



KEEPING BLOOD

IMMORTAL COUNCIL

COURTNEY BREAZILE

Born into a world of immortal creatures, Alexia is a one of a kind hybrid between her vampire mother and werewolf father. Shunned by both species, she is alone in her world, wishing only to be human and for once, truly accepted. Ian, a werewolf from another pack, shows up and claims she is his fated mate, much to his own displeasure. When Alexia's parents disappear, she is forced to ask Ian, and a very unpleasant vampire, Paxton, for help in finding them. Thrown together in their mission to save her parents, will they also find that they share a fate to be mated? Will Alexia finally find acceptance with Ian, or will their differences keep them apart?

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KEEPING BLOOD
THE IMMORTAL COUNCIL SERIES BOOK TWO

BY

COURTNEY BREAZILE

DEDICATION

Thanks Casady for always being my cheerleader and sounding board. I couldn't do this without friends who are honest enough to tell me when my idea is less than great. Love You.

CHAPTER ONE

Alexia tried to lead a normal life and was mildly successful, for just under five hours a day. She could be out in the sunlight for that small amount of time each day, acting like every other twenty year old on the college campus. The other nineteen hours of the day, she hid from something, be it sunlight or moonlight.

The rays of the sun tingled against her skin and she knew she was cutting it close. She glanced at her watch and grimaced. She had been gone for four and a half hours. Her mother would throw a fit. But she was on her way home now and she would make it in time. Alexia wasn't stupid, she didn't *want* a crispy new look.

She rolled the tinted windows up in her car, blocking out all but two percent of sunlight, she knew from experience that this would only buy her a couple of extra minutes. She accelerated out of the city toward the safety of her lightless home, where she lived with her parents, Zyra and Tarquin.

They lived in a large remodeled manor house on the outskirts of Portland, Oregon. Looking at the place you might think it a well kept, but still creepy, old house on the outside and they were a normal family of three on the inside. What no one would guess was that the freakiest things were the seemingly normal people inside the house.

Alexia was a half-vamp, half-were, the only one in existence her family knew of. Her mother was a beautiful vampire who drank blood on a regular basis and could never go out in the sun without risk of certain death, who had fallen deeply in love with her father, a werewolf.

The vamps and weres had little in common, which is probably why it had never come to pass that they bred and produced something like Alexia. They both had great strength and speed, and they were part of the secret world of what most on earth thought to be fictional fairytale creatures. They were both dominant, both territorial and both quick to anger, which made them a bad match for friendship, let alone marriage. Somehow Alexia's parents had gotten past all that, not without disapproval of both their species however.

Alexia was so close to a normal human, which almost made it worse. One thing she had inherited from both sides of her family was a quick temper. She had some serious anger issues and it didn't

help that she was constantly trying to be something she wasn't. The stress made her quick to strike, and when she became angry, her blue vampire eye glowed red and her brown werewolf eye glowed yellow. Not to mention the fact that her fangs extended and she was sure to merge with her wolf counterpart if she didn't calm fast.

So deep breathing and mantras along the lines of, *I don't want to kill anyone today*, had become part of her not-so-normal daily life.

When she had told her parents last fall that she was signing up for classes at the community college, they had tried to talk her out of it. They didn't want her exposed and vulnerable if her anger got the better of her. She had done everything in her power to prove them wrong and she was almost through her second semester—so far no one had been killed. Although there had been a few times when she had been forced to leave quickly before biting someone's head off, literally. She hadn't confessed those close calls to anyone as her parents would force her to quit if she did. There was a real risk to a very large, very dangerous population if even one fantastical being was revealed for what they truly were.

Humans would be the least of her problems if she outed herself.

Alexia glanced in the rearview mirror into the backseat where her petite red wolf lay curled up,

head on paws and eyes closed, although she wasn't asleep. Alexia heard the hum of the wolf's thoughts in the back of her own mind. The wolf constantly took in information about its surroundings from its heightened senses, the sounds and the smells, always on alert for possible danger to its keeper, which is what the human half of the werewolf relationship was called. Not that there was much love between them as the keeper was the wolf's life—if the keeper died, so did its wolf. Most keepers embraced this symbiotic relationship, but Alexia refused. It was just one more thing that made it impossible for her to live a normal life. She never even had a boyfriend because relationships with humans were forbidden. Not that any vamp or were around would give her the time of day. She wasn't really like them, she wasn't really like anyone.

Her wolf whined in the back, empathizing with Alexia's pain. She wasn't normal either. The wolf counterpart of a normal keeper ran free on the full moon, part of a pack, hunting and eating fresh meat. It's what they lived for, but Alexia kept her wolf back by drinking blood, the only reason she ever drank blood. It was just better that way, safer for everyone.

Alexia pulled off the freeway and onto their private wooded drive. She groaned when the big black SUV parked out front came into view.

Another reason she hadn't rushed back home today, they had visitors.

Alexia's father was an Alpha and as the time for the full moon approached, other weres started showing up to run with him. The full moon merge was important to weres. At midnight, the merge was forced and they ran as a pack. It was a time of celebration for the keepers and their counterparts.

Not for Alexia, she dreaded it. She hated the house being overrun by keepers and their wolves, and most of all, she hated that she was forced to drink blood to keep her wolf under control. For her, the hunt was a kind of torture she would do anything not to endure.

Alexia pulled her car into the garage, safe from the sun, and looked back at her wolf. *I'm sorry I can't do it, you understand, don't you?* Alexia pushed her thoughts out to her wolf.

I know, Alexia, the wolf thought back sullenly. I wait for the time when we are safe and then we will both be free.

"Don't hold your breath." Alexia got out of the car and her wolf jumped through the closed back door to stand beside her, offering her its strength to get through the next couple of days.

The wolf's back reached Alexia's hip and she reached down and gave it an appreciative pat. At least her wolf understood, even if it didn't like it. Survival was an instinct ingrained in all of the

fantastical beings and it was hard to deny, which was why they were still thought to be make-believe.

No creature out there wouldn't do anything and everything in its power to keep the secret of their existence from the humans. The one and only rule all types of fantastical beings adhered to, *don't let them find out about us*. Humans were so quick to be prejudice and freak out. It would be disastrous if suddenly they found out that their nice neighbor was a shape shifter or a witch. Talk about Armageddon—the earth would be destroyed in the effort to rid it of the *evil* creatures.

Alexia was safe from the sun in the garage so she waited for a few minutes, preparing herself for what she would face inside the house. She crawled up on the hood of her car and leaned back. Her wolf hopped up soundlessly and stretched out beside her. Alexia stared up at the ceiling and imagined what it would feel like to sunbathe on the beach all day, or go for a romantic moonlight walk with a lover. These were her common relaxation scenes, and they were almost working when her wolf jumped up and growled at the closed door.

Alexia sat up as painful sunlight came through the opened door. She hissed and moved with her vampire speed into the shadows.

"Oh, Alexia, I didn't know you were in here. Is

the sun *bothering* you?" Sam sneered from the open door, allowing rays of sunlight to fill the space as he eyed her with open hostility.

It was a look Alexia had come to expect from most weres, especially him. Whenever she was around him, she smelled his violent hate for her, more intense even than most of the other weres. She wasn't sure why he hated her so extremely and she didn't really care, it was what it was. She pushed herself away from the wall, deliberately going slow as if she weren't bothered in the least by the sunlight, and walked toward him.

She stopped a few feet away, hands on hips, head cocked to the side, feigning boredom with the situation. Her red brown hair was soft where it touched her skin, curling around her face and shoulders. She had always been told it gave her a feminine, almost whimsical look, a stark contrast to her violent and deadly nature.

She could smell the familiar burning stench of his hatred, his violent wish to do her harm. He didn't even try to hide it. After all, no one else was around to smell it but her.

"Is there something you need in here, Sam? Or did you just come out here to bother me?" Alexia let her anger go up a notch unchecked, her eyes would glow red and yellow out of her innocent face.

"Fuck, Alexia, your eyes are really freaky." Sam

pushed away from the door and let it close behind him. He stood between her and the exit, arms crossed over his chest, doing his best to intimidate her with his size, which was small for a werewolf male, but still much bigger than her.

Even female weres were bigger than her. Vampire females tended toward the petite side and she supposed it was from her mother that she got her small size.

“What do you want, Sam?” Alexia held firm, she wouldn’t let him intimidate her into stepping back. She would never let someone like him dominate her even a little bit. Her wolf sniffed at what seemed to Alexia to be nothing, but she knew it would be Sam’s wolf. The wolves could see each other just fine, no matter the absence of moonlight.

“I saw you pull in and I thought I would come out here and personally invite you to hunt with us this moon.” His words were polite, but belied by the slight glow in his eyes and dangerous tone in his voice.

“Or I could just come over there and suck you dry, then neither of us would hunt this moon, how about that?” She hoped he wouldn’t dare her to follow through on her threat as she really had no desire to put her mouth on him, but she would do that before she would let him see her back down. Her fangs elongated at the thought of blood, even

if her mind revolted at the idea. She smiled wide so he could see them filling her mouth expectantly. Her wolf backed closer to her, preparing to merge if her anger went much longer unchecked.

Sam growled and his eyes flashed yellow, he was close to merging now, too. Obviously he didn't take well to being threatened and it irked him that she wouldn't back down. *Typical bully, Alexia thought. He doesn't know how to react when someone smaller isn't afraid.*

Alexia prepared herself for what she would have to do. Her body made room for her wolf and her eyes locked onto the pulse at Sam's neck. She could be merged and ripping out his throat in three seconds, no problem, Sam wouldn't even be merged by the time he was on the ground, his lifeblood flowing out.

She didn't relish the idea of killing, but she couldn't let him dominate her. Sam had always had it out for her and he would not stop until one of them was completely cowed—there was no way in hell it would be her. She let loose with an intimidating hiss and took a small step forward, shifting her weight for an optimal attack.

The door burst open and the harsh sunlight momentarily blinded her. The vulnerability would have been enough to make her merge fully if her father's voice hadn't reached her at the same time

as the sunlight.

"Alexia, Sam, I hope you two are playing nice in here." His neutral voice didn't fool either Alexia or Sam. He would be furious over them fighting. Tarquin was very protective of his daughter and he was never in favor of pack members fighting without a very good cause.

"Yeah, Dad, you know us, best friends forever and all that." Alexia's flippant tone did nothing to hide her true feelings. Surely her eyes continued to glow brightly and she could feel her fangs, still prominent in her mouth.

Sam hung his head low in submission to Tarquin and let out a slight whine when Tarquin's gaze landed on him.

"Sam, why don't you head on back to the house. Zyra has dinner prepared." Silence surrounded them until Sam was gone and the door once again shut.

"Is there something I should know, Alexia, other than the fact you have once again worried your mother into a fit? She was about to send out the entire pack to look for you. She can't understand your reason for making it such a close call. Of course, the fact that she can't come find you or help you, even if you were dying, doesn't help the situation. I do think she would follow you everywhere if she could, keeping danger at bay." The words were spoken with love and

understanding, but there was still a hint of reprimand in them. Tarquin would do anything to make his wife happy. It was why they were still so sickeningly in love after so many years together, and in spite of such vast differences.

"Well that could be part of the reason I stay out as much as possible. I don't need her worrying over me all of the time."

"She loves you, Alexia, and she knows you aren't happy. I think her biggest fear is that someday you just won't come back home."

"I'm sorry. I don't worry her on purpose. I just like to feel normal for whatever short time I can manage." Alexia's gaze was on her feet as she spoke, she really did feel bad about worrying her parents and she felt so much guilt over not accepting herself as she was, as they had made her. As far as parents went, they were great, had always provided her with all the love and attention she could have asked for, but it didn't make up for the fact that everyone else in her life had at best found her distasteful.

The love of one's parents wasn't enough to drown out the hatred of everyone else that truly knew what you were.

Tarquin walked over and enfolded her in his strong arms. "I have always wanted to give you anything at all to make you the happiest girl alive, because you and your mother have certainly made

me the happiest man alive. But I feel like I have failed you time and again. Would it be better if I no longer had any pack here for the full moon merge? I know it makes you kind of uncomfortable. We could arrange to meet elsewhere if it is what you need. This is your home, too, after all. You deserve to be happy in it."

Alexia pulled away from Tarquin and looked up into his loving face. He didn't look much older than her, although he was somewhere around nine hundred, it was a keeper thing. They stopped aging in their prime and lived basically forever. It was the same with the vampires—her mom was fairly young though she was only around three hundred, but she looked not a day over twenty-five. Anymore when they were seen together, on the very rare occasion they were seen together by humans, everyone assumed they were sisters. Another reason Alexia couldn't live a normal life. It wasn't like she could bring anyone home to meet her parents who looked like they were maybe ten years older than herself.

Alexia sighed heavily. "I know how important it is for you to do this, how important it is for all of those werewolves to run with an Alpha like you. I wouldn't dream of standing in the way of that." And it was the truth. She didn't want to be responsible for taking away her father's source of

happiness, or give the other weres a better reason to hate her.

Tarquin planted a quick kiss on her head and then led her out of the garage, one arm slung protectively across her shoulder.

Alexia always felt so safe under her father's arm, even more so than in her mother's protective embrace. He understood what it was like for her, what kind of sorrow there was in not belonging anywhere.

Vampires at heart were very selfish creatures, which made them content to be alone. Most resided alone in dark fortresses, killing any who dared get too close. Only when they mated did they live together. If a child was born, it usually left as soon as it was old enough to take care of itself. Instinct would drive it into seclusion in an area where it could hunt and provide for itself without drawing unwanted attention from the humans. It was amazing that they managed to find their mates at all. Recently, the vampires had become somewhat organized, mostly through the internet. Face to face meetings were still uncommon.

Werewolves on the other hand, were not happy if they were not part of a pack, companionship was vital for their survival. A werewolf alone would become depressed and die. It was unheard of to see a werewolf living with less than two

others, unless they were newly mated, then they would live as a pair until they started producing offspring. After the first child was born, it was not unusual for pack members who were single to move in with the family.

This of course meant that Alexia couldn't tell her father to stop having his pack mates come over, especially not during the full moon. As happy as her father was living with only his vampire wife and half-breed daughter, he would suffer if he didn't have this time with his pack. The pack would suffer as well. Her father was their Alpha which meant the others gained strength by being in his presence during the full moon. And except for the ones who outwardly wished her harm, like Sam, she didn't wish harm upon any of them.

Alexia let out a sigh of relief when the house door shut behind her, completely blocking out the rays of the sun. Their house had long ago been remodeled for their special needs. It sealed out even the smallest hint of daylight, then it would open up to let the moon shine in brightly to every room at night. A compromise that kept everyone in the house happy, most of the time.

"Alexia, dear, I was getting quite worried about you. I don't know why you insist on staying out in that horrible sunlight for a full five hours." Zyra rushed to Alexia's side and peered at her,

searching her face for any sign of sun damage.

"I'm fine, Mom, really you worry too much. I know all about the danger of UV rays, I watch the news." Alexia's smart remark gained her a frown from her mother, but she didn't pursue the topic.

Zyra knew her daughter hated having her differences pointed out, especially when others were around. And the next room was full of keepers at the moment.

Alexia's own wolf was hopping around and playing with invisible playmates. Alexia could pull strength from her wolf and see the outlines if she tried, but she didn't care to. Alexia could feel her wolf's joy at the play and easy acceptance. It only made her resent her counterpart all the more. No easy acceptance waited for her anywhere.

The dining room hushed when the three of them entered, part of it was respect for Tarquin as Alpha, but mostly it was uneasiness over Alexia and her mother's presence. The pack had never quite accepted a vampire as part of them. They saw vamps as dangerous enemies.

Around the table sat six keepers, more would no doubt show up before tomorrow night's run. Sam was there, looking defiant about his earlier behavior. Jack and his mate, Staci, along with their son, Henry, were there—semi-friendly faces those three. Alexia didn't recognize the other two male keepers, which made her anxiety and adrenaline

kick up a notch. One had white blond hair and golden skin. The other had black hair and golden skin. Their features were similar and she assumed they were related. Alexia averted her eyes quickly, walking nonchalant toward her seat.

All six keepers sniffed lightly, scenting her emotions, knowing it for what it was.

Weakness.

Alexia caught Sam smiling at her obvious discomfort. She used that, turned her anxiety to anger, which was so much less dangerous to show, and then spread calmness over herself to throw them all off. She felt eyes boring into her as she walked the length of the table, but refused to look around and care who watched her with such intensity. Her wolf bounded to her side, sensing the same unknown hostility in the room.

Alexia took her seat on her father's left, her mother sat to his right and the two unknowns were next to her. On Alexia's left was Staci, who was not bad for a keeper. She didn't actually seem to hate Alexia as much as the others. Perhaps because Staci had come from a different pack, the same one her father had once been a part of, before she mated to Jack. Staci didn't know the pack without Zyra and Alexia around, and Staci had been treated like an outsider by most of the other keepers, until she had born a strapping young son.

The pack was like a gang. Even after you joined, you weren't really a part of it until you did something to prove yourself. Alexia scoffed to herself, she didn't want to be a part of anything as ridiculous as all that.

"Staci, it's so nice to see you again. How was your trip back home?" Alexia asked with unusual cheer, purposely ignoring the intense desire to look around and find the gaze that was boring into her.

Beside her, Alexia's wolf growled, whined, then fell oddly silent, lying at Alexia's side.

Staci looked at Alexia, obviously surprised by her unusual behavior. Alexia usually didn't pretend she was friendly with any of the keepers.

"Oh, it was wonderful actually, British Columbia is so very nice this time of year, there is still a bit of snow on the mountains, but the grass is green all around and flowers are beginning to pop up."

"Wow that sounds really great," Alexia said as she accepted the potatoes her father passed. She took the opportunity to peak around the table on the sly, pinpointing the gaze she felt on herself. The blond one watched her intensely behind half-lidded eyes. No one around the table seemed to notice the odd behavior, but Alexia felt like he was looking into every corner of her being and hating everything he saw there. Obviously, he knew

what she was and resented her for it. Most keepers, when they first met her, saw her as a dangerous threat and their instincts told them to eliminate it. Of course, the other instincts that often came up were worse, in Alexia's opinion.

She forced herself to look at Staci as she handed off the potatoes. "So you went there to see your sister right?" She wanted the mundane conversation to continue so she wouldn't think too hard on the stare of the stranger.

"Yeah, my sister just had a baby, named her after me, so I was there for the christening. I brought two of my cousins back with me." Staci motioned to the two unknown keepers across the table.

Alexia couldn't ignore them as they were introduced, that kind of rudeness was not tolerated by her father. She forced a look of indifference on her face as she looked at the two keepers.

"This is Terrance." Staci indicated the dark one who responded with a friendly smile and formal *nice to meet you*, then went back to his conversation with Henry. "And this is Ian." Staci indicated the blond.

Ian scowled at Alexia and looked quickly away, concentrating on the food he was pushing around his plate and pretending to eat.

Alexia gave up on conversation after that and

concentrated on her own food, barely eating anything as conversation buzzed around her, but never included her. Her father usually tried to keep her involved to a small degree, but tonight was quite intent on his conversation with the dark-haired Terrance and Henry. They were discussing the differences between the pack structure of the BC pack and the Oregon Pack.

Terrance and Ian were sons of the BC pack's main Alpha and because he ruled with absolute power, they were left with not much in the way of responsibilities. Alexia's father divided his pack into groups, making it easier, in his opinion, to watch the activities of members who were on the other side of the state. There were four Alphas under his control and together they ruled over all in the state of Oregon.

She listened, but Ian didn't speak a single word the entire dinner, and when she dared to peek up at him, his own brown eyes were watching her, slightly yellowed with an increase of emotion. Whatever he had against her, Alexia didn't think she wanted to find out about it. She would assume it was a general hatred of vampires, but his hostility didn't seem to extend to her mother, a pure vampire. It seemed oddly personal, this hatred.

Is everything alright? Zyra pushed her thoughts to Alexia.

Fine, Alexia thought back, gritting her teeth and forcing a calm that she didn't really feel over herself.

Why is that were so angry with you? I can smell the anger in his blood, Alexia, it's quite intense.

I don't know. I have never met him before. He probably just hates me for what I am, like everyone else does. No one seems to need a better reason than that. Alexia blocked her mind after that. She didn't want to hear denial from her mother. Denial they both knew to be false. After a while, Alexia knew her mother stopped trying to reach her, the pinpricks of blocked thoughts stopped coming and she relaxed her mind.

"The sun is down." Her mother spoke quietly, the words seemingly conversational, but for a vampire, the moment the sun went down was like the lifting of a knife that had been held at your throat all day. Their life was no longer in such immediate danger, at least until the sun rose again. Being one of the strongest of immortal creatures, vampires also had one of the biggest weaknesses. Not even a werewolf's aversion to silver was as dangerous. Being that it only affected them when merged, the keeper part of the werewolf was unaffected by the metal.

Zyra got up quickly to push the button to open the rooms, allowing in the moonlight the werewolves so craved.

Ian and his brother Terrance both watched Zyra warily as she darted from the table, where she hadn't been eating, and in a flash, she was across the room then back to her seat. Vampires moved faster than human eyes could see. Werewolf eyes could see them and move *almost* as fast themselves, but it was still disconcerting to those who saw this as a sign of a dangerous enemy. In a keeper who lacked control, it would have been more than enough to push a merge and fight. Luckily Terrance and Ian both seemed to be in control of their wolves.

Electronics went to work and moonlight soon filled the house from windows and skylights that had been completely sealed a moment before. With the moonlight, the wolves were revealed, eight wolves of varying size and color around the room. The mated wolves of Staci and Jack were cuddled together, bathing each other serenely. Her father's red wolf, as usual, was seated with its head in her mother's lap, perfectly content with the vampire as its chosen mate.

A huge white wolf loomed protectively over her own small wolf who was acting oddly submissive. She assumed it was Ian's as a wolf's fur tended to be quite close to the same color as its keeper's hair. Why it was there next to hers, Alexia didn't know, nor did she particularly care. Everyone else in the room, however, gasped and

stared at the sight with varying degrees of shock and horror. Her father made a choked sound in his throat. And to render an Alpha speechless was quite a feat.

Ian stood up so quickly his chair skidded out behind him and clattered to the ground. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath as they watched to see what he would do. Alexia felt her blood heat with anxiety, she had no idea what was going on, or why everyone was acting the way they were. Was Ian about to kill her, was his wolf simply holding hers down so his keeper could come after her? As her mind raced with confusion, Ian stalked from the room, throwing her an accusing glance before he left.

His wolf whined forlornly in Alexia's wolf's direction before walking after its keeper with obvious reluctance. A vicious warning growl was sent in the direction of a large black wolf Alexia didn't recognize, Terrance's she assumed, as the white wolf followed Ian out.

Awkward silence filled the room for a moment, then Jack quickly started in with a story about a trip he had taken years ago up to Alaska where there was a quite large, and very wild, pack of werewolves. The others slowly joined the conversation or started their own, but Alexia could smell the unease in the air—no one seemed to know quite what to do. They all covertly

watched Tarquin, expecting him to suddenly jump into action, and do what, Alexia didn't know. But Tarquin just sat and ate, thoughtful. He glanced at his wife with a look Alexia couldn't discern and Zyra gave him a strained smile. They may not be able to communicate mentally, but they still could talk with a look, like any normal married couple.

Sometimes Alexia hated her deficit of knowledge where customs of the weres and vamps came in. She didn't know what was happening, but she could tell it had everyone on edge. If she wasn't too proud, she would demand answers, but hated to reveal her lack of knowledge. Even worse she hated to show that she had any interest in the world that they refused to let her be a part of. So she held her questions back and tried to choke down a few more bites of food.

She could have asked her mother, but that would mean opening up her mind which she had been keeping half-locked. Usually when she deliberately blocked her mother, the retaliation was a like blocking when she asked a question. She wasn't going to give her mother the satisfaction of paying her back in kind.

CHAPTER TWO

Alexia slipped from the dining room. Everyone pretended that they didn't notice, but she could taste the sudden relaxation in the air as she left. She headed into the kitchen, grabbed a prepackaged blood bag and went out the back door. She had to drink blood tonight and tomorrow night to keep from merging. She didn't have to do it in front of anyone though. She held the door open for her moonlight rendered solid wolf and sat down on the cold stone steps.

So what was that all about? Alexia pushed her thoughts to her wolf, giving in to the ache of unknowing now that they were alone.

He thinks we are their mate.

"What!" Alexia couldn't help speaking the word aloud. The idea was just too incredulous. She had expected to hear that the wolf wanted to kill them because they were different, but not this. She knew werewolves believed that they knew

when they met their mate by the instincts of their wolves, but Alexia had always thought of it as one of those stupid love at first sight sort of things that humans believed. It was cute for movies and books, but not real life.

Wait, you say thinks? And obviously Ian doesn't agree. I saw the look of hatred on his face. Alexia thought this time, not wanting to draw the attention of all those inside with their supernatural hearing. Soundproof walls or not, the amazing hearing abilities of most immortals could still catch things if they were trying.

That's not the way it works Alexia. It isn't the keeper who chooses the mates, it's the wolf. A wolf has better instincts, even you know that, and so it is the wolf that finds a mate who will bear the strongest offspring and provide the most fitting match to the keeper. Ian's wolf has picked us.

That is insane, you know that, right? I am pretty sure Ian would rather kill me than mate with me. Not to mention my own feelings on that subject. He is no different than the others.

This is different, Alexia, and he doesn't have any more choice than you do traditionally. Ian told his wolf that he wanted him to find their mates while they were traveling. He is ready to settle down. That is why he and his brother left the BC pack. They were unable to find mates there. This is a mate draw, not just an instinctual draw to reproduce. It is a very strong thing, Alexia.

How the hell do you know so much? Alexia couldn't help but feel betrayed by her wolf. It wasn't like they were best friends or anything, but still, wasn't it a wolf's prerogative to do as its keeper would want? Yeah, right, her wolf never acted like that.

His wolf told me. As soon as we entered the dining room, he recognized us for what we are.

Why didn't you warn me? We could have left before anything embarrassing happened, like everyone saw you being submissive to Ian's big stupid wolf!

I couldn't have done anything that Ian's wolf wouldn't have wanted me to do, unless it was harmful to you of course.

Oh perfect, my wolf is nuts. Alexia's phone vibrated in her pocket and she pulled it out, thankful for the distraction. She recognized the number. It was a nice guy from one of her classes. Travis was a normal simple human, how she envied him. Alexia flipped the phone open. "Hello."

"Hey, Lex, it's Travis."

"Yeah, hi, what's up?"

"Well, I was just wondering if you were busy, or, I mean I wanted to see if you wanted to get together...so I could borrow your notes from class today. I didn't make it in." He laughed nervously.

