

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



STEPHANIE  
JULIAN

EDGE  
OF  
*Moonlight*

## **Edge of Moonlight**

*Stephanie Julian*

*Book three in the Lucani Lovers series.*

Etruscan wolf shifter Kaine Giliati has longed for John Simmons since he willingly agreed to wipe all memory of her from his mind. The pain in her heart is only magnified by terror – the ability to call her wolf appears to have deserted her, as well.

For months after he and his sister escaped a crazed kidnapper, John has been dreaming about a beautiful woman he's never met but who seems so familiar. A woman he's shocked to find in a dark bar one night. A woman who agrees to come back to his apartment for raw, passionate sex.

One erotic, stolen night reopens old wounds, uncovers buried memories and sets Kaine and John on a path filled with danger, magic and potential heartbreak.

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Edge of Moonlight

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# *EDGE OF MOONLIGHT*

Stephanie Julian

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## Glossary

*Arus*: magical power inherent in the *Fata* and *Enu*, races of Etruscan descent

*Boschetta*: Etruscan coven, traditionally comprised of thirteen *streghe*

*Candela*: Etruscan sprite, tiny magical beings with wings and a certain glow about them

*Decurio*: legion rank of commander

*Eteri* (pl. *eteri*): Etruscan for foreigner, used to describe regular humans without magic

*Enu*: humans of magical Etruscan descent

*Fata*: elemental beings of magical Etruscan descent

*Folletta* (pl. *folletti*): Etruscan female fairy

*Linchetto* (pl. *linchetti*): Etruscan night elf

*Malandante*: descended from the Etruscans but born with a bent toward evil, with a taste for power and wealth

*Praenuntio*: Goddess Gift of foresight

*Pugio*: a Roman dagger

*Quercioli*: the offspring of a *folletta* and a *linchetto*, always female

*Salbinelli*: Etruscan satyr

*Sicari* (pl. *sicarii*): assassin

*Silvani*: one of the three original Etruscan *Fata*; always female, protectors of fields and forests

*Speculator*: spy

*Strega* (pl. *streghe*): Etruscan witch

*Versipellis* (pl. *versipelli*): literally “skin shifter” —shapeshifters including Etruscan *Lucani* (wolves), Norse *Berkserkir* (bears) and French *loup garou* (wolves)

## Chapter One

"Kaine, are you okay?"

Coming back to consciousness with a start, Kaine Giliati bolted upright, her heart pounding not only from being startled but from the dream.

In her mind's eye, she still saw him. Glass-green eyes ringed in topaz, sharp cheekbones, strong jaw. An intensely masculine face framed by short, dark brown hair clipped close to the skull.

He'd been bending closer, nearly to her lips...

Blinking, Kaine registered the sight of Tira Belludi's concerned face staring down at her.

Shit. *Shit*. She'd fallen asleep on the couch in the living room of the home she shared with three of the people she trusted most in her life. Three people who cared about her, worried about her.

She saw the worry in Tira's eyes now, in the way she bit her bottom lip.

Worried because Kaine had been dreaming.

When she dreamed, she dreamed of him.

And longed for what she couldn't have.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Ti. Really." Maybe if she said it enough, it'd be true. "I'm fine. What's wrong?"

Tira shook her head slowly. "Nothing's wrong. I just...thought you called out. Were you..." Tira huffed, as though exasperated by trying to talk about the subject no one would broach.

Kaine didn't blame her, not one bit. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to worry you." And that was the absolute truth. "But I don't know what I was dreaming about."

And that was a big lie. *Huge* lie.

Which Tira knew. Her hands went to her hips and her mouth flattened into that line she got when one of her men tried to pull something over on her. Tira might look like a sweet little blonde cupcake but she had a backbone that was fast becoming steel-plated.

Kaine thought that was great. Really. Tira needed it to put up with the two men in her life who also happened to be Kaine's partners, Nic Rocca and Duke Ducati. Kaine knew from working with the men how overbearing they could be. How protective.

But Kaine didn't like when Tira turned that steel-plating her way.

"All right." Tira crossed her arms over her chest, her tone firm. "This has gone on long enough. You need to talk to someone. I'm here. The guys aren't. Please, Kaine."

We're worried about you. You haven't been yourself. Believe me, it'll be better if you do talk about it."

No, Kaine was pretty sure it wouldn't get any better if she talked about her problems. Because unlike Tira, who'd spent eight years separated from the men she loved and who loved her by her own design, Kaine's separation wasn't willing. Not on her part, anyway.

What was worse, the man didn't even know she existed. At least, not anymore.

So, yes, Kaine was pretty sure she didn't want to talk. She hadn't wanted to talk since that day a week ago when her commanding legion officer, Kyle Rossini, and his former partner, Dan Ferrante, had loaded two unconscious *eteri* in their car and driven them away.

"I'm fine."

Tira shook her head. "No, you're not." Moving to the front of the couch, she sat on the cushion beside Kaine. Tira didn't touch her and for that, Kaine was grateful. As a *strega*, an Etruscan witch, Tira had inherited her mother's Goddess Gift of *praenuntio*. That gift allowed her to see the future through skin-on-skin contact.

Kaine didn't want to know what her future held. She already knew what it *didn't*.

"I know you've been crying even though you try to hide it," Tira said. "The guys can't see the signs but I can. I know you're not sleeping well. And...I know you miss him."

Kaine dropped her gaze to stare at her hands, clenched into fists on her lap. With a conscious effort, she forced them to relax.

"Miss" was too tame to describe how she felt.

*Vaffanculo*, she'd only known John a couple of days. How could he—

"Kaine," Tira's voice snuck in under the wall of ice she was trying to erect against her emotions. "Just say it."

Her lips started to tremble but she bit them. Hard. The weight on her chest grew heavier. She felt like heated emotion was being forced through her entire body until finally she couldn't contain it anymore.

She opened her mouth to speak but the tears rolling down her cheeks must have released the floodgates. She sobbed. The sound frightened her because she never cried. Not since she'd been a kid.

Now hard sobs racked her body, making her feel horrible.

She wanted to curl into a ball and fade away until she didn't hurt anymore.

Gentle hands settled on her shoulders, guiding her down until she rested her head on Tira's denim-covered thigh as Kaine poured out her heart in her tears.

Outside, she heard the howl of the late February wind and thought how much it sounded like a wolf in pain.



\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, don't you have that job interview today?"

John Simmons set aside the classified section of the local paper and let his gaze scan his sister instead.

Standing beside the small kitchen table, Evangeline looked tired. Her pale gray eyes held shadows and her cheeks looked hollow. At five-one and a hundred and five pounds soaking wet, Evie had always reminded John of a pixie, pretty and delicate. Someone to be shielded and protected.

*Fucked up that job requirement, didn't you?*

Anger and frustration bubbled in his gut but he forced it back, hopefully without alerting Evie to its presence. "How'd you sleep, brat?"

She shrugged one too-slim shoulder before moving to the kitchen in their apartment in downtown Reading. Not hers. Not his. *Their* apartment. "Not too bad. No dreams last night so that's an improvement."

Yeah, it was. Although he couldn't say the same.

He had dreamed last night, the one he'd had every night for the past two weeks.

It always started the same way.

With the debilitating horror of discovering his sister had been kidnapped.

That was no dream. That had actually happened two weeks ago but the dream made him relive it again and again.

Then bits and pieces of his life flashed by, like a montage from a movie. The day he'd signed onto the Navy. The moment he'd received his Budweiser. Then the realization that his sister had missed her weekly call. And that he hadn't noticed until three days had passed.

That hadn't been a dream either.

He'd requested emergency leave and hopped the next flight back to Philadelphia before renting a car for the drive to Reading. He'd gone to her former apartment. He remembered opening the door, seeing the mess then being overpowered and waking in a cell with no windows.

Drugs had kept him docile while they'd done blood tests. His captors had never spoken to him or asked him questions. It'd been surreal, like he'd been thrown into a movie, one he'd never auditioned for.

They'd fed him, given him water but they'd never released him from the cage. Then one day, he'd read the lips of his captors and discovered the address where they were keeping Evie.

He'd escaped somehow. That part was fuzzy in the dreams, though when he was awake, he remembered exactly what had happened. His kidnappers had drugged him and left him there to die. But he'd managed to crawl out of the cell and out of the house.

Managed to remember where they'd been keeping his sister and he'd gone to save her. Alone.

He remembered fighting the kidnappers who finally ran off, leaving him and Evie to bolt in the opposite direction.

But then the dream got weird because the woman appeared. A woman he didn't remember ever meeting.

An exotically beautiful woman with huge, dark brown eyes, a full mouth and a shaggy mass of hair that ranged from shades of gray to brown to gold. Sleek and lightly muscled with small breasts and no hips.

She should have looked like a boy. John had no doubt she was all woman. His body yearned for her. But every time he dreamed of her, he never got to actually kiss her.

He wanted to kiss her with a passion that was becoming obsessive.

"Hey, John. Where'd you go?"

His gaze snapped back to his sister, now holding a cup of steaming coffee in her hand. Damn, he must have blanked for at least a minute while Evie stood there, staring at him with worry in her eyes.

No way did he want her to worry.

"Just thinking about the interview."

For a job he didn't want.

"John?"

Evie cocked her head to the side, wide gray eyes watching his every movement. His wild-child, fuck-authority, leap-first baby sister had become a timid mouse since the kidnapping.

She'd given him no hassle about dying her hair back to its natural light brown, losing the midnight black with blue streaks that would make her too noticeable.

She'd had it cut too, in a chin-length bob that made her look so much younger than her twenty-two years. She still had the multiple piercings in her ears, though the multitude of different earrings had been replaced with tiny silver hoops and balls. She'd removed the tiny diamond stud in her nose though the hoop remained in her bellybutton.

And now she jumped at shadows.

John had moved her out of her former apartment the day after they'd escaped. He'd considered moving them out of state but figured whoever had kidnapped them wouldn't expect them to stay in the area. They wouldn't look so close to home, if they looked at all.

As off-the-wall as it sounded, John had come to the conclusion that the kidnappers must have been organ harvesters. He could explain the testing no other way. He must not have had whatever they were looking for, but Evie...

Would they return for Evie? Common sense said they wouldn't but he wasn't taking chances.

He and Evie had stayed a few nights in a hotel before he'd found this apartment for them. Located in a decent neighborhood on Eleventh Street in Reading only a block from City Park, the apartment occupied the entire top floor of a townhouse.

From the front window, they looked down into the garden of the house on the other side of the street. From the back, they looked up onto Mt. Penn where the Pagoda, a bright red replica of a Japanese temple, lit the night with its vivid lights.

The building's owners, a middle-aged couple with no children, lived on the two floors beneath.

John had turned on the Navy charm to impress the couple, yes-ma'amed and no-sirred until they'd finally agreed to let them move in immediately. Of course, no one could resist Evie when she turned her imp smile on them. Adam and Beth Schultz had fallen under her spell immediately.

He'd used an alias to sign the lease, one only Uncle Sam would know was him. Evie hadn't batted an eye at the false name. Just as she hadn't cared when she'd called her boss at the preschool where she'd worked and was told she'd been fired for not showing up.

John had thought she'd loved that job.

"John, are *you* okay?"

He nodded, not trying to force a smile. She'd know it was fake and then she'd worry even more. "Mostly, yeah. What about you, Evie? How are you? We...haven't talked about what happened."

Because every time he broached the subject, her expression wiped clean. He hadn't known she could do that. She must have learned it from him. And she had her response down perfectly.

"I'm fine. Honestly. They didn't hurt me, didn't do anything except take some blood and hair samples." Then she dropped his gaze with the pretense of grabbing a box of donuts from the counter and setting them on the table.

She pulled out a powdered-sugar fat bomb and took a huge bite then nearly choked on it when he asked, "What about the police? Do you want to go to the cops?"

Her eyes widened again and John cursed himself for putting the fear there.

"Do you think we need to? I thought you said they wouldn't come after us again. That they were long gone and would think we were too. I don't want to go to the cops. No cops, John, you promised."

Yes, they'd agreed. John would take care of everything. He'd hide them in plain sight and deal with the bastards who'd kidnapped them.

He even had a lead, one he'd been following the past couple of days. Nothing to get too excited about yet but it was a name, something to go on.

"We can't go to the cops," she said, shaking her head.

Evie had been adamant about the no-cops thing and he couldn't—

Two lightbulbs burst in the ceiling fan in the living room showering tiny bits of glass over the couch and chair.

Evie jumped about a foot off the ground, gasping and trembling.

John stood, reaching for her to draw her into his arms and gather her against him. "Hey, it's okay. It's all right. It's just a couple of bulbs. A power surge. You're fine. I won't let anything happen to you. I'll clean it up before I go."

He hated that it took a full minute before she finally drew a deep breath and began to control the shakes. And he didn't try to restrain her when she pulled away from him.

"No. It's okay. I'm okay." She nodded as if trying to convince herself. "I'll clean it up. You better get moving. Don't want to be late for your interview."

Actually, yes, he did. He didn't want the damn job but they needed to eat and pay bills. He'd rather be out finding the bastards who'd stolen the light from his sister's eyes.

While he'd run wild after their dad's death when John was sixteen and Evie was eight, Evie had fallen into depression. He'd left his mom to deal with most of it when he'd chosen to enlist in the Navy right out of high school.

While he'd been straightening his life out in the Navy, Evie had gotten into drugs and alcohol as a teenager, which led to therapy and rehab at nineteen.

Then their mom had died two years ago in that fucking car accident. And John had thought he might lose Evie to the depression and the drugs again.

But she'd pulled through. She'd made a life for herself these past two years.

Until those kidnappers had done something to her.

He looked up at the now-dark light fixture.

Something strange.

Something John couldn't explain.

And was afraid he didn't want to.

## **Chapter Two**

*Two months later*

Shivering in the cool April morning, Kaine knelt on the patch of soft green moss in the woods behind her home and prayed to the Great Mother Goddess for a miracle.

"Blessed Uni, I'm begging here. Please, I'm just asking for a little help."

Closing her eyes, she turned her thoughts inward and called to her wolf.

She listened, strained to hear the answering howl in her head.

And heard only the birdsong in the trees around her.

Fear began to rise up but she forced it back with an effort of will and tried again.

She longed to feel the sharp prick of magic as it shot through her body, changing her very cells into those of a wolf. Longed for those milliseconds of sheer agony when her body shifted.

She was *versipellis lucani*. A wolf skin-shifter bred with magic in her blood and the ability to transform her body into that of a sleek gray wolf.

Only...she couldn't do it.

Her lips parted to draw in much needed air, even as she tried to control the impulse to hyperventilate.

She couldn't shift. Hadn't been able to for two months.

Not since John —

With a frustrated groan, she let herself curl into a ball, her naked body cushioned by the moss. Arms wrapped around her legs drawn up against her chest, she stared into the forest floor reawakening from its winter nap.

Spring in southeastern Pennsylvania was in full swing. The redbuds had already burst into vibrant violet blooms. The mayapples and dutchman's pipes were just beginning their show on the forest floor.

Kaine typically loved spring. She loved to run through the forest, the scents and sights enticing her to stop and sniff or chase and catch.

In her pelt.

Goddess, she wanted her pelt. Her human skin chilled and pebbled in the slight breeze. Her pelt would keep her warm. It'd —

She froze, catching the scent too late to sit and pretend everything was okay.

"Kaine."

Her fellow *sicari*, Duke Ducati, stepped into the private little hollow.

Together with Nic and their commanding officer, Kyle, she and Duke formed an elite branch of the *lucani* legion. They were the special ops force of the Etruscan military.

They did the wet work. They were *sicarii*, assassins.

They didn't lie down and cry when the going got tough. They were the ones the *lucani* king turned to when things *got* tough.

Sitting up, Kaine considered ignoring him. But damn it, she wasn't a coward.

She looked up into Duke's dark eyes. "I can't shift. I haven't been able to for two months."

Surprise flashed through his normally hard-edged expression for a brief second before he lowered himself to sit next to her and handed her the clothes she'd stacked in a pile next to the tree for her to dress. He stretched out long legs covered in black tactical pants, the pockets filled with at least two blades and maybe a garotte.

A dark gray t-shirt stretched over a multitude of muscles that would make any sane *eteri*, those regular humans with no magic, steer well clear of him.

Kaine knew just how strong the man was. And how dedicated he was to his friends.

"Did something happen?" he asked. "Are you injured?"

She shook her head. "Not that I know of." But she had her suspicions. "And... Well, it's probably better if I just show you. But you have to promise not to tell anyone. Not until I figure out what's going on. Please Duke. You have to promise me."

She watched as he considered her request, knowing he'd agree. Still, she waited until he gave his word. As well as she knew him, he also knew her. He knew she would hold him to his promise.

"All right, Kaine. I promise."

Holding her trembling hand over the ground at her side, she closed her eyes and envisioned the heat of her body entering the soil, calling to the still-dormant seeds, forcing them to break through the earth with their tiny stalks.

It didn't require much energy. Not as much as she would expend to call forth her pelt. If she could.

*Gods damn it.*

Opening her eyes, she saw a mat of green, new growth.

She'd caused that. She'd coaxed seeds to life that shouldn't have germinated for at least a month.

Turning, she saw Duke staring at her own little patch of the world.

"Well, shit," he finally said before turning back to her with stunned amazement in his eyes.

Yeah, that had been her reaction the first time she'd done it. Except she'd used a lot more obscenities.

She'd been sitting in the forest, pretty much exactly as she was now, trying to shift and having no luck. She'd curled up her fist and pounded at the earth. And watched as a thousand tiny little seedlings sprung from the soil.

She'd been shocked speechless then. Now, she didn't *want* to talk about it. She didn't want to know what was going on. She only wanted it to go away.

What if this was the reason she couldn't shift? What if something had happened to her and she'd never be able to shift again? What if she lost her wolf forever?

"Have you noticed anything else unusual?"

Duke had finally thought through all possible angles and figured this was the best one to approach the problem. Duke was good like that. If it'd been Nic who'd found her, they would've played Twenty Questions for hours.

"Except the fact that I can't call my wolf, no."

If she couldn't call her wolf, what would she do? She'd been born and bred to be a *lucani* soldier. It was all she wanted, all she'd *ever* wanted to be.

And she was a damn good *sicari*.

Duke fell silent again, his gaze glued to the tiny patch of green seedlings. After another minute or so, he stood. "Let's go. We're going to talk to Sal."

\* \* \* \* \*

John walked through the front door of Lacey's Stay-A-While a few minutes after seven p.m. on that Thursday night, did a quick visual then headed straight for the bar to his left.

He'd already ripped off the tie he was forced to wear for work. He'd stuffed that in the pocket of his ridiculous blue jacket seconds after he'd gotten in his car. Then he'd tossed the jacket in the backseat.

You'd think a multimillion dollar financial firm wouldn't hesitate to shell out money for decent uniforms to outfit their private security force, especially since there were only four of them.

John's immediate superior was a former Army Ranger. The other two guys had been police officers, one from New York City, the other Atlanta.

Good guys. Guys he understood.

The executives they were paid to keep safe? Assholes in thousand-dollar suits with no common sense or common courtesy.

Damn, he missed his SEAL team.

With a sigh, he slid onto one of the barstools, rolling up the sleeves on his white button-down and tearing open the top two buttons.

Evie was working the late shift at the restaurant and had said she wouldn't be home until after two. She'd just started the job a week ago and this was her first late night.

He'd offered to pick her up after her shift. Hell, he'd wanted to insist.

She'd merely lifted her eyebrows at him and told him *she* didn't need a bodyguard.

He still wasn't so sure of that. They'd had no trouble at all since their escape but that didn't mean there wasn't someone still out there looking for her. Or him.

No way would he say that to her, though. She was finally starting to come back to life.

So instead of sitting at home worrying about her, he figured he'd at least get out of the apartment, drink a few beers... Okay, more than a few beers.

Maybe a couple pitchers of draft and several shots of Jack. Hell, he wasn't driving. He only had to walk a block or so back to the apartment.

He wasn't leaving until he was sure he could sleep through the night.

Or pass out and spend a few hours unconscious.

At least then he'd have no dreams.

"What can I get you?"

John took the measure of the bartender in seconds. Tall guy with dark, curly hair and sharp, dark eyes that met John's squarely. "Don't Fuck With Me" should have been tattooed across his forehead.

John liked him already.

"Shot of Jack and a draft."

Since the taps were located right in front of John's stool, the bartender didn't have to move far. "Rough day?"

No, just... Just what?

The guy set the draft in front of him then turned for the Jack Daniel's bottle.

Staring at the dark amber liquid as it poured into the shot glass, John had the completely alien desire to spill his guts.

He sighed. "Just a long one."

"Yeah. Those suck too. You hungry?"

As a matter of fact... His stomach registered the mouthwatering scent of grilled meat and cheese coming from the kitchen in the back of the building. He typically didn't eat bar food. Too much fat and grease. But tonight... Fuck it.

"Cheeseburger, fries and whatever vegetable you've got as long as that's not fried."

The bartender nodded. "No problem. I'm Teo. You need anything else, just let me know."

John nodded as Teo walked away to place his order.

Wouldn't that be nice? If he could just tell someone what he needed and they'd give it to him?

Be easier if he knew what the hell he wanted to begin with.

\* \* \* \* \*



"You sure you want me to leave?"

The indecision on Duke's face nearly made Kaine laugh even though there wasn't much to laugh about.

Sal's bombshell still reverberated through her body. She almost felt like she'd been electrocuted. Her muscles snapped and pinged, her temples throbbed and her stomach rolled.

She didn't know whether she was going to pass out or puke at any given second. She thought she'd managed to hide it from Duke.

But she knew she wasn't pulling anything over on Salvatorus.

The centuries-old *salbinelli* sat on the couch, smoking a fragrant cigar. Half-man, half-goat, Sal was one of the most handsome men Kaine had ever known. He had strong Etruscan features, curly black hair and a pair of small black horns on his forehead that never failed to fascinate her.

As a guardian of the *Fata*, the fairy races of the Etruscans, Sal ran a safe house for those who needed a place to stay, a bed to sleep in. Or just needed counsel.

"I'll be fine, Duke. Sal and I have a lot to talk about."

Duke nodded though that was a severe understatement. "A lot" didn't cover it.

"I know, it's just..." Duke sighed, as if he didn't want to continue. "Look, I know how much you hate being in the city."

Which was something of an understatement. She *loathed* the city. All the concrete and brick and metal. Only tiny patches of grass and earth here and there.

She didn't know how Sal put up with it, but he'd lived here for centuries.

"I'm sure. It's just for the night. I'll be home tomorrow."

Hell, she wanted to be home now so she could crawl into her own bed and hide. Or maybe just forget everything Sal had told her.

Maybe she should go with Duke. She really didn't want to stay here. Not at all –

"She'll be fine, kid." Sal barely bothered to cover his amusement as he chomped on the end of his cigar and stood, practically shooing Duke to the front door. "Give your pretty Tira a kiss for me. Go on home."

*Home.*

Where Kaine wanted to be. Not sitting here in Sal's living room in the row house he'd occupied in south Reading for more than a century.

Oh, the surroundings were nice enough. The bright blue walls and white carpet on the white-washed floor reminded her of a beach house. Not that she'd ever been to the beach. She did love to watch HGTV decorating shows, though. The artistic process fascinated her and decorating definitely qualified as an artistic pursuit. Designers played with color and form and texture like artists did with oils and watercolors.

The loveseat and sofa were covered in sand-colored microfiber and the end tables were painted a distressed white.

The effect should have been peaceful, relaxing.

Kaine wished it would work on her.

The clop, clop, clop of Sal's hooves announced his return until they were muffled by the carpet.

She lifted her gaze and caught his dark eyes staring into hers.

She took a deep breath. "So my mom was *silvani*. And my dad never told me."

Just saying the word, *silvani*, made her shiver. Talking about her mom... That qualified for major shakes.

"I know you got issues with her, kid, but —"

"Issues?" Her eyes widened as she stared at Sal. "I have *issues* with her? My mom dropped me on my dad's doorstep hours after I was born and disappeared. I never knew her, Sal. What I don't understand is why my dad never told me she wasn't *lucani*."

All her life, Kaine had been *lucani*. She'd never questioned who or what she was. She'd learned not to ask about her mom because whenever she did, she saw the pain in her dad's eyes. And she loved her father too much to want to hurt him. She didn't ask.

She'd always assumed her mom was *lucani*.

Big mistake there.

And now Kaine couldn't shift and the knowledge that she wasn't full-blood *lucani* threw her perception of who she was into turmoil.

*Blessed Mother Goddess, why?*

Sal hopped up on the couch next to her. Her gaze dropped to see his hooves hanging inches above the floor.

It should look funny.

To an *eteri*, Sal would be a freak. She would be a monster. In her community, among her own kind, she'd been accepted. Respected. Loved.

Would the insular *lucani* continue to accept her as one of them? Especially now that she couldn't shift?

And what about her position as *sicari*? Would she be forced to resign?

Tears formed but she blinked them away. She wouldn't cry.

She was fucking finished with crying. It gave her a headache and made her feel weak. She refused to be weak.

"Kaine." Sal's voice had softened and lowered, as if he knew she was near the breaking point, that it would only take the slightest touch to send her over the edge. "This is not a death sentence. In fact, you may find this is a good thing. And in your dad's defense, he thought he was doing what was right for you."

Her gaze shot back to his. "By hiding half of what I am?"

Sal shrugged. "Why confuse you? Your mom left you with your dad as a baby. From that moment, you showed every sign of being a regular *lucani*. You shifted on

schedule. You never displayed any powers other than your wolf. Hell, you even inherited your dad's ability to track.

"Now, I'm not excusing your mother's actions. But maybe she thought she had a good reason for it. You've heard the stories, right? How the *Malandante* used to force the *lucani* to be their guard dogs, force them to do their dirty work. How they used *quercioli* to be their sex slaves. You've heard the story about *silvani* they tortured until they broke and then sapped them for their powers."

She'd heard the stories. Stories told to frighten young Etruscans. But what *eteri* parents and children believed were only stories about monsters, Etruscans knew to be the truth.

Then she thought of something she hadn't before. "Do you know who my mother is?"

Sal took a few seconds before answering. "I believe I do, yes."

Her mouth dropped open before she could stop it and she closed it with a snap. "And you never told me?"

She'd known Sal all her life. Hell, he'd babysat her on occasion.

He shook his head. "Not my place to tell."

Betrayal burned in her stomach like acid, wanting to bubble up through the rest of her body. "Then why now? Why even bother?"

"Because now you need to know. You're going to need to learn how to control these new powers because, yes, they're interfering with your ability to shift. And if you don't learn how to control them, you may never regain your wolf."

Could the hits get any worse? She thought she might buckle over from them. She physically felt every word like a blow to her body.

"What... How..." So many questions jumbled together in her head, she didn't know which one to ask first. And she wasn't sure she'd be able to understand anything Sal said at the moment anyway.

