



Melissa
Bradley

MAXIE BRISCOE:
WEREWOLF

A NOVEL

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...They materialize from the darkness, hunters intent on their prey. Me.

My breath hitches, the animal inside rippling beneath my skin. I'm nervous, but I refuse to let them see. This bitch rolls belly-up for no one. I stride onto my front porch, prepared to defend my territory. Dressed in loungewear, I am hardly the picture of a strong alpha female, but you go with what you got. I look them both dead on.

I fold my arms over my breasts. "What do you want?" I growl, my voice a low rumble.

"We've come for you, little one." With a voice like muffled thunder, the taller of the two moves forward onto my lawn. Twisted steel with sex appeal about sums him up. His dark hair is pulled back in a tail, tee-shirt molded to his cut frame.

My nostrils flare, catching his scent, fresh like a mountain spring at first thaw; my female parts quiver in anticipation. I want to coil myself around him like a python on a Kapok tree, hugging every hard inch of flesh. Ruthlessly, I shove down the urge. It's dangerous. Ulterior motives are written all over the two of them, and I just know one of those motives is to dominate me.

"It took us a long time to find you, Maxie."

The whisky baritone draws my attention, and I watch the other one emerge, lean and graceful, his muscles liquid precision. Definite hotness is woven into the male half of the werewolf genetic code. His scent is warm and dark, like night in a jungle. My nipples bead with excitement as he lopes toward me, brushing past the larger wolf. He stops at the base of my stairs, conqueror etched in every line of his body. This is definitely the alpha of the pair...

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BY

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CHAPTER 1

“Bitch!”

I roll my eyes at the corpulent little imbecile from accounting, then spin on my heel to head back to my desk. I need to get the hell away before I hurt him. His grumbles and curses follow, but I keep right on walking. It occurs to me I could really get Fred back by telling Human Resources about his outburst, but the truth is, he hadn't insulted me. Not at all. I am a bitch. The biggest bitch on the block, in fact.

I'm a werewolf.

That's right. You heard me. Werewolf. Call it what you want, *loup-garou*, *lobizon*, the fact is, I am a real, live, full-moon-loving, silver-hating, Halloween icon.

My name's Maxie Briscoe and I've been a werewolf since the

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age of fifteen. How did a sweet little gal like me end up a monster? Simple. I didn't listen to my mother. She'd told me more than once that she had a bad feeling about Larry. I, of course, gave her advice the attention it deserved in my know-it-all brain and went out with the boy. I won't go into the gory details, except to say that no one should ever try to impress me with a childbirth story or a kicked-in-the-nuts tale. Ever have your stomach chewed with a meat grinder? When you do, come talk to me about that night Larry attacked me and turned me into a wolf.

Then there's the whole being-a-teenager thing. If you think trying to control hormones in high school is bad, try adding blood hunger to the mix. There were days I couldn't decide between kissing guys and ripping out their internal organs. Still can't, but I have better control now. I had to learn because I couldn't exactly miss school by calling in werewolf, and there's the little matter of someone sending animal control for me.

Oh yeah, and forget whatever you've read or seen about werewolves going through hideous spasms and changing only at the light of a full moon. Doesn't work like that. My animal side, my Beast, is always with me. I can change at will, and to any degree I want—from full-on monster, to just claws and fangs. I also have hairy problems at a certain time of the month. At least the stories have that right.

Reaching the sanctuary of my five-by-five cell, a.k.a. my enclosed work cubicle, I slide onto my desk chair, sit back and close my eyes, focusing on the minute sounds and smells of the office. The soft but insistent slap of size seven pumps against the carpet reaches my ears as a whisper of Chanel Number Five floats on the air. My boss, Haley, is on her way. Fred obviously went straight to her after our little exchange. Whoo hoo. This is one of

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those times when I'd really love to...

My Beast stirs deep inside as images of Fred fill my mind's eye. I picture his short, plump body running, stumbling, his high-pitched porcine squeals echoing through the night as I chase him, the scent of his fear hitting me like a potent drug. The Change ripples over my nerve endings, my nails lengthening. Like I said, no hideous spasms required. One second I look human and the next... Inhaling deeply, I strive for calm. It would be bad form to shift in the office.

I manage to leash my Beast and keep my human form as Haley appears like a Chicago Gold Coast Valkyrie in her designer business suit, ready to protect the sanctity of her orderly office. Her blonde locks are in a smooth up-do, her blue eyes a cold sea.

"Maxie, I told you that accounting needed those reports today. We can't authorize the ingredient purchases without them. Fred is simply doing his job. I don't know why you two can't seem to work together."

In a way, she reminds me of my eighth-grade teacher. Like Mrs. Lindemann, Haley always wants everyone to get along. I'm tempted to tell her about Fred's tantrum, place some of the blame on the little porker, but it's nearly time to leave, and I don't feel like prolonging the nonsense. My weekend is calling.

"I'm sorry, Haley. I do have those reports. I'm just waiting to hear from Titan Bakeries. Don Fargo was supposed to get back to me yesterday."

One of her hands grips the edge of the cubicle entry, the other is braced on her hip as she gives me a piercing look as if she's not quite sure she is hearing my words right. "I understand, but Fred said you were being rather rude and uncooperative."

I open my mouth to lay it on thick because I'm tired and do not

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need a Haley lecture about keeping the gears and cogs running smoothly. Instead, I say, “I am sorry. I’ll apologize to Fred.”

Her shoulders slump in relief. “All right. Just try to remember that while you may be dealing with your own problems, others have theirs as well, and we need to be mindful of our attitude. We all work together as a single unit here at Carson Kramer.”

Blah, blah, blah... She spouts a few more platitudes before she leaves, and I manage not to bite her throat out. Drinks all around. The clock on my computer reads four-forty-six. Fourteen more minutes until freedom.

Five o’clock hits, and I muscle my way onto a crowded elevator with the skill and speed of a running back breaking tackles for a first down. I regret it almost immediately as the doors close, trapping me in a sea of coffee, farts, sweat and dirty clothes. One thing about being a werewolf is that the senses are heightened no matter what form my body has taken. It’s times like this when I really regret such abilities. As soon as the bell rings for the lobby, the car opens and spews us out like a burst dam. I glance at my watch and realize I have only ten minutes to get from Clark and Madison, to Randolph and Michigan. Child’s play in my wolf form, a veritable handicap in my heels and miniskirt. I so hate being a girl sometimes. Still, as a lycanthrope, I do have a certain speed and agility advantage over everyone else.

I push through the revolving doors and into the brisk October evening of the Chicago Loop, inhaling deeply as I start my trek. I love Chicago as the weather turns colder. The air is crisp, and the smells have a reduced pungency. In my wolf form, I love the feel of cool ground under my paws as I move, claws digging in for greater traction. I shiver in delight at the prospect of a good run under the stars before I head out for this evening’s festivities.

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A car horn sounds over the din of a passing “L” train as I dart into traffic on Wabash cutting off a taxi in mid-turn. A spate of some central Asian language follows shortly and as I give the driver a look, he hoists me a one-fingered salute. Cabbies are wonderful.

I hold my breath as I duck into Millennium Station with two minutes to spare. After a quick glance at the schedule board, I identify the track on which my University Park train is boarding. I head down the stairs holding my breath. I hate the malevolent combination of odors in the underground tunnel because it has an overlying scent of cinnamon and coffee that sours my stomach. It’s like using a floral spray to cover the odor after someone’s taken a huge dump in the bathroom.

I get a seat all to myself in the last car and I’m grateful for it. I hate sharing the seat with someone who’s already started imbibing for the weekend. After an uneventful ride, I step onto the Hazelcrest platform just as a stiff northeasterly wind sends cold breeze under my long trench coat. If I were still totally human, the cold air would have set my teeth chattering.

“Hey, Maxie!”

I turn at the nasally tones and see my best friend, Drea Mancuso, hustling toward me, cheeks ruddy from the cold. She’s elegantly thin and tall like a water bird with dark hair and darker eyes. We’ve known each other since the first day of high school. She is also the only person on the planet, beside my mother and Larry, who knows what I really am.

That sleepover conversation when I broke the news to her was something else. I mean, I wasn’t exactly revealing my secret crush. At first she laughed, then reality pounded at her with hammer blows until she stared at me glassy-eyed like a shock victim. Drea

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avoided me like the plague for about a month until she talked to my mom. She recovered after that, and in true BFF fashion, emptied the library and a local occult store of werewolf material to help me navigate my new life.

We learned about all the obvious things like the danger of silver, full moon fever, speed, strength...but we also discovered I was a rare lycanthrope because I was female. Apparently, werewolf DNA does not bond well with the double X chromosomes in women, which is why males are so prevalent within the werewolf population. Of course, the guy who wrote the article was only spouting a theory because no one's ever studied a real, live werewolf as far I know. We're legends that most people don't believe. But there are those who know that a grain of truth lurks in all folktales. Then again, I don't know any werewolves other than Larry, so that leaves a whole lot of blank canvas for me to paint.

I smile at Drea. "Hey, yourself. Didn't see you." I hadn't exactly been looking for her, though. I had just wanted on the train and away from the Loop.

"I was in the front car, standing until Seventy-fifth Street." The breeze whips up, and she brushes thick chocolate curls out of her eyes. "Are we still going to the Red Dragon tonight?"

"Absolutely."

Red Dragon is this hot new club in LaGrange that attracts some of the sexiest men around. I need a little action tonight. Maybe I'll pick up one...or two. I love watching two guys get it on and then joining in on their fun. Although you usually can't count on straight men for threesome action unless they're friends. Trixter, a club in Evanston, is more my speed with the bi crowds. In any event, as far as I'm concerned, my intense sex drive is one of the

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biggest perks of being a werewolf.

“We using my car tonight?” Drea asks as we head across Park Street toward the lot.

“Sure, if you don’t mind. I’ll pay your cover and the gas.” I prefer having Drea drive because then I can either leave with someone or have a ready excuse when I need a ditch.

We hit my car first, a shiny red Chevy HHR—a nice, boxy SUV, low to the ground with lots of room. I love trucks, but my short stature isn’t conducive to large vehicles.

“You want to come by my house around nine?” I deactivate the alarm and unlock my door.

“Cool. Max, um...” Drea’s voice trails off as she leans against the hood looking about as comfortable as a Democrat at a Republican rally. “Do you mind if, uh...Tori comes?” The last two words are like a gunshot, a sharp, brief report.

I bite back a groan. “Not really.” I’m lying. Truth is, I do mind. I can’t stand the little witch, never could. But if Drea is asking me this, there must be some kind of trouble with her sister. “What’s going on?”

“Well, she had a huge fight with Derek.”

“Big surprise.” I roll my eyes.

“Stop. I think they’ve broken up for good this time.”

And little sister needs to prowls to make herself feel better. Fucking perfect.

“They break up for good at least twice a month.” I open my door and toss my bag on the passenger seat.

Drea heaves a sigh as she digs out her car keys. “It feels really different this time. She’s been too quiet, no crying or her usual bitching.”

“That is strange.” If there is one thing that Tori is good at, it’s

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being vocal about the asshole qualities of her boyfriend. Plus, she specializes in waterworks like a brew master does hops.

“I know she’s a pain, Max.” Drea hunches down into her coat, biting her lower lip.

I put a hand on her arm, and she gives me a weak smile. “Look, it’s not a problem, really. You know me when I get to a club.”

Drea laughs. “Hell, yeah. You’re a ho.”

I grin and wink. “That’s why they call ’em meat markets.”

* * *

Meat market is, in fact, the only term that comes to mind when I step through the doors of the Red Dragon four hours later. The DJ spins the latest club tune, its bass-heavy beat thumping through my veins like a seductive, primal mating call. My blood heats, and my nipples start to chafe against the silky lace of my strapless bra. It’s been a couple of weeks since I’ve had the pleasure of a man between my thighs.

Of course, the intensity of what I’m feeling right now is nothing compared to what I experience on the night of a full moon. That’s when it’s a real bitch, no pun intended, to be me. I go into super monster mode. I’m so crazed, so animalistic, I want to hump anything that moves. Unfortunately, I could hurt or kill any human man I have sex with.

Mom and Drea have to lock me away all night because I am so strong. My mother came up with the locking-me-away thing after my first full moon, when I ripped through the walls of my room, tore a hole in the ceiling and threw her car across the driveway. Thank God we lived on a farm at the time. And you thought your PMS was a nightmare.

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I scan the crowd, checking for some possible action. Men are like parts of a cow, really. First you have your obvious top sirloin—men who are cut and fit, with lots of stamina, confidence and great personality. Then you got your round steak—guys who can keep up, but are a little too much on the beta side of things. Rump roasts are your basic teddy bears...cute geeks and others who'll let you do whatever you want to them because they can't believe they're going home with you. Finally, you got your ground chuck. You know the type: total dorks, octopuses, Hoovers who suck your face off when they kiss. These are guys you don't even want to think about until you've had four or five shots of tequila and a Jagermeister chaser.

My eyes alight on two definite cuts of sirloin.

"Oh. My. Gawd. Would you look at the guns on that one?"

Tori's high-pitched tones shock my ears like turning on the radio after forgetting the volume is set on high. She is looking right at one of my targets, damn her. A low, territorial growl rumbles in my throat.

"Easy, Max." Drea touches my arm, the gesture helping me reign in my baser urge to shove Tori into the nearest wall as I assert the fact that I have first dibs. Did I mention my dominance issues? I turn to glare at my friend, only to see her little sister move forward out of the corner of my eye. The little bitch.

"Let her go." Drea's eyes remind me of a puppy's, huge and pleading. "The one she's heading for reminds me an awful lot of Derek."

Derek the Asshole, the reason Tori is here tonight and ruining my fun. I clench my fist and tamp down my animal instinct. Just this once, I suppose I could play nice and let the girl get first bite.

Drea gives a gentle squeeze. "I owe you."

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No, she doesn't. I smile and slip an arm around her waist. "Let's go find us some choice cuts."

She laughs, and we stride toward the dance floor. A strange feeling hits me as I step onto the parquet. This huge, dizzying wave of knowing washes through me, ending with static electricity firing over all my nerve endings. I look around, but see nothing out of the ordinary.

"Are you all right, Max?"

Drea is standing in front of me now, eyes full of concern, her face awash in the purple, red and blue lights streaking over the floor. I shake my head and sniff. Under the sweat, musk and meaty smells of the dancers, under the cologne, alcohol and wood, there is a definite feral tang. I'd only smelled it one other time after I became a wolf, the night I went after Larry for changing me. Joy and dread tangle my nerves. Another werewolf is *here*. My pulse leaps. I want to find this other one, but...

I breathe again and follow the scent.

"Max, where—"

I ignore Drea and weave through the crowd, inhaling every couple of seconds to stay focused on the trail. The smell excites me, terrifies me. My Beast wakes as I track my target, stirring just below my skin in anticipation of sex, a hunt, or maybe both.

I push through the front doors to the outside and see three people striding down the stairs—two very large, very Grade A men and a tall, lithe model-like woman. The scent is stronger now and it's coming from the guys. Holy shit! After all these years of feeling isolated, I find not one, but *two* more like me. I follow the weres to the parking lot, oblivious to the cold night air. The compulsion to join them overwhelms my senses.

Control, Maxie.

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As I close my eyes to gather myself, I feel the weight of someone staring. My eyelids shoot open, and I see both men looking in my direction now, their expressions intense as they scan the crowd. My survival instinct finally kicks in, and I move to mix with a large group heading into the club. What the hell am I thinking? I don't know them. What if they're like Larry?

God, I hope they didn't actually see me.

"Max, where the hell did you go?"

Drea rushes over to me as I walk back inside. I am totally rattled now that I have myself back under control. Two werewolves right here in LaGrange. Un-fucking-believable. I mean, I always knew there were others. Larry had to come from somewhere. But this is shocking and scary with a serving of happy on the side.

"You're freezing,"

I realize I am shivering. This encounter has really wiggled me out, and I need a drink.

"Come on." I shift direction toward the huge, U-shaped bar.

"Are you going to tell me what the fuck happened just now?" Drea yells in my ear, obviously forgetting that I have wolf hearing. Her shouts are like a bullhorn.

I stop, and she crashes into me. I whip around and glare.

"No need to shout," I remind her.

She gets a sheepish look on her face. "Sorry."

I nod, then continue my quest for liquid refreshment. By the time the bartender hands me my Tequila Sunrise, I am feeling somewhat normal. Then I take a few sips and let the alcohol do its job. Chugging the rest of it down, I order another.

"So, you going to talk or just keep gulping down eight-dollar drinks?"

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She has a point.

“Maxi, oh my God! I didn’t know you were gonna be here tonight.”

I turn to see my friend and neighbor, Mary Elizabeth Barrett, standing behind me in a whirl of golden sparklies. Her green eyes are anxious and hazed with alcohol.

“Just thought we’d check out the new joint. What’s up?”

“Listen, can we talk? Oh, uh... Hi, Drea.” She nods uncomfortably at my friend, then takes a quick pull on the skinny straw in her pink candy drink, head and hips bopping out of sync to an electronica remix of some Top Forty pop song. She has a definite stressed air about her, eyes flitting around, unable to settle. I can smell fear underlying her natural scent.

I touch her arm, gently bringing her attention back to me. “Are you okay?”

“Sure.” A nervous titter escapes. “I came here with some girls from work. Ally, Lauren and Dawn.”

I gulp more of my cocktail in an effort to suppress the sarcastic comment brewing on my tongue. M.E. always did have lousy taste in companions. If I remember these girls right, they may have one functioning brain among them. But, in a place like this, all a girl needs is a good rack, a hot ass and an eager attitude. The airhead triplets have more than their share of all three.

“Look,” she says, leaning in close, a blast of warm, booze-scented breath making my nose wrinkle. “I really need to talk to you.”

“About what?”

She glances around, then sways in closer, her expression intense. “I need to ask you something very important. You’ll probably laugh, but I don’t know what else to do.”

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What the hell? “Ah...sure. Did you want to go to the ladies or something?”

M.E. pulls back, her gaze darting as she rapidly stirs the ice in her glass. She looks back at me. “Not here. Come by my place tomorrow.”

“Okay. I—”

“For the sunny gold girl.” The bartender’s gruff bass cuts off our conversation as he sets another dollhouse confection on the bar near Mary Elizabeth and me.

A slightly confused expression crosses her face as she sets aside her now-empty glass. “Who’s this from?”

The bartender gestures across the big U to an escapee from 70’s porn heaven, bulky and hairy with a mustache reminiscent of Burt Reynolds’ without the grooming. He looks like a costume shop reject. The guy flashes a creepy smile, the white of his teeth gleaming like flashlight beams through a dense forest. For an instant, I feel like he’s looking right at me.

My lupine senses are tripping. There is something weird about him, like he’s a fake person. But I shrug it off. At a place such as this, the creep probability factor is like roulette with loaded dice. You’re always going to score at least once.

M.E. smiles thinly and lifts a hand in a weak wave, then tilts her head toward me. “I have no desire to star in a *Debbie Does Dallas* remake. I am so out of here.” She weaves her way through the crowd and disappears near the dance floor.

Drea pokes me. “Come on, back to your sitch. What the hell is going on?”

I take one more sip of medicinal tequila and meet her anxious gaze. “There were others here.”

“What do you mean, others?”

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“Like me.” I stare at Drea, willing her to understand.

“Oh. OH!” Her eyes bug out like a cartoon version of herself. “Holy shit! Did they see you? Were they alone? What did they look like? What...”

I smile as Drea’s nervous motor mouth takes over and wait for a break in her babbling before I speak.

“First, I don’t know if they saw me. I know they sensed me. Second, they were with some tall, skinny bitch and yes, they were very hot. Tall and muscular, one had short hair, the other long and black. Prime cuts.”

“Maybe you could talk to them or something?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. I mean, if Larry is anyone to go by, talking is the last thing these wolves want to do.”

“They could be different, you never know.”

I’d like to think she’s right, that they might be different, but I just don’t know.

“Good looking, you say?” She gives a low whistle. “Damn.”

“Uh huh.”

“You think it’s a werewolf thing? I mean Larry was a prick, but he was a total sizzler.”

“Don’t know,” I murmur and take another drink. Drea was right about one thing. Larry had been smoking....a little older, dangerous and everything my fifteen-year-old cheerleader self had wanted. I’d started dating him, and there’d been this magic. He’d made me feel singular, special all the time, and I knew I wanted him to take my virginity. Larry had had that...and my stomach and the lower third of my small intestine. Me, bitter? Just a little. I need to get my mind off werewolves for a while and get back to what I came here for—action.

I finish off my second drink, and my gaze wanders, landing on

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a couple of rump roast puppies making eyes at me. I am suddenly in the mood for tender. One seems to be about five-six with short, dark hair in a messy skater style. The other is tall, lean and blond. Both are looking pretty good at this point.

I nod at Drea.

She strikes a seductive pose, then leans in and whispers, “Don’t forget. If I get the bad one, I’m getting your sapphire tennis bracelet for a month.”

I grin. “I know.” We’ve played this game before.

We smile and waggle our fingers, letting them know we’re interested. As they get closer, I can smell how excited and turned on they are. Oh, so sweet, yet part of me hopes whomever I go with, at least knows what he’s doing once we hit the sheets. I am not in the mood to teach a class.

“Hi.” The blond nods at me, his eyes warm and friendly. “I’m Jack and this is, er, Louis.”

The shorter one waves. I realize then that I am way too much woman for poor Louis, so I lean in to Jack, making a mental note that I would be turning over my bracelet to my best friend.

“Hi there. I’m Maxie, and this is Drea.”

We make small talk until I’m about ready to scream. Taking Jack’s arm, I lead him to the dance floor. “Would you like to dance?”

“Well, um, yeah. Sure.”

His response seems hesitant. I hope it’s just shyness, that he’s got some semblance of rhythm. If he can’t even work it on the floor, then I have to go back to the drawing board.

Jack surprises me with a few moves and great hip action. My impression improves still more as he spins me so we are pressed together, my back to his front. He grinds against me, his hands

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sliding over my hips with just the right amount of pressure. He has game. My lust begins to simmer, and I give him a few booty pops. His palm smoothes over my ass and squeezes. Yeah, baby. That's it.

Jack and I burn up the floor for a few more tunes, our arousal growing. My breasts are now pressing against his chest, nipples hard like little jewels. His thigh slides between mine, the fabric of his jeans rough against my skin. He leans down, nuzzling my neck. His scent intoxicates me—clean sweat, warm skin and cotton with a hint of sandalwood. I can't wait to get him home, to taste his...

"Max!"

Drea's voice shocks me like a fire hose.

"What?" I snarl. From the look on her face, I can tell that my eyes are probably glowing. I take a deep breath and get myself back under control. "Sorry, what is it?"

"It's Tori."

Jack's erection is hot against my belly. Tori better be in serious trouble, or Drea is going to be short one sister.

"I can't find her."

"Isn't she with the Derek look-a-like?" My hand squeezes Jack's ass forcing him tighter against me. The things I am going to do to him.

"Yes. Can't find him either."

"What?" Damn it.

"Maybe you should go help your friend," Jack whispers in my ear. "I'll find Louis and wait for you by the bar."

The man goes from rump roast to top sirloin in three-point-five seconds. He's getting a cowgirl ride on my mattress when we get to my place.

I kiss his cheek and weave through the crowd with Drea.

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Inhaling, I scan the crowd, all my senses alert for some sign of the stupid girl. Once we're off the floor, we pass some tables, and I catch a hint of her lavender and Obsession scent. Tori's been using the same soap and cologne since high school, so there's no mistaking that combo. I motion for Drea to follow, and we hit a darkened booth to find the ho astride her Derek avatar.

I am sorely tempted to yank the bitch off her man by her hair, but I control myself and let Drea have at it.

"Tori, what the hell are you doing?"

As my friend reams her little sister a new one, I size up Tori's pony ride. I don't like him at all. Oh, he looks top choice, but there is a serious asshole factor working here. I give him the eye, but he's oblivious, too busy staring at Drea's breasts. I can just hear those ménage thoughts churning in his pea brain. I would love nothing more than to chase him down in a dark forest while he screams and shits himself.

"Come on, Tori, let's go." Drea tries to be firm.

"She doesn't want to go." Mr. Creep interjects.

Christ, what a dick.

"She knows better." Drea continues to glare at Tori, who is clearly not interested in giving up her seat on the merry-go-round.

"Oh, Drea, just go. I want to have some fun." Tori giggles in a high-pitched, drunken way and snuggles into her play man.

This is going nowhere.

"Tori." Drea appears to be reaching the end of her rope, and I am about to lay into the little witch, myself, when Derek, who is not Derek, decides to be an even bigger tool.

"Hey, here's an idea, Big Sis. Quit being an interfering bitch, and let Tori do what she wants."

Drea gasps and pulls back. She is not a confrontational person

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when things start to escalate. Lucky thing I am.

I lean in and give him my best predatory stare. “Listen, Dick. Back off.”

The look usually works with most pricks, but apparently this one has had more than enough alcohol to boost his attitude. He sets Tori off his lap and stands, using every inch of his impressive height to try and intimidate me.

“Why don’t you shut your fucking mouth, bitch, before I shut it for you?” He grabs his rod, to show me how big his stick is. “I got plenty to keep you quiet.”

I roll my eyes as he pushes into me. I’ve had enough. There’s a man waiting for me at the bar, and the last thing I need is shit from this asshole. I grab his nuts and squeeze with my lupine strength, lengthening my claws just enough for him to feel the sharp edges through the denim of his jeans. His face turns white, sweat beading on his brow and upper lip.

“I suggest you zip it before I rip off these little olives to garnish my martini.”

“O-Ok-kay. P-Please, let me go.”

His fear is intoxicating, and I increase the pressure, delighting in his whimpers.

“Come on, Max. He’s not worth it.”

Drea’s voice reaches me as if through a fog. I slowly return to myself and ease my hand off the jackass’s sac. He collapses into the booth, his chest heaving. He’ll be putting ice on those things. It’ll be a long time before he has sex again.

Speaking of sex... It’s time to find Jack and get the hell out of here.

CHAPTER 2

I gasp and whimper as Jack licks around my vaginal lips. He seems just a tad hesitant, though. His strokes and touches feel great, but they're restrained, like he knows he's overzealous and wants to make sure he's doing everything right. I can dig that, but, really, I need more. He nibbles the inside, not quite touching the magic button, and I buck my hips, my hand sliding through his silky hair, urging him to get to the right spot. He finally does, and I shiver.

"I must be doing something right." He laughs, rubbing a cheek along my pubic mound.

Hell, yeah. Now keep it up.

The warm puffs of his breath tease my aching flesh, and I grip just a bit harder, spreading my thighs wider, biting back a snarl. I

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love when a guy goes down on me, love the velvet sensation of the lingual movements, the wet heat of saliva and my own moisture pooling in the sensitive channel.

Catching my lower lip between my teeth, I raise my other hand to play with my nipples, pinching and pulling the tight peaks in time to Jack's maneuvers. I jerk as he sucks my clit into his mouth, hard against the palate, his tongue fluttering, the nub pulsing harder as he works it. My heels dig into the smooth muscles of his back, and I thrill at his grunt, his fingers gripping my buttocks in a vise.

My body is on the knife-edge of orgasm.

This is where I have to be real careful. If I let loose, I could hurt or even kill Jack. Nothing slays the moment quicker than ripping off your partner's head. Going solo doesn't help my control either, by the way. I've obliterated several toys giving in to a wild climax. I can bench press a Cadillac on my calmest days, so a little plastic and rubber doesn't stand a chance against a full-on, werewolf climax. I remember spending months picking up beads from a pulverized jack rabbit pearl.

Since my little rump roast is presently at ground zero, I have to focus and ride out my release, essentially swallowing most of it...like you do when you're having sex with your parents in the next room. It's enjoyable, but not the all-out, screaming-monkey, jungle ride you really want.

Inhaling sharply, I thrash my head against the pillows, everything tightening in anticipation of the explosion. My Beast stirs along my nerve endings. I close my eyes and mentally count to ten, Mississippi-style, my body clenching. The wild rush eases as small tremors seize all my muscles.

"Ooh, so good," I whisper, knowing that like most men, he

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probably expects to hear that he's doing a great job.

Jack nuzzles the inside of my thigh, the beginning of whiskers on his jaw rasping against my skin. He smiles as he raises himself, and I let my legs slip to his sides. He moves up the line of my body, his penis hard and insistent on my belly. The tang of male arousal teases my senses. I savor the scent, my mouth watering at the thought of having him deep inside me.

Jack captures my lips in an eager, whirlpool kiss. He tastes of beer, single-malt scotch and a spicy sweet essence that is all his own with some eau de me mixed in. The unique flavor explodes across my tongue as our lips explore. He is a great kisser. No vacuum suction here, that's for sure.

I trail my hands over his firm back, pressing him closer, enjoying the feel of his chest hair against my nipples, the crisp curls teasing the little tips, making them tighter and tighter. He grinds into me as our kisses become stronger and deeper.

He reaches down and teases the wet crown of his cock along my damp pubic crease. I moan as the hard heat slides just inside to tease my clit.

"Christ!" He jerks back, panic on his face. "Condoms."

I knew we were missing something and curse myself for forgetting. According to Drea's research, werewolves are supposed to be immune to human illnesses, so disease isn't a problem for me. I mean, I haven't had a cold or flu or anything else since *that* night. But I don't want any mini me's around for a good long time.

Jack scrambles back and stumbles toward the pile of clothes near the foot of the bed. He digs around, then holds up a foil packet with a look of triumph and returns to sit next to me. I love watching a guy roll on a rubber...how they carefully and quickly smooth it over their erection, or if they're too eager, how they

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hesitate, trying not to come. Jack definitely falls into that latter category. He curses softly as he tries to slide the latex down his bobbing shaft three times.

“Want help?” I ask, rising on my elbows.

“No.” He gives me a tight look as he finishes.

“Stay there,” I command and roll off the bed. Back at the club, I promised to give him a cowgirl ride, and that is exactly what I intend to do. Besides, the evening is entirely too vanilla for my normal taste. I know I said I was in the mood for tender, but holding back a strong orgasm has made me edgy and longing for something a little wilder.

I stand in front of him and give his chest a gentle shove. “Lie down.”

His eyes get this look, like he can't believe what's about to happen and he scoots farther onto the mattress. I wonder if this cowboy's ever been ridden.

I crawl over him, his eyes widening as I straddle his thighs. I smile as I see his Adam's apple bob with three hard swallows, his gaze on my breasts and roaming farther south. He's excited, but trying to keep it together. I can just hear those thoughts inside his mind about the next level in some on-line game or the box scores from the Bulls game. Anything to keep from blasting out of pole position before the green flag.

I lean forward and give him a long lick from collarbone to navel, circling around his cute, outie belly button, then give it a nibble and a tug. He tastes so good, salty sweet, and I bite a little harder, careful not to break skin. My Wolf likes his flavor and I stop, forcing back my lupine strength. Jack's not the only one riding an edge.

His breath hisses; his cock bobs against my throat. I tilt my

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head, rubbing my cheek along the hard flesh, inhaling his male essence. I smooth my hands over his quivering pectorals to play with his nipples, pinching and twisting them, rolling them between thumb and forefinger.

Jack's hands clutch my wrists. "Please," he croaks.

I smile into his stomach, reveling in the texture. His skin is on fire. I can feel the blood roaring through him now, his heart beating like a tribal drum, seductive and primal. My own pulse throbs in time to his. I close my eyes and think spreadsheets, tax forms...anything to keep from pouncing on the poor man.

His fingers tease over my back, playing along my spine until they reach my ass, then he clamps down with the grip of a bull rider, squeezing hard enough to bruise, if I were human. A rather nice little surprise.

I push to my knees and fist his latex-covered erection, pumping up and down along the shaft, giving the crown a bit extra with a swipe of my thumb. He groans as I rise enough to position him, then slide the head around just inside, massaging my clit. I stroke faster and faster, nearly bringing myself to orgasm. My ears prick at his sharp grunt, and I realize I've got to dial it back.

I glance at him and fight the sudden urge to laugh. With his eyes fever bright, his mouth slack and hanging open like a broken screen door, he looks rather idiotic. Well, they say sex makes you stupid.

With a swivel of hips, I push down, gasping as Jack's cock fills me. Panting, I take him all the way inside until I feel his wiry pubic hairs against my nether lips. I arch my neck and give him a slow ride up and down. His hard length feels amazing, hot and pulsing. There is nothing like having a lover inside you, so close and so very vulnerable.

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After a few strokes, I lean forward to kiss him, letting him play with my breasts. His lean fingers delicately roll the hard pebbles like he's fine-tuning an old car radio. This position also allows me to take him deeper. He's not very thick, but he is long.

I move a little faster, feeling him bump my cervix. I get wetter and hotter as I ride him, the fever inside me boiling over. My teeth lengthen, my fingernails become claws. I stop, shoving my nails through the mattress and take slow, deep breaths.

"What's a matter?" Jack mumbles, rubbing a palm over my lower back.

"Just catching my breath," I mutter into his neck, keeping my eyes shut tight. They glow when I get really turned on. I take a few more seconds to reign in the predator.

Under control, I push to my knees and start again. I slide up, then plunge down.

"Yessss... Oh God..." Jack is panting.

His muscles tighten beneath me, trembling as I continue to move over him. The pressure builds, and I can feel another orgasm rising. After rubbing my hands in circles across his chest, I tweak his small nipples, tugging on the curled hair. I pump faster, Jack joining in, clutching my hips, surging up as I push.

Swallowing back the urge to howl and rip, my body shakes with the effort to take my pleasure and keep the animal from overwhelming this moment. I snarl and fall forward as the orgasm sweeps through every fiber of my being, my muscles spasming.

A few seconds later, I feel Jack slipping out of me. I roll to his side and bury my face in the pillows. He stirs enough to turn into me and throw an arm around my waist.

"Night," he whispers.

I smile as his soft snoring fills the room.

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* * *

Carefully, I move from underneath Jack's arm and pad downstairs. I need a run in the woods and some fresh food. I have a huge appetite after sex, as well as a restless, pulsing energy. Maybe it'll be different if I ever get the chance to truly satisfy my carnal desires. Until then, it's run and hunt.

In silence, I navigate through the shadows to the kitchen and walk into the backroom. I step outside, ignoring the chilly air, and head into the trees far enough so that houses are no longer visible. The foliage is still thick enough that I don't have to go far to be concealed from view, but I like to get past the paved path that winds through the forest preserve just beyond my yard. I have a neighbor who works odd hours and might be awake and looking out the window.

The first couple times I changed in the dead of night, I had been nervous. The strangeness, the loneliness and all the stories I'd heard growing up had played in my mind. I had to remind myself that I had become one of the things feared in the dark. After that, all my anxiety faded away. Now, I love it.

The Change bubbles through my system, small tingling bursts like a fizzing bath tablet. Then it washes over me in an overflowing rush like champagne as it streams down the bottle when the cork pops. The energy builds faster and faster until my nails become claws, my bones stretch and grow, thick black fur covers my skin. (Don't ask me why my fur doesn't match the hair on my head. I don't know. Larry was gray in wolf form and his hair was brown.)

My muscle size increases, and lupine proportions take over the shape of my face. Now, I have teeth that are razor sharp for biting

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and tearing. Canine vision sees the world in high def black and white, while my sense of smell becomes even sharper, a palette of a million scents so crystalline, they could be read like words.

I am a true blend of wolf and human, not the four-legged kind most books and films portray. I can run on all fours or on only two legs, like a person...doesn't matter. Because of the humanity dwelling inside my Beast, I would understand your words if you encountered me and spoke. Of course, if you saw me like this, you'd run screaming in the opposite direction.

Inhaling deeply, I crouch like a sprinter, then take off. I bound through the forest, my claws digging into the hard ground. Pushing off of logs and trunks, I jump and charge. I stop near a small ravine and sniff, my ears pricked, listening for any sound.

The fur along my neck and back stands on end. Someone or something is out there, watching me. I scan the area, testing the air. In total silence I watch, absolutely still, waiting for movement or sound. There is nothing. With a low growl, I resume the hunt, forging around trees, through thickets and underbrush.

I slow as I reach a clearing, staying just within the tree line. The scent of deer is on the air, and I am hungry. I sight the herd in the field, eating. Perfect. I charge through the dried brush, and in two leaps I am on them. They start to run. I catch a young buck, my claws slashing his sides. My weight drags him down. As we roll, I take out his throat, killing him instantly. I devour the flesh, my teeth cracking the ribcage as I bite and rip into the viscera. The blood pours hot down my throat, satisfying the ache of my hunger. In no time I finish and bury what's left. Doesn't make sense to let the carcass rot out in the open for possible discovery.

I run back to my house, stopping just in sight of my yard to resume my human form. This part of the Change is the easiest. My

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body starts to shrink, the wolf form falling away and then I am standing in the frigid night, shivering and sweating. I trot inside and head into the main floor bathroom to clean up.

It frustrates me because I can heal injuries through the Change, but there's not a damn thing I can do about bloodstains. Those I have to clean up the old-fashioned way. Fucking figures. At least there are no clothes to wash. I snag a towel from the built-in shelves behind the door and step in the shower. I start the water, wincing at the too-hot spray. After I return human form, my skin is extra sensitive. I'm adjusting the temperature when my ears pick up Jack coming down the stairs. *Shit.*

"Maxie?" He knocks softly on the door.

"Yeah?"

"Cha' doin' in there?" Jack's voice is mellow and sleepy, a quiet muffle through the wood.

"Just taking a shower." I scrub the shampoo through my hair, wishing he would go back upstairs. Working a dab of body wash into a soft sponge, I scrub it gingerly over my skin, careful to make sure to get off all the red.

Why in the hell isn't he like most of the others I've brought home? They're usually anxious to leave after the action or sleep like the dead until ten or eleven in the morning. No, Jack has to be curious and wander like a puppy. *Fuck.*

"Can I join you?"

"Uh..." I look down to make sure the blood has all washed away. "Sure."

Maybe I can distract him with shower sex or something. No condoms down here, though. Crap.

Jack walks in, and I pop my head around the curtain, flashing him my best come-hither smile. He steps in the tub, then wraps his

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arms around me from behind, nuzzling my neck. “Why’d you leave?”

This is the problem when you bring home a sweet one. They tend to get clingy and affectionate.

I turn and kiss him, working my lips over his to keep him from talking anymore. His cock rises against my belly, tapping like a drummer. I wend my way from his mouth to his throat, down over his chest and on to his belly button, bending to take his penis into my mouth. Since I won’t have sex without condoms, giving him a blow job is the next best thing.

Ten minutes later, we exit the bathroom, him with a dopey, post-orgasmic look and me, anxious to get him upstairs so I can clean the fucking bloody footprints off the floor. Sometimes my life is like a dark sitcom.

* * *

I lie in bed the next morning, the sunlight streaming over my face. Jack burrows his nose into the nape of my neck, his morning wood poking me like an insistent child. I want him to go away; he wants more action. If he’d just promise to go home and leave me in peace, I’d probably give in and agree to one more round before he goes, but I’m afraid more sex will just stoke his expectations for more than I’m willing to give him. He may have been upgraded to top sirloin last night, but in the light of day and without the alcohol, he’s still rump roast.

“Morning,” he whispers, placing a gentle kiss in my hair.

Gag. I wish I could be mean and throw him out, but he’s so nice. I know, maybe I can fart, burp or get a spontaneous attack of explosive diarrhea...anything that will gross him out enough so

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he'll run far away. But my body betrays me. There's nothing, not even a queasy rumbling. Oh hell, now I have to figure out what to say.

"How about some morning play time?" He nibbles at my earlobe.

I roll my eyes and pat his thigh. "How about some food?"

"Sounds good. I make excellent pancakes. I could mix a batch, and we could have breakfast in bed."

Jesus, he's not just clingy, he's like a goddamned leech. I'm trying not to be a bitch about this, but if he doesn't scam, I may just have to kill him on principle. And that would ruin a good weekend.

I roll over with a big smile. "Pancakes sound delicious."

