



WOLF'S SOUL

A MIDNIGHT HOWL NOVEL

TIERNEY O'MALLEY

Red Rose Publishing

Wolf's Soul

A Midnight Howl Novel

By

Tierney O'Malley

Dedication

For Tom.

A big fan of wolves.

Thanks for taking us to Yellowstone

National Park.

Me.



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter One

Marrowstone Island, Washington

Present time

Light.

Marisol was home. If he made it to her front door, she would take him in. He knew deep inside his wild beast heart, she would.

Almost there. Ignore the pain. It's just a nick, Callum. You'll make it. This isn't how your fucking life's going end.

Callum blinked to clear his vision. The wound on his left shoulder sapped his strength like a greedy leach clamped on a flesh. Exposed to the harsh rain for quite some time now, his fur no longer protected him from the cold. Soaked, tired, and in tremendous pain, he wanted to stay right there in the mud puddle, drown, and end his fight. He pawed the rain off his face with extreme care. Still the simple movement caused him so much pain that he snarled angrily with himself, his weakness. Most of all he hated the beast that cut him—Atos, mean son of a bitch leader of Blood Robbers.

The thought of Atos had him snarling. No. He wouldn't die here and let the bastard win. Not going to happen. The hell with his goddamn pain.

His fight with fucking Atos became personal since Alysia's death. Stupid Atos, as evil-minded as he was, believed that he lured his sister outside the safe haven of Blood Robbers den. He had killed many Blood Robbers and would do so again if necessary. But he would never kill a sweet, down-to-earth, naïve young she-wolf. Yeah, she was Atos's sister, but not once had he thought about using her to get to Atos. Alysia thought about humans differently. She was against what the Blood Robbers Clan stood for—feeding off humans.

Somewhere, thunder rolled.

Callum's body shivered from the cold. The need to transform from wolf into human was so strong. A sign that death was near.

To hell with death. He'd fight it with fangs and nails. Dying wasn't on his list of things to do this year or the next. Not yet. His brothers would kick his ass if they find him like this. They gave him a job and by fucking shit, he would see to it that it was done. Besides, he had made a promise to Doctor Saint James, a friend he missed and wished was still around. Damn his soul if he failed to fulfill that promise. He must stay in his wolf form to live.

As a wolf, his senses were paranormal and his strength and power could sustain his life. He could buy time this way. In human form, and with the amount

of blood he'd lost, he would die before he could reach the pottery barn. And that would mean dying for the fifth time. He never feared death, but it would be great if one of his brothers were around when that happened. To finish him off before he turned.

Damn. He couldn't tell which existence was better. To live as a human, die one time and never come back. Or, born as Midnight Howl with five lives and come back as Cancer after dying for the fifth time.

Who wants to exist as a fucking Cancer, a soulless Shape-shifter with nothing in his mind but to kill? Not him. Although the possibility of it from happening had already started. The unbearable pain from his shoulder reminded him of that.

Fucking sword.

If it were an ordinary sword that cut him, his body could heal the wound. Too bad for him, Atos used the same sword that ended his ancestor's immortality to sliced him—Valdo's sword. Once its blade cut anyone's skin, death would quickly travel to the bloodstream. It was made to kill.

Callum panted. He could definitely feel death touching the back of his neck.

There were only two ancient swords in this world. The one the Midnight Howl wanted to get a hold of and currently hidden in Marisol's barn, and the other happened to be the one that Atos kept. His clan wanted Atos's sword too. Not because of its power, but to end its misuse. Trying to take it away from him,

though, would mean shedding blood, guts and losing more lives. Atos would never give up his ancestors' sword without a fight. Not while he was still living. And now he wanted the sword's twin. What a greedy son of a bitch.

Callum shifted his position. His body screamed from staying too long in one position. Damn he felt stiff. Not good. He must make it to Marisol before Atos or the Grim did.

The wind whipped around him slapping the towering trees making them groan. Pine needles, leaves, and old branches began to rain down on him. He must get out of here. Atos and his ugly, slime ball sidekicks might not waste time finding him because of his wound, but they would exert more effort of finding Marisol now that they knew who she was.

He would not be in this situation, so fucking helpless, if it weren't for the group of loud hikers that hiked up the Olympic Peninsula. He was on his way to Marisol's when Atos blocked his path, sword in hand. The bastard gave him his evil grin then attacked him. While the other Blood Robbers watched, he dodged Atos's hard blows. He was doing fine protecting himself from Atos's sword, when they all heard the chatting and heavy breathing of humans. Atos pointed his sword at him then signaled the other two Blood Robbers to find the hikers. He knew what would happen to the hikers if he didn't get to them first, but Atos attacked

him like a rabid animal. With his mind on the hikers, Callum inadvertently took his eyes off Atos giving him room for an opportunity to score.

