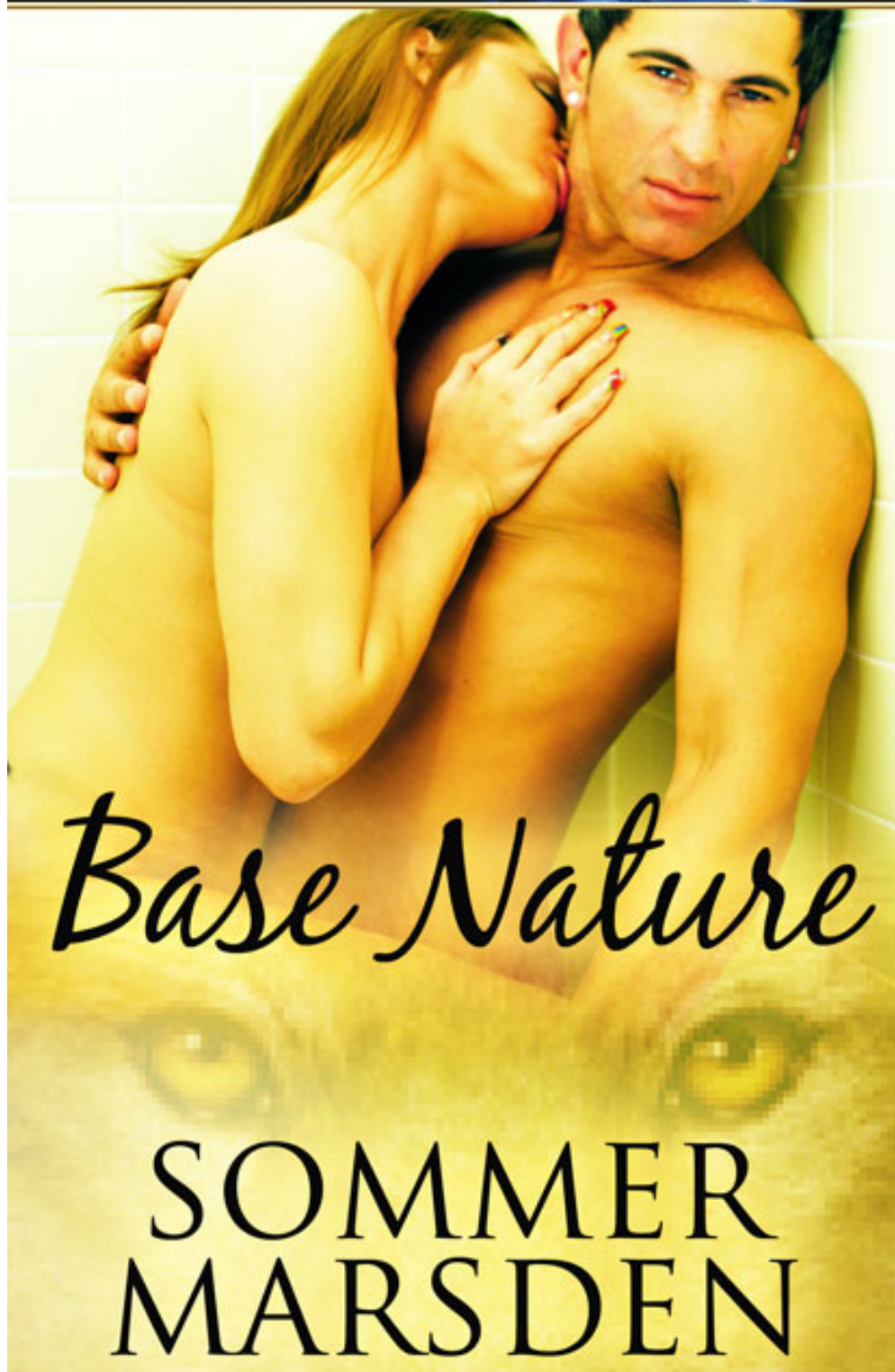


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Base Nature
Sommer Marsden

When Garrett Gustafson breaks from his pack, it's all about distance. He doesn't expect to meet a long-tortured woman or someone he wants so bad his teeth damn near ache. He most definitely doesn't expect to meet a woman he'd even consider changing. Changing is frowned upon and dangerous. But Liv McCoy not only captures his heart, she tempts him. Tempts him to take her, to change her and even to love her.

Liv McCoy has been the weak one all her life. All she wants is a little power. When Garrett shows up she feels an unspeakable pull. Not just to give herself over to him in bed, but to offer all of herself—heart, body and soul. Garrett can give her power. She just needs to convince him that she can handle the change. And his love.

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Base Nature

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BASE NATURE

Sommer Marsden

Dedication

For the man. Forever and ever, amen.

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XOXOs

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Prologue

Restless

He felt it right under his skin like mild electricity. The restlessness zipped and zinged along his arms and legs, making him shake as if he could throw it off. If only it were that easy. To just get free of the feeling that almost resembled craving. But Garrett knew it wasn't that easy and it had taken him all of his thirty-one years to get to the point where it was as mild as a craving. Once upon a time, it had been a need. It had been violent and swift and savage. The cyclical sweep of his natural desires had to be managed, as all urges did. But it hadn't and here he was, two days from the full moon, wondering why he felt it more intensely this month. Why it was so overpowering. Something was coming, intuition told him so. He had used his extra sense long enough to trust it. So why was he lying to himself?

Garrett shook his head, turned his car into the driveway and cut the engine.

"Not something, man. *Someone*," he said to no one and ran a hand through his hair. It was shaking.

So someone was coming and he was scared. This couldn't be good.

Chapter One

Remembrance

Liv sat up straight. The blankets puddled around her middle and her heart banged restlessly. "It's okay, it's okay," she said to the empty room.

Brisk air flowed in through the cracked open window and somewhere far off a dog howled into the lightening dawn. All the hair on her neck stood up and she shivered. Stupid dreams. Stupid, vibrant dreams. No matter how hard she worked to put the past behind her, the dreams couldn't be escaped.

Her feet hit the frigid hardwood floor and she felt around with her toes, hoping to find her slippers. The dream was the same one she always had. Walking through the narrow row-home to the sound of her stepfather hitting her mother. Rick Reed would hit Liv's mother, Margaret, over and over and over while she begged. Her mother would promise and plead and above all else, she would try to stay quiet so Liv would not hear. But Liv always heard.

If she went to find her mother, try to help, it only got worse.

Liv stood, finding one slipper and then the other. She slid them on and padded into the hall. There would be no more sleep for her. It was best to just accept it now and start her day. She turned the bathroom light on with shaking hands and sighed. "You're thirty years old, Olivia. Don't you think it is time to let go of this?" But that is not what Dr. Sanders had told her to say. She tried again, "I am a strong, grown woman. I am in control of my surroundings and my life. I am secure and safe and empowered."

When she finished relieving herself and finally climbed into the shower, she was still chilly and had started to cry.

"Another fabulous night, I see," Ellen said.

"I've had better." Liv typed the statistics into the computer file and hoped that her friend would let it go. Ellen was a wonderful friend but she could be a bit aggressive when it came to her opinion.

"Wouldn't it be better if you went ahead and made an appointment instead of torturing yourself?"

"Don't need one."

"You have circles under your eyes that look like you should be on a football field."

"Football?" Liv laughed.

"You know, that crap they smear under their eyes." Ellen threw her hands up. "Okay, you look like shit. That's what I mean. Does that make sense?"

Liv tried not to smile and failed. "Roger that. I'm fine. Really. I just didn't get enough sleep."

"And why is that, Livvie?" Ellen turned from her computer and attacked her already short nails with a nail file. If Dick, the office manager, caught her doing that, she was toast.

"Because I didn't?"

"Because you dreamed of it all over again, yes? Because you had the same nightmares you've had forever and a day. And they are all being aggravated by that prick Kevin calling here."

Liv put her head down, determined not to get upset. Kevin was calling, sure, but she was a big girl and she could handle it. He was just a guy and if she felt the need, she would pick up the phone and dial 9-1-1 and let them handle him.

"Liv," Ellen sighed, rolling toward her on her desk chair, "you have to get that man gone. Get him out of your life. You had to deal with a violent ass all through your growing-up years, you should not have to deal with a guy who hits you now."

"I'm not dealing with him. He's gone."

"He's not gone if he's calling you. He's just harassing you via phone as opposed to in person."

Ellen's lips were set in a thin, tight line and it hurt Liv to see it. She just wanted things to be better. She just wanted to get through this. "I'll work it out. I promise."

"You can't let him rule your life."

"I won't."

The phone rang and they both stared at it. The truth was it could be anyone. Anyone at all. She was at work, after all. So why was she so sure it was him?

"It's that asshole," Ellen hissed, confirming Liv's suspicion.

For some reason that struck her as extremely funny. Liv started to laugh. She heard herself and felt panic in her belly. Even to her own ears, her laugh sounded high and anxious. "Hello?" Her hands shook and her stomach flip-flopped.

"Hello, Livvie," he said and she closed her eyes.

"I don't want to talk to you, Kevin." Her voice was shaking to match her hands. She should have hung up but hadn't quite managed the part of her that told her she was allowed to do that. She could hang up, shut the door, not listen. She could break free. But some damaged part of her had yet to put this into effect. Most days, Liv tried to look at that as progress. The fact that she realized she had it in her to turn her back. It was just a matter of getting to the point where she did it, all the time. Took control of the situation. Today was not that day it seemed.

"See, there, you don't have to *talk*. You just have to listen. I'll be there tonight to pick you up. We need to talk. Or I need to talk and you need to hear," he said.

"I can't."

"You will."

"I'm busy," she lied.

"You're lying," he said.

How many times had he verbally abused her before he'd hit. And then how many times had he hit before she'd finally, with the help of friends like Ellen, broken free? Too many. And how many times would he keep creeping back to see if she would break, or if her support system could be fractured as it were? Liv felt that the answer was probably too many. He would just keep coming until something changed. It could only be her.

"I am. I am lying. I don't want to see you, Kevin. Ever. I don't want to see you ever again."

"Careful, Liv." His voice held menace and a smile. Kevin always did have a sick sense of fun.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Sure. Hang up on me then."

Liv could hear that tone in his voice. The same tone that Rick always used with her mom and then later that day or night she would hear him striking her. Only twice had he started hitting her in front of Liv but many times Liv had walked in on the violence. Too damn many.

"I..."

"Come on, brave, brave Livvie. Hang up the phone. Tell me to fuck off. Tell me you hate me. Tell me you never ever want to see me again and that you don't still love me."

Ellen had slunk closer and now she pressed her head to Liv's head. Her blonde hair tickled along Liv's jaw and Liv shivered from the crawling sensation. Her hands were cold, her heart heavy. Her mouth so dry she felt like she could drink a gallon of water. "I..."

Ellen pulled her head back, frowning. *Tell him* she mouthed. Her lips were pressed into a tight seam and the sense of disapproval was nearly overwhelming to Liv.

"Kevin, I..."

"Careful," he said, his voice full of venom.

"She doesn't love you, nor does she want to talk to you, and you, Kevin McHale, are a turd," Ellen hissed and hit the button with her finger and cut him off. "There," she said, turning. Her back was rigid with anger and her fists were clenched.

"There," echoed Liv but she felt that wasn't quite the end of it. Fear snaked up her spine. She did her best to ignore it.

The day passed slowly. The way a day will pass when you are dreading an event that's coming. Liv tried her best to put the sound of Kevin's voice out of her head. "I give up," she said to herself in the mirror.

"No you don't," Ellen said, coming out of the stall by the door.

Liv jumped. "Jesus. You scared me. I do. I give up, El. I can't be this...beaten down any more."

"You just need to find your power. Like the good doc said. Like *I* said," she laughed. "God knows my opinion trumps any doctor's." Ellen winked at her in the mirror. Her reflection as vibrant and bright and strong as the woman herself. Liv envied her more than she could fathom at that point in time. When would she feel that strong? Ever?

"I'm trying."

"Try harder," Ellen said. She hugged Liv and pulled her out of the restroom. "Now onward and upward. Go home, take a hot shower, put your feet up. Pour yourself some wine, honey. And remember, that ass has no more power over you than you give him. Don't give him any."

"Don't give him any," Liv repeated. Easier said than done.

* * * * *

The shower was a brilliant idea. It was exactly what she needed. Liv stepped in and replayed the nightmare of a day. Examining the worries was the only way she had found to get them to up and leave her thoughts. The beating had been taking place in her mother's pristine white bedroom. So much like her own, she realized. Liv didn't need a shrink to point out that she was in fact re-creating and keeping the white, blood-free existence her mother had strived for.

Where Margaret tried to keep a crisp white room, it always ended dotted in blood. Rick made sure of that. He had once, to Liv's recollection, called it decorating. *Let's decorate your pretty white sheets, Marge* and then the sounds of hitting. Liv would see the sheets, speckled like fancy Easter eggs, with a burgundy pattern of light spray. Bloody noses only. Rick was careful to not leave her mother black and blue.

"He used it as stress release," Liv said to the bathroom ceiling and then she laughed. The laugh was high and tense. The laugh of a crazy person. All this time, this worry should be gone. This fear should be gone. By now fear should be her friend, instead it was her tormentor. Liv was tired of the fear.

But she didn't know how to fix it.

Something banged in the bedroom. A sharp sound from the far side of the wall, audible even over the shower's hiss. Liv froze, trying to figure what it could be. The windows were closed to the October chill. She didn't have a pet. Her nipples went taut with a sudden chill despite the hot blast of water. Goose bumps sprang up on her skin and without thinking Liv said, "Hello?"

Now whoever or whatever it might be was aware that she knew of its presence. She left the water running but slid the curtain back. The stark white bathroom assaulted her eyes. The overhead lamp blazed, the heating element glowed amber in the ceiling. The window was cracked open and she could see a slip of her backyard through the space.

Liv pulled her heavy red robe on and tied it. Her hair shed droplets of water, already cooling as it ran down her neck.

Jesus, I'm having a heart attack...

She glanced around the room, her heart banging painfully hard. There was nothing she could use as a weapon. Nothing heavy or long enough to hold a person off. There was no phone in the bathroom and her cell was down on the dining room table. Another small bang came. Almost as if the person was playing with her. "Hello," Liv whispered but no one could hear. Finally, she shut off the water so she could hear better.

There was a creak and a shuffle that did not belong in her solitary home. Liv bit her lip, forcing herself to stay calm and not to cry. A dry raspy sound came from the door. It was up just a bit, she hadn't locked it.

"Livvie?" came Kevin's voice.

Liv found her face in the steamed-over mirror. Big eyes, pale cheeks. Fear. She pushed her shoulders back, determined not to let him hear. Now was not the time to break. "Get out of here, Kevin!" she yelled.

It sounded weak but she had managed.

"Livvie," he said again, his voice plaintive but dark. A man pretending to be sorry. Pretending to be apologetic.

"Now, Kevin!" She opened the medicine cabinet as quietly as she could. It barely made a sound and that small sound was probably inaudible to anyone but her. And Liv was shocked she could hear anything at all over the wild knocking of her heart.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Liv."

Liv heard him sigh the way he did when he felt she had been silly or stupid or angered him. He'd often sighed that way before he hit her. She grabbed a pair of tweezers from the second shelf of her medicine cabinet. Worst-case scenario, if she could manage it, she'd go straight for the eyes. "Go now, Kevin!"

Nothing. No sound, no whispers, no creaks of the ancient hallway floor. Nothing at all, as if nothing more than a bad dream or a specter had been in her house. Liv wondered for a brief moment if she was in fact insane. If she had imagined him being there. She swung the door open and on the pristine carpet was a smooth stone from her garden out front. His little way of assuring her that he had indeed come by. That he had been in her house and she hadn't let him in.

Liv kicked the stone to the side of the hall and peeked around her bedroom door. Nothing. The window was now raised. Which meant that Kevin had hopped easily enough onto the banister of her porch, boosted himself onto the small red roof and then pushed her unlocked window up. Liv rushed forward and pushed the window shut. She heard him coming before she could push it back up to call out for help.

First she felt his big dark presence, then the vibration of his footsteps on her old, faded country carpet before he hit her. She barely got to turn. She didn't get to wield

her deadly tweezers because Kevin hit her with a solid shoulder. Like the football player he used to be. Like the angry man he was. He hit her in the belly with the curve of his shoulder and carried her down to the floor with his bulk.

Liv managed one good scream before he shoved his palm across her lips. His angry face was inches from hers. His hand covered her mouth and part of her nose and he said, "Hi there, Livvie. Did you miss me? I missed you, baby. You ready to have some fun?"

He pushed at her robe and Liv tried to scream but it was all lost behind a big, strong hand.

Chapter Two

Action

Garrett set the shovel down. He raised his head, sniffed. A small sound had set his teeth on edge. His muscles went rigid and a cold kind of awareness flooded his system. He cocked his head, listening above the normal sounds of the traffic and the birds and the squirrels who were damn near berserk gathering acorns from his tree. He heard the tick-tock of the clock in the kitchen, the wheeze of the ancient sump pump in the crappy basement of his brand-new shiny fixer-upper. He heard the worms in the earth he had been weeding and he heard the couple next door having sex. What he did not hear was the sound that had made his blood sing.

He inhaled again, deeply, catching the scent of flowers and shower and woman. The hot water smell carried a light scent of lavender and a woman who was not presently ovulating. "You're being creepy," he muttered to himself. If any of his new neighbors looked out to see him sniffing at the air like a hound dog on a suspect's trail, they'd talk. It was better to be careful when away from the group. He had decided on a solitary life, so he needed to watch out for himself. He was now a pack of one.

There it was again. A small and startled *Mmph!* that was gone before it registered. He sniffed again as subtly as possible and his nose picked up the strong burning hair smell of fear. He felt it again and tensed. The same feeling as this morning, the sensation right under his skin like mild electricity. This was who was coming. The person who had made that startled small sound.

Garrett hopped the fence and followed his nose. If his neighbors saw, he'd have to deal with it later. He'd tell them all he'd run track in high school. Had been an expert at hurdles. That he was a super hero. He'd tell them anything at all but the truth.

Across the street, his boot found the railing and he jumped to the roof above. He really hoped he was on the money with this or he had a lot of explaining to do. Garrett didn't trust much in his life right now but he always trusted his instincts above anything else. He had heard what he had heard and smelled what he had smelled. "And here we are," he said and dived head first through the window pane.

Christ. He hoped he was right.

The force carried him down to the hardwood floor and he grabbed the plaid shirt of the man who was holding down the woman he had smelled. The smell of fear was thick and sickening. Garrett heard himself yelling, he heard the growl and the danger in his tone and tried to tamp it down. He tossed and hustled and moved the big man, growling and yelling the entire time. All the while in the back of his mind he reminded himself not to change.

Do not turn, man. Do not...do not. They'll come for you if you do. If you're visible. If you end up in the news.

He didn't turn but he quite literally chunked the big man down the flight of stairs and watched him tumble to the faded Oriental carpet below on the first floor. The intruder stood, rearing up with bravado and bluff.

"Come back and I'll kill you," Garrett informed him.

The man yelled a bunch of angry words that made no sense to Garrett because he could hear her crying. The girl who smelled like lavender and smelled like burnt hair. He turned his back on the man, unafraid of what he thought he could do to Garrett because Garrett knew that the man could really do nothing at all. And if he showed the stranger what he was, it would end right there.

He walked softly so he wouldn't startle her. But she still backpedaled on her hands and feet when he entered. Her big red robe tripped her clumsy crab-walk up and she fell on her butt with a small cry. "You're..." she started. It was lost in sobbing. He could see her hands shaking, he could smell the muddy yellow stink of menace in the room. Maybe he wouldn't have raped her but the smell in here was very close. Brutality, cruelty, masochism.

"Sorry to barge in," he laughed, trying to be funny. She frowned and Garrett found himself mimicking her expression.

"Your eyes are silver," she said in a small voice.

"More grayish-blue on a cloudy day," he joked, looking away quickly.

"No. They're silver. Like coins."

Damn. She wasn't supposed to notice. It was rare for humans to notice. Very rare.

"I think it's the light. Maybe you need a stronger bulb." He pointed to the ceiling fan and the one softly glowing bulb shaped like a tear drop.

"No. They are. Silver like chrome. Silver like, well...silverware."

Garrett could smell blood and he frowned, moving forward to check her over. "Hey, I'm Garrett, your brand-new shiny neighbor. Are you hurt then?"

"Shiny silver neighbor," she said but more to herself than him. Then she sat up straight. "Kevin!"

"Is that his name? He's gone."

"Gone, how?" She narrowed her eyes at him and pulled her red robe tight.

"I escorted him out. He's left the building. Like Elvis only not as beloved."

She smiled for a split second and he took the chance to squat down and give her a visual once-over. A small trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth. The smell filled his head. Her blood, her warmth, the lavender, the innate femaleness of her entire being. He felt the cold unusual prickle from earlier turn to molten, malleable want.

"See, they're silver!" Before he could react, she stabbed him in the forearm with something sharp. Garrett threw his head back and roared.

"Jesus Christ, woman! What was that for?" He hadn't meant it to sound so harsh. Even with the bleeding and everything, he didn't want to scare her. But she was scared, the smell of her fear was nearly choking him. "Hey, I'm sorry. Clearly you're a bit..."

"They're blue now," she said. But she crab-walked a little farther away from him. Out from under him really, as he'd been leaning over her. She backed up, tugging her robe from where it had snagged on his boot. He let her go as far as she wanted. Garrett had a feeling that was the point. She wanted to make sure that he wasn't as dangerous as the asshole he'd just tossed out.

"What are?" He was so confused. And bleeding. But the flow was slowing and soon the skin would begin to knit. Then she'd see. Garrett hurriedly pulled his shirt sleeve down over the wound.

"Your eyes. They're blue now. The silver is gone."

"Told you." He smiled and stood, giving her the space he could tell she needed.

"But they were silver. I know they were." She frowned and started to stand. Her legs shook as did her hands. Garrett offered her his and after a moment's hesitation, she took it. "Don't you want a bandage?"

"For what?"

Garrett stared at her pale full lips. He would focus on helping her and the danger she had just been in. He would focus on who that big mean guy had been. He would focus on making her feel safe and in control. What he would not focus on was the mild warmth that seemed to course up his arm and the twitch of excitement in his belly. He certainly would not let himself consider the brief but explicit mental image of having her that flashed through his mind. He shook his head, plastering a smile on his face.

"Well, I pretty much stabbed you so most people would require a bandage for that." She pushed at his sleeve and he stilled her hand with his. Gently but he stilled it. His eyes found hers, big and dark and haunted. His cock wanted to come to life but he gritted his teeth and tried to think of things other than how he could feel her heartbeat banging through his fingertips from where they touched her pulse at her wrist. His eyes betrayed him, darting to where her robe had fallen open a bit. The blush-colored crescent of her right nipple visible. He cleared his throat and shook his head.

She caught his eye and gathered her robe closed with one hand. It wasn't shaking as much, Garrett was happy to see.

"It wasn't as bad as you think. Just a scratch," he lied.

"Liv," she said.

He cocked his head, heard her pulse rate jack up from the small movement and tried not to smile. He could smell her attraction as clear as blooming roses, though it smelled more like the earthy smell of a garden to him. "Um..."

"My name. My name is Liv. Short for Olivia. And thank you for, you know," she glanced down, eyeing the shattered glass and the busted part of the wood window frame. "For saving me."

Garrett couldn't help it. He barked laughter so hard his stomach cramped. What a fucking mess. "I'm Garrett. And I'm going to use your front door and leave. I'll hop over to my house and grab a piece of plywood. We can cover this until tomorrow. I'll get a new pane and all that jazz."

"Hey, better a broken window than..." she trailed off, going pale under the dark blonde hair that hung in wet tangles around her face. "The alternative." She shrugged and he eyed the flutter and bang of her blood at her throat and temples.

Garrett reached out but stopped himself when she cringed. "Why don't you get dressed, Liv? I'll check everything downstairs and go grab that stuff I need."

She nodded. Dark brown eyes swimming with tears she refused to shed. Garrett didn't think he'd ever seen anyone look more haunted in his life. Or stubborn.

Not unless you count the reflection in the mirror.

"I will. Thank you and it's nice to meet you, Garrett."

"I'd shake your hand but I'm afraid of what you'd do to me," he joked.

She smiled. "That's funny." She turned before he could see the tears start to fall but Garrett could smell the saltwater, ocean smell of them just the same.

* * * * *

He was so big. Liv shoved her legs into her faded Levi's. The ones that always made her feel sexy and pretty and sane. "He's so big," she said, standing in her walk-in closet. When had he moved in across the street? She had known that Peter and Sylvia had put the house on the market when they separated, she just hadn't been aware that they had actually sold it.

That showed how much she was focused inward instead of outward. The house sat directly across from hers and the yard was visible from her living room. The view provided her a clear glimpse of both the front and backyard. Or most of it anyway. "How did you miss him, Liv, he's so big."

And he was big. Big and imposing but in an entirely different way from Kevin. Whereas Kevin seemed to suck up all the light and air in a room like a dark force, Garrett was a towering presence of calm. Even when she'd been stabbing him, he had radiated calm. "Now that's some damn calm," she sighed and pulled a long gray turtleneck on. No need to look enticing. Big and calm and sexy or not, she had no interest in men. Men only seemed to intimidate, crush and destroy. Not what she needed.

"Hello?" He was back and her heart jumped erratically. She felt nauseous and giddy and happy all in one fell swoop. Because she was clearly insane.

"I'm up here! Coming!" Liv stumbled out of the closet clutching her shoes. When she hit the hallway he was already halfway up the steps, carrying a large section of plywood and a tool box. "Thanks for doing this," she started but he cut her off.

"I was thinking, Liv. Don't you think you should call the cops? Wouldn't that be good? I didn't get a great warm and fuzzy from that guy." Liv watched him clench his jaw at that. The muscles bunched just below the crisp cut of his jaw. The motion forced his pale pink lips together in a tight line that was somehow enticing. Liv wondered what it would be like to kiss him. If she kissed him would his mouth loosen up a bit? Would he not look so aggressive? Because he did right then. He looked stolid and aggressive and some part of her mind piped up with great honor—*protective. He looks protective.*

But that was crazy. That sealed the deal—she was a nut.

"No. No cops. Cops don't do much besides paperwork."

"Well that's—"

"My opinion. Let me help you with that," she rushed on and grabbed the top of the plywood.

He looked at her for a beat too long and her heart sort of twisted in her chest. She couldn't quite breathe. And for the first time in her life a man said, "Whatever you want, Liv."

She thought she might cry right then and there. But more from shock than anything else.

Chapter Three

Watching

Garrett sat in the chair beside the falling-down chain-link fence and watched her pace. Liv would pick up the phone, set it down. Pick it up, set it down. She had currently repeated this action more than a dozen times.

He knew about fear and he knew about anger. It was what had landed him without his pack in a horribly crumbling fixer-upper in the first place. But with one glimmer of a smile, he realized it was also what had landed him across the street from who appeared to be the most indecisive woman on God's green earth. But it wasn't so much indecision as damage that had Liv McCoy—he'd read her mail on the entryway table—doing this nervous kind of dance.

"She's trying to decide whether or not to call the cops." He said it aloud just to hear a voice, even if it was his. He had planted the seed in her mind to report that asshole. He hoped she would.

Finally, she set the phone in its base and poured herself a glass of wine. Garrett could see her clearly through her double-hung front windows. He'd have to tell her in the future to draw her blinds. He watched her hit the lights and come out onto the huge front porch. She sat on the swing and rocked, sipping at the wine. He could smell despair coming off her even from here. Garrett sat far back in the shadows and camouflaging himself was second nature. He didn't fear discovery as he raised his head and sniffed the air to pick up her scent.

Yep, there it was. Despair and worry and something sweeter. Interest. Garrett smiled.

The phone rang in the kitchen. He bolted for it, wondering who would be calling so late. And did he really want to talk to them? But he'd answer the call. He couldn't sit outside and spy on his neighbors all night. He'd keep alert for any sign of trouble over at Liv's place just to be safe.

"Hello?"

"Come back home, Garrett."

"And here I thought you'd try to woo me, Kelly." He grinned despite himself. He could hear the slight squeak and sway of Liv on her porch swing. Even across the street and in the house he could smell the earthen lavender smell of her.

"Come back to the pack."

"No can do. I've got my bachelor pad firmly established. I even have a female in my sights." He was joking but as the words came out of his mouth he recognized the truth in what he was saying. Something in him sprang to life and something else ached.

"A human, I presume?" Kelly asked. There was a smile and a frown in her voice all at once. He'd seen her pull off this complicated expression on many occasions. His love for Kelly was nearly overwhelming. It hurt him to hear the pain in her voice. Pain he had caused.

"Why would you presume?"

"Because I don't know of any other of our kind recklessly living off on their own away from their kind. But that's just me."

He heard the soft laughter in her voice but the comment still cut. "How's Ches?" Kelly's husband Chester was a father-figure to him. Kelly was, for all intents and purposes, Garrett's mother, having raised him from three years old when his own mother died of leukemia. A rarity for wolves.

"Chester is as demanding, cantankerous and wonderful as ever. He's presently ripping down the old barn to build a pen for a new horse. His horse. Correction, his baby, Mathilde."

Garrett laughed. He heard the small, sharp protest of the swing springs across the street. Heard the soft snick and jingle of Liv going inside and shutting her door for the night. He'd get her a dog. He'd rescue a stray after some searching. Something with senses like his to live under the same roof with her. "It's always good to have something to care for."

Garrett hadn't meant it that way but there it was. All these last years wrapped up in a single sentence. He heard Kelly suck in a small breath and blow out a soft sigh. "Garrett... I know how badly you've been hurt. I know how angry you are with me. With us. All of us. But when it comes to these things, we have to consider —"

"The pack. I know. But my loss should have been pack loss," he growled.

"It was."

"And there was no call for repercussions then? My future stolen from me by a single human and there could be no vindication? No justice?" His voice held so much anger that he wanted to simply hang up. He hated talking to Kelly with so much rage in his voice but Garrett knew that hanging up on her would hurt her more than his ire.

"Garrett, we had young ones and we were on the radar. We couldn't go around exacting vengeance. The surrounding neighbors might have taken note. And we can't afford a showdown with a bunch of ignorant humans. Not that they're all ignorant, mind you." He could hear the smile but it did no good. His heart was twisting, bruised and bloodied, it couldn't much handle this particular conversation with grace.

"Not even for a wrongful death? Even for a death that could have—shit—should have been avoided. That man was a drunk and he had two hunting strikes on his record. Drunks should not be out during hunting season."

"Garrett—"

"And they let it slide because he was kin to the sheriff. And what was the result?"

"Eileen."

"My kin, Kelly. *My kin*. My future wife, the woman I loved, the woman who was to bear my young ones. How are we protecting the young ones if we raise them to be timid and weak? If we let the humans take out our own and do nothing, nothing at all, to send the message that it's not okay. That is in fact wrong!" The last words came out in a great burning burst of air. His face was hot, his heart racing. He felt that silver tight wire of choice. He could change or he could get control of himself.

"Garrett. Sweet boy," Kelly said and he could tell she was crying.

"I'm better off alone, Kelly. Give Chester my love. And take good care of yourself because I miss you," he said and hung up the phone.

He was glad he had hung up softly. His first instinct had been to drive the older wall phone into the cradle with enough force to push it into the wall. "But that wouldn't have done anyone any good, would it?"

He put his head down and tried to catch his breath. If he could simply get his pulse under control it would be fine. All he heard at first was the roaring of his own blood in his ears. Then the tick of the clock. Then the few hearty crickets who refused to give up their mating songs to autumn's chill. And then he heard the soft snuffle and whimper carried on a burst of October wind. The dry leaves that clung to the tall trees in his yard almost buried the sound but he'd just heard it on the phone, so his already keen ears were tuned to its mournful nature.

Liv was crying. He pulled the back door shut as he hurried out and down the rickety porch steps that desperately needed replacing. He'd have to do it fast so he couldn't think about it. Thinking about it would introduce logic, logic would rule it out, he'd capitulate to good sense and not go. So better to hurry and outrace his own good sense.

* * * * *

He thought about climbing up the way he had earlier but giving her a heart attack wasn't his intent. So Garrett knocked like a normal, sane man, or the closest he could mimic. The first round of knocks brought her to the steps. He heard the fourth step down the flight squeak as she stood, trying to decide what to do. He called out to her, "Liv! It's me, Garrett, from across the street. I thought I heard something, I thought I'd check on you."

He knocked some more, lighter now, so as not to startle. He could feel her in there weighing her options. Trying to decide whether or not to trust him. And judging by what he had seen of her, he couldn't blame her much. Liv McCoy seemed nearly as damaged as he was. She was right on the other side of the door. Garrett put his palm to the white wood and said more softly, "It's me, Liv, Garrett Gustafson. Can you at least tell me you're okay?"

He heard her breathe, her heart speed up, her eyes blink. It was as if Garrett could hear her being. If he held his breath and focused would he hear her blood flow? Her fingers move? Her hair whisper?

Garrett shook his head to clear it and she said to the crack where door met jamb, "Hold on a second, I'll undo the chain."

She was going to trust him. Garrett wasn't sure why but his body felt a hundred pounds lighter, his mind bright yellow. He felt, in fact, happy. It had been a long, long time.

* * * * *

Entry

"What are you doing here?" Liv pressed her face to the small crack and studied his face. Concern. That was what she saw. Concern and a handsome lean face lit milk-white by moonlight. Something in his face looked mildly haunted. She recognized it because she had seen that particular look in the mirror many times.

"I thought I heard something. I wanted to come check and see if you were okay. That you weren't having..." He warred with himself here, Liv thought. Trying to be vigilant but not scare her. "I wanted to make sure the trash stayed out," he said and grinned.

That simple grin that broke his serious face into boyish lines made her stomach flutter with invisible butterfly wings. She couldn't help but smile back. "How's your arm?" She opened the door wider but still didn't let him in.

