



Lunar Mates 8:

Hunter’s Moon

By

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Dedication

To all the fans of werewolves who have made this series such a success. Thank you!

Chapter One

Anthony left his clothes in a pile in the SUV's backseat and shifted into his wolf form as he walked towards the waiting woman. He smiled a wolfy grin at Gia's shocked expression. Few werewolves could shift while moving, but he was far from ordinary. To his annoyance, she quickly covered her reaction with chilly disdain, spun on her heel, and strode away.

He sat on his haunches to admire her. Her steps were soft, but measured and efficient, as she stalked forward to the tree line. Her ass swung in provocation he knew she was unaware of and she sure as hell wouldn't like his appreciation of it. In his current form, he could admire it without giving himself away.

The moon was almost full, easily penetrating the gloom so when she turned to see if he was following, her gray eyes glowed silver. He moved forward and she fell into step at his right, an arm's length away. They moved in step, as one, as if she'd always been at his side. As if she'd hunted with him for years instead of just months.

He made himself focus on the assignment. They were in a forest on the Georgia side on the Savannah River. Hunting a rogue cat. It was impossible to tell what breed exactly from the markings left on the victims' bodies but it was definitely a shifter. Big cats didn't stalk the city streets of Atlanta. And as the leader of the Hunters, the werewolves charged with hunting down and executing rogues, he didn't normally hunt cats. He would have scowled if he were in human form.

It was a distraction he couldn't afford. He never would have made such a stupid misstep otherwise and Gia turned to glare at him as the twig cracked loudly under his foot, announcing their presence in the silent night. He was reaching for the power in him to switch forms when he saw the shadow, when he saw it move. With a forceful leap and lunge, he took the naked man to the ground and clamped his jaws around his throat in an animal demand for submission.

He sensed more than saw Gia step up to his side, weapon drawn and pointed at the stranger. He snarled as the man under him tried to turn his head to see her. His throat moved under Anthony's tongue and teeth and he released his grip a bit, just enough so the man could gasp out a question.

"Can you call him off?" he asked Gia.

Anthony growled low in his chest. This cat wasn't free to speak to *his* woman. His claws dug a little deeper into the man's chest, puncturing the skin so tiny droplets of blood appeared. But only just enough to pierce his skin. Just enough to let him know Anthony meant business.

"What are you waiting for?" Gia demanded in a whisper.

Good question. Why was he waiting? Anthony had seen the last victim just minutes after his murder. The answer came immediately in the stink of panic on the man's skin. He was a cat, all right, but the wrong cat.

Anthony let go of the man's throat and backed away, using his body to force Gia behind him before he risked shifting. Just because he wasn't the killer they were looking for didn't mean he wasn't a killer.

He focused his will, forcing his body to change back into a man's. Bones lengthened, popped. Muscles stretched and changed shapes. In mere seconds he stood tall

and waited while the cat-man stood too, holding Gia back with one arm when she tried to step around him. She gave an exasperated huff and dug her fingernails into his forearm in protest, not realizing his wolf side found the display of irritation amusing. Pleasing.

"I'm Carlos." The cat was careful to keep his distance and to keep his bearing neutral, but Anthony didn't miss the power in the shorter man's leanly muscled body. Like a real cat, he was built for speed and agility and Anthony had been around long enough to know not to underestimate him. "I'm not the one you're looking for."

Gia's grip on him relaxed, stroked, and he let his guard down enough for her to slip under his arm. Her pistol was still in her other hand, but pointed at the ground, as if she was at ease. Anthony knew better, could feel her tension, and knew she'd react quickly, no hesitation, if necessary. He didn't want it to be necessary. Didn't want her anywhere near this life at all, but he didn't have much choice in the matter.

"Well?" she asked softly, asking him to confirm the cat's assertion.

"No," he responded. She shivered. Now that the excitement was over, he became aware of the cold. "It's not him."

Carlos let out a relieved breath. Cat must have realized he was safe for the moment. Gia tugged her bottom lip between her teeth, a gesture that never failed to bring Anthony's body screaming to full life. He fought the reaction, willing his cock to behave. There were a lot of things he wanted to do to her, none of which she'd let him try yet, but trying to coax her into accepting him in the cold, in the middle of the woods, in front of a stranger was not high on his list. His struggle for control was easily achieved when he caught the gleam of interest in the cat's eyes, however.

"Don't even think about it, cat." He added a sub-vocal growl to the warning for good measure, and saw it was noted immediately.

The cat grinned. It transformed his face from cruel beauty to charm, and Gia sucked in a breath. "You wolves are always so possessive," he said. Trying to defuse the tension? He couldn't risk asking now.

Anthony narrowed his eyes, and wrapping his hand around Gia's elbow, pulled her close to his side. "What are you doing here?"

"And rude. How could I forget rude?" the cat continued as if talking to himself. He sighed dramatically, but Anthony ignored him. Waited him out. He hadn't met a non-theatrical cat yet. The façade hid cunning and god only knew what else.

"The same as you probably." This time spoken seriously, with a bite of menace in his voice. "Hunting for the feral one."

"And did you find him?" Gia asked.

"No," he answered with a curt shake of his head. "I found an abandoned camp, next to a dirt access road. Tire tracks. Whoever he is, he's moved on."

"Shit," Anthony muttered. He'd really hoped to find the feral cat quickly, execute it, and go back home. Now the search would start all over again. Unless... "Are you going to keep tracking him then?"

"Sorry, wolf. No such luck." The damned cat grinned. "I was on a mission for my king when I got word of the feral. Since he's not here and you are, however, there's no reason for me to continue the delay."

He swore under his breath while Gia asked what was obvious to him. "King?"

"He's a lion," Anthony practically snarled. He'd come across a few werelions over the years. They tended to be charming but standoffish and were fanatically loyal to their pride and king. "Is this feral cat a lion?"

"Of course not," Carlos answered disdainfully. Oh yeah, now he remembered why he *really* didn't like lions. They thought their shit didn't stink. Whatever. Time to move on.

"Where's the camp?"

Carlos gave them directions, then backed away in the opposite direction and disappeared into the trees. Anthony changed back into his wolf form and led Gia to the camp. The camp had been abandoned and the feral cat hadn't left anything that might identify him behind. His scent ended on the dirt road where he'd obviously hidden a vehicle of some kind. A truck, Anthony guessed by the size of the tire markings.

They made the trek back to their car and the return drive home in silence. It was dawn before they reached their North Carolina town. He watched until Gia let herself into her house, before returning to Hunter headquarters. It had been a long day and night, and he collapsed in his bed fully clothed, asleep before he could motivate himself to strip.

Chapter Two

Anthony woke hard and aching, alone and wanting Gia. As usual. He rose, pulling off his slept-in clothes with distaste, and entered the shower. He washed with quick efficient moves and hesitated only a moment before wrapping his soap-covered hand around his cock.

With a groan, he tightened his grip for a series of slow strokes. Her image in his mind. Driving him crazy. Making him crave. His wrist moved faster as he envisioned her. Slowly stripping her. Touching. Tasting. Learning every sweet curve and sharp angle. Making her his forever. His strokes grew quicker, faster. Frenzied as he

imagined the bite that would mark her as always his.

He came, leaned against the shower wall and watched the spurts of cum go down the drain. It seemed a fitting metaphor. If he didn't convince her to give them a chance soon, his dreams for a future with her would follow.

Shaking off the maudlin thought, he turned off the water, dried off and got dressed. There was work to be done. There was always work to be done.

He found Clint and Ellen in his office. At least that was one problem that had been dealt with. Ellen glowed, happy that Clint had finally accepted his past and her place in his present.

When he entered, Ellen lifted a department store bag emblazoned with the local costume shop's logo and set it on his desk, then stepped back with a Cheshire grin. Fuck. He had cats on the brain. Still. Growling, he peeked inside.

"What is this?"

"Your costume."

He pulled out what he could only describe as gold underwear. "What in hell, Ellen?"

"The Halloween party tonight? Human hunters? Remember?"

He pulled the rest of the things from the bag. The underwear was some kind of loincloth. Sandals and calf guards. Something that looked like it might cross his chest. A red cape. There was no way she could really expect him to wear this!

"And what the hell is this?"

She was still grinning. "I thought it would fun if we all went as Spartans. You know? *300*? Great movie."

"Yeah." He got it. "No."

Ellen tilted her perfect heart-shaped face to one side, long red hair cascading over her shoulder at the movement, and he didn't feel...anything but brotherly exasperation. Even knowing she wasn't his, he'd considered her the ideal of feminine beauty for years. Now another face, another body, demanded his regard. He refused to call it obsession, but he knew he was bordering on it.

Ellen set her hand on Clint's forearm, and moved in front of him, as if blocking him. It set Anthony's teeth on edge. Made his hackles rise.

"You know," she started, while caressing her mate. "Maybe seeing you as a Spartan is just the push Gia needs." She shrugged. "Women are just as susceptible to physical appeal as men."

He frowned. "Sure they are."

She shrugged again, and he knew she was changing tactics. "Well, Clint is secure enough to wear it."

Anthony laughed. "Sure he is."

"Yeah," she said with a huff. "He is. I'm going to set dinner out." She pivoted on her heel and left the room.

He looked up to meet Clint's gaze. "Tell me you aren't."

"If it makes her happy and I go to bed happy?" He smirked and shrugged one shoulder. "Why not?"

Anthony tossed the loincloth onto the table. "No fucking way."

"Whatever you say, Tony," Clint said turning to follow Ellen as the desk phone rang. He glanced at the caller id, determined to ignore it, but snatched it up when he saw Gia's name and number.

"What's wrong?" he barked, not even trying to temper his tone. She never called him unless there was a serious problem.

"You are *not* going to believe who is here," she answered in a harsh whisper.

He suspected he knew before he asked. "Who?"

"That lion!"

There was a long pause, and he wondered if there was a reason she thought this should be a private conversation. His wolf nature went on high alert. "Are you okay? Do you need me?"

She blew out a long breath and he could imagine her blowing the hair from her forehead and rolling her eyes. He smiled. "I'm fine. But I have no idea why the fuck he's here. I don't like it, and Julian won't talk." She paused and practically growled before going on. "I don't like this cat."

Anthony preened. She didn't like the cat, because whether she wanted to admit it or not, a part of her knew that Anthony was her mate. And finally, finally, she'd come to him outside of an assignment for help. He knew better than to let her hear his satisfaction though. He picked up the damned costume. Fingered the soft fabric. Maybe Ellen was right. Maybe it was time to really go on the offensive instead of just trying to insert himself into her life and wait for her to take the next step.

"I'll be there soon."

"What? Why?"

"Party? Tonight?" He kept his tone light. He didn't know Gia's history, but he'd watched her keep herself closed off from everyone long enough to guess it was ugly. He intended to change that.

"Oh yeah." She sounded almost confused, like she'd never been to a party, but she signed off before he could ask her what she was going as. He hoped it was something sexy and grinned at the image of her in a French maid's outfit. He wasn't that fucking lucky. She'd probably go as an Amazon. Or Xena, Warrior Princess. That would be pretty damned hot too, come to think of it.

He loaded the costume back into the bag and followed the others into the dining room. Ellen had ordered in Italian and he helped himself to a huge plate of lasagna. One of his favorites. She ate silently at the other end of the table. Probably waiting for him to announce he was giving into her suggestion. When he met her gaze, her

expression was so expectant he nearly laughed.

"Fine. If Clint goes all macho and Spartan, I guess I will too."

When he saw the look on Clint's face, he realized the other werewolf had made the same deal with her. They'd both walked right into her trap. He did chuckle then, and shook his head.

"That wasn't nice, Ellen."

She smirked. "Worked though."

"You could have just told me," he said to Clint.

"I didn't think you'd ever agree to it," Clint said with disgust in his voice. "Too late now."