The sword landed hard on his shoulder. Trained not to give in on the first cut, he managed to give Atos the taste of his own bite and tore a chunk of flesh off his shoulder deep enough to shock his senses. As Atos staggered backwards, Callum grabbed the opportunity and took off. He ran after the two Blood Robbers. They were already circling the hikers when he found them. Without thinking twice, he jumped on top of the closest one ready to attack the hiker's leader, bit his neck and was about to snap it into two when blood curling screams from the other hikers rendered in the air. Callum let go of his hold on the Blood Robbers neck. The remaining Blood Robber snarled at him then ran into the woods. Atos, with his sword in a ready position, appeared before his matted cohort's ass disappeared from his view. Callum knew why Atos remained in human form. He would have to let go of his sword in order to shift. And the bastard also knew that Callum could beat his dirty ass when in wolf form.

One of the hikers was on the phone screaming for help while the others shook miserably like shaved Chihuahuas left out in the cold. Callum wished they would run instead. He couldn't blame them though. Paralyzing fear could make anyone become rooted on the ground.

Atos glared at the hikers and then smirked at the wolf lying on the ground. After desecrating the ground with his spit, he sheathed his sword. He gave Callum a satanic smile that made the hikers whimper in unison. "Have fun living as a Cancer, Midnight fucking Howl. Next time we meet, I'll stand by your side until I'm positive there's not a drop of blood left in your filthy veins." With a contemptuous look, he left the trail to disappear in the thick of the trees and growth abundant in the area.

He was still gazing on the spot where Atos disappeared making sure the bastard wouldn't come back when he felt a rock hit him on the head. He turned around and found one of the hikers holding a bigger rock ready to throw it at him. Bleeding like a gutted pig, he growled low and showed his fangs to scare them. The hikers huddled together and began scooting away from him. Callum hoped they would go back down and leave and forget about hiking. They would most likely tell this story to everyone willing to listen. Hopefully, no one dumb enough would believe them. Convinced that the humans would be safe, he left the trail and ran into the thick of the woods until he reached the path that would lead him to Marrowstone Island where the main town Nordland lies.

Now here he was. Bleeding. He was close to Marisol's barn now.

Callum's shoulder burned he wanted to howl from the pain. He'd heard about the sword's poison quickly spreading the moment its blade cut open anyone's skin.

He now knew what it was like to feel the poison spread in his system. He could tell where the tainted blood flowed, which part of him was dying, how close he was to going to fucking hell.

Yeah, close but not there yet. He wouldn't let death overtake his whole body. Not in this lifetime.

Another flash of lightning lit the wooded property showing black shadows of tall and thick Cedar trees. Like gigantic sentinels in the dark, the trees stood. One branch touching the other so any animal could easily travel from one tree to the next.

Then darkness descended once again in the woods.

The sweet scent of wet grass, earthy leaves, and foul animal excrements enveloped his sense of smell. Sound of night creatures scampering, rustling leaves, whistling wind, animals rooting underfoot, tree limbs breaking and crashing on the ground were loud in his ears. Callum could see everything as if it was daylight. But with the intense pain he suffered from, he had a hard time focusing on anything. Trees began to multiply and sway around. Shit.

Only a few yards left. I could do this. His whole body shuddered as he tried to remain on his feet, but his legs buckled beneath him. *I'm not going to die here. Not like this.* He took a deep breath and concentrated on living and not dying.

He defied death many times before. He could do it again. All he had to do was try to make it to Marisol. She alone could help him. She must have saved Mark's medicine. Gods, he hoped she did; otherwise, he'd say his fucking goodbye to the world tonight.

Curse on you, Atos. You and your fucking clan would pay for this.

Callum summoned his strength and crawled on the dirt. Each time he moved, blades of green grass sliced at his open wound. The pain was so intense he could hardly breathe at all. Growling low, he focused his mind to task and tried to ignore the pain. He'd stayed long enough in the woods. The bastards could be somewhere close.

"Fuck you, grim. Especially you Atos. When we meet again, your blood will drip on the ground until your puss ugly face dried up like a prune." Callum conjured the image of the Blood Robbers mourning their traitorous leader. "Hell yeah! I'll make it happen."

Anger and a promise to get even with Atos and his clan gave him another surge of energy. He dug his paws on the soft ground and pulled himself until he was at the edge of the wooded area. A few feet more and he would be outside Marisol's front door.