Alexia grimaced. Travis was cute. And so normal, she wished she *could* date him. She looked

from the wolf at her side to the bag of blood in her hand and wanted to scream. Why was *her* life so damn complicated? "Sure, where do you want to meet?"

Her wolf whined disapprovingly as she arranged to meet Travis at a diner near campus. When she flipped the phone closed, she looked down at her wolf. *What? I will do whatever I want. I don't believe in anything as stupid as mating just because a wolf says so.*

Alexia went back in the house to replace the still full blood bag. Her mother stood in the kitchen, an empty blood bag in her hands and a look of pure bliss on her face. Whenever she watched her mother feed, Alexia felt a pang of pure jealousy that made her sick. She didn't want to crave blood and she certainly didn't want to enjoy drinking it, but to see her mother's ecstasy at drinking it, the peace it brought her, that is what Alexia craved. *I'm going out*, Alexia informed her mentally.

Where? Why? Is it that werewolf Ian, because I think your father went out to try and find him, talk to him about what happened. Don't worry, your father isn't going to force you into mating with him. He doesn't run his pack that way. But you have to realize that Ian might not give up easily. It is difficult for a werewolf to go against its instincts.

Don't tell me you buy into this stuff, too? You aren't even a were.

I know, but it didn't matter for your father and me. Your father's wolf fell in love with me just the same as he did. It was odd, unheard of actually, but it happened. And his wolf admitted I was their mate before your father did. Zyra smiled at the memory.

Alexia's jaw tightened with repressed emotion. *I can't...I just can't stay here and discuss this lunacy. I will be out for a while. I am meeting up with a friend from class.*

But it's almost the full moon, are you sure that's safe? And you haven't drunk any blood, you can so easily merge.

I will be fine, Mother. Alexia blocked her mind, for the second time that night, and rushed outside. Her mother would be hard pressed to forgive her. But really, she reasoned, her mother worried way too much, and her belief in the mating thing, Alexia should have expected that.

Vamps had their own similar beliefs where mates were concerned. Vampires believed they could find their mate through a blood vision, a glimpse of the future they got when drinking blood from a preternatural source.

Alexia didn't believe in either theory for mate finding. How could she? She wasn't one of them, either of them, and she refused to pretend different. No matter who claimed she was their intended mate, she wasn't buying it.

With a full mind and senses dulled to the point of distraction, she walked across the lawn. Her

wolf's warning growl made her look up as she entered the dark garage. Sam loomed in the darkness, his yellow eyes glowing with violent anger.

"So you think you can become a part of us by mating with Ian? You aren't even good enough to be food for someone like him."

Such dark hostility filled the garage it choked Alexia. This was more than Sam's usual dislike. This scared Alexia. Her wolf was poised at her side, ready to merge at a moment's notice.

"Sam, I don't want to be a part of *any* pack. So why don't you just get out of my way so I can leave. I am meeting someone."

"A boyfriend, Alexia? Does the poor bastard know what kind of blood sucking freak you are?"

Sam pushed away from the shadows and Alexia sucked in her breath when she saw his eyes glow brighter, he was more than halfway to merging already.

"You are good for nothing but being someone's whore, you know that?"

Alexia bristled at his words, so like the thoughts of the others, but none had dared to speak aloud what they saw in her. Somehow it was worse when she heard the words spoken. It made it feel almost true.

"If you leave now, I won't tell my father about this little conversation." She hated leaning on the

strength of her father like that, but in this case, it was necessary. Sam was pretty far gone and she didn't know if she was strong enough to take him down. She was faster than a normal were, and if she could change before him, she would be able to take him down no problem. But half-merged like he was, she would not be quick enough. She knew if she even started to merge, he would attack, she could taste his eagerness, and it wasn't only her death he was after.

As he stepped closer so did her wolf, begging to be let in so she could protect them. Alexia held her off with a newfound iron control.

"After I am done with you, your father will see you for what you are, and he will throw you to the wolves." He smiled at his own sick joke and took another step forward.

Alexia was two seconds from risking the merge, she would not go down without a fight and she would rather die than be anyone's whore.

Somehow the thought calmed her, she wasn't going to be weak and accept the place he would put her in. Death would be a relief in some ways, let her out of this nowhere existence she was forced to live in. Perhaps in death she would finally find her place, she hoped.

"I would step away from the girl if you value your disgusting life."

Alexia recognized the voice even though it

wasn't very familiar. Terrance, Ian's brother, had somehow entered the garage unnoticed by either her or Sam. Alexia knew some weres held special powers, especially powerful ones born of powerful Alphas. She wondered if Terrance was one of those, and if he was, could his brother be as well?

"You don't understand what she is, what she will do to your pack if she is allowed within it. Just like that whore of a mother, she will ruin everything great about the werewolves. The only respectable place for her is servicing the unmated males and breeding a more powerful were."

Alexia growled at the insult to her mother and she knew her eyes would be glowing now. Having Terrance at her back allowed her enough confidence to show her rage to Sam.

"Were you leaving?" Terrance asked calmly of Alexia.

"Yes."

"Go then, I will make sure Sam is taken care of."

Terrance stalked around her like a practiced predator. Sam backed down, moving as if he couldn't help himself, no matter how badly he wanted to stand, fight and kill. Terrance was a strong Alpha, even Alexia could feel that. It would be enough to command most weres to obedience.

However, that could change in a second if the

were was crazed or suicidal. Sam was definitely insane in Alexia's opinion.

Alexia wasted no time. She hurried to her car and started the engine. She hit the button to open the garage door. As moonlight flooded in, she saw a look of terror in Sam's eyes that she couldn't ignore. She hated him, he had tormented her every day he could. Today was just the highlight of his actions. But he had never actually harmed her—not that he wouldn't have today, she'd seen as much in his eyes. And he had been honest in his hate for her at least, unlike so many of the other pack members.

Before Alexia could think better of it, she stepped out of her car and spoke quietly to Terrance. "He isn't worth killing. If he swears to leave and never come back, I would be happiest if no one knew about this encounter."

Both men looked at her. Sam's face was shocked and then enraged. Terrance's face was calm, deadly, emotionless, a killer's face.

"You are sure? No one would argue with the justice of killing him. You do know what he intended for you, don't you?"

Alexia's checks reddened, but she didn't back down. Violence did not always have to be the answer. "I know, and I am sure. Like I said, if he leaves and never comes back, then I can forgive him. He is only acting on instinct." Alexia took a

deep calming breath as emotions threatened to overtake her. "I have always been the enemy here." With those words, she jumped back in her car and sped out of the garage and away from the house.

By the time she hit the main road, her whole body was shaking and she had to pull over before she caused an accident. She took a few breaths and pulled on the calming strength of her wolf, something she rarely did. She hated admitting that she ever needed her wolf.

It wasn't long before she was capable of driving safely and she sped onto the freeway. She wanted to be as far from everything that had happened tonight as she could get. If it had been safe, she would have driven all night and never looked back, but as it was, she had nowhere to go. There was no one to take her in and hide her from the sun, or the moon, or feed her blood so she didn't merge tomorrow night with the full moon.

So she went to meet with Travis instead. Hoping his normalcy would seep into her and calm her nerves, at least dull her brain enough so she could play normal for a few hours.

Alexia pulled into the parking lot and parked right next to the building, under the light of a fluorescent sign. The artificial light would neutralize the moonlight and cause her wolf to become intangible. She could walk right into the

diner unnoticed by human eyes. It was risky, and Alexia rarely attempted such a stunt, but tonight she didn't care. She needed a break from her life and all its restrictions.

This is a bad idea, her wolf thought to her.

This is not a bad idea, staying home and close to Ian and Sam and all the others who wish me dead, that is a bad idea, she thought back and hurried into the diner.

Travis was seated in an intimate corner and waved Alexia over enthusiastically when he saw her walk in.

Stay in the brightest light, Alexia commanded her wolf, who huffed indignantly and sat under the glow of fluorescents. Her wolf was not at all happy about being here. She wanted Ian's wolf. It was now her desire to make that other wolf happy. Luckily Alexia was still in charge and where Alexia went, so did her wolf.

Alexia joined Travis and ordered coffee and chocolate pie, comfort food. They talked about class and flirted mildly for an hour. Alexia felt relaxed and blessedly normal, surrounded by humans who were on dates and out with their families. Travis smiled across the table at her and laughed at something she said that really wasn't funny at all—he was trying very hard. She almost felt bad for leading him on like this. She would be the death of him if they got involved for real.

"You know you really do have the weirdest eyes I have ever seen, Lex. I mean, they are cool, but I don't think I have ever seen anyone with two totally different colored eyes before."

"Thanks, I think."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to point it out if you are self-conscious about it," he quickly amended.

"No it's fine. I guess I would wear contacts if it bothered me much." That wasn't completely true. Alexia had tried contacts when she was young. They were so uncomfortable, causing her better-than-humanly-perfect vision to become clouded. For a human, it would be nothing, but for her it was like looking through a dirty window. Her mood plummeted. The reminder that she wasn't like him, wasn't like anyone else in this place, was depressing and she wanted to leave. Pretend all she wanted, she didn't fit here either.

"Is everything all right? You look upset. I really am sorry about pointing out your eyes. I think they are quite breathtaking." He reached a hand across the table and laid it on her clenched ones.

Alexia knew he was hitting on her, that she had given him the wrong idea by coming here tonight, and that just wasn't fair. She pulled her hands out of his grasp and smiled sweetly at him. "Thanks, Travis. It isn't anything about you. I just had a fight with my...family tonight and it got me a little upset. Actually, when you called, I was really in

need of getting out of the house so I guess you kind of saved me tonight.”

“Well I always did want to be a knight in shining armor. Do you want to talk about what happened? I am a pretty good listener, too.”

“No, but thanks. I should probably go though, it’s getting late.” Alexia wished she could talk to *anyone* about what was going on, but a human was about the farthest thing from an appropriate outlet for her issues as she could get.

“Oh, okay, thanks for coming out. I really did need these notes.”

Alexia waited while he paid the bill and let him walk her outside. Her wolf’s ears perked and her nose sniffed fiercely as soon as they were outside. Alexia ignored her. She didn’t sense any danger, and if her wolf did, she would let her know it.

Run!

The single word sliced through Alexia’s mind like a knife. It took a second to recognize that it was her mother’s voice, so filled with pain and terror it was barely recognizable.

Run, Alexia!

Alexia gasped and fell back against her car, instantly her wolf was at her side. Alexia slammed her eyes shut, trying to hide the sudden glow she could tell was there, the urge to merge was coursing through her body. Her parents were in danger, she had to help them.

"Alexia, are you all right?" Travis's voice was full of concern and he reached out a comforting hand to her shoulder.

Alexia bristled at the contact, her instincts crying out to rip the hand off the offender. Alexia's wolf growled viciously at the contact. Alexia moved slightly to dislodge Travis's hand, but it remained firmly in place, showing a strength she hadn't expected from him.

"I just need a minute, headache." Alexia rubbed her temples to try and get through the panic and reach out to her mother's mind, but she was gone. White-hot panic flooded her and she didn't care that she was merging. She felt her wolf begin to crowd into her body, and for the first time in her life, Alexia welcomed it. Her fingers elongated to claws and her feet swelled inside her shoes. She didn't know what she was going up against, but she hoped whatever it was wouldn't be expecting her.

"Take your hands off my mate."

The words were deadly calm and her wolf practically purred as she slithered back out of Alexia's body. Alexia snapped her still glowing eyes open and saw Ian looming over Travis, easily a head taller than and twice as broad as her classmate.

Travis's face was full of terror as he stammered an apology and tried explaining that Alexia had

gotten a sudden headache, that he wasn't hitting on her or anything. Ian looked down at him with pure menace in his face. Travis was so quick to relent any claim on Alexia in light of the Ian's presence, Alexia was a little disappointed that he wasn't more of a man. Of course she was comparing him to an alpha were, not much more manly than that.

Some knight in shining armor, Alexia thought.

"What's wrong, Alexia? You are full of terror. What did this *boy* threaten you with?" Ian's words were delivered with a calm that fooled no one—he was deadly and he was no stranger to violence. His body was coiled tight and ready to spring into action, protecting and punishing as necessary and desired.

"Nothing, it's nothing, Ian, Travis is a friend of mine. I have to go."

Ian growled and Travis took a step away from them both, hands held up in front of him in surrender. "I didn't realize she had a boyfriend, my man, no harm done though. She never even showed any interest in me, I swear."

Ian took a couple steps toward Travis, placing his body between her and Travis. Neither of them were paying any attention to her and she felt the panic well up again. With the shock of Ian's presence gone, she was once again thinking, she had to get to her house, fast. She jumped into her

car and sped out of the parking lot, leaving behind two very confused men.

Ian can help us, Alexia. Her wolf pushed the thought at her with frustration and anger.

No, we don't know what's happened, we don't even know if Ian is involved somehow. He is a stranger and you saw how angry he was at dinner, I don't trust him and you shouldn't either.

He is our mate, he can't hurt us. His every instinct is attuned to our needs. He has to protect us, Alexia, that is what a mate does!

He may be your mate, but he isn't mine. I am no keeper remember? I am a nothing, a half-breed that shouldn't even exist.

Her wolf didn't have an answer for that and Alexia smirked with angry triumph. She was on her own, no surprise there.

CHAPTER THREE

Alexia thanked God for not passing any police while she sped out of town. She stopped just off the highway where her car would be hidden at the end of her long driveway. She couldn't guess what she might find, and she didn't want to announce her arrival to whoever might be waiting.

She got out of the car, listened and sniffed, but she couldn't hear or smell anything out of the ordinary. She tried once again to reach her mother's mind, but the usual connection was completely cut off. Alexia wasn't sure if her mother was the one blocking it or if it wasn't there because her mother's mind was no longer there. She shook the horrifying thought away and concentrated on what she needed to do.

Do you sense anything I am missing? she asked her wolf who whined in the backseat, wanting to be let out. "Oh, sorry." Alexia sometimes forgot

that the moonlight rendered her wolf too solid to pass through objects when it was this full. She opened the door.

Her wolf jumped out and sniffed, closed her eyes and twisted her ears toward the house. *Nothing, it seems as if no one is up there at all.*

Alexia began to quickly strip. She would continue to the house as a werewolf, her senses were better that way, hated though it was. She would do anything for her parents. They were all she had in this world she lived on the outskirts of.

Halfway through undressing, Alexia's wolf sat and looked behind the car. Alexia almost screamed when she saw a large white wolf jump out of the trees silently. It skidded to a halt and Alexia recognized it as Ian's werewolf form. Ian in wolf form was magnificent, Alexia couldn't help noticing. He was bigger even than her father and exuded masculine power that made the basest parts of her shiver with delight.

Ours. Her wolf purred into Alexia's mind.

Alexia clamped her teeth and pushed her wolf's thoughts and instincts out of her body. It certainly wasn't her vampire instincts that wanted to roll over and beg for his attention.

He licked her wolf lovingly and growled at Alexia admonishingly.

Alexia couldn't help but growl back. How dare he reprimand her in any way, he was nothing to

her and she didn't owe him a thing.

Ian split with his wolf and stood before her fully clothed. She was taken aback by that, she had never seen anyone split and come out dressed, but she was only momentarily distracted from her annoyance and fear.

She pulled her shirt in front of her to hide her nakedness. Unfortunately she wasn't wearing any pants and her bikini panties were not hiding much of her most private areas.

Ian ran his gaze appreciatively from the top of her dark head to her pretty pink toenails curling in the grass with embarrassment.

"Why are you following me?" she demanded of him.

"Tell me what is going on, Alexia."

Alexia looked up into his dark brown eyes. They looked at her with a glow that had nothing to do with anger, and that terrified her even more. A familiar cold dread worked its way into her belly. Alexia pulled her anger around her like a cloak to hide the smell of her fear from him. Fear was like an aphrodisiac to some weres, like the smell of fresh blood to a vamp.

Run, her mother had said, but run from what, and who, did that include Ian? She knew she didn't have time to waste, but she needed more information before she decided whether or not to trust him. God, she needed to trust *someone*. But

why him, why not someone who hated her just a little less intensely? Right now she would be happier with Sam, well maybe not Sam, but anyone else.

"Why are you here?" she asked accusingly, not ready to give up her suspicions yet.

"You have obviously been upset by something. You are my mate whether we like it or not. I will not leave you unprotected." He spoke with anger that did nothing to calm Alexia's fears.

Ian reached out a hand and touched her head lightly. His hand was huge, easily palming the top of her head.

She stiffened. Her whole body reacted to his touch as if he had pulled a gun out of his pocket loaded for were. Her eyes lit up the space between them and her fangs jutted out of her gums, ready to tear out his throat. She hissed, a very vampire sound, her wolf having completely abandoned her in the calming presence of Ian's wolf.

"I am not going to hurt you. I am searching your memories to see what had you so terrified."

Alexia immediately snapped her head away from his hold.

He let her go without a fight.

"I don't want you in my head, Ian. I don't want you in my life." She bared her fangs in warning.

"What was your mother warning you about? More importantly, why didn't you listen? If there

is danger here, then you need to leave, now." His voice held all the command of a person who expected to be followed and the menace on his face would have sent even a seasoned general to flee without a second thought.

Alexia gave him a blank stare. She would not be submissive to anyone. "I said stay out of my head. It's none of your business anyway."

"It *is* my business when it involves my mate, now tell me!" His voice rose in anger and he stepped closer. His large body crowded her and his eyes were bright as he stared her down. He was very angry.

It would be stupid of Alexia to provoke him further, and she knew that. "I am not your anything," she snapped back. Even though fear flooded her, she fought it with anger and determination. If he knew he scared her, she would never win this argument. "But I will take your help," she conceded. "My parents are more important than my dislike of you." Alexia wasn't sure she could trust him, but she didn't have a lot of options and he obviously wasn't going to leave. She didn't believe he had anything to do with whatever her mother had warned her away about, and that made him an ally of sorts, at least for the time being.

"You will stay here while I go take a look around," he stated flatly.

"No, I won't stay back while my parents' lives are in danger. If you think I will, then you are an idiot," she spat back with as little emotion as he had given his last command.

His lips twitched as if he were about to smile, but not quite. "Fine, but go as a werewolf."

"What do you think I was getting undressed for?" she snapped, disturbed by the sudden desire to see him smile fully. She was sure his already attractive face would be devastating under a glistening smile.

"Well then get to it."

"I will as soon as you turn around."

He rolled his eyes, but did turn around. His wolf stretched and grew and Ian disappeared, merged with his wolf. He sat watching her with cold expressionless eyes.

She quickly shed the last of her clothing, not giving him the satisfaction of showing it bothered her. Most weres were not shy about this sort of thing. She wasn't most weres though, and soon he would be slapped in the face with that fact. She merged and stood proudly before him, daring him to comment on her form.

As a were, she was...unique, unlike anything anyone had ever seen, according to the few who had seen her. It was one of the reasons she so hated merging. She stood out even more as an oddity. A freak among freaks, she had always

thought of herself. A keeper was not the dominant being in a normal pair, and so when he merged with his wolf, he took on the form of the wolf, resulting in a werewolf that looked like a giant wolf. Scary and deadly, but still a wolf in form.

In Alexia's case, her vampire half made her more dominant, instead of her wolf making room in her body, Alexia made room in hers. Her body grew slightly larger, but her hands and feet became claws, her face transformed into a sinuous mix of wolf and human. Her nose elongated, her vampire teeth extended and her ears grew larger and pointed. Silky red brown hair covered her entire body, about an inch long, and the hair on top of her head shrunk to match.

The result was something not ugly, just different and frightening in its lethal beauty. The few keepers to see her like this had all at once wanted to rip out her throat for being such an obvious dangerous threat, and force themselves upon her in burning lust to create strong offspring. Luckily none had tried to do either, too seriously.

Oh...my...God.

Ian's voice whispered through her mind and she lifted her chin in defiance. The thoughts of werewolves were linked when merged. A pack could call across a great distance to each other. But even weres of different packs could speak through

thought when in close proximity while merged.

A beneficial trick, since normal weres couldn't speak aloud. Alexia could in her werewolf form, but she chose not to—her voice was strange and somewhat hard to understand in the were form.

Let's go, she thought back, Alexia sent out a *hello* into the surrounding area, searching for any of her father's wolves, but no one responded. She tested the air with nose and mouth, but didn't find anything out of the ordinary.

I have never seen anything like you.

His thoughts held all she had come to expect, and dread. *Don't talk to me, find my parents.* Alexia started through the woods on two feet, then readjusted her spine and joints to go to four. She heard Ian's surprised and passionate snarl behind her, but ignored it.

If she didn't ignore it, she knew the panic that was always so close to the surface in this form would bubble up, and that would only entice his wolf instincts all the more. At the moment, she knew he wasn't very close to her and he wasn't letting his instincts rule him, he was in control. She was safe, she hoped.

Alexia. Ian thought with emotions she cared not to examine.

She was unable to block Ian's thoughts in this form, but she could still choose to ignore them. She concentrated on the fact that her mother had

been terribly frightened when she had sent the warning. Zyra was in danger. Her mother was the strongest thing Alexia knew, stronger even than her father's werewolf. If something had frightened her mother, what the hell kind of chance did Alexia have against it?

She continued toward the house, concentrating on scenting anything out of the ordinary. Everything seemed frustratingly as it should, except that it was quiet, so very quiet. As they got close to the garage at the back of the house, Alexia picked up a scent that was less familiar, but couldn't place it.

It's my brother, Ian offered.

He is no longer here either. It was more statement than question. She could feel the surrounding area and there were no werewolves lurking.

No, I can't find him in my head. Usually we are connected over even a great distance, something must be very wrong to block me out.

I know what you mean. My mother blocked me as soon as her warning hit me. The question is, are they blocking us on purpose or... The question hung between them coating them both in fear and anger for their loved ones.

We can only hope at this point.

Hope, right, I guess that's what we are left with. That and pure determination, it can get you even farther than hope sometimes. Alexia continued to the

house, still on the alert, but not worried that anyone was around. They were too late. She could feel the emptiness of her home, the absence of the only two people who had ever cared for her, like a weeping hole in her soul.

It's going to be all right, Alexia. If they are alive, we will find them.

Ian's words were little comfort as they entered the house and found the place a total wreck. There had been a very big struggle here and her parents had lost. Who could have defeated her father? He was an alpha and he was old and strong and...he was her daddy. Alexia felt tears rolling down her cheeks, helpless to stop them as she walked through the wreckage of her living room to the dining room. Just hours earlier they had all been here, maybe not happily, but still they were here. She would take that strained complacency over this. If only she hadn't fled when things had gotten upsetting, she might have been able to help them. Her merged werewolf form was so strong. She may have been what it took to turn the fight in her parent's favor.

Alexia sat on the floor and split from her wolf. She pulled her legs tight to her chest and dropped her head on her knees. She sobbed, thinking of all the times she had wished to be a part of a normal family, resenting what her parents were, what they had made her as a result. Now they were

gone, she was alone and it hurt even more than she had ever imagined it could.

Her wolf whined next to her, offering its comfort and shared sorrow. She resented her wolf and everything it represented, but right now, she would take comfort where she could. Alexia didn't push it away with thought or action as it curled around her naked trembling body.

A warm hand landed on her shoulder and she tried to shake it off, not lifting her head. "Leave me alone, Ian. You can't want to stay anyway, I won't mate with you."

"Why?" he asked gently, he didn't leave, but he removed his hand from her shoulder.

"I am not like you, or anyone. I am a freak and I refuse to be reminded of that every day of my life if I can help it. I won't mate with you and your stupid wolf. I won't go from being the freak of this pack to being the freak of your pack."

"You surprised me back there, I admit. I have never seen anything like you before. You are magnificent in your werepire form."

Her head jerked up and she glared at him through tear-filled eyes. She searched his face for the disgust he must be hiding from his voice. "It's not nice to lie you know. And werepire? That is real cute, but I don't want a name for my one member species. Don't think I don't know what my form induces in others. This wasn't my first

time merging.”

Ian placed a hand on her head and she glared at him. She was about to tell him to stay out of her head or lose his hand, but he pulled away too quickly, a look of rage on his face. His eyes swirled to glowing yellow and a growl rumbled from his chest.

“I will kill all of them. I swear to you, I will, Alexia. You are my mate, I have accepted that, and I will not have you thought of in such a vile manner.”

Alexia gasped. She knew what he had searched for and found in her memories. Her first and only full moon merge. It was when she had turned sixteen, the age when all keepers first merged with their wolves. Her parents had no idea what she would become. They assumed that because she didn’t have to drink blood to survive, that she was more were than vamp.

It is a sacred time, the first merge of a young keeper, something that a whole pack comes out to take part in. For her it had been no different. She was, after all, the daughter of an alpha. No one would dare insult him by not coming to watch, even if they hated his vampire wife and half-breed daughter.

When her father spoke the sacred words that would allow her first merge just before midnight, she was hopeful. She wanted to finally be a part of

the pack, part of what seemed so important to those around her. They had always treated her differently, but she thought the first merge would change that and they would see she was more like them than not.

It was horrible. She merged, but she was nothing like the others, nothing that any of them had seen before. Even her father had gasped in horror and quickly chanted the words for her to split. But not before she had heard, and felt, the reactions of those around her. They simultaneously wanted to kill her and breed with her, violent and terrifying thoughts from the men and women alike, although the women's thoughts stayed with murder and resentment.

So much hate, so much violence. All directed at a frightened sixteen-year-old girl. There went her one last hope of acceptance, of belonging.

She had never spoken of it to anyone. She didn't want to, it was embarrassing and hurtful. Her parents had tried to speak with her about it, but she refused. Her father had even tried to convince her to try it again, after people had time to settle to the idea. But she had seen the unease in his face as he had said it. If he wasn't even comfortable with what she was, how could anyone else be expected to be?

It was then that she had decided to become a vampire, but she had discovered that her hatred of

drinking blood was more than she could bear. The only good thing that had come of it was the discovery that it would keep her from merging with the full moon, so she would never have to put herself in that kind of horrific danger again.

And she hadn't. She had never merged with the full moon again. The few times she had merged after that had been moments of intense anger, and even those had been all but stopped in the last few years. She was a model of self-control most of the time — she had to be. She wasn't safe merging even around a house full of keepers.

"I don't want you in my memories, Ian, and I don't need you to avenge me either. Those other keepers were right, I am a freak, a true monster and I should not exist."

Ian grasped her face in his palms and forced her eyes to his. "I don't lie and I don't spare people's feelings. I am a werewolf alpha and I don't need to care what anyone else thinks of me. I think you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, in and out of werewolf form, Alexia."

His gaze traveled over her and she suddenly became quite aware that she was naked. He, of course, sat there fully clothed.

She felt vulnerable and so in need of comfort, she wanted to curl up in his lap and let him make everything all right. Of course she wouldn't do it, she had meant what she'd said. She had no

intention of being his mate.

Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke and she resented that he could make her feel anything other than hatred. "How is it you keep your clothing?" She latched onto the mundane thought, not daring to think about anything else that was going on.

His lip twitched, a smile trying to come out, but thoroughly blocked. "It is a simple trick." He waved a hand and she was fully clothed as well, back in the clothing she had discarded by her car earlier. His hands dropped and his face became a mask of guarded calm.

No matter what he tried to tell her or himself, she knew the truth. He didn't want to want her, and if it wasn't for his wolf, he wouldn't like her any more than anyone else did.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alexia dozed off and on for a couple of hours as Ian made phone calls. He said that if an alpha was missing there would be a lot of keepers willing to take action. His brother was also missing, which meant two alphas were missing and that was cause for serious alarm. Ian and Terrance's father, Kairos, was the King Alpha of British Columbia. There would be no sitting back while a Prince Alpha was in danger.

Alexia tried to remember any stories she had heard about Ian and his family. She wished she had paid more attention to werewolf lore. It might give her some insight into Ian. She knew it was where her father had come from originally. Her father and Kairos had been longtime friends, but she'd never asked him to talk about it, tell her stories about his time there. She'd hated all things to do with what she couldn't have.

Ian had sent her to bed with a dark contemplating look in his eyes that had her

scampering away quickly without protest. Even if he accepted that she was his mate, which she vehemently disagreed with, he certainly wasn't fond of the idea, and that was the thing she worried about most as she lay unable to sleep in her bed.

She finally decided to get out of bed when the sun was up and the house was completely dark again. In the kitchen, she poured herself a bowl of cereal and ate it over the sink, wondering where Ian had gone. She had heard him cursing vampires as the house buttoned down a half hour before dawn.

It had made her smile, cementing her conviction that he couldn't accept her for what she was. It had also inspired her. She certainly knew a few good ways to keep reminding him of her vamp half and that might be enough to keep him away from her. Maybe she hadn't missed the dark lust in his eyes when she had merged. She could practically hear his wolf saying, *See I told you she would breed us strong offspring*. Like that was all she could possibly be good for. His wolf was just civilized enough to want to marry her first.

Ian arrived an hour later, looking exhausted and angry. He growled in her direction to not leave the house, then went into one of the guest rooms and fell asleep. Almost instantly, too, Alexia had checked. Vamps and weres alike did

not require much rest, but they did need regenerative sleep for a few hours a day to be in prime condition.

Alexia hadn't planned on going anywhere today, but after that snarled order, there was no way in hell she was sticking around. She left the house quietly, a note tacked to his door—*Went to school, be back in less than five hours. Alexia – not your mate and won't stand for your orders.*

Before she opened the door, she set her watch, something she did religiously. It was a very serious thing to be exposed longer than her five-hour time limit.

She had learned that lesson early on. She had defied her parents as a young teen, thinking they were being ridiculously overprotective in saying no more than three hours outside. They had only given her three to be extra safe. When hour four passed and she was fine, she had become so angry she had traveled so far from home she had no hope of getting back once the sun had started to hurt, around hour four and a half. Her father found her half-hidden and completely burned in a dark forest. Luckily she hadn't been exposed to enough of the sunlight to kill her, but she had wished for death before her regenerative body had healed itself. She would not make that mistake again, even if she did insist on pushing it out to hour five most of the time.

She wasn't really going to school though, she wouldn't waste time on that when her parents were missing. But leaving a note that said *Went out to investigate on my own* just seemed to be begging for his anger when she returned, which she would no doubt have to do. It wasn't as if there was a place safe from the sun, or an easy blood source, anywhere else nearby.

Alexia went into Portland to the one person who she held any hope wouldn't immediately throw her back out the door. At this time of day, it was still a risk. She knew she should probably wait till the sun set, but she really didn't want to risk having Ian around Paxton.

Paxton was a vampire, the only one in the city of Portland other than her mother. That didn't mean he was going to welcome Alexia into his home of course. He was even more of a recluse than a normal vampire. Zyra had told her that Paxton once had a mate, one he had found without the aid of a blood vision, something unheard of in vampire society. One night his mate was drinking from a human who they didn't realize was gifted with a preternatural ability, triggering a blood vision in the vampire. Paxton's mate saw her future, her true mate, and left Paxton in search of her true love.

The loss had turned an already broody vampire into a creature so menacing that even other

vampires stayed away. Alexia and her family were no different, they had no reason to bother the vampire living in their midst, until now. Lucky for her, she had no trouble locating the vampire in the city. She had smelled him many times in the city and driving around where his scent was the strongest, she was able to pinpoint his house.

He lived in an old brick house with a well-maintained front yard. It looked so normal on the outside, it almost made Alexia forget that the vampire who dwelled within was supposed to be frightening. Perhaps he wasn't as bad as everyone assumed. Her parents had, of course, been of the opinion that Paxton was someone not to be messed with. So Alexia had only met the old vamp once when he had shown up at their home, announcing his arrival in Portland and intent to stay. She was only five, but had gotten the impression from his brief visit that there was a familiarity between her parents and the vamp, although not completely friendly. She hoped it would be enough to make him want to help.

Alexia knew he was watching her. There would have been an alarm sent to him as soon as she opened the white picket gate and stepped onto the cobblestone path. Cameras no doubt followed her hurried walk to the door, which opened before she reached the top step, confirming her suspicion. She felt like the dumb sorority girl in a bad movie,

going alone to investigate that strange noise. Fortunately she was fully dressed and hadn't just been engaged in an orgy of any kind, so by the laws of scary movies, she should be safe.

Of course she didn't have to look farther than her own nose to know that the truth was quite often much scarier and more unreliable than fiction. Who would have thought a werepire could even exist? So if all the laws of horror films were not in application, none could be. This meant she wasn't safe even if she was an innocent here. Not a comforting thought as she stepped through the unmanned front door.

The inside of his house was elegant, in a dark and dangerous sort of way, decorated in a likeness of an era long past that Alexia couldn't readily identify. Deep rich colors and fabrics, elaborate wood furniture and large foreign landscape paintings. No light shone through any of the windows of course. Alexia stepped all the way through and the door shut behind her.

Paxton appeared at the top of the stairs. "You are Zyra's daughter, the half-vampire, half-werewolf. I can smell her sweet blood in your veins, mixed with that *dog's* of course. A pity, you are quite pretty like your mother, except perhaps not as delicate of bone structure, a dog is a robust creature."

Alexia ignored the obvious dig on her

parentage. "I am, and I am truly sorry to bother you, especially in the middle of the day like this. But I need help and I don't know where else to go."

"You come here seeking aid?" He floated down the stairs toward her.

Alexia's eyes had no trouble discerning his beautiful features in the lightless room. His face was smooth and flawlessly pale, his eyes glowed red with irritation and his jet black, chin length, hair framed his face perfectly. He was really quite handsome in a terribly dangerous I-want-to-suck-your-blood sort of way.

"Yes?" The word came out as more a question than a statement and Alexia immediately straightened her shoulders, narrowed her eyes and grasped tight to her determination. "My parents were taken last night, I don't know by whom or why, but I have to help them."

"And so you came here? Why do you think I would care to help, even if I was able?"

Alexia had a hunch. If she was right, it may be the only way to enlist his aid—if she was wrong, the worst he could do would be kill her for bringing it up. She figured it was worth the risk since her options were so limited at the moment. "Because you love my mother and I know you would not want to see anything bad happen to her. Isn't that why you are living here in Portland

in the first place?" It was a stab in the dark, something she had always wondered about, but never confirmed. The sudden sparks shooting from his blue-turned-red eyes were confirmation enough. Her mother was once his mate, but would that make him want to save her, or make him want to watch her suffer? Alexia didn't know.

Paxton hissed and spun around, intending to go back up the stairs, she was sure. Alexia couldn't let him leave. He was her only chance, her parent's only chance. She was sure of it.

"Please, Paxton. I don't even know where to start looking for them." Alexia reached out a hand, but he rushed up the stairs away from her.

"She left me, Alexia, for that damn dog!" He laughed bitterly. "Look what it has gotten her, outcast by her own people and his. It is not my place to rescue her now." He disappeared in the darkness of the upstairs and the front door opened behind her, obviously a not so subtle invitation to get the hell out.

Alexia's eyes glowed into the darkness of his home, in all their mismatched fury, as she debated chasing after him. Her wolf growled in sympathizing fury by her side.

She may not be your mate, but I don't believe she would stand by if you were in danger. She has spoken of you with affection. You cared for each other once. That should mean something when a life is in danger, she

thought out toward him. He had to be close enough to catch it, even if he didn't respond. Then she spun on her heel and left, the door slamming behind her with a very final *bang*!

Alexia stared at her feet, dejected, as she walked slowly down the pathway. What were her options now? Throw it all in with Ian and trust that he would do all he could to save her parents as well as his brother? She had no reason to trust him like that and she really didn't want one. Trust could lead to so many other emotions, connections, all dangerous openings for hurt and rejection once he proved to be no more than anyone else had ever been.

"Why did you come to the house of a vampire and why did you lie to me?"

The growl was so menacing Alexia almost took a step back, almost. She had trained herself never to react in such a way, no matter what she was facing. Ian leaning against a tree by her car, glaring at her with glowing yellow eyes was something that spurred more unease than she wanted to admit. Her wolf bounded toward him, stopping to presumably sniff and cuddle noses with his wolf.

Traitor, she thought toward her wolf as she gathered her nerves and continued to her car as casually as she could manage while her blood sped through her system with unease. "I don't

have to explain myself to you, but I will tell you that I was seeking assistance in our plight. Paxton is the only vampire around and I thought he might be able to find something we missed.”

Ian pushed away from the tree and stood between her and her car. His hands were fisted at his sides and his jaw was clenched. “You will not leave without me again, Alexia. We don’t know if whoever took your parents might come back for you. I didn’t want to worry you unnecessarily, but apparently you don’t have the good sense to keep yourself safe. I wasn’t able to get anything from your father’s pack, except their unreasonable dislike for you and your mother. It’s not enough to damn them, but it doesn’t look good.”

He leaned toward her and his quiet words were so intense Alexia couldn’t help the shiver of fear that raced down her body. She had ignored any thought about her personal safety, worried only about her parents. But she knew he was right, she could be in danger as well and, until they knew why and who, anything was possible.

His hot breath fanned her face and she tried not to think about his soft lips so close to her own, his hard body radiating hot angry concern toward her. Concern for her safety, it was something new to come from a source other than her parents.

Alexia’s body reacted instinctively to his nearness, her lips parted and her body leaned

toward his. Her blood pounded through her veins and her fangs elongated. Her sudden hunger for his body and his blood was overwhelming. It was like nothing she had ever experienced in all her short life, and he was right there, so close she could reach out and take from him what her body so desired, so hungered for.

She could almost taste his skin on her tongue, his blood rushing into her sucking mouth. Feel his hands caressing her body, touching her intimately where no one had ever touched her before, where she had only rarely touched herself, feeding her body the passion and blood that it so desired, so needed. She was sure she was going to die if she didn't have it, have him, right this minute.

"Alexia?" His rumbled question broke her out of her passionate daze.

Alexia jumped back and glared at him accusingly. "I won't sit around and be frightened, Ian. My parents are all I have and I will do everything I can to find them." She was amazed she spoke at all, and she wasn't sure it made sense, but she thought it must have because he nodded at her in acknowledgement.

"Get in the car, I will drive us home."

He held out his hand for the keys, and although she wanted to refuse, she was too shaken by the feelings he had evoked in her. She didn't think she would be capable of safe driving right now. She

tossed him the keys and walked around to the passenger side with as much dignity as she could while her legs wobbled with hungry desire and her mouth was full with hunger of another kind.

The drive home was torturously long and silent. She was confused by her reaction to him and more than a little frightened by it. Never in her life had she *wanted* to drink blood, and to have that desire mixed with a very passionate desire for his body, another first, it was more than she could sort through. She wished more than ever that she had a girlfriend to confide in, someone with experience to guide her through these things.

Alexia didn't even look at Ian as she stalked from the garage to the house. She was hungry and she was angry, but most of all she was confused. She went straight to the kitchen and rummaged around for anything that might dull one or the other of her new desires, chocolate perhaps? As she started to pull her head out of the fridge, she remembered her plan from that morning. She was going to make sure Ian didn't forget what she was. Now more than ever she needed to distance him.

"Alexia, I know you are worried. There are some keepers arriving today from my father's pack, they will help us. I questioned most of your father's pack last night. None of them had any information that will help, but they were all going to do what they could. We are all meeting here at

dusk. Tonight is the full moon and it might be our best chance of connecting with your father. The full moon merge can carry a linked thought much farther, and hopefully we can connect with him, get enough information to find them all." Ian's voice was calm, gentle and just short of soothing to her fiery nerves.

Alexia pulled her head out of the refrigerator with a package of blood in her hand. She wanted to drink it in front of him, shove it in his face that she was half-vamp, but if she was going to want to merge anyway, then why torture herself with drinking unnecessary blood?

Ian eyed the package in her hand with open disgust. "You...I watched you eat food last night," he stated warily.

"I am half-vampire, Ian, don't forget it." Alexia let her fangs descend and punctured the package, slurping it down as fast as she could. She held back the grimace at the taste and locked eyes with him, glowing yellow with glowing red and yellow. "I am not like you, I will not be your mate, Ian, and I think you can admit it is best that way." She turned and left the room, a hurt twisting in her gut that she told herself was only a fraction of what he would cause her if she let herself believe they could have any kind of normal life together. That was one fantastical fairy tale she knew was bullshit.

CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't hard to avoid him the rest of the day. She stayed in her room and ignored the cowardliness of it. About an hour before dark, Ian knocked loudly on her door, demanding entrance without saying a word.

Her wolf perked up from her position by the door and wagged her tail happily.

"What, Ian? I am a vampire, I sleep all day remember," she snapped.

"No you don't, and besides, keepers sleep most of the day, too. We are drawn to the moonlight, both creatures of the night, remember," he snapped back, imitating her snotty tone on the last word.

Ian opened the door without waiting for her permission and leaned against the doorjamb.

Alexia was lying on top of her bed, arms linked behind her head. Her window was open, letting the last of the day's sunshine fall on her face.

"See, you like the sun," he said smugly.

Alexia pressed a button and the shades instantly closed, locking out any rays of light. "My time was up. Don't want to burst into flames. What do you want?" She didn't look at him, she didn't dare. She didn't want to see a repeat of the disgust she had seen there earlier when she had drunk the blood. It was bad enough that she felt that way about herself. She didn't need to see it from someone else. Even though she'd been hoping his disgust would keep him away from her. She was sure that was what she wanted, she was sure that was what she *should* want anyway.

Ian walked into the room. He swung her desk chair around and sat on it backward, arms crossed over the top and dark eyes watching her carefully. "I'm sorry."

Alexia shot up on her bed and glared at him. "What the hell for? You aren't the first person to be disgusted by what I am, you won't be the last. I just hope you can keep that in mind and impress upon your wolf the lunacy of his choice as mate."

Ian didn't react to her words.

That set her jaw to clenching and her anger rose to the point where she was sure her eyes would be glowing slightly with it.

"I'm sorry that I haven't taken the time to understand what your special needs are. I misunderstood your...*reaction* to me earlier. I was

surprised to find that you were in need of blood when we arrived back here. I had thought...well, never mind what I thought." Ian stood and shoved the chair back under the desk. "I just wanted to assure you that I will not react in such a way again, if you are to be my mate, then it is my job to provide for you in whatever way becomes necessary."

Alexia stared at him, mouth gaping open in shock. She didn't even know where to begin processing his words.

"There will be keepers arriving soon. I believe we need to present a united front with your father's pack. I also wish to keep you within my protective sights around them. Will you join me downstairs and promise to keep close tonight while there are so many about? You aren't exactly on anyone's friend list. It would be all too easy for old resentments to come out during a crisis such as this. Or worse, have unmated wolves seeing a lone female without protection who is so obviously a prime choice."

Alexia gritted her teeth so hard at his *prime choice* comment, she was surprised they didn't crack. "I will do what is necessary to find my parents, but I can take care of myself with the weres, Ian," she hissed through her clenched teeth.

He didn't say anything, just turned around and left, as always, infuriatingly stoic and dark.

Alexia bit her lip and tried not to think about his apology and confession. It made her desire things that were impossible. Things she had trained herself never to desire. It was embarrassing to think he had guessed correctly her reaction to him outside of Paxton's house. She would have to be careful in the future, preferably stay the hell away from him. That way he wouldn't have an opportunity to guess at her reactions again.

Alexia fell back on her bed and concentrated on the coming night, the importance of what they were going to try and accomplish. She looked over at her wolf, who was pining after Ian's wolf with disgusting enthusiasm.

We will merge tonight, only if we have to. If we do, you know what a huge risk it is, especially without my father here to keep everyone in line. I hope you're ready for the battles we will certainly have to face, she thought toward her wolf.

We are not alone, Alexia, we have Ian and his wolf to protect us. They are fierce alphas. No one will dare cross them to get to us.

I am not so sure about that. And I refuse to pay the price of their protection, she added silently to herself.

Alexia picked out her most comfortable jeans, holes in the knees and pockets, and a pink tank. She wasn't trying to impress anyone tonight after

all. She checked herself out in the mirror, smoothing her shoulder length hair and clipping it away from her face, a little lip gloss and eye liner. She peered at her face, one blue eye and one brown, smallish nose and full mouth. She knew she was pretty, despite the oddness of her eyes, but she had never felt truly beautiful. Last night, Ian had called her beautiful. She wanted to believe him and that made her mad. She didn't want to need someone else's approval, it made it all too easy to become dependent on them and then there was the hurt when they disappointed you by being like everyone else.

Disgusted with herself, Alexia squared her shoulders and left her room as the house opened up for the night.

Moonlight flooded the house and her wolf bounded solidly down the stairs in front of her, no doubt in search of Ian's wolf.

Ian's wolf came around the corner from the dining room, walking cockily, if you could say that about a wolf, and nuzzled her own wolf familiarly. Alexia glared at Ian's wolf. She knew it was immature, but she didn't care at the moment. After all, he was the beginning of many of her recent problems. If it wasn't for him, she wouldn't have left the house and she could have helped protect her parents. She wouldn't have the smallest glimmer of wondering in her mind about

a life with Ian, a werewolf mate and protector. She wouldn't be so confused by her desire for his blood and his body. Damn that wolf and his stupid instincts.

Alexia resisted the urge to stick her tongue out and stomp her feet as she passed the two love birds, but just barely.

Ian had cleaned during the day, she realized as she walked through the dining room. Everything that had been destroyed was cleared away and everything salvageable was put back in its place. Alexia was thankful for that. She didn't think she could handle looking around at the damage that proved her parents had been taken violently from their home. She softened slightly toward Ian, appreciating his thoughtfulness. An alpha like him would not be expected to do such work when there was a less dominant, especially a female, around to do it.

It was one of the many archaic beliefs that have been carried over since the dark ages. It was difficult for a person to change the beliefs they grew up with, even if they grew up nine hundred years ago. Most of the fantastical species adhered to past morals and beliefs that humans gave up on decades ago. The women's movement hadn't happened, except perhaps among some of the more sexually liberated species, such as the nymphs and witches.

Alexia found Ian in the kitchen where he was making sandwiches and there was a package of blood sitting out on the counter. She froze in the doorway, the sight of this big, brooding, handsome man providing sustenance for her, even blood, which he so obviously abhorred. It made her want to like him, something very dangerous.

"I don't need the blood," she snapped, trying to regain some of the earlier hostility that she was losing with each thoughtful and domestic act he performed.

Ian looked up at her and handed her one of the finished sandwiches. "I wasn't sure and I want you as strong as possible tonight. I told you I would provide for you whatever was necessary, Alexia, and I meant it."

Alexia took the sandwich and went to the small kitchen table. What could she say to that? Unless she wanted to admit she had misled him earlier, to hide her obvious reaction to being so close to him. But that was not something she was ready to reveal. He may be trying to be nice to her, but she still didn't trust him enough to commit to being his mate. And if he knew that he could so easily make her want his body, she would never convince him to give up.

She sat in her normal seat and tried not to think about the empty ones around her. Ian followed and handed her a glass of water. He sat in her

mother's usual seat and started eating without a word. When she just sat there, glaring down at her food, he growled at her.

"Eat dammit. I won't have you weak from hunger."

Alexia glared up at him, but took a bite. She knew he was right. The last thing she needed was to be hungry tonight. The sandwich was roast beef and onion, pretty good actually. He had melted cheese and toasted the sourdough bread. She took another bite and tried to ignore the man sitting with her, which was quite difficult considering his whole being exuded look-at-me vibes. He drew her were senses like nothing she had ever encountered. Even her vamp senses prickled at his nearness, responding to the sweet earthy scent of his blood.

Wolf, you are messing with me, you are making me feel things that I don't really feel, Alexia thought accusingly toward her wolf, who was currently cuddled up with Ian's wolf next to the table.

You know I can't do that, she thought back smugly.

Alexia growled in frustration. She did know that, or at least she was pretty sure that was the case. And it didn't explain away her vamp awareness anyway.

"Is something wrong?" Ian asked, looking at her from his kicked back position in his chair. He

of course had wolfed down his food in record time, even though he had made himself two of the sandwiches. Typical were near the full moon, merging took a lot of energy and if you didn't prepare for it ahead of time, you would be exhausted when it was over.

"Is your father expected to be here tonight?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, him and a couple pack members will be here to aid with the search. He will have the greatest connection to Terrance of course. You should have the greatest connection to your father. But his entire Portland area pack will be here tonight as well, to send out a message powerful enough it should be able to get to him no matter where he is being held."

Alexia stiffened at the thought of the entire pack being present. The numbers were somewhere around twenty wolves, not including the four who had been here last night. Alexia's eyes widened and her mouth went dry. "What about Sam, did you speak with him yesterday?" Alexia's voice cracked as she spoke. If Sam was here and she was in her werewolf form, there would be dangerous problems for her.

"He must have been taken with your father, Alexia. Wasn't he the other were here last night?"

Alexia met his dark eyes. "No, he wasn't. I had your brother send him away after..." Alexia

clamped her lips shut. She didn't want to share what happened—it was embarrassing and definitely not his business.

"After what, Alexia?" Ian's voice was strained with fury and his eyes began to glow slightly. "What did Sam do and why was my brother involved?"

"It was nothing. Sam's a jerk. We argued and your brother came upon us. I asked him to make sure Sam left. Which means Sam shouldn't have been here when the others were attacked. You should have found him in town."

Ian reached across the table so fast she didn't have time to react. He held her with one hand on her shoulder and the other placed gently on her head. A ferocious snarl ripped from his throat and his eyes glowed so brightly Alexia was surprised he wasn't werewolf by now. She leaned away from him, intimidated by his anger even though she was pretty sure it wasn't directed at her.

"If he shows up, I *will* kill him."

Alexia shot up out of her chair, her own eyes glowing mismatched in anger. "Why? Because he feels like everyone else, only he wasn't afraid to say it out loud? Deal with it, Ian. I have to every day. I am not a were, I am not even a vamp. I am nothing and I refuse to pretend any different. I don't care if idiots like Sam think I am a worthless piece of trash. At least they are honest about how

they feel and what they think I am good for. At least he doesn't pretend to want to protect me because of some archaic wolf custom."

Ian was around the table in an instant, his hands grasping her arms in a brutal grip, his glowing eyes bored into her with barely restrained violence.

Alexia felt her blood start to pound through her veins. She knew if she hadn't drank blood earlier today, she would have merged and ripped out his throat to protect herself from him. She had finally pushed him too far. He was going to treat her like she expected and then she could hurt him back and be satisfied that she was right. There was no chance for a true mating with him or any other were.

"No one deserves the kind of treatment you have been dealt. I *am* your mate and as is my right, I will protect you." He bent his head close.

His hot breath fanned her cheek, his mouth whispered so near her ear she could feel his lips brush against her sensitive skin.

"I want you, Alexia, because you are strong and you are beautiful. I will have you because you are my mate."

As his words sank into her bruised soul, her anger turned to something else, something hotter and so much more unsettling.

Alexia could hear his blood pulsing at his

throat, so near her mouth. Her fangs extended and her mouth watered for a taste of him. Desire swirled fast and hot, low in her belly. She couldn't hold back the hungry groan.

Ian pulled away and looked at her revealed fangs. "You lied," Ian whispered, his voice hoarse with emotion.

Alexia tried hard to ignore that emotion, along with the hard ridge pressing against her lower body. She blinked up at him, confused by his words.

"You obviously need blood," he stated with a grimace.

"She doesn't drink blood."

They both whirled around at the words. Ian pushed Alexia behind him, shielding her with his body from whatever danger there might be. She had no doubt that if Ian hadn't recognized the face as he whirled around he would have merged an instant later and attacked the intruder.

"Relax, son."

Alexia gasped and peaked around Ian's body, then shoved him out of the way and faced the three men standing in her kitchen. She didn't want them to think she needed, or wanted, protecting. The one in front, Kairos, was Ian's father. He looked very much like a slightly larger version of Ian. He had the same white blond hair, only his was streaked slightly with gold and his brown

werewolf eyes were not nearly as hard and unfeeling as Ian's tended to be.

Kairos looked at them with mirth in his eyes and a slight twist to his lips that hinted at a smile, so similar to what she had seen on Ian's face a couple of times. His wolf was smaller than Ian's and the same white, except his paws were golden brown. The other two keepers looked like twins. They had sandy brown hair and brown skin. They looked at her with the same look of mild interest. Their wolves were identical—sandy brown in color and as large as her father's, only slightly smaller than Ian's. The men flanked Kairos and their wolves flanked Kairos's. Obviously they were his bodyguards, but Kairos was the one in control. He was powerful she knew, and she instinctively feared what that could mean for her.

Alexia pulled a cloak of indifference around herself, expecting the usual barrage of disgust from them when they found out what she was. Or worse, the instinctual perverted interest that came when they saw her in her wolf form.

"I am not a full were, my mother is a vampire," she said with as haughty a tone as she could manage and flashed her fangs that were still extended from her gums.

Ian stayed between her and the others, although he didn't try and shove her behind him again, for which Alexia was grateful. She didn't

fool herself into thinking she could actually bend Ian to her will easily, and she didn't relish the idea of a power struggle in front of these unknowns.

"I know what you are, girl. Your father and I have been friends for a very long time. I am sorry to say I have not had the opportunity to meet you, although I have had the pleasure of meeting your mother many years ago. I know that you do not drink blood to survive. I assume your extended fangs at the moment are in reaction to my insensitive son."

Ian shot her an accusing look. "You *don't* have to drink blood?"

