



MOIRA ROGERS

# CROSSROADS

SOUTHERN ARCANA • BOOK 2

SAMHAIN publishing, LLC

He's the last man she should ever want. She's the last woman he can ever have.

*Southern Arcana, Book 2*

Coming from a family with psychic gifts, Derek Gabriel was aware of but separate from the dangers of the supernatural world, until a rogue wolf shifter stripped away his humanity. The change he barely survived didn't drive him insane, but the cultural bias against him as an inferior transformed wolf might. And it doesn't help that he's fallen for the daughter of the most powerful wolf in the country.

Almost from the moment she was born, Nicole Peyton started planning her escape from the strict confines of elite shapeshifter society, an old-fashioned world where women are valued only for their bloodlines and bank accounts. In New Orleans she has a bar she loves, friends in decidedly low places, and a smoldering sensual tension with an incredibly attractive and deliciously unsuitable man.

Their forbidden longing erupts into unbridled need—until Nick's sister burns into town with a strike team hard on her heels. Saving her means Nick has to play by the Conclave's rules...and give up the man she is growing to love.

Unless Derek does something completely crazy—issue a challenge that could shake the foundations of their world.

Warning: This book contains forbidden lust, strip poker, instinct-driven sex in odd places, devious shapeshifters, and love and loss in a world of paranormal politics and supernatural schemes.

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# Crossroads

*Moirra Rogers*

## Dedication

For Mylius, who always laughed whenever the society princess was actually supposed to know what to say.

Thanks to all the gamers who know how important this is, and that revisions should only be interrupted with chocolate tossed through a briefly opened door. And very heartfelt thanks to Yvonne, who helped make this a better book by knowing when to poke and when to cheer.

# Chapter One

“If you don’t get off your ass, someone’s going to snake that woman right out from under you.”

Derek tore his attention from the paperwork spread out over his desk and leveled his sternest glare at his best friend and partner. “Excuse me?”

Andrew didn’t look up from his drafting table, but he cocked one eyebrow. “Hey, I’m just saying. It’s a small miracle she’s not already dating someone. At least, that’s what Penny says.”

“If you and Penny don’t have anything better to do than talk about my love life, maybe we should go find some more work.” He turned his attention back to his invoices, which had piled up at an alarming rate and made it clear that the last thing they needed was more clients. “Besides, give me one good reason I should listen to pithy advice on love from *you*.”

Andrew grinned and spun his stool to face Derek’s desk. “Tell me you don’t want to ask Nick Peyton out, and I’ll shut up about it.”

Two invoices went into the stack on the right, the ones that would go in the mail on Monday. Derek ground his teeth and picked up a third one, but he couldn’t focus on the words.

Maybe because he did want to ask her out, and everyone knew it. Hell, *Nick* probably knew it. But he had his reasons for hesitating. He had plenty of reasons.

He realized he’d been staring at the invoice in silence and put it down with a disgusted sigh. “I can’t believe the man who’s been in love with my cousin for, like, two years is over there lecturing me on getting off my ass.”

“We’re not talking about me.” Andrew’s easy smile didn’t fade. “You keep stalling, and you’re going to end up kicking yourself. Women don’t wait forever, not without a little encouragement, at least. And Jackson said that wizard’s been asking Nick for dates. The one who runs the fake ghost tour out in the Quarter.” He pulled out a small drawer, stored his technical pens and rose. “He’s coming to the party tonight.”

Derek had been a shapeshifter for almost two years, and he still wasn’t prepared for the rumbling snarl that worked its way out of his chest. It was instinctive, like the way his fingers tightened around the arm of his chair until he was sure he’d leave permanent dents. “Fuck.”

His friend eyed him solemnly. “Now imagine having to watch him hump her leg all night.” He grabbed his keys and wallet from another drawer. “I can’t pretend to know what it’s been like for you, Derek. But I know you don’t want to see her with someone else.”

Derek slumped back in his chair and tried to rein in the homicidal urges that accompanied the mental image of another man laying hands on Nick. “You’d think I’d have it under control now. Alec’s one cool fucker. He makes it look so damn *easy*.”

Andrew sat on the edge of Derek’s desk and made a face. “He was also born into all this crap. You’ve had a couple of years. That officially makes this the stupidest comparison ever.”

“Yeah.” Derek pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes. “Shit. I was going to ask her out anyway, you know. But every damn time something like this happens, I think I’m not ready. It’s fucking hell, Andrew, not knowing if something will make me snap and freak out.”

“She can probably handle a little crazy better than thinking you don’t know she’s alive.” He nodded toward the door. “I’m cutting out so I have time to go home and wrap Kat’s present. I’ll see you at the bar?”

“Yeah. Hey, send Mari in here, would you?” He picked up the next invoice on his stack and forced himself to look at it. “I need to talk to her before she takes off for the party.”

“Sure.” The door closed behind Andrew, but Derek still clearly heard his voice when he spoke to their office manager. The shapeshifter hearing had taken a while to get used to, if only because twenty-nine years of experience told him he shouldn’t be able to clearly make out words spoken in another room.

He shouldn’t be able to...but he could. Just like he could tell that Penny had been in the office earlier today, because she always smelled of an oddly soothing mix of sawdust, engine oil and cinnamon. The world was alive around him in a way it hadn’t been two years ago but, no matter how hard he struggled, he couldn’t seem to find solid footing.

The door opened again and Mariko stuck in her head. “Are my invoices ready, or do you want to ask me a question I’ve already answered four times? Because I’m about to start rationing those.”

“Invoices are ready. Mostly.” He waved to the mess of files on the desk. “You know I’m crap at this.”

She walked in, clad in head-to-toe black despite the lingering October heat. “I’ll check them before I mail them out. Did you have a chance to look over the subcontractor estimates for the Halstead project?”

“Those were...” He stared down at the disaster he’d made of his desk, trying to remember what color the folder had been. “Shit. When did you give them to me?”

Mariko leaned past him and pulled a yellow folder off a file cabinet. “They can wait, you know. It’s not urgent.” She eyed him sympathetically.

The sympathy grated on his nerves, but it had become a common fixture around the office since Jackson’s new flame had shown up. Now, more than a month later, Derek still felt the same panic that had gripped him when he’d learned Nick was about to make a suicidal assault on a madman’s stronghold to rescue Mackenzie—and that she’d left town to do so without saying a word to him.

Kat had pointed out, with some volume, that Nick didn't owe him an explanation of her actions. What his cousin didn't understand was that the truth only irritated him more. Fear had kept him from staking his claim, and that fear had left him in the dark when she'd been in danger.

*Never again*, he promised himself. Things had finally settled back to normal—or as normal as they ever got in this city—and Nick's decision to throw a birthday party for Kat made the perfect excuse. Tonight, he'd make his move. *And kill any wizards who get in the way.*

Mariko cleared her throat, and he started and reached for the folder. "My brain's shot this week, but I promise I'll pick up the slack. Thanks for keeping everything under control, Mari."

"You need some time off," she admonished. "You've been going nonstop, and then that mess with the break-in and Kat's bosses..."

"Yeah." He flipped open the yellow folder and glanced at the first printout. "If everything calms down next week, maybe I'll actually take the vacation I was supposed to go on last month."

"I already shuffled some things around, so just say when."

"You already—" Derek snorted and shook his head. "Andrew and I may have our names on the letterhead, but I guess I should have figured out by now that you and Penny run this place."

"You have the best construction foreman and office manager in southern Louisiana. Quit your bitching and thank your lucky stars." She leaned a hip on the edge of his desk. "Where are you planning to go?"

"Shit, I have to go somewhere?" His gaze skated to the bottom of the invoice without actually reading anything for the third time, so he shut the folder. "I might just sleep for a couple weeks."

"Any reason you can't do that in a hammock on the beach in Maui?"

*Because someone could be asking out Nick or breaking into Kat's apartment?* While his libido was more concerned with the former possibility, the protective instincts borne of looking after his cousin for nearly a decade still hadn't settled after the excitement from the last two months. Twenty-four or not, Kat was an empath running haplessly through a supernatural community whose collective power dwarfed her own.

He had a feeling Mariko knew what he was thinking. "Is Kat still digging in her heels about letting you put a magical security system in her apartment?"

She pulled her heavy, dark braid of hair over her shoulder and curled the ends around her finger. "Less these days. The break-ins scared her pretty badly." She hesitated, then pursed her lips. "Nina and I could use a roommate. I wonder if Kat would be interested."

"I think her lease is up soon. She moved in not long after her birthday a year ago." Having Kat live with a witch and a telekinetic psychic would certainly make it easier for him to sleep at night. Alec had tried to warn him about the instinctive need to protect his family, but day-to-day life hadn't prepared him for the overwhelming rage that had nearly incapacitated him the first time Kat had been threatened.



"If I get the chance, I'll ask her tonight." Mariko rose and straightened the short hem of her skirt. "Speaking of which, you'd better get off your ass."

This time he didn't bother to choke back his growl. "Jesus, did you put it in the company newsletter? Do you see me getting all up in yours and Nina's sex life? Back the fuck off, Mariko."

She raised both eyebrows at his outburst. "I meant it's getting late. You're not going to have time to go home before the party if you don't leave soon."

"I—" *Shit*. Derek covered his face with his hands again and groaned. "Sorry, Mari. I'm an asshole." A *hypersensitive asshole*. "Listen, I'm going to come in tomorrow and finish up the crap that can't wait, then I'll take my vacation and hopefully come back here in a better mood."

She just smiled, her expression once again shadowed by sympathy. "Stop worrying about everyone else. You're going to drive yourself nuts. Just do what *you* need to do, okay?"

He needed to get his hands on Nicole Peyton and disappear with her into a locked room for a week or two, but somehow he doubted that was an appropriate suggestion for a first date. "Someone's got to worry about you hooligans. I'm going home to get changed. I'll see you and Nina at the bar. She's coming, right? Or has she had enough of your crazy coworkers?"

"Are you kidding? She loves the insane lot of you." Mariko took the yellow folder with her when she headed for the door. "Leave these to me. If any of the subcontractors are trying to screw you, I'll know."

"Thanks, Mari. You're a lifesaver." He waited until she'd shut the door behind her before dropping his arms to his desk and slumping down with his forehead on his hands. As much as he hated to admit it, Mariko was right. The last time he'd taken time off from work had been the month he'd needed to physically recover from being attacked by a crazed shapeshifter. He'd come back to the office because there hadn't been a choice; the insurance he and Andrew paid out the nose for had been sadly lacking in paid leave for werewolf attack. After struggling for so long to build their business from the ground up, Derek had *had* to keep working.

But they had Mariko now. She could keep Andrew from drowning in work if Derek took a couple weeks off, and Penny was more than tough enough to make up for the fact that Andrew could be a little too nice. The three of them could keep things running.

Then he might just have enough time to consider pursuing something serious with Nick Peyton. *If I can keep from howling at the moon or humping her leg or whatever happens to relatively new shapeshifters without a lot of control.*

Groaning, Derek lifted his head and pushed himself to his feet. He still had to swing by his place and pick up Kat's present, shower and change. If tonight was the night he made his move, he could at least make an effort to look good.

*Maybe the damn wizard will get a flat tire, and I won't have any competition.*

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Nick smoothed her hair behind her ears and stared at the gigantic sheet cake laid out on the stainless-steel counter. “Who likes carrot cake this much?”

“No one.” Mackenzie lifted a case of full beer bottles with an ease that made it clear she was finally growing accustomed to her newly gained shapeshifter strength. “Then again, Kat is one quirky kid.”

Nick laughed and pushed open the door from the kitchen into the main bar. “She’s practically our age, Mac. Twenty-four today.”

Mackenzie just snorted as she hauled the beers into the front. “I aged a lot this year. I might be pushing forty now.”

A quick glance around the bar satisfied most of Nick’s anxiety about the festivities. Her staff had worked hard to prepare for Kat’s private birthday party, one to which a good number of the supernatural denizens of the French Quarter had been invited. *Including Derek.*

She ignored the tiny stab of pain that lanced through her. Of course Kat’s cousin would be there. Nick had been looking forward to the party for months, viewing it not only as an opportunity to celebrate, but also to spend more time with Derek. Maybe even finally convince him to go out with her.

*I have a better chance of sprouting wings and flying home tonight,* she thought dispiritedly as she checked the liquor supply behind the polished bar. In the weeks since Alec had told her Derek liked her, she’d tried to strike up a few conversations with him. He’d answered politely, but treated her almost with annoyance, as if she’d done something to irritate him.

*Or maybe I just piss him off in general.* He wanted her; there was no mistaking his physical reaction whenever he came near her. And yet...

“Derek Gabriel hates me,” she told Mackenzie suddenly. “Alec is full of shit, and Derek hates me.”

Mackenzie froze, one hand holding open the ice cooler behind the bar and the other clutching a bottle of beer, and blinked at her. “He—what?”

Nick blew her bangs out of her face and started filling the pretzel bowls. “Alec told me that Derek hasn’t acted on any of the eight *hundred* flirtatious hints I’ve thrown his way because he likes me too much, and he needed to get all his new shapeshifter crap under control before he could start anything. But our friend is full of it because, lately, whenever Derek lays eyes on me, he looks like he wants to punch a hole in the wall.”

Mackenzie’s confused expression melted into one of guilt. “Shit, Nick. Maybe it’s not you. I mean, not just you. We did get his cousin mixed up in some crazy shit, and none of us bothered to warn him. Someone broke into Kat’s apartment, and if it was Charles Talbot, or someone like him...”

“Maybe.” She exhaled and shrugged one shoulder, unable to dismiss the feeling that it didn’t have anything to do with Kat at all. “I wouldn’t blame him. Jackson told me she was terrified.” Nick hoped being able to unwind with twenty of her closest friends would raise Kat’s spirits.

“Poor kid.” Mackenzie resumed stocking the fridge. “Which one does she have the crush on? Derek’s partner?”

“Andrew,” Nick confirmed. “The tall blond guy. They have this...thing. It’s epic.” She checked her watch and sucked in a breath. “People should be arriving soon. Dinner’s been set up, right?”

“Yep. It’s all ready.” Mackenzie shoved the last two beers in the cooler and picked up the case. “I could stay back there and keep an eye on it, though.”

“Surely you’re not scared of Jackson’s mother.” He was due back from the airport with her any minute. “Seriously. She’s great.”

“So I’ve heard. What about you? If you’re giving up on Derek, what else have you got going on?”

“Not a damn thing,” Nick muttered darkly. “My love life is officially a barren wasteland, where sexual satisfaction is entirely reliant on a fresh supply of C-cell batteries.” To say nothing of the loneliness that had plagued her for months.

“You could stop throwing out flirtatious hints and ask him out,” Mackenzie pointed out. “I mean, before you resign yourself to dating electronics.”

Nick had been set to do just that on returning from Boston. Then Derek had started gritting his teeth whenever she got within ten feet of him, and it stopped seeming like such a good idea. “Maybe.” She waved both hands in the air and made a disgusted noise. “I don’t want to talk about my pathetic love life anymore. Let’s talk about you and Jackson.”

“What’s to talk about?”

“Moving in with him?” Nick snatched up a towel and started giving the bar one final polish. “That’s a big step.”

Mackenzie laughed. “C’mon, Nick. After the year I had? Not all that big a deal.”

“You make an excellent point. But I’m proud of you for getting past it and moving on with things. Like the dance studio.”

Her friend’s eyes lit up. “Have you seen it lately? The contractors Derek found for me, God, they’ve worked magic.” She hesitated. “You don’t think he found me contractors who actually work magic, do you? I still can’t tell.”

Nick tried not to laugh. “As far as I know, it’s all sheetrock, semigloss paint and mirrors. But I want to come by sometime next week and—” She broke off when she caught sight of Kat waving through the etched glass of the front window. “Guest of honor’s here.”

She hurried to unlock the front door and pulled Kat in past the standing sign which proclaimed the bar closed for a private party. “Happy birthday, sweetie.”

Kat took in the bar’s decorations with wide blue eyes that made her look young, even if she was almost Nick’s age. “Wow, it looks awesome. I haven’t had a birthday party in years.”

“Just wait ’til the booze starts flowing.” She winked at Kat. “I’m going back to start the music. Want some champagne?”

“Sure!” Kat bounced up to the bar, obviously overflowing with excitement. “Heya, Mac. Where’s Jackson?”

“Picking up his mother from the airport.” Mackenzie popped the cork from one of the bottles of champagne. “They should be back any minute.”

“Awesome. Mama Holt is the best. You’re gonna love her. Tell her, Nick.”

Nick leaned into the back office and flipped the switch on the speakers linked to the satellite radio feed. “I did. But she’s nervous because Jackson got shot. I told her that’s a depressingly normal day around here.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say Jackson gets shot every day. But, you know, he’s in some trouble or other, like, every time I turn around. That’s what happens when you hang out with Alec.”

“Amen to that.” Nick surveyed the room again, pushed her hair behind her ears and glanced down at her shorts and T-shirt. “I need to go upstairs and change. Do you guys mind?”

Mackenzie grinned at her. “No problem. I’ll hold down the fort.”

Nick barely made it out the back door before her easy smile faded, and she cursed herself roundly as she climbed the wrought-iron stairs to the unoccupied apartment above the bar. Of all the nights to fall into a depressive funk, this had to be the worst. Not only would she ruin Kat’s birthday, but everyone would know she was upset because...

*Because why, Nick? Because you sleep alone? Or because you can’t breathe when Derek Gabriel smiles, but he won’t smile at you?*

She stomped through the kitchen and into the bathroom, where she’d left the bag containing her spare clothes and toiletries. At this point, she’d be better off going to New York to let her father fix her up with whatever random, well-heeled werewolf he’d managed to scrounge up.

He’d been dropping hints again, ever since she’d gotten back from New England. “Come home, Nicole,” she mimicked as she tugged off her T-shirt. “You’re missing too many priceless opportunities by living so far away.”

Priceless opportunities to marry well and get ready to take over the family business, something he knew she couldn’t care less about. She didn’t want to be queen of the werewolves, or whatever.

*So what do you want?*

Nick dropped her shorts, snatched up her lightweight black slacks and stepped into them. “Tonight, I want to be the consummate hostess,” she whispered to her reflection. “I want everyone to have a good time, including myself, if at all possible.” She paused before shrugging into her sleeveless red silk blouse. “And I don’t want to think about the fact that I’m going home alone.”

## Chapter Two

Nancy Desmarais Holt accepted the large paper box and laughed. “Now, Nicole, I want you to know I wouldn’t normally be so rude as to accept such a big piece, but that cake was *mammoth*.”

“Yes, it was,” Nick agreed with a smile. “Are you sure you won’t take more?”

The older woman glanced at Mackenzie, who shook her head while raising both hands. “Oh, no way. I’m not sure I can look at carrot cake again for at least a year.”

Kat’s voice drifted from the other side of the bar. “Hey! Don’t knock carrot cake.”

“Whatever doesn’t get taken home is going to the nearest shelter in the morning,” she warned over her shoulder, then rose on her toes to kiss Mama Holt’s cheek. “Don’t be a stranger. Come back tomorrow. I’ll make mint juleps and fill you in on all the latest gossip.”

She beamed. “That’s a deal, honey. Come on, Mackenzie. Let’s meet Jack outside. I think the party’s winding down.”

Nick kissed Mackenzie’s cheek next. “Be careful, and I’ll see you guys later.”

Mackenzie leaned closer and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Don’t be an idiot, Nick. Derek’s been making big eyes at you all night. Make a move now or I never want to hear you complaining again.”

Her cheeks burned. “We’ll see.” She waved as they walked out, locked the door behind them and turned toward the table where her remaining guests waited.

Kat sat sideways in the booth, leaning back against Andrew. He was finishing up a beer and grinning at Derek, who sat across from them. Nick’s breath caught, and she made a concerted effort to breathe in and out.

He’d dressed simply in jeans and a gray button-up shirt that made his eyes look unbelievably blue. Nick tamped down the lust that rose in her and grabbed a bottle of top-shelf tequila and a handful of shot glasses from behind the bar. She walked over, the low heels of her slip-ons clicking against the floor. “Shots?”

“Oh God, more alcohol?” Kat laughed and struggled to sit upright. “Can I sleep on a table here? I don’t even remember where I live.”

“That’s why friends and taxicabs were invented.” Still, Nick lined up only three glasses and raised an eyebrow. “Andrew? Derek?”

Andrew shrugged his shoulders as gingerly as he could without disturbing Kat. “Hell, I’m game.”

"None for me," Derek murmured, though his friendly smile managed to warm and confuse her at the same time. "Not sure how I feel about chasing carrot cake with tequila."

Which was exactly why Nick had avoided the cake altogether. "Come on." She poured the shots and sat beside him, acutely aware of the warm press of his thigh against hers. "Live dangerously."

Andrew grinned and raised his shot. "To Kat, on a happy birthday."

Nick clinked her glass against his and gulped the shot, grimacing as the liquor burned down her throat. "I should have fetched more limes from the kitchen."

Kat snatched the last glass and tipped it back. She gasped, tears springing to her eyes as she slammed the glass down on the table. "Derek will go get some with you. You can teach me how to do body shots. It looks fun in the movies."

With both men at the table shooting her apprehensive looks, Nick shook her head. "Maybe next time. My birthday's coming up in a couple months, you know."

Andrew hooted. "We can have another party."

Nick toyed with her empty glass. "I don't know. My father wants me to come to New York. He's been after me about it for weeks."

Kat listed a little to the side before Andrew steadied her. "Hey, you should take Derek. Mari said he's taking some time off, and he's going to be depressed if you're not around to hit on."

Derek glared at Kat, and a furious blush spread up his neck and cheeks.

"I'm sure he'll find something to occupy himself," Nick said casually, but she could feel her easy countenance beginning to slip, so she glanced over at Andrew. "Do I need to call a cab?"

"Nah." He slipped one of Kat's arms around his shoulders and laughed again. "Up, birthday girl. We're being kicked out."

"What?" Kat let Andrew nudge her out of the booth, but she swayed a little when he urged her to stand. "Oh, are they going to make out? Thank God. Finally. Let's go."

Nick could *hear* Derek grinding his teeth. "You better leave with Andrew, Kat, because if I take you home, I'm dunking you under a cold shower."

"Bah. You're no fun." Kat looped her other arm around Andrew's neck and beamed up at him. "Andrew will take me home."

"God help him," Derek muttered too softly for them to hear.

Nick unlocked the door, and Andrew led Kat outside. The street was still fairly crowded, and she imagined they'd have no problem grabbing a taxi without calling one. She cleared her throat and looked at Derek, who still sat in the booth. "Do you want another beer? Or I could make some coffee..."

He tilted his head. "Come sit down, Nick. We need to talk, since my drunk-ass cousin screwed up my careful plans."

She secured the door again and slid into the booth opposite him. “She’s wasted, Derek. I own a *bar*. I know better than to listen to drunken ranting. It’s okay.”

He snorted. “She’s a drunk psychic, Nick. She understands more about what’s going on in my head than I do.”

He didn’t seem to want to take the graceful exit she’d offered, so she reached over, retrieved her shot glass and raised an eyebrow at him as she slowly refilled it. “Does that mean you want to go to New York with me?”

“Well, it wasn’t in my plans since I didn’t *know* about it.” He grinned, righted Kat’s glass and pushed it toward Nick. “Besides, I was more thinking about asking you out on a date before we went on vacation together.”

She bit her lip and filled his glass with the amber liquid as well. “Could have fooled me, Gabriel. All you’ve done lately is glare at me.”

“Yeah.” He closed his eyes and exhaled on a sigh. “I...was pissed at you. Only I didn’t have any right to be, so I was pissed at myself too.”

She pushed the shot toward him until it nudged his hand. “Why were you angry with me? What did I do?” *What did I not do?*

Derek’s strong fingers curled around the glass. He lifted it to his lips and tossed it back without opening his eyes, giving her a glimpse of the strong column of his throat as he swallowed. The glass hit the table with a hollow *thud*, and he finally looked at her again. “You went charging into danger. You went on a suicidal rescue mission, and I had to find out about it from *Kat*. I have no right to be angry that you didn’t tell me. But every time I think about it, every weird, freaky instinct inside me flips the fuck out.”

Nick froze with her glass halfway to her mouth and stared at him. It was a common reaction, a purely animal response to instinct. Which meant he considered her, at least on some level, to be under his protection. “What do you think about that?” she whispered. “Rationally, I mean?”

“There’s nothing rational about it. But the human in me says I should have asked you out already, and then I wouldn’t be fighting with myself over whether or not you’re mine.”

*Mine*. She couldn’t breathe, much less drink more, so she lowered the shot of tequila and studied the planes of Derek’s face. She knew every inch of it already, every dimple and expression, a knowledge borne of countless hours of desire. Of yearning. The words escaped before she could stop them. “Will you come upstairs with me?”

He wanted to; there was no mistaking the desire. He groaned and slid his hands over to cover hers. “God, Nick, don’t tempt me. I’ve been trying far too hard not to screw this up, and right now I don’t think jumping into bed with tequila as a third wheel is the way to go. But...if you don’t need to go to New York right away, maybe a date? Dinner, at least. Someplace without nosy shapeshifters and obnoxious psychic cousins.”

Her heart thumped. “Do those places exist in New Orleans?”

“I’ll find one.” He smiled at her. “It’d be worth it.”

She hoped he couldn’t feel her trembling, though she knew better. “We could always order in.”

He licked his lips, and his gaze dropped to her mouth. “Okay. I’m going to get up and leave, and I’m going to call you when we’re both sober. Because that’s the responsible thing to do.”

Nick wasn’t drunk, and she’d be willing to bet Derek wasn’t, either. “Do you have my number?”

“I think so.” He flashed her another of those quick, nervous smiles and eased out of the booth. “Either way, I can find it. Especially since Kat and Andrew are probably spray painting it across the side of my truck right now as a subtle hint.”

“Only if they couldn’t find a skywriter this time of night.” She followed him to the door, trying not to stare at the broad expanse of his back.

He turned and nodded awkwardly when he reached the door. “I’ll call you tomorrow, Nick. Count on it.”

She tried in vain to think of something witty to say. “Have a good night, Derek. I’ll talk to you soon.”

He leaned down, his breath warm against her skin as he brushed his lips over her cheek in a soft, barely there kiss. Nick reacted without thought, turning her head until her mouth touched the corner of his.

The world tilted as her feet left the ground. She heard Derek’s low, desperate growl as her back hit the wall, just a second before his mouth covered hers.

She’d been dreaming of it for the better part of a year—longer, if she was going to be honest with herself—and shock still thrummed in her veins, making her heart jump. Then the surprise faded, replaced by animal satisfaction. His taste and scent filled her senses as his tongue twined with hers, and she drove her fingers into his hair and held on.

One large hand landed on her hip and slid down, coaxing her leg up and around his waist. His hips ground against hers as he groaned and bit her lower lip in a purely possessive gesture.

Nick locked her legs around him and met the next thrust of his hips with a frantic arch of her body. “Derek.” *Mine*. The word echoed in her head as she urged his head back and trailed a hot line of kisses over his jaw and neck. She whispered his name again and bit him.

His hand crashed into the wall next to her head hard enough to send a framed picture crashing to the floor. “Fuck. Nick, I’m losing it...” His voice sounded lost in the boundary between lust and terror. A growl rumbled up through his chest and tore free of his throat and, when he spoke again, he sounded scared. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me.” Her denial was instant, automatic. Then the full meaning of his words hit her, and she froze. “Oh, God.” She laid her hand on his face. “You haven’t had sex since the attack.”

“No. Shit, I’m not—” He drew in a breath, and his cheek heated under her hand. “It’s not *that* bad. But I haven’t had a lot of it, and not with anyone I really... Not with anyone—” He groaned and squeezed



his eyes shut. "Please tell me you understand all that complicated shit Alec explained to me about the hormones and the instincts and temporary insanity?"

It had never seemed all that complicated to Nick. Then again, it was the only thing she'd ever known. "Physical chemistry is amplified. A strong enough attraction can make it hard to control desire." God knew she was having a hard enough time with it, though she'd had a lifetime of practice. "It could be fast, maybe, the first few times, but... You won't *hurt* me, Derek. You don't have to worry about that."

"God, I know. My manly pride stings a little at the idea of crappy sex. I sort of wanted to impress you."

Nick arched an eyebrow at him. "Who said anything about crappy sex? Fast doesn't equal crappy, not when it's—" She broke off and looked down. "They write poetry about it, you know. About that moment where you can't stop, and nothing else matters. When someone could be holding a knife to your throat and you wouldn't notice, because every single part of you is focused on—" She found herself staring at the pulse throbbing at the base of his throat, and a quiet growl rose. "We— If we wait—"

He swallowed. "Is this why all the myths talk about werewolves mating for life?"

"Part of it." She lowered her hands to his shoulders and tried to ignore the strong flex of muscle under her fingers. "It's supposed to be very...affecting."

"Supposed to be?" He narrowed his eyes. "I really hope that doesn't mean I'm the only one feeling this, or I'm going to go away now, and possibly die."

Nick stared at him for a moment, surprise stealing her voice. "It doesn't work if it's one-sided. Not like this."

His breath left him in a whoosh. "Oh, thank God."

Then he kissed her again.

A fresh wave of need crested inside her, sweeping away rational thought. She moaned into Derek's mouth and pulled at his shirt, desperate to feel him. The fabric tugged free of his pants, and she slipped her hands under it, moaning again when she encountered the heat of his bare skin.

She tried to work the shirt higher, but he didn't relinquish her mouth. He tilted his head to the side and deepened the kiss, and she started to think he might *never* stop.

It took someone pounding on the glass door a foot away from their heads to tear them apart. Derek lifted his head with a rough curse that cut off with a strangled noise. He jerked his gaze back to her face, his expression wild. "Uh, I hope your sister is an identical twin, because someone who looks exactly like you is standing outside with the tallest man I've ever seen in my life."

"What?" The fog of pleasure in Nick's head lifted, and she turned her head as she pushed at Derek's chest. "Michelle?"

He stepped back and lowered her to the ground. "I guess so."

Her sister barely looked like herself. Instead of her usual immaculate suit, she wore sweatpants and a rumpled T-shirt, and her normally well-groomed hair had been jerked into a haphazard ponytail. Her face was pale and drawn, exhausted. Even Aaron seemed uncharacteristically grave, with tight lines around his eyes and mouth.

Nick rushed to the door and unlocked the deadbolt with a frightened jerk. “Micky? What the hell are you doing here?”

She stumbled over the threshold. “The Conclave’s issued an order for Aaron’s execution.”

Nick caught her and rocked a little as she met Aaron’s steady, resigned gaze. “Why? What the fuck is going on?”

“I’m pregnant.” Michelle let the blunt words hang between them for two short heartbeats before she burst into tears.

## Chapter Three

Derek could have made a graceful exit while Nick's sister sobbed. Nick gave him several opportunities, but he balked at leaving. It could have been because Aaron and Nick kept exchanging tense, worried gazes that screamed danger, or because the girl in hysterical tears looked almost exactly like Nick.

He got water instead, pulling a chilled bottle from the fridge behind the bar before catching Nick's gaze. He nodded toward Aaron, then the bottle of tequila, one eyebrow raised in silent question.

Nick shook her head and framed her sister's face between her hands. "Sweetie, just breathe. Breathe, okay? You're here, and you're safe, and all three of you are going to stay that way." As she spoke, she lowered one hand to Michelle's stomach. "I swear it, Micky. All of you."

Michelle shuddered, and magic twisted through the room so fast and intense that the water bottle slipped through Derek's fingers. The deadbolt on the door slid shut with a clatter and all of the lights went off. A moment later the streetlights dimmed. He turned to the windows and blinked stupidly at the frosted glass that had replaced Nick's usual dual-paned windows.

A wail jerked his attention back to Michelle, who was actually *glowing*. The gentle light faded as she closed her eyes and curled her hands into fists. "That's the other problem. I haven't had very good control since it happened. The Conclave thinks I lost my powers because of that stupid myth, but if they find out the truth, they're going to kill *me* too."

Nick scoffed and shook her head again. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and serious. "They'll have to snatch you over my dead body, sweetie."

The fact that she meant every word made Derek's heart catch. He fought back that same protective rage that had been choking him over the past weeks and snatched the bottle of water from the floor. "Should I call someone? Alec or Jackson? They both owe you."

"Jackson's hurt, and his mother is—" She looked up at him and bit off the rest of her words with a soft curse. "Their cell numbers are on the corkboard in the office. Can you call them and ask them to meet us upstairs?"

"Yeah. Sure." He tried to smile to reassure her, but it felt flat. "Anything else?"

She scooted her stool closer to Michelle's. "Have you eaten lately, Micky?"

It was apparently the wrong question to ask. Michelle groaned and paled even more. "Aaron keeps forcing food on me every hour."

Aaron growled softly. "Because you keep throwing it up."

“Because I’m pregnant and *terrified*.”

“Which makes it more important to eat, not less.”

Derek cleared his throat. “You’ve got some tea back there, don’t you, Nick? Kat’s always drinking it when she’s here. I can find some of that.”

“The decaf stuff. Thanks, Derek.” She glanced at him again. “And some pretzels, I think. From the pantry.”

“Pretzels and tea. Got it.” He fought the urge to ask if she’d be okay going upstairs on her own. It would be insulting, considering Nick could probably command her shapeshifter strength better than he could. Then there was Aaron, whose bulk dwarfed them all. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

She murmured something unintelligible, her attention already back on Michelle.

He faintly heard their fading voices as he strode into the kitchen and squinted at the wall until he found a light switch. He flicked it up and down, but nothing happened, so he gave thanks to his enhanced senses and picked his way across the kitchen to the office on the far side.

The lights in the office *did* work. Derek pulled out his cell phone as he studied the corkboard beside Nick’s neat desk, but he didn’t dial any of the numbers he found there. Instead he called Andrew.

His friend answered on the third ring, sounding tired and grumpy. “If you’re calling me to gloat about how you finally got to nail your dream girl, I’m going to kick your ass tomorrow.”

If only. “Not so much. Listen, this could be awkward, but I need you to go back to Kat’s apartment and keep an eye on her.”

His entreaty was met with silence. Then Andrew cleared his throat. “Not too tough. I haven’t left Kat’s yet. What’s going on?”

Derek froze, caught between relief and irrational protective anger. “You haven’t left yet?”

“Derek, I’m not leaving Kat here alone, passed out drunk. I’m on the couch.”

“Okay, okay. Just...stay there, would you? Nicole’s sister showed up at the bar talking about their Conclave and fucking execution orders. Last time all the shapeshifters got riled up, someone broke into Kat’s place for God knows what reason.”

“Christ. Yeah, I’ll stay. Are you calling Alec and Jackson?”

“Alec, first. Not sure if we should drag Jackson into shit when he’s still recovering and his mom is in town. Alec will know, I guess.”

“Sure.” On the other end of the phone, a microwave beeped and stoneware clattered. “I’m going to have some coffee. Call me back if I need to take Kat over to my place.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Andrew.”

“Don’t mention it. Keep me posted.”

He disconnected the call. Instead of consulting the corkboard, he scrolled through the numbers stored in his cell. This time it only rang twice before he heard Alec's gruff voice. "You'd better not have called me by mistake during some drunken sex."

The greater New Orleans area seemed to be under the assumption that he and Nick would be naked by now. *Which we might be, if life didn't suck.* "Hi, Alec. I'm doing great, thanks. Nick asked me to call you. Think there's trouble. Her sister's here."

"Michelle? Alone?"

Derek moved to a shelf on the far side of the office and picked up a flashlight. "Not alone. With a big hulking angry-looking werewolf."

"Well, that goes without saying. Aaron's her bodyguard. I meant, is the Alpha with her? Their dad?"

"No. She said something about being pregnant, and an execution order for Aaron, and her powers being out of control."

"For fuck's—shit, just a second." He heard a muffled noise and the faint murmur of a female voice, followed by the slam of a door and the crunch of gravel. "I'm not that far out. They at Nick's place?"

"No, upstairs above the bar." Derek flicked on the flashlight and moved back into the kitchen to search the cupboards for tea. "Nick asked me to call Jackson too, but I figure you'd know if that was a good idea."

"Fuck, no. His mom's in town."

"He can't let Mackenzie look after his mother?"

"Kid, no one tells Nancy Holt to stay home and keep out of things. That woman'll be climbing all over us if she gets a whiff of trouble, and Nick knows it."

She *had* looked wary. Derek propped the phone against his shoulder to free up a hand so he could search the cabinets. "So we're not calling him?"

"I'll decide once I figure out what the hell is going on. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Uh-huh, and then you're going to explain to me what in hell is going on, right?"

Alec snorted. "You don't want to know."

Maybe he didn't, but sticking his head in the sand and walking away wasn't an option. "Maybe not, but I *need* to, Alec."

"Yeah." Alec sighed roughly. "Fine. Reader's Digest version. You know Michelle's a Seer, right?"

"Superpowerful magic shapeshifter hybrid. I paid attention to the shit that went down last month, Alec." Which was only a *little* lie. He would have paid attention if any of them had bothered to explain it to him while it was happening. "She's got all sorts of rules and shit governing her life, and it sucks. I remember that part."

"Do you remember the part about her not being allowed to have sex?"

Derek dropped a box of tea. "Uh, she's pregnant, Alec."

“Well, someone’s been breaking the rules. I say more power to her, but the possibility that she’s going to have some powerful little Seer baby is going to give the Conclave a collective shit-fit.”

“Jesus. They’d *kill* her for it?”

“Derek, most shapeshifters would kill her just for being who she is. If Nick’s dad wasn’t the big fuckin’ honcho, chances are she wouldn’t have survived infancy. That’s our dirtiest little secret. They may shun wolves like you, but they murder the ones like Michelle.”

“And Aaron?”

“He’s not really her bodyguard. At least, he’s not supposed to be. He’s a Conclave spy. If he helped her escape, that’s treason.”

Derek had gotten the impression that Aaron’s involvement was a lot more intimate and involved than just escape plans, but it was the last subject he wanted to discuss with Alec over the phone. “Okay. So the Conclave’s scared and pissed. Is Nick in danger?”

“Doubt it. It may seem like their dad can’t protect Michelle, but he’s fighting a few hundred years of tradition there. Nick’s the Alpha’s heir. No one would dare touch a hair on her head.”

It made it easier to breathe, if only because he knew Alec wouldn’t lie. “Okay, I’m going upstairs now. I’ll tell Nick you’re on your way.”

“Ten minutes out, kid. Hang in there.”

“Thanks, Alec.” Derek shoved the phone in his pocket before rummaging through the boxes again. It only took a few seconds to find the one box of decaffeinated tea. The pretzels were easier to find, and Derek snatched up an entire bag and hurried upstairs.

He found Michelle and Aaron sitting on the overstuffed sofa. The tall man had one brawny arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into him. Nick paced in the kitchen and rushed over to him as soon as he opened the door. “Thanks, Derek.”

“Alec’s on his way.” He handed her the box of pretzels and nodded to the kitchen. “Want me to put the kettle on?”

Nick shook her head nervously. “It’s already on.” She turned the box over in her hands and gave him a serious look. “Can I talk to you outside?”

He wanted to curl around her until the nervousness in her body eased, but there was nothing to do but nod. “Of course.”

She closed the door behind them and motioned him down the iron staircase. He stopped on the first landing and she stood a step above, nearly eye to eye with him. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” she whispered, “and don’t think this is what I want. But you need to go.”

He stiffened. “No. No way, Nick.”

"I don't know how they got away, Derek. What I do know is it's not going to take the board long to find them." She raised a hand to smooth his hair. "I'll be safe, I promise. But if you're here... If you get in the way—" Her teeth sank into her lower lip. "Please trust me."

"But Alec and Jackson can be here?" That hurt. "So this is all about what I am? About the fact that I was *made* a shapeshifter instead of born that way?"

"That has nothing to do with it!" Fear blanched her face and clouded her eyes. "I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you." She exhaled and gripped the iron railing with both hands. "That's all this is."

"Okay." He reached out and wrapped both arms around her, though he wasn't sure if the hug was for her benefit or his own. "I'll go, but you have to promise me you'll call me tomorrow. First thing. Or I'll show right back up over here and you won't get rid of me again."

"I might even wake you up," she said instantly, her words muffled against his chest. "I'll need your help. I just have to—to figure this out first."

"Anything you need. Anything, darling." He tugged her head back and kissed her forehead. "I'll help you."

"I know you will." They stood there for several moments. "Derek—"

The scrape of booted feet on the pavement at the base of the stairs cut her off. Derek didn't have to turn; he could smell Alec. "It has *not* been ten minutes."

"I speed."

Derek smiled at Nick. "He speeds. Why am I not surprised?"

Though she smiled in return, the expression was wan and tremulous. "Because he's crazy?" She brushed a wrinkle from the sleeve of his shirt. "Be careful. If anything odd happens, call. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He ignored Alec's presence and leaned down to kiss her. "Tomorrow."

She nodded, her eyes bright. "I mean it. Be careful."

"I will."

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Nick cast another glance down the hall toward the small bedroom, the tenth in as many minutes, and clenched her jaw against the anger that flooded her. Michelle had fallen into an exhausted, fitful sleep, but her own rage hadn't faded. "This is bullshit. Absolute bullshit."

The repetition usually would have earned her a caustic comment from Alec, but for once he seemed equally irate. "Yeah, Nick. It's bullshit."

Aaron spoke, but his tired words only made Nick angrier. "When her magic started failing, she went to the Conclave. She didn't know they'd call in a midwife right away to see if she was pregnant."

*And she didn't know they'd point a finger at you.* "How did you get out?"

He met her gaze and straightened his shoulders. "Mahalia Tate helped us. But I think the Alpha knew. He must have let us get away."

"Doesn't matter if Mahalia scrambled their trail or hid them, the Conclave'll come here first." Alec's voice was quiet and almost gentle, which was a surer sign of trouble than anything.

"They'd be stupid to think otherwise." Nick sighed.

"We didn't have anywhere else to go," Aaron whispered.

She snorted in disbelief. "If you'd taken my pregnant sister anywhere else, I'd have hunted you down myself."

Alec shot her a quelling look before sinking into the chair across from Aaron. "Okay, we don't have time to be nice and prissy about this. How long have the two of you been having sex, and how long has she been pregnant?"

The tops of Aaron's ears colored, but he met Alec's gaze squarely. "A few weeks. We didn't know she was pregnant until the Conclave brought in the midwife."

Nick filled the coffee carafe with water and threw a filter into the machine. "She thought the sex neutralized her magic."

"Yes," Aaron admitted.

"That bullshit myth?" Alec rolled his eyes. "Sacred virginity, my ass."

"She didn't lose her magic," Nick told Alec as she scooped coffee into the coffee maker. "She just lost control of it." *Which is worse, damn it.*

"Well, I wouldn't know this if I didn't work with Jackson, but that's not uncommon." Alec tilted his chair back, balancing on two legs. "It's a self-defense thing for the baby, I think. We'll have to ask him to know for sure, or—hell, Mahalia, if we can call her. Guess I never thought about it applying to Michelle, but I don't see why it wouldn't."

"They're going to want me back," Aaron reminded them quietly.

Nick pressed her hands to the counter to hide their shaking. "Doesn't mean they're going to get it."

The legs of Alec's chair hit the floor with a solid thump, and he leaned forward. "You need to snap out of it, boy. Michelle needs you, so keeping you safe is up near the top of our list. If you've got any dumb ideas about guilt or, God forbid, self-sacrifice, I'll kick your ass all over this room."

Defiance flared in Aaron's eyes. "I didn't get to where I am by being weak *or* stupid. But if working for the Conclave has taught me anything, it's that they don't give up."

"No, they don't. So first thing tomorrow you're packing up your girl and taking her to my safe house. Thing's warded to hell and back, and I doubt the Conclave would have anything to do with the sort of spell caster who could break in there."



Of course they wouldn't, because they would have killed that spell caster a long time ago. "As soon as you and Michelle are safe, I'll see what I can do about damage control. Daddy may not be able to do anything officially, but he's not going to let the board hunt you down, Aaron. No way."

He nodded slowly, then stood. "I'm going to check on Michelle."

Nick laid her hand on his arm and tried to smile. "We'll work it out. We always do."

He made his way down the hall slowly, moving as if the weight of the world was bearing down on him. Nick had to press the heels of her hands to her eyes for a moment before she could speak. "This, Alec. This kind of shit is why every wolf with half a brain is jumping ship."

"Yeah." Alec stretched his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. "What do you want to bet my dad's already called my place?"

"Oh, he'd *love* for you to be the one to turn in the fugitives." Nick made a face as she grabbed two mugs from the drain rack and rinsed them.

"Well, I hope he has fun when I'm the one to make sure no one finds them."

"Mmm." She poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Alec. The tension inside her had built to the breaking point, but the mindless, rote tasks she'd undertaken since Derek's departure had helped. Now, she found herself on unsteady ground. "I'm going to lose it, Alec." Her voice trembled. "I'll kill anyone who so much as looks at my sister, I swear to God I will."

"Hey." He dropped the mug on the coffee table and rose to his feet, one arm extended. "C'mere, kiddo."

If she let down the walls now, she'd never be able to function through the next few days. "I can't, Alec. But thank you. For everything."

For a second she thought he'd argue, but he dropped his arm. "Fair enough. Now what are you planning on doing with Derek Gabriel in the middle of all this mess? Because you're gonna have to tie him up and stick him in a closet to keep him out of it."

"Oh, Jesus. He thinks I'm trying to keep him away from it because he's a second-class werewolf or something crazy like that. I just don't want him getting his head ripped off because of me when I'm not even in danger."

"*He's* going to be in danger if you don't sit him down and explain shit to him. You can't leave him out of it, Nick."

The thought made her chest tighten painfully. "I don't know what to tell him." Even after nearly twenty-six years, there were so many intricacies she didn't understand. "I'm bad at the political stuff, Alec. No matter what my father's aspirations are, I don't think I'll *ever* get it. So what do I say?"

Alec planted a hand in the middle of her back and urged her to sit on the couch. "You tell him the truth. He doesn't need to know the stupid details, just the general situation. If you want, I'll help."

"The truth." She knew Alec was right. What else could she tell Derek? "I have to. I'm going to need him, or I'll never get Michelle and Aaron through this."

"Trust me, that boy isn't going to stand idly by and let you go through this alone, so at least make sure he's helping instead of getting in the way. He wants to help. Fuck, he *needs* to."

She leaned back into the plush cushions of the sofa. "He's half-crazy from that crap with Talbot anyway. Christ." If she'd known he gave a damn, she wouldn't have just run off to help rescue Mackenzie and fight a power-mad Seer. She'd have talked to him, made him understand that she had to help. Maybe even asked him to join her and stand by her side.

"Why don't you go in there and curl up with your sister? Being near her will do you both good, and I can keep watch."

"Aaron—" Her voice failed. "Aaron's there. He'll do a better job than I could. I-I don't want to intrude or..." Nick growled and shot off the sofa. "I hate feeling like I don't know what to do. And I can't let Michelle see how scared I am."

Alec watched her in silence as she paced the room in an attempt to still the frantic energy inside her. After a few minutes, he rubbed at the side of his face. "I'll talk to Jackson in the morning. If we can't shuffle his mother out of the way, I was thinking we could drop her in the safe house with Michelle and Aaron. It's secure, and Michelle could probably use a little bit of mothering."

Jackson would be pissed they hadn't called him already. Derek would need an explanation. And her father—"I'm kicking Aaron out for a while, after all," she said suddenly. "I need to be with Michelle."

"Send him on out here." Alec bared his teeth in a grin. "I'll keep him distracted."

Michelle stirred as Nick nestled behind her on the double bed and drew another plush coverlet over them. "It's okay, Micky. It's me."

Her sister shivered and pulled the blanket tightly under her chin. "I should have known better than to tell the Conclave. I should have *known better*. How can I still believe in their good intentions?"

"Because you want to be normal." *Loved*. Nick wrapped an arm around her sister. "I sent Aaron out with Alec. Is that okay?"

"He's too nervous to sleep anyway." Michelle rolled to her back, staring up at the ceiling with eyes that should have been the same ones Nick saw in the mirror every morning. But pain had made Michelle old before her time, pain and weariness and the constant demand by the Conclave that she know her place.

"You should have left a long time ago." The words sprang, unbidden, to Nick's lips. "Fucking Conclave."

Michelle laughed, and it sounded tired. "It seemed like such a perfect plan, Nick. Use their stupid, chauvinist superstitions against them. They believe them, even if they pretend not to. If it weren't for

Aaron—” Michelle’s lips tightened, and Nick knew she was biting back words, trying to find a way to minimize the mistreatment she’d suffered. “I didn’t think about contraceptives. I didn’t think about *anything*. Every time I touched him, our brains shut off. I’m surprised they didn’t catch us the first time.”

She thought of Derek—and the insane desire that gripped her whenever he came near her. “I understand what you mean. But you’re safe now, and you can be together.”

“I love him, Nicky.” Her sister’s voice trembled. “I love him so much.”

The blanket ripped a little under Nick’s hand. “I know, sweetie. Alec is going to take you both someplace safe tomorrow, and I’m going to figure this out.”

Michelle moved her hand over Nick’s. “I want to help, but I have no idea what to do. The magic... It’s completely out of my control. Most of the time I can’t access it at all, but when there’s danger or I’m scared, insane things happen. Like the lights earlier.”

“All you need to worry about is relaxing and staying calm. For your baby.”

“For my baby.” She dropped her hand to her stomach and smiled at Nick. “Your niece. Or nephew. If the magical midwife person could tell, she didn’t say.”

“We can find someone to tell you,” she promised, a smile curving her own lips. “Jackson might be able to. If not, we’ll keep looking. And there are great hospitals here, Micky.”

Michelle closed her eyes and snuggled her cheek into the pillow. “I’d like to see Jackson again, and I’d like to meet Mackenzie. How are they? Together?”