Garrett didn't seem to take offense. "Arm?" A car whizzed past and he tensed slightly at the sound. Just enough for her to take note.

"Where I stabbed you. You know? The blood, the cut, the pain. Most people would remember a flesh wound." She cocked her head, studying the light that bounced off his sharp cheekbones, the comma of white light on his dark, dark hair. And the silver shimmer of his eyes when he turned just slightly to the left. She gasped before she could stifle it and took a small step back.

Garrett stood at the opening but didn't step in. He didn't enter and he didn't question her. He waited. If anything, he took a step back into the shadows. "It was not nearly as bad as you thought. It was just a scratch," he said, his voice soft like she was some wild thing easily startled.

Maybe she was.

"Are you a vampire?" she blurted. Her face colored hotly and she actually giggled. It was a high, sort of insane sound. But the dam had broken and the night before and the whole entire shitty day came crashing down around her like a stack of glass dishes shattering around her. Liv started to laugh. Before she could collect herself, she was laughing so hard that tears streamed down her face.

He chuckled darkly from the door. "Can I come in? Are you okay?"

"You are! You are a vampire," she managed. "You can't come in without permission." This too struck her as wildly funny and another wave of laughter washed over her. One might call it hysterical but Garrett Gustafson seemed to find it amusing.

He pushed her door open with long tented fingers. She thought how they looked like a pianist's fingers. Strong but somehow elegant. He put a foot on the tile threshold and stood inside the door. "I can. But I won't. That would be wrong. It would be exactly what your...gentleman caller did earlier. And that was wrong."

In the warm yellow light of her living room lamp he was damn near beautiful. Liv stopped laughing long enough to stare at him. The fine, high cheekbones, the dark, too-long hair, the storm-gray color of his eyes and the washed-out rose color of his lips. He looked like a painting or a poet but better. "It was wrong," she said, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"I know. Now may I come in?" He stood there, on the dark red tile of her entryway and waited.

She wasn't sure what to do with a man who did not barge, demand and bully. "Yes, you may." How formal they were. "How is your arm?"

He pushed his sleeve up revealing a mild tan on his fair freckled skin. That skin was not meant to be tan. It was meant to be pale as cream so that the fragile skin under his eyes looked bruised almost. He really was beautiful. She shook her head, staring at the blush pink mark on his skin. "Fine. See. I told you." He pushed the door shut and looked around. Almost seemed to raise his head as if to smell the air.

"But I stuck it in you!" Liv heard her own words a heartbeat after she said them and tucked her head down, laughing. Her face hotter than hot but all the rest of her pleasantly warm. She felt no fear of him as big as he was. As odd as his eyes appeared. Despite how unusual his nighttime appearance seemed just as she had been giving in to the fear and the stress of the day and letting herself have a good wallowing cry. She inhaled deeply, cleared her throat. "What I mean is, you were bleeding."

"I'm a fast healer. I always have been. Mind if I look around? Secure the perimeter as it were?" He moved toward the living room but stilled until she gave him a short nod.

Liv gathered her sweater tight around her middle and followed behind him, watching him test the locks and the basement door. He tugged the kitchen door and pushed back the curtains to make sure the windows were down.

"But you were bleeding, Garrett." His name felt heavy on her lips. Like she was saying more than just a word. More than just a name. It felt very much like it held power and she licked her lips to cover the nervous tingle in her mouth.

"I was. But I cleaned it up and it wasn't nearly as bad as it seemed." He turned and she was right on his heels. They were very close. Closer than she had realized and Liv could see how long his eyelashes were and how white and neat his teeth were. She saw the caramel spattering of freckles across the fine bridge of his nose and the small bits of

grayish silver mixed into his dark coffee hair. Up close his breath smelled like nighttime and grass and cinnamon. "I..."

He put his hands on her arms, softly. Nothing harsh about his touch. The contact reached out warm tendrils of sensation. Shooting down her arms into her fingertips. Spreading through her belly and lower still. Liv clenched her thighs together to still the warm beating pulse that had started between her legs. It didn't quell the sensation, it only made it worse. She made a small lost sound in her throat and he smiled down at her. "Mind if I check my handiwork upstairs to make sure it's okay?"

Her voice was gone because his hands were still on her and for the first time, she stood very close to a man whose evident power seemed to be intentionally protecting her instead of bullying her. "Sure," she said but it was more of a sigh.

He gently moved her to the side and walked past her. But his voice had gone deeper and he seemed a bit preoccupied. "Good. Thank you, it will make me feel better and then I'll get out of your hair."

"You're not in my hair," she said and then laughed. That had been brilliant. But she followed Garrett's broad back, swathed in a clean but worn denim shirt, up her steps to the second floor. He took a right into the hallway and headed to her bedroom as if he'd been there a thousand times. That thought made the wet beat of her pulse in her pussy that much worse. Would it be inappropriate to jump him and throw him to the bed? She eyed him again. He was way too big. She'd never felt him. It would be like trying to fell a tree or a lamppost.

She smiled and when he fingered the edges of the plywood she felt her body shudder sympathetically. Liv wouldn't mind being that plywood right about now and the thought shocked and thrilled her. "Looks good," Garrett said, turning fast. His eyes flickered silver and then gray again. She didn't feel fear this time. She felt drawn.

"What are you, really?"

"A man. A fast healing, nosy, barging-in-to-check-your-windows man," he said and smiled. The smile didn't touch his eyes. He was lying.

Liv stepped to him, a totally foreign move on her part for unfamiliar men. No matter how nice they might appear. "That's not true." She touched his shirt, right over the place she had driven her tweezers into the skin. "What are you? Who are you?"

He took a step back despite the fact that the look in his eyes said he wanted to step forward. Maybe pull her to him. Whatever the look, he stepped back and grinned, shrugging to appear nonchalant. "Just a nosy neighbor. A Good Samaritan. A traveling window hanger. A —"

Liv leaned in and kissed him. The tingle from where he had touched her was nothing compared to what happened with the kiss. Her lips, her tongue, her chin, all down her throat felt as if it sparkled with a thousand hot little lights. Like Christmas lights or fairy lights. *Or you've finally lost your mind.* But she ignored that nasty voice and leaned into him more. Soaking up the big safe feel of him. The protective vibe that seemed to come off him like a baking kind of heat. The heat of the sun or a summer day

or a warm oven on a cold night. The heat was something that she was not used to but welcomed with a big open heart. "What are you? What? Come on, tell me, please."

"I'm your neighbor."

Liv felt the pull of want. Not normal want, like any woman feels but something more too. Something bigger. Something that nearly felt like it was independent of her. Her hands smoothed over the hard lines and planes of his chest. He made a sound, way down in his chest like he was trying to bury it. She nipped at his bottom lip and pushed her pelvis to the front of his dark brown cords. "I'm sorry," she said and didn't know why. "I'm sorry." She kissed him harder, pushing the front of her to the hard ridge of his cock. A small part of her rejoiced at the small bit of evidence that he wanted her. At least on a physical level.

"Why are you sorry?" That noise in his chest had turned from a rumble and a growl to a deep, choked masculine voice. For just a second she felt him kiss her back. She felt the small pull of his lips at hers as he kissed her. His big hands tangled in her long hair and he pulled her forward just a bit using her locks as a lead. She whimpered but not from fear, from need.

He let her go. Took a step back. Broke the spell.

"I'm sorry because I don't know why I did that," she said. Liv touched her lips like maybe they might tell her the secret as to what had propelled her. "That's not like me. I'm normally..."

He stroked the radiator and she could tell it was simply to give his hands something to do. That touched her for some reason. "Normally what?"

"Afraid," she breathed. It was easy to admit it to Garrett. "I've been afraid for a long time. And most men scare me." She twisted her fingers in her sweater. "A lot."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to scare you."

"You don't."

He grimaced for a split second. "Maybe I should."

"But you don't."

"I should go." He moved to go past her and she caught his hand up in hers as if she had known him forever and ever and trusted him implicitly. Because as crazy as it was, she did.

"Garret, what are you?" She held her breath, hoping she would answer.

"You don't want to know," he growled, his eyes flashing flat silver and hypnotic. And then he had softly, almost soundlessly moved past her and was gone.

Liv heard the door snick shut downstairs. She sat down hard on her bed and touched her lips that still tingled with energy and heat. She wanted to go after him. Was drawn to be with him. Even if she hadn't figured it out. So she'd sit here and count heartbeats while she waited to see what she would do. But she wasn't crying and that was a start.

Chapter Four

Instinct

Garrett stretched out on the bed, feeling more like a corpse than a man hunting sleep. He was wired and confused, no real urge to sleep filled him, but he lay there to try to signal to his stubborn body that it was time to settle down. To let the day go and surrender consciousness so that tomorrow could start a new day. It was only very recently that he did not greet the rising sun with the disappointment of waking to find yet another day to try to live through.

He could hear her heart beating from here. Liv. "But that can't be true," he said to the ceiling. He knew he was really talking to Eileen. He had spent many nights talking to the ceiling. Talking to her and telling her how sorry he was. How sorry he was that he had failed. "It can't be true even for me. I cannot hear her heartbeat."

Garrett sighed, ran a hand through his hair, stilled his hand by his face and inhaled deeply. No, he could not hear her heartbeat from here but he could smell her on his skin. That unique earthy smell of her chemistry and her warm blood and her perfume. Something that was more wood and spice than flowery. His cock stirred and he stolidly ignored it. *How long since you've wanted a woman?*

"Not long enough."

It would be wrong to want someone so soon, he felt. It had been a little less than two years. Some days it felt like two lifetimes, some days like two minutes. His loss was still too fresh to want Liv.

But he did.

He felt the heaviness of warring with himself pull him under. Just enough that he couldn't push thoughts away so readily but not enough that he slept. There was Eileen, her red, red hair and her sharp green eyes. He joked with her, *you look more like a fox than a wolf when you change* and then he would let her chase him, nip at his heels, draw a little blood before flipping her over, baring her belly, pinning her so that even in wolf form she laughed with a wide grin.

Garrett heard himself sigh but the act was strictly overheard. He wasn't physically aware of doing so.

Eileen faded away, her bright vibrant memory withdrawing into darkness and he let himself relax. But just as readily, his tired mind thrust Liv at him. Long, long limbs and streaky blonde hair tangled around her face. The fear in her eyes when that big man loomed over her, the different fear she showed when he'd arrived. But then a flash of anger and strength and the survival instinct when she drove the shiny silver weapon into his skin.

Lucky it was nickel not actual silver...

She had wanted to survive. She was stronger than she thought. A wounded warrior. A damaged avenger. Inside her was a fighter that she had lost sight of. She called to his blood. But in more ways than one. Initially to protect her but secondly to shift and take her. Change her.

Garrett had never changed anyone. Ever. He hadn't needed to, his mate had already been wolf. And the pack frowned upon changing. Very few instances were allowed.

You're not pack anymore.

He rolled over to his side, willing himself to sleep. If he slept he wouldn't pick at the scab of the day. He wouldn't turn over every breath Liv had taken or how long it had been since Eileen had drawn any breath at all. Sleep would give him a little bit of peace.

The phone rang and he jolted. The clock showed it was barely past ten. No wonder he couldn't fall asleep. It was still early enough for someone to phone him but he was done with this day. Ready to trade it in for a new one. He let the phone ring and finally it stopped. Garrett saw the wash of moonlight on his threadbare carpet. Yet another thing that needed to be replaced in this house. The moonlight drew his eye again. He could get up and change. He could run. Maybe kill some small critters, have a snack, get his pent-up angst out in the nearby field.

It was the only thing that truly scared him about being alone now. If something were to happen to him, he had no one looking out for him. No one running with him or possibly stumbling over him later on their own moonlit run. He had no one.

Garrett sat up, stuck his toe in the middle of moonlight. He fell into it, let his mind and his awareness tumble headfirst into the bright white light that dotted his dry-rotted carpet. He was not aware of the shortening or narrowing of limbs. He was not aware of the snout growth or jaw shifts. He was not aware of the hair that sprouted in cool gray tufts along his flanks. It wasn't like the movies. It wasn't a submission to pain. It was simply a letting go, like when you relax your eyes to find the hidden pictures in those paintings. It was a loosening of awareness until awareness shifted.

He hit the floor on all fours and sniffed the moonlight. He tossed his head back but even Garrett's wolf knew not to howl here. Best to wait until he hit the local park. He could roam the hiking trails and rustle up some rabbits and squirrels. Maybe he'd get lucky and hit a group of deer. News had not spread of his arrival yet. The local wildlife were still fat and lazy, unaware of his presence.

He was at the top of the steps when the doorbell rang. Garrett froze, forepaw in the air, snout back, ears perked. He heard the scuff of slippers or soft shoes on his broad-planked front porch. The wind tossed the oak tree out the side window and it brought to him the scent of her. Wood and blood and lavender. He closed his eyes, picturing the moonlight, falling backward into it again. When he opened his eyes, his feet were white

against the old Oriental runner on the steps. He grabbed sweats from the banister and pulled them on and went to answer the door.

Garrett took two deep breaths at the door. He could see her outline through the thick leaded glass. The pebbled, opaque window distorted her and threw the color of her red robe around like a strobe light. *But she's still beautiful.* He willed his body to calm and right itself. Not the wolf part, the man part. The smell of her had given him a belly full of butterflies and an erection that would be difficult to hide. He pulled the door open but kept it in front of his body like a shield. "Hi, Liv. Everything okay?"

The wind chose that moment in time to blow viciously. A skittering chaotic parade of dead leaves marched across his porch and billowed her robe around her bare legs. Under the thick red covering she was wearing only a nightgown. Liv let out a whoop of surprise that quickly dissolved in a self-deprecating laugh. "Fine, it's all fine. I wanted to come and say—" Another whoop and more wind.

Garrett could smell a storm coming. One with electricity and wind. The threat of lightning made his nose and throat tickle like a mild shock. He grabbed her wrist but kept his touch gentle and tugged her inside. "Get out of the wind, Liv. No reason you can't stand in my...um..."

Her eyes had gone right to his bare belly, his navy sweats and his still pretty obvious hard-on. She breathed out and it almost sounded like a word but not quite.

"Sorry," Garrett said, "I was sleeping." As if that explained his hard cock. As if he owed her an apology.

A warm rush of lust washed over him a split second before she reached out. His mind clouded white and red. Moonlight and blood. The opposing forces of pure and savage swirled in his head and made his heart race. She touched his belly and the muscles spasmed like she had burned him. "Liv..." he started, his voice holding a warning.

"I came to say I was sorry for kissing you. For being inappropriate. But now, I..."

Her fingers tucked themselves, long and cool and delicate, under his waistband. He tried to bite his tongue to focus his attention. He tried to count in his head to divert himself. But all he could smell or feel or think was her and her fingers on his bare skin and her pulse pounding like some big primal force in his ears.

He attempted to pull back but she curled those long, elegant fingers into his sweats and held him. Oh, Garrett could have broken her hold easily. Even as he pulled in another breath, saturated with the addictive smell of her, he thought about doing just that. But the feel of the back of her knuckles pushed flush to the pulse that pounded low in his belly was stronger than his resolve. When she stepped to him, he didn't pull back.

She didn't kiss him but the feel of her breath on his face was more intimate than any kiss had ever been. "You should be home safe in bed," he said. Trying to be a gentleman, polite. Trying so hard to do the right thing.

"I want to be safe in bed," she said. She watched him, looking just as shocked as he felt. But also flushed and gorgeous. The smile on her lips showed some of the warrior he could feel hidden inside her.

Something broken inside him healed just seeing that look on her face. Garrett smiled, watching now to see what would happen. A spectator in his own life. It was up to Liv.

When she pushed her lips to his, for one split second he held his breath. Waiting for Liv to freak out or change her mind. She did neither. Instead, she pushed her soft, wet tongue past his lips and that's when his resolve broke. He hauled her forward as gently as was humanly possible at the moment. The wolf was not gentle, nor was its human and that part of him wanted to throw her down right there. The urge to peel her out of her ridiculous big, puffy red robe and push her thighs wide so he could enter her was nearly overwhelming.

Garrett settled for gripping tightly to her hips and pushing his cock to the warm yet concealed V between her legs. His body screamed to be hasty and get inside her. He knew she would be perfect and warm and welcoming.

Her lips tasted like peppermint and her tongue was hot against his. "I want you, Garrett." He heard that gentle tremor in her voice that signaled these kinds of words were foreign to her and he smiled.

"I think it's clear what I want right about now." He ran his palms over the swell of her ass, feeling the hard but soft lines of her muscles. She bit his bottom lip gently and he stifled a dark sound that threatened to rise up in him.

She had no idea what she was doing here.

Liv pulled at his hair and kissed him deeper, rolling her full hips to his pelvis until he thought he might just drop dead in the entryway. "Liv..."

"Please?" The way she said it broke his heart a little. Like she feared he'd actually turn her down.

"This is not a please situation," he said. Garrett traced the dip of her small waist with his fingertips. Pulled the belt of her robe until it submitted and parted the sides like crimson curtains. "Jesus."

She looked like she wanted to shrink. The full rise of her breasts under the partially translucent white nightgown shut down the more refined parts of his brain. The barely visible blush of nipples to fabric had him counting in his head again. He bent his knees and picked her up. She gave a little cry and her cheeks bloomed rose red with embarrassment. She probably thought she was heavy. If he wasn't so damn turned-on he'd laugh.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

Garrett kicked the door shut and hit the steps. He took them two at a time and that was only because he forced himself to not do them in threes.

"I'm taking you upstairs. Giving you time to change your mind," he growled. All the while his fingers stroked the warm, fuzzy robe that barely covered her perfect ass. He was a dead man.

"Why would I do that?" She pushed her lips to his throat, licking the skin just above his pulse. He slammed his eyes shut for a second, to steady himself.

"You might not like my true nature." He had to be honest with her. She was special. Different.

"I think you're wrong," Liv said.

He rounded the door and laid her on his bed, being careful not to throw her down in his hurry. "I hope so but I think you might be wrong," he said and let himself tip backward into the moonlight and shift.

Chapter Five

True Nature

Liv thought it was the kind of thing that would make her scream. She had been terrified making the decision to come here. Downright shaking as she'd locked up her house and hurried across the silent street to his house. So his secret should make her scream, she thought. Lord knew she'd had enough to scream at during her life. This did not make her scream. This stilled her breath in her lungs so that all she could hear was the pounding of her heart and the panting of the big smoke-gray wolf at her feet. He cocked his head, tongue pink and moist and seemed to wait for her reaction.

"Garrett?" The word was more of a sigh than speech and she tentatively reached out a hand to his muzzle. Her hand was shaking but not from fear, Liv realized. From adrenaline and excitement and amazement. "Is that really you?"

The great beast appeared to nod, giving a small chuff that wasn't a whine and wasn't a whimper. When her hand survived the brief stroke of his nose, she plunged her hands into his thick fur without thinking.

The wolf rested his head on her bare thigh, his hot, heavy breath blowing back the red fold of her robe. She rubbed and stroked and remained silent as the heat of his fur seemed to wrap around her thigh, her fingers, her hand. "You don't scare me," she said. "Not one bit. So if this was a test..." She bent her head and some small part of her sat back in amazement. She kissed the wet, black tip of his nose and stared into ice-blue eyes. The eyes of a passionate animal and at the right time, she was sure, the eyes of a perfect hunter. A killer. And yet, no fear. "So if you can change back, I wouldn't mind picking up where we left off." She pushed the tips of her toes into his warm gray fur along his haunches and he made a soft sound in his barrel chest. It happened almost too fast for her eyes to take note, the shift from beast to man. And there he stood, sweats at his feet, cock jutting out hard and his mouth hanging open just a little in surprise.

"You didn't run."

"Nope. Not one step. It was the least frightening thing I've ever seen." She put her hand on him, stroking him, wanting him about a thousand times more than she had five minutes before. Which was saying something as she'd wanted him with everything in her then. "Will you take me now? Now? Have I passed?"

He opened the bedside drawer and withdrew a packet. The silver glinted in the splash of white moonlight and when he removed the condom she held out her hand palm up.

"Oh, you want to do it?" He smiled at her and everything in her felt warm. All of her body wanted to trust him. So she did.

"I'd like to," Liv said, trying so hard to sound sure of herself. She swore she could still feel his coarse fur under her fingers, in between her toes. She felt safe with Garrett. Like some of his power might rub off on her. "If you're okay with it, that is." She met his gaze for one breath and then dropped her eyes to stare at her thighs. They felt tingly and disconnected. Like they didn't even belong to her at all. The silver-white moonlight threw a crescent pattern on the floor.

She felt the condom hit her palm and Liv looked up.

"No funny business though," he said, leaning in so they were face-to-face. "I won't be happy if I come before it's all said and done. A hand job isn't what I'm after." He kissed her so lightly it felt almost as if nothing more than air had touched her skin. Liv laughed, she couldn't help it.

"That would never happen." She rolled the condom on, loving the hot hard feel of him in her hand.

Garrett's voice was busted glass and barbed wire. Beyond gruff with what she hoped was urgency. "Apparently, you have no idea how badly I'm hanging onto my control right now."

Liv touched the dark hair that curled at his lower belly, sifted her fingers through it like it was water at the ocean. "No. I don't."

Garrett pushed her back to the bed. Her panties offered no resistance to his hands. Her nightie surged up as he pressed himself between her thighs. He was big and warm and more imposing up close than he had ever seemed. She caught the glint of his teeth and the shine of his blue eyes in the low light. "Barely. I am barely holding on, Liv."

"How barely?" She licked his lower lip and he grew tense against her.

"So barely that I'm scaring myself. I haven't..." He stopped.

God, dare she hope it? Was it even possible? She didn't say a word though. Liv ran her hands down between them. Feeling his body against her hands, firm and strong, closer than she usually could stand. But if she could, she'd get Garrett closer to her. She pulled him to her, lips against his throat as he pushed his cock to her wet entry.

She would not ask.

But he finished. "I haven't been with anyone in a very, very long time." And he slipped into her perfectly. Filling her and stretching her, his cock pressing the places in her that needed it the most. Liv felt the orgasm rush at her almost instantly. She had some magical place in her that Garrett found with ease. Everything in her rose to the surface, a blur of emotion. Anger, pain, happiness, sadness. A huge surge of all the emotional debris she carried in her. And he wiped it out with an unnatural sense of peace and safety. He would protect her. Garrett would protect her, even from himself it seemed.

He moved in her so that she lost herself. The pleasure too big for her to track. Liv held her breath, clung to him.

"I'm going to come," she said almost conversationally and laughed. Liv arched up to feel as much of him against her as she could get. His heartbeat slammed against her chest and she felt the sympathetic pounding in her body. His heartbeat and hers. Her pussy clenched up around him and she held onto him. If she didn't hold on tight, she just might fly away, or he might disappear.

"Jesus. That's...well, that's perfect," he said against her neck. His teeth scraped her skin and for an instant she wished he would bite. Hard enough to make her come again, hard enough to leave a bruise.

"Garrett, I'm not afraid of you." Liv wasn't sure who she was telling, Garrett or herself.

He nodded, scraping his teeth lower, slamming into her. His fingers finding her nipples, stroking and pinching as he thrust. More pleasure bloomed high in her womb, low in her belly and all the places in between. "I'm glad, because this would be a bad place to be if you were."

He shoved his big hands under her bottom and tilted her just so. Liv watched his face, watching for flashes of his wolf there inside the man. He grew closer to orgasm, pushing into her, kissing her until she thought she would die. A flutter and flash of the animal in him here and there. It thrilled her. Coursed up her spine like a shiver. "Come for me. Come in me. Please. I want you to." It all tumbled off her lips without a single thought. Things she would never normally say spilled from her mouth for him. "Fuck me, Garrett. Harder. Please."

Liv welcomed the orgasm as it tugged her gently at first, then harder. It slammed through her pelvis as he tossed back his head and made a wild sound. Part groan, part howl, it filled the small, chilly room as she came harder than the first time. Harder than she could imagine. Liv pressed her breasts to his broad chest and locked her legs behind his back as he jerked against her, still lost in his release. Anything in the world to keep him close.

She bit him above his collarbone, smoothing her tongue over the small violence. He tasted like salt and sex and wildness. He growled, literally growled and then pulled back, pushing her flush and kissing her harder than the first time.

* * * * *

He came back from the bathroom with an extra blanket. The man had a sheet on his bed—in October. He draped it over her and tucked her in like she was something small and precious. Liv closed her eyes for a moment feeling looked after, a wholly foreign feeling since childhood when her mother would tuck her in at night. "I guess you don't get cold much?"

The bed sagged under his weight. He didn't look that heavy but the old springs protested as if he weighed a ton. "Not so much. It's a wolf thing." Garrett blew out a sigh and even sex-drunk and exhausted, Liv could see that he was worried.

"Why'd you tell me? Why show me that? I would think that the fewer people who know the better. At least from your standpoint." Then she felt stupid and wished she could suck the words back in. Why put worries in his head if they weren't there to begin with?

"Don't worry about it," Garrett said, curling himself around her. She basked in his heat, her body still throwing off little blips of pleasure like a car engine ticking and popping as it cools. "I was fretting and I don't know."

"Don't know what?" Liv turned on her side to face him. Tucking her head under his chin to get closer to him and also so she wouldn't have to look at him. Her heart was floundering right about now at the whole unearned trust thing. She trusted Ellen, her mother, her boss, a few select friends. Kevin had been the straw that broke the fragile girl's back and now she trusted this man for no apparent reason.

"I don't know why I told you. I just did." He tugged her closer and Liv let him. She pressed her ear to his heartbeat and listened to him breathe. Her eyelids fluttered, wanting to shut, but she wanted to talk to him. Figure this out.

"There has to be a reason," she laughed. Even as she laughed she turned the question on herself. There had to be a reason why she trusted him. Was it simply his rough-and-tumble entry into her house to boot Kevin out? The alpha hero role that went on to show compassion. No anger or rage when she stabbed him with the tweezers. "Wait! I stabbed you with silver!" She sat up then, the blanket fell away, her robe flying open. The chilly air embraced her and her skin pebbled with goose bumps in an instant.

Garrett grinned, chuckling. "You did. My God, it's a miracle, why aren't I dead!" He clutched his chest, rolling from side to side like a bad actor in a worse movie. She swatted him on the chest, snorting. Liv rolled her eyes but he went on. "Oh the horror. The dread. I'm..." He gasped, rolled to face her still grinning. "I'm not going to make it, Liv. Go on without me. Tell the children..."

His face went from humor to dread in a second. Liv shook her head, confused. "What? What did I do?"

"Why do you always think it's you, Olivia?" He kissed her and then stood. "Be right back. Gonna grab a beer. You want one? Wine? Tea, coffee, me?" He smiled but the smile didn't touch his icy blue eyes.

"I'll have a beer too. Thanks." She frowned and he bent, fast but silent and kissed her again.

"You didn't do anything. At all. Other than rock my world, sister."

Then she laughed out loud, forgetting the hurt. Rock my world was not something one would expect big, imposing Garrett to say. And he knew it. He had made her laugh on purpose. The trust grew deeper still, though Liv didn't think that was entirely possible. And then completely out of character for her but going with the flow, she reached out and traced the line of his cock with a fingertip. "If you come back soon, I'll do it again," she whispered.

Garrett rumbled like some big machine and the sound made her body react in a visceral way that no sound ever had. That no *person* ever had.

* * * * *

Worries

Garrett pawed to the back of the fridge for the good beers. He'd tucked a few Oktoberfest brews in the back. He pulled out two Marzens and popped the caps. What he was trying to do with beer and rifling was distract himself.

"First you want to bite her, then you want to mate her," he said under his breath. If he didn't say it out loud he might end up saying it to Liv. Or he might end up screaming. As man or beast, it had happened a few times in his life. A werewolf version of a temper tantrum, a rapid back-and-forth shift between human and wolf, raging all the while. It was painful, exhausting and, in the long run, entirely unhelpful.

Garrett pulled out a block of cheese and roughly hacked off enough squares to cover a small red plate. He had wanted to bite her right as he came. Not bite her to get off but bite her. Break the skin, draw blood, mark her as his. The instinct had been as big and blinding as the natural instinct to give in to an orgasm. Then once he'd gotten himself under control, he made the crack about children.

"Idiot," he said. He pulled a sleeve of crackers from the cabinet. "Fucking idiot."

"Who's an idiot?" Liv asked.

He turned too fast and the eye shine must have shown. For just an instant she stilled, looking the tiniest bit uncertain. Then she smiled and came to him. "Me. I'm an idiot. I upset you," Garrett said.

"Not at all. I'm fine." She took the crackers and a beer and walked out of the room, leaving him to follow. So he did.

"You were upset. You thought you'd done something." He walked behind her and did a double take when she bypassed the living room and the dining room and hit the steps to go upstairs again. "Something tells me you think that a lot." Garrett watched her lush bottom as she climbed the stairs. No wonder she made him crazy. Lush and feminine, the perfect hour-glass shape, she was trim but not skinny. There had been plenty of warm, soft woman to hold onto as he'd fucked her.

She turned and caught him staring. She grinned at him, berry colored lips spreading wide to show him a flash of white teeth and rosy pink tongue. His cock stirred to life and Garrett had to remind himself to inhale. "Old habits die hard."

"Pardon?" He'd lost his train of thought and when she continued up the steps, the train derailed even further. He watched the tug and pull of her muscles under that lust-red robe and all he could picture was driving into her again. Fucking her so that she made that needy little sound in the back of her throat. Screw the beer and the food, Liv was all he needed for the rest of the night.

"The blaming myself for things. For every breath and frown and angry glance of every person in the world. All of it is usually my fault," she said, brown eyes flashing in the low light from the streetlamps outside. "So wherever you went in your head just then was clearly my fault."

"Of course," he said, watching her stop at the doorway to his room.

She turned and they were fully close then. His chest an inch from her breasts. His lips not much farther away. He closed his eyes and the smell of her filled his head. Above the beer and the cheese and the crackers and old carpet and rain, the scent of her soared. He held his breath and heard her heart beating. Fast and lively, she was excited. He knew that this time, yes, he could hear her heartbeat because she was close enough to lick and sniff and fuck. "I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"I should have asked. Can we eat in your room? May I?" She smiled.

"Liv, baby, you can do anything you want. At all."

She blushed, dipped her head and at that moment he realized that what he felt in his chest, his stomach—his cock—was the first tentative stirrings of love. He was screwed.

Garrett watched her lick the tiny bit of cheese off her pointer finger and thought he might drop dead right there. Could you die from wanting a woman? He thought so. His heart felt too big, his baggy sweats too small, especially in the crotch area. And his windpipe had apparently shrunk to drinking straw size. Not many women affected him at all, let alone this fiercely. Liv was a whole new ball game. Liv was a new star, a perfect storm, a fantasy he'd never expected to realize. Liv had made him shift in front of her as easily as drawing a breath. Liv, so far, had made him think the word love without wanting to wreak havoc, scream at the sky and destroy.

Garrett didn't know what to do with this information, it would scare her. So he listened to her talk and nodded and tried to ignore his extremely intrusive member.

But she didn't. Her fingers closed around his cock through his pants and she squeezed. "Did you hear anything I said?" She pushed the waistband down and shifted her weight so she could run a loose, warm fist up and down his shaft. It was the most magical feeling Garrett could recall for a very long time.

"I did my best."

"And that was?"

"About every other word." He grinned, thrusting just a bit, without thinking, into her hand. He ran his fingers over her cheeks and lips like he could steal her secrets just by touching her. He leaned in to kiss her and she put her mouth to his chest for a brief hot second and bit his nipple. Garrett pushed her back, fast and hard, pinning her to the bed. "Careful, Liv. Inside me is an animal and those things you do with your teeth mean a lot where we come from. In our culture."

She nodded, her big brown eyes as serious as hell. She parted her legs and he settled there, running the hard ridge of his cock to the wet, slick valley of her pussy. "I want you all over again," she said. "That's scary."

Garrett rocked against her. All of him feeling her but his eyes watching her face for every flicker and truth. "Why's that?"

"Because I'm a sex camel."

Garrett dropped his head and laughed. It felt good. A loud explosive sound that filled up the tiny room and was perfectly accented by Liv's softer, more feminine laughter. "Is that so? You seemed pretty un-camel-like just a bit ago." He pushed his hands high on her bare thighs and watched a fine tremor start in her body. Her eyelids fluttered and she inched just a tiny bit closer.

"That was because of you. I'm not really good in the men department in case you hadn't figured that out. So I don't have much call to turn down or have scads of sex." She paused for a moment, thinking and then smiled. "Let me clarify, *good* sex." Her hand made another lazy tour of his hard-on.

Garrett grunted. He had no comment on that asshole he'd ejected from her house earlier. He reached behind him, grabbing for a foil packet from the still-open drawer. His body was getting ahead of his mind. He was a little Liv-drunk at the moment. He kissed her hard, parting her lips so that she had to open for his tongue. Her mouth yielded to his and those cool fingers stroked him again. "You don't really need that. I'm on the Pill. I'm all clean and safe and shiny." She arched against his exploring hands and laughed. "I'm damn near brand spanking new."

"No. We use this. Got it?" He tried to keep his voice easy and soft but despite his efforts some steel crept into his tone. She went tense for just an instant. Garrett felt her heartbeat race and then slow and in a great rush of air she said, "Fine. Of course. Safety first." Then she parted her legs and the heat of her blanked out his rational mind. He rolled the condom on and in one hard thrust was seated in her again. The perfect heat of her cunt gripped up around him and Garrett began to move.

He could love her. He could fuck her. But there would be no productive mating. No young ones. He couldn't do that to him or to her or to the possible offspring. Being a wolf was too damn painful sometimes.