She wanted to run. She wanted to hound Sal for answers she might not want to know.

But there was one thing she *needed* to know. "Who is my mother?"

Sal settled back into the couch and she saw grief cross his expression. "Her name was Tekeias."

Tekeais. An old name, like Kaine's. Then she realized —

"Was? She's dead."

Sal nodded. "She was killed fighting off a *Mal* attempt to capture her, not long after your birth."

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, Kaine's head felt like someone had pounded a stake between her eyes.

She didn't think she could absorb any more information even though she still had so many questions rattling around in her overloaded brain.

Sal had finally fallen silent, his dark gaze steady on hers.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted one hand to her temples to rub at the throbbing pain there. She needed a drink, which was something of a shock because she wasn't much into alcohol.

Wine gave her a headache which lasted well beyond the slight buzz. Beer tasted like shit. Give her something sweet that didn't taste like alcohol and she'd be in business. Though it pained her to say, she liked girly drinks, sweet and frothy and fruity. Just don't put a little umbrella on the damn thing. She wasn't a wuss.

"Kaine, you all right?" Sal asked.

No, she wasn't. Not really. But neither was she completely overwhelmed. Maybe just slightly whelmed.

"I'm okay, Sal. I just..." Need some time. A little time to let everything settle into place so she could then break it down and examine all the little pieces.

Kind of like tracking.

First, you found the scent to get you started then you set out on the path and followed it to the end. She just needed to find that one piece of the puzzle to get her started so she could follow the rest of the pieces to a logical conclusion.

Right now, though, she couldn't find a starting point.

"I need to take a walk, Sal. I don't want to be rude but I could use a little...space."

His mouth quirked in a half-smile and he patted her knee. "No problem, kid. Why don't you head up toward Eleventh Street? There's a bar there, before you hit Penn Street. Lacey's. Etruscan friendly. Tell Lace and Teo I sent you. Try the burgers. Delicious."

Sure. Right. Burgers.

Grabbing her black sweatshirt, Kaine walked out the front door then stood on the front step, pulling the hoodie over her head.

Dusk had faded into night and there were only a few other people on the street. In her faded jeans and scuffed black combat boots, she fit right in. Her tight t-shirt was black too, an Avenged Sevenfold concert tee Duke had bought for her when he'd taken her to her first concert three years ago.

She knew she'd have to call Duke soon. He'd be worried. Nic, Duke and Tira treated her as their sister, cared for her like family and she didn't want them to worry. At least, she didn't want them to worry any more than they already were.

The whole John situation...

No, she definitely didn't want to think about that now.

Heading northeast, she went deeper into the heart of the city. She didn't pass many people at this time of night, close to nine o'clock, but those she did barely gave her a second look.

Most probably thought she was a teenage boy, and a skinny one, at that. Her breasts would barely show through the heavy sweatshirt and the hood covered her hair and face.

Walking along the concrete sidewalks, she felt the power of the ley line that ran through the city calling to her. That was what had drawn the Etruscans to relocate here in Berks County from Tuscany.

Many Etruscans still lived in the city, hiding in plain sight. The *lucani* had always lived on the outskirts, in the forests. They needed that connection to the earth, the ability to put their bare feet in the dirt, the space to run when they wore their pelts.

You couldn't do that in the city without getting shot at.

But in your skin, you could still walk through the streets, at least in this part of the city, without being accosted. No one had spoken to her all the way here and that suited her just fine. She was still processing, trying to find that path through the information.

She walked right past the bar and only realized she'd done it when she reached Penn Street. Doubling back, she took note of the sign and the word *taberna* worked into the design. The Latin word for tavern. A code for Etruscans that they were welcome here. And that if you tried anything stupid, you'd pay for it.

Kaine felt the power of the wards surrounding the building. Impressive. And comforting. This place reminded her of home.

Pushing open the front door, she let her gaze sweep the room. A few guys at the bar to the left, their attention glued to the TV in the corner showing the Flyers game.

A few people at tables, eating, talking, laughing.

She caught the eye of one of the men, who took her measure in seconds and nodded. Etruscans at that table. She could smell it on the air, the glaze of their magic overlaying the magic woven into the building itself.

There were a few humans here too but her thoughts were too disjointed, her emotions too jumbled. She dismissed their scents. Hell, she practically put up an invisible wall around her so she couldn't sense them. *Eteri* were nothing but trouble.

Scoping out the darkest corner of the room, she headed for the booth in the farthest corner from the bar. She didn't want to mingle. She just wanted a few drinks.

And the illusion that she wasn't completely alone in the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

John exited the bathroom, meaning to pay his tab and head home.

He'd probably had a few more shots than he'd needed but the room wasn't spinning so it was all good.

Sliding back onto his stool, he nodded to Teo, who turned to the cash register to print out his bill.

As John reached for his wallet in his back pocket, his gaze caught on the mirror behind the bar. In the far corner, a flash of movement had caught his eye.

Startled, he froze as part of his dream from last night replayed and he saw the woman with the multicolored hair in his mind's eye.

*Holy shit.*

His fuzzy brain stuttered to a stop as he stared into the glass.

He couldn't see the person's face but that absolutely stunning mix of brown, black, and gray hair was exactly what he remembered from his dream.

He stared harder, willing the person to look into the mirror so he could see her face. He knew it was a woman. He just knew. But she was facing away from the bar.

"Hey, man. You okay? You look a little pale."

Teo laid his bill in front of him and John automatically reached for it, pulling his gaze away from the mirror. "Yeah, I'm fine. Hey, you know, I think could use a cup of coffee, if you don't mind."

"You driving?" Teo's eyes had narrowed down to slits. "I can call you a cab."

"No. I actually live just up the street."

The worry left Teo's expression and he reached for a mug under the bar. "Move here recently?"

With a concerted effort, John kept his gaze from skipping to the mirror. "Couple months ago. Don't get out much. Long hours at work."

"Haven't seen you around before. My...wife and I live above the bar." He turned as a woman pushed through the doors from the kitchen. A real looker with a sweet smile and kiss for her husband. "Speak of the devil. Hey, Lace. Say hi to John. He just moved into the neighborhood."

"Hi, John. Nice to meet you." Then she reached up to pull her husband down for a brief but very hot kiss. One that made John drop his gaze. These two were in love. Hell, he could almost see the glow surrounding them. Then again, he'd had more than enough to drink tonight. He'd probably be seeing flying monkeys in his dreams tonight instead of stunning women with multicolored hair.

When Teo and Lacey broke apart, she let her fingers run down Teo's cheek before she waved those same fingers at John. "Gotta get to work. Talk to you later, John."

Then she headed straight for the table he'd been staring at.

And John nearly choked on air as the woman in the booth finally turned so he could see her face.

*Holy fuck.* It *was* the woman from his dreams.

No. No, that couldn't be right. He must have seen this woman on the street. Must have passed her one day as he was going to work.

Yeah, that made sense. A brief glance when he'd been rushing to get to his car in the morning. Maybe their eyes had caught and they'd exchanged hurried smiles.

But...why didn't he remember her? And why had she made such an impression on him that he dreamed about her but he didn't remember the first time he'd seen her?

She looked younger in person than she did in his dreams. Early twenties. Hell, could she really be almost a decade younger than him? He was only thirty. But she had to be at least twenty-one to be in here this late at night. Right?

Lifting the mug to his lips, he dragged his gaze away as Lacey returned to the bar and began making what looked like a margarita.

Damn, what the hell should he do?

His legs twitched with the expectation of movement. He had the almost overpowering urge to go over and introduce himself but wasn't sure if he should.

Christ, he felt like a kid with a crush.

He'd never had a reaction like this to a woman before. Not even the one he'd considered asking to marry him. It just didn't make any fucking sense.

And the last thing he needed in his life right now was a woman. He had enough on his plate with this new job and his sister.

He must be drunker than he thought. So he'd have a couple cups of coffee.

And maybe he'd go over and introduce himself in a few minutes.

What could it hurt?

\* \* \* \* \*

Kaine had a double margarita and was feeling no pain.

For the short time the tequila in her drink affected her, since a *lucani's* increased metabolism worked alcohol out of the system faster than an *eteri's*, everything seemed to settle.

And wasn't that one huge, fucking relief. She could shut all thoughts of John, her mother, the loss of her shifting ability and the growth of her new powers out of her mind and simply sit here and stare at nothing.

With her back to everyone else in the bar, the only person she'd talked to had been the owner, Lacey. A pretty, feminine *Fata* with kind blue eyes and a sweet smile, Lacey had taken her order and addressed her by name.

Sal must have called ahead. The guy was worse than her dad. Then again, she probably hadn't looked all that steady when she'd walked out of his house. Maybe he thought she'd throw herself under a bus or something.

Not that she'd ever think of doing anything like that. She wasn't a coward.

She had problems? She fixed them.

She'd figure this out.

Tomorrow.

Yeah, tomorrow sounded good.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes and let her head rest against the high back of the padded booth. Taking a deep breath, she —

*Holy shit.*

Her eyes flew open as she caught the hint of a too-familiar scent.

Heart pounding at attack pace, her gaze fixed on the worn leather of the booth seat across from her.

It couldn't be. What were the odds that John Simmons was here?

She hadn't seen him since the day he'd chosen to forget all about her. Kyle had expressly forbidden her from tracking him and his sister, Evie.

After the *lucani* had saved John and his sister from the red-haired woman, John had told them he didn't want the *lucani's* protection. He wanted to forget their existence. He'd protect his sister. He'd make them disappear.

Of course, Kaine hadn't listened to Kyle. She'd gone to Evie's apartment a few days later, but it'd been empty. She'd struggled with the decision to let it go. To let *him* go.

And finally, she'd returned home to face the other problems in her life. Her inability to shift. The arrival of these new, unwelcome powers.

How cruel would fate be to throw him back in her path now?

Pretty fucking cruel. She'd met the Etruscan Goddess of Fate. Nortia had a mean streak.

Taking another deep breath, she knew absolutely that John was here in the bar.

How had she missed his scent the first time around?

Blessed Goddess, she must be further gone than she'd thought. To have missed someone's scent like that... It was unthinkable for a *lucani*.

*But you aren't just lucani, are you?*

*Shit. Shit.*

She had to get out of here. Now. She needed to leave. She couldn't see him.

*Just one look.*

Goddess, she wanted to see him again. How the hell could someone she'd spent so little time with, and who was horrified by her very existence... How could he make her heart race like this? Make her fingers ache to touch him, her arms to hold him? To be held by him?

Tinia's teat, she had to get out of here. If he saw her and she didn't see a spark of recognition in his eyes, she might just crawl into a hole and not emerge. Not ever.

No. No, this pity shit wasn't her. Her back stiffened.



Gods damn it, she wasn't some weak-kneed, pansy-assed girl. She was *sicari*. Her king trusted her to handle whatever mess he threw at her. Her commanding officer trusted her to watch his back and the backs of her partners.

She just needed to get the hell out of here. Now.

Away from him. Away –

“Hi.”

She froze, like a rabbit in sight of a larger predator. His voice, deep and raspy like one of Duke's favorite metal singers, stroked against her alcohol-loosened libido and made her go wet.

Barely able to breathe, she couldn't believe he was standing next to her. For two months, she'd dreamed about him, longed for him.

“Hey, I don't mean to bother you, and I know this is gonna come off like a bad pick-up line but... Have we met?”

Forcing a polite smile, Kaine lifted her gaze to his, bracing herself for impact.

And had to bite her tongue to force back tears.

Gods, he was just as handsome as she remembered.

His brown hair was a little longer than it had been. He actually had to comb it now where before it'd been military short. His sharp green eyes watched her every move but it was his smile that nearly made her lose her grip on the tears.

She'd never seen him smile. It made his usually solemn expression lighten in ways that urged her to get closer. To put her hands on his face and draw him down so she could taste him, run her tongue across his lips and tempt him to invade her mouth with his tongue.

She felt her will literally tremble. She wanted to press herself against him, feel the firm muscles she knew he possessed beneath the white button-down. He wasn't made to wear dress shirts and silky dark pants, no matter how well they fit him. He was meant for worn jeans or tactical pants and tight t-shirts.

He wasn't made to be confined in a corporate job. He'd been a soldier. Like her.

Now... What was he doing now?

Did she even want to know?

“No, sorry. I don't think so.”

She nodded then, as if dismissing him. Or giving him permission to leave.

Why the hell had he approached her in the first place?

Her brain locked as the implications of that thought worked through.

Had the *streghe* spell wiping his memories not worked? Did he remember something, anything from the few days he'd spent with the *lucani*? Did he remember her?

With an effort, she gave him one more brief, polite smile and dropped her gaze back to her drink, willing him to go away.

He didn't take the hint.

"Yeah, look," he said with a sigh. "I know you're trying to get rid of me, but can I tell you something before you send me packing?"

She should tell him to get lost, blow him off or freeze him out. She'd been told she was good at the freeze-out. She'd been told that several times, as a matter of fact. Actually, most guys just told her she was a frigid bitch.

She couldn't do it to John.

Taking a healthy sip of her drink, she prepared to torture herself.

She let her gaze connect with his again. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. It's been a long day. Why don't you have a seat?"

He didn't rush to slide into the opposite side of the booth but he didn't take his time either. "Thanks." He stuck his hand across the table. "I'm John."

She hesitated for a second before taking his hand. She hadn't touched him for two months and even when she'd been close enough the last time, she'd been too afraid he'd reject her to even try.

Now, as their palms met, she knew he felt the jolt of electricity that traveled between them. Her thighs tightened and her lungs stopped working.

With an effort, she forced herself to release him, to hide any reaction. She wasn't a teenager with no control of her hormones. Except, he seemed to be the only one who made her hormones behave like this.

"Kaine. Nice to meet you." *Again.*

He released her as soon as she started to pull away and she wondered how fricking bipolar she had to be because she wanted him to *not* want to release her.

"Unusual name." His gaze sharpened, as if he recognized it. Or if he was trying to remember why it sounded so familiar.

Or maybe she was reading too much into this. Maybe he was simply attracted to her.

It'd been known to happen.

"It's a family name." A very ancient one, though he didn't need to know that.

"It's beautiful."

A real smile slipped past her guard and pleasure lit her from the inside like a candle flame. Uni's ass, she must be out of her mind.

But she'd be damned if she cared at the moment.

"Thank you."

He didn't say anything else as his gaze slipped down to her lips. She swore she felt his desire for her like a physical caress.

He wanted her.

Oh, gods. That candle flame burst into a bonfire.

She wanted him with a passion unlike any she'd known before.

"Sorry." He finally lifted his gaze back to hers with a rueful smile. "I don't mean to stare or make you uncomfortable. And I know this is going to sound unbelievable but...I swear I had a dream about you last night."

She couldn't hide her immediate first reaction – shock. It rocketed through her body like adrenaline, making her heart pound and her lungs constrict. Followed closely by the urge to crawl across the table so she could kiss him.

*And you could have him. He wants you.*

She saw his desire for her in the heat of his gaze, in the way he stared at her.

And Blessed Goddess, she wanted him so badly.

She wanted just one night with him.

What harm could come from it?

They were both a little drunk. If she was gone when he woke in the morning, he'd never be able to find her. Hell, maybe he wouldn't even look.

But she'd have the memory of his touch. And maybe this would allow her to sleep at night without dreaming of him.

She looked into his eyes again, feeling the pull of his attraction, the drop in her stomach. The emotion that threatened to choke her.

No, that wasn't going to happen.

"I hope it was a good dream."

His smile slowly faded but his desire became a palpable force. She felt it rub against her senses, as if he was stroking her pelt.

And she really didn't want to think about that now.

Their gazes locked, John nodded slowly. "Yeah, it was."

She could barely breathe but forced the words out of her mouth. "I could use a good dream."

She'd never been one to flirt and tease. She'd been a tomboy all her life, and a loner at that.

Before John, she hadn't found a man she wanted to flirt with. She'd had sex, yes, but that had been more about curiosity and scratching an itch.

John had been the first man to make her want...something more. An emotional attachment. Even if it could only be for one night.

And if all she had was this night, then she damn well didn't want to waste time trading longing glances in a bar.

She needed to cut to the chase. "Do you live close, John?"

He blinked, the only sign that her question might have startled him. "Yeah, I do. Would you like to come back to my place for a drink, Kaine?"

She opened her mouth to agree but caught herself just before she did. What would he think of her if she merely followed him back to his apartment? Would he think she was a slut? Or just plain crazy?

Did *eteri* women blindly follow men they'd only just met back to their homes for sex? Especially big, strong ones?

She could protect herself from pretty much anything an *eteri* dished out, even John. But he didn't know that.

As she considered her options, he leaned away from her, as if trying to give her some space. The problem was, she didn't want space. She wanted him to crowd against her, to tear her clothes off and ravage her. To make her scream out his name while he pounded into her.

The image stole her breath.

John backed off just a little farther. "Or you could let me buy you a —"

"Yes, I'd love to go back to your place."

If John had second thoughts, he never showed them as he slid out of the booth then waited for her to follow. He held out his hand to help her to her feet but released her immediately so she could grab her hoodie.

Both of them threw money on the table to cover their bills and, without another word, they walked out into the spring night.

## Chapter Three

The cool night air seeped into John's clothing as he and Kaine walked at a steady pace toward his apartment.

It helped to contain the raging lust coursing through his body.

He was starting to wonder if he was more drunk than he'd thought. He'd never had this reaction to a woman. Hell, not even when he'd been a teenager and perpetually horny.

This was...almost like a fever, one he had to get under control before they reached the apartment. The way he felt right now, he'd be ripping off her clothes before he got her inside.

Cars zoomed by, the thump of a bass and the annoying buzzsaw of a fucked-up muffler filling the air. They didn't speak but the silence between them wasn't uncomfortable. It held anticipation that grew with every step.

He glanced at his watch. Almost ten p.m. At least four hours until Evie got home.

He didn't want to waste a second. He thought about picking her up and running for the apartment but figured that might be pushing it.

She could get frightened and bolt, even though he hadn't had to twist her arm to get her to leave with him.

He'd been almost afraid to touch her since they'd left the bar because maybe he was dreaming and he didn't want it to be over yet.

Hell, she'd practically flat-out asked to come home with him.

Maybe he should be worried that she'd agreed so fast. She didn't know him but she didn't seem to have any fear of him. Did that mean she was a nutcase?

Or did she feel the same irrational lust for him that he did for her?

He stole a glance down at her, walking at his side. The top of her head barely reached his shoulder and that unusual hair hid her features from view. She looked like a teenager, and a boy, at that, with the hoodie covering her from her shoulders almost to her knees.

He couldn't wait to strip her down to her skin and reveal the sleek, muscled body he suspected was hidden under all that clothing.

She wasn't anything like the women he typically dated. She wasn't blonde and built like a supermodel. And she probably had more brains than his last three dates combined.

Kaine's dark eyes held a sharp intelligence and she walked with a confidence most men didn't have.

It made him hot as hell.

He walked faster and though her legs were shorter than his, she had no trouble keeping up.

Just before they reached the house with the rose hedge that he could see from the apartment's front window, John touched her shoulder and directed her to cross the street.

Unable to help himself, he let his hand rest on her elbow. For some reason, he needed that contact, needed to touch her.

She didn't pull away.

Taking her around the side of the building, he opened the private entrance to the stairway to their third-floor apartment.

He waved her in front of him and nearly tripped up the steps as he watched her tight ass sway under the hoodie all the way up the stairs.

By the time they reached the top floor, he had a hard-on threatening to bust his jeans. He had to unclench his fists to get the key out of his pocket and the width of his hand tightened the material against his cock until he hissed in a sharp breath between his teeth.

She glanced up at him at that moment, her dark gaze meeting his. The raw lust in her expression made something snap inside him.

Like an overwound rubber band breaking, his control shattered and it was all he could do to fumble the key into the lock and get the door open.

He crowded against her, practically pushed her into the apartment, wanting to cover her with his body.

Irrational instinct made him want to subdue her even though he knew she wouldn't submit. At least, not without a fight.

Christ, he looked forward to the challenge.

He couldn't quite contain his groan when she reached for him. But he nearly came in his pants when she gripped his shirt and ripped it open.

Buttons flew, cotton tore and for one brief second, he thought he could contain the animalistic lust that made him want to pull down her pants, toss her over the arm of the couch and fuck her hard and fast.

"Christ, Kaine—"

"Shut up and kiss me, John. Please."

It was the "please" that broke his control, combined with the heat in her eyes.

He dropped his mouth over hers, but he didn't have to go far because she reached up to meet him.

He lifted his hands to cup her face but she had his shirt down around his elbows by that time. For a brief second, as his mouth opened over hers and their tongues clashed

for that first, intoxicating taste, he was trapped. He couldn't move his arms, he couldn't touch her and that nearly made him crazy.

With a growl, he snapped his arms straight so the shirt could fall away. Hands now free, he reached for her jeans, for the zipper.

But of course, her jeans didn't have a zipper. Four difficult buttons impeded his progress and he needed both hands to open them.

He felt her hands pull his plain white undershirt out of his waistband and the touch of her skin on his overheated flesh made him groan into her mouth.

She kissed him with the same desperation he felt as he worked the buttons. Her hands spread across his back for a brief second, as if soaking in his heat. Then she went to work on his belt and pants. Scant seconds later, he felt his pants drop to the floor and her hands pushed under the waistband of his boxer briefs to cup his ass.

Oh, *fuck*.

His cock throbbed as he toed off the loafers he hated and pushed her tight jeans down her legs. Releasing her mouth for two seconds, he bent to toss his wallet at the couch then rose to tear the sweatshirt over her head and settle his mouth over hers again.

He couldn't get enough of her taste, so hot and sweet, as he swept his hands down her arms just to feel the silk of her skin before he grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and lifted that as well.

Now he took a moment to look down, to take in the sight of Kaine naked and beautiful before him.

She wore no bra and didn't need one. Her breasts were small but perfect, high and hard, her nipples tight and ruddy red.

He wanted to stop and stare but her hands continued to move, pulling up his undershirt so she could rip it over his head. Then she grabbed the waistband of his boxer briefs. He sucked in a breath as her hands brushed the tip of his cock before she yanked the briefs down his legs.

His hands covered her breasts at the exact moment one of hers wrapped around his shaft and the other cupped his balls.

Kaine gasped, her eyelids fluttering shut for a brief moment before she lifted her head to stare into his eyes. In the darkness of the apartment, her eyes looked black, bottomless. He had the oddest sense that he'd seen them before and not just in his dreams.

Then his body shuddered as she began to slide her warm hand up and down his shaft.

She held his gaze as she did it, watched as he fell more deeply under her control. It was a strange sensation. Typically, he was the one in control during sex, just by virtue of his personality.

He'd let this woman he'd just met do whatever she wanted.

And right now, she wanted to stroke him. Slow and tight, she pumped his shaft as her other hand played with his balls. Her steady motion combined with her hot gaze made his heart pound while his blood heated.

*God damn, her hands...*

He felt the heated rush of orgasm building and wanted to come right then. Just let himself go in her hands.

It almost seemed as if that's what she wanted.

Shit, was he that much of a pushover?

*Fuck no.*

Without warning, he grabbed her under the arms and lifted her so her feet hung off the ground. Luckily, she released him, her hands going instead to his shoulders as he started to walk. He only needed to go a few steps. The couch was right behind him.

But she wasn't going to let him get that far.

Her hips shifted as she lifted her legs around his waist. And the tip of his cock slid against the wet lips of her pussy.

They both gasped, and electricity sparked through John's body as he shuddered to a stop.

"Christ, Kaine," he gritted through clenched teeth. "Don't—"

She arched her back, moving her hips until she had his cock poised to enter. "Shut up and do me. Please."

He didn't think he'd be able to stop now if the world was ending.

Reaching between her legs, he positioned his cock and thrust into her.

Tight, hot. Holy hell, she clasped him like a fist. So tight he was almost afraid to thrust again for fear he'd hurt her.

But then she moved, wriggling against him, his shaft forging more deeply into her, every inch a victory that made him feel like a conquering hero. He wanted to savor the moment.

"Oh gods, John." She sounded almost as if she were going to cry. "Don't stop. I need you."

And he needed her. So much so, he burned with it.

Forcing himself to take the last few steps, every movement causing lust to streak through his body, he made it to the couch and sank down in the middle.

Then, like they'd done this a hundred times before, Kaine's knees bent on either side of his hips as he grabbed hers and sealed her mouth with his.

He drew back to thrust again and felt something cool touch his thigh.

His wallet.

*Shit.* Condom. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten one 'til now.



"Kaine, hang on." By touch, he fished the condom from his wallet and eased her off him for the few seconds it took to sheath himself.

"What – Oh." She watched his every move, her body trembling.

When he reached for her, she practically dove into his arms, lifting her hips and sliding down on him so fast, she took his breath away.

Then she started to move.

Kaine set the pace, hard and fast, and he let her. She kissed him with fire and passion, her tongue mimicking the thrust of his cock into her body.

Cupping her ass with one hand, he moved the other between their bodies, sliding a finger between them so he could flick her clit with each downward thrust. She moaned into his mouth, her hands clutching at his shoulders as if he might try to get away.

Their skin slickening with sweat, they strained together as one. John felt her every breath, every pulse of her muscles around him. The intensity of their passion felt like adrenaline rushing through his blood.

He couldn't hold her close enough, couldn't get deep enough inside her. He needed her to come, to feel her break apart around him, because it was him.

With each flick of his finger, he learned what made her moan, what made her shudder. Feeling his own release building, he stroked her clit and had the fierce satisfaction of feeling her body tighten just before her contractions started, milking his cock until he exploded into the warmth of her body.

For the first time in forever, he wished like hell that he wasn't wearing a condom. That he was pumping his seed deep inside her. Making her his.

Forcing the thought out of his head, he wrapped his arms around her still shaking body, her head falling onto his shoulder and her warm breath blowing against his skin.

"Jesus, that was fast."

Well, shit. The filter between his brain and his mouth must have dissolved along with his control.

She shook against him and it took him a few seconds to realize she was laughing.

"Yeah, it was." She leaned away, just far enough to stare into his eyes. "But I don't have a curfew. Do you?"

Amazingly, heat began to build. "No, no curfew."

Her smile made his cock twitch. "Then I guess we have time to go for slow."

Kaine tried not to smile like an idiot but couldn't quite manage to control it.

She'd like to think the alcohol was still a factor but she knew better.

It was all John.

With his arms wrapped around her and their bodies still joined, she wanted to rest her head on his shoulder and sleep. Then let him wake her as he carried her to bed so they could explore each other more thoroughly.

This first time had taken off some of the edge but she still wanted him.

*Would always want him.*

No, she wasn't going to think about that. That way led to heartbreak and tears.