“Mmm. She moved in with him.” Nick almost felt fifteen again, snuggled in a canopy bed with Michelle, gossiping about boys. “His mom is visiting. Maybe you’ll get to meet her too. And...maybe you’ll get to spend some time with Derek.”

“You seemed pretty fond of him,” Michelle teased sleepily. “You know, people were walking by the bar and staring at you two.”

“They don’t call it the Big Easy for nothing.” Nick’s laughter subsided. “He wasn’t born into this. He was attacked two years ago.”

Michelle’s eyes popped open. “Oh, Nicky. That’s awful. Did they find whoever did it?”

They’d never spoken of it, but she’d have bet the bar downstairs that Alec had killed the rogue wolf responsible for Derek’s attack. “Yes, they did.”

“Good.” Her sister sighed. “I’m so tired. But every time I try to sleep I think I hear something. I’m scared I’ll wake up and someone will have come for Aaron.”

“Sleep.” Tears threatened to choke Nick, but she blinked them away and slid her arms around Michelle. “No one is getting in here. Aaron is safe.” *For tonight.*

“Thank you.” Her sister’s voice was a sleepy murmur. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Michelle.” Nick lay there, unmoving. She could hear Alec and Aaron talking in the other room, their low, unintelligible tones soothing.

Her next step would usually be to call her father for help. But the Alpha would be honor-bound to report what he'd learned to the Conclave. The only way he could help was obliquely, with as little knowledge as possible of what was going on. Nick's heart ached for him; he'd tried so hard to protect Michelle, to make her life better than the average Seer's.

He'd succeeded to a degree, a sad acknowledgement considering her sister had fled to New Orleans in fear for her life.

Nick wasn't ready for something like this. She'd been running from her responsibilities for too long. Even now, her first thought had been to call someone else, someone who knew what to do. Her days of having that luxury were limited. Sooner or later, she'd have to buck up and start taking care of her own shit.

"Tomorrow," she whispered. She'd start tomorrow.

## Chapter Four

A pounding on the apartment door woke Nick, and her heart jumped into her throat. Michelle made a soft, distressed noise, and Nick raised a finger to cover her lips. “Shh. Stay here.”

She slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her, and reached the end of the hallway in time to see Alec open the door for a livid Jackson.

“Crap,” she muttered.

He barely glanced at Alec before pointing at her. “You are up the creek, missy. What the hell is going on?”

“Aw, shit,” Alec drawled, stepping aside. “Who tattled? Derek?”

Nick crossed her arms over her chest. “Derek wouldn’t have done that.”

“Kat,” Jackson told them shortly as he stomped in. “Derek pissed her off because he got some, or something, and she didn’t, except that Andrew says no one got any. Which is beside the point. What happened?”

She ran her hands through her hair. “Michelle’s pregnant, and the Conclave’s hunting her and Aaron.”

Jackson cursed. “My mama’s downstairs with Mackenzie.”

“Precisely why Derek didn’t call you last night when he called Alec.” Nick dropped to a chair by the sofa and made a face. “It’s under control, Jackson. As much control as we can muster right now, anyway.”

“Aaron.” Alec rose and gestured to the tall man who stood silently in the corner. “Why don’t you take Michelle downstairs? Mackenzie and Nancy will get you both something to eat, I’m sure, and she’ll be safe down there between you and Mac.”

Aaron headed for the bedroom, and Nick walked into the kitchen to retrieve a mug. “Want some coffee, Jackson?”

He arched an eyebrow. “No, thanks.”

“How long are you going to be mad at me?”

Jackson transferred his withering look to Alec. “I’m mad at you both.”

Alec seemed unconcerned. “You used magic to sneak out of my house and face a homicidal Seer for my own good. Your high ground’s not so high, Holt.”

Aaron led Michelle out of the bedroom, and Jackson’s frown disappeared. “Hi, Michelle.”

“Jackson.” Her sister actually smiled as she hurried across the room. She stopped suddenly a foot short of Jackson, looking like she wanted to hug him but wasn’t completely sure the gesture would be accepted.

He opened his arms with a wide grin. “Come here.” She flew into his embrace, and he glanced at Nick over her head. “There’s someone I want you to meet downstairs, Michelle. My mother.”

Michelle looked momentarily concerned, but Alec didn’t give her a chance to say anything. “Mama Holt’s dying for some more people to mother, Michelle. Sorry, sweetheart, but I’m throwing you under the train that is Nancy Holt. If I don’t, she’ll be up here trying to find me a wife.”

“Oh, God forbid.” Nick sipped the coffee and grimaced. It was terrible. “She’s sweet, Michelle. You can practice your conversational French with her.”

“Okay.” Michelle slipped her hand into Aaron’s, and he led her out the door, leaving Nick and Alec to face Jackson.

Alec dropped back into his chair. “I’m thinking we should bundle your mother off to the safe house with them, Jackson. Keep her out of trouble and give Michelle someone to look after her who isn’t a nervous daddy trained in deadly combat.”

Jackson looked down at his own injured leg. “Mackenzie and I could go too. Just in case.”

“Well, yeah. But if I’d told you to go, you would have dug your stubborn ass in and refused.”

Jackson glanced at Nick, who shrugged. “He’s got a point.” She ignored Jackson’s disgusted noise and gave him a serious look in return. “I need your help. I need you to make sure no one busts through all of Alec’s security. To keep my sister and her baby safe.”

He scratched the back of his head. “Which safe house is it, Alec?”

Somehow Nick wasn’t surprised Alec had more than one. “I was thinking the one out in the bayou,” he said, tilting his chair back. “It’s not the nicest, but it’s got the strongest wards. Now that Michelle’s gone, Conclave doesn’t work with anyone strong enough to break them.”

“I’ll see if I can’t bolster them too. If I’m going to have Mama out there...” Jackson took Nick’s cup and drained it. “Jesus Christ, that’s awful.”

Nick took the mug back and tossed it in the sink. “Aaron must have brewed it. He’s always made crappy coffee.”

Alec cut through the small talk with characteristic bluntness. “Jackson, what happens to pregnant spell casters? Their magic goes to hell, doesn’t it?”

“I thought I noticed something different about Michelle.” Jackson nodded. “‘Necessary neutralization’ is what they call it. Resources are diverted to the baby, even magical ones. Most women end up with little to no control, just—”

“Automatic defensive measures,” Nick finished. “Which won’t hurt her or the baby, but could be dangerous for bystanders.”

“Shit.” Alec scratched at his beard, his eyes focused on the floor. “Can we assume she’s not going to do anything to hurt friends and loved ones, or is it open season if she gets startled?”

Jackson dug through the fridge and pulled out a can of soda. “Honestly? It’s probably no big deal unless there’s real danger. Then who the hell knows? She could take out everyone, just trying to eliminate the real threat.”

“Well, fuck. Maybe we *shouldn’t* have your mama in the house with her.”

He popped open the can. “It’ll be fine if I’m there.”

Nick hopped up to sit on the counter. “When can we get them out there? Like you said last night, Alec, this is the first place they’ll look.”

“Shit, as soon as they get something to eat. Jackson and I can take care of that, though.” Alec pointed a finger at her. “*You* have something else to do, young lady. Derek’s going to lose his everloving mind if you don’t talk to him.”

“I’m not putting it off, I swear.” Even through her nervousness, she was eager to see him again. “I just want to make sure Michelle and Aaron are safe before I run off to fix my love life.”

Jackson finished his soda. “It could use some fixing, Nicky.”

“It’s not just your love life,” Alec corrected sternly. “You’re way past that, kiddo. That guy’s dominant as hell and feels like you’re in danger. If you don’t want him getting himself and some of us killed, deal with it.”

For a horrible moment, she couldn’t breathe. The thought of Derek hurt or worse... “I’m going to handle it. Now.”

Jackson tapped his empty can against the counter, then tossed it in the recycling bin. “I’ll go round everybody up.”

Alec waited until the door closed behind Jackson and shot Nick a serious look. “Don’t try to protect him, Nick. He may not have your experience, but he’s smart and he’s tough, and I’ve taught him a lot in the past two years. He can help.”

Derek’s strength had been one of the first things that had drawn her to him, even before the attack that had cost him his human existence. “I wouldn’t have sent him away last night if I hadn’t needed to, Alec. But I couldn’t deal with it all. Maybe that makes me weak or something, but I couldn’t do it.” She shrugged. “One of the things I realized is that I need his help.”

Oddly, Alec smiled. “You’re growing up, kiddo. Sort of sucks, huh?”

“Christ.” Nick rolled her eyes at him. “Get out of here before *I* decide to make your life hell by trying to find you a wife.”

If Nick guessed he was already on his way over when she called, she was polite enough not to mention it. He arrived at the bar three and a half minutes after hanging up and gave her a sheepish smile. “Hey.”

“Hey.” She shoved several plastic cards into her back pocket and grabbed her cell phone and keys from the bar. “Can you help me with something?”

“Sure. Need a ride somewhere?”

“I need to go to my place, pick up some things for Michelle and then maybe go shopping.”

He pulled the door open for her and gestured to the beat-up truck parked behind the bar. “Posh it’s not, but it’ll get us around.”

“Mackenzie took my car. She and Jackson are staying with Aaron and Michelle and...” Her words trailed off, and she turned to him. “Thank you, Derek. For what you did last night, and for helping me now. And...just everything.”

He didn’t remember moving, but in the next second he had her nestled against his chest, his arms around her. “Shh. I’m here, for anything.”

She reached up and slid her fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck. “We need to talk too. I should explain things to you.”

“There’s time, Nick. I don’t want to be pushy and make it harder, I just need to be around.”

She flashed him a self-deprecating smile. “I can’t imagine how nuts I’d be if you were going through something like this. I promise to *try* and keep you in the loop, Derek.”

“That’s good enough for me.” He gave in to temptation and leaned down to kiss her, avoiding her lips at the last minute out of sheer self-preservation. He brushed his lips over her cheek and pulled away. “Come on. Let’s go.”

She gave him concise directions, and they spent the short drive to her house in silence. Nick seemed edgy, almost anxious, and he could hear her heart pounding over the rumbling of the truck’s engine.

She had her keys out by the time he pulled up to the curb. “Do you want some tea or a soda? Coffee?”

“Coffee would be good.” He parked the truck and shot her an amused look. “Kat had a fit at me this morning and kicked me out. Andrew, who also spent the night being an overprotective jackass, got to stay because he made her breakfast.”

That prompted a laugh as she reached for the door handle. “He got to stay because she wants to see him naked.”

If he never had to hear about Andrew and sex again, he’d die a happy man. “I don’t think she’s going to get that. Andrew’s got some screwed-up thing in his head about Kat not liking him if she really gets to know him.”

“That’s stupid.”



“Yeah, well...” He grinned and followed her through the front door. “You girls make us boys sort of stupid.”

Her keys clattered on the counter as she reached for the coffee pot. “You boys turn us into idiots too.” She eyed him while she started the coffee. “I have a lot of stuff to tell you. About how I grew up. About the way things are.”

“Alec’s told me some of it.” It was hard to think about what that had been, though. The graceful curve of her neck bore a tiny bruise. A mark.

*His mark.*

His hands shook as he curled them around the counter and jerked his gaze away from her. His voice was strained when he spoke again. “I know the basics.”

“Then the first thing you should know is that I’m not in danger. It sounds ridiculous, since we’re having to hide my twin sister away, but it’s true. I’m the Alpha’s heir. No one is going to touch me.”

Alec had told him same thing, but it didn’t ease the tense worry. “I can hear that intellectually, but I’m not sure how to convince my instincts.”

“I don’t know if you can.” Nick leaned against the counter. “You missed breakfast?”

“Yeah. I could pick something up for us, if you want. Or cook, if you don’t mind me messing around in your kitchen.”

“God, no. Mess around all you want.” She pulled open the refrigerator and gestured inside. “I’d help, but there’s not a lot of stuff I can make without setting off the smoke detectors.”

Cooking was something he could do, though it seemed somewhat less than heroic. *Unless people are hungry.* He crossed the kitchen to peek in the fridge. “My mother was a chef, you know. I’m a pretty decent cook.”

“I didn’t know that.” Nick eyed him over the fridge door. “Is it rude if I make you fix me breakfast while I take a shower and pack some things for Michelle? You can absolutely tell me if it is.”

“No, it’s polite to give me something useful to do. I really need to help out, Nick.”

She grinned at him. “Then the waffle maker is on the counter. I’ll be upstairs. Yell if you need anything.”

Nick proved to have a well-stocked kitchen for someone who claimed to be unable to cook. Derek used the familiar ritual of mixing batter as a way to quiet his mind, fighting against the part of him that wanted to follow the sound of the water. Nick was upstairs, in the shower. *Wet and naked...*

The handle of the wooden spoon in his hand creaked dangerously, and he released it with a muffled curse. Three hours of fitful sleep and a screaming match with his cousin, and he *still* couldn’t keep his mind out of his pants. Nick’s scent surrounded him, embarrassingly enticing and more than a little arousing. Not even the smell of cooking waffles could erase the subtle hints of jasmine and musk he associated with Nick.

It didn't take her long to come back downstairs. She wore a flowing black and white patterned skirt and a black tank top, and her hair hung in wet tendrils around her shoulders. "I didn't want you to have to wait. We can pack after breakfast."

A drop of water fell from her hair and rolled down her throat, tracing over the mark of his teeth. Blood pounded in his ears and he told himself to look away.

*Begged* himself to look away.

She reached past him and took two mugs from a shelf. They hit the counter with a clatter, and he noticed for the first time the slight trembling of her hands. "The waffles look—I mean, everything—" Her words cut off with a frustrated moan, and she swayed toward him. "You're killing me."

"I'm killing us both." He barely recognized his own voice. The words sounded low, harsh. Barely human. "Fuck, Nick, you have too much to worry about to deal with me—"

"Shh. I think..." She pressed her face to his chest and slid her hands around his waist. "If we keep fighting it, we'll both be useless, Derek." She tugged his shirt free and pressed a shaking hand to his bare skin.

He had the presence of mind to yank the cord to the waffle iron out of the wall socket before he grabbed her around the waist. She was so *tiny*, and once he'd used one hand to knock the bowl—and the rest of the batter—into the sink, there was plenty of counter space. His mouth found hers as he dropped her onto the tile, so far beyond desperate he couldn't help but groan.

She kissed him with almost bruising force, breaking away only to pull his shirt over his head. "I need you so much," she whispered against his mouth. "I can't think about anything but you touching me."

"Christ, Nick." He got his hands under her shirt and coaxed it up, impossibly aroused by the smooth skin of her back under his fingers.

She dragged the black cotton over her head with an impatient noise, baring her body to the waist. "Tell me."

The things he wanted to do didn't feel very human. His hands shook as he slid them up to cup her breasts. "You need to tell me how to slow down, because I want to drag you to the floor and make a Discovery Channel feature."

Heat flared in her eyes, and she framed his face with her hands. "I don't know how. That's what I meant last night. I've never—" She moaned and tilted her head back, offering him the pale curve of her throat. "Not like this, Derek. Not like you."

He got one hand under her skirt as he licked the spot over her pulse. His knuckles brushed damp fabric and the last shred of sanity fled when he realized she was every bit as aroused as he was.

He got them to the floor, but he couldn't remember how. He shoved her skirt up above her hips and dragged at the expensive little panties, succeeding only in getting them to her knees before he had to touch her.

She bucked up with a low cry, her bare feet sliding on the polished tile. Her nails dug into his shoulders as he stroked his fingers through her wet folds, and she rocked into his touch and watched him with glazed eyes. "More. I want you."

He wanted to make her come, to do *something* smooth or sexy or exhibiting the tiniest bit of self-control. Instead he urged her over and tore at her underwear until it ripped away in his hand. The bare line of her spine beckoned, and he licked the back of her shoulder as he moved above her. "Tell me I can."

"Yes." She sighed the word as she reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair. "Anything you want."

It was too fast, and he was supposed to care. There were probably other things he should be thinking about too, aside from how quickly he could get her onto her knees and how good it would feel to be inside her.

And then he *was* inside her, and he'd been wrong because it was so much better than anything he could have imagined. Nick cried out and threw her head back against his shoulder, already shuddering around his cock. She murmured to him, hoarse, whispered nonsense, but still he knew she meant for him to move, to drive her on. To make her scream.

He got a hand around her and slid it down until he encountered slick heat, the sensation enough to make him moan. His thrusts came too fast, too hard, but he couldn't stop. Not when she writhed beneath him, whimpering and moving back to meet each advance. He rubbed his fingers over her clit and found he remembered one word. "Nick. *Nick*."

Her entire body jerked and shook. Her head crashed into his chin, but he barely felt it. Instead, he focused on her voice, trembling and needy and finally screaming his name as she came.

Derek couldn't stop himself from biting the back of her shoulder as the clenching heat of her body dragged him over the edge. He came with a roar, drowning out the sound of her voice.

She shivered under him, her back tight against his chest, and finally exhaled with a low curse. "Not crappy. Amazing."

He wasn't entirely sure he could speak, but he tried anyway. "Crazy out of control and still sort of awesome."

Nick groaned quietly. "Come on, Derek. I feel *really* good. Don't hurt my feelings with 'sort of'."

"Sort of," he repeated as he shifted to his side, heedless of the cool tile floor. He rolled onto his back and pulled Nick on top of him. "You only came once."

"Once? Really?" She grinned and bit his jaw. "Seemed like more than that."

"Mmm, no. I was keeping track." He curled his fingers in her hair, loving the way it felt under his hand. "Christ, you still need to eat."

Nick tucked her head under his chin. “So do you. We need to get some things together for Michelle and find some time to talk, and—” She lifted her head suddenly and stared down at him. “Can you still take that vacation you mentioned last night?”

“Sure, Nick. Hell, Andrew might not let me back through the office doors if I *wanted* to be there.”

She stroked her thumb over his cheek. “Can you stay here with me? Just until we figure out this whole thing with the Conclave? It’s the only thing I can think of that’ll calm your instincts. And...me.” Her lips brushed his. “It’ll be better for me too.”

They hadn’t managed a single date yet, and she was inviting him to take up residence in her home. He would have been thrilled if half of him hadn’t been terrified that he’d never want to leave. But the wolf replied for him, whether he wanted it to or not. “Yes. Of course.”

She studied him wryly. “Too much, too fast, but I don’t know how else to fix it, Derek.”

He snorted. “You don’t get it. My real concern is how I’ll make myself move back out when it’s over.”

Something softened in her eyes as she sat up and smiled down at him. “Let’s burn one bridge at a time.”

“Fair enough.” He reached up to curl a damp lock of her brown hair around his finger. “You should get dressed. I’ll see what I can salvage of our breakfast.” *And my clothing.*

She climbed up and pulled on her tank top. Then she balled up the expensive silk remains of her panties and jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “I’ll be upstairs, okay?”

She ran out before he could say anything else, even if he’d been able to find the words.

## Chapter Five

Nick fled upstairs. It was bad enough she'd attacked Derek in the kitchen when they had more important things to do, but to ask him to *move in* with her?

He had to think she was crazy.

To top it all off, she hadn't given a thought to birth control before yanking off his clothes in the kitchen. She stared at her reflection in the mirror before stripping out of her tank top and skirt. Maybe Derek hadn't had much experience dealing with the mating instinct, but she knew better.

She should have known better.

"Fuck. *Fuck.*" She covered her face with her hands. "Damned mating—" Her words cut off in an angry sigh. No matter how much Derek affected her, she couldn't afford to get distracted by the need to touch him, especially to the exclusion of everything around them. *Michelle* couldn't afford that.

She couldn't afford for Nick to sit around brooding, either.

Nick grabbed some fresh clothes, dressed hurriedly and snatched the extension phone from her bedside table. The Conclave had to have a trace on her phone already, but they'd be idiots not to suspect Mahalia of being the one to help Michelle and Aaron flee.

The woman who had been a surrogate mother to her for the past few years answered on the second ring. "I've been waiting for you to call, Nicole."

The receiver's plastic casing cracked, and Nick had to remind herself to loosen her grip. "Thank you. I don't know what I can do for you, but I owe you."

"Don't insult me like that. How is she?"

"Exhausted. Scared." Nick shuddered. "Worried as hell."

"Don't blame her one bit."

"Me either." She hesitated. "Does Daddy know?"

"That I helped?" Mahalia sounded wholly unconcerned. "Honey, if he can't figure it out, he doesn't need to be the Alpha."

Which was the witch's way of saying John Wesley Peyton had known and let them slip away. "Are they giving you a hard time?"

"They dragged me before their little board table," Mahalia admitted. "It was all very official and intimidating."

Nick fought a vaguely hysterical laugh. *Intimidated* was the last thing the older woman seemed. “Threatened you?”

“Mmm. Said I should just tell them what they wanted to know, because they have ways of encouraging people to talk.”

Fury washed over her in a red wave, and Nick gritted her teeth. “You didn’t react well, I take it?”

Mahalia laughed, the amusement edged with something dark and determined. “I told the bastards they could try, they just wouldn’t like what happened.”

“Good for you.”

“They don’t scare me, baby girl.” She remained silent for a few moments. “How’s he holding up?”

Aaron. “He’s getting it done. Mahalia, you know who I’d call first.”

“I do. And so does the Conclave.” The words carried a soft warning.

Alec didn’t give a damn if every council in the United States knew he took every chance he could get to buck their rules and traditions. “Do you know where we’d take them?”

It took her a moment to answer. “I have a good idea.”

“Is it safe enough?” Nick wanted to trust Alec and Jackson, but this was her *sister*. She had to find out everything she could. “Do they have anyone strong enough to get in there?”

“Hell, no. Not anymore, anyway. It’s safe.”

Nick released the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Thanks, Mahalia.”

“Don’t mention it, Nicole. Take care of her.”

She heard the whisper of Derek’s bare feet against the floor a moment before he knocked on her door. “Nick?”

“I have to go, Mahalia. I’ll call later.”

“That better be a promise,” she shot back. “Now, you give Derek Gabriel a kiss for me, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nick hung up as Derek opened the door. “Is something wrong?”

Derek held up his cell phone. “Alec just called. Jackson’s with your sister, but Alec’s coming over. He said someone from the Conclave is here.”

She hadn’t had time to prepare herself for the political shit. “Did he say who?”

“I believe the quote was ‘Enrica’s punk cowboy mama’s boy is on his way to try and bag your woman. Don’t eat him or you’ll start a national incident.’”

“Luciano Maglieri,” she said automatically. “His mother’s on the Conclave. She’s probably heading the search, since my father obviously can’t do it.” It was clear what Enrica had planned. “Luke’s a beta, always has been, but marrying me would guarantee him control of the Conclave. That’s what Enrica wants. Why he’s coming here.”

Derek looked a little queasy. “So dynastic marriages are still all the rage for shapeshifters?”

“For some.” It was part of what she had to tell him, part of everything he’d need to understand to help her through Michelle’s defection. “The ones who have power, like Enrica, want to keep it. The ones without power will do just about anything to get it. Like—like Alec’s father.”

“Oh.” Derek leaned against the doorframe. “Alec said his father had called him, but not why. I guess he’s supposed to come over here and try to bag you first?”

“Something like that.” Nick fell back on the bed and stared at the slowly revolving ceiling fan. “I want no part of it, Derek. It’s...everything I wanted to get away from.” She couldn’t breathe. “It’s crazy.”

“Hey.” His feet made almost no noise as he crossed to stand next to the bed, and he brushed his fingers over her hand. “Alec said almost the exact same thing. At least he’s on your side of whatever this is.”

“Luciano doesn’t want me, either. What I don’t know is what Enrica’s going to do when we both say no.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Derek suggested softly, and she could tell the words hurt him. “I mean, don’t marry him...but don’t say no right away. Wouldn’t that buy us some time?”

Nick rolled to her side and looked up at him. “Maybe. Or maybe if I hesitate, it’s as good as blood in the water. She’ll try to force my hand while I’m weak, come in for the kill.”

“Shit.” He eased onto the bed next to her. “So you turn down his offer and what happens next? They come looking for Michelle?”

“Maybe.” She tried to stay still, but instinct drove her to press closer to Derek’s strength, his warmth. “I don’t think this particular situation has ever come up before. I think it’s safe to say they’ll come, but who knows what they’ll do when they get here?” She sat up and turned her face to his shoulder.

He tugged her into his lap with both arms around her waist. “I didn’t get how bad this could get. I thought I’d be more useful.”

“We’re all winging it, Derek.” She looked into his eyes. “If you keep me from having a nervous breakdown, I’ll owe you my life.” *And my sister’s.*

“Hey, I can try that.” He leaned down until his lips almost touched hers and froze as the sound of a car door slamming reached their ears. “Fuck. I hope that’s Alec and not the punk cowboy.”

The doorbell rang as they reached the downstairs landing, and Nick yanked open the door. “Tell me something good, Alec.”

Alec stared at them for one tense, silent moment before his nostrils flared and he laughed. “Good news is, only an idiot’s going to try to seriously propose marriage to you with Derek’s scent all over you. Luke’s a mama’s boy, but he’s not an idiot.”

“It’s not his fault she tromps all over him.” She left the door open and stalked back toward the kitchen. “The Conclave has been threatening Mahalia. What does your father know?”

“Jack and shit, as usual. He’s freaked out that Luke might get his hands on you and cement Enrica’s place as the queen bitch.”

“It’s so nice to be nothing more than a matrimonial trophy with a prized uterus.” As soon as she spoke, she wanted to take back the words. The last thing she needed to do right now, in front of Alec, was remind Derek they’d forgotten to use a condom during their romp on the floor. “I mean...”

Alec blinked. “What?”

But Derek had already caught on. He paled and glanced toward the kitchen. “Jesus Christ, Nick. I should have—”

“It’s okay,” she interrupted. She softened the quick words by weaving her fingers with his. “We can talk about it later.” When Alec wasn’t around. When the world wasn’t falling apart. “Mahalia said there was no way the Conclave had anyone who could bust into your safe house, Alec. So we have that, at least.”

“Good.” He blew out a breath and leaned against the counter. “I don’t know how far behind me Luke is, but it can’t be far. My dear old pop isn’t exactly high on the information chain. The kid could be knocking on the door within the hour.”

“Then maybe I should take a shower.” Derek glanced at Nick. “If you don’t mind?”

“No, go ahead.” It would give her time to ask Alec some frank questions that still might scare the shit out of Derek. “Take your time.”

Derek’s gaze slid to Alec, then he shrugged and stepped close enough to drop a kiss on the top of her head. “Yell if you need me.”

She leaned into him for a moment. “I will.”

When he was gone, Alec tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. “So. Was it worth the wait?”

She swung at him, but he seemed to be expecting it and had no trouble avoiding her half-hearted punch. “I don’t ask you about your sex life, do I?”

Alec grinned. “You could, if you wanted to.”

“Thanks but no thanks, man whore.” Her stomach rumbled, and she jerked her head toward the plate of waffles on the counter. “Derek made breakfast. You hungry?”

“Always. Why don’t we drag it to the table and get the uncomfortable stuff out of the way before he comes back downstairs?”

Her hands shook as she dropped the platter on the small dining table and went back to the refrigerator. “When was the last time a Seer went rogue, much less a pregnant one who happened to be the Alpha’s daughter? We’re in some uncharted territory here, and I have no idea how it’s going to play out.” She pulled out a carton of strawberries and turned to the sink. “We can’t fight the whole goddamned Conclave.”

“Enrica Maglieri knows a thing or two about uncharted territory,” Alec reminded her. “If the Conclave put her in charge of this mess, we’ve got to assume at least half of them are hoping she’ll fuck it



up and prove once and for all that women can't take care of business. It makes her a lot more dangerous, but it means the Conclave won't exactly have her back."

Which gave them a little wiggle room, but not enough for Nick's peace of mind. "They're not going to like the way Enrica's wasting time with the marriage proposal, but that doesn't mean any one of them would let Michelle and Aaron walk, either."

"Nope. But the more they're fighting amongst themselves, the better off *we* are."

"Maybe." Nick tossed the washed berries in a bowl and dug a bottle of maple syrup from the pantry. "I have to ask you a question. A serious one."

"Sure."

She swallowed hard and met Alec's steady gaze. "Do you think Enrica could convince them to let it go if I did it? If I married Luciano?"

Alec hesitated, which was usually a bad sign, but there was no doubt in his voice when he replied. "I think she'd try, kiddo. But I think your sister's days would be numbered the minute you signed the contract. The Conclave might tolerate Enrica, but that tolerance won't last if they think she went behind their backs to snatch up a pet Seer."

Nick forced herself to breathe as she pulled plates and silverware from the breakfront and arranged them on the table. A sick, icy knot settled in her stomach. "I have no other way to protect Michelle, and the help you've given us already could get you executed."

"Well, I've got an idea on how to work this." He sat at the table and waited until she sank into the chair across from him before continuing. "It could keep Michelle safe...but it wouldn't exactly be a shining step forward toward enlightenment for our kind."

Most of the wolves with a family legacy didn't give a shit about enlightenment. They cared about tradition. The ones who'd run, or who'd never been embraced by the ruling class to begin with, just wanted to be left alone. "What is it?"

"Two parts." He held up one finger. "Convince them that their superstition is right, and Michelle's not a threat anymore since she had sex. Not exactly a girl-power message, but under the circumstances it might be best. That's the hard part."

"Girl power makes a lot more sense when you're alive to enjoy it." Nick nudged a fork out of the way and folded her hands on the table. "What's the easy part?"

"Take yourself out of the line of succession. That'll keep them so busy stabbing each other in the back over who gets to become the next top dog that they won't care about Michelle unless she's a direct threat."

"Efficient. And if someone gets impatient, it could get my father killed."

Alec leaned forward, his eyes intense. "You think your father isn't under just as much of a threat every goddamned day? People are terrified he's going to shove you down their throats as the first female Alpha. John Wesley Peyton can take care of himself, my girl."

"I guess so." The harsh words twisted the knot in Nick's stomach tighter. Her skin felt cold and hot at the same time, and nausea made her sway in her chair. "You've spent a lot of time with Derek. Is he going to make it through this?"

"I can't make any promises." Alec brushed his fingers over her hand. "But he's tough enough. You just have to go easy on him, kiddo. Especially when people start showing up trying to talk you into marriage."

"I have crappy timing." Nick pushed her damp hair back. "It shouldn't have to be this hard for him."

"Yeah, well, he can get at the back of the line when it comes to pouting over it. It's not like Jackson didn't have to put up with just as much shit, and *he's* not dumb enough to blame Mackenzie for it."

Jackson hadn't had a ton of very new, very confusing instincts to deal with, either. Nick shoved a fork at Alec. "Eat. Luciano should be here soon."

She stabbed a waffle with her own fork and reached for the strawberries. It would take time to put Alec's plan into motion, so maybe they'd still be able to snatch a few hours of peace before all hell broke loose. If Derek could control his reactions enough to get through the next few hours, they'd have some time. Not enough, but some.

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If there were two words Derek wouldn't have picked to describe Luciano Maglieri, they were "punk" and "cowboy". The man who arrived on Nick's doorstep was handsome, immaculately clothed and groomed, and looked like he'd stepped out of a lineup of New York City's most eligible bachelors.

Luciano was pretty much everything Derek wasn't, and it sucked.

"Come in, Luke. We've been expecting you."

"Nicole." Luciano stepped inside and leaned over to drop a kiss to Nick's cheek. She tensed and pulled away, and the man raised his eyes to Derek. "Hi. I'm Luke Maglieri."

*If you put your lips on her again, I'll send you back to your mother in pieces.* Derek was proud that he only sounded slightly surly. "Hi. I'm Derek."

Nick kept her hand wrapped firmly around his, something Luciano acknowledged with a small smile. "I see my intentions aren't a secret, either."

"Let's sit down," Nick suggested, "and we can talk about things."

Alec waited in the living room, sprawled in one of Nick's chairs with his legs stretched out in front of him and his ankles crossed. "Howdy, cowboy. How's the ranch?"

"It's fine, thank you." Luciano straightened his suit jacket. "Foaled some impressive animals this year."

Nick indicated the chair near Alec's and steered Derek toward a love seat. "I'm glad your operation is doing well. I'm equally sorry you came all this way for nothing."

"I thought it might be that way." Luciano grinned as he sat down. "I hope you won't be offended if I express my earnest relief at your refusal."

It was almost too good to be true. Derek tightened his fingers around Nick's hand and watched Luciano's face. "You don't want to marry her?"

"Actually, no." He seemed sincere. "Not that you're not lovely, Nicole. But the *last* thing I want is control of the Conclave."

"We have that much in common," she admitted.

Luciano's vaguely cool, polite demeanor thawed a little. "I was sorry to hear about Michelle's situation."

Derek glanced at Alec, who shrugged one shoulder in a tiny, almost invisible gesture. Nick just sat a little straighter. "What was your mother offering? The terms, I mean."

A lock of dark hair fell over Luciano's forehead, and he brushed it back. "Aaron Spencer would be given a private execution. She couldn't budge on that. Michelle would be spared, and the baby would become a ward of the Conclave. You and I would be married, with a prenuptial agreement stipulating division of assets and—and heirs."

Nick made a soft noise and leaned closer to Derek. "Those are shitty terms, Luke."

"I know."

Nick's pain grated painfully against Derek's instincts. He dropped her hand and curled his arm around her shoulders instead, holding her against his side. "So if you know it's shitty, why are you here?"

He blinked. "Because I was told to come."

"What if they tell you to hurt Nick or Michelle?"

Luciano's expression melted into one of shock, and he glanced at Alec. "Is he serious?"

Alec snorted. "If you'd spent the last two years getting spit on by the ruling elite the way he has, you'd be asking the same damn question, kid."

Derek felt Nick's eyes on him, but he kept his gaze on Luciano. The man's shock didn't vanish; it worsened. "Oh, I see. Uh, well. No, I mean them no harm. Things certainly haven't reached that point."

Maybe it was supposed to be comforting, but Derek just kept hearing the unspoken last word: yet. "In case Alec's subtlety didn't give it away completely, I wasn't born like this. I was turned two years ago, and I don't quite get your polite rules where we sit here and casually discuss how the father of Nick's niece or nephew needs to be executed."

Luciano stared at him, and Nick sighed. "Michelle isn't a threat, I swear. We just need a few days to figure something out. Can you stall?"

He offered her a gentle smile. "I can tell Mom we're talking things over. I'm sure she'd like to hear how successfully I'm wooing you."

Derek didn't realize he'd tightened his fingers until the arm of the love seat cracked.

“Okay.” Nick took a deep breath. “Alec, can you walk Luke out? And, please, leave Alec your cell number and the number at your hotel.” She didn’t move. “Thank you for doing this.”

“You’re welcome.” Luciano’s expression held a surprising sympathy.

She glanced at Alec. “Can you—?”

Derek almost winced as Alec speared him with a pointed look. “I’m fine, Alec.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

After a moment Alec nodded and rose. “C’mon, cowboy. Let’s clear out.”

When they were gone, Derek shifted his attention to the arm of the loveseat. “I can fix this,” he promised, the words shaking a little. He’d snapped the wood, and he hadn’t even been thinking about it. If his hand had closed on Nick’s shoulder...

“I don’t care about the furniture.” She knelt on the love seat beside him and took his face in her hands. “I care about you.”

There was no doubt about it, not with the way she watched him. Derek closed his eyes and inhaled her scent to steady himself. “I’m scared of what happens if I lose my shit and I’m holding something more important than a chair.”

She kissed him softly. “After we’ve helped Michelle and Aaron, we’ll lock ourselves in a hotel room for the weekend and not talk to anyone who isn’t bringing room service. You just need *time*, Derek.”

“Yeah. Time would be good.” After a few seconds, he trusted himself enough to curl his fingers around Nick’s waist. “Do you trust that man? Luke, I mean. If we reach the point where people *are* trying to hurt Michelle—” *Or you*. “Do you trust him not to be one of them?”

Nick turned and eased onto his lap. “Luciano’s in a tough place. His mother has grand plans for him, but he’s not interested. I know how that feels.” Her tone was light, but it held an undercurrent of pain. “Luciano isn’t alpha. He couldn’t handle control of the Conclave, and Enrica just won’t see that. Me? I’m just a selfish bitch.”

The words sounded like something she’d been told before, probably more than once. Derek cradled her cheek with his hand and rubbed his thumb along her jaw. “I’ve been watching the sort of shit you left behind for less than twenty-four hours, and I don’t blame you a bit.”

“That isn’t the point.” She turned her face to his touch. “I was born with responsibilities. It’s the way things are. Part of all those polite rules.”

Rules he’d never understand. Hell, at this point, rules he didn’t *want* to understand. “I’m sort of useless, aren’t I?”

“No, you were dealt a crappy hand, and you’ve been busting your ass to deal with it for two years.” Her nose brushed his jaw as she nuzzled her face to his. “I don’t think you’re useless. I think you’re beautiful.”

“Yeah, well, I think he’s a hunk,” Alec drawled from the doorway, “but we probably have more important things to discuss.”

Derek groaned. “You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are.”

“Whatever, I’m a goddamned laugh riot.”

“Nothing else to discuss at the moment,” Nick told him. “They know my sister’s here, and they know they can’t get to her. So we’ll gather some things together for her and Aaron, make *damn* sure that safe house is impenetrable...and then I’m going to plan a trip.”

Derek stiffened, and he fought to keep his fingers from tightening around her hips. “A trip?”

“I may have to go to New York, after all.” She slipped her fingers through his hair, seemingly unconcerned by Alec’s presence. “I have to find another way to give Enrica what she wants. A way that’ll keep Michelle safe.”

Now he felt vaguely queasy. “*What* way?”

“She wants to take control of the Conclave. That may not happen for her, but it can happen for Luciano’s kids. If—if no one else has a better claim.” She shrugged. “So I’ll give up mine.”

## Chapter Six

Jackson met them at the door to the safe house. He muttered a few words, and the heavy press of magic that reverberated through the walls eased. “You’d better get in here, Nicky.”

His stern expression scared the hell out of her, and she shoved him aside, already searching for Michelle. “What is it? What happened?”

The few necessary items in the front room were in disarray. Jackson’s mother knelt near the kitchen, sweeping up broken glass. Michelle was nowhere to be seen. “Jackson—”

“She’s fine,” he interrupted. “I think. Hell, I don’t know.”

She gripped Derek’s hand, took a deep breath, and called her sister’s name.

The air on the far side of the room shimmered, and an open door appeared in the middle of the wall. Through it she saw her sister curled on the bed, shoulders heaving as she buried her face against Aaron’s chest. He looked up and caught Nick’s gaze, and his green eyes looked exhausted. “Shelly, sweetheart. Your sister’s here.”

Nick let go of Derek and rushed into the room, heedless of the magic that still rippled through the air. She didn’t stop until she was on the bed, her arms around Michelle. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Jackson leaned against the open doorway. “She’s been upset. All kinds of weird stuff’s been happening. This door?” He knocked on the doorframe. “It’s been disappearing. With fair regularity, actually.”

“It’s not disappearing.” Michelle’s voice sounded hoarse and, when she lifted her head, Nick’s chest ached at the bruised exhaustion on her sister’s face. “I think it’s an illusion. But I don’t know, because I’m not *doing* it.”

Derek stood behind Jackson, watching helplessly. Nick tried to smile at them both. “Can you guys go out and get the things we brought? Take your time.”

Jackson hesitated only a moment. “Mama, yell if y’all need anything, okay?”

“Shelly?” Aaron’s hand hovered over the back of Michelle’s head. “Do you need time with Nicole?”

“Please.”

Aaron shot Nick another worried gaze, but he inched from under Michelle and rubbed the back of her shoulder. “I’ll be just outside if you need me. If you need anything.”

It was almost worth everything to see that quiet happiness on Michelle’s face, and the way Aaron’s fingers brushed her cheek in the softest of touches.

Nick felt like she was intruding on a private moment, so she averted her eyes until Aaron had left the room. “Do you need some water, Micky? Have you eaten?”

“Yes.” It came out a little forceful, and Michelle took a breath. “I didn’t mean it like that. But if one more person asks me that question, I think I’ll blow something up on purpose.”

“We’re worried, that’s all.” Even as she spoke, dread still weighed in her belly like ice. “You just...have to bear with us.”

“I don’t know *how*.” Michelle pulled back and rubbed her hands over her face. “Damn it, Nick. You know what my life is like. Dad’s not exactly demonstrative, and having this many people acting concerned about me is making me nervous.”

Nick fought a growl. The thought that her sister’s life had left her unable to accept even the most basic concern from others filled her with fury and guilt, mostly in equal measure. “I’m sorry.”

“They just keep hovering. And...trying to hug me.” A tiny, almost hysterical-sounding giggle escaped her. “My God, Nicky. They’re trying to *hug* me.”

“Things are different here.” As explanations went, it was grossly inadequate. “Has Mama Holt offered to bake for you yet?”

Michelle wrinkled her nose. “She wants to teach us how to bake. Apparently it’s a serious crisis that we can’t make fudge. Mackenzie’s under strict orders to bring back a candy thermometer.”

Nick stifled a laugh. “This’ll be the most well-stocked safe house Alec has by the time you guys get to leave.”

The words brought the worry back to Michelle’s eyes. “Have you talked to anyone yet? Do you know what’s going on?”

Nick had to look away to answer. “Enrica sent Luciano to talk to me.”

“Oh.” Michelle’s voice sounded carefully neutral. “I always got the feeling he isn’t any more interested in pack politics than you are.”

“He isn’t, but he does what she tells him. Up to a point, anyway.”

“Enrica hasn’t been very subtle over the years. Everyone knows she wants Luciano to marry you.” Michelle’s gaze flickered to the door. “Luciano met Derek?”

“Mmm. It went well.” The potential for bloodshed was something Nick didn’t want to consider. “Luke’s going to help us stall Enrica and the Conclave for a few days. It’ll give us a chance to make plans.”

Michelle tightened her fingers around the bedspread. “What did Luciano say about Aaron? There must have been terms. There are always terms.”

Nick’s first instinct was to lie, but she quelled it. Her sister had been lied to enough. Besides, she had to already know. “The Conclave wants to execute him, Michelle.”

The mirror on the other side of the room shattered. Glass tinkled to the hardwood floor, the soft sound dwarfed by the low, inhuman snarl that rose in her sister’s throat.

Michelle's normally brown eyes had bled to amber. Power gathered in the room, and Nick felt an echo of that magic inside of her, fighting to break free.

"I'll kill them all," Michelle whispered. "If they touch him, I will *kill them all*."

"So will I." Nick gripped Michelle's hand and tried to center her. It had been so easy when they were younger, almost effortless, but they'd spent too much time apart. "If anyone comes after either of you, we'll stop them. I swear."

Magic flared again, and Michelle closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "No one heard. I...think I managed to shield the room before I lost it. I must have. Aaron would be in here already if I hadn't."

*If they can find the door.* Desperate to ease the fear permeating the room, Nick pressed Michelle's hand to her heart. "Micky, they're not going to get to you here. I'll stop them. You have to believe that, or you'll make yourself sick." *Or crazy.*

"I'm not worried about me, Nick. I'm worried about *him*."

She thought of Derek and nodded. "I meant both of you, sweetie. All of you."

Michelle's fingers trembled against her chest. "All right. Tell me what you're going—what we're going to do."

"Give them something they want more than you and Aaron and your baby."

"You are *not* going to marry Luciano Maglieri!"

"No," Nick shot back, aghast. "Neither of us wants that, for Christ's sake. I'm going to give up my succession. Let the rest of them fight it out. I never wanted to be Alpha anyway."

Michelle hesitated. "That could work. For a while. But they won't let me go, and they won't just pardon Aaron."

"It'll buy us time to figure out what to do."

"All right." Michelle dropped her hands to her lap. "Will you stay for a bit? I'm so tired, but every time I start to fall asleep, the power slips. Maybe if you're here to balance it..."

"Wild horses couldn't drag me away, sweetie." To illustrate her point, Nick kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the bed.

Michelle relaxed on the pillows, her eyes fixed on the ceiling and one hand resting on her stomach. "So much chaos because of a baby."

Nick ignored the stab of pain that stole her breath and scooted closer to Michelle. "So much chaos because of some stupid, archaic customs."

"Stupid, archaic superstitions. You know, I almost believed them. I almost thought—"

"I know." What wouldn't Michelle give to escape the magic she'd lived with since birth? It had denied her any sort of normal life, even the kind Nick herself had managed. "I'm sorry."



Michelle's jaw tightened. "Well, I'm not. It's too late for anyone to accept me, and they'll never accept any children I have. So I damn well need this power to protect them. If that makes me a freak, so be it."

"You're not a freak." It should have scared her to hear a Seer—any Seer—talking so brazenly about letting the magic inside her run free, unchecked. But Michelle had never been normal in that respect, and all Nick felt was pride. "I'll help you."

Her sister's hand wrapped around hers, the grip so tight her nails dug against her palm. "I don't know if it would work, but do you think Jackson knows any spells that might help me sleep?"

He did, but she didn't know if he dared to use them on a pregnant Seer whose magic had gone haywire. "I can ask."

Michelle licked her lips in a nervous gesture Nick hadn't seen in a decade. "It's okay if he doesn't want to. But...I thought maybe with you here..."

"I'll check. If he can't, maybe Mrs. Holt knows something that will help you."

"Thank you." Her eyes drifted shut. "Could you ask Aaron to come in for a second? He'll get snarly at everyone if I don't let him check on me. He's so worried."

Maybe his presence would soothe her. If Aaron could help Michelle sleep, Nick would have time to talk to Jackson and to call Alec. Time to figure out what the hell they were all going to do. So she patted her sister's leg and climbed off the bed. "He'll be glad to get back in here, I bet."

Nick hurried out and closed the door behind her. The front room was empty, and she leaned against the back of the threadbare sofa and covered her face with her hands.

The vague, roiling nausea in her belly sharpened, and she bolted for the nearest door. It turned out to be a small bathroom, and she barely made it to the toilet before her stomach emptied. Afterward, she knelt on the curling linoleum, tears seeping out between tightly shut lids.

*I just have to help Michelle through this, she thought desperately. Whatever it takes.*

Jackson put the last bag on the porch and leaned against a support post to stretch his leg. "Getting shot sucks. My leg's killing me."

"That's what happens when you run off on your own to play hero," Derek remarked, then winced when he heard his own challenging tone. "Sorry. I'm still...you know."

The wizard just shrugged. "I get it. I did what I felt I had to. Maybe it saved lives, and maybe it didn't. Either way, I'd do it again."

Derek wasn't sure if Jackson had missed the point or if he really didn't understand. "No offense, Jackson, but it wasn't your ass I was worried about. The woman I'm a little in love with ran off to storm a crazy magician's lair and I didn't know until my cousin called me. That chafes."

"Yeah." He lowered himself awkwardly to sit on the steps. "That part's still my fault too, huh?"

Derek moved aside as he heard Aaron's footsteps behind him. "No, it's just—"

"Lay off him, Jackson." Aaron leaned against the other railing and shot Derek a sympathetic look. "He can't help it. You of all people should know that."

"I've spent enough time keeping Mackenzie from freaking out when I get a hangnail," Jackson agreed readily. "I'm not giving him a hard time."

It was a possibility that hadn't occurred to him—and made him feel the tiniest bit sexist. Nick certainly didn't hesitate to get insanely protective over her nearest and dearest. *Which now includes me.*

His thoughts must have shown on his face, because Aaron nodded. "It's not about who's big and burly," the man said. "Dominance is about more than one kind of strength. Physical strength's the least of it. Jackson's little kitten's got some mean teeth."

Jackson grinned. "I think she might be worse than Nicky, actually."

"Whereas I have a hard time not jumping when Nick tells me to." Aaron rolled his eyes skyward. "Don't think she didn't take advantage of that when the two of them were teenage girls with a new, young bodyguard to torture."

Derek felt the corner of his mouth twitch up. "I thought *everyone* jumped when Nick told them to."

"You don't," Jackson pointed out lazily, "or you'd already be stashed someplace 'til all this was over. Tell me she didn't try it. And Alec sure the hell doesn't hop to when she says so."

"Yeah, I guess he doesn't." Alec was the one who could help her. He understood the rules of the vast political game they were tangled up in. He knew what to do, how to help. He was *useful*. Even now the man was off trailing Luke, doing some sort of private-investigator surveillance to ensure everyone's safety.

*So far I've fucked her on her kitchen floor—while forgetting to use a condom—and offered to fix the loveseat I broke to begin with.*

In the grand scheme of things, he seemed to be making Nick's life *worse*.

He looked up and found Jackson watching him with a serious expression. "She needs someone like you, Derek. Somebody she doesn't have to fight all the time. Someone who can share responsibility with her instead of always trying to take it all."

It took effort not to scowl. "Am I that transparent, or are you two fucking psychic?"

"Neither." Aaron's smile looked tired. "You're just not as special as you think. For anyone who's a shapeshifter or anyone who lives with them..." He nodded to Jackson. "Dealing with the power games is a fact of life."

"Hell, yeah, it is," Jackson said immediately as he shifted position with a wince. "But you two have instincts about each other, and I don't know how that goes." He paused. "But I do know Nicky."

Derek braced himself. "And?"

"And you're what she wants." The sandy-haired man stretched his legs out in front of him. "She's crazy about you. Has been forever."

Which would have been enough a few days ago. Now... He looked from Jackson to Aaron. "You know how this political shit works. What's going to happen to her if she tries to get involved with someone like me? Someone who wasn't *born* like you?"

He realized his mistake when Aaron stiffened. "You mean, are you going to be on the run next when the Conclave decides you're not good enough?"

"No. No, I just mean—"

"I don't care what you mean." Aaron's tone was implacable. "Either she's worth putting up with anything they throw at you, or she's not. If she's not, walk the fuck away. Now."

"Aaron, what was all that bullshit you were handing me about going easy on him?" Jackson rose and took a wobbly step away from the porch. "My guess is Derek's a little more concerned about making Nick's life hell, not his own. Am I wrong?"