Anthony shrugged, already resigned. Since all three of them lived in the mansion that served as Hunter headquarters, he preferred to not rile Ellen up. She wouldn't do it on purpose, but if she was displeased with any of them, *all* of them would know it. Thank God, Clint had finally claimed her. Anthony had hated to watch her sadness grow with each year that Clint had let pass. And that idea just firmed his resolve to more actively pursue Gia.

He finished his dinner and after rinsing the plate and putting it in the dishwasher, took the bag upstairs to his room. He dumped the contents on the bed and stripped before he changed his mind. He pulled the outfit on. First the loincloth, then the gold metal plates that strapped behind his knees and calves, and finally the cape whose black straps crisscrossed his chest. There was a sharp rap on the door that he recognized as Clint's, and he reluctantly turned to face the mirror while calling out.

"Come in." Fuck. He couldn't do this. He looked ridiculous. He felt ridiculous. Hands on his hips, he faced Ellen who'd ducked in under Clint's arm. He was wearing the same get-up. She whistled. "There's no way I'm leaving the house in this."

Her grin was accompanied by an appreciative gleam in her eyes as she looked him up and down. "Oh, yes you are. You made a deal."

She leaned back against Clint and her costume finally registered. There was no way Clint was letting *her* leave the house like that. She'd curled her hair and piled most of it on top of her head, but some fell loose down the back. The look accented her bare neck, the thin straps of the gown over her shoulders, the deep V cut all the way to her waist.

"You ready to go?" she asked.

He snorted. Yeah right.

"As soon as everyone gets dressed."

But when he met Clint's gaze, he realized she was serious. "Sorry, man. Neither one of us is winning this one."

Ellen was still smiling, eyes shining, when she turned and kissed Clint then stepped around him to leave. "Just let me grab my bag. I'll meet y'all downstairs."

"I can't believe you're letting her leave the house in that," he said to Clint who'd taken a step towards the door to follow her. He turned around to meet Anthony's gaze and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You've known her almost as long as I have. You gonna tell her no?"

He had a point. The woman was stubborn. And hell, he might look at her as a little sister, but when it came right down to it, she wasn't his woman. Wasn't his to watch over anymore either.

"Besides, she's been looking forward to this for weeks. When was the last time you saw her that happy?"

A few months ago when you finally claimed her, but he kept the thought to himself. Clint was still learning how to live as part of a unit after years of trying to cut himself off from everyone who cared about him.

"Come on!" Ellen called impatiently from downstairs and he had to laugh as he buckled the sandals on and followed them out.

Chapter Three

Gia gripped the stem of the wineglass so hard she couldn't believe it didn't snap. Where the hell was Anthony? And why the hell was she expecting him to come rescue her from this social disaster? She'd never felt so exposed.

It was her own damned fault for picking out this costume. She should have come as a nun, but no. She had to lose her damned mind and decide to turn that damned wolf's taunting back at him. Let him drool over her for once. It better fucking work. Nothing else would make this nightmare worth it. Hell, if the black vinyl corset and short as hell skirt didn't do the trick, nothing would.

Speaking of male attention, Carlos, the werelion, said something but her mind was a million miles away and she didn't catch it. She murmured assent and smiled, which seemed to please him so she assumed it was the right response and went back to cussing out Anthony in her mind.

She'd tried this afternoon—again—to talk Julian into assigning her to work with someone else. And again, he'd refused. He kept insisting she had to learn to work with people she didn't like. He totally didn't get it.

She liked Anthony all right. Way too much. And he seemed to live to torment her. She wondered what would happen if she took him up on one of his many insinuated offers. Hell, she knew the answer to that one. Several weeks ago, after a very bad day, she'd finally responded to one of those offers. *Sure, Anthony. Take me to bed.* And what had he done? Laugh it off as a joke. Okay, yeah, she'd been pretty flip when she said it, but it didn't mean she wasn't serious damn it.

He'd actually backed off for a few days, and she'd finally realized it was just a working relationship. He wasn't serious about getting into her pants. She was so damned horny she was probably even reading innuendo where none was intended. God, what a depressing thought. Had she been celibate so long she'd forgotten what male interest really looked like?

She glanced around the room and caught Declan, one of the werewolf Hunters, checking her out. Okay. Maybe not. She must have frowned because Declan arched a questioning eyebrow and Carlos asked if she was okay. She forced a smile for both of them and drank the last of her wine.

"I'm fine," she said, standing up. The vinyl of the tight black corset squeaked with her movement, and she tugged on the matching short skirt. Carlos smiled appreciatively as he looked her up and down once more.

"Sure I can't get you to run away with me, honey?"

This time her grin was real. Her instinct had been to mistrust him. But he was open and friendly and much too charmingly persistent. "Sorry. But no."

"Ah, well. I'll just pine away alone, I suppose." He looked up when the door opened. "And now I suppose your wolf will be stealing you away."

"He's not my wolf," she snapped. Damn him.

Carlos stood and lifted her hand, turning it over to press a kiss on to her palm. "Oh, I'm afraid you're mistaken about that, darlin'. Here he comes."

With a two-fingered salute, he turned and strode across the room to where the bar was set up. She turned to see if Anthony had, in fact, showed up. Now that Carlos had decided to leave her in peace, of course he would arrive. When she saw him moving through the crowd, she caught her breath.

Good God. Was he supposed to be Leonidas? He certainly looked like a Greek warrior king. She'd seen him naked several times when they were working and he was between shifts. It was always a struggle to control her reaction then. Leave it up to him so show up at a party half, well mostly, naked. It was like he was tormenting her on purpose.

Oh, but he was nice to look at. Not an ounce of fat. Thick, defined muscles. She had dreams about those arms, picking her up, bracing her back against a wall as her legs came up to wrap around his waist. They always ended before she got to feel him inside her. Always ended before she got any satisfaction.

He was talking to one of his Hunters, his body angled slightly away from her, and she sighed when he turned enough to give her a better look at his profile. Like he sensed her there watching him, he turned his head right to her, caught and held her gaze a moment before going back to his conversation. Like she was just another stranger in a roomful of strangers.

It was like a punch to the stomach. Her heart started to pound, and she looked around for Julian. She had to get out of there before it got worse. God, she hadn't had a panic attack in years. They couldn't start again now. She took a deep breath, counted slowly till her heart slowed, and finally located Julian behind the bar. She made her way through the crowd, thankful the lingerers scattered when she arrived.

She almost sent them a mean smile. None of them would ever believe she was less than the tough as nails hard ass she portrayed. She'd learned all her hard life lessons at sixteen when a rogue destroyed her world, and accordingly, had wrapped her heart in ice. But she'd paid a steep price for protecting herself. Julian was the only person in the world she was close to, and he made lousy girlfriend material. She scowled. Not that she was admitting for one minute that kind of friendship was missing from her life.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, and no one else would have seen the worry he tried to hide. But what everyone didn't know was her connection with Julian was more than just years working together. He was her uncle, her guardian, after her werewolf father went rogue and killed her mother. Shaking her head, she forced those memories away. It was too much in a week that had already been too much.

"I'm getting out of here."

"It's Halloween, Gia," he *almost* whined, and she grinned.

"Believe me, I hadn't forgotten that. Why else am I in this ridiculous getup?" she teased and tried to ignore the sadness he couldn't quite hide from his eyes. Tried to ignore the matching sadness that weighed like a stone in her chest.

"You look more like your mother every day," he said softly but with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "That is exactly the kind of thing she would have worn for Halloween."

"Thanks," she answered dryly. How did he know to bring her up when Gia had just been thinking of her?

"You need to start living a little, Gia."

She rolled her eyes. She didn't want to have this old argument again. It was too late to change now. She picked up a glass of wine rather than start a fight that never ended. "I'll be on the porch."

She exited through the French doors behind the makeshift bar. It was a little cool, but not uncomfortably so, and several people were hanging around outside. She waved hello, but didn't stop, doubted anyone would have wanted her to, and walked to the corner where the porch wrapped around the back of the house, glad to find it empty.

She sat on the swing hidden in the shadows at the end of this long section, and nudged the floor with her foot. With a sigh of relief, she rested her head on the back, closed her eyes, and let the gentle motion rock her to a more peaceful state of mind. One that was ruined by the soft tread of footsteps. A gait she recognized. Damn him. Anthony just wasn't going to leave her alone, was he?

He'd only looked away for minute, but when he was done being filled in on the search for the feral cat, Gia was gone. Eyes narrowed, he searched the room but there was no sign of her. He saw Julian playing bartender and the older man met his gaze with a hard, disapproving one of his own. What the hell was that about? Anthony started in his direction. If nothing else, maybe he could find out where Gia had run off too. He only made it two steps before that damned werelion blocked his path.

"I don't have time for you right now, cat."

"Make it. And apologize to your woman. If you can find her. Personally, I think there should be groveling involved for that little stunt."

"What the hell are you talking about?" It better be damned good if the cat didn't want his throat ripped out.

"She's been waiting all day for you to show up. A woman like that does *not* put on a corset for just anyone."

He hoped that was true. That corset was almost indecent. He liked it. A lot. He'd only allowed himself a brief glimpse, but what he'd caught...Slender waist, beautiful breasts, long bare legs. Tattoos. He was intrigued. He'd never figured her for the tattooing type. He was getting derailed. He focused on the cat and tried to banish the images of her naked, writhing beneath him.

"Where did she go?"

He scoffed. "You blew her off. Looked right at her and turned away. And the entire room saw it. I may be a cat, but you can be damned sure we know how to treat our women. But hey. You haven't bothered to claim her. Why don't you just leave her to me?"

He didn't bother to repress the growl as he got in the cat's face. "She's *mine*. You better not forget that."

"You upset her. I'm a cat. We react badly to that kind of thing."

So he was just looking out for her? No way. The werelion smiled and stepped out of his way. "She went outside. Don't make me have to give you a lesson in manners, wolf," he added softly as Anthony walked by him.

He fisted his hands, ignoring the taunt and the urge to punch Carlos, and went outside. He found her alone. It was clear she was not happy when he joined her.

"What do you want? You think you could wait to get on my nerves another night? I'm really not up to going twenty rounds with you now," she said without lifting her head or opening her eyes.

"What are you up for?"

She snorted, sat straight for a moment—just enough to take a long drink from her wine glass—before resuming her position or answering. "Nothing you can give me," she whispered. He sat down next to her on the swing, a little alarmed at the change he was seeing in her. She seemed so sad. Is this what she hid under that sharp, acerbic tongue of hers? Rolling her head so she faced him, she opened her eyes. "What do you want? I really mean it. I'm not up for this tonight."

"What's wrong? Let me help."

She met his gaze and held it. Which was a good thing because he was having a hard time not letting his gaze drift lower. It happened anyway and he nearly groaned at the glimpse down her cleavage. That promise of heaven was inked alright. As deep as he could see, an explosion of red roses covered the tops of her breasts, into that tantalizing V, and up to her collarbone.

"Like the view?" she asked sarcastically.

He bit his lip against replying in kind and went with simplicity. "Yes."

Her eyes widened. "No snappy comeback?" There was a faint tremble in her voice, and with his superior wolf's senses, he heard the acceleration of her heart. He shook his head. "No."

He turned to face her, laying one arm across the back of the seat, gripping it with one hand. The other he lifted to touch her, gliding softly down the side of her face, down her neck, stroking once, twice across her collarbone. She shivered and he smiled at her response.

"You're not as immune to me as you try to pretend."

"I never said I was," she whispered.

"In a million little ways, you have. You go to great lengths to keep me at a distance, Gia."

His fingers moved to the exposed swell of her breasts, then along the edge of the corset. He drifted up to trace the petals on one of the flowers and she froze, breath caught for a moment at the contact. He liked the reaction. How would she respond if he tasted her? He bent his head to do just that when she jerked away and spoke.

"Hey, I already made you an offer. You turned me down. Remember?"

He straightened, knew there was a touch of bitterness to his laugh. "You know damned well you weren't serious."

