

Zellia's Blade

Kitty DuCane



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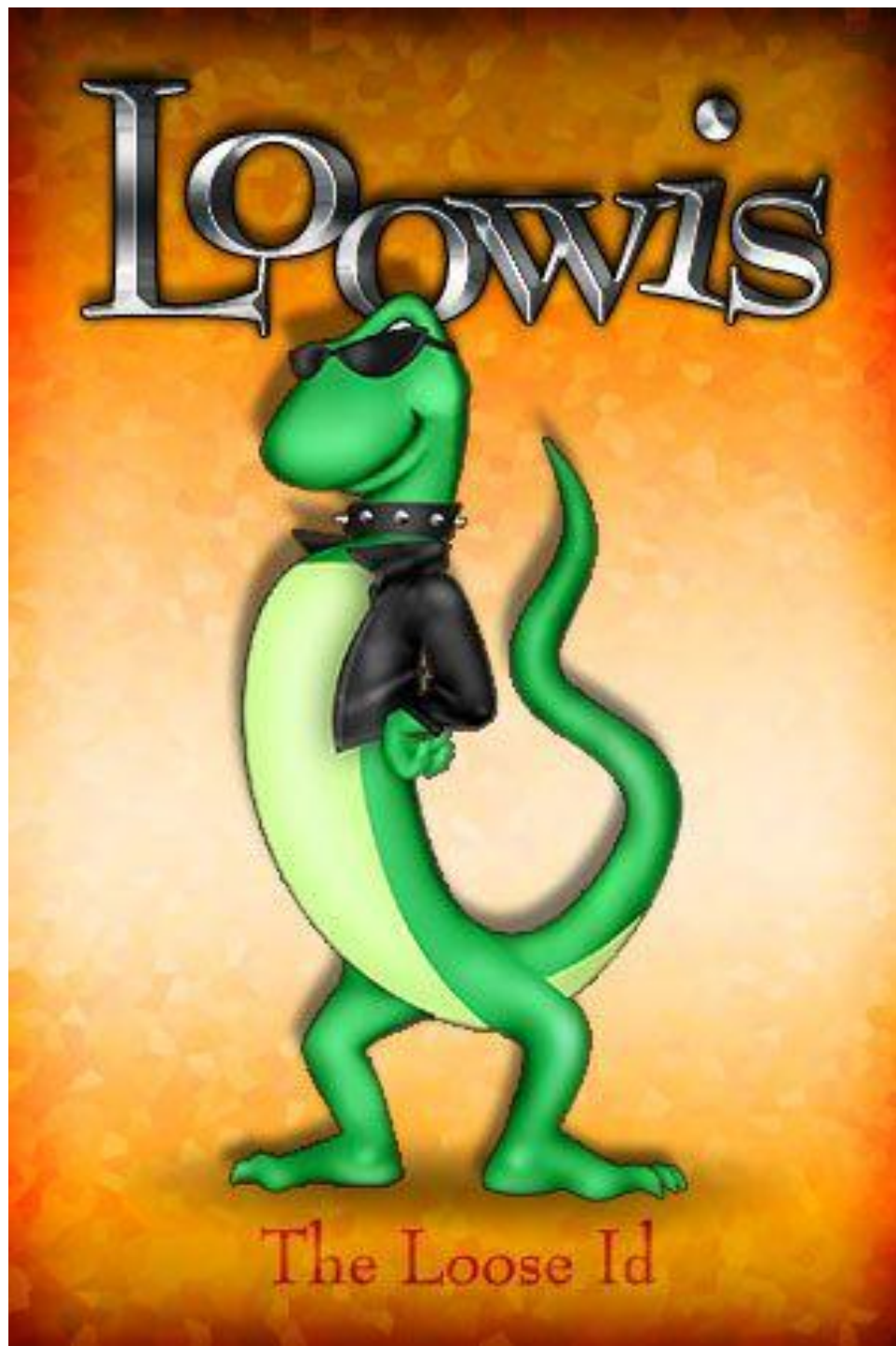
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Chapter One

Blade slipped into the house unnoticed, his senses on high alert. His nose flared, searching, processing. Distant gunfire occasionally sliced the silence, but he barely noticed as he took the stairs. His wolf caught the scent of something sweet, enticing.

His prey.

He continued down the hall and stopped outside a partially open door where the scent was the strongest. He heard papers ruffling and a hushed voice that reminded him of angels.

Blade peered into the room. The little hothouse flower stood before a desk, shuffling haphazardly through papers. She jerked another desk drawer open, scooped up the contents, and dumped them on the desk, muttering something that wasn't a curse but should have been. She scanned the papers and then flung them to the floor. He quirked an eyebrow. Apparently his little flower wanted info and wasn't finding it.

She intrigued him even more.

His little flower propped her hands on her hips. He watched her survey the room. Turning to the credenza, she began trashing it too. Now that her back was entirely to the door, Blade slipped in behind her, silent, unnoticed. He was a trained killer, and slipping in and out unnoticed was his specialty.

He stalked her, his beast antsy. When he stood directly behind her, he inhaled deep, breathing in her fragrant soap and a light perfume that he didn't recognize. But it was the scent that was her essence that slammed into his beast.

Mine!

His mind reeled from that knowledge as she bent over the credenza to study some papers. His beast almost pounced. Her luscious round ass tempted him, and his cock swelled to painful proportions. Oh, what he wouldn't give to bury his cock balls-deep within that ass of hers. When she stood up, he wrapped his arm around her, trapping both of her arms, and clamped a hand over her mouth.

She squeaked, and he smiled. He tilted her head to the side, giving him a perfect view of her round, full, enticing breasts. His cock swelled some more.

She was warm, soft, and all woman; his woman.

"I'm going to remove my hand. Don't scream. That's an order. Do you understand?"

She hesitated and then nodded.

He released her mouth and wrapped his hand around her slender neck. Her skin was soft, like a baby's blanket. He watched the rise and fall of her breasts as she tried to breathe.

"Tell me why I shouldn't kill you, right here, right now?"

She paused and then replied in perfect English. "Tell me why you *should* kill me, right here, right now?"

"You're in Manuel's house. That's why." He swirled his thumb over the frantic pulse in her neck.

"Association doesn't make one guilty."

"It does in my book."

"Then you're no better than Manuel. Not everyone's here of their own free will."

He smelled the truth of her statement and was relieved.

"You want to tell me what you're looking for?"

"I do not."

"Mmm," he murmured against her neck. "Stubborn, aren't you?" He breathed her in deep.

“Make up your mind. Either kill me, or let me go.”

His hand tightened on her delicate throat, applying enough pressure to make her wince. “I will snap your neck and not think twice about it.”

“Go ahead,” she managed to say. “There are some things much worse than death.”

“I highly doubt that you know what they are,” he said.

She was silent, the only sound her labored breathing. He released his grip and caressed the skin on her throat. Such delicate bones covered by sensual skin.

“Are you one of Manuel's whores?” he asked.

“I will not dignify that with an answer.”

His nose detected no other human scent on her, especially that of a male, and he was pleased.

“I'm asking you again. What are you looking for?”

“None of your business.”

A laugh rumbled in his chest. “I'm making everything about yo—this hellhole my business.”

She pushed against his hold. “Please release me.”

A tormented howl pierced the night air and sliced through Blade. “I will, little girl. And I suggest you run, because I'm coming after you as soon as I wrap up things here.”

“You can't be serious.”

“I am.”

“But why?” she stammered.

He nuzzled her neck. “I want to know what you're hiding.”

“That's absurd. Just go back to where you came from.”

“I can't do that, honey.”

He untied her hair and fluffed out the long, dark curls and imagined her hair sliding over his thighs as she knelt between his legs. A jolt of desire shot through him.

He bent her over the credenza, his erection nestled against her backside. Yeah, he wanted her, and he wanted her to know that he wanted her. His beast wanted her.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Just letting you know that this is my favorite position.”

Her arousal spiked and sent his beast pacing. Her body was getting ready for his, even though she was scared shitless. His erection pressed painfully against his pants. He wanted his pants gone, and her naked beneath him. Blade ground his cock against her, his pants biting his swollen rod.

He wanted her bound before him, at his mercy to do what he pleased. He imagined her eyes wild with lust, fringed by fear, as he showed her all the things he would do to her. He liked the bite of pain, that mind-sharpening pain that touched close to euphoria.

Did she like it rough? He hoped so. But she was delicate and probably not into the pain side of sex. And that was okay.

She was voluptuous, just the way he liked his women. He felt the shiver roll through her body. He grabbed a handful of tit and squeezed her nipple hard through her dress. She yelped. He smelled her arousal, strong and spicy, but he had to leave, for now.

“Run, little girl, run, because I’m coming back for you.”

Then he disappeared.

Chapter Two

Zellia Calderon waited, waited for the stranger to assault her. His body said that he wanted her. She knew rape wasn't about sex but about dominating or terrifying the victim. The silence stretched, and when she heard no movement behind her, no rustling of clothes, she stood and turned.

The room was empty. She let out the breath she was holding and rubbed her neck. She could still feel the imprint of his big hands. There was power in those hands, power to take her life if he had chosen to do so. Did he really mean for her to run? Was he coming back for her?

She was shocked to find that her panties were wet, and her body hummed with a need, a need she'd never known before. His strong arms and thick erection had excited her, and she was ashamed that she'd become aroused by the mere touch of a brute of a stranger.

Zellia pushed her glasses back up on her nose and the stranger from her mind as she finished searching Manuel's office. There had to be something here. A clue. A morsel. A tidbit of information. She searched for another half hour before she found a name and a location.

She hurried down the hall to her room and changed into a pair of men's cargo pants and a shirt that she'd pilfered from the clothesline behind the makeshift shantytown that Manuel used to house his workers. "Workers" was the wrong word; they really were slaves, trading work for their lives.

Zellia snatched a small satchel from under the bed. After opening the armoire, she removed the little panel in the bottom. She dumped the medical supplies that she'd been hoarding into the bag. It wasn't much, but someone could benefit from

Manuel's drug money. She pulled a pistol from its hiding place and put it in the bag. She didn't know how to use it and hoped to God she never had to. She'd take it for insurance. Or maybe she could barter with it.

Money? Money? Where were the money bags that the handsome man flew in yesterday? A pain sliced her heart as she remembered the grief in that handsome man's face. He'd lost the love of his life just hours earlier. Her name was Victoria. But there was nothing Zellia could have done to save her. Aortic valve repair wasn't something one could do in the middle of the jungle.

Zellia grabbed a hat, her satchel, and her medical bag, and went in search of the money, which she found in the basement, along with two dead bodies scattered among the piles. She picked two bags that weren't oozing blood and threw them over her shoulder.

As a pack mule, she made her way through the house, intent on finding transportation. Lucky for her, she found a jeep out back. She slung her things in the backseat, removed the pistol, and covered the bags with a tarp. Then she said a prayer for the dead man as she pulled him from the driver's side and let him topple to the ground. He was one of Manuel's enforcers; no love lost there. The blood from the man's fatal chest wound hadn't spilled onto the vehicle, and for that, she was thankful.

She climbed into the jeep and stuck the pistol down beside the seat, hoping to God that she never had to use the darn thing. Adjusting the strap to keep her hat on, she started the jeep and then floored it. She careened through the compound, passing several soldiers stationed by the gate. They weren't Manuel's men, though. They were the men who had attempted to rescue Victoria.

They shouted for her to stop, but she kept driving. They'd either shoot her or let her through. She didn't have time to stop and explain. She had to find the lab before the news of Manuel's death reached it.

* * *

Blade watched the jeep shoot out of the gate. His little hothouse flower was running just like he'd told her to.

Zellia. Hayden had told him that her name was Zellia and that she was a doctor. His mind rolled her name over and wondered what it meant.

He decided that he didn't need any transportation; he'd catch a ride with her. Blade hitched his survival pack over his shoulders and set out running—the other way. The service road behind the compound intercepted the road she had chosen for her escape. Because he was a werewolf, he could run for miles without tiring, and he certainly could intercept a jeep driven by a timid rabbit. The question in his mind was: how far should he let her run before the wolf caught the rabbit?

Chapter Three

Zellia rounded a curve and slammed on the brakes to avoid an idiot standing in the road, arms stretched out like he was Jesus hanging on the cross. She still almost hit him as the jeep careened sideways.

The man sauntered up to the driver's door. "Well, you're the epitome of a crazy woman driver," he said.

She blinked. "Me? You're the lunatic standing in the middle of the road in a curv—"

Her heart stopped as she recognized that voice, deep and sensual.

"That's right. It's me. At least you obeyed me and ran. I like it when women obey." His smile lit up his handsome face.

Yep, that was him. Just like she imagined him. Big and strong. Dark hair curled around the bandanna he had tied around his head. And he was trouble with a capital *T*.

She cut her eyes at him. "What do you want?"

"Same as before. What were you looking for in Manuel's office? What are you hiding?"

"As I said, that's none of your business."

"I told you, honey, I'm making everything about you my business."

"No. You said, 'everything about this hellhole.'"

He grinned. "You're right, honey. I did say that, but now I have a new objective. You."

Before she realized what was happening, he rounded the jeep and slipped into the passenger's seat. He stashed his backpack on the floor between his legs and then buckled himself in.

She managed to close her gaping mouth that had dropped open at his brazenness. She scanned the area. "Where's your vehicle?" she asked.

"I don't have one. I thought I'd tag along with you."

"So how did you know I'd pick this road?"

"I didn't."

"You must be insane. Are you off your meds today?"

"No, honey, I don't take any meds, but that's not to say that I don't need them."

He turned to face her and placed his arm on the seat behind her head. "So, where are we going?"

"*We* are not going anywhere. Please get out."

"Oh no, honey. I'm going to be stuck on you like flies on shit, peanut butter on jelly."

She made a face at his clichés. "I don't want to be *stuck* with you. I want to be left alone. I'm asking you nicely to get out."

"How about you asking me un-nicely. You know, show me your mean, bad self."

What was he talking about? He kept her off balance, off balance with his words and certainly off balance with his too-confident self. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Who, me? I'd never do that to you. Now, show me your bad-ass self."

The man infuriated her to no end. He was arrogant, way too self-confident, stubborn, and probably many more adjectives than she could possibly think of right now. He was crazy. She didn't have time to waste. Lives depended on her getting to the lab.

She leaned forward and placed her head on the steering wheel to shield her arm. Feeling down along the side of the seat, she gripped the cold, hard metal. *We'll just see what the man thinks of this.*

* * *

Blade stared at the pistol aimed at his face. He was more concerned about her hand shaking like a leaf in a hurricane than her deliberately pulling the trigger. This woman didn't know her way around guns.

"Get. Out." She ground out.

"You got the balls to pull that trigger?"

"You want to find out?"

In a blur, he snatched the pistol from her grip. "First thing you need to do is chamber a bullet..." He pulled the slide back to chamber one. "And take the safety off." He flipped the safety down.

Then he placed it in her hands just like he'd found it.

He grinned. "Now I'm really scared."

Normally, he would kill anybody who pointed a gun at him. That's what he was trained for. He could have turned her weapon on her, or taken her out with his bare hands, snapped her neck like a twig. But she was scared and frustrated, not hell-bent on shooting him. But he would make her pay for pointing a gun at him. Pay sexually, of course.

They stared at each other, she with disbelief and he with amusement. She let her hand drop, and he eased the gun from her grip.

He flipped the safety on. "Just flip the safety off, and you'll be ready to shoot me next time." He handed it back to her.

Her face flushed. "I guess you think I'm an idiot."

"Nope."

She arched a brow.

"I just think you don't know shit about weapons."

He saw her weariness. She'd probably been up half the night with all the explosions going on, and now she was running.

She rested her hands and her head on the steering wheel again. He could smell her defeat, and his beast didn't like it. Women and children were the saviors of the races. They were cherished, protected, even if they didn't want to be protected.

"You can't come with me," she finally said. "It's dangerous."

"Danger's my middle name."

"I am begging you to get out."

Blade knew she was changing tactics. If she couldn't shoot him, she'd try to appeal to his soft side. Hell, he didn't have a soft side. He was a killer. Killers weren't soft.

"No. Now drive. I'm hungry, been up all night." He glanced over his shoulder and surveyed the meager supplies in the back of the jeep. "We camping in the jungle or some luxury hotel you've picked out?" he asked, hoping she'd opted for a hotel, betting that she wasn't the outdoorsy type.

"We'll stop in the next town to eat, and then you'll catch a ride back to wherever you belong."

His laughter rolled through the jungle as the jeep lurched forward.

Later that afternoon, he was wolfing down *carne desmechada*. Steak was steak no matter what continent you were on. She picked at her meal. No doubt her brain was churning out ideas on how to get rid of him. Even if he weren't a werewolf, he would still be the best tracker on his team. Blindfolded, he could find her in a whiteout snowstorm.

Blade noticed the bruises on the delicate skin around her neck and knew he had put them there. He shouldn't feel sorry about that. At the time, he was interrogating her as an unknown.

He shook his head. She was still an unknown, and now he was letting her take him to an unknown territory for an unknown reason.

Blade glanced at this watch. "It's about three. Are we driving all night?"

She lifted her weary eyes to his. "Yes."

“Then you better let me take the next leg. You'll get us killed if you fall asleep.”

“I am tired, but I will *not* fall asleep.”

He simply nodded. “How far to the next village?”

“Two, maybe three hours' drive.”

“Good. We can go that far and then stop for the night.”

She leaned her elbows on the table and rubbed her temples before she looked at him. “I'll pay to get rid of you.”

He grinned. “How much?”

“Whatever. Name your price.”

“Half a million. And that's discounted just for you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don't have that kind of money, but you already know that.”

He wiped his mouth as his gaze slid over her. She was desperate to get rid of him. He thought she was sincere about the danger and not wanting to get him involved. But he was involved now. She intrigued him with more than just her secret. “Then I guess you're stuck with me.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Just remember right before I get you killed, I tried to get rid of you.”

“See, if you'd tell me what's going on, I could make an informed decision.”

She shifted her eyes away in frustration. “What's your name?” she finally asked. “You know, just in case I want to say a prayer over your dead body when I get you killed.”

“Blade.”

She frowned. “What kind of a name is that?”

“I'm good with knives, and I'm a killer.”

“That's just great. I'm traveling with a killer.”

“Don't worry, honey. You're safe with me.”

She arched her brow. "I highly doubt that."

Oh, she could take it to the bank, because no one was going to touch a hair on that pretty little head of hers.

* * *

The man watched them leave as he listened on his cell.

"Yes, sir. She'll be dead by morning."

Chapter Four

The hotel was old and the only one in the town of maybe eight thousand people. Blade followed her into her room, closed the door, and flipped the flimsy lock.

Zellia stared at him with wild eyes. "Your room is across the hall."

"I know, but I'm not using it."

"What do you mean? You can't sleep here. It's not proper."

"Proper, smoper. I'm not giving you the chance to escape."

"I will not sleep with you."

"Yes, you will, and I promise not to lay a finger on you...unless you want me to, of course." He grinned.

"This is absurd. First, you force me to bring you along, and then you force me to share a room with you."

"Just think of it as the buddy system. It's safer this way."

Blade crossed the room and peered through the window before snatching the thin curtains shut.

"Why don't you take a shower first, just in case there's not enough hot water for two? Unless you want me to take one with you?"

"What do *you* think I want you to do, you...imbecile?"

"I think your mind doesn't want me anywhere near your body. I think your body thinks something entirely different."

She stomped into the little bathroom and slammed the door.

"I guess her mind won that round," he said.

He heard the water running, and then the sound changed when she put her sweet body under the water. Blade's cock tightened. He hoped there wasn't any hot water left for him. He'd have to jack off, something he hadn't done in a long time, because there was never a shortage of willing womanly flesh to ease his needs. Zellia wasn't willing, at least not yet.

He set two explosive devices, one at the door and another one at the window. Then he rifled through her baggage. Well. She had some explaining to do.

When she opened the door, she was wearing the same clothes she had on before her shower. She eyed her open bags on the bed and crossed her arms under her breasts.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“I noticed you didn't pack anything to eat when you were fleeing the compound in such a hurry. Change of clothes, bug spray, clean water? Shit like that.”

“No, I'm not very good at this commando survival thing. I left in a hurry. I had to get out of there. And now I still have to get rid of you.”

“I noticed you've got a shitload of medicine in here. Are you planning on saving the world?”

“Mr. Blade. There are lots of little villages between here and my destination, and there is always someone who needs medical attention. And if I can save someone with drug money, then that's what I am going to do.”

He smiled at her defensiveness and raised his hands in surrender. “Take it easy, doc. I was just picking at you about the medicine. With any luck, we won't meet anyone who needs your expert medical skills.”

He grabbed a black bag off the bed and tossed it at her feet. “But I never suspected you to be a thief.”

“Just remember, Mr. Blade, you don't know me at all. I am not a thief.”

He crossed his arms over his chest to match hers. Of course, he liked her presentation better than his. "The definition of a thief is someone who takes something of value that doesn't belong to them."

"Trust me, Mr. Blade. I've earned that money. And before you say anything stupid, it's not for me."

His eyes narrowed. "Bribe money?"

She paled. "Precisely."

The fact that she wasn't stealing money for personal gain was a relief. And money could go a long way in accomplishing a mission, whatever the hell her mission was. He would have done the same thing. "Who are we bribing, and what are we bribing for?"

She smiled. "Nice try."

She was smart; he had to give her that. "I'm going to take a shower. I've placed one explosive device on the window and one on the door. If anyone tries to get in, they'll explode. If anyone tries to get out, they'll explode. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Perfectly. I'm at your mercy."

"Sucks, doesn't it."

* * *

He opened the bathroom door. Zellia was half-asleep, sitting on the bed. Her eyes flew open as he approached.

"You have no clothes on," she screeched.

"I always sleep bare-assed."

"I'll...sleep on the floor," she said as she jerked the quilt off the bed and grabbed one of the pillows.

He stepped in front of her, his cock jutting out. "No."

Her eyes flew to his cock. It jumped. She blushed as her gaze returned to his face. "No? What do you mean no?"

“You're sleeping with me. Take most of your clothes off; leave on your panties and bra.”

She backed away from him until her back hit the wall.

“Don't worry. I won't touch you unless you want me to.”

“But your...penis...says something different.”

He frowned at her. “I don't have a penis, Zellia. I have a cock. A penis is that clinical term you use when you're performing bladder surgery to get the snake out that someone deliberately let crawl up their...penis.” He gripped himself, giving his rod a long, slow stroke. “Now this is a cock.”

She eyed his massive penis and blinked. Clinically speaking, she'd never seen a male penis that big. She stared at his huge hand on his huge penis, and need pooled in her privates.

“Don't worry, honey,” he said. “It will fit.”

Great. Now he's a mind reader.

She looked away. Anywhere but at him and his...penis. She felt his gaze on her, and she couldn't help but glance at his penis again.

“Have you ever been fucked before?”

Her eyes snapped to his. “Of course I've had sex. I am a whore; you said so yourself.”

“No. I didn't ask you if you'd ever had sex before. I asked you if you'd ever been *fucked* before. You can't even say the word, can you?”

Her breath caught in her throat at the very mention of that word. “Semantics. That word is highly inappropriate.”

“Going clinical on me again?”

“Yes.”

His laugh was deep and rich and would be very pleasing if he weren't laughing at her.

“Well, this cock of mine wants to fuck you. It wants to be buried inside you.”
He slowly stroked himself with his massive hand. “Does this look clinical to you?”

Her eyes flitted between his face and his member. “You...want me?”

He frowned. “Of course I want you. What hot-blooded straight male wouldn't?”

* * *

Her confusion assaulted him. Didn't she know she was sexy as hell? Beautiful? Sensuous? Hadn't she ever had her brains screwed out before? He balked. He hoped not.

“I've never raped anybody before, and I'll not start with you.” A grin split his face. “And I've never been turned down before either. I guess you'll be the first. Now take your clothes off and get in bed.”

She stood rooted in her place against the wall. Her eyes flashed fire.

“Take them off, or I'll do it for you.”

She slowly shook her head.

He crossed the space between them, grabbed the blanket and pillow she held, and flung them on the bed. Then he snatched open the button on her pants, unzipped them, and let the oversize pants fall to a heap around her ankles.

His eyes held her mesmerized as he unbuttoned the first button on her shirt and then the next. When he was done, her beautiful, glorious breasts cupped by the plain material of her bra made his mouth water.

“You're staring at my breasts,” she managed to say.

“You have nice...tits.”

“They're too big.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Who told you that?”

“No one. There's just too much of them. They make me look...top-heavy.”

He smiled and shook his head. “No. They're perfect.”

He bent his head and placed a soft kiss on one glorious mound.

She sucked in her breath. "I thought you said you were not going to touch me."

He grinned. "I did, but that was payback."

"For what?" she whispered.

"Pointing a gun at me."

He kissed the other round globe. He heard the hitch in her breath and the wild beating of her heart. "I'll bet your nipples are a dusty rose."

"You'll never find out," she said slowly.

A laughed rumbled in his chest. "Oh now, honey. You've just made a grave mistake."

"What mistake?"

"You threw the challenge flag."

"I did no such thing," she screeched.

"Yes, you did, and I accept your challenge."

"I challenge you to leave me alone," she quipped.

She was getting her fire back, and that pleased him, because she was nowhere near ready for him to pleasure her. Her anger and her irritation put her in her comfort zone. "You need to understand. I can't do that."

"I don't understand."

"No, I'm sure you don't."

He pushed her shirt from her shoulders and deliberately stepped into her so that his cock rested against her belly. He almost moaned as her soft skin met his hard flesh. Cupping her head, he lifted her face to his and kissed her. The spicy scent of her arousal slammed into him, stoking the fire that was already raging.

He pulled back. "Now get in bed before I change my mind."

Zellia's eyes were big as saucers as she stepped around him and climbed into the bed. After placing her glasses on the nightstand, she pulled the covers up to her eyeballs.

Blade followed her, placing one knife in the far corner, another knife beside her glasses on the nightstand, and his gun under the pillow. "You'll have to sleep on the other side. I've got to sleep on my left side so I'll have my shooting hand free."

* * *

Zellia scooted over and turned to face away from him. The bed sagged under his weight. She scooted over some more to give him as much room as possible.

She yelped when a strong arm grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to his big, warm body, his erection nestled against her backside.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Getting comfortable. Now sleep."

Sleep! Sleep! How could she sleep when she was so aroused? Her womb burned with something foreign, and he hadn't even really touched her, just kissed her breasts. She closed her eyes and fought a moan as she remembered his hot lips on her...tits, as he called them.

His hand burned her where it was splayed across her belly.

And his erection. It was huge. She'd never seen or felt anything like it in all her medical years. There wasn't anything about his...cock...that was normal. Just thinking about him gripping it flooded her womb with fire, and a shiver spun through her.

"Are you okay?"

No. "Yes."

His cock jerked against her behind, and he whispered into her ear. "You sure I can't help you with something?"

"You could sleep on the floor," she choked out.

His laughter rumbled against her back.

This was a first. She'd never slept with a man all night. She liked it, and she hated it. He was strong and warm. She felt protected, safe from all the bad things in her world. After all, he hadn't assaulted her. But she also knew he'd hinder her

plans, slow her down. She had hundreds of miles to go, and some of those miles were over trails, not roads. Surely she could ditch him by then.

Time was running out.

The exploding door rocked her from her fretful dream. Blade grabbed her body and rolled them both off the bed, firing as they went.

She landed on her back, her legs spread, with him nestled between them.

He grinned. "Thanks for offering, honey, but I'm a little bit busy right now."

"Ohh," she said as she pushed against him.

Then his face changed right before her eyes as he pushed up to a crouch. "Stay down. That's an order."

She did, because she had no clue what the heck was happening. Her eyes were glued to him as he peeked over the bed. She couldn't see anything, just the blurry outline of him. Then he stood and rounded the bed. Panic swamped her when she lost sight of him. She glanced under the bed and watched his blurry bare feet head for the smoldering doorway.

Her heart sounded like a drum in her ears, and she was sure her heart was going to leap out of her chest. She heard a moan. Oh my gosh. Someone was hurt in the explosion. She got to her knees, snatched her glasses from the nightstand, and peered over the bed. Blade stood over a man sprawled in the hallway. Blade was naked as the day he'd been born, but it didn't seem to register to him that he was naked in a hotel hallway. She shook her head, grabbed her medical bag, and went to Blade.

"I didn't tell you to get up." He growled.

"Stop scowling at me. I'm a doctor. It's the whole oath thing."

Zellia's nose wrinkled at the smell of burnt flesh. She tried to get closer to the man, but Blade blocked her way.

Blade turned back to the man and picked him up by the shirt collar. "Who sent you?" he ground out.

The man gurgled twice and then died.

Blade shoved the man to the floor and spun on her, his yellow eyes flashing cold, hard fury.

She winced.

"What?" he asked.

"You could have a little more care for the dead."

He frowned. "I didn't want him dead. I wanted him alive so he could answer my questions, and then I would kill him with my bare hands." Blade looked like there was no shame in the world for what he'd just done, and that bothered her.

Blade turned back, squatted, and searched the man's pockets. "Do you recognize him?"

"No." She grimaced. "Not even if he had the other half of his face back."

"Well, I did put the DO NOT DISTURB sign out. He just didn't know that I meant it."

He turned back to face her, and his eyes settled on her mangled leg. "Get dressed. We've got to move."

His harsh voice startled her, and she followed his gaze to her leg. She was instantly ashamed. She knew her leg was badly disfigured, with several scars that had not healed properly, and it ached if she spent too much time standing. She was a cripple, and now Blade knew the source of her limp.

* * *

Blinding rage tore through him. He could tell by looking at her leg that her injury was from a beating, not from an accident. He wasn't upset with her, but he wanted to tear the motherfucker apart who'd done that to her. And he'd damn sure find out who'd done it.

Chapter Five

Blade was driving, and she regretted the heck out of that decision. Several times her lunch threatened to present itself on the dashboard.

“Oh my gosh, you drive like a maniac.”

“Don't worry, darlin'; you're in the safest hands in the world.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“I've never had an accident. I mean one that I didn't intentionally cause.”

