

NAOMI CLARK

an urban wolf novel

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SILVER KISS

A former army brat, Naomi Clark is now happily settled in Cambridge, living in a converted cowshed with a tank full of catfish. She has been writing stories ever since she learned to write. A lifelong fascination with dragons, monsters, magic and ghosts eventually lead her to urban fantasy. Her short fiction has appeared in a variety of ezines and she also writes a monthly horoscope column for a local magazine.

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BY

NAOMI CLARK



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Pedication

This one is for my mum, just because.

Acknowledgements

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One

"I wish you were coming with me tonight." I tried not to sound whiny as I said it, but couldn't quite manage. I glanced at Shannon over my shoulder while I fiddled with my earrings. She was sitting on the bed, laptop open. Her lips were pulled into the tight line that meant she was concentrating hard and she didn't look up at me as she answered.

"No offence, Ayla, but I'm glad I'm not allowed," she replied absently. "The whole thing just sounds...wolfish."

I grimaced as I threaded the gleaming golden hoops through my ears. "It is wolfish. That's the point." And that was the problem. Lupercali was the biggest night in the werewolf calendar and humans were not allowed. No exceptions. Not even for partners. It was a tradition dating back to Roman times and whilst we wolves prided ourselves on fitting into modern society most of the time, Lupercali was different. *Sacred*.

I was dreading it.

I still couldn't believe I'd moved back home at all, let alone agreed to be officially sworn back into the Pack. When I'd first walked away eight years ago, I'd vowed never to return. But never is a long time and people—even parents—can change. After the brutal murder of my cousin by anti-werewolf group Alpha Humans, I'd rethought my position on Pack and family. Luckily for me, Shannon agreed to move down south with me—not that I'd have come without her—and here we were.

In the three months that we'd been here, all my parents had talked about was Lupercali, how I'd be officially welcomed back into the Pack after so long as a lone wolf. Traditionally Lupercali was a ceremony for the cubs, the night that they became adults in wolf lore. But it was also a ceremony for welcoming home strays like me, blooding and reaffirming us as part of the family.

And it wasn't that I didn't want that. It was just that... Well, I was a little bit scared. "It's going to be awful," I said, aware of that whining edge to my voice again and cringing internally at it. My wolf pawed at the insides of my mind, mentally echoing my whine. "The whole Pack will be there, watching me."

Shannon looked up now, locks of sandy hair falling from her loose ponytail to curl around her delicate face. "You'll be fine," she assured me. "From what you've said, it'll all be over in a few minutes and then you can just get rip-roaring drunk."

I stared down at the tangle of necklaces and earrings on the vanity. Most of it was Shannon's. She'd told me I needed to dress up tonight. Make the right impression. I glanced back at the mirror, wondering if Shannon's elegant gold jewelry really looked right with my lip piercing.

"I'm nervous," I confessed, pulling at the lip ring. "I mean Lupercali is so formal. I don't see why I have to do this massive ceremony just because I moved back home. It's not like I ever officially left the Pack in the first place. I was never made outcast or anything."

"It'll make your parents happy." Shannon was staring at her laptop screen again. I wasn't sure if she'd even heard me. I cleared my throat pointedly and her head jerked up, eyes wide with surprise. "Sorry," she sighed, setting the laptop aside and rising from the bed. She stood behind me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, kissing my hair. "You're going to be fine. Like I said, it'll be all over before you know it and then you can just enjoy the party. And Vince and Joel will be there to support you."

I thought of Vince, my best friend, who'd determinedly kept me in his life despite the distance I'd put between myself and the city, the Pack and my family. I'd missed him. If only for having him back in my life, returning had been worth it.

"I suppose." I tipped my head back far enough for us to kiss, just a quick sweep of my lips against hers, but it was enough to warm me up a little. "And you'll be okay here alone?"

"I'll be fine. I've got plenty to be getting on with." She nodded to the laptop. "Got a meeting with my first client tomorrow."

I smiled, that warm feeling growing. It had been a big step for Shannon to move here with me. She'd left behind a well-established PI business and starting afresh hadn't been easy. She had a good reputation but no local contacts. Before the move she'd had friends on the police force and in local politics that were happy to slip her information about abusive spouses and tax cheats on the sly. Now she had to build all those relationships up all over again. She hadn't complained, but I knew she'd been anxious.

"I love you," I said, twisting on the stool so I could kiss her properly.

"I love you too," she said. "Now get moving. You'll be late."

For the first few weeks that we'd been back here, Shannon and I had stayed in Vince and Joel's guest room. Joel, an architect, had one of the bigger houses in Larkspur, a custom-built wolf estate. They'd been happy for us to take up residence indefinitely, but we'd been keen to get our own place. The move wouldn't feel real until we did. Now we had a small two-up two-down on Foxglove, a slightly lower class estate, home to both humans and wolves. It wasn't much, but it was ours. At least until we could afford something better, I told myself as I gave the front door a sharp kick to get it open. Vince, who'd been rapping on the door, leapt back as it swung open. It hadn't taken either of us long to learn that routine.

"Oh, Ayla. I could build you a better house out of twigs and straw." Joel leaned out of his car window, regarding the little house with sorrow, eyes gleaming in the light from the street lamp. His lips were curved in a rueful smile.

I straightened my shoulders. "There's nothing wrong with this house."

"Apart from the fact that it's small, ugly, crammed in amongst countless identical houses—"

"Alright." Vince cut his partner short, rolling his eyes at me. "Down boy." He slung his arm round my shoulder and hugged me against him. I nuzzled into his leather jacket and inhaled deeply, comforted by the mix of leather, whisky and oak rolling off him. "You ready for this?" he asked me, guiding me to the car.

"Absolutely not." I clambered in, silently cursing the clunky heels I had on. Where had this myth started that high heels make you walk more gracefully? I just stomped, convinced I was going to fall off them any minute.

"Relax," Vince told me as he slid into the passenger seat. "There's nothing to worry about."

I nodded and stared up at the house as Joel pulled away. I could see the light from our bedroom glowing round the edge of the curtains and I pictured Shannon sat on the bed, diligently preparing for her meeting. Then I imagined Moreland Park bathed in icy moonlight and full of wolves from all over the city, all watching me lined up with the cubs, ready to be blooded and welcomed back to the Pack. My stomach churned. I fiddled with the hem of my dress, picking at specks of dust. A dress, for God's sake. A red dress at that.

Vince and Joel chatted about Pack gossip as we drove, trying to draw me into the conversation about which cubs would be blooded and how much their parents had spent on their outfits. A total waste of money if you asked me, since by the end of the night the designer suits and couture dresses would be in shreds, scattered through the park. I dropped in a vague comment every now and then, but that was all the enthusiasm I could muster.

I stared at the bright full moon sailing above the clouds in the inky sky. The February moon was called Wolf Moon in some cultures. What better night for a ceremony like this, when young wolves were declared adults and hunted for the first time? Of course, wolf cubs were born with the ability to shift—my mum was fond of reminiscing how I'd been born wolf and hadn't shifted to human until I was a week old—but to be deemed mature enough to hunt solo was a big deal.

I'd been blooded age ten, Vince alongside me, both of us

almost frenzied with excitement. I hadn't cared about people watching me back then; I'd been proud, desperate to shift shape and run off to hunt. Now all I could think was that something was bound to go wrong. I'd fall off my shoes, or throw up on someone, or pass out. Or all three.

I realized Joel was saying something to me and forced myself back into their conversation. "Sorry, what?"

"I said have you heard from the police yet?"

"Oh. No, it'll be another couple of weeks." I'd marked the date on my calendar, highlighted it and everything. I'd applied to join the police as a community support officer as soon as Shannon and I moved back here. After my Cousin Adam's murder and the involvement of two officers in the aftermath, I'd felt a need to redress the balance somehow. Make sure no more kids suffered like Adam had.

Once upon a time, the police fast-tracked werewolf applicants, eager to get the stronger, faster wolves on the force. It had only taken a few nasty accidents for people to realize that being stronger and faster than a human means nothing if you don't have the training and discipline to use those skills properly. Now wolves went through the exact same screening and training process as humans and fewer people got their bones accidentally crushed while being arrested.

"You're going to be great," Vince said, reaching back to pat my knee. "Officer Hammond. I can't wait."

I smiled and squeezed his fingers. "This doesn't give you an excuse for speeding, Vince. I'm not going to *lose* your tickets for you."

"Ticket, single," he stressed. "One ticket. And I was justified. I was—"

"We're here," Joel announced, turning into a wide gravel car park already full with cars. The rough wooden gates to Moreland Park loomed in the distance, surrounded by tangled hedges and slender birch trees. Moreland was the biggest park in the city, left to grow wild to give us wolves somewhere to truly run free. I opened my door and inhaled deeply, catching scents of game and greenery on the chill night air. It brought a rush of memories of my first Lupercali with it and the first

tingle of excitement crackled through me, burning away some of the nausea.

The gravel was rimed with frost and I skidded a little on my stupid heels until Vince linked arms with me. I clutched at him gratefully, my heart thudding with a cocktail of nerves and anticipation. I glanced around the car park as we picked our way to the gate and saw my parents' pearl-grey two-by-four parked a few feet away from Joel's crimson estate. *God*. The real root of my anxiety tonight was that I'd somehow embarrass my parents. Why it bothered me when I'd been an embarrassment to them for years I didn't know, but it did.

A few other groups were drifting to the gate; I saw young kids in sparkly dresses and freshly-pressed suits, giggling excitedly as they were ushered along by their parents. Vince and Joel called out greetings to wolves they recognized. I hadn't really been home long enough to reconnect with anyone, so I kept quiet and focused on staying upright. I would burn the shoes when I got home, I silently resolved. The pointed toes were already killing me and the dull ache in my feet made me itch to throw off my human shape and run as a wolf.

Soon, I promised myself and my wolf, glancing at the moon again. Just a couple of hours and we're free.

The Lupercali ceremony was held in the center of the park, a wide clearing ringed by ancient oak trees. By the time we arrived the clearing was crowded, every wolf in the city spread around the circle. Teenagers clustered in the shadows of the oak trees, too cool to sit with their families. Elder wolves had brought garden chairs with them and sat with blankets draped over their knees to ward off the winter cold. Young cubs chased each other in and out of the blackberry thickets, yelping and barking joyfully under parents' watchful eyes. Glasses clinked and people murmured and laughed. My heart swelled a little at it all. *Family*. I wished once more that Shannon had been able to come.

"Ayla!" My mum emerged from the crowd, dragging my dad behind her. She was wearing a tawny fake fur coat. I couldn't decide if that was ironic or just weird. Dad was in an immaculate dinner suit. I tugged nervously at my dress again; suddenly glad I'd let Shannon talk me into buying it and wearing the gold jewelry. "Darling, we were wondering where you were!" Mum hugged me warmly, then released me to look me in the eyes. "Are you okay? Nervous? You don't need to be."

"I'm fine," I assured her, although of course they could both smell the acrid scent of my fear. "Just want to get on with it, that's all."

"You look beautiful," Mum said. "We're both so proud of you."

Dad nodded and gave me a gentle, buddy-thump on the arm. "Big night, baby," he said, flashing me a smile that showed entirely too many teeth. "Knock 'em dead."

He was as nervous as I was. It didn't settle my stomach one bit.

With my parents on one side and Vince and Joel on the other, I moved through the gathered throng towards the center of the clearing. A huge bonfire cracked and flared there, shooting sparks and orange-blue fingers of flame into the night. The clouds were clearing to show the moon in all her glory, surrounded by a faint sprinkling of stars. The scent of burning wood mingled with the rich aroma of cooking meat. That came from a barbeque a few feet from the main fire, where someone was cooking herby sausages and burgers.

When the ceremony kicked off, I'd be standing by the bonfire waiting for one of the Pack alphas to daub my head with sheep's blood, cut my palm, and declare me one of them. Then me and the cubs would run off into the forest while everyone else stayed here and ate and drank until they passed out. Like I said, it was a Roman thing.

I spent the time before the ceremony being dragged from one person to another by Mum and Dad. Even though I hadn't done much socializing since my return, a few Pack members recognized me from Adam's funeral. A few even remembered me from before I'd left home and I got the usual refrains of I remember you when you were this high and you look just like your mother from them. I bore it with gritted teeth and a tight smile, counting down to the start of the ceremony.

The only person I was glad to see was Gloriana, kitted out

in full drag queen regalia and gliding through the woods with perfect balance on her six-inch stilettos. Aside from being one of my few new friends in the city, Glory was the star act at Silks—the local werewolf gay bar—and not only dressed like a diva but unashamedly was one. Even Mum loved her.

"Sweetie, you look gorgeous!" she told me, catching my hands in hers. "Red is so your color. You should dye your hair, you know. A burnished copper, maybe. Black washes you out."

I ran my hand over my dark spikes. "Black goes with everything though."

She patted her own bright red beehive wig. "It's a party, Ayla, not a funeral." She drifted off to greet Joel before I could think of a witty retort.

Finally it was time. Someone at the center of the clearing blew a shrill whistle that cut through the low babble of the crowd and drew everyone's attention to the bonfire. Eddie Hughes, one of the Pack alphas, stood before the bonfire, the flames throwing jagged shadows across his stern face. "Settle down, everyone!" he yelled. "Let's try and show some decorum."

A chorus of whoops and cheers answered him and he waved his hands to quiet everyone down again. "We all know why we're here, so there's no need for all the ancient poems and recitations," he continued. A few people groaned, but most were relieved. There was a huge, turgid cycle of poetry associated with Lupercali that we were all forced to learn in Lupine Studies at school. Being forced to sit through it every Lupercali as well just seemed cruel and unusual.

"Now, let's get everyone up here." Eddie beckoned to the small group of kids hovering near the fire. "Don't be afraid, this is an important night," he told them as they joined him. I counted eight girls and six boys, all around ten or twelve years old. The girls wore pretty, floaty dresses sewn with sequins that looked way too thin for the frosty night. The boys wore suits and ties and looked embarrassed and uncomfortable. I wavered on my heels and sympathized. I wished I was up there with them so we could all be embarrassed together,

instead of having to wait until after they were done.

Once they were all lined up, Eddie gave a short speech about how important this night was and how proud they should be to be here tonight, about to become adults. The boys lost their unease as he spoke, their backs straightening, eyes flashing with excitement as the crowd parted. A female wolf I didn't know strode to the bonfire, a dead lamb in her arms. Its throat had been recently cut and the lamb still smelled warm, its blood perfuming the air. The scent of fresh meat stirred the wolf in me, as it did all of us, and electric currents of energy and power swept through the crowd.

The she-wolf took the lamb to the cubs and set it down on the grass in front of them. One of the girls whined, a sound of hunger that a few of the others immediately echoed. Eddie whispered something to them and they fell quiet, but the hunger still gleamed in their eyes, feral and keen. Behind me, people started panting and whining as their own hungers twisted inside them. My wolf growled and pawed at me, wanting freedom. I bit my lip and clamped her down, heart racing.

Eddie knelt to dip his fingers in the bleeding wound at the lamb's throat. Rich, coppery blood stained his hand as he rose to daub a moon shape on the first cub's forehead. "Who keeps company with wolves will learn how to howl," he intoned, his sonorous voice rising to drown out the whimpers and sharp yaps from the crowd. "For the strength of the Pack is the wolf and the strength of the wolf is the Pack. Always remember that as you hunt, remember it as you work and mate and live." He moved from one child to the next, smearing them with blood as he went.

Trembling howls pierced the night as few of the watchers let their wolves go. I breathed fast and shallow, reaching for Vince's hand and finding claws instead of fingers. He glanced at me and smiled, revealing gleaming canines. Soon the change would take him completely. Next to him, Joel held onto his human shape, in control as always, although his pupils were dilated with excitement. Glory wet her lips and shifted from foot to foot. The mix of fresh meat, hot blood and a mass of other wolves would soon overcome them both. I held on too,

as my wolf cried for freedom. I still had to get through my own part of the evening before I could let rip. By now my nerves were strung tight and I felt prickly and light-headed.

The cubs began howling too as Eddie reached the last of them. They threw their heads back and sang to the moon; thin, high voices joining the deeper, richer songs of the adults. Eddie gestured for silence and they promptly shut up, nerves returning as the second part of the ceremony began. They'd taken the lamb's blood—the offering of the Pack to them—now they had to offer something back.

Eddie produced a deceptively small knife with a carved rowan wood handle. Going back to the first cub, he took her hand. "This won't hurt," he lied to her as he drew the gleaming blade across her palm. I saw her bite her lip to smother a cry and closed my own hand into a fist in sympathy. He raised her hand so the blood ran down her wrist and arm. "Blood binds us to the Pack and Pack runs in our blood," he said. The howls rang out again, a few louder than others as Eddie moved down the line. To their credit, none of the cubs cried as he slit their palms. I had a feeling I might.

The smell of wolf blood mingled with the lamb's blood, a weird mix of predator and prey. My nerves jangled as Eddie cut the last cub and let his blood drip to the earth. Splashes of crimson dotted the frosty grass, shining dully in the moonlight. Countless generations of wolves had stood here and done this, their blood soaking into the ground and marking this place as theirs; their home, their territory. I could almost feel the earth vibrating with the power of it.

Eddie threw his arms out to the forest. "Blooded and declared adults, all of you," he announced. "The forest is yours tonight."

The cubs surrendered to their wolves, shredding their silky dresses and crisp shirts to fall into wolf shape. Another joyous chain of howls accompanied their change and within seconds they were racing into the icy shadows of the trees, yipping and yapping and snapping at each other playfully as they went, wounds forgotten. They'd passed through Lupercali.

Now it was my turn.

Two

"AYLA HAMMOND, WHERE ARE YOU hiding?" Eddie called, gesturing for silence once more. A hush settled over the crowd at the sound of my name and my stomach tried to eat itself as I stepped forward. I looked back at Vince for reassurance, but he was in wolf shape now, a charcoal smudge at Joel's side. He lolled his wide pink tongue at me in a wolfish grin. It was the best I was going to get from him. Mum though, still human, waved at me. I smiled thinly at her.

Heat from the bonfire pounded at me as I joined Eddie. Hot air toyed with the hem of my dress and sweat beaded at my brow. This was it. *Please don't let me fall over*.

Eddie smiled at me. "Welcome home," he whispered, patting my shoulder. "Feeling alright?"

I nodded and tried to smile back. The knot in my stomach was twisting and tightening, my wolf prowling endlessly in the confines of my mind. *Just a few seconds*, I assured her, *and we'll be out of here*. I inhaled and caught the coppery scent of the cubs. They hadn't gone far yet—tussling in the trees just out of sight.

Eddie cleared his throat and I turned my wavering attention back to him and the circle of wolves watching me. Some of them had been my friends, years ago. Only Vince had bothered to stay in touch after I left, but then I hadn't made much effort with them either. Maybe that was part of my problem—I felt exposed, naked in front of strangers. Yes, this was my welcome home ceremony, but how many of the people here even cared that I'd gone, much less come back?

"We aren't just here tonight to watch our children become

adults," Eddie called out, gripping my hand tight enough to hurt. "We're here to welcome back a wanderer." He raised my hand over my head and a ring of howls went up from the watching crowd. The knot loosened a little at the sound, the wolf recognizing her own and relaxing. "We listened for a voice crying in the wilderness," Eddie quoted, lowering my hand, "and we heard the jubilation of the wolves. Our cubs have gone hunting, but they've also come home. And our Pack is richer for that."

I was surprised to feel tears stinging my eyes as the Pack sang together, the haunting cries echoing through the forest as if they'd sing down the moon herself. My wolf was bursting to be free now, no longer scared but frantic with joy. She was home. She'd missed her Pack. I hadn't realized it before—I'd been content with Shannon and my freedom. When I left home I'd been a disappointment to my parents and an anomaly to the Pack as a whole. I wasn't sure I'd ever stop feeling like that, but the music of the Pack went some way towards assuring me.

Eddie bent to dip his fingers in the rapidly cooling lamb's blood and drew a sticky design on my forehead. I glanced at the crowd and saw my parents beaming with joy. Mum waved at me and I wriggled my fingers at her in return, not sure if protocol allowed a real wave back.

Eddie grasped my hand and pressed the blade to my palm. I shivered, anticipating the pain. I remembered it hurting the first time round. Not as the actual cut was made, but afterwards, it had stung like hell.

"Relax," he whispered. "It hurts more if you tense up."

I forced myself to loosen my muscles as he made the cut. Blood welled immediately, followed by a flash of pain. I sucked in a deep breath as Eddie raised my hand and the blood dripped slowly to the ground. He recited the words again, like they were a magic spell, transforming me from a lone wolf to a Pack member.

"Welcome back, Ayla," Eddie said as he stepped away from me. "You're one of us again now, kid."

One of us. I couldn't help but grimace a little at that, but

before I could react, Vince shot from the crowd to crash into me, knocking me to the ground with an excited yap. I landed hard, two hundred pounds of wolf on top of me, and the air whooshed from my lungs. I gasped as Vince washed my face and snuffled into my hair, trying to draw some oxygen back in. I wrapped my arms around him and managed to flip us over, pinning him.

My wolf wouldn't be denied anymore. She wanted to run, wanted to hunt, wanted to play. I kicked off my shoes and let the change that had been itching at me all night take me over. A molten wash of pleasure-pain consumed me for a brief instant as my body reshaped itself. The song of the Pack resonated through me as I changed; taking on new meaning as my wolf half took over.

I stood, flicking my ears and shaking my tail as the world took on new depth and aromas to my lupine senses. Vince, next to me, whined and nibbled at my ruff, inviting me to play. Before I could turn and swat at him, another wolf rammed into me, knocking me to the earth and running her great tongue over my face. *Mum.* I rolled onto my back, exposing my vulnerable belly to her, a sign of trust as much as submission.

She crouched, forelegs splayed, plumed tail waving madly. I hadn't played with Mum like this since I was tiny. I leapt back to my feet and ran round her, barking and feinting at her. She bared her teeth and snapped at me as I danced past, making no real effort to catch me.

Vince pounced at me again, grabbing my ruff and growling at me. I flipped round, twisting myself free, and batted at him. Briefly forgetting Mum, we tumbled head over tail together, sheer exhilaration speeding through me. The sounds of the forest beckoned me away from the circle and the bonfire. Vince clearly wanted to race off too. But I hesitated, turning back to look at my Pack through wolf eyes for the first time in eight years.

The older wolves lounged around, loftily ignoring our antics. Teenagers, still human shaped, were sneaking away from the circle now that the ceremony was over. My dad was leaning against a tree, talking with a wolf I didn't know. Joel was

popping open a can of beer and chatting to Glory, who was slipping out of her shoes. And as much as my wolfish heart swelled at the sight of them all, my family, my Pack, accepting me home again, my human heart sank at the thought of Shannon back home. Alone.

Vince nipped my tail and I spun on him with a mock-snarl. While we darted and danced together, Glory and Joel shifted. Joel barked at us as they ran past into the forest and Vince quickly took off after them. While I paused, Mum nudged me forward with a whine. The message was clear—I'd done the formal stuff. Now I could go.

I raced off after Vince.

It was a cold night and game was scarce. The cubs had already flushed out most of the rabbits and deer that were about, so the hunting was soon over for the four of us. There was no fun to be had in chasing rats and voles. After about an hour of racing around the forest, we shifted back and collapsed under the bare branches of a dying beech tree. I could hear the sounds of Lupercali in full swing—howls and laughs, barks and shouts. The smell of the barbeque overpowered the smell of game, which was muted by the ice anyway.

Werewolves' blood runs a bit hotter than humans, so the chill that kept them inside on nights like this didn't bother us as much. It would be a while before we really felt it, as warm as we were from exercise and the shift. We curled up together, skin to skin, and watched the moon and stars overhead. I felt happy and sated, almost like I'd been drinking. Vince wrapped one arm around me and one around Joel, pulling us in together. Glory—stripped of her wig and glittering shoes by the shift and now Glenn; slender and boyish and smeared with ruined makeup—lay next to Joel.

"I told you there was nothing to worry about," Vince said, nuzzling my hair.

"I was mostly worried about falling off my shoes." I curled my bare toes into the dirt. Now it was over, I wasn't really sure why I'd been so worked up. Yeah, I'd hated everyone staring at me, but I hadn't tripped over or thrown up, I hadn't embarrassed myself or my parents and I was happy. Happy to be home, something I never thought I'd say, when for so long *home* had been synonymous with *miserable* and *misunderstood*.

Voices drifted through the night towards us, accompanied by the burned paper smell of cigarettes. There was an odd tang mixed with the tobacco, something I didn't recognize, but my wolf found intriguing. I narrowed my eyes, picking out the approaching teenagers. Thin tendrils of grey-blue smoke curled into the air over their heads and the cherries of their roll-ups glowed in the shadows.

"Hey, check it out," one of the boys called when they spied us. "It's the queer wolves!" Giggles broke out amongst the girls in the group.

I sighed and Joel rolled his eyes. "Very clever," he said. "You kids must have been waiting all night to get that gem out."

One of them broke free of the group to join us under the tree, a grin on his cherubic face as he blew smoke towards us. "Just messing around," he said and nodded to Vince. "Alright, Vince?"

"Hi, Oscar." Vince stood and pulled me up with him. "Ayla, this is Oscar. He's a waiter at the Fox. He thinks he's hilarious but he's actually just annoying." He reached out and ruffled Oscar's blond curls. "I want to fire him but he's the boss' kid. Nepotism at work."

"Hi Oscar," I said, inhaling deeply to try and identify the weird smell coming off his roll-up. It was sort of earthy, but with a metallic aftertaste. *Unpleasant*. "What are you smoking?"

Oscar offered me the cigarette. "Silver Kiss. Want to try?" "What's in it?" I asked.

He winked at me. "Little of this, little of that."

I hadn't ever smoked, so Oscar's mystery roll-up didn't really entice me. Vince shook his head and Joel turned his nose up, but Glenn accepted. He took a deep drag, then coughed violently and hurriedly passed the cigarette back to Oscar. "Vile habit," he muttered, wiping his mouth.

Oscar took another drag and fixed me with a slightly glazed stare. "You're Adam's cousin, right? You killed that copper."

"I didn't kill anyone," I corrected, that tight knot pulling at my stomach again. "But yeah, I am Adam's cousin. Did you know him?"

"Yeah, a bit." Oscar sat down, gesturing for us to do the same. A couple of his friends drifted over to join him, all smoking the same metallic-scented roll-ups. I wondered briefly if it was illegal, then dropped the thought. I wasn't a copper yet.

"I knew him," a blonde girl chipped in, settling down next to Oscar and resting her head on his shoulder. "Is it true it was an Alpha Humans attack?"

I shrugged, wanting to pull into myself and hide from them. Adam's death was still officially an open case as far as I knew. There was no proof that Alpha Humans were behind it and the involvement of two crooked cops in the aftermath had complicated things further. Anyway, it wasn't my place to talk about it. I hadn't really known Adam—he'd been a child when I left home—and I didn't think his parents would want me gossiping about his brutal murder with stoned teenagers.

Vince sensed my discomfort and shooed the kids away. "Come on, it's Lupercali," he said. "Haven't you lot got better things to do than hang around here?"

They conceded that they did and disappeared into the night, whooping and shrieking at each other. I stretched and tilted my head back to the moon. Moths fluttered around me, wings glancing across my bare skin, and I shivered, suddenly longing for wolf shape again. The aroma of charred meat wafted back to us from the barbeque and my stomach growled. I glanced at the others. "Race you back?"

Seconds later, we were sprinting through the forest again, singing as we ran.

The night was fading fast by the time Lupercali drew to a close. People had been drifting away slowly as the night waned, replete with alcohol and food. My little group had lingered late—or early, maybe. My parents had found us once we got back to the clearing and we'd lazed around with them eating charred

hot dogs and discussing mine and Shannon's plans for the future.

It was nice. *Really*. But God, I was glad when Mum finally stood, stretched her arms and announced she was heading home. I scrambled to my feet to hug her and Dad, promised to call them soon, and followed Vince and Joel back the car.

The slinky red dress I'd started the night in was in tatters, barely covering me, and the seatbelt cut into my shoulders and stomach, leaving me wriggling around to get comfortable. Joel grinned at me in the rearview mirror as I struggled.

"So that's it. You're officially home again."

"I've been home for three months," I pointed out. "I'm officially Pack again."

"It's the same thing," he said. "Now all you need is a decent house."

I bit back my retort, too tired and content to be bothered. My crappy little house might not match up to Joel's high standards, but that was his problem, not mine. I pictured Shannon curled up in bed, blonde hair fanned out across the pillows and a tingle of pleasure weaved through me.

She wasn't in bed when I crept into the house at five am though. She was sitting at the kitchen table, cradling a steaming mug of tea in one hand and finger-combing her tangled hair with the other.

"Hey." I slid into the seat next to her. "Hope you haven't been waiting up for me."

She smiled wearily and looked me over. "Good night, by the looks of it?"

I had dead leaves stuck to my feet and my hair was disheveled and rimed with frost. The odor of barbeque and cigarette smoke clung to me. My sliced palm stung but the shallow wound was already healing. "Better than I expected," I admitted. I prodded her with my toes, brushing the soft flannel of her pajamas. "So, why are you up so early?"

"Oh, I couldn't sleep. I thought I might as well get up and do something productive as lay in bed staring at the ceiling." She tapped the papers in front of her. "I'm just looking at the notes for this meeting again." "Is there a problem?" I craned my neck to get a look at the notes. "Missing person?"

"Yeah, not my usual field. I'll probably end up referring her somewhere else." She yawned. "But it's a start."

"Something to tide you over until you get back into the thrilling world of tax evasion and unpaid parking tickets?" I couldn't quite keep the sarcasm from my voice. I'd helped Shannon out on a few of her cases and had quickly decided her job wasn't for me; too much sitting around.

She shuffled her papers together and leaned over to kiss my nose. "When you're handing out those parking tickets and filing witness reports on those tax evaders, don't come crying to me." She stood. "I'm going for a shower. I can't think straight with you sat there half-naked. Put some clothes on, will you? For my sake."

* * *

While waiting to hear from the police, I was working at a tattoo parlor to pay my share of the bills. I'd done the same job before and liked the environment. Inked was a new shop, relaxed and bright, pumping indie rock through the speakers. Photos of finished tattoos lined the walls: everything from complex, swirling tribal designs to tacky, leering cartoon devils. Soft sofas sat by the window, facing a display case of lip rings and navel bars. Tattoo and music magazines were scattered on the glass and metal table by the sofas, inspiring customers to plump for bolder, crazier designs.

Inked's manager and star tattooist, Calvin, was polishing the table when I pushed open the front door. A bell tinkled as I did and Calvin glanced up to give me a welcoming grin. Despite his profession, he was free of body art and piercings and looked more like he should be helping you pick out curtain fabrics than slamming metal bars through your tongue.

"Hey, Ayla," he greeted me. "How did last night go?"

"It was okay," I yawned. I'd crashed out on the sofa for a few hours after getting home and now I wished I hadn't bothered. Napping just made me more tired. I slipped past Cal into the tiny staff room. A TV blared in one corner, coffee brewed in the coffeemaker on the side. I hung my jacket on the coat stand in the corner and helped myself to coffee. "Same as every Lupercali, really."

"Which of course means nothing to us mere humans." He leaned in the doorway, flicking his polishing cloth at a cobweb strung across the corner. "When I was a kid, my brother used to tell me that you guys hunted humans down at Lupercali. He used to scare me shitless telling me you'd steal little kids and chase them through the woods on full moons."

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "My granddad used to tell me that human hunters went after us on full moons." I sobered quickly, thinking of Alpha Humans and Adam's battered body. "Well, honestly I think you'd find Lupercali underwhelming. It's basically a barbeque and a piss-up."

We fell into casual conversation as Calvin continued cleaning and I set up the till for the day. We didn't open for another half hour and the other two staff members—Kaye and Lawrence—would roll in just before opening. Kaye was the piercing specialist, Lawrence was Inked's other tattooist. I adored Lawrence and tolerated Kaye, who wasn't keen on lesbians or werewolves.

Dead on nine, Lawrence clomped into the shop, heavy boots slamming on the wooden floor, cigarette smoke clinging to his faded biker jacket.

"Yeah, yeah, don't give me that look," he addressed Calvin, who frowned at the roll-up in his hand. "Too hung-over for breakfast. Got to have something in my system." Lawrence stubbed out the cigarette on the staff room table and flicked the dog end into the bin. The scent of metallic smoke clung to him and I sneezed as he ruffled my hair.

"Ayla, babe, you won't let Calvin oppress me, will you?"

I drew back from him. Lawrence, an aging biker, always smelled of motor oil and hot rubber. Today that was masked by the smell of the roll-up. It reminded me of the stuff Oscar had been smoking last night, just slightly less acrid. "Are you smoking Silver Kiss?" I asked.

"You better not be!" Calvin warned. "I don't want any funny shit in my shop."

Lawrence held up his hands in a *who me?* gesture. "It's not *funny shit*. It's not even illegal. Just a little herbal high, that's all."

"It had better be," Calvin said sharply. He disappeared into the basement section of the shop, where the tattooing was done. Lawrence gave an exaggerated sigh.

"It's like working with my ex-wife sometimes."

"What is in Silver Kiss?" I asked. "Some of the kids were smoking it last night."

"Herbs," Lawrence replied. "You know, cloves and stuff."

I wrinkled my nose and carried on emptying change into the till. A few seconds later Kaye strolled in, along with a man who apparently couldn't wait another second to get his frenulum piercing done.

It was a quiet day and I split my time between manning the till and flicking through the TV channels in the staff room. I sent Shannon a text to check in and see how her meeting had gone, but got nothing back. That wasn't unusual—she was pretty strict about not dealing with personal messages during her office hours. Too distracting, she said. It never stopped me from texting her though.

I had a couple of bitchy messages from Vince about how busy work was and how many people had called in sick. I was replying to him when Kaye sashayed in, stiletto heels clicking on the wooden floor. She snatched the TV remote up from the coffee table and put the news on.

"Anyone catch the tennis at the weekend?" she asked. "My new boyfriend kept me busy all afternoon and I missed the results."

Kaye had a new boyfriend every week. I wasn't sure she always got rid of the old ones first, but I didn't care enough to ask. I focused on my phone, not wanting to be drawn into conversation with her.

Lawrence joined us, flopping down into the chair next to mine. "Don't watch tennis. Not really a man's game, that. Now boxing, that's a proper sport." He nudged me. "Right, Ayla?"

"I don't watch sports at all," I said. "I don't see the fun in

grown men hitting balls at each other."

"Well, presumably that's why you hook up with women," Kaye purred. Lawrence cackled like it was genuinely witty and I glowered at the pair of them. As much as I liked Lawrence, he and Kaye together was an unpleasant mix. I suspected her skin-tight trousers and plunging necklines were to blame.

I sent my text to Vince and glanced at the TV, watching the highlights of the tennis flick by. A yellow band scrolled along the bottom of the screen, displaying breaking news headlines. Stock market crashes, celebrity scandals and football scores flashed by, totally uninteresting to me; although I was sure Shannon would want to know her favorite actor had been caught drink-driving. Then the final headline went past: *Teen werewolf still missing in Yorkshire*.

"Oh shit," I said, a little pang of sadness tugging at my heart. "They still haven't found that kid."

"It's been two weeks now," Lawrence said, stroking his greying beard. "They're not going to find him, are they? Runaway kids don't really come home safe and sound."

"Maybe he went feral?" Kaye said. Now that the tennis highlights were finished, she was rearranging her corset, jiggling her boobs about with a frown of concentration. In about five minutes she'd be complaining about how hard it was for her to find tops that fit her cleavage. "You guys do that sometimes, don't you?"

Yeah we did, but it wasn't that simple. Not that Kaye really wanted to know. The doorbell tinkled and I went back into the shop to greet a young girl who was after a new belly ring. Over the blabber of the TV I could hear Kaye moaning about how she was sure her breasts had grown since she bought her corset.

* * *

Shannon was cooking a stir-fry when I got home that evening. The smell of pork and ginger permeated the house, making my mouth water. I came up behind her at the stove and wrapped my arms round her waist, kissing her neck. "How was your day?" I asked.

She prodded a few mushrooms around the wok and shrugged. "I met the client, Tina Brady. It was...difficult, actually. I mean, I was all ready to refer her, you know? I explained how I didn't do missing person cases and probably couldn't help her."

"Hmm." I pinched a piece of pork. It wasn't cooked yet, but I loved the fleshy feel of raw meat in my mouth. "So?"

"So then she burst into tears and said I was the only person who could help her because of my ties to the wolf community." She shrugged again, shaking me off so she could turn and face me. "Because of you, basically."

I frowned. "I don't get it. What do I have to do with it?"

"She's a wolf. Her daughter ran away just over a week ago and she's convinced I'll be able to help her because I've got an *in* with the wolves through you."

I sat down at the kitchen table to take off my boots. "The police aren't doing anything yet, I suppose? And the Pack?"

"Tina filed a report with the police, but there's not much they can do. Molly is a wild child, according to Tina, and this isn't the first time she's pulled the vanishing act. She's got a criminal record already—vandalism, assault—she's only fourteen, for God's sake!" Shannon shook her head as she turned back to the food.

I racked my brains for the name Brady, but I'd been away from home too long for it to ring any bells. "Well if the police can't help, the Pack should," I said. "We look after our children. This Tina should know that."

"It's a delicate issue," Shannon said. "She's an outcast."

"Oh." That was delicate. Tina had done something somewhere down the line to get herself kicked out of the Pack. It was different to my situation—I'd chosen to leave and therefore could choose to return. Tina didn't have that choice. "Even so, when it's a child involved... What did she do to get made outcast anyway?"

"She didn't say and I didn't ask. It wasn't really relevant."

"So will you take the case?"

"I shouldn't."

Which meant she would. "Well, I can ask around if you

like," I offered. "Vince and Joel might know something useful."

"I'd appreciate it." She smiled sweetly at me over her shoulder, a gesture belied by the tight set of her shoulders. "Although, if she's been outcast a long time, people might not remember her."

"Someone will." I tapped my nails on the tabletop. There were all sorts of reasons a wolf might be made outcast, none of them pleasant. I suddenly felt bad for the missing girl, Molly.

Shannon dished up the stir-fry and joined me at the table. "It's probably a good thing," she said.

I looked up from a mouthful of mushrooms and frowned at her.

"Not the girl being missing," she clarified. "Me taking on something new. There's only so many nights you can spend tailing cheating husbands to strip clubs before you start to feel a bit sleazy."

"Always good to challenge yourself," I agreed. "I can't wait to get out there on the streets and start dispensing justice."

She laughed. "You're going to be a community support officer. Don't get overexcited."

"Alright, so it's not saving the world." I rose to grab a bottle of white wine from the cupboard and poured us a glass each. "But it is making a difference and it's more worthwhile than being a cashier in a tattoo parlor."

"You loved working in Skin Deep back north," she said, accepting her wine.

"I like working in Inked too. But...I don't know, it just feels a bit pointless now." I sipped at the crisp peachy wine and poked my noodles around my plate. "You help people, don't you? You go on and complain about the sleazy husbands and benefit cheats, but you make a difference to people, don't you? I don't. I want to."

"You make me sound like a superhero," Shannon teased, but there was a hint of concern in her eyes.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. I just...I know you're still upset about Adam. And I understand that. But I don't want you running off and joining the police on some quest for revenge."

"It's not about that!" I paused and reconsidered, remembering the Alpha Humans symbol splashed on the wall at the scene of Adam's murder. I couldn't pretend that didn't still haunt me, not to Shannon. "I just don't want to waste my life," I said finally. "I feel like I should be doing something more than I am."

She reached across the table and laced her fingers with mine. "And I'm proud of you for doing it. I just worry about you." She shrugged. "Silly, really, all things considered. You could snap me in half without breaking a sweat and I worry about you getting hurt by some homeless druggie."

I raised her fingers to my lips and kissed them. "I'll take care of me for you. Promise." My wolf rumbled her agreement.

Three

Inked was dead the next afternoon. For whatever reason, Tuesdays were always quiet. Lawrence was down in the basement tattooing a dragon onto a punk rocker's back. The even buzz of the needles was just audible under the current of music pumping through the shop. Calvin combed through the magazines looking for fresh design ideas, while Kaye sat in her piercing booth at the back of the shop, hidden away behind a white curtain. I had no idea what she was doing back there, but it probably involved adjusting her bra straps. I was rearranging the various hoops and spikes in the display counter, shifting all the plain stainless steel jewelry to the back to show off the sparkly, gem-encrusted stuff.

"Ayla, you want to learn body piercing?" Calvin asked suddenly.

I glanced up. "You'll show me?" I'd been strictly a cashier back at Skin Deep. At the time I'd longed to become a tattoo artist, but I had no artistic flare whatsoever. Stick men were about my level. Body piercing didn't really require any creativity: you just shoved the hoop in the chosen hole.

"Kaye will." Calvin's blue eyes gleamed, as if he took pleasure in the grimace I couldn't quite suppress. "Kaye, you'll give Ayla a crash course, won't you?"