She was not going to use that against him. They'd both been grumpy after days of chasing a rogue wolf. Snappy and exhausted, snarling at each other for hours, and cooped up in a car together. It was not a day he remembered fondly. She went very still again, then stood and started to walk away. Fuck. Now what? Why had she even brought it up? Just to have an excuse to push him away? Pausing, she spoke without turning to face him.

"You're wrong about that. I was dead serious."

She didn't hesitate this time when she walked away, stride long and hurried. Oh hell no. He wasn't about to let her retreat. He caught her before she reached the turn in the porch.

Grabbing her elbow, he spun her around to face him and kissed her before she could protest, before she could try to take the words back. His tongue swept into her mouth with no resistance. When it touched hers, she moaned, pressed against him, and went so limp he grabbed her quickly. But he didn't have to worry. She hung onto him, fingers digging into his shoulders, while her body pressed against his. Her belly rubbed against his throbbing erection. He liked, no loved, the direction this was going, but he was damned if the first time he had her was outside on a porch. She whined when he broke the kiss. She wanted him. If his cock wasn't throbbing so hard, almost painfully, he would have smiled.

"I need a bed. I need you naked. And horizontal," he panted.

"No." She shook her head. "Out here. The moon is so beautiful tonight."

She took his hand and tugged until he followed her down the stairs to the yard to a cushioned lounge chair that sheltered under a huge oak tree. He knew it was a favorite spot of hers, having spotted her there many times through the summer and fall.

She pushed him onto the chair then straddled his waist with a sigh and a soft murmur even his greater hearing couldn't make out. But then there was no need to hear or even think. She leaned forward, pressing her lips against his skin, following with her tongue. She closed her teeth around his nipple and tugged.

He was harder than he'd ever been and close to losing control when she shifted her lower body to press against him. He set his hands on her thighs, gliding up slowly under the skirt while she pressed biting kisses across his chest to his other nipple. As she flicked her tongue over it, he slid his fingers under the edge of her panties, moved to stroke over her clit. She trembled and ordered in a ragged whisper, "harder."

Gladly. He didn't know what had caused this sudden change, but he sure as hell liked it and planned to do plenty more of it. The panties had to go, however. He gripped her hips and lifted her to stand next to him, then also stood. He walked around her and found the zipper on the skirt, slid it down so she could shimmy out of it and tug off her undergarment. Then he unstrapped the plates on his legs, letting them fall to the ground before pulling off the stupid loincloth he'd been convinced to wear and lay back down.

Bare from the waist down, Gia moved backed into position. Would he want her to remove the corset? It was tight and restricting, concealed her nipples and she'd really like him to play with them, but it made her feel sexy and wanton. Emotions she'd never felt and she liked it, wanted it to last as long as possible.

He didn't touch the front zipper on the garment. Instead his hand returned to her pussy, now exposed to the cool air and his gaze.

"When I have more time..." He let the thought trail off and she wondered what he was promising for later. If he was. She would have asked, but his fingers were pushing into her cunt, his thumb rubbing circles over her clit, and the power of speech failed her. She moved with him, urging him into faster, harder strokes, biting her bottom lip to keep from crying out when the orgasm rushed over her.

And then he was lifting her, rearranging her so his cock could thrust up into her. His thumb was back on her clit, his thrusts deeper, harder. Better. Infinitely better than anything her fevered imagination could come up with.

She tried to fight it, to draw it out. Her head fell back, eyes closed, as she struggled with the sensations. He replaced his thumb with two fingers, squeezing a little, rolling her clit between them. She started to shake, knew there was no more delaying the orgasm.

"Look at me," he demanded and what she saw in his eyes only seemed to intensify what she was feeling. Dominance. Lust. Possession.

The orgasm seemed to start in her fingers and toes, worked quickly through her limbs, came to settle and explode in her womb. She trembled with the power of it, unable to stop herself from yelling out his name. Like that was a signal he'd been waiting for, he sat up and claimed her mouth. There was no other way to describe it as his cock and tongue thrust into her in the same short, fast rhythm. He only broke the kiss to cry his release into the silent night.

After a moment, he lay back against the chair, pulling her with him. With her ear pressed against his chest, she could hear his heart pounding, his ragged breathing, and she finally realized this was a huge mistake. Yeah, there was a ton of sexual chemistry between them, but they got on each other's last nerve in the best of circumstances. How was she going to deal with him now? Would there be constant references to this incident? No, he'd probably pretend it'd never happened. That should suit her just fine, but it didn't. Damn, what a mess.

She rose, reluctant to break the quiet peaceful moment, but determined to get it over with. Like ripping off a Band-aid. Standing, she pulled on her underwear and skirt, struggled a bit with the zipper before he sat up, turned her around and helped.

"Where are you off to?" His smile was slow and sexy. "I'm not finished with you yet."

Her heart lurched in her chest at the words, but she refused to read anything into them other than a bit of lingering lust. It couldn't be more than that. She didn't have it in her to trust a werewolf with more than casual sex.

"I need a minute. To get cleaned up." She was making up excuses to get away, knew by the way he narrowed his eyes that he knew it too. "I'll see you back inside." She hurried away before he could protest. She needed more than a minute or few to compose herself. She was afraid anyone who saw her now would know what had happened.

She almost got away. He had to put his costume back together, but it wasn't long before she heard his quick steps behind her. She'd only made it as far as the porch when he stopped her with a hand on her elbow.

"Let's get out of here. I want to talk to you. Alone, Gia."

Damn. He had that hard undertone to his voice, the one he used when he refused to be denied.

"I promised Julian I wouldn't leave. Give me a minute and I'll meet you back at the party."

She fled before he could stop her. She went straight to her old room. Julian kept it ready for her even though she'd moved out years ago, so when she walked into the tiny bathroom she found just what she wanted. Her fingers shook as she brushed out her hair, getting rid of the *I've just been very bad and loved it* look. She took several deep, steadying breaths before picking up the tube of lipstick. Anthony had kissed hers off and once reapplied she felt more like her old self.

Figuring she was about out of time, and he'd come looking for her soon, she returned downstairs but she still wasn't up to facing him. She went into the office first, willing her heart to slow, wiping damp palms against her thighs and thankful for the distraction of the beeping fax machine.

When the page was printed, she picked it up and scanned it, her attention not really on its contents, which was a little disturbing. Since when had reports of rogue werewolves become blasé? Man, she needed a nice long vacation. The only thing of major interest to her in the report was the location. The rogue was suspected to be in the next town over, the town her mother had died in.

She left the paper on the desk and went to tell Julian. The party was in full campy swing when she returned. "Monster Mash" blared from the stereo, and humans and werewolves mingled in their costumes. A couple posed for pictures with a fake skeleton in one corner and others with the Dracula staged against the windows. She shook her head. It was hard not to grin at the silliness.

"There you are," Julian said behind her right shoulder. She turned to face him.

"Here I am," she answered, her smile slipping when she recalled why she'd been looking for him. "There's a new report. I left it on your desk."

He pressed his lips together. "Tonight is supposed to be about fun, not work. You remember what fun is, Gia?"

She shrugged. Had she ever known what fun was? Someone jostled her as he moved by, and she grabbed Julian's elbow to steady herself while staring at the offender's back. "I needed to decompress. Big crowd this year."

She didn't care for crowds. It wasn't debilitating or anything, but she avoided them when possible. It wasn't possible at Julian's Halloween parties, though, and this year was worse than usual with the addition of the werewolves. She made the mistake of looking around the room. Not because she wanted to check Anthony out in that skin and muscle revealing outfit. No way. She just needed to know where he was so she could avoid him. But my oh my.

He had his back to her and had tossed the long red cape over one shoulder, leaving his back and his ass in clear view. She had the urge to sneak up behind and squeeze. Just to see if his glutes were as impressive as they looked.

"Your man is hot. Not as hot as mine, mind you, but damn, who knew Anthony's been hiding that all these years?"

God, she was off her game tonight. Ellen was the second person to sneak up on her in the last ten minutes. She turned to meet the other woman's gaze wondering when the hell Julian had abandoned her. Was she that far gone?

Hell yeah. This kind of lust was a potent thing. She refused to consider what it might signify. Instead she smiled at Ellen. The woman was so beautiful, so ethereal and Earth angel-like, Gia had been certain when they first met she'd hate her. It was impossible not to love Ellen though. She had an angel's face, a sharp tongue and brilliant mind, and lived with werewolves. She not only held her own but gave them a run for their money.

"I have to agree. But he isn't mine," she added hastily when Ellen's eyes lit up in interest.

"Oh, honey," she said softly, turning back to look at Clint and Anthony. "You're wrong about that. He's yours for the taking."

Pressing her lips together, she shook her head. Sex was one thing. Hell, she'd love a repeat. But anything more lasting? Anything that suggested permanent? Something that went with that *mine* assertion? Fuck no.

Ellen gave her the focused considering look she did so well. "You do understand what's going on between you two, right?"

She huffed. "I know what you're getting at, but no. You're wrong."

Ellen arched an eyebrow, disbelief obvious. "Right." She didn't push it though. Shrugging, she added, "If you say so."

"I say so." Her answer was weaker than she'd intended because Anthony had just turned to meet her gaze, giving her a hot, searing look she felt clear to her toes. Damn, but the man was fine.

"He's coming this way." Ellen sounded pleased and Gia wondered what her stake in the situation was, until she realized Clint was accompanying Anthony. Those two were so hot and heavy they practically reeked with pheromones.

Gia looked around for an escape route. She didn't have much time to duck out, but she took the chance. And almost made it. She was entering the hall and reaching for the door handle when Anthony grabbed her elbow and spun her around.

"Running, Gia?"

Time for a little blunt honesty. "Yes."

He blinked. She'd surprised him. It was hard to ignore the delicious little thrill of pleasure that gave her. One upping Anthony had become a favorite pastime over the months.

"Not before we talk, you aren't."

She rolled her eyes. God, he was bossy. "Talk then. I'm in a hurry."

He tugged her elbow so she had to follow him down the hall to the office. She considered digging in her heels, refusing to be alone with him, but they were already garnering more attention than she liked. The rumors would be flying by midnight.

He didn't let her go when they were inside. Kicking the door closed, he turned to face her. He was going to kiss her. She saw it in his eyes, all hot and dark and needy. Her body responded even though she ordered it not to. Damn traitor. She hastened to put some space between them before either could act on the impulse. He smiled as he stalked her around the desk.

"This really scares you, doesn't it?"

Great. He was going right for the jugular. How had she got herself into this situation? Oh yeah. She'd fucked him. It was her own damned fault. That pissed her off almost as much as him accusing her of being afraid of him. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

"Listen, Anthony, there's no reason at all to rehash what happened out there. I had an itch to scratch. You were available." She shrugged. "End of story."

Then why did her heart hurt when he didn't argue with her? When his expression went blank the way it did when he was incredibly pissed off. Usually at her. Neither moved for several minutes. She felt his stare, but she focused on the wall behind him, refusing to meet his gaze or look at him.

"That's an itch," he finally spoke, "that no one else will be scratching for you. I'm a possessive man, baby. I don't share what's mine."

She looked at him, hoped her expression was as heavy on the disbelief as she felt. God. Again with someone claiming she belonged to him. These werewolves still lived in the Middle Ages, and damn it, she would not be owned.

"I don't belong to you, Anthony. I don't *belong* to anyone."

His smile was more cruel than kind. "You're wrong about that, baby."

She was spared answering when the door opened. Julian, looking grim, walked in with Sunny Nolan, one of their trackers who'd been on assignment and wasn't dressed for the party. She must have finished early and come straight over. Carlos came in right behind them and softly shut the door.

"What's up?" she asked Julian. That look didn't bode well for anyone. He sat behind his desk and glanced over the earlier fax before nodding to Sunny to report. She didn't speak, just handed Gia her small camera.

"Scroll through to the last ones."

She did, and Jesus, the world tilted. If she'd needed a reminder why she shouldn't get involved with Anthony here it was staring her in the face. Her father. Older. Weathered. But definitely him.

"Where?"