She cut her gaze toward him. “But that doesn't mean you won't have one here. You don't know these roads, the sharp hairpin turns. And spider monkeys attempt suicide every day.”

“I'll send the kamikaze spider monkeys to hell.”

She gasped. “You're a horrible brute. How can you do that to a poor, defenseless animal?”

He laughed. “Ahh. You've got a tender heart.”

“Yes. Something I'm sure you can't relate to.”

“And don't you forget it,” he said.

What in the heck did *that* mean?

“The only things I brake for are old people and small children.”

“Well, I wish I had thought of that yesterday when you were standing in the road.”

He laughed as he took a pothole at Mach 1, and she shrieked when her butt actually left the seat. Thank goodness for seat belts.

“Try not to tear up the jeep. It's the only transportation we've got.”

"I can always borrow one."

She laughed. "Borrow means to ask if you can use it, and then you return it when you're through."

"Okay. So maybe borrow wasn't the right word."

She smiled when his eyes crinkled. "So, you're a killer and a thief."

"Yes. Pretty soon you'll know my whole résumé."

"I doubt that."

"And here I know very little about you," he said.

She smirked. "That's part of my plan."

He stared at her with those eyes from hell, the ones whose gaze could rake across her skin and leave a mark. His eyes were a warm yellow, but sometimes, she swore, they seemed to...*change*, for lack of a better word.

"Tell me what happened to your leg."

She looked away. "An accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"Nothing you need to be concerned with." She watched the trees whiz by and hoped he dropped the topic. She'd always been comfortable as a cripple, but there was something about Blade and being a cripple that bothered her.

He growled. "Your leg's been battered by something, two-by-four, ball bat."

She stared straight ahead.

"Who did that to you?"

"It's still none of your concern."

Blade slammed on the brakes, sending the jeep skidding sideways and stopping in a rolling cloud of dust. He turned to her and grabbed her chin.

"I asked who did this to you."

She narrowed her eyes and tugged against his hold. He released her chin.

"It was my father, right after he beat my mother's brains in with the club he always carried around."

Blade's jaw snapped shut.

Zellia could tell he was clenching his teeth by the tension in his jaw. She watched him grip the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white.

"Your father? How can a father do that to his child?"

"He wasn't a nice person."

"You meant to say, 'he was a son of a bitch.'"

She shrugged.

"So where's your father now?"

"I don't really know. I'd heard he went to America. I haven't seen him since..."

She fell silent and looked at the dashboard without really focusing on anything in particular. Before she knew it, she said, "He sold me into slavery." God. What had gotten into her? She never talked about her life, especially to a stranger.

"To Manuel?"

"Yes. Manuel needed a doctor, my father owed Manuel, I was competent and available, and..."

"And your dad got to live." He finished the sentence for her. "How long?" he ground out.

"Eight years."

"It must have sucked the big one to be betrayed by your dad and indentured to that snake Manuel."

"It wasn't so bad."

He eyed her skeptically.

"I wasn't beaten or raped. I just didn't have my freedom."

"There were a lot of beatings and rapes?"

“Yes. I don't know how many vaginal injuries I sewed up. He used some kind of thing on them that had sharp spikes that ripped their vagina and womb. He was a beast. I think he just liked to hear them scream. I'm glad he's dead. At least Manuel didn't rape Victoria. And I'm sorry. She was bleeding out. I couldn't save her.”

He eased off the brake, and the jeep moved forward. “Don't worry your pretty little head over Victoria. She's alive.”

“What? That's impossible!”

“I assure you that she's alive and well.”

“Now, I'm adding liar to your résumé.”

He turned and grinned. “Trust me. When this is all over, I'll show you what saved her.”

“You have to tell me now. Whatever it is could save many people's lives.” She shook her head, incredulous. “It's a miracle.”

“I'll show you later. I promise.”

“Come on. You have to tell me. I'll go insane not knowing. Did you put her on life support and fly her home?”

He glanced at her before he said, “You better hope I never meet your daddy.”

She frowned. “You're deliberately changing the subject.”

“Because I'm going to kill the motherfucker.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I don't want you to kill anyone for me. Just leave him alone. It's over. It's done.”

“I'm not making that promise, Zellia. When I find him, I'm going to kill him.”

“What?” she asked. “You can't mean that.”

All emotion left his eyes as he stared at her. “Yes, I do,” he said flatly.

His icy voice sent chills scampering down her body, and she flinched. She recognized the finality in the hard edge of his voice. “You're insane.”

“I thought we'd already established that.”

She looked away. He'd said he was a killer. Did he want her to believe that? Because she was very close to believing that. His carefree demeanor *had* suddenly changed to a scary calmness.

They rode in silence for a while. She watched the scenery as it whizzed by at a dizzying speed and prayed that the spider monkeys stayed out of the road. The last thing she wanted to do today was patch up a monkey. She's met a few doctors who wouldn't help an injured animal, but she'd patch up any living thing.

"Is your daddy the one trying to have you killed now?"

She blinked and rolled that thought around in her mind. "I don't think so. What would he gain from my death? Besides, that man may have been after *you*. After all, your people did destroy one of the largest cartels in Colombia."

"I hate to break it to you, honey, but someone is after you. No one in his right mind would send one man after me if they knew about the destruction at Manuel's compound. That was a first-class op, and anyone who knew about our raid would know that I'm a professional."

"You're that deadly, huh?"

He grinned. "Yep."

She rolled her eyes. He probably was deadly. He had that threatening look about him, with that hard, chiseled face and that wild, unkempt hair. His arms were massive; his muscles rippled every time he moved. She flushed. Nice abs too. Nice everything.

Blade was a bad boy, and she'd avoided bad boys all her life. Now she was stuck in a jeep in the middle of the jungle with a bad boy.

"I'm betting that a spy whose job was to keep an eye on you was stationed at Manuel's home. And when you up and left the compound, he sent word. Somebody knew you would be heading this way."

"That's preposterous. How can you possibly know all that? I've never seen that man before in my life."

"I said he sent word to someone; otherwise, he could have killed you at the compound. The spy was probably a servant, not a killer," he said.

She mulled over the possibilities, unable to fathom anyone spying on her. She wasn't a threat to anyone, even if she did find the lab.

"What's your last name, Zellia?"

She blinked. "Calderon."

"Zellia Calderon. I like it."

She rolled her eyes again. Did the man *like* anything besides bossing her around?

"What does *Zellia* mean?"

"Sunshine."

He grinned. "That fits you perfectly. So, how did you get into medical school?"

"My father was a doctor, and he sent me to Harvard. I came home and worked in his clinic for a while, and then I started traveling the countryside to help those villages that didn't have doctors."

"Jungle doc on call."

She grinned. "Yes. I owe him for giving me the opportunity to practice medicine. If he hadn't paid for my college, I'd be...unfulfilled. I love medicine. I love to help people."

"And that was worth your indentured servitude?"

Uneasiness settled around her. She hadn't been mistreated or raped. The worst she'd had to endure was knowing that she couldn't change the situations of the men and women that Manuel enslaved. She nodded. "Yes, most definitely."

Chapter Six

They stopped in the next village to eat. It was hot, and Blade noticed Zellia was wilting. She wasn't drinking enough, but that was going to change. She'd drink if he had to pour it down her delicate throat.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"You're always squinting and pushing your glasses up on your nose."

"I'm almost blind, and it's been three years since I had them checked, so these glasses are way out-of-date."

"You mean there's not a jungle eye doc on call?"

"Not that I know of, but I'm sure the people need one."

The *people* needed one, not *she* needed one. Zellia was always thinking about everyone else before herself.

Blade couldn't imagine not being able to see clearly. His wolf eyes never missed anything, and here Zellia was walking around in a haze. Of course, he could solve that problem for her if he turned her. The only problem was her leg. He had no idea what would happen. She either would be a crippled wolf or completely healed. A crippled wolf wasn't good. A wolf depended on its legs for hunting and protection. She may not be able to have any of those things. He sighed. She'd be better off as a human. The unknown wasn't something he wanted to take a chance on. A crippled wolf? He couldn't imagine how such a wolf would cope.

A man at least ten days older than dirt approached their table, and Blade immediately pulled his knife from the scabbard at his side.

Zellia's eyes widened. "What are you doing?" she whispered to Blade, then stiffened. The man stood right behind her. Blade's beast was not happy.

She turned to face the man. The man totally ignored Blade, spoke in Spanish to Zellia, and asked if she was the doctor who'd come there a long time ago. She told him yes, and he begged her to come with him.

Spanish was a second language to Blade, so he knew what the old man had asked. "I don't like it," growled Blade.

"Well, that's a surprise. There's not much that you do like," she said.

His face softened along with his voice. "I like you."

"Do you? I just thought you wanted to know where I'm going and what I'm hiding."

He grinned. "Well, yeah. There is that."

She smiled, got up, grabbed her medical bag from the jeep, and followed the old man.

"I'll bring the jeep," Blade called out in English. "I don't want our bribe to disappear."

"Good thinking," she replied over her shoulder.

Blade parked the jeep outside a hut, and it puzzled him that the hut was far away from the protection of the village.

He pulled back the sack that served as a door. Zellia stood not more than ten feet away. He parked himself in the doorway so he could watch her, the jeep, and the surrounding area.

It was stifling in the hut. Zellia had better make it quick, before he jerked her ass out and put her back in the jeep.

* * *

Zellia bent over the child who couldn't be much older than fourteen or fifteen. She was pregnant, and the baby was coming. She figured the child was the man's granddaughter, and she wondered where the parents were, and why the women of

the village weren't there helping her. She asked the man how long she'd been in labor, and the man replied since last night.

That wasn't a good sign.

Zellia washed her hands in the not-so-clean basin and then put on a pair of latex gloves. Infection was the jungle's deadliest weapon.

She felt the child's cervix. That wasn't the baby's head that had crowned. Damn. Breech. And the amniotic sac hadn't ruptured either. Zellia pinched the membrane and then twisted. Warm fluid spilled onto the dirty cot.

The girl was small framed, and Zellia couldn't tell if the girl's hips were wide enough for a regular delivery. And with a breech birth, the baby's head could get stuck, since the baby's bottom was softer and might not dilate the cervix enough.

The girl screamed and clawed at Zellia and begged her to take the pain away. Zellia felt like a knife sliced through her heart and wished it were that simple, wished she possessed that kind of power.

She glanced at Blade. He stood vigil at the door like a warrior, suspicious of everything, a permanent scowl plastered on his face.

Time passed, and all Zellia could do was dab the child's face with cool water and check on the progress every fifteen minutes.

"Thank God," cried Zellia.

The tiny butt was through the birth canal. "Push," Zellia told the girl. The girl had to push the child through the birth canal. She ordered the grandfather to push on the top of the girl's belly.

The girl screamed, and the grandfather seemed to age another hundred years.

Zellia grasped the baby's hips and gently pulled. Finally the baby slipped free.

It was a little girl. Zellia smiled and cleaned the baby, especially the nose and mouth. The child wasn't breathing well, so she took extra care to remove all the mucus. She wrapped the tiny one in a piece of an old blanket, cringing at the host of germs that probably clung to the blanket, and laid the baby on the girl's chest.

That's when she noticed the girl's blank stare. Zellia shoved the old man out of the way, picked up the baby, and gave her to him to hold. Zellia felt the girl's neck. No pulse. She started CPR.

* * *

Blade watched Zellia work for half an hour on the poor girl. Sweat covered Zellia, soaking her back, and her hair hung in wet strings.

He hated the smell of death. It was a black oil that coated everything. Hard to remove. Hard to forget.

Blade could tell that Zellia's heart was breaking. She'd given one life but couldn't save another. He had to get her out of there before she became violently ill herself.

He pulled her to her feet and wrapped her up in himself. "You've done all you can," he said quietly. "Let her go."

A sob escaped as she buried her face in his chest. Her sadness rolled through him like a freight train, stealing his composure, tormenting his mind.

She pushed away from him and turned to the old man.

"I'm sorry," she said.

The old man shoved the baby at her and told her to take it.

She shook her head and pushed the baby back. "Surely you can find someone in the village to help you look after her," she protested.

"No one will help me," the old man said.

The man pushed the baby at her again, and Zellia refused. Before she knew what was happening, the man grabbed a knife from the table and held it over the infant. Blade moved in a blur and wrenched the baby and the knife from the old man. Blade handed Zellia the baby, grabbed her medical bag, and pushed her toward the door. Once outside, Blade buried the knife in the log that was part of the door frame. That was a better option than burying it in the old man.

"We'll find someone in the village who wants a child," said Blade.

That, though, proved to be unsuccessful. No one would take the baby, and no one would tell them why. They just spat at their feet.

“Get in the jeep, and tell me what you need to feed the baby.”

“Goat's milk.”

He took the safety off her pistol and handed it to her. “Stay here and shoot anyone who comes near the jeep.”

* * *

Zellia was numb as she stared at the little life she held in her arms. She shook her head and tried to think what they were going to do with a baby. She had to get to the lab, but she couldn't very well drag a newborn through the jungle.

She saw Blade round the corner, and her eyes grew big. She watched him stride effortlessly to the jeep, as if the thing he carried weighed nothing.

“You stole a goat?”

He dumped the goat in the back of the jeep and then climbed into the driver's seat. He took the gun from her hands and put it back beside the seat before he started the jeep and drove them out of the village.

“Old hag wouldn't sell me any milk.”

“You stole her goat?”

“No. I threw some cash at her before I took the goat. What the hell's wrong with these people?”

Zellia shook her head, completely bewildered. “I don't know. The grandfather or the girl must have been banished for something terrible.”

“Well, I hope they all burn in hell. Not the banished people, but the selfish village people.”

“The sins of the one are the sins of the whole family.”

“Not in America. Your sins are your own. We pass a lot of shit down, but sins aren't one of them.”

She looked at the baby in her arms and noticed a smear on the blanket. She didn't want to know what it was. She tucked the blanket in such a way that the smear was away from the baby's face.

"My God, Blade. What are we going to do with a newborn?"

"We're going to the next village and see if anyone wants a baby."

"They won't, you know. Everybody's poor. Another mouth to feed isn't something they'll jump at."

"How about if I pay them?"

She shook her head. There were a lot of good people in her country, but there were also lots of cruel people. "They may take your money and then abandon the baby."

"Any orphanages around here?"

She shook her head again. "Only in the big cities."

"Don't worry. We'll figure something out. You do know how to milk a goat, don't you?"

She smiled until she was roaring with laughter. "I'll guess we'll figure that out too."

An hour later, at her insistence, Blade took a side path off the road.

He cut the engine and looked at her. "What do you need?"

She laughed to keep from weeping. "Get the goat out, get some milk from the goat, and let's feed the baby."

Blade just sat there. "She's got to have a name," he finally said.

"The goat?"

He chuckled. "No, smart-ass. We'll call the goat Gertrude. I picked the goat's name; now you pick the baby's name."

She searched his face. He was serious. Blade wanting to name the baby touched her heart. He recognized this little being as a person, not some problem or garbage that no one wanted. "How about Sarita? That means princess."

He smiled. "Perfect. Gertrude and Sarita. Life can't get any better than this."

"Well..." she said as she crinkled her nose. "Gertrude needs a bath."

He laughed. "That she does."

It took them an hour to figure out how to milk Gertrude, and Gertrude was none too pleased with their attempts. Lucky for them, they only needed a small amount. Zellia punctured a thin hole in one of the fingers of a surgical glove and filled the finger with Gertrude's contribution. Sarita wasn't too happy, but after several frustrating tries, she got the hang of it.

Zellia fashioned a diaper out of Blade's bandanna and made a mental note to put baby supplies in her medical bag from now on.

She watched Blade lead Gertrude back from the woods. At least Gertrude hadn't chewed her rope leash in two yet. Blade was shirtless, his hair damp and curling with water. Wow, he had a great body. She smiled. And he knew it too. How did it feel to be that gorgeous, self-confident, and totally in control?

"I found a small steam back there. You want to wash up? Believe me. It felt great."

"That sounds wonderful. I've checked Sarita. She's fine, just sleepy. We'll have to feed her every two to four hours, depending on how well we can get her to eat."

"You go play in the creek, and I'll watch her. Take the pistol, and holler if you need me. Or I could come and watch you if you think you'd be safer that way."

She grinned at his teasing. "You're the only one I worry about."

"Exactly."

She stood and handed Sarita to him. He held the baby like she was fragile glass in his big strong hands. Zellia's heart flipped. "Thank you. I don't know what I would have done without you. I owe you."

"Don't worry. I always collect."

* * *

Blade sat down, leaned against a tree, and put little Sarita in his lap. God, the child was beautiful. So tiny, so fragile. And so alone. That part slashed his heart. He didn't have a heart, but this little wonder tugged at something in his chest, just like Zellia did.

Zellia was wonderful too. She was smart, caring, giving one hundred percent of herself to help others, even if it meant tormenting her soul.

She just didn't trust him. He couldn't blame her for that. He was a mean son of a bitch. Usually he did his job without any feeling, and suddenly he had these feelings for Zellia and Sarita that he didn't understand. It was simpler when it was just his badass self. Now he was responsible for two fragile delights.

Gertrude came and nudged him in the shoulder. He glanced at her. She was haphazardly chewing some unknown vegetation that looked like weeds, her floppy ears twitching. Damn, he even had some feelings for Gertrude. Gratitude.

Sarita stretched and yawned. He smiled. She was the most amazing thing.

"What's the big, bad killer smiling at?"

Blade looked up into Zellia's face. "Life. Precious life."

She smiled. "Yes, it is precious."

He coughed to clear this throat. "I also have the solution to our problem, not that Sarita's a problem. I guess I really have a solution to Sarita's problem."

Zellia sat beside him. "I'm listening."

"Let me evac her out of here."

He saw the confusion fleet across her face. "What do you mean?"

"I can get a chopper in here, pick up Sarita, and fly her back to my home in Miami. She'll have medical care as well as anything else she needs."

Zellia chewed on her lower lip as her eyes rested on Sarita. "I'm not sure I can give her up now."

"I know what you mean. When you get through traipsing around the jungle, you can have her back."

“It's illegal to take a child from its homeland without the government's permission.”

“But it's not illegal for an entire village to shun a newborn.”

Zellia rubbed her hand on Sarita's head, and Sarita made a face. “You could get in trouble.”

“Listen, honey, sometimes I'm back home in my bed before the Colombian government even knows I've been here. I can't tell you how many people I've flown out of this country without the government's permission.”

Her brows furrowed. “Who?”

“Missionaries, businessmen. Colombia is a hotbed for kidnapping people and demanding ransom. Trust me. The government doesn't give a shit about Sarita unless she can give them some leverage or get them some money.”

* * *

Zellia held his gaze and then looked at Sarita. She did trust Blade to help Sarita. He'd do exactly as he said he would. And it was the best thing for Sarita. Really, it was. The jungle was no place for Sarita. Zellia couldn't give up on finding the lab. She just had to find it or die trying.

“Okay. But only if you promise I can have her back.”

He grinned. “I promise.”

Chapter Seven

They spent the night in the jungle because they weren't sure they could check Gertrude in as a minor. Besides, they were up every three hours to milk Gertrude and feed Sarita. Zellia and Sarita had slept comfortably in the back of the jeep, and Blade had slept in the driver's seat. Blade felt safer in the jungle anyway. The night called to him, comforted him. He wanted to let his beast run but decided against it. There'd be plenty of time for running when this unknown op was over.

Blade had given Rat the coordinates of a clearing that Zellia had remembered, and fortunately, it was big enough to land a BLACK HAWK. The Apache Longbow wouldn't have to land, just ride shotgun. Blade prayed it wouldn't have to use its 30 mm cannons, 70 mm rockets, or its missiles.

Blade watched Zellia change Sarita's makeshift diaper and eyed the abomination.

"What *is* that shit in her diaper? Is she okay?"

Zellia laughed. "Yes, she's fine. That's meconium. It is amniotic fluid, epithelial cells, mucus, hair, bile, and water. It's perfectly normal."

"Are you sure? It looks like greenish black tar."

"It is greenish black tar, but it is normal greenish black tar."

"God. That's the most disgusting stuff I've ever seen."

"Oh, come on. You're a killer. The man back at the hotel with his face blown off looked worse than this."

"Not to me."

She made a face. "Well, I guess it's just whatever we're used to."

"I'll never get used to *that*," he pointed to the diaper rag.

While they waited, Zellia sat with her legs bent on each side of Sarita. Sarita was gurgling while Zellia made funny faces at her. It was easy to see that Zellia loved children, and he wondered why she didn't have any of her own. She would be a wonderful mother.

He checked his watch and then squatted beside Zellia. "We've got a few minutes. You need to say your good-byes now. When that bird lands, it has two minutes to get back in the air. Do you understand?"

Fear crossed her face, but she nodded. He couldn't stand the hurt churning through her. It sliced a gash through his soul. His beast pushed against him to spare her the hurt, but there was only so much he could do.

"You can always get on the bird with her and forget whatever it is you're after."

She shook her head and swallowed her tears. "I can't. It's something I have to do."

He reached out and brushed a lock of dark hair from her brow. "Okay. It's your choice."

She nodded as she went back to playing with Sarita. He knew she was struggling with her emotions. *Just don't cry*, he said to himself. Anything but crying.

"I hear the choppers. You want me to take her?" asked Blade.

"No, I can do it."

Zellia bundled the protesting Sarita in her scratchy blanket, and Blade helped her to her feet.

Zellia patted Sarita's bottom and bounced her, saying soothing words to her. Sarita settled into sleep right before the chopper landed.

Blade stooped, lifted Gertrude, and slung her over his shoulder, gripping her four legs to keep her from squirming, and then motioned for Zellia to follow. Rat wouldn't cut the power; getting away was the main objective.

Rat flung back the door and squatted. Blade hitched his head and acknowledged Rat.

"Zellia, I'd like you to meet my good friend, Rat."

She looked at Rat and quirked a brow. Rat wasn't small like a rat; he was huge like Blade, and tattoos covered his arms. She extended her hand and smiled. "How do you do, Mr. Rat?"

Rat shook her hand and looked at Blade.

"I know. She calls me Mr. Blade."

"Polite, ain't she?"

"Very," said Blade.

Zellia reluctantly handed Sarita to Rat.

"This is Sarita," said Blade. "She's the most precious cargo you've ever transported. Do you understand?"

Rat tucked the infant into the crook of his arm and eased the blanket back to take a look. A grin split Rat's face. "I believe you're right. This *is* the most precious thing we've ever transported."

Rat looked at Zellia. "Don't worry, ma'am. Victoria's waitin' back home to scoop this little thing up and take care of her. She would have been here, but Hayden pitched a hissy fit."

Rat handed Sarita to another man. "We've even got her an infant seat for the ride to the States. Diapers, a blanket, and a bottle of formula too. Victoria even sent this thing called a onesie and told us to put it on her when we got the chance. She'll be fine."

Zellia eyed the infant seat strapped into one of the helicopter's seat. They had it strapped in facing the front instead of facing the back, but she supposed it didn't make a difference, since she didn't think there were airbags on a helicopter.

The Apache running coverage made a circle, and Blade waved.

Blade grinned at Rat. "And I've got one more passenger for you."

Blade lifted Gertrude from his shoulders and handed her to Rat.

Rat's brow hitched. "A goat. You want me to evac a goat out of here?"

Zellia laughed, because the look on Rat's face was priceless.

"This is Gertrude. She's Sarita's personal pet, supplied Sarita lifesaving milk. I'm sure if Sarita could talk, she wouldn't let you leave Gertrude behind."

Rat eyed the goat and wrinkled his nose. "I'm sure you're right."

"You'll have to watch Gertrude. She likes to eat everything. Now move," said Blade.

"Roger that."

Blade didn't give Zellia anytime to think; he whirled her around and pulled her back to the jeep.

They slid into their seats, buckled in, and just sat there, saying nothing. Doing nothing but watching the chopper lift from the ground and disappear over the trees.

"I hope Rat has to change her diaper."

Zellia grinned. "You're so bad. You'd better hope that Gertrude doesn't get airsick."

"I just hope she doesn't eat anything important enough to bring the chopper down."

They fell silent again, and Zellia played with a spot on her pants.

"Let's find a hotel, a hot bath, and a steak," he said.

"That sounds wonderful," she managed to say.

Chapter Eight

“Are you sure you don't need help washing your back?”

“I'm positive. Will you give it up? I'm not sleeping with you.”

“Who said anything about sleeping? I was just offering to wash your back.”

“Thank you, but no.”

Blade removed the dinner trays while Zellia took a shower. His beast was attuned to the sound of the water and imagining her body that was under it, and his beast wanted out. Out to claim his mate. But Zellia wasn't ready for a mate. Hell, she wasn't even ready to trust him, and that was a big fat blow to his ego. He was no saint when it came to women, and his beast wasn't either. But damn it, he was being a saint now. For Zellia.

Letting Rat take Sarita had wounded her. She was a jumble of nerves, raw and tender. He had an idea about what would make her feel better, but he should just let her sleep tonight. He didn't want to push her over that emotional edge, but he also didn't want her to push herself over that same edge. She was in mourning, feeling sorry for herself. That shit had to stop. She'd see Sarita soon; he'd make damn sure of it.

With his mind made up, he prayed that he didn't regret what he was about to do.

When she came out of the bathroom, she had on the new clothes they'd bought that afternoon.

“Take your clothes off, Zellia.”

She stopped dead in her tracks, her eyes wide. “You're scaring me, Blade.”

“That's the idea. Take them off and get on the bed.”

She crossed her arms and set her jaw. “No.”

He crossed the room in a flash, stood toe-to-toe with her, and scowled. “Take them off, or I'll do it for you.”

With trembling hands, she unbuttoned her shirt. “Have you gone berserk on me? What happened to the man who saved an infant's life?”

“He's taking a break. Your bra, too.”

“You've gone mad. You're treating me like a common whore.”

“You are not a whore, and I won't lay a hand on you. I promise. Your pants now.”

She shoved her pants to the floor and stepped out of them. “I don't believe you.” He heard her heart beating a staccato beat against her rib cage. He also smelled her fear and a little bit of something else.

“Have I ever done anything that I said I wouldn't?”

“No, but there's always a first.”

He pulled his backpack from under the bed and fished around until he found a foil packet and some lubricant. He placed them on the nightstand.

She eyed the condom. “What's that for?”

“In case you change your mind.”

“Why do you carry condoms in the jungle?”

“It is standard issue in a mercenary's survival pack, especially mine. Nobody wants children strung all over the world. After a mission is complete, when I'm jacked up on adrenaline, I want to fuck. Not have clinical sex. Fuck long, hard, and fast. Now lay on the bed, in the middle, on your belly.”

She ripped the covers back and crawled in. In a flash, he straddled her and pulled two ropes from the pillow.

“What in God's name are you doing?”

He placed a slipknot loop over her right wrist and tied it to the headboard. Then he did the same with her left.

“So now what? Are you going to rape me?”

“If I wanted to rape you, I'd have done it while you were bent over the credenza.”

“Your favorite position.”

He grinned. “Yeah. What's your favorite position?”

* * *

She flinched. She didn't have a position, much less a favorite one, and she certainly wasn't discussing it with him, even if she had one. Zellia shrugged.

“I said I wouldn't touch you unless you asked me to.”

“Well, I'm not going to ask, so why this?” She tugged on her restraints.

“First, I need to take a shower, and I only have one device for the door, not the window.”

“So?”

“I don't want you leaving while I'm taking a shower.”

“Well, all you had to do was ask me not to leave.”

“You don't trust me, and I don't trust you. That's the thing about trust; it's earned.”

She craned her neck and watched his back as he retreated into the bathroom. She wanted to call him a bastard but couldn't muster the gumption to say it aloud. Where was her savior, her knight in shining armor? She wanted that man back, not this crazed killer.

Zellia thought about screaming, but was afraid he'd gag her, and who knew what or who would come to her rescue. She didn't understand this weird mood. Maybe he was a psychopath and had never shown any signs until now. She groaned. This was more than just being crazy. He'd snapped, and she was on the receiving end of his madness.

Remaining perfectly still, she willed herself to breathe shallow and slow and hoped he would think she was asleep. Maybe the sane side of him would have mercy on her. Maybe the shower would resurrect the sane man.

God, she was mortified, her ample bare butt displayed like she was a whore.

She felt the bed sag and flinched.

"I'm punishing you for not obeying me."

Her eyes flew open. "When?"

"You didn't stay where I told you to stay the other night when we had our visitor."

"That's absurd. I'm not one of your hired help that you can boss around."

"Pull your knees up under you."

"I will not."

A smack reverberated in the room. The sting sent a zing to her womb. She'd known physical pain before, but this was different, something erotic, something she shouldn't be feeling. This was crazy. *Get a grip, Zellia.*

"You hit me."

"No, honey. I spanked you."

"Spanked. Hit. Is there a difference? And don't call me honey."

"Of course there's a difference. It hurts, but just a little bit. I love spanking your ass." He slapped her ass again and then rubbed it with his hand.

"Pull your knees up," he said.

She pulled her knees up and under her, and shame flooded her. Her bottom lip quivered.

He rubbed her ass. "You've got a nice blush back here. So pretty."

"So how does this madman's game work?" she choked out.

"I'll spank you until I've had enough. Or until you beg me to stop. Or until you beg me to ease that ache between your legs."

“There is no ache between my legs. So this is about sex. About you promising me that you wouldn't touch me and renege on your promise.”

“First of all, you're wet. I can see your cream. Is there something sexual about spanking?”

She swallowed hard, felt the cool air across her wetness. “No. It's just degrading.”

“Why?”

“I have my big, fat, ugly butt displayed like a Christmas turkey,” she screeched.

* * *

He heard the hurt in voice, smelled her pain. “Who said that to you?”

She said nothing but turned her head away from him.

“Tell me, Zellia.”

“I can't, Mr. Blade. You'll just have to spank me for that too.”

“Tell me, and I'll stop spanking you.”

She turned toward him, her eyes flashing. “Mr. Blade. I despise the way you negotiate for information. I'm bound with my behind in the air, and you're hitting me, and you'll stop if I tell you something that's none of your business. That makes so much sense.”

