do you, Brody?"

"You're pretty enough," he muttered gruffly, rolling his shoulder as he focused on his task, "but I don't place much stock in beauty."

"Ouch." Her tone was contemplative, soft. "Can't ask for a more honest answer than that, now can I? I'd be offended, except I think you're being rude on purpose, trying to push me away so that you don't have to tell me about your grandmother."

"She lives up in Shadow Peak but we've avoided each other for years." He let out a deep breath, feeling like an ass, wondering why he couldn't just keep his mouth shut around her. "And the reason we don't talk isn't a pretty story, Doucet."

Quietly, she said, "I didn't imagine it was."

He didn't know why, but he found the words spilling out of his mouth in a low, emotionless rumble. "My father was a Silvercrest Lycan who fell in love with a beautiful human, and she repaid his love with an endless string of affairs. Even though he felt the call of a life mate for her, I guess she was either too coldhearted or too self-centered, or maybe just too dead inside to return his feelings. When she had an affair with another mated Lycan male whose wife demanded action by the pack, she and the guy were sentenced to punishment by the wife's family under one of the old laws that has since been rewritten."

"How old were you?" she asked, the words hushed, and he could tell she was trying to hide her own emotion, knowing he'd close up if she showed him so much as an ounce of pity.

"Young, just turned eight, but I understood what was happening. Like a little fool, I tried to rush to my mother's rescue, and ended up receiving a punishment of my own for daring to interfere. Each member of the wife's family was allowed to give me a single lash with their claws. All the blows were delivered to my back, until it was her father's turn." Snorting, he said, "I guess he was pissed at the others in his family for going easy on me, so he pulled me up by my hair and slashed my face. My father, who was already being restrained by members of the pack, was so furious that he challenged the Lycan later that night and they both died during the Challenge Fight."

There was a slight tremor in her voice that she couldn't disguise as she asked, "And what happened to your mother?"

He shrugged, careful to keep his eyes on the screws as he twisted them into place. "She lost too much blood from the punishment and the pack wouldn't allow Jillian's mother, who was Spirit Walker at the time, to do anything to help her. She died later the next day from her injuries, and the guy she'd been screwing around with abandoned his family and the pack. No one ever heard from him again." "Wh-what happened to you?"

"My dad's mom took me in," he grunted. "But she was a right old bitch. Didn't want to be saddled with a kid any more than my mom had. She made sure I understood why she was stuck with me—because of my parents' recklessness and stupidity. And she made it her mission in life to teach me the control they'd both lacked, making damn sure I'd never forget it."

Control? What about love? Michaela thought, her heart breaking for the little boy who must have felt so alone, so unwanted. What about cuddles and bedtime stories and kisses on his skinned knees?

Deep, burning pain pierced her chest at the thought of all he'd missed as a child. Was that the lesson the women in his life had taught him, that he wasn't wanted? Wasn't worthy of their love and affection? Had the lessons from his past made it impossible for him to get close to any woman—to give them the chance to get close to him?

Rage for his mother and grandmother poured through her veins in a hard, rushing spill of anger and disbelief. How could any woman not cherish her child? Not do everything in her power to protect him from the world? Suddenly, despite her inability to read him, Michaela began to understand the complicated Runner, to see him in a clearer light. No wonder he was so wary of allowing others to get close to him.

"I'm sorry for what you went through," she said gently, noticing the way he flinched when she stroked her hand across the firm curve of his shoulder, wishing she could wrap him in her arms and hold on to him. Stupid wish, since she knew she would only end up being rejected. At worst, used. But wishes weren't always wise, or even healthy, blooming from that innocent part of our souls that held eternally to faith and hope.

He rolled his shoulder, shifting away from her touch. "No need to be sorry, Doucet," he muttered. "It's ancient history and I was stupid to interfere. I was impulsive and I paid for it."

"That's not true. You were very brave, and you loved her. What you did, it was incredibly heroic. You should be proud of what your scars represent. They're a symbol of your integrity."

Brody groaned under his breath at her huskily spoken words, wishing she'd just shut the hell up, feeling like an idiot for opening that vein and spilling his memories in a crimson wash of shame. He didn't know why he'd done it, except for the fact that he wasn't himself around her. All she had to do was smile at him, look at him, breathe for God's sake, and his hard-earned control and legendary restraint were shredded. He wanted to lash out at her, tell her to get lost, but the words were stuck in his throat, along with his heart, which was hammering like a freaking train.

A second later, the door chimes sounded again, and he silently swore, cringing at the thought of having to go through another inquisition. Wondering if he could sneak into the back office before she introduced him to another customer, he picked up a scent that was out of place, even in the strange parade of customers that had been coming and going throughout the day. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood up in alarm, and he sniffed the air, spinning the instant he caught the thick scent of Lycan musk.

"Oh my God," Michaela gasped, at the same time Brody grabbed hold of her, shoving her behind him as he turned to face the couple walking into the middle of the store. Michaela's fingers grasped onto the back of his shirt, twisting the soft cotton into angry handfuls, and he knew she'd recognized Dustin Sheffield, the dark-haired, golden-eyed Lycan from her brother's *Novitiate's* ceremony. It was Dustin who had kicked Max when he'd fallen to the ground. His father, Cooper Sheffield, once one of Stefan Drake's key supporters, had been killed by Jeremy after the attack on Jillian's life. Now, with his father gone, it'd been rumored that Dustin had stepped into the role of Drake's right-hand man.

Taking a leisurely glance around the shop, Dustin whistled softly under his breath. "I heard Simmons had quite a field day with this place, but it looks so spiffy and clean. What a shame."

"What the hell do you want, Sheffield?"

Ignoring the question, the Lycan flashed a slow smile, then leaned down to whisper in the ear of the cute blonde clinging to his arm. Vapid and blank, her big eyes blinked slowly as she listened to him. No more than eighteen, the human girl giggled at whatever he said and turned to wander toward the far side of the shop, studying a display of crystals while blowing bubbles with an enormous wad of purple bubble gum. Dustin watched her ass in a low-slung pair of jeans that revealed the hot pink fabric of her thong underwear, then turned back toward them, one brow arched in a cynical lift as he tilted his head to the side, trying to see around Brody's body. "Is there a sexy little Cajun hiding behind you, Carter? I can't see her—" he took a slow, deep breath "—but I can sure smell her."

Michaela released Brody's shirt and moved to his side, her chin high, eyes narrowed with fury as she stared at the smirking Lycan who winked back at her. Brody wrapped a protective arm around her waist, hauling her even closer to him as he kept his attention focused on Dustin. Stopping beside a display of pewter figurines and chalices, Sheffield's hard eyes traveled over Michaela's body, lingering on the lush swell of her chest. Obviously aware of his stare, she crossed her arms, shielding herself, and the corner of the bastard's mouth twitched with a grin.

Pitching his voice seductively low, he drawled, "Do you know who I am?"

She nodded with a jerky movement of her chin. "You're the sadistic asshole who kicked my brother."

"Aw, don't be a bad sport, angel. I was doing him a favor. If he's going to make it in our world, he needs to toughen up. Just ask Carter, here. Your Runner is known as one of the most brutal hunters there's ever been. They say he can kill a man without even batting an eye."

"Brody kills gutter scum who deserve to die," she murmured, surprising him by rising to his defense. "All you did was act like a bully."

A low, sinister laugh fell from the Lycan's lips. "Now you're just trying to hurt my feelings," he rasped, the golden hue of his gaze bleeding away, replaced by a deep, infinite black that revealed nothing, utterly devoid of emotion. "But guess what, sweetheart? It won't work."

Jeremy had told Brody and the other Runners that Dustin was close to turning, if not already, rogue. It was something you could just feel, after you'd been hunting as long as they had, the way an elderly arthritic man could predict rain. A sense...a feeling, not unlike the way Michaela had described her own abilities.

More than anything, it was in the eyes. Cold, emotionless, a rogue knew nothing beyond its hunger for death and satisfaction. There was no warmth, no soul. Just that hard, relentless push for a dark, violent rush of pleasure. Brody wanted to take the bastard down, but his first priority was keeping Michaela safe. "For the last time, Sheffield, tell us what you want and then get out."

The grin curling Dustin's mouth shifted into something sly, suggestive, and he shook his head. "Something tells me that you'd put up a fight if I told you." Picking up one of the figurines, a lovely little sprite arching her back, arms flung high over her head in sensual abandon, Dustin ran his fingers over the feminine lines of its body, his gaze never leaving Michaela as he drawled, "But if you're really that interested, Drake sent me down to make sure you were doing your job, keeping her on a short leash."

"And he chose you for his messenger boy?" Brody snorted, aiming for his ego. "So with Simmons dead and your old man gone, I guess Drake is really having to scrape the bottom of the barrel for support these days, eh?"

Sheffield made a tsking sound under his breath. "Drake used Simmons's thirst for revenge to make a move against Dillinger, but the idiot turned out to be too weak to see it through. It was embarrassing, if you want to know the truth. As for my old man, he let himself get careless. But me, I'm smarter than both of them. I know how to keep myself alive. And I don't plan on going until I've gotten a taste of all that life can offer," he murmured, giving Michaela's body another slow, hungry look.

"Get your eyes off her right now," Brody demanded in a low, deadly rasp, "or I promise you're going to regret it."

"You can't touch me, Runner. None of you can. Drake's hatred has made him more powerful than anything you've ever known, than anything you can handle."

"See, that's where you're wrong, Sheffield. And if you're not

careful, all you and Drake hold dear is going to come crashing down around you. Sooner or later, the humans are going to find out about the rogues. What do you think they'll do then?"

"You're so pathetic," the younger man snickered, shaking his head with mock pity. "The Silvercrest are embarrassed by you, and yet you still put their needs above your own, protecting them from discovery. Personally, I say let the humans find out the truth about us. They're no match for our strength. They're nothing but food."

A rich, husky rumble of laughter shook Brody's chest. "Food that would end up kicking your ass."

"Hmm, I wouldn't hold my breath about that if I were you," Dustin whispered, a gloating sheen of satisfaction coating his skin. "After all, her precious brother cried like a baby when I took a bite out of him."

For a moment, time stood still, suspended, and then Michaela exploded into action, a hoarse sob breaking from her chest as she lurched forward. Brody reacted instantly, throwing his arms around her, trapping her against the front of his body. She struggled in his hold, same as she had at the clearing the night before, but he didn't blame her. He wanted to tear Dustin apart, as well.

"You sick son of a bitch," he snarled, his own rage crashing against his control, battering it down. Only the need to protect the woman in his arms kept him in place, kept him from acting on the slow burn of fury rushing through his system. Tangling his hands in Michaela's hair, he cupped the back of her head and pushed her face into his chest as the first racking sobs shook her feminine frame, her anger and frustration escaping in a torrent of emotion. Cutting a cold, deadly look of menace at the Lycan, he said, "Get the hell out of here. Now." Dustin made a soft, crooning noise under his breath. "Don't cry for Max, beautiful. I'll even be a sport and say hi to him for you."

Wrenching in his hold, she turned and shouted, "Stay away from my brother!"

"It's sweet that you're worried about him, but pointless. If anything," the Lycan murmured, his voice low and soothing, like a lover's, "you should be worried about your *own* skin. After all, if things don't go well for Max, your blood will be on Carter's hands."

She went still in Brody's arms, staring at Dustin in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

The Lycan's dark brows rose on the smooth expanse of his forehead. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?" she demanded.

"If your brother fails, he's not the only one who'll die. All threats have to be neutralized, which means your watchdog would be expected to take your life. Wonder if he'll enjoy killing you as much as he's enjoyed all his other kills?" he mused, slanting her a laughing look as he set the sprite back in its place. "Who knows, maybe he'll even enjoy doing you while you're still warm, before finishing the deed. There's something wild about him that says he likes it a little rough."

Though he tried like hell to hold himself in check, Brody's restraint finally snapped and he pushed Michaela behind him as he surged forward, his fingertips burning as deadly claws pricked just beneath the surface of his skin. If it weren't for the human girl on the other side of the room, he'd have allowed them to slip free, but fought back the impulse. Instead, with one hand he grabbed a handful of the Lycan's shirt and drew his other arm back, preparing to smash the bastard's smirking face, while Dustin shoved at his shoulders.

"Come on, Runner. Give it your best shot," Sheffield taunted, just as the front door chimed and a group of eight young college students filtered in, laughing and chatting, oblivious to the tension at the far side of the shop. Releasing his hold, Brody shoved the Lycan away from him. His hands fisted at his sides, chest heaving as he struggled to claw onto some shred of his control.

"Better luck next time," Dustin drawled with a hoarse laugh, and with a crooked smile, he turned and walked past the oblivious students, out the front door, the wide-eyed blonde following faithfully behind him.

Chapter 6

That evening, they made the drive back to Michaela's house steeped in the same charged silence that had been hanging over their heads ever since Dustin Sheffield's visit. Brody had called Cian and brought him up to date on Sheffield's confession about Max's attack, and then he'd talked to Mason, who said he would notify the League. Not that they expected anything to come from it. Because of Dustin's close ties to Drake, until they had solid proof that Sheffield had gone rogue, and not just Brody's word, they knew the League would refuse to assign a Bloodrun on the Lycan.

And while he was sure Michaela had believed him when he'd awkwardly tried to assure her that he'd never cause her any harm, despite Dustin's taunting remark to the contrary, the tension between them had remained thick. Or maybe that was just the growing web of sexual awareness that he couldn't shake, its clinging, powerful strands ensnaring him tighter with each passing second, until he could barely breathe without panting for a deeper pull of her maddening, mouthwatering scent.

He parked in front of her house, and they both climbed out of the truck, the cool evening breeze wrapping around them, bringing hints of a coming storm, the air crisp and damp. As they made their way up the front walkway, he caught sight of a white swing hidden in the shadows at the far end of the porch. It creaked gently back and forth in the gusting wind, and his blood scorched its way through his veins as he studied it.

Too easily, Brody could imagine the beautiful human lounging there on the wheat-colored cushion, swinging lazily while a sultry summer breeze ushered in the twilight, a knowing smile curving her lush mouth as she beckoned him closer with the feminine crook of her finger. For a moment, the tender, seductive image was so powerful that he almost believed he could reach out and touch the warmth of her flesh, the heavy silk of her hair. Explore the heavenly textures of her body beneath his callused, work-roughened fingertips.

And daydreams are going to get you nowhere, you jackass... other than in a shitload of trouble.

Why was he having such a hard time grasping that concept? This—this bizarre sense of obsession, hunger and fascination—it wasn't him. The others, sure. Hell, Mason and Jeremy were so in love with their mates they were practically floating. And he could see some woman wrapping Cian around her finger someday, if she could find a way to put up with the smart-ass bastard. Even Pallaton would eventually be tamed.

But not him.

And yet, when he faced facts and owned up to exactly

what he'd have been willing to give up for the chance to touch Michaela Doucet, just once, it was staggering. Brody couldn't stop his mind from lingering across the visual details of her body as she led the way up the path toward the house, the barest hint of her profile visible as he followed behind her, her face as luminous as a pearl beneath the hazy glow of the streetlamp. Would her skin be that soft and pale everywhere, revealing the tracery of veins beneath her voluptuous breasts, her belly, the tender flesh of her inner thighs?

Muttering to himself, Brody wondered how he was going to survive another night under the same roof with her without touching her, battling against the visceral, sharp-edged hunger that wouldn't leave him in peace. He'd been insane to think he could watch over her, protect her, without losing his everloving mind.

Completely lost in the thick, unctuous tangle of his thoughts, he'd just set foot on the bottom porch step when he heard a vehicle behind them, its tires screeching to a stop in front of her small yard. Turning, Brody cursed hotly under his breath at the sight of Dustin Sheffield grinning at them from the passenger side window of a sleek, black Silverado.

Brody didn't recognize the driver, but Dustin sat with his arm braced in the open window of the door, the smoke from the cigarette perched between his lips, curling like a serpent above his head.

"What the hell does he think he's doing?" he muttered, aware of Michaela coming back down the porch steps to stand at his side.

"Pushing your buttons, no doubt," she whispered, grabbing his left arm, as if she could hold him back. "Please don't give him what he came here for, Brody." Since, by this time, he was dragging Michaela along with him away from the porch, he stopped halfway down the stone path that bisected the front yard, unwilling to take her too close to the truck. "What are you doing here, Sheffield?"

Dustin exhaled a silvery stream of smoke and smiled. "Just being neighborly, making sure the little lady got home okay tonight. Didn't want her to be upset after what she learned today."

Brody curled his lip. "You're pushing your luck, and I don't give a crap about Drake and your pathetic threats. Only thing that concerns me is making sure you understand just how serious I am about you staying away from her. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," the Lycan laughed, his smile widening as he flicked the cigarette butt into the street. Reaching behind him, he shifted as he pulled something out of the back pocket of his pants. Brody heard Michaela's gasp and knew she instantly recognized the pale lace bra Dustin brandished in the open window, rubbing the soft material between his fingertips, while his lips twisted in a taunting grin. "Hope you don't mind, Runner, but I borrowed a few pieces of the Cajun's lingerie for Kimmie today and wanted to return them. Dressed her up in it before I screwed her stupid little brains out, the scent of your woman filling my head. God, what a high," he sighed. "I was gonna return the panties...but, well, let's just say they were a little worse for wear." He snuffled a soft laugh, then lifted the bra to his nose, took a slow, deep breath and moaned deep in his throat. "Mmm, and no wonder you were so eager to volunteer to be her white knight, Carter. Little Cajun's sweet, like candy." His tongue flicked out, and he touched it to the delicate lace. "Good enough to eat, in fact."

A deep, snarling growl jerked out of Brody's throat and he lunged forward, while Michaela clung onto his arm. "You son of a bitch!"

Chuckling, Dustin tossed the bra in Michaela's direction and the truck immediately sped away, its tires screeching against the damp asphalt as it swerved and roared down the street.

"What do you think you're doing?" Michaela cried, breathless as she struggled to keep hold of Brody's arm while he tried to pull her off without hurting her.

"I'll tell you what I'm doing," he seethed, his voice so guttural, she could barely understand him. "I'm going to do what I should have done this afternoon and chase him down, then beat that little shit's face into the ground for daring to even look at you!"

"Stop it," she snapped, holding on to him with all her strength. "I'm not going to let you do this! It isn't going to change what's happened to Max, and it isn't going to help anything!"

"Do you know where he got that thing?" he shouted, pointing at the bit of lace lying in the grass.

She sucked in a sharp breath. "From my house, obviously."

"He could have gotten you," he snarled, his expression so livid, Michaela was sure he was going to slip from his human shape any second now, allowing the primal fury of his beast to break through. She could see the tips of his fangs gleaming wickedly in the moonlight, just beneath his upper lip—could feel the visceral, animal energy pouring through him while his eyes burned like twin golden-green embers. "He was *here*, Doucet! What if you'd come home alone last night? Or today? What if I wasn't with you? He could have done anything he wanted to you. There's no way you could have stopped him." She went pale as his words sank in, but she didn't back down. "It doesn't matter," she said hoarsely, knowing that keeping Brody safe was more important to her than any kind of revenge against the rogue Lycan.

"Like hell it doesn't," he growled, not even sounding human. "I'll be damned before I let him terrorize you this way."

"He isn't terrorizing me, Brody. Upsetting me, yes. But I know what he's doing." She blinked up at him, releasing her hold on his arm so that she could press her palms against his broad chest, aware of his heartbeat thumping heavily beneath her touch. "He's using me to get to you, I mean to the Runners, just like you said they would. It's all just a game to him. Even what happened with Max. But with you watching me, he isn't stupid enough to actually try to hurt me, because he knows the lot of you would have his ass if he did."

"Jesus, when are you going to get it?" he demanded, his tone thick with anger and impatience. "He wants you, Doucet. Once his kind sets their sights on a target, they don't just let it go. Trust me, I know. This is the kind of filth I track down month after month. He isn't going to just up and forget about you."

"Well, he isn't going to get me, is he?"

Brushing her hands away from his chest, he took a deep, shuddering breath, his expression still etched with deep lines of fury, though she could tell he was trying to calm down. "We're packing up tonight. I want you in the Alley. It isn't safe for us down here."

"Okay," she murmured, glancing down the street as she snatched up the bra, hoping like hell that none of her neighbors had heard their raised voices. The last thing they needed was to deal with a concerned good Samaritan or the police. "I finished up at the store today and everything's ready for David. If you'll just come inside with me, I'll pack up a suitcase and we can go ahead and leave."

She turned toward the house, and he stayed her with his hand on her shoulder, the heat of his fingers burning its way through the soft cotton of her dress. "We go in together, with you at my back. I need to make sure it's safe."

Michaela nodded, and together they moved up the narrow pathway. She unlocked the front door, and they walked into the silent house, turning on lights along the way. In the kitchen they found a window with a broken lock, obviously where Dustin had snuck in. Nothing was touched or out of place, however, until they reached her bedroom upstairs. The second Brody flicked on the light, she gasped, pushing past him as she rushed into the room, turning in a circle in the midst of mindless destruction, the bra falling to the floor, forgotten.

She'd already known Dustin had been through her things, but she hadn't expected this kind of devastation. Her furniture had been slashed, deep grooves from what looked like claws marring the smooth cherrywood finish. Her bed and mattress had been shredded, feathers from her pillows and comforter blanketing the ruined clothing that had been dumped from her drawers and closet. On her dresser, her antique perfume bottles had been smashed, the painting that hung above her bed, the one her *grandmère* had given her before her death, streaked with crimson letters, as if a message had been written in blood.

Blinking the tears from her eyes, she tried to read the words, but she couldn't focus. "What's it say?"

Brody made a harsh sound in the back of his throat. "It says Your blood will be on Carter's hands." "Oh God."

"Doucet, I'm...sorry."

"Why?" She sniffed, hating the tears. It was just stuff, after all. Not worth getting emotional over. But this was her private space, and knowing it'd been breached felt as if someone had spied on her with a hidden camera. Leaning down to pick up a shattered picture of her and Max and Torrance at last year's Christmas party, she said, "It wasn't your fault, Brody."

"I hate that this bastard got close to you."

There was something in his words, an underlying thread that made it sound as though he actually...cared, but before she could look at it too closely, the screeching sound of a car slamming on its brakes came from the front of her house. She flinched, and Brody moved toward the bedroom window facing the front yard. Looking through the white wooden slats of her blinds, he swore a foul string of words under his breath, while the soft spill of golden light from the bedside lamp played over the auburn silk of his hair, catching at the deeper, shimmering strands of ruby and crimson. "I don't believe it."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Nobody."

"Oh God. Ross?" He nodded and she groaned, unable to believe her luck could be this horrendously awful. Pushing her hair back from her face and swiping her fingertips under her eyes, catching at any wayward tears, she said, "I'll go get rid of him. Just promise that you'll stay here."

"I'm not a goddamn dog," he countered in a low, guttural rasp, turning to face her, an incredulous look on his face. "And I'm not letting you talk to him alone."

"Brody, be reasonable. You...you can't...you're too..." Taking a deep breath, she tried again. "Look, I don't know how to say this any other way, but your wolf is too close to the surface tonight. Your eyes are glowing and the tips of your...of your fangs are showing. You *can't* go out there. It'll only take me a minute to get rid of him," she said quickly, turning away from him to head back toward the hallway.

"I don't give a shit what I look like." Brody grabbed her arm with controlled strength and spun her back around. "I don't want you going anywhere near him," he confessed in a rough voice, and she could see the shocking spill of an emotion that looked incredibly like jealousy burning in his deep green eyes. Of course, she knew she must be misreading what was simply his protective nature. The man could be reasoned with, but the wolf in him dealt in absolutes. He'd been assigned as her bodyguard, and he meant to keep her by his side.

Pulling out of his grip, she headed down the hall. "You can watch through the window. I give you my word I'll stay close to the house. You'll be able to see me the entire time. But I want him out of here. Can you imagine what would happen if Dustin comes back and Ross sticks his nose in the middle of another confrontation? It'd be a nightmare."

Stalking behind her, he muttered, "Open your eyes, Doucet. This is already a nightmare."

She stopped halfway down the stairs, gripping the banister so tightly that her fingers turned numb. "If you want to hand me off to someone else, Brody, I'll understand."

He grunted under his breath, his voice thick as he said, "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Ruefully aware of the relief pouring through her system, she set back off down the stairs, mindful of the heat of his big, powerful body following close behind her. When she reached the living room, he moved to the side of the door. She glanced up at his face, marveling at how he could look so angry and beautiful at the same time, a perfect blend of violence and grace. "Don't you want to watch through the window?"

Slowly, he shook his head from side to side, the scarred corner of his mouth lifting the barest fraction. "The door stays open, Doucet."

She didn't bother arguing with him, not when he wore that dark, predatory look of intent. "Okay, fine. This will only take a second, anyway."

Standing in the open doorway, Brody hooked his thumbs in his front pockets, braced his shoulder against the doorjamb and watched Michaela meet the Armani-suited human in the middle of her front yard. The neighborhood remained silent, but then she'd told him it was an elderly community, most of its residents keeping early hours. And being at the far end of the street provided a certain degree of privacy.

He could tell from Ross Holland's body language that the prick was furious to have found him there. Wearing a ghost of a smile, Brody kept his stare targeted on the guy's handsome face, watching him closely, just waiting for the idiot to make a wrong move. If the bastard even looked at her the wrong way, Brody was going to take it personally.

The guy muttered something to Michaela, and her shoulders drew back, spine rigid as she hissed back at him, their words lost in the gusting breeze that played havoc with her long, midnight curls, until Holland raised his voice. "You're dumping me for a scarred-up freak like him?"

"How dare you!" she seethed, advancing on the ass like an enraged she-cat. "I'll have you know that he's better-looking than you could ever hope to be. And what's more, he's a man, Ross. A *real* man. He doesn't need to hide behind designer suits and power ties, the way you do, trying to disguise what a worthless little prick you are. And for your information, I dumped you a long time ago!"

Stunned by her passionate defense of him, Brody swallowed the heavy lump of emotion in his throat. He had the strangest sensation of warmth in his chest, like something cracking open, spilling inside of him—but at the same time, an uneasy feeling curled around the backs of his ears, solidifying as he heard the asshole snarl, "You'll be sorry for this."

Taking a step onto the porch, he frowned as Michaela said, "I'm already sorry. I'm sorry for letting you use me, sorry for ever setting eyes on you. Now get off my property and know this, Ross. The next time you set foot on it, I'm calling the cops *and* the news crews. What do you think your wife and constituents would think of that, Councilman Holland?"

His face turning a mottled shade of pink, Holland spit out, "You snide little bitch. No one talks to me that way, Michaela. Not even a mouthy little whore like you." He grabbed her as the last words left his mouth, but Brody was already moving. With a savage growl of outrage erupting from his chest, Brody rushed forward, seeing red—the whole scene taking place within a mere span of seconds. He was almost on them when the bastard pulled back his arm and smacked her across the face, jerking her head sharply to the side as she slammed to the ground. Brody instantly sensed the warm scent of her blood, his rage burning hotter, more violently than ever before. In a flying leap that hurtled him high in the air, over her body, he took Holland to the ground, rolling once and pinning the human to the damp grass beneath him.

"What the hell are you?" Holland gasped, staring at him

in wide-eyed shock, his face pale with fear. Brody knew he should have been concerned about revealing the animalistic side of his nature, but he was too furious to worry about the inhuman leap he'd made to take the creep down.

"Trust me, asshole," he snarled, his voice so guttural, he sounded more animal than man, "you don't want to know what I am. And I'll tell you why. Because the thing I hate the most in this godforsaken world is spineless pricks who hit women." He leaned closer, aware that his eyes glowed with an unearthly light, his gums and fingertips burning as deadly fangs and claws fought to break free, held back by the last, crumbling vestiges of his control.

"Jesus Christ!" Holland croaked, his perfect features twisted into a mask of terror as he stared into Brody's changing eyes. "You're some kind of...of—"

"I'm your worst goddamn nightmare. And if you ever come near her again, I will take you apart, you cowardly son of a bitch."

Holland stared up at him in mute horror, and Brody felt his beast shift beneath his skin, prowling the confines of his body, desperate to break free of its human prison and go at the bastard with teeth and claws. He'd never been so livid before, his fury like a physical thing in his body that had substance and weight, pulsing like a toothache in his gut, pressing against his skin from the inside out. Panting, trapped between the fury of the man and the bloodthirsty hunger of his beast, he kept Holland pinned to the ground, struggling to maintain that final tenuous hold on his control, until he felt the cool, gentle brush of Michaela's fingers against the nape of his neck.

"It's okay, Brody. Let him go," she murmured, soothing

him with nothing more than the touch of her skin against his. "He isn't worth it."

"The bastard deserves to pay for striking you," he snarled, shaking, sweat slicking his skin despite the cool chill of the autumn breeze.

"Please, Brody," she whispered, her voice small, shaken. "Just let him go. I want to go inside now. I just want to get away from him and never set eyes on him again."

Heaving a deep, ragged breath, he released his hold on Holland, standing as he watched the human roll onto his hands and knees, crawling across the yard, until he finally lurched to his feet and stumbled his way to his car. Climbing behind the wheel, he sped away without ever looking back. Brody watched until the taillights of the Mercedes disappeared at the end of the street, Holland nearly taking the turn on two wheels in his haste. He'd wanted to give the bastard a final warning to never come near Michaela again, but figured he'd made his point.

Flexing his hands out at his sides, he took another deep, shuddering breath, struggling to regain control of his emotions, until he turned and saw Michaela standing at his side. From one heartbeat to the next, he felt that vicious burst of rage transform back into sexual craving the second he set eyes on her. The only thing that stopped him from grabbing her up and taking her to the ground, sinking into her then and there, was the knowledge that she needed his comfort at that moment, not his lust.

But God, he was dying, the need killing him.

"You're done calling the shots," he rasped. "I was an idiot to let you talk me into it, you coming out here alone. And that was the last time it's going to happen. From now on, I'm stuck on you like a shadow, no matter who you're dealing with. Understood?"

"Yes," she whispered, the soft glow of the streetlamp illuminating the fear in her eyes, as well as the angry welt of red slashing across her cheek from Holland's hand, the corner of her mouth bleeding. "I understand."

Steeling himself to hold it together, Brody moved forward and lifted her into his arms, locking his jaw against the jarring, heart-pounding knowledge of how perfect she felt against him. His pulse was roaring in his ears like the ocean surf, rhythmic and strong, blocking out everything else. The world could have come crashing down around them and he wouldn't have flinched, wouldn't have known, every part of him focused with blinding intensity on the warm feminine body snuggling against him, as if he were her shelter in a world gone mad.

She rested her face in the crook of his shoulder, slender arms wound around his neck, softly panting breaths warm and damp against his skin, and melted into him, so trusting that it damn near broke his heart. Her scent drifted up from the pulse point in the base of her throat, and he nearly walked into the side of the house, missing the open doorway, his fascinated gaze snagged on that fluttering patch of skin, so soft and smooth, begging for the touch of his tongue, the carnal scrape of his fangs.

Gritting his teeth, Brody ripped his gaze away and focused on the stairs as he climbed to the second story, heading down the softly lit hallway. "Which bathroom?" he asked, his voice a quiet rasp, betraying the slightest tremor.

"The one next to my room," she murmured, and his gut clenched as he felt her mouth move against the sensitive skin of his throat, like a lover rubbing sweetheart promises into his flesh. Not that he'd ever had a lover who promised him anything, much less love or affection.

Yeah, and let's pass on the pity party, he silently snarled, disgusted with himself.

He found the bathroom with the door open, and moved into the shadowy space, settling her on the counter between two sinks. A dimmer switch controlled the lighting, so he twisted it until nothing more than a soft wash of gold filled the warm, inviting space, needing to see what he was doing, but wanting as much shadow to hide behind as he could get. He knew it made him a coward, but between Sheffield and Holland and this gnawing need to get Michaela Doucet naked and under him as fast as humanly possible, he'd already been pushed to his limits.

