

Moonlight Champion
Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 4
Written by Jessica Coulter Smith

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[2]

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[3]

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Praise for Moonlight Guardian

"I have started to grow a fondness for Jessica Coulter Smith with Moonlight Guardian. She really took a step away from the magic filled werewolf story to the more romantic and real romance of the characters. I have to admit I was taken aback a few times throughout the story, it was not easily predictable."

Dark Diva Reviews

"As usual, the author keeps the reader guessing, not allowing them to fall into the predictable theme of knowing precisely whom Chloe would wind up with by the last chapter. The Ashton Grove Werewolves have proven to be an exciting series that I wish wouldn't end, fresh, inciteful and full of unexpected drama, twists and turns."

Talk About My Favorite Authors

[4]

Prologue

Mobile, Alabama

Aislinn sat in her favorite chair reading a book. She'd always had a thing for paranormal romances and was reading about a werewolf in a place called Ashton Grove, Georgia. The hero was everything she'd ever dreamed of in a man. As she turned the pages, she lost herself inside a world where the women always found the men of their dreams, princes among men. It was such a far cry from her life that it was almost funny. At twenty-three, she was married to the worst possible man. Hugh Winston had been charming, funny, and a gentleman while they were dating. It had been no small wonder that Aislinn had accepted his proposal nearly a year later. If only she could turn back the clock! At the very least, she was thankful she had kept her name when she had married him. In retrospect, she was surprised that Hugh hadn't pitched a fit when she'd told him she was keeping her maiden name.

Hugh and Aislinn had been married for nearly a year now. The first month hadn't been too bad, but after that... well after that Hugh had changed. She'd often heard women say they married one man and ended up with another. No truer words had ever been spoken! A little over a month into their marriage Aislinn noticed that Hugh was drinking more and more. The more he drank the louder and more obnoxious he became. It didn't long before he started hitting her.

Aislinn remembered the first time as if it were yesterday. She had been ironing his shirt when he had suddenly backhanded her across the face, yelling at her for using the wrong type of starch. The blow had been strong enough to knock her to her knees. She had apologized profusely, having no idea what had set her husband off in

[5]

such a manner. However, the next day he found something else to complain about and hit her again. Now he didn't need a reason.

As Aislinn fell into her book, she wondered why she hadn't been given a fairy tale ending. Sure, she was young and could always divorce her husband, except he'd made sure that she had nothing and nowhere to go. She supposed she could call a women's shelter, but just the thought of doing something like that made her shiver. Was it really too much to ask for a knight in shining armor to ride up her driveway, knock her husband out, and carry her off into the sunset?

Hearing a car in the driveway, she quickly put her book down. Running to the kitchen, she checked on dinner. The roast still had another fifteen minutes before it was finished. What was she going to do? If dinner wasn't on the table when Hugh walked in, she knew there would be hell to pay. Never mind that he was home half an hour early; it would still be her fault somehow.

Opening the fridge, she spotted his favorite brand of beer in the back. Grabbing the bottle, she popped the top and placed it on the table beside his comfy chair in the living room. Maybe she could placate him while the roast finished cooking. Rushing, she quickly set the table. Aislinn was just placing the silverware on the table when Hugh walked in the door.

"Something smells good," he said, putting down his briefcase and taking off his suit coat.

Aislinn popped her head out of the kitchen. "I'm making a roast with potatoes and carrots. I made your favorite salad on the side," she said with a smile.

He grunted. "It isn't ready yet?"

"Almost. I put your favorite beer by your chair. I thought you might like to change clothes and relax for a minute while I put the finishing touches on dinner."

Hugh stormed into the kitchen, "You're full of shit and you know it!" Fury rolled off of him in waves. "You're just trying to butter me up. You screwed up and you know it!"

Aislinn backed toward the other kitchen door, ready to flee if she needed to. "No, Hugh, I honestly thought you might like to change and relax! Really! Besides, you're home a little earlier than usual."

Hugh roared in anger and lunged for her. "So this is my fault? I'm early you say! It's never your fault, is it Aislinn?"

[6]

Aislinn took off for the bedroom, but she didn't make it in quite enough time. She felt Hugh grab a handful of her long hair and pull as hard as he could; pulling her off her feet, dangling her like a ragdoll. When he released her, he backhanded her across the face, knocking her to her hands and knees.

"I'm tired of your lies, you stupid bitch!"

Hugh kicked her in the ribs, sufficiently knocking the air right out of her lungs. Aislinn curled into a fetal position, gasping for air and trying to see through the haze of her tears. She felt the blows fall one after the other to her arms and legs. She had her face covered as best she could, but knew she would have one bruise for sure.

Just when she thought he was finished, she felt Hugh's hand grab her by the throat. He hauled her to her feet and slapped her. Grabbing her throat once more, he lifted her into the air and threw her across the room. Aislinn flew the four or five feet to the bedroom wall. As she was flying through the air, she made a wish; she wished that her fairy tale ending could come true and that she could find her knight in shining armor.

Aislinn hit the wall with a sickening thud and her thoughts were no more. As her body fell to the ground, it suddenly vanished into thin air, leaving her abusive husband staring in disbelief.

[7]

Chapter One

Early March

Ashton Grove, Georgia

Connor was happy to be inside his home. He'd spent a long day outside and was ready to unwind. His cousins had offered to let him work at their garage, but he preferred being outside. He figured it was his wolf side that pushed him into working in the great outdoors. When a local construction company started going belly up, he had bought them out. Not wanting anyone to accuse him of being lazy, he often worked right alongside his men, and woman. He had one female construction worker who worked as hard as the rest, but she also worked hard at trying to get the boss into bed. He'd managed to avoid the issue so far, but Cameron was relentless. He knew he'd have to do something soon.

Connor never asked anyone to do a task that he himself was not prepared to tackle, so he often found himself working shoulder to shoulder with his employees. It didn't bother him to get a little dirty and sweaty thanks to the southern heat and humidity. It could be back breaking work at times, but it was always rewarding.

He looked around his spacious living room and wondered why he'd let his family talk him into buying the monstrous place. He'd been living one town over, but apparently that wasn't close enough for his cousins; they had insisted that he move to Ashton Grove to be closer to the pack. Now he had a spacious four bedroom home all to himself. His brother, Colin, had also bought a home nearby.

Grabbing a beer out of the fridge, he sat down and turned on the TV. Just as he was bringing the beer up to his mouth for a drink, a bright light flashed and a woman materialized in his lap. Startled, Connor almost dropped both the beer and the woman. He quickly

[8]

grabbed the woman and set his beer down on the table. He briefly wondered what in the hell was going on. Being a werewolf, he wasn't immune to the unknown, but having a woman literally drop into his lap was a first.

Seeing that she was unconscious, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. Laying her down on his large bed, he turned on the light to get a better look at her. Her long brown hair was tangled, but her face ... someone had damaged her beautiful face. He swore under his breath at the large blue bruise blossoming on her cheek. Her face was swollen and he would almost guarantee that she would have a black eye in the morning. He wanted to check her for further damage, but was afraid he might hurt her further. Picking up the phone, he called Gabriel.

On the third ring, the joint-alpha picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Gabriel, I need your help," Connor said, a death grip on the phone as he looked worriedly at the woman on the bed.

"What is it Connor? Are you okay?" Gabriel asked sensing the tension in his cousin's voice.

"No, I'm fine. But I do need some help. Do you think Kiera feels up to coming over? Or should I call Marin?" he asked.

"Connor, why do you need one of the women to come over tonight?" Gabriel asked, knowing that something was missing from the conversation.

"My mate just materialized in a flash of light. She's been hurt though and I don't know how bad it is," Connor explained, knowing he sounded ridiculous.

"Appeared? Is she a fairy?" Gabriel asked, thinking of his half-fairy wife who possessed unique abilities.

"No, she seems human. I think someone did a number on her though. Her face is blue on one side and swollen. I'm worried that she might have sustained other injuries."

Gabriel growled; the one thing he hated most was violence against women. "We're all coming over. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

When Gabriel hung up the phone, Connor got a cool cloth to wipe the woman's face. He tried to make her as comfortable as possible while he waited on reinforcements. He was afraid to move her too much in case she had serious injuries he couldn't see.

The woman on the bed whimpered, a frown creasing her brow. Connor hunkered down beside the bed so his height wouldn't frighten her if she should awake.

"Shh, it's okay. You're safe now," he murmured to her.

Aislinn heard the soothing voice and felt a calm settle over her. She fought to open her eyes, but they weren't cooperating. Had someone come to help her? The last thing she remembered was hitting the wall after Hugh had thrown her. Was she dead? Had she made it to heaven? The voice speaking to her was deep and soothing; it could easily belong to an angel.

Slowly opening her eyes, she tried to focus on her surroundings. Nothing looked familiar. Her gaze came to rest upon the man kneeling beside the bed. He was broad shouldered with a strong handsome face, set with green eyes and full, strong lips. His chin had a slight cleft in it, which would have made her sigh if she weren't in so much pain. His brown hair brushed the tops of his shoulders, giving him a bad boy look.

"Where am I?" she asked in a whisper, her throat still sore from Hugh's iron grip.

"You're in my home in Ashton Grove," Connor answered.

Her eyes widened and she tried to move, only to wince in pain. Ashton Grove? Had he just said Ashton Grove? But it didn't exist! It was merely part of the book she had been reading... lying back against the pillow, she realized that she must either be dead or dreaming. Maybe this was her version of heaven. Her brow furrowed. If this were heaven, wouldn't the pain have stopped?

"Are you okay?" Connor asked, instantly feeling stupid, of course she wasn't okay.

"Did you say Ashton Grove?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. If you aren't from here, where are you from?" he asked.

"Mobile, Alabama," she whispered.

Connor cocked his head and looked at her carefully. "Do you know how you came to be here? Do you remember what happened before you woke up just now?"

She swallowed painfully. "My husband came home from work and flew into a rage. He chased me through the house."

"You're married?" Connor asked in surprise. How could his mate be married? It felt as if his chest were caught in a vice being squeezed tight.

[10]

"Yes, for a year now. He did this to me," she said, a tear slipping down her battered cheek.

Connor swallowed down his rage. He slowly reached out a hand and gently stroked her hair. "He won't hurt you anymore. You're safe now."

Aislinn gave him a wan smile and her eyes started drifting closed again. This was definitely the nicest dream she'd ever had. If it meant the nice man beside her would stick around, she wouldn't mind staying in her dream world forever.

Afraid that she wouldn't wake up again, Connor tried to keep her talking. "You never told me your name."

"Aislinn. Aislinn Walsh," she whispered.

"And your husband's name?" he choked out.

"Hugh Winston."

He was surprised, but tried to keep his face neutral. "You didn't take your husband's name?"

"No. I'm the last in the Walsh line and it was important to me to keep my name." She paused, "Or maybe deep down I knew what he was really like and it was a way of protecting myself, of keeping myself separate from him."

The front doorbell rang, startling them both.

"I'll be right back, Aislinn. That's going to be my family. They're here to help you," he told her.

She nodded and closed her eyes, waiting for him to return.



Connor pulled open the front door, not really surprised to find all three of his cousins, their wives, and his brother standing outside. He motioned for them to come in, waiting for them all to gather in the living room before closing the door.

Looking at the women, he motioned toward his bedroom, "She's in there and she's in pretty rough shape. She said her husband beat the crap out of her."

Gabriel's gaze sharpened on his cousin. "Husband?"

Connor shrugged. "It appears that my mate is already married. Guess I'm a bit late finding her."

Gabriel studied his cousin for a moment. He knew that it had to weigh heavy on Connor that not only was his mate married, but she

had been abused by her husband. He could almost hear the "what if" statements going through Connor's head.

The women excused themselves and scurried through the bedroom door to check on their patient.

Connor's gaze followed them. He wished he could go with them and be by Aislinn's side.

"Did she say how she got here?" Gabriel asked.

Connor shook his head. "She said she's from Mobile, Alabama."

"I'll contact the pack there and see if her husband is looking for her. If her picture is on the news, we'll have to report that we've found her whether you like it or not."

Connor growled under his breath.

"I know you don't like it, but we can't have the police thinking you kidnapped her," Gabriel said. "Especially if she looks as bad as you say."

Connor motioned for Gabriel to follow him to the bedroom. He opened the door a crack and peeked inside. Aislinn was surrounded by the women and she was sitting up in bed. She looked like a terrified rabbit. Connor pushed the door open further and stepped into the room.

"Is everything okay in here?" he asked, his eyes focused on Aislinn.

Marin, Chloe, and a very pregnant Kiera turned to him in surprise. Aislinn looked relieved to see him.

"Why wouldn't everything be okay?" Marin asked.

"I can't check on my guest?" Connor replied.

Marin shrugged a shoulder and looked away.

She'd been miffed at Connor for weeks now, but heck if he knew why. He was getting tired of the barbs she constantly slung his way.

"I'm okay," Aislinn said quietly, her voice slightly less husky than before. "Just a little overwhelmed."

"Aislinn, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Gabriel. You've already met his wife, Kiera."

Aislinn gave them a smile. "It's nice to meet you. I was just telling your wife she shouldn't have come out so close to her due date."

"She wanted to make sure you were okay," Gabriel replied.

Aislinn nodded. "I would say I've had worse, but I think this time might have been the worst one yet."

[12]

Connor moved closer to the bed. "How many times has he done this, Aislinn?"

"Too many," she said in a near whisper. "When I first heard you speaking to me, I couldn't open my eyes and I thought that he had finally killed me." She grinned ruefully. "I thought you were an angel."

Connor sat on the edge of the bed and gathered Aislinn in his arms, ignoring the snickers from his family. It was no secret that he was far from angelic, but he wasn't about to dissuade Aislinn from her misconceptions just yet.

He had expected her to resist, but she melted against him. It was as if she belonged in his arms. "I won't let him hurt you anymore."

"If I really am in Ashton Grove, then he can't hurt me. For that matter, he won't even be able to find me."

Connor looked down at her with a puzzled look. "Why is that?"

"Because it doesn't exist."

Everyone in the room looked at one another with a look of shock on their faces.

"Aislinn, what do you mean it doesn't exist?" Connor asked.

Aislinn stifled a yawn, feeling run down. "It only exists in the book I was reading before Hugh came home from work." She smiled.

"A book about Cole and Marin now that I think about it."

Connor looked at Gabriel. "What kind of book, Aislinn?"

"A romance novel," she murmured sleepily. "When Hugh threw me against the wall, I remember thinking that I never got my happily ever after. I wanted my fairy tale ending."

Connor stared down at her in shock. "A romance novel?"

"Mmm-hmm. It was about a werewolf finding his mate."

Connor almost dropped her. She knew they were werewolves? He hoped his apprehension didn't show. "We're going to let you get some rest. I'll come back and check on you in a minute."

Carefully laying her back on the bed, he ushered everyone out of the bedroom and closed the door. Once they were all gathered in the living room, he asked, "Is that even possible?"

"Is what possible? That she hit her head and dreamed up another reality?" Marin asked.

Connor shook his head. "She appeared in a ray of light. What if she is from another reality?"

[13]

Gabriel grinned. "Then I'd say you're off the hook as far as the husband goes."

"It's going to be more complicated than that. She's been abused," Connor reminded him. It had felt so right to hold her in his arms, but he wasn't going to kid himself. He was going to have to earn her trust.

"She went willingly into your arms a minute ago. I don't think you're going to have a problem," Gabriel said. "She might have been abused by her husband, but I think she wants to be loved. You heard what she said. She wished for a happily ever after."

Connor sighed. "We still need to see if we can locate a Hugh Winston in Mobile, Alabama. I want to make sure we exhaust every effort to try and find her husband."

Gabriel nodded. "We can do that. And if we do find him, we can also make sure he disappears."

Connor shook his head. "I may not like the fact that she's married, but I can't just make her husband disappear."

"I meant more for the abuse than because she's your mate."

Connor gave him a grim smile. "No, for the abuse I get to rip him to pieces."

"Until then, what do you want to do?" Gabriel asked.

"Whether she's married or not, she's my mate, which means my blood will heal her. I can't leave her in that condition," Connor said.

Cole held up a syringe. "I came prepared when Gabriel said your mate had been injured."

Connor nodded. "Then let's get this over with."

Pausing outside of the bedroom door, he took a breath. If she knew about Cole and Marin, then she would know what it meant to accept his blood. Would she allow him to heal her? And could her story be believed? It was all just a little too unreal for him. The paranormal world never ceased to amaze him. There seemed to always be something he didn't expect. It was enough to make him question everything he thought he knew about his life. What else was out there that he had only thought was a myth or science fiction?

Chapter Two

Connor stepped into the bedroom and quietly walked to Aislinn's side. When he took her hand in his, she opened her eyes.

"Aislinn, I'm going to ask you something important."

"What is it, Connor?" she asked softly.

"If you know about Cole and Marin, then you know that a werewolf's blood can heal his mate, right?"

She smiled. "That's what the book said."

"And being that I'm related to Cole, you realize that means I'm a werewolf, too?"

She nodded her head.

"Well, what if I told you that the book was right and that you were my mate?"

The smile fell from her face. "Then I would say it was a cruel joke."

Connor crouched beside the bed to be at eye level with her. "Why would it be a cruel joke?"

"Because of everything I've been through with Hugh. All I've ever wanted was to find my perfect match. In all of the stories I've read, werewolves mate for life and they always find the perfect female to be their mate."

"Aislinn, you didn't answer my question."

She blinked away her tears and looked away. How could she tell him that he was everything she'd ever dreamed about? Why would someone like him want to be with a broken, battered woman like her? How could she possibly be his mate? Besides, Ashton Grove, and werewolves, didn't exist. She was simply unconscious and living in a fantasy. Then again, a fantasy wouldn't be making her say things or do things she didn't want to, or couldn't.

[15]

"Aislinn?" Connor gently grasped her chin and turned her face toward him.

"Please don't make me answer you. I can't."

"I can't give you my blood without your permission. If I can't heal you the easy way, I'll have to take you to the hospital."

"Connor, I can't go to the hospital."

"Aislinn, I have no way of knowing how bad your injuries are. I can't just leave you here."

A tear slipped down her cheek as she looked away. It had been so long since anyone had cared what happened to her. The neighbors at home had looked away whenever they saw bruises on her arms. Her friends had stopped calling. She could handle anger, but kindness... she wasn't sure she could handle Connor's kindness right now. Closing her eyes, she pretended to go to sleep.

Connor sighed and left the room.



"Did it work?" Cole asked.

"She wouldn't let me do it," Connor said, mumbling something about stubborn women under his breath.

"Then we're taking her to the hospital," Gabriel said.

"I told her that, but she refuses to go to the hospital, too."

Gabriel shook his head. "It's not her decision to make."

"Uh, not to be the one to break up the party or anything, but if she materialized just as she is what about ID?" Colin asked.

"She doesn't have anything other than the clothes on her back," Connor said. "I'll cover the hospital bill, but you know they're going to ask for a driver's license or something."

Gabriel nodded. "We can call Cassie's dad, but I don't think he can get anything here that quick."

Cole grinned. "You might be surprised. He worked pretty quickly on Marin's stuff."

"Alright, see what you can do. I'll call Lucas. I think he dated a nurse at the hospital. Maybe she can help us out until then," Gabriel said. "Without knowing how severe her injuries are, it's hard to say whether or not she's in stable condition."

Connor looked over his shoulder at the closed bedroom door. The tightness he'd felt in his chest doubled at the thought of losing

Aislinn. He didn't care if she was married or from another reality. She was his mate and he would fight to keep her.

"Connor, she may fight you, but you'll have to carry her out to Cole's truck. You can ride in back with her."

Connor nodded. He tuned his brother and cousins out while they made their calls, his thoughts focused on the woman lying in his bed. Whether she liked it or not, she was under his protection. He wasn't about to let anything else bad happen to her.

Walking to the bedroom door, he opened it a crack and peeked inside. Shock rippled through him. A man dressed in black sat on the edge of the bed holding Aislinn's hand. What the hell? Connor wondered. He held back a growl as the man kissed Aislinn briefly and disappeared.

Connor wanted to storm into the room and demand an explanation, but he held himself back. Obviously the paranormal was at work. Had Aislinn lied to him? Was she really working with someone else in order to gain his trust? And if so, to what purpose? He wanted to trust her, but should he?

He stiffened when he felt his brother's hand on his shoulder.

"Are you ready? Gabriel and Cole have everything worked out," Colin said.

"Yeah, just give me a minute."

Colin turned Connor to face him. "What's going on?"

Connor shrugged. There were times, like now, when sharing a psychic link with your brother wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"Who was in there with Aislinn?" Colin asked.

"I don't know, okay?" Connor growled.

Colin narrowed his eyes at his brother, but didn't say anything else. Giving Connor some space, he rejoined the others.



Aislinn opened her eyes when Connor left the bedroom and stared at the ceiling. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she had to figure it out pretty soon. Connor seemed like the kind of guy who was used to getting his way.

Wincing, she tried to push herself into a sitting position.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said a deep voice in the corner of the room.

Aislinn gasped and froze.

A large blond man dressed all in black walked out of the shadows.

"My name is Eric and I'm here to guide you, in a manner of speaking."

"What do you want?" Aislinn asked.

"You made a wish, a powerful wish, Aislinn."

"You know my name?" she asked, eyes wide in shock.

He gave her a half grin, his beautifully sculpted mouth tipping up slightly at one corner. "Yes, I know your name and a great deal more. You see, I'm what some would call a wizard. Others call me a warlock or a sorcerer. There are a hundred names for me, but actually none of them are correct. I'm unique. I've lived for a thousand years."

Aislinn's mouth fell open. "But you don't look very old."

Eric laughed. "I stopped aging when I was twenty-six, so I guess in a way I'm not much older than you."

"Why are you here?"

"Your wish."

Aislinn studied him. "The wish I made when Hugh and I were fighting?"

He nodded and moved closer to her. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he took her hand in his. "You weren't meant to be with Hugh.

You've suffered a great deal because the Fates screwed up."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It means that you were owed a second chance at life."

Aislinn mulled over his words. "I died, didn't I?"

He brushed her hair away from her face. "Yes, sweetheart. I'm afraid you did. Or rather, you would have if you hadn't made your wish."