“Tell me, Zellia, and I'll stop. It's just information.”

“It was...my father. Are you satisfied now?”

“Fuck no, I'm not satisfied. I want to kill that bastard.”

Zellia blinked. The growl that emanated from him didn't sound human.

“What did he do to you, Zellia? Did he touch you?”

“No...he just liked to watch.”

“And what did he hold over you that allowed him to watch?”

“He threatened to kill my mother if I didn't let him look, so I did.”

“He did that anyway,” he said blandly.

“Then at seventeen, I went off to college. And when I came back, he wanted more than a look.”

“And you told him no, so he killed your mother and beat you,” Blade said softly.

“Yes,” she whispered. “The next day, Manuel's men arrived and took me away. I didn't even get to bury my mother.”

A normal man might not have believed her, but his wolf could smell her truth and her embarrassment. “I'm sorry, Zellia, but I will make him pay.”

“I don't want him to pay. I just don't want to ever see him again.”

“You don't *ever* have to see him again, I promise you that. But back to your luscious ass. There is nothing wrong with your ass. It's beautiful. So round and lush. It makes me hard just thinking about it.”

“Oh, please. You're just saying that, because you feel like a cad for blackmailing me into telling you something that was none of your business in the first place.”

“No, honey. I love your ass, and one day, you'll let me show you just how much I love it.”

“In your dreams, Mr. Blade. Now let me go.”

“No.”

“No? You said...”

“That I'd stop spanking you if you told me. I didn't say that I'd let you up.”

“Oooohhhh.”

“I'm going to show you just how much I want your ass and the rest of you.”

“And not touch me?”

“Not even lay a finger on you.”

He untied her and told her to prop herself up against the pillows, but he wouldn't let her cover up.

He reclined on the end of the bed, facing her. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and he felt like shit. He'd caused her pain because he had to know if her dad had raped her. He could care less if she'd been raped, other than he would have hated that it happened to her. It wouldn't have changed what he thought of her, what he felt for her. But her dad would pay—with his life.

And now he had to make her forget the past few hours.

“You are beautiful, Zellia. Everything about you. Your ass is perfect, those tits are perfect, that mouth is perfect. Everything.”

She shook her head in disbelief, her long, dark curls dancing around her, her eyes shimmering with tears. “I know that's not true, but thanks for saying it anyway.”

Blade gripped his cock. Her eyes flew to his hand, and she watched him make a slow slide. “What is this in my hand?”

A smile played around her face as she wiped her nose. “Your penis.”

“No, Zellia. This is my cock, and it wants you very much.”

She shook her head.

“One day, you'll let me fuck you like I want to. I'll begin by giving you a massage with warm scented oil. I'll start with your toes and work my way up, touching every inch of your smooth, soft skin. I'll caress your fine ass.”

He noted her gaze flitted between his face and his cock. “I'll do your palms, your fingers, your tits. And when your body is nice and slick, I'll tie you to the bed on your back. Then I'll spread those lovely legs of yours and place my tongue right on your sensitive clit.”

* * *

The image he created in her mind was driving her crazy. Her sex quivered, her folds swollen to the point of being uncomfortable. She watched his strong hand

slowly stroke his member, and with every slide, she imagined him inside her. But she didn't want it slow and tormenting. She wanted it fast and hard.

He was beautiful—strong, muscular chest; flat, firm belly; long, lean muscular legs; and his arm muscles bulged with each stroke of his cock.

“Then I'll lash it and suck it with my tongue, but I won't let you come. Do you know why?”

She pulled her gaze from his member and to his face. She slowly shook her head.

“Because I'm going to turn you over, pull that fine ass of yours up in the air, and ram my cock in your sweet, slick pussy. I will be hard and fast, and I'll spank your ass just for the hell of it.”

She stifled a moan as his hand pumped harder, squeezing his thick, swollen flesh.

“Watch me come, Zellia, because I wish I was inside you.”

She watched as his hand flew against his engorged flesh. The desire in his hooded eyes jolted her burning core. He threw his head back, his neck muscles corded as his body convulsed. He cried her name as hot semen shot from his cock and landed on his belly. He kept pumping as little aftershocks rolled through him. When he looked back at her, his yellow eyes seemed to glow with something feral.

That was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen. It set her body on fire. She was wet, dripping with desire.

“Zellia. Do you want me to finish you?”

She couldn't speak, but she shook her head.

“I can do it with one finger. Just let me give you what you need with just one finger.”

She shook her head no.

“Okay. You're burning up; your skin is flushed with desire. Take your fingers and touch your swollen flesh.”

Masturbate. He wanted her to masturbate while he watched?

“Do it,” he said softly.

She watched her hand as it crept down her belly. Her fingers brushed the hot, swollen flesh of her outer folds.

“That's it. Now, push two fingers into your warm pussy.”

She eased two fingers inside, and her muscles clenched around them.

“It's all warm and slick, isn't it?”

She barely nodded as her wetness covered her fingers.

“Okay, honey. Now, slide those fingers in and out as you press your palm against your clit.”

She did, slowly at first, but that wasn't enough, not nearly enough friction. She increased the speed and the pressure and lifted her hips, grinding them against her hand. She watched his hand slide over his still-ready cock. His finger brushed the tip, and his belly lurched.

* * *

Blade could see that it wasn't going to be enough. She needed a cock, his cock, but she wasn't ready for that. Her fingers weren't big enough to give her the rub that she needed. He'd smelled her embarrassment at masturbating, but she'd quickly gotten over it when the needs of her body were demanding release. Damn, he wished he had a vibrator for her, but hell, she probably wasn't ready for that either.

“Let me take you over the edge.” He held up his finger. “Just one finger.”

Her gaze roamed his face. He knew she was trying to decide if he'd be true to his word. She finally whimpered and nodded. He didn't give her time to change her mind. He grabbed her ankles and pulled her so that she lay flat on the bed. He plunged a fat finger into her soft, wet pussy, and she cried out as her muscles clenched his finger.

“Now, take your fingers, place them on your clit.” He grabbed her hand and placed her fingers on her clit. “Brush them across your clit fast and hard, just like I did my cock.”

She did, and he saw her muscles bunch in her belly, could feel her pussy grabbing at his finger.

“That's it. Imagine my cock sliding in and out of that warm, sweet pussy of yours.”

She thrashed against his finger, trying to get more friction. Her head rolled from side to side. “It's not enough,” she managed to say. “I need more.”

“Two fingers or my cock?”

Her breath was coming in small spurts. “Your...penis.”

“No, Zellia. I don't have a penis. What do you want?”

“Your...cock,” she said as she strained against her hand.

He wasted no time in opening the condom, rolling it on, and applying a generous amount of lube.

He pulled her to the edge of the bed. “Tell me, Zellia. Do you want it hard and fast?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you.”

“No, I want your cock...hard and fast.”

Her eyes glistened, and her answer sent his beast pushing against his skin. He grabbed her hips and slammed his rod into her silky folds. She was so warm, tight, and slick, and made just for him.

“Yes. Oh, yes,” she cried out.

“Tell me how it feels, Zellia.”

“You're hard and hot.” Her fingers bit into the flesh of his arms.

He looped his arms under her arms and grabbed her shoulders as he power jacked into her body.

“Oh, I'm going to come,” she said between her teeth.

He felt her pussy clamp down on his cock as spasms rocked her little body.

“Mine. You are mine,” his mind said as his orgasm rolled through him. His cock jerked against her swollen, slick flesh as he pounded into her.

When his cock was spent, he slumped over her. Her heart thudded against his chest as he captured her warm mouth. She tasted like a fine wine that he couldn't get enough of, would never get enough of. He pulled away from her and brushed her hair from her face. He buried his face in her neck and held her tight. She was his, meant only for him.

He finally rolled off her when their breathing returned to normal.

Zellia said, “You weren't supposed to touch me.”

“Yeah. Change of plans.”

Chapter Nine

“What are you doing?” asked Blade.

Zellia looked up from the tattered vehicle manual.

¡Dios mío! How did he find me so soon?

And why wasn't he still sleeping? The sedative she gave him should have kept him sleeping until late afternoon, and she was supposed to be farther away.

She cleared the fear from her throat. “Reading.”

“Reading what?” He reclined his big body against the jeep, crossed his arms, and regarded her with cool eyes.

“How to change a tire.”

“You want me to help you?”

Her eyes rounded. He was going to help her after she'd drugged him? And he said it so sweetly too.

She had no idea why the thought of drugging him had popped into her head. She was watching him sleep, the steady rise and fall of his yummy, muscular chest, and suddenly, she had to make sure that he didn't get hurt because of her. Her problem wasn't his problem, and he was too hardheaded to realize that. So, she'd eased out of bed and filled a syringe with a sedative. Her heartbeat had pounded in her ears as she'd pushed the needle into his vein. He hadn't even flinched.

“No. I just want you to go away. Far, far away.”

Blade eyed the flat tire. “Sure you don't want some help?”

She watched him shift his legs apart and adjust his penis. Normally that was disgusting to her, but he had an erection, a huge bulge in the front of his pants, and for the life of her, she didn't know why.

She pulled her eyes back to the manual. "I'm positive."

"This would go a lot faster if you'd let me help."

She snapped the manual closed and glared at him. "I don't want you to help. I want to do this by myself. I'm not an idiot. I can read the manual."

"I know you're not an idiot, sweetheart. The problem is, are you strong enough to loosen those lug nuts?"

Zellia glanced at the rusty lug nuts. "Damn."

He laughed. "What did you just say?"

Her mouth formed a perfect O as she flushed; then she sputtered. "See why I don't want to hang around you? I'm picking up your bad habits."

She hid her embarrassment and turned back to the lug nuts. "If I can't get the lug nuts off, I'll just have to walk."

"See. There's the problem, honey. I don't want to walk to wherever in the hell we're going. I'd rather ride in the jeep with the wind blowing through my hair."

She rolled her eyes. "Really? The wind blowing through your hair? Now I've heard everything."

She reopened the manual but kept looking at the rusty lug nuts. She was cursed. What were the chances that she'd have a flat tire on the day she illegally injected Blade? And why couldn't she be a man, strong enough change a flat tire? She sniffed.

* * *

Her lower lip quivered. *Do not cry*. Blade could take anything, but a woman crying wasn't one of them. You could stab him in the heart. Cut his balls off. But... Do. Not. Cry.

"Listen, sweetheart. I'll change your flat tire for you...in exchange for something."

She eyed him wearily. "What?"

"I don't know yet. I'll decide, based on how hard it is to get those lug nuts off."

"No. I need to know the terms up front, before I agree."

He rubbed his chin and grinned. "You don't trust me?"

"No."

"Good. You shouldn't trust me, because I eat little girls like you for breakfast."

"Mr. Blade. I am not a little girl."

So she was back to calling him Mr. Blade. "You look little to me. And I'd love to eat you."

She was so cute when she blushed.

"That's because you're not normal."

"Sure, I'm normal. I'd love to taste your..."

"What is your request?" she interrupted, trying to steer the conversation away from sex.

"I want to know what or who we're searching for."

She shook her head. "First of all, there is no *we*. Secondly, I'll never tell you that. I'd limp around the world twice."

And he knew that she meant it. She was that stubborn.

"Okay, I can be reasonable...for now." He cupped his chin as he struck the *thinker* pose. "How about one kiss?"

Her brow hitched, and she blushed. "You've already had two. Surely you haven't forgotten it already."

"Oh, I remember them. But I want this one to last a little longer than those two. I want to show you what a real kiss is. You know, a little tongue action."

"What makes you think that I don't know what a real kiss is?"

“I don't think you know what a real kiss is by a real man.”

“You are so full of...” She stopped and frowned, as if her brain was searching for a word.

“Shit. The word you're looking for is shit.”

“Crap.”

He grinned.

“Okay, but you get your kiss now, not later,” she said.

He laughed. “No, honey. You don't get to pick when you pay your debt. For now, all you get is a tire changed. I want you to think about our kiss all day.”

* * *

She tried to ignore him as she feverishly flipped thorough the book. Please let this be easy and those lug nuts spin freely.

She finally found it. HOW TO CHANGE YOUR TIRE IN TWELVE EASY STEPS.

First, find a stable and safe place to work. The middle of a jungle on a deserted road was as good of a place as any.

Second, make sure the car cannot roll. Put the parking brake on, and place a block behind the wheels. Zellia pulled up the parking brake before rummaging around in the back, looking for something to place behind the wheels.

“A small log would work. You might find one in the bushes.”

How did he know what I was looking for?

She gave him her sarcastic smile and headed for the side of the road.

“Watch out for snakes,” he called.

“Shut up,” she called back.

She found a small branch and placed it behind the back tire.

“Honey, I think that goes in front of the wheel, since the car is pointed downhill.”

She flushed. "That's not what the manual says."

He shrugged. "It would be a lot simpler to borrow a vehicle."

She threw her hands up. "Do you see one to borrow out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"No, but I'm sure one will come along eventually that we can borrow."

"I'm not stealing a car!"

She went back to her manual.

Third, remove the spare tire and jack. She skimmed over the part about where to place the jack, and something about a frame.

She found the jack and wondered how a little thing such as this could lift a big ole jeep. Luckily for her, the spare tire was hanging on the rear door. Except those darn lug nuts held it in place.

She grabbed the manual.

To remove the spare tire from the carrier, remove the tire cover, if equipped, and remove the lug nuts with the lug wrench, turning them counterclockwise. If equipped with an anti-theft lug nut (A), use the "Key" (B) and the lug wrench. The "Key" is stored in the glove box.

She dragged her hand down her face and spun on Blade, her lower lip quivering. "Just one kiss."

He nodded. "Just one long, slow kiss, when I want it, and your mouth has to open to mine."

"That shouldn't be a problem, because I'm going to start screaming now and never stop."

Zellia stood in the hot sun and watched him change the tire without even looking at the blasted manual. Why were men born to work with cars as if it were second nature? If she weren't a doctor, she would think that they had a neural implant of some sort.

Of course, he'd taken his shirt off before he started slaving over that tire. His muscles rippled under that tanned skin every time he moved, and sweat glistened in the sun and made him look like a male model. She was getting hot and bothered, and it was not from the jungle heat.

"There," he said, slapping the sand and dirt from his pants. "That didn't take long, did it? And that's a lot easier than changing a tire on a Black Hawk."

"A helicopter? You've changed a flat tire on a helicopter?"

"Well, it wasn't flat, but it needed changing anyway."

He grinned as he washed his hands in some of the water that he'd packed yesterday. She wasn't cut out for traipsing around the countryside, trying to find a lab that may or may not still be there. But he thought of everything. Like water.

He donned his shirt, and she purposely looked at anything but him. He slid into the driver's seat and waited for her. When she'd buckled in, he floored the jeep.

"You going to tell me why you drugged me and left me back in the hotel?"

"Yes, I'll tell you again. I don't want you here. You're going to get yourself killed over something that has nothing to do with you."

"It's my choice, and I'm pretty hard to kill. I've been told so."

She glanced at him. "I'm sure someone pumped your head full of...crap like that. Besides, you don't have your handy-dandy heart-lung machine in your backpack to sustain your life."

"I never said it was a heart-lung machine."

"No? Well, it's got to be something like that."

He grinned at her. "We'll see."

The jeep lurched over a pothole. "You know, I'll have to punish you for drugging me, and you won't get off lightly."

She glared at him. "I believe it's called rape."

"No, honey, you remember it from last night. When your body's on fire, and you need me to put out the flame, it's called desire."

Her eyes closed as she remembered how he'd made her feel. He was warm and hard. Heat pooled in her panties, and her eyes flew open. "Oh, shut up," she said.

Chapter Ten

Blade opened his pack and pulled out his sat phone. He'd already had his shower, and Zellia was taking hers now. One day he was going to join her in there, but not tonight.

He punched in the number.

"Hey, Blade. What's shaking? How's that sweet little Zellia doing?" asked Rat.

"Shut the fuck up, Rat, or I'll have to kill you *and* cut your pay."

"Ooohh. This must be serious," said Rat.

"It is, and don't you forget it."

"I got it, brother. Now what can I do for you? You never call me just to talk. You always want something. You make me feel used." Rat's voice had taken on that pouting-female tone.

Blade rolled his eyes. Rat was good at playing parts. One time, he'd dressed up as an Iraqi woman and gathered intel at the wash hole.

"I am going to use you," said Blade. "I want you to use those computer skills that I pay you so highly for and find out all you can about Zellia Calderon's dad. Zellia and her dad went to Harvard Medical, and I'm sure you can hack into little old Harvard and any other site like you do the DOD and locate her dad." Blade knew that if the Department of Defense couldn't keep Rat out of their systems, then Harvard would be a pushover.

"Anything you want me to do with him when I find him?"

"Sit on him."

"Roger that."

“Now, how's my precious little Sarita?” Blade asked.

“She's doing great, but that damn goat has got to go!”

* * *

Zellia stepped from the shower, her body a bundle of raw nerves. One kiss wouldn't be so bad, but what about the punishment for sedating him? It was wrong of her to sedate him—she knew that—but he'd never understand that it was for his own good. She had no idea what she'd find at the lab, but she knew the type of people who ran the lab, and they wouldn't appreciate her just showing up on their doorstep, much less with someone like Blade in tow.

She put on a shirt and panties but left her pants and bra off. A couple of things less to remove for the punishment.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. He was reclining on the bed, naked.

“I just spoke to Rat. Rat says that Sarita is doing fine, but you need to come home and change diapers.”

A slow smile filled her face. “I'm glad you got her out of the country.”

He smiled back. “Yeah, me too. And according to Rat, Gertrude has only eaten a couple thousand dollars worth of highly sensitive and extremely technical equipment.”

“I hear they'll eat anything and everything.” She glanced at the window, the door, and the tacky picture over the chest of drawers. Her eyes flitted from his penis to everything else around the room and then back to his penis, where she watched it slowly rise.

“You look like the lamb going to the sacrificial altar, sugar.”

“Aren't I?”

“Nah.”

He scooted to the edge of bed and draped his massive legs over the side. “Come here.”

She meekly stepped before him, and he pulled her between his legs, his cock settling at the apex of her thighs.

Zellia searched his beautiful face. She saw no malice in his eyes, only gentleness and passion. He cupped her face with both hands and ran his thumb over her lips.

“You're so beautiful,” he said.

She should deny it, but she couldn't. For once, she wanted to be beautiful enough for him.

He angled his head and drifted toward her, his eyes never leaving hers. Chills raced across her body when he lightly brushed her lips with his. He nipped gently at her lower lip before his tongue slipped into her eager mouth. His tongue dueled slowly with hers, not rushing, just deliberate thrusts. When his mouth captured her tongue and sucked, warmth radiated from her womb.

He was right. She'd never been kissed like this, and she whimpered when he pulled away.

“Get in the bed. You need sleep.”

Her eyes popped open, searching his. Did she do something wrong? “What about my other punishment?”

“That will have to wait until we get back stateside. I have plans for you, plans you may not like, but I'm going to find out anyway.”

Her eyes widened. “What...kind of plans?”

A smile played around his lips. “I plan on taking you sexually where you've never been taken before. I have toys, lots of toys, just for your pleasure.”

“And your pleasure?”

“I have toys for me too.”

She touched the base of his cock, feathering her fingers over the red indentations. “Did one of your toys do that to you?”

“Yes. I have several cock rings. My favorite one has spikes on it. It bites into my cock, and the more I swell, the more it bites.”

“You like...pain?”

He nodded. “Does that scare you?”

“A little bit.”

“Don't worry. I will never, ever hurt you. The worst pain that I'll give you is a spanking and the bite of a butt plug.”

Her sex quivered. Why did his words always paint an image in her head that was so real?

“I have some ass toys that will make you scream with pleasure.”

The thought of something wicked placed in her anus caused her womb to clench, and she closed her eyes as a shot of desire jolted her.

He pulled the covers back for her. “We need to go to bed. Unless *you* want to jump *my* bones?”

He was doing this on purpose. Getting her all worked up from the kiss and planting wicked thoughts in her mind, then leaving her sexually frustrated. She wanted to kill him.

Her sex was throbbing, weeping for his touch, and she needed him.

* * *

Blade could smell her arousal, and it spiked when he talked about the butt plug. He had a small one that would work nicely on her.

He arched a questioning brow. “What can I do for you, Zellia?”

“I want to be...punished.”

His beast soared at her words. He searched her face. She was wary but aroused. She wanted him, and she was willing to step out of her comfort zone. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“My rules?”

“Has there ever been anything but your rules?”

“It's a yes or no answer...slave.”

“Your rules.”

“Master,” he said.

“Your rules, Master.”

He wanted her for a slave, not to demean her, but to control her enough so that she'd allow him to pleasure her beyond her wildest dreams. “Kneel before me, slave.”

Her brow quirked, but she did as he said.

“Now, wrap your hand around my cock, and while you're giving me head, take those fingernails of yours and dig them into my rod.”

He saw the hesitation on her face. He'd bet that she'd never given head before. That was okay; he wouldn't come in her mouth, and he'd try not to gag her.

She wrapped her hand around his cock, but when her warm, lush lips closed over his purple head, it was all he could do not to shove himself to the back of her throat. She swirled her tongue under the head, making his cock lengthen.

Her head bobbed and her cheeks hollowed as she took more of him into her mouth. Damn, that felt so good. Her nails bit into his swollen flesh.

“You're a very talented slave. I think I will keep you.”

He wanted to capture her head and ram into her as far as possible, but he knew she wasn't ready for that.

“Take your other fingers and put them in your pussy.”

Her eyes rounded as she searched his face. He watched her hand travel down her belly, and he knew when she entered her warm pussy, because she whimpered against his shaft, and her arousal flooded the room.

The wolf was pacing against the cell of a man, waiting to escape and take what nature had deemed as his. He forced his beast down. She would be his, but only when the time was right.

“Put two fingers in your pussy,” he commanded.

Her breath hitched.

“Stretch it for me. Get it ready for me.”

The pumping of her hand on his cock matched the pumping in her pussy.

“I order you to take one of those slick, wet fingers and push it into your ass.”

He watched her eyes fly open with fear as she frantically searched his face.

“Do it. And keep pumping and sucking.”

She returned slowly to administering to his needs, and he knew the minute she slipped past her tight ring. A shiver rolled through her, and she lowered her eyes.

“Now, fuck your ass for me. Stretch it, because we're getting ready to put it to good use.”

* * *

Zellia squirmed against the feeling of her finger in her butt. God, it felt so wicked, so foreign. She imagined him doing this to her, making her body sizzle.

She sucked harder. He groaned, and she felt her ring clench around her finger.

“Enough,” he said. “Keep your finger in your ass and get on the bed, on your knees, face down, ass in the air.”

She stood and did what he asked as embarrassment and heat flooded her body. For some reason, Blade's authoritative manner excited her. He was in control of both of their pleasures, taking her places that she'd sexually never dared to go.

He bent and kissed the round cheeks of her lush ass. “You've got a beautiful ass, slave. Now I'm going to show you pure ecstasy. Remove your finger.”

She did and immediately felt something sticky on her anus, and then he plunged one finger in.

“It burns a little, doesn't it? You're so tight here. One day, I'm going to put my cock right here.”

His finger moved in and out of her, creating wonderful sensations. She moaned when he pulled his finger out.

“Get ready, honey. You're going for something bigger.”

She felt something cold and hard against her anus, and she flinched.

“Relax. I won't hurt you, slave.”

She forced herself to relax for the invasion.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“It's my KA-BAR knife handle. It's bigger than my finger.”

She whimpered when the metal butt of the knife slipped past her ring. He kept pushing. The indentions on the handle scraped across her flesh, sending wonderful sensations along her core.

He pulled it almost all the way out and applied more lube. Then he pushed it all the way to the hilt.

“Tell me what it feels like, slave.”

She swallowed hard. “It's cold but slick,” she managed to say.

“I see that cool black metal sliding in and out of your ass, and my hands are mimicking the movement around my cock. I wish it were my cock in you.”

She moaned as cool metal scraped sensitized skin, sending electric fire racing though her body. Her hands fisted in the covers as a whimper escaped her lips.

Blade quickly donned a condom and slicked himself up. Then he removed his knife from her sweet hole.

“Take your hand and work your clit.”

He forced himself into her tight pussy, practically lifting her off the bed.

She cried out at the wonderfully slick slide, stretching her to the point of pain. Then he shoved two fingers into her butt as he pumped into her pussy.

The sensations were too much, too foreign. Her whole body contracted as she exploded into a million pieces. Lightning whipped through her as Blade grabbed her hips and pounded his release. A piercing growl split the air, and she shivered.

She collapsed, and he collapsed with her, his warm body covering hers, their breathing ragged, their bodies satisfied. She wondered about that growling thing. It sounded wild, unnatural, almost predatory.

He brushed her hair from her face and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. "I'm tired of fucking you in seedy-ass hotels. I want you tied to my bed and lying in my satin sheets, where I can take you so much higher."

She might want that; she couldn't really think at this point in time. Besides, whom was she kidding? She'd never be in his life for long. His was intense and self-confident. Everything she wasn't, nor ever would be, but she knew she would take what she could get and hoped her heart could take him walking away.

* * *

There was so much smoke; she couldn't breathe. Her lungs burned, and tears rolled down her face. She stumbled and fell, charred remains biting into her palms.

She had to keep moving. She couldn't stop. And then she saw it. All the buildings were gone, burned to the ground, and bodies lay about the compound. There was nothing left but smoke, ashes, and the smell of death.

Noooooo!

"It's okay, Zellia. It was a bad dream."

Her eyes snapped open as she sucked in a ragged breath.

"Just breathe. You're okay."

Her eyes focused on his, and she shook her head. "It's not okay. It's just not."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about my dream. It's not okay." She shivered. "It never is."

Chapter Eleven

A light rain was falling, but she didn't care. She had to get to the lab, hoping against all odds that she wasn't too late. The dream was etched in her soul for all eternity.

"You've been antsy ever since this morning. You want to tell me why?"

Zellia glanced at him and shook her head. She stepped on the accelerator.

"And you're driving like we're going to a fire. You're gonna get us killed."

We are going to a fire.

"You want me to stop and let you out?" she quipped.

"No. I want you to stop and let me drive."

"No."

"Okay. Don't forget to say that prayer over my dead body."

A smile touched her lips. "I won't."

She rounded another curve and slammed on the brakes. Soldiers blocked the road; several searched a truck about fifty yards up, slinging items from the back.

"I hope you have papers," she said.

"You mean like a pedigree."

"No, you idiot. Passport or something. You're not from here, and Dante's soldiers don't like foreigners."

"You know a lot about Dante's soldiers."

"They're part of the reason that the drug trade is so prosperous here. They were in and out of Manuel's all the time."

"Maybe that's why they're looking for you, honey."

She glanced sideways at him. "Me? How do you know that?"

He hesitated. "I can read lips."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head in disbelief.

"Now why is the government looking for such a sweet little thing like you?"

"I don't know, but we're getting ready to find out."

They watched the soldiers roughly pat down the truck driver before they let him climb back into the truck, his merchandise still scattered in the road.

"I can always tell who the government soldiers are," she said. "They are the most arrogant, conceited men I know. Except for you, of course."

"There's one difference between me and them, honey. I'm good at what I do."

She snorted as a soldier approached the jeep.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Blade.

"Are you psychic too?"

"No. I just know what danger looks like, feels like, and smells like, and you're in danger."

"Oh, puh-lease. Everything's a threat in your book."

"If this shit goes bad, do exactly as I say. You can't argue; just do what I say. This is my job, and I'm damn well good at it."

She grunted.

The soldier stopped and held up a picture beside her face, and she flinched.

"Are you Zellia Calderon?"

"I am. What is this about?"

The soldier totally ignored her. "And who are you?" the soldier asked Blade, his Spanish rapid-fire.

"I'm just a hitchhiker along for the ride."

The man in charge made a motion, and the other four soldiers surrounded the jeep, guns drawn.

"You will come with me," he said to Zellia.

"No, I will not. Not until you give me an explanation."

"I don't give explanations." The man smiled, and Zellia instantly thought of a snake.

The man grabbed Zellia's arm and pulled her. She slapped at him, but the man grabbed both of her wrists and pulled again. Blade reached over and unbuckled her seat belt. She turned and glared at Blade.

He shrugged his shoulders.

She scraped her shin on the way out and stumbled against the man.

"Let go of me, you brute."

The man ignored her demand, grabbed her arm, and dragged her toward a military vehicle.

"What about him?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Kill him."

"No!" cried Zellia.

She turned and tried to pull free, but his fingers bit into her upper arm.

"Just go with him, Zellia. Do as I say. I'll be fine," said Blade.

Fine? How could Blade even say that? There was nothing *fine* about this situation.

"If fine is the same thing as dead, then yes, you will be fine," said the man dragging Zellia as he turned to look at Blade.

The soldiers laughed.

"What's your name?" Blade called out to him.

"Captain Ortiz."

"I'm coming to get you, Ortiz, and you are going to die."

The captain's eyes locked with Blade's across the distance.

Zellia felt a chill race up her spine. She'd caught a glimpse of Blade's eyes, and like she'd seen before, they held the promise of death. He'd done it again. He'd gone into that killer-mode thingy he seemed to do so well. The temperature seemed to drop as Blade eyed the captain.

"Come and get me," the captain said before he shoved Zellia into the passenger's seat.

The captain handcuffed her to a bar on the dashboard. He slid into the driver's seat, turned to her, and smiled.

"Your capture will catapult my career to the top."

Fear lodged in her throat, and her heart thumped against her ribs. She didn't even get to say a prayer over Blade's dead body. She'd gotten him killed, just like she'd told him she would. Zellia didn't care if they killed her, but she didn't want Blade killed. She should have tied him to the bed when she sedated him. Then he'd be safe.

"Why do you have to kill my innocent...hitchhiker?" she spat out.

"Orders."

She blinked. "You have orders to kill an innocent man?"

"Of course. That's a standing order at my discretion."

"Just tell me what this is about, and maybe I can congratulate you."