As if he sensed her distress, John tilted his head back to look at her. His gaze held a question but she had no desire to talk. She only wanted to touch him, kiss him. She wanted him inside her body, making her forget everything but physical ecstasy.

Pressing her mouth against his, she kissed him hard, let their lips meld together and her tongue slip against his as he responded to her kiss.

His hands, already spread across her back, flexed and kneaded then started to slide down until he cupped her ass in his hands. His body radiated heat and strength. Her hands smoothed from his shoulders down to his bulging biceps.

She reveled in the feel of his skin against hers and her hips rolled as he twitched inside her.

He drew back with a groan and she would have followed him if he hadn't cupped her face in his hands to halt her progress.

"Hang on."

She had a moment to realize what he intended before he slid forward on the couch, wrapped his arms around her and stood, the strong muscles of his legs bunching beneath her thighs before he lifted her higher on his body.

As he stood, his cock slid from her and she swallowed at the sensation against her most sensitive skin.

With her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist, he carried her like she weighed nothing. The apartment wasn't huge and it took less than a minute for him to reach his bedroom.

Even though it was dark, she could see the Spartan nature of the room.

A chest against the wall, another next to the bed that was smaller than her own at home.

He pulled the comforter down and set her on the cool sheets before leaning down to kiss her hard and fast. "You need to use the bathroom?"

She shook her head, restraining herself from grabbing onto those strong arms and pulling him back to her.

"Then I'll be right back," he said.

Nodding, she let her fingers curl into the sheets. "Hurry."

He sucked in a sharp breath, as if she'd stroked him. His jaw set and he nodded just once before striding through a door on the opposite side of the bed.

She watched him walk away, watched the muscles of his thighs and ass bunch and move under his skin.

Blessed Goddess, the man was a work of art.

She was still staring at the door when it reopened and he stepped out again. He'd gotten rid of the condom and his cock had already hardened enough to stand away from his body.

She couldn't help her smile. He wanted her, maybe as much as she wanted him.

Turning toward him, she watched him stop several feet away from the bed and let his gaze travel her entire body. He started at the top of her head, held her gaze for only seconds before moving onto her lips. Her mouth parted under his stare as if he'd pressed his lips against hers and she had to work to draw in air to her starved lungs. That drew his eyes down to her breasts.

Kaine had never had any reason to care what anyone else thought of her body. She didn't have an ounce of fat on her and she wasn't overly muscled. But she definitely didn't have a chest that drew men's attention. At least not other men's attention. John seemed to like what he saw, if the faster pace of his breathing and the hardening of his erection was anything to go by.

She wanted to lay back on the bed and stretch, preen for him. She'd never considered doing that for anyone else.

When his gaze dropped again, and settled on the dark curls between her thighs, she felt moisture well in her pussy.

If he were *lucani*, he'd be able to smell how aroused she was. Hell, maybe he could anyway.

His expression hardened with lust, the hands at his sides tightening into fists before he forced them to relax as he took the few steps back to the bed.

When he finally stood beside the bed, she thought he'd join her. Instead, he stopped with his knees almost against the side of the mattress, close enough to touch, and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

"I know this is going to sound really stupid after what we just did but...are you sure we haven't met before?"

It took all her acting ability to let her mouth curve in a slight smile. "I'm pretty sure I would've remembered you, John."

He nodded, releasing an amused breath. "Yeah. I feel the same. But damn it, I swear I've been dreaming about you."

Her heart nearly jumped into her throat. Goddess, what she wouldn't give to have him truly remember her. And accept her for what she was.

But that would never happen. This night was the only time they'd have. And she wasn't about to kill the mood by dissolving into a puddle of tears now.

Maneuvering her body until she lay on her back, she curled one arm over her head and let the other drape over her stomach. She wanted him to join her, not break her heart with his talk of dreams. "Well, you're not dreaming now."

Flattening her hand on her stomach, she let her fingers just brush against the curls on her mound. His eyes narrowed as he followed her movement, his cock pulling high and tight against his stomach.

Letting her hand drift lower, she used her middle finger to tease her clit, spreading her legs so John could watch.

She forced herself to keep her own eyes open. When she'd gotten herself off in the past couple of months, she'd always had her eyes closed, thinking of him. Now he stood here next to her and she wanted to make sure she saw him watch her. At least until she couldn't take it anymore and made him cover her with his body and fuck her into oblivion.

Her body trembled with lust, her lungs straining for air as she stroked her clit. Pleasure tingled in her pussy and deeper, clenching spasms made her sheath burn to be filled.

By him. Only by him.

She was on the brink, just from the touch of her own finger and his proximity, his gaze on her. She wanted to come, needed to —

Her eyes closed and in the next second, John pushed his legs between hers, spreading her wide as he grabbed her hand and held it up and away from her.

She released a frustrated cry that was cut short when he put his mouth over her lower lips and set about making her come with practiced skill and determination.

The hand he wasn't holding away reached for his head, brushing against the short strands, trying to get a grip. She needed to hold onto something or she was afraid she'd fly apart.

Lacing his fingers with hers, he anchored her as his tongue licked through her lips, flicked her clit then plunged into her, fucking her, making her cry out his name.

She was panting by the time she finally splintered. Her body snapped against him as she came, her release flowing into John's mouth as he continued to tongue her.

She hadn't stopped shuddering when he lifted his head and started kissing his way up her body. His tongue flicked into her bellybutton before making a path to her breasts. Small and extremely sensitive, her nipples peaked and hardened when he sucked one and then the other between his lips. Her back arched off the bed when he bit her.

"John."

He strung a line of kisses between her nipples then sank his teeth into the underside of her breast, almost but not quite hard enough to leave a mark.

"Shh, sweetheart. I know."

His hand released hers as she felt him reach across the bed as his mouth settled over hers.

He kissed her with enough heat to fry all her circuits and she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders to hold on.

"No, reach up, Kaine. Hold onto the headboard."

She obeyed immediately, so completely unlike her but then she'd never felt like this about anyone, had never wanted to give up that much control to anyone. Only to him.

Wrapping her fingers around the curved spindles, she watched as he sat back on his heels and tore open the condom with his teeth.

She almost told him not to bother. She knew he didn't have any diseases and neither did she. And if she got pregnant—which was highly unlikely given that he was *eteri* and she *lucani*—it wouldn't matter one rat's ass to her. If she couldn't have him, at least she'd have his child.

But she knew he would have questions if she told him to forget it.

So she watched as he rolled it in place, shaking with desire, nearly crying with it.

Finally, he kneed her legs apart even farther, spreading her open as he lowered himself over her.

He put his elbows on either side of her head, his body covering hers completely as the head of his shaft nudged at her entrance. His eyes locked with hers, he began to push into her, so slowly she thought she'd have to scream at him to go faster. His glacial pace made her feel stretched to the point of pain, invaded.

Completely conquered.

She couldn't get enough. She wanted to melt into his skin, fuse together with him so they were one.

And then they were. He was buried deep and didn't seem in too much of a hurry to move again.

"Damn, you're tight." He'd lowered his head so he could whisper in her ear, the stubble on his cheek rasping against hers. "I can feel your muscles still pulsing around me."

"I want you to move, John."

"Say my name again."

"John. Please."

He groaned, his heated breath bathing the side of her neck as he slowly flexed his hips and retreated until his cock nearly slipped free.

"John."

He plunged forward, hard this time. "Keep saying my name and I'll give you anything you want."

"John."

She chanted his name as he filled her over and over, his hips snapping forward as her ankles locked at the small of his back to hold on. The bed rocked with his thrusts, but she barely moved because he had her trapped beneath him.

Time became inconsequential.

His mouth dipped to cover hers and his kiss was long and languid, firing the heat in her blood. When he finally broke away to suck in a deep breath, his pace picked up.

His hips churned faster, and she felt another orgasm cresting, burning her.

When she came, her hips lifted into his, trying to get him as deep as she could until she felt him groan, his cock pulsing inside her, his mouth sealing hers again.

How the hell was she ever going to leave him?

## **Chapter Four**

Kaine murmured the spell that would keep John asleep while she slipped out of his bed and out the door.

The clock on the bedside table said 2:08 a.m. and she had to leave. Right now. If she stayed another minute, watching him sleep, she was afraid she'd never have the strength to go.

Her stomach clenched into a tight ball and her heart beat like a trapped bird. Her tongue tripped over the simple spell and she forced herself to take a deep breath and begin again.

If he woke while she was sneaking out...he'd have questions. Maybe he'd ask to see her again and she'd have to lie and say okay and give him a false cell number.

And if he didn't... If he patted her on the ass, said "Hey, it was great, see ya around" and sent her on her way...

That might just kill her.

No, this was for the best.

When she felt the spell take hold, felt the slight disturbance in the energy around him, she slid out of bed and forced herself to get the hell out of his bedroom. Her clothing lay scattered across the living area, a visual reminder of the intensity with which he'd wanted her. Hell, he'd practically devoured her.

John had made her feel desired. As if he couldn't breathe without touching her just one more time.

She'd felt loved.

Shaking her head at the complete and utter bullshit running through it, she dressed as quickly as she could. She was pulling on her boots when she realized someone had just opened the front door.

With a gasp, she stood to see a woman standing in the doorway, staring at her with wide eyes as her mouth hung open.

Kaine registered the other woman's fear first and foremost before she realized that this was John's sister, Evie. She'd changed her hair color and had it cut since the last time Kaine had seen her. The changes made her look... Well, normal was the only thing Kaine could come up with.

Before, John's younger sister had looked a little wild. A little out of control, on the edge.

Now, she just looked normal.

And scared.

Kaine forced a sheepish smile and raised her hand in greeting. "Hi."

Evie didn't move. She stayed in the doorway as if ready to run at any second.

So Kaine kept moving, slowly so as not to scare her any more than she already was. She picked up her hoodie and pulled it over her head. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. I was just on my way out. You're Evie, right? John told me you and he lived together."

"And you are?"

Kaine didn't blame Evie for the suspicion in her tone. The woman had been kidnapped and subjected to testing for something she would never understand. While the *streghe* had taken all of John's and Evie's memories of the Etruscans, they had left the siblings with everything else that had happened to them.

Of course the woman would be frightened to find someone she didn't know in their apartment.

"I'm Kaine. Your brother and I, ah, met at the bar down the street tonight. We came back here for, ah, drinks."

*Yeah, right. Why the hell didn't you just say you came back here to bang his brains out?*

Evie's eyebrows lifted as the realization of what Kaine wasn't saying filled her expression. "And where's John?"

Kaine felt an actual blush paint her cheeks, though not from embarrassment. Images from their time together ran through her head. "He's in bed. Asleep. I need to get up for...work tomorrow so I need to go. Now. Yeah, I can't stay."

Blessed Uni, could this get any worse? She needed to leave. Right now, before she said something incredibly stupid.

"Uh huh," Evie said as she finally moved into the room, though she stayed near the door she hadn't closed. "So you're leaving?"

"Yes." Kaine nodded, trying to contain the gamut of emotions threatening to swamp her as she pulled her hoodie over her head. "I'm going right now. Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Do I know you?" Evie asked. "Have we met?"

Kaine tried not to let the shock of Evie's questions show on her face even as adrenaline raced through her system at the scent of magic coming from the other woman.

What the hell was going on?

The *streghe* had supposedly erased all traces of magic from Evie after she'd been infected by the woman who'd kidnapped her. Using a mishmash of spells from all sorts of origins including Etruscan, Egyptian, Celtic and Norse, the woman had given Evie the ability to call power, much like the Etruscans did. But whatever had been done to her, it'd nearly destroyed her.

Evie had had no control over the power. She'd been dangerous, to herself and others. If the *streghe* hadn't been able to scrub it from her system, they never would



have released her. She would've been unstable and dangerous. A time bomb waiting for a trigger to set it off.

So why the hell did she still smell like magic?

With as much calm as she could pull together, Kaine slowly approached Evie. She kept her expression friendly and a little abashed. As if she were embarrassed at being caught sneaking out of John's bed.

Evie watched her as warily as a cat being stalked by a larger predator, her hands curling into fists at her sides, ready to defend herself if necessary.

When she was only a few feet from the door and Evie, Kaine smiled. "Sorry, I don't think we've ever met."

Nodding slowly, her gaze still locked on Kaine's, Evie took a deep breath. Then another. And another.

Kaine's gaze narrowed. "Hey, are you okay?"

She automatically reached out to touch Evie, to offer her some comfort but Evie pulled away as if Kaine had drawn a knife.

"I'm fine. Just a long night at work. I don't mean to be rude but I'm really tired, so if you could just..."

Leave.

But Kaine couldn't.

The scent of magic continued to intensify around Evie. Kaine felt Evie drawing it to her, felt the other woman pull on the power from the ley line in the earth below the city.

And from the look on her face, Evie didn't have a clue what she was doing. Only that she felt something happening and it scared the hell out of her.

"Evie, you look really tired. Why don't you go sit down? Can I get you a glass of water?"

"No, please, I just need you to leave. I need..."

The look of fear on Evie's face made Kaine's stomach clench. Evie began to back away, her eyes widening as she stared at Kaine.

"What are you doing to me?"

Evie's breathless question made Kaine draw in a sharp breath.

*Oh, shit.* Was this her fault? Was she somehow triggering Evie's magic?

"Okay." Kaine took a step back toward the door. "No problem. I'll just —"

The door swung shut, knocking Kaine to the ground with the force of its motion.

As she stared up at Evie from the floor, Kaine had only a few seconds to think, *Shit, this is bad*, before Evie lost control.

As if she were watching a scene from one of the horror films Nic loved, the taps in the sink in the kitchen turned until water spewed from the faucet and the few candles in the room burst into flame.

But when the floor began to shake beneath her, Kaine stood and headed straight for Evie.

The woman stared at her with fear and confusion in her eyes.

Kane shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

Then she cold-cocked Evie with a roundhouse to the jaw and watched as the woman crumbled to the floor unconscious.

And power in the room dissipated like smoke on a breeze.

For five seconds, Kaine let tears well. Then she blinked them away, took a deep breath and lifted Evie into her arms to place her on the couch.

Pulling her cell phone out of her jeans pocket, she hit speed dial.

"Sal. I need you."

\* \* \* \* \*

It took only minutes for Sal to get to her, but in those few minutes Kaine worked herself into a pretty decent panic attack.

So when he finally appeared in the living room, having magically transported himself from his home to here, she could barely breathe as she paced from the living room to the dining area to the kitchen and back again.

Sal took one look at her before grabbing her hand, leading her to the chair by the couch and forcing her into it. Then he grabbed her head and pushed it down between her knees.

"Breathe, Kaine. Slow, deep breaths."

"Evie... John..."

"No talking. Everything else will wait, baby girl. Just breathe."

The steady, familiar tone of his voice helped calm her more than anything. She let her body relax as Sal rubbed her back like she was a baby being lulled to sleep.

Keeping her eyes open so she didn't get nauseated, she focused on Sal's sneakers. Gone were his goat legs and hooves. At least to the naked eye. He'd pulled on the glamour he wore when he went out among the *eteri*. Instead of a fortyish looking man with the lower body of a goat, he looked like an *eteri* boy around ten or twelve wearing a knit ball cap. For some reason, Sal would never magically erase his horns. Maybe he couldn't.

When she finally felt she had her body under control, she sat back and took a deep breath.

Sal met her gaze head on, no accusation or anger evident in his eyes or his stance. He simply waited for her to speak.

"I met John at the bar. I didn't even go looking for him, if you can believe that. He was in Lacey's. I came home with him. We had sex and as I was leaving, Evie walked through the door. I think whatever's going on with me triggered whatever had been

done to her. She started to pull power. She had no idea what she was doing. She could have brought the building down around us.”

She stopped to take a breath, closing her eyes as the realization of what could have happened hit her again.

*Her fault. This was her fault.*

“I had to knock her out before she...before she lost control.”

Sal sent Evie a thoughtful look before turning back to Kaine. “I thought the *streghe* took care of this?”

“I thought so too. I think they did. I think it’s me. I think I did something to her. What if it’s me, Sal?”

Sal reached for her hand and gave her a squeeze. “Now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. First, we’ve got to figure out what’s going on.”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to know,” John said. “Why don’t we start with who the fuck you are?”

John’s head ached like a sonuvabitch and he felt so damn tired, he wondered if Kaine had drugged him.

He had no idea what’d woken him but when he’d reached for Kaine and found her gone, he’d wanted her back in his bed so badly, he’d forced himself to go in search of her, despite the headache and the dragging need to sleep.

He’d heard voices out here, thought maybe Kaine and Evie were having a conversation. About what, he didn’t have a clue. His brain wasn’t exactly functioning at top speed.

Which was probably why he didn’t go for a gun when he realized there was someone else in his house.

A kid, wearing jeans and a black knit cap, stood next to Kaine, holding her hand as if comforting her.

Was he dreaming?

He looked back at Kaine. She looked...stricken. Guilty.

Why the hell —

*Shit.* Evie lay on the couch, unmoving. He ran for her, nearly stumbling in his haste. Or from the dizziness in his head.

“Evie! Evie, wake up.”

“John, stop it. She’s fine.”

The boy’s tone barely filtered through his brain as John lifted Evie into his arms. He had to hold her, had to make sure she was okay.

Her cheeks were pale and there seemed to be a bruise on her chin. Had someone hit her?

Rage began to build in his gut and he tried to stand, tried to get him and Evie away from the boy. It had to be the boy.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I'm not here to hurt you, John." The kid's face twisted in a grimace and John was caught by his eyes. The kid had old eyes. Ancient eyes. "Kaine called me for help."

"What? Why? I didn't hurt you. I wouldn't hurt you."

Tears welled in her eyes but she blinked them back. "I know that. I didn't call for help for me. Evie needs help, John. I think she's in trouble."

"I know that. I just don't know what's wrong."

Shit, what the hell had loosened his tongue?

Kaine and the boy exchanged a glance as John held Evie closer. Should he run? He had to protect Evie but even though the situation was surreal, he didn't sense danger. Which could just mean he was more fucked up than he thought and not thinking straight.

"Maybe you want to tell me what's been going on." The boy who'd been holding Kaine's hand released her and took a few steps closer to him.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because maybe I can help."

Help? Yeah, help would be nice. Help would be really nice right about now. But why would he accept help from a kid who didn't look older than twelve, a kid he'd never met before and who shouldn't be in his house?

John shook his head, trying to clear his brain. "I don't know you."

The kid nodded. "No, you don't. But you can trust me. Kaine trusts me and you can too."

Kaine. His gaze shifted back to the beautiful woman he'd brought home from the bar. She stared at him with huge, dark eyes.

He trusted Kaine. Why the hell did he trust Kaine?

"Christ, none of this makes any sense." He lifted one hand to rub at his temples. "And my head fucking *hurts*. Who the fuck are you?"

The kid looked at him with old, old eyes and a well of patience. "My name's Sal. I'm Kaine's friend and I can help Evie. You just need to tell me what's going on with her."

What was going on with Evie?

Hell, weird, freaky shit was going on with her. Light bulbs burst when she got angry or scared. Tables and chairs moved across the floor on their own. Doors slammed, windows cracked.

"You're right," the kid said. "That's freaky. Hell, Kaine. This is bad."

Whoa, he must be really far gone. He couldn't remember saying that out loud.

In his arms, Evie started to wake. Her eyes fluttered until finally she opened her eyes just enough to see him.

"John?"

"Shh, Evie. It's okay. I've got you."

"What's going — Wait." Her eyes shot open. "There was someone in the apartment. Someone was here, John."

"It's okay. I know. Kaine's here, she's a friend."

Evie started to shake her head then couldn't stop. "No. No, she's not. She did something to me. She... She hit me."

"What?" His gaze snapped to Kaine and her guilt was so easy to read. "Why?"

"Tinia's teat, the girl's pulling some serious power," the boy said. "We've got to shut her down or she's going to blow the roof off this place."

"I know." Kaine's voice was barely a whisper. "I don't know what I did."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here." The boy walked over to him, his smile easygoing. "Hey, John. Everything's gonna be okay."

Evie burrowed closer to him as the pain in his head threatened to crack his skull open.

Then everything went dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

John and Evie went out like someone had pulled their plugs.

As John's arms loosened around his sister, Sal caught her before she fell off John's lap and hit the floor.

Evie already had a bruise on her chin from where Kaine had knocked her out.

John would hate her for that. Hell, he'd hate her for a lot more than that.

He'd slept with a monster. And if the *streghe* had to lift the spell masking his memories of everything that had happened, he'd know that.

And he'd despise her.

"Kaine, we don't have time for you to fall apart right now." Sal's sharp tone snapped her to attention as he set Evie on the couch next to John.

He'd released his glamour and the cap, the clothes, were all gone now. His hooves made little indentations in the carpet as he moved to stand in front of her.

"The girl needs help right away," Sal said. "I'm afraid she's going to have permanent physical damage if we don't do something."

And that was Kaine's fault. She'd been so selfish. "Then do it. John will be devastated if something happens to her."

Sal nodded as his gaze sharpened on hers. "Before we go back to the *streghe* with them, I'm going to hit up Amity for help." Sal stepped away from the couch to an open spot on the floor. "I put them out pretty hard. They shouldn't wake before I return."

Kaine nodded, shameful grief and guilt making her stomach roll. If John woke, she'd take whatever he dished out.

"Kaine!" Sal's sharp tone bit at her and she felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. "I know what you're thinking. Just don't. At least not yet. You need to suck it up and deal until I get back, *sicari*. Understood?"

Her back straightened at Sal's deliberate use of her rank. Yes, she understood. It didn't matter that she couldn't shift, or that she was something other than she'd always understood herself to be. She was still *sicari* and that would get her through.

"Go," she said. "Get Amity. I'll be fine."

After another hard look into her eyes, Sal nodded. Then he closed his eyes and disappeared.

For several seconds, she just stood there, staring at the spot Sal had been standing in only seconds ago.

Then with a deep breath she turned to look at John. Her breath left her in a rush when she found him unconscious still.

Thank the Blessed Mother Goddess for small favors.

The man had the will of a bear. He'd broken through her sleeping spell earlier. Granted, she hadn't made the simple spell too powerful. She'd only wanted enough time to slip out of bed and out of the house. It should have kept him out for several hours at least.

But he'd fought through it somehow.

Maybe the spell had failed because she was different now. Maybe none of her magic would work the same as it had before.

Maybe...she just wasn't ever going to be the same.

Tears threatened again and, even though she knew John couldn't see, she couldn't cry in front of him. She *refused* to cry in front of him.

She forced her feet to move, to carry her to the opposite side of the room and the window that overlooked the street in front of their building.

From this height, she could see down into the small garden in front of the house on the opposite side of the street. The rose hedge separating the garden from the sidewalk and the street sported fresh green growth. The thickness of the hedge kept passersby on the street from seeing into the garden beyond, but up here, Kaine saw the lines of a beautifully maintained courtyard.

It looked almost magical in the dark and fit the house behind it. The house looked like a tiny castle, made of stone and featuring tiny turrets.

Kaine wondered if a princess slept in that house, waiting for her prince to come wake her.

Which was such bullshit.

Why did all those stupid old fairytales insist that a woman needed a man to save her from the evil witch? Maybe the man needed to be saved from the big bad wolf.

*Vaffanculo*, she needed to get over herself. Enough with the self-pitying crap.

As soon as Sal got back, she'd get the hell out of here.

John would probably want a piece of her pelt when he woke. He'd be confused, worried for Evie and pissed off. At Kaine.

And rightly so.

Behind her, she sensed Sal's return and turned before dropping into a curtsy for the woman standing by his side.

No, not a woman. A goddess.

"Lady of the Singing Heart, greetings."

Munthukh, Etruscan Goddess of Health, or Amity as she called herself now, strode over to wrap her arms around Kaine's shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. "And hello to you, too, Kaine."

Startled at the warm embrace, Kaine hugged her back for just a second before remembering that this was a goddess. And she was an assassin.

When Amity released her, Kaine took a deep breath and forced a smile for the woman standing before her. Unlike some of the other Etruscan goddesses Kaine had met, Amity was not so much beautiful as pretty. Light brown hair the color of polished chestnuts fell in waves past her shoulders and framed a pretty face full of soft features.

Dressed in a purple sweater set, a denim skirt and matching purple Chuck Taylor high-tops, this goddess drew you in with her bright smile and warm brown eyes.

Kaine felt comfortable in her presence and the walls she'd built around her heart to keep it from aching started to fracture. Taking a deep breath to catch back a sob, she only just managed to contain it.

Amity's smile turned rueful between one heartbeat and the next. "Now, now, it'll be all right, Kaine. Just give me a few minutes to check out your friends. Sal's given me the rundown so I have something to go on. Why don't you just go have a seat and give me some room to work?"

Nodding, Kaine turned and grabbed the nearest chair, the one at the dining table against the wall by the front window.

And started to pray.

\* \* \* \* \*

John woke with the realization that he was on the couch in the living room.

The sky was still dark and moonlight seeped in through the window. Still hours from dawn.

How had he wound up here on the couch when he'd went to bed with—

"John."

His gaze shot to the woman standing so still against the wall directly in front of him. She had her hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans, her shoulders hunched as if fighting off a cold wind. Or anticipating a blow.

But her gaze met his straight on.

"Kaine? When— What's going on?"

He sat up, hating the sense that he was missing something vital.

"Evie's in trouble, John. She needs help. She had a breakdown when she came home from work."

Jumping to his feet, he didn't stop to think. He pushed open the closed door to Evie's room and stopped when he saw his sister asleep in her bed and another woman sitting next to her on a chair.

"Hello, John. I'm Amity. Your sister's resting peacefully now but we need to talk."

In two steps, he'd crossed to his sister's side and put himself between Evie and this woman he'd never met. "What the hell did you do to her?"

In spite of the consuming fear threatening to drown him, he swore the woman's smile made his heart ease off its heart attack pace just enough to let him think more clearly.

"I didn't do anything to her. But she nearly caused herself irreparable damage last night."

Shit, was the woman saying—

"Oh, no," Amity rushed on as if she'd read his mind. "She didn't try to hurt herself. But Evie needs help. I have her powered down for now but when she comes out of this, I'm not sure what she'll do if you can't keep her calm."

Amity remained seated, seemingly unafraid of him. Which didn't make any sense because he was pretty sure he was wearing his intimidation face. Grown men were known to break and run when he looked like this.

This woman just smiled. "I'm sure you've noticed changes in your sister. Since the kidnapping."

John went deadly still. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Amity continued to smile. It should've freaked him out, should've made her seem weird or creepy.

But he sensed no danger from her at all.

A flash of movement in the doorway caught his eye and he turned to find Kaine staring at him with no emotion whatsoever. But from her, he sensed guilt.

"I want answers now."

"And you'll get them, of course," Amity said as Kaine dropped her gaze to the floor. "Evie's resting comfortably. Why don't we go into the other room and talk there?"