Aislinn nodded. "I think I knew that already."

"Ashton Grove really does exist, Aislinn, but it exists on another plane. It's another realm, I guess you could say. It looks like yours, has the same cities, stores... but the city itself doesn't exist in your world."

"What are you saying, Eric?" she asked him quietly.

"I'm saying, this can be your new home, if you want it to be."

"And if I don't?"

He studied her, taking in her battered face. "Why would you want to return? You're dead in the other world."

"I'm scared," she admitted.

"Scared of what? Of being loved?"

"Why would he love me?"

[18]

Eric grinned. "He's your mate, or rather you're his mate. Why wouldn't he love you?"

"How permanent is this? I'm not going to fall in love, start a new life, and suddenly disappear am I?"

Eric leaned forward and gently kissed her, giving her thereassurance she needed. "I'll make sure you're taken care of. If youdecide this world isn't the right place for you, I'll personally findsomewhere for you to go. But you need to give him a chance, Aislinn.

Give yourself a chance, a chance at happiness."

"Thank you."

He nodded and disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

Aislinn felt confused, but she also felt something else - something she hadn't felt in a long, long time... hope.

[19]

Chapter Three

Connor walked into the bedroom and surveyed the area, looking for any trace of the man who had been by Aislinn's side. There was an odd scent in the air, but other than that he would have never known anyone else had been around.

"Connor, what's wrong?" Aislinn asked.

He turned toward her, his eyes piercing her. Was she as innocent as she looked? "Are you ready to go?"

Fear gripped her. Is he going to throw me out?

"Go where?" she asked, struggling to sit up, but failing miserably. The pain was just too much to bear.

"To the hospital. A friend of ours was able to get you a driver's license." Relief was evident upon her face and Connor felt like an ass.

"Where did you think I was taking you, Aislinn?"

"I wasn't sure."

"Is there any reason I should take you somewhere other than the hospital?" he asked, hoping she would tell him about the strange man in black.

She shook her head gently.

Connor sighed. Obviously he wasn't going to win this battle. If there was one thing he'd learned from his cousins and their wives, it was to choose his battles carefully - especially when dealing with a woman.

"Come on. I'll have to carry you out to Cole's truck. He and Marina are going to give us a ride to the hospital. Gabriel is going to meet us there with your driver's license."

"Where does it say I'm from?" she asked.

"They put my address down as your home address."

[20]

He watched her face for a response. Other than surprise, he didn't see anything else. Either she was a very good actress, or everything she had told him was the truth.

Stepping closer, he gently lifted her into his arms. She whimpered in pain once, but he held her close. When they got outside, Cole had the rear door of the truck open and was waiting on the other side.

"Just hand her in," Cole said. "I'll hold her while you get situated."

Connor wasn't happy with the idea of anyone else holding his mate, but he relented. He handed Aislinn into the truck, giving her to Cole. Climbing in, he held his arms out to her. She immediately settled against him.

"I'll try to keeps the bumps down to a minimum, but I can't help it if the roads are paved horribly," Cole said as he closed the door.

Aislinn was quiet for most of the trip to the hospital. Every now and then she would let out a cry or whimper of pain, but Cole kept to his word and tried to make the ride as smooth as possible for her. When they arrived at the ER, Connor held her close before passing her to Cole.

"When they ask you what happened, tell them you were attacked. If they ask you to describe your attacker, try to be vague. Understand?"

She nodded and went willingly to Cole while she waited on Connor to get out of the truck. Once she was back in Connor's arms, she visibly relaxed.



Inside the ER was pandemonium. Lucas's friend rushed over to greet them.

"You're lucky that Lucas called ahead," she told them. "Otherwise, you'd be here all night."

"I don't know that we have all night," Cole said as he stepped aside so the nurse could see Aislinn.

The woman sucked in a breath and rushed off only to return a moment later with a gurney and two orderlies. "We're going to take her back immediately. I'll need one of you to stay and fill out her triage paperwork."

Cole nodded to Connor. "You go with her. I'll wait here for Gabriel and take care of the paperwork."

[21]

Connor gently laid Aislinn down on the gurney. Holding her hand, he followed her into the back. "They'll have you good as new in no time, honey."

"What happened?" the nurse asked.

"I was attacked," Aislinn whispered. It wasn't entirely a lie. Hugh had, after all, attacked her.

"You poor thing! I'm going to put you in room nine and a doctor will be right with you."

"Thank you," Aislinn murmured.

The nurse nodded and ducked out of the room, leaving Aislinn and Connor alone.

"Connor?"

He pulled the chair closer to the bed. "What honey?"

"Have you ever heard of a Sorcerer or Wizard?"

He grinned. "You mean like in books?"

She shook her head. "I mean here, in Ashton Grove."

The grin was replaced with a look of intense concentration. "I haven't ever met one. I actually thought the Sorcerer was just a myth. Why do you ask?"

"The Sorcerer? As in the only one?"

"From what I remember, he's been around since the time of the Vikings. He's popped into stories here and there throughout the ages, but what exactly he does is a little vague."

"Is he a good guy?"

"I don't know. Why are you so interested in the Sorcerer, Aislinn?"

Before she could respond, an orderly stepped into the room.

"Aislinn Walsh?"

"Yes," she answered.

"We're going to take you for some tests. Mr. Tierney, if you'll wait here, we'll bring her back as soon as we can."

Connor nodded and watched as they wheeled Aislinn out of the room.



An hour later

Aislinn was asleep when the orderly brought her back the ER room.

Connor stood when they brought her in. "Is she okay?"

[22]

The orderly smiled. "She's just fine, Mr. Tierney. I think the tests wore her out a bit."

"When will we know something?"

The orderly shook his head. "Hard to say. They ran three or four different tests. You just never know when the doctor will finish reviewing the results."

Connor nodded.

"It's probably best to let her get some sleep. Once the doctor comes in, there's no telling what he'll want to do."

"I have family in the waiting room. Could you let them know what's going on?" Connor asked.

"I'm sure she'll be fine for a few minutes if you'd like to tell them yourself."

Connor looked down at Aislinn. She was so pale and looked so small lying on the bed. "I guess I could go tell them the news and come right back."

"If they move her, I'll be sure to come tell you."

Connor followed the orderly out of the room. He quickly walked to the ER waiting room to tell his family that they were waiting on test results.



Eric, invisible to the human eye, watched as Connor and the orderly left. His focus immediately shifted to Aislinn. As he neared the bed, he materialized.

"Why are you in the hospital, Aislinn?" he asked her softly.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gasped in surprise when she saw Eric. "Connor brought me."

"He wouldn't have brought you if you had taken his blood," Eric pointed out.

"If it had worked, it would have proven I was his mate."

Eric shook his head. "I've already told you that you're his mate."

"I can't be. He deserves better."

"Your time is running out, Aislinn. You're about to be out of options. When the doctor comes in, you'll have to make a decision. Either accept that you're his mate, or not."

Aislinn swallowed and stared up at him. "What happens if I accept that I'm his mate?"

Eric smiled. "Then you can start your new life."

[23]

"Just as easy as that?"

"Nothing in life is ever easy, Aislinn. You'll still have the memories of your life with Hugh. And with those memories will still be the nightmares."

Aislinn sighed. "I've had Hugh hanging over my head for a while now. I think I can live with that."

Eric gave her a grim smile. "There's more, sweetheart."

"What?"

"You'll be tested. No one gets a second life, even if it's owed to them, without there being a price to pay."

"What kind of test? What price?"

"The test is the price. If I told you what the test was, it wouldn't be a test. You'll know when you're being tested, Aislinn. Just know that it won't be easy."

She nodded.

"Connor is coming back. I have to go."

"But..."

Eric disappeared just as Connor walked through the door.

[24]

Chapter Four

Connor looked around the room and sniffed. With a growl, he focused on Aislinn.

"He's been here, hasn't he?"

She nodded. "He left just as you were coming in."

"What did he want this time?"

"He said that if I stayed that I would be tested."

Connor brushed her hair back from her face. "Tested how, Aislinn?"

"He didn't say."

Connor growled low in his throat. "I don't like this guy. And I really don't like that he shows up when I'm not around."

"I'm fine," she said softly, her strength starting to wane.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," Connor said.

A portly man with glasses entered, giving them a smile. "I'm Dr. Kent. You must be Aislinn," he said looking at his patient.

"Yes, sir," she mumbled.

"You are quite a remarkable lady."

"What do you mean?" Connor asked.

"Well, she has three fractured ribs, one broken rib, and her right wrist is sprained. She has internal bleeding and a skull fracture. By all rights, she should be unconscious. How she's able to sit up and talk is beyond me."

Connor sank blindly into the chair beside Aislinn's bed, the blood draining from his face.

"Now, before you get too carried away Mr. Tierney, I should tell you that we plan on running more tests. This young woman is a miracle to say the least. We're going to do everything we can for her."

"I'd like a moment alone with her," Connor said quietly.

The doctor nodded and left the room.

Connor stared at Aislinn, dazed. "The Sorcerer must have kept you alive."

"He said I would have a decision to make. I think I know now what he meant."

He looked at her, waiting for her to continue.

"Will your blood heal all of my injuries?" she asked quietly.

Connor's breath hitched in his throat. Was she asking because she planned on staying? "I'm not sure. I know Marin was severely injured when Cole found her, but nothing like your injuries."

"Will you try?"

"What exactly are you asking me, Aislinn?"

"Will you try and heal me? Will you..." Aislinn paused. It was hard to form the words, but she knew she had to.

"Will I what?" he asked quietly.

"Will you let me stay with you? Will you..." No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't form the words will you accept me as your mate.

Connor gently squeezed her hand. "Yes."

"But how? The doctor isn't going to let you inject me with anything."

"Let me worry about that."

Connor stood and opened the door. Sticking his head into the hall, he waited until Lucas's friend walked back. Flushing her down, he asked a question he hoped wouldn't be impossible.

"I need a syringe."

She gave him a questioning look and opened her mouth to respond.

He held up a hand. "Please, I can't answer the question you're about to ask, just know that it's going to help Aislinn."

"Does this have anything to do with Lucas and his secrecy?" the nurse asked.

Connor gave her a grim smile. "I'm afraid so."

She nodded. "Give me a minute and I'll bring it to you."

"Thank you."

Connor closed the door and sat down beside Aislinn again. He held her hand, stroking her fingers. He'd never tried to heal anyone

before. The thought of losing her scared him to death. What if it was too late? What if her injuries were too severe for the blood to work?

"Connor, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, flashing her a grin. "Just anxious for the nurse to return."

"If... if it doesn't work, I want you to know that I appreciate what you've done for me."

"It's going to work," he said, squaring his jaw in determination.

"But if it doesn't... it's been a long time since anyone has cared about what happened to me. I'm glad I met you, Connor."

The door opened and the nurse stuck her head inside. "Here's the syringe," she said in a hushed voice.

Connor got up and took it from her. "Thanks."

She nodded and slipped back out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Connor took a breath and faced Aislinn. "This might be easier if I were sitting behind you."

"I don't mind," she said weakly, "but I can't sit up on my own."

Connor helped her into a sitting position and climbed onto the bed behind her. Settling her body between his legs, he wrapped an arm around her, letting her head fall back against his chest.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked, his voice rumbling through his chest under her ear.

She nodded.

Taking the syringe, he uncapped the needle and stuck it in his arm, withdrawing as much blood as he could. He pulled the needle out.

"Before I inject you, I need to get a band-aid. You won't heal as quickly as I do."

Aislinn looked at the injection site on his arm and realized it had already closed.

Connor rummaged in the drawers until he found an adhesive strip.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded and curled against him. Extending her arm, she tried to relax. She winced when the needle pricked her skin, but Connor's murmured words of comfort helped.

He had just put the bandage on her arm and deposited the needle in the biohazard tub when the door opened again.

[27]

"We'd like to run some blood tests," Dr. Kent said. "We'd like to figure out how it is she's survived this long."

"Dr. Kent, we appreciate all you've done, but if her injuries are as severe as you say I'd rather take her home for however long she has left."

Dr. Kent narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips, his displeasure apparent. "I can't stop you from checking her out of the hospital, but I would advise against it."

"I understand," Connor said, "but I think we'll take our chances at home. At least she can be comfortable there."

The doctor nodded. "I'll draw up her release paperwork, but you should know that it will say she's being released against doctor's orders."

"I understand."

"Connor?" Aislinn said softly.

"What?" he asked, shifting her so that her body was more comfortable.

"Thank you for taking care of me."

He grinned. "It's my pleasure, sweetheart."

While they waited on someone to bring Aislinn's discharge papers, Connor absently rubbed her arm, lulling her to sleep. He buried his nose in her hair and breathed in her scent. Connor couldn't remember a time when he had felt so content just holding someone. He only hoped his blood would be enough to heal her. Now that he'd found his mate, he didn't want to lose her.



An hour later, a portly nurse walked in carrying a clipboard.

"I have your discharge papers ready," she said in a no nonsense voice.

Aislinn stirred from her nap and opened her eyes.

"Did you hear that? You get to go home," Connor said with a smile on his face.

Aislinn gave him a half-hearted grin and buried her face against him. Still tired, she closed her eyes again.

"I'm afraid I need Ms. Walsh to sign the papers," the nurse said.

Connor hugged Aislinn and whispered in her ear, "Come on, honey. You have to wake up now. The nurse needs you to sign some papers."

Aislinn snuggled closer to Connor.

"Aislinn, if you don't sign the papers, they won't let you go home."

Aislinn lifted her head and scowled at him. Turning to the nurse, she held her hand out for the clipboard. Signing on all of the highlighted lines, she handed the papers back to the nurse.

"Okay, Ms. Walsh, you're ready to go," the nurse said.

"That's it?" Connor asked in surprise.

"Since you're declining medical attention, she won't have anything to take home with her other than the receipt showing she was here. We can't send medical advice home with someone who doesn't want to be treated."

Connor nodded. "Well, thank you for your time."

He gently shifted Aislinn, lifting her into his arms and got out of the hospital bed. Carrying her, he headed for the ER lobby and his family.

[29]

Chapter Five

Later that evening, Cassie and Matt stopped by after having heard about the excitement from Kiera. If Connor was surprised to see them, he didn't give any indication.

"So, where is she?" Cassie asked with a smile.

"In the bedroom, resting."

Cassie lifted a small plastic bag. "We stopped and did some shopping on the way here."

Connor sighed. "I should have known. Alright, go on in, but try not to wake her if she's still sleeping."

Cassie grinned at him and hurried through the living room to the bedroom, leaving Matt and Connor alone.

"How is she?" Matt asked.

Connor shrugged. "It's too soon to know if my blood was enough to heal her or not."

Matt nodded. "Let us know if we can help in any way."

Connor rubbed a hand across his jaw. "Now that you mention it, I don't want to leave her alone when I have to return to work on Monday. Do you think Cassie would come and sit with her?"

Matt smiled. "I bet she would be delighted to. The kids are staying with their grandparents next week for spring break so she'll have plenty of time on her hands."

"Thanks. I'll feel better knowing someone's here with her."

"You never know. She may be good as new by Monday. You have the whole weekend."

Connor nodded. "True, but she's ..."

"She's what?"

"He nearly killed her. She has broken and fractured ribs, a skull fracture and a laundry list of other injuries. The doctor said it was a miracle she was alive."

[30]

Matt placed a hand on his shoulder. "But she is alive. That's what counts."



In the bedroom, Cassie quietly approached the bed. She didn't want to disturb Aislinn if she was sleeping, but she wanted to get a closer look at Connor's mate. She looked over her shoulder at the closed door, hoping no one would walk in. She didn't just have clothes and toiletries in the sack. She'd also prepared a spell.

Taking out her anointed candles, she placed them strategically around the bed and the sleeping woman. Pulling a piece of paper out of the sack, she took a steadying breath.

Goddess of love and light

Embrace this woman with your power.

Make the wrongs right.

Heal her hour by hour.

Wrap her in your arms,

Bathe her in your love.

Let her come to no harm,

Protect her from above.

Sprinkling a powder of lavender, sage, and patchouli around the bed, she thanked the goddess for assisting with her spell. Putting everything back in the bag, she pulled out the clothes she'd brought. Laying them across the back of the chair in the corner, she turned back toward the bed.

"You poor thing," she murmured, eyeing the bruises covering Aislinn.

Quietly slipping from the room, she left Connor's mate to her rest. It would be a miracle if she survived the night, but at least Cassie knew she had tried to help. Between her spell and Connor's blood, the young woman in the bed might just have a fighting chance.

Following the voices of her husband and Connor, she found them in the kitchen. "I left some clothes in the chair for her, but I doubt she'll feel up to wearing them for another few days."

"Is she still asleep?" Connor asked.

Cassie nodded. "I'm sure she'll be improved by morning."

[31]

"I hope so. The only way she could get worse is if she died."

Cassie tried not to grimace. She knew that death was a very real possibility. "If you need anything, just let me know."

"If she lives, do you think you could sit with her when I go in to work on Monday?"

"You're going to work? You don't think this is reason enough to take a few days off?" she asked, incredulous.

"I don't have a choice, Cassie. I'm the boss, remember?"

"All the more reason to take off! Don't you have a foreman or someone who could oversee things for a day or two?"

Connor rubbed the back of his neck, tension having built up painfully. "Yeah, I have one, but I need to be there Monday to sign their pay checks. I'm the only one authorized on the bank account."

"I don't mind staying with her, but she needs you. Don't ask me why it's important that you stay with her as much as you can, but it is."

Connor stared at her a moment, trying to read between the lines. He knew there was something Cassie wasn't telling him, but he couldn't figure out what it was. But if she thought it was important for him to be with Aislinn, then he would stay by her as much as he could. Regardless of what Cassie said though, he had a job to do.

"If you can stay with her Monday, I'll take Tuesday and part of Wednesday off work. I'll see if Colin can stay with her when I'm not here for the rest of the week."

"Connor..."

He shook his head. "I can't let the company run itself yet, Cassie. It wouldn't do me any good to stay with Aislinn and lose the company, the only means I have of supporting her."

Cassie grinned. "So she's going to stay here permanently?"

"I'm hoping she will. She knows what I am and she accepts it."

"Well, for your sake, I hope she stays. Call me if you need anything." She tugged her husband toward the door. "We need to get home before it gets any later."



In the bedroom, Eric materialized by Aislinn's bed. He was glad she had chosen to be Connor's mate and to stay in Ashton Grove. But, before she could have her happy ending, she was going to need a little help. The werewolf blood now flowing through her veins was

helping repair the damage that had been done, but it wasn't enough. Even Cassie's spell had lent a little extra power, but it would fall short and Aislinn would die by morning. Unless he intervened.

Leaning over her prone form, he brushed his lips against hers, passing some of his magick to her. As his breath entered her lungs, her body was bathed in a golden, healing light. The bruises on her face and arms slowly started to fade.

Eric placed his hands on her ribs and felt them become whole again. He stepped back from the bed and smiled. He'd done as much as he dared. It was time for the werewolf's and witch's magick to heal her now. As it was, interference of this magnitude would be frowned upon. But he couldn't let her die. She was a fighter and deserved her chance at happiness. No matter what it took, Eric was determined she would get it.

Sitting in the chair by her bed, he decided to watch over her until the werewolf returned. While he knew the Fates had to test her, he didn't want the trials to begin before she was fully healed. It was going to take everything she had to fight the upcoming battle. If it had been left to him, she would have been given her second chance free and clear. After all, the Fates were the ones who had screwed up, not the young woman lying in the bed before him.

If he had to play guard dog until she was well, then he would do so. It was beneath him, but this one time he didn't mind. He'd seen so many humans get a second chance, most of them undeserving. This was the first time he felt the human had truly deserved another chance, a new life.

Aislinn was a remarkable young woman. More so than she realized. She may think of herself as plain or ordinary, but she was far from it, especially in Ashton Grove. In this world, she was capable of so much more than she realized.

He grinned when he realized that Cole's and Michael's mates were the only ordinary humans. The gift of sight allowed him to see Colin's future mate, Ramsey's and also Hunter's. All three men would be blessed with unique women. And Connor... Connor's mate would be the most unique of them all. Coming from another world, defying death and being granted special gifts would make Aislinn the strongest of the mates, and the most useful.

The footsteps echoing down the hall were his cue to leave. While he knew Aislinn had told Connor about him, it was entirely different

to let the werewolf see him. He needed to maintain an air of mystery. More importantly, he needed to make sure no one would recognize him. Aislinn would be able to, but she would be the only one in the pack who would know who he was, and it needed to remain that way.

As the doorknob turned, Eric faded until the werewolf wouldn't be able to see him. Cloaking himself in darkness, he hid in the shadows. The werewolf would know he had been here, but he wouldn't know why.

Eric smiled when he remembered how jealous Connor had been before. Let the werewolf stew a little longer. It wouldn't do for him to think Aislinn was his simply because she was his destined mate. After all, everyone had free will.

[34]

Chapter Six

Connor stepped into the bedroom and sniffed the air. Growling, his eyes scanned every inch of the room. He knew the wizard had been here again, but he didn't know why. Swiftly walking to Aislinn's side, he checked on her.

Shock rippled through him. All of her bruises were gone. He knew it was impossible for his blood to have healed that much damage so quickly. Scenting the air, he recognized some of Cassie's herbs and realized she had done a spell. But somehow, he didn't think even that would have been enough to heal her so quickly. That only left the wizard. Connor had no idea why the illusive man had chosen to heal Aislinn, but he was thankful just the same, if not a little suspicious.

Aislinn was still sleeping peacefully. Making sure she was comfortable, Connor settled himself into the chair near her bed and kept watch. So far the wizard hadn't harmed her. But not knowing what the man's motives were, Connor wasn't about to take any chances; his mate was far too precious to him.

As he watched over her, Connor pondered Cassie's statement. She had seemed convinced that Connor should remain by his mate's side. But she hadn't said why. It wasn't like Cassie to be so cryptic. Was something going on that he needed to worry about? Was Aislinn not yet safe?

He had promised Cassie that he would leave work early on Monday and would remain home Tuesday. He had every intention of keeping that promise, but he didn't like to leave the office for too long. Sure, he had a good bunch of workers, but the company was still new to him. It was like having a new baby and leaving it with complete strangers, it left him feeling unsettled.