Chapter Six

Changes

Liv came in a blink. They came so fast with him, rushing at her like sudden balmy gusts of emotion and pleasure. She gripped his shoulders and shuddered under him, giving in to her orgasm. There was a flash of something in her that felt like disappointment but Liv pushed it away. She stilled him and he braced himself over her, breathing hard. Liv wiggled under Garrett and he groaned. Liv wiggled lower and he grabbed her upper arms, holding her still. "Where you going, Little Red Riding Hood?" he whispered, doing his best to give her a wolfish grin.

It sent a shiver down her spine but his humor and ease with her lightened her insides. "Down a bit."

"Oh yeah?" He slipped up higher on the bed, bracing himself on his forearms, head dipped to watch her wiggle lower.

Her feet hit the floor, her bottom brushing the edge of the bed. She found his hipbone with her mouth, sucked and then bit him. Her fingers plucked at the condom and pulled it free. She pushed her mouth to his skin, licking the salty hot flat of his flank. He thrust without thinking, sighed deeply. The sound and sight of pushing this big, big man just a bit too far out of his comfort zone thrilled some part of her. She felt power and want and excitement swirling in her belly, her brain buzzed with it. She licked above his cock, running her fingers through his short, dark pubic hair, tracing the beginning of the line with the rigid tip of her tongue so he did that jittery thing with his hips.

"Liv, if I die, I can't fuck you again," he said. Liv could tell he was trying to joke but the words came out on little puffs of air that made him sound both vulnerable and confused.

Liv loved it.

She touched her lips against the crown of his cock, running them softly around the tip without actually taking him in her mouth. He shivered above her like he might fall. She hoped not. He looked pretty heavy.

"Do it, Liv. Open up. Look what you've started."

She raised her eyes to see him staring down at her. The flashes of lean and dangerous animal evident in his features if he shifted his head. Like a hidden picture, a magic painting, something just beneath the surface. He licked his lips, watching her with those intensely blue eyes, and he pushed just enough to pop her lips apart and slip the very tip of himself into her mouth.

Liv found the small slit with her tongue and sucked. His face grew dark as he fought for control. He shivered harder and Liv gave in. Gave in to herself and to Garrett. She opened her mouth and rose up, taking the hard, hot length of him into her mouth. She sucked, tasting the salt of his skin. The wild, rich earth smell of him filled her nose. He smelled very much like a forest in autumn. A smell that had always soothed her. Garrett felt so much like home to her. The kind of home she had always dreamed of, safe and welcoming. She pushed the thought away, arching up to take him deeper.

"Jesus Christ, Liv," he said but he smiled. His hips shifting so that his cock filled her throat. He watched and she knew it was for signs of discomfort or fear. She countered by gripping his hips with her hands, stroking his skin with her fingertips. She slipped up and down his cock with her mouth and relished the power she had at that moment in time. It was Liv who finally pulled back, looked up and said, "If I keep going, I'll finish," she admitted.

He moved to the side and Liv pulled herself up, touching him here and there as she did. His skin was hot and human under her hands and she wanted to feel what she had felt earlier. Liv put her head down, afraid he'd laugh at her or think her a thrill junkie. But she found the nerve to ask. This was Garrett. She could show him all the strange little bits of herself. At least that's what her heart said.

"What's wrong?"

Garrett leaned in, dark hair falling in his eyes. He kissed her, resting his hand against her throat so that her pulse beat against his thumb and pinkie. He growled softly. It was a sound that never failed to turn her just a bit inside out.

"Nothing's wrong. But will you change for me? For just a second? Don't laugh at me." She smiled as if to ward off any humor he might feel.

He didn't laugh, or even smile. He glanced once at the patch of moonlight on the floor and then he was melting, reforming, shifting and flickering so fast and perfect her eyes could not keep up. Liv felt like she was trying to focus on a movie that had jumped its reel. It was impossible. The result was fantastic. A huge, daunting gray wolf with eyes the color of an October sky, settled on the bed. Head cocked, tongue lolling, eyes pinned to her, asking what's next. What now?

"Nothing major. Nothing dirty." She laughed and felt her cheeks color. "I just wanted to feel this again. All of this power in a warm, dangerous package." Her fingers burrowed and slipped between tufts of silken hair. Some of it was coarse and tickled at the fragile dips between her fingers where the skin was thinner and paler. She rubbed her feet along his flanks again, the hair brushing the soles of her feet so she jumped a little with the sensation. "I'm amazed that you don't hurt me when you're like this. Not because you would hurt me," she hurried on when he looked confused. "But because we're taught to fear so much. Each other, wild animals, strangers, people in power and people with none." Liv twirled tufts of hair between her fingertips and Garrett licked the back of her hand, panting patiently. His eyes were like live wires. Gas flame blue. Perfect, true...aware.

Liv kissed his snout and he reared back, sneezing. She laughed and he seemed to grin. "I have spent all my life afraid. And here you are a coiled mass of muscle and jaws. You could kill me in the space of time between my heartbeats and I feel no fear at all. I feel more powerful than I ever have when I'm touching you. Probably because you could savage me and leave me for dead...but don't."

The wolf seemed to nod in understanding. Liv gently pressed the pads of his paws with her fingertips, careful not to hurt him because she knew those spots could be sensitive. The plump sandpaper feel of those places made her understand how much he trusted her. It was one of the few places where she could hurt him, truly. The easiest place to inflict injury or pain, to draw blood. "Now will you shift back and take me? I have all the powerful feelings in me I can stand right about now. I'd like you in me now, Garrett. Right now."

She didn't have to ask him twice. He reared back, the movie jumped its reel again and Garrett was over her, sweating lightly, smiling hugely. He rolled on a fresh rubber and then fitted himself between her thighs. "I don't know what this means. Why I trust you or why you wanted me that way. You're kind of fucking with my head, Liv. Making me think and feel things I'm not so sure I can handle," he said as he slipped into her. Liv threw her head back, closing her knees to his flanks, letting her body grip up around him so that her belly and cunt thrilled at the full friction of him moving inside her.

"I know the feeling. Intimately." Her fingers dug into his back. Smooth, hot skin where a moment ago there had been fur. His lips crushed down to her throat, teeth testing her flesh but not biting. Human lips, full and pink where a moment ago they'd been thin—the thin black lips of a wolf. Garrett dipped his head and sucked her nipples, alternating until she pushed up to meet his mouth, with greedy little movements. He bit the flesh between her breasts gently and Liv heard herself as if from far away whisper, "You can bite me for real. You can bite me and I won't care, Garrett. I'm not afraid of you at all."

"That's a mistake," he said, thrusting faster. Her offer seemed to have pushed him that fraction past the point of his self-control.

Offer or request, Olivia?

"Telling you it's okay?" The first orgasm rushed through her. So big and so fast she didn't quite know it was coming until she was crying out in his ear, biting down on his lobe as her body seized up around him, milking his cock. Garrett groaned but kept thrusting. His hands pinned her arms above her head, his face pressed to the crux of her shoulder and throat as he fucked her.

"Not being afraid of me. Trusting me. All of it," he said to her ear and she jerked with a shiver and chill.

"I do trust you."

"There are ways I can hurt you without hurting you," he said.

She pitied him for a moment. To think he would not realize that she didn't know that. "I'm aware. I've been hurt in lots of invisible ways," she said.

He stilled, his hands pinning her hands, his blue eyes locked with hers. "I'm sorry." He rocked against her so softly, then. As if he feared she would break or crumble under his weight. "But I have..."

"Have what?" He had stilled but her body could not. Liv lifted, pulling him down with her hands even as she moved up to meet him with her body. She tightened her pussy so that he blinked, blinked again, closed his eyes, his jaw set and tense. Holding on.

"I've lost a lot. And I think part of what I lost is myself." The confession seemed to free him and he bore his weight down on her, crushing her to the mattress that squealed and complained.

Liv wondered what he had lost, sensed this wasn't the time to ask. "It's fine. It's fine," she murmured to him like he was an innocent. "You don't have to say and you don't have to bite. Just love me, right now. Come with me," she said, realizing she was about to come again, swept up in his emotion and his scent. The world outside could have stopped for all she knew. The mild rumbles of a passing storm echoed. "And then let me sleep here. Hold me. Just for tonight."

"Just for tonight," he laughed. "That'll be hard. I can't imagine not being near you now that you're here," he said and came. His teeth finding her throat, gripping so that the skin tingled and she hoped against hope. But no. He did not bite.

His hands tangled in hers as if he was tugging her slowly toward a release.

Maybe one night he would use his teeth. Maybe one time. But for that second as her orgasm filled her pussy, Liv grasped at the happiness. She'd take it for now. She wouldn't push. This one moment in time was already more than she'd ever had for as far back as she could remember.

* * * * *

Urges

Liv slept with her head against his chest. Garrett watched her, he watched the moonlight. When he closed his eyes he watched the mental movie in his head of him shifting, taking her, biting her, changing her. Caring for her as the effects took. The bite of a lycan to a human could result in two scenarios. The bite and the blood became infected and the bitten died a horribly painful death much like the influenza epidemic that wiped out so many lives. High fever, pain and dehydration racked the patient. Eventually, the brain basically boiled, the body knotted with pain and then the patient succumbed to the toxic bite. The second scenario was better. The body accepted the invading saliva and embraced it. On some cellular level they were simpatico and the human became a hybrid. Part wolf, part human. A made creature.

They didn't know why sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. In the way of nature and all its creatures, there was no perfect set of rules or answers. Why were some humans allergic to bee stings and others not? Peanuts? Poison ivy? Spider bites? The list went on. But one thing was certain, were he to ever lose every shred of his sense and change Liv, her life would be one racked with painful changes. Those born human who became part wolf later never had easy changes. They did not fall backward into moonlight and let the lines of their anatomy blur and soften.

No. They were what horror movies were made of. They were the ones who screamed and cried and were often left bloodied and broken and exhausted by shifts. Even the older ones who'd had much practice. It was rare for a changed wolf to take to change easily. It happened but it was rare.

Liv turned, saying something under her breath he couldn't quite make out. He smoothed her hair and said, "I could never do that to you, Liv. I care for you too much."

To that, she turned, smothered by some dream of pain already experienced. "No. No. Don't hurt me."

Garrett felt his blood heat a bit at that. Felt his heart wrench so that his breath went ragged. Why the hell did someone so good have to relive so many bad memories? The pain and the fear radiated off Liv like heat off a wood-burning stove. He could close his eyes and feel ripples and waves of anger and worry and terror as she tossed in her dream.

He pulled her in closer, hoping against hope that some part of her, locked down in there in the black and the gray of her dreams, could feel him. Hooking one leg over his, she pulled at him like a drowning woman thinking he could save her. Garrett wished he could. He wasn't even sure he could save her going forward as damaged as he felt on the inside.

Not since Eileen had he felt so very protective. But not since Eileen had he felt so vulnerable. Vulnerable was not comfortable to him, as a man or as a wolf. Vulnerable was the kiss of death in all respects. He'd learned that two years before.

She opened her eyes for a split second and Garrett smiled down at her. He didn't speak because he wasn't quite sure that Liv was awake. "Help me," she said but somewhere in her eyes she was looking past him. Or so it seemed.

"Liv? Do you see me?" he whispered in such a soft voice even he had trouble hearing it.

"Help me," she repeated.

Her toes pushed at his calf, her fingers pulled at his shoulders. Her brown eyes wide and darker than dark in the shadowed room.

"What can I do?" he asked, playing along. She didn't see him. She wasn't here. He smiled, smoothing the wild tangles of brown and blonde that climbed around her neck and cheeks like vines.

"Make me strong. Make me strong," she said in a panicked voice.

"You are strong, you just don't know it." He bent to kiss her forehead. She would close her eyes and return to whatever horror awaited her behind closed eyelids. And he would hold her and watch over her until dawn or until sleep came.

"Make me strong, Garrett. Make me dangerous."

He froze. She had said his name. Some part of her knew that he was here with her. That he was watching over her. Her words set off an alarm in him, almost akin to anxiety. "Oh you're dangerous to me, Liv. You make me crazy." He smiled at her but she still looked past him even though her fingers pulled and plucked and worried at him like she was slipping away.

Garrett took her hands in his and held them until she stilled. "Make me unafraid," she said and he could smell her tears before he saw them. The salty, untamed smell of ocean and sky. Garrett kissed her again, his lips pressing to the wet streaks that trailed down her cheeks.

"Don't be afraid."

"Only you can save me." She put her head down and was asleep again. But this time she was still.

He pulled her flush, wrapping his arm across her back, the other looped behind her bottom. Garrett held her there like she was a child and she finally slept without tossing and thrashing. Her breath warmed his throat and her heartbeat ticked off each dark minute until the sun rose. When it did, he had not slept and he was half sure that if she really, really wanted him to, he would give in and change her. He'd capitulate to her needs above his better judgment.

* * * * *

Garrett was cooking eggs when Liv came flying into the room. "I'm late!" she said, eyes wide. She'd thrown on his sweatshirt and it hung damn near to her knees. A pair of socks by the bed had found their way onto her feet and she looked good enough to eat, he thought.

"You are? Where do you need to be?" He stirred the eggs gently.

"Work!" Liv looked torn between anger and tears and he tried hard not to smile.

"You work on Saturdays?" he asked. He kept his eyes on the stovetop while she digested that.

"It's Saturday?" She dropped her robe and her nightgown at her feet. They whispered into a white and red pile.

"Yes ma'am. All day long." Garrett finally gave in and grinned. Then he laughed because she was laughing, her shoulders shaking with her giggles.

"Damn. I was terrified. Terrified and — Hey, are you making food?"

A woman with a good appetite. He thought he just might die. "I am. I am making some bacon and eggs and biscuits and orange juice. I don't suppose you like any of those things."

Liv crept forward. He'd seen weaker animals do that in the forest, creep forward to see what they could see. To see if they could get a morsel for themselves. But humans were not animals in the usual respect and the fact that she approached him, even cautiously, was a good sign. "I do. I love all of those things."

"Do you love coffee? Strong coffee, be warned."

Liv dropped her head in mock frustration. He could smell her high spirits and playfulness and the smell to him was as perfect as fresh air and sunshine. "I guess I can force myself to drink some strong, fresh coffee." She forced a sigh and shuffled forward in the too big, slouchy socks. Her manner was easier now, not tense and stressed but happy and loose. Garrett handed her a mug and she filled it with dark brew. Her brown eyes were clear despite their meager sleep and her bad dreams. Garrett had no intention of letting on that he had witnessed her unconscious tortures. She sipped and rolled her eyes.

"Good?"

"Does a bear sh—never mind."

Garrett bent in and kissed her. Her mouth tasted like toothpaste and he laughed.

"What?"

"Did you do the old finger-toothbrush trick?"

She sipped again and snickered. "I did. Guilty as charged."

He took the mug from her and pulled her in briefly for a hug. "You smell nice," he said, his cock agreeing wholeheartedly by growing stiffer with each second she was this close.

"I smell like sex," she whispered.

"Which I happen to think smells nice."

"Does it smell different for you?" she asked, pushing her pelvis to his cock.

Garrett caught her mouth up in a kiss and tried to be gentle. It was an effort that was failing him, fast. "It's more intense. I think I can smell layers of me on you, that you can't." And it made him nuts but he didn't tell her that part.

When she put her hands on his neck and opened her mouth wider for him to kiss her harder, deeper, he lost his battle, putting the frying pan on a cold burner and hiking her up on the counter. "What about the food?"

"Food reheats." He pushed her legs wide and dropped to his knees. Garrett kissed up her thighs, licking the salt of her skin until his cock was so hard he feared it might snap. That would be bad. To have a woman like Liv around and be cockless. He laughed.

"What's funny?" she asked and he felt her stiffen. He didn't want her worrying. Garrett looked up.

"I was worried about my cock snapping off I want you so bad." The truth would always be best with Liv. She would always worry she'd done wrong, he realized.

Her cheeks flushed but her eyes sparkled. He kept his gaze on her but pressed her clit with his thumb through her panties. He felt her jump a bit and the thick smell of arousal filled his head. He was a goner. "I don't want that to happen." She found his hard-on with her toes and stroked him lightly. Garrett shut his eyes for a moment.

He leaned in and inhaled the scent of her and then pressed his mouth over her pussy without moving. He simply breathed in and out, in and out, letting the moist heat of his mouth flood over her. Letting the dark, mystical scent of her fill his head. He wanted to fuck her so bad but couldn't.

She read his mind, pushed her toes to his cock harder. Laughing, she said softly, "You don't have a condom down here, Garrett."

Chapter Seven

Improvisation and Visitors

He stopped and Liv shivered. His eyes were dark blue with mischief, he cocked his head like he was listening to something far off and said, "Who said, Little Liv, that I need a condom?"

Her belly tingled then, was he going to take her up on her offer? There was something enticing in a nearly sinister way about having sex with him with nothing between them but body heat. He pushed his face to the V of her thighs again, running his tongue over the already sodden patch of cotton between her legs. Liv forgot her taunting, gasped and arched up to his tongue. Imagining him in her mind pulling the panties off and finally putting his hot tongue to her clit. She imagined it and imagined it like a visual prayer, hoping against hope that he would read her mind. He did. He tugged hard and the small band of elastic at her hips snapped with a tiny popping protest. He pulled the panties off in a swift motion like a magician, paused to grin at her and then put his mouth to her pussy and started to lick.

Liv pushed up to meet him, forcing her legs wider to get as much of the feel of him as she could. She touched the small strands of pure white that were woven in his darker than dark hair. She sifted his hair through her fingers, tugging lightly so he groaned. "I don't need one," he said, his tongue sliding up and down the ridge of her clit and wet pussy so that she stilled, heart beating too hard to breathe deeply. "There are other ways to get you off."

Garrett sucked in her hard nub, sucking hard enough to stir a deep echo of pleasure in her womb. His thick fingers pushed into her cunt, fucking her in slow even strokes. First one finger, then two. Arching with an expert pressure against her G-spot so that her body warmed rapidly, her limbs tingling and heavy. "What about you?" She toed his cock, trying to push him past his rational little game plan. No unprotected sex.

Why is this so important to you, Liv?

She didn't know. Her toes slipped clumsily up and down Garrett's erection but she provoked him into thrusting and that thrilled her. Every time she knew she had pushed him just a bit, it swelled up in her. A huge rush of power and excitement. Something about being able to make him react thrilled her. More than with any other man.

"I'll make do." His free hand captured her foot and held it and he slowly thrust his cock against her foot so that she was now the one to shake with excitement. He curled his fingers in her, pressing harder so her legs closed a bit involuntarily. Garrett licked her harder, biting her clit with just enough pressure to make her sob a little, and she was coming. Trying desperately to synch up her toes to her orgasm so that she could maybe, somehow, magically tip him over the edge.

But he pulled back from her, removing his hand and planting both of his palms flat to her thighs. He held her wide on the counter, drinking in the soft wash of juices from her pussy, licking her clit that now felt unbelievably fragile in that moment until her whole body accepted the stimulus and raised up to meet him. She went from too sensitive to the verge of another release in a few wet drags of his tongue. "Fuck me, please," she said, not above begging. "We can go up and get one. I can wait. Or I'll follow you."

She'd apparently bargain to have him hard and inside her.

Garrett laughed softly, the sound and sensation traveling through her pelvis. Her pussy clenched around nothing and she wanted to cry but it felt too good.

Warm autumn sunlight streamed into the kitchen through the opaque white curtains. At least no one could see her pinned her on the counter, man-beast between her legs. She laughed at her own name for him and he stilled. "What's so funny, girl?"

Everything was more vibrant at that moment, the cornflower blue walls, the rich smell of coffee, the musky smell of their sex, the sound of a lawnmower somewhere on the block. His big blue eyes pinned her, daring her to lie. She couldn't. Her heart was too big, her chest too small, the air too thin. She had never felt better. "Nothing, I just called you man-beast in my head."

She held her breath waiting for him to get angry but he grinned a lupine grin and *tsked* at her. "Hmm. How to punish a bad girl. Oh I know." He bent and lapped at her until she squirmed. The brief reprieve to her clit only making this pleasure and pressure that much more intense. Garrett licked her until her fingers curled around the lip of the counter and her legs shook and then he stopped.

"Wha—" She was breathing hard and now confusion filled her mind like muddy water.

"Such a bad girl. Time for a lesson from the man-beast," he chuckled.

Liv waited to feel fear or even anxiety. A lesson could be harsh or bad. No fear came. No worry. A frazzled kind of excitement was what she felt. "Oh," she breathed.

"Yeah, oh." With ease he hefted her. He grabbed a spatula from a sunflower patterned pitcher and plopped into a big ladder-back chair with her draped over her lap.

"Garrett!" she gasped, seeing what was coming now.

"Five swats for being such a bad girl." He did wink at her and that tamed the small flutter of uncertainty in her breast. "One," he said, smacking the flat of the white spatula so that she yelped. The sting blended into a pleasurable hot pulse in her skin. Her cunt echoed the pulse and she noticed for the first time the hard press of his cock against her belly. Liv wiggled and he laughed. "Bad, bad, bad. Now another." He whacked her again and her pussy grew taut. She felt so swollen. So hot. So ready, she wanted to scream. She wanted to wiggle back and suck his cock. She wanted to climb onto his lap and slide down his hard cock, ride him until she came. Until he came, his

teeth on her shoulder. Instead she braced for three and bucked under the smart, stinging swat.

"Please, please, please. I need —" Liv stopped.

"What do you need?" He didn't deliver four. Instead he parted her thighs wide and she felt the cool, plastic end of the spatula run a fast circle around her clit and up her slit. Her head fell down, her forehead banged his leg.

"Oh God."

"What do you need?" Garrett slipped the handle inside her just a bit. Slow, cool slips into her, halting drags out of her. He propelled the handle up and into her with a gentle motion and as she raised her head to speak, she felt the biting sting of a blow from his palm.

"Make me come. I need to come." She said it as honestly as she could. Her head tossed back, watching him over her shoulder as he clenched his jaw. His eyes on her. The flicker of weakness when she wriggled just so and rubbed his cock with her belly. To make her point she said, "Four." Liv dropped her head and watched her hair brush the floor.

"One more," he said, hurrying his thrusts with the tool. Pushing against that sweet spot inside her his fingers had already found. "One more from the man-beast."

"Yes," she whispered. And he smacked her harder than ever even as he obviously tamed his own strength. Liv let the orgasm take her under. Wet and fast and overwhelming like a swell of water. She fell into it and let go of herself, sobbing on his lap, moving as she came. The feel of his erection pressed to her middle. The evidence of his want of her.

"I wanted you to fuck me."

"No protection."

"But you..." She was still balanced on his lap as he ran his palms over the warm skin of her ass. She felt each heartbeat in the places where his blows had landed.

"I'm not worried about me." He was telling the truth but she could feel him hard and unfulfilled right there under her.

"I am." He gave one half-assed grab at her but she wiggled around between his thighs and tugged at his blue boxers. "Come on. Don't hurt my feelings. Give it up."

"Give it up!" he cried, grinning.

"Yeah, don't hold out on me, baby," she cooed. But before he could laugh again, Liv bent and licked at the silken pink head of his cock. She ran the tip over her lips and reveled at the feel. Like warm flower petals or smooth sun-baked stones. It was the smoothest thing she'd ever felt and the smell of him overwhelmed her. She opened her mouth wider and took him in. Her hands on his thighs and his hands in her hair.

There was that rush again. Of more than affection, more than attraction and a consuming rush of power. She could push this man to be a bit weak, a bit desperate. The power to affect him that way was a bit of a buzz. Liv had never reacted this way to

another man. Always there was a vein of worry and trepidation in her when she met a guy. What would make him turn? What would make him angry? At what point would she start doing it all wrong? She had none of those feelings. Only the thought of his hands on her and his voice soft in her ear. The image of him coming through her window and grabbing Kevin. The feel of him protecting her.

"Do you like that?" she asked, dropping lower, licking up the back of his cock with the tip of her tongue so he danced a little in the chair.

"Do you have to ask?" His voice was deeper than she had ever heard it. A rocky, dry gasp when he tried to form words.

Could she push him far enough to shift?

Liv pushed the thought away. That was a wonder for another day. Right now her slippery hand slid up and down his shaft as she kissed his inner thighs, the spot above his knee. She went back to him with her mouth and he slipped forward in the chair, thrusting into her mouth like a man who had lost that final little tether to self-control. "Don't move, Liv," he said, thrusting. His movements firm but gentle. He held her head in his big hands and it occurred to her that most likely he could kill her if he chose to. Not even mostly likely. He could kill her if he chose. In man form or wolf form. Instead of terrifying her, the realization shot through her like a tiny orgasm, igniting a tumble of electric nerves in her belly and cunt.

Liv pressed her tongue to him and he thrust one more time, his fingers in her hair, his palms blocking all outside noise. She was lost in a soundless moment where he was letting go. His eyes flashed silver, then blue, then silver again and he looked nearly hesitant. Until his lips closed in a harsh seam and his jaw clenched and then it all went away when he smiled and just gave in to his orgasm. His body bucked and Liv smoothed her hands against his skin to feel all of him moving that way.

And then he was coming and she was lapping at him, thinking he was so powerful and yet, somehow, so vulnerable. Maybe more vulnerable than her.

* * * * *

"Hot food is totally overrated," Garrett said, forking up microwaved scrambled eggs.

Liv snorted, spraying crumbs from a room temperature biscuit. "Are you kidding? After that, I could eat rocks and twigs and be happy." She sipped her coffee watching him.

The strange look on his face had vanished once they were dressed and moving about the kitchen in domestic good humor. He had only seemed off for the blink of a moment and then he was fine. His hand came down on hers and he squeezed. It was an affectionate gesture and besides kind of turning her on, it made her feel good. Liv squeezed back.

Another lawn mower kicked on and the sun was still shining in through the curtains but not as bright. "Storm's coming," he said.

"Last mow of the season then," she laughed.

In their neighborhood, half the folks were older and retired and their schedules revolved around yard work. Mr. Scott mowed out front on Fridays, out back on Saturdays, handled weed and debris on Sundays. Mr. Towers up the street mowed the whole yard on Saturday, weeded on Sunday and did "landscaping and upkeep" on Monday afternoons.

She polished off her last piece of crispy bacon and wondered now what? Assume the day was theirs? Assume she should go? Before she could ask him, the doorbell rang.

"Sit tight. Maybe we can run up to the farm for some apples and that pumpkin pie they make once a year." He rose and she was so grateful for him wanting her around she thought she'd fold up on herself right there. She was nearly weak with relief that she wasn't overstaying her welcome.

Liv heard a woman's voice at the door and turned. She stared, knowing she shouldn't but doing it anyway. The woman's profile was regal and she was staring Garrett in the eye, so she was tall. Over six foot. Her long chestnut hair was tied into a windblown single braid and her face was ruddy with the October chill.

After a brisk but affectionate hug, they spoke softly at the door and Garrett dropped his head, stepped back, let her in.

Liv stood, feeling very much out of place now. She put her napkin on her plate and headed for the steps. "Excuse me," she mumbled. "I'll go up and..." She was going to say, *take a shower* but settled on, "Get out of your way."

"Hi there," the strange woman said.

Liv froze, turned, tried to read Garrett's face but it was unreadable. She could tell by the air and body language that this was not a rival for his affection. This woman had a more maternal feel to her. Someone he respected and maybe even deferred to. "Um...hi. I'll just..."

She had never wanted to run more in her life.

"Go on and take a shower, Liv," Garrett said. His voice was low and controlled. He was struggling to keep a rein on his emotions. It boggled her mind that she could tell that already just from his stance and his tone.

"Nice meeting you," the woman said.

"Likewise," Liv said, wishing it were true. She didn't know how to feel about the woman. And she didn't know why she was suddenly so nervous.

She ran up the steps and when she slipped into the hot steamy shower, she tried to get her heart rate down. She tried to calm the nerves that danced in her stomach. And she tried to figure out what the hell she was so nervous about in the first place.

Chapter Eight

The Truth

"Is that her?" Kelly asked, stepping past him into his kitchen. The low wall that separated the kitchen from the foyer sported various potted plants and she touched each one in turn.

"Her who?" Garrett turned his back on her to shut the door. Rather rude to do to an elder but he wasn't feeling very polite at the moment.

"The her who has grabbed you by the balls. And the heart," she said, laughing when he started at her gruff language.

"She's just a friend."

Kelly tossed back her head, green eyes glittering like beach-glass and sniffed. "Really? Just a friend? I don't recall you ever smelling that way after being around me."

"Ches would rip me to shreds," he said.

"Chester would not, because you would never feel that way about me."

Garrett pushed down the anger swelling in his chest. Seeing Kelly was too much. It brought to mind all the hurt and rage he had lived with before finally leaving. "Please, Kelly," he said. "I can't handle this right now." He threw his hands up, facing her, trying to make her see. "I need to rebuild my life a shred at a time."

"Why are you being so safe with her?"

He blinked, confused. "What?"

"Oh, I smell sex and sex and sex," Kelly laughed.

He actually felt his face color as if there were any reason to be embarrassed by having sex in his own home. "Well, that's great. Thanks for sharing." Garrett pushed past her and started to load the dishwasher. When he looked at Kelly he saw the pack. When he thought of the pack, he thought of Eileen. And when he thought of her, he thought of the woman he adored, loved beyond measure, dying a horrible long death in a frozen winter wood, having been mistaken for a deer by a drunk who never should have had a weapon to begin with.

"But I do not smell mating." Her eyes were darker green now. She sat at his table and played with the small red napkin holder.

"I don't want to mate."

"She's nearly fertile."

"I don't want to mate!" he roared, crashing a plate down so hard it severed into three ceramic jigsaw pieces.

"But you could. She smells...potent. Like her blood would be receptive to our—"

"Stop," he whispered. All the fight gone out of him. "No more."

"Did you ever think that maybe, just maybe, you're not mating with her because if you have unprotected sex, with the potential for conception, you might smell it on her?"

"Smell what?" But he knew and yes, he realized. He was being so militaristic about protection despite the Pill and the clean bill of health because if he had sex with her with nothing between them but sweat and air and emotion, he would smell that she was to be his mate now. And that would mean letting Eileen go forever.

"You know. A new mate. A new life. Fuck, Garrett, a second chance."

He put the broken plate in the trash and smiled. "So how is Chester, anyway?"

Kelly frowned at him but conceded, nodding her head. "He's good. Ornery as ever. Got any coffee for me before I hit the road back to town?"

"Sure thing," he said and poured her a cup.

He'd changed the subject and she could tell, after knowing him all her life, that the subject would stay changed. No matter how much he loved her and Chester. No matter how much he missed the pack.

Vengeance had been denied him. The life he was supposed to lead had been denied him. Maybe he was willing to take life up on its offer of a second fucking chance.

* * * * *

He was impressed that Liv didn't ask about Kelly. Liv had taken a long shower and then had stayed upstairs until Kelly's pickup pulled out of the driveway. She had then come down nonchalantly enough, drying her hair with one of his thrift store towels as if she had not been waiting upstairs for the other woman to leave. He had let the nicety go but had been unable to suppress the urge to hug her for her kindness. So he had hugged her. He had pulled her in and hugged her so hard she gasped a little.

Now in the apple orchard, he took her hand and led her to the best trees. "I always come to these trees," he said, handing her a basket.

"You've been here before?" She kept her eyes ahead and he could feel the uncertainty radiating off her in waves.

"Sure. Every year. We eat apples, you know." He laughed. "And the farm is just north of here. My home and family, I mean. And when I left..." he trailed off, part of him wishing he had never said it. Part of him hoping she would prompt him to ask. It would be like lancing a boil in many ways.

"I thought wolves were pack animals," she said, eyes on the tree. She was smiling but there was curiosity in her voice. She turned and smiled at him, her brown eyes a lighter chocolate shade in the sunlight. "Why are you staring at me?"

"Because you're gorgeous," he said. *The truth will set you free.* "And I know you hung upstairs for me and Kelly and thank you. Oh and we are."

"Are?" She was watching his lips, her attraction for him blinking like an invisible neon sign that only he could see.

"Pack animals. I left for various reasons." He looked down and she looked up. He waited to see which way she would push him.

"So that lady is..."

So she would not poke at why he had left. She had a lot of courtesy, Liv did. "That is Kelly. Kelly is very much the matriarch of the pack. Her husband Chester is alpha patriarch."

"I've never understood that alpha stuff." She selected a reddish gold apple and set it gently in the basket.

"It's complicated. And it's not." He shrugged. "I guess if you're raised with it, the structure of it makes perfect sense. Chester is alpha and eldest. They are not necessarily one and the same."

"So are there other alphas?"

"Yes but there can only be one. Mostly."

"Like Buffy," she said and laughed.

"Joke's on you, little girl. I watched that show. I was, in fact, a die-hard fan."

"Ah, well, then you know what I mean." Another red fruit went in the basket

"Yes, that the lines can blur and it can get complicated."

She nodded. "Exactly. I always wanted to be a strong badass like someone on TV or in a comic. I always wanted to walk without fear."

He remembered her dream and dropped his own apple in the basket. "We all want power."

"Not even power, so much. More a sense of peace...safety." She suddenly stood on tiptoe and kissed him. It was an entirely sweet and innocent gesture and it made his chest warmer than the sun ever could.

"What was that for?"

"Well, you're away from home and from your pack. Your mom, so to speak, is clearly worried about you and I'm pretty sure wants you to come home but you still found time to save me and take me in and...make me feel good. And now," she held another fruit high so he could smell its sweet perfume. "Apples!"

"You like apples?" His blood had leapt when she'd kissed him. Garrett glanced around, seeing no one. They were far back in the orchard and the overcast afternoon had brought fewer visitors than normal.

Liv nodded, kissing him again. This time her breasts pressed flush to his chest, the basket crushed between their bellies. "I love apples. They make me ready for fall. For pie and then snow and the holidays. They make me happy."