"No, you pretty much nailed it." Derek glanced at Aaron. "I've been told enough times I'm nothing but a mutt."

Aaron unbent enough to nod. "Some people might view it that way. But a lot of them might be glad if Nick hooked up with a guy like you. It'd make her ineligible to take over. Ugly, but true."

A cold knot settled in the pit of Derek's stomach. "Guess that answers *that* question."

Jackson swore under his breath, but the word lacked heat. "I'm sure Nicky's already told you she doesn't care. If she *wanted* to take over, she wouldn't be tending bar in Louisiana."

"Right." He tried to sound convincing, but the affirmation seemed hollow to his own ears. Nick's birthright involved the sort of power and prestige he could barely wrap his head around. He was chatting with a man who had once served as her bodyguard, proof enough of that fact.

Then Jackson wrinkled his nose and laughed. "You're a crappy liar, Gabriel. I don't blame you for not knowing which way's up. Yet. You'd better figure it out quick, though, because Nicky needs you."

Derek managed a wan smile. "I'll figure it out, if you call Kat for me. She's going to rebel just to spite me if I tell her to lay low, but she listens to you."

"So you call Andrew and get him to run interference. Kat's too smart to cut off her nose to spite her face. If it means hanging out with Andrew, she'll suck it up and deal."

He was marginally sure Jackson wouldn't find the idea as entertaining if he'd watched Kat grow up. "Sorry, I'm still trying to recover from the fact that Andrew told me Kat tried to climb into his pants last night. The mental image is a bit much."

Jackson chortled and headed for the porch steps. "Sucks to be you."

That pretty much summed up the whole fucking day. "At least no one's shot me yet, smartass."

"Not yet," he grunted as he clomped up the steps. "But break my best friend's heart, and I might remedy that myself."

“I might let you.” It was the cocky response expected of him and seemed better than admitting the truth.

*If anyone's coming out of this with a broken heart, it's me.*

## Chapter Seven

Nick reread the same paragraph for the fifth time and tossed her paperback on the coffee table with a groan. "I can't concentrate, and I'm terrible company. I should just go to work."

"And leave me all alone?" Derek peered at her over the screen of his laptop. "I'm almost done answering email."

"I'm losing my mind." She needed to be *doing* something useful. She needed to be at the safe house with Michelle.

But Jackson and Alec had warned them that the last thing they should do was traipse back and forth constantly, potentially leading people from the city to the remote location where Michelle and Aaron were staying.

"It's for the best, Nicky," Jackson had told her. "Just for a few days."

A few days. It had been less than one, and she was already going crazy.

Nick sat up on the sofa and took a deep breath, then released it in one long, slow exhalation. "How are you at poker? I've seen you play at the bar a few times, but I don't know if you're any good."

"Not bad." His gaze dropped to his computer again as he typed something. "I quit playing with Kat though. Between the statistical analysis and the fact that you can't bluff her, it's completely pointless."

"You should have known better than that anyway." She studied Derek's bent head and relished the tingle of attraction that bloomed inside her. "Have you noticed it's not so bad anymore? The attraction?" It came out wrong, so she tried again. "It's not so primal, I mean. Mindless."

"Oh, I don't know about that." But his grin was teasing. "The mindless part seems to come and go, but it hasn't been uncontrollable at least."

She wished she could give him a lighthearted reassurance, but she couldn't hide her solemnity. "Because we stopped fighting it. We made our claims on each other."

"Ah." After a few more clacking keystrokes, he closed his laptop and set it aside. "As enjoyable as frantic sex on the kitchen floor was, I'm glad."

"Me too." She'd meant to tell him it was all right for those claims to be short term, that it wouldn't hurt her feelings if they didn't last. The words wouldn't come. "I'm glad too."

He reached out and smoothed a finger down her forehead and along the bridge of her nose. "You're frowning and getting cute little wrinkles."

It would have been easy to relax into his touch and encourage more. To forget words. “Do you know me, Derek? Who I really am, not what most people see?”

“Hell, Nicky. I’ve spent so much of the last two years trying not to look at you that I don’t even know what most people see.” His finger followed the same path again. “Alec says the mating urge is like a blind date with better sex. You have to do the getting-to-know-you part after you remember where you left your clothes.”

“Alec is a little bit of a pig, but he’s not wrong.”

“So?” He tapped her in the middle of the forehead. “Poker. Strip poker. Strip poker with revealing personal questions?”

Not quite what she’d had in mind, but appealing all the same. “You’re not wearing enough layers to make that fair, baby.”

“I’m not planning on losing.”

“That’s what they all say.”

Five minutes and a winning hand later, Nick slapped her hand on the coffee table. “Give me a shoe and tell me what you wanted to be when you grew up.”

He leaned down and tugged at the laces on his left boot. “I wanted to own a restaurant. Be one of those crotchety but brilliant chefs.”

“Brilliant, yes. Eccentric, maybe.” She grinned at him. “But you’re not crotchety.”

“Oh, I could have been.” He got the boot off and dropped it to the floor. “However, when I was sixteen I had teenage rebellion and decided it was unmanly to follow in my mother’s footsteps.”

“Hence the hard hat and construction boots. I see.”

His eyes twinkled. “It’s very manly.”

“Indeed.” She pushed the cards across the table so he could deal the next hand. “I wanted to be a princess, until I realized that I sort of already was. Then I wanted to be anything else in the world.”

“Like a bar owner in New Orleans?” He shuffled with quick, efficient movements, his gaze on her face instead of the cards. “How’d you end up with the bar, anyway? I mean, you bought it from Mahalia, obviously, but what made you do it?”

Nick shrugged. “May was looking to retire, and it seemed like a solid investment.” More than that, she’d been fascinated by the mix of patrons—witches and wizards, psychics and shifters. Everyone mingling, no one making judgments. “I liked how everyone could go there. It didn’t matter who they were. I hadn’t seen a lot of that before I came here.”

He dealt the cards with the same careless grace. “I’ve noticed. I send Andrew on business trips these days. He doesn’t have to worry about getting challenged by shapeshifters.”

Derek had had a hard time of it, and it made her feel ashamed, as though she could control their society. But she couldn't, so she changed the subject. "Anything you want to know? I'm feeling more generous with the information than with the clothes at the moment."

"Hmm. Favorite food?" He looked sneaky. Devious.

"Pepper steak," Nick answered absently. "What are you plotting?"

"Dinner."

"Reason number sixty-five to keep you around," she teased. Her cards sucked, so she threw in two and hoped for better ones. "I'm still going to win though."

It wasn't even close. Before long, she'd only lost her shoes and shirt, but Derek was down to his boxers...and she was holding three kings and an ace. "You are so screwed, mister."

Derek wagged his eyebrows at her. "How do you know I'm not cheating?"

"Because there are easier and more expedient ways to get naked if that's what you want?"

"I thought easy and expedient was our problem." He ran his fingers over the top of his cards and eyed her. "I want more answers. First kiss. Tell me."

Nick swallowed. "Nate Kelly. He was the housekeeper's son, and Michelle and I practically grew up with him. I was sixteen."

"Shapeshifter?"

"Human. Psychic, actually." She laid her cards on the table. "His abilities didn't manifest until a year later. My father looked high and low for someone to help him but, that late, there wasn't much to be done."

She saw sympathy in Derek's gaze. "It was rough with Kat. She was reading people's emotions before she could walk, and thank God that's all she could do. Her powers spiked during puberty, right before our parents died, and she was still unstable when I took over as her guardian. The tutor I found for her said that if she hadn't built a strong foundation growing up, the shock could have killed her."

The shock *had* killed Nate, slowly but surely. First, it had driven him crazy. Then, it had driven him to suicide. "How old were you when the accident happened?"

"Twenty-four." His voice was a little rough. "Kat had just turned seventeen and started college. She looked all grown-up on paper, so it wasn't hard to convince them to let her stay with me, but... Well, you know Kat."

"She's a handful?" She tried to imagine barely being more than a kid herself, losing both her parents to a car crash *and* finding herself suddenly responsible for a teenaged cousin. Her heart ached for him, and she reached for his hand. "You did a good job, Derek."

"I did as well as I could." He tugged at her hand, pulling until she slid into his lap, seated sideways with her legs stretched out along the couch. He curled both arms around her and rested his chin on her shoulder, his breath tickling her neck. "I resented it for a long time. Obviously there's some sort of magic

or psychic power or whatever in our family, but my mom and I were human, and my father might as well have been. But Kat's mother... She was involved in some crazy shit. Psychic cult shit."

"People look for answers. Things to believe in."

"I guess. Kat's dad kept her out of it, mostly. He and my father understood each other. My aunt was crazy, and they were her brother and her husband. They thought they could make it better. Or make her better. In the end all it did was get the four of them killed."

A shiver took her, and Nick pulled away enough to look into his eyes. "It *was* an accident, wasn't it?"

She'd never seen him look so tired. "I was trying to get custody of Kat. I couldn't exactly tell the police that I thought a telekinetic might have sent their car through the guard rail."

And there it was, the sad reality of supernatural life. As choking and rigidly structured as wolf society was, at least there *was* a structure, a ruling body to which one could appeal for help. Derek would have had no one. "I'm sorry."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "Jackson and Alec looked into it after Kat started working for them, but it had been two years by that point. I guess there's a file in their office somewhere... Kat went through a phase where she was pretty obsessed with it, but all I wanted to do was keep her from following the trail back to whatever cult her mom was tangled up in."

"I don't blame you." Kat was strong, and there were plenty of supernatural groups—essentially terrorists—who would gladly twist her abilities to suit their goals. "She's had enough tragedy. You both have."

"That's life, I guess. Finding the good stuff in the tragedy. The supernatural world blows, except for the awesome people you can meet. Like hot shapeshifting bar owners."

"Are we back to easy and expedient?" She nuzzled his cheek. "What about your first kiss? I want to know."

"Jennifer...something." He laughed. "We used to spend part of the summer in Boston, visiting Kat's parents. I was fifteen and had just shot up to six feet, and Kat's babysitter was a smoking sixteen-year-old. I convinced her I was twenty, and she thought I was hot shit. Then she found out how old I *really* was and never spoke to me again. You women and your older men. You break a guy's heart."

She couldn't resist teasing him. "Uh-huh. So you'd rather I went and found someone younger, that's what you're saying?"

He nipped her lower lip. "Miraculously enough, I find myself more forgiving of the trend as I grow older."

"I wonder why."

"Like I said, it's mysterious."

"Not so much." She studied him, curious. "First love."



His body tensed, just for a second. Even after he relaxed, his laughter sounded forced, his voice strained. “I thought I was in love once. We’d been together a year when my parents died, and she was great through all of it...until I told her I had to come back to New Orleans. She was human. I couldn’t explain why Kat had to stay here.” He shrugged one shoulder, the muscles bunching under her hand. “It got ugly. She got mean. It went to hell so fast maybe it was never love at all.”

He *hurt*, and Nick wanted to make it stop. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s okay.” The corner of his mouth ticked up. “It means I understand that you have to help Michelle. That’s what good people do. They take care of the ones who need them.”

It was one thing they had in common—responsibility to others. “It still sucks sometimes.”

“Yeah, it sure the hell does.” He stroked his thumb along the side of her neck. “What about you? Any ex-boyfriends gonna come after me?”

There had been casual dates and a few steady ones, but nothing important. Nothing like Derek. “I haven’t had much time. I don’t have a general manager at the bar, so I’ve been handling most of the day-to-day stuff myself.”

“By choice? Or because the bar can’t support a manager?”

“Mahalia didn’t have one, and I guess I just haven’t gotten around to hiring one yet.”

“So if you found someone interesting enough to make time...” He flashed her a wicked grin. “We could have a date outside the house some time. One where we keep our clothes on.”

“Hey, that was my plan all along, before life intervened.”

“I’m derivative.” His fingers tickled up her back, brushing along the line of her bra. “I’m also considering stealing your bra.”

Nick reached back and slapped at his hand. “You didn’t earn this lingerie. You lost the game.”

“It wouldn’t be stealing if I’d *earned* it.”

“Thief.” She didn’t care. She just wanted to kiss him.

So she did, his jaw first and then his lips. His fingers crept back up to her bra strap, and he unhooked it as his tongue teased just inside her mouth.

Nick bit his lower lip and pulled away. “Ready to admit to your ulterior motives?” she asked softly against his ear.

“I wasn’t aware they were very ulterior.” The wet heat of his tongue dragged along her jaw, and he laughed, low and dirty. “The mating urge may not be scrambling my brain at the moment, but I’m still a man with a really hot chick in his lap.”

“I was talking about the strip poker.” At least, she thought so. It was hard to remember with his tongue on her skin.

He found the sensitive spot above her pulse. “Does anyone suggest strip poker for innocent reasons?”

The telephone interrupted Nick's answer, and she groaned. "Hold that thought." She handed him her lace bra. "And this too."

He yanked her back and nipped her neck once, then released her. "If we weren't at Shapeshifter Alert Level One, I'd rip the phone out of the wall."

"If something happens, Jackson or Alec will call my cell. It's got to be work."

It turned out to be Phillip, the closest thing she had to a bar manager, with the minor crisis of a missed delivery. Nick mouthed an apology to Derek, who pouted ridiculously for two seconds before tossing her bra at her.

She caught it and headed into her small home office to handle the call. She knew she shouldn't resent the intrusion—the bar was her business, her livelihood, and Phillip needed her guidance. But, for the first time in forever, she had the chance to spend time alone with Derek. It was the sort of thing she'd sacrifice for her sister or Aaron, but she was loath to do it for anything else.

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Life had settled into the most surreal mimicry of normal Derek had ever experienced, and it was driving him more than a little crazy.

Alec and Jackson maintained their insistence that they avoid any unnecessary travel between New Orleans and the safe house. Jackson was the only one who could be completely sure he'd shaken any followers—magically, Derek assumed, though no one had come right out and said as much. Nick had been reduced to endless phone calls with her sister and long, hushed conversations with Mahalia, whose continued presence in New York was starting to make sense.

Derek couldn't concentrate on work. He had no damn idea how Nick kept dealing with the bar. Every time the phone rang they both tensed, but after three days of waiting, he was starting to realize they hadn't been kidding when they talked about how slowly the Conclave moved. Aaron and Michelle could have fled to New Orleans on a tricycle and still gotten there before anyone made a move.

Talking. Sitting and talking and waiting, and the only thing that made the days tolerable was the fact that Nick had hardly left his side. They'd skirted the issue, as if she was as unprepared to acknowledge the insanity of it as he was. But not discussing it didn't change it.

Instinct had taken over, and they were along for the ride.

They ended up at his house on the second night, and Derek dragged Nick out of bed in the morning before the phone could ring and shatter the illusion that the world held just the two of them. "Coffee," he said, pushing a steaming mug into her hand. "Drink it and don't be grumpy. I need my sous-chef on top of her game."

"I'm not a morning person." She gulped the coffee. "Are you a morning person? This could pose a problem."

"I never used to be." He moved across the kitchen and retrieved his battered old cookbook from the cupboard above the stove. "Something about the heightened senses I have now. The damn birds wake me up. You can hear them a half mile away."

Nick yawned and slid onto a barstool by the counter. "I've never known anything else, I guess. It doesn't bother me."

"Maybe someday I'll get used to it." He carried the book to the island and set it down in front of her. "This is something very special. Don't tell Kat I'm letting you look at it, because she's not allowed to touch it thanks to page fourteen."

Nick arched an eyebrow and flipped to the page. "What the hell?"

The dark text was illegible, obscured by smeared ink and formulas scrawled in bright purple, but Derek knew the recipe underneath by heart. Hot chocolate, the rich, decadent kind his mother had made when someone needed cheering up.

He ran a finger along the edge of the crinkled page and smiled. "I was already away at college, and Kat was living with my parents for a few months while her mom had one of her episodes. She must have been about twelve and, with me gone, my mom was looking for someone else to cook with, I guess."

"And Kat had a problem with the..." she laughed and peered down at the page, "...hot chocolate recipe?"

"Uh-huh. She decided to try the recipe for herself one day...after she made some adjustments to the proportions. Apparently was better at math than cooking. The way I hear it something blew up and from then on bonding was restricted to talking about books."

"How exactly does one make chocolate explode?"

"Got me." He flipped a few pages, looking for another familiar recipe. "She splattered milk and chocolate all over the kitchen, and my mom grounded her for writing in the sacred book."

She trailed her fingers over the inside edge of the cover. "This was your mother's?"

"My grandmother's first. They added to it, altered it, glued in new pages and glued over things they didn't like." He found the waffle recipe and flipped the book around so she could read it. "Best waffles ever made, right there."

"The ones you made the other morning?" Her smile was predatory. "Those were fabulous."

"Damn right they were." He had the recipe memorized, so he didn't look before moving to the cupboards to start pulling down ingredients. "Now *you're* going to make them."

She snorted. "Did you forget the part where I can't cook? I suck at it."

"So you'll try again." He tossed the flour onto the counter. "You can do it, baby. I've got faith."

"So did Mrs. Kelly. She spent fifteen years trying to teach me."

"I'll just have to try creative incentives."

"Sounds dirty."

“Probably because it is.” Though if he didn’t stop thinking about it, they’d skip breakfast again.

There had been something incredibly satisfying, something *primal*, about having her in his bed. If he hadn’t pulled her out of it, they might have ended up spending the morning naked and groping each other like horny college kids.

Derek gathered the sugar and baking powder and turned, and his heart kicked up into his throat when she smiled at him over the rim of her coffee cup. Sweet, a little goofy, and so very, very *Nick*. It wasn’t the wolf who wanted to sweep her off the stool and hold her close.

So maybe it wasn’t *all* instinct.

Maybe she heard the way his heart skipped, or maybe his expression revealed his thoughts. Either way, a soft look came into her eyes, and her smile gentled. “Thank you, Derek. For being here, and being you.”

He cleared his throat and dropped the ingredients onto the counter. “The supernatural world makes dating an adventure, huh? At least I’m not having to chase you all over the country like Jackson and Mac.”

“No, you’re just having to abandon your life in order to keep me sane.”

“Not really.” Though maybe he shouldn’t tell her how little of a life he’d had to abandon. “I was supposed to be on vacation already, remember?”

“Exactly.” She toyed with a dry measuring cup. “This can’t be very restful.”

“Restful’s overrated.” Derek grinned and shoved the flour toward her. “You can apologize until you’re blue in the face, but I’m still making you cook. Cowgirl up, Peyton.”

“All right.” Nick rose and studied the ingredients he’d already laid out. “Just remember, though, that you asked for it.”

The first batch tasted like baking soda, and the second was so runny they couldn’t even cook them. Derek thought she might have had it with the third batch, but the celebratory kiss turned into dirty, celebratory sex against the counter, and they forgot to unplug the waffle iron this time.

By the time they actually got breakfast on the table, it was nearly ten in the morning and the kitchen looked like Kat had performed one of her doomed high school science experiments in it. Derek ignored it and drenched the waffles in maple syrup, then handed the bottle to Nick. “Told you so.”

She’d already torn off a corner of her waffle for a taste test. “Mmm, nowhere near as good as yours, but not bad.”

“Just takes practice. So what’s your plan for today? Didn’t Jackson say he’d take you out to visit your sister?”

“This afternoon. He has to come back to the city anyway, and he said he’d drop by and we could follow him out there.”

*We*. Instinctive pleasure was more satisfying than the damn waffles. “Good. Anything we should take?”

She shook her head as she reached for her coffee. “I don’t think so. They should be pretty well stocked on everything.”

Except hope, but he couldn’t pick a bag of that up at the corner market. If Derek was climbing out of his skin half the time, he couldn’t imagine what life was like for Aaron, trapped in a tiny house with a pregnant lover and a death sentence over his head.

It put a damper on his enjoyment of the waffles. “Any news from New York? Or Alec?”

“Not yet. It looks like Enrica bought the story about me needing time to think about—about Luciano’s proposal.”

His fingers tightened, but he didn’t shatter the coffee mug in a blind, instinctive rage. *Progress.* “That’s good right?”

“It bought us some time, and we need it, if only to make them believe I’m getting desperate enough to walk away from all the power they crave.” Her hand slid over his. “What matters now is what happens next.”

He liked the feel of her skin on his, the soft, casual brush of her fingers. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, inhaling the scent that was slowly becoming as familiar as his own. “Then eat up, Nicky. We’ve got places to be.”

## Chapter Eight

The night was unusually warm and damp, humidity gathering on his skin like a blanket. Derek leaned against the tailgate of his truck and scrolled through his cell phone's directory looking for Andrew's home number. Nick had disappeared out the back door with Jackson a few minutes ago for what looked to be a potentially tense conversation, and every instinct in his body screamed at him to follow her. To protect her.

But she'd asked for privacy, and right now it was the best thing he could give her. The gift of his absence.

Which was the whiniest thing he'd thought all day. *Fuck.*

He stabbed the call button a little too violently, and swore again when the plastic casing creaked. But a moment later the call connected with a soft sound, proving he hadn't done in this phone like he had the last one he'd tried to use during a temper.

Andrew answered on the third ring, sounding as crabby as he felt. "Is your cousin always unreasonable, or is she just that way with me?"

It wasn't nice to be amused, but it didn't stop Derek's smile. "I don't know. Has she started screaming about Cousin Arrest yet?"

"I take it that's a familiar refrain?"

"Tell her she's the one who thought working for supernatural PIs would be more fun than a video rental store. What the hell set her off? She was fine when I talked to her earlier."

Andrew hesitated. "I might have told her she couldn't get her stuff from the office until I could go with her. And she just started screaming at me."

Screaming wasn't an understatement, because Derek heard Kat's voice clearly through the phone. "That's because you joined the dark side, you impossibly chauvinistic *bastard*."

A door slammed, and Andrew sighed. "On the upside, she's not trying to climb in my pants anymore."

"I guess not." *Thank God.* "Sorry, man. If it helps, she'll probably forgive you a lot faster than she forgives me."

"Did you miss the part where she just compared me to Darth Vader?"

Derek fought another grin. "I don't know, I'm pretty sure I was Darth Vader in that insanely fucked-up insult."

"Dude, in this metaphor, I'm Vader. You're obviously Palpatine."

This time he lost the battle with laughter, and it felt good to laugh about something. “Shit, man. Sometimes I forget why my geeky little cousin’s in love with your rock-climbing frat-boy ass, and then I remember you’re just a big fucking dork.”

The front door slammed open, and Nick stormed out of the house. She muttered harsh curses as she jumped off the porch, avoiding the steps altogether.

Derek’s laughter faded. “Hate to leave you to the enraged geek princess, but I’ve got to go. Hang in there, okay? She’ll get over it, I promise.”

“Take care, Derek. Tell Nick I said... Hell, I don’t know. Something reassuring.”

“I will. Thanks. I owe you one. Or two. Or twelve.”

“What you owe me can’t even be quantified, man. Later.”

Derek snapped the phone shut and shoved it into his pocket as he pushed off the tailgate. “Nick?”

Color flamed high in her cheeks as she growled and covered the space between them with quick steps. “I’m angry. I’m angry because it’s easier.”

He reached out and caught her shoulders in a gentle grip. “Easier than what?”

She looked up at him and laughed almost hysterically. “Easier than completely and utterly losing my shit.”

“Oh, Nicky.” She felt so tiny as he slid his arms around her, delicate and fragile. Even knowing that seeming weakness was deceptive, every urge in his body clamored to find someplace safe to hide her away from the world and the misery in it.

But it was her world. He didn’t know the first damn thing about protecting her from it.

Her teeth scraped his arm through his sleeve, and she stumbled out of the circle of his arms. “I’m sorry. I just—I’m losing it.” Her eyes had gone wild, and she dragged her shirt over her head as she kicked off her sandals.

Too late he realized what the power gathering around her meant. “Are you going to run?”

“I have to, Derek.” Her skirt billowed to the ground, and she tore at her underwear. “Come with me. Please.”

“Of course.” His instincts wouldn’t let him stay there while she ran off by herself. Derek tugged his T-shirt over his head, anticipation prickling along his skin. The heat that preceded a change stole through him, something hot and heavy and tinged with a lust fueled by Nick’s naked body.

Her wolf must have been close the surface, because she’d barely hit the ground when the air around her shimmered and then pulsed with energy that washed over him in a hot wave. She stood before him, a small gray wolf who shook and pawed impatiently at the grass under them. Derek yanked at his belt and kicked off his boots, itching with the need to join her.

The change was usually easy, but he’d never done it in front of Nick before. He was far too aware of his body’s reaction, of the fact that he was hard and aroused and shaking under the force of the magic.

Closing his eyes, he sucked in a breath and reached for that flickering bit of power inside him, the animal waiting just below the surface.

It felt like magic because it was. Pleasure pounded through him and his skin tingled, and he crouched down and gave in to it. The most natural feeling in the world, because now he was *free*...

Instinct lifted his face, and the wolf howled pleasure at being let loose. When his exultant howl faded, he found Nick watching him. After a moment, she yipped and took off toward the woods.

Her scent enflamed him. Her challenge entranced him. Human concerns bled away as he launched himself after her, wanting nothing more in the world than to run at her side.

Nick's muscles burned. She had to focus on breathing, on drawing in one gulp of muggy night air after another. That was exactly what she wanted, to occupy her mind with something other than the fact that, one way or another, her sister might die.

Even if she hadn't heard him, she would have sensed Derek behind her, a warm zing of magic that dovetailed perfectly with her own. He felt solid, *right*, with his trampling steps echoing hers.

She knew he'd follow her until exhaustion claimed him, if it didn't take her first. But it was too hot to run for long, and Nick stumbled over a fallen log and tumbled to the ground under an ancient oak tree.

Letting go of the wolf was easier with fatigue quelling her nervousness. Twigs snapped under hands and feet instead of paws, and she collapsed onto a bed of moss, her chest heaving.

*Fire.* If it had only been the pull of exertion, she could have ignored it. But the change burned through her and scraped her nerve endings into a vicious flurry of arousal. "Derek," she rasped.

It took him longer to regain human form, but soon enough he crouched at her feet, his muscular chest straining under his panting breaths. He looked massive in the moonlight filtering through the trees, a hulking giant of tanned skin stretched over hard muscles. When he lifted his head, she caught a glimpse of eyes still glinting yellow.

His gaze caught hers and drifted down her body, the stare so blatantly sexual it stole her breath. One hand dropped to her ankle, and his large fingers encircled it easily. "Tell me to stop."

She couldn't. She *wouldn't*. "No."

Derek dragged her ankles apart and dropped to his knees between her legs. He tickled his fingers up her calves as he jerked his gaze to hers again. "Put your hands over your head."

Sheer primal instinct drove her to obey. She licked her lips and exhaled a shuddering breath. "I need you."

"Not as much as I need you." His thumb traced along the inside of her knee, a small teasing caress that vanished when he moved his hands to the ground on either side of her hips. He loomed over her, his wide shoulders blocking out the light filtering through the trees.

His expression was wild. Feral. His gaze locked with hers, and he shuddered. "Do you trust me?"



“Yes.” The answer would have been the same even if she hadn’t been aching to feel his skin against hers, even if they hadn’t spent the last few days learning about each other. “With my life.”

A rumbling noise of approval started deep in his chest and escaped his lips as he lowered them to her breast. His tongue circled the tip in a teasing flick, and he drew her nipple into his mouth with another low noise.

Nick tried to stifle the cry that accompanied the sharp rush of pleasure, but it rolled out of her between clenched teeth. Her back arched off the ground, toward his mouth, and she barely remembered not to move her hands.

She felt the scrape of teeth, then the heat of his mouth disappeared. A low, masculine laugh rose as he nuzzled her stomach and dropped tiny kisses on her damp skin. “I can smell how hot you are for me.”

Something witty should have popped to mind, the perfect rejoinder to his soft, sexy words. “I want you so bad it hurts. I always have.”

He dragged his tongue up the center of her chest before veering off to nip at her shoulder. “And now you have me.”

*Do I?* The words hung in her throat as the throbbing need in her body grew worse. Her skin flamed wherever he touched her, but it wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough. “Derek, please.” Her fingers curled into the mossy earth above her head. “Let me have you.”

His teeth closed on her neck, hard and possessive, and he groaned against her skin and shifted his weight above her. One hand skated over her hip and slipped between her legs, and his fingers stroked through slick folds. He lifted his head and watched her, his face tight. “I want to see you come,” he growled a moment before his fingers centered on her clit.

She thrust her hips up with a whimper. He touched her as if he’d been doing it forever, as if he knew every inch of her already. Desire took over, and she felt him watching as she bit her lip and arched her head back. “Don’t stop.”

He *did*, but only long enough for his thumb to replace his fingers. Then his fingers shifted lower, easing into her as he groaned. “God damn it, Nicky. *Come*. Come so I can be inside you.”

“I need—” Her words melted into another desperate cry as the pinpoints of heat and pleasure scattered through her began to gather and tighten. “Kiss me.”

His mouth landed on hers, hot and a little rough. There was no hesitancy, no doubt. Just his tongue, sliding over hers before thrusting into her mouth, and his low groan as he hurried his movements.

Nick forgot to be still, forgot everything but *Derek* and the way he surrounded and filled her. She shoved her fingers into his hair as release swelled in her, then dug her heels into the ground as it took her. She managed to muffle her scream against his neck, but nothing could stop the shudders that wracked her.

“Yes.” Her body still shook when he pulled his hand away and the world tilted. Derek’s fingers wrapped around her hips and dragged her upright until she straddled his legs. “Like this, so I can watch your face.”

His words barely registered, and she cut them off with another kiss. A lingering hunger made her writhe in his lap, lifting and moving until the head of his cock nudged her entrance. She pulled back far enough to meet his eyes, whispered his name and started slowly lowering her hips.

He growled and dragged her the rest of the way down to him with a sharp tug of his hands. “*Fuck*, you feel so good.”

Nick could barely breathe through the vise of pleasure that squeezed tight around her, and she dug her nails into his back with a moan. “Whenever I saw you, I thought of this. Of making love to you.”

One of Derek’s hands skated up her back and wrapped in her hair, pulling her head back. “Is this making love?” he panted, the words low and feral. “Too hard, too fast...”

His voice was gentle despite the harsh tone of his words, and she sighed. “It’s *you*.”

He kissed the pulse pounding in her throat and drew his tongue over it as he shifted their bodies, settling into a tormenting, rocking grind. “No, Nicky. It’s you. You’re everything.”

She had to cover his lips again to silence the satisfied scream that had as much to do with the adoring look in his eyes as the pleasure set off again by the hard thrust of his body inside hers. *Mine*. There was no room for doubt here, stripped of everything that didn’t matter, with nothing separating them.

Derek rocked back suddenly. He crashed to the ground with a muffled grunt, her body still on top of his. His feet found purchase on the ground, and he rocked up into her with another strained noise. “Ride me, Nick.”

Her knees hit the ground, and the weight of her body drove his cock even deeper. For a moment, all she could do was shiver over him, lost in sensation, in possession. Then she began to move, need urging her to take up a hard, fast pace.

Over the past two months, she’d seen a thousand variations on guarded or wary flicker through Derek’s eyes. Now they were gone, replaced with an open, desperate longing that reflected her own, so deep it stole her breath. Large hands curled around her hips as he found her rhythm, just like they’d done it a thousand times before. “So good—so *good*—”

Heat blazed through her, and she’d have lost the rhythm completely if he hadn’t been guiding her hips to move. Blood pounded in her ears, and she only vaguely heard her own voice chanting Derek’s name.

Then everything stopped, closed in for one still, incandescent moment, and she screamed again as pleasure crested and crashed over her.

He whispered her name and thrust up, hard, and it was magic. Their energy meshed as easily as their bodies, power swelling between them until it felt like one glorious, continuous wave.

She collapsed against his chest, relishing his scent and strength as well as the mingled power that lingered around them. “That was... I don’t even know what that was.”

Derek’s voice was nothing more than a rasping whisper. “That was making love, dirty style.”

Her hands slid over his skin, slick with sweat and humidity. “That was mating.”

Underneath her, Derek’s body went rigid. “Shit.”

Nick froze. “What is it?”

“We forgot the birth-control issue again.”

The glow faded abruptly, and she pressed a shaking hand to her forehead. “We’re not always very good at that, I guess.”

He rubbed his hands up her back. “I didn’t think. God, when you touch me I *can’t* think.”

His words were reminiscent of the ones Michelle had given her to explain how she’d ended up pregnant. Nick laid her fingers over his lips. “It happens, a *lot*. Not to me, I mean, but in general.”

“Yeah. The math of mating.” Derek squeezed his eyes shut. “I think Alec left out a few variables when he tried to explain it.”

“What did he tell you, exactly? Besides the sexy-blind-date thing?”

“That chemistry was bad, emotions were worse, and both together would wipe out your higher reasoning capacity.”

Nick laughed helplessly. “That about covers it, actually. It probably lost something in translation, what with Alec’s amazing powers of understatement.”

Derek lifted his hand and stroked the back of her head, his fingers sifting through her hair. “I think the gist of it is that I’m going to need a lot of condoms and you might need pants that I can’t unbutton so easily.”

“Good idea.” She stretched and kissed him softly. “Though this time I think it was the shifting. Sometimes it makes me *crazy*.”

“Maybe it was...” His voice faded, and he tilted his head to one side. A moment later, Nick heard it too—the sound of underbrush snapping in the distance as someone or something approached them at a run.

Derek moved fast, coming to his knees and getting his body between hers and the noise. Nick gripped his shoulder with a noise of protest and moved up beside him.

The wind shifted, and carried with it a scent she recognized. Derek frowned a little, his eyebrows coming together. “Is that—?”

A sleek cougar burst out of the trees and skidded to a stop, paws slipping on the moss. Magic shimmered in the air before the cat regained her balance, and Mackenzie appeared, trembling and out of breath.

Fear seized Nick. “What happened?” Her own voice sounded far away and hollow. “Oh God, Michelle—”

“Not Michelle.” Mackenzie looked at Derek. “It’s Kat and Andrew.”

## Chapter Nine

Holt and Jacobson Investigations sat tucked away at the edge of the Central Business District. The windows were covered with thick blinds and a faint feeling of magic that spoke of strong wards, probably Jackson's work.

Derek fought panic as he shoved through the unlocked door, panic that doubled when the sick scent of death slammed into him. The front of the office was a mess, with papers and computer equipment scattered all over the floor. Several upended file cabinets sat in one corner. The room was dark, most of the light coming from the open door at the back that led to the rest of the office.

Slight movement to his left drew Derek's gaze, and his heart seized. Kat was tucked into the corner, so small and silent he hadn't noticed her. Her scent was lost in the sharp smell of blood that hung in the air and stained her hands and clothes. She stared blankly ahead, her only reaction a flinch when Andrew's pain-filled groan rose in the back room.

Nick touched his arm. "Kat needs you," she whispered. "I'm going in the back."

The words propelled him out of his daze. "Check on Andrew," he managed in a tight voice as he crossed the room. "Then come tell me. Please."

"I will."

Kat didn't move as he approached. Her eyes stayed fixed on some distant point, dull and unseeing, but he could hear her heart pounding. "Kat. Sweetie."

No response.

He knelt a foot away and reached out, alarmed at how cold her tiny hands were when he enclosed them in his own. Her breathing hitched, but it could have been in reaction to another pained noise coming from the back room.

Derek rubbed her hands to warm them. "Look at me, Katherine. Tell me what happened."

She blinked once and licked her dry lips. "I didn't kill them," she whispered, her voice so pained it nearly broke his heart. "I didn't kill them, but what I did was worse. Alec—Alec was scared. Of me."

He'd spoken with Alec on the drive over, but the man had told him only that there had been an attack, and Andrew was clinging to life, but maybe not to humanity. And Kat—

Derek heard Alec's voice again. "*Just a little bruised up, nothing big.*" At the time, he'd taken the tense tone as concern, but there had been something else there. Something a little like fear.

The idea of Kat doing something terrifying enough to scare Alec made Derek queasy. “What happened?”

She pulled her hands free and looked away. “I need Jackson.”

“Kat—”

“Now.”

Nick hurried into the front room. “Franklin Sinclair is back there trying to stabilize Andrew. It looks pretty bad, but Alec said he’s...” She stopped and looked away. “Alec said he’s already healing.”

He steeled himself against emotion as he rose and dug in his pocket for his cell phone. “Better than dying. Kat wants to talk to Jackson. Can you call him on my phone while I go—”

“Jackson’s not here?” Kat’s voice broke on a hitched sob, and Derek choked on the protective rage that fought to break free. There was no one here to kill, no one he could punish for terrorizing Kat and destroying Andrew’s life. Futile, helpless fury tightened his fingers around his phone until plastic cracked.

Nick’s hand slid under his collar. “Derek, stop.” Her other hand pried at his until he opened his fingers and let his ruined cell phone fall to the floor. “Jackson can’t leave the safe house right now, but you can take Kat there.”

That meant leaving Andrew. Worse, it meant leaving Nick. With the scents of blood and death heavy in the office, the idea lifted the hair on the back of his neck. “I don’t know if I can leave,” he whispered roughly, not wanting Kat to hear the words. “Not until I know Andrew’s going to be all right.”

“We still have to get her to Jackson, or she’s going to break down. Tell me what you need.”

He nodded and turned back to Kat. Another wave of rage washed through him when she whimpered at the sudden movement. It hurt to go slowly, but he knelt in front of her and eased his hands up to frame her face. “Katherine. Listen to me, honey. Nick’s going to take you to Jackson. Nancy—Jackson’s mother, remember? Can you go with Nick? I promise I’ll take care of Andrew.”

Kat finally looked up at him and shivered. “I don’t want to hurt her.”

“You won’t,” he promised, hoping like hell he could believe his own words. Then again, if Kat’s empathy had been functioning, his rage would have had her clawing his eyes out. Shock or fear had apparently dulled her senses—and Nick had to get her away from Andrew’s pain before it wore off. “Come on.”

Nick followed his lead, keeping her movements slow and easy as she helped Kat to her feet. “Just outside. Come on, sweetie.”

Derek paused at the door to check the street for anyone who might find the sight of a bloody secretary staggering from the office to be worthy of investigation. When the street was relatively clear, he glanced over Kat’s shoulder at Nick. “Thank you.”

“Be safe,” she whispered in return. “Take care of Andrew, and I’ll do the same with Kat.”

It hurt like hell to watch them walk away, but the animal inside him trusted Nick with Kat’s life.

It trusted Nick with everything.

When they'd gone, Derek crossed the paper-strewn office and stopped at the door to the back room. The scene inside unfolded in snapshot nightmare images. Andrew bleeding on a table while Franklin bent over him, stone-faced. Alec on the other side of the table, with some sort of metal instrument that held Andrew's belly open. Chairs overturned, blood spattered on the walls, and in the corner...

Two naked men, both covered in blood and reeking of wolf. Dead, glazed eyes stared up at the ceiling, still etched with the remnants of fear. It made Derek's skin crawl. If it weren't for the awkward angle of their necks, he would have sworn the two men had died of fright.

Alec glanced up and followed his gaze to the corner. "That's part of a Conclave strike team. Pretty much the scariest motherfuckers around."

Derek tensed. "What happened to them?"

"Kat happened to them." Alec turned his attention back to Andrew. "From what I got out of her before she clammed up, the team ambushed them and someone hurt Andrew. So she fried their brains."

Derek didn't have time to ponder the terrifying implications of that statement. Franklin tossed down what looked like an oversized pair of tweezers with a clatter. "Almost there. I need another clamp."

"Got it." Alec reached out to dig through the bag at his side without looking up, but he addressed his words to Derek. "Did I hear Nick leave with Kat?"

Franklin accepted the clamp with a bloodied hand and swore. "She shouldn't have left. She could be going into shock, especially after what happened."

Derek's gaze drifted to the two bodies in the corner again. "So what did she do to them? Knock them unconscious? I've never even heard of her using her empathy as a weapon before, but I guess she could have..."

"She fried their fucking brains, Gabriel." Alec's voice was hoarse. "They were drooling vegetables when I got here. Killing them was a fucking mercy."

It was impossible to process. Kat was his harmless little cousin, the one who was practically his bratty kid sister. Brilliant and precocious, but always alarmingly unprepared for the dangers of the world she inhabited. In the supernatural underground of New Orleans, psychics were barely more than human. Kat's dogged determination to play with wizards and shapeshifters was what got her shuffled off into protective custody every time shit hit the fan.

She was helpless. She was harmless.

And the most intimidating shapeshifter in New Orleans was *scared* of her.

*Don't forget that she's traumatized and trapped in a car with the woman you want to protect.*

Alec glanced at him. "Where's Nick taking her? To Jackson?"

"Yeah."

“Kat’s probably not going to flip her shit before they get there, but you need to call Jackson and give him a heads-up. He may have to do something to keep her from leaking all over everyone, and I don’t know if she needs to be cuddling up to Michelle right now.”

Derek hesitated. “What about Andrew? When will you know?”

Franklin looked up and fixed him with a piercing green stare. “If the wolf hadn’t taken hold already, he’d be dead. For now, he’s stable. He’ll live.”

“As one of us?” A second-class citizen scorned by a society who thought anyone not born a shapeshifter might as well not *be* a shapeshifter.

“As one of *us*,” Alec confirmed, and the slight emphasis on the last word made it clear he wasn’t making any such distinctions. “Go call Jackson. Tell him about Kat. Tell him...” Alec hesitated and cast a helpless look at Franklin. “Shit, have you ever seen a psychic in shock?”

“A few.” He swabbed Andrew’s inner elbow and opened a plastic package. “Make sure someone there knows how to recognize the physical symptoms of shock. Emotionally, she’ll probably lose whatever barriers she has, at least temporarily. She might be so drained she can’t do much, but it could uncomfortable for everyone around her.”

“Jackson will know,” Alec said. “Hell, Aaron probably will too.”

“Got it.” Derek spared Andrew’s still form one last look before hurrying into the front office. He skirted around Kat’s desk and stopped at Alec’s. Two deep breaths ensured he wouldn’t end up crushing the phone, and he dialed Jackson’s cell phone from memory.

“Alec?”

“It’s Derek.” He drew in a breath. “Alec wanted me to call you. Nick’s on her way back with Kat, and Kat’s...not in good shape.”

Jackson swore. “Is she hurt? What about Andrew?”

“Andrew’s got Alec and Franklin up to their elbows in his guts, and will be howling at the moon soon.” The words came out too harsh, but he couldn’t seem to stop them. “I guess Kat watched an elite shapeshifter attack squad tear him up and then flipped her shit and used her empathy to erase their minds.”

It took Jackson a long time to answer. “Okay. We’ll handle things here. Tell Alec to call me as soon as Andrew’s out of the woods.”

The words were too calm, and they grated on Derek’s already ragged temper. “Did you *hear* me? My cousin took down a pair of fucking commando shifters with her brain. Can you keep her from doing the same to you?” *To Nick, goddamn it?*

Though he remained calm, the wizard’s voice held a sharp edge. “I’ll know what to do when she gets here and I see how bad off she is. The only thing I know with any certainty right now is that Nick doesn’t have a clue what happened to those men, or she sure the fuck wouldn’t be happy about bringing Kat to the



safe house where her pregnant sister is hiding out. Do I have a solid grasp of the situation, Gabriel, or would you like to yell at me some more?”

Derek forced himself to breathe, but the air in the office still reeked of blood and fear. He shuddered and exhaled on a sigh. “Sorry, Jackson. Not my best day. Just—take care of both of them, and I’ll be there as soon as Andrew’s okay.”

“I’ll take care of them. You can count on that. You just look out for yourself.”

“Thanks, Jackson.”

“You’re welcome.”

He dropped the phone back into its cradle and stared at it. The last thing he wanted to do was go back into the room where Andrew struggled for life and two dead men served as a reminder of what Kat had done, of what she was *capable* of.

There was no alternative. So he squared his shoulders and did what needed to be done.

Nick had seen people on the verge of a breakdown before. By the time they made it out of the city, she’d almost turned the car around a dozen times. Kat sat in the passenger seat, unmoving, and stared out the window.

Derek would never forgive Nick if his baby cousin lost her grip on sanity on her watch. She gripped the steering wheel and tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind.

Finally, she said, “Andrew will be okay. Franklin will make sure of it.”

Kat made a quiet noise, something that sounded almost like a whimper. “I need Jackson. He can stop me.”

The words didn’t make sense. “Stop you from what?”

The girl fell silent again.

“Kat—” Nick choked on the words as fear and something darker flooded the interior of the car. “Kat, please.”

“I can’t talk.” The hoarse words sounded like she’d forced them out around broken glass. “I can’t think, Nick. I can’t—can’t do anything until Jackson is here to keep you safe. To keep everyone safe.”

“Okay.” Nick focused her attention on the road. Whatever had happened in Alec and Jackson’s office had traumatized Kat even worse than she’d feared. “It’ll be okay.”

Kat didn’t respond, simply turned her face back to the window and rode in silence.

Jackson opened the passenger door before the car came to a full stop. “Hey there, Kat. Come on, honey.”

Fear tore through the car, strong enough to make Nick's heart hammer even though the emotion wasn't her own. Kat spilled into Jackson's arms as a wrenching sob shook her. "It was me—my fault—"

"Shh. Come on."

Nick jumped out of the car and hurried around to help him. "Have you heard from Derek or Alec yet?"

He ignored her as he drew Kat out of the car. "Let's get you inside, sweetheart."

Kat yanked free of him and stumbled back two steps. "*No*. Her sister's in there! And your *mother*. You can't let—Jackson, you have to stop me!" She took another step away, directly into a shaft of moonlight that had filtered through the trees surrounding them.

She looked terrified—and terrifying. Her once brightly colored cotton sundress was liberally soaked in blood, blood that was beginning to dry on her bare arms and legs. It was drying in her hair too, making it stick to the side of her ashen face. But all of that paled compared to the look in her eyes, a panic bordering on madness.

"I can make you sleep," he whispered, "but what if you dream, Kat? What kinds of emotions would you be projecting?" He held out his hand. "We trust you. Come inside."

Kat wavered, and her gaze jumped to Nick. "Didn't Alec tell you?"

He hadn't, but Nick was pretty sure the sinking feeling in her gut meant some part of her had already figured it out. She fought a quick battle against the urge to get Kat away from the cabin, away from her *sister*, and finally took a deep breath. "It's like Jackson says, Kat. Come inside."

"I lost control." It came out as a hoarse whisper, and Kat curled her fingers toward her palms, clenching her hands until her knuckles turned white. "They said they were going to take me somewhere and make me talk. Make me tell them about Alec's safe houses. Andrew—" She choked on a sob. "He just wanted to protect me and they hurt him and I *lost control* and they shifted and he just kept bleeding—"

Nick caught her before she fell, and they hit the grass together. Jackson made a noise of protest, but Nick held up a hand.

Kat shuddered, fear and self-loathing heavy in the air. "I had to do it. I had to stop them. Because it was my fault they attacked him. It was *my fault*."

Nick's arms tightened around her. "It wasn't, Kat. They thought you had information they wanted, and they decided Andrew was in their way. They would have killed him."

"Because of me!"

Pain lanced through Nick. "Because of my family," she corrected quietly. "My sister's here, and Alec is helping me hide her."

Kat stiffened in her arms, but her voice stayed quiet. Tense. "You really believe this is happening because of you."

“It’s the truth. Michelle wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t run away from it all. From New York and my family and—” *And my responsibilities.* She remembered the stricken, enraged look on Derek’s face when he’d seen his cousin covered in his best friend’s blood. “None of you would be hurt if it weren’t for me.”

“Andrew wouldn’t be hurt if I’d—” She shuddered again, and this time the shivering didn’t stop. “I did worse than kill them, Nick. I raped their minds until there was nothing left. I b-broke them...”

“You did what you had to do, and now you’re going to forget about it for a while.” Nick moved until her eyes met Kat’s. “We’ll get you inside and cleaned up and then call about Andrew, okay?”

Kat’s face went sickly pale. “I’m covered in his blood.”

*Shit.* “Come on, sweetie. You can take a shower.”

“I’m covered in his blood.” The words rose in pitch and volume, a sure sign of oncoming hysteria. “I had my hands in—in him—”

She could chase Kat down if she needed to, but the woman was going to go crazy if Nick kept holding her. She let go, and Kat scurried away across the damp grass. She made it a few feet before losing the contents of her stomach, retching until sobs overtook her.

## Chapter Ten

Nick tried not to slam the cabinet as she searched for a bigger pot. “When the zombie apocalypse comes, we can’t hide out in one of Alec’s houses. He doesn’t stock them for shit.”

Mackenzie watched from her perch by the counter. “What are you looking for?”

“A big pot,” Nick growled. “I was going to make something, but I only know how to make waffles, and that’s only because Derek taught me. Anything else I made would be inedible, so what the hell am I doing?”

“You’re coping. Kat’s in there crying herself sick on Jackson’s mom and if you weren’t so worried about Derek you might be wondering if all that shit you told me about crazy people’s decisions not being my fault was really bullshit.”

“That attack tonight wasn’t ordered by a crazy person.” She’d known it would come eventually, but she thought they’d have more time. She sure as hell hadn’t expected Kat and Andrew to get caught in the crossfire. “Shit. That almost makes this worse, doesn’t it?”

Mackenzie shook her head. “I don’t know. All I know is that life sucks when people get hurt.”

Nick dropped a small pan on the counter and covered her face with both hands. “I don’t know what to do, Mac. There’s only one thing I could do to make this all go away, and that won’t save Aaron’s life.”

Strong, steady arms folded around her. “First thing we’re going to do is bundle Jackson’s mother out of the state. I’ll put her in the goddamn car myself if I have to. Then you’ll have me and Alec and Jackson. And Mahalia. Jesus, don’t forget her. You’re not in this alone.”

“And Derek.” Fear trembled through Nick, and she tried to steady her breathing. “This whole situation has cost him so much already. If I could get him to go away, I’d do it in a millisecond. But he won’t go. He never will.”