[35]

The thought of a baby drew his eyes to the sleeping woman in the bed. She had finally accepted that she was his mate, but did she fully understand what that meant? Would she welcome children that could very well shape shift into werewolves?

He grinned. She was certainly an unusual woman, not even balking at the thought of werewolves existing. No, what had worried her was the fact that Ashton Grove had existed in reality and not just in a book. He still found it hard to swallow that there were other realities out there, realities in which he and his family played fictitious characters. Yet, with a cousin who was psychic, a cousin by marriage who was part fairy and part werewolf, and a family full of werewolves, he had learned that anything was possible. It seemed that life was going to test his belief system on a regular basis. Between fairies, vampires, other shape shifters, psychics, discovering the wizard was real... well, he'd had an interesting life to say the least, and most of those things had happened just in the past year.

The phone in the living room rang and he reluctantly went to answer it, leaving the door ajar on his way out. Picking up the phone, he recognized the number on the caller ID and grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to Cameron.

"Hello."

"Hi boss. Just thought I'd see if you were busy tomorrow."

Connor glanced at the clock. "Cameron, do you know how late it is?"

She laughed. "Yeah, but you're still awake so what does it matter?"

"I may be awake, but other people are sleeping."

Silence reigned on the other end of the line.

"Are you still there?"

"I'm still here. So you're having a sleepover and didn't invite me?"

He could practically hear her pouting on the other end of the line. She probably thought it was cute, but Connor only found it annoying. He'd tolerated her before finding Aislinn, but now that he had found his mate he found that he was less tolerant of the woman.

"Cameron, I've told you before that I'm not interested in you that way. We have a working relationship and that's all."

"But it could be more than that."

Connor sighed. The woman was so damn thick headed! "No, Cameron, it can't be more than that."

[36]

"It's not like you're seeing someone."

"How would you know?"

"Are you? Is that why you won't date me? Because you're sleeping with someone else?"

Connor fought back a growl. "Cameron, I'm not having this conversation with you. We can either continue to have a working relationship, and only that or you'll need to find another job."

He heard the loud click and knew Cameron had hung up on him. Turning the phone off, he put it back on the charger and walked back to the bedroom. To his amazement, Aislinn was sitting up in bed waiting for him.

"Was that your girlfriend?" she asked softly.

"I don't have anyone in my life but you, sweetheart."

"It sounded like you were talking to a woman."

He grinned and walked to her side. "It was someone from work."

"A female someone who wants to be more than a co-worker?"

Rather astute of her, he thought and he nodded.

Aislinn wasn't sure how she felt about other women wanting Connor. She might be his mate, but she knew she wasn't what most would call beautiful. Deciding not to think on it any longer, she decided to change the subject.

"If I'm feeling better next week, I'd like to start looking for a job."

Connor sat on the edge of the bed, unsure what to make of her statement. She might have healed quickly, but she should probably take it easy for a little while. "You don't have to."

"Yes, I do. I'm not going to rely on you to support me. I'm going to need a car and a place to live, and I can't get those things without a job."

"I thought you would stay here."

Aislinn stared at him a moment. She would have never thought of arguing with Hugh, but knowing Connor wouldn't hurt her made her a bit braver than usual.

"Connor, my husband refused to let me work, refused to give me away to earn any money for myself. No matter how nice of a guy you may be, I'm not putting myself in that situation again."

He winced when she said "my husband." Maybe he could find a compromise. He didn't like the idea of her living anywhere other than here with him. His house was large enough, but if he had it his way she'd remain in his bed, even if they weren't sharing it yet.

[37]

"What if you got something part-time to give you some spending money of your own and let me worry about the rest?"

She started to shake her head, but he stopped her.

"Honey, you almost died. I don't want you to over-do it right now. You've already agreed that you're my mate and belong with me. At least let me help take care of you. I'm not asking you to be completely dependent on me, not that I would mind it if you were."

"I don't know that I can buy a car with a part-time job."

"What if we went car shopping and you picked out something you felt comfortable with?" He hurried on before she could protest.

"Think of it as a gift. It's not every day I find my mate."

Aislinn bit her lip, thinking it over. She had expected an argument over her declaration, but he was being really nice about it. She knew he wasn't Hugh, but at the same time she was terrified of being without the means to support herself. "You won't mind if I work?"

Connor reached over and took her hand. "I would prefer it if you didn't, simply because I think you need a break, but I won't stop you."

His kindness and understanding brought tears to her eyes. She blinked them back and smiled at him.

"Thank you. You don't know what that means to me."

Connor smiled and settled himself in the chair by the bed. He would give anything to hold her, but he didn't want to push it. Just because she had let him hold her once, didn't mean she would let him do it again. At least, not this soon. He knew she had suffered a great deal at the hands of her husband, and he swore she would never be harmed again.

[38]

Chapter Seven

Two week later, Aislinn was completely healed. She smoothed her hands over her hair, trying to get the wild strands to calm down as she stared out of the window of her new Ford Focus at the construction site in front of her. She hadn't found work yet and staying at the house was starting to drive her crazy.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the car. She should have called Connor, but had opted to surprise him instead. If she were honest, she'd admit that she hadn't called on purpose - and it had nothing to do with surprising him. She'd worried that he would tell her to stay home and not to bother him at work.

She closed her car door and walked along the gravel path to the trailer at the front of the site. She knew that was where Connor had his on-site office. She only hoped he was actually on site. He had mentioned having an office in downtown Ashton Grove, but she wasn't sure where it was located. Not that Ashton Grove was big by any means, but she was still learning her way around.

Her tennis shoes crunched on the gravel. Looking down at herself, she hoped she was dressed okay. Jeans and a long-sleeve tee weren't exactly stylish, but she thought would suffice for going to a construction site. Having never been to one, she wasn't quite sure what the dress code would be.

As she neared the trailer, she heard raised voices. One she instantly recognized as Connor's and the other was a female's. Connor had mentioned having a female employee, and Aislinn remembered his phone conversation from the previous week. If the yelling was any indication, it seemed the woman was still upset.

Steeling her nerves, she opened the door and peeked inside.

When Connor spotted her, he smiled, his eyes lighting up in pleasure.

"What are you doing out here?"

She tentatively entered and pulled the door closed.

[39]

"I thought I would surprise you," she answered softly.

Coming around the edge of the desk, he wrapped her in his arms. Aislinn breathed in his scent and hugged him back.

"I'm glad you did."

She smiled up at him. "I was worried I might be interrupting your work."

Across the small room, Cameron decided she'd had enough of being ignored.

"Ahem, you are interrupting."

Connor looked at her over his shoulder and narrowed his eyes. If Cameron had a clue as to just how upset he was, it didn't show. Instead, she flipped her long hair over her shoulder. Hair he'd told her repeatedly needed to be in a pony tail or braided for safety's sake, yet the woman's vanity wouldn't allow it. It had been one of the many things they were arguing about before Aislinn had arrived; her skin tight clothes had been another.

"Aislinn is welcome here anytime she wishes to stop by."

Cameron folded her arms over her chest and looked away.

"Connor, I can go. I didn't mean to disrupt your work schedule," Aislinn offered, hoping to ease the tension in the room.

He smiled down at her. "Sweetheart, you're fine. Matter of fact, I was thinking of taking a lunch break. Why don't you join me?"

"Connor, I asked you to go out to lunch," Cameron whined.

His jaw tensed. "And I said no."

"Connor, really I..." Aislinn started, but he stopped her by gently placing his finger over her lips.

Deciding it was time to claim Aislinn in more than words he lowered his head and kissed her gently. His lips barely brushed hers, but it was enough to make them both hungry for more.

Having seen enough, Cameron stormed past them and out the door, letting it bang open against the side of the trailer, startling Aislinn and Connor.

Aislinn gently touched her lips. She'd kissed Hugh many times, but she'd never felt anything like she did now. Connor's kiss had been tender and sweet, yet it had stirred her unlike any other kiss; he made her feel safe and cared for.

Connor caressed her cheek and smiled at her. "Come on, I have somewhere special in mind."

[40]

Aislinn looked down at her clothes. "I don't think I'm dressed for anywhere special."

"You look beautiful."

Aislinn blushed and allowed Connor to take her hand.

"There's somewhere I want to go before we have lunch."

She looked at him quizzically, but didn't say anything.

Connor helped her into his large truck, which had been parked behind the trailer. Once they were buckled, he headed for Main Street.



Connor pulled up in front of a small jewelry store and turned off the truck. He had a feeling Aislinn was going to fight him when she realized they were going inside; more specifically, when she realized what he was buying. He needed to make sure that everyone knew she belonged to him, and vice versa. What better way to do that than with an engagement ring?

"Come on," he said with a smile. "We're just making a quick stop, and then we'll go get something to eat."

Aislinn looked at the jewelry store and eyed him uncertainly. The hospital had removed her wedding ring before starting her tests and she hadn't put it back on, leaving her without any jewelry. Had Connor noticed and planned on getting her something? She wasn't sure she was comfortable with him making so many expensive purchases for her. First the car and now jewelry?

Curious to see what he was up to, she got out of the truck and followed him into the store. When they stopped in front of a display of engagement rings, she froze. She understood that being mated to him meant they had a forever kind of relationship, but marriage? She wasn't sure she was ready to go back down that path - now or ever.

"Connor, I don't think..."

He placed a finger over her lips. "Let me do this, Aislinn. If you won't let me do it for you, then do it for me."

She pulled his hand down. "For you?"

He nodded and pulled her aside, out of the hearing range of the people in the store. "You're my mate, Aislinn. I want you to marry me."

She shook her head. "I can't, Connor. I'm sorry, but after everything I went through with Hugh, I just can't do that right now."

"Then at least wear my ring and think about it. If you need time, I'll give you time, but I want everyone to know you're mine."

She gave him an odd look. "Is this a territorial thing?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "No, sweetheart. It's not just that I want people to know you're mine, I also want them to know I'm yours."

Hers. She liked the sound of that. "Will it really mean that much to you?"

He caressed her cheek. "Yes, it would."

"Then I'll wear whatever ring you buy for me."

With a smile, he kissed her gently and led her back over to the cabinet of engagement rings. She may not have agreed to be his forever, but at least she was going to wear his ring. It was a step in the right direction.

[42]

Chapter Eight

Later that night, Aislinn sat in the living room and waited for Connor to come home. She had planned on cooking dinner for him, but had found the pantry was rather bare. She would have gone grocery shopping, but she didn't have any money. All in all, she felt rather useless.

The rumble of a truck in the driveway told her Connor was home and she leapt off the sofa. Hurrying to the door, she opened it and waited anxiously on Connor. She may not want to get married again, but she had to admit he was rather spectacular to look at, his shirt clinging to his muscular arms and chest.

He smiled when he saw her waiting in the doorway. "Front door service? I feel rather special."

Aislinn smiled and felt a blush spread across her cheeks. "How was work?"

"Well, after you left, it was rather uneventful. Cameron never came back from lunch so the afternoon was rather quiet. I have to admit, it was nice not having her around."

"I was going to make dinner, but I couldn't find anything to fix. I know you've been eating out a lot lately, but would you mind going out tonight?"

He pulled her closer. "Aislinn, I don't mind taking you out for dinner. If I had thought about it, I would have left some money for you to buy groceries today."

"It's okay. I just feel so useless. I don't have a job so I can't afford even the most basic of things."

"Honey, you're not useless." He gave her a quick kiss. "Let me shower and change, then we can go out."

She nodded and stepped back out of the way, letting him into the house. While he showered, she went to change her clothes, putting on a long-sleeve lavender dress with matching flats. Her body might

[43]

have healed, but she'd never been graceful enough to wear high heeled shoes, not without tripping.

When she put on her lipstick, her ring caught in the light and cast rainbows across the room. She looked at the rather large rock on her finger. When she'd agreed to wear his ring, she hadn't realized he would buy one that cost quite so much. She'd expected something more sedate like the ring Hugh had bought for her, more of a chip than an actual stone, but the two carat diamond on her finger was definitely not a chip.

Fluffing her hair, she walked out of the bedroom and collided with Connor.

"Easy, sweetheart."

She smiled up at him. "Sorry, I guess I should have been paying more attention."

Connor's eyes devoured her. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you." Her eyes dropped to his chest.

He tipped her chin up and smiled down at her. Slowly, he lowered his head and gently brushed his lips across hers. When she didn't pull away, he coaxed her lips apart and delved into her mouth with his tongue. As his tongue glided along hers, he felt Aislinn lean into him. Pulling her closer, he slanted his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss.

When his heart began pounding, he pulled back, worried he would lose control. She was so sweet that he wanted to consume her, wanted to feel her sweet body pressed against his, wanted to feel her moist heat wrapped around him.

"We better go."

His voice had gone husky from desire and washed over her. Aislinn opened her eyes and stared at him in wonder. In all the times she'd been married, she'd never experienced passion like she did in Connor's arms. For the first time in her life, she wondered what it would be like to make love with someone.

Hugh had been rough and it had always ended quickly. He was the only man she'd ever been intimate with, and now she wondered if she had been missing something. Not having been allowed any friends, she hadn't had anyone to discuss it with. Surely not all men made love to their wives like a rutting bull.

When Connor took her hand, she nearly forgot to breathe. Her new-found feelings were puzzling. She wondered if it was yet

[44]

another part of being Connor's mate, or if it was something else. Perhaps it was just good old fashioned attraction. Either way, she was both excited and terrified of the way Connor made her feel. She wanted to explore the new sensations with him, but was afraid that her happiness would only be jerked away from her. The wizard had told her that she would be tested. What happened if she failed the test?



Dinner had been quiet and relaxing. Connor had stopped by the ATM to make sure she had money for grocery shopping the next day and then they had returned home. The ride in his truck had been easy going, with only light conversation, but now that they were home Aislinn felt self-conscious.

"Connor, may I ask you something?"

He pulled her over to the sofa and sat down, tugging her down beside him.

"You can ask me anything."

Aislinn fidgeted. "Can you explain this whole mate thing to me again?"

Her question wasn't one he had anticipated so he took a moment to answer. While the question seemed simple enough, it was a rather difficult one.

"A werewolf mates for life. There is one woman in the world destined for each of us. In my case, that woman would be you."

"But how does it work?"

"I guess it works like any relationship. The difference is that you don't have to worry about me cheating on you, or wanting another woman period. You're the only woman I'll ever want to be with for however long I live."

"What happens if... if I were to disappear as quickly as I appeared?"

Connor studied her a moment. He could tell she was hiding something, but he wasn't sure what it was. "Why would you disappear?"

"What if I can't pass the test? The wizard said I would be tested, but what if I fail?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Honey, you won't fail. You're meant to be with me."

[45]

She burrowed into him, needing his comfort. "I wish I could be as certain as you. I'm terrified that I'll..." She stopped, not ready to admit she was already starting to feel something for the man holding her. It was too soon!

"You'll what?"

She shook her head.

"Aislinn, we can't keep secrets from one another."

"I'm scared that I'll start to care too much about you only to have you taken away from me. I've survived living with Hugh's abuse, but I don't think I could survive that."

He hugged her tight. "You're an amazing woman and you can survive anything, but you won't have to worry about losing me. I'm not going anywhere and neither are you. Now put it out of your mind."

She nodded and leaned into him, drawing from his strength. She still wasn't certain that she would remain with Connor, but he was right to put it out of her mind. If she kept worrying about it, she would only ruin whatever time she had, and she meant to enjoy every moment of her time with Connor.

"Connor?"

"What it is, honey?"

"Would you... would you mind holding me?"

He grinned. "I thought I was already doing that."

"I mean, would you hold me tonight? While... while I sleep?"

Connor nearly stopped breathing. She wanted him to share a bed with her? Part of him was elated that she trusted him that much, but the other half knew he would be tortured. Holding Aislinn without being intimate with her might very well kill him. He'd held his beast at bay thus far, but he wanted to claim his mate in every way possible.

"I'd be happy to," he finally answered.



Connor lay in the bed wide awake. Aislinn was wrapped in his arms, snuggled against him, her nose buried in his chest. When he'd climbed into the bed in his boxers and nothing else, he'd thought for sure she would balk. While a pretty blush had stained her cheeks, she had climbed into the bed and gone willingly into his arms.

A glance at the clock showed he would have to get ready for work in five hours. He knew sleep would elude him. Aislinn's hesitation over being mated to him still ate at him. He knew it wasn't that she was repulsed by the idea; she would have never agreed to wear the engagement ring otherwise. Then again, he got the feeling that she wasn't taking it seriously. He would give her all the time she needed, but he wondered if it would be enough.

Aislinn was already the most important thing in Connor's life. He wished she could feel the same about him. It broke his heart that he had finally found his mate, only to discover she didn't really want to be with him.

Yes, she was lying in his arms, but only because she needed comfort and no one else was around. If she would have had a choice, she probably wouldn't have chosen him. He wished he knew what she wanted. She'd talked about being independent and getting a job, and while he had no problem with that, he wanted to take care of her. She'd had such a rough life that he wanted to make everything better. He wanted to hold her, make love to her, and show her that no one would ever harm her again - and he would, if she would just let him.

She shifted in his arms and he tightened his embrace. Looking down at her, he smiled. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. And she was his! No matter what it took, he would make sure she remained exactly where she was - in his bed and in his arms. It was where she belonged.

[47]

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Aislinn woke to find herself wrapped in someone's arms. She stiffened until she realized it was Connor. With a smile, she snuggled closer. While she still thought being his mate was too good to be true, she was happier than she had been in a long time. Life with Connor was comfortable. She'd never had that with Hugh; it had been one stressful day after another.

Connor's alarm went off and he blindly felt for the clock. Smacking his hand down on top of it, he pulled her closer and kept dozing. She took a moment to study him, admiring his handsome face. If fairy tales could come true, she would find her happily ever after with him. But she wasn't sure she believed in fairy tales anymore.

"Connor, aren't you going to be late for work?" she asked softly.

He mumbled something she didn't quite catch.

"Connor?"

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you going to be late if you don't get up?"

He slowly opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. With a sigh, he let her go and stretched.

"Yeah, I have to get up, but I'd rather stay right here with you."

She smiled and felt butterflies flutter in her stomach. "It won't be long before the weekend is here again. Then you can lie in bed as long as you want."

He pulled her back into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "I'll be looking forward to it. Lying here with you is definitely a nice way to spend my time."

Aislinn hugged him. "As much as I like you being here with me, I don't want you to be late for work."

He grumbled. "You're already sounding like a wife."

She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, so she let it go. Being Connor's wife would certainly be better than being

Hugh's wife, of that she had no doubt. She watched as he rolled out of bed and went to take a shower, admiring the way his muscles moved when he walked. His kisses told her that making love with him would be more than pleasurable. Now if she could just figure out how to convince him she was ready.



At work, Connor was going over the budget for the current project when the door to his work trailer banged open. Looking up, he saw to his chagrin that it was Cameron.

"What are you doing here?" he asked with a frown. "I mailed your final check to you."

"I came to talk."

He shook his head and looked down at the budget report again. "There's nothing to talk about. You didn't show for work or call for several days. As far as I'm concerned, you resigned."

"You know I wouldn't quit on you like that. Not when you need me," she pouted.

Connor glared at her. "No, actually I don't need you. I've already hired a replacement."

She looked offended, but moved closer to his desk. "You know you can't replace me."

"Cameron, I just told you that your job isn't available anymore."

"Maybe not, but you could always use some help around the office." She smiled. "You know your paperwork is always disorganized."

Connor looked at his desk and realized she was right. But it wasn't Cameron he was going to hire. "It won't be this way much longer. I hired a secretary yesterday," he lied easily.

She narrowed her eyes and her lips thinned. "Then where is she?"

"She doesn't start until next week. Now, go away."

Cameron mumbled something under her breath and stormed out of the trailer, slamming the door closed behind her.

Connor smiled and picked up the phone. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of hiring Aislinn sooner, but it answered both of their problems. He only hoped she would agree to take the job.

When she didn't answer, he hung up and frowned at the phone. It wasn't like her to leave the house without letting him know where

she would be. He waited a few minutes and tried again, but there was still no answer.

Apprehension filled him and he grabbed his keys. Locking up the office, he told his foreman he was going home and would be back soon. He jumped in his truck and sped out of the construction lot.



Connor hadn't been gone long when Eric appeared.

Pulling the covers up to her chin, she looked at him uncertainly.

"Are you here to take me away?"

He smiled. "No. Well, not exactly."

"What's that supposed to mean? You're either taking me away or you aren't."

"I'm taking you somewhere, but you're coming back."

She looked at him, confused. "I don't understand."

"You will."

With a wave of his hand, Aislinn was dressed in a beautiful green dress with flared sleeves. She stood and looked down at herself in amazement. She knew he had powers, but the things he did still amazed her.

"What about Connor?" she asked.

Eric smiled and held out his hand. "Worrying a little will be good for him."

Hesitantly, she placed her hand in his and they vanished as quickly as he had arrived. When she next opened her eyes, she stared at her surroundings in confusion. She had never lived in the slums, but she recognized them just the same. Some small children played on a street corner, drug dealers worked the corner across from them.

She looked at Eric with a million questions on her mind, but she only asked one.

"What are we doing here?"

"You're here to learn something. Watch," he said with a tip of his head towards the children.

It was like watching a horror show in slow motion. A man walked down the street toward the children, a knife in his hand and a cold look in his eyes. Aislinn took a step forward, wanting to call out a warning to the kids. Surely Eric wasn't going to make her watch an

[50]

abduction take place! She could only imagine the horrors the child would suffer.

When the man reached for the smallest little girl, hoisting her up by her hair and pressing the knife against her throat, Aislinn screamed and flung out her hands as if to stop him. She knew the little girl wouldn't survive if someone didn't intervene.

"No!"

The man's eyes went wide and he dropped the child as he staggered backward, thrown off balance. Looking around, he tried to find the source of the blast that had lost him his prey. He watched the kids scamper away and quickly walked in the opposite direction, fury blazing in his eyes. When he was out of sight, Aislinn looked at

Eric with a comical expression on her face.

"What just happened?"

He smiled. "You just saved a little girl."

"But... I don't understand."