His face lights up, and he scrambles out of bed. My acting skills aren't half bad.

After settling Chef Jack in the kitchen, I head out to get my paper and the mail. I open the door and the scent of blood, *human* blood, overwhelms me. I step back, every sense, both human and animal, on alert. I sniff the air and determine it's not freshly spilled, that it's been congealing for hours. The odor of the deer's blood last night must have masked it, otherwise I would have noticed it then. Intent on finding the source, I inhale and start walking, heedless of the cold. It grows stronger as I reach Mary Elizabeth's house across the street. My stomach seizes as I realize what I'll probably find. I march up her front stairs and peek in the window.

The thin white curtain lends a gauzy look to the slaughter. Someone has butchered my friend. Through the hazy fabric, I can see blood and God knows what other body fluids soaking a wide swath of the pale blue carpet. The rusty streaks and puddles form a

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trail that stretches to the hall leading to M.E.'s bedroom. I can only see her legs, and I wince at the dark splashes coating them like some gruesome, pre-school art project.

The Change ripples beneath my skin. I growl and back away from the sight. The anger and shock act like accelerators. My teeth and nails lengthen, my vision darting between canine and human.

“Hey, Maxie!”

Striving for calm, I fight back the Change. I whirl to find old Ed Heinman on his porch. He lives next to Mary Elizabeth.

“You all right?” He starts down his stairs.

“I’m fine. Ed, you gotta call the cops.”

He ignores me and keeps coming. “What? Why you’re out here with no shoes, girl. Let’s get you—”

My Beast snaps.

“Call the fucking cops!” I roar, my will power nearing the breaking point.

He jumps back, looking at me like I’ve sprouted a second head.

I turn away to grip the iron railing, feel it bend to my hand and count to fifty, dragging in deep breaths. The urge to change and hunt returns, riding me even harder. I haven’t been this close to losing it since I was in high school. I grit my teeth, my control razor thin. Reigning in my Beast right now is like pulling the zipper on an overstuffed suitcase.

Ed’s looking at me like I belong in an institution when I am finally able to talk. “I’m sorry, Ed. Something’s happened to Mary Elizabeth.”

CHAPTER 3

Ed gapes at me for several long moments. Then he rushes up his front stairs, yelling for his wife, Fran, to call the police.

I look down and realize I need proper clothes and shoes before the cops arrive. I jog across the street and push through my door just as Jack is coming out of the kitchen, coffee in hand, wearing his black jeans from last night, top button undone.

“Did you get the paper?”

The question brings me up short and I stop, giving him what is surely a puzzled look. I can’t seem to think straight at the moment. To my stunned brain, he looks like he’s in one of those Folger’s commercials, all smiley and normal with a hint of sleepiness. The antithesis of what I’ve just seen.

“No.” I snap out of my fog and start up to my room.

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“Maxie, is something wrong? Where’re you going? Coffee and food are this way. ” He jerks a thumb toward the kitchen, a confusing frown settles on his face.

I back down, not sure what to say. How do you tell your boy toy that you just found your friend brutally murdered? You can’t exactly say it with flowers. I take the direct approach.

“Jack, I, uh found my friend, my um...neighbor and uh, well, she’s dead. The cops will be here any minute and we need to get dressed.”

People take news like this in a variety of ways. Some freak out, others go into a daze, still others start babbling and screaming. It all depends. Jack’s expression gets that slack-jawed, imbecilic look, and he gapes at me like a concussed trout, his mouth opening and closing. The coffee starts to spill out of the cup. Turns out, he’s a babbler.

“Oh, my God. Maxie...that’s... Holy shit! What did you...Was she...” He couldn’t seem to wrap his mind around a coherent thought.

With preternatural speed, I whisk the cup out of his hand, saving a bigger mess. I take advantage of his stupor and hustle him up to my room, tossing him his shirt and other pertinent clothing. I rush around and grab jeans, an old Fila sweatshirt and socks, remembering underwear at the last minute.

“What happened?”

Jack’s voice stops me in my tracks.

“I told you, she’s dead.”

“I know. What I mean is, is she dead like heart attack or dead like”—he makes a hesitant slice with his finger across his throat—“murder?”

I roll my eyes at his gesture and sigh. Jesus Christ, how could I

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have ever thought this man top sirloin?

“With what I saw, I think it’s safe to say she was murdered.”

Jack suddenly looks green around the gills. “Oh, God.”

I ignore him and yank on my clothes in jerky movements, nearly plunging a fist through my jeans in my haste. I am nervous, scared, pissed off and ready to pounce. Cops make me uncomfortable, to say the least, and they really set my Beast on edge. I cock my head and hear the sirens in the distance. They should be here in a couple of minutes.

I go back downstairs and open my door, watching as a police car pulls across Mary Elizabeth’s driveway. Two officers—one tall, light and wide, the other short, dark and athletic—rush up to her porch. The tall one knocks on her door while the shorter guy peeks in her window. I can smell the adrenaline and sweat from here. The cop looking in the window jerks back and turns to his partner with a horrified look. They force open the door and enter. In the meantime, an ambulance from the nearby firehouse slows and parks in front of the Heinmans’ house. Ed and Fran are huddled by the side rail, staring at Mary Elizabeth’s place, their fear enveloping them like river mist.

The short cop comes out and loses his breakfast all over the evergreen bushes Mary Elizabeth’s brother, Ethan, planted last summer. My stomach clenches when I think about Ethan and the rest of the family. I know them as well as I know my own family. They are very tight-knit and will be utterly devastated.

“It’s not like one of those cop shows, is it?” Jack comments.

“Nope.” I shrug. “I have a friend who works dispatch in Chicago. She told me that those programs tend to get stuff wrong because they have to add things for dramatic effect. I wish this would work like a television show, though. You know?”

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“What do you mean?”

“If this were one of those shows, they’d find Mary Elizabeth’s killer in the next couple hours, and have him tried and shipped off to prison by Tuesday, just in time for the ten o’clock news.”

He places an awkward hand on my shoulder, his touch irritating rather than soothing. I want him gone, like right now. While he was good last night, I never should have brought him home. I had been off my game after scenting those two wolves and hadn’t been thinking as clearly as I normally would have. Now this. All in all, it was time for Jack to exit stage right and never return.

“The cops will probably want to talk with us, huh?” Jack squeezes that sensitive spot between my neck and shoulder.

Fuck. He’s right, which means ol’ Jack is going to be here for a while longer.

I dance away from him, grab a cozy jacket and step out on my porch. Taking a seat on the swing, I huddle into the warmth of the denim coat’s flannel lining and lean back, my mind drifting to the grisly sight in ME’s house. Jesus, who could have done such a thing?

Unfortunately, Jack joins me, sitting with his thigh brushing mine, one arm slung around my shoulder. I tolerate the gesture because it’s not worth the effort to shake him loose.

As the scene unfolds across the street, I see another vehicle pull up and wonder if maybe these are the crime scene people or perhaps staff from the coroner’s office. A second cruiser arrives and the first two officers head over to talk to the new uniforms. The tall guy of the original two, appears to be in charge. He gestures to Ed and Fran, then points a finger in my direction.

I watch as the patrolmen separate and a thin, African-American

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officer walks toward my house. He has that beautiful, dark ebony skin that seems to shine with its own light, as if flesh really can glow. I can see a razor of a mustache stretching above his top lip. He has no sideburns. I wonder if he's bald under the cap. The bulletproof vest makes his lean frame look bulky. I peg him to be five-seven or eight, judging by the length of his stride as he moves. He takes my stairs two at a time. Good balance, I note, although why, I have no idea. A million random thoughts are flying around inside my head.

"Ms. Briscoe, I'm Officer Harris."

His brown eyes are so dark, they're almost black...and very intense. I feel like an animal at the zoo all of a sudden, and my Beast is not happy. I swallow it back, hard, hoping the nice police man takes it for a nervous gesture.

"And you are?" His gaze swings to Jack.

"Jack Caladan." Jack holds out his hand, and Harris shakes it.

"Would you two care to talk out here or inside?"

"Here's fine," I tell Harris. "I have another chair, if you'd like to sit."

"No thanks." He leans against the rail and pulls out a small notebook. "Your full name is?"

"Uh, Maxine Briscoe."

"Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

I go through everything from the moment I walked over to Mary Elizabeth's, with as much truth as possible, leaving out certain werewolf details like scenting her blood in the air.

"Okay, let me make sure I have this right." The officer reads my words back to me. "Anything else you need to add?"

"No. If I think of anything, um..."

"Call this number." He hands me a card and then shifts to

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speak with Jack.

Jack goes through his story, and I notice that sweat is beading on his neck. Cops must wig him out as well. Glad to know I'm not the only one, although between the two of us, I'm the one with the most to fear.

Officer Harris gets our contact information and leaves. I can't help but let out a sigh of relief at the sight of his retreating back.

I sit for a little while longer, watching as the work continues in Mary Elizabeth's house. Morning turns to afternoon, and I wonder if the police have finally notified her family. Tears burn and my nerves itch like mosquito bites as I picture the shiny, happy Barrett clan, now minus one.

As I relive every memory I have of M.E., right up through last night, my fists clench as I focus on the brief conversation we'd had at the club. Shit! She'd been so troubled, so anxious to talk to me. What in the hell had she wanted to tell me? And did it have anything to do with her murder?

All day, I maintain my vigil, staring as cops and techs come and go, Jack still glued to my side. Exhaling heavily, I shoot him a glance. He sits there useless as a guardian stuffed animal, and I know it is definitely time for him to leave. Shooting up off the swing, I push inside, the rump roast on my heels. I stop short, Jack plowing into my back.

"Maxie, I'm sor—"

"Look." I whirl and cut him off with a hand to his mouth. "Last night was wonderful and you've been great today, but it is time for you to go."

"Bu I wanna..." he mumbles into my fingers.

I increase the pressure. "No more talking. You need to leave. Right. Now."

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He looks like I've just bitten the head off his puppy as he stands there, staring at me.

For my part, I've run out of patience, and I have to refrain from shoving him through the thick wooden door.

With one more hang-dog look, he grabs his keys, then moves to leave. *Yes!*

Come on...two more feet.

He stops, turning back.

Shit!

"Can I call you sometime?"

Is he kidding?

"Jack, maybe under different circumstances..." Like if I get knocked out or drugged. "But I don't think this is going to work."

He sighs, and I feel bad for like a second. He bends to give me a quick kiss on the cheek and finally, finally walks out the door. I close it and for good measure throw the deadbolt and the chain.

Hustling upstairs, I yank off my clothes, tossing them every which way and turn on the shower in the bathroom. I step in, let the water run over me, and suddenly my legs are too weak to hold me up. A yawning chasm of pain opens up deep inside. I drop to my knees as huge wracking sobs consume me.

I cry for Mary Elizabeth. And I cry for her family...especially her brother, Ethan.

He had been my fiancé and the love of my life at one time. He had made me feel special, wanted, and most important of all, needed. He had never minded things like my big appetite, and had seemed to accept my explanations for those full moons when I was "unavailable." Sure, I still had had to hold back on the sex, but I hadn't minded so much because I'd loved him.

Briefly, I had thought we could have a life together, which is

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why I had accepted his proposal of marriage. But it didn't take long for me to be honest with myself. I realized I couldn't marry him without telling him that I was a werewolf. I had been terrified of seeing the love in his eyes turn to fear, and so I had remained silent about my true identity. Eventually, my secret had grown too much to bear, and I had to let him go. Breaking up with him had been the hardest thing I'd ever faced, until now.

A mournful howl tears from my throat as my heart breaks at the realization that with M.E.'s death, I had lost two people very dear to my heart. At last, I collapse to my side, arms hugging the edge of the tub. I stay there until all the hot water is gone, an icy stream pouring over me. I get up slowly, my knees slightly stiff from the porcelain. I don't even bother drying myself, just stumble into my room and crumple naked on the bed. It still smells of sex and Jack, but I don't care right now. All I want to do is lose myself in sleep. I curl into the fetal position and fade into unconsciousness.

* * *

I awake to total darkness. My eyes adjust quickly to the lack of light. A check of the clock tells me that it's seven-ten. Damn, I've been out for hours, but feel more exhausted than I did when I crawled into bed. Rolling over, I stretch my limbs to their limit, my joints creaking. I get up, grab some yoga pants and a huge tee-shirt from a dresser, then head to the kitchen, my stomach growling the entire way, reminding me that I haven't eaten since I'd feasted on the deer last night. The smell of stale pancakes hits me. Even though he's gone, Jack's presence still lingers. I scrape the uneaten food into the garbage, close the bag and toss it by the back door.

After snagging left-over beef chow mein from the refrigerator,

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I shove it in the microwave and pour myself a huge glass of iced tea while it reheats. The timer dings, I move the carton to the table, grab a fork and dig in. I am halfway through my meal when I get the same prickly knowing that I had last night. The wolves from the club are here. My heart rate shoots through the roof, my Beast going on high alert. I inhale deep and slow, listening carefully to every sound.

After getting to my feet, I move as quietly as possible and check my yard, but I see nothing. I pad swiftly to the living room and sense movement in the shadows by Mary Elizabeth's house. My hackles rise, my skull prickling with nerves as a shape crosses my yard and moves into the trees of the forest preserve next to my property.

I can feel them waiting out there. For good or ill, I'm about to make contact with my own kind.

CHAPTER 4

They materialize from the darkness, hunters intent on their prey. Me.

My breath hitches, the animal inside rippling beneath my skin. I'm nervous, but I refuse to let them see. This bitch rolls belly-up for no one. I stride onto my front porch, prepared to defend my territory. Dressed in loungewear, I am hardly the picture of a strong alpha female, but you go with what you got. I look them both dead on.

I fold my arms over my breasts. "What do you want?" I growl, my voice a low rumble.

"We've come for you, little one." With a voice like muffled thunder, the taller of the two moves forward onto my lawn. Twisted steel with sex appeal about sums him up. His dark hair is

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pulled back in a tail, tee-shirt molded to his cut frame.

My nostrils flare, catching his scent, fresh like a mountain spring at first thaw; my female parts quiver in anticipation. I want to coil myself around him like a python on a Kapok tree, hugging every hard inch of flesh. Ruthlessly, I shove down the urge. It's dangerous. Ulterior motives are written all over the two of them, and I just know one of those motives is to dominate me.

“It took us a long time to find you, Maxie.”

The whisky baritone draws my attention, and I watch the other one emerge, lean and graceful, his muscles liquid precision. Definite hotness is woven into the male half of the werewolf genetic code. His scent is warm and dark, like night in a jungle. My nipples bead with excitement as he lopes toward me, brushing past the larger wolf. He stops at the base of my stairs, conqueror etched in every line of his body. This is definitely the alpha of the pair.

“Didn't know I was lost.” I widen my stance, ready to spring. If he's looking for a challenge, he's got one.

He smiles, teeth bared, the faint light from the scimitar moon exposing the predatory glint in his eyes.

I can feel the hunger resonating through them, matching my own deep desire.

“We can smell your craving, little one,” the taller one rumbles as he joins his partner.

I hate arrogant assholes. “Is this the part where I'm supposed lie back, spread my legs and say, ‘Do me like Red Riding Hood, you Big Bad Wolf?’”

They chuckle in that knowing, masculine way, the sound like tropical waves lapping along my insides, teasing and inviting.

“She's more than we imagined, my friend.” The dominant wolf

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smiles over his shoulder at the other one as he starts up the first step.

“Hold it right there, Romeo,” I snap.

He stops, huffs out a breath and moves back to his original position. “The name is Damien Black. And this is Noah Rayburn.” He jerks a thumb toward the larger guy who inclines his head with a gleaming look in his eyes.

They stand there, watching me, probably wondering when I’m going to quit being so difficult and invite them inside to fuck. Maybe I will and maybe I won’t. All depends on their explanations.

“Two things. First, how did you find me? And second, what were you doing over by that house? It’s a crime scene.”

“You really want to discuss all this out in the open?” The alpha, Damien, grips the newel post, giving me a you-can’t-be-serious look.

He is right, damn it. I have to let them in unless I want to risk someone listening in on the conversation. I don’t need my neighbors turning into a mob of angry, torch-bearing villagers ready to blame the monster for the fair maiden’s death.

Before I can open my mouth, Damien and Noah step forward.

“I didn’t give you permission to come in, yet.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Damien snaps.

“Nothing, just making sure you understand the rules.”

They stare at me in disbelief, then hold their hands out in surrender.

Score one for the chick. “All right. Let’s get something clear here. Right now, this is just talk. I don’t care how much sexual tension is perfuming the air.”

“So that human pup was enough to satisfy you?”

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Damien's taunt hits a nerve and my arms drop to my sides, claws forming and teeth lengthening before I can stop myself. "Mind your manners, wolf," I snarl.

With eyes like an inferno of red orange, their Beasts surface to match mine. Their faces are human transparencies over wolves' heads. We have to dial it back or my block will be treated to a live-action creature feature. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, reigning in my lupine energy.

After a minute or so, I crack my lids to discover everything is back to normal. They're watching me, maintaining their distance. I am torn between wanting to wrap them around me like blankets and sending them back into the night. I take another deep breath, looking them up and down. Keeping control of the situation is paramount. I remember how Larry always seemed to be one step ahead of me. I remind myself that this is different, that I am a werewolf and I am strong. Neither one of these guys is getting the upper hand.

"All right, let's get this show on the road." My heart races as I take a step back and allow the two wolves to approach.

Their otherworldly energy drifts over my skin, their scents a potent aphrodisiac in the cold night air. My insides liquefy like wax before a flame, my pulse throbbing a steady percussive beat. These guys are trouble in capital letters with an exclamation point, and I have the sneaking suspicion I am going to be on my toes more than a prima ballerina.

No matter the species, men suck.

I hate being right. As soon as I lock my door, I turn and get a face full of hard, male chest.

"Back off, before I get ugly."

Their deep laughter rasps along my nerve endings, the sound at

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once arousing me and stirring my anger. They crowd in closer.

“I like your spirit, Maxie.” Damien’s breath dances over my flesh. “And your scent.” He takes a quick nuzzle at my neck. “Spicy sweet.”

If I don’t do something, they’ll have me naked and on my back in three seconds flat. I call my Beast, lengthen my claws and strike, raking deep gashes over their pectorals. The smell of their blood and their angry growls cut through the fog of lust and male arrogance.

“You guys seem to be hard of hearing. Try that again and you’re out.”

“Well, Dam, you wondered how she’d measure up to us, and I say she is much more than you thought,” Noah teases. He presses his hand against his wound, then raises his stained hand to his lips, licking the blood. The raw intensity in those dark depths curls through me, and I force myself to look away, reluctantly catching Damien’s gaze. The alpha continues to glare at me, though I detect heat and a certain grudging respect in the stone gray of his eyes.

I wait to see if they will attempt anything else before I start down the hall to the kitchen. I bring them there because I am nervous and need to do something with my hands. Making coffee will help. I flip on the overhead light as I pad over to the counter.

“Would you guys like some coffee?” I plug in the pot, open a cabinet and take down the bag of gourmet hazelnut.

“I’d rather have a sip of you, little one,” Noah rumbles as he and Damien remove their jackets, hanging them on the back of their chairs.

I roll my eyes. “Ha, ha. All you’re getting is some caffeinated bean juice. So zip it.”

After I get the coffee going, I lean back against the counter to

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check out the werewolves in living color. They look good enough to eat, lick, bite and any other naughty thing I can think of as they sit quietly, trying to look harmless. The blood stains from my claw marks are a glaring reminder that the air around here is charged, and things could go supernova at any moment.

They both have luscious dark hair, Damien's short and chocolate brown, layered to lie close against his skull. Noah's is long and black, pulled in a thick tail at the base of his neck. I want to tangle my hands in both their manes, preferably while they're on their knees, their lips on my breasts. I clench my fists as I swallow my lust along with my tongue.

"See something you like?" Damien settles back in the chair, hands behind his head.

"Maybe." I amaze myself with my cool reply. I deserve an Oscar, I think. Still, before Mama can get her sweet treats, she needs to find out how they know where she is and why they come here. I lean against the counter, jam my hands on my hips and give them my best Dirty Harry don't-fuck-with-me look.

"How in the hell did you find me?"

"I'm a private investigator," Damien volunteers. "In my free time, I track cases involving possible werewolf sightings, victims, etc."

My heart stops for a minute. "I'm being investigated?"

Damien shakes his head. "It's not like that. Please let us tell you the whole story."

I try to swallow my rising panic. The idea of someone...or something...checking up on me is freaking me out. I take a deep breath and decide to play it their way, for the moment. "So, are you local? I mean, I think we would have sensed one another before now, if you were."

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He shakes his head. “Wisconsin, Janesville. Noah is from Madison.”

“Okay, but how and why did you two hook up? I mean, all the research I’ve done, including some unfortunate personal experience with my sire, tells me that werewolves are solitary creatures.”

Damien sighs and grips the edge of the oak table. “Normally, we are. Noah came to me to help him track the guy who’d turned him.”

“Wanted to know what he’d done to me,” the bigger wolf mutters, drumming his fingers on the table. “Hard having urges and powers you don’t understand.”

I could empathize, big time. “His name wasn’t Larry, was it?” I had to ask.

“No. Gary Mercer.” Damien cocks a brow. “Why? This Larry your sire?”

“Yeah. Bastard caught me in high school.”

Damien looks decidedly uncomfortable at my response, and I start to wonder what all he’s not saying.

“That makes it worse.” The sympathy in Noah’s voice catches my attention, his dark blue eyes liquid with unspoken emotion. “Did you ever catch up to him? Haven’t cornered mine, yet.”

“I ran into him a couple of years after and pushed the envelope on werewolves being able to heal everything.”

They grin.

“What did you do?” asks Damien.

I give him a broad, evil smile. “I bit off his twig and berries.”

Their faces turn the color of cheap, mint chocolate-chip ice cream.

“Holy God.” Noah manages. “I’d say you got revenge.”

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“Damn straight. And I’m a whole lot meaner now.”

My mom always tells me to begin as I mean to go on, and I don’t want them having any kind of upper hand. Also, I’m a big believer in defining the boundaries. That way, you know what you can stand behind and what you can run through.

“Now getting back to why the two of you are here. You found me, how?” I glance at the coffee pot. Only a couple more minutes.

Damien clears his throat as he props his elbows on the table and leans forward. “I tracked a story from this area, actually more toward Morris, about a teen girl being attacked by a wild animal around a dozen years ago or so. No one knew what happened to her. Her parents apparently hustled her out of the hospital as soon as they could. Paid the docs to keep quiet or something.”

“Couldn’t have been me. I lived out near Ashton.”

“I know. This girl was your neighbor, Mary Elizabeth.”

“What? No way. She isn’t...wasn’t a werewolf, I’d have sensed it”

Damien shakes his head. “We know now that she wasn’t a werewolf. But at first, all we learned was that she had been attacked by something that could have been a werewolf.”

“I can’t believe something like that happened to her. I knew her...know her family...well. She would have told me.”

“Ask her family.” Damien’s voice is implacable.

Something starts niggling in the back of my mind, certain scars I’d seen on her at a pool party and once when she’d worn a low-backed dress. She’d brushed me off when I’d mentioned them, and I’d filed away her reaction, assuming she was just being self-conscious.

This is completely fucked up. What had attacked Mary Elizabeth back then? Why did her parents cover it up? Why hadn’t

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Ethan ever said anything? And did it really have anything to do with werewolves? With me? The questions roll fast and furious like a psychotic bowler in my brain.

The coffee stops brewing, and I reach for a mug. “You guys having any?” I choke the question out around the basketball in my throat.

“Sure,” Damien intones.

I grab a second cup. “Noah?”

“No. You got any water or juice?”

“Fridge. Hand me the creamer? Thanks.” I’m glad to have something to do because I can barely wrap my mind around this information. “So...uh... What else can you tell me?”

Silence descends like a spider.

“Well?” I shove away from the counter, caffeine and hospitality forgotten. “Give me something, I am running out of patience.” My voice has a deep edge.

Both wolves brace, looking at me like I’m about to attack. And I have to say that the instinct to lunge and beat more information out of them is fierce. My nails elongate, my control fraying like old jeans, and I have to fight hard to keep from changing.

“Maxie! Get a handle on yourself and listen to me. You need to pay attention to my words. ” Damien’s voice reaches me as if through a fog.

My Beast folds away. “Okay. Go ahead.”

“When I was looking into Mary Elizabeth’s attack, I came across yours by accident.”

“What?” Another surge of panic blooms in my stomach. “How could you have learned about that? I never went to the hospital....certainly never reported it.”

“But the same nurse treated both of you,” he continues. “A

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Jane Hiller. I interviewed her.”

“Oh, God.” My blood cells freeze. Jane was the niece of our then-neighbor, George Hiller. I suddenly recall how George had told my mother and me that Jane worked at the medical center in Morris. “But we came up with a story for what happened to me. We were sure she didn’t suspect...”

“And if she hadn’t treated your friend, too, you might have gotten away with it,” Damien rumbles. “But having two attacks so similar raised questions—“

I barely hear his words. “That means that someone else out there knows about me. Or, at least suspects something.” I cover my mouth, swallowing back the bitter tang of fear in my throat. All this time, I think we’ve been so careful, but anyone can find out anything about you if they look in the right places and ask the right questions. I am so fucked.

“I’ve also been looking at bizarre murders that went down in such a way it could have been a werewolf that was killed.”

For an instant, his words don’t register. Then their significance hits me as I see M.E.’s crime scene flash before my eyes. In one huge gulp, I suck the oxygen out of the room. Holy Mother of God.

“As a result of my investigations, I believe there’s a sicko out there murdering people he thinks are werewolves,” Damien continues.

“And you didn’t go to the police with this?” I spear him with a glare.

He pounds a fist on the table. “I tried, but I got stonewalled or ignored all together. Besides, most of the cases had gone cold. I didn’t want to press and maybe bring the law down on me.”

“How many victims?” I ask. A psycho werewolf hunter. Fuck.

“Six confirmed.”

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“And M.E. makes seven?”

Damien nods.

I shake my head and glance over at Noah, who’s been too quiet. From the look on his face, I get the feeling Damien’s not through with this bombing sortie.

Sure enough. The next words out of the alpha’s mouth are: “It gets worse.”

My stomach churns. Oh, God, here we go.

“I think this guy found out about Mary Elizabeth’s attack back in Morris, came to investigate and probably found out about yours, too. It wouldn’t be hard for him to do, you know. A little extra digging and paying attention to certain details.”

My body shivers at the thought that M.E.’s murderer had learned my darkest secret. My whole world has just been ripped away.

Damien takes a deep breath. “There’s something else, too. I don’t know if this means anything, or is pure coincidence. But, did you ever notice that you bear a striking resemblance to your neighbor? I think M.E.’s murderer confused the two of you. I’m thinking he saw you shift one night. When he attacked M.E., he did so thinking he was destroying that werewolf....you.”

Damien’s words send fingers of dread strumming down my vertebrae. I never thought about it before, but my breath quickens as I picture Mary Elizabeth in my mind and compare her to me. Same shoulder-length, dark blonde hair—mine thick and straight, hers with a bit of a wave. Similar green eyes—mine like jade, hers like summer leaves. We’re almost the same height, although she was slightly shorter...

Oh, my God!

“So, you think this guy has realized he killed the wrong girl.

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You think he's after me, now."

Damien nods.

It's all too much and I can't function. Everything seems so far away, like tunnel vision.

"Here." Noah walks over to me and swings me up into his arms. He settles me in a chair, pushing my head between my knees, then kneels in front of me.

"Breathe, little one." The huge wolf gently kneads my shoulders.

Damien scoots his chair over to sit beside me, entwining my cold fingers in his.

Their presence and their touch soothe me. And I need them, because I am afraid. For the first time since becoming a werewolf, I am genuinely afraid, like I have some huge-ass target on my back. I also feel horribly guilty. If Mary Elizabeth has been killed because of me...

I look at them, their gazes—one gray, the other blue—fill with concern. Some strange impulse comes over me and I fall forward into their embrace. I wrap my arms around them, soaking up their presence, drowning in their scents, desperate to chase away these awful feelings.

They murmur nonsense comfort words, their hands running over my back, and I hold them so tight that I would have broken bones had they been human. I need this, need them so much. It feels so good to finally know the touch of my own kind. Something inside me breaks, an inner defensive wall crumbles, and I burrow myself farther into them until I can feel every delineation of muscle.

I rub my cheeks against theirs, absorbing the feel of their whiskers. Damien's is raspy, just pressing through the skin. Noah's

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is stiffer, more a two-day growth than a five o'clock shadow. Instinct has me turning my face to Damien, seeking his lips. He is the alpha, and I must taste of him first.

“Maxie... Mmm.”

I cut off Damien's words with my mouth. He tastes like his scent—hot and dark, an exotic spice I have no name for. His lips are firm, not too full, dragging over my mouth with a rawness that is intense and primal, a gathering thunderstorm. I dive deeper into the kiss and he growls, devouring me. He is what I have been waiting for.

All my senses come on high alert, my Beast awakening as my desire grows. My temperature rises, my blood starting to boil in my veins. I am drowning in Damien.

Noah snarls, cupping my breast, reminding me he's still there.

I break Damien's kiss and capture Noah's lips. He tastes of the deep arctic forest, wild and cool. His kiss is hungry, savage, fire and ice like an Icelandic volcano.

My chest is pumping like a winded tourist walking around Machu Picchu.

We shift position and fall to the floor, grunting, biting as our Beasts struggle to break through. Somewhere, I hear a loud crack and I shove back to see one of the chairs on its side and Noah holding a broken leg.

“I'm sorry, little one.” Noah flashes me a sheepish grin, his hair hanging over his beautiful eyes.

“He doesn't know his own strength sometimes.” Damien smiles, resting an arm on his knee.

“Guys, we're going to have to take this someplace safer.”

CHAPTER 5

Their deep chuckles go straight through me.

I push to my feet, glancing at my ruined chair. No doubt the safest place will be the basement. There, the property damage will be minimal. I glide to the hallway, their presence behind me like a wall of energy, pulsing, waiting. My skin tingles in remembrance of their touch, my nipples hard and rasping against the cotton of my tee-shirt.

I turn the knob on the basement door and give a brief thought to my big comfy bed. Nope, there's no way I can afford to replace a bed right now. I flip the light switch, the wood of the stairs cool and rough against my bare feet.

The front part of my basement isn't the creepy place you'll find in many older homes. Mom and I actually fixed it up so that it

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screams suburban sprawl with its ancient, braided rug, energy-efficient washer and dryer, sweater rack, shelves and double sink. There's a third bathroom down here, too, along with a battered couch and a low table with some magazines to read while I do laundry.

The back part of the basement is a different story. It's straight out of a horror film.

Cordoning off a small room—the place where I spend the night of the full moon—is a steel bar door. I came across the thing at a junk yard in central Illinois, believe it or not. The owner of the yard had taken it from a pile of scrap created after an old prison had been demolished. It had been of the prison cell doors.

Inside the room, silver-lined manacles are bolted into the floor with thick anchor chains. The chains are also salvage—from a dismantled tanker ship. Mom had spied them on one of her dates with a merchant marine when he'd given her a tour of a shipyard. She said that she'd thought of me immediately when she saw them. She figured if they could hold 90,000 tons of ship in place, they could certainly restrain a werewolf on the night of a full moon. Anyway, she'd offer to buy them and her date, who had a twisted sense of humor, presented them to her as a gift.

Also in the room are thin, utilitarian mats spread across the floor. I like to have a little bit of comfort when I sleep off the moon cycle. Sometimes the mats get shredded...it all depends on how bad I am that month. After the last full moon a few weeks ago, two of them had had to be replaced.

Damien squats by the chains, lifting one. "Let me guess, full moon fever?"

I nod. "What do you do?"

A light flush creeps up his neck as he looks me dead on. "Noah

and I take care of each other.”

I suck in a breath at the implication of his words. This is too good to be true. I get to have sex with two male werewolves who play with each other. Lust spikes through me, making my knees weak.

Noah’s large hands grasp my shoulders. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Hell no. I shake my head, continuing to stare at Damien. “I love watching two guys. Do you have a problem with *that*?”

“Not at all, do we, Dam?” Noah’s massive arms slide around me, enveloping me against his hard frame.

Desire shoots through my system quicker than tequila.

Damien stands and strides toward us, his silver gaze never wavering. He leans in to me, inhaling deeply, then rubs his whiskered face along my neck, pressing little kisses to the underside of my jaw. A small moan escapes as I rise on my toes.

I gasp as Damien’s tongue laves the hot spot right beneath my ear, Noah’s mouth taking over on the other side. My fists clench as they feast on me, liquid heat roiling through my veins.

Snarls punctuate the air as Damien lifts me, squeezing my ass. Noah’s fingers slide to cup my breasts, the cotton and heat from his hands making me squirm. I growl and rip Damien’s shirt, tearing across my original claw marks to smooth over his hot, hard chest, my fingers tangling in the crinkly hairs.

He grunts and lets go of my ass to jerk his ruined shirt over his head.

I slide down Noah’s body and feel the big wolf get rid of his own tee. He moves around to stand beside Damien. Their eyes glow with the fire of their Beasts. Hunger pulses from both wolves’ very pores. I lick my lips in anticipation of all that flesh on

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me, over me, behind me, inside me.

With preternatural speed, their claws drop and they rip my clothes from my body. I'm too turned on to care about the damages. There's going to be a lot more wreckage before this night's over.

Nude, I leap at them, and they stumble back. We smash onto the couch, the wood frame cracking, and we crash to the floor. I'm between the two males. We writhe around, kissing, biting and scratching. Damien rolls me so I am lying on top of Noah, who is half-reclining against the wall. Noah's hard, hairy chest rasps the flesh of my back, his denim-covered cock pressing into my ass. His thick fingers pluck my nipples; his teeth worry the flesh between my neck and shoulder.

I whimper as Damien yanks apart my thighs. His silver eyes turn to fire as he buries his face against my wet vagina. He licks and sucks, teeth scraping the outer lips as he consumes me.

My hips surge up, my feet flat on the floor, on either side of Noah's legs.

Damien snarls and holds me still with a palm against my lower abdomen. His tongue plunges deep, swirling and fluttering inside me like he's licking an ice cream cone. My clit swells with each lingual stroke, pulsing harder and harder.

"Arrrh... Urrrh..." My teeth elongate, my claws ripping bloody runnels on Damien's back.

Sweat pours down my body as my orgasm gathers force. Every muscle and nerve stretch to their limit, my joints popping. An enormous howl rips from the depths of my soul as huge tremors tear through my body with the force of a fighter jet in a five-G dive.

I come back to myself. Damien is still feasting, his back a red

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ruin. I quiver with the aftershocks, ready to go again. I am only a bit sorry about his back. He'll heal.

Finally, he looks at me, his expression intent, mouth wet with my juices. "One's first true lupine orgasm is magic."

I want to laugh and dance. I am so energized, I could swim the entire length of Lake Michigan. Or... I wiggle my ass on Noah's lap. I could fuck two enormous werewolves. Door Number Two, please.

Damien stands, and I forget to breathe as he shucks his jeans down his incredible legs, revealing a long, thick cock with a wide, purple head and several prominent veins. It's paler than the rest of him, a creamy gold that matches the swim trunk tan line starting just below his belly button and ending at the top of his thighs.

My mouth waters as he takes himself in hand, pumping slow, watching me and Noah.

Noah grunts and moves me to his side as he shrugs off his clothes. His cock is equally impressive—thicker than Damien's, though not as long. It's uncircumcised, a dark red cap peeping out from the foreskin.

I want to see them rubbing their erections together. I must have said something without realizing because suddenly they are both smiling at me like they've scored the hot chick at the dance. My mouth goes Sahara dry as they kneel and face each other, their erections sliding together. Their hands pull and stroke until both cocks glisten with their pearly pre-cum.

"Care to join?" Damien teases.

I crawl over, settle back on my heels and grasp their penises. I'm in heaven as I pump the shafts, rubbing my thumbs over the heads, slipping my fingers just inside Noah's foreskin.

He growls, throwing back his head.

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Damien watches as I play, the only signs of his increasing arousal are the amount of fluid leaking out of his cock and his harsh breaths.

I bend and flick my tongue over their hard flesh, inhaling the musky scent, reveling in the salty sweet taste. My clit throbs as I imagine their erections rocking in and out of me. Muffled grunts sound, and I look up to see their mouths crash together. They grasp the backs of each other's necks, devouring one another. I straighten and shove myself into them, turning it to a ravaging three-way kiss.

My two wolves turn into me, forcing me back to the floor, then kiss their way to my breasts. Their mouths latch onto my nipples, sucking hard and tight.

I'm groaning, shaking with need, hands tangling in their hair, holding them to me as they suck and lave, the pleasure savaging my entire nervous system.

They growl, each plunging two fingers deep into my wet pussy, fucking me.

I roar as another orgasm rips through me, my body rising to push against the males. It takes their combined strength to hold me as my Beast howls and I writhe, arching into the maelstrom of pleasure.

My eyes flutter open to see both of my wolves hovering over me.

"Still with us, little one?" Noah teases, amusement tempering with concern in his blue gaze.

Two ripping orgasms and their cocks have yet to be inside me. Holy shit! Pushing to my elbows, I glance at their erections, glistening with moisture. Their control impresses me because I have none whatsoever tonight.

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Damien pushes aside Noah and straddles me, his gray eyes silver flakes of mica, a red glow floating at the edge of the iris like a drop of blood in silver paint.

“This is more than I imagined,” he rumbles, leaning over me, hands on either side of my head. “Your scent is”—he inhales deeply—“like flowers in an ocean breeze. Clean.” He nuzzles my neck. “Unbound.”

I shiver at his words, fine tremors pulsing through me. I cannot look away from Damien, the sheer force of his personality like a starship tractor beam. I grasp his biceps and attempt to pull him to me.

He chuckles. “Tempted as I am, I have another position in mind.”

Bracing on my thighs, Damien pushes to his feet and holds out a hand to me.

Noah makes a deep noise somewhere between a whimper and growl. I glance to see him on his knees, tugging his erection, watching us, those dark blue eyes filled with hunger.

My lower abdomen clenches with lust as I grasp Damien’s hand. He hauls me up and before I can think, he jerks me into his arms, his erection rubbing against my belly, leaving slick trails of fluid. He covers my mouth, tongue delving deep inside, swirling over my teeth and palate. His dark flavor is intoxicating.

I wrap myself around him, legs locking to his hips, arms twining about his neck. I bury my fingers in his hair, luxuriating in the raw silk.

A deep bass rises from Damien’s throat and he stumbles, slamming us into the nearest wall. The sound of cracking plywood panel fills the air, little shards of wood scraping my back. I whimper and bite down on his lip, worrying the tender flesh with

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my teeth until I can taste his blood. The metallic flavor goes straight to my head. I growl and shove against him, forcing us to shift position.

I propel Damien into the wall, breaking through another panel. We bite and scratch, grunting and sliding against each other.

A sharp cry fills the air along with the scent of ejaculate. Damien and I tear away from each other to see Noah furiously pumping his cock, his seed spraying in droplets onto the old braided rug.

The sight of his cum is a brutal reality check.

“We need condoms,” I rasp.

Damien grins and sets me down. “Be right back.”

My breath hitches as I watch Damien lope over to his discarded jeans, the epitome of savage grace.

Movement flickers at the edge of my vision. Noah is crawling to me on all fours in precise, elegant moves that someone his size should not have. He is hypnotic and agile, fluid. His hands grasp my ankles, and he licks a circular pattern across the top of each foot.

I squirm as he laves a slow path along my right leg, pausing to nuzzle behind my knee. He rolls his head to look at me, the expression predatory. Then he continues up my leg until he hits the hot spot. A wave of heat spirals straight to my uterus, and I gasp.

A dangerous growl sounds as Damien approaches. He shoves Noah with enough force to send the larger wolf slamming against the block foundation wall. A cloud of dust fills the air.

“Mine first.”

Noah rises like a leviathan and snarls.

Damien snaps his teeth, and Noah drops back.