Torn between leaving his sister, who did appear to be sleeping soundly, and finding out what the fuck was going on, he decided he needed answers first.

This Amity woman appeared to have them. And the woman he'd taken to his bed last night, who'd blown his mind as he'd come in her body...

She'd lied to him. He could see it in the way she held her body. She felt guilty about something.

Fine, he'd let these women tell him what was wrong with his sister because he knew there was something going on with her. Ever since the kidnapping, Evie had been different.

And somehow Kaine, who he'd never met before last night, knew what was going on.

This he wanted to hear.

Then again, maybe he didn't.

Half an hour later, John thought banging his head against a wall might be helpful as he tried to make sense of what the crazy woman sitting next to him on the couch had told him.

"So, you're saying the tests done on Evie gave her powers. Like...magical powers."

"No," Amity said. "What I'm saying is that the tests brought out her latent powers and she doesn't know how to handle them."

John fell silent as he considered everything the woman Kaine had brought into his house to help his sister had said.

The thoughts in his brain tangled around each other until he couldn't seem to get a handle on any one thread and follow it to a logical conclusion. Absolutely none of this made sense.

At least, none of it made logical sense.

When Amity spoke, it sounded plausible as all hell. When she told him magic was real and his sister needed help controlling hers, it all made perfect sense.

But in the rational part of his mind, he knew better.

And he knew that Evie had been holding it together until he'd brought Kaine home last night.

The woman who looked so damn guilty.

Yet every time he caught sight of her, standing still and quiet against the wall by the door, he wanted her. It felt like a fever in his blood.

"You know," he said, "this all sounds fucking crazy, right? Like some B-grade movie on the Syfy Channel."

Kaine's head dipped lower, as if trying to make herself invisible.

"Yes, I know what it sounds like," Amity said. "And I know how hard this is going to be to understand but you can't handle this for Evie. You can't make it better."

Damn, that almost sounded like the woman had read his mind. Again. Another impossibility.

His gaze shot to Kaine and he forced himself to ask the question he didn't know if he wanted an answer to. "Did you do something to her? Did you do something to Evie?"

Kaine's head shot up but she didn't open her mouth. Instead her lips trembled.

He saw how pale she'd gotten, how physically ill she looked. And he wanted to comfort her. Wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her everything was okay. But if she'd done something to Evie...

"Kaine had nothing to do with this." Amity's voice cut between them like a knife and John glanced at the other woman to see Amity and Kaine staring at each other, Amity's expression set in determined lines. "I know you think you did. I know you think you were the trigger for Evie's breakdown, but it wasn't you. At least, not you specifically. From what you told me, Kaine, you startled her when she came home last night. You didn't mean to. But she saw you as a threat and after her kidnapping, you can't blame her for that.

"But it was in no way your fault. It could have happened to her at work the next day or at the mall if she'd gone shopping and someone happened to brush against her. Anything could have triggered her. This isn't your fault."

Kaine didn't say anything, but he knew she didn't believe a word the other woman had said.

"So," John sighed, "if it wasn't Kaine's fault, then how did she know what was happening to Evie? How did she know to ask you to come here?"

Kaine took a deep breath before answering but held his gaze. "Because I recognized what was happening and I sent for Amity's help."

A tiny fragment of memory flashed in John's brain then, something about a kid in a knit cap in his living room. No, one fucked up mess at a time.

"And you believe in all this bullshit?"

He'd deliberately made his question snide, wanted her to show a little spark. She looked like she'd been kicked in the gut and he hated thinking it was because of him.

He couldn't really believe Kaine had done anything to harm his sister. He usually had a good handle on people and Kaine hadn't thrown up any red flags in the time they'd spent together. All he'd felt had been lust.

*And maybe that should have been a warning.*

Kaine's chin tilted up the slightest bit and her mouth firmed. "Yes, I do. I know magic is real."

Her voice, so matter-of-fact, made his eyes narrow. She absolutely believed what she was saying.

Christ Almighty, what the hell was he supposed to do?

"Then show me."

He needed to see. He wasn't a man who took things on faith. He needed proof. Physical, tangible proof.

"Kaine."

Amity's voice held a warning. And a note of sympathy. As if Kaine was about to do something painful as she pushed away from the wall and walked to within a foot of him.

Damn it, he didn't want her to—

Kaine held out her right hand, snapped her fingers and a bright orange flame flared into being just above her index finger and thumb. Like a candle, the teardrop of fire burned bright.

"Go ahead, touch it," she said. "It's very real."

He was already extending his hand to pass it over the flame and felt the heat of it lick at his palm.

Parlor trick. Easy enough to do, his brain insisted.

Kaine's expression was dead serious. But the look in her eyes... She was terrified of what he would think.

Not the look of a woman who was trying to con him.

And when she snapped her fingers and every one of the many candles Evie had placed around the room burst into flame, he took a deep breath. Then another.

"So, my sister has magical powers she can't control. Fine. How do we get rid of them?"

Kaine's eyes widened in shock and the flames she'd conjured sputtered and died.

Shoving her hand in her pocket, she backed away, intending to retreat to the wall. She needed the support, needed to feel something solid at her back.

She couldn't believe he'd accepted her demonstration so easily. She'd expected him to scoff, to rant, to deny. She'd expected disbelief, at the very least.

Instead, he sat there, looking at her as if she had more answers for him.

Luckily, Amity spoke up. "Now we take her to see a group of women who should be able to help her. It's not far. But I have to warn you. There may be nothing they can do for Evie except teach her how to control her powers."

John's gaze narrowed on Amity's as the goddess paused to bite her lip. The man read facial expressions like some people read a book. He'd probably know exactly what she was thinking, how she was feeling if he'd been looking.

But right now he had a laser's focus on Amity.

"A group of women." He paused and she swore she could see his brain cycling through information.

"Yes," Amity said. "And yes again to exactly what you're thinking."

His chin rose the tiniest bit. "Witches. You want me to take my sister to see witches."

"If that's how you want to classify them, then yes, that's exactly what I'm suggesting."

The only outward sign he gave about his thoughts was the tightening of his mouth. She thought for sure he'd start to laugh and tell Amity she was crazy.

That they were both crazy and they should get the hell out of his apartment and out of his life.

Maybe she should go now. Get the hell out of here while the getting was good. He wouldn't want her around. While he might believe she hadn't caused Evie's meltdown—at least, not on purpose—she still couldn't believe he'd want her near his sister.

Not after what he'd seen she could do. And that was just the tip of a very large iceberg.

If she ever regained her ability to shift...

"And you think these...women will be able to help Evie?"

She blinked in shock. She couldn't believe he was actually considering Amity's plan.

"Yes," the goddess answered solemnly. "I do."

"Will you go with us?"

Her gaze snapped back to John's when she realized he'd directed that question to her.

"What? Why?"

His expression told her nothing and shock at his request made her blink at him stupidly.

"Because I trust you to tell me what's going on."

He trusted her. Why the hell did this man trust her?

And, Blessed Mother Goddess, she wanted him to be able to. But if his memories were restored, he'd hate her.

*Yeah, but until then, you can be with him.*

And she absolutely hated how much she wanted just that.

"Fine." She nodded, trying to keep her expression clear. "I can do that."

"Then I suggest we don't waste any time," Amity said. "Kaine, please call Nica and tell her to expect us."

Even though she'd been expecting it, Kaine had to cover a wince. Nica was Tira's best friend. As soon as Nica realized what was going on, she'd be on the phone to Tira.

And Nic and Duke would be on their way to Nica's.

"I'll do it right now."

Five minutes later, Nica had sleepily agreed to be waiting for their arrival. In the background, Kaine had heard Tanner and Jensen questioning Nica just as she was hanging up.

She liked the Miller brothers, she thought as she tucked her phone back in her pocket. Even though they were *eteri*.

They'd fit into life among the Etruscans as if they'd always known about the existence of *streghe* and magic. And *lucani*.

Sure, they'd been freaked the first time they'd seen her shift in front of them. She'd actually been their first.

But once they got over that "Holy shit" moment, they'd been cool. Curious and fascinated, but cool.

They hadn't recoiled from her, hadn't hesitated to run a hand over her pelt.

John had wanted the *streghe* to wipe all memory of the *lucani* and magic from his and Evie's minds.

And now the *streghe* would probably have to release their memories and he'd once again know what she really was.

He'd know he slept with a monster.

"Are you okay?"

Amity's soft question just to her left drew Kaine's attention out of her thoughts.

Could she lie to a goddess?

Probably not a good thing to do.

So she turned, not bothering with a smile. "I will be." She had to believe that.

Amity nodded, though she didn't have a smile either. "I do understand your fear, Kaine. But your John is strong."

*Your John.*

Kaine checked to make sure he was in the bedroom putting together a bag for him and Evie. "He's not mine, Lady."

Now Amity did smile as she brushed a hand over Kaine's hair, like a mother would do.

But Kaine didn't have a mother. The woman who'd given birth to her had dumped her on her father's doorstep and gotten herself killed, which wouldn't have mattered to Kaine if the damn woman hadn't screwed Kaine over by giving her half her genes.

"Okay, Kaine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Amity released a short sigh then nodded. "If you need me, Sal will know where to find me. I'm sorry I can't do much more for her but the *streghe* should be able to help her more than I can. Afraid I'm not much good for complex cases like this."

Kaine heard a note of regret in the goddess's voice that made her feel petty for wallowing in her own misery.

Though no one liked to discuss it or much less mention it, the Etruscan deities had lost most of their powers centuries ago. They'd been displaced, first by the Roman deities, then by science. Yet they still remained.

Kaine had never really wondered *how* they lived, what they did over the course of their ageless existence.

Maybe she was just that self-centered.

Behind Amity, Kaine saw John emerge from Evie's bedroom, carrying his sister in his arms and a heavy-looking duffel bag in one hand. Curtseying to the Lady of the Singing Heart, which probably looked pretty stupid considering she was wearing jeans and combat boots, Kaine walked over to John to take the duffel out of his hands.

She scented metal and gunpowder and knew he'd stashed at least one gun in his bag and another in a holster at his back, covered by the loose cotton shirt he'd pulled on over a tight t-shirt.

"We can take my car," John said, his expression unreadable. "If you can drive stick."

"I can. Are you ready?"

He hesitated for two seconds before he looked down at his sister. "Yeah. Let's go."

## Chapter Five

As Kaine drove, John paid careful attention to every landmark, every road sign they passed.

They'd driven through the city and into Mount Penn, the neighboring borough. From there, she'd taken them through Exeter Township and into Oley Township.

Urban sprawl had given way to suburban developments then to fields and farms and intermittent patches of forest as the sky began to lighten with just a hint of dawn.

When she finally turned onto an unmarked lane cutting through a stand of trees, he knew he'd be able to find his way back to the city with no problem.

He still couldn't believe he'd agreed to this.

Did he honestly believe his sister had magical powers that the people who'd kidnapped them months ago had purposely released from hiding? And that a bunch of witches could fix her?

Witches.

Well, how could he not when it would explain so many of the unexplainable things that'd been happening around her?

Christ, he should've taken her to the emergency room.

*Yeah, and what would you have done when she blew out the glass in the windows and caused the electricity to go haywire in all that equipment?*

Shit. This was just too fucked up to believe. Maybe he'd wake up in the morning and find this all to be one long, drug-induced nightmare.

If only it were that easy.

But where would that leave Kaine?

The woman hadn't said one damn word the entire ride. Not that he'd attempted conversation. He'd been thinking, turning things over in his mind, trying to look at all the angles.

Kaine had been stewing.

John knew guilt when he saw it and Kaine had a boatload of it sitting in her gut. Amity, the witch doctor or whatever the hell she was, had told Kaine it wasn't her fault, that she wasn't to blame for what had happened to Evie.

Kaine thought she was. He'd read her expression clear as day back at the apartment. He couldn't see her face now in the darkness of the car but tension continued to roll off of her in waves.

He was almost surprised Kaine hadn't driven them off the road and into a ditch. But she handled his temperamental '73 Dodge Dart with the ease of a professional driver.

He'd had the Dart since he was teenager, had rebuilt the thing from the wheels up with his dad over the summer of his sixteenth birthday.

They'd finished it only months before his death.

"We're here."

Blinking, John realized Kaine had eased the car to a stop.

Since there wasn't a streetlight in sight, he could only see the outlines of one-story homes clustered along a road that was little more than a lane.

The house they'd parked in front of had its porch light burning and three people stood in the open door.

Two men, one woman.

"That's Tanner and Jensen and their, ah, mate, Nica. Nica's who you're here to see. She's a healer. She's really good at what she does. She'll be able to help Evie."

He turned back to look at her. "You know this all sounds crazy, right? All this magic shit. I don't even know why the fuck I'm here."

He watched her face, looking for who-the-hell-knew-what but her dead-serious expression never flickered.

"You're here because you love your sister."

"Who's passed out in the backseat for a reason I don't fucking understand."

"Amity told you what's going on."

"But do you honestly expect a sane person to believe all this crap?"

She shrugged, her mouth quirking into a rueful curve. "You came, didn't you?"

For one very brief moment, he remembered exactly how hard he'd come inside her body. Twice. And heat flooded through him.

But he knew she wasn't talking about sex.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Then let Nica take a look at Evie. She can help."

Despite the situation, despite everything that had happened and the general weirdness of the situation, John *knew* he could trust Kaine. He felt it to the bottom of his soul.

Reaching for her, he cupped her jaw in one hand. The bone felt delicate in his hand, her skin so damn soft. He felt her freeze like a deer in the headlights and watched a painful vulnerability creep into her eyes.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, hold her against his chest and —

She turned away and slid out of the car, heading for the porch.



His gaze followed her, saw the hunch in her shoulders, hands stuffed in her pockets. A slight breeze ruffled her gorgeous hair and she shook it out of her face with an angry snap of her head.

*Shit.*

With a sigh, he pushed out of the car then reached into the backseat for Evie, still out cold. She looked calm, peaceful, her breathing deep and even. She didn't look to be in any kind of distress.

But she felt so light in his arms, so insubstantial. As if she was wasting away and he had no idea how to stop it.

*So you're going to consult a witch.*

Yeah, he was.

As he walked up to the house, he catalogued every piece of information he could see.

The two men flanking the woman could be considered threats. They were both in shape and never took their eyes off of him. They even went so far as to keep the woman just slightly behind them.

Until she slipped through the space between them to hug Kaine.

Pretty and dark-haired, the woman—Nica, he remembered Kaine had called her—had a comforting smile and kind eyes. Kaine allowed Nica to hug her but only for a few seconds before she pulled away.

Each of the men leaned down to brush a kiss against Kaine's cheek before going back to staring at him.

When he reached the porch, Nica turned that smile on him. And for some reason, her smile seemed familiar and totally trustworthy.

"Hello, John. I'm Nica. Please, come in. I've got a bed all ready for your sister."

With a nod, he followed her through the door, the two men parting to allow him to enter.

When the front door closed behind them, the tall blond guy pointed his thumb behind him, an easy expression on his face. "I'll show you where. I'm Tanner. He's Jensen."

The dark-haired guy nodded when John looked at him, his face an impressive blank slate. No idea what he was thinking, though John noted the way he held his hands at his side. Loose. Ready to reach for a weapon.

As if John could be a threat to their woman.

And Nica was most definitely both of theirs.

The men looked at her with identical expressions of possession, just as Nica did with both of them.

Not your typical couple. Hell, not a couple at all.

Again, he had the weirdest sense of déjà vu. And it was really starting to piss him off.

Shoving the nagging sensation to the back of his mind, he followed Tanner to a bedroom at the back of house and set Evie on the four-poster bed that'd been turned down already.

Everyone had followed behind him but the men stayed by the door as Nica approached the bed. Kaine remained just beyond the door and he had the almost overwhelming urge to force her to stand by his side. As if he needed her.

"John, I'd like to make Evie more comfortable, if you don't mind." Nica had moved to the other side of the bed. "Did you bring nightclothes for her or maybe just a loose t-shirt?"

"I packed a bag. It's probably still—"

"I'll go get it," Kaine volunteered and immediately turned on her heel and left.

He wanted to call her back but he forced his mouth to stay shut. He needed to be here with Evie. Needed to know how this woman was going to fix her.

"So, what can you do for my sister?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey," Jensen said. "You okay?"

Standing at the window in Nica's kitchen, Kaine stared out into the garden and the forest at the rear of the property, wishing she could shed her clothes and run in her pelt in the pale light of dawn.

Which, of course, she couldn't do. Might never be able to do again.

So how did she answer Jensen's question?

She'd heard him leave the bedroom and follow her here after she'd retrieved John's bag from the car and given it to Tanner.

Nica and John were talking in the bedroom. She figured he wouldn't want her there so she'd made herself scarce.

She couldn't run, though. She'd told John she'd stay.

She'd known one of the Miller twins would come looking for her. They'd probably shot rock-paper-scissors to figure out who stayed with Nica and who talked to her.

Looks like Jensen had lost.

Which was an absolutely bitchy thing to think.

Jensen and Tanner had become more than acquaintances over the past few months. Because Nica and Tira were best friends, the twin brothers hung out with Nic and Duke and, by association, with Kaine.

She spent hours training with them on the weekends, sparring or teaching them how to fight with the iron knives and swords most Etruscans learned to handle as kids.

Since iron was the only metal unable to be manipulated by magic, it made the best weapons. Conventional guns and bullets could be easily influenced by the slightest use of power because of the trace amounts of other metals in them. Most of the Gifted population fought the old-fashioned way – with their hands and their magic.

Jensen and Tanner had no innate magic. They were *eteri* through and through. But they were learning to fight like Etruscans and that set them apart in Kaine's book. They also happened to be great guys.

She and Jensen, in particular, had formed a closer friendship than she'd thought possible with an *eteri*. So she didn't blow him off like she would someone else.

Jensen didn't say much so they had that in common.

Which meant this should be a short conversation.

"Not really, no."

Jensen walked to her side and stared down at her. "That's him, isn't it?"

*Vaffanculo*, did everyone know she had the hots for the guy?

Not a lot of people in the Etruscan community had been told about John and Evie Simmons. That info had been strictly need-to-know.

She sighed and leaned forward to rest her forehead against the cool glass of the French doors. "Yeah. That's him."

"You want I should beat him around the head for a few hours?"

Her laughter at Jensen's attempt at a Jersey accent caught her off guard. "Probably not a good idea. But thanks for asking."

Jensen put his arm around her and she let her head fall back against his shoulder. God, she was pitiful. And apparently easy to read.

"No problem, hon. You staying?"

She sighed. "I'm staying."

"Then maybe you wanna give Kyle and the guys a call, let them know what's going on. They're gonna need to know. Better if it comes from you."

Yeah, she knew that but she'd been avoiding thinking about making those phone calls. Especially the one to Kyle.

He was her commanding officer but in the months since she'd become *sicari*, he'd become more than that. To say she worshipped the guy would be overstating the case. But maybe only a little. Didn't matter that Nic and Duke felt the same way about him.

She didn't want Kyle, Nic or Duke to see her like this, pining away over an *eteri*. Duke already worried about her because of the shifting problems.

This would just make him nuts.

Still...

Sighing again, she nodded. "I'll call. Just...give me a few minutes, okay?"

"No problem. So, you want coffee?"

"How about some peach schnapps and orange juice?"

Jensen actually cracked a smile. "Part of a complete breakfast. Pancakes too?"

She returned his smile. "Chocolate chip?"

"What else?"

She fluttered her eyelashes at him, feeling a tiny bit of weight fall off her shoulders. "I think I love you."

He hip-bumped her and headed for the cabinets. "Get in line."

\* \* \* \* \*

From the doorway of the bedroom, John watched the exchange between Kaine and Jensen.

His jaw locked as he tried not to let irrational anger get the best of him.

When he'd stepped away from the bed so Nica could hold her hands over his sister's body and do whatever the hell she was doing, he'd immediately looked for Kaine.

He couldn't leave Evie alone but he wanted Kaine here beside him. He refused to examine why too closely.

He'd seen her standing at the window in the kitchen, staring out into the dark. The expression on her face had torn at his gut. He'd wanted to go to her but Jensen had beaten him to it.

The guy obviously cared for Kaine. John saw it in the way he put his arm around her shoulders.

And if John hadn't been absolutely positive that Jensen was totally committed to Nica, he would've broken the guy's arm.

Jesus, he'd gone over the deep end.

Tearing his gaze away as Jensen released Kaine and started opening cabinets, he forced his attention back to Evie.

And nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw the blue glow emanating from Nica's hands.

*Holy shit.*

His lungs shuddered to a stop and he had to make a forceful effort to draw in air.

Magic. Holy fuck, she was using magic on his sister.

"John, hey, you need to breathe, man. Your sister's in good hands."

Tanner's voice registered and John actually understood what he was saying but he couldn't answer.

There was static in his brain, white noise that drowned out rational thought.

"Nica will find out what's wrong with her," Tanner continued. "She's damn good at what she does."

"What is she doing?"

"Well, since I didn't grow up knowing about magic, I'm still not real sure how it all works, but I think right now she's just checking things out."

John finally pulled his gaze away from Nica and Evie to look at Tanner. "So you're not like Kaine and Nica?"

He shook his head. "They call us *eteri*. The Etruscans call anyone who doesn't have magical blood *eteri*."

His gaze narrowed as his brain started to slowly kick over. "Etruscans? Like Italians."

Tanner nodded. "They came from Italy originally, yeah. But their civilization has been around for more than three thousand years. Look, I know it's a lot to take in all at once but you'll get used to it."

John shook his head, though he wasn't saying no to anything. It was more like he was trying to shake some sense into his head. And not having much luck.

Etruscans, huh? He filed away that piece of information to talk to Kaine about later. He'd have a hell of a lot of questions for Kaine later but right now he needed to be here. With Evie.

Several long minutes later, the glow suffusing Nica's hands gradually disappeared and the healer or whatever the hell she called herself finally opened her eyes.

She sighed, twisted her neck as if it were stiff and rubbed her hands together as if to warm them. Tanner walked over to her and put his arms around her.

Nica sank back against him tilting her head to the side so he could press his lips to her neck. She drew in a deep breath then slowly released it.

As she lifted her head to look at him, his heart sank at her grim expression.

"Just tell me," he said. "Whatever it is..."

"I will." Nica nodded. "I just think we should sit down first."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, the magic is affecting her nervous system? And if it gets worse, she could die."

Nica frowned as if that wasn't exactly right. "Basically, yes, that's what I think. I'd like to call in one of our doctors so I can talk to him but that's my initial thought, yes."

Christ, another witch doctor? "And this is the result of some spell the woman who kidnapped us put on her?"

"A series of spells, yes."

Rage boiled in his gut as he sat on a comfortable chair in Nica's living room. Nica sat on the couch in front of him, flanked by Tanner and Jensen. She held Tanner's hand while her other rested on Jensen's leg. She hadn't stopped touching them since they'd sat down. John had the sense she needed the contact, as if she was...recharging. Why

the hell he thought that, he didn't have the slightest. Maybe she just liked touching them.

Behind him, he heard Kaine pacing and he wanted to grab her and force her to sit here with him. He needed an anchor. He had so much shit going through his head right now, he could barely think straight.

As if he'd called to her, Kaine walked over to stand next to him. Her hand fell on the arm of the chair, only inches from his elbow. He wanted her to touch him, needed the contact.

Which was why he didn't reach for her.

"Do you want me to call Dane?" Kaine's fingers curled into the chair.

"No, I'll do that." Nica smiled at her. "But you need to call Kyle. Let him know what's going on."

"Who's Kyle?" He looked up at Kaine but she was staring at the floor, nodding. And looking like she was going to be sick.

"He's my...commanding officer."

"You're in the service?"

Finally she looked at him and those deep brown eyes hardened. "Not in any you'd recognize. I need to go make that call now."

He nearly grabbed her arm as she strode by on her way to the front door. The tension had returned to her shoulders, and she held herself ramrod straight. She didn't want to call this guy, whoever the hell he was. Would she be in trouble?

So many unanswered questions.

"John. John?"

He looked back to Nica, still holding onto her men.

"Dane Dimitriou has a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. He's well versed in human anatomy as well as, uh, other forms." She sighed, shaking her head. "I know this all sounds so cryptic and I don't want to scare you. It's just that, well, you're *eteri*, and there are things you don't know. Things it's in your best interest not to know."

"My best interest is knowing how to cure Evie. Can you do that?"

Nica looked him straight in the eyes. "I'm not sure. I don't recognize all of the spells. If I knew exactly what had been done to her, maybe then I'd have a better idea of how to treat her. How to untangle the spells."

"What if you had the woman who did this to her? What if she told you what she'd done?"

"Then we'd be a hell of a lot closer to finding out how to treat her." Nica's gaze narrowed on his. "Are you telling me you know where the woman is?"

"No, I don't." Which wasn't a complete lie. He didn't know exactly where she was. But he had a lead. One he would follow up on as soon as he met this doctor Nica wanted to call to treat his sister.

He'd have to leave Evie here and that made his heart nearly freeze in his chest. But he didn't have a choice and he trusted Nica. No idea why. He just did.

And when he got his hands on the woman who'd done this to his sister, she'd give him answers. He'd make sure of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Kyle."

"Kaine? What's wrong?"

Might as well just rip off the bandage. "John Simmons and his sister are at Nica's. I picked up John in a bar. We had sex and as I was sneaking out the door of his apartment, Evie caught me and had a magical meltdown. The *streghe's* spells didn't work on her. She still has power and Nica is going to have Dane come take a look at her. You need to come do damage control. I can't..."

The words stopped in her throat and stuck there until she could barely breathe.

*Vaffanculo*, she didn't know what to do. Everything was fucked up and it was all her fault.

"I just can't..."

"Kaine."

She needed to run, wanted the comfort of her pelt but even that was denied to her.

"Kaine!"

Kyle's voice snapped her back to the moment. "Yes, sir."

*"Baciami il culo.* Don't flake out on me now. I'll be there in half an hour. Don't go anywhere."

"Yes, sir."

"Fuck the sir shit," Kyle growled. "You're freaking me out. Just stay put."

He hung up without another word and Kaine slid her cell phone back into her pocket.

She'd freaked out Kyle. Great. Just great. She swore she'd never seen the man ruffled, much less freaked. But she'd managed to do it.

*Fuck.*

With a tired sigh, she fell into one of the wicker chairs on the porch and studied the pale sky as the sun got ready to rise. The cool air served to calm her nerves, at least a little anyway.

But her stomach rolled and her temples throbbed.

Kyle was going to kick her ass and rightfully so. This was her fault.

She should have stayed away like Kyle had told her to. When John had approached her at the bar, she should have blown him off instead of being selfish. Instead of feeding her infatuation by having sex with the man.

But, oh Blessed Goddess, the sex had been amazing.

She wanted –

The front door opened and John walked out. He turned his head to look right at her, as if he knew where she was.

He looked tired. Which made sense. He'd only gotten a few minutes of sleep. Which was more than she'd had.