“No, he won’t.” Mackenzie’s words were quiet and certain. “No more than Aaron’s going to leave Michelle, or I’m going to leave Jackson.”

“It’s selfish to want him to leave. I know it is, and I still can’t stop.” Nick pulled away from Mackenzie and swiped at her burning eyes. “It’s not right.”

“Well, then we’re both assholes. I’m not leaving Jackson, but I’d lock him in a closet in a heartbeat to keep him out of this shit. I think that’s what you referred to as instinct when I bitched about it while he was getting better.”

“Yeah.” Nick paced, trying to relieve the nervous tension twisting her into knots. “Derek’s best friend almost died, and God knows what tonight has done to Kat. How will he be able to look at me? I can barely look at me.”

“You really want to know?” Her friend’s gaze held its own pain. “Call Mahalia and ask her how she manages to look at me when the man she loved *died* protecting me.”

*Forgiveness.* Nick started to speak, but the sharp trill of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts. She scrambled for the phone, her heart pounding. “Hello?”

Derek’s voice crackled across the line. “I knew Alec was a crazy bastard, but you never told me just how bad he could get.”

“Oh, crap. What did he do?”

He hesitated just long enough to spin the tension in her stomach tighter. “Kidnapped Luciano.”

Nick gritted her teeth. Alec might be crazy, but he wasn’t stupid. “Where is he going?”

“We’re going to Alec’s house. Which I suppose makes me an accomplice.”

She snatched up her keys. “Jackson and Nancy are taking care of Kat. I’m on my way.” Someone had to make sure Alec didn’t forget himself and kill Enrica Maglieri’s golden child. “Just...keep Alec busy and don’t let him knock Luciano around too much.”

“Violence doesn’t seem to be on the menu, though I think Alec’s keeping it in reserve. He said something about leverage.”

“Of course he did.” Which meant he didn’t think Luciano was really responsible for the attack on Andrew and Kat. “How’d Luke take it?”

“About as well as anyone getting kidnapped, I guess. He’s unconscious and tied up.”

“Christ. I’m on my way.” She flipped the phone shut and growled at Mackenzie. “Did you catch that?”

“I should—” Mackenzie seized the edge of the counter and swore. “Someone needs to go with you, Nick. Jackson’s not leaving Kat and his mother, but if Alec’s decided to start throwing people in his goddamn truck...”

“Nicky?” It was Michelle’s voice, soft and worried. Her sister stepped through the narrow doorway into the kitchen. “What’s going on?”

The last thing Michelle needed to worry about was Alec fucking around with shapeshifter politics. “It’s nothing. I’m handling it.”

“*Nick.*” Power tickled up Nick’s spine as Michelle frowned at her. “Don’t treat me like an invalid.”

She stopped and took a deep breath. “Fine. Alec went off the rails and snatched Luke Maglieri from his hotel.”

“Damn.”

Nick saw her own worries reflected in her sister's eyes, worries Mackenzie would never fully understand. Even Aaron had never been forced to participate in the complicated dance of shapeshifter politics; he was the hired muscle, a man expected to take orders and not think too closely about them.

Michelle took a steadying breath. "I want to go with you, but I can't. Aaron's getting fidgety about being trapped here, but it's the only place he's safe."

Michelle couldn't go, anyway. Even if the Conclave was having trouble finding them, which seemed likely considering the fact that they'd gone to Alec and Jackson's office looking for information, they'd be able to locate Luciano easily. "You two staying here is for the best. I'll smooth this over."

"Luciano's one of the only Conclave kids who treats me like a person. He doesn't deserve to get hurt just because his family's cruel. Alec of all people should know that."

"He does." Nick hoped the assurance was true. "Derek is there. He won't let Alec do anything crazy."

Mackenzie released the counter and straightened. "Okay, I'm coming with you, Nick. Just wait for me and pretend you can't hear the screaming fight I'm about to have with my boyfriend."

"I can do that."

When Mackenzie was gone, Michelle moved to sit on the stool she'd abandoned. "About the girl...Kat? She's a psychic?"

"Empath," Nick confirmed. "You want something to drink? Water or juice?"

"Juice." Michelle tapped her fingers absently on the countertop in a familiar pattern, the pinky twice followed by her index finger. A signal that she was thinking. "Empath. You said she neutralized two men from one of the tactical teams?"

That was one way to put it. "Alec didn't say, but he had to kill them, I guess."

"I've seen it before." Michelle slapped her hand against the counter. "I've dealt with it before. A rogue empath with a vendetta against the Conclave. They wanted the man put down, but Dad fought to give him a fair trial. I kept him in his head, fixed it so he couldn't project."

Nick poured a glass of white grape juice. "Uh-huh, but you weren't pregnant then. Your magic is all wonky now."

"Which is why I haven't done anything yet." The tapping resumed, absent-minded and a little nervous. "It didn't take a lot of power. Mostly finesse. Jackson has a lot of that."

"Jackson's pretty good with instructions." Nick slid the small glass over the counter to Michelle. "Mahalia does it all the time. You could give it a shot."

"Do you think he'd feel...comfortable working with me?"

Nick watched her sister slowly sip the juice. "I wouldn't have suggested it if I thought he wouldn't, sweetie."

"Okay." Michelle finished the juice and rose to her feet, but she hesitated. "I'm so sorry, Nicky. For everything."

“It’s not—” *It’s not your fault.* Nick rubbed her aching head. “I’m the world’s biggest hypocrite.”

“All of this is my fault, Nick.” Her words were quiet and confident. “I know you. You’re taking it all on yourself because you don’t know how to do anything else. But it’s my problem, and I’m not going to survive if I lose you...or if you lose Derek.”

“No one is going to lose anyone, Michelle,” she whispered fiercely. “Not this time.”

“Promise me, Nicole, that if things get to that point, you’ll tell me. Don’t keep me hidden here while people die for my mistakes. You might think you’re doing what’s best for me, but I can’t live with it any more than you can.”

She’d hide all of it from Michelle if she could, but they were far past that point. “I won’t keep things from you just because you’re on the run and pregnant and freaking out. Aaron might kill me, but I can handle that.”

The scuff of Mackenzie’s boots against the wooden floor signaled her return. “If we don’t get out of here, Jackson’s going to kill *me*. You ready?”

“Mmm. Think we should take a whip and chair to deal with Alec?”

“Punching him out might be a better plan. We can take turns hitting him until he goes down.”

“I’m all over that.” Nick bared her teeth. “I have practice.”

Alec had a cage in his basement.

Derek was familiar it. Alec had told him the basement was the main reason he’d purchased the house to begin with. During the first few months after his transformation, Derek had spent more than one frantic night curled up in that cage, fighting the change because he was too terrified to give in to it.

Just standing there brought back memories he’d fought to repress. Only instead of remembering his own misery, every time he glanced at the metal frame in the corner of the basement, all he could think about was the fact that Andrew could be there soon, suffering the same frightening magic.

But, for now, Andrew was upstairs under Franklin’s attentive eye, and Alec had left Derek downstairs to watch over the cage’s current occupant.

Luciano looked worse for the wear, mostly because he’d fought. Alec had untied his feet and dumped him unceremoniously on the narrow cot before retreating upstairs with curt instructions to fetch him when their prisoner woke up.

Luciano woke quietly, with a single muttered curse as he gingerly probed his swollen jaw. “Damn Jacobson. This hurts like hell.” He sat up on the cot, his back against the bars of the cage. “Does Nick know you’re helping the headcase kidnap people?”

Derek fought a wave of anger at the man’s casual, unconcerned tone. “I’m covered in my friend’s blood, a bunch of which I found splattered all over my baby cousin. If I find out you knew what your people were going to do, I’ll help the headcase kill you before Nick can get here.”

Irritation and confusion sped across the man's face, and his heart began to pound loudly. "I don't know what you're talking about. Just like I told Alec."

"Sure." The iron bars were cool under Derek's hands. "Kat had her hands in Andrew's stomach. My twenty-four-year-old cousin had to put her hands in the guts of the man she loves, and that's not even the worst thing that happened to her tonight. I'm not feeling very trusting."

"Jesus." Luciano closed his eyes. "I gave Nick my word. Even if you don't believe me, I wouldn't break that. I respect her and her family."

He might call it respect, but there was something a lot more personal in Luciano's voice. Only the magic woven around the cage kept Derek from tearing through the bars. "Seems to me that you pureblood assholes don't really know the meaning of the word. Or is respect something you reserve for each other?"

"Pureblood assholes? How does your girlfriend feel about being called names like that?"

"I think my girlfriend's going to call you worse things if you manage to kill her sister."

Luciano climbed off the cot and stalked to the middle of the cage. "I admire Nick and Michelle. Nick doesn't let anyone tell her what to do, and Michelle has always made the best of a bad situation. I wouldn't hurt either one of them."

Everything Alec had ever taught him about using his senses to sniff out the truth screamed that Luciano wasn't lying, but it didn't erase the memory of Kat's shocked, dull eyes staring at nothing. "So why is there some sort of goddamn shapeshifter commando squad down here ripping people up? I thought your family was in charge of this bullshit investigation."

"I don't know why, unless—" Luciano's shoulders slumped a little. "Unless my mother knew Nick wouldn't consider a marriage offer and figured out we were stalling."

"You think?" Derek released the bars and stepped back, unable to contain his sarcasm. "Jesus, what the fuck is *wrong* with you people? How many bodies are you willing to step over to keep Michelle from having a normal life?"

"Michelle's power makes her dangerous, so it puts her in danger. It always has. But the whole thing with the rogue cougar Seer has the Conclave spun. They're nervous."

"Are you *defending* it?"

Luciano snorted in irritation. "How many Seers have you met?"

"One." One who had Nick's big brown eyes and stubborn jaw and the same way of trying to protect everyone around her even when her own life was falling apart. "I thought you said you respected Michelle."

"I do. She's a damn good woman, and the only Seer I've ever seen who managed to keep her head despite the magic." Luciano paced to the opposite end of the cage. "But exceptions only prove rules where the Conclave's concerned."



The fact that the man's voice held the same warmth when speaking of Michelle as it had with Nick allowed Derek to relax. "Nick's on her way," he said finally. "She should be here before too long."

Luciano leaned his head back against the metal bars. "Good. Maybe she can keep Jacobson from killing me before I get a chance to help."

"Maybe." The image of Kat's traumatized face rose in Derek's mind again. "You're the one who was born this way. What would you do if you were Alec and a Conclave team went after someone you cared about? Someone who was young and out of her depth and couldn't take care of herself?"

When Luciano spoke, it was with quiet conviction. "If I were Alec Jacobson, I'd have killed myself a long time ago."

Derek didn't know if the statement was a judgment of Alec or of Luciano himself. Either way, it scared the hell out of him.

## Chapter Eleven

Nick turned onto Alec's quarter-mile driveway and cursed. "If he did something that's going to get Michelle hurt, I'll kill him."

"What would you say the chances of that are?" Mackenzie sounded calm, but there was a tension in the car that they'd both been ignoring for the entire drive. "Alec has always seemed pretty clear-headed to me, even when shit's going to hell."

"Not when there are women involved." Nick tightened her hands around the steering wheel. "He loses it. Especially Kat. She's worked for him and Jackson since she was nineteen."

"Now she's..." Mackenzie swallowed. "Jesus. Jackson said he'd call when she wakes up, but in the state she's in I don't think putting her on the phone with Alec is the best way to calm him down."

"She won't want to talk to Alec anyway." There was only one person Kat gave a damn about at the moment. "We need to make sure she knows Andrew is going to be okay."

"Is he?"

"Depends on how you define okay." And on how strong Andrew turned out to be. It was usually impossible to predict how strongly magic would take root in a new wolf. "But he'll live, at least, and he has Derek. Yeah, I think he'll be okay."

Mackenzie let out a harsh breath. "I can't believe I was supposed to have magical babies who went around tearing apart people's lives like this. That was one freaky goddamn plan."

"No argument here." The house came into view, and Nick parked beside Alec's truck. Quick steps took her to the porch and through the door. "Alec Jacobson! Where the hell are you?"

The man who entered the foyer with slow, wary movements wasn't Alec. It was Andrew, disheveled and bandaged, wearing only a pair of low-slung flannel pants. He stalked around them in a wide circle, keeping his back close to the wall. Then he took a tentative step toward Mackenzie and made a soft noise.

Mackenzie pivoted to keep Andrew in front of her. "Did he just sniff me?"

"Yeah." Nick stared at him, her heart pounding. "Shit. *Shit*. He was—Jesus Christ." He'd been nearly dead at the office, bleeding out and holding on by a thread. She remembered the stern set of Franklin's jaw, the doubt in Alec's eyes. They hadn't been sure he'd live, and he was already stomping around the house, sniffing out his surroundings.

He brushed past Mackenzie and stepped so close to Nick that it hurt her neck to return his steady stare. But she didn't break the contact, just watched him as he watched her. Finally, he huffed a little and backed off, muttering, "This is pretty fucking weird."

"How is he on his feet when Kat looks like—"

Andrew cut her off. "Kat. Did you bring her?"

"We didn't know if you were okay." Nick kept her voice calm and even. "We didn't want to bring her back here if you were still in bad shape, and we thought you would be."

He growled again, this time viciously, and drove his hands into his hair. "I can't sit still. Nothing makes *sense*, damn it."

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs as Mackenzie eased her cell phone from her back pocket. "I'm calling Jackson. Do you want to talk to Kat, Andrew?"

"No!" He almost roared the word. "I want her back. I want her *here*!"

"Calm down, Andrew." This time, Nick reached inside for the magic, forcing it out in a commanding wave. *Calm the fuck down.*

But he wasn't cowed. He stomped past her toward the front door as Derek rushed out of the basement.

Mackenzie got to the door first. She pressed her back against it and glared at Andrew. "I'm not scared of the big bad wolf, so you back off and I'll get Kat over here."

He took a deep breath. "I haven't lost my mind, lady. I just want to go outside for some air."

"Uh-huh." Mackenzie's gaze traveled past Nick and landed on Derek. "Should I move?"

Derek looked tired and miserable, but he nodded. "Would you go with him? Just in case he needs anything?" He was obviously exhausted and pained, and Nick's heart ached for him.

"Sure." Once Mackenzie had opened the door, she glanced at Nick. "Should I have Jackson bring Kat? Or is he going to pee on her leg or something crazy?"

"I'm not going to pee on anyone." Andrew growled, and Mackenzie stepped aside and let him pass. She rolled her eyes and followed, already dialing the phone.

Derek sighed. "Well?"

"He seems okay, I guess." Better than expected, actually. "Derek, this is fast. Crazy fast."

"I know. I wasn't hurt nearly as bad as him, and it still took me a few days to get back on my feet. Franklin and Alec were trying to play it cool..." His voice trailed off as he stared at his hands. "Shit."

"Hey." Nick took his hands in hers, her thumbs tracing soothing circles over his skin. "I'm here. Everyone is, and we can help. Are *you* all right?"

"I don't know." The words were raw. "God, Nick. My cousin is killing people with her brain and I helped Alec kidnap a guy. Who, by the way, is in a fucking cage in the basement."

"Kat'll be fine. Jackson and Michelle are taking care of her, and I can handle the situation with Alec and Luciano." *I think*. At a loss for anything more comforting to offer him, she slipped her arms around his waist. "I'm sorry, Derek."

His hands fisted in the back of her shirt, and he took a shuddering breath. "This is the life I live, but I should have gotten her away from it. I should have kept Andrew away from it. They weren't ready for this."

"Not many people are. Kat will be fine once she finds out Andrew is okay."

Derek's hand brushed over her lower back. "Luciano is waiting for you. I'm glad you're here, because he's a pain in the ass."

"What do you expect? Alec kidnapped him." She pulled away with a snort. "Where is he, anyway? Alec, I mean."

"Taking a shower. Andrew bled a lot."

Nick took a moment to steady herself and inclined her head toward the basement door. "You coming with me, or is it easier not to?"

Derek's laugh sounded almost hysterical. "I think I might pull something if I try to stay up here. Maybe he has a reason to be pissy, but he has been having a damn good time poking at me. If you go down there alone, I might have to kill him."

She lowered her voice. "He didn't do this, Derek."

"How do you know?"

"Same reason he'd rather risk being disowned than marry me," she whispered as they began to descend the stairs. "He has a thing for Michelle."

Derek made a choking sound behind her. "Come again?"

"No one knows, least of all my sister, but it's true. He wouldn't hurt her like this."

He caught her arm before she reached the bottom step and waited for her to look up at him. "How well do you know him, Nick? Because I'd find his crush a lot more comforting if the death sentence wasn't on Aaron's head."

She fought a shudder. "Would you kill someone I loved just to get a crack at me?"

Derek released her and looked away. "I'm not saying Luciano is necessarily a bad person. You asked the wrong question. What you should have asked is who I might sacrifice if I thought it was the only way to keep you safe."

"You have more power over Aaron's life than Maglieri does. Sacrificing Aaron won't help Michelle, and it won't help Luciano, either."

The railing creaked under his hand. "I'm trying to understand it all, Nick. I'm trying."

"You have to trust me on this. Can you do that, just for a little while?"

The hesitation hurt but, when he finally spoke, at least his words sounded truthful. “Yes. You’re the only one I *can* trust.”

“Okay.” She gripped his hand. “Still want to come down here with me?”

He offered her an exhausted smile. “No. But I have to.”

Luciano rose when they walked into view, already tense and wary. “Finish talking about me?”

“For the most part. Be nice, Luke. Derek’s had a shitty day.” Nick approached the cage, but didn’t get too close. “Did Alec hurt you?”

“Not much.” He hesitated and hung his head. “Is Michelle okay? My mother—”

“I figured.” Nick ached for him, and for her sister. For the whole damn situation. “Michelle’s been better.” She turned and addressed Derek. “Did Alec say what he planned to do?”

He shook his head. “Just said he was keeping his options open.”

“Great.” Which could mean anything from trying to pry information out of Luciano to using him as leverage in a Conclave bidding war for Michelle’s pardon. “Can you go get him, Derek? Please?”

For a few seconds, she thought he’d refuse. His heart beat too fast, the heavy weight of his discomfort curling around her as he studied her. Then he pushed away from the wall with a short nod. “I’ll be right back.”

Nick waited until the door at the top of the stairs closed and wrapped her hands around the iron bars of the cage. “If you know *anything*, Luke, you need to pony up. Now. Because the team your mother sent fucked up. They turned a man, damn near killed him, and Derek’s cousin got mixed up in the middle of it. That’s what sent Alec over the edge.”

He backed to the other side of the cage and slumped against it. “Damn it.”

“Pretty much.”

“I had no part in it, Nick. I swear.” She couldn’t doubt his sincerity or the bleak expression he wore. “What’s he going to do?”

“Who knows? I think I can rein him in, though, at least enough to get this figured out.” She took a deep breath. “What about your mom?”

He looked pensive. “Depends on whether she had the Conclave’s approval. If she sent that team unauthorized...”

The rest of the Conclave would be furious at the exposure. Nick nodded. “We can work with that.”

The door whispered open, followed by heavy footsteps that had to belong to Alec. A moment later he emerged from the stairwell, barefoot and wearing nothing but jeans. He glanced from Nick to Luciano. “Fuck, Peyton, I didn’t hurt the kid too bad.”

“Never can tell with you, Alec.” She jerked her head toward the stairs. “What did Franklin say about Andrew?”

Alec's eyes hardened. "He was circling the drain two hours ago, and now he's prowling around in my backyard. Makes you believe in the legends, that your magic is as strong as the wolf that turned you."

Nick shuddered as she remembered the wild look Andrew had worn. "Kat's okay. Or she will be, anyway. She needs to see him for herself."

"He may settle down when he sees her." Alec shoved his fingers through his damp hair and exhaled sharply. "Or it could all go to shit. I don't really want to have to smack him down right now, but he's been freaking the fuck out over her since he came to."

Behind them, Luciano spoke. "Wait a minute. Is this the guy the team attacked? I thought you said he almost died."

Nick turned and stared at him, not bothering to hide her fear. "He did."

"Shit." He stared at her, his frightened gaze just short of disbelieving. "Is he okay upstairs? Thinking straight, I mean."

Alec snorted. "No. Gabriel and Mac are keeping an eye on him, but he's not going to settle down until he sees Kat in one piece. The last thing he remembers is your mama's attack squad threatening to torture information out of her, so he's a little riled up."

"Quit it, Alec." Nick rubbed her hands over her face. "Unless you're ready to start damning people for their family's actions."

"If I were damning him for his family's actions, he'd be dead, Peyton. And if I track down whoever escaped the carnage at my office, they *will* be dead."

It was a bad sign when Alec started pulling away and calling everyone by last names. He couldn't deal with the situation calmly, so he was shutting down emotionally. "Tactical usually sends out four-man teams. Considering the men they left behind, who knows what kind of shape those other two will be in. In the meantime, we need to find out if Enrica gave the orders, or if the whole Conclave is ready to kill us all to get to Michelle and Aaron."

"Well, cowboy?" Alec leaned one hand against the cage. "Convince me I should let you out."

Luciano held his slumped pose, but tension vibrated off him. "I did what Nick asked. I stalled for time. What else do you want from me?"

"Gabriel says you've got a thing for Michelle. Look me in the eyes and tell me you want her safe."

Instead, he shot Nick a glare. "Your boyfriend's got a big mouth."

She sighed. "Just tell him, Luke. He's alpha. It's something he understands."

Luciano straightened and met Alec's stare evenly. "I care about Michelle. I'll do whatever I have to do to keep her safe."

After a tense moment, Alec nodded and moved to a discreet panel on the wall. He flipped it open to reveal a number pad and, of all things, a bright pink smiley-face sticker. He scowled at Nick. "Mariko

thinks she's so damn funny. It's magically attached. Last time I tried to scrape it off, I triggered a spell that turned the cage pink for a week."

Nick managed to keep a straight face. "Be glad she didn't get Jackson in on it. They'd have turned *you* pink for a week."

"Probably." His fingers flew over the pad, and the lock on the door clicked as it disengaged. "Here's the deal, cowboy. You're out for good behavior, but that just means you're not staying in the cage. You *are* staying with me. If you do anything to fuck up our plans, I'm throwing you back in there, and it won't be fun."

"Wasn't fun the first time, either." Luciano stepped out, still hesitant. "But thanks."

"Alec wouldn't know what to do with himself if he wasn't threatening someone, Luke. Don't sweat it." She had to get back upstairs. Derek would need her, and she didn't know how much time she'd have for him before duty demanded her attention. "Do we need to move safe houses? I could have been followed when I took Kat there."

"Not right now. I called Jackson before I came down here, and told him to keep an eye out while he's leaving to bring Kat here. Right now, your sister's safer inside that house than moving, even if they do know where she is. No shifter can get past the wards."

"Unless the Conclave authorizes drastic measures and they just blow the place up."

Alec's face tightened. "Peyton, if it comes to that, there's no place safe enough. They'll find her, no matter where she goes, so let's just hope they haven't lost their minds yet."

Hearing him say it made it more real somehow, and Nick's throat closed. "Okay," she rasped. "When Jackson gets here, we can start looking for the rest of the strike team."

And, if they managed to find them, she'd keep Alec the hell away from them. He might want them dead, but he'd have to wait until she found out what she needed to know.

Derek's chest ached as he watched Andrew complete his third circuit around the backyard. In all the years they'd been friends, Andrew had always been the stable one. The calm, laidback one who steadied the people around him. The months after his own change would have been unbearable without Andrew's ability to roll with the punches.

*Which he's still doing.* The way Andrew studied his surroundings as he started his fourth round made the hair on the back of Derek's neck rise. Even with anxious, frantic energy vibrating off him, Andrew took in everything, identifying and categorizing.

The sound of a familiar truck engine drifted down the road, and Derek tensed. "You doing okay, buddy?"

"Fine." It was no more than a growl. "Is that an engine?"

"Jackson's truck. It rattles like a bitch."

"He's bringing Kat." Andrew headed for the front yard, not bothering to pass through the gate. He just vaulted the fence with inhuman ease and rounded the edge of the house.

It was hard not to flash back to Alec's office and Andrew's guts, bared to the world as two men struggled to hold him together. Derek tore open the back door and jumped the steps, startling Luciano and Nick where they sat at the table. "Jackson's here," he told Nick as he crossed the kitchen in two strides, heading for the front door.

Mackenzie hit it first, and she was fast. Derek had seen shapeshifters move with a speed that seemed impossible, but Mackenzie moved like gravity couldn't touch her. By the time he got to the door, Mackenzie had jumped the porch railing and hit the ground running.

Derek swore and jumped as well, but he lacked Mackenzie's grace. His foot slipped in the grass and he stumbled, hitting the ground hard enough to jar his bones. He ignored it and pushed himself to his feet in time to see Mackenzie slap her hand against the truck's hood as it rolled to a stop. She spun and placed her body directly in front of the driver's side door, her entire posture full of protective challenge.

Andrew ignored her and stalked to the other side of the vehicle, where Kat was already scrambling with the handle. Panic shot through Derek as Kat kicked open the door and tumbled out, her erratic heartbeat audible from ten feet away.

Andrew caught her loosely, as if afraid to close his arms around her. "I thought they'd taken you. They were going to."

Derek had joked a hundred times about his cousin's crush, but the look on Kat's face as she lifted her gaze to Andrew's was naked love, plain and simple. The strength of it made Derek feel uncomfortably voyeuristic, but he couldn't turn away from the way Andrew's power flared, fitful and unbalanced.

He was dangerous. His friend was dangerous, frighteningly so, and Derek could do nothing but watch in helpless confusion as Kat pressed her palms to the angry red scars on Andrew's chest, the ones that had been ugly gashes only a few hours before.

"You're okay." Her voice trembled, partly lost in the soft sound of Jackson closing the driver's side door. "You're okay. You're—you're okay."

Derek felt the gentle slide of Nick's hand around his arm as Andrew nodded and frowned. "I guess it wasn't as bad as they thought."

Instinct rose again, the terrifying need to intercede battling the knowledge that Andrew would never hurt Kat. *But that's not just Andrew anymore.* Derek slipped from Nick's grasp and took a slow step forward. "Kat, you're shaking so hard you can barely stand. Let's go inside. Andrew will come with you."

Instead, the blond man snatched Kat off her feet with a snarl.

Derek froze, afraid to move and set off a confrontation Kat wouldn't survive. "Kat, are you—?"

"I'm fine." She sounded steadier now, and she stroked the side of Andrew's face. "I'm fine," she repeated, and this time the words were all for Andrew, low and gentle as her thumb brushed his lips.



Tension made Derek quiver, and he glanced at Nick. "I don't know what to do."

She bit her lip. "Just...give him a minute."

It seemed to be working, the interminable moments where no one moved. Then the front door slammed, and Andrew started, his arms tightening around Kat. Her breath whooshed out in a soft grunt of pain.

Worry snapped the leash on Derek's self-control, and he lunged forward at the same time as Mackenzie. Andrew spun away, one fist flashing out in a dizzying jab that caught Derek on the jaw hard enough to spin him. He barely had a chance to regain his balance before Andrew swung again, this time at Mackenzie. She twisted out of the way as Kat's voice rose, loud and edged with anger. "Back off! Leave him alone!"

Derek caught Mackenzie's arm and dragged her away just as a shivering wave of power spilled over the front yard. The hair on the back of his neck rose, and his legs locked in place. Mackenzie began to tremble next to him, and he glanced over at Nick, who looked mostly annoyed by the wash of commanding energy.

Alec stepped into the sudden, tense silence. "Andrew Callaghan, put that girl down before you hurt her. No one's going to touch her, but if you're not going to take care of her, you can't have her."

Andrew bared his teeth at Alec with an uncontrolled burst of power. The arm around Kat's waist tightened again, and her gasp this time was louder, filled with unmistakable pain. Derek's heart pounded as Kat drew in another unsteady breath and whispered, "Andrew, you're hurting me."

He set her down on her feet immediately, though he kept his arm around her. "I'm sorry," he told her thickly. "I didn't mean to."

Kat wrapped her arms around Andrew's waist and relaxed against him with a trust that terrified Derek. She seemed oblivious to anyone else as she rested her cheek on Andrew's bare chest. "You wouldn't have done it if Alec wasn't an asshole."

Nick turned to Alec with an irritated hiss. "Next time, poke him a little harder. Call his mother names or something."

Alec's worried gaze stayed fixed on Kat and Andrew. "You're not the one who's going to have to smack the kid down when he starts challenging people. If I give him a goddamn inch now, I'll have to beat on him even harder later. Maybe I don't want to."

"It doesn't help Kat at the moment for you to act like you own her and force that challenge."

Derek cut through the arguing by reaching out for Nick's arm. Andrew's power was stronger, but the look in his eyes was familiar. Confusion and instinct tangled and torn between a desperate need to protect Kat and the fear of being the one thing she needed protection from. It was everything he'd felt with Nick those first confusing months after his change, all the emotions that had driven him to avoid her long after instinct had settled and he didn't have to worry about breaking everything he touched.

He caught his friend's gaze and nodded once. "Tell me what you need."

Andrew let go of Kat and backed away. "I think...I need to go home."

"Okay." Derek slid his hand down Nick's arm and grasped her hand. "Nick and I will drive you."

"And me," Kat said quickly. "I'm going with Andrew."

"No." Andrew took another step back and shook his head. "No, I'm going alone. I need to be— No."

Watching pain blossom on Kat's face would have been hard enough, but with Nick standing next to him the guilt cut deeper. He'd done the same thing a dozen times. He'd pushed her away when his instincts had roused, terrified of his less-than-human urges. He'd pushed her away because he was terrified of hurting her.

He'd hurt her every time.

"Andrew." Kat's choked voice broke Derek's heart. "Please..."

"Derek, you and Andrew should get in the car." Nick dug in her pocket for her keys and held them out. "I want to talk to Kat for a second."

He clasped the keys and took a shaky breath. "You okay with that, Andrew?"

Andrew wanted to say no; it was etched on his face, in the tense set of his shoulders. "Yes."

Derek caught Nick's gaze. "Thank you." He didn't know if he meant, *Thank you for taking care of Kat* or *Thank you helping me with Andrew* or even *Thank you for giving me a second chance*. At that moment all that mattered was that Nick was there, with him. Taking care of the people he cared about.

Taking care of him.

"You're welcome." Her expression softened. "I'll be just a minute."

Andrew brushed past him, arms crossed over his chest, almost in a daze. Derek followed him to the car and settled into the passenger seat, watching through the windshield as Nick spoke briefly to Kat, her hands on her upper arms. She had to look up to speak to Kat, but everything about her demeanor screamed authority.

Kat's expression tightened, and Derek swore he saw tears in her eyes. Unable to watch any longer, he turned to the backseat. "You okay?" A stupid question, but the only one he could ask.

"Better than okay," Andrew rasped, his eyes closed and his head against the back of the seat. "I'm a damn wondrous miracle, right?"

"You're alive. I know better than anyone that it may not feel like a good thing right now, but it gets easier."

"I don't know what to think or feel yet, but I'll take your word for it."

Derek turned around again to see Jackson slip his arm around Kat's waist. Mackenzie laid a hand on her shoulder, and the two of them coaxed her toward Alec's house. Derek wished there was time to sleep. "Do you want me to tell Kat anything?"

Before he could answer, Nick opened the car door. “Franklin’s going to meet us at your place, Andrew. You want to be at home and I don’t blame you, but you can’t be alone right now. It’s too dangerous.”

Andrew didn’t argue. “Fine. I just want to rest.”

It was a sentiment Derek understood all too well. As Nick started the car, he concentrated on summoning whatever energy he could find.

Something told him he was going to need it.

## Chapter Twelve

Derek settled one of Kat's bags into the trunk of Jackson's rental car and tried not to view the action as a failure. "Nick's upstairs helping Kat get her laptop and school books together."

"She's got all the numbers, including the one at my parents' lake house." Jackson lifted the other bag and loaded it beside the first.

Derek stepped back and rubbed his hand over his chin. His stubble had grown into an actual beard over the last week, and he needed to shave before disheveled or shaggy bled into crazed mountain-man. "I know she's better off out of it. Just gotta convince the instincts of that now."

"I hear that's the hard part."

"Sure seems to be." Derek rubbed his thumb over the suitcase, over the monogrammed initials that had belonged to his father. "She didn't sleep last night. I thought being in her old room at my place would help, but she was up the whole night. Lied to me and Nick about it this morning and didn't even care that we didn't believe her. I think she's still numb."

Jackson cursed, quietly and under his breath. "Wouldn't blame her. Sometimes it's the only thing you can do."

It was scary, seeing Kat's usually bright, energetic gaze slide over a room without focusing on the people in it. The part of Derek that had been responsible for her for so many years rebelled at the idea of sending her away when she was so clearly hurting, but the rest of him recognized the truth—things were getting bad, and Kat was safer far, far away.

Alec had put it a lot more bluntly when he told Jackson to load up his mother and Kat and take the potential human hostages out of the equation.

Derek gave the suitcase one last look before stepping back. "Maybe a few days with your parents will be good for her. I don't do comfortingly parental very well."

Footsteps echoed on the stairs overhead, and Nick leaned over the railing, her hair swinging around her face. "Just a few more things. Kat's locking up now."

Even with his world in pieces and exhaustion hanging heavy around his neck, Nick's smile made his heart jump. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." She skipped the last steps and held up two bags. "Books and computer. She didn't even want to carry it herself."

Kat relinquishing her stupidly expensive laptop to anyone else's care was a step short of unthinkable. Derek winced and accepted the laptop bag. "Maybe she just really, *really* trusts you?"

"Maybe." She stowed the books in the backseat, and Derek glanced up toward the balcony that fronted Kat's apartment and led to the stairs. Keys jingled, and a lock clicked into place, but footsteps didn't follow.

He glanced at Nick and raised both eyebrows in silent question. She shook her head helplessly.

Derek handed the precious laptop bag off to Jackson and circled around to the iron steps. The staircase trembled as he took them two at a time, and by the time he reached the landing, Kat was scrubbing her hands over her cheeks in quick, furtive movements. "I'm fine."

"Liar." Two rickety plastic chairs sat to the left of Kat's door, along with a planter bearing a plastic tree and enough cigarette butts to make it clear Kat had been smoking again in recent months. Derek ignored them and coaxed Kat to sit before kneeling in front of her. "It's okay to cry, kiddo."

Annoyance tightened her eyes and pressed her lips into a thin, hard line. "The kiddo shit isn't as funny as it used to be, Derek. I think I grew up a lot this week."

She needed him to acknowledge it, that much was clear. Everything inside him struggled against allowing her that growth, but he tried. "I know, Kat."

"Do you?" The words sounded so dark, so empty. He folded both of his hands around hers and studied her face, forcing himself to look at her. To *see* her. Some women's features thinned out as they aged, but Kat still looked soft and young. Derek had his mother's dark looks, but Kat had the freckles and blue eyes that her mother and Derek's father had both shared.

They made her look young, until she lifted her face and he got the full impact of a frozen, hard gaze in red-rimmed eyes. He couldn't begin to untangle the emotions there, though he could imagine a few—horror, pain. Rage.

Fear. Her hands shook under his, and some instinct prompted him, recognized panic as only a predator could. Not fear of him, but of *being* feared.

"Kat."

She pulled in on herself, and Derek felt the world shift a little under his feet. Thin ice, he was balanced precariously on thin ice and the wrong word would send them both plummeting.

"Kat, look at me."

"No." She trembled hard enough the chair shook with her, one of the off-balance legs scraping over the concrete landing.

"I'm not scared of you. None of us are scared of you." A tiny lie, maybe, but as locked up inside herself as she was, he knew he could get away with it. "You saved Andrew's life, and it hurt. I wish like hell one of us had been there to do it for you. But in this world we're in sometimes that's all we can do. Mackenzie killed someone to save Jackson, and no one thinks she did anything but what she had to do."

Tears stole down Kat's cheeks, and her words were thick. "I want to stay. I want to help Nick. I want them to *pay* for what they did to Andrew."

"They will. You know Alec will make sure of it. But the shapeshifters can't do their thing until the humans are safe—and that means all of you. You, Jackson and Jackson's mother." He wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Don't tell Jackson that Mackenzie's secretly bundling him off to safety, huh? You know us men and our tender egos."

It startled a short laugh out of her. It was still half-sob, but she opened tear-filled eyes long enough to glare at him. "I hate men and their tender egos."

"You and every other woman." He smiled and smoothed Kat's hair back. "You have a big project due soon, don't you? Go have your vacation and work on it, and let me take care of Andrew."

Kat lifted her hands and rubbed tears from her cheeks. "You gonna let Nick take care of you?"

Nick could probably hear every word they said, and he replied knowing it. "Like I could stop her. I'm helpless when she smiles at me."

"You are." Kat's tilted her head and stared up at him. "You know that, right?"

"I said it, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but do you really know? I mean, you've had that disturbingly intense booty-call vibe around her for years, but that's not all it is. Not by a long shot. Not anymore."

It wasn't something he had any intention of discussing with Kat before he'd talked about it with Nick, so he caught her hands and tugged her to her feet. "Don't think I didn't see what you did there. Big eyes and a wobbly lower lip won't save you. You know the penalty for snooping."

She smiled, wide and brilliant enough that he let himself believe for the first time that she'd be okay. She shoved her keys into her pocket and started toward the steps. "Sucks to be you. My apartment doesn't have a swimming pool."

"Jackson's parents have a lake house. I bet I can get Mackenzie to dunk you."

"Whatever." Kat paused three steps down and turned to stare back up at him. "Thanks, Derek."

"You bet, kiddo."

That earned him a rude gesture and a muttered curse, and he'd never been so glad to hear his sweet baby cousin cussing like a sailor.

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It was late, and watching her bedroom ceiling fan make its slow revolutions was making her dizzy. Nick turned over and buried her face against Derek's shoulder. "I can't sleep."

His arm came around her without hesitation. "Sleep seems to be in short supply."

And no wonder, with the difficult decisions they'd all had to make over the last week. "Are you all right with Kat being so far away right now?"

"I don't know. I think so. It's like I told Jackson—she's hurting, and I'm not so good at that comforting-parent gig. Maybe she needs someone like Nancy Holt who can hug her and tell her everything's going to be okay and sound like she knows what she's talking about."

Nick propped her chin on his chest and stared up at his profile in the darkness. "You've done the best you can."

"Yeah. I don't blame myself, not for that. I was too young to be everything a seventeen-year-old kid needed, but I did what I could." His fingers traced away from her shoulder, smoothed down along her spine. "It's not being able to protect her. I spent all that time letting Alec kick me around so I'd be good in a fight, and it's still not enough."

"Then maybe it's time to let go. Stop thinking you should be able to protect her and teach her to protect herself."

"Maybe." He sounded doubtful. "She's never going to be as fast or as strong as us. Jackson may not be a shifter, but he's got spells and magic. I just wish I could get her the hell out of this life."

Kat's empathy was strong enough to place her outside the rest of humanity, whether Derek liked it or not. "Where would you have her go?"

"Damned if I know. If I had a clue what I was doing, Nick, I'd probably be sleeping."

She pulled free of his arm and sat up. "That's what I mean. Doesn't *she* get to decide?" She'd spent her life having everyone else plan her future—where she needed to go, what she needed to do—and it sucked.

"Don't look at me like that." Derek rubbed the side of his face and blew out a tired breath. "Of course she gets to decide. I'm an overprotective bastard, but I'm not *that* bad, am I?"

"Good intentions don't change the outcome." They never had in her family, anyway.

"Are we still talking about Kat, sweetheart?"

"Maybe not." She toyed with the edge of the comforter. "I can sympathize. With you, for wanting to protect her. With Kat, for wanting to live her own life."

Derek caught her fingers and tugged them up to rest on his chest. "No one could ever think you haven't lived your life on your own terms."

Of course she had. What no one expected was that she'd continue to do so. "Most people who care to think about me consider my entire adult life a rebellious phase I just have to get through before I settle down."

"Aren't there *any* well-bred shapeshifter kids who run off to join the circus?" His sudden laugh shook the bed. "Except Alec. God, thinking of him as well bred actually hurts a little."

"It really isn't funny." She pulled her hand away. "Haven't you figured it out? New Orleans *is* the circus."

His laughter faded. "Just you and Alec?"

"Alec doesn't count. His family would be ecstatic if he took an interest in politics, mostly because they've been trying to claw their way up to the Conclave for fifty years."

"Oh." He tucked his hand behind his head and studied her silently. "Sometimes I forget the shapeshifter royalty thing. I mean, I don't forget that your family's important...but I forget how many people know you. Have expectations for you."

It was the furthest thing from the truth she could think of. "They have expectations, but they don't know me."

"Know *of* you, I meant." A gentle smile, almost shy. "I like to think I'm getting to know you."

That he seemed so glad to have that chance humbled her. "So what do you expect of me?"

"Hmm..." His free hand swept over her shoulder. "Expect, or want? Because one of those is nice and polite and boring, and the other might get my mouth washed out with soap."

He was teasing her, and it was impossible to maintain her dour mood in the face of it. Nick leaned over him, letting her hair brush his skin. "Tell me both."

"I expect you'll continue to be a sweet, open, caring woman who helps her friends whenever she can." He lowered his voice—and his hand, until his fingers traced along the curve of her hip. "I want to see if we can use the rest of that box of condoms we bought in one night. I bet you'd sleep then."

Arousal shivered through her, echoed by need. "Your plan is to fuck me unconscious?"

"Hell, no. That's crude. My plan—" His arm latched around her waist and he rolled her until she was curled on her side, her back pressed tight to his chest. "Is to fuck us *both* unconscious."

"Oh, good. That's far less crude." She reached up and ran her fingers through his hair as she stretched slowly.

"Mmm. Can you reach the condoms? Before we forget them this time?"

"We're not going to forget them." She dug through the bedside table anyway. His mouth found the back of her shoulder, and one hand smoothed around to cup her breast. There was something different in his touch this time, all of the need and passion, but none of the frantic urgency.

It let her relax against him and enjoy the heat of his skin on hers. "Slow?"

"As slow as we can manage."

"Mm-hmm." That had been hit or miss over the last week. Control always dissolved for one or both of them at some point, sweeping them away in a furious haze of desire.

He chuckled, his breath stirring against her shoulder blade. "You doubting me?"

She shivered. "We don't have the best track record when it comes to slow, sweet love."

"Math of mating," he murmured, then slid lower. His tongue teased back up her shoulder to the base of her neck, where he made slow a hundred times more difficult by closing his teeth on her nape.

Nick couldn't *not* squirm against him. "That's cheating."



“Thought we covered that during the strip poker, baby.” Another bite, harder this time, accompanied by a soft growl. “I’m a cheater.”

“Yet you have everyone convinced you’re such an upstanding man.”

“Maybe you’re the only thing I want bad enough to cheat for.”

Her laugh was shockingly breathless. It took him a matter of seconds to leave her tense and trembling, and the sudden urge to do the same thing to him overtook her. Nick turned in his arms and draped one leg over his hip. “There you go with the cheating again, when all you have to do is ask.”

“Oh, is that all?” He caught the back of her head and whispered the words against her lips. “Nicky Peyton, can we make with the dirty hot fucking?”

She bit his lip with a moan. “That’s why we can’t do slow. You say things like that.”

Derek urged her over until she was stretched out on the cotton sheets, arms above her head, and pressed the box of condoms into her hands with a low, wicked laugh. “Hold on to those. I’m gonna be busy for a bit.”

She tossed the box on the bed with another laugh and drove her fingers into his hair. “Poor baby. Haven’t I told you I’m bad at following directions?”

“So you want me to stop?”

It was the last thing she wanted, and she told him so with a pleading twist of her body. He teased her when he touched her, his fingertips skating over her stomach and hips and down her legs.

She endured it as long as she could, but she wound up bracing her hands on his shoulders and flipping him onto his back with a growl. “What if I want to be busy?”

“Well, I don’t have any *particular* objections...” His hands landed on her hips, fingers spanning to cup her ass. “Oh yeah, this is nice.”

“I bet.” His size and strength tripped some primal response, and her basest instincts rose. She wanted to test him, to push until he proved himself strong enough to handle her. “Tell me what stopped you before.”

“Stopped me from doing what, when?”

“Me. Ever.”

The restless movement of his hands stilled. Sounds filled the silence, the soft tick of the fan, his heartbeat strong and steady in his chest and the rough sound of his breaths. Finally he sighed. “I was scared. Scared that I wanted you for the wrong reasons, and that I’d fuck it up before I could get the right ones straight under all the instinct.”

It wasn’t terribly different from her own reasons, and the realization was oddly soothing. Nick leaned down and kissed him gently. “Me too.”

“And?” He rubbed both hands over her lower back. “Still scared?”

Her answer surprised her. “Yes. But now I’m scared because we waited so long, and things are so crazy...”

“Things won’t be like this all the time.” There was no doubt in his voice, or in the strong touch at her back, holding her against him.

She tucked her face against his neck and murmured, “I don’t want you to fuck me unconscious.” It felt almost like a confession. “I want you to hold me.”

“Any time.” He wrapped both arms around her. “Any place. Forever.”

Instinct eased as she relaxed and drank in his quiet strength. The need for comfort was as much a part of the mating drive as a craving for sex, but so much harder to satisfy. Finding someone to be a lover *and* a partner was far less common or simple than one or the other.

And yet here was Derek. She nestled closer. “Thank you.”

His chest vibrated under her cheek with his soft reply. “You’re welcome.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Nick clenched her jaw as the door closed behind Aaron. Once again, she was being pulled into the backyard for a summit, one eerily reminiscent of the one Jackson had staged days earlier.

He'd made her say it out loud—*"I might not be able to fix this."* She'd hated him for it at the time, and she wasn't sure she felt much more charitable now. Still, she understood his motivations. They all needed her to understand what they were up against, the years of unwieldy tradition standing between them and Michelle's happy ending.

Now Jackson was in Georgia, and the magic that had protected the safe house as they traveled back and forth was gone. It seemed Aaron understood the implications of that; they wouldn't be able to make any more trips, and he and Michelle would be safe at the house, but mostly alone.

Nick forced herself to relax. "Did Michelle sleep at all last night?"

He looked too tired to lie. "No. She played calm and in control for all she was worth until everyone left, then fell apart." He slanted a look at her. "Please tell me you're not about to join her in a duet of the Peyton guilt ballad, because I'm seriously not in the mood."

"I practiced mine plenty on Derek already." Nick ran a hand roughly through her hair and cursed. "She's going to kill herself if she doesn't stop worrying, so we need to figure out how to make that happen."

"That's not why I dragged you out here, Nicole." His gaze scanned the backyard, though it seemed mostly habit and not a conscious action. "We need to have a serious talk. You're not going to like it, but I don't give a damn."

He never called her Nicole. She closed her eyes against his somber expression. "You're not turning yourself in to protect Michelle and the baby. No way. Even if it would work, it would *kill* her, Aaron."

"If turning myself in would keep Michelle and our baby safe, I would have already done it. But they're not going to stop until they've got control of any children Michelle has, and that's what I need to make sure never happens." Aaron turned to look at her, and his eyes were dark. "If I can't, you need to. Because I'm not coming out of this alive. Michelle can't face it, so you need to."

Her brain couldn't process his words. This was Aaron, invincible, unstoppable *Aaron*, the man who'd been their protector even before Michelle had fallen in love with him. He was part of her family, and what he was saying was incomprehensible. "Shut up."

“No.” Just one word, quiet and implacable, its hopelessness sharpened by the words that followed. “I knew this day would come the second I started having feelings for her. Falling in love with her made me a traitor.”

Incomprehensible...and true. “I’m going to find a way. Don’t get all fatalistic on me yet.”

The corner of his mouth tugged up in a sad smile. “Happily ever after isn’t in the cards for me. I’ll fight like hell for it for Michelle’s sake, but I came to terms with this shit a long time ago.”

Arguing was pointless and would squander time they didn’t have. “No one from the Conclave will ever touch Michelle or that kid,” she whispered. “I don’t care what I have to do.”

Aaron’s rugged face relaxed, as if a weight had been lifted from him, but when he spoke, his voice sounded tortured. “I promised myself I’d never cross the line. I told myself I was a decade older and knew better and I’d never break her heart like this. But when she got hurt in that mess with Charles Talbot... Instincts turn us all into idiots.”

A few weeks earlier, Nick wouldn’t have understood. “I get it. I get that nothing else matters.”

“I know you do.” He opened his eyes and reached out to muss her hair. “Little Nicky finally found a man who could handle her. Just so you know, he’s worth about ten of those prissy, well-bred jackasses back in New York.”

She launched herself at him and ended up with her arms around his rib cage in a tight, desperate hug. “But maybe only one and a half of you.”

His arms closed around her and he kissed the top of her head. “You Peyton girls have too much life in you for civilized men of good lineage. God help Derek when he figures out what he’s in for.”

His words stung, though she knew he hadn’t meant them that way. “Would you go back and do it differently? If you could?” *Would you walk away while you still had the chance?*

“God damn me to hell for being a selfish bastard, but no. I should, to spare her what’s going to come...” His voice faded to a whisper. “She’s worth it. So are you, Nicole Peyton.”

She freed one hand and swiped tears from her cheeks. “You’re an idiot, and I love you. I’ll take care of your family.”

“Never doubted it, shorty.” He glanced back toward the safe house with a tiny little smile. “I lay even odds that they’ve cooked up some sort of gourmet masterpiece by now, or that Michelle’s puking her guts out in the bathroom.”

They had to leave soon, and Nick sniffled. “Both. Derek whipped up the masterpiece while Michelle hung out in the bathroom.”

Aaron laughed and hugged her one more time before letting go. “I should know better than to gamble with a Peyton.”

“Nah. Some people never learn.”

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After spending half the morning in Alec's basement, Derek had come to one conclusion: When the apocalypse came, be it zombies or alien invasion, Alec's house was the place to be.