Alexia ignored him and continued to face Kairos. "Welcome to my home, Kairos, I wish it could have been under better circumstances."

"Thank you, Alexia." He turned to his son. "What do you know about the capture?"

Ian glared at Alexia before turning to face his father. There was a definite promise in his eyes. This would be discussed later.

Oh goody, she thought sarcastically. She would have to do some major skirting of the truth, or outright refusal to answer. That might work if he couldn't touch her head and find the memories of her reactions to him. How mortifying that would be, for him to discover what kinds of things his nearness made her want to do.

"They were taken with a struggle, although

there are no scents here unfamiliar to Alexia. It was Tarquin, Zyra, and three of his pack mates, Jack and Staci and their son, Henry. And Terrance, possibly one other werewolf, Sam, but we don't know for sure."

"How is it that they were taken and there is no blood and no sign of anyone else? You have spoken with all other pack members I assume. They are involved in no way?"

"There were elves here." Paxton loomed in the doorway leading to the dining room.

Alexia silently cursed herself. That was the second time in ten minutes that she had been snuck up on in her own home. She was usually much more alert than this. What the hell was wrong with her? She huffed silently. She knew what was wrong, Ian. He messed with her senses so much that she was blind to anything else going on around her.

Ian pushed her again, this time toward his father and twin companions, to stand between her and the vampire.

"Ian, I swear if you push me one more time I am going to rip your throat out." Alexia tried to shove past him, but he easily held her arm and kept her safely behind him. The other three keepers had moved closer, too, surrounding and protecting her as if she were something special to them. It was odd, something she had never

encountered before, this concern from any who weren't her parents. She pushed away the feelings of comfort she wanted to derive from the act. It just didn't fit with her view of this world—there was always an ulterior motive.

"Alexia said you could use my help in locating her mother. I am Paxton." He was dressed in all black, very cliché vamp, but somehow he made it look good, and dangerous. His dark hair was slicked back and his blue eyes were bright in his pale face, proof that he held no malicious intent at the moment. He leaned casually against the doorway, as if it didn't bother him at all to be facing four werewolves. Alexia was sure he would be ready to fight off an attack in half a second if he needed to be.

"This is who you were visiting today?" Ian asked Alexia without taking his eyes from the vampire.

"Yes, now let me go and stop being rude to guests in *my* home." Alexia pulled her arm out of his grasp.

Ian reluctantly released her, but didn't relax. He looked like he was ready to do anything to keep her safe. She didn't like the warm fuzzy feeling that created in her.

"How do you know there were elves here? I can't smell anything elfish," Alexia said, then thought for a moment. She had never actually met

an elf, so really didn't know what they smelled like, but assumed they didn't smell like her father's pack.

Elves were supposed to be fairly peaceful, if a bit fanatical, creatures. Despite the fact that they were powerful they never started trouble, only responded to what was done to them.

Paxton sniffed carefully. "They were animal elves, I think, hiding their scent with magic. I can smell their magic. That is how I know they were here," he explained to Alexia, ignoring the glaring men around her that thought they were in charge.

Alexia thought about that. Her father had told her about elves in bedtime stories as a child. There were three types of elves, nature elves, animal elves and water elves. He had said that they value keeping things balanced. They barter for everything and believe in an eye for an eye. Balance is a religion to them. They are definitely not creatures you want to be indebted to or make angry—they *will* get even as a way of keeping things balanced.

She thought all types of elves could teleport and do some magic, like hiding their scent apparently. She knew they could use a magic called glamour as a way of camouflaging themselves around humans and appear as nothing more than another human. Although this didn't work on most other creatures of myth, they could

see right through the glamour unless it was done by a very powerful elf. Similar in looks, they were tall and slender with long white hair and pointy ears. Her father said they were all quite beautiful, male and female alike.

The only way to tell which type of elf you are looking at was by its eyes. Animal elves have brown eyes, nature elves have green eyes and water elves have blue eyes. Each species of elf has special abilities. Animal elves can speak to animals and entrance them for short periods of time to do as they command. Water elves can control water, drawing it out of objects and air. Nature elves can make plants and such grow or die as they wish.

Why an elf of any kind would be after her parents she couldn't imagine, but it didn't bode well if they were trying to get things even. They were nearly impossible to stop if that was what they were after.

"What kind of dealings has your father had with animal elves, Alexia?" Kairos asked, agitation in his voice contrasting his calm demeanor.

"None that I know of," she answered honestly.

"They won't attack unprovoked," he said in an accusing tone.

"My father has never sought to harm or cheat any creature," she said indignantly.

Paxton scoffed at that, but kept his obvious disagreeing comment to himself.

"Well, someone did something and if we don't know what, it is going to be that much harder to figure out how to get them back."

Alexia felt cold fear grip her at Kairos's comment. For the first time she felt like she really might not see her parents again. It could already be too late.

Ian reached out a comforting hand and placed it on her shoulder.

She shook it off and tamped down on the fear and grief she was sure everyone could smell. It would do no good to freak out, even if it was what she really wanted to do. "So what do we do to get them back?" she asked stiffly.

As the men started talking amongst themselves, debating what the motive and method could have been and where to go from here, Alexia started inching toward the door. They didn't need her right now and she needed some fresh air and time to think. She needed to deal with all the confounding feelings Ian brought out in her so she could focus fully on the problem of getting her parents back from the elves.

"Why, Ian, your wolf has mated." Kairos's jubilant voice echoed through the suddenly silent kitchen.

Alexia froze, one hand on the doorknob. She had been so close to escape. And it was all her stupid wolf's fault, cuddling up with Ian's so

blatantly. Not a care for her keeper's feelings on the subject.

"Yes," Ian said in a completely detached tone.

Alexia's back stiffened even more and she turned slowly to face them all.

"How wonderful. Why didn't you tell me Alexia was going to be a part of our pack?"

Her eyes flared red and yellow as Ian sat there, shrugging in answer. "I am not Ian's mate," she said forcefully, meeting the gazes of each of the five men in the room briefly to emphasize her point.

"You have refused my son? Then why hasn't your wolf refused his?"

All eyes looked down at the two wolves in question. Alexia's small red-brown wolf acted the submissive to Ian's large white one, who guarded her from the other three wolves who looked at her with open interest.

Ian turned to the others and growled. The twins, Mabon and Malcolm, both looked guilty and their wolves backed down. His father looked unaffected, but his wolf backed off as well.

"If the lady refuses you, Ian, you have no right to keep others from pursuing her," the twin called Malcolm pointed out boldly.

Ian shot her an accusing look, as if she were stirring up trouble on purpose.

Alexia took on a serene expression and avoided

looking at him. "I am not anybody's mate, nor do I wish to be."

Kairos smiled, amused by her show of defiant independence. "That is a female's choice, as it is a male's choice to fight off other suitors in his own pursuit of her."

Alexia's eyes widened. The last thing she wanted was anyone fighting because of her. Before anyone could say anything further on the subject, lights flashed across outside. The pack was arriving.

Kairos and the twins stood to meet with the arriving keepers outside. All three flashed her bright smiles as they passed. Paxton followed with an amused expression on his face.

Good luck with that one. I saw your little interaction outside my house today. He is hot and he is angry and he is all about you, Paxton thought as he passed.

Alexia hissed under her breath.

Ian stayed where he was and stared darkly at Alexia, who pressed herself against the counter, suddenly quite nervous about things. Not the least of which was the open interest of not just one, but four wolves and their keepers. How the hell had that happened? What was wrong with these BC keepers, thinking she was mate material?

Ian stood and stalked toward her.

Panic rose in her chest.

"Why did you lie to me about the blood?"

There was something in his eyes that made Alexia feel unreasonably guilty. She didn't really have anything to feel bad about. She hadn't technically lied to him. But she had deliberately let him believe something that was false, and that was just as bad. She knew it, but she didn't have to be sorry about it. All her life she had done what was best to protect herself, why should that change just because he said so? "I didn't lie, I just didn't correct you," she stated truthfully, lifting her chin slightly. Ian was so close now, she could feel the heat radiating off his body.

"Why did you drink blood this afternoon? Do you just enjoy it, or does it give you extra strength? Either of those reasons are understandable, Alexia. I wouldn't deny my mate anything she found pleasure in, nor would I deny her something that kept her strong enough to defend herself against those who wished her harm."

"No, I hate it actually, although yes, it does strengthen me slightly. I only drink it during the full moon because it allows me to stay in control and not merge with my wolf." Alexia was nearly breathless. He was so close and her heart beat wildly in reaction. The scent of his body, his blood, reached her and her fangs elongated in readiness.

"Why do your fangs ready for my blood when I

am near if you don't desire to drink from me?"

"I don't know why I react to you in such a way, maybe because I wish to tear out your throat for bothering me so much?" Her answer was flippant, trying to calm the situation down from getting way to personal. She was in serious danger of admitting she desired him, or worse, having him find out for himself. She eyed his hands warily, but he kept them fisted at his sides.

"I know a vampire, a friend of mine actually, back home. He told me once that a vampire's fangs elongate when they are sexually aroused as well as hungry. That they will drink the blood of their partner during the act of coupling. If it isn't my blood you desire, maybe it is my cock."

The crude words were no doubt meant to shock her, but they made her knees weak with longing and she barely caught herself before she groaned like a horny teen.

"If you don't accept me as your mate, I am going to step back and you will be floundering out there, an unattached female. I can guarantee that there will be at least three males after you. Think about it, Alexia. I will restrain my wolf if that is really what you want, but then I won't step in to help when there are more after you. Will you sit back and watch them fight for you when you have no desire to take the winner? Or will you accept that you want my body and my blood and my

protection?"

"Is that a threat?" Alexia tried to sound infuriated rather than frightened, but the picture he painted was something she never wanted to see. She would hate to see anyone fighting for her, especially when she had no intention of taking any of them to mate. But damn Ian for giving her such an ultimatum, she wasn't ready to say yes to him either.

"It's the truth, Alexia. Whether you realize it or not, you are an amazing creature that will call to every wolf instinct in a keeper. You are strong and beautiful and even if my father's pack is a bit more civilized than yours obviously is, they will still see you as a prize they have to go after while they can."

Alexia didn't know what to say. She looked up at Ian with indecision clear on her face. She searched his for anything to cling to, any sign that he cared for her even a little. All she saw there was his mask of calm, nothing to let her know how he really felt. Or maybe that was it. He felt nothing for her beyond his wolf instincts to mate with her, no different than her father's pack, just barely more civilized as he had put it. They wanted to breed her, not thinking she was good enough to mate with, he wanted to mate with her so he could breed her. It wasn't any better and she wouldn't accept it.

"I will take my chances." She shoved past him and walked out the door to join the others.

CHAPTER SIX

Keepers and wolves were gathered around in a loose semicircle outside with Kairos at its center. The sight of so many made Alexia's stomach twist. Usually she avoided situations like this at all costs. Tonight it was too important—she had to be here and she had to be here alone.

Alexia stayed back, on the outskirts of the meeting where she hoped she would go unnoticed.

Kairos addressed the pack members once they were all present, including Sam who shot her looks that promised retribution for last night. She couldn't help but take his threat seriously now that her father wasn't around. There would be little to hold him back.

Most of the others politely ignored Alexia, as usual. She was no more or less important than before.

Ian joined his father in addressing the others

and as promised, or threatened, his wolf stayed away from hers. Which she told herself she was thankful for, at least she wouldn't have that embarrassing sight drawing attention to her.

The twins stood on either side of the large group, watching everyone carefully. A missing alpha could mean power struggles, which would hinder the efforts of finding them all. Hopefully Kairos's presence would be enough to discourage that. If not, the twins were obviously there as enforcement.

Paxton stood behind Kairos and Ian, waiting for his turn to speak of his knowledge. His presence made the keepers nervous. A vampire so close was not welcome, especially on the full moon, and tempers were short. The whole situation had a volatile feel on a nuclear level.

She hoped things stayed calm. One little thing could turn this whole meeting into a bloody brawl.

Now you've done it, Alexia. We are without protection. Alexia's wolf whined to her as she watched all the other wolves warily. More than a few wolves looked at hers with malicious or aroused intent.

Be quiet, I refuse to be what he wants, and I can't believe you aren't offended by it, too. What happened to my fiercely independent wolf?

I accepted a mate. They are a perfect match for us,

strong and able to protect us and provide for us, not to mention incredibly attractive. What more do you want?

Everything, Alexia thought wistfully, and wondered silently why she should settle for anything less. Just because she was the freak here, did that mean she should be grateful and accept whatever she could get? If that was the case, she should have become the pack's whore years ago, at least it would have felt more honest.

Alexia saw Sam start to move around the crowd and figured he was headed her way, but she refused to move from her chosen position. She wasn't going to be scared off by him and until he got his confrontation over with, he would just follow her anyway.

He came up beside her and sneered. "Well isn't this convenient. The whole household is kidnapped and you are out whoring around when it happens."

Alexia's wolf growled low and menacing at Sam's, who growled back. Neither made a move to attack the other however. Wolves never attacked each other outside of a merge, they could only get as angry as their keeper. And if a keeper was that angry, they merged to be stronger and fiercer.

"I could say the same about you, Sam," she shot back calmly—he wasn't worth her anger. "Except you wouldn't be the whore in that scenario, would

you? I am sure the only way you can get any is if you pick one up off the street."

"You little bitch," Sam spat at her.

His hand slapped across her face so fast she didn't have a chance of preventing it. It was forceful, but she was strong and didn't let it move her more than a turn of the head.

Ian merged with his wolf instantly. He leaped toward them in a blur of speed. He must have been watching them closely to have reacted so quickly. Obviously he wasn't fully committed to leaving her alone.

Sam merged with his wolf as he was knocked off his feet. Clothing tore apart and scattered, howls of rage ripped through the night. Every eye was turned to the two fighting werewolves and glanced at her curiously and accusingly as the obvious cause.

Alexia watched in shock as the two snarled and snapped at each other. She had seen her father's werewolves fight before. It was violent and extremely dangerous. She didn't want to see Ian hurt like that. Her wolf whined beside her, terrified for Ian.

Alexia glared frantically at Kairos as he and the twins had instantly converged on her as the fight began. Protecting her perhaps, or just getting close enough to prevent any real harm to Ian, she wasn't sure. "Do something," she demanded of

Kairos.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "What can I do? Ian is fighting for your honor. His mate has been insulted. That is his right as long as he feels you are his."

Alexia gaped at him, then turned back to the two werewolves.

Ian lunged and caught the back of Sam's neck. They rolled and Ian ended up on the bottom, Sam was above him, snarling and snapping so close to his sensitive neck. Sam drew blood across Ian's shoulder. Alexia could feel her wolf begging entrance to her body, to defend Ian and his wolf. Alexia was sure it would only make things worse though. She looked back and forth between the fighting pair and Kairos. Kairos was calm, watching the action with no more care than one would give passing traffic.

He's insane, Alexia decided.

Ian kicked out with his hind legs and flipped them, positioning himself on top, claws digging into Sam's body. Sam rolled out from under Ian and they were again circling, snarling and snapping. The others looked on with sick fascination. Many of the keepers' eyes glowed yellow and they shook with the effort to keep from merging. The sight and smell of hate and blood was a heady mix to a were, and on a full moon, it was nearly impossible to deny.

"Fine, let them kill each other, it's not like I care." Alexia crossed her arms under her breasts and watched with forced detachment even as her stomach knotted in terror for Ian.

"I cannot blame Ian for fighting with that were. He looked at you with such hostility and lust, I nearly went after his throat. Then to strike you like that, man, he is lucky we didn't all converge on him at once," one of the twins said, Malcolm she thought it was.

Alexia looked at him like he was completely nuts, which might be a pretty realistic assessment. "Why the hell would you do that? It's not as if I want you either," she snapped, agitated that these new keepers suddenly thought she was under their protection.

"I would protect any female of a pack, especially one so desirable, and from such obviously malicious intent." He spoke in a calm quiet way, as if explaining himself to a dimwitted child.

Alexia glared at him, the reactions from Ian's pack was something so different. She didn't know how to handle it all. It made her uncomfortable, second guessing their every action. At least with her father's pack she knew what was behind their actions, hate. "I don't need anyone to protect me."

"My goodness, your eyes are a sight when you are angry," Malcolm said, taking a step back.

Alexia smiled, this was a reaction she was more comfortable with. "Yeah, remember that I am half-vampire." She expected him to cringe at the reminder, but he only smiled at her.

"That only makes you more precious, Alexia. You are so much more than a were, so much more than a vamp. I would be proud to call you my mate," Malcolm said, recovering quickly from his shock.

"Hey, brother, be careful. I think Ian might attack you next if he hears you saying such a thing to his mate," Mabon interjected.

Alexia scoffed at both of them, then turned back to the fight, which had grown more vicious in the last few moments.

Alexia could smell blood, both of them were bleeding, but she couldn't tell how badly. Ian's white fur showed blood much better than Sam's dark brown fur, but she wasn't sure how much of it was Ian's and how much was Sam's. Werewolves healed quickly and were hard to kill, short of decapitation or silver. But a great deal of damage from any source could still be quite painful and take a long time to heal, leaving them vulnerable to more serious attacks.

"Stop this, dammit!" she shouted. Many eyes turned to her, but neither of the fighting werewolves even glanced up. "I said stop this, Ian, Sam! This is ridiculous. *Stop!*" Nothing. "Forget

this,” Alexia grumbled and stomped off. If they wanted to act like idiots and get hurt, fine, she wasn’t going to stand around and watch.

She made it all the way to her living room without realizing she was being followed. She was too busy grumbling to herself about men acting like adolescents even after hundreds of years to grow up.

She jumped at the shadow behind her and whirled around to see Paxton following close on her heels.

He grimaced in apology.

“What?” she snapped agitated.

“I don’t think it is safe for you to wander about alone at this time. I get the impression that most of those wolves out there do not like you, and I would feel very...displeased if you were to meet with any harm. I don’t have anything against you personally after all, and you did come to me for assistance. I am compelled to keep you from harm while I am assisting you.”

“Fine.” Alexia walked on into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, intending to ignore him. After all, he was another stupid dominating male. But he was helping her because she asked him to and she couldn’t hate him for wanting to keep her safe from all the weres that would rather see her dead. At least he didn’t want to breed with her. Alexia stilled,

turned slowly with the water bottle falling from her lips. She narrowed her eyes at him.

Paxton leaned casually back in a chair at the table, looking completely relaxed and at home.

"You don't think I am your mate do you?" she asked pointedly with a sharp edge to her voice that made quite clear her opinion on the matter.

Paxton's face broke out in a full grin and his eyes sparkled nearly clear in his amusement. "No, Alexia, worry not. My intentions are completely honorable where you are concerned. I know who my mate is, and it certainly isn't a werepire."

Alexia wasn't sure if she should be affronted by this or not. Certainly she was embarrassed by her outburst, so she decided to ignore it. "Can I offer you a package of blood?" she asked, moving them past her embarrassment.

Paxton smiled awkwardly at her. "No, thank you, I ate earlier."

Something in the way he said it made Alexia think he hadn't eaten packaged blood earlier. She shuddered at the picture it brought to mind.

Paxton lurking in a dark alley, innocent young woman strolling along, on her way home from a hard day at work, then suddenly she is being held tight and drained of some of her precious life's blood. Of course she would never know it, a vampire would make the small incisions nearly disappear instantly and the memory of the attack

would fade just as fast, leaving behind a slightly foggy bemused remembrance of a frightening meeting. The human would shudder at the thought of dark alleys for the rest of her life, no doubt, but never quite know why she would walk a half mile around just to avoid one.

It wasn't as terrible as Hollywood made it seem, but it wasn't a pleasant thing either. She had never done it and she didn't intend to, ever. A feeding vampire was often so caught up in the act that they could not pay attention to their surroundings and were likely to be seen. Especially in a busy city like Portland and then there was a big problem to deal with. There were vampires out there whose job it was to keep other vamps from letting their existence become known. They were ruthless about their job, which is why most vamps have moved on to more civilized methods of feeding, having packaged blood delivered on a weekly basis.

Some of Alexia's thoughts must have been strongly directed at Paxton because he picked up the gist of them and smiled wickedly at her.

"Have you ever taken blood from a source, Alexia?" he asked, cocking his head to the side and eyeing her with dark amusement.

"I don't drink blood at all, except near the full moon." She avoided answering directly, the next question would no doubt be, *ever wanted to?* Then

what would she say, *no not until recently and Ian came into my life, explain that one to me*. No way was she going to share that little bit of information.

"A shame." Paxton didn't explain his remark. He leaned back at the table, lounging with his eyes closed while she paced the kitchen anxiously.

Ten minutes later, Ian stormed into the kitchen, his shoulder was bleeding through his shirt, but Alexia couldn't see blood anywhere else on him. Seeing him there, relatively unharmed, relief flooded through her. She didn't look too closely at the feeling, didn't want to analyze the deep concern she had been harboring, to have him fighting so viciously. She welcomed the anger that came next, anger at his embarrassing reaction and idiotic behavior. She pulled it close and wrapped it around all the other feelings for him, choking them out. She concentrated on it and felt her eyes glow as it grew. With the anger so abundant, she could hold back the hunger that started to gnaw at her with the sweet earthy scent of his blood filling the room.

"We are leaving. We need to go somewhere safer for you to turn at midnight," Ian commanded.

He stared her down with yellow eyes, daring her to argue with him. His chest heaved from his exertions and sweat dampened his hair. Damn but he looked good. Alexia felt a portion of her fury

subside to the desire that tried to well up and take over.

“We can go back to my house,” Paxton offered, jumping to his feet.

His eyes were reddened with hunger and Alexia was pretty sure he wasn’t breathing. She focused on his eyes so she could get her desire under control. It didn’t work.

Alexia didn’t have a chance to make her opinion known before it was decided and she was ushered out of the house. Not that she trusted herself to open her mouth right then. She wasn’t sure she could let go of her tightly held anger long enough to form actual words, without risking losing her annoyance completely to her desires.

She reasoned that she allowed them to usher her away because she had no desire to see another fight, but she was also scared to stay there. To merge around her father’s pack would invite a reaction like the one when she was sixteen, though without her father there to protect her from his pack’s violent instincts, it would be worse.

Paxton declined the offer of a ride. Being in a car with a bleeding Ian wasn’t a good idea he joked, although they all knew it was more than true. The draw of blood from such a strong being like Ian would be very hard for any vampire to resist. Paxton took off through the woods and would probably beat them there anyway.

Ian drove Alexia's car and she sat silently in the passenger seat, trying to deny the fact that the sweet earthy smell of his blood was as tempting as a dark chocolate truffle. Her fangs were extended in her mouth and she knew her eyes glowed with need. Her sex ached with a different need entirely, as if the scent of his blood were the most potent of aphrodisiacs, perhaps it was. She squirmed in her seat uncomfortably and kept her lids down to keep from alerting any cars they passed with their inhuman glow. She wasn't able to hide the obvious desire from Ian. He would see the glow of her eyes even though they were pointed down, and he would scent the desire pooling between her thighs.

"Should I be worried that you are going to lose control and attack me?" he asked mockingly.

Alexia hissed at him in response, a noise so vamp like it even startled herself.

"I'll take that as a no. Well then, how about we discuss the plan for tonight?"

"Whatever." She sighed, but was thankful for the reminder of what she needed to do. The important thing was finding her parents. With that thought firmly planted in her mind, her fangs receded slightly, but the ache between her thighs continued mercilessly. Her whole body felt hot with it.

"At midnight we will both merge. You will

reach out to your father and I will be reaching out to my brother. They should be merged as well, allowing our thoughts to link. Finding out where they are is top priority, then who took them and if there is time, why they were taken. Don't waste time with emotional greetings, the link won't necessarily last if they are weak or wounded." Ian said the last word quietly and the thought that there may not be a connection at all because they were already dead hung in the air between them.

Alexia shot him a frightened glance. "You don't really think they are wounded, do you? I mean, there wasn't any blood in the house." Her voice was weak and worried, but she didn't try to hide it from him. What she wanted to ask was if he thought they were dead, but the words wouldn't form.

"I don't know, Alexia, but we will soon enough. And until then it isn't worth worrying overmuch about."

It wasn't reassuring, but she knew he was right – no sense in worrying, yet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They stopped in front of Paxton's house and Alexia jumped out of the car, inhaling the fresh clean air. Her fangs receded more and her eyes dimmed. The ache of arousal even began to dull as she inhaled breath after breath of air untainted by Ian's scent. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of having her body back in control—something she hadn't known to enjoy until it was gone. She opened her eyes to find Paxton staring at her oddly from the walkway.

"Alexia, you look...well I suppose you are not as immune to the smell of blood as you would like to be," Paxton commented and then went to the porch and held the front door open for them.

She ignored his comment and walked into the house.

"I think the bleeding has stopped. If you have a shirt I could borrow, Paxton, I will change and leave this one in the car, so as not to tempt either

of you bloodsuckers with my sweet taste."

The last was said directly to Alexia and she didn't bother stopping the urge to stick her tongue out at him in response.

Both men laughed at her display of temper.

"Of course, wait right there," Paxton said with a chuckle in his voice. He hurried away and came back an instant later with a black T-shirt. "This might be a little small, but it should do the job." He tossed it to Ian.

"Thanks."

Alexia hadn't intended to watch, but as Ian removed his ruined shirt, she couldn't tear her eyes from his broad muscled chest with its spattering of blond hair around dark nipples, trailing down over a rock hard stomach and disappearing below the waist of his jeans. Alexia's gaze stuck on the bulge there, until his hands pulled down the shirt and caught her attention away.

"You are looking like you want to attack me again."

His husky voice made Alexia think of dark bedrooms and silk sheets, snarling animal lust and exquisite release. Alexia turned around on weak knees and hurried into the living room, Ian's low rumble of laughter following her. Damn him, he knew and she was helpless to hide it from him. But she wasn't an animal and wasn't ruled by her

desires or her instincts. Which meant she was in no danger of sating herself, in any way, on Ian's luscious delectable unbelievably tempting body.

"How much do you know about vampires, Alexia?" Paxton asked quietly when she entered the room.

"Enough, why?" she snapped, then instantly felt bad. It wasn't Paxton who made her so frustrated. He didn't deserve her anger, except perhaps for enjoying her frustration too much outside.

Paxton smiled knowingly and motioned for her to join him by the fireplace. "I was thinking perhaps you were confused by your reactions to the dog. Did your mother ever explain to you what it is like for a vampire to fall in love, or make love?"

Alexia felt her face redden and couldn't meet his eyes. "I know enough, Paxton, and I assure you I want nothing to do with Ian in that way."

A warning growl rumbled through the room. Alexia and Paxton looked toward the sound. Ian stood in the doorway, eyes glowing brightly as he stared at them.