Kaye peered out from behind her curtain. "Yeah, I suppose. If she really wants to know."

"Why not?" I abandoned my glittery earrings to squeeze into the booth with Kaye. It was a small space, just big enough for the dentist-esque chair and cabinet of piercing paraphernalia kept there. Kaye frowned at me as I entered. "Hands

where I can see them, Ayla."

I obligingly gave her the finger. "Where do we start?"

She looked at me consideringly, eyes lingering on my lip piercing. "Where does that go when you shift?" she asked, sounding almost worried. "Does it fall out?"

"It stays in." I toyed with the piercing, edgy under her sudden scrutiny. "Does it matter?"

She flipped her dark curls, a nervous gesture to match my own. "I never thought about it, really. In the books it always makes out that piercing is this big taboo for werewolves—that only the really kinky masochists get it done."

"Maybe I am a kinky masochist," I said. Kaye's eyes widened and she sat down in her chair, putting a little distance between us.

Being this close to her wore at my temper. To my wolf, she smelled equally angry and nervous, a mix of cold sweat and hot adrenaline. It surprised me. I'd put her antagonism down to my sexuality more than my species, never figuring she was just plain afraid of wolves. It made me feel a little sorry for her and a little irritated. I was suddenly no longer interested in learning the ancient art of body modification.

I made a show of checking my watch. "Almost lunch time," I announced. I poked my head round the curtain to catch Calvin's eyes. "Is it okay if I go now? I've got to meet Vince."

"Sure," he said. "You can both go if you want. It's like the Marie Celeste in here today."

"Great." Kaye barreled past me like she had a burr in her tail. "I'm meeting Gareth for lunch." She flashed me a toosweet smile. "I guess your girlfriend is too busy to meet you."

My sympathy for her evaporated.

"Yeah, my girlfriend has a full-time job," I said, pulling on my battered jacket. "I guess your boyfriend doesn't?"

"He's rich enough not to have to work. He's a financial consultant."

"No accounting for taste then." It was a crap joke, but it let me get the last word in as I shot out the door before Kaye could fire anything back.

Although it was nearly midday, a thick mist filled the

streets and the roads were slippery with black ice. It was one of the nastiest, longest winters I could remember. My breath fogged in the air and I tugged my coat tighter around myself. Vince was a sous-chef at the Tipsy Fox, a gastro pub in the city center. I was already daydreaming about steak sandwiches as I headed there. Maybe even a Scotch to chase the cold away.

The Tipsy Fox was nestled between an antiques shop and one of those fancy boutiques that sold frilly, impractical underwear. The smell of yeasty beer and steak and kidney pie greeted me as I pushed open the door and the mixed sounds of low chat and loud yelling hit my sensitive ears. The yelling was coming from the kitchen and I recognized Vince's voice as the one doing the shouting.

I didn't even pretend not to be nosey. Vince wasn't a raiseyour-voice type. I strolled to the bar and leaned over it, straining my ears to catch the words.

"—bloody zombies! It's not fair, Greg, and I'm not putting up with it!" Vince sounded genuinely pissed. I heard metal slamming on metal, then a shimmying echo, like he'd thrown a pan across the kitchen.

"He's my son and this is my pub and I make the rules!" A new voice, raspy and exasperated. "You don't like it, Vince, that's tough."

"Can I get you a drink?"

I jumped as a barmaid slid into my line of sight and I pulled back from the bar, flushed. "Uh, yeah, just a coke, please. And a steak sandwich with extra chips."

She smiled sweetly. "Take a seat and I'll bring it over when it's ready."

I cornered a table by the huge brick fireplace. It was lit, the flames dancing low in the grate. I watched the patterns they cast on the pale brickwork, entranced, until Vince stormed out from the kitchen and threw himself into the chair next to mine.

"Bloody twat," he muttered rebelliously, glaring at the tabletop. He picked up a coaster and began shredding it. "Why do I work here, Ayla?" "Because you like giving me discounted drinks?"

"We're not allowed to do that anymore. Greg's clamping down. We're not even allowed to drink here when we're off shift anymore," he said distractedly. "God!"

"What's wrong?" I asked, pulling a few scraps of coaster from him and tossing them in the fire. "I've never heard you yell like that."

"A few of the bar staff have been calling in sick a lot, Oscar included. He hasn't been in since Lupercali. It's getting ridiculous and it means the rest of us have to fill in for them. I'm not a bloody waiter, Ayla, I'm a chef. I don't want to be pulling pints and serving food. I don't get paid for that."

"So why doesn't Greg just sack them?" I wondered aloud. "There's always going to be kids after waiting jobs."

"Because he's an idiot." Vince slumped down in his seat, resting his arms on the table. "They're off getting stoned on their bloody freaky cigarettes and leaving the rest of us to pick up the slack. You can't run a business like that. Oscar's the worst of the bunch—he used to be such a nice kid, too. You saw him on Sunday night and he was fine, wasn't he? And this morning he's ringing in sick and swearing at people when they call him on it."

Silver Kiss. I was starting to feel like I was missing out. Lawrence lazed around on his breaks, puffing on the stuff and extolling its soothing virtues. Calvin frowned on it, but then Calvin also frowned on drinking, gambling and watching porn. Silver Kiss seemed harmless enough to me and Lawrence certainly wasn't acting stoned. "He did seem fine at Lupercali," I said. "A bit spacey, but..."

"He's turned into a complete little shit," Vince said. "He—" He stopped himself when the barmaid appeared with my sandwich, then carried on in a lower tone as she left. "He's got really aggressive and nasty lately. When he's here, I mean."

I ate without really tasting my sandwich. "I don't suppose he's friends with a girl called Molly Brady, is he?"

Vince straightened up, expression suddenly sharp. "Brady? Like Tina Brady?"

I nodded, mouth full of chips and mayonnaise.

"Wasn't she made outcast a few years ago?" he mused, helping himself to my chips. "I remember the alphas putting the word around."

"What did she do?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. So, what, Molly's her kid? Why do you ask? Is this Shannon's new case? Something to do with the Bradys?" His eyes gleamed. "I smell scandal, Ayla."

"Client confidentiality, Vince. I can't reveal any information."

"She's not your client though, is she? Come on, if you're going to pump me for information, you've got to tell me." He nudged me. "Is Molly in trouble? What is it, drugs? Prostitution? Arms dealing?"

I shook my head and took a bite of the sandwich. Steak and onion prevented me from answering him. While I chewed, the door to the pub opened, bringing a gust of cold wind with it that sent the flames rippling around the hearth. Oscar sauntered in, the heavy odor of cloves rolling off him. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair greasy and the sight of him raised my hackles. My wolf snarled inside me, pawing to get out. Surprised at my own reaction, I elbowed Vince and pointed at Oscar.

Vince curled his lip in his own silent snarl. "Look at him. I can't believe his dad thinks this is okay."

Oscar went to the bar, shoving other people aside and thumped his fist down on the wood. "Hey! Can I get a drink already? Fuck's sake, my dad owns this fucking place!"

The barmaid who'd served me shot him a dark look. "Oscar," she warned. "Don't start." She glanced around the busy pub. People were trying not to stare, but a horrible tension had fallen over the room.

"I've already started." He thumped the bar again. "Come on, give me a beer, Mel. You can follow that with a vodka."

"You're not old enough," Mel said, sounding impressively calm. I'd have smacked him already. Then again, she was human, so staying calm in the face of an angry adolescent werewolf was really her only choice.

"It's my dad's fucking pub!" Oscar roared. People were

watching openly now, no longer pretending to ignore the scene. Oscar leaned across the bar, jabbing his finger in Mel's face. "Give me a fucking drink before I come round there and give you a slap."

My wolf howled inside me, outraged. I leapt to my feet. Vince did the same, pushing me back as he stormed over to Oscar.

"That's enough," he said through clenched teeth, grabbing the boy by the shoulder and dragging him into the kitchen. Oscar struggled, but Vince had a good foot on him in height and an adult wolf's strength. I followed, but Vince slammed the kitchen door in my face, leaving me fuming and wild. I sucked in a deep breath and turned to Mel, who was clutching the bar, knuckles white.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

She gave me a strained smile. "Kids these days!" She managed a laugh that was apparently good enough to assure the other customers. With Oscar out of sight, they returned to their drinks and meals and the tension ebbed away.

"I can't believe that!" I said. "I met him at Lupercali and he seemed really nice!" My wolf growled, telling me again that there was just something plain wrong with Oscar. "He threatened to hit you!"

Mel released her death grip on the bar and sighed. "Spoilt," she said with a shrug. "My son knows better than to talk like that to his parents. But Greg's soft—Oscar's his only son."

I wasn't sure that was an excuse. Wolves didn't bear children easily so there was a tendency to indulge them. But that didn't explain Oscar's behavior. That wasn't a spoilt child having a tantrum. That was a near fully-grown werewolf on a rampage. I glanced to the closed kitchen door, listening for Vince or Greg. It was Oscar I heard though.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You can't push me around—I practically own this fucking place!"

I winced, trying once again to reconcile this furious, foul-mouthed wolf with the mellow one I'd met just two nights ago. I just couldn't mesh the images.

Glancing at my watch, I told myself it was none of my

business. I had to be back at work soon. I finished up my sandwich, which was now cold, the bread soggy with steak juice and threw some money on the bar. I wanted to check that Vince was okay before I left, but judging from the now hushed but still angry voices in the kitchen, he wasn't coming out any time soon.

Telling myself more firmly it was nothing to do with me, I headed back to work.

* * *

I managed to put the whole scene out of my mind and spent the rest of the day getting a terse lesson in the basics of piercing from Kaye. By the time we closed up, I was worn out from fending off snide comments and firing back my own. I had a sneaking suspicion Calvin had paired us off in an attempt to make us bond. It hadn't worked.

I'd just left Inked when Lawrence strolled out to walk with me.

"Fancy a drink?" he asked. "I've been stuck in that bloody basement all day. I need some human company!"

"Why not?" I said, feeling I deserved a drink for not throttling Kaye. "Let me call Shannon and see if she's up for it."

"Sure." He released me to light up a cigarette while I called Shannon. She sounded tired and frustrated and readily agreed to a drink.

"See you at Silks in half an hour?" she suggested. "I need to finish up some paperwork."

"Silks?" I said to Lawrence.

"Yeah, alright." He zipped up his jacket and blew a stream of smoke into the air. "Never been to a gay werewolf bar before."

"Your sexuality is safe with me," I assured him.

We ambled to the club, chatting idly. He was wondering if dying his beard would make him less manly. "Too many grey hairs, nowadays," he said, stroking it. "I know lots of men do it, but it doesn't feel right to me."

"I need to dye my hair soon," I said, running my hands

through my spiky mop. My natural mousy blonde roots were starting to show. "I had it blue once, but blue wolves look a bit weird."

Lawrence was a head taller than me, just the right height to examine my hair critically. "So when you shapeshift, you keep whatever hair color you have, even if it's not natural? That's awesome. I'd dye my hair some really crazy color if I were you. We should go and get it done together. I'll get my beard done and you can go multicolored. Like a My Little Pony."

I grimaced. "Yeah, that's not really the look I want."

The inside of Silks was cool and dark, mostly empty at this time of day. Soft music flowed through the club, ambient chill-out stuff instead of the usual jazz. Posters on the wall advertised the various house acts that played throughout the week; a mix of pure jazz and cabaret. Apparently there was going to be a burlesque show this weekend, which peaked my interest. Silks mainly catered to werewolves, although humans were welcome. A werewolf burlesque troupe might be worth seeing.

Lawrence and I propped up the bar, nursing a couple of pints while we waited for Shannon. I was still explaining the reasons why I didn't want green and yellow hair when she joined us, looking just as harried and fed-up as she'd sounded on the phone.

"Make mine a vodka and coke," she said when Lawrence offered her a drink. "A double."

"Hard day?" I asked, catching her hand in mine.

She kissed my cheek and settled on the bar stool next to me. "Just long. I've been doing some digging for the Brady case—trying to get in touch with the local police and social workers to see if they can help and it's like getting blood from stone. They're just so suspicious of a private eye asking questions. I think they're expecting something out of a James Ellroy novel."

There was bitter frustration in her voice and it cut into me. I knew what she was thinking. Back home she had contacts, friends, allies. Here she had nothing. I wondered guiltily if she was starting to regret moving down here. It had been for me,

after all, not her. It wasn't just her reputation and contacts she'd left behind; all her family and friends lived up north too.

I covered my sudden anxiety with a swig of my drink. "Well, we'll find a way in," I said. "There's bound to be somebody who knows somebody who'll help."

Lawrence handed Shannon her drink. "So you're a PI. Pretty funky! Have you ever gone undercover as a gangster's moll or anything?"

Shannon laughed. "I once went undercover at a Chinese takeaway to prove they had illegal immigrants working for them. Does that count?"

"Only if you had to dress in a sequined gown and sing for it," he replied, then sighed when she shook her head.

"Did you get a chance to speak to Vince?" she asked me.

I nodded, then shrugged, remembering how abortive the conversation had been. "He recognized Tina Brady's name but didn't know anything about her."

"Oh well." She dipped her finger in her drink, prodding an ice cube then sucking her finger dry. The movement fascinated me. "I'm not beaten yet. It's only day one."

"Can't you just ask Tina? Clearly she wants her daughter found—isn't she pretty much obliged to tell you anything useful?" I asked.

"People have funny ideas of what's useful sometimes." Shannon plucked the ice cube from her glass and popped it in my mouth, laughing as I flinched at the sharp cold snap on my sensitive gums. "Most people in situations like this are usually afraid of being thought of as bad parents. They keep things back."

"Have you tried water torture?" Lawrence asked. "Bamboo under the fingernails?"

"Funnily enough, no," Shannon said.

I crunched my ice cube and turned the problem over in my head. Vince hadn't known anything about Tina Brady. But my parents might. Mum was always well-informed on Pack gossip and going-ons; once you got her started it was impossible to shut her up. It was a facet of her personality I'd loathed

growing up, because it meant the whole Pack knew every argument we ever had over my sexuality—my *phase* as my parents had called it. Everywhere I went as a teenager, some bignosed Pack member was there dropping hints and making insinuating comments about my private life. When was I going to just settle down and start a family? Didn't I know what a disappointment I was to my parents?

Pack gossip could be vicious, devastating. In such a tight-knit community as ours, there was little real privacy and I'd decided early that the best way to deal with that was to leave town. Now I was back and homosexuality was less of a taboo than it had been eight years ago, I might be able to turn the Pack's penchant for tittle-tattle to my advantage. That would make a nice change.

Four

l arranged to go to my parents for dinner on Thursday night. Shannon gracefully declined the offer. My parents had made a real effort to accept our relationship but there was still a hint of uneasiness about their interactions, like they still thought I might wake up one day and fancy men. I tried not to let it get to me—and it didn't get to me as much as it had when I'd been younger. Maybe I'd mellowed with age. Or they'd become less obvious in their disapproval.

Either way, I arrived at my childhood home alone, clutching a bunch of flowers for Mum. The smell of chrysanthemums and daisies wafted around me, mixing with the fatty, buttery aroma of roasting potatoes coming from the house. I paused on the front step, looking around at the neighborhood as I always did. Like me and Shannon, my parents lived on a mixed, but largely human estate, the Oaks. The main reason for their choice was so I could get into Sparrowfield Middle School, the better of the two middle schools in the city. On a werewolf estate, we would have been out of the catchment area.

The main difference between purely wolf estates and mixed ones was the lack of green, open spaces. The Oaks was built like a maze, little twisting streets and passages that seemed to lead to a different place each time you walked down them. There was one small play park at the heart of the estate, but no real room for a wolf to shift and run freely. I suddenly had a renewed appreciation for my little house in Foxglove, which bordered one of the city parks.

Dad opened the door before I could knock, greeting me with a broad smile. "Ayla! Just in time. Your mum's just

dishing up. We're having your favorite." He ushered me into the dining room, where Mum was indeed serving up plates heaped with steaming vegetables and generous cuts of roast lamb. My mouth watered as I watched.

"Hello, love," Mum said, setting a plate down in my place. "Oh, are those for me?" She took the flowers with a sweet smile. "They're lovely."

"Yeah." As always, I couldn't quite find the words to convey my sentiments. *They're because I love you* didn't feel right, even if it was true. "I thought you'd like them."

"Sit down, tuck in," she ordered. "I'll put these in some water."

I obeyed, spooning mint sauce onto my lamb. I felt like I'd slipped back in time, reverted to a child. Whatever tensions had—and did—exist between me and my parents, I always felt a little safer here; a little more at home.

"So have you heard from the police yet?" Dad asked.

I shook my head. "Could be another six weeks yet."

"You'll get in," he said confidently. "Before you know it you'll be out on the streets being insulted and spat at by junkies and yobs."

"Oh Dad, don't. It's not going to be like that."

"Depends where you get sent," Mum said, sitting down opposite me and smoothing out the checkered tablecloth absently. "The city center is fine, but I wouldn't want you out on the beat in some of the suburbs."

"I think I can take care of myself," I said, spearing a baby carrot. "I doubt they'll send me after the crack whores and baby killers on my first shift."

"No, they'll save that till they've broken you in," Dad said. "How's Shannon doing?"

"She's working on a case. Actually, I wanted to ask you about something." I turned to Mum, figuring she'd be more willing to divulge any scandal than Dad. "Do you know a wolf named Tina Brady?"

Mum frowned, chewing a piece of lamb meditatively. "It rings a bell. Tina Brady... Would that be Christina Markham, do you think?" she asked Dad.

"The wolf that was made outcast?" Dad wore a frown that matched Mum's exactly. It was cute. I wondered if Shannon and I would develop synchronized expressions over time. "She was married to Robert Markham, wasn't she?"

"Yes, but they divorced before she was outcast," Mum said. "She had an affair, I think."

"I thought he had the affair?"

"Maybe they both had affairs?" I offered. That couldn't be why she was outcast. Infidelity wasn't anything like a strong enough reason to exile a Pack member.

"No, it was definitely her," Mum said. "Because she got pregnant, didn't she, and that's why..." She trailed off, staring down at her food.

I prodded, sensing some juicy secret. "Why was she outcast anyway?"

My parents exchanged dark looks, a ripple of disquiet passing between them. Mum was suddenly very occupied with her roast potatoes and Dad took a long chug of his water. I waited patiently while they eyeballed each other.

"You tell her, Paul," Mum said. "It makes me feel ill."

Dad set down his cutlery and sighed. "She had an abortion."

"Oh." I set down my cutlery.

I suppose I should have suspected something like that. There was no law against abortion in the Pack, same as there was no law against homosexuality. But there was an unspoken, acknowledged rule that it was not done. In the past few generations, birth rates amongst wolves had dropped dramatically. There were lots of theories why—pesticides, pollution, too many vegetables in our diet... You name it, someone blamed our decreased fertility on it.

Most wolf couples nowadays produced one cub in their lives, more than one child was a celebrated rarity. Twins were unheard of. So it followed that abortion was a pretty big deal. Obviously there were always times when it was the only option, but I guessed that wasn't the case with Tina or she wouldn't have been outcast.

Still, it unsettled me. Given my situation, I hated the idea

of the woman being judged so harshly for her choice. Shouldn't the Pack be past the age where this was such a big deal?

"Oh," I said again. "That's...bad."

We all resumed eating in silence. I churned Dad's words round in my mind. Did this help Shannon? Not really, unless Molly's disappearance had something to do with Tina having an abortion several years earlier, which I doubted. I shoved my vegetables round my plate glumly, barely noticing when Mum whipped the plate away and replaced it with a bowl of trifle.

I didn't stay long after dinner, which-after the turn the conversation had taken-seemed to relieve my parents.

I'd walked over straight from work, knowing I'd probably want to run home to work off the masses of food Mum always insisted on feeding me. I stripped off on the doorstep and left my clothes with Mum. We said our goodbyes and Mum told me to bring Shannon next time. I thought she even meant it.

Nightfall brought a light snow shower and flakes melted on my skin like cold little kisses as I stretched, preparing for the bone-popping pain of the change. Although the waning moon was obscured by thick snow clouds, I could still feel her energy firing through my blood. I threw my head back and howled as the change took me, relishing the answering howls that echoed through the night. Other wolves, other Pack members, ran tonight and I was one of them again. Despite all my reservations, the glow of that knowledge hadn't diminished yet.

I padded through the streets, claws clacking on the pavement. To my wolf senses the night was alive with sounds and scents that were muffled and dull to my human body. I could smell the gravy from the meal I'd just eaten, hear the slam of a back door a few streets away. An owl hooted softly somewhere nearby and a cat yowled in response. As I passed through the estate, a few dogs barked and snarled at their windows, upset by the presence of a werewolf.

I picked up speed as I left the estate and entered the city again.

It was getting late and most people were inside. A few small groups drifted past me, snapping photos with their mobile phones.

Snow dusted my black fur as I paused to sniff a discarded pizza box. A few shreds of pepperoni remained in the box and I gulped them down before moving on. The change burned through a lot of energy, so despite Mum's massive meal, my stomach was already growling. As a human, I'd have turned my nose up at cold pizza, but as a wolf it was a nice little treat.

I headed west, out of the city and towards the park that bordered Foxglove. I could get a proper run there before reaching home. I could already smell the slightly sickly perfume of the flowers that gave the estate its name and hear the muted yaps of two other wolves rough-housing together. The sound tugged at me, urging me on. I wanted to join in, tussle and wrestle with them.

I found the pair of them a few minutes later as I entered the park. One adult wolf, one younger—a tawny adolescent—chased each other round, snapping and snarling at each other in that kind of play-fighting that verged on real. That drew me up short and I dropped to my belly before they saw me. My paws crunched in the fresh-fallen snow and I laid my ears back with a whine, no longer sure I wanted to play. The older wolf, a dusky blond, bowled over the younger and clamped his teeth round the other's throat with a rumbling growl.

There was something different about this wolf. He didn't smell like Pack, but wildly foreign, an odor that both excited and scared me. I crouched low, ears flat, tail tucked between my legs as I watched. When he released his grip on the younger wolf with a snarl, the cub flopped to the snowy ground, exposing his belly with a whine. The dominant wolf nudged at his flanks, tail held erect in a classic posture of strength and the youngster scrambled back to his feet and shot off into the park with a yelp.

For a second I thought the dominant wolf would chase after him, ignoring me. I stayed low, hoping to avoid notice, but the breeze was going the wrong way, carrying my scent straight to him. He swung his great head straight towards me, hackles high. I held my own submissive position, quivering with a cocktail of nerves and energy. He was a feral, there was no doubt about that. In all my years as a lone wolf, I'd never met a feral. They were almost mythical; werewolves who chose to live as wolves, cutting away their humanity in favor of the wilderness that lurked in us all.

What the hell was one doing in the city limits, bullying a Pack youngster?

He bounded over to me with a sharp bark, warning me to stay put while he thoroughly investigated me, cold snout poking at my groin and belly. I closed my eyes and put up with his nosing, even if the human part of my brain was screaming in outrage. The wolf part of me knew better than to protest. He was twice my size and weight; there was no way I'd beat him in a fight. So I stayed still while he sniffed me over, fighting to ignore the hot flush of fear he gave me.

After a minute or so he backed off, letting me up. I rolled to my feet, keeping my head low. We huffed at each other, breath fogging in the night air. His hackles were down, but his amber eyes were narrowed, wary, like he didn't know what to make of me either. I probably smelled as alien to him as he did to me: a muddle of city scents and the earthy signature of Pack.

We faced each other for a long, dark moment and then I took a cautious step forward. He rushed me, snapping at my neck with an angry yowl. I yelped as his fangs tore into my skin and dropped back into my crouch. Hot blood dripped from the wound, sending a spike of panic through me. I cowered, assuming the meekest pose I could. I didn't want to fight him.

He chuffed at me, shaking his thick ruff, then pressed his nose to the ground, snuffling through the snow. Picking up the other wolf's scent, I decided when he turned toward the direction the youngster had run. The feral wolf gave me one last look, feigned a snap at me, then trotted off after the youngster. In seconds he was gone, hidden by the curling mist.

I collapsed onto my side, as exhausted and shaken as if we had actually fought. Adrenaline rode me hard, the thrill and

fear of the encounter twisting my stomach. I tried to crane my head enough to examine the bite on my shoulder, but it was impossible. I'd have to get Shannon to look at it.

With a grunt, I forced myself to my feet and headed home. I had to pace myself. My shoulder pulled as I walked, a tight line of pain all the way down my right foreleg. I hoped feral wolves didn't carry any diseases. The last thing I wanted was a raging case of rabies.

* * *

"Ayla, my God!" Shannon cried. "What happened?"

I whined and pawed at her leg. She stood on the doorstep, blocking my entrance, worry etched on her face. I butted at her to get her to move, wanting to shift back to human and get a proper look at my shoulder. The pain had increased as I walked home and I could feel the blood drying in my fur.

She stepped aside to let me in. I hopped into the hall, bringing a flurry of snowflakes with me. Ice had crusted on my paws and I left wet prints on the powder blue carpet as I limped to the living room. I sat down on the rug with a humph and began nosing at my frosty paws. Shannon knelt down next to me, brushing her fingers lightly down my back. I closed my eyes, tongue lolling in pleasure at her touch. It was a weird thing, when I was in wolf shape and she touched me. Not sexual, as it would be in human shape. But still, whatever form I wore, she was my mate and her touch did something to me.

She gently parted the fur around the bite mark to examine it. "Scrapping with the local strays, were you?" she murmured. "It's not deep, but it needs cleaning. Might be easier if you change back."

I sighed and clambered gracelessly to my feet. Shaking my head, I shifted shape. The bite was a riot of agony as I did, sending hot flares through me that were somehow worse than the usual pain of shapeshifting. When I was human again, I fell straight back to the rug, burying my face in the thick creamy-white weave.

"Shit," I said.

Shannon propped me up against the armchair in the corner of the room. The worn leather was blessedly cool after the heat of shifting and I relaxed against it with a moan. Once again, exhaustion hit me. I pressed my fingers tenderly to the bite mark. It had stopped bleeding on the walk home, but changing had opened the wound again, bringing fresh blood to the surface. I winced.

"Stay still," Shannon ordered. "I'll get some water and bandages." She hurried off to the kitchen and I heard her rummaging through cupboards.

"It'll stop in a minute," I called. Shapeshifting usually went someway to healing wounds; broken bones often fixed themselves as the body remade them to suit the new shape, for example, but bruises and cuts tended to linger in either form. A bite like this should scab over pretty quickly if I stuck to one shape for a while.

Shannon returned with a bowl of warm water, a bag of cotton wool and a roll of bandages. "It needs cleaning. God knows what kind germs you could have picked up." She sat down next to me, dipped a wad of cotton wool in the water and swabbed it across the bite.

I rolled my eyes, even though I'd thought the same thing myself and submitted to her ministrations. "It was a feral wolf," I said, dragging my nails through the carpet. "I ran into him in the park on the way home from Mum and Dad's."

She glanced up at me, surprised. "I didn't think ferals came into cities."

"I didn't either. He was fighting with a Pack cub, then he went for me when he saw me."

She frowned. "So do you have to tell the Pack? Is this a violation of protocol or something?"

"I've no idea." There weren't many hard and fast rules for dealing with ferals. Pack wolves just had so little to do with them. "If something happens to the cub... I should have gone after them," I realized with a pang of guilt. "I didn't think, I was just so... I don't know, freaked out."

Shannon finished cleaning the wound and bandaged it carefully. "It's not your business," she said, stroking my hair.

Now it felt sexual and my body tightened in response to her caress. I was suddenly conscious of being naked, where I hadn't cared before.

"It's Pack business," I said, picturing the youngster's submissive body language. A feral wolf had no right asserting dominance over a Pack wolf. Hell, a feral had no right being in Pack territory—that much I was sure of.

Shannon snuggled closer to me, pulling me against her. I nestled my head in the curve of her neck and slid my hand up her thigh. She was in her pajamas, old flannel that was soft to the touch and smelled of her floral shampoo. "Pack business doesn't have to be your business, Ayla," she told me, still playing with my hair. "It was probably nothing. Maybe it wasn't a feral, just a Pack wolf you don't know."

I supposed that was possible. Even if my senses told me it wasn't. Even if the wild, exotic scent of the other wolf wasn't burned in my memory, telling me it wasn't. I hadn't known every wolf in the city before I left, so why would I know now? I sighed and shook it off. *Whatever*. Shannon was right—it wasn't my business.

"I asked Mum and Dad about Tina Brady," I told her. "Apparently she had an abortion and that's why she was outcast."

"Harsh," she said, sliding her hand down to my good shoulder. "Interesting, but not really helpful." She sighed. "I should have referred this case."

"How about we go and talk to Tina together?" I offered. "Maybe she'll feel better talking to another wolf."

"We could," she said, sounding unconvinced. "What I really need is a chat with the police officers she reported Molly's disappearance to. Think you can swing that?"

"Not just yet." I turned and kissed her cheek. "But we'll get there. You've only just started."

She caught my lips with hers, turning my chase kiss into a deeper, hotter one. I squeezed her thigh, pressing myself against her. Shannon gripped my shoulders, forgetting the bite, and I pulled back with a soft hiss of pain.

"Oh God, sorry." Immediately contrite, she leaned away

from me. "Are you okay? Does it really hurt?"

I craned my neck to look at the bandages. "It's fine," I assured her, tangling my fingers in her hair to pull her in again. "I'm not broken."

"I'm not so sure." She pressed her lips to mine teasingly, little butterfly kisses that whet my appetite for more. "Maybe I need to play nurse?"

I snapped playfully at her, tingling with excitement. "Still got that Halloween costume?"

"It's tucked away somewhere." She rose, pulling me to my feet with her. "I'm sure I can dig it out if you really think you need some first aid." She winked and cocked her hip saucily.

I growled and gave her a light push towards the stairs. "Take me to bed, Nurse Nightingale. I feel a hot flush coming on."

* * *

My bite wound was pretty much healed by the morning. Whether Shannon's bedside manner had anything to do with that or not, I didn't know. But when I peeled the bandage back in the shower, the hot water sluiced over a thick scab and a purplish bruise and nothing more. I was relieved, although I felt silly for it. A tiny part of me had been genuinely scared of catching rabies or tetanus from the feral. Stupid, when there hadn't been a recorded case of werewolf rabies in almost a century, but with a feral...who knew? They didn't live like us.

I left Shannon in bed with a plate of scrambled eggs and a cup of tea and set off for Inked. Despite her misgivings she'd decided that both of us speaking to Tina might help—or at least wouldn't hurt—so I planned to ask Calvin for a half day.

As usual he was already at work when I arrived, down in the basement area polishing the tattooing chair. I quirked an eyebrow at him and he shrugged.

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness. And you can't be too hygienic in a tattoo parlor."

I shrugged. I'd spent the morning worrying about rabies, so who was I to question him. "Can I take a half day?" I asked. "I've got something on this afternoon."

He whistled through his teeth. "It's pretty short notice." "It's important."

Calvin sat in the chair, twirling his polishing cloth in the air. "Wolf stuff?"

"Not exactly. Private eye stuff."

"You have the most exciting life, Ayla." He threw the cloth at me. "Alright, but you can't have it as holiday."

I caught the cloth. "No problem. I'll make up the time somewhere." I couldn't afford to lose half a day's wages. A few extra hours stocktaking or cleaning wouldn't kill me.

"Finish polishing down here and we'll call it even," he said, tossing me a can of furniture polish. "Then you can sterilize Kaye's needles."

I grabbed the can with a sigh. Exciting didn't really seem the word.

46 * Naomi (Tark

Five

Hollow Hill was a suburb of the city that would probably make Joel fall to his knees and thank God for Foxglove. Street after street of identical, depressing boxy houses, saplings fenced off with chain link and gardens filled with broken cycles and abandoned children's toys. It was the most depressing part of the city and—coincidence or not—it was where Hesketh had lived. He was the bent copper who'd skinned my cousin Adam after his death, using the skin to transform himself into a wolf-monster. Driving into Hollow Hill with Shannon that afternoon, I was crushed with memories of my fight with him.

It had been Alpha Humans who'd murdered Adam, but Hesketh and his werewolf partner Kinsey had desecrated him. Rage threaded through me as we drove to Tina's, feeding my wolf, who still thirsted for revenge. Never mind that Kinsey and Hesketh were gone. I still didn't feel like anyone had truly paid.

Shannon tapped my arm, pulling me out of my black thoughts. "This is it," she said.

I glanced at the house. Like the all the others down this street, it was grim and uninspiring. Maybe even more so, as it didn't even have a proper garden. The lawn had been paved over with thick concrete slabs and lichen filled the cracks between slabs. *God.* If this was what Molly had to live in, no wonder she'd ran away. She must have been starved for greenery, for open space.

"So what's the plan?" I asked Shannon, who drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. *Nerves*.

"I don't really have one," she confessed. "It's not like I

think she's involved in Molly's disappearance or anything, I just think she can be more helpful than she has been. Tell us more about Molly, her friends, her hobbies. Anything would be useful at this point."

I nodded. I'd helped Shannon out on cases before, mostly with research. I'd never questioned anyone before, but how hard could it be? As Shannon said, Tina wasn't a suspect. We weren't going to be shoving bamboo slivers under her fingernails, as Lawrence had suggested.

We went to the door and Shannon rang the bell. A few seconds later, a woman I guessed was Tina answered. She was younger than I expected. Prettier too. I'd built this image in my head of a world-weary wolf, ground down by the bad hand life had dealt her. But Tina's eyes were bright, curious and, when she recognized Shannon, hopeful.

"You've found her?" she said eagerly, letting us in. "Oh God, tell me you've found her."

"Not yet, Tina," Shannon said. "But we're making progress. This is my partner, Ayla Hammond," she added, stepping aside so I could shake Tina's hand.

The other woman's grip was firm; she knew I was a wolf and she was testing my strength. No way would she have subjected Shannon to this bone-crushing grip. I squeezed her fingers in return, holding her gaze. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." She released me, flipping her thick brown hair out of her face. "I didn't know you were bringing your partner along, Ms Ryan." There was distrust in her voice. I supposed I couldn't blame her, knowing how the Pack had treated her.

"I hope you don't mind," Shannon said, smiling sweetly at her. "Shall we sit in the kitchen?" Without waiting for an answer, she strode through. Tina frowned, then followed.

I lingered in the hallway for a second, taking in the clean décor, the photos on the wall. Pictures of Tina with a girl at various ages, Molly, I guessed. She was the spitting image of her mother, fine-boned for a wolf, with dark hair and eyes. As the pictures went on chronologically, her expression changed though: from open and beaming to closed and dark. Typical teenage moodiness, I thought. I'd hated having my picture

taken at that age. Of course, it hadn't driven me to run away from home.

I'd had plenty of other reasons to do that.

"Can I get you a drink, Ms Hammond?" Tina called from the kitchen. It was an obvious hint to join them, so I took it, wandering into the kitchen.

"Black coffee, thanks," I said. Shannon was sitting at a small round table; her open folder revealing more pictures of Molly. I sat down next to her, once again taking in the décor. The kitchen was furnished country-style, lots of pine and red-and-white check. Fresh tulips sat in ceramic vases on the windowsill and the shelves were lined with porcelain chickens and pictures of wheat sheaves. It was all strangely at odds with the grim exterior of the house.

"This is nice," I said.

"My ex paid for it all," Tina said with a shrug. "If you've got to live in a shit hole, it may as well be a nicely decorated one."

"Does Molly have much to do with her dad?" Shannon asked.

Tina smiled thinly at her. "You asked me that last time."

"I just want to reiterate a few things, that's all," Shannon said. "It never hurts to go over the details."

"She sees him a couple of times a month. Weekends here and there. She wasn't outcast, so she's free to mix with the Pack." Tina glowered down at the kettle she was filling, as if aiming all her bitterness at it. "But they're not very close. She blames him for...everything, I suppose. The divorce, me being outcast."

"The abortion?" I asked, as carefully as I could.

Her shoulders stiffened, then slumped. She turned her head from us, letting her hair veil her face. "Fucking Pack bullshit," she spat. "You can't fucking take a piss without one of them poking their nose in to tell you you're doing it wrong. We're better off without them!" She slammed the kettle down on the sideboard. The lid jerked open, splashing water all over her arm. She swore and reached for a tea towel. "Have you spoken to her dad yet?" she demanded of Shannon, making

a visible effort to curb her anger.

"He's not back from his holiday yet," Shannon said. "I told you when we last spoke that I'd contact him as soon as he was, but given that he was in Greece when Molly disappeared, I don't think he'll be much help."

"Well if you don't have anything new to tell me, why are you bloody here?" Tina slumped against the sideboard, kettle forgotten. "Why am I paying you if you're not actually doing anything to find her?"

I gritted my teeth, aggravated by her manner. Shannon stayed impressively cool, simply shuffling through her papers until she found a blank sheet. "When we first spoke, you mentioned Molly had been in trouble with the police in the past. I wanted to follow up on that. Does she have any friends you think might have helped lead her astray? Any boyfriends who were trouble?"

I watched Tina visibly struggle with her reply. Maybe she was just curbing the urge to yell again, but it felt like more. Like she was deciding whether to lie or not. After a few tense seconds, she sighed and dragged her fingers through her hair. "Look, I didn't tell you this the first time because I didn't think it was important, okay? So don't get all uptight with me."

"I'm not here to judge you, Tina," Shannon said gently, rising to stand by her. "Anything you can tell me that will help Molly is important."

Tina nodded and did that noisy exhale again. "She was seeing this boy—a human." She raised her hands defensively. "I don't have a problem with that, I really don't. I didn't think it would ever get serious, because Molly wanted a family one day and well...you know." She shrugged. "Anyway, this boy—his name's Marc Wright—lives a few streets away and he's got a reputation. You know." She cocked an eyebrow at us as if we should know. I didn't.

"A reputation for what?" I asked.

"Drugs, gangs, that sort of thing." She sniffed. "I suppose having a werewolf girlfriend is a status symbol for kids like that. Anyway, I went round and spoke to him after Molly ran off, in case she'd said anything to him or they'd had a fight or whatever."

Shannon was making notes, frowning. "You should have told me this the first time," she said. "These kinds of details can be crucial in cases like this."

"Well he didn't know anything!" Tina said, folding her arms across her chest. "He told me and I'd have known if he was lying. He swore he hadn't seen her and she hadn't said anything to him about wanting to take off, so why would I tell you when it was already a dead end?"

"Then why are you telling us now?" I asked.

"Because I'm desperate! Molly's been gone for almost a month and nobody's bloody doing anything! The police, the Pack, nobody!" She burst into tears, balling her hands into fists and hiding her eyes. "She's never been gone this long before. And I know things have been horrible and I know she hates me, but she's never been gone so long!"

Shannon wrapped her arms around the other woman, pulling her into an embrace. Tina struggled at first, then relaxed and leaned into Shannon, weeping into her hair while Shannon stroked her back. I sat and watched awkwardly, at a loss for what to do. I was embarrassed for Tina. I guessed she would hate herself for this weakness afterwards—I certainly would—but I also sensed she needed it right now and I didn't know where to look. It was all so weirdly intimate.

I stared at Shannon's file while my partner murmured comforting nonsense to Tina. I flicked through the photos and notes. There were school pictures and holiday snapshots, a few of Tina and Molly together, copies of the photos in the hall. There was one that I guessed must have been taken at a Lupercali a few years ago; a younger Molly posing in a smart green dress, a few other cubs lined up with her. I frowned, recognizing one of them as Oscar.

"Tina," I said.

She looked up from Shannon's shoulders, blinking red eyes at me.

I held up the photo. "Was Molly friends with this kid?" I pointed out Oscar. He was a few years older than Molly, but

they stood close together, identical smiles of pride on their faces.

Tina wiped her eyes and peered at the picture. "She used to hang out with him a lot, before we moved here," she said. "Oscar Maxwell, that is. Rob—that's my ex—is good friends with his dad."

I nodded and set the photo down. Did one missing teenager and one erratic teenager make for a lead? I had no idea, but I made a mental note to tell Shannon about Oscar later.

As it happened, she began pressing me for details as soon as Tina shut the front door on us fifteen minutes later.

"So?"

"Nothing," I said. "Well, I think it's nothing. Just that I met Oscar at Lupercali and then saw him again when I went to see Vince at the Fox on Tuesday." I explained Oscar's wild mood swings and his argument with Vince. Shannon nodded, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

"It can't hurt to ask any of Molly's friends if they've heard from her," she said. "Although it doesn't seem likely that she would have been in regular contact with any Pack teens since Tina was made outcast."

"Depends," I argued. "The outcast ruling doesn't include Molly—she'd still be free to do wolf things, go to Lupercali, all that. So she might still be in touch with Oscar."

"I'll look into it," she decided. "I want to talk to the boyfriend first."

"Want me to come?" The idea of Shannon marching off to speak to a drug-dealing gang member by herself put my wolf on edge. You never let your mate go hunting alone.