He could try sending Doctor Saint James's daughter a message using his mind channeling. He knew Marisol would be able to hear him if he tried. Once,

while she was working, she looked up and stared at him when he'd said *later* as if she heard him mentally. That time was different though. If he tried sending her a message and heard his voice clearly right now while alone, she might think she was losing her mind. Hearing voices when no one was around, to humans, would mean real bad. Scaring Marisol wouldn't do them both any good. Howling was out of the question. Wolves had impeccable hearing. If Atos were trailing behind, he'd be able to hear him from miles away. Among the many talents of wolves, tracking was one of them. Any sign—sound, scent, anything—could be used to track a prey.

He must be careful. It was pure luck that nature was on his side tonight. Rain had been washing all traces of his blood. In his condition he wouldn't be able to cover up his scent.

Once more, he gathered his strength and stood up. Behind the cluster of rhododendrons and cedar trees, he listened for any suspicious sound. Other than the sounds of torrent rain that pelted the wet ground he heard none.

He watched for anything that moved. The distance from where he stood and to Marisol's door was short, but enough to be seen. If humans spotted him, he'd most likely die in their hands more so than get his neck broken by another Shape-shifter's powerful jaws.

Callum looked at the house. Sheets of rain blanketed the house. Water poured from the gutter like transparent curtains. Mark had mentioned that he needed to work on the barn's gutters, remove the pine needles, and reattach the aluminum pipe's elbows. Now Callum knew what he was talking about. With the doctor gone, who would fix the gutters and rain drains? Marisol would have to hire someone to do it. Or...or if he survived from his wound, he'd offer his help. That would be if he survived. So, first thing first, He must make it to the barn.

Raising his nose, he sniffed the air. He didn't sense evil souls close by. It was safe to go.

Ignoring the blinding pain from his shoulder, Callum limped toward the barn. It took him a couple steps before his legs gave out and he fell flat on his stomach. Angry at himself and with Atos, he clamped his fangs on a broken thick branch lying on the ground. He tasted blood and dirty rotten wood. So fucking what? He didn't care. He kept his firm grip on the wood, channeling his pain and anger, imagining it was Atos's neck crunching between his teeth.

Keeping his emotions in check, he closed his eyes, sucked in his breath then let it out so slowly. Chest tight, he pushed himself up trying to remain on all fours. His breathing was short and shallow. Fuck!

Through his hazy vision, Callum saw the barn door left ajar. Marisol must have propped it open with a bowl full of kibbles. If not raw meat. Leaving her door

open like that, one of these days, she'd find real badass robbers inside her home. And for what? To leave him dog food and uncooked meat.

Damn. *When will she stop leaving food for me? I prefer my meat well-done and not bloody.* He wished he could tell Marisol that. To her, he was just a stray wolf. And wolves eat raw meat. But she had no way of knowing that his kind weren't just wolves, that they were Shape-shifters—different in many ways.

Callum finally made it to Marisol's barn. Using his better shoulder, he nudged the door open but unable to stop himself from losing his balance. His whole body landed on the floor with a loud thud. The door banged against the wall with an impact so strong it rebounded and hit his back. Pain stole his breath, he couldn't even howl. Without moving his head, he tried to see inside the barn through his blurry vision. He didn't see Marisol. Where was that woman? She was always here. He tried to yelp so Marisol could hear him but his mouth was sticky. He swallowed and tasted something metallic. He tasted blood.

Unable to move, he remained where he was wishing for Marisol to appear. Uncontrollable shivers racked his body but he didn't care. He knew he'd be okay. He was already inside the barn. Marisol's barn.

He'd be okay.



Rain pounded hard and loud on the glass windows like pellets on an empty can. Marisol watched the beads of water roll down like fat tears to pool at the bottom of the window. The pinging sound lulled her for a moment. She loved the rain especially at night when she cocooned herself underneath her quilt. Her father used to like it, too. He said rain was good. It washed away the stink of the day. Rain brought back good and bad memories, too, Marisol thought. Yeah, she had good memories of frolicking outside in the rain with her father. Lots and lots of them. Sadly, she couldn't add anymore. Marisol sighed. Her dad had been gone for a month now, but his absence never failed to pierce her heart.

She would give anything to hear his voice, his laughter, and his grumblings once more. Since his death, coffee never tasted good, breakfast was boring, nights were lonely. Life lost its luster the day she lost him in the hospital.