A square wooden table now sat in the middle of the room and was covered with an alarming array of weaponry. More alarming was the fact that Nick didn't even blink as Alec took apart a complicated-looking gun with a practiced ease that made it clear he was hardly paying attention.

"What about Coleman?" she asked. "Is he still looking at getting his kid in?"

Luciano handed Alec a small square of cloth and a bottle of what looked like oil. "Yeah, he's working on it."

Alec paused with the bottle in his hand and frowned. "Veronica's been mediating disputes. Playing public defender so the Conclave members can pat themselves on the back about how fair they are is a far cry from getting her dad's seat someday."

Luciano flashed Nick a questioning look, and she wrinkled her nose. "Noah Coleman is too traditional for those kinds of aspirations, Alec. He's worse than your dad. He's been focused on marrying her off to one of the other families."

"Including mine." Luciano snorted. "He should be glad to learn my mom's plan to get *us* hitched is going up in flames."

It was starting to seem like the Conclave spent most of their time either plotting world domination or ruining their kids' lives. Derek rubbed a hand over his aching head and tried to put everything he'd heard in some semblance of order. "So, on the Conclave, there's Noah Coleman. Luke's mom, and Nick's dad, and...two other guys?"

"Conrad Hoffman and Jorge Ochoa," Alec confirmed. "My father's so far up Ochoa's ass he hasn't seen daylight in years. Probably still thinks he can wiggle his way onto the Conclave if Ochoa bites it."

"But, even if Alec's family's stock wasn't in the toilet already, Ochoa has a son who's just like him, only twice as smart, ruthless *and* mercenary." Nick wrapped her hand around Derek's and squeezed. "You doing okay?"

He had no idea. "I'm thinking my life has been simple before this."

Her eyes were huge and somber. "It's less complicated when you break it down and look at what they all want and what they're willing to do to get it. Trust me."

A quiet, decidedly feminine voice drifted from behind him. "The quick and dirty answer to *that* is everything...and anything."

Derek was out of his chair before he realized he'd moved, and only a supreme act of willpower suppressed the instinct to drag Nick behind him. When he turned, he saw a tall blonde in dark clothes leaning against the far wall.

The woman didn't flinch when Nick and Alec both snatched handguns from the table. She only rolled her eyes and looked at Luciano. "Did you miss me?"

He didn't reply.

Derek inhaled sharply, then frowned. "I can't smell her."

"You're not the only one," Alec snarled. His eyes narrowed slightly, and he swung his arm around until the barrel of his gun was pointed at Luciano. "But there's still one person in this room I can shoot, so someone better start talking."

The woman started forward and stopped, her jaw tight. "This must be Jacobson's kid. The crazy one."

"Stop it." Luciano ignored the gun in Alec's hand. "This is Wynne. She works for my mother, and you can't smell her because she isn't really here."

Alec glanced at her again. "Witch?"

"No." A memory surfaced, one of the hundreds from the time when Kat had been trying to get help with her psychic abilities as a teenager. Derek squinted at the woman. "Wynne Albrecht. She's a psychic who can astrally project. One of Kat's tutors said there were only a handful of people in the country who were really good at it." The fact that she'd used Wynne as an example of a psychic who used her gift for evil was anything but comforting.

"And she works for Enrica." Nick sighed. "Looking for Luciano, I guess. As you can see, he's fine."

"So he is." Wynne didn't look away from the gun in Alec's hand. "Your mother's worried about you, Luke."

Derek ignored Alec and fixed his gaze on Wynne. "Did his mother send people to try to kill my cousin?"

She blinked. "Is the crazy man with the gun your cousin?"

"My cousin is a twenty-four-year-old psychic who nearly got tortured by some elite shapeshifter commando squad."

"Oh." Wynne shifted uncomfortably. "Their objective was to obtain information on the whereabouts of the Seer and—" She glanced at Nick. "The team was looking for Jacobson. His father flew up to New York and told the Conclave that nothing goes on in this city without his son knowing about it."

Alec's hand actually trembled. "Fuck." One word, but it was laced with enough guilt to make Derek queasy. "Those fuckers attacked a girl and turned a human. So maybe you should run back to your boss and let her know none of them are getting out of New Orleans alive. Even by the Conclave's rules, they crossed the line."

Wynne's eyes flashed. "Mrs. Maglieri is well aware—"

"Shut up." Nick took a step toward the woman, her face set in a mask of rage. "You *should* run back to your boss. Tell Enrica I want to see her, and she'll need to bring the Alpha."

The blonde stumbled back into—and nearly through—the wall. "Luke?"

Luciano sounded exhausted. Resigned. “Go, Wynne. We can’t stop it now.”

The air around Wynne shimmered, and then she was gone with as little fanfare as she’d arrived. Alec exhaled and dropped back into his chair, but Derek could still hear Luciano’s words echoing in his head.

He turned to Nick and fought to stay calm. “What can’t we stop now?”

She shivered and avoided his eyes. “I just challenged Enrica.”

The words had only one possible meaning, and it terrified him. “To what? Pistols at twenty paces? Fists? Claws?”

“The Alpha won’t acknowledge a challenge on your behalf.” Luciano shook his head. “Presiding over it would be a conflict of interest, and he wouldn’t let anyone else do it. He’ll limit you to mediation.”

“Then I’ll talk to her,” Nick whispered. “For now.”

Derek didn’t realize Alec had moved until the door that led upstairs smashed open. Alec stormed up the steps with a snarl, leaving behind a tangible aura of frustration. In the years Derek had known Alec, he’d never seemed anything but perfectly in control. Cool, confident and able to handle anything life threw at him.

Nick laid down the gun. “Alec isn’t going to be rational until he deals with feeling like what happened to Kat and Andrew is all his fault. We should make sure he doesn’t... He could do something stupid.”

“Make sure he doesn’t what? Recover?” The only thing scarier than out-of-control Alec was the thought of perfectly in-control Alec who *still* wanted to kill people.

“It’s not that simple. The farther out of his head he is, the less likely he’ll be to care if people get in his way.”

“Jesus.” Derek sank back into his chair and glanced at Luciano. “You’re awful quiet.”

“Yeah, I guess I am.” He’d gone pale, and dark rings stood out under his eyes. “You don’t understand. If the mediation doesn’t work, the Alpha will have no choice but to recognize the challenge. These things escalate until there’s a resolution.”

It seemed like they were already a long way past a resolution, but that just made being a virtual hostage to that resolution all the more terrifying. Derek glanced at Nick and raised both eyebrows. “Talk it out with me, Nick. Help me understand. I’m not a political mastermind, but I’m not stupid. Maybe I can help.”

“Okay.” She leaned one hip against the table. “I issued the challenge because now Enrica will come here. If I can get her here, I can give her what she wants—a clear path to having her family succeed mine.”

“By stepping down or abdicating or whatever? Is your father going to let you do that?”

She lifted her chin in a stubborn gesture he was coming to recognize. “My father doesn’t get to decide what I do.”

"No," Derek acknowledged. "But if he's really spent most of your life rearranging shapeshifter politics so he can pass the empire on to you..." It was hard to imagine her father being pleased. *Especially when he starts to wonder how much I have to do with this.*

"I'm Michelle's only chance, Derek. My father can't help her, and he knows that. He won't question me."

Derek glanced at Luciano. "What's your part in this? Take Nick's place as the heir to the werewolf throne?"

"I doubt it." Luciano fidgeted uncomfortably. "No matter what my mother thinks, it's not my thing. Someone else on the Conclave will take over. Ochoa, maybe, or Hoffman."

Which wouldn't give Nick much leverage. "So what's going to get your mom over to Michelle's side?"

He hesitated. "The Alpha has to be ruthless. It's business, always business. Never personal."

Derek fought a growl. "Spit it the fuck out, whatever it is."

It was Nick who spoke, and she sounded exhausted. "Enrica has every reason to encourage me to sacrifice my future, because she doesn't *want* me to turn Michelle and Aaron over to the Conclave. If I did that..."

"It would secure her succession," Luciano finished. "They'd elect her tomorrow, because they need someone that cold to make the hard decisions."

Derek tried to imagine wanting something so badly that he'd accept the possibility of Kat's death as worth the price. The only thing he wanted right now was Nick, and she certainly wasn't to blame for what had happened. Even if they'd never gotten romantically involved, Kat still would have been Alec's secretary. She still would have been in the path of harm. None of it was Nick's fault, though it was her world.

If there was one thing he knew by now about that world, it was the brutality of its laws. "What if mediation doesn't work? You said the challenge keeps escalating."

She glanced at Luciano, so quickly Derek almost missed it. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

He almost shut up, but something in that look made him uncomfortable. "Why? I can't tap dance political circles around anyone, but if things get physical I'm not helpless. I could fight."

"I don't—" She didn't finish the sentence. Instead, she turned and hurried out the door.

Derek turned to Luciano. "What was that?"

The man didn't answer. He just shook his head.

Frustration sharpened until he realized what that sharp look at Luciano had *really* meant. The challenge escalated until it was resolved...and if it ended in violence, it would be Luciano's mother. "Oh."

"Yeah." Luciano sank into a chair. "Oh."

He didn't much like feeling sympathy for Luciano, but it was hard to choke it back. "Sorry."



"You should go after her."

"Planning on it. I just..." *What? I'm sorry I talked about killing your mother?* Not exactly a Hallmark greeting-card sentiment.

In the end there was nothing to say, so he rose and followed Nick up the stairs.

She was in the sunlit kitchen, speaking to Alec in low, terse tones. "Of course I did. What other choice do I have at this point?"

"Shit, Peyton. I dunno. Draw horns on a picture of her and email it to the Conclave?"

Derek could hear her teeth grind from the hallway. "Can you try not to be a jackass for five seconds, Alec? Please?"

A sigh—Alec's, and it sounded tired. "Well, at least you lit a fire under the Conclave's ass. I bet they'll have Enrica on a plane and touching down in New Orleans this afternoon."

"Except we're losing Luciano now, which means one less person looking out for Michelle."

"You've got a soft spot for Luke, Nicole, but you need to face facts. That kid's nice enough, but he's got no damn backbone when it comes to telling his family to shove it. He was never on your side, not enough to count on."

Even though they both would have heard his footsteps, standing in the hall felt perilously close to eavesdropping. Two long strides brought him into the kitchen, where Alec acknowledged him with a short nod before looking back to Nick. "You're the only Conclave kid not under her parents' thumbs one way or another, and you need to get right with that before this goes any further."

Still, she argued, "I think you're selling him short."

"Think all you like, Peyton. Doesn't change the fact that he jumps when Enrica says frog."

Derek was surprised to find his wolf had no compunctions about facing Alec down, not when his words put that defensive, upset look in Nick's eyes. "Jesus, Alec, give it a rest."

Nick handed Derek a mug of coffee and leaned into his side. "I didn't want to talk about the challenge in front of Luciano. You understand that, right?"

"Not as quickly as I like, but yeah. I got it."

She was still too pale. "I'm going to call Jackson." She ducked out of the room before either of them could say anything.

Derek waited until she was gone to turn to Alec. "Maybe I don't get it."

Alec shrugged. "Enrica's not a huge woman, and Nick's got youth and stamina on her side. If it came to a throw-down, Nick would probably win. Conclave knows that. Hell, some of them probably won't be able to decide if they want Nick to win just to get rid of Enrica, because they all resent the hell out of her."

Which still didn't explain that tight look in Nick's eyes. "And?"

"And if the Conclave finds out Nick's got a hulking boy-toy down here who's as big as most of them and younger to boot?"

Derek didn't know whether to laugh or punch the man. "Hulking boy-toy? Can I put that on my business card?"

Amusement curved Alec's lips into a smile, but it held a dark edge. "Sure. Then send a few to the Conclave, and they'll get riled up so fast there'll be no hope of solving this short of violence."

"Straight talk, Alec. What are the chances of solving this without violence?"

The amusement faded. "No idea. Not great."

"So what do I do?"

"For now? Nothing." Alec pushed off the counter. "Maybe I'm a cynical old bastard and John Peyton really does have a chokehold on the Conclave's brutal tendencies. But if I'm not..."

The silence dragged on too long, and Derek finally prompted him. "If you're not?"

"Then maybe you should be thinking about how far you're willing to go. Conclave challenges are usually fights to the death."

Derek closed his eyes. *To the death.* He tracked Alec's movements by the soft sound of boots on hardwood as Alec left the kitchen and returned to the basement stairs, which creaked slightly under his weight. The faintest whisper of Nick's voice drifted in from outside, more tone than words, a soft rise and fall as she talked to Jackson.

*To the death.* The past week had blurred into a confusing jumble of days, punctuated by fear and frustration, but the clearest moments were Nick. Her body under his hands on her kitchen floor the first time they'd given in to lust. Her laughter as she beat him at poker or destroyed a batch of waffles. How good it felt to run with her on four paws, the earth under their feet and nothing but joy and the chase.

He was no stranger to combat. Alec had insisted on the training at first because pushing his body had been the only way to learn it again when everything had turned upside down. Hard physical labor, endless bouts of sparring, running, weight lifting—anything that would teach him his new limits and weaknesses. In time, he'd started to enjoy it.

None of that answered the question of how far he was willing to go. Maybe it was a question he didn't *need* to answer, because an unsettling truth stirred inside him, something born of instincts that had nothing to do with mating and everything to do with brutal, savage possession. His human half could balk at the prospect, but it was already too late. The wolf's answer was primal and unwavering.

*All the way.*

## Chapter Fourteen

Nick made another turn toward the city and flexed her hands. They ached from gripping the steering wheel too tightly, but she couldn't relax. Not now.

The hours since Wynne's unexpected visit had passed in a bizarre haze of worrying and waiting. Alec hadn't been wrong about the effect of Nick's declaration on the Conclave. A phone call to Mahalia had revealed that, as expected, Enrica and the Alpha had boarded a plane less than an hour after the psychic's departure. They'd already touched down in New Orleans, and Nick would have already been at Franklin's clinic to meet them if custom hadn't dictated that she make something of a grand entrance.

At least Alec had gone ahead with Luciano. If nothing else, Enrica might be more inclined to listen to reason if she saw for herself that her son was fine instead of having to rely on Wynne's reports.

Nick exhaled. Derek still had no idea what he was getting himself into, but it couldn't be helped. All she could do now was try to prepare him as best she could.

And that meant they needed to talk.

She reached a relatively straight stretch of back road and slowed the car. "Derek—"

"Don't slow down." His gaze was fixed on the side mirror. "I'm pretty sure we're being followed."

The rearview mirror revealed a dark sedan fifty yards back, though it was impossible to see more through the slanting glare of the late-afternoon sun. "How long?"

"I thought I saw them before we hit the highway, but they disappeared. Showed up again half a mile back."

"It could be nothing."

Derek shook his head, and nervous power flared between them. "It's not. I can feel it. We should turn up here and see if they follow."

"Okay." She flipped on the signal and held her breath as she watched the car behind them. It did nothing, so she bit her lip, made the turn and sped up again. "Maybe it's a different car than the one from—"

The sedan turned behind them.

Derek let out his breath and twisted in the seat to reach for the bag he'd brought with him from Alec's house. "Now it seems kind of stupid that we never discussed if you're good with guns."

"I usually hit what I mean to hit." She thought of the remaining two members of the Conclave tactical team and shuddered. "If it's one of the guys Enrica sent, it won't matter—"

The back windshield shattered. Nick ducked, fighting to control the car. Adrenaline surged through her, and she cursed.

She heard the bag tear as Derek ripped off the zipper in his haste to get it open. He pulled out a compact semiautomatic and straightened in his seat. "Let's hope all the target practice paid off."

Fear gripped her as another bullet ricocheted off the car with a metallic *zing*. "I don't think I can lose him. Not on this road." Not with the trees so close to the car and no side roads in sight.

Derek rolled down the window and leaned out far enough to get off one careful shot. She heard the bullet hit the other car, but they didn't slow at all. Derek swore. "How much trouble do they get in if they hurt you?"

"A shit ton." Nick spotted a road ahead and stomped on the accelerator, counting on the car to perform on par with her reflexes. "But he might not be so worried about that after what went down at Alec's office." *If he's still in his right mind at all.*

He glanced over his shoulder for a split second. "Can you make that turn up there? That dirt road? I might get a clear shot at them while we're turning, and I think we need to get out of the car."

The shaky panic spiked again. "You build houses, Derek, and I'm an accountant who makes a living mixing kamikaze shots. We're not *trained*. We're not soldiers."

"He's a badass, but he's outnumbered." He fired another shot out the window, and this time she heard glass crack as it shattered the windshield of the car behind them, sending the man swerving across the road.

Even if she didn't trust herself, she trusted Derek. "Hold on." She waited until the last possible second to turn, and the car slid and shuddered. The road didn't look like a driveway, but a "dead end" sign flew past as Nick stepped on the gas again.

Derek fired off three shots in rapid succession as the other car careened around the corner and hit the brakes. Metal sparked behind them, and she heard the sound of breaking glass and a screeching noise as a tire blew and the car's bumper scraped the road.

"Shit." Nick barely looked at the road in time to spot a fallen tree leaning across it. She managed to avoid it, but the man following them slammed into it.

"Have you got room to whip around?"

"No." The road had widened, but not nearly enough. Still, they were on dirt, so she hit the brakes anyway and jerked the wheel.

They narrowly avoided two more trees, and the back end of the car skidded wildly before stabilizing. By the time they came to a stop, facing the opposite direction, Derek had his door open. He tumbled out, the gun still in his hand.

"Derek—" She scrambled out, dust burning her eyes and lungs, to shout a warning, but the man behind the wheel of the sedan was still. "Be careful."

Derek reached the crumpled car and nearly wrenched off the passenger side door. He dragged the barely conscious man across the seats and dumped him onto the ground with a low snarl. "Is there a pressing reason why I can't shoot him in the head?"

Nick grabbed his arm. "We need to talk to him. Unless you know a good medium, that'll be hard to do if he's dead."

His fingers tightened around the gun. "I bet I could find one."

"Derek, we don't have time."

"You're right." Derek swung the gun down to point at the man's knee and nudged him in the side. When he stirred and opened his eyes, Derek smiled coldly. "The lady wants to ask you some questions. Start talking or I'm going to shoot pieces off of you."

Nick took a deep breath. Enrica could have gone rogue and sent him after her, but it was unlikely. Not only would it jeopardize everything the woman had worked for, but she had nothing to gain by the action. Which meant the man on the ground was operating on someone else's orders...or was just out for revenge. "Where's your other buddy? The one who made it out with you?"

His eyes rolled back in his head, and ragged laughter spilled out of him. "No one made it out. No one's making it out. Just tell your mutt to shoot me."

Her blood chilled. "No one's shooting anybody."

"Not ruling it out," Derek muttered. "He sounds cracked."

"Cracked." The man laughed again. "You should know. You and your psychic bitch."

"Shut up." Nick glanced at Derek. "Put him in the trunk. We're taking him to the meeting with us."

Derek was breathing heavily. A hint of the wolf stared out of his eyes as he lowered the pistol. "He's talking about Kat."

"Yes, he's talking about Kat." Her suspicion had been right. The man was out of his head, and the whole chase suddenly made sense. No one who'd been trained by the Conclave could have been bested by her driving.

"He's going to go back to the Conclave and keep talking about Kat."

Could he really think it would be the first they'd heard of her? "The Conclave already knows about Kat, Derek. Just like they know about Jackson and Mahalia and *you* and everyone else who has anything to do with me or Alec. They *know*."

He trembled. "They can't know what she's capable of. *I* didn't know what she was capable of. I didn't know she could..."

Their captive bared his teeth in a challenging grin. "Scrape out a man's brains and stick 'em back in backwards? I'll tell them. I'll tell everyone if you don't shoot me."

Nick closed her hand around the gun, her pulse racing. "He doesn't want to go back to the Conclave and face my father. That's why he's saying this."

"I know." It was barely a whisper. He let go of the gun, but leaned down and pulled the man to his feet before throwing him against the side of the car. "So help me God, if you do anything to put my family or my friends in danger again, you're going to wish her father had taken you apart piece by piece."

Nick situated her finger on the gun's trigger and stepped back. "I have some chain in the trunk."

"Don't do it. Shoot me. Shoot me or I'm going to—" The man's voice cut off as Derek dragged him away from the car and slammed him back into it hard enough to knock him unconscious.

Nick could barely feel the weight of the steel still clenched in her hand. "Get him in the trunk." She was anxious to begin negotiations. During that process, at least, Michelle and Aaron would be safe, their lives guarded by the honor and word of the Conclave.

She longed to see her father. Even if the burden of saving Michelle's family had to rest on her, simply being near his solid strength would help. He couldn't officially interfere, but he could advise her. He could *be* there.

She just had to hold it together until then.

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Derek had been to Franklin's small clinic a dozen times since he'd become a shapeshifter. The building was tucked away from heavily trafficked streets and seemed unremarkable from the outside. The clinic provided free care to walk-in patients and was reputedly run on the donations of several rich beneficiaries who preferred to remain nameless.

Like most supernaturals in New Orleans, Derek knew the truth. Whatever stream of revenue kept the clinic's doors open was supernatural in nature, as were a large number of the patients who visited on any given day. Mixed in with the human staff were a number of psychics, witches and shapeshifters who treated their kind discreetly, regardless of affiliation.

It was neutral ground. Franklin permitted no feuds or political distinction inside the walls of his domain. And his domain it was, no matter how often he protested that he just kept things running. Within the four walls of the clinic, his word was the law, and the law was peace.

Franklin met them on the sidewalk outside with a smile and a short nod. "Your dad's already here, Nick. I put him and Mrs. Maglieri in the conference room."

"Thanks, Franklin." She was pale even in the heat, and her hands trembled as she tucked her hair behind her ears. "I'd better not keep them waiting."

The conference room was oblong and ran the length of the back of the building. Inside its pale blue walls was a long table. Only three chairs sat at it now.

Derek paused just inside the door out of instinct, standing with Franklin as Nick crossed the room on her own. Standing on the opposite side of the table were two wolves whose power screamed danger though they stood quietly.

He didn't know what he'd expected when he'd envisioned Nick's father, but it certainly wasn't the man he saw. John Wesley Peyton rivaled Derek's height, but he was as wide as Aaron through the shoulders and even more intimidating. The woman next to him—presumably Luciano's mother—seemed slight in comparison. Nick looked outright tiny.

But what Luciano's mother lacked in physical presence she made up for with a cool air of confidence. It was clear she considered herself the equal or better of every person in the room, up to and including the Alpha, and she barely spared Derek a glance.

Nick's father, however, stared at him. He could feel the Alpha's calculating assessment, and it was then he realized how strongly Nick carried his scent.

*So much for subtle.* He'd never have another chance to make a first impression—a *good* impression—and it took him a moment to remember it hardly mattered. Nick's father had probably compiled a file on him the first time he'd stepped into Nick's bar. There was no chance to make any impression at all. He'd been judged long ago and found unsuitable.

It had never seemed like such an insurmountable barrier before.

"Nicole." Her father held out his hand.

"Hi, Daddy." She took it, and he enfolded her in a quick hug. When she pulled away, she blinked hard. "Thank you for meeting me, Enrica."

The woman nodded once.

Nick went on. "I brought a peace offering. One of surviving men from—"

Franklin cleared his throat quietly behind him, and Derek turned to see that Luciano had joined him at the back of the room. "Nick, your father and Enrica thought it would be best if Luke and Derek waited in my office while you three have your talk. That agreeable to you?"

Stricken, she stared at her father, who met her disbelieving look with an impassive expression. "I..." She turned her gaze to Derek, an apology in her dark eyes. "If that's what they prefer."

Derek tried to smile. "It's okay. I'll wait for you."

The two older wolves seemed surprised he'd spoken, and Luciano cleared his throat. "Come on, Gabriel. They have things to figure out."

He couldn't turn away, not with Nick staring at him with guilt and pain in her eyes. Two steps back took him out of the room, and Franklin murmured an apology as he pulled the door shut behind them.

The walls were soundproof. Either that, or the three wolves on the other side were staring at each other in silence. Whatever the case, Franklin didn't give Derek a chance to brood on it. He nodded toward a door on the other side of the hallway. "There's a couch in there and a minifridge with some drinks. Make yourselves comfortable. This could take awhile."

Luciano walked into the office, pausing only briefly before bending down to inspect the contents of the small refrigerator. "Want a beer?"

“God, yes.” The office door whispered shut with a soft *click* as Derek sank to the couch. “Was I not supposed to open my mouth in front of the Alpha?”

“Don’t take it personally.” Luciano tossed him a can and popped the top on one of his own. “I’m not allowed to speak, either.”

“Jesus.” For the first time, Derek forced himself consider the kind of life Luciano had obviously led. Derek might have lost his parents, but he’d been an adult with a couple decades of parental adoration and approval behind him. He’d never had to wonder if his family might turn on him for political gain.

A few days ago sympathy for Luciano would have seemed impossible, but there was no mistaking the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach. He looked at Luciano and saw the man’s tense expression ease into wry amusement. “Don’t feel bad for me over something stupid like that. You want to pity me? Do it because I have even less of a chance than you do of ever being with the woman I love.”

Derek had almost forgotten the entire reason Nick trusted Luciano. “Has Michelle’s life always been this...” He groped for the right word. “Complicated?”

Luciano stared down into his beer. “Michelle’s got it pretty good. They’ve kept Seers in cages before, or under heavy sedation. Killed a lot of them if they seemed particularly unstable.”

The words were bleak. Tired. Derek had known the reality of Michelle’s life intellectually from the moment she’d shown up at Nick’s bar, but there hadn’t been time to understand. The most primal part of him felt the strange, terrifying power every time she entered a room. She was different, unnatural on a level it shamed him to consider. But if even *he* felt it...

Luciano’s silent hopelessness was more telling than a thousand passionate words. With nothing filling the tense quiet of the office, Derek finally faced the one truth he’d been fighting all along. “They’re not going to let her and Aaron go, are they? Nothing Nick can say or do will make that happen.”

“Let them go where?” Luciano ran a rough hand through his hair, leaving it hanging over his forehead in disarray. “There’s nowhere for someone like Michelle to go.”

Instinct told him Luciano was telling the truth—or thought he was. Which left only one question. “Then what is Nick trying to do?”

“She’s trying to make sure Michelle doesn’t end up dead or in a cage. If they—” He sat next to Derek. “If the Conclave agrees, someone can be responsible for her. Sort of like a—a keeper.”

Derek had to set his beer can aside to keep from crushing it as the wolf howled in warning. There was danger here, but not the sort he’d expected. “So, a keeper. Someone like Nick?”

“Someone like Nick.”

It seemed too easy, which meant it wasn’t. It wouldn’t be as simple as packing Michelle up and moving her into Nick’s spare bedroom. If he’d learned anything over the past two years, it was to view the actions of the shapeshifter aristocracy through the lens of antiquated prejudice and misogyny.



It didn't take a scholar of history to recognize the obvious answer, not with Luciano and everything he represented sitting right in front of him. "Someone like Nick and a well-trained husband who does every damn thing they say." Anger infused his words, and he let it. Anger was better than fear.

Luciano stared down at his own hands. "You're not slow. That's good."

"That's some condescending bullshit, not an answer."

"Come on, Gabriel. Nick's always been a dreamer, but you strike me as the realistic type."

Wanting to deny the truth just because Luciano had agreed with it was an immature, idiotic urge. Derek braced his elbows on his knees and dropped his face to his hands. "Have you been watching me this whole time, thinking I'm a fucking fool? An idiot who thought he could be a part of her life?"

"No." The denial was quick and sincere. "Nick thinks she can talk them into letting her look out for Michelle down here. But that isn't going to happen, no matter what she says to them." He rose and paced the floor. "Nick wants to be with you, and she wants to take care of her sister. What she doesn't understand yet is that she can't do both."

*I have to let her go.* Even as the thought formed, he couldn't quite believe it had come from him. But Luciano hadn't put it there—it had been festering inside him all along, the danger his wolf couldn't understand because it would never understand that asking Nick to choose his love over her sister's life would mean losing her anyway. If he backed her into that corner, he'd be as bad as the Conclave. He'd be worse, because he was supposed to care about her.

Derek stared at his hands and said it out loud, just to be sure. "I have to let her go."

"Maybe not forever." Luciano offered the words, but they were meaningless. "Maybe not even for long."

A week ago, that reassurance might have given him hope. But hope was in short supply, and nothing could silence his furious instincts. They demanded that he fight, for Nick and for what they could be together. She was *his*.

*And I have to let her go.*

\*\*\*

They drove back to Nick's house in silence. Half a dozen times, Derek opened his mouth to say the words, to broach the subject they both avoided as if by mutual consent.

And half a dozen times he closed it again without a word, because knowing what he had to do didn't make it easier. Not with Nick sitting next to him, radiating misery and hopelessness.

She didn't speak when she parked and unlocked the front door, or while they walked through the dark foyer and up the stairs. When they reached her bedroom, she bypassed the lights and sank to the edge of the bed. "I have to go to New York tomorrow."

"For how long?"

"I don't know. A few days, at least. Maybe longer." She ran her fingers through her hair. "As long as it takes for me to convince them."

Derek knelt in front of her and laid his hands on her knees. "You don't have to say it, Nicky. I understand."

"No, you don't." Her head fell forward, and hot tears splashed on his skin as her shoulders shook. "I don't even understand why the stupid bastards won't listen to me."

His heart broke as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his lap. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. *I'm* sorry. I'm—" The words broke off in a sob.

"I know you care about me. If there was any way..." His voice shook, and he swallowed back tears and tightened his arms around her. "You need to save your sister. You need to fight for her, and you can't do that with me around. But I'll be here." *I love you.*

"No." She pulled back to look at him, her face set in a mask of pain. "I can't ask you to do that. I might have to sell the bar and my house. I don't know if I'll make it back to New Orleans, Derek. You can't wait for me."

*You can't stop me.* But telling her wouldn't help, not now. Now he needed to give her what she needed. He had to give her goodbye.

He lifted his hands to frame her face and kissed her once, hard. "If this is the last time, I want everything."

"Everything." Nick closed her eyes, but tears slipped down her cheeks anyway. "I love you."

Those three words weren't supposed to destroy him. Derek kissed the tears from her cheeks and prayed she wouldn't open her eyes and find him crying too. "I love you, Nicole Parker Peyton."

She nuzzled his face as she tugged at his shirt. "Make love to me, like it's any other night. Like it'll never end."

It would be something to remember when he was alone in his cold, miserable bed. He lifted her to the bed and held up his arms so she could remove his shirt. Hers tore a little when he got his hands on it, but soon she was shirtless and he was free to cover her shoulders and neck with desperate kisses.

She wove her fingers into his hair and held his mouth to her skin while she whispered soft, encouraging words. Her whispers turned into gasps and then moans, and she let go. "Lie down."

He couldn't deny her anything. Not now. He crawled on the bed, rolled onto his back and held out a hand. "Come here."

Nick clasped his hand and knelt over him. Her hair brushed his skin as she bent to trace hot circles on his chest with her tongue. Every movement was careful, deliberate, as if she meant to memorize him.

Finally, she kissed his stomach and lowered her hands to his belt.

"Baby." He held her head and tried not to arch up against her. "God, I want you so bad. I need you."

She unbuckled his belt, loosened his jeans and freed his cock. "I dreamt about doing this for so long."

Even with their lives falling apart, the instincts inside him stirred. The soft touch of her hand conjured fantasies, the urge to rise off the bed and spill them both to the floor. To turn her over and take her with sure, strong thrusts that branded her as his. Instead, he dropped his hands to the bed and grasped the comforter. “Do whatever you want. Anything.”

Her breath blew over him, hot and teasing, a moment before she took him in her mouth.

Derek groaned as heat shot through him. “Fuck!”

It was slow and torturous. She stroked every inch of his cock with her hands, lips and tongue, breathing appreciative sighs and moans when he arched into her touch.

It was perfect, and it wasn’t nearly enough. Derek reached for her, wrapped his hands around her arms and tugged lightly. “Get up here. I want to kiss you.”

She crawled over him, flushed and panting. “What else do you want?”

“Just you.” He tangled his fingers in her hair and dragged her lips to his. He poured everything into the kiss, everything he couldn’t say and everything he felt. The love that should have been enough but couldn’t be.

Nick melted into him, her desperation matching his own. She began to jerk at her jeans, and she whispered against his mouth. “Help me, baby.”

He almost tore the button free from the denim. His fingers fumbled with the zipper, and he froze. “Shit. Condoms. We’re supposed to remember condoms this time.”

She bit his jaw with a growl and leaned over to fumble with the nightstand drawer. “I have some...”

Derek rolled over and reached past her to yank the drawer free from the nightstand. It fell to the floor with a clatter, and he snatched up a condom and tossed it on the bed next to them with a low noise.

Nick lay beneath him, her ass pressing up against his cock. She laid her cheek on her arm and drew in a shaky breath. “It feels so good when you touch me.”

“I know.” He kissed her shoulder and then her back as he dragged her jeans the rest of the way down her legs. His pants joined hers on the floor, and for several heartbeats he simply stood at the edge of the bed and tried to fix the sight of her stretched out on the bed in his memory. “You’re so fucking gorgeous, Nicky.”

She watched him, her eyes dark, and he knew she was doing the same thing—studying him until she could remember every detail and moment. “Say it again.”

The bed dipped under his weight as he knelt next to her and smoothed his hand up the line of her spine. “You’re gorgeous. You’re beautiful.”

“So are you.” She shivered. “I’ve always thought so. Even when you were taking your shirt off just to torture me.”

He didn’t have to ask what she was talking about. New Year’s Eve, when he’d gotten too drunk on shots of vodka to care that he’d just challenged a telekinetic to a game of strip darts. Nick’s gaze on his

body had been a triumph and a torment, proof that she wanted him even if he couldn't bring himself to take her.

*Too little, too late.*

Derek banished the thought, rolled onto his back and reached for her. "Stop talking and kiss me."

She came to him, her mouth and hands hot and eager. Foil crinkled as she pressed the condom into his hand and bit his neck.

His hands fumbled. He felt too clumsy, too frantic, but there was no way to slow down. She kissed him so hard he wanted to drown in it, and it wasn't until he had the condom on and his fingers wrapped around her hips that he really believed it was the last time.

Nick hovered over him, her mouth on his. She started to speak but kissed him again and angled her hips down over his in a smooth rock that brought him deep inside her.

Thought shattered. The woman of his dreams was over him, riding him, and it was so fucking perfect all he could do was clutch her waist and whisper her name.

She rode him, her hands braced on his stomach and her head thrown back. Her movements were slow at first, silent until her breath began to escape in pants and moans. Every roll of her hips was more intense than the last, until she was digging her nails into his skin and gasping his name.

Derek ground his teeth together and slid his fingers between her legs. "That's it, baby. Come on..."

She came as soon as he touched her. A desperate, shuddering cry tore free of her, and she jerked against his hand as she tightened around his cock. Pleasure turned sharp as the need to give in clawed at him, but he dug his teeth into his lower lip and took over the rhythm of their movements.

Her eyes snapped open as a second orgasm shook through her, and she leaned forward to bite his chin. "Please," she whispered, her voice husky with pleasure. "Derek—"

He wanted to hold on. For minutes, for hours... *Forever*. His body betrayed him with her next whimpering cry, and the world swam in hazy pleasure as he came with her name on his lips.

Nick wrapped her arms around him and tucked her head against his shoulder. It took a while for her to speak, and she still sounded breathless. "Will you stay tonight?"

It would prolong the agony, but he didn't know how to say no. So he stroked her hair back and prayed he'd be strong enough to walk away in the morning. "Of course."

## Chapter Fifteen

They were keeping her sister in a fucking dungeon.

Nick plastered a bland look on her face. She couldn't afford to have the guards report her reactions to the Conclave, not if she expected them to believe she was approaching the entire matter as a rational member of their society and not an angry, emotional sister.

Michelle saw through her. Her tiny smile was tired but real. "They let us stay together. Thank you for making that happen."

Aaron wore the carefully impassive expression he'd cultivated over years of service to the Conclave. Nick touched his arm. "I'll be back tomorrow. I may not know anything yet, but I'll be by to visit."

"Thank you, Nicole." His gaze found hers. For one brief moment, she saw that same resignation from the day at the safe house, the day he'd told her he was going to die. "Do you think you could talk your father into sending down some fruit for Michelle?"

"Aaron." Michelle gave him an exasperated look. "I'm not sure pregnancy cravings are top priority at the moment."

"I'll ask Mrs. Maglieri." Enrica would be flattered by the deference. "I'll take care of it." One of the guards nodded to her, and Nick stifled a sigh. "I have to go now. Sleep well tonight."

She didn't wait for an answer, and both guards flanked her as she headed for the door. It swung open to reveal not only Mahalia but also a tall man loitering nervously in the hallway. He looked like Alec, only older and softer, and Nick wanted to run in the opposite direction. "Mr. Jacobson."

"Nicole." He rubbed a hand over his hair and smiled at her. "It's so nice to see you back in New York."

*It's nice to be here.* The expected words hung in her throat, and she couldn't resist a subtle dig. "Thank you. Alec sends his regards."

The barb hit. He stiffened and shot a dirty look at Mahalia, who favored him with a sweet smile. "So I've been told."

"He's a good friend." Nick ignored her own revulsion and took his hand in hers, patting it. "Like the brother I never had."

"Oh. That's..." His smile turned sickly. "I promised Jorge I'd meet him for dinner, so I have to run. Good luck with your...petition."

"Thank you, Mr. Jacobson."

He rallied enough for one last retort. "I'm sure you'll be joining us for dinner tomorrow night at the Ochoas' penthouse. Jorge's sons were looking forward to seeing you again."

The reminder of her true worth in their society brought goose bumps to her flesh. "They're charming men," she managed to say, "just like their father."

She didn't wait for him to respond. When she turned away, Mahalia grasped her arm. "Come on, honey. I'm taking you back to your daddy's place."

"It's not far, May. I can manage on my own."

"Shush." They reached the end of the hall, and Mahalia called the elevator. "You need a break from the maneuvering, and I need a friendly face."

They didn't speak again until they'd made it up to the ground floor, through the lobby and out into the fading sunlight. A breeze whipped some of Nick's hair free of its awkwardly secured bun, and she gripped Mahalia's arm tightly. "I thought it would be hard."

"What?"

"Coming back here." Except that wasn't quite right. "No. I wondered if I'd even remember how things worked up here, but it's like second nature."

Mahalia huffed. "First nature is more like it. Good or bad, you were raised in this, Nicole. This is what you know."

"I guess." People hurried past them as they strolled down the street toward the park. "It sucks to realize I belong with a bunch of power-hungry vultures."

"Didn't say you belonged here." Mahalia wrinkled her nose. "I think you belong down in Louisiana with that boy of yours, and the quicker you can get back, the better."

Nick shouldn't have been so damn cold in a long-sleeved shirt and blazer. "I'm not going back to New Orleans, May."

Mahalia stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and grasped Nick's shoulders. "You can't mean that."

It was the one thing she hadn't let herself consider, but it had become tragically apparent after only a few hours in New York. The other Conclave members weren't interested in any agreement she made with Enrica. Most of them had strong sons who wanted to lead, and much more to gain from having them married into the Peyton line than from having Nick out of the way. It was a more traditional route to power than scrambling after the end of a former Alpha's legacy, and Conclave members could be depended on to prefer tradition over nearly anything else.

Nick had no choice but to go along with it. Her agreement with Enrica meant nothing if the rest of the Conclave refused to support it, and the only way to leverage a better outcome for Michelle was to have them all vying for her favor. They'd go out of their way to please her if it meant she might accept a marriage proposal, and that potential for leniency offered the best chance Michelle and Aaron had at happiness.

Mahalia was still staring at her, bewildered, and Nick averted her eyes. “Going back to Louisiana isn’t an option for me. That’s what Alec’s dad was talking about when he mentioned Ochoa’s sons. My value here is tied to marriage. To—to breeding. It’s the only thing I have to bargain with.”

Mahalia ground her teeth together. “Did you tell Derek Gabriel that?”

If she’d known what she’d have to do, she could have given him that truth. In her more selfish moments, she was glad she hadn’t known, hadn’t had to tell him and see the look in his eyes when he understood she’d soon belong to another man. “I told him not to wait for me.”

“And when he hears you’ve married someone else?”

“That isn’t fair, May. I ended it.” Pain lanced through Nick, and her throat burned. “*We* ended it. I didn’t lie to Derek, and I didn’t make him any promises. He knows I—he—” She couldn’t cry on the street a block from the Conclave’s headquarters. She *wouldn’t*. “Can we talk about it later?”

The older woman’s stricken expression hurt to see, and Nick looked away again, just in time to see a dark limousine pull to a stop beside them. She tensed instinctively, but the back window slid down to reveal her father’s face.

He smiled, the expression tired. “How’s your sister?”

“Better since she found out they’re letting Aaron stay with her.” She eyed the car. “Were you going in or headed home?”

“I’m headed home, if you’d like to ride with me.” Her father’s gaze flickered to Mahalia. “Ms. Tate, I hope you’ll join us as well.”

“I’d be happy to. Nicole and I should finish our conversation, after all.”

*You mean you you’re not finished chastising me for breaking Derek’s heart.* “Climb in, May.”

When they’d both settled onto the seats, Nick leaned against the headrest. “Alec’s father was in there. He’s more than a little upset that his kid has no interest in trying to win my hand.”

“Alec’s involvement in the situation hasn’t won his father any points with Jorge. He’s in danger of falling out of favor, and it’s made him desperate.”

“So I’ve noticed.” Calmly discussing Conclave matters in front of Mahalia would only incense her further, but Nick couldn’t help it. “How long do you think I can make them wait before I decide which one to marry?”

Her father tapped his fingers on the seat in an absent-minded gesture. “I think that depends on whether you have one of the sons in mind. Luciano’s the least qualified for leadership, but it could be argued that makes him a better candidate as a husband.”

Mahalia made a choked noise. Nick ignored her as the splintering pain in her chest grew in intensity. “It makes no difference who I choose if I can’t string them all along until they make a formal decision about Michelle. That’s the only way we’ll get a majority vote.”

“Knowing who you’ll choose isn’t the same as making the choice. I don’t think you should string them along at all. Defer the decision to me.” His lips twisted in something that almost looked like distaste. “They can excuse me from making the decision while my other daughter’s fate hangs in the balance, of course.”

“This is bullshit.” Mahalia ground out the words. “You’re trading one girl’s freedom for the other’s.”

Her father tensed, and Nick leaned forward. “Stop it, May. It’s my *choice*.”

“Not when there aren’t any alternatives,” she argued. “John, how can you let her walk away from the man she loves for this kind of—of servitude?”

Nick froze. She hadn’t told her father about her feelings for Derek, and it was the one thing she’d hoped he’d never discover.

“Nicole?” Just her name, but there was no mistaking the command in it.

*I don’t love him.* She tried to force out the words, but they tasted of betrayal. She fought back tears and whispered, “I made a choice.” Her vision blurred with tears, at once sudden and the culmination of days of misery. “I left him, because I made a *choice*.”

Her father pressed a button on his armrest and a speaker crackled to life. “Paul, could you pull over for a minute, please?” He didn’t wait for a reply, just lifted his hand as the car rolled to a graceful stop. “Ms. Tate, I hope you’ll pardon my inexcusable rudeness in asking if you can walk the last block on your own. I need to have a private discussion with my daughter.”

She opened the door and touched Nick’s hand. “Nicole—”

“I know.” She tried to breathe through her tears. “You just don’t understand.”

The door slammed behind Mahalia. Nick’s father turned to her and held out both arms. She fell into them, into the same strong embrace that had comforted her as a child. “I’m okay. I can do this.”

“Shh.” Strong fingers stroked over her hair. “You should have told me, Nicole. I understand what’s at stake, but that just makes it more important for you to tell me the truth.”

She swallowed a sob. “I didn’t want you to know. This is hard enough.”

He rubbed her back gently. “I wish I could tell you there’s an easy solution. I’m still looking for the leverage I need, but the incident with your friend and Charles Talbot has left the Conclave unusually united on the Seer issue.”

The truth was stark. Terrifying. “I’m the only leverage you *have*.”

He didn’t lie. “Maybe. But if there’s any way to stall long enough to find more, we’ll do it.”

To hold on to that hope only to have it dashed would be unbearable. Nick sat back in her seat. “I’ll make it clear you’re the one who’ll choose my husband. Each one will find in favor of Michelle and possibly even Aaron, just on the off-chance you’ll choose his son. His family.”

“Most likely.” Her father pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her. “Noah’s the only one without a son to throw at you. It’s going to infuriate him, but he can’t stop it.”



“That still leaves three members eager to make an alliance.” She looked out the window. “When the time comes, I’ll choose Luciano. I like him, and we respect and understand each other.”

“I think he would make the best husband. I think he’d be...sympathetic to your responsibility to your sister.”

A vise tightened painfully around her heart. “You mean we’d both be doing it because we love Michelle.”

The car slowed to a stop in front of the hotel that housed her father’s penthouse. “Even with all of this, Nicole, it may not be enough to buy Aaron a reprieve. Their prejudice works in your sister’s favor, because she’s young and sheltered and in their minds may not have known better. But Aaron broke the oaths he made to the Conclave. He committed treason.”

“No.” It wasn’t an option. “If they kill Aaron, we may as well let them keep Michelle locked up for the rest of her life.”

“Aaron disagrees. Vehemently, I might add.”

“Of course he does. He can’t think about leaving her behind, miserable and hopeless, so he’s convinced himself she’s going to be fine without him.”

“Sometimes we lose the people we love, Nicole. We go on because other people need us.” His voice turned firm. “Because our children need us. Consider that before you condemn your future nephew to being born in a jail cell.”

She bristled and barely managed to check her growl. “I didn’t say I wasn’t going to fight Michelle’s imprisonment. But we need to find a way to save Aaron too.”

“We’ll try.” Her father fixed her with a stern look. “I don’t like the realities of the situation any better than you do, but ignoring them won’t help your sister, and it won’t help Aaron.”

“This is exhausting.” The confession escaped her along with a hoarse sigh. “It’s just so fucking *exhausting*.”

For a moment, she thought he’d agree. Instead, he changed the subject. “Mrs. Kelly has prepared lunch for us. After that, you’ll have a few hours before we’re scheduled to meet with Enrica.”

She would get through the day, and then the next, because she had to. Nick smoothed her disheveled hair and slid across the seat. “I’ll be ready.”

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Nick poured a second cup of tea and arched an eyebrow at the woman across from her. “Sugar?”

“Please.” Veronica’s smile was a little shy. “Should we get the necessary unpleasanties out of the way? I’m sure you know I was sent to ferret out your evil plans like a dutiful daughter.”

“I expected nothing less.” Nick handed over the cup and a saucer. “How is Mr. Coleman doing these days?”

“Upset.” The spoon clinked gently against the side of the cup as Veronica stirred her tea. “With me, mostly. He’s convinced that if I’d done my job and convinced Luciano to fall desperately in love with me by now, Enrica would be on his side.”

“What about Ochoa’s sons?”

“Too many of them. I could have won one of them, but the other two could still go after you and upset any alliance I managed to secure.”

“Same with Hoffman, I guess.” If there was anyone else in the world who knew what it was to be nothing more than a pawn to be taken, it was Veronica Coleman. “I’ve given the decision to my father.”

“Smart. It might save you some of the worst of Oscar Ochoa’s come-ons, at least.” Veronica sipped her tea before rolling her eyes. “He courted me for a month before our fathers had their latest fight. Two years ago now, I think. He paid his assistant to bring me a dozen roses a day with cards that had my name spelled wrong.”

“He apparently didn’t pay his assistant enough. You’re allergic to flowers.”

“Mmm. When he found out you’d have thought I’d developed the allergies just to spite him.”

“He must have inherited his father’s legendary sensitivity.”

“Ladies of the world, beware.” Veronica set her saucer on the table and placed her teacup on top of it, fidgeting with it until the handle lined up perfectly with the edge of the table. When she finally looked up at Nick again, her expression was guarded. “With the exception of Hoffman’s youngest, who’s barely nineteen, Luciano’s the only tolerable one in the bunch.”

“I don’t want him, if that’s what you’re asking.” But Veronica deserved the truth. “My father will probably choose him, though. I hope you understand.”

Veronica’s sadness was tangible. “I’m not in love with him. I don’t think it would be hard to love Luciano, but I know better. That sort of thing is a liability for women like us.”

The only time love hadn’t felt like a liability was with Derek. Nick shoved back the memories. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“There’s a man back home in New Orleans. He’s been a wolf for about two years now, and I...” She took a deep breath. “I left him. To come here.”

“Oh, Nick.” Veronica leaned forward and held out her hand. “I didn’t know, or I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t have...”

“That wasn’t my confession.” She set down her cup and saucer so they wouldn’t rattle as her hands shook. “The thing is, I’d convinced myself I wouldn’t have to do this. That I would never have to come back and be part of this life. So you’re smarter than me, Ronnie. You figured this shit out a long time ago.”

“No. I just didn’t have the courage to fight them. I was never as strong as you are.”

As if that strength mattered. She'd left her home and the man she loved, because nothing could spare her the responsibilities resting on her shoulders. "It doesn't matter now. That was...another lifetime."

Veronica covered Nick's hands with her own and lowered her voice. "What can I do to help Michelle? I'll tell my father whatever you want me to."

The plan was in place, and it was a good one. Foolproof. "Tell him that I'm miserable, and that my father's having the devil's own time keeping me in line. And that—that I refuse to marry for anything other than love." Maybe Noah Coleman would at least feel vindicated by her suffering and be too distracted to cause problems.

"Can I also tell him Oscar Ochoa has a snowball's chance of winning you over?" Veronica smiled. "They might be the truest words I'll ever speak to him."

Nick almost laughed. "Whatever else you choose to add is fine with me."

"Good. Now, while I'm here, I wanted to apologize for not having a chance to meet your friend yet. Marcus, I think?"

"Marcus Talbot, yes. Did they assign you Eddie's case?"