"Nica's calling the doctor now. I assume you talked to your...Kyle?"

"Yes, he'll be here in a half hour. Probably less if he lets Tam drive."

"Tam?"

"His mate."

"Ah."

John released a hard sigh then walked to the chair next to hers but instead of sitting in it, he dragged it directly in front of hers so when he sat in it, all she could see was him.

"I think it's time for a few more answers, Kaine."

Yeah, it was probably past time but she shook her head. "You'll have to ask Kyle."

"First I had to talk to Amity." His gaze pinned her to the chair. "Now I have to talk to Kyle. You can't speak for yourself?"

She felt tears prick the corners of her eyes but she forced them back. "Depends on what you want to know. We have strict rules about what we tell outsiders."

"You mean *eteri*."

Her eyebrows rose. "How do you know that word?"

"Tanner told me. He also told me you're Etruscan."

All relatively innocuous facts. "Yes."

"Are you like Nica? Can you do what she does?"

A little stickier now. "I can control power, yes."

His gaze narrowed. "But you're not like Nica."

"Look, John, my people have very strict laws about what information we give *eteri*. For very good reason."

"So you can sleep with them but you can't tell them what you are?"

She tried to conceal her flinch but wasn't sure she succeeded because John's eyes narrowed even more. The man was a trained SEAL. He was smart, strong and not used to taking bullshit from anyone.

She wanted to tell him everything. Wanted to spill her guts and hope like hell he didn't look at her like she was an animal.



But she didn't want to hurt again like she had when he'd made the decision three months ago to have every memory of her and the Etruscans wiped from his mind.

"Yeah, I can fuck them."

Her harsh statement didn't seem to have any impact on him at all. "Did you use magic on me to make me want you?"

He should just shoot her with silver bullets, she decided. It might hurt less. "Do you think that's the only reason why you would have?"

"No. I don't. Jesus Christ, Kaine. I saw you in the mirror at the bar and I wanted you. It was like a match to gasoline. I never wanted anyone that much that fast. So give me a break here, would you? It's been a fucked-up night."

John slumped back into the chair, his eyes closed as one hand lifted to rub his temples, as if he had a headache. Which he probably did.

Before she knew what she was doing, she reached for him, for the hand clenched around the arm of the chair. Her fingers slid against his and he spread his fingers to lace them together.

"I'm sorry." She was. Totally and absolutely sorry he had to deal with this.

His eyes opened and she got caught in that green gaze. She fell into the warmth she saw there, in the heat. For her. There was worry, too, for Evie. But right now, he only had eyes for her.

"Come here."

Her mouth dried at the command in his tone. She was a soldier. She took orders from her superiors. But she'd never been much for blind obedience.

Still, she let him tug her to the edge of her chair as he leaned forward. He moved slowly, like he didn't want to spook her but she wasn't spooked.

More like mesmerized.

She stared into his eyes until the very last second before his lips touched hers. Then she let her eyelids fall and the touch of his lips wiped away everything but his taste.

He didn't try to devour her. He just kissed her with a need so enticing, she felt like she was freefalling.

His lips moved on hers, brushing lightly then pressing harder.

He released her hand and her arms slid automatically around his shoulders. His hands curved under her arms, lifted her out of her chair and onto his. With their lips still sealed, her legs spread until her knees settled on the outside of his strong thighs.

She knelt above him, her head higher than his as she cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. His whiskers scratched at her palms, a delicate rasp that made her fight to get air into her lungs even while she refused to release his mouth.

Blessed Goddess, she wanted to eat him up.

His arms came around her waist, hands spreading on her back as if soaking in her heat. Or keeping her from getting away.

He let her control the kiss but he drove her crazy with each flick of his tongue against her lips. He wanted in and she let him have his way because she wanted the same.

His tongue invaded but only for a second because he encouraged her to do the same, to slip her tongue into his mouth and wrap around his.

She flashed hot, her nipples tightening into hard tips that she wanted to press against his hard chest. Or better yet, have him suck one into his mouth and bite.

A moan worked its way out of her chest and into her throat. That sound should have embarrassed her with its neediness. Instead, it made him answer with a deep growl that made her pussy clench and moisten.

She smelled her own arousal, wondered if he could, as well. She wanted him to know how much she desired him. How much she needed him.

But in the still-rational recesses of her brain, she heard the distant approach of a car.

She wished she could shut it out, wanted only to stay here in the moment with John.

But she knew the sound of that motor.

Kyle would be here in minutes. And he'd have a heart attack if he found her sprawled all over John.

She broke away abruptly and scrambled off his lap, turning her back on him and heading for the other side of the porch.

Damn it. Gods damn it, why this man? Why now?

"Kaine."

He rose from the chair and headed her way but stopped when she held up one hand.

"No. Kyle's coming and I don't..."

"What? Don't want him to know about us?"

Fat chance of that happening. Kyle already knew she'd slept with John. And if she hadn't told him, he'd be able to smell John all over her.

She knew she'd worried everyone who cared for her in the past few months. Nic, Duke, Tira, Kyle, Tamra. Even her dad, though he hadn't been around to see how she was handling everything. He was off who-knew-where-doing-who-knew-what for the *lucani* king.

*Par for the course, there.*

"No," she said. "He already knows."

"Then what?"

"I don't want him to go primeval on your ass, okay? He can be a little overprotective."

"You're a grown woman."

"Yes. But he's my commanding officer. He takes his responsibilities more than a little seriously. And I'm a responsibility."

As she spoke, Kyle's jeep came into sight down the road leading into the *streghe's* village of New Tarquin.

In the haze of dawn, she could see Kyle in the front seat, as well as Dane Dimitriou. And when the Jeep finally pulled to a stop, Kyle stepped out then reached into the back to help Tam.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to reach for just a little bit of peace, a tiny bit of calm in the face of Kyle's take-no-shit attitude.

She straightened as he reached the porch, her chin lifting, her arms stiffening at her sides until Kyle had reached the bottom of the porch steps. Then she saluted with her right fist to her left shoulder.

She didn't give his rank, knowing he wouldn't want John to know anything more until Kyle decided on a course of action. And it would be Kyle's decision how much to tell John and when.

She'd already fucked up enough.

Kyle just shook his head as he came up the steps. "Kaine, gods damn it, don't—"

"Kyle, honey." Tam none too gently elbowed her mate out of the way to get to the porch, linking her elbow through Kaine's until they stood side by side. "I think you should take John and go with Dane to see Nica while Kaine and I have a little talk, okay?"

Tiny and fierce, with baby-fine blonde hair and an expression that could cow a grown man in seconds, Tam took shit from no one. Including her older, tattooed hard-ass of a mate.

With a sigh, Kyle held Kaine's gaze for another few seconds before he motioned to the man waiting behind him.

"We've got our orders, Dane. Let's go see what's what. You and I," he made sure she knew he was talking to her, "will talk later."

She nodded. She knew this was only a brief reprieve.

"We'll be in in a minute." Tam shooed the men away with one hand as she tugged on Kaine's arm and pulled her toward the other end of the porch. "I just want a few minutes."

Kaine chanced a look over her shoulder at John, who was watching her with a steady gaze.

"He'll be fine," Tam whispered, knowing Kaine would be able to hear her. "He's a big boy and Kyle doesn't bite. At least not unless I ask. And then only if I can bite him back."

A slight smile tugged at Kaine's lips. "You know I really don't want to have those images about my commanding officer in my head. And I know why you said it. I'm fine, Tam. Really."

"Well, we can all use a time-out now and then. You looked a little, um, flustered."

"Kyle told you I slept with John, didn't he?"

Tam's nose crinkled as she frowned. "Well, it was more like he started ranting about cutting off a particular appendage of John's for daring to touch you. But yeah, I got the general idea."

The men still stood on the other end of the porch and Kaine couldn't help but hold her breath until Kyle stuck out his hand to re-introduce himself to John. Not that John remembered him.

Dane had already gone into the house.

"So," Tam said. "How are you really?"

Kaine shook her head. "I have no fucking clue."

\* \* \* \* \*

Though not as strong as the first time he'd seen Kaine, John had that same sense of déjà vu with her commanding officer.

He hadn't dreamed about this guy though so he didn't have a clue what the fuck was going on.

The guy's dark hair hung to his shoulders and the tattoos on his arm were like no script John had ever seen. He looked like he bench-pressed two-fifty easy and walked with a distinctly predatory stalk.

The man had the air of an officer and John straightened under his amber glare.

He almost didn't expect the guy to put out his hand and introduce himself.

"Kyle Rossini."

"John Simmons." He bit back the "Sir" that automatically sprang to his lips as he shook the guy's hand.

Kyle wasn't his commanding officer. He didn't have to take orders from this man.

And he really wanted to know what the hell was going on.

"Kaine updated me on the situation with your sister. Why don't we go inside so we can talk to Dane and Nica? I'm sure you'll want this taken care of as soon as possible."

*So you can get the hell away from Kaine that much faster.*

Kyle didn't have to say the words. His expression made it perfectly clear that's what he meant.

John bit back the urge to tell the guy to mind his own damn business but he couldn't fault Kyle for trying to protect one of his own.

A quick look across the porch and he found Kaine and the woman Kyle had arrived with huddled together. Kaine had her back to him so he couldn't see her face but he could read her body language. Her shoulders had hunched again, her head was down and she was shaking it like she disagreed with whatever the other woman was saying.

God damn it.

With a sharp nod, he followed Kyle into the house and back to the bedroom, where the new doctor and Nica stood next to the bed.

John was actually a little surprised to see the doctor with a stethoscope in his hand as he listened to Evie's heart.

"Dane," Nica touched the man's shoulder, "this is Evie's brother, John. Maybe he knows the answers to your questions. John, this is Dr. Dane Dimitriou."

John took a good look at the doctor. The guy looked as clean-cut as any serviceman he'd ever met. At least six-two and a solid one-eighty, the guy was built like a swimmer. Strong upper body and arms. Long, lean torso and legs. Short brown hair barely brushed his ears and sharp gray eyes took John's measure at the same time.

"Has your sister been having any muscle cramps? Nosebleeds? Convulsions?"

For the next ten minutes, John answered as many of Dane's questions as he could, feeling more and more useless every minute.

Had he ignored warning signs that there was something seriously wrong with her? He remembered the incident two months ago when she'd blown out the light bulbs in the apartment. He'd tried to ignore it then.

Had he ignored it too well? What else had she been dealing with and hiding from him?

What if Evie had had her meltdown before he'd met Kaine? Would his sister still be alive?

That one really tore at his guts. And twisted his brain into knots.

A brain still trying to come to terms with magic.

When Dane finally stopped, John felt battered, like he'd gone a few rounds with a champion prize fighter. Too much information in his head to make sense of it all. Too many questions.

His eyes wanted to close, he was so damn tired. But he shook his head and tried to think.

"John, it's going to take me a little while to consult with Nica and figure out a plan of action," the doctor said. "Maybe you want to take some time and get some rest."

"The house next door is empty right now," Nica spoke up. "It's quiet."

Quiet time. Right. Time to think. Christ, just what he didn't need.

What he *did* need was a drink.

"I'll take him."

His head whipped around at the sound of her voice.

Kaine stood in the doorway, her gaze on Kyle. She looked to be standing at attention, her shoulders straight, expression stoic.

He didn't have a clue what she was thinking now. Before, he'd gotten the impression she felt guilty for whatever role she'd played in Evie's meltdown.

Now, she'd had time to hide.

"Kaine —"

"I'll take him. Sir."

Damn, the woman had claws. He liked that about her.

And Kyle understood exactly what she was saying, as well. The guy could have ordered her to step back. Instead, his jaw set and he nodded, just once.

"Fine. I'll come get you when Dane and Nica have something to go on."

Then Kyle turned to John again with a warning look he couldn't miss.

And couldn't care less about, at the moment.

John turned to Nica. "If anything happens...if Evie wakes —"

"We'll come get you right away," she assured and John knew she would. He trusted Nica.

Just as he trusted Kaine.

She turned her gaze his way, but he could tell she wasn't really looking at him. She was looking through him and that pissed him off. Which just meant he really did need time to get his head together.

With one last look at his sister, lying still and quiet on the bed, he followed Kaine out of the house and across the small lawn to the next house.

The sky had lightened and the sun was just about to break the horizon. A cool breeze blew past him but he barely noticed. His gaze focused solely on Kaine.

He ached to touch her, to hold her. To press her against him while he kissed her. Wanted her to return his passion.

Which was ridiculous.

Reaching for the handle, Kaine pushed open the front door. Guess if they had magic at their fingertips, they didn't need to bother with keys and locks.

Yeah, sure, whatever.

What would she do if he put his arms around her, pulled her against him and kissed the hell out of her?

Would she push him away? Could he get her to respond before she realized he was using her to avoid everything else? To avoid the situation with his sister? Or avoid the fact that he didn't know exactly what Kaine was?

He barely noticed his surroundings, he was so intently focused on her.

His brain registered furniture, light-colored walls and wood floors. But nothing else mattered except Kaine.

Tracking her with his eyes, he watched her head directly toward the back of the house. The dark still lingered here but she moved without hesitation. As if she knew her way around.

Or she could see clearly.

He followed her to the kitchen, where she opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle, which she held up to show him.

He hadn't made a sound but she'd known exactly where he was.

How?

He couldn't make out the words on the label so he just nodded and watched her turn to another cabinet for glasses.

"Is this your home?" he asked, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"No." The sound of liquid spilling into a glass sounded loud in the quiet. "The women who live here are friends."

"But you live in this village?"

"No."

Okay, he could pull teeth with the best of them. "So where do you live?"

She handed him a short glass filled nearly to the brim with a dark liquid. He lifted it to his nose. Jack Daniel's. He knocked back half of it and watched her take a healthy sip.

"I can't tell you that."

"I know we're in Oley Township. Do you live close?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why?"

"Because I don't live alone and I can't compromise my friends' safety."

Well, shit. Who the hell did she live with? His eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me you have a lover or husband or mate or whatever the hell you call it?"

Her expression showed no emotion at all. "No, I don't. That's not what I meant."

Blinding relief shot through him but frustration bit at its heels. He wanted to know more about her. Wanted to pick at her until he forgot everything else going on in the neighboring house.

But Kaine didn't seem willing to help him.

"Then what the fuck do you mean? Jesus Christ, Kaine. Give me a break, will you? I'm getting really sick and tired of feeling like the idiot in a school for geniuses. Obviously, there are things I don't know, things I need to know. And I need you to tell me."

She downed the rest of the whiskey in one gulp then deliberately turned her back on him to put the glass on the counter.

Shaking that gorgeous hair, she began to walk away.

And John's control snapped.

He practically threw his glass on the counter and snagged her arm, spinning her back to him.

She didn't gasp in surprise, didn't fight him at all. She didn't put her arms around him either.

He needed that. He needed her to cling to him. Or fight him. He wanted her to push him away or grab his head and pull his mouth down to hers.

But she just stared up at him like a sacrificial fucking lamb.

So he dropped his mouth on hers and kissed her. Hard. Put his hands on her shoulders and dragged her against him, until he felt every slight curve of her body pressed against his.

Lips smashed together, he worked at her until she opened to him, until he could slide his tongue into her warm mouth and curl around her tongue. He pushed her deliberately, sucked her breath away and felt even more desperate when she let him.

She stood there and let him kiss her, let him ease the ache in his chest with her lips and her taste and the feel of her body against his.

But he didn't want her docile. He wanted... No, he *needed* her to respond.

One hand slid to her neck to hold her to him while the other slid from her shoulder to her breast. He cupped the small mound and felt a primal rush when the hard tip of her nipple pressed against his palm and she moaned into his mouth.

*Yes. More.*

Releasing her neck, he let that hand slide down her back until he reached her ass. Sleek and firm, her body was made for him to touch her. He wanted to rip her jeans down her legs and bend her over the nearest table.

Just the thought that he would treat her like that should've brought him to his senses. Instead, it made him kiss her harder.

And finally, *finally*, she began to come to life.

Her hands, which had been hanging at her sides, reached up to clutch at his back, her slim fingers kneading, stroking. Inflaming. Her mouth moved beneath his, caressed his lips. Her tongue stroked along his.

Gathering her shirt in his hand, he pulled it up until he touched bare skin. She didn't wear a bra. She didn't need one. Small but perfect, her breasts drew his attention away from the sweetness of her mouth.

She was so slight it didn't take much effort to lift her with one hand on her ass so those pretty little nipples were right where he wanted them—at mouth level.

Clutching at his shoulders now, she arched her back as he sucked one hard tip between his lips then closed his teeth around it.

He wasn't in the mood for foreplay but he had to taste her and he knew from before that she liked his mouth on her tits.

"John."

His name sounded like a plea from her lips. A plea for more.

God, he wanted more.

"I want you right here, right now," he murmured between her breasts. "Tell me you want me too."



"I do. I absolutely do. Right here."

Nothing else she could have said would've been better.

With one last nip at the fleshy side of her breast, making her squirm in his arms, he opened his eyes and focused on the first piece of furniture that would work. The table directly in front of him.

He took the few steps needed to close the distance, set Kaine on her feet and spun her around to face the table.

Bending without any direction from him, she fumbled with the buttons on her jeans as he tore at his own. He had the zipper lowered just as she pushed the material over her hips, baring her beautiful ass.

One of these days, he wanted that ass. Jesus, he hoped he was still around to take it.

Sliding his fingers between her thighs, he felt the wet proof of her desire. God, she was hot and she was gonna be so damn tight. With the jeans restricting how far apart she could spread her legs, she'd feel like a damn vise.

His cock throbbed at the thought, his balls tightening.

He grabbed her high on the inside of her thighs and spread her as far as he could, which wasn't far at all. In the faint light now spilling through the front windows, he saw the bare lips of her sex glistening with moisture.

The thought flashed through his mind that he should taste her. Drop to his knees, put his mouth on her and get her off.

But his body had moved ahead of his brain. With his cock in his hand, he bent his knees just enough to align the tip of his shaft with her entrance.

He spread her slick heat over the head, let it tease his senses until he couldn't stand to not be inside her.

Then he thrust.

Kaine's guttural moan echoed his own as she lifted her ass into him, trying to get him deeper.

Pausing for a few brief seconds, he felt the glove-like fit of her sheath ripple around him. He already felt his climax building in his balls and he knew he wouldn't last long.

Ecstasy beckoned. Pulling out proved to be difficult, she was that tight.

And synapses all over his body snapped and crackled with sensation. Her sex pumped him like a fist as he pushed back in.

She struggled to open her legs wide, her back arching and her hands grabbing onto the sides of the table to hold herself steady as he thrust into her.

"Christ, Kaine. I'm gonna blow. Are you close?"

"Yes, just don't stop. Gods, don't stop."

Her hoarse words released his restraints and his hips began to pound in time to his raging heartbeat.

He had only one objective. Come in her body, fill her with his seed and make her his. She *was* his.

Spread out before him, pinned to the table, she could only move if he allowed it. He bent over her, covered her with his body as she gripped the edge.

His pace never slowed and now she truly was at his mercy. Through the fever in his body and brain, he recognized the need to mark her somehow.

He had his mouth on her neck before he realized what he was doing and when he bit her, he had the satisfaction of feeling her cry out as she shuddered.

Her orgasm made her sheath clench hard around him, milking him like a fist and he exploded inside her on his next thrust.

With her name on his lips, he pumped his seed deep.

Christ, she felt so damn good.

Because he wasn't wearing a condom.

The animal in him, the one that had pinned her to this table, howled. Satisfied.

The rational part of his brain couldn't even begin to care that he'd gone without.

And that could be one hell of a problem.

## Chapter Six

Still trying to catch her breath, Kaine felt John watching her as they straightened their clothes by the table.

Her body was sated but her brain wouldn't give her a break. It wanted to analyze every detail of their time together, to break it down and compartmentalize every touch, every sigh, every thrust.

Wanted to rejoice at the fact that he hadn't used a condom.

Had he made a conscious choice to go without it? It would imply a certain level of trust if he'd done it consciously.

More likely, he'd been so caught up in the moment, he'd forgotten.

She understood. Every time she touched him, she felt feverish with an almost insane need to have him.

*So not good.*

"Kaine. Are you alright?" John's voice was pitched low and held an undercurrent of self-disgust. "Christ, I feel like I attacked you."

She tilted her head back until she could meet his gaze. "You didn't. Believe me, I was right there with you."

He nodded but his expression remained tight. "Good to know. But I still feel like I—" He ran a hand over his head, barely mussing the short strands of hair. "Damn it."

"Used me?" She shrugged, buttoning the last button on her jeans while trying to hold an impassive front. "If you did, it was mutual."

He stilled. She actually felt his complete lack of movement and realized she'd taken the wrong tack.

"You know," his voice sounded way too calm, "I'm getting really sick of this front you put up. I would rather see you get pissed at me than put up this wall."

She forced to hold his gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, you do. I don't know what the hell to say to you, Kaine. I don't know what to think about Evie. I don't know what the fuck I should do here. And I'm typically the one who's got the god damn plan."

She saw his frustration, his confusion, and wanted to take it all away. Or, at the very least, ease it. She'd thought sex would help him calm down. Seems she'd just added more weight to what he was already struggling with.

"John. You've already done the best thing you can do for Evie. You brought her here. Dane and Nica will figure out what's going on."

"And what about you? I feel like I'm making all the wrong moves with you."

He actually cared about her feelings? Blessed Goddess, she wanted to believe. Truly she did. But she couldn't let herself go there.

"You don't have to worry about me."

"What if I want to?"

Her breath hitched in her lungs. "Then I'd suggest you wait until you know me better."

She turned, needing a little space. But he came after her, put his arms around her shoulders and pulled her back against him.

Gods, he was solid and so damn warm, she wanted to bask in his heat. And she wanted to fix this.

"John, you said you had a lead on the woman who kidnapped Evie. What were you talking about?"

He paused, as if considering what to tell her. Or to tell her anything at all.

Finally he took a deep breath and released it in a warm rush by her ear. "The warehouse where Evie was being kept. I found a name on a courier receipt. I could be completely off track that it belongs to the same woman. It may not lead to anything. But...I may get lucky."

"What's the name?"

Again he paused and she wondered if he was going to tell her. If he'd trust her enough to give her more information.

"Grace Bell. Has to be an alias. It's too simple."

"True. But it's something to go on."

"Yeah."

Weariness made the normally deep tone of his voice even more husky. And sexy.

She turned, trying not to love the way he kept his arms around her so she couldn't go far. Glancing up, she noticed the shadows under his eyes. "You're tired."

"I'm fine."

She couldn't help but smile at the male pride in that statement. "I'm sure you are, but why don't you sit down on the couch, put your feet up."

"Why don't you come with me?"

She wanted to. Damn it, she really wanted to. At least for a few minutes. Then she needed to check on that name. "Sure. There's no TV but I could put some music on."

"No need." He grabbed her hand and led her to the couch. Then he sat down and pulled her down next to him. "I just need a little quiet."

While she would have merely sat there next to him, John leaned back and put his arm around her shoulders again, drawing her into his side. It was so tempting to rest her head on his chest, to lay against him and close her eyes and pretend, for just a few minutes, that they were two normal people getting to know one another.

Not a damaged *lucani* pretending to be something else to a man who was going to be horrified that he'd had sex with her. Multiple times.

But she did it anyway. She curled into his side, her ear against his chest, picking out the strong beat of his heart.

What would he do when he discovered the truth?

And he would. Kyle was going to decide to reverse the spell that had taken John and Evie's memories. It was the only thing that made sense. To help Evie, Dane and Nica were going to need to know everything about their captivity. And they could only know that if they had their true memories.

And while John handled that, she would track down Grace Bell.

But to do that, she needed John to take another nap. How he'd fought out of the last sleeping spell she'd put on him, she had no idea. She'd been under a lot of stress. Maybe she'd screwed it up.

This time, she wouldn't.

"I can practically hear you thinking," he mumbled above her, the words echoing in his chest. "Tell me."

Tell him she was a *lucani versipellis*?

He'd find that out soon enough.

"I'm hoping you don't think we're all nuts when the sun sets tonight."

He didn't answer right away but the steady rise and fall of his chest eased her.

"I'm pretty much a have-to-see-it-to-believe-it guy but I saw things that can only be explained by magic. Does that sound crazy? But yeah, my former teammates would think I was nuts."

"What about the guys you work with now?"

"Shit, I didn't even think about that. I better call and let them know I need to take a few days."

"You don't need to make that call yet. It's barely seven."

"Since we have some time, I want to know more about you. Who are you, Kaine?"

She was the woman who loved him.

Which didn't matter one damn bit because she couldn't tell him exactly who she was so she could never be anyone to him.

But she could at least help him track down the woman who'd kidnapped him and his sister. The *lucani* wanted that woman too. Needed to know why she was kidnapping *eteri* and infecting them with spells that gave them magical powers.

Needed to shut down this woman who threatened to expose the magical races.

"I'm nobody, really. Just a soldier."

"For what army?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Then what can you tell me?"

*Not much.* "I can tell you that I will do whatever I can to help Evie get better."

Frustration sounded in his harsh sigh.

Yeah, this sucked for both of them.

With a minimum of movement, Kaine maneuvered her body until her legs straddled his and she had both hands on his face. His eyes widened, as if he were startled. Then his hands settled onto her hips as she lowered her lips to his.

Lust rose up immediately but it wasn't just that. Another softer emotion followed on its heels. She tried to ignore its presence but it snuck under her shield and infused everything with its lure.

As his mouth conformed to hers, she nearly sank into the spell that was John. Heat and warmth and forbidden dreams.

She wanted him so much, she was almost willing to accept the fact that she may never be able to shift again if it meant she could keep him.

*The spell, stupid. Recite the spell.*

The reason she'd kissed him flashed in her mind. She'd hoped to draw more power to her to fuel the spell and this time keep him under for a longer period of time. Drawing on their mutual desire, she figured she might be able to power the entire eastern seaboard.

Instead, she funneled it into the spell and knew the second it took hold. When his lips went slack against hers.

Gently, she let his head rest against the cushion. With his eyes closed and his face relaxed, he looked much younger than his thirty years.

This time the spell would stick. It had to.

She needed time to do a little digging.

And then she would go tracking.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where's John?"

Kyle's sharp question made Kaine's back straighten when she slipped through Nica's door.

"Asleep on Tira's couch. I put him under. How's Evie?"

Kyle walked over to her, his gaze narrowed and his nostrils flaring. She knew he could smell what she'd been doing with John, knew he wanted to say something.

They were alone. Kaine figured Tam, a nurse, was in the bedroom with Nica, Dane and Evie, which was better.

At least she didn't have to endure Tam's questions as well as Kyle's.

She waited, standing at attention. He was going to start in on her about John so she just waited.

After what seemed like forever, he finally said, "No change in her condition. Nica and Dane are still talking. I want you to head back to your place, provide support for Nic and Duke. I just sent them out on assignment."