A quick look around showed a stack of fluffy white washcloths sitting on a shelf beside the shower. Flicking on the hot water, Brody let it run in one of the sinks, while he grabbed a washcloth, watching her from the corner of his eye. She sat silent and still, returning his heavy gaze, her expression calm...but in no way serene. No, there was a flush on the delicate crest of her cheekbones, a heaviness in her eyes, a glittering fire burning within that deep cerulean blue that revealed her own emotional struggle.

She watched him hold the cloth under the hot water, steam rising in a slow, sensual swirl from the porcelain sink, adding to the breathless sense of intimacy wrapping around them. He wanted her to tell him to get lost, scram, that she could take care of herself, offering him the perfect avenue of escape. But when he wrung out the cloth and lifted it to the corner of her mouth where her lip had broken open, her fair skin smeared with blood, she grabbed his wrist, saying, "It's okay, Brody, I can do it," he shook his head, wordlessly demanding her submission. Her breath hitched and she sighed, letting go, and he dabbed at the crimson streaks of blood as gently as possible, hating that she'd been hurt—that the bastard had touched her.

"You're shaking again," she whispered huskily, staring at his chest, and he realized it was true. His muscles were rigid with tension, body tremoring with the effort of keeping himself from taking the thing he wanted most, the only steady part of his body the hand that held the cloth, afraid that he'd hurt her.

"Tell me to leave," he groaned, his voice nothing more than a low, tortured snarl of emotion. "Tell me to leave you the hell alone, Doucet."

She shook her head no and big blue eyes as rich and clear as a summer sky flicked up to his face, captured by the blistering heat of his stare. Brody watched, the roaring in his ears growing louder, thicker, as she pulled her lower lip through her white teeth, that peaches-and-cream scent growing stronger, heavier, richer, pulsing off her body in dizzying, head spinning waves, until he felt drunk on the lust pouring thickly through his system.

"I don't want you to leave." Reaching up, she cupped the feverish heat of his cheek in her cool palm, stroking one of the scarred ridges that slashed his face with the baby-soft pad of her thumb. "Thank you, Brody."

"For what?" he grunted, undone by the touch of her hand against his skin.

A shy smile played across her beautiful, battered mouth. "For being here, for taking care of me."

The cloth slipped from his grasp, falling to the floor with a wet slap of sound, and he curled his hands over her shoulders, the soft cotton of her dress cool beneath the heat of his hands as he fought to keep his grip from crushing her. His chest heaved, but he couldn't calm his erratic breathing. In that moment, it became frighteningly clear that controlling the violent burn of carnal hunger in his gut was even harder than mastering the fury of his beast.

"Christ," he growled, the word nothing more than a graveled scrape of sound, ripped out of his throat. He was painfully aware that his muscles were shaking with the savage need to touch her, everywhere. To press his mouth to her skin, in the damp, intimate places where that heady scent would be the strongest. To get inside her, and claim her for his own. But he had to fight it, fight himself, terrified of admitting the truth his heart kept screaming at him. "Don't do this, Doucet."

"Don't do what?" she asked, her mouth trembling with emotion as she stared up at him through her lashes.

"Tell me to leave. Now. Trust me, you don't want to go where this is going to lead."

"Brody," she whispered, her hand slipping from his cheek, trailing down the column of his throat, until she placed her palm against the raging beat of his heart.

"Damn it, this *can't* happen," he groaned, even as his hands slipped down her arms, wrapping around her biceps; at the same time, he stepped closer. Her knees spread in supplication, welcoming him into her personal, private space, like a siren opening her body to her lover.

Staring into his eyes, she held him trapped with the sheer force of her will, the quiet intensity of her need. "It can," she said huskily, blinking as a luminous wash of tears clung to her long, thick lashes. "It can if we both want it to. Is that what you want, Brody? Don't you want to touch me?"

Chapter 7

Michaela was stunned by her own boldness, but she refused to take back the shocking words. Brody's eyes burned with anger, lust and something that was seething just beneath the surface. Something she couldn't see, could only feel, the way you could watch the surface of a calm sea and know that something violent lurked just beneath the serene, glasslike plane of water. But it didn't scare her. Instead, she wanted to reach out for it, grab it and rip it to the surface, take the wildness of it into her hands and hold it, throw her arms around it and cover herself with it.

She wanted him to lose control, to give her everything. All of him.

"Don't I want to touch you?" he snarled in a low, guttural rasp, so close that she could feel the heat of his breath, see the tiny flecks of gold that glittered in the deep green of his eyes. "If you had any idea of what I want from you, woman, you'd run screaming, while you were still able to, and get as far away from me as you could."

"I don't want to run away from you. I should," she admitted, the throaty words almost solemn. "You have the power to break me, Brody. A part of me that's more fragile than my body or my pride, and even though that terrifies me, I still want you. I want to get closer to you than I've ever been to anyone. I want to pull you inside of me. I want to wrap your body around me. Keep you. Feel you. Taste you."

"Christ, you evil little witch," he growled, his control snapping so sharply she could have sworn she could hear the sibilant hiss as it shattered, and then he was there, crowding into her, the touch of his warm mouth electric against the coolness of her own, and it took her breath, stealing it straight from her panting lungs. He kissed like something that was feral and wild—as if he could taste every part of her through her mouth, pulling every breathtaking sensation up from the depths of her soul until he could feast on them with his lips and tongue and teeth.

"Your mouth," he rasped. "Am I hurting your lip?"

"No. God no," she moaned, unable to get enough of him.

He growled low in his throat and kissed her harder then. And he was touching her, too, those big, beautiful, scarred hands clutching at the shivery sides of her throat, thumbs pressed just beneath her quivering chin, his mouth slanting across hers, taking instant possession, demanding her submission. She gave it freely, knowing that she'd goaded him into this. A part of her stood back in fascinated amazement at her boldness; it was so unlike her. So *not* her. But this hunger, this maddening craving for him, had driven her to this place, and she had no intention of balking now. No, she was going to enjoy every sweet, deliciously intense detail. She was going to wallow in them, steep herself in the erotic textures and flavors of him, so rugged and male and perfect. Salty and dark, his scent and taste overwhelmed her, everything inside going hot and soft, melting for him. She ached, from deep inside all the way to the surface of her skin, her desire making her crazed for his touch, his taste.

"Brody," she gasped, tunneling her fingers into the warm, silken strands of his auburn hair and clutching him to her. Lifting her legs, Michaela wrapped them around his hips, tilting her pelvis forward until she could feel the thick, heavy ridge inside his jeans pressing against that needy, empty part of her. "God, Brody, touch me more," she pleaded. "Everywhere. Please."

As if commanded by her breathless plea, his hands lowered, slipping across her collarbone, over her chest, until the lush weight of her breasts was filling his hands, her nipples like hardened berries beneath his thumbs as he stroked them. They both gasped, breaths soughing together, and Brody slid one hand under the neckline of her dress, wrenching until the fabric tore with a sharp slice of sound. His fingers ruthlessly burrowed beneath the delicate lace of her bra, and he cupped her naked breast in the rough heat of his palm, rubbing, molding, massaging her, while the other hand ran down her back, curving around that sweet ass. He jerked her forward, to the very edge of the counter, fitting his jeans-covered cock into that sweet, warm notch between her legs.

"Pull your dress out of the way," he growled, his voice savage and dark, full of predatory demand.

She clutched handfuls of the fabric and wrenched it to the side, her mouth moving under his while he pressed forward, only his jeans and the delicate lace of her panties separating him from that soft, wet flesh, its succulent scent filling his nose, his head, hunger like a stabbing pain inside him, raw and insistent.

Now that he had her in his arms, under his hands, Brody couldn't get enough. She tasted like something he needed to live, now that he'd found it. Tasted like warm sunshine, hot and honeyed and sweetly addictive. He could taste the blood from her lip, its sumptuous flavor only adding to the perfection of her mouth, providing a deeper, headier, intoxicating layer of spice. The details crashed down on him, through him, obliterating the reason of the man, until there was nothing but this burning need to consume her. The pansy softness of her inner lip, the sleek well of warmth within, her kittenish tongue that played with his, as if she were as greedy for the taste of his mouth as he was for hers. The berrylike tip of her nipple stabbing into his palm, so full and tempting, the warm heat of her sex melting against the fly of his jeans.

He'd never had a woman give him back so much. Normally, he could always sense a part of them that they held in reserve, in fear, ready to retreat should he lose control. But not Michaela. There was no hesitation, no questioning. She kissed him back with an avidity that stole his breath; slender, feminine hands clutching at him as if she could draw him into her body. Low, provocative little sounds broke from her mouth into his, making his blood roar, his wolf maddened with the need to mount and claim. Their mouths moved against one another, first from one angle, then another, deep, gasping breaths stolen before they came together in another clutching, groaning need for more. His hands roamed wildly, down the line of her spine, her shoulders, ribs, the lush side swells of her breasts, shaking from the need to rip her clothes from her body and bare her to his gaze, to his touch. He wanted nothing more than to sink to his knees and press his face into that moist, precious, intimate part of her, taking her with his tongue, lashing and thrusting until she gave him everything he wanted, tasting every part of her.

The only thing that held him back was fear. Terror, actually. Because he knew what would happen when he finally lost that last tenuous hold on his control.

But she wouldn't let him retreat, goddamn it. She just kept pushing him with the hungry kiss of her mouth, the provocative touch of her hands on his back, lower, stroking herself against the granite-hard ridge of his cock, until he could feel the slickness of her flesh sliding against the rough denim of his jeans.

"More," she moaned, breathless, biting at his lower lip with her small, white teeth, and he lost it. His restraint broke, and he knew he was going to have her. How could he fight it? The truth was blatantly clear, stunning him with the force of a blow, refusing to be denied. Chanting a low, coarse stream of swearwords into her mouth, he pressed his hand between her legs and ripped out the damp gusset of her panties, the tender, delicate feel of her sex beneath his fingertips so good that he wanted to howl. She was hot, wet, the softest, sweetest thing he'd ever felt, and he immediately buried two thick fingers deep inside of her, his thumb brushing against the swollen heat of her clit.

She cried out, and he pressed deeper, sinking all the way up to his knuckles. Her sex was small, delicate and tight, and his fingers were big. Brody knew the penetration had been too much, too soon, but she didn't push him away. Her hands clutched at him as eagerly as her body, those strong inner muscles pulsing around his fingers, bathing him in liquid fire. Her heartbeat surrounded him, and as he stroked her with his thumb, he curled his fingers forward, stroking her deep inside, as well. She stiffened in his arms for a tight, breathless moment, then melted against him, shivering...whimpering with pleasure against his mouth as the sensations inside her swelled. He swallowed every sound, their breaths tangled, gasping and rough, as if they were in pain. But it was a good kind of agony, the kind that held that breathtaking promise of a shattering, engulfing ecstasy at the end that would swallow them whole, leaving them different...changed...renewed when the crashing wave of sensation slowly receded back inside of them.

He wanted more. All of her. Everything he could take.

"Doucet," he groaned, rubbing her name into her lips, and she arched against him, pulsing hard and deep around his fingers, killing him with her passion. "I want you to come in my hand, baby. All hot and slick and wet. I want it right now."

"Brody," Michaela said thickly, crazed with the need to feel his body, hot and hard beneath her hands. Somehow, she managed to claw his shirt up over his head without breaking their kiss for more than a moment, and tossed it to the floor. Then she moaned deep in her throat, running her hands over the bounty of masculine power she'd uncovered. His broad, beautiful chest, with its ruggedly defined muscles and small brown nipples nestled within dark hair, fascinated her, as did the veins wrapping the muscles in his powerful arms. She ran her fingers over the fever-hot skin of his strong shoulders, trailing them down the sleek muscles running the length of his spine, her breath hitching as she felt the ridged scars she knew were from the punishment he'd received for trying to save his mother. They were deeper, thicker than the ones on his face, and her heart broke for all that he'd suffered when so little, while his hunger as a man blew her mind.

The touch of his hands on her skin, the taste of his mouth, were unlike anything she'd ever known before. Dark, intense, primitive and rough. He didn't touch her because he wanted to seduce her—he touched her, tasted her, as if he *had* to. As if he craved her. Was starved for her. Sensations built like the sensual strains of a symphony, growing layer upon layer, until they roared through her head, through her system. She was lost in them as her need rose higher, hotter, heavier, her senses screaming for more intimate contact. She was crazed, wanting to touch him, have him, everywhere at once. All of him. The velvety dark heat of his mouth, salty and sweet, flavored with hot coffee and hungry male. The silken skin stretched taut over mouthwatering muscles, so hard and lean and powerful, honed to battle perfection, like a weapon.

And those wicked, wonderful fingers that were quickly unraveling her into a shivering, sobbing mess as he gently pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger of one hand, the other buried possessively between her thighs. She could feel it building, the sensations inside of her too overwhelming to contain, to hold on to, even though she wanted to clutch at them and savor them, never wanting to let them go. But he was ruthless in his insistence, demanding her pleasure, knowing just where to touch her, how deep to stroke...to thrust, and how fast, devastating her with his knowledge of her body, as if he knew just how to make her burn. And he did. She felt blinded by the intensity and shocking rush of swelling ecstasy that he ripped up from the buried depths of her soul, hidden so deep she hadn't even known they were there. But she was eating her way into his mouth, clawing at his shoulders, anything to get closer, to have more of him, and then it slammed into her, knocking her breath from her lungs in a loud, keening cry. Michaela flung her head back, the dark, decadent waves of pleasure pumping through her, pulsing in her sex, her earlobes, her fingers and toes, eyelids and throat. She felt his mouth press against the rapid flutter of her jugular, felt the erotic slide of his fangs as he stroked them across her vulnerable flesh, and in that moment, she knew he was going to do it.

He was going to bite her.

The knowledge cranked up the stunning force of her orgasm, and she cried out, fisting her hands in his hair, pressing his face to her throat, wanting it, willing to beg for it if she could find enough air in her lungs for speech. Starstudded crystals of infinite night stuttered against her eyelids, her skin tingly and hot and damp...muscles shaking, strained, and then she went under.

She was distantly aware of Brody cursing, tensing against her body, ripping his hands from her flesh, his mouth from her throat, as he tried to pull away from her, but she held on, unable to release him. She was falling...into his mind, into him. Scared, she struggled against it, but she just kept sinking, her power flung wide, her body in a total weightless free fall, until she found a part of her landing in the midst of a midnight forest, while the other half remained trapped in the present, sitting on her bathroom counter. In a foglike trance, she could see both scenes, the present and the past, as if watching two movie screens layered on top of one another. Michaela knew she should have been terrified, but her reserves of fear and terror were drained by the distant scene of horror playing out before her eyes.

In the present, her arms closed around him, hands trailing over the scars crisscrossing his strong back, while in her mind, she could see the blood spilling down his young body as she watched him on his hands and knees, surrounded by the savage sight of bloodthirsty werewolves, their deadly claws dripping with the blood they'd already drawn from his slim back. A full moon hung low in the sky, his choked sobs filling her head as he buried his face in his small arms, until a dark gray wolf reached down and jerked him to his feet by his hair. Her screams blended with the outraged shouts of a Lycan male she could only assume was Brody's father. Crying out in terror, Michaela watched the gray wolf deliver the final blow that came to the child's face, nearly taking out his eye. Then he'd been thrown onto the ground, unconscious, left there as the pack stalked into the surrounding forest, and it'd taken four of them to drag Brody's father away from his son. His memories whispered their secrets to her, and she knew that Brody had stayed there on the bloody forest floor until his grandmother had been allowed to come to collect him, but by then it had been morning. He'd been so cold through the night, so alone...so in pain.

Her heart broke into a thousand pieces, tears coursing down her cheeks as she cried for all the suffering he'd endured, both physical and emotional, until suddenly she was jerked back to awareness. Gasping, she found Brody gripping her upper arms, shaking her, his voice urgent and hard. "Goddamn it, Doucet. Snap out of it!" "I'm here," she croaked, blinking against the salty wash of tears in her eyes. "I'm back."

"Back from where? What the hell was that?"

She shook her head, trying to get her thoughts in order, her tongue heavy in her mouth, throat dry. "I don't know. It...it just happened..."

"What?" he demanded. "What happened?"

"I saw you, when you were little," she whispered, struggling to explain, her words choked with tears. "That night... when they cut you. I saw it, all of it."

His brow lowered over the unearthly green of his eyes. "I thought you told me you couldn't read me," he growled in a soft, chilling rasp.

"I can't. This...this was different. I don't know why it happened. I'm sorry, I...I didn't mean to do it, Brody."

She reached for him, but he lurched away from her, until his back came up against the bathroom wall with a dull thud, and Michaela finally noticed the...*difference* in him. His eyes burned, glowing even brighter than before, as if lit with a blazing fire from within. Wolf's eyes. And through his parted lips she could see the glistening tips of fully elongated canines fangs—shiny and white. Her breath caught, but amazingly not with fear. She remembered thinking he was going to bite her while her climax had roared through her, remembered wanting it, before he'd started trying to pull away from her. Clearly, a part of him had been fighting the urge to take that bite, fighting to get away, but she'd held on to him, unable to let go.

Chewing on her lower lip, Michaela tried to sort out what had happened. Why had he panicked? Had he been afraid of hurting her? Terrifying her? Or was it something else? She knew, from what Torrance had told her, that a bite between mates led to a powerful bond, but she had no reason to believe she was Brody's life mate. An upsetting thought, that, but one that she refused to dwell on. Was he afraid, then, of changing her? Somehow, the moment had felt too sensual for such a grave outcome—and yet, hadn't her brother been changed by a bite?

Then there was the strange vision of his past. Was it because of her powerful feelings for Brody that she'd been able to steal that little glimpse into his mind? The gift of sight had been her *grandmère's*, but never had Michaela experienced anything even close to what had happened. She'd had feelings, echoes of emotion—but this had been so sharp and clear. She'd been able to smell the blood and the sweat, to hear the low growls of the pack and Brody's broken whimpers.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, and noticed his gaze dropping to her chest, eyes darkening as he stared. Glancing down, her face flamed as she suddenly realized what had snagged his attention. With an embarrassed gasp, Michaela jerked her dress closed in front, covering her breast, and smoothed her skirt over her knees, horrified that she'd been sitting there so exposed while he was angry at her. "I really am sorry, Brody. Should I...do you want me to pack up now?"

His gaze lifted, and in an emotionless monotone, he rasped, "No. I'll be on watch downstairs. Get to bed and rest. We'll head out first thing in the morning."

He didn't wait for her response or bother to explain why he no longer wanted to leave that night. He just turned and headed off into the darkness of the hallway, leaving her alone to sort out the tangled mess of her thoughts. Sliding off the counter, Michaela decided to take a long, steamy shower while she struggled to make sense of everything, of her own feelings. Locking the bathroom door, she slipped out of her wrinkled dress, while admitting to herself that she was still wary of her emotional connection to the brooding Runner, terrified of getting used again, the way she'd been used by Ross—and yet, didn't his actions speak for themselves? If Brody had only wanted her for sex, like Ross had, he'd just given up the perfect opportunity. Why? What was holding him back?

Yet another question she didn't have the answer to, but one thing became strikingly clear to her, the harder she thought about it. Stepping beneath the stinging spray of hot water, her legs still shaking from the force of her orgasm, she accepted that there was more between them than breathtaking hunger, more than the feral burn of lust.

Michaela just had to decide if she was woman enough to go after it—or if she was going to allow fear of another broken heart control her, keeping her back from the thing she wanted most. Not just the man, as wonderful and breathtaking as he was.

No, if she found the courage to fling herself at his feet and open her soul, taking the risk of putting her faith and trust in him, she wasn't doing it for anything less than the ultimate prize. Because as badly as she wanted his hunger and passion, his laughter and his smiles, the thing that she wanted most from Brody Carter was the part of himself she knew he was going to fight the hardest to protect.

If she found the courage to go for it, she wasn't accepting anything less than his heart.

They made good time the following morning as they headed west, back to the mountains, back to the Runners' private sanctuary known as the Alley.

Resting her head against the comfortable seat of the Ford,

Michaela closed her eyes and thought back to the moment when she'd first awakened to the bright glare of morning sunlight sneaking through the slanted blinds in her spare bedroom. For a breathless moment, she'd stared at the sundappled shadows on the ceiling, the piercing, poignant sweetness of her dream still lingering like a warm wave of pleasure in her veins.

She'd closed her eyes then, as well, savoring the remnants of the dream, clutching at the details with greedy mental fingers. After her shower the night before, she'd crawled into one of the twin beds in the empty spare room, determined she wouldn't sleep while she worried over Max and waited for Brody to come to bed, only to find herself succumbing to a deep, heavy exhaustion.

And she'd dreamed. Dreamed of sitting on a quilt in a bright summer meadow, the fresh scents of the nearby forest and flowers dancing on the air, while fluffy, sun-kissed clouds rolled through the deep azure blue of the sky. A quiet rumble of laughter at her side drew her attention, and she'd turned to see Brody sitting beside her on the patchwork quilt, holding a dark-haired baby girl who had the Runner's beautiful bottlegreen eyes. He chuckled as he played with the toddler, laughing and cuddling with her, his green eyes shining with happiness while the sun dazzled off the rich luster of his auburn hair pulled back in a short ponytail at his nape. He'd lifted his head, sending Michaela a heavy look of desire, his white teeth flashing in a bright, sexy smile within the golden beauty of his face. She'd smiled back at him, sharing a powerful connection that had all but skittered with sparks, heavy and potent and sizzling-and then the little girl had grabbed his face with her preciously chubby hands, demanding his attention. He'd laughed as he tickled the child, the joy of father and daughter so powerful and sweet it had made her chest ache.

Lying in the narrow bed, she'd pressed her hand against the sharp, burning glow of happiness in her heart, wanting to hold on to it, keep it—accepting, in that moment, that if it weren't for her fear of getting hurt, she'd be willing to do whatever it would take to make that breathtaking dream a reality.

Now, as she opened her eyes and watched the Runner from the corner of her vision, his profile so rugged and strong as he steered them down the highway, she wondered just how powerful a hold this man could have on her. She'd spent so long being wary, building her walls, her defenses, but with Brody, none of that seemed to matter. He was like a force of nature battering them down, smashing her resistance without even trying.

How could she resist him when she wanted nothing more than to be close to him, to break through his own defenses and breach his heart? To prove to him that if he could find a way to care for her, even a little, and be true to her, she'd do everything in her power to make him happy, to give him joy. To take him into her life, her heart and her very soul.

In the grand scheme of things, she hadn't known him long—just a flash of time over the minutes and seconds of her life—and yet, she knew him more deeply than she'd ever known any other man. Knew his fears, his demons, his strength and courage, his selflessness and temper. Knew he was fierce and loyal, savagely sexual, and yet, tenderly caring.

He tried to act so tough, but he couldn't fool her. As angry as he'd been with her last night, when she'd pulled herself from bed that morning and headed toward her bedroom to dress and pack what few things she'd hoped to find still in one piece, she'd been stunned to discover her room cleaned. It must have taken him all night, and yet, he'd picked up all of her clothes, her bedding, restoring the destroyed room as much as possible. Her bras and panties sat at the foot of her bed, and she'd blushed at the thought of him handling her lingerie, both touched and bemused that he would go to all that effort. Even her clothes had been awkwardly folded and placed on top of her dresser, the mental image of his big hands trying to handle the feminine articles bringing a smile to her lips.

When she'd come downstairs and told him thank you, he'd rolled his shoulder in embarrassment and asked if they could get on the road.

While they traveled down the highway, Michaela watched as he covered a yawn with his hand and wondered how much sleep he'd actually gotten, if any. He'd been quiet during the drive, but then she knew he usually was, never one for idle conversation. She couldn't help but wonder, though, if he was still upset with her for the scene in the bathroom.

Deciding she'd had enough of being timid, she cleared her throat and simply asked, "Are you still mad at me?"

He stiffened at the sound of her voice, then slowly relaxed, his long fingers flexing around the top of the steering wheel. "I'm not mad at you, Doucet."

"Then why am I getting the silent treatment?"

He flushed, slanting her a quick look. "Sorry. I've just been running over everything in my head."

"Oh. You mean the investigation?"

"Yeah," he rumbled, his worry and fatigue evident in that single word.

Michaela could understand why he was so preoccupied. She wasn't even a Runner, and it was never far from her mind, the worry over what Stefan Drake and his rogues were planning. "What do you think Drake hopes to accomplish?"

Sighing, he scratched the ginger bristle darkening the hard line of his jaw. "Hell if I know."

Pulling her hair over one shoulder, she shifted in her seat until she was facing him, bending one leg beneath her. "When Jeremy and Jillian told us what things were like up in Shadow Peak, I couldn't believe that so many of the Silvercrest could be following Drake, believing his racist propaganda and accusations that you guys are lying about the rogues. Why can't they see what he's doing, the way he's manipulating them? Why are they so afraid to believe the Runners?"

"Because it's easier to buy his lies than it is to think for themselves," he replied, his deep voice heavy with frustration. "That's the downside of living in a society entrenched in such steep traditions. They've forgotten how to question the authority of those who tell them what to do, what to think. They believe themselves so powerful, and yet, they've lost their backbone, their free will, following the League like cattle, while Drake seems to control more and more of the League."

"Considering the way they treat you guys," she murmured, "why do you risk your lives by Running for them?"

He pulled back his shoulders, the corner of his mouth twisting in a wry smile. "I wish I had some clever answer, but the truth is that we Bloodrun because it has to be done. I can't stand the backward-ass Lycans who'd rather spit on a human than shake one's hand, but their blood still flows in my veins. In all of our veins. As Bloodrunners, we're sworn to protect them. To see them destroyed is to see a part of ourselves destroyed—and with each rogue kill, not only does an innocent human die, but the risk of discovery and exposure of the entire Lycan community becomes extreme."

"It's very honorable, what you and the others do," Michaela told him in a soft voice, unsurprised that he ignored the praise, knowing he'd be uncomfortable. Taking pity on him, she went back to the subject of Drake. "I was there for the meeting you guys had the day after Jillian had been attacked by Elise. I heard Mason tell you and the others about the Legend of Azakiel. Do you believe it?"

"That Drake used one of the other Elders to pull his daughter's wolf from her body? I don't know," he admitted, shrugging his powerful shoulders. "It sounds crazy, but it happened. And not just to Elise, but to the other Lycans who were in front of Jillian's house that day. No one has any other explanation, so maybe it's true. I've known weirder things to happen."

According to the legend, there was once an ancient Elder named Azakiel who seized control of a European pack after mastering the dark art of ripping forth another's wolf against their will. Mason's father and Graham, the Lead Silvercrest Elder, found the reference in one of the League's archaic texts, which told of how two Elders could combine forces and together produce enough power to wrench the wolf from an unsuspecting Lycan, be it night or day. As if the violation wasn't bad enough, the wolf, once drawn, was feral, angry and violent, its actions completely controlled by the ones who'd pulled it. The entire idea was horrific, and Michaela had shivered with fear as she'd listened to Jeremy recount the attack on Jillian's life a little over a week ago. It was a miracle she'd survived, and though they still didn't know which Elder Drake had used as his accomplice, at least they'd been able to finally confirm their suspicions that Drake was the traitor they'd been after all along.

"But what's he hope to gain by using this 'dark art' as they called it? I know you believe he's still recruiting rogues who've been taught to dayshift. Why does he need to be able to pull the beasts from his own people if he already has a loyal following of rogue werewolves?"

"We have some ideas, but nothing solid. Once we had time to step back and think about it, we realized the attack on Jillian was probably a practice run," he explained in a low rumble, his dark eyes narrowed on the road. "We figure Drake wanted to see if it would really work. He got Jeremy out of town, then made sure Elise overheard his conversation with Cooper Sheffield that day, knowing she'd go straight to Jillian. That's why he needed Jeremy gone, so that no one could stop him when he put his plan into action. But Jillian's little sister, Sayre, spoiled his plans when she had some kind of... whatever the hell you call it."

"A premonition," she supplied.

"Is that what you have?" he asked, pushing a strand of auburn hair back from his face. "Premonitions?"

"Me? No," she told him with a smile. "Although my Gran had visions. Flashes of the future or of...the...past..."

As her words trailed off, silence settled for a moment, heavy and thick with unspoken thoughts. "I'm curious," he finally murmured. "Now that you've had time to think about it, do you know what happened last night?"

Here it is. Decision time, Doucet.

Michaela knew she could admit what she suspected to be true, or tell him nothing. Honesty could keep him from ever touching her again, but she couldn't lie to him, even by omission. Staring at her hands folded in her lap, she swallowed the heavy lump of emotion in her throat and struggled to put her thoughts into words. "I told you that sometimes my interest in a person can crowd my power," she said huskily. "I think that's why I can't read your feelings—but when you're touching me...I don't know. It was like a meltdown. No shields, no barriers. I still couldn't read your feelings in the present, but the image, the scene from the past, just blasted me. I couldn't stop it from happening, but I didn't mean to invade your privacy that way."

Warily, she lifted her eyes to gauge his expression. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but his cell phone suddenly started buzzing on his hip. Reaching down, he lifted up the silver phone and flicked a quick glance at the number displayed on the screen. "Cian," he murmured, and answered the call.

Michaela could tell from his expression that it wasn't good news. He listened to his partner, then grunted, "We're already on our way up, so we can meet you there."

"What's wrong?" she asked the instant he disconnected the call.

He slanted her a dark look, his fury and frustration evident in the rigid set of his features, the brackets lining his mouth deeper than before, the sensual curve of his lips compressed in a hard line. "I hate to do this to you, Doucet, but we've gotta take a little detour."

"Why? What's happened?"

"There's been another killing," he rasped. "Cian's with the body now."

Chapter 8

The knowledge that another kill had been made pounded through Brody's brain with the brutal force of a hammer, stabbing behind his eyes like a migraine. Squinting against the sharp flare of pain, he stared out at the road ahead of them through a red-tinged haze of fury. He was filled with anger and bitter frustration, as well as a gnawing sense of failure. Despite their efforts, they hadn't managed to stop the son of a bitch who had been ritualistically killing young blondes for weeks now, before another innocent human victim lost her life.

His head felt as though it'd been split in two—and as if that wasn't enough, he was tormented by the terrifying discovery he'd made last night: the fact that Michaela Doucet was his life mate.

Beyond the windows of the truck, the autumn forest

passed by in a golden splash of color as Brody took the next exit off the highway, that dark knowledge wiring its way through his brain again and again, set on a continual replay loop.

My mate. My mate. My mate.

He supposed it explained the unprecedented lack of control he experienced when around her, as well as the violent surge of emotion, as though he'd plugged his senses, his heart, into a nuclear reactor. The cool, calm nothingness that had encased him for so many years had been cracked the first time he'd met her, then slowly shattered, leaving him a little more raw, a little more exposed, each time they came into contact. He'd recognized it, on a subconscious level, and yet, he'd done everything he could to avoid what he knew was the truth. But knowing he'd been on the verge of sinking his fangs into her throat last night—well, he could hardly pretend ignorance any longer. That had never happened to him before. Never. Not once, in his entire thirty-four years.

He'd been furious at the time, but only because it'd scared him when he'd realized how close he was to making that bite. As his mate, the bite would have created a blood bond between them—one that could never be undone. And she'd have hated him for it, which was why he'd tried like hell to rip himself away from her—only to have her go into that strange, dreamlike trance on him. When she came back to awareness and admitted what had happened, his fear had bled into stark, raging terror that she'd now be able to read him, as well.

The possibility had made Brody's blood run cold, because it meant she'd have known. Known how badly he wanted her, and not just for sex—though there was no doubt that he wanted her under him. He'd been months without a woman, the visceral need of his body and beast like a raw, aching wound within his soul. It was a craving that only Michaela could satisfy, a pain that only she could ease.

There was no denying that it made him feel threatened, trapped, the thought that her powers might change, that his feelings and hungers could be revealed to her. That was the most terrifying part of all, the possibility of her discovery that she was his mate, destined by nature to be his and no other's—not that he planned to do anything about it. Hell, just because nature sometimes screwed up was no reason to run his heart through a sieve like his old man had done. He'd seen firsthand that, despite its awesome power, nature could only add so much to the equation. Without love to strengthen the bond between mates, the risks for potential heartbreak were devastating.