"They did. But it's low on their list, and I wasn't in town anyway. My mother was sick. I've been in Atlanta for the last two months helping her get back on her feet."

Nick's father had told her Noah still wanted a son so badly his wife kept getting pregnant though she'd been advised not to. Her latest pregnancy had ended in a late-term miscarriage. "I was sorry to hear about it, Ronnie."

Veronica closed her eyes, but not fast enough to hide the tears. "My father likes to make his opinion of the women in his life clear. Do you know what he said to me when he asked me to come over here?"

"No, I don't know." She didn't want to. The look on Veronica's face was heartbreaking enough.

"You're going to steal Luciano from me. In my father's mind, that trumps the fact that we grew up together, trumps friendship, trumps *everything*." When she opened her eyes, there was anger there. "I'm a grown woman with a law degree, and he doesn't credit me with a single thought of my own besides getting a man."

The whole truth was so much more insidious. "He isn't crediting Luciano with much, either, if he thinks he could be so easily swayed."

"He will be," Veronica replied quietly. "Just like I'll end up marrying one of them even though I don't want to. That's the privileged fate we were all born into, Nick. Money and power and whatever life our parents think best."

Her tea had cooled, but Nick didn't care. Her stomach had knotted into a cold, hard ball anyway, so she set the cup and saucer down again. "And I thought I'd gotten out. See, Ronnie? Stupid."

"Not stupid. Hopeful. You had the guts to get out. I wish I had."

"You still could."

Veronica shook her head. “Michelle is your hostage. My mother is mine. She failed to provide a suitable heir, and he’s never going to let her forget that.”

Nick fought a shudder. “An awful lot of blackmail and arm-twisting for a supposedly civilized people, isn’t it?”

“My mother likes to say it’s how we all stay civilized, by twisting arms instead of tearing them off like we used to.”

It was a good rationalization. “The old way’s more honest. You always know where you stand with someone who’s trying to rip off your arm and beat you with it.”

“You can say that because you’re strong enough to tear off arms.”

“An excellent point.” Nick rose and walked to the window overlooking the park. “Want to go to Cedar Hill? Hide under Glade Arch like we did when we were kids?”

Veronica laughed. “I was going to go shopping and find an appropriate dress to wear to the Ochoa dinner tonight. I’ve been told business professional will not be tolerated.”

“I don’t own anything appropriate. Not anymore.” Nick turned and smiled weakly, reluctant to give up one of the few friendly faces left for her in the city. “Can I come along?”

“Of course. You can help me pick out the frumpiest, most unflattering dress on sale in New York City.”

Nick would have loved to employ the same trick. But she had to play her role to the fullest, and that involved looking sophisticated but demure, attractive but modest. “Come on. Let’s go.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Derek dropped a stack of dirty dishes in the sink and indulged himself with another quick peek out the back window. Kat was safe enough roaming the backyard with Mackenzie keeping her company, but it wasn't her physical well-being that concerned him anymore.

Kat and Mackenzie were sitting on the old-fashioned swing Derek had helped his father build as his first wood-working project. His heart ached a little as he watched Mackenzie wrap an arm around Kat and pat her shoulder. Whatever words she spoke were too soft to be heard this far away, but Kat offered a small smile in response.

He turned away from the window. "Mac seems to have bonded with Kat on your adventure to Georgia."

"Kenzie knows what it's like to wake up one day and realize you can kill people without expending a hell of a lot of effort." Jackson leaned back in his chair. "Speaking of, how's Andrew been?"

"Shitty." He pulled two beers out of the refrigerator, handed one to Jackson and took the seat across from him. "Alec's very close-mouthed about the whole thing, but I get the feeling things are seriously, seriously fucked up in that department."

"My partner is remarkably close-mouthed about a lot of things." Jackson regarded his beer for a moment. "But if there's anyone who can help Andrew, it's Alec. You know that better than most."

"Yeah. Except at this point after my attack, I was still hiding in Alec's basement, wincing at loud noises. Andrew's..."

"Don't feel too bad. From what I can tell, you're the norm, not this crazy shit."

Derek drained half his beer and slammed the bottle down on the table. "I'm not suffering a bruised ego. I'm worried about my friend."

"Hell, I know that. There isn't a damn thing I can say or do to reassure you, though, and you deserve to know that."

Alec had said the same thing. "Franklin found someone to help Kat. An empath who splits his time between New Orleans and England. He's due to be here in a few weeks, but I don't know how to keep Kat from going nuts before then. She won't *talk* to me."

Jackson's bottle thumped on the table. "Let me and Kenzie worry about Kat until then. Even if she could talk about it, she's not going to burden you. Not right now. You've got your own shit."

"My shit is that I can't help any of the people I care about deal with *their* shit."

"All Kat needs is time."

"And Andrew, and Nick. Is that what they need too?"

"Do yourself a favor and focus on Kat and Andrew." Jackson looked away. "You can't help Nick."

Derek closed his eyes. "Is there news?"

"Not really. Not *news*." The other man's bottle tapped rhythmically on the table. "Do you understand why she went back to New York? What she's there to do?"

"She's there to save her sister." Derek didn't open his eyes, because the tone of Jackson's voice had shifted. Wariness, or maybe even pity. "I don't know the details, but she's probably never getting her life back."

Jackson was silent for a long time. "It's a trade. Michelle and her kid get a pass, such as it is...and Nicky gets auctioned off."

The pain of the last week disappeared in a black hole of agony. His instincts screamed for action, for him to charge up to New York and destroy anyone who might challenge him for his woman. His mate.

His hands ached, and it was only then he realized he'd clenched them into fists so tight his fingernails were digging into his palms. It hurt to take a breath, but he managed. Speaking was worse, but he managed that too. "Anything I try to do will just make her life worse." *Please contradict me.*

"I'm sorry as hell, Derek."

If he saw sympathy in Jackson's face he'd scream. "Don't. She's the one who has to..." He couldn't even get the words out.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean—" The words melted into a curse, and Jackson's chair slid back from the table. "Sometimes it hurts worse being the person on the sidelines."

"I'm not on the sidelines. I'm not invited to the game."

"I know. Shit."

Torturing Jackson about it wasn't going to do any good. Derek met Jackson's gaze. "Andrew and I are going to be at Franklin's clinic for the next week, helping with some construction upstairs. I don't know what to do about Kat. She can't come with us but I don't think she's ready to go back to your office yet." Maybe if he concentrated hard enough on micromanaging Kat and Andrew's lives... *Because sticking your head in the sand has been a huge fucking success so far.*

"Mackenzie would love to have her help over at the dance studio."

"Perfect. She was so excited when Nick told her—" His voice cracked as the bottle in his hand shattered. The purely physical pain of glass shards slicing into his palm barely registered over the wave of loss. Not a human loss, either—the agony clawing inside him was animal and furious, every bit as strong as the lust that had come with Nick's touch.

“Fuck.” Jackson’s voice sounded far away and vague. He dragged Derek to the sink and quickly rinsed his hand. “You should go see Alec,” he advised as he wrapped a clean kitchen towel around the wound.

“Alec.” Derek’s voice was hoarse, jagged, and the wolf felt too close to the surface. He shuddered and tried to find the control he’d spent two long, miserable years learning. “Kat. Kat was going to stay here.”

“Let us handle it. We’ll take her to our place.”

With Kat gone, he could let go. “Soon?”

Jackson glanced out the window over the sink. “Now.”

With Kat gone, he could fall apart.

Holding it together while Jackson rounded up Mackenzie and Kat was one of the hardest things he’d had to do in an already difficult week. But he smiled and closed his healing hand into a fist so she wouldn’t see the blood, and Kat was so locked up in her own head that she didn’t question his assurance that he’d be fine on his own.

There was no reason she should. Derek was the steady one. The responsible one who’d taken over the difficult parental role in her life when she’d still been young enough to believe parents were strong. Not immortal—she’d lost too many family members to believe that—but unshakable.

So he kissed her forehead and Mackenzie’s cheek. He ignored the worried look in the woman’s eyes as she tugged Kat toward the door. It was enough to know Kat would be safe. Jackson and Mackenzie would take care of her.

She’d be better off than him.

He listened to Jackson’s truck rumble to life in the driveway. He leaned against the door and followed the sound of the vehicle backing out and shifting gears. Within moments, the clanking rattle of the engine had faded and he was alone.

*Alone. Something I’d better get used to.*

It would be nice to think he wasn’t the type to indulge in self-pity, but he’d never been very good at lying to himself. The last two years of his life had been one endless self-indulgent snit as he wallowed in his misery and used his uncomfortable situation as an excuse. An excuse to avoid everything he was too afraid to face.

Like the fact he wasn’t human anymore.

Derek pushed off the door and headed to the kitchen to finish cleaning up. The cuts on his hand were almost healed, nothing but thin puckered lines that would fade to silvered scars by midnight and be gone in the morning. *Not fucking human.*

He’d admitted it on the surface. He’d even used it as an excuse to keep Kat trapped in bubble wrap for the last two years. She might complain and bitch and throw things at him sometimes, but he’d always held the trump card. *It’s instinct.* He’d see that flash of guilt in her eyes, the realization that he’d gone through

hell and survived, that she could have lost the only family she had left. And she'd buckle just enough to let him protect her from the things that had happened to him.

Not that he'd done her any favors. Supernaturals lived dangerous lives. The number of their acquaintances who had been orphaned before twenty was proof enough. Believing he could keep Kat safe forever had been foolish, but instead of helping her learn how to cope with the dangers of the world she insisted she belonged in, he'd...

*What did you do, Gabriel?*

He'd done what he'd always done. He'd acted like that world Kat played in was a world in which neither of them belonged. He'd been born human, after all. Even after he'd recovered from the attack, he'd tried to resume his previous life, as if humanity was something he could shoehorn himself back into if he just fought hard enough.

Wasting time had cost him everything that mattered.

He blew out a breath, trying to fight the rising swell of pain. It didn't matter. The wolf inside him grieved for a lost mate, and nothing would dull the pain but time. Alec had promised him that much, at least.

Alec was probably a fucking liar.

It didn't matter. He'd take the pain, make it his. Find a way to use it to do things differently, to help Kat become strong enough to take care of herself, to help Andrew adjust to the new world he was stuck in. To find a place in that world for himself, because hiding in between the two worlds hadn't done jack or shit for him.

And maybe, *maybe*, if Nick found a way out of her political mess—*don't hope, don't you dare hope*—he'd be ready to meet her as a partner.

It might be breaking the spirit of his promise, but it was the best he could do. Because if Nick Peyton thought he could go on with his life as if she hadn't left a gaping hole in it...

*Alec is a fucking liar.*

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Nick pulled her patterned silk wrap more tightly around her bare arms and sighed with relief when she and Veronica stepped through the hotel's revolving door and into the night. "That was horrible."

"Moderately so, yes." Veronica's modest heels clicked against the sidewalk as she moved to the curb. "I'm sorry I couldn't help much, but I doubt I would have caught anyone's attention without stripping naked and climbing on my chair."

The pleated hem of Nick's dress fluttered around her legs, and she shivered. "One of the Ochoa boys said I'd lost weight and asked me if I make myself throw up after I eat."

"Well, for an Ochoa, that was almost tactful. He must have been trying."



They'd all been trying. "Way too hard," Nick murmured. "Want to come back to the penthouse for a drink?"

Veronica smoothed her hand over her dress in a self-conscious gesture and shook her head. "Did you see my father's face before he left? Riding home with you instead of him is all the reprieve I get. I need to let him yell at me for not being gorgeous and charming or whatever my crime is this week."

Though the style of her dress was sedate, the expensive, pale gold fabric complemented Veronica's dark skin beautifully. "He's full of shit. You know that, right?"

"I do." Veronica turned to watch the traffic zipping by. "I didn't always. I thought I could be enough, and I tried for a long time. But the one thing that he wants is the one thing I'm never going to be—a nice, dominant son who can take over his empire. So fuck him."

"I feel your pain." There weren't any empty cabs in sight, so Nick started walking. The words built up in her throat, choking her, and she blurted them out. "All I want to do is go home to New Orleans."

Veronica caught her hand and squeezed it. "I'm so sorry, Nicky."

She barked out a laugh. "I get maudlin and whiny when my father and Michelle aren't around to hear me."

"Good. Let's walk a few blocks and you can whine at me. Tell me about him."

"About Derek?" Even thinking his name scraped at the raw wounds inside her, and she steeled herself against flinching. "What do you want to know?"

Instead of answering, Veronica changed the subject. "There was a boy in Atlanta. No, not a boy. A man. A thirty-three-year-old bartender who was turned six years ago. The first time he touched my hand, I thought I was going to melt into the floor."

It sounded too familiar. The first time she'd met Derek, he'd still been human. He hadn't had a clue who she was, and he'd flirted shamelessly with her. Afterwards, after the attack and the hospital and Alec dragging him off to heal, things had been different. He was half-wild, almost twitchy, and something beyond flirtation had passed between them without a word. Something powerful, undeniable.

Goose bumps rose on Nick's arms, and she rubbed them away. "Melting pretty much covers it, I think." She'd wanted him to wrap around her, warm and strong and hard. "It's...intense."

"It's intense," Veronica agreed softly. "But it doesn't last forever, I promise."

*If only.* "It's not just mating instinct." She bit her lip. "I love him."

"I loved Raul too. Or I convinced myself I did."

"Yeah?" Nick tried to breathe through the pain. "Did you have to try to convince yourself it didn't mean anything? That it was just sex? Stupid, instinctive sex?"

Silence stretched out too long, so the answer, when it came, was no surprise. "No."

Nick closed her eyes. Even through the months she'd spent dropping the really blatant hints, waiting for Derek to take what she was offering, she'd known he wouldn't. It didn't matter if he wasn't ready or if

he liked her too much or if the intensity of their attraction had scared him. "I tried to believe it was about sex because I couldn't have him. Even if I could, it wouldn't be for long."

"Nicky." They'd come to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk, and Veronica coaxed her into the shadow of a nearby building. "God, I didn't mean—"

"It doesn't matter." She couldn't stop shaking. "It was part of another life."

Veronica's arms closed around her shoulders. "The good things always are."

Regardless of the pent-up anger and frustration clawing at her, having this conversation on the street was a bad idea. Anyone else leaving the party early would see them. Nick hugged her friend briefly and broke away. "Would you mind if we had that drink later? I think I need to be alone right now."

Veronica studied her face. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Absolutely." She didn't bother trying to smile. "I'm just going to go home and try to forget tonight happened."

"If you need anything..." The words trailed off. "Well, I won't be able to do a damn thing, but I would if I could."

"Yeah." Nick lifted her arm to hail a cab. "I've felt that way for years. You, me, Michelle, Luciano... Is it really worth all this?"

"Maybe." Veronica dropped her gaze to the ground. "When I was young and stupid, I thought that our generation would change everything. I wonder if they thought the same thing when they were our age."

If they had, surely they knew better now. "Change is tough. People don't like it."

"I suppose they don't." A taxi pulled up to the curb, and Veronica squeezed her hand. "Call me if you need me."

Nick held her hand for a few moments. "Thanks. I mean it."

"You're welcome, Nicky."

The rest of the lone walk to her father's co-op helped settle some of the pain and frustration roiling inside her, but her hands still trembled when she crossed the lobby and called the elevator. They didn't stop until she made her way through the dark, quiet foyer and into her father's study, where a quick search of the bar yielded an unopened twenty-seven-year-old bottle of Glen Albyn.

She poured herself a triple.

Mahalia appeared in the doorway, a kitchen towel thrown over her shoulder. "I thought I heard someone. How was dinner?"

"Uneventful." Nick drained half the Scotch and shrugged. "Decent catering."

"Mm-hmm. And the company?"

*Horrific.* "Acceptable."

Mahalia fidgeted with the edge of the towel. "I wanted to apologize for the things I said the other day. I don't know how things were between you and Gabriel, and I don't know how you left them."

"It's all right." Nick counted to three and felt a small sense of triumph when the burning in her eyes subsided. "I understand. The situation has everyone on edge."

Instead of seeming pleased by the acceptance of her apology, Mahalia snorted. "That's very kind of you. Very polite."

The trembling returned, worse this time. "I try."

The older woman's dark gaze grew stormy, troubled. "Are you going to live this way forever? With little Nicky Peyton shoved in a box and some carefully groomed shapeshifter trophy wife in her place?"

Nick finished her Scotch and considered the alternatives. "Well, I could go back to New Orleans and ask Derek to abandon his family and friends and run away with me. Of course, he'd hate me for it, and I don't think I'd like myself too much either, given what would happen to Michelle and Aaron."

"Nicole—"

"So...yeah." Nick refilled her glass with more liquor this time. "I'm going to be vicious, May. I'm going to lock Nick Peyton in that box and never think about her again, because I *can't*." A ragged sob escaped. "If I start to wonder what kind of life she might have had, I won't be able to do what I have to do."

"What is that, exactly?" Mahalia rounded the desk and took the glass from her hand. "You marry this Maglieri boy, and what then? What does it accomplish if you're both miserable as hell on fire?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Nick rubbed her aching head. "Babies, May. Power and legacy, everything the wolves hold dear."

"Maybe some of them, but not Derek. Not you."

*Stop, please.* "Do you *really* think what I want matters?"

Mahalia's jaw tightened, and she leaned one hip against the edge of the desk. "It should, especially to your future husband."

Nick snatched the glass back with a small growl. "Luke is as much a pawn in this whole thing as I am."

"So marry him." Mahalia's tone was decidedly casual. *Too* casual. "Surely it's not so different from human marriages of convenience. Marry Luciano, and then you both agree to lead your own lives."

"No."

"Hear me out—"

"No, May, you don't understand." Desperation drove Nick to pace the floor. "Even if it wasn't a shitty thing to do, Derek couldn't take having me belong to someone else."

"Even if you had an—an arrangement?"

"Even then." She stopped by the window and leaned her forehead against the glass. "I know you're trying to help, to find some way, but you have to listen to me." Tears streamed down Nick's cheeks. "If there was a way for me to be with him, I'd do anything, go through anything. But there isn't, Mahalia, and you have to—have to *stop*..."

“Shh.” Mahalia wrapped her arms around her and rocked gently. “It’s just not fair, honey.”

“Yes.”

She hesitated. “He loves you. If that helps.”

“I know.” Nick could barely choke out the words around the sobs that overtook her. She’d rather he hated her for what she’d put him through, for not keeping her distance in the first place. Knowing that he loved her—even though that love was impossible—didn’t help at all.

## Chapter Seventeen

“I think we should make Penny full partner.”

Andrew looked up from the clinic blueprints he was studying. “You do?”

Derek turned his attention back to the wall. Whatever spells ran through the wiring made his skin prickle every time he touched it, but at least the low-level discomfort distracted him from his misery. That had been the general idea of doing *pro bono* work for Franklin’s clinic in the first place—tax their bodies so they didn’t have to sit around and think so damn hard.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t working. Not for him, anyway. Derek scraped the extra spackle into the plastic container in his hand and finished his pitch. “Yeah. I sucked at the office stuff to begin with, and you’re not going to feel like doing it for a while. We can’t do it on our own anymore.”

Andrew leaned on the worktable they’d set up in the middle of the room. “Are you thinking of leaving?”

“No. Absolutely not.” *Because there’s nowhere to go.*

“Okay.” Andrew spoke slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. “Then I think Penny would appreciate it. She works hard. She’s good, and she’s earned it.”

Derek slapped another gob of spackle on the wall and smoothed it over the joint, his movements automatic. “I tried too hard after the attack. Tried to go back to my normal fucking human life like nothing had changed. It’s starting to seem like that was a really dumb idea.”

Andrew came over and picked up another small bucket. He hissed when he touched the wall, a soft growl issuing from his throat. Then he laughed a little. “No. No, we’re not human anymore.”

There it was, the sum of a miserable night’s realization. *We’re not human anymore.* How much of the past two years’ misery could he have avoided if he’d stopped fighting his instincts? If he’d acknowledged that easygoing Derek was gone and let himself be...

Derek laughed. “How pathetic am I? Over thirty fucking years old, and I don’t have a goddamn clue who I am. At least you’re not going to waste two years pretending nothing’s changed.”

Andrew kept his gaze on the wall in front of them. “From the way Alec talks, I don’t have that option. I could hurt someone if I don’t face things.” His knuckles turned white, and the solid plastic handle of the spackling knife creaked.

Magic flared. This time, it was the power in Andrew instead of the wards in the walls. Derek recognized it easily, the twitchy, tense prickle of a wolf who wanted to break free. “Has Alec taken you running yet?”

“Every day.”

That made the primal energy roiling inside his friend even more alarming. “You going again tonight?”

“I’m picking up dinner when I’m done here and heading over.” He finally met Derek’s eyes. “You want to come with me?”

It would have been easy to force a challenge right then, and part of him wanted to. Part of him wanted to shed his human form and vent his rage and loss in a fight that would wear him out and establish which of them was the strongest.

Derek looked away before the temptation overtook him. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Good.” Andrew tossed the bucket on the ladder between them. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have the urge to just kick my ass? Because I want to punch you, and I don’t get it.”

Derek bit off a laugh. “Welcome to my world. I was just thinking about taking a swing at you.”

Instead of looking relieved, Andrew flashed him a disgruntled look. “I understand why Alec would bug me, but you’re my best friend. I don’t *want* to fight with you...but I *do*.”

He tried to remember the way Alec had explained it to him. “Because we’re both tough assholes, and the wolves like to know for sure who’s tougher.”

Andrew looked surprised by his own nod of agreement. “That makes sense. In a completely nonsensical way.”

“It’s not going to be the same with the women, just so you know.” Derek took a deep breath and concentrated on smoothing the spackle knife over the wall. “I mean, sometimes it will. But you might be more interested in”—*love*—“fucking before fighting.”

“So I hear.” His ears turned pink. “So long as the urge to hump women’s legs doesn’t overwhelm me, I think I’ll make it.”

His sanity would be much preserved by not knowing what kind of urges Andrew might have now, especially where they related to Kat. “It’ll get better,” he said vaguely. “It did for me.”

“I remember,” Andrew said somberly.

The knife’s handle snapped in Derek’s hand as the thoughts he’d so carefully guarded circled around to Nick and the way he’d felt every time he’d seen her. Casual flirtation had turned into a deadly serious game overnight, until all he could see when he closed his eyes was the fantasy of her head thrown back and her lips forming his name...

He slapped his palm against the wall, and the magical wards zapped him so hard he jumped back with a muffled noise. “Fuck. *Fuck*, I’ve got to get out of here.”

Andrew didn't say anything, just thumped the lid back on the bucket and hammered it into place with two careful blows of his fist.

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Nick could see Michelle quaking from across their father's office. "Are you cold?"

"No." The denial came too fast, as if her sister hadn't even heard her. Michelle sat with her ankles crossed and her hands resting primly in her lap, but her white-knuckled grip was as obvious as her trembling.

"All this waiting gives me ulcers." Nick rose and paced behind the desk. "Stupid sexist bullshit."

"Nick." Michelle's voice was nothing more than a whisper. "I—I have to say something. Before we go in there."

Goose bumps broke out on her arms, and Nick had to catch herself before she started shaking her head. Instead, she walked over and knelt in front of Michelle. "What is it?"

Michelle's eyes looked huge in her pale face, and so lost. She curled her hands around Nick's fingers and took a slow, careful breath. "I don't want you to do this. Whatever they're going to ask...it's not fair."

"I don't think they care about what's fair." She smoothed a stray lock of hair behind Michelle's ear. "We all do what we have to do, sweetie. That's all."

Tears welled up, and her sister closed her eyes. "I feel so selfish. You're in love with him, Nicky. I see it. I *feel* it. I'm letting you throw your life away because I can't let them take my child."

"Please stop." Nick took a deep breath and hugged Michelle. "I love him, but I can't let the Conclave take your child either. Derek understands that. Just...let me do this for you."

Michelle's tears fell fast and hot against her shoulder. "Does—does Derek know?"

She'd spoken to Mackenzie that morning, and she'd told her about the tense conversation where Jackson had told Derek the truth. "He knows."

Michelle's arms came around her. "I'm so, so sorry."

If she started crying she wouldn't stop, and Nick refused to let the Conclave see that. "We should be focused on you right now. You and Aaron and this kid."

"Aaron doesn't think he's going to survive this. He spent all morning making me listen to him talk about what to do when he's gone, but he got so upset when I tried to stop him." Her voice broke. "He—he said goodbye when I left. Like he wasn't going to see me again."

"He tried that with me." She would have said or done anything to rid her sister's voice of that soft note of resignation. "But I refuse to accept that, because I fixed it. You'll see."

Michelle lifted her head and caught Nick's hand. "Did anyone tell you? About the baby, I mean. The magical midwife examined me again. She told the Conclave I'm having a son."

A boy. "Michelle, that's—"

The office door swung open, and their father's assistant stuck his head in. "They're ready for you in the conference room."

Nick shivered and rose, holding her hand out to Michelle. "Come on, sweetie. Let's get this done so you can see Aaron again."

Michelle wiped her cheeks and smoothed her hair into place needlessly, a ritual Nick recognized. She was donning her public persona, the one she struggled to keep in place for her own safety. Quiet, obedient, harmless. Michelle seemed to shrink into herself as she rose until she was little more than a shadow.

A shadow whose powerful magic vibrated in the air between them when she took Nick's hand. "I'm ready."

The walk down the cold, sterile hallway took too long. Nick's mind began to race with possibilities, contingencies for which she hadn't planned. *What if they won't let go of the child? Aaron? If the mess with Talbot scared them too badly to let Michelle—*

Her mind mercifully blanked out before they reached the meeting, and she did nothing more than breathe and cling to Michelle's hand as they walked inside.

The small, lacquered board table stretched out before them. The seat in the middle of the table was empty, and their father stood behind the table and off to one side. The rest of the Conclave members filled the other four seats.

Tense power made the air heavy. Whatever decision the Conclave had arrived at, it hadn't been a choice made easily, and not everyone agreed. Veronica's father Noah sat, tight-jawed and furious, on the right side of the table, his gaze fixed straight ahead and his shoulders stiff. Next to him, Jorge Ochoa seemed almost relaxed, though his sharp eyes assessed Nick in an uncomfortably proprietary fashion.

Enrica Maglieri watched her the same way, with a smug certainty that made Nick want to scream. Only Conrad Hoffman seemed capable of hiding his feelings. He nodded politely to them both before speaking to the man standing just inside the door. "Please, bring a chair for the Seer, and Miss Peyton, too, if she'd like one."

Noah Coleman's lips pressed into a tight line.

It was then that Nick realized she must have won some measure of leniency for Michelle. The rest of them would never have been so solicitous otherwise. "Thank you, Mr. Hoffman."

He smiled as someone placed a chair behind Michelle, who sank into it as if her knees couldn't quite hold her. "Of course. The Conclave has reached a decision and apprised your father of it. Hopefully you'll find the compromise to your satisfaction."

Nick remained standing, and she looked at each of the Conclave members in turn. Fear churned in her stomach, but she managed a smile. "I look forward to hearing what you've decided."

When she returned her gaze to Hoffman, he nodded again, and this time it seemed almost respectful. "It is our decision that your sister be released to your custody today. She'll be restricted to the city unless



her travel plans are vetted and approved by the Conclave. When outside of New York, she'll be accompanied by a Conclave-appointed bodyguard to ensure her safety and the safety of her child."

Michelle had always had to follow those rules. Nick tensed even as relief began to unfurl inside her. "What about the child?"

"The child will remain with the Seer. The midwife we consulted seems certain the baby has none of his mother's magical aptitude, but I feel it's only fair to stress that this compromise is contingent on that holding true. You'll understand that different arrangements will be made if the child is born with magic."

They didn't need to spell it out. There was no way they'd let the magical child of a Seer live for very long. Nick felt numb as she asked, "What about Aaron?"

The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch, and Michelle shivered. "Aaron Spencer will be granted a stay of execution, but will remain in custody to ensure the Seer's continued cooperation. On the day you marry a suitable candidate, Miss Peyton, Spencer will be released to your husband's custody. The restrictions on his actions will be considerable, but fair. You may consider it a probation."

Noah Coleman made a rude noise. "You may consider it a bribe."

They couldn't hold Michelle without angering the Alpha, but they could dangle Aaron's life in front of Nick like a carrot until she married one of their sons as planned. It wasn't a bribe; it was extortion.

She met Coleman's angry glare with a level look. "I consider it a blessing. I'm sure my future husband will be just as concerned with the well-being of my sister's family as I am." *Just in case anyone sees this as a temporary solution.*

Hoffman looked smug, probably because he knew Luciano wasn't ruthless and Ochoa's sons weren't likable. He probably thought his own son was the strongest contender for her hand, putting him in line to gain considerable influence and control of Nick's inheritance.

His easy smile reinforced the impression. "I'm sure whoever is lucky enough to marry you will do everything he can to care for your family. The midwife is on my payroll, but her services will be made available to the Seer at any time. Your father has asked that we allow you to take your sister home and make sure she's settled before you return in a few days' time to finalize your marriage choice."

Nick sought Michelle's hand and held it tightly. "Thank you all for your time, and for your careful deliberation."

Michelle's kept her gaze lowered in what seemed to be a careful show of submission, but Nick could feel the strength in her fingers as her hand squeezed hers. "Thank you. I'm—" The tiniest flare, enough for Nick to taste how much it hurt her sister to force out the words, but her voice was quiet and subdued. "I'm sorry I...betrayed the trust you've shown me."

Nick needed to get her sister out of there before they both broke. "If we can be excused, I'll get Michelle home."

Coleman shoved his chair back from the table before anyone else could speak, dripping disdain as he rose. Power punched into Nick, pure, furious magic. “Congratulations on your participation in subverting our laws. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Anger swelled in her along with a magic to match his, surprising in its intensity and strength. “I’ve protected my family. I can’t think of anything I’d take more pride in, Mr. Coleman. Not a single thing.”

Looking away would be a sign of defeat. For a few uncomfortable moments, Nick thought he might try to stare her down. Instead he turned abruptly, giving her his back in a clear show of disrespect. “When the three of you stop drooling over Peyton’s money and bloodline, you’re going to regret this day. Or maybe when one of your precious grandchildren ends up like her.” He thrust out his hand, pointing unerringly at Michelle.

Nick trembled with rage, but Enrica’s firm voice cut through the tension. “That’s enough, Noah. Take your leave before you say something you’ll regret.”

Coleman laughed bitterly. “Yes, you would defend him. Do you think he gives a damn about you, Enrica? He shoved you down our throats as a test run for his spoiled little princess, and all you’ve done so far is show us why women can’t be trusted to handle decisions. Thanks to you, there’s another mutt in New Orleans playing footsie with Jacobson’s kid—”

“Enough!” Hoffman surged to his feet and leaned over the table, both fists braced against the polished wood. “Say one more word, and it had better be a challenge. The Conclave voted. You lost. Walk out the door now.”

Coleman muttered another disgusted curse and stormed past Nick, his shoulder bumping hers roughly. He was twice her size, but she managed to hold her ground.

She was glad she had when the door slammed and she chanced a look at her father. He was shaking, his hands clenched so tightly around the back of a chair that he’d already torn the supple leather. “It wouldn’t be worth it,” she whispered. Not if challenging Coleman put their newly struck deal with the rest of the Conclave at risk.

Ochoa spoke up for the first time, his low, easy drawl faintly reminiscent of Alec’s. “We don’t normally interfere with each other’s family affairs but, since we’re the cause of Noah’s fury, we might take responsibility for the likely targets. I can’t be the only one who’s seen and disapproved of the way he treats his wife and daughter.”

“I’ll call his wife myself,” Enrica said woodenly. “We’ll send guards to fetch her and Veronica, if need be.”

Nick’s father released the chair. “His wife is still recovering in Atlanta, but his daughter’s in town.” His gaze found hers, silently questioning.

She nodded. “Ronnie will call me if things get bad.”

“In that case,” he continued, his voice brooking no argument, “I’ll take my daughters home.”

“Of course,” Hoffman said. “Nicole, we look forward to seeing you again in a few days. If you require anything, you need only call.”

It was an invitation any one of them besides Coleman would have issued in a heartbeat, and it reminded her that, for them, the truly important decision had yet to be made. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

They’d only made it a few steps down the hallway before a wave of nausea hit Nick. Michelle stumbled, her fingers digging painfully into Nick’s arm. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Come on.”

The nearest ladies washroom was an executive suite that had only seen secretaries and the occasional visitor before Enrica had taken her place on the Conclave. Nick stared at a flower on the expensive wallpaper while she held Michelle’s head, smoothing her hair back.

Her sister shuddered, and her hand flew out to clutch the edge of the counter. For one terrifying second magic flared and Nick felt the echo, strong enough to raise the hair on the back of her neck.

The light above them flickered, but Nick didn’t take her eyes off that tiny flower.

“It’s okay. You’re okay.” She’d help Michelle, and then she needed to get back to her room at the penthouse. Her numbness would fade soon, and reality would take its place. She’d have to face the fact that she’d traded away her freedom, and it didn’t matter how many times she reminded herself it was for the best.

She’d still break down.

## Chapter Eighteen

Basement cage accommodations were the second most useful feature Alec's house had to offer for newly made wolves. Far superior was the land that had come with his house, just enough acres of wooded solitude to give them a place to run. The property itself was the only evidence Derek had ever seen of the wealth Alec's family reportedly possessed, though he supposed it was ample evidence all on its own.

Derek parked his truck next to Alec's and nodded to the takeout bags sitting next to Andrew. "You got that?"

"Sure." Andrew climbed out, looking jittery after another long day. He almost dropped one of the sodas, but managed to right it. "Got it, yeah."

They'd run every night since the day they'd decided to make Penny a full partner. Six times, and the soothing predictability of it got them both through the turbulent week. For Andrew it was a chance to burn off energy that seemed to build with alarming speed, but for Derek it was...

*Pack.*

He might be lonely, but he didn't have to be alone.

Alec met them on the front porch and held out a hand. "Give me some of that before you drop it."

Instead of unloading a bag or a few of the drinks, Andrew lifted his chin in a stubborn gesture. "I can handle it."

A touchy challenge, and a reminder of how prickly Derek's own pride had been in the months after his change. Alec dealt with Andrew the same way he'd managed Derek two years ago—rolled eyes and a complete refusal to acknowledge the subtle prod. He jerked his head to the side in an invitation that wasn't *quite* a command. "We can eat on the porch."

Dinner was burgers and fries eaten in silence. Derek had given up on conversation by the third evening, when Alec proved as uninterested in small talk as usual and Andrew seemed determined to give him a run for who could deliver the most monosyllabic replies.

It didn't matter. No one was there to talk.

The sun dropped behind the trees as they finished their meals. Derek gathered up his trash and tucked it into the takeout bag before rising. "Well?"

Alec nodded and took the bag. "You two change. I'll be along."

He may as well have released Andrew from invisible bonds. He tugged at his shirt as he jumped the porch steps and landed on the grass. Derek followed him at a more sedate pace.

The change always brought a rush of adrenaline, an amplification of baser instincts. Around Nick it had translated to sex—a hot, joyful lust that licked at his skin and made him anticipate a chase.

Now it was violence. He had to concentrate on the little things, the buttons on his shirt, the buckle on his belt, the mud-encrusted laces on his boots. It would be easy to let the rising power drive him to force a challenge, a fight that would be too vicious without Alec there to intercede.

Andrew ground his teeth. Derek realized the energy roiling inside him was clear and unmistakable when his friend spoke. “I don’t want to fight. I want to run.”

The knot on his left boot was tangled, covered with dirt and a leaf he’d probably picked up at the last construction site he’d visited. The wolf inside him snarled, and the lace snapped under his fingers. “Don’t worry, I’m sure Alec will kick my ass a few times.”

“Do you need it?” Andrew asked.

“Maybe.” He kicked off his boots and shed his socks. “It’s been a long week.” A frustrating week, full of problems that couldn’t be faced head on. Not surprising the wolf was ready to claw his way free.

“No shit.” Andrew fell silent, and a rough surge of magic ripped through the still night air. Derek rose to his feet and watched as the brownish wolf explored Alec’s backyard, every movement carrying the same leashed tension Andrew evinced as a human.

“He’s getting better,” Alec said from behind Derek, his low voice carrying on the evening breeze.

“I know.” That was the scary part. “He wouldn’t be holding it together at all without your help.”

“He’ll be okay. You both will. Now hurry the fuck up.”

Derek shed the rest of his clothing in silence and reached inside. The wolf rose, gleeful at the chance to escape, and the change flowed over him in a rush of pure magic.

Andrew howled. The breeze carried the short burst of sound, an invitation to run, to shed more than their clothes and human forms. To shed their *humanity*.

The man slipped away, and the wolf *hurt*. Part of Derek was missing, the mate he’d stalked and cornered, the one he’d taken and let claim him in return. Pain tore through him, and his howl held loss and loneliness and the agony his life had become.

A moment’s hesitation, and Andrew joined him in a rising call of mourning. Magic surged again and a third howl shook through the night, low and hopeless enough to remind Derek that Alec had known loss of his own, a loss that had left him slowly bleeding to death for years.

Derek moved first, lunging toward the tree line. Andrew overtook him quickly, bumping his way ahead through the dim forest.

The urge to challenge was gone. Violence wouldn’t ease the pain of Nick’s absence, but the slowly forming bonds of pack could give him something he needed in order to cope. Friendship. Family.

After only a few hundred yards, Andrew skidded to a stop on the carpet of pine needles and fallen leaves, his ears and tail erect. He’d scented prey. A chase.

They knew their places now, knew how to stalk their prey. Derek gave in to the thrill of the hunt, silent as he raced through the trees. Ten days ago, the wolf had been a monster inside, something to be fought and controlled. Now he knew the human world had no place for him, but this world welcomed him. The adrenaline, the freedom, the joy...

The pain.

He'd found the world he belonged in, but he hadn't found home. Home was Nick Peyton, and neither wolf nor man could rest without her.

So he had to find her again.

He gave himself over to the wolf, knowing tomorrow a different sort of hunt would begin.

Derek accepted the beers Alec handed him and passed one to Andrew. The cool evening breeze set the huge wind chime on Alec's porch swaying, the quiet tinkling almost soothing enough to make up for the fact that the chime itself was a garish purple and featured cartoonish pink and yellow wolves cavorting across the top.

He caught Alec's gaze as the older man sat and tilted his head toward the wind chime. "Mari's handiwork?"

The corner of Alec's mouth twitched up in an almost-smile before he covered with a scowl. "Kat. Gave it to me for my birthday last year."

And Alec had hung it up, though it probably made him cringe every time he looked at it. *You're not the only one looking out for her, Gabriel.*

Andrew barely glanced up. "Seems like the sort of thing Kat would pick out."

"Especially if Alec pissed her off first."

"Which I do weekly." Alec twisted the top off his beer and flicked it over the porch railing. "Had a talk with Mari this morning."

Derek's easy relaxed feeling vanished in a rush of trepidation. "Is our office still standing?"

"Yeah." Alec gestured to Andrew with his bottle. "Mari was blaming all of Kat's emotional turmoil on you, which I think is crediting you with a little more prowess than you've got, but hey. Kat won't tell her what happened, so she hasn't got much to go on."

"It doesn't matter." Andrew drained a fourth of his beer before continuing. "She's angry, but she'll get over it."

Alec's eyes narrowed. "Kat can't move on while Mari won't shut up about this shit," he said, his voice quiet. "I yelled at Mari. I told her enough that she's probably going to apologize."

A hard wave of energy burst from Andrew, but his expression didn't change. "You shouldn't have done that. I don't want her apologizing to me."

"I didn't do it just for you," Alec replied, his voice hushed but intense. "Let her get it out so *everyone* can move on."

Andrew didn't answer. From the tense set of his friend's jaw, the subject was closed. Derek drained half his beer and changed the subject. "Andrew and I are going to make Penny a full partner."

"Yeah?" Alec picked at the label on his beer. "Good. She's one of scariest humans I know."

An apt assessment, and a compliment, coming from Alec. "She'll keep things on track over there."

Andrew grunted. "Penny deserves the promotion, plus she's got two kids to support. God knows where that deadbeat ex of hers is now."

Derek took another sip of his beer before answering. "Gave up on his dreams of making it big in Vegas, I think. Mari said she found him on a Dial-a-Psychic website a few weeks ago, charging twenty bucks a minute."

A growl was Andrew's only answer as he reached for another beer. "I'd drop a couple hundred just to yell at him for not visiting Kyle and Ross last Christmas."

It was a common sentiment, but Andrew's rough words and the anger that rippled through the air was new. Not unwarranted, though. Penny busted her ass working full time and raising two kids while their father puttered through life with a chip on his shoulder because his paltry magic skills hadn't gotten him a free ride.

Penny was human and lived in the world of the supernatural because she had to. Her older son was thirteen and hovering at the age where puberty might spark latent magic and make it necessary to find him a teacher. She didn't sit around bitching that it wasn't her choice or that she wanted her nice, normal life back.

Sometimes Derek thought he could learn a lot from Penny.

He drained his beer and set the bottle aside, determined to follow through on his newfound resolve to make a few changes. The first one, at least, he could take care of now. "When Kat's feeling better, I think she needs to learn some self-defense techniques."

Alec watched him just long enough to make him nervous, those dark eyes seeing far too much. Finally he tilted his head. "Not saying I think smothering her has done her a lot of good, but she could have been down at Zola's dojo five days a week since she was fifteen and not been able to take on a fucking Conclave strike team. So if this is about guilt—"

"It's about freedom." Andrew's voice cut through Alec's. "Kat's freedom *and* his."

Derek winced, but didn't disagree. "She's not a kid, and she's not going to get a boring job away from all of this shit. She talked about getting lessons from Zola after the Talbot thing, but I..." He'd lost his already short temper. Nick had just returned from a near-suicidal run on a madman's fortress without so much as asking his help, and Kat might as well have been telling him he wasn't strong enough to keep her safe.

Alec crumpled the label he'd peeled from his bottle and set it aside. "It's a stage you go through, and it never goes away. Nothing politically correct about it, either. We need to protect 'em because we're strong, but you gotta know when your ego's getting in the way of that. End of the day, all that matters is that people are safe, not that you're the one who made 'em that way."

Andrew leaned forward suddenly. "I can help. With Kat, I mean. Some of the responsibility is mine." His tone dared Derek to argue with his reasoning.

The reasoning was fair enough, but the execution was trickier. "Thought you were staying away from her for now."

He frowned. "Doesn't mean I can't look out for her."

"Because that worked great for me."

Confusion and then anger flashed in Andrew's eyes. "Are you trying to compare this situation to your thing with Nick Peyton?"

Alec groaned. Derek ignored him. "Yeah, because it's really fucking hard to see the parallels there, huh?"

Andrew rose to his full height and glowered at Derek. "You're comparing me feeling responsible for what happened to your cousin to...what? You being too goddamn scared to get off your ass and claim some chick?"

His friend's power might be stronger, but it was erratic and unfocused, and pain made Derek pissy. "You're going to throw her out of your life for her own damn good and still think you have the right to have a say in how she deals with it."

"Yeah?" He set his bottle down on the porch railing. "One of these days, you have to tell me where you got this idea that Kat and I are destined for some great romance even if it's the last fucking thing either of us wants."

The rage that rose inside Derek made no sense. A couple weeks ago he'd agreed with Andrew, understood that Kat was better off safely out of reach until his friend understood the changes tearing through him.

A couple weeks ago he'd believed little mistakes didn't kill a happy ending.

He growled, and Alec made an exasperated noise. "Okay, boys—"

Derek didn't give the older man a chance to tell them both to sit down and shut up like good little puppies. The wolf inside him would accept violence as a suitable distraction from grief, and it wasn't until his fist had crashed into Andrew's jaw that he had the fleeting thought Andrew might be suffering the same problem.

Not that it would stop him from kicking his friend's ass.

Andrew shook off the blow, grabbed Derek's shoulders and slammed him against the side of the house. He was shaking with rage, growling as he drew back his fist for a punch of his own.



It came slowly enough that Derek had no problem wrenching his body to the side. Andrew's fist slammed into the wood siding an instant later, and Alec swore and started toward them.

Derek lunged forward directly into Andrew, knocking him back a couple steps. The porch was only a few feet off the ground, and the railing wrapped around it at waist height except for an opening for a set of stairs leading to the yard.

Another good shove and Andrew slammed through the rail, crashing to the grass with a roar. Before Derek could react, a hard hand shoved into his shoulder and sent him barreling after Andrew.

He twisted just enough that he didn't actually land on *top* of Andrew, but he still hit the ground with a bone-rattling thump. Alec stared down at both of them, his face impassive. "By all means, beat on each other. Keep the damage to a minimum, though, because I'm making you jackasses fix it all."

Insanely, Andrew began to laugh.

Derek sagged to the grass, ignoring the aches and pains and the piece of the railing digging into the small of his back. The adrenaline from the fight faded, leaving the gaping hole in his chest that a month's worth of violence wouldn't hide.

"You can help keep an eye on Kat," he said quietly, cutting through Andrew's laughter. "You both have to. Because not fighting for Nick is going to kill me."

Andrew sobered and brushed himself off as he sat up. "I thought there was nothing you could do."

"Maybe there isn't." In his mind he conjured Nick, the way she'd watched him their last night together. The way her lips had looked when she whispered she loved him. "Alec?"

The man's voice drifted down from above. "I'll make a few calls. Maybe I can figure out exactly what's going on up there and we can come up with an idea. Fuck, if it'll keep Nick from marrying one of those assholes, I'll even call my damn father."

Andrew made an apologetic noise. "I'm sorry, man. I'm an ass."

He knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't. "You *will* be if you hang around Kat, and she's really the last fucking thing you want. The girl's in love with you. She killed two men to protect you. Watch out for her if she's in trouble but, if you're going to break her heart, you owe it to her to make it clean."

"I know that." Andrew rubbed his hands over his face with a groan. "Nothing is *mine* anymore, Derek. Not a goddamn bit of my life from before this happened, and that includes Kat. I can—I can make sure she knows that. I *think*."

"Leave Kat to me and Jackson," Alec interjected. Derek sat up and found Alec leaning on the remains of his railing. "Andrew needs to steer clear until he gets his instincts under control. I'm going inside to make my calls. The two of you can fight over who's going to fix my damn porch."

Andrew huffed. "I'll do it. Not surprisingly, I've been in the mood to hammer and saw things an awful lot lately."

“And punch people?” Derek’s back protested as he rose, but the bruise he’d earned from landing on part of the wood railing would be gone by morning. He rubbed at it anyway and eyed Andrew. “Sorry about your face, by the way.”

“Forget about it.” His friend shrugged. “My insides are still where they’re supposed to be. These days, I guess that means I’ll live.”

The memory of watching Franklin with his hands inside Andrew’s abdomen wasn’t fading anytime soon. “If Alec digs something up and I have to go to New York, will you be okay handling work with Penny and Mari to help you out?”

“Too soon for morbid humor, huh?”

“That always was your shtick, buddy.”

“A guy’s gotta have one.”

“Sucks for us that Jackson’s cornered the market on Southern charm and Alec’s hoarding all the brooding man-pain.”

“Nah.” Andrew picked a splinter out of his hand and laughed. “I think there’s plenty of everything to go around.”

Andrew had regained his humor—or at least the macabre part of it—but something edgy still hovered around him. A power that might not settle anytime soon. Maybe not at all.

The wolves of New Orleans rarely bothered with formal ranks and challenges, especially since most of them had come to the city to avoid the supernatural politics that plagued their society. But the first few months after Derek’s change had been hell as he’d struggled with the instinctive need to find his place, to test his strength against those around him.

Alec had slapped him down. A few times. His pride had stung at first, but it hadn’t taken long to realize that Alec *was* the strongest male wolf in New Orleans.

Or he had been.

Derek cleared his throat and watched Andrew gather the splintered wood into a pile by the steps. “So do you get the urge to punch Alec a lot?”

“Dude, you have *no idea*.”

“Oh, I have some idea.” He tossed the piece of wood that had bruised his back onto the pile. “Might as well get it over with. Trust me, I speak from personal experience. It won’t go away until you do.”

“Think I’ll wait until I’m not so wobbly.” Andrew leaned over and squinted through the back door. “The man has a cage in his basement and an arsenal in his garage.”

“Yeah.” Derek took a deep breath. “You never answered me. I need to know you’ll be okay if I disappear for a while. Because I can’t just let her marry some bastard. I *can’t*.”

“I can handle it. Like you said, I’ve got Penny and Mari. If Mari decides to speak to me again.” The humor faded from Andrew’s expression. “How bad is it going to fuck things up for Nick if you head off to New York in a manly, possessive rage?”

“I’m in love, not stupid. I don’t know what I’m going to do.” But he had to try something. Everything. *Anything*. “Hey. We’ve got money, magic and Alec’s willingness to kidnap random bystanders. What could possibly go wrong?”

Andrew groaned. “I’ll spare you the Gloomy Gus routine if you promise no one else is getting kidnapped.”

“No promises, man.” After all, he’d spent the previous night staring at his ceiling and wondering if he could talk Nick into packing up Aaron and Michelle and hiding on a tropical island. It still seemed like a half-decent idea, leaving aside the part where he’d have to abandon all of his friends and responsibilities.

He needed her. Simple. Inarguable. He needed Nick, and if there was the slightest chance she needed him too... Jackson and Mackenzie were proof that love could triumph over fucked-up shapeshifter politics.

If he concentrated on that, he wouldn’t have to think about Alec, who was walking proof that sometimes love wasn’t enough.

## Chapter Nineteen

Enrica checked her slim watch with an irritated noise. "I'm telling you, he's not coming. Not after what happened last night."

"Tradition states we need the full Conclave to pass sentence," Hoffman reminded her. "Jorge, call him again."

"Pointless." Ochoa was the only member of the Conclave watching Nick this morning, his gaze uncomfortable and inscrutable. "He's hardly going to accept a call from me."