Shock made her blink at him stupidly for several long seconds. He wasn't going to interrogate her?

Feeling like she'd dodged a silver bullet, she nodded then realized what Kyle had said. "Wait. Where'd they go?"

"Report of another possible kidnapping, this time *lucani*. Could be a false alarm. The guy's been known to go off radar but his parents are worried because of what's happened and we don't need a fucking panic on our hands."

"Why didn't you send me with them?"

She blurted out the question before she gave it much thought and nearly shrank under Kyle's stone-faced expression.

Shit. He hadn't told her because she'd been fucking around with John.

"You were needed here," Kyle finally said, though she knew what he wasn't saying. *You wouldn't have been any good to them right now.*

Which was true.

*Vaffanculo.*

With a stiff nod, she turned on her heel and headed out the door. Kyle didn't call to her. He let her go without a word.

Trying not to run, she slipped into John's car, because she didn't have her own, and started to drive.

She wasn't going home, though. She had something else to do.

From her cell, she made a quick call to Camillus de Feo. The *linchetto*, an Etruscan night elf, ran a private investigation firm for those of Etruscan descent with his brothers Antonin, Teo and Rio.

Cam woke up fast when she told him who she was and what she wanted, and twenty minutes later, she had to shake her head as she pulled to a stop in front of John's apartment building.

*Small fucking world.*

The address Cam had given her was directly across from John's apartment. She couldn't see the house though because of the thick rose hedge already in bloom. In April.

Cam had told her he'd call his brother Rio so he'd be expecting her. Then he'd told her how to find the gate to Rio's house and how to open it so she didn't get her hand pricked by thorns. When the gate opened inward, she walked through and headed for

the front door of the stone home that looked like a miniature castle. Truly, it did. It had turrets and everything.

Enchanted, she thought. Had to be.

And smack in the heart of the city.

Cool.

On her walk through the small garden to the front door, her attention settled on a small rose bush that seemed to have fallen behind the rest in terms of blooming. To say it called to her would have been pushing it. Still, she stopped by its side, her hand reaching out to stroke the petals of its lone white flower.

She sucked in a sharp breath as the bush quivered beneath her hand. Like a dog begging to be petted. As she watched, her mouth hanging open, the leaves turned a little greener, and several buds appeared on the branches.

"Wow, my godmother's gonna love that. She's been babying that plant for months. Nothing she's done has helped."

Kaine tore her gaze away from the plant to look at the woman standing in the now-open doorway of the house. She had a sweet smile, a pleasant face and purple eyes. Elizabeth Taylor eyes. Wow.

"Hi, I'm Rosie de Feo. You must be Kaine. Rio's still getting dressed. He needed a shower to wake up."

"Kaine Giliati. Sorry to come so early."

Rosie waved her concern away as she stepped through the door. And into an art gallery. Of some of the strangest art she'd ever seen.

Her mouth literally dropped open and her feet faltered at the statuary and artwork filling the open space of the first floor.

"My godmother Lora likes to sculpt."

Okay. Kaine guessed Lora also liked sex because every one of the pieces depicted naked men and women in various erotic poses.

"And my godmother Fanny loves to paint."

And Fanny apparently had a thing for horror movies George Romero would be proud of.

Paintings recreating the murderous shower scene from the movie *Psycho*, the zombie cemetery scene from *Night of the Living Dead* and the rape scene from *Evil Dead* hung on the walls.

"Wow. Good taste in horror movies. And the black velvet Elvises are, uh..."

"Pretty hideous." Rosie laughed as she walked to the circular iron staircase winding up in the center of the room. "Don't worry. I know. But Fanny loves them so they stay."

Following Rosie up the stairs as the other woman called out to her mate, Kaine's enhanced sense of smell noted the fact that Rosie was *Fata*. She knew Rio was *linchetto*.



Rio supposedly had mad skills on the computer. Well, she was going to put them to the test—

A way-too-handsome dark-haired man stepped out of a doorway in the second floor hallway, an open smile on his face and a hand outstretched to shake hers.

“Hey, you’re Kaine, right? Nice to meet you. I’m Rio. Cam said you had a name or something you wanted me to run down?”

“Yes. I’m not sure if it’s an alias or an actual legal name but I need anything you can find on it.”

He smiled at her again and opened another door along the hall, this one filled with computer equipment. “Come on in and let me see what I can find.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When he woke this time, John knew he’d been put under by magic.

Which sounded so fucking ridiculous but was the only explanation for the fact that he’d fallen asleep while Evie was in trouble and he’d had Kaine in his arms.

Kaine was gone now.

But he wasn’t alone.

He stood and turned to find the hard ass, Kyle, at the table in the kitchen.

The same table where he’d bent Kaine over and fucked her hard and fast.

Just the thought was enough to make his cock stir but he forced the lust and the other, heavier emotion down, far enough that this man wouldn’t see it.

But from the way the guy was eyeing him, he probably already knew.

And he wasn’t happy.

Again, John had the almost uncontrollable urge to stand at attention with the guy.

Kyle motioned to the seat across from him. “We need to talk.”

“Is Evie okay?”

“There’s been no change in your sister’s condition. She’s still unconscious and Dane and Nica believe that’s for the best.”

So this wasn’t about Evie. John’s back straightened as he approached the table, sliding into the chair so he could face Kyle head-on.

“Where’s Kaine?”

Kyle’s amber gaze held steady on his, giving up nothing of his thoughts.

“She’s on assignment.”

Yeah, right. John wanted to demand to know where she was. As if he had the right to know.

But a few rounds of high-octane sex didn’t give him rights to her.

Still, his hands clenched into fists on his thighs. “Is she okay?”

Kyle didn't hesitate. "No, she's not. And yeah, that's your fault."

The guy wanted to be in his face. Fine. But John was a god damn Navy SEAL. He didn't back down. Not from anyone.

"You know, I really don't give a fuck what the hell you think. The only thing that matters to me right now is Evie."

"So Kaine doesn't matter to you?"

He nearly bit his tongue in half. "My relationship with Kaine is none of your fucking business."

Kyle's gaze narrowed down to hard slits. "See now, that's where you're wrong. She is *my* responsibility. No one gets to fuck with her head, especially not some dipshit *eteri* who doesn't know when to shut the fuck up."

John tried to hold onto his temper. He generally didn't get riled too fast or too easy. But right now, his gut tightened with rage and he wanted to pound his fists into Kyle's face and demand answers.

Hell, he didn't even know the questions. Didn't matter.

This man had something to tell him but he was taunting him with it.

And John had had enough.

He rose, slow and deliberate, so Kyle had no doubt what was coming.

"I'm sick of this bullshit. You want me to take a swing at you. You want me to fight you. Fine. Let's take it outside and we can pound the shit out of each other. Frankly, I could use it. But I want to know what the fuck you're not telling me."

Kyle didn't get up, just sat there staring up at him. As if he couldn't care less that John had basically challenged him to a fight.

"Are you really sure you want to know everything, John? 'Cause I gotta tell you, you're not gonna like it."

John set his fists on the table and leaned forward. "You don't know anything about me. How the hell would you know what I like and don't like?"

Kyle leaned back in the chair, his mouth lifting into a sarcastic smirk. "I know more than you think. Sit down and let me tell you about the first time we met."

\* \* \* \* \*

John had to work pretty damn hard to keep his mouth from falling open as he stared at the large black wolf sitting in front of him.

A wolf with Kyle's amber eyes.

Even though he'd seen the transformation with his own eyes, John's brain was having trouble making sense of it.

Actually, his brain was simply blank with disbelief.

No way. No *fucking* way.

The wolf snorted and shook his head, his fur gleaming blue-black in the morning sunlight now glaring through the windows.

Beautiful animal. Absolutely gorgeous.

But it was an animal.

John blinked several times in rapid succession.

Kyle must have hypnotized him. Yeah, he'd hypnotized him so he wouldn't remember Kyle leaving and bringing in this animal.

John looked around the room, searching for some evidence that he was right. Looking for Kyle hiding in a corner somewhere.

John walked to the door and checked on the front porch. Then he looked in every room in the house.

When he returned to living room, the wolf still sat there, looking up at him with a bored expression on his face.

If a wolf could actually have a bored expression.

Maybe he was still sleeping. Maybe this was some weird fucking dream.

But he'd tried to tell himself that last night too and look what had happened.

Maybe this was just one long dream. Maybe he'd dreamed Kaine, dreamed the whole damn thing. Maybe when he woke up, it'd be morning and his life would be back to normal.

Including a job he barely tolerated and a sister with secrets.

And no Kaine.

"Kaine's like you, isn't she?"

The wolf cocked its head to the side and just stared at him. If it'd opened its mouth and spoke, John didn't think he could've been any more stunned.

Shit, he actually felt dizzy. He reached for the nearest chair and lowered himself into it, his gaze clinging to the animal.

A werewolf.

Kyle was a werewolf.

*Kaine* was a werewolf.

Holy shit.

The wolf rose to its feet. No, a wolf had paws. He rose to his paws and John couldn't look away. He sat unblinking, mesmerized and dumbfounded as the wolf wavered out of focus. Its body shook, contorted and for a brief moment wavered out of view. Then Kyle stood in the exact same spot.

He reached for the pants he'd taken off earlier and hung on the back of a chair then pulled his shirt over his head. He didn't bother with his shoes.

John watched as Kyle crossed his arms over his chest and cocked one eyebrow at him.

How the hell had he reacted the first time? The time he'd seen Kaine shift just after he'd shot her.

Kyle had told him that he hadn't escaped from the house where he'd been kept. Kaine in her wolf form and two other men had gotten him out.

When he'd run from Kyle's home, where he'd been taken to recuperate after being left for dead, Kaine had followed him to his home and only when they'd been found by Kyle's team had she shifted back into human form.

Which was when he'd shot her.

According to Kyle, he'd nearly killed her.

His lungs started to work a little harder, unable to keep up with his need for oxygen.

After she'd healed from the gunshot wound, that was when a group of Etruscans, with very little help from John, had rescued Evie. And when the *streghe* from Nica's *boschetta*, from her coven, had cleansed Evie of all the spells—or at least thought they had—she and John had made the decision to have their memories of the Etruscans erased completely.

Had he done that? Had he willingly erased Kaine from his mind nearly three months ago?

Kyle wanted him to allow the *streghe* to release his memories now. Kyle thought maybe John would remember something useful to help Evie.

"Arrange it. Right now. I'll do it."

Kyle didn't move. "Fine."

"Where's Kaine?"

"On assignment."

"When will she be back?"

"No idea. Hopefully not 'til you're long gone."

## Chapter Seven

"Sorry it's not more to go on but whoever this is, she's buried herself pretty damn good."

Tearing her gaze away from the address in her hand, Kaine looked up to see a frown on Rio's handsome face.

"This is great, really. It's a place to start, which is more than I had when I got here."

Rio sighed, shaking his head. "I'll be able to dig a little deeper with more time. Give me a couple of days and I should have a lot more information."

Evie may not have a few more days and Kaine wasn't about to wait. But she smiled and nodded. "Thanks, Rio. I really appreciate this."

"No problem. I'll give you a call when I find more."

"I'd appreciate that. Just leave me a message if I don't answer. I have a few other leads to track down, I may not be able to get to my phone if it rings."

Rio nodded, already turning to head back into his office and his computer. "No problem, I'm just gonna run a few more things here..."

Rosie touched Kaine's shoulder, an apologetic smile on her face. "Sorry. He gets a little lost in his work sometimes. He really doesn't like to lose. He'll have more information for you by the end of the day. Believe me, this will bug him."

Back in John's car after saying goodbye to Rosie, the address in her hand, Kaine knew what she had to do. She couldn't wait for more information. Evie needed help now.

And really, she'd only be wasting time going back to Kyle's place to fight with him about what had to be done.

Kyle would want to send Nic and Duke. Without her. Just as he'd sent them to find the missing *lucani*. Without her.

Kyle didn't trust her now. He didn't trust her to be able to do her job because of her feelings for John.

That stung like a *pugio* between her ribs.

Well, fuck that. She'd show her commander just how capable she was. She'd track this information and she'd call for backup if she found anything. She wasn't stupid, contrary to popular opinion at the moment.

She'd go to New York City. She'd find what she was looking for.

But already, the tightness in her chest was threatening to strangle her.

God damn, she hated cities.

And New York City was hell on earth for *lucani*. She'd been there once, had gone with her dad to help track a *Malandante* snitch. The smell had made her gag until she'd gotten used to it. The sounds had been deafening and it never stopped. Not even at night. Sirens, horns, people talking, TVs blaring, music throbbing.

All those people, all that concrete and brick suffocating the life-giving power of the earth. Nowhere to run, except Central Park. Central Park had been amazing, especially at night. Teeming with wildlife, homeless people, criminals, groups of kids looking for trouble or fun, police on horseback.

While there were some pockets of old magic still lingering in New York City, Central Park held the bulk of it.

And according to Rio, this address was right across from the park.

*You can do this.*

She was *going* to do this.

She was going to New York to track down this lead. Damn it, she was the best tracker the *lucani* had, next to her dad, of course. Who was off on some super-secret mission for the king, out of touch.

When he found out what she'd done...

He'd be horrified that she'd disobeyed a direct order from her commanding officer.

Tough. This needed to be done and it was her gods damn job. Kyle would understand, once he got past being pissed off.

Besides, it wasn't like her dad had never disobeyed a direct order, or a few hundred, in his day. Hell, her dad was known for it.

And John needed her to do this. For his sister. She owed him that much.

"New York City, here I come."

\* \* \* \* \*

The women standing around him as he sat on the couch in Nica's house didn't look like witches.

They didn't call themselves witches, either.

They were *streghe*, which he vaguely realized was Italian but only because Evie had loved the book *Strega Nona* as a child.

Their mom had read it to her endlessly.

"John, we need you to clear your mind, not let it run endlessly." Margorie laid one warm hand on his shoulder as she stood behind him. "I know it's not that easy but we need you to open up to us. You've got some pretty strong walls in your brain and we really need you to bring them down."

Apparently Margorie had been in attendance the last time they'd wiped his memories. As had the older woman with the steel gray brush cut, Ronia. She didn't look too happy to see him again.

Nor did the tiny, hunched ancient one named Sifai. She just flat-out glared at him.

John was used to ignoring just about anything—sleep deprivation, hunger, anger, fury, tears, pleas and blind hatred—and getting the job done.

So what the hell was his problem?

Kaine. She was his problem.

Well, only a problem in the fact that he wanted her here.

No matter what he remembered, when he opened his eyes, he wanted her by his side.

But one look at Kyle and he knew that wasn't happening.

Jesus Christ, when the fuck did this all get so complicated?

"John."

Margorie's kind smile, the only one in the room at the moment, made him take a deep breath and he nodded, just before he closed his eyes and shoved everything out of his mind.

He turned off the little voice in his head and forced himself to relax.

And someone took a pickaxe to his brain.

Sharp, blinding pain struck him right behind the eyes and light flashed behind his eyelids.

No, not light. Images. Memories. Pieces of his life from that time that suddenly made sense.

The wolf who'd found him in that basement cell, who he'd carried to safety after a blast had rocked the building and knocked her unconscious. Kaine's partners, Nic and Duke. Escaping from Kyle's home with the wolf on his heels. The wolf who'd turned out to be a beautiful woman. The woman he'd accidentally shot when Nic and Duke had rushed him after his so-called escape. The fight at the warehouse where the redheaded woman had been keeping Evie.

The gut-wrenching decision to erase all memories of the Etruscans. To erase all memories of Kaine.

He'd known it was a mistake. That's why he'd been dreaming about her.

How the hell they'd formed so strong a bond in such a short time, he didn't have a clue. He only knew it was real.

It was why sex with her hadn't seemed like pick-up sex. It'd held an emotional depth that should've scared him.

When he finally opened his eyes, he found Margorie sitting by his side, holding his hand.

"Drink this, John. It'll help with the headache."

He didn't think twice. He just did it. He sucked the straw inside his mouth and grimaced at the sweet taste of the liquid. Thankfully there wasn't that much of it and it did seem to ease the pain in his head slightly.

"Where's Kaine?"

"Drink the rest."

He obeyed then went to push off the couch but Margorie put her hand on his shoulder. "Oh, no, you don't. You need to sit for a few more minutes."

He looked directly into Margorie's eyes so she didn't misunderstand him. "I need to talk to Kaine right now."

Margorie sighed and shook her head. "She's not here, John. I'm sorry."

"Where's Kyle?"

"Right here."

Kyle leaned against the wall on the far side of the room, watching him through slitted eyes.

"I want to talk to her. I *have* to talk to her."

Kyle didn't say anything right away, just stared at John. Finally, he nodded. "I'll call her. But first you need to talk to Nica and Dane about your sister. See if your memories hold any clues as to what we can do to help her."

"Of course. But I want to talk to Kaine. When I'm done. She needs to know..."

"Know what?"

John shook his head. "I just need to talk to her."

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, John's head throbbed but this time his chest hurt too.

Like he had a weight sitting on it that he couldn't dislodge.

He, Nica and Dane had gone over and over and over everything he'd seen and heard during his captivity. Some of it was still fuzzy, though Margie said that would clear up eventually.

He didn't know that it would matter since he couldn't remember hearing or seeing anything that would help Dane and Nica help Evie.

"So now what? What are we going to do about Evie?"

Nica and Dane looked at each other then back at John.

Dane just shook his head but Nica started to worry her bottom lip with her teeth.

"What?" John asked her. "What are you thinking?"

Nica's sigh sounded weary. "I'm thinking we really need to get our hands on the woman who did this."

John ran his fingers over his head, frustration beginning to mount. "I've been trying. For two months, I've been trying to find anything I could. I only recently got a name and —"

"What name?" Kyle practically barked. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me that before?"



"Why the fuck should I? Christ, you treat me like a god damn criminal then expect me to trust you?"

Kyle looked ready to explode but John was beyond caring. Evie needed help or she could die.

And John wanted Kaine here. Now.

"Gentlemen, this isn't helping." Nica's calm voice barely made a dent in the level of animosity between him and Kyle. But he knew she was right. It wasn't helping. "Why don't you tell us the name now and we'll see if we don't have more luck tracking it down."

"Fine." He nearly ground his back teeth into dust as he said that, still glaring at Kyle. "I already told Kaine so—"

"What? When?" Kyle finally showed some flash of emotion. He'd stunned the bastard. Good.

"Just this morning. She—"

He cut off when Kyle grabbed the cell phone out of his pocket and hit a button.

Seconds passed and with each one, Kyle's expression got tighter as no one picked up on the other end.

John's chest started to compress, like someone had his lungs in a vise and had started to squeeze.

"*Baciami il culo.*" Kyle nearly crushed the phone in his hand as he drew it away from his ear. "Son of a fucking bitch. I *knew* she left too gods damn easily."

Shit. *Shit.* Kaine.

"I only gave her a name. I don't have anything more than that. Where the hell could she have gone?"

Kyle started to pace. "Call her," he ordered John, who already had his phone in his hand. "Maybe she'll pick up for you."

But John had no such luck.

And he swore he heard the tick of a countdown in his head.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took almost three hours to get to New York City.

Luckily, John's car had a GPS and it took her straight into the city, through the Lincoln Tunnel and into the Port Authority Building, where she parked the car and nearly gagged at the noxious fumes of diesel and gas in this underground tomb.

The concrete walls magnified every little sound as she tried to breathe only through her mouth as she made her way to the escalator to the upper floors. To freedom.

Her head hurt and her lungs gasped for air as she fought through the late afternoon crowd going wherever the hell they were going at breakneck speed.

She had to stop on street level to use the restroom and pick up a city map but then she practically ran to the doors leading out onto 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

Her backpack felt comfortingly heavy on her shoulders as she turned left on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and started the trek to Central Park.

Blessed Goddess, she could hardly keep herself from staring at the crowds like a rube tourist, in town for a show and some sightseeing. All she needed was a camera around her neck and a pair of high-end walking sneakers.

Still, no one gave her a second look in her black hoodie, jeans and boots and that was just fine. She needed to be invisible here and in a city of however many million, that wasn't so hard.

With the map in one hand and the address from Rio in her pocket, she walked, head up, eyes forward. People rushed by her, on their way to wherever they were going as fast as they could get there.

Only the tourists stopped to gawk and point and look up.

It took every ounce of will Kaine had not to do the same.

Noise assaulted her from all sides, trying to draw her attention. Smells made her nose twitch as her brain tried to identify them all.

Still, the farther she ventured into the heart of the city, the more her fear turned to curiosity.

The height of the buildings simply astounded her. And the architecture amazed. Glass, brick, stone. Some were enclosed in steel skeletons, men in hardhats wandering around though none of them seemed to be working.

Restaurants and markets emitted mouthwatering scents, countering the fumes from the cars, buses, taxis, delivery trucks and the subway rumbling below the city streets.

And finally, faintly, she caught the scent of the earth. Of trees and grass and growing things.

That new sense inside her, the one tied to the *silvani* powers from her mother, made her walk faster. She sensed the power lurking in that huge tract of open land and she needed to get there. Now.

By the time she hit Columbus Circle, she was practically running. She couldn't help herself. She saw the trees first, bursting with spring greenery. Navigating her way across the circle required a concentration she barely had but finally she hurried past a large gold and plaster monument that she couldn't care less about and entered Central Park.

She had the overwhelming urge to take off her shoes and simply stand in the closest patch of grass, sinking her toes in and letting the earth's power fill her. She couldn't believe how strong it felt here. It called to that part of her that was magic, the place inside where she kept her wolf.

The wolf she couldn't call forth.

It also called to the magic of the *silvani*, the new power she still hadn't figured out.

For the first time since she'd learned about her *silvani* heritage, she realized she sensed that magic now, just in a different way than she did the *lucani* magic. She *felt* the energy in the trees and shrubs and in the newly revitalized grass.

And if she let herself, she could probably draw that energy to her and boost her own power.

Maybe she could call her wolf.

The lure was almost too powerful to ignore but she knew she couldn't attempt it now.

She had a mission to complete first.

\* \* \* \* \*

"*Vaffanculo*, this is a fucking gods damn clusterfuck."

Kyle had been swearing for the past twenty minutes in a mix of English and what John assumed was Italian.

John wished he knew Italian so he could join in because English wasn't enough to cover the fear as he threw clothes and weapons into a backpack Nica had given him.

Kaine had gone to New York. Alone. To follow the lead John had given her.

After checking one final time to make sure he had everything he needed, he zipped the backpack and slung it over his shoulder.

Kyle had wanted to go himself. He'd nearly been out the door before Tam had reminded him that the *lucani* king, Cole, had demanded he stay here. That was when Kyle had started to swear in Italian.

John didn't give two shits about what Kyle wanted or needed. He was going after Kaine. No one was going to stop him.

He walked back into the front room, trying not to let Kyle's anxiety infect him. At least, not anymore than it already had.

"Kyle, honey, calm down. Getting pissed isn't helping." Tam tried for a soothing tone but her constant pacing wasn't helping either. "Call Sal again. Maybe he's home now."

"She can't fucking *shift*." Kyle ran a hand through his dark hair, yanking at it as if it would help him think. "Why the hell didn't she tell me?"

Kaine's partner Duke had dropped that bomb when Kyle had contacted him after he'd talked to Rio de Feo.

"That doesn't matter now." Tam shook her head. "We need to concentrate on getting someone to the city to help her."

"I'm going."

Kyle didn't even bother to sneer at him. "Fuck that. You're not strong enough to be any help to her."

John forced his immediate anger back and stood his ground. He wasn't going to brag or list his accomplishments. Kyle didn't give a shit that he was a Navy SEAL with more than a decade of military service. Didn't matter. John was going.

"I'm leaving now and I don't need your permission. I only need the address. Besides, you don't have anyone else to send."

"I've got a gods damn legion full of men I trust more than you to back her up."

"Then why aren't you sending them?"

Kyle practically growled at him, raising the hair on John's neck. "I'm going to—"

"Kyle, that's enough."

The female voice came from behind him and John turned to see a short, blonde beautiful woman standing in the room.

He'd never seen her before. She hadn't come in through the front or back doors, both of which John could see from where he stood.

And everyone around him bowed or curtsied to her.

"Lady of the Silver Hammer," Kyle's tone immediately leveled, as if he was speaking to a commanding officer. "What—"

She cut him off by raising one index finger. "He goes."

Kyle wanted to argue. John could see the struggle he waged against blurting out whatever was in his head.

"Lady, let me get another man to go with him. He's not *lucani*. He won't be able to protect her—"

"Kaine is perfectly capable of protecting herself. Or so I thought you believed when you chose her to be *sicari*."

*Sicari*? That was a new one. John had no idea what it meant but he didn't think now was the time to ask. Whoever this woman was, she was on his side at the moment so he kept his mouth shut.

"John."

She turned to him as if she'd heard his thoughts. Her vivid blue eyes speared through him and the word regal suited her to a T, even though she was dressed in a tight blue miniskirt and white top. He had the overwhelming urge to bow as well. Who *was* she?

He straightened his back even as his head bowed. "Yes, ma'am."

The force of the blonde's smile hit him like a blast of heat directly in his solar plexus. Holy hell, the woman made every hair on his body stand at attention. She was a freaking force of nature. Too damn beautiful to be believed.

"I can see why Kaine fell for you. All that strength and manners too." She turned to wink at Tam, who smiled back. "Anyway, you're going to need a little help finding Kaine when you get to New York. Despite Kyle's momentary lack of faith," she lifted

her eyebrows in Kyle's direction and he had the grace—or the good sense—to look abashed, “she's very good at disappearing when she wants to. And her new powers—”

“What?” Kyle interrupted. “What new powers?”

“Will give her an edge against detection.”

“Nortia, what—”

Again, the lady raised one finger and Kyle shut his mouth.

But John had the same question. “What powers?”

Nortia smiled. “When you find her, you can ask her about them. But you'll need this to find her.” Reaching into the pocket of her skirt, Nortia pulled out a slim crystal attached to a long dark chain. “Wear it against your skin, under your shirt. She'll be well hidden and you'll need all the help you can get to track her down. The crystal will grow warm to the touch and begin to glow when she's near so you'll know you're on the right track.”

“Thank you...”

She smiled again and held out her hand for him to shake. At least, he hoped that's what she'd intended. Not for him to kiss her ring or anything.

“Nortia, Lady of the Silver Hammer. Don't worry. You don't need to know exactly who I am right now. You can take the crash course in Etruscan mythology when you get back. With Kaine. Kyle, give him your car keys.”

Kyle stared at him for several seconds but obviously wasn't about to disobey a direct order from Nortia, Lady of the Silver Hammer. What the fuck kind of name was that anyway? And that line about Etruscan mythology refused to stop winding around his brain.

No, he really didn't want to think about the implications of that. So he merely took the keys when Kyle held them out to him.