My alpha wolf turns back to me, his eyes glowing with the

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light of his Beast, the edges of his fangs lengthening. My own animal rises to the challenge. Our bodies crash into each other and we are savages, our skin soaked with sweat, grinding and slapping together in a primal rhythm.

He grabs my upper arms in a vise-like grip and holds me above him, feet dangling over the floor as he walks me to the steel door. I feel the cold bars dig into my back as he presses me against the metal.

He forces my hands over my head until I grab onto the bars. "Hold on."

The wolf maneuvers me until I feel the heat of his condom-covered cock at my opening. I glide down slowly, taking his thick length.

Damien grabs my hips tightly and slams upward, driving himself all the way inside me. I howl, locking my legs tight around his hips, digging my heels into his firm buttocks. He feels so fucking good, so deep I can feel him bump my cervix.

We rock together in an ancient, animalistic frenzy, his claws digging into my hips as he pumps hard and fast. My inner muscles squeeze his length. I can barely breathe as the biting pleasure pain roars through me. I grip the bars with all my strength, feeling metal conform to the shapes of my fingers and palms as I stare into the fathomless red-silver light of Damien's wolfen gaze.

A deep desperate sound tears from his throat.

I relax my vaginal muscles, snarling as Damien slides even deeper. His head tilts forward and his teeth bite into the flesh of my shoulder.

My body starts to tremble, my joints and muscles convulsing in tiny shivers that grow larger and larger like shockwaves until I erupt in a ten-point-five earthquake, gasping and howling, nearly

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twisting the metal bars.

Damien clutches me to his hard chest, teasing his lips along my neck while he whispers sweet nonsense between kisses. My legs slide down his until my feet hit the cold cement floor.

I bend over, trying to catch my breath, when I sense movement behind me

Noah's hands massage my back, my buttocks, his touch stirring the embers of my arousal. "Are you ready for me, now?"

The words wash over me like the spray of a hot shower after being caught in November rain. My body leaps to life, lust pumping through me like I haven't just come three times.

I am more than ready for round four. Werewolf sex rocks.

Noah lifts me, my inner thighs burning as they stretch around his big, heavily muscled frame. His condom-sheathed cock bobs, slapping against my lower belly as he carries me to the wreckage of the couch.

I nip his jaw. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Quiet."

Frowning, I rake my nails down his arms, wanting to make him bleed for his insolence.

I smile when he grunts, but my moment is over all too soon when he sinks to his knees and manhandles me to all fours, my legs splayed across his thighs, ass in the air, my arms braced on the cushions.

He moves his big paws over my buttocks, alternately slapping, rubbing and squeezing.

"I love this ass," he breathes against my neck.

I squirm, my vagina clenching, moisture snaking down the insides of my thighs. I grunt as he shoves a hand between my legs, cupping me, scissoring two fingers along my nether lips. I rock

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back and forth on his hand, reveling in the touch.

It is a shock when he removes his digits, but before I can protest, the broad head of his penis is there, pressing against my opening.

He jams inside me, his body blanketing mine as he thrusts.

The pleasure is overwhelming. My nails tear into the ruined cushion as his teeth clamp down on the nape of my neck. He pumps deep, my inner muscles squeezing his entire length as he drives in and out of me.

“Ah... unh...” Small, primitive noises escape my throat.

Noah snarls, clutching my thighs, pulling me down toward him, forcing himself deeper.

I explode, my muscles and bones flying apart like a starburst as Noah pounds into me, darkness teasing the edge of my vision.

I hear a distant howl, from Noah I think, as I collapse and the world goes dark.

“Maxie?”

My eyelids blink open, and I am staring into Noah’s gruff features, his expression somewhere between relief and tenderness.

“I’m here.” I wriggle a little and realize that I am on top of Damien, my head on his chest.

Noah heaves a sigh. “Good. I thought I’d hurt you.”

“Told you she was tough,” Damien rumbles, smoothing a hand over my belly.

Part of me wants to stay right here on my werewolf couch, but the exhausted part knows that this is no place for a good night’s rest. Blinking rapidly a few more times, I sit up.

The basement is a FEMA disaster area.

“Oh. My. *God.*”

I crawl off of Damien and climb to my feet to survey the

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damage. I mean, I knew there was going to be some wreckage, but damn. Giant holes break up the plywood-paneled wall of the bathroom, the couch and table are destroyed, two of the support posts are cracked, and there is man-sized imprint in my foundation wall.

Boy, am I ever going to pay for my fun. I try calculating the damages in my over-sexed brain, but I'm having a hard time focusing. But even in my muddled state, I know I'm looking at a catastrophe on the scale of global warming.

I turn to glare at the two self-satisfied wolves on my floor. "I hope you two can afford to pony up some money to fix this. Homeowners insurance doesn't cover werewolf sex. Not to mention, my agent would shit cats and drop me in a hot minute."

"Don't worry. It'll be fine." Damien flashes a lazy smile.

"Fine? I am screwed and you're telling me it's fine?" I am going to kill them.

"Correction, you *were* screwed." Noah chimes in.

"Fuck both of you." I head to the stairs. I need a hot shower.

"Maxie, wait." Damien calls as he gets to his feet. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Oh, really?" I fold my arms under my breasts.

"I'm a contractor." Noah's big grin could be seen from space.

CHAPTER 6

The kitchen clock chimes ten o'clock as Damien, Noah and I sit at the table in heavy silence, like a jury about to head out with a guilty verdict. I am tired, sore and still a bit turned on as I stare at the werewolves' shirtless chests. I tilt my head against the back of my chair and draw in a deep breath, my nipples chafing against the Grateful Dead tee-shirt I threw on after my shower. It's hard to believe our wild fuck fest didn't even take two hours. Now that the joyride is over, I force myself to get down to business.

"So how long before the guy who killed M.E. comes after me?" I raise my head and stare at Damien.

He gives me a hard look, his gray gaze like steel. "Probably not long."

"This sounds so freaking incredible, I can hardly wrap my

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mind around it. I mean, what if this isn't about werewolves at all? What if this is all some fucked up serial killer with a hard on for blondes? There could be all kinds of other explanations..." My voice fades as I realize how silly and desperate I sound.

"Stop it, Maxie." Damien's harsh command cuts through the fog of fear in my brain. "This killer is all about werewolf business...that's the one thing we do know. He beheaded your friend...probably shot her with a tranq dart, first, so there'd be no fight. That's what happened in at least two of the six cases I investigated." He reaches out to place a hand over mine. "You've got to deal with this, be ready when he moves against you."

"Thanks for the reminder, asshole," I snap, yanking from his touch.

"I'm trying to help save your life."

I feel guilty about my outburst. "I know. I just hate thinking I could be a target. I want to do something. How will I even see him coming?" I massage a hand along the back of my neck, where fear and stress are winding my muscles tighter than a corset on an overweight stripper.

"You most likely won't. And from the way the other murders played out, this guy won't risk giving you a chance to shift, either. You'd better stay alert."

"Shit," I curse softly, raising my feet to plant them on the seat of my chair, then wrapping my arms around my knees. My mind runs through all the times I'm out in the open. "Do you think he'd try for me in a crowd? Like at the train station?"

"That's foolish." Damien gets up to pour himself some of the coffee I forgot about. "Taking you out in a crowd would draw too much attention, and he wouldn't have a clear shot if he's using a dart gun."

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A small relief. “But I’m vulnerable when I run in the woods...” I trail off, a chill running through me as I remember the night before.

“What is it?” Noah reaches out a large hand and gives my knee a gentle squeeze, forcing me to look at him.

My gaze flicks from him to Damien. “I was just thinking about when I went for my run last night.”

“What happened?” Damien rumbles, his expression fierce.

“I couldn’t shake the feeling I was being watched.”

He curses softly. “Were you able to see anyone?”

“No.” I tell him everything that happened after I left the club, leaving out the sex details.

“Has this happened before?” Damien leans back in his chair, his gaze never wavering from me.

I shake my head. “Last night was the first time.” A horrible thought occurs to me. “Could that have been the killer, afraid to approach me in my animal form?”

“I honestly don’t know. It’s certainly possible. I mean, you can never rule out anything until a case is solved.”

“Great,” I mutter. I could be tranquilized and killed in my own backyard.

“We won’t let anything happen to you,” Noah rumbles. “We are going to find who did this.”

His gruff reassurance does little to quell the yawning fear taking root inside me. As if working at a crappy job and being a werewolf weren’t enough. Now it looks like I’ll have to deal with some psycho who wants to kill me just because I’m lupine. Correction, he doesn’t just want to kill me, he wants to slaughter me like meat on the hoof. Can Damien and Noah really protect me from him? And who’s to say they’ll stick around, anyway? I mean,

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most guys can't be bothered with making a phone call the morning after.

Noah starts rubbing my knee as if he senses the chaos in my brain, and Damien reaches out to play with my fingers. I look at both of them and feel a surge of guilt for thinking that they wouldn't be there for me. Somehow, I know they won't leave me to fend for myself. After all, they did come looking for me...well, a rare female werewolf, anyway.

I meet Damien's silver gaze and ask him, "So what do I do?"

Before he can answer, we hear voices and car doors slamming. I jump to my feet, push past Noah and jog to the living room to peek out the window. Fucking A, it's my mom and Drea.

* * *

Mia Briscoe is the human equivalent of an F-five tornado. She blows in, destroying everything in her path, then exits, leaving me to comb through the debris field.

"Who are they?" Damien rubs a hand on my ass, bending down to rest his chin on my shoulder, our faces glowing with moonlight in the reflection of the glass.

"Trouble." I touch my cheek to his, the stubble tickling me. "Do me a favor and go back to the kitchen."

I push away to answer the door, then glance at his and Noah's bare chests. "And put on your shirts."

I breathe a little easier as the guys exit. Time to let the two-woman demolition crew inside.

My mother is the first through the door, wrapping her arms tight around me. I am enveloped in a storm of raspberry and baby powder.

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“Oh, Baby, I am so sorry about Mary Elizabeth.”

“Thanks.” Her arms squeeze with brutal strength. “Okay, Ma. It’s all right.”

The hug gets tighter. I picture my capillaries erupting as I smother to death.

I look at Drea, willing her to save me. No help there as the bitch just smiles and lets my mother have at me. I know I can twist steel in my bare hands, but it would be so wrong to use that strength on my mother, even though she has a grip like the Incredible Hulk.

“Why didn’t you call?” Mom jerks back from me, holding my upper arms as she gives me a shake.

My lungs weep with joy as my mother’s focus shifts to another part of my body.

“You know how I worry. It doesn’t take much to pick up a phone and press a few buttons.” Her green eyes whittle me down to age ten in two seconds flat.

“Ma—”

“Maxine Eunice Briscoe, you are in big trouble.” She shoves away from me and yanks off her jacket. I bite my tongue as she hands it to Drea, who’s already hanging up her own coat on the row of hooks next to the door.

With another furious glance at me, Mom stalks into the darkened living room, fumbling with a couple of lamps as she moves, spewing the entire time and whipping herself into an even greater righteous fury. The storm is just getting started.

I roll my eyes as she goes on about courtesy, how she loves me and blah, blah, blah... I tune her out like I did when I was a kid, only to catch sight of Damien and Noah just outside the kitchen entrance.

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“Eunice?” Damien mouths, big evil grin on his face.

I narrow my eyes and am just about to threaten revenge when I hear a gasp and glance over to see Drea staring at the guys. *Oh no.*

Perfect timing all the way around as my mom walks up next to me

“I know you can snap tree trunks, but I—” Mom looks over at my male guests. “Who the hell are you two?” She skewers Damien and Noah with laser-like precision.

I smirk as they step back in unison like a marching band.

“Don’t you back up like a couple of cowards. Come out and tell me who you are, and what you’re doing here with my daughter.”

Three werewolves in fear of one human woman. Un-fucking-believable.

“Yeah,” I say sarcastically. “Come on, tell her what you’ve been doing to me.”

They glare at me as they march toward us like a couple of reluctant five-year-olds on the first day of kindergarten.

Damien recovers first. “I’m Damien Black, Mrs. Bri—”

“That’s Ms.” She continues to glare.

Mom is the biggest bitch I know.

“Uh...*Ms. Briscoe.*” Damien scrubs a hand over his face as Mom slights him and moves on to Noah.

“And you are?”

The big wolf shuffles forward, hand extended. “I’m Noah Rayburn.”

She folds her arms over her chest. “Tell me, which one of you is fucking my daughter?”

“Ma!”

“What? You think I can’t tell what’s going on?” Her steady

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gaze wavers. “Oh, my God! It’s both of them, isn’t it?”

I’m sure my face can guide home airplanes in the fog.

“I’m twenty-seven freaking years old! Will you stop?” Great, I’m shrieking like a teenager with boy band concert tickets.

My outburst brings her up short, and she takes a deep breath, cooling her jets. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’re right. But you know how I get when I’m upset. I worry about you. You’re my one and only child.”

I fist my hands into my eyes. “I know. I just wish you wouldn’t come out with both barrels blazing all the time.”

“No one can ever accuse me of being subtle.”

No kidding. I pinch the bridge of my nose and head into the living room. I need to sit. I also need a fifth of tequila, but one thing at a time.

Mom follows right behind, plopping down next to me on the big couch. She combs her fingers through my hair like she used to when I was kid and I was having a hard time telling her my problems. The gesture is soothing, but unfortunately the situation is far more complicated than getting a D in Algebra.

I stare at the floor as the others move into the room. I hear Damien park himself in one of the two easy chairs on either side of the sofa as I watch Noah’s big work boots stride past me to the other one. Drea joins my mother and me on the couch.

The tension is heavy, like rainclouds before a storm. I just want to kick everyone out and hide in my room for a month. I look up and all eyes are on me. Fucking perfect, I get to be lead-off man.

Taking a deep breath, I plunge ahead. “Mom, Drea. Damien and Noah are here because...uh...” I shut my mouth, realizing I don’t know what else to say. To continue would mean that I’d have to reveal that the pair know I’m a werewolf. I also have to be

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careful about revealing their true identities to Mom and Drea. Unless, of course, they give me permission to.

“Go on,” my mother snaps.

“Well...” I begin, not sure what to say. I mean, I trust Mom and Drea, but like I said, I need some sign from the guys that it’s okay to go talking about the werewolf thing. I throw Damien and Noah a questioning look, hoping they pick up on its meaning.

The two study each other for a long moment, then Noah nods slightly.

For an instant, Damien hesitates, then he turns his gaze to me.

“Go ahead, Max,” he says. “Tell them.”

“Tell us what?” Mom asks, suspicion heavy in her voice. “What?” She sits forward giving the two wolves the evil eye. “Just what the hell do you want with Maxie?”

“Relax, Mom. They’re werewolves, too.

“Sweet Mother Mary!”

I’m seized with the urge to laugh at my mother’s outburst, her eyes widening to resemble orchestra cymbals. I must admit, I haven’t seen her this shocked since she found out I was a werewolf. Boy, that was a mother-daughter moment for the record books. There are no magazine articles for a mother who has just found out her daughter has been transformed.

Mom recovers from the news with the speed of a NASCAR champion. Her eyes rake over Damien and Noah as she says, “And so what, that’s why you’re both having sex with her? Because she’s your kind?”

There are times I hate her one-track mind, but I’ll take sex talk over murder. Especially since I’m feeling really raw and exposed right now.

“No!” Damien’s too-quick denial is nearly a shout.

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My bullshit detector is off the charts. That's exactly what those two wanted when they arrived in my neighborhood this morning. Sex with the werewolf...who turned out to be *moi*. And boy did they get it.

"Enough of this. I am fucking tired so let's just get everything out on the table." I glare at Damien. "Just why were you so intrigued with the idea of finding a female werewolf, if not for the sex? Were you going to help me deal with my lycanthropy like some werewolf version of a therapy couch?"

"What are you talking about, Maxie?" Mom asks.

I turn back to her. "Originally, they came looking for a female werewolf they'd heard about. They'll be happy to fill you in on the details, right guys?" I throw the pair a look I hope is menacing.

Damien narrows his eyes, and I resist the childish urge to stick out my tongue. He stretches his long legs out toward the coffee table and settles back in the chair, looking like he's trying to figure out how best to begin.

He starts talking and spins the goods about tracking others of our kind, then works his way to the current situation. "Before the Morris story, I'd only learned about one female werewolf in the eight years I've been investigating. And by the time I'd tracked her down, I was too late and she'd gone missing. Everything else I'd come across relative to animal attacks that signaled possible werewolf involvement pertained to men or boys, only. And of that number, the only werewolves I've actually encountered are my son-of-a-bitch sire and Noah. The rest are dead, missing or are instances of ordinary animal attacks. The Morris case was the first involving a female subject who was still alive and hadn't disappeared into the wind."

"I can understand you being eager to talk to a female of our

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kind, but I'm confused," I jump in. "There has to be more behind your curiosity than just the fact that female werewolves represent the opposite sex. What the hell were your original intentions behind your investigations?"

Damien lets out a deep breath, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "I wanted to look at the big picture, and that means both genders. For as long as I've been a werewolf, I've had this burning desire to know where we come from. Was there a first wolf? Folklore can only tell you so much. And I wanted to know if there were others like me. I felt so alone for so long. The day Noah came to me, was like..." He trails off and looks over at Noah. The emotion passing between them is raw and intense. I almost feel like a voyeur.

"Anyway." Damien's gaze swings back to me. "I've also been trying to track the werewolf sires in addition to the victims. Where are they? Why did they do this? Do they know each other? Is there like a pack or something? So far, I've only uncovered hints of three sires. There's mine, whose name I don't know. Noah's sire is Gary Mercer. And now, yours...Larry...last name?"

"Talbot." I wince as I hear the jokes threatening to roll off Damien's and Noah's tongues. The main character in the old Lon Chaney movie classic, *The Wolf Man*, was Lawrence Talbot. "I know, cliché to the core."

"No. I was just going to say maybe it was an alias. He was your age or there about, right?"

Curiosity grips me as I think about Larry...really think about him. His looks, his manners... Shit, it had been so long since I left him howling on the floor of that garage, his groin a red ruin.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure he was around my age. No older than eighteen. A typical bad-boy teenager. He was never in school with

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me. He was an outsider, a rebel.”

“Hold on. I’d like to take some notes.” Damien climbs out of the chair and leaves the room, returning with a small spiral notebook. “Okay. Go ahead.”

Drea breaks her silence, scooting to sit forward on the couch. “I remember you never went to his house, Maxie. And I thought that was weird. Of course, everything about him was weird. He looked kinda Goth or something.”

I nod. “He was way into the horror scene. Had tats of all these monsters and slashers on his arms. His name really could have been an homage to one of those *Wolfman* flicks.”

“I never liked him.” Mom pipes up. “He was scary and had attitude to spare.”

For the next few minutes, Damien takes copious notes on the fucking little bastard. Then he shifts position in his chair, crossing an ankle over his knee, and takes a deep breath. “Thanks. I’ll add this stuff to my files. Someday, I’m going to put all this together. So, getting back to what we started talking about, I”—his gaze flicks to Noah—“that is *we*, came to town intending to meet with a female werewolf. I wanted to talk about sires. And to maybe...” He fades out, looking very uncomfortable.

And we’re back to sex.

“So you were hoping to have sex with her because you’d never touched a female of your kind before,” Mom says. “It’s understandable.”

Everyone turns to stare at my mother as if she’d just announced she had the cure for cancer in her diary.

“What?” She leans back on the sofa, an oh-so-innocent look on her face. “I can understand needs. Seems to me that you would be more than a little empathetic, Maxie.”

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She has me there.

I scoot back enough to bring my feet up on the couch and wrap my arms around my knees. The movement gives me time to sort out some other questions I want answered. “And you said before that you looked into my attack because you connected Mary Elizabeth and me through the nurse who treated both of us, right?”

“Right. We got to Morris to talk with the nurse that originally treated Mary Elizabeth.”

“You’re talking about Jane Hiller.” My mom cuts him off neatly and turns to me. “George Hiller’s niece. I remember her. And we needed her after we found you in the park near the underground springs.”

The memory came rushing back like a bad burrito. Larry had torn me up, left me for dead, and I lay in that park for hours, waiting to die. Somehow I didn’t. My mom, Mr. Hiller and his niece had found me. I was starting to heal by then, so I looked like I had been in a bad fight...nothing unusual. Or so I thought. Obviously, what Jane had seen, had stuck in her memory.

“Well,” Damien continues. “Jane told me about this young girl that had lots of strange-looking wounds that seemed to be healing right before her eyes, and the similarity of the wounds to those she saw on Mary Elizabeth. After that, she wondered about you guys off and on over the years, but since she didn’t have any current info on either of you, she let it go.”

“What about the club last night?” I ask. “M.E. and I were both there.”

He nods. “We sensed a werewolf presence, but didn’t know which one of you—or both—was the one.”

“So why did you leave with that sexed-up supermodel?”

I know, I sound like a jealous bitch. I can’t help it.

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Damien and Noah both get those knowing, masculine grins and Damien says, “With all the pheromones in the air and having never encountered a female wolf before, I thought it best for us to leave. I didn’t want to risk things getting out of control. I knew we would find you, eventually. Besides, you had your fun, too.”

I hate that he’s right.

Damien shoots me a look. “We came here this morning, but saw the cops and stayed back. I did some listening on the police scanner and chatted up some of your neighbors to try and find out exactly what had happened. We came back after we were sure the cops would be gone.”

“Wait one freaking second,” Mom interjects. “What you haven’t said is that you think poor M.E. was killed because this guy mistakenly thought she was a werewolf.”

“Mom...”

“Shut up, Maxie. I want to know.”

Damien nods.

“Now my daughter’s in danger, isn’t she?” Mom pierces him with a look.

“She is.”

“Can’t we just go to the police?” Drea chimes in.

“And say what?” Damien scoffs. “That we think Mary Elizabeth was slaughtered because someone thought she was a werewolf?”

“No need to be an asshole.” I reach over and pat Drea’s knee, throwing a glare at Damien.

He huffs out a breath. “Sorry.”

He is right, though. There’s no way we can go to the cops with this, which means we have to catch this guy ourselves. My stomach tightens. I’m not a freaking cop or private eye. I solve

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crimes like the rest of America, watching crime shows. *Fuck.*

“Earth to Max.”

I glare at Drea for pinching the back of my arm. I hate that. It’s an annoying little not-quite-there pain like when I’m in wolf form and the flies start biting my ass as I stalk my prey. *Arrgh.*

She shrugs. “You had your ‘I’m cruising the solar system’ look and not paying the least bit of attention to Stud Number One over there.”

My gaze catches Damien, who winks. I can feel the heat blaze over my cheeks. I hate blushing. This night just keeps getting better.

“All right, so...uh...what’d I miss?”

“Well, Shuttle Commander, I was just saying since we obviously can’t go to the cops, and Noah and I have decided to go after this guy, ourselves, we need to interview Mary Elizabeth’s family.”

I shake my head. “You guys won’t get anywhere near her relatives. I’ll talk to them.”

Mom pats a hand over my upraised knees. “Maxie’s the obvious choice. She used to be...ah...close to the poor girl’s brother, Ethan.”

Open floor and let me fall through to another dimension.

“Really?” Damien’s quiet remark carries an undercurrent of steel to it...not quite jealousy, exactly, I don’t think. More like he’s wondering about possible competition. I can feel Noah’s gaze boring into me, too.

For my part, my teeth are on edge, and I can feel my Beast start to surface. I have never felt this intensely about lovers before. A prickly awareness and possessiveness makes me want to stake a claim and yet assert my independence.

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I can sense my mother and Drea start to get wary. I feel their gazes dart nervously around me and the guys. And I can understand that, because the air is ripe with the Change. Three sexually charged werewolves mean that this train is rushing past bad and straight on to catastrophe town. All aboard.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I can feel the other two drawing their energies back as well.

Opening my eyes, I look carefully at Damien and Noah, willing them to have a little understanding. “Ethan and I used to...umm...date...but it was nothing too serious,” I hedge. “We were good together, and then it was over.”

My mom knows I’m lying big time, so does Drea, but it just doesn’t seem like the smart thing to tell my current lovers how I’d been engaged. I don’t need to deal with some alpha wolf, you’re-my-territory-no-one-touches-you thing right now. That shit is going to have to be tabled for some other meeting.

Damien and Noah continue to look at me. I’m sure they can smell that something’s up, but oh fucking well.

I concentrate really hard on the thread unraveling on the inseam of my leggings. I want to look anywhere but directly at the two wolves right now. “So, what kinds of things do you want me to ask Ethan when I see him?”

“You’re not fooling me, Maxie,” Damien snapped.

This thread really needs to be cut. I tug a little harder, fighting to keep my gaze away from Damien. It’s so freaking difficult though. I mean, his alpha-ness, or whatever, is really potent. He’s like Dracula or something. I can feel his power surging, reaching out to me, trying to penetrate my mind. It’s a compelling thing, crawling over my skin like hundreds of centipedes, ticklish but creepy. Part of me wants to give in to him, confess my past. The

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urge to look at him is strong. I squirm a little more, but manage to hold my own and avoid eye contact.

“Damn, Damien. No one’s ever been able to block you like that,” Noah breathes.

My feet slide from the couch to the floor as Damien jerks his attention from me. Fucking finally.

“Stay out of my head you bastard fuck,” I growl, my vision going red at the edges.

CHAPTER 7

“Are you sure you’re going to be all right with those two?” My mom looks at me, concern in the dark hazel depths of her eyes.

We are outside now. She and Drea are about to leave. It was not hard to convince them to go home after the little dominance and aggression display they’d just been treated to. Man, I want to kick Damien’s ass all the way to Milwaukee. I definitely have to set some boundaries, but first I’m getting certain people out of the line of fire.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’m sorry about all of this. I—”

“Don’t be.” Mom curves her hands on my shoulders. “You’ve never encountered other wolves before, and you’re feeling your way. So are they.” She nods her head toward the house.

Feeling our way? It’s almost laughable the way Mom refers to

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the pissing contest back in my living room. I cross my arms over my chest and sigh as I stare at the ground and toe the hard dirt. “It’s a giant ass pain, that’s for sure.”

Drea giggles, and I look over at her standing beside Mom’s little green car.

“What?”

“You and those two sexy wolves in there. What was I saying last night about werewolves being hot?”

I grin.

“You know I deserve details, my friend. Explicit ones.”

“Andrea Maria Mancuso!” Mom whirls to face Drea.

Drea shrugs. “Hey, she left me with Louis. It’s only fair.”

Ouch. I did do that. “He wasn’t that bad, was he?”

She smacks her palm on the roof of the car and throws me a dirty look. “Eight hands, four lips and overactive salivary glands.”

“Ewww. Thank God you didn’t drown. I guess this means my sapphire tennis bracelet’s on its way to your jewelry box.”

“Oh, yeah.” She winks. “You know, back to last night. I have to give my little octopus points for being cool about Tory.”

“I’m glad. She was a handful. I hate to ask, but how is she?”

Drea rolls her eyes. “Back with Derek.”

I shake my head. “Figures.”

I watch the pair start to climb into the car. Waving, I call out, “Good night.”

They wave back, then the car pulls out of the drive. I rub my arms a bit as the car drives out of my view down the street.

Big hands come down on my shoulders, gently massaging.

“Damien says we’ll leave, too. If you want,” Noah whispers.

His breath is hot against my ear, warming me all the way to my toes. I lean back against his rock hard body, reveling in the heat.

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Do I want them to go? On the one hand, yeah, it would be great to be alone and process this wild, weird, horrible day. Then again, I've got two gorgeous men to spoon with, and they are my own kind. No pretend, no holding back.

However, one of them is a colossal asshole at the moment and needs to be put in his place before I allow him to stay. I push away from the big wolf and stride back into the house. Damien is sitting where I'd left him, holding himself very still, like he's waiting for a storm. The glow from the lamp bathes him in golden light, making him look like a statue from some long lost Egyptian pharaoh's tomb.

I narrow my eyes, letting him feel all of my anger. "What was that little Vulcan mind fuck thing you tried to do?"

He turns, leveling a steady gaze at me over his shoulder. "I'm an alpha wolf and being able to focus my will on others has been something I've been able to do since I was eighteen. I'm so used to doing it without others even realizing it, that I just did it with you. It's how I get information that I need, or how I get my way."

"Get your way. What are you, a diva?"

"In my line of work, people aren't always forthcoming with answers, so I need to prod them in the right direction." He pushes to his feet with an almost feline grace and comes to stand in front of me.

I fight the urge to knock his block off. "You didn't need to *prod* me about anything."

Damien moves closer, erasing the small distance between us. "You weren't being honest about Ethan."

"So," I counter. "He's not any of your business."

He bares his teeth in a feral smile, eyes gleaming. "He most certainly is my business, now."

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“Excuse me? We fuck, and you get to claim me like territory?”

A verbal response isn’t necessary, his implacable gaze says it all.

“It doesn’t work like that, you prick.” My temper hangs on a thin thread. I can feel my Beast rising. I inhale deeply, drawing on all my reserves. No one has ever spiked my anger like this.

“Come on, guys, let’s cool it, huh?” Noah’s voice slices through the haze of my fury.

To my surprise, Damien retreats and starts pacing by the windows. “You know, Maxie, I’ve never encountered anyone who’s been able to hold off my power like you have. Even Noah is susceptible to me. I think this means you’re an alpha female.”

“What?”

“You know, alpha. As in the lead female in the pack.”

“I know what it means,” I snap. “It’s just... I thought werewolves were almost always solitary, seldom in packs.

Damien shrugged. “So little is really knows about our kind. But that could be true, of course. So, consider the possibility that packs were common in the past. Maybe evolution changed that. My power and your reaction to it could be a throw back.”

Makes sense to me. Still, the thought of him and me *both* being alphas is scary.

I look up and stare at Damien’s back as he gazes out the window. He pivots and starts toward me.

“I’m sorry, Maxie.” He halts in front of me and skims a finger over my hairline then down my jaw.

He looks so sincere that I really want to believe him. I inhale deeply, his scent clean with a hint of dark musk. No lie there, I would have smelled it. When someone is trying to put one over on me, their regular scent changes...there’s something off, like trying

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to cover up the odor of rotting food with a fruity plug-in.

“Are we all okay now?” Noah places a big hand on both of our shoulders.

“For the moment.” Damien looks at me as if waiting for me to gainsay his answer.

“Don’t try mind-fucking me again and things will be just fine.”

An unspoken agreement hangs between Damien and me. Still, I know we’ll tango again because I’m just that independent and he’s just that arrogant.

I rub a hand over my face and stifle a yawn. My body feels like lead, and all I want is my bed and about thirty hours of hard sleep.

As if sensing my weariness, Damien scoops me into his arms and heads to the stairs. I hear Noah right behind. I know then that I don’t want them to go. I just want to snuggle with them all night.

“Which room is yours?” Damien whispers as we hit the top.

“End of the hall.”

The next thing I’m aware of is the coolness of sheets against my naked skin. Somehow, Damien and Noah have managed to get off my clothes. Shit, I am tired.

The mattress dips on either side, and I am surrounded by firm, hot male flesh. The skin-to-skin contact is soothing, comforting. I drift off, feeling safe and sound.

* * *

I push open the ornate doors of the Red Dragon, the throbbing beat of the music reverberating through my body. I am on the prowl, and the anticipation is turning me on. I smile as several top sirloin men catch my eye. My belly tightens as I imagine them between my thighs. A red-and-purple psychedelic glow tinges the

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edges of my vision as an oh-so-familiar laugh rings out.

Mary Elizabeth is on the dance floor in all her golden, sequined glory, rubbing up against the seventies porn star man who tried to buy her a drink the last night of her life. I watch in horror as he morphs into Larry. I gasp as my sire licks and fondles her, claiming her.

“Tasty, isn’t she, Max?” Satisfaction pours off him in waves.

I try to lunge at him, but I’m frozen in place. I can’t get my throat to work, my words trapped like fish in a net.

His teeth elongate and break the skin on her neck just below the ear.

“Too late. She’s one of us, now.” He swipes his tongue through the rivulet of blood as I howl my rage.

Someone in black shoves past me, a big knife gleaming dully in his right hand.

I snarl, my Beast raging through me as I watch this shadowed figure grab Mary Elizabeth from Larry. Then I shift and spring, my claws ripping and tearing into this evil man. I pull back, his head in my hands. Only it isn’t his head, it’s M.E.’s, her eyes glaring at me, bloody lips moving...

* * *

I jerk awake, my heart pounding.

“Maxie, go bacasleep...” Damien mumbles in my ear, his breath tickling along my neck.

Every muscle in my body stiffens. Suddenly, there are too many bodies in this bed. I climb out as quickly and carefully as possible, moving soundlessly to the door. I snatch my robe off the hook and slip it on, padding toward the other bedroom. The

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coolness of the house invades my senses, soothing me and washing away the remnants of the nightmare.

I glance at the lonely-looking twin bed and opt for the huge easy chair by the window. I curl up on the overstuffed cushions and lean my head back, taking in slow, easy breaths. I hate having weird-ass dreams that yank me out of sleep. They always leave me with an edgy, sick feeling.

I stare out at the trees, my mind flipping through all the events that have happened over the last twenty-four hours that have sent my life from cruise control to cluster fuck. Priority one is to find and stop Mary Elizabeth's killer before I end up impersonating the Headless Horseman. I can't even begin to figure out how to do that with all the cops running around the neighborhood.

Then there're Damien and Noah. What a shit sundae my associating with them could turn out to be. I am happy to finally be with others like me, but this crazy closeness growing among us is way scary. I don't want anyone knowing me that well. What if Damien is able to read my mind eventually? What happens if we're able to speak to each other psychically? That would freak me out.

And finally, Damien's whole alpha wolf schtick. Hells to the no if he thinks he can be in charge of me, rule my life. At least Noah seems more...amenable.

Sighing, I rub my eyes, then scrub a hand through my hair, my fingers pulling at the sleep tangles. I really need to go back to bed. It's pointless to think about all this tonight when there isn't a blessed thing I can do about it.

The familiar sense of knowing hits me as I push up from the chair. Damien comes through the doorway, shirtless and sleepy-sexy. My entire body tightens with lust, all my senses on high.

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Damn it.

“What’s a matter?” His voice is rough, deep.

“Needed to think.” I plant my ass back in the chair, folding my legs Indian style, stuffing the fabric of my robe down around me to keep the Southland covered. Damien may have already seen that part of me, but it’s still tacky to flash the goods when you’re trying to have a conversation.

He glides toward me, all supple motion. My insides start to melt. All thoughts of Damien’s asshole attitude dissolve like sandcastles under a wave. My gaze drifts down his sculpted perfection, and I wipe my chin, checking for drool. This guy is one potent son of a bitch. I’m going to have to keep my hormones under lock and key, or I’ll never be able to behave normally with him.

I blink rapidly and force myself to think about the Blackhawks. Hockey stats help me focus. Mom says I’m just like a man in that regard. Baseball box scores also do the trick. When these don’t work, there’s always the Periodic Table of Elements. A girl needs to have a fallback when she’s got a raging beast inside.

Damien drops to his knees in front of me with a graceful move that would make a ballet dancer green with envy. “Is there anything I can do?”

He’s so close, my fingers are digging into the fabric of the chair to keep from jumping him. My Beast is raring to go.

I squeeze my eyes shut and go right to the science. Hydrogen...helium...lithium... Slowly, I open my lids. Yep, he’s still close to me, but chemistry has ridden to the rescue. I can look at him without turning into a puddle of goo.

“Tell me something.” I scrape a fingernail along the arm of the chair, wondering if I should ask my question or not. It seems so

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stupid.

“Sure.” He flashes a sexy smile and leans closer.

“Is being this...um...studly, part of the whole alpha werewolf thing?” I sneak a quick peek, hoping I haven’t lost cool points.

Damien’s hands cover mine, and he looks like he’s gathering his thoughts, trying to figure out the best way to explain. “Yes and no.”

“What the hell kind of answer is that?” My embarrassment flees in the presence of my confusion and frustration. I refrain from booting him in the gut.

“Well, your looks don’t change as result of becoming a werewolf.” His response is a bit slow, patient, as if he were a teacher explaining the alphabet to kindergartners.

“Well, duh. Otherwise I’d have longer legs, cheekbones and a smaller ass.”

He chuckles, squeezing my fingers. “What I’m trying to say is that whatever one starts with, it gets enhanced.”

That makes sense. “So, even before you became a werewolf, you were sex on a stick.”

A sharp, painful expression comes into his eyes at my off-hand remark, and he looks away.

Way to go, Maxie. Open mouth...here comes the Big Foot Express.

I touch my hand to his cheek and force his gaze back to me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I get these severe, uncontrollable attacks of foot-in-mouthitis and I—”

Damien cuts me off with a palm over my mouth. Probably didn’t like my lame attempt at humor.

“It’s not you. It’s... Well, shit.” He sits back on his heels, fists clenching and releasing, staring at the floor like he doesn’t know

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how to begin to explain. He exhales sharply several times, then looks me dead on. “I don’t remember too much about what it’s like not to have been a werewolf.”

At first I just stare, trying to figure out what he’s telling me. Then my mouth opens in shock. “That would mean that you...that you were a kid when... Oh, my God.”

He looks so isolated, alone. I can feel the sadness emanating from him, and I instinctively try to touch him. He jerks back, holding out a hand as if to ward off any potential comfort I try to give.

“No.” His voice is rough with despair. “Don’t. Just give me a minute.”

I hate to see such pain, so I ignore his defenses and reach out, drawing his big body to me. A wounded, sob-like sound escapes as he buries his face against my neck, his breath hot and rapid. There are no tears that I can tell, but fine tremors wrack his muscles as his arms tighten around me. I rub his back in slow circles, trying to soothe him.

My own injuries are seared in my brain, a never-ending nightmare. My conversion was savage and brutal for me at fifteen. I can’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like for a child.

“How old?” I whisper into his hair.

“Seven,” he chokes out against my shoulder.

Holy Mother of God.

My heart aches for him, and suddenly all my complaints don’t matter. I hold tight, muttering nonsensical words and syllables.

“Tell me,” I whisper against his ear. “Let it out.”

He squeezes tighter, burrowing into me, like he wants to crawl inside, but can’t figure out how. I press light kisses to his temple,

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the soft strands teasing my nose and lips. I want more than anything to reach back in time and save that little boy.

“My dad and I were on a fishing trip and...” He sucks in a huge, gasping breath like a drowning man fighting for air. *“Fuck! This is so hard. I can’t...”*

I remain silent, letting my hands speak for me with small touches. My eyes burn, and I will back the tears. Now is not the time for me to cry. I know what’s coming next, and I don’t want to hear, but I can’t—and won’t—back away from it.

“It was nighttime, and we were inside the cabin. We were laughing, playing army by the fireplace. I was destroying his tank with my rocket launcher.”

He grows quiet once more, and I play with the fine hairs at the nape of his neck, waiting for him to continue. All I can do is give Damien the safety and space to speak his darkest horror in his own way, in his own time.

He rubs his face into my neck, and I feel his mouth move as his next words spill out in a near-silent rush.

“There was a terrible howling that just echoed all around. My dad jumped, and I heard the sound again, this time closer. Then the wall by the door shook, the wood shuddering. Dad told me to run and went for the rifle by the fireplace. Something crashed through the window. This big, brown snarling thing grabbed my dad and started tearing and ripping him to pieces. Dad fought and screamed, and there was so much blood everywhere. Something hit me. It was red...and it was wet and... Oh, God!” His whisper is high and thin, the sound of a frightened child.

I wrap my arms tighter around him, feel him gathering himself to go on, to face the rest of the savage memories. An eternity passes in heavy silence, and I am glad the room is mostly dark with

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just a faint glow of lunar blue around us. It's seems wrong to speak of such horrible things in the light.

I can't help but remember my own attack. The way Larry had changed right on top of me, smashing me with his increased weight. How his teeth had ripped into me, crushing my windpipe so I couldn't scream, everything smelling of blood and meat.