Marisol imagined her father's face smiling at her. God, how she missed him. There were times when she found herself looking outside, waiting for him to come home, expecting him to darken her door calling her name asking what was for dinner. Many times, she felt as if he was still in the house with her. Or could it be just a wishful thinking? An inner longing, a call from a daughter to her father to come back and hug her again, to hush her fears and whisper that everything would be alright? Dad's death seemed like a bad dream. The pain caused by the hollowed spot in the very center of her heart, though, was no illusion. It was as real as the

fact that she now fell under the category of an orphan—alone with no one to call a relative.

Another stab of pain made her hold her breath. How long would it before the pain goes away? Or would it ever go away?

Her nose stung and began to drip. She sniffed so loud she bet her father would have said something like, “*Mari, when your nose drips, that means you need to blow that goop out of it.*” But he wasn’t here to give her a hard time. And he would never come back again.

Not fair, Dad. I still need you.

Marisol wiped the lone tear off her cheek. Life, she realized, was comparable to her clay. She could mold it the way she wanted it to be, but sometimes no matter how hard she tried, the clay would fall apart. Like her father’s life.

She pleaded to doctors and prayed to god to help save her father. But his wounds were fatal. He died at the hospital even before the nurses could start the blood transfusion.

“Keep the sword close to you. Guard it with your life. Practice using it. Practice, Mari. Practice. I love you.”

Those were her father’s last whispered words. He wanted her to practice wielding the sword he put in her hands when she turned five. Why? For protection? From the animals that attacked him that night? *He* was the one who

had the need for it not her. Why had he not put it to good use like whacking the bushes instead of hiding it? He could have protected himself from whatever bled him dry. He could have been with her still. They could be sharing dinner and stories tonight and she wouldn't have to face days and night alone.

"Damn it, Dad! I want you back. I want you back." She angrily wiped her tears with the back of her hands.

What was the big deal with the old sword? She knew it belonged to her late mother. So what? What was so damn important about it that her father had to use his last breath to remind her to guard it like some precious stone? If he said take care of it because it cost a fortune, she would understand. To practice using it so she would become an expert swordswoman, now that idea she couldn't get. Her father knew what she wanted—to see her pots on display in a gallery, to become a successful artist.

Oh, Dad. Was there anything you failed to tell me about the sword?

The sword was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Without a doubt, it belonged to times long past. Like the historical period. Thirty-seven and three quarters long, double-edged, leather wrapped around the handle, the guard and pommel were made of cast metal with designs that looked like entwined vines. To top it all off, engravings in Gaelic decorated the blade that scared the bejesus out of her when she read it for the first time.

In her native tongue, it read: *Cut thy skin and forever it will stay open. To bleed, to feed the earth.*

With its length, dang, it would definitely bleed anyone dry. When she held it in her hands she could feel power emanating from it. Or maybe it was just her imagination because she liked to think she was Uma Thurman in the movie Kill Bill each time she practiced swinging it.

Sighing, she looked up heavenward. “Mom, I know you wanted me to be good with the sword. Why? No one uses swords anymore for protection. Gangsters use AK 47, .45’s, and Rottweilers. Dad showed me how to shoot. Guns could give same or better protection, I think. Alright. Fine, I’ll keep practicing because that’s what you and Dad wanted me to do. Take care of Dad for me in heaven, okay?”

Marisol veered her mind back to the night she arrived at the hospital. Her father was already in the emergency room. The doctor told her an animal attacked him. But he couldn’t tell what kind. He said the puncture wounds on her dad’s neck and arms were from pointed conical teeth. Like a dogs canine, but they were too deep to belong to a normal dog even a cougar. When she started asking too many questions, the doctor said they would have to wait for the lab results for a definite answer. However, he believed that wolves attacked her dad. A theory that Davis, the town sheriff, shared. He whispered that there had been cases of animal

attacks in the area and that her father wasn't the first victim. As if it would make her feel better, he added that more traps had been set up to catch the beasts to prevent more killings from happening.

Fine. A wolf attacked and killed her father. Still, that didn't answer the question about the loss of blood or the small amount left in her father's body. He'd lost so much but very little was on his clothes. It was as if someone siphoned him.

Whatever or whoever caused his death, Marisol found out—from nights of reading her father's documents—that her mother suffered from the same fate, too. Deep puncture wounds and a broken neck killed her. Could it be that the same animals responsible for the death of her mother came back in the area eighteen years later? Or maybe they never left at all? What kind of an animal would siphon a human's blood? Sheriff Davis, a man with an answer to everything, couldn't come up with an explanation. He just told her not to blabber her questions around. Last thing he wanted was fear spreading like a wildfire on his island.