Garrett walked her back to the sagging wooden fence. The cluster of trees around them so thick the air was rich with the cidery smell of fallen apples and the lazy

buzzing of the die-hard bees who fought the fall chill. He pushed at her jeans and her panties. She didn't fight him. She in fact wriggled to help him and he bit her lower lip a little and she started. "Will this make you happy? We could get caught, you know. Someone might find us here." Even as he said it, he pushed his finger into her pussy and found her drenched.

"I don't care," she said into his mouth, her tongue sweeping in after the words. "I don't care. Right here and right now. If we're caught, we'll have a good story to tell."

She shimmied her pants down and drew one leg out with a small move that reminded him of a ballerina. Garrett fished for his wallet and Liv tugged his belt. He freed the foil wrapper from the pocket and for one heartbeat he almost put it back. He thought of Kelly's words. He wondered what he would smell if he put the condom back and just took her. Took her and made her his.

In his mind a flash of sex and scent and the white blur of teeth at her nape. He shook his head, broke the packet, rolled the condom on but not before she touched his cock with her small cool hand. The feel of her skin on his skin nearly changed his mind right then and there. Again.

Too soon. Too hard to deal with...

He pushed her back, forcing that free leg higher up and driving into her like he was punishing her. But in the best possible way. She thrust up to meet him, clenching around him like a hot wet fist. The perfect amount of tension in her cunt, the perfect amount of lips on his as she kissed him. Her mouth hot and lush like her pussy. Her eyes closed, lashes brushing his cheek. The golden light flashed in her long blonde hair as it tangled around her face. She looked very much like a painting and moved under him very much like a dream.

Garrett touched her everywhere. Moving over her and into her. "Right there," she said. He rocked against her, finding his rhythm, reading her body, inhaling her sweet breath. She came, gripping up around him, and he had to close his eyes to hang on.

"Give me one more, sweetheart. One more. I like to watch your face as you come."

She opened her eyes then and there was so much trust there. The words hovered on his lips. Telling her how he felt, for no reason other than from being around her, would either be the smartest thing he'd ever do or the dumbest. He swallowed the words. "Come on, Liv," he whispered against her neck.

He shifted his hips a bit, going deeper but slower, feeling every nuance of her reaction. She hooked her leg behind his waist, pulling him in but surging up to meet him with her hips. Her mouth popped open, bringing to mind many X-rated thoughts, and he groaned. "Come with me," she said.

Garrett nodded, kissing her before running his teeth down her neck so she shook under him. Her tight pussy gripped him taut and she pulled at his shirt. The fence groaned with their added weight and then she was coming, little spasms gripping his cock until he lost the battle and came with her. He'd never lost a better battle.

“Wow,” she said. Her eyes flying open just as he heard the distant voices of some people approaching.

“I think someone’s coming,” Liv said and they both laughed. “Not us!”

“I think—” But he never got to finish because the fence collapsed on them and dumped them on the ground. A tangle of clothes and limbs and apples.

Chapter Nine

Pie

"Jesus, please us!" Liv couldn't stop laughing though as Garrett fumbled to yank up her jeans and then actually help her up off the hay-scattered ground. He grabbed the fence and stabbed the post back into the ground deep enough to keep it upright. Probably deeper than it had been to begin with. "I'm guessing a normal man couldn't have done that?"

Garrett shrugged. "Probably not." He buckled his belt just as a family of four rounded the bend, toting apple baskets with them. Mom, Dad and the two young boys smiled and started grabbing fruit from the trees. "Whew. That was close." He bent to collect their apples and Liv let herself admire the broad muscles of his back jumping under his navy pullover. The way the late afternoon sun somehow turned the coffee color of his hair to burnt caramel in places. The way he smelled.

She bent, brushing his finger with hers as she helped pick up the scattered fruit. He turned his head and she boldly planted a kiss on his mouth. "Close but worth it," she whispered, her lips pressed to his earlobe so only he could hear.

"Careful," Garrett growled, snagging the last apple and plopping it in with the others. "Keep that up and it'll happen again. And I don't want to scar the Brady Bunch for life."

She nodded, giggling but that sharp jump of excitement in her made her feel electric. Garrett Gustafson did really, really weird things to her. Things she liked.

"Let's go then, we have enough for me to make you a pie," she said. An odd domestic bliss had settled over her. She rarely made pies, though the ones she did make once in a blue moon were damn good. She had no one to make pies for. During the holidays she would bake for Ellen and the office and if she went home to visit, she'd bake with her mom. On a weekly basis, though, her sweets were store bought. No sense in getting fancy just for yourself.

"I love pie. You'd better make two. One for me and then one for me and you to share."

Liv laughed but believed him. Apparently shifters ate like horses. She'd seen him put away a huge breakfast and now his stomach was rumbling. "Maybe we should grab a pit beef sandwich before we leave."

Garrett threw back his head and sniffed. "I'd tell you to lead the way but..." He'd taken a sharp left up a dirt hill, past a small ragtag band playing bluegrass and to the hut that held a pit and men serving up beef on rye bread with horseradish sauce.

"But we're here!"

"Exactly. You find a table, I'll get the food. You want one or two?"

She chuckled but realized he wasn't joking. "Um...one. They're huge!"

Garrett bounded off, looking very much in that instant like an overgrown boy. Liv let the happiness in her flare bright and hot for just an instant and then she wrangled it. She was being silly. This was hooking up at the least, dating at the best. No reason to feel all warm and fuzzy. She snagged them a small plastic table set with two green chairs, a chrome napkin holder and salt and pepper shakers.

She watched him come toward her, his boots kicking up dust, his grin sweet enough to make any woman all gooey inside. She caught a few women watching Garrett walk past. The interest was palpable because Garrett was a presence. He stood out as different even in a crowd of people. Liv didn't blame them at all. She had a hard time not staring at him too. "Wow. That is —"

"A snack," he said, winking. He handed her one of the sandwiches and a small plastic container of horseradish sauce, then pushed the tray laden with French fries, fried pickles and onion rings to the center. "Help yourself."

Liv stared. "I have no idea how one person can eat all that." She accepted the cold can of soda from him and swallowed three crisp gulps and sighed contentedly.

"Easy. Just watch."

"So, not that you have to answer me but did Kelly come to ask you to come back? To your family?" She took a big bite, to give her big nosy mouth something to do.

Garrett's face went from food-drunk glee to clenching jaw in a blink. She wanted to suck the words back in but what good would all her good feelings be if she couldn't ask him a simple question? He gave a brisk nod, swallowed and sighed. "Yep. Pretty much. She wants me to return to the pack. I don't want to. She thinks that a motherly visit and maybe some well-placed guilt can do the trick. It can't."

"Why did you leave?" She said it before she could stop herself and found that she was finally afraid. The question scared her. Liv put a hand to her chest to try to still her now-pounding heart. An impossibility but she tried.

He glared at her, almost like he was angry but quickly shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. Garrett tossed his uneaten onion ring on the tray and frowned. "Let's just say that I lost too much to live there anymore. And despite how much I lost, the pack..." He shook his head again, sealing his mouth into a tight line of disappointment.

"They let you down?"

His eyes registered shock for just a moment and then he gave a brisk nod. "Yes, they let me down. I'm willing to wager that you're familiar with this?"

"Yes, I am. My stepdad beat my mom fairly regularly but when I would say anything... And one time I tried to help her. Told a teacher at school and she..." The memories of her fractured childhood were still too much sometimes. Liv felt her throat

shrink two sizes and her eyes flooded with tears. She blinked furiously to try to clear them.

"She made excuses for him and basically made you out to look like a liar?" Garrett took her hand, his thumb making soft sweeping arcs across her skin.

Liv nodded, not trusting her voice. She managed another bite of her sandwich so that she wouldn't have to talk.

Garrett leaned in and waved away an errant bee circling the soda cans. "You know that's common in victims of abuse. One of my brothers is married to a woman who was married before. She said it took her years to not cover for the asshole beating her on a regular basis. Somewhere in the mix it becomes a sick kind of symbiotic relationship."

"What changed her mind?" Liv feared she knew the answer.

"Her daughter. She couldn't do it anymore. She was afraid it would spread to her daughter."

Liv saw him coming at her in her mind. Hand raised, fist cocked and then her mother jumping in front of her, taking the blow. But she didn't leave him. Nope. And a few times Margaret hadn't been fast enough to intercept the blows. She swallowed what felt like a large rock but was only cooked beef and said, "I guess my mom wasn't quite at that point. He left her for another woman. They were still married, she was still making excuses. But he got tired of her."

"Did he ever hit you?" Garrett asked. His face showed a quiet kind of rage. An emotion he was trying to suppress and thought he was succeeding. She wanted to kiss him for it.

"Just once or twice." And it wasn't a lie. But she did leave out the part about him trying more often.

Garrett didn't look like he believed her but he kissed the back of her hand. A gesture that stole her breath and made her laugh at herself. How easy was she. "Okay, let's drop all this heavy bullshit about people we can't control. Let's go home and get busy."

"Again?" she laughed. She wrapped up her sandwich to take home. In the time she had eaten a third of her huge, overstuffed sandwich he had polished off two full sandwiches, most of the onion rings, most of the fries and all of the pickles. Plus two cans of soda. It must burn a lot of calories being part wolf and full-time sex god. She blushed.

"I meant you have to make me some pies. But the way, you just blushed like that and what I smell coming off you. Yes, again." He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Hurry, woman, or we might just get busy at the orchard again."

Liv studied him as he led her through the now-teeming parking lot to the car. She thought she'd get busy with him just about anywhere. Any time. Any way. The closer she got, the more she wanted.

* * * * *

"Is it done yet?" Garrett rested his chin on her shoulder, his arms looped around her waist. Liv tried to focus on mixing the apple slices in the cinnamon and sugar and spices as he pressed his chest to her back, his pelvis to her bottom, his breath feathering down over her shoulder.

It was an almost impossible task.

"No. It's not even in the oven yet." Liv pressed back to him, liking the warm, hard feel of his body right up against hers. How in the world could she possibly want him all over again? She didn't know how but she sure as hell did.

"But that smells really good like it is." Garrett plucked an apple from the bowl and popped it in his mouth.

"Hey, back off, mister! Let me actually assemble and bake the pies before you eat them. Please? I promise you they'll be worth the wait."

"Fine, fine," he sighed. "But what do I do in the meantime?"

Liv laughed. "What would you be doing if I weren't here?"

"I'd be out in the yard working or upstairs working on that horrible wallpaper in the bathroom."

"There you go." She tried to focus on the crisp apples and pastry and butter but her mind kept zigzagging to his mouth on her, him pressing her into the dirt and hay at the farm, the cool slide of the spatula handle in her pussy. All the things he'd done to her in so little time.

"Well, it's raining," he pushed back the curtains. "Hard."

"Wallpaper?"

"No ma'am." He shook his head and blew out a breath.

"Why not?"

"Because you're blushing again and I know why. I can smell you. And then, of course, I'll smell the pie."

"You can smell me when I'm..." She ducked her head and poured the pie filling into the crust. The oven ticked and popped as it heated and rain snickered against the small window over the sink.

"When you want me? When you're horny? When you are so ready you just can't stand it and you're wet and you want me to slip my big—"

"Garrett!" she half shouted, half gasped. His big blue eyes glittered with humor and he laughed so hard his big shoulders jumped comically.

"Am I lying?"

"No but..."

"It made it worse," he said, raising his nose and sniffing softly.

"Oh. My. God."

"It's true."

"Yes, it's true but God. How...embarrassing."

"Don't be embarrassed. I want you anyway. But when I can smell how much you want me, that makes me want you more and then we...do stuff. It's a big, horny vicious circle. The best vicious circle ever." He put his hands on her cheeks and leaned over the counter to kiss her. "Which is why I am going to grab that pane of glass I saw in the back of the basement and I'm going to replace the glass in your window from my daring rescue yesterday. You bake, I'll fix." He beat his chest and grunted. "Liv make pie! Garrett fix window! Tarzan want Jane."

She found herself shaking with laughter at his goofiness. It had been a long, long time since she had laughed as much as she had in the last day or so. If she had ever laughed this much. "Okay, you do that, Tarzan."

"Then Tarzan come home and eat pie." He came at her like a gorilla and pressed his full lips to her ear and spoke softly so that a shiver ran through her. "And then Tarzan might eat Jane. And do other stuff..."

"Go," she gasped, her nipples growing stiff under her sweater. Her breath coming hard and fast as her pussy grew ready for him in that small space of time. "Go now or there will be no pie."

He kissed her temple, laughed softly and went down the basement steps.

Chapter Ten

Broken

Garrett cleared the broken glass from the floor before putting in the new pane. Broken glass, broken man. Recently it all had seemed broken but now it was beginning to feel less so. Being around Liv was making him think. Making him feel. And making him want. Sometimes it made him want to scream or push her away. Sometimes it made him want to cave in and give her what she wanted.

Her need for him was palpable. He hadn't told her. Some part of her would be mortified. But it radiated off her like a halo of energy. She wanted to mate with him. She wanted to connect with him and her blood sang out to him. She would be a compatible change.

"But you don't have to change her, you doof. You can mate with her and be with her and she can stay human." Many of his pack were mated to humans. There was no issue with the breeding. It was the matter of one gene. The offspring usually were wolf but not always. And the ones that were human weren't shunned and were usually faster, stronger, smarter and braver than the average human child.

He knew all of this. Knew he could have her, love her, mate with her just as she was. But a part of him literally raged like a dangerous caged thing to change her. He wanted to change her. He wanted them to run together and hunt and breed. And he wanted to run from her when that feeling became a little too crystalline. But he wouldn't.

Can't run from every good thing. You've run from the pack. Don't run from her.

Now would he be wise enough to listen to his higher self? His wiser side? Or would he give in to his baser nature and change her and then possibly bolt because he was too stuck in the past? On what he had lost and the vengeance he never had.

He'd never been happier and alternately, he'd never been more miserable and confused.

"Fuck me hard," he said and finished up the window. He swept the old glass that still littered the floor into a dustpan and emptied it, taking the trash out with him.

He smelled the man before he saw him. The pepper and vinegar smell of hostility. "Where's Liv?"

"Not here. I think it's best if you leave, either way," Garrett said. He kept his voice low, his eyes averted. Once in a great while they would glitter in just the right way so a human spotted it.

Like Liv did. But that's because she's your mate...

"I asked you where she was. Not if she was here." Kevin stepped in front of him to block his way. Garrett stopped, not because he had to. He could have easily punted Kevin to the side like a football but this was not the time or place. Outside in broad daylight in a brand-new neighborhood where fifty percent of the people were nosy retired people. Not the best place to exercise your strength.

"Move."

Kevin stepped forward, puffing up his chest. The smell of aggression and a tiny bit of confusion came off him, filling Garrett's nose, firing his predatory nature.

"I said, *move*." He let a tiny bit of the rolling grumble into his voice. Cocked his head and stepped toward the man instead of back. "And leave her alone. Do you hear me? Or I will be the one you answer to." His anger flared and the other man's face flickered with uncertainty.

There goes the eye shine, genius.

The rain coated them in a fine mist and Garrett didn't wait for Kevin to decide to answer. "I said, do you hear me?" Garrett asked. He took one more step forward so that they were practically nose to nose. Though his nose was about three inches higher than Kevin's. He shook the bag of glass and Kevin's eyes shot to it. "You tend to destroy things when you're around."

"You did that," Kevin said, trying to sound cocky but only managing unsure.

"I did that rescuing her from you. She doesn't want to see you. Which means I don't want to see you around."

"I don't take orders from you," Kevin said. "Tell Livvie I said hi and I'll see her soon." He turned on his heels and stomped off. Garrett didn't miss the fact that he walked just a bit too fast for someone throwing around threats. But he didn't trust the asshole so he'd have to keep his eye out for Kevin.

"I'll be fucked blue before I tell her that," Garrett said to no one.

* * * * *

He walked in to find two fragrant pies cooling on the counter. The house smelled like a home and the kitchen was a welcome warmth from the bitter, damp chill outside. He heard the hiss of the shower and grinned. Maybe he'd pop in and say hi to Liv. Tell her how good her pies smelled. Garrett kicked his boots off on the mat and snapped his belt out of the loops. He hung that on the hook and shucked his soaking wet jeans. A hot shower with a hot woman sounded like just what the doctor ordered.

He took the steps two at a time. The door barely made a sound. He'd just oiled it this week. Garrett stood and watched the steamy, blurred outline of her through the clear plastic curtain where it gaped. Her head was tipped back, eyes closed. Her long lashes brushing the flushed apple of her cheeks. She was, to him, damn near perfect. Her long unruly blonde hair was dark brown from being soaked with water and the tips of it brushed her hips just above her ass. He saw the fawn spray of freckles above

her breasts and on the bridge of her nose. The small dark triangle of her pubic hair. The heady scent of her and shampoo and heat.

He didn't realize how quiet he was being, it just came naturally to him. It didn't dawn on him at all until he pulled the curtain back to say something smart like *surprise!* or *trick-or-treat, lady!*

Before he could, she clutched at herself, dark eyes flying wide, face terrified. She screamed so loud his ears rang from the shock and she dropped into a fetal position at the foot of his shower. Her body promptly racked with sobs, her heartbeat suddenly audible to him and the feel of her fear so thick he could have broken off a chunk of air.

Garrett went from horny and happy and playful to enraged in the space of a breath.

He took Liv by her upper arms and lifted her as gently as he could manage. She was so wet and so scared. She shook in his arms as he led her to the wicker chest he used as towel storage. He got her to sit, murmuring softly. Nonsense words. Niceties and soothing sounds just like Kelly had done for all the younger ones as they grew up. His own mother had died a few years after having him and Kelly had often been a stand-in mom when a gruff but loving father wasn't enough for a young man. It had been from her that he learned the importance of a lulling background of sound during illness or trauma.

"It's okay, it's okay. I have you now. I'm sorry. I was joking around and I'm an ass. Breathe deeply, Liv. Take a breath, baby," he rambled but she obeyed. He wrapped a red towel around her and she grasped the top with shaking hands to hold it closed. Garrett stood, flipping the switch for the small overhead heater. The bathroom grew a bit warmer but she was still shaking.

"I'm sorry," she said, teeth chattering. Liv kept her head down, her feet rubbing against each other, a nervous gesture, he guessed.

"Why the fuck are you sorry? I'm the one who scared you," he said. He brushed her wet hair off her face with his fingertips, examined her face as if she might be wounded.

She bit her lip, her face pale under the wet strands of hair. "Because a normal woman wouldn't have reacted like that."

"Fuck that. You're you. It was me." He stood, pacing the small room. Wanting to hit something but not giving in to the urge. "I'm not mad at you, by the way." He saw her nervous look and tried to still himself.

"Why are you mad then?" she whispered, squeezing her hair with the towel to dry it.

"I'm mad because a person like you shouldn't have to feel this way," he roared. "Ever!"

"Garrett, you're scaring me," she said.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He grabbed a smaller yellow towel and draped it over her hair. "I don't know how to do that weird towel thing you girls do."

She cracked a smile and his heart untwisted just a bit. Liv flipped her head forward, her hair smacking her lower legs like little wet whips, and then she twisted the towel around it like a tall halo. "There."

He stooped, picked her up and nudged the door open with his toe. "Come on, I'm putting you in my robe and finding that space heater. The house is raw and chilly and you're going to get sick."

"Why are you..." She swallowed, let the sentence drop, looking uncertain.

He set her on his bed, still unmade and messy from their night together. "Why am I what? Mad? Look, I have a bit of a hair trigger when I feel—"

"Not mad," she said.

"Then what? Put this on." But he didn't let her do it, he helped her into it and belted the big robe. So big on her she almost looked like a kid sitting in her father's robe.

"Why are you treating me this way?"

"Shit, Liv, don't you think it's about time someone treated you this way?"

Then she shocked the hell out of him for a second time by dropping her head and crying again.

* * * * *

Begging

She'd expected anger when she started crying again. Liv was accustomed to rage in the face of her worry or weakness. Ellen had been the one to push her to the point of being able to talk about how she felt. Along with Dr. Sanders who she should probably call soon. But she still expected it. The nightmares had been too much and then Kevin breaking in. Garrett had been a miracle, a rescuer but it had still unnerved her. And now on top of it all, she had serious feelings starting for him and an almost unnatural need to be with him physically.

Throw in an unhealthy obsession with forcing the issue of unprotected sex...

She was truly happy and there was a tiny space filled with peace inside her since she'd met him but she needed to remember that her body did not know the difference between good stress and bad. Only her mind did. And when he had snuck in to surprise her—when that shower curtain had been ripped back—she had felt every moment of powerless fear come crashing down on her. And she'd cracked.

Garrett's anger had been palpable but it was different. She'd believed him, miraculously, when he'd said it wasn't her who was making him angry. It was the circumstances that she'd seen that could make her that way. That small space of peace had grown a little.

When the second wave of tears had come, he'd pulled her onto his lap and rocked her back and forth, very much like a child. Maybe once in a while she needed to feel like a child. A safe one.

Now Liv heard him downstairs in the kitchen. He had gone to make her tea and check the pies and she was under strict orders to lie down and warm up and relax. Her face burned from the tears and embarrassment but her nose had stopped running and her hands had stopped shaking. She closed her eyes, listening to the domestic sounds of a big man maneuvering in a small kitchen.

The quilt on his bed was heavy. Heavy like the one her grandmother had owned. It seemed to press her to the bed and immobilize her and the intense warmth made her sleepier than the crying jag had. Liv felt herself drifting and tried to rally, she wanted to lie and listen to the sounds of him making her tea, building a fire, being there. Just being there. But the warmth and the weight and the moment of calm won out and she drifted down further...

It was exactly as she'd thought. Him slipping into her that way. Her head filled with the forest and cool air smell of him, under it the perfect warm spice scent of a man and sex and attraction. Garrett thrust deeper, his hands cupping her ass, tipping her just so, making it so that each thrust touched off nerves and little sparkly flashes of pleasure so good she shook her head. He whispered to her. Told her all the things he felt. All the ways he would keep her safe and keep her close. She would never know fear again. Only him and the pack and family. He moved faster, his breath warm on her face, his lips hot on her lips. Her shoulder, her collarbone. His breathing like some great animal now, her hips moving up to meet him. The sudden tight spasm of her release rushing toward her and as he went tense against her, something like a growl uncoiling from his throat. And then his teeth. His sharp perfect teeth, penetrating so fast and expertly that it did not feel like pain but like something hot touched to her skin. Just enough to mark. Just enough to draw the tiniest amount of blood. But the orgasm in her doubled, trebled, overtook her and his small sound turned big as he emptied into her. And she wasn't afraid. And all she could smell in her world at that moment was Garrett...

"You in there?"

Liv opened her eyes and he was standing there. Bigger than life, imposing, strong, gruff sometimes. He should have been intimidating to her. All she saw was hope. "I'm right here," she said, reaching up her hands.

He stepped in, a baking sheet he was using as a makeshift tray on the nightstand. "Yes, you need me?" He grinned, leaning into her reaching hands.

"Yes," she said. His face flickered with confusion and then some unidentifiable emotion. He recognized the truth in her word. "I do need you."

Garrett took her hands in his and leaned in, kissing her on the forehead, the nose, each eyelid, each cheek, before finally pressing his lips to hers and kissing her hard. Each soft touch of his mouth to her face filled her with a bigger want. She pushed her fingers into his hair, feeling his warm skin under her hands. She opened her mouth, let his tongue dominate hers and then he settled onto her like a much heavier quilt.

His cock rode the cleft of her pussy and he slipped against her softly. Just enough to make her want him that much more. Which was impossible. "Garrett?"

"Yeah?" he said but then looked at her. "Don't ask me," he said.

She wanted to cringe but some part of her reveled instead. She should feel bad but she felt anticipation. *Don't ask me* meant *I can't deny you*. It wasn't a denial. It was a plea.

"Please," Liv said, delivering her own plea.

"I can't. It isn't done. It isn't safe."

Liv parted her legs so that he could smell and feel the heat of her there between her legs. His cock rubbed and she arched, the room heated quickly despite the lack of a space heater. Rain rapped at the window pane and she swore she could hear each drop hit like a drumstick on dry wood. She pressed up to him, her fingers roaming the planes of his face. He pushed a finger into her mouth and she sucked it hard, running the tip of her tongue along the length of it before he covered her mouth with his palm, groaning, his hips bucking against her body.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Everything was reduced to her body's craving for Garrett. For a mating. For a change. For the loss of fear and the gain of independence.

"It's painful," he said, nipping and kissing and licking along her throat. His big hand covered her mouth still, gentle but firm. A silent command to listen. But something about this exercise of dominance over her made her wet with urgency. There was no fear in the face of his show of power. There was only the increasing beat of her pulse in her pussy and her temples. She could hear her blood like the ocean in her ears as he said, "It would be the end of everything you know. It would be a change like no other. It would be dangerous and painful," he repeated.

She kissed his palm and he took it away to let her speak. His hips still moved against her, rotating in lazy circles that made her nipples spike against the soft gray robe. He parted it and sucked one pink circle into his mouth as she managed to push out the words, "My whole life has been pain. This, I would be in control of." He tugged the hard, rosy nub with his tongue and she cried out. Now she was too hot. Robe, covers, man. She pulled at the robe and he uncovered her, unbelted it, parted it so that it settled around her in gray, flannel butterfly wings. Garrett licked from her breast to her belly, tipped his slick tongue into her navel and an invisible string of pleasure tugged in her pussy. "I need some control."

He parted her legs and settled that tongue on her clit. He simply rested it there. An epicenter of wet heat on her most sensitive place. And just when she thought she would sob with frustration, he sucked in, taking the whole tiny nub in his mouth so that her back arched and she clutched at him.

"I can't. Don't ask me," he said, sounding utterly defeated.

Garrett started slow, even strokes that brought her right to the shiny fuzzy edge of coming and then he licked up her inner thighs. Liv grabbed fistfuls of sheet and his

hair, pulled at him. "Please." She meant both things. *Please let me come. Please give this to me.*

Garrett sighed, putting his tongue to her again, sweeping wet circles that had her holding her breath until her head buzzed with vertigo. The orgasm was the sweetest one she could remember. Nearly soft at first but gripping her in a long lazy wave of spasms that radiated heat and pleasure through her belly and legs. Her limbs felt heavy and limp and her pussy clutched around nothing at all. Empty. Needing him. "Please," she said it again but moved her legs a little. An impatient dance to get him to move. To come up to her and into her.

He reached for the drawer, stilled. Liv knew it wasn't fair. Knew she was asking him to give something of himself he might not be able to. Knew that she was testing him in the most precarious way. She knew it instinctively because he had never really said a lot out loud to her. She didn't speak but watched him.

He kissed her, softly. Almost like he was sad and her heart broke a little. But then he looked at the drawer, dismissing it. Garrett tugged at his jeans and her hands joined the fray. "Are you sure, Liv?" He pressed his cock to her but did not enter.

She didn't say a word. She pushed her legs wider, hips up, slipping the head of his cock inside her and then she leaned up and kissed him. She hoped that even a fraction of her thanks was in that kiss. He could still change his mind but she didn't think he would.

You never asked him outright. You never said change me.

It was true. She hadn't. She squeezed herself around the tip of him and he kissed her one more time, thrusting into her slowly as he did. He gave her a moment. A perfect still moment where her body adjusted. Her pussy full, her mouth working against his. He stayed right there for one blissful heartbeat so they could both simply feel. And when he started to move, her entire self responded, a second orgasm already brewing in her. Tightening and loosening her body in tandem, a physical oxymoron.

He knows. He knows what I want.

When he blew out a breath against her neck, she knew she was right. When he pushed his nose to her throat, her hair, her shoulder, she knew she was right. His hands were more possessive, his movements more aggressive. When he reared back to look at her, nip at her lip, the tarnished metal silver of his eyes winked back at her. She had no fear at all. She just said, "What do you feel?"

"I smell," he corrected.

"You smell what?" The orgasm fired off with no warning. It was as if this coupling were magic. Some storm of flesh and blood stirring up the perfect electrical display. She rode it out, holding onto Garrett like she was drowning.

"My mate. You. I smell you and this is why..." He broke off. The planes of his face going lean and sharp in a flickering movie reel way that was surreal. Dusk was falling and his hands pulled at her, anchoring her as he pounded into her.

Liv braced for his orgasm, braced for his teeth. She was once again skating close to coming and she knew right then that when it happened, she would come. She would come and the pleasure and pain of it all would morph into something brand-new for her. She expected a last-minute surge of fear or panic. None came.

Garrett threw back his head, going stiff against her, his jaw tight with the power of his orgasm. Liv dug her nails into his back, her own orgasm ripping through her, she felt a hot trickle under her fingers but it didn't really register, because then Garrett's head was coming down, his eyes mercurial in the low light and then his teeth were on her.

Chapter Eleven

The Perfect Storm

All he could smell when they started mating was her. It was a viable mating. For his kind, any sex that could result in offspring was viable. And that was when a wolf could smell his true mate. It would be like identifying your favorite dessert in a bakery by scent. An intoxicating smell that could not be denied. Once he had taken the step to make love to her without protection, Garrett knew he was done. The moment he pushed inside her and her pussy had closed around him, he could smell nothing in the world but the earthy smell of lavender and sandalwood and her hot, hot blood.

Every breath she exhaled was filled with the scent of compatibility. Her heartbeat even marked off each beat in synch with his. She was a mate for him. One had been taken, another was being offered. One more chance at what he thought his life should be.

It was the most perfectly bittersweet moment of his life.

Her cunt flexed around his cock, a perfect velvety receptacle for him. Each thrust brought him one step closer to giving in to the image that had been in his mind since he'd come flying through her upstairs window like some lycan version of Batman.

Change her.

He tried to push it away. They could build a life, get married, have babies, all of it with her as *human*. There was no reason to put her through the change. None at all.

But it persisted in him. The irrational, overwhelming, bright and shiny dark thought, *change her. Be her champion. Give her something no one else ever has...*

Power.

In the end, he'd lost his battle. His release had swallowed him up. A roar of light and noise and sound, the smell of his mate filling his head to the point where he felt a sharp but blissful vertigo overtake him. He came, spilling his seed, and at the same instant the wolf claimed its mate. Claimed it irrevocably with teeth and penetration and blood.

He sat back, studying the darkening bruise on her throat. The slightly staggered line of his teeth marked on her. She slept, already sweating. He put his hand to her forehead, shook his head. Already the heat baked off her. Her breathing was going up, her color going down. Outside a sudden storm raged and Garrett bent his head, kissed her closed eyes.

He had operated on instinct but so had she. Not even forty-eight hours. Few humans reacted so fast to love or lust or need. The animal in him had spotted a mate in

her the moment she had boldly stuck those tweezers in his arm. The man he was had followed suit with very little resistance.

He'd get her water. He'd get towels. He'd hover and poke and coo and watch her until this was done. She was his now and he was hers. He bent, one more kiss before he'd go and gather what he needed. "I love you, Liv."

She opened her eyes, looked at him and then closed them again.

* * * * *

He made tea, a pitcher of ice water, gathered some crackers. He wet towels and all the while, as he maneuvered in the kitchen, he knew it was busy work. Liv wouldn't drink any of this. She would not eat crackers. She would lie up there and she would rage with fever, she would most likely be out of her mind with it for some time. If all went well, she would go through hell and back and then she would be fine. And the pain of her first shift would be what awaited her on the other side. If all did not go well, he'd have a body upstairs very soon. One that the coroner would mark as a massive heart attack due to the complications of some unknown virus or anatomical glitch.

"But that will not happen," he said to himself. Part of him was so steeped in self-loathing he could barely function. Another part of him felt that he had gifted a woman he so abruptly loved with what she was asking for. And deep down inside him where the truth lived, there was calm. It would all be well. But Garrett didn't know how much he trusted that truth sayer. At all.

The phone rang and he tensed, his whole body tight with nerves. Caller ID gave him no information beyond out of area and private caller. He answered, hands shaking. It was too late to change his mind when he heard Kelly's voice.

"I can't talk right now," Garrett said, adding a bottle of pain reliever to the tray as if that would help.

"I just need a moment, Garrett. I wanted to make sure we were okay from earlier? I miss you and you know I feel like you're one of my —"

"I know, it's fine, Kelly. Really. I'm not upset. I'm just busy."

Somewhere upstairs Liv made her first noise of the night. A deep, sobbing kind of howl. It was the sound that no human throat should make and it sounded like unadulterated agony.

"What was that?" She knew though. He could hear it in her voice. He hung his head and tried to get his shaking voice to behave.

"Nothing. It's the TV. Some Halloween movie." Even as he said it, he knew that Kelly would call bullshit. They knew the sound of their own and then knew the sound of a changeling in pain.

"What did you do, Garrett?"

"Nothing. It was just —"

"Did you change her? Did you bite her? Are you trying to nurse her alone?" Her voice went lower with each question. A deep vibrating note joined her normal tone. She was worried and her animal was showing.

"I...yes. She wanted me to and I've had this...shit, this urge since day one and it all got the better of me. And there's nothing I can do about it now, Kelly. Not one goddamn thing but be there for her and help her. I can't let her be alone."

A long high cry echoed from upstairs. This one very much the sound of a human woman terrified.

"Garrett, you can't—"

He hung up the phone muttering, sorry, sorry and took the steps two at a time. Much like earlier in the night when he'd headed toward a warm, wet woman and a hot shower. What the hell had happened, he wondered.

She glared at him when he entered, eyes glassy with fever, mouth moving but no sound coming out. She thrashed to face him but just as quickly rolled to her back. Her body bowed as if caught in the mother of all muscles spasms—because it was—and she rolled right. Garrett knew she was trying to find a comfortable position. He knew from watching several passages from human to mix that there was no such thing. There would be no comfort for Liv until the change was done.

"I'm sorry," he said more to himself than her. But her ears, already tuning into higher registers and softer sounds, picked it up. She twisted his way again, her face a bizarre mix of understanding and anger. She reached for him. Garrett almost couldn't take her hand. He felt like it was something he no longer deserved but she kept reaching and he couldn't deny her.