The vehicle lurched forward, and she craned her neck to catch a glimpse of Blade, but she couldn't see him. Her lower lip quivered. She would not cry in front of this monster.

"You know what this is about," the man said.

"No, I do not. I've never had any dealings with the military." *Other than to silently curse them every day.*

"Well, I'm not at liberty to discuss military operations with you."

"Well, that's convenient."

"Too bad my orders weren't to kill you. You and I could have had a little fun."

His meaning was clear, too clear to Zellia. "That's what I despise about my country. The people in power are all corrupt."

This man reminded her of her father: belligerent and disrespectful of women. He even had the unibrow just like her father. And people like Ortiz and her dad were always in control. Her dad had ordered her mother around like she was a dog, and once, Zellia actually saw her dad strike her mother just because her mother hadn't passed on a message to him. God only knew what her dad had done when she went off to college. She blinked to clear the past from her mind.

She prayed that Blade was as good of a killer as he claimed to be, because he was going to need it. Zellia closed her eyes, leaned her head back on the seat, and said her prayer for Blade. A tear slipped down her face as she realized that she'd never see him again. Never experience his wit or that slow, easy, sinful smile. Never have him hold her in those safe arms of his. Several tears splashed on her shirt as the pain clamped down on her heart.

* * *

Captain Ortiz was going to die.

Blade got out of the jeep. He was already in killer mode, his senses heightened, his vision clear, his purpose deadly. He wanted to kill these four slowly, but he had to get to Zellia.

Without warning, he dived into the jungle, peeling off his clothes and weapons before shifting. The jungle wildlife erupted into a panicked chatter as several bullets whizzed by him.

His bones cracked and contorted, fur replaced tanned skin, and his fangs elongated. God, but he felt good. The wolf maneuvered through the jungle with ease. He heard their shouts. They were spreading out. His wolf smiled. Just what he wanted. He circled back and to the left and waited in the thick foliage. The thrill of the hunt was all-consuming. His nostrils flared as his first victim came into view. The vision of Zellia's frightened face fueled his beast's rage. There would be no remorse for these kills.

Blade heard booted feet thirty yards ahead. He waited. He watched. When the man stepped within five feet, the wolf lunged, striking the man in the chest. Fangs latched onto the soldier's throat. The beast ripped, tearing flesh. The man only gurgled.

He stalked them all the same, not really taking the time to enjoy the hunt or the kill. His mate was in danger.

When the four were down and left for the jungle to claim, he shifted, gathered his clothes and weapons, redressed, and climbed into the jeep. Zellia's fear was strong and easy to follow.

Blade picked up his sat phone and called Rat.

"Yes?"

"Pull the satellite coordinates from this sat phone and tell me what's west of here."

Blade heard the clicking of a keyboard as fingers flew.

"There's a little village about an hour away, but the satellite also shows a high concentration of vehicles due west of that village another two hours. Who are we tracking?"

"Dante's military has Zellia."

"Shit. How far behind her are you?"

"Maybe thirty minutes."

"Well, if you're lucky, maybe some of Gertrude's relatives are running loose on the road. Hell, I'll be glad to bring Gertrude back over there and throw her in the road for you."

Blade laughed. Leave it up to Rat to cut the tension with humor. "Before you do that, let me see if I can handle this myself."

"Roger that."

Blade signed off. He drove like a madman, skirting people and livestock along the way. Captain Ortiz probably wasn't driving like a madman, because he had no reason to think that anyone was hunting him.

After an hour of terrorizing the natives and their livestock—the livestock down here always seemed to take up the most of the road—he found the captain's vehicle pulled off to the side. He slid up beside the military jeep, slammed on the brakes, and pointed his gun at the driver's door. Empty.

Of course, it couldn't be that easy.

Blade turned the jeep around and stashed it a hundred yards up the road, completely out of sight. He got out, pulled his weapon, and eased into the jungle, making his way back toward Ortiz's jeep. His nose told him that Zellia was in the jungle on foot, and Ortiz was right behind her.

He grinned. He couldn't wait to hear how she'd escaped.

After stashing his clothes and weapons under a nearby log, Blade shifted. His wolf stretched before he lifted his nose to the air. They were at most ten minutes ahead of him.

He moved through the jungle on silent feet, checking each palm frond and bush for the brush of her scent. Wolf eyes never missed a broken branch or a muddy footprint. He followed them deeper into the jungle.

His wolf also had a keen sense of smell. He sniffed. Her scent was stronger. He was close now. Suddenly he heard the pounding of petite feet moving through the dense undergrowth and the muffled curses of that damned Ortiz.

* * *

Zellia stumbled and fell, her palms scraping against broken sticks and causing her to wince at the pain. She struggled to her feet and pushed forward through the foliage. A spider monkey screamed, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. She could hear Ortiz behind her, calling her name, threatening her with death.

She didn't care. She would not be treated as a common criminal by a self-proclaimed power nut.

Her body struggled to suck in the saturated air, her lungs burning with each step. The scrapes and cuts on her arms and legs burned when the dense, wet foliage slapped against them.

Her leg throbbed like the devil. She had no choice but to stop and lean against a tree to rest, knowing she shouldn't, hoping she was at least five minutes ahead of him. She pushed her grimy glasses up her nose. She needed to rest for two minutes, just two. Cripples weren't supposed to be running for their lives in the jungle. Her chest heaved as she tried to control her breathing, and her body shook from the adrenaline that raged through her. She hated the adrenaline rush. It made her feel so out of control.

The chatter of spider monkeys startled her just as Ortiz's wrapped his around her throat and pinned her to the tree. He squeezed harder, and she brought her hands up to strike at his face. She couldn't reach his face, so she slapped at his arms.

"How does it feel to die?" Ortiz asked.

She grabbed his arm and tried to pull him loose.

Zellia closed her eyes as her vision narrowed, blackness creeping into her brain. She was going to die. It was inevitable. Nothing could save her now.

A growl vibrated through the thick air, followed by a rousing jungle chorus. She opened her eyes in time to see a black beast knock Ortiz to the ground. Zellia's legs buckled, and she slid down the tree. Her hand went to her throat, and she coughed to get some air in her lungs.

A wolf circled Ortiz. Zellia saw the fear etched on Ortiz's face as he fumbled to get his weapon out of the holster.

The wolf bounded on him and latched onto Ortiz's wrist. The sound of bones breaking split the air along with Ortiz's howl of pain, and Zellia's belly lurched.

The wolf circled his prey, blood dripping from his fangs. The wolf lurched again, teeth clamping down on a right ankle and giving it a twist.

Zellia was mesmerized. The wolf was methodically torturing her captor. She blinked. But that couldn't be true. Wolves were hunters, always going immediately for the kill. And there weren't any wolves in South America. The only thing they had that resembled a wolf was a Maned Wolf, which looked more like a fox but really wasn't a fox or a wolf.

This...animal...was definitely a wolf. A big, black, male wolf. She watched in mortified fascination as the wolf kept attacking Captain Ortiz. The wolf moved, and Zellia's eyes widened.

Ortiz tried to stand, and the huge wolf put himself between Ortiz and Zellia, teeth bared, snarling. Ortiz made it to one knee when the wolf jumped, hitting Ortiz in the chest as its fangs crushed his windpipe. Leaving the man on the ground, the wolf stepped back and turned to face Zellia.

Zellia swallowed the bile in her throat as she pushed to her feet and fled. She was not going to be the next meal for the wolf without making it work for it. She stumbled over roots as plants slapped her in the face. She glanced over her shoulder, but she didn't see the beast. Her mind was in a whirl when she finally stumbled into a clearing with a deep ravine on one side and two rock walls on the other two. She turned to escape the way she'd come, but the wolf was right behind her.

She picked up a stick and retreated until her back was flat against the rock wall. She was going to get at least one jab into him before he took her down. She pushed her glasses up on her nose, so dirty she could barely see out of them, and held the stick in front of her, jabbing at him.

The wolf sat down. Zellia frowned. Staring at the wolf's eyes, she noted their unique yellow color. She tried to think; she'd seen that color somewhere before.

She watched him, waiting for any aggressive movements. He'd better make his move soon; her leg was getting ready to buckle, and she wanted at least one swipe at him.

The wolf shocked her when he lay down and rolled onto his back, like he wanted to play.

Insane. She was going insane. Hallucinating to the point that a wolf was acting like a dog.

Her leg collapsed, and she sank to the ground, but she kept her stick up just in case. The wolf rolled and was instantly on his feet, staring at her with glowing eyes.

"Okay, wolf. You win. I'm too tired to fight you. Come on and get me. At least let me poke this stick in you one time before you eat me. That would make me feel better."

The wolf slouched down on all fours and crawled toward her.

What is it doing now?

When he came within reach of her stick, he stopped. She slowly took the stick and tapped him on the head. He flinched like she was reprimanding him.

"You know, this would go faster if you'd attack me and get it over with. My heart's rattling around in my rib cage, and I can't catch my breath."

The wolf rolled over onto its back again and flailed like a dog. Then he stood and sat down in front of her, her stick poking in its chest.

"I know this is insane, but I can't attack you first, and I don't even know why."

She let the stick drop, and then, to attest to her total insanity, Zellia slowly reached out to touch him. Yeah. That's where the teeth were. She touched his snout, and the wolf rolled his head into her palm, much like she'd seen lovers do on TV.

He was soft and warm. Her hands traveled his neck, and her fingers twined into his fur. It was soft too. "You're beautiful, but you already know that, don't you? Deadly too. Thanks for saving my life and...not taking it right now."

Her eyelids drooped as she stretched her legs out to the side. "I'm tired, and I'm going to take a nap. I hope that I'll wake up with my sanity and know exactly how to get out of this jungle. If you're going to kill me, make it quick. I don't want to suffer."

The wolf cocked his head when she spoke to him, as if he knew every word she was saying. She leaned her head against the rock and closed her eyes. She jumped when the wolf laid his head in her lap.

She was officially crazy.

* * *

Blade enjoyed her fingers stroking his fur. What a woman. His woman. She was going to fight him off with a stick. That took guts. He expected nothing less. He knew there was blood on his chest, but she didn't seem to mind. One day, he needed to teach her how to protect herself. A stick in the eye or carotid artery would provide her time to escape.

The sun had set when her breathing finally indicated that she was in deep sleep.

He shifted to his naked self, picked her up like a child, and made his way back to the road. She needed water first and then medical attention. His heart contracted as he took in her pale, drawn face. She was exhausted. And he hated that he was going to have to lie to her about her rescue.

* * *

Zellia woke to water pouring down her throat.

She coughed and sputtered. "Are you trying to drown me?"

"No, just rehydrate you."

Her eyes flew to Blade's, and she grabbed and hugged him. "You're alive? How did you escape? No, don't answer that, I don't want to know, even though I probably know that you killed them, but don't say it." She stopped. She knew she was rambling.

“Drink,” he ordered as he shoved the canteen to her lips.

“I've missed your bossiness,” she said.

His lips quirked. “Just drink.”

She took the canteen and swallowed two large gulps. “Thanks. That's the best water I've ever tasted.”

She frowned as she took in her surroundings. “What happened? How did you find me?”

He took the canteen and gulped a swallow himself. “I found Ortiz's vehicle beside the road and tracked you and him into the jungle. I found him first. Looked like a wild animal got him. I kept tracking and found you asleep. I picked you up and brought you back here. Now I need to tend to your wounds.”

She hesitated. “Is that the only thing you saw?”

“Yes.”

“You didn't see a big black wolf?”

“Nope.” He opened the medical kit and laid out the supplies.

“The wolf killed Ortiz.”

“That's a good thing, but how did you escape?”

“You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

“Go ahead, give it a whirl.”

She shook her head. “I don't even believe it. But my gosh, the wolf was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. He was huge, powerful, and his fur was so soft.”

“He let you touch him?”

“Yeah. He even laid his head in my lap.”

Blade hitched his eyebrows.

“I know you don't believe me. I wouldn't believe me either. Ow!”

“Sorry,” Blade said as he dabbed alcohol on her cuts and scrapes. “Now you know how your patients feel.”

“Well, I at least tell them that it's going to hurt. You know, give them a warning.”

“Sorry. I was more interested in your interaction with the wolf. I didn't know there were any on this continent.”

“Me either.”

He finished dabbing her wounds. “I'm just glad you're safe. It's late, and you're tired. I don't know how far the next town is, so we'll sleep in the jeep tonight.”

“I don't know. It may not be safe. That wolf may come back.”

He lifted an eyebrow, and she glared at him.

“Not safe for you physically and me mentally.”

The look he gave her was skeptical.

“Fine,” she said. “I don't know how much sleep I'd get anyway. My leg's throbbing.”

He fumbled in his survival pack and retrieved an ibuprofen. “Take this. It will help with the pain and inflammation.”

“Thanks. I think I will.”

“And don't worry about the wolf. I'm sure he's long gone.”

But that's just it. I want to see him again.

Chapter Twelve

Fear gripped her as the jeep climbed higher. She had seen the remnants of smoke in the distance, hoping against all hope that it was a heavy mist. *Please, let my vision be wrong this time.*

Blade pulled the jeep into the smoldering compound. Bodies lay like garbage around the dirt yard. Zellia rubbed her forehead.

"I take it that this is what we've been looking for?" asked Blade.

She nodded, afraid her voice would crack if she spoke.

"You stay in the jeep, and I'll see if I can find any survivors."

She unbuckled her belt and stepped out.

He pinned her with his gaze. "Didn't I just tell you to stay in the jeep?"

"Yes, but there might be a survivor or two, and I need to questio—help."

"Well then, stay behind me." Blade pulled his SIG from the holster.

"Yes, sir," she said as she eyed his gun.

Her nose wrinkled at the smell of death. This was violent death, not the easing from this life into the next. Agony and terror still hung in the air.

She let Blade check the bodies. He seemed detached as he moved from one body to the next; she, on the other hand, felt the horror pressing the breath from her lungs. She prayed that at least one body wasn't here, but how could that be? There was so much destruction!

Blade rolled an elderly man over and felt for a pulse. "This one's alive."

Zellia hurried over and squatted beside the man. An ugly gash slashed across his chest, and he was bleeding from his mouth. She examined the wound and

listened to his chest with her stethoscope. She lifted her eyes to Blade and shook her head.

“Can you tell me what happened here?” she asked in Spanish.

The old man's eyes fluttered open, and he coughed, trying to clear the blood from his lungs.

She leaned close to his mouth. “Men...from the sky...butchered everyone.”

“Where's the little girl?”

The man shook his head. “Don't...know.”

“Can you give us any names that might help us find whoever did this to you?” asked Blade.

The man shook his head again as pain washed across his pale, weathered face.

Zellia brushed a hand across the old man's forehead. “I'm sorry,” she said to the man.

“So...am...I,” he said.

As the last breath left the man's body, Zellia closed his eyes and made the sign of the cross as she said a silent prayer.

“Zellia, we need to go. It's not safe to stay.”

“I can't. I need to search the rubble.”

He pulled her to her feet and searched her face. “And what are we looking for?”

“A sign.” She pulled out of his hands, spun, and walked toward the smoldering rubble, not giving him a chance to ask her anymore. The lab, or what was left of it, looked like it had been two stories, which would only make it harder to find any information.

She felt Blade beside her. “What does this sign look like?” Blade asked.

“A piece of paper.” *A small body.*

“Will any piece of paper do, or does it have to have specific information on it?”

"By the looks of this place, any piece of paper will do," she said as she stepped into the rubble.

They searched for twenty minutes but only found a few pieces that they could actually read. None of them yielded the information she was seeking. She hoped against hope, but there was nothing here but burned remains of the lab.

* * *

Blade managed to maneuver Zellia to the jeep. Her emotional pain was deep, and it made him wonder what really was going on.

She slid onto the seat and leaned her head back on the headrest, her face streaked with soot and tears.

"I have resources, Zellia. I can find and punish the bastards who did this. I can find whatever you're looking for."

She didn't open her eyes. He stared at her as he listened to the quietness of the area, which had probably been full of life only hours earlier. He heard each beat of her heart, each breath she took.

"You don't trust me," he finally said.

She didn't open her eyes, just swallowed hard. "I don't trust anyone. It's a habit that I've learned over the years. If you rely solely on yourself, then you're not disappointed when other people let you down."

"That's pretty cynical."

"Unfortunately, it's always been true for me."

"Tell me who would blow up a lab and kill all the scientists and innocent people. Is it bioweapons? Is that what was going on here?"

She shook her head.

"Let me help you. What are you looking for?"

Zellia opened her eyes and fixed them on Blade.

"My daughter."

Chapter Thirteen

Zellia's daughter? A thousand questions rolled through his mind, and the most frightening one was...who was the father? And why wasn't her daughter with Zellia, instead of stuck out in the middle of the damn jungle?

Blade's brain finally kicked into overdrive, and he cupped her face. "Let's find your daughter."

He retrieved his pack, opened it, pulled out the sat phone, and called Rat back in Miami.

"Hey, Blade," said Rat. "You find Zellia?"

Blade glanced at Zellia. "Yeah, she's fine. Use those satellites you borrow all the time and find two or more choppers that left these coordinates, in, say"—Blade glanced around—"the last twelve hours."

He handed Zellia the canteen and stared at her until she drank. His eyes roamed the devastation. Most of the bodies were men to do the work, whatever the hell that was. He didn't see any buildings that looked like housing, so he figured the men came from the village they passed a while back. When these men didn't come home tonight, their families would come looking for them, and he and Zellia needed to be long gone.

"I have two bogies leaving your coordinates at 1408 hours. One appears to be a troop carrier."

"That would explain the destruction."

"Let's see where they're going," said Rat. "Now fast-forward through time. Change bearing, change bearing again." After a few seconds, Rat said, "They're at the airport."

"Can you get me a tight shot of that bird?"

"I'll pretend you didn't say that."

Blade was amazed at what Rat could do with a computer. There wasn't anything he couldn't hack into, no information that he couldn't get, not a person he couldn't find.

"I've got satellite image coming up in three, two, one. Zooming in. I see four people getting off the chopper and getting on the plane. I'll pull airport security and see if I can get enough for a face recon."

"I want to know where that plane lands. And when it lands, I want to know where the people are going. If they land in the US, call Hayden. He has DEA resources in every city. I'll call you back in an hour. I'll try to find a place for an extraction. Get the birds in the air."

Hayden and his Drug Enforcement Agency would be all over a plane originating in Colombia and landing on US soil.

"You like to live dangerously, don't you?"

"It's time to head home. I've seen enough of the jungle to last me a lifetime."

"Roger that. We'll be wheels up in an hour. Pick up in six, which would make it a night extraction. You got enough flares?"

"Of course." Blade closed the phone and put it in his pack. He turned to find Zellia staring at him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm a mercenary for hire. I have many resources at my disposal, and I'll do whatever it takes to find your daughter."

She wrapped her arms around her middle and frowned. "You're a hired killer?"

He shook his head. "No. Mercenary means soldier for hire. I run a legitimate business. I don't take on those dickheads that want to assassinate someone so they can take over a country. I do kill when necessary, like when my team rescued

Victoria, or when we rescued a seventeen-year-old missionary six months ago in Somalia. Yeah, I killed those bastards.”

Before she could say anything more, he said, “We’ve got eight or so hours before our ride gets here.”

“I’m not sure I can leave,” she whispered.

Blade froze on the spot. He never considered that she wouldn’t go with him. “Just come with me for now, and when you decide you want to come back, I’ll bring you back.”

“I’ve got to find my daughter. Maybe I have the wrong lab. Maybe she was moved to another lab before we got here...”

“You can’t stay here. Did you forget that someone’s trying to kill you?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I haven’t forgotten, but I don’t really care.”

Blade gripped her arms and pulled her roughly to him. “*I care.*”

He knew she wasn’t thinking clearly. “The best chance we’ve got to find your daughter is with those choppers that left here. If there’s another lab, we’ll find it. Whatever it takes. Let’s just get out of this damn jungle and away from these people who are trying to kill you, and I promise, I’ll find your daughter. I’ll find the people who are after you. When I take care of all of that, you can come back here if you want to. Deal?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Then lean on me. Let me take care of you until you know.”

She nodded slowly, her weariness assaulting his beast. He held her close and cradled her head against his chest. If only he’d known about Zellia’s daughter, he could have had Rat run a team in and pick her up. If only she had trusted him.

“I’ve got to scout the area and see if I can find a LZ, landing zone, and you can’t go with me.”

She eased away from him. “Good. Because I didn’t want to go anyway,” she managed to say.

"I'll find her. I promise." He caught and held her gaze. "You've got to trust me."

* * *

She searched his face. She saw honesty and goodness. Compassion and gentleness. He was no killer. "I do trust you, but I understand if you can't find her. These people are very powerful. They'll kill you."

"Good. I feel like killing somebody myself."

She rolled her eyes. He took her hand and tugged her behind him until he reached the edge of the jungle. He backed her up against a tree and told her to sit. "Stay here and out of sight. I'll be back in one hour. If anyone comes, go deeper in the jungle. Do not engage anyone. I'll find you. Don't come looking for me. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I think I got it."

He pulled her pistol from his waistband, flipped the safety off, and handed it to her. "Shoot first; ask questions later."

She took the pistol. "You know I'm not going to shoot anybody."

* * *

Blade let Zellia sleep as long as he could, and he purposely avoided asking her the questions that flooded his mind.

The sat phone chattered.

"Go ahead," said Blade.

"We've got a problem. Troops are two miles from the LZ. Pickup's going to be tricky, and they'll be there about the same time as we are. You want to delay?"

"No," said Blade. "Let's do a grab-'n-go."

There was silence. "Are you sure?" asked Rat.

"Give me ten minutes to set up, and then come get us."

Blade closed the phone and fetched his survival pack. Zellia was going to kill him.

Earlier, Blade had found two trees that were less than perfect, but they were out of time, so they'd have to do. He strung a rope between the two trees and tied the two ends together. Then he tied the moneybags and the medical supplies to the rope.

"Why are we taking the money?" asked Zellia. "It's drug money."

"Dante's men are coming. I can either burn the money or take it and donate it to some charity of your choosing."

"We could use it for Sarita," she said.

"There's no need to worry about Sarita. I'll start a trust fund for her, along with a monthly allowance for you and her. No strings attached." He wasn't going to tell her that they were going to get married. That info would have to wait.

"But why would you do that?"

He dragged her to him and kissed her. "Because I can."

He tied the ends of the rope to his harness and then tied the rope around Zellia. With any luck, he'd take the brunt of the snatch.

"I'll tell you what you can do with some of the money. I'm pretty sure the people that were killed at that compound came from that village we passed."

She rolled her lip between her teeth. "Yes, they deserve it. And there are a couple of legit orphanages that will actually use the money for the kids."

"I've got connections, and I'll make sure the money gets to the right people. See how good I am at solving problems?"

She smiled a little, and that was good enough for him. He flipped the phone open and punched the Speed Dial. "We're ready. Twenty meters high." He placed the phone in his pack and hooked the pack on his shoulders.

"Listen to me, Zellia. They're going to come through with a grappling hook that's going to catch that rope between those two trees and snatch us. Then they're going to reel us in. It's not going to be fun for you, but I'm going to love the hell out of it, because I'm addicted to adrenaline." He grinned. "And you."

"You mean 'and sex."

He kissed her. "No, I mean *you*. But I'll warn you now: when this is over and you feel like it, I'm going to make love to you for three days. The only thing you can wear is nothing."

Blade removed her glasses and secured them in his backpack. Then he cupped her face and slowly kissed her, savoring her warm lips. He could kiss her forever, but reluctantly pulled away when he heard the choppers. He sensed her hesitation. He probably shouldn't be talking of sex, since she was devastated that she hadn't found her daughter, but he'd rather her get mad at him than be sucked down that black hole she was teetering on.

Blade waited a minute before he lit the wicks running to the flares. He picked her up. "Wrap your legs around me and hang on. Don't look down."

"Looking is not going to be a problem," she replied.

He watched the flame race along the wicks, and the two flares erupted just as gunfire split the night air.

He heard more gunfire and knew his choppers were returning fire.

"Hang on," he said. "We've got company."

Blade listened to the chopper engine to gauge just when the snatch would be. Blade heard the hook as it sliced through the air and caught the rope. He hugged Zellia as tightly as he could without breaking her.

The harness bit into his legs as the rope yanked them into the air. Adrenaline rushed through his system as the sensation of soaring rushed over him. He felt Zellia's heart thud against his chest, and the smell of her fear was almost too much to bear.

He looked back and saw his men launch a missile into the side of the mountain, eliminating any threat from the soldiers.

Blade saw the tree line approach and knew they weren't going to clear it; he rolled so that the treetops clipped his back and not Zellia's. Something sliced his

side, and he clenched his teeth. The force of the impact caused them to spin, whipping them like a string in the wind.

He heard the winch kick in. His fun and her terror would be over soon. Lucky for her, their dancing in the air was minimized the shorter the winch line got.

* * *

Zellia's kept her eyes closed, but that didn't alleviate the horror that threatened to suck the very life from her. The gale-force wind whipped at her face and back. She wasn't sure if her gooseflesh was from fear or the cold wind. If she had anything in her stomach to lose, the spinning would have emptied it. Time crawled, and her fear escalated.

Her body was rebelling from not finding her child and now from being frightened to death. Just when she thought that her heart was going to cease beating, the rush of the wind subsided.

"You can open your eyes now."

She cracked one eye, not trusting him. More of the noise subsided when someone closed the door.

"And as much as I love your legs wrapped around me..."

She snapped both eyes open and made a distressed sound that she didn't even recognize.

Blade lowered her until her feet hit the floor. "I'd prefer you naked when you wrap your legs around me."

Her legs collapsed, and Blade caught her, eased her down into a seat, and buckled her in. Then Blade retrieved her glasses and handed them to her. She slipped them on and glanced around the helicopter, noticing several men grinning. They had headsets on. Did they hear what Blade said?

Rat squatted before her and put on her headphones.

"Welcome aboard."

Zellia managed to smile. "Thank you, Mr. Rat. It feels good to be anywhere but hanging in midair."

"I'm sure it does, ma'am." Rat shoved a bottle of water in her hand.

"Thanks." She tried but couldn't get the cap off because her hands were still shaking.

Rat stood and waited for Blade to buckle in before he handed Blade a bottle of water as well. Blade opened his water and traded with her.

She managed to swallow the water without choking. Her throat felt thick, like it was clogged with a sock.

Zellia glanced around. Several men filled the space. They were all huge alpha types just like Blade. They avoided looking at her, and she was grateful.

Blade leaned up to take the clipboard that Rat handed him, and she saw the blood oozing from Blade's side.

"Oh my gosh, you're injured," she said.

Blade looked at her. "It's nothing."

"Don't tell me it's nothing. I'm a doctor, and in my professional opinion..."

Blade removed his headphones and hers too. He leaned into her ear. "I like pain."

Her eyes rounded and immediately flew to his penis where it strained against his pants. She felt the heat rush to her face.

"Pain sharpens the sensations."

She quickly glanced around to make sure the others weren't listening. Rat was smiling. Surely his ears weren't that good.

She rolled her eyes as she put her headphones back on, but not before she heard Blade's laughter.

"Blade." Rat's voice came through the headset. "The plane landed at Miami-Dade."

"That figures. Colombians love Miami."

"We've got people all over them."

"How's Sarita?" asked Blade.

Rat beamed like a giant spotlight. "She's just great. Cutest thing in the world. Victoria's hounding the shit out of Hayden to have a kid now."

Zellia smiled. Victoria. She really was alive.

And Sarita was alive, the child that no one wanted.

All because of Blade.

Zellia hooked her arm through Blade's and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Maybe he *could* find her daughter.

* * *

"Is it done?"

"Sir, the troops missed."

"Imbeciles. Why do I only employ imbeciles?"

"Only two survived the attack. There were two choppers, one transport, and one gunship."

"Are you telling me that one gunship took out the whole unit before you could kill her? The landing should have given them enough time."

"Sir, they never landed. They were snatched from the ground by the transport chopper."

His nostrils flared as he clenched his teeth. "I don't suppose you know who's helping her?"

"No, sir, the survivors didn't get any identifying numbers from the choppers."

Failure. He hated failure. And lately that's all he had. "Make sure those two survivors don't survive. I don't want any witnesses."

He slammed the phone shut and resisted hurling it across the room. Instead he dragged his hand through his hair. He couldn't believe it. How hard could it be to

kill one crippled bitch? And who the fuck was helping her? Someone who obviously didn't know who he was. Someone who would pay for meddling in his affairs.

In a year's time, he would be a rich man. And no one—no one—would get in the way.

Chapter Fourteen

Zellia limped beside Blade. They had landed in another compound that reminded her of Manuel's, except she was sure drugs weren't being manufactured here.

"Is this your place?" she asked.

"Yes. Welcome to my home, Miss Zellia Calderon."

She managed a weak grin. "Why thank you, Mr. Blade."

He looped his arm around her as they walked toward the house.

"This is also the headquarters of the mercenary organization."

She glanced around. "Mercenary jobs must pay well."

"Of course. The risk is high, and so is our fee."

"Is that where you got the half-a-million-dollar figure you quoted me?"

He grinned. "That was the discounted rate."

She laughed. Underneath all that bad-boy facade, Blade was such a fun-loving guy. Zellia lifted her eyes and saw someone hurrying across the lawn toward them.

"You don't recognize her?" Blade asked.

"You forget. I can't see that far."

She concentrated on the hazy figure moving toward them.

"Zellia," someone called.

"Victoria?"

Blade grinned. "Yep."

Victoria didn't stop when she reached them; she plowed right into Zellia with a big hug.

"I am so glad you're okay. Hayden and Rat wouldn't let me go with them on the rescue."

Victoria was dressed in a tank top and cargo pants just like Blade's, and Zellia couldn't keep her eyes from the slight scar on Victoria's chest. She vividly remembered the blood spurting from the main artery above Victoria's heart where Manuel had put a bullet in her.

"I'm glad you're alive," said Zellia. "And I can't wait until I find out how you're still alive, because you should be dead."

Victoria cast a hesitant glance at Blade. "Don't worry about that now. I've got something to show you two."