"Why not?" She smiled at me and I relaxed a little. "If he really is as villainous as Tina makes out, a werewolf bodyguard could come in handy."

"Oh yeah, especially a wolf as fierce-looking as me." I was shorter than Shannon, who wasn't exactly towering, and humans who didn't know better thought that made me a weak wolf. Shannon liked to say it gave me the element of surprise. It just annoyed me.

The first year after I left home, I'd spent all my time getting into bar fights as I worked my way north. Every drunken idiot who wanted to prove he was tougher than a werewolf had picked me to prove it.

Shannon patted my cheek as she unlocked the car door. "I think you can be pretty damn scary when you put your mind to it."

I thought of the feral wolf. "Not scary enough."

* * *

Marc Wright was a beautiful boy of about seventeen, with smooth chocolate skin, huge liquid brown eyes and a knife as long as my forearm. He brandished it at us through the living room window as we approached the house, his eyes wide and wild, clearly warning us off. Shannon, once again showing a level of calm I was sure she must be faking, ignored the knife and knocked on the front door.

His mother opened the door, a thin, harried-looking woman with sharp eyes and a mean mouth. "You social workers? Selling something? Church types?"

"My name's Shannon Ryan and this is my partner, Ayla Hammond." Shannon flashed her business card at the woman. "We'd like to talk to Marc Wright about his girlfriend, Molly Brady, if we could."

The woman examined the card, brimming with suspicion. After a few seconds, she nodded. "Marcus!" she bellowed. "Come out here!"

Marc slunk to the door, knife still clutched in his hands. "Coppers?" he asked in the same *I ain't done nothing* tone as his mum.

"It's about that girl of yours. So make sure you tell the truth, now." His mum shoved him outside and slammed the door on him. Shannon and I exchanged glances. This was going to be hard work.

Marc slouched against the front door and fixed us with a mean, assessing glare. "Molly? I ain't seen her in weeks."

"But you were her boyfriend?" Shannon asked.

"Yeah, I suppose. We hung out. She was a bit young for me, like." He looked me up and down and winked. "I like older women. Experienced women."

I ignored his leer. "Have you heard from her since she ran away?"

"Nah. We weren't serious or nothing, we just saw each other for a laugh sometimes. She was always going on about running off, you know? Starting a better life for herself, that shit." He sniffed, disdainful, and pointed at me with the blade of the knife. "You a werewolf? I like wolf women. They're always up for a laugh."

"I'm not," I said, the faintest hint of a growl in my voice.

Shannon angled herself between us. "Did you notice any change in Molly's behavior in the days before she left? Did she mention any new friends, anything like that?"

He scratched his nose as if genuinely thinking about it. "She was smoking this new shit. Went right off the weed, which was a pain, because she was buying her weed from my mate and he always gave me a cut, didn't he?"

Silver Kiss. I wasn't sure why I was sure, I just was. It was clearly the new big thing with humans and wolves. Lawrence was addicted to the stuff and Vince had said most of the kids at the Fox were into it. So it wasn't too much of a leap in the dark to assume Molly was too. Whether that was relevant, I wasn't sure. As Lawrence had assured Calvin, Silver Kiss was a herbal cigarette, nothing illegal or dangerous.

"What about new friends?" Shannon persisted. "Where was she getting this new stuff from if not your mate?"

"I dunno, like, she did mention this guy. I thought she might be banging him on the side—she is a bit of a slut, you know? I can't remember his name. It was like Stuart, or Simon, or something. Something a bit gay."

I couldn't help myself; a full growl escaped me and Marc glanced at me in alarm. "You not gonna wolf out on me, are you?" He held the knife up again in a more defensive position.

Shannon laid her hand on my arm. "I think you've told us everything you can, haven't you?" she asked Marc.

He nodded, wide eyes fixed on me.

"Great. We'll get off then." She handed him her business card. "Just give me a call if you think of anything useful. I know Molly's family would be so grateful."

He glanced at the card. "Is there a reward or something then?"

"Maybe." Shannon smiled brightly at him. "Thanks for your time, Marc."

"Yeah." He looked back at me, apparently satisfied I wasn't going to rip his throat out. "Yeah, and hey, you ever want some fun, you come find me." He winked again. "I know loads of fun stuff."

"You're not my type," I assured him as we left.

* * *

"Not entirely a wasted day," Shannon said as we drove home. "I still don't feel like we're really onto it yet though. I'll have to ask Tina about this Stuart or Simon, see if she knows anything."

I stared out the window at the passing houses. Twilight was falling fast, bringing another light snow shower with it. The streetlights turned the snow orange, giving the city an eerie, otherworldly glow. "What about the wolf Tina had the affair with?" I asked. "Is it worth checking him out?"

"I've pretty much ruled him out already," she replied. "According to Tina, he bitterly regrets the affair and is working hard to repair his marriage."

"She already told you about the affair?"

Shannon shrugged. "I asked her about Molly's dad and it came up. She didn't go into much detail."

"Has he got kids, the other man?" I asked.

"None. Which I suppose just compounds the damage. His wife can't conceive, but he knocks up the first woman he hops into bed with for a drunken fling. It's got to be unbearable for the wife."

And it hammered home how strange it was that Tina had aborted the child. To conceive twice ought to be a joyous

triumph for a wolf, regardless of the circumstances. I wondered, if she hadn't been caught out, would she have kept the cub and claimed it as her husband's?

"Here's what I think at the moment," Shannon continued. "It's a straightforward enough scenario. Molly's angry and resentful over how the Pack treated her mum, but she's also angry at Tina for messing up her—their—life. She's fallen in with a bad crowd, probably got into drugs if what Marc says is true and now she's met someone new and she's run off with him. It's a way to upset and piss off her mum and get some attention at the same time."

"If that's the case, she might just come back on her own when she's had enough," I mused. "She's only fourteen—she'll miss her home comforts soon enough, surely?"

"Hopefully, but I think I have to act like that's not the case. Which means the next steps are finding out who this Stuart or Simon is and figuring out how she might have left the city. Checking out CCTV and that sort of thing." She rubbed her forehead. "I hate going through CCTV tapes. It's so bloody boring."

"Find out if she was into Silver Kiss," I said. "Vince said Oscar was fine until he started smoking that."

She nodded, but I could tell she was only half listening. "I never thought of wolves as being into drugs," she said after a brief silence. "It's weird to think of werewolves shooting up or snorting coke."

"Well, maybe we're not as superior to you puny humans as we like to make out." I switched the radio on and the blast of bubbly pop music filled the car, keeping us both quiet until we were back home.

Actually, there was a long tradition of drug-use in were-wolf history. Back in the Middle Ages, before it was understood that wolves and humans were separate species, people believed they could transform themselves into werewolves by using potions and rituals. They'd smear themselves in anise and opium, or drink beer mixed with blood under the light of the full moon and wait for Satan to show up and gift them with wolf shape.

In Egypt, where they'd been more into cats, it was believed that cat spirits could possess a human and transform them that way, if the human had taken the right mixture to open them up to the spirit world. We'd all heard the stories of the kugarvad—cat shifters—as children, but they were extinct now, if they'd ever existed at all. Wherever you looked in history, humans, shapeshifting and hallucinogenics were tightly woven together.

Of course, none of that was useful to Shannon, so I didn't lecture her on werewolf history throughout the ages. She'd had to do Lupine Studies in school same as me.

Six

I'D PLANNED A RUN WITH Vince and Joel for Friday night, in Larkspur Park. I went there straight from work, feeling a pang of guilt at leaving Shannon home alone for the night. She was busy making calls about CCTV, guaranteed no fun at all. It wasn't that she didn't have friends here—she was pretty cozy with the family next door to us—but there was so much I did that she couldn't join in with here. When it had just been the two of us, me a lone wolf with no Pack to run with, it had always been *our* friends, *our* social life. Now it was mine and hers and I didn't like the divide.

Nor could I do much about it. She couldn't run with the three of us. That was just fact, whether I liked it or not.

I smothered my guilt as I arrived at Joel's place and caught a whiff of steak and chips, Vince's Friday night staple. Joel let me in and ushered me into the kitchen where a bottle of beer was already waiting for me.

"We should really do something as a foursome next Friday," Joel said, echoing my earlier thoughts. "Maybe a film or something?"

"I'd love that. Shannon would too," I said, sniffing my beer. It was faintly redolent of bananas and I checked the label to see it was indeed banana bread flavored. Seemed utterly pointless to me, but Vince was a member of one of these ale clubs that sent you weird varieties every now and then. I'd been given chocolate beer last weekend. I hadn't been able to finish it. Some things just aren't meant to go together. Banana bread beer was strangely palatable though.

"How's she doing anyway?" Vince asked from by the oven. "Any new gossip on the Tina Brady case?"

"It's not about gossip," I told him tartly, "it's about finding her daughter. Shannon's working her fingers to the bone on it." I picked at the label on my bottle. "I think she's enjoying it, actually, as hard as it is. It's a complete change of direction for her."

Vince dropped a handful of chunky mushrooms into a frying pan sizzling with oil. "You know, we were talking about it the other night. Seems like not so long ago that you were taking off yourself, Ayla. I guess nothing changes."

I thought about that, thought too about the missing werewolf up in Yorkshire. I suppose the first reaction when a child—human or wolf—went missing, was to assume the worst. Pedophiles, drugs, rape. But it didn't have to be that sinister, did it? Maybe Molly had just run off to spend some quality time with a new boyfriend, maybe the Yorkshire kid had a blazing row with his parents and went off to teach them a lesson.

"It's a different world now though," Joel said, joining me at the table. "Alpha Humans didn't exist ten years ago. There weren't so many problems with gangs and knives."

Alpha Humans wasn't an angle Shannon had pursued yet. I hoped she wouldn't. Last time we'd encountered one of their groups, she'd ended up with two broken ribs. My wolf shuddered at the memory. To distract myself and my wolf, I changed the subject. "How's work, Vince? Oscar still giving you problems?"

Vince shook his head. "Greg finally lost his temper and sacked him. He's probably at home licking his wounded pride right now. Things have calmed down a bit since that."

"And you?" I asked Joel.

He grinned, popping open his own beer. "I just won a contract to design the new science department at the local secondary school." He raised his bottle to clink with mine. "Got the news today."

"That's fantastic!" I exclaimed. "Why aren't we having a proper celebration?"

"Because we're having it tomorrow," Joel said. "I've

booked a table at the Fleur de Lis—seven o' clock sharp. I assumed you and Shannon wouldn't have any plans."

"That was very presumptuous of you," I scolded lightly, "but as it happens, we don't. Of course we'd love to come! Who else is coming?"

"My folks and Vince's and Glory, once she's finished at Silks. She probably won't make it until later, but she'll do her best."

Joel's success dominated the conversation throughout the meal. He talked animatedly about his plans for the project, talking in architectural jargon that meant nothing to me—or Vince, judging from his vaguely baffled expression—but his passion was clear. As we cleared up after the rare steaks and homemade chips, our thoughts turned away from ceiling arches and support struts and to the run.

The skies had been clear all day, promising a frosty but snow-free night and I was itching to get out there and run. My skin felt too small and tight, my wolf desperate to burst out. But as Joel filled the dishwasher and Vince dropped our beer bottles in the recycling bin, I recalled the feral wolf and the youngster he'd been pushing around. I rubbed my shoulder absently. The wound had healed up quickly; I didn't even have a scar. I hadn't mentioned the encounter to anyone other than Shannon and I hadn't heard any news relating to it. No rumors about ferals in the city, no word of another young wolf going missing. So I'd dismissed it as a freak occurrence. Maybe it had been a feral who'd decided to rejoin society. I'd never heard of it happening, but surely it did?

With the night outside calling to the wolf inside, I tried once more to dismiss it, but the image kept coming back to me. The feral chasing off after the youngster, the untamed light in his amber eyes. I bit my lip, chewing on my ring.

"Come on, girlfriend." Vince said, slapping me on the shoulder. "The night awaits!"

We stripped in the garden and shifted fast. The cold was exhilarating, affecting my worried mind like a douse of icy water. I shook my head and huffed, looking around for Vince and Joel. Vince had already bounded over the fence into the park with a yip of excitement. Joel was crouched down next to me, head to the ground, hindquarters up in the air. His tail whipped back and forth, inviting me to play.

I dashed at him, feigning an attack before breaking off to circle round and grab his tail. We tussled, rolling around in the snow with mock growls and snaps, until Vince started barking at us on the other side of the fence, an edge of a whine in his tone. We were ignoring him. I broke away from Joel and leapt the fence. Joel joined us, immediately dashing to his mate to engage in more play fighting.

Larkspur Park wasn't the biggest park in the city, but it was my favorite. Most wolves tended to head for Moreland when they wanted a run, so the hunting was always good here. I put my nose to the ground, pushing through the light dusting of snow to search for deer. Their rich, gamey scent was faint here, so close to the houses, but deeper in the park it would get stronger. I wagged my tail, anticipating a chase. I wasn't out to kill or eat; not after the meal I'd just eaten, but a good hunt was its own reward sometimes. Shannon didn't get that. She thought it was immoral to terrify the poor deer by stalking them that way, which I didn't get. Surely killing one and not eating it would be worse?

A quick glance at Vince and Joel told me I wouldn't have any company on my run. They were tangled up in each other, a knot of gold and black fur and wagging tails. I huffed my disgust and trotted off, leaving them to it.

I quickly found my deer, a young buck, strong and healthy. He wouldn't suffer too much from a little game of chase, I decided. Shannon would approve. I picked up his scent and followed it into the clutch of shadowy trees ahead, my paws gliding silently over the snow. After a while, Vince and Joel's yips faded away and I was alone in the woods. Owls called to each other over my head and every now and then I heard a faint splash as some water creature went about its own nocturnal business. A chill wind ruffled my fur as I tracked the buck and despite my hot blood, I felt a pang for the heat of summer. The height of summer was the time of the other big festival in the werewolf calendar—the Green Wolf ceremony.

That one I truly loved and had observed even during my years as a lone wolf. I was already looking forward to celebrating it as part of the Pack again—and it was one Shannon could attend too.

My mind wandering, I didn't recognize the sound for what it was at first. I absently assumed it was a bird, maybe a cat crying. It took a few slow minutes for me to realize that yes, it was crying. Human crying. A child crying.

I forgot my buck and pricked up my ears to pinpoint the sound. There—off to the east, not too far from me. I picked up my pace, moving from a steady lope to a run, nerves on fire. Both my wolf and human instincts urged me on and in seconds I'd leapt a thicket of dead blackberry bushes to find myself in a small clearing.

Not alone. A girl was shivering in the shadow of a pine tree, curled in on herself in what had to be a fruitless attempt to stay warm. She stank of Pack and of fear and of another scent I couldn't place, but knew I knew. As a wolf, I only saw in shades of sepia and grey, so all I could really tell from here was that her hair was dark. I padded cautiously to her, her choked sobs tugging at my heart, and nudged her arm with my nose. She stiffened, her breathing fast and shallow, and she turned her head to me. Terror and desperation was etched on her thin features and I could almost taste the fight-or-flight conflict going on inside her. Not wanting to scare her any further, I backed away and sat down, contriving to look as harmless as I could.

It was clear she was in no condition to fight. She was only wearing a t-shirt and jeans and she was visibly, painfully scrawny. She was also battered and bruised, cut and scratched all over her face and arms. I'd no idea how long she'd been out here, but I did know that she couldn't stay any longer. I'd need help to get her to a doctor.

I tipped my head back to the iron-grey clouds and howled, a long, thin howl that would bring Vince and Joel running. If they weren't too busy shagging, that is.

After a few seconds I heard Vince's answering howl and relaxed a little. They were coming. The girl flinched and

moaned at the sound, turning her face away from me again. God, she was scared. I could taste it, metallic and hot on my tongue. Scared of me, another wolf? I was Pack—she ought to be relieved. Wasn't that the instinct that powered through us all, as undeniable as the moon's call? Pack was safety. Pack was home.

But her fear was a living thing, setting me on edge. I whined and decided maybe she'd feel better if I was human-shaped. Then I could at least talk to her, try to find out what she was doing out here. I stood and forced myself to change.

It was always harder to shift back to human then it was to shift into wolf. My body preferred wolf-shape and since my hunt had been abortive, my wolf-self felt cheated. She wanted to run and stalk, pounce and kill. She had no desire to change back yet. It was a desire so deeply rooted I had to fight, had to wrestle myself back into human form. After a few blistering minutes, I dropped to my hands and knees in the snow, panting for breath, sweat dripping down my body.

The girl never moved the whole time I was shifting, just lay there and cried, which made me feel weirdly guilty. I crept closer to her.

"Hey," I said, pitching my voice low and calm. "Hey, are you alright?"

She lifted her head to glance at me from under a matted mess of hair. Recognition flashed through me and I froze, shocked and disbelieving. "Molly? Molly Brady?"

She didn't answer, just dropped her head again. I shuffled closer, then hesitated. Should I try moving her? She might have internal injuries. If she had broken bones and I moved her, they might heal in the wrong position. I tried to dredge up anything useful I'd picked up over the years about first aid, but all that came to mind was the recovery position. I didn't think Molly was in danger of choking to death on her vomit, so I decided to leave her where she was until Vince and Joel arrived.

I could hear Vince howling, not too far away, and that shook me out of my stupor a little. Maybe Molly wasn't about to choke to death, but it was clear she was badly hurt and probably in shock. The best thing I could do was try to keep her conscious and aware, if I could.

"Molly, look at me. Can you look at me, Molly? My name's Ayla. I'm going to help you. My friends and I will get you to the hospital and everything will be fine, okay? Molly? Dammit, please say something. At least look at me." I sucked my lip ring into my mouth, panic threading through me when she failed to respond. I resisted the temptation to shake her, afraid of hurting her, and just kept up my stream of chatter. She twitched and whimpered every now and then, but that was all I could get out of her. My panic mounted by the second, the cold beginning to sink into my bones. If I was feeling it, she had to be. Hypothermia was just as serious for were-wolves as humans.

To my relief, Vince and Joel burst into the clearing a few minutes later. Vince had shifted back to his human body, but Joel was still in his wolf shape, gleaming gold in the moonlight. He bounded past Vince to Molly, snuffling loudly. The girl looked up sharply, suddenly alert, and met Joel's eyes. He huffed in her face. She screamed.

Joel jumped back from her with a bark of alarm and Vince rushed forward to grab his mate, dropping to his knees and slinging his arms round Joel's neck. Molly staggered to her feet, then collapsed into me as if unable to support herself. I caught her, slumping backwards under her weight and we hit the ground in a tangle of limbs. She clung to me, sobbing against my bare shoulder.

"Please, please," she gasped, digging her nails into me until I squirmed.

I craned my neck to look past her to Vince, who was still hanging onto a clearly baffled Joel. "Maybe he should shift back?" I suggested. It was obvious Joel had upset her, even if it wasn't obvious why. I didn't see the point in upsetting her further.

Vince stroked Joel's head and released him, stepping back. Joel let out a wolfy sigh and shifted back to human. I looked away, holding Molly awkwardly. She was trembling in my arms, refusing to look up and still mumbling nonsense at me. It always felt wrong to watch someone change back to human. They were vulnerable then, exposed to danger, and averting your gaze felt...polite. A way of showing the other wolf you meant no harm.

When Joel was human again, he sat down in the snow, knees pulled demurely up to his broad chest. "So what's going on?" he asked calmly, as if a strange, teenage wolf hadn't just shrieked in his face.

"I found her," I said. "We need to get her to the hospital."

Vince stepped forwards and crouched down next to us, reaching for Molly with gentle hands. "Hey kid," he said gently. "You wanna let go of Ayla and let us take a look at you?"

I was surprised when she responded, given her reaction to Joel. But Molly loosened her death grip on me and glanced up at Vince warily. He beamed at her. "There we go, let's see those pretty eyes," he crooned, sweeping her filthy hair away from her face. "Hello, gorgeous. Come here then."

With a sniffle, Molly peeled herself away from me and moved into Vince's open arms. He hugged her carefully, stroking her hair as he had Joel's. "Okay then," he said. "We should get you somewhere safe and warm, shouldn't we?"

I got to my feet, mentally running through everything we should do. *Call Shannon. Call Tina. Call the police. Call an ambulance...* But looking at Molly, battered and bloody and wrapped in Vince's embrace, I knew he was right. first thing we had to do was make her feel safe.

"Can you carry her?" I asked Vince. "We should take her back to yours."

He nodded and swung Molly up in his arms with ease. She didn't protest, just snuggled further into his embrace, eyes screwed closed. He headed back towards the house. Joel and I fell into step behind him.

"What's going on?" Joel asked again, whispering to me. "Who is she?"

"Molly Brady," I whispered back. "I just stumbled across her—God knows how long she's been out here, but she's in a bad state."

"That's the girl Shannon's been looking for? Shit, that's weird." He whistled. "We should call the police."

Even though I'd thought the same thing seconds ago, I shook my head. "Not yet. She might bolt again. Let's get her home and see how badly she's hurt first." Molly was a troubled teen, I reminded myself, already had a criminal record. I was pretty sure she'd disappear like a shot if the police showed up.

We trudged back to Vince and Joel's place in silence after that, feet crunching through ice and slush. I'd run further than I realized on my hunt and the walk home stretched out miserably, the night getting colder and colder, anxiety gnawing at me. When the warm lights of the estate emerged from the shadows, the sight sent a shiver of relief through me. I sped up, dragging Joel with me so we overtook Vince and Molly. Joel unlocked the back gate and the four of us were soon ensconced in the kitchen. Me and the boys dressed hurriedly, then Vince went to find a blanket for Molly.

She sat in sullen silence at the table, a big tartan blanket draped around her thin shoulders. Joel set a cup of hot chocolate before her and she stared into the creamy drink without seeing it. I glanced at Vince. She'd responded to him before, where she'd ignored me and screamed at Joel. Maybe if we left them alone, she'd talk?

"Joel, should we...um..." I waved my hands vaguely towards the door, then looked significantly at Molly.

"Oh. Yeah, I suppose. Vince, we'll be in the living room." Joel caught my hand and ushered me out of the kitchen, closing the door behind us. Then we both huddled against the wood, listening to Vince chatter to the young girl.

"So you don't like hot chocolate," he said brightly, as if all this was perfectly normal. "How about something stronger? Coffee?"

"Vodka?" Molly asked. Her voice was raspy, as if she hadn't used it for a while.

"Hmm, not sure I can stretch to vodka..." There were a few bangs and slams as Vince rifled through the cupboards. "How about a beer? Honey beer?" "Sounds gross."

"It is." A hiss as a bottle cap popped. "But it's alcoholic." Chairs scraping on tiles; Vince sitting back down. "Now," he said. "What's your name, pet?"

"Molly."

"And what were you doing out in the woods, Molly? Did someone hurt you?"

Joel and I both went still keen to hear her answer. For a few long seconds, she said nothing. I heard gulping as she swigged from her beer. Joel sighed in my ear, impatient. I nudged him, every ounce of my attention on the girl behind the door. When she spoke, Shannon's case would be cracked.

"I don't know," Molly said, crushing my hopes. "I don't remember anything."

And then she inhaled sharply and there was a thump and a crack. When I opened the door, Molly was slumped on the terracotta tiles, unconscious.

Seven

"BLOODY HELL, Vince, WHAT DID you give her?" Joel exclaimed, rushing to his mate's side as I dashed to Molly's.

Vince reached for the kitchen phone, alarm lighting his eyes. "Did she hit her head? Is she bleeding?" he asked as he punched in the emergency number.

I lifted Molly's head, checking for new wounds. "No, no blood," I said. "But she needs a doctor. God, we should have taken her straight to hospital. What was I thinking?" If Molly was permanently hurt or seriously injured, it would be my fault. I cradled her head in my lap, chewing my lip. "Can you call Shannon and tell her?" I asked Vince once he'd called for an ambulance. "She ought to know—she needs to tell Tina, too."

He nodded and dialed again. I bent over Molly, pressing my fingers to her throat. Her pulse was strong, but her skin was icy and pale. It sent a frisson of fear through me, stirring the wolf's protective instincts. I pulled the girl into a hug, pressing my cheek to hers as if I could force my body heat into her. She smelled of mud and blood and that unfamiliar-familiar smell I'd noticed when I first found her. It reminded me of... Lawrence. Floral and bitter at the same time.

Silver Kiss. God, that stuff was everywhere. I closed my eyes, trying to think it through. I wanted to be a police officer; this was my chance to try it out. Molly starts smoking Silver Kiss. Disappears. Then shows up beaten black and blue. Oscar starts smoking it and develops wild mood swings. There had to be a link somewhere, didn't there? I just couldn't see it.

Especially when Lawrence hadn't changed at all since he started smoking it.

I growled softly, frustrated. It was like trying to do bloody Sudoku: I knew the numbers had to go in the grid, I just couldn't see where they went. I needed Shannon for this stuff.

"Shannon's on her way," Vince said, as if he'd read my mind. He squatted down beside me. "How is she?"

"Cold," I said and Vince huddled close to us so he could embrace us both, adding his warmth to mine. I gave him a nervy, affectionate smile. "You lanky git."

Joel got round on my other side to join in, the same Pack need to protect and nourish sparking in him. The three of us clung to Molly desperately; willing her to be okay, regain consciousness. I don't know how long we sat there, but eventually I heard sirens wailing in the distance, cutting through the unsettling quiet that had cocooned us. Seconds later, a car screeched to a halt outside the house and I heard Shannon calling my name, hammering on the front door.

Squashed as I was in a Vince-Joel sandwich, I couldn't get up to answer. Instead, Joel detached himself from our group hug to go. When I next looked up, the kitchen was swarming with paramedics. I relinquished my hold on Molly and stood, looking for Shannon through the knot of people while they fired questions at Vince. How long had Molly been unconscious? Had she taken anything? Where did we find her?

"Ayla!" Shannon elbowed aside a paramedic who was bringing a stretched into the room. "What happened?"

I caught her hands, suddenly numb all over. "I found her in the woods. I think she might be really hurt."

"Move aside!" one of the paramedics barked. "Don't crowd her."

That numb feeling intensified as I watched them lift Molly onto the stretcher and attach an oxygen mask to her face. God, why didn't we take her straight to hospital? How much more damage had we done her by wasting time bringing her back here? And Vince had given her beer, for God's sake!

"Ayla?" Shannon cupped my cheek, blue eyes brimming

with worry. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I just... I'm scared for her." I nodded to Molly. They were taking her out now and she looked so fragile and young and suddenly I was thinking of Adam again. He hadn't been much older than her.

Shannon turned my head, forcing me to look back at her. "Stop it. She's not going to die, you know," she said firmly, as if she'd read my mind.

I swallowed and nodded. "I know. I know."

"Right. So let's get to hospital so we can find out where she's been." She took my hand and glanced back at Vince and Joel. "You two coming?"

They both nodded and the four of us headed outside. The ambulance was pulling away in a blur of red lights. I pushed thoughts of Adam away and got into Shannon's car.

* * *

The City and General Hospital was quiet for a Friday night. I'd expected A&E to be overflowing with drunks, girls who'd fallen off their stupidly high heels, boys who'd got into fights over perceived insults; the kind of misfits you see on TV. The very thought had upset my wolf, making me feel itchy and claustrophobic before we'd even got there. But the hospital was surprisingly peaceful. Nurses glided silently through the corridors, machines beeped softly. It all felt so surreal, dreamlike.

I held Shannon's hand as we hurried after Molly's stretcher. A doctor fell into step next to me, looking bone-weary and ancient despite his baby-face features. His dark hair stuck up in all directions and his face was sheened with sweat, making me realize how deceptive the calm aura of the place was.

"You found her, I understand?" he asked me briskly, eyes on Molly's still body.

I nodded. "Out in the woods."

"You should have brought her straight to us. You wolves think you're bloody invincible." He shook his head and I wanted to jump in and defend myself, but I agreed with him so I kept silent. "I'm guessing hypothermia, shock and maybe internal injuries," he continued, no longer really talking to me. "We'll get her in for X-rays. Do we have a next of kin?"

"I've called her mum," Shannon volunteered. The doctor glanced at her, first in surprise and then with an appreciative second glance that got my hackles up. "I'm Shannon Ryan. I was investigating Molly's disappearance. I called Tina Brady as soon as I knew Molly had been found," Shannon added.

The doctor nodded approvingly and slowed enough to fall into step with us as the paramedics up ahead disappeared into a lift with Molly. "I'm Doctor Palmer." He offered a hand to Shannon.

I intercepted, gripping his hand first and squeezing just a little. "Ayla Hammond," I introduced myself tightly. "Shouldn't we call the police as well? She's been beaten up."

Palmer nodded. "Been done. They should be here to take a statement from you within the hour. And the other two..." He craned his neck looking for Vince and Joel. They'd fallen back when we first arrived. Palmer beckoned them over now. Joel looked pale and queasy and Vince was rubbing his back with big, slow movements. I looked them over, pursing my lips.

"You okay?" I asked Joel.

"Fine," he lied. I glanced at Vince.

"Joel's got this thing..." He glanced at his partner, who looked away, suddenly flushing red. "He's got this problem..."

"It's a phobia," Joel said indignantly.

"Of hospitals?" Shannon asked.

"Blood," Joel corrected.

I stared at him, sure I'd misheard. "But you're a werewolf. How can you be afraid of blood?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Shouldn't we be focusing on Molly?"

"But how can you be afraid of blood?" I repeated. "I've seen you hunting—I've seen you kill plenty of rabbits and there was blood all over the place—"

Joel turned away from me, swallowing hard. Vince scowled and made a *zip-up* gesture at me. Palmer cleared his throat.

"I was just explaining that the police will probably want statements from the pair of you."

"Of course. We're happy to talk to them," Vince assured Palmer.

Palmer nodded and told us to wait in the A&E waiting room. He hurried off to X-ray. I exhaled in relief when he disappeared from sight. He'd been standing far too close to Shannon for my wolf's liking. I snuck a glance at Joel. He still looked ready to vomit. I shook my head. A wolf with a blood phobia, I couldn't help but smile.

The seats were orange plastic, scuffed and scratched and suspiciously stained. I got as comfortable as I could and stared out the glass doors, waiting for either Tina or the police to arrive. Vince and Joel went off in search of coffee and Shannon checked her phone every ten seconds. The click of her opening and closing the clamshell handset began to grate on me, my wolf roused again.

"Give that a rest," I said, closing my hand over hers to stop her popping the phone open again. "It's getting on my nerves."

"Sorry." Shannon dropped the phone in her bag. "I'm just surprised Tina isn't here yet."

The doors slid open on cue, Tina rushing in, a whirl of knotted hair and bleeding mascara. "Shannon!" she shrieked. "Where is she?"

Shannon rose to greet her, catching her as Tina collapsed sobbing into her arms. "Tina—"

"Is she okay? Is she hurt? Oh God, I need to see her. I'll wring her neck. Is she okay?" she babbled. She stared at Shannon, eyes shining with tears and a touch of wolf. It was weird, seeing that amber glow to her human eyes, as if her wolf was peeking out from behind her. Tina being outcast, I'd found it hard to think of her as a real werewolf to begin with.

Except she was a wolf and she was terrified for her child, her baby. And her pain tugged at me and my wolf, woke up that deeply-ingrained Pack compulsion to protect our own, outcast or not. But once again, I didn't know what to do, what to say to comfort her.

"Tina, stop," Shannon said, sitting her down. "They're taking care of Molly and I'm sure they'll let you see her as soon as they can."

Tina sniffled into her sleeve. "I blame myself," she said. "All this mess...if me and her dad were still together..."

"This isn't your fault," I said, sitting down next to her and draping my arm round her shoulder. "You can't think like that."

"Ayla's right." Shannon took the seat on the other side. "Molly needs your strength right now, so you have to be strong, okay?"

Tina nodded, eyes closed. "She will be okay, won't she?" she whispered.

"Of course she will," I said, trying not to think of how cold and still Molly had been. "She's home now."

* * *

The police statements were quick and simple. I recited the story as plainly as I could. Dwelling too much on the details hurt and I just wanted it all over and done with. Tina had to speak to them too, recapping for them how Molly had run off, how it wasn't the first time.

"They know all this," she muttered when they were done. "I told them everything when she first ran off and they didn't do a fucking thing then."

They'd done the interviews in the hospital staff room on the second floor of the sprawling complex. I'd followed the officers up there blindly and now I was sure I'd never find my way back to the exit. Everywhere looked the same, one mint-green corridor after the other, walls lined with abstract art in pastel colors. It felt depressing now, rather than soothing.

I linked arms with Tina. "Let's go find Molly," I suggested. "There must be someone up here who knows where she is."

Her daughter's name drove away Tina's anger. She bit her lip, eyes glowing again. "God yes. I need to see her."

"Ayla." Vince caught my arm, pulling me aside. "Me and Joel are heading home. You don't mind, do you?" His gaze

flicked back to Joel, who was staring fixedly at the floor.

"Sure." I patted Vince's arm. "Is Joel okay?"

Vince leaned in to whisper, despite the fact Joel was well within hearing range. "It's the green walls. Green and red are color opposites, so...you know."

"Okay..." I was none the wiser, but I shrugged it off and patted his hand. "Thanks for everything tonight."

"Yes." Tina slipped in between us, grasping his hand. "Thank you. Thank you for saving my Molly." She had to crane her neck to meet his eyes and the gratitude in her expression made him flush and mumble.

"I didn't do much...Ayla found her."

"But you carried her home," Tina countered. "I know the word of an outcast doesn't mean much, but I won't forget that."

He mumbled again that it was nothing, cheeks bright red as he headed off. Tina took my arm again. I was a little surprised that she was clinging to me and not Shannon, but maybe it made sense, thinking about it. I was Pack and that would always mean something.

We headed down the corridor, looking for a sign to point us in the right direction. Shannon walked beside me. "How can a werewolf have a blood phobia?" she asked me.

"Beats me." I mulled the idea over. "He always has his meat well-done though, now I think about it. Maybe he's only phobic in human form?"

"It just seems so weird. It's like a bird being afraid of heights or something."

"Bloody posh kids," Tina snorted. "His parents probably raised him on veggie burgers and lentils."

After a few minutes of aimless wandering that set my wolf on edge, feeling trapped and lost, we stumbled upon a sign pointing the way to X-ray. It seemed like the best place to start. On the way we bumped into Palmer, who was ever so happy to help Shannon and take us to Molly. I ground my teeth, repressing the urge to snarl at him and warn him off. My big bad wolf routine would be out of place here.

Molly, being a werewolf, had warranted a room all to

herself. An injured wolf was a potential danger to staff and other patients, especially when they first regained consciousness so all modern hospitals were equipped to deal with that. Every ward had a *wolf room* fitted with reinforced steel doors and bars on the windows. Every bed came with metal restraints—always a last option, but there nonetheless. Access was restricted to doctors only—no nurses, no cleaning staff. A werewolf doctor was always the first choice, so that Pack would be the first thing the injured wolf would smell on waking.

"Sadly, the wolf due on shift tonight called in sick," Palmer explained as he unlocked Molly's door. "I'm sure Molly won't cause any problems though, now you're here," he added to Tina. "We've confirmed there are no internal injuries and most of the cuts should be healed by morning." He pushed the door back to reveal the girl, tucked up under those stiff, off-white hospital sheets. Her dark hair was a sharp contrast to her chalky skin and there was a drip feeding into her arm, a sickly yellow liquid flowing through it.

"What's that?" Tina asked, hovering in the doorway like she was afraid to get too close. "Drugs?"

"A vitamin drip," Palmer said. "She's dreadfully malnourished."

That was the trigger that sent Tina scurrying to her daughter's side, crying freely again. "Oh God, my baby, my baby. What happened to you?"

"Shouldn't she have woken up by now?" I asked Palmer. "She hasn't...there are no head injuries, right?"

"She's exhausted. Natural sleep is one of the best cures for cases like this," Palmer replied. "She needs rest and TLC first and foremost. And of course, sleep will give her body time to heal."

"She said she couldn't remember anything," I persisted. "When we asked her where she'd been, she said she couldn't remember anything. Doesn't that mean she might have a concussion or something?"

"Shock," he said. "I'm certain there's nothing wrong with her that proper care won't fix."

Tina knelt by the bed, stroking Molly's face. "She'll get it,"

she vowed, eyes raking the mottled bruises marring Molly's face. "I'm not letting her out of my sight."

"Once she feels better, we'll talk again," Shannon said. "Try and find out what happened. It's obvious she was beaten—the police will pay attention now, Tina. Assault on a minor is serious."

Tina nodded but it was clear she wasn't really listening. Every fiber of her being was focused on Molly. Shannon and I exchanged looks and backed out of the room. We weren't needed right now. Palmer pulled the door to and addressed us in a low voice.

"I understand from Molly's records that she and Ms Brady are outcasts. Could this have been some kind of werewolf feud?"

I bristled at the implication. "Werewolves don't attack little girls, Doctor Palmer. This isn't the bloody Middle Ages."

He held up his hands in a pacifying gesture that just riled me more. "I don't mean any offence, but I have to ask. Adolescent werewolves are pretty tough, so for her to sustain this level of injury suggests to me that someone even tougher dealt it out. And that most likely means another werewolf."

"Or Alpha Humans," I said, thinking of Adam once more. "A group of humans with a baseball bat each could easily do this to her."

"They don't usually starve their victims first though," he said. "I'm not saying it's not a possibility—of course it is—but it's not the only possibility."

"No way would an adult wolf hurt a cub," I said flatly. "It's just unheard of."

"Which isn't to say it doesn't happen."

I opened my mouth to fire off an angry retort, but Shannon cut me short. "It's a matter for the police, not us." She squeezed my arm, a warning to behave, and smiled sweetly at Palmer, which didn't make me feel better. "We should go. There's nothing else we can do here."

I let her lead me away like a good dog, fuming inwardly. I wasn't really sure who I was so angry with—Palmer or Molly's unknown assailant. Either way, the urge to hunt was

suddenly strong within me again, my wolf clawing at the walls of mind like a caged beast desperate for release.

I swallowed the urge, calmed the wolf. Being a wolf wouldn't solve anything tonight. I needed to be human for that.

Sight

"So what's next?" I asked Shannon once we were home. It was after midnight and all I really wanted to do was curl up in bed with her and sleep off the adrenaline rush the night had sparked in me. But my mind was on overdrive, refusing to calm down.

Shannon stretched out on the bed, brushing her hair from her eyes with a sigh. "Nothing," she said. "Molly's been found. Case closed." She didn't sound happy.

I lay down next to her, kicking off my boots with a thud. "But—"

"Molly's home. I think that means my services are surplus to requirements."

"Oh." I rolled onto my back to stare at the ceiling. The paint needed retouching, I noticed distractedly. Thin cracks were snaking out from the light fitting. I gave myself a mental shake. "Tina will pay you though, won't she? Even if you didn't find her?"

"She'll pay me for my time, but it won't be very much because she doesn't have much. Back to insurance fraud for me, I think."

"I'm sorry." I shifted onto my side so I could look at her. She was staring at the ceiling now, probably counting the cracks too. Her lovely lips were drawn tight and thin, her eyes dark. "We should have called you straight away."

She closed her eyes. "It doesn't matter. The important thing is that Molly's safe."

"Yeah, but she's not, is she? She's lying in hospital, starved and battered."

"It's a police matter now," she said, sounding a little less sure than she had at the hospital.

I nestled closer to her, nuzzling her cheek. "My money's on Alpha Humans. I don't see who else it could be."

"It could have been anyone." Shannon turned her head to look at me, tracing her fingertips down my cheek and over my lips. "I think Palmer's right about that—you can't rule anything out."

Her touch sent a bolt of desire through me, but it was overridden by the indignation her words caused. "No werewolf would hurt a child like that. Ever. It just wouldn't happen."

"Why not?" she asked reasonably, still stroking my face tenderly. "Look how the Pack treated Tina—hell, look how they treated you for being a lesbian."

"It's different." I said, sitting up. "There's a whole world of difference between making someone outcast and kicking the shit out of a fourteen-year-old girl."

"I know that, Ayla." Shannon sat up too, putting on her best patient, soothing tone. It always worked wonders on her clients, but right now it just aggravated me. "But it's all part of the same mentality, isn't it? "Do as we say, not do as we do." That's Pack all over."

"That's bollocks!" I cried. "We look after our own."

"Obviously not, when a woman and a young child are ostracized the way Tina and Molly were," she said, the patience slipping a little. She tossed her hair from her face, frowning at me. "I'm not criticizing you, Ayla. I'm not badmouthing your family. I'm just saying Pack life isn't all sunshine and roses, is it? Are you really saying it's absolutely impossible that another wolf didn't beat up Molly? That there are no circumstances in which it could happen?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," I snapped, although a worm of doubt crept through me. I remembered Oscar screaming at Vince, threatening Mel. I could easily see him, in that state, physically following through on his threats.