Her hand was both hot and clammy all at once, the sinew under her skin rock-hard and shivering with tension. "Am I dying? I'm dying. Nothing can feel like this—" She closed her eyes, trying so hard to focus. Her legs whipped straight, then bent and crooked in an arthritic slant. "Nothing can feel like this that doesn't end in death."

Garrett sat, trying to smooth her hair back, but the moment he did she shivered, whipped her head to the other side and it shrouded her pained face again. "I don't think you will die, Liv. I feel like... I never would have done it if I really thought that. This pain is your body changing. This is the beginning of what you wanted. This is what has to happen for you to get to the other side."

She moaned low in her throat, such a mournful sound that Garrett wanted to run. He couldn't take the sound of her pain. Not that much pain. But he had to. He absolutely had to, so he gripped her hand, murmuring to her that he was there, he was right there.

Liv gripped his hand hard. Way harder than she normally would. It was already taking effect. Her body was breaking down but simultaneously rebuilding. It was wholly necessary and completely unnerving. He bent and kissed her, she thrashed like he had burned her. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

She stopped and stared at him. Garrett could see the enormous amount of effort and concentration it was taking for her to stay still and just look him in the eye. "I asked you for this," she whispered. The whisper turned to a gasp and she winced. Garrett could feel the invisible rays of heat blazing off her. She was a tiny beautiful sun in the chilly bedroom. "Do not be sorry," she managed and then she had to turn away.

He could see the silver tracks of her tears in the shoddy light. She sniffled, trying very hard not to cry. Garrett wondered how many times in her life she'd had to tamp down her feelings and hide her pain. Often emotion led to more abuse and he could tell Liv had had more than her fair share of abusive people in her orbit.

"Let it out, Liv," he said. He rubbed her back and she jumped as if he'd stabbed her. Any pressure on her skin was painful. Sound and light and even scents could induce wild giddiness, pain and nausea until her body accepted its changes. "Being quiet will only make it worse. No one can hear you. It's fine. Let it go, baby."

She shuddered harder, sniffled once more and then she let out the loudest, most blood-chilling wail he'd ever heard. It took his breath away, the agony in that cry, and made his heart jump. Garrett did the only thing he could think to do, he lay on the bed, spooning Liv, holding her as her body shook with illness and she screamed until her voice gave out.

Chapter Twelve

Kelly

It took an hour to get from the farm to Garrett's new house. When she turned off the main road she could hear Liv. That smiling, blonde human woman from the house. The one who had scurried upstairs to give them peace. The sounds she let loose made Kelly's skin crawl.

"Oh dear God, that poor, poor girl." She parked in a cockeyed mess on Garrett's parking pad and ran to the front door. He had it locked and another fierce cry came from the upstairs and her ears started ringing. Kelly put her shoulder to the door, gripped the handle and leaned into it. The door opened and a bit of the wood splintered. "He'll have to forgive me. I'll get him a new door," she said, talking to herself. First sign of crazy, her mother had always joked.

Kelly took the steps fast, hearing the harsh sounds of Liv's distress. She rounded the corner and Garrett turned, tense to spring. He'd been so wrapped up in the girl he hadn't sensed her at all. She held up her hands in mock supplication and he relaxed.

"How did you get in?"

"So I owe you a door," she said. "How is she?"

"Burning up. How hot do they get? It's been so long I can't remember."

His jaw was so tight the small muscles stood out. Kelly could see the fear in his eyes. She'd seen him angry, she'd seen him annoyed and she'd seen him so very grief-stricken she thought it might kill him but she had never ever seen him so scared.

"Very hot. Too hot. It would kill most people. One-oh-nine? One-ten? About there."

"Dear Christ," he said and shook his head. "She's getting quiet. The quiet is worse to me than that crying and screaming."

"Because you have to worry if she's—" She cut herself off when he looked up, face lean and harsh in the small amount of lamp light. He'd turned a light on in the corner and she could see the writhing outline of Liv in the bed. Her body was covered with quilts as she shivered uncontrollably, her body's wires completely crossed. Every nerve and fiber of her confused and in crisis.

"What can we do?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing. We can sit, wipe her head, talk to her, try to give her liquids. But mostly, nature has to take its course. It will accept or reject the invasion. It will adapt or die."

"I'm not going to die," Liv said from the bed.

Garrett turned so fast to touch her he nearly fell off the bed. Kelly would have smiled at that had she not been so concerned for the smaller woman. "I believe you,

honey. If you're talking when you're not even halfway done, then you are one strong lady." She went to Liv and knelt by the bed. She put her face up close to Liv's so she could see her clearly. "Did you want to be changed?"

"I did." Liv bit her lip, her body contorting for a moment. Kelly smoothed her wet bangs off her face. Touched her forehead. Heat blazed off her and her skin was not wet now, it was dry. Dry like sun-baked clay in the summer.

"Good. Thank you for answering me."

"Why do you need to know?" Even in this state, the woman looked concerned. Her eyes darted to Garrett and she asked, "He won't get in trouble, will he?"

"Answers will have to be provided. We take changing someone very seriously. Very seriously. Garrett is the last pack member I would ever expect to change a person. You must be very special." She leaned in and kissed Liv on the forehead.

Liv looked shocked but then closed her eyes. Groaning, she rolled to her back. "I asked, I begged. I wanted it. I'll tell them myself. When I'm better." She sniffled softly and appeared to fall asleep.

Kelly motioned Garrett into the hall. "I'm going to make you a steak and whatever else I can scrounge up. You need to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"It doesn't matter, your body is. You know how this goes. You can't go losing a bunch of weight and letting your body get weak. She needs you to be strong. Stronger than you've ever been. Wolves need food," she said and grabbed him in a hug. He'd take her hug whether he liked it or not.

"Fine. I'll eat." He hugged her back but only briefly.

"Why didn't you call me, Garrett?"

"I didn't know I'd do it until I did. I kept thinking I'd..."

"See reason?"

"Chicken out, actually. Because I wanted her to be mine. I wanted to take her and change her. And I don't really know why other than it was there. And we mated and..."

"And?" Kelly stared at him. She could hear the rain streaking the sunlight in the hallway. It painted his face with silver and gray.

"And she is mine. She is mine because all I could smell or think or feel in the whole world was—"

"Her. Which was why you were being so cautious. You were afraid you were right." She sighed. "I could have—"

"You would have talked me out of it. It was something we both needed and I can't really explain it." Liv gave a small gasp and then a sob and he turned toward the sound. "I have to get in there with her. I'm sorry. You don't have to stay."

"Sure I do." Kelly turned but he called her name from already halfway down the hall.

"But Kel?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't have anyone to answer to. I don't care what the pack thinks or feels. I would never change someone against their will but I don't care if they believe me. I don't give a good goddamn what any of them think. Which is how they felt about me." And then he was gone, tending to his new changeling.

Kelly put her head down, muttering a tiny prayer to Great Spirit. The one her mother had taught her as a child, *Oh Great Spirit, help me always to speak the truth quietly, to listen with an open mind when others speak and to remember the peace that may be found in silence.*

She went down to prepare Garrett his meal. It would be a long night and his body would need a lot to keep up. Anxiety, stress and worry taxed them physically more than most. They could drop pounds overnight if they neglected to nourish properly. She would keep her peace. Let things lie. The best gift she could give Garrett right now was to listen, to try to hear what his heart was saying and to keep her mouth shut. The best thing she could offer him was her silence and her help.

* * * * *

Liv turned to see the tarnished metal sheen of his eyes, his face went lean, his nose sharper. She smiled, reaching up to touch Garrett. "Are you okay?"

He barked laughter, the sound of his base nature in there for her to hear. A rumbling quickening of breath. He shook his head. "You're asking me if *I'm* okay?"

"You're flickering," she managed. Each breath was like fire in her lungs. Each word like a razor sliding over her lips. Everything hurt. Her face, her toes, her stomach, her head, her ears rang and ached like someone had shoved ice picks into her ear drums. Her scalp sang where the pressure of each hair protruding from her skin created pain. Her eyes were dry and hot, her tongue like sandpaper. Garrett held a glass to her lips and she sipped a little. Her stomach seized in a cramp.

"When we get upset, really upset, we tend to have less control on our wolves. You'll learn. You will, in fact, have to learn. Fast."

"That sounds promising," she laughed. "Like you think I'll make it."

"You'll make it." He bent, kissing her full on the mouth despite her being a total wreck. It made her smile though even her teeth hurt. "You have to."

His eyes flashed again and she winced, then everything righted. He was struggling. "Don't fight it. Just change. Lie here next to me and keep me warm. Be all beast-man."

"You're lucky you're sick, lady. Or I'd definitely do you right now." He shifted in an instant. Again the blur and flicker of an old movie that has jumped its reel. He was in one breath a man, the next a wolf. A beautiful regal gray wolf with eyes the color of tropical waters.

Liv laughed. "You'd do me right now. You are brave." Then pain torqued up her belly and her arms, cramps that made charley horses look like fun and she curled in on herself hoping for some relief.

Garrett rested his muzzle on her hip and whined a little. Keeping watch over her, he rubbed his fur over the soft skin of her arm. He licked her hand until she settled and when she looked his eyes never wavered. She finally dozed, feeling his gaze on her and the solid reassurance of his presence.

Chapter Thirteen

Sunrise

Garrett came down with the sunrise to find Kelly passed out on the sofa. The kitchen showed a night of nervous puttering. Food stuff lay scattered, clean dishes dried in the rack and dirty dishes clogged the sink. He opened the fridge to find pudding, gelatin, a casserole and on the counter behind him sat a pineapple upside down cake. "It looks like Betty Crocker exploded in here," he mumbled.

"Not quite but close. I wasn't sure what either of you would want to eat." Kelly stood, rubbing her eyes, stretching tall and then bending forward like she was made of rubber.

Garrett shook his head. How did she do that? "You figured we'd both be on a sugar kick?" he laughed.

"Hey, most of us crave sugar after we shift. It's fast energy. If you're shifting for the first time..." Kelly shrugged.

She rinsed the coffee pot and Garrett dug out the coffee and filters.

"How is she?"

"Sleeping," he said. "I finally left her because the fever broke and she went from restless sleep to sacked out. I didn't want to bother her."

"You know she'll shift tonight. Are you ready for that?" Kelly kept her head down and Garrett suspected it was to avoid a conflict. She wasn't judgmental but he was in a place of guilt and worry right now. He'd find judgment where there wasn't any. She knew him well enough to play the offensive.

"I know. I'm ready. I would never have changed her if I weren't ready to..." He sighed, put coffee in the filter and hit the button. "Deal? Keep her safe? Mate her? Shit, your guess is as good as mine, Kel. I have no clue. I've been operating mainly on instinct with Liv."

Kelly frowned, looking concerned for the first time. "But our instinct isn't to change people. That's not how our instincts work, Ga—"

"As a man," he said gruffly. "I meant as a man who wanted a woman."

She shut her mouth so fast her teeth clacked and they both smiled. "Got it. Well, I have zero to say about that but I do understand what you mean. I'm going to hop in your shower and then I'll come fix breakfast."

"I'll grab a piece of cake," he said.

"Good lord, fine. Have cake but when I come down there'll be eggs and bacon and toast and fruit. Good stuff. Tonight's going to be another rough one, you need your energy."

"Yes, Mom," Garrett said, grinning.

In mom-mode, she swatted him with a throw pillow and then bounded up the steps. Kelly was easily in her mid-sixties but she moved like a twenty-year-old. "Maybe that was why I changed her. Had to," Garrett said to himself. "I couldn't watch her grow old and die and lose her. I couldn't face another loss."

He wasn't immortal but his life span would be significantly longer than Liv's. Probably by at least half a dozen decades. Too many decades to be without her.

Garrett heard the dog that lived next door to Liv barking like mad. He looked out the window as the shower came on upstairs. No sounds from Liv. Hopefully she would sleep long and well. Her body needed that more than ever. Twice during the night her body had contorted, hovering right on the edge of shifting. Her muscles, bones and sinew doing a painful dance, caught in limbo. She had clutched at him, pulling his fur, gripping him close and sometimes painfully hard. He had stayed vigilant and ready to help her if she needed. Mostly she just needed his presence.

As he watched, Kevin, he of the alpha temper and brain-dead ways, came around the side of Liv's house. He banged on every door and window with a stick from the front yard. He did his best to peer into the windows, cupping his big hands around his big stupid face and straining to see. Garrett swore he could smell the oily stink of the other man's bravado. Probably so.

Upstairs, Liv tossed, cried out softly. Even he had barely heard it. She was caught in some kind of dream that made her anxious. Almost as if the memories of the man now stalking around her house had seeped into her sleeping form to haunt her simply because he was here.

Garrett tapped the window. Something in him told him to stop but it was make his presence known or go over there and rip that man to little bloody shreds. That was the kind of mood he was in.

Kevin didn't hear him. He stomped onto Liv's porch and Pepper, the neighbor's dog, went wild, howling and barking. But no one was home at the Petersons' to hear. Kevin kicked the brass kick-plate at the bottom of her door, hammering with his fists. He didn't yell though. That would create too much of a spectacle and men like that were all about flying under the radar.

Garrett felt his own anger clogging up his chest, his throat, muddying his head. He tapped the window and eventually started slapping with the flat of his palm. It was only when the other man stopped for a moment that he heard the now violent *smack, smack, smack* of flesh on glass. Kevin turned and Garrett glared at him, hand still on the chilled window.

Kevin glowered, stomped down the steps, started to come but caught something in Garrett's face. Something made him hesitate on the far side of the street.

No... Liv from upstairs.

He heard Kelly start down the hall from the guest room. Her shower had been short and perfunctory.

The men locked eyes and Garrett felt his anger, a fiery horse of rage barely tethered by the reins of his common sense, start to buck. He glared at the man, hoping against hope he took the point and never came back.

No!

Kevin took one more step, stopped and finally rose his fingers in the imitation of a gun and fired. Then he turned and walked to his truck.

"No!" Liv screamed from upstairs and Kelly called him. No panic in her voice but concern.

"Coming," he said softly but he knew Kelly would hear him.

"Asshole," Garrett said, watching Kevin drive off, still doing his best to stare him down. When he turned the corner and was gone, he went to check on Liv.

Pepper had stopped barking.

* * * * *

Power

Liv wasn't even sure she was saying it aloud until her body jerked in sympathy with the cry that came out of her. She sat straight up, the *no* dying on her lips. Her eyes didn't want to clear but she made out the large shadow of someone—*Garrett, you can smell him*—coming toward her. His hands were on her and his voice was soft as the other shadow moved into her line of sight. *The woman. Kelly. She smelled of sympathy, warm cake and worry.*

"Are you okay, Liv? It was a dream." Garrett's voice in her ear.

Liv shook her head, most of the dream had fled, most of it was gone. Just a sticky residue of unease. The loud bang and a pitched vision and hard impact and running, running, running. She shook her head again like a dog shaking off water.

Garrett sat, the bed squealing under his weight. "What was it?"

She shrugged. Best to let it go, leave it be. That was how she'd done it for ages and ages. Liv didn't tell him that in the dream Kevin's face had been a huge looming presence like a jack-o-lantern at Halloween. It was simply her inner demons rearing up because of the fever.

She shook, shivered and then her body righted itself. Liv kissed Garrett softly, smiled at Kelly who was hovering like a concerned mother in the corner. She flexed her fingers. They felt different. They felt longer, bigger, stronger. But they looked the same. They felt as if they should have white sparks of energy floating off them. Garrett pushed her hair back off her forehead.

"I need a shower," she said.

Dead silence and then they both laughed. Booming laughs full of relief. The sounds of big breaths being held captive in lungs finally being released.

"We can arrange that," Garrett said.

"And I am starving."

"Honey, I am all over *that*," Kelly said and disappeared. Liv could nearly smell the contentedness of the other woman. Having something to do, some way to help. She thought she would like Kelly very much.

The day was not over for her though. She could tell. She could tell by the way Garrett was looking at her with both relief and concern. She could tell by the coiled feeling of energy and power in the pit of her stomach. Her skin tingled with some dark energy. And she wasn't quite sure how it would play out. But for that moment, she just wanted to be clean and fed.

"Come on, I'll help you. You're going to swing wildly between I can lift a bus to I can barely stand up."

Liv let him take her hand and help her up. The tangle of sheets and blankets fell away. The nightgown he'd slipped over her during one of her cold spells was tattered and shredded. "Did I do that?"

"Yeah, probably. It was a rough night for you. How do you feel?" He touched her as he talked. Light touches, strokes, feathering his fingers over her skin. It was as if he thought she would suddenly vanish if his skin wasn't on hers.

"Dirty and hungry."

"I like dirty," Garrett laughed, guiding her to the door. "I like dirty a lot."

There was the flash of ornery hot man she had fallen for hook, line and sinker. Liv smiled, feeling safe and warm and exhausted. Overall, a pretty pleasant feeling. "I knew you would."

The small bathroom filled up with steam fast. The hot water pounded on the porcelain tub and it sounded like a billion jackboots marching. Liv winced. Garrett caught the look. "It will level out. You've a bit of hyperacusis right now. Everything will sound too loud and too big. Your body will adjust."

She brushed her teeth quickly, thinking that mint had never tasted so good. Then Liv dropped her nightie and stepped in, hot water washing over her in a decadent river. She sighed. A wave of vertigo hit and she clutched at the wall. "Oops."

"Right. Okay, step back." Garrett stepped into the shower in his sweats and tee. Instantly soaked, he pulled at the sodden clothes.

"Well, that was dumb. Why'd you get in with your clothes on?" Liv turned to face the stream of water, his hand on her bare hip to steady her.

"I didn't want you to think I..." But then his words broke off in a rough mumble. Which meant he had done it on purpose because Liv swore she could hear each individual drop of water hitting the shower floor like a crash symbol.

"What?" She turned a bit too fast, clutched at him. Garrett steadied her with a fast grab. One hand at her hip and one behind her head. Liv let herself sink back into that

cupping hand for a moment. Reveling in the feel of the possessive nature of his touch. She could feel it coming off him like invisible bubbles of energy. *minemineminemine...*

"I said, I didn't want you to think I was trying to... You're not ready yet, you're too weak. But when I get near you..."

He looked both horrified and desperate and the combination amused her. She laughed, touching his stomach through the now misshapen yellow shirt. "What?"

"I didn't want you to think I was being fresh!" he blurted.

Liv grinned, so tired her bones hurt but craving him with such an inexplicable urgency, she couldn't think. She ran her fingers along the now visible swell of his hard-on and he shut his eyes, clenching his jaw. He was trying so hard to be the good guy here and it made her need to push him over the edge that much more intense. "Liv –"

"I'm sad that these are on," she said, stepping to him. Pressing the heat of her body to his, nothing but the soaking wet clothes separating them.

Garrett made a frustrated sound and his mouth came down on hers. He tried to keep the kiss gentle, Liv could feel his restraint. She stood on tiptoe, though the world rocked a bit and licked his bottom lip once. When he groaned, she nipped it with her teeth. Garrett molded himself to her, his body tight with controlled emotion. "You should rest," he said, sounding like he wanted to scream.

"I did rest. All night." The power and excitement and want overtook her, every part of her tingling and flickering with intensity. "Now I want you." She pushed her hands into his sweats, wrestling the sodden fabric, laughing just a little. The material ripped in her hands and she was both overjoyed and terrified. "Oh God."

"You have a little more strength than before," he said softly. Garrett stood stock still, trying to gauge her reaction.

"I'll say." Her voice was shaking but her heart was soaring. She had strength. She had power. Liv pushed the sweats down and they hit the porcelain with a dull smack. She tugged his shirt, murmuring to him. Small sounds that really didn't serve any purpose but to spur him on.

Garrett finally started to help. Tugging his tee, touching her breasts, stooping to kiss her once more until finally, blissfully, he had her pressed to the wall. The tile cold despite the flecks of hot water. It felt good on her back. At moments her skin felt too hot, too tight, too small, like it wasn't her own. She wanted to be lost in him for just a bit.

"I wanted to be the good guy," he said, dipping his head to suck her nipple, running his tongue over the pebbled skin. The shiver of pleasure skittered down into her belly and she slid her hands along the length of his cock, squeezing him so that she felt his heartbeat quicken.

"This is good." She pressed back, hooking one leg around his waist so that his cock seated naturally at her pussy. She was so wet and hot. Like the fever hadn't really gone but had simply banked inside her like coals in a hearth. The sound of blood in her ears was too much to simply be hers. She had to be hearing his too.

Garrett pressed the tip of himself to her. Sliding in just enough so that she gasped, held her breath, felt the thrilling bang of her pulse. "No. I wanted to not do this. To let you be. To let you rest and just help you." He looked lost. A little tortured. Torn between wanting to thrust in deep, seat himself inside her and move...or simply stop.

Liv touched his lip, pushed her finger into his mouth until he sucked hard enough for her to feel the tug in her cunt. She arched forward enough to force him in a little more and said, her lips pressed to his, "I need this. Please, I need this now. I need you now. I can't explain—"

She didn't have to. Garrett thrust and her feet left the ground but for the tips of her toes. All the words stopped. The vertigo stopped. The world seemed to stop as he pressed her flush to the cool tile and started to move. Stronger than he looked, so much stronger, he held her there secure. She wrapped her legs around his waist, opening for him, meeting each of his thrusts with a welcome thrust of her own until the fever inside her was more than anything she'd felt the night before and she was coming. Arms wrapped around his neck as he buried himself deep inside her. Tears tracked down her face, lost amid the little rivulets of cooling shower water. She was crying for so many reasons. The loss of her fear, the gain of her power, the feel of Garrett moving inside her, nothing between them but the need.

He found that tender place on her throat that still carried its own special kind of pain and he pinned that flesh with his teeth. Fucking her harder so that her hair tangled up around her face, strands of it plastered over her lips and her mouth. He broke, kissed her, returned to that place that marked her as his and he thrust once more, his teeth clamping down, harder than ever. And he came. A whole new kind of dizziness assaulted her as a second stronger orgasm rocked her, right on the heels of his. Something was different.

That had been more than sex.

"Mating," he said, reading her mind. "It's a whole 'nother ball game."

She kissed him, not knowing all of what he meant, not caring.

Finally, he said it. "I love you, Liv."

She could see how hard it was for him, even now. And her throat closed with unshed tears.

Chapter Fourteen

The End and the Beginning

Garrett waited, staring at Liv. Seeing all the drops of water on her skin like gems of ice. He waited for it to hurt. He waited to explode, drop dead, cry. He waited for a wave of anger and loathing and guilt over letting Eileen go. Nothing but a sense of peace. A feeling of wholeness.

Liv watched him, concern on her face where only exhaustion should be. He loved her even more for worrying about him. For taking herself out of the ordeal of the night before. What her body, mind and spirit had been through and for thinking beyond that scope to see him and his small self-flagellating worry. "I love you too, Garrett." She said it like she was fearful of his reaction. As if her feelings were wrong.

He never wanted Liv to feel that way again. Garrett felt like he knew everything about her and nothing at all. Like no matter how much she clued him into herself and what was inside her, it would never be enough. "Yeah?" He took her face in his hands, running his thumbs over the wet warmth of her cheeks.

He was still in her, soft but there and he started to move, eyes locked with her.

Liv's eyes went wide. Brown eyes, honest eyes. She gasped, opening her mouth, closing it, opening it again. "Yeah," she breathed. Her voice caught, her breathing increased, he could smell her body warm to him.

"I love you, Liv," he said it again. Moving slower than slow this time. Feeling every single flicker and clench in her pussy. Watching her pupils dilate, her breasts rise and fall. The water was cool now and her skin pebbled with goose bumps before smoothing out like a magic trick of flesh and blood under his fingers. He moved deeper, so slow she held her breath and her pussy went tight around him. She was right there and he loved when she was right there. Because Liv's right there pushed him a stumbling step closer to his own orgasm. To that moment, if all the stars aligned and he found his patience and will, they came together like some force of nature that gods had set together.

She moved just a fraction of an inch and tightened around him on purpose. It was his turn to gasp. Her small, insistent hands found his hips and she tugged him toward her. "And I love you." She said it again, slowly, watching his face.

He grinned and she grinned back. When he thrust hard she wasn't expecting it and her eyes flew wider still. Garrett chuckled, pleased with himself until she clenched up around him again, tighter than before. But then she sighed and put her forehead to his chin, melting his heart with her honesty. "I'm so tired, Garrett, just fuck me. But softly this time. And look at me when you come. I want to see."

That almost did him in right there but he cupped the back of her head, watching her face as he went slow and steady, and when he came he stared into her big brown eyes and wondered just how the hell he got so lucky. And he prayed that no one would take it from him this time.

* * * * *

He got her back into bed. She was in one of his big tees and the smallest pair of his pajama pants he could find. The double header of sex and then the food that Kelly had deluged her with had put her out like a light.

"She looks good," Kelly said.

"Yeah. She does. I think she'll be fine. Even the change will be okay, I think." He pulled on his boots and snagged a cookie from the tray on the counter. "You're going to use all my food, woman," he joked.

"Hey, when I get nervous, I bake! Did she like the soup?"

"She loved the soup. And the bread. And the cake...the cocoa..." He laughed, tying his laces.

"Where are you going?" She sipped her own cocoa, playing with the marshmallows and watching him with wary eyes.

"Just to check her house out. That douche bag was over there the other day. The ex-boyfriend."

"I know. I could smell the antagonism coming off him, Gar. You be careful. He's got that harsh ozone smell of crazy about him."

"He won't hurt me," Garrett said but he had felt it too. Kevin was gunning for him. His little pissing contest earlier had been laughable but under it all, he was malicious and reeked of the bravado that could swiftly slide into violence. "But I'll keep my eyes open, okay?"

"Thank you."

"Now, you, leave her be! Don't go waking her up to feed her! I'm just going to make sure the house is good and then I'll be back to help you clean up." He surveyed the counter cluttered with dirty bowls, flour, measuring spoons and coffee cups. "If that's even possible."

Kelly swatted him with a towel and scowled. "Don't be such a smart ass. I'm going to call Chester and tell him I'm okay. He's a bit of a mother hen if I don't check in."

Garrett grinned. How lucky were they? And did they know it. That much love after all these years. Kelly read his face, smiled. "Yes, I've got it good and so do you. I'll send him your love," she said.

"Do that!" Garrett called and stepped out into the October rain.

The outside looked fine but he could smell the sharp, nasty odor of Kevin's rage as he'd circled the house. Garrett sneezed three times and then went to the back door. He

used the key that Liv had given him from her robe pocket. The house smelled like her. Earth and laughter and lavender.

No sound. Just the tick of the oversized clock on the wall and a dripping faucet upstairs. Sunday was being quiet in this house. What would happen Monday, he wondered. Would she call in sick? He'd remind her of the day and let her decide. It was easy losing track of time when your body was morphing.

The phone rang and he jumped before he recognized the sound. Mr. Berger down the street was working on his chain saw, revving it and then cutting it off, revving it and then cutting it off. This must be a fall ritual for him, because he was prone to doing it for about an hour every day since the weather had changed.

"Livvie, Livvie, Livvie! Where are you? Call me! If you don't call me, I'm going to be sad. Hope your weekend is going well. Hope you're resting up for Fred's big slide show tomorrow. Coffee filters have never been this exciting. Especially for us support staff who have nothing to do with the actual selling of our products." The woman snorted and Garrett smiled. "Oh, this is Ellen, by the way. Which you should know. But just in case you've...lost your mind. It's me! Call me! Later, gator." And then a beep and she hung up.

That was the one good friend that Liv had mentioned. He was listening to the sounds of a life forever changed. Liv's old life. He found himself being grateful to the stranger for looking out for Liv. For *caring* about her. He liked her already and hoped that one day they'd meet.

He touched the small machine and hit something. Gone were the days he remembered of tapes and rewind. It was all digital now. "I came over there this morning, bitch. Your boyfriend was watching me. Were you there, Liv? With him? You'd better hope the answer is no. I'm not done with you. You can't get rid of me that easily. I don't care who you're fucking or how big and strong you think he is. He can't protect you, Liv. No one can."

"Wrong," Garrett said and hit a button marked DEL. It prompted him, *Are you sure?* He hit enter and the message was gone. It bothered him though. The man truly had no fear if he left proof of his aggression. That could easily be played for cops or judges or anyone who wanted to help her.

He remembered the cocked gun, the cocky look, the lack of true fear. Kevin was a loose cannon. He was a dangerous man. Not so much because he was aggressive and violent but more because he thought he was untouchable. Unstoppable. He was dangerous because he simply didn't care.

* * * * *

Shifting

It felt like she had just closed her eyes but when Liv opened them again, she could tell it was late afternoon. Nearly dusk. The day had flown in a flurry of sleep and flickering dreams that danced around the edge of her awareness but refused to come close enough to be examined.

In the pit of her belly warred worry, excitement and hunger. Liv sniffed. A mélange of smells assaulted her newly sensitive nose. Bacon, cake, cookies, ham, potatoes, the sweet tang of fruit, the rich bitter odor of coffee. All of it swirled around her. She perked her ears, listening intently, but he still startled her.

"Look who's up," Garrett said and her heart did a drunken little two-step in her chest. She wanted him all at once the instant he came into view. She wanted to kiss him, press against him, have him hold her, have him take her. She wanted to take him and hug him and lay with him. She wanted to have a lifetime of affection and sex with him in this one instant. Like a starving woman finally being allowed to eat, she couldn't get a handle on her cravings for him other than they were simply bigger than her.

"I'm up," she said, smiling. She felt stronger but ravenous.

"Hungry?"

In response her stomach rumbled greedily and they both laughed. "That answer is, um...yes?"

"Yes. I think that's the right answer. No worries, Kelly has cooked, baked, prepared and brewed every item of edible foodstuff in this house. You should have no trouble getting full."

"Am I going to change?" she blurted. Her stomach sizzled with the electric energy she remembered vaguely from her earlier dating experiences. It was a sick mix of dread and butterflies. A roller coaster ride, a winding road.

Garrett stepped in, so big and yet so quiet. Surefooted in a supernatural kind of way. Like watching the ghost of a man who had been big in life. He sat, pulled her close to him. "You will. Tonight. Are you scared?" His voice caught a little when he said it and she could tell it bothered him. Liv wished she could take away his worry but she was having enough trouble wrestling hers.

"I am. I am very scared. But it's a different kind of fear from what I'm used to."

"How?" He moved to cover her but she stood. Too much lying around. She'd needed the rest but now her body ached from inactivity and she wanted to eat and move and...fuck. She wanted copious amounts of all of the above. So much so that her body poised on the very edge of chaos. She felt like she could have sex all night, run a marathon, eat an entire restaurant out of its contents. Drink an ocean or a keg of beer. She felt like, quite honestly, she could pick the world up and shift it on its axis if the need arose. And she laughed.

Garrett frowned and that made her laugh harder. "Sorry. How is it different? That fear was helpless fear. This is fear of the unknown. Of what I can do or will do. What I am now as opposed to what I was. But I don't miss what I was, no sir." She kissed him, pushing him back, running her tongue over his.

Garrett groaned, raised his head. "You have to eat."

"But —"

"But nothing. You need to feed the machine, my love, or you will crash and burn. What you used to eat, quadruple it and we'll see how you do. It still might not be enough."

"But I'll get pudgy," she griped.

"Ha! No way, sister. Pudgy will not ever describe you. If you don't eat that, you'll waste away. Now come on." He pulled her in for one more lingering kiss, his hands holding the small of her back in a possessive and sexy way. "We have to take you down and feed you before Kelly crawls out of her skin. She's waiting down there like she's going to be serving a queen or a goddess."

Liv grinned. She felt happier than she'd ever remembered. It filled her with a warm glowy drunken feeling. But it also made her nervous. She was so happy she was horrified at the thought of losing it.

* * * * *

The first wave hit her like a barrage of white light, noise and motion. The world blurred, going soft around the edges and too bright. Liv set her fork down and gripped the lip of the table. Garrett and Kelly were joking and moving about in the small kitchen but her gasp of surprise drew them both.

Everything righted itself and she felt fine.

"Garrett..." Kelly said from the doorway, her voice warning.

"I know. I see," he said. He sat across from her and waited.

"You okay, Liv?"

"Fine. I just got a little dizzy for a moment." She reclaimed her fork, determined not to freak out. She was different now, this was to be expected. It would all be fresh and new and a little scary. She took another bite of the best mac and cheese she had ever tasted but a fresh sweep of overstimulation hit her and she was barely able to swallow.

"I think you need to stop eating," Kelly said softly. She moved toward Liv but Liv went tense. Not intentionally, it was a natural reaction. Her guard went up and her body went taut with coiled power and awareness. Kelly raised her hands and took two big steps back. "Gotcha. Garrett's there. Your mate is there." Kelly kept her voice low like she was addressing a spooked animal.

Because she is...

Liv pushed her plate away, heart pounding, ears ringing from the cacophony of sound. Her ears literally ached from the noise and it consisted only of the sound of the leaves outside moving in the wind, the rain tapping the window and the clock's ever present report. Kelly's breath sounded like a tornado coming, a freight train of sound. Garrett's chair creaked when he moved and she winced. "Baby, let's go sit you down," he said so softly she knew it would be inaudible to most people.

And still it seemed as if he was shouting at her. "Yes," she managed. "I think I need to sit down."

He led her to the sofa and the first horrible wave of cramping hit. A spasm like nothing she had ever felt rocked her. Liv feared she would turn inside out, that was how intense the pain was. It settled but then sucked her in, a black void of agony and she clutched at Garrett like she was drowning. She vaguely felt her fingers twist in the soft gray fabric of his Henley. Oddly that registered just as a red wave of pain hit. She threw back her head and screamed. The scream filled her skull, took her under. She lost all sounds but herself.

In her ears the crickets screeched, the rain was like a siren cracking against the glass with an amazing force, the leaves shrieked like the damned and her own heartbeat sounded like a train coming at her. "Garrett," she said, her knees buckling.