"When I saved your life, I had to give you part of my life essence. Some of my magic transferred to you as well. It didn't exactly take any power from me, but you have a few shared abilities with me now. Abilities that will help you in the months to come."

"Powers?"

"Yes, Aislinn. I'm afraid the price of me saving your life is that you're now a sorceress. A rather powerful one at that." Once you learn to use your powers, he silently added.

She just stared at him with a blank look, unable to truly grasp what he was saying, yet unable to deny that something had happened when she had wanted to save the small child. But how could she have been the one to stop the man? How could she have power like that? It didn't seem possible that the woman who had been unable to defend herself for the past year was now able to save the lives of others.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand. "It's time to get you back home. I imagine your mate is rather worried about now."

Her eyes lost some of their haze at the mention of Connor. "What about Connor?"

Eric gave her a wicked grin. "Your mate has discovered you aren't answering the phone and is on his way home as we speak."

"How do you know that? How did you know about the little girl, about my ... abilities?"

[51]

"I just know things, Aislinn. But knowledge comes with a price. You'll have to learn that you can't save everyone, no matter how much you might want to. The more power you use, the more tired you will become."

"But you don't seem to get tired."

"Ah, but that's because I am power. You simply inherited a bit from me."

She nodded and leaned against him, ready to go back home. Before she could blink, she was standing in the bedroom at Connor's again. Eric was nowhere to be seen, but she heard the front door open seconds before her mate was calling her name. She could tell he was frantic and she hated that he had been worried.

She narrowed her eyes and looked around the room. The damn wizard was going to get her into trouble one of these days.

"I'm in here Connor."



Hearing her voice in the bedroom, Connor rushed through the house. Part of him was relieved she was okay and the other part wanted to strangle her for worrying him. He pushed open the door and froze, sniffing the air.

He growled and scanned the area, but the wizard was either hiding or had left. "Is he the reason you didn't answer the phone?"

She took a step toward him and stopped. "Yes."

His muscles tensed. "What did he want this time?"

She shrugged, not sure if she should mention her abilities or not. What if it had just been a fluke? She didn't want to claim power she didn't really have.

"He said he wanted to show me something and then he transported us somewhere."

Connor stalked closer, his eyes raking over her body. "To what? Go shopping?"

She blushed. "Actually, I think he made this with magick."

His hands tightened into fists as he thought of the wizard giving her such a gift. Was the man a threat? Would Aislinn prefer the wizard to him?

Connor struggled to get his jealousy under control. "I was calling because I have a job for you, a paying one."

[52]

She smiled and stepped even closer, their bodies nearly touching as she looked up at him, her eyes completely open and honest.

"Really?"

He sighed, letting loose of his anger. It wasn't Aislinn he was upset with, it was the damn wizard, and he refused to take his temper out on his mate. The man was starting to get under his skin, always popping up when Aislinn was alone, and then disappearing before Connor could enter the room. It was hard to fight against

something, or someone, you couldn't see.

"Yeah. It was brought to my attention today that I don't do well with paperwork. I was hoping you would work for my company as my secretary."

She bit her lip, some of her excitement fading. "Connor, you don't have to invent a job just to make me feel more useful."

He lightly caressed her arms. "I'm not. I really do need your help."

She tipped her head to the side. "Really? You really need me?"

He smiled and tugged on a strand of her hair. "Yes, I really need you." For a moment he wondered if they were talking about his office, or something else. "My office is a mess and my filing system... Well, it mostly consists of stacks of paper here, there, and everywhere. You'll have to order some supplies to get me organized."

She smiled and threw her arms around him, hugging him tight.

"I thought you could start Monday. I have no idea how much a secretary costs these days, but I'll do some research on it today and let you know your salary by dinner tonight. There's even a health insurance plan."

"Thank you," she said softly.

If he didn't know better, he would swear it was love he saw in her eyes. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part. Regardless, he was obviously moving in the right direction.

"I better get back to work. I just came home to check on you."

The smile slipped from her face. "I'm sorry you were worried. I wanted to call, but..."

"But he wouldn't let you," he finished. If he ever got his hands on the wizard, he was going to choke the life out of him.

She nodded.

Caressing her cheek, he pressed a soft kiss against her lips. "It's okay, Aislinn. I know it wasn't your fault."

[53]

She leaned into him and rested her cheek against his chest. Being in his arms always comforted her. His strength made her feel protected, his embrace made her feel cherished. It felt so right to be with him.

"You look beautiful," he said quietly, his hand caressing her back. The green suited her and he loved seeing her in something so feminine. He only wished that he had bought it for her.

Not wanting to part from her, he asked, "Would you like to come to work with me? See what kind of mess you'll be getting into if you take the job?"

She leaned back and smiled up at him. "I'd love to. Just let me grab my purse."

Connor waited patiently while Aislinn got her purse and brushed out her hair. When she was ready, he gently clasped her hand and walked with her out to the truck. He always felt calm and content when she was near.

He glanced down at the ring on her finger and smiled. Knowing that she was his gave him more satisfaction than anything else. He only wished that she would trust him a little more. It was going to be a constant battle, one he was ready to win, but he wanted to erase the pain of her past and show her that a man could take care of her. He wanted to be the one to prove to her that not all men were like her ex-husband.

His throat constricted. Truth be told, he knew that Hugh wasn't her ex. In order for there to be an ex, there would have been a divorce. Even knowing that her husband was in another reality, it still ate at Connor. He wanted Aislinn to be solely his, and he felt that as long as Hugh was out there that would never happen.

If he could ever nail the wizard down, he'd ask if it would be possible to take a trip to Aislinn's time. Every time he thought of the man's hands on her, he saw red. He knew violence wasn't the answer, but he wanted Aislinn to be well and truly free from her past life. He just didn't know how to accomplish it.

[54]

Chapter Ten

Aislinn followed Connor into his work trailer at the construction site. During her previous visit, she'd only had eyes for Connor and his argumentative employee, Cameron. Now, she viewed the place through the eyes of his future secretary, and she realized at once that it was going to be a lot of work. She was thrilled that he had such confidence in her and anxious to get started.

"Could I look through things and give you a list of supplies I'll need? That way I can start right away on Monday."

He nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. I know you need file folders and those green things that hang in the cabinet to keep them organized."

She stifled a grin. "You mean hanging files?"

He shrugged and looked sheepish. "I honestly don't know. Maybe if I knew more about them, I would have used them and this place wouldn't be such a mess."

She lost the battle and smiled at him. "Yes, but then you wouldn't need me."

His face grew serious and he pulled her closer. "I'll always need you, Aislinn."

She blushed and looked up at him through her lashes. Shaking her head, she took a step back. "No, sir, Mr. Tierney. If I'm going to work for you, we're going to have to lay some ground rules."

He grinned. "Really? And what might those be?"

"No fondling the help."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Well, I'll endeavor to keep the fondling to a minimal, except for after hours."

Aislinn placed a hand on her hip. It wasn't that she minded his touch, but the man was distracting enough already. If he kept touching her at every turn, she was going to lose it.

"I mean it, Connor. How am I supposed to get you organized if you're going to grab me at every turn?"

[55]

He held his hands up in surrender and did his best to keep a straight face. Fondling indeed! "Okay, I promise to keep my hands to myself." As much as possible, he added silently.

She glanced around the space. "Um, Connor... Where am I supposed to work in here?"

He looked around and realized the only flat surface was his desk, which was currently covered in papers.

"I'll bring a small desk and work table in first thing Monday."

She nodded and began looking through the various piles of paper work. She frowned as she tried to figure out the different forms he had strewn about the place. It looked mostly like invoices, job bids, and contracts. Those would be easy to sort. With a shrug, she figured anything else she could set aside and ask Connor about at a later time.

"Do you have a pen and paper I could use to make my list?" she asked without looking up from her task.

He grabbed a notepad and pen from his desk and handed them to her. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he kissed the top of her head.

"Thanks for coming in to help me."

She smiled, accepting the items. "You're paying me for my help. And remember, hands to yourself."

He chuckled and retreated behind his desk, figuring that was the only way he wouldn't touch her every second of the day. Anytime he was near her, he wanted to hold her. Having her on the job site with him was going to be a unique form of torture, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about the wizard disappearing with her again.

Sitting down, he tried to focus on his budget reports again, but his eyes kept drifting to Aislinn. After fifteen minutes of being unable to work, he grabbed his hard hat and headed for the door.

"I'm just going to be outside checking on the guys. I'll be back shortly."

She smiled and nodded before returning to her piles of papers.

Connor let his gaze drift down her body one last time before disappearing through the door. As he stepped out into the sunshine, he took a deep breath. Work was about to get a lot more interesting with Aislinn around.



An hour later, Aislinn had a list of the supplies she would need in order to not only organize Connor, but keep him that way. She'd also noted the items that were running low, like pencils and staples. In the end, instead of separating out the different types of documents, she'd decided to use a file folder for each company Connor dealt with and have folders with multiple tabs for the different items. It seemed the most efficient way of getting things in order, even if the folders did cost a small fortune.

Connor still hadn't returned and she wasn't sure what to do with her time. She spotted a hard hat hanging on the wall and thought about putting it on and looking for him. Glancing at the clock, she decided to give him another fifteen minutes before she searched for him.

She hesitantly walked behind his desk and sat in his chair, feeling a little out of place, like she was trespassing. Pulling up his computer she didn't look at the document that came up, but went straight to the games folder. A game of solitaire was just the thing to pass the time. She opened the game and soon became lost in the aggravation of trying to best the computer, so focused, in fact, that she didn't hear the door open.

"Well, what do we have here?" a male voice said, sending chills down her spine.

She looked up and her eyes widened. The man was tall, but not as tall as Connor. Where her mate was lean and muscled, this man was thick and fat, apparently enjoying an excess of food and drink. She shrunk into the chair and hoped he would go away. Instead, he came closer, an oily smile on his face and a gleam in his eyes that she didn't trust.

"So who are you, sweet thing?"

"Aislinn," she answered softly.

"And just what are you doing in the boss's chair?"

"Playing a game."

His smile widened and his eyes darkened, frightening her even more.

"I bet I know a better game we could play."

Aislinn was about to try out her new-found powers when Connor stepped into the trailer. He took one look at her terrified face and narrowed his eyes on the construction worker.

"Something I can help you with, Charlie?"

[57]

He flicked a glance over his shoulder at Connor. "Just introducing myself to the little lady here."

Connor walked past him to stand behind Aislinn and laid a proprietary hand on her shoulder. "She looked a little scared for an introduction."

The man eyed him with interest, but backed up a step, realizing there was something going on between the woman and his boss. He held up a hand.

"No harm intended. Just thought we could have some fun, but I see she's already taken."

Connor fought back a growl. "Yes, she is." With a tight smile, he said, "Charlie, this is my fiancé Aislinn. Sweetheart, this is Charlie, one of the men on the construction crew."

Charlie's eyebrows lifted at the word fiancé and he backed up even further. "Well, it seems congratulations are in order. I hadn't heard that you were getting married."

"Make sure everyone else knows."

Charlie nodded, understanding the underlined meaning. Aislinn was Connor's and anyone who didn't know or remember that would pay the price. The boss man was fair and no one wanted to jeopardize their job over a woman.

"I'll do that. I was just coming in to let you know that the men on the east side are going to take a break."

"Thanks. Be sure to get something cool to drink before getting back to work."

Charlie nodded again and backed out of the door, his eyes flicking over to Aislinn once more. This time the darkness was held at bay and he seemed like an ordinary guy.

After the man left, Aislinn let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. The tension in her shoulders eased and she leaned her head back, closing her eyes.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"I'm sorry I left you alone. I should have taken you around and introduced you to everyone before disappearing on you."

She shook her head. "It's okay, Connor. I'm fine."

He growled. "No, you're not. You were terrified when I came in."

"He's just a big guy," she hedged, not wanting to get the man in trouble for something that may very well have been her overactive

[58]

imagination. And yet, she'd seen darkness in him. Another ability perhaps, to see the good or evil within someone?

"I think it was something more than that, but I'll let the matter lie for now."

She nodded and wiggled the computer mouse, pulling her game back up. "I hope you don't mind, but I borrowed your computer while you were gone."

He squeezed her shoulder. "No, I don't mind. I have nothing to hide from you, Aislinn."

She smiled up at him. "I know, but I didn't want to mess with your computer when you had work stuff pulled up. I was just too bored waiting for you and temptation won out."

"Speaking of temptation," he murmured before lowering his head and kissing her softly.

Aislinn curled her hand around the back of his neck, his kisses always left her humming and wanting more.

When he pulled back, he smiled. "Ready to go?"

She nodded and stood, ready to follow him anywhere. She wasn't sure how to convince Connor she was ready for the next step in their relationship, but she was determined it would happen that night.

She slipped her hand into his, picked up her purse, and followed him out of the office. With a smile on her face, she wondered if her magick could do the same things as Eric's. Maybe, just maybe, she could create something like he had done that morning with her green dress. She'd seen the appreciative look in Connor's eyes and she wanted to see it again.

[59]

Chapter Eleven

Later that night, Aislinn paced the bedroom. Connor had kissed her on the cheek after dinner and said he needed to take care of a few things, and then he'd run out of the house like his tail was on fire.

Shaking her head, she blew out a frustrated breath. Why was he playing hard to get? She knew he wanted her, it was evident in the way he watched her, touched her... and yet he didn't claim her.

She kicked a pile of laundry in frustration and heard a chuckle behind her. Spinning around, she saw it was the wizard and narrowed her eyes.

"Now what? Is there a puppy being kicked somewhere you need to show me?"

He smirked, knowing her anger wasn't directed at him but at her mate. Crossing his arms, he strolled over to her.

"It seems you have a bit of a temper."

She froze and looked at him, stunned. "You're right. I always did, but then..."

"Then your husband beat it out of you?"

She nodded, surprised to discover she had been acting more and more like her old self. It was thrilling!

"You know, I suspect your husband is the reason the werewolf hasn't claimed you." He glanced at her ring. "Well, in a more werewolf type of way."

"What do you mean?"

"Technically, you're still married, as far as he's concerned. You'd be dead if you were in the other world, but that doesn't

[60]

matter to Connor. To him, you and Hugh are still connected, and it's stopping him from acting on his urges."

She frowned and her heart sank. "I can't do anything about Hugh, so how am I supposed to convince Connor I belong to him?"

With a wicked grin, the wizard raked his eyes over her body. Aislinn felt her skin humming and looked down. Surprised, she now found herself draped in a gauzy nightgown with a halter style top and long skirt that touched the tops of her feet, a slit in each side running up to her hips. In the light, it left little to the imagination. Noticing the look in the wizard's eyes, she blushed and crossed her arms over her chest.

"So this nightgown will change his mind?"

"It would certainly change mine," he murmured, his eyes burning with desire. It was obviously time for him to find a woman.

Her blush deepened and she took a step back. "Thanks."

He nodded and looked around the room. Grinning, he waved his hand and dimmed the lights. Candles appeared on the dresser and the air was scented with jasmine and honeysuckle.

Aislinn looked around in amazement. "I know what you can do, but I'm always still stunned when I see the proof of your magick."

"Our magick."

"So, I can do things like this too?"

"With some practice."

She nodded; at least one of her questions had been answered.

Eric looked toward the door with narrowed eyes. "I think it's time for me to leave. Your mate isn't too happy with me right now and he'll be here any second."

"Will you be back soon?"

"Yes. There's still much for you to learn about your abilities. Try not to get into trouble."

[61]

She looked affronted. "And just why would you think I'd get into trouble?"

"I saw you earlier, in Connor's office. If that guy hadn't backed down, you would have blasted him just like the child molester from earlier in the day. Except this time you would have known what you were doing and the blast would have been far more powerful."

She bit her lip. "I'm guessing that wouldn't have been a good thing."

"I noticed you didn't tell your mate about what happened during our morning trip. If you're trying to keep your magic a secret, it's best not to use it around him or his work place."

"I understand. It's not that I want to keep anything from him, but... I just don't understand my powers yet. How can I explain to him something I don't even get?"

Eric stepped closer and hugged her briefly. "It will get better. I promise."

She gave him a hesitant smile and returned the hug. "Thank you, for everything you've done. I wouldn't have made it without you."

With a smile, Eric vanished, leaving her alone in the room. A moment later, she heard the front door open and close. She heard Connor's footsteps in the living room and then the kitchen. Listening intently, she heard the refrigerator open, clinking, and then heard it close.

With a frown, Aislinn eyed the closed bedroom door. What was he doing? Stealthily, she crept to the door and slowly opened it. She peered out into the hall and caught a glimpse of Connor sitting in his recliner, drinking a beer.

She narrowed her eyes and suppressed a growl of frustration. She had expected Hugh to act like this, but Connor? The thought of her mate hiding behind a bottle of beer infuriated her.

Holding her head high and throwing back her shoulders, she opened the door and walked into the living room. When she

stood beside Connor's chair, she folded her arms over her chest.

"Connor, are you coming to bed?"

He looked up at her and choked on a swallow of beer. Gasping for air, he let his eyes drift over her. "What are you wearing?"

"A nightgown."

He gave her a heated look. "That isn't a nightgown."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Torture."

She smiled. Good, she thought. She trailed a hand over his shoulder and down his bicep, and felt a tremor run through him. She felt in control for the first time in ages, and she loved it. Knowing that she had so much power over him delighted her. Just knowing that Connor wouldn't hurt her like Hugh had, was enough to make her feel safe and courageous. Courageous enough to slip into his lap and loop her arms around his neck, making sure her nightgown draped her body in such a way that one leg was exposed.

"Connor, aren't you ready for bed?"

He stared at her, his eyes trying to see into her soul. It was obvious she was up to something, but he wasn't sure what it was. Her nightgown was designed for seduction, but Aislinn wouldn't do that - would she?

"I'll be there in a minute."

Her eyes travelled over his face. Staring into his eyes, she realized he was filled with light. So I really can see if a person is good or evil. Interesting, she thought. Such a gift would have come in handy when she married Hugh. She would have been able to see from the beginning how rotten he was. It gave her even more confidence and she leaned forward to gently press her lips to his.

After a moment's hesitation, Connor sat his beer down and buried his fingers into her hair. He kissed her with greedy lips, wanting to devour her. His tongue slipped between her

lips, tasting, savoring, wanting to drown himself in her. Her body pressing against his was enough to drive him mad, but her kisses were the killing blow. His wall of resistance crumbled and he knew that he would do whatever she asked.

She broke the kiss and smiled. "Take me to bed, Connor. I want you to make love to me."

His lungs seized in his chest and he felt lightheaded. He'd never wanted anything so much in his life. He stood, holding her in his arms, and carried her to the bedroom.



Tossing her down on the bed, Connor gazed her with a hungry expression, no longer able to hide his desire. He'd wanted her from the moment she had landed in his arms, and having held back for so long he felt his inner wolf howling to be let loose. Not wanting to scare her, he was determined to be gentle.

Connor pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor before covering her body with his. The heat of her body and her lush curves were enough to drive him mad with desire, making it hard to hold back. Gently, he kissed her neck, feeling her pulse beat wildly under her skin. His blood pounded with the knowledge that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

His hand trailed down her side to her hip, eliciting a soft gasp from her. He tenderly kissed her, wanting her to understand how much she meant to him. Finding his mate had been a gift, and Aislinn was the best mate he could have ever asked for, fitting him perfectly in every way.

When he looked into her eyes, he was surprised to see not only passion blazing in their depths, but also trust. It humbled him that she had faith in him after all she had been through.

Rolling to his side, he pulled her close. He fingered the long, silky strands of her hair. As her small hands explored his chest, he felt his heart beat erratically under her palms and marveled at how different it was to lie with Aislinn than it had been with

any other woman. Knowing she was his, and only his, made the experience magickal.

Claiming her lips once more, he buried his hands in her hair and molded her body to his, wanting to brand her as his own. With agile fingers, he untied the top of her nightgown. As he began to part the material, he heard the front door of the house open and slam shut.

With a curse, he jumped up, all of his senses on alert. When he realized it was his cousin, he gave a deep growl.

"Dammit, what the hell does he want?"

Aislinn quickly tied her nightgown again and stood beside him. "What does who want?"

"Gabriel. Wait here, I'll be back in a minute." Assuming I don't murder my cousin, he thought grimly.

[65]

Chapter Twelve

Connor stalked toward Gabriel with narrowed eyes.

"I realize you have a key to the house, but I'd prefer you not use it on a whim."

Gabriel grinned at him. "Interrupting something, am I?"

With a silent curse, Connor crossed his arms and stared at his cousin, his jaw squared in determination. It was going to be a short conversation, even if it meant bodily throwing Gabriel out of the house. He jerked his head toward the living room; once there he flopped down in a chair.

"So, what do you want?"

Gabriel stifled his amusement and sat on the sofa facing his cousin. "Cassie has done some digging on parallel universes, and also on the wizard."

Connor leaned forward, bracing his arms on his legs. "And?"

"We have no idea how to travel from our plane of existence to the one Aislinn came from. But, we do think we can summon the wizard."

Connor grimaced. "He's here all the damn time. I don't think calling him will do you much good."

Gabriel looked intrigued. "Here, as in he comes to your house?"

"He likes appearing to Aislinn when I'm not around. If I didn't know better, I'd say he does it just to irritate me."

"Interesting. Do you think he'd come to her if she called him?"

Connor shrugged. "Maybe."

[66]

"Bring her out here and let's see if it works. The only way to get our questions answered is by confronting him. We have to see what he knows in regards to your mate."

Connor ground his teeth, but got up and went to the bedroom.

Aislinn was pacing the bedroom, her brow furrowed. She looked up when Connor entered the bedroom.

"It's Gabriel. Can you come to the living room for a minute?"

Without a thought to her apparel, or lack thereof, Aislinn followed her mate as he requested. When she saw the joint-alpha, she smiled.

"It's nice to see you, Gabriel."

He returned her smile and made sure he kept his eyes on her face. The gown she wore left little to the imagination and he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

Grumbling was heard from the corner of the room and the wizard materialized out of the shadows, frowning at Aislinn. With a wave of his hand, a velvet robe with fur trim covered her body.

"Had I known you were going to gallivant around in front of people, I would have never made that blasted nightgown," he grumbled.

Aislinn gave him a shy smile. "I wasn't exactly thinking when I walked in here. Thank you for the robe."