I growled and leapt up, unable to sit still anymore. I paced our tiny bedroom, the wolf stirred by my stormy mood. I wanted to rip and bite, exorcise my prickly anger. "It has to be Alpha Humans," I said finally. "They've got a motive, this is what they do! They hate us—look at what they did to Adam."

"Baby, this isn't about Adam." Shannon rose to embrace me, stroking my hair. "It's nothing to do with him and, really, it's nothing to do with us anymore. The police will take care of it from here."

I couldn't respond to her touch and eased out of her arms, wincing at the hurt on her face. I hated going to bed angry with her. When we'd first been together I'd always been the childish one, running off whenever we had a fight, then crawling back later with my tail between my legs to apologize. Almost six years on, I was better at not running off. I just wasn't any better at controlling my temper. "You didn't find her, Shannon. You didn't see her—didn't see how scared she was when she first saw me. She shrieked when she saw Joel. Scared of her own kind." I shook my head. "Someone must really have done a number on her to mess her up like that."

"Scared of her own kind," Shannon echoed. "Well, that's pretty strong evidence that another wolf was involved, isn't it?"

I whipped round to glower at her. "Will you stop-"

She raised her hand. "Why would she be scared of another wolf if no wolves had ever hurt her?"

Her calm, school-teacher manner was infuriating. "It's not your case anymore, remember?"

"And it was never yours to begin with," she countered, folding her arms and staring me down.

I dug my nails into my palms until I drew blood. The sharp pain and warm flow called my wolf and I snarled, baring my teeth at Shannon. "She's Pack. It matters."

"She's not Pack because the Pack kicked her and her mum out."

"No, they just kicked her mum out," I corrected. "Molly is still one of us."

Shannon sighed and shook her head. "I hate it when you're like this. Let's just go to bed and talk in the morning, okay?"

"Like what?" I challenged, barely hearing her. "When I'm like what?"

"Stubborn. Werewolfy." She began stripping off, keeping her back to me as she peeled off her top. "Bitchy." She glanced at me over her shoulder, a deliberately coy look, all pouting lips and creamy skin. "Drop it and come to bed." She was trying to distract my wolf with sex.

And it was working. My anger cooled a little at the sight of her naked back and slender hips, the dusky rose satin of her bra. I wet my lips, not sure if I was ready to stop being angry. "I'm not bitchy."

"You are." She unzipped her jeans and did a little shimmy for me as she slid them off. "You're being bitchy because I insulted your precious Pack. The Pack you took off from because they were so close-minded and intolerant, remember?"

Her tone was light, teasing. Soothing the savage beast, I thought with a flicker of annoyance. But it worked every time, damn her. My wolf responded to her even when I wanted to stay mad and argue some more.

Grudgingly, I shucked off my own clothes and rolled under the duvet, determined not to let her have it all her own way. She was going to have to work for it.

Shannon slid in beside me, pressing her naked body to mine with a little wriggle. "Look at me," she coaxed, slipping her arms around me. "We're not going to fall out over this, are we?"

I turned, keeping my sulky mask in place while internally my wolf wagged her tail. "Depends..."

She tugged gently at my lip ring. "Bad dog. No brooding in bed, remember?"

That slight tug sent a shiver through me, as if she'd touched me far more intimately and a little more of my anger dripped away. "You're not playing fair. Why can't I just be angry?" I complained.

"Ayla, you don't even know what you're angry about." She traced the shape of my lips with her fingertips. "You just get yourself all worked up and forget why you started." She kissed me chastely, sending butterflies fluttering through me. "Your eyes have gone all wolfy," she murmured.

My vision shifted, changing the world to sepia hues.

Shannon's blonde hair turned to dark honey, her blue eyes fading to a whitish-yellow. My wolf prowled through me, eager to claim her mate and I gave in. Shannon was right; I didn't really know what I was mad about. Molly was home and safe—surely that was the most important thing?

That and Shannon's hands trailing lazy paths down my body, pooling wet heat between my thighs. I growled again, aroused this time, and took her mouth with a deep kiss. She snuggled closer to me, fingers slipping down between my legs. I closed my wolfy eyes, feeling those butterflies grow bigger as she teased and toyed with me. I wanted to roll her over and take her, no games, no waiting. My anger burned away in the heat of my sudden desire. I writhed and moaned as Shannon whipped me into a frenzy with her clever fingers and sweet lips.

A breathless, rushing sensation built in me as she raked her nails over the soft skin of my inner thighs. My eyes snapped open and the world flashed in and out of color as wolf and woman battled for domination. It was like seeing stars. When she flicked her tongue over my clit and slid her fingers inside me, I let the wolf win, letting out a howl of pleasure. I knotted my fingers in her hair and pulled her up roughly to capture her lips again. The usual restraint I treated her with slipped away a little as I used my superior strength to flip her onto her back, exposing her perfect breasts. I bit down on one of her nipples hard enough to draw a cry from her and that pulled me back a little. The world flashed back to color as the woman pushed away the wolf.

"Did I hurt you?" I whispered, nuzzling her cheek.

She responded with a hot, fast kiss. "Never."

It was all the encouragement I needed. We didn't go to bed angry.

* * *

Back in the early nineties, a few human writers really latched onto the idea of werewolves and novels began flooding the bookshops. You know the type: wolves as angst-ridden, romantic heroes pining for their *one true love*; wolves fighting demons and vampires to save the world. I'd always liked those. I'd been secretly disappointed when I realized demons and vampires probably didn't really exist. The writers always had a skewed notion of the Pack structure in their books, depicting it as an almost feudal system with one alpha dominating at the top while everyone else scrambled for position underneath.

The reality was different, of course. Maybe back in the days of witch-hunts and Inquisitions we'd lived like that. But in the days of democracy and equal rights, *alpha* was an honorary title. Our alphas were older, respected wolves; pillars of society rather than benevolent dictators. They were the kind of men and women you see in the same corner of the same pub every night of the week, telling the same stories about how things were different in their day.

You didn't expect to find them on your doorstep at eight o' clock on a Saturday morning, which is where I found Eddie Hughes the next day.

Shannon and I had risen early, spending some time making sure I really wasn't mad anymore. Then, hungry from all the exertion, I'd come downstairs to make a fry-up. It was my day off and I intended to indulge myself. I was halfway through poaching myself an egg when the doorbell rang.

I smelled Eddie before I opened the door. He was a smoker and the acrid scent of tobacco wafted through the thin wood. I wrinkled my nose as I peered round the door. I was dressed in an oversized Muse t-shirt that barely covered my thighs. Despite the notoriously casual werewolf approach to modesty, I just didn't feel comfortable half-naked in front of an alpha.

"Eddie," I greeted him. "This is...nice." I hadn't seen him since Lupercali, hadn't expected to see him again until the next one.

"Morning, Ayla. Sorry to disturb you so early. Can I come in?" he asked. "I smell bacon." He smiled, his weathered face crinkling. You couldn't say no to a face like that. five minutes later Eddie was tucking into my fry-up while I stood at the

stove pretending I didn't mind starting my breakfast all over again.

"Heard about Molly Brady," Eddie said around a mouthful of bacon. "Bad business, that."

"Yeah." I hid my surprise at how quickly the news had spread. One of the doctors had probably called the alphas as soon as Molly came in. Tina would love that. "Poor kid, she was really in a mess."

"You found her, I understand?"

I nodded, glancing at him over my shoulder. His salt and pepper hair gleamed in the light of the sun peeking through the kitchen blinds. His eyes were fixed on me as he poked at his food, dark and intent. I suddenly felt nervous. Had I done something wrong, helping an outcast's child? "Yes," I said aloud. "Out in Larkspur Park."

He shook his head, said nothing, which only intensified my irrational feeling of guilt. Finally Eddie sighed and set down his knife and fork. "I spoke to the doctor in charge of Molly first thing this morning and he told me there were large quantities of drugs in her system. Specifically traces of aconite."

I regarded him blankly. My experiences with drugs were limited to headache pills and evening primrose capsules. If I was supposed to know what aconite was, I'd failed. "Oh?" I said politely.

"It's turning into a real problem, this Silver Kiss junk," he continued, oblivious to my ignorance. "I've been saying it for months, this rubbish is going to lead to trouble, and now this happens." He tucked into his food again. "I know everyone thinks we alphas are old-fashioned and out of touch, but I keep an eye on what's happening in this city. Molly won't be the only wolf who ends up this way. Addiction! It's a killer."

I flipped my egg and watched the white spit and sizzle at me. Of course I agreed that what happened to Molly was awful, but I didn't see why Eddie felt the need to come and talk to me about it.

"I understand your partner was working with Tina Brady to find Molly?" Eddie asked. I tensed. Was Shannon in trouble? "Tina hired Shannon—she's a private investigator—because she thought the police weren't doing enough," I confirmed. "That's not a problem, is it?" I added, an arch note creeping into my voice.

"No," Eddie assured me. "No, no, of course not. But I'd like to talk to Shannon and see what she found out. We're all concerned about the growing popularity of this drug and if Shannon has any information on dealers or whatever, it'd be very useful to us."

"Oh." I must have looked visibly relieved because Eddie chuckled and shook his head at me.

"Don't look so worried, Ayla! We're not going to hold Tina's mistakes against her child. Molly's still a member of the Pack."

Shannon joined us then, poking her head round the kitchen door to crinkle her nose at me. "I smell breakfast." She smiled at me expectantly. I rolled my eyes and started dishing up. Then Shannon noticed Eddie. "Oh, sorry. Is this a Pack thing?"

"Not at all." Eddie stood to shake her hand. "Eddie Hughes. You must be Shannon. I was hoping to meet you."

She sat at the table, pursing her lips. "Can I help you with something, Mr Hughes?"

I set a plate down in front of her and set about pouring myself a bowl of cereal. "Eddie wants to ask about Molly," I told her.

"Oh, well. Obviously all my cases are strictly confidential," Shannon said. "I can't reveal anything without discussing it with a client first."

"Of course, I understand that," Eddie said. "I'm sure in this case Ms Brady would be happy for you to talk with me." He explained briefly about the drugs in Molly's system and the growing trend amongst younger wolves for Silver Kiss. Shannon ate while he spoke, but her mind clearly wasn't on the food, which only annoyed me more as I tucked halfheartedly into my cereal.

"Marc Wright did say Molly was a habitual cannabis user," Shannon mused. "From what he said, she'd moved onto

something else before she went missing."

"Silver Kiss," Eddie said. "Has to be."

"It's just herbal stuff though, isn't it?" I interrupted. "One of my workmates smokes it all the time and he says it just chills him out."

"It's the aconite," Eddie replied, like it should be obvious. "The regular stuff is fine, but some idiot's cutting it with aconite before selling it to wolves." When I looked blankly at him, he sighed. "Monkshood, Ayla. Look it up."

I scowled at him over a spoonful of corn flakes. Alright, so I wasn't up on my herbs and spices. Screw him.

"Well, obviously it's tragic that Molly's drug habit lead her to this," Shannon said, best professional voice on, "but I don't see what I can do. I can't tell you anything except that her boyfriend thought she was smoking something other than weed." She shrugged. "It's not exactly helpful."

"The Pack is looking into the matter, of course," Eddie said. "Aconite is both addictive and dangerous for wolves. We want this stuff controlled—banned, ideally. The problem is, because it's a street legal herbal substance, there are no laws against selling or carrying Silver Kiss at the moment. And that means people can buy it, cut it with aconite and sell it on."

"So you need to build a case for banning its sale to wolves," Shannon surmised. Eddie nodded.

"Any information you can give us that might help would be invaluable, Shannon. Someone is dealing to kids like Molly and we want them protected."

"Molly would have been protected if her mother wasn't outcast," Shannon said. I bit the inside of my cheek, marveling at how cool she sounded. "She might never have run away in the first place if she lived in the kind of loving, secure environment the Pack is supposed to provide."

Eddie bristled. In wolf form, his hackles would have been up. I tensed, ready to leap to Shannon's defense either verbally or physically if need be. Then Eddie forced a smile. "Perhaps, but she'd still have been smoking Silver Kiss."

"Have you spoken to Greg Maxwell?" I asked, more to take his attention off Shannon than anything else. "His son, Oscar, is hooked on the stuff. Maybe you can find out who his dealer is."

Eddie nodded. "That's something we'd ask you to look into," he told Shannon. "If you agreed to work for us."

She stared at him, forkful of mushrooms halfway to her mouth. "You want to hire me?"

"We'd pay generously," he said hurriedly. "We can discuss a rate—"

She waved her fork at him, cutting him off. "I'm sure we can, but let me get this straight first. You want me to start chasing down drug dealers? Is that right? Drug dealers whose main clients are young werewolves."

"That's the gist of it."

"No," I said immediately. They both glared at me. "No way. Shannon, you can't. Drug dealers! You absolutely can't."

She frowned at me. "I'll decide that, thank you."

"Shannon! Drug dealers! Werewolf drug dealers!" I slammed my fist on the table, making her jump. "You can't!"

"We wouldn't send you out alone," Eddie said. "Shannon would be working with one of the Pack."

I bit back the snarl that rose in me at the thought of another wolf messing with my mate. "Who?" I demanded.

"Moira Clayton," he said. The name meant nothing to me, which didn't make me feel any better.

"Private investigator?" Shannon asked.

"Retired police officer," Eddie corrected. "She worked in Narcotics at Scotland Yard. Moved down here after she retired. She's pretty much an alpha now. Very well respected."

Shannon's face brightened and they fell into an animated chat about the mysterious Moira Clayton, who I already hated. I fidgeted; certain Shannon would take the case and hating that too. Looking for a missing cub was one thing, but tracking down werewolf drug dealers was ridiculous. You couldn't ask a human to do that! And why did the Pack even need Shannon if they had Moira bloody Clayton at hand?

"...ferals in the city."

I tuned back into the conversation on hearing Shannon's words, "What?"

"I was saying," she said patiently, "how you saw that feral. We were wondering if it's anything to do with the drug dealing."

"You should have told us earlier," Eddie reprimanded me.

I opened my mouth to defend myself, then shut it. Sometimes you just know you're not going to win. "Yeah, I suppose," I muttered.

They stood, shaking hands. "I'll be in touch," Shannon told Eddie. "I'd like to meet Ms Clayton as soon as possible."

"Of course," he said. "Good to meet you, Shannon. Thanks for breakfast, Ayla. I'll see myself out."

As soon as the door slammed, I turned on Shannon. "You can't do this. It's too dangerous!"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Ayla. I can't afford to turn down a case right now."

"You could be hurt! Killed!" A thousand episodes of Real Crimes whirled through my head. People beaten, maimed, murdered for messing with drug dealers.

"We're not talking crack cocaine and heroin. This is small-time drug dealing, probably kids," she said dismissively. "And I'm not going to be snooping around crack dens looking for meth heads. For God's sake, Ayla, don't overreact. I'll be asking a few stoned teenagers where they get their Silver Kiss and giving the names to the Pack. And I'll have an ex-copper with me. What could go wrong?"

Once again I had that sense of fighting a losing battle. "I want to meet this ex-copper first," I grumbled. "Make sure she knows what she's doing."

Shannon sighed and began cleaning up the remains of breakfast. I looked wistfully at the cold black pudding she was scraping into the bin. If Eddie was going to come and steal my breakfast and my girlfriend, the least he could have done was enjoy my cooking.

Mine

I SPENT MOST OF THE morning feeling utterly useless and utterly pissed off in turn. Shannon had disappeared to the bedroom with her laptop to pull together her notes on Molly Brady's case ahead of meeting Moira Clayton. I had a free day and too much energy to burn through. I couldn't settle on anything but I didn't feel like going for a run, so I stalked around the house, anxious and itchy, until midday when I scoffed a ham sandwich just for something to do.

I switched on our ancient PC and connected to the Internet while I ate. A quick search on aconite left me far better informed, not to mention more worried, than I had been when Eddie first mentioned it. My appetite had vanished by the time I was done.

Aconitum napellus, also known as monkshood and wolfsbane, was a heart and circulatory stimulant. It was also highly toxic and, based on what I knew about Silver Kiss, incredibly addictive. I remembered that stupid Wolfman movie from the sixties, Lon Chaney Jnr's cringe-worthy portrayal of a pathetic cursed werewolf. What was that poem? Something about wolfsbane blooming and saying your prayers?

I slumped in my chair, trying to clear my head and think it all through. Okay. So regular Silver Kiss was fine. Just herbs, as Lawrence had told me. But someone was buying it, cutting it with this poisonous crap and selling it on to wolves.

Why? And where did it tie in with Molly's case? Had she fallen out with her dealer? Owed them money or something?

Shannon had probably thought of all this already. I chewed my thumbnail and pondered. Where did the feral wolf

come in? Guilt stabbed me as Eddie's words echoed in my head. I should have told someone. What if something had happened to the cub I'd seen that night? I'd never even tried to find out who he was. Paranoia rode hard on the heels of my guilt. I grabbed my phone and called Vince.

"Hey, girlfriend," he greeted me. "You and Shannon set for tonight? I think it'll be just what we need after last night's drama."

"Tonight?" I repeated, mind blank. Oh God, Joel's big celebratory meal. "Yeah, yeah, we're raring to go." I hadn't even mentioned it to Shannon yet. "Listen, Vince, have you heard of any Pack kids getting into trouble recently? Running off, getting into fights, anything like that?"

"You mean beside Oscar and his cronies?" Vince snorted. "Potheads."

I avoided mentioning what Eddie had told me; not knowing if he would want me sharing our conversation.

"No, I mean... I ran into a feral a few nights ago and he was fighting a Pack kid. I don't know who the kid was, but—"

"A feral? In the city?" Vince sounded doubtful. "I haven't heard anything."

His words soothed my guilt. Working in a pub as he did, Vince picked up most Pack gossip sooner or later. If another teenager had gone missing or been hurt, word would have spread fast. I could only assume the wolf I'd seen that night was safe and well. Some of the tension knotting my stomach eased.

We chatted a bit more, made plans for that night and said our goodbyes. I switched off the computer and went upstairs to disturb Shannon.

She looked up from her laptop with a smile and patted the bed. "Recovered from your hissy fit?" she asked me.

I rested my head on her shoulder. "Yes, but I still don't want you doing this." I told her what I'd found out about aconite. She typed as I spoke, adding my findings to her notes.

"I need to call Tina and make sure she's happy to share Molly's case with the Pack. It might be useful to speak to Marc Wright again, get some leads on local dealers," she said. "And I'll need to speak to Molly, once she's well enough and find out exactly what happened."

"She told us she didn't remember anything."

"Shock. Once she's recovered, her memories will come back," Shannon said confidently. "Of course, she'll have to talk to the police first. I can't wait until you're on the force, Ayla. It'll make it so much easier to get inside info."

"I'm going to be a special constable," I reminded her. "They're not going to let me photocopy the remand files for you."

"No, but you can introduce me to someone who will." She kissed my hair.

"Maybe Moira Clayton will show you her case files," I muttered.

"You're being ridiculous."

"You're not planning to go scouring the crack dens tonight, are you? We're invited to dinner at the Fleur de Lis. Joel got this big new contract."

"Great," she said absently, checking her watch. "I'll try and speak to Tina and Eddie before we go. I should get to the hospital, see if the police have visited Molly yet."

She was in full-on work mode; I'd get nothing out of her now. I slipped away, leaving her glued to her laptop and headed back to the PC to see where aconite was most commonly found in the wild. It made me feel slightly less useless.

* * *

According to my mum, who knew this sort of thing, the Fleur de Lis had been a venereal disease clinic back in the seventies. I had that in the back of my mind as we walked in that evening. Now it was a gleaming, polished restaurant with crystal chandeliers and fresh roses on every table, but when I inhaled I was sure I could smell disinfectant and alcohol wipes. Of course, that could have been the cocktails.

Joel and Vince were already propping up the bar when Shannon and I arrived, along with Glory. She was dressed to the nines as always, making me feel underdressed in my linen trousers and blouse. Luckily Shannon kept the side up in a navy blue trouser suit. Of course, Shannon looked good in everything. She was just one of those women.

"Darling!" Glory cried. "How are you?" She embraced me, engulfing me in a cloud of Miss Dior Cherie.

"Love the dress." I stepped back to admire her slinky outfit, surprisingly conservative for Glory. "I've never seen you in black."

She winked and flashed her shoes at me. They were six inch lime green stilettos. "I thought I'd better dress down for this place, but I can't say no to shoe sales." She turned to give Shannon a hug. "Hello sweetie, you're looking gorgeous as ever."

Shannon returned the hug, then congratulated Joel, who was preening at the bar, beer in hand. We did the obligatory how are yous and made idle chatter while we waited for Joel and Vince's parents to arrive. Amidst the low lights and soft music of the bar, I almost forgot about Molly until Joel leaned past Glory to ask me if I'd heard anything about the girl.

"Any news?" he asked.

I glanced at Shannon, not sure what—if anything—I was allowed to say.

"Molly's still in hospital," Shannon said. "I spoke to Tina earlier and she should be home tomorrow, once they're sure she's up to it. Standard stuff."

"God, I can't believe you found her out in the woods like that!" Glory pressed a hand dramatically to her fake breasts. "It must have been so exciting! And Vince told us you met a feral too, Ayla! Darling, you have all the adventures."

I wrinkled my nose. "I wouldn't say that."

"I can't believe a feral got into the city without anyone noticing!" Joel said. "For that matter, why would a feral come into the city?"

"Maybe he wanted to go urban?" Vince suggested.

"That never happens," Glory said firmly. "Once you go wild, that's it. The end." She slashed her witchy talons across her throat. "They forget what it's like to be human."

We all fell silent for a moment and I knew us wolves were

all thinking the same thing. How beautiful it was to abandon humanity, however briefly. How tempting it was to stay wolf and run wild. A sweet melancholy settled over me as I contemplated it.

Then Shannon tapped my arm and the mood left me. "How about some cocktails?" she asked brightly. "Joel, fancy a Bloody Mary?"

The meal was fine despite the whole VD clinic thing and I found myself unwinding slowly as the night went on. I even managed to forget about Molly and the feral, although my anxiety over Shannon's upcoming drug dealer hunt didn't quite go away.

We lingered over coffee and mints for a long time before Joel and Vince's parents headed home, leaving us young things to enjoy the rest of our night. As midnight approached, we paid up and left too, full of food and booze. I linked arms with Shannon and Glory as we stepped out onto the icy street. Street lamps stained the frosty pavement amber and the clear, moonless sky sparkled with stars. Clumps of teenagers drifted past us smelling of beer and kebabs. I inhaled deeply, the scents of the city suffusing me and filling me with a deep, drowsy sense of contentment.

"Taxi home?" Joel asked, taking Vince's hand. "I don't think I have the energy for walking."

"I could go for a run, actually," Glory said, releasing me to step out of her shoes and pick them up. "I need to run off some of that lamb or I'll never fit into my dress for tomorrow." She leaned in to whisper to me conspiratorially. "It's a vintage flapper dress. Lots of glitter and sequins."

"Well you're running alone," Vince said, sinking against Joel's bigger frame and turning to him for a quick kiss. "I'm voting for the taxi. The quicker we're home, the sooner we can get back to celebrating." He smacked Joel's backside and leered at him. Joel pretended—unconvincingly—to be offended by such talk.

I wrinkled my nose. "I don't think I want to share a taxi with you two."

"Come running with me." Glory took my hand, dragging

me away from Shannon. "Shannon won't mind, will you, sweetie? You can share with Joel and Vince. Well, share the taxi anyway." She winked at Shannon, who rolled her eyes.

"If you two want to go off, I'll get myself home," she said. "You won't be late though, will you?" she added, brushing my hip with her fingertips and sending a sensuous shiver through me.

"Not long at all," I promised.

Going for a run with Glory was a big production. Before the others could hail a taxi and leave, Glory and I had to strip off and pass our clothes on to them to take home. There was a changing booth at the corner of the street—the city council had installed them all over the place once we wolves started living so openly amongst the human population. They looked and smelled like public toilets but offered us a little privacy while we shifted. It was more for the humans than the wolves, I'd always thought. Nudity was such a big deal for humans.

Outside the booth, Glory solemnly presented her shoes to Shannon, making her swear to keep them safe and unscuffed. Then we both slipped into the booth to change. I watched as Glory stripped off her outfit. Underneath the bright red waves of her wig, she was a natural mousey blonde. Without the wig adding to her femininity, she suddenly looked like a little boy playing dress-up, all over-the-top makeup and chicken fillets stuffed in her bra. Then came the dress, which she folded neatly and slid under the door to Shannon, along with the bra and fillets.

I tapped my feet impatiently. I'd already stripped down to my underwear, which I wasn't bothered about ruining, and was eager to shift and get moving. I felt heavy and bloated from all the food and a good long run home felt like bliss. "We could be home by now, Glory."

"You can't hurry genius, sweetie." Finally, Glory plucked out her earrings and took off her necklace and the transformation was complete. She was a he. Glenn. A slender young man in elegant make-up instead of a busty, brash woman in a beehive wig. I'd seen him do this a few times now, but it never failed to fascinate me. I thought Glory was beautiful, but I

thought Glenn was even more stunning. Without the wig dominating his face, you could properly appreciate his perfect cheekbones and startling green eyes. He flashed a brilliant grin at me. "There, that didn't take long, did it?"

"I'm never going clothes shopping with you," I muttered. I dropped to my knees and the change took me fast, juddering through me. With my stomach as full as it was, I felt slightly nauseous when it was over.

Next to me, Glenn completed his own change. In wolf-shape he was no bigger than me. I poked my nose in his ear and huffed. He swept his tongue along my muzzle, then padded outside to jump up at Joel, setting his paws on Joel's shoulders. Tail wagging, he washed Joel's face enthusiastically.

"Good thing I'm not the jealous type," Vince said wryly. To my wolf ears, his voice was loud and strangely high. I flicked my ears and whined, wanting to set off. I spared Shannon one more look before turning tail and trotting off. Glenn barked and raced to catch up, leaving the others behind.

My claws clicked on the ice, skidding a little, so I resisted the impulse to just sprint. Once we were out of the city center I'd be able to, but here, weaving amongst drunken teenagers and crawling taxis, it wasn't worth the risk. Glenn kept pace with me, stopping occasionally to sniff some piece of crap or another on the pavement. Chewing gum, fag ends, crisp packets; nothing was too disgusting for him to investigate. A couple of times I stopped to bark sharply at him, impatiently calling him on.

A couple of people tried to stop us—humans with cameras desperate for photos to sell to the various wolf-spotting websites. We ignored them, more interested in the beckoning scents of damp wood and pondweed wafting on the night breeze from the parks. Glenn took the lead as we left the city center, directing us towards Crescent Green; a tiny strip of land better suited to toy poodles in my opinion.

I didn't argue though. I'd promised Shannon it would be a short run. We leapt over the chain link fence onto the Green and Glenn pounced on me immediately. We wrestled for a few minutes, rolling around clumsily, yipping like cubs.

And that's when I smelled the feral.

That crazy, alien scent that excited and cowed me. It was like a blow to the head, smelling it again. I reeled, whining and nudging Glenn. He lay on his side, tongue lolling from his mouth, ignoring me until I nipped his tail. Then he shot to his feet with an offended yelp and sniffed the air. The scent affected him even more strongly than me. He whimpered and dropped to the earth, ears flat, tail tucked between his legs.

Forget it, a little voice in my head said. Just go.

I couldn't.

I pressed my nose to the ground, sorting through the maze of scents until I found his, strong and fresh. I cocked my head at Glenn, silently asking him to come with me. He whined and closed his eyes. I chuffed at him, disappointed but not really surprised, and took off on the trail of the feral.

He wasn't on the Green anymore, but he wasn't long gone either. I tracked him through the estate bordering the Green, noticing his odor was mixed with the cloying, metallic smell of Silver Kiss. I picked up other wolves too, but there were too many for me to be sure if any were actually with him.

I moved mindlessly, fully focused on the hunt, ignoring humans and cars and other wolves. I was consumed by the smell of the feral. Why was he here again? Was he connected to Molly? I trotted past dark houses, rousing sleeping dogs who strained against their chains to howl at me. I ignored them too. I'm not a dog-person.

At the edge of the estate I paused, panting. If I kept tracking him, I'd be out of the city and into the surrounding countryside. A few miles north was a dual carriageway that I wouldn't have traveled on foot even in human form; south was a cluster of smaller towns and a giant shopping center. But the feral wasn't heading for either of those. He was heading for the massive nature reserve several miles to the east. It was marshy land, home to rare water birds and protected by the government as a nature sanctuary. Humans were allowed to walk their dogs there as long as they stayed on the right side of the river. The rest of the area was a wilderness. It was the perfect place for a feral to den and maybe not the perfect

place for a city wolf to go alone. I huffed, torn. I ought to let it go and head home to Shannon. But that scent was driving me crazy and I couldn't let it go.

A wolf howled a few streets away and I recognized Glenn's call. I called back, my voice trembling in the cold air. A few seconds later, he was at my side, nuzzling and licking me. He nosed the air and looked at me, ears pricked curiously. Were we going on or going back?

I felt braver with Glenn next to me, so I set off again, glancing back to see if he followed. He hesitated a second, then ran to join me with a worried yap.

Out of the city we could really run, unhindered by concrete and the trappings of humanity. As I nosed around for the feral's scent, I felt something wild unfurling inside me, something hot and hungry. My senses buzzed, assailed by the countryside, the sounds of owls hooting and the rustle of leaves as vermin raced away. The scents of mulchy earth and the early-blooming snowdrops, the shifting shadows, the distant sounds of the city muted by the night. It was so heady, so vivid, so *now*, I felt drunk with it all. For a second I forgot the feral, until I picked up the odor of Silver Kiss again.

That dragged me right back to reality. It was fainter, but still clear—the frost and recent snow dampened the local scents a little, so the trail left by the feral seemed to blaze in comparison. I could almost see the scent in my mind, a nasty shade of purple.

A few minutes later, the feral's stink was everywhere. He'd scent-marked several trees and bushes, a clear warning we were entering forbidden territory. I hoped I was imagining it, but I thought I could smell Molly too. Maybe she'd come this way last night on her way home.

Glenn growled as he picked up on the scent-marking too and we both slowed down. We were reaching the edges of the marshland and I guiltily remembered my promise to Shannon. The sensible thing, the human thing, to do would be to head home and report to Eddie in the morning. I wasn't feeling sensible or human and the faint traces of Molly's musk didn't help. I was all wolf and the wolf wanted to keep hunting.

I looked to Glenn, wanting it to be a joint decision. If he wanted to, we'd press on. If not, we'd go back. Pack stuck together—hell that was why he'd followed me this far. He dipped his head with a soft bark and nudged me gently. We were going on.

Excitement burned through me as we set off again, slinking through tall grass and rushes. The ground grew damp and marshy underfoot as we approached the long, winding river that was the boundary between open countryside and protected land. The reserve was faintly sinister in the moonless night, tall riverside plants swaying back and forth with hushed rustles, the leafless willow trees like skeletons in the shadows.

The feral's scent was a stimulant to me, firing all my lupine instincts. It overrode the bitter smell of rotting pondweed and the musty aroma of bird feathers, drawing me in like a fish on a line. Glenn was just as intoxicated, stopping to sniff every rock and patch of slushy mud the feral had marked. He whined and huffed under his breath, tail flopping back and forth. The thrill of the chase had infected us both; I don't think we could have gone back anymore.

We reached a point at the riverbank where the feral's musk disappeared and without hesitating, I plunged into the icy water to swim across. Seconds later there was almighty splash as Glenn joined me, yelping as the cold hit him. The river wasn't very wide and we were across in minutes, shaking ourselves off and sneezing violently. I licked my paws, pulling a few strands of weed from between my claws, then set about picking up the feral's tracks again.

Glenn caught it first and bounded off down a dirt track, yapping for me to follow. I could definitely smell Molly now and other wolves too. I didn't recognize any of their scents, but there was a clear difference between urban wolves and ferals and I found both on the track. That set me on edge. Chasing down one feral was a daunting proposition. The idea that we might run into a whole pack of them was just scary.

Once again, my human self reared her head and whispered that it was time to turn back. I stopped, looking back

the way we'd come. A sense of dread that was more human than wolf settled over me and I was suddenly shivering with cold and ready to go home. The two of us couldn't take on a pack, if it came to it. I called Glenn to my side and licked his muzzle with a whine, telling him it was over.

He returned the gesture and we both swung back. My unease lifted as we reached the river again. The human part of me was back in charge and she knew this was the smartest course of action, despite my wolf's desires. Then Glenn came to an abrupt halt beside me, hackles raised, a savage growl rumbling in his throat. I snapped irritably at him and then I saw what had him snarling.

A pair of amber eyes glowing like hot coals in the shadows ahead of us.

The feral.

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Ten

There was no warning this time. One second the feral was crouched in the shadows; the next he was flying at us—at me—with fangs bared and claws ready to rip. There was no time to dodge: he was on me before I could react and we went down in a riot of barks and snapping jaws.

Like I'd known when we first met, the feral was heaver and stronger than me and it wasn't long before I found myself trapped beneath him, the soft flesh of my throat and belly exposed to him. He raked his claws across my belly and the coppery smell of blood flooded the night. I strained my neck to snap at him and caught his ear more by chance than design. I clamped down and yanked, ripping part of the ear away. He howled and rolled off me, giving me space to get to my feet again.

Glenn darted in then, catching the feral's tail and biting down hard. At the same time I went for his throat, getting a mouthful of fur for my trouble. The feral whipped back and forth, trying to fend me and Glenn off. We danced around him, taking turns to lunge and snap at him. It wouldn't work for long. I could feel blood dripping from my stomach wound and the fiery ache was spreading through my limbs, wearing me down second by second. Glenn, light and quick, was unhurt so far, but if I went down, he'd be defenseless against the bigger wolf.

And the feral, wiry and tough, could probably keep up this game a lot longer than either of us

Desperate to end it before I got any weaker, I threw myself at him, hitting his midsection hard and sending us both tumbling towards the riverbank. We crashed into the water, the shock of the cold driving everything from my head. I yelped and thrashed, my wound stinging like a thousand needles had been plunged into the skin. I went under the water, came up blind and disorientated. The feral grabbed my hind leg, pulling me under again.

Ice-cold water filled my lungs and ears and panic gripped me. The feral released me and I was dimly aware of splashing as he swam to the bank, leaving me fighting the rising tide of terror inside me. Beneath the water, in the lightless, airless murk, I was lost and my hot blood was chilling fast.

Stricken, I grasped onto one thought: wolf-shape was no good now.

The change was the most painful and frightening I'd ever endured. In those nerve-shredding seconds it took my body to reform in the dark water, I was utterly helpless. If the feral returned I was dead.

I popped back into my human body with a scream that brought more water burning into my lungs. For a second I was sinking like a stone, limbs numb and leaden, and I knew I was drowning, going down in a tangle of slimy waterweeds.

And then there was a sharp pain in my arm; teeth clamping into my skin and I was dragged to the surface. I broke free of the water with a choked gasp, flailing wildly at my attacker...no, my rescuer! My frozen brain dimly recognized Glenn's scent and I threw my too-heavy arms around his neck, letting him drag me to the riverbank. I managed to crawl partially out of the icy water, sobbing in pain as pebbles and weeds scraped my wounded stomach. I vomited violently, bringing up a gush of water and chunks of dinner. The sight of the wetly glistening mess made me throw up again.

Glenn bounced out of the water and flopped to the earth, his nose pressed to my cheek, sides heaving. I was still half in the river, too weak to drag my lower body out and I clutched at him with shaking fingers, trying to communicate wordlessly that I still needed him. My arm was bleeding where he'd bitten me, red droplets mixing with river water and splashing onto Glenn's muzzle. With a sigh, he surged to his feet and

gripped my arm again. I cried in pain, then bit my lip and let him drag me all the way out of the river.

We both collapsed, tangled together, wet fur to wet skin. I shivered against him, the feral driven from my mind. The fact that Glenn had saved me told me the feral was gone, for now. If he came back, we'd probably both just roll over and give him our throats. I certainly didn't have the strength for anything more.

After a few minutes, Glenn shifted back to human and maneuvered me into a sitting position, wrapping his arms around me. "Sweetie, we need to move," he said, teeth chattering in my ear.

"I don't think I can," I moaned. I pressed a hand to my stomach. It came away sticky with blood. A deep wound, probably now crawling with infections from my impromptu bath. I shuddered. "I'm hurt," I said pathetically.

Glenn gently pushed my hand aside to prod at the wound himself. His touch was light but it still sent spears of agony through me. "It needs cleaning, but it isn't as bad as it looks."

"What about the feral?" I looked around, half-expecting him to explode from the darkness again and finish us off.

"He ran off after he got out of the river," Glenn assured me. "So why don't we get out of here before he comes back with his friends?"

We staggered to our feet, me clinging to Glenn as pins and needles cramped up my legs. It was a relief to have the feeling back, but dammit, it bloody hurt. Keeping one hand pressed to my wound, I sucked in a deep breath and forced myself to walk. I wavered a little at first, but Glenn supported me and we started to make progress.

"God, this is the last time I go anywhere with you, Ayla," he told me. "I just can't do the rough stuff, you know?"

"Wuss," I said, managing a very stiff grin.

"Darling, I can't afford to have this face ruined by romping with the local hicks." He brushed a hand over his flawless skin. "My career is built on my looks."

"Lucky mine's not." I huddled closer to him, stealing the

meager warmth his body had to offer. Movement and natural werewolf reactions were warming my body up, but slowly. I still felt the chill of the river right down in my bones and I wanted nothing more than to fall to the ground and pass out.

I was too scared to stop though. Fear kept my feet moving while my mind fought to just shut down. The feral could be anywhere. Could be stalking us right now. I scented the air, but his odor was everywhere anyway, spun around us like a spider web, so I was none the wiser.

"He's gone," Glenn said, sensing my unease. "Keep walking, sweetie, just keep walking."

I did. We did. I lost track of time, but eventually the pain in my stomach lessened as my body began to heal and my blood ran hot again. My feet ached and my legs cramped and my head throbbed, but we kept going, Glenn chattering all the while to keep us both distracted.

Dawn was breaking when we reached the road. The sky was a cheery blur of pink and blue as the city came back into view. By then we were both limping and Glenn's voice had given out. We'd run so much further than I'd realized and I felt stupid and guilty now. Stupid for going after the feral in the first place; guilty for dragging Glenn along with me.

By the time we were back in the city center, my wound had healed up, leaving smears of blood across my torso. My entire body ached and I hoped the feral hadn't done any internal damage.

"Your place or mine?" Glenn asked hoarsely. "I need a hot bath and some fluffy slippers."

"Yours," I rasped. His flat was closer. Once there I could ring Shannon, who'd probably be frantic with worry. It was another thing to feel guilty about.

Glenn lived in a roomy apartment over a glittery clothing boutique on Miller Street, one of the bohemian areas of town. We dragged ourselves up the stairs and practically fell into his living room. I tumbled onto his plush sofa, too exhausted to do more than lie there and look at the mossy green carpeting. Glenn, not quite as worn-out as me, disappeared into the bathroom. A few minutes later I heard the sound of running

water and Glenn's almost orgasmic cry of appreciation as he climbed into the shower.

I closed my eyes, listening to him splash around like a child. I'd call Shannon in a minute, I promised myself. I just needed a few seconds rest. Just a minute or two to recover myself...

Glenn shook me awake and I snapped to with a muffled yelp. "What time is it?" I asked stupidly, heart racing.

"Six in the morning," he replied. "You should have a bath, sweetie, it'll do you a world of good."

I sat up, running my fingers through my knotted, ratty hair. Glenn was scrubbing his hair dry with a towel; I couldn't have been asleep that long. "I need to call Shannon," I said. "She'll be so worried—"

"Have a bath first," he said firmly, pulling me to my feet. "A few more minutes won't hurt."

"But I promised I'd be home, I told her..." I drifted off again, a sense of helpless frustration filling me. "I promised," I repeated.

"Bath." Glenn propelled me to the bathroom and all but threw me into the steaming water. I gasped, a sense-memory of hitting the river crashing over me. Then the scent of citrus shower gel wafted over me and I relaxed again. "Wash your hair," Glenn instructed me. "I always feel better with freshlywashed hair."

"You always shove a wig over it too," I muttered, obediently reaching for his suspiciously pink shampoo.

He flashed me a very Glory-esque smile. "See, darling, you feel better already." He sashayed off, leaving me to lather, rinse and repeat alone.

Fifteen minutes later I was truly warm again and sitting on the sofa wrapped in Glenn's purple dressing gown. He was in the kitchen making tea and singing songs from Phantom of the Opera to exercise his voice.

I tried to shut that out as I reached for his phone. The need to hear Shannon's voice was overwhelming now, my wolf needing to touch her mate, make a connection with her family. I dialed and waited for Shannon's voice to answer.

But she didn't pick up.

Irrational horror gripped me when the call went through to the answer phone. *It's early*, I told myself. *She's asleep. Of* course she is.

My wolf didn't believe me. She wanted her mate and her mate wasn't there. It drove shards of fear into me and roused my protective instincts. "I have to go," I told Glenn as he entered the living room with two cups of tea. "Shannon's not answering the phone."