"It turned to me." Damien's voice is little more than a rasp, broken with pain. "Its fur was coated with red and other things, and I froze. The next thing I knew, it became a man, a big, blood-covered, naked man. He was laughing, saying, 'Well, well, little boy, this is your lucky night. Daddy was such a filling meal, I don't have room for dessert. Pity. I will take a little bite to go, though.' He lunged at me, and it was so goddamned fast, a blur, really."

My lungs are so constricted that each breath feels as though it's punching its way out of me. The tears I've been holding back threaten to choke me, but I still rein them in. If I cry now, Damien will stop and try to comfort me, and I don't want him to do that.

His body shudders against mine, and I tilt my head closer, touching my cheek to his.

"He picked me up"—the words are barely audible—"and changed back into a monster and bit me. I screamed and screamed until he...it...dropped me to the floor. I remember lying there, whimpering. He stood over me as a man again and said, 'Quiet, boy. I've given you a sweet gift. You'll thank me someday.' Then he was gone and I..." His breath comes in huge, gasping pants as he hugs me closer, nearly crawling into my lap.

I pet and touch him wherever I can reach, tears blurring my vision as I let them fall at last. I am filled with such rage, such hate. I want to claw and bite and kill Damien's sire, taste his blood

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on my tongue. My Beast threatens to surface as my fury mounts.

Damien jerks back, staring at me through his hair, grazing a finger along my face from temple to jaw. His eyes are pale in the weak moonlight and there is raw, naked need in them.

My Wolf calms under that vulnerable look.

The quiet closes in, sealing us in this moment. We move into one another, our lips meeting in gentle, tentative communion. I taste his sorrow and strength, his mouth firm against mine in silent communication.

I brush my hands over the solid contours of his shoulders and back, skin warm to the touch. I stroke up and down, mapping the supple planes of muscle.

He retreats a little, tangling a hand in my hair. "I'm sorry... I never..."

I stroke a finger over his lips. "Shh."

He snags the nape of my neck, drawing me closer for another round of soul-touching kisses.

Oh, my God, I have never been kissed like this before. It's like I'm drowning and on fire all at once. My heart beats like a bass drum, a deep, heavy throbbing that matches the molten waves coursing through me. I melt into Damien, my hands touching him everywhere I can reach, finally spearing them through his hair to keep him right there, lips locked onto mine. Our tongues duel in a long, slow dance, fueling this incredible firestorm that threatens to send me shooting skyward like a roman candle.

There's a tug at my waist as he works my robe loose. His palms tease over my abdomen, the muscles quivering as he glides higher and higher, each tormenting touch bringing him closer. I jerk as his thumbs trace the underside of my breasts, my nipples beading in anticipation.

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“Oh.”

Finally his hands are on my breasts, squeezing, fingers brushing the hard peaks. I arch up into him, my belly scraping along the fine line of hair on his abdomen. The sensation ripples over my nerves, heading straight to my clit.

He pushes his way between my thighs, the soft denim rubbing and sliding against the tender flesh adding to the building pleasure. The heat from his erection pulses through the fabric, and my Beast flares to life in anticipation of mating.

Our mouths meet in a savage dance, feral and primal.

Reality crashes in like an eighteen wheeler through a plate glass window. There is no way I want to destroy my perfectly good guest room, so I know I'm going to have to hold back like I do with my human lovers.

“Mmph... Wait.” My hands gripping either side of his face, I peel his lips from mine.

“What's wrong?” He drags a finger along my hairline.

“The disaster that is my basement. I don't want that to happen up here.”

He gives me a questioning look, then grins as apparent understanding dawns.

“Come on. You saw the wreckage.”

Damien just keeps giving me this look.

“Hello, I have carved up mattresses with my claws and dialed back orgasms to keep from tearing apart guys.” My hands slide from his face to his arms, my fingers squeezing his muscled biceps.

“Ah, but you hadn't had full-on werewolf sex before tonight, had you?”

“No.” I drag the word out to three syllables.

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“Maxie, werewolf sex is that wild only under a few circumstances—the first time, at the full moon, and if you haven’t indulged in a while.”

“You’re not making that up, are you?” I would hate to hurt him if he’s only saying this so we don’t have to move.

He smiles, stroking a thumb over my lips. “Nope.”

“You mean...” Handel’s *Messiah* echoes in my brain as I digest this amazing revelation. “Shit, I still got a lot to learn about being a werewolf, don’t I?”

“Not as much as Noah did.” Damien chuckles as he trails his hands over my abdomen, leaning in close to press soft kisses in the wake of his touch.

The mood has officially lightened, and I couldn’t be happier, even if it is at my expense...sort of. “Nice to...oh!”—his tongue flicks over my nipple—“know that.”

My pussy throbs and burns as he grinds into me tight and slow. It’s like breathing through steam—wet, heavy and so very intense.

“Easy, Max,” he whispers against my throat. “Just ride the wave.”

Before I can respond, his lips close over mine, our mouths melting together.

After wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I hug him close and tight, kneading the firm flesh beneath my fingers.

He continues to kiss me, lazy and deep, gentling the raw, feral lust.

My animal power rises once more, but instead of an urgent gallop, it’s an easy lope, like the Wolf is there, but content with the slower pace. It’s heady, knowing that, at last, I’m with someone who can match me strength for strength. And that I can have sex with him without having the act become overwhelmingly

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destructive.

Reveling in this newfound experience, I savor the slide of his skin against mine, his chest hair teasing the hardened peaks of my nipples. It's arousing, passionate, but there's no animal urgency, no desperate need to control a wild beast. It's fucking awesome.

I spear my fingers through his hair and press him still closer. I want more of this, need more.

We taste, lick and suck, our tongues twining in an erotic dance as we rock into each other, our bodies moving in an ancient rhythm.

His hands drift down my sides to squeeze my hips and hold me against the hardness of his erection. My hands slide past the waistband of his jeans, and he grunts as my fingers find the dimple just above his crack.

He breaks the kiss. "I want to be inside you, but let's get more comfortable over there." He jerks his head toward the twin bed.

I nod, sliding my arms from him as he pushes to his feet. Holding out a hand, he hauls me up.

"Hey!" A huff of surprise escapes as Damien uses the opportunity to yank off my robe.

He flashes an appreciative smile at my nudity, and I squirm a bit under his regard. "I love your body. It's petite with hot curves in all the right places and enough cushion"—I yelp as he reaches around and slaps my ass—"for the pushin'."

A crude cliché to be sure, but coming from Damien, it makes me shivery all over. Sometimes I can be such a girl.

He tugs me over to the bed and shoves me onto the mattress. I am about to say something about his lack of manners when he unzips his jeans. He didn't bother with underwear so his erection springs out thick and hard.

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My thought process grinds to a halt, and it's all I can do to keep my tongue safely in my mouth.

"Like what you see?"

His confident words jump-start my synapses, and I decide two can play at this game. I lean back on my elbow and trail a hand down my stomach to my pussy, tangling my fingers in the curls, stroking slowly over the moist lips. My clit throbs as I draw a nail carefully over it. My muscles quiver like an Indy car at the starting pole.

I smile as he sucks in a breath, eyes glowing with a hint of his Wolf.

Oh, yeah.

I amp up the teasing, pushing two fingers deep inside, sawing back and forth through the wetness.

His nostrils flare. A growl rumbles up from the depths of his chest and in the blink of an eye, he's removed his jeans and is standing over me, condom in hand.

Snagging my wrist, he halts my masturbation.

A sharp gasp escapes as he pushes me farther back on the bed, then crawls between my thighs with liquid grace. He grasps his cock, pumping it in long, slow movements. Pearly fluid glistens on the tip.

My stomach tightens with pangs of lust as I watch him. I feel myself getting wetter, hotter.

He pulls the condom from its foil packet and with quick, sure movements, he covers himself. Flashing a seductive smile, he curves his hands around my thighs, spreading me wider. He hooks my legs over his arms, bringing my sex closer to his. From this angle, there is nothing I can control. This will be a claiming, a mating.

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I whimper as he guides his penis to my nether lips, deliberately circling the wide head over my clit, making it pulse. Sweat beads on my skin as the pressure of my orgasm builds, threatening to explode. I arch my hips, needing him deeper. “Damien... Unnh...now.”

He rocks his hips and thrusts.

My fingers squeeze the quilt as his cock slides thick and hot all the way inside me with languid intensity, thrusting home until it bumps my cervix. Then he withdraws, only to plunge back, hard, his balls bouncing against my ass.

The air is redolent with lust, sweat and the feral tang of animal as we writhe in animalistic bliss.

Leaning forward, he clamps his teeth on a nipple, drawing blood, marking me. The pleasure pain sears my nerves. Incoherent cries and snarls puncture the night as he rams into me.

I thrash my head against the pillows. My Beast rises, but it's not trying to escape. Instead, it heightens everything I'm feeling. My nerves have multiplied, and each sensation is magnified by a thousand.

I howl, shutting my eyes as an orgasm roars through me, smashing every atom. I disintegrate, my entire being scattered across the stars.

Damien howls and shudders with the force of a shockwave

I don't know how long we lie there, our bodies rebuilding, but eventually, I sense Noah's presence. I look over at the door as he walks in, huge and naked and limned with the whitish-blue glow of moonlight.

“Did you save any for me?”

My hormones reawaken, and I look at Damien. His cock twitches, as eager as I am for another go.

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We smile and wave Noah over.

CHAPTER 8

My ears prick as Fred blathers nervously with his report. It's all I can do to keep from lunging at his throat. Usually he's so smug. Maybe he's sick, but I could care less.

My gaze drifts to the clock above the dry erase board, and I bite back a groan. This meeting started thirty minutes ago, and I've aged a hundred years. Monday mornings are on their own temporal plane, moving at a much slower pace than the rest of the week.

I glance at the agenda and nearly prostrate myself in grief. Fred's presentation is bad enough, but the next report is coming from Jenna, the head of marketing. If that woman has two thoughts at the same time, they scare each other and run away. Stapling my fingers is a lot more appealing.

I am so drained from talking to cops and dodging news people.

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The reporters were every-fucking-where yesterday, buzzing around, then attacking like dive-bombing mosquitoes. To think I actually used to like watching a couple of those people on television. Like turns to hate real quick when they beat on your door and try to stick a camera up your nose, all the while asking a hundred rapid-fire questions.

Damien and Noah kept a lot of them away, especially Noah. With his size and fierce looks, he was like a guardian grizzly. I got pure enjoyment out of the way the camera crews scurried back whenever he answered the door. Can't keep out the cops, though. I had to rehash my story for a detective, but at least he kept the questions to a minimum and had no equipment.

What I should have done is called in sick today, but Haley isn't the most understanding of bosses, and I didn't need a lecture from her about missing the weekly meeting. *"The course of the week is set. If you miss it, then it throws the whole office into disarray..."*

"Maxie."

I look up to see Boss Lady staring at me over her glasses.

Oh, crap.

I sneak a peek at the window, hoping for a giant meteorite, but there's nothing, damn it.

"I uh, didn't catch that last part."

She sighs. "Fred was asking if you had heard back from Baked Delights about how much high fructose corn syrup they'll need."

"Yeah, uh..." I flip through the papers in front of me. "One hundred barrels."

Fred's shaking hand scribbles my answer, sweat gleaming on his pallid forehead.

What the hell is wrong with him today? It's like he's scared or something.

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“Okay, I have the outline for the new coupon program...” My ears start to bleed as Jenna takes over, bleating and cooing through her shit.

The next hour drags along like traffic after a Springsteen concert, and I manage to survive. I slink toward the door, hoping to flee before Haley, Fred, or anyone else can trap me. My left foot hits the hall when...

“Maxie, do you have a minute?” Fred’s whiny voice assaults my senses.

Son of a bitch.

I turn, pasting on my brightest smile and watch as he works his portly body toward me, neatly dodging the rest of the inmates.

“Haley asked me to talk with you about this new cost reduction proposal for the bakeries. She said you had the figures from the production heads.”

I inhale the scent of sweat and sick fear pouring out of him. What the fuck? My Beast is interested, and I force myself to dial back the urge to play with him like prey. I concentrate hard on my next words.

“I do. I haven’t finished the spreadsheet, though.”

“I see.”

In complete control of my Wolf, I really look at Fred and take in the dark circles and gray pallor of his skin. Something is definitely going on with him. I am so going to hate myself for doing this, but never let it be said I cannot be a nice person.

“Hey, uh Fred. Are you okay?”

His face gets waxy, and he looks like he’s gonna blow industrial chunkage all over the floor.

I instinctively take a step back

“I’m fine. Just a little nauseous.” He drags a finger along the

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inside of his sweaty collar.

Jesus, the man is terrified.

“All right. Well, I have some mints in my purse.”

I pray silently to the Universe that he won't want them. I've done my good deed, and I need to get away from him because I'm starting to see him as food.

“No mints, thanks. Just get me the spreadsheet as soon as you can.” He turns and heads down the hallway with slow, precise steps like a buzzed driver at a field sobriety test. Weird, but I have my own problems.

I hit the sanctuary of my little cubicle and pull up the spreadsheet. If I finish the update quickly, maybe I can leave early.

The minutes fly by as I lose myself in the calm of my hands on the keyboard, punching in all the necessary data. I click the Save option just as my phone rings.

“Purchasing.”

A deep sigh sounds on the other end of the line. “Maxie?”

All my electrons slow at the sound of Ethan Barrett's voice. I have been scared shitless to have this conversation since I stood on Mary Elizabeth's porch Saturday morning.

“Ethan, are you...” What the fuck do I say?

“As well as can be, I guess. I'm kind of numb, then not. It doesn't seem real. We haven't been able to go inside her house or even see her body.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that it's best if he doesn't ever see her body, but I swallow the urge like nasty cough medicine.

“Is there anything you guys need?” I want to go over there, be a good friend. I also want to run far away and never have to deal with these grieving, sad people. I could be responsible for Mary

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Elizabeth's death, and that possibility has been looming over me like darkness on the horizon. I've tried not to think about it, and Damien and Noah have been great at the diversionary tactics, but going to the Barrett house would force me to face it. Still, I can't avoid the Barrett family forever.

"Just... Can you please come tonight? You and M.E. were friends, and I know since we broke up you haven't been coming around, but Mom and Dad would really like to see you. And it's..." He breaks off with a watery chuckle. "It's a freaking mess around here. I don't know what to do."

"It's okay. I'll be there. What time?"

"Any time is fine." His words sough, a breath of sorrow. Jesus, how can I look these people in the eye?

The strained conversation mercifully ends after I tell Ethan to expect me around eight. I need to get my ass in gear so I can catch the one-thirty train. I'm going to require some time to prepare myself to go over there.

* * *

There are no news vans or shockingly, cops, as I turn onto my street and pull in my driveway. I notice that Damien's car is absent as well. His choice of vehicle surprised me when I first saw it yesterday. I expected such an alpha male to drive a big pick-up, and he laughingly told me that his career choice forces him to drive the nondescript sedan. For surveillance, it blends better than any truck or SUV.

I start up the front steps just as Noah opens the door. Part of me is shocked that I've let him and Damien have the run of my house. I don't know them, well...at least, in one sense. In another way, I

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do. After all, they are my own kind, and that makes them my family after a fashion.

The concern and warmth in Noah's eyes hit me, and the urge to burrow myself into his giant body is overwhelming. I brush past him and shrug out of my coat. Like a well-trained butler, he takes it from me and hangs it on the hook. I drift into the living room, and he follows.

"You shouldn't have gone in today," he gently admonishes.

My eyes burn and I stand frozen, helpless against the sudden force of grief. There is no way I am going to be able to keep it together tonight.

Noah slides an arm around my waist and pulls me to him. I wrap my arms around him and hold tight, my face pressed into his chest. This is so exactly what I need. I can hear the steady thump of his heart, his cool scent enveloping me. His big hands move in slow circles over my back, the touch soothing.

I absorb his comfort like drought-stricken grass soaks up rain. He drops a soft kiss into my hair, then swings me up into his arms. I bury my nose into his neck, breathing him in as he carries me deeper into the room. He sits on the couch, me in his lap.

Smoothing his cheek across the top of my head, he makes soothing sounds. One big hand cups my knee, squeezing tenderly.

"What's wrong, little one?" Noah breathes against my temple.

I can't answer him right away because of the rocks lodged in my esophagus. He and Damien will want to go with me tonight, and I can't let them. But God, do I want them there.

"Ethan Barrett called, and the family wants to see me tonight."

He drops a kiss on my forehead. "Do you want us with you?" His voice makes my skin all goose bumps.

I shake my head. "You can't come. It wouldn't be fair to

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them.”

He tangles his fingers underneath my hair and starts to massage the base of my skull. “Is this why you came home early?”

“Yeah. I needed...” I can’t finish as my eyes start to tear up once more. Suddenly I am furious at my behavior. In two short days I have become a weakling, and I don’t like it. Shoving myself away from Noah, I surge to my feet and stare down at my lover. I hate seeing his blue eyes fill with sympathy.

“Stop looking at me like that!” I snarl and kick the coffee table out of my way, cracking the leg. So much for that piece of furniture.

Everything is closing in on me, and I need space. Desperately, I want to Change and go for a run, but it’s too light.

“I’m supposed to handle this myself. You shouldn’t even matter. You’ve been here what, two days? Shit! You were supposed to be out of here after the sex was over. Don’t you get that? I didn’t want to hear Damien’s story. I don’t need you, either of you!”

I storm up the stairs and slam my door, not caring when I hear the crack of wood. My chest heaves as if I’d just run a hundred-meter hurdle, everything inside me screaming to get out. I throw myself on my bed, my nails digging into the mattress. I love the feel of them shredding through the material, and I break my cardinal rule. I use my claws to slash and destroy, the damage feeding my savage need.

My teeth elongate, and the Change ripples through me.

“Maxie! No! You stop this.” Noah’s big hands seize my wrists, and he yanks me to him, my back colliding with his chest as my Wolf breaks free.

I howl and scream, my clothes ripping, jewelry popping. Black

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fur coats my expanding musculature, my growls deepen. The bed creaks under my growing mass.

“Come back, Maxie.”

I snarl, teeth snapping as I try to pull away.

Noah is very powerful, though, and his strength subdues my Beast, his calming energy flowing over me until I return to human form. I hang limp in his arms.

“It’s all my fault she’s dead, Noah. Oh, God, she’s dead, and it’s my fault.” I sob, my head falling forward, all the rage burned away. Only a yawning chasm of pain and guilt remains, threatening to swallow me whole.

“No, little one, it’s not. The blame lies with her killer.” He maneuvers so that we lie spoon fashion on the ruined bed and carefully removes the remnants of my clothes.

Cuddling my now-naked body to him, he pushes my hair out of the way and presses soft kisses to the nape of my neck. The effect soothes me until my eyelids flutter.

I huddle in Noah’s embrace, semiconscious, listening. To his breath, his heartbeat. He continues kissing me, his lips pressing lightly in my hair, around my ear, his big hand rubbing slow circles over my abdomen. My pulse slows to match his, our breathing nearly synchronous.

“Better?” The gentle whisper of his question sends teasing ripples down my neck.

I nod my head, my cheek scraping against the warm, firm bulge of his upper arm just brushing the edge of his tee-shirt sleeve. If only I could stay right here, wrapped in Noah’s strength, and forget about the world for, oh, say fifty years. Speaking of strength...

I roll, forcing Noah onto his back and straddle him. Suddenly I want all that power inside me, filling me, driving away this grief

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and sadness.

Shoving my hands into his hair, I smother his mouth with mine. Savage passion breaks over me like a rogue wave, and I can't get enough of him. This urgent need to mate rides me hard, blazing through me, an all-consuming inferno.

His big, work-roughened hands squeeze my ass, the sensation making my pulse climb.

Muffled moans and gasps break the silence as we devour each other with tongues and teeth. I writhe on his still-clothed, hard body, frantic. Needing to be skin to skin, I rip his shirt, nuzzling my face into his chest, the crinkly whorls of hair teasing my nostrils and lips.

"Maxie," he pants, red-faced. "I..."

"Shh."

Licking a trail down the muscled ridge of his abs, I trace each indentation, reveling in the raw flavor of flesh and sweat. I dip my tongue into his navel. Nipping the tender area around it, I smile as he sucks in his stomach, growls of pleasure tearing from somewhere deep inside him.

I kiss my way to the waist of his jeans. His erection tents the sturdy fabric, pulsing against my chin like a second heart beat. Easing down the zipper, my lungs stutter.

Noah is not wearing underwear.

Sliding the denim away from the prize, I can't help but lean in for a taste. Starting at the base, I lick the underside of his thick shaft from base to tip, pulling back a little on the foreskin to dart inside and savor the pre cum beading on the wide red cap.

He fists a hand in my hair, holding my head right there, and I suck the crown inside my mouth, fluttering my tongue against him. His grip tightens, and I work it harder.

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Snapping his teeth, Noah uses his grip to pull me off. “Jesus, Maxie.”

Sitting up, my legs on either side of his knees, I stare down at him. “What’s wrong? Didn’t you like it?”

“Hell, yeah.” He gives a wheezing chuckle. “It’s just...”

“What?”

Suddenly, what he’s trying to tell me, dawns on me. “Damien isn’t here.” I narrow my eyes.

A flush creeps up his cheeks, and he looks away.

“Why does he always have to be first?” Really, I am not liking this whole alpha thing. I don’t like anyone feeling less than around me, especially a lover.

“It’s...” Noah starts, looking as though he needs to gather himself. “It’s been this way ever since I hooked up with Damien. He took me in, explained how things were, helped me control my Beast. He was also my...” He breaks off and scrubs a hand over his face.

“Your first werewolf sex, huh?”

He nods, still not looking at me. “It feels natural to let him be...I don’t know, in charge. I mean, yeah, there are times I’d like to be first, like the other night, but... God this is so fucked up.” He shakes his head.

“It’s okay, what’s happening between us.”

“No!” he growls, cutting me off. “This isn’t okay. You have to understand, I grew up with all girls. I have always had to be super conscious of my size, my strength. Becoming a werewolf made that so much harder. When I was first turned, I used to run deep into the woods to try and escape the hungers. And my first couple full moons were...” He sucks in a shaky breath, his eyes twin pools of anguish.

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“I know,” I whisper, trailing a palm down the ridge of his abdomen. My insides twist as I remember the isolation and terror of realizing I was no longer human.

“I was so afraid to touch, to even be touched, scared I would hurt or kill someone. I cut myself off from family, friends, everyone.” Noah covers his face with his forearm.

I scoot up his big body and move his arm to press my cheek to his, smoothing a hand in the soft hairs along his temple. He hugs my body tight to him, belly to belly, breast to chest, and I wonder if he’s drawing comfort from our combined touching.

“Until I found Damien, there was no contact, no sex, nothing,” he continues, his voice a soft rasp. “He’s been showing me how to control myself as a werewolf. For these last two years, the sex has been either the two of us with one woman or just the two of us. I’ve gotten used to this way and now...” He fades out, like he’s unsure what to say.

“Look, Noah.” I raise to my forearms, looking deep into those magic blue eyes of his. “I can understand why you feel like Damien has to be first all the time. He’s really powerful, taught you a lot, saved you, even. But there comes a time when you have to relax and let it all go. Just be. I’m not human, I’m a werewolf. You’re not going to hurt me.”

“I know, but it’s, well... I think Damien wants you.”

“Well, duh.” Tired of the talk now, I attempt to maneuver back down to his erection, which has faded some, but he grabs my upper arms and forces me to stay in place. “What?” I whine.

“I mean *wants* you, as in mate. You know, wife.”

It takes a second or two for Noah’s words to register and then the all-clear hits like an oncoming car out of the fog.

“Excuse me? Did you just say the W word?”

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He nods, blue eyes solemn.

Shrugging out of his grip, I scoot off him and climb out of the wreckage to start pacing. If what Noah is saying is true, this is not good. I haven't even gotten used to the fact that these two pushed their way into my home and haven't left. I haven't lived with anyone since college. Now I have two giant roommates. It's effing crazy.

I stop and refocus on Noah, still sprawled with his dick hanging out, now at half-mast. A rush washes through me, reminding me of what we were about to do before all the heavy talk. "Okay, so even if you're right, it's not just about what Damien wants or thinks. We're all three of us in this together...whatever 'this' is."

I crawl back over Noah, planting a knee on either side of his hips and lean over him, my breasts inches from his mouth. "I am empty and sad and have to go talk with my murdered friend's family in a little while. But right now? I need this." I fist his cock and start to pump it as I lean in and capture his lips, sweeping my tongue inside to duel with his.

Our passion re-ignites quicker than a lit cigarette on gasoline.

Noah snarls into my mouth as I skim a thumb over the head of his engorged penis, swirling the moisture leaking out, teasing the foreskin.

I break the kiss and settle back on Noah's thighs, my hand still working his erection. "You need to get out of these jeans." Grasping the denim with both hands, I start to ease it over his hips. "Lift up," I command.

I smile as Noah raises his backside enough for me to pull down the sturdy trousers. I slip the fabric over his feet and toss it somewhere. Moisture pools inside me as I rake my gaze over his well-muscled form, naked but for the remnants of his tee-shirt and

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his white socks, his erection wet and arrowing toward his stomach.

The power of Noah's regard forces my attention back to his face. The look in his eyes sends all thoughts of Damien and the Barrett family scattering to the four winds. I want him, and he wants me.

He reaches for my arms and draws me up and over him.

I yelp as he brings me down, pressed breast to chest, belly to belly, his cock riding up between my cheeks. With a little rocking motion, Noah drags his erection along the crease of my ass, the base bouncing gently along my vaginal lips.

My temperature rockets toward boiling, little sparks teasing over my nerves and straight to my clit, which is pulsing like a tribal drum.

His mouth captures mine and it's the Fourth of July in January as he devours me. The kiss is all lips, teeth, and tongue as our hunger builds. With a growl, he surges up and breaks away from my mouth to lick and suck at my neck, my collarbone...all the way to the valley between my breasts.

My hands shove into the black silk of his hair as he cups one breast, his mouth latching on to the nipple. I gasp and arch into him as he laves and sucks the little peak, twirling his tongue around and around the areola.

I reach between my legs to drag his cock along my slit, through the wetness to my slick entrance. Slipping the head just inside, I move it around just enough to tease the hot button. I can feel the little eye and the edge of the foreskin teasing and tightening everything down there. Round and round, I stroke, bringing myself to the knife edge of orgasm.

"Enough!" Noah snarls, pulling my hand away.

Tossing me to the side, he shoots to his feet. "Where are the

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fucking condoms?”

“Nightstand,” I gasp. All my nerves are screaming for release.

“Fuck,” he groans as he rips out the little drawer, its contents spilling out on the floor.

I stifle a giggle as the big guy squats awkwardly to snag a foil packet.

“Think that’s funny?” He turns to face me, slowly fucking his hand.

I nearly come at the sight of that thick cock sliding through his fist.

He rips open the packaging with his teeth, clenched the condom between his lips, and uses his free hand to extract the condom and spits the wrapper to the floor.

I am struck stupid as he rolls the rubber down his thick length.

Before I can utter a sound, he grabs an ankle and hauls me to the edge of the bed. I think he’s going to kneel and have me slide onto him, but he has other ideas.

He scoops me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

“Where are we—” He cuts me off with a finger to my lips and carries me to my dresser, where he sets me on the short edge perpendicular to the drawers, next to my big, full-length wall mirror. The cool wood briefly chills my heated skin as a rush of sensation washes through me.

I catch sight of my lower body and his entire length in the reflection.

“I’ll fix the dresser,” he rasps as he wrenches apart my thighs and fits himself to me. Sliding his hands to my knees, he holds my legs wide and shoves inside.

Incoherent sounds choke out my throat as he rams himself deep, every thick inch scraping all the right places.

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“God, you feel so tight,” he grinds out through clenched teeth.

The dresser shudders as he rocks into me.

My gaze slides to the mirror, and I watch the motion of his hips as he grinds his pelvis against me. The movement is sexy, powerful, the way his thighs clench, how his right cheek bunches and pushes with each thrust.

Slow and deep he fucks me, face grimacing with the effort, hands squeezing my knees roughly as he maintains his intense pace.

I lie back and enjoy the ride, my nails elongating and digging into the dresser top as my breasts jounce with the force of his body driving into me. The wood chafes my ass.

“Fuck... Max...” he wheezes.

The top of my head feels like it’s about to explode as waves of bliss pour over me like a tropical waterfall. Need floods me as pressure builds in my core.

Desperate to meet his movements with my own, I raise onto my elbows and pop my hips in a circular motion to draw him farther inside.

He bends toward me for better leverage. Our bellies slap together as our rhythm turns frantic. In out, in out, out of control, ferocious.

His thrusts are short, hard, ramming me with an urgency that drives me closer and closer to the edge of oblivion.

I throw back my head and howl, nails shredding the dresser top beneath me as I fly apart like atoms in a particle accelerator. A deep roar follows as Noah collapses on top of me, his body shuddering as though he were receiving electro-shock therapy.

We sense Damien an instant before he appears in the room.

Shit. Sometimes I think I must have been the most successful

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cross maker in Jerusalem in a previous lifetime.

CHAPTER 9

Damien snarls and heaves Noah onto the ruined bed. To my surprise, the big wolf pops right up, ready to battle Damien.

I'm not in the mood for these two to fight. I snarl, "Hey! I don't want to see a pissing contest right now. Save it and take it into the woods tonight."

They both turn to me, their Beasts falling away.

Noah comes over and lifts me from the dresser so I won't get splinters in my ass from the claw marks.

Seeing the look in Damien's eyes, I move between him and Noah, my gaze locked on the alpha wolf. We stare each other down like two gunslingers. If Damien's an alpha male, then sure as hell, I am an alpha female. And I'm not taking his bullshit. I dare him silently to say one fucking thing about what just happened

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between me and Noah. I can feel the anger, the hurt and the jealousy roll off him like steam from the hot springs at Yellowstone.

“Dam, I—” Noah begins.

“Shut the fuck up,” Damien growls, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Quit being an asshole,” I snap.

“Well isn’t this just cute, the bitch and her puppy.”

Wrong thing to say.

I catch Damien with a right hook on the jaw. He flies back and lands on his ass, hard. Rocky Balboa would be proud.

Instantly, he shoots to his feet. Noah is beside me before Damien can get near.

“Stay back, Noah. I’m not going to do anything to her.” He glares at the two of us before stalking out of the room.

The tension deflates quicker than a leaky balloon, leaving a distinctly uncomfortable pall over the room.

Noah opens his mouth.

“Don’t you fucking say you’re sorry. I don’t want to hear it. What we did was good and right and just what we needed. If he can’t see that, then fuck him. I don’t need male ego raining all over my sex life and my feelings.”

“I was going to say, nice right you have there.”

I flash Noah a big smile. “Really? Aren’t you afraid the almighty bad ass is going to be supremely pissed off and make your life miserable?”

He gives me a sheepish look as he reaches for his jeans and yanks them on. “Damien will let me have it later, but what you and I did felt too good. You’re right about making this work among all of us.”

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“I told you, I’m not putting up with monster ego crap. I want all of us to feel free to be with each other, whenever. What if you two want to be together? Threesome means three equal parts in no particular order.”

With a quick grin at me, he finishes dressing and heads downstairs to face our third. I am not quite ready to do that and decide to hop in the shower first. Time for some thinking.

Fifteen minutes later, as I dry off, I sense one of them coming upstairs. Wrapping the towel around me, I walk out and see Damien standing in my bedroom doorway, arms folded across his chest and a shoulder propped against one side of the frame.

Great, more jealous asshole talk. I should play professional baseball. I’m batting a thousand today.

“Noah tells me you’re going to see Mary Elizabeth’s family tonight.”

Talk about a complete direction change. “What?”

“I said—”

“I heard you.” I brush past him and aim for my closet.

“I’m going with you.”

I stop, hand on the door knob, shaking my head. “No. Absolutely not.”

“It’s important for me to talk to the family.”

“Not now it isn’t. This is about me visiting M.E.’s family. You’ll just have to check it for tonight, Magnum.”

I pull open the door, flip on the light and start rifling through hangers. What does one wear to pay condolences?

“Do you intend to be a bitch all night?”

The edge in Damien’s voice makes me smile.

“My house, my ’tude,” I call out, examining a gray jersey dress. Nah. I put it back and move on.

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I look over a few more outfits, don't like a single one, and decide to go casual with black twill pants and a dark green sweater. They'll go nice with... I scan the floor under the racks and spy a pair of knee-high black leather boots in the far corner. I love my lupine vision. If I were straight human, I'd be on all fours, crawling around the closet and cursing.

"Maxie, this is the perfect opportunity for me to talk with them." He leans into the small room, arms on either side of the door frame. "The police won't be there and you can tell them—"

"Tell them what?" I snap.

"That I'm helping to find her killer."

I stand there and gape at him for a second or three before I can find my voice. "You've got a pair on you like Godzilla." I push at him with the pile of clothes in my arms, forcing him out of the closet. "There is no way—noo-ho waa-hay—I'm taking you over there. End of story. Finito."

I throw the clothes on my bed and stalk over to my dresser in search of underwear. I swear I can hear Damien grinding his teeth. He's probably trying to think of another way to convince me to take him along. But I'm interested in another subject altogether.

"So, what did you do with Noah?" I open my top middle drawer and start digging for panties. "Put him in a corner?"

He growls. "No. He's downstairs."

"In one piece?"

"Yes," he snarls. "I haven't laid fang or claw on him. Yet."

"I admire your restraint." Under my towel, I slide on a pair of green, silky, boy-cut briefs.

"Noah's a big boy. He can handle anything thrown his way."

"My point is, he—"

"Drop it." Damien's voice takes on a deep bass edge.

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I roll my eyes. Men.

After yanking open the top right dresser handle, I rummage through a mountain of underwire, front-hook, sport and strapless bras. I have a lingerie thing. The number of undergarments I own could probably upholster a small African country. Only when I can see the bottom of the drawer do I actually find a bra matching my panties.

Slipping the straps over my arms, I let the towel fall.

Damien sucks in a breath.

I smile and turn, getting a certain perverse pleasure as I watch his eyes dip south. For extra effect, I jiggle the girls a bit, making sure they're in place.

Beads of sweat form on his forehead.

Having breasts is like having a superpower that makes men stupid on command. Doesn't matter if they're real or not, either. I've seen plenty of guys get slack-jawed over a nice fake rack on some drag queen. It's all about the boobs or the illusion of boobs. Kryptonite, schmyptonite... Lois melted the Man of Steel with the girls.

I tug on my sweater and peek over at Damien to see that intelligence has now returned to the head with the gray matter in it.

"About tonight," he begins.

"Are we back to that again?" I button and zip my pants.

"Look, I haven't been able to get jack from the woods or the house. There are too many cops and their canines roving around out there, and your neighbors are tied up with the detectives. Not to mention morbid curiosity seekers all over the place. If we're going to find out who did this before he can do anything to you, then we have to start getting some leads."

I pull on my boots and mull over his words. Maybe there is

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something that he can learn from M.E.'s family. On second thought, no. It would be better if I talk with them first, feel them out. Still, I'd rather not go alone. Then it hits me. I'll ask Mom to come with me.

"So, Maxie, did I make my case?"

Noah walks in as I open my mouth to respond. His expression screams trouble.

"What is it?" Damien asks the question before I can.

"There's a Detective Ostrander here to talk with you, Max."

Oh, goody.

* * *

I descend the stairs, my stomach bouncing around like a super ball. I so don't want to go over my story again. Once was enough. But like on TV, the cops tag-team you, hoping that maybe by the one-hundredth time you've given your answers, something you say will change. The guys are right behind me, of course, even though I specifically asked them to stay out of it. Walking into the living room, I see the detective looking around slowly, as if there are clues to the murder embedded in my IKEA decor.

Ostrander is as Dutch as his name. I peg him to be in his mid-thirties, tall, with thick blond hair and high cheekbones. There's an oddly familiar air about him, too, and I realize that he could pass for my one-night-rump-roast, Jack. Physical resemblance between the two is all there is, though. The detective is pure cop with that empty, expressionless look meant to make both witness and suspect squirm.

"Ms. Briscoe." A spark of what might be considered warmth flashes briefly in his sea-tinted eyes.

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“Detective.”

He offers a hand, and I accept it. The grip is firm, no-nonsense, with none of the gentle palm press and finger squeeze most guys give women. I like that.

“I want to go over your statement and ask a few additional questions. Can we talk here, or is there somewhere else?” His question is to me, but his gaze lasers over my shoulder to Damien and Noah.

“Here’s fine.” I glance back at the two wolves, who are returning Ostrander’s scrutiny with hard looks of their own. The air is charged. Hooray for alpha posturing.

“Are your boyfriends planning to stay?” There’s a derisive edge to the detective’s voice that puts up my hackles.

“Yes.” I plop on the easy chair nearest the entry. “Is there a problem?”

Ostrander looks at me like he’s itching to say something, then grabs the couch. A single woman with two men in her house. I do believe that I’ve slid a notch or three in the good detective’s estimation.

Damien takes the seat opposite me, with Noah planting himself on the floor directly across from the detective. Their gazes never waver from him. I hope Damien doesn’t try his mind trick with this guy. Although, the detective might be too hard-headed and single-minded for the alpha to pick up anything.

Ostrander pays them no heed and gets out a small black notebook. He flips through a few scribbled-on pages until he comes to his starting point. “Okay, then, Ms. Briscoe. I’d like to start with what happened from the moment you found the body.”

An oppressive quiet descends. I stare hard at the floor, then start to talk. The technicolor details of that horrific morning rush

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back, sickening my human self and angering my Beast. The predator inside wants to hunt the one responsible. I curl my fingers into fists, my lengthening nails biting into my palms as I struggle to rein in my Wolf and remain focused.

“When was the last time you saw Ms. Barrett alive?”

“The night of her death. At the Red Dragon night club, about nine-thirty or so, I think. Maybe closer to ten.”

He writes, the ball point making a thunderous scratching noise in the heavy silence. Ostrander looks up, his gaze cool. “You saw her alone?”

“No. I was there with my friend, Drea, and Drea’s sister, Tori.”

“Was *she* alone?” Ostrander fails to keep a hint of disgust out of his voice, and I get the feeling he’s ready to peg M.E.’s tragedy as loose-morals-lead-to-bad-end.

“You mean was she humping some guy on the bar while I talked to her?”

A light flush creeps over his cheeks. “I *meant* was there anyone with her that you could see?”

“She told me she had come with three girls from work. Ally, Lauren and Dawn. I know them, but not their last names.”

“Uh huh.”

More scrawling. I want to rip that pen out of his hand and his fingers right along with it.

“Did she seem upset, agitated in any way?”

“Uh...” I trail off, wondering just what to tell him. M.E. had been fidgety, afraid. I still can’t figure out why she had wanted to talk to me alone. I look up and see Ostrander’s stare. Damn. I have to tell him something. I don’t want this guy coming back to bite me in the ass at some point.

“Come on, think back. Was there anything unusual about her

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behavior? You were her friend, you would have noticed something.”

I take a deep breath, my Beast waiting to be unleashed all over this prick. I don't dare look at Noah or Damien at this point.

“She was upset, stressed.”

“How so?” Ostrander leans forward, intent on my every word.

“She came up to me, already a little buzzed, but her gaze kept darting around, like she couldn't settle. Then she asked if I could come over the next morning. Said she wanted to talk to me, had to ask me something. Before I could really answer, we got interrupted.”

“By?”

I knead my fists into my thighs, the motion helping me maintain control. “The bartender. Some guy at the bar had bought a drink for her.”

“Did she appear to know this person?” I could tell from the tone of his voice that the detective was wondering whether or not M.E. had been on the prowl.

“No. He was just some guy. The bartender did point him out, though.”

“Could you describe him?”

“Sure. He looked like a bear, broad in the chest and all hairy. It was dark hair...maybe brown or black.”

Ostrander makes a noncommittal grunt as he notes my description. He rereads what he's written, then pins me with a hard look. “You have any idea why the victim wanted to speak with you?”

“No.”