"In Gold Falls." Of course. The town she'd grown up in, where she'd lost her mother to her father's madness. She handed the camera back to Sunny.

"I'm sorry, Gia," she said softly. Sunny was one of the only people who, outside of Julian, knew her history. Gia waved her off. She couldn't handle any sympathy right now. She felt raw and exposed.

"I need a few minutes, Julian. Then we can decide what to do about this."

He frowned. "You're not going after this one, Gia."

She made herself go cold, forced all those unwelcome emotions into a bottle and buried it deep. "Yes. I am."

"Damn it, Gia." He knew she wouldn't be persuaded otherwise. "Anthony goes with you then. And one of his Hunters."

She couldn't ignore Anthony anymore and met his gaze. He was silent, but his confusion was there in his eyes. "The shot is mine."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Okay. But who? And why?"

She shook her head. She couldn't talk about it. Not now. Not yet. Maybe never. She'd kept it locked up inside so long. All that grief and fury would be incapacitating if she set it free. She looked at her watch.

"I'll meet you back here at midnight."

She left before he could stop her, but she heard him questioning Julian. Heard Julian sending Sunny and Carlos away. She ran up the stairs before she could hear anything more.

Chapter Four

Anthony waited until Sunny and Carlos left before rounding on Julian.

"Who's the target? And why is Gia so upset about it?"

He knew she had secrets but he was almost afraid to ask about this one.

"She had a hard time. Growing up. She hasn't told you any of it, has she?"

"Told me what?"

Julian sighed, shook his head once and grabbed a bottle of water out of the office mini fridge. As he twisted the top off, he spoke again. "I really thought when you met her...well, I thought she wouldn't be able to hide from you."

"You know, I'm really getting sick of the Secret Squirrel shit, Julian. She won't talk. You won't talk. She's been acting weird all week." He narrowed his eyes as the other man turned to meet his gaze. "I could take her away from here. She never takes a break. But would it do any good?"

He shook his head. "Probably not. She does this job...out of guilt, I think. Trying to make things better."

"Why?"

"It wasn't her fault. And it's not my story. But if I'm right, and she's your mate, you have to get her to talk. Don't let her run. Make her live, Anthony. Why do you think I brought you in? If I could see it, surely you can."

So Julian was giving care of his niece over to him? Oh, they thought he didn't know about the relation, but he'd overheard a conversation months ago that made it clear. The question stayed the same. Why? And Julian knew he was confused.

"She needs to tell you. She'll never trust either of us again if I tell you. Go." He lifted his chin to indicate the door behind Anthony. "Last door on the left."

He turned slowly, almost reluctant. It would be so much easier if Julian just told him, so he knew what he getting into when he walked up there. Was she a danger to his people? To her own?

"Anthony."

He paused in the doorway to face Julian again.

She's much more fragile than she looks."

That he believed. He nodded. "I know. I'll take care of her." She was his mate. He couldn't do anything else.

"The target is her father."

Sweet Jesus. If her father was a werewolf it was no wonder she tried to keep him at arm's length.

"He's a wolf?"

"Yes."

Anthony nodded his head and walked out. She was going to be harder to woo than he'd originally hoped. He grabbed the bag of spare clothes he kept in his trunk before following her upstairs. They couldn't go hunting in costumes.

Scowling, he didn't bother to knock before entering. This was one hunt she really needed to stay out of. She was too emotionally involved. The chances of him talking her out of it were probably nil to none though. The woman was damned stubborn when she set her mind to it.

He reconsidered that opinion when he saw her however. Julian was right. She was fragile. He'd just never seen it before because she kept herself so tightly wound. But now she looked on the verge of breaking. She wouldn't want him to witness that, but hell if he cared. He was there for her to lean on whether she liked it or not. Whether she admitted she needed that from him or not.

Chapter Three

Gia thought he would follow her and she had to admit she kind of wanted him to. She was tired of her life. She wanted, needed something to shake it up. But she was also relieved that he didn't follow, because the very thought of taking that step terrified her. The fact that he was a werewolf made it about fifty times scarier.

God, why had her father come back? Why this week of all times? Was it remorse? Or had he come to finish off his family? She didn't want to think about it. She'd come up here to change and clear her mind. Focus on the coming job, not the target. She was better off thinking about Anthony, trying to figure out how to put an end to the craving she felt for him. She'd dressed up to get his attention, had sex with him. That should have gotten it out of her system.

It so did not work.

She nudged the door shut behind her softly, approaching the vanity with its big old-fashioned mirror, and studied her face in the glass. The strain was starting to show. Hell. She should have known better than try to do something normal. She wasn't normal. Never would be.

With a grin, she pivoted a little to check herself out though. She looked good, even if she did say so herself. Even if it wasn't PC. The corset was black vinyl, zippered up the front and laced up the back. She'd had to get Julian to tighten the back laces and he really hadn't pulled them tight enough, but she got that. He was her uncle, her mother's brother. He didn't want to see her sexy, and damn it, in this thing she was sexy.

She didn't have much in the boobs department, just a B cup, but the corset cinched everything in and then pushed it up. She even liked how it made her tattoos look. Big and full. In total display. She took a deep breath and reached for the zipper, tried to pep herself up.

So what? Who really cared what he thought of her? Between the anniversary of her mother's death, her father's reappearance, and a near constant want for Anthony, her emotional walls were battered. She started to tug it down and was surprised when she had to gulp down a sob. She had to face one truth at least. She cared. Too much.

Lowering her hands, she gripped the edge of the vanity and took several deep breaths. She wouldn't cry here. Not in this house. Not in a place where anyone could walk in at any time. When she did let loose, and she knew she would, it would be the kind of uncontrollable crying she hadn't indulged in since her mother died sixteen years earlier. It made sense. Psychologically, she knew there was nothing so cathartic as a good cry. She just hadn't indulged one in so long she was afraid it would incapacitate her.

She was so distracted, so wrapped up in her thoughts, that she didn't hear the door open or shut. She wasn't aware that anyone was in the room at all until his hands came to rest on her shoulders and she damned near jumped through the ceiling.

"Go away. Just do me a favor, and get the fuck out of my life," she said quietly. She was so done fighting with him. Done arguing, always being on guard. She met her own gaze in the mirror, knew what choice she had to make. Straightening, she turned around to face him.

"After this hunt, I'm leaving. Julian has been trying to get me to give this up for years, and well, he's right. I need a break. I need to get away."

He huffed. "You aren't going anywhere, Gia. Not alone."

She could hear the tears in her laughter and knew she was close to snapping but she didn't care. "You really don't get it, do you?" Oh, what a bitter twist in the heart. She shook her head. "I can't stay here. Not with you around. Not with any werewolf around."

Anthony's expression could be described as shocked. "There is no way I, or your uncle, will let you leave here alone."

She almost smiled, and she lifted her hand to touch his face. "Do you really think you can stop me, Anthony?"

Anthony couldn't believe what she was saying. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her a little. "Yes! You're mine, Gia. You're my mate. Do you really think I'm going to let you go?"

Instead of arguing, she paled and shrank back. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I want you, sure. But I don't want that. I don't want you like that."

"It's the truth," he answered calmly. Soothing. Her reaction was over the top and when her heart started to race, when she struggled to breathe, he was alarmed. He moved towards her but she shrank back. It looked like the action of a scared woman. An abused woman. What the hell? Julian hadn't given him the impression she'd been her father's victim. The idea she could ever be afraid of him cut to the bone. He followed softly.

"Baby, I would never hurt you. Never. But I need to know where this is coming from. I can't help if I don't know why. And I can't walk away. Surely you know, I can't walk away."

It physically hurt to see her so shattered. She'd backed herself into a corner and slid down to sit on the floor. How the hell had she gotten so traumatized and Julian not done anything about it? He dropped to his knees and walked to her. She needed help and her uncle was not fulfilling that need.

"Julian's got a lot to answer for," he said harshly when he reached her, wiping the sweat off her brow.

"He did enough," she said between wheezes of breath. He realized this was the beginning of a panic attack. "He buried his sister. He took me in. I never chose to burden him with more."

"He's family. And even I can see he loves you." In retrospect it was crystal fucking clear. "He would have done whatever was necessary."

She smiled a bitter smile. "You think? My father is a rogue." She paused, he was sure it was just long enough to let it sink in. He didn't interrupt to tell her Julian had filled him in on that much. He needed to know the rest and couldn't risk her clamming up again. "I was sixteen. My mother...she grew up in this world. My world. My father was a Hunter. They crossed paths and ended up together. He made her quit." She sent him a hard glare. Stubborn to the end. "And she was miserable. He tried to control every move we made, every thought we had."

She sighed, clenched her jaw, and then finally met his gaze before speaking again. "I came home from school one day, and he'd killed her. He *waited* for me." He wiped away her silent tears, his own heart bleeding for her. "Told me he was sorry. That he'd called Julian to come get me. And then he disappeared. I haven't seen him since then."

He put two fingers under her jaw and lifted her chin so she would meet his gaze. "You know we aren't all like that, baby. You know we aren't. I'm not."

She cut her eyes away and he could see she was struggling not to break down. She shook her head. "There is a part of me that will never believe that. And it doesn't matter. I didn't want to enter into this agreement with y'all because I knew I wouldn't be able to work with you. I'm not the only one who feels this way either. I'm just the one that got stuck with you."

"And most of you have been hurt by rogues?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I can't do anything but show you, and the rest, that I'm different. No amount of talking is going to change anything."

One corner of her mouth curved up in a half smile. "I know. That doesn't mean I have to stay here and watch it, though."

She finally stood up but kept her back pressed to the wall. "Please leave, Anthony. I need to change. You know everything there is to know about me now."

He didn't budge. "Don't make this harder than it has to be," she whispered.

She really thought he was just going to leave. He did step back to give her some air, but once there was some space between them, he stopped, crossed his arms over his chest, and shook his head. "I'm not leaving, Gia. I'll wait as long as you need, but I think you really don't need it. I think it's an excuse. Makes it easier to keep me, everyone, at arm's length, doesn't it?"

She took a deep outraged breath, and the things it did to that corset made him curse the months of abstinence. His control was shot to hell. Then she tugged on the zipper, exposing more of her cleavage.

"Don't," he ordered gruffly. "We need to talk and if you keep that up..."

She sauntered towards him. "You want me to stay or go? Talk or not talk?"

She circled him, her hand skimming his waist as she moved. "What about what I want? Does that count?"

He stopped her, grabbing her hands and pulling her in front of him. "Jesus. I can't believe you have to ask that. What kind of life have you lived, baby?"

She gave him the fake smile he'd so come to hate. "Nothing so bad." She pulled away and was almost out of the door before he stopped her.

"Enough, Gia. Enough. It's time for the truth now."

He pushed his body against hers, pressing her against the door so she couldn't escape.

"I just..." She looked at the floor and muttered. "I'm not strong enough to walk away later. I thought I was, but I'm not."

He couldn't take her pain. It was like knives flaying his skin. Bending his head to her neck, he sucked her skin between his lips until she gasped and arched into him. "I'm going to bite you, Gia. I thought you knew what that would mean, but I'm starting to wonder."

She tried to move away from him but he held her hips against the wall. "I know how a mate bond is formed, yes. Is that what you want to know? Don't do that to me, Anthony. You want to fuck me. You don't love me."

"You're wrong about that, baby."

She refused to listen, just went on. "I get on your last nerve. That isn't going to change," she ended dryly.

Hell, the woman would be coming to excruciating pain if he gave her the chance. He didn't. When his mouth returned to her nape, he broke the skin, mixing her blood with the enzymes in his saliva. The combination would tie them together forever.

The sweet taste of her skin against his lips was enough to make him hard as a rock, and he felt the connection between them snap together. He licked off a bead of blood and kissed the small wound, leaving a trail of kisses up her neck before claiming her lips. His hands were busy elsewhere. Ripping off her thong, dropping his costume to the floor. He lifted her easily, thrusting into her hard. He froze when she groaned. Broke the kiss and searched her face.