Victoria grabbed Zellia's hand and headed for the house with Blade close behind. Once inside, they took the stairs and stopped in front of a door. Anticipation spread through Zellia as Victoria pushed it open and pulled Zellia inside.

Zellia saw a crib on the far wall, and her heart stopped. The crib itself was a work of art, as was every other baby item in the room. Zellia slowly moved to the crib and peered over the side. Sarita was dressed in a little pink dress and was sleeping so peacefully. Tears stung Zellia's eyes.

Blade wrapped his arms around Zellia while Victoria slipped from the room.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Blade whispered against her ear as he rested his chin on her shoulder.

Silent tears slipped down Zellia's cheeks. Yes, she was beautiful. An ache started in her heart. An ache for what she'd missed out with her own daughter. Her tears turned to sobs, and Blade just held her. She couldn't control these emotions, thankfulness and regret all rolling into one.

"Don't worry about a thing," Blade whispered.

Zellia wiped the tears from her cheeks and finally brought herself under control. Her life was in such turmoil. She could only wonder about her life from this point on. Where would she go? Could she get a job here in the States? Would she ever find her daughter?

Sarita wrinkled her forehead and then passed gas.

Both Blade and Zellia laughed.

"She's been hanging around Rat too long," said Blade. He turned Zellia around and held her to his chest. "Let's get a shower and maybe a nap for you."

* * *

The next two days were hell on Blade. His friends were gathering intel on the men from Colombia, and Blade tried to deal with Zellia. She was cool toward him, almost aloof. He didn't like it, and his beast didn't like it. He needed to touch her, but she acted like she didn't want him to. He knew she was hurting, but how long before she sank into mire that even he couldn't pull her out of? Well, today was the day that he was going to rescue her...from herself.

He found her in Sarita's room, standing over Sarita's crib, her hair cascading in dark, rich curls down her back. She was clad in loose-fitting jeans and an overly large shirt. She was hiding her figure again, but his body still responded. She could be dressed in a burlap sack, and she'd still turn him on.

He stepped behind her, stopping only inches from her. He smelled her wonderful womanly scent that his body craved, that the beast inside him clawed to get to. He wanted to wrap her in his arms, never let her go.

She turned and smiled weakly at him. "I'm glad you're here. I need to talk with you," she said.

He moved beside her and leaned his arms on the crib, careful not to wake Sarita. "Okay."

"I need to leave here."

Shock rolled through his body, quickly replaced by anger, then fear. "What?"

"I need to find a place of my own."

"Why?"

"Don't get me wrong, Blade. You've been good to me; everybody here has been good to me."

"But?"

She shook her head. "I'm not used to this many people. I was a loner when I was younger, and when I got to high school, I didn't have any friends either, because I didn't want to explain to anyone why I couldn't bring them to my home. I didn't want my father to do something crazy to anyone else. And then when I was at Manuel's, I absolutely stayed by myself. It was safer that way."

Blade drew her into his arms. He stiffened when she flinched. "I'll send everybody away."

"Oh my God, no! That's the last thing I want you to do. These people belong here. I don't."

"That's not true. You belong here," he ground out.

She pressed her palms against his chest. "No. No, I don't. Listen. It's not you. It's not them. It's me. I need some space. I need to heal my mind, and I can't do it here. I know you're working to find my daughter, and I'm grateful, but I need some space."

He understood the need for space, but when he needed space, he just went to the reserve and ran. And if he wanted to stay out there for days, he would. And when he could face his friends again, he'd come home. It was simple for a werewolf, not so simple for Zellia. She had that determination set in her eyes, and he wasn't sure he could deny her.

"Okay. I'll get you a house of my choosing. I will equip it with the best security."

"No. That's not what I meant. Besides, I can't afford that."

He glared at her but decided not to press her about money. He had plenty, and that meant she had plenty. "What did you have in mind?"

"I...I was going to a women's shelter."

"Oh, no. Hell no." There was no way he could protect her there. He'd have no control in that environment. He'd have to have Rat dress as a woman and live in a women's shelter until Zellia came to her senses.

"Are you taking Sarita?" he asked.

"I wanted to."

He smelled her emotional pain. "You're going to take Sarita and raise her in a shelter?"

"It's just for a short while. Until I figure out who I am. I'm not the same person I was a week ago, and I've got to search until I find myself. I can't do that here."

He couldn't deny her. It may be the only way to save their relationship. "Okay, Zellia. I'll let you leave under two conditions. One, I get to pick the place, and two, I'll give you all the time you need, but you belong here with me, and I'll be damned if I'll let you go without a fight."

"But I can't pay you." He saw the distress in her face. She hated to owe someone. Well, he wasn't just someone.

"Damn, Zellia, it's not always about money. You can stay for free until you get on your feet."

"That's not what I want," she said.

"You know, we don't always get what we want; sometimes we have to compromise when we damn sure don't want to."

"Right. Some of us have to do a lot of that. Whatever place you find, it needs to be near the bus stop."

"You can have the Hummer. It's bulletproof."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"Did you forget the people trying to kill you back in Colombia?"

"No, I haven't forgotten."

"It's nonnegotiable, Zellia. Just accept it." His tone was harsh, harsher than he intended, but she was making him crazy.

"I've also got to find a babysitter for Sarita."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Victoria would be more than thrilled to babysit. And I'm sure Rat and the others around here would love to have Sarita around. They're going to miss her, you know. Hell, Zellia. Even I can take care of her." God, that was all he needed, to have to put surveillance equipment in a daycare center.

He rounded the crib and stood in front of the window, raking his hands through his hair. She was killing him with her deep-cutting emotional pain. He was losing her, losing her to the daughter that she didn't know.

* * *

Zellia stared at Blade's back. He would never understand. He was so sure of himself. What she wouldn't give to be like that. She knew she was broken on more than one level, but right now she couldn't deal with that and Blade at the same time. Blade affected her on so many levels. She wanted to give herself over to him completely, but if she did that, she might never find herself again. She had to crawl out of this hole by herself. She might never find her daughter. The lab had been her best—last—hope.

She had several things on her to-do list. Find a job was the main one. She had to pay Blade back. She had to support herself and Sarita and be self-sufficient.

Zellia remembered the passport that Rat had pulled out when they waltzed through customs at the airport. Rat had used her real passport photo. God only knew how many laws he'd broken to do that. And apparently, the customs people in Miami were used to Blade dragging in people. It was amazing and crazy at the same time.

She also needed to see a counselor, and she didn't want Blade to know. That was the main reason for moving out. She needed mental help.

* * *

Blade sat in his empty room. He could smell Zellia in here. Her scent was strong on his sheets. She'd taken a nap in his room the first day she arrived. The next day she'd slept in the guest room. His beast had been a tyrant that day. He had wanted to snatch her ass back up and dump her in his bed where she belonged, but he was afraid, afraid of her emotional well-being.

Now he understood. When he came off a mission, all he wanted to do was fuck and then be alone so that his brain could process the mission and come to terms with every little nuance of that mission. That's what Zellia needed, to process the events.

He had to let her go in order to do so.

Chapter Fifteen

"You have information for me?"

"Ye-yes."

"Well?"

"Zellia Calderon came through customs yesterday. She was on that list you gave me several years ago."

"And why am I just finding out about his now?"

"I...I was off yesterday. I only looked at the log today."

"Was she alone?"

"No, sir. She was with Merc-Air."

"Do you have a name?"

The sound of papers shuffling came through the line. "Here it is. The one they call Blade is Jack Núñez. He owns the two choppers that came in. I assume he owns the whole outfit."

"Do you know anything about this...outfit?"

"Yes, sir. They're mercenaries for hire, mostly rescue, funded by big businesses. They come through here quite a lot. He came in yesterday on a BLACK HAWK and an Apache, and I know he has several planes."

"Do you have an address?"

After he wrote down the address he said, "Well, it looks like you've finally earned your keep. And...give my regards to your lovely wife."

He replaced the phone on the receiver, eased back in his chair, and made a tent with his fingers.

“Zellia, Zellia, Zellia. I should have killed you years ago, but as successful as my latest experiment was, I'm glad I didn't. I need to experiment...again.”

Yes, that was what he needed, another experiment.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Blade drove to Hayden's house. He had to talk to someone before he did something stupid like tie Zellia to his bed, barricade the door, and never let her out. He went to the back door and lightly knocked.

Victoria opened the door and waved a spatula at him. "Blade. Come on in. Do you want some pancakes? Hayden will be down in a minute."

Blade followed her in and closed the door. She motioned for him to take a seat as she flipped a pancake.

"What's on your mind, Blade? You look like you've lost a best friend or two."

"Zellia's leaving me."

Victoria scooped up the unfinished pancake and dumped it on a plate. She dried her hands off, went to the table, and slid into a chair. "Okay, you've got my full attention. What on earth are you talking about?"

"Zellia's leaving me." His heart ached just saying it aloud.

"That can't be true. Why in the world would she do that?"

Blade cracked his knuckles on each hand, a bad habit he did when his skin was too tight. "She says she needs space, to be by herself. She says she's been alone all her life, and that there's just too many people at the house."

"Well, that may be true. Listen, Blade. She's been through a lot. She probably waited forever to find her daughter, and she was so close, and for things to turn out like they did, she's just an emotional mess. Even when she couldn't be with her daughter, she had hope. This may be the only way that she can deal with it."

"I told her that I'd send everybody away."

"That would only make her feel bad. The last thing she wants to do is upset other people's lives. Besides, your place is overrun with testosterone-laced alpha males, and she's probably intimidated by all of you."

"She wants to go to a shelter."

Victoria blinked hard. "That would be a no. Let me guess. She has no money, and she doesn't want to be a burden."

Blade nodded. Hayden came in and slapped him on the shoulder, then stopped and looked from his wife to Blade and then back to Victoria.

"What the hell's going on?" asked Hayden.

"Zellia's leaving me," Blade responded. It wasn't any easier to say the third time.

"Well, what can we do to help?" Hayden said as he leaned against the counter and folded his arms over his chest.

"You aren't going to ask me why?" asked Blade.

Hayden shook his head. "Nope. Victoria will tell me when you leave."

"Well, what I need is to find a place to rent in a good neighborhood, and I need to do it soon, because she's threatening to move herself and Sarita into the women's shelter. Rat's ordering the security equipment as we speak, and it should be in tomorrow. Then I have to set up a surveillance schedule." Blade scowled and shook his head. "Why does she have to be so stubborn?"

Blade caught the look between Victoria and Hayden.

"Now you know how I feel when I have to deal with Hayden's stubbornness," said Victoria. "I really wanted to go and help with your extraction, but Mr. Neanderthal wouldn't hear of it."

"You belong here with me and not flying over the damn jungle, and that's final."

"See what I mean? Stubborn Neanderthal. And I bet you were stubborn when you told Zellia that you'd find the house for her."

"Of course I'm going to find her a place to stay. She'd pick the cheapest, most run-down place in the worst part of town because she has no money."

Hayden poured himself a cup of coffee. "There's a house for rent over on the next street. I saw it yesterday."

"That would be perfect," said Victoria. "That way, we can take turns looking out for her, because I know your mate won't go unprotected."

"You know she's my mate?"

"Yeah, it's written all over your face. I can swing by during the day and teach her self-defense," said Victoria.

"That's a great idea, Victoria." He thought back to the jungle and her poking him with a stick and smiled.

"Sign me and Victoria up for a night watch," said Hayden.

Victoria looked at Hayden, surprised. "Are you going to let me work with you?"

Hayden grinned. "Well...you'll have to try real hard to convince me."

Victoria laughed and turned to Blade. "That will be no problem. Put us both down for night watch."

"When you going to turn her?" asked Hayden. "I remember you telling me that I should turn Victoria whether she wanted to be turned or not."

Victoria glared at Blade and then busted out laughing. "So you *are* a Neanderthal."

"Yeah," said Blade. "You women are nothing but trouble."

"Yes, but we're worth it."

"Let's eat," said Hayden. "And then we'll go check out that rental."

* * *

Zellia stared at the security system as Rat explained how to work the darn thing. Didn't they know that she was electronically challenged? She heard the words "state of the art," "best that money could buy," and "premier." Once again, Blade had gone overboard. The house was small, cozy, and beautiful, and she'd

never be able to repay Blade. The place wasn't furnished, so men were unloading a truckload of new furniture, and Blade's friends were moving Sarita's stuff in.

Hayden and Victoria were unloading brand-spanking-new kitchen stuff complete with groceries, and Blade was supervising a teenager as he tried to mow the lawn to Blade's specifications.

She just wanted to cry. Push everyone out the door and cry.

"Zellia? Are you listening?" asked Rat.

She blinked. "I'm sorry. I zoned out there for a second. What did you say?"

"I asked what you wanted your security code to be."

Security code? "How about one-two-three."

Rat frowned. "No. That's too simple. You need at least six numbers that you can remember. Ten would be better. Not your birth date, and not your Colombian ID number."

Zellia raked her hand down her face. That eliminated simple. She rattled off six numbers and told Rat to write it down for her and then turned and fled. Unfortunately, there was nowhere to go, because there were people everywhere.

She found Victoria in the washroom. "What are those?" she asked.

Victoria stopped piling the sheets into the washer. "Satin sheets."

"For my bed?"

Victoria grinned. "Blade wanted you to have satin sheets, so I picked these up. I hope you like the color."

"Yes. Yes. The color is fine." But she would have preferred plain white cotton to go on her brand-new bed with its brand-new mattress.

She watched Victoria finish stuffing the sheets into the washer and start it. Then Victoria turned around and just looked at her. It took Zellia a moment to realize that she was blocking Victoria's exit.

"Sorry," she murmured.

“Why don't you go sit down in the kitchen and rest? You look like you're about to collapse.”

“I am about to collapse. This is all too much,” Zellia said as she went to the kitchen, pulled out a chair, and plopped down.

“You better get used to it,” said Victoria. “All these men are the same. Everything is top-notch, over-the-top. They don't know how to do it any other way. Once we all get out of your way, you'll be fine.”

Zellia doubted that.

“I can keep Sarita if you want to sleep through the night. Hayden's got a drug bust tonight, so I'll be up anyway. I can't sleep until he gets home.”

Zellia looked at her friend, the one who should be dead but wasn't. It must be horrible to wonder every night if your husband was going to walk in the door. Zellia couldn't live like that, wondering if her husband was okay.

“I don't know how you handle that.” Zellia said as she looked at her hands on the table. “It would be like living in constant fear. I would never marry someone whose job was so dangerous.” The moment she spoke, she regretted it.

“I'm sorry,” said Zellia. “It's none of my business.”

Victoria put her warm hand over Zellia's. “That's okay. Hayden loves his job, and I love Hayden. You know, Zellia. Sometimes people fall in love, regardless of how hard they fight it.”

Victoria released her hands, leaned back in her chair, and smiled. “Besides, I may be going to work for the DEA too, and then Hayden will have to worry about me.”

Zellia didn't understand what Victoria was smiling about, because that would mean that two people were worrying over each other. That was no way to live. She thought about Victoria's rescue with all the explosions and gunfire, and how Blade enjoyed being snatched from the earth by a helicopter. He loved it. It was his job. She hated it. It was too painful to think about right now.

* * *

Zellia sat on her new couch and gazed at the new fifty-two-inch plasma TV with surround sound. She decided that she'd just treat this as a furnished house. When she left for a place of her own, she'd leave everything but what she came with—nothing.

And she'd take Sarita, of course. Somehow, Rat had worked his illegal magic, and Zellia was the legal guardian of Sarita. She fought with that idea too. It bothered her that laws were broken, but Sarita had no one who cared, so maybe she shouldn't worry about it.

She leaned her head back on the couch, closed her eyes, and tried to block out the new smell. It wasn't a bad smell; it was just a reminder of what she didn't have. She had decided to let Sarita spend the night with Victoria, hoping it would give Victoria something to do besides worry about Hayden. The house was quiet. She should turn on her new TV, but the remote was way too complicated to figure out.

Zellia had just dropped off to sleep when the doorbell rang and woke her. It took a second before she realized she was in her newly furnished rental house.

She pushed herself up off the couch and limped to the front door. She flipped the deadbolt and pulled the door open.

Blade stood on the other side holding Chinese takeout. The smell was wonderful, and her tummy growled.

Of course, he had a scowl on his face. "What?" she asked.

He pushed by her and punched a code into the security panel, then closed the door. "You need to see who it is before you open the door, and don't forget to punch in the security code so that the alarm doesn't go off. If you can't get the security right, you'll have to move back in with me."

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "If I weren't so tired right now, I'd..."

Blade pulled her pistol from his back and offered it to her. "Shoot me."

She looked from him to the gun and then back to him. What were they talking about?

He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the kitchen. Pulling a chair out, he then gently pushed her into it. He got two plates from the cupboard and two Cokes from the fridge.

“Eat, and then off to bed.”

She watched him fill her plate. “I think I'm too tired to sleep.”

“I've got the perfect remedy for that,” he said as he plopped a piece of sesame chicken in his mouth.

She barely arched her brow. “And what would that be?”

He grinned and sat down. “Not what you're thinking.”

“I'm not sure I'm capable of thinking.”

“Just trust me. You'll sleep like a baby when I'm done with you.”

Chapter Seventeen

Blade marched Zellia up the stairs, knowing that navigating the stairs was an effort on her part. It reminded him of being on a mission, in the field for days with little or no sleep. Of course, his body was trained to function in those conditions. Zellia's body was in the process of shutting down.

He parked her in front of the sink and told her to brush her teeth. He proceeded to fill the bath tub with warm water and ignored her questioning look.

"Don't worry. I won't let you drown," he said as he poured some bath salts into the tub. He didn't remember ordering the salts when he rushed to compile a list of all the things that Zellia and Sarita would need. He figured that Victoria had something to do with that.

When she finished brushing her teeth he said, "Now be a good little girl and take your clothes off."

She just stared at him wide-eyed.

"Don't worry. No sex for you tonight."

She started unbuttoning her shirt, and when she couldn't get the hang of it, he helped her.

He maneuvered her like a child, removing her bra, undoing her jeans, and shoving them down. He helped her step out of them and her panties. He pulled her glasses off and laid them on the vanity.

She yelped when he scooped her up and set her gently in the tub.

"Is it too hot?" he asked as he grabbed a washcloth and squirted body wash on it.

“No, it feels great.”

“Let me wash your back first, and then you can lie back.”

She leaned forward, and a soft, round, ample breast drew his attention. They were a handful, just like he liked them, but this wasn't about him, so he focused on her delicate back, slathering it with suds. He purposely traced each and every knot in her spine, and when he reached her neck, he lifted her braid and scrubbed there too.

When he was done, he rinsed the cloth, filled it full of water, and squeezed it over her back. He watched the water cascade down her fine bones, over smooth, silky skin. He'd imagined doing this each time she was in the shower while they were in Colombia.

He told her to lean back and made sure to drape her braid over her shoulder. Blade lathered his cloth again, took her petite ankle, and raised her leg out of the water. He started between her toes, then her delicate arch, then her ankle. Her moan of contentment eased over his skin, giving him a satisfaction he'd never known before. Blade worked his way up her leg, stopping at mid thigh. Her questioning gaze locked with his as he moved to the other side of the tub and started washing her other set of toes. He focused on just washing her and not on how his cock responded to touching her.

“You're spoiling me,” she said.

“Yep.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Every woman deserves to be pampered, especially you.”

She stared at him as he finished washing her leg and lowered it into the warm water.

He rinsed out the cloth and soaped it up again before he placed the cloth on her shoulder. He washed one shoulder and then the next before he swept the soap over her breast. Her sharp intake of breath pleased him. He washed her other

breast before traveling down to wash her rounded belly. The soap glistened on her olive skin, and he wanted to abandon the washcloth and just use his hands.

“Spread your legs,” he said, his voice a bit hoarse, and she complied.

He swept the cloth over her mound, washing her curls, then her clit, her pussy, and her anus. He felt her muscles clench under his fingers, and a jolt shot through his body. Being the good guy was hard on a man.

He rinsed the cloth and used it to sluice water over her chest, squeezing it so that rivulets ran over the swell of her breasts. He wanted to taste her, feel that little nipple pebble in his mouth. But not tonight. Tonight was about her resting, not about his raging lust.

He dropped the cloth and pulled the plug.

“Is it over so soon?” she asked.

“Afraid so. It's bedtime for you.”

“But aren't we going to...”

He shook his head. “Not tonight. I want you at the top of your game when I make love to you.”

He hauled her to her feet, took a warm plush bath towel, and dried her delicate skin, making it even more rosy pink. He made sure he dried all her sensual places. When she was thoroughly dry, he ditched the towel and scooped her up. When he reached the bed, he set her down.

“Now roll over and lie on your stomach.”

* * *

Zellia wondered what in the world he had planned now. It was amazing how those big, strong hands of his could be so gentle and soothing. She rolled to her stomach, the satin sheets cool to her belly. Of course, her butt was exposed again, but she wasn't sure she had the energy to even care. The bed dipped as he sat, and her body tensed, waiting for whatever came next. She felt warm oil and warm

hands on her feet. He massaged her toes, the ball of her foot, and when he used his thumbs on her arch, she moaned.

“Oh, my God. That feels wonderful! That feels better than...”

“Don't say sex, because we've not had real sex yet.”

She rose on her elbows and looked at him. “What kind of sex did we have?”

“Lie back down.”

She complied.

“We've just had appetizer sex. When you're ready, we'll have the full course.”

She didn't know if she'd ever be ready for the full course. What they'd already had was intense by her standards. How could it get any better?

He moved up her calf, using long strokes on her injury. Then he started with her other foot. She closed her eyes and sighed as he swirled, kneaded, and stroked her foot and calf.

“If you ever give up your day job, you can always become a masseuse. You have wonderful hands.”

“I hope they're not too rough. I mean calloused.”

“No,” she murmured. “They're perfect.”

He proceeded up her legs, massaging both with extreme care. Then he started on the tips of her fingers and traveled up her arms. She felt so peaceful under his skilled hands, hands that could bring ecstasy so easily. For the moment, she forgot they could kill just as easily. When he started massaging her shoulders and back—*Dios mío*, that was it—she fought to stay awake.

“Go on. Go to sleep,” he said. “When you drift off, I'll set the alarm and let myself out.”

* * *

Blade's beast prowled around inside him. Zellia wasn't aroused, but his beast knew that he, the man, hadn't tried to arouse her, and that pissed the wolf off. When her breathing evened out in sleep, he pulled the sheet and coverlet over her.

Blade stood for a long time staring at her sleeping form. His need to shuck his clothes and climb in there with her was strong. Just to hold her. He hadn't held her in seven days, seven long, lonely days. And who knew how long it would take her to get over losing her daughter, if she ever did.

Blade's heart ached for her. How does one get over losing a child?

Chapter Eighteen

“Here's a six-month supply of your new contacts and your new nonprescription sunglasses to wear over your contacts. Your new prescription glasses and sunglasses will be ready tomorrow. Start wearing your contacts an hour today, two hours tomorrow, and so on, until you get used to them. At first they're going to feel like you have sand in your eye.”

Zellia blinked at Dr. Zimmerman. “Ahm...I only need a set of glasses to replace my old ones. I don't need the rest of this stuff.”

“Nonsense, my dear. You'll eventually come to love those contacts.”

“I'm sorry, Doctor, but I can't afford all this.” She glanced at the stuff he'd placed in her lap.

“Of course you can. I have your insurance card right here. Now, the ladies up front will file your insurance.”

“How much is all this?” she asked.

Dr. Zimmerman hesitated. “Don't worry about that.”

“Yes, I have to worry about it, Doctor. I need to know how much I owe...this person.”

“Well, looks to me like you'd only owe the deductible.”

“How much, Doctor?”

Dr. Zimmerman looked at her over his glasses. “I suggest you take that up with him.”

“Do you know who *he* is?”

"Of course. He comes in here once a year. He's a mighty fine man with all that work he does for charity."

Dr. Zimmerman obviously didn't know what Blade's fee was. At those prices, that wasn't charity.

"Maybe you should just accept this and find another way to pay him back."

"Doctor!"

"No no no. I didn't mean...like that. I meant, like cook him dinner or something. Sometimes, some things are worth more than money."

Dr. Zimmerman, whose face was now the color of red wine, handed her the insurance card. She glanced at the card. Yep. There was her name. *Dr. Zellia Calderon, MD*, and Sarita was listed as a dependent.

She thanked the doctor and checked out before heading back to the Hummer, where Victoria was watching Sarita.

Zellia got in and turned to Victoria. "Did you know that I have medical insurance?"

"No, but all of Blade's employees have insurance provided by him. Since Hayden's DEA, we're on the fed's policy."

"But I'm not an employee. How am I ever going to repay him?"

"Why do you want to repay him? He has more money than he can possibly spend in a lifetime, and he doesn't live that extravagantly. Yeah, he lives in a compound and has the best vehicles, choppers, airplanes, weapons, and surveillance equipment, but that's all."

Zellia blinked. "That's all? It reminds me of Fort Knox, and I've never even been to Fort Knox," stated Zellia.

Victoria laughed as she put the SUV in reverse. "Well, it's probably as secure as Fort Knox. And I don't know the last time Blade took a vacation. Hayden says that Blade pretty much works all the time."

"I just don't like it."

“Well, that's what you can expect when you're dealing with men like them.”

“Like them? You make it sound like they're a different species.”

Victoria kept facing forward. “They are. They're very alpha males. Determined and definitely hardheaded.”

That was the very last thing she needed in her life. Her father, Manuel, and now Blade. Well, she couldn't put Blade in the same category as her father and Manuel, because those two were from the very bowels of hell, but Blade was used to taking charge and bowling over everybody in the process.

“I don't know. For just once, I'd like to be in control of my life.”

“You will be, one day. You're just going to have to lean on everybody else until you get on your feet.”

Victoria turned to Zellia and grinned. “And speaking of taking over your life, Sarita's got a pediatric appointment tomorrow. And right now, you've got a date at the hair salon.”

“Speaking of Sarita. I need to get moving on the adoption.”

“I'm pretty sure that's already been handled.”

Zellia glanced sideways at Victoria. “How can that be?”

“Listen, Zellia. You and Sarita needed protection, and Blade and Rat made sure all that was handled.”

“But how well was it handled? I don't want someone to show up later and demand Sarita back because of this whole illegal...whatever you call it.”

“I'm sure Sarita's yours, and if anyone does show up, Blade will handle them.”

“You mean kill them.”

“I didn't say that, but Blade can be pretty persuasive when he wants to be.”

“Is there anything Blade can't do?”

“I've never seen him walk on water, but I wouldn't put it past him.”

He probably could walk on water. That, and anything else he wanted to do.

"Zellia. Blade's not a bad person. He does good things. He and his men rescue a lot of people."

"For payment," Zellia chimed.

"Sometimes," said Victoria. "But not all the time. They rescued a young missionary for free one time because her family didn't have the money to eat, much less fund a military operation. And Blade's flown several organs for free. He's flown kids for the Make-A-Wish Foundation...for free. Just because he has to make difficult choices sometimes doesn't make him a bad person."

Zellia thought about that for a while. No, Blade wasn't a bad person. He could probably be a bad person when he wanted to or had to, but deep down, Blade was good. He didn't have to save Sarita. He didn't have to bring them to Miami. He didn't have to give her a comfortable house and health insurance. He didn't have to do any of those things, yet he did them anyway. But she had to get back on her feet. Take care of herself. She sighed. At least she was still licensed to practice medicine in the USA.

"Can we stop by the hospital so I can pick up an application?"

"Damn," said Victoria.

"What?"

Victoria grabbed her cell phone and punched in some numbers. "Hey, Blade. It's Victoria."

She glanced at Zellia and grinned. "No, nothing's wrong. I just..."

Victoria stopped in midsentence and listened. "Blade," she cut in. "Listen to me. Nothing's wrong, but you may want to get Zellia a laptop so she can start looking for a job."

Glancing at Zellia, Victoria rolled her eyes. "I know you don't want her to work, but she wants to work, and you're just going to have to get the hell over it."

Victoria listened some more. "You can tell Hayden anything you want, but it's not going to matter. Bye, Blade." Victoria snapped the phone shut.

She turned to Zellia and said, "Neanderthal."

Zellia ran her hands down her face. "You shouldn't have done that. I can go to the library to work."

"Right," said Victoria. "Because it's cheaper, but it's not convenient."

Zellia could only nod and hoped she could remember what she owed Blade before the list got too long. She made a mental note to herself to buy a notepad.

"After we get your hair trimmed, we're heading to the mall."

Zellia glanced at Victoria. "Let me guess. He's given you money."

Victoria grinned. "Only to buy you some clothes. And he said to especially steer you into Victoria's Secret."

Zellia rolled her eyes. "Will this madness ever end?"

Victoria pulled into a parking spot, put the car in park, and killed the engine. Then she looked at Zellia. "Probably not."

Chapter Nineteen

Blade pulled into Zellia's driveway, killed the engine, and went deathly still. Zellia wasn't alone. She waved at Blade and then turned to speak to the man sitting on her front porch, like that was the most normal thing in the world to do.

She laughed at something the stranger said.

Claws eased from Blade's fingers. Fangs appeared in his mouth. The predator in him needed to hunt, to kill. He watched her smile again and tried to remember the last time she'd smiled at him.

Blade forced his beast back, steadied his breathing. Time to meet the competition.

He exited his truck and slammed the door harder than he needed to and rounded the truck with purposeful strides. The man's smiled died on his face when he saw Blade.

Yeah, buddy. You're a hair away from dying.

Blade went straight up the steps, kissed Zellia full on the mouth, and watched her blush. Then he leaned on the porch post. He smelled her unease, but was it because of her visitor or because of him?

"Hey," she said. "This is Brad, my neighbor. He lives next door."

Blade turned his icy stare on the man, and Blade's nostrils flared. This man was a werewolf. The man wasn't as tall as Blade, but he was about as muscular as Blade was. "Does Brad have a last name?"

Brad wiped his hand on his jeans and then stuck it out to Blade. "Yes, sir. Rollins."

Blade ignored the hand. "What does Brad Rollins do for a living?"

"Blade. That's rude!"

Blade kept his gaze on Brad.