Paxton threw up his hands and backed away from Alexia. "I am not trying to move in on your woman, I assure you. I know better than to step between a were and its mate. I was merely speaking to her about a...rather delicate matter."

Reassure him, Alexia. Paxton thought at her

"Relax, Ian. I like Paxton about as much as I like you."

Ian growled, unappeased and took a couple steps into the room, gaze locked onto Paxton with clear challenge.

Not good enough, stop teasing him. Paxton thought at her harshly.

"Ian, I don't want Paxton in any way," she said slowly to diffuse the escalating situation. "Big and pale isn't my type, alright."

Ian's eyes dulled back to almost normal, but he moved into the room and positioned himself between Paxton and Alexia. Obviously he wasn't completely appeased.

"I don't know what your problem is, Ian. You were supposed to stop acting like I'm your mate. What happened to that?" She glared, hands on hips and eyes glowing slightly with irritation, irritation with him for acting so possessive and with herself for liking it just a little.

Ian's eyes flashed yellow and then settled back to dark brown. "I tried, now you will just have to accept that I am your mate."

"Are you kidding me? I will do no such thing, and to even insinuate it is insane."

Their gazes clashed in anger and Paxton silently removed himself from the room.

"I am insinuating nothing. I am telling you that

I am your mate and as long as I am alive, I will fight off any creature who thinks to have you or harm you.” Ian closed the distance between them and pulled her roughly against him. He slammed his lips to hers in a branding kiss.

Alexia’s hands went to his chest with the intention of pushing him away, but they curled into his shirt and pulled him closer instead. Her lips parted under his assault with a sigh of resignation.

He gentled the kiss and grasped her hips firmly, pulling her lower body roughly against the proof of his desire.

Alexia couldn’t believe the pleasure she received from such a simple act. It shot like lightning through her body and then back to coil low in her belly. She had kissed boys before, but never in her life had she felt such raw sensuality in the act, such desire as a result.

Never had she wanted it to go any further.

His hands went to her butt and squeezed its firm plumpness appreciatively. She gasped at the sensation and he slipped his tongue into her open mouth. He expertly mated their tongues, sending shocks of pleasure to her burning center and shivers of delight to her curling toes.

Her fangs extended fully and Ian’s tongue caressed them carefully. The feel of his warm wet flesh made her moan with hungry desire and

moisture pooled between her legs on a rush of erotic excitement. The sensation was unbelievable. There was nothing to compare it to. She wanted to sink her fangs deep into his flesh as he sank his flesh deep into her, she wanted to draw sweet succor from him as they both writhed and shivered with pleasure.

Her hands wrapped around his head and instinctively tilted it to expose the beating pulse at his neck. She broke the kiss and her gaze locked onto the spot on his neck where she knew she could draw his sustenance into her mouth, hot and thick. She whimpered with the extreme desire, the pull of his tiny thumping pulse was so strong.

Alexia lowered her head toward his neck. She was helpless to stop herself, helpless to care enough to try.

A clock chimed, a howl ripped through the air and Ian shivered as he tried to keep from merging. He kissed her once more, quick and hot, then stepped back as the moon drew him together with his wolf. He used his magic to keep from ripping his clothes. They simply disappeared as he merged, an amazing trick she wished she had for the rare occasion she merged.

Alexia stared at the man, now wolf, who she had been so close to attacking with desire. What the hell was wrong with her? She tried to clear her

mind, but it was so thick with unfulfilled needs. She turned around and took a deep breath, trying to get herself back under control. She had a very important mission to do tonight and she couldn't merge with her wolf while all her vampire instincts were on high alert. Ian whined behind her and she took another breath. She had to do it now, while her father was sure to be changed as well. Injured or not, he would be merged at the strike of midnight, for a short time at least.

Alexia took off her clothing and merged in record time. Ian didn't have the decency to look away as she did it. She tried not to care, but all she could think about was, *I hope he finds me attractive*. What a ridiculous thought, she chastised herself. She didn't want to want him and didn't want him to want her. Want of body did not a good mate make, she reminded herself sternly.

Alexia, I...

I don't want to talk about it, Ian. Get to work contacting your brother.

Ian growled, but did as she instructed. There was no time to waste. She hoped that by the time he brought it up again, she would have her hormones firmly under control and be able to tell him to go to hell without telltale desire lacing her every word.

She closed her eyes and concentrated, feeling through her mind for the link she had with her

father. It wasn't very strong. She had never had a reason to strengthen it. She wasn't a true member of his pack after all. But it was there, and as soon as she recognized it, she poured her energy into it until she was sure it was strong enough for him to hear her call if he was merged, and not actively blocking her. *Father!*

Nothing, her heart beat wildly as images of his cold bloody body flashed through her mind. No, she had to keep trying, she would not give up. *Father, can you hear me?*

Alexia? The reply was weak but it was there.

Relief flooded her and she drooped to the floor, savoring the knowledge he was alive. *Where are you, Daddy?*

You need to stay safe, Alexia.

I am safe, but I need to find you, where are you?

You are safe?

Yes, I am fine, I am with Ian. But where are you being held and why did the animal elves take you?

Ahh, good. I love you, Alexia, you are the greatest thing I ever accomplished. Then he was gone, the connection completely cut off, firmly blocked.

She called and searched for over an hour before giving up and splitting from her wolf, utterly exhausted. Ian paced and whined, but didn't pay any attention to her. She couldn't tell if he had made contact or not. Alexia curled up on the couch and watched him walk back and forth until

she dozed off sometime around dawn.

She dreamed of blood, so much blood. She swam in it, lapping it up by the mouthful and drawing it deep into her body. It was hot and sweet and so much better than she had ever imagined it could be. She wanted more and more. She wanted to gorge herself on it until she blacked out from the overload.

A dark shape floated near. She paused in her reveling to push it away. It turned over and Alexia stared down into the flat lifeless eyes of her father, terror contorting his features, his mouth gaping open in a soundless scream. She tried to swim away, but bumped against something. Turning, she saw another body floating face down. She didn't touch it, didn't turn it over, but she knew. She knew it was her mother, and she knew its eyes would be just as dead as her father's.

They were gone, they were both gone, and she was alone, so alone.

Suddenly she wanted out, wanted away. No more blood, no more death, she couldn't take any more. She started swimming, long powerful strokes, but there was no edge to get to. She turned around and headed in the other direction, but the crimson pool extended forever in all directions and she couldn't escape. She spun around and around, searching for something, anything to cling to. She felt herself sinking,

sinking down into the thick sucking depths of death. Death, she knew she should just accept. She knew she had nothing to live for with her parents gone. Death would be easy, death would be quick.

As her face sank below the surface, an image of Ian flashed in front of her—Ian in her kitchen, making her a sandwich and offering her a package of blood that he found repulsive, then Ian standing protectively between her and his father, her and Paxton, twice. Ian merged with his wolf, attacking Sam with so much anger, anger over her being hurt and insulted.

Ian was alive. Ian meant she wasn't alone. She suddenly wanted to live, she wanted to experience Ian.

She kicked her legs and pushed her arms, reaching for the surface, but try as she might, she couldn't get there. The surface never got any closer and the blood became thicker the more she struggled in it. Squeezing her tighter, suffocating her.

Alexia gasped and jerked as she came awake. Her heart pounded in her chest and her fangs were long in her mouth. Her gaze darted around the dark room in confusion until landing on Ian, still merged and curled up next to her on the couch. She was still at Paxton's, who was sprawled in a chair nearby, and both men were asleep.

Alexia relaxed back into the cushions and tried to sort through the images from her dream. She couldn't. They were all horrifying and she didn't want to think about what her mind could be trying to tell her. Somewhere in her subliminal mind, did she know that her parents hadn't survived the night? Almost as disturbing, did she really want to fully experience life under Ian's tutelage? Alexia shook her head, denying both scenarios.

She looked over at Ian, wondering what he had found out last night, if he had found out anything. If he hadn't gotten any more information than she had, then they were screwed, and her parents were dead. They had no idea where to look for them and could very well already be too late.

Panic rose in her chest and she struggled with the urge to shake him awake and make him tell her anything he knew. Make him reassure her that things were going to be all right. But he couldn't, not really. The only people who could make things all right were her parents. If they weren't safe, then nothing could possibly be all right, no matter what her confusing dream had been trying to make her believe.

Her cell chimed, bringing her out of her dark thoughts and waking Ian and Paxton with startled jumps. Alexia hurried to answer it before either male decided to smash it for its rude intrusion on

their rest. "Hello."

"Hey, Lex, it's Travis."

"Oh, hey, Travis." Alexia heard Ian rumble next to her, right before he split with his wolf, coming out fully clothed. Damn him for that annoying ability.

"Where are you? You missed class, and I still have your notes. Are you alright? I mean, your boyfriend was pretty upset the other night and..."

"I totally forgot about class, that's all, don't worry. Umm, can I meet up with you later maybe? I am hung up with some family stuff today."

"Sure, just give me a call whenever. But you don't think your boyfriend will mind, do you? I mean I don't want him to think I am trying to trick you into a date or anything, or get upset with you for meeting up with me."

Ian smiled beside her, obviously having no trouble listening in on her private conversation, and liking that the guy was afraid of him.

"He is *not* my boyfriend, I will call you later." Alexia hung up and glared at Ian, who glared right back. "You are not my boyfriend, Ian."

"You're right. I am much more than that," he insisted, narrowing his eyes to hard slits and tightening his jaw stubbornly.

Alexia clashed eyes with him, her own jaw set to hard lines. Neither blinked, neither so much as breathed as they stood off against each other in a

wordless battle of wills.

"Sooo," Paxton said, drawing the word out until he had gained their attention. "What did we learn last night, anything interesting or useful?"

Alexia relaxed her face. The most interesting thing she had learned last night was that Ian tasted like sweet hot desire. "No," she answered simply. She didn't trust herself to say much more while remembering the passionate kiss they had shared, and the resulting overwhelming craving for sex and blood.

"Terrance wasn't able to tell me why they were taken, but it was definitely animal elves that did it. They are being held somewhere within their colony near Eugene, he thinks. He heard the names Lillian and Lucas mentioned as the leaders there."

Paxton's eyes widened just the slightest bit at this news.

Ian gave Alexia a sympathetic look before continuing. "They are being held separate from each other, but when they arrived, no one was harmed significantly."

Alexia didn't miss the *significantly* he had thrown in, which meant they were not in great condition. She couldn't help but fear the worst, especially after her dream. She bit her tongue to stop the tears from flowing and dug her nails into her palms. She soon felt the relaxing presence of

her wolf who shared her calm with Alexia. It was enough for her to gain control.

Ian reached out a hand and placed it comfortingly on her knee. "I contacted my father last night and he said that the local pack was unsuccessful at reaching Tarquin. I'm sorry, Alexia, but that doesn't mean he isn't okay."

Alexia took a deep breath, but still her voice shook as she spoke. "I know. I was able to reach him briefly, but only long enough for me to tell him I was all right. I think he blocked me after that. He was weak though, I could tell, weak but alive." For now, she thought to herself, but for how long? Certainly they were not being held for friendly conversation. And what about her mother, she needed blood to keep her healthy and alive. Was she being provided for? If she was being held alone, she couldn't even take blood from a fellow prisoner to survive. She could be suffering greatly even now. Alexia knew that a vampire who was withheld blood wished for death, blood starvation is excruciatingly painful. Alexia took a deep breath and held back the tears that once again pricked the backs of her eyes. Tears would do no good here. She had to be strong in order to help.

"So what is the next step?" Paxton asked, politely ignoring Alexia's obvious distress.

"My father has already begun the short journey

down there. He will call when he has any more information. So we wait." Ian gave Alexia an understanding look, knowing that waiting was about the hardest thing to do.

"Well, I trust you will keep me informed as to anything you might need from me. If there isn't anything at the moment, I will retire. You are welcome to wait out the day here if you'd like." With that, Paxton rose and left the room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Alexia and Ian left. There was no reason to wait till dark when they could be more comfortable in her home. Ian drove without argument from her and she sat sullenly in the seat beside him. She felt so helpless, so disgustingly helpless. She couldn't imagine either of her parents just sitting back and waiting if it were her in danger. But what choice did she have? It wasn't as if no one was doing anything.

Kairos was heading down there now. He would find out some more information and let them know how best to help. She just wished it was her taking that control and making those decisions. It left her with nothing that she could do to aid her parents right now and that just plain sucked. Even after they discover why they are being held, there was a very good chance there still would be nothing she could do. The fear and guilt ate at her—fear over the impending loss and guilt over

surviving, not being there when it happened. She would have rather been taken along with them, forced to die at their sides rather than live without them. What did her life mean without them in it?

Alexia looked over at Ian. His shaggy white hair blew in the open window and his muscles bulged in the black shirt of Paxton's. He was golden skinned and his face was a beautiful mask of calm. What would it be like to feel that kind of calm, to be so uncaring, so accepting of whatever life handed out to you?

"I wish I could tell you that everything was going to be fine, Alexia, but I can't. I *can* say that no matter what is going on, I will do everything in my power to help them all."

She wanted to be reassured by that, but the chances were not good, and he wasn't promising that he *could* help them, just that he would try. The world she lived in was so difficult sometimes. It wasn't as if there was a law enforcement agency that she could call up and get help from. No FBI or CIA that could go out and take over negotiations and then a court of peers to decide what justice called for. Each species of creatures had its own laws, its own sense of justice and its own punishments. None conformed to another, which meant all the captured keepers were now subject to whatever the elves wished to do to them.

Retaliation was always an option of course, but

not a very good one, especially when dealing with the elfin populations.

When they got to the house, Alexia couldn't make herself get out of the car. The house was empty and now she wondered if it was always going to be that way. She just couldn't imagine her life without her parents. They were the only ones who accepted her. Even Ian, who wanted to be her mate, couldn't really accept what she was. He only saw in her a strong healthy mate, no more than that, and that only because his wolf told him so. That wasn't real acceptance, real love. The only two people who had given her that were being held captive by a bunch of fucking elves and she was powerless to do anything about it.

Alexia raged inside her head and slammed her fists into the dashboard, cracking the cheap plastic and cutting her hands. She didn't feel better after she had done it, but at least now she could just concentrate on the blood trickling out of the stinging wounds.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" Ian asked gently, politely ignoring her outburst.

"How can you be so calm? Your brother is there, too. Don't you care about him at all?" Alexia turned accusing eyes on him.

His face saddened and he gave her a lopsided smile. "I love my brother. He has always been my companion, but I am too old, have seen too much,

to not hold out a little bit of hope. My brother and I have both gotten ourselves out of worse situations than this. And until we know why they are being held and have seen their punishment executed, I refuse to live in fear of possibilities.”

Alexia was startled out of her self-pity by his sincere words. Not that it changed her opinion. Maybe she just wasn’t old and wise enough to have the same kind of foresight he had. Try as she might, she couldn’t see that much hope in the situation.

She forced herself into action and got out of the car. Ian followed silently, giving her the space she needed. She hurried into the house and went straight to her bathroom.

Her palms were already healed by the time she was undressed, a perk of her magical parentage. She rinsed her hands in the sink, almost missing the sharp sting that had distracted her mind for a moment. She wasn’t relaxed enough to sit around and wait so she stepped into the shower, hoping the hot spray would help. She stood under the hot spray for twenty minutes, letting the warmth seep into her terror-chilled soul.

We don’t have to be alone, her wolf thought to her, keying in on her depressive feelings.

Even if we mated with Ian and joined his pack, we would still be alone. It’s not as if there is anyone else there that has to hide from the sun, not to mention my

unique merged form that will always set me apart.

Her wolf had no answer to that.

The water grew cold so she quickly rinsed her hair and stepped out into the steamy bathroom. Her wolf was curled up by the door, looking as depressed as an animal was capable. Alexia could feel more than see the emotion in her wolf, and it mirrored her own hopeless loneliness.

At least she wasn't alone in her sorrow.

Alexia took special care combing and braiding her hair, then she spread lotion over her skin. She knew she was procrastinating, but couldn't help it. She hadn't remembered to grab any clean clothes before coming in, which meant she would have to go down the hall in a towel or put her discarded clothing back on.

Ian was no doubt downstairs, so it shouldn't matter, and she really hated to put on dirty underwear. But she was loath to risk it. She didn't want him to think she was in any way trying to lead him on. Of course, if he was out in the hall, it was his own fault, not hers.

She listened at the door, but didn't hear anything. When she opened the door wrapped in a towel, her wet hair braided over her shoulder, Ian was seated on the floor across from her. His eyes widened, then narrowed to glowing slits as he took in her mostly bare flesh above and below the small red towel.

She stared back in shock, not able to move quickly back to the safety of the bathroom or rush down the hall to her bedroom. How had she not heard him, unless he was deliberately not making any sound? Bastard.

The scent of his arousal reached her nose and triggered her own. She hated that he could so easily make her feel things she had never felt before, it wasn't fair and it was unacceptable. She was in control of her body, not him. "What?" she snapped, agitated at him for being there and her own body for betraying her response.

Ian growled.

Alexia's feelings of indignation quickly turned to unease. She had grown so used to him, so sure he wouldn't harm her, she had forgotten that deep down he was a werewolf. He was a predator by nature and he was driven by animal instincts, some of which pointed to her as his mate, his to rightfully claim as he wanted.

Alexia stood very still. She was sure that if she tried to get away it would only make things worse, trigger him to chase and make it so she was unable to run from him again. She lowered her eyes submissively, waiting for him to gain control.

She was pretty sure he didn't consciously want to harm her or force her into anything. If he could gain control, then he would certainly leave her alone, she just couldn't do anything to trigger him

into reacting right now.

Ian rose to his feet and stalked toward her slowly. His hands were amazingly gentle as they caressed her bare shoulders and arms. He lowered his head to her neck and placed one soft kiss there, then another, breathing her scent deeply into his lungs and exhaling with a tortured half-growl, half-groan. He placed his hands against the wall on either side of her and buried his face in the hollow between her neck and shoulder.

“Alexia.”

That one word was so full of pleading desire it made her insides turn to responding molten desire and reciprocated need. Her instincts were begging her to give him what he needed, and in the process, satisfy her own base needs. Her heart cried out for acceptance and love from any source. Her vamp instincts surged forward, extending her fangs and calling out for satisfaction from his veins.

“I need you, Alexia. You are my mate and it is killing me to not be able to claim you fully. Accept me, Alexia. Accept me for both our sakes.”

“I...Ian, I...” Alexia didn’t know what to say. She wanted to believe that he wanted her, that he needed her and desired her above all others. But her mind reasoned that it was impossible he truly desired her beyond what his wolf instincts were telling him. And she wanted so much more, she

knew she deserved more. She should be able to have it all, even if she had only ever been half of anything, she wanted to be fully loved, fully desired and fully accepted. But what if this was as good as she could hope to find? What if all her life she searched and never found anything better than what Ian was offering her right now? Would she forever regret it if she told him no, if she continued to deny them both this union, this mating?

Her mind buzzed with the possibilities, the weight of the decision heavy on her shoulders, and she wanted to scream in frustration. She was saved from making any sort of decision when his phone rang.

He growled an oath and swung away from her with sudden tenuous control.

She took the opportunity to escape into her room, locking the door behind her—as if that would keep him out if he truly wanted in—and leaned against it, trying to catch her breath and calm her erratic heartbeat.

The way he made her feel was unreal. Even now, her fangs were long and her sex ached. She wanted to give in to him, and herself, but was terrified of what would happen next. What would it be like to be the mate of an alpha instead of just the daughter of one, to be looked at with disgust by keepers who had to respect you as an alpha?

She didn't want to continue her life as it was now, in her father's pack. She wanted to belong somewhere and be valued for what she was, or at the very least not hated for it. Surely Ian wasn't the only one who could make her feel this way. Her desire wasn't about him, it was what he represented, love and acceptance. That is what she wanted to see in him, what allowed her desires to come out in full force. But she didn't really believe it was there, her body was just reacting to the hope that it was, or that it could be someday.

Her mind, her soul, wanted love, and she wasn't going to settle for anything less. Even from an unbelievably attractive alpha.

With that thought firmly in place and her body under semi-control, she quickly dressed while Ian was still distracted with his phone call. She would not make the mistake of tempting his instincts like that again. She threw on clean jeans and a T-shirt and then stepped out of her room. Ian was just flipping his phone shut when she walked out into the hall cautiously, ready to retreat if he gave her any indication that he wasn't completely in control.

His eyes were cold and dark, his face back to an emotionless mask.

Alexia took an unconscious step back, not sure what to expect.

"That was my father. He thinks we need to be

down there.”

Alexia forgot her apprehension and stepped closer to him, worry for her parents shoving her own safety concerns aside. “Why, what’s going on? Are they okay? Oh God, Ian, I am so scared.”

He grabbed her to him and held her tight against his chest.

She clung to him and fought back the tears threatening to fall. His hands stroked her back and hair in an awkward attempt at comforting her. It worked though, his strong uneven pats and strokes calmed her nerves and the tears receded. She wasn’t alone at the moment. He was here to help get her parents back safely.

“I don’t know what’s going on, Alexia, my father didn’t say, but I promise you we will find out. And no matter what happens, you are not facing this alone.”

Alexia pulled back and looked up into his face, it was suspiciously blank and doubt crept through her. She pulled silently out of his comforting arms and once again closed herself in the bathroom. “I will be ready in ten minutes,” she said through the door. She waited until she heard his steps on the stairs before collapsing in a weeping ball.

Twenty minutes later they were in the car heading South on I-5. Silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words and unsated desires.

The drive took almost three hours, that, plus the near hour she had been exposed earlier, left her with only one hour of exposure left in the day and a good four hours of daylight left. Even now, she was feeling sensitive to the light. Alexia pulled her ball cap down farther to shade her face and slipped her sunglass on to cover her eyes.

"The light is bothering you?" It was the first either of them had spoken since they had left the house and the sudden sound of his voice was strange in the silence.

"I will be okay for a bit longer." Alexia hated the weakness that kept her from living a normal life, like so many of her unique qualities.

"My father is waiting for us at a hotel. We will be able to safely wait out the daylight there."

Alexia resisted the urge to thank him for his consideration. She really didn't want to extend the conversation, so she sat back and waited for blessed darkness.

The hotel was less than light free and Alexia was forced to shut herself in the bathroom with a towel at the base of the door just to survive it. She leaned against the cool porcelain tub and stared up at the ceiling.

There were forty-five tiles up there, two had cracks and thirty had brown spots, eight were half tiles and one was a slightly brighter shade of white, as if it had been replaced some time

recently. The wallpaper border had exactly seventy-three pinecones and twenty-nine and a half moose. There was one crack in the wall plaster that was the length of three of her hands and one that was the length of her arm and a half. The hideous hotel artwork of old barns reminded her of a horror movie scene. She could almost imagine the monsters that could star in it looking something like herself. The floor consisted of thirty-one tiles, two that were stained with something Alexia tried not to think about, and one that had a bluish tint. The toilet sink and shower were white and stain free and she had read every ingredient on every sample size item in there.

She discovered all of this in her effort to not think about what Ian's father had told them upon arrival. So far it wasn't working.

Her father and mother stood accused of violating the balance of nature through their interspecies union. As neighbors of sorts, the animal elves have taken it upon themselves to bring them in and put them on trial for this accused crime. The others were being held because they tried to stop the apprehension, and thereby justice, of Tarquin and Zyra.

Rage spiked up in Alexia when she thought about her parents being treated like this, just for wanting to be together, it was insane. She took a couple deep breaths to calm herself and began

counting the ceiling tiles again. She was on fifteen and feeling about as calm as she could manage, which wasn't very, when there was a light knock on the bathroom door.

"What?" she hissed, knowing it was Ian on the other side. Ian who had half-smiled when she had been forced to barricade herself in the bathroom, Ian who could walk around in the sun all he liked and never even squint. She hated him right now, almost as much as she hated the animal elves.

"I brought food. You should eat now so that we can leave as soon as the sun sets and it is safe for you."

They were going to go to the colony and demand to see the prisoners as soon as possible. Kairos had already been allowed access to his son, although it was brief. Terrance had been unable to tell them anything helpful about the charges against Zyra and Tarquin. The only reason they knew what the charges were was because Kairos had spoken with the colony leader, Lucas.

He seemed to be a fair man according to Kairos. He would be judging the trial, along with his sister, Lillian. Although he was not the one to order the arrest, he would not overturn it without a proper and fair trial. That was the way of the elves. The trial was to be held tomorrow night, seeing as Kairos had requested the time to talk with the accused and come up with some sort of

defense for them.

There wasn't a lot of hopeful feelings floating around about the situation, but Ian assured Alexia that he would do all he could.

She opened the door just enough for Ian to squeeze through with a bag of fast food. He sat on the floor and handed her a wrapped burger and a box of fries. She ate because she needed the strength, but each swallow was forced, and the food sat like a lead ball in her tense stomach.

Ian had no such problems. He finished his own two burgers and fries in record time, then polished off most of Alexia's fries when she couldn't choke down a single one more. When the food was gone, he laid back and smiled in satisfaction.

"So, we have about a half hour left till I figure it's safe."

"More like twenty minutes," Alexia mumbled.

"Ah yes, your vamp instincts let you know pretty much to the second when the sun is down and it is safe. What other vampire traits did you get from your mother?"

Alexia looked sideways at Ian, expecting to see mild interest at best, but he looked like he really cared to know about that other part of her. She almost wanted to deny him for spite, but they were stuck for the next twenty minutes anyway, she might as well fill it with meaningless chatter.

"Well, I suppose I have pretty much all the same, except I don't have to drink blood, I digest food just fine and I can stand the sun for around five hours a day. Umm...I am faster than a normal were and I can communicate telepathically with other vamps in the immediate area—not that any of them usually care to talk back, except my mother."

Ian was quiet.

She looked at him and was surprised to see him looking thoughtful at her words instead of freaked out.

"It seems like you gained the best of both worlds. All the strength of a were, the speed of a vamp. But none of the weaknesses, not the mandatory full moon turning of a were, or the dependence on blood or the inability to handle any sunlight of a vamp. You are quite an incredible hybrid, Alexia."

"Oh please, I am a freak and everyone knows it. I am not some great new hybrid species. I am not a one member species of werewolf. I shouldn't exist. Weres and vamps weren't meant to be together, definitely not reproduce. Isn't that why my parents are being held by the perfectly balanced nature police? Because they broke some unwritten law of nature when they got together and created me!" Alexia's voice cracked on the last statement, and tears stung the backs of her eyes. She hated

that she resented what she was, what her parents had made her, but she did, and most of the time, she wished they had never met. But now they were being persecuted for that very feeling in others and she may never see them again. Life was so unfair.

The bathroom was suddenly way too small, airless and suffocating, she had to get out. She couldn't breathe, not with him looking at her like she was being ridiculous, like she was a tantrum throwing child who had no real point.