And what about Michaela? She was an amazing woman and she deserved someone who could cherish her, love her. Someone she could cherish and love in return. She didn't merit a lover who was more monster than man—one who she'd wake up beside one morning and wonder what in the blazes she'd been thinking.

Not one for self-torture, Brody figured he'd save himself the heartache and pain and pass on the whole having-hisheart-ripped-out part of the scenario. The smart thing to do would be to simply stay away from her, but how could he? Her life was in danger, and his wolf was too possessive to allow another Runner near her. He was just going to have to suck it up and find some way to harden himself against her intoxicating allure.

Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that, jackass. 'Cause it's worked so well for you so far.

Shaking off the irritating thought, Brody made a series

of turns onto roads marked with Private Property signs, before following a narrow dirt road that wound its way up the side of the mountain, bordering the Silvercrest pack land. He spotted Cian's Land Rover parked on the shoulder, pulled to a slow stop behind it, then turned off the engine and looked at Michaela. "I wouldn't bring you here if there was another choice, but the case is mine and Hennessey's and I need to see it. You never know what a second set of eyes might pick up, and we can't risk missing anything at this point."

Her throat moved in a convulsive shiver, betraying her nerves, but her voice was steady as she said, "It's okay. Really. I understand."

Climbing out of the truck, he walked around to open her door for her. "Come on. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get you up to the Alley."

Though there was no sign of his partner or the crime scene from where they stood, Brody could scent Cian, as well as the victim, the stale odor of blood thickening as the wind surged toward them. "This way," he grunted, wishing he could just leave Michaela in the Ford. But it was too dangerous. The bastard they were after made his kills while in his dayshifted werewolf form, leaving no traceable odor, only a sharp acidic scent that was impossible to track. They didn't even know how close he had to be before they could pick up that vinegar-like odor, which meant Michaela stayed within an arm's reach of him the entire time they were in the open.

They only had to travel a hundred yards into the woods to find Cian and the body. His partner leaned back against a nearby tree, his right leg bent, boot braced against the trunk, while he stared over the gruesome scene with a cold, gray gaze. Brody had seen that chilling look in his partner's eyes too many times to count, knowing precisely what it meant.

The Irishman was furious.

Exhaling a slow stream of smoke, Cian flicked the ashes from the smoldering tip of his cigarette and gave them a somber nod as they stepped into the small clearing. The body lay in the center of the open, moss-covered space, naked, her face turned away from them, blond hair matted with blood, her arms and legs sprawled as if she'd been staked to the ground. But death was the only restraint holding her in place. From the look of her wounds, it'd been as violent as the others, a great gaping hole in the center of her chest, the heart missing from within, literally eaten out of her.

"There's no purse or identification anywhere around here," Cian rasped, the wind blowing the stygian strands of his hair across his face as he took another slow pull on his cigarette. "Hell, I can't even find her clothes. But I doubt she's more than twenty. Twenty-one at the most. And as you can smell, there's not so much as a whiff of Lycan musk on the body. Nothing but blood and death and that damn acidic odor burning the hell out of my nose."

"How'd you find her?" Brody kept his voice soft, an eerie silence hanging over the scene that demanded deference.

Cian took a long drag, then slowly released an ethereal stream of smoke. "Silvercrest scouts were patrolling the pack land borders and came across the kill. They called it in not even an hour ago."

Bending his knees, Brody knelt beside the body. Digging into the rich soil beside the vic's head, he lifted a handful to his nose and sniffed, but was unable to pick up anything other than the sharp odor Cian had mentioned. "I was hoping something would stick out, catch our attention. Something that might set it apart from the other crime scenes. But it's all the same."

"What about trace evidence?" Michaela asked, standing just to his left, by the victim's pale hip.

Studying the body, Brody explained, "We investigated the use of trace years ago, hoping to use it like the crime scene department, but our genetic material decomposes too quickly. That's part of what's enabled us to remain a secret for so long. Plus, there's no discernible difference between Lycan DNA and human DNA. And even if we did leave blood behind that was instantly analyzed, it would look human in composition."

"That's why the lack of a traceable scent has made it impossible to name the killer," Cian added. "Without the scent, which is the only evidence a rogue leaves behind that doesn't fade, we're unable to identify him. In the past, it's only been a problem when a rogue's scent was washed away by rain before we found the body, but by making the kill while in his dayshifted form, this particular killer is like a ghost to us, a phantom. There's nothing left behind for us to follow, nothing to hunt."

"But if the authorities found a body like this, wouldn't they be able to tell that this kind of attack wasn't human, even without any trace evidence?" she asked. "Just from the wounds themselves?"

"That's always been the greatest threat to our secret—a body like this being found. Normally, a rogue Lycan hunts on the fringes of society," Brody went on to explain, "because the game is easier, and the kill made near the safety of his or her pack land. But this one, he's growing careless. The girl he killed in Covington, the one dealing drugs, could have been found by anyone. It was pure luck that Sophia Dawson showed up first and had the presence of mind to call us. If the cops had arrived on the scene, there would have been serious consequences. Not even Monroe would have been able to help us cover it up."

"Monroe? He's the FBI agent, right?" she asked, looking down at him as she wrapped her arms around herself, while the wind caught her hair, lifting it from her shoulders. "The one whose sister married a Lycan from the pack?"

"Yeah," he replied, fighting the urge to go to her and take her into his arms. Instead, Brody focused his mind on the scene. There was one thing left to check that might point them in the direction of the killer—something he'd put off, concerned about how Michaela might react. Shaking the dirt off his hand, he reached out, brushed the tangled, matted strands of the vic's hair back from her face, grasped her small, pointed chin and tilted her face toward them. A low breath jerked from his lungs; at the same time Michaela let out a shaky gasp of relief.

"Mon dieu," she whispered, dark eyes glistening with tears as she stared into the girl's sightless blue gaze. *"I thought...I* was afraid that it might be Kimmie, the blonde from the shop. The one who was with Dustin."

"Yeah," he sighed, straightening his legs as he rose to his full height. "Me, too."

"It's still terrible...it's just that, I didn't want it to be someone I had met. I would have felt awful that I hadn't tried to warn her away from him."

Brody gave a slow nod of understanding.

"Sheffield had a blue-eyed blonde with him?" Cian asked, taking a long drag on his cigarette, his midnight brows pulled together in a deep scowl. "Do you think he could be the one?"

With his mouth set in a grim line, Brody shook his head. "Hell if I know. But the thought has crossed my mind more than once since yesterday." "Well," Cian sighed, sounding as tired as Brody felt, "when I talked to Mason, he said Reyes and Pallaton were already on their way up to the Alley. Thinks it would be a good idea if we all met up at his place and talked things out for a while. Sounds like Dustin should be a topic of discussion."

"And I want to know what kind of reaction Mason got from Dylan about Dustin's confession."

Flicking his cigarette into the damp moss, Cian scowled with frustration. "Don't get your hopes up, man. You know the League won't move until their hand is forced."

He muttered a short curse under his breath, hating that his partner was right, while at his side, Michaela trembled, staring down at the body. "He hated hurting her," she suddenly said in a voice so eerily quiet, it was almost lost in the howling wind, "once it was over."

Narrowing his eyes, Brody watched as a shiver traveled the length of her body, her lips rolling inward as a tear tracked down the left side of her face. "What do you mean?"

Without looking at him, she shook her head, her brow furrowed with lines of concentration. "It's just a feeling. I sense...conflict."

"The killer's conflict?" Cian asked, pushing off from the tree to move closer.

She nodded, the shivering in her lips now, her skin so pale, she looked like a ghost, while her long curls blew wildly around the paleness of her face. "Have you ever felt anything like this before?" his partner asked, gray eyes fixed on her face.

"No," Michaela murmured, feeling so cold, as if her bones had been coated with ice, a sickening sensation of dread wrapping around her, keeping company with her heartbreak for the pretty young woman lying dead at her feet. "I've never felt anything like this, but then, this is the first time I've come into contact with a violent death, so I...I don't have any basis for comparison. Maybe it's a result of the situation."

She had another theory, as well—one that she kept to herself. Just a gut feeling, really, but she couldn't help but wonder if her psychic abilities were being affected by the redheaded Runner playing havoc with her hormones and her heart. Cutting a wondering look at him from beneath her lashes, she found Brody watching her with a fierce expression, brows drawn, mouth hard, his color high. Was his presence boosting her abilities, like a jolt of lightning surging through a power source?

If it was, she wasn't going to tell him. Not after what had happened last night. The last thing she needed was to give him any more of a reason to be on guard around her.

"What else can you pick up?" Cian asked her, his sharp, speculative gaze moving between her and Brody.

"That's it," she admitted, lifting her face to stare up at the graying sky. "I wish there was more, but it's as if there's a cloud hanging over this place, heavy and thick and evil. He...he stood here and stared at her in horror, after it was over. Almost as if he couldn't believe he'd done it."

"Can you pick up on him now?" Brody asked, moving closer to her side.

She shook her head no, and he looked at Cian, saying, "I don't like having her out in the open like this," when she could tell what he really meant was that she was spooking the hell out of him and he wanted her as far from the body as possible. "We'll see you back up at Mason's. How long until cleanup gets here?" "Not long," his partner replied. "Another fifteen at the most. I'll let them deal with the body."

Brody watched as Michaela told Cian goodbye, before they began heading back through the woods, taking the same path as before. They moved in silence, absorbed in their thoughts—until they were about halfway to the truck. With a low gasp, she came to an abrupt stop, grabbing hold of his arm with her right hand.

"What is it?" he asked, voice low, eyes narrowed on her pale face.

Shivering, she looked over her shoulder, staring back into the dense woods behind them.

"Doucet," he quietly growled; at the same time, he was sniffing the air, searching for any signs of danger, but the acidic odor from the crime scene had temporarily diminished his sense of smell. "Answer me."

"Brody, I know it sounds crazy," she whispered, her eyes wide with fear, "but I think someone's watching us."

"Cian?"

"No...no, it isn't him. I can still feel him back with the body. This is...oh God," she gasped, looking up at him, "you don't think it could be Ross, do you? I can't read him. Maybe he followed us."

"Even with that sharp odor still in my nose, I'd be able to smell a human if he was close by," Brody assured her, taking her hand and pulling her along with him, anxious to get to the truck. His natural instinct was to turn and fight whatever the hell was out there, but he couldn't put her at risk that way. "I promise you that Holland isn't anywhere around here, Doucet."

"You're right," she told him, nearly jogging to keep up with his hurried pace. "I'm just nervous, I guess." Taking out his cell, he called Cian, warning him to be on his guard, all the while keeping Michaela moving as quickly as possible. "Anything else?" he asked her as they broke out of the trees, near the truck. "Can you pick up anything?"

"No, there's just this strange static in my head, and it feels...I don't know, like someone's eyes are following me, pressing in on me." Her own eyes were huge within her face, shadowed by fear. "You know the feeling?"

"Yeah, I know it," he rasped. What worried him was what to do about it.

Hurrying her into the truck, Brody climbed behind the wheel, gunned the gas, and got the hell out of Dodge.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived back at the Alley, just as the first drops of rain from a coming storm began to fall. Serving as a place for the Runners to live separate from the pack, while still on Silvercrest land, Bloodrunner Alley housed ten cabins, only six of which were currently in use. Although set within a rural, majestic setting, surrounded by the natural beauty of the forest, the Alley boasted all the modern amenities, from plumbing to electricity to satellite TV, while its isolated location afforded the Runners the privacy they preferred.

Heading straight to the Dillingers, Brody took a quick look around as he stepped into the kitchen and asked, "Where are Reyes and Pallaton?"

"On their way back from Wesley. They had a lead come in on a possible hideout for Drake's rogues."

"They get anything?"

"Naw. It turned out to be another dead end," Mason told him, reaching into the fridge to pull out cold sodas for him and Michaela, who had moved to sit beside Torrance at the table. A platter of ham and cheese sandwiches sat in the center of the pine table, along with potato chips and pasta salad the growling of his stomach reminding Brody that he was starving. They sat down to a late lunch, purposely keeping the conversation light by silent agreement, since Michaela was still far too pale, only picking at her food. They were just clearing the last of the plates when a screeching metallic noise sounded from the front of the cabin.

Brody whistled softly under his breath, at the same time Mason growled, "What was that?"

Together, the group headed into the living room, all eyes zeroed in on the front door as Wyatt Pallaton shoved it open, his rain-soaked partner following close on his heels. They were drenched with water, leaving a wet puddle forming in a haphazard circle at their feet, and Torrance and Michaela quickly hurried from the room to get towels.

"Let me guess," Brody drawled, arching one brow as he crossed his arms and propped his shoulder against the wall. "Wyatt forgot to pack the soft top for the Jeep again?"

Reyes pushed her sodden tangle of blond hair out of her eyes. "If I weren't such a *nice* person," she announced with a chilling dose of menace, "I'd kill him."

Her partner frowned as he sent the irritated woman a baleful glare, his dark eyes, which he'd inherited from his Native American grandmother, glowing like a midnight stretch of star-studded sky. "If I'd known the heavens were gonna unload today, I'd have put the damn roof on before we left," he said tightly, the words all but ground through his clenched teeth. "I said I was sorry, so what else do you want from me? Honest to God, woman, just tell me and I'll do it. God knows it'd be better than listening to you go on and on." The female Runner bared her teeth in an evil smile. "If I were you, I'd save that question for some other time, Pall—preferably when I'm not feeling like a drowned rat. Right now, you might not like what I ask for."

Wyatt made a grunting sound of frustration, which he quickly choked off when Torrance and Michaela came back into the room, their arms loaded with thick towels. "Thanks," he murmured as Michaela handed him one, then offered two to Reyes. They ran the towels over their heads, then dried their clothes as best they could, while Torrance threw three more towels over the puddle on the floor.

"Let's take this into the kitchen, where it's warm," Mason drawled, once they were no longer waterlogged. "I'll put on some fresh coffee."

"I'll take mine with some whiskey," Reyes sighed, wrapping one of the towels around her head.

"I'll take mine with whiskey, too," Wyatt muttered. "But hold the coffee."

Everyone snickered, and together they all wandered back to the cozy kitchen, Jeremy and Jillian coming in a few minutes later. The group had been sitting and talking for nearly a quarter of an hour when Cian finally came through the archway. It occurred to Brody that the Irishman's "dark angel" looks were the perfect complement to Michaela's stunning beauty, the thought sending a sour feeling to the pit of his stomach that felt suspiciously like the hateful burn of jealousy.

"Any trouble?" he asked when his partner took a seat beside him, his handsome features etched with strain and fatigue.

"Nothing," Cian sighed, stretching out his long legs as he leaned back in his chair. "Whomever Michaela felt, he never showed his face and I never picked up anything to track." Michaela gave a self-deprecating smile. "It was probably just my imagination."

"You said that you heard static in your head," Jillian remarked thoughtfully, her hands wrapped around a thick blue mug of coffee. "Have you ever experienced anything like that before?"

"Only at the clearing," she explained, "after Max's ceremony. It was just before I left."

Mason cut a dark look at Brody. "Maybe our killer is so screwed up, his psychic signals or whatever it is that Mic's able to pick up on are coming through warped."

"Hence the static," Cian murmured, locking his hands behind his dark head, the corners of his wide mouth turned down.

"He could even be trying to reach you, Mic." Torrance suddenly gasped, leaning forward in her chair. "That's it! What if he's trying to communicate with you, but you're just not picking up the signal clearly?"

"God, I hope not," she murmured, her expression revealing her horror. Studying her from beneath his lashes, Brody noticed the way her hands trembled, betraying her nerves and fear, though she tried not to show it, her scent growing stronger with the rise of her pulse. "I don't want some maniac talking in my head."

A slight shiver rushed through her, the skin on her arms covered with chill bumps even though it was warm in the kitchen. Brody wanted to reach out and take her hand, but knew he couldn't.

Jerking his attention away from her before he did something stupid, like follow through on his primitive instincts, he listened as she talked with the others, while struggling to get control of himself. With no conscious direction from his brain, Brody found himself watching the subtle love play between the mated couples. The brush of a hand against an arm. A secret smile. A shared look. The closeness, the connection. He'd been around them many times before and never felt this illogical urge to get up and run from the room, escaping the proof of their love. Despite wearing a light T-shirt, he was sweating, feeling trapped, unable to relax.

He prayed for a distraction, on the verge of panic, nearly sighing with relief when Mason, his hard tone cut with disappointment, looked at him and said, "By the way, I talked to Dylan. He took the information about Dustin's attack on Max before the League."

"And?" he prompted, scratching his palm across the edge of his jaw.

The Runner sighed as he leaned back in his chair. "As expected, Drake argued against taking action, claiming conflict of interest."

"He accused Brody of lying?" Michaela demanded hotly, her voice shaking with anger as she tuned into their conversation.

"It's okay, Doucet," he assured her in a low voice, even though he was furious with the League. "We expected it."

"It isn't okay," she argued, turning toward him so quickly that her hair fanned out around her shoulders. "You risk your life for them, Brody. The least they could do is treat you with respect. And that monster attacked my brother. He deserves to pay!"

Frowning, Brody said, "If you feel that strongly about it, why didn't you let me go after him last night?"

"*Merde!* Because you could have been hurt," she said tightly, her frustration evident in the thickening drawl of her accent. "Not that you'd have actually left me there alone, so stop acting like you would have. And just because I didn't want you going after him on your own doesn't mean I don't want to see him pay for what he's done!"

"I didn't mean to insinuate that you did," he murmured, unable to take his eyes off her. She was always stunningly beautiful, but when she had her back up, you could see the energy coming off her like incandescent sparks, vivid and wild and breathtaking.

"Did I just hear that right?" Cian drawled, squinting his eyes as he stared at Brody with an incredulous look of surprise. "Because it almost sounded like you were actually apologizing."

"Can it, Hennessey," he muttered under his breath.

"Before you two start going at each other's throats," Mason sighed, "I just want to remind everyone to watch their backs." His golden-brown gaze traveled around the room. "Something's coming, and I think it's getting closer. When it blows, it's gonna be big."

"Just so long as it doesn't blow tomorrow night," Jeremy murmured, flashing a warm smile at his fiancée as he lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of her fingers. Looking toward Cian, he asked, "Did you get the cedar for the fire pits?"

"Don't worry, boyo," Cian drawled with a slow smile. "It's all taken care of. You and your little lady love will be able to enjoy your wedded bliss in the great outdoors without everyone freezing their asses off."

Brody pushed back from the table. "I'm going to go ahead and take Doucet up to my cabin so she can get settled in."

"Before you head up to Brody's," Torrance said, reaching across the table to take hold of Michaela's hand, "I wanted to let you know that we heard from Eric this morning."

"Did you talk to Max?" she whispered, her voice husky

with emotion. "Why didn't you tell me earlier, *ma chère*? What did he say?"

"You were so pale when you got here, I wanted to give you a chance to relax before I brought it up. And I didn't get to talk to Max, because he was upstairs with Elliot," Torrance explained with a smile. "But Eric said he's doing great."

Oh thank God, Michaela silently cried, struggling to hold back a hot wave of tears. There was a storm of emotion roiling just beneath the surface of her composure that threatened to overflow every time she thought about her brother.

Blinking back a salty wash of tears, she heard Brody ask, "Elliot's there?"

Torrance nodded. "When Elliot heard about Max, he called Eric and asked if he could come over. I guess the two of them have really hit it off. They're close in age, and have both been through a lot. Eric asked Elliot if he'd come and stay while Max is in training. He thinks Elliot's going to be a lot of support for Max right now."

Elliot Connors was a Silvercrest teen who had landed in some serious trouble a few weeks ago with one of Drake's rogues. The kid was lucky that the Runners and Mason's parents had taken him under their wing, offering him their friendship and support, since his own parents had all but washed their hands of him. He had a long road ahead of him, but Michaela knew he would make it. The few times she'd been around Elliot, she'd sensed nothing but a good heart. His soul was shadowed by pain, but he was strong enough to overcome his mistakes.

"Eric says Elliot and Max are getting along like they've known each other for years," Torrance added, "bonding like a couple of kids." A sad smile twisted the corner of Michaela's mouth, and she tried to shake the melancholy sensation, but Torrance noticed. "What's wrong, honey? I knew it would upset you to talk about Max, but I thought you'd be relieved he's doing okay."

"I am. I just...I feel bad, I guess. Max has worked so hard to pull his weight, even though I've told him time and again that there's enough money now for him to go to school without working. He's never had a break. I just think it's sad that it took something like this to make him step back and take a deep breath. He doesn't even really have many friends back home. I'm glad that Elliot's there with him." Turning toward Brody, she said, "Do you think I'll be able to see him soon?"

"You want to go to Shadow Peak?" The look he gave her showed his surprise. "Are you sure you're up for it?"

She gave a soft, shaky laugh. "It's going to take more than a town full of werewolves to keep me from seeing my baby brother. They won't scare me, so long as you're there with me. No one would dare mess with you."

"Max is under Eric's protection," he said in a low voice, and she could have sworn his cheekbones were flushed with color, as if her praise embarrassed him, "but I'll take you up so long as he gives the okay."

Michaela smiled at him as he stood, unable to believe what he'd said. "You mean it? You'll really take me?"

The corner of his mouth kicked up in a boyish grin at her obvious excitement, breaking her heart, since she doubted he'd had much reason to grin as a child. "If you're sure that's what you want, I'll go give Eric a call right now."

Chapter 9

Brody couldn't help the chord of anxiety that accompanied him as he entered Eric's house and spotted Max standing nervously on the far side of the room, the young man's knuckles white as he gripped the back of a pine chair. Part of a dining set, the chair sat in an arched alcove off to the right side of the living room, the kitchen just beyond.

For a split second, Brody worried about the reaction Michaela would have toward her brother, now that Max was one of them and no longer human. It didn't take long, however, for him to realize his concern was misplaced. With an ear-piercing cry of joy that spilled into the room like a colorful swarm of butterflies, Michaela rushed past him the second she set eyes on Max, running across the hardwood floor and hurtling herself into her brother's arms. Max crushed her against his lean body, his shoulders shaking while he buried his face in the thick waves of her hair, obviously as overcome with emotion as his sister.

Brody shook his head in wonder and relief, painfully aware that he shouldn't have underestimated her. There was no hesitation as she embraced her brother, carefully avoiding the bandages on his injured shoulder, and yet, holding him as though she had no intention of ever letting him go—as if she could take all the pain he'd suffered the past few days and make it her own. Untainted and unguarded, her love existed completely without prejudice.

As if acting by silent agreement, he and Eric remained by the door. The tall, broad-shouldered Lycan stood silently at his side, hands shoved in his jeans' pockets as he watched the Doucets with dark gray eyes and a pleased expression that revealed his own relief at the successful reunion. When Max and Michaela sat down at the table, put their dark heads together and began quietly talking, Eric slanted him a knowing look. "Man," he drawled, "I didn't think I'd ever see the day, but you've got it as bad as Burns does."

"Got what?" Brody asked in a low voice, not wanting to disturb the siblings.

"Like you don't know," the Lycan snorted. "You've been bitten by the lovebug, man."

Brody made a rude sound in the back of his throat, cutting the jackass with an "as if" look. "Get real," he muttered, trying to appear unconcerned, while inside, his heart rate kicked into overdrive, roaring through his head. Christ, was it really that obvious?

Eric's shoulders lifted in a laughing shrug. "Hey, don't blame me for the yearning state of your heart. I just call it like I see it."

"You don't see jack," he snarled under his breath, wanting

to wipe that knowing look off the bastard's handsome face. "If I'm watching her, it's only because it's my job to protect her."

Recalling their earlier conversation—and eager to steer the topic of discussion away from himself—he added, "You mentioned on the phone that there was something you wanted to talk about."

"There is." Holding Brody's dark stare, Eric's expression turned serious as he rubbed one hand across the rugged angle of his jaw, the sleeve of his T-shirt shifting to reveal the bottom edge of an intricate tattoo wrapping his thick bicep. "I want to help. I want to be a part of the investigation into the rogues and what happened with my sister."

"We're after your own family," Brody scoffed, wondering what the guy was up to. "Looking to bring down your old man. We appreciate you stepping up to help Max, but what makes you think we'd trust you to help in our investigation?"

"Because I saved your friend's life," Eric pointed out, wearing a ghost of a smile. "And while I may be a lot of things, a traitor isn't one of them. My loyalty is to the pack, not my father. Any sense of familial obligation I felt to the man, he managed to destroy a long time ago all on his own."

"And how do we know you're not just playing sides?" he countered for sheer argument's sake. It was obvious the Bloodrunners, including himself, had already decided to trust Eric Drake. If they hadn't, they never would have allowed Max to remain under the Lycan's supervision.

"Playing sides?" Eric snorted in response to his question, crossing his brawny arms over his blue T-shirt covered chest. "Do I look like the playful sort to you, Carter?"

"Yeah, you're about as giddy as a rattlesnake, and just as ornery."

Rolling his eyes, Eric muttered, "You're too good for my ego, man." The Lycan paused for a moment, once again watching the Doucets as he ran one hand over the short scrub of his dark hair, before blowing out a rough breath. "Look, I know it's going to take time to learn to work together, but I wanted to let you know that the Runners aren't alone in this any longer. You have support in the pack. There are others who feel like I do, they're just too afraid to come forward and risk my father's wrath. But we can keep an eye on things here, relay information that might be useful. There's been a communication breakdown between the town and the Runners for too long. It's time we put an end to it."

"I'll have to talk to the others," he grunted.

Giving a confident nod, Eric smiled as he said, "You do that." He knew damn well that the opportunity was too good for the Runners to pass up. "And speaking of how you need a better foothold in the information loop, I have some news."

"What kind of news?"

"The kind that not many people know about yet. Not even Jillian." His expression grim, Eric said, "The *Pippa Stanton has gone missing* kind."

Brody cursed under his breath, while dread settled heavily around his shoulders, weighing him down. "Do you know what happened?"

"Not a clue. There's a small group that was asked by the League to search the surrounding woods, but nothing's turned up so far."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Brody muttered, raking one hand through his hair before cutting a narrow look back at the Lycan. "And no doubt that your old man's behind it."

Eric's brows drew together in a questioning frown. "I'm

assuming he's behind it, too, but do you actually know of any reason my father might target Pippa specifically?"

"Maybe," Brody averred, rolling his shoulder. "Maybe not."

There was silence for the beat of several seconds, and then Eric quietly growled, "Shit. You *do* know something, don't you?"

Only something that had been passed on to him and the other Runners in confidence, that couldn't be repeated. It was Pippa who had revealed the secrets about Drake's past to Jeremy and Jillian the week before, telling them the story of how the Elder's wife left him for a human. When Drake demanded his wife be hunted down and executed for her treachery, the League had refused. According to Pippa, he'd never forgiven the League for "turning their back on him in his time of need." From that point on, his hatred and rage had consumed him, until he became the twisted, fanatical leader that he was today.

Instead of addressing Eric's question, Brody asked one of his own. "Do you know when she was last seen?"

For a moment, Eric looked as if he'd press the issue, before shaking off his irritation. "Yeah," he sighed. "It was last night, at a League meeting. Her sister called Graham when it started getting late and Pippa still hadn't made it home."

Damn, that wasn't good. Brody had already been uneasy about bringing Michaela into the lion's den, so to speak, risking the visit to Shadow Peak, but had felt a certain measure of confidence that Drake and his rogues wouldn't dare try anything in broad daylight, when all eyes were on them. But knowing that he'd had the balls to target Pippa, another Elder, was proof that Drake's madness had outweighed his reason. If he was willing to take out one of the most powerful members of the League, he'd be willing to risk *anything*. Glancing out the front window, he saw that evening was fast approaching, and he didn't want to have Michaela out after dark. Things were dangerous enough during the day, but come nighttime... No way in hell was he risking it. An ambush on the road home would be too easy. And though Brody was confident in his abilities, he didn't relish the idea of single-handedly battling a contingent of rogues in order to keep Michaela safe, the way Jeremy and Mason had done with Torrance just weeks before.

"Okay, I'll let the other Runners know what's happening as soon as we get back. And if anything new comes up, let me know. You've already got my number." Without waiting for Eric's response, he headed toward Michaela, stopping just inside the alcove. "I know we haven't been here long, but it's time for us to go, Doucet."

Clutching one of her brother's hands, she looked at him over her shoulder. "Already? But we only just got here."

"I'm afraid so. It's getting dark and I need to get you back to the Alley." Shifting his gaze to Max, who was trying to look tough despite the sheen of tears in his dark blue eyes, Brody said, "I promise we'll make it back up as soon as we can."

"Your brother's going to make it through this just fine, Michaela," Eric said as they headed to the door. "Whenever Carter can bring you up, you're welcome to come and visit. And if you want, I'll be happy to keep in touch with you, so you know how he's doing."

"That would be wonderful," she replied, her voice breathless with relief. "If you have a piece of paper, I'll write my cell phone number down for you."

Brody crossed his arms over his chest and muttered, "Forget it, Drake. If you have information for her, you can damn well call my number and give it to me." "Brody," she gasped, sounding appalled. She probably wanted to smack his hand with a ruler for being rude, but what did she expect? He wasn't going to stand by and watch her exchange phone numbers with another man. Not in this lifetime.

With her cheeks flushed, she sent an apologetic look toward Eric, who was clearly trying not to laugh, his gray eyes glittering. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"No need," Eric said smoothly, grinning like a jackass. "I think I understand *exactly* where Carter is coming from."

Grunting under his breath, Brody ushered her out the front door, wishing like hell he could figure out not only where he was coming from, but where he was headed. Because from where he stood, it looked like nothing but trouble.

"What's the matter with you?" Michaela hissed the second she slammed the door of the truck shut. Breathing hard, she ripped her seatbelt into place so violently, she damn near strangled herself. Brody knew she'd been dying to lay into him since the moment they'd left Eric's, but had held her tongue until they were alone.

"Hell if I know," he muttered, the words thick with disgust as he cranked the engine, setting the heat on low for her benefit. He was already hot beneath the skin, burning up in nothing more than a T-shirt and his jeans.

"I'm curious, Brody. Just what do you think is going to happen if Eric calls me?"

He cursed under his breath as he pulled away from the curb, navigating the Ford down the narrow street lined by beautiful oak trees. "I know what he'd *like* to happen."

"Honestly, Brody. You don't want me, but no one else can be interested, is that it?" "You want him to be interested?" he grunted, while what felt like a ton of bricks landed in his gut.

"No," she snapped. "That's not the point. My point is that you can't have it both ways. You can't keep me at arm's length, then demand that no other man get close to me. And for your information, I find your entire attitude insulting." As she paused to take a quick breath, he wondered if she even realized her voice was steadily rising, growing louder with her anger. "Believe it or not, I'm not some femme fatale constantly on the make for a man. *Mon dieu*. My life is a mess, Brody. My brother has become a werewolf, I'm being threatened by rogues, and both my shop and my house have been broken into and vandalized. I'm warning you right now, if you don't cut me some slack, I'm going to have a freaking meltdown!"

He slanted her an uneasy look, aware that she was truly furious with him. More so than he'd thought. Calmly, he pointed out the obvious. "You're shouting."

She took a deep breath that vibrated with fury. "You think this is bad," she shot back, "just wait till you see what happens if you don't say you're sorry. I'm sick and tired of you and every other man I meet always thinking the worst of me. I am not some brainless bimbo looking to get treated like crap!"

He blinked, while a swarm of reactions skittered through his system. On the one hand, there was a part of him that wanted to smile at the way she'd so passionately declared she wasn't a "brainless bimbo," finding her ridiculously adorable, even in her anger. The other part wanted to pull her out of her seat, across his lap, and ravage her mouth with a breathtaking kiss until there was no doubt in her mind exactly who she belonged to.

It was the second scenario that scared the ever-loving hell

out of him, and Brody found himself prodding at her anger with a verbal stick. "What do you know about being treated like crap?" he muttered. "Your life's been a freaking fairy tale compared to what most people know."

She flinched in reaction to his low, guttural slide of words, anger and hurt flashing like sparks in her eyes. He expected her to lash out at him, but she just sat there, hands twisting in her lap, chest rising and falling beneath her sweater, appearing more vulnerable with each deep, shivering breath. She looked as if she would melt into a hot wash of tears at any moment, but when she finally spoke, her calm, soft voice betrayed only the slightest tremor. "Believe it or not, Brody, you don't have a monopoly on a painful past. I may not have suffered to the degree that you have, but I have my own emotional scars. Ever wonder why I don't mention my parents?"