Brad's brows rose at the word "Blade," but Blade sensed it was in amusement and not from alarm. And that just pissed Blade off even more.

"I'm a general contractor. I've been out of town. Just got back today." Brad smiled at Zellia. "And was delighted to find that Zellia had moved in."

Well, buddy. Don't get too delighted.

"Humph," grunted Blade. Blade smelled Brad's confidence, which was a wolf trait. He wanted Brad to be terrified, but that wasn't going to happen.

"And what do you do for a living, Mr. Blade?" asked Brad.

"I kill people."

Brad's eyes barely registered surprise. "So you're military?"

"Something like that."

Blade turned to Zellia. "I'd like to take you and Sarita to dinner tonight. Run along and get dressed. Wear some of those new clothes I bought you. Brad and I will just get to know each other."

"Ah...well...sure. Sarita will be up in a few minutes." She stuck her hand out to Brad. "Thanks for stopping by."

Brad took her hand and covered it with his other hand. "The pleasure has been all mine."

Brad's smile irritated the hell out of Blade. *Brad's teeth. Down his throat. Good plan.*

Zellia smiled at Brad. She glared at Blade as she grabbed the baby monitor and disappeared into the house.

Blade waited until he heard Zellia go upstairs. "You're sniffing around the wrong lady...*Bradley.*"

Brad laughed. "But her scent is so alluring. Sweet. Innocent. I noticed it the minute I got home. And she's very attractive."

Blade flexed his hands; his claws edging from the tips. "I'm only telling you once, Bradley. Otherwise, it's not going to be pleasant for you."

Brad smiled. "Your scent is not strong on her, and you haven't claimed her."

"I'll claim her when it's time."

"Until then, she's fair game, according to pack law."

"Fuck pack law."

"You wouldn't break the laws of the wolf, would you?"

"Just try me. If I smell that you've been over here, I'll challenge you. She's mine, and I keep what's mine."

Brad stood up and stepped off the low porch. "I have no doubt that she's yours, but the question is, are you hers?"

Blade's eyes followed Brad until Brad disappeared into the house next door. Oh, he was hers, all right. She just didn't know it yet.

Blade phoned Rat. "Did you know we have one of *us* living next to Zellia?"

"Who?"

"Brad Rollins."

Blade heard keys clicking. "He's a general contractor."

"So he said. Did you know he was pack?"

"Nope. No way to know that. We don't keep that shit in a database. But I can send one of the others to sniff the neighborhood and see if there are any more of *us* out there."

"You do that, and in the meantime, find out if Brad has any friends we should know about."

* * *

Zellia sat across from Blade, and Sarita slept peacefully in her infant seat between them. Giorgio's Italian Eatery smelled wonderful, and her stomach growled.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Yes. Apparently, I'm starving."

"This is my favorite place to eat. Giorgio knows how to cook."

She laughed. "Certainly smells like he knows how to cook."

Blade took a swallow of his beer. "So. Do you like Bradley?"

She shrugged. "I don't know him well enough to like or dislike, but you sure didn't like him. You were pretty rude."

He shrugged. "I don't like him, and I want you to stay away from him."

"What do you know about this guy that I don't know?"

"I don't know anything yet, but I will. It's just my sixth sense working."

"You mean that I can't be friends with him?"

"Yep."

"That's pretty barbaric, don't you think?"

"Listen, Zellia. Just do me a favor and stay away from him."

"Okay. But I don't know why I'm agreeing to this." But she did know why. Blade was good to her, and he'd never really asked her for anything. If Blade thought she had any interest in Brad, he could think again. Brad sort of gave her the creeps, but she wouldn't dare tell Blade that. Blade would snatch her and Sarita up and carry them back to his house. Brad reminded her of Blade, the way they were both built, the way they acted and carried themselves. But Brad wasn't Blade. Nobody was Blade.

Her meal was delicious, and so was the wine. Maybe she'd had too much wine. Sarita was sleeping, Blade was charming and entertaining, and Zellia wasn't even thinking about her missing daughter, only trying to enjoy the moment...for just a little while.

“Blade, you're back.”

Zellia's wineglass stilled at her lips, and her eyes rose to meet the woman who had flung herself all over Blade.

“Why didn't you call me? The last thing I heard, you were on some dumb-ass mission to rescue someone who was stupid enough to get into trouble.”

Zellia let the wine slide down her throat. She hoped the woman wasn't talking about Victoria, because she was pretty sure she wouldn't sit through someone badmouthing her...friend.

She watched the beautiful blonde grab Blade's face and place a sloppy wet kiss on his mouth; then the lady just fell into Blade's lap, and her breasts spilled out of the confinement of her thin top. They were bigger than Zellia's and perfectly round.

Blade's face flushed, either from irritation or embarrassment, Zellia couldn't tell, and then she watched as his eyes changed into something cold, hard, and flat.

“God, Margo. Where's your damn manners?”

The blonde pouted. “Manners? I don't remember you having any manners the last time you...”

Blade clamped a hand over the blonde's mouth as he literally pushed her off his lap. “Margo, I'd like you to meet my friend, Zellia. Zellia, this is Margo.”

The blonde's gaze slide over Zellia as she swept her hand through Blade's hair, and Zellia didn't miss the possessiveness that Margo's gesture implied.

Margo barely smiled, and Zellia faintly smiled back. Margo glanced briefly at Sarita before she turned her attention back to Blade, stroking his hair again. And that irritated Zellia too. Most women ohhhed and ahhed over babies.

Blade probably had many women who knew him, many women who wanted to be with him. She could understand that. He was a good lover. No, he was a great lover. And he was good-looking.

Silence hung in the air too long. “Would you like to join us?” Zellia finally asked.

"No, she wouldn't, would you, Margo," asserted Blade.

"Not tonight, Pookie," said Margo, "but call me tomorrow." The woman grabbed Blade's head and placed a kiss on top of it. Of course her breast smashed into Blade's face.

Zellia admired Margo's confidence as she watched the other woman leave. When she turned back to Blade, he was staring at her. "I can catch a cab home...Pookie...if you'd rather be with her."

"I hate that name," Blade ground out before he drained his beer.

She smiled as she toyed with the rim of her wineglass. "I can understand why. You don't look like a Pookie."

"Listen," said Blade. "I only dated her twice..."

Zellia held up her hand. "Whoa. I don't want to hear about this. It's okay, Blade. It really is. You're a hot-blooded male, and I understand perfectly."

Blade laid his napkin on the table and stood. "Look at me. Do I look like she has any hold over me?"

Zellia's eyes glanced at his crotch. She was surprised. He didn't have an erection.

Blade sat back down. "But if you'll come over here and sit in my lap, I'll guarantee a different reaction."

She was tempted to try it. Some little voice in the deep recesses of her mind wanted to know if she could get a rise out of Blade when the gorgeous blonde couldn't. She'd seen his penis swell when he was around her, but Zellia always put it down to overactive male hormones. Didn't men get hard when the wind blew?

"You're only mildly jealous," said Blade.

She frowned. Yeah, she was a little bit jealous, but Zellia understood the shallow need for flesh. That woman wasn't Blade's type, but neither was she. Blade would want someone beautiful and intelligent. Margo was beautiful but appeared to be shallow, while she was intelligent but nowhere close to being beautiful.

Bladed leaned and rested his arms on the table. "She means nothing to me."

"I know. She was nothing but a two-night stand."

He raked his hands down his face. "I'm sorry you had to witness that."

"Oh, I wouldn't have missed it for the world...Pookie."

She smiled to herself. He was squirming.

"You're not going to leave that alone, are you?"

She shook her head slowly. "I intend to use that knowledge to my best advantage."

"And what do you think that will be?"

"Rat comes to mind, the next time you force me to do something I don't want to do."

"That's blackmail."

"Yes, it is, and if it wasn't you whom I was blackmailing, I'd ask you to give me some pointers on how best to use that information."

"Weigh your options carefully. I might have to kill Rat if he starts razzing me about it. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

She laughed. "Then I suggest you behave and keep Rat safe."

Sarita stretched, and her eyes popped open. Her little eyes blinked.

"Hey, pretty girl," said Zellia.

Zellia placed her napkin on the table and started to stand.

"No, you finish eating. I'll take care of my princess," said Blade.

Zellia eased back in her chair and watched Blade lift Sarita from her child seat and place her in the crook of his arm. His eyes twinkled when he started talking baby talk to her and playing with her little hand. Zellia's heart broke. This man was the greatest person she knew. He cared for a child who wasn't his, a child nobody else wanted. He'd spent his money to get Sarita out of a cruel environment, met her basic needs with food and medical care and more toys than any child should be

allowed to have. And what did he want in return? Zellia watched him make a funny face at Sarita.

Nothing.

* * *

Zellia handed a big fluffy towel to Blade and scooped Sarita from the baby bathtub. Sarita stiffened when the cooler air brushed her skin. Blade cocooned her in the towel and rubbed her wet head.

"She loves her bath, but she hates to get cold between the tub and the towel," said Zellia.

"She's just like a woman, always cold."

Zellia stopped wiping down the counter and turned to face him.

"I meant cold as in temperature, not cold as in calculating and certainly not cold as it refers to sex."

Zellia grinned. "Okay, Pookie, as long as you explain it that way."

Blade growled, and Sarita jumped. "Sorry, princess. Your mother is teasing me, and I don't like it."

Blade carried Sarita into the nursery and laid her on the changing table. He watched Zellia maneuver tiny arms and legs into what looked like a footed bodysuit. It looked very hot to him, but Sarita seemed to like it.

Zellia turned to him and had a look on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"Can you feed her while I take a bath?"

"Sure." He placed his big frame in the rocking chair that was built for midgets. Zellia placed Sarita in his arms and handed him a bottle.

"I won't take long, I promise."

Blade watched Zellia retreat. It must be hard to get any time by yourself if you had to look after a newborn all the time. Zellia probably placed Sarita in her carrier on the bathroom floor when she was taking a shower. And all that was just stupid.

Zellia and Sarita should be at his place, where he could help. Hell, there were always five or six guys hanging around who would love to look after Sarita. And those guys missed Sarita just like he did. Sarita could transform a bunch of killers into mush. He smiled down at her. She already had.

He had to get a grip on the situation. Zellia belonged with him. He thought back to that night after Sarita was evac'd out, and what he'd done. How he'd pushed Zellia out of her emotional turmoil. But this situation wasn't the same.

Zellia came in a short time later smelling like heaven. Blade watched her luscious body move under the lacy thing she wore as she took Sarita, burped her, and then laid her in her crib.

Just looking at her made his cock swell painfully. He wondered what she'd do if he pressed her back against the wall and looped her leg over his hip as he pressed into her womanly core.

"You want some coffee?" she asked.

Hell no.

Blade stood and folded her into his arms. After giving her a gentle squeeze, he placed a chaste kiss on her forehead.

"I'll have to pass on the coffee. I've got something else to do tonight."

Hurt flashed across her eyes as she tried to pull away from him.

"Aren't you going to ask me what it is?"

"No. It's none of my business," she said as she pulled against him again, but he held her tight.

"Well, I'll tell you anyway. I'm going to go home and take a long, hot shower. And then I'm going to crawl into my bed, get some of my toys, and play with myself."

A blush crept up her skin. "Oh."

"And the whole time I'm fucking myself, I'm going to pretend that it's you that I'm pumping my cock into instead of my hand."

The scent of her arousal was heady. She liked it when he talked dirty to her.

"I've missed you," he said.

She swallowed hard as she searched his face.

"And I want you to play with yourself tonight."

Her eyes flew wide, and she shifted against him.

"Remember how you fucked your ass with your finger?"

She barely nodded.

"Do that again tonight. Work that sweet hole of yours, because pretty soon I'm going to show you the ecstasy that I can bring you in both your lovely holes. Think of my cock buried deep within you."

A moan rolled in the back of her throat as she shivered. He grabbed her hair and gently pulled her head back, exposing her throat. He kissed her sensitive skin, and she pressed her body closer to his, her hands drifting up his back. He molded her body to his as he kissed her mouth, his tongue darting in and out. Damn, she tasted like honey.

He pulled back from the kiss and studied her face. Her eyes spoke of her desire, but she still wasn't ready to come fully to him.

Blade planted a peck on her lips. "I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep well."

Chapter Twenty

"What is wrong with you?" asked Victoria.

"I need...something," answered Zellia.

Sex. She needed sex!

She'd tossed and turned all night long, but she couldn't escape the images that Blade had planted in her head. And when she'd tried to pleasure herself, she found that she couldn't bring herself to that boiling point.

Then she'd cursed him. Cursed him for making her want him, cursed him for revving her up, and cursed him for leaving her in a lurch.

"Well?" asked Victoria. "What is it?"

Zellia glanced away from Victoria as a blush crept up her face. Victoria was her friend, but Zellia couldn't just blurt out her problem. Victoria would probably laugh her buns off. "Nothing," said Zellia.

"Well, I'm sure Blade can help you with whatever you need."

He could have, but he didn't. "He is the problem."

Victoria arched a brow. "Just ask him, Zellia. Lean on him if you need to."

Just ask him. Why *didn't* she ask him to stay? Because she needed time, space. She needed to find herself.

Well, she didn't like what she'd found. A sexually needy woman.

Victoria motioned to the driveway of the pediatrician's office; Zellia gave her signal and turned. The car behind her honked, but she didn't care. Couldn't they see this big black thing? She smiled, remembering what Blade had said about her being a woman driver.

She maneuvered the Hummer, which was really a tank, to the far end of the parking lot, hoping to find a space she could pull through. No such luck.

Zellia circled back around and found a lone space. Of course, if she ever got this thing in there, they'd have to climb out the back window. She swung wide and inched toward the space, but the rows were so narrow, it wasn't enough. She backed up a bit and tried again.

And tried again.

What was wrong with her? She couldn't park a dang tank. She rested her head on the wheel and willed herself not to cry. This was just another ding in her crappy day.

A horn blew.

"Just back up," said Victoria, "and pull over there. You and Sarita check in. I'll park this monster, beat the shit out of that asshole behind us, and meet you inside."

Zellia glanced at Victoria. Victoria wasn't smiling, so Zellia wondered if Victoria was serious. "I'm such an idiot. I can't even park a vehicle."

"This isn't actually a vehicle. It's a man's play toy that you just happened to get stuck with."

Zellia backed up and pulled behind the cars. She grabbed her purse, opened the door, and slid out. She couldn't resist looking at the car behind her. She mouthed *sorry* right before the man said something that she was glad she didn't hear. She unbuckled Sarita and lifted the carrier out and waved at the man as she crossed the road.

If she had any luck, the doctor's visit would go a lot better.

* * *

Blade closed his cell phone. Now he had to get Zellia a new vehicle, and getting it fitted with bulletproof glass would take some time. He was so stupid. He should have known that she wasn't used to Miami traffic and Miami parking. He could buy her the H3, which was a tad smaller. Or maybe a Tahoe. Hell, the best thing to do

was ask her what she wanted, and if she wanted a minivan, hell, he'd put bulletproof glass and armor plating in a damn minivan.

Blade found Rat in his cage. Expensive cage. Rat had conned him into buying every security gadget ever made. Every software program, every...whatever. Of course, Rat could make every one of them sing if that was the intent.

Blade slapped Rat on the back. "What have we got, buddy?"

Rat glanced over his shoulder as his fingers flew over the keyboard. "They like pizza."

Blade grinned. "And?"

"They don't like to be outside. They never leave the compound, except for the service people. And they have a lot of muscle."

"Okay, spare me the problems. Have you got a plan?" asked Blade.

"Yes."

Blade waited for the plan, but Rat kept banging on the keyboard. "Well, what the hell is it?"

"Two plans, actually. One is to wait until they leave the compound, surround their vehicles, and capture them. Or two, we can blow up half the compound and invade the other half."

"Have you seen any sign of a little girl?" asked Blade.

"Nope."

These assholes had slaughtered innocent people on a mountain, possibly kidnapped Zellia's daughter, and broke Zellia's heart. "Let's go with the second plan. I feel like breaking something."

Blade still didn't know the purpose of the lab. He'd never broached the subject with Zellia, and heaven knew that since she'd moved out, he wasn't going to go rock that boat. "Any idea what the lab was for?"

Rat shook his head. "I have no idea. It's privately held by a conglomerate of a conglomerate of a conglomerate. I'm still huntin' for a name. I don't think the

Colombian government owns it, because the Colombians have never been able to keep their mouths shut. No, this is a private lab.”

Blade's claws eased out. “At this point, I don't give a shit what their names are. I'll need to interrogate these assholes. I want to know if they know anything about Zellia's daughter, and I want to look them in the eyes while they explain to me why they killed all those people.”

Rat spun around in his chair and stretched the kinks out of his back. “Are you sure you can hold out long enough for them to explain it to you?”

“I'm not making any promises.” He held these people responsible for separating Zellia, his mate, from himself, and for causing her a pain the likes of an emotional tsunami.

Blade left Rat to his computers and went to his office to tackle the large amount of paperwork that had accumulated in the last couple of weeks. But that wasn't what he wanted to do. He wanted to see Zellia. He wanted to know how her day was going, if she needed anything.

He entered his password into the computer and brought up the GPS-tracking application. The blinking red dot said that she was leaving the pediatrician's office and heading home. She should be driving here and not to some rental house.

He could call her and ask about Sarita.

Or call her and ask how her day was going.

Or call her and tell her he was bringing a movie and pizza over to her place tonight.

Or call her and ask her over here for pizza and a movie. Tell her that the boys wanted to see Sarita. Yes, that was the better plan.

He remembered his nobility last night and the agony that it created. His cock had been so hard when he left her, he thought it was going to rupture. And even after he'd jacked off, he wasn't satisfied. He needed more. He needed her. He needed to bury his cock balls-deep into those warm, slick folds.

The blinking dot stopped at Hayden's and Victoria's house before it moved again. What the hell? He watched it travel past her street and head back toward the freeway. He punched in Zellia's number, and his irritation climbed with each ring.

"Damn it, Zellia. Answer the damn phone!"

He let it ring until it rolled to voice mail. He punched the Off button, dialed Victoria's number, and knew that Victoria was going to give him shit about tracking Zellia. He'd let Hayden handle her.

"Hello."

"It's Blade. Do you know where Zellia was going after she dropped you off?"

"No. She said she had an errand to run and asked if I'd keep Sarita for a couple of hours."

"She didn't say anything about heading toward downtown Miami?"

"No Blade, she didn't. Maybe she wanted to run to the grocery store. Wait a second. Are you tracking her? I'm sure she'll be pissed when she finds—"

"Not now, Victoria."

Blade ended the call and then dialed Rat's number. "Get a laptop and meet me at my Hummer," Blade said as he raced toward the parking garage. She was unescorted in the city, with no protection, no one to watch her back. Didn't she understand the possibility that the threat may have followed her to Miami?

Blade pulled the door between the kitchen and the garage open with so much force, it groaned. Rat was climbing in the passenger's side as he raced to the driver's side.

The garage doors were rolling up as the Hummer lurched forward, clearing the bottom of the garage door—barely.

"Get Zellia on the GPS."

Rat asked no questions, and his fingers danced on the keyboard. After a few seconds, Rat said, "She's stopped at a medical office complex beside the hospital."

"Who's in that complex?"

"Give me a second." Rat grimaced. "There are fourteen offices in that complex including an OB-GYN, podiatrist, internal medicine, cardiologist, et cetera. But if she's parked in the wrong complex and she's walking to one of the two other ones..."

"In other words, she could be anywhere within a hundred-yard radius."

"Afraid so."

"We'll just have to track her with our noses."

"No."

Blade looked at Rat. Rat had never told him no. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"She may be having a problem that she doesn't want you to know about."

Blade's gaze bore into Rat's.

"You know," said Rat. "Like female problems. Why don't you just wait and see which building she comes out of. You just want her to be okay, don't you?"

Yeah, he wanted her safe, but he also wanted her to trust him enough to tell him where the hell she was going. And if she was sick, he definitely wanted to know that.

"She may be applying for a job," said Rat.

Blade pulled into the parking lot and maneuvered over to the Hummer, blocking her in. He scanned the area, looking for her or anything that could be a threat to her. And he didn't give a damn if she caught him tracking her.

Blade waited forty-five minutes before Zellia exited the office complex.

"I want you to hack into every business in that complex and tell me who her appointment was with."

Rat closed his laptop. "No."

"No?" That was the second time in less than an hour that Rat had told him no.

"I'm not prying into her personal business. If she was a tango, some slimy sleazeball that was our mark, then I would do it, but she's not a tango. She's your mate, when you get around to claiming her. She deserves personal privacy, just like you and I do."

Blade started to chew Rat out, but Zellia had spotted them, and she didn't look too happy. She stopped beside the driver's door, and Blade rolled down the window.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I'm tracking you, and I'm not apologizing for it."

She slung her hands on her hips. "Well, I don't appreciate being tracked like an animal."

"You should have told me where you were going, and then I wouldn't have tracked you."

"Where I was going was none of your business."

"It is my business."

"No, it's not. I'm an individual; I have rights."

"Everything about you is my—"

Rat leaned forward and cut Blade off. "What Blade's trying to say and doing a piss-poor job of it, is that we don't know if the threat to you is over yet. The people who destroyed the lab and flew here could be the ones who were trying to kill you. And until we find that out, he'd—we'd—like you know where you're going. That's all."

"I still don't like it," she said.

"We know, but it's only for a little while longer," said Rat.

"Okay. I'll think about it. Now move this tank so I can get my tank out of here."

"You want me to drive you home?" asked Blade.

He watched her roll her lower lip between her teeth, and desire shot through Blade. He wanted to replace that lip with his tongue. She was so sexy when she was pissed. But he was unprepared for her next statement.

"No. Rat can drive me home."

Rage quickly replaced desire. Was she picking Rat over him because she was mad at him or because she liked Rat better?

Rat swallowed hard and glanced at Blade. "I don't think that's a good idea. In fact, I'm positive it's not a good idea."

"No, either Rat drives me or I'll drive myself."

Blade saw the determination in her face. She was pissed at him. But was she sick? Did she need someone to drive her home? She didn't smell sick. Her exhaustion was evident, though, and Miami traffic was a bitch.

Blade turned to Rat. "Drive her home, and I'll pick you up at her house."

"It's not my house," she interjected.

"I'll pick you up at the place where she's staying."

* * *

Blade and Rat locked eyes. No unmated alpha male in his right mind would climb into a vehicle alone with another's mate. Rat knew that controlling the beast was sometimes impossible, and if Blade's beast thought that Rat was encroaching, the beast would appear, and Blade wouldn't be able to stop it. And then he'd have to fight his best friend.

Damn, thought Rat. Women were a lot of fucking trouble.

"It's okay," said Blade. "Drive her home."

"Are you sure?"

Blade inhaled deep. "Yeah, I'm sure." Blade lowered his voice so Zellia couldn't hear. "Just don't touch her."

Rat leaned over and laid the laptop in the backseat, opened his door, and said, "No shit."

He held out his hand, and Zellia dropped her keys in his palm. Rat breathed a sigh of relief.

Rat slipped into the driver's seat and waited until Zellia strapped herself in. When Rat reached the freeway, he filled his nose with her scent.

And thanked God that he didn't detect another male on her.

"So," said Zellia. "Does Blade track all his...acquaintances?"

"Nope. Only you."

"I don't believe you."

"It's true."

"Why does he act like that?"

Because he loves you. Hell, he couldn't tell her that. That information had to come from Blade. And he sure as hell couldn't tell her that Blade's beast had decided that she belonged to him.

"He cares about you. If someone were to bump into you, Blade would probably kill the guy."

"That's why I had to leave."

Rat held up his hand. "Don't tell me that. I don't want to know shit like that."

"Why?"

"Because Blade is going to drill me when we get back home, and I don't want to have to lie to him."

"Don't lie; just tell him it's none of his business."

Yeah, tell a werewolf that the conversation you had with his mate was none of his business. The woman was going to get him killed.

"He smothers me, you know," she said.

"He doesn't mean to. He's just overly protective of you." *Crazy is a better word.*

"He wants to protect you and provide for you and Sarita, and you're making it hard for him to do that since you moved out."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm dying on the inside."

Rat was going out on a weak limb. "I can't imagine what you've gone through. To have a child, hope to find her, and then..." Rat let his voice trail off as her sadness bombarded his nose. "Blade will give you all the time you need." *Even if I have to lock him up.* "But don't shut him off completely. He needs you, and you need him. You're good for each other."

"I went to see a shrink today."

Rat cringed. Oh, hell. More information that he didn't need to know.

"That's good," Rat managed to say. He hoped that shrink was a fast miracle worker.

Rat pulled into Zellia's "place she stayed." Blade was leaning against the Hummer, a scowl on his face. Blade moved to open Zellia's door, and Rat exited from the car, aware of the volatility of the situation.

* * *

"How about another date tonight? Pizza and a movie at my place. We'll swing by Victoria's and pick up Sarita. The guys miss her and want to see her," said Blade.

Indecision flitted across her face.

Blade leaned into her and whispered in her ear, "And I want to be with you."

The doctor had told her that it would take time to heal her heart, but she shouldn't push everyone away while she healed. She'd told the doctor that she didn't want to use Sarita to replace her daughter, the daughter that she may never find, and the doctor told her that Sarita was a beautiful gift and that her confusion was normal.

The doctor also told her to live, enjoy life, that she was blessed.

Zellia looked into Blade's eyes. She was blessed, blessed that he wanted to be with her.

"Yes, that's a wonderful idea."

"Zellia," Rat said. "I'll take your vehicle and pick up Sarita from Victoria. And you two can take Blade's."

Zellia turned to Rat and shielded her eyes from the setting sun. "Sure. I'll get her stuff, and we'll meet you there."

They watched Rat leave, and then Blade followed her into the house. She heard the door close behind her right before Blade spun her around and pressed her against the wall. His mouth slammed against hers as he lifted her leg and placed it on his hip.

"I miss you, Zellia," he said against her lips. His nostrils flared. "And I think you miss me too."

Her hands fisted in his hair as she kissed him back. She did miss him, more than she should, more than she wanted to admit. He ground his hard erection against her mound, and a moan escaped. She breathed in his male scent, increasing her hunger.

"I do miss you," she whispered.

He left her lips and kissed her cheek and then her earlobe, his breath warm against her skin. She tilted her head, giving him complete access. She pressed her palms against his chest, feeling the hard ridges of his pecs.

He stopped and cupped her face. "Go get Sarita's things."

What?

"Tell me that you're mine tonight. That you'll submit fully to me, so that I can pleasure you like I've been wanting to since I bent you over the credenza in Manuel's office."

Whatever he wanted, she'd give it to him, because she knew he'd pleasure her beyond her wildest dreams. She knew the game he played, setting her on fire and then making her wait, but she wanted him. Zellia looked into his eyes.

"Yes."

* * *

Blade waited until Zellia was out of the room before he turned and banged his head on the wall where he'd just had her sweet body pinned. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her; his nose told him that much. It had taken all his willpower not to strip her naked right here and fuck her senseless, but he'd made a

promise to himself that the next time he took her, it would be in his bed where he could pleasure her all night.

And tonight was that night.

Chapter Twenty-one

Zellia trembled as Blade lead her up the stairs, and she wondered if it was possible for one's heart to explode from sheer anticipation. His hand was warm against her back as he ushered her into his room.

Blade closed the door and then gently grabbed her arms and turned her to face him. "You're my slave tonight. I won't hurt you, only pleasure you. No means no. All you have to do is say it. Understand?"

His thumbs teased her skin, and she recognized his lust for her in his eyes. No, he wouldn't hurt her. She trusted him more than she trusted anyone.

She nodded.

"Take a shower and shave your pussy for me."

She started to protest, but he cocked a brow. "Take the scissors and trim it first; then shave it. Open the box I left in there only when you're ready to dress. Leave your hair down and then come back to me."

Blade released her, turned her around, and gently pushed her toward the bathroom.

She went, but her mind was spinning from what he'd asked her to do. Most of the ladies Manuel brought home were shaven, but she'd never really thought much about it until now.

She quickly showered and shaved. Shaving her pubic area wasn't easy, and she hoped she didn't nick anything vital. When she'd decided that was the best that she could do, she dried off, eyeing the pink box with a big pink bow on the counter the whole time. A gift. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten a gift. She

slid the bow off, careful to keep it intact, and removed the top and laid it aside. She took a deep breath and eased back the tissue.

Her breath caught in her throat. They were beautiful. She lifted the lacy black silk bra, complete with rhinestones, out of the box and held it up to her. Eyeing herself in the mirror, Zellia wondered if she could do the lace justice. Then she noticed that it didn't have any cups; her breasts would be completely bare. She slipped on the bra and eyed herself in the mirror. The fit was perfect, even though in her mind, it exposed way too much.

She turned back to the box and fingered the black lace garter. She turned it around and found a beautiful pink bow on the back. She slipped on the garter and then the sheer black stockings. The stockings were silk and felt like nothing she'd ever felt before. She fastened the stockings in place with the garters that were pink silk ribbons to match the bow.

No panties. Of course Blade wouldn't give her panties. She gazed in the mirror, a little amazed at the picture created by the black lace. She felt beautiful. Zellia glanced at her bald spot. The air felt cool on her nether lips, and she blushed. With one last look in the mirror, she took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped into the bedroom. The room was aglow with candles. The flames danced in the slight breeze, creating a warm, romantic atmosphere.

"Step into the light."

She obeyed as anticipation rolled within her.

"Now turn slowly, so I can see you."

She did as he asked, glancing in his direction, but he was hidden in the shadows.

"You are beautiful," he said.

"I feel beautiful."

"Now go to the side of the bed and face it."

Her belly lurched. Excitement raced along her skin as she made her way to the bed on shaky legs.

“Pick up the handcuffs and cuff your hands behind your back.”

With trembling hands, she picked up the velvet-lined cuffs and snapped them on her wrists, the clicking echoing in the room.

“Very good, slave. Bend over the bed.”

She did as he said and felt the ribbons sensually slide over her behind. Her heavy breasts fell forward.

“Now lift your right foot.”