Veronica had called Nick from the airport late the night before, on her way back to Atlanta. Ochoa had put her on the plane himself. "Ronnie said her father was angry. Ridiculously angry. He wants no part of this."

*This.* The moment she got to see Aaron's face when they told him he'd have his life. His freedom. Her only regret was that Michelle wouldn't be allowed to attend the meeting.

"What does tradition matter?" Ochoa finally looked away from her, only to glance at her father. "John can't participate in the sentencing anyway. Let the three of us have done with it, Conrad. We have other things to do."

Nick shivered in her long sleeves. "Aaron knew the hearing was last night. He's bound to be a nervous wreck by now. Can't we just tell him?"

Enrica pushed off the wall and strode toward the door. "He isn't coming. Let's go."

"Fine, fine." Hoffman smiled at Nick and offered her his arm. "How is your sister? Hopefully the midwife has been of some help?"

"Michelle is fine." She was so exhausted and relieved she'd done nothing but sleep since the night before. "Thank you for your assistance."

"Of course, Nicole. I'm sure you know I hope we'll be family soon."

Behind them, Ochoa snorted inelegantly. Nick ignored it. "I'm sure my father will make the best possible choice. He's a very wise man."

"I'm becoming a very impatient man," her father murmured from behind them. "I'm not going to think about Nicole's marriage until this situation is resolved."

The guard unlocked Aaron's door and held it open while they filed inside. Aaron rose immediately, looking tired and worn, but a little of the resignation on his features relaxed when he saw Nick. She gave him an encouraging smile and blinked back tears.

Enrica and Ochoa stepped to the left. Nick's father took her arm and urged her to the right, leaving Hoffman in front of Aaron. "Aaron Spencer. After further consideration of the charges laid against you, and out of respect for our long-standing working relationship with John Peyton, the accusation of treason has been dropped, and the order of execution revoked."

Aaron's tense shoulders relaxed. "Thank you."

Nick couldn't hide her wince at Hoffman's next words. "Nicole has agreed to shoulder the responsibility of supervising you. You'll be held here until she marries, then remanded to her husband's custody."

That made Aaron's jaw tighten. He glanced at her, clearly uncertain, and she eased her arm from her father's grip and walked toward Aaron. "Michelle already came home. It's only a matter of time before you do too."

"Nick." Her name sounded hoarse, rusty. "Thank—"

The door crashed open behind her, cutting off his words. Aaron's eyes widened as he swung his arm, hitting her hard enough to knock the breath from her lungs. Behind them, Hoffman shouted a warning. Her father's voice echoed it in an outraged roar, more furious sound than coherent speech.

Two shots rang out in quick succession. Aaron stumbled into Nick, and she pulled him to the floor with a shriek. Shielding him with her body was useless—he was *God* knew how many times bigger, and trained to deal with these things. She shielded him anyway, curling around his back and shoulders with a sob.

Enrica screamed. "Noah, *no!*"

*Coleman.* Nick shuddered as a third shot echoed above the cacophony of shouts and scuffles. The bullet flew past, so close she flinched away from the whine, and hit the wall. Bits of concrete exploded out, zinging through the air like shrapnel. A piece struck her face, and Nick clawed at her stinging cheek.

Blood covered her hand, far too much for such a tiny wound, and far too cool and sticky to have just seeped from her flesh. "No."

Aaron lay still beneath her, and her vision blurred as she turned him over. *No, no no—*

His green eyes stared ahead, glassy and unseeing. A jagged hole marred his temple, and blood matted his hair. "Aaron," she whispered. "Don't do this."

"Nicole!" Her father grabbed her shoulders. "Are you bleeding, are you—?" Horror filled his voice. "Jesus Christ."

"He's dead." The words hardly seemed real, even when given shaky form.

"John, the guards have Noah—" Enrica spoke behind them but stopped short with a gasp and a soft curse.

Nick turned. Two men knelt by Hoffman, pressing bundles of torn cloth to his shoulder beneath his bloodstained jacket. And Coleman stood between three more guards, still struggling to break free. "Aaron's dead."

"I know." Her father urged her up. "Come on. Help me, Enrica."

Nick let them pull her to her feet. As they backed away, she thought she saw Aaron move. "Wait, maybe he's *not* gone. There might still be time to do something."

Enrica caught her before she reached him. "Nicole, don't."

"I have to—"

"No."

"Let go of me." The words came out as a whisper, and she repeated them, this time on a scream. "Let go of me!"

"Stop it!" Enrica hissed and shook her by both arms. "I know how it is. Your mind doesn't want to accept the truth, but half his brain is on the wall. He is *gone*, Nicole."

More guards swarmed the room, and Ochoa appeared beside Nick. "Into the hallway, Enrica. John, you too."

Nick moved because they made her, practically carrying her out between them. "I can't just *leave* him here."

Ochoa showed an unusual sympathy as he touched her shoulder. "I'll check on him, sweetheart. Go to your father."

Enrica dragged Nick from the room, her grip on her arm so tight she'd have bruises. When she finally released her, Nick stumbled and leaned into the wall.

Aaron. She'd tried so hard, given up *everything*, and Michelle was still losing him. The world dissolved in a haze of tears, and Nick screamed. Strong, familiar arms wrapped around her. Her father pulled her close, his hand on the back of her head, and whispered her name.

"It's not fair." Her throat flamed, raw with anger and misery. "It's not *fair*." Nothing in Michelle's life had been, but this would be torture, for her to glimpse a future with Aaron only to have it snatched away.

"It's not." For once, her father's normally even voice held true pain, as if he could keep it at bay no longer. "Nothing in our world is fair, and it should be. It's my job to make it that way."

It was his job to make it bearable. *Fair* was beyond any of them. "Oh God, what do we tell Michelle?"

"Shh. I'll tell her. You just need to be there for her."

The door behind them clicked shut, and Ochoa's voice echoed in the quiet hallway as he whispered to Enrica. "They're taking Conrad downstairs to meet the medical team. I don't think the bullet hit anything vital." He hesitated. "There's nothing else to be done."

Nothing for Aaron, he meant. Nothing for her sister. Nick bit her lip until it bled. "I want to go home, Dad. I want to be with Michelle."

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At least one good thing had happened.

Penny continued to outline the status of their current projects, and Derek let her voice wash over him. The phone call was nearing the thirty-minute mark, but Penny's enthusiasm showed no signs of flagging. Twelve hours as a full partner, and she'd already cleaned up a week's worth of messes. Her determination was comforting.

Exhausting, maybe. But comforting.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Derek grinned, glad she couldn't see him. "Yeah, boss. Though I don't have a clue how you're still talking coherently. Did you sleep at *all* last night?"

"I've got two preteen sons and I work full time. Do you think I ever sleep?"

"Point taken." A knock sounded on the door, and Derek rose. "You don't have to check this shit out with me, you know. We trust you. It's not like you haven't been running the place for the last two years anyway."

"Maybe I don't like the idea of you sitting alone in your house and brooding," Penny retorted. "It's not healthy, Derek. You're going to turn into Alec."

"Ouch. If it makes you feel better, I'm pretty sure he just showed up on my doorstep."

"Yeah, that's great, because what you need is encouragement."

Derek was still laughing when he pulled open the door. Alec stood on the porch, facing away, but the tense set of his shoulders and the uncomfortable prickle of magic boded nothing good. Derek's stomach twisted as Alec turned.

Cold eyes. Dead eyes. Derek had seen Alec filled with rage, determination, annoyance and disdain, but he'd never seen the man look so utterly fucking bleak. Lead settled in Derek's stomach, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from that frozen stare. "Penny, I'm going to have to call you back."

"Derek, what's—?"

"I'm going to have to call you back," he repeated dully, then disconnected the phone.

For one endless moment neither of them spoke. When Alec finally did, the words filled Derek with dread and the tiniest thread of hope. "Pack a bag, Gabriel. You're going to New York."

## Chapter Twenty

Nick pulled open the door and leaned against it. “Come in, Luciano. I’m sorry I called so early—”

“I’d have come anyway, even if you hadn’t called.” He looked perfectly put together in his dark slacks and sweater, as if their world hadn’t exploded before eight a.m. “How’s Michelle?”

“Honestly, I can’t tell.” She’d cried, and her sporadic flares in magical power had left Nick with a blazing headache. Then, after only an hour, Michelle had fallen quiet. “She was a mess for a while, and now she’s...I don’t know.”

He nodded, his dark hair falling over his forehead. “How can I help?”

“I asked her to call you.” Michelle stepped into the foyer, and the temperature seemed to drop. She’d washed her face and pulled her hair into a severe knot, every strand smoothed into place. Nick had seen her fake composure before, but usually some hint of emotion bled through. Now she was cold. Hard.

Luciano looked away. “You don’t know how terrible I feel about what’s happened, Michelle.”

The chill in the air intensified and then disappeared altogether with another surge of power. “Thank you. But I don’t have the luxury of grief. I have a child that most of our society would rather see dead than alive.”

Another spike of magic ripped through the room. Nick had to steel herself against it, and she still almost staggered.

Even Luciano frowned uncomfortably. “I’ll do anything I can to help. You both know that.”

Michelle fixed her gaze on him for several seconds, then turned sharply. “I’ll take advantage of your kindness. If you’re not prepared for that, you should leave. Otherwise I’ll be waiting in the sitting room.”

Luciano looked at Nick, but she could only shrug. “I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

He bent his head close to hers. “Have you talked to your father yet? About what you’re going to do now?”

“Not yet. There hasn’t been time.” The last two hours had been a blank jumble. “He dropped me off and went back to handle things, but who knows what’s going to happen.”

His gaze was fixed on the doorway to the sitting room. “If Hoffman and Ochoa are scared Michelle will retaliate—”

“I know.” It had become the worst-case scenario, the eventuality Nick could barely let herself consider. “But they have to take responsibility for losing control of one of their own. I’m not letting them gloss over what happened to Aaron.”



When they stepped into the sitting room, they found Michelle seated on the edge of the loveseat, her hands folded in her lap and her posture rigid. She watched as they each took a chair. “Nick, you’re not going to like any of this but, considering the life I’ve led up to this point, I hope you’ll understand how badly I need to have some control over what happens to me next.”

She bit back her protests and nodded slowly. “I’m listening.”

“I’m not going to be allowed to live on my own,” Michelle said, her voice flat. “They want someone they can trust watching my every move. Someone with familial loyalties.” She nodded to Luciano. “They would have gotten that if you’d married Nick. You would have been responsible for making sure I didn’t cause trouble, even if they pretended I was in Nick’s custody.”

“More than likely.” He leaned forward. “If you’re worried about whether I can still do that, don’t be.”

“And if I asked you to marry me instead of Nick?”

He flinched almost imperceptibly. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.” Nick rose and walked over to kneel beside Michelle. “How would you ever convince the Conclave to go along with this? They’re expecting a marriage that will yield money, prestige *and* children.” The words hung in her throat, raw and painful, but she forced them out anyway. “You know they are.”

Michelle’s cold eyes found Nick’s. “There are three of them left. Hoffman and Ochoa want to blame Enrica.” The tiniest crack appeared in her sister’s icy demeanor, along with another one of those stomach-roiling swells of power. Michelle forced her expression into utter blankness again before turning her attention to Luciano. “Do you share your mother’s ambitions for your future?”

He was shaking his head before she finished the sentence. “No, I don’t.”

“Marriage to me would satisfy the Conclave’s need to punish your mother by destroying your chance to take her seat on the Conclave or become Alpha someday, and it would put me under their thumb.” Michelle touched Nick’s cheek. “You’d be free, because they’ll never consider this a wrong done to me. They made a bargain with you and broke a bargain with you. You can use their absurd customs against them.”

It was the first glimmer of hope she’d had in weeks, and Nick’s first instinct was to grab it and not let go. She hated herself for it. “And if it doesn’t work?”

“You’ll make it work,” Michelle whispered, the confidence in her voice unwavering. “You don’t want to be a part of this life, but you’re strong enough to face them. Help me make a life I get to choose. If Luciano is willing.”

He sat, pensive and still, and watched them. “I’ll do it.”

Michelle dropped her fingers to Nick’s hand, clinging to it with a desperation that belied her calm exterior. “Don’t agree until you’ve heard me out, Luciano. What I’m asking is unreasonable and selfish.”

“I understand.” He smiled wanly. “I know how things are, Michelle. I’ll do it.”

Something quiet seemed to pass between them, an unspoken moment of understanding. Michelle returned her hand to her lap and laced her fingers together. "They can't think you're doing this to help me, or they'll never agree to it. I'll speak to my father. My inheritance is rather spectacular. No one on the Conclave will wonder what would prompt you to accept such an unacceptable wife when doing so provides you with the means to expand your ranch and reason to stay there indefinitely."

He braced his hands on the arms of the chair. "It's common knowledge that my mother doesn't support my business, and none of them know the first thing about horse breeding. It won't be hard to convince them I need that money, and badly."

"As long as you make them believe this is a union in name only, for selfish reasons. It's the one thing I need you to promise me, Luciano. That you won't ever give them reason to suspect your loyalties can't be trusted. Your life depends on it, and so will my son's."

Nick rose, feeling a little dizzy. "I'm going to make some tea. You two...have a lot to talk about."

Michelle was focused entirely on Luciano. "Thank you, Nicky."

"You're welcome."

Neither of them really noticed when she left the room, and Nick walked just far enough across the foyer to make it out of earshot. Then she leaned her forehead against the wall and braced her hands on a table. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

The front door opened behind her, and her father's voice drifted over her, low and gentle. "Luciano's here?"

"In the sitting room with Michelle." She forced herself to straighten and turn to face her father. "How's Hoffman?"

"Fine. Once they stabilized him, he started healing." He tilted his head toward the kitchen. "If your sister's all right for the moment, I need to talk to you."

"I was going to make some tea."

The kitchen was deserted. The housekeeper had been absent all morning, and Mahalia had been keeping to herself. Nick had appreciated both, because she'd needed the time to help Michelle. "Did you give Mrs. Kelly the day off?"

"The morning. She wouldn't accept the whole day." A hint of a smile tugged at his lips. "She's always been very fond of you both, and Aaron won her over eventually."

If she stopped thinking of what came next, of all the practical things, she wouldn't make it. Nick took a bracing breath as she filled the kettle. "What do we do about Coleman? You can't challenge him. You're the Alpha. It isn't allowed."

Her father's low, angry growl filled the kitchen. "Don't think I haven't considered breaking that rule."

"You can't." Michelle's words came back to her. *You can use their absurd customs against them.* "We can't afford to break tradition right now, not when they must feel like they owe me reparations for Coleman's actions."

"They won't want to swallow it. If we give them any excuse to back down, they will." His gaze shifted to the doorway, as if he could see Michelle. "Is Luciano here for the reason I think he is?"

"Michelle already asked if he'd—"

"Don't like to interrupt." Mahalia walked into the kitchen, her shoulders set in a tight, tense line. "I just got off the phone with Alec. His father called him."

Her father's eyes flashed annoyance, but he didn't seem willing to order Mahalia from the room, though he would have had no such compunction had it been anyone else. "That's to be expected. Alexander likes to tell himself his son wants to be involved."

The older woman frowned at him. "If that was the news, it would have kept." She turned to Nick. "He just put Derek Gabriel on a plane."

Shock warred with relief, and Nick sagged against the counter. "Damn it. God *damn it*."

"I notice he called *after* it was too late to stop him."

Nick slammed the kettle on the stove. "Of course he did." Because Alec, of all people, would know she'd have told Derek to stay home. Fear ripped through her, with panic hard on its heels. "I can't be worried about this, Dad. On top of everything else, I can't be worried that Derek is going to come here, not knowing what the hell is going on, and try to take on Coleman. I *can't*."

Her father laid a hand on her shoulder and glanced at Mahalia. "Did Alec say anything about Coleman?"

Mahalia leaned on the counter. "He said Derek could do it. He said he could beat him."

"Interfering *bastard*." Facing the man who'd killed Aaron herself wouldn't have been this terrifying. "Derek's only been a wolf for two years. Even if he knew how these things worked, it'd be dangerous."

"It's dangerous no matter what," her father said quietly. "You know that I don't hold with the sexism prevalent in our society, but some things can't be equalized. I don't care how fast you are, Nicole. You're half Coleman's size, and you don't have the sort of training it would take to overcome that. You can't fight him."

"So I should throw Derek at him?" she asked dully. "I'd rather let Ochoa or Hoffman take him. I'd rather let him *rot* in a Conclave cell for the rest of his life."

"Be prepared for what that means, then. It would undermine us. Make us look weak."

"I don't care." Even as she spoke, she knew it was a lie. She cared, because Coleman had stolen part of her family. Her *pack*.

Her father had always been able to read people. "Tell me honestly, what do your instincts demand?"

Retribution. Blood. "I have to—to talk to him. I have to make sure he knows what it would mean."

Her father looked more tired than she'd ever seen him. "I'll find a way, Nicole, if I have to. My children have suffered enough."

There was no other way, and her father knew that. "I just need to see Derek."

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If he hadn't seen Mahalia on the sidewalk, Derek might have convinced himself the cab had brought him to the wrong place.

He passed several crisp bills through the divider window to the cabbie and climbed out. He hefted his small carry-on as his gaze traveled up. And up. And up.

It didn't take a knowledge of architecture to see that anyone who occupied the penthouse in a building this lavish had the money to buy and sell him a hundred times over. For one breathless second, he forgot about supernatural politics and death and fate and fought a rush of inadequacy that came from remembering the love of his life was an honest-to-God heiress.

"Stand like that for too long, you'll get a crick in your neck."

Derek jerked his attention back to Mahalia with a self-conscious smile. "You suck at quitting smoking."

"With the week I've had, no shit." She crushed out the cigarette and reached for his hand. "We need to have quite a talk, but we can do it in the elevator on the way up. Does that blow your mind, or what?"

"Mahalia, my mind's been blown for a couple weeks." Her hand was small, almost delicate, but something about her grip was comforting all on its own. Maybe because he'd trusted Mahalia since the first time a nineteen-year-old Kat had dragged him into the bar Nick would eventually own and proved the supernatural community wasn't all bad.

He'd been human then. Still young, still stupid. *A whole lot's changed since then.* "Tell me what's going on, because Alec's version sounded like a battle plan."

She snorted and lowered her voice. "One of the Conclave members murdered Aaron, and now the Peytons have to get their pound of flesh. I was hoping you'd understand, because I sure as hell don't."

Alec's terse instructions had been to the point and starkly terrifying. "I think it's an honor thing. Pistols at dawn and the whole damn outdated shebang. They can't let the insult lie, but tradition states the Alpha is above challenges unless they're formal ones for his place on the Conclave. Alec said that if they break tradition, they'll lose all the leverage they have to keep Michelle and her kid alive."

The doorman pulled open the door, and Mahalia shook her head as she walked into the lobby. "It's archaic, honey. You sure you want to be a part of it?"

He didn't, but it didn't matter, not while Nick was a part of it. "What are you still doing here?"

She cast him a sharp look and called the elevator. "I don't run out on people who need me. But I'm not going to be neck-deep in their politics, either."

Derek turned it into a joke because he didn't know what else to do. "Don't worry. You're short. Neck-deep for you should be just past my elbows."

"Smartass."

"I'm trying to cope." He swallowed as the lights flickered on the display above the elevator, marking its progress up the impossibly tall building. "How is she? How are *they*?"

"Michelle's in hell. Nicole..." She blinked hard and stared straight ahead. "Nicole needs you."

The anxious animal pacing inside him agreed. "I'm here. I'm all in, May. They may not want me in the game, but I don't care anymore."

The elevator hit the top floor. "I don't think it matters, Derek. I'm not an expert, but I think we're in uncharted waters."

The doors slid open onto a private hall decorated in rich tones of crimson and gold. It wouldn't have been so bad if the wealth had been ostentatious or gaudy, but Derek knew just enough to understand that understated, effortless elegance wasn't effortless at all.

He was still wearing the faded jeans and T-shirt he'd had on when Alec had shown up. His hiking boots fell heavy on the spotless, polished hardwood floors, and he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a gorgeous antique mirror, his tired features overwhelmed by what had been a five o'clock shadow two days ago and mussed hair that badly needed trimming. He didn't belong here.

*Too fucking bad.*

Nick's father pulled open the heavy oak door before they reached it. He'd looked worried when Derek had first seen him in New Orleans. Now, he looked twenty years older. "Gabriel."

*Manners, Derek.* He didn't know who that silent voice in his head belonged to, but it offered sound advice. "Mr. Peyton."

He stepped aside, his expression inscrutable. "Nicole's in the kitchen."

Not exactly an open-armed greeting, but he hadn't been expecting one. The fact that the Alpha wasn't wrestling him back into the elevator was as close to approval as he was likely to get. He should consider himself blessed and get to the kitchen. To Nick.

Of course, finding the kitchen on his own was another problem.

He didn't have to. Nick appeared in a doorway off to his left and froze. She stood there for a few seconds, her face pale and eyes red-rimmed, just looking at him. Then she breathed a sob and hurried across the foyer, past her father and Mahalia.

He dropped his bag a second before she launched herself at him. It didn't matter anymore that John Peyton, Alpha of the fucking United States, was standing there eyeing him with what had to be disapproval. It didn't matter that he felt grungy and out of place in a house so far out of his league it made the moon seem within reach.

She mattered. Derek closed his arms around her body and dragged her against him, his heart aching at the way she trembled. Nick had always been small, but for the first time she felt fragile. The last week had broken something inside her, and it made him want to scream.

*Later.* He buried his face in her hair and whispered her name.

“They killed him.” Her voice was small and muffled. “It was Coleman, but they all did it. They’re all responsible.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” Useless words, but all he had. “I’ll help you with whatever you need to do. Anything.”

“I know.” She pulled back at the sound of footsteps retreating, leaving them alone in the foyer. “Come on. Get your bag and I’ll take you to our—to your room.”

He lifted the bag without taking his gaze from hers. “I missed you. I missed you so damn much, Nick.”

Her hand still rested in his, and he felt the tremor that ran through her. “I...” She shook her head and pulled him down a hallway. She didn’t stop until they reached the last door, and he almost stumbled when she yanked him through it.

It was her room. Framed family pictures and black-and-white photos of the city plastered the walls, and it felt the same as her house back home, cluttered and eclectic and warm.

Derek barely had time to drop his bag again before Nick was back in his arms. “I missed you too. I love you.”

He lifted her this time, clear off the floor, and stumbled back. He hit the door, slamming it shut behind them with a noise he barely noticed because Nick was against him, in his arms, and all he could think about was kissing her.

So he did, covering her mouth with a low groan and kissing her with a desperation that wasn’t even about sex. He needed her to be safe and close and *happy*. Needed her to be his.

He needed to be *hers*.

Nick clung to him, her fingers threaded through his hair, and whispered words against his mouth. “I don’t care what happens, I’m not letting go again. I can’t.”

The words were everything he needed and, for the next few heartbeats, the world ceased to exist. The harsh, cruel world of prejudice and politics, sexism and violence—everything faded away in one moment of blissful fucking perfection.

Chemistry, magic, *love*—it didn’t matter what it was, just that it felt like he’d spent the last two years struggling against the current only to let go. Peace settled over him as he kissed her again, savoring the softness of her lips and the warmth of her body.

Her mouth left his to trail over his cheeks and jaw. “I need you, but I’m scared, baby. I know why Alec sent you.”

Derek curled his hands in her hair and urged her head back. “First things first, Nicole Peyton. Alec didn’t *send* me anywhere.”

“You mean that.” Her eyes blazed with something hot and primitive, something that stirred the wolf inside him. “You came for me.”

“Damn right I did.” Now that they were together, she didn’t feel fragile. She felt strong, dangerous, the dominant magic inside her an equal for his own. Together, they could do whatever they needed to. “I don’t give a shit if things are dangerous. You’re not dealing with it alone.” *Never.*

Her small hands framed his face, and she kissed him again. “Thank you for being here.”

“No place else to be, Nick.”

Doubt and then a fierce protectiveness flashed across her features. “We need to talk to my father.”

He’d come here prepared to kill a man for her if he had to. It didn’t say much about him that facing her father seemed more daunting. *Or it says something about her father.* “He’s not going to love me, Nick. It’s okay. He doesn’t need to, as long as you do.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to let him treat you badly.” Her jaw tensed. “No way.”

Alec had told him not to waste time worrying about earning the Conclave’s respect. Nothing he could do would matter, because he wasn’t one of them. And that included Nick’s father.

But Nick seemed determined, and he couldn’t bring himself to deny her that hope. “Okay, sweetie. You’re the boss.”

Nick kept her hand wrapped tightly around Derek’s as they stepped into the kitchen. Her father and Mahalia were side by side at the counter, chopping vegetables and speaking in low tones. “Dad?”

His gaze snagged on their joined hands for a moment before it reached her face. “Yes?”

“We need to talk.” She pulled out a stool beside the island and sat. “Figure out what to do about Coleman, and what comes after.”

Her father nodded and set down his knife to brace both large hands on the counter. “First off, tell me if you knew what your sister had planned.”

“I knew when she asked Luciano if he’d marry her.” She rubbed her thumb over Derek’s hand. “She didn’t consult me beforehand, if that’s what you want to know.”

Derek’s fingers tightened around hers, but he stayed silent as her father frowned. “She didn’t consult anyone, and that’s not like her. If it’s because she needs to take control, that’s one thing, but I’m worried about her making impulsive decisions out of grief and desperation.”

Mahalia shook her head as she began to chop broccoli into a colander. “I’d bet anything it’s the former, John. I’ve seen people crazy with grief, and Michelle’s not that. If anything, she’s locked down.”

The description brought a sick feeling to Nick’s stomach. “She said she needed to decide for herself. To *do* something about her future instead of just letting everyone else handle it.”

"But Luciano..." He trailed off as his gaze flickered to Derek.

Derek didn't flinch. "Luciano cares about her, and that makes it a sticky situation."

They didn't have the luxury of taking too much care with Luciano's feelings. "Even if he winds up with a broken heart, he'd count it as a small price to pay for Michelle's safety. He *can* guarantee that, Dad. You know he can. Hoffman and Ochoa are just dying to shut Enrica out after this whole mess."

"As if they would have done any better." He straightened, rising to his full, impressive height. "They'll use this as an excuse to say women don't belong in positions to power. To keep you off the Conclave."

It was the moment of truth. Nick met his stare. "It kills me that they'll take this and twist it into some misogynistic bullshit. But personally? I don't care if they shut me out. It's not for me. It never has been."

For the first time in her life, the words didn't bring a disapproving look from her father. He studied her in silence, that tired, worn expression worse than ever, and nodded. "I understand."

It seemed too easy, and it scared her. Before this whole fiasco, her father wouldn't have hesitated to try to convince her, to sing the praises of leadership and its rewards. That he didn't try now spoke more loudly than his words. "Do you understand? Really?"

"I wanted to change our world for you and your sister. I wanted to make us civilized. Maybe we're not as ready for it as I'd hoped, and I'm through making you pay the price for that."

Having her walk away for good would weaken his authority with the wolves, maybe even force him off the Conclave. Looking into her father's eyes, Nick could tell he didn't give a damn anymore. "All right. Michelle's taking care of herself for once. What we need to handle is the situation with Coleman."

Derek cleared his throat. "Alec told me a little about that."

Of course he had. Nick rubbed her hands over her face. "Coleman's bigger than me, but I'm fast—"

"No." Derek's voice, quiet and intense. "You've asked me to stand by and watch this shit nearly kill you. This is the one thing I can do. For God's sake, let me do it."

"Can you do it?" She kept her voice as quiet as his. "You can bet your ass he's trained for this sort of thing. He's ambitious, and no matter how civilized Dad keeps trying to make things, Coleman wouldn't have gotten this far without tucking a few victories under his belt." She had to make him understand. "A challenge like this is a fight to the death, Derek. It's not the same as sparring with Alec in his backyard."

He caught her chin and lifted her gaze to his. "Remember, someone has tried to kick the shit out of me on just about every business trip I've been on."

"But not someone who clawed his way up to a seat on the Conclave."

"Oh, and how many Conclave members have you fought?"

Mahalia cut in. "That's enough. Your father was right, Nicole. You may be quick in a fight, but that's no advantage against Coleman. He's just as fast, and you can't match him for size. Derek, on the other hand..."



Nick had swallowed tears until her chest ached. Maybe it should have been simple to ask Derek to do this for her, for her family, but she couldn't.

Had Michelle felt this way, taking that first step? Getting involved with Aaron, knowing she might as well march him in front of the Conclave and declare him a traitor? Had it felt this selfish?

"Do whatever you need to do," she whispered thickly, avoiding his gaze as she slid off the barstool. "I'll be in my room."

"Nick—"

"Give her a second." Her father, low and sure, and his words continued as she fled the kitchen. "Remember how *you* felt, being helpless..."

She didn't stay to listen. Her eyes burned and she couldn't see, but she made it to her bedroom anyway, slamming the door shut behind her.

It opened seconds later, even with her leaning against it. Derek's scent coiled around her, followed by the warmth of his hands as he grasped her shoulders and pulled her to him. "Have a little faith in me."

"It isn't that. Christ, Derek, you're the strongest person I know." Over the last two years, she'd watched him more closely than she'd admitted to herself. "You work your ass off, and I've never seen you give up on anything. This isn't about you."

"It's about me if you want a boyfriend who sits on his ass when you don't need sex or waffles."

"I *don't*!" Nick jerked free and rounded to face him. "You shouldn't have to fight Coleman. It's *my* fault. All of it, everything."

Derek groaned and leaned back against the door. "Everything? Come on, Nick. Give the rest of us a chance to fuck up once in a while."

"Not like that. Not the situation." Misery churned through her. She wanted to stop arguing, to give in and go to him, let him hold her, but she forced herself to stay still. "Would you be okay with it? If I had to face something like this because of you?"

"What the hell do you think the last month has been like?" He caught her shoulders again and leaned down. "I want a partner, Nick. I want to *be* a partner. I'm never going to be able to do the political shit the way you can, but I can fight. You did your part, so let me do mine."

He still didn't get it, and he probably never would. Their situations weren't reversed, and he'd already spent more than his fair share of time having to think of her in danger. That none of that danger had been directly attributable to him didn't matter.

She took a deep breath and tried one last time. "Because of me, Derek. If something goes wrong, you'll be dead because of me, and not in some hyperguilty, theoretical fashion. Because you took my place in this fight." She held up a hand to halt his protest. "Hang on. You want to do this, and I understand. Really, I do. I just need some time to get okay with it."

"No." He tilted her head back again. "You need to get okay with the fact that there aren't *your* fights and *my* fights anymore. This is our fight."

His conviction was absolute, and his strength both calmed and humbled Nick. She squeezed her eyes shut and leaned against him. "I think you're getting the short end of the deal here."

Derek laughed and kissed the top of her head. "Only literally, baby. And that's okay. We'll get you a step stool."

She let go of his shirt and smoothed the fabric. "We have an advantage, you know. A big one."

"Yeah?"

"My father. He's seen Coleman fight before. He knows his moves."

"Then he can show me." A feral smile curled his lips. "You have no idea how much I want to hit something. I got in a damn fistfight with Andrew."

"Did he deserve it in the slightest?"

"Don't think either of us deserved it, but we both needed it."

"Hopefully it helped you both blow off some steam." She bit her lip. "How is he doing? And Kat?" She'd been so wrapped up in her own problems that she hadn't thought to ask.

Derek closed his eyes, and she knew the news wasn't good. His thumbs rubbed along her collarbones, the touch almost absentminded. "Why don't we sit down and talk?"

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Nick stirred the mixture in the double boiler. "Almost ready. You still like cinnamon?"

"I think so." Michelle's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I never know how things will taste these days."

"You can try it first and see." The thick chocolate had just started to foam, so she cut off the heat and reached for two mugs. "Did you and Luciano get things worked out?"

"He agreed to everything." Michelle sounded tense. Worried.

"You don't think he understands what you're asking of him?"

"I think he understands." Her voice dropped, and Nick heard the first hint of pain. "I think I'm taking advantage of him, and he's letting me."

"Sweetie." Nick braced her hands on the counter and leaned down to catch Michelle's gaze. "You think that, and you may be right. But it's what he *wants*. He wants to be able to take care of you."

"I'm not going to love him, Nick. Even if I did some day, for some reason...it wouldn't matter. I'm done."

Only a few days earlier, Nick would have protested the finality of the quiet declaration. "I understand."

Michelle tucked her hands in her lap. “I suppose what upsets me the most about it is that I’m not sorry. I’m using his feelings and doing it unkindly, and I should feel something. Anything.”

She’d been walking around in a fog all morning, and Nick had the feeling it wouldn’t clear until things were settled. “I don’t think you should feel anything right now. If you could, it might drive you crazy.”

“Maybe.” Awkward silence filled the kitchen for a few moments before Michelle changed the subject. “I talked to Dad. He said he’s issuing a challenge on behalf of the Peyton family.”

“It’s nothing less than they expect.” What they couldn’t foresee was *who* exactly would be showing up to participate. “I wonder if they think he plans to fight Coleman himself.”

“They can’t imagine a girl issuing a challenge. They could think Alec’s going to step in for us.”

A hysterical giggle bubbled up in Nick’s chest. “God, can you imagine his father’s reaction to that?”

Michelle didn’t laugh. “His father would be ecstatic if Alec defeated a Conclave member in a challenge. It would put Alec one step closer to being a serious contender for real power. And New Orleans *is* in the Southeast council.”

Michelle wasn’t joking, not in the least, and a shiver claimed Nick. “If that’s what he still expects, he’s crazy. I don’t care if the council was headquartered in Alec’s front yard, he’d never take a spot on it. He’d wall himself up in his basement first.”

“Do you think his father wants to believe that?”

“No.” Alexander Jacobson would believe the earth was flat if he thought it might help elevate his station. The man craved power more than anything else.

“But it won’t be Alec.” For the first time, something other than pain or blank stillness shone in Michelle’s eyes. She smiled, a trembling, tentative movement, and warm magic filled the kitchen. “He loves you so much.”

“I know.” Derek loved her. Without her own uncertainty blurring her perceptions, she could see how much every time he looked at her. “We both spent so much time running.”

“Aaron really liked him.”

The mention of his name brought back memories of the day Aaron had forced her to promise him she’d take care of Michelle when he was gone. Nick tightened her hand around the edge of the marble counter. “He told me Derek was worth more than a few of these Conclave sons.”

“He was right. He usually was.” Michelle’s smile wavered. “Except when he told me I’d be fine without him.”

Nick had no words to comfort her, so she rounded the island, slid her arms around Michelle’s shoulders and rested her cheek on the top of her head. “I think...he wanted to believe it. For your sake.”

“We’ll have a son,” Michelle whispered, her voice thick. “I need to be fine for him. I need—” Magic spiked in time with Michelle’s gasping sob, pain tearing through the room, riding on an edge of power that would have sent the Conclave scrambling in fear. “I can’t do this alone, Nick.”

Michelle’s pain sparked her own, and Nick closed her eyes against the tears that welled. “I’d planned on selling the bar when I came here, and I think I’m still going to. Maybe I can visit you on the ranch? Stay for a while?”

“I—” Another sob, and Michelle’s icy control shattered. Deep, jagged sobs wracked her body and her tears fell hot on Nick’s shoulder as her pent-up grief spilled out.

“Shh. It’ll be okay.” Nick rocked her sister, only half believing the words she whispered. They may have figured out their options and made a plan to deal with things, but nothing could change what had happened, and what Michelle had lost.

The only thing she could hope was that time would bring relief, and that Michelle would heal. At least she’d have something to live for—her son. Without him, the rest of her sister’s days seemed almost too bleak to imagine.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Derek spent the three days leading up to the challenge learning why Nick's father ruled the wolves. Seventy years and change, and John Wesley Peyton had still kicked Derek's ass around the room with an ease that left his ego just as sore as his body. By the end of the second day, Derek was bruised and exhausted, and thanking every god he'd ever heard of that Andrew and his newly aggressive instincts were safely on the opposite end of the country.

The interminable wait culminated in a lengthy drive upstate, their destination a private bit of land owned by the Conclave. When the scenery had shifted from urban sprawl to rolling woods, Derek glanced at Nick. "Do they use this property for anything other than beating the crap out of each other?"

"Running," she murmured. "Congregation. We used to come up here all the time when I was a kid."

The car slowed to turn down a long, unmarked drive lined with towering trees. "Guess it's a good place to run."

Her hand tightened around his. "Don't forget. He's too aggressive. He leaves himself unguarded."

"I remember." He took a breath. "So what do you think they're going to do when they find out the representative of the Peyton family is a mutt?"

"They'll be scandalized, and Coleman will think you're bound to be easily beaten." She turned until she was facing him on the seat, pride shining in her eyes. "He'll be wrong."

"Yeah, he will." The expensive leather creaked as he shifted his weight and looped an arm around her shoulders. "How's Michelle?"

She leaned into him. "Holding up. She and Luciano should be married by the time we get back. Dad seems to think they were right to not wait and ask the Conclave's permission."

"Luke explained it to me." It hadn't seemed logical at first, but Derek had to admit there was a certain cunning in the maneuver. To the Machiavellian minds on the Conclave, it would probably look like Luciano had leapt at the chance to snatch up Michelle's money while no one was around to stop him.

"Mmm. They get rid of two problems—him and Michelle—all at once, and it looks just self-serving enough for them not to be too suspicious of his motives."

"His mother's going to be furious, isn't she?"

"That doesn't really cover it. Apoplectic with rage, maybe?"

Derek slid his fingers through Nick's hair, taking comfort from the soft strands on his skin. She was safe. She was his. Life would be perfect, if it weren't for his impending fight to the death. "Can she do anything to hurt either of them?"

"Not unless Hoffman and Ochoa don't officially support Luciano's plan, for some reason. Personally, she'll never lower herself to acknowledge that it bothers her." The car stopped, and Nick sat up and glanced out the window. "Here it is."

*Here* proved to be a graceful mansion with at least four stories and two distinct wings. It looked completely out of place nestled in untamed forest, and it took a few moments for Derek to realize it was the lack of landscaping that bothered him. Trees were trimmed back from the roof itself, but the only token attempt to control the wild around it came from the rough gravel drive that lead to two heavy oak doors adorned with massive carvings.

He slid out of the car without waiting for someone to open the door for him and reached back a hand to Nick. "This is surreal."

Most of Nick's attention as she climbed out of the car was focused on a group of men standing near the mansion. "More or less so because you're about to be dueling in the backyard?"

"At least it's not pistols," he murmured. Several of the men watched them closely. "That's the Southeast council, I take it?"

"Part of it," she whispered, turning away from the group. "The Mendoza brothers and a few of their supporters. Cesar, the oldest, has been looking for a way to oust Coleman for years."

Derek couldn't look away. Something feral rose in the face of such blatant appraisal, a feeling he'd choked back dozens of times. A wild hunger, one that demanded blood and violence.

For the first time, he let the magic come. His skin tingled, and power settled around him with an almost tangible *click*. He *felt* the difference as he met the gaze of the tallest man and let the new awareness fill his eyes.

Nick stepped closer to his side, her touch soothing on his arm. "Cesar challenged Coleman about five years ago and got his ass handed to him."

He held the man's gaze for another few heartbeats before Cesar looked away, a grudging surrender accompanied by a sneer of disdain.

Derek had seen that look enough times. "Looks like my total lack of reputation precedes me."

She pulled him toward the wide front doors of the house. "It doesn't matter. They'll know your name after today."

They knew his name already, and he'd bet his business on it. "They're not sneering at me because they don't know who I am, Nicky. They're sneering at me because they know *exactly* who and what I am."

For a moment she looked almost shocked, as if he'd reminded her of something she'd forgotten, and her eyes hardened. "Then they won't sneer for long." Her thumb rubbed over the back of his hand. "I'm proud of you for doing this, Derek. For standing up to this sort of thing."

As if he was doing it to make a stand. Derek lifted her hand and kissed it, enjoying the shocked murmurs from behind them. "I'm not looking to become the poster boy for the disenfranchised, baby. I just don't give a shit anymore, as long as I've got you."

The foyer was lined with more people standing along the walls. Among them was Nick's father. "They're waiting in the conference room." He stepped forward and lowered his voice. "Are you ready?"

Derek wasn't sure which of them the question was meant for, but he answered it with all the courage he could muster. "Absolutely."

"Let's go."

Nick didn't release his hand as the crowd parted for them, though the murmurs and questions grew so loud he could easily make out the astonished words. She held her head high, her cheeks red with what he knew had to be anger rather than embarrassment, and gripped his hand tighter.

The conference room turned out to be a large, open area with glass walls and ceiling, built more like a greenhouse or solarium than a boardroom. Instead of sitting around a table, the three remaining members of the Conclave waited in the middle of the room.

One man wore a sling on one arm. *Hoffman*, Derek thought, and that meant the darker man pacing the stone floor was Ochoa. Enrica Maglieri had a cell phone to one ear and a frown on her face. Trying to call Luciano, probably, and Derek knew how useless that would be. Yesterday morning, Luciano and Michelle had used the chaos of the impending challenge to apply for their marriage license. By now they'd be in front of an official. By the time the challenge was over... *Please let me be alive to buy them a stand mixer.*

The dark man stopped and frowned a little in Derek's direction. "You're late, Peyton."

"Everyone is," Enrica interjected. "Did Luciano come with you?"

John shook his head. "Luciano agreed that Michelle didn't need to be alone during this trying time, so he stayed behind with her."

Enrica's expression tightened. "I see."

*I just bet you do.* It was better not to give her too much time to think about it. If the Conclave had time to consider Michelle unsupervised in New York City or, worse, supervised only by Enrica's son, they might be distracted. That could spell disaster for Luciano and Michelle.

He knew one way to make sure everyone's undivided attention stayed fixed on the upcoming challenge. Releasing Nick's hand, he stepped forward, angling his body slightly in front of hers. "I'm here to challenge Noah Coleman on behalf of the Peyton family."

Hoffman laughed, the sound disdainful enough to spike Derek's temper, but a vicious snarl from Nick's father silenced the mockery.

A look of disbelief and then anger spread across Ochoa's features. "It's not allowed, Peyton. You can't just bring someone in off the street because your daughter isn't strong enough to win a challenge."

Alec had told him what to say, but he wasn't prepared for the swell of possessive satisfaction that came with speaking the words. "The right of challenge is mine as Nicole Peyton's mate."

No one laughed at that. The dark-haired man's scowl melted into openmouthed shock, his expression mirroring the others.

John Peyton sighed. "I'm tired of pushing Nicole away by trying to make her life conform to what I want. She's chosen her own path, her own mate...and I believe she's chosen well."

Total silence.

Derek had the insane urge to laugh at the display of flustered consternation. He didn't know what had shocked them more—the idea that Nicole had chosen him over one of their precious sons, or the fact that her father seemed to approve.

The seconds ticked by, and the silence became uncomfortable. Derek cleared his throat and repeated his challenge in a quiet, sure voice. "I'm here to challenge Noah Coleman on behalf of the Peyton family."

Enrica finally spoke. "We recognize your challenge. Whether Noah will fight is up to him."

They'd warned Derek of as much. He knew Nick was secretly hoping Noah Coleman would refuse the fight and cement his own disgrace. It was the only way of avoiding bloodshed, but Alec had assured him during his last phone call that it was a long shot at best. Refusing to fight would be seen as a sign of weakness. A sign of fear.

A man like Noah Coleman couldn't let anyone think he was afraid of a wolf two years made. Pride would drive him to fight. Desperation would force him to fight hard.

It was too late to back down, even if Derek wanted to. "I understand."

"Conrad." She turned her head to the sandy-haired man. "Bring him out to hear his challenge."

No one moved. For a few seconds it seemed like no one *breathed*. Then the blond nodded sharply. As he strode from the room the other man spoke up, though his gaze stayed on Nick's father, as if Derek was beneath his notice. "Does he understand what he's doing?"

"He's standing right here," Nick said tightly. "Why don't you ask him, Ochoa?"

Cold black eyes fixed on Derek's face. "You're challenging the leader of the Southeast council. In the event of your victory, you'll take your place as a member of that council...until someone challenges you for your place. And, believe me, the challenges will come. Daily."

Derek grinned at him, a deliberate baring of teeth that was just short of a challenge on its own, and said the kind of infuriating thing he imagined Alec might say in his place. "Yep, might have heard something of the sort."

Ochoa snorted and cut a glance at John. "This one's been spending too much time with Jacobson's kid."



As if he'd had a choice. In spite of what he'd told Nick, in spite of swearing he wasn't interested in changing their society, he couldn't keep his damn mouth shut. "That's because Alec Jacobson spends his time cleaning up after your messes. That's what he's doing right now, you know. Taking responsibility for the lives your commandos ruined."

Enrica paled. Ochoa just looked smug. "For your information, not everyone on this board approved that disastrous show of force."

Disgust rose inside him, and he didn't try to hide it. "Don't pretend you give a damn about the people they hurt. It's insulting."

The man flushed. "You've got a smart mouth, kid."

Nick's father stepped between them. "Jorge, that's enough."

Dragging himself back under control was a formidable test of willpower, but Derek managed it. Nick caught his hand and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and Derek tensed as the sandy-haired man returned, leading three hulking men who were obviously guards and the man he assumed to be Noah Coleman.

He was large. Not as large as John Peyton, but almost as tall as Derek himself and a little wider. He looked to be in his forties, which meant he was probably in his sixties.

Coleman stared at Derek for a moment and shook his head. "You're just a damn kid."

Cold rage rose up inside him, narrowing his focus to Noah Coleman. "So?"

"So nothing," he said flatly. "I hear your challenge, and I accept."

Pure exhilaration. Derek wanted to throw back his head and howl. The wolf paced anxiously, ready to break free, and Derek didn't try to hide the rush of power.

As the challenger, it was his right to pick the time. No more waiting. No more wondering. With his humanity fading, it was a struggle to remember the words he'd been taught. "I don't require any time for preparations. Choose the method."

Coleman's stare went hot and feral. "We face each other as wolves."

It had been too much to hope that Coleman would accept the fight in human form, and John had warned him not to expect it. "Where does this happen?"

John Peyton jerked his head toward the far wall of the room. "There's a clearing about a quarter-mile back in the forest. The traditional grounds."

"And we go there now?"

"We go there now."

Nick's hand went stiff in his. The others filed out of the room, but she hesitated. "Derek."

He waited until they were alone to turn to her. "Nicky?"

She folded her arms around his neck and kissed him hard, then whispered in his ear. "I love you."

It firmed up his resolve, among other things. "You can love me all you want tonight. My instincts are a little riled."

She licked his ear. "I'll show you how we celebrate a victorious challenge."

Now all he had to do was win.

Nick had never been more terrified in her life. When Coleman had burst into Aaron's cell with a gun in his hand, she hadn't had time to be frightened. Now, she'd had days to imagine the ways this challenge could go wrong, and it scared the hell out of her.

She released Derek as they approached the clearing, and her father caught her arm and urged her to stop. "When he steps into the circle, Nicole, he has to go alone."

She knew that, but it didn't lessen her need to stay beside him. "He can do this."

Derek turned to look back at her. "Damn right I can, sweetheart."

She nodded slowly, acutely aware of the appraising gazes. "Yes."

He was full of hungry, dangerous power and leashed strength that made her want to rub against him, to show him all the ways she could sate that need raging inside him.

He smiled, and she wondered if he knew what she was thinking. "Be right back." Then he turned and walked into the circle.

Coleman had already shed his clothes and knelt on the ground. In a seemingly effortless moment, he shifted, gray fur covering his body. Derek stripped off his clothing as well, still poised on the edge of the circle as he dropped his shirt and his pants. The change came more slowly for him, but when it was over the dark wolf she remembered from their run together stood on the edge of the circle, tall and strong.

Coleman bristled, his tail twitching jerkily as he paced in the center of the circle. His lips lifted to bare his teeth, and he growled.

Derek pounced.

It was fast, so fast that he was on Coleman before Nick registered that he'd moved. Teeth flashed, and his snarl rose as he snapped his jaws shut where Coleman's shoulder had been a heartbeat before.

Shocked murmurs rose from the gathered onlookers, but the gray wolf facing Derek stared him down with gleaming eyes. The attack had been aggressive, and it must have seemed carelessly so to Coleman.

Derek didn't give him a chance to regain his composure. He attacked a second time, and a third, forcing Coleman to bend his body out of the way, to defend.

It was everything her father had told Derek. *Stay on the offensive. He's a decent fighter who can match your strength, but he tires quickly.* "Is this going to work?" she whispered softly.

Her dad's hand came up to rest on her shoulder, the weight warm and reassuring. "He's fast and he's tough. Jacobson's not a bad teacher."

“No, he isn’t.” Alec’s influence showed in every feint and snap. Derek’s fighting was quick, dirty...and effective. Over and over, he drove Coleman back, and once almost took him off his feet.

But it didn’t take long for his opponent to realize that Derek’s aggressiveness left him no room for a defense of his own, and every lunge left him open to retaliatory attacks. The next time Derek snapped at Coleman’s side, the older man let him, taking the minor bite as he turned into Derek’s body. A heartbeat later deadly sharp teeth sank into Derek’s shoulder.

He wrenched out of Coleman’s grip and recovered quickly, but his next attack was just a little more cautious, a little more restrained.

Nick stepped forward before she could stop herself. There was nothing she could do, but it didn’t help the fear. The truth of the situation, the gravity of it, trembled through her all over again.

Derek could die.

She could barely speak. “What happens if Coleman wins?”

Her father’s voice dropped to the barest whisper, too soft to be heard by anyone else gathered around the circle. “Coleman is stripped of his rank and sent home in disgrace. But if he’s willing and able to challenge his way back onto his council, he could take his old Conclave seat back.”

Nick shuddered, though she barely felt the tremor. Coleman had everything to regain by winning. It would make him viciously determined to do so.