"Don't stop now." Her tone was a bit on the testy side, but her eyes were clouded with lust, her yearning open on her face.

He started a slow stroke in and out, knew that wasn't going to last long at all with the urgency he felt, but wanted to bring her along for the ride with him.

"Next time we're doing this in a bed," he said gruffly, struggling to maintain control long enough to make her come first.

She chuckled. "There's one right behind you, but you're kind of fulfilling a fantasy of mine so I'm not complaining."

"Is that right?" He thrust harder, the idea a serious turn-on. He planned on fulfilling every single fantasy either one of them had. "What is it?"

"Me against a wall," she started to pant when he angled his thrusts to rub across her G-spot. "Hard and fast."

Hell yeah. But she wasn't quite ready for that yet. Reaching between them, he tugged the zipper on her corset down enough to expose her breasts. Beautiful. The surge of possessiveness was so intense he felt a growl rise from his throat.

He moved one arm under her ass, holding her still. With his free hand, he cupped her breast, lifting her nipple to his mouth. She smelled like vanilla and strawberries, and tasted even better. Sweet. *His*. She moaned when his teeth closed around her nipple and tugged. He felt her response in her pussy as she grew wetter around his cock. Her inner muscles clenched when he pumped into her harder.

Her moans mixed with breathy pants. The little sounds from her throat drove him harder, faster. He bit her nipple one last time before releasing it with pop and leaving a trail of kisses up her body to her neck. She gasped when he sucked the skin where he'd left his mark. Nails dug into his shoulder and she trembled, then shuddered as the orgasm rushed through her body.

It was the most incredible feeling in the world. Feeling her come around him. Feeling her come for him. He felt like he'd stepped into an abyss when he came. She was still convulsing around him, massaging his cock, sucking all the cum from him.

Her grip on his shoulders slackened and she lowered her legs. He reluctantly let her go. But it would only be long enough to get her to the bed. He turned to look at it, frowning. He wanted her at home, in his bed. Where she belonged. She walked around him, around the bed, and the frown turned to a scowl.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She opened a door he hadn't noticed on the opposite wall, revealing a bathroom. Excellent idea. He could explore her in full light. Wet. She'd be slick when he entered her in the small shower stall. She disappeared inside and the water came on seconds later. He followed her in. She arched an eyebrow when he stepped in behind her.

"We don't have time for this. There's a job to do."

No way. He was not about to let her hunt down and kill her own father. He shook his head as he reached for the soap and began to lather her up.

"No. You need to let someone else handle this one, baby. I'll take care of it personally."

He spun her around to do her back, but not fast enough to miss her glare. She stiffened under his hands. He wanted to stroke her, to massage the tension from her shoulders and back, but he kept his touches impersonal. They needed to have this out.

God, how had Gia gotten in this mess? Yeah, she'd wanted to fuck him. Both times. But how could she have forgotten in the middle of that intense passion that he'd claimed her? In her own defense, he had been doing incredible, sinful things to her body. But as soon as that was over, he got bossy. There was a small part of her that even found the bossiness a turn-on. If he touched her between her legs, he'd find her wet and ready. There was only one explanation. She'd lost her damned mind.

She struggled for control, tried to calm herself as the full ramifications of what he'd done sunk in. *Face it, Gia. You could have stopped him. You didn't want to.* God, it was true. A secret, repressed part of her had wanted, no yearned, to be tied to him so permanently. And she fucking knew better. She'd seen firsthand what happened when a domineering, obsessed werewolf lost control.

She had to get rid of him. Get away from him. She could only think of one way to make that happen and the bitterness of what she planned twisted like a knife in her chest.

"Do it then," she said softly, struggling to contain her anger and resentment. "Take care of it for me. Tonight, Anthony."

She turned around and realized her mistake right away as she met his distrustful gaze. Damn. She'd given in too easy. She never did that. She always fought him. Even over stupid shit. He didn't say a word, just reached behind her, turned off the water, and stepped out. She followed, accepting the towel he handed her and hurried to dry off before going back into the bedroom.

Since she spent so much time in the house, she kept extra clothes in the closet. She grabbed the first pants and shirt she saw, dug a bra out of the drawer. When she looked up, Anthony was already dressed. He must have brought clothes when he followed her in. How she'd missed that she couldn't fathom. His eyes were narrowed on her.

"Those are jeans."

Shit. She hadn't looked because it didn't matter, but these weren't what she would wear on a mission. Obviously, she'd intended on skipping out while he went after her father. She threw them on the bed and got the right kind of pants from the closet. Black with cargo pockets on the thighs.

"You weren't planning on going with me." He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her his meanest look. "What were you planning? Running away?"

Somehow she kept her intended deceit from her face. "You insisted on taking care of this for me."

"I assumed you were working up to the fight over that." Something colored his voice. If she didn't know better she'd call it vulnerability.

"I told you earlier I'm not up for fighting tonight," she replied, referring to the conversation on the porch.

Stay calm. Don't let him see how desperate you are. To get away. Or how confused. To stay and give in. Where the hell had that thought come from?

He stalked to her, the dangerous predator he was heavy in each step. She didn't flinch, didn't pull away. She should have, but her pride wouldn't allow it. The corner of his mouth turned up in a slight grin.

"You're not afraid me. Never have been. Don't try to use that as an excuse to fight our mating, Gia."

It was a lousy time to remind of her of what he'd done. Her eyes narrowed. "You didn't give me a choice. I didn't choose you."

He grabbed her before she could react. His hands were on the back of her head holding her still, forcing her to meet his gaze. She tried to will the iciness she used to feel before she met him into her heart. He growled and this time she did flinch.

"You don't get to hide from me damn it. Not anymore. And you did choose, baby. Out there on that lawn chair. You never would have let me touch you otherwise."

She shook her head no, but couldn't avoid that repressed voice in her mind that agreed with him. Was he right? She sighed. Maybe. Hell. Probably.

"I'm still pissed at you." It was a concession, and they both knew it. At least he didn't gloat over his victory. No smirk. Nothing but acceptance in his eyes.

"Let's get moving." He held his hand out to her, then led her out into the hall. "You never told me your parents' names."

It took her a long time to answer, and she couldn't hide the pain and regret and longing in her voice when she did.

"Hattie and Arthur."

They'd just reached the bottom of the stairs. Julian was talking quietly to Asa and Declan a few feet away.

"Arthur Roberts?" She heard the disbelief in his voice and glanced over to look at the other three men.

"Yeah."

"He was a Hunter."

She frowned. Did he have to remind her? Hunters were supposed to be incorruptible. Obviously they weren't. This time he frowned.

"There's a surprising lack of communication going on around here. Have you noticed no one exchanges full names between these two groups?"

She shrugged. They didn't have to fully trust each other to work together. "So?"

Chapter Four

"There's someone you should meet." Anthony took her elbow and led her to Declan. He fell silent at her approach, studied her carefully, and Anthony suddenly knew Declan knew exactly who she was. And that pissed him the fuck off. He was the closest thing to an Alpha the Hunters had and one of his men had kept a pretty significant secret from him.

"You know exactly who she is," he accused, keeping his voice dangerously soft. Declan wasn't intimidated in the least.

"I know"

"And you didn't think I should be informed?"

"She's human. She's no threat to us."

"Her father could have come after her, Dec!"

The other werewolf ground his teeth together but didn't say anything.

"What is going on?"

He turned to look into her upturned face. That bruised expression was back. He regretted being the one to fill her in. She'd been through a lot in one night. He was fixing to make it worse.

"Declan." He nodded at him, like he was introducing two strangers.

"I know who he is," she answered irritably.

"Do you?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Declan. Roberts."

He saw the moment she made the connection. She shook her head. "No."

Declan stepped forward, looking sorry as hell this had come up. He definitely would be by the time Anthony was done with him.

"I met your mother once. You look just like her. When our two groups hooked up, I did some digging. I'm Arthur's younger brother." He met Anthony's gaze. "It was obvious she didn't want to acknowledge any connections with us. You can't blame me for honoring that."

"But you didn't even come to me. You didn't say a word. Did you know?" she asked Julian. Her voice vibrated with anger and hurt. Anthony took her hand and softly stroked her fingers with his thumb. He wondered if she knew the touch had calmed her.

Julian nodded reluctantly, glancing at Anthony before returning his gaze to Gia. "You haven't been yourself since we joined with the werewolves. You always made it clear you didn't want anything to do with Arthur's family, even their names, so we decided to leave it alone."

"She should have been told," Anthony interjected, pinning Declan under his gaze. "And so should I."

Declan rolled his eyes, and for half a second Anthony was tempted to demonstrate exactly why he was the leader of the Hunters, but reminded himself, forcefully, this was one of his oldest friends. That just made him angry all over again.

"Where's Sunny?" Gia asked Julian. "I need a last known location and anything else she can give me."

Anthony felt her withdrawing again, pulling into herself. Under the circumstances he didn't blame her. He'd make her talk on the drive.

"She's waiting on the porch."

Anthony knew she'd probably gone out to avoid the crowded house. She was even more anti-social than Gia.

"Wait," Declan said when they started to walk in that direction. "I know my brother, Gia. I don't know what you saw, but there is no way in hell he killed Hattie. He loved her more than anything."

She stiffened at his side and her eyes were glacial when she turned back to her werewolf uncle. "He loved her to death, Declan. Trust me. You weren't there. I was."

"You actually saw him kill her?"

"I saw him covered in her blood. I heard him say it was his fault."

"That's not the same as a confession, Gia."

"Close enough," she said coldly. With those parting words, they left.

Sunny was waiting, sitting on the porch railing in the farthest, darkest corner. Gia pulled free, and he let her walk away to talk to the woman privately. With his heightened wolf senses, he would be able to easily listen in unless they whispered.

"Where?"

Sunny handed her a slip of paper and without saying a word stood and disappeared around the corner of the house. Gia rejoined him and he held his hand out for her keys. He was a little worried when she tossed them over without any argument. He always insisted. She always argued. It occurred to him that was probably more routine now than from any real objection.

He didn't speak until they were on the road. "Where are we going?" Since the house was at the end of a dead-end road there'd been only one way to go.

"Gold Falls." Softly said and he knew why. She'd once told him that's where she grew up. It wasn't far, only about thirty minutes if he drove fast. He decided to drive slow.

"Do we know where?"

She laughed, but it was anything but amused. He heard bitterness, anger, confusion. So much emotion wrapped up in one little sound. He reached across the console and took her hand. Lifting it to his lips, he pressed a kiss on her palm.

"It's gonna be okay, baby."

It was a promise to her. One he had no idea in hell how to fulfill. He could execute her father. His oaths demanded he execute rogues. But this wasn't just any rogue. This was his mate's father. He also had to consider her mental well-being. She might despise the man, might hate him with every fiber of her being, but he was still her father. It might not be today or tomorrow, but at some point she'd be upset about his killing her father.

"No," she said softly, staring out the passenger window so he couldn't see her expression. "It's not going to be okay. It never has been."

He could hear the unshed tears in her voice. His heart broke for her. "Don't do that, baby." He could handle her yelling at him. Could handle the ice queen, too, if it came down to that. But he couldn't take her hurting, especially when she wouldn't even let him comfort her. It ripped him up inside.

For years he was more crazy than sane. Grief could do that to a man. The only thing that had kept him from taking his own life was vengeance. Ironical that they'd circled back to where it all started.

He remembered the day, sixteen years ago, clearly. The day he'd lost everything. He'd gone for a run, come home to find his beautiful Hattie dying. He'd known as soon as he entered his house another wolf had been there, and she'd lived long enough to describe the wolf who'd attacked her. It was a scent he'd never forgotten.

He'd held her, covered in her blood, consumed with rage and grief, until Gia arrived home. She'd thought he'd done it. Killed his mate, her mother. He'd let her believe the lie. In a way it was true. Being part of her life was what had made her a target. It made Gia a target too, so he let her go also. Her human uncle would take care of her, watch over her. And some day, maybe, after he killed the rogue who'd killed his wife, he could return to his daughter.