She followed his instruction, and she felt him strap on a shoe. He asked for her other foot, and when she shifted her feet, she found that she was standing on a three-inch heel. She'd never worn heels. Heels weren't meant for cripples.

Blade held her arm to steady her, and when he finished strapping on the second shoe, she asked, “Can I see them?”

“Not now. Maybe later. But I'll tell you what you look like.”

She heard him move away.

“I see a beautiful woman bound before me on sexy heels with silk stockings that were meant to stir a man's blood. Little ribbons are displayed across her wonderful, luscious ass, held in place by a garter made for sinning. Her round breasts are full and heavy, the nipples tight points of need. And from behind I can see that her pussy is bald, and soon it will be glistening with arousal.”

His words floated over her, making her aware of how he perceived her. She wanted to be beautiful and sinful just for him. She jumped when he ran his finger down her cleft and into her warm folds as lust surged through her. Her legs almost gave way. This was what she wanted. His touch.

“You're wet for me.”

She nodded.

“Back in the jungle, I told you that your ass was mine. I'm claiming it tonight, slave. Now spread your legs wider.”

She heard the *pop*, and then cool gel flowed over her anus. She clenched as his finger breached her puckered flesh. He pushed his finger in and out slowly. She felt more gel, and then her womb contracted as two fingers invaded her.

“Relax.”

He kept working her butt, but he never kept the rhythm long enough to satisfy her. He withdrew his fingers, and she immediately missed the pressure against her sensitive ring. She felt her juices trickle against her clitoris, just like he said.

“Now, slave, I'm inserting a butt plug. It's bigger than my two fingers and bigger than my knife handle. Don't fight it. Push back against it, and it will go in easier.”

She instinctively tilted her hips forward when something cool pressed against her. He smacked her behind.

“Don't, slave.”

Zellia arched her back and relaxed as the sting from his hand lessened. She felt the push, the pain as it slipped a little farther inside her. The plug retreated and pressed back in; then, with a final push, it lodged deep within her. She recoiled as her body adjusted to the pressure. *Smack*.

Blade pressed against her back. “It will only sting for a minute. I promise.”

He trailed his finger from the middle of her back and down her cleft. She held her breath when he stopped at the plug, and she flinched when he pressed against it. Then he skimmed down and slowly pushed his finger between her feminine folds.

* * *

Blade's body was on fire for her, and his beast, well, his beast was pushing to get out. But Blade couldn't let that happen. He didn't want to turn Zellia. He couldn't create a crippled wolf. He had to be strong, stronger than his beast. Zellia's life depended on it.

After crossing the room, he stopped in front of his cabinet, punched in the code, and the doors sprang open. He retrieved his favorite cock ring, spreader bar, a short chain, another pair of handcuffs, a handcuff key, and a vibrator. He placed all the items on the bed except for the chain and handcuffs. He looped the chain over the hook in the ceiling before he walked back to the bed.

Leaning over, he whispered in her ear. "You are my beautiful, bound slave."

He released one of her wrists. She turned to him, and he helped her from the bed. "Stand under the chain, spread your legs wide, and raise your arms."

Zellia tilted her head up and looked at the chain hanging from the ceiling, and Blade saw terror slide across her face. "Remember," he said, "I will never hurt you."

She slowly turned her face to him, and he saw that she believed him. She slowly raised her arms over her head and widened her stance. He took the cuff that was still on her wrist and attached it to the chain, and he used the second pair of handcuffs to cuff her other wrist to the chain.

* * *

Zellia looked into Blades' eyes and saw lust, lust for her. Having her arms over her head pushed her ample breasts forward, her nipples tight buds. Blade leaned forward and captured one in his mouth, and she couldn't hold back the moan. He licked it, sucked it, and then bit it, and her womb convulsed as pleasure mixed with pain shot through her.

He let go of her nipple and smiled. He got a bar, and she watched him cuff one ankle to the bar, spread her legs wider, and then cuff her other ankle.

"This is called a spreader bar. It's to keep you open to me at all times."

He stepped before her and brushed his lips against hers. She leaned forward, but he backed away. God, she wanted him to just take her. She felt her juices slide from her body, her breasts ache with longing. The plug didn't hurt, but the weight and pressure added to her arousal. He dropped to his knees, and she held her breath.

His tongue snaked out and moved across her clit.

“Oh, my God,” she cried.

She tried to press forward, but the cuffs and spreader bar prevented her. She was completely at his mercy. She tried but couldn't angle for more pressure.

“You're so fucking wet.”

His tongue slid into her channel, and she moaned as her head fell back. And then he stopped. She opened her eyes and looked down.

“You want to ask me something, slave.”

She could barely form a coherent thought, much less a sentence.

“How about 'please tongue-fuck me, Master.’”

She swallowed hard. “Yes, please tongue-fuck me, Master.”

He smiled and then flattened his tongue and raked it across her clit before sliding it between her warm, sweet folds. His tongue darted in and out, driving her insane with need, and then he clamped down on her clit and sucked hard. She couldn't take it any longer. Her orgasm rolled through her forcefully. Her body jerked as he slid his tongue inside her.

When the aftershocks subsided, he stood and kissed her. She tasted herself on his lips.

“Say 'thank you, Master.’”

She swallowed. “Thank you, Master.”

Blade sat on the bed and said, “Watch me, slave.”

Zellia lifted her head.

“I'm going to put on my cock ring.”

Blade opened the cock ring and placed it at the base of his cock. “Don't look away,” he ordered.

He clamped the ring shut, and the teeth bit into his flesh. He hissed as sweat popped out on his brow.

He lifted his gaze to Zellia. "Don't worry, slave. This is self-inflicted pain, and I like it."

Her eyes narrowed as he slowly stroked his cock.

"See what you do to me? Just looking at you makes me want to come."

He stood and removed the handcuffs from her wrists. Her arms ached as the blood rushed back to them, but she didn't care. She couldn't pull her eyes from Blade's engorged penis. The head was thick and ruddy, and the base of his cock bulged around the ring. He released her from the leg shackles and held her steady as he walked her to the bed.

"Lean over and place your face on the bed, and spread your glorious legs for me."

She remembered that this was his favorite position. The plug pulled when she changed positions, and thinking about what he was going to do next made her sex quiver. She felt her juices slide from her body, across her sensitive nub.

With her head turned to the side, she watched him open a foil pack and roll on the condom. His hips bucked when he slathered his cock with lube. He picked up a vibrator and moved to stand behind her.

"I'm going to double fuck my pretty slave."

She felt cold, hard plastic nudge her folds, and she relaxed against the invasion. He pulled it out and pushed it back in, and the sensations made her moan.

"Does that feel good to your pussy, slave?"

She bit her lower lip. "Yes, Master."

The sweet sensation created by the ribs of the vibrator felt different, erotic to the point that she felt herself pushing against his upward stroke.

"Use your hand and hold the vibrator for me. Don't move it; keep it still."

She slipped her hand down between her legs and grabbed the vibrator from him, her body contracting at the thought of her pleasuring herself. Blade dislodged

the plug from her butt, and she instantly missed the wicked pressure. She felt his hands anchor her hips and his engorged flesh press against her swollen tissue.

“I've wanted to fuck your ass since the first day I saw you bent over that credenza.”

Her tight opening clenched as his cock pressed against her. “Just relax. Push back against me,” he said. “That's it.”

She trusted him and opened herself to him. She gasped when he pushed his thick head past her tight ring. White-hot pain shot through her, but her womb clenched, and she wondered why the pain had turned her on.

“How does it feel, slave?”

“It burns.” But it was so erotic, teetering between pain and pleasure. She didn't understand it.

“Is it a good burn?”

“Yes, Master. I want more.”

With a growl, he buried himself balls-deep. She felt him slide against the vibrator. He filled her, pressed against sensitive tissue, and her body welcomed the invasion.

“God, your ass is so fucking tight around my cock.”

Blade leaned forward, slipped his hand beneath her, and touched the vibrator. In seconds, she felt vibrations inside her.

She tried to squirm and wiggle, but he held her still.

“Say it.”

“Please, Blade.”

He pulled a few inches out and plunged back in. “Please what?”

“Please make me come.” Her voice was ragged as she tried to breathe.

“No.”

“No?”

“You're my slave. I always want you to say cock, fuck, and pussy. Say 'please fuck my pussy.'”

Her lone hand fisted in the covers. She needed more, faster, harder. “Please fuck my pussy harder, Master.”

She heard a growl as he pulled back and slammed against her. Her body clenched as he pounded her; with each push in, his penis nudged the vibrator. The sound of flesh slapping flesh increased, and her body coiled as too many sensations assaulted her. Waves of pleasure washed over her as the most powerful orgasm she'd ever had sent her soaring, touching every part of her body and her mind with pure pleasure.

* * *

Blade was on fire, his body shaking from the sensation of his cock sliding inside her tight ass. He watched his cock slip in up to his cock ring, and then back out of her swollen flesh. He felt her pulse around him as her orgasm consumed her.

His fangs descended, and the urge to bend over her and bite the tender flesh of her shoulder was strong, almost too strong to resist. His wolf wanted to mate, to claim what nature had blessed him with. Blade forced himself to stay upright, focusing on her fine ass dressed in lace and a bow. The vibrator still pulsed against his cock, and the cock ring pushed him toward the euphoria of pain. He felt her twitch.

“Oh God, Master. I'm going to come again.”

He felt her pulse around his cock again as her muscles gripped him, and he couldn't hold back. With a roar, he cried her name, and his release shot from him, the cock ring biting.

He watched Zellia sleep, and a single tear slipped from his eye. He wanted to mate with her so badly, and to know that he could never do that hurt his heart, not to mention that it angered his beast. But he'd take what she could give, because

he'd never endanger her. There wasn't a lot of literature on turning someone who had a physical ailment, but he loved her too much to turn her and find out she would still be a crippled wolf, one who wouldn't be able to defend herself properly.

No, he loved her too much to do that to her.

Chapter Twenty-two

Zellia sat in the big conference room that someone called the *war room*. Blade was on her right, and scattered around the table were Rat and the other men. Something that looked a lot like the console of a spaceship held several computers, and big monitors hung on each wall. She didn't know what this meeting was about, and neither did Blade, but Rat had made it mandatory for everybody, including her.

She smiled when she noticed that most of them were carrying baby monitors. That was in addition to their cell phones and weapons—she saw knives and guns—that were clearly visible on all of them. Apparently, around this crowd, you just weren't dressed unless you were carrying something deadly.

The door opened, and Victoria and Hayden came in with Sarita. Zellia smiled at Hayden, so happy that Victoria was alive for him. She never wanted to see that kind of despair on any man ever again.

Zellia watched Victoria lean into Hayden. Something sparkled in Victoria's eyes. Zellia wanted that. Wanted that with Blade. She knew she could fall for Blade so easily. He was funny, serious, and kind to her. But she also knew that he wasn't her type, and she definitely wasn't his.

Victoria handed Sarita to Zellia. Sarita smelled like baby lotion, and Zellia inhaled deep. The doctor was right: Sarita was a wonderful, precious gift. Bright eyes stared back at her, and a tear slipped down Zellia's cheek. She was so happy to have Sarita in her life.

Rat cleared his throat. “No crying in the war room. It tends to short-circuit the equipment.”

Zellia wiped her cheek and mouthed *sorry*.

Rat's fingers flew over the keyboard, and a picture of a mansion displayed on one of the monitors. "This is the house where the people we tracked from Colombia are hiding."

At the *click* of a key, a picture of a man appeared on the monitor. "This is Dr. Rico Hidalgo. He specializes in behavioral sciences."

The screen flashed. "This is Dr. Diego Fonseca, and he's a geneticist." Rat rattled off each doctor's laundry list of accomplishments.

"Do you know these two?" asked Blade.

Zellia shook her head.

The screen flashed again, and a beautiful little girl filled all the monitors in the room. Each monitor contained a different shot.

Zellia stared at each picture on the monitors.

"This beautiful little girl was brought here from Colombia. Have you seen her before?" asked Rat.

Zellia shook her head slowly as unease settled over her.

"Zellia," said Rat. Rat pointed to the screen. "Could that be your daughter?"

Zellia was speechless as possibilities crowded her mind. What if it wasn't her child, but someone else's? Her hope had been shattered last time, along with the jungle lab, and she didn't think she would survive another disappointment. She didn't want to hope and then lose. She couldn't go through that again. Tears lodged in her throat as she stared at the screen for a long time. Did the child look like her baby pictures? The beautiful child had big eyes with lots of dark, curly hair.

"She looks like you," said Victoria. "Same eyes."

It was too hard to tell, too hard to hope for.

"Aryiola," Zellia finally said.

"Aryiola?" asked Blade.

"That's my daughter's name. It means fortune-teller."

The room was silent, the only sound the humming of the equipment, as each man and woman processed the hope of the moment.

"I've never seen my daughter," she felt compelled to add.

Zellia couldn't pull her eyes from the screen. Could that be her daughter? The child she'd never met?

Rat pressed a key, and the monitor changed.

"That's Fidel Véliz. He's Aryiola's father," Zellia claimed.

Zellia glanced down at Sarita and took a deep breath to calm her jangled nerves. "You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," she managed to get out.

The men shifted in their seats, and Blade said, "Give us a try, honey."

"I have a gift," said Zellia. "I...I have dream visions. I don't control the dream visions. They control me. When they feel like it, they slam into my brain while I'm sleeping. I knew you were coming to rescue Victoria," Zellia looked up and said to Hayden. Then she looked at Blade. "And I knew I would be chased by a wolf in the jungle, on a continent that doesn't even have wolves. And I knew before we arrived that the lab had burned."

Sarita squirmed, and Victoria fetched a bottle from the diaper bag and handed it to Zellia.

"I didn't birth Aryiola. Fidel Véliz took my eggs against my will, fertilized them with his sperm, and placed them in a host. I was only told of Aryiola's birth. Véliz has visions too, but his are flashes while he's conscious. Véliz wants to create a super visionary." Zellia grew quiet, then said, "I was never allowed to see my daughter, but Manuel would drop hints about her."

"Manuel knew of your talent?"

"Yes."

"And your father?" asked Blade.

She made sure Sarita was eating before she whispered, "Yes."

Zellia swallowed the lump in her throat as hope fluttered anew. “So am I one hundred percent sure that she's my daughter? No. Véliz could have found other visionary donors.” She turned to Blade. “But I have to find out, even if it means she belongs to someone else. It's been six and a half years. I have to know.” *Even if it kills me.*

The room remained silent as Zellia placed the half-empty bottle on the table and laid Sarita on her shoulder. She gently patted Sarita's back as she glanced around the room, trying to gauge what everyone was thinking. They must think she was borderline psychotic.

But Zellia's fear quickly turned to hope. Hope was a wonderful thing. Her daughter may be right there in Miami.

“When are we going in?” asked Blade.

Rat grinned. “Tonight.”

A smile played around Blade lips. “Tonight,” echoed Blade.

Blade turned to Zellia, took her hand, and gave it a squeeze. “Why don't you run back to the”—Blade grinned—“place you stay, and pack yourself and Sarita an overnight bag. You can stay here tonight with Victoria while we...handle things.”

Fear squeezed Zellia's heart as she thought about what could possibly happen to these people whom she now considered friends. She glanced around the room at the hard faces that stared back at her. Then their faces revealed determination. The room hummed with adrenaline.

Zellia turned to Blade. “I don't suppose you're going to walk up, knock on the door, and ask to see her?”

Blade shook his head. “Don't worry. We know what we're doing.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “You're going to kill them?” she whispered.

“Don't forget they killed all those innocent people at the lab.”

The men around the table shifted in their seats as they murmured among themselves. There was something so wrong about this. She was a doctor. She gave

life. Zellia closed her eyes and hugged Sarita close her body. Sarita's little body held life, and she would fight for Sarita. She might even kill for her.

Suddenly, Sarita's loud burp echoed in the room, and everyone chuckled.

“Well,” said Blade, “let's go get your daughter.”

Blade leaned over, kissed Zellia, and then sniffed. Blade wrinkled his nose.

“Rat, Sarita needs a diaper change.”

“Listen, buddy,” said Rat. “I'll make you a deal. I'll change her diaper while you go shovel the goat shit out of Gertrude's pen.

Blade looked at him. “Gertrude's in a pen?”

“I had to put her in a pen when she started chewing the tires on the Hummers.”

Zellia started laughing and couldn't stop. Leave it to a goat to decide that she liked designer tires.

Chapter Twenty-three

An hour later, Blade met Rat in the war room to review the plan before briefing the rest of the team. Blade would be primary, going in first. He had the most to gain, and he certainly had the most to lose, so he'd lay his life on the line first. His body was already humming with pent-up emotions. He wanted his hands around Fidel Véliz's lousy neck when that bastard drew his last breath.

Blade glanced at the picture displayed on Rat's screen. It was of an older gentleman, late fifties, early sixties, gray hair, gray beard, wearing black glasses.

"Who's that?" asked Blade, pointing to the man next to him.

Tension sliced through the air, and Rat slowly turned toward Blade. Rat's face was white, as if he'd seen a ghost. "That's your favorite contractor that lives next door to Zellia. Brad Rollins."

Blade's heart stopped as his body contracted, forcing all the air from his lungs. Blackness invaded his vision and fear gripped his body. His body revolted as he gulped in a deep breath. When his vision cleared, his beast roared. "Hell, no. That's not Brad Rollins."

Blade turned and sprinted from the room as Rat sent a distress message telling all members to meet at Zellia's.

* * *

Blade slid into Zellia's driveway, shoved the Hummer into park, and jumped from the vehicle before it stopped rolling. His heart thudded as his long strides ate up the ground. He pulled his SIG as he stood by the open door and stopped to listen. Hearing nothing, he peeked around the door, noting the overturned table that stood beside the door. He eased inside, keeping his SIG ready.

The scent of Zellia's fear was strong.

And he smelled Bradley.

Damn! How could he be so stupid? It was dumb not to do a background check with a visual verification of each person within a three-block radius before she moved in. And the key word was visual. Blade had been more concerned about other werewolves being near her instead of a werewolf pretending to be a neighbor, stalking her, waiting for the right moment to kidnap her. The real Brad Rollins was certainly dead.

Blade heard the faint sound of a hawk, which signaled that Rat was coming in and not to shoot him. Blade motioned Rat to go right and another man to go left as he took the stairs. Blade knew that the others were stationed outside, searching for his mate. There was no scent of fear upstairs, but he had to check.

He heard two "clears" and signaled his own.

Blade stood in her bedroom and dropped his head back to stare aimlessly at the ceiling. "Dear God, please keep her and Sarita safe." When he got her back...if he got her back, she was moving in with him, whether she liked it or not.

When Blade got downstairs, Rat's fingers were already clicking away on his laptop. He stood behind Rat as the screen played the video of the abduction from the security tape. Bradley had ambushed her just as Zellia opened the door. The team watched Bradley shove Zellia against the wall, toppling the table. And through all of it, Zellia had hung on to Sarita's carrier, shielding her from Bradley.

Sarita didn't like being jostled, and she let out a wail in protest. Blade watched the surprise on Zellia's face quickly turn to fear.

Blade's claws eased from his fingers, and his fangs dropped down. Bradley was a dead man.

"Tell me where she is," Blade ground out.

Rat borrowed the government's satellites again, and the team watched Rat replay Bradley's truck leaving Zellia's, getting on I-95, and heading south.

It didn't take long. "Damn it," said Rat. "He's taking her to Véliz."

Chapter Twenty-four

“Why did you bring the brat?”

Tim really hated the current prick he worked for, but he paid well and paid often. “I didn't know if you wanted it or not.”

Véliz was unpredictable. If Tim didn't bring in the brat, the guy would be unsatisfied, and since he did bring in the brat, he was still unsatisfied. And Tim couldn't call him, because he was conveniently at an art gallery with state-of-the-art surveillance, complete with a time stamp.

“It's not hers. She's never been pregnant. Get rid of it.”

“Cost you an extra 10 g's.”

Véliz opened his desk drawer, retrieved three envelopes, and slid them across the desk to Tim.

Tim took them and stuffed them into his jacket pocket.

“You're not going to count it?”

Tim shook his head. “If you short me, I'll shoot you.”

Véliz threw his head back and laughed, and Tim almost snarled aloud.

“It's nice to do business with someone who truly understands the business.”

Tim managed to smile and not growl. “Call me if you need my services again.”

Tim walked to the door and opened it. “Oh,” Tim said. “Just one more thing. The people who are coming to rescue her are not normal people. You're probably going to die.”

“Don't you think I know who Zellia has conned into helping her? I know everything. I own this town. I'm fully equipped to handle anything,” the arrogant man answered.

Tim grinned. “Yeah, I think you are too.”

Not.

“You could stay and help.”

“I don't do protection work.”

“Don't kid yourself,” said Véliz. “You'll do anything for money.”

And that was the issue. He wanted to live long enough to spend the money. He had a charter plane waiting to take him to Vegas, and he felt lucky. One more loose end to tie up, and then he was going to pick him two lovely ladies and fuck the hell out of them. And if they were real good, he'd let them live.

* * *

Véliz's compound was heavily secured, but it was nothing they couldn't handle. The problem was the time. A couple of hours had passed, and that was too long. Anything could have happened to Zellia and Sarita. Blade's comm brought him information that the team was in place. Blade pulled his SIG, chambered a bullet, and stuck it in his back, and then he readied his AK. His metal was the appetizer, his bare hands the entrée.

“Blade,” said Rat. “Our Bradley imposter has just taken Sarita toward the swamp one hundred meters to your right.” Rat rattled off the coordinates.

Blade eased to his right, silently moving through the brush. Only his team or Bradley could possibly hear him.

“Hayden and Victoria, converge on those coordinates; everybody else, hold your positions,” Blade whispered. “And remember, he's one of us. He can smell us coming.”

When Blade reached the party, Bradley stood in the middle of Rat, Victoria, and Hayden. Blade completed the circle.

Bradley clutched Sarita over his heart with his 9-mil aimed at her head. Little Sarita's head lolled to the side, her eyes were closed, and she wasn't crying. Blade could hear her faint breath.

"You drugged her? That's a little excessive for an infant, don't you think?" asked Blade.

Bradley smiled. "Yeah, these things make too much damn noise."

"She's not a thing, and you are going to die," Blade growled.

"If I die, she dies too. The way I see this playing out is that I'm going to walk out of here with this brat, or she's going to die along with me."

"That's where you're wrong, *Bradley*. Oh, that's right. That's not your real name. You're dead anyway. You were dead the moment you entered Zellia's house."

"My name is Tim."

"Okay, *Timothy*."

Timothy was sure of himself, but most werewolves were. Blade was patient, waiting for Timothy to give him an opening. Everybody fucked up eventually. Blade planted his feet, crossed his arms, and waited.

Timothy made a step to his right, and Hayden and Rat moved to cut him off.

"You see, *Timothy*, if we let you leave here with Sarita, you'll kill her the first chance you get. Sarita's chances are better here."

"Then you've just guaranteed her death." Tim looked at the baby. "Why do you care about this brat anyway? She's not yours, and she's certainly not a wolf pup."

Blade smelled Victoria's anger rise as maternal instincts kicked in. Timothy had better make his mistake soon, or Victoria was going to combust.

"Sarita is not a brat. She's a human being with people who love her, people who'd kill for her," said Blade.

"Then you'd better figure out how to let me and her live."

"Why don't you just hand her to Victoria, and we'll let you walk. I'll give you a week's head start, and then I'm coming after you."

Timothy frowned. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I'm a man of my word, my word that you can leave here today, unharmed, and my word that I'll kill you when I find you."

Everyone waited as Timothy played the scenario out in his pea brain. Timothy shifted, and Sarita's head rolled the other way, causing everyone to tense.

"No deal," Timothy finally said. "The kid goes with me, and I'll call you and let you know where she is."

"No deal," answered Blade. "Of all the people standing in this swamp, you're the least trustworthy."

Timothy waved the gun away from Sarita's head as he opened his mouth to say something.

Opportunity.

Blade grabbed his knife from the scabbard that hung on his back, flicked his wrist, and sent the knife sailing through the air. The blade entered Timothy's left eye, and he was dead before he could reposition his gun against Sarita.

Hayden moved swiftly and caught Sarita as Timothy slumped to the ground. Hayden cradled Sarita, and Blade watched as Victoria examined her for any injuries. Victoria lifted Sarita's eyelids to examine her pupils and then checked her pulse.

"Her pulse is strong," said Victoria.

Bastard! What type of man would drug a child? "Hayden," said Blade. "You and Victoria take Sarita to the ER and have her checked out. Flash your DEA badge and explain away what happened to her."

Hayden handed Sarita to Victoria, and Blade watched them disappear through the swamp before he turned back to Timothy and crouched beside Rat. Timothy was dead. The blade had pierced his brain. Blade pulled his knife from Timothy's eye and wiped it on Timothy's shirt.

"I'll take him to the truck," said Rat, "and dispose of him later. I'll meet you inside."

Blade nodded to Rat before melting into the night. His beast wanted out, out to kill. His mate was in danger, and nothing short of death would stop him from finding her. It was simple, basic animal instinct.

* * *

Zellia fought the inky cloud that had captured her mind. She just wanted to sleep, but some instinct told her to fight the murky blackness. Something was wrong, and she needed to fix it. She winced when she finally cracked her eyes, the harsh medical lights overhead stabbed into her brain like a hot poker, and she shivered as she felt the cold, hard metal table at her back. She had a splitting headache, nausea, and her tongue was thick.

She'd been drugged.

She tried to sit up but found that her wrists were bound by leather restraints. She tugged against the leather. Why was she tied to a steel table? She tried to swallow, but it was almost impossible.

"Zellia, welcome to my lab."

She craned her head to find the unfamiliar voice that echoed off the cold, sterile walls.

"We finally meet."

She closed her eyes as realization struck her. *Véliz*. It all came rushing back. Brad had attacked her and Sarita.

"Where's Sarita?" she asked.

"She's been disposed of."

"Nooooo."

"It wasn't yours, so it had no value to me. You, on the other hand, have become extremely valuable."

Véliz came and stood beside Zellia. She searched his face for any sign that he was kidding, that she'd mistakenly heard him, but she saw nothing but malice.

"You killed a child? Why couldn't you just drop her off at an orphanage or something?" she choked, and a tear slid down her temple and into her ear. Pain squeezed her heart. Sarita dead? Zellia closed her eyes as visions of little Sarita played through her mind, images of her stretching, yawning, smiling, and crying. How Blade handled her like she was a rare Ming vase, and Rat had issued everyone baby monitors, and how all the guys doted on her. Yes, Sarita was loved.

"You've made a grave mistake, Véliz. People cared about her, and they won't stop until you pay."

Véliz's grin grated on her nerves. "Are you talking about your friends? I know all about them. They may be good at rescuing people from half-ass, wannabe thugs, but this is a fortress. State-of-the-art everything. And I hire only the best."

Zellia laughed, the hollow sound reverberating in the cold room. "You've never met Blade."

She thought back to what Blade had told her. *This is my job, and I'm damn good at it.* And how he'd escaped certain death from Ortiz's guards.

"He's the best. And...and he loved Sarita." *Like she was his own...and he might even love me too.*

"Let's not waste time discussing what will never come to be."

She heard the door open. Footsteps echoed across the floor, and two men stopped beside the table. "This is Dr. Hidalgo and Dr. Fonseca. They're going to give you a physical and then start your fertility treatments."

Fertility treatments? The damn slimy bastard. She should have known that that was the only reason she was still alive. "What about my daughter?"

"My daughter. She's not yours; you were only a donor. Aryiola's brilliant, by the way. Far more powerful than I'd ever imagined. That's why I need your eggs. I

need more just like her, hopefully a boy this time. Boys should be more powerful than girls.”

“I want to see her.”

“I don't know about that. You'd really be better off if you didn't meet her, and I know she'd be better off. No bonding. And I don't want her sidetracked. Her training is coming along nicely, and you'll only distract her from her strengthening exercises.”

She had to think. Zellia didn't care about what Véliz did to her, but she had to see her daughter. She had to figure out how to get Aryiola away from this madman, because if things didn't go as Véliz wanted, he'd dispose of Aryiola too, just like he was going to dispose of her when he got her eggs.

“I promise not to disrupt her training, and maybe I could even help. She may respond better with me around. Maybe she needs a woman's touch.” *Or love.*

She knew it sounded lame, but right now, that was all she could dig out of her fuddled brain. Véliz paced beside the table, his face betraying nothing. She hoped he was at least considering her comments.

Véliz finally stopped. “There may be some merit to that; I'll think about it.” He then turned and strode to the door. “When you get through with her exam, have the guards send her up to my room and tie her to my bed. Maybe she can convince me to let her see Aryiola.”

* * *

Blade eased down the hallway, checking each room as he went. His beast was working overtime, pulling microscents from the air, hearing flies buzz and critters crawl, but no Zellia. His nose detected faint smells of several people who had passed this way, but none within the past hour. His instincts said that she wasn't on this floor, but he had to check for Aryiola. He didn't know her scent, but it probably was sweet like her mother's.

Blade searched the last room and then headed for the stairwell at the end of the hall. From the blueprints that Rat had extracted from city hall, he knew there was a single third-story room at the top of a winding staircase.

On silent feet, Blade took the stairs one at a time, testing each to see if it creaked. He heard voices, one child and one adult. It had to be her. It had to be Aryiola. When Blade reached the top step, he stopped at the door that was slightly ajar and listened. He couldn't see the occupants, but the child was calm.

"I know my mommy's here. I want to see her."

"My sweet. You are so powerful. I purposely made sure that she was hidden from you, but you know anyway."

"I want to see her."

"And what will you do for me if I let you see her?"

"I don't know."

"I want you to move objects with your mind."

"I can't do that."

"Move that ball on the table with your mind, and I'll give you what you want."

"I can't," she whispered.

"Then you can't see your mother."

"I know you're outside the door."

Blade shook his head. He was hearing things.

"You're not hearing things. You've come to rescue my mommy and me."

"Yes," answered Blade, hoping she could hear him in return. *"How can you talk to me in my head?"*

"It's a gift, much like you being a werewolf."

"How do you know these things?"