He bit Derek again, focusing his attack on the same spot as before. Derek threw his weight behind a lunge that toppled them both onto the ground as loud snarls rose above the quiet murmur of voices.

They broke apart and came to their feet, and Derek charged before Coleman caught his balance.

By now, the fight had evened out. They each had an idea of the other’s style, and it became a tense exchange of attacks and dodges, or glancing blows and bites.

Derek was young, tough, but his shoulder began to bleed freely when Coleman managed one more tearing bite. Nick clamped her own teeth on her tongue to keep from crying out, but she refused to look away.

The constant attacks on his wounded shoulder began to take their toll. Derek stumbled with his next lunge, but Coleman was beginning to tire. He didn’t move fast enough to take advantage of Derek’s unsteady footing, and when he *did* move forward, Derek whipped around and caught his opponent’s back leg in a bite hard enough to wrench an enraged snarl from Coleman’s throat.

They both went down in a jumble of flailing limbs and snapping jaws. It took a minute for Coleman to break away and stagger to his feet. Derek followed, favoring his injured shoulder as the wolves circled.

Behind Nick, her father tightened his fingers on her shoulders in silent reassurance. But the longer they fought, the harder it was to watch.

She caught sight of Conrad Hoffman. He stood on the far edge of the circle, eyes narrowed and a slight frown marring his usually mild expression. When Derek snarled and attacked again, driving Coleman back, Hoffman's frown deepened.

The gnawing fear in Nick's belly flared and faded into numbness. She sought out the other Conclave members and found them watching the fight the same way, with a mixture of disbelief and discomfort.

They wanted Coleman to win. He'd ignored their official decision, gone rogue and killed Aaron, and it didn't matter. Having him back in power would be preferable to having Derek.

Her father's hands tightened again, hard this time, as if he was afraid she couldn't keep her feet on her own. "Say the word and I'll end it. Even if it tears everything apart."

"No." Derek was still fighting. He sank his teeth into Coleman's leg again, only a glancing, shallow bite, but he was still *fighting*. He hadn't given up on her, and she wouldn't give up on him. "Derek can do this. He's winning. That's why Hoffman and the others are so worried."

He could do this. He could win, and turn their world upside down.

Still trembling, Nick watched.

The last time Derek had felt pain this intense, he'd gone down human and woken up a shapeshifter.

He wrenched his body out of the way of Coleman's next attack, taking some comfort in the fact that it was slower than the previous lunges. But Coleman wasn't the only one slowing down, and every second that passed brought another layer of agony.

Instinct that had been sure and confident at the beginning of the fight had begun to waver. Coleman was older, but he had cunning on his side. He'd hit Derek's left shoulder so many times the pain was starting to drift toward a terrifying numbness that made it hard to maneuver.

He had to end the fight. He had to kill Coleman.

He had to figure out *how*.

He darted back, and his bad leg chose that moment to give out. They hit the ground, Coleman on top of him, and it was only a minor blessing that the powerful jaws closed on his shoulder instead of his throat. Coleman shook him so hard that pain exploded through him, and Derek put everything he had into twisting away.

It was Nick's tiny, terrified gasp that gave him the strength to fight the pain. Coleman had killed Aaron in cold blood in front of her. He wasn't going to get a second chance to hurt her like that.

Derek rolled, hard and fast, and slammed Coleman's injured side into the ground. The older wolf's jaws opened on a yelp of pain, and Derek wiggled free. He couldn't feel his shoulder anymore, and he didn't need instinct to tell him that was bad. Time was running out.

So he gathered everything he had, bared his teeth, and lunged.

He hit while Coleman was still struggling to his feet, and the wolf went down with a snarl. Claws sliced into his injured shoulder, and Derek ignored it. Ignored the pain and the fear of losing his arm for good and the shocked murmurs around them as Coleman began to panic, to struggle with frantic desperation.

Derek had worried there might be hesitation when he closed his teeth on his enemy's throat, but the wolf rose in giddy triumph as he snapped his jaws shut, tasted blood. Coleman's body jerked underneath him, his efforts slowing.

His second bite crushed his opponent's throat. His third tore it open. Blood gushed, and Coleman writhed for a few final seconds and fell still.

Silence reigned around the circle, broken only by Nick's hoarse, ragged sobs. Derek took three trembling steps back and dropped to his haunches, trying to spare his shoulder. He had no doubt that the numbness suffusing his body was only a temporary reprieve. Shock and adrenaline would soon fade, and he sure the hell wanted to be in human form before it did.

Finding the energy to shift was the hardest thing he'd ever done. The wolf fought him, high on the thrill of victory, and his injuries made the magic sluggish. Changing was usually easy, a burst of magic that burned through his body too fast to register pain. This time it crawled, dripping over him like molasses and leaving pain in its wake. It took too long to feel grass under his knees and, by the time the power faded, he was panting for breath, his left arm limp and useless at his side.

The wolf howled its outrage at being vulnerable in the face of so many potential enemies. Derek ignored it and focused on the only one who mattered, forcing out her name in a ragged, broken whisper. "Nick."

She wrenched free of her father's grasp and ran to him, skidding to her knees in the grass beside him. "You're hurt."

"I'm okay." A lie, and they both knew it.

Her hands slipped over his blood-slicked skin. "Can you stand? You have to."

He had to face the Conclave, accept his victory. *And tell them where to shove their council seat.* He felt like he'd lost a game of chicken with an eighteen-wheeler, and he'd happily sleep for a week, but he pulled himself to his feet and managed to stand, though his grip on Nick's shoulder had to be hurting her.

It was Hoffman who faced him first, his face set and almost angry. "The Conclave heard your challenge, and Noah Coleman accepted it. You prevailed. Under our laws and traditions, that which was his is now yours."

There were traditional phrases, things Nick had taught him over the past three days. Everything seemed blurry through the haze of pain and he had to struggle to get *any* words out. "His fortune and his property should remain with his family."

Ochoa nodded, obviously at least mildly appeased by the concession. "That leaves his council seat. We were going to strip him of it, but your challenge took precedence. Since he still had it..."

Derek didn't want it. Every day would be a battle, a fight for change that no one around him wanted, and it would tie him to a world Nick only wanted to escape.

Validation wasn't worth it. So he straightened and met Ochoa's gaze squarely. "I respectfully decline."

Derek may as well have grown a second head. The man's eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. "You have to want it. Why the hell else would you have risked this fight?"

If they didn't understand things like love and loyalty, nothing he said could make them understand. "Because my Xbox broke and there wasn't anything good on TV. Are we done?"

Ochoa opened his mouth, but Nick interrupted him with a growl. "Where's the doctor, Jorge?"

"He's waiting inside," he told her, his gaze still on Derek. "If a winner can't walk out of the circle, he's not much of a winner."

"I won everything that matters." Derek squeezed Nick's shoulder once and released her, letting his hand fall to his side as he turned. Every step sent agony shooting through his body, but he ignored it as he walked to John's side.

Nick's father nodded once, in acknowledgement or maybe gratitude. "I'll take care of the rest," he murmured. "We'll talk later."

Nick waited until they were out of sight of the gathered crowd, just inside the mansion's back door, and grabbed him. "It's okay. They can't see you anymore."

Sometimes he forgot how strong she was. Pride had gotten him inside, but it was Nick's stubbornness that got him across the room and down the hallway when his vision had already begun to swim in time with the pounding of his heart. "My arm's bad, Nick. Really fucking bad."

It took her a moment to answer. "It'll heal, and that's what matters."

He wasn't feeling nearly so confident. Then again, he wasn't feeling much of anything at all, which probably had a lot to do with the trail of blood he'd left behind them. "Promise you'll still love me if I end up with one arm."

"Baby, I don't care if you only have one of everything." Her voice had taken on a strained quality, and he realized he was leaning heavily on her. "But if you don't stop talking like this is it, I'm going to smack you."

"That's my Nicky. Violent to the end." He reached up with his good arm and braced it against the wall. "I think I'm gonna pass out now, if that's okay."

She probably responded, but he didn't hear it. He was too busy putting action to words.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

His shoulder ached, he had wood glue all over his hands, and he'd never been happier.

Derek stepped back and caught the ratty old towel Luciano tossed at him with a wince he didn't bother to hide. It was freeing to feel safe showing weakness after the miserable weeks in New York, though the irony of being comfortable in Luciano's presence didn't escape him. But there was something soothing about the heated workroom behind the sprawling ranch house. He could hear the wind battering the side of the building, heralding the kind of harsh weather he'd never had to live with in Louisiana.

Something he'd just have to get used to, since Nick wasn't going anywhere.

He turned his attention to Luciano as the man examined the cradle they'd spent the afternoon assembling. "All it needs is a little more sanding and some stain. How's it look?"

"Michelle will love it." Luciano ran his hand over a side panel and rocked it a little.

Derek wiped his hands clean as well as he could and studied the day's work with a critical eye. It had been a long time since he'd had the luxury of indulging in his favorite hobby, but he hadn't done too badly, all things considered. Either way, it would be worth a few extra twinges in his injured arm if he managed to coax a rare smile from Michelle.

He dropped the towel to the side and grabbed a worn piece of sandpaper. "How's Michelle doing? Nick's wearing herself down between worrying about her sister and fussing over me."

"She's been quiet." Luciano began to smooth a sheet of sandpaper over the other side of the cradle. "Keeping to herself, mostly. A little sad. But she seems to be feeling better."

For a moment Derek was tempted to ask Luciano how *he* was doing, but their unspoken truce hadn't had time to grow into friendship. Though maybe it was time to change that. "Thanks for the rooms, by the way. It means a lot to Nick to be able to stay here for a while."

"This is Michelle's home now," Luciano answered quietly. "You two are welcome any time you want to be here."

"I don't think you're getting rid of Nick. Not until the baby's born." Derek gave in and rubbed at the throbbing ache in his shoulder. "I have to go back to New Orleans to deal with business from time to time. Aside from that, I think I'll take you up on that offer."

Luciano grinned. "Ranch life suits you?"

It did, and more than he'd anticipated. "Someone almost ripped my arm off my body a month ago in polite, civilized society. I could do with a little more time in the untamed wilds."

“You busted their polite society wide open. Was it worth it?”

He thought of Nick, and of how Luciano loved Michelle in his own way. “What do you think?”

Luciano was silent for several moments. “I think you and I understand each other.”

“I think you’re right.” They’d both do whatever they had to in order to keep the Peyton sisters safe. Luciano’s hell was the fact that he’d never be more than a friend and protector to the woman he loved.

Luciano seemed content, but Derek couldn’t imagine a world where he could watch Nick, day in and day out, knowing she’d never need him the same way he needed her. *But you’d do it*, he told himself, *if it was the only way to keep her safe*.

He didn’t envy Luciano at all.

“What would you do?” Luciano finally asked. “If you knew she’d never love you, but she still needed your help? If her child needed your help?”

His first instinct was to protest, to insist that Michelle might grow to love Luciano in time. But he’d seen the bond she shared with Aaron. He’d seen the *love*, the kind you didn’t come back from losing in weeks or months. It would be years before the scars on Michelle’s heart healed, and even then there was no way of knowing if she’d ever return her husband’s feelings.

So he answered the question as honestly as he could. “I’d take care of her, however she needed. I don’t think I *could* do anything else, even if I wanted to.”

“Yes, and that’s what I’m doing. I only wish Michelle didn’t feel so guilty about our situation.”

Derek felt the corner of his mouth tug up. “I’m starting to think telling a Peyton girl not to feel guilty is like asking the sun not to rise. All we can do is try to remind them we’re big boys who can make our own choices.”

Luciano laughed. “How are you faring with that?”

The words slipped out before he could stop them. “I’ll let you know after I ask her to marry me.”

The man’s laughter faded into a whistle. “The long haul, huh?”

“Pretty much. Guess that’d make you my brother-in-law.”

“I guess so. Congratulations, Derek.”

He should have felt more nervousness or trepidation or *something*, but he’d already faced the hardest battles. He’d killed for Nick. He’d claimed her as his mate in front of the strongest wolves in the country. As far as the animal inside him was concerned, the rest was silly formality.

Of course, there was still a part of him that wasn’t all animal and instinct, and that part was scared to death. “Congratulate me if she says yes.”

“I’ve seen you two together. She’ll say yes.”

Derek trusted that he was right and changed the subject. “I may need to borrow your truck and head into town tomorrow to pick up a few things. Everyone back in New Orleans made the deductive leap that since Nick’s birthday is next week, so is Michelle’s. I think some of them went a little overboard. You’ve



got about three boxes of books on their way, thanks to Michelle and Kat bonding over a shared love of reading. Thought I'd build a couple of nice bookcases, since it was my cousin's doing."

"Take any of the trucks. Gus can show you where the keys are." Luciano braced his elbows on the table and groaned. "I'm afraid to get Michelle a present. Like I'd be pressuring her somehow."

Sympathy rose in Derek. "So help me with the bookshelves. They can be from both of us."

"It wouldn't be fair. You'll be doing most of the work."

"Buy the supplies. We've got a new partner at the firm, so I just took a pay cut."

"Then be prepared for insinuations about the Parker family trust funds." When Derek blinked in confusion, Luciano shoved his hands in his pockets. "Their mom's parents set them up before Nick and Michelle were born. High six figures back then. Could be eight by now."

He'd always known Nick had grown up rich, but somehow he'd never quite translated that to the state of her bank account...or how many zeroes the balance had after it. He waited for pride to kick in, or maybe discomfort at the idea of being dependent on Nick.

None came, only relief that they'd have the resources to do whatever they had to do. To take care of Michelle, to make sure the company didn't go under while Andrew found his feet, to find a psychic to help Kat. They could take care of business.

They could do it *together*. "I guess if it takes the Parker family trust fund to keep things going for a while, that's what'll happen."

Luciano grinned. "As long as you and Nick know the score, I say that's all that matters."

"Damn straight." Derek nodded to the cradle. "What do you say? Should we finish it up and submit it for approval tonight?"

"Don't see why not." Luciano bent and searched through the bottom of a set of large metal shelves. He came up with fresh sheets of sandpaper. "We can ask Michelle what sort of stain she'd like and do that tomorrow. If, uh, I can figure out how to do that."

Derek laughed. "Don't worry. I'll show you."

The sun had already begun to set over the foothills, painting the sky in dimming shades of purple and gray. Nick looked out the glass walls of the sunroom and rocked slowly, her hand on the arm of Michelle's chair. "It's beautiful here. Quiet."

"Peaceful." Michelle had her eyes closed, her expression almost serene. "I can't tell you how much I needed peaceful."

"You don't have to." Her sister's pregnancy was starting to show, just a gentle rounding of her belly. "What did the midwife Luciano found have to say?"

Michelle's hand dropped to her abdomen. "So far so good. My powers have settled out. She thinks as long as I stay calm and secure, I won't have to worry about magical flare-ups."

A little of Nick's twisting tension eased. "Do you feel secure here? With Luciano?"

Her sister didn't answer at first. The rocking chair creaked as she pushed her foot against the sun porch, the only other sound the gentle whisper of the television inside the house. Finally she opened her eyes and glanced at Nick. "I'm safe. Luciano has given me everything I need and stayed out of my way the rest of the time. But...I miss Aaron. Even before I fell in love with him, he was the only constant in my life. The only person who was always there. I don't know if I remember how to live without him."

As far as Nick knew, there was no way past that, and nothing to heal those losses but time. "I'm sorry, sweetie."

Michelle's sadness trembled in the gentle power that surrounded her, but it was a thousand times better than the chilling numbness of the first few days after Aaron's death. "It's getting better. I can breathe when I think about him now. Maybe someday all I'll remember is how lucky I was to have someone love me that much."

"I think that's a lovely thing to remember."

"It's what he deserves." Her voice hitched and, after a slow, steady breath, she changed the subject. "How's Derek? Is he recovered from the fight?"

"His shoulder's going to take a while to heal, but he's happy here too." Away from New York, even away from his home. "It's almost like relearning who you are, isn't it?"

"No shapeshifter politics. No trouble around every corner, or people saying one thing and meaning another." Michelle closed her eyes again. "Now I understand the allure of New Orleans. The chance to be just...a person."

It was a chance Nick herself had snatched years ago, and she figured Michelle deserved it more than anyone. "Is it my turn to cook tonight? Derek's turn," she amended.

"It was, but since the men have been so busy with their mysterious project, I asked Gus to save us something from what he cooked up for the ranch hands. Did you know that Luciano's cook is related to Alec? On Alec's mother's side, I think, so Gus might be a Parker."

Which would make him a relative of theirs, as well. "Huh. It *is* a small world."

"Mmm. He's a good cook."

"No kidding. Between him and Derek, I'm going to have to buy new clothes before we go home."

Michelle went tense. "When *are* you going home?"

"Don't know yet. Thanksgiving is coming up, and then Christmas..." The time she'd spent separated from Derek had crawled, but it was flying by so quickly now. "When I left Louisiana, I had every intention of staying in Manhattan. I don't really *have* to go back. Derek does, at least for business trips, but not until after the holidays."

Michelle clutched at her hand, hard enough to make Nick's fingers ache. "I don't know why I thought you'd leave me so soon. I suppose I still don't believe it's over. Derek did something incredible for us."

Yes, he had. “It’s over, Michelle. This is your life now, and mine is with Derek. But he understands how important it is for me to be here with you right now.”

Michelle relaxed back into her chair. “Then I’ll have to thank him. I’m so happy for you Nick. Never think I’m not. Even with everything that’s happened, I’m so glad you have him.”

It would be hard to watch other people find happiness when your own had just been shattered. She’d felt a hint of it herself when she’d walked away from Derek to give Michelle and Aaron a chance, but that had been nothing compared to her sister’s pain. Derek had been alive and well, a fact Nick could cling to as she’d faced a dim future. “I understand. I’m glad too.”

“Good. You should be.”

They rocked in easy silence for a while as the sun sank behind the hills. The wind picked up outside, the chill seeping through the thick double-paned glass, and Michelle shivered under the heavy, hand-knitted afghan. “Luciano says we’re due a blizzard soon. I suppose that means all the snow we’ve gotten so far *weren’t* blizzards. I’m not sure if I should be delighted or terrified.”

“At least you’ve been in New York, so you’re almost used to it. Derek and I are going to spend all winter hiding under the covers.”

Michelle actually smiled. “You weren’t going to do that anyway?”

Nick blushed, and she nudged Michelle’s arm with hers. “I meant huddling for warmth.”

The front door opened, and heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway, followed by Derek’s voice. “Where are all the pretty ladies hiding?”

Just hearing him still made Nick’s heart race. “Back here, looking at all this cold, white stuff.”

Derek and Luciano arrived a few moments later, carrying a large wooden cradle between them. They set it down in the empty space behind the rocking chairs and Derek threw Nick a wink. “An early birthday present for Michelle. Or a *really* early birthday present for your nephew.”

Tears had already welled in Michelle’s eyes, and Nick bit her lip. “Derek, baby, can you and Luciano go see what Gus made for dinner?”

She had to give Derek credit, he had no trouble getting a hint. He nodded and jerked his head toward the door. “We’ll see if it’s ready too.”

“Thanks.” When they’d gone, she knelt in front of Michelle’s chair. “There are a lot of people who want to do things for you and the baby.”

Michelle squeezed her eyes shut, but it didn’t stop the tears from escaping. “It’s not that. I just— Luciano was trying to be nice, and I’m...”

*Still missing Aaron.* Nick rose. Michelle would need some time to compose herself. “I’m going inside. Why don’t you take a few minutes?”

“Thank you.”

Derek was waiting in the hallway, and Nick leaned her head on his chest. “The cradle is beautiful.”

"I was listening." He didn't sound at all repentant, either. His hands settled on her lower back. "Tell me if I need to back off. I don't want to kill her with kindness."

"Maybe a little, though Michelle can probably take it from you better than anyone else right now." She tried to smile. "She can always chalk it up to you being kind because of me."

His lips brushed the top of her head. "Then maybe we should pretend all those books Mackenzie and Kat rounded up are from me too. Though she might wonder when I spent time raiding used bookstores for books with naked men on the covers. Did you know about Mackenzie's thing for pirate books?"

"Mmm, most women have one." She tilted her head back. "Mine's Regency rakes. Your cousin likes cowboys. The dirty kind."

"I could have lived another decade without knowing that, thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Uh-huh. If your sister's likely to be alarmed by dirty cowboys, maybe you should vet the books. Mac took Kat out book shopping to try to cheer her up, and they ended up spending about five hundred bucks."

"I'm not surprised." His body was warm against hers, and Nick slipped her hands into Derek's back pockets.

He just held her tighter and lowered his voice. "I know you two want to spend your birthday together, but I was hoping you might sneak away with me for the night after we celebrate. A nice hotel room far away from people with superhearing."

She'd been remarkably well behaved while he recovered from his injuries, but now she bit his jaw lightly and growled. "Yes. I need some time alone with you."

"I'll make a reservation." He twisted his head and caught her lips in a brief but hard kiss. "Can't wait, baby."

"Yes, you can, because you have to." She pulled free of his arms. "Did you find out what's for dinner?"

"Uh-uh. I delegated."

"Of course you did." One more kiss, and she pulled him toward the kitchen. "Let's go help. Well, you can help. I'll watch."

"Or we can both watch." His fingers tightened around hers. "Fighting Conclave members to the death is one thing, but I'm not invading Gus's territory without permission."

She didn't blame him. "Fair enough. We'll stand here and make out, then."

For the first time in weeks, Michelle surprised her with a laugh. "No, you won't. You two had better get out of the way before this baby decides his mommy's too hungry and moves you himself."

Nick felt weak with relief. Michelle would be okay. It wouldn't be quick or easy, but nothing good ever was. Life goes on, and the very fact that her sister could still laugh through her pain made it all right for Nick to move on as well, to make plans and look forward to the life she and Derek could make together.

She pulled his hand to her lips and kissed the back of it. “Lesson number one, baby. Never get between a Peyton and food. Learn it, live it, and you’ll be just fine.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“Oh *God*.” Nick couldn’t hold back her moan as she clutched Derek’s arm. “Oh God, try this one. It’s a caramel.”

“Christ, no more.” Derek laughed and swatted at her hand, but his eyes glinted when the chocolate dropped from her fingers to land between her breasts. His grin turned to a leer as he wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Unless I get to lick it off you.”

“Fine chocolate,” she declared, “is messy. And since my only other option is to clean it up with the sheets...” She leaned back on the pillows and flashed him an expectant look.

His tongue teased up her stomach, hot and taunting, but he caught the chocolate between his teeth and sat up without following through. “No way, evil temptress,” he said as soon as he’d swallowed the caramel. “You’re not fooling me into another round of hot, sweaty birthday sex until you open your present.”

“I already have everything I want.” She had more than everything. She’d never imagined the kind of satisfaction that came from *having* instead of constantly *wanting*.

“Too bad.” He leaned over the side of the bed, so far she worried for a moment that he’d pitch off the edge. He resurfaced with a long, neatly wrapped package.

It couldn’t have been his own handiwork, because he’d joked about his poor wrapping skills when he’d given Michelle her gift. Nick took the package and stared at it. “You brought me here, Derek. You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“If it makes you feel better, I didn’t *buy* you anything.” He cleared his throat and nodded to the carefully folded paper. “Your sister wrapped it. If you don’t open it, she’ll pout.”

She tore at the package, and the paper fell away to reveal a carved wooden box. “You made me a jewelry box? It’s...” Her voice failed her when she opened the lid on its delicate hinges.

A gold ring she recognized instantly sat nestled on the top tier of the jewelry box, its glittering diamond catching the dim light. “My mother’s ring.”

He leaned close behind her, and his whisper skated across her shoulder. “Your father gave it to me the night after the fight.”

The ring had been one of her only links to her mother, a tangible reminder that she’d *had* one, and Nick had spent a good portion of her childhood romanticizing it. Her hands shook, rattling the box as she caught Derek’s gaze. “That he would do that means a lot, but you—you shouldn’t feel pressured to give it to me. We have time—”

“Pressured?” He made an amused noise. “Baby, I hope your father never tells you how he ended up giving me that thing, because I vaguely recall a morphine-induced rant about how I’d love you more with one arm than any man could with two, and if he didn’t like it I’d send him a postcard from Vegas.” He plucked the ring from its resting place and held it up. “He spent twenty minutes convincing me my arm was still there and came back that night with the ring.”

Trying to imagine her father’s reaction to Derek’s belligerent, intoxicated challenge elicited a slightly hysterical giggle. “You want to marry me so badly that you went toe-to-toe with the Alpha?”

“Mmm, and I still thought I only had one arm, so that would’ve been a short fight.” His lips brushed her cheek. “Marry me, Nick. Marry me and keep me out of trouble.”

She turned her head and whispered against his mouth. “It’s the least I can do, seeing as how I love you madly and never want to be without you.”

He nipped her lower lip. “Don’t need a big wedding, just family. Kat, your dad, your sister and Luke.”

“I think everyone else will understand.”

“If you want something crazy fancy, I’ll do it for you. I’d do *anything* for you.”

“Fancy’s not my style. Barefoot on the beach, maybe.” They could work out the details later. Right now, all she needed was him, so she climbed into his lap and slid her arms around his neck. “I don’t expect you to do anything like that for me. Just love me.”

“Love me back enough to let me,” he countered.

“You drive a hard bargain.” Still, she held out her left hand.

He eased the ring onto her finger with a wide, goofy smile. “I love you a whole damn lot, Nicole Parker Peyton.”

Her heart was going to pound out of her chest. The ring was warm from his hand, and she stared at it for a moment, wondering. “How am I this lucky?”

“Dunno.” His lips brushed hers, tender and perfect. “Think for a few decades and let me know what you figure out.”

“Deal.” She pushed him to the bed, mindful of his healing shoulder, and kissed him back.

There were no more words, nothing but whispered pleas and hitching breaths. She took her time, exploring him with her hands and lips and tongue, a memorization and a promise that it wouldn’t be the last time. It was only the beginning, and she felt dizzy, almost giddy, every time he arched under her. It was the same thing she’d felt since he’d won his challenge and staked his claim on her, belonging and contentment and *happiness*, so entwined that sex seemed like an afterthought and a necessity, all at once.

*Love.* He reached for her, his hands shaking as he drew her close to his chest and thrust into her. Every pulse of pleasure burned hotter than the last, and she whispered to him between kisses. “Love you.”

“Love you.” The words rode a rumbling growl. “Need you.”

Yes, that's what it was. Need, pure and perfect. Undeniable. There was nothing in the world she needed so much as him, and nothing she couldn't handle as long as she had him. Everything else would work out, if only because they cared enough to try, to keep working until they found a solution.

Nick lay against his chest, trembling and sated. *This is where I belong.*

She didn't know she'd said the words aloud until Derek chuckled hoarsely and stroked his fingers through her hair. "That's right, sweetheart. Doesn't matter if we're in New York, New Orleans or the back of Wyoming. Wherever you are, that's where I'll be."

"Together." It seemed like such a simple thing, but they'd had to fight so hard for it. There would still be obstacles, problems she couldn't even begin to foresee or fathom, but it didn't matter. They'd face them.

Together.



## About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at [www.moirarogers.com](http://www.moirarogers.com), or drop them an email at [moira@moirarogers.com](mailto:moira@moirarogers.com). (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

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*To find her destiny, she must trust him with her life...and her heart.*

## Crux

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### *Southern Arcana, Book 1*

Jackson Holt makes a decent living as a private investigator in New Orleans, home of one of the largest underground supernatural populations in the United States. He and his partners have never met a case they couldn't crack...until a local bar owner asks him to do a little digging on her newest hire.

New Orleans is the fourth destination in as many months for Mackenzie Brooks, a woman on the run from a deranged stalker. After all, any man who shows up on her doorstep claiming to be her destined lover has more than a few screws loose. But crazy doesn't explain why he always finds her no matter how far she runs.

When her well-meaning boss puts a PI on her case, Mackenzie comes face to face with the incredible truth: magic is real, and whatever spell has kept her hidden and separate from the paranormal world is rapidly deteriorating.

With time running out, she has no choice but to trust Jackson as he struggles to uncover the truth of her past—and her destiny.

*Warning: This book contains devious schemes, epic battles, forbidden love between a shapeshifter and a spellcaster, nosy secondary characters, furniture-endangering sex and a woman fighting to choose her own destiny.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Crux:*

Mackenzie resisted the urge to change positions again. It didn't help. Instead she wrapped her hands around the strap of her bag and stared straight ahead, refusing to look at Jackson. Every time she did, the arousal that had been on low simmer all afternoon burst into full-on desire, and she could barely keep her hands to herself.

Even *thinking* about touching him made primal satisfaction unfurl slowly inside her. She stubbornly headed it off. "Can you explain this to me again?" she asked in a low voice, wrapping her fingers more tightly around her bag. "Maybe thinking will help. Or distract me."

"Explain what?" His eyes didn't leave the road. "The ants in your pants?"

She let out a strangled laugh. "That's one way to put it. You said Alec thinks it's some...spell or something?"

"Well, no. The spell would be what normally keeps you from getting this way." He checked his mirror and signaled to pass. "It's some sort of shapeshifter thing. The animal has to get out. When she doesn't, you get restless." He arched an eyebrow. "Sometimes *really* restless, I guess."

Mackenzie groaned as she slid lower in the seat and closed her eyes. Every instinct in her body screamed for action. Her vivid imagination provided endless scenarios for how she could soothe the hot need twisting her into knots. The scene unfolded behind her eyelids like an erotic movie—pulling off the road, finding someplace secluded... She could almost smell the clean scent of his skin, could imagine how it would feel under her lips when she slid into his lap and nuzzled her face into his neck.

The earlier fantasies of long, hot lovemaking vanished. The frantic need inside her would be satisfied by nothing less than equally frantic sex. She wanted his hands and mouth on her skin, wanted to feel him writhing helplessly beneath her as she moved above him, driving them both into limp exhaustion.

A tiny whimper escaped as she fought back the image of his face, eyes hazy with pleasure and lips forming her name as she rode him to completion in the front seat of the car. “Oh, God. You have *no* idea how restless.”

He shot her a sharp look. “I suppose I... Hey, how about some music?” He cranked up the volume on the radio, and a song with a low, throbbing beat spilled out of the speakers. He stared straight ahead as he stabbed a button with his finger, changing the station to one featuring talk radio.

Mackenzie stared out the window into the night and took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose you—I mean, it’s a bit of an odd proposition, but would you consider—” She snarled. “The sexual frustration is going to kill me.”

Jackson reached for his phone, hit a button and slapped it to his ear. After a moment, he said, “Yeah, it’s me. Look, about what you said... Yeah, what can she do about that? You know, that won’t—” He paused, obviously listening. “Yeah. Oh no, uh-uh. Okay, yeah. Later.” He snapped the phone closed. “Sorry, no sex. The bottom line is that you could die, and that would suck. You also can’t take care of it yourself, because you could weaken the spell even further.”

A tiny part of her curled in on itself in embarrassment when she realized Jackson and Alec had just had a discussion about whether or not she could masturbate. The rest of her just wondered if she could talk Jackson into taking the chance that she might not die.

“Jesus Christ.” She closed her eyes again. “Can we pull over at the next town, maybe get some food? The close quarters aren’t helping.”

“Absolutely,” he said immediately. “I think food is a great idea. We can walk around and stretch our legs too. Terrific idea, Mackenzie.”

“Terrific idea,” she agreed faintly. *Except we’re not even halfway there and I’m already losing my mind.* It was going to be a very long night.

The diner was small and cozy, and looked to cater mostly to truckers. Their waitress showed them to a booth without a word, setting two menus down before returning unprompted with a pot of coffee.

Mackenzie glanced at it, but caffeine wasn't something she needed to add to her system. "Have you got any milkshakes?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure, honey. Chocolate or vanilla?"

"Vanilla, please." She glanced across the booth at Jackson. "You drinking coffee?"

"Yeah. Got a lot of driving to do if we want to make it to Boca anytime soon." He favored the waitress with a smile as he turned over his mug. "Fill 'er up, darlin', and I'll have an omelet as big as my head, with bacon, peppers and cheese, please."

The waitress's bored expression melted into an answering smile as she filled Jackson's cup, Mackenzie apparently forgotten. She seemed terribly impressed by Jackson's easy smile, and set aside the coffee pot as she jotted down his order. "Anything else with that, sweetheart? Sausage? Pancakes? We got some of the best muffins in the state here, if I do say so myself. Bake 'em fresh every night."

"He said he wants an omelet." At first, Mackenzie didn't even realize she'd spoken. Her voice barely sounded like her own, low and dangerous with a hint of menace. Color flooded her cheeks, and she avoided Jackson's eyes, wishing she could sink into the booth and disappear.

Jackson choked on his coffee, but recovered quickly enough to throw his head back with a laugh. "Now, now, sweet tart, I'll stick to my low-carb diet, but the nice lady's just doing her job." His smile turned sheepish. "That's what I get for marrying a health nut, I guess."

The woman turned back to Mackenzie, her expression cool. "And what would you like with your milkshake, ma'am?"

The urge to snarl at her again was so overwhelming Mackenzie dug her teeth into her lip and flashed Jackson a pleading look.

"She'll have a couple of those muffins," he said quickly. "Damn hypocrite's what she is, huh?"

As soon as the waitress retreated, Mackenzie folded her arms on the table and dropped her forehead to rest on them. "What in hell is *happening* to me?" she demanded, though she wasn't sure she wanted an answer. The intense desire to slide across the table and rub herself against Jackson to warn off the waitress was too disturbing for words.

"Well, you seem to be getting possessive there, darlin'."

She raised her head and glared at him. "No, really?"

"Look." He leaned forward earnestly. "This isn't any more fun for me than it is for you, but it's going to be one hell of a long trip if we can't come to some kind of understanding about what I can and can't ignore. The wiggling around on the car seat like a cat in heat? I can ignore it. But I can't let you make some poor waitress's life miserable just because I'm a charming bastard. She can't help that."

A powerful need to strangle him replaced the urge to climb into his lap. Her scowl deepened as she inched out of the booth. "I'm going to the restroom." *Maybe to run my head under some cold water.*

Jackson unlocked Mackenzie's door and swiped a hand across his forehead. They'd managed to finish dinner without further incident, and he had to credit his purposefully conceited comments with distracting Mackenzie enough to make it possible. "Watch the muffins," he told her as she climbed into the car.

The look she gave him as she deliberately threw the muffins roughly into the backseat was hot and challenging, but at least it wasn't inviting. She seemed capable of switching back and forth between lust and rage with startling speed, but she'd been having a lot more success controlling the anger.

*Thank God for that.* Jackson rounded the car and opened his own door. It would be a lot easier to deal with her hating his guts than to smack her hands away from the button-fly of his jeans when she started feeling randy again. "All right, buckle up. Miles to go and all."

She took another of those deep breaths that seemed to be the only thing holding her together. "Damn it, I'm hungry." She twisted in her seat and reached for the bag of muffins.

Her shirt rode up when she stretched out her arm, revealing the smooth skin of her side and stomach. By some stroke of bad luck—or her own subconscious design—it happened just as she brushed against his arm.

Mackenzie froze, her skin still pressed to his, and moaned, low and needy and desperate. "I want you so badly."

He snatched his hand away and slammed his forehead on the steering wheel. "Okay, woman. You have *got* to have a little pity on me, here. Fucking around in the backseat could *kill* you."

She crowded against him suddenly, her body soft and her breath hot against his ear. "Right now I feel like *not* fucking around is killing me too." As if that wasn't bad enough, she ran her tongue lightly along the shell of his ear.

*Jesus God.* He flattened himself back against the car door and batted her away. "Am I going to have to put you under?" he demanded.

For a moment—just a moment—something flashed in her eyes. The Mackenzie he'd been slowly getting to know stared back at him, and she looked terrified. Her fingers curled in his shirt. "Help me," she half-sobbed. "I don't want to—I can't—"

He framed her face with his hands, breathed a word against her forehead and she shuddered.

The spell took effect, but not nearly as quickly as it should have. It seemed as if it had quieted the frantic battle inside her without putting her to sleep. Her blue eyes slowly cleared, and the hands clutching at his chest relaxed.

"Thank you." The words were a barely audible whisper, and her eyes fluttered shut. When they opened again she looked dazed, as if her body was fighting sleep and losing. She leaned closer, her lips touching his cheek and then sliding to the corner of his mouth. "Thank you," she breathed again.

She kissed him. It wasn't frantic or desperate or aggressive like her earlier advances had been. Her lips were warm and soft, her kiss heartbreakingly gentle.

He relaxed into the caress, but she sagged against him, dragging him back to reality. Kissing her while she was in this condition was no better than doing so while she was drugged, so he pulled his mouth from hers and moved her back onto the passenger seat. "Sweet dreams, Kenzie." He pulled the seatbelt across her body and fastened it. After another moment's thought, he reclined the seat and brushed her hair from her face.

His phone rang, startling him, and he fumbled for his headset. "Hello?"

A rich voice filled his ear. "I know you've got a good reason for leaving fifteen frantic messages on my voicemail and scaring the living daylight out of me, don't you, Jack?"

"Damn straight I do, Mahalia." Jackson started the car and spared Mackenzie's sleeping form another glance. "I've got a cougar trying to climb in my pants."

"Is that some sort of clever euphemism?"

"I wish to hell it was, May." He gritted his teeth as he pulled out of the parking lot. "I'm on the way to your place right now. *Tell me* you've got some experience with spells meant to keep the animal at bay."

"Some, but not much. You're coming to Boca Raton?"

"Yeah. I've got a woman here who's in a bad way. Some extremely well-connected asshole has been stalking her across the country, trying to convince her to have his babies. She's never shifted, and now she's getting...frustrated. Besides which, there's something weird about her parents and a deadly house fire that maybe wasn't deadly at all..." He trailed off and exhaled roughly. "It's a fuckin' mess, May, pardon my French."

"A house fire?" Jackson could practically hear the gears turning in her head. "What was the name? Do you remember?"

"Evans. Why, does it ring a bell?"

She didn't answer. "Get here as fast as you can," she commanded. "I'm calling Steven."

"Hang on just a minute," Jackson protested. "What's going on?"

"I don't have time to explain, Jack. Just get your ass down here."

She hung up, leaving Jackson perplexed and frightened. Any situation that could put that edge of fear in Mahalia Tate's voice was serious enough to make a grown man piss his pants.

*When the sun goes down, passion is unleashed*

## Primal Hunger

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*Pendragon Gargoyles, Book 1*

Kennedy Beaumont loves her bartending job, even if her spirited nature sometimes gets her in trouble. Like threatening to hose down one of Pendragon's co-owners. When it comes to Tristan, she could use a good hosing down herself—maybe it'll help her stop casting him as the star of her wickedest dreams. Since he goes out of his way to avoid her, it ought to be easy to put him out of her head—until he reluctantly offers her a ride home.

Gargoyle shape-shifter Tristan Callaghan hasn't had time for anything other than recovering the mystical dagger that was used to permanently lock his brother in a prison of stone. The cat inside him should have stopped craving Kennedy's touch long ago, but now that she's sitting next to him in his car, his very human need for her is sharper than ever.

The distraction is costly. In a split second, Kennedy finds herself thrust into a dangerous, millennia-old hunt for Excalibur. A hunt that marks her for death—and leaves Tristan with a painful choice—sacrifice his family, his quest...or the one woman meant to be his.

*Warning: There's nothing tame about this alpha male hell-bent on claiming his mate. Featuring bone-melting explicit sex, graphic language, violence and a little harmless bite...or two.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Primal Hunger:*

"I still don't see why we're not going to the police first." Kennedy studied him, confusion lingering in her pretty brown eyes.

He jerked the wheel to the right, swerving at the last second to avoid a pothole he would have noticed if he hadn't been staring at her again. "We're closer to Cale's."

A few minutes later he stopped in front of the gate that kept unwanted visitors—mainly humans—off the property. He frowned at the security console. The number sequence that would open the gate jumbled together in his mind, and the harder he tried to recall the code, the harder his head pounded.

"Problem?"

Not compared to the spider web on her hand, but he didn't tell her that. Instead, he shook his head and hit the intercom button. Whatever the wraith had used in the darts was still screwing with his head. The mercenary couldn't have been expecting Tristan would show up to give Kennedy a ride or the darts would have been loaded with something a lot more potent.

Cursing his sister, who should have answered, he stabbed the intercom again. Another minute ticked off, and he gave up, digging out his cell phone this time. When Briana still didn't answer, he shoved the



phone back in his pocket. Reversing back onto the street, he parked the car and climbed out. Kennedy followed suit, glancing around.

“It’s safe.”

She cast him a dubious glance, trailing after him as he walked the front perimeter of the stone wall bordering the property. “This *is* Cale’s place, right?”

“Last time I checked.” He spotted the tree towering above the wall on the corner of the lot. “Stay right here.”

Her spine snapped straight. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll just be a few seconds. You’re safe. Promise.” Until the wraith tracked her here, but that was one more certainty he didn’t plan on sharing. “I’ll be right back.”

Ducking around the corner, he sprang up—high enough Kennedy would have asked questions—and grabbed the top of the stone wall, pulling himself over. From there he jumped easily into the tree and then back to the front of the wall overlooking the street.

“Give me your hand.”

Kennedy peered up at him. “How did you get up there?”

“Footholds on the other side.”

She stared at his outstretched hand. “I’m sure I can climb it too.”

“This is faster. Unless you’re scared of heights,” he taunted, grinning when she planted one foot on the wall and pushed off, catching his hand.

A burst of warmth exploded up his arm, the sensation tunneling straight to his groin. He tightened his grip and hauled her up the wall.

She grabbed ahold of him when she reached the top to steady herself. “Work out much?”

His grin widened as he savored the feel of her body tucked close to his. Her hand drifted down his arm, but the narrow wall didn’t leave her much room to back away.

“Do you do everything the hard way?”

“This coming from the woman who relies on water hoses to settle disputes at a crowded bar.”

A reluctant smile drew his attention straight to her mouth. He spanned his fingers across her lower back, preventing her from edging away from him. He’d let her go in just a minute, first indulging the cat’s need to touch her. The man, however, wanted a whole lot more. Hours more. Days.

Kennedy shivered. “You’re not still mad about that, are you?”

He shook his head. “But I can’t promise I won’t retaliate the next time.” Because the need to lower his head and run his mouth along the slender curve of her neck threatened to overwhelm him, he nodded to the thick branch extending from the tree. “Ladies first.”

Easing out of reach, she stepped gingerly onto the branch, clinging to the overhead limbs for balance. When she reached the trunk, she moved to another branch and waited for him to climb down first.

The cat wanted to climb higher in the tree and wait for the wraith to make another appearance, but he needed to get her inside first. His feet hit the ground and he reached up to help her down.

“Crap,” she hissed, skidding down the tree.

He should have caught her easily and kept them both upright. Maybe it was the drugs slowing his reflexes, or maybe he wanted to feel her sprawled across his chest when the impact knocked them both to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Her eyes widened and she tried sliding off him.

He anchored one arm across her back, keeping her still. “Not really.” He probably wouldn’t be okay for a long time. The closer she got, the more he wanted her there, proving his attraction to Kennedy ran much deeper than he’d imagined.

“You’re bleeding.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, wincing in sympathy.

“Just a scratch.” He barely registered the scrape on his cheek from connecting with the tree bark during the fall. Barely registered anything but all the places she was nestled against him. The only thing better than having her draped across him, would be her draped across him *naked*.

She stared in the direction of the main house, exposing the tempting curve of her throat.

Tristan didn’t think about it, he lifted his head and closed his mouth over her skin.

Kennedy moaned, and he ran his lips higher, sliding one hand into her hair and coaxing her down. Her thigh slipped between his legs, rubbing his arousal. The friction unleashed a groan in his chest, and he grazed her with his teeth before sucking her harder between his lips.

Why did she feel so good, taste so good? Attempting to wrap his mind around it didn’t matter to the animal basking in the feel of her fingers threading the ends of his hair, dragging him closer.

In the distance a lone howl, then a series of barks echoed through the night, and he tried to remember why that was important.

*Fuck.* The dogs.

“Oh, shit.” Kennedy scrambled off him, and he rolled to his feet as a pack of Dobermans tore across the grass toward them.

*She has the cure. He has the means. Together, they just might have a chance.*

## Wolf Rain

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After a well-intentioned experiment goes horribly wrong, a new breed of wolf Shifter takes over the night.

Diana has the cure, thanks to research she carried on after her father's death. But in her increasingly dangerous world, there's no one she can trust. Allowing anyone close could be the death of her—and of any hope the cure will reach those who need it.

Harm has the means, but lacks the cure. For years, he's worked for an elite government force, using his superior half-Shifter abilities in the battle to keep the streets safe. Now the Shifters are mutating and there's real fear that mankind is on its way to extinction.

When Diana and Harm's lives collide, they have only one chance to save the human world.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Rain:*

They came out of the dark, their eyes shining and their heads bent as they glared at her. A pack of them, four in all, were stalking towards her, deadly intent in every move they made. They inched forwards stealthily, their padded feet muffled against the hard asphalt. She couldn't take them all. She would maybe get one shot off before the others were on her. She tried not to panic, instead relying on her father's lifelong teachings. Find the alpha. Take him down. The others would still attack, but one might stay behind to protect the fallen leader. The rest wouldn't be nearly as fast or as strong, and there might be a chance...

She took a deep breath and silently demanded her muscles to be steady. She knew what to do to give herself at least some slim chance of survival. And if she was going to die, she sure as hell was going down fighting. She searched the wolves that were only a few feet away, zeroing in on the white-haired animal as the alpha. He was slightly larger, just a fraction of an inch in front of the other creatures. He would be the first to pounce, and the others would follow. He was her target.

She took her stance again, bracing her legs slightly apart, gripping the wolfsbane in her fist. The world began moving in slow motion as the leader crouched slightly, the muscles in his legs tightening. She narrowed her eyes and waited—and nearly gasped when the wolf was thrown to the other side of the alley, his thick body smacking against the brick wall.

The others immediately turned and began barking and snarling, racing towards whatever had taken down the alpha. She stood for a few beats, blinking as she stared at the fallen creature. Blood was slowly seeping out of his side, matting the white fur with its scarlet color as the jagged corner of a cracked rib stuck through the pliant flesh. The Shifter's head was turned at an awkward angle, his eyes open and unseeing, his tongue lolling from between his sharp teeth. *Dead*, she thought, and was stunned. Her logical

mind told her to run, to use the distraction to get the hell away from the Shifters. But the other part of her brain was filled with blinding curiosity, a curiosity that overrode every other thought. Suddenly she, too, was running, following where the other wolves had gone. She had to see what had done this.

She stopped abruptly a few feet into the side alley, staring in amazement as another wolf was flung past her, landing like a rag doll on the hard, wet ground. There was a shadow in the mouth of the alleyway, a dark visage that looked strangely like a man. She watched, mesmerized, as he pushed another wolf away then kicked at the fourth. They weren't down, though—she could still hear the dual growling of the furious creatures.

They bounded at the same time, launching themselves at the stranger with more strength than grace. He didn't so much as flinch when they jumped. He simply opened his arms wide, waited a split second and crushed their skulls together. They fell to the asphalt with a muted thud, splashing into a puddle.

She didn't know what to do, what to say, and she wasn't sure if she had the words anyway. It wasn't possible—at least it wasn't supposed to be possible. A human taking on a pack of werewolves, it was too much like an urban legend. Managing to escape them, certainly, but actually taking them down... Impossible. To her knowledge it had never been done, though her father had conjectured about how it might be possible.

"You should go home."

His voice was deep, slightly sharp, the gravel in his tone strangely soothing and electrifying all at the same time.

She couldn't stop the snap of her words as she pocketed her spray. "That's where I was headed. I certainly wasn't going clubbing at this time of day."

She could have sworn she heard a chuckle before he replied. "You should let your boyfriend walk you everywhere."

"I don't have a boyfriend." She stared at him a moment, trying to decide if he'd just given her a horribly cheesy pick-up line, or if he was making assumptions. From his expression, she decided he wasn't trying to scope her out. "Besides, I've seen most grown men scream and run when they're confronted with Shifters. I could do without the hysterics."

"True, but two are less likely to be attacked than one."

"And one shouldn't even be attacked at five in the afternoon. They shouldn't be shifting until moonrise."

There was a soft whoosh of air as the shadow shifted his weight. "You have a good point. They shouldn't be able to... Come on, I'll walk you home."

He turned and took a step into the watery light of day, pausing as he waited for her. She stared at his wide shoulders and decided his offer had to be one of the most interesting proposals she'd ever had. She

wondered if he ever thought of hiring himself out as a bodyguard. She knew she'd be one of the first in line to pay for his services.

"You shouldn't walk home alone," he repeated, his back still to her.

Sighing, she shrugged and made her way out of the alley, carefully stepping over the lifeless bodies of the wolves. She knew that in the next hour, their tissue would begin to break down and their bodies would shift back to human form, leaving them naked and mangled. There had been a time when she'd pitied them, but she had been very young then.

In the soft light, she could easily see the muscled physique and proudly held body of her rescuer. His dark brown hair was worn in a severe crew cut, a look that hadn't been popular in the civilian sector for years. She noted his urban camouflage, from his broad shoulders all the way to his large feet, and felt suspicion crawl up her spine. There were two guns strapped to his side, and she was sure each was filled with wolfsbane bullets. If the bullet itself didn't kill the animal, then the concentrated liquid at its core would poison the blood as well as cause excruciating agony. Only certain government-sanctioned agencies were allowed to carry such things, though she knew civilians had ways of purchasing the bullets underground.

When she finally reached the stranger, she stopped directly in front of him, determined to see the face of the man who had saved her life. Government or not, she had to concede she owed him more than she could ever repay. What she saw when she finally laid her eyes on him sent her back a quick step.

He was gorgeous. There was no way around it. This man was a fine specimen of the male species. From behind she could see that he was well muscled, but a nice body did not an interesting face make. And his face was more than interesting, it was enthralling.



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