Alexia threw open the door, ignoring the painful burst of sunlight, and raced out of the front door. She gasped for air, for the reality that Ian wanted to take from her.

She didn't make it far however.

The sun was still bright, although low on the horizon, and she had already reached her limit of exposure for the day. Her skin sizzled painfully under the UV assault. She screamed silently as her skin began to blister instantly. She retreated quickly back into the room, shoving past Ian where he stood watching in shocked horror from the doorway. She rushed to the safety of the lightless bathroom, shutting the door on all rays of light.

Alexia curled up in a ball on the floor as her skin healed itself in the cool darkness. There was a quiet knock on the door, which she would have

ignored except Ian opened it and slipped inside carefully without waiting for a response.

"Are you hurt?" he asked softly, crouching down beside her, careful not to touch her healing skin in the small space.

"I am fine. And you?" she asked sarcastically. She had no intention of talking about her little fit and she really was fine. She had been burned worse in her life and the great thing about her genes was she healed with the incredible speed of an immortal.

"Could be better," he answered with a smile.

It was the first real smile she had ever seen on his face. That smile was amazing, his whole face brightened and relaxed, his eyes lightened and she felt the ripple down to her toes. Her insides responded with a flip and a swirl of pleasure. She wanted to see that smile more often, although it would be great if she didn't have to torture herself to get it.

They didn't say anything more to each other. Ian relaxed against the door and Alexia concentrated on healing. When she felt the sun descend below the horizon and knew it was safe to go, she stood up. Ian followed suit and they both walked out of the hotel room to meet his father and the twins.

CHAPTER NINE

They drove together in Kairos's rented SUV. Alexia was stuck in the back between Malcolm and Mabon who both had to first swear on their mother's hide that they would not try anything with Alexia, before Ian would allow her into the vehicle. He, of course, sat in front with his father because he was higher on the totem pole, and all six of their wolves were huddled together in the very back seat and cargo area.

To say the least it was an uncomfortable ride, one that Alexia never wished to repeat. Every slight movement or polite question by one of the twins was met with a growl from either Ian or his wolf, sometimes both.

The twins, of course, found this to be a very amusing game.

With each issued growl or fierce warning, Ian's back, neck and shoulders tightened and his eyes glowed a little brighter in agitation. Alexia was

starting to get concerned when she saw Ian's hand gripping the console with white knuckles. The last thing she wanted was to experience a werewolf fight in an enclosed space while going sixty miles an hour down the highway. Even their immortal bodies might not be able to survive that.

Alexia took a calming breath and made herself as small as possible between the two large weres. They were sprawled across their own seats, not caring in the least that their thighs and shoulders pressed against hers.

"Don't worry, we have known Ian a long time, he won't actually kill us. I'm pretty sure. Especially since the two of us put together are stronger than him," Malcolm whispered, none too quietly, resulting in another warning growled under Ian's breath.

Malcolm laughed at the threat.

Finally Alexia had had enough. "I am going to sit in the back with the more civilized animals," she huffed between clenched teeth.

That statement had gotten her laughs from all the men, except Ian.

After she was seated safely in the very back among the wolves, Ian relaxed, although his wolf decided it was best to sit practically in her lap. Alexia was pretty sure Ian had told him to do it, but she was not going to argue with an already pissed off keeper.

The rest of the ride continued without incident. If you had asked Malcolm or Mabon, they would have said it wasn't nearly as fun though.

It wasn't long before the high walls of the colony rose up ahead of them and all five minds turned to the business at hand.

The animal elf colony was a very modern gated community, surrounded by woods for added privacy, but not more than a half mile from the nearest human dwelling in any direction. The space was more than enough to keep their secrets safe.

If humans knew how closely they lived with so many different creatures that were supposedly nothing more than fairy tale and myth, they would have a collective mental breakdown. As it was, most human minds were incapable of recognizing something so damaging, no matter how obvious. They made whatever they saw conform to what they knew to be reality. In this way, the species of myth and fantasy survived alongside humans unnoticed and undisturbed and the humans remained blissfully unaware.

It was a relationship that had worked for millennia.

This particular mythical creature, the elf, was capable of looking like a normal human through glamour, and so went unnoticed as anything else. They managed to keep their dealings secret by

living in a private area like this where no humans could possibly see them doing anything out of the ordinary.

The security for this gated community was intense, armed guards stood outside and checked each vehicle and being trying to enter or leave. The walls were high and cameras constantly watched the surrounding wooded land. The place was thought of as nothing more than a very exclusive place to live by the humans surrounding it, and it was. Not even another elf breed was allowed to dwell within those walls. It was a pure animal elf colony and that was the way they seemed to prefer it, separatists to the core.

They stopped in front of the gate and two guards stepped out of a small office. It was dark and being blocked in the back seat as she was, Alexia couldn't get a clear view of the men. Kairos handed a piece of paper out of the window and the guard gave him a doubtful look. They were all asked to alight from the vehicle as the guards called their boss about their supposed pass to get inside and see the prisoners.

Alexia was the last to get out and she couldn't help but gasp at the first clear sight of the elves. The glamour a human would see was of a couple beefed up, steroid-loving meatheads with really big dangerous looking guns. But what she saw was intoxicating. They were two of the most

beautiful men she had ever seen in her life.

They were tall and thin, yet still muscular under their flowing pants and tunics. They each had braided white hair that reached their waists. Their brown eyes were bright and cold, assessing and disdainful, the look someone had when peering down at something that was so far below them it barely registered as existing. They had delicate features and pale skin with a slight shine to it, almost a sparkling quality, but so unlike anything she had ever seen before. Their ears came to delicious points that made Alexia think of licking and nibbling them. They looked so similar and yet totally different and Alexia couldn't even identify what set them apart from each other. She found herself panting and leaning toward them as they all stood waiting for the call back from their boss.

"Alexia, what the hell is wrong with you?" Ian accused, looking from her love struck face to the two guards.

She couldn't respond. All she could think about was the fact that she wanted those men. No, she needed them, needed them like she needed to breathe, like she needed to eat. She would walk ten hours in the sun to get to them and be happy doing it. Nothing would stand between her and them. She would tear apart anything that tried.

"Alexia!" Ian shouted and grabbed her around

the waist as she tried to lunge for the men who stood before them all, expressionless over her actions.

"Let me go, I want them! They are mine. You have to let me go!" she shouted and clawed at Ian, drawing blood along his forearms.

"What the hell are you doing to her?" Ian growled as he struggled to keep his hold on her.

Mabon stepped up to try and help hold her, but was rewarded with a clawing to the face when he got close. He stumbled back and Malcolm came at her from the side, narrowly avoiding another swipe of her clawed hand. He managed to grasp her wrists, but was forced to apply nearly breaking pressure to keep them under control.

"Damn, Ian, she is too strong. If I hold any tighter, her bones are going to snap, but she doesn't even care."

Alexia was blind to anything going on to her or around her except the two men who stood stoically in front of her. She didn't feel the pain of her wrist as it snapped or her ribs bruise as she strained harder against Ian's hold. None of that mattered, none of that was as painful as not being able to touch those beautiful men, her men.

"What the hell is going on here?" Kairos asked with an air of authority that most would bow down to, but not the guards. They simply looked at him with blank faces, refusing to answer.

"Please, let me go to them," Alexia whined breathless and frantic. "I need them."

"That is enough boys." A female elf appeared out of nowhere.

Instantly Alexia went limp in Ian's arms, dazed as the spell lifted.

"I am sorry. It is a defensive habit to produce pheromones that will attract the opposite sex, especially when there is a potential enemy involved," the beautiful woman explained. Her features were similar to the two men, but somehow even more delicate, and her white hair hung loose to her knees, her ears peaking daintily out of the cascading locks.

Ian grunted and continued to hold Alexia close. He didn't trust the elves.

"Ian," Alexia whispered. "I think I can control myself now." She was burning up with embarrassment, her right wrist was broken and her ribs hurt. She just wanted to crawl back in the car and die of humiliation. Then anger took over as the two guards smirked knowingly at her. She bared her teeth at them and hissed.

Ian didn't want to let her go but he did, slowly.

Alexia cradled her broken wrist and glared at the two elves who didn't look the least bit repentant for the ordeal they had created. Beside Alexia, her wolf growled in the elves' direction.

"I am so sorry, Alexia," Malcolm said, looking

pointedly at her wrist. "You're a lot stronger than you look."

"It's alright, you would have had more to be sorry about if you hadn't held me back, I suppose," she said, trying to make light of her embarrassment and pain. It wasn't worth delaying them after all. They were here to see her parents, to help them. The elves' tricks were nothing more than inconvenience, this time.

Did you feel that? she thought to her wolf who was seated protectively at her side.

No, their Pheromones must not be appealing to your were instincts.

But my fangs didn't extend, it couldn't have been my vamp instincts.

Maybe it was neither.

You think it was nothing more than a magic trick? Messing with my mind, not my body? The woman said pheromones, but perhaps that was just to mislead us.

Could be, just be careful. I don't trust these elves.

Alexia didn't either. She doubted there was any kind of innocent mistake in what they had just done.

"I am sure that is a very effective method of gaining control over a situation," Kairos offered good naturedly. "No permanent harm done. My son here, of course, is a little sensitive about his mate lusting after others." Kairos indicated Ian who glared with glowing yellow eyes at the two

guards.

"My apologies. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lillian, co-leader of this colony. On behalf of myself and my brother, Lucas, I welcome you. You will be allowed to access the prisoners for as long as you need tonight, and may come back at nightfall tomorrow for their trial. We have made the allowance of a nighttime trial to accommodate our vampire prisoner." Lillian spoke as if she expected praise for making this allowance.

"We appreciate that, and we will definitely be here for their trial tomorrow night," Kairos assured her, acting quite the diplomat.

Alexia supposed she should be grateful that one of them was capable of making nice.

"These two were not here earlier today," Lillian said, indicating Ian and Alexia. She walked toward them with a curious eye. She assessed Ian quickly, then dismissed him and eyed Alexia. She stopped a few feet in front of Alexia and her eyes widened. "What is she?" Lillian asked with clear disgust in her voice.

Alexia was sore, embarrassed, frightened and angry. She was not thinking clearly enough to give this woman the respect that would have gained favor for herself and her parents. She bristled at the attack on her being and refused to take the insult from this stranger with a haughty attitude. "I am a werewolf, what the hell does it matter to

you?" she snapped, letting her anger show through her glowing mismatched eyes.

Lillian gasped and took a step back. "An abomination. Exactly what we feared would happen with the joining of two species."

Ian reacted faster than Alexia and threw himself at Lillian. If it hadn't been for her ability to teleport, Ian would have ripped her apart with his bare hands. As it was, she disappeared and Ian fell to the ground where she had been standing a second before. He scrambled to his feet and looked around, but she was nowhere to be found.

Alexia watched Ian with fascination. No one had ever gotten so defensive of her feelings before. It warmed her heart.

"If you will follow me, I will take you to see the prisoners," one of the guards offered, giving no reaction to the intended attack on their leader.

It seemed to Alexia that the elves were about as different from her as they could possibly be. Their almost complete lack of emotion was in such vivid contrast to the vamp and were's fiery tempers. It was disconcerting to not really know what was going on in their minds.

They were led through the gate and emerged in another world. On the other side of the wall was a pristine suburban neighborhood, complete with matching pastel colored homes and perfectly trimmed lawns. There didn't seem to be anyone

about. This wouldn't seem odd considering the time of night, except that elves, like most immortal beings, didn't tend to conform to those human rules of night and day. They slept, but like most other members of the fantastical beings groups, they didn't require much and preferred to spend most of their nights doing the things that were more difficult in the light of day with so many humans about to see.

The oddest things were the animals. They were everywhere and they were all different kinds. She spotted a jaguar high in a tree, watching them with black eyes, and a group of iguanas lounging on a porch nearby. Dogs, cats and horses, even a cow were milling about. She couldn't believe they were all so content, none seemed to want to attack even their natural enemies. She almost tripped when she saw a bear cub under the loving gaze of its mother, playing gently with a couple rabbits.

There was no way a human wouldn't think they were on a bad trip if they walked in here. It was like the beginning of a Disney movie, and it gave her the serious creeps.

She looked closer and noticed that the animals all wore tags, as if they were pets, and perhaps they were as this was an animal elf colony after all. They stopped to let a gaggle of geese cross, followed by a frisky colt, then continued on their way. Everyone in their group stared here and

there with amazement. The guard, of course, didn't even notice the menagerie they walked through.

The guard led them to the center of the colony where a large house stood imperiously on a small hill. The house was white and blue with columns and a southern style wraparound porch. It gave the impression of importance and innocence all at once. No doubt it held the horrible beasts who had ordered her parents locked up.

Alexia grimaced at the irony. Wasn't her own home, Paxton's as well, such a vivid contrast to what was housed within. They all played to the innocence of humans who could destroy them all if only they knew their nightmares and fairy tales actually existed behind those beautiful facades.

As their small group crossed in front of the house, Lillian appeared on the front porch, soon followed by a male who looked so similar to her it could only be her twin, Lucas. A small brown monkey, no taller than his head, sat on Lucas's shoulder and lovingly stroked his hair. They watched and, it seemed to Alexia, argued. But they were too far away to tell for sure. Even with her excellent hearing, they were speaking so low to each other she could only hear the angry tone. It looked as though Lucas was unhappy with something his sister had done, probably letting them in to see the prisoners and delaying their

trial.

Alexia looked away from the stunning pair. How could such beauty hide such cruelty?

A very utilitarian looking building was situated past the large house at the bottom of the hill. There were no windows and two guards were posted at the door. These guards, unlike the ones out front, didn't bother trying to hide their true form. Similar to the true form of the guards out front, these two were, what seemed to be, typical animal elves—stunning delicate features and long white hair, sparkly skin and pointy ears, tall and emotionless in expression.

As they approached, the two guards stepped aside and Alexia had a sudden attack of nerves. She was about to see her parents locked up like criminals. She didn't know how to comfort them while she still had no idea how to help them. Visions of last night's dream surfaced and she felt like she was drowning again, surrounded by the bodies of the ones she loved. Would that be her only escape if she lost them, would death call to her? And would she welcome it, or would she then turn to the only other person who had ever offered her even a hint of comfort and companionship?

"Are you sure you want to go in there? I can question them myself if you'd rather wait out here," Ian offered quietly, placing a soothing arm

around her back.

She wanted to pull away from his comfort. It didn't seem right when her parents were no doubt suffering so near and alone. But she couldn't make herself. She wanted his warmth, his comfort. "No, I need to see them for myself, let them know that we are going to get them out of there. I will do anything necessary, Ian." Alexia looked up into his eyes, pleading in her own. "Remember that, anything necessary, to get them all out of here safely. Without them, I don't think I have any reason to go home." Alexia hurried ahead before Ian could say anything, breaking the momentary solace his contact had given her.

Don't think about doing anything stupid, Alexia, her wolf thought to her, brushing against her side to emphasize her words.

It's not stupid if it's the only option.

And what about me, I don't get a vote on our life?

Just help me get through this meeting, okay? I might need your strength for this.

You know I am here for you, Alexia, you just never choose to take advantage of what I might have to offer.

Their group was led into the building and instantly the smell of fear and anger assaulted Alexia. She realized that the elves she had encountered weren't just stoic in expression. She hadn't been able to smell them. Not a whiff of body or emotion or blood, it was as if they weren't

even there to her senses. Perhaps that was why neither her vamp nor were instincts had kicked in when she was lusting. The elves didn't register to her basic instincts.

Magic. Paxton had said they use magic to hide their scent. Apparently it's not something they save for special occasions. It would definitely put any enemy at a disadvantage, this not being able to sense them.

The guard led them down a staircase deep underground. A dark corridor curved in front of them when the steps ended. Cells lined the walls on either side, but they were all empty at first. Alexia shivered, thinking about how much room they had for more prisoners like herself, the abomination. Her wolf stepped closer, offering support and behind her, Ian laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you sure you can handle this?"

Alexia shook off his hand. "I am fine, Ian, tougher than I look." She just hoped it was tough enough.

Ian didn't argue.

She could feel him studying her from behind. His gaze bored into her back, watching to make sure she wasn't going to freak out. Unfounded as his concern was, she still couldn't help but appreciate it.

The first occupied cell they came to housed

Henry, Jack and Staci's nineteen-year-old son. He was merged and he threw himself at the bars in a blind rage as they passed.

Alexia stopped and stared into his glowing eyes. He was so scared. She wanted so badly to comfort him. He hadn't been outwardly cruel to her ever. Alexia stepped up to the bar and tried to soothe him, but barely snatched her hands back before he bit them off.

He is beyond reasoning, her wolf thought to her. I can't even communicate with him. He is going on pure instincts now. He will be lucky to ever come back.

And if he didn't, he would be killed. Alexia knew that. A werewolf that was living on instinct alone was a very dangerous thing, for everyone.

Alexia quickly moved on. Staci was in the next occupied cell. She wasn't merged, but she wasn't in good shape. She was curled up on her side in a corner. She wasn't conscious, but Malcolm volunteered to stay by her cell and try to communicate with her if she awoke. If nothing else, his wolf would be able to talk to hers.

Jack was in better shape, conscious and angry, but not merged. When he saw Alexia, he cursed under his breath. "You shouldn't be here."

"Do you really expect me to hide while my parents are in trouble?"

"It isn't safe, they're crazy." He eyed their guard with uneasy eyes, but the guard didn't

seem to even register the insult.

"We noticed," Ian said dryly.

"I thought she was your mate. How could you allow her to come into such danger?"

Ian snorted.

"I am not his mate, and even if I was, he couldn't hope to stand between me and what I wanted to do."

Jack managed a smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Good luck with that one, my man."

Alexia continued on, disgusted by their male bonding at her expense. Mabon stayed with Jack to talk about tomorrow as the rest of them continued on.

Terrance was in the next occupied cell. He looked calm and composed, completely undeterred by the fact that he was being held in a cell beneath the ground at an elf Colony.

"It is nice to see you again, Alexia," he said politely, inclining his head respectfully.

She would have appreciated it if he hadn't been acting like that just because he saw her as his equal, being mated to his brother.

Unbelievably annoying.

"Yeah, it's been really great every time. First that awkward dinner, then Sam trying to rape me in the garage, and now this." Alexia waved her hand around in a grand gesture. "Wait, can't you..." Alexia stopped herself before

inadvertently letting their guard know that Terrance had the ability to move through objects. She was sure that's what he had done in the garage. So he should be able to walk right through the bars to safety, why hadn't he?

Terrance smirked conspiratorially at her. "You can ask Ian about that later." He gave her a wink.

She smiled at Terrance, then looked down the hall. The next occupied cell would hold one of her parents. How would they be taking their incarceration? Ian squeezed her shoulder and her wolf rubbed against her side, both offering comfort and encouragement.

"My father can stay here with Terrance. Let's keep going, Alexia."

She was touched by his offer. He no doubt wanted to talk with his brother, but he was willing to give that up so she wouldn't be alone to face her parents and whatever condition they may be in. It was more heartwarming than she wanted to admit. Damn him for making her almost like him. Why did he have to all of a sudden act like he truly cared for her instead of just wanting her to mate? She needed to keep the distance between them. Otherwise she would be in serious danger of accepting him.

"You stay here, Ian. I don't need you to hold my hand." He dropped his hand from her shoulder and narrowed his eyes at her, but she

didn't relent. Space, they needed space, no matter how much her belly twisted with the desire to grab hold of his hand and not let go until this whole horrible ordeal was over.

"Fine, but I will be along to talk with your father shortly."

"Fine." She turned before he could see the hurt in her eyes. Alexia was led further down the hall. The guard unlocked a door and led her through an adjoining hall. There were more cells here and Alexia couldn't help but wonder what kind of race this was that needed to hold so many people prisoner at once. It seemed as if they were prepared to hold an opposing army's worth of prisoners. Not the kind of people you wanted to piss off.

Too late for that, she thought cynically.

Her father was in the first cell.

The moment he saw her, tears sprang to his eyes and ran down his face. They hugged through the bars, both silently weeping for a few minutes before a single word could be spoken.

"You shouldn't be here, Alexia, why didn't you listen to me? I thought Ian was keeping you safe."

"Oh, Dad, did you really think I could sit back while you and Mom were in such trouble? What kind of daughter would I be if I didn't do everything I could to help?"

"You never choose the safe route do you,

Alexia? You remind me so much of your mother."

His statement took her by surprise. She had never thought of herself as being much like either parent. Seeing as she wasn't either of their particular species. But more than that, her mother was so beautiful and so graceful and so confident. None of the things she had ever applied to herself.

"Your mother was always so determined to do what she wanted, I am grateful for that now. It is why we have had so many years to love each other."

"And why you'll have so many more," Alexia insisted.

"I certainly hope so. It would be nice to know that you are being taken care of in the event that this doesn't go well though."

"I don't want to talk about that. You and Mom will come out of this fine. It's not as if they have any good reason for holding you here anyway."

"I hope so. Ian is taking you to mate, isn't he?"

Alexia ground her teeth and clenched her fists. She couldn't believe that her own father was talking about her in such a way. As if this was nineteen hundred and she needed to be married off to a good man who could take over her care from her parents. Like there was something detrimentally wrong with her if she didn't get married and let a man take care of her.

"Now, Alexia, don't get angry. It's just the way

things are.”

“Where? Where are things like that? Certainly not in the real world, just this backward world all stupid immortals seem to be stuck in.”

“Remember, Alexia, I grew up a long time ago. I guess that gives me permission to act a little old fashioned. Besides, I am not telling you that you have to accept him, but I am going to encourage that you do. It will give me and your mother peace of mind. You are such a special being, Alexia. You need to be with someone who can appreciate that.”

“I don’t want a mate, and I certainly don’t want Ian as my mate.” She huffed in a tone even she could recognize as childish.

Tarquin cocked his head at his daughter, smelling her lie. “You don’t really believe that, so how can you expect me to?” he asked in a tone she had come to hate as a child.

“What makes you so sure he is right for me, certainly not just because his wolf says so?”

“I spoke with him that night, Alexia. I know he is willing to take care of you, in every way provide for you. If not, then he wouldn’t have gone looking for you instead of running off while he had the chance. You know he couldn’t have lied to me. It’s true he was having a hard time with acceptance, which is why I sent him away, to think things over before approaching you again with the

subject of mating. Instead of leaving, he went to you. That has to count for something."

Alexia hated when he was right. She refused to talk about it further though and when Ian showed up, she was grateful to move on and talk with her mother.

"You shouldn't be here," Zyra chastised her daughter as they embraced through the bars. "But I knew you would come. Unlike your father, I never believed you would stay away. Honestly, I think he was just kidding himself anyway. He knows you better than that, too. You have too much of me in you to not stand up and fight for the ones you love, no matter how stupid the act may be."

"Yeah, well I couldn't."

"I know, baby, and you know your father is right about Ian."

Alexia pulled out of her mother's grasp and gawked at her, open mouthed in shock. "How can you say that?"

"Because it's the truth."

Alexia felt ganged up on and completely beaten down by it. Her mother wasn't so old fashioned that she should believe all the mating things her father did. Apparently she did though, and she was not afraid to say it either. She felt powerless to deny what everyone kept telling her. Ian was a good prospect for her and she should just accept

him because their wolf instincts were right, more often than not.

CHAPTER TEN

In the end there hadn't been much accomplished during their visit. Her parents were well enough, just worried and uncomfortable. They were both more concerned over Alexia being near the fanatical elves than anything else.

When she had returned from seeing her mother, her father and Ian were deep in conversation and Ian had a look on his face that spoke of deep-seated revelations and confounding decisions.

It seemed to be directed at her, and she was scared.

Ian didn't touch nor talk to her the whole walk back out of the Colony or the ride to the Hotel. He, like the others, seemed distracted in thought, and they weren't pleasant thoughts judging by the thick smell of angst that filled the car. Probably they were all thinking about how hopeless the situation was.

Alexia's parents had both begged her to stay away tomorrow night, not thinking there was much good she could do. They seemed resigned to their own deaths. It didn't make sense to her. How could anyone be so submissive to the insane beliefs of some other species?

Alexia had, of course, completely refused to even discuss not being there, fighting for their freedom. Her mother had opened up their mental connection, since Alexia wasn't hiding anyway, and there was some comfort in that. Even though she doubted she would use it, she rarely had before, it was nice to know it was there. It made her feel less alone.

Alexia's gaze traveled to Ian in the front seat. He had been like a thorn in her side ever since they had discovered her parents missing. It seemed that for the first time in her life she wasn't alone, someone was there just for her. Even if his reasons were less than chivalrous, he was still there offering her company through this ordeal, and beyond if she accepted it.

Well, maybe he wasn't there *just* for her, his brother was being held as well. But still, all along the way he had offered her his protection and assistance. Never once telling her she should stay behind, out of the way. To him, she wasn't an inconvenience that he was forced to deal with, and for that she was grateful.

Alexia bit her lip. Why did her thoughts keep drifting to him in such a positive light? She needed to hate him so she could deal with him safely, comfortably, but it was getting harder and harder all the time.

The sun was coming up when they reached town. They went to an all night restaurant and ate silently before heading to the hotel where they would rest and wait out the day.

Alexia looked forlornly at the two beds in the room she and Ian shared. She would be forced to sleep on the floor of the bathroom. She couldn't risk falling asleep where she was exposed to sunlight, and if she saved most of her resistance time for that afternoon, they would be able to head to the Colony a few hours before dark. She wanted that, she wanted to see her parents again before their trial was held.

It looked like the cramped bathroom was her only option. Yippee.

"Will it be safe enough if we put a blanket over the windows?" Ian asked as he closed and locked the door behind them.

"Maybe, but I would rather not risk it. Crispy just isn't a good look for me. I will be fine in the bathroom." And not so near to you, she added to herself. Shut in the room with him, his presence dominated and when the male smell of him reached her, she could feel a warm needy desire

start to coil in her belly. He was toxic to her system.

Ian closed the distance between them and brought her forcefully into his arms. "Let me take care of you, Alexia. I promise I won't let anything happen to you. Why can you not trust me to do that?"

Alexia almost giggled she was so unnerved by his closeness and the intensity of his gaze. "Really, Ian, I will be fine in the bathroom where it is nice and dark."

"And alone?" he growled accusingly.

"Yes, and alone." Her words were barely a whisper. Alone is what she was, always had been and he threatened to knock her out of that thinking. Threatened to become something for her to lean on and trust in. She wanted that so badly, she didn't want to be alone. She didn't want to be the freak werewolf with loving, yet completely different species, parents.

Ian leaned down and pressed his lips gently to hers, then moved them to her ear. "Let me take care of you. You don't have to be alone anymore, not ever. You can belong, with me."