“If *anything* happens to her...” Kyle's gaze bored into his. “If she so much as breaks a nail, I will hurt you. If she dies...I kill you.”

John nodded, his blood frozen in his veins at the thought. “If she dies, I let you.”

## Chapter Eight

By the time night fell, Kaine swore she'd watched a million people enter and exit The Century building.

None of them the woman she was looking for.

From her perch high in a tree in Central Park, directly across from the building, she noted the presence of a doorman and some decent security. Nothing she couldn't bypass but, damn, the building was freaking huge—two towers and more than thirty floors.

Luckily, Rio had given her an apartment number as well as the address. Still, it was going to take some doing to get into the building, make her way to the twenty-eighth floor and sneak into the woman's apartment.

She needed time. And a team.

Which she didn't have because she'd stupidly and naively thought she could drive to New York City, find a powerful woman who didn't want to be found and drag her back to Reading where she'd be forced to cure a woman she'd already tried to kill.

*Shit.*

Okay, she was officially an idiot.

She hadn't even thought about where she was going to spend the night. It wouldn't be the first time she'd slept outdoors but, this time, she wouldn't have her pelt to keep her warm.

She should get a hotel room. She had a credit card with no limit but the second she used it, Kyle would be on her. And she had no desire to face that situation yet.

When she returned home, she wanted to be dragging Grace Bell with her.

Which brought her back to the first problem—how to get the woman out of the building.

Below her, the city rushed by. Even at night, horns honked, people hustled in and out of taxis and raced off to wherever they were going. People passed below, walking along the park paths, completely unaware of her while she watched their every move.

She was used to being invisible. She needed to be invisible for her job.

But...she'd never felt so disconnected before.

And that struck a chord deep inside.

She missed John.

Which was ridiculous because he'd probably already regained his memories and wouldn't want to see her again.

Her heart thudded almost painfully against her ribs and she took a deep breath to try to contain the pain.

Damn, the city completely fucked up her sense of smell. There were just too damn many and they jumbled together into a mass of puzzle pieces she couldn't make fit into any semblance of order. Trying to ignore that puzzle required a level of concentration she couldn't maintain for much longer.

She needed to find a hole for the night, catch a few hours of sleep somewhere she'd feel safe enough to close her eyes.

Checking below to make sure no one could see her, she began her descent. Beneath her hands, the bark of the old oak warmed to her touch. She swore she felt sap running through its limbs and a hum unlike anything she'd ever heard before. Almost like a melody.

She paused about twenty-five feet above the ground, her hands pressed against the thick trunk. And listened.

Blessed Goddess. She *did* hear something. Something amazing. Closing her eyes, she let the melody of the tree transport her.

Minutes passed and the sounds of the city faded to a drone that curiously only complemented the melody that never ended.

Absolutely amazing.

If she'd ever stopped to think about how the trees had felt before – and why the hell would she have ever done that? – she would have thought the trees here would be screaming at their imprisonment, surrounded on all sides by concrete and brick and all these people. The motor exhaust alone should have choked the life from them.

But no, they were singing.

And she could hear it.

Shaking her head, she finally made her way to the lower branches.

She waited as a couple jogged by then slid off the branch. The backpack barely jiggled as she landed on her feet and immediately started walking, as if that's exactly what she'd been doing all along.

Head up, she walked like she knew exactly where she was going. Which is how she must have missed him.

She felt someone come up behind her and had a momentary flash of panic when she thought she recognized his scent.

But she couldn't have. It couldn't be –

"You shouldn't have left without me."

Her foot caught a crack in the walk and she nearly fell as she flashed cold then hot at the sound of his voice.

Before she embarrassed herself any further, she stopped and turned to face him, barely able to keep from throwing herself at him.

John looked... Well, he looked pissed. His gorgeous mouth was flat and straight, no hint of a smile. The look in his eyes matched. And the pulse at the base of his neck, which she could see just above the collar of the tight black t-shirt he wore, throbbed.

She didn't care. Not one bit.

He was here. As if she'd only had to wish for him and he'd shown up.

Though how he'd found her...

So many questions. And only one answer she cared about.

"Why are you here?"

His lips flattened further and she thought he might actually be more than pissed. Yes, she'd taken his information and run with it but she'd done it for him. She knew he'd want to stay with his sister.

"Do you really not know the answer to that?"

A frown creased her forehead as she shook her head as more questions started to jumble together in her head. "How did you find me? I didn't tell anyone where I was."

"And you thought that was a good idea?"

Confusion continued to build and she didn't have a clue what he was getting at.

"John, what —"

"No. Not here." His voice had dropped to a bare whisper, as if he knew she'd be able to hear him. "Let's go."

He slipped his hand around her arm and started to walk. She either had to follow along or resist. And possibly draw unwanted attention. They'd reached the sidewalk along Central Park West, directly across from the Century and she couldn't help but stare at the building.

"Kaine, not now." John tugged on her arm, not painfully, not hurtfully. Just enough to keep her moving.

And the caveman routine was getting old. Not bothering to be subtle about it, she pulled away from his grip on her arm but kept walking beside him. "Where are we going?"

"I got a room at the Mayflower. It's right next door."

She opened her mouth but he cut her off before she could say a word.

"Don't. Just don't say anything right now. Not until we get inside."

Okay, he'd just stepped on her last nerve.

Her back straightened and her jaw locked against the urge to bite his head off.

Eyes straight ahead, she followed him through the lobby of the hotel, too pissed to notice much of anything but the gold and black decor. The silent elevator ride grated on her nerves, as did John's reflection in the mirrored doors. His gaze was glued to her reflection, watching her every move.

Her jaw tightened almost to the point of pain and she knew if she didn't release some of this tension soon, she'd break.



And that would not be pretty. Or quiet.

She noted the floor they stopped on. Fourteen. Noted the number of the room. They'd have a view of the park and the street below.

Tapping her foot as he opened the door, she walked through when he pushed the door open. A bed, a chair, a desk, all shoehorned into a room half the size of her bedroom at home.

Didn't matter. She was going to tear him —

He clapped a hand on her shoulder and spun her around, his mouth covering hers and stopping the stream of furious words bubbling in her gut.

She tasted anger in his kiss but not in the hands he wrapped around her ribs. He held her in place but his fingers didn't bite into her.

And though she knew she should be resisting his kiss, she simply couldn't.

Her mouth opened to accept his invading tongue, her head fell back in a surrender her brain hadn't consciously given.

Anger still burned in her gut at *his* unreasonable fury. The fury that threatened to incinerate her.

Her body responded to the heat and power of his. Her breasts ached for his touch and she arched her back even as he crowded closer to her.

Her back hit the wall with a loud thud but when he would have drawn away, she clamped her hands on either side of his face and wouldn't let him.

She sucked on his tongue and when he retreated, she followed him back and tasted him. His chest rose and fell in a harsh pattern and finally he had to break away to take a deep breath.

His lips parted but she slapped one hand over his mouth none too gently to shut him up. "Don't say a word. Just do me. Right now."

For one second, she thought he might refuse and her heart began to shrivel. She couldn't decipher the look in his eyes, didn't know what he was thinking.

But in the next, he'd clamped one hand to her nape to lift her up to his mouth again while the other unbuttoned her jeans.

Relief and hot, hot heat poured through her at the taste of his desire. And the all-consuming possession of his touch.

She wanted it hard and fast. And right now.

But her hands kept getting in the way of his. She reached for the hem of his t-shirt and started shoving it up his body, forcing him to release her mouth and abandon her buttons for the few seconds it took to drag it over his head.

But he fell right back to kissing her the second she dropped it to the floor.

He didn't bother with her shirt as he finally released the last button on her jeans but she couldn't bear not to feel his skin against hers. So she stripped her own shirt and cried out when her diamond-hard nipples pressed into his chest.

He swallowed her incoherent cry before he pulled away to string kisses along her cheek to her ear. "Undo my pants. Faster, baby, come on."

Every nerve ending in her body lit up like a rocket at his husky tone. Everywhere he touched her, she burned. Her hands fumbled with his belt, with the button and the zipper. She couldn't go fast enough and her fingers refused to cooperate.

Frustration made her moan but finally she shoved his pants and boxer briefs down his hips, wrapped one hand around his stiff erection and cupped his balls with the other.

He shuddered against her, his groan rumbling in his chest.

"Kaine."

She froze at the tone of his voice. He sounded as if he were in pain.

Looking up, she saw his eyes were closed and his lips parted, as if he couldn't get enough air.

She released him, her fingers curling into her palms, worried –

"No." His eyes flew open, laser-blue and blazing. "God no, don't let go. Put your hands on me, sweetheart."

Her eyes stung at the raw emotion in his voice and she blinked, fighting back imminent tears.

"Ah, Christ, don't cry, Kaine."

"No." She shook her head. "I'm not."

His hands cupped her face, thumbs stroking over her cheekbones. "Then why's your face wet?"

Because she was weak. She reached for him again, stroked her hand up and down the shaft in a rough caress she knew he loved. "Shut up and fuck me."

His breath hissed in between his teeth as she felt his cock tighten even further in her hand. "I'll fuck you, baby, but no way can I shut up. How can I tell you how beautiful you are if I can't speak? And this has gone beyond fucking, sweetheart. You know that."

Her eyes widened at the implications of his statement but before she could say anything, he covered her mouth again and kissed her with a passion that rocked her foundation and threw her nearly to the point of orgasm.

Just from the touch of his lips on hers and the emotion in his voice.

His kiss devoured, his hands smoothed down her body, trailing fire. As she stroked him with an ever-increasing rhythm, he molded her breasts in his palms and tweaked her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

Her sex responded with a fierce contraction that made her gasp into his mouth.

He played with her breasts as her knees got weaker, until she honestly thought they'd give out on her.

She released him to grab for his shoulders but he was already lifting her against him, propping her up against the wall and positioning his cock at her entrance.

Her head fell back and her eyes opened so she could stare into his as he entered her. Every inch was a revelation, each thrust and retreat heaven and hell.

His eyes flickered shut as took her body, his expression sharp and full of desire. She didn't need to see his eyes to know his every thought. Each one showed plainly on his face.

And brought her that much closer to orgasm.

It seemed like he took forever but when he finally had himself seated deep inside her, filling every empty space, he opened his eyes.

As he held her gaze, he began to thrust, slow and easy. She felt every inch of his flesh as his cock withdrew then invaded again, spreading her, stretching her.

He kept the pace steady at first until she could have suffocated from the expectation. Every breath she took was more difficult than the last. Every time he pulled out, she thought he couldn't fill her fast enough.

She barely realized when he picked up the pace, his hips pistoning against hers. Her legs tightened around his waist, her heels digging into the small of his back, urging him on.

Her sheath clutched at him, each drag of his flesh against her sending bolts of pure fire through her body.

When her orgasm hit her, it hit hard, like a bolt of electricity. She clamped around his cock, each movement making her orgasm burn brighter.

With a groan, he dropped his head to her shoulder and with one last thrust, he came. She felt the warmth of his seed bathe her, the heat of his breath on her neck. She never wanted to let him go.

But she knew he couldn't stay.

John knew the second he came that his life had just changed irrevocably.

Before he'd left Pennsylvania for New York, he'd still had the vague idea that when Evie was fixed, they'd get the hell away from all this madness. From people who changed into animals and women who healed with their hands.

That they'd put all of this behind them and start over somewhere far away.

He hadn't let himself think about Kaine, about what leaving her would mean.

Now he knew that wasn't going to happen.

She was his. Just as he was hers.

He didn't care that she was *lucani*. He wanted to be with her.

He loved her.

He just had to convince her—and himself—that they could find a place to fit in this world.

\* \* \* \* \*

"God damn. I think that's her."

After John had spent most of the night making love to her with an almost palpable sense of possession, Kaine had caught a few hours sleep somewhere around four a.m.

She wasn't sure if John had slept but he must have at some point. He looked too alert to have spent the entire night watching the comings and goings next door.

He'd kissed her awake around seven, made love to her again then they'd taken a shower. After breakfast at a little market behind the Century, they returned to their room to watch the comings and goings next door.

They hadn't spoken about last night, as if they were afraid to bring it up and ruin the illusion that they were happy.

Around ten, they'd headed over to Central Park and taken up residence in what Kaine was beginning to think of as her tree.

John had climbed just as silently as she had and they'd been perched here for only forty minutes or so before he spotted the woman.

Kaine's gaze narrowed on the entrance and immediately caught sight of John's target.

Yes, she had red hair and, through the binoculars John had brought, Kaine was pretty sure he was right. That's the woman they wanted. But...

"Who's she pushing in the wheelchair?"

The woman who'd kidnapped John and his sister had exited the front door of the apartment building pushing a high-tech wheelchair. A child-sized wheelchair with one small boy huddled in it.

The boy didn't look happy but the woman's expression held so much love as she bent to wrap a blanket around the boy's legs, Kaine couldn't help but wonder if they'd made a mistake.

"Sonuvabitch," John muttered and Kaine knew they had the right woman.

The unnaturally strong goon who'd nearly killed Nic with his bare hands followed the woman out of the building and kept close on her heels as she pushed the boy in the chair to the nearest crosswalk then across the street and into the park.

When they'd lost sight of the little group, Kaine turned back to John.

"We've got a problem."

He nodded, his expression solemn. "Yeah, two. I wasn't expecting her to have a kid, much less a disabled one."

"Do you think the goon is her husband?"

John shook his head. "He didn't act like it. He acted like muscle. She must have money to be able to live there with the kid, afford a bodyguard and support her kidnapping habit. Christ, none of this makes any fucking sense."

"Doesn't matter." Kaine sighed, knowing only one thing. "We need to get her and take her back with us so we can get her to tell us what the hell she did to your sister."

"And what do we do about the kid?"

"We bring him with us."

"The goon's gonna be a problem."

She nodded. "Then we need to take him out of the picture."

"I don't want you anywhere near him."

Turning slowly, she stared John straight in the eyes. "Excuse me."

His expression held a hard edge that she was pretty sure meant he wasn't kidding. "I'll take care of the goon, you get the woman. She won't fight you, not if you use the kid as leverage."

Okay, he might have made a good point if she hadn't been positive John didn't trust her to be able to handle herself against the bodyguard.

Her eyes began to burn but she refused to show weakness of any kind. John would mistake tears of rage for tears of hurt and that was unacceptable.

"I think I need to draw the goon away while you get the woman and the kid back to your sister," she said carefully, slowly. As if speaking to a child. "I'll meet you back there after I ditch the guy. The less drama, the better."

John shook his head. "No way. You're not —"

His mouth shut with an almost audible snap as Kaine continued to stare at him.

"I'm not what, John?"

He just stared at her, as if he shouldn't have to say the words because she knew exactly what he was going to say. But there was no way he was going to get off that easily.

Something in her chest cracked as she realized he didn't completely trust her. Might never trust her. He didn't trust her to be handle the bodyguard, didn't believe she was strong enough or smart enough.

And that only fueled her own doubts.

Which she couldn't have. Doubts made you sloppy, made you screw up. They couldn't afford a screw-up now.

Besides, she was right. Separate the woman from her bodyguard and she would follow John anywhere if he threatened her child. At least, that's what any mother would do. A mother who loved her child.

"Kaine. I know you can't shift. You're not strong enough to confront him on your own."

Her lungs froze and her vision went blurry. Her hands gripped the rough bark of the tree trunk until she thought her fingers might bleed and she heard a faint ringing in her ears.

She forced herself to maintain eye contact. "And how do you know that?"

His gaze never wavered. "Kyle told me."

Duke. He'd broken their promise. An ice-cold shaft of hurt plunged into her stomach. Then something else occurred to her. "So I'm safe now. Is that what you think?"

John's brow furrowed and confusion clouded his green eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can't call my wolf. No more worries about me turning furry. Which I'm sure was a total turnoff for an *eteri*."

She saw the second John realized what she was talking about. His eyes widened before he managed to clear his expression. "You think I didn't want you when I found out what you were, what you could do."

"Of course you didn't." She shrugged at his matter-of-fact tone. "How could you? Werewolves are monsters, creatures most sane *eteri* don't even believe in. I never wanted you to find out, John. I made a fool out of myself at Kyle's house the first time around, after we rescued you from the cells. Everyone knew I had a thing for you. Stupidity on my part. Believe me, I never meant to have the hots for an *eteri*."

His gaze had hardened as she spoke. "So, that night at the bar, I was supposed to be a one-night stand. You scratched an itch then tried to sneak out the door. But you ran into Evie and all hell broke loose. Am I getting this right so far?"

His tone held no emotion whatsoever but Kaine knew he wasn't very happy at the moment. She shook her head. "It doesn't matter what you think. We don't have time to discuss it. We need to separate those two and get Grace Bell back to your sister."

He let his gaze bore into hers for several long seconds, a muscle in his cheek jumping as he ground his back teeth. She didn't care. They had a job to do and now was the time. She knew how to separate the guard from the woman.

"The guard doesn't know what I look like but if I get close enough, he should be able to sense my magic. That should pull him away, at least long enough for you to grab the woman and the kid." She pulled out her cell and handed it to him. "Press and hold the nine button until the call connects. A man should answer. Tell him I told you to call and to transport you, the woman and the kid to Nica's. He'll know what it means."

"What about —"

"Try not to be freaked out and make sure —"

"God damn it, Kaine, what if you need —"

"You stay at Nica's." Her smile tasted bitter. "And don't worry. I'm pretty damn good at taking care of myself. Lots of practice."

"Fuck, Kaine —"

She didn't hear anymore as she let herself drop to the ground.

John's breath caught in his throat as he watched Kaine drop nearly two stories and land on her feet.

She landed like a cat, soft on her feet, and walked in the direction they'd seen Grace Bell disappear.

*Fuck.*

It took him a few precious minutes to get out of the tree and he nearly got caught by a tourist with a camera, who looked terrified when John appeared directly behind him as he took a picture of the park.

John sidestepped the guy and hurried after Kaine. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, he tried not to run but she had a lead on him and he was terrified he'd lose her.

Until he felt the warmth of the crystal against his skin. He couldn't lose her.

Breathing a little easier, he managed to catch up with her after only a few minutes. And even though he wanted to force her to get behind him, to let him handle this, he kept his distance.

Because she was right. She was just as highly trained as he was. Maybe more so. But without her ability to shift, was she somehow more vulnerable?

Or was she right? Did he really think she couldn't take care of herself?

No. Absolutely not. He had faith in her.

And the only way he could show her was to follow her lead.

But the thought of something happening to her, of her being injured, made him want to shove her in a hole and keep her there until it was safe to come out.

Yeah, he was an idiot but at least he knew when to take a step back.

Traffic in the park was lighter today than it had been yesterday. Fewer tourists, maybe kept away by the threat of rain in the gray clouds. Little foot traffic along the path. And no cops, at least none that he'd seen yet.

The trio shouldn't be that hard to find.

And soon enough, he'd spotted them just ahead.

Kaine was nowhere to be seen.

She'd disappeared but he knew she was close because the crystal bled heat into his skin.

He made himself do the same, slipped off the footpath and behind a flowering bush. As he watched, Grace Bell parked the wheelchair at a bench and took a seat herself.

She smiled at the boy in the chair, tried to get him to eat a cup of yogurt that she fed him with a spoon. The boy, who looked to be only eight or nine, didn't seem to be able to use his hands, which were curled in his lap.

He had copper-colored hair and blue eyes that John could see from this distance. Eyes that didn't seem to focus on anything.

Multiple sclerosis? Muscular dystrophy? He didn't have a clue.

Didn't matter. He would never hurt a child but Grace Bell didn't know that and Kaine was right. The kid was the way to get the woman to cooperate.

She obviously loved the boy and from the hair color, John assumed they were mother and son. He also saw the resemblance in the shape of their faces and slope of their noses.

Pulling out Kaine's phone, he pressed and held the nine button until he heard it dial.

"Kaine."

The male voice sounded familiar but John couldn't place it. "No. This is John Simmons. Kaine told me to call this number. We're in New York City. She said you'd transport me and two others to Nica's house."

"She told you that, huh? Well, John, then I guess that's what we need to do."

"So I call you and we just magically disappear from here and end up back at Nica's?"

The guy laughed like hell. "Yeah, that's about right, son. Just make sure you're in contact with the two other people when you do. Freaky as hell, huh?"

"You could say that." John sighed. "I'll call you back."

"I'll be waiting."

John snapped the phone shut, his gaze still on Grace, her son and the goon. Whose attention seemed to be focused on something behind the bushes to his left.

If this worked, he'd be leaving Kaine behind.

His hands clenched into fists. It went against everything he believed in. You didn't leave your partner behind.

And you certainly didn't leave the woman you loved to fend for herself.

*Shit.*

He really didn't—

"Sit tight," the goon said, snapping John's attention back to where it needed to be. "I gotta check something out."

Grace barely nodded, her entire attention on the boy. As if she had nothing to fear. "We're not going anywhere, are we, Alex? It's nice to be out in the fresh air. Do you hear the birds, sweetheart?"

Christ, this was fucked up. The woman who'd kidnapped his sister and made her life hell sat in Central Park cooing at a little boy like she was Mary frickin' Poppins.

But this was it. The bodyguard turned his back to Grace and Alex and headed across the path, toward the trees on the opposite side, focused on something directly in front of him.

Kaine.

Fuck. His lungs caught in a vise of tension, John's only move was to play this out like they'd agreed.

He speed-dialed and the phone immediately picked up, just as he got within five feet of his targets.



"On my mark," he spoke into the phone.

"Your mark," the man said.

John kept expecting the goon to turn, to see him, recognize him.

It never happened. The guy was too intent on following Kaine.

If anything happened to her...

Forcing the thought from his mind, he walked behind the bench where Grace Bell sat feeding the boy, placed one hand on her shoulder and one on the boy's and yelled "Now," hopefully loud enough to be picked up by the phone he'd stuck in his back pocket.

Grace drew in a breath to scream but never managed it because the world folded in on them.

For a few brief seconds, John honestly felt like he was being drawn through a tiny hole in the fabric of reality. By a fishhook in his stomach. His lungs stuttered to a halt and he nearly released his hold on the boy and the woman. But he'd come this far and he couldn't fail now.

As everything went black, he gripped Grace and the boy tighter and began to pray that Kaine would be okay until he got back.

## Chapter Nine

Kaine caught a brief glimpse of John, Grace Bell and the boy just before they disappeared into thin air.

As if they'd never been there.

She'd been watching from behind a nearby tree. She'd had to get increasingly closer to her target until he'd noticed her. Whatever it was he sensed, whether it was a magical signature like a scent or a sensation that rubbed against his skin, he'd turned toward her hiding spot with narrowed eyes and an expression of intense concentration.

As he'd come closer, she'd seen John move in on the woman and boy, place his hands on her shoulders and shout, "Now!"

She'd held her breath for the brief second it took Sal to transport them away.

Which of course got the attention of the goon.

Kaine actually thought he might have an aneurism on the spot. His face turned bright red and his hands clenched into fists at his side. The guy had huge hands and curled into fists, they looked almost comic.

But she knew how strong the guy was. She had to stay out of those hands at any cost.

So she ran.

She had a split second to decide which way to go and when she took off at a dead run, she didn't have time to second guess. She headed away from the city streets and deeper into the park.

Here, the magic in the earth called to her. It sang in her blood and added fuel to her speed.

She kept off the paths and instead stuck to the wooded areas.

Behind her, the goon kept pace. He was big but he ran almost as fast as she did.

People stopped to stare as she raced by, the goon not far off her tail.

She'd thought she'd be able to lose him but realized that the park had too much open space for her to slip out of his sight. She would've made out better heading for the city and losing herself in the crowds.

But he might've gotten the jump on her there. He had to know the city better than she did. If she took a wrong turn and ended up in a dead-end alley, she'd be fucked.

At least in the park, she had free range. Once she lost him, she'd head back to the city and the car and get the hell out of Dodge.

*If I could shift...*

No, she couldn't think about what she couldn't do. She needed to figure out what she could do.

Behind her, she heard the guy's feet pounding against the earth, barreling through the bushes she'd leaped over just seconds ago.

Shit. More speed. She needed —

She needed help.

She wasn't going to be able to outrun him.

What could she do?

Blessed Goddess, she could hear the sound of his breathing, knew he was gaining on her.

Her lungs began to burn, her brain running options. Getting caught was not an option.

Dodging trees and bushes, she saw an open space ahead of her and burst onto a playground. A few small children laughed and screamed as adults sat on benches and watched. Several actually snatched up their children as she and her pursuer ran by.

Putting on a burst of speed, she headed for the next stand of trees.

And caught her foot on a tree root and went sailing through the air before landing hard on her shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took a few seconds for John's vision to focus before he realized he stood in Nica's living room.

Before him on the floor slumped Grace Bell and the boy. Without his wheelchair. Both of them had lost consciousness.

John wondered for a few seconds if he wasn't going to join them.

"Kyle!"

"Right here." Kyle's voice came from behind him and John hadn't even turned before Kyle was bending down to pick up the boy and set him on the couch. "Dane, come here. Now. Damn, I can't believe you did it. Where's Kaine?"

"I have to go back. Now."

Kyle's head flew up and his gaze pinned John in place. "You left her there alone."

"She didn't...give me a choice."

Shit, the room was spinning. Or he was. Christ, he couldn't afford to pass out. He had to go back. Forcing the dizziness aside, he grabbed Kyle's shoulder. "I have to go back *now*."

"*Vaffanculo*. I'm gonna kick her ass six ways to Sunday. Tam! We need Sal."

Kyle's mate had a phone to her ear as she came rushing out of the back room, speaking into it as she pushed John into the nearest chair.

"I have to go back."

"Yeah," Tam said into the phone, "they're here but not Kaine. John says he needs to go back. Okay, right." She shoved the phone into the back pocket of her jeans then cupped John's face in one hand. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three. I'm fine. I have to get back to Kaine. Send me back."

He'd never felt panic like this. It encased his guts in ice and made his heart beat like a trapped bird. He needed to get a grip but the countdown clock in his head got louder with each second.

"Tam, I have to get back."

"I know," she said, her hands gentle as she ran her hands over the back of his head and neck. Nurse, he thought vaguely. "Sal should be here —"

"I'm here." The voice John recognized from the phone made him look around for the man attached to it. "Shit, son, you were supposed to bring her back with you."

John's mouth opened but nothing came out. The creature standing in front of him was only four feet tall, had tiny black horns, a man's upper body...and the legs of a goat.

"No time for explanations." The creature stopped right in front of him, his hand reaching out for him. "Gonna be woozy when you get there. Try to breathe."

John automatically leaned away until his back hit the chair cushion. "What the —"

"Hey, what's this?" The creature lifted the chain around John's neck until the crystal came out of his shirt. "Kyle, did you know he had this?"

Kyle moved into the narrow scope of John's vision. "Yeah, Nortia gave it to him before he left. Said it'd help him find Kaine."