"I shouldn't think she is, at this ungodly hour," Glenn sniffed. "I haven't been awake at this time for years, personally."

I ignored the proffered cup. "Can I borrow some clothes? I can't stay, Glenn. I've got to see her."

He looked me over. "Darling, you shouldn't—" He broke off with a sigh. "Oh, you're mad, Ayla, do you know that? Positively insane." He led me into his bedroom and began rummaging through his spacious wardrobe. There wasn't much that I could see except spandex dresses and hot pants, but I was almost desperate enough to snatch those and run anyway. Then he produced a lime green velour tracksuit with a bright smile.

"Should fit perfectly," he announced, bundling it into my arms. "It's Juicy Couture," he added, as if that excused the vile color.

Still, it was better than a pair of hot pink short-shorts. I threw it on, kissed him on the cheek and took off as fast as my tired body would go.

* * *

My sense of foreboding grew as I entered Foxglove. Call it woman's intuition. Call it animal instinct. I just knew something was wrong. So I wasn't entirely surprised when I saw the police car outside our house. My heart constricted and my head pounded and I pushed myself into a run, my mind

spinning with dozens of bloody scenarios as I reached the door.

And then I slowed, seeing the graffiti scrawled across the front door. Bright red paint, like fresh blood, gleaming in the early morning sunlight: *Die dyke bitches*.

Beneath the words was a modified anarchy symbol, Alpha Humans' insignia.

"Shit. Oh shit. Fuck." I fumbled with the door handle, found it locked—of course—and began hammering on the wood. "Shannon! Shannon!"

The door opened and I stumbled inside, barely registering the police officer who'd opened it. I flew into the kitchen. "Shannon! Where are you?"

"Ayla!" She leapt up from the kitchen table, rushing into my arms. "Oh God, where have you been? Are you okay? What happened?" She cupped my face in her trembling hands, staring at me with tear-filled eyes. "Don't you dare ever scare me like that again! Where the hell were you?" Anger and relief warred on her face.

My throat was dry and I couldn't speak. So I kissed her instead, hard and fast, before hugging her so tightly she yelped in pain.

"Ms Hammond, I take it?" a dry voice asked behind me.

I didn't release Shannon, just swiveled round so I could see the officer over her shoulder. He was a middle-aged human, stern face, graying hair. "What's going on?" I asked him.

"Perhaps if you put Ms Ryan down, we can discuss it," he suggested.

I didn't think I could let go of Shannon yet. Her body against mine was the best feeling I'd had in hours and her familiar sandalwood scent was the most comforting thing I could imagine. I buried my face in her sandy hair and inhaled deeply, closing my eyes. I could have died, I realized with a sick lurch. I could have drowned and never seen her again. Never held her again.

The realization hit me hard, a delayed reaction.

All the way back to the city, in Glenn's apartment, I'd kept the thought at bay, concentrating just on getting back. Now I was home and safe, it was suddenly all I could think about. The feral could have killed me. I released Shannon and sat down at the kitchen table, heart in my throat.

"Ayla?" Shannon sat down next to me, lacing her fingers with mine. Her voice shook. "Are you okay?" she asked again.

I glanced at her, taking in her mussed hair and clothes. She was still in last night's outfit and she hadn't washed her makeup off. Mascara bled down her cheeks, giving her that panda look that, under other circumstances, I found adorable. "Have you been up all night?" I asked.

"Of course I bloody have," she cried. "I was waiting for you! Where were you?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. I didn't want to talk about the feral in front of a human copper. "What happened to the door?" I asked instead.

"It was like that when I got back," she said. "I was going to call the police when you got back, but you didn't get back." She leveled me with a hard glare, a silent message that, as happy as she was to have me home, she was also mightily pissed off. "So I called them this morning instead and PC Weldon showed up."

"Obviously this is an Alpha Humans attack," Weldon said, taking the last chair at the table.

"Obviously," I agreed, unable to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

"I understand you had a run-in with them a few months back," he continued as if I hadn't spoken, "so I'm assuming this is a revenge attack."

I'd been arrested for affray last time we'd *had a run-in* with Alpha Humans, after Adam's funeral. And Shannon had ended up in hospital. As far as I was concerned, we ought to be the ones seeking revenge. I kept that to myself though.

"So what do we do?" I asked, squeezing Shannon's hand. "Their scents must be all over the garden—can we get a wolf copper in?"

He smiled patronizingly at me. "Scent evidence isn't admissible in court, Ms Hammond, as I'm sure you know. For

now, there's nothing to do except monitor the situation. Nobody was hurt and unless they strike again, we don't have much to go on."

"You are not serious," I said.

Shannon cut me short. "PC Weldon, this is intimidation," she said, sounding far more sure of herself. "And a serious threat to our safety. *Die dyke bitches* is a pretty clear message, don't you think?"

"Of course and we take such matters very seriously," he said. "But at this stage there is simply nothing the police can do. We'll file a report and take statements from you both and you'll have an incident number. If anything else occurs—"

"What else has to occur before you can do anything?" Shannon asked. "I take it that when Alpha Humans are breaking down our front door and smashing the house up, you'll do more than give us an incident number?"

Weldon kept his patient mask fixed in place, although I could smell his exasperation. I imagined a lifetime of this, dealing with irate and scared crime victims, trying to assure them all was well when it clearly wasn't. I was exhausted just thinking about it.

Before Weldon could speak again, I jumped in. "Let's just leave it, okay? I don't have the energy for this now." Shannon shot me a dark look, but Weldon seemed grateful. I smiled weakly at the odd role-reversal between me and my mate. Normally she was the pacifier and I was the one making a scene; the change made my head ache.

We gave our statements—both brief given that neither of us had been here at the time of the incident—and Weldon left, promising to stay in touch. Shannon slammed the door on him, flipped her hair from her face and rounded on me.

"I sat up all night for you, Ayla. What the hell happened?" She sounded furious, but I caught the edge of anxiety in her voice. She'd been scared for me after seeing that graffiti. I'd have felt the same. Drained, I sat down on the bottom step and held my face in my hands. My stomach stung as I leaned over and I winced, straightening up again. Seeing me flinch, Shannon was instantly on her knees beside me.

"Ayla? Are you hurt? God, speak to me, will you? I was so worried about you."

"Me and Glenn smelled the feral," I said, raising my head. "And we followed him and we fought." I pulled up the hem of the tracksuit jacket to show the faint pink scar on my stomach. Shannon touched it tenderly.

"Tell me," she said.

I did, telling her about smelling Molly and other city wolves, reliving the feel of the feral's claws ripping through my skin, the horrible plunge into the river. I shuddered, cold again at the thought of it. When I finished, Shannon heaved a heavy sigh.

"I can't believe you did that," she muttered. "You could have been killed."

I nodded. "I'm sorry."

"You should have just come home. This is exactly the sort of thing we're supposed to be telling Eddie. He's not bloody paying you to play hero, Ayla."

"He's not paying me at all," I retorted. "He's paying you."

"Don't say stupid things." She stood, pacing the hall. Frustration rolled off her. "Do you know what I thought when I saw that awful graffiti and then you didn't come home? I thought those Alpha Human thugs had found you and killed you. I thought I'd lost you. I thought all kinds of crazy things, Ayla, and you were off chasing ferals with Glenn and getting into fights!" She whirled to face me, tears in her eyes. "Why didn't you just come home?"

I wasn't sure if she was madder at me for staying out all night or for nearly dying. I did know that whatever I said would just make her angrier. So as much as I longed to stand my ground and argue that I'd done what I had to, that it was a Pack thing, I held my tongue. Maybe I was just too tired to speak.

"Say something," Shannon demanded when I didn't answer her. "Don't just look at me, say something!"

"I'm sorry," I said simply. It was the safest thing I could think of.

She shook her head. "We should never have moved here."

"What?"

"Ever since we got back here, it's been one shitty thing after another. You're always off doing *Pack things* and I'm always sitting here wondering where you are, if you're safe." She turned away from me, hugging herself. "I thought you were dead last night, Ayla. Dead."

"I nearly was." I could have kicked myself. It was such a stupid thing to say.

"Exactly!" Shannon thumped the wall and spun back to me, tears streaming down her face. "That's exactly my point, you could have died and I wouldn't have known and for what? For a bunch of fucking werewolves who didn't want you the first time round!"

I leapt up, righteous anger burning away my weariness. "Don't say that!"

"Well it's true! This never happened before, did it?"

"So it's my fault? My fault a feral nearly disemboweled me? My fault a bunch of prejudiced bastards are scrawling insults on our front door?" *Dammit*. I couldn't shut up now. I should, I knew I should, but I couldn't. She was overreacting.

"It never happened before," she repeated. "Before we moved here."

"Well you didn't have to bloody come, did you?"

"I wish I hadn't!" she screamed.

We both fell silent then, chests heaving, eyes stinging with tears. I stared at her, wetting my lips and letting her words sink in. She stared back, fists clenched at her sides like she was restraining herself from...what? Hitting me? Surely not. Not Shannon. Not my Shannon.

"Do you mean that?" I asked quietly. "Do you hate it here that much?"

"This is your life, your world," she replied. "It's dangerous and it's cruel and I don't belong in it."

"You can't mean that." I shook my head. "We never– We've always..."

"Before we moved here," she finished my garbled sentence for me. She scrubbed her sleeve across her eyes. "Oh Ayla, I love you, but I can't keep this up. How many more nights am I going to sit up waiting for you and not knowing where you are?"

"It was one night, Shannon."

"And it never happened before."

We fell silent again, deadlocked. She was overreacting, I told myself again. A mix of stress and relief turned to anger. It wasn't like her, but then it wasn't like me to disappear all night, I had to acknowledge. It wasn't like us to have hateful graffiti painted on our door. "So," I said finally. "What now then?"

"I'm going to bed," she said, stomping past me. "I can't deal with this right now."

I slumped back on the step, listening to our bedroom door slam. Something inside me cracked. I hoped it wasn't my heart.

Eleven

Raw and Bruised From our fight, I couldn't stay in the house. As much as I wanted to curl up and sleep, I couldn't. Shannon needed space—I was sure that once she'd slept on it, she'd realize how over the top she'd been—and I needed peace. So I went to my parents. They were a little confused to find me on the doorstep at eight o' clock on Saturday morning in someone else's clothes, but to their credit, they didn't ask. And I didn't tell them anything except that Shannon and I had argued and retreated to my old bedroom to sleep the day away.

Once I was up there though, huddled down in my old bed, I couldn't relax. The events of the night, the words Shannon and I had hurled at each other, ate at me. I stared around my room, trying to drive the thoughts away by cataloguing my childhood possessions.

My parents had left the room pretty much as it had been when I left at seventeen. They'd freshened up the paint, changing it from angsty-teen purple to soothing blossom pink. And they'd packed away most of my toys and stuffed animals in the attic. But my shelves were still loaded with beloved childhood books, including those terrible werewolf novels from the early nineties. My favorite author back then was Meredith Greening. She'd written the Katrina Pagan series, about a werewolf assassin, who took out vampires for the government. I'd read my copies to rags years ago.

I reached for one now, needing the comfort of something simple and familiar and was soon lost in a world of actionpacked adventure and kinky sex. It was all so simple for Katrina, of course. She was always tripping over clues and finding men willing to risk their lives for her even when she was being a complete bitch to them. Me, I had a drag queen and a hysterical girlfriend. It didn't seem fair.

Around midday I finally fell asleep, head in the book, and didn't stir until Dad came to shake me awake a few hours later. The sky was darkening again outside and the rich smell of beef stew was drifting up the stairs, making my stomach growl. I hadn't eaten since the restaurant last night, I realized and was immediately ravenous.

"Your mother thinks you should eat," Dad said, in that tone that meant he thought my mother was interfering. "She seems to think you're upset about something."

And of course, force-feeding me would solve the problem. I yawned, stretched and followed Dad downstairs. Mum dished up the most enormous plate of stew and dumplings I'd seen in my life and then they both sat and watched me eat with the intensity of vultures waiting for a starving man to die.

After about two minutes of it, I set my fork down and scowled at them both. "I'm alright."

"You're obviously not, Ayla," Mum said. "You looked terrible when you got here."

"Thanks."

"And you're not eating, either," she added, nodding to my plate.

"I don't like being watched while I'm eating." What was it about parents that turned you from adult back to sulking teenager so quickly?

"Are you going to tell us what's wrong?" Mum persisted.

"Anna, if she doesn't want to talk, you shouldn't make her," Dad warned.

"She does want to talk, don't you, Ayla? I can tell."

"Fucking hell, Mum!" I growled. "I came here for a bit of peace and quiet!"

"Ayla!" Dad barked. "Do not talk to your mother like that!"

I glowered at him and shoveled a spoonful of stew into my mouth, buying myself a few seconds of silence. My parents both continued to watch me. I swallowed and mumbled an apology to Mum. She patted my hand.

"So do you want to talk?" she asked. Dad cleared his throat pointedly and she amended, "you don't have to."

"I told you, I had a fight with Shannon," I said. "I just thought we could do with a break from each other for a few hours."

"Ah," Mum said knowingly, shaking her head.

I ignored the spark of irritation that caused in me. "It's nothing serious." No sense telling them about the graffiti. They'd panic and lock me in my bedroom or something. "I'll go home in the morning and everything will be back to normal." I hoped. It had been a long time since we'd had a row bad enough for me to storm out over.

"Good," Dad said when Mum opened her mouth. "That's good, isn't it, Anna?"

She closed her mouth and nodded meekly, some unspoken message passing between them. My irritation turned into anger. There was a sermon brewing, I sensed. Something along the lines of, well, these are the problems with dating humans, aren't they? They don't understand Pack problems. I could practically see the words working their way up Mum's throat. Only Dad's pointed stare kept her from actually speaking. Mum assumed that every time Shannon and I rowed it was because she was a human.

It wasn't something she'd ever said outright. My parents had made a concerted effort to keep their mouths shut regarding Shannon since I'd moved home, scared of driving me away again. And really, their main issue with her was that she was a woman, not that she was human. But it was there, a silent undercurrent of vague worry, the silent message that Shannon and I were just fundamentally too different.

It shouldn't have been an issue at all. Humans and wolves had been sleeping together for centuries before humans even knew we existed. For a while after the First World War, when we were first thrust out of the trenches and into the public eye, it was something of a taboo, but that didn't last. The big deal with werewolf homosexuality was that there was little chance of naturally conceived children.

Human-wolf relationships were no less fertile than wolf-wolf ones, so the Pack didn't frown on them in the same way.

With wolf fertility rates dropping as they were, some Packs even encouraged interbreeding. Anything to produce the next generation of cubs. At the other end of the scale, some Packs forbid it completely, believing that it was our increased integration with humans that was causing our problems in the first place.

Of course, human-wolf children could have serious long-term health problems. The wolf genes were rarely dominant and the human body wasn't built to deal with shapeshifting. There was Coral's Disease, a degenerative condition that wore down the bones and muscles over the years, leaving the children virtual cripples before they even hit their thirties. Then there was Siodmak Syndrome, where sufferers just physically couldn't shift leading to all sorts of psychological problems.

None of that was a problem for me and Shannon of course. Neither of us wanted children so we'd never even discussed adoption. And neither of us were about to turn straight either. Something Mum had come mostly to terms with after Adam's death and our reunion. Didn't mean she thought Shannon and I were right for each other, but she never said it out loud.

I could almost smell her desire to say it throughout the rest of the meal. The atmosphere was tense and charged and I almost wished I'd just stayed at home. Then I remembered Shannon saying she wished she'd never moved here and changed my mind. I'd rather deal with my parents.

After dinner, Dad went outside for his ritual post-meal cigarette and I joined him, leaving Mum to clean up. I used to offer to help when I was a kid, but she'd always insisted I just got in the way, so after dinner became my time to bond with Dad.

The night air was heavy with the threat of snow again and I hugged myself against the chill, longing for the hot summer nights that were still months away. Mum and Dad's small, carefully-tended garden was lined with pots that would sprout into basil, thyme and parsley in the spring, but were just dead, dry earth for now. The light in the kitchen cast a small

square of illumination over the lawn; everything else was lost in shadow. I wandered around the garden after Dad as he checked on his plants, feeling a little lost and aimless.

"Your mother only wants you to be happy," Dad told me suddenly, voice soft and low in the dark. "You shouldn't get angry with her."

"I know, I'm sorry. But I am happy. I love Shannon. We just..." I shrugged. "Don't you and Mum ever fight?"

"Of course," he replied. "We tend not to run home crying to our parents whenever we do though."

I bristled indignantly. "I didn't run home crying."

"More or less, pet." He knelt down to poke at a rose bush, dormant for the winter. "What exactly did you argue about?"

I hesitated. Dad was more pragmatic than Mum, but the mention of Alpha Humans would set him off nonetheless. Adam had been his nephew after all and his death was still a raw wound for the whole family, especially when we were no closer to justice than we had been when he died. I decided to leave the graffiti out of it for now. Pack gossip would ensure my parents found out sooner or later, but I'd prefer later right now.

"I was out all night with Glory," I said finally. "We went for a run and I'd promised Shannon I'd be home early, but ..." Again I halted, mentally censoring myself. I wanted to tell Eddie about our encounter with the feral before I told anyone else. I felt obliged to. *God.* It seemed like a lifetime ago already. "But we lost track of time."

"That doesn't seem such a big deal to me," Dad said. "We're wolves, we run. Shannon must know that."

There it was. That wolf-human divide he and Mum were so careful not to bring up directly. "Of course she does. But I promised her and I broke my promise. She was worried about me."

"And you fought about that? It really doesn't sound worth fighting about, Ayla."

I bit my lip to contain my frustration. He was right. If you stripped our row down to its bare bones, it wasn't worth fighting about. It was all the other stuff that made it so complicated. "She said she wished we'd never come here," I said. That was what stung me the most. The idea that she was unhappy here gnawed at me.

Dad straightened up and took a long drag of his cigarette. "People say things they don't mean when they're angry."

"I think she did mean it though." I stared past him, into the kitchen. Mum was loading the dishwasher and singing along to the radio. I ached suddenly, wanting to be at home with my partner, not here dissecting our relationship with my Dad. "I should probably go home and sort things out with her." Just the thought brought tears to my eyes, a swell of anxiety to my chest. What if she didn't want to sort things out? A strange sort of panic filled me, as if I'd already lost her.

Dad slung his arm round my shoulders and pulled me into a bear hug. "Not tonight, pet. You stay here tonight, alright? A hot bath and a good night's sleep and everything will seem better."

I nodded against his chest, exhaling and trying to release the panic. Everything would be fine in the morning. Shannon and I would make up and I'd tell Eddie about the feral. Everything would be fine. It had to be.

* * *

I didn't feel much better in the morning. But since I had to be at work, I forced myself up anyway. All I had to wear was Glory's hideous Juicy Couture outfit, which would make me a laughing stock at Inked, so I raided Mum's wardrobe. Not that I expected to find anything much better in there, but at the very least I could find something that didn't make me want to vomit every time I looked at it.

I managed to pull together a respectable outfit of faded blue jeans—when had Mum ever bought jeans?—and a blue and white checked shirt. It wasn't really me, but it wasn't lime green either. Mum forced a heaped plate of bacon, egg and sausage on me and waved me off to work with a worried smile.

I glanced up at the pale sun as I left. Inked didn't open

until eleven on Sundays and it was just after nine. If I was fast, I could go home and see Shannon before work. I'd probably be a little late, but I was sure Calvin wouldn't mind once I explained everything to him. And if he did, well...I was going home first anyway. I took off towards Foxglove, settling into a steady jog. It felt good to move. It gave me a fake sense that I was taking action.

My heart twisted in my chest as I approached our house, apprehension at seeing Shannon again, apprehension at seeing that horrible graffiti again. I almost choked on my nerves when I saw Shannon outside, scrubbing the front door with hard, vicious movements. A bucket of water sat at her feet. She was in her pajamas and smelled of sweat and misery, a bitter musk that pricked at me as I walked down the path towards her.

She stiffened, hearing my footsteps on the stones. I stopped, playing with my shirt cuffs and mentally running through everything I'd planned to say. They all vanished when Shannon turned round, cheeks red with exertion.

"I wasn't sure you'd come home," she said softly.

I shrugged. "I wasn't sure you'd want me." As jokes go, it fell pretty flat. Shannon's lips quivered and her eyes gleamed. I plucked the sponge from her hand and squeezed her fingers. "Shannon—"

"Don't, Ayla," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I'm still tired." "But I just—"

She held up a hand, silencing me again. "You're going to be late for work. And I've got a job of my own to take care of."

My temper snapped. "Fuck work! This is more important!"

"It can wait," she said, snatching the sponge back and scrubbing at the paint again. "It waited all yesterday, didn't it?"

And as quickly as that, my anger vanished, replaced by a heavy lethargy. "If you say so."

"I spoke to Eddie last night," she continued, business-voice on. "We're meeting him and Moira tonight at Eddie's place." "What for?" I asked dumbly. "To talk about the feral. And I'm going to see Molly this morning, as soon as I've cleaned this mess up. She's back home again."

"Okay." A numb resignation settled over me. Shannon had decided we weren't talking about the fight, so we weren't. That was that. Nothing I said was going to move her so there didn't seem much point in hanging around. "Okay," I said again. "I'm going to work."

"Okay." She didn't even look at me.

"Shannon?" I touched her arm, desperate for some contact, and she glanced at me, blue eyes still moist. "We're okay, aren't we?"

She dredged up a tight smile. "Yeah, we're okay. I'm just... tired, Ayla. I'm just tired."

So was I. I returned her smile and went to work, aching all over.

* * *

"You look like shit," Lawrence told me when I walked into Inked.

"I feel like shit." I slumped down on my seat behind the counter and ran my hands through my greasy hair. "I've had a couple of shit days."

"Trouble in paradise?" Kaye leaned out of the piercing booth to regard me with malevolently gleaming eyes. "Dish the dirt, Ayla."

"Fuck off, Kaye," I growled, letting an edge of my frustration into my voice. I don't know what my face was like, but it must have been scary because she blanched and ducked back inside the booth.

Calvin appeared from downstairs and frowned at me. "You're late and you're swearing," he said shortly. "I've got a customer down here, Ayla."

I mumbled an apology and he went back down. Lawrence leaned against the counter and stroked his beard, dark eyes lit with sympathy. "Smile, cherub. It can't be that bad."

"I had a massive row with Shannon yesterday," I said. "I'm not sure... She said we were okay, but..."

"Oh well," he said. "Everybody argues. You should have heard some of the rows me and my ex had. Still got the scars from some of them. You wouldn't be human if you didn't row every now and then. Well, you're not human, I suppose, but you know what I mean. I'm sure it'll be fine." He leapt up and stretched. "I'm going for a cigarette break."

"Silver Kiss?" I asked, idle curiosity stirring in me.

"What else?" He produced the packet from his shirt pocket with a flourish and I snatched it off him.

Eddie's words came back to me as I studied the ingredients. No sign of aconite in Lawrence's fags. "Where do you get them?" I asked.

"Newsagents," he said, sounding faintly mystified. "You thinking of taking up the habit?"

I wrinkled my nose. Even wrapped in plastic, the cigarettes had that nasty metallic tang that offended my senses. "No thanks. Just curious. Loads of young wolves are smoking this stuff, but they're getting it cut with this monkshood stuff and it gets them addicted."

Kaye emerged from her booth again. "Junkie werewolves sound like a public threat to me," she said. "Gareth told me that some kid in Spain got mauled by a werewolf on crack last month."

"Oh, are you still with Gareth?" I asked innocently. "That must be, what, a whole week now?"

She narrowed her eyes at me but didn't rise to the bait. "Can I bum a fag, Lawrence?" she asked. "I suddenly feel the need for fresh air. It smells sort of like wet dog in here." She smiled sweetly at me. "I'm really not a dog person."

"That's funny because I always had you down as a dog... person." I drew out the pause. Kaye scowled and swept past me. Lawrence rolled his eyes at me and followed her outside. I sank down into my seat with a sigh. It was going to be a long day.

By mid-afternoon I'd been reprimanded by Calvin twice more for swearing in front of customers and Kaye and I had come close to blows. We were never exactly chummy, but she seemed to be on a personal mission to aggravate me today.

Constant slurs that were just the right side of open insults, frequent factoids that her lovely boyfriend Gareth had fed her about the dangers of werewolves and enough attitude that even Lawrence lost patience with her.

"What is your problem today?" he demanded, rounding on her after we'd nearly come to blows for about the fifth time in as many minutes. "You're being a real bitch, Kaye, even by your standards."

She tossed her hair and treated him to an icy glare. "I don't see what the problem is with pointing out the true fact that a werewolf was arrested for rape in America last month. There's no law against telling the truth." She gestured to me. "I just wondered what Ayla thought about it, that's all."

I stared at the tray of earrings in front of me and wondered if I could claim temporary insanity in the event of me killing her. "I don't think anything about it," I said. "Anymore than you think anything about humans being arrested for rape, alright?"

"Gareth told me-"

"Fucking hell!" I spat. "Does Gareth ever fucking shut up? What is he, an Alpha Human?" The amount of anti-werewolf propaganda Kaye had been spewing today, I'd be surprised if he wasn't. She'd never liked me, but today she was simply poisonous.

Kaye straightened up as if stung. "Absolutely not," she said indignantly. "Gareth wouldn't be seen dead with those thugs. He's a member of People Matter."

The name meant nothing to me, but it sounded like pure semantics anyway. All these idiot anti-werewolf groups were called things like Humanity first and Earth's Children or some hippy shit and they all had the same basic principles.

"Well fuck People Matter," I muttered.

"All I can hear up here is screaming and swearing." Calvin emerged from downstairs once more. He'd been down there all afternoon working on a cover-up, appearing every now and then to yell at us. It was like being told off at school. The three of us fell into guilty silence, avoiding eye contact and flushing

red. Calvin pointed his finger at me and Kaye. "If you two can't get along, you can both start looking for new jobs. It's disruptive, it's unprofessional and I'm sick of it."

We both shot each other dark looks and mumbled insincere apologies. Lawrence cleared his throat and produced another cigarette from inside his velvet jacket. "Cigarette break," he said.

I leapt up. "Me too." I darted outside before Kaye could object, leaving her to whine at Calvin.

Outside, Lawrence and I slipped down the alley running between Inked and the next shop—a vintage record store—and I kicked the wall in frustration, wishing I could let loose with a full-on howl. I could feel one bubbling away in my lungs, waiting to erupt.

"She's been completely out of order today," I fumed. "I can't deal with her on top of everything else."

Lawrence lit up, the smell of Silver Kiss drifting down the alley. "She's all talk, Ayla. It's this new bloke. She was dating a goth last year and all we got was self-harm and absinthe. As soon as she meets someone new, she'll stop."

I wet my lips, tasting the cigarette smoke. It was thick, cloying and made me want to spit to clear my mouth. I couldn't imagine what it would be like with aconite in. Surely it would just clog up your senses, slow everything down? Why would a wolf enjoy that feeling? I thought of Oscar's wild mood swings and couldn't imagine enjoying that either. Being a teenager was difficult enough without adding drugs to the mix.

While Lawrence finished his cigarette, I checked my phone, hoping for something from Shannon.

There was nothing, of course. No personal calls during work hours for Shannon, even on a Sunday. I shouldn't have been disappointed, but I was anyway. I considered texting her but lost my nerve halfway through the message and cancelled it. I didn't want to seem clingy and neurotic, even if I was. It was only a couple of hours until we closed; then I could head home and try to get her to talk to me properly.

I tapped my foot nervously. What if she said she was truly miserable here? The thought made me sick.

Lawrence nudged me. "Penny for 'em."

"Thinking about Shannon."

"You've got to chill out, you know. One little fight isn't the end of the world."

"I know!" Of course I knew. But this wasn't just one little fight. This was me nearly drowning, this was feral wolves and drugs and missing kids, Alpha Humans and then one little fight. All of which made for one big mess and I wasn't sure how we were going to clean it up.

* * *

Shannon was sitting on the living room floor surrounded by paperwork when I got home. I loitered in the doorway, waiting for her to notice me and studying the papers. All stuff from Molly Brady's case: photos, notes, newspaper cuttings. Shannon was absorbed—or ignoring me—so I cleared my throat. She looked up and smiled. My heart caught as her smile faltered.

"Hey," she said. "You alright?"

"Not really." I sat down opposite her, staring at the carpet. "I've had a shit day. What time are we supposed to be at Eddie's?"

"Sevenish he said." She shuffled the papers together, clearly just for something to do than because she needed to.

"So are we going to talk?" I asked. "We've got a couple of hours."

She set the papers down and looked at me squarely. "I was terrified last night," she said. "That graffiti, you being missing, it scared the hell out of me, Ayla, after what happened with Adam and...everything."

Everything meant Hesketh, the police officer who'd skinned Adam and used the wolf strap he made to transform himself into a freakish wolf-monster. Shannon hadn't seen it—she'd been nursing broken ribs from our run-in with Alpha Humans, but she'd heard, of course. Glory had delighted in telling the gory details to anyone who would listen.

I hadn't thought of that last night. I didn't really think I'd

come close to dying with Hesketh, not the way I had when I'd plunged into that frigid water and felt it rush into my lungs.

I swallowed and traced abstract patterns in the worn carpet. "I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I. I said some horrible things, I know. I didn't really mean them, but you scared me. I never worried about you before we moved here, not like that." She reached across the small space between us and touched my hand. The contact was like a bolt of lightning to my starved senses and I shuffled closer to her. "I worried about human things before," she said. "Like, what if you got bored of me? What if we couldn't pay our rent? Stuff like that. Now I worry about werewolf stuff, like what if some stupid Pack problem drags you away from me? What if you get killed? I don't know how to cope with that."

"Shannon." My throat closed up and tears stung at my eyes. I wiped them away hurriedly. "Pack is..." I stopped myself, trying to find the right words and realizing I didn't have them. I hadn't moved back here for the Pack. I'd moved back for Vince and my parents, for the chance to mend my relationship with my family. I shook my head. "It's not even about Pack."

"But all this has happened because of the Pack," she insisted.

I rubbed my throbbing temples. "I know."

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know."

She sighed and wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tightly. I buried my face in her hair, nuzzling her neck. "Maybe we're being silly," she said.

"Maybe."

She released me and kissed my nose. "Hungry? We should eat before we go."

Food was the last thing I wanted, but I nodded anyway. It was a bit of domestic normality, Shannon cooking up spaghetti Bolognese while I fussed over the mess she was making. For an hour or so, it was like nothing had happened and I think we both began to relax again. We lingered over the food,

putting off the inevitable as long as we could. But towards seven, the meal was gone and the washing up was done and we had to go and meet the alphas.

Twelve

EDDIE'S PLACE WAS a COZY little cottage at the edge of the city, full of family photos and boasting the one luxury I truly envied him—an open fire place. The crackle and spit of flames and the woodsy smell of smoke filled the small living room, creating a palpable atmosphere of warmth and welcome. Eddie sat in an ancient rocking chair by the fire, cradling a glass of Scotch, a cat on his lap. I gave the cat a double take—as a rule cats and dogs don't like werewolves. This scraggy black mog purred away contentedly though, tail swishing against Eddie's thigh.

His wife was out for the evening, he told us. "Giving us some privacy. Moira should be along soon."

Shannon took the other fireside chair while I prowled the low-ceilinged room, studying the photos with unabashed interest. Eddie and his wife, Angie, had two kids and several grandchildren, making them an unusually fertile couple. Their offspring's lives were charted in glorious color all around the room; every birthday, every school sports day and Christmas party. Other Pack alphas featured in several of the photos. Seeing them felt like a dig at me, stupid as that sounds. A reminder that whatever my reasons for coming home, ultimately it was all about the Pack and always would be.

For a second I thought I understood why some wolves went feral. The absolute freedom they must have...

The doorbell rang, breaking that chain of thought before I could take it any further. Eddie shooed his cat and went to answer the door, returning with Moira Clayton.

I inhaled sharply as the older woman entered, catching

the scent of peonies and tulips, reminding me of a holiday Shannon and I had taken in Amsterdam a few years ago. She was tall and slender, dressed immaculately. Her silvering hair was cropped short in what I thought of as a *no-nonsense* style. She looked like an ex-copper.

Her amber eyes flicked over me and rested on Shannon. "Ms Ryan?" she asked.

Shannon stood to shake her hand. "Ms Clayton. Nice to meet you."

"Moira, please." Moira turned to me. "And you must be Ayla." She offered me her hand and I shook it, wary without knowing why.

"Well." Eddie clapped. "Formalities done. Let's get down to business. Shannon, you spoke to Molly Brady today, I gather?"

She nodded and sat down again, opening her file and pulling out a sheet of paper covered with her illegible notes. "I spent most of the morning with her and Tina. Molly still claims to have no memory of what happened to her and she certainly didn't say anything that we can tie to the feral Ayla met."

Met. Nice way of putting it. I stood behind Shannon to peer over her shoulder, years of practice enabling me to decipher her scrawl. "But she did give up the name of her dealer?"

Shannon nodded. "A wolf called Sly. No surname. I expect whoever he is, he deals to all the wolves."

"And unless he's going by an alias, he's not one of our Pack," Moira said. "I'd assume an alias, however, especially for a drug dealer. He's probably got a record already." She bit her thumbnail, a meditative expression on her sharp face. "Any clues as to where we can find this Sly?"

"Molly always met him in a place called Happy Jack's." Shannon looked at the alphas. "Any ideas?"

"It's a nightclub. Trashy, nasty little cesspit. I'm not surprised Molly was hanging out there." Eddie scowled. His cat jumped back on his lap and mewled shrilly, as if in agreement. "Well, that's your starting place then."

"You want Shannon and Moira to go after this Sly?" I asked, gripping the back of Shannon's chair so hard the wood

creaked under my fingers. "A werewolf drug dealer?"

"I'm not proposing they go and corner him and shake him down, no." Eddie stroked the cat until it settled on his lap and started purring loudly. "But we need to know who's selling this Silver Kiss and it sounds like Happy Jack's is a good place to start."

I shifted my weight, trying to control the tide of irritation and worry rising in me. "Shouldn't we send the police in? I can't see them appreciating us busting drug dealers on their behalf."

"We're not busting anyone," Eddie said with heavy patience, as if I was being deliberately dense. "We're...investigating. Shannon is a private investigator, after all."

"And she'll be perfectly safe with me," Moira added. She smiled. "I handled my fair share of dealers in my time."

Shannon twisted round in the chair to pat my hand reassuringly. "I'll be fine."

"Of course she will," Eddie agreed. "And you'll be too busy to worry about her anyway."

"Why?" I looked up from Shannon's sweet smile—the first real smile she'd given me since *the argument*—to meet Eddie's cool, calculating gaze. "What will I be doing?"

"Showing me where you fought the feral."

My stomach lurched. "You want me to take you there?"

He nodded. "Me and a couple of other alphas." He wagged a finger at me. "You should have told us immediately when you saw him in the city, Ayla. Especially when he was bullying one of our cubs."

I flushed. "I know."

"And after what happened to you the other night—"

"Who told you that?" I demanded, clutching the chair again. *Pack grapevine*. There was no bloody privacy in this city.

"Word gets around," Eddie replied. "Glenn couldn't wait to tell Joel and Joel told his parents, who told me."

For a moment I wanted to throttle Glory, even though Eddie's source was no surprise. Glory and Joel told each other everything and Joel's parents were thick with the city alphas. Still, it annoyed me that Glory had turned our fight with the

feral into some juicy anecdote for Joel's entertainment. "Great," I said through gritted teeth. "When?"

"Tomorrow night," Eddie said. "You remember the way, don't you?"

The route was tattooed on my memory. "And when are Moira and Shannon going after Sly?"

They exchanged looks. "I'd like to get moving as soon as possible," Moira said.

"No time like the present," Shannon agreed. She looked to Eddie. "Will this place be open on a Sunday night?"

Eddie shrugged. "Most places are these days. Twenty-four hour drinking and everything."

"We'll go," Moira decided. "Even if it's quiet, we might find something."

"Can't hurt," Eddie agreed. "We want this dealt with quickly. No more Molly Bradys."

"How was Molly?" I asked Shannon as she stood, pulling on her coat.

"She's doing okay," she replied. "Tina's smothering her a little, but she's okay."

"Do you think she's telling the truth about not remembering what happened?" Moira asked. "Or is she lying?"

Shannon pursed her lips, considering. "Honestly, I think she's lying, but she was being very cagey anyway, with Tina hovering over her. She didn't want to say too much in front of her mum. That's the impression I got."

"Probably knows how fast it would get around town if she did open her mouth," I muttered.

Eddie's weather beaten face creased in disapproval at my words. "Can I have a quick word in private, Ayla?" he asked.

My spine stiffened. A private word with an alpha was akin to being sent to the headmaster's office. I was in for a caning. Metaphorically speaking, I hoped. "Go on," I told Shannon when she lingered in the doorway, waiting for me. "I won't be long."

She gave me a nervous smile and left the cozy warmth of the living room, Moira behind her. The front door slammed a few seconds later and Eddie sighed heavily. "I was really pleased when you attended Lupercali, Ayla. It meant so much to your parents to have you take that step, make your homecoming official."

"It meant a lot to me too," I said, unsure where this was going, but not liking any of the directions I could imagine. "I'm happy to be home again."

"But I don't get the feeling you're happy to be Pack again." He scratched his cat's head and it closed its eyes in pleasure, drool dripping from its whiskers. "You miss being a lone wolf?"

I chewed my lip, thinking over my answer. My hesitation in itself was enough answer for Eddie. He nodded knowingly. "Hard coming home, when you're used to your freedom, making your own rules," he said. "I know. I wasn't always old, you know. I was young like you once, headstrong and sure I knew it all. Knew better than my alphas."

I opened my mouth to object to that, but he waved me silent. "I know Pack life can seem stifling, Ayla, especially after you've been out on your own. But you've only been back five minutes and it would break your folks' hearts if you took off again."

"I know." I did. But... "Shannon isn't happy here."

"I see." He sounded like he really did. He stared into the fireplace, watching the flames leap and flicker around the kindling. "Well, you'll either work it out or you won't. Go on, get off to this club with her." He clucked his tongue. "You won't believe she's safe unless you're glued to her side, will you?"

I ducked my head and hurried out without a backwards glance. Eddie made it sound so simple, like there was nothing to lose. *You'll either work it out or you won't.* Easy for him to say, with his quaint little cottage and fat, drooling cat.

Shannon and Moira were waiting in our car; Moira in the passenger seat, leaving me to slide in the back. I had an odd sense of playing gooseberry, which I stomped on quickly. Shannon met my eyes in the rearview mirror. "Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine." Even if Moira hadn't been there, I wouldn't have felt like discussing Eddie's homespun wisdom with Shannon just then. "So we're off to Happy Jack's?"

"If you're okay with that," Shannon said. She wet her lips so they gleamed in the darkness. I imagined pressing mine to them like I might have done if I wasn't worried she'd push me away. "I'd like you to come," she added.

"Might make us look a bit less suspicious," Moira agreed. "From what I hear, Jack's doesn't really cater to women my age." She smiled ruefully.

I strapped on my seatbelt. "Let's hit the town then."

* * *

Even for a Sunday, Happy Jack's was busy, people and wolves packed in at the bar, yelling to be heard over the offensively loud music. The place was dark and dank, only a few wild strobe lights piercing the gloom, illuminating the customers in dizzying flashes of red and green. It was a pretty even mix of humans and wolves from what I could tell, the earthy scent of Pack almost lost under the miasma of body odor and cigarettes. The stink of Silver Kiss mixed with stale beer and spirits hit me the second we stepped inside. I felt dirty just stepping inside and the blend of overpowering scents made my head spin and my eyes water.

I had to shriek at the dead-eyed barmaid to get her attention over the thumping bass of the sound system. Through a frustrating combination of hand gestures and more screaming, I managed to get us three beers. By the time I had them in hand, I just wanted to throw them at the woman. Moira took one sniff of hers and growled in disgust.

"Smells like cat piss," she muttered, pushing her glass away. I sipped mine cautiously and decided she was probably right. Shannon didn't even touch hers, just sat on the sticky leather barstool, scanning the room carefully.

"Seen any clues?" I bellowed in her ear.

"No chance. This really is a cesspit."

Moira leaned across Shannon to ask me, "can you smell that?"

No need to ask what she was talking about. The scent of

Silver Kiss was as familiar to me as Shannon's perfume by now, the smoke tangling around me like a net, clouding my senses and making my head pound. I nodded, a keen sense of irritation riding me. Why the hell had I agreed to come to this hole?

"Mingle," Moira ordered me. "See if you can track down anyone who might be selling based on their scent."

Her brusque tone set my teeth on edge, challenged my wolf. "And what will you be doing?" I asked archly.

She glared at me, her own wolf rising up behind her eyes. "Looking for clues," she said coolly. "Obviously."