Alexia's knees went weak and her mind swirled with the desire to say yes, to give in and accept him and all that he offered to her. She wanted so badly to belong, to be accepted and loved, taken care of and protected. Ian offered her every secret

fantasy.

“Alexia.” He breathed her name against her cheek before placing tender kisses along her neck and collarbone. He stopped when her fingers curled into the fabric at his shoulders.

She felt each tender touch like a jolt of electricity. Each press of his lips to her skin made her heart speed up and the blood pound through her veins, heading straight to the heart of her desire. Moisture seeped between her thighs and the smell of her own desire was like the most intoxicating of drugs.

Ian’s dark eyes met hers with longing and vulnerability. He wanted her and he knew that she wanted him. But he would deny them both if that was her wish, he would not force the issue. And that knowledge was what made her cave, he was not just after her body or her womb, he was after her entire being, just as it was.

Alexia pressed her lips tentatively to his, nipping and tasting him. He growled and pulled her tighter against him as she played gently at his mouth. Soon her fangs extended and the smell of his blood was all she could think about. She pulled away from his mouth and her gaze locked onto the pulsing vein in his neck, the sweet earthy scent calling to her.

“I want your blood, Ian. If we make love, I will take it. I don’t think I will be able to help myself.”

Alexia's voice was strained and excited. She barely held onto her control, but she wanted him to know what to expect, what it would mean to him if they made love.

"I know, Alexia. I know what it is like for a vampire to mate."

Her gaze flew to his. There was no disgust, not even resignation in his tone or expression, only desire and excitement. He wanted her to do it. He was actually looking forward to her drinking from his vein. "I have never done it before, Ian. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." Ian took her head in his hands and kissed her deeply. He teased her mouth open with his tongue and gently caressed her fangs.

Alexia shivered with need as his hot flesh touched her aching fangs. He pulled back before she could react and bite down, she whimpered in protest.

"Not yet, it is supposed to happen during orgasm. That is supposed to be the best time anyway to heighten the pleasure." Ian smiled wickedly at her, then pulled her shirt over her head. He drank in the sight of her flesh, just barely covered by red lace. His fingers traced the edge of her bra and he sucked in his breath when her nipples hardened beneath the thin fabric, straining and begging to be touched, to be tasted.

Alexia was surprised that she didn't feel the

need to cover herself, she was proud to display her body for him. His eyes met hers with hot appreciation and there was no denying that he found her small form more than acceptable. His head dipped down and his mouth latched onto one of her nipples, caressing it through the lace and creating a delicious sensation with the friction. Alexia buried her hands in his pale hair and held him close, moaning unabashedly as he lavished attention on first one, then the other, of her nipples.

He moved down to her belly button and across her flat stomach to the waistband of her jeans, kneeling before her. He looked up and met her passion dazed gaze as he slowly unfastened her jeans.

She stiffened a bit as he pushed them down her legs and he looked at her matching red panties—lace and see through, they were meant to entice.

He growled and gripped her bottom fiercely, burying his face between her thighs and taking deep breaths as his whole body shook uncontrollably.

Alexia was unsure of what was going on, had she done something wrong? Was he disappointed in her in some way? She tentatively touched his head. “Ian?”

“I just need a minute, I need to gain control or I will be doing this all wrong. I can smell your

innocence from here, Alexia. I thought, I hoped, but I didn't know, and now my instincts are howling to take it, take you fast before anyone else can. I just need a minute."

"A-all right," Alexia stammered, suddenly nervous about what they were about to do. What if he lost control and hurt her, would she be able to fight him off if she needed to?

"Please, Alexia. Please don't be frightened. I swear I won't hurt you, I would rather harm myself than you." Ian lifted his head.

Alexia saw that his eyes were blazing yellow, his wolf was trying to take control, but he was fighting it. Alexia forced herself to relax, she believed his words, he didn't want to hurt her. "I trust you, Ian."

Ian stood slowly, seeming to gain control with her words. His eyes were slightly dulled, but the yellow didn't completely recede. But she wasn't afraid, not of him.

Ian lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed farthest from the window. He laid her down and slowly removed her remaining coverings, kissing and nipping at the revealed treasures. When his lips pressed against her sex, she nearly flew off the bed with pleasure. Crying out his name and fisting her hands in his hair as he slid his tongue along her opening, tasting her desire.

He made a strangled sound as he pulled away from her body and in a blink, he was naked, towering over her in all his male glory. His body was perfectly muscled and Alexia gloried in the feel of him under her palms.

She ran her hands over his chest and arms, learning him. He purred at her touch and she became bolder. He was hard and proud against his stomach. She trailed her hands down and embraced him. He jerked a bit at the contact, but didn't pull her away. She stroked him experimentally, learning what movement would pull what kind of sound from his constricted throat.

"That's enough, Alexia. Much more of that and I will spill my seed all over your pretty little hands."

Alexia pouted up at him. She had been enjoying the touching, but as his lips captured hers, she forgot all about it. Her body instantly ignited to a new level of need as his hot bare flesh pressed against hers and all she wanted was him inside of her. She needed him to soothe the ache that he was creating.

He nudged her legs apart and settled himself between them, pressing against her ready sex. He had felt huge in her hands, but pressed against her like this, he felt impossibly big. There just didn't seem to be any way he could fit. She wanted to tell

him, but he wouldn't stop kissing her to give her a chance, and soon he was pushing against her, demanding entrance.

"Relax, Alexia," he whispered against her lips. "I am trying not to act like the animal you make me feel like, but I need in you, now. Relax and let me in. End my torture Alexia."

She hadn't realized she had stiffened up until he said that. She relaxed, took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. She wanted this and she wanted him.

Ian pushed himself into her slowly until he hit her barrier. His whole body was tight, straining to keep under control, to not pound his way through and claim her once and for all. He kissed her deeply, distracting her away from the intrusion. Then he pushed the rest of the way in with a single forceful thrust.

Alexia cried out against his mouth, the pain was sharp.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her lips, pressing feather light kisses to her mouth.

Alexia took stock for a moment. The pain was gone already and she felt a warm fullness with him inside of her. She moved slightly and a rush of pleasure ran through her. She moved again and Ian groaned.

Ian took control then, sliding out and back in, stroking her gently, but in just the right way. She

was soon spiraling with such intense pleasure she thought she would explode from it. Her fangs ached with such need she couldn't stop herself from pulling Ian's neck to her mouth and, driven on instinct alone, piercing his vein.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she noted his howl of pleasure and increased tempo as his blood rushed into her mouth. It tasted even better than it smelled and Alexia was sure she had never experienced such mouthwatering pleasure in her life. She gulped his earthy sweetness and her whole body tingled with a sensation unlike anything she had ever experienced. The burning pleasure in her sex suddenly exploded and she broke from his neck to howl her release.

She was shattering, burning and riding such a wave of pleasure she didn't think it would ever stop. She didn't want it to ever stop. This was better than she had ever imagined in her dark room, ever experienced on her own. The double pleasure, her mouth and her sex taking him in, certainly there was no better way to make love. She didn't think she would ever resent her vampire half again.

Ian collapsed on top of her and rolled them to the side, holding her tightly against him as they both shivered in the aftermath of exquisite pleasure.

His neck was dribbling blood and Alexia leaned

forward, intending to lick the wounds closed. As soon as she tasted his sweetness again, her fangs exploded from her mouth and she was once again latching onto his vein, helpless to stop herself, and helpless to care enough to try.

Ian groaned at the intense sensation of her feeding from him. He hardened inside of her, ready for round two. He held himself back until she pulled away, sealing the holes with her tongue.

As she sighed her contentment, he rolled onto his back and guided her further down onto him. Her eyes widened in shock, then quickly she was finding the joy of controlling the pace of their lovemaking. She rocked back and forth, slow, then fast, then slow again, making his eyes roll back as he ached to slam into her. His hands grasped and kneaded her breasts and nipples, sending little shockwaves to her core.

Alexia leaned forward and took his mouth as she continued her torturously slow pace. Their mouths mated, mimicking the mating of their bodies.

Ian trailed one of his hands between their bodies and fingered her. She shook and writhed as he expertly pleased her. She was so close to exploding again, but she wasn't ready to stop this closeness, this sweet torture.

Ian grabbed her hips and thrust into her until

she was arching above him, nails clawing his chest as she hissed his name with release. He thrust once more, deep and final, howling his own release and spurting hot seed into her clenching body.

Alexia collapsed against him and instantly fell into a deep sated sleep. Sweet dreamless darkness surrounded her. She floated on a cloud of comfort and love, pleasure and acceptance.

Alexia couldn't breathe when she woke up, there was a solid weight on her chest and the unfamiliar room was completely dark. She gasped for air and tried to get away. The band tightened around her and locked her against an equally hard body. The scent of sex and blood surrounded her and she didn't know why. What had happened to her?

Visions of attacks upon her helpless sleeping form surrounded her. She kicked out and squirmed, trying to get away from whoever was beside her, holding her down. Her heart pounded in her chest and the scent of her own panic became prevalent.

"Why are you panicking?"

The deep sleepy voice broke through her clouded mind even as the arm tightened around her. Memories assaulted her, pleasant memories of her and Ian, memories of unbelievable passion and pleasure.

Then she remembered what was going to happen tonight, and her panic returned, along with guilt over feeling such happiness at a time like this.

"What's wrong, Alexia? Is there too much light in here?" Ian sat up and whipped his head around, looking for the offending entity.

She couldn't help smiling at his worry, his protectiveness, but it didn't displace her worry or guilt. Who was she to find such happiness when innocent people were suffering? "I was just thinking about tonight, that's all, and thanks for blocking the window. How did you manage to cut out all the light?"

"Two blankets and some duct tape I found in a drawer. I am surprised I didn't wake you when I did it. I was trying to be quiet, but still." Ian leaned over her and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. "Good morning, sort of."

Alexia slid away, unsure of how to react with him. Unsure of what her sleeping with him had done. Were they mated now? And if they were, how did she feel about that?

Ian blinked at her from the bed, his eyes narrowed and his jaw set with anger as she backed further away from him.

"I uh...I am going to take a shower." She ran to the safety of the bathroom, locking the door behind her, like that would deter an angry keeper

even a little bit.

She turned on the shower before collapsing onto the toilet. Her wolf stepped through the bathroom door and sat staring at her.

What the hell is wrong with you. Alexia? her wolf thought angrily at her.

Nothing, I just need a shower, okay? Alexia stepped into the shower so she wouldn't have to face the accusing stare of her wolf. She knew she had just made a mistake. Ian was no doubt out there fuming and hating her. She was acting all wrong, but she was just still so confused.

He will forgive you if you go back out there. Tell him that you accept him, or you risk losing him forever.

Alexia angrily soaped her hair. *Why should I? Why do his feelings mean any more than mine do. I just need time. I am under a lot of stress right now and I wasn't in a solid frame of mind earlier.*

"So you are still going to reject me?"

Ian's voice floated through the bathroom, freezing her in mid-rinsing motion. Alexia ground her teeth and dared a peak out of the shower. Ian was standing in the open bathroom doorway, leaning against the frame, arms crossed over his chest. He was naked and damn, he looked good. Images of their earlier escapades flashed through her mind and her fangs extended with eagerness. Her eyes locked onto his neck, but there was no sign of her bite.

Ian growled, sensing her desire and stepped into the bathroom. "I said are you still going to reject me Alexia?"

"I..." Alexia looked into his face, still all she saw there was an emotionless mask, but she had seen past it when they had made love and in his actions this entire time. She knew that he cared for her. She knew that he would take care of her. "No," she finally said, with a hint of resignation in her voice.

Ian stilled, didn't even breath as her one word washed over him. "No?"

"No. I will accept you as my mate, Ian." The moment the words were out of her mouth, she was flooded with a sense of rightness. He was right for her and she would be safe with him.

Ian's eyes flashed bright yellow and he quickly closed the distance between them. Their wolves howled behind him, celebrating the union. His lips crushed hers as he joined her under the hot spray of water. His hands roamed her body, igniting the passion that had been so close to the surface since their first touch.

Alexia broke the kiss and met his heated gaze. His guard was dropped and she saw clear desire burning in his brown eyes. Earlier they had been yellow when they had made love. His wolf had been there when he was filled with passion for her.

"Why are your eyes brown now? They were yellow before when we..." Alexia didn't finish the sentence, still feeling a bit shy about their physical relationship.

Ian grinned at her sudden shyness. "You have accepted me as your mate. My wolf has relaxed a bit. But don't worry. I will be just as passionate without his presence." He grinned wickedly, then knelt before her and began to lick and nip at her thighs.

Alexia threw her head back and arched her back, begging silently for him to kiss higher, deeper. He obeyed, his tongue tasted her flesh and she shivered with delight. She clutched his hair and rolled her hips for more contact. He groaned against her body, the vibrations adding a new level to her pleasure. She screamed as waves of pleasure washed over her and Ian lapped up her release.

He stood up and before he could move to take her, she threw him back against the wall and latched her mouth to the vein in his neck. His body trembled as she drew blood from him. His hands lifted her legs and she wrapped them around his waist, positioning herself perfectly for his entrance. He slid her down and she broke from his neck, moving to cover his mouth while they ground against each other with desperate need. Moans and cries of pleasure were muted by their

kisses.

Alexia's body clenched around him and she threw her head back, embracing her release. He joined her a second later, their howls ripping through the air together.

Sated and giddy beyond belief, they clasped each other and allowed the spray of water to wash away their lovemaking.

Urgent knocks cut through their delirium. They ignored it until a deep unfamiliar voice joined the banging.

"Open up in there, we don't allow pets."

"Is he talking about you or me?" Ian asked, smiling down into her face.

Alexia giggled and licked the wounds in his neck closed. "You of course, anyone can see I am the beast tamer here."

Ian growled low in his throat, giving her a light slap on the bare backside as he moved out of the shower. The man at the door was continuing to knock and yell, obviously he wasn't going to give it up.

Ian walked out of the bathroom without bothering to cover himself.

Alexia heard the door swing open and stifled a laugh as she imagined the look on the man's face that went along with the strangled sound of horror he made. Alexia rushed to the door and peaked around. Yep he hadn't dressed himself,

even though he could have easily done it while walking to the door. She couldn't see the man, but he was profusely apologizing for interrupting their *honeymoon*.

Ian slammed the door in his face and turned to face Alexia. She let out the laugh she had been holding in as she saw that he had in fact decided to cover himself. There was a swatch of fabric covering his still slightly aroused flesh—a little tuxedo shirt, complete with a red bowtie.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As they shared a dinner of fast food chicken Ian had obtained while Alexia sat safely in the hotel room, Alexia remembered what she had meant to ask Ian. "Your brother can walk through things," she stated enthusiastically around a bite of biscuit.

"Yes, how do you know that?"

"In the garage, he walked through when Sam and I were fighting."

The reminder of her near attack made Ian's eyes flash yellow and he fisted his hands.

"Focus, Ian." Alexia snapped her fingers at him, feeling emboldened by their new connection. "Why is he not waltzing out of the prison then?"

"He won't leave the others there like that. Not while there is still hope that they will all get out okay. I assure you he won't let himself be held to the death, but if he lets them know what his ability is, they might find him an even bigger threat.

There are ways of killing him without holding him in a prison cell first. Your father once spared his life. Terrance will repay that if he can."

Alexia nodded and finished her dinner thoughtfully. She hadn't missed the word *spared* rather than *saved*. But she figured it would be better to ask her father about that directly.

The scary thing was that even with Terrance's amazing ability, he was still just as susceptible to death as any of them.

Kairos came to collect them about an hour before sundown. He sniffed the air delicately, then congratulated them on their mating, which caused Alexia to rush to the bathroom, red with mortification. Life around beings that could smell every emotion and action you had, left no room for privacy. Some accepted it and became uninhibited, others lived in constant embarrassment. Alexia had always leaned toward the latter.

When she had emerged, the twins were there as well, but no one mentioned their mating again, thankfully. That is until they were walking out and Malcolm noticed a red spot on Ian's neck that was quite recent and hadn't completely healed yet.

"Oh my God, she bit you!"

Alexia turned around, fully intending to spend another ten minutes of mortification in the

bathroom. Ian caught her hand and held her tight to his side so she couldn't escape without making a bigger scene.

"Jealous because nobody wants to taste your blood at the height of passion, Malcolm?"

Alexia's face burned hotter and she wished the earth would just open up and swallow her.

"Well, yeah, kind of. You got any friends, Alexia?"

"No," she gritted between clenched teeth. Her eyes started to glow red and yellow as anger replaced her embarrassment. Was nothing in her private life sacred?

Mabon pushed his twin out the door. "Sorry, Alexia, I got the brains and he got the death wish."

After they were alone, Ian pulled her around to face him and kissed her deeply. Her anger and embarrassment disappeared as passion took over her body. She went limp against him and sighed as his lips pulled away from hers.

"I am not ashamed of what you are and what we are and how we make love. You shouldn't be either."

He was so intense, so serious, that she couldn't help but believe he was right. "Okay," Alexia replied in a husky voice. She ran her fingers over the pulsing vein in his neck, her fangs throbbed and she wanted more of him. He was addicting and she could imagine spending the next

millennia shut up in a room with him and being perfectly content.

Ian pulled away, his eyes bright with desire. "We better go before someone comes looking for us."

"Like Malcolm the pervert. I think he would ask to join if he caught us."

Ian chuckled as he ushered her out of the room. "Don't worry, I am not into that, unless you lied to Malcolm and you do have a friend."

Ian ducked her punch, but she managed to trip him as they walked. He was too graceful to fall all the way, but she made him stumble and that was satisfying enough.

Alexia marveled at the easy teasing camaraderie that had developed between them. All her life she had longed for a friend that would give her even half what he was giving her, and to have that, plus the mind blowing sex...

She felt like the luckiest werewolf in the world. Of course, she was also the unluckiest, which even if she wasn't, the only one would be a good bet. With her parents lives hanging so close to death right now and still no idea how they could help, she was sure she couldn't get much unluckier and still be alive to moan about it.

All teasing and joy halted as they drove to the Colony. Alexia once again sat between Malcolm and Mabon, but Ian was relaxed in the front,

secure in their mated status. After all, she now carried his scent on her. No other werewolf would dare attempt to take what was his.

Depression and anxiety hung thick in the air as they drove. None of them knew for sure what was going to come of the trial. And they all knew there was a very good possibility that death would be the outcome for one or all of the prisoners. Alexia prayed silently for a positive outcome, but never being real big on religion, she wasn't so sure it would do any good. She was pretty much asking for a miracle from someone she had never spoken to or given much thought about.

Being immortal kind of puts a damper on your afterlife worries.

They got into the Colony without incident this time. They were asked to leave their vehicle outside and were led by the same guard to the prisoners. The houses they passed were eerily empty again, as if no one wanted to dare be seen by these other species. Unwelcoming didn't even begin to cover what Alexia felt as she walked through the deserted streets, knowing that each house they passed held at least one elf. Purists, Ian had called them. It seemed to her that it went way beyond the realm of healthy. Maybe they needed the elf version of Dr. Phil to come in and tell them to get real.

The prisoners were gathered together in a large

underground room this time, with the exception of Henry who was still beyond reasoning with, even for his parents. He couldn't be let out. There was no doubt he would attack anything and everything if he wasn't locked safely away. But that was the second problem they needed to deal with. After all, if they were all going to be sentenced to death, it didn't matter if he was too crazy to be let free.

When they entered the room, Alexia rushed directly into the waiting arms of her father and mother. They squeezed and cried and squeezed. It was the kind of greeting you would expect to receive after being gone for months, not mere days of separation. But for them it was the longest they had ever been apart. It wasn't as if Tarquin left on business trips or Alexia could go on a European vacation. They were bound together so fully that they didn't ever spend a night apart.

Tarquin pulled away first and eyed her suspiciously, then turned angry yellow eyes to Ian.

"I may have wanted you to protect her, but I am still her father and I will not be happy that you touched her before the mating ceremony has taken place."

"Dad!" Alexia cried out, her cheeks heating with embarrassment.

Ian threw his hands up and smirked. "Sorry,

sir. I assure you I fully intend to make it official just as soon as this little mess is cleared up.”

“Oh it is wonderful,” Zyra said soothingly to her husband and daughter. “Alexia, you have picked a very fine specimen. But did you *see* it, your life with him? A blood vision is the only way for a vampire to know for sure,” she whispered the last conspiratorially, as if they weren’t in a room full of beings with superhuman hearing.

“No, but I am not a full vampire. I don’t have all of the needs of one, who knows if I am even capable of blood visions,” she said nonchalantly. She didn’t want anyone to put too much credence to her mother’s words. Her relationship with Ian seemed tentative enough without that question hanging in the air.

Zyra bit her lip, a gesture she reserved for when she was really worried about something, and that frightened Alexia. What if Ian wasn’t the one for her, what if she eventually had a vision and saw someone else’s face there? It was too terrifying to even consider. Alexia pushed the thought out of her mind. She couldn’t deal with that now.

Alexia peeked behind her. Ian was looking at her through narrowed eyes, obviously thinking about her mother’s words. And not liking them one bit.

“So what is the plan?” Kairos asked, thankfully changing the subject.

Tarquin's face darkened. "I guess we just go with what feels right in the moment. I am unsure of what they will specifically charge, so it's hard to plan a defense to that. Hell, I don't even know if we will get a chance to defend ourselves. It's not as if they offered to get us a lawyer."

"If this were a keeper issue, the pack would be present and the alphas would collaborate over the evidence. The accused would get a chance to speak and then the main alpha, or King Alpha, would make the final decision. His word is law in the pack, but he has to stand by the consequences of his own actions as well. The pack can challenge him if they don't agree," Kairos said, a meaningful look passing between him and Tarquin.

"But these are elves, who the hell knows what kind of process they use. I seriously doubt it's based on evidence, considering the way we were arrested," Tarquin said angrily. "I have agreed with my wife to start with reason. She has agreed to use brute force after that."

As they continued to discuss the possible ways of elf trials Ian, grabbed Alexia's hand and pulled her into the far corner.

"You need to have a blood vision," he said intensely.

Alexia blinked at him, too stunned to speak for a moment. "What? Are you crazy, Ian? I can't just *have* one."

"Then how can you be sure that you are supposed to be with me?"

There was such vulnerability in his eyes as he spoke those words, such fear. Alexia's heart ached for him. She never wanted to see him suffer like that, not if she could help it. Alexia reached up and stroked his face. "Ian, I don't need a blood vision to know that I want to be with you. You are just going to have to take that for now. I...feel deeply for you and don't want to hurt you, but I won't lie to you either and say it's for eternity when I don't know. Even if I had a blood vision, I would still not know, because I have never believed in fated pairs. I just believe in the feeling of rightness I have in your arms."

He pulled her tightly against his chest and buried his face in her hair. "I love you, too," he whispered, then kissed her soundly, leaving her panting and weak-kneed.

"I hope it's always so easy to make you want me," Ian teased as she parted her lips and revealed her ready fangs. "I would be lying if I said I ever thought I would come to so love the sight of fangs bared and thirsting for my blood, and mismatched eyes, glowing or not. But now those are definitely some of my favorite things to see."

"Could you two stop gushing all over each other, you're giving me a hard on," Malcolm said as he approached the embracing couple.

Alexia hissed at him, but knew it was better that they not continue as this wasn't the time or place. Of course, Alexia admitted to herself, any time in Ian's arms felt warm and right and so beautifully perfect.

Oh God, I have become one of those disgusting women who pick flowers and draw hearts haven't I, Alexia thought toward no one in particular.

Yes, her wolf and her mother answered in unison.

And it's wonderful, her mother added happily.

"Since everyone has arrived, we can begin the festivities," Lillian said from the doorway.

Although her words held an edge of excitement, her face gave nothing away. Alexia was sure that if she could smell her, she would be giving off waves of anticipation and excitement over the prospect of hanging these innocent people.

Alexia's mouth went dry and her stomach twisted. How were they possibly going to fight the laws of people like her? *Bitch*, Alexia thought to her wolf who growled in agreement.

Lillian glanced in the wolf's direction momentarily, but quickly looked away.

She heard me, she saw me, her wolf thought to Alexia.

A very interesting detail, although Alexia wasn't sure if it would help them in any way.

"If the guests will follow me, the prisoners will be escorted out in a few moments."

Alexia hugged her parents and then grasped Ian's comforting hand and strode out of the room with as much confidence as she could manage. She had to stay strong for her parents. The last thing they needed was a weepy daughter to worry about. If only she could be as emotionless as the elves. They were amazing in that ability, Alexia grudgingly admitted.

As they left the room, she threw one last look at her parents. Her father's face was full of controlled rage. Her mother looked thoughtful, as if she were concentrating very hard on what someone was saying, except no one was talking.

They were led into a large round room, decorated in all white. At the far end was a long table with two chairs behind it. In front of that table were six chairs, apparently for the accused, even though only five would be present without Henry. Behind those were seats that they were led to and commanded to sit in. Around the entire perimeter of the room were empty chairs.

Lillian seated herself in one of the chairs behind the table and Alexia barely bit back a groan. If Lillian was one of the judges, her parents were doomed for sure. That woman hated and she looked unmerciful.

Soon a back door opened and animal elves filed

into the room, filling the chairs that lined the walls. They all looked so similar, only varying slightly in features and height. They all wore the same look of non-emotion on their sparkling faces and their brown gazes watched Alexia's group. None of them bothered with hiding their true forms, no need for glamour inside the Colony, Alexia supposed. It wasn't as if any humans were around to see them for what they were.

When all those chairs were filled, Lucas joined his sister at the table. His monkey was perched on his shoulder and, although he held himself like all the others, there was something in his eyes when he met Alexia's gaze. She couldn't help but think he was different in some way, but she couldn't explain what or why. His eyes were cool, assessing, and curious perhaps? But not condemning in any way, and that gave Alexia the tiniest bit of hope.

The eye contact was terminated when the door Alexia's group had entered through opened and the prisoners were led inside.

Alexia squeezed Ian's hand as she tried to keep tears of rage, or sorrow, from bursting forth. She wanted nothing more than to spring forward and tear out the throats of Lillian and Lucas for even thinking about punishing her parents for their commitment to each other.

Zyra met her daughter's gaze as she passed.

Stay strong, baby, no matter what happens, Zyra's

thoughts floated to Alexia on a wave of sadness.

The prisoners were seated in the row facing their accusers and waited patiently for their so-called trial to begin. One seat stood empty, Henry unable to attend. The poor were would never know that he was being sentenced to death.

Lucas stood. "If there are no objections, we will begin." He paused and looked around the room. No one spoke up so he continued. "We will first deal with the case against, Jack, Staci, Henry, and Terrance."