"Huh. The Lady must like you, kid. Damn good thing she does. I can put you right next to Kaine."

"What *are* you?"

The creature's mouth curved in slick smile. "I'm Sal. Nice to meet ya. Now, put your hand on the crystal and concentrate on Kaine."

John couldn't move. He could only stare. Until the creature used his very human hand to smack him on the side of the head and rattled his brain back into place.

Kaine. He had to get back to her.

"Hand on the crystal, John. Think of Kaine."

Ignoring the fact that the...that Sal had hooves, which he'd only noticed about a second ago, John closed his eyes and wrapped his hand around the crystal until he thought his hand would bleed.

He wiped his mind of everything but her, felt the crystal warm beneath his hand.

And then that weird-ass sense that he was falling through a hole in space consumed him again.

This time, he did fall.

He landed on the ground hard, retching, struggling through the pounding headache and the vicious nausea.

Ears ringing, he heard the sounds of a fight as if through a glass wall. On his knees now, he lifted his head and saw Kaine take the full brunt of her attacker's fist on her jaw.

*Fuck no.* Pushing to his feet, forcing himself forward, John ran at the guy. He shouldn't have made it. He should have stumbled and fallen but the fact that the guy was going after Kaine again kept him upright. At least long enough for John to tackle the guy at the knees.

His stomach threatened to revolt when they hit the ground but he couldn't let the guy hurt Kaine.

Of course, he might not survive the pounding. As John scrambled to get to his feet, the goon got to his first and swung out with a left hook that took John down again.

"No!"

Kaine's shout distracted the guy long enough for John to roll out of his path but fear struck him low in the gut as Kaine launched herself at the goon's back.

"John! Get away."

With her arm around his thick neck, Kaine seemed to be trying to strangle the man. No way could she manage it.

"Let go of him, Kaine!" He couldn't hit the guy without possibly striking Kaine and that wasn't an option.

She didn't listen, shaking her head as she cranked her arm tighter around his neck.

Adrenaline pumped through him, making his muscles bunch as he prepared to launch himself at the man who tore at Kaine's arms as if to rip them from the sockets.

He'd almost reached them when the man managed to rip Kaine away from him and throw her to the ground so hard he swore he heard bones break.

Rage consumed him, clearing his head as nothing else could. He ran at the man who'd dared to hurt Kaine, the only thought in his mind to neutralize the threat to her.

John landed two punches before the guy swung back.

And knocked John on his ass at least ten feet from where he'd started into a stand of bushes. If his ribs didn't break when he hit the ground, they sure as hell fractured. Branches tore at his skin and punctured it in various places. But that wasn't his biggest problem.

That was the goon coming toward him to finish him off.

John forced himself to his knees, the black tinge on the edge of his vision making it hard to concentrate. Trying to blink it away, he saw the guy coming for him as if in jerky, stop-motion animation.

And knew he didn't have a chance in hell of coming out of this fight alive.

Kaine watched through a haze of sharp pain as the goon went after John.

Bleeding from the ears and various places on his body, he wasn't going to be able to withstand another attack. The man would kill him.

She needed her wolf. John needed her wolf.

Closing her eyes, she sank her hands into the earth at her feet and pulled hard at the magic she felt coursing below the surface.

Power that wanted to seduce her into listening to its music. Like the music she'd heard in the trees the other day.

A melody so unusual, it started to distract her from her purpose. Around her, she felt all manner of growing things respond to her call. But not her wolf.

The thud of flesh meeting flesh terrified her, infuriated her. John needed her. He was taking a beating because of her and if she couldn't find what she needed inside herself, he was going to die for her.

And she wanted him to live for her.

There! She heard the faint howl deep in her soul. Reaching inside, she grabbed hold of it and commanded it to come forward. She let it bust through the walls she erected inside, the walls she'd built against John.

The walls that had been shielding her wolf because that's what she'd thought John didn't want.

Agony flashed through her and she welcomed it with a ragged cry that changed into a howl as she transformed into her wolf.

A howl that quickly became a growl as she stood on her four paws for one brief second before she lunged at the man about to hit John for the last time.

She caught him on the arm he'd pulled back to deliver another blow. And knew she'd signed the man's death warrant when she felt her teeth break the skin. She couldn't allow him to live.

The magic that allowed her shift into a wolf was transferred to another through the saliva of the animal. If she didn't kill him, he would transform into a wolf on the next full moon.

If he was lucky. If not, he'd die in the process. A wickedly painful death, from all accounts.

The guy fought her with that unnatural strength, tried to throw her off but she clung with tenacity and desperation. John had managed to drag himself out of the way of the fight but she couldn't stop to do more than glance his way. All her focus had to remain on her foe.

He was tough, but in the end, he was no match for her. She let him shake her off his arm but only because she needed to strike at his neck. Which he realized too late.

She leaped one more time, her mouth opening and her teeth crunching through flesh and bone to crush his windpipe. He couldn't scream and he only brought one hand up to fend her off.

The scent of his blood as it ran from his torn jugular made her want to howl but she knew they'd already made too much of a scene. The small, wooded hollow they had fought in had hidden them from anyone walking by but sooner or later, someone would see them.

She tightened her jaws, even as she felt the blade he produced from somewhere slide into her stomach.

The shock of it nearly made her lose her grip on him but she couldn't let go, not now. She had to hold on, even as her own blood seeped from her.

Finally, she felt the last little bit of fight seep from him. With a shake, she released her jaws and stood over the body until she no longer scented his breath.

He was gone.

"Kaine."

And she was left to face John.

Her eyes rose to meet his as he stood above her. In his eyes, she saw fear and horror.

And knew she'd lost him. Even as she'd saved his life, he was gone from her forever.

Which might not actually be all that long for her.

John's heart nearly stopped when he saw the wolf slump to the ground.

Every muscle hurt as he forced himself to bend down and put his hand on her head. To stroke the sleek fur that was the exact colors of her hair.

"Kaine, baby. Come on, sweetheart. You've got to wake up."

She didn't move though he could see her body moving up and down with each labored breath.

Should he pick her up? Did he dare move her?

He ran his gaze over her body and froze as he caught the glint of metal beneath her.

"Oh, fuck." She'd been stuck with a knife. He saw blood now, beginning to pool beneath her in a spreading stain.

He had to get her out of here. How —

The phone.

He fumbled it out of his pocket with the hand that wasn't sporting a broken finger and laid the damaged one on her shoulder. They'd have to leave the goon behind but Kaine needed a doctor now.

If anything happened to her...

The phone clicked in his ear. "John! Fuck me, son, wha —"

"Get us back. Now. Kaine needs a doctor."

John didn't know if Sal said anything else or if the fact that he was being magically transported more than a hundred miles away from where he stood interfered with his senses.

He only knew blackness.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he opened his eyes, John stared into the darkness of an unfamiliar room.

He didn't recognize the bed he lay on or the sounds of the building around him.

His head pounded like a sonuvabitch and his back felt like someone had walked all over it with nail-studded shoes.

*Kaine. He needed to find Kaine.*

With an uncontrollable groan, he forced himself to sit up and swing his legs over the side of the bed.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." He lifted a hand to his throbbing head, surprised he didn't feel his brains leaking out his ears.

Jesus, the pain should have liquefied anything left in his head by now. What little remained of his brain was telling him to lie back down and sleep for a few more hours.

Amazingly, though, he felt no broken bones. And he knew he'd left New York with at least a couple if not several.

He'd been healed. Just like magic.

Damn, he almost laughed.

But not until he'd found Kaine.

She had to be here somewhere. He refused to consider any other possibilities.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he noticed faint light spilling through the small window behind him. The moon still hung in the sky, so maybe he'd slept six, eight hours.

Too damn long.

Putting his feet on the ground, he pushed off the bed and stood.

Whoa, headrush.

Goddamn that hurt but, fuck it, he wasn't stopping now.

When he didn't fall over after a minute or so, he took one step, then another. He made it all the way to the door before the dizziness nearly did him in. He laid his head against the wood and took a few deep breaths before turning the knob.

The light out here nearly blinded him and his groan elicited a response from someone in the room.

"Damn, man, you need to sit down before you fall over. What the fuck are you doing out of bed?"



John recognized the voice as Kyle's and forced some strength into his backbone. "Where's Kaine?"

Kyle slung John's arm around his shoulder and practically carried him the rest of the way to the couch. "You look like shit. How do you feel?"

"Like shit. Where's Kaine?"

With not much effort, Kyle eased him down. "Dane said you had a concussion and a few dozen broken bones when you got here. Nica healed you a few hours ago but you shouldn't be moving around too much yet. You need a few more hours of sleep to be back to normal."

"Where's Kaine?"

Kyle sighed. "You're a stubborn *scassacazzo*, I'll give you that. She's next door with Nica. You needed a bed —"

Whatever Kyle said after that, John didn't hear. He forced himself back onto his feet.

"*Ti prendo a calci in culo*," Kyle muttered under his breath. "You're in no fucking shape to walk over there."

John thought about giving the guy the finger because he was pretty sure whatever Kyle had said wasn't complimentary, but that would waste too much energy. And he needed every ounce he had to get next door.

Besides, he was pretty sure his middle finger was one of those broken bones Kyle had told him about and even though it'd been healed, it still hurt.

He had to see Kaine. He had to know she was okay even though every single step felt like someone was driving stakes into his temples.

Probably not the smartest thing he'd ever done but then he'd never felt like his heart would stop beating if he couldn't see her face.

Putting his hand on the doorknob, he made sure he had a good grip before he tried to turn it. Didn't want Kaine's commanding officer to think he was weak. That he didn't deserve her.

Behind him, he heard Kyle continue to swear but it just kind of faded into background noise. Or maybe it just didn't make it through the ringing in his ears. Didn't matter.

He made it out to the porch and if he remembered correctly, there were only one or two steps down to the ground. He could handle that. No problem.

Just as his foot hit the first step, he felt Kyle next to him, giving him a shoulder to lean on.

"Gods damn, you're stubborn. You hurt yourself and Tam won't let me hear the end of it. Don't fucking fall."

Tam. Kyle's mate.

Kaine was his and she wasn't here so he had to be where she was.

The distance between this house and the next seemed to take forever, each footstep digging those spikes into his head a little deeper.

But Kyle shut the hell up so that cut down on at least some of the static in his brain. By the time they reached Nica's house, the pain had pushed out most of the static and only the thought that each step brought him closer to Kaine made him put one foot in front of the other.

Kyle opened the door and practically dragged him into the house. He heard other voices, some he recognized, some he didn't. Didn't care.

The stone on his chest pulsed with heat, warming him. Every step forward was a step in the right direction until finally he saw her.

Lying in a bed made up with white sheets, Kaine's skin was nearly as pale. It scared the shit out of him, made his gut curl into a tight little ball. But she was back in her human body and that had to be good. Right?

He nearly stumbled and would have fallen if not for Kyle's hold. Somehow the other man got a chair under him and shoved it as close to the bed as he could. John dropped into it, his legs finally having given up the fight.

With a sigh, he slid his hand into her smaller one, put his head on the bed next to her arm and let the darkness take him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Kaine finally roused, she barely had her eyes open a second before she closed them tight again.

Bright. Way too bright.

Her groan echoed in the room and when the bed moved, she wanted to tell whoever had woken her to get the hell away.

Taking in a deep breath, she realized in the next second that John was here.

That was him at her back, curled around her. So warm and strong.

Still here.

"Kaine."

His voice whispered in her ear and she bit her lip to hold back the whimper that wanted to escape.

"Kaine, are you okay?"

Tears pricked her eyes though she had no idea why. Because he was still here? Because his arms curled around her body and held her tightly against his? Because his mouth pressed a kiss right behind her ear as he gently turned her so he could look into her face?

Rolling onto her back as he lifted his body onto one elbow beside her, she saw his beautiful green eyes sharpen as his gaze caught hers.

"How do you feel?"

She thought about her answer before she gave one, stretching her side experimentally where she'd been stuck with the blade and feeling only minimal pain. "Not as bad as I should. Nica healed me."

He nodded, his gaze darkening. "Yeah, more than a day ago. You've been sleeping since then. You're damn lucky, Kaine. A few inches north and the blade would've punctured your heart. As it was, you lost a lot of blood. Dane and Nica weren't so sure you were going to make it. Jesus, you scared the fucking crap out of me."

Her eyes widened at the ferocity in his tone. "I didn't mean to."

"I know that. Damn it..." He sighed and closed his eyes as if reaching for patience.

His expression looked pained, as if he was angry with himself, which just didn't make any sense at all. She fumbled around in her head for something to say but the closeness of his body, the heat in his eyes and the lingering sensation of his kiss screwed with her head.

What was he doing here? Why wasn't he with his sister?

And why had he kissed her like he was afraid she'd break?

More than anything, that confused the hell out of her.

Because she could have sworn the last time she'd seen him, he'd been horrified by her transformation into a wolf.

And she'd thought her heart had broken.

That's what she'd dreaded all along. She didn't want him to think of her as a freak.

Now...

Confusion made her brain fuzzy and she struggled to find her way through the minefield of questions.

"Did someone go back for the bodyguard?"

"Sal," he shook his head as trying to clear it, "uh, Sal had no power left. Kyle said the cops had already found the body. The news is reporting a freak dog attack. Apparently there are packs of feral dogs in Central Park. Who knew. Kyle said he'd send someone to pick up the body at the morgue."

"So...you met Sal?"

He nodded. "Briefly. Interesting guy."

Blessed Goddess, he'd met Sal and hadn't run screaming. But then she'd known John had a strength of will most men didn't. It was part of the reason she loved him so much.

And another little four-letter word kept trying to creep into her heart.

*Hope.*

She wanted to ask him flat-out why he was still here but couldn't get past the fear that his answer wouldn't be what she wanted to hear.

So she stuck to neutral ground.

"Did we get anything out of Grace Bell?"

His gaze narrowed just the slightest bit, as if he knew she was avoiding the elephant in the room. "Kyle and Dane have been questioning her since this morning. They haven't gotten much out of her but when I spoke to Kyle a few hours ago, he said they had to let her see her son because she'd been nearly incoherent. Kyle said he's gonna give her a couple of hours to stew then go back at her. He's pretty sure whatever Grace Bell was looking for, whatever experiments she was doing on my sister, it had to do with a cure for her son. So far that's all they've been able to get out of her. Dane's been talking to the kid but he hasn't been able to get much out of him either."

Kaine nodded, knowing she should care about this, knowing it was important to John and Evie. But tension made her head hurt. The answers she wanted all dealt with him. She wanted to know why he was still here with her. Why he'd been lying in bed with her.

Tinia's teat, she had so damn many questions and no idea how to ask them. She couldn't get a read on what he was thinking, couldn't—

"Christ, Kaine." He rolled off the side of the bed to stand beside it as she carefully rose to a seated position. "Don't look at me like that. If you want me to go, all you have to do is ask. I don't want to but I will if it'll get rid of the fear in your eyes."

She blinked in shock. "You think I want you to go?"

"Don't you?" His voice held a bitter edge. "You couldn't even wait for backup to go after Grace, you want me gone so badly. I appreciate everything you've done for Evie but if you want to get rid of me all you have to do is ask. But that doesn't mean I'm going to go willingly."

Her head must still be screwed up because that made no sense at all. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You want me gone as fast as possible. I get that."

Her mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?"

"Hell yes, I'm serious. Now that we've got Grace Bell, the faster Evie's cured and the faster I'm gone."

Blessed Goddess, could he really be that clueless? He certainly seemed serious and she didn't know what the hell to say.

"Well, fuck that, babe. I'm not leaving you this time so you might as well get used to me."

A warm ball of joy blossomed low in her body and began to spread. "So...you don't want to leave?"

He stopped, his eyes narrowing. "You don't want me to leave?"

She shook her head slowly. "I never thought you'd want to stay."

He stalked back to the bed, wrapped one hand around her nape and bent to take her mouth.

If she'd been standing, his kiss would've made her weak in the knees. As it was, it stole her breath and caused her to go still with shock.

But his lips were hot and hard against hers, seeking a response she couldn't help but give him. Her arms lifted to wrap around his shoulders, her hands splayed against his back, pressing him closer.

He came willingly, his arm encircling her waist to lift her into him.

Where she only ever wanted to be.

She opened her mouth and let her tongue slide into his, loving the sound he made as she did. They battled for position but eventually she let him win and he followed her back, stealing her breath, making her heart pound and her thighs clench.

Pushing to her knees, she arched until her breasts flattened against his chest. The thin cotton gown she wore soaked in the heat of his body but it was a barrier she wanted removed. Lowering her hands, she shoved them beneath his shirt to get to bare skin.

Goddess, she loved the feel of his skin against hers, warm, silky, the muscles beneath sleek and hard.

He groaned, the rumble of it starting an avalanche of sensation in her body.

Heat pulsed between her legs, wanton desire pushing out all conscious thought. She needed him. She wanted him.

He'd already told her he was staying and fighting for her.

Nothing could have made her happier.

Except getting his clothes off.

She shoved his shirt up his body then leaned back to draw it over his head. But when she reached for the waistband of his sweatpants, he trapped her hands against his stomach.

The thin line of dark hair that arched down to his groin brushed against the backs of her fingers and she longed to follow that line and wrap her fingers around his cock. She glanced down to see the thick bulge pressing against the thin material of his pants, making her mouth water with anticipation.

"I want you, Kaine. Make no mistake. I want you so badly I can't see straight. But are you really in any shape to handle it? Because what I want to do to you... I don't want to hurt you, baby."

Her smile widened. "Believe me, this won't hurt. The only way you could hurt me would be to leave."

He stilled completely for a brief second before his hands tightened on hers and his eyes narrowed.

"I already told you, I'm not going anywhere. You better be damn sure what you want, Kaine, because if you decide later that I'm not the man for you, you will break my heart."

The absolute sincerity in his voice made her breath catch in her throat. "I know how that feels. When you left the first time..."

She'd wanted to crawl in a hole and stay there until it didn't hurt to think about moving, about getting up the next day and not seeing him.

His eyes closed for a brief second as if he were in pain as he threaded one hand through her hair. "I had to do it. For Evie. I thought... I truly believed it was the only way she'd be able to move on. I didn't think she'd be able to handle any of this."

"And now?"

"Now she'll make up her own mind. I fucked up the first time. If I hadn't been so stupid, maybe she wouldn't be in the trouble she is now."

She dropped her gaze but he tugged on her hair to make her look up again.

"How many times do I have to tell you what happened with Evie isn't your fault? If it hadn't happened with you, if it'd happened at another time and no one would've been there to help her, she might've died."

"I thought you couldn't handle what I was. What I am."

"It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen. I know you wouldn't have been able to live without your wolf."

"You wanted me to get it back?"

"It's part of who you are. I love you. Not just pieces of you."

Goddess, she wanted so badly to believe that. "I am *sicari*. It's what I am, John. I'm an assassin."

"From where I was standing, the guy deserved it. He would've done the same to you. Kaine, honey, you're strong and brave and I think that's sexy as all hell."

Her smile began to return as his hands loosened his grip on hers. Sliding down, she let her nails scrape against his skin until her fingers caught in the elastic waistband of his sweats.

"Sexy, huh?"

She dragged the cotton down, making sure she didn't catch his erection and cause him any pain. She had plans for that piece of his anatomy.

One hand tightened in her hair as the other reached up to caress her jaw. "Extremely."

Pushing the pants past his muscular thighs, she let them fall to the ground and found her mouth only inches from the fat tip of his cock.

"Did I tell you how absolutely fine I'm feeling right now?"

"No, I don't think you – *Fuck*."

Her mouth closed over the head of his cock. She sucked him in and slicked her tongue around the hot flesh. His groan made every nerve in her body light up like a Christmas tree.

She loved this, loved making him groan, loved the taste of his flesh in her mouth, the sense that she gave him more pleasure than he'd ever had.

His hand in her hair gave a tug and the slight burn only increased the heat sliding like lava through her veins. Her pussy burned for him but the ache was a good one.

And when he slid his finger under the thin gown she wore and stroked up the outside of her thigh, she moaned around him and sucked him deeper.

Pulling up, she let him slip from between her lips only to suck him back in quick and to the root. And as she swallowed, she felt his fingers slide between her wet lower lips and pierce her in one smooth move.

Yes. Gods, yes. She wanted this. Needed him.

"God damn, you're wet. And your mouth is killing me. Jesus, Kaine."

She loved the way his voice went husky and deep. It made her pussy clench around his fingers as they teased and destroyed her.

"Just a little more, baby. I don't want to come in your mouth. I want to be deep inside your pussy when I come."

Every word he spoke made her hotter, every stroke of his fingers pushed her that much closer to orgasm.

His hips began to move, to fuck her mouth slowly when she would have pushed him higher and faster. The hand in her hair ensured she couldn't go any faster than he wanted her to.

But she needed to go faster. Lust pounded at her, pushed her farther.

When he drew away, she whimpered and tried to hold him to her but he had a firm grip on her hair.

"No way am I coming in your mouth. Lie back, baby."

She obeyed without question then held her arms out to him with her own demand. "Now. I can't wait."

His erection taut and ruddy red, he followed her onto the bed. Spreading her legs with his knees, he knelt between her thighs and put one hand on her mound. "You're so fucking beautiful. Perfect."

His words drew a smile from her even as he leaned over her, one hand guiding his cock to her entrance. He slid the tip through her drenched folds, wetting him in preparation for entering her.

She arched her back, trying to capture him, entice him to thrust hard and fast inside her.

But he pulled back. "Oh, no. The second I get inside you, I'm going to lose control. And you deserve better than that."

"Don't you know that's what I want? I love to make you lose it, John. I love knowing I do that to you."

His eyes closed and his expression went tight, desire making his skin flush. "You're a witch, you know that?"

"No. I just love you. Please, John. Take me now."

His eyes flew open and the tenderness in that green gaze made her breath hitch in her chest. He didn't say anything in response, though, as he positioned his cock and began to sink into her.

Her eyes drifted shut as she absorbed him, felt every ridge, every sleek inch tunnel into her.

He took his sweet time about it but time had no meaning at the moment.

Only the feel of him taking her held any significance.

When he'd finally seated himself completely, he held there, just breathing. His chest rose and fell against hers and when he leaned closer to nip at her earlobe then string kisses along her jaw, she felt the control he was using to remain still.

"You feel like silk around me, Kaine. Tight, warm, wet. So fucking good."

Lifting her arms, she wrapped them around his shoulders, her hands spreading over his back to stroke him, pet him, then reached down to grab his ass. "I'm glad you think so. Now fuck me, John."

"Ask me nice, baby."

"Please."

"Please what?"

"Please make love to me."

As her eyes opened, he lifted his head until only centimeters separated their mouths. "Always. I will always love you."

His mouth covered hers as he began to move. His tongue mimicked the motion of his cock until he had to break away so they could breathe.

But he continued to take her with a steady rhythm that built in intensity. Her legs climbed higher around his waist with each thrust. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, nails digging into his flesh.

Her sheath clenched around him as he pushed her closer to orgasm with each thrust. He surrounded her, heated her, made her yearn for the release only he could give her.

And when she came, when he thrust that final time and groaned her name, when she felt his release inside her, triggering her own, she knew she'd only ever want him.



## Epilogue

"Evie, take a deep breath, hon. I swear, everything's gonna be okay."

Evangeline Simmons tried to listen to her brother. He'd never steered her wrong before. Then again, he'd never gone off the deep end before. That'd always been her specialty.

Which might explain why she thought he'd said the word "Magic."

Oh, he'd said a hell of a lot more than that one word as he'd tried to explain what the hell had been going on the past few days.

She'd listened to everything he'd said without interrupting him but what it all really boiled down to was the fact that *she* was magic.

Or rather, she could control magic.

She must have finally done it. She must have cracked because her former Navy SEAL brother would never believe in magic. And never in a million years would he tell her she could control magic.

Maybe she was still dreaming.

Maybe she only thought she'd woken in this strange room with John sitting by her side. Maybe she really was still asleep. This certainly felt surreal.

But now she wanted to wake up in her own bed, in the apartment they'd rented a few months ago.

"Evie." John squeezed her hand, drawing her attention back to the present. "I know it's a lot to take in—"

"No, it's not. Because this is a dream. When I wake up, none of this will mean a thing."

The little muscle in John's cheek started to throb and she swore she felt walls snapping into place around her. She tried to take a deep breath but it got caught somewhere in her throat.

"You're not sleeping, Evie."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not. Everything I've told you is true. We're going to be staying here for a while. You're going to need help figuring things out. You now have...abilities you didn't have before. You need to learn how to control them."

He looked so serious but then John almost always looked serious. He'd lost the ability to have fun a very long time ago.

"Are you honestly telling me you believe I have magical powers?"

He nodded. "Yes, I am."

Okay, now she knew. This wasn't her brother. He looked like John and he sounded like John but John never would believe any of the weird-ass crap he'd just told her.

Magic.

There was no such thing as magic.

At one time she might have believed there was. But she'd believed a lot of things when she was younger. She'd actually believed killing herself had been a viable option at one point because the crushing depression had been too much for her to bear.

Without John, she would have succeeded. He'd been her anchor, her sanity.

Now he was telling her she had "power".

*And you know he's right.*

No. No, she didn't know that.

*Yes, you do.*

The light bulbs blowing, the furniture moving whenever she got upset or frightened ever since she'd been kidnapped. Ever since the tests.

No.

"I want to go home."

John shook his head. "You need help."

Fear and a healthy dose of anger rose up from her gut. Her body temperature rose as she stared at the only family she had left.

"I want to go *home*."

The window across from the bed shattered outward, the sound of the breaking glass like an explosion.

"John, what the hell's going on?"

A man burst into the room. Tall, dark-haired. A man who seemed strangely familiar.

He rushed to her bedside, staring down at her with concern in his dark eyes.

"Evie, you need to calm down." He spoke in a low tone, a soothing tone.

But Evie wasn't going to be soothed. Not with this wild energy running through her body.

"John? What's happening?"

"It's going to be okay, Evie." John squeezed her hand even tighter. "Dane, what the fuck?"

"I don't know. Evie, I need —"

Dane froze just as his fingers brushed against her arm.

Then, in a sparkle of light, he was gone.

No, not gone. In his place stood a dog. A huge dog that looked like a wolf.

Evie started to scream.

## About the Author

Stephanie Julian is an avid reader who used to have a book-a-day habit. Then she realized she not only wanted to read books but write them too. Romance has always been her first love, the sexier the better. Hot men, strong women and a heaping helping of magic dominate (and she does mean *dominate*) her blazing hot stories.

When she's not writing, she's, well...she's certainly not cleaning. And she only cooks when her guys complain that they're hungry (ain't cereal grand!). Otherwise, she's got her fingers on a keyboard, her butt in a chair and her head in the stars.

Stephanie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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Magical Seduction 2: Seduced in Shadow

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