I itched to snap at her, show her I wasn't subordinate to her, even if she was an alpha and a bloody ex-Scotland Yard detective. My wolf wouldn't be submissive to her, not when I knew full well I could take her in a fight, the old mutt. I inhaled deeply, sucking in a lung full of tainted air, heavy with Silver Kiss and alcohol fumes, and let Moira see I wasn't intimidated. I bared my teeth, the wolf in me close to the surface and alive with the toxic emotions that had been eating at me for the past two days.

Moira snarled back, eyes snapping with her own anger. It was such a sudden shift in her mood that it threw me. I'd been spoiling for a fight all day, but Moira had seemed so in control just moments ago, unruffled and unfazed. I inhaled again, doubting my own rage and its sudden intensity.

Shannon rested her hand on my knee. "Calm down," she warned me. "We're all friends here, remember."

I blinked, my vision suddenly hazy. Shannon's voice was a balm, soothing my irrational anger. I pushed the wolf down with an effort. She wanted to be free, wanted to run riot. I looked at Moira and saw the same internal struggle going on. She shook her head, the fire leaving her eyes, and she laughed sharply. "God, did we just get a contact high?"

"Did we?" I scanned the bar, picking out a few wolves who were smoking Silver Kiss. The place was rank with it—the air heavy with the fumes. If anyone in here was smoking the aconite mix, it was filtering into mine and Moira's lungs with every breath we took. How long did it take to get addicted to a

drug? Maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea. I tugged at my lip ring, trying to breathe through my mouth. Shannon laughed at me and nudged me in the ribs. "You look like a fish."

And just like that, I was pissed off again. I jumped off my bar stool. "I'm going to mingle," I said shortly and left her with Moira.

Moving deeper into the morass of smokers probably wasn't a good idea either. If inhaling Silver Kiss smoke had me and Moira at each other's throats, mixing with the smokers might have me ripping their throats out. The idea chilled me and excited the wolf at the same time. Our last hunt had been thwarted and there was a small, but growing sense of bloodlust in me that I needed to satisfy. A full moon was usually the time for that, the time when wolves gave in completely to their animal nature and went out to rip and tear into their prey, tasting the sweet gush of hot blood and savoring the snap of fragile bones.

But full moon was weeks away. And I was not an animal tonight. I chanted it to myself as I elbowed aside the other customers, no idea where I was going, just knowing I had to move, had to burn off the crazy mix of emotions swelling inside me.

God, if I was this edgy, what were the actual smokers like? I tensed, expecting a brawl to break out any second. When a clammy hand slammed down on my shoulder, I spun, fist ready to swing. I pulled back just in time when I saw Oscar behind me, looming out of the strobe lights like a zombie.

"Hey, it's Ayla, right? Vince's friend, right?" He grinned widely at me.

I nodded mutely, shocked at the change in him. When I had last seen him, a handful of days ago? He'd been fit and healthy-looking, a young wolf on the cusp of adulthood. Now he looked...tired. Worn out. Not that physically different, not malnourished the way Molly had been when we found her. But the same aura of desperation clung to him. His hair was greasy and lank, his skin sweaty and pale. His rumpled clothes stank, not just of Silver Kiss, but also of piss and perspiration.

"Are you okay?" I asked needlessly.

"Yeah, I'm good, I'm pretty good." He nodded, blood-shot eyes darting around the bar nervously. "So, like, I've never seen you in here before. Hey, should we get a drink?" He grabbed my elbow and my wolf recoiled at his touch.

"I don't want a drink," I told him.

"Cool, I'll just have a vodka and coke then." He propelled me to the bar, ignoring my protestations. "You'll get this round, right? I'm short on cash."

Spending it all on Silver Kiss, I guessed. I shoved a handful of coins towards the barmaid. Oscar downed his drink like a man dying of thirst and slammed the empty glass on the bar. "Shit, that's bad," he gasped. "Get me another?"

"I don't think so," I said, suddenly on edge again. Something had changed—something in his body language had become more aggressive, less nervy, fuelled by the blast of alcohol.

"Oh come on, one more. I'll pay you back. Fuck, my dad'll pay you back. Come on, Ayla, I need a drink. I'm having a fucking shitty day." Oscar glowered at me, his wolf challenging me the way Moira's had moments ago. And once again my wolf rose to the challenge.

"No," I said firmly, the slightest snarl in my voice. "I don't think you need more alcohol."

"What are you, my fucking mother?" He shifted closer to me, getting right in my face. He was so much taller than me, I couldn't help feel a little intimidated and that just pissed me off. I was not going to be pushed around by a foul-mouthed child.

"Back off, Oscar," I growled.

"Or what?"

For a long, dark second we were deadlocked, neither willing to back down or step up and make it a real fight. Then Oscar threw his hands up with a high-pitched laugh that grated at my ears. "Fucking hell, Ayla, I was joking! Relax, have some fun. I bet you never have fun." He stepped back, giving me breathing room. I didn't dare relax though. Every second I spent in this dingy pit wound me tighter and tighter, the

smell of Silver Kiss racing through me, its aconite afterburn pushing at my wolf.

"I need some fresh air," I said and shoved past him to the fire exit at the side of the bar. Stepping into the cold dark was paradise after the stuffy innards of the bar. The air was clean, free of the wretched smells of Happy Jack's and my whole body shivered with gratitude. My head still felt foggy, like I was hungover, but my wolf eased off a little.

Oscar followed me out, hands jammed into his pockets, that nervous aura back. "So why are you here, anyway? Doesn't seem like your place. I guessed you'd be at a gay bar or something."

"Why are you here?" I countered, ignoring his last comment as too stupid to answer.

"Looking for someone." He glanced over his shoulder as if expecting said someone to appear out of the shadows. "I owe this guy some money and he was supposed to be here tonight. Christ, I could do with some Silky."

Silky. Cute. "Loads of people in there are smoking it," I pointed out. "Don't tell me you can't bum a fag off one of them."

"Nobody shares the real stuff." He spun on the spot, kicked the fire exit door. "You ask another wolf for a drag and you just get snapped at. Or punched." He rolled up his grubby shirtsleeve to reveal a lurid yellow-green bruise on his arm. "That was last night. I tried to steal a pack off someone." He laughed wildly. "Man, he was so mad, Ayla! It was crazy!"

I took a step back, assessing Oscar more carefully. "How long since you last had any of the real stuff?"

"Couple of days. Not long. Feels like forever. You don't have any, do you?" he asked eagerly. When I shook my head, he growled impatiently. "Well why the fuck are you here? Nobody comes here unless they're buying or selling!"

"Who do you buy from?" I asked, heart skipping a little at his words. I guessed it was the same person he owed money—and the mysterious Sly seemed like a safe bet. If I could get Oscar to point me towards the dealer, Shannon wouldn't have to trawl this shit hole looking for him herself.

"Guy called Sly," he said, making my heart leap now. "He's supposed to be here for his money. I'm telling you, Ayla, nobody else has the good shit. I'd crawl over broken glass for a proper hit right now."

I sniffed in disgust. "That's pretty pathetic, Oscar."

"I don't care. It's so good." His eyes misted over. "Hey, if you come back in with me, we can get someone to give us some, right? Two wolves are better than one, right? We can just fucking make them give us a hit."

I had no intention of going back inside. Just the thought made me want to puke. I couldn't imagine what sort of buzz Oscar was getting from Silver Kiss that he craved it so much. I just felt angry and nauseous. "I'm not staying," I told him. "I'm just getting my girlfriend and we're going home."

He snarled at me, that wild aggression returning to his posture. Then he dropped it again, plastering a big, fake smile on his face. "Well then how about a small loan, just until next week? Just so I can buy some Silky after I've paid Sly off. I'll share with you."

"I'm not interested," I told him. "Go home, Oscar." I turned away, planning to brave the bar once more and drag Shannon out. If Sly wasn't here, we weren't staying. Anyway, maybe it would be enough for Eddie to know that Happy Jack's was Sly's usual hunting ground. I'd meant what I'd said earlier; drug dealing was a police issue, not a Pack one. Shannon didn't need to get involved anymore than she already was.

Strong hands grabbed my jacket collar and Oscar hauled me round again, eyes wild and wide. "Just a small loan," he growled, dragging me in so he could shove one hand into my jeans pocket. "You've got to have something. I need it, Ayla, I need it."

His touch revolted me and I reacted without thinking, yanking free and slamming my fist into his nose. Blood spurted over my hand and Oscar reeled back, shock on his face. "You cow!"

"Don't you dare touch me again," I snapped, hot anger flaming in me, calling the wolf once more. Maybe it was the Silver Kiss smoke in my lungs, but I suddenly felt dizzy and punchy again. If Oscar so much as breathed at me, I might just rip his throat out.

He jabbed me in the shoulder. "There, touched you. What are you going to do about it?"

I slapped his hand away, hovering on a knife's edge between walking away and turning violent. My wolf soared up in me, howling for violence, driven to breaking point. I bunched my hands into fists, feeling my nails prick at my skin as they elongated and sharpened, changing. "I mean it, you little—"

"Oscar!"

We both whirled at the voice. A thick, gravelly voice, like the owner wasn't used to talking. He leaned against the wall at the end of the small alley, masked by shadows. It didn't matter. I didn't need to see him to know it was the feral. His musk was unmistakable and it pushed me right over that edge.

I rushed him.

Thirteen

THE FERAL STRAIGHTENED UP, BRACING himself for my attack, but I never reached him. Oscar tackled me from behind and we went crashing to the concrete. I hit the ground face first with a short howl, scraping my cheek and chin. My skin burned and I struggled to roll over. But Oscar had my arms pinned to my side and all I could really do was thrash my legs and snap at the empty air.

The feral crouched in front of me, giving me my first clear look at him. Even in human form he looked wild, rough. Dark stubble lined his narrow face and his hair was disheveled and lank. His amber eyes shone and I noticed with a start that they were wolf eyes, alien in his human face. He grinned at me, baring sharp canines. He'd spent too much time in wolf shape.

"Hello again," he growled at me, then jerked his head at Oscar, a silent signal from a dominant wolf to a submissive.

Oscar let me up and I jumped to my feet with a snarl, shoving him away from me.

"Bloody runt," I muttered, rubbing my face. Oscar bared his teeth at me and I thought he might go for me until the feral stepped in, yanking Oscar aside.

"Got my money?" he asked. Oscar paled visibly.

So this was Sly. It sort of made sense and sort of confused me at the same time. Why the hell would a feral get into drug dealing? What did he need the money for? Ferals lived wild—no need for the material trappings that urban wolves had. I pushed down my burning desire to slam his head into the wall as payback for the other night and watched Oscar instead.

"Yeah, I got it. Got most of it." Oscar dug in his pockets and handed Sly a worn brown envelope. "I'm a bit short."

"How short?" Sly opened the envelope and inhaled, like he could count the money by the smell of the notes.

"Not much," Oscar said quickly. "Couple of hundred, but that's okay right?"

Sly backhanded him with a snarl. Oscar's head snapped back and he staggered into the wall, whimpering. I growled, forgetting that I'd wanted to do the same thing a few seconds ago. Oscar was Pack, Sly wasn't. It was that simple to my wolf. I caught Sly's wrist when he went to smack Oscar again.

"Don't," I warned.

Sly turned those inhuman eyes on me and bared his teeth again. I had a sudden flashback to our fight, the frigid cold of the river. I didn't want to fight him again—I doubted my chances were any better in human form than they had been in wolf. But I didn't want to see him bully Oscar either.

"Got a problem, bitch?" he asked me.

I squeezed his wrist. "Yeah, you, you bastard. What the hell are you doing, anyway?"

He pulled free with little effort. "Kid owes me money. Not your business."

"It's Pack business when you start beating up Pack kids," I said.

Oscar crept around behind me, clinging to my coat. Funny how we were suddenly united.

"I'll get the rest," he whispered. "I can it get from my dad, I just need another day, that's all. Come on, Sly, there's five hundred quid there. That buys me something, right?" he pleaded. "Just a couple of smokes."

Or maybe we weren't united. The idiot child was still only interested in getting his drugs. I shook him off and faced Sly. "The Pack knows what you're up to," I told him. "You're not going to be able to set foot in this city again after tonight."

Sly spat at my feet. "I don't answer to Pack." He moved towards us and I snarled, flexing my shifted hands so the streetlights gleamed off my claws. Sly stared at me, eyes narrow and wary. "I'm not scared of you, bitch."

"Your mistake," I replied.

We sized each other up as we had before. I still didn't fancy my chances against him, but at least in human form I could kick him in the groin. That wasn't an option for wolves, really. For a few nasty seconds, I thought he would lunge at me. A low bass growl rumbled through him and he arched his body as if about to pounce.

I tensed, ready for his attack and trying not to think about our last fight.

Then an ambulance shot past Happy Jack's, siren blasting, and Sly leapt away from me as if burned. Oscar took advantage of his distraction to dart back through the fire exit into the club, leaving me staring at Sly's back.

I wet my lips, hesitated a second, then charged him.

Attacking him from behind was cowardly. I couldn't stop myself though. Here was a chance to work off all the anger and aggression I'd been carrying around since our last encounter. I hit him hard, knocking him to the ground as Oscar had me. Sly roared and flipped us over so I was pinned beneath him and bit into my collarbone, tearing flesh from bone.

I howled and slammed my hand into his neck, shoving his head away from my shoulder. He snapped at my fingers and I head-butted him as hard as I could. The impact made my skull crunch with pain and Sly reared back with a shout. For a second we both reeled, then he leaned in to snap at my face.

His sharpened teeth snagged on my lip ring and he yanked hard. Agony shot through me, racing through my head and down my spine so I could feel it in my toes as he tore the ring out and my lip ripped.

I shrieked, pulled back and head-butted him again, then snapped at him, catching hair. Sly twisted his head, trying to avoid my teeth and by pure, dumb luck, I clamped onto on his ear and bit down until my teeth clashed together. Pain rocked through me in a second wave as I bit into my split lip.

The taste of flesh flooded my mouth and I gagged, spitting out blood and probably bits of my own lip. Sly smacked me hard, sending stars spiraling across my field of vision. I

closed my eyes and gagged again, waiting for him to rip my throat out.

Noise and chaos spilled out into the alley and footsteps thundered around my head. I heard shouting, swearing. I dimly picked out Shannon's voice somewhere in the babble and opened my eyes again. A knot of people surrounded us, all yelling and waving their arms. Sly leapt off me and shot off out of the alley like his tail was on fire. A few people separated from the crowd to run after him. Someone leaned down and offered me a hand up.

I grabbed it and let them pull me to my feet. My rescuer was a wolf; beyond that I couldn't say anything about him. I was almost blind with pain. I slapped my hand over my bleeding mouth and staggered away from him, hot and dizzy. I leaned against the wall, pressing my grazed cheek to the cool stone and fought the urge to throw up.

"Ayla!" Shannon shoved through the crowd to reach me, sheer panic etched on her face. "Oh God, Ayla..." She pried my hand away from my face and gasped, turning chalk-white. "Ambulance!" she called. "Someone call an ambulance!"

I tried to speak but it hurt too much. I settled for sagging against the wall, trying to figure out what had happened, mentally kicking myself for letting Sly get away. I glanced down the alley but he was gone and the few who'd started after him had already lost interest and were milling around me instead.

"What happened?" someone asked. "Who was that?"

Oscar elbowed his way to the front of the swarm. "Ayla, fucking hell, you crazy bitch!" He was pale and shaking, eyes too bright. "Did he take my money?"

A surge of hatred shot through me. I balled up my fist and punched him in the head. He hit the ground like a stone and people started screaming and yelling again. I closed my eyes, clapped my hand over my throbbing mouth again and wished them all away.

It was hard to convince Shannon I didn't need an ambulance when I couldn't speak properly. Once the crowd decided the theatrics were over and went back into Jack's, I was left

with her, Moira, a groaning Oscar and a killer headache. *And mouthache. Lipache. Something.*

"You've got to go to hospital," Shannon insisted as I limped down the alley away from the club. "Ayla, please!" She trotted after me, anxiety radiating off her. Moira helped Oscar to his feet and they trailed after us, Oscar alternatively muttering about assault and asking Moira for money.

I shook my head at Shannon, made a slashing motion with my hands. I couldn't stomach the thought of hospital. I just wanted to go home and clean myself up.

"The police then," Shannon said. "We should report this—you were assaulted! This is grievous bodily harm!"

Again I shook my head and turned to Moira, hoping she would get it, one wolf to another.

"Ayla will have healed by the time we get her to hospital," Moira said, apparently picking up my silent plea. "We should get Oscar home first, anyway."

"I'm not going home! I'm not a baby!" Oscar pulled free from her and glowered at me. "I should bloody sue you, hitting me like that. That was an unprovoked attack! And I still haven't got any bloody Silky. Fucking waste of a night!"

"So the wolf attacking Ayla was your dealer?" Moira asked.

"Yeah and fat fucking chance he'll be back now." Oscar fidgeted with his shirt, twitchy again. "Where else am I supposed to get Silky now?"

"Where did Molly Brady get it?" Moira asked.

Oscar shrugged. "Everyone gets it from Sly. And now Ayla's cocked that up, hasn't she?"

I couldn't have cared less and if I'd been able to speak without searing agony, I would have told him that. Shannon glanced over her shoulder, frowning at him. "He can get himself home, surely? If Ayla won't go to hospital, I'm taking her straight home and I don't want to drag some junkie dog around with me."

Oscar flinched at the *dog* comment. "Fine, fuck off. I don't care. I hope Sly gave her rabies." He gave me the finger and slunk off, mumbling under his breath.

Moira watched him go, eyes narrowed. "He's going to get himself into trouble tonight," she said.

"I don't care," Shannon replied. She slid her arm round my shoulders. "It's not our problem."

We made our way back to the car in silence, dodging the few gawkers who stopped to get a look at my bloodied, swollen face. My cheek flared and ached where Sly had hit me and my whole body stung. I was sick of getting beaten up by that feral. Next time he could just eat Oscar alive if that's what he wanted.

* * *

It was close to midnight when we got home. Shannon had dropped Moira off along the way and spent the rest of the ride checking that I was sure I didn't want to go to hospital. I just kept shaking my head.

Moira was wrong; I wouldn't be healed by the time I got home, but there wasn't much a hospital could do to speed up the process. All I wanted was a hot bath, not hours sitting around in the emergency room waiting for some nurse to poke me and shove painkillers down my throat.

Our street was in darkness when Shannon pulled into the driveway. I dragged myself out the car and limped to the front door, waiting for her to catch up. My night sight being keener, I saw the graffiti on the door before she did.

"This is exactly what I was talking about before," she began as she joined me. "We—" She trailed off as she saw what I was staring at. "Oh hell."

That about summed it up. Once again, the Alpha Humans' insignia was sprayed across the woodwork, this time with the legend *abomination* painted above it. It was chillingly similar to the scene of Adam's murder. The same word had been sprayed on the wall over his body. My heart skipped and Shannon gripped my hand tight enough to make me wince.

"We're calling the police," she said, voice tight but determined. "Right after I've taken care of you." She unlocked the door and ushered me inside.

Her hands were shaking as she sat me down in the kitchen. I stared at the tabletop, listening to her messing around in the cupboards, looking for the first aid supplies she kept. *Abomination*. The word was branded into my mind's eye. Without thinking I bit my lip, then howled. "Fuck!"

"Ayla!" Shannon was next to me instantly, a damp cloth in hand. "Let me see." She moved my hand from my mouth and pressed the cloth to the wound. It had stopped bleeding in the car and now I'd opened it up again. "You might need stitches," she told me, sitting down next to me and twining her fingers with mine.

"Be alright in the morning," I managed to say around the cloth. "Should shift." The idea of shifting made my head ache even worse though.

"Do you want anything? Painkillers? A drink?

"Bath?" I asked hopefully.

"I'll run one for you." She stroked my hair. "I'm sorry, Ayla. I'm so sorry."

I looked at her questioningly. It wasn't her fault I had to go picking fights with bigger, badder wolves.

"I shouldn't have agreed to help the alphas. I should have just left things. I just wanted..." She waved her hands, as if the words had escaped her. "I'm sorry I said all those things. I didn't mean any of it. I'd die if I lost you, Ayla. I'd just... I couldn't cope." Her blue eyes gleamed with tears and my heart squeezed. I gripped her hand, not too hard, but hard enough to tell her I was sorry too.

"Love you," I said.

"I love you." She kissed my forehead and rose. "I'll go run you a bath."

I slumped back in my chair, pressing the cloth harder to my lip. Damn that feral. I'd liked that lip ring. I huffed, thoughts switching between the Alpha Humans' little love note and Shannon. Did Shannon's words mean things were okay again? I'd thought we were heading for another argument there on the doorstep, before we saw the graffiti. She'd been about to say *I told you so*, hadn't she?

I ran my free hand through my hair, trying to push

everything aside. We could deal with it in the morning. I did agree with her on at least one point: she should never have agreed to help Eddie.

A few minutes later I hauled myself upstairs. Shannon was just turning off the taps as I entered the bathroom. Fragrant steam rose from the tub, perfuming the room with orange blossom. I stripped and plunged in, moaning in bliss as the hot water hit my skin. Shannon perched on the edge of the bath, finger-combing my hair for me.

"I'll tell Eddie tomorrow we're done," she said.

I nodded, ducked my head under water and rose up again, shaking off like a...well, like a wolf. The water stung my lip, but it was a better sort of pain, a clean pain. I touched the split lightly, winced and reached for the shampoo.

Shannon took the bottle from me and started lathering up my hair. "I can't take the stress of seeing you hurt like that again."

"S'not great for me either," I said, closing my eyes. Her fingers working on my scalp felt delicious, diffusing my thoughts and melting away some of the aches.

"No, of course not." She fell silent for a minute, stroking my bruised face with soapy fingers. "I really think we should consider moving back home," she said finally. "I know this city has a reputation for good human-wolf relations, but this graffiti...and after yesterday too... I don't feel safe here, Ayla."

The graffiti freaked me out the least. Alpha Humans weren't really that active here; certainly less so since Adam's murder. I was fairly confident graffiti was the worst we would get from them. Sly was the bigger threat. Not to us personally, but to the Pack. Whatever he was doing affected the whole Pack and while a part of me agreed with Shannon, a bigger part of me felt I couldn't just run away.

That was old ground now though. Saying it would just turn into another row about Pack that I didn't want to have right now. So I just nodded and enjoyed the feeling of her hands working on me, the hot water lapping over my tired body and the scent of flowers wafting around me.

When the water grew cold, Shannon helped me out of the

bath and we went to bed. I fell asleep with her arms around me, hugging me like I might vanish in the night and I dreamed of blood-red graffiti and the gravelly howl of the feral.

* * *

The sound of my phone ringing broke the heavy fog of my sleep. I groped around on the bedside table for, knocking the damn thing under the bed in the process. I opened my eyes and rolled to the edge of the bed to reach under it. By the time I'd retrieved the phone it had stopped ringing. I swore and checked the caller ID.

Vince. For some reason a tremor of anxiety shook through me. Sitting up and brushing my hair from my eyes, I called him back. Next to me, Shannon muttered something unintelligible and snuggled closer to me, her face pressed against my thigh.

"Ayla, you okay?" Vince asked as soon as he picked up. "I heard about last night."

I grunted, not surprised. It was a wonder my parents weren't already hammering on the door demanding to check me over.

"I'm alright," I said, poking my lip gingerly. It stung, but it had scabbed over. I'd have a lovely long scar when it healed. I should have shifted last night. "Just a bit sore."

"I've just got off the phone with Greg," he continued. "He's not opening up today—Oscar got home last night blazing drunk and smashed the pub up before disappearing again."

I remembered Moira's portentous words. "Yeah, he wasn't in good shape when I saw him."

"I've been telling Greg for days it would come to this, but he wouldn't listen," Vince continued. "Anyway, since I've got the day off today, I'll come over and cook you some lunch. Good food always works wonders when you're feeling rough."

Chicken soup for the werewolf soul. "Thanks that would be nice." I glanced at my watch. Shannon and I had both overslept, unsurprisingly. It was nearly noon. "I need to call the police," I realized, remembering the graffiti. "Alpha Humans

tagged our house last night."

"Shit." Vince was silent for a second. "Are you and Shannon okay?"

I looked down at my sleeping girlfriend, brushed a lock of hair from her face. "I think so. It's just paint." I didn't mention that it was the second lot of paint. "You haven't heard about anyone else getting tagged, have you?"

"No, it's all been fairly quiet since Adam." I could picture Vince shrugging. "I think all the media attention after that sent them underground again."

"Yeah." Alpha Humans had a bigger following elsewhere, in cities where wolves weren't as welcome as they were here. Until Adam's murder, I hadn't heard any rumors of them being active here. Back where Shannon and I had lived before, there'd been the occasional attack or scuffle between Alpha Humans and wolves, but never anything really serious. There were other activist groups out there too; I guessed Kaye's People Matter was one of the newer ones. There was a werewolf group called Brother Moon that was dedicated to improving wolf-human relations in third world countries. None of it really interested me. I liked my little corner of the world as it was.

Except for times like now, when it was falling apart around me.

I realized Vince had fallen silent, waiting for me to respond. I couldn't remember what he'd said though, so I just said, "yeah. What time are you coming over?"

"Give me an hour. I need to stop and pick up some stuff and then I'll be straight there."

We hung up and I slid out of bed without waking Shannon. Three nights in a row of fighting, both physically and verbally, had left me tender and stiff and I yearned for a good run in wolf shape. Maybe Vince would be up for it later. I paused to examine myself in the mirror and was surprised to see I didn't look as bad as I felt. My mouth was a mess, scabbed and bruised, but the rest of me looked pretty normal. It didn't seem right somehow.

I called Inked to tell Cal I wouldn't be in today. He bitched and fussed and then gave up, telling me I'd lost a day's pay.

Feeling even lower, I dressed and slunk down to the kitchen to retrieve the bucket and sponge Shannon had used to clean up yesterday's graffiti. The street outside was empty as I began scrubbing the door clean; the kids at school and the parents at work. The silence grated on me.

An hour later, Vince showed up with a bag overflowing with meat, vegetables, herbs and oils, which he immediately dumped all over the pavement when he saw me.

"This is it then?" he asked unnecessarily, taking in the graffiti.

I stopped scrubbing and wiped my forehead, spilling warm, soapy water over myself in the process. "Yeah, this is it." My arms ached from scrubbing and I wasn't really making any headway. It would be quicker to paint the door blood-red and be done with it.

"Maybe Joel has a point about this neighborhood." Vince retrieved his shopping. "Come on, leave it. I'm making you citrus beef salad."

Shannon was pacing the kitchen when we went in, talking on her phone and gesturing wildly with her free hand. "Eddie, after what happened— No, no, it's not—" She caught my eye and made a despairing motion. "It's not okay, Eddie—Fine, come round. I won't change my mind." She slammed the phone down with a vicious curse. "You wolves and your bloody alphas."

"What's wrong with him?" Vince asked, spreading ingredients out across the sideboard.

She shrugged, running her hands through her tangled hair. "I told him I wasn't prepared to help anymore after last night and he told me I had an obligation to see the case through. An obligation! After Ayla gets mutilated by some psycho wolf! He's coming over here so we can *talk sensibly*."

"Well I'm not cooking for him," Vince said.

I moved to Shannon's side and squeezed her hand. "He can't make us do anything," I said. "We've done more than enough—let the alphas take care of it from here."

She nodded. "You do mean that, don't you? You're not going to roll over if Eddie shows his teeth or anything?"

"I mean it." I touched my lip and smiled ruefully at her. "I'll tell Eddie what we know about the feral and that's that."

Vince snorted as he rummaged through our cupboards. "You've been gone a long time, girlfriend."

Fourteen

Vince was DISHING UP HIS hot beef salad when Eddie arrived and despite his words, he was obliged to give a share to the alpha. Not that Eddie asked for it, exactly. He didn't have to. For a few awkward moments we all sat round the table in silence, eating and avoiding each other's eyes.

"Good food," Eddie said around a mouthful of noodles. "Really nice, Vince."

Vince grunted his thanks.

"And how are you this morning, Ayla?" Eddie asked me. "Moira told me about Happy Jack's. Nasty."

"Yeah," I said darkly, stabbing at a chunk of beef. "Nasty."

"Which is why we're not helping anymore," Shannon cut in. "I assume Moira told you that Ayla met the dealer and Oscar confirmed he's the only one dealing Silver Kiss. So now you know, you can go after him and we don't need to be involved any further."

"Or," I chipped in, "you can report it to the police and let them deal with Sly."

"The police aren't going to do anything," Eddie said. "Even the wolves on the force are reluctant to get involved, because Silver Kiss isn't illegal." He stressed the last few words carefully, as if we were small children who didn't quite get it.

"I don't get it," Vince said. "Why's a feral selling drugs anyway?"

I'd asked myself the same question last night and despite my resentment of Eddie right now, I looked to him for answers. He pursed his lips and shook his head. "I don't know. I can't imagine money's a factor—why would a feral need cash?" He waved his fork at Vince. "And it's not just round here, is it? That young wolf in Yorkshire who went missing a few weeks ago was using Silver Kiss too, it turns out."

"Any idea where he was getting it?" Shannon asked. I nudged her ankle with my foot, trying to remind her that we were backing out, not getting dragged further in.

"I have a theory," Eddie replied. "That's why we need to pin down this Sly, see what he knows, see where he's getting his supplies."

"Not we," I said. "Shannon and I aren't helping anymore."

Eddie didn't answer immediately, just toyed with his food and eyed me speculatively. I squirmed in my seat, waiting for the hammer to fall. "Saw the graffiti on the door," he said finally. "Alpha Humans?"

"Obviously."

"Wonder why they're targeting you two now. You've been back a while and had no trouble, haven't you?"

Shannon and I exchanged glances, a flush of worry creeping over me. "What are you getting at?" Shannon asked.

He winked at her. "You're not the only one capable of detecting, Ms Ryan. I've done my own share of poking around since this whole mess started." He tapped the edge of his plate with his knife. "My theory. That kid in Yorkshire was getting his drugs from an Alpha Humans member."

"What? Why?" I asked, my worry mutating into anger. I would like to have known that before Shannon and I agreed to get involved in this crappy farce of an investigation.

He nodded. "Bad werewolf publicity, you see? The aconite makes the wolves crazy, they start acting up in public and Alpha Humans can say see? Animals. Dangerous. And it's working—you've seen how these kids are acting when they've been taking this stuff. And your little punch-up at Jack's will attract plenty of negative publicity for us, Ayla."

Well excuse me. I bit my lip, winced and glowered at him. "Alright, I get that. It makes sense. It doesn't explain Sly."

"Unless he's working on Alpha Humans' behalf here,"

Shannon said. "It must be easier for a wolf to sell to a wolf."

"Possibly," Eddie agreed. "The sooner we get hold of this feral, the sooner we'll know."

"So what does this have to do with our front door?" I demanded.

"If Alpha Humans are involved here like they are in Yorkshire, they might be trying to scare you off," Eddie said, more to Shannon than me.

She smiled sweetly. "It's working."

"The Pack will protect you, Shannon," he said. "You're not in any danger."

"No, because I'm the one taking all the beatings," I snapped. "Is the Pack protecting me, or am I getting the shit kicked out of me in the line of duty?"

He leveled me with a steely gaze that shut me up as fast as a slap in the face. "If you work with the Pack, Ayla, then yes, you will be protected. If you insist on running off alone, then we can't help you, can we?"

Was that a reprimand or a threat? *Probably both*. I sighed and shoved a forkful of cooling meat into my mouth to stop myself swearing at him.

"Anyway," Eddie continued. "Myself and a couple of other alphas will be setting off to find the feral this evening, and I'd like you come, Ayla."

"I don't think so," Shannon said before I could. "You obviously haven't paid attention, Eddie. We've done our part and we're not doing anymore. Ayla got really hurt last night—"

"Ayla knows where the feral's den is," Eddie interrupted. "And Ayla has an obligation to her Pack to help weed out this predator."

"Take Glory," Shannon said. "She was there too."

Eddie curled his lip at the suggestion. "I don't think Glenn is the best wolf for the job, do you?"

"What's in it for Ayla?" Vince asked. I glanced at him in surprise; I'd almost forgotten he was there.

Eddie stared at him incredulously. "This is Pack business!" he boomed. "It's not a matter for bargaining and dealing!"

"Yeah, but there's got to be some benefit for Ayla, right?" Vince argued. "She's already put herself on the line for the Pack against this feral, twice. And if the Pack gets drawn into any...I don't know, dubious dealings, it'll affect her chances of getting into the police, won't it?"

"What are you suggesting, young man?" Eddie pushed his chair back slowly and paced around the table, hovering behind Vince in a display of dominance. Vince twisted in his seat to face Eddie calmly.

"You don't want the police involved because you think they can't do anything. So it's Pack justice, right? Like with Hesketh and Kinsey. A quick, quiet resolution."

I felt sick suddenly. I'd known, in abstract, what had happened to the two corrupt policemen. I'd tried not to think about it in any real detail. Hearing Vince talk about it now turned my stomach.

Eddie didn't look any more comfortable. His eyes slid to Shannon. "Can we wolves have a moment of privacy, Ms Ryan?" he asked.

She looked at me and I nodded, heart sinking like a stone. If Alpha Humans really wanted to prove we were nothing but animals, all they had to do was uncover the truth behind Kinsey and Hesketh's sudden extended career breaks. For all the Pack's desire to live alongside humans, we'd never fully shaken off our wild side. Never would.

Shannon left the kitchen and Eddie pushed the door shut behind her. Then he slammed his palms down on the table and glared at me and Vince.

"We do not talk about Kinsey and Hesketh," he said bluntly. "They were dealt with. They're irrelevant."

"But I am right, aren't I?" Vince insisted. "You're going to kill this feral when you find him."

Eddie said nothing. He didn't need to. I dropped my head in my hands, emotions helter-skeltering inside me.

When I'd first come home for Adam's funeral, I'd wanted revenge for what had been done to him. And when I found out how two coppers were involved, I'd wanted justice meting out to them. Swift, brutal justice. I'd known, of course, what Pack justice was, but I'd never dwelt on it. Adam was a child. Hesketh and Kinsey might not have actually killed him, but they'd desecrated his body and for that, they'd got what they deserved. I believed that. I just didn't think about it.

In asking me to take him to Sly, Eddie was asking me to participate in his death. Bile rose in my throat.

"Don't be soft, Ayla," Eddie said impatiently. "You're a wolf, a hunter."

"A hunter of rabbits and deer," I snapped. "Not other wolves."

"A hunter," he repeated firmly. "A hunter protecting her Pack from its enemies."

"No, no." I thumped the table. "I'm not doing this. I won't. Vince is right—I'd never make it onto the police force with this hanging over me."

"Nobody would know. Who's going to miss a feral?" Eddie asked.

"It's not the answer. Sly may be the dealer but he's not the main supplier, is he? If we get rid of him, whoever supplies him will find someone else to deal for them." I shook my head. "And we can't—you can't take out every bloody Alpha Humans member on the basis that they might be involved."

"Of course not," Eddie agreed. "We'd be found out. But one feral..." He shrugged.

I felt dizzy. We could not be sitting in my kitchen discussing murder. I couldn't believe Eddie was even thinking it. "I won't do it," I said again.

He bared his teeth at me, his wolf rising inside him. "Won't?" he echoed, voice rough with the power of a dominant wolf. He didn't speak loudly but he might as well have been shouting. Vince and I both flinched and stared at the table. "Alright, Ayla. Fine."

I looked up, heart skipping. "Fine?"

"We can find the feral without you. He won't be that hard to track and Glenn can give us a rough idea of where he is." Eddie smiled at me, but the wolf still shone in his eyes. "I will remember that you refused to help the Pack though, Ayla."

"That's not fair!" Vince exploded, leaping up.

Eddie waved him away. "I'm not a cruel wolf, Ayla. I'm not unreasonable. You've got a lot to lose. And of course you don't see things the same way an alpha does. I've got a duty to my Pack, a duty to protect them. Anything I see as a threat, I act against. I have to, you understand?"

I nodded numbly, grabbing Vince's hand to pull him back into his seat.

"This feral hurts the Pack, so I'll deal with him. I won't force you to join in." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop, an erratic rhythm that set me further on edge. "But I will remember what you chose, when your Pack needed you."

I shrank away, sure I was about to puke. "You can't make me outcast for this."

"No, but I can make life difficult for you and Shannon."

He didn't need to elaborate. There was any number of ways he could make life difficult for a lesbian wolf-human couple. Hatred burned inside me, chasing away my nausea. "So you're blackmailing me," I said.

"Don't be melodramatic. I'm not asking anything difficult or dangerous of you, Ayla! You take us to the feral. That's it. That's all."

A catalogue of broken laws scrolled through my mind, conspiracy to commit murder being foremost. "Shannon and I can leave," I said, digging my fingers into the table until splinters spiked into the skin under my nails. "You can't make us stay in town."

He growled viciously at me. I growled back. Vince brushed my arm, cautioning me, but I ignored him. For a long, spine-prickling moment Eddie and I stared at each other, the air between us crackling with energy, the alpha's eyes blazing as he tried to force me to back down through sheer will alone. He'd obviously forgotten that I'd spent several years alone, Packless and fighting my own corner. I wasn't going to back down.

And then Shannon's phone rang, buzzing across the sideboard, and the electric tension between me and Eddie snapped. We both reared back, our wolves retreating as the human world intervened. I shook my head, clearing away some of the anger and Eddie sat down abruptly, a frown carved into his face.

Vince laughed nervously and passed me the phone. I answered without thinking. "Hello?"

"Shannon?" A woman; familiar but not immediately recognizable to me.

"No, this is Ayla. Shannon is..." *Probably on the other side of the door, listening to every word.* "Who is this?" I asked.

"It's Tina. I need to speak to Shannon."

I muttered a curse. This was the last thing we needed with Eddie in the house. "Hang on." I opened the kitchen door and saw Shannon sitting at the bottom of the stairs, a studied look of innocence on her face. "It's for you," I said, handing her the phone and glancing over my shoulder at Eddie and Vince who were watching with undisguised interest.

Shannon took the phone and retreated into the living room, shutting the door firmly behind her. It wouldn't stop us hearing her end of the conversation, but it gave her a measure of privacy.

"Who's that?" Vince asked.

"Client," I said shortly, starting to collect the dishes and cutlery, needing some activity to take my mind off Eddie. The alpha went back to tapping his fingers on the table, looking relaxed and chirpy, like he hadn't just tried to coerce me into murder. I shot him a filthy look. "You don't have to stay, Eddie," I said, taking his empty teacup from him.

"We're not done talking yet," he said.

"Yes we are." I gripped the cup hard, resisting the urge to throw it at his head.

He stood, raising his hands in a pacifying gesture. "For now then. But we're going after this feral whether you come or not. And if you don't want to help, well... You know."

The ceramic cracked in my hands, jagged shards hitting the tiles, my temper getting the better of me. "I know."

I waited until I heard the front door slam behind Eddie before I let loose the scream that had been building inside me for the past hour. A short, shrill scream of pure frustration that left my throat burning and raw. "Fuck!" I kicked the pieces of

broken cup across the kitchen floor. "Fuck!"

"Ayla!" Vince rested his hands on my shoulders, pulling me back against him. "Calm down."

"You calm down," I said stupidly, wriggling free of him to scoop up the mess I'd made. "I can't believe that just happened. I can't believe that old bastard walked in here and tried to blackmail me!"

Vince knelt to help me, picking a few smaller pieces out from under the table. "He won't really do anything, you know that," he said. "It's all talk to bully you into doing what he wants."

"Yeah?" I glanced up, meeting his eyes. He didn't look too sure. "They've kicked other wolves out for less than this, haven't they? I don't know why I bloody came back."

Vince shook his head. "They won't make you outcast for this. How can they? Eddie just sat there and said the alphas were planning to kill this feral. If they make you outcast, what's to stop you telling the whole world about it? That would do Alpha Humans all sorts of favors, wouldn't it?"

I grunted, not any more convinced than Vince sounded.

Soft footsteps made me look up. Shannon leaned in the doorway, watching me and Vince scramble around under the table on our hands and knees. "That was Tina," she said. "She wants us to go round."

"Is Molly okay?" I sat up quickly, banging my head on the underside of the table. I hissed and rubbed my head, scooting backwards across the tiles so I could sit up properly. "What's it about?"

"She didn't say. Just said she wanted us to come over." Shannon sat down, her pretty face anxious. "I heard...everything."

"I thought you would." I leaned against the dishwasher, closing my eyes. "What do you think?"

"I had no idea Pack politics got so...Machiavellian," she replied. "You told me Hesketh and Kinsey were kicked out of the city."

"They were," Vince said grimly. "Nobody laid a finger on them inside the city." She blanched. "I had no idea," she murmured.