Instead of responding to her, he glared at the alphas. They needed to spend less time worrying about him and focus more of their attention on upcoming events. The pack would be fighting for their lives soon, and none of them were prepared for it.

"What the hell do you two want?" he asked with barely restrained fury.

"We have some questions about Aislinn and her future with the pack," Gabriel answered calmly, appearing unfazed by the wizard's temper.

"And you couldn't ask her?"

[67]

The werewolves looked at one another and then at Aislinn.

"Do you know something you should share with us?" Connor asked, finding it hard to believe his mate would keep pertinent information from him.

Noting her pallor, Gabriel gave her the assurance she needed. "We just need to make sure you're safe. Without knowing if your husband can track you here, we're vulnerable to an attack."

"I came here by magick. Since Hugh is the least magickal person I know, he won't be able to find me." She looked at Eric before looking at her mate. "In my world, I'm dead. I'm not going to vanish and I'm not going to be returned to my world."

Unless I screw up, she silently added.

Connor looked away from her, his jaw tightening in frustration. "Why didn't you share this with me before now?"

She moved toward him and stopped. "I didn't know it was something you were worried about. If you had asked me, I would have told you what I know."

"Is there anything else I should know?" Connor asked softly, his stance still rigid and unyielding. It was obvious he was going to make this difficult for her.

Aislinn look at Eric helplessly. She knew she should tell them about her magickal abilities, but she wasn't sure how much she could tell them. It wasn't just her secret, it was Eric's.

The wizard sighed and tipped his head back, closing his eyes briefly. "I'm supposed to observe without interfering, but I've screwed that up this time."

"You're the reason Aislinn healed so quickly, aren't you?"

Gabriel asked, the pieces of the puzzle finally coming together.

Eric nodded. "I shared my life's essence with her in order to save her life. However, my gift came with a price."

"What kind of price?" Connor asked, torn between wanting to thank the man for saving his mate and want to throttle him for having any kind of relationship with her.

[68]

"She inherited some of my magickal abilities. If threatened, she can defend herself."

Connor looked between Aislinn and Eric. "Anything else?"

Eric shrugged. "She may be able to do a few other things, but I won't know how extensive her powers are until I'm able to test them."

"More tests?" Aislinn grumbled.

He flashed her a smile. "Only if you want to harness your power, little sorceress."

"Sorceress!" Gabriel and Connor exclaimed at the same time.

"Yes, the latest addition to your pack is now a sorceress. And if she continues to practice, she'll be a rather powerful one."

The werewolves looked stunned.

Connor looked at Aislinn as if he'd never seen her before. Her heart broke a little and she wondered if things would ever be the same between them again. She was still the same woman he'd wanted to make love to moments ago, and yet she knew there was now an invisible wall between them. She looked to Eric for guidance, but he only gave her a sad smile. Obviously she had to fight this battle on her own. She just wasn't sure how.

In a blink, Eric disappeared, leaving Aislinn alone with the werewolves. She eyed her mate uncertainly. Her gaze shifted to Gabriel and he gave her an encouraging smile. Rising from the sofa, he walked over and gave her a hug.

"Everything will work itself out," he said with a smile.

"I wish I could believe that," she replied with a subtle look in Connor's direction.

Gabriel squeezed her shoulder before showing himself out, leaving them to work out their problems.



Aislinn looked at Connor, but he refused to meet her gaze. She swallowed the lump forming in her throat and walked away. At the bedroom door she paused, wondering if Connor

would still want to share the room with her. Looking down the hall, she moved toward one of the guest rooms.

She pushed open the door to the blue bedroom and stepped inside. Closing the door softly, she leaned against it, no longer able to hold herself up. Everything had been going so well, and now it seemed she'd lost it all. It seemed incredibly unfair that she would finally find love only to have it taken away so suddenly.

Sinking to her knees, she buried her face in her hands. There had to be a way to fix things. She refused to give up!

What good is magick if it can't fix a broken heart, she wondered.



In the living room, Connor was feeling hurt and betrayed. His mate had special abilities, ones that made him useless in her life. If she could protect herself, why did she need him? And why hadn't she told him?

He'd been vaguely aware of her leaving the room, but hadn't stopped her. For once, he wasn't sure what to say or what to do, wasn't sure if anything could make it right again.

He loved her. That much he knew, but did it really matter if she didn't trust him or love him in return? What was their relationship built on if everything had been a lie? She hadn't seemed like a deceitful woman, and yet she'd kept things from him, important things.

Rubbing a hand down his face, he looked to the hall. She hadn't gone back into their room. He didn't want to sleep in his bed without her, but he didn't trust himself to be around her just yet. Grabbing his keys, he left the house, hoping a long drive and maybe a stop at the local bar would help him figure things out. If nothing else, it would help dull the pain and allow him to sleep.



Aislinn heard the front door close and knew she was alone, again.

"Eric?" she called softly.

The wizard materialized in front of her and hunkered down so that he was eye level with her.

"That didn't go very well, did it?"

She shook her head. "I think he hates me now."

He gave her a tender smile. "No, he doesn't hate you. He's just confused and hurting right now. He doesn't understand why you kept your magick a secret from him, but he'll come around."

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you and Gabriel seem to be."

Eric reached out and took her hand. "Come on. You obviously aren't going to get any sleep so we might as well

work on honing those powers of yours."

With a sigh of resignation, she stood and leaned against him.

"Where to this time?"

He flashed her a grin. "It's a surprise."

Isn't it always, she thought, right before they vanished from the house and reappeared in what seemed to be the barrio in southern California.

"Eric, I think I'm over dressed."

With a chuckle and a wave of his hand, her gown and robe changed into shorts and a baby doll tee.

Aislinn scanned the scenery, knowing that her lesson for the day had to be hidden in plain sight. She just couldn't figure out what it was. Waiting patiently, she kept an eye on her surroundings.

Finally, a small Hispanic woman with two small children walked by; their clothes well worn and hanging loosely on their bodies.

"So that's my project?"

[71]

Eric nodded. "Now you get to learn how to make something from nothing. I think it's time they had their pantry stocked and their clothing replenished."

[72]

Chapter Thirteen

After Aislinn had finally learned to create something from nothing, not an easy task to be sure, Eric had transported them to a beach. They'd walked the sandy shores for a good hour in companionable silence before Aislinn had asked to go home.

Once in her room again, she sank onto the bed, looking tired and lost.

"I thought you would be feeling a bit better after helping that family," Eric commented.

She gave him a wan smile. "I was, but it wore off. Now I'm just tired and feel a bit drained."

He nodded. "That's to be expected. It takes a lot of magick to create things, and it can be especially draining on someone new to their abilities. You'll have to take it slow for a while."

Aislinn brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. Resting her cheek on her knees, she sighed.

"I'm tired of being alone."

Eric looked at her in surprise. "But you aren't alone. You have an entire pack now."

She closed her eyes. "You know what I mean. I was alone in my relationship with Hugh, and now that Connor's mad at me I'm alone again. I thought I'd finally found the person I was suppose to share my life with."

Eric sat beside her and drew her close, wanting to comfort her. "You have. I told you that he just needs some time."

Aislinn leaned into him, needing his strength. "I'm glad you're my friend."

[73]

Friend? Is that what I am? Eric wasn't sure what to think about her statement. He hadn't had friends in centuries.

"I'm always here if you need me, you know that."

She nodded sleepily.

He pressed a kiss to her temple and helped her lie down on the bed. "Sleep now. You'll need your energy to face what's to come."

"What's to come?" she asked sleepily.

"Connor's been out all night, but I imagine he'll want to talk later today. The sun will be up in another hour or two."

Aislinn sighed again. "I feel like I could sleep for a year."

Eric smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. "I don't think a year is possible, but you can get a few hours of sleep at the very least. The werewolf will be home before long."

"Where did he go?" she asked softly, almost afraid of the answer.

"He's not sleeping with anyone, if that's what you're worried about. He went out drinking."

"But he didn't sleep here."

"He's not cheating on you, Aislinn. You don't have to worry about that. He might be upset, but he'd never do that to do you."

She nodded and closed her eyes, unable to stay away for another moment.

Once she was asleep, Eric vanished from the room, leaving her to get some rest.



Connor groaned as he came awake, the light streaming through the window making his head pound. He slowly opened his eyes and stared up at an unfamiliar ceiling. Where am I?

Rising up on an elbow, he surveyed the room. Cassie's house. It wasn't the first time he'd stayed in Cassie and Matt's guest room, but it was the first time he didn't remember how he got there. He remembered being mad at Aislinn and leaving

[74]

to go to the bar. I remembered drinking large quantities of beer and tequila. But after the sixth or seventh shot of tequila, everything became a bit fuzzy.

Climbing out of the bed, he spied his jeans and shirt on an nearby chair. Getting dressed, he stumbled into the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. Opening the cabinet over the sink, he pulled out of the new toothbrushes Cassie kept on hand for company. He brushed his teeth and splashed more cold water on his face. While both helped him wake up and feel a little more human, neither did anything for the monster headache pounding behind his eyes and in his temples.

Staggering to the stairs, he gripped the rail and slowly made his way downstairs. The screeches of the kids made him wince, but he forged ahead toward the kitchen, following the sounds of laughter and conversation. Propping a shoulder in the kitchen doorway, he smiled as he watched Cassie and Matt take care of their brood of children. It seemed they had another one every time he blinked. Both having been only children, they'd wanted a house full of kids. It seemed they had gotten their wish and then some.

"Well, there you are," Cassie said with a smile in his direction. "I wondered if you would rejoin the land of the living."

With a grin, he moved into the room and sat at the only empty chair left at the table. "That bad, huh?"

"Matt had to practically carry you into the house. Want to tell us what drove you to drink? You don't normally stay at a bar until you're about to pass out under a table."

He shrugged and looked around at the kids. "Just had a fight with Aislinn is all."

"Does this have anything to do with Gabriel's call last night about the wizard, and something about Aislinn having powers?"

He nodded. "She lied to me."

[75]

Cassie cocked her head to the side and studied him a moment. "You know, if I were in her place, I would be scared to share something like that too."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Honey, you were in her place. You were terrified of Cole finding out you could communicate with spirits."

Cassie smiled. "True. Maybe that's why I can sympathize with Aislinn. I'm nowhere near as powerful as she is, but I do get premonitions through dreams, and I still see spirits everywhere I go. Does that make me any less lovable?"

"You know it doesn't," Connor answered.

"So, why are you so upset your fiancé has magical gifts?"

"It isn't the gifts I mind, Cassie. It's the fact that she kept them hidden from me, was seeing the wizard behind my back.

How can I trust her if she can't trust me with the truth?"

"Did you ask her about it?"

He hung his head. "No, I didn't give her a chance to explain. I was too angry to think straight."

"So you left her last night after arguing to go and get drunk, which you already know terrifies her thanks to her previous life, and now you've stayed out all night. You're going to be lucky if she doesn't change you into a toad when you get home."

Connor made a choking sound. "Could she do that?"

Cassie shrugged. "I have no idea, but I would imagine she'll be hurt and angry enough to try."

"Great. Just what I needed, an angry sorceress."

Matt grinned. "Worse, you have an angry mate. I'd be more scared of that than an angry sorceress."

Connor groaned and dropped his head into his hands. "I've made a royal mess of everything."

"Why don't you stop by the florist on the way home and then crawl on her hands and knees and beg for her

forgiveness?" Cassie suggested with a grin.

"Flowers I can do, but an alpha never begs."

[76]

Matt threw his head back and laughed. "Just wait, she'll have you begging before long."

Connor muttered something under his breath and pushed his chair back. If he was going to make things right with Aislinn, he needed to head home. He only hoped she was still there.

"Thanks for helping me out last night," he told Matt and Cassie. "I guess I better go home and see if she'll forgive me."

Matt reached behind him and grabbed Connor's keys off the counter. He tossed them to him. "You'll need these. I took them from you last night to keep you from attempting to drive."

Connor nodded. "Thanks. Wish me luck!"

Matt and Cassie looked at each other and smiled, knowing that luck wouldn't have anything to do with it. They could have eased Connor's mind and shared Matt's latest vision with him, but the man was cocky enough already. It would do him some good to worry about his future with Aislinn.

[77]

Chapter Fourteen

After picking up two dozen red and white roses, Connor pulled into his drive and stared at the house. It seemed still and quiet, which made him uneasy. A few weeks ago, he would have been used to coming home to the house being so still, but now that Aislinn was in his life he was used to more energy.

Getting out of the truck, he took a breath and walked up to the house. As he pushed the door open, he frowned. He could smell a faint trace of the wizard, but he could smell Aislinn too. It gave him a small amount of comfort to realize she was still in the house, but he frowned as he realized the house was undisturbed. Was she still sleeping? A glance at the clock showed that it was nearly ten o'clock, which was far later than Aislinn ever slept.

He quickly walked through the living room and into the house, pausing outside of the door to the blue bedroom. Turning the knob, he pushed the door open and stepped into the room. Aislinn lay sprawled across the bed, still sound asleep.

Connor moved further into the room and sat the flowers down on the nightstand. Sitting lightly on the edge of the bed, he traced the curve of her jaw with his fingers. She looked so peaceful when she slept; the dark shadows that usually haunted her eyes went away for a short time.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. When she woke, he would apologize to her, and hope that she forgave him. He knew that his life would be empty without her, even if they had

[78]

only known one another for such a short time. To think that he had jeopardized his chance to have a mate made him ill. Every werewolf waited for the day they would find their mate, find the one person who made them whole. Connor knew without a doubt his mate was Aislinn, now he just needed to make sure he treated her as such.

Rising from the bed, he left the flowers would she would see them when she woke, and he quietly slipped out of the room. Not wanting to disturb her, he turned the TV on low and settled into his chair.



Aislinn slowly pulled herself out of her dreams and opened her eyes. Seeing the beautiful red and white roses on the nightstand, she sat up and looked around. She picked them up and sniffed at them, enjoying the perfume that rose from their delicate blossoms.

Shoving the covers aside, she rose from the bed and went in search of Connor, knowing he had to have come home and left the beautiful flowers for her. Hearing the low hum of the TV, she walked into the living room, and found Connor asleep in his chair.

She moved into the kitchen and took down a vase from the cabinet. Filling it with water, she placed the roses in the vase and set it on the counter. She was surprised to see it was almost noon. Deciding to surprise Connor, she pulled out the ingredients she would need in order to make meatloaf. Once it was prepared and she had slid it into the oven, she chopped fresh carrots and placed them in a pot of water with some brown sugar, cinnamon, and honey, letting them simmer on low.

Wiping her hands off on a dish towel, she went into the living room to wake Connor. If the flowers were any indication, he wasn't as angry today as he had been last night. At least, she hoped that's what the flowers meant. She had

[79]

automatically assumed they were from Connor, but what if Eric had left them as a way to cheer her up?

She placed a gentle hand on Connor's shoulder and shook him awake.

"Connor, it's almost noon."

He mumbled something under his breath, but didn't wake up.

"Connor?"

His eyes slowly opened and she smiled at him. "I have lunch cooking, if you're hungry."

He gave her a hesitant smile. "Lunch sounds good."

She removed her hand and started to walk away, but he grabbed her hand and held her still. With a gentle tug, he pulled her into his lap.

"Aislinn, we need to talk. About last night..."

She shook her head. "It's okay, Connor. You were right, I should have told you."

"But I never let you explain why you didn't, and that was wrong of me."

Aislinn felt her eyes tear up. She'd never had a man be as reasonable as Connor. "I was scared, Connor."

"Of what? Help me understand, Aislinn."

"I didn't understand the power that was given to me and it scared me. But even more, I didn't know what I was capable of and I was afraid to tell you. I knew you would ask questions I couldn't answer."

"We could have figured it out together," he told her gently.

"I realize that now. I know that you're different from Hugh, but... I'm not used to a man being nice to me, being reasonable about things. I'm used to everything always being my fault, always being blamed for things that are out of my control."

"If dinner wasn't ready on time, he would beat me, even if it wasn't done because he'd come home early. If his beer wasn't cold enough because the refrigerator had broken, that was somehow my fault too."

[80]

"I'm not Hugh."

She smiled faintly. "I know. But while a part of me knows that, recognizes the differences between you, the other part of me is still afraid."

Connor wrapped his arms around her. "You don't have to be afraid anymore, Aislinn. I'll never hurt you like he did, that I can promise. I'm sorry for not listening to you last night. I can't promise that we'll never fight again, but I can promise that I will always listen to you. I won't let my anger rule me again."

Stifling a sob, Aislinn burrowed into him. "That's all I can ask of you."

Hearing her voice break, he knew she was crying. "Honey, please don't cry."

She lifted her head and gave him a tremulous smile. "I'm not crying because I'm sad, I'm crying because I'm so happy I found you."

"Does that mean you're wearing your ring now because you want to, because you want to be my wife?"

She nodded. "I've wanted to be your wife from the moment I laid eyes on you, but I was too afraid to believe it could be real. I've dreamed of meeting someone like you my whole life, it just seemed surreal when I finally found you."

"I know we just met, but I love you, Aislinn."

She leaned forward and kissed him. "I love you too, Connor."



The weekend passed in a blur and before they knew it, Monday had arrived. For Aislinn, it was an exciting day, another beginning in her new life. She dressed for work with a smile on her face, anxious to start her new job with Connor, and excited that she would be with him all day.

"You seem awfully happy this morning," he commented as he kissed her cheek.

She smiled at him. "I am. I'm looking forward to working with you today."

"The supplies you ordered should be there by this afternoon. Since you won't have much to do for the first part of

the day, I'll show you around the job site."

"I have to admit that some of your men make me nervous."

"You mean Charlie?"

She nodded. "He reminds me of Hugh."

"None of my men will hurt you. Most like their jobs too much, and the rest are just inherently good men."

"I won't be afraid anymore. I know that when you're around, you'll protect me."

"And when I'm not, you can protect yourself," he reminded her.

She nodded. "Yes, I can. It's nice knowing that you can defend yourself, especially after..."

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her. "That's all in the past. You don't have to worry about Hugh anymore."

"I know," she said with a smile.

[82]

Chapter Fifteen

True to his word, Connor had shown Aislinn around the jobsite most of the morning. After lunch, the office supplies had arrived and she'd gotten to work on his files. After she had a stack ready to be filed, she opened the laptop Connor had bought for her and began entering them into the database she had designed. Connor would be able to pull up a client's name and see everything that had been received or sent, along with notes from phone conversations. Once a file was cataloged, she filed it away in the large file cabinet behind his desk.

After several hours of working and only having fifteen files done, she realized it was going to be a long work in progress, but she didn't mind. It was nice to have something to do, to feel useful.

She rose from her chair and stretched her arms over her head. Rolling her head from side to side, she tried to work the kinks from her neck and shoulders, the muscles having grown tight from sitting at the computer for so long.

She felt Connor's hands on her shoulders and leaned back against him.

"Are you ready to go home? You've had a busy day."

She nodded and turned to wrap her arms around him. While his presence had been distracting when she had first started working, she had become so absorbed in her project that she had forgotten he was around.

"I didn't get as much accomplished today as I had hoped, but at least I have a good start on it."

[83]

"You did a lot of work today, honey. It's just going to take a lot of time to get through it all. I haven't filed anything, not properly, since I took over the company a few months ago. And, as I'm sure you can tell, the previous owner didn't believe in filing anything either. If you think this office is bad, you should see the main office."

She gave him a horrified look. "You mean there's another set of files like this somewhere?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, but you don't have to tackle those anytime soon. Just worry about the ones related to this job site for now."

She looked around the office, aghast. "You mean, all of these are just for this one job?"

He nodded. "For the most part. A lot of the vendors are used for multiple jobs, and I have a few things lying around for a future job."

"Connor, you have got to be the least organized person I know. How on earth did you let it get this bad?"

He smiled. "Just talented I guess."

Aislinn shook her head and picked up her purse. "Okay, let's go home before I decide to dive back into this mess."

Offering her his arm, he escorted her from the trailer and to the truck. When they were on their way home, Connor's phone rang.

"Hello."

"Connor, it's Kiera."

He smiled. "Hey, Kiera. How are you?"

"In labor. Can you and Aislinn meet us at the hospital? Gabriel wants the whole family there."

"You bet. We'll head that way now."

Hanging up the phone he smiled at Aislinn. "Kiera is in labor. Change of plans, we're going to the hospital."

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh wow, I didn't realize she was due already. Did she sound okay? How's Gabriel?"

[84]

He shrugged. "Kiera seemed fine, but I'm sure Gabriel is a mess. This is their first baby and he dotes on that woman."

Aislinn smiled and looked out of her window. Much the way you dote on me, she wanted to ask. Suddenly, the thought of having Connor's child seemed rather appealing. Of course, she'd have to coax him back into her bed again. Maybe this time they wouldn't be interrupted.



At the hospital, Marin and Cole sat in seats across from Gabriel. Michael was beside him, with Chloe by his side. Connor's brother, Colin, was leaning against the wall. Two other pack members, Austin and Hunter, were also present.

Aislinn took in the scene with wide eyes. She hadn't expected quite so many people to show up. She'd met Gabriel before, as well as Marin and Kiera, but the others were strangers to her.

The man leaning against the wall looked almost identical to her husband, which was a shock. She hadn't realized he was a twin.

"You must be Aislinn," Colin said with a warm smile. "I'm your mate's brother, Colin."

She took his hand and returned his smile. "It's nice to meet you, but I must confess that I didn't realize he had a twin."

Colin laughed. "I'm not surprised. He was probably worried you'd prefer me over his sullen self."

Aislinn looked at Connor. "Sullen?"

He shrugged. "Colin has always been the more exuberant of the two of us."

Her gaze swept over the waiting room. "It must be nice to have such a large family."

Connor tugged her over toward Gabriel. He smiled at them and gesture for them to have a seat. "It could be a while."

"Why aren't you in there with Kiera?" Aislinn asked. When she heard a collective indrawn breath, she realized she might have asked the wrong question.

"She asked me to wait out here. I think she felt I might be more hindrance than help, and she may be right. Cassie is in there with her and Matt is at home with their kids."

"I like Cassie," Aislinn said with a smile. "If she's in there with Kiera, then everything will be fine."