He laughed, a hoarse, rusty sound he hadn't heard in years. Like that was ever going to happen. Too many years had gone by. He'd missed half her life. The chances she'd let him back into it were about nil and none. Still, he would at least be able to explain things once this was all over.

But it wasn't over yet. He entered the old abandoned house to wait. It was alive with ghosts. He avoided the front living room where she'd died and went to the back of the house. All of the old furniture was still there. It looked like Julian hadn't removed anything. He dropped a backpack and sleeping bag on a couch, sending dust flying into the air.

He stepped out of the cloud and went to explore the rest of the house. The time warp extended to the kitchen and upstairs bedroom. The only empty space was Gia's. Her clothes and books were gone, though she'd left her furniture. He doubted a grown woman would want to keep her twin bed from childhood.

He frowned. He should have made more of an effort to inform himself about her life over the years. She was grown now. Was she married? Did she have children? Shaking his head, he pushed the questions away and returned downstairs. He had to focus, and he needed to catch up on some sleep before he faced the rogue.

He spread the unrolled sleeping bag on the floor, pulled off his shoes, and lay down with his arms crossed under his head. He'd dream of revenge.

But sleep eluded him. Why had the rogue come back to Gold Falls? Why come back to the beginning? He couldn't say how, but he was positive the rogue would find him. Maybe he was finally tiring of the run and hide game they'd been playing for so long. God knows Arthur was tired of it.

And then he heard it. Bushes scratching against the windows, but there was no wind. Someone was out there. Careful not to make any noise, he rolled into the shadows and rose into a crouch. The back door opened, creaky on long unused hinges, and he waited patiently. A silent lure hidden in the gloom.

The scent that came to him was the last he expected however. Not the rogue he was lying in wait for, but another loved one he'd abandoned. Declan entered without making a sound, and he realized his younger brother had intentionally made a little noise outside, a way of announcing his presence.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

Of course. His brother was a Hunter, and since he'd never bothered to clear his name, he was a target.

"You'll have to wait to kill me until later."

Declan shrugged. The gesture looked benign and easygoing, but Arthur saw the tension in his frame. "Sure. Why not? You've got some explaining to do first anyway."

"I didn't kill Hattie."

"Gia thinks you did." He'd seen her. Arthur didn't know whether to feel jealous or sad.

"How is she?"

"Hard as nails. She hunts with the humans. And she's mated to Anthony."

Damn it! He'd stayed away from her hoping she'd have a normal life. Whatever the hell that was. Not this. He'd given her care over to Julian, sure he'd protect her.

"I didn't want her touched by this world," he said through clenched teeth.

"Kinda hard to avoid that. She is the daughter of a werewolf. She's convinced you killed Hattie. Did you really just expect her to walk away?"

He had a point. The girl he remembered was stubborn as hell and just as smart. He'd started teaching her self-defense when she was very small, and by sixteen, she was an expert. What kind of woman had she grown into?

"Who did it?"

He was lost in his head and his brows drew together in confusion as he met Declan's gaze. "What?"

"Who killed Hattie?"

"Tim Burns." There was a surge of satisfaction at that knowledge. It'd taken years to track the wolf and learn his identity. One that was well known as a matter of fact. He was highly placed in the Society that harbored rogues.

"You seriously expect anyone to believe that?" asked a hard, yet feminine voice.

He'd heard the car pull up, of course. Followed by the front door opening and two sets of footsteps. Her scent hadn't changed. He shouldn't have been surprised by her appearance, but he was unprepared to see his baby girl all grown up and dressed for battle with her werewolf mate at her back. She was so like her mother. It was clear to him Anthony wouldn't be able to control her any more than he'd been able to control Hattie.

Gia hadn't known that. Had never known that he sometimes gave in and let Hattie go hunting with him. Gia would go off to visit a friend or relative in the summer, and before he knew it, Hattie had conned him into tagging along. He'd never been able to resist her. Couldn't deny her anything. God, he missed her. And here stood his daughter who, despite his best attempt, was probably just like her mother.

He didn't answer her question. "Hope you're not the same sort of adrenaline junkie she was."

He surprised her, guessed from her expression she didn't find the chase a thrill at all. Good. Maybe now that she'd found him, she'd quit. But what of the man standing at her side?

He couldn't read Anthony at all. He definitely was not untried pup Anthony remembered, however. Anthony stood with confident ease, Gia's hand held loosely in his. She, on the other hand, fairly strummed with tension and anger. While he watched, Anthony let her hand go and moved his to grasp the back of her neck. His thumb brushed over the mark on her neck and she calmed. He sensed their bond was new, the bite was definitely fresh, but they already seemed a strong team. Then her hand moved to the gun on her hip.

Gia understood now why Anthony had insisted on doing this hunt by himself. Her fingers flexed around the butt of her pistol, but she couldn't do it. She didn't believe his story for a minute, but she couldn't kill him. For the first time in years, memories of happier times intruded. She tried to ignore them. She didn't want to remember anything that made him look less like the monster he was.

No matter how hard she tried, however, the memories came. Him laughing at one of her mom's stupid jokes. Teaching Gia to fight. Making breakfast and serving it to Hattie in bed on Mother's Day. Damn it. This wouldn't do at all.

He was watching her carefully. Expectantly. Why? What was he looking for? She turned her back on him and met Anthony's gaze. "You're going to have to take care of this one," she said softly even though she knew the other two would hear her.

He watched her a long time before he moved. What did he see on her face? Was she at least hiding it from everyone else? He stepped to her side, hand gentle on her elbow as he prodded her to move with him, farther away from Arthur and Declan.

"What if he's telling the truth?"

She was outraged. Hurt he was taking up for the werewolf who'd killed her mother.

"You can't believe that," she snapped.

"I don't. But we do have an obligation to be sure." He didn't sound happy about it at least.

"So now what?" Declan asked when they turned back around.

Anthony took a long time to answer. "Take him home. Check out his story."

Declan nodded. "Pack up."

Arthur rolled up his sleeping bag, grabbed a backpack from the corner, and was ready to go. She watched through narrow eyes. Did he always travel so light? And why the hell did she care? She followed the group outside.

"You can ride with me," Declan offered.

"No," Anthony ordered. "He stays with us."

Declan looked like he wanted to argue, but he kept it to himself. Arthur took the back seat, and Declan followed in his car.

"Where are we going?" she asked when they passed the welcome sign on the outskirts of their town.

"Home."

He didn't elaborate, and she almost asked which one. His, hers, or Julian's? She didn't bother. There was no point in giving Arthur any knowledge not absolutely necessary. The logical choice would be Anthony's house, which doubled as Hunter headquarters. As a former Hunter, Arthur already knew its location. Anthony wouldn't go to her place; he'd never expose her to danger he believed could be avoided.

No one spoke for the remainder of the drive.

At the house, they all entered his office. She could see her father's surprise when Anthony seated himself behind the desk. Arthur hadn't known Anthony was the leader of the Hunters then. Declan, Asa, and Clint followed them in. The four werewolves were good friends but there was no doubt who was in charge.

Anthony crooked his finger, beckoning her to come to him. Under normal circumstances, she would have laid into him and accused him of being presumptuous and sexist. But these were not normal circumstances, and she desperately needed the support she knew she'd have at his side. She needed to borrow some of his strength.

She wanted to blame it on his bite, but admitted the trust had been building for months. He'd teased her. Flirted shamelessly. Driven her crazy with need. She finally realized he hadn't been tormenting her for his own amusement. He'd been working up to claiming her for months. Letting her adjust to his presence in her life. She wasn't sure if she was pissed or touched. Probably both.

She walked to his desk and perched on one corner. He took her hand and nibbled on her knuckles, giving her a wicked grin in the process. Her stomach dropped like she was on a roller coaster.

He reached up and pulled her into his lap so her back was no longer to the room with four werewolves behind her. He never allowed her to feel vulnerable with anyone else. It was one of the things she loved about him. Holy shit. Was she really ready to go there? Admitting that depth of feeling for anyone? Much less a bossy werewolf who was going to do his damndest to run her life.

"What's wrong?" he whispered.

She shook her head, bit her bottom lip. "Nothing."

"Not nothing." His gaze narrowed. "But I'll let it go for now."

She rolled her eyes. That was exactly what she was talking about. Thankfully he turned his focus from her, and she didn't have to punch him.

"Explain," he demanded, pinning Arthur under his gaze.

"Gia should leave first. There are things she's not ready to hear."

"Like hell," she snapped, anger pulsing through her again. Even Anthony's soothing hands didn't make it abate. She didn't want to hear any of it, not one of his lies, but there was no way he was running her off. She really just wanted him gone and she didn't care who took care of making him disappear anymore. "I have a right to hear your lies."

Arthur looked to Anthony for a decision, acting as if she had no choice in the matter at all. "She doesn't leave my sight." His voice was implacable, making it damned

certain Arthur didn't have anything to do with her decisions while also making it clear Anthony considered her his. She was no longer sure how she felt about that. Besides, if he'd tried to send her away, it would have felt like a betrayal of her trust, like he believed she couldn't handle herself. She needed some room and time to think, but it would have to be later.

But later...they would be alone, and he would touch her again and her brain would stop functioning. Fuck. She was screwed. She bit her lip to stop a frantic giggle. Or she would be at any rate. He'd promised her a bed next time, and damned if she didn't want to experience that.

Arthur sighed. "Your call, of course."

No, it wasn't, but he'd never get that, would he? He'd tried to rule their every move when she was a child. No doubt he expected other werewolves to behave just as badly. "Just get on with it."

"I didn't kill your mother."

He looked straight at her, and as much as she wanted to, she couldn't look away. Couldn't respond either.

"I loved her more than anything. You have to know that, Gia. You must remember it."

She refused to remember it. "You were covered in her blood. You said, I did this. That's what I remember."

He sighed and shifted in his seat like he was uncomfortable. Good. He deserved it. "I meant that I was responsible. It was my fault. I was so afraid whoever it was would come after you so I sent you to Julian." He shook his head. "That's true, but you couldn't have stayed with me then if it was a car accident and not an attack that killed her. The grief—he took a deep breath—"was too intense. For a long time, the only reason I kept on was vengeance."

She turned her face into Anthony's shoulder. He immediately wrapped an arm around her, rubbed her neck until she went limp against him. God damn, Arthur. If he was telling the truth, he'd abandoned his daughter. If he was telling the truth, he'd let her believe the worst for sixteen years. Then in one night he expected to turn it all upside down. Like she didn't have enough problems right now dealing with Anthony.

"What happened later?" Anthony asked. He must have realized she couldn't find her voice anymore. She didn't turn around as her father answered, knew she couldn't hide all the emotions from her eyes.

"It was a long time before I could think clearly. You're new to the bond, right? It's very hard to live without the other half of your soul." His voice broke at the end but she refused to feel any sympathy for him. He took a minute, seemed to compose himself before going on. "When I could function again, I went searching. I must have gotten home that day right after the rogue left. His scent was strong. I've never forgotten it."

"And you think it was Tim Burns?" one of the others, Asa, asked. Declan had obviously filled him in during the drive back.

"I know it," Arthur practically growled. "It took me a long time to get close enough to him to be sure, but he's always protected. For some reason, he's gone back to Gold Falls."

"Could be he knows you're following him, and he figured it would be the right lure," Anthony drawled.

She sat up then, turned around to look at Arthur. He nodded. "That's my guess."

Shit. He was using himself as bait? Before she could protest, Anthony spoke. "It's late. Let's continue this in the morning." He caught Clint's gaze and gave a slight motion with his head. What was he up to now? "Under the circumstances, I'm sure you understand you'll be under guard in this house."

"Is that really necessary?" Declan asked.

"Yes," he answered with his best alpha tone. Its effect on her had always been carnal and she shivered. His hand stroked absently up her back.