I opened my eyes to meet hers, my insides a knot of temper and worry. Would she hate me now, knowing I knew about Hesketh and Kinsey? Would she think me an animal, savage and inhuman? I truly believed they'd got what they deserved. This feral though...I wasn't sure it was the same kind of thing. Eddie had been talking cold-blooded murder and I didn't—couldn't—believe that was the solution to the Silver Kiss problem.

Shannon sighed and shook her head. "How many other people have they done this to? How many humans and wolves have gone missing at the Pack's command?"

Vince and I both shrugged. I'd been out of town too long to know if Hesketh and Kinsey were the rule or the exception. And Vince wasn't part of the Pack's upper echelons. Neither of us was privy to the alphas' secrets.

"Jesus Christ," Shannon said. Then she stood and moved to where I sat, offering me a hand up. "Let's go and see Tina." 16Z * Naomi (Tark

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Tina met us on the doorstep, a cigarette hanging out of her mouth and shadows under her eyes. It was immediately clear why she'd called us. Her front door was tagged with the same graffiti as ours: the Alpha Humans symbol and the word abomination scrawled underneath. That was bad enough by itself, but above the symbol was the sinister message we're watching you.

My heart flipped. "My God."

"Tina, are you okay? Is Molly okay?" Shannon hurried to her side, catching her arm.

"She's fine. We're fine," Tina assured her. "Just a bit shaken. Molly won't come out of her room." She turned to stare at the graffiti, lip curled in a snarl. "Bastards. They must have done it last night. Who the fuck do they think they are?"

"Have you called the police?" Shannon asked.

"What good would that do? They didn't help when Molly was missing." Tina pushed the door open and pushed us through to the kitchen. "Molly hasn't said anything, but I think this is something to do with when she was gone," she told us, voice hushed. "I think she got herself in some real trouble—you saw the state she was in. Beaten black and blue." She closed her eyes for a second as if picturing Molly's wounds. I know I was. "What if some Alpha Human thugs got to her?" She opened her eyes and gazed at me, intense and demanding.

I opened my mouth to tell her we'd had the same graffiti. That probably loads of wolves across the city had and it didn't mean Molly was in danger. But Tina caught my hand, digging her nails into my wrist and silencing me.

"What if it's like your cousin?" she whispered. "What if they kill her?"

I blanched, my throat going dry. I couldn't have answered her even if I'd wanted to. I dropped my gaze from hers; hoping Shannon would fill the sudden, tense silence.

She did.

"Molly still hasn't told you what happened to her, I take it?" she asked Tina.

Tina shook her head. "She won't talk to me at all." Her eyes gleamed. "What could have been so bad that she won't talk to her own mum about it?"

"I'm sure it's not personal, Tina," Shannon assured her. "Molly's been through a lot and she probably doesn't want to worry you anymore."

"Her keeping secrets from me worries me," Tina spat. "We might not be in this situation now if she hadn't kept so many secrets from me."

Shannon gave her a brittle smile. "Well, that's what you wolves do, isn't it? Keep secrets."

Her comment hung in the air between Tina and me, icy and cruel. It was such a non-Shannon thing to say, she might as well have slapped us both. The unspoken message—you wolves are different from us humans—was such a physical blow anyway I think I'd rather she had just hit me.

I cleared my throat, trying to shake off the chill her words gave me. "Maybe we should speak to Molly?" I asked. "She might talk to us." I looked to Shannon for confirmation and she nodded, suddenly on my side again.

"It's worth a try." She stood, pressing her hand to Tina's shoulder. "We've been hit by graffiti artists too," she told her. "I'm sure it's nothing to do with Molly, it's just those sick bastards having their fun."

Tina shook her head. "Maybe. I hope so. I can't take anything else, I swear..." She ran her hands through her hair, looking fragile and defeated. "Go on, go and talk to her. She won't tell you anything." She nodded towards the stairs.

We went up, leaving Tina lighting up another cigarette. Molly's room was dark and smelled stale, like the windows hadn't been opened for a while. Posters of bands and film stars lined the walls; the carpet was littered with clothes and shoes. A typical teenage girl's room, I supposed. Molly was in bed, almost lost under a massive duvet. Her dark hair was a tangled snarl around her narrow face and her eyes gleamed in the darkness, too bright, too wary.

"Hi Molly," Shannon said, closing the bedroom door after me. "How are you feeling?"

"Shit," Molly replied, voice raspy.

"You look shit," I agreed, finding a clear space on the floor to sit. Molly frowned at me.

"Didn't you have a lip ring before?" she asked.

I touched my lip with a grimace. "It got ripped out."

She shivered. Shannon perched on the edge of the bed, resting her hand on Molly's hair, stroking the knotted mess soothingly. She did the same thing to me to calm me down. I looked away, wishing I still had a piercing to chew on.

"So, you've seen the graffiti?" Shannon asked, taking a nonsense approach.

Molly grimaced. "Yeah, so?"

"So your mum thinks you might be in trouble," Shannon said. "You don't know why Alpha Humans have tagged your front door, do you?"

"No."

"It's nothing to do with where you were when you ran away?" Shannon persisted, gentle but determined. I thought she might have met her match in Molly, though. The girl shrugged and burrowed deeper into her duvet.

"I'm not telling you anything. I don't have to."

"We've been tagged too," I said, hoping the common ground might draw her out.

"Yeah?" She glanced at me through her mane of matted hair. "Well, you're a couple of dykes, aren't you? Alpha Humans probably hate dykes as much as wolves, fuckers."

Shannon blinked and I growled softly. Molly just kept staring at me, a challenge in her eyes. Whatever she'd been through, it was far worse than me, those eyes told me. There was no threat I could make that would match it.

Shannon stood. "I guess we're wasting our time here," she said.

"Piss off then." Looking drained, Molly sank back under her covers. She yawned and rolled over away from us. We were dismissed.

I stalked from the room, Shannon in tow. "Waste of time," I muttered.

"She's still hurting," Shannon said. "Still afraid."

"Well she's going to stay afraid if she doesn't tell someone what happened! How many other wolves are going to be hurt and afraid because of this Silver Kiss shit?" I bunched my hands into fists, wishing I had something to hit. I just kept hearing Eddie's words, over and over. He could make life difficult for us. Molly could make life easier. All she had to do was open her mouth and tell us what had happened to her. I knew it was tied into Sly and his drug dealing. If Molly spoke up, gave a statement to the police, all this could be over and Eddie could fuck off.

"Come on," Shannon said, taking my hand and leading me downstairs. "We're not getting anything done here."

Tina peered round the kitchen door as we entered the hall. "Well?" Shannon shook her head. I just grunted. Tina's shoulders slumped. "I knew she wouldn't say anything. Alpha Humans will be bashing in our door and killing us in our sleep before she says anything."

"Call the police," Shannon advised her as she opened the door. I ground my teeth at the graffiti, the nasty paintwork dull in the dying afternoon light. "It can't hurt, Tina."

It was her turn to grunt. "It can't help either."

* * *

"We're watching you." Shannon said it as if tasting the words. She frowned at me. "What do you think?"

We were stuck in traffic on the way home; dusk falling around us, a solid line of cars in front of us. I fiddled with the radio, trying to find something other than sports to listen to. "I think Molly needs a good slap," I muttered, not meaning it.

"What do you really think?" Shannon asked, grabbing my hand to pry it away from the radio. "Leave the news on."

I leaned back in my seat, listening to the news while I thought about my reply. The newsreader was droning on about the weather in Scotland, her tone monotonous and dry. "I'm scared for her," I said finally. "What if Tina was right and it is the same gang that went after Adam?"

"It can't be."

"It could be, though."

"No." Shannon shook her head. "You said it yourself—it's something to do with Silver Kiss. Molly had to be getting hers from Sly. If she would just talk to us..." She bit her lip in frustration. "We could get Eddie off our backs."

I nodded, trying not to picture Molly bloodied and broken, like Adam. It was impossible. "I don't know what to do," I confessed, misery crawling through me. Shannon shook her head again. I suppose she didn't know either.

We crept along in silence after that, the traffic moving slowly through the city. In the growing dark, in the hot, close interior of the car, I felt trapped. Caught between loyalty to the Pack and fear for myself and my mate.

Needing to do something, I reached for the radio again, just as the newsreader dropped a bombshell in her robotic voice.

"... to recap our top story, the dead werewolf found yesterday morning in Moreland Park has been identified as fifteenyear-old Seth Walters. A post-mortem showed Walters died of internal injuries with large traces of narcotics in his system. Police are keen to question—"

I flipped the radio off, blood rushing to my face in a hot swell. "Shit."

"Oh God," Shannon said. "Poor kid."

I pressed my hands to my face. There was no reason to think it was the wolf I'd seen with Sly the first night I'd met him. No reason in the world except the sick lurch in my gut and the burning in my head. "I saw him," I whispered.

Shannon slammed on the handbrake as we hit a red light. "What?"

"The night I saw Sly, I saw that cub, I'm sure. I'm sure

it was him."

"Did you know him? Had you seen him before?"

"No, but I'm sure. It was Seth Walters." I gripped my knees, digging my nails in through my jeans to my flesh. "I just know it."

"Animal instinct?" There was no bite in her voice, just concern. I looked up at her.

"We have to go back to Molly."

"Ayla, you don't know that this kid is the same one you saw. And even if it is—"

"Narcotics, Shannon. You heard!" I pointed at the radio. "He was found with narcotics in his system. We have to go back to Molly. She knows what's going on and we have to make her tell us." My vision slipped, the world turning sepia as my wolf clawed to the surface.

"Okay," Shannon said. "Okay, calm down. We can't go rushing in without the facts and start bullying her. We'll go home—"

"No. We're going back now. Turn around." I slapped my hand down on the dashboard hard enough to rattle the rearview mirror. "Now, Shannon."

She stared at me, wetting her lips, eyes wide. I was scaring her. I couldn't help it. I was so *sure*. So sure I'd seen Seth Walters that night and let him run off, Sly on his tail, without giving him another thought. And now he was dead. "Turn around," I said again, closing my eyes and breathing deeply. When I opened them again, color had returned and Shannon was looking for a place to turn the car around.

* * *

Tina looked surprised to see us again, but didn't say anything when I barged past and ran up to Molly's room, Shannon hot on my heels.

"Ayla, calm down!" She grabbed the back of my jacket, jerking me to a halt on the landing. "Do you really think Molly will talk to you when you're like this?"

She was right. I forced myself to stop for a second and

compose myself. Or I tried to. The landing was in darkness, the only light coming from a street lamp outside, seeping in through drawn curtains. In the darkness it was harder to think human. Night was the wolf's realm and she was panicked and angry.

I swallowed it down, pushed her back and knocked on Molly's bedroom door. There was no answer, but I went in anyway, flipping on the light. Molly hadn't moved since we left about an hour earlier. She was still curled up under her duvet, face screwed up against the sudden invasion of light.

"What?" she mumbled, sitting up and rubbing her bleary eyes. "What d'you want now?"

"Did you know Seth Walters?" I demanded, my wolf springing right back into my throat again.

Shannon pushed in front of me, shooting me a warning look. "Molly, we need your help," she said, kneeling down to get on eye level with the girl. "You're the only person who can help us."

Molly had paled at Seth's name, unmistakably. I itched to leap in and demand answers, but I held myself back, restraining myself with all the control I could muster. Shannon was better at this than me. Much better.

Molly stared at the carpet, then the ceiling. For a second I thought she'd just tell us to get lost and I didn't know if my nerves could take that.

"Molly, you're not in trouble and you're not in danger," Shannon said. "Nobody's going to hurt you for talking to us."

"I know Seth," she said, tossing her hair. "So what?" Still trying for bravado.

"Seth is dead," I said bluntly. I couldn't help myself. Molly flinched again, thin shoulders shaking.

"No. No way. No."

Shannon reached for her, closing her hand over Molly's. "Molly, is it something to do with Silver Kiss? With Sly?"

She flinched, telling us far more with that single reaction than any words could have. Her lips trembled and her eyes sparkled with tears.

Shannon brushed her cheek, sweeping lank hair away

from her face. "Tell us, sweetie," she coaxed.

"Oh God. Oh God, I didn't think I was going to get out," Molly said. She sat up suddenly, shoving the duvet aside. "I wasn't going to say anything, coz I just want to forget it all, yeah? But Seth... If Seth is dead..." She trailed off, wiping her eyes and her nose on her pajama sleeve.

I bit my tongue; not wanting to scare her off now she was about to tell us what had happened. I just nodded, hoping Tina wouldn't barge in and send Molly back into silence.

"Don't be afraid to tell us, Molly," Shannon said when Molly didn't say anything else. "Anything you tell us is confidential—nobody else ever has to know."

"No, but that's the point. If Seth is dead, other people have to know, don't they? But I don't want Sly to know. That I told you, I mean," Molly added, face flushed with fear. "I don't want him coming after me again."

"Sly will never know we spoke to you," Shannon promised. "Go on, Molly. When you're ready." She squeezed the girl's hand and Molly squeezed back. A little too hard judging from Shannon's expression.

"Well, it's because of the Silky, yeah?" Molly began in a rush, like she couldn't stop the words now she'd started. "I mean it's good. I'm not lying, I'd kill for some right now, except I don't ever want any again because of how much it messes you up. But I miss it. I really miss it. And Sly's the only one who sells the wolf cut, right? So we all have to go to him and if he says he's not giving us any, there's nothing we can do. And this one time, I was desperate, yeah? It'd been like almost a week and I really, really needed some, so I found Sly and I told him I'd do anything, pay anything, and he said..." She stuttered, wiping tears from her eyes. Shannon shifted position to wrap her arm around Molly, hugging her.

"Take your time," she said.

"I'm alright. I just ..." Molly shrugged, took a deep breath and started again. "So Sly says, come with me and I'll fix you up. So I go with him and he takes me off to this place in the middle of nowhere and he says that's where all his supplies are and if I want some, I'll have to do a job for him."

"What kind of job?" I asked, stomach churning. I couldn't think of many jobs an adult wolf might have for a fourteen-year-old cub.

Molly dropped her gaze, cheeks blazing red. "I don't want Mum to know," she whispered, staring at a pile of t-shirts in the corner. "I don't ever want Mum to know."

"Molly," Shannon said gently, taking her hand again. "Did he—"

Molly's head shot up again. "What, rape me?" she asked. Shannon and I both jumped at the word. Hearing Molly say it so bluntly was just so wrong. "No, he never did that." She looked down again. "He made us fight."

"He made you fight," I repeated slowly. "For drugs?" I thought of Oscar and his hair-trigger temper, so quickly switching between pleading with me and attacking me.

"Yeah. He'd get us all high on Silky and then make us fight. People came and watched, you know, betting on it." Molly ran her nails up and down her arms as if she could scratch away the memory. "I was one of the smallest, so I never won."

"Betting." Cold fury filled Shannon's voice. "He was taking bets on werewolf fights? My God."

"How many others were there?" I asked Molly, levering myself to my feet so I could pace the room. Fury filled me too, but molten and scorching. Suddenly Eddie's plan seemed perfectly reasonable. Death might actually be too good for Sly. "Just kids, or adults too?"

Molly scrubbed her arm across her face. "I dunno, I only ever saw other kids, like Seth. I wasn't there long and Sly didn't use me much."

"How did you get away?" My mind whirred, sliding it all together. The first time I'd seen Sly, he must have been taking Seth to his den for this. Must have been cultivating Oscar, withholding the drugs to get him as desperate as Molly had been.

"Sly dumped me," Molly replied. "He said...they said I was no good, coz I couldn't fight as well as the boys and they weren't making enough money off me, so Sly beat me up and dumped me. I think he was going to kill me, but I made out I

was more hurt than I really was and he just left me."

He'd probably thought the cold would finish her off. It nearly had.

"And who's they?" Shannon asked. "He had accomplices?"

"Humans. Dunno who. Didn't pay much attention. I was high most of the time and out of it the rest."

Alpha Humans. Shannon and I exchanged looks. I hated knowing Eddie was right. "You did the right thing, Molly, telling us all this," I said. "And we won't say anything to Tina—if you promise you'll tell her."

"I don't know if I can. She'll never let me out of the house again." She sniffed and looked to me. "What... What did they do to Seth?"

I wasn't sure I should tell her. All my anger had drained away as she talked. But she was a wolf, tougher than she looked too, given all she'd been through. And maybe knowing would kill any lingering need for Silver Kiss. "Internal injuries," I said. "I guess he lost a fight."

Molly sobbed and buried her face in her pillows. Shannon stroked her hair and tucked her in, folding the duvet around her before motioning to me to leave.

In the hall outside Molly's bedroom, Shannon slumped against the wall with a heavy sigh. "Werewolf baiting. That was not what I expected."

"It's barbaric!" I growled, wanting to punch something. "Absolutely barbaric." I paced the small hallway, the wolf inside me enraged, pushing the human part of me down and away.

"I'm calling Moira," she said. "The Pack has to call the police in now, they can't—" She broke off, staring at me with sudden alarm. "Ayla..."

I stopped pacing to look at her. The world had faded to sepia, like an old photo, so I knew before Shannon said it that my eyes had changed.

"You've gone all wolfy on me again," she said softly, reaching for my hand. "Pull it back, baby."

I blinked, trying to shake off the wolf's influence. "I can't

help it. I just... I can't believe it." I closed my eyes and counted to ten slowly, curling and uncurling my fingers in a futile effort to calm myself. "Call Eddie," I told Shannon. "He needs to know." I opened my eyes, relieved to see color seep back into the world.

"Didn't we hate Eddie this morning?" she asked. "I don't want to deal with him anymore, Ayla, not today." She slid her phone from her pocket, then glanced down the stairs. The hall was empty, but Tina wouldn't be far away. I could smell her distinctly over the lavender furniture polish and fake-rose potpourri. She was lingering in the living room, waiting for us to come back down. Shannon slipped her phone back. "Outside," she said.

I nodded. We'd promised Molly confidentiality. Part of me thought Tina ought to know—like me she was probably thinking abuse and rape—but it was surely better for Molly to tell her mother herself, when she was ready to.

As we were leaving, Tina poked her head round the living room door, face pinched and suspicious. "Is she okay? What was all that about?"

"She'll be fine," Shannon said, stopping to brush Tina's arm. "She just needs a bit of time alone, that's all."

Tina's eyes filled with tears. "But she won't talk to me. And her dad won't help, he says it's my fault..."

"It's not," I cut in sharply. I grabbed Tina's shoulders and shook her, harder than I meant to. "Listen to me, Tina, it is not your fault and don't you let anyone tell you it is."

"But the Pack..."

"Fuck the Pack," I snapped, surprised to find I meant it. "Pack's done nothing for you for years, so don't let them tell you now that you've done wrong."

She sniffed and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Will you tell me what she said?" she asked.

Shannon shook her head regretfully. "Molly made us promise not to tell you—she wants to tell you herself, okay?"

Tina nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Thanks, Shannon. Both of you—thanks." She slumped her shoulders, some of the tension leaving her. I hoped Molly really would tell her what had

happened. It would help both of them, I thought.

Outside, Shannon wasted no time in calling Moira and reporting what Molly had told us. Standing behind Shannon, I heard Moira's sharp intake of breath. "Oh God," she said. "Have you contacted Eddie yet?"

"No," Shannon replied, taking my hand and tugging me towards the car. "We're... We had a bit of a difference of opinion with Eddie on how to handle things. I'm not sure where that leaves us."

I bristled, thinking of Eddie's veiled threats earlier. In the light of Molly's information, I felt torn now. Did I believe Sly needed shutting down, immediately? Absolutely. Did I want to part of his cold-blooded murder? Absolutely not. The best thing we could do was tip off the police and leave it for them to deal with.

That's what the human part of me thought, anyway. The wolf part had different ideas. Nastier, more violent ideas.

I got into the car, waiting for Shannon to finish her call. When she slid into the driver's seat, she mimed banging her head on the steering wheel. "Moira thinks Eddie's being overzealous."

"Really?" I couldn't keep the sarcasm from my voice. "Over-zealous?"

"She's going to talk to him about how we—they—proceed."

"Why can't we just call the police and tell them where Sly is?" I grumbled.

Shannon drummed her fingers on the wheel. "I don't want to antagonize Eddie," she said. "After this morning, I don't think we want to risk upsetting him."

"But he's not going to change his mind," I said. "In fact, Molly's news will just make him more determined to go and kill Sly."

"I know." She started the car and pulled away from the house. "I don't know what we're going to do."

I watched Molly's bedroom window as we drove away. Her curtains twitched and I caught a glimpse of her pale face peeking out at us. I imagined her, high as a kite and desperate to

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stay that way, forced to fight bigger, tougher werewolves for the entertainment of slavering humans. I bit my lip until I tasted blood. I didn't know what we were going to do, but I knew what I wanted to do.

Sixteen

THERE WAS NOTHING I WANTED less than to go into work the next morning. I lay in bed listening to the alarm clock ringing and contemplated calling in sick. My head felt like a black hole and I couldn't face Kaye, couldn't force myself to be chirpy and polite to the customers all day.

Shannon reached across me to switch the alarm off before flopping back onto her pillow with a groan. "You should go to work," she said, as if reading my mind. She propped herself up on her elbow to look at me, her eyes crusted with sleep and shining with worry. "We need to try and stay normal, Ayla."

I thought that was asking a bit much, but I grunted my agreement and levered myself out of bed. I couldn't afford to lose another day's pay and I hadn't been at Inked long enough to get sick pay. I showered and made Shannon a cup of tea, bringing it to her in bed.

"What's your plan for the day?" I asked her as I shrugged into the least-wrinkled clothes I could find in the wardrobe.

She pressed her palms to her eyes and sighed. "I don't know. I really don't know. I should get in touch with Moira and see what's happening."

I bit my tongue to keep myself saying that was the last thing she should be doing. What happened to staying normal? Rage was still brewing in me after Molly's revelation. The thought of it turned my vision red. But as much as my wolf wanted to rip Sly and his human helpers apart, my human side quavered and balked at the idea. My human side just wanted to run away from the whole miserable mess.

I ran my fingers through my wet hair and sat down on

the bed to stroke Shannon's cheek. "We've done enough I think."

"It's not that simple, Ayla. You know that. Drug dealing is one thing, but I can't sit around and do nothing when children are being murdered." Shannon's eyes filled and I brushed the tears away, understanding and hating her change of heart.

"You know what Eddie wants," I said, rising to look for my sneakers. "You can't be agreeing with him."

"No, of course not. But I'm hoping Moira will have talked him round, made him see we have to involve the police now."

I nodded. "Call me, yeah. Once you've spoken to her?"

"I will do. And..." she hesitated, dropping her gaze and setting me on edge immediately. "I was thinking of looking at houses. Up north."

I opened my mouth but she hurriedly cut me short. "I just think it's the best solution," she said. "I told you, I don't feel safe here and we were happy before, weren't we?"

"We were happy here before this whole Molly Brady thing," I grumbled. "Once it's all over, everything will settle down again." I sat back on the bed, rolling her over so she looked up at me. "Shannon, I know things are horrible right now, but I don't want to just turn tail and run. I don't want to lose my parents and Vince again."

She played with a stray thread from my shirt, eyes still downcast. "I never really understood what being part of the Pack meant until we moved here," she said. "It just takes over everything, doesn't it? No wonder you ran away."

"I'm not saying it's perfect. It never has been. But we can make things work, Shannon. Please."

She sat up and kissed me. "You'd better go. You'll be late for work."

Way to avoid the subject. I sighed and said my goodbyes. I didn't want to argue with her and that was the only way this conversation could end right now. So I left her in bed and headed to Inked. At least there I could argue with Kaye without feeling bad about it.

* * *

But Tuesday was Kaye's day off so I had nobody to vent my anger on except Calvin, who didn't deserve it, and Lawrence, who didn't notice it. Both were busy with clients all morning, leaving me alone upstairs to man the till and check my mobile every five minutes to see if Shannon had called.

When it got to midday and I still hadn't heard from her, I left Lawrence on the till chatting up a couple of young goth girls and headed to the Tipsy Fox to see Vince. I needed a drink and a friendly face.

I was halfway there before I remembered Vince's news yesterday. Oscar had smashed the place up; no way would they be open already. I kicked my heels into the slush with a muffled curse and glanced around. Town was quiet, cold weather still keeping most people indoors. There were a couple of coffee shops up the street and the smell of brewing coffee and warm pastries was enticing enough to make my stomach growl. But both places were jammed full when I investigated and I didn't want to waste my precious lunch hour queuing.

Restless and itchy, I flitted down the high street from one shop to the next, flipping listlessly through DVDs, clothes, books and chocolate bars whilst my mind circled endlessly from Shannon to Eddie, Molly to Oscar, Sly to Shannon and round again. My hour was almost up when I shook myself free of my daze and headed back to Inked, still hungry, still waiting to hear from Shannon.

I walked straight into my uncle before I saw him. Chris is a big wolf, all shoulders and chest and I smacked right into him, slipped on a patch of ice and would have ended up slamming into the pavement if he hadn't caught me. He grabbed my arm and hauled me back onto my feet.

"Sorry, Ayla, I thought you saw me. I did call your name."

"I'm sorry, I was miles away." I dredged up a smile for him, but he just frowned in return.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Not really," I said, then bit my lip, wishing I could take the words back. Chris was still getting over Adam's death; I didn't need to dump any more grief on him. It was too late though. Chris had his arm round my shoulder and was guiding me

towards one of the coffee shops I'd tried earlier. It was quieter now and the bitter, rich scent of mochas and cappuccinos was even more appealing. I made a token protest as he bundled me inside, saying I was due back at work.

"You look like you're about to fall apart, Ayla," Chris said. "It won't kill you to be a few minutes late."

Chris and I weren't really that close anymore. Before I'd run away we had been. I'd spent a lot of time with Adam when he was a cub and Chris and my mum were always close. But I hadn't seen much of my aunt or uncle since I moved back home. They'd cut themselves off from a lot of Pack activity—they hadn't been at Lupercali—and so it felt weird to be sitting in oversized green leather chairs with Chris, stirring cinnamon into hot chocolate and picking at a blueberry muffin like we did this all the time.

"So what's up?" he asked me. "I saw your parents the other day, they said you'd been having some problems with your girlfriend?"

Typical. I frowned and shook my head. "No, everything's fine with Shannon." Mostly. "It's other stuff. It's...hard to explain."

He smiled sadly, looking weary and old. There were a few grey hairs in his dark blonde locks, a few crow's feet around his eyes. It made me feel tired too.

"It's been a tough few months for the family," he said. "Vivian and I are thinking of going away for a bit, just to get a break. It's hard being around the house..." He ran his hands through his hair. "Part of me keeps thinking Adam will walk in the door."

I stared at my hot chocolate and said nothing. As long as Adam's killers were free, Chris and Vivian would probably never feel comfortable in their house again.

He shook himself. "Sorry, Ayla. I didn't drag you in here so I could moan. You are okay, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "I had a run in with Eddie Hughes. He's just..." I trailed off and shrugged again, words failing me. I didn't want to drag Chris into the middle of this mess.

"Oh Eddie." Chris laughed; no humor in the sound. "That

old vulture. He was round ours last week, poking through Adam's stuff."

"Really?" I looked up, surprised. "Why?"

"It's this Silver Kiss junk. Eddie got it into his head that Adam was smoking it." Chris scowled and tore a chunk out of his muffin. I wondered if he was imagining it was Eddie. "He's bloody obsessed with the whole affair."

"Did he find anything?" I asked, then regretted it when Chris shot me a fiery glare. "Sorry." I bit into my own muffin and glanced at the big chrome clock hanging over the coffee bar. "I'm late. I've really got to go, Uncle Chris." I crammed the rest of my muffin into my mouth and scrambled out of my seat. "Give my love to Aunty Vivian, yeah? I'll stop by some time."

Chris nodded, patted my hand and let me go without another word. I ran back to Inked, feeling guilty for upsetting Chris, but curious about Eddie's visit to him. I couldn't see Adam as a druggie, but then, what did I really know about the kid? And if so many other kids in town were using Silver Kiss, who was to say Adam wasn't?

I got back to Inked twenty minutes late and accepted my dressing down from Calvin without protest. My mind wasn't there at all. As soon as Calvin disappeared back into the basement, I went back to checking my phone. And finally, just when I was on the verge of caving in and phoning Shannon, a text came through from her.

Eddie + Moira coming over tonight. Think the shit is about to hit. *Great*.

* * *

Dusk was settling over the city when Eddie and Moira showed up on our doorstep. Shannon was curled up on the sofa with her laptop, looking at properties up north in a sort of pointed silence. I sat next to her, flipping through TV channels and occasionally glancing at the laptop screen to grunt a half-hearted opinion on whatever house she had up. "We could afford this," she said, tapping my arm. I looked at the house and groaned inwardly. It was a tiny, grey stone mid-terrace house, crammed in amongst numerous identical grey stone houses in a dirty council estate with not even a flowerbed in sight. My wolf cringed at the thought of it.

I was saved from having to tell Shannon that I'd rather live in a box under a bridge by a heavy knock on the door. My stomach flipped. It had to be Eddie. I jumped off the sofa and went to let him in. Moira was with him; both looked severe and for a second I drew back, cowed by the presence of the two alphas. Then I remembered Chris and sucked up my courage.

"I saw my uncle today," I began.

Eddie cocked an eyebrow at me. "Chris Thatcher, isn't it?"

"He said you thought his son was using Silver Kiss, before he died."

"Ah. Young Adam. Well..." Eddie shrugged and sat down on the sofa. Shannon curled up a bit tighter in her spot, as if trying to make herself invisible. It was an oddly wolfish reaction. "It's just part of my theory. In all fairness, nobody's ever told me Adam was using, but in light of Molly Brady's information, I wonder..."

I knew exactly what he'd been wondering because I'd wondered it myself. Had Adam's death been a bungled kidnapped attempt? Had Alpha Humans been planning to use him in their werewolf fight club?

"We'll never know," Eddie said, perhaps seeing his thoughts reflected on my face. "I didn't mean to upset your uncle, of course, but you know how I feel about this problem, Ayla. And now we know what's really going on, I think you have to agree we can't afford to pussyfoot around the issue anymore."

I didn't answer him, but turned to Moira, who was lingering in the doorway to the living room. "Have you told the police about Sly?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"What? Why not?" Shannon demanded, incredulous. "One quick phone call and he could be in custody this time

tomorrow and all this could be over! Are you going to let more wolves die before you do the right thing, Eddie?"

Eddie shot her a condescending look, shaking his head. "Don't you young people think? What do we know about this feral and his set-up? He's working with other people, probably Alpha Humans. They could have information sources inside the city, maybe even in the police. No." He shook his head again. "No, we can't risk it. He could be gone before the police move in."

I squared my shoulders. "You could have told us this over the phone," I said to the alpha. "There was no need for the personal visit."

"Do you remember what I told you?" he asked. "I said I didn't want any more Molly Bradys. No more drug-addled wolves ruining their lives. I meant that, I won't stand for it. I'm going after this feral tonight and I want you to come with me, Ayla. Surely you must agree now, knowing what he's been doing, that this is the right course."

"No, she doesn't," Shannon said, gripping my arm as if to stop me running off with Eddie. "It should be in the hands of the police, Eddie."

He ignored her, all his powerful focus on me. "I welcomed you home at Lupercali. I made you Pack again. If that meant anything to you, Ayla, you prove it now."

I growled. "So this is my test, is it? I didn't realize my homecoming was conditional on me committing cold-blooded murder."

"That's not what he's saying." Moira stepped between us, pressing her hand to Eddie's chest. "But this is Pack business, Ayla. Wolf, not human."

Shannon narrowed her eyes at the older woman. "You're keeping something back," she accused.

Moira and Eddie exchanged furtive looks. He rubbed his nose and huffed. "Nothing important."

"It's important to enough to stop you going to the police," Shannon argued. "Why should we do anything to help you when you're not being honest with us?"

Once again, Eddie and Moira glanced at each other, silent

messages running between them. After a tense, tight second, Eddie shrugged and growled. "Sly was Pack once," he said.

That wasn't really a surprise. Most ferals started out as Pack wolves as far as I knew. I'm sure some were born in the wild, but the simple fact that Sly spoke English told me he'd been Pack once. "So?" I prompted

"He was part of our Pack. Made outcast, thirty years back." Eddie rubbed his nose again and I realized with surprise that it was a nervous gesture. "He killed his partner and unborn child."

I gasped and Shannon gripped my knee hard enough to hurt. "Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded.

"Does it make a difference?" Eddie asked.

I started to say that of course it did, but stopped myself. I wasn't sure it did. Sure, it was horrible and it made me feel even luckier to be alive, but it didn't make me want to kill him.

But then again, I'd been happy enough to let the Pack take care of Hesketh and Kinsey. What made that okay and killing Sly wrong? My gut twisted, my head spinning as I tried to sort through my churning feelings.

While I sat mutely, Eddie carried on, taking my silence for agreement. "We move tonight, catch him before he gets wind of what's going on, before he can hurt anyone else. I can track him myself, but it'll be faster with you helping, Ayla."

I ran my hands through my hair, wanting to yank it out. I felt like I'd been dropped into a spy film, all intrigue and lies. The hallway felt too small and hot for all the emotions running through it. "Who else is coming?"

"Ayla, you can't," Shannon said, grabbing my sleeve and pulling me round to face her. "Not again, please."

"Myself and Moira," Eddie said to me. "The other alphas won't be coming."

"Why not? I thought they were all for it?" I asked, covering Shannon's hand with my own. "Why have they dropped out all of a sudden? Or haven't you even told them?"

"Maybe they know they should be leaving it for the police," Shannon snapped.

"Because we don't need to draw attention to ourselves, and the other alphas agree with that," Eddie corrected. "The three of us should be able to take Sly down without trouble."

I didn't want Sly to get away. Adam's killers were still out there. My aunt and uncle had put their lives on hold, waiting for some culprit to be brought to trial. I imagined Tina doing the same, waiting for Molly to talk to her, waiting for justice and never getting it. As long as Sly was free, Molly would probably never feel safe enough to talk to her mum.

"I'll go," I said finally, the words painfully raw in my dry throat. Shannon dug her nails into my arm hard enough to make me flinch. I shook her off. "I'll go as long as you promise me something, Eddie. Two things"

He cocked his head at me curiously. "Go on."

"First, we bring him in. We don't kill him."

Eddie swore and glared at me, turning on the alpha-eyes again. "Ayla..."

I matched his gaze, determined to get my way. If we'd been wolf-shaped, it would be hackles up and tails stiff as we battled for dominance. Eventually, to my dark delight, Eddie backed down, looked away from me and nodded. "And the other thing?"

"I want Molly and Tina looked after. They need support and care and they're not getting it right now."

Moira nodded, but Eddie frowned. "Molly already has support and care—"

"No she doesn't," I cut in. "As long as Tina is outcast, Molly's as good as outcast too. They're on their own, dealing with all kinds of shit. If you want to help Molly, help Tina."

"Alright. Fine." He sighed and held out his hands to me, a placating gesture. "I don't want us to fall out, Ayla."

"Tough," I said. "We already have.

Seventeen

Shannon Pulled me into the kitchen, shutting the door to give us the illusion of privacy while Moira and Eddie hashed out the plan.

"You're going to get hurt," she whispered, caressing my cheek. "Ayla, I'm really scared for you."

I rested my forehead against hers, clasping her hands. "I'll be careful. I'll be fine."

She kissed me with trembling lips, the darkness giving a sweet intimacy to her touch. "Promise me."

"Promise." I stroked her hair away from her eyes, realized she was crying. "I'll be back before you know it." I kissed her again, wanting to give her something to hold onto while I was gone. "We'll talk about moving tomorrow, okay? If that's really what you want."

"It's... I just want you to be safe. Everything else is secondary to that." She smiled, although her lips still quivered. "I love you."

"I love you too." We kissed desperately then, all fire and need. I clung to her, tracing her curves as if memorizing them and she bit my neck with dark ferocity, drawing a little whimper from me. When we parted, breathless, her eyes still shone bright, the street lamp outside casting a soft orange glow over her face. My heart sang and wept at the same time. She looked like an angel.

"I'll be back soon," I said.

"I'll be waiting."

We stripped in the garden and ran through the obligatory sniffing and mock-snarling. In her wolf-form, Moira was attractively sleek, whilst Eddie was a great, hulking brute, twice as big as either of us. My wolf-self found his size reassuring. I lowered my haunches to the ground, tail tucked in, ears back and licked his throat. Despite our differences in human-form, as a wolf I was prepared to submit to him, let him lead this hunt.

He grabbed my ruff and gave me a quick shake, then moved to nudge my hindquarters, a signal he was ready to go. I set off at an easy pace, the frost crunching under my feet. I had a brief pang of longing for hazy summer nights, lush with prey and living scents, then pushed it aside. I'd wanted an excuse to run; now I had it. So I ran, stretching my muscles and relishing the easy power of my wolf body, power I so often had to restrain in human form. Behind me, Moira and Eddie kept pace effortlessly, Eddie occasionally throwing a wild bark into the night that was answered by another wolf across the city.

It wasn't long before we were out of the city limits, on the trail Glory and I had followed a few nights ago. As if in remembrance of our last encounter, my mouth throbbed. I shook my head to throw off the phantom sensation and glanced back at my hunting companions. Moira caught up to me, trotting alongside me and huffing. I danced at her, snapping playfully. I couldn't help myself; I was brimming with nerves and energy and needed to work some of it off.

Moira snapped back, batting at me with her paws. Eddie growled, leaping between us and butting her aside. He swung his big head towards me, eyes glowing in the darkness, and bared his fangs. I got the message. *Focus*.

I whined and dropped my nose to the ground, searching through the scents of the countryside. We were probably about five miles from the nature reserve and Sly's scent was strong and clear, like a beacon to my wolf nose. He'd run back this way the previous night, wolf-shaped and sore after our fight. I could smell sweat and blood, tantalizing scents, drawing me on.

A thin sliver of moonlight lit the snowy landscape around

us, glazing the fields chalky white. No other animal stirred, perhaps all scared into hiding by us. There was nothing to distract me now; not a mock-fight or the simple joy of movement. The closer we drew to the nature reserve, the more my nerves tingled with a mix of excitement and fear. The aroma of Sly's blood was irresistible but the memory of our previous encounters filled me with dread. Especially now I knew he'd killed before, maybe more than once.

Eddie was whining with anticipation next to me as he picked up the feral's scent too. Moira was silent, slinking through the long grass with the focused glare of a predator on the hunt. Her deliberate pace grated on me. We'd raced out of the city, pushing our stamina to its limit, but now that we were nearly at the reserve, she and Eddie seemed determined to slow down. I just wanted to get there, get it over with and get home to my mate. Frustrated, I danced a few paces ahead of them and turned back, barking.

Eddie pounced on me and cuffed me hard, sending me whimpering to the ground. I flattened my ears and instinctively rolled onto my back. He snarled and leapt over me, ignoring my submission. Stung, I got up and followed him. Moira moved past me, licking my nose on the way. I sighed and hung back behind them. I didn't like being bottom of the Pack, as much as I knew I had to put up with it right now. I liked being a lone wolf.

The realization surprised me but I didn't have time to dwell on it. Eddie and Moira were picking up their pace again and I joined them, pushing my rebellious little revelation down to deal with later.

Twenty minutes later, we were inside the nature reserve and, as one, we all slowed down again. I crept along behind Eddie, inhaling the musky odor of Sly and the other wolves that had passed this way. Now I knew why, my blood ran cold.

When we reached the place Glory and I had fought Sly, I stopped, shifting my weight and whimpering to catch the others' attention. Eddie and Moira fell back to me. Eddie cocked his ears and tilted his head, as much of a questioning

expression as a wolf could manage. Since I couldn't tell him that my nerves had finally overridden my exhilaration, I dipped my head, pretending to be scouting for scents. In reality, I was a tangle of memory and fear.

I could smell my own blood now, preserved by the cold weather. And I could see the furrows in the frozen earth where Glory had dragged me out of the water. Once more my mouth stung, even though the wound there was well healed now. My legs shook and it took all the strength I had not to turn tail and run.

I pictured Molly's thin, scared face and steeled myself. She'd gone through far worse than I had at Sly's paws. I held onto that thought as I raised my head to look at Moira and Eddie again. He was shifting impatiently, she was snuffling around at the water's edge, clearly picking up on mine and Glory's musk there.

Eddie yipped at her and snapped at my ear. I flinched away, following meekly when he set off. As we moved deeper into the wilder part of the reserve, I noticed human scents as well as the werewolf ones. I thought I picked out Oscar, but it was too faint to be sure. The idea rattled me. After what Vince had told me this morning about Oscar, it wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine he'd run here for more Silver Kiss.

And over it all, Sly's scent burned in the air like a living thing, spiked with Silver Kiss. Back and forth he'd come, countless trips to and from the city to supply his desperate customers, or lure them here.

We followed the river round a sharp bend and then all stopped at the same time, like we'd hit an invisible barrier. A large barn loomed out of the shadows ahead. The stink of werewolves, humans and spilled blood permeated the air. If I'd been human I might have gagged on it; to my wolf-self it was an interesting, even exciting smell. Cars were parked haphazardly around the barn, though there were no lights on inside.