"I'm able to read your mind. After you save me, I promise not to do it again."

Blade smiled. That would be like asking him not to smell someone's emotions.

"He's going to slice my throat."

"I will not let—"

"It's okay. I'm not ready to die yet. I want to see my mommy. You'll just have to turn me. Mom won't care. Well, she might in the beginning, but she'll see the reasoning. And you can turn her. Her leg won't be a problem."

"I won't let him touch a hair on your head."

"It doesn't work that way. You can't change what I see, even though you know what's going to happen."

"That's what your mother said."

Blade was amazed. Talking with this child was like talking to an adult.

"And then you can turn mother and Sarita. I can't wait to see my baby sister."

"You know about Sarita?"

"You love her just like you do my mother. And you'll love me too. One day Mommy's going to have another baby. It's a boy."

Blade's heart stopped beating in his chest as that information slammed into him. Zellia would one day give him a son? *"How can you possibly know that?"*

"I just see things. Of course, you may not want to save me."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I want to save you."

"People will always be trying to kidnap me. I see things and read people's minds. He has already told some people about me."

"At least he didn't know about your mind reading."

"Yes. That is a good thing. It's time."

"Wait. Are you sure I can't change the outcome?"

"I'm sure."

The child moved so that Blade could see her through the crack in the door. She was a small replica of Zellia. Blade watched the child stop and close her eyes, and Blade felt the power radiating from Aryiola.

Véliz knelt in front of Aryiola and grabbed both of her arms. “What is it, Aryiola. What vision do you see?”

She took a deep breath before she opened her eyes. “I see your death.”

Véliz shook Aryiola. “That's not funny,” he screamed. “You will be punished.”

Just as Véliz drew back his hand to slap her, Blade pushed the door open and leveled his gun at Véliz.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” said Blade.

Véliz quickly spun and put Aryiola between himself and Blade. A knife appeared at Aryiola's throat.

Blade cursed. Just like her vision said.

“So you're Aryiola's biological father?” Blade asked.

“Yes. Zellia gave up all rights to her when she became the whore of Manuel.”

Blade frowned. That was not what he expected Véliz to say. “What makes you think she went willingly?”

“Of course she went there of her own free will. He had money, he had power, and he held her father's life in his hands.”

“That doesn't constitute free will. I personally would have let her dad die, but that's just me. Now why don't you let the child go before I kill you?”

“You wouldn't kill the father of your whore's daughter.”

Blade glanced at Aryiola and hoped that she didn't understand those words.

“Sure I would, especially if you call Zellia that again. I've seen you two together just now; Aryiola has no love for you. I wonder why that is? Maybe at the tender age of six she knows that you're exploiting her.”

“I'm six and a half.”

Blade smiled. *“Sorry, darling.”*

“I'm training her. Training her to do what she was born to do.”

"Maybe she doesn't want to be trained. What are you going to do, sell her to the highest bidder?"

"No. Sell her services. She'll make me very rich. Aryiola is powerful, more powerful than Zellia and I together. She has a powerful gift."

"I want to see my mommy."

Blade tried to keep his face passive, but Véliz glanced between Blade and the child.

"I see that she is talking to you, speaking in your mind. I wondered if she was capable of that, but she's been hiding it from me. At six, she's very good at deceiving people."

"She's six and a half," interjected Blade. "And you mean deceiving monsters. I wonder where she learned that."

"One day she'll learn just how profitable deception can be. Aryiola is not stupid. She used to whine for her mother all the time, but then she got wise and stopped."

"You beat Aryi to get what you wanted?" asked Blade.

"Her name is Aryiola, not Aryi," declared Véliz.

"No, I like Aryi."

Blade ginned and looked at Véliz. "She said she likes Aryi, so I think I'll call her that."

Véliz bristled.

"And I think she already likes me better than she likes you," Blade said.

"Enough! Drop your weapon and let me pass, or I swear, I'll take her life right here."

"I don't think you'll kill her. She's too valuable to you."

"I'll kill her before I'd turn her over to you. She's my entire future, mine and no one else's. I made her."

Blade lowered his weapon, bent his knees, and laid his gun on the floor. He raised his hands and stepped away from the door. His gut tightened.

Véliz looped his arm around Aryi's middle and hoisted her up, the blade only inches from her artery. The pair eased out the door and down the winding steps. Blade followed at a safe distance, hoping that for once, the foretelling would be wrong. What good was seeing the future when you couldn't change it?

Blade watched Véliz maneuver the steps and knew the exact moment when the future became the awful present. The bottom of Véliz's expensive bottom loafers slipped on the iron step, sending both of them tumbling down the steps. Blade moved as fast as he could down the steps as Véliz scrambled away from Aryi. The knife protruded from Aryi's neck.

Zellia's wail sent chills up his spine. Blade saw Zellia rush to kneel beside Aryi. He was glad Rat had found her, but he didn't want her to witness this. Anything but this.

"There's so much blood. I can't save her. Someone call 911," cried Zellia.

His heart broke.

Damn, he hated that she had to see this. Blade stood and spoke to one of his men. "Take Véliz to the swamp and turn him loose. I'll be there in a few minutes."

The man jerked Véliz to his feet and ushered him down the hall.

Blade turned to Rat. "Hold Zellia," he said as he removed his harness, unbuttoned his shirt, and let it slide from his shoulders. Rat pulled Zellia to her feet, and she buried her face in his chest. Rat's gaze found Blade's, but Blade didn't acknowledge his questioning look. He just toed off his boots, unbuttoned his cargos, and shoved them to the ground.

"Zellia. Look at me."

She turned her head a little.

"I'm going to show you how we saved Victoria. I'm going to save Aryi the same way."

He saw the confusion in her face, probably because he was standing buck naked over her daughter.

“Watch me, Zellia, and don't be afraid.”

Blade crouched beside Aryi and pulled the knife from her throat.

* * *

She watched as first claws emerged, followed by the sound of breaking bones as Blade transformed into a large wolf. A large *black* wolf. The wolf from the jungle. Zellia squeezed her eyes shut and then snapped them back open. The wolf, Blade, sat looking at her.

The wolf turned away from her, and before she realized what was going to happen, he bit Aryiola's neck.

“No.” She struggled against Rat's hold. “You've got to stop him.”

“It will be fine,” Rat said.

Zellia scanned the room, hoping someone else was sane, but they all stood around like it was a perfectly normal thing for a man to transform into a wolf and bite a child.

“What's he doing?” she finally whispered to Rat.

“He's turning her into a werewolf. Her body can then heal itself.”

“Are you sure he's not killing her?”

“I'm sure.” He nudged her. “Look. Your daughter's about to become a wolf pup. She's got to change to heal.”

The wolf eased back on his haunches and eyed Zellia. A low growl rumbled in the wolf's throat, raising the hairs on her arm.

“It's very important that you don't move or say anything. I'll explain it to you later,” whispered Rat. Rat released her, raised his hands, and stepped back. Blade suddenly had that predator look in his eye, and she was afraid. The breaking of bone pulled her gaze to the body of her lifeless daughter. She saw her daughter's

body contort, and smooth fur replaced her creamy skin. She wanted to go to her daughter, but she was uncertain if Blade would let her.

Then Blade turned and trotted down the hallway.

Rat went and knelt beside the little wolf pup and motioned for Zellia to follow. She approached slowly, unsure of what her own eyes had seen. Unsure of what she was seeing now.

The pup was breathing but seemed to be unconscious. The wound in her neck had stopped bleeding and appeared to be closing.

"Go ahead," said Rat. "You can rub her. We wolves love to be petted."

Zellia slowly extended her trembling hand and laid it on the warm fur. Hope fluttered in her chest at the possibility that her daughter would be saved.

"Where's Blade going?" asked Zellia.

"Hunting."

Her hand went to her throat. "Like he did Ortiz."

"Yep. Blade's not really himself right now. The wolf takes over, and sometimes it is hard to control."

"Why did he turn and growl at me?"

"He wasn't growling at you. He was growling at me."

"But why? You're his friend."

"Because I was touching you."

"That makes no sense."

"You're his mate. Wolves mate for life. I am an unbound male, and I was touching his mate. Blade knows that I meant nothing by it, but his wolf doesn't always understand. There's always a struggle between the wild wolf and the tame man."

Zellia stroked her daughter's muzzle. "Mate. What does that really mean?"

"It's kind a like being married, but it is forever, bound by the laws of nature, not man."

Her daughter whimpered.

"Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine. It just takes time."

"What about Blade?"

"What about him?"

"He can't just go running around killing people."

"That's the part that you'll have to get used to. The wolf lives under a different law, but Blade's a good man."

"And I've never killed anybody who didn't deserve it."

Zellia spun around and stared at Blade. He stood but a few feet away in all his glorious, naked beauty. Zellia felt Rat slip away.

"Did you kill Véliz?"

"Yes. He won't bother you or Aryi again."

"Aryi?"

Blade moved to his clothes and started dressing. "She told me that's what she wants to be called. I think she doesn't want to be called Aryiola because that's what Véliz named her."

When he was dressed, he knelt beside Aryi and stroked her muzzle. He touched the pup's neck. "It's almost healed."

"How will she turn back?"

"She's too young to hold the wolf change for long. She'll change back when she's ready."

"You're sure she's going to be okay?"

Blade looked up at her. "I'm positive. Hayden saved Victoria just like this."

Zellia cupped her hand over her mouth to fight back the tears, but the tears won.

Concern etched Blade's face. "What's wrong?"

"Sarita. Véliz killed her."

"No, he didn't have a chance. We got to her before Bradley could do the deed."

Zellia searched his face for the truth "She's...safe?"

"Yes. Hayden and Victoria took her to the ER because Bradley, whose real name is Timothy, drugged her. He wanted her quiet because she made too much noise."

Zellia couldn't believe it. Sarita was alive, and her daughter was alive. It was beyond comprehension as joy swelled up inside

Zellia threw herself into Blade's arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. "This is the best day of my life. How can I ever repay you?"

"You could move back in with me and marry me."

"Marry you?" Zellia searched his eyes intently. "Is that the wolf talking or the man?"

He grinned. "You know about that, huh?"

"Rat told me. Besides," she dropped her gaze. "I'm not right for you."

"You're right about that. You're not right for me...you're perfect for me."

She frowned and looked back up at him. "But I'm a cripple."

"So? I love you, Zellia. I love everything about you. Your shyness, your laughter, your generosity, everything. You're the only woman for me. But maybe you don't want me."

She grabbed his face with both of her hands. "Oh, don't be ridiculous. You're *my* everything. I just thought you might want someone more...I don't know...sexy."

Blade rolled his eyes. "Haven't I proven that you're the only sexy thing for me? On several occasions. When you'd let me."

“Oh, Blade. I do love you.”

Blade crushed her to him as he took her mouth. She kissed him back, opened her mouth, and let his tongue slide in.

“I'm hungry.”

Zellia jumped away from Blade and gazed at her daughter, who was sitting on a pile of torn clothes. Zellia wasted no time in gathering her daughter to her and hugging her. She'd imagined hugging her daughter for six long years. Now she was finally hugging her. Another tear slipped down Zellia's cheek.

“Hello, Mommy.”

Zellia smiled. “Hello, Aryi.”

“Can we go to McDonald's? I've seen them on TV.”

Zellia turned to Blade and laughed through her tears.

“Sure, Aryi,” said Blade. He crouched down beside them and encircled the two of them in his own hug. “And then we're going home. Together.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Blade's eyes adjusted to the darkness and to outline of the body in the bed.

Hate.

He hated the man in the bed.

His beast pushed against his skin for escape. Escape and kill. Revenge was sweet to the wolf, and this man had to pay for crimes, especially against his mate.

Blade shook the man in the bed. "Get up, old man."

The old man spit and sputtered as he came awake. "What...what's going on?"

"You're being visited by the grim reaper."

Blade handed the old man his glasses. "Here. I want you to see your fate."

With trembling hands, the old man put on the glasses and squinted against the pale light. Blade reached over and turned on the lamp.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"That's not important. You want to explain to me why you sold your only daughter into slavery?"

"Zellia? This is about Zellia?"

"Yes. Answer the question."

"Zellia is dead to me. She should have killed herself instead of becoming a whore."

"Careful, doc. Don't make me kill you before I get all the answers. You've had a good life since you sold Zellia. You live in this fine estate, and I see you're head of the pediatric unit at New York Presbyterian Hospital. I wonder what all those parents would think if they knew you sold your daughter into slavery to a leader of

a Colombian drug cartel to save your own ass. How fine and upstanding would they think you are?"

"All that's in the past, and the past is dead."

"Zellia's not dead."

"She is to me."

"And how about your granddaughter? Is she dead to you too?"

"Granddaughter? Zellia had a bastard child with Manuel?"

Blade ground his teeth together and fought the urge to kill the bastard. "No. She had a bastard child with Véliz after he stole her eggs."

"Boy or girl?"

"Girl."

"Pity."

Blade growled as his hand snaked out and gripped the old man's throat. It would be so simple to crush his windpipe. Blade's nostrils flared before he released the old man with a shove.

The old man grabbed his throat. "Well, I don't know anything about Véliz," he said, his voice raspy.

Blade sniffed. "No? I do hate a liar. Because you sold her in the first place, that makes you responsible for anything that happened to her after you sold her."

"You won't kill me."

"Why not?"

"I sense that you're very enamored with my daughter and granddaughter."

"I am. I'd give my life for them." *That was an understatement.* "But you're right. I won't kill you. You're going to die of a heart attack."

The old man chuckled. "Zellia dreamed that, did she?"

"Actually, no. Your granddaughter saw the vision." Of course, Blade was amazed that Aryi figured out it was her grandfather. Blade was beginning to

wonder if Aryi could read memories too, since no one had ever mentioned the old bastard. When they questioned Aryi about it, she just said that she knew.

The old man searched Blade's face. "She's more powerful than Zellia?"

Blade grinned and nodded. "Yes, and all the visions that she's had have come true. Before today, I always wanted to change what she or Zellia saw in the future, but not now, not with you."

Blade let the old man think about what he'd said and noted the spike of fear in him. "Or I can kill you now and save you the worry."

"Thanks, no. I think I'll take my chances."

Blade shrugged. "I suggest you get your bony ass up and check in to the hospital and see if they can save you. And if by some stroke of luck, they do save you, you'll be killed later by a wolf."

"A wolf? That's preposterous."

"Yeah, I've heard that before." Blade stepped back and disappeared into the shadows.

When Blade reached the grounds, he glanced back at the mansion and the frantic silhouette that flitted across the old man's window. Blade might not have had the pleasure of killing the old man, but at least he got to scare the shit out of him, which was still less than the bastard deserved.

* * *

NY DAILY NEWS—DEATH NOTICES

Calderon, Jose, head of pediatrics at New York Presbyterian Hospital, died of an apparent heart attack. Arrangements are incomplete at this time and will be handled by New York Presbyterian Hospital.

Chapter Twenty-six

Three months later, Zellia stood in the kitchen as Aryi snatched a cookie off the baking rack. "Why can't I go running, Mom?"

"Because there is no one to go with you."

"When are you going to let dad change you? It's so much fun. You'll love racing the wind."

Racing the wind, Zellia thought. How would a cripple wolf race the wind?

"I told you that you would not be crippled once Dad changes you."

Zellia turned and gave her daughter her best glare. "Were you reading my mind again, Aryi? It's rude." Zellia hid her smile, though, as she turned back to the counter and finished slicing the carrots for the stew. What a temptation she was. How would she and Blade ever teach Aryi to control her gift?

"I didn't read your mind."

Zellia cast a suspicious glance over her shoulder.

"Really, Mom. I've read your mind before, and I know how you feel about it." Aryi grabbed another cookie. "You will be fine. I saw it in a vision, and they're never wrong."

Zellia turned and placed her hands on her hips. "Everybody is wrong at some point in their lives. Yours just hasn't happened yet."

Aryi shrugged. "Dad will be back tomorrow?"

"No, sweetie. He's on his way now; the mission didn't take as long as they'd planned. They are almost through customs. Supper will be ready in an hour, so stop with the cookies."

Aryi took another bite and stared out the window. Finally she said, "I'm bored, Mom."

Zellia reached for her daughter, pulled her into her arms, and hugged her. "I know, sweetie. Tomorrow's your first soccer practice, and you'll get to meet all the girls on your team. Then maybe we can all go out for pizza as a team."

A smile lit up Aryi's face. "Then can someone come over and play?"

"Sure." Just as soon as Rat ran a background check on the parents.

Zellia's heart bled for Aryi, who, at six years old, had no chance for a normal life. Blade was trying to figure out how to give Aryi and Sarita as normal a life as possible. Aryi wanted to go to public school, but Blade had agreed to a private school. Of course, a bodyguard would always be present. Aryi was so smart, and no one knew how fast she'd get bored. Not to mention the temptation she faced, trying to guard against reading the minds of her teachers and classmates.

"That will be cool. How many men?"

Zellia frowned. "What?"

"How many men are going to practice with us?"

Zellia laughed. "All of them."

Aryi placed her head on her mother's chest. "This gift is a really a curse."

"I know, baby. But you do understand that we just want to protect you. We don't know who knows about you."

"I know."

Zellia kissed the top of her daughter's head. "Now go practice your soccer kicks while I finish supper."

"I need my goalie to practice against, even though he's getting slower every day."

"Uncle Rat will be home soon. And he's not slowing down; he's just using his human strength instead of his wolf strength. You'll have to learn to do that too."

Aryi shook her head. "That will be harder than avoiding people's minds. The wolf is always there."

"Well," said Zellia as she brushed a stray hair from Aryi's face. "I know you'll do your best."

Zellia laughed when Aryi moved away from her, snatched another cookie, and skipped out the back door. The child was as skinny as a beanpole, so Zellia knew that the cookie wouldn't hurt her.

The baby monitor alerted Zellia that Sarita was finally awake, so Zellia turned the burner down and headed for Sarita's room. When Zellia pushed the door open, Sarita was watching herself in the mirror.

"Hey, pretty girl." Zellia picked up Sarita and laid her on the changing table. "You're up at the right time. Daddy will be home in a few minutes, and he'll want to get all your sugar." Zellia smiled into Sarita's bright eyes and played with her chubby little legs.

A jolt shook her entire body when the intruder alarm suddenly went off. Zellia stood frozen on the spot, unable to move as fear gripped her. "Oh my God. Aryi."

Zellia picked up Sarita and cradled her to her chest as she ran down the hall and almost fell down the stairs.

Sarita didn't like the alarms or the fact that she was being jostled and started to fuss. "I know, sweetie. Mommy doesn't negotiate stairs too well."

Zellia flew to the safe room where the door was already open. She kissed Sarita before placing her in the baby seat that Blade had insisted they needed in the safe room. She'd never thought they'd need it, but she was sure glad there was one now. Zellia buckled Sarita in and then said a prayer as she stepped outside the safe room and punched the codes to secure it. They'd practiced this a hundred times, and Zellia knew that she couldn't save Aryi and worry about Sarita at the same time, even though it broke her heart to leave a crying Sarita alone.

Zellia ran back to the kitchen, her leg throbbing with each step. "God, please keep Aryi safe."

She yanked open the back door in time to see the wall at the far end of the compound explode. Fear sliced through her, threatening to send her to her knees.

"Mom!"

"I'm coming, Aryi." Zellia ran out the door. Two of Blade's men were battling six men dressed in black not far from the big gaping hole in the concrete wall. Through the smoke she saw someone step over what was left of the wall.

"Aryi, where are you?" Zellia screamed in her mind.

"We've just entered the swamp."

"How many people are with you?"

"Just one."

"Stay calm, baby. Help's on the way."

Zellia stepped through the hole created by the explosion and then tripped and fell on the rubble. She pushed herself up, ignoring the blood on her palms. She wished she had the wolf's nose. She wished Blade was here. She wished she had her pistol.

Hoping that she was going in the right direction, Zellia began moving through the swamp. She stumbled many times, but then she caught sight of something black moving in the foliage in front of her. Zellia picked up her pace despite the sharp pain in her leg. She didn't bother keeping quiet, because if he was human, he wouldn't be able to hear her over the sounds of the swamp. And if he was a wolf, she couldn't be quiet enough.

She lost sight of him and panicked, but two turns later, she was within thirty feet of him. Her mind raced to process the situation. Why couldn't she be a trained killer? Today, at this very moment, she understood the need to kill. And it made her belly churn.

Taking a deep breath to clear her mind, Zellia searched for a weapon. All she found was a heavy branch. She picked it up and took a practice swing, but it was too heavy for her to do any damage with it.

“Think, Zellia,” she whispered to herself. “You can't swing it, so what can you do with it?” Then she grinned. Being a doctor had its advantages.

“Aryi. Listen to me. I'm right behind you. When I attack, you shift and then run and hide in the swamp. Daddy will find you.”

“I thought we didn't want people to know what we are.”

“That rule doesn't apply when you're in danger.” But Zellia knew in her heart that it really didn't matter. These people would be dead, including whoever sent them.

“Aryi, do you understand?”

“Don't, Mommy. Wait for Daddy. I'm afraid for you.”

“Don't worry about me. Shift when you can and then run and hide. Don't come out until Daddy or Uncle Rat finds you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Lucky for them, the man stopped to transfer Aryi from his left to his right arm, and Zellia used the opportunity. Hefting the tree branch in her arms, she rushed the man.

The man screamed as she rammed the pointed edge of the branch into his kidney. “Run, Aryi,” Zellia yelled as she pulled the branch back and aimed for his other kidney. The man turned on Zellia, but Aryi took that moment to shift. Dumbfounded, the man stopped as he realized he was holding a wolf pup. Aryi wiggled free, dropped to the ground, and ran deep into the brush. Zellia took the opportunity to jab the branch at the man's neck, but he'd regained his focus and blocked her shot. In a move that she'd seen Blade do, he swept low with his leg and knocked her to the ground.

“You bitch!” The man stood over her and pointed his gun at her. He looked back at the place where Aryi had disappeared and then down at the torn clothes at his feet.

Zellia sat and stared into the barrel of the gun. She knew she was staring at her own death and prayed that Aryi had followed her orders.

* * *

A gunshot eerily echoed through the swamp, and fear threatened to choke the life out of Blade. Damn it! He shouldn't have taken the job. He should have stayed near his family. Zellia's fear was strong. He was close, but he wasn't close enough. And where the hell was Aryi? He knew the shot wasn't for Aryi. No, she was the prize. His wolf knew that the shot was for Zellia. She should have waited until he got home to go after Aryi. She wasn't trained for this.

Another shot rang out, and he picked up his pace.

His beast roared at the smell of blood—Zellia's blood. His heart roared in his ears as his beast felt fear. He heard his men behind him, their footfalls echoing his. He skidded to a halt at the sight before him.

Zellia lay like a rag doll on the forest floor, a bright red stain covering her stomach. A man stood over Zellia, poised for another shot. Before the man knew what hit him, Blade ran, ripping his shirt off and shifting in midair. His shoes and pants fell away as he slammed into the man. His wolf clamped down on the man's throat and gave it a quick snap. The man went limp. Ah yes, dead. The wolf enjoyed the kill...and so did the Blade the man.

Blade turned to face the pack, and they scattered into the swamp to find Aryi. Blade walked over to Zellia. He could sense that her life force was almost gone. The wolf inside him screamed, urged him on. Blade bent and clamped down on the faint artery in her neck with the turning bite. He forced his energy into her, forced the wolf into her mind, urged her to shift, and willed her to live. Then he released her, stood back, and waited for her wolf to heal itself.

And then she shifted.

Zellia's wolf jerked slightly, and then went still. Time crawled, and Blade's wolf started to pace, antsy that it was taking too long. Blade walked over to Zellia

and nudged her with his muzzle. Her head rolled to the side, and then she rolled to her feet, the two bullets dropping to the ground.

* * *

Zellia glanced around, her eyes taking in the sharp, clear images, especially her mate standing before her. Her wolf recognized him instantly. *Mine* echoed in her soul, and she understood the need to possess.

She pulled her gaze away from her mate and glanced at her leg, looking for the mangled mess, but she found none. She took a tentative step forward and waited for the pain, the pain that didn't come. She stepped again, unable to believe it. She wanted to jump for joy, but Blade shifted.

He approached her slowly and reached down to examine her leg. His touch was a caress, given with love.

And hope.

"Looks good," said Blade, looking at her with fierce pride on his face.

Did she see some tears in his eyes?

"Now shift back, and let's see if you're permanently healed."

Zellia was reluctant to shift. What if it didn't work? What if it only made the pain more intense?

Blade had worked with Aryi on how to shift, so Zellia knew that all she had to do was think about being human again. She finally shifted and found herself on all fours. Blade helped her up and crushed her to him, planting a quick kiss on her lips.

"I like you on all fours," he whispered.

She grinned and whispered back, "I know."

"Take a step," said Blade.

"I don't like this naked thing," mumbled Zellia.

Blade grinned. "That's not what you said last night."

She glared at him. "You know what I mean."

"The pack is very comfortable with our nudity, and you're pack." He kissed her on the temple. "You'll get used to it."

Was she really pack? She could see better, and her nose picked up several new and distinct scents. Zellia glanced down at her leg, the scars still evident. She eased away from Blade and took a step on her bad leg. She felt no discomfort other than her nakedness, so she took another step.

And another.

Her hands flew to her face as joy filled her. "I don't believe it. It doesn't hurt at all."

She turned and walked away, resisting the urge to skip like a child, and then she turned and walked back to Blade.

And that's when she saw her attacker. Her hand flew to her mouth as she choked back the memories and the fear.

Her hands flew to her stomach. "He shot me," she said.

"Yes," said Blade. "But your wolf healed you. All of you."

She looked down in wonder. There wasn't even a dent to suggest she'd been shot. The wonders of wolf healing.

Zellia grinned and glanced at her leg. Still scarred, but now there was no more pain. No more limping. "I guess she did. Oh my God." She looked wildly around. "Where's Aryi?"

Just then, the wolf pack walked out of the bushes with little Aryi in front. Zellia let out the breath she'd been holding as a tear escaped her lashes.

Blade cupped her face and brushed the lone tear away. "No crying. Everything is fine." He gave her a quick hug. "Let's shift and head back to the house. I'm sure Sarita wants to know where we all are."

Zellia smiled as she felt herself shift. Yes. Everything was fine.

* * *

Blade was propped against the headboard as Zellia cuffed him to their bed. He smiled. Becoming a wolf had bolstered her confidence, and he liked it. She wanted something, and tonight she was going to make sure that she got it.

She was dressed in a silky black robe, and his beast knew she had nothing on underneath. The candles she had placed around the room danced and shimmered, casting a rosy glow on her skin.

"I know you can probably snap these cuffs in two with your brute strength, but I'm asking you not to," she said.

"I promise to try to behave," replied Blade. But he had no idea how long his beast would allow this teasing. His cock was rock hard, and slick moisture glistened on the tip. He wish she'd let him put on his cock ring, but she had replied, "Next time."

Hell, he had to survive *this* time first.

She unbelted her robe and let the sides hang loose, then she straddled him. Her breasts hung heavy, and he wanted to lick them, bite those pebbled tips.

"You know," she said. "I've been on fire for you all day."

"I'm ready anytime. You just need to ask."

"I know, but I wanted to make myself wait. Make you wait."

"Well, I hope the waiting's over."

Blade watched her hand travel over her belly up to her breast where she gave her nipple a little tweak. Desire filled her eyes, and his cock jerked against her leg. She was going too slow for him and definitely too slow for his wolf. Foreplay was a human thing, not a wolf thing, and if he chose to change right now, he could easily slip free of the cuffs. But he wouldn't unless she dragged this out past his beast's ability to be contained.

She cupped both of her breasts and lifted them. They were a handful for her petite hands, but he knew exactly what they felt like in his. Her arousal was heady, and he knew she was slick just for him.

She moved her hands to his belly, avoiding contact with his member. Her soft hands moved across his abs, setting him on fire. Then she leaned forward and kissed his nipple. His cock was trapped beneath her soft body, and he couldn't resist pressing into her, trying to slide against her flesh. She took his whole nipple in her mouth and sucked hard. And then she bit him, and his beast roared at the pleasure.

"Harder, baby," Blade begged.

She smiled as she traveled to his other nipple, where she licked and sucked. Damn, she was driving him crazy, especially when she *didn't* bite him. She leaned back and grinned.

"Tease," he ground out.

"Me? Never."

* * *

Zellia's body was on fire. Lust roared through her, and she felt her wolf push for more, faster. There was so much she wanted to do to Blade's beautiful body tonight, but her own body trembled with expectation. She was barely in control, and she could ease the sweet pain for both of them.

But hell, she was weak.

She lifted up, positioned her pussy over his cock, and slowly sank down. It stretched her swollen tissues to the point where too much became not enough. Blade let out a hiss as she worked her way down until she'd taken all of him. Then she took a slow slide up and back down, and Blade's hips rose to meet her downward motion. She wanted to go slow, savor every second, but need outweighed her control, and she found herself increasing the pace. She took her finger and swirled it frantically against her clit. The sensations were breathtaking, and she felt her pleasure build. She purposely kept her eyes trained on Blade. His eyes were glowing, and she wondered if hers were too. She leaned forward and nipped his hard, flat nipple, and the shift allowed him to pound into her, creating more friction, giving her what she needed. The pleasure built, and as it erupted, her fangs

elongated and sank into Blade's nipple. His growled his release as they both pulsated, their bodies taking and giving what each needed.

Zellia released his flesh, her fangs retracted, and she collapsed on Blade. "That was just...wow."

"Yeah, wow."

She heard something break, and then Blade's arms came around her and hugged her tight. She smiled into his chest as she snuggled closer.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too. And I can't wait."

"Wait for what?"

His hand slid down and slapped her ass. "My turn to tie you to the bed."

 THE END 

Kitty DuCane

Kitty lives in NC with her wonderful husband of 28 years, a yellow Lab, and a pile of cats, all strays—well they're not stays now. She has two children in college and is taking full advantage of the empty nest: no more ball games or golf matches, just time to read the hot stuff and write the hot stuff.

Check out the latest on her Web site at <http://www.kittyducane.com>.