“Okay. Well, I think we're done for now. I may have more questions.” The detective pats himself like he's trying to remember

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where he put something, finally digging into an inside pocket in his suit coat. He pulls out a business card and hands it to me. “If you think of anything else, give me a call.”

Ostrander stands, looking like he’s getting ready to leave, and I couldn’t be happier. “Ah, just one more thing.”

God damn it.

“Do you always go barefoot in cold weather, Ms. Briscoe?”

The question startles me and makes my heart beat a little faster. “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

“Your neighbor, Ed Heinman, said he noticed you were barefoot and that’s a little unusual considering this is October. So I wanted to know if you made that a habit.” Ostrander’s gaze pins me like a specimen in biology class.

Oh, shit.

How do I answer that without revealing anything about my lupine abilities? I can feel the weight of Damien’s and Noah’s gazes as I struggle to find an answer and not look wiggled out. “I sometimes will do that without thinking. You know, run to the neighbors or drag the garbage out in bare feet. I, uh do it, no matter the weather. Laziness, really.” I’m going to throw up.

“Uh huh.” He buttons his coat, looking as though he’s weighing the plausibility of my answer. “I’ll be in touch.”

My stomach churns as I walk him to the door. He steps out, then turns back before I can close the door.

“You can never be too careful, Ms. Briscoe. A woman alone should really watch the company she keeps.” He nods toward Damien and Noah, who have come up behind me.

“Thanks for the warning Detec—”

“Yes, *Detective*,” Damien cuts me off, his voice a near snarl. “Thanks for the warning, but we take *very* good care of our

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Maxie.”

* * *

“We don’t have to stay long. We can leave as soon as you feel like it.”

Mom’s chatter provides a pleasant white noise as I scan the crowded street for a place to park. Though I’m not really up to all her talking, I am glad I decided to bring her with me. I have never been to someone’s house so soon after death has entered it.

“Do you want to come up with a code or something?”

“Huh?” I murmur absently as I pull into a spot three houses down from the Barrett’s.

“A code, you know, in case you want to book out of there.”

“Oh. Yeah, um sure. Like what?” I turn off the motor and glance at the house in the rear-view mirror. Mom runs through a list of excuses, and I barely pay attention. I drum my finger on the steering wheel, working up my nerve. A shot of Jack or Jose would be great right now.

“Earth to Maxie.” Mom waves a hand in front of my face. “Are you even listening?”

“What? Oh. Sorry.” This has got me more rattled than I thought.

“I wanted to know which excuse you preferred.”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s just go.”

Jerking the key from the ignition, I quickly check my makeup in the visor mirror and climb out. Mom walks around the front end of the car to join me. Our boot heels echo on the sidewalk, slow measured sounds acting as a soundtrack for this awful visit. A cold breeze washes over me, and I catch a faint noise in the trees, like

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twigs snapping.

I jerk to a halt, my ears straining to hear it once more, hoping it's just some animal.

Mom tugs on my arm. "Maxie?"

I ignore her and step onto the lawn, moving quickly to the side of the house to get a better listen. The street runs parallel to the forest, and the Barrett backyard ends at the tree line. Beyond that is a six-foot-wide paved footpath that winds around through the woods back toward my place. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but I'm getting this weird, neck-ruffling sensation that I've been followed, and like that night of M.E.'s death, that I'm being watched. I can feel my Beast starting to pace deep inside me.

I inhale deeply, slink closer to the fence. The smell is deer, but synthetic, like someone covered themselves in that spray hunters use to attract their prey.

I hear Mom move closer. "Maxie, what's—"

I turn on her with a snarl.

She jumps back, startled. "I hate when you do that."

"Shh." Mom loathes being told to keep quiet, so I flash her a look to drive home the point.

My Wolf would like nothing better than to charge into those trees, but with my luck, whoever's out there has something silver. The slide of a van door somewhere in the neighborhood reminds me that we are not alone.

"Did you see something? Was there anyone there? Oh, my God, there was, wasn't there? I knew you'd be in danger."

"Mom, please. It was a noise." I head to the stairs, throwing a glance over my shoulder at her. She's standing with arms folded, a mulish look on her face.

"I'm worried about you. I hope you plan on telling those two

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hunks of beefcake staying with you about this.”

I stop on the first stair, rolling my eyes. “Okay, I will say something when I get home. And Ma?”

“Yes?”

“Beefcake? Really?”

She gives me one of those mother looks as she catches up to me. “They haven’t been around long enough to be boyfriends.”

“Ma! Wha—”

The door opens before I can get out the rest of my words, and I’m enveloped in a strong, familiar, Old Spice embrace.

“Oh Jesus, Maxie,” John Barrett whispers against my hair. Mary Elizabeth’s father is a head taller than I am, strong and a bit pudgy. I always feel like I’m hugging a giant stuffed animal or something. He rocks me a little, and I hold on as he sniffs back tears. Of all the men that have come and gone in my life, he’s been most like a father figure. I’ve known him as long as I’ve known M.E., nearly six years, I think, but we hadn’t gotten close until I dated Ethan.

“Dad, let the poor girl get inside.”

As if my thoughts could conjure him, Ethan emerges from the living room, a sad half-smile etched on his handsome face. Sexy in that lean man, pretty way, he is by far the best-looking guy I’ve ever dated. Grief only seems to enhance his looks.

“Ethan.” I move into his arms, tears burning my eyes. I swallow them back with a huge gulp. He doesn’t need me crying all over him.

“Hey, sweet girl. Thanks for coming.” His words tickle along my neck as he lifts me against him. It’s been nearly two years since I was last in his arms, and just for a moment, I let myself remember our time together. This is the only man I ever considered

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being with for the rest of my life. Now, after my experience with Noah and Damien, I know my harsh decision to leave Ethan had been the right one. In order to be with him, I would have had to hold back my true nature forever. I could never have done that...it would have cost me too much. I pull back and gaze at him, knowing that he will be in my heart forever.

The look in his moss agate gaze lets me know how much he still cares for me. He strokes a hand over my cheek, then reaches to enfold my mother in a quick hug.

John hangs up our coats, then both men lead us farther into the crowded house.

“Eleanor’s in back. Patty and Jeannie are with her,” John informs us like a museum docent giving a tour. I fight the urge to run away.

There must be fifty people here at least, all talking in low murmurs and looking over at the newcomers. Uncomfortable can’t even begin to describe the feeling in the pit of my stomach. A few folks, cousins I once knew, thank me for coming as we move past them.

We arrive in the family room where M.E.’s mother is holding court on a big flannel couch, flanked by her daughters. Four of the six grandkids are playing near the French doors.

“Ellie.” John tugs me toward the sofa. “Look who’s here.”

Eleanor raises her soft teary eyes to me, and my heart stops. M.E.’s mom was always small, but now she looks shrunken, a doll-like version of herself. I’m afraid to accept the embrace she rises to give me for fear of crushing her bones.

“Maxie, it’s good you’re here.” Her rose and lily perfume nearly makes me sneeze. She pulls back, sliding her hands to my face, cupping my cheeks. Her hazel gaze captures mine, making

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me want to squirm. Someone killed her child because of me.

“I’m so sorry, Eleanor.” Mom slips up, deflecting the attention from me.

I step back, casting a nervous glance at Patricia and Jean. They’re not as welcoming as their parents and brother had been. They didn’t really give me the evil eye, but their expressions were close enough. I can’t blame them, though.

“I need to talk with you in private.” Ethan places a hand at the small of my back and guides me toward the back stairs.

He takes me upstairs to what appears to be a sewing room of sorts. With a quick check of the hallway, he shuts the door.

“What’s going on?” *Please, please don’t ask for details about M.E.’s death.*

Rubbing his forefinger and thumb over his chin, he gives me a thoughtful look, then gestures for me to sit on one of those delicate spindle chairs designed expressly for the hind ends of five-year-olds. I pull the thing out from its place at the large craft table and sit very carefully, trying not to cause damage.

The silence continues, and my anxiety shoots up another notch. Time for a jump start. “Ethan, you obviously need to either say something or ask something. I’m here, I’m listening, so what is it?”

“Jesus, Max, if you only knew how fucking bizarre this is.” Shaking his head, he sits on the table next to my chair.

“The last few days have been beyond weird. Lay it on me.”

Ethan looks down at me intently as if trying to guess what my reaction will be to his words. Oh, if he only knew.

“That’s one thing I’ve always loved about you. You always get right to the point and never flinch. The thing is.” He swallows hard. “The thing is... Shit... You know how into folklore M.E. is...was.”

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I nod. “So?” A tingle of suspicion slithers down my spine. This can’t be good.

“Well, she was taking this class over at South Suburban on Wednesday nights. Some kind of Native American studies thing and... Fuck, I’m just gonna have to say it. They were talking about skinwalkers and how people can become, you know, werewolves.”

My breath freezes in my lungs. Oh, fuck.

I force my lips and tongue to form a response. “She was taking a...a class. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It was making her act all weird and shit. Not like herself.”

My pulse is racing faster than a cheetah at full speed. “I hadn’t really noticed anything different.”

“You wouldn’t. You guys didn’t see much of each other after you and I broke up. She started spending a lot of time in the library and hanging out with a couple of weirdos from the class. I think maybe one of them was the teacher.”

Curiosity edges its way inside my dread. “You think they might have something to do with her death?”

“See that’s the thing. I don’t know, it’s just a feeling really. I mean, she started talking werewolves and how they exist among us, like she’d found some new religion.”

“Werewolves are myths, stories.”

He laughs uneasily. “I know that, but what if she fell in with someone who thinks he is one...like, I don’t know...some psycho who thinks he’s...you know, whatever they call people who get full moon fever or some shit. What is the word? Not lunatic, but... It begins with an ‘L,’ too.”

“Lycanthrope,” I supply.

“Yeah. That’s it. Lycanthrope.” He says the word a couple more times, like he’s test driving it on his mouth.

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“It’s not full moon fever, exactly,” I say carefully. “It’s a mental illness where people actually believe they are werewolves.”

“I think maybe she fell in with someone like that in her class, and maybe that person killed her.”

I mull over his theory, knowing that his logic is sound, but that he’s reaching the wrong conclusion.

“Or maybe it was some whacko she turned down in a club,” Ethan continues. “I don’t know. All I know is my baby sister dead, and the police don’t have squat.”

“It takes time,” I counter. “They could have a motive or theory or something they’re following.”

“Maybe.” He shakes his head.

A knock sounds, and a willowy brunette strides in.

I don’t know whether to be grateful or irritated by this interruption. My stomach feels like an over-wound rubber band thanks to Ethan’s revelation. Had M.E. wanted to talk to me about that class?

My attention turns back to the brunette, who is now wrapping herself around Ethan, possession tattooed on every line of her body. Judging by the look in her eyes, I should be a stain on the floor.

“Baby, I’ve been looking for you all over,” she whispers.

Ethan kisses her quickly, his hand straying absently to her ass. “Lori, this is Maxie. Maxie, this is my fiancée.”

“Congratulations.” I smile as genuinely as possible, hoping to alleviate some tension. I *am* happy for Ethan. He’s one of those guys who should have the gold rings, white picket fence and minivan.

“So exactly why are you two up here alone?” Lori trails a finger around Ethan’s ear.

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I hear a hint of suspicion in her question.

“Maxie was just letting me talk about M.E.’s behavior these last weeks,” Ethan answers smoothly.

Lori brushes back a lock of hair from his forehead, a soft look on her face. She turns to me, tears brimming in her chocolate eyes. “I guess he’s told you about that class.”

“Yeah.” I shift on the chair, the seat edge digging into the backs of my thighs, the hard wood making my ass numb. “Have you told the police what you think, Ethan?”

He grunts. “I did. They said they’d check into it, but I get the feeling that they’re concentrating more on my sister’s sex life.” Anger fills his voice. I can sympathize after my interview with Ostrander. “Have you talked with the cops at all, aside from the first night?”

I sigh. “Yeah. A detective showed up right before I came here, as a matter of fact.”

“What did he say?” His gaze pierces me, shoulders rigid with tension, like he’s bracing for a blow. I am wondering just how much to tell him as Lori presses a kiss to his temple. He gives her a gentle squeeze, as if to calm himself.

“He asked the usual sorts of things. What was she like at the club? Did she seem agitated or upset or...” I trail off, hesitant.

“They wanted to know if she was with anyone, right?” He shakes his head. “That’s what we’ve been asked a million times. Who was she seeing? Was there anyone new in her life? God...” His voice cracks, and he burrows deeper into Lori’s embrace. She murmurs quietly, stroking his hair.

I suddenly feel uncomfortable and shove to my feet, anxious to leave. In a heartbeat, I’m at the door completely forgetting to avoid using my preternatural speed in front of people. I turn back slowly,

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expecting slackened jaws and wide eyes, but fortunately, the two are still wrapped in each other. I slip out, forcing myself to maintain a normal *human* pace down the stairs should I run into anyone.

Stopping short at the bottom, I narrowly avoid a collision with John.

“Whoa, slow down, sweetheart, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Sorry. I...”

“No worries. I was just going to get a drink.” He slides an arm around my shoulder. “Would you like something to drink? Or some food? We have plenty.”

What is it about death that makes everyone want to feed people? I’m not in the mood to eat. But he looks so fragile, I want to humor him, so I let him lead me into the kitchen. I crane my head, looking for my mother.

“Mia was in the dining room the last time I saw her,” John says, as if he read my mind. “She was talking to my sister, Rose.”

He guides me over to the expansive kitchen table, laden with enough refreshments to open a deli, and grabs a plate. “There’re cold cuts, salads and one of those nice veggie trays from Walt’s.” Without waiting for an answer, he starts piling food on the plate, then hands it to me.

I smile as I accept it and take a bite of the turkey sandwich.

“Drink?”

“Umm... Diet Pepsi,” I manage around a mouthful of food. In spite of the situation, the turkey is good, and I realize it’s been a few hours since I’ve eaten. I take a couple more bites, before John presses a glass into my hand.

“Cold, no ice, right?”

He sounds so pleased that I don’t have the heart to tell him I

prefer lots of ice.

“Maxie, there you are.” Mom walks up, a tight smile on her face. If she’s been talking to M.E.’s Aunt Rose, it’s no wonder she’s feeling strained. That woman is a narrow-minded Bible-thumper who manages to get on my last nerve every time I see her.

Mom nods at John, then grabs my arm in a vise, hauling me out of the kitchen.

“Take it easy, Ma.” I barely keep from spilling my plate as she hauls me through the dining room. Apparently, she’s not in a mood to listen.

We weave through people until we finally reach a semi-quiet spot near the foyer, and I gratefully set my refreshments on one of those small tables designed for holding mail and keys.

“Are you ready to leave yet?” Her furious whisper is like a gale in my ear. “I got cornered by Ms. Perfect Rose. God! The woman is a combination of the Spanish Inquisition and flypaper. Once she catches you, you’re in torture city. Oh good, you got food.” Mom snags a piece of broccoli, her anger forgotten at the sight of snacks. “I haven’t had a chance to get anything, yet.”

I slap a hand over my mouth to cover the sudden bubble of laughter threatening to escape. “Yes, we can leave,” I say after a minute. “I’m as ready to go as you are.”

Her eyes widen. “Mmph...Efan,” she manages around the mouthful. “Holy cow,” she gasps after swallowing. “How did it go with Ethan?”

I glance past her and see my one-time fiancé making his way toward me. “Not now, Ma.”

Ethan grabs my hand with a gentle squeeze, then looks at my mother. “Mia, I hear you were with Aunt Rose. My apologies.” A wan smile briefly touches his lips.

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Mom sniffs and grabs Ethan in a hard hug. She pulls back, her hands sliding down to clasp his forearms. “You were the best thing that ever happened to my daughter. I’d do anything to help.”

I shake my head. Mom can never resist a dig. She hounded me for months after the big breakup. Anxious to cut her short, I speak up. “We were getting ready to leave, Ethan.”

Ethan nods. “Let me get your coats.”

“While you do that, Mom and I are going to say good bye to your parents.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He heads to the closet while we dive back into the sea of relatives. Twenty minutes later, we shrug into our coats. I dig my keys out of my purse as Ethan opens the door.

“I’ll call you, Maxie. And promise you’ll call if you hear or think of anything, all right?” he says.

I nod and move to the stairs, then turn back to him. “Ethan?”

“Yeah?”

“I like Lori.”

He winks, a bit of his old humor sneaking out past the pain. “She’s not sure about you, so don’t expect a wedding invitation.”

I flash him a grin, then slowly walk down the stairs to join my mother, who went on ahead of me and is now standing on the front walk, waiting. After listening to the snick of the door closing, I jog across the lawn to the fence. The wind picks up, a cold rush on my face.

Muted thuds slap the turf as my mother moves in behind me. “You think that creep is still here?”

“Maybe.” A few quick sniffs tell me that whoever it is, is not in the immediate vicinity. The odor is faint, an echo on the breeze.

Mom tugs on my arm. “Let’s go back to your place and tell those two big hunks of yours.”

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“They’re not mine.” I peer into the Barrett’s yard. It’s empty. I detect no other odors or sounds coming from back there. My Wolf trickles along my nerves in anticipation of the hunt. A stroll in the woods is just what I need.

“What are you doing?” Mom glares at me, the faint glow from a lamp inside the house casting her face in orange and shadow.

“I’m going to take the long way home.”

“You can’t...” she sputters. “This is dangerous, Maxine Eunice Briscoe.”

“Keep your voice down, huh?” I smile, handing her my purse and keys. “Take the car and meet me back at the house. I shouldn’t be more than thirty minutes.”

“But—”

I glide past her and open the gate.

“Go.” I wave her away.

“I’m telling them the instant I get there. In fact, I just might call them from the car.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus, Ma. I know these woods. Give me a little credit, huh?”

She looks like she’s about ready to clock me with my own bag. “If you get hurt, I’m going to kill you.”

I wiggle my hand at her again, waiting for her to go. She finally spins on her heel and stomps to the street.

Turning, I follow the fence to the rear gate, open it, and slip silently across the grassy easement and into the trees, picking my way through the knee-high, thick undergrowth. My highly acute night vision picks up every piece of deadfall, rock and shrub in my path. Sniffing the air, I breathe in traces of rabbit, raccoon, coyote... The scents are vibrant, like an artist’s palette to my nose, each one a different shade.

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As I reach the footpath, I detect a faint hint of the synthetic deer and pungent rubber from earlier. Whoever it was definitely passed this way.

With another sharp inhalation, I fixate on the hunt and move swiftly into the dark.

CHAPTER 10

I stick to the shadows along the side of the path, using my preternatural agility to move as soundlessly as possible. It takes me deep into the woods, past small clearings and hollows, then over the wooden footbridge at North Creek. From there, the trail opens onto a large field and picnic area. To the left is a drive leading out to the main road. The smell of Port-O-Potty hits me like a three-hundred-pound linebacker at full speed. It gets worse until I nearly gag as I finally pass the damned outhouse. Sometimes it's really not good to have such an acute sense of smell, and I couldn't be happier now that the stench is downwind.

A wave of knowing washes through me, sweet and sharp like honey on a blade. I jerk to a halt, inhaling deeply, the faint feral odor of wolf on the night air. It's not Damien or Noah. The nuance

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is different. Hauling ass into the trees, I stop, fangs and claws at the ready, a low growl rumbling up my throat. My Beast is riding me hard, but I refuse to do a full shift here.

My skin is hot, tingly, and I taste my heartbeat on my tongue, an appetizer before the main meal. Whoever it is out here, is going to learn not to mess with me. The tension ramps up each minute sound as I wait for this other wolf...the murmur of every leaf, cricket and small animal magnified to the nth degree. Nothing moves, the forest around me undisturbed.

Then I hear it. A whisper of darkness on the wind.

The sounds are animalistic, but my brain comprehends that they are words. Make that more than words, a command. I feel the tug of obedience from my Beast. She wants to follow, and I feel the Change pushing hard against me. My flesh ripples as my muscles get ready to expand. I am suddenly terrified, and the fear is enough to shove back the animal. I return completely to human form and hightail it down the path, looking over my shoulder more than a few times.

As I rush out into the familiar clearing near my yard, I hear the rustle of brush behind me, then the faint vibration of a bow string. I hit the ground hard just as an arrow flies past and slams into a tree to the side of me.

Snarls and shouts fill the air as I spring to my feet, bracing for attack. I glimpse movement along the far tree line as strong arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me against a solid male chest.

“Maxie.” Noah’s voice rasps in my ear, the sound like soothing music. “It’s okay, I have you.”

I turn my face into his neck, breathing in his cool, arctic scent. The calming effect is immediate.

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“Are you all right?” Damien cups my cheek, forcing me to meet his gaze. I nod, but he keeps staring at me as if he needs further proof. He plants a quick kiss on my forehead, gives me one more long look, then strides away to start searching the area.

“What’s going on over here?”

A flashlight beam hits me in the face and I wince, holding up a hand. A tall, lanky Cook County Forest Preserve officer stalks over.

Fucking perfect.

“These woods are closed. What are you doing out here? And, miss, why are your clothes all torn?”

I look down and realize that my sweater and pants are ripped in several places.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Damien strolls over and stands directly in front of the cop. “We were playing a game and well...” He shrugs, a placating smile on his face.

A prickle of unease slides down my neck. I didn’t want him to work his mojo on Ostrander, but here with this cop, I’ll let him. The sooner this guy is gone, the better. I’m not in the mood for questions or reprimands.

“Officer,” Damien says in an oh-so-reasonable voice with a hint of steel in it. “We were just working off some excess energy, having some harmless fun.”

The officer stares intently at Damien, belief slowly trickling into his eyes. It’s like that moment in Star Wars when Obi Wan tells the storm trooper that these are not the droids they’re looking for.

“You shouldn’t be in the woods, you know. There was a murder in the area.” A puzzled frown settles on the cop’s face, like he knows that he should be doing or asking something, but can’t

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quite remember what it is.

Noah squeezes my shoulders as the tension in my body starts to dissipate. We watch as Damien keeps talking in that steady, there's-nothing-to-see-here tone. He leads the officer away from us, toward the official, gated western entrance to the preserve.

“He is getting really good with that mind fuck stuff,” Noah says gruffly with more than a hint of awe. Planting a quick kiss on my hair, he steps back. “Let’s get that arrow, little one, and see what else we can find.”

“Yeah, okay.” I glance around wondering why I can’t seem to get my motor functions in order. My thoughts are tumbling all over the place. I know I sensed a wolf out in the woods. But I didn’t think wolves carried around bows and arrows. So, who was the archer? And why was I a target? Oh, man. Was the archer the dude who was watching me the night M.E. was killed? Did he kill her?

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Noah slips his arms around me from behind, lacing his fingers over my stomach. “You can go home, if you want. Damien and I can handle this.” He nuzzles his cheek along mine, rocking me gently.

For a minute I allow myself to rest against him, absorbing his strength and warmth. I’d like nothing more, but I can’t.

“I’ll be fine,” I whisper against his stubbled jaw, then turn in his embrace. Cupping his face, I slant my lips over his. The kiss is soft and all too brief, but it steadies me. His arms tighten, pressing me against his solid frame.

“Did you two find that arrow?” Damien’s question lashes the air like a whip crack.

Ignoring his harsh tone, I go to him, slipping my arms about his waist.

“Hey.” He pulls me tight to him, his face buried in my hair.

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“It’s okay.”

I whimper, burrowing into his chest. Need wells up inside me and I can’t seem to get close enough. He strokes my back in slow circles, whispering nonsense. Noah moves in, hugging both of us. We maneuver into a three-way embrace, quietly absorbing each other’s presence for a brief moment.

Damien is the first to pull back, his hematite gaze locked on me. “If you want to go back—”

“No. I’m staying.” I’d go crazy in the house with Mom, waiting for them to return. “Before we go any further, though, there’s something that you both need to know.” I don’t want to say the words that will spoil what we’ve just shared, but I have no choice.

“What is it?” Noah grabs my hand, rubbing a thumb over my knuckles.

Damien looks as though he’s waiting for a disaster. How appropriate.

“I encountered another wolf.”

“Son of a bitch!” Damien rakes a hand through his hair. “When?”

“About twenty minutes ago. That’s why I wasn’t paying attention when that arrow whizzed by me. The other wolf scared the shit out of me.”

“Jesus. Did you see him?” Noah squeezes my fingers tightly.

“No. I felt him.” I give them a quick rundown of what happened.

“God *damn* it!” Damien glares at me, shaking his head.

He holds up a hand. “Right now, let’s get the arrow and look for whatever else we can find.”

“Damien, do you think the guy with the bow and arrow is the one who killed M.E.?”

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He shakes his head and says in a softer tone, “I don’t know, sweetheart. Let’s start with the evidence before us and go from there.”

I nod, and my stomach does a pitch and roll just thinking about that deadly projectile. I let the two of them go after it. I can use the alone time.

Picking my way in the opposite direction of the shot, I check along the ground for footprints, broken shrub and underbrush. My canine vision takes over, everything in hi-def black and white. The archer had had plenty of time to set a shot while I was hung up with the other werewolf. I’m having a helluva night so far. Pincushion or mindless minion. Fuck! I hug myself tight and keep searching.

“Maxie!” Noah shouts, breaking into the morbid train of my thoughts.

I glance back to see the two wolves advancing on me, liquid grace flowing through the dark. Slowing, I wait for them to catch up.

There’s a sharp tug on my elbow as they reach me.

“Don’t go off alone like that,” Damien growls.

I jerk away. “Watch it.”

“Stop!” Noah shoves the arrow under my nose. “This thing has a silver point. Do you know how close you came to being really hurt or even dying?”

“Yeah, I was there.” I whirl around and resume tracking.

“That’s all you have to say?” I can hear the bass of Damien’s Beast in his voice.

I stop, my gaze flickering over both of them. “That’s all I got for now.”

“Not good enou—”

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A sharp howl pierces the night, cutting off whatever the alpha asshole was going to say.

“Holy shi—”

Ignoring my outburst, Damien takes off, charging in the direction of the sound. Noah and I are right behind him. Another howl breaks the dark. Dread turns my bowels to water. My instincts are screaming that something is seriously fucked up here. Perhaps the lycan has confronted Archer Man.

Barreling out of the forest near the picnic area, the scent of blood hits me. It’s definitely *werewolf* blood, and a sink hole opens in my stomach, fear bitter at the back of my throat. The human’s scent is pretty thick as well, and wildly, I look around for bodies. There are none.

“Shit.” Damien breathes. “Stay on the wolf.”

As if someone hit an unseen switch on all three of us, we bolt across the parking area to the roadway leading into a section of the woods. We spill out onto Cottage Grove Avenue, the main street running through the forest. We forge ahead to 183rd, the closest cross street. A car engine roars to life as we reach the corner. The only glimpse of the werewolf is taillights in the distance.

“Fuck,” Damien curses softly.

I can’t help being a little relieved that the wolf is alive.

“Let’s shift gears and pick up the trail of the human,” Noah says over his shoulder, striding back toward the park roadway.

My relief is short-lived. Now we’re going after the guy who took a shot at me.

We return to the picnic area and catch the scent of our mystery man. It takes us down the way I had originally come. I wonder if this guy is heading toward the Barrett house. He could have easily parked his car at the riding stable southwest of their place. The

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stable lot is open to the public, 24/7. Instead, his trail splits off to the east. We jog back to Cottage Grove and cross to where the walkway joins another track weaving south to Glenwood-Lansing Road.

As we emerge onto a huge field, I can see a big guy with a bow and arrow running to the street. He crosses to the parking lot of an apartment complex and disappears in the distance.

Damien growls and tears after him, cutting off Noah and me. We pick up the pace, though, staying just behind. I gasp as Damien runs into the road, nearly getting himself run over by a pickup truck. Heedless of the driver's curses, he dashes around the building where our target vanished.

Noah and I hold back until it's all clear, then rush after him.

A dark sedan peels out of the same parking lot from where my attacker had disappeared. I have a sinking feeling that the driver is our nocturnal William Tell. Damien's snarls and curses ring out, confirming my suspicion.

"Did you at least get a look at the plates?" Noah asks Damien as we catch up to him.

"No, the numbers were blacked out. Like they were smeared with mud or something. Fuck! I was so goddamn close."

"Maybe something will pop later." I try to comfort him, stroking a hand along his lower back. The touch is as much for me as it is for him. He scared the shit out of me when he ran out into the street. I know wolves can withstand a lot of physical abuse, but still...

Damien leans into me, draping an arm over my shoulders. "We lost this round. Let's get back to your place."

* * *

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“Do you three have any idea how worried I’ve been?” Mom shouts as we trudge up my back stairs. She’s standing in the mudroom doorway, hand on her hip, eyes afire like an ancient Greek Fury.

“Ma, would you relax?” I brush past her, edgy and seriously pissed off.

“Maxine Eunice Briscoe, do not dismiss my concerns.”

I hear her right behind me as I move into the kitchen. She must have cut off the wolves. I shake my head as she picks up steam.

“You leave me to go after someone you think is watching you. Someone who could very well be a *killer*. I get here, tell the Beefcake Brothers, and they go blazing out like...”

Ignoring her tirade, I saunter over to the fridge, open the freezer, and take out the bottle of vodka stored there for emergencies. I unscrew the cap and take a few healthy swallows.

Looking across the kitchen, I see Damien and Noah in the doorway, looking cowed by the little whirlwind of righteous anger in front of them. I shake my head. Cowards.

Putting back the bottle, I lean against the Kenmore and stare at Mom. “Are you through? “Cause I’m not talking until you’re done.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, then shuts it as I narrow my eyes at her.

“Fine. I’m done. For now,” she huffs.

“Oh goody.” Motioning for her to sit at the table, I wave off the guys and grab a seat. I give her the edited version of events because the object is to get her gone as quickly as possible.

“Have you told me everything?” she asks when I finish.

“I’ve told you the important stuff.” Mom just spears me with one of her I-know-this-isn’t-all-but-I-can’t-prove-it looks and

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remains silent. After a minute or two, the quiet drives me crazy. “Is there something else?” I snap.

Putting a hand under my chin, Mom looks me right in the eyes. “I know when I’m being placated, Maxine. All right, keep your secrets for tonight, but don’t think I’m through with this.” After another second or so, she gets up. “By the way,” she says as I rise. “I’ll be keeping your vehicle. I forgot to mention that I promised Ezra I’d take Godzilla to be groomed.”

It’s a promise Mom’s made up right this second to get back at me for scaring her. Man, her neighbor is going to be overjoyed when she shows up tomorrow to take the thousand-pound slobbering monster he calls a dog for its semi-annual bath. I’ll be scrubbing my poor Chevy for weeks.

I clench my teeth in a tight smile. “Fine.”

Mom grabs me in a brief hug, then gives me one more admonishing look before she heads out the door. Shutting it, I lean my head against the cool wood, the tension and fear of the last couple of hours trembling through my body. Taking a deep breath, I slide the chain in place. The finality of being locked in for the night smoothes the jagged edges of my nerves.

I know what I really need and, jackpot, I get to have it times two.

Snickering at my dirty thoughts, I head up the stairs in search of my two lovers. Jesus, what a cheesy romance novel term. *My lovers*. But what else can I call them, really? I mean, boyfriend is high school, and they haven’t been around long enough to be considered significant others. So what does that leave? Friends with benefits, fuck buddies? Get real.

Shaking my head, I reach the top and start down the hall toward my room.

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“You think this is like that girl in New Mexico, don’t you?”

Noah’s question to Damien stops me cold. I pause in the hall to listen to their conversation, wondering what they are talking about and if it has anything to do with what just happened out in the woods.

“It’s sounds too much alike for it not to be...”

I catch a glimpse of Damien as he stalks past the partially open door. All thoughts of sex are obliterated as I continue to eavesdrop, catching Damien’s words as he goes on, “The boyfriend said that before she disappeared, Daryl Ann sensed another wolf...”

Daryl Ann? Another wolf? What the—

I need explanations. Right. Fucking. Now.

CHAPTER 11

“What in the hell are you two talking about?”

Damien and Noah are so caught off guard. For an instant, they look like I’ve just found them masturbating as they paw through one of my lingerie catalogs. It’s so funny, I’d laugh if I weren’t pissed off. I can’t believe they didn’t sense I was coming. Guess even werewolves can be fooled some of the time.

“Someone please answer me.” Folding my arms across my chest, I prop myself against the door frame and wait for the two of them to recover.

“Shit.” Damien shoves a hand through his hair. Shooting me an irritated glance, he strolls to the window seat in the alcove at the far end of the room. He sits, then leans forward with elbows on his knees and stares hard at the carpet.

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Noah, sprawled across my bed, gives me a brief look as he rolls onto his stomach. “Might as well tell her what you told me.”

Damien huffs out a breath, his gaze never leaving the floor. “Remember when I told you that I’d only investigated one other case involving a female werewolf?”

“Yeah.” Of course I remember, it was one of the first things I learned when they arrived here the other night. God, has it really only been a few days? I glance up to see both of them watching me. I roll my eyes. “Go on, Damien.”

He nods. “It was about a year ago that I found an old article about a girl by the name of Daryl Ann Eagle being the victim of an animal attack. I could scarcely believe it. I’d finally come across my first possible female werewolf. It was the usual story...she was found bloody with claw marks and bites. Since the attack wasn’t fatal, I jumped at the chance that she might still be in the area and made a beeline for Truth Or Consequences, New Mexico.”

I pull away from the entry to join Damien on the long end of the L-shaped window seat. He reaches out, absently playing with the ends of my hair, while he continues telling the story. “After I got to town, I interviewed the sheriff. He maintained that Daryl Ann had left town. Her stuff was all gone, her apartment, everything, just packed up. That’s all he said about her. His lack of details was frustrating, but when I talked to people in the town, I really got disappointed and pissed off. I mean, she was MIA, and no one seemed to care. No one wanted to answer my questions. That is, except her boyfriend, R.J. He couldn’t shut up and talked about her original attack. How she had survived and healed, and had begun to live a life as a werewolf. And then, she just disappeared.” He leans against the window, turning his head slightly to look at Noah and me.

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“Did he have any idea why she might have run off?” I ask.

Damien exhales sharply. “R. J. told me that one night she came in from a shift and a run, scared. She said she’d sensed another wolf. That he had tried to lure her to him. For the next two weeks, she stayed close to home. Then the full moon came and she decided she needed to get out. When she returned home, she was even more terrified than before. She’d been followed by the mysterious wolf. And, again, he had tried to draw her in. Over the next couple of days, she became more and more agitated. And then she was gone. R.J. panicked, but he didn’t know what to do. I tried to find out if Daryl Ann had given R.J. any clue as to what this other wolf looked like, but he said she clammed up tight, refused to talk.

“It frustrates me that I’ve never been able to find any trace of her, or this other wolf.” Damien shrugs. “It’s like they just dropped off the planet, and as an investigator I know that’s not possible. There’s always some trace or clue somewhere. I just haven’t found it, yet.” He scrubs a hand over his jaw and looks at me. “You didn’t see the wolf at all?”

My stomach tightens. “No. It was just a voice in my head and a scent on the wind. That voice, though...it terrified me because it was so commanding. I really had to fight not go to him.”

“Jesus,” Damien huffs, reaching out to play with my hair.

The other wolf’s voice plays over and over in my mind, and my pulse picks up speed. What if I hadn’t been able to break his mental hold? Where would I be right now?

A warm masculine hand closes over my suddenly chilled one. “It’s okay, Maxie. You’re here with us, now, and we are not going to let anything happen to you.”

The fierce promise in Damien’s words does little to comfort

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me. I need to talk about something else, and in light of seeing my ex-fiancé tonight, I latch onto Daryl Ann's poor boyfriend.

Grabbing a throw pillow, I hug it to me. "So this R.J...he knew Daryl Ann's secret."

Damien nods.

I exhale sharply, wondering briefly if Ethan would have stood by me had he known about me.

"Why?" Damien prods, an edge to his voice.

"Just wondering is all."

"About what?"

"Just thinking about my own situation."

He isn't about to let me off so easy. "Why? Because you saw your ex-fiancé tonight?"

I glare at him, not liking his tone. "It's nothing, leave it alone."

Damien grabs me, hauling me onto his lap, his eyes swimming with silver-red fire. "R. J. was an exception. Your human would not have understood. You'd have been a monster to him."

"How do you know what's in someone's heart?" I rasp, fury rising even though I know he's right. "I could have given him a chance."

He shakes me. "What, a chance to call animal control or plug you with a silver bullet, himself?"

Our harsh breaths mingle, the furious current between us threatening to spill over. Damien's words have hit me in my most vulnerable spot. I want to strike out at him, break his face.

"Knock it off, you two!" Noah barks.

I curl my hands into fists, drawing down my rising energy and pushing back my Wolf. Even though I know I made the right decision to break up with Ethan, regret for what happened still gnaws at me. But taking out my raw emotions on Damien is

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pointless. I have to move past the pain.

With a soft curse, Damien sets me from him. Breathing hard, I slide to the side and resume my seat. Time to get back to the matter at hand. “So, how long had Daryl Ann been gone when you got there?” I ask in a shaky voice.

“A few months. I was this fucking close.” Damien holds his thumb and forefinger half an inch apart.

“You think she tangled with the other wolf?” I shiver, remembering the power embedded in the command I’d sensed in the woods. Poor Daryl Ann.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. In Daryl Ann’s case, there was no body. And all her things were gone. Who knows what happened to her.”

Noah stretches, turning onto his back, his face upside down. “Well, where do we go from here?”

“First thing”—Damien pins me with an implacable look—“Maxie, you are no longer going into the woods alone.”

I scoot away from him, shaking my head. He’s fucking starting with me again, the asshole.

“Shit no. I am not turning into some house wolf, here. I run when I run.” Shoving to my feet, I turn to stand over Mr. Macho, furious as hell. “I already have a boss, and I get paid to listen to her. I’m not going all submissive because this bastard tried to get me to follow him like some dog show entry.”

“Right. And you certainly don’t want to worry about a little thing like a silver-tipped arrow.” Damien’s sarcasm blasts me as he rises and gets right in my face. Our gazes lock. He looms over me, his size filling my vision. He’s shorter than Noah, but his attitude more than makes up the difference.

“You will do what I tell you because I will not allow anyone to

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harm a hair on you, and that includes protecting you from your own stubbornness.” The tone of his voice would do a dictator proud.

“I am not some...some lower-ranking wolf to be ordered around by the badass alpha.”

“Maxie.” Noah’s quiet voice reaches me through the building tension.

“What?” I look down at him. He’s pushed himself into a seated position at the edge of the bed.

“He’s right. Wait—” Noah holds up a hand to halt my indignant tirade. “You are being deliberately obtuse about this. You should have seen yourself tonight. You were practically transparent when I got to you.”

“Hello, someone tried to shish-kebab me,” I argue. Yeah, I’m being an idiot right now, but I hate more than anything to have my freedom curtailed. I face enough of that already watching my behavior twenty-four-seven and locking myself up during the full moon.

“Jesus, woman, do you hear yourself? Someone tries to control your mind and lure you away, then someone else tries to kill you, and all you can do is bitch about the precautions we want to take to keep you alive.” Damien scrubs a hand over his stubbled jaw, incredulity evident. “I want you safe, and that can’t happen if you won’t cooperate.”

I suck in a breath and jam my hands on my hips. “I understand that, but you are asking too much. It starts with not going into the woods and then comes a whole list of other places I shouldn’t go to alone. I will take reasonable care, but I have a job and a life and I can’t—I won’t—let anyone take that from me no matter what. If you can’t get that...” I trail off, too exhausted to say anything

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more. I plop back on the window seat, this time maneuvering to stretch my legs out on the cushions. Closing my eyes, I press my cheek and temple against the cool glass, a hollow pang forming inside as my anger dies away. I wish everyone and everything would just go away.

“I’m sorry as hell this is happening to you.” Damien lifts my feet onto his lap as he sits. His strong hands squeeze my calves through the stiff leather of my boots, the gentle repetitive strokes heating my blood.

Slowly, he eases off one of the boots, tossing it casually to the floor. It hits with a soft *thunk*, then he removes the other one. I glance down and can’t help but notice their ruined condition. A trip to Macy’s is in my near future.