So this was it. This was where Molly had been forced to perform for her fix. I growled and Eddie echoed me. Moira flicked her tail and dropped low to the ground, surveying the scene. As far as I could see, the place was deserted. Was Sly back in the city, dealing drugs or dumping bodies?

Eddie slunk towards the barn, low and slow. I settled down with Moira, waiting for the alpha's signal. Best-case scenario—Sly was elsewhere and we could free any wolves who might be inside and leave. Worst case—everyone was elsewhere because Sly had been tipped off and we'd wasted the trip here. I really hoped that wasn't the case. The cars implied there might be people around somewhere, but...

A cracking twig behind me was the only warning I had. Before I could even whip round, Sly pounced.

I rolled reflexively, dodging before his teeth closed on my throat. His weight crushed me to the ground though with no way for me to shake him off. *Bastard!* He'd hidden downwind from us, had probably been following us since we first entered the reserve. I writhed under him, trying to dig my claws into him. Moira leapt at him, knocking him off me and scraping her own claws over my belly in the process. I yelped and twisted onto my feet. Moira and Sly circled each other warily. She was bigger than me—not as big as him, but still large enough to make him wary.

I barked for Eddie, but he'd vanished into the shadows and I could hear human voices. A thrill of fear ran through me. A few seconds later, Eddie's gravelly howl split the night, summoning Moira and I.

Her head jerked up, her attention off Sly for a fraction of a second. It was all the time he needed to dash in and take her down. He struck her leg, fangs ripping through flesh and sinew. Moira howled as she collapsed, almost drowning out the sick crunch of snapping bone. I lunged at Sly, grabbing his ruff and yanking him away from Moira as hard as I could.

We sprawled on the hard earth and he pulled free of my grip, leaving me with a mouthful of fur. I spat it out and rounded on him just as Eddie howled again. Sly shot past me towards the sound, leaving me torn between Moira and the alpha.

Moira lay on her side, her damaged leg bleeding heavily. I bounced over to sniff the wound. Ripped muscle and wet bone gleamed dully in the feeble moonlight. I tentatively licked

at the bloody mess and she snarled at me, biting at me. Her teeth scraped my nose and I jerked back.

Eddie howled once more, frantic now, and human yells and jeers rose up in the night. I abandoned Moira and raced towards him.

In a ring of cars, Eddie and Sly circled each other. A handful of humans, all reeking of beer and bloodlust, stood around them. One clutched a length of pipe. The others were unarmed. Sly and Eddie feinted at each other while the humans whooped and cheered. I guessed that this was just another version of the games Sly set up for them here all the time. I crept closer, hiding between a couple of the cars.

Sly rushed Eddie, going for a leg as he had with Moira. Eddie, bigger and tougher than Moira, whacked Sly round the jaw, sending him scampering back. Eddie barked triumphantly and dived at the feral, bowling him over and ripping his heavy claws through Sly's flesh. The smell of the feral's blood flooded the air and my heart skipped in wild excitement. I yapped and Eddie spun round to face me. Sly pounced immediately, going for the throat this time. Eddie yelped and tumbled down, rolling Sly over, but not before the other wolf sank his fangs into Eddie's throat. The coppery scent of blood intensified.

Eddie struggled and thrashed, but Sly clung on with grim determination, jaws locked. I yapped again, scrambling from my hiding place to throw myself at the feral. As I lunged into the circle, the human with the pipe thwacked at me. The pipe connected with my ribs and I dropped like a stone, all the air knocked out of me.

I lay on my side, twitching and whimpering, watching as Sly hung onto Eddie's throat, bleeding him out while the bigger wolf fought to free himself. He would die. Eddie was big and strong, but Sly was a fighter, a feral, not a soft-bred city wolf like the alpha. He would wear Eddie down eventually.

I forced myself up and took a pain-riddled step towards them. A shout rose up from the circle and the human with the pipe swung at me again. I dodged—barely—and lunged at him, driving my full body weight into his legs. He slammed into the car behind him with a thunk and a curse. I threw myself at Sly, catching his hind leg and biting down until he yelped in pain and released Eddie.

Eddie staggered away panting, blood dripping down his chest. Sly turned on me, twisting himself round to snarl in my face and shake me off. Up close he was demonic, splattered with blood and spittle, eyes wild. I sucked up my courage and attacked him, claws tearing into him, only for my human assailant to grab me by the tail and haul me off Sly. I tore myself free and spun away, hackles up, bloodlust pounding through me.

Eddie joined the fray again, springing clumsily at Sly and knocking him to the ground. Using his greater weight, he pinned the feral down, smashing one big paw into Sly's throat. Sly choked and spat but couldn't free himself. Eddie tossed his head back and howled in victory, preparing to finish the feral by ripping his throat out. I howled too, the thrill of battle flushing through me. Kill him, my wolf sang. Finish him.

Sly closed his eyes, submitting to his fate.

Eddie dropped his head to deliver the fatal strike.

And one of the humans watching pulled out a gun.

The blast echoed in the clearing, smothering my surprised yelp. Eddie never made a sound. The bullet hit him right between the eyes.

Eddie slumped to the ground, blood seeping from the bullet hole into his glassy eyes. The world seemed to stop for a second and my heart pounded so loud I was sure it was about to burst. A red mist fell over me; rage and hurt and animal madness. I howled, a high-pitched keening sound that hurt my ears, and rushed to the alpha's side. Sly scrambled out of my way, but I barely noticed him. All my attention was on Eddie.

Whining desperately, I nosed at him, scenting him for signs of life. He had to be alive. Couldn't be dead, that wasn't the plan. He was an alpha. Alphas didn't die. He had to be alive. I pawed at his shoulder, nudged his head. It lolled to one side, bringing the bullet hole up against my muzzle. The bitter smell of death hit me hard and I scuttled back, a wave

of anger and grief crushing me.

Sly barked behind me and I whirled to face him, hunching over Eddie's body. Hackles up, tail stiff, I stood guard over the alpha, daring Sly to approach. He eyed me warily but didn't move. The humans encircling us whooped and jeered, encouraging us to fight. Their voices stung my ears, sickening me. I wanted to kill them all. Rip their throats out. Feel their blood rush into my belly, hear their bones crunch in my jaws.

Without warning I leapt at the nearest one, hitting him in the midriff. He fell with a scream of panic that was music to me. I pinned him down and tore into him, shredding his shirt and the skin underneath. My claws sank into him with a satisfying meaty squish as for a second I was all wolf, all beast, not a trace of humanity left in me.

And then one of them was on me, two of them, three of them, surrounding me, grabbing and hitting and kicking. Pain exploded through me as boots connected with my skull, my ribs, my spine and the world spun and flared. I was dragged off my prey and there were too many of them, too many faces, too many limbs. I snapped and bit but my jaws met only empty air and I was too dizzy to focus, my vision filling with stars.

And then the one with the lead pipe brought his weapon crashing down on my battered skull and the stars vanished and my last thought was that my mate would be furious when I didn't come home.

Sighteen

Consciousness returned to me in pieces. Scents first: blood, urine, rust. Then sounds: whimpers and muffled voices, dimly filtering through wooden walls. I opened my eyes, blinked at the bright sunlight glaring down on me. For a scary second I was blind and then vision returned, showing me a wire mesh inches from my nose. *Cage. Small cage.* I whined and tried to move. My muscles burned in protest and I froze, breathing quick and hard. Every inch of me hurt. Even my tail hurt.

I trembled, an onslaught of primitive fear rushing me. *Cage*. I was trapped. Imprisoned. I tried again to move, get a sense of the size of the cage. It wasn't big. I couldn't even stand up or turn around. Wild panic swamped me and I began barking madly, bashing my head off the cage door over and over.

Around me, other wolves jolted awake at my cries and began barking too, more out of surprise than anything else. I ignored them, ignored everything except my own terror. *Cage*. I was in a cage. I was trapped. I was trapped...

Something hit the mesh right in front of my nose, startling me into silence. The whole cage rattled with the force of the blow and I pressed myself back as far as I could as the man in front of me lowered the baseball bat he'd slung against the cage. My heart hammered, pure adrenaline shooting through me as I met his gaze. It was Sly.

He was filthy, caked in blood and mud. His hair was pushed back to reveal his ruined ear. Great greenish-yellow bruises marred his face and throat. His wolf eyes gleamed, full of poison. I bared my teeth at him and he echoed the gesture, his canines stained with blood. *Eddie's blood*. We stared each

other down, hatred boiling between us. Then he smiled, slow and sinister, and gestured around the room with his bat.

I looked around properly for the first time, dread settling over me as I took in the grim scene. It was a small room and the walls were lined with cages. Most of the cages were empty, but a lot had wolves in. Young wolves. They'd all stopped barking when Sly hit my cage and now they stared at us with crazed eyes. Scrawny and scarred, they cowered away from him like I did, a sick fog of fear and need hanging over them all.

They couldn't all be local or we'd have known about it ages ago. I thought of the Yorkshire cub, vanished without trace for weeks and wondered how big Sly's operation was.

I turned my head back to Sly. He was still smiling. "Welcome to your new home, bitch." He produced a hypodermic needle from his shirt pocket. Grayish liquid swirled inside and the sharp smell of Silver Kiss stung the air.

I began barking again, pushing myself back against the wall behind me until splinters dug into my rump. Sly curled his lip at me. "Not for you." He moved to the cage next to mine and I craned my head to watch, hopelessly fascinated in spite of myself.

Unlike me, the wolf in the next cage was straining towards Sly, pressing himself up against the mesh and panting desperately. Under the smell of piss and sweat, it took me a second to identify my neighbor. *Oscar*. The realization made me sick. He'd come straight here Monday morning, I guessed, desperate for his Silky after Sunday night's abortive deal.

Sly waggled the needle in front of him. "Want it? Want it bad?" he asked, husky voice smug and cruel. Oscar whined and laid his ears back, a *yes please* gesture. Sly unlocked the cage and Oscar crawled forwards on his belly, whining eagerly. Sly grabbed his ruff and dragged him out of the cage, throwing the young wolf to the ground. Oscar twisted around so he faced Sly, his tail sweeping the dusty floor. Sly knelt down and jabbed the needle into Oscar's neck, under the thick collar of fur there.

Oscar barked, then sagged to the floor, little grumbling

noises vibrating up this throat. His eyes fluttered closed and his sides heaved as his breathing grew fast and shallow. He rolled onto his back, thrashing back and forth. Some of the other wolves began scraping at their cages, whining and yelping. One or two snarled and rumbled, striking as aggressive poses as they could manage in their confines.

I couldn't help myself; I joined in, contaminated by their excitement and hostility. Sly raised his head to grin at me while Oscar ceased rolling and just lay on his back, breath labored. Then he sprang to his feet and rushed around the room, barking high and shrill. His eyes were wide and white and spittle flecked his muzzle. He stopped in front of my cage, sniffing me. I bared my teeth, trying to warn him off, but he simply raised his hackles and dropped into an attack pose, body low to the ground, leaning forwards. Despite the wire between us, I tensed, adrenaline racing through me. The chorus of wild barks and howls around us fired me up and Eddie's death flashed through my head and I all I could think was hunt, hurt, kill.

I threw myself at the cage door, snarling and spitting at Oscar, determined to remove the barrier between us so I could just get at him. My claws snagged on the wire and it cut into the tender skin between my toes. I didn't notice. It was just more fuel for my rage.

Oscar flung himself at me, our claws and teeth clashing frustratingly briefly as we both attacked the cage door while the other wolves sang their bloodlust and encouragement. Sly roared with laughter and kicked Oscar hard in the flank, sending him scurrying away for an instant. In the brief second before Oscar leapt at Sly, the feral opened my cage and I launched myself out, falling between him and Oscar.

Oscar spun midair, darting away from Sly to lunge at me instead. We clashed, forepaws tangling, jaws snapping, both blind with fury. This close, Oscar stank of Silver Kiss, like he was sweating it and the smell drove me crazy. It was enticing and sickening at the same time, like rotting meat. I twisted under Oscar and closed my jaws on his shoulder, sinking my teeth in deep.

He yelped and pulled away, leaving a spatter of blood on the floor between us. He was younger than me; a less experienced fighter and I sensed his surprise at the injury. He'd probably never had a real fight before, soft little pup that he was. He dropped to the floor, looking up at me with glazed eyes, waiting for my next move. I pounced, whacking his head with my paw and grabbing at his muzzle, drawing blood again before he tore free and darted away. He shot to the other side of the room, backing up against an empty cage, where he licked his bloody chops and regarded me with real fear.

I stalked towards him, excitement filling me. He cowered as I approached. I had him. He was already beaten, pathetic little runt. I'd have his heart's blood on my tongue in minutes, the pack around me howling their approval. My own heart pulsed and skipped. I could almost taste his death already.

And then a new voice joined the chorus of bays and wails. I paused, flicking my ears towards the wolf battling to be heard over the others. I knew that voice; it stirred something in the fog that consumed my brain. My wolf-self retreated a little as my human-self remembered Moira.

She'd been hurt. I'd forgotten.

I swung towards Moira. She was caged between two skinny, battered wolves, laying on her side with one leg bent awkwardly underneath her. Sly did that. I remembered now and my wolf pulled back a little more, some of my wild anger slipping away. I trotted over to her, Oscar forgotten, and pressed my nose to hers through the diamond-shaped gap. Her nose was warm and the sour smell of old blood emanated from her. I sniffed at her leg, seeing that it was healing, but healing wrong. The broken bone hadn't been straightened and would mend at a horrible angle. She'd have to break it again to get it healed properly.

My anger returned in full force on her behalf and the wolf took over again. I wasn't interested in Oscar now though; there was only one target I wanted. I whipped round and flung myself at Sly.

Faster than I could move, Sly scooped up his bat and swung it. It connected with my ribs with an audible crack and I collapsed with a yowl. The world spun around me as I fought to breathe. Sly leaned over me.

"Feisty bitch," he said. "Got plans for you."

Nearby, out of my sight, a door creaked open and the scent of humans filled the room. Three men entered. I recognized them as some of the ones from last night and whimpered at the memory. Across the room, Oscar yelped fearfully, but all the other wolves had fallen silent. Eerily silent.

"So?" one of the men asked Sly.

He stood and nudged me with his bare foot. I didn't have the wind just then to do more than cough in response. "We got a fight tonight," he said, hefting the bat again. I closed my eyes before he brought it down on my skull. It didn't hurt quite as much as the lead pipe had.

* * *

When next I came round, I was outside and dusk was falling. I was back in the ring of cars, under a storm-heavy sky. I shook my head, trying to chase away the dull ache that burned in my battered skull and something cold and hard tightened around my throat. I jerked in surprise and the choke chain tightened again, throttling me.

Despite the urge to tug against the chain, I forced myself to relax, picturing rabbits caught in snares. The harder they pull, the tighter the trap gets. I slumped to the ground and the chain slipped enough to let me breathe. I huffed in relief and looked around, wondering what the hell was happening now. I wasn't sure I could handle much more. I wanted to change and slip free of the choke chain, but when I tried I couldn't. I just couldn't. Maybe I had a concussion? My head was foggy and my body wouldn't do what I wanted it to. I was trapped in wolf-shape and it scared the hell out of me.

There was nobody else around, but I could hear wolves barking and howling inside the barn. The memory of the cage sent a shiver through me. Sly's last words before he'd knocked me out came back to me and I whined. It didn't take much to guess what was next.

Sly couldn't force me to fight, could he?

He didn't have to, I realized. He just had to unleash another drugged-up wolf on me and I'd have no choice but to defend myself. Both my wolf and human self were in perfect harmony on that. I wasn't going down without a fight, even if the idea made the bile rise in my throat.

Dusk turned to darkness and the cold seeped into me as I lay there, waiting nervously for Sly to appear. I flicked my ears as owls and bats emerged into the night, their cries breaking the heavy silence. The sounds in the barn faded. Maybe all the wolves were sleeping now. Maybe Sly had left me out here to freeze?

No. I heard humans tramping my way and Sly's gravelly voice barking orders in their wake. A group of them came into sight, two of the bigger men dragging a wolf along behind them on a chain like mine. I wasn't surprised to recognize Oscar. The knowledge ground at me, wearing me down as they came closer. Sly followed them, that wicked grin on his face. I wanted to chew it off.

Sly broke away from the humans to approach me, flourishing a syringe full of Silver Kiss. I growled but forced myself to stay still, wary of the chain. He knelt down and caught a handful of my ruff, forcing my head down to expose the back of my neck. I fought to pull free and bite his hand but he was so strong, too strong. And the choke chain constricted as he pushed my head around and it was all I could do to keep breathing.

There was a brief prick of pain as he slid the needle into my skin, but it was nothing compared to the injuries I'd already suffered. I hardly noticed it, not with blind panic at the thought of being drugged taking me over. I tensed up until my muscles winced, my whole being on edge as I waited for the drug to kick in. I was sure that every itch, twitch and tic was a symptom of the Silver Kiss worming into my system. I quaked and sniffed, picturing Oscar thrashing around on the barn floor and wondering if I was about to do the same, just lose control and choke myself to death in the throes of narcotic madness.

My vision swam and Sly's face blurred. I raised my paw to strike him, but it was too heavy, too awkward to control. My lungs burned and my head felt stuffy, full of cotton wool. My limbs were stiff when I stood; no give, no flexibility to my joints. It scared me and angered me. I wanted to move, needed to, yearned to and this wolf was in my way. I hated him. Wanted to kill him. It would be so easy, just one quick snap. I could already taste his flesh and blood; smell his sweat and the dirt under his nails. Smell other wolves on him, each musky scent an intoxicating mix of need and fear.

My heart fluttered, my senses going into overdrive. He was so close, killing-close and I forgot the chain and dived for him. I was inches from him, inches from ripping his throat out, when the chain snapped taut and I was pulled back with a strangled yelp. Rage crushed me, bringing that red veil down over my eyes again. I twisted and thrashed and fought, all the time closing the chain tighter and tighter around my neck until lack of oxygen had me dizzy and half-blind.

Dimly, I heard chanting and jeering, heard another wolf barking at me. The sounds infuriated me; filled me with the pounding need to get free, get moving. I tore at the earth underfoot, yipping and panting, no clear idea of what I was doing, just knowing I had to do something. I heard a shout but it was human speech, just garbled noise to me. And then there was a dull clunk and the chain around my neck loosened. Heavy coils of rope slapped my hind legs and I stumbled, tripping over the leash.

I pawed the now blessedly loose choke chain off over my head, backpedaling to finally slip free of it. Before I could recover myself, Oscar shot at me and we clashed in a chaotic knot of teeth and claws. Over and over we rolled, tumbling and biting and scratching. Blood flew, his and mine, and the smell drove me crazy, blending with the scent of sweat and aconite that poured off us both. I felt moon-fevered, mad and animal to the core.

My opponent skidded on a patch of ice and slipped away from me briefly. I lunged at him, grabbing his ruff and shaking him hard, until he twisted free and smashed into my ribs. I howled in rage and pounced on him, my weight crushing him down. He cried in pain and I rolled him over, knocking his head back with a blow of my paw to his throat. A wave of cheers and whoops shot up around us, men encouraging me to kill. Their shouts grated on my ears, made my blood boil.

For a second I forgot the wolf beneath me and turned on the men, a primal hatred spurring me to dive at the nearest one. Enemies, we'd always been enemies. For as long as there had been forests and prey to stalk in them, man and wolves had been enemies. The primitive beat of my heart echoed round my skull as I hit my target, slamming him into the hood of the car he leaned on. He didn't have time to react, just went down with a shout as I raked my claws down his chest.

Immediately, a dozen of them were on me, throwing me back into the circle to face the young wolf. He caught my tail, pulling out a clump of fur and the humans were forgotten; we tangled again, no finesse or skill, just brute strength and wild anger. I stopped tracking my injuries, or the ones I dealt him. The world narrowed down to tooth and claw and the hard thump of my heart. I dealt him a vicious blow, tearing open his shoulder and we broke apart to circle each other, both panting for breath as we weighed each other up. He was young and weak, reactions dimmed by the aconite pumping through him. He was slowing down and I scented victory.

His shoulder bled freely, dark droplets splattering onto the stiff grass, and the bitter scent pierced the haze in my brain a little. The human part of me struggled to emerge through the wolf. It was familiar, the smell of his blood. *Pack.* He was Pack. Not just a wolf a rival. *Oscar.* I whined, suddenly unsure of myself. What was I doing? What was wrong with me?

Then a human booted me in the ribs, slamming me into Oscar, who responded by chomping down on my flank, teeth ripping through flesh and muscle. I yelped, fell, and he was on me, pinning me like I had him. He went for my throat, murder in his eyes and the wolf part of me took over. She had to. I moved faster than Oscar and fastened my teeth into his throat first. Taking advantage of my position on my side, I dug my claws into his belly until his skin popped under the

pressure, spilling more blood over us both. The air was thick with its scent now and my human self sank away beneath it.

Oscar gargled and slumped on top of me, his weight only serving to push my claws deeper into his belly. There were some boos from the crowd and something sharp prodded me in the rump. I tried to wriggle away from it and a burst of human noise blasted me. Cries that sounded angry, hungry. I closed my eyes and hung onto Oscar, trying to block them out.

And then a sound I couldn't ignore. *Gunfire*. I released Oscar, who rolled off me limply, and scrambled to my feet, primitive fear drumming through me again. Around me, pandemonium erupted. The humans were scattering. The feral stood frozen near the barn, a mix of rage and dread pouring off him. Inside the barn, the caged wolves exploded into full voice, yowls and yaps echoing through the building. I scented the air, smelling petrol and humans, new humans, heading our way.

My haywire brain switched gears and suddenly I wanted to protect Oscar from this new threat. I stood over him, hackles up, trying to keep an eye on every human there. The original ring was scattering, shouts and curses polluting the air. Some were climbing into their cars. Most were just running. One dashed past me and I snapped instinctively, hamstringing him. He fell with a shriek of pain and rolled away from me. Someone else tripped over him in the darkness and I crouched low over Oscar, bracing myself in case either struck at me.

Gunfire sounded again and a stern human voice rang out over the shock of noise in the circle. His words penetrated my wolf brain, tugging at the human part of me again.

"Nobody move. Everybody stay calm."

It was an alpha's command, strong and commanding, and I responded as I would to any alpha, swinging my head in his direction and dropping into a more submissive stance. I couldn't see him yet, but his scent was powerful, riding over the blood and fear inside the circle.

Lights glowed close by; torches, sweeping over the circle and the humans trying to escape it. There was nowhere for them to go though, I realized, as human awareness returned to my wolf-self. The new humans had brought cars, pinning the others in. If I hadn't been doped up and crazed, I might have heard their engines earlier. I wagged my tail hesitantly. Was this help, or more danger?

As I watched the lights approach, there was a swift movement to my side. I turned in time to see Sly kick the man I'd injured out of his way and make a break for a gap between two cars. He was stripping as he ran. If he shifted and made it out into the reserve, he'd get away.

I launched myself at him, snapping at his heels and missing by a whisker as he fell into his wolf shape with liquid smoothness. Unlike me, he was fresh and unmuddled by drugs, and he quickly pulled away from me as we broke free of the circle and ran into the marshy wilds of the reserve.

I'd catch him. I had to. Ignoring my aches and wounds, I threw my head back, baying to the stars, and raced after the feral. Just before I plunged into the tall grass where Sly had vanished, I was sure I heard Shannon's voice calling me. I didn't stop though, just put my head down and kept moving. Sly's scent was a red-hot trail under my nose. It didn't matter how fast he ran, I'd find him.

Mineteen

Maybe the Silver Kiss in my system was doing me some good. Despite my injuries, I didn't feel tired or sore. I felt aggressive and energized. I'd pay for it later, I knew, but for now I gave the wolf her head once more and pushed my body to its limits, something I hadn't done for years. I gloried in the hidden strength I possessed, the stamina and power in my limbs. My human body felt like a distant dream, limited and fragile in comparison to this. For a few seconds I almost forgot why I was running and just reveled in the thrill of movement.

Then the strong musk of the feral hit me and I shook myself, focusing again. A splash of bitter sweat on a rock told me he'd slowed his pace, falling into the steady lope more suited to wolves than flat-out sprinting. I had a chance to catch up if I pushed myself that little bit more, really put myself to the test.

I gave myself one last shove, called on every last shred of energy and strength and sped through the reserve, hot on Sly's heels. Through reeds and over icy puddles, trampling through swans' nests and scattering water voles and rats out foraging. Bounding over trees felled by winter storms and fighting through thickets of dead brambles. Now the aches set in. Now the wounds stung, cold air abrading my torn skin. But I was closing in on Sly. His scent was getting fresher with every step I took.

Excitement roared through me, adrenaline blocking out some of the pain. I could hear him now, not too far ahead. His form was lost in the shadows, but his breathing was loud and clear, steady and even. It struck me that as hard as I pushed

myself, I'd still never take him in a fight; he had too many advantages. I couldn't win a fair fight, wolf to wolf. It was time to bring the human back a little.

I veered away into a knot of trees and slowed down, taking a second to catch my breath and let Sly think I'd given up. The sound of his breathing and the grass crunching under his paws faded into the distance. I couldn't let him get too far ahead, but I had to give him a little reprieve. As soon as I thought he'd gone far enough ahead, I started again, circling around the trail he'd taken. This worked best with another wolf to take the other side and trap Sly in a true pincer movement. Since I was out here alone, I'd have to adapt. Luckily, I'd spent years on my own. I didn't need another wolf, just the darkness and the element of surprise.

I made a wide loop around Sly, keeping him upwind of me so my scent wouldn't carry to him whilst his hit me sharply, letting me track him and keep myself hidden. Instead of running now, I crept through the trees, low to the ground. He'd slowed his pace as soon as he thought I'd given up, but was still moving determinedly east. Out of the reserve, I guessed. Away from the mess he'd made back at the barn. I growled softly and closed in, narrowing the distance between us slowly but surely. I couldn't risk any mistakes. As much as I wanted to just rush in and rip his throat out, I had to play it safe.

A few minutes later, he was in my field of vision again, taking a break at the edge of the river. I stopped, dropping down into a pounce position, even though he wasn't close enough for it. This was it: my one chance. If this went wrong, he'd get away and probably leave me for dead. I had to be quick and precise, not the easiest thing. I wasn't planning to kill him and if I misjudged anything, I might do so accidentally. I thought I'd burned off the Silver Kiss—my head felt clearer, my mind more like my own—but I couldn't be sure and I dreaded making a mistake.

Sly trotted to the riverbank, putting his back to me while he drank. Now was my moment.

I slunk from my hiding place, hardly daring to breathe for fear of alerting him. He kept drinking, head almost under the water. I shivered but suppressed the flash of memory that threatened me. I wasn't going in the water this time. I moved closer, my heartbeat counting the seconds until I pounced.

Sly raised his head and shook it, shining droplets of water flying from his muzzle. I gathered up everything I had left inside me—every scrap of pain, outrage, and disgust—and flew at him.

It was a magic moment; that perfect hunter's moment that all wolves cherish and long for. I hit him in the side, sent him sprawling to the earth in a tangle of limbs and with two swift, hard bites, hamstrung him, severing the tendons at the back of his knees. His pained howl rang in my skull, making my head spin. I stiffened my trembling legs; afraid I might collapse now and undo this perfect moment. Sly was at my mercy and he knew it. His eyes were wide, rolled back in his head, and his sides heaved, the acrid tang of his fear hanging over us. I had him. *Finally*.

Changing back to human shape after so long as a wolf left me disorientated and giddy with relief. My irrational fear that I might be trapped in wolf shape dissipated in a surge of adrenalin and beautiful agony. A euphoria that was short lived; I felt sick. I'd been pushing my body to its limits. Throw in Silver Kiss and payback was a bitch. The first thing I did was lean into the reeds and throw up. My forehead burned when I pressed my hand to it and my vision swam. I wanted to sleep for about a week, then eat everything I could get my hands on.

I didn't have the luxury of that just yet. It would take Sly a while to heal the snapped tendons, but it would happen eventually and I wanted him locked up before that. I wiped my mouth and stood, wavering for a second while my eyes adjusted to the new colors and slants of light available to them. My body twinged as I stretched, a multitude of injuries starting to heal up, eating through the reserves of energy I had left. I wasn't sure I had the strength to get Sly back to the barn where—I hoped—a few police officers would be waiting for him.

Sly looked pitiful, crashed out at the river's edge, twitching and whimpering constantly. I couldn't find it in myself to feel sorry for him. Not after he'd caged me, drugged me and watched me half-kill another Pack wolf. Part of me—the part that was still all wolf, all instinct—wished I'd just killed him and shoved him in the river.

Sighing, I grabbed his ruff. He made a half-hearted attempt to bite me, but I stepped on his back leg and he yowled and went limp, shivering. After that, he let me pick him up and carry him like a puppy. He was heavy and my muscles screamed in pain as I staggered back the way we'd come. I could have dragged him, but I imagined his ruined back legs, nerves and tendons torn and snapped, dragging along the stony track and I couldn't do it. It was too easy to imagine myself in the same position.

Maybe I did feel a little sorry for him after all. What a sucker.

I hadn't limped more than a few meters when I heard voices up ahead and saw flashlight beams sweeping the ground. Exhaustion hit me in a wave and I dropped to my knees, calling back. My voice was raw and rough, too long unused. I sounded like Sly. I glanced down at the feral in my arms. His eyes were closed, ears down. He wasn't going to fight me anymore. I set him down, keeping one hand pressed into his fur in case he did try anything and waited for the people to find us. I closed my own eyes briefly and caught a waft of sandal-wood and jasmine on the night wind.

Shannon.

Even as I thought her name, I heard her voice. I opened my eyes and saw her burst out of the trees, blonde hair glowing gold in the light of her torch. I blinked, shielding my eyes from the light, and when I could see again she was right there in front of me.

"Ayla," she whispered, a world of questions in the single word. Her eyes flew to Sly, then back to me, face contorted with sick fear and slow-dawning relief. "You're okay." Her voice flowed over me like honey, sweet and soothing.

I nodded. I wasn't but I would be. Now. She knelt down

beside me, running her fingers over my face, tears shining in her eyes. "Damn you, Ayla, I could kill you myself," she said.

I sighed. What a way to go.

* * *

The scene back at the barn was messy and nasty. The police had arrived in force and most of the humans who'd come to watch Sly's fights had been arrested. Officers milled around, talking into radios and shoving the handcuffed men into their cars. Some struggled without any real heart, making vile threats and throwing out the usual insults.

The wolves who'd been locked up in the barn were now free. Some do-gooder idiot had simply unlocked the cages and let them run riot. A couple of the young wolves had simply shot off into the night without a backwards glance. Most, starved, deprived of Silver Kiss and expecting violence, had turned on their liberators. No serious injuries, thankfully, but an ambulance was on its way. A couple of coppers who were also wolves had shifted and were now rounding up the scared cubs, driving them back into the barn where at least they could be contained until they calmed down and could be dealt with properly.

"Where's Moira?" I asked Shannon.

"One of the officers is driving her straight to hospital," she replied. "She's going to need some serious surgery on her leg." Shannon paled, no doubt picturing the gruesome mess Moira's leg had been.

Someone had draped a woolen blanket over me and I pulled it tighter around my shoulders now as I watched the aftermath unfold. The wolves in the barn barked and grumbled and I ached to go to them, check them over, assure them it was over now. It wasn't my place though.

A few feet away, two officers were standing over Eddie's body. I watched them kneel down to get a better look and a trickle of grief dripped through me. I hadn't really liked Eddie, I realized. Somehow that made it worse. He'd been a bully but he hadn't deserved death. Who would be charged for his

murder? I had no idea which human had pulled the trigger on him. Maybe Sly would be held responsible.

Shannon squeezed my fingers. "Want to go home now?" "Don't I have to give a statement?"

"Tomorrow," she said firmly. "There'll be plenty of time tomorrow." She wrapped her arm around my shoulders and guided me to the car.

She'd waited up all night for me, she said, just like before. And when, like before I didn't come home, she'd called my parents. Called Vince, Glory, Cal, everyone she could think of. None of them knew where I was, of course, but all of them agreed that she should go to the police. Unlike Eddie, none of them believed in taking the law into their own hands.

So Shannon and my parents had gone to the police.

"I spent most of the day going over Molly's case with them," she explained as she ushered me into the car. "It took ages to convince them I wasn't some conspiracy theory crackpot. I could have throttled them it was taking so long. I just kept thinking—I could be out there, looking for you."

Tina Brady had been pulled in then, along with her daughter, to confirm the story. After that, things had moved fast. Not fast enough, in my opinion, but fast considering. By dusk, the police were ready to move out, having gathered enough evidence and, maybe more importantly, enough werewolf officers to be confident. It was a shame that by that time I'd already half-killed—

"Where's Oscar?" I grappled with the door handle, terror and guilt surging through me. "I've got to see him." I stumbled out of the car, back into the bitingly cold night.

Shannon leapt out too, running round the car to intercept me.

"Ayla, stop! Oscar's gone to the hospital with Moira."

"He's alive though?" I gripped her arms, searching her face for the truth. "He is alive?"

"He's hurt, but he's alive," she confirmed. "And we need to get you home and rested, alright? You can visit him in the morning if you want."

"I did it," I said, the words falling heavy from my tongue.

"Sly made us... He drugged us..."

"Ayla." Shannon pressed her fingers to my lips, silencing me. "Please." Her voice shook; exhaustion, or perhaps fear. Fear for me, not of me. I slumped my shoulders and got back in the car.

Tomorrow. Another thing to deal with tomorrow.

* * *

It was close to dawn when we got home and I was looking forward to falling into bed. Of course it wasn't that easy. My parents, Vince, Joel and Glory were all waiting in the living room for me and Shannon. It was a good hour before I'd hashed out enough of the story to satisfy them. Mum just sat and cried the whole time. When I finished talking, she took my hands.

"You should have told us," she said softly. "We wouldn't have let Eddie push you into this."

I stared at our joined hands, a mix of awkward emotions bubbling in me. "It was for the Pack," I said.

"It wasn't worth it," she replied bluntly. "Ayla, if we'd lost you..."

Dad rested his hands on her shoulders. "Eddie had no right to drag the pair of you so deep into this."

"He thought it was for the best," I said, blinking back the tears stinging my eyes.

"I'm sure he did. But for me, family comes before Pack," Dad said fiercely. I glanced up at him, shocked at the blazing anger in his dark eyes. "I would have fought tooth and claw to keep you out of this if I'd known."

Family before Pack; the concept felt strange. The whole reason I'd left town as a teenager was because my parents had pushed my duty to the Pack ahead of my rights as an individual. My right to my own sexuality, my own identity. My throat was too thick with tears for me to speak, so I just nod-ded. Maybe he sensed my confusion, because he covered mine and Mum's joined hands with his.

"We lost you once, Ayla, because of Pack rules and histrionics. I'm not saying Pack isn't important—of course it is.

But if it comes down to you or Pack, I'm choosing you. You're my daughter."

I couldn't stop myself crying then, great, ugly sobs that tore up my throat. Immediately, my parents closed around me, smothering me in their embrace and then Vince and Joel were in there too, hands stroking my hair, noses rubbing my cheeks, a wolfy hug that told me better than any words ever could that I was safe.

I savored the group hug for a few seconds before realizing someone was missing from it. I peeked out from under Joel's arm to see Shannon smiling nervously at me. She was poised on the edge of her seat, as if about to leave. I held out my hand to her, silently inviting her in. If this was about family, there was nowhere else she should be.

She wavered, biting her lip and then Vince shuffled aside on the sofa to make room for her. She smiled then, a real smile, and knelt in front of me, wrapping her arms round my waist and laying her head on my lap. I tangled my fingers in her hair and let my family cradle me—us.

I could have stayed there like that forever.

* * *

I didn't, of course. I eventually wriggled free of my family's embrace, pleading exhaustion, and Shannon and I went to bed. We slept with our arms wrapped around each other, clinging together with a desperation neither of us could vocalize.

It was dark outside when we stirred again and I could hear Vince and my parents downstairs in the kitchen, pots clanging, glasses clinking. I shuffled closer to Shannon, reluctant to face the real world just yet. I was mostly healed from my adventures in the woods, but I was ravenous and aching all over, so I'd have to move soon. Just, not yet. I loved how warm and soft she was against me, loved the darkness of the room and the intimacy of it in contrast to the bustle downstairs. It was like we were in our own little bubble, hidden away from reality.

Shannon kissed my forehead. "You okay?" she asked softly. "Better." I nuzzled her. "Are you?"

"I am, now. Now you're home." She sat up, leaning back against the headboard. "Before you left, you said we'd talk about moving."

"Yeah, I did." My heart twisted. "Do you want to? Move away, that is?"

"I want to be with you," she replied simply. "Home's where you are, really, isn't it?" She didn't sound entirely happy about it.

"Let's go on holiday," I said impulsively. "We haven't been away together for years. We've earned a break. Somewhere hot and sunny, and far away. Maybe...maybe that will put things in perspective."

She nodded slowly. "A holiday would be nice."

"Joel's parents have a holiday home in France."

"Sounds perfect."

We nestled back down in the covers together, a small measure of peace attained. Things would be all right, I decided as I closed my eyes again. I'd make them all right, somehow.

Twenty

I Gave my STATEMENT TO the police the next day. Neither me nor the officers who interviewed me were sure if I'd be charged for maiming Sly. His tendons had already healed apparently, which left no evidence except his word to prove I'd done anything in the first place. It was always hard for werewolves to press assault charges. And given the depth of shit Sly was in, he probably wasn't thinking about me too much.

One of the officers, a wolf, let slip to me that most of the humans arrested at the barn were Alpha Humans members. Not exactly a surprise, but it did confirm Eddie's theory that they were supplying Sly with the Silver Kiss he'd been feeding to the wolves at the barn. It also more or less confirmed that the graffiti on ours and Tina's doors had been the same group, trying to keep Molly quiet about Sly's operation and keep us from poking our noses in.

"The West Yorkshire Police have a similar case going down at the moment," the officer told me as she escorted me out of the interview suite. "You didn't hear it from me, but I doubt this is the last we'll see of this kind of thing."

It was a depressing thought, one that completely killed any satisfaction I'd felt at capturing Sly. This was happening up and down the country, I'd bet, Alpha Humans using it to discredit werewolves, or just to entertain themselves. And wolves like Sly, greedy and wild, were helping. It made me sick.

After that, things slipped into normal routine. I went back to work at Inked to find out that Kaye had dumped her People Matter boyfriend in favor of a nice tennis player she'd met at the gym.

"He was getting a bit intense," she told Lawrence, who nodded sagely. "He wanted to take me to some werewolf boxing match, or something. I don't know, it was just weird."

I started at her words but kept my mouth closed. It didn't matter. It was over. I chanted it to myself over and over in the days following.

* * *

A week later I got home to find a letter telling me that my application to join the police was on hold, due to my upcoming involvement in Sly and the Alpha Humans' trial. I showed the letter to Shannon, trying to sound like I didn't care. She saw through me.

"It's not a rejection, just a delay. Don't look so miserable."

"I'd have thought bringing down a drug-dealing kidnapping circle would be in my favor," I said as lightly as I could, whilst disappointment welled inside me.

Shannon kissed my cheek. She was baking and the sweet smell of apples and caramel clung to her, lifting my mood a little.

"Don't get too upset. Let's face it; you're too much of a maverick to be on the police force, always running off on your own to tackle the evil villains. Maybe you should become a superhero instead."

I grimaced and tore the letter up, tossing it in the kitchen bin. I was sure it was only a matter of time before the actual rejection came though. I'd been counting on getting into the police. It would have been another anchor to the city and the Pack. At least, before all this Silver Kiss shit happened, it would have been. Now, after everything that had happened, I wasn't sure how closely I wanted to be tied to the Pack. Family, yes, like Dad had said. But Pack? I just wasn't sure anymore.

I hadn't told Shannon that. I was waiting until after our holiday. But deep down in my blood and my bones, I already knew I was a lone wolf, had been one for too long now to change. I didn't want to leave my family and my friends again, but

I didn't want the cloistering, all-consuming pressure of being a Pack wolf either. I wasn't sure I could have it both ways. I left Shannon to her baking and went to sit on the back doorstep, staring up at the waxing moon. Another week and she'd be full and fat again, inviting us all out to play. By then Oscar and Moira would be fully healed—although Moira was going to need physiotherapy for a while, being an older wolf than Oscar, slower to bounce back. By then Eddie would be buried under a hawthorn tree, as was traditional.

By then Shannon and I would be packing for our holiday. We'd be gone for two weeks, a fraction of time compared to the eight years I'd been gone before.

I leaned my head back against the doorframe and watched the stars twinkle overhead. Somewhere out in the city a wolf howled, greeting the night, and a dozen others took up the song, filling the air with music. I closed my eyes and soaked it up. It was beautiful, it was magical and it was Pack. I just wasn't sure if that meant it was home. 218 * Naomi Clark

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