"I'd assumed they'd passed away," he rasped, sliding her another uneasy look, aware of a suspicious heat rising up the back of his neck and ears that felt uncomfortably like shame.

Her mouth twisted with a wry smile, arms wrapped around her middle as she turned her head to stare out her window. "Oh no, I'm sure they're alive and well somewhere, enjoying their burden-free lifestyle."

"What does that mean?"

Sighing, she looked back at him. "It means they dropped Max and me off with our *grandmère* one day when he was little more than a toddler, then just got into their car and drove away. None of us ever heard from them again."

"Son of a bitch," he cursed hotly, brows drawn together in a deep scowl over the vivid green of his eyes, his scars accentuated by the fierceness of his expression. "That was heartless." "It could have been worse," she remarked dryly, turning her attention back to the scenery beyond the window as they drove through the town, picturesque cottages and various buildings visible on both sides of the road. Amazingly, Shadow Peak looked like any other small mountain community. If you were just passing through, you'd have never suspected that something sinister lurked beneath the charming surface. Something with fangs and fur and claws, that would scare most humans into a catatonic state of terror.

"How could it have been worse?" he demanded, the words thick with outrage.

"They could have stayed around," she murmured. "In the long run, I think Max and I were better off without them. My grandmère truly loved us. She raised us until she passed away when Max was fourteen. After that, we moved here to live with her sister, my great-aunt. She willed her house to us when she died a few years ago, so we stayed in Covington. I opened my shop, and the rest is history."

"I still think it was heartless," he muttered, ripping the scarred fingers of his right hand through the auburn strands of his hair, while steering with his left. "Something must have been seriously wrong with them."

Michaela had no argument for him there, having never been able to understand how a mother could fail to love her child more than anything in the world. With a small shiver, she thought back to the dream she'd had last night, the one where Brody was playing with a beautiful raven-haired, green-eyed baby girl. The memory of that dream shot a pang of warmth through her middle, dissipating the last of her anger, and she pressed her hand against the center of her chest, as if she could control the hammering beat of her heart. Needing a distraction before she lost her head in wishes that were never going to come true, she deliberately changed the subject. "Speaking of relatives," she murmured, "are you going to contact your grandmother?"

He arched one russet brow. "Why would I do that?"

"I know she doesn't deserve it, but...after what Meredith said, don't you think that maybe it's time to open up and give her another chance, Brody?"

"I don't give first chances," he grunted, "so what makes you think I'd give her a second one?"

Shaking her head, Michaela didn't know whether to feel sorry for him or knock some sense into him. "You're just a one-man island, is that it?"

Cutting her a frustrated look of exasperation, he took the next right, turning onto the private road they'd taken into Shadow Peak, though they were still in what looked like the center of town, the street congested with traffic. "Don't sound sorry for me, Doucet. I don't need your pity. I like my life the way it is," he rasped, his tone suddenly as belligerent as it was defensive. "I'm doing just fine."

She shifted in her seat, tucking her leg up under her so that she could stare at his rugged profile, the late-afternoon sunlight glinting through the windshield revealing the creases at the corners of those deep green eyes.

"Are you really happy with your life, Brody?" she asked softly. "Don't you get lonely?"

Narrowing his eyes on the road ahead, he looked as if he wondered just how much she knew about him, how much she understood. She realized, in that moment, that he still didn't completely trust her, and after what had happened the night before, she didn't blame him. "I can tell from the look on your face that you still doubt me, Brody, but I didn't lie to you last night. I might have had that one vision when we were so...um, involved with each other, but you're still about as easy to read as a gator's expression in the middle of the bayou at midnight."

He snuffled a rough laugh under his breath at her colorful analogy, turning to stare at her after pulling to a stop at the town's last traffic light, the green of his eyes deep and dark, swirling with a myriad of thoughts and feelings she knew he'd never admit to. "Don't worry," he murmured, his tone dry, gaze shifting back to the road when the light turned green. There was a husky undertone to his words that made her shiver with sensual awareness as he said, "I believe you."

"You do?"

"Yeah. If you could read my mind, you wouldn't be ... "

"What?" she demanded, her voice breathless.

He shifted his long body in his seat, pulling back his shoulders. "Nothing."

"Brody..."

"Drop it, Doucet," he muttered.

Unwilling to let the topic go that easily, she opened her mouth to press him further, when the sudden blaring of a horn made her jump. Peering through the window, she saw that the sidewalks were now packed with as much pedestrian traffic as the roads. "This is crazy. Are the streets always this crowded here?"

"Not like this. If I had to guess, I'd say everyone's heading to the Town Hall because Drake's holding another one of his rallies tonight. Jeremy told us he's using them to incite the pack, brainwashing them with lies, spouting a bunch of nonsense about how the Lycans are being oppressed by human society and the Runners are lying about the growing number of rogues." "It's getting close, isn't it?" she whispered, his words sending a sliver of alarm down her spine. "Just like Mason said. You can feel the tension hanging over this place, just waiting to blow."

"Yeah," he agreed, his tone roughened by worry. "You can feel it in the air when you breathe, like a storm coming in. It won't be long now."

Brody glanced at her from the corner of his eye, seeing her own worry revealed in the strain around her eyes and mouth, her beauty taking on a haunted quality that tore at his heart. "And when it happens, your life is going to be in danger," she said softly, the unspoken meaning behind that tender, emotional tone taking another notch out of his hard-earned control; at the same time his automatic defense mechanisms kicked into gear, as natural to him as breathing.

"Our lives are in danger now, Doucet," he muttered in a low, coarse rasp. "Why else do you think I'm with you?"

The hateful words landed between them with an ominous thud, and she winced, unable to hide her reaction. Closing in on herself like an oyster, she turned away from him, staring silently out her window as he drove them home to the Alley. Neither of them said another word until Brody came to a stop in front of his cabin.

"Brody," she said in a small voice, breaking into the breathfilled silence. "I know we're not getting along that great right now, but it seems we have bigger problems than being at odds with each other."

"Yeah?" he rumbled, turning his head to see her peering out the passenger's side window. "Like what?"

She looked back at him, her eyes wide within the paleness of her face. "Look at your front door."

Peering around her shoulder, he cursed sharply the second he realized what he was staring at. "Son of a bitch," he hissed, grabbing hold of her arm. He opened his door and pulled her across the front seat, out the driver's side, sniffing at the evening air, searching for any imminent signs of danger. "Stay close to me," he ordered in a chilling tone of voice, keeping hold of her arm as they moved around the back of the truck, toward the porch. When the wind blew the scent of blood toward them, she made a sharp gagging sound, closing her eyes as she fought her nausea.

"Is that what I think it is?" she whispered, her voice little more than a whispery thread of sound.

"Yeah," he grunted, clutching the back of her head and pressing her face to his chest, finally giving in to the urge that had been riding him all day and wrapping his arms around her, holding her in a tight, possessive embrace.

A red haze of fury tinged the edges of his vision as Brody stared over her head at the atrocity nailed to his front door. A knife had been embedded deep within the dark wood, Pippa Stanton's long silver braid hanging from the bloody scalp that had been nailed there, along with a message written in blood. The writing was nearly illegible, the blood dripping down the wooden surface like crimson rivers of death, distorting the letters, but he could make out the bloodcurdling warning. He just couldn't believe Drake's rogues had dared to kill an Elder, trespass into the Alley and threaten the woman under his protection. And there was no doubt this was a direct threat against Michaela's life—the warning simple and straightforward, with no room for misinterpretation.

Scrawled across the door like a message from hell, it read *The Cajun is next.*

Chapter 10

Michaela lingered in a hot shower until the water threatened to run cool, her mind working over the chilling events of the last few hours. After the gruesome discovery of Pippa Stanton's scalp, as well as the terrifying, blood-written warning, Brody had taken her down to the Dillingers' cabin. Reyes had been ordered to stay with the women, while the men searched the Alley. They'd been unable to pick up any trace of Lycan musk, although there was a lingering vinegarlike odor on the scalp. Evidently, the rogue had delivered the macabre warning while in its dayshifted form, which explained why the Runners who were at home in their cabins hadn't scented the trespasser.

And even though the Runners knew the rogue had been confident that his disguised scent would allow him to slip in under their noses, they were still stunned by the arrogance of the move. Drake's rogues were getting cocky—a fact that only substantiated the Bloodrunners' belief that something would happen, sooner rather than later.

After stepping out of the granite-tiled shower, Michaela found a stack of fluffy white towels folded beneath the sink, and wrapped one around her body, overlapping the edges at the front in a tight knot. Opening the door that led into Brody's bedroom, she propped her shoulder against the doorjamb, taking a moment to study the room, enjoying the intimate look at his private sanctuary—aware that she was searching for ways to keep herself distracted so she wouldn't worry about Max, that horrific warning and the painful declaration that Brody had made in his truck.

The style of the room was just as she'd expected—strong, bold and ruggedly beautiful, exactly like the man himself. His bed sat low to the ground, a rich mahogany platform frame supported by thick posts and legs. A matching chest and armoire sat on opposing walls, the only other piece of furniture an oversize chair in espresso-colored leather with gently sloping arms that looked great for reading.

She'd have loved to have been worry free and relaxed, just cuddled up in that big chair with one of her favorite novels, without a care in the world. But even more than that, she'd have loved to have seen Brody sprawled across that beautiful bed. Closing her eyes, Michaela lost herself in the heady, breathtaking daydream. She could see herself coming out from a steam-filled bubble bath to find him propped up against the headboard, waiting for her. He'd have taken off his shirt and shoes, a low wash of golden lamplight at his bedside setting the beauty of his hard body alight, picking out the burgundy highlights in his hair. His broad chest would gleam like bunched satin, his muscles perfectly formed, his ridged abdomen drawing her eye as she followed the silky trail of dark auburn hair that tapered into the waistband of a faded pair of jeans. A significant bulge would be pressed against the straining hold of his button fly, her mouth watering as she watched his right thumb stroke along that swollen ridge, his fingers curled against the rigid muscle of his thigh.

Licking her upper lip, Michaela could practically feel the desire shifting restlessly within her body, as if she had a beast of her own that moved within her, struggling to break free. And she knew precisely what its prey would be.

Brody.

But he seemed determined to keep his distance from her, now more than ever. It made her heart twist, because she wanted so desperately for him to reach out to her. To walk to her with his mouth curled in a sexy grin, and when he reached her, to close his arms around her, pulling her into the hardness and heat of his body. Holding her as if he wanted to absorb life from her.

With a sad smile, she reminded herself that he'd held her for a moment on the porch when they'd first made the grisly discovery, but not out of passion. Her *grandmère* would have said something wise, no doubt, about how beggars couldn't be choosers—but damn it, was she really asking for so much?

Opening her eyes, she stared at the bed they were never going to share, and became painfully aware that she *was* asking for too much.

"Why else do you think I'm with you?"

Michaela knew he'd spoken the truth, but it still hurt, the knowledge that if it weren't for the fact she needed protection, he'd still be doing everything within his power to avoid her. Stifling a low groan, she wondered how she would deal with him tonight. It was hard enough to hide her fierce attraction under the best of circumstances—not that there'd been many of those—but tonight she was too...needy. Too hungry for comfort. Worry and fear had worn her down like the weathered heel of a shoe, leaving her sensitive and raw. She didn't want to face the night alone. Though she still grappled with her own fear of being used, then discarded—she could too easily see herself seeking the warm security of Brody's muscled arms, begging for his protective embrace.

A wry smile curled her mouth, and she choked back a sound that fell somewhere between a sob and a giggle. God, she could just imagine his reaction if she tried to touch him. Knowing Brody, he'd probably blanch and push her away if she found the courage to even try it. No—no matter how tempting it would be to turn to him, she was going to have to find the will to resist.

She'd already unpacked her suitcase, using the empty drawers he'd brusquely pointed to in the beautiful armoire, his body language stiff as he'd shown her around his cabin, as if he couldn't wait to escape her company. He'd said something about needing to get some work done in his office when he'd left her in his room, and she assumed he would spend the rest of the evening hiding there. She'd eaten some soup while she'd waited with Torrance, Jillian and Reyes, and assumed Brody had already grabbed something for his dinner.

Growing chilly in the towel, she dressed in a comfortable pair of black leggings and a long, loose black shirt, the dark color matching her somber mood. Taking her cell phone from her purse, she checked her messages, in case David had called from the shop, but there was only one voice mail from Ross. Wincing, she listened to his outraged message, shaking her head as he accused her of dating one of her "freak" customers, claiming that Brody wasn't normal. If it were anyone other than Ross, she supposed she might have been worried about what kind of trouble he could cause with his accusations. But Ross was too concerned with his public image. If he'd caught Santa in the act of coming down the chimney on Christmas Eve, he'd have kept the stunning news to himself, afraid of what people would think of him, of what they might whisper behind his back.

No, even if he'd seen Brody in all his beautiful, beastly glory, he'd never breathe a word of it to another soul. And even if he did, he'd probably find himself carted off to the nearest psychiatric ward for sedation. Still, she'd texted him back that she had no idea what he was talking about, and suggested his time would be better spent thinking about what a jerk he'd been.

Having dealt with that, she sat down on the edge of the bed, wondering what to do next. Rain had begun to fall again, its heavy rhythm soothing against the cabin's roof. Should she go to bed, listening to the storm? Find a book to read? She had seen a collection of current thrillers on a bookshelf in the living room. Or should she do what she really wanted, which was walk out of the bedroom, go down the hall and find the man she couldn't get out of her mind?

He would most likely be ugly and rude, if not insulting, in an attempt keep her away. But even knowing that, could she ignore the need to be close to him? The driving urge to keep chipping away at his resistance until he finally stopped fighting this powerful force pulling them together? Could she resist the temptation?

And more importantly, did she even want to?

The jarring cracks of thunder rumbling across the nighttime sky marked the tedious passage of time, its movement drawn out and heavy, like the thick, sluggish spill of honey from a jar. Brody felt each second that passed by, moving painfully into the next, his tension twisting into tighter, straining knots of frustration with each individual tick...tick...tick.

Staring at the muted colors on his computer monitor, he rubbed his tired eyes with the heels of his palms when the contours of the map began to blur together in a swirling kaleidoscope of color. He'd been staring at the same image ever since Michaela had turned on the water in the bathroom, the gurgling in the pipes mesmerizing him as effortlessly as the pied piper's famous tune.

He still regretted the words he'd spoken in the truck, even though he knew they were for the best. For some unknown reason, the woman kept being nice to him, when it was the last damn thing he needed. *Nice* made his heart think there was a chance in hell things could work out between them, when he knew it wasn't true.

They were beauty and the beast, come to life from a storybook setting. But this was no fairy tale. Pippa Stanton's scalp hanging from his front door was proof of that, as was the infuriating threat against Michaela's life. It made him so violently angry, Brody knew he could have torn the one responsible into pieces.

The viciousness of that thought reminded him of another key point: the fact that he was more monster than man, the craving of his wolf growing stronger, edgier, every moment he spent with her.

He didn't want to be loverlike and caring. He wanted to

consume her sexually, claiming her so thoroughly it obliterated the memory of any other man, any other lover, she'd ever known.

And when he did, he knew she'd turn away from him. Knew he'd scare the hell out of her...or worse, hurt her. He couldn't risk it, no matter how painful it was to fight his beast's demand to claim her flesh with his body, her soul with his fangs.

The only thing he could think of that would be worse than bonding himself to a woman who didn't love him, was seeing the look in her eyes when it was over...when he'd lost his control and claimed her with all the raw, carnal sexuality of the wolf that lived within him, its power over him growing stronger the longer he went without sex.

He should have just swallowed the bitter pill of reality, gone into the city, hit the bars and found a woman to lie down with. Someone he could use as easily as she would use him, but he hadn't been able to stomach it.

And so here he was, so on edge he felt like one wrong move, one slip of the tongue, one dangerous touch, and he'd make the most destructive mistake of his life.

Enough already. Time to get your mind off the woman and back on the case, where it belongs.

"Okay, okay," he sighed, opening his eyes and studying the map once more. It covered the mountains in a forty-mile radius, with the Alley at its center. Red circles marked the location of the victims they'd found, small black stars plotting the locations that had been searched as possible rogue hideouts for Drake's teenage gang of killers. Though they suspected many of the teens in town who were part of Stefan Drake's "pureblood" movement were close to turning, they knew many already had, having been recruited, and at times even forced, by Drake and his cohorts. There was no doubt Drake had nefarious plans for his little rogue army—the Runners just wished they knew what they were. An attack on the humans? God, his blood ran cold at the thought. Or an attack on the Alley, one meant to take the Runners out once and for all? Possibly.

Though they'd found several abandoned hideouts, they'd yet to come across the rogues themselves. The band had kept a low profile ever since the failed attack on Mason, Torrance and Jeremy a few weeks before, but the Runners knew they were out there, like a pack of predators hiding in the shadows, just waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

And though they hadn't found any bodies, they knew the Lycans they were hunting were killers, as well as rapists they just didn't know how many victims had been claimed. Five? Ten? A dozen? Unlike the blond human girls who were being left out in the open for discovery, they'd yet to find the remains of the rogue gang's victims. Were they mass feeding, completely consuming the bodies? Were they taking them to their hideout, storing the remains there?

Though they hadn't found evidence of the kills, the Runners knew they were being made. After they'd rescued Elliot Connors, the teenager had admitted he'd been set up to kill a human girl, though her body had never been discovered. He'd even been able to send them to the place where the kill had happened, but by then the rogues had already abandoned the cave and moved on, an old animal carcass they'd left behind the only evidence of a feeding. The Runners suspected they were still splitting their time between the human city of Covington and the mountains, never staying in one place for long. And Elliot had only been allowed to interact with a small portion of the group, most of whom had been killed when they'd attacked Jeremy and Mase, but he'd talked of them going out to hunt... to feed.

At times, the entire nightmare seemed like madness, but there was an organized chaos behind the fragmented pieces that formed a larger picture. And yet, the Runners still had as many questions as they did answers. With his small army of rogues, why did Drake need this so-called Legend of Azakiel that allowed him to pull out a Lycan's wolf against his will? Who was Drake's accomplice? What was he after?

And how was the rogue killer of the blond humans connected?

Was the killer they were hunting, the one ritualistically killing the human girls, part of the rogues? Was it Drake, Dustin or someone else? An Elder? No matter who it was, there was no doubt he was connected to Drake. The murders had been made while the rogue was in his dayshifted form, and they'd heard Simmons himself speak of the one who would keep killing "the pretty blondes" before he'd died. If it wasn't Drake, and Brody didn't think it was, then it was one of his followers. But who? And why? The eaten heart was symbolic, but again, in what way? All of the victims were young and fair, with the exception of the redhead Simmons had killed to screw with Mason's mind. All blond and blueeyed, similar in features and build, almost as if the same kill was being made over and over again.

The only difference in the crime scenes that he and Cian had investigated so far was the location, the first two near pack land, then that third one found down in Covington. The fact that the last body had been found near pack land again probably indicated some sort of mistake, possibly a loss of control, on the part of the rogue killer with the victim they'd found in the city. Brody no longer thought that the city location had been an intentional move. No, if that'd been the case, this last kill would have presented an even greater threat of exposure—the body left out on a city street, instead of turning back up in the mountains again.

Feeling as though he was grasping at straws, Brody opened his e-mail and typed up a message for Monroe, asking the FBI agent for an updated missing persons report, narrowing the list down to young blond females with blue eyes who had gone missing within the state during the past several months. Maybe the search would turn up a lead, some sort of connection to someone within the pack.

Glancing at the pad of paper sitting on his desk, he reread the names he'd listed while waiting for his computer to boot up. He still had Dustin's name at the top of his list, reasonably so, since he'd already admitted to attacking Max—but the more Brody thought about it, the more it didn't fit. He couldn't see the Lycan losing control *or* making a mistake. Dustin might be his worst nightmare, but he wasn't sloppy.

Stefan Drake was next. Brody supposed the Elder could be playing out some twisted fantasy about a younger version of his wife, but when would he have had the time? Between recruiting rogues and masterminding whatever the hell he had planned, could he really be sneaking into the city for victims?

One of the rogues, then? But who? They didn't even know them all, suspecting the group to have grown from other nearby packs. And you couldn't go through the town and do a census. The Silvercrest weren't forbidden to leave Shadow Peak. Lycans could come and go as they pleased, and many of the young ones often spent time away from the mountains. And even the ones who'd "gone missing" were unlikely to be turned in by their relatives, who didn't trust the Runners any more than they would have trusted a human.

There were times when their work seemed like such a futile undertaking, because for every rogue they took down, it seemed that two more were just waiting to take his place. Something had to be done to stop the trend, and that had been before this current hell had started. Even after they caught Drake and managed to nail his ass, the Runners still had to hunt down the ones he'd tempted into turning.

It was enough to make a man contemplate a new line of work, that was for sure. Not that he was actually serious. No, as pathetic as it made him, Brody had meant every word that he'd said to Michaela when she'd asked why he Ran for the pack. He and the others took their positions and purpose seriously, and he knew none of them would ever walk away from it, no matter how frustrating it became.

Succumbing to his steadily growing headache with a foul curse, Brody swiveled away from the computer screen, fighting the urge to pick it up and hurl the equipment against the wall of his office.

Bracing his elbows on his spread knees, he cradled his head in his open palms, spearing his fingers back through his hair, and concentrated on taking deep, even breaths. In. Out. In. Out.

His next inhalation made his muscles clench in awareness, and he knew, without lifting his head, that Michaela stood in the doorway, even though she hadn't made a sound. Her warm, womanly scent wrapped around him, seducing his senses...seducing his heart. He could smell the warmth of the shower on her, the tang of her soap on her skin, shampoo in her hair. In his mind's eye, he tortured himself with the mental vision of her standing beneath the steamy spray of water, her body naked and wet and beautiful—knowing, instinctively, that she'd have welcomed him in there with her...if he'd had the balls to go after what he wanted.

"What are you working on?" she asked, the muted Louisiana drawl that softened her words melting into him, provocative and rich. He could listen to her talk for hours, turned on to the point of pain from nothing more than the sultry sound of that intoxicating voice.

Silently cursing his weakness, Brody lifted his head and jerked his chin toward the computer screen. "It's a map showing the locations where we've found bodies, along with places we've searched as possible hideouts."

She nodded, bracing one hand against the doorjamb. "Why do you think he came back to make this last kill on pack land, after risking discovery in the city when he killed the girl who was dealing drugs?"

"Who knows?" he sighed, leaning back in his office chair as he stared at her, her beauty taking his breath, same as it always did. "Maybe he lost control and didn't mean to make the kill in Covington. Could be that the close call scared him, made him more cautious."

As if echoing his earlier thoughts, she frowned, saying, "That doesn't sound like Dustin."

He rubbed at the tension knotted in the back of his neck, and asked, "What do you mean?"

"He's too arrogant, too cocky. And I was thinking about that feeling I had when we were with the victim. The conflict I felt in the killer. That doesn't sound like Dustin, either. From what I could read in Dustin when we saw him in Covington, he doesn't seem the type to mourn his actions. If he were the killer, I think he'd be gloating about his success. For that matter, I don't see Stefan Drake having that kind of reaction, either. Both have God complexes that would prevent them from feeling conflicted over their actions."

Scrubbing his hands down his face, Brody knew he had to agree. "You're right. We're still looking in the wrong direction."

Her head listed slightly to the side as she studied him, the damp curls of her hair falling like a midnight sheet of silk over her shoulder. She should have looked washed-out, with the black clothes and all that long black hair, but her skin shone with the luminous sheen of a pearl, cheeks and mouth flushed a blushing rose, eyes brilliant and bright and blue. "I know it's frustrating," she told him, "but you'll figure it out."

"I don't know. I feel like the answer's staring us right in the face, but we just can't see it."

"Has anything come up on any of the other Elders?"

"Naw. They all have their share of secrets and skeletons in their closets, but hell, who doesn't? We could make an argument for any of them as easily as we could make an argument against them." He sighed, leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees once again. He turned his right hand over and stared at the lines on his palm, as if he could find the answers there as easily as Meredith had. "When we first started, we didn't know much about any of them, since we've been so isolated from the pack for so long, our interactions with the League as minimal as possible. But even now, we're still no closer to any answers, and Pippa was the only one willing to talk to us."

"And after what's happened to her, the others are going to be reluctant to stand against Drake, no matter how extreme he becomes," she murmured, stepping away from the door and walking into the room. Michaela didn't know what drove her forward. Loneliness? Need? Love? All of them? She only knew that she had to be near him. Stepping closer, she was no more than five feet away when he glanced up and jerked to his feet so quickly the chair crashed over behind him. Holding up his hand, he said, "Stop."

Michaela froze, standing in the middle of his office. She opened her mouth, but couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't scare him away. And he was already wary enough. She could see it in his eyes, in the hard tension of those broad, beautiful shoulders and the tight stretch of the roped muscles and sinew in his arms.

"This isn't going to happen, Doucet. I can't touch you," he growled in a low, tortured voice, "because once I start, I'm not going to be able to stop."

She absorbed that, playing the words over in her mind. Pressing one hand against her stomach, she asked, "Is there someone else you go to, then?"

"There's no one else," he admitted, his tone gruff, as if the words were being ripped out of him. His strain revealed itself in the hard lines of his expression, the brackets around his mouth deeper, jaw tight, scars more prominent against the rise of color in his face. In a broken, guttural scrape of words, he said, "I haven't...it's been...too long."

With a jolt of surprise, she understood what he was trying to tell her, but it stunned her. She'd assumed a man like Brody must have women lining up to be with him, and yet she was sure he was telling her that he'd been a long time without a woman.

Carefully, she asked, "Are you...are you afraid of hurting me?"

"Hurting you?" he repeated, a sharp, hoarse bark of laughter

jerking from his chest. "Jesus, Doucet. It may not scare you that I'm as much wolf as I am man, but it should. I want...I need..." Struggling, he finally snarled, "Just trust me when I say that you wouldn't be tempting me if you knew what it would be like, getting under me."

"I think you're wrong," she said in a soft, quiet rush, daring to take a step closer to him. "And isn't that my choice to make, Brody?"

He gave a hard, sharp shake of his head. "No, I won't risk it." Risk what? Hurting her? Losing control? Biting her?

"If you're not willing to take the risk, then I am," she whispered, taking that final step that brought her within mere inches of his body, so close his deliciously masculine scent filled her head, his heat warming her skin.

Lifting her right hand to his face, she trailed her fingertips over the slight ridges of his scars, wishing she could take his pain as her own. He carried his scars on the outside, while she carried hers within. Lessons learned from a lifetime of mistakes. And yet, it didn't feel like a mistake with Brody. It felt as if she'd finally got it right, as if she was right where she belonged.

The touch of her hand against his scars was Brody's undoing. One moment he was trapped, suspended in a state of agony, and then he was reaching for her, his hands curling around her biceps, pulling her to him. Instantly, he captured her mouth with his, and she was too goddamn sweet, her taste flooring him. The textures of her mouth assaulted his system, breaking him down, leaving nothing but this trembling, aching hunger, craving, in its wake. The pansy softness of her lips, that sweet slickness that lay just inside the lush swell. He could stroke that with his tongue forever and never get enough. He kissed her harder, and she greedily accepted his aggression, matching it. No matter how desperately he kissed her, she responded with breathless urgency, as if he could draw the pleasure up out of her through nothing more than the touch of his mouth against hers.

The next thing Brody knew, he was trapping her against the wall of the office, surprised to realize they'd moved from the center of the room. Pushing her against the smooth surface of the wall, he curled his fingers around her right knee and lifted her leg, the spread position giving him room to press against that warm, liquid part of her, grinding the burgeoning ache of his erection against her. He buried his face in the sweet-scented crook between her shoulder and neck, scraping the tender length of her throat with his teeth. Her skin tasted dangerously perfect, and he repeated the primitive action that completely unraveled his control. Before he knew what was happening, the tips of his fangs slipped free, and she gasped, jerking against the heavy press of his body.

He lifted slightly away, and his eyes burned as he watched a thin rivulet of deep crimson slip across the pale perfection of her skin. His beast roared in triumph. He'd scratched her throat, drawn blood, the animal half of his nature longing to throw back its head and howl in victory. A low, thick snarl of possession broke from his mouth, and he leaned down, licking her throat, slowly lapping at the decadent taste of her, aware that his beast was drawing closer and closer to the surface.

Without any conscious direction from his brain, his claws began slipping the skin at the tips of his fingers, and he quickly embedded them in the wall on either side of her head, blood smearing against the white plaster as he gouged its surface. At the same time, his head spun with the conflicting shouts of beast and man.

Grinding his jaw, he forced himself to take a step back, pressing his palms against her shoulders to hold her away from him—careful not to hurt her with the claws piercing through the tips of his fingers. She stared at him, and Brody knew she was going to fight him. That she wasn't going to accept defeat in whatever twisted game she was playing with his sanity.

And damn but did she play dirty.

Reaching between their bodies, she pressed her palm against the rigid, massive bulge of his cock trapped beneath the fly of his jeans.

"Doucet," he growled, grasping her wrist, careful not to squeeze too hard lest he crush her bone. Undeterred, she simply reached for him with her other hand. Gripping that wrist, as well, Brody squeezed his eyes shut, his voice a fractured whisper of sound as he snarled, "Goddamn it. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Unwilling to give up without a fight, driven by the blistering need to be close to this man, Michaela leaned forward and pressed her lips against the damp side of his throat, his skin warm and delicious beneath her mouth, his scent the most wonderful thing in the world. "Please, Brody. I want to touch you, learn you. Hold you. Feel you pulse in my hand."

Releasing her wrists, he took hold of her shoulders again, shoving her away from him as he rasped, "What do you want from me?"

"I just—"

"What? You wanna have some fun?" he burst out, the

guttural words forced through his gritted teeth, eyes glowing an unearthly green within the burnished frame of his lashes. "Torture me? Is this to get me back for embarrassing you at Eric's? Are you playing with me? Or am I a charity case, Doucet? Maybe just something to pass the time with? A little walk on the wild side, getting your cut of the danger? It wouldn't be the first time a woman's used me that way, but none of them ever screwed with my head the way you do. *What. The. Hell. Do. You. Want. From. Me?*"

"You...just you," she gasped, her eyes stinging with a hot wash of tears, burning with anger and passion. So many words and explanations crowded against one another in her mind, crashing together like rocks caught in a violent, churning surf.

"I don't want to hurt you, Brody. I just wanted to make you feel good. To make you—"

"I don't need you to fix me," he seethed, the auburn strands of his hair falling around the rugged angles of his face as he stared down at her, looking every bit the part of a fallen angel, tortured and dark and angry.

"Damn it, I don't want to fix you! And I don't want to use you!" she shouted, thumping her fists against his broad chest. "I just want to be close to you! I'm different from those other women. Can't you see that?"

"Yeah, they wanted a piece of me for the danger. I'm betting you just want to try and make me into something that fits in your little picture-perfect world."

"That's not true," she argued, shaking her head, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes as her frustration grew, hot against the back of her throat.

"Like hell it isn't. But I've got news for you, sweetheart. It won't work," he snarled. "I'm not going to pretend to be something I'm not, just to make you feel better. And I'll keep on protecting you without expecting you to pay for it on your back."

"Why do you always have to be so ugly?"

"Might as well fit the personality to the face," he snorted, the corner of his mouth kicking up in a taunting smile, but there was more pain behind his words than sarcasm. And there was no doubt he'd be even angrier if he knew she could see it.

Her heart broke for the hurt she could see in his eyes, but it made her furious to hear the things he said to her—even more so when he kept putting himself down. Her own anger rising with stunning force, her voice shook as she said, "You're an idiot if that's what you really think, Brody. And blind, if you can't see how gorgeous you are. Being a wolf doesn't make you a monster or evil, and scars don't make you unattractive. They only have the power you give them. And as far as the women you've been involved with, I don't know what their problem was. Maybe you just have bad taste, because they sound like a bunch of bitches to me, and stupid ones at that if they weren't smart enough to hold on to you!"