Clint moved forward. "This way." Arthur stood and followed him out, so did the rest. Suddenly, she was nervous. Alone again. She scrambled out of his lap and around the desk. He just smiled and walked to the door where he stood and held his hand out.

"I believe I said something about a bed earlier."

Chapter Six

Gia trembled and he hadn't even touched her yet. His gaze swept her body, and it felt like a hot caress. Molten. She felt an answering desire. One of them might combust when he touched her.

He cocked an eyebrow when she didn't move. "I guess we could try out the desk first."

She couldn't help it. She looked over at the desk, considered it and discarded the idea. Nope. She really wanted that bed. Forcing her feet to move, she stepped forward. But he didn't lead her from the room. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

It started out gentle. Tender. A soft kiss against her lips and another until she opened her mouth for him. His tongue brushed over hers and his moan filled her mouth

When she touched him in return. She wrapped her arms around his neck, fingers tunneling into his hair, and pressed her body as close as possible. His cock was hard against her belly and she rubbed against it. He abruptly broke the kiss.

He was breathing hard, and she felt a surge of exhilaration. She did that to him. She made him lose control.

"Any more of that and it will be the desk." He stepped out of the doorway and ushered her through, slapping her ass when she passed him.

"Anthony," she protested, but she didn't really mean it, and he knew it. He growled, and why did that turn her on even more? Hell, why keep trying to figure this out? *Just go with it, Gia.*

"Upstairs," he ordered.

She was only too happy to oblige and jogged up the stairs unafraid of letting her eagerness show. He opened the last door on the left and nodded for her to enter first. She walked in, suddenly overcome with nervousness, and looked around.

It wasn't a bedroom. She guessed it would be called a living room, but den would be a better description. Like the rest of the house, the floors were a lightly stained wood. But that's where any lightness stopped. The couch and chair were black leather, the coffee and end tables a dark mahogany. A flat screen TV was hung on one wall next to a bookcase. It was definitely a man's room.

She heard the door click shut and lock. Then he was behind her, his heat sinking into her. He grunted.

"You're gonna want to redecorate, aren't you?"

Oh god, she hadn't even thought about that. She was coming to accept this mate thing, but moving in with him, that he'd want her to, hadn't even occurred to her.

"Probably," she answered. "But, you know, I have a perfectly good house."

He stepped around her, shaking his head. "Until I find a replacement, I have to live in the house."

She couldn't have heard that right. "I didn't know you were looking for a replacement."

He shrugged. "Not yet. But one day we'll have kids, and I owe them better than this life."

Her stomach became a knot of nerves. Kids? She didn't know a damned thing about raising children. Had never considered having any. Of course, she'd also never believed she'd find herself tied to one man, one werewolf, for the rest of her life.

He grinned at her. "Don't panic yet, baby. We have time before we have to worry about that."

How did he read her so damned well? And weren't they supposed to be horizontal about now? His eyes glowed in the dark room as if he knew exactly what she was thinking about. He took her hand and tugged her with him.

"Let me show you around." He approached a door she hadn't noticed and pushed it open.

"There's the main room we entered and two bedrooms, each with a private bath. I use this one as an office." He shut the door, turned on his heel, and crossed the room to another door. "This is our room."

Our room? Shit. He did mean for her to move in. He entered the room and she followed cautiously a little afraid of what she might find in there. In her experience, men weren't the neatest of creatures, and she was a neat freak. She had to have order in her living space. She needn't have worried.

The room was dominated by a four-poster king sized bed. There was a chair in one corner next to a window and a long dresser stretched across one wall. Two doors on the far wall led to the bath and a closet, she presumed. There was no clutter anywhere, no clothes left lying on the floor, nothing on the walls. It was almost Spartan. Just like she liked it.

It was also masculine. The bed was made with a heavy black comforter. The posts thick columns. "I want to tie you to that bed, Gia."

She gasped, her pussy growing wetter at the suggestion. She'd always wondered what that would be like. Would not having to have even an ounce of control be as freeing as she imagined? She shook her head in denial. It couldn't be.

"Why not? I have my own fantasies about you," he said with a voice full of sin and a wicked grin. He pulled his shirt off, exposing his mouth-watering chest and shoulders, then sat on the bed and pulled off his shoes and socks. When he stood, he reached for the snap on his jeans. There were off in seconds. He'd gone commando, and his cock was hard and thick, jutting out, a creamy drop of pre-cum on the head.

Unable to resist, she stepped forward and stroked a finger along the shaft, catching that tantalizing drop on the head and sucking it into her mouth. His cock jumped, but the rest of his body froze with rigid control. She didn't want him to have any control.

"Get rid of those clothes," he growled.

She smiled. Oh yeah. She shook his self-control all right. She walked across the room, knowing he was staring at her ass, he always did, and stopped by the dresser. Removing her thigh holster, she carefully set her gun on top of it, followed with her other holster and knife. Then she bent over, still facing away from him, and unlaced her boots. Stuffed her socks inside and tossed them into a corner.

Her trousers were next. She unsnapped and unzipped them, then shimmed them down over her hips, down her thighs to her ankles. Sensing him move behind her, hearing his heavy breathing, she smiled. He gripped her hips and bent his head to nuzzle her neck, on the spot where he'd left his mark. Sensation surged through her. She groaned and rocked back against him, against the hard cock pressed against her.

"You're playing with fire, baby," he whispered harshly, grabbing the bottom of her t-shirt and yanking it over her head.

"Maybe I like playing with fire." Her whispered dare ended in a gasp as his fingers closed around her nipples and pinched.

"Hmm." Lips pressed against her skin, sucked it between his teeth. "Let's see how adventurous you are."

Without giving her any warning, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. He dropped her in the center and retraced his steps to the dresser. She heard a drawer open, but he blocked her view with his back. She had no idea what he was rifling around for until he returned to her holding up two long black ties.

He arched an eyebrow. "Well?"

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, fascinated by the way his gaze zeroed in on the action. His eyes were so hungry. She was tempted to take his offer. Too tempted. He sat on the edge of the bed, trailed the ends of the ties up her side. She shivered at the light touch.

"You're thinking too much." His eyes searched hers. "You know I'll take care of you."

He would. She had no doubt of that. Slowly, she nodded her acceptance. He didn't wait for her to change her mind. He had one wrist secured before she even had a moment to reconsider. By then, he'd tied the other, and it was too late.

"Beautiful."

He spread her legs apart and knelt between them, gaze focused on her pussy. She felt a hot flush spread up her chest to her face. She'd never felt so exposed. His palms rested on the insides of her legs, just above her knees, and she wondered when he would move them. When he'd stroke her into orgasm. Her hips lifted in unspoken demand and he looked up to meet her gaze, a wicked grin on his face.

"Did you want something, baby?"

Now he was going to tease her? She rolled her eyes. "Yes. You have me at your mercy. The least you could do is put me out of my misery."

"Misery, is it?" His smile broadened a moment before his expression turned serious, almost solemn. "I've dreamed so often of having you at my mercy, Gia. The things I plan to do to you..."

He let the thought trail off and her eyes narrowed. That didn't sound so good. "What things?"

He bent over and sucked one of her nipples into his mouth. Hard. She'd almost forgotten the question when he released it.

"Good things," he whispered against her, his tongue lapping over her nipple. "I'm going to make you feel so good, give you so much pleasure, you'll never consider leaving me. You'll never want to."

God, was that insecurity in his voice? She couldn't believe it, but he met her eyes again, and it was clear to see. The bond wouldn't allow them to separate without a whole lot of pain, a choice she doubted either would make. But even though he tied her to him in the most permanent way, he wanted her to choose him. Knowing that did something funny to her heart. She tried to reach down to cup his face before she remembered she couldn't. Once she would have panicked. Not now.

"I'm not going anywhere, Anthony," she whispered, letting him see the truth of it in her eyes. She was afraid he might see her heart there too, but no, she wasn't that far gone yet. It was like he read her mind.

"I'm going to make you love me, baby, if it takes the rest of my life," he promised.

She forgot to breathe. And then she forgot all the reasons against caring about him too much, all the reasons for holding a bit of herself back. He concentrated on her nipples. One he rolled between his thumb and finger while he sucked the other between his teeth. She screamed, the pleasure was so intense. So perfect. She sobbed when he moved, wanting to feel that exquisite mouth on her again.

But he didn't pay attention to her protest, kissing his way down her body. He paused a moment to explore her navel with his tongue then licked his way to the curls that hid her pussy. He spread her lips and blew a hot breath over her.

She tried to lift her pelvis, hoping, desperately needing his mouth on her there. He held her still easily, one strong forearm across her hips holding her where he wanted her. He looked up the length of her body to meet her gaze.

"I want everything, Gia. All of you."

She shook her head. It must be the mating bond that let her know what he meant by that statement. Complete trust. He wanted her to drop every barrier, to give over all control to him. It was too much, too soon. But tempting. He watched her struggle with the idea, and she wanted to scream at him. Just fuck her already. Wasn't this enough of a first step? Maybe later she'd be able to give him what he wanted. But not yet.

"Yes, baby. All of you. Right now."

Had she spoken aloud? She didn't get to ask because he chose that moment to put his mouth on her. He started with an open-mouthed kiss, a brief, soft brush. Then he pushed his tongue into her sex. She tried to meet his thrusts, the orgasm building so quickly she knew she'd come in seconds, but he stopped. Moved on to lap at her clit. Just as good. Better in fact.

But again, he didn't let her come. He kept her right on the edge, his knowledge of her body absolute. Every time she was close, he moved to another spot or slowed his strokes or completely changed his rhythm. Each time she wanted to weep in desperate need. She thrashed in his hold, but still he didn't give her what she wanted.

And then she knew. He wasn't going to until she gave him what he wanted. She stopped struggling to keep any control and gave into the temptation, gave into the urge to just let everything go. Let him take over. Under any other circumstances she would have laughed at the sense of male triumph she felt through the bond.

He robbed her of the power of speech or anything else, however. She couldn't even moan. He sucked her clit between his teeth and didn't let go until she was shaking, until she was screaming his name and begging him to fuck her.

He didn't make her ask twice. He moved up her body with werewolf speed, claiming her lips in an almost brutal kiss as his cock thrust into her. He took her hard and fast, and she wrapped her legs around his hips to hold on. Her body on fire, another orgasm building fast, and she knew he was close too. A damned shame. She didn't want this feeling to ever stop.

But of course, it had to. She came, the most intense orgasm she'd ever experienced. It felt as if her mind splintered, her body shattered. She wasn't sure if she knew how to put the pieces back together and when Anthony came too, whispering *I love you* in her ear, she doubted she ever would.

Chapter Seven

Soft tapping on the door roused Gia from a deep sleep. She snuggled into the male body wrapped around her and tried to tune it out. Tapping became knocking, and Anthony rolled out of bed before she could protest. He pulled his discarded pants on and opened the door just enough to stick his head out. She didn't need his superior hearing to know something was wrong. His back stiffened, and he turned his head to look at her.

"We'll be right down," he said as he shut the door. Sighing, she got up and caught the clothes he tossed her. Looked like the honeymoon was over. Back to work. She watched him from the corner of her eye as she dressed. He looked disapproving when she strapped her weapons back on. Tough shit. Did he expect her to change just because he'd claimed her? She gave him a challenging look.

"You can't expect me to like it, baby."

"I'm a hunter. You knew that when you met me. You knew that when you *bit* me."

"I know," he answered softly. "I'm not trying to change who you are, Gia. That doesn't for one minute mean I'm happy about you putting yourself in danger though."

So the man could bend a little after all. She smiled. Teased. "I think I'm pretty safe with the big bad wolf watching out for me."

He chuckled, ushering her out the door. He stayed behind her. Once she'd thought that was because he enjoyed ogling her ass, but maybe it was just as much a protective instinct. She frowned. There was too much she didn't know about him, but he seemed to know everything about her. He'd been wheedling information out of her bit by bit for months. He'd got her last secret with the story about her parents. Speaking of which, where was her father? She was waiting when the others entered the office, but no sign of Arthur.