“Oh!” I gasp as Damien starts to massage my left foot, hitting a particularly sensitive area that sends a spark of heat directly to my nipples.

“Like that, huh?” He takes my other foot, his magic fingers finding the same spot.

I moan, my head falling back. I really miss having my feet massaged. Ethan used to do it all the time. Damn, I need to put him out of my mind.

“You like this a lot,” Damien murmurs, rubbing harder.

I’m about to melt and ooze onto the floor.

“Did your human do this for you?”

Fucking A, he just can’t let it go. I have to be the bigger wolf.

“No.” I lie, watching him beneath my lashes. His touch grows more intense, and I bite back a grin. Men are simple, no matter the species.

After sliding down on the window seat a little farther, I rest my head against the pillows and let my mind drift. I gasp as Damien’s

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fingers find their way under my pant leg to tease the bare, supple flesh of my calf.

Noah is suddenly beside me, hands under my sweater, easing it up.

“Hey!” I slap at him.

He easily blocks my playful protests, then shoves my bra out of the way to fully demonstrate his talent.

I moan at the feel of his lips sucking at my nipple, his tongue circling my areola.

Fingers unbutton my trousers and ease open the zipper.

“Lift her,” Damien growls.

Noah slides his hands under me, raising me just enough so they can get my lower body nice and naked. Damien plays, stroking and pinching as he works my trousers down my legs.

Desire roars through me like a back draft. I need to touch and be touched.

“No...Wait,” I whisper as Noah tries to lay me back. “Here, help me.” I push against him, struggling with my sweater and bra.

Our hands tangle in the fabric. We manage to get off my sweater, but he’s useless when it comes to my bra. After a few frustrated attempts, I rip it off.

Noah sucks in a huge breath, his gaze riveted on my bare breasts.

The cool air tightens my nipples, and I slide my hands up to tease the turgid little gems, twisting and pinching. I shiver from the stimulation, my pussy growing damp.

With a growl, Noah hauls me to him and we overbalance, crashing to the floor, landing with me on top of him.

“*Oof.*” My breath whooshes out, but in my excitement, I could care less. I crash my mouth onto his, capturing him in a savage

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kiss. We are all over each other, kissing, biting and sucking in a frenzy of need.

Noah squeezes my ass, my belly pressing against his erection.
“Easy, you two.”

I snarl as Damien takes charge. He plucks me into his arms, setting me on my knees before him. The carpet burns as I rock into him seeking something, anything to assuage this ache growing inside.

“Maxie, Maxie...you taste...” His teeth graze along my throat, the fangs barely there, teasing goose bumps all the way to my breasts. “Wild.”

After tangling a hand in my hair, he forces my neck back, stretching it. His heated gaze holds me in thrall, then his mouth fastens onto mine. He ravages my lips, his tongue sweeping inside to duel with mine.

Sharp growls and grunts escape as our savage kisses fuel the building fire. My arms snake around his waist, my fingers tearing at his tee-shirt, roaming over the span of his back until I find the hem. Whimpering, I yank it over his head and fling it away.

My nails scrape over his firm flesh as I touch him everywhere. Licking my way down his chest, I reach for his fly.

He grabs my wrists, stopping my progress. “I got it.”

Teeth clamp down on my neck as Noah moves behind me. His palms glide over my hips, hands locking over my belly. He had undressed while I tangled with Damien, because he pulls me into his firm, *naked* chest, the crinkly hairs teasing the flesh of my back. The hot tip of his cock grazes my lower spine, leaving wet trails and tightening everything deep inside me.

Moisture gathers, preparing for the mating to come.

Hands stroke over my heated flesh, followed by lips and teeth,

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both wolves mapping every inch of my curves. Sweat, theirs and mine, pours over me as they grind me between their large, hard bodies

“Ooh,” I gasp as Damien latches onto a nipple, tormenting the little peak with licks and swirls, his lips pulling it hard against his palate.

Noah reaches around to pluck the other one, rolling it firmly with thumb and forefinger.

Wave after wave of pleasure scorches my nerves, my hips gyrating back against Noah’s erection. Blindly, I reach out, the fingers of one hand stroking and sliding in Damien’s wet hair, the other squeezing and rubbing Noah’s hair-roughened thigh.

“Ease back.”

I’m not sure whether Damien’s hoarse command is for me or Noah, until I feel the big guy slowly pull away. I glance over my shoulder to see him lie on the floor with his back against the window seat, then he reaches for me.

“What?” I turn to Damien as Noah runs a palm over my buttocks.

“Shh. Lie back. You need to be very wet, for what I have in mind.”

My heart stutters at the look in his eyes, a huge wave of lust flooding me as various kinky things play through my mind.

“Come, little one.” Noah’s hands clamp on my hips and I am airborne like one of those Cirque du Soleil acrobats. He eases my body down over his so we lay chest to back, my legs over his, his cock bobbing between my thighs.

I lay my head over Noah’s heart, the strong, fierce beat calling to me.

Damien looms over us, the hot, predatory expression on his

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face making me melt.

“Lift your legs,” he commands.

Without thought, I raise my legs up and out. Noah’s big hands slide under my knees, holding them in place.

Damien flashes me an evil grin as he settles over me. “Such a beautiful sight.” He traces the quivering outer lips of my labia, gentle, back-and-forth strokes that make me want to explode.

My hips arch up. I need him inside me right now.

He scissors his fingers just inside, teasing my throbbing clit, gliding over and over the swollen nubbin.

Noah grunts as Damien’s touch slides along his cock, tormenting the hard shaft.

“Dam...” Noah grits out. “Be careful or I’ll come.”

Damien chuckles and leans down. “You can take it.”

Harsh sounds explode from the big guy and me as Damien grabs Noah’s penis and rubs the tip just inside my pussy.

Around and around he guides the slippery tip over my hot button, bringing me off without full penetration.

My hips fight to rock in time to Damien’s movements, but in my position, I can only lie there and take it. Moisture floods my pussy, and the sensations build higher and higher.

“Aah.” I reach up to play with my nipples, pulling and pinching, arcs of fire blazing straight to the center of my being.

“That’s it, Maxie.” Damien increases the speed with which he manipulates Noah’s cock.

“Damien...” Noah groans.

Just like that, Noah’s penis is gone, replaced by Damien’s fingers. He jams two of them deep inside, fucking me hard and fast until I’m screaming.

“Fuuuuccckk...” Orgasm barrels through me like a bull in a

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china shop, shattering every nerve and bone.

Damien keeps his hand busy inside, dragging out the pleasure until I am absolutely insensate.

“There. Now you’re wet enough.”

Before I can register the meaning behind his words, he moves over to his pile of clothes and comes back with two condoms. I drag in a huge breath, watching as he tears open the first packet and glides the latex over his thick, bobbing erection with both hands.

Finished, Damien looks right at Noah. “Now you.” Taking the other foil wrapper, he crawls over to Noah. The big guy grunts as Damien grabs his penis and strokes the sheath over his length.

“It’s go time.” Damien fits himself to me.

“Oh!” I release a sharp gasp as his thick shaft glides along my sensitive walls, sliding all the way inside to bump my cervix. He holds steady, staring deep into my eyes, then pulls all the way out.

A weak cry escapes me at the loss.

“Your turn.” Damien reaches down, positioning Noah at my vagina.

I lick my lips, my breath rasping in my throat.

Noah’s thick shaft pushes deep, then retreats.

I don’t have long to wait before Damien is inside me once more. In and out.

Damien, then Noah.

I am helpless to move, only able to lie there and take their thrusts, honeyed cream pouring out of me. My thighs tremble, my hips jolt. I clench my pelvic muscles as my two wolves fuck me slow and deep.

Their harsh bestial grunts fill the air.

Damien reaches down to pinch my clit, the squeezing sends a

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tide of renewed lust pouring over me, making my vagina still wetter. Soft, incoherent cries bubble up my throat.

“So good,” Damien rasps

“Again,” Noah grunts as he thrusts home. His grip slips, hands sliding down my thighs, and I shift my legs to dig my heels into Damien’s back, giving myself some purchase to move with them.

They pick up the pace, rocking faster and faster. One in, one out.

It is a raw, intense, hedonistic ride. Flesh against flesh, slapping, grunting, groaning, sweat pouring off our bodies. The scent of sex and wolf is thick on the air.

Damien snarls, bending to capture a nipple in his mouth. With teeth and tongue, he worries the peak.

My hands flail, desperate for something to hold onto. Noah covers them with his own, pressing against the floor, stilling them.

Tremors shake me as they continue to pound into me, driving me to the void. My head thrashes on Noah’s chest, hair whipping across my face.

“Nownownownow...*Now!*”

Shock waves rip me apart as my orgasm thunders over me.

Damien and Noah howl, their climaxes not far behind.

* * *

Relaxed and loose, I stand at my counter putting the finishing touches on an enormous sandwich. I’d much rather run down a deer, but the guys and I are all for staying the hell out of the forest for the rest of the night.

“Oh, shit!” I whirl around, dropping the mayo-covered knife into the steel sink. “I forgot to tell you what happened at the

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Barrett house tonight.”

Damien and Noah stare at me, their own post-sex deli sandwiches inches from their open mouths.

“So spill, already.” Damien takes a huge bite.

Placing my roast beef and cheese on the table, I drop onto the chair across from Noah, the wood cool against my ass through the thin fabric of my sleep shorts. “Okay. Ethan has this wild theory. It seems M.E. was taking a folklore class at South Suburban College. He says she was obsessed with the lycanthropy part, and wondered if she’d encountered someone from the class who thinks he is an actual werewolf. Perhaps this person killed her.”

Both wolves stop chewing and swallow hard.

“Interesting theory, if you don’t know what we know.” Damien grabs his Pepsi, then chugs a huge swallow.

“Right.” I snag a pretzel from the open bag on the table and break it in half. “But it did make me wonder if she thinks...thought...I might be a werewolf.” The idea sets my nerves twitching. I pop one of the pieces in my mouth, thinking back to the night of the murder. M.E. had been anxious, very determined to get me to talk with her as soon as possible.

“Why would she suspect?” Noah asks, crunching on a chip.

“Little things. She caught me a few times going into the woods at night and asked me about it, plus after we went out for coffee one time, she joked to Ethan about the way I always disappear the night of full moons. Her comments scared me into being a lot more circumspect.” I broke up with Ethan not long after that coffee incident.

“She ever say anything else to you?” Damien wipes a drop of mustard off his chin.

“No. But she had a mind like Stephen Hawking. She loved

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solving puzzles, putting things together. She may have connected my habits with the stuff she learned from those tales discussed in her class. I really think she suspected something was up with me. And if that's the case, then she may have written it down somewhere." Lead forms in my stomach. "Oh, my God, what if she did make notes, and they're in with the stuff the cops have already taken from the house?" My gaze flicks wildly back and forth between the guys, my stomach jumping like frogs in a pond.

"Calm down, Maxie." Noah reaches out and grabs my wrist, giving it a light squeeze.

"He's right, relax."

The tone of Damien's voice forces my eyes to his.

"So what if she made notes and the cops do have them? Werewolves don't exist. We're Halloween creatures, legends, remember? Do you really think Ostrander is going to come over here and arrest you? Haul you in on suspicion of growing claws and fangs? He'll probably think she was on drugs or something."

Crazy laughter bubbles in my throat as I touch my forehead to the table, narrowly missing the broken pretzel. I snort. "I can just picture Ostrander calling animal control: 'I know it's a woman, but really, she's a wolf. Trust me.'"

The tension dies away with laughter, and hunger gets the better of me. I pick up my forgotten sandwich. This is the best one I've ever eaten, I decide, swallowing the first bite and digging in for another.

"I need to search your friend's house." Damien walks to the fridge to grab another soda. He tosses one to Noah, then pops the tab on his and takes a drink.

"That's gonna be hard as hell." I reach for a pickle. "The cops have been all over it since Saturday. And when they're not inside,

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they're watching it."

"Yeah, but we'll keep an eye out over the next couple of days, see who comes and goes, note the patterns and move from there."

I take another bite, washing it down with a drink of Damien's Pepsi.

"Hey! That's mine," he snarls.

"Yeah, so? You didn't bother to ask if I wanted one."

"Sorry," he mutters.

Damien doesn't sound too sincere and I feel annoyance rising in my gut. "Whatever. Typical alpha behavior. You don't like to ask or share," I snap.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he barks.

"It means exactly what it means." I arch a brow, giving Damien the Evil Eye. "Mr. Moving-In-Without-Asking. And while we're on the subject—"

Damien cuts me off with a growl.

The teasing has hit a nerve for both us, and a twist of anger nags my gut. I don't like the attitude and leave it for now.

"Let's get back to talking about searching the house." Damien takes charge of the conversation. "I noticed that a patrol comes about once an hour, parks for a good twenty and leaves."

"Don't forget the neighbors. Ed and Fran are early to bed, but the Mannings, right next to them, are night owls. And over here is Sheila Ford." I jerk a thumb at my own next door neighbor. "She's an ER nurse who works odd hours. I have to take extra care with her."

Damien nods, crunches on a couple of chips, then swallows. "Once we get down the police routine and your neighbors' habits, what would be the best way to get inside M.E.'s house?"

"That's easy. The back door has a small roof over it, and

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there's a second-story window over that. We climb in through there."

"The 'we' is Noah and me. It doesn't include you." Damien gets up and takes his plate to the sink.

Anger whips through me, but I'm going to try for reasonable. "I know her house."

"I'm the professional." He returns to his seat, leans back in the chair and folds his arms behind his head, arrogance coloring every line of his expression. "Draw me a map."

I roll my eyes. "I can't draw."

"Then I'll figure it out. You are not going with us."

He is being such an asshole. I look at Noah.

"What?" He shrugs. "I happen to agree. You don't need to be there. We've done this before."

"Oh, really." My voice is thick with sarcasm. "And just how many breaking and entering trips have you been on, Mr. Contractor?"

He looks away. "One."

Harsh laughter spews from my throat like venom. "One? Why am I not surprised?" I narrow my eyes and look over at Damien. "And here I was thinking he'd done this dozens of times. You know, it's not like I'd get us all killed or something. I know the house, the neighbors. I'd know what to look for, too."

Damien exhales heavily, uncrossing his arms to rub his hands over his thighs. "The honest truth is, two-man teams work best. I trust Noah to do the job."

"But—"

He springs. Suddenly he's kneeling next to me, my chin caught in his hand, his silver gaze boring into mine. "Maxie, I have no choice. I don't plan on getting caught, but there is always a risk,

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and I would rather go with someone who has experience, even just a little, than a complete rookie.”

I continue to glare. He may have a valid point, but I’m not prepared to give ground. “There’s something to be said for knowing the lay of the land, and it seems to me that you two are the strange wolves here, not me.”

Damien slowly climbs to his feet, his eyes locked with mine, anger coloring every line of his face. “You really think this is about me muscling in on your goddamned territory?” His voice is lethal, quiet.

“I do.” There, I’d unpinned the grenade and let it roll. “This is my turf. I need to be doing something to help solve this. You can’t expect me to let you handle everything.”

“May I remind you that we’re trying to protect you?”

“And let me remind you that I am not some frail *human* female. I’m a wolf, just like you.”

He grabs the back of my chair with one hand and the edge of the table with other, looming over me, surrounding me. His hot jungle scent fills my nostrils, the heat from his hard body sending a quick jolt of lust arcing through my insides.

A quick flash in his eyes tells me that he knows exactly the kind of effect he’s having.

Bastard.

I shoot to my feet, sending the chair skittering across the floor.

“Fuck that. You know you muscled your way in here without ever asking, just taking. You wanted to find someone like yourselves. This murder just fell into your laps.” I glance over at Noah, who’s gotten awfully quiet. “Is he like this with you? Ordering you around like a child?”

He shrugs, looking more than a little uncomfortable. It seems I

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hit a bulls-eye.

“Fucking perfect.” Damien drags a hand through his hair. “I’m just trying to do a job, and you’re crucifying me for it.”

“This is not a job to me. Why can’t you understand that everything is closing in around me? God! I can’t think straight, anymore.” I shake my head, then start pacing, needing to work off some of this energy that’s building inside of me. “I mean, hell, part of me likes having you here. I feel safe. But on the other hand, I don’t know you. Christ, the only werewolf I knew prior to you two was my asshole sire.”

“So we’re just like him, is that it? A couple of assholes.” Damien’s voice is subzero cold.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.” I shove my hands in my hair, pulling the strands tight. “It’s just...” Every thought in my head is swirling like a kaleidoscope.

“It’s just what?” He folds his arms across his chest looking remote and untouchable like a mountain fortress.

“It’s all happening too fast,” I mutter, halting in front of the rear kitchen window. I stare at the shadowed reflections of my two lovers, torn between my need for them and my need to regain some control over my life. These last couple of days have been the strangest—horrible and exhilarating all at the same time. I can’t take it anymore. Tonight’s encounters with the wolves are really making me see the need to find my own strength and not depend on someone else to take care of my messes. Maybe they should go. At least for now.

“I don’t understand you, Max. You let us in, let us stay here, let us touch you, and now you don’t want it anymore. What the fuck is that about?”

My stomach churns at Damien’s harsh words.

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“Cut her some slack,” Noah says quietly.

“The hell I will.” Damien stalks up behind me, grabs my arm and whirls me to face him. “You want us gone? Say the words.”

The heat and hurt blazing in those silver depths kill me.

“For now, yeah.” My voice is a small, barely there whisper, but it hits with the force of a sledgehammer.

Damien stiffens. “Let’s go, Noah.”

I watch as he walks away, rigid, unyielding, then drop my gaze to the floor, tears burning behind my eyes.

I hear Noah get to his feet and glance up, expecting him to say something, but he’s already moving toward the hall, his back to me.

It’s for the best. At least that’s what I’ll keep telling myself.

CHAPTER 12

“How are you holding up?”

Drea’s voice on the phone is quiet, sympathetic and not what I want to hear right now. I’d rather be listening to a whisky baritone or a deep gentle bass, but the chances of that are as slim as the credit line left on my Visa.

This last week has sucked out loud. I know kicking out the wolves had been the right thing to do, but I can’t help missing them. At least I’d finally gotten my car back from Mom, even if it was caked in dog fur.

“I’m doing, I guess. You know.” I sigh. “Oh, hell, who am I kidding? I’m freaking miserable.”

“As bad or worse than when you were with them?”

“That’s the question of the decade. What I feel— Hang on a

sec.” I push the phone’s hold button and swivel to my computer to pretend to do actual work as my boss, Haley, waltzes past. I do not need a reprimand. Once she is far enough away, I pick up the call again.

“Anyway, where was I?”

“Your feelings,” Drea supplies.

“Duh.” I shake my head and lean back in my chair, wrapping and unwrapping my finger with the cord. “Yeah, what I feel for them is so very complicated. It’s nothing I’ve ever experienced. Damien’s like this wild, intense roller coaster that you want to just ride and ride ’til you’re exhausted and—”

“Excuse me,” Drea chimes in. “Did you just say ride and ride?”

“Shut up. I’m trying to be serious.”

“Okay. Got it, ma’am.”

“Drea.” My voice drops an octave.

“Fine. Shutting up, now.”

“And yes, I did say that, but it’s not what your dirty mind is thinking.” My eyes light on a blank legal pad next to the phone. Snagging a pen, I start doodling. It relaxes me, like popping bubble wrap. “I just meant that Damien is so alpha, but Noah...mmm...he’s the comfy bed you burrow into when the trip is over. He’s soothing where Damien is rough. Together they’re the perfect guy.”

“Shit, you’ve got it bad. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Fuck.” I stare up at the ceiling, thoughts roiling around in my head like a witch’s brew.

“Do you want to stay with both of them?” Drea’s question lasers straight to the heart of the problem.

My gut tightens, and the pain that had been nagging behind my eyes for the last two days roars to life, a throbbing beat hammering

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away at my brain. Things were supposed to be clearer after I kicked them out, got back my space. Instead, the waters got a hell of a lot murkier. Did I want to stay with both of them? Yeah, who wouldn't? At the same time, sleeping with two guys simultaneously is a little much. A one-night threesome can be chalked up to hedonism, every night is something else all together. New territory with no local guides.

"Yeah, I want both of them. For now, yeah." I rub my brow, willing away the pain. "Although I'll be the first to admit that it's too soon to make any kind of relationship decision. I don't even know how to define what has been going on other than sex and protection. Listen to me, I'm making this sound like some kind of *Sopranos* episode."

"You're putting this all on yourself, Max. It's not all about you," Drea scolds softly. "You haven't talked to them at all, have you?"

"No." Guilty as charged. I rub my finger along the armrest. "I haven't had the guts."

"Typical M.O. You stew about it on your own until you come up with what *you* think is the right decision for everyone. Regardless of what anyone else thinks. That's what you did with Ethan."

Her words cut deep.

A heavy sigh sounds over the line. "I love you, Max, and have your back always, but you can be one selfish bitch."

"Don't be afraid to speak your mind." My lips quirk in a half smile. Drea has some brass balls when it comes to friends and family. I hate that. And love it.

"Not when I know I'm right. Listen to your wise friend. Talk with them and quit brooding. God knows there's already enough to

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be depressed about. Hold on.”

I hear the buzz of distant conversation as she deals with whomever just walked into her office. My mind starts to wander. I could have handled Damien and Noah a lot better than I did. Telling them to get out the way I did was not one of my more shining moments.

“Max?”

The question jerks me back to the present. “Still here.”

“I’ve got to get back to work. The FNG really messed up and there are some blazes that need putting out. Of course, Ken expects me to step up to the plate like a good little baseball guy.”

“Batter up, then, Drea. Save the new guy. Haley and I will be discussing the ins and outs of the new brochure for the purchasing department this afternoon.”

“*Working nine to five...*” Drea showcases her Dolly Parton.

Laughing, I hang up, then drag myself back to the computer. I submerge myself into the waters of phone calls, orders and brochure notes, finally surfacing when my stomach growls to let me know it’s time to get some food. Shutting off the monitor, I grab my purse and exit my cubicle.

I stick my head into Haley’s office. “I’m going to lunch. You want anything?” Might as well put her in a pleasant mood before our meeting.

“Sure. Where are you going?”

“Thought I’d hit the Thompson Center. See what tantalizes my appetite.”

“Get me a veggie calzone from that Italian eatery.” She digs out a ten from her wallet and hands it to me. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Tucking the money into my bag, I stride down the aisle past the

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marketing department when an annoyingly familiar voice hits my sensitive ears.

“Sorry I wasn’t much help, Detective,” Fred says rapidly.

Detective? What the fuck?

I do an end-around to the accounting area in time to see Ostrander emerge from Fred’s little cell.

Oh, shit.

* * *

The detective’s presence rattles me, and I turn to beat a hasty retreat.

“Why, Ms. Briscoe, I had no idea you worked here.”

Escape plot foiled, I swing back slowly to see the lanky detective striding toward me, his smile all teeth like a great big blond predator.

My Beast flutters just under my skin. She recognizes the blatant challenge and wants to fight. Whatever expression showed on my face in that instant made Ostrander take a step back. I couldn’t help but offer my own toothy grin.

“Detective, what brings you to Carson Kramer? Getting into the baking business?”

“Nah. I’m here following some leads, purely fishing around.” His voice is easy with an edge. “Mind if I ask you some more questions? Kill two birds, you might say.”

I do not want to talk to this guy ever again, but there’s no help for it. “Conference room?” I hook a thumb toward the large empty room directly across from us.

He nods and waves me on. “Ladies, first.”

“I’ll meet you in there.”

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He gives me a hard look, then saunters into the chamber.

There's no way I can get my boss's lunch now. Fortunately, her assistant, Patty, chooses that moment to return from her own break. I flag her down, give her a basic gist and hand her Haley's money.

I march into the mustard-and-brown Seventies boutique and grab the nearest mud-colored chair. Ostrander has already seated himself at the head of the table. Of course.

"I've been meaning to get back to you to clarify a few things. How convenient that I should run into you like this." He reaches into his jacket and pulls out his small notebook. The sound as he flips the pages to find his place, reminds me of sails snapping in a stiff breeze. Finding what he needs, he goes over everything I told him about seeing M.E. in the club and discovering her body the following morning. He slips in a few other innocuous questions like he's trying to trip me up.

I'm getting agitated and more ravenous by the minute. I fight not to shift and bury my claws into this guy so I can eat him for lunch. The bastard doesn't really seem to be going for anything new, just flashing his badge and his balls because he can. My stomach howls.

"I'm sorry to be keeping you from your lunch." Detective Asshole tries looking sincere, but he could care less whether or not I eat.

I attempt to keep my face neutral. "That's all right. I'll get some chips later."

"I was talking to your colleague, Mr. De Lint. Were you aware that he knew the victim?"

Shock hits with the force of a wrecking ball, my fist clenching and unclenching in my lap.

He studies my face, watching my reaction. "Hmm...

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Interesting.” Ostrander scribbles something in his book, then looks at me once more. “You had no knowledge that the victim and Mr. De Lint were acquainted?”

I swallow. “No. Why would I?”

“Ms. Briscoe, I’m slowly putting together a puzzle and that means I turn over every piece, no matter how insignificant. I see that you, the victim’s neighbor, and another of her associates, work together. This is a very curious situation to me. I don’t believe in coincidence. Did you ever have occasion to interact with Mr. De Lint outside the office?”

It’s obvious he’s trolling for some proof of more intimate contact. The dirty whore button got pushed at our last interview. I want to tell him to take his attitude and shove it, but I have to cooperate. Any offense on my part will only make him come down harder on me or possibly the guys.

“Just the usual office parties.” Man, I wish Damien was here to work his mind fuck magic. This conversation would be over, and I could be chowing on something cheesy and meaty.

“No coffee dates, after-work drinks?” Ostrander persists.

I stifle a growl at the rude tone of the question. This guy is really making me mad. I take a deep breath, forcing back my anger, and focus on the question, itself.

“No, Detective.” I look him dead in the eye. “There is nothing between me and Fred beyond working for the same company. I know you find that hard to believe since I’m nothing but a big slut.”

“Your sexual proclivities mean nothing to me, Ms. Briscoe. I’m simply trying to ascertain the facts.”

Bullshit, he is.

“Do you have anything else you’d care to ask?”

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Ostrander makes a big production out of flipping through his notebook once more, making me await his grand pronouncement.

“I think that will be all, for now. I’ll be in touch if there’s anything else.” He stands, his gaze flicking over me like he’s looking at garbage. “Make sure your boyfriends are available. I may have some questions for them.”

I’ll just bet he does. Does she give good head? What’s her favorite position? “I’ll let them know, Detective.”

I remain in the chair until I can’t sense the bastard anymore. Glancing at the clock, I realize there’s only half an hour left to my lunch. I ignore my hunger and go in search of Fred. He’s in his cubicle, sweating like a sumo wrestler in a sauna, pasty skin a sick pallor. Ostrander really got to him.

I knock on the partition. “Fred.”

“What do you need?” He rubs a shaking hand over his mouth.

“I just spoke with the detective.”

Fred flinches, his eyes ready to roll up white. He’s total prey, and the scent of fear is potent. My Beast senses food. It’s all I can do to keep the predator out of my expression.

“Did he...um...say what he wanted?”

His rapid pulse reminds me of a frightened doe, and my mouth waters in anticipation. I wrap my purse strap tight around my hand, the leather creaking, threatening to tear.

“He was doing...uh, follow-up with me.” I swallow hard to keep from jumping on the desk and ripping out his throat. *Focus, Max.* My nails elongate enough to dig into my palms, the pain helping to dial back the animal. I lick my lips. “Where did you know M.E. from?”

“Who?” he squeaks.

“Mary Elizabeth Barrett. Ostrander said you knew her.”

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It seems impossible, but Fred turns even whiter. “I-I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

His denial triggers calm inside me. Something else to zero in on. “Come on, Fred. Mary Elizabeth—you know, the murder victim—was my neighbor. The detective asked me if I was aware that you knew her, and I admit that fact shocked me. He thought it was curious that we should both know her *and* work together. Evidently, he doesn’t believe in coincidences.” I glide into the space, in control now. “So I want to know how you knew my friend. It’s a simple question, Fred.” I lean over his desk, letting out just a bit of the wolf.

“It’s none of your business what I...er...talked about with the detective. Please leave.”

It’s clear I’m not going to get anywhere with him right now. There’re too many people around, and he’s too scared. If I’m not careful, he’ll shit himself or have a heart attack. “Fine. I’ll go, but I will find out how you knew my friend.”

I leave the little rabbit cowering at his desk and head out for something to fill me up before my afternoon meeting.

* * *

Damien’s voice mail picks up once more and I growl, tempted to throw the phone against the wall. I have got to tell them what happened today, but neither one of the wolves is bothering to answer. Are they just being pissy, or has something happened to them?

I glance at my watch. It’s only ten after seven. Way too early for a shift and run. Irritated, I stalk back and forth, wearing a path on my carpet. I can’t believe they’re ignoring me like this.

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Payback, I guess, for not answering their calls earlier this week. This is such a fucking mess.

Headlights shine outside, and I peek through the window to see a cruiser park in M.E.'s driveway. The conversation I had with the guys last week about getting into her house flits through my mind. Part of me wonders if they managed to do it. That train of thought gets me agitated all over again.

I grab the cordless and try both numbers once more. Nothing.

I toss the receiver on the couch and head upstairs to change out of my work clothes. Maybe getting out of the suit and into something comfortable will ease my nerves a little. Once inside my room, I grab a loose tee and some old jeans, fling them at the bed and jerk out of the confines of my fabric prison. Nearly nude, I stretch and take several huge, cleansing breaths. My mind starts to relax, my nerves not as taut.

As I change clothes sitting on the end of the bed, I try and focus on what happened earlier that day with Fred. The little porcine man knows something, I sensed it. At first, I thought he had been upset about Ostrander, but now that I really think about it, he was terrified of me, specifically. It was almost like he really was a rabbit in the presence of a wolf.

Oh fuck.

If Fred knew M.E., what if she talked to him about her suspicions? My stomach pitches, and a slick, greasy wave of nausea churns my insides. My hands white-knuckle the blanket, and a tearing sound shocks the quiet air. I look down to see myself clutching fistfuls of colorful counterpane. Damn. There went the pride of a Ralph Lauren bed set.

Gathering up the soft material, I head downstairs to toss it.

The buzz of knowing hits me before I reach the kitchen, and I

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haul ass to the mudroom in time to see Damien and Noah emerge from the trees. They bound up the stairs as I open the door.

“Where the *hell* have you two been?”

CHAPTER 13

Damien is first to the door, tension coloring every line of his solid body. Without a word or glance, he surges past, forcing me to step to the side. Noah rushes in right behind, and they are through the kitchen, heading to the living room before I even finish securing the lock and chain. Wondering just what went down, I hurry after them, my senses on high alert.

When I jog into the living room, I see them standing at either end of the large picture window, carefully scanning the street.

“What happened?” I ask, moving toward them.

“We got inside your friend’s house,” Damien says without turning around. “Problem is, someone called the cops.”

“You didn’t get anything?” I tug nervously on a lock of hair.

“We almost got caught.” Noah half turns, a grim look in his

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eyes. "It was too close."

I glance over at Damien, but he's still occupied with the scene outside. The sound of a car pulling into my driveway breaks the silence.

"Fuck," he curses, dropping the curtain back into place. "There's an unmarked out there, now."

"What's the plan?" Noah steps away from the window, crossing his huge arms over his chest.

Damien scrubs a hand over his jaw, then pins me with his gaze, his eyes alight with a speculative gleam. "Feel up to lying to the cops?"

My pulse speeds. "Absolutely." After what I went through with Ostrander today, I'm more than happy to fuck with The Man a little.

We all freeze when a lead fist threatens to beat its way inside my house.

"Basement." I jerk my head in the direction of the downstairs door and they slip silently away.

The pounding has become muffled explosions. I give the wolves another few seconds before I answer the hammer blows.

Ostrander is standing there with another detective and two uniforms.

"Think of any more questions for me?" I could put frost on windows in July.

A nasty, superior grin splits his lips as he takes an aggressive step forward. "No, Ms. Briscoe, but I have thought of a couple for your boyfriends. I'd like to speak with them." He cranes his head as if trying to spot them.

"You're out of luck tonight. They're not here."

"Funny, two men matching their descriptions were spotted

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fleeing the crime scene not twenty minutes ago.”

Rage forms in my gut at the thought of Damien and Noah being made to look like suspects. I force myself to remain calm. “Well, I can’t help you. I repeat, they’re not here.”

He glares down at me, his blue eyes wintry, the pupils like two fish frozen in the ice. “Yeah? Mind if I take a look around, confirm that statement?” He slaps his hand flat on the door, keeping me from closing it in his face. I could snap that arm like a carrot, but I don’t want to be arrested.

My Beast stirs inside, pissed at the intrusion. I get in his face. “I do mind. Unless you have a warrant, stay out.”

Anger turns his features to stone. “I’m taking note of your uncooperative attitude and how it’s impeding my investigation. I intend to have my answers, Ms. Briscoe, and if necessary, I will come back with a warrant.”

“You do that.” My voice is hard as a diamond.

Ostrander rakes me with a long, derisive look, then turns to head down the stairs. I watch until he and the other detective drive away. The uniforms remain behind in their squad car. I can feel them eyeing me, their anger evident. Shaking my head, I close the door, shutting out the world.

“Tried to force his way in, didn’t he?”

I turn at Damien’s question. His gaze is riveted on me as he strolls down the hall, Noah looming after him, a giant shadow.

“Bastard picked the wrong bitch to try and roll.” Shoving a hand through my hair, I walk into the living room, the guys trailing behind. Plopping on the couch, I tuck myself into a corner and stare at the empty space where my coffee table had been before I’d damaged it. “Asshole threatened to get a warrant if I don’t become more cooperative.”

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“Fucker,” Damien growls.

My gaze slides to him. His back is to me, arms outstretched, palms pressed to either side of a large window that faces south and the woods. “He just might get that warrant, Max.”

“Are you serious?” Needles of dread poke at my insides. If it gets that far, I have a whole hell of a lot to explain.

Tension holds sway over the room. The shit is hip-deep, piling high, and we haven’t done anything wrong.

“What the hell am I going to do?” I whisper to no one in particular.

“I am not about to let some judgmental prick hassle you.” Damien slaps the window frame. Fortunately, the blow is not strong enough to cause damage. He turns, eyes hard and bright. “Noah, looks like you and I are going to have a sit-down with this asshole.”

“Absolutely.” The big guy flashes a feral grin from his sprawled position in the easy chair next to me. “I’d like nothing better.”

“Uh...” I scoot around against the cushions, pushing myself just a little higher in the seat. “Before you Big Bad Wolves go charging off to put the ass panda in his place, you should know that he came to my office today.”

Simultaneous expletives pierce the air as both of them laser their sights on me.

“What did he want with you?” Damien grinds out, teeth bared.

“Wasn’t there to talk to me. He *claimed* he didn’t even know I worked there.” I tug at a piece of thread on one of the throw pillows, purposefully not looking at either wolf. Their testosterone is about to drown me.

“Maxie,” Noah rumbles. “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

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When I finally look up, the pair appear ready to eat steel. “He was there to talk with Fred De Lint.”

“Who the fuck is that?” Damien stalks over to me and grabs my chin, forcing my gaze to his. I feel him pushing against my mind like he’s trying to dominate me.

I attempt to jerk free. “Knock that shit off!” I snarl.

His hand drops, his expression softening a little. “Sorry.” He backs away to sit on the other chair. “You were saying.”

I study him for a couple of seconds.

“What?” he snaps, reminding me just a bit of the beast from an old fairy tale.

“Fred is my corpulent little nemesis from accounting. According to Ostrander, he knew Mary Elizabeth.”

“She was your friend, and you had no clue she knew this guy?” Noah asks, leaning forward, curiosity lighting his features.

“No. Caught me completely off guard. In fact, Ostrander ambushed me as I was heading out to lunch.”

“Shit,” Noah breathes.

“Tell me about it.” I run through the whole thing for them, from the moment I was caught by Ostrander until I nearly went tooth and claw on Fred. “I’m sure the little oinker knows something, but he’s not talking. The next time I see him, though...”

“You can’t do anything if he’s too scared. Scared people clam up quicker than a church meeting when a hooker walks in.” Damien’s got this look on his face like he’s processing and planning. “Could M.E. and Fred have been introduced at an office party?”

“Not one of ours. I’ve been to all them the entire five years I’ve worked there. Besides, I don’t picture Fred as having a social life.

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At least, not one that involves interspecies contact.”

Noah barks out a short laugh. “You really have a high opinion of this guy, don’t you?”

I snort. “Don’t get me started.”

Damien climbs to his feet and starts to prowl the room. He halts before he gets ten feet and whirls around, his eyes gleaming like a lawyer who’s just found a loophole. “What about that class you said M.E. was attending? Could they be linked through that somehow?”

“Oh, my God.” I shoot to my feet, tentacles of sick knowledge writhing along my nerves. “You think? Holy shit!” Hugging myself, I walk around, jumpy with shock. It’s like being a Maury Povich mom finding out if her boyfriend is her baby’s daddy from a DNA test. “That has to be the connection, has to be. It makes a twisted kind of sense, you know. M.E. had her geek tendencies, and Fred, well, he has more than just tendencies in that direction.”

“I’ll hack into the school’s database, see if I can get the roster.” He shoots a look at Noah. “The car’s on the other side of town.” Slapping his hands on his pockets, he unearths a set of keys and unhooks a flash drive. “Maxie, I’m going to need your laptop.”

“Sure.” I whirl and rush up the stairs, so glad that the wolves are back. I’ve been disconnected and lonely without them. When I first saw them tonight, coming out of the trees, my immediate instinct was to throw myself at them, to rub against their bodies, wrap their scent around me like a big warm blanket, then fuck them senseless. When I ended things with Ethan, it was agony, but nothing like I felt when I threw out Damien and Noah. I don’t know what kind of relationship the three of us have, and it scares the hell out of me, but I can’t help but be happy they’re here.

Shoving away my train of thought, I snag my sleek little red

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machine from my messenger bag and hurry back down. I leave Damien and Noah to get their hacker on and amble into the kitchen to start washing my breakfast dishes. If I sit out there with the two of them, I'll run off at the mouth and irritate them.

As I dry my cereal bowl, I wander into the mudroom and look through a window at the darkened trees. My animal senses hone in on movement in the distant shadows. There's someone out there coming toward my house.

I set the stoneware on the washing machine, drop the towel beside it and prowl to the door, keeping the person in sight. The hair rises on the back of my neck, my nails lengthen and my lupine vision comes to the fore. It's definitely a man. As quietly as possible, I open the door and slip out into the night. I smell him instantly and trot across the lawn. Silent and swift, I pick my way to some thick underbrush and crouch down.

"What are you doing here?" I growl as I spring out in front of him.

Ethan stumbles back with a yelp, tripping over some deadfall to land on his ass. Papers he'd evidently been carrying, fly everywhere.

"Jesus, Maxie," he wheezes. "What the hell is the matter with you, sneaking up on me like that? I think I'm having a heart attack or something." He swipes a hand over his mouth, and my preternatural vision allows me to see the harsh look he shoots at me.

"Sorry." I reach out to help him stand and start yanking him to his feet effortlessly, forgetting all about masking my strength. What the hell is wrong with me? I freeze and force myself to do no more than provide a steadying hand as he hauls himself up the rest of the way.

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He sucks in a breath and remains silent.

“Are you all right?” I venture after a minute.

“Um, yeah. I...” He shuffles and toes the ground in awkward silence.

Shit. I can tell by his scent that he’s wary of me. That hurts. I should have controlled myself better. “Look, Eth...” I start, then stop.

“Hey, you took me by surprise is all. I wanted to, ah, talk to you about some notes and stuff I found with M.E.’s things. We got access to her house.”

A wave of sympathy breaks through me, and I step toward him, reaching out to twine my fingers with his. “Oh, my God, how are you?”