He blinked slowly, as if shocked by her words, his expression closing in on itself, and she could see his shields thickening before her eyes. His face came closer to hers, nose to nose, the angry heat of his breath rushing against her mouth as he spoke. "I'm only going to say this once, so pay attention. Whatever it is you think you're doing, it won't work. You can't come into my life with your laughter and your smiles and make things right. I may be damaged, but it isn't your problem, and there's nothing you can do to change it or make things different."

He stepped back from her, gaze nothing more than a narrow slit, mouth a hard, flat line. "So stop with the damn

seduction routine, because I meant what I said, Doucet. You don't have to whore for your safety."

All it took was an instant, and her hand cracked across the side of his face before she'd even realized she was going to do it. She was shocked by her action, but refused to back down as he lifted his hand, fingertips touching the red welt she'd left on his cheek. "What is it, Brody?" she whispered, swiping at the tears spilling down her cheeks, feeling lost in her own skin, as if she didn't even know herself anymore. "Do you always find a way to push away the people who care about you?"

"No one cares about me. Not for long, anyway. Don't you get it?

"You're wrong," she argued in a soft, nearly silent rasp. "You just won't give them a chance."

He turned his back to her then, and she lifted her hand, reaching toward his shoulder. Michaela had never slapped a person in her entire life, not even Ross. And though Brody had been intentionally cruel with his words, she wanted to apologize. But something inside of her choked on the words...her own defenses rising to protect her, and she pulled her hand away. "No one asked you to take this job," she said unsteadily. "When you want me gone, just say the word and I'll be gone."

She turned then and walked out of the room, back down the hall, toward his bedroom. Just before she shut the door behind her, Michaela heard a loud, crunching sound come from inside the office, making her flinch.

With a heartbreaking sense of certainty, she knew that Brody's frustration had finally gotten the better of him.

Chapter 11

Michaela opened her eyes to the misty spill of early-morning sunlight drifting through the bedroom window, her head aching the way it always did when she cried herself to sleep. And yet, it wasn't with a sense of defeat that she faced the new day. Though she'd gone to bed still questioning whether she had the courage to follow her heart, she no longer felt mired in indecision and fear. Oh no. With the refreshing glow of morning sunlight came the knowledge that she was willing to do whatever it took to get what she wanted...what she needed.

No price was too great—not even her pride. Though heartache and bitter disappointment had smothered her as she'd lain down between the crisp, cool sheets of Brody's bed, her dreams had freed her, filled with beauty and tenderness. With visions of Brody and the beautiful green-eyed baby girl, their laughter and smiles stealing her heart. As she rolled over to her back, staring at the sun-dappled ceiling, a sweet, refreshing wash of tears warmed her cheeks against the cool morning air. She knew, using nothing more than the yearning of her heart, that that powerful dream was worth fighting for. That it was meant to be hers. That Brody and the baby girl were *meant* to be hers.

No matter how hard he fought her, she was determined to do whatever it took to become a part of Brody's life—because Michaela wanted that dream to become a reality more than anything in the world. She wanted to hold her and Brody's child in her arms, nuzzle the velvety softness of her cheek and kiss the smooth perfection of her forehead. And in the sweetness of the evening, when their daughter lay down to bed, she wanted to take her man into her arms and hold him, love him, cherish him.

Her man. In all her life, she'd never thought of anyone as hers and hers alone—but he was. She felt it in her bones and her blood, in the very fabric of her soul.

Brody Carter belonged with her.

Drawing in a deep breath that filled her head with his rich, mouthwatering scent, she vowed then and there to see it through. It wasn't a decision she made lightly. If she wanted him, she had to be willing to work for him, to fight and claw and battle, because there was no way he'd make it easy.

Throwing on some jeans and a sweater, Michaela brushed out her long hair and used concealer to hide the dark circles under her eyes which seemed to keep getting darker by the day. As she stepped out of the bedroom, the cabin was silent and still, making her wonder if Brody was still sleeping. She tiptoed down the hallway and peeked into his study through the door that had been left ajar. Her breath caught at the vision he made, his long body sprawled out across the chocolatecolored sofa, his auburn hair gleaming against the rich luster of the soft leather. The only clothing he wore was a faded pair of jeans that molded his hard thighs, the top two buttons undone. He had his face turned away from her, one hand low on his bare abdomen, lying across the drool-worthy cut of his abs. The knuckles of that hand were swollen and bruised evidence of the fact that he'd lost his temper the night before after she'd run out on him. Sure enough, there was a fist-sized hole in the drywall on the far side of the room.

Pulling her hot gaze back to Brody, Michaela stared for a breathless eternity, it seemed, wanting so badly to walk into the room, kneel down beside him and press her lips to that shadowy vee in the open fly of his jeans. Feel the heat of his skin against her lips, the musk of his sex, salty and warm, filling her head with each breath. She'd lap at his skin with her tongue, his low grumble of pleasure telling her he was waking up, the hard, blatant ridge of his cock pressing against the denim proof of his hunger, his desire, his need.

Then she'd release those last remaining buttons, and take that hard, massive part of him deep into her mouth, showing him how much she wanted him, how badly she wanted to make him writhe and moan. Make him feel good, wanted... even loved.

For a moment, her fingers tightened on the soft white finish of the door, but then she slowly released her grip and stepped away, shaking her head as she stared down at her sneakers. She couldn't do it. Not yet. She knew he still wasn't ready. Knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he'd only reject her again.

To get what she wanted, she was going to have to tread carefully, with as much caution as determination. And she needed answers, needed insight into the enigma that was Brody Carter.

Luckily, she knew just where to get them.

Sitting at the Dillingers' breakfast table, Michaela took another comforting sip of tea and thought over what she'd learned from her best friend. While Mason worked with the others outside, setting up chairs for the wedding that was to take place later that evening, Torrance had told her what she knew about Brody's past relationships. In short, there hadn't been many. One-night stands with nameless, meaningless women—except for one. And the story behind that relationship finally explained why Brody was the only Runner who didn't get along with Dylan Riggs.

According to what Torrance had learned from Mason, Brody had been involved with Dylan's younger sister, Jenny Riggs, the year before. Though Jenny rarely spent time in Shadow Peak, preferring to live with her mother's birth pack in upstate Virginia, she had come down to stay the summer with her brother while she worked on her painting. She'd dated Brody in secret, finally breaking up with him when her brother had found out about the relationship. It seemed that while Brody was good enough for her to fool around with, Jenny had been embarrassed by the idea of the town finding out about her involvement with a Bloodrunner. She'd dumped him, left Maryland and never looked back.

Though it made her own jealous streak burn hot, Brody's experience with Jenny Riggs explained a lot about his resistance to a relationship with her. Michaela could have pressed Torry for information about Jenny all day long, wondering what she was like—but they were short on time and Brody's past relationships had been only one of the questions she had for her best friend. Speaking softly to keep from being overheard, Michaela had then asked Torrance to tell her about a Lycan bite. While there was still a lot Torrance had to learn about the Lycan way of life, she was able to explain that a bite between mates created a powerful type of metaphysical link called a blood bond. The bond formed a deeper connection between the couple, to the point that it could even be used to help pinpoint the location of a mate. However, when a Lycan bit a human who wasn't his mate, it would result in his or her turning, as it had with Max, whether the Lycan was in his wolf or human form at the time.

Since Michaela had no intention of turning Lycan, she was going to need to be clear about whether or not she was Brody's mate before she begged him to bite her again. And she had been ready to beg. For some reason, whenever he touched her, the thought of his fangs sinking into her throat became incredibly arousing, adding a deeper layer to the hunger that coursed through her veins.

Of course, she also couldn't help but wonder about the fact that he'd obviously wanted to bite her. Did that mean that Brody's urge was born from a deeper need to bond her to him, because she was his mate?

Oh God. The thought made her pulse ramp up to breathtaking speed, her head feeling light as she sat at the table, waiting for Torrance to return. Her best friend had gone to answer the knocking at the cabin's front door, thinking it would be Jillian with some last-minute tasks. However, when Torrance walked back into the kitchen, she didn't have the pack's beautiful, golden-haired Spirit Walker with her. Instead, the visitor was an older Lycan, most likely in her early seventies, her auburn hair pulled back in an elegant French twist.

Torrance shot her an anxious *what-the-hell-is-going-on* kind of look as she stepped into the room, the guest coming in just behind her. Staring straight at Michaela with penetrating green eyes, the woman asked, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," Michaela rasped, keeping a careful grip on her teacup, making sure it didn't rattle as she set it down and came to her feet. "You're Brody's grandmother."

"That's right," the Lycan murmured, taking a seat across from her at the table. "I'm Abigail Carter."

"Your grandson is still sleeping, Ms. Carter," Michaela murmured, beginning to step away from the table, "but if you don't mind waiting, I can get him for you."

"No, no, that's all right. Take a seat, child." She waited for Michaela to sit down once again, making no secret of studying her with a critical eye, declining Torrance's offer of coffee or tea. After flashing her an encouraging smile, Torrance moved to the sink, where a mass of flowers had been left, and began trimming the stems. At the same time, Abigail Carter folded her hands on the gleaming surface of the table, saying, "There's no need to fetch my grandson. I'm sure he'd only refuse to talk with me anyway. No, it's you I came to see. I'd hoped to catch you like this, without Brody near, so that we could talk for a moment."

Warily, Michaela asked, "Why would you want to talk with me?"

The woman's expression remained as closed as her grandson's, giving nothing away, but there was a tightness around her eyes that suggested she wasn't quite as relaxed as she was trying to appear. Michaela threw out the soft net of her power, but caught nothing, a surge of frustration flaring as she realized she couldn't read this woman any more than she could read Brody.

Answering her question, Abigail said, "I've heard the rumors of what transpired at your brother's *Novitiate's* ceremony. Dreadful stuff, really. I don't know why the pack is so stubborn in its desire to support Stefan Drake, but then we often hold on to the idea that we find most comforting. It's easier for them to believe that the Runners' accusations are false, saving them the humiliation of admitting that they've allowed themselves to be led by a racist fanatic. But I'm afraid they won't open their eyes to the truth until it's too late. In that regard, I'm not so different."

"But from what you've just said," Michaela murmured, you're clearly not one of Drake's followers."

"I'm not speaking about Drake, Ms. Doucet. But my grandson."

Frowning, Michaela shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

Abigail sent her a meaningful look, while a low vein of laughter vibrated her slight frame. "You're a beautiful girl, Michaela, but you couldn't tell a lie to save your life. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Let's not be coy. I'm too old and the topic is too important."

"Very well," she said, her temper flaring as she thought of all the heartache this woman had caused in Brody's young life, at a time when he'd needed her love and comfort. "If you want honesty, here it is. I'm wondering what possible interest you could have in your grandson, Ms. Carter. Brody has spoken of the upbringing he received at your hands."

"And?" Abigail asked, her voice slightly softer than before.

"And it was so cold," she explained, anger causing her own voice to shiver, "I'm surprised to see you're a flesh-andblood woman, and not made of ice."

At the sink, Torrance made a sharp, choking sound of surprise, and Michaela knew she'd shocked her with her bluntness. She had been raised to always show respect to her elders, but the protective streak she felt where Brody was concerned made her so angry, it was all she could do not to stand up and demand to know why the woman had been such a coldhearted bitch. She thought she might have, too—if it weren't for the memory of Meredith's words to Brody, reminding her that there was a good chance Abigail had finally come to her senses and had a change of heart.

"I suppose I deserve that," the Lycan murmured, the corner of her mouth twisting with a self-deprecating smile. "God knows I've made my share of mistakes. And you've got fire, girl, which is just what he needs. He had that fire as a child, brimming with heat and emotion, and I chilled that in him. Taught him how to bury it all inside, until he learned the lesson even better than I'd hoped."

"So you don't deny that you were cold to him? That you withheld the love and comfort he so desperately needed?"

"I'm too old to waste time denying my mistakes. I was tough on him, I know. But after what happened to my son, I wanted to make Brody strong. Make him hard enough to stand on his own."

"And did you also set out to teach him that he wasn't worthy of a woman's love?"

Abigail shook her head wearily, the early-morning sunlight glinting off dark red hair so similar to Brody's. "An unfortunate consequence that I hadn't planned on, but then we rarely see things clearly while we're living them. It's only hindsight that gives us such a clear, painful picture of our errors. I thought I was protecting him from making the same mistakes as his father. He learned the lesson too well, though, and I've feared he'd always be alone," she confessed softly, before a small smile curled the corner of her mouth. "And yet, from what I've heard, it seems that you've managed to break through his armor."

Michaela lifted her chin. "Only because I refuse to let him scare me away."

"Like I said, you've got fire, girl. And I'm glad. It's what Brody needs, someone who'll shake that infernal reserve of his. Unlike his father, Brody has chosen well. And hopefully he'll learn to follow his heart before it's too late."

Her anger softening, Michaela said, "It's not too late for you, either, Ms. Carter."

"Perhaps, perhaps," Abigail murmured with a wistful expression as she rose to her feet. "But now I must be on my way. Enjoy the wedding, ladies. If my grandson is half the man I believe him to be, I have a strong feeling it won't be long before the Alley hosts another wedding. And this time, I expect to be invited."

With those softly spoken words, Abigail walked out of the kitchen, leaving both Michaela and Torrance staring quietly at the archway, their expressions mirroring their surprise.

"Are you going to tell Brody she was here?" Torrance finally asked.

"I...I don't think so, *chère*. Not yet. I want to see what Abigail does. If she's serious about wanting a relationship with Brody, then she can make the next move. Telling me what she wants and actually doing it are two different things." Picking up her teacup, she carried it to the counter, adding, "It may sound heartless, but I'm more worried about Brody than her. He doesn't deserve to be played with."

Sighing, Torrance placed a comforting hand on Michaela's shoulder. "I agree. And I'll go ask Mase to tell the others to stay quiet about her visit."

After waking up in his office, Brody had swung his legs over the side of the chocolate leather sofa, hung his head between his shoulders and braced his elbows on his knees. For endless moments, he'd struggled to get his breathing back under control, the strangest dream he'd ever had still screwing with his mind. A disturbingly tender, heartwarming dream of him and Michaela sitting on a blanket in the middle of a field, playing with a baby girl who had looked just like her mother, but for the bottle-green eyes that had stared up at him with such joyful delight, it made his chest hurt.

He didn't know where in God's name the images had originated from, the thought of his own child as alien to him as the idea of walking on the surface of the moon. He'd just accepted as fact that it would never happen in his lifetime, so what was the point in wishing for it? But the dream had been so crisp, so clear, the little girl's laughter filling his ears, making him smile, while Michaela had sat beside them, staring at them with the most powerful look of love; he'd felt like the luckiest bastard alive.

Where had it come from? He ground his jaw, wondering if the damn woman had bewitched him...put a spell on him.

His mood, already slipping into foul, hadn't improved when he'd failed to find Michaela in his cabin, unable to believe he'd been so angry the night before he'd forgotten to set the security system. Panic had ripped at him with deep, gouging force as he ran out of his front door, not even bothering with his shirt and shoes. He'd run into Cian first thing, who was setting up the tables and chairs for Jeremy and Jillian's wedding. His partner had arched his brow when he saw him, then silently pointed at the Dillingers' cabin, a slow, knowing grin curving one corner of his mouth, a cigarette perched in the other. Snarling under his breath, Brody had set off for the cabin, finding Michaela laughing in the kitchen with Torrance, Jillian and her younger sister, Sayre, the women busy as they arranged the centerpieces for the wedding tables.

Riding the hard edge of fear and fury, he'd ripped into her for leaving the cabin without waking him. After the threat they'd received along with Pippa's scalp, he'd told her he expected her to be smart enough to know that she stayed by his side at all times. He'd expected her to snarl back, giving as good as she got, but instead she'd only smiled at him and apologized for making him worry, her mood as calm and poised as his was fractured and raw. And it didn't improve from there.

Now, with the wedding over and the celebration well under way, Brody sat at the head table, his jacket draped over the back of his chair, watching Michaela talk with Torrance while they stood beside one of the elegant fire pots that had been placed among the tables to provide warmth for the guests. Reluctantly, he admitted to no one but himself that fear for her safety accounted for only part of his foul mood. The other came from the fact that he wanted her all to himself, jealous of everyone she talked to, smiled at, danced with. Of the wineglass that touched her lips, the soft, navy-blue silk of the dress that draped so sensually over her body. He wanted to be the only thing covering her skin, warming her with his heat, with the hard press of his flesh against hers.

Frustrated with himself, he wondered if it was the romantic setting making him so on edge...so restless. Brody had only been to a handful of weddings in his lifetime, but he knew enough to understand that, like Torrance and Mason's two weeks before, Jeremy and Jillian's ceremony had been special. He was hardly the sentimental type, but he'd sensed the wave of emotion overcoming the guests as the bride and groom had exchanged their vows. Jeremy's deep voice had been husky, the reverent look in his eyes as he stared at his stunning bride enough to make the single men shift uncomfortably, while the women had swiped at their tears. It was obvious the couple loved each other to distraction, and after a decade of bitter heartache and separation, even Brody had to admit that it was wonderful to finally see them so happy.

Pushing one hand back through his hair, he tried to pull his gaze away from Michaela—but he couldn't do it.

As if she could feel the press of his eyes on her, she turned her head, a slow, siren smile curving across that beautiful, fantasy-inspiring mouth. She'd been smiling at him like that all day and night, driving him wild, making him so hungry he was amazed he'd been able to hold it together for as long as he had. He wanted so badly to take what she was offering, no longer caring if she was using him or not.

But what about the bite? Would he be able to resist? Christ, he didn't know. The only thing he knew with any sense of certainty was that the night had worn him down to his last nerve—and watching her share a dance with Dylan a few minutes earlier hadn't helped. Monroe, who had been having a blast playing DJ, put on a slow jazz piece with a deep, heavy rhythm of alto saxophone. Taking the empty seat at Brody's side, Mason stretched out his long legs under the table, a lazy smile on his face as he looked out over the dancing couples. Mason's father, Robert, had asked Torrance to dance and was now playfully twirling her around and around, her long red hair streaming behind her as her laughter filled the air. And on the other side of the makeshift dance floor, the bride and groom danced so close together their noses were nearly touching as they gazed dreamily into each other's eyes. Everywhere he looked, guests were enjoying themselves. All but Pullaton, who was taking his turn patrolling the woods, ensuring no one came near the Alley with the intention of causing trouble.

Sighing, Mason took a long sip of his champagne, then said, "How are you holding up?"

Brody grunted under his breath as he watched Cian approach Michaela and ask for a dance. They moved together onto the parquet dance floor, the evening wind blowing her long curls until they wrapped around Cian's shoulder, and the tall Runner took her into his arms, both of them dark-haired and gorgeous, like something off the cover of a goddamn magazine.

In all the years that they'd been friends, since Cian had come to live with the Silvercrest, Brody had never been jealous of him—until this moment. For the first time, he now coveted his partner's effortless charm, his perfect good looks. It was as if nature were playing a bad joke on them all, singling Michaela out as his mate, instead of the handsome Irishman's. And yet, he knew there was no way he would ever let Cian have her.

"Michaela looks like she's having a good time," Mason murmured.

Softly, he snarled, "I'm going to take Cian apart if he doesn't get his hand off her ass."

"That's her back, not her ass," Mason snorted, before saying, "We need to talk."

Brody scowled. If he got a lecture on being more sociable, he was going to take his drink and dump it over Mason's head. "What about?"

Leaning forward to set his empty champagne glass on the table, Mason quietly said, "I talked to Dylan before the ceremony. He didn't want to say anything in front of everyone and ruin things for Jeremy and Jillian, but he had news, and none of it was good. The first thing he told me was that Drake is pressing for a vote to rescind Jillian's position, just as we'd expected. He thinks the League could call the meeting any day now."

"Nice wedding present," Brody sneered, his contempt for the League hardening the edges of his speech. "We'll have to stand with her and Jeremy when it happens. Offer our support."

"I agree," Mason sighed. "And believe it or not, his second bit of news was even worse. They found Pippa's body just before he got here."

He scrubbed his hands down his face, cursing under his breath. "Where was she?"

"Out by the old mill. She'd been staked to a tree, the word *traitor* carved into her stomach with a set of claws."

"Shit," he muttered, rubbing at the knots of tension in the back of his neck.

"Yeah, it was pretty bad," Mason grated, slanting him a dark look from the corner of his eye. "From what Dylan was told, sounds like she was covered with bite marks. I think they killed her as slowly and painfully as possible."

194

Leaning forward in his chair, Brody braced his elbows on his spread knees, his gaze finding Michaela as she danced through another song with his partner. "They obviously killed her because she talked to Jeremy," he said grimly.

"That's what I explained to Dylan, since we hadn't told him yet that it was Pippa who talked."

"Speaking of Dylan," Brody rumbled, "he looks rough as hell tonight."

"Yeah, I'm worried about him," Mason admitted. "It's not like him to show up to something like this without a woman on his arm, but who knows. I've already warned him twice tonight to let up on the liquor, which isn't like him, either. Maybe it's just the stress getting to him. I think he's been burning the candle at both ends."

"Maybe," he grunted, but as he cut his gaze to the haggardlooking Elder slouched against the side of Jeremy's cabin, silently watching the couples dance, Brody found himself wondering if it wasn't something more.

Chapter 12

The towering flames of the nearby fires warmed the night, while zigzagged strings of overhead lights glinted above their heads like shimmering stars as Michaela danced with Cian, the Irishman's tall, muscled body moving in perfect rhythm with hers. She enjoyed dancing with him, as much as she could enjoy dancing with any man who wasn't Brody—and Brody hadn't asked her. Cian was sinfully dark and beautiful, but he didn't make her heart race. Instead, she felt comfortable with Brody's partner, as if he were someone she could become great friends with.

Smiling up at the grinning Irishman, Michaela kept her voice soft as she said, "Thanks for asking me to dance. When Torrance partnered up with Robert, I was afraid Dylan was going to come over and ask me again."

"Don't you like Dylan?" he rasped, gazing down at her

with pale gray eyes that looked almost silver beneath the thick black fringe of his lashes.

Lifting her shoulder, she tried to explain. "I have no reason *not* to like him. It's just...there's something about him that puts me on edge."

He was silent for a moment, then said, "Is it something you're picking up from him, using your power?"

"No," she admitted, feeling foolish for even saying anything. "Dylan's one of those that I've never been able to get a read on."

"Hmm," he murmured, the corner of his mouth curling with a slow, contemplative smile. "Then it's probably just Brody's dislike for him rubbing off on you."

"I knew there was no love lost between them," she told him, lowering her gaze to his chin, lest her eyes reveal more of her feelings than she intended, "but it wasn't until this morning that I learned the reason."

"The Jenny story isn't a pretty one." Cian sighed, taking her into another slow spin as the sultry notes of a jazz song filled the nighttime air. "I was afraid he was going to let it screw up his life forever, but then you came along, and at just the right time, I think. I've never seen Brody so focused on a woman, not even when he was dating Jenny. With her, he always had his standard cool, calm control. And, lass, that's something that he's sure as hell never had around you. It's about time a woman came along who could shake him up."

Michaela rolled her eyes. "You make me sound like an earthquake."

A low, husky chuckle rumbled deep in his chest. "I think you're just what he needs. Whatever you do, sweetheart, don't give up on him. I know it won't be easy, but just listen to your heart, as my mother would always say. It will lead you where you need to go."

Michaela started to smile, when suddenly there was a touch on her bare shoulder, and she flinched, a clammy sensation of dread spreading over her skin. She knew, without turning, whose hand touched her, just as she knew it was going to lead to a scene. Casting an uneasy look up at Cian, she saw that his sharp gaze was focused on the man standing behind her.

"I'm cutting in," Dylan Riggs slurred, his slow speech betraying the fact that he'd hit the open bar one too many times that night.

"Not now, Dylan," the Irishman murmured in a low voice, obviously sharing her same opinion.

"You've had your turn, Irish," the Elder countered.

"And you've already had yours." Despite the casual tone of his voice, the Runner's words were cut with steel. "Let it go."

"You know, I'm getting damn tired of being told what to do tonight," Dylan growled, stepping closer, until Michaela could feel his heat against her back, the cut of her dress leaving too much of her skin exposed to his touch. With a sickly sensation in the pit of her stomach, she felt one of the fingers of his other hand trail lightly down the line of her spine as he rasped, "So be careful what you say."

"If you don't like being lectured," Cian warned him, the lilting burr of his accent thickening, "then maybe you should stop acting like a bloody child."

The hand on her shoulder tightened, fingers digging into her skin with bruising force. Determined to avoid a confrontation in the middle of the wedding reception, Michaela ignored the sting of Dylan's grip and bit her tongue to keep from crying out, but it was already too late. From her left came a deep, furious rumble as Brody snarled, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Riggs?"

"Just planning on enjoying the pleasure of the Cajun's company tonight," Dylan drawled. "You got a problem with that, Carter?"

What happened after that was nothing but a frenzied, chaotic jumble of images and sounds as Michaela found herself forced against Cian's hard chest at the same time Brody crashed into Dylan, slamming him onto a nearby table stocked with plates and glasses of champagne.

"Son of a bitch," Cian hissed, moving her to his side with a protective arm as Dylan swung at Brody, clipping him on the side of his mouth, just before Brody countered with a driving right that slammed into the Elder's nose. Blood spurted, covering the snowy-white shirt beneath Dylan's tuxedo jacket, while more blood poured from his left hand, drenching his sleeve. Broken shards from the shattered champagne glasses glittered against the table's surface, accounting for the cut on Dylan's hand.

"Stay back," Cian ordered her, stepping forward as more punches were exchanged. Michaela assumed the Irishman would break up the fight, but it was Mason who suddenly took action, hauling Brody off of Dylan. The Runner trapped Brody against the front of his body, pinning his arms behind his back.

"What the hell is your problem?" Mason snarled in Brody's ear, while around them everyone drew closer, trying to hear what was being said.

His chest heaving as he glared at Dylan, who was slowly pulling himself off the table, Brody grunted, "Get off me, Mase. The bastard was asking for it." "Jesus, Brody, get a grip," Mason snapped. "It isn't like you to go around acting like a jealous ass."

"He was hurting her," Brody growled, jerking out of Mason's hold, his angry gaze cutting to Michaela's shoulder.

Turning toward Michaela, Mason's eyes narrowed with concern, as well as a thread of confusion when he saw the dark finger marks against her pale skin. "Are you okay?"

"It's...nothing," she whispered.

"Dylan?" Mason said carefully, looking back toward his friend, his brows pulled together in a deep vee over the shadow of worry in his eyes.

But the Elder averted his gaze to the white dinner napkin he'd wrapped around his cut hand, the linen drenched with blood from the seeping wound. Stepping to his side, Jillian reached for his hand. "You had better let me look at that."

"Forget it," he grunted, jerking his arm away from her, while a strange expression shadowed the lean angles of his face. "I'm fine."

Frowning, Jillian said, "I don't mind, Dylan. Really."

"I said forget it!" He took a deep, shuddering breath, then more calmly said, "You've got better things to do on your wedding night than worry about this. I'll be fine."

"You should let her heal it," Jeremy offered quietly, eyeing Dylan with a quizzical gaze, as if he wasn't quite sure what or who he was looking at.

"I don't need you to be my goddamn mother," Dylan snapped, releasing another quaking breath. Cutting his gaze back to Jillian, he muttered, "Sorry for the scene." Then he turned and walked away.

Almost at once, the entire group of onlookers seemed to release a collective sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry, Michaela," Mason murmured, rubbing the back of his neck as he turned her way, his ruggedly handsome face etched with deep lines of strain. "He's a good man. I think the stress of the past few weeks is just getting to him."

"It's more than that," Brody argued, pulling his ruined shirt off, balling it up, and wiping his face with it, the corner of his mouth bleeding from one of Dylan's punches. "Open your eyes. The guy's coming apart at the seams."

"What are you suggesting?" Mason demanded, narrowing his eyes.

"I don't know. I just...I don't think we can avoid facing the facts. If Drake's accomplice *is* another Elder, then Dylan could be the one."

"Just because you can't stand Dylan doesn't mean anyone else shares your opinion. He's our friend, Brody. Not a killer." Slanting a meaningful look at Michaela, Mason growled, "And all things considered, I would have thought you were getting past old issues and grudges."

"I may not like him," Brody ground out in a voice like gravel, "but that doesn't mean I'd point the finger at him for no reason. You guys are blind if you can't see he's been acting strange as hell."

"He's under a lot of pressure," Mason grimaced. "Like we all are."

"Just don't let friendship cloud your perspective," Brody rasped, his auburn hair brushing against the golden sheen of his powerful shoulders as the wind picked up, surging around them.

"And don't let hatred cloud yours," Mason countered.

"He wouldn't let Jillian heal him," Brody pointed out, and Michaela knew he was thinking of the fact that the pack's Spirit Walker could see into the minds of those she used her power to heal.

"And Michaela can't read him," Cian added, rubbing his palm against the hard set of his jaw as he entered the argument.

"From what I've heard, she can't read Brody, either," Mason quietly snarled. "Does that mean we should lock him up in the woodshed and accuse him of being a traitor?"

"Enough!" Reyes finally shouted, obviously deciding to be the voice of reason as she glared at all three men. "In case it escaped your notice, we're in the middle of a celebration. So why don't we save it all for tomorrow, before the three of you start bashing each other's brains in?"

"Carla's right," Torrance whispered, sending an apologetic look toward the wedding couple, who stood a few feet away, Jeremy's strong arms wrapped around his wife's shoulders as she cuddled into his side.

"Christ, I'm sorry," Brody murmured as he sent the newlyweds a flushed look of contrition.

"No worries," Jeremy replied with a wry grin, repeating one of Michaela's favorite sayings. "At least no one will be able to say that the party wasn't exciting."

Some of the guests smothered sharp barks of laughter under their breaths, while others shared worried smiles as they turned back to whatever they'd been doing before the commotion. Monroe put on a new song, and Jeremy pulled Jillian back onto the dance floor for another dance, then Torrance did the same to Mason.

Eyeing his partner's tense posture, Cian murmured, "Why don't you be a doll and take Brody home early, Michaela. See if you can't help calm him down."

"Come on," she whispered, reaching out and taking his

warm hand, surprised that he let her, instead of pulling away. But he looked a million miles away, completely lost in thought as she said, "Let's go, Brody."

She'd just started to lead him toward his cabin, when Pallaton suddenly ran out of the woods, and everyone stiffened in alarm. Panting, the Runner stopped at the edge of the dance floor, jerking his chin toward the thick expanse of forest behind him, and in a low, guttural rasp, he said, "We've got company."

The night was cool, the moon bright within the blue-black stretch of autumn sky, thin clouds stretched across its dark canvas like pulled threads of cotton. Brody and his partner moved with stealthy purpose through the trees, careful to stay downwind, closing in on their prey, while Mason and Pallaton headed in from the other side.

Their differences momentarily put aside, the foursome had immediately moved to investigate, while Jeremy remained behind with his bride, Reyes taking Michaela and those guests who chose to stay to the Dillingers' cabin. While patrolling the perimeter of the Alley, Pall had picked up the scent of a group of ten or more Lycans in their human forms. Considering the threat that had been scrawled across his door the day before, Brody wasn't taking any chances with Michaela's safety. Fully prepared for battle, he and the others had already shifted the top halves of their bodies into wolf form, fangs and claws at the ready.

Unfortunately, the wind shifted as they drew nearer to their prey, allowing the Lycans to pick up the Runners' scents. Mason bellowed a short, sharp howl just to their north, telling them that he and Pallaton were trailing a smaller group that had branched off from the first, most likely retreating in fear. The rest held steady, about twenty yards in front of them, either too cocky to run, or too stupid.

Personally, with the growing tensions between the pack and the Runners, Brody thought anyone foolish enough to venture near the Alley uninvited must be missing some valuable brain cells. The wind blew stronger, and he finally caught what he'd been looking for. *Dustin.* The flames of a fire could be seen flickering through the trees just ahead, and he and Cian moved in perfect synchronicity as they burst into the small, open patch of land surrounded by the thickness of the forest.