The back door banged open and all eyes turned to see Paxton stroll in as if he hadn't a care in the world. Alexia spun her head back to Lucas and saw a brief flash of something there, happiness perhaps? Certainly there was recognition, they knew each other.

But if they knew each other, then why hadn't Paxton mentioned that before? Alexia narrowed her eyes, assuming the worst of the vampire. Had this all been some insane attempt at revenge, or an attempt to claim Zyra once again for himself?

"I am here to act as lawyer for the accused couple, Zyra and Tarquin," Paxton announced loudly.

There was an audible gasp by all in the room, except the elves. They were unflappable it seemed.

What the fuck? Alexia thought toward Paxton.

Just relax, little one, I know what I am doing,

Paxton replied.

He does, baby, Zyra thought to her.

Was there some kind of plan then, something her mother was in on, she wondered. Her father sat stiffly, obviously just as surprised as everyone else.

"Of course, we welcome you," Lucas said. "Do you not wish to defend the others though?"

"Not necessary, I am sure you will find they have done nothing besides defend themselves against attack." Paxton seated himself in the remaining chair beside the accused as if it had been set there just for him.

Tarquin was in the seat next to him and growled low and menacing. No friendship there, not that Alexia could blame him. Paxton was her mother's ex-lover.

"And so we have," Lucas agreed with an incline of his head. "I was just getting ready to announce that my sister and I have discussed the matter and all charges have been dropped on the four who defended against the apprehension of their friends. They did nothing we did not do, and therefore cannot be punished for those actions. Equal violence meets equal violence."

Waves of relief rolled off of the three dismissed keepers who were present.

Alexia just hoped Henry could be saved from himself. Otherwise she had no doubt that his

parents would be wishing they were killed today as well. Henry has been acquitted of one death sentence just to face another.

"So we move on to the main event," Lillian said, rising as her brother took his seat once more. "Zyra and Tarquin, you stand before my brother and I, and our court of witnesses, accused of defying, of violating, the balance of life with your unprecedented union. How do you plead?"

"My clients plead not guilty, of course," Paxton said quickly, rising before either Zyra or Tarquin could respond.

"On what basis do they find themselves *not* guilty of being two different species mating as if they were one and the same?" she asked with a hint of smugness that grated on every one of Alexia's nerves.

"Well, in that they are guilty, I assure you. They mate quite well, given their difference of species."

Tarquin growled, but Alexia saw her mother put a calming hand on his thigh and he instantly stopped. She had always been able to calm the beast inside of Tarquin. Alexia had always assumed it was why they worked so well together—Zyra neutralized Tarquin's negativity.

"Do you not feel that Zyra should be with one of her own kind?" Lillian asked with a trace of menace in her voice. "A vampire like you perhaps?"

Alexia held her breath, waiting for his answer. She had no idea what his plan was, but she was sure that if he answered yes to that, then all would be lost.

“Love is love, Lillian, it doesn’t follow any laws. Not vampire, or keeper, or elfin. But that is not what we are here to discuss, to defend. This is not a question of whether or not the two of them love each other.” Paxton waved a hand at the couple who sat holding hands, heads inclined slightly toward each other and knees touching. “It is disgustingly obvious they do. I dare any here to say differently.” Paxton waited a moment but none spoke up.

Alexia watched Lucas and Lillian carefully. Lillian seemed to tighten her lips slightly, as if she were becoming angry. Lucas seemed to be lifting the corners of his mouth by the slightest of degrees as if amused.

Both were showing more emotion than she had ever seen on an elf.

“Then please, enlighten us,” Lillian said, clearly disappointed that her baiting of Paxton hadn’t gone as planned. “What is in question here, in your opinion?”

“The balance of life, of course. We all know that.” Paxton looked at her, practically daring her to deny what he was saying.

The look she gave him held a smug note, as if

he were still going where she intended.

"I would like to call a witness if it pleases the judges." Paxton didn't wait for a response. "Alexia, daughter of Tarquin and Zyra, please stand in defense of your parents."

Alexia was too shocked to move at first. She had no idea how she could possibly be any help, but she knew she had to try. She stood on shaky legs. *What is your plan Paxton?* she thought toward him.

Just answer my questions honestly, Alexia, and trust me to help your parents, he thought back.

She figured she didn't have much choice, but if he hurt their case, she would definitely hold him responsible.

"Are you a keeper, Alexia?" he asked in an official tone.

"Yes," she answered, her voice shaky. She stiffened and took a deep breath. She had to be strong, convincing.

"Are you a blood drinker?" he asked in the same flat official tone.

Alexia's face reddened as she thought of the recent joy she had found in drinking Ian's blood. "Yes, at times I am. Although I do not need it to survive it is beneficial to me at times."

"You are a keeper and you drink blood. So what does that make you, Alexia?" he asked, his voice never wavering from its set tone.

"It makes her an abomination, the very thing we are trying to prevent from occurring," Lillian cut in, slamming her hands down on the table in front of her.

The outburst was all the more dramatic coming from an emotionless elf. All eyes flashed to her with surprise. Even the other elves in the room couldn't hide the momentary shock of seeing her react like that.

"Sister, please. You must not make a mockery of our law by assuming to judge without reason. We are a people living by the law of balance, of fairness. Listen first. Then you may judge and give a punishment equal to their crime." Lucas's voice held censure.

Alexia wondered if he might be on their side, or at least not completely against them. Maybe he was just so in love with their laws that he really didn't judge until the end. That didn't mean he wasn't going to order death to those he deemed guilty.

"Tell us, Alexia, what are you?" Lucas asked in his emotionless voice.

"I am a hybrid of my vampire mother and my werewolf father. I am a werepire, one and only member of my species and proud of the species I am." She held her shoulders back and her head high. She meant what she said—she was proud and she was not going to let anyone take that from

her, not anymore. She was done hating her parents for their decision to make her. She was done agreeing with everyone who thought she was a worthless mistake. She was ready to embrace her being, her life, as it was.

Paxton smiled at her outburst, as if he hadn't expected any other answer from her. "You are a hybrid, a *balance* of vamp and were." Paxton looked pointedly around the room. "How can you presume to say two species who create a perfect balance of an offspring are going against nature with their union?" Silence, heavy and thick, settled over the room. Paxton turned in a slow circle, eyeing each and every elf there, ending with Lucas.

"We can't. Innocent," Lucas stated, still with a flat emotionless voice.

Alexia saw a glint to his eye, however, as if this was exactly the outcome he had hoped to achieve.

"Lillian, your vote please."

"Innocent."

She said it with so much grudging anger that for the first time Alexia was able to smell an animal elf, as if Lillian had lost control of her magic that was covering it. It was potent anger, and it was directed, oddly enough, at her brother rather than Alexia or her parents. There was definitely more going on here than it seemed.

"They are innocent and the precedent has been

set. Two species of equality can mate without disrupting the delicate balance of nature. The details of determining such equality will have to be worked out." Lucas's gaze rested meaningfully on Paxton. "May I propose a council of sorts, to determine such things?" Lucas suggested in an obviously planned sort of way."

"A council you say, what a wonderful idea," Paxton replied in a rehearsed manner.

Lillian glared and huffed next to him.

"I will serve as animal elf representative, of course."

Alexia watched Lillian's eyes narrow with rage at her brother and Paxton's performance.

"I will volunteer for representation of vampires," Paxton offered, then turned a prompting eye on Alexia and Ian.

"I want no part of your insanity," Ian growled at Paxton.

"I will represent the werewolves, since my brother has turned down the position," Terrance offered quickly.

"Of course, we would love to have you." Lucas then turned his gaze to Alexia, where Paxton's still rested, waiting.

"What?" she demanded of them.

"You are the only member of your species," Paxton pointed out gently.

"Oh hell no. We don't want to be involved," Ian

cut in before Alexia had a chance to voice her opinion.

"Is that how you feel, Alexia? You would like your species to go unrepresented in the Council of Immortals?" Paxton pressed. *We need you, we will need every species*, he thought toward her.

"I will be a part of it," Alexia answered, keeping her eyes trained forward, afraid to look at Ian. Would he be angry, betrayed by her acceptance after his vehement refusal?

Paxton and Lucas both smiled brightly at her. Both rare smiles dazzled and warmed her.

Ian growled at her side and put a possessive arm around her waist, nearly shouting *mine*, to the two men.

"So the prisoners are free to go," Lucas declared.

Lillian gave her brother a betrayed look before rising and exiting the room. The other elves, apart from Lucas, soon followed her out.

It's all coming together.

The words came from Paxton and floated to Alexia. She looked at him curiously, but his back was to her and she wondered if he had meant for her to hear that, and what did he mean by it?

Relief soon took center stage in the room and Alexia was flying so high she didn't care what else was going on. Her parents were going to be released, along with all the others, without

violence. She fell to her seat and clutched Ian, not caring about the sappy public display of affection.

"Did you know Paxton was going to be here?" Ian asked as they embraced.

"No, but it seems as if him and Lucas are familiar with each other. I would say we owe them both a great debt of gratitude. It would have been nice if he had let us know before, we could have worried a whole hell of a lot less," Alexia grumbled.

"All very odd." Ian eyed the two in question.

"You're not angry, are you, that I agreed to be on the council? It's not as if there is any other to represent the werepires, as you well know I am one of a kind."

"Not at all, love, just so long as it doesn't interrupt our time together."

Alexia kissed him briefly and then turned to her parents. She embraced them both and congratulations were passed around.

Jack and Staci remained solemn. Henry was still a big question mark here, and soon that knowledge brought them all crashing back to reality.

"We need to get him home, to the safe room so that he can recover," Tarquin said, taking control as the alpha.

Jack and Staci both smiled with tense relief that Tarquin wasn't ready to sign their son's death

warrant yet. But he would if it was necessary, and they all knew that. An alpha's number one priority was protecting his pack, and sometimes that meant eliminating a dangerous member.

"He just needs a good reason to come back from the edge he is on," Zyra said, squeezing her husband's hand tightly.

"I am just not sure how we can get him into the safe room without someone getting seriously injured. He is in pretty bad shape," Terrance pointed out. "Can we sedate him enough for travel?"

"Perhaps. It would have to be a very high dose of sedative, and administered at least twice during the trip. His werewolf blood system will burn through any drug very fast," Tarquin said quietly.

"Well, I would say the elves did it once, they can do it again. They can transport him fast enough that only a minimum dose of sedative would keep him and whoever else quite safe enough," Alexia offered, already feeling the diplomat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

By dawn, Henry was safely, although not so calmly, being held in the basement of Alexia's house. Lucas had agreed to transport him, no hard feelings over the trial. To him it was over and done with, and quite satisfactorily at that.

Jack and Staci remained close to their son, safely on the other side of the reinforced bars, hoping that their presence would soothe him. So far it wasn't working.

Tarquin agreed to give it a month before deciding there was no hope for the boy, which both Jack and Staci were very agreeable to. They knew it was more than they had any right to hope for.

Alexia watched the couple huddle together and speak softly to the growling beast their son had become. She couldn't help but wonder what kind of creature her own children would end up being. She assumed more were than vamp, but still not

completely were and not quite like herself either. Any children she managed to produce would be a sub species of werepire, another first.

Alexia wasn't sure if she was willing to condemn her child to that life, her life. But what about Ian, how did he feel about children? Was he determined to have them, and right away? A baby was usually a celebrated thing in a pack, they were rare and so they were protected and loved by all. A keeper was only able to get pregnant during the full moon merge, so it was difficult to get pregnant at times. Usually a mated pair started trying right away to reproduce and were successful within a year or two. Then after that, the chances of reproducing went way down. No one knows why. Most keepers didn't have more than one or two children. But none chose not to have any, it was unheard of. The species had to procreate to survive.

Vampires were fertile enough. They just generally didn't choose to have many children. It went along with their selfish streak, Alexia supposed. Children were a lot of work and took much devotion from its parents. When a vampire wanted to get pregnant, she would refrain from drinking blood from a source other than her mate. This would allow her to get pregnant, and throughout the pregnancy she would only drink from her mate. It made birth control easy,

drinking blood from a different source didn't bother most vampires.

For both vamps and weres, the decision to have a child was a very deliberate one. There weren't a lot of accidents or surprises in their worlds.

It was one decision that Alexia wasn't ready to make, but she didn't know how to prevent it for sure. She and Ian had not made love at the full moon merge, but she had drank his blood and no others since they had made love. Were her reproductive organs more vamp or more were, or some hybrid combination of both?

She had to be sure she didn't get pregnant until she was ready, but how was she going to explain that to Ian?

"Well, I think we have some things to discuss," Tarquin said, slapping Ian firmly on the back. "Why don't you and I and your father go up to my study?"

Alexia eyed her father nervously. They were going to go make the arrangements for the mating ceremony, no doubt. After that, everyone would be expecting her to reproduce, including Ian. Her heart beat wildly, frantically and she couldn't help the fear that was sliding off her body into the room.

"I will join you two in a moment. I would first like a private word with Alexia," Ian said.

Alexia wasn't sure if she liked that idea, but she

supposed now was as good a time as any to discuss a possible deal breaker. She walked slow and dejected toward the kitchen.

Ian followed.

Alexia looked longingly at the fridge, she should drink blood, just to be safe.

"Tell me what is wrong." Ian placed his hands on her shoulders.

She didn't realize he was so close. His words brushed hot air against the back of her neck and she shivered with anticipation of his closeness. Just remembering how their bodies had enjoyed each other was enough to get her ready to take him again.

Ian growled, grabbed her tighter and buried his face in her hair. "I can smell your desire. I know you want me so tell me what has you so worried. Are you just not willing to become my mate officially?" Ian stiffened.

Alexia could feel his deep worry and fear and her heart ached for him. She didn't want him to feel this way, especially since she did want to mate with him, commit to him. "It's just so sudden, Ian. I wasn't looking for a mate when you showed up."

Ian's whole body relaxed at her words. He kissed her cheek and turned her to face him. Grasping her small face in his hands, he smiled one of his increasingly common smiles at her.

"I would wait for you if that is what you need.

Time I can give you, in moderation. But our fathers might not be happy about that."

Alexia was grateful that he was willing to give her time, but she knew that it wasn't going to fix the real problem. She had to know how he felt about having children. He had to understand that she needed to drink blood from another source.

"There is more, I can still sense your distress. What are you not telling me?" Ian demanded, his grip tightening on her arms again.

Alexia couldn't look him in the eye as she spoke. She fisted her hands in his shirt and stared there. "Ian, I don't know if I want to have children." She felt him stiffen around her. "At least not any time soon," she amended quickly, looking up into his dark eyes. She was shocked to see a pained look there. She almost relented and told him they could have children right away if that was what he really wanted.

Then his control broke and he laughed at her. Deep gasping laughs.

Alexia stepped away from him and crossed her arms under her chest. Her eyes glowed mismatched in fury and she barely resisted the urge to kick him. "What the hell do you think is so funny about that?"

Ian regained control and met her glowing gaze. He took a step forward and reached out to touch her face.

She bared her fangs at him and he chuckled.

"Oh, sweets, I am just beyond relieved, that's all. I was imagining all kinds of horrid things. I was debating killing and maiming and stealing, just to keep you with me. I laugh in relief that you do want to be my mate still, even with your family safely back at home."

She allowed him to touch her face this time, but didn't relax her stance.

"Anything you want, always anything you want. I can't say I don't want to have children with you, because I definitely do. But we have plenty of time. I want a life with you and children can wait."

Alexia was shocked by his easy acceptance. "But most keepers are expected to reproduce as soon as they can because it is so hard for them to succeed and children give their parents prestige in the pack."

"Well," Ian said with a cocky grin. "I come from a very fertile father. Did you know that not only do I have a brother, Terrance, but I also have a sister back home? And besides, I have more than enough prestige being the second son of the King Alpha of BC. I don't need to breed my mate just to get more."

Alexia snapped out of her shock and hit his shoulder hard enough to hurt them both. "Next time I am worried, I expect you not to laugh at my

feelings. I was terrified of what you would think of me not wanting to have children right away."

Ian pulled her tightly against him. "Well it is easy enough to prevent, just stay out of my direct line of sight during the full moon."

"That only works for werewolves," she said, muffled against his chest.

Ian frowned. "I must say I am not knowledgeable as to vampire birth control."

"Blood." Alexia kissed his neck. "If a vampire drinks her mate's blood, and only his blood, she will be fertile. She only has to drink blood of another to counter the effects of this." She nipped playfully at his neck and was rewarded with the feel of him hardening against her belly. "My best guess is we will have to mate during the full moon and I will have to only drink your blood to get pregnant. So I think we are free to mate during the full moon."

Ian picked her up and carried her to her bedroom. As he closed the door behind them, a shout made its way up the stairs.

"Ian, I expect you are not trying to violate my daughter before a proper mating ceremony can be held, not in my own home."

Ian growled.

Alexia giggled. "Go meet with them. I will get something to drink." She winked at him. "Then we will finish this later."

"If he lets us. I think I will explode all over his house if he thinks to keep us apart until the mating ceremony."

Alexia, your father is going to come up there if you don't send that boy down, her mother thought to her with urgency and amusement.

"Go, and we will most definitely finish this later, even if we have to leave to do it." Alexia pushed him toward the door, then sank to her bed with a goofy love struck smile on her face.

After a couple heavy sighs and a thorough run through of possible places to drag her lover off to for some alone time, Alexia headed back downstairs.

The meeting was quick, everyone already in agreement to the mating. The ceremony had been set for two weeks time and Ian had been warned on threat of dismemberment to not touch Alexia until then.

Alexia laughed when Ian had growled at her to not touch him. He wanted to respect her father's rules, *no matter how impossible and torturous*, he had said.

She'd kissed him chastely, then offered to make him something to eat before they retired to different rooms to rest.

Paxton was stuck there for the day, not having had enough time to get home safely. Even though Tarquin had told him he didn't care if he burned

alive on the doorstep, Zyra and Alexia had both stepped in to demand more respect to their lawyer. Tarquin had grumbled about vampires always ganging up on him and retreated to smoke a cigar and catch up with his old friend, Kairos. They were going to discuss the union of packs through the mating of their children.

Lucas was still there, too, although Alexia wasn't really sure why. He and Paxton cornered Alexia in the kitchen.

She pulled her head out of the fridge and nearly jumped out of her skin to see the two men staring intently at her. Paxton with his black hair and blue eyes next to Lucas's white hair and brown eyes, both tall, both thin, both muscled and both with inhuman power emanating from them, they were an intimidating sight.

"What?" she asked nervously drawing out the word.

"I have been feeling for a very long time that it is necessary to form a council of sorts, something where the immortals of the world can have representation and form laws for all to abide by. Laws that will eventually aid in a union strong enough to withstand an assault of the humans when they find out about us, which I have no doubt that they will. I have lived a very long time and have seen the changes coming slowly. We won't be able to hide from them forever and if we

are all fighting alone, none of us will survive."

Alexia blinked at Lucas, trying to comprehend even half of what he had just said.

"What Lucas is trying to say," Paxton continued, "is that we are thankful that you have agreed to join us in this. We intend to unite the different species of the earth so we can better police ourselves and eventually better deal with the humans finding out we exist right next door."

Alexia understood these words much better. There was something way too intense about Lucas's unemotional words. Perhaps it was the odd little monkey that sat on his shoulder, distracting her from what he was actually saying. She wasn't sure, but she knew she agreed with what Paxton was telling her.

"What is going on in here?" Ian growled as he came into the kitchen.

"We were just explaining to Alexia that we appreciate her willingness to represent her species in the Council of Immortals. We hope to gain representation from each species and form a set of laws and unity for all immortals. So we can better handle the event of human knowledge," Paxton explained.

"Yes, so my brother was telling me earlier. I agree that it is necessary, and I hope it will make others more accepting of the more unique beings, such as my wife." Ian put a protective arm around

Alexia's shoulder as she turned back to her task of making him a sandwich. "And have no doubt, I may not be representing the keepers, but I will be very present in this council, next to my wife."

"Of course, you are more than welcome to be involved unofficially. We have just begun creating this, so the attainment of all species may take a while. You two should be able to enjoy a nice honeymoon before we need her presence too desperately," Paxton said with a smile.

"I will be going after the mermaids," Lucas said with intensity.

"Mermaids?" Alexia gasped, turning back to the men. "I thought they were just a myth."

All three men gave her a placating look.

"I am sure they would say the same about werewolves," Paxton responded.

"Point taken." She listened as they planned and then Lucas immediately left to find his mermaid. Alexia had a feeling there was something very personal in the mission for him.

When the house was quiet, all immortal species catching the few hours of sleep they needed to be rested, Alexia tossed and turned on her bed. She didn't want to sleep alone.

Go to him, her wolf encouraged.

You're right, I am an adult and my father can't stop me from doing as I please. Alexia threw a robe on over the panties and tank top she slept in. She

opened her door and nearly tripped over Ian's wolf laying on the floor there. Ian was crouched a few feet away, watching her door intently.

His eyes were slightly yellow and his hands were fisted at his sides. He looked ready to pounce, raw sexual tension rolled off him and the bulge in his pants grew under her gaze. He was obviously trying very hard to control himself.

"Come inside," she whispered silkily.

He shook his head and tightened his jaw, then gave a meaningful look in the direction of her parent's room. Luckily there was incredible sound proofing in all the walls and ceilings, otherwise the unnatural hearing abilities would allow for no privacy in this house. As it was, there were a few gasps and moans escaping into the hall from her parents' room.

"I won't be treated like a child, Ian. Come into my room, we are consenting adults."

He just shook his head at her.

Alexia bit her lip with frustration. She wanted him now more than ever. Typical, tell her she can't do something and all of a sudden it was all she wanted.

"I won't disrespect your father like that, not in his own home. My father would kill me for it."

"Really?" Alexia said slyly, then dropped her robe, revealing tiny black panties under a lacy red tank top.

Ian groaned, his gaze riveted on her body.

Alexia saw his control breaking and her body heated with anticipation. Her nipples hardened under his ravishing gaze and the fire of desire sparked to life in her belly.

His eyes darkened as her obvious desire registered with his senses. She smiled wickedly as he struggled to remain seated.

Alexia drew one finger into her mouth, sucking deeply, then trailed it down to her nipple, circling it once, then continuing down over her belly.

"Stop," Ian ground out between clenched teeth. "I cannot bear this. Don't you understand what it is taking for me to not be on you right now? Are you hoping I will shame myself in your father's hallway? Because I swear I am about to burst in my pants just looking at you."

"Dammit, Ian, I want you and I will have you. Get your ass in my room right this instant or I swear I will make you sorry." Alexia stomped her foot and put her hands to her hips.

"Do you not care at all for your father's wishes?"

"Not particularly, no," she answered honestly. "Not when it involves staying away from the man I love." It was the first time she had said the words, and it broke through Ian's tenuous control.

He stood swiftly and closed the distance between them. He held her face between his palms

and looked deeply into her mismatched eyes. "Oh, Alexia, my love, what I ever did so right to deserve you I don't know. The gift of your love is more than I could have ever hoped for." His lips came down on hers in a gentle kiss.

It was nice, but Alexia needed more. She deepened the kiss, thrusting her tongue at his mouth as she gripped his pale hair in her hands.

Ian responded instantly, smashing her body to his and rubbing his hands up and down her back, trying to feel her everywhere at once. He pushed her back into her room, sending a mental command to his wolf to shut the door behind them.

"Now my dear, you will pay for that teasing," Ian said darkly.

He used his magic to strip them both instantly. She reached out to run her hands over his beautiful body, but he stopped her. He turned her around and brought her back up against his chest, snugly fitting their bodies together. He bent his head and bit playfully at her neck until she was panting and grinding against him. He was snug against her and as she rubbed against him, her body thrummed with intense pleasure.

Her hands grasped desperately at his head and neck as he continued on to tease her ear. Her fangs were long and aching to drive into his flesh.

Ian's hands roamed across the front of her

body, plucking and rubbing her breasts and nipples, then moving blessedly lower to delve into the core of her heat. His amazing fingers danced across her most sensitive areas, making her cry out with nearly instant release.

Alexia's hands joined his. Guiding him to the places she most needed his touch. She rocked and pulled until he was thrusting against her back with almost lost control. Their linked fingers slid deeply within her and Ian bit down on her exposed shoulder. As her blood touched his tongue, he stilled and pulled back.

"Oh God, Ian. Yes!" she cried out and pulled his head back to her shoulder.

He hesitated at first, then licked experimentally. After a moment, he began to suck and groan, obviously enjoying it. She shuddered around his thrusting fingers, at the edge of release. He removed his fingers and broke the seal of his mouth on her neck.

Both losses left her feeling desperate and cheated, she had been so close.

He pushed her down until she was leaning over her bed, hands braced. His hands trailed slowly from her neck to her tight butt, which he gave an appreciative slap. He nudged her legs apart. He was hesitating too long.

Alexia threw her head back and hissed over her shoulder. "Now, Ian, I need you now."

He smiled at her and slid slow and deep into her tight body. He grasped her hips and gave her what she wanted, hard quick strokes to send her over the edge she was so close to.

It didn't take long, she felt the swirling heat take over her body and then the shattering pleasure of release as her body clenched and shuddered around him. As she cried out his name, he bent over her and held her shuddering body tightly to his, still stroking in and out of her, to draw her pleasure out that much longer.

Once she was settled, he flipped her onto her back and took her mouth in a passionate kiss. He stoked her fire of desire back up as his still hard member began a slow rhythm within her body.

She moaned against his mouth. His tongue slipped in and slid dangerously against her aching fangs.

Alexia grabbed his head, pulling it away and positioning his neck for her assault. As her fangs slid into his neck, they both trembled with a new onslaught of pleasure. Hot, sweet and earthy, his blood rushed into her mouth. Each gulp was a spray of fuel to her burning desire. Each pull was a stroke to his pulsing need.

Ian's hands found and caressed her breasts, teasing and plucking at her nipples while she shuddered under him, her hips thrusting up to meet him. His hands slid down her belly to touch

her. His expert touch rocked her body. She broke from his neck to scream her release. Ian closed his mouth over hers to muffle the sounds of her pleasure as he joined her in exquisite release.

EPÍLOGUE

There were two vampire women coming to life in the house, neither under his body, and Paxton felt it down to his toes. As he laid in an empty guest bed, his body thrumming with sexual energy, he tried his best to close his mind to the women. Neither probably knew that they were sending such intense mental messages through the house. It was something that they wouldn't feel from each other. Only a male vampire would be able to pick up on the heat they were throwing off.

When closing his mind off proved to be all but impossible with the intensity of their pleasure, he did the only other thing he could. He took himself to hand. He closed his eyes and pictured the face that he had seen so many years ago, in his one and only blood vision, the face of his mate. He was getting closer to her. The steps were being laid for their meeting. The Council of Immortals was forming. Soon he would have her and his life

would be complete, if she could accept one of his species as mate.

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