Marisol understood his meaning. Marrowstone Island benefited from the influx of tourists every year. News about wild animals *siphoning* humans would affect the tourism business here.

If the sheriff and the doctor couldn't explain what happened to her dad and the other victims, then something sinister, perhaps evil, was happening in this town. Maybe a crazy lunatic, an escapee who had a penchant for killing people

and draining their blood, did it. How else could you explain what happened? None of it made any sense.

She often wondered about the poultice she helped her dad mixed. How many times had Dad sworn that it contained healing powers because of her. Marisol shook her head. Whether her special contribution, as his dad called it, really had the power to heal, he had lost so much blood she doubted the poultice would have saved his life. Besides, the poultice was for animals not for humans. She tried it once on her scraped knees when she fell off a tree. It didn't work. Puss formed on the open flesh before it finally scabbed. And, she'd never heard Dad use it for anything else other than the wounded wild animals he happened to find in the woods and whatever pets the neighbors brought in to his clinic. Marisol started thinking hard about the poultice until her head began to throb. Gah! She worked too long today. The clay fumes filled her mind she couldn't even think straight. Tomorrow she would call the sheriff. Maybe he had more information to add about her father's death.

After a couple of deep breaths, she patted her face dry then began arranging her unfinished products. Tomorrow, she'd bring these babies to their final state. She stacked the two unglazed mugs, three Tuscan urns, and a pot shaped like a fishbowl on the drying shelf. They need to be completely dry before being bisque fired. The initial firing would remove the physical and chemical water. Without it,

her products would turn into mud. And that would be as awful as having a hangnail.

Marisol placed the last pot on the drying shelf, stepped back then admired her days work. Her shelf was full. All of them made from red Alberta clay. Once they were bisque, they'd have a terra cotta appearance. Tomorrow morning, she'd fire the kiln. By mid-afternoon, the products would be ready to for display in her Bisque It store. For tonight, she'd make popcorn and watch Pride and Prejudice. The DVD was a gift from her father on her twenty-third birthday. She'd seen it at least five times, but the story was too good it never got old. If Renée was here, she'd invite her to come over. The rainy night was perfect for a romantic, with happy ever after movie. Well, her best friend was probably having a more perfect night with her fiancé James in Florida. Lucky girl. Marisol sighed.

When will a handsome man land on my feet? Dang, even one with a hairy back would be okay just to keep me company right now.

Marisol removed her apron and hooked it on the peg on the wall. Her stomach growled. Man, it seemed she just had a bowl of salad with oil and vinegar for lunch and now it was time to eat again. Well, thanks to Sara Lee she wouldn't have to cook tonight. Not that she had anything fresh in the fridge to cook anyway. And if she took the trouble of cooking, there was no one to eat dinner

with. Even the wolf that had been visiting her wouldn't even join her. Such a finicky wolf.

She wondered if he would show his handsome face today. The day her father died, the wolf showed up at her door. He stayed in one spot watching her with his sharp blue eyes. She didn't shoo him away. Her dad, a veterinarian who treated and loved all kinds of animals, would never do such a thing. Besides, she liked him. Not only was he a handsome wolf with brown, grey, black and white fur, he also had eyes that bespoke kindness, intensity and intelligence. When he looked at her, it was as if he was a man admiring what he was seeing. His visits became regular. Most of the time, she felt he was trying to communicate or say something. One time, she thought she heard him say something. Of course, it was absurd. Yet, when she met his eyes, a creepy feeling ran up her spine and made her shiver.

Her father told her once that all she had to do was look into an animal's eyes and she'd be able to see all the way down to his tail—if he had one. With this particular wolf, it was hard to go beyond his beautiful bluer than blue eyes. He'd never acted like a dog that would lower his snout on a bowl of water or food. Not once had he touched the cut up meat and kibbles she'd left for him.

The same time every day, he would come and sit just inside the door, watch her work on the wheel, and then—the most interesting part—whenever she said I'm done for the day, he would lower his head as if in acknowledgment then he'd

disappear into the wooded property. It was the oddest thing. She bet if her father was still around, he'd have an explanation for that kind of behavior.

Marisol wished the wolf would poke his nose at her door tonight. She badly needed a company.

A flash of lightning lit the room. It had been raining all day. Wolf must be hiding somewhere dry or huddled inside his cold and miserable den wherever that was. Better than being here or in the pound. He shouldn't be here anyway but somewhere up in the North Cascades.

Everyone believed the reappearance of the wolves had to do with the missing pets and number of dead deer carcasses found. Well, wolves were carnivores. They would eat anything. Marisol sighed. She hoped her wolf didn't step on an animal trap.