Sitting on a rock on the far side of the small campfire in a T-shirt and jeans, Dustin Sheffield shot them a slick smile, a longneck bottle of beer in one hand, smoldering cigarette in the other. Three of his friends stood behind him, their expressions indolent, though Brody could scent their fear on the air. Unlike Dustin, they were wary of facing off against him and Cian, now that the time had come.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the legends themselves," Dustin drawled snidely, slowly clapping his hands. "Carter and Hennessey, two of the most bloodthirsty Bloodrunners who've ever existed. Tell me, boys. Exactly how many of your own kind have you murdered in the hopes of one day buying back a place among us?"

His voice roughened by the muzzled shape of his ebony snout, Cian barked a low, gruff burst of laughter. "I get the feeling you don't like us much, Sheffield."

"That's because I don't," the golden-eyed Lycan replied, causing his friends to snicker nervously behind him.

"Good," Cian rasped, his long, sinister fangs glinting white in the flickering firelight. "Because we think you're a sniveling little shit." Standing, Dustin took a hostile step forward, the flames of the fire casting his young face in a demonic light, as if he were standing at the gates of hell itself. Brody thought it was a fitting analogy, considering he didn't think it would be long before the rogue actually found himself waiting on Lucifer's doormat. "You can't talk to me like that," Dustin snarled.

"Yeah?" Brody rumbled, just waiting for Dustin to make a move so that he could rip into him. The only thing that kept him from dealing out the punishment Sheffield deserved for attacking Max was the knowledge that if he struck first, the League would deem it an illegal kill and sentence him to death. Not that he was afraid of dying, but he couldn't leave Michaela when it was his job to keep her safe. And just roughing Dustin up a bit wasn't an option, no matter how tempting. No, Brody knew that once he got his claws on the little bastard, he wouldn't stop till he was dead. "Who's gonna stop him, Dusty? Your daddy? Your pals? Sorry, but your daddy's dead, and your buddies are all pissing themselves in fear right now."

"You're forgetting Drake," Dustin murmured, the corner of his mouth kicking up in a taunting smile as he took a slow drag on his cigarette, the gusting breeze whipping his brown hair around the sharp angles of his face.

"You think he really gives a shit about you?" Brody laughed, shaking his head. "Hell, Drake'll probably kill you himself when he's done with you. That is, if I don't get you first."

"Aw, are you still sore about the pretty little Cajun and her brother?" Dustin smirked, exhaling a long stream of smoke. "Look around, Runner. No little lady to worry about protecting now. What'd you do? Leave her back at the Alley all alone?"

Brody took a step forward, and Cian stayed him with one

long, claw-tipped arm across his fur-covered chest. "Don't let him bait you, man. He's just getting worried. Isn't that right, Sheffield? You know, if Drake doesn't kill you, he'll probably just set you up to take the fall for the blondes."

Dustin threw back his dark head, a low, rusty laugh spilling from his lips. "Aw, nice try, Runner. But it won't work. Still, I'll let you in on a secret. I'm not the one you want for the blond little bitches. I'll take the blame for a lot of things, but not those pathetic whores. Too dramatic for my tastes. If I'm going to put myself to the trouble of a good meal," he drawled, his slow smile baring the tips of his fangs, "I expect to enjoy more than just her heart."

"And just whose whores are we talking about?" Cian asked.

The Lycan's mouth curled in a cocky grin. "Wouldn't you like to know, Runner."

"I bet I could make you tell me," Brody rasped, stepping closer, the heat of the fire searing against his fur.

Holding up his hands in a mocking gesture of surrender, the golden-eyed Lycan smirked as he backtracked into the woods. "I'd love to hang around to see what you have in mind, but there's no rest for the wicked. Another time, Runner?"

"You can bet on it," Brody rumbled.

Dustin winked at them, then turned and disappeared with his cohorts into the trees.

Michaela was standing beside the front window of the Dillingers' cabin when the Runners finally returned. She watched as the half wolves came back into the Alley, their sheer size staggering, enough to make fear thicken in your veins. And yet, she wasn't afraid, knowing they used their skill and strength to protect the innocent. She picked out Brody immediately, his deep ginger fur glinting like blood-red rubies beneath the ethereal glow of the moon, green eyes burning vividly bright as he looked toward the window. He was terrifyingly beautiful, savage and powerful and deadly, and yet, all she wanted was to run to him. She wanted to throw herself against him and sink her fingers into that rich, thick fur, holding him as the shape of his wolf bled away, back into the equally powerful body of the man.

And then she wanted to take him to the ground and rock his world, blow his mind, enslaving him with her feminine wiles.

Snorting under her breath, she shook her head at her foolishness, thinking it was a nice fantasy—but one that didn't have a chance of happening. Despite how people tended to perceive her, she was actually kind of shy when it came to sex, always feeling a bit awkward and nervous, instead of a confident seductress. Still, if she had to learn to seduce Brody, then that's what she'd do. She wasn't going to let him keep fighting her forever.

Who knew? Maybe it wouldn't be so hard after all, considering how wild she went in his strong arms, her natural reserve destroyed beneath the force of her desire.

Moving away from the window, she stepped out onto the front porch, coming down the stairs. As she watched, the Runners allowed the shapes of their wolves to melt away, thick fur giving way to the sun-darkened flesh of man, though their eyes still glowed with preternatural fire. Cian gave her a sly wink, then turned and headed toward his home that sat higher up the glade. Pallaton joined him, the two talking quietly as they walked, while Mason nodded as he passed her on his way to his front door.

Suddenly, Michaela found herself alone with Brody. He

stood fifteen feet away, his broad, muscled chest expanding with his breaths, and she had the strangest feeling that he was drawing in slow, deep pulls of her scent, the sensation as evocative as an explicit touch against her skin. He was so beautiful, it was a physical ache within her body not to rush to him, running her hands over that smooth, bare chest and powerful arms, his skin slick and hot and manly beneath her palms. But she held her ground, aware that she needed to bide her time...tread carefully.

"Don't worry," she whispered when she moved toward him and the rugged lines of his face tightened with apprehension, making his scars more prominent, his eyes narrowed to piercing, cautious green slits. "I won't bother you tonight, Brody. I just want to make sure you're okay."

"Not bother me?" he snorted, shaking his head as she stepped closer to him, the hazy streams of moonlight and slowly dying flames in the fire pits setting the deep auburn silk of his hair afire, as if it were hot to the touch, like his skin. And he was hot. Shifting even closer, she could feel the erotic shock of his heat as it poured off him in waves. "Christ, woman, you bother me just by breathing."

Wanting to make him smile, if only for a moment, she playfully took in a deep breath, holding it with her cheeks dramatically puffed out. He narrowed his eyes on her, looking as if he thought she was crazy, before the sensual curve of his mouth twisted in a crooked smile and he let out a low rumble of laughter. "Come on," he murmured, jerking his chin toward his cabin. "Let's get out of here."

Releasing her held breath, she moved into step beside him. "What did you find?" she asked.

"Just Dustin and some of his gang."

Tension twisted in her stomach like a thousand piercing knives at the thought of Brody in danger. "Did you fight them?"

"Naw," he rumbled, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. "Though I would have liked to take that little shit apart. But he was too chicken to make a move against us. Ended up slinking away with his buddies."

The forest-scented wind blew harder, surging as a thunderstorm crackled far in the distance, and she shivered, suddenly hit by an unsettling sensation, not unlike being touched by a stranger. The rustling of the trees filled the air, but there was a strange current of static buzzing in her head, just for a split second, and then it was gone. Had it been the same as she'd experienced before, or was she simply psyching herself out?

"What's wrong?" Brody asked, and she realized that although he was trying to give the impression of cool nonchalance, he was actually as focused on her as she was on him. So much so that he'd picked up on her telling shiver.

She gave a small, self-conscious laugh. "Nothing. I just...I had the strangest feeling that someone was watching me just now."

"Not surprising. Guys have been watching you all damn night."

"You know that's not what I meant," she sighed, shaking her head.

He stopped for a moment, tilting back his head, nostrils flaring as he breathed deeply. She waited beside him, silent but for the pounding of her heart roaring in her ears, until he lowered his head and resumed walking toward his cabin. "I can't pick up anything. It's probably just Cian peeking out his friggin' front window." Slanting her a dark look, he grunted, "It's not like you weren't all over the guy tonight." to believe what he'd just said. "I hope you're joking, Brody, because that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I've given you no reason to think I'm interested in any man other than you."

His shoulders stiffened, the bunched muscles in his chest and arms hard with tension. "And facts are facts, Doucet."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she snapped, following him up his porch steps, careful not to twist her ankle in her heels.

"You don't sleep to dream?" he snorted, rolling his shoulder as he hid the side of his face beneath the auburn fall of his hair. "Well, neither do I. I saw how good you and Hennessey looked together tonight, and I'm not the only one."

"God, Brody, he's your friend." Her words were sharp with frustration, the blistering emotion searing through her veins until she wanted to pound her fists against his chest. "And for your information, we were talking about you the entire time we were dancing! You don't need to be jealous!"

"No?" he snarled, turning away from the front door he'd just opened to face her down. The interior of the cabin was shadowed behind him, the only light a muted glow from the kitchen light that had been left on. "God knows you deserve him. You're both too goddamn beau—"

"He's not the one," she gasped, cutting him off, her voice nothing more than a breathless, fleeting wisp of sound.

"The one what?" he grunted, his scent coming stronger... filling her head...making her dizzy with lust and love and this urgent, desperate craving that scorched the inside of her body, her surface so hypersensitive she trembled from nothing more than the sensual warmth of his breath against her skin. Her face went hot, mouth quivering with emotion. "He's not the one I want. The one I lo—"

Lunging forward, he grabbed her by her upper arms and jerked her off the ground, bringing her face-to-face, eye-toeye with him. "Do. Not. Say. It," he growled, the guttural words vicious and hoarse, his expression etched with tormented fury, as if he'd been pushed beyond endurance.

"Not. Another. God. Damn. Word."

Chapter 13

"Please," Michaela whispered, unable to give him the silence he'd so desperately demanded. "*I need you*."

He closed his eyes, body tremoring, the roped muscles and lean sinew straining beneath the burnished surface of his skin. She held her breath as she watched his eyes slowly open, the green shining golden and bright, glittering with predatory awareness. He pulled her fully against him, then, and she hovered over the ground, her breasts crushed against the solid heat of his chest, her dress a silken caress between their bodies. When he spoke, his words were guttural and raw, his breath sweet as it pelted her mouth, salty and warm, like his scent. "You win, goddamn it," he seethed, his lips pulling back over his teeth. "You want me at the edge, Doucet? Want to break me down? I'm there, sweetheart. *You. Win.*"

"I don't want to win," she whispered, trying to tell him ev-

erything that she felt with her eyes, knowing the words would scare him away. "I just...I just want to be alone with you."

He was all action and quick, violent bursts of movement then, rushing them through the open doorway, inside the cabin. The heavy wooden door slammed behind them, and the shadowed room spun as he took her to the floor right there in the middle of the living room, trapping her beneath his body as he caged her in on his hands and knees. With his auburn hair hanging around the rugged angles of his face, he stared down at her as if she were some rare, breathtaking discovery made in the midst of an Amazonian rain forest, something coveted for aeons, until finally unearthed. He looked as if he were afraid to believe she was real, afraid to believe that the moment was actually happening. "Why are you here, Doucet?" he whispered.

"Because I want you." She reached up to cup the hot side of his face, desperately needing to touch him, but he stopped her. Just before her fingertips made contact, he shifted his weight to one arm and snatched her wrist with his left hand, suddenly trapping it in his hold.

"Please, Brody. Let me touch you," she said huskily, needing to put her hands on him. She wanted to cradle his jaw and stroke her thumb across the ridge of his scars. Wanted to press her palm against his throat and feel the sensual movement as he swallowed, the pulse of his heartbeat, the ragged intake of his breath. Wanted to run her hands over his gorgeous body and experience the shift of all of that hard, mouthwatering muscle rippling with power beneath the sleek heat of his skin.

His eyes narrowed with anger and doubt and something deeper...darker. "Why, Doucet? Out of pity? Charity? Am I

so pathetic that you think you can make my life better by lying down for me?"

Her temper flared as he threw the ugly accusation in her face, and a violent surge of frustration had her freeing her wrist and rolling over beneath him, her hands scrambling for purchase on the gleaming hardwood floor as she struggled to crawl away, her legs tangled in the skirts of her dress. Flipping her onto her back again, Brody took hold of both wrists this time, pinning them to the floor as he leaned close, growling, "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm so tired of you being ugly to me," she shouted up at him, her words broken with emotion. "Every time I'm honest with you, you throw it back in my face. I'm tired of getting slammed for wanting you!"

Brody's pulse roared through his brain, as heavy and violent as the surf in the height of a savage storm, while her angry words echoed through the room, before settling silently into the shadowed corners. "Why?" he groaned, feeling as though the question was being torn out of him. He knew the smart thing to do was get up and run, as far and fast as he could—and yet, he couldn't do it. "Why can't I stay the hell away from you?"

"Because you're watching me," she answered in a soft, husky rasp. He didn't know what she saw in his expression as she stared up at him, but he watched her anger bleed back into desire, the thick weight of her lashes darkening her gaze. Her chest lifted with each of her shallow breaths, the shadowy swell of her cleavage drawing his gaze, begging for the touch of his mouth, the primitive scrape of his teeth.

I'll be the last wolf watching you, Doucet. Brody growled

the possessive words within the safety of his mind, painfully aware that he'd never be able to say them out loud. That he'd grow old with them, replaying them in his mind as he lived off this memory, clutching at it year after year, while his life slowly passed him by.

But he was going to have her. At least for tonight, damn it. He was going to offer her one last out...and if she didn't run, he was going to slake himself on her, feasting on the rich, sensual bounty that was Michaela, layer upon layer of intoxicating, womanly perfection. It required a painstaking physical effort, but Brody managed to release his hold on her, placing his hands on either side of her head, his knees bracketing her thighs. "If you don't want this, you need to run. Right now. Because once it starts, I don't trust myself to be able to stop. I have no control with you."

She blinked up at him, the color in her face burning darker, lips moist and parted and soft. "I don't need you in control. I just need *you*, Brody. I'm not afraid of you."

Ironically, before she'd even finished her hushed confession, the tips of his fingers began bleeding, the razor-sharp claws of his wolf slicing through the callused flesh. His breath hissed through his teeth from the keen sensation, his body feeling everything more intensely with her so close to him...under him, her mouthwatering scent filling his head.

She turned her face, staring at the lethal claws that could so easily hurt her, and he waited, breath held, for the look of horror to fall over her face...for the cry of fear to break from that beautiful, passion-red mouth. But as always with this woman, she took what he knew as reality and turned it on its head. "You're beautiful," she whispered, her gaze shifting back to his face, her eyes liquid and soft as she visually traced the slashing lines of the scars. "Every part of you. You don't scare me, Brody."

His fingers flexed in reaction, claws digging deeply into the wooden floor, creating a sharp, screeching hiss of sound that cut across the sensual canvas of their breaths like nails down a chalkboard. "I *should* scare you," he growled. "You stay, you're going to be under me all night, and it isn't going to be easy or sweet or nice."

I don't want easy, Michaela thought, so turned on, she felt as if she were going to melt into a puddle of boneless, lustthick need beneath him. "I wouldn't expect it to be any of those things," she murmured, while the corner of her mouth curled with a slow, sensual smile. "All I want is for it to be real, Brody. For you to let go and take me in whatever way that you want."

"You don't know what you're asking for," he warned in a gritty rasp, but she could see his excitement, the hope that he was so afraid to feel. The vulnerable look in his eyes tore at her, making her want to wrap him up in tenderness as much as she wanted to hear him cry out in passion.

"I know what you are, what you're capable of," she whispered. "I may not be able to read you, but I know you wouldn't hurt me."

"You don't know jack, Doucet," he muttered, shaking his head. "But this is your last chance. Are you running? Or staying?"

Reaching up to curl her hand around the side of his strong, tanned throat, she said, "I'm not running, Brody. I'd like to see you just try and get rid of me."

A ghost of a smile twisted the corner of his mouth at her

words, and she could feel his pulse hammering against her palm, the heat of his skin so intense, she should have felt blistered from the contact. He leaned closer, his breath warm against her mouth. Just before their lips touched, she heard herself ask, "You're not worried about my power?"

His eyes burned, the green brilliant and bright within the heavy fringe of his dark lashes, his auburn hair falling around his face like a blood-red veil of silk, beautiful and thick. "No, I'm not worried about your power," he told her in a deep, velvet-rough voice graveled by need. "This time, when you break, Doucet, you'll be feeling too much—coming too hard—to have time to go messing around in my head."

"Mon dieu," she whispered in response, pulse beating wildly in the pale base of her throat, mesmerizing him.

She was flushed with desire, her eyes heavy, bluer than he'd ever seen them. Wanting her with a primitive violence that shook him, Brody finally touched his mouth to hers, tasting the sweetness of her lower lip with the tip of his tongue. She arched beneath him, her low moan vibrating through him, and with a hard growl, he opened his mouth over hers. Then he took, he possessed, he claimed. There was no other word for it. It was too carnal to be kissing, too urgent to be passion. It was need in its most primitive form, hungry and violent and consuming.

Desperate to touch her, he retracted his claws and curled his fingers over the bodice of her dress, then wrenched, ripping the fabric until the top half split down the middle. The creamy perfection of her breasts spilled out, skin as smooth and pale as a pearl, topped with berry-red nipples that beckoned for his touch. Her back arched violently at the first stroke of his tongue against one tight, hardened tip, the sensual flavor of her skin too good to resist, until he had to take her deeper into his mouth. And with every hungry, desperate pull, every slow, tasting lick, he pulled the ecstasy up from deep inside her, following the cues of her body, soaking up her responses, feeling as if he'd been made for this—for the heady, breathtaking purpose of giving her pleasure.

With his wolf seething in hunger, prowling beneath his skin, Brody moved from breast to breast, nuzzling and suckling and lapping with a hungry avidity that he couldn't control, couldn't temper, until her nails were embedded in his biceps, body writhing against the floor, long midnight curls spread out around the flushed perfection of her face. She was all luminous silk and rosy softness, the provocative, intoxicating scent of need growing hotter on her skin, stronger, until he couldn't hold back.

He wanted to savor her, to saturate his starved senses for hours on end, but his need, his craving, for this one beautiful, fiery woman was too great.

Ripping his mouth from the sensual bounty of her breasts, Brody shifted back on his knees and clutched slippery handfuls of her gown, wrenching it up and out of his way. Staring down at her, there was a heart-stopping moment where her beauty actually frightened him—her body so pale and radiant in the soft light, lush breasts bared to his smoldering gaze, nothing more than a tiny midnight-blue patch of silk covering her mound, legs deliciously long, tipped by sexy heels that strapped around her delicate ankles. The vision was so devastatingly erotic, he felt as if something important were going to snap inside his brain from the sexual overload, like a circuit breaking. Shaking with hunger and the most sharp-edged excitement he'd ever known, he pressed his knees between her legs, forcing her to open for him. Unable to wait a moment longer, he took hold of the thin strips of silk that held the panties on her hips, and ripped, tossing the ruined lingerie to the side. Then he curled his hands behind her knees and pushed them high and wide, completely exposing that most exquisite, intimate part of her, the tender folds wet with desire, glistening and candy pink, so beautiful he wanted to throw back his head and howl. The only thing that kept him from doing just that was the fact he wanted to taste her even more. Wanted to bury his face against her sweet, delectable flesh and make love to her with his mouth. With his lips and tongue and the gentle edge of his teeth.

Before she could shy away from him or tell him no, he settled his broad shoulders between her thighs, shoving them deliciously wide, and touched his tongue to her. She was unbelievably sweet, warm...wet. Good enough to eat, which was exactly what he'd planned for.

"You're beautiful, Doucet," he whispered, the low words lust-thick and gritty. Then he lapped his way through the tender, silken folds, curling around the thrumming heat of her swollen little clit, feeling her heartbeat pulse against his tongue. She cried out, and he did it again...and again... learning her, taking as much pleasure from the explicitly carnal act as he gave. Cursing hotly under his breath, he growled, "Tastes too damn good," and then he closed his mouth over her, slipping his tongue deep inside, and hungrily thrust it into the lush, clutching depths of her body, unable to get enough. He turned his face one way, then another, thumbs holding her wide, so that he could get to all of her. Like water rushing up from a well, he could feel it building, the growing climax pulling her body tighter...and tighter, until she finally crashed into that star-studded, infinite stretch of keening, thrashing pleasure, her husky, choppy cries filling the air while her body arched, the heels of her shoes gouging into the floor as she grabbed his hair and pushed herself against him.

His wolf silently snarled in primal, visceral victory, and while she broke against his mouth, the sweetest, most perfect thing he'd ever tasted, Brody worked furiously at his pants with his right hand. Buttons ripped, scattered across the floor, the aching weight of his cock surging thickly into the damp heat of his palm. It had always been difficult for a woman to take his full length, seldom actually happening—and despite how wet she was, Michaela was tiny and tight. Deliciously so. He told himself he had to go easy, but as he moved over her, jaw locked, body hot and painfully hard, every muscle from his neck to his calves tensed in savage anticipation, and fit the heavy head of his cock against her—he lost it.

Her breath caught as he surged heavily into her, stretching her, her body closing around him like an endlessly soft, silken fist, and an animal sound broke from his chest, low and deep and scary as hell. He blinked the sweat from his eyes, panicked, knowing she was going to tell him to get off her.

Only...she didn't. Instead, she raised her knees, hugging his hips, and sobbed, "*Brody! Please...more.*"

Shaking with amazement and relief, a low, wicked rumble of laughter surged past his lips, and he pressed deeper, loving the way her eyes went wide as he gave her another thick inch. Loving the way her mouth parted, teeth stunningly white against the dark stain of color in her lips. Loving everything about her.

And then he started to move...and it broke him down.

That perfect feeling of burying more and more of himself inside her, until she'd taken all of him, every inch of his cock buried up into her warm, clutching depths. Christ, there was no way to hold himself together. With a primitive snarl, he opened his mouth over hers, swallowing her sharp cry of surprise when he pulled back, then slammed at her harder, putting all his strength, all his hunger behind it, driving into her the way he'd fantasized about doing since the moment he'd first met her, each heavy thrust sweeter than the last.

And in the midst of the maddening pleasure, Brody felt his beast raise its head, sniffing at the ripe, sweet scent of her...and demand its satisfaction. His fangs slipped his gums, piercing and hot, tongue heavy within his mouth, his body readying itself to make the bite that would claim her as his own.

Growling, he screwed his eyes closed and stiffened his arms, levering himself away from her. He turned his face to the side, grinding his jaw, anything to keep from giving in to that blistering, blinding urge, knowing it was wrong. All wrong—for him and for her. She'd be terrified...angry. And he'd spend the rest of his life in misery, drowning in guilt.

Keep it together, jackass.

Brody concentrated on his heartbeat, on the roar of his pulse—and held still, buried hot and thick inside of her, while her muscles fluttered around him in an endless, breathtaking caress that felt better than anything he'd ever imagined. And through the hazy fog of urgent, animalistic hunger, he heard her calling his name. At first it came soft and fleeting, as if she were far away, but then it gradually grew louder, until she was shouting up at him, demanding his attention.

"Brody, look at me!" she pleaded, arching beneath him, her

cool hands stroking his chest, the tight tendons in his throat, the tensed muscles in his arms.

"Can't," he growled, his deep voice a guttural slash of sound, more wolf than man.

"I won't turn away from you, Brody. I know what you are, and I'm not afraid. You can be yourself with me," Michaela struggled to explain, the intensity of his possession making it difficult to put her thoughts into words. "You...don't have to be afraid."

And yet, he was. She could sense his fear as his wolf struggled to break free. Could see it in the glittering, oddly glowing light in his eyes as his lashes lifted and he warily turned to stare down at her, the sharp tips of white fangs just visible beneath the sensual curve of his upper lip. Clutching his face in her hands, she held him with her gaze, unwilling to let him look away—knowing that no matter how badly he wanted it, he wouldn't bite her. Not yet. Not tonight. "Stay with me, Brody. It's okay. Please don't turn away from me. I trust you."

Then she pulled his face close to hers and she kissed him, slipping her tongue between the dangerous points of his canines, and he growled into her mouth, the predatory sound tasting as sexy as it sounded. She couldn't get enough of him. He was addictive, hot and musky and so wonderfully male. He made her feel fragile and feminine, and she loved it. Loved knowing that she'd brought him to this sharp precipice of control. It was a dark, forbidden kind of knowledge, like Eve reaching for the sin-cursed apple—and she knew she wouldn't have had him any other way.

Michaela ran her palms down the muscled length of his back, reveling in the feel of him, the power of his muscles

222

tensing and flexing beneath her hands as he started to move again, thrusting his body into hers, his rhythm deep and powerful and strong. She loved that he held nothing back. That he gave her all of him, everything that he had, taking her with all the power and intensity of the man *and* his wolf. Fever hot to the touch, she should have felt scorched by the heat of his skin, and yet, the sensation of being covered by his warmth, driven against the cool wooden planks of the floor beneath her back, made her writhe, aching for more.

"You deserve a man who's more than an animal, Doucet," she heard him snarl, voicing his demons, and she couldn't help the grin that played at the corner of her mouth.

"No," she moaned, the provocative friction of his hard body moving inside hers making her sob with pleasure. "I deserve everything you've got. All of it. Don't you dare hold back on me."

She pulled him closer then, pressing her lips to his scars, the pansy-soft kisses tender and reverent, demanding his surrender. Brody marveled at the proof of her acceptance, unable to believe that even with his eyes turned the deep, glowing green of his wolf, his claws once again digging into the floor beside her, and his fangs slipping free, she accepted him, telling him that she wasn't afraid. That she trusted him. And amazingly, because of that trust, he felt himself able to hold on to that small shred of control that kept his beast from becoming too savage and hurting her. From sinking its fangs into her throat and taking the warm, rich spill of her blood into his body.

Grasping her wrists and stretching them over her head, he buried his face in the feminine curve of her shoulder, and drove himself into her, as hard as he possibly could; thanking God and anyone else he could think of, when a husky cry of pleasure filled his ears, instead of pain. He couldn't get deep enough inside her, inside of the tender, clutching grasp of her body as she came, so perfect and swollen and small. Hot. Slick. Breathtaking. The stuff of fantasies, white-hot and spellbinding. She devastated him, and as he followed her over into that vicious, raging storm of pleasure, spilling himself inside of her in searing, pumping surges that had him shouting against the tender curve of her shoulder, Brody realized that he was never going to be the same again.

In the aftermath of the most incredible experience of her life, Michaela lay in a sprawl across the muscled beauty of Brody's chest. They'd shed their clothes and shoes, his breathing slowly returning to normal, but she could still feel the tension in him, the hunger that lurked just beneath his calm surface. One of his hands rested possessively in the small of her back, his thumb stroking her skin in a lazy, sensual pattern that made her want to purr with pleasure, while his other hand smoothed over the long, tangled length of her curls.

She murmured a soft, incoherent sound of satisfaction as the hand on her back slid lower, over her bottom, then lower still, the callused tips of his fingers touching between her legs, caressing screamingly sensitive, slippery flesh. Her breath caught, and her body responded with a renewed wave of warm, wet heat. He growled low in his throat, the wickedly sexy sound vibrating deep within his chest, right beneath her ear.

And then, without a word, he rolled her over, one thigh holding her legs spread wide, his upper body resting on his bent arm, gaze vividly intense, glowing and green. He stared into her eyes, before running that smoldering stare down her body, while his fingers pressed possessively between her thighs, playing havoc with her senses. His thumb stroked baby-soft caresses against the thrumming heat of her clit, while two thick digits thrust up into her body, penetrating her, curling until they rubbed against that one deep sweet spot that made her scream, the sensations came so sharp and bright. Then he slid over her, covering her, moving with a speed and masculine grace that should have been impossible for a man his size. And yet he was all predatory strength and power, like something escaped from a primeval jungle.

"I'm sorry," he groaned raggedly against her lips, pressing kisses to the corner of her mouth, before raking the inside with his tongue, the kiss as bold and hungry as it was breathtakingly possessive. "I know you'll be tender...but I can't...can't be gentle, Doucet."

"I don't want gentle," she murmured, rubbing her mouth over the burnished skin of his throat, his shoulders, the muscles steel-like beneath the firm flesh. He pushed into her, working himself back inside, and she said, "I just want *you*."

"You've got me," he murmured, laughing a low, wicked sound deep in his chest. Then he hooked one arm under her bottom, the other around her back, and shifted to his feet, carrying her through the shadowed rooms of the cabin, his cock thrusting deeper inside of her with each step, the pleasure as sharp as it was intense. Hazy streams of moonlight lit the bedroom, and as he pressed her into the cool, crisp sheets, she gasped, the heat of his body on top of her making the sensation of cold beneath her back even sharper.

He held her gaze as he started moving again, withdrawing, then driving deep...thick...hard, back inside of her, stretching her to the point that it would have hurt if she hadn't been so desperate for him, her body soft and wet and slick. They rolled across the bed, the passion between them explosive, with her head hanging over the edge at one point, while he thrust into her again and again, giving her everything that he had. Giving her all of him.

Levering his upper body away from her, she watched him as he stared at the place where their bodies joined, and ran the rough tip of his forefinger along the strained edge of her swollen sex, the look in his eyes one of wild, primal possession. She could barely take him—and he liked it, loved it. Reveled in that dark, primitive knowledge. She could see it in his eyes, hear it in the fractured cadence of his breathing. Her back arched as the pleasure mounted, building stronger, and Michaela closed her eyes, trying to prepare for it, to hold it together when it crashed over her, not wanting to fall apart on him.

"No," he rasped, fisting his hand in her hair, his words gritty and thick with emotion as he growled, "Open your eyes, Doucet. I want to see it when it happens. I want to see the look in your eyes when you go over."

She lifted her lashes, and he went into her thick and hot, then just held there, packed tight within her, the look in his eyes so impossibly sexy, she couldn't take it. With her next breath, she broke around him, the pleasure rushing through her with the furious energy of a storm, and she screamed, head thrown back, held in his hand, body completely overtaken by the intensity of the sensations, white-hot and blinding. Lowering his head, he growled against the tender stretch of her throat, his fangs scraping against her skin in an erotic slide of temptation, and his body convulsed deep inside of her, the wracking spasms of his orgasm spearing her own into a deeper, spiraling darkness that consumed her. And just as he'd predicted, she didn't fall into his mind with this orgasm, either. On the one hand, Michaela was relieved, since she didn't want anything to mar the stunning perfection of the moment. And yet, there was a tiny part of her that had wanted to see into him again...if only to learn more about him.

He held hard and tight inside of her for long, breathless moments, his body rigid, then finally collapsed over her, trying to move to the side, but she stopped him with the clutching hold of her arms, wanting the delicious press of his weight. "I'll crush you," he grated in a passion-rough voice, the deep rasp sending erotic sensations racing across her flesh like a brush fire.

"I don't care," she whispered. "Don't leave me."

Brody moved just enough to the side so that she could breathe, pulling her farther onto the bed, then buried his face in the fragrant silk of her hair spread out across his sheets. As exhaustion overwhelmed him, he meant to leave before falling asleep, telling himself he could lie beside her for just a moment longer—taking a few more stolen moments of heaven. And then suddenly the screeching call of a hawk hunting for a late-night snack sliced across the sky, and Brody awoke with a husky grunt, jerking to consciousness. He stared at the moonlit shadows shifting across the bedroom ceiling, wondering how long he'd slept, while his chest labored to pull in deep, gulping bursts of air.

Blinking his eyes, he glanced at the digital clock on the far side of the bed that read 2:00 a.m., then looked down to see Michaela's dark head buried in his shoulder, her mouth parted the barest fraction, breath warm and sweet against his skin. They'd obviously moved together in sleep, their bodies naturally finding more comfortable positions. She had one fist curled in the middle of his chest, her graceful hand looking as small and delicate as a child's, and it made his heart hurt, how trustingly she'd lain in his arms and slept with him.