"Don't let her go, Garrett," Kelly said from very very far away. Another room, another house, another universe.

His hands settled on her to try to keep her from slipping. The heat of his skin was fire and brimstone. Hell made flesh. She screamed because it burned, she screamed because her own cry hurt her ears. She buckled despite his efforts and her back bowed like it was made of elastic instead of bone.

"Look at the moonlight, Kelly," Garrett blurted, his face whiter than any living man should be.

"There is no moonlight, Gar," Kelly boomed, though Liv knew she was whispering. "Imagine moonlight, Liv. White and shiny like the light of heaven. Imagine it flowing around you and in you. In your mouth, in your nose, your ears. Radiating out of your fingertips and off your hair. Shooting out of your toes. Bathing you like a shiny shower of stars and snow. Picture that, girl. Garrett's here. We have you. It's okay."

Garrett blew out a sigh and said, "Jesus Christ."

Liv wanted to tell him not to worry. That what Kelly had said had helped. It didn't hurt as bad and she was fine and not to feel bad that he had panicked. It was all okay. And him being this upset just meant he loved her more than she thought. But all of that got lost because the moonlight stopped rippling and enveloping her when the next wave hit.

Liv clawed at the rug, the sofa, Garrett—anything in reach—and she howled with her pain.

* * * * *

Kelly watched Liv fold in on herself like she was coming unhinged at her joints. She threw her head back, long blonde hair flying around her face. Garrett grabbed for her, his voice soothing and his words a constant stream of nonsense. He looked at her, scared, helpless, angry with himself. She could see it all. "There's nothing you can do,

honey,” she said to him. “All we can do is make sure that she doesn’t hurt herself the first time. You can run her when she’s done turning.”

Garrett nodded, jaw tight with anger. He kept one hand on Liv even as her body drew up on itself, moving too fast, then too slow. A chaos of shifting molecules and flesh and blood morphing to foreign matter.

Liv let out one more scream and it was done.

She was golden like wheat in the sun. Her eyes a fierce brown that made him think of wild things and the hunt.

Garrett blew out a sigh of relief, gathered the new panting wolf to his chest. He kissed her muzzle, looking so faded by worry Kelly was truly concerned for his health. But he was fine and so was Liv. She smiled. “Good. Now you can let her calm down and you can shift and you can take her for her fir—”

Someone started pounding on the already compromised door like an angry god come to collect its due.

* * * * *

Too Fast

Garrett nearly ripped the doorknob off, he was so enraged. The jury-rigged hinges protested. Who in the hell would be knocking like that now? The only two people on God’s green earth who even *cared* where he lived were here right this moment. Who else could it be?

He opened the door and his brain did a double take. He didn’t really have time to react. He registered a malicious face—the sharp jaw, the pointed nose, the dark hair. Silver dashes of rain sparkled around the person for a moment and then a hot stab of pain filled him. It wasn’t the rain that flared bright. Something else.

Garrett heard Kelly scream and felt his legs start to collapse under him. Why was he sitting? Why? But then he smelled it. His own blood flowing from right where his heart sat in his chest. The trickle had turned to a gush. This was not enough to kill him, surely not. He was a fucking wolf. This would not kill him, it was just a bullet, a regular old bullet. He could smell the lead and the gunpowder. No silver here.

His back hit the wall and Kelly was grabbing at him, her hands cold on his face, her words a mumbling background to the roar of blood in his ears.

Garrett looked up into Kevin’s smiling face. He had a second to realize that he wished the man dead and then a blur of blonde fur and gnashing teeth shot past him and the other man was gone from the doorway.

* * * * *

“You need to wake up, you know.”

She was small but long, like one day she would be a very tall young lady. Her hair a dark auburn mess whipping around her head in the wind. Her eyes, clear green like glass washed smooth by the tide and then washed up on the sand. "I'm tired."

And he was. He was so damn tired. All he heard was the rush and tumble of the waves on the shore. He didn't want to hear the rest. Somehow he had screwed it all up. Again.

"This isn't like you and if you leave Liv to herself now...she is getting the same thing from life she's always gotten."

"Disappointment?" That hurt his heart to think it. He didn't want to disappoint Liv. He loved her. Loved her more than he had realized till fate had plopped him here on the imaginary beach where apparently your mind went when your body died.

"No. Solitude. And that is much worse."

Great. He was cursing Liv to more solitude if he caved in and died. Garrett barked out a laugh. His chest burned, his head swam. "Who the hell are you anyway? I was expecting at the very least Eileen if I was going to hover on the cusp of death. Are you an angel or just a figment of my lunacy?" Either was possible, he knew.

She sat down then, cross-legged in the sand and smiled. He saw Eileen in that smile and his soul swelled with love and recognition that he still couldn't quite grasp.

"My name is Autumn."

"But that's the name – "

Eileen's green eyes, the auburn hair, the cut of her jaw and the tilt of her head. "Of your daughter. If you ever had one."

"We didn't," he breathed deep but his heart cramped up anyway.

"You did. She was pregnant with me when it happened."

"So I lost two of you?" Why was he finding this out now? Wasn't he in enough pain?

She nodded, solemn but matter-of-factly. "You did. But you can change all that now. You already love her, all you need to do is be brave. Be brave, Daddy."

And then she kissed him.

* * * * *

Garrett opened his eyes to Kelly. A steady stream of words burst from her mouth but at first he couldn't hear them. They were nonsense. Just a string of mumbled sounds that made no real sense at all. "What?"

The front door stood wide open, blood red wood accenting the dark night sky. He had originally bought the house, partially because of the door. The red door had felt to him like the magical door into a new life. An alternate reality. Now it felt like the door to hell.

"Bleeding has slowed down."

He caught that, grabbed Kelly's hand. "Where is Liv? How long have I been out?" He was weak and woozy but now he was scared too.

"She took him down and then he ran and she was right on his heels. They were headed toward the main road, at the crosswalk."

"The park across the street," he groaned. "If she gets him there, he's gone."

"Garrett, she's probably gotten him by now."

"Well, why didn't you go after her?" he roared so loud he saw spots.

"I needed to be with you. You were shot and —"

"It wouldn't kill me."

"It could have!" It was Kelly's turn to roar. She was no shrinking violet. When it came to temper, Kelly could run with the big dogs. "It was right there next to your heart. You are a wolf, Garrett, you are not a fucking immortal!"

He bit his tongue to keep from saying something more stupid. "We have to find her." He studied the hole in his chest. Even as he watched his body constricted, pushing at the foreign object. The dull metal bottom of the bullet started to show. His body would eject it if he left it be. He didn't have time for that. Garrett pushed his fingertips into his skin and gripped the narrow end of the bullet with his fingertips. He wiggled it up and pulled it free, gritting his teeth and grimacing. He didn't mind pain but his own blood didn't exactly make him happy.

"Jesus. You are stupid sometimes, boy," Kelly said but took the bloody chunk of metal from him.

"Let's go. Maybe we can catch her in time." He started to shift and Kelly grabbed him.

"You can't do that. You're injured. It could weaken you, Garrett. I'll shift and you meet us." Before he could argue she'd flickered and changed. A black wolf with shots of white like small stars over her forepaws. Big amber eyes and a look that said, *No arguing, boy*. Her clothes puddled around her and she stepped free. Before he could say anything, her paws hit the entryway tile and she was gone into the heavy rain.

Garrett grabbed his truck keys and ran, feeling clumsy, angry and entirely too human as he went.

Kelly ran to the main road, nose to the ground. She waited at the side until he came to a stop with the old red pickup. "Did they cross?"

She responded by sneezing once, hesitated for a car going past and bolted across the street. Garrett waited for another vehicle and then angled the complaining old truck across the street and cut into the side street that held the access road for the state park. Kelly was waiting. She threw her head back but did not howl. The small white winking bit of moon danced under the clouds overhead for a second and then the gloom swallowed it whole.

Garrett heard it then, from a distance but not too far, an angst-riddled howl. Bone chilling and lingering. She was going to kill him if they didn't get there in time. In that one sound was all the pain, all the fear, all the abuse of a lifetime of neglect. Garrett

wanted to save her by saving Kevin. If he'd could he'd save her from herself. He looked at Kelly, blew his horn and she jumped, baring her teeth.

"Why are you standing there?" he shouted at her. Her eyes glimmered silver and green in the headlights. "Go! Go get her! I'm right behind you."

She only hesitated for a heartbeat and then she turned tail and ran, moving through the underbrush like a ghost. Silent and deadly and hopefully fast.

* * * * *

Kelly ran. Ran faster than she thought she had in years, even on the hunt. Hunts were for fun, for food, for rabbits and squirrels and the game of the chase. A snack. A nibble. Exercise. But this was different. This was do or die and Kelly could feel the agony and premature grief of the new wolf in the air.

Liv thought Garrett was dead. She thought that this man who had obviously hurt her in many ways had now taken from her the mate she had just found. The person she trusted and loved the most in the world. Liv's energy was damaged but had gotten stronger and brighter and better from the moment Kelly had met her. Garrett's love, his trust, turning her though it was frowned upon, had done amazing things for Liv. Liv was the treasure you find in the box of junk. Tarnished and ugly but with some polish and elbow grease, you have something priceless. She could give Garrett back his hope for a life and a family and happiness in his heart.

Kelly jumped a downed tree, smelled a fox nearby, kept going.

Garrett could be happy again. Garrett could be whole. But if Liv killed she would have to answer for it. Killing a human meant possibility of exposure. Of the pack, of their kind. There were humans who knew of them. Those who aided the pack and had ties to shifters in general, but this was the city and this was strange territory. This was the place where people scoffed at anything not neon and human and automated. This was where people feared the unknown. Anything *other than*—wolves, shifters, non-humans were an unknown and therefore a threat.

Another howl and she heard the man scream. *No, no, no! Bad dog! Go dog!*

Good. He was still alive. Stupid but alive. Clearly Liv was no dog but he was too small and fearful and cowardly to see what she was. All he could see was what he expected to see.

Kelly darted under a bush, down a slope clogged with leaves and mud and tore toward the changeling. She could smell fear, hunger, confusion and bloodlust. She hoped she was in time.

Chapter Fifteen

The Kill

All Liv could smell was dirt and rain and what smelled like metal. The copper of pennies, the stink of rust, the odor of stainless steel.

That's Kevin's fear...

He was gone. Kevin had taken too much from her already. Her self-esteem, her love, her trust. He'd put himself out there as the nice guy to begin with. Then she had given him the chance. Risked the fucking thought of giving her heart and her trust to another man. He'd gotten in and gotten comfy and then it had started in small ways. A harsh word, a manipulative gesture. All the little things that seemed no big deal until you added them all up and got one big ball of controlling man.

She heard a small animal in the brush and the instinct to give chase reared up but she ignored it. She barreled ahead on Kevin's heels. She knew she could overcome him if she tried but for that moment in time, the smell of his terror and the sight of him fleeing were more powerful and intoxicating than any moment of dominance.

Liv rounded the corner, saw her chance. She pinned him then. Blocked him into a tightly packed copse of trees. The small trees were growing so close together they nearly formed a tall picket fence of birch saplings. She growled, marveling at the natural feel of this alternate skin. The teeth felt deadly but entirely hers, the limbs strong and agile. Her whole head was alive with the smell of the forest and Kevin's fear. She liked that most of all. It chased away any chance of pain or sadness.

She had dreamed many times that he was a fear eater. Someone who felt it was his entitlement in life to make someone unhappy and scared and then fed on the twisted, intense emotions he wrung from her like twisting water out of a rag. She sniffed, taking in the smell of his heart racing and his body sweating and his teeth clacking together. His breath changed from panting, becoming dark and sour, gone was the minty smell of his handy breath freshener. His scent became more intense and bitter. Like scorched metal mixed with melted tar. It was the most heavenly of scents to Liv.

"No, please. Please no. Don't bite me. Just go. I'll stay right here and you go. Good doggie, go. Go home, dog! Go home."

I'm not a dog, moron. If she could have laughed she would have. But she felt the soft smile on her thin black lips and then she bared her teeth, the growl coming from somewhere low and malicious in the barrel-chested body she was sporting.

"Please, no. I'll be good. Maybe this is a sign. I've been an asshole. First to Liv and then that creepy guy. Maybe I need to be better."

He had thrown his head back and was talking to the sky. His voice soft and desperate. He was talking to God, expecting a bargain.

No deal.

She growled louder, her jaws growing tense, her already keen hearing heightening even more, her eyes taking in every flicker, rustle and wave in the night landscape. Her nose picked up the warm, sharp smell of urine before she even saw the dark spot growing on his jeans.

If she could have clapped her hands right then, she would have. Instead she took a step forward.

"I need to change. Be better. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. So sorry. Make it leave, make it go. I've learned my lesson. I have. Truly." He stared at her and she crouched lower, slinking like a dark dangerous thing. Because at that moment that was what she was. A slinking dark thing that brought death.

Kevin's eyes flew wider. He felt it coming, sensed the end. He threw his head back, neck long —

Big mistake.

And he screamed, "Help! Somebody! Anyone! Help! Help me for God's sake! Help me. Oh sweet Jesus. Somebody! Somebody help m —"

Liv was already on him. All she had in her head was the smell of his blood and the vengeance for Garrett.

Too late.

* * * * *

Her mind shut down when her teeth hit flesh. That was probably good. It was probably for the best.

Finally, Liv opened her eyes and wiped her skin. Soft, pale, cold shivering skin. Human skin. The rain wound its way through the maze of leaves still clinging to the trees and dripped in her face.

"Oh Liv."

She looked up to find Kelly, naked and shivering, looking over the mess that was once Kevin.

Liv's stomach turned over when she looked at him. "Did I do that?"

"Yes, honey, you did. Are you okay?" She hunkered down, looking Liv over for marks or wounds. She brushed her hair out of her face and smiled. "It will be fine."

"I did that?" But even as she said it, she knew she was stunned but not sorry. Not sorry as she had expected of herself. It had been nice, though possibly wrong, to exercise her power over Kevin. But she had done it. For once, she had been the one with the upper hand.

The gray wolf that was Garrett came flying out of the woods, landing by her side. "Garrett?" She turned to Kelly. "Is that him?" Liv felt a sob rush up in her throat and cut off her air.

Kelly nodded, *tsking* as she patted his nose. "He was shot, Liv, but not killed." Then to Garrett, "You are a terrible listener, Garrett Gustafson. Did you not understand that shifting could make you weaker? Keep you from healing properly?" She swatted him on the muzzle, clearly trying to ignore the corpse.

Garrett growled at her and she whapped him again. "Don't you growl at me, boy!" Kelly was the one in charge, that was obvious. Liv stared at her, starting to shake from cold, adrenaline and the change. "H-he's alive?"

"He's alive. But *he* is dead." She shut Kevin's eyes with shaking fingers. "Oh honey, why?"

Liv turned and Garrett hunkered down in front of her in human form. "It's my fault, Kelly."

"They'll want answers for this."

"It was justified. She was new and alone and he was an aggressive force with a history of violence."

"But it's still a death on our hands. In our camp. We are more than you and her, Garrett." She stood, her muscular form smeared with mud and water and leaves. Liv watched her, feeling numb and scared all over again. This fear was different. This was the fear of being punished justly.

"I knew what I was doing," she said to no one.

"Hush, Liv," Garrett said, pulling her close.

She stared at the shrinking, ragged hole in his chest. Blood still oozed but the fast freshet was gone. "You're dead," she sobbed. "I thought you were dead."

"It would take more than that to kill one of us. Especially bred wolves. You might be easier to kill that way but not us."

"You were dead," she said to Garrett again, pushing the flat of her palm to his wet chest. His skin was mildly cool from the rain but heat still came off him, heating her enough so that she didn't shiver.

"I'm fine. Liv, would you have killed him if he hadn't shot me?" Garrett pulled back, watching her face.

Liv bit her bottom lip tasting blood and dirt and rain. She hated Kevin. Wanted to hurt him the moment he came into view through her wolf eyes but would she? Finally, she shook her head. "No. I might have chased him. I might have scared him. Just to see what that felt like..." She dipped her head as if admitting the worst thing in the world. Garrett kissed her wet tangled hair.

Kelly watched, saying nothing. Waiting.

"But I never would have killed him. I thought he had killed you, Garrett. I thought he had taken my new life. Already!" Then she began to cry in earnest. Angry and sad

that Kevin had already managed to fuck up her new chance. To throw a wrench in the workings of her life.

"Garrett, you know that they'll still have to —"

"Later, Kelly. It's all about intent. We both know that."

"Garrett, she has to answer for —"

It was too much. Was this the base nature Garrett had once referred to? Was she now and forever just a killer? She'd never had the nerve to stand up for herself and now she was bleeding people out. Her head swirled with too many worries, too much light and sound and the dusky earthen smell of the woods. Liv pulled away and stumbled back, bouncing off the slippery young birches, crying. Hurting. She looked at them both. Kelly's resolve, Garrett's worry. And she shut her eyes, falling back into moonlight in her mind. The pain was searing, intense, blood red and consuming. But it was over faster than the first time.

They started to coo to her. To try to talk her down. But she turned tail and ran. She couldn't think of where to run, so she ran home.

* * * * *

Kelly watched Garrett shift again. It was so fast even her eyes had trouble seeing what was truly happening. She'd been doing it and watching it forever and a day and he changed that fast. "Garrett! You're not going to heal if you don't—" He turned, watching her, stark blue eyes looking haunted. "Go," she whispered. "I have to take care of some stuff. I'll get the truck."

He dipped his head, chuffed once and took up the chase immediately. The brief flash of his white underbelly twisted her heart. All she could do now was contact Chester and the others. She would run interference for them. Set up the self-defense and explain what had happened, all the contributing factors.

"And I get to do all of this bloody and naked," she laughed. But it was a dark laugh. Her feet were sure, even in the gloom of the woods. True nature couldn't be ignored, Kelly thought.

She found the truck, keys in the ignition, at the edge of the access road. She turned the key, wrapped a blanket from the back of the seat around her like a toga and headed to Garrett's house. She'd hold down the fort and plant the seeds of leniency with the pack.

* * * * *

Where Bad Began

Garrett stopped short and sat at the base of the stonework steps. They were sagging and the mortar was wearing away. Stones had slipped off the piles so the steps

themselves were uneven and dangerous. He'd seen Liv jump through the bay window. The glass had been shattered ages ago and he worried she'd cut herself. He sniffed the air and smelled nothing but dirt, age, neglect and the murky scent of a negative space.

"Jesus. Where are we? What is this place?" He stood on numb feet now. His body racked with shivers and chill. He glanced at his wound. The healing had not progressed in the least. If anything, it was looking a little worse. "Great."

He took the steps carefully, holding onto the post that supported the FOR SALE sign and the realtor's information. Even in his weakened state he could feel the nasty, oily feel of this place. "Christ, Liv, is this your home?"

He pulled the busted, ragged screen door open and tried the front door. It was unlocked and swung in on stiff hinges that complained over the motion. Garrett spotted a box in the front hall. Socks and blankets hung out over the lip of cardboard. Probably a donation pile for charity. He dug for a moment, found a trash bag full of more bedding. He wrapped a comforter around him because the chill was worse now. Dizziness swept over him and he grabbed the archway for support. "Liv?" he called.

Nothing.

The soft report of paws on the floor above his head sounded and he found the main staircase in the foyer. He took the steps slowly, at spots they felt soft, like the wood under the runner had rotted long ago. At the top of the steps was a bathroom. A dingy gray room with black and white tile and a stained claw-foot tub. There was a shower ring at the top but no curtain. The curtain loops hung in clumps like bad fruit on a metal tree. "Liv?" he whispered.

Still no answer but he could feel her here. Garrett strained to hear, strained so hard his ears buzzed in the silence. The dirty, smelly blanket he clutched around him whispered as he walked. A small animal moved in the wall by his left. He saw a flash of blonde fur and heard the tick-tick-tick of her nails on the hardwood floor.

He passed two other rooms. One painted what had once been a bright white and now was a dirty water color. The other had been plain, utilitarian white, now stained with mold and mildew from the place where the roof had caved a bit from water damage.

Garrett stepped into the room and she was sitting on a small bed, stripped bare of bedding. This room had been yellow. The years had worn it to the color of bile. "This was my room once," Liv said, turning a long piece of hair around her index finger like she might yank it out. "This is where the bad began," she said. She laughed and it was the sound of a heart breaking down.

Garrett went to her, dropped to his knees, laid his head in her lap. "It's okay, Liv. We'll work it out. I promise."

"Can you smell the blood and fear and anger here?"

Garrett nodded but stayed silent. She needed to get this out. This would eventually eat her like some alien disease if she didn't talk now.

"I can smell it now. But you know, I think I could smell it then too. Just in a different way."

He stroked her calves, wet from the rain, dirty from the change. She shivered a bit and he sat up, pulling the blanket around them both. She touched his chest, hissed, stared. "Garrett! You're bleeding worse. I thought you should be healed by now."

"It's all the changing, it burns too much energy. I'll be fine. Keep going."

She pointed toward the once white room he'd passed but then pulled her hand back into the warmth of the blanket. "He'd hit her in there. He'd come home from work, angry and frustrated and...whatever the hell people like that feel and he'd start drinking."

Garrett had heard this story before. People who had ended up with the pack, either as the occasional changeling or as mates, told stories like this. Violence, blood, weakness, abuse. He pulled her in, felt his body responding to her being so near. He ignored it, that could be later. Now was important. All that mattered was he'd found her and she knew that he was there now. Would always be there. No matter what.

"That's never good," he said, prompting.

"Oh, sometimes she'd drink too. And they'd go at each other, verbally, I mean. But when it came to hitting. He always—" she broke off, her laughter harsh.

"He always?" Garrett put his hands low on her back, holding her heat to his. The blanket smelled like plastic bag and dust. But it was warm and she was safe. Beyond that, they could work it out.

"He always had the upper hand, is what I was going to say. Isn't that funny?"

"No."

"I know," she sighed and Garrett could feel her tears falling on his chest. "And now I'm back here because I've done something equally bad. Equally horrible. I killed a man."

"You killed a man who shot me. He didn't shoot me to get my attention, Liv. He was trying to kill me and you reacted. You fought back and defended your mate." He kissed her when he said *mate*. Just saying it made the situation feel more real, more intense.

Garrett smelled her warming to him. Wanting him. The urge to couple was often overwhelming after a hunt, a kill or during times of stress. He ignored it, focusing on her answer. "But still. I'm a killer."

"Yes, you are and so am I. But we don't normally going around killing humans. Just like humans, we kill to defend and protect. We monitor ourselves the same as *normal* society."

This is what Kelly wanted you to understand. Vengeance is not only yours to give. It affects the whole pack. The whole lot of us...

Garrett shook his head, he could worry about his own stupidity and stubbornness later. Right now she was shaking in his arms. "Are you scared?" he asked.

"No." Her hands came up his flank, small and warm. She trailed her fingers over his belly and the muscles erupted in a flurry of twitches. Liv touched his face, his hair, leaned her head back and kissed him even though her tears continued to fall.

"Then why are you crying?"

"I'm crying because I don't feel worse. Because *I'm not* scared. I should be." Her fingers found him and she took him in hand, his cock growing harder still in her palm. Garrett pressed his lips together tightly, trying to focus. It was hard to think of anything beyond the feel of her hand on him and the small kisses she dropped along his neck and shoulder.

"Not really. Liv, you're different now. You acted on instinct to protect and avenge me. Simple as that. To you, who you are now, you did nothing wrong. You reacted appropriately."

"Base nature," she murmured, stroking him now.

He pushed up to thrust into her palm, feeling the tightening of excitement and want low in his belly. God, he wanted her. Needed to be in her. The coupling would calm them both and more than anything he wanted Liv to feel how present he was, how much he was here for her. How very much he wanted and needed her. The fact that she had gone after a man minutes after her first change in his stead, in honor of him and the loss she thought she'd just suffered was staggering. It humbled him even as her hands worked him up.

"Base nature isn't a bad thing, baby. It's simply who we are when all the bells and whistles are swept away. And under it all you are fierce, a warrior and you are good."

That brought a sob but he quieted it with a kiss. She kissed him with a desperate kind of love. Like she was on the razor edge of death and he could save her. He could save her, she just didn't know it. All she had to do was let him love her. "I love you. Don't worry. It will all work out. We'll make it. It has to."

She nodded over and over. A protection spell of her own. Say yes to his words and it would be so. Garrett rolled to top her. He pressed his pelvis to hers, feeling the intense heat between her legs that made his cock ache and his pulse speed.

"I should feel worse, right?" she whispered. "I feel like I should," she confessed but she rose up with her body to meet him. Liv parted her legs just enough that the heat of her pussy became more evident. Harder for him to ignore.

Garrett did his best to soothe away her worries with his mouth. He kissed her harder, swallowing up her cries and self-doubts. Her skin was warm and tacky from the change, from running, from all of the big dark night that had stretched out before them. When he kissed low on her belly her muscles trembled with excitement and fatigue. The smell of her made him drunk, his head muzzy with his craving. When he put his mouth to her, found her clit with the tip of his tongue and started to lick, the flavor of her filled his mouth. She was honey and wine and the sweetest herbs. Her fingers plucked and tugged at his hair and her pussy was warm under his lips. Garrett thrust the rigid tip of his tongue into her, juices wetting his face. She moved like she wanted to get away. But

he could feel that she wanted to move forward. Her body sheer, beautiful chaos. "Come up here, please," she whispered over and over. Not quite able to simply lie back and take what he wanted to give her.

Until he shushed her and the vibration of his request rumbled through her pelvis. He felt her cunt tighten so slowly around the tip of his tongue and he smiled. He lapped at her, cleaning off each bit of juice she gave him, altering his rhythm so she couldn't guess. And when he had her right at the edge, her body moving like an impatient wave under him, he sucked her clit into his mouth and nibbled until she shook and sobbed, tugging his hair so hard it brought tears to his eyes.

Garrett kept going and she gasped. Her body going stiff, even her toes pointing where they rested under his thighs. Her big toe brushed his cock and he thought of them in the kitchen, her stroking his cock with her soft feet. Him spanking her, fucking her with the spatula. It seemed like a lifetime ago and yet had only been the day before.

"Garrett, you have to stop!" she panted. She pulled at him, trying to worm her fingers, small and thin and chilly under his armpits as if she could haul him up. He had to laugh that she would even try. "Oh God, don't laugh, that makes it worse. It's too much, too much..." she said again but even as she protested her body relaxed, uncoiled and unwound over his roving tongue.

Her wetness had a whole new flavor now. Dark sugars and warm fruit, aromatic wood and cool wind. She tasted of nature and love and peace. He felt like he could cry, instead he focused on the hard nub of her clitoris, pushing his fingers into her pussy, stroking her so that she blossomed for him. Wave after wave of her orgasm sucking at his fingers and making her thrash on the narrow abandoned bed.

When he looked up, her eyes were shining. He could barely see her in the gloom, there was no electricity here. She reached out, touched his face, her body still moving here and there in a soft erotic dance from her orgasm. "Now will you come up here?"

"Now I've lost my hold on my emotions," he groaned. He rose up over her, flipping her harder than he ever would have when she was human. He pulled her hips up and she hung her head, moaning low, moving her body back so that her pussy readied for him. Garrett's hands shook as he pushed the head of his cock to her, he bit his lip as he slipped into her, grabbing her hips in his hands and thrusting hard. She was smaller than him, he tried to remember but her head pushed to the mattress and she gripped the edge of the ticking to keep herself in place. Her pussy gripped tight around him as she pushed back to take him in, he lost his little shred of control when she tossed her head back, her long dirty hair flying through the air, her slender back arching. She looked like art, a painting, some magical shadow woman in the gloom.

Garrett wrapped his arms around her waist, driving deeper as he felt her start to grow taut around him, the slick fist feel of her body taking him in was all there was. The smell of her was overwhelming. The feel of a mate was staggering. It hadn't been as long as it sometimes felt since he'd had Eileen by his side. Most days, it felt like a lifetime. The way he felt for Liv was something he'd assumed he would never feel again. "Liv, I'm barely hanging on, baby," he said. He wanted her to know because he

felt like one more inhalation, one more exhalation and he would lose his slippery grasp on his body and come.

All his instincts whispered of viability and lust and love and procreation. There could be young ones, offspring, a blood line.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm yours, Garrett," she said. Her voice sounded like it had just occurred to her but it was the most honest statement in the world. She was *his*.

"God, you're not helping me, woman," he said, slowing a bit. Stroking her ass, feeling the perfect smoothness of her skin. He gripped her tight and felt her under him, giving herself up to him. Offering herself wholly.

There was that knot again in his throat.

"I should feel worse, please say you still love me. The thing is...I liked it, Garrett. I liked it. I liked the feel and the taste of his fear. I liked being the one to cause the fear for a change. Please tell me you still love me."

He could feel her crying. Her body rumbling and moving under him, he pressed his hands to the small of her back, feathering his fingers over her spine. She was perfect, beautiful, loved...and she had no idea.

"We all do what you've done, we all like the fear, it's part of the hunt. Whether it's human or animal." Garrett stilled in her but she started to move, pushing back, her arm moving as she rubbed her clit. He blew out a breath and the orgasm gripped him, prodding him to move again, thrust, bury, fuck. "We simply learn to control it. We *all* have to do it. We all go through it, Liv. Even you, baby. We'll teach you. And I love you, Liv. Don't ever doubt it. Ever."

"Okay," she said. And then she started to cry. "Thank you."

"Don't ever thank me for loving you. Because I do. And I will. Whether you like it or not."

She gripped him on purpose, he could tell and he growled. She growled back, letting a little of the wolf timbre in her voice. She sounded wild and dirty and completely his.

Garrett came. Liv continued to move back against him, moving her hips, touching herself and when he leaned in and bit her right above her shoulder, she came too.

* * * * *

Liv's breath was slow and even on his throat. They'd dug a few more blankets from the box in the front hall. He dozed off, feeling the throb of pain in his chest where the bullet had entered. It had been fairly shallow as far as gunshot wounds went but still. Being shot was pretty bad.

You need food. And warmth. Rest and then more food. Not to be shifting and fucking and sleeping in a freezing abandoned house.

Liv snuggled in closer and he told himself at least he had that heat. Once upon a time, not so long ago, if something like this had happened, if he'd been running from

something, he'd have been alone. At least now he wasn't alone. She was, in fact, the very reason he was doing this. She was that important to him and he refused to let them hold her culpable for that man's death. He was an aggressive, dangerous wild card and he'd walked in at the wrong time, provoked the wrong wolf. Young, aggressive and thinking her mate had been taken.

"Any one of us would have had a hard time not doing that," he said. He hoped she heard and he could hear Kelly in his head. Telling him about retribution, how it could cost you more than it gave you. How you usually weren't the only one to pay for it. How it could trickle down and affect so many other lives.

Kelly would be at home trying to pave the way for leniency. She would be guarding his house, worrying, looking out for him. She was always there for him, despite his recent anger. His childish demand of blood for blood.

Now he understood. Now it was he who would watch out for Liv. And if they made it past the elders, if they were able to have what they wanted – which they would because he would allow no other way – he would let his anger go. He'd simply let the rage for the drunk hunter go. That man was the one who had to look at himself in the mirror and know that he'd taken Eileen.

And Autumn.

His heart seized up then, a sickening kink that hurt more than any gunshot ever could. "And Autumn," he said.

He'd let the anger and the thirst for vengeance go if it meant he could have her and be happy. If it meant a new life, he could put it aside. For Liv. For Kelly and Chester who were parents in the stead of his own. In Eileen's memory and the daughter he'd never even known he was going to have. Most of all, he'd have to put it aside for himself.

Chapter Sixteen

Leniency

"She did it because of him. I mean, picture it, Chester, you've just been turned. All those emotions and the bodily changes are overwhelming you. Your wolf senses are overriding your human nature. You can hear and smell and feel everything magnified but has never happened before. But there's also a searing, bone-crushing pain because you weren't born to shift. Your body feels like it's going to turn inside out and —"

"Kelly —"

"Let me finish, Chester!" she snapped. "And then this intensely cruel, dominant person who has made you suffer emotionally and was working himself up to physically hurt you—again—shows up and shoots your mate. Shoots me! Imagine someone shooting me right in front of you and you've just turned. What would you do, Chester?"

"I'd fucking kill him," Chester sighed. "Or I'd want to, Kelly."

"I would. I'd kill someone who shot you without a second thought. I wouldn't hesitate for a second. And I have been a wolf all my life, Ches. And I'd go after that person and take him or her down like there was no tomorrow. Because for me, there wouldn't be."

"She'll still have to answer. It's not the kind of thing we can ignore, sweetheart. No matter circumstances or her intention or how green she is. It doesn't matter."

"I just need reassurance that the pack will be accepting and gentle and, you know, lenient. She didn't do this intentionally. I think it was just the perfect circumstances at the perfect time. She had aggression for him as it was. He shot her lover, her friend, her mate. She was full of new feelings and urges and then rage. She took him down, Ches. I mean, she took him down. It was a kill very much like a lifelong wolf would do. It was intense."

"Are you okay? Should I come?"

Kelly hesitated. Things were always better when Chester was there. She opened her mouth but nothing came out.

"That's a yes. You are the most stubborn woman. Ever. Give me a few hours. I'm bringing some of the boys with me." The boys were a group of brothers who had been abandoned on pack property. All four of them were shifters. The parents were as yet unknown. How they knew the boys would be safe on the farm where the pack lived was also unknown. But that was where they'd ended up and the pack embraced them. Chester hurried on before she could argue. "We'll find Garrett and this girl and we'll get them safe and taken care of."

"I'm afraid for Garrett, Ches. He shouldn't be shifting at all. Not after being shot. I'm afraid it will..." Kelly couldn't bring herself to say it aloud.

"Stop worrying. We won't let anything happen to Garrett. He's smart. He can't be there for his mate if he's dead. He'll watch himself."