All her life, she'd seen only a handful of wolves. She often thought of them as very private animals and that they prefer to stay away from people. Now, she believed otherwise. They just like to keep their distance and watch from afar. Sometimes, when she spotted them in the woods, she had this feeling that they were guards looking out watching for...

A loud crashing sound made her jump. "Eeekk!"

What the hell was that about? Marisol stilled. She listened for more sound. Nothing. She'd left the barn door ajar in case her wolf showed up. The wind must have blown it. Crud, it sounded like someone had tried to break the wall.

A burglar wouldn't make that awful loud noise. He would be one stupid burglar if he did. It must be the wind. For safe measure she grabbed the baseball bat leaning up against the corner of the drying room. Heart hammering against her chest, she gripped her bat with both hands unsure whether she should she go out there or lock herself in the room until whatever caused the noise was gone. What if she was right about the wind blowing the barn door wide open?

Yup, I should go out there. "This is my barn, for Pete's sakes."

Instead of rushing outside of the drying room to see what caused the sound, she moved stealthily as a cat on the roof. Marisol opened the door and poked her head out real quick. No one was in the barn but the door was wide open. She looked again. The wind howled and whipped against the wall spraying water on the lump on the floor.

"What the...Wolf?"

If it weren't for his face, she would think someone had dumped a bundle of wet carpet on her front door.

Dropping the bat, she ran toward him. He was soaking wet bleeding like a gutter heavy with rain and looked dead. "Oh no, buddy. Please don't be dead."

The wind blew spraying more rain inside. Heck, how was she going to stop the rain from coming in? Buddy here was blocking the door. She dropped on her knees.

“Hey there. What happened?”

Poultice.

“Poultice?” Marisol looked around. She was sure she heard someone say poultice. It was faint, but she heard it. “Did you say poultice? Of course not. You’re a wolf. It must have thought out loud. Bad habit. God, you look horrible.”

She peered closer where the blood oozed. Through dirt and bits of grass, she could see a big cut and raw flesh. Marisol winced as if she were the one bleeding. God, he must be in awful pain. She must stop the bleeding. Her dad had kept his bandages and medicine in his clinic. “Be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

I won’t.

“You won’t—” Marisol turned to look at the wolf. “Jesus, I must be losing my mind.”

Chapter Two

Marisol ran in her father's clinic. It didn't take her long to find the black leather medicinal kit. For a briefest moment, she stopped in the middle of the clinic and took a deep breath. Tobacco. The clinic still held the scent of her father's smoke. Everything looked the same. His father's favorite plaid shirt hung on the back of the old wooden chair, his black medicinal book with a pair of reading glasses on the small desk in the corner. Nothing changed. The only one missing was her father's presence and his raspy laughter.

"I miss you, Dad." Medicine kit in hand, she grabbed a handful of rags stacked on the shelf and an old beach towel then left the room.

The wolf remained where he was. He looked dead. Marisol kneeled in front of the wolf then lifted one heavy paw three times as big as her smaller one. She shook it a bit looking for a sign that he was still alive. He didn't respond. Man, where do you look for a pulse on a wolf? She pressed two fingers on the wolf's neck. Nothing. Running her fingers through the wet silky smooth fur, she tried to feel his chest. There. It was faint but the heartbeat was definitely there.

“What the heck did you do, buddy?” Marisol grabbed the rags and wiped the blood off his shoulder. The cut was more visible now. “Oh my god! Poor baby. Someone tried to cut you in half.” She couldn’t take her eyes off the open wound. How could someone do this to him?

“Baby, were you caught trying to eat someone’s cat or bunny? I’ve been giving you food so you wouldn’t have to hunt for animals.” Tears blurred her vision. Her wolf came to her even in his state of dying. Why? To say goodbye? Her fingers felt clumsy as she tried to open her father’s kit.

“Don’t die on me.” Marisol found the jar full of mixture that looked like a petroleum jelly but inky black. As soon as she unscrewed the lip, scent of mint, marjoram, and beeswax floated in the air reminding her of her father. She swallowed. No time to go maudlin right now. “Okay, I know this poultice by heart. Dad made this with my special touch. I’m not going to tell you about my contribution to this poultice because it’s weird. And to tell you the truth, I think it’s unnecessary. You see, when I tried this, it didn’t help heal my own cuts. Now, personally, I have not used this before on pets so I don’t know the effect. Dad’s the vet, you see. He said this works on wolves. You’re a wolf. So this should help you. Damn, times like this I wish I studied animal husbandry instead of molding clay.” She sniffed and wiped her dripping nose with her forearm.