It was, without a doubt, one of the most wonderful moments of Brody's life—as well as the most wrenching. Wonderful, because this woman was everything to him, a part of his very soul—and yet, heartbreaking, since he knew there wasn't a chance he could keep her.

Doing his best to slip away from her as slowly as possible, Brody eased his legs over the side of the mattress, bracing his elbows on his knees as he hung his head in his palms. He concentrated on taking deep, even breaths, struggling to ignore the tearing pain ripping across his heart at the thought of getting up and walking away from her.

"What happens now?" she suddenly asked into the quiet, moonlit darkness, the sound of her voice wrapping around the hard, drumming beat of his heart as it pounded painfully within his chest.

He wanted so badly to confess to her, to tell her everything that he felt inside—but held back. He didn't know why. Fear? Caution? Cowardice? A combination of them all? Even after she'd given him everything—her passion so loving and sweet, and yet, scorching and wild, leaving him wrecked with pleasure that was unlike anything he'd ever known—even after all that, he still didn't have the guts to be honest with her.

To tell her the truth.

"Brody?" she whispered, and he could hear the tears in her voice, his hands fisting as he resisted the need to turn around and take her into his arms, under his body.

"I'm sorry, Doucet. But this...this was all I could give you."

"All you could give me...or all you want to give me?"

"What I want doesn't matter," he stated, his tone flat, devoid of emotion. He'd taken it and buried it deep inside of himself, hoping like hell he was able to keep it there.

"It *does* matter, Brody. Do you think this doesn't terrify me, the idea of opening up to you, of letting you into my heart, of giving you that kind of power over me? I'm scared to death, but I can't seem to stop myself from needing to be with you. I know you could hurt me emotionally. Hurt me more than any other man has ever done, but it doesn't seem to matter."

"This thing between us, it just isn't going to work out," he grunted, moving to his feet, doing his best to ignore her wrenching confession. "It shouldn't have happened in the first place, because I knew better. I should have stayed the hell away from you."

"Is it because of Dylan's sister?" he heard her ask as he reached for the pair of jeans he'd left draped over the arm of the chair when he'd dressed for the wedding earlier that day. "Was she...was Jenny Riggs your mate?"

A low, harsh laugh jerked out of his chest. "God no."

She absorbed that for a moment, then quietly said, "Do… do you sense anything when you're near me?"

"Like what?" he grunted, ripping one hand through the damp, tangled strands of his hair so hard that his scalp stung.

"Like the...others? Mason and Torrance. Jeremy and Jillian. I thought maybe—"

"Even if I did," he grated, not really giving her an answer as he cut her off, "it wouldn't make a difference."

"Oh..." she said softly, and in that moment, Brody hated himself more than he'd ever hated anyone or anything in his entire life. Clearing his throat, he turned around to face her, knowing his words were pathetically inadequate. "You're an amazing woman, Doucet."

"Yeah, thanks," she hiccuped with a small, watery laugh, staring at her lap, hiding her face from him behind the fall of her hair.

"If I could be different..." He winced as the words trailed off, painfully aware that he sounded like a total jackass.

She shook her head, pulling the sheet up over her body, hiding herself from his gaze. "You never lied to me, Brody."

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, as if his ability for speech had just dried up. He just stared at her, the time stretching out into a long, seamless expanse of anger and hunger, frustration and hopelessness. Eventually, he turned and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

The early-morning sun struggled to burn its way through the thick cover of storm clouds that had blown in during the night, the promise of rain thick in the air as thunder rumbled in the distance. Brody stared out the window over the kitchen sink, his nerves jacked up from the two cups of coffee he'd already downed, while his brain kept replaying that final scene from last night over and over in his mind. The details were gut wrenching and stark—no fuzzy perception to blot the depth of pain, to make him feel like less of a bastard. But even more than that, he felt like a coward. In his head, he could hear his ego making mocking noises at him, taunting him for being such a chicken shit.

You know what you want, you're just too terrified to take a chance on her. Too afraid to believe she could be for real that she could want you for forever. The sound of footsteps down the hallway had him breaking out in a cold sweat, that lush, mouthwatering peaches-andcream scent wrapping around him like some biologically altered, fast-growing vine, imprisoning him, squeezing the air from his lungs. It released on a low, shaky breath when she stopped at the entrance to the kitchen, and he searched for the balls to turn around.

He hadn't slept after walking out on her in the middle of the night, and from the dark circles he spotted under her eyes as he faced her, neither had she.

And yet, she was painfully beautiful. She licked her bottom lip, and his muscles clenched, that tangled knot of hunger in his gut roiling, damaging him inside, like an emotional wrecking ball. What the hell was he doing? He wanted so badly to go to her, shoving her against the kitchen wall, imprinting his body against her own, until he could feel every inch of her. Wanted to rip those hip-hugging jeans to shreds and sink to his knees, pressing his face into the lush, breathtaking sweetness of her sex, his tongue and lips and mouth taking everything she had. All of it. Demanding it.

The memory of her taste sat on the tip of his tongue like a treasure, taunting him, and he fisted his hands at his sides, his claws breaking through until he could feel the piercing tips cutting into his own flesh, the warm wash of his blood filling his palms. Turning back to the sink, Brody flicked on the water and put his hands under the warm flow, washing away the evidence of his weakness. Christ, he had no control with this woman. None. Hadn't last night proven that?

Bile rose in his throat, and he choked back a low string of

curses that burned across the landscape of his mind, leaving scorched earth in their wake.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice closer, and he knew from her scent that she'd come into the room, standing maybe five feet behind him. He closed his eyes, struggling for the strength to resist, wanting nothing more than to turn around and take her to the ground, the way he had last night. He wanted to shove himself into her until he felt the white-hot, blissed-out feeling of being home again, of being right where he belonged, a part of her, those graceful limbs wrapped around him, her mouth pressed hot and damp to the side of his throat.

God. He was going to combust or do himself bodily harm. "Brody?"

"I'm fine," he managed to grit through his clenched teeth, sounding like a bastard. He could imagine her flinching at his tone, that tender flair of concern in her eyes dimming beneath the force of his anger.

"This isn't going to work, is it?" she whispered. "How are we supposed to—"

The sound of a fist pounding on his front door saved him from having to hear what she'd been about to say. "Carter, open up!" Cian called out. Turning off the faucet, Brody grabbed the hand towel off the front of the stove as he moved past her, into the living room. Yanking open the front door, he found his partner standing on the porch, the scent of the cleanser they'd used to remove Pippa's blood still tangy and sharp in the air.

"Isn't it a little early in the day for you?" he rasped, eyeing his partner with a wary gaze.

Cian took a slow drag on his cigarette, eyes heavy beneath his brows. "Duty calls," the Irishman muttered.

Damn it. He didn't like the sound of that. "What's going on?" "Mason got the call from Dylan this morning," Cian grunted. "They're making the vote on Jillian in just under an hour."

Chapter 14

Once Michaela had learned Brody was going to Shadow Peak, she'd asked if he could drop her off at Eric's while he was in town, so that she could spend time with Max. Feeling guilty over the way he'd walked out on her in the night, Brody had reluctantly agreed, though it went against the fierce burn of possession in his gut to leave her in the protection of the Lycan.

She'd rushed to get ready, and they'd left the house not fifteen minutes later, taking his truck, with Cian riding along in the backseat. Now, as Brody steered the Ford up the private road that led to Shadow Peak, there was a devil sitting on his shoulder, whispering in his ear that he was making a huge mistake—that something wasn't right. He chalked it up to being on edge, and yet he couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that he should turn around, take Michaela home and never let her out of his sight. The rain started falling in a torrential downpour halfway there, slowing them down, so that they were already late by the time he pulled in front of Eric's house. After listening to his stern warning to remain inside with Eric and Max until he came back for her, she got out and waved goodbye, and Cian moved to the front seat while Brody waited for her to get safely into the house before driving away.

When they were underway again, he reached for his back pocket and pulled out the list of names he'd printed up that morning. Unable to sleep, he'd been working on his laptop at sunrise, when he'd received an e-mail from Monroe with the names he'd requested. Brody had glanced over them, but nothing had caught his attention. Still, he'd printed it up, planning to run it by the rest of the Runners as soon as he got the chance. Handing the list to Cian, he was about to tell him to take a look at it, when his cell phone started buzzing on his hip. Glancing at the number, his gut tightened when he saw the call was coming from Eric's house.

"What's wrong?" he grunted into the mouthpiece, at the same time he steered the Ford into a parking place on the side of the road and flicked off the windshield wipers, thankful that the violent burst of rain was already letting up.

It was Michaela calling with some unsettling news. Eric knew nothing about Jillian's hearing and was under the impression that a committee meeting was on the morning's docket instead.

"Eric's on the committee and is expected to attend, but he doesn't plan to leave Max and Elliot. Doesn't it seem strange that they would hold a committee meeting at the same time they're taking a vote on Jillian?"

"Yeah, that's weird," he murmured, slanting a worried look

toward Cian, who was watching him with a concerned expression on his dark face.

"Where are you now?" she asked.

"We've just parked on Second Avenue, one street over from Main Street and the Town Hall. We're heading over right now."

"Okay. Just promise me that you'll be careful. I don't want to sound paranoid, but I have..." She hesitated, then said, "I have a really bad feeling about this, Brody."

"Me, too," he grunted, raking the fingers of his free hand back through his hair. "I should've left you in the goddamn Alley. Whatever the hell happens, you stay there with Eric. Understood?"

"I won't leave," she assured him. "Just figure out what's happening and then get back here."

"I mean it, Doucet. Do not leave that house."

"I won't," she promised, and then she hung up.

"What's going on?" Cian rasped, pulling out a cigarette.

Brody filled him in as they climbed out of the truck, unease moving them swiftly down the road, their long legs eating up the sidewalk with rapid strides. "Seems weird they'd schedule the meeting to coincide with Jillian's hearing."

"This doesn't feel right," Cian murmured, scowling as he took a long drag on his smoke.

"We need to find the others, because I have a bad feeling we've been told what was needed to get us here," he muttered, at the same time a stark, resonating howl echoed in the distance. Both men stopped in their tracks.

"It's a bloody setup," Cian grunted.

They shared a dark look, then started running toward the Town Hall.

* * *

Replacing the phone in the cradle attached to Eric's kitchen wall, Michaela chewed on the corner of her mouth, struggling to calm her emotions. But it was a wasted effort. They'd been at full tilt for too long, ever since the shattering hours she'd spent in Brody's arms the night before. Hours that had stripped her down, leaving her shaky, as jittery as an addict going through withdrawal.

She'd channeled all her energy into the hope that Brody would finally open up to her when she opened her body to him, but she'd been wrong. Despite the blistering intimacy they'd shared, in the end, he'd walked away from her, just as Ross had done. The effect, however, was so much more devastating, because while she'd cared for Ross—she was passionately, head over heels in love with Brody Carter.

She felt foolish, but she couldn't escape the sharp burn of worry piercing her chest, terrified that something was going to happen to him—that his life was in danger. "I got Brody," she murmured, looking toward Eric as he walked into the kitchen. "He's going to check out what's going on at the Town Hall and then get back here."

Eric nodded as he leaned back against the counter, brawny arms crossed over his chest. "Max should be down in a minute. He and Elliot are just finishing up with one of his training exercises."

Curious about her brother's training, Michaela started to ask for details, when a long, sinister howl suddenly sounded from the front of the house. Eric stiffened, pulling his dark brows together into a deep vee over the metallic gray of his eyes. "Son of a bitch," he hissed, turning and heading for the living room, while Michaela ran after him. "What was that?" she gasped.

Peering around the front blinds, Eric cursed a guttural string of words under his breath. "Max! Elliot!" he shouted. "Get down here!"

Another howl came from outside, so close it sounded like the animal was in Eric's front yard. "What the hell is that?" she asked again, her voice growing shrill with fear.

"Rogues," Eric grunted, still staring out the window. "About five of them in the street. Looks like some of Sheffield's groupies, but I don't see Dustin." Slanting her a dark look over his shoulder, he said, "This isn't good, Michaela. I want you to go in the back bedroom and stay there. Whatever you hear, do not come out. I'll call Brody, but the boys and I should be able to hold them off till the Runners can get over here."

"What do you think they want?" she asked unsteadily, unable to believe this was happening. Her chest grew tight, making it difficult to breathe.

Before Eric could answer, a guttural voice shouted, "All we want's the girl, Drake! If you don't want any trouble, send her out!"

"Well, that answers that," she muttered, at the same time as her brother and Elliot came racing down the stairs. Eric immediately began firing instructions at the young men. Michaela stood silently by the wall, listening, until Eric turned toward her.

"Get the hell out of here," he barked. "Right now."

She ran to Max and gave him a quick hug and kiss, whispering, "Be careful!"

Then she headed for the back of the house. By the time she'd reached the bedroom, she could hear the fighting in the front, the sharp sounds of shattering glass and breaking wood. Were the rogues coming in through the windows? Breaking down the front door? Unless a miracle happened, they were all going to die—because of her.

And they'd seemed a bit short on miracles lately.

Pacing from one side of the room to the other, Michaela listened as the sounds of fighting grew louder, wondering why it was taking so long for help to get there. Had something happened to Brody and the others? Should she try to call him, in case Eric hadn't been able to get through? Rushing for the phone sitting on the bedside table, she'd just picked it up, when she felt chills break out along her arms, slithering across the back of her neck. Closing her eyes, she threw out the soft, diaphanous web of her power, and could *feel* Dustin Sheffield. He was on the left-hand side of the house, creeping slowly toward the far window.

Michaela knew he was powerful enough to break through the window with ease—and by the time the others got to her, she'd already be dead. Rushing to the bedroom door, she cracked it open a careful fraction, wondering if she could make a run for it, but the hallway was blocked by the massive, fur-covered body of a golden werewolf fighting Eric.

Closing the door, she glanced at the window on her right, and could see beneath the partly lifted blinds that the sky was slowly darkening with another ominous wave of storm clouds. Soon, it would start raining again, and Brody had explained to her that rain hampered a Lycan's sense of smell, making it difficult for them to track their prey.

If she slipped out the window, maybe she could outrun Dustin until the rain came down, covering her trail. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was better than staying in that bedroom and waiting for him to break in and kill her.

Sensing that Dustin was preparing to crash through the blind-covered window on the other side of the room, Michaela ran to the one on her right, pushed it open, and climbed out, surprised to discover that Eric's yard bordered the edge of the forest. With adrenaline pouring swiftly through her veins, she set off into the woods at full speed, thankful for the sneakers that covered her feet. Though she moved as quickly as she could, it wasn't long before a stitch began twisting in her side, slowing her down. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to keep moving, knowing that if she stopped, he'd catch her and then he would kill her.

She would die. Pure and simple.

Michaela had always believed she'd experience a moment of clarity when this time came, facing her death, but only two truths filled her mind. She was going to miss her brother and she wished she'd told Brody that she loved him.

Praying for the growing storm which had yet to break, she kept running, certain that Sheffield had already picked up on her scent and given chase. She'd no sooner finished the thought, when she sensed someone closing in on her. *Dustin*. As she used her power to read him, Michaela could feel the anticipation rushing swiftly through his veins, the heavy weight of lust and hunger in his gut for the moment when he'd take her down. She thought she heard him off to her left, then her right a moment later, and her stomach heaved as she realized what was happening. He was playing with her, the way a lion cub might tease its prey before finally making the kill.

But Dustin Sheffield was no cub—and Michaela refused to be his plaything.

Jumping over a fallen log, she struggled to keep her balance, when he suddenly burst onto her path, coming out from the dense foliage to her left. She skidded to a jarring, jolting stop, and he smiled at her, his face and body still human, though his hands were anything but, sporting long, deadly claws. "Well, hello there," he drawled.

Taking a step back, she hissed, "Stay away from me."

"No can do, little Cajun. While Drake is busy turning the Runners into mincemeat, I thought we could enjoy a little private playtime." He stalked closer, running his tongue over his bottom lip, mouth curled in a malicious smile, while his eyes glowed like golden embers of fire. "I've been looking forward to this, Michaela. You have no idea how much."

"It was you, wasn't it?" she whispered, taking another step back...and then another. "You're the one who's been watching me?"

His low laugh was obscene, slipping down her spine like cold, wet slime, making her shiver. "So he's had his eye on you, eh? I wondered about that. Drake wasn't happy about you being in the mountains, worried what that little gift of yours might allow you to pick up from him."

"From who? Drake?"

"No, the one your Runner has been hunting," he told her. "The one with a taste for cute little blondes."

"Who is it?"

"Oh, I can't go spoiling the surprise," he crooned, matching each step she took until her back came up against a tree. "And we have more important things to keep us busy. Why don't you use that power of yours and tell me what they are?" Reaching out, he trailed his claws down the front of her sweater, the tip of the middle one just catching on her left nipple, making her cry out in pain. "Come on, Michaela," he drawled. "Something tells me you'll get it right on the first guess."

Trembling, she said, "You'll have to kill me before I let you rape me."

"And what makes you think that'd be a problem for me?" he asked with a slow, cruel smile, chuckling under his breath, the sound as sinister as it was soft. In a startlingly swift move, he took her to the ground, catching her wrists in one clawed hand, imprisoning them over her head. Then he pressed his denim-covered erection against her at the same time the shape of his face transformed, a long, fang-filled muzzle stretching out his jawbones, popping and cracking into position, and she screamed. Screamed louder than she'd ever screamed in her entire life.

"Don't worry," he purred in a tone that all but dripped with venom. "You won't die. At least not yet. After I have my fun with you, I have orders to take you back to Drake." His deadly mouth twisted into some kind of grotesque imitation of a grin, while his eyes burned with malevolent pleasure. "He's got special plans for you, little Cajun. You're gonna be a present to all of those who've served him. A kind of 'job well done' bonus. Too bad you won't survive it. Oh, maybe the first few, but after that, you'll bleed out before the others can get to you."

"You're sick," she whispered.

"We'll see how sick you think I am when I'm done with you," he murmured, a low, guttural laugh vibrating deep within his chest, while he ran his claws lightly down the right side of her face. He scratched her skin just enough to break the surface, so that blood welled hotly from the stinging slice, and she sobbed from the pain.

Still grinding himself against her, Dustin leaned down and

licked the shallow cuts, his tongue rough and warm against her face, and Michaela cried out, struggling against his hold, as he hummed, "Mmm. You're a tasty little thing, aren't you?"

He reared back then, his knees straddling her thighs, and with his free hand, the fingers still elongated into gnarled, claw-tipped weapons, he reached for the fly of her jeans. "No...no...no," she chanted, twisting her upper body every possible way that she could, but he was too strong, the hold he had on her imprisoned wrists impossible to break. Terror consumed her, smothering her to the point that she couldn't breathe, could no longer even scream, nothing but a broken stream of dry, choking whimpers breaking out of her.

And then suddenly, Dustin was rearing backward, being pulled through the air, and Michaela blinked against the incredible sight of Dylan Riggs holding the rogue by the scruff of his neck. Scrambling to her knees, she watched in shock as Dylan, who was still in his human form, with only his hands shifted into claws, slammed Dustin face-first against a nearby tree, then turned him, pinning the younger Lycan against the thick trunk. Dustin snarled in outrage, and before she could draw in enough air to scream, the Elder's head transformed into the shape of his wolf, and he killed the rogue Lycan with a single vicious bite.

Nausea overwhelmed her, but Michaela fought against it as she watched Dylan step back, releasing Dustin's body, which slumped lifelessly to the ground. The Elder's head shifted back into that of a man and he turned to look at her with piercing eyes that glowed an unearthly hue, as if lit from within. Shock made her stumble backward, a cry breaking out of her mouth as she found herself bombarded by a horrific wave of hatred and despair that emanated from him, the blackness seething inside him overwhelming her with a torrent of gruesome images and fractured emotions.

She was reading Dylan Riggs, and she suddenly understood why she'd felt so uncomfortable around him, so on edge.

Oh God. Dylan is the one...the one Brody has been hunting!

"You can read me now, can't you?" he asked, staring at her with tortured eyes that revealed both horror and pain.

She nodded, too shocked to speak.

"I was almost hoping you *would* be able to tell, Michaela," he stated in a soft rasp, a wry smile tipping the corner of his mouth. "That you'd be able to read me, the way they say you can sometimes do. That's why I've been watching you. Wondering if you'd see what I was hiding. Half hoping you'd expose me and bring this nightmare to an end. But you didn't pick up on me. Not in the clearing on the night of Max's ceremony, and not even—"

"In the woods, when we found the body," she whispered, taking another instinctive step back as he moved closer, keeping one eye warily focused on the claws he'd yet to shift back into human hands. "And last night as I was walking with Brody to his cabin."

"That's right."

"I picked up on you," she admitted, "but something was jamming the signal. All I heard was static. But I...I can read you now, Dylan. You're hurting because you...killed someone you cared about."

"Her name was Jessie," he told her, his words soft, barely more than a whisper. "Jessie Bonness. She was a human, like you. Blond and blue-eyed, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

244

"What happened?"

Shaking his head, he said, "I kept our affair a secret from the pack, but I'd been trying to work up the courage to tell her the truth about me for months. I knew I'd have to give up my position on the League if she agreed to marry me, but I was willing to do it, if it meant having her in my life. My only concern was how she would react to the truth about what I am. And then one night I went down to the city to see her, and she told me she was pregnant."

He broke off his explanation, staring at the leaf-covered floor of the forest, lost in the memory. After a moment, he took a deep breath and went on. "I knew I couldn't put it off any longer. So I told her...everything. She didn't believe me, and we argued. She called me crazy, so I shifted just my hand for her to see, and she reared away from me in horror, her features twisted with disgust, as if I was some kind of monster." A low, bitter sound lost somewhere between a sob and a laugh jerked from his throat, and he raised his gaze back to her. "I loved Jessie, she was pregnant with my child, and all she could do was scream at me, calling me names, telling me I was an animal. At first, there was nothing inside of me but the most excruciating, hollow sense of pain, of loss-and then she told me that she'd rather die than ever have me touch her again, and something inside of me snapped. Suddenly, that hollow feeling was gone, replaced by the most intense, vile wave of hatred I'd ever experienced. And in that moment, my beast awakened, lashing out at her in its fury, and I..."

His throat worked as he swallowed, brow drenched with sweat, tears streaming from his eyes, running through the blood on his face. "I didn't mean for it to happen, but I killed her. It was like watching something in a movie, as if it wasn't really me doing those horrible things to her body. But it was." He shuddered, his voice lowering as he said, "And my beast, it'd found a taste for something it liked—an outlet for all the primitive rage roiling in its blood over the loss of its mate. And she was, you know. My mate. I knew it the first moment I scented her skin. Jessie walked by me in a bookstore down in Covington, and I damn near tripped over my feet as I turned to chase her down."

"But why the others?" she asked, wondering if Brody would track her down in time to save her. Though Dylan had rescued her from Dustin, Michaela still didn't trust him.

The corner of his mouth quirked with another smile, and it was clear the Elder was no longer sane. "Like I said," he told her, "the beast had found a way to ease its heartache."

Disgust thickened her voice as she croaked, "By eating the hearts out of those innocent girls?"

"I don't expect you to understand," he said quietly. "Hell, I hardly understand myself. But as that blackness inside of me grew, I lost more and more control, until I became the monster humans depict us to be in their horror folklore. And my wolf liked it. It enjoyed becoming the monster Jessie accused me of being."

"Drake somehow found out, didn't he? And he blackmailed you into helping him."

"Yes, on both counts," he admitted, while thunder boomed in the distance, the scent of rain growing stronger as the next storm finally prepared to roll in. "After reading about the legend, Stefan had been waiting to find a weak link in the League, needing an Elder he could force to help him. Hoping to catch one of us in a compromising position, he'd been having each member of the League followed. Suspicious about my trips down to Covington, he'd assigned Anthony Simmons to follow me, and got what he'd been looking for. The night I killed Jessie, Simmons was watching through her bedroom window. On Drake's orders, he covered up the murder. Then Stefan told me that I would be working with him—telling me that I just needed to learn to focus my rage and control my beast, but it...it just kept wanting to kill again. And so I kept finding those girls, all blond and blue-eyed, reminding me of Jessie. And each time my wolf relished the sweet reenactment of its revenge, as if it were killing her all over again."

"Why not just tell Drake no?" Michaela pressed, aware that no more than a handful of steps separated them, knowing he'd have her down in a second if she tried to run.

"He threatened to send Dustin after my sister, fully aware that I'd have nowhere to turn for help so long as he held that information against me. He'll stop at nothing to get what he wants, which is revenge against the League and full control of the pack. And he's going to get it, Michaela. Nothing can stop him now."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, recalling with terror Dustin's claim about the attack on the Runners.

"Drake drew the Runners to Shadow Peak on purpose today, knowing they'd come to support Jillian. It's all a setup. Today's his final bid for power. With my help, he's already pulled the wolves from those townspeople who showed up for the committee meeting. Once he had them in his control, he ordered half of them to turn on the League itself."

"He assassinated them?" she asked, stunned.

"All of them. After that, we pulled the wolves from the other half, who were outside with the Runners." His gaze dropped to the ground, shifting uneasily before he continued in a broken rasp. "Without the power of the moon, the Runners will be unable to fully shift."

"You just left them there to die?" she whispered, almost taking a step forward, wanting to scratch and claw at him. "How could you do that?"

"I didn't have a choice!" he seethed, lifting his gaze to her tear-streaked face. "He'll kill Jenny if I don't do exactly as he says."

Terrified for Brody and the others, she struggled for a way to appeal to the man who was trapped within the insanity of his beast. "It's not too late to do the right thing, Dylan. You can still help them."

A hoarse crack of laughter burst from his throat. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Damn it, they're your friends!" she cried. "You can't just let them die!"

"No," he rasped, his dry laughter fading. "They're not my friends. Not now. Not anymore. If they survive, it will be their job to track me down and kill me. I can't...can't let that happen. I have to find a way to protect Jenny. That's why I came after Dustin."

"Isn't there any way to stop it? To put an end to what's happening?"

"They would have to kill Drake," he said after a moment. "That's their only hope. Once he dies, the feral wolves will change back."

"Then come back with me," she pleaded, knowing the Runners would need all the help they could get. "Please, Dylan."

"No," he grated, backing away from her, and she knew he was going to run. "You can't go back to town, Michaela. You'll die." "Then I'll die," she screamed at him, her voice cracking with fury. "But at least I'll go knowing that I did everything I could to help the people I care about!"

He stared at her a moment longer, his eyes growing deeper, face pale beneath the crimson stain of Dustin's blood. Then he turned and walked away. Wiping at the tears spilling down her cheeks, Michaela started back toward town, moving as quickly as possible, ignoring her aches and pains, praying only that she would make it in time.

After racing toward the Town Hall at the sound of the first howl, Brody and Cian had found the other Runners already engaged in battle, facing off against an overwhelming number of fully shifted werewolves. The nightmare, it seemed, that the Runners had been waiting for had finally arrived, unfolding across the morning like the terrifying pages of a horror novel, complete with blood and gore and a maniacal madman.

"What the hell's going on?" he'd shouted at Mason, who was striking claws with a honey-colored wolf.

"We got here and found a crowd gathered outside on the steps," the Runner had shouted back at him. "Said they were supposed to be here for a committee meeting, but that Drake had told half of them to wait outside, then locked the doors. Next thing we knew, they started changing and attacked us. We were able to get Torrance and Jillian out of here, but Drake has the other Elders trapped inside!"

Together, he and Cian had joined the battle, the Runners hoping to fight their way into the Hall and rescue the League before Drake killed them. Brody had fought alongside his friends until Eric had called and told him about the attack on his house. He'd left the others fighting, and headed for Eric's in his truck, going hell-bent for leather, but by the time he'd gotten there, Michaela was gone...as were the rogues—except for the two that lay dead in the living room, killed during the fight.

When they'd found Dustin Sheffield's thick scent outside one of the bedroom windows, Brody had realized she'd probably had to run for her life. He'd nearly choked on the great rising wave of fear that overwhelmed him, terrified he wasn't going to get to her in time. He'd told a blood-spattered Eric to take Max and Elliot to Jillian's—and then he'd immediately taken off after Michaela.

Running as fast as he could, Brody's legs now powered him through the damp forest, the air growing heavier as thunder rumbled in the sky, heralding the coming storm, while he followed the lush trace of her scent. He could scent Dustin as well, the rogue's musk ripe with lust, and his insides twisted with rage.

A broken, snarled stream of swearwords tumbled from his lips, his heart hammering within his chest to a painful, panicfilled rhythm. And then suddenly, he could hear someone ahead of him, moving directly in his path, Michaela's scent growing thicker...richer, and then she was there, emerging from between two towering trees. She cried out when she saw him, throwing herself into his arms, their combined momentum crashing them against one another.

"Brody!" she gasped, running her hands over his shoulders and arms as she stared up at him with wide, tear-drenched eyes. "Oh God, Brody, you're alive!"

"Doucet," he grated, his throat tight with emotion, unable to believe he'd found her—or that *she'd* found *him*, since she'd run right into him. Now that he had her in his arms, he wanted to throttle her for scaring the hell out of him, at the same time he wanted to kiss her senseless. And since he'd have rather chewed off his own arm than harm her, the kiss won out.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, Brody cradled the back of her head with the other, her hair cool and damp against the heat of his skin. "I will not lose you," he growled against her mouth, sharing her breath...and then he claimed possession, pouring everything he had into his kiss. She tasted like sunshine, honeyed and warm, her flavor rolling through him like a miracle—like something that belonged to him and no other. She clutched at handfuls of his hair, trying to crawl her way up his body, her tongue stroking his, making him so hot he was amazed steam didn't sizzle off his skin as the sky cracked open and a deluge of rain poured down on them, the raindrops sharp and cold against their faces.

Forcing himself to break away from the heaven of her mouth, Brody grabbed her shoulders, staring into the deep, fathomless depths of her eyes. "I almost died when I got back to Eric's and found you were gone," he rasped, his breathing choppy, while his body shook with a mixture of anger and piercing relief.

"I'm sorry," she panted, "but I sensed Dustin getting ready to break into the bedroom where I was hiding and knew I had to run. Is Max safe?"

"Eric's taken him to Jillian. He's fine, just a little scratched up. You're the one I'm worried about," he growled, one hand hovering over the scratches that Dustin had left down the side of her face, afraid to touch her lest he cause her more pain. "Are you okay? Where's Sheffield now?"

She shuddered as if something slimy had crawled over her skin. "Back...there."

"Son of a bitch." Staring at her torn clothes, he could feel his rage punching against the inside of his body, pressing against his skin, as if it would break out of him in a vicious, violent demand for revenge. "Did he touch you?" he asked in a soft, seething rasp.

She shook her head, pale face drenched with tears. "No, he...he was going to, but Dylan stopped him."

"Riggs was there?" he grunted, shocked. He'd assumed Dylan was inside the Town Hall with the other Elders, either as a prisoner...or as Drake's accomplice. "And he let you run off on your own?"

Taking a deep breath, she said, "Dylan killed Dustin. When it was over, I thought he was going to bring me back to you, but it didn't take long for me to realize that something was wrong."

The back of his neck prickled. "What do you mean?"

Clutching handfuls of his damp T-shirt, she explained. "Dylan's the one, Brody. Drake was blackmailing him. That's why he was cooperating with Stefan. But that's not all. He's the one you've been hunting. The one killing the girls."

A sharp, guttural curse fell from his lips, his head spinning as he absorbed her words. She went on to quickly relate what had happened, telling him about Jessica Bonness, the human Dylan claimed to have fallen in love with, and Brody was shocked to realize he recognized the name from the list Monroe had sent him.

"Goddamn it," he finally snarled.

"You're going to have to take me with you."

He knew she was right, but the idea of taking her into danger infuriated him. "You will stay where I tell you, Doucet. No running. No interfering. You got it?"

"I will, I promise."

Grasping her hand, he threaded their fingers together. "Come on," he growled, pulling her along behind him. "We don't have any time to lose."