Gabriel nodded and gave a small smile. "I kinda figured the same thing."

Marin crossed her arms, sullenly. "I still don't know why she didn't want me or Chloe in there with her."

Aislinn wasn't sure what to make of Marin or her comments. From what she had gathered, Cole's mate was sweet and rather quiet, but the woman she'd been faced with twice now seemed otherwise.

Without conscious thought, Aislinn reached out to Marin with her senses, lulling the woman into a calm state before probing what was wrong. With a gasp, she realized that she knew why Marin was upset. She wasn't sure if she was more startled by what had been revealed or by the gift itself. She would have to ask Eric about this new-found ability when she was able.

Rising from her seat, she walked over to Marin and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. She sank to her haunches and looked the other woman in the eyes, no longer surprised by the pain and suffering she saw in their depths.

She tipped her head to the side, motioning toward the door. "Let's take a walk."

Marin's eyes widened in surprise, but she rose with Aislinn and followed her from the room. When they were alone, she blew out a breath.

"You know, don't you?"

"Yes."

Marin shook her head. "But how? Even my mate doesn't know."

"When the wizard saved my life, he transferred some of his abilities to me. I realized, sitting in that waiting room, that I could read your emotions and your body."

"That's pretty amazing," Marin said with a grin.

"Why haven't you told your mate?"

"I don't want to worry him. There's nothing he can do to save me, and that's going to tear him apart." Marin sighed and looked at Aislinn with teary eyes. "Why make him suffer more than he has to? He's going to have to bear so much before long; I just want to make his time as happy as possible before then."

"Marin, you have to tell him."

A deep voice interrupted them. "Tell me what?"

Aislinn looked over her shoulder at Cole and Connor. The two had obviously followed them, wondering what was up. It wasn't her story to tell, so she looked at Marin.

"You need to tell him. He's strong and his strength will help you."

Marin nodded and sniffled. "Stay with me?"

Aislinn nodded and gripped her hand for support.

Marin faced her mate with tears trailing down her cheeks. She held out a hand to him. When his fingers clasped hers, she fought back a sob. It was so unfair that she might lose him after all they'd been through.

"I... I can't tell him," she said brokenly, looking to Aislinn for help.

Aislinn nodded and looked at Cole. "I'm sure you've noticed some changes in your mate. Her personality isn't what it normally is, for one."

Cole nodded.

"There are some other changes to her as well, physical ones. Marin has cancer."

The blood drained from Cole's face and her words sunk in and his hand began to tremble.

"How long?" he rasped.

[87]

Aislinn looked at Marin, trying to read her body again. "I'm not sure, but I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure she stays with you."

Connor stepped behind Aislinn and placed a hand on her waist, giving her his support. He was proud of her and wanted to lend her his strength. Whatever she needed, he would give her.

"Ovarian cancer is quick and deadly, but I may be able to reverse it, or at least arrest it. I won't know until I try, and I prefer to have Eric around when I do. He knows more about my powers than I do."

Cole nodded and pulled his mate into his arms, burying his face in her neck. His silent tears soaked her hair and his shoulders shook as he cried at the thought of losing her. Marin placed an unsteady hand on his back and held him close.

"Come to Connor's when you're ready and we'll begin," Aislinn told them before walking back to the waiting room with Connor.

The other pack members looked at them with questions in their eyes, but they held silent. Aislinn wouldn't tell Marin's secret. If the other woman wanted the pack to know what she was going through, she would tell them. Otherwise, the secret would remain between the four of them. Well, five if you counted the wizard. Aislinn hadn't been joking. She didn't want to try a healing without Eric nearby.



Two hours later, a nurse brought out a pink wrapped squalling baby and handed her to Gabriel.

"Your wife is fine and is being moved to another room. She said to tell you that your daughter's name is Radha Elaine Andrews."

"Radha?" Gabriel asked in surprise.

"Your wife said it's Irish and pronounced Row-a. She said it meant a vision." The nurse smiled at the baby. "And she's certainly a vision."

Gabriel smiled down at his tiny daughter. "Yes, she is."

"I'm going to put Radha in the nursery. We'll come get you in just a few moments and take you to see your wife."

Gabriel handed the small bundle back to the nurse and sat back down, waiting rather impatiently to see his wife.

[89]

Chapter Sixteen

It was hard to believe a week had passed since they had discovered Marin's illness. Aislinn had mentioned it to Eric and had asked if it were possible to heal her. In order to prepare her for the task ahead, he had taken her to a small hospital in Mexico in order to train her on the art of healing.

By the end of the day, Aislinn had been soaked in sweat, deathly pale, and worn out. But she'd learned how to set bones, heal influenza, the common cold, and several other injuries. None of the patients had cancer so she wasn't able to practice her healing on someone that sick, but Eric assured her she would take her to another low income hospital where her talents would be much appreciated and she would be able to practice more.

So far, they hadn't taken that trip. She was worried about Marin, but the woman didn't seem to be getting any worse. At least, not yet, but it was only a matter of time.

A commotion outside of the work trailer drew her attention. The men were gathered in a circle around something and seemed to be arguing. Unable to stop herself, Aislinn stepped out to see what was going on. As she drew near the circle, she knew something wasn't right.

"What's going on?" she asked in her most authoritative voice.

The men parted and eyed her silently. Finally, Mack, one of the newer guys stepped back and allowed her to see what held

[90]

their fascination. A small wolf lay curled up, blood oozing from a wound in its side.

"Oh! Oh my!"

Aislinn scurried into the circle and knelt beside the babywolf cub. She placed a hand on the animal and murmured to it softly. A prickling sensation crept from her hand to the animal and she bit back a gasp. Not a wolf. A werewolf!

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's get you inside and taken care of."

Aislinn lifted the furry bundle into her arms not caring about the blood now smeared on her clothes, and carried it into the work trailer. Laying her precious cargo down on the small sofa, she gently prodded the wound, trying to get a better look.

Reaching for the radio beside the door, she pressed the button. "Connor, it's Aislinn."

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"I need you in the trailer now. We have an emergency."

A moment later, her mate appeared, his worried eyes scanning her and widening when they saw the smears of blood on her shirt.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but this boy isn't."

His eyes looked down upon the small bundle of fur and his brow furrowed. "Boy?"

"You don't recognize him? He's not one of the pack?"

"Aislinn, what are you talking about."

"He's a werewolf."

The pup's head lifted at her words and his eyes bore into hers, surprise flaring in their depths.

"It's okay, honey. We're going to take care of you," she assured the youngster.

"How do you know it's a werewolf? I only sense a normal wolf lying there." Connor frowned. If it truly was a werewolf,

[91]

one he couldn't sense, then that could only mean something sinister was afoot.

"I think he's been masked, probably as protection against whoever hurt him."

"Can you heal him and maybe get him to shift?"

Aislinn bit her lip. "I think so, but it would be better to do it at home. Too many of them saw me bring a wolf in here. If I carry out a small boy, they're going to wonder where he came from and where the wolf disappeared to."

Connor nodded. "Okay. Let me just tell the foreman what's going on and we'll head home."



An hour later, her patient lay on a towel on the bed. Using peroxide and some clean clothes, Aislinn had cleaned the wound as best she could while the child was in his wolf form.

"Can you shift?" she asked.

The wolf pup shook its head.

With a sigh, she knew she would need help. "Eric! I need you."

The wizard materialized and crossed his arms. "You called on me to fix a werewolf?"

"He says he can't shift and he's been sliced open with a knife. Obviously someone means him harm."

Eric stepped closer and looked over the pup. The blue eyes that met his looked familiar. "Zachary?"

The pup whined and nudged the wizard's hand with his nose.

"You know him?" Aislinn asked.

"His father was the alpha of the North Carolina pack, until he died last month. The new alpha, Benjamin, took the position of alpha through a challenge. It seems he didn't want to take a chance on Zachary coming back to claim his spot at the pack's alpha."

"That's horrible!"

Eric placed a hand over the pup's side. A blue glow engulfed both the wizard's hand and the wolf pup's side. When Eric pulled his hand back, the wound had vanished. Picking the pup up in his arms, he murmured a few words in a language Aislinn didn't understand. A moment later, a little boy with auburn hair and freckles was in his arms.

"I think we may need some clothes," Eric said with a smile. Placing the lad on his feet, he immediately dressed the boy in jeans and a sweater.

Aislinn knelt beside the child. "Zachary, my name is Aislinn."

"Hello, ma'am," he said in a soft voice that held a trace of a North Carolina accent.

"You're safe here."

He nodded and tears formed in his eyes. "The new alpha killed my daddy and my momma. He tried to kill me too."

Aislinn wrapped her arms around the small boy and held him close. "I know, darling. But the bad wolf won't hurt you now, you're safe here."

He nodded and hugged her back.

"The big bad wolf?" Connor asked from the door with a raised brow.

"You heard?" she asked.

He nodded. "Obviously the boy can't return to his pack. I'll call Gabriel and ask him to come over, along with his brothers and mine. We'll convene in an hour."

Aislinn tightened her arms on the child. "I don't care if you convene or not. He's staying."

Connor raised a brow and looked at her, his look souring when the wizard began laughing.

"The sorceress has spoken, werewolf. I'd listen to her if I were you."

Connor glowered at the wizard. "I heard her."

Aislinn looked into Zachary's blue eyes. "How old are you?"

"Five," he replied shyly.

"Would you like to stay here?"

[93]

He looked from her to Connor to Eric before nodding enthusiastically.

"Then stay you shall." Aislinn rose and glared at her mate.
"You might want to move."

As Connor stepped back into the doorway, Aislinn transformed the blue bedroom into a little boy's delight. A table appeared with a wooden train set, the dresser was topped with a lamp in the shape of a wolf, glowing stars and a moon appeared on the ceiling, and a blue wolf print rug materialized beside the bed.

Deciding to lend a hand, Eric made a matching bedspread and pillows appear. Next, he created several pairs of jeans, sweaters, socks, and underwear for the child. A toy box materialized in the corner. A stuffed wolf's head poked out of the box.

When Zachary pulled the wolf out, he saw a ball, cars, and a play set of solders inside the box. Tears formed in his eyes and he ran to hug Eric and Aislinn.

"I've never had so many toys before. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Eric stated in his deep, rumbling voice.
"You've had a trying day. Why don't you take a nap while Aislinn fixes you something to eat?"

Zachary nodded and climbed onto the bed. Burrowing under the covers, he laid his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. In a matter of minutes, his breathing became deep and even.



In the living room, Eric stood against the wall, arms folded over his chest, while Aislinn and Connor sat on the sofa. The pack had been called and they were merely waiting.

"You know you're going to let him into the pack. Why call everyone over?" she asked.

"Because it's a formality. I share leadership with Gabriel, so it's only right that he has a say in this."

[94]

Aislinn snorted and rolled her eyes. "Please, as if any of you are going to turn your backs on that precious little boy. I swear to you Connor, if you turn him away, I'll walk out the door and never come back."

He looked taken aback. "You're serious? You would choose that child over a life with your rightful mate?"

"If my mate is an obtuse pain in the butt, then yes. If you turn your back on that child, send him out there alone, then I won't stay with you."

Eric grinned in perverse delight. "I do believe she has you by the short hairs on this one."

Connor nearly choked at the comment. The wizard was right, but he'd be damned if he was going to admit it. Aislinn meant the world to him, and he'd do anything for her, even if it meant adopting another werewolf's son. And he had a sinking suspicion it just might be part of the requirement of being her husband. She was obviously attached to the child already.

"If the others agree to let the boy stay, we have to be clear on something. He may be a male child, and once we're married we can adopt him as our own, but only a blood related male can inherit my position as alpha."

Aislinn lifted her eyes to his. "And if I only give you daughters?"

Connor looked startled by the thought. "Then, I guess we could reassess the situation then. It will also depend on the type of young man Zachary grows into. If he grows up to be the type of young man who could one day lead a pack, then I won't have a problem with him becoming my heir."

Aislinn smiled in triumph. "That's all I can ask."

[95]

Chapter Seventeen

The pack had been in complete agreement to take in Zachary, and Connor had placed a call to Matt, hoping he would have insight into how to go about adopting the young werewolf. If his original pack thought he was dead, and their alpha had tried to kill him, they didn't want to advertise that the boy was alive.

After a filling meal and some time to get acquainted better with Aislinn and Connor, Zachary had settled right in to his new life. While he missed his mother and father, he was happy to have found a new family, one who obviously cared about him already. He was lucky and he knew it. He swore to himself, that no matter what it took, he would repay their kindness one day.

While Zachary was playing in his room, Connor and Aislinn cuddled on the sofa.

"You know, someone might recognize him one day. We probably shouldn't use his given name."

"You mean, rename him?"

Connor nodded. "It isn't uncommon when a small child is adopted. And it might help keep him safe."

"We should talk to him about it. It isn't right to change his life so much without discussing it with him first."

"I know, but when he understands it's to keep him safe, I'm sure he'll be okay with it."

"Okay with what, Connor?" Zachary asked from the doorway.

[96]

"Come over here a minute Zachary. Aislinn and I need to discuss something with you."

"You decided not to adopt me?" he asked in fear.

"No, nothing like that," Aislinn assured him. "It's just that...we're worried that someone in your old pack might see you one day and recognize you. There can't be too many werewolfboys with red hair and blue eyes answering to the name of Zachary. Understand?"

"You want to change my name," he stated.

Aislinn nodded. "Yes. We don't want you to ever forget who you are, but we want to make sure you stay safe too."

"A new name and a new family." He nodded. "So what will my name be?"

Aislinn thought a moment. With his red hair and freckled face, he reminded her of a Scotsman. "What about Alisdair?"

He sounded the name out, trying it out on his tongue. With a smile, he nodded and ran over to hug Aislinn.

"Alisdair Zachary Andrews," Connor said with a smile. "Something new with something old, keeping you a part of both families."

"I'm glad you were the ones to find me. I felt like I was led to the construction site and now I know why."

"Why?" Aislinn asked.

"Because you're the best parents ever."

Aislinn looked at Connor over the top of the boy's head, tears forming in her eyes. She cleared her throat, not wanting Alisdair to see she had been crying.

"Well, I think it's time for bed Alisdair. Would you like me to tuck you in?"

He smiled at her and nodded, then scampered down the hall to his room.

Connor reached over to take her hand. "We should get married as soon as possible and have the adoption papers pushed through. It's the only way to guarantee his place in our lives."

[97]

With a tremulous smile, she kissed his cheek. "I'd really like that."



The next morning, Aislinn woke to find herself in Connor's arms. She smiled and snuggled closer, having missed him the one night they had slept apart. She hadn't convinced him to be intimate with her again, but she hoped it would happen soon. Having a small child in the house was going to make it more difficult, but not impossible. Alisdair awoke some nights crying out in the throes of a nightmare, but Aislinn was always able to calm him down and get him back to sleep.

Stretching, she pushed Connor's shoulder.

"Time to get up."

He grumbled and tried to pull her back into his arms.

With a smile, she pushed him again. "Come on, I mean it. Time to get up."

With a sigh, he rubbed his eyes and sat up. "Are you coming in to work after you drop Alisdair off with Cassie?"

She bit her lip. "I thought it might be best if I stayed with him, at least for a little while. Everything is so new to him; I don't want him to feel frightened."

He grinned at her. "Honey, you're going to coddle him to death. He's a tough little guy, and I'm sure he'll have a blast playing with Cassie's kids."

"I know, but..." She grinned. "I guess I am being a little over-protective, but I haven't been a mother before."

Connor pulled her close and kissed her neck. "If I have any say in the matter, you'll be a mother before too long."

She frowned. "I already am. Connor, you have to think of Alisdair as part of the family. Once the adoption is complete, he'll be your son just as much as he's mine."

He nodded. "You're right. It just takes some getting used to, but I'll make sure I refer to him appropriately."

"Come on, you need to get ready for work and I need to wake up Alisdair and get him fed."

[98]

"Hey! Don't I get fed too?"

She giggled. "Yes, you do. Now, go take a shower and get dressed for work. Alisdair and I will leave shortly after you do. I don't want to show up at Cassie's at the crack of dawn. I figured eight o'clock was early enough."

Connor kissed her cheek and rolled out of bed, going to take a shower as she had suggested. He smiled as he realized she was settling into her new life fairly well. She already treated Alisdair as a son, and treated him as if they were already married. A well placed call to the pack wives and to Cassie would get the ball rolling.

With a frown, he thought of Marin and wondered why she hadn't stopped by yet. He knew she had to be in a lot of pain, and from Aislinn said the sooner they tried to help her, the better. Maybe he'd call Cole before calling the ladies.



Connor arrived at work with a frown on his face. According to his cousin, Marin had been healed by the wizard, and yet the man had said nothing to Aislinn. Why had he kept it secret, and why was he still training her in the art of healing?

When he entered his office, his frown deepened. "What are you doing here?"

Cameron smiled slyly and sat on the edge of his desk, displaying a lot of thigh in the process. "Waiting for you."

"Cameron, you have no business being on this job site, especially in that short skirt."

"I came to offer my services as your secretary again. I see she's missing today."

"She'll be in later."

Cameron made a tsking sound. "Already coming in late?"

"She had to drop her son off at a play date. I gave her permission to come in late, but I don't see what business it is of yours."

She pouted. "But Connor, I only want to help."

[99]

He glared at her and didn't comment. The only thing the infernal woman wanted to help with was getting him out of his clothes. And that wasn't going to happen!

"I don't have time for your games, Cameron. I have work to do and a wedding to plan."

Her smile froze and her eyes became cold. "You're still going through with it? You're still going to marry that frumpy little nobody? When you could have this?" she asked as she waived toward her exposed legs.

Connor grinned. "Aislinn isn't frumpy and she isn't nobody. She's a beautiful, amazing woman, a woman I'm going to marry."

Something shifted in her eyes and she pushed away from the desk. Sauntering over to him, she draped her arms around his neck and wrapped a leg around him, pressing her body close. "You know you want me, Connor."

Before he could respond, the office door opened and Aislinn walked in. Her face remained calm as she took in the scene, but Connor knew she was less than pleased.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that he doesn't, so kindly unhand my fiancé," Aislinn demanded in an even tone.

Cameron stepped back and eyed Aislinn with barely disguised anger. "Why would he want you when he could have me?"

Aislinn stepped forward and hooked her arm through his and gave him an adoring smile before facing the loathsome woman again. "Because we're meant to be together, and no one, not even you, can change that."

Cameron was seething as she grabbed her purse and walked out the door, stopping to look over her shoulder one last time.

"You're making a big mistake."

Aislinn's smile grew. "The only mistake would be accepting your offer. Thankfully, he has too much taste and class to sink to your level."

[100]

Connor choked back a laugh and stared at his fiancé in amazement. Where had this little fireball come from? Apparently her lessons with Eric were giving her a lot of confidence and self-worth, both things that had been much needed when she'd first appeared. He was happy to see her standing up for herself.

After Cameron slammed the door shut, Aislinn faced him and crossed her arms. "Am I going to have to get to a restraining order against that woman? I swear, every time I'm not around she glues herself to you like a leech."

Connor chuckled and pulled her into his arms. "At least you were here to come to my rescue. I'm getting tired of fending the woman off."

"Makes me wish I could turn her into a toad," Aislinn grumbled under her breath.

"I thought you were going to take longer this morning," Connor commented.

"Alisdair took right to Cassie's kids and informed me he was a big boy and I didn't have to stay with him. So I got back in the car and came to work."

"Well, I have some other good news for you."

"What?"

He sat on the edge of his desk. "I called Cole this morning since Marin hadn't stopped by the house yet. It seems that your wizard stopped by a few days ago and healed her. Know anything about that?"

Her brow furrowed. "No, he said he was training me to heal people. Maybe he thought it was too much for me right now?"

Connor nodded. "Maybe. Your powers are still new and probably a bit unpredictable at the moment. He might have thought it was dangerous for you to try healing something as big as ovarian cancer."

Aislinn bit her lip.

"What is it?" Connor asked.

"I haven't seen Eric, have you?"

[101]

He shook his head. "He only appears to you, sweetheart."

"Eric!" Aislinn called.

The wizard moved into the room from a dark corner. "You bellowed, my dear?"

One look and Aislinn knew he was drained. His skin had a gray tinge to it and his eyes were bloodshot.

"You healed her. Why didn't you let me help?"

He gestured to himself. "Because I may look like deathwarmed over, but you would have died if you had tried to cure her."

"But you've interfered again. Won't that get you into trouble?"

Eric laughed. "Darling, the fates have their hands busyenough without worrying about an immortal like me. Besides,I've seen the future and Marin wasn't meant to die. Which meant that I was allowed to heal her."

"But at what expense?" Aislinn demanded.

"I'll be fine in another few days. We'll have to put our lessons on hold until then."

She sighed and nodded, knowing it was pointless to argue with him. He was every bit as stubborn as Connor was.

"Call if you need me," Eric said as he vanished from the room.

"I hate when he does that," Connor grumbled. "Hasn't the man heard of a door?"

Aislinn smiled. "It wouldn't be nearly as dramatic, and I think he loves doing dramatic things."

"You mean like curing a dying woman? Or rather, two dying women?"

She nodded. "He saved me, and for that I'll always begrateful. But now he's saved Marin as well. Don't you think it's time we considered him a friend of the pack?"

Connor nodded. "Maybe you're right. He's done a lot of good for the pack, even if he is irritating."

[102]

"Come on, you have work to do and I have files to organize.
The sooner we get started, the sooner we can go home."

"And plan our wedding?" he asked with a raised brow.
She smiled. "Yes, and plan our wedding."

[103]

Chapter Eighteen

Somehow, Aislinn and the other women had managed to plan and arrange a wedding within days. Less than a week had gone by, and now Connor found himself standing at the front of a church. He pulled on the bow tie once more, feeling as if someone were strangling him.

"Leave it alone," Gabriel muttered behind him.

He gave the joint-alpha a baleful glare before looking out over the church once more. Aislinn hadn't had many friends to invite so Matt and Cassie were sitting on her side, along with the wizard and Alisdair. All of Connor's family, with the exception of Marin and Gabriel, were seated on the groom's side.

"She deserves a bigger wedding than this."

Gabriel placed a reassuring hand on Connor's shoulder. "I promise she doesn't care how many people show up, just as long as you're here and the preacher is here, that's all that matters."