Darn it. Crying is not going to help this wolf.

“Okay, buddy. I’m applying this on your wound. Let’s hope Dad was right when he said this thing worked like magic.” She hoped it would work on a half-dead animal. Scooping a large goop, she spread it on the wound.

As soon as the black medicine touched the raw flesh, the wolf’s body nearly lifted off the floor as he let out a nightmarish howl. His head rose then turned to look at her. Surprised, a soft gasp escaped Marisol’s mouth.

“Wow. That was fast.” Marisol smiled and was about to add more solution on the wound when the wolf crinkled his nose baring his fangs. A low growl rumbled deep from his throat. Marisol jumped back. “Nice wolfie. Just trying to help.” Good god. The medicine must felt like hot chili on his wound.

The wolf’s eyes were dark blue but only for a few seconds. Like the reels of a slot machine, they changed to gray, to dark blue and back to gray again. They reminded her of the eyes of the dead people or zombies. *Is he dead?* Of course not. He wouldn’t be growling if he was.

Oh so weird. His fangs, although stained with blood, still gleamed. Saliva hung on both sides of his mouth like stalactites, suspended because of its stickiness. Without taking his freaky eyes off her, the wolf stood on fours.

Marisol gasped and panted in terror. *Lord, he’s going to eat me.*

The wolf's lips drew up quivering as he continued to snarl at her. His saliva began dripping on the floor. Marisol stared at the wolf's elongated teeth. Was it her imagination or his teeth grew longer?

Oh god, oh god. She tried to utter his name. No sound came out of her mouth.

The wolf lowered his head with his crinkled snout then snarled repeatedly.

"Wolf sit!" She screamed. "Please, buddy, don't hurt me. This is Marisol. I'm just trying to help. Please. Don't you recognize me?"

Thankfully, the wolf stopped snarling. He blinked his freaky looking eyes. and they turned blue again. He swayed from side to side then dropped on the floor.

Oh my god. Letting out the breath she didn't realized she was holding, Marisol stared at the wolf at her feet. Viciousness was gone from his face. He looked like an ordinary cuddly pet. Except he wasn't. Her wolf was a deadly beast.

She shook her hands to rid of her nervousness. No wonder Sheriff Davis wanted to get rid of the wolves. They were unpredictable and vicious. And what was that about his teeth? She would ask Sheriff Davis about it or maybe Google it.

Thunder echoed from a distance. The cold rain hadn't let up. Marisol shivered. She supposed it was a good thing the wolf moved. Now she could close the door. Quickly, she got up and shut the door. Leaning against it, she looked down on the wolf lying on the floor. What the heck happened to him? He transformed into a big bad wolf with freaky eyes. She waited a minute to make

sure the wolf wouldn't wake up again before cautiously kneeling in front of him again. The rise and fall of his chest told her he was alive. Picking up the jar, she looked at it. Was her father talking literally or figuratively? Well, she didn't need to know the answer. What mattered was it worked.

Marisol grabbed a strip of clean cloth and then lathered it with the goo. She was about to wrap it on the wound when she remember her bat. Quickly, she ran back to where she dropped in on the floor. "Okay, I'm going to bandage your wound to stop the bleeding. But don't you dare snarl at me again. I'll smash your head with this bat. God, I must be nuts for doing this." She laid the bat beside her. Praying the wolf would remain asleep and wouldn't react to the medicine, she slowly wrapped the cloth on the wound. It wasn't easy considering the wolf weighed a ton. She had to squeeze the material underneath him to be able to wound the cloth around his body. At least, he remained asleep. Thank god.

Marisol looked at the mess on the floor. She should take him to the clinic and close the door. "Got to move you, bud." She unfolded the towel and placed it beside the wolf. "I'm gonna have to drag you." Just like the bandage, she squeezed it beneath the wolf and then pulled it on the other side until his whole body was on top of it. "Boy, you don't look fat, but you're dang too heavy. Just hang on, buddy. I'll take you to Dad's clinic. You'll be comfy in there." It would be best if she

kept him inside until he was strong enough to go back to the woods. “God, what do you eat? Bricks?” Grunting, she pulled the towel until she reached the clinic.

The wolf was dead to the world. The amount of blood he lost must have weakened him. Too bad Dad wasn’t here to fix his wound. And, it was equally bad that she didn’t learn her father’s profession. Poor thing came to the wrong person for help. “Sorry, buddy. Dad’s not here to help.” Marisol ran her hands on the soft wet fur. Lithe, tall and long, she’d never seen a wolf this big. What a beautiful creature. “Well, buddy. You’ll just have to stay here on the floor. I can’t lift you up on the bed. Besides, I don’t want to move you again. You might wake up and eat me for your next meal.”