"Where is he?"

Asa rubbed the back of his neck, a disgusted look on his face. "Gone."

"How? When?" Anthony sat quietly while she asked questions. He must have been told during that whispered conversation at the door.

"We didn't search him well enough. He had a cell phone. I went in to take it when it rang, but instead he got me with a chair."

"You're kidding." She couldn't quite keep the disbelief or censure out of her voice.

"I wish I was."

Just when she was beginning to believe maybe his story was true. But did an innocent man run? She had an unwelcome, disturbing thought. He would if he was obsessed with one prey in particular. If killing that man meant more to him than proving his innocence. "Fuck," she muttered.

"What?" Anthony asked.

"He went after Burns." She couldn't prove it, but it's what she would do in his position. If he was telling the truth, and some time in the night, she'd started to hope he was.

Anthony's cursing was more colorful and lasted longer than hers. When he fell silent, she asked, "Now what?"

"We track him." His voice was rough, almost as much wolf as man. Acting on instinct, the visceral fear any human would feel confronted with a werewolf, she backed away a step. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flared, as the focus of his anger shifted. She lifted her chin in the air. She trusted him, damn it. It was a move born purely of instinct. He couldn't fault her for that.

"Let's get going then," she said, ignoring his ire and its cause.

He didn't move, didn't blink, but she swore she could see him thinking. Could hear the words before they were even spoken. He was going to try to order her to stay behind. He was going to do the thing he'd promised not to and try to change her. He smiled, but there was nothing nice about it. She must have looked as mutinous as she felt. What could she say? It was a personal failing.

"Still don't trust me, Gia?"

She shrugged, unable to resist the taunt. "Guess we'll see. Do you trust me?"

"And on that note, gentlemen," Clint said wryly, "it's time for us to vacate the premises."

They were all too happy to do that. The traitors. They could have stayed around to stick up for her. But, no, Clint shut the door behind them with a final sounding thud. And Anthony prowled closer. The look in his eyes, a cross between anger and desire and possession had her backing up. Careful measured steps until her back hit the wall.

"Going somewhere, baby?" he asked, pressing his body against hers. His erection pushed against her belly, and at the contact, her womb fluttered. She took a shaky breath.

"Wasn't planning on it."

"But you're backing away from me."

"Not anymore," she said sarcastically, but she couldn't miss the flash of hurt in his eyes and she softened. "You had that look on your face. The wolf in your voice."

"What look?"

"The one that says you want to kill someone. Or something."

He sighed, leaned his forehead against hers. "I would never hurt you. One day maybe you'll believe that."

She lifted her hands to cup his face, rubbed her thumbs over his cheekbones. "I do know that. It was just an instinctive move." She rolled her eyes. Joked. "You're as alpha as they come. You don't ever back down. I don't always have that luxury." Realizing she'd handed him ammunition to lock her up to keep her safe, she rushed to add, "Which doesn't make me weak. Or incapable of doing the job."

He heaved a sigh. "Yeah, I was wondering if there was a way to keep you from the hunt. It isn't because I can't trust you to watch your back and mine."

She believed him. Before. But now he was acting under the protective impulses of a mated wolf. "What then?" she asked softly, challenging his assertion.

"I can't lose you." Baldly said. Raw fear in his voice. "You saw your father. Whether he killed her or not, your mother's death destroyed him. Badly enough he never even tried to contact his only child."

"Which is a damned good reason never to have kids." The possibility scared the hell out of her. God, more than possible. They hadn't used protection once. She hadn't even thought of it, and she was always extra careful. He gave her his best *wanna bet* grin and she slapped his arm. "Not funny."

He sobered. "No. And I was trying to think of a way to protect you that, yes, you wouldn't have liked. But I knew I'd never follow through. See? I'm dealing with the fear."

She glared at him, trying to hide the tenderness welling in her throat. "The baby thing is not negotiable."

He stepped back and looked her up and down, gaze lingering over her stomach. "It could be too late for that kind of negotiation." Something in his expression made her think he knew more than he was saying, and she refused to ask. It just didn't seem right that he could smell changes in her body before she felt them.

A commotion in the hall interrupted the conversation. The office door flew open, banged against the wall, and Julian stalked in. He was just as angry, dangerous, and alpha as Anthony had been moments ago. Carlos and Sunny followed him in.

"What's going on?" Anthony asked, cocking his head to one side. She understood why. It was rare to see Julian on the edge of control. Gia doubted Anthony ever had.

"You let him escape?" His voice shook with fury.

"Not on purpose," Anthony answered dryly. He took her hand in his, thumb soothing over her knuckles. "We were just going after him."

"Gia is not. I'll go."

"Gia is my mate and a grown woman. She's made her choice. Neither one of us has to like it, but we do have to live with it."

Sunny smiled and gave her a thumbs up. The other predator in the room, Carlos, scowled fiercely, but kept his protest to himself. Good. She'd hate to get blood all over her carpet. She wasn't fighting it anymore. Anthony was hers, and this was her home. She stepped in front of him and glared at Julian.

"He's right. This is my choice." From the corner of her eye, she saw Declan slip in. Great. She could deal with both uncles at once.

"Why didn't you kill him last night?" he demanded of Anthony.

"There were unanswered questions."

"Dad claims he didn't kill Mom." She realized with the slip of the honorific she'd decided she did believe him. Julian looked stunned. Whether at the revelation or her belief in his innocence she couldn't say.

"That's crazy. He's just trying to save his own skin."

"And you're just trying to avenge your sister's death," Declan said quietly.

Julian spun around to confront him. "You, of course, bought every word of it, didn't you?"

The werewolf shrugged. "I never believed he did it. You know that."

"Then why did he escape? Tonight and sixteen years ago. He abandoned his daughter. His brother. His pack."

Every were in the room was uncomfortable with the question. The tension level shot through the room.

Carlos was the one who answered, and she wondered at the pain she heard in his voice. "It's a kind of madness to lose your mate. Your mind is never right again. Most weres, no matter their species, don't survive it."

"Another bond can be created," Sunny offered. "We know of cases where that's happened." She was referring to a couple in the Appalachian pack. The woman had been mated to someone else. When he died, another wolf claimed her.

"That was not a true mating," Carlos said. "To lose a true mate is the closest you can get to death yet still live."

Julian considered that. "Maybe. But that doesn't excuse his running. Leaving his child."

She wished he'd quit harping on that. Yeah, it'd been painful. A pain she'd forced herself to live with for years. But she'd been sixteen, old enough to fend for herself with an uncle who loved her to help.

"No, it doesn't excuse anything. But it's in the past, and we can't change it." She held up her hand to forestall the next complaint. "And no, it doesn't prove his innocence. Maybe we can satisfy your questions to that when we catch up with him."

"He's slick," he said bitterly. "You think I didn't try to track him?"

"We'll find him, Julian. We'll find your answers," Anthony said.

Chapter Eight

They tracked him for a week before deciding to regroup. Gia stared at the large map pinned to the wall, the thumbtacks stuck in it. They marked every reported sighting of Arthur, but by the time they got a hunter into position, he'd be long gone.

Ellen rushed into the room, face flushed, almost shoving Gia out of her way. She had a roll of twine in her hand. "Got an idea," she said in response to Gia's startled look.

Anthony was still lounging in his chair behind his desk, and the other weres had followed Ellen in. Clint caught her gaze and shrugged. He didn't know what Ellen was thinking either.

"It looks random, right?" Ellen asked while unraveling the twine. She wrapped it under the base of the first tack, representing where they stood now. But instead of going to each tack in order, she stretched it out in an almost straight line. She stood back and grinned. "He's trying to make it look like he's moving randomly, but he has a purpose."

Gia frowned at the map. It did look like that, but why all the subterfuge? Unless he knew someone else was following him. "Where's he going?"

Anthony had come from his desk to stand before her. Declan, Asa, and Clint all edged forward to get a better look. "Shit," Declan muttered.

"Yeah," Clint agreed.

"What?"

Ellen took pity on her. "If he sticks to this pattern, he'll end up in Miami. We're pretty sure that's where the Society is headquartered." The Society was made up of rogue wolves, those who'd turned their backs on the rules all weres followed and who looked at humans as prey.

"He won't get in there alone," Clint said, and she remembered a rumor she'd heard long ago, that he had once infiltrated the Society.

"We have to go after him. We can't let him walk into that alone." Fear was a foul taste in her mouth. She'd just found her dad. She didn't want to lose him again so quickly.

"No," Declan and Asa said together.

She turned to protest, and Anthony pressed against her back, wrapping one strong arm across the front of her shoulders. She leaned into the embrace, into his heat and strength.

Declan smiled at her. "Don't worry, Gia. He won't be left to fend for himself. But we aren't letting any mated wolf go on this mission. It's too dangerous."

She knew there was no way in hell she would win this argument, but she was contrary by nature enough to try. Declan shook his head at her, his smile rueful now. "Don't even try it. Asa and I will go. We know a couple others that might want to tag along."

"Hey, don't I get a say in this?" Asa mock complained.

"Nope. I'm bigger and meaner, and I say you're going," Declan jabbed back. She'd become so used to their bantering insults she laughed reflexively.

"Okay. Okay. I get that I'm overruled. Just...keep me posted."

"I will." He indicated Anthony with a jerk of his chin. "Keep an eye on him. He's trouble."

Anthony growled. A week ago she might have started, but she knew him well enough now to know there was no menace in the growl. Declan and Asa hurried from the room to prepare for their trip. They were leaving as soon as they packed.

Hours later she lay in the dark next to Anthony unable to sleep. There was a very good chance her father wouldn't survive his hunt and that Asa and Declan wouldn't survive their rescue mission. She felt bad for putting them in danger, even knowing it was their job, but she was happy she didn't have to risk Anthony. He'd become too important to lose over the past few days. No, scratch that. Over the past few months.

"You're thinking too much." He'd been asleep, and his voice was that sexy drowsiness that made her crazy with want. "I can feel your worry."

The strength of the bond had scared her at first. It didn't leave her much privacy. He always knew if she was sad or happy, content or angry. Horny. He rolled over on top of her, his thick cock sliding into her. He thrust slowly, shallowly. Took his time. Comforting more than anything else at first.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"We live in a screwed up world."

"We do," he said and waited for her to go on.

"I hate sending friends into danger."

"Sometimes it's unavoidable."

She met his gaze, and her heart rate accelerated. So much love in those icy blue eyes. She didn't want that look to ever fade. And she knew that she wasn't being fair. He told her he loved her all the time, but she'd withheld the words. Denied him the knowledge. *Just say it, Gia. It'll be easier next time.*

He watched her expectantly.

"I love you," she blurted out.

He looked surprised for a moment, but then he smiled and leaned down to kiss her. It was a long, slow, soul-consuming kiss. His cock thrust deeper, adding speed to his rhythm. Slowly increasing her pleasure, cautiously pushing her towards orgasm.

He tore his mouth from hers, kissing a trail across her face, down to her neck.

"I know, baby," he whispered in her ear. "I feel it every time you look at me. Every time you touch me. Every time you come for me."

He hit the perfect sweet spot on her neck, kissing his mark, lightly biting it. "I love you too," he went on in a whisper. Then continued to show her the ways.

Author Bio

Loribelle is like the South she calls home. Hot and sultry. Languid and sexy. Magnolias and gardenias scent her silk-lined boudoir, and men and children alike bow to her magnificence...

Okay, maybe it isn't quite that glamorous. She does have two smart and lovely daughters who give her a run for her money and a son that will one day be someone's model of a romance hero. (She promises.) Her husband is a real-life hero, and Loribelle just tries to keep up with the demands of military life. In between, she writes a book or two.

She's had every job under the sun, but haven't most writers? That Army military police, bookstore manager, waitress, wedding photographer, website designer experience has to come in useful sometimes. As they say in the South, it all washes out in the end.

She loves hearing from her readers and can be found at <http://www.loribellehunt.com>.