Connor grinned. "I know. I just want it to be perfect for her."

A moment later the music started and Connor faced the back of the chapel. Aislinn walked down the aisle with Marin on her heels. His bride looked radiant in an off the shoulder ivory gown with roses embroidered on the shoulders and hem. A long veil was held in place with a rhinestone tiara.

His throat felt tight with emotion as she placed her hand in his. He responded to her tremulous smile with a reassuring one of his own. It had only been a few weeks, but it felt like he

[104]

had waited forever for this moment, the moment he was able to truly claim her as his wife.

As the preacher began to speak, they faced forward, but looked at one another covertly, silly grins plastered on their faces. They recited their vows perfectly and swapped rings. When the preacher said, "You may kiss the bride," Connor gently pulled her into his arms and tipped her head back. Claiming her lips in a gently kiss, he felt as if he were complete.

Their family and friends cheered from the pews and Aislinn looked up at him with laughter in her eyes. It was the most beautiful he had ever seen her and his heart constricted when he realized how very much he loved her.

Escorted to Connor's truck by their boisterous friends and family, the bride and groom set off on their honeymoon. Not wanting to be away from Alisdair for too long, they had decided to stay at a hotel in nearby White Pines, Tennessee for the weekend. It was only a few hours away in case there was an emergency.

"I already put our suitcase in the backseat, but I thought you might want to go home and change out of your wedding dress before we hit the road," Connor told her with a smile.

"While I love my dress, it will be heavenly to get out of it. It definitely wasn't designed with comfort in mind," she replied with a smile.

Connor grinned and hurried home, anxious to get on the road. They still hadn't managed to make love, which made their honeymoon pretty much perfect. It was going to be a true marital celebration.

At the house, Connor changed from his tux into jeans and a sweater while Aislinn changed into something similar.

Grabbing some drinks and snacks from the kitchen, they climbed back into the truck and started the drove to White Pines.



Late in the afternoon, after they were checked into the hotel and had eaten a late lunch, Aislinn and Connor collapsed on the hotel bed.

"Well, it was certainly an eventful day," Aislinn mused.

"Yeah, but one that I'll remember for the rest of my life."

She smiled and rolled toward him, draping an arm over his waist.

"So, how does it feel to be Mrs. Tierney?"

Her smile grew even bigger. "Like a dream come true."

Rolling her to her back, Connor kissed her. "I'm glad. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have by my side."

Her eyes grew misty and she returned his kiss. Burying her fingers in his hair, she tugged him closer. After wanting to be intimate with him for weeks, she felt like a nervous ball of energy. She knew being with Connor would be different than being with Hugh, but she wasn't sure what to expect. By all rights, she was still something of a virgin since Hugh only liked doing it the regular way. Aislinn knew there were many positions from some of the books she had read, but she'd never had a chance to try any of them.

Her heart fluttered in her chest and she reached for Connor's belt buckle. Unfastening it, she unsnapped his jeans and reached inside.

He groaned into her mouth and bucked against her, his cock hard and throbbing against her fingers. Aislinn's fingers curled around him as she gently stroked him.

Connor sucked in a shuddering breath and threw his head back. "You're going to kill me," he muttered.

Aislinn gave him a wicked grin and stroked harder. "That's kind of the idea."

Pulling away, Connor quickly stripped off his sweater and jeans. Standing before her in only his underwear, he reached for her, helping her out of her clothes. As he exposed her skin one layer of clothing at the time, his eyes devoured her. He unfastened her bra and slid the straps down her arms,

watching as her nipples puckered in the cool air. Next, he reached for her panties and slipped them down her legs.



Completely exposed to him, Aislinn thought she would have felt vulnerable. Instead, she felt like her skin was on fire. She loved the hungry look in his eyes as he gazed at her.

He stepped closer and gently nudged her legs apart. Aislinn felt the cool air as her pussy was exposed to him and she sucked in a breath. Her lids drooped and her breathing deepened.

Connor reached out and stroked her with his finger, drawing a gasp from her. His finger felt warm against her cool skin, and it left her feeling even more aroused.

He quickly stripped off his underwear and climbed onto the bed, lying down beside her. Leaning over, he took her nipple into his mouth and suckled, while his fingers delved between her legs, stroking her swollen clit.

Aislinn arched off the bed, wanting more of the exquisite torture, wanting more of Connor. She'd never felt pleasure in the bedroom before and she was anxious to see what else Connor would do. He continued stroking her with his fingers, long, slow strokes intent on driving her mad. When he slipped a finger inside, she groaned from the pleasure.

"So wet, and so sweet," he murmured against her breast.

He trailed kisses down her stomach until he was kneeling between her legs. Pushing them open further, he held her open with his fingers and tasted her. His warm, wet tongue took a long swipe of her, grazing over her clit.

"Connor, I... I..."

"You what, sweetheart?"

"I never knew..."

His eyes narrowed and with a growl, he pulled her hips closer and sucked her clit into his mouth. Nipping, sucking, and licking, he pushed her to the edge. Just when she was about to topple over, he stopped.

[107]

"Why? Why did you stop?" she panted.

Rising above her, he placed his cock at her entrance.

"Because I want to be inside of you the first time you come."

Her eyes widened as he thrust inside of her. He made her feel wondrously full. As he thrust into her again, she lifted her hips to meet him.

He ground his teeth together, trying to hold it together, but Aislinn was so tight and wet that he didn't think he'd last another moment. "I can't hold on, honey. I wanted to make this last for you, but I can't."

"I don't care, Connor. I just want you."

With a grin he thrust into her hard and deep. "Then you'll have me."

Aislinn met him thrust for thrust until she finally tumbled into her first orgasm. Crying out his name, she grabbed at his shoulders as he continued to slide in and out of her. As the spasms slowed, Connor thrust into her one last time, burying his face in her neck he gently bit her, marking her as his own.

She felt a warmth spread through her and smiled, knowing they could very well have already created a new life. She knew it wasn't likely, but the idea pleased her.

[108]

Chapter Nineteen

Connor opened his eyes and smiled as he saw Aislinn sleeping soundly beside him, their naked bodies intertwined. Closing his eyes, he pulled her close to his side, reveling in the feel of her next to him, skin against skin.

Burrowing his nose into her hair, he inhaled her scent, letting it surround him. He stroked her breasts, smiling when her nipples peaked against his palms. She murmured something in her sleep, but didn't waken. Reaching between her legs, he felt that she was already wet and ready for him.

Connor rolled Aislinn to her stomach and covered her body with his, entering her with one long, deep thrust. She gasped and her eyes fluttered open, already dilated with desire. Reaching under her body, he teased her breasts with one hand while bracing himself with the other. As he thrust into her, he closed his eyes, the scent of her arousal spurring him on. She whimpered in pleasure and he grinned, feeling his chest swell with pride, knowing he was the reason behind the small noises.

"Oh," she breathed. "Connor, I'm ... I'm..."

"That's it, come for me, sweetheart."

With a cry, she shattered, convulsing around his cock as he thrust into her again and again, until he found his release and buried himself deep inside of her sweet warmth.

Slumping over her, he gathered her close and rolled them to their sides. He kissed her damp neck and nuzzled her ear.

[109]

"I love you."

Aislinn's indrawn breath was a good indication of her shock; Connor only hoped he hadn't said the words too soon.

"I love you too," she answered after a moment.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to say the words," he told her.

She shook her head. "I've loved you since that first week. I was just too scared to tell you."

He grinned and hugged her tight. "Then I'm glad I finally told you how I feel."

"When do we have to go back home?"

Before he could answer, his cell phone chimed. With a frown, he picked it up and read the text message his brother had sent.

Hope the honeymoon is going well. Heading to California for a bit. See you when I get back.

"What is it?" Aislinn asked.

"Colin was just letting me know that he's taking a road trip. He's heading home to visit our family."

Aislinn frowned. "You haven't mentioned your family before, except for the pack members and their wives. I didn't realize you had other family."

"We have some cousins and an aunt in California. They haven't come out here for a visit, but maybe we can travel to California after this job is finished. I don't like to be gone too long in the middle of a project."

"I guess our wedding threw a wrench into things," she commented.

He kissed her cheek. "It was a welcome distraction, just like you."

[110]

Aislinn grinned and turned to face him. "You never did say when we had to go back home."

"We could probably stay another night..."

His phone chimed again, and he picked it up with a sigh.

Alisdair misses his mommy and daddy. He didn't sleep well last night and is already throwing fits this morning.

Connor groaned. "Or we could head back this afternoon," he said, showing her the message.

Aislinn smiled. "I'm sorry he had such a rough night and morning, but it's nice to be missed. Besides, we have a whole life together. I'm sure we'll have time alone again before too long. Once he settles into his new life better, he won't mind spending the night with his Uncle Cole and Aunt Marin."

Connor sighed and threw an arm over his face. "I had hoped to have you to myself a little longer, but you're right, we should head back this afternoon."

"Then we should definitely make the best of our time," Aislinn said as she stroked his chest.

Connor grinned and pounced on her, making her squeal as they tumbled into another round of love making.



Later that night, they arrived at Cole's house to pick up Alisdair. The little werewolf came running across the front yard and tackled Aislinn, nearly knocking her to the ground with his exuberance.

"I'm happy to see you too, Alisdair," she said with a laugh.

"I missed you, mommy."

Aislinn's eyes misted. It was the first time he'd called her mommy, at least to her. She knew he had referred to her as such around Cole, but it wasn't the same.

[111]

Next, the little boy hugged Connor. "And I missed you too, daddy."

Connor swung the boy up in his arms and hugged him. "We missed you too, little scamp. I hear you didn't sleep well last night."

He shook his head. "It wasn't the same not sleeping in my room."

"Well, you'll get to sleep in your room tonight," Connor told him with a grin.

As they settled Alisdair into the truck, Aislinn hugged Cole and Marin, thanking them for keeping the little werewolf while they were gone. She knew it was a lot to ask with a baby in the house, but she was glad they hadn't balked at the request.

Climbing into the truck, completely worn out, they headed for home. Alisdair fell asleep in the backseat before they'd even turned onto the main road. Aislinn looked at him and smiled.

"Poor thing was worn out."

Connor looked at him in the rear view mirror. "I guess not sleeping will do that." He glanced at her before looking at the road once more. "I saw your face when he called you mommy; you looked stunned and pleased all at the same time."

"I was," she murmured, closing her eyes. She absently rubbed her stomach. "I can't wait to give you more children, Connor."

He grinned. "If you give me too many of them, we'll need a new house."

"I don't think we'll be having that many. But I do want a big family. I always thought that if I would have had a brother or sister, maybe Hugh wouldn't have picked me, or if he had

[112]

then maybe things would have been different. He wouldn't have been able to isolate me like he did."

Connor reached over and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry for everything you went through with Hugh, but I'm glad it brought you into my life."

She smiled. "Me too. Who would have guessed that something wonderful could have come from something so wretched?"



After Alisdair was tucked into bed and Connor was in the shower, Aislinn crawled into the bed. As a shadow moved in the corner of the room, she squeaked and drew the covers up close.

Eric chuckled as he showed himself. "Afraid of shadows?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you doing here, Eric?"

"I wanted to congratulate you on your marriage." He paused and looked around the room. "And I had some unpleasant news for you."

She sighed. "I knew my new-found happiness was too good to be true. What is it this time?"

"There's something big coming, something evil. It's going to sweep the town of Ashton Grove if you and the pack can't stop it. You only have a week or two to prepare, then it will begin."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't tell you anymore and I won't be able to help you when the war starts. But you've learned everything you need to know in order to succeed."

"Why must you always bring darkness and despair with you?"

He grinned. "Well, I do have some good news for you too."

[113]

"Well, what is it?"

"You've passed your tests, you get to stay."

Her eyes widened. "Really? But... when was I tested?"

"Your first test was to allow yourself to open up enough to accept Connor as your mate. You passed that one within forty-eight hours of being here."

"And the next one?"

"When you mastered your powers," he grinned, "or at least when you were willing to learn more about them, you passed another test."

"That's it? That's all I had to do?"

"Actually, the biggest test was saved for last."

She looked at him expectantly.

"When you opened your heart to Connor and learned to love him, and to accept his love in return, you passed the third and final test. You're now free to live the rest of your life in Ashton Grove without interference from the fates."

Squealing with excitement, she launched herself out of the bed and into Eric's arms, giving him a bear hug. "Thank you!"

A throat cleared and she looked toward the door and a glowering Connor.

"I've only been married to the woman for a few days; don't you think you could wait a little longer before whisking her away somewhere?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Aislinn said with a smile. "I passed my tests!"

His eyes widened slightly and he looked to the wizard for confirmation. When Eric nodded, Connor grinned and swept Aislinn into his arms.

"You have no idea how happy that makes me."

[1 1 4]

Chapter Twenty

A week had gone by and Aislinn and Connor had settled into a routine after their return from Tennessee. Alisdair spent his days with Cassie or one of his aunts, and then he was picked up in the afternoons by Aislinn. He seemed to be adjusting well to his new life.

Late Friday night, the phone rang, startling Aislinn.

"I'll get it," Connor said with a grin. Rising from his chair, he picked up the phone.

"Hello."

"Connor, it's Colin."

"The cousins called and said you left California early this morning. How's the trip going?"

"I'm staying in a hotel tonight in Arizona. It will probably take me another two or three days to get back home."

"You? You hardly ever stop over night. Something going on?"

Colin grinned. His brother was always astute. "Yeah, you could say that."

"So are you going to tell me or do I have to drag it out of you?" Connor asked.

"I was driving down the highway when I found someone lying in the middle of the road. A woman."

"Is she okay?" Connor asked, going on instant alert.

"She's been hurt, but she seems okay. She's getting cleaned up right now."

[115]

"Why didn't you take her to a hospital?"

"Because... she's mine."

"Yours? As in she's your mate?"

"Yeah," Colin said with a grin. "Anyway, I just wanted to call and let you know I'd had a slight delay in my trip. I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Colin wait, what was she doing in the middle of the road?"

"I don't know yet. She only woke up a few minutes ago. I'll keep you posted."

Connor stared at the phone, dumbfounded. As he sat the phone down, he felt Aislinn's hand on his arm.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"It seems that Colin has found his mate."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

Connor nodded. "He found her lying in the middle of the road, but he didn't tell me anything else. It's going to delay his ride home a little."

Aislinn smiled. "Well, it's wonderful news, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't like the fact he hung up on me. It usually means he's hiding something."

"Maybe he was just anxious to get back to his mate. Maybe you're reading too much into it."

Connor nodded. "You're probably right. Come on, let's head to the bedroom. It's been a long day."

Aislinn took his hand and walked with him to the hall. "I want to check on Alisdair first."

He grinned and released her hand, letting her go check on their son. He had the adoption papers on his desk at work, just waiting to be notarized so they could be turned in. Matt and worked his magick once again and it seemed that Alisdair was going to be a permanent part of their family. Connor couldn't imagine a better gift for Aislinn, who already doted on the boy as if he were her own.



The next morning Aislinn woke to another presence in the room. She tensed until she realized it was Eric.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, glancing at Connorto make sure he was still asleep. He had been understandingabout the wizard so far, but that didn't mean he wanted the man in his bedroom first thing in the morning.

"We need to talk."

"And it can't wait until later?"

Eric shook his head. "It's about Colin's mate."

Aislinn stared at him a moment. "Is there anything in this world you don't know about?"

He grinned and tipped his head toward the living room. "I'll wait for you out there, but don't take too long."

With a long suffering sigh, Aislinn slipped out of the bed andchanged her clothes. Pulling her hair back in a ponytail, she quietly left the bedroom, careful not to disturb Connor.

Sitting in the chair opposite Eric, she crossed her arms. "So what is it this time?"

"Colin's mate has been injured by a pack of demons."

"I'm sorry, did you just say demons?"

He nodded.

"Wait. Demons exist?"

His lips quirked up in a grin. "So a sorcerer and werewolfyou can accept, but you have a hard time with demons being real?"

She shook her head. "I just wasn't expecting it. Does that mean angels are real too?"

"You know I can't answer that, right?"

She sighed and motioned for him to continue.

"The pack of demons that attacked Colin's mate are knownas the Skulls of Hell. They're vicious and destructive. Mostimportantly, their tenacious. Once they get an idea, they don't stop until they see the deed done."

"And this has what to do with me?"

"You're going to stop them."

[117]

Her eyebrows winged up. "Excuse me?"

"The demons are making their way to Ashton Grove. Colin and his mate are racing against time to get here, but they may not make it in time. You have to be prepared for the upcoming battle, a battle you can't afford to lose."

The blood drained from her face. "What happens if I do?"

"You don't want to know, just know that you can't fail."

"So how do I prepare for this battle?"

"You have to hone the powers you've already discovered, and we have to see if you've inherited any others. I'm not allowed to fight for you, but no one said I couldn't train you."

Aislinn groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "Will things ever settle down? I've already heard of what the pack has been through, not to mention my own ordeal, but now demons are going to attack. Are we going to get a break at some point? A chance for a happily-ever-after?"

"That's up to you," he answered quietly. "So, are you going to fight?"

She sighed. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not if you want to live."

"Then that settles it. I guess I'm fighting."

A sleepy Connor entered the bedroom. "Fighting what?"

Aislinn glanced at Eric only to discover the man had vanished - again. She really wanted to learn that trick.

"It seems our lives are about to be interrupted yet again - by demons no less."

He stared at her, sure he had misheard. "I'm sorry, did you just say demons were going to interrupt our lives?"

"Do the Skulls of Hell ring a bell?"

Connor sucked in a breath. "They're only the fiercest band of demons around. Please don't tell me they're coming here."

She nodded. "I'm afraid so. And it seems I get to fight them."

"You? But..."

She gave him a wan smile. "Another perk of having my special gifts it seems. Eric promised to train me so that I will

[118]

be prepared, or at least as prepared as possible. I'm still in shock I think."

"Did he say why they're coming?"

"He told me I didn't want to know," she said softly. "And that if I wanted to live, I had to fight."

Connor felt a little lightheaded at the thought of losing Aislinn. Sinking onto the sofa he stared at her a moment, his thoughts jumbled.

"How can I help?"

Aislinn smiled. "I'm not sure. But I have a feeling our little one will need to learn more about his abilities as well. Think you can give him some werewolf training?"

"I can try. Honestly, I didn't inherit my abilities until puberty. I'm not sure how to deal with a five year old who can shapeshift already."

Aislinn frowned. "I didn't realize his ability to take his wolf form was so unique."

"I was spelled by a witch," a small voice said from the hall.

Both adults turned to stare.

"A witch?" Aislinn asked.

The small boy nodded. "When my other mommy was pregnant with me, she was cursed by a witch. I was born furry."

"You were born as a wolf?" Connor asked incredulously, having never heard of such a thing, much less realizing it was even possible.

Alisdair nodded again. "My father worked hard to teach me to change into my human form. Now I can shift whenever I want."

As if to prove his point, he shifted into a wolf. Trotting over to Aislinn, he jumped up in her lap and curled up.

"Well... I guess I don't have to teach him anything then," Connor said.

Aislinn smiled. "It seems fitting that our son should be so unique."

"Well, you have a pack of werewolves to help you fight, and a half werefox. Just tell us what you need and we'll help in any way we can."

"Thank you," she said softly, stroking Alisdair's fur. "Until my training starts, I won't have a clue as to what I'll need. But

the moment I do, I'll be sure to tell you."

"Demons," Connor mumbled. "I'm scared to ask what will happen next."

[120]

A Sneak Peek
Moonlight Warrior
Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 5
EXCERPT

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Please note this is an unedited/unproofed excerpt and is subject to
change prior to being released.

[121]

Chapter One

June

Highway 75, Arizona

Colin roared down the highway in his new car. The trip to California had done him some good. It had been nice to see his family again, especially his psychic cousins. In fact, it had been his favorite cousin who had talked him into the car and told him to leave a day earlier than he had planned. She wouldn't say why, but he knew it was important whatever her reason.

The sun had set a while ago and the night air was cooler than the dry heat he'd faced all morning. The desert spread out around him, quiet and still. The moon was hidden behind clouds and his headlights were the only illumination in the inky black night.

Rolling his shoulders to ease the tension from driving all day, he looked down to change the radio station. Glancing back at the road, he slammed on the brakes. A lump was lying in the middle of the road, large enough to be something living.

As the car rolled to a stop, he jumped out to investigate. He wasn't worried about danger, being a werewolf put him at the top of the food chain. With a grimace he remembered the vampire that had attacked his cousin Kiera and amended his thoughts to werewolves being near the top of the food chain. The creature had been unbelievably fast, and quite deadly.

Approaching the pale lump, he realized it was a person. Not just any person, but a woman. Her pale blonde hair spread out across the pavement. Leaning down to investigate further, he noticed her pallor and the sickly gray shade of her skin. He reached out and gently touched her, eliciting a groan from her dry, cracked lips.

"Shh, it's okay," he crooned, hoping to ease her fears should she awaken and find him crouched over her.

[122]

He gently lifted her into his arms, startled by how light she was. Moving quickly, he sat her down inside his car on the passenger's side. The dome light revealed a delicate chin, full lips, and a cute button nose. Her eyelashes lay dark against her pale cheeks.

His eyes roamed over her, checking for any injuries. Her dress was torn and dirty. Something that looked suspiciously like dried blood was caked on her leg, barely visible beneath the hem of her dress.

Gently, so as not to wake her, he lifted the hem just enough to see there was a gash on the inside of her thigh. Looking her over more carefully, he noticed bruises on her wrists and arms.

What has she been through? Colin wondered.

Fastening her into the seatbelt, he quietly closed the car door and hurried around the driver's side. Sliding into the car, he closed the door and sped down the highway. The sooner he located a hotel, the sooner he could make sure she was safe.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes as she moaned and slumped in the seat. The vent caught her scent, weaving it under his nose, taunting him. Even under the dirt and blood he could smell the scent that was uniquely hers.

Mine, he thought as he focused on the road again. She's mine.



A half hour later, he pulled into the parking lot of a Motel 8 just off the highway. Quickly paying for a room in an empty section of the hotel, he got back in the car and drove around to his room. After making sure the coast was clear, he gently extracted his precious cargo and took her inside.