"Not with this girl. I don't think he will. He's just not right when it comes to her."

"Well, who is when they fall in love, Kelly?" Chester laughed. "Do you remember us?"

She dropped her head, laughing for a moment, forgetting how worried she was. "Yes. I do. And we're still sort of like that, aren't we?"

"Hopelessly in love," Chester said. "In fact, I can't wait to get my hands on —"

"Chester!"

"Sorry. But you know I wouldn't be saying that if I didn't know they were fine. They're fine. Okay?"

"Right."

"We'll be there in a few hours. I have to let A.J. know what's going on, then we'll hit the road."

A.J. would step in and keep an eye on the farm while Chester was gone. Alexander James Mann was not someone to be questioned so they never worried about even the greenest of wolves when they were gone.

"I'll be here. I don't want to go searching alone and I don't want to spook them. Garrett's really upset that she will have to address the elders."

"Standard operating procedure. That boy should know that. You just sit tight, and Kelly?"

"Yeah?"

"Clean up the scene there. Just in case. If she chased him off into the woods, I doubt anything will come of it but it should look like he was never there."

"I'm way ahead of you," she said. Kelly told him she loved him and hung up. It was going to be a long night and with all the worrying, cleaning would keep her sane if nothing else. She was out of things to cook, so she'd have to clean up to kill the time for Chester do show.

* * * * *

She woke with the rain. Liv found an old pair of jeans and a sweatshirt in the linen closet, wadded up in a box of cleaning supplies. She could only assume it had been the cleaning attire the former owner used to get the house ready for sale. It smelled of sweat and chemicals but it would cover her. She ran the two miles to the main road through the woods, her bare feet barely feeling the cold wet leaves, rocks and sticks. She could smell sugary donuts and coffee and knew that the Simpsons' small bakery would be

open already. The Donut Nook would have coffee and fresh pastries. The Simpsons worked the small store alone. Or they had, she hoped it was still so.

The back door was open as usual, the screen door giving a dirty segmented view of the kitchen. She heard Fran and Sam out front chatting up a customer. They'd given her plenty of free donuts and hot chocolate back in the day. The young girl from the troubled home, she never had any money and they had no kids. They doted on her when she made the short but lonely walk through the peaceful woods, following the scent of sugar and grease and sounds of laughter that could be heard before you even hit the shop.

She pulled the screen door slowly so it didn't scream. Her shaking hands had a hard time pouring the coffee into two to-go cups. She scooped random donuts from the large silver bakery trays and dumped them in a white paper bag. She clamped it in her teeth and grabbed the cups. Backing out of the kitchen slowly, she made a mental note to come back and leave them money when she wasn't a naked pauper. Liv knew in her heart that Fran and Sam would understand.

Garrett needed calories and so did she. She ran back the way she had come, ignoring her outraged mind. *So this is what you've become. Stealing from people who were kind to you?*

It didn't matter that she'd pay them back. First she had killed a man, now she was a thief. But she was doing this for Garrett and thought she had been doing the other for him too. Why was love so fucking hard, she wondered. Liv held off tears as she ran, head down, bag swinging, trying not to slosh hot coffee on her skin. She had to get Garrett some nutrition so he could heal. She didn't have time to focus on anything but that. And that was a good thing.

Liv ran up the front steps, marveling at how surefooted she was now. She was the person who stumbled, fell, lost her balance and basically embodied klutzy. Now she maneuvered hills and valleys, rocks and unstable surfaces like a pro. The rich smell of fat and sugar filled her head and her stomach rumbled.

She nudged the door with her hip and stepped into the gloomy house, very much like a tomb. A tomb of her childhood. A tomb of the bad she had endured. Leaving here with Garrett, working all this shit out, would be like a rebirth. Coming back from the dead. It could only get better.

Liv found him in the bedroom, in wolf form, sleeping. The wound in his chest not so visible through his fur. She was sure it'd be worse as a man. He told her, somewhere in the middle of the night, that letting himself be wolf was easier. It would conserve his energy and he'd heal faster. She plopped down and brushed the fur on his nose, leaned in and whispered, "I have donuts and coffee, wolf boy. Will you wake up for me?"

He opened his eyes, the color of January ice and panted. She tried to watch him change but again it was too fast. A jittery blur of swirling motion and color and there was her Garrett, gorgeously naked, mussed hair, stubbly face, grinning at her. "Did you

say coffee?" he said but he sniffed the air and tore open the bag. "Wow. And seven pounds of donuts."

"I was just grabbing," Liv said, laughing.

"What do you want, little girl, asked the big bad wolf," he said, waving a bear claw in her face.

Liv saw the wound gape a bit as he moved his arm. Saw the deepened lines around his face, saw how pale he was. Her eyes darted to the bedding and the rust-colored stain there. Not a wide stain but who knew how deep? Who knew how many layers of the mattress were clouded with his blood? She saw him wince and shift the pastry from one hand to the other.

"Garrett," she said, reaching for him. He shied from her, pulling that side of his body back. "Garrett," she said again, tearing up, her throat closing. He was hurting, he was bleeding, for her.

"It's fine." He bit into the donut, chewing. "I just need food."

"Garrett, we have to go back. Now. You need them to help you."

"You help me," he said.

"I don't think they'll do anything to me, Garrett. But if they do, I deserve it, I killed a man."

"He wasn't a man. He was a coward," Garrett said, his eyes dark with pain and anger.

"Whatever. I took a life. And I can't take yours. You need help."

"You help me," he said again, pulling her in and kissing her. His mouth warm and full of sugar glaze. "You're all I need now, Liv. I won't go back until I know they understand."

Liv nodded but her eyes went to the ragged hole in his chest again. She knew it should be much smaller if not nearly gone by now. It wasn't. And that scared the hell out of her.

* * * * *

Healing

Garrett could feel the worry rolling off Liv like smoke from an oil fire. He tried to ignore it, he also tried to act as if nothing was wrong but the pain was radiating up from his chest, around the back of his shoulder and down his arm. The bleeding had tapered off unless he moved too much and provoked it but he feared infection had set in. He could smell a slight spoiled scent when he moved a certain way and if that was him he was smelling, he had a narrow window of treatment before things got more complicated. But offering her up to the elders to possibly make an example of was too much. It wasn't how it normally played for the pack but once or twice A.J. had argued

for and won punishment for rogue wolves that seemed way more intense than the crime. And A.J. didn't take very kindly to changelings. He was a bit of a bloodline snob.

A.J. was what worried him. He was the avenger of the pack. Inside the pack, that is, because A.J. had done nothing to avenge Eileen. The outside world was not what A.J. worried himself with.

"I'm right as rain. It takes time for us to heal too. Not as long as you but it is a gunshot wound, Liv, and I hate to tell you, getting shot sucks no matter what your nature."

She smiled at him but he knew she wasn't buying it. "Hey, we'll check in tomorrow, okay? We'll find a way to contact Kelly and see what she says. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal. Here, eat these. Eat all of these! I'm going to go check the shower. See if we have water."

"You do that. But I'm not standing in a cold shower for anyone."

Liv wrinkled her nose at him. "Hmm. A prima donna, eh? How about if I clean the tub and then see if I can fire the gas stove. How do you feel about a tepid bath made with boiled water?"

"I could warm to the idea," Garrett said. He took a huge bite of a cruller and watched her smile.

When she turned, he forced himself to swallow. The sweet dough tasted like sawdust and pennies in his mouth. He was so fucking tired, all he wanted to do was sleep. His hands trembled and his head buzzed with dizziness. Just one more day and they would contact Kelly. It would be fine.

* * * * *

Garrett tried to ignore how utterly wiped out he felt. He had sprawled on the old, dusty mattress, listening to her move around the house to get a bath ready for him. He could smell stagnant air, old anger and her fretting so clearly.

The sound of Liv cleaning and then multiple trips up from the kitchen with water should have been music to his ears. Entirely homey, comforting sounds. Domestic sounds that could never be more reassuring than when you were laid up in bed for some reason. He did love the sound of her moving about but he also realized that for the most part, he was weakened. If anything were to happen, he had no idea how much his body could handle. Or if it could rise to the occasion at all.

He should very well shift and stay that way but the act of shifting scared him. What if he got stuck? What if it made him weaker? Garrett decided to just stay as he was until he had to shift.

"I found these," she said, coming in and holding up small packets. "Aspirin. Prepackaged. They don't expire until the beginning of next year. And this is good through this month. Lucky us." She smiled, waving a tube of antibiotic cream at him.

"Yeah, if you have to get shot, do it before the ointment goes bad, am I right?" He tried to laugh and winced.

She caught it, frowning, shaking her head. "Garrett, let's just go home and we'll work it out. I'll bite the bullet. I'm a big girl. If you can't do the time, don't do the cr —"

"No. I'm fine. You're overreacting. It's been a shit storm of a few days, yeah?" He grinned, biting his lip to keep from wincing again. "Help me up and wash me, baby. Make me clean."

Liv laughed but the laugh was forced and that killed him a little. "I doubt there is any way to make you clean, you dirty pervert."

Garrett stopped and touched her face. Took it in his hands and turned her so he could kiss her. She had sugar and frosting on her lips and coffee on her tongue. His cock stirred and she shivered.

"You should not even be —"

"I'd have to be dead not to want you," he said, cutting her off. He kissed her. Kissed her long and soft and then harder. He needed her to know how much of her was in him now. How much of his heart she owned. All of it. "I love you, so yeah, I'd have to be dead *and* buried not to want you, Liv."

Liv shocked him by running her fingertips down the length of his hard-on so that this time he shivered. "Well, I'd have to be dead, embalmed *and* buried to now want you. But right now I want you in the tub so we can get this wound clean. If you behave, maybe, just maybe I'll give you a little nibble."

She helped him forward and he palmed her ass, squeezing just a bit too hard so she jumped. "Nibble? Bite. I want a bite."

Liv shook her head, blushing. He could smell the rush of blood to her skin, it smelled of late-blooming roses. "Yeah, yeah, in the tub with you, wolf boy."

He did as he was told.

"Now stay right there. I have a big pot on the stove and that should warm it right up." She ran out, hair flying. Those jeans were atrocious but somehow she made them work. The ragged sweatshirt and leaves in her hair all worked.

"Wild Liv. Brave Liv. Strong, unafraid, raging Liv," he mumbled to himself like a prayer. Garrett put his head back against the cool porcelain. A tree smacked the bathroom window over and over again. How long since someone had lived here to trim it? A few years? The house was steeped in bad feelings and worse energy. But it was old emotion, not the former owners'. It had to be Liv's family who had left the desperate scent of anger on the house.

"Here we go. I'll pour it down here so I don't burn you." The pot steamed, turning her already rosy cheeks redder. She caught him looking and put her head down like she

was shy. Because deep down she really was still. Only with him, she seemed a bit more comfortable in her skin. Garrett had never felt more grateful before, than to realize that.

The hot water slipped around his feet, mingled with the tepid water. "Now, when my mother wasn't drunk she'd think to do this when we heated up the tub water from the hot faucet." She dipped her hand in and swirled it like some pink magical starfish. She fanned her hand so that the hot water migrated all around his aching muscles, slipping and darting into the nooks of the backs of his knees, around his ankles, over his hips. She brushed the hot water around him, her fingers skimming his skin here and there. When her pinky touched his cock, his body responded with an almost violent need.

He grabbed her wrist, hard, and she jumped. He'd scared her but not in a bad way. Her shoulders went back, brow smoothed, eyes went darker. She licked her lips and tried to pull away but he held her fast. Would she trust him?

"Garrett, you're wounded. Don't you think we should skip this particular mating?" But her hand betrayed her words and she twisted her hand in his so that she grasped the underside of his wrist with her smooth palm. His pulse was palpable now. Trapped in the cage of her palm, it seemed to beat triple in speed. He was so ready for her. The ache of his cock, the thumping beat of his ache for her completely outweighed and overshadowed his injury or his pain.

"Climb in here with me, Olivia. You're dirty too. You have leaves in your hair, after all." He grinned at her, stroking his fingers over her wrist so that he felt her pulse flutter like a small butterfly under her skin.

"You are the big bad wolf," she said, dropping her head and blushing. But not before Garrett saw her eyes dilate and her tongue dart out to wet her lips. She slid on her knees on the old black and white tile, her arousal sudden and rich in his nose.

"For you, I am. Come on, little red, come in here with me."

She stood and he watched her. The way she moved, the slip of her hair around her shoulders. All of it made him itchy in his skin until she was with him. Until he was inside her. It was the best possible place to be, he thought. With Liv in his arms and him in her body, he could just be.

"Garrett—"

"Off with the mom-jeans. Off with the sweats. Come on, baby. Do it for the injured guy. Do it for me. Do it..." He reached up, tracing the curve of her thigh where it met her knee and she gave in.

Her fingers, trembling a bit, popped the brass button on her jeans, drew down the zipper and Garrett felt his focus go soft like a man mesmerized. She shimmied out of the denim like a dream and his eyes found her bare underneath. Her skin the color of milk and porcelain. A small brown birthmark like a bit of punctuation on the flare of her hip. "Now the sweatshirt," he said, sounding dark and guttural even to himself.

Liv lifted the horrible covering and her breasts came into view. The honey freckling across her chest so fucking gorgeous it stole his breath. How many times now had he

run his tongue over those freckles and at what point would it not mean so much to him?

Never.

"Garrett, you're hurt," she whispered but she stepped into his seeking hand and he slipped his fingers between her nether lips, touching just the tip of one finger to her clit so that she sighed. "Garrett you really should –"

"Get in, Liv," he said, trying to keep his voice soft and failing miserably.

She stepped forward and in, the water swelling around him like a welcoming tide. "Good girl," Garrett said and pulled her down to kiss her.

* * * * *

The Arrival

The water licked at her calves and then thighs as she tried to wiggle down in the tub with him. Garrett's hands came up to claim her like he couldn't wait another minute. He pulled her forward, lips locking on hers, tongue darting and stroking around inside her mouth until she felt the echoing wash of arousal in her pussy. Liv settled on his hips, his hard cock pressed to her wetness, the warm water swirling around them. She dug her fingernails into his biceps enough for his cock to jerk from the brief pain.

"Put me in you, Liv," he said against her bottom lip, biting her hard enough that a white hot spark of pain blazed across her bottom lip and her cunt clenched, ready and wanting. He arched his hips. "Come on, do it."

Liv rocked her hips, left to right, right to left, feeling his breathing grow shorter and faster, hotter against her mouth as he tried so hard to maintain control. "You should be resting," she said, really trying hard to protest. They shouldn't be fucking. She should be playing Florence Nightingale not naughty nurse.

"This is resting. It's healing. You're my healing spring. A wet well of willing woman," he growled.

Liv shook her head no but the pressure of his erection to her opening was enough to override good sense and her caring nature. "Garrett –"

"Now. Do it now, Liv. You do all the work. I'll just lie here," he said. His lips pressed warm and insistent to her ear, right up close so the vibration of his words shimmered on her skin, making her nipples go hard. She rubbed them to the warm, hard expanse of his chest, avoiding his wound but feeling him under her. So real, so human, wanting her with all of himself. It was too much.

"Fine but don't you move. Not at all."

"Not even when I come?" he teased but then he groaned because she was setting the flushed tip of his cock to her pussy and dragging him through the wetness pooled there. Not putting him in yet, just letting him feel it.

"No, not even then," she breathed. "Promise?"

"Promise," he said. His voice was rough and broken. He was barely hanging on but she liked the feel of him pressed to her this way, all potential. The precursor to a lot of pleasure. Always pleasure with him.

Garrett thrust up mindlessly as she pushed the head of his cock to her again but didn't sink down to take him in. "Ah-ah. You promised."

"Sorry, but Liv?"

"Yeah?" She settled down on him, legs shaking from excitement and chill, to take just the head into herself. She squeezed.

"You're going to turn me from just wounded to wounded *and* mad. I don't want to go crazy, baby. Come on, Olivia," he whispered.

When he said her full name she sank down on him, his cock stretching her perfectly as she lowered. The full length of him brushed every hungry nerve ending in her and Liv began to rock. Already it felt too good. Already she was so damn close to coming.

Garrett pulled at her, cupping the back of her head, pulling her forward so his mouth could find her mouth, her neck, her nipples. He sucked one, then the other, hard enough for her to feel the resounding tug in her cunt, the tickle in her throat. She came around him, gripping his cock tight with her body when his teeth found that sore place on her neck that marked her as his. He licked it then, the thin skin that covered the pound of her pulse from the pleasure and pain.

Liv put her own teeth to his throat, feeling the blood jump and shimmy under her teeth. His heart was pounding, his hands roaming. Over her waist, her ass, the sides of the claw-foot tub. He cupped her bottom, tugging her firmly against him so that he could thrust up with the barest of thrusts, bumping her G-spot so that a warm epilogue to her orgasm worked through her arms and legs. Her fingers were loose and flexible with it, colors swirled behind her eyelids as she flirted with her release. "Be careful. Careful," she chanted in a whisper. "Don't hurt yourself. You promised. Careful, careful, Garrett."

"Hush, woman." He moved her ever so slightly, his arms bulging with the effort, and Liv fell forward, kissing him, rocking her hips, shoving her fingers into his hair so that he hissed against her mouth from her tugging.

"I love you. I love you. Sometimes I don't think you're real. I wait to wake up. I wait to blink and you're gone. Or you're Kevin and I've just gone crazy because all my life I've just wanted..." She was crying a bit then and he took her hands, holding them in one of his, urging her hips to roll and slide with the other at the small of her back as she moved over him.

He was perfect. Liv's heart broke at the thought of losing him in any way. A tear slipped down the slope of her nose, dropped to his lips, full and red, almost sinful for a man, lips like that. He licked it away, brought her to him with a tug of her hands and kissed her one more time before his body went rigid, his lips tight as he said, "You have it now. You have my love forever. And if anyone in this world tries to hurt you, they'll

have to go through me first. And not just go through me—" He moved, chaotic and shivering in the water as he came. Liv hovered right on the edge of coming until he pressed his fingertips into her skin and thrust one final time. She tumbled back into it, managing to come in tandem, with a fluid sigh as he finished.

"They'll have to kill me," he said. And Liv knew he meant it.

* * * * *

She put him to bed and then drained the tub. Liv walked the house, making sure it was secure. She'd never felt more at home and peaceful despite being in a cold, dirty, abandoned home that had once been her hell. Garrett had been fine until he came, then the energy he had dug up to be with her had evaporated like water on a hot day. He'd let her put him in the bed, cover him and when she had turned to make sure he was settled, the gray wolf with Arctic eyes regarded her calmly before putting his head down and going to sleep.

The house was cooler than the outside, she thought. Liv went to her closet and pulled it open, hoping that it didn't wake Garrett. Inside it was bare. A few metal hangers and some paper on the floor. Nothing in here of the girl who had lived here. No clothes or jewelry or keepsakes. Not even a movie ticket. Not that she got to go out very often but when she did, she kept a memento.

When she slid the door to shut it, the dark markings caught her eye. Olivia at four...Olivia at ten...Olivia at eleven, twelve, thirteen. She watched herself grow taller and taller via ink marks on scuffed white paint. She could think back and remember vividly. At four her mother had fallen down the steps, so her stepfather said. At ten her mother had sported a black eye for Thanksgiving. Eleven, a busted shoulder, twelve, a fractured kneecap and a limp. Thirteen was the first time he took a swing at Liv. Her mother had rallied for that, earning a fat lip and a chipped tooth. Her throat closed with emotion and she shut the door.

"Come lie with me," he said.

Liv turned, frowning. "You have to stop shifting! You're never going to heal."

"Sorry. I keep forgetting that if I had simply made a sound you'd have understood. I can feel how sad you are from here. And that's being exhausted, freezing, tired, bleeding and recently zapped of all my energy with your feminine wiles."

"That was totally your fault," she said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come lie with me, woman."

She crawled in next to him. Let him hold her. She let Garrett soothe away so many years of feeling lost and invisible. She let him hold her and she let herself not worry. Just for a bit.

* * * * *

Chester had called and said it wouldn't be until late morning that they arrived. By then the house was sparkling clean and the rest of the pantry items that could be baked had been.

Kelly had barely slept and felt that itchy "bugs under the skin" feeling that only came with extreme nerves. Kelly ran to the door when she heard the bell. She ripped it open ready to jump on Chester and kiss him until he cried. Instead her heart stuttered in her chest and the words she'd been about to say crawled back down her throat.

"Kelly, glad to see you too. Do we have any idea where they are? What's been done with the body?"

A.J. brushed past her as if he owned the joint. When Chester came clumping up the brick steps like the weight of the world was on his shoulders, the greeting she had planned turned into a hissed, "What is Satan doing here?"

"He's not Satan, Kel, and I'm sure he can hear you. He wouldn't take no for an answer. And I really can't order him around. He's pretty much second in command and he's way more stubborn than me. The boys are holding down the fort at the farm. They can keep an eye on things long enough for us to sort this out."

"For the head honcho you sure rolled over and showed your belly," she growled. Kelly slammed the already damaged door behind them so hard that this time it cracked the frame. A picture fell off the wall and A.J. turned and bared his teeth in a vague smile as he faced her.

"I know you're overjoyed to have me but I need to know about that body."

"The body was found and removed this morning. Some hikers found it," Kelly said. "I saw it on TV while I was waiting for Chester to come." She nodded to the TV that had been put on mute. The news for the day flickered on the screen, brightly colored news of death and poverty.

"And they think?" A.J. leaned on the counter in the cocky way of an alpha who wasn't quite. It always made Kelly want to smack him in the head.

"They think an animal attacked him."

"Hmph. Let's see how far that gets us," he said, looking around. A.J. sniffed the air and grinned. "He has it bad for her."

"He's mated to her now, you jacka —"

"Let's be productive now, folks," Chester said softly. He put his hands on Kelly's shoulder and she felt her blood pressure drop, her anger receded just a bit.

"Fine. We need to find them. Garrett's wounded, she's new. He keeps shifting and that's slowing down the healing progress. Plus, I mean, it's a bullet wound for fuck's sake. He's a shifter but not a god. So we need to have it cared for. By now he's flirting with infection, if it hasn't already set in."

Chester walked to the front door where the attack had happened. He sniffed and Kelly knew he could smell well below the disinfectant and bleach she had used. "He

came here to kill him. Maybe her too. He deserved to die.” He said it bluntly like he was reporting the weather.

“We’ll see,” A.J. said, rubbing his hands together. It was an utterly malicious gesture and Kelly had to clench her fists to keep from grabbing him and punching him. Hard. That would do nothing. For now they had to find Garrett and get him safe and treated.

Chapter Seventeen

Stand-Off

It wasn't really hard at all. They simply waited for dark to fall and when the purple light of twilight settled around six o'clock, they shifted. The moon was full and peeking through the black and gray mottled sky. It stared down from over the steeple of the local church. Kelly glanced at it, made a wish that Garrett was fine and Liv too. That this would all work out. Having A.J. here set her on edge. Her heart raced and her nerves were shot. Even Chester's calming presence couldn't negate A.J.'s aggravating provocation.

They ran past the place of the kill. The smell of blood was still thick and metallic in the air. It hung, an invisible orange and brown stain of scent in the crisp fall air. A.J. stopped, sniffed, threw his head back and howled.

Asshole letting Garrett know he's gunning for him...

She put her head down and hurried past him. If she had her way, she'd beat A.J. and even Ches to the new mates. She had a maternal streak a mile wide for Garrett Gustafson.

She'd also have to make a point of reprimanding A.J. openly for announcing their presence with his alpha, balls-out howl. Jerk.

Chester gave her a short growl, knowing she was woolgathering and knowing she was seething. She snorted at him, putting on speed and dodging a fallen tree. She was smaller than he, so she could go faster and get into tighter spots. She grinned, her thin black lips pulling back. When all was said and done she'd pay for that move. Chester would take it out on her hide. She hoped.

* * * * *

Garrett heard A.J. and woke. He was curled around Liv. He'd shifted back again and the wound in his chest beat raggedly with his heart. His pulse jumped so hard he felt dizzy. She'd shifted back to her human form in her sleep, a common occurrence with changelings. He'd done so to accommodate her, he could only assume. He was a living echo of her now. What she did, he embraced and the opposite would stand true. They complemented each other now, as it should be.

Garrett ran his hand down the small of her back, feeling her supple skin, watching the small amount of light from the bedroom window play across her jaw, her cheekbones. She shivered made a small noise, pressed her body back to meet the warmth of his touch.

"A.J.'s coming, Liv," he whispered. "And that can't be just. A.J.'s form of justice is rarely pro-wolf. A lot of us think he's a wannabe human."

She moved back a bit more, talking softly in her sleep. But a smile curled her full lips and his heart rushed with love for her. Garrett felt grateful in that instant. Her second shift had been easier for her than the first. He'd noticed even in the chaos. It seemed Liv was special in many ways. She might just be one of the lucky few who accepted the change with ease. And power. Before he'd changed her, when she slept she cried, she screamed, dreamed horrible dreams of always being a breath away from abuse. Now she slept and dreamed peacefully. He hoped she was dreaming of him.

"I'll protect you," he said, kissing the back of her neck so she sighed. "I know you don't hear me but I will. Because if he's here, then you'll need it."

He felt sick to his stomach, his head pounding with fatigue and pain. He needed to get home and get food and warmth. He needed to have his wound looked at and he probably needed an antibiotic. He was useless to Liv if gangrene set in and he fucking kicked it.

"They're coming," Liv said in her sleep. Her brow wrinkled with worry and she frowned. "I need him," she said.

Garrett felt his stomach dip like he was falling. He kissed her shoulder. "You have him," he said into her ear, hoping that she heard. The him being him, of course.

He didn't want to wake her. He didn't know how long it would take the others to track them to this place—not long he sensed—and he didn't want her scared. If he only had a few minutes, he'd rather it be peaceful for her. He didn't have the strength to run right now. He was man enough to admit it. He was wiped. His body was consuming every ounce of energy to try to clot the bleeding and heal the damage. Shifting so often and barely any food had made matters worse.

"I need him," Liv said again and she gave a little cry.

He had the urge then to change, rise up and run, taking her with him. So angry at seeing her scared again that his rationale left him. But it was almost too much effort to breathe, he couldn't imagine running. He kissed her one more time, feeling the slide of her silken skin under his lips right before everything broke down into dots of white and gray.

Garrett lost his grip on consciousness.

* * * * *

She was gorgeous, A.J. would give him that. A totally different female from Eileen. Where Eileen had been average height and lithe and redheaded with sparkling green eyes like the sea, this one was tall and curvy, with flared hips and a small waist. Long unruly hair swirled around her pale face and when she heard him, her eyes flew open, dark brown like the best mahogany wood. They were so dark, in fact, for an instant he thought they were black.

"Hi there, you must be the new mate. I'm A.J. and I'm here to make sure you answer for what you've done." He said it softly and grabbed her by the arm to haul her up. She might be wolf now but he was bigger and stronger, older and a born lycan. She was half human, brand-new and had no idea what was going on. He smiled at her even as she kicked out, instinct taking over.

Garrett, pale and unconscious on the bed, tried to stir.

"Put her down, A.J.!" Kelly said from the door. She stalked in as if she owned the dank hovel of a house. Bits of ceiling flaked down around them like rotten snow when the door banged the wall on the backswing.

"Mind your own business, Kelly," he said. He shook the girl a little. Just to show her that he could.

A.J. felt the wave of fear he was after but then she surprised him, snapping at him with her very even, very white but very human teeth. He laughed, he had to. "Oh my. Who's afraid of the little new wolf? Not I but I give you an A for effort," he said and dropped her. A.J. gathered both wrists in his big hand and squeezed until she winced.

"I don't think there's any call for that, A.J.," Chester said walking in. He put his hand on Kelly's shoulder to tame her. She looked fit to kill.

A.J. grinned. "I'm pretty much the elder who handles justice, so I think there is. At least until we get it all straightened out. Now, what about our little lost lamb here?" He took the toe of his boot and nudged Garrett. Garrett struggled to open his eyes and barely could. Liv let out a cry and moved for him but A.J. tugged her back, the pressure on her shoulders so hard she screamed.

"A.J.!"

"Shut up, Kelly. Is he dying?"

Kelly and Chester both rushed forward. "We need to get him back and cleaned up. Doc Verde can look him over and—"

"Let's all go then. We'll head back to the farm. I've got his mate here, I'll take her. You take Garrett."

"A.J., you'll take that girl over my dead bo—"

"Elected justice enforcer," he said. "Now why would you doubt me? Plus, I wouldn't harm her. That would make me no better than her and she's a killer. Aren't you, doll?"

She snapped at him again, her eyes rolling wildly from him, to Garrett and back again. "That just never gets old," A.J. said and turned her roughly. She was wrapped in nothing but a filthy blanket and he was bare. Getting back to the vehicles would be fun but they'd make do. Wolves always had. "We'll be outside waiting. You see about him. Don't take too long, though. You wouldn't want me to get bored. Come on, sweetheart. Let's see you march like a good little prisoner."

He hustled her out as Liv did everything within her power to halt his progress. "If you make me, I'll pick you up and sling you over my shoulder like a sack of dirty clothes. Do you want that?"

"No," she said from between clenched teeth.

"Then knock it off and walk."

A.J. had just gotten outside, pushing her in great staggering steps across the front lawn, when Garrett came crashing out of the second-story window. Snarled fur, bared teeth, weakened but intent. He was off the roof in a leap and had A.J. backed to a tree in no time.

"See, I know you're angry, Garrett. I know you are. But I have her and in order to fight you I have to shift. And I'm not shifting. Because shifting means letting go of princess here, and princess is a killer. A murderer."

Garrett, roared, stalking forward, head and neck craning toward A.J. for a weak spot.

"So I can't shift. But I sure as hell can take her from you. Would you like that?"

Garrett froze, teeth bared, breath ragged. Kelly and Chester hit the front porch already changed. Three wolves to one man and a captive. A.J. didn't mind those odds.

He pushed the short silver knife to Liv's throat and she yelped. The metal irritating her skin almost instantly. The threat of violence too real already after changing. She was still off.

She was a weak one, he thought. Or she had been. He pushed a little harder just to make his point.

Garrett growled, advancing one step as Kelly and Chester slunk closer.

"See, what we have here," A.J. said softly, "is a stand-off."

* * * * *

Old Wounds

"A.J., you don't want to do this." Kelly advanced, barefoot, naked, in her plaintive, very human form. Proving her vulnerability.

Liv waited, heart pounding. It was Garrett she was worried about. He seemed unstable. Injured and angry, he panted way too hard. His fur was mussed, eyes mildly fixed. He was worse than he'd let on and she felt her anger grow. Who was this man to keep her captive? Who was he to threaten what was hers? Whoever he was, he was in a position where others watched their behavior.

Kelly was firm but remained reserved. "A.J.?"

"Garrett's been a thorn in the hide of the pack for a while. His constant demands for vengeance. Then he leaves to live as a lone wolf? Because he didn't get his way."

"He suffered a great loss, A.J. Any one of us would want vengeance. It's our nature to protect and seek retribution for ours."

"He's a weak wolf. He's a failure."

Liv felt the anger building. Her breath barely sneaked past his grip on her throat. Garrett flickered, the lines of his form bleeding in the air and then he was there, as a man, crouched low on the ground. Pale, dirty, bleeding. "Why don't you tell them the truth? You blame me for Eileen's death."

Kelly looked confused and out of the corner of her eye, Liv caught the shimmer of Chester shifting back to human form also. She wondered, in a half hysterical way, how long it would take her to get used to all these naked people.

"What's he mean?" Chester asked. He moved forward slowly. The stand-off very much a hostile hostage situation. Everyone moved around them with great care which upset her even more. How dangerous was this man? Or how angry?

A.J. went taut behind her. His grip released just a bit and Liv sucked in a great breath. She could taste the wet earth, grass and hostility on her tongue.

"I mean," Garrett said, still crouching, "that he wanted her. He harassed her and wooed her and she wouldn't leave me. She loved me and he could never stand that."

"Garrett, you have clearly lost your mind," A.J. said. But his body language said that Garrett had pushed a button. Liv felt the knife pull back a bit.

"Did you try to take his mate? Is that true?" The anger in Kelly's voice was audible. Her face flushed red, she shook her head. "Goddammit, A.J., how could you do that?"

"I would never do that!"

The knife sagged a little more and Liv's body went to war. The wolf in her urging her to change to her base nature. Prodding her to shift so she could be in control, have more advantage. The human part of her feared the blade and what would happen if she tried. All hell could break loose and she could make things worse for Garrett and the rest.

"He's a liar," A.J. said but his voice said he was lying. His hands shook with barely suppressed rage and though the knife hand fell back a bit, his other arm around her waist became a vise.

"Garrett should be second in command," Chester said softly. "But he didn't want that on him. He's always been a bit of a loner. But then Eileen had him grounded in the pack. In the community. Do you think if he comes back he'll want your place as law?"

"He'd never win it. He abandoned the community!" A.J.'s voice was poison and barbed wire. He gripped her harder still and the unnatural strength made Liv gasp for air. She was unnaturally strong now too but once again in a position of weakness. Tears pricked her eyes from frustration. But there was no fear and for that she was grateful.

Garrett studied them intently and she watched him weighing the option. "You wanted her. You wanted Eileen and then when she was killed you punished me by not getting justice for her. You blamed me, you hated me and you punished me. So you

didn't pursue it with the sheriff. You simply let it go and let her death stand as nothing more than an accident. When it was clearly drunken recklessness, something that should never have happened. Never been allowed, A.J.! A crime. Something should have been done!" Garrett roared. Even as his anger overtook him, his color grew paler, his hands shook. Liv sobbed, unable to go to him, trapped as she was. The anger in her became white hot. A monster with claws and teeth.

She shook with rage and A.J. laughed softly in her ear. "Oh, you're so brave now, aren't you?"

Garrett had to resist the urge to rush forward and simply take A.J. out. He'd fucked with his life years ago, he'd left Eileen's death an open wound – not just for Garrett but for all who loved her – and now he had Liv.