By the time they made it back to Main Street, chaos and death covered the streets in a gruesome, crimson wash of blood. Brody parked his truck on the side of the road, ordering her to stay inside, and to drive like a demon if anyone came within ten feet of the vehicle. She understood what it had cost him to take her back into town with him, but she also knew he didn't have any choice. He had to come back and help the others. It was a part of who he was—one of the things that made him so remarkable. The rain had mellowed once again to a gentle mist, and Michaela was able to watch Brody through the front windshield as he fought his way toward the center of the action, where the Runners were still battling their way into the Town Hall, Eric Drake fighting at their side.

"It's too late," she could hear Brody shouting, his voice raised so that he could be heard over the chaos. "The League is already dead!"

Mason turned toward him, his expression furious as he listened to Brody, and she knew that he was explaining about Dylan, while danger loomed around them. Again, she could hear Brody shouting, "I'm telling you, man, Dylan's the one!"

Mason shoved him hard, then, nearly sprawling Brody in the middle of the street. "I told you that was enough of that shit!"

Taking down a gray werewolf, Jeremy turned and lunged between them, shoving them apart, at the same time Brody shouted, "I'm telling you the truth, Mase. He confessed to Doucet. Told her everything. Said the only way to put an end to this is to take down Drake." "Goddamn it," Mason roared. "If you're lying, I'm taking you apart myself."

"Oh, but he isn't lying," a cold voice suddenly called out, and her gaze scanned their surroundings as Michaela searched for the source.

The Runners looked up to see Stefan Drake standing just outside the now-open door at the same time Michaela did, a cruel reptilian smile of triumph creasing his lean face. At his back, werewolves filed out of the Hall, one after another, their jaws dripping with blood. "With the help of your dear friend, I've taken out the League, and you Runners will be next. I'll gain control of the Silvercrest, and my rogues will maintain order. Anyone who doesn't like the new establishment will, of course, be dealt with accordingly."

"You sound awfully cocky for someone who hasn't won yet," she heard Jeremy call out.

"It's only a matter of time," Drake laughed. "The second I give the word, you and your pathetic friends are going to be torn to pieces. There'll be too many of them for you to fight at once, no matter how bloody good you are at killing."

With her breath held tight in her chest, Michaela watched in horror as the first wolves threw themselves from the top step, taking the Runners to the ground. She sat frozen in fear, until she saw Drake moving down the stairs. He didn't even have to fight his way through the gory battle; a small group of the feral wolves he controlled moved with him for protection. She wondered what he was up to, until she realized he was stalking closer and closer to where Brody now stood fighting at the edge of the group.

As if moving through a thick, hazy fog, Michaela found herself opening the door and climbing out of the truck, her steps gradually picking up speed, drawing her nearer to the bloodthirsty fighting. She felt...compelled, positive that something awful was going to happen. She had no claws or fangs, or powers like Jillian's that could help her in a fight. All she had was the love that burned in her heart, propelling her forward. Her skin felt tight, hot, while a cold wave of terror swept through her insides.

Brody was engaged in deadly battle with a black-furred werewolf, their claws clashing against one another. He lunged to his side when the Lycan made a move for his gut, then stepped back as the wolf advanced and separated him from the rest of the Runners, herding him toward the steps that Drake was slowly descending. As the Elder's hands transformed into sinister claws she realized what Drake meant to do.

Reacting purely on instinct, Michaela began running right into the heart of the battle, straight toward the man she loved.

Chapter 15

A strange sense of finality spread over Brody's flesh, as if death were stroking his skin, as his opponent maneuvered him to the edge of the conflict and away from the others. He knew he needed to take him down, and fast, before he was attacked by one of the wolves on the stairs behind him. Striking out with a powerful side kick, he slammed his boot into the Lycan's jaw, breaking it, at the same time as a high-pitched cry of outrage sounded behind him. Spinning, he found Michaela diving between him and Stefan Drake, who was lunging at him from the steps leading up to the Town Hall.

With only a split second to react, Brody wrapped his arms around her and reared backward, dragging her with him, but he wasn't fast enough. She screamed, jolting in his arms as Drake's claws sliced into her abdomen, their backward momentum as Brody crashed onto the ground the only thing that kept her from being ripped in two. A great roaring wave of fury filled his head, broken and raw. He knew he'd made the horrific sound, though he couldn't feel the cry breaking out of him. All he could feel was rage as he watched the Elder stalk forward, the tips of his claws stained with Michaela's blood.

"She's mine now!" Drake snarled, while his pale eyes burned with maniacal triumph and he lunged forward, going for the kill. Brody shouted for Cian, but knew his partner couldn't get to them fast enough. Sprawled on his back, with Michaela's injured body draped lifelessly over him, Brody felt the cold chill of inevitability seep into him as he realized he couldn't move quickly enough to save her. Like an evil specter, Drake descended closer, his malevolent gaze fixed on Michaela's throat as his jaw expanded and his fangs speared through his gums. Brody clutched Michaela in his arms and rolled, shielding her with his body and protecting her throat as he tumbled her beneath his frame. And then, just as Drake reached them, something slammed the Elder's body to the side, the powerful force moving so rapidly that Brody couldn't be sure what it was.

Brushing the long, windblown strands of Michaela's hair out of his face, he turned his head to see Dylan Riggs rolling over the bloodied road with Drake, locked in battle. It was clear that despite Drake's power, Dylan had the upper hand. As if sensing that fact, Drake opened his mouth, calling out to the feral wolves still battling the Runners and Eric. "Take him down!" the Elder screamed. "I want Riggs dead!"

Like puppets on a string, the wolves instantly ceased their battles and moved toward the two fighting Elders wrestling in the middle of the road. Dylan pinned Drake's body beneath his as they locked claws, their bodies human but for the shape of their hands and heads. Like zombies robbed of their free will, the Lycans threw themselves at the Elders, one after another, until the two were lost in a snarling, writhing pile of bodies.

"Mother of God," he heard his partner rasp as the Irishman crouched beside him. Blood oozed from a nasty gash on Cian's temple, dripping down the side of his face in a thin, meandering trail.

"Help me sit up," Brody croaked, trying to be as gentle as possible with Michaela's limp form while Cian supported his back and helped him into position. From the corner of his eye, he watched Eric and the Runners move toward them, the group as battered and bloodied as Brody felt.

"They're both going to end up dead," Mason snarled, and Wyatt grunted in agreement.

Stunned, the weary group stared in shock, unable to believe what they were witnessing. It was a gruesome, violent sight, until suddenly the roiling mountain of bodies grew eerily still. Like a caving mound of sand, the mountain fell as the Lycans began stumbling away from the pile, changing fluidly back into their human shapes. They swayed on their feet, clutching their heads, many falling to their knees, confused and disoriented. Some burst into tears, while others just stood in the middle of the street, staring at their blood-covered bodies with horrified looks of astonishment.

As they staggered away, one by one, the two Elders were finally revealed. Cian made a sharp, hissing sound through his teeth, while Mason swore under his breath. Drake's body had been torn into mangled pieces, while Dylan lay on his back beneath him. Somehow, he'd managed to roll Drake on top of him when the feral wolves had closed in, and though his chest lifted with short, shallow breaths, he was obviously dying from his injuries.

"Dylan," Mason rasped, kneeling beside the broken, bloodied body of his friend. Dylan's flesh was torn in more places than not, vicious bite marks on the side of his throat, down his arms, his abdomen. "Hold on, man. We'll get you to Jillian."

"No," Dylan argued weakly, his voice a hoarse thread of sound. "I need to...talk."

"It can wait," Mason grunted.

"Can't..." Dylan gasped, his breath rattling in his chest. "I've lied to you, Mase. And misled you. I told you I was in Alaska at the time that you were finding those first dead girls. I lied to throw you off my track. I was hiding out on the other side of the mountain, trying to get my head together."

"Christ," Mason grated, his shock at learning that his friend was the brutal killer they'd been hunting, as well as Drake's accomplice, evident in the hollow sound of his voice. "They were yours? All but the redhead that Simmons killed?"

"Yeah," Dylan croaked, his face nothing more than a ravaged mask of pain.

"For God's sake, why?" Mason demanded.

"Ask Michaela. She'll...explain. Told her...everything. I'm...I'm sorry, Mase," he said softly. "I was going to run...but...I'm glad I came back."

The Elder drew in his final breath, and his head listed to the side. Mason leaned down and closed his eyes, then turned back toward the place where Brody sat in agonized silence, clutching Michaela against his chest, her body cradled across his lap.

"Where's Jillian?" Brody hissed, rocking her gently in his

arms, painfully aware that her life was slipping away with every second that passed by.

"I've already called her. She's on her way," Jeremy told him. But it was obvious the Runner feared his wife was going to be too late.

Brody didn't know how many minutes passed before Cian knelt down beside him again, but it felt like hours, the time stretched out and drawn like a body on the rack. He'd pressed his left hand against Michaela's blood-soaked sweater, across her wounded abdomen, still rocking her gently back and forth, devastated by the knowledge he was losing her. It twisted through him like a lethal blade, as if it were his own life spilling out over his fingers in a warm, wet flow.

"Brody, man, you need to loosen your hold on her."

"No," he croaked, his own voice unrecognizable, ravaged by grief. "I can't let go."

"You've got to," Cian told him, placing his hand on Brody's shoulder, "or Jillian won't be able to get to her injury."

"She's dying," he rasped, his vision blurred by tears for the first time since he was a boy, as he pressed his lips to her temple, her skin cool and infinitely soft against his mouth. He blinked impatiently at the hot tears that wouldn't stop falling. And then he could see Jillian settling on her knees in front of him, her gentle voice telling him to loosen his hold through the roar of noise buzzing in his ears—loud and disorienting—but he couldn't do it. His body wouldn't follow the command of his mind.

"Listen, man. She's going to be okay," Cian assured him, his deep voice cut with compassion. "Just let Jillian do her thing. She's going to make it, Brody."

Taking a slow, trembling breath, he reached deep and

finally found the strength to relax his muscles, easing his hold on her, and she fell softly away from his chest, still cradled within his arms.

With gentle movements, Jillian lifted Michaela's gray sweater away from her stomach, pushing up the bloodstained material to reveal the horrifying evidence of her wounds. His gut clenched, heart stuttering, breath suspended, unable to comprehend why she'd done it, putting herself between him and Drake the way she had.

Saving his life.

Michaela gave a soft, nearly inaudible groan and turned her face toward him, nuzzling his bicep, when Jillian placed her hands directly over the raw, vicious claw marks that had ripped open her skin.

Time seemed suspended as Jillian knelt there on the bloodcovered ground, eyes closed, blond hair concealing her face while she whispered quietly under her breath, her skin glowing a warm, vibrant shade of gold, as if lit with heat from within. No one spoke a word as they waited for the Spirit Walker's power to work its magic on Michaela's tender flesh.

Carefully shifting her head into the crook of his arm, Brody leaned down, pressed his mouth against the tender shell of Michaela's ear, and whispered his secrets to her, the emotion pouring out of him in a broken, rambling stream of words.

He only wished that he'd had the guts to say them sooner...when she could have heard them.

Walking through the front door of his cabin the following morning, Brody couldn't help but notice the increase in his heart rate at the thought of seeing Michaela. She'd still been sleeping peacefully when he'd left at daybreak, going with the other Runners back up to Shadow Peak to help deal with the lingering confusion and chaos that would take weeks, if not months, to sort out.

When he'd gotten Michaela back to his cabin the previous afternoon, he'd laid her in his bed, tucking the covers up around her chin, handling her as if she were made of spun glass. Making his way into the kitchen, he'd found the others waiting for him, Torrance and Reyes sitting at the table with a shattered looking Mason, while Cian and Wyatt had propped themselves up against the counters, their ankles crossed in front of them. Reyes's right arm had been in a sling, bandages in various shapes and sizes covering the others, since Jillian would've been drained if she'd healed each of their injuries. She'd handled the severe ones, but most were left to heal the old-fashioned way, over time.

They'd discussed Drake's plan, marveling at how all the pieces had fit together in the end. The Elder had finally gotten the revenge he'd wanted against the League for failing to order his wife's assassination, and if things had worked the way he'd intended, he would have gained ultimate control of the pack. The move would have allowed him to rule the Silvercrest with a prejudiced hand, one that would have ushered in a reign of terror, they suspected, for both Lycans and humans alike.

In its own twisted way, his plan had been horrifically brilliant. By using the townspeople to murder the League, Drake had not only found the means of gaining the power he coveted, but he'd done it in a way that would have played on the guilt of those who'd made the kills, even though the feral wolves had been under Drake's control at the time. And with his contingent of rogues already in place, he'd had the means of keeping in line anyone who disagreed with the new leadership, like his own personal, diabolical SS.

Eventually, everyone had headed home, and Brody had made his way back to Michaela. Unable to resist, he'd lain down beside her, needing to be close to her, holding her in his arms, reassuring himself that she was okay. That they'd survived the nightmare.

As he'd slid under the covers, hope had begun to burn in his chest as he thought of what she'd done that day. Why had she put herself in front of him that way? What did it signify? He was so afraid to believe, and yet he couldn't stop the foreign, sweet churning of excitement, of hope, burning like a warm, dazzling glow in his chest, expanding out through his body in a gently pulsing wave. As tired as he'd been, he'd felt more alive than ever before, looking forward to the morning to the moment when she'd awaken and they could talk.

Now, as he wandered through the cabin, making his way toward the bedroom, he rubbed at that pulsing spark of heat in the center of his chest, a low rumble of laughter breaking out of him as he realized what the odd sensation was.

Happiness.

Wearing a crooked grin, he stepped quietly into the bedroom, in case she was still sleeping. But she wasn't. In fact, the bed was empty. Turning around, he hurried back through the cabin, his heart pounding harder with each breath when he failed to find her anywhere.

Heading for the front door, Brody ripped it open, intending to go straight to Mason's cabin and look for her there, but he was brought up short by Cian, who stood on his doormat, a cigarette hanging precariously from the corner of his mouth. "Let me guess," the Irishman drawled. "You've lost your little lady love." Brody scowled. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Just ran into Jeremy," Cian murmured, slipping past him into the cabin, making himself at home as he perched on the wide arm of a leather chair. "He said that both Torrance and Jillian are gone. Left notes saying they'd be back tonight and not to worry."

Rubbing his palm against his whiskered jaw, Brody asked, "And what does that have to do with Michaela?"

Cian shook his head with mock sympathy. "You're not thinking straight, boyo. Obviously, all the ladies have wandered off together while we were up in town."

"Goddamn it," he grunted under his breath as realization suddenly dawned, and with it the sickening knowledge that he'd lost her—that she'd left him. "They've taken her home."

"Probably," his partner drawled, pinching his cigarette between his thumb and index finger and taking a slow drag, while keeping his keen gaze focused on Brody. He knew the bastard was studying his reaction, but he couldn't play it cool. Too much was crashing together inside of him. Anger. Hurt. Frustration. Turning to pace toward the far wall, Brody ripped his hands back through his hair, then locked his hands behind his neck, his jaw grinding. All the budding hope that had been burning in his chest since last night turned to ash, charred by the devastating sense of loss flooding through him, and he struggled to hold back the telling, guttural stream of obscenities that poured quietly from his lips.

"I thought so," Cian whispered, narrowing his pale gray gaze. "You sneaky son of a bitch. You've been keeping secrets, boyo."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that she's your mate!" Cian growled, tossing the butt of his cigarette in the empty grate as he surged to his feet. "Were you ever planning on telling her?" Like a verbal set of brakes, the Irishman's words stopped him dead in his tracks. For a moment, he just stood there, panting, every muscle in his body rigid with tension, and then he finally croaked, "Hell no."

"Why not?"

"Open your damn eyes, Cian!" he snarled, pinning his scowling partner with a blistering look of outrage. "In case you didn't notice, she could do a helluva lot better than tying herself to me for the rest of her life!"

"Well, she apparently doesn't share your crappy opinion," Cian snapped, his fury evident in the crisp tones of his speech. "If she did, she wouldn't have nearly gotten herself killed yesterday trying to save your miserable ass. She loves you, man."

Brody made a rude sound in the back of his throat. "If that's true, then why did she leave me?"

"Jaysus, you don't understand anything about women, do you?" Cian grunted, making Brody want to throttle him.

"Don't push me," he growled.

"You need it," his partner shot back. "You need to have your miserable ass kicked, is what you need."

"She left me!" Brody roared, losing complete control of his temper, nearly floored by the caving pain in his chest.

"And did you give her any reason to stay?" Cian demanded. "Did you ever tell her how you feel about her?" Brody's silence was all the answer the Runner needed. "Yeah, that's what I thought," the Irishman sighed, his voice thick with disgust. "Did it ever occur to you that she'd need to know, Brody? That she has her own fears? She can't read your goddamn mind."

His partner was right. She *couldn't* read him. Hesitantly, he said, "You think I should tell her?" "If you can find her," Cian snorted with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "Honestly, you're as bad as Mason was before he finally pulled his head out of his ass and married Torrance. From this point on it's mandatory bonding for the lot of you. God knows you guys can't keep track of your women."

"I know where she's gone," he stated in a quiet rasp, his anger swiftly shifting into nervous energy that ramped up his heart rate with stunning force. All that churning chaos was slowly coming together, solidifying into a brilliant, terrifying plan. "She would have gone back home, to her house in Covington."

"Then get off your ass and go get her," Cian drawled, while the corner of his mouth kicked up in a grin, his gray eyes glittering and bright. "Or else I'm going to be stuck listening to you bitch and moan for the rest of my days."

Yeah, that's it. Go get her. Tell her everything. All of it.

Could it really be that simple? Like walking to the edge of a cliff and just flinging himself off in a daring, breathtaking dive, hoping he didn't crash and burn.

Rubbing at his chest, Brody looked inside himself. Was he brave enough to go after the prize? To put his heart on the line and finally tell her everything he'd bottled up inside?

Damn straight he was.

Brody made the drive down to Covington in record time, and just as he'd expected, Jillian's car sat parked in front of Michaela's house. In fact, it was the pack's Spirit Walker who answered the door when he knocked. Before she could say anything, he shoved his shaking hands in his pockets and blurted out, "I need to see Michaela. Alone."

Snuffling a soft giggle under her breath, she smiled and moved aside so that he could enter. Torrance grinned at him,

and the two women shared a knowing look as they slipped on their jackets. "We'll give you two some privacy and head back home now," Jillian told him, surprising him with a quick hug.

"Better start getting your excuses ready," he warned them with a wry grin. "Mase and Jeremy are pissed as hell that you left the Alley without telling them."

Jillian laughed, and Torrance rolled her eyes. "They'll get over it. And Mic ran upstairs to grab a quick shower, but she should be getting dressed by now. I think she's gonna be happy to see you." She winked at him then, and they walked out of the house, closing the door behind them. Taking his hands out of his pockets, Brody rubbed his damp palms on his jeans-covered thighs, released a choppy breath, then turned and headed up the stairs.

He found Michaela in the spare bedroom they'd shared before, staring out a window that looked over the backyard. She was wearing stonewashed jeans and a long pink sweater that looked fuzzy and soft as it hugged the womanly perfection of her body. Dappled sunlight painted her skin a warm, golden hue, glinting off the midnight strands of her hair as it fell in long, feminine curls over one shoulder.

She turned, as if sensing his presence, and the second their gazes caught, her dark blue eyes went wide with surprise. "You came," she gasped.

Nodding, he wanted to demand an explanation for why she'd left him. Instead, Brody heard himself say, "There's something I should have told you, Michaela."

Her lush mouth trembled, glossy and soft, and she wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes luminous with tears, so beautiful they took his breath. Quietly, she said, "You don't need to thank me for what happened, Brody." "Well, there's that, too," he rasped with a tender smile, "but I was thinking more along the lines of—"

"Mon dieu," she suddenly cried, as if only just realizing what he'd said. *"You called me Michaela! You never call me by my first name."*

His smile slipped into a nervous grin. "That's because I've been terrified of getting too close to you, of how I felt about you, but I—"

"You're not stuck with me any longer," she said shakily, cutting him off again. He could see the tenuous hold she had on her emotions slipping, her cheekbones flushed with vibrant color, breath coming in short, shallow pants. "You no longer have to protect me. It's...over, Brody."

"Not quite," he murmured, stepping into the room, the need to touch her like a physical ache within his body.

She blinked, looking uncertain. "What do you mean?"

"We still have unfinished business, sweetheart."

"We do?" she asked in a breathless rush, followed by a whispered, "Did you just call me sweetheart?"

"Sure did," he drawled, wearing a ghost of a smile.

Terrified she was going to wake up and find she'd been dreaming, Michaela watched as Brody stepped closer, then closer still. When he stood before her, he took her face in his hands, carefully avoiding the healing scratches made by Dustin's claws. The touch of his callused skin was hot and slightly rough, his warm, masculine scent filling her head like the rush of a pleasure-giving drug, smooth and rich and sweet. Shaking with nerves and excitement, she stammered, "Wh-what unfinished b-business?"

"The fact that you're my life mate," he rasped, staring deeply

into her eyes, the fierce green of his gaze burning with tender intensity. "As well as the fact that I'm madly in love with you."

"You're...what?" Michaela croaked, blinking up at him in amazement, unable to believe she'd heard him correctly.

"I love you." The corner of his mouth lifted in a boyish smile, and as he threaded his fingers through her hair, she could have sworn his eyes glittered with a sheen of tears.

"You love me?" she gasped.

"Completely. Utterly. Irrevocably. Always. And forever," he rumbled, his deep voice so wonderfully sexy, it made her shiver. "And if you ever leave me again, I won't be able to make it without you."

"Oh my God, Brody," she sniffed, her eyes overflowing with the hot, salty wash of tears that burst out of her. "I love you, too."

He caught a teardrop with his thumb, asking, "Then why did you leave me?"

"I wanted to stay so badly. But I...I needed to put this decision in your hands. I was too afraid to hope that anything like this could ever happen, but I knew if we had any kind of chance, then I had to trust my heart and have faith that you would come after me, or else I'd spend the rest of my life always wondering, never knowing if you were with me out of some sense of gratitude or guilt. I didn't want you to feel pressured. I was so scared, but I knew I had to have faith that you'd come for me, if that's what you really wanted."

"I'd like to see you try to keep me away," he murmured in a husky tone roughened by emotion, while he rubbed his thumb against the corner of her mouth. "And the only guilt I've felt is sticking you with someone like me. I know you deserve so much better than me, but I swear I'll love you, that I'll be true to you, till the day I die." "Brody, I love you so much," she sighed, unable to stop the cathartic flow of tears, "but sometimes you can be so blind. There is *no one* better than you."

A sexy rumble of laughter fell from his lips, his breath warm and soft and sweet against her mouth. "God, you're the blind one, sweetheart. But I'm sure as hell not going to be the one to buy you glasses."

"I don't need them," she sniffed, pressing her palms against his chest, over the thunderous pounding of his heart. "I see you just fine, inside and out."

Arching one russet-colored brow, he said, "I thought you couldn't read me?"

"I don't need powers to know the kind of man you are," she told him with firm conviction.

"Oh yeah? And what kind is that?"

"Brave. Beautiful. Honorable and strong. Rough and tender and everything I could ever want. And mine," she stated with a rich, delicious sense of satisfaction. "All mine."

His hands smoothed their way down her neck, to the curve of her shoulders, before trailing down the length of her back, setting a blaze of need beneath her skin, melting her with desire. "All yours," he rasped. "For as long as you'll want me."

"Then you had best settle in for forever, because once I claim you, I'm never letting you go."

"Claim me?" he drawled, flashing her a slow, wicked smile that made her toes curl. "Sounds kinky."

Michaela laughed, pressing her damp face into the warm hollow of his throat. "I'll do my best to see that it is."

He lifted her face with his fingers beneath her chin and kissed her then, and it was unlike any other kiss she'd ever had. Full of breathless passion and urgent need, and yet, achingly tender, conveying just how desperately he cared about her. She could taste the emotion on his lips, feel it in the tremor of his body against hers.

"I want to be the last wolf watching over you," he growled, taking her to the nearest bed and pulling their clothes from their bodies. When he laid her out over the cool, crisp sheets, he pressed reverent kisses over the healing pink scars that crossed her abdomen, then higher, covering the aching tips of her breasts with his mouth, one by one. "I want that right," he rasped moments later, breathless, his hunger conveyed through the urgency of his touch as he positioned her beneath him, "along with all the others, to be mine and mine alone."

"Always," she whispered as passion consumed them, spinning them in its shimmering, dazzling web. They couldn't touch enough, get close enough.

"Hurry," she urged him, running her palms down the slick heat of his spine, craving his possession with a need that would have frightened her, if he hadn't been there to keep her safe.

He threaded their fingers together, imprisoning her hands on either side of her head, covering her with his heat, with the mouthwatering strength of his hard, beautiful body, so warm and solid and perfectly male. "No," he told her in a husky rasp that made her shiver from the inside out. "This time I *take* my time."

"No way," she argued, arching beneath him, rubbing her body against his, doing everything she could to seduce him to her will. "We have the rest of our lives to take our time. I need you *now*, Brody!"

"Michaela," he groaned, and she loved the sexy way that he said her name, the sound of it on his lips the most provocative thing she'd ever heard. "Don't tempt me right now, sweetheart. I need to hold it together, and you're going to push me past my control."

"And maybe that's what I like. Pushing you to the edge. You don't scare me, Brody. I love every part of you."

"Damn it," he hissed, and she could see the sharp points of his fangs as his lips pulled back over his teeth.

She took a deep, trembling breath, then softly said, "If I were to say that you want to bite me right now, I'd be right, wouldn't I?"

He closed his eyes, his features tight with strain, accentuating the pale lines of his scars, then slowly lifted his lashes. "Yes," he grated, his voice hoarse. "You'd be right."

"Well then, what are you waiting for?" she drawled, loving the heated look of surprise that flared in his eyes. "Go ahead and stake your claim, Brody. In case it escaped your notice, I'm not telling you no."

He stared down at her, his breath rushing through his slightly parted lips—and then he smiled, slow and sweet and beautiful. "Trust me, baby. I noticed."

"I want it, too," she confessed, meaning every word. "I want you to do it, Brody."

The corner of his mouth twitched as he rumbled, "Christ, woman, you could tempt a saint."

"Oh yeah?" she laughed. "And what about a devil?"

"Him, too," he grunted. "But I'm not going to put you through that right now. I love you too much, Michaela. No matter how badly I want it, we're waiting till you're strong enough."

"I'm strong enough now," she argued, rubbing herself against the hot, thick heat of his rigid cock as it pressed heavily against her stomach, huge and hard and hungry. She wanted him so badly she could have screamed, desire coiling through her like a smoldering spark that only he could ignite.

His hair fell around his face like a crimson veil, thick and beautiful as he shook his head, growling, "No."

"Oh yeah," she murmured in a seductive tone. "Just see if I'm not. And I have to warn you that I won't let you hide from me anymore, Brody. I'm going to want everything from you. Everything."

"You can have anything from me," he promised in a deep, graveled voice roughened by need, his eyes darkened by hunger. And then, there at the edges of his irises, she could see the warm glow begin to break through, his wolf awakening within his big, beautiful body. "Whatever you want, Michaela. I'll give you everything that I am, that I'll ever be." He shifted lower and pushed inside of her then in a thick, delicious thrust, giving her every inch of him, his muscles flexing...rippling as he rode her, driving deeper...harder, her body so wet, she was more than ready for him. "I can't get deep enough in you," he growled. "I want in your heart, in your mind, in your very soul. I want to own them. Claim them."

"Yours," she told him with a husky cry, writhing beneath him as he pressed his mouth against the side of her throat, his hair soft against her face and shoulders, like silk. His fangs pricked against her skin in a deliciously erotic caress, and Michaela knew it wouldn't be long before he could no longer fight the blistering need to bite her.

And to her endless delight, by the time the moon had climbed its way into the evening sky, he'd finally done just that.

Epilogue

Three months later...

Curled up on the swing in front of the house in Covington, Michaela enjoyed the beauty of the sunset while Brody put dinner on in the kitchen. He'd sent her outside with a chilled glass of Pinot, telling her to simply relax and enjoy her wine. They'd spent a beautiful weekend in the city, but tomorrow they would head back up to the Alley, to their cabin and their friends.

It still amazed her, the changes that the last three months had brought to their lives and to the pack, since the deaths of Stefan Drake and Dylan Riggs. In a shocking move to improve relations between the Bloodrunners and the Silvercrest, Eric Drake had organized an interim government based on free election—one in which the Runners would play a significant role, handling all elements of security for the pack and the town. In fact, her brother and Elliot now shared an apartment in Shadow Peak, and were both set to begin their Bloodrunning training by summertime.

And while it had taken another week of searching, the Runners had finally found the mountain hideout for Drake's teenage rogues, many of whom had been forced to turn. Most of them had refused to give in and ended up dying in battle. There were some rogues, though, who had come home in tears, emotionally scarred, but with the help of Jillian and her mother, Constance, who had offered her assistance, they were slowly finding peace. Their guilt, however, for the things they had done would live with them forever.

There had also been talk, thanks to Eric, of rewriting the Bloodrunners Law so that full-privileged membership was a right available to all Runners automatically, though the men had grumbled about it, claiming it wasn't necessary. Despite the fact that relations between the Runners and pack were slowly improving, Michaela knew it was going to be a long while before past animosities and resentments were forgotten. The pack lay on the verge of a new era—the arcane, rigid ways of the past giving way to the freer, open-minded path of the future. As Eric would often say, the Lycans had evolved, and it was time their societal rules and structures evolved with them, though they knew it wouldn't be an easy road. Still, it was a fascinating time, like watching the birth of a civilization.

But the most miraculous change of all was in the man who held her heart. Michaela had never dreamed that Brody could lower his shields to let her in the way he had, and yet, he'd opened himself to her completely. She knew, because from the moment their blood bond had been made, she'd been able to "read" him—and what she saw in her mate made her feel like the luckiest, most cherished, most beloved woman in the entire world. And best of all was the happiness she could feel burning inside him. At her urging, he'd even made contact with his grandmother, putting the pain of his past behind him and learning to forgive.

Abigail had even come to their wedding the month before, and enjoyed herself immensely, sharing a special dance with her grandson that had brought tears to Michaela's eyes. But then, she'd been teary eyed that entire day, so full of love and happiness, it had been impossible to hold it all inside. Max had given her away, and a great roaring cheer had gone up from the guests when Brody had devilishly bent her back over his arm as he'd kissed her, the touch of his mouth against hers the sweetest, most poignant moment of her life. He'd whispered a husky "I love you" against her lips, and she'd melted from the possessive, joy-filled look on his handsome face.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the screen door opened and Brody stepped out onto the front porch. Their next-door neighbors, the Hendersons, were in their front yard gardening, and they waved when they caught sight of the tall Runner. Unlike before, when he would have shied away from all humans, he held his head high, his thick auburn hair pulled back from his ruggedly beautiful face in a sinfully sexy ponytail, and gave the elderly neighbors a friendly wave in return. Feeling overcome with emotion, Michaela smiled at him, beckoning him closer with her finger. A powerful look of love and hunger darkened his deep green eyes, and his mouth curled in a devil's grin as he moved toward her, saying, "You just made one of my favorite daydreams come true."

She laughed softly, and when he reached the swing, he

leaned over her, placing a hot, delicious kiss against her mouth, making her melt as easily as he always did.

They spent the last minutes of twilight cuddling there on the swing, content just to be in each other's arms. As the sun finally dipped beneath the horizon, Brody pressed his mouth to hers, and whispered, "I love you so much, Michaela. All I want is to spend the rest of my life with you, making you happy, giving you everything your heart desires, making all your dreams come true."

With the soft, lavender twilight surrounding them, Michaela curled her arms around his shoulders with soul-deep pleasure, gave him an impish smile, and said, "Speaking of dreams, I've been wanting to tell you about this one I had on the night you first kissed me. There was this field, filled with flowers, and you and I were playing with a beautiful baby girl..."

ISBN: 978-1-4268-1746-5 Copyright © 2008 Harlequin Books S.A.

The publisher acknowledges the copyright holders of the individual works as follows:

Last Wolf Standing Copyright © 2008 Tabitha Byrd

Last Wolf Hunting Copyright © 2008 Tabitha Byrd

Last Wolf Watching Copyright © 2008 Tabitha Byrd

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and TM are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.eHarlequin.com