He huffs out a breath, moving closer. His sadness seems to mute the initial uneasiness. “Not good. It was—”

I never get to hear the rest of his response. Everything in me tightens, and I wheel around as Damien and Noah emerge from the darkness, two hulking shadows.

“What’s going on, Maxie?” Damien asks. There’s an edge to his voice, like he’s pissed I’m out here, but glad I’m in one piece.

“We heard you leave the house.” Noah’s statement is softer, his concern more pronounced.

I hadn’t meant to worry them. Opening my mouth to say something, I watch Ethan brush past me.

“I came here to talk with Maxie,” he says.

“Ethan Barrett.” Damien says the name slowly, like he’s tasting the syllables. “Maxie’s former fiancé.”

“Yes.” Ethan stiffens. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem, yet.” The wolf prowls toward him, forcing Ethan to take a step back.

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“Look.” Ethan holds out a hand. “I’m not sure what’s going on here, and I don’t think I want to know. The thing is, I really need to speak with her. Alone.”

Wrong thing to say as both wolves subtly shift closer to Ethan. They’re reacting as if he’s invading their territory. To my ex’s credit, he’s right there with them, not giving ground. If they were human, he’d be in their weight class.

“Alone?” The rigid civility of Damien’s tone barely conceals the bite beneath.

“Yes, alone. What I have to say to her is none of your business.”

Tension fires around us, fueled by testosterone. I’ve had enough.

“Knock it off.”

The three guys look at me.

“I’m sick of all this chest-beating bullshit.” I push up into the wall of pecs, glaring at each of them in turn to make myself clear. “Ethan came here to talk to *me*. You don’t like it, then you’re welcome to leave. And you”—I jab a finger at Ethan— “step back and stop antagonizing.”

“Maxie, wait.” Ethan starts

I hold up a hand and turn away. “I’m going inside. I’m done.”

“I only came out here because you’d left the house.” Damien’s accusation stops me cold, and I turn to look at him. “Remember what happened the last time you were out here alone.”

I shrug. “Nothing. I went for a run *last* night and *no-thing* happened.”

“What!” The Wolf hovers just under Damien’s features.

I’ve just pressed the wrong button. *Way to go, Max.*

“Damien.” Noah puts a hand on the smaller wolf’s shoulder,

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but the alpha throws it off with a snarl and stalks toward me.

Unfortunately, my ex gets in his way. “Don’t you touch her,” Ethan yells and grabs Damien’s arm.

Damien starts to throw him off, but as he begins to raise Ethan off the ground, he seems to think better of it. I hear Damien draw a deep, shaky breath, then appears to rein in his preternatural strength and merely shoves Ethan to the ground. Hard.

“You son of a bitch.” I lunge at Damien, claws and fangs riding just below the surface.

He catches me before I can cause damage. Wrenching a hand through my hair, he forces me to meet his gaze. “I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

I snarl and struggle.

He squeezes me tighter, making it hard for me to breathe. “Stop it,” he hisses softly in my ear. “Think about what you’re doing. We can’t slip like this in front of Ethan.”

Through the red haze clouding my vision, I see the truth in his eyes and go slack in his arms, letting the animal fall away. He sets me down, then retreats into the shadows, heading for the house. Noah remains, staring hard at me.

“What?” I snap.

He shakes his head, then turns to follow Damien.

I jog over to Ethan, dropping to my knees next to him. Combing my hands through his hair, I begin searching for lumps.

He shoves at me. “I’m fine.”

I sit back on my haunches as he struggles to sit.

“Some friends you have there.”

“Yeah. Sorry about their testosterone rush.” I push to my feet. “Let’s get you inside where we can talk.” I hold out a hand.

He waves off the gesture and climbs to his feet. Swaying a bit,

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he looks around. “Shit, where are her notebooks and papers? I can hardly see a damned thing out here.”

“Here, let me help.” As I easily grab the first sheet of paper, I realize that I can’t use my werewolf vision to help Ethan collect the scattered materials. I force myself to slow down and pattern my actions after his fumbling attempts to recover the paper in the dark. After an interminable amount of time, we succeed in gathering all the stuff.

Shuffling the papers in my hands, I look up at Ethan. “Let’s go.”

He doesn’t move, and I get a niggling of fear near my heart. Did Damien, Noah and I reveal too much of our werewolf selves to Ethan just now? I know we slipped, but I had hoped Ethan hadn’t noticed. I start to panic. Ethan would never understand about me and the guys. God, I hope I’m overreacting.

I turn away, needing to create some distance between us.

“Wait, Maxie.”

I stop, every muscle stiff in anticipation of harsh words.

“I have questions, and I need answers. The police are useless, so I’m here to talk to you. I think you can help me.” He pauses and takes a deep, shaky breath. “I read M.E.’s notes, well some of them anyway, but enough to know that she suspected there was something different about you. Then I got to thinking about the way you broke up with me. I always suspected there was a deep-seated reason for it. I never pressed you, but now...now I think M.E.’s suspicions about you, and your break-up with me, and her death, may all be related somehow.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Look, I don’t think for one instant that you had anything to do with her death directly, but if you know anything that can help me... “

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I sigh and pivot to look at him, but remain silent.

“Maxie, I know that your friend started to pick up my two-hundred-pound body like I weighed nothing more than a football. Oh, he caught himself, and I’m sure he thought I wouldn’t notice anything weird. Just like I’m betting you think I didn’t catch how you started helping me to my feet a few minutes ago. And I know that last week, you made it across my old bedroom in the blink of an eye. So there you have it.”

I give a weak chuckle. “Damn, thought you were too busy with Lori.”

“Not enough. Something’s going on with you...and your friends...and I want to know what it is.”

Tension yawns between us, wide as the Grand Canyon. Fear and nerves careen through my insides. I’m terrified to tell him the truth for the same reason I had been last year—I don’t want to see him look at me like a monster. And the truth involves more than me, now. I have to consider Damien and Noah, and this police investigation.

I start walking toward the house, not sure what to say to him. “Come on. Let’s go inside.” I have no choice but to see how this mess plays out.

* * *

The kitchen is dark and empty as Ethan and I make our way into the house. We head down the hall to the golden light of the living room. Damien and Noah are bending over my desk, studying what looks like a list. I wonder if they’ve managed to get the class roster. They look up as we come in, and the hurt, jealousy and anger in their eyes threaten to drown me.

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“I’m sorry for my part in what happened out there.” Ethan immediately takes charge, and I watch as Damien stares at my ex’s outstretched hand. “I don’t want any more trouble, okay?”

Ethan has more spine than I thought, and I can’t help but be impressed and a little bit anxious. For an instant, Damien looks as though he’s going have Ethan for a late night snack, but then he extends his hand to the man.

“Sorry about earlier. You all right?”

The seven signs of the Apocalypse run through my brain. Damien has taken that alpha stick out of his ass and apologized. I catch a brief look from Noah, who looks as though he’s read my mind.

“Right. Uh, yeah. I’m fine.”

I make the introductions among the three.

Ethan nods to the wolves. “Look, Damien, Noah, I’m just going to talk to Maxie right now.”

“You might want to talk with all of us, Ethan.” I put a hand on his arm. “Damien’s a private eye and Noah works with him. They’ve been helping me figure out what happened to Mary Elizabeth.”

Ethan’s eyes widen as he sucks in a breath. Then he looks wildly at the three of us. “You guys are investigating my sister’s murder? Is that even legal? Why aren’t you working with the cops?” He steps back, fury and shock plain on his face. “What the hell is going on?”

“I’ve been looking for your sister a long time.” Damien moves forward, a wolf cornering prey. “I heard about the brutal attack she endured in high school.”

“Excuse me?” Ethan gets right up into Damien’s face. “That attack was one of the most horrible things that ever happened to

her. Why would you want to bring all that up again? God damn it.”

“Sit the fuck down and shut the fuck up,” Damien growls and backs Ethan into the couch. My ex stumbles, then drops onto the cushions.

I start forward, but Noah grabs me. I glare at him, but he only tightens his hold, giving me a stern look.

“Now”—Damien looms over Ethan—“I’ll tell you why your sister’s case interested me so much. You’re going to listen without speaking another fucking word until I’m done. You’re also going to remain silent about what you hear and not utter a thing about it to another human being. Do I make myself clear?”

Ethan stares hard at the big wolf, the mental debate playing across his face, then he nods.

“Good.” Damien launches into the history of his investigation.

As my former love listens, I watch anger, hurt, and a whole host of other emotions play across his features. I wonder how he’s going to handle all this. It’s enough to drive even the strongest person bat crazy.

Ethan remains quiet after Damien winds up his tale. He’s folded in on himself, like a marionette tossed in a steamer trunk. In spite of the fierce looks from Damien and Noah, I sit next to Ethan and rub his back. Like old times, he curls himself into me, accepting my attempt to comfort him. I draw him into my arms.

“Jesus, Maxie. Werewolves? I mean, I don’t... I can’t... Shit! It’s impossible. I can’t wrap my mind around this. Oh God... This, this psycho killed my baby sister because he thought she was one. No, no. Nooo.” The word ends on a broken sound, and he slides his arms tight about me, burying his face into my neck.

“Shh...” I rock him gently, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. My eyes burn, and I glance up to find both wolves watching

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me.

Ethan finally pulls back, his eyes red. “I never thought such a thing could be possible, but after what Damien just told me... Tell me, Maxie, are you some kind of, of...”

I take the plunge. “Werewolf,” I finish. “Yes.” I glance over the top of Ethan’s head and meet Damien’s eyes. He gives me a slight nod. I know he’s given me permission to tell Ethan about him and Noah. I return the nod, and the pair leave the room.

Ethan’s breath grows rapid as he shifts to put some distance between us. “Christ.” He shoves his fingers through his hair, then pushes to his feet. He prowls back and forth like an agitated cat. “Is that why you broke up with me?”

I nod.

“Oh Jesus, Jesus.” He walks over to the side windows, staring at his reflection in the dark. “Do your friends in there, know? Wait, of course they do. They’re wolves, too. That’s what that business outside was all about, protecting the secret.” He pauses, continuing to stare into the glass. “I’m taking your silence as a yes.” He leans his head against the cool glass, his hands gripping the sill. “I loved you so much, you were my life. How could you not say one thing, not a hint.” He whirls around, his eyes hot and accusing.

“I was afraid to tell you. Didn’t want to see you look at me in fear and disgust.” I jump to my feet. How many times had I had nightmares about this moment?

“You were afraid to trust in me, in us. So you just broke it off with no thought for me at all.”

“No! I...I...” I fade out, unable to say anything. He is right. I hug myself and turn away from his recriminating gaze.

“And I have to find this all out after my sister is slaughtered? Maybe if you’d come clean then...”

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“Shut up!” I blaze, unable to stand this anymore. “How could you think my silence with you got M.E. killed?”

The fury leeches out of his face so fast, I’m reminded of water pouring onto an over-dry houseplant. “I’m sorry, Max,” he whispers. He holds out his arms, and I move quickly into his embrace. “I didn’t mean it, sweet girl, I swear,” he rasps into my hair. “I’m just... Everything is so...”

“I know, I’m sorry, too. Sorry I didn’t say anything.” My words trail off into sobs.

We stand there holding onto one another, two survivors, trembling as misery, regret and so many pent up emotions sweep through us.

CHAPTER 14

Ethan draws in a shaky breath, wiping his eyes. “That was a long time coming.”

“Yeah.” The storm has passed, leaving me hollow and a little lighter inside for the first time in nearly a year. I bend to snag a tissue from the box on the end table.

“What’s it like?”

His soft question startles me. “What?” I dab my eyes.

“What’s it like? You know, being a werewolf?”

“Like anything else, it has its good and bad.” A niggling thought slithers across the back of my mind. “Do you want to know how I became what I am?”

He nods. “Only if you want to tell me, though. If it’s too horrible then don’t, you know, relive it on my account.”

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Do I want to tell him? Not really. Then again, I've never gone through every minute, gory detail before, not even with Mom or Drea. Maybe it's time I did.

"All right." I wave him to the couch, then sit beside him. I take a deep breath, running my palms over my thighs, nervous energy spilling through me. I glance over, meeting Ethan's steady gaze.

"Becoming a werewolf is the most painful, horrible thing you can imagine. It's... Shit, this is hard." I haul in a deep breath.

He twines my fingers with his. "It's okay, I'm right here."

I stare down at our linked hands and find the courage to take Ethan through the entire story. I tell him everything from the moment I met Larry, through the attack.

"Fifteen!" His hands grip mine in a sudden, strong hold. "You've been this way since you were fifteen? Oh, Christ." He pulls back to drape an arm over my shoulder, hugging me to his body, then rests his chin on top of my head.

"There are others who were even younger when they were changed." My mind flits briefly to Damien. "There are no rules or anything, you know. As far as I know, this is like any other random act of violence."

He shakes his head, and I wait to hear if he's going to say more before I continue, taking him through my first full moon and everything that Mom and Drea have done to help. It's so freeing to finally, finally be able to say all this out loud.

I finish my story by telling him how I met Damien and Noah, leaving out all the sex details, of course. When I look at Ethan, he has this out-of-body expression that has me a little concerned.

"Ethan?" I run my fingers down his jaw. "You in there?"

"Yeah, it's just so much. How do you deal with this? I would go nuts."

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“I just do, what choice do I have? Eat a silver bullet?”

“Don’t even joke.” He pushes up from the couch and starts to walk in circles around the sofa. Ethan does his best thinking on his feet, and I just know he’s got more questions.

He stops dead in front of me, dropping to his knees, a curious light in his eyes. “Can I see?”

“See what?” Comprehension dawns before he answers. “Oh. You want to see my werewolf form.”

“Only if the transformation isn’t violent and messy like in all the movies.”

I smile. “No, nothing like that. You’d be surprised.”

“So, can I?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want you to run screaming.”

He rubs my knees. “I won’t.”

“You say that now, but it could happen. My own mother stays far away when I change.”

“Come on,” he cajoles.

“I’d listen to her, Barrett.” Damien is leaning against the wall in the entrance to the living room, arms folded across his chest. “Don’t try to talk her into it for your own satisfaction.”

“I don’t think that’s what he means.” I push to my feet and go to Damien. His silver gaze burns into mine, The depth of loyalty and love in his eyes touch places deep inside, warming me, making me feel safe.

“Are you really sure about this?” He glances over at Ethan, then leans close to me, lowering his voice. “His sister was murdered because of what we are.”

I shiver, cold to the marrow at this reminder. “It’s something I think I have to do.”

He opens his arms and I step into them, rubbing my face into

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his neck, drawing his hot wild scent into me.

I feel Noah approach and hold out my hand to pull him to us, not caring that my former fiancé is still in the room. I hold on to Damien, Noah sliding his huge arms around both of us, and we cling together in a three-way embrace. After another minute or so, I turn in their arms to face Ethan, who has developed an acute interest in my desk.

He looks over, heat coloring his cheeks. “Sorry. I didn’t want to intrude and didn’t know how to leave without disturbing, you know.” He flicks his hand at us, clearing his throat.

“It’s okay. Do you still want to do this?”

His brown gaze is sharp and steady as he nods.

I slip out of Damien’s arms. “Let’s go into the basement. There’s no risk of anyone seeing something they shouldn’t.”

“Okay. Are they coming, too?” Ethan gestures at the wolves.

“Yes.” Damien’s tone is implacable.

* * *

We troop down the stairs, my stomach jumping like a field of grasshoppers. I’ve confessed everything to Ethan, but here is the litmus test—how he handles seeing me in my werewolf form.

“Jesus,” he wheezes, jerking to a halt as we round the staircase. “What the hell is that for?”

“This”—I point to the steel bar door—“is where I spend the night of each full moon.” I walk into the room and turn to face the three of them.

Ethan looks at me, his eyes wide as dinner plates. “You mean those stories about shape shifters and the moon are right?”

Damien opens his mouth, but I answer instead. “To a point,

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yeah. Our transformation isn't tied to the lunar cycle in that we can change at will, but our urge to shift and all the insipient hungers are super strong at the time of the full moon." I start to strip.

"What are you doing?" he bursts out.

"You didn't think she was going to change in her clothes, did you?" Noah looks incredulous.

My ex scrubs a hand over his face, looking a bit sheepish. "Yeah, er, no. I mean, I don't know."

"Ready?" I draw his attention to me.

He looks at me for a long moment, those chocolate eyes boring into mine. We are about to cross a huge boundary and my insides are buzzing. He doesn't have to nod or say a word. It's all right there in his face.

I let go, feeling the champagne bubble burst of the Change course through me, faster and faster like water right before a rolling boil. My skeleton grows, my muscles expand, black fur pouring over my skin like fast forward on an old VHS tape.

I blink down at Ethan, his face a combination of shock, wonder and horror. He stands frozen, like an ice storm has blown into my basement and crystallized him in this moment.

"Oh, my God," he breathes, when life finally returns to his body. "Maxie." He starts forward, then catches himself, as though he's starting to cross the street and remembers at the last second there is oncoming traffic. "Are you really in there?"

"It's okay." Damien puts a hand on Ethan's shoulder and gives him a push. "She can understand you. It's just too difficult for the lupine mouth to form words for her to speak."

I make a soft noise in my throat to try and let Ethan know that it is okay to approach me, to touch me even. He comes closer, his gaze running over me like he can't decide just where to look. I

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hold out my paws, pads up, and I sough a breath of air as he runs his hands over the leathery skin, tracing the lines and indentations like a blind person “seeing” a face. His touch moves to my claws, slowly feeling his way along their razor sharpness.

“I never imagined.” At last he looks up, and our eyes meet. I see a little fear in his expression, but I can find no hint of disgust or horror. He reaches up to run his hand along my muzzle, and I keep my jaws closed so only my longest front fangs are visible. He’s careful to avoid those. I bend my head to him, and he scratches my ears in an automatic gesture, like one would with a friend’s dog. He jumps back with a nervous laugh when I make sound of pleasure.

Noah grins. “Ear scratching rocks.”

Ethan throws him a dubious look, like the big guy’s just given him too much information about me.

The big guy shrugs. “I’m just saying.”

Ethan turns his attention back to me. “Can you change back now?” He speaks in that deliberate tone people use on the less intelligent of the human race, apparently forgetting I can understand him.

The tape reverses, every hair, bone and muscle going back to its normal human state. I stand naked in the cold of the basement, goose bumps covering my skin, my nipples hardening. Ethan is still standing in front of me, his jaw slack.

“Okay, show’s over.” Damien sidles in between us, like a stag warning off a young buck. “Let’s take this back upstairs.”

* * *

“I obviously can’t take my sister’s notes and stuff to the

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police,” Ethan says, pinning Damien with a hard look. We’d spent the last half hour or so going over everything Ethan had found out from the police, and were starting in on the stuff he’d brought from his sister’s house. “They’ll just think she was crazy, and I don’t want that. They might even decide to check out Maxie just because she was M.E.’s friend.” He pushes up from the couch and wanders over to the desk where some of M.E.’s notebooks and papers are stacked. Rifling through the pile, he tugs out a red ledger. “When I looked through this, I was stunned. None of it made any sense, but now I know she was really on to something.” He tosses the wire-bound tablet to Damien.

The alpha flips open the notebook and starts reading through the pages. “Shit,” he breathes.

“What?” Fear cuts a notch in my spine.

Ethan walks over and hands me the rest of the material from the stack. “Here. She was hanging out with some guy named Fred De Lint, apparently. He was a classmate, I guess.”

I look at Damien, who nods. “We confirmed it with the class roster before you came back in the house.”

I freeze, thinking back to Ostrander’s visit to my office. He’d been meeting with Fred. Now I know why he’d linked Fred with M.E. Again, I wonder how much Fred knows about me. If M.E. had had her suspicions, thinking I was “different” somehow, what did Fred think?

My hands shake as I set the pile of paper on my lap and start pouring over the scrawled notes and crude, surreal pictures. My eyes burn, and the sensation of going into freefall swamps me as I find a picture of what appears to be my face drawn on a upright, dog-looking thing.

I gasp, the notebook dropping from my nerveless fingers.

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Damien and Noah are instantly there, holding me tight, supporting my body before I keel over. “Ohgodohgodohgod,” I moan into Noah’s broad chest. “She *knew*.” With a whimper, I burrow deeper into my lovers. It is one thing to wonder if M.E. might have had her suspicions about me and quite another to be confronted with her speculations in black and white.

“Maxie.” Ethan touches my knee.

I turn to look at him, my cheek pressed to Noah’s heart.

“No one will *ever* find out anything from me. I don’t know what my sister intended with all this, but I do know she loved you and never would have used something like this to harm you.”

He’s probably right, but I feel more exposed now than I did when I was standing naked in front of him downstairs.

“Barrett,” Damien rumbles. “I’m keeping these. There’re some things I’d want to check, including following up on some of your sister’s classmates.”

“I don’t want the material. It’s all yours.”

Damien strokes a hand through my hair and kisses the top of my head. “We’ll get past this, Maxie. You’ll see.”

I twist around to face him. The promise in his eyes is absolute.

* * *

Ethan and I are silent as I drive him back to his parents’ house. I’m grateful for this because my senses are still shaky. I pull in behind his car and turn off the motor. Leaning my arms on the steering wheel, I stare out the window. Sorrow settles over me. I’m not sure how to say good-bye.

“Thank you,” he whispers, placing his warm hand over my wrist.

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I turn my head, my eyes burning. “You, too.”

A sad half-smile lifts the corner of his mouth. I gaze deeply into his eyes and see my thoughts reflected there. Both of us are trying to recapture years’ worth of memories in a single moment—when we met, our first kiss, his proposal...all of it.

“We had a lot of good times, didn’t we?” He drags a finger down the bridge of my nose.

I nod, unable to form words.

His expression grows serious. “I should really count on the police, but in my gut I know that justice for my baby sister is going to come from you and your new friends.”

My eyes widen, and I open my mouth to refute his claim.

“Shh.” He brushes a thumb across my chin. “Don’t say anything. I’m never going to really understand all of this...the how, the why. I *will* keep your secret, know that. No one, not my parents, not Lori, *no one* will ever hear a word from me.”

I look at him, amazed at his acceptance and wondering how I could have been so wrong about him in the past. With a sob, I wrap my arms around him and hold on, inhaling his warm scent. We cling to each other for a long time, then we draw apart.

Tears glitter in his eyes, making them shine in the pale moonlight. He touches his forehead to mine and presses a quick kiss to my lips. “Good bye, sweet girl,” he whispers, then climbs out of the car and out of my life.

CHAPTER 15

Damien and Noah are right where I had left them, pouring over M.E.'s notebooks and what looks like several computer printouts. Their gazes zero in on me.

“Hey.” My greeting is barely a whisper.

“You should see this stuff, Max,” Damien remarks. “I think we all could benefit from taking this class. Looks like the teacher knows more than we do about werewolves.” He pauses, studying me with kind eyes. “Are you all right?” He sets aside whatever he’d been reading and climbs to his feet, Noah not far behind.

I shrug. “I will be. I just...” I stand there, drinking in their presence like water. Need surges through me, fast and furious, the need to touch, the need to *control*. A picture of Damien chained for my pleasure in the basement flashes through my mind. I shudder as

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a hot thrill washes over me, my nipples hardening to rigid peaks, moisture gathering deep down.

My purse and keys drop to the floor.

“Maxie?” Noah starts forward.

I ignore him and hurry to the basement, ripping at my clothes as I go. The knob comes off in my hand as I yank open the door. Cursing, I toss the little brass thing toward the kitchen and wrench my tee over my head, flinging it behind me as I jog down the stairs.

Damien and Noah are at my heels when I hit bottom. I tear off my bra and start jerking at the zipper on my jeans. I glance up to see the wolves looking at me, spellbound.

“Get naked,” I order, shoving my pants and underwear down my legs. I kick out of the fabric pile, eager for skin-to-skin contact.

The guys have only removed their shirts. In my fevered opinion, that’s enough.

Damien grunts and staggers back as I leap on him, fisting my hands in his hair, crushing his mouth under mine. Feeding from his lips, I wrap my legs tight around him and push my breasts against his chest, undulating to drag my nipples across the firm muscles and quivering flesh.

His rough hands squeeze my ass, kneading and massaging, one finger slipping down to trace my crease.

I stake my claim on him with a sharp bite to his lower lip, drawing blood. The animal inside me rises as I taste the sweet coppery fluid. Slowly, I rub my lips over the wound, painting my mouth with the red essence.

With a sigh, I pull back just enough to nuzzle my cheek along Damien’s jaw. I catch sight of Noah, standing behind us, waiting patiently to join our pleasure. I reach out, tugging him closer and

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behind Damien. He presses his broad chest to the shorter wolf's back, drawing a low moan from the alpha.

I snag my hand around Noah's neck, forcing him to me over our lover's shoulder. Our mouths meld in a raw, hungry kiss. Noah feeds from me, licking Damien's blood, taking me deeper into a dark kaleidoscope of passion.

Not to be left out, Damien sinks his teeth into me. Noah swallows my cry, his tongue twining with mine in a melting, lingual dance.

The desire to dominate, to bend these wolves to my will, seizes every fiber of my being. I shove away from them, sliding down Damien's hard body.

With a slow smile, I crook my finger at the pair, waltzing to the small room I use on the nights of a full moon. I open the steel bar door and sway inside the space, padding across the cool nylon mats to the chains bolted into the floor. I turn to face them. Gliding my hands up my curves, I cup my breasts, rubbing them slow and easy, fingers plucking the hard tips. I roll my head back, savoring my touch, watching my wolves through my lashes.

"Come here," I beckon, giving my nipples a strong pinch that sends a streak of heat straight to my pussy.

Damien strides through the door first.

I laugh as he seizes and lifts me just enough so my breasts are even with his mouth. With teeth and tongue he teases, tastes. My eyelids flutter on a gasp as he latches on to a nipple, sucking hard, his tongue trilling against the distended flesh. I spear my hand in his hair, holding him tight, and ride the sensation, shivering in his grip.

Damien growls over my flesh, then whips his head around.

Noah has moved behind him. My attention is riveted as he

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slides his big hands over Damien's sculpted abs, across the broad pecs to play with the reddish nipples.

I'm not the only one looking to take some control.

"Noah," Damien warns, but there's no real heat behind his words.

I take advantage of the momentary distraction and wiggle out of Damien's grasp. Noah fastens his big hands around Damien's upper arms before the alpha wolf can utter a protest, holding him fast.

Picking up where Noah left off, I scrape my nails over Damien's thrumming flesh, trailing pink scratches in my wake.

Damien sucks in a breath, dropping his head onto the broad shoulder behind him.

Noah leans down to mouth Damien's nape, working his way to the spot where neck and shoulder meet. He sinks his teeth into the flesh, drawing a deep, primitive noise from Damien.

An arc of heat spears through me at the sound, and I bury my face in Damien's firm chest, sliding my cheek in the whorls of crinkly brown curls to revel in his hot jungle scent. I work my teeth over a beaded reddish nipple, then latch onto it, sucking it hard against the roof of my mouth.

Damien grunts, his hand fisting in my hair to me keep right there.

I need to mark him as mine.

My teeth elongate, and I bite on the hard disc until I taste his blood once more. A bestial roar rings out. Damien's grip on my hair becomes painful. A small, impatient cry escapes, and I reach down blindly to grab his belt, my fingers tangling with Noah's. I glance up to see a roguish look in the beta's eyes, and together we work the leather strip, tugging it open. I slap the big wolf away to

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tackle the button fly, myself.

Caressing the firm bulge behind the denim, I give a little squeeze.

“Shit!” Damien wheezes, arching up into my touch.

Slipping the metal discs open, one by one, I inhale the scents of man, wolf and sex. His cock throbs beneath the cotton briefs, his arousal sending coils of lust spiraling around my veins. I yank down his clothing until his erection bobs free and grasp the veined shaft, pumping in deliberate, even strokes.

“Fuck.” Damien pushes his hips toward me.

I keep stroking, the sensual strain on Damien’s face spurring me to rub my thumb over the weeping, plum-colored cap and dip my thumb into the slit. His breath hisses through clenched teeth. I slow my movements, careful not to take him too close to the edge.

Movement catches my eye and I see Noah step out of his own clothes, his mouth still working on Damien’s neck and shoulder, one hand still holding tight to the shorter wolf’s bicep. His arm jerks as he tugs on his cock, a slight wet sound ringing out as he slaps it against Damien’s ass.

Damien bucks against Noah’s big frame.

My moment has come. Bending, I grasp the chains and quickly snap the thick manacles onto Damien, connecting him to the huge bolt in the floor.

He jerks out of his sensual haze. “What the hell?” Pulling half-heartedly at them, he looks at me with a faintly amused expression. “You want to be on top or something?”

“Or something.” I stand on my toes and nip his chin. “You see, Noah and I want a little role reversal tonight. It’s time you relinquish control.”

Surprise flashes in his eyes.

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Noah reaches under Damien's arm and forces the wolf to look at him. "Do you trust us?"

Damien's breath quickens. "Yes."

With that one syllable, a chasm of raw, churning emotion opens inside me. This strong, dominant male is going to submit himself to our care and pleasure, let himself be taken over.

Noah stares at Damien for long moments as if waiting for him to change his mind. When there is no contradiction, Noah's gaze swings to me, and the longing in those blue depths sears itself on my heart.

I reach up, placing a hand on each of their jaws and bring them in for a three-way kiss. Our lips and tongues blend together, caressing, exploring. The heat builds as we savor each other, letting our hands roam over buttocks, thighs, anywhere we can touch.

Damien's erection rubs against my belly, leaving a moist trail over my throbbing flesh. I break the kiss. We look at each other, chests heaving, muscles trembling with eager fire. Noah and I move in tandem to help Damien remove the rest of his clothes.

Our alpha male is a bound god, the lines of his body ready for the challenge, his eyes daring us to do our best.

I drink in every muscle, every bit of firm flesh, deciding what to do first. Meanwhile, Noah walks out of the room, returning with a wrought-iron, straight-back chair from the pair I have stowed under the stairs. He sets it front of me, a glint of dark pleasure in his eyes. I swallow hard.

A hot rush of excitement washes through me, wet heat flooding places down low. My thighs clench in anticipation.

"Come," I order, my voice deep, carrying a hint of my Beast.

Damien steps forward, looking right at me. The chains grate

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along the floor, the sound like a siren call to my alpha female. He is mine to control.

“Hands on the chair.”

A low growl punches from deep inside him. He wraps his hands around the top, flexing his grip, his expression a promise of retribution in near future.

I pull my gaze from him and turn to Noah, who is watching Damien. The beta’s thick cock sticks straight up from its nest of black curls, the red helmet peeping through the foreskin. His breath is deep and steady, a hunter eyeing its prey.

“Bend over,” he commands, a bestial edge to his voice.

Damien snarls, but obeys.

My breath hitches.

Noah and I stroll over to our fettered lover, our hands smoothing over his back and ass. As I run my palms over his taut cheeks, I can’t resist a couple of sharp smacks to pinken the flesh.

Damien grunts, his body lifting.

“I think he likes it.” Noah rumbles and delivers a brutal slap.

“Fuck!” Damien cries out, sweat beading on his back.

I deliver another blow, then Noah. We work up a steady rhythm. The heat pours off Damien. He is quivering when we stop, the top of the chair twisted under his strength.

Running a hand through his sweat-soaked hair, I lift his head. “Very, very good. Are you ready for more?”

He glares.

“Hmm, no matter.” I let go and step to his pile of clothes. Whipping the belt from his jeans, I snap it a couple of times against my palm, then turn to look at the wolves. My heart stutters at the sight before me.

Noah is rubbing his stiff penis over Damien’s ass, sliding it

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along the crack. His head is thrown back, chest heaving.

“Noah!” I bark, snapping the big wolf out of his lustful haze. I hold up the belt. “Round two?”

Damien groans as he catches sight of the leather.

I brush aside Noah and step behind Damien. After moving back, I grasp the metal end of the belt and coil it around my hand twice to create a makeshift whip. I crack it against the floor a couple of times, the sound making both wolves flinch.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Just do it.” Damien groans, his buttocks clenching in anticipation.

Swish! Whack!

Damien gasps as the blow connects with his upper thigh right below his ass. I let fly with two more successive strikes, delighting in the way his body arches, the way his skins reddens.

Swish! Whack!

Damien roars as I deliver more licks, taking it all. I raise my arm for more when Noah seizes my wrist.

“Enough, little one.” He takes the belt from me and flings it toward the pile of clothes. Twining his fingers with mine, he leads me to where Damien is still bent over the chair, heaving and soaking wet.

We stroke our hands over his back, soothing him like a horse that’s been run too hard. I rub my hand over the heated skin of his buttocks, squeezing the fevered flesh, reveling in the warm feel of it beneath my palms.

I watch as Noah traces a finger along the crack of Damien’s ass and slip my own beside him. We trail a path to the pucker of his anus then farther down to his balls. Small grunts emerge from his throat.

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I return to the tight ring of flesh, stroking it hard, moisture flooding me as I imagine finger-fucking this powerful wolf, driving him over the edge.

“We need to lube him up.” Noah cuts through my rapacious thoughts.

My gaze flashes to him, the meaning of his words dawning on me. I swallow hard, a spike of lust making my clit throb. Before I can say a word, Noah draws me to him, his hands smoothing over my belly, edging lower and lower until he cups my mound.

I gasp as his fingers tangle in my nether curls, gently teasing. My head falls back against his arm, and I arch into his touch. I bend my knees, widening my thighs in blatant invitation. He chuckles, easing two fingers inside.

Twisting my hips, I press against his hand, reveling in the tantalizing in-and-out glide.

He pulls out, my cream coating his hand. “We need to lube him up,” he repeats, kissing me hotly.

I watch as he coats my hand with the moisture gathered from my body. I glance over to see Damien watching us, the eagerness on his face intoxicating. Noah and I trail our glistening fingers along Damien’s crack, up and down, each time moving closer to the taut pucker of flesh.

“God,” Damien bites out. “One of you *do* something.”

“Easy, Dam.” Noah pats the wolf’s flank. He takes my finger and guides it to the hole. “Circle it, ease just a bit inside. That’s it.”

I plunge into the opening, loving the sensation of being inside the most intimate part of Damien. Noah slides his finger along mine and we move in and out, slowly stretching the tight passage.

Damien is reduced to small, desperate noises as he pushes back against our fingers, encouraging us to go deeper.

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The look on Noah's face, part desire, part need, has me wondering. "Have you ever fucked him?"

Noah pulls out, stunned.

"No!" Damien answers, panting.

Noah confirms with a slight shake of his head. "He's always fucked me."

"Would you like to?" My clit throbs at the thought of seeing Noah ride Damien.

The big wolf stares at me, hard, then nods.

"Damien?"

It's all quiet except for our breathing.

Damien stands to face us, his expression one of acceptance, understanding and deep intensity. "Yes, but I want to fuck Maxie while you do it."

His bold statement whets my appetite, my sex swelling at the thought of having Damien deep inside me as Noah fucks him blind.

Noah's eyes bore into mine. "Maxie?"

I flick my gaze to Damien. "You stay chained."

He flashed his teeth. "Of course."

* * *

My heart pounds, my nipples rising to urgent peaks as I watch Noah open the bottle of baby oil. The slippery fluid glistens on his fingers as he coats them.

"I want to help."

Noah flashes me a knowing smile and pours a generous amount on my hand.

"Hurry up," Damien grunts. He's on all fours in front us, his

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magnificent ass clenching and unclenching as he awaits our attentions.

“Shh,” Noah soothes, gliding his palm over the quivering flesh. He looks at me and together we trace the crease, running our fingers between the taut cheeks, up and down, down and up, edging closer to the pinkish brown pucker.

A shiver wracks Damien’s body as Noah and I press down on the tiny ring of muscle. I draw back and let Noah push inside first. I watch in hungry concentration as that long finger disappears deep into the tight opening. My pussy throbs, warm moisture seeping along the lips. I slide a hand down to cup my mound, burrowing inside to rub my aching clit. The back and forth motion makes me hotter, wetter.

“Maxie.” Noah’s voice cuts through my arousal. “Now.”

I work two fingers into Damien, scissoring them around, working the slick passage.

“Jesus,” Damien wheezes, arching into my touch. ”I’m gonna shoot.”

“Okay, Max. I think he’s more than ready.” Noah clasps my wrist, gently drawing out my fingers.

Damien collapses on his forearms, muscles trembling. I lean in and press soft kisses over his ass cheeks, the smell of baby oil, sweat and skin sending hot chills through me. He turns his head to look at me, his expression fierce behind the sweat-soaked tendrils of hair. I suck in a breath at the intent in his eyes.

Noah strokes a hand over Damien’s back. “Let’s get you covered.” He takes out a condom package and helps the smaller wolf to sit back on his knees.

I gasp at the sight of Damien’s cock, thick and red, arrowing toward his abdomen. Unable to resist, I crawl to him and plunge

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my face between his muscled thighs, rubbing my cheek against his furred sac, the pubic hairs teasing my nostrils. The scent of wolf, man and sex is intoxicating. I mouth the delicate globes as small hungry noises burst from deep inside me. I move up to taste the veined shaft.

Noah joins in the pleasure, his tongue tracing the underside. Our mouths meet at the glistening plum tip, kissing and sucking.

Chains clank as a cool heaviness descends on my back. Damien's hand fists in my hair. He holds Noah and me tight to his swollen rod, pushing it into our lips. We kiss and lick, tormenting him until Damien shoves away with snarl.

"Enough! I want to be deep inside Maxie when I come."

Noah picks up the condom once more and tears it open.

Damien snags the foil packet in frustration. "I'll do it. Slick yourself up." He nods at Noah's straining erection.

A wave of instant, intense arousal consumes me as I watch the pair stroke themselves, their soft grunts and careful touches a sign of just how eager they are.

Damien turns to me, his eyes hot, expectant.

I lay back on the mat, the nylon cool against my heated flesh. Damien grasps my ankles, spreading me wide. He dips down, rubbing his nose in my curls.

"Mmm...Sweet." His tongue darts out to lick the damp lips.

I lift up, eager for more.

He doesn't disappoint. Plunging his mouth into my wet pussy, Damien laps at the moist lips, then uses his fingers to open me farther. He devours me with teeth and tongue, licking, nipping, short primitive bursts rumbling against my tender flesh. All I can do is lie back and submit. My hips buck, but he places a strong arm over my belly to hold me still.

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My hands scabble along the mat, my nails lengthening to give me purchase.

“Unnh...” My eyelids flutter.

Noah looms over me, a sexy smile hovering at his lips. “My turn.” He dips down to suck a nipple into his mouth, pinching the other one with his fingers.

I scream as my body disintegrates.

I come back to myself to see Damien fisting himself, then tracing his latex-covered glans over my quivering labia, each pass bringing him deeper inside.

Damien’s gaze locks with mine as he plunges deep. I am so wet, there is no resistance, his hard length penetrating to my womb, his balls resting against my bottom cheeks. The chains whisper across the mat as he plants his hands on either side of my shoulders, our bellies pressed tight together. He grinds into me, our sweat-slicked bodies writhing together.

I shift to watch as Noah moves over Damien, a big hand scraping along the smaller wolf’s spine.

My breath hitches as Damien rocks into me, holding himself still, then pulling back out.

Noah grasps Damien’s hips, halting the alpha’s forward plunge.

Damien snarls, his body trembling. He locks his gaze on me, and I know just when Noah enters him. His eyes widen, his body trembles like he’s having a seizure. He moans loud and long, holding himself still. I can understand. Noah is not small.

I push up on my elbow to see Noah, head thrown back, chest heaving. He senses my regard, looks down and smiles. He smacks Damien’s ass, the sharp slap ringing out.

“Fuck!” Damien grunts, plunging back into me.

I gasp at the force, my internal muscles contracting around his

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thick length.

He pulls out, arching back to screw himself on Noah's dick.

The big wolf leans over to look at me, his thrusts pushing our lover into me. We're fucking each other through Damien's body.

Back and forth.

In and out.

Damien drops to his forearms, burying his face between my breasts.