His hearing was shot, his head full of the sound of his own blood in his veins and the ringing that got worse the weaker he got. His chest ached, a dull stabbing pain that made each breath harder and harder. And he was freezing. The lack of calories and clothes weren't helping the weakening nature of his injury. He couldn't read Liv, either because his wires were crossed or because she was too scared.

She looked angry and he hoped he was right. Everything in him screamed for him to lie down, shift to wolf and sleep for a thousand years or until help or death arrived. Instead, he staggered forward a little bit. "You left her death to the humans. You didn't protect the pack. You were a coward and you fell down on the job all to punish me because a woman who deserved the world loved me instead of you."

"She could have loved me," A.J. said and the pain and hatred were crystal clear in his voice. "When we were younger she –"

"But then she grew up and saw what you really are!" Garrett yelled, taking another clumsy step forward.

He tried to signal to Liv. He tried to get his message across but her eyes were wide with the confusion and commotion.

Garrett ran, head down, full force. He caught the brief but exquisite dull metal glimmer of Liv's eyes as she took it all in. The tarnished silver sheen of her gaze gave him hope. Hope that she would act the way he wished her to. A.J. gave a huge cry and pushed the blunt silver knife to Garrett. He pressed it hard and time seemed to slow like the dragging breath of a dying man. The tip slicing down Garrett's left shoulder as everything went white.

His grip loosened immensely and Liv sucked in a great breath. She pushed her thoughts away, embraced the pain as it rushed to her and let her body take over. The agonizing cramps and onslaught of aches were overwhelming but she pushed past them. It only took seconds but felt like lifetimes. She opened her jaws wide and took A.J. down as his arm arched back up with the knife to deliver a debilitating blow to Garrett. She stood, paws forced to her enemy's heaving chest, jaws hovering

precariouly close to his throat. Liv's weight wedged the blade hard between his palm and her soft underbelly where it sawed into the flesh. The damage was enough to steal her breath. It burned but she kept the pressure. As long as the knife was pressed to A.J.'s flesh he could not change. Or so she'd been told. The important part was, she was in control. Unafraid.

"She could kill you right there," Kelly whispered. She came forward slowly, looking as if she feared Liv would mistake it for aggression. Liv wagged her tail. This was all so new. Having her very real human thoughts in the body of a sleek yellow wolf was nothing she'd ever thought possible.

"But she isn't," said Chester and he laughed. Liv liked him right then. His laughter was clear and deep and perfect.

But then she caught sight of Garrett, bloody and unconscious and she pressed her powerful teeth to A.J.'s throat. Pressed them hard enough for him to flinch.

"No. Don't!" he said, feeling her rage from the small pressure she applied.

She didn't bite. She had learned her mistake the last time. Bloodshed must be avoided at all costs. For their protection. So she nipped hard enough to make him squirm. To scare him, to make him beg—but she didn't bite, though she wanted to.

Chapter Eighteen

Surgery

"We really have to take him back to the farm, I hope you understand," Chester was saying. Liv's head was pounding and she pulled the clothes that had been in his truck around her tightly. They hadn't even gone in a house—hers or Garrett's. There were sweats in every vehicle and Chester had tossed her some. Together they'd loaded Garrett into the back of Chester's truck and had strapped him into a small cot back there. Then they'd bundled him up in woolen blankets. Chester wouldn't let her ride in the back with Garrett and it was hard for her to accept. "He'll know you're here and he won't let himself go under. He needs to go under so he can conserve his energy."

"Go under?"

"It's like a bear going into hibernation. Sort of. Hard to explain. He basically shuts himself down to bare bones metabolism to try to heal up."

She'd shivered and he'd covered her with a spare blanket in the truck's seat. The rain had started again and the headlights from Kelly's truck bounced sparkling white lights around the inside the cab.

Kelly was escorting A.J. home to the farm. There they'd figure it all out. There waited a pack member, Ben Verde, who was also an M.D. He would fix Garrett, he had to. Now she prayed—a lot—though in the past it hadn't helped much.

Another wave of shivers overtook her and Chester patted her leg. "You okay, kid? It's been a long day. Lots to absorb. We'll get it all worked out, just watch."

"I'm fine. It's not about me. It's always been about me in my head. My whole life, you know? Struggling to keep my head above water. Now, this—this is not about me. This is about Garrett. And the fact that I can't lose him. I can't lose him, Chester," she said, swallowing her tears. "I just found him, I can't lose him. It's not fair."

"You won't, Liv. You won't. You watch, Ben will get him all stitched up. Good as new. And then you two can start doing your part to keep our farm populated."

She blushed, tried to laugh but it came out as a strangled sob. "I've been so afraid forever," she said. Chester—in her heart—was already a surrogate father. A man she could trust. She'd never had any, now she had two.

"I know. Kelly told me some of it but—"

"You don't understand," she rushed on. "None of that fear, no matter how big or horrible it was, could touch this. The thought of losing him just...it takes my breath. It makes me cold all the way through."

"You're not losing anybody. You hear me?"

She nodded, fingers twisting around and around themselves with nerves. "Promise me? I know you really can't but I—"

"Oh yes I can, young lady. And I do. I promise you that Garrett Gustafson will be fine and you will have your mate until he drives you crazy and you want to just choke him the way Kelly does with me sometimes."

The windshield wipers slapped the glass and more bright balls of fairy light bounced across the dashboard, speckled Chester's rugged profile. "Good. Thank you. Even if it's a lie, I need to hear it."

"It's not a lie," Chester said, patting her leg again. "He's a good boy. He's not going anywhere. He went through hell and back to arrive at you. And I believe he did so for a reason. I don't think Great Spirit would have put you in his life to up and die. This is just the concrete. The proof he needs."

"For what?" She shook her head. How in the world could this mess be part of some divine plan?

"Garrett needs to know it's okay to love again. He needs to know that he doesn't have to punish himself forever over Eileen. It was a tragedy but not his doing. He needs to let it go and move on. Build a life. Be happy. And maybe coming a kiss away," he made a kissing noise and smiled at her. As scared and tired as she was, she couldn't help but smile back, "from losing it all is exactly what he needs to dive in headfirst again and live. Really live. With you."

Then she started to cry. Liv held her side and cried. And he let her. Chester was wise enough to know she needed to.

* * * * *

"How long's he been like this!" Ben Verde barked. He was tall and angular with dark brown hair that hung in his forehead and kind green eyes. But his jaw was set and his brow drew down when he frowned. He did not look happy and that scared Liv.

"About thirty-six hours," Kelly said softly.

"Jesus! We'll be lucky if we don't lose him. Why'd it take so long? What stupidity is this?" he asked, almost to himself but it ripped through Liv and the tears came again. This was her fault. She tried to swallow her anxiety and managed to get herself under control. Barely.

"Ben! Watch it," Chester said.

Ben's eyes shot to Liv and he gave Chester a brisk nod. "He'll be fine. We'll get him taken care of. But he should have been here immediately."

"He wouldn't come, Benjamin," Kelly said, putting her arm around Liv. "You know how he is."

"Stubborn and dumb as a box of rocks," the man answered. He glanced at Liv even as his hands moved over Garrett, palpating. "I can say that because we grew up

together and we're like brothers. I was even there the day he hooked his thumb with a fishing hook. All the way through, the baby. Garrett never does anything halfway."

Liv let out a burst of laughter that surprised even her. But she could picture it and it struck her as oddly funny. Inappropriate laughter was her specialty.

She shook a little and Kelly rubbed her to warm her. How had she gone from Ellen telling her to call her shrink about her bad dreams to an impromptu surgery and a werewolf pack? What day was it? Was she due at work? Would she go back to work? Would she stay here?

It all swirled in her head, muddying her thoughts, but she recognized the defense mechanism well. If she fretted over all the stuff that didn't matter, she wouldn't get consumed by the one big thing that did.

Garrett being okay.

"I think we've beaten sepsis. I think if I excise some of this and treat the infection...pump him full of antibiotics..." Ben blew out a sigh and ran his rubber-glove sheathed hand through his hair.

"Then?" Liv practically shouted. She didn't mean to but she did it.

"Then he should be fine. Because he's strong and stubborn as an ass."

Liv felt weak with relief. She sagged against Kelly as Ben moved to the sink to wash his hands. "Thank God. Oh thank God," she said, her knees buckling a bit. She sagged, her head pounding.

"I'll need everyone out of here. I have to get him prepped and someone send in Melissa to assist. Tell her to scrub up so we can cut out that tiss—she okay?"

"Liv?" Kelly said. She shook her a little and Liv marveled at how far away Kelly was. How was she touching her that way, that dull uneven pressure of Kelly squeezing her arm, when she was so far away? "Liv?"

"I'm fine," she said but her tongue seemed too big and too slow to form the words. "Worry about...him." She really had to force that last word out and then surprisingly the floor was rushing up at her. A great swift blur of yellow and white tile and the feeling of falling through space.

* * * * *

Kelly pushed back the mottled gray sweats. "Jesus. He got her too, Chester. Did you not see!"

"No, woman, I did not see, or I would have said something." Chester frowned at her, his body set with tension. He bent and examined the wound. "Ben, you might have another patient."

Ben rushed over as Melissa, scrubbed and focused, prepped Garrett for the work they had to do. "What kind of knife was it? Silver?"

"Yeah, you know A.J., he never does anything half-assed."

"He should be strung up by his toes for this," Ben said, getting a closer look. "I think it's fine but she'll need stitches. Even with food and healing time, it will take a good long time for that to close on its own. The silver has necrotized some of the tissue. So we need to help her out and close it up so infection doesn't set in. Kelly, run and get Sabrina. She's been helping in the clinic. She'll know how to hook up the glucose and get her set up so I can stitch her up next."

"Jesus, poor girl. So much trauma for such a short life," Chester said, picking Liv up and carrying her to a cot.

"A.J. should be run out on a rail." Ben returned to Garrett and snapped on a fresh pair of gloves.

"She was a killer. A murderer according to law. And pack law says—"

"You know as well as I do, Ches, that pack law can be pretty damn archaic."

Chester settled Liv and brushed her hair out of her face. He said nothing. They'd have to work it all out when Garrett and his mate were better.

Chapter Nineteen

A Favor

Garrett woke to a big ugly face in his. "Jesus Christ, man, you trying to scare me to death?" he grunted, taking a swat at Ben.

His friend laughed, sat on the bed, making the bed springs protest. "No, not me. But it sure as shit looks like someone did. How you feeling?"

It all came rushing at him then and he sat up, grunting from the sharp stab of pain followed by a dull bad-tooth kind of ache. "Where's Liv?"

Ben pushed him back none too gently. "She's in the next bed. Sleeping beauty took a blade for you. We had to clean her up and stitch it but she will be fine. We put her under, because it went fairly deep and the whole time she was out she talked to you."

"What'd she say?" Garrett craned his head and saw the shape of Liv under the blankets. Her honey-blond hair spilled down her back and she was breathing softly. Relief made him slump back and take a deep breath.

"Well, she loves you. How'd you fall ass backward into that?" Ben laughed.

Garrett grinned. "Hell if I know. She's okay, though? She's fine?"

"She's fine. She'll have a pretty scar. So will you, though. Bullet wound *and* a silver blade all in one day. You going for a record?"

"Yeah, the jackass record," Garrett snorted. "Fate, she is a bitch."

"That wasn't fate, that was A.J. swinging his big cock to prove he's an alpha. When he's not."

"Yeah, about him," Garrett growled.

"The elders are talking. He's under house arrest. The boys are watching him."

Garrett laughed. "Oh, I bet they'll have some fun with him. They never liked him anyhow."

Ben grinned. "That's the point."

"Liv will probably be ready to run back home when she's better. Who'd want to stay here?"

Ben grinned. "Her. The lovely lady wants to stay."

Garrett went to punch Ben on the shoulder and yelped.

"Smooth move, genius," Ben said. "You have about a million stitches."

"A million?"

"Okay, so it's more like twenty but still. That won't be good for them. Stay still." He handed Garrett a mug of hot tea loaded with sugar and cream. "Drink it. You need all the calories you can get. They're making you a feast as we speak."

"How do you know she wants to stay?" Garrett drank his tea in three big gulps though it scalded his tongue.

"I told you she talked when she was under. She basically seems to fear you don't want her here. That it'll be over. She fears that she's a killer, she fears the pack won't accept her and that you'll choose here over her."

"She talked that much?"

Ben laughed. "Non-freaking-stop. We hit her with anesthesia and she was off and running. It has that effect on some folks. But look at it this way, my friend, A.J. did you a favor."

Garrett sat up, grabbing his side when the pinching pain became too much. "Jesus! You hack, what'd you do to me?" he teased. "How in the world did that jealous lunatic do me a favor?"

"If you'd come here without his drama and his crime against another wolf, she'd have been viewed as a killer. It would have been more severe. You know it and I know it. We are a curious breed who can be more than a little hung up on tradition. But this changes it."

"He committed a crime against another wolf," Garrett said, nodding. "And a changeling. Which is cruelty."

"And a mate. Not to mention a girl with a history of violence against her. So much more sympathetic than just a girl who snapped and killed a man. No matter that the man had tried to kill you or had been violent to her. It still would have earned her much more retribution."

"So her being a victim again is good?" Garrett frowned. "That pisses me off."

Ben leaned in. "Ah but she's not really. She took down A.J., for shit's sake! And she kept her cool and minded her bite and didn't take his throat out. All things in her favor."

"It could be argued that she learned from her kill and she showed leniency to someone who was threatening to kill her and me."

"Her mate," Ben said, nodding. "See, Kelly and Chester have always told you —"

"Yeah, yeah. Everything happens for a reason." Garrett's stomach growled. "I moved off pack property to my own home and met Liv. Changed my life."

Liv rolled over and in her sleep said, "Where is he? Where is he?"

Ben walked over and whispered, "Right here. It's fine and so is he. He's right here, doll." He looked at Garrett. "Changed your life and changed hers. Now I'll go see about that food. You two need about a whole Thanksgiving dinner each to start mending."

Garrett crawled into bed with her, gathered her close. Liv opened those big brown eyes and he could see the glassiness from the drugs. "Psst," she said. "Are we dead?" He had to laugh, a great rumbling laugh that seemed to erase all the tension from his body.

"Nope. Not dead. Curled up in the infirmary in the second barn on the farm. You are nearly naked, I am nearly naked. You have stitches, I have stitches. You are drugged, I am laughing at you."

She smiled big and touched his nose. "You feel very alive to me. I have a pain in my side."

"That would be where you got stabbed."

"That sucks." She blew out a sigh and her eyes drifted closed. Then they flew back open and she struggled to stay awake. "Are you fine?"

"I'm fine. They're cooking us a ton of food so we can gorge and get better."

"And then what?" she said, eyes fluttering softly closed again. She fought it some more and struggled to open them.

"And then I'm going to get you alone and do bad, bad things to you. And you'll like it. A lot." He pulled her even closer, feeling the warm curves of her body pressed to him. It comforted him, made him feel less anger, less worry over what could have happened.

"And then?" she said and this time he picked it up. The worry in her voice. The tension that seemed to glimmer under her skin where only bones and blood should be.

"And then we set up house. I have a nice little cottage on the back property. I don't share my home with anyone. But now I do. Okay?"

"Who is it?" She stared at him and under the shiny film of her drug daze and Garrett saw that she needed him to say it. She needed to hear it.

"It's you, Liv. You're my mate now. We stay here together or we leave together. Whatever we do, we do together. Okay?"

"Really?" her eyes were filling up and his heart was breaking. Why would she even doubt that? But he knew. Part of Olivia was afraid to believe.

"Really, now go to sleep, you silly woman. So when they come we can wake you up and stuff you full of food and —"

"And then?" she said softly, but this time she smiled. Her eyes slamming closed as if she hadn't slept in a year.

He wrapped both arms around her tight and even though he knew she was asleep he said, "And then I ravish you and ravish you and then love you forever."

He kissed her forehead.

* * * * *

Justice

The feast was immense. Beef, turkey, bison, chicken, side dishes as far as the eye could see. Liv found herself ravenous and ate with gusto. The mashed potatoes, served in a bowl almost too big to handle, were the best she ever tasted. Fresh beets, corn, green beans. The harvest of summer vegetables had not depleted yet, though the frost was coming.

Chester rose and all eyes turned to him. Garrett put his hand on her leg and squeezed, sensing her nerves.

"The elders have discussed what brought Liv here to us."

Liv felt her stomach bottom out. Her fingers grew numb and she put the turkey leg she was holding down. Garrett leaned in, his breath warm on her ear. "Don't look so worried. There is no firing squad on the farm."

But she was worried. She had taken a human life. And for this group, her new group, this meant possible exposure. Composure, control, handling your wolf—the base nature—was crucial and she had failed. Being a changeling was no excuse.

"We feel that given the circumstances, there will be no legal repercussions for Liv. Kelly has been following the news from the area where the body was discovered. There are no leads beyond an animal attack and we doubt there will be any way for the authorities to trace the death back to the pack."

Liv slowly let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Her heart pounded so hard her ears ached and she felt on the verge of tears. "He's smiling, Liv. Breathe," Garrett said to her softly.

"What's the verdict?" called Ben. He pounded the table with his fist like a barbarian but he was smiling when he did it. A low rumble of laughter worked its way through the barn where the ridiculously long table was set up.

"The verdict is that the couple, wolf and changeling—also known as Liv McCoy—who also happens to be Garrett's new mate, must live here. You are required to live on pack property for a period of one year. During which Liv will prove her fealty to the pack, become a productive member of our society, hopefully she will add to our numbers, bringing a life into this world to make up for the one she took."

Liv dropped her head, blushing. Garrett chuckled next to her and kissed her on the ear. "Oh my God," she breathed, which made him laugh harder.

"Also, we would like to commend you," Kelly spoke up, rising from her seat.

Liv looked up, shocked. "Commend me? For what?"

"For your restraint with A.J. We all agree it would have been justified for you to take him down. He was threatening your life and your mate's."

"Who was already wounded!" Ben chimed in. Liv thought she already loved him like a brother.

"And any one of us, born wolves, would have had a hard time resisting the urge to put him down. It is the natural instinct."

Base nature.

"And you didn't," Chester said and smiled at Kelly who nodded in agreement.

"A toast to Liv. To welcome her and to honor her control!"

"To Liv," echoed through the barn and she had to put her head down again. Garrett pulled her in and hugged her, whispering to her, nonsense sounds and soothing words. She wasn't used to this. This feeling of acceptance. And love.

* * * * *

"So tomorrow I call Ellen and talk to my boss about a leave of absence." They walked in the darkness to Garrett's cottage. She could hear and see and smell so much more now. The world seemed a richer, more colorful place in all ways. A small rabbit darted across their path and she realized it was lucky that they were wandering along in human form.

"Plus, it has the advantage that we just ate a ton of food," Garrett said to her unspoken thought.

"How did you —"

"I felt you tense. You're a hunter now. It's normal to react that way."

The cottage came into view, he'd left a small light burning inside. A light they didn't need but still the image of a softly lit house was comforting.

"That's my punishment, my sentence? To live here with the man I love and be among people who have treated me well?" She was still stunned.

"Don't forget A.J. He didn't treat you well."

"What will happen to him?" She took Garrett's hand and squeezed. The pressure pulled her stitches a bit and she bit her lip. It was getting better so much faster though. In comparison to how long it would have taken before, this would be nothing.

"Most likely they'll strip him of his duties, give him a mundane job. Something with servitude in it. The worst possible case for someone like A.J." She saw the flash of his white teeth in the dark blue evening light.

"Wow. That's hardcore. But better than jail, right?"

"Trust me, he'd rather go to jail," Garrett said, laughing. He let them into the cottage and before the door clicked had her in his arms.

Liv sank against him, loving the feel of him, big and strong and warm against her. Very much alive and that made her so happy she could cry. His cock was hard, pressed to the line of her pussy, and she was filled with that instant, knee-jerk arousal that came hand in hand with being in the same room with Garrett Gustafson.

"You're injured."

"I'm healing fast," he said, walking her back, kissing her hard.

His lips crushed down on hers, so hard she felt like she was bruising. So hard and yet all she wanted was more. More kisses, more nibbles, more sharp plump bites of pain

from his teeth nipping her. Her pussy went hot and wet and ready in the space of that one kiss. When he scooped her up, she wrapped her legs around his waist, mindful of his wounds but unable to resist the feel of him against her. Her own wounds pulled and Garrett felt her stiffen.

"But you are not healing as fast," he said, laying her back on the big king-sized bed. The quilts brushed her face, a tangled mess still from their earlier, half-asleep lovemaking.

"I'm fine. Just the walk and the being picked up and..." She stopped, the breath stalling in her chest when he pulled her sweater up and nuzzled at her collarbone. His tongue tracing slippery circles around her nipple until her throat tingled with emotion.

Liv pushed her hands into his thick dark hair.

He needs a haircut. Maybe he'll let me cut it.

She tugged at him to get his mouth to hers. She tugged too hard and the echoing bite of pain in her stitches made her gasp.

"You really are a terrible listener, Liv." Garrett tsked as he bounced off the bed and went to the closet.

"Where are you going? I'll behave!" she cried. She watched him, curious and a little panicky. Her body warmed like an engine. Parts of her giving off little blips of pleasure. Her belly loose, her pussy tightening gently and then insistently on itself. The pull of desire strong in her womb. She waited, restless but intent.

"I just need to make sure you don't hurt yourself so we have improvised restraints, for your own good," he whispered, coming at her.

Liv caught the tarnished metallic flash of his eyes and she was locked in a perfect mixture of fear and thrill. "I'll be good. I don't really need you to restrain me," she whispered. But deep down she wanted him to and Garrett could tell. His eyes said he could and that kicked her into a place of borderline ecstasy.

"See, I think it'd be best for everyone," he said.

She just stayed that way. On her back watching him as he placed her right wrist gently above her head, like he might break her if he didn't go slowly. He tied it to the wooden-slatted headboard with a strip of soft cotton he'd obviously torn from something larger, like a sheet or a curtain. Liv made a small sound in her throat, her pussy clenched up, eager, her nipples hard where they jutted from under her sweater. "I'm still dressed," she said, feeling confused.

"Not all the way, you're not," he said. His teeth were so perfect and white when he smiled at her and she closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the sharpness of those teeth on her skin, and Liv flitted closer to orgasm. He hadn't even touched her yet and she was ready to come. Garrett pulled her other hand up but made sure it didn't pull the stitches that cross-hatched her pale skin. He kissed above and below the wound, his eyes going glassy for a moment.

"God, Garrett, kiss me," she said when she saw his harnessed emotions but he just smiled and shook his head.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? To distract me that way?" His fingers slipped under the waistband of her jeans and he drew them leisurely toward the center. Her body was on red alert and she rose up to meet his hands in any way possible. He stopped. It was only when she dropped her hips and waited, breath shallow and fast, that he tackled the lone button on her jeans. He dragged the zipper down and tugged so that her jeans started to slide. When she wiggled to aid him, he froze.

She was learning.

Liv stayed completely still and Garrett peeled her jeans off and then hooked her panties with his fingers and drew them down too. Bare from the waist down, arms secure above her head, she felt utterly vulnerable and yet...completely trusting.

Liv parted her legs just a bit. Just enough that he could see the rosy flesh of her sex, just enough so that his expert hunter's nose could catch her scent. The scent of how very much she wanted him in her, filling her with his cock and moving against her. Pinning her flat and taking her. She wanted the world to stop and it to be only them. Soft sounds, eager movements, eyes locked, skin on skin. With her head full of all that, she said, "Please, Garrett. Don't toy with me."

"That's no fun," he said but he settled himself on her, giving her a brief moment of the idyllic pressure of himself. Hot, hard, leanly muscled man, pressed flat to her. Then he slipped lower, his eyes on hers as he put his face between her legs and started to lick. Torturous swipes of his tongue over her clit so that within seconds an orgasm ripped through her, making her tug against her bonds, though she'd promised herself she wouldn't.

She came with a cry and Garrett continued to lap at her, drinking her in, his fingers slipping inside her to press and test her until she felt on the verge all over again. "I want you ready for me, Olivia. Really, really ready because I have no patience tonight. No part of me will be gentle or soft or patient. So you need to be ready. So ready you're practically crying." The tips of his fingers brushed her G-spot, manipulating the fragile bundle of nerves until Liv chewed her bottom lip, swallowing a whimper.

"See, just like that," he said and stood to unbuckle his belt and shuck his jeans. His cock stood out hard and ready, blushing the plum color of arousal as he kneeled back on the bed, between her pale legs his tan flanks were the color of caramel.

Garrett placed her legs, one at a time, like she was made of porcelain, on his broad shoulders. His hands dipped the mattress when he pressed them down by her hips. He pushed the tip of his cock to her. So wet, she felt her own moisture pooled there between her thighs, so ready she was on the verge of simply begging. Babbling for him to enter her, pleading with him to fuck her, promising him anything in the whole wide world that he wanted if he'd just be in her.

She forced herself not to move. Not to jerk up to meet him as he slipped into her inch by inch. If she moved, he would stop and if he stopped, she thought she might

actually die. Liv held her breath and he kissed her calf where the muscles ached. She hadn't realized they ached until his lips were on that spot. "We need to get you loose. I'll have to fuck you until you don't have any tension at all," he murmured.

She made a small sound of desperation and he went still again. She thought she'd lose her mind but then without warning, he thrust deep, filling her cunt so that she sucked in a big breath with her surprise. Then she shivered, whispered, "Ohhh" as he started to move.

Liv felt her wrists want to test her bonds but she forced herself to be docile. Garrett caught the look on her face, the indication of her internal war, and he bit her ankle just enough to make her pussy spasm around him, milking his cock so that they both stilled for just a moment. "Good girl. You're trying to behave, aren't you?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice to do anything but beg.

"Perfect." He fucked her faster, his face dark, almost grave, something not usually present on his relaxed features. Garrett touched her, wrapping his fingers around his cock as he entered her, dipped his fingers into the wet recesses of her body and finally, pressed his fingers to her clit and worked her as he moved faster. His breath hot on her ankle, his cock high and hard inside her, Liv's legs stretched with tension from riding his shoulders.

But when he worked her with his fingers, the rush of sweet pleasure was all encompassing and her ears rang a bit, her vision flashing white for an instant as she held her breath.

"Come with me. I told you – fast and hard. No niceties tonight. I need you to come with me though, Olivia. So please." He thrust into her, filling her, touching all the perfect places with his cock as his fingers played a counter tune on her clitoris. When he said it again, he took his finger from her, pressed it to her anus and pushed slowly. Up to the first knuckle, pressing so that a whole new kind of pleasure found her, swept over her. "Please—" he murmured and she did. She obeyed Garrett with an orgasm even as his own release took him down and under so that words were gone and only sounds remained.

He covered her with his body, his muscles twitching and cooling even as she trembled slightly under him. "I love you, Liv. Forever," he said into her hair, kissing her shoulder and finally kissing her mouth, the smell of him filling her head.

She wanted to touch him back, to tell him she'd never thought she'd be allowed to have this. That she was still a little fearful that it would all go away. Instead, she nodded and returned the kisses. Unable to wrap her arms around him. She encircled his hips with her legs and he groaned.

"God, you're gonna get me again, woman."

"That's fine but untie me first. This time I get to touch you."

So Garrett obeyed her.

Chapter Twenty

Square

"What are you so nervous about?" Her nerves were making his nerves a mess. "It's just the monthly meeting. It's a check-in. We all eat and drink too much and announce stuff and basically keep track of each other."

"I'm just really nervous. I don't know. Sorry. Sorry."

Garrett watched her and couldn't help but smile. Her cheeks were rosy and the wind rushed down into the valley tossing her hair around like wheat in a field. Big brown eyes shot with hazel magnified by the sunlight gazed at him. She grinned big and he bent to take her face in his hands and he kissed her.

Her lips were warm and sweet and her tongue tasted like honey and cream from her tea. "Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell," she said and she was lying.

"Tell me." He held her in place though she started to walk. He lifted her easily from the ground and her feet walked to nowhere.

Liv laughed. "Put me down! Unhand me, you brute!"

She smelled different too. Like fall grasses and the full moon. He cocked his head and waited. It would come to him.

Thanksgiving had just passed and Liv had spent her first holiday with the pack. She had held her own, helping to harvest and prepare the meal, eating with gusto, bonding with the men and women alike. She had even argued for leniency for A.J. when the matter was discussed at the council meeting. He was still under house arrest but he was possibly going to keep his position if he could make amends and reconcile with certain pack members.

"You're keeping something from me, Liv," he said. He turned her, studied her face, the set of her jaw, the sparkle in her eye. "It makes me nervous. Tell me, please."

Garrett ran his thumb over her lower lip and watched her weigh her options. Tell him or not. He held his breath. Soon it would be Christmas. He had made her a sleigh bed for her gift. Chester had taught him to woodwork as a teen and he'd rarely used his talent. For her, he had made the effort. It was something she had confessed one night she had always wanted. She said, when she would hear her stepfather and her mother, she would picture herself tucked into a wonderful sleigh bed, safe and warm in soft white sheets in a safe warm house.

That was his gift to her. A sleigh bed, soft white sheets he had found, the safe house and his arms. There would also be a diamond ring in that bed and a question for her.

"I'm just excited to announce that I'm square," she said and dropped her head. She dug the toe of her cowboy boot into the dirt and blushed a startling crimson.

Garrett shook his head, baffled. "Square? What? I'm lost, baby."

She looked up, her smile beatific. She made the sign of a small square in the air with her fingertips. "I'm square. All is repaid."

Garrett laughed. "I'm either ridiculously slow or you're talking in code. Tell me, you're driving me mad." He playfully shook her by the upper arms and she giggled.

"My sentence, Garrett Gustafson, was to stay here and prove my loyalty to the pack. And possibly to..."

"To one day repay the life you had taken with a life for the..." he stopped.

"For the pack." She said it softly.

"Wait. That means... you mean—"

She didn't speak. She took his hand and put it over her faded jeans, low on her belly, over the cold metallic zipper. For an instant he imagined he felt something. *Too soon* but he did feel a leap of joy in his gut. His heart pounded. "You're..."

"I took the test this morning. I was too afraid to say until I did. And it's...well, Ben confirmed a positive. He said the tests can be wrong because of—"

"DNA issues. But he?"

She nodded even as he moved in, kissing her, kissing her, kissing her like he would never be able to stop kissing her. "He said yes," she said in his ear. Garrett picked her up, too happy to mind his strength.

"So you're providing a life for a life."

"Gladly."

"I love you."

"And I love you."

Garrett set her down, dropped to his knees, pressed his lips to her belly. Whispered, "And I love you."

"Garrett, he doesn't even have ears yet."

"Doesn't matter." He kissed her belly again. Paused. "He?"

"Mother's intuition."

He bent his head and she ran her fingers through his hair. The wind smelled sweeter than it had. The light was more golden. The sounds and smells of the meeting coming from the barn were more welcoming. She bent and kissed the back of his neck. "Now come on, Daddy. Let's go tell them that not only are they stuck with me but there will be more of us."

He'd never been happier to make an announcement in his life.

Epilogue

Ben bent his head and frowned. "Hmm. Give me one more push, Miss Liv." He groped, grappled and held up a squirming bundle of screaming baby. A few snips and he yelled to his friend. "Come and collect your young one, Dad! Hurry up, you goof, he's kicking me. Has his father's strength."

Caleb Gustafson let out an eardrum-piercing cry as his father came to collect him.

Liv raised her head to see and Garrett brought the boy down for his mother. Ben sank back down on his stool. "Now to deal with the afterbirth. And, oh —"

"Oh?" Garrett said, not really paying attention. His eyes were locked on his boy and his wife. Each of them eyeing the other with a look of mutual admiration and love. Or so it appeared. They were the most beautiful people in the world to him. He thought he might drop dead of pure, unadulterated love right there.

"How you feeling, Liv?" Ben asked softly.

She paused, frowned, "Crampy. Really, really crampy and oh God —"

"Yeah, push for me, sweetheart," Ben said.

Liv did, gripping Garrett's waiting hand, eyes wide, brow popping out in a fresh crop of sweat. "Ben?" she gasped.

"Yeah, you're not quite done. Caleb's been keeping a secret," Ben said, his head down, face intent.

"What?" Garrett asked, hands shaking even as he soothed his brand-new son.

"Push once more, hard," he said, ignoring his friend.

Liv did as asked, crying out, tears streaking her face. She gripped the birthing bed, straining, and then another cry broke the hush that had fallen.

"What?" Garrett yelled, feeling stupid and slow.

"A sister," Ben laughed. "Looks like you two are square squared. Folks, meet your daughter."

Liv looked down and laughed.

"But...but we don't have a name," Garrett stammered as if that mattered.

Ben cut the cord and wiped off Garrett's daughter. He wrapped her, presenting her to Liv who was quietly weeping. She studied her daughter, kissed her forehead.

"Drew," said Liv.

"Drew Gustafson. Wow. That's a big name for a little girl," Ben said and started cleaning up Liv.

"Why Drew?" Garrett asked.

Liv smiled. "It means courageous. And she will always be strong, always be courageous."

Garrett turned the boy to the baby girl his wife now cradled. "Caleb, this is your sister, Drew. Don't mess with her or I think she'll kick your ass."

Then he kissed his lovely, brave wife who couldn't quite hold back her laughter.

About the Author

Sommer Marsden writes from her cozy Baltimore home, which she shares with a very patient family and a chunky wiener dog. She's widely published in the erotica genre. Her work has appeared in dozens of anthologies, multiple magazines and on numerous websites. When she's not writing, you can find her haunting thrift stores, walking, drinking red wine and eating frozen blueberries. Often simultaneously. Visit Sommer at her blog, Smut Girl (www.smutgirl.blogspot.com), to keep up with her dirty ramblings and daily updates about her life of controlled chaos.

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