Lying her down on the large bed, he picked up the phone and asked for someone to stop by his room. While he waited, he looked at his mate. By all rights he should be terrified that his days of being free were over, but he wasn't. He just felt a calm acceptance that his mate was lying on the bed, injured. He refused to let his anger take over until he knew what had

[123]

happened to her. Not having seen any cars in the area, he assumed she had been dropped off by someone. But why?

Surely they had known she would die in the desert.

A knock sounded at the door and Colin went to open it. A teenage boy stood on the other side.

"You needed something, sir?"

Colin smiled at him reassuringly. "I have an errand I'd like for you to run. My girlfriend was hurt earlier and I don't want to leave her. If I give you a list, do you think you could pick up some clean clothes for her and a first aid kit?"

The kid eyed him skeptically. "Clothes?"

Colin nodded. "I thought she'd packed her things with mine and only grabbed the one bag, but apparently she didn't. She's asleep right now and I'm hoping that if I have something new for her to wear when she wakes up, she might not be so angry about it."

The kid grinned at him. "If she's anything like my sister, she'll be mad regardless, but she'll sure appreciate the new clothes."

Colin smiled at him. "Just give me a minute to write down her sizes and what I'd like you to grab. If you're uncomfortable with it, see if your sister will help you. I'll pay you both."

The kid's eyes lit up and he nodded. "I bet she'd like that. I'll call her while you get the list."

Colin closed the door and grabbed the pencil and pad by the phone. Checking the size of his mate's dress, he wrote down the size with a note to purchase two dresses. He eyed her uncertainly. Knowing women as well as he did, he knew she would like a clean bra and panties, but there was no way for him to guess her size. Deciding to brave her wrath should she wake up and discover him checking her out, he gently lifted her dress, exposing more and more of her skin.

When her panties were in sight, he quickly checked the tag for a size. Writing it down, he lifted the dress higher to check her bra. Holding the dress away from her body, he noticed she

had more bruises along her back. He frowned and let the dress fall back into place.

Hurrying back to the door, he handed the list to the kid along with enough money to cover the purchases and then some. "Keep whatever is left over."

The kid grinned and nodded before taking off.

Colin closed the door and locked it. Leaning against it, he watched his mate sleep. He approached the bed and gently took her hand in his. Her fingernails were ragged, like she'd been in a fight of sorts, and dirt was smudged on the backs of her hands.

She'll be pissed at me for sure and rightly so, but she needs a hot bath, he thought. There was no sense in giving her new clothes if she was still filthy. Besides, he reasoned, how can I make sure her wounds are properly taken care of if she's so dirty?

He stepped into the small adjoining bathroom and started the water in the tub. Filling it as much as he dared, he tiptoed back into the bedroom. He couldn't very well cover his eyes and walk across the room with her and not fall. Being practical, or so he told himself, he undressed her and lifted her into his arms. He tried his best to not think about the fact that her naked body was pressed against him as he walked into the bathroom with her.

Gently laying her in the tub, he grabbed a washcloth and began washing the dirt from her body. Once her skin was free from the grime of the road and heaven only knew what else, he braced his hand under her neck so he could wash her hair.

He was so intent on his task he didn't realize a pair of blue eyes were watching him. Rinsing the soap from her hair, he carefully leaned her against the back of the tub - and froze.

"Why are you washing me?" she asked in a soft voice.

Colin cleared his throat. "I found you in the middle of the road, unconscious. I've sent for clean clothes and bandages,

but wanted to get you cleaned up so I could assess the damage better."

She looked at him with those guileless blue eyes, looked at him until he was certain she could see into his very soul. Just when he thought she wouldn't speak, she said, "My name is Kendall. Kendall Wright."

"I, uh, guess I'll step out. Now that you're awake I'm sure you can finish washing."

Kendall just looked at him silently. "Actually, if you wouldn't mind draining the water, I'd like some fresh water to soak in."

Colin reached under the water and pulled the plug on the tub. As the water slowly drained from the tub, he tried valiantly to keep his eyes anywhere but on Kendall. She seemed so calm and accepting of their situation that he wasn't sure what to make of her.

With the dirty water drained from the tub, he began refilling it with fresh warm water. "Do you need me to stay and turn it off? Or can you manage?" he asked.

"Stay," Kendall said softly.

Colin nodded and watched the water level slowly rise. He could feel her eyes on him, but he wasn't sure what to say. He wanted to ask what had happened to her, but he doubted she was up to talking just yet.

Reaching over to turn off the water, he said, "I'll leave you to your bath. Just call me if you need anything."

"I don't know what to call you," she responded.

"I'm Colin. Colin Tierney."

A smile gently curved her lips. "Thank you, Colin."

His breath caught in his throat as he gazed at her. To him, she was beautiful. As his gaze roved over her face, he supposed that some would call her passable. She had a girl next door quality that appealed to him.

"I'll be in the other room if you need anything," he said as he stepped out of the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Chapter Two

Colin pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He stared at it, uncertain if he wanted to call home or not. He knew his brother would be worried about him if he were late returning from California, but he wanted to keep Kendall to himself a little longer. He wasn't ready to answer a hundred questions about her, questions he wasn't sure he could answer.

After hesitating another moment, he sighed and dialed Connor's number. Regardless of what questions his brother asked, he knew he needed to make the call. On the fourth ring, his brother answered.

"Hello."

"Connor, it's Colin."

"The cousins called and said you left California early this morning. How's the trip going?"

"I'm staying in a hotel tonight in Arizona. It will probably take me another two or three days to get back home."

"You? You hardly ever stop over night. Something going on?"

Colin grinned. His brother was always astute. "Yeah, you could say that."

"So are you going to tell me or do I have to drag it out of you?" Connor asked.

"I was driving down the highway when I found someone lying in the middle of the road. A woman."

"Is she okay?" Connor asked, going on instant alert.

"She's been hurt, but she seems okay. She's getting cleaned up right now."

"Why didn't you take her to a hospital?"

"Because... she's mine."

"Yours? As in she's your mate?"

[127]

"Yeah," Colin said with a grin. "Anyway, I just wanted to call and let you know I'd had a slight delay in my trip. I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Colin wait, what was she doing in the middle of the road?"

"I don't know yet. She only woke up a few minutes ago. I'll keep you posted."

Before his brother could ask another question, Colin flipped the phone closed and sat it down on the table. He knew his brother would spread the word to their cousins that he'd found his mate. Hopefully they wouldn't decide to call him anytime soon. He wanted some time alone with Kendall to figure out what was going on. He needed to make sure she was safe and that she trusted him before he could take her home to his family.

A knock on the door drew him from his thoughts. Answering it, he found the boy from earlier and a girl he assumed was the boy's sister.

Colin opened the door with a smile. "I see you found a few things."

The girl smiled at him shyly. "It was fun getting to shop for someone else. I hope your girlfriend likes the stuff we picked out."

"I'm sure she'll love it," he answered with a smile of his own.

The girl handed over a sack of clothes. The boy handed him another bag.

"This is the best first aid kit we could find. I hope she feels better."

"Thanks," Colin said. "Did you have any money left over for your payment?"

The girl held out sixty dollars in change. "This is what we had left."

"Keep it and split it between the two of you."

Their eyes grew round in shock, but Colin only smiled at them.

"It's the least I can do since you were so kind to help me out. Go treat yourselves to a movie or go buy something."

"Thank you!" the girl gushed.

Tugging her brother away, she smiled at Colin one last time.

He closed the door and put the sacks on the table. Pulling out the first aid kit, he opened it. It seemed to have all of the supplies he could ask for without having a professional kit. Opening the sack of clothes, he pulled out one of the white bras and a white pair of panties. The girl had chosen two knitted dresses, one a solid and the other a print. Pulling out the solid pink dress, he carried the clothes to the bathroom door and gently knocked.

"Kendall, I have some clean clothes for you."

"You can come in," she called through the door.

Bracing himself for the sight of her naked body, he opened the door and stepped into the bathroom. His eyes were automatically drawn to her. She was still reclining against the back of the tub where he'd left her.

"I had some of the local teens run out and buy a few things for you," he said. "Your other clothes were bloodstained."

"Thank you," she murmured, her eyes meeting his directly.

"You know, you seem awfully calm considering you're lying there naked in front of a stranger," he blurted out, inwardly wincing at his lack of tact.

A smile curved her lips and her eyes twinkled. "But I'm not with a stranger. I'm with you."

"But you don't know me," he persisted. "And after the way I found you..."

"You don't understand why I'd be so trusting," she finished for him.

"Right."

She sighed and held a hand up. "I'll need some help getting out of the tub and getting dressed. This is going to be a rather lengthy conversation, one I'd rather have out of water if possible."

Setting her clothes down on the closed toilet lid, he grabbed a towel from the rack and helped her out of the tub. When she was standing before him in all of her naked glory, he wrapped the towel around her.

"I don't exactly have experience drying off women."

"I think I can manage if you'll just stand there and make sure I don't fall. I'm a little unsteady on my feet."

He nodded and studied her face. She didn't look very old, at least not compared to him. He'd guess she was at least ten years younger than he was which would put her in her early twenties. Any other woman in her position would have been screaming and freaking out by now. So why wasn't she? Why was she so accepting of everything?

"Could you help me with the clothes?" Kendall asked softly.

Colin swallowed hard. He had experience undressing women, but he'd never helped one put their clothes on. It was intimate and for some reason it made him feel vulnerable to her.

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[130]

A Sneak Peek
Moonlight Savior
Ashton Grove Werewolves, Book 6
EXCERPT

Written by Jessica Coulter Smith, ©2010

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Please note this is an unedited/unproofed excerpt and is subject to
change prior to being released.

[131]

Prologue

Ramsey stormed up the walkway of the Victorian, ready for battle. Wedding decorations were still scattered around the yard. He was too late. He banged on the front door, making it rattle on its hinges.

Kiera opened the door with wide eyes. "Ramsey, you're home early."

"Where is she?" he growled, slamming the front door behind him.

Kiera gulped and scurried backwards into the kitchen. She'd never seen Ramsey so upset before. "She?" she asked, deciding to buy some time by playing dumb.

"You know very well who I'm looking for, Kiera."

"She's married now, Ramsey. There's no point starting any trouble."

"Dammit, Kiera! You knew how I felt about her!"

Kiera winced. "I know. I tried to talk her out of it."

Ramsey sighed and sank into a kitchen chair. "Why did she do it?"

"She thought you didn't want her."

"Why? Why would she think that?"

Kiera shrugged. "You went off to play at being someone's mate."

"I told her the Colorado pack asked for my help."

"Yeah, but when she moved out to the apartment, you didn't exactly go after her either. You just left again without one word."

Ramsey hung his head. "I was going to go talk to her when I came back tonight. It's why I came home early."

"I'm sorry, Ramsey," she said softly. "I truly am. I tried to get her to wait, but she said if you had cared for her at all you wouldn't have left the way you did. She said you would prefer to pretend to be someone else's mate than to be her mate for real, or something along those lines."

[132]

He nodded. "So she's married to Michael?"

"They were married this afternoon."

"Did she move out already?"

"No. They went on their honeymoon right after the wedding."

Ramsey winced. The thought of Chloe and Michael together was too painful. "I can't think about that right now."

"You're not going to have a choice, Ramsey. You're going to see them together."

"I know. I'm just not ready to deal with it right now. Maybe I'll take some time off and ... I don't know, travel or something."

Kiera placed a comforting hand on his arm. "I wish there was something I could do."

"Undo the past twenty-four hours," he said quietly.

"I wish I could," she said. "If it's any consolation, I think he'll treat her well."

Ramsey gave a harsh bark of laughter. "Have you already forgotten their fight? The nurse's orders that Michael was to stay away from her? His iron grip on her arm?" He ground his teeth together. "I swear Kiera, if he harms one hair on her head I'll tear him to pieces."

"You'll have to get in line," Gabriel said from the doorway.

"But I don't think it will ever come to that."

Ramsey looked up at the alpha. "Why did you do it? When she asked you to choose a mate for her, why did you choose Michael?"

"Because he loves her."

"So do I," Ramsey said, anguish written across his face.

Gabriel nodded. "I see that now. I'm sorry, Ramsey. She asked me to make a decision."

"I don't know if I can stay and see her with Michael, not right now."

Gabriel watched the other werewolf thoughtfully. "I may actually have an assignment for you."

"What is it?"

[133]

"There's a young woman in Mississippi who wants to move here. She was raised by werewolves and her family has recently passed away. She's petitioned me to join our pack."

"And you want me to go get her?" Ramsey asked.

Gabriel nodded. "She's going to have her things moved here professionally at a later date, but she'll need someone to pick her up. That should get you out of town for a little bit."

Ramsey sighed. "I don't think forty-eight hours will be long enough."

"So leave now and help her pack. She won't be ready to move here for another month or two. I can call and see if she has space to let you stay with her. Then you can bring her here when she's ready to move."

Ramsey eyed the alpha. "Why do I get the feeling there's more?"

Gabriel shrugged. "She's gotten some threatening messages from the local pack. One of their youngsters wants to marry her. He's been pressuring her to be his mate."

"So since I just finished pretending to be someone's mate, you figured I could do it again?"

"Actually, I thought a mate might take your mind off Chloe."

"What?" Ramsey asked in surprise.

"I'd like you to consider being mated to her."

"I've never even seen her!"

"Just consider it Ramsey," Gabriel said.

Ramsey sighed and nodded. "I'll leave in the morning."

"I'll call and tell her to expect you."

"What's her name?"

"Luna. Luna Delgado."

Ramsey grinned. "Well, at least she has an appropriate name for a werewolf's mate."

After packing his SUV, Ramsey set out for Mississippi. He knew he had a directive from his alpha, but he hadn't promised he would arrive to help Ms. Delgado immediately. He'd just

[134]

promised to leave immediately. Taking the scenic route, he figured he would get there in his own time.

Chapter One

Two months later

Luna sat in her living room listening to the storm rage outside. The piece of paper on her coffee table drew her eye once more. She'd been receiving the notes more and more frequently, especially since her adopted parents had passed away. Her father would have never forced her to marry a man she didn't love, but the local alpha had other ideas. As long as she remained with the pack, she had to abide by their laws. So far, she'd managed to brush off any unwanted advances, but Reed was getting more and more adamant. She didn't think she could fend him off for much longer, and if the alpha finally agreed with the young werewolf she would have no choice but to be mated to him.

Reed wasn't a bad looking guy, just a little too cocky for her taste. Luna wanted someone down to earth, someone who would love her for who she was and wouldn't try to change her. It was rare to run across a relationship like that in a werewolf pack, but her parents had managed to find true love and that's what she planned to do as well.

It had been over two months since she'd petitioned the pack in Ashton Grove, Georgia. The alpha had responded and was sending someone to help her move, but so far no one had arrived. She still had the problem of letting her local pack know. She'd gone behind their back to make her request and knew there would be retaliation.

A noise outside startled her, a board on her front porch squeaked as if someone heavy had tread upon it. Luna went on

[135]

instant alert. A knock on the door eased her tension somewhat and she went to see who was outside.

Peering through the peep hole, she could only tell the man was large. His back was to her, but he didn't seem familiar. Broad shoulders and a tapered waist filled her vision and made desire shoot through her. Startled by her body's reaction, she almost didn't open the door. Almost.

When she pulled the door open, she peered out into the inky night and had to tip her head just about all the way back to see the man on her porch. "May I help you?"

The stranger turned and her breath caught in her throat. If she'd thought the back of him was impressive, the front was even better. Green eyes observed her from the darkness. A Roman nose led to full, sensual lips and a strong jaw. The man could have been carved from granite, muscles bulging from his arms, chest and thighs. She doubted there was an ounce of fat on him anywhere.

"Are you Luna Delgado?"

The man's voice was a deep baritone, sweeping over her and making her desire ratchet up another notch. "I'm Luna."

He stepped forward, towering over her, making her feel small and delicate. "I'm Ramsey Tucker. The alpha of the Ashton Grove pack sent me."

Relief spread through Luna and she stepped back to allow him entrance into her small home. The man was nearly a giant and he dwarfed her small living room, making it seem as if the walls were closing in on them.

"I wasn't expecting you. I'm afraid I'm not packed yet."

He nodded. "Gabriel thought you could use a hand."

Luna motioned toward the sofa. "Please, have a seat. You must be tired after your long trip."

Ramsey sat on the small taupe sofa and stretched his legs out under the coffee table. He watched as Luna sat in the small chair to his left. She was as beautiful as her name. Petite with small curves, long dark curly hair, and large expressive eyes,

[136]

she made his heart kick up a notch. He might still be smarting over Chloe's rejection, but he was a man after all and not a blind one.

"What did your alpha tell you about my situation?"

Ramsey ran a hand through his hair, drawing her attention to the thick, unruly locks.

"He said you'd had some trouble with an unwanted suitor and wanted to move. I'm afraid he didn't say much else."

Luna knew he would need to hear the whole story if he was going to help her.

"I'm afraid it's a little more involved than that. My parents were part of the local pack, but they were my adoptive parents. My birth mother left me on their doorstep when I was an infant with a blanket that bore the name Luna Delgado. Other than that, my parents knew nothing about me, yet they raised me as their own.

"When they passed away, I was able to stay in the house. But over the past six months, Reed has been hounding me to be his mate. No pun intended."

Ramsey grinned.

"The letters have been arriving closer and closer together. He accosted me when I was out shopping last week and now I'm scared to leave my house. Honestly, when the porch creaked a moment ago, I thought it might be him. You have no idea how relieved I was when you told me who you are."

He motioned to the letter on the table. "Is that one of them?"

She nodded and watched as he picked up the letter. As he read it, a frown marred his handsome face. A twitch in his jaw told her that he was irritated, but she didn't know if the irritation was with her, Reed, or the situation as a whole. She imagined he'd had to drop his life and come out here to help her. What if he had left a girlfriend or wife behind? The thought made her feel guilty for ogling him moments before.

"What does your alpha say?" Ramsey asked as he sat the letter back down on the table.

[137]

"He hasn't said much so far, but I'm afraid that he's going to side with Reed pretty soon, which is why I petitioned to join your pack." She squirmed in her seat. "There's something else you should know."

"What?"

"They, um, kind of don't know that I'm leaving."

Ramsey raised an eyebrow. "When were you going to tell them?"

"The day I left."

He shook his head and pushed to his feet. Pacing the length of the living room, he knew he was going to have no choice but to roll play again, at least if he wanted to get her out of this in one piece. The woman obviously hadn't been thinking clearly when she'd made her decision to move. You didn't just up and move out of a pack without first discussing it with the local alpha. Okay, so Kiera had done something similar, but she had been ostracized by her pack. It seemed that Luna was in demand, which was going to make things tricky.

"I have a plan for diffusing the situation and getting you out of here, but you may not like it."

Luna scooted to the edge of her seat. "What plan?"

Ramsey stopped pacing and hunkered down in front of Luna. "You'll have to be my mate."

Her eyes widened in shock and she opened her mouth, but no sound came out except a squeak.

"Let me re-phrase that since I seem to have taken you by surprise. You'll have to be my pretend mate."

Luna snapped her jaw shut. "I don't understand."

"If the pack thinks you're moving to Ashton Grove because we're mated, they won't bother you. Plus, it will get rid of your problem with Reed."

"But what about your girlfriend?"

Pain flickered in Ramsey's eyes, but he shuttered them immediately. "It's not a problem."

[138]

Luna wondered about that brief moment when he had been unguarded, but she knew better than to ask. If he wanted to talk about his girlfriend, he would and if he didn't, then she wouldn't push him.

"So what exactly is involved in being your pretend mate?"

"First of all, we don't call it that after this moment. Anyone could be outside and could pick up on our conversation, and then all of this would be in vain. Second, it means that we have to appear cozy, like a couple, when we're out in public."

She shook her head. He might not want to talk about his girlfriend, but she wasn't going to do that to another woman. Even if this charade was nothing more than an attempt to make her leaving easier, she wasn't going to pretend to be mated to a guy who was already taken. She couldn't believe the Ashton Grove alpha would have sent someone like Ramsey to help her.

"Why are you shaking your head?"

"I won't do it."

He pushed to his feet and glared down at her. "I'm sorry if being mated to me is so repulsive to you, but it's your only option."

Her jaw dropped as she stared at him. "Repulsed? Have you looked in a mirror?"

The moment the words left her mouth she wished she could retract them. Her face flamed in embarrassment and she looked away.

"If it isn't that, then why don't you like the plan?"

"I won't put another woman in that position. Even just pretending to be your mate is an insult to your girlfriend."

The blow struck a little too close to home and Ramsey began pacing again. When he stopped in front of Luna, he knelt down so they would be eye to eye.

"I'm only going to say this once so listen closely. I don't have a girlfriend. The woman I was seeing married the alpha's brother last week because I was off in Colorado having to pretend to be someone's mate. The precise thing I need to do

[139]

now in order to protect you. Chloe was hurt and she turned her future over to our alpha."

Luna could see the pain in his eyes and wanted to comfort him. She fought to not reach out and touch him. "I'm so sorry."

"The alpha sent me here to help you, partly to get me out of the area for a while. He wanted Michael and Chloe to have a real shot at a happy marriage, and quite frankly I didn't want to be in Ashton Grove. I needed to escape for a while."

"So you're here pretending to be my mate?"

Ramsey reached out and cupped her cheek. "We might be doing more than just pretending."

His touch made her skin feel as if it were engulfed in flames, desire spiraling through her and making her insides melt.

"Why?" she asked softly.

"My alpha wanted me to consider being mated to you permanently."

Luna swallowed. Her mind was in a fog. His words didn't quite register, yet she grasped their meaning. She could certainly think of worse fates than being mated to a big, strong, handsome guy who made her insides liquefy with one touch. Her body had a mind of its own as she leaned forward and gently brushed her lips against his; feeling their warmth and breathing in his scent made her want more.

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[140]

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As Cady struggles with many challenges thrown her way, she finds herself caught in a difficult spot. While Marshall may not love her, he isn't ready to let her go. Marshall's friend and fellow pack member, Brendan, knows that Cady is special and will stop at nothing to make sure she's safe, even if it means going against his brother, Eric, to keep her.

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[141]