I watch over his shoulder as Noah's muscles bunch with the force of his heavy thrusts, a feral light in his eyes. His teeth elongate, and he leans in to bite Damien's neck.

The effect is electric.

Damien snarls, jamming his penis inside me with ferocious intensity. Through him, I feel Noah move faster.

Our bodies surge together in a bestial frenzy, a heaving mass of slapping, twisting, growling.

Noah howls, clawing Damien's back as he climaxes.

Damien surges forward, teeth sinking into my nipple as huge tremors rip through him, his cock pulsing hard inside me.

Gulping for air, I grip Damien's arms, everything inside me winding tighter and tighter as the pleasure builds. I scream and my nails elongate, tearing into the mat, shredding it as my body explodes.

CHAPTER 16

I get off the train from the city and scan the station parking lot, huddling under my umbrella, hoping for some sign of Damien. He said he would pick me up here after work since the brakes are out on my SUV. Just my luck, it's raining, and he's late. I dig out my phone and try his cell, only to get bounced to voice mail. Damn, I hate unreachable boyfriends. I try Noah's mobile phone and get the same result.

Aggravated, I try texting them. No response from either one.

A gust of wind sprays rain in my face. I blot the drops with my sleeve and look over my shoulder at the dry station house, berating myself for choosing to wait outside in this mess. A glance at my watch tells me Damien is now fifteen minutes late.

I'm thinking about trying my mother when my animal senses

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kick in, and I have the feeling of being watched. Wildly looking around, all I can see are the stragglers from my train. I pull the umbrella lower over my face for some semblance of cover, as if that's going to do any good.

Damien is dead meat when I see him.

As I continue to curse my lover silently, I catch a glimpse of a familiar porcine figure in the distance. What in God's name is Fred doing here? This isn't his train.

No matter, I decide this is an opportunity for some intelligence gathering, to find out more about the class he and M.E. had together and what, if any, contact they might have had outside the college. Maybe he'll be a little more forthcoming now that there are no cops around.

"Fred!" I call out and hurry toward him.

His gaze is darting through the rain.

I think he sees me, but he doesn't act as if he does. Odd. He seems to be looking right at me. I raise the umbrella and shout his name again.

This time, he responds with a weak wave in my direction. Given our recent go-around at the office, he's probably wondering what the hell I want with him.

"Hey, Fred. What's going on?" I smile wide, hoping to put him at ease.

"Uh...Not much. I've got a couple of hours to kill before my class tonight."

"Oh?" The class he had with M.E., perhaps. I nod, trying to keep the conversation alive.

"Listen." He clears his throat. "I wanted to apologize for the way I acted a couple of days ago."

"No worries," I assure him. "The detective had me rattled, too.

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So I wasn't exactly on my best behavior, either."

He nods his round little head, reminding me of an animated cantaloupe. "Yeah, he was quite rude."

I want to pounce, demand details about the class and everyone in it, but he still seems nervous, and I realize he's too guarded to talk to me easily. I'm going to be forced to make some more chit chat to loosen him up. Otherwise, I'll blow this chance with him altogether.

"The guy had attitude to spare, liked to talk right over a person," I sympathize, edging closer, smiling.

He steps back, giving me a weird look. Fred obviously doesn't know how to play the boy-girl game.

I try another tack. "M.E. was a very close friend of mine, you know. I told you she was a neighbor, right?"

"Um, sure."

"She lived right across the street from me."

Fred takes a quick look at his watch, like he can't wait to bug out of here. "You know," he starts. "I didn't want to say anything to you because I don't like being involved in all of this, but perhaps it would be good if we went somewhere to talk. My car is right over there." He jerks a thumb toward the far end of the parking lot.

Well, knock me out with a Styrofoam hammer. Stunned at this unexpected golden egg, I refrain from doing the happy cha-cha. "You mean like now?" *Keep it cool, Max.*

He nods. "Unless, you're going somewhere?"

I gape at him for a few seconds. "No, no. Let me just call my friend, who is supposed to pick me up and is horribly late. I'll tell him not to bother coming." I retrieve my phone and call Damien. Voice mail. Again. God damn it. This time I leave him a message.

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I turn back to Fred. “Shall we?”

He leads me across the near-empty paved expanse of parking lot to a boat-sized vision of American steel, circa 1974.

“It’s not much, I know, but I love her.” Fred chuckles as he unlocks the passenger door, then leans in to clear some stuff off the seat. “Sorry about the mess.”

“No problem. You should see my Chevy. I think it’s more of a mobile closet than an SUV.” I glance about as he keeps fiddling around, carrying on about old cars. For a moment I wonder how Damien would proceed in this situation.

A buzz of knowing hits me, primal and powerful, a whisper of darkness in my mind. I feel my Beast start to rise in obedience. My eyes scan around me in a frenzy as the feral scent of wolf reaches me. Oh, shit! That other wolf from the forest is here. I continue to look around, but I see nothing. Where is he? His strange, bestial words echo in my mind.

“All done.” Fred’s voice cuts in, forcing my attention back to him, the other wolf momentarily forgotten.

Fred gestures to the car. “You can get in, now, Maxie.”

I nod and jerk my umbrella closed. Taking one last look around, I scramble onto the passenger seat and yank the door shut. I grimace when my hand comes away coated with a greasy, oil-like substance. Gross! I start digging in my bag for a tissue.

Fred climbs in beside me, giving me a look that’s part expectant and part something else. “All set?”

“Let’s hit the road.” I unearth a small pack of wipes.

“So where would you like to go?” Fred asks as we swing out of the lot.

As we turn on to Wood Street, I catch a glimpse of a dark-haired man staring intently at me. The sense of knowing once

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again flits over me as we pass him.

I turn my attention to the packet in my hand and start to open it. Suddenly, my vision turns fuzzy, and the wipes fall to the floor. What the hell? A warm buzzed feeling settles over me, like when I've had too many margaritas.

I blink rapidly, my brain trying to process the answer to Fred's question. Instead, I hear myself snort. I start giggling.

"There's a great café a few blocks from here. Perhaps we could go there to talk," he suggests.

My lips flap together. "Caaa faaay." I can't wrap my tongue around the word. I laugh so hard, I bang my elbow against the door, denting it. "Oh, no." I look at the damage, then glance over at Fred, but he just keeps on truckin'...like the song. I titter at the outrageous thought.

There's something I need to ask, but hell, I'm having the best damn time right now. Who knew Fred was such awesome company?

He brakes at the light, and I fall forward, smacking my head on the dash. "Oops." I feel something drip on my face. I touch it, and my palm is a smear of red. "Look." I hold out my hand. "Blood."

"There's a napkin in the glove box," he says, his voice hard.

I've never heard that tone from him before. Wonder what's up with that? I start laughing.

"Fred," I hiccup. "You are so cute and so funny. Why don't we get along at work?"

"Because you're a werewolf," he growls.

Roly-poly Fred sounds like a mad teddy bear.

"Get out!" I wheeze. "How'd you guess? I haven't been here for a while." Man, my eyelids weigh a ton. And I am so tired, all of a sudden. My head flops against the headrest and lolls to the side.

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“I didn’t have to guess. My brother found out about you.” Fred’s voice is harsh.

I blink rapidly, trying to stay awake. Who knew Fred had a brother? And why is he getting on the expressway if the café is just a few blocks from the train station?

Smacking my lips, I try to form another question. “Whatareyousomadabout?”

“You made my brother kill the wrong person, you bitch! You remember...your neighbor, Mary Elizabeth? She didn’t have to die. You’re the one who should have died. Damn you, anyway. If she hadn’t looked so much like you, Charles never would have made that mistake.”

“Huh?” Mary Elizabeth? Why is he so pissed about M.E.? Darkness creeps at the edge of my vision. Damn, I don’t need this crap from him. I need a nap. I should have waited for Damien to come get me at the station.

* * *

I crack open my eyelids. My mouth fills with an horrendous taste...like a vomit burp. I am so freaking thirsty my throat feels like a salt flat. Shit. What did I do last night? Rubbing my tongue over my cracked lips, I peel my cheek away from the dried drool crusting the side of my face and raise my head, wincing at sick, yellow light.

What the hell am I doing on the floor? And more importantly, whose floor is this?

When I try to move, a killer pain knifes through my back, making me cry out. Gritting my teeth, I push up onto all fours. Tears burn behind my eyes at the stabbing agony. Christ, did I get

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shot? I bite my lip, panting as I gather myself for another move.

Slowly, I bring my right leg under me and use it as leverage. After a few tries, I finally lurch to my feet.

I stagger a couple of steps, the room spinning. Hot, greasy waves of nausea roil through me as I stumble toward a wall, falling to my knees before I can reach it. My stomach pitches and I throw up, heaving until there's nothing left but bile.

Wiping my arm across my mouth, I realize I have no shirt on, only a bra. Where is my blouse? Oh God, was I *raped*? Painfully shoving away from the disgusting puddle, my breath comes in panicked huffs. I look down at myself, doing a rapid check. I discover that I'm still wearing the skirt and hose I wore to work. There's no pain between my legs. Thank you, sweet Mother Mary. Shoes are gone, though.

My gaze flits around the room. It's about the size of a small studio apartment and made entirely of concrete cinder block. No windows. One door...steel, I think, squinting at it. It's on the far side of the room, almost directly across from me. A breeze caresses the top of my head, forcing me to look up. I see a barred opening in the center of the ceiling. The only light source comes from a yellow bulb above the entry.

I crawl away from my puke and manage to reach the door. Breathing like an asthmatic, I maneuver to prop myself against the wall next to it. My back brushes against the metal. and fire streaks along my spine. I cry out, collapsing to my side, huge, gulping sobs wracking my body.

Finally getting myself under control, I twist slightly to stare up at the opening in the ceiling and see stars. It's nighttime. But which night? I have no idea how much time has passed.

As I lie there, memories assail me. Bits and pieces fly at my

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mind's eye like shrapnel. Damien, Noah, the murder...Fred. I gasp as I think back to the car ride with the pudgy little bastard. I remember the gunk on my hand, hitting my head.

Touching my forehead, my fingers scrape along the dried blood.

I close my eyes and try to remember more details. I'd been laughing like I was drunk, and Fred said...Fred said...

A black wave hits me as I recall his words. About how he knows I'm a werewolf, that I made him kill the wrong person. No, not him...his *brother*.

None of it makes sense to me. All I know is that I need to shift and get the hell out of here.

I force myself to roll onto my stomach and push to my feet. Standing as steady as I can, I close my eyes and wait for the familiar sensations of transformation to course through me.

But there's nothing.

My pulse pounds in fear.

I take a deep breath and wonder if the Change just needs another minute to start. I've never been drugged before. Maybe the effects slow the transformation. Wincing, I inch toward the wall, putting my hands out to lean against it, pressing my cheek to the cool concrete. Once more, I try to shift.

Nothing happens.

My entire body freezes under an onslaught of panic. *Oh, my God.*

I stumble back on wooden legs, shaking my head, denying the nightmare as I scream and scream and scream. No wolfen howl, just mere *human* screams.

Clapping my hands over my mouth, I scrunch my eyes closed and force myself back from the yawning abyss in my mind,

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sucking in huge, gulping breaths.

My gaze flies to the door as it opens. Fred walks in, no longer my chubby pain-in-the-ass co-worker, but a sinister criminal who has taken me prisoner and has a small pistol pointed at me. A larger man follows close behind.

I don't need my wolf sense to know this stranger is true evil. Tall and broad, this brute radiates power. Instinctively, I step back. His reptilian gaze follows me, a snake watching its prey. His thick lips spread in a death's head grin.

Dread chills my spine, radiating out like an arctic wind to freeze every cell.

"Poor Maxie," Fred jeers softly. "What's a little werewolf to do without her powers?"

A low, sinister chuckle sounds from the hulk. "I told you they aren't much, once you take away their animal strength. Just weak wastes of skin." His smile is broad, his teeth like bleached bone.

There's something in this psycho's malevolent expression that is oddly familiar, and for an instant, a flash of recognition cuts through my fear. "I've seen you. I know it," I rasp.

Mr. Big, Bald and Crazy's grin widens. "Yes, I bought your friend a drink at the club."

Oh, God. He's talking about M.E. But the dude at the bar looked different from this man. I shake my head. "No, that guy had lots of hair."

He gives a harsh laugh. "Don't recognize me without my wig, do you?"

Sucking in a painful breath, my mind flits back to that night.

"Got a little thing called alopecia," he goes on. "Comes in handy with disguises."

I stumble as he takes a step toward me and says, "Time to get

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on with our fun, Brother. She's certainly weak enough."

"What did you do to me, you sick fucks?" I choke.

"Looks like you were the sick one." Fred's lip curls in distaste as he glances at the floor. "The little animal has messed her cage, Charles."

"A nasty side effect of the silver poisoning. Maybe we should force her to lick it clean," the big man says to Fred, nodding. The dull yellow light makes his hairless skull gleam like a streetlamp on a rainy night. He has no eyebrows to speak of, lending his face the look of an unfinished wax sculpture.

"Silver poisoning?" I wheeze, taking another painful step back.

"Why, yes," Fred sneers, his piggy eyes boring into me. "Surely you know all about silver and werewolves?"

Silver... Suddenly the image of a silver-tipped arrow whizzing by me, just missing me, fills my fuzzy brain. I sway on my feet, struggling to keep my balance as I turn toward Charles. "You...you were the archer in the woods."

He glares at me. "Can't believe I missed you. I was so close."

"And...and that means you were the one watching me. Those times when I went out for my run—"

"Yeah, yeah. I kept an eye on you. I saw you and your filthy ways. The way you shifted and butchered deer for food. I saw it all. Filthy. What's happening to you is nothing you don't deserve."

"Deserve! Who are you to judge?"

"I'm *human*. That's who I am. And why I can judge you." Charles strides toward me, grabbing my wrist in his big, vise-like hand, unholy fury in his dark eyes. "*Humans* are the top of the food chain on this planet. You and all the others like you are evolutionary aberrations that must be exterminated. I track you all down. One by one."

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I swallow hard, staring at Charles. “Why? Why would you do that to me? To us?”

His gaze grows even more sinister. “I was witness to the bloodlust of your kind.” He spits the words at me. “One of you tore my sister to shreds. Before my very eyes. From that moment, I vowed to kill every one of you.” His hand shakes with his rage, my wrist bones grinding under his punishing grip.

“So why haven’t you killed me like you did Mary Elizabeth?” Me and my big mouth.

He hits me in the jaw with the force of a wrecking ball, my head snaps back, fireworks bursting behind my eyes. I slam against the wall and fall to the floor, screaming as I land on my back. Hot spikes of agony tear through my body, shredding my insides.

“Charles, not like this.” Fred’s voice is faint to my pain-filled ears, as if he’s a million miles away. “She has to pay for Mary Elizabeth’s death.”

I’m vaguely aware of the big guy crouching next to me. “I’ve always given your kind the dignity of a quick death,” he hisses. “Now I think it’s time I see what one of you looks like on the inside. I’m going to enjoy taking you apart, piece by piece...making you pay for the death of an innocent.”

He shoves away and heads for the door. “I have some new tools I can’t wait to try out on you.” He disappears.

Terror overrides my pain, and I force myself to my knees. I can’t go down like this.

“Oh Maxie, you have no idea how good this makes me feel.” Fred comes to stand over me, the superiority in his swinish gaze galling. “To think this almost didn’t happen. Then again, we were ready for you. We had plans for every contingency.”

“Contingency?”

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“We’d prepared the car for you in case I was able to lure you into it. If one or both of your boyfriends had picked you up at the station, I was going to follow you to your home, where Charles would be waiting.”

A jolt of shock shoots through me. It must have shown on my face, because Fred sneers, “That’s right. My brother was waiting for you in your very own house. He had tranq darts with him. Enough to take all three of you.” He spreads his arms wide. “This was supposed to be a party.” Fred leans down and gently scrapes the pistol along my jaw, his breath hot on my face.

“All three of us?” The words knife through me. “That means that you know they’re—”

“Wolves? Oh, yes. We know they’re wolves, too,” Fred cuts in. “Considering how things worked out, we’ll have to wait to get them another time, which is really too bad.” He frowns like a petulant child. Then, as if something happy occurs to him, he smiles. “But at least we have you to play with.”

Fury starts to pour over my pain at the thought of anything happening to Damien or Noah. I push up against the wall until I’m once again on my feet, gasping as my chest tightens.

He pivots. “Hmm. Charles may not get to play with you as long as he’d like to.” He cocks his head, double chin jiggling. “I can tell it won’t be too much longer for you. They don’t call it silver poisoning for nothing. It takes just a little, too. I inserted a needle of the pure stuff in your back. It was all so easy. Of course that little dash of wolfsbane oil on the car door handle was the reason it all went down so smoothly.”

“What?”

“Wolfsbane oil. I told you I’d prepared the car for you just in case. The oil was smeared where I knew you’d touch it. And it did

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its job...kept you from changing and got you all sloppy happy. Then it made you pass out.” His eyes glaze with smug triumph.

A red haze fills my vision, incredible rage rising within. I lunge at Fred’s corpulent body and manage to send him flying right into the noxious puddle. Calling on every single ounce of strength I have left, I stagger to the door.

“Come back here, you bitch!” Fred rages. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him slip as he tries to get up. He starts screaming for his brother.

I ignore him and keep moving. I have to escape. And please, God, don’t let me run into his psycho brother, Charles. I will not die in this fucking cage.

To my surprise, the door leads directly outside and tears streak down my face as I see trees, trees and more trees. In the distance, I see a roadway and the headlights of cars.

I stumble into the shadows, looking back in time to see Fred emerge from the room. Charles is with him, a wicked blade in the big man’s hand. They shout wildly as they spot me and start running toward me.

I turn and keep moving, blessing the adrenaline I can feel pumping through my system. I have no idea how far or how long I run, nor how close Charles and Fred get to me as I plunge deeper into the woods, using the thick trees as cover. At one point, I hear a car engine. It sounds close to me, but I ignore it and push on. I feel as if I’ve been running all my life. My whole body is on fire, my breathing labored.

I struggle to keep going, but finally I fall to my knees, collapsing sideways, body shivering. I turn my head to stare up at the sky. The moon and the stars are so beautiful. I wish desperately for Damien and Noah.

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Suddenly, human screams puncture the night, and I hear the cry of werewolves. My lips form a smile as I fantasize that Noah and Damien are tearing apart Fred and Charles.

I close my eyes.

Time passes before I feel someone looming over me. I open my eyes to see a lean, muscular man crouching next to me.

“A pity I wasn’t able to get here quicker. You should have obeyed when you sensed me at the station.” He strokes a hand along my temple.

A wave of knowing hits me in response to his touch. On some level, I recognize this man. “I...I saw you when I was...in Fred’s car,” I rasp.

“Yes. And you sensed me in the forest days before that.”

“You...you’re the wolf...” I struggle to stay awake.

He sighs. “Such a shame. You’re no good to us now.”

“W-what?”

“The silver’s likely done too much damage.” He looks up, sniffs the air. “At least you won’t die alone. I had a feeling I might be too late and left an anonymous tip with...well, let’s just say I called a friend of a friend. The cavalry will be here soon.” He pats my shoulder, then shoves to his feet. “Good-bye, Maxie.”

Turning my head to the side, I watch as he melts into the trees.

Darkness slips over me once again. This time when I open my eyes, I see two huge wolves burst through the trees, one white, one gray. My animal sense isn’t necessary to recognize the pair.

As soon as they see me, Damien and Noah let out a mournful howl and rush to my side. They drop to their knees, their Beasts falling away.

Damien gingerly scoops me into his arms. I cry out as he bumps the spot where the needle had been injected.

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“Shh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Tenderly he cradles me into his chest, turning me so that Noah can examine the wound.

I feel Noah’s gentle touch tracing my spine.

It’s silver,” he rasps.

“Oh, God, Max.” Damien presses soft kisses to my forehead, cheeks, anywhere he can reach.

I feel Noah take my hand, and I turn my head. He strokes a finger along my hairline, his expression terrified. “You stay with us, little one.”

I hear new voices.

“We need to get her to the hospital,” says a woman. “Hurry.”

Damien rises with me in his arms, while Noah clutches my hand.

* * *

“There’s my girl.”

I wake to the sound of a musical voice and the sight of bright morning sunshine. Two women are staring at me. I’m guessing one is a doctor because she’s wearing a white coat. She’s statuesque and stunning, her cocoa skin shining, her brown eyes laughing.

The other is shorter and looks Native American with copper skin and jet black hair.

“Who are you? Where am I?” My voice sounds weak and faraway.

Both women smile broadly. White-coat lady says, “You are in a Detroit hospital.”

“Hospital? Detroit?”

She laughs. “All in good time. My name is Laverne Stokes, and I’m the doctor who’s been treating you. Four days ago, you were

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brought in barely conscious. I am so very glad to be able to talk to you, honey. You gave us all quite a scare...especially those two fine men out there.”

“Two fine...” *Damien and Noah*. “Can I see them?”

Dr. Stokes laughs. “Just a minute. Let me finish my exam.”

She asks me basic questions while the other woman, who must be a nurse, takes my vitals.

I grimace as the doctor puts her stethoscope to my chest and listens to my heart.

“Okay, Sit up.”

She helps me to a sitting position and checks my breathing. I look over at the nurse.

“I’m Daryl Ann Eagle,” the woman says in quiet tones.

My eyes widen. I recognize her name, of course, but there’s something else about her niggling at the back of my mind, like I know her from somewhere else.

“I take it you’ve heard of me, then.”

I nod. “Damien talked about your case.”

“How I disappeared? Yeah. R.J. told me he had talked to Damien.”

“But...but R.J. told Damien he had no idea where you were.”

“Yeah, we thought it was safer to hide my whereabouts. At least, until we knew who we were dealing with. We decided we could trust Damien. So I went to see him.”

“You went to see... When?” I feel like I’m joining a game already in progress.

“How’s your breathing, Maxie?” Dr. Stokes interrupts.

“Fine,” I say absently, my attention still on Daryl Ann as she helps me lie back.

She looks at me, an uncomfortable shadow in her eyes. “As it

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turns out, the day I met with Damien was the day you were kidnapped, Maxie. I had figured he could help me find other werewolves. Our meeting ran long, so he was late picking you up at the station. And then you were captured. If I hadn't kept Damien—I really feel like what happened to you is my fault. I am so, so sorry.”

I gape at her and then slide a glance at the doctor, wondering why she's not saying anything. But she continues to make notes as if this bizarre exchange between me and Daryl Ann is all natural.

As if sensing my regard, she looks at me, her dark eyes serious. “Honey, we're all werewolves here.”

Talk about stepping off a cliff. “What?” I gasp.

“This clinic, this building, is for werewolves,” Dr. Stokes continues “We are an underground organization simply known as the Network. We were originally formed to help those who have survived the conversion process and were left for dead. Our mission has expanded to provide support to any werewolves who need us, and to learn more about our kind.”

“I don't understand.”

“You will. Now, any pain?”

“Not too much.” I touch a hand to my jaw, which is very tender. Don't think I want to see that bruise.

“Good.” She gives me a considered look then turns her attention to the nurse. “Daryl Ann, why don't you start filling her in on the underground? You've been part of it longer than I have, and I need to check on another patient.” Her gaze swings back to me. “One of our younger wolves got caught in a bear trap coated with silver shavings. Leg's a little slow to heal, and I need to check it. I'll return in a little while with the results of your blood tests. We'll talk more then.” Reaching up, she tucks my chart in the

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metal holder over my bed, then heads out the door.

I turn back to Daryl Ann. She opens her mouth to say something just as Damien and Noah burst in. Without a word, she leaves the room just as Noah reaches me, his blue eyes incandescent with emotion.

“Oh, God, little one.” He seizes me in a strong, gentle grip, managing to avoid the stitches in my back as he buries his face in my hair. I burrow into him, breathing in his cool, arctic scent, tears pricking the back of my eyes as I press my cheek against the steady beat of his heart.

He draws back, his gaze searching me, like he’s making sure I’m really breathing. After lifting his hands to my face, he draws me into a deeply tender, melting kiss. His lips caress mine thoroughly, and I cling to him, wanting more. But I haven’t the strength, and this is not the place.

“A promise for later,” he whispers against my mouth, then presses in for another kiss. Tangling his hands in my hair, he rubs his cheek against mine, then draws me tightly to him once again.

Over his broad shoulder, I spy Damien pacing back and forth, throwing harsh looks at me, like he’s angry. I sweep my hand along Noah’s broad back before patting his shoulder and pulling out of his embrace.

He shifts around and sits beside me on the bed, slinging his arm across my shoulders.

Damien halts directly in front of the bed. “Why in the *hell* did you go with that son of a bitch?”

“I thought it was my chance to get some answers, to help out,” I croak.

“*I’m* the investigator,” he snaps, his face darkens with mounting fury. “You’re not supposed to—” He spins away to pace

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some more.

Noah gives me a gentle squeeze as we watch our lover try to get his emotions under control.

“Damien,” he starts.

“No!” The shorter wolf shouts. He points at me, anger and something much deeper roiling in his steel gaze. “She was supposed to stay put at the station and call me.”

“I did, but—” I break off as Damien smashes the room’s only chair with his fists.

He looks at us, tortured, hands clenching and unclenching. “I know,” he chokes out. “I saw your number show up on my cell phone after it was...was...*too late*.” These last words tear from him in a howl.

Tears spill down my cheeks and I hold out my arms. He staggers to the bed as if he has no strength left and falls into Noah and me, half-sitting, half-laying across us, his face buried against my throat. His body shudders, and I whisper nonsense, kissing his hair, rubbing his back. The movement pulls at my stitches, but I ignore the pain, just holding on through the storm.

“Talk to me,” I whisper when Damien settles. He stays quiet. I feel him swallow hard, like he needs to say something, but can’t.

“Noah?” I turn my head and meet his sorrowful gaze. “Something happened. Tell me.”

He looks away, smoothing a big hand over Damien’s back.

“Please.”

Finally, Damien draws back, his silver gaze troubled. “Maxie, when we got to that hideout...that cinder block hell...When I realized you’d been held there...”

“Go on.” I put my hand under Damien’s chin, forcing him to look at me, then I glance up at Noah. “You guys have to tell me.”

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The big wolf closes his eyes, like he can't bear to say a word.

"I tracked those men in the woods and killed them," Damien rasps, hanging his head. "I ripped them to pieces."

"Oh, my God." I try to haul him back into my arms, but he fights until he sinks against me at last. Noah reaches down to pull Damien closer, and the three of us just sit, no more words, only touch.

I don't know what to think. I mean, I'm glad those psychos are dead, but having Damien be the one to kill them...

"God help me, I didn't even think," Damien says softly against my breast some time later. "I sunk my claws and teeth into them..." He swallows, working his throat muscles. "Then when I saw what they had done to you, I was happy I'd done it. Still...I've never killed any human before and I—"

"Shh..." I kiss his hair. "Don't say anything else. Let it go for now."

He seems to accept my words and the three of us stay right like this until the last rays of sun turn the room dark orange.

* * *

"Hey, Maxie." Daryl Ann smiles as she walks in. I'm hoping she's here to talk, to give me some answers. "How are you?"

Her question causes a knot to form in my stomach. I know she wants to know if I've felt the Change, but I still haven't, and it's starting to bother me.

"I'm okay."

She makes small talk while she checks my vitals, and it's all I can do to keep up my end of the conversation. Again, I have the sensation that there's something about Daryl Ann that's familiar.

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Then, it hits me—its her voice. I've heard it before, somewhere other than the hospital. "I'm sorry," I say. "But have we met?"

She smiles. "In a manner of speaking. I was there when we found you in the woods."

"I don't know how to thank you for helping to save me."

Daryl Ann shakes her head. "No need. I told you it was my fault you were there."

"But the guys knew exactly what to do...bringing me here and all. They wouldn't have known to do that without you."

She smiles. "Speaking of the guys. Where are they?"

I grin. "They went to get food. Neither one of them can abide hospital grub, even though this stuff is heavenly compared to the average hospital cuisine."

"Well then, that gives us a chance to talk." Settling on a chair—a replacement for the one Damien broke—she crosses her legs and gets comfortable.

"Can you tell me about the Network?" I ask her. I've been bursting with curiosity about it, and I can feel the relief as I finally vocalize my question.

"The Network was founded about three years ago, by a couple whose son got turned. They were from Auburn Hills, so naturally it's based here in Detroit."

"Motown, huh."

"Our primary goal is find and help new converts," she continues, filling in details about the hospital and housing provided for the Network. "Now, I don't what all Damien told you about us, but aside from helping out survivors, we're researching our kind. All sorts of projects are under way."

"Like identifying the sires? I know that is what Damien was investigating."

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“Right. Damien’s found three. We know of at least six others. We accidentally found one of them, a Harrison LeFoy, in a photo from the American Embassy in France. One of our people recognized him as the wolf who turned him.”

“Another male.” I shake my head. “Folklore wasn’t kidding when it said female werewolves were a rarity.”

Daryl Ann nods. “You, me and Laverne—Dr. Stokes—are the only three female werewolves the Network has ever encountered. When you’re better, we’d like you to join us.”

My chest tightens. “I don’t know. If I’ve been permanently damaged by the silver, it may be just the two of you in the Network.”

She pats my hand. “We don’t know that the damage is irreversible.”

But it could be. Fear boils up inside at the thought. *Don’t think about it Maxie. Move on.* I decide to change the subject to the wolf I sensed in the woods.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“R.J. told Damien that before you disappeared, you had sensed another wolf near you when you went out for your runs. Is that true?”

Color leeches from Daryl Ann’s face. I have my answer.

“Yes,” she whispers. “I’d go out for a shift and run, and he was just there. I couldn’t see him. But I smelled and sensed him. He was sending out a command to my Beast.” Her words are barely discernable to my not-so-werewolf hearing.

“He was so hard to resist,” she went on. “I was terrified. I don’t know what he wanted, but whatever it was, it felt evil, somehow. Thank God, the Network found me when they did.” She leans

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forward, gripping my blanket. “What happened with you?”

I take a huge breath, then plunge ahead, telling her about my similar experiences with the wolf in the woods and at the train station. Like Daryl Ann, I talk really soft, as if speaking too loudly about this wolf will bring him here. “When I escaped that little torture chamber, he was there in the forest.”

“Who was in the forest?” Damien asks as he and Noah walk in.

The big guy is carrying a greasy bag. He holds it up. “Figured you might be tired of hospital food, little one.”

“What are you two talking about?” Damien looks from me, to the nurse, and back again. “Maxie, talk.”

“We were discussing the werewolf who tried for me before I joined the Network,” Daryl Ann supplies.

“What about him?” Damien’s tone is tense.

Daryl Ann hesitates. “Well, that’s just it. No one seems to know anything about him. In the past, I asked some of our people about him, but they came up empty, and I just put him out of my mind. But now, after what Maxie’s just told me, I’m thinking the Network needs to dig deeper and really investigate him.”

“What did Maxie tell you?” Noah asks as he sets the bag of food on my tray.

I shake my head. I don’t feel like food right now.

I feel the weight of Damien’s gaze on me, waiting for me to say something. Biting my lip, I gather myself, then look right at him. “He was there at the train station, then again in the woods after I escaped that cell, just before you two arrived to save my ass.”

“Fuck!” Damien starts to prowl the room.

“I remember him leaning over me. And then he said something like I was ‘of no good to us now’ because of all the damage I’d suffered from the silver, and that he’d called in an anonymous tip

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with someone—a friend of a friend, I think he said—so I’d get help and wouldn’t die alone.”

“We’ve got to find this fucker,” Damien snarls.

“I told you, the Network hasn’t been able to learn anything about him,” Daryl Ann says absently. She’s not looking at any of us as she pulls on the end of her braid.

“That’s about to change.” Damien sits on my bed and fixes Daryl Ann with a hard look. “Who gave you the tip where to find Maxie?” he asks her.

“The tip came from a police source in Indianapolis,” she says. “The number will have been recorded.”

“We can track down the number, but I can almost guarantee that the call was placed from a disposable cell phone.” Damien shakes his head. “This wolf is just too damn good at hiding his tracks.” He pulls a tiny notebook out of his jeans pocket. “Maxie, tell me what you remember about this guy.”

I supply Damien with every detail I can recall. He listens, occasionally interrupting me to ask a probing question. Then he moves on to Daryl Ann.

“Okay.” He finally snaps the notebook closed. “I’ll start asking around and going through all my case files. Something has to turn up about him.”

I lie back in the bed, suddenly overwhelmed with the magnitude of everything that’s happened to me. I hear the guys and Daryl Ann leave the room as I drop off to sleep.

The next week passes slowly. Damien and Noah visit, but don’t spend much time with me. I know they’re preoccupied with their investigation of the mysterious wolf, so I don’t press them. Finally, at the end of the week, the pair enter my room. Noah leans against the wall by the door as Damien drops onto the bed next to me. I

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raise an eyebrow at the alpha, but don't say anything, waiting for him to speak.

He takes a deep breath, then growls, "I can't find one fucking scrap of paper on this wolf. "I've been asking, digging, using every resource I've got. Normally, by this point in a case, I'd have at least turned up lint by now." He jerks his hand through his hair. Frustration and fury are pouring off of him.

I stare down at my blanket as a shiver chases down my spine. I know how good Damien is. For him to have turned up nothing... The thought of that wolf out there somewhere scares the crap out of me.

"Hey, little one."

I look up at Noah.

"Don't look so frightened. We'll find him."

Before I can answer, my door opens and in walks Dr. Stokes. She shoos out the guys and begins to examine me.

"Doc?"

"Yes?" she murmurs, checking my breathing.

"Did you ever encounter this wolf we've been talking about?"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Damien when he asked me that question. I haven't. Then again, I may be of no interest to the mystery wolf since I'm twice the age of you and Daryl Ann." She shrugs. "Who knows?"

I mull over her words as she continues her exam. Then my thoughts turn to the other thing weighing heavily on my mind. I still haven't felt any of the familiar sensations of the Change.

"What about my shifting?" I ask when she finishes. "I know that I've gone so long with the silver in my body that my entire lycanthropic system is compromised, but do you have any idea when I'm going to recover?"

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“Bodies are unique, and this situation will take time to resolve itself. It could be days, weeks...I just don’t know how long it’ll be before we know something. I’ve only seen one wolf with this degree of poisoning, and it took him months to recover.”

“But, he did recover.”

Dr. Stokes drops her eyes away from mine. I know what she’s thinking. It’s possible I’ll never recover.

My eyes burn as I stare down at my hands, wondering how I will adjust if I have to live as a human again.

I look up as Damien and Noah reenter the room. A huge ache starts to form where my heart is as I take in every beloved detail of the two of them. I’ve only just found them. But they are part of my werewolf life. If I can never shift again, then this precious relationship I’ve created with them is over. It’s not fair.

Dr. Stokes touches my wrist, her eyes full of sympathy and quiet encouragement. “Just relax and give it time. Your body has a lot of healing to do.”

I watch her walk out, my throat tighter than an over-wound rubber band.

Damien sits beside me and tries to offer a comforting touch—Noah, too—but I flinch and turn away. I don’t want to hear anything from anyone. After a few more minutes of my silent treatment, both of them leave.

* * *

“Maxie, we’ve had enough of your brooding.” Damien plucks me out of the rocking chair in the guestroom and hauls me into what has become our bedroom, since they’ve moved in and are living with me now. He drops me on the new king-size bed beside

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Noah, then crawls in.

“What’s going on?” I rise up on my elbows, my gaze flickering between them.

“We’re staging an intervention.” Noah traces my jaw with his finger. “Ever since we got back, you’ve been hiding yourself away. You’re not really eating, you don’t go out. Your injury has turned you into a hermit.”

Damien cups my chin, drawing my attention to him. “We’ve been forced to deal with your mother and your best friend because you’ve shut them out as well. I think we’ve been extraordinarily patient with you. But, as they say, the jig is up.”

I sigh, leaning my head back. Chest tight, my eyes start to burn with tears.

“Talk to us,” Damien cajoles, combing a hand through my hair.

“Please, little one.” Noah kisses my temple.

“It’s been five weeks and nothing. The full moon is coming up and still I feel no urge, no heightened senses,” I say softly. “I’m scared, all right?” I shove off the bed and whirl to face them. “Is that what you want to hear? I’m scared that I’ll never be what I was and scared that... Scared that you’ll leave me.” I throw up my hands on a sob. “Damn it, here I go again. All I want to do is fucking cry lately. Shit!” I start to walk out.

“Come here.” Damien moves to the edge of the bed and holds out his hand.

I wipe my face with my sleeve, staring at him for a long moment before twining my fingers with his. He draws me back to the bed to lie with them once more. They roll into me, covering me with their bodies, surrounding me with their scent.

“Oh, Maxie,” Damien whispers, his silver gaze tender as he rubs warm circles over my belly. “We’ve created something

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among us that is so much stronger than whether or not you are still a werewolf. Don't you know that? I've shared things with you that I have never shared with anyone. Our bond is deep. I'm right here at your side and at your back."

"When I thought we were going to lose you, I—" Noah breaks off, burying his face into my breasts.

I tangle my fingers in the silky black locks of his hair. "Shh. I'm here."

He looks at me, eyes shimmering with unwavering devotion. "I cannot imagine a life without you in it. It doesn't matter to me if you are or aren't still a wolf."

Suddenly, the wall I've built over the last weeks crumbles, leaving behind an amazing lightness, like my soul is floating. My lips form a watery smile and I touch a hand to each of their cheeks, drawing them close, closer till our mouths meld in a perfect three-way kiss. With newfound certainty, I realize that everything is going to be all right, regardless of whether I ever shift again, or not.

Over the next few days, I feel stronger and better. Even the specter of the mysterious wolf doesn't scare me as much as it once did. Damien and Noah still haven't been able to find out anything about him. But they continue their investigations. I know the mystery of the wolf will be solved in the future. Until then, I'm learning to get on with my life...whether it's as a human or a werewolf.

* * *

The night of the full moon finally arrives. The knots in my stomach have knots.

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I have not felt a thing all damned day. I know Damien and Noah will stay with me, but still, I'm terrified of being human again. I've been Maxie Briscoe, werewolf, for nearly half of my life. How can I go back to being Maxie Briscoe, human? I barely remember her.

I run deep into the forest trailing Damien and Noah, who have long since shifted. They have brought me up to Wisconsin as a surprise. The woods here are stunning, deep and isolated with rivers, creeks and bluffs. Over deadfall and brush, I run in human form, clumsy and tripping. I stop, stooping to catch my breath.

Noah crashes through the trees, his giant gray Beast looking at me, expectantly. He turns and drops to his knees in front of me. I climb onto his massive back, my arms wrapping about his neck. I bury my face in his fur as he takes off, bounding through the trees.

Branches and leaves snag at my hair as he charges onward. We are heading for the bluff where Damien and Noah hunted together for the first time. Noah jumps over a fallen log and lands at the base of the bluff. Damien is there waiting. He moves in so that I can slide from Noah to him. I ride the rest of the way up on Damien's back.

The sight on the bluff takes away my breath. The moon is so close I can touch it, the stars a glittering array of gems against the velvet black of the night. I jump off of Damien and walk to the edge, staring out over the river.

I strip down and stretch, my hands reaching out to the moon. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, breathing in the scent of wood, wolf, sky and water. I concentrate on each minute alteration in my blood. And there it is, the faint first stirrings of the Change.

I cry out, my joy absolute as the beloved sensations course through me. I fall forward as the familiar feeling of expanding

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muscle and skeleton increases. I revel in the sight of black fur coating my skin.

I rise and face Damien and Noah. They approach me, sniffing and petting, the happiness evident in their glowing eyes.

I howl my rapture to the heavens, my lovers joining me in a wild symphony.

MELISSA BRADLEY

Melissa Bradley grew up in a book-loving, storytelling family on Chicago's southeast side. Some of her fondest memories are of her father regaling her with tales of giants and goblins. She has a passion for stories of history, romance, adventure, fantasy, science fiction and horror. Her favorite places include bookstores, libraries and movie theatres. You can find out more about her at:

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* * *

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