She should call Sheriff Davis. He mentioned at the town meeting that if a wolf had been sighted it should be reported. For the wolves and residents protection, he said. He was right. Maybe Sheriff Davis would help her take this wolf to a nearby vet.

Marisol peered at the wound. Unbelievable, blood wasn’t gushing out of his cut anymore. Still, he probably needed stitches otherwise it would take forever for the wound to heal. An open wound this big could get infected if remained open. He should be in a real doggy hospital. Besides, she couldn’t keep him here. Tomorrow, Mrs. Bode’s preschool kids would be here at noon to look at her pottery barn. Cancelling their field trip would only disappoint the kids. She

wouldn't want that. Marisol sighed. She'd met Mrs. Bode's kids before. They were a rowdy, excited bunch. It wouldn't be good to have a wolf around, contained or not.

She witnessed how this wolf could change from one cuddly looking animal to a feral one. She shouldn't take a chance. If her dad were here, he'd know what to do to keep the wolf sedated. Not her. She had no clue whatsoever on how to fix animals. As much as she wanted to keep him, he needed proper care. Yeah. She would call Sheriff Davis.

Chapter Three

Sheriff Davis, a man in his sixties with a belly as round as her kiln and sausage shaped fingers walked in the barn. Smith Smithers, the trigger happy deputy, limped behind him. Both men were soaked. Marisol noticed none of them removed their plastic covered hats and mud splattered boots. They tracked dirt and water all over her floor.

“Glad you both came.”

“We have to respond to any calls about wolves right away, Marisol.” Smithers grinned then patted his holster.

Marisol took a quick look at the deputy’s gun. Sure enough, it was cocked and ready. Lordy, he never learned. When someone asked him why his gun was always at a ready, he simply said. “*You never know when someone’s going to jump at you.*” Sadly, for Smithers, the only time he pulled his gun out of its holster was to shoot a garden snake foolish enough to wander in his wife’s yard.

Marisol stepped away from Smithers when he walked by her. He’d already shot his own foot twice, which he claimed to be an accident. It would be wise to stay away from the man. Just to be on the safe side.

“You said the animal is in your bedroom?” Sheriff Davis asked in his commanding tone.

“Not my bedroom, Sheriff. He’s in Dad’s clinic,” she pointed at the second door at the far end of the barn.

“How did he get in?”

“I, uhm, left my front door open.”

“Stupid beast can get in anywhere.”

“He’s in there asleep. He’s wounded so be careful.”

Smithers, who stood beside her, snickered. “Careful. One of them beasts killed John’s horse last week. I won’t be gentle with this one ‘cause I’ll bet my other foot this wolf won’t be gentle either when he tears my carotid artery.”

“John’s horse was old. He died from natural causes.” Marisol knew how and when John’s horse died. She’d been there when it happened. The poor thing had his snout in the trough and then he just dropped dead. The horse died of old age.

“Not what I heard.”

Marisol decided not to push the issue.

“I don’t know what made them come down from the Cascades. More and more of them had been spotted recently.” Sheriff Davis pursed his lips as if he was looking at the dinner menu and couldn’t decide what to order.

“You know, Sheriff. This could be the one that killed and sucked Doctor Saint James—”

Sheriff Davis coughed. He speared his deputy with a look that could only mean shut up. “Okay then. Open that door, Smithers.”

“What if the beast wakes up, Sheriff?”

“Shoot it.”

“Gladly.” Smithers gun appeared in his hand in a matter of seconds.

Impressive, Marisol thought. She bet he’d empty his chamber on her wolf if given the chance. The thought made her heart drop all the way down to her toes. “Wait. Sheriff, you didn’t say anything about shooting the wolf. I thought...maybe we should wait for the Animal Control. They can keep him until he’s well enough to go back where ever he came from.”

“That is the most stupid thing to do, if you ask me. Don’t get it why we have to return these beasts back in the wild when we know they’d be coming back to eat our pets and wild deer. You know how the tourists like to see the deer. Did you hear the news the other day about a black bear that wandered inside a store? Them animals are trying to invade us.”

“I beg to differ, Deputy Smithers. I think it’s *us* invading their homes by mowing down the trees to built new houses. *They* were here first. *We* moved-in into their territories. That bear was just coming back to see his old home that

developers must have destroyed.” Marisol lifted her chin a fraction a bit. Those were her father’s words. Her dad always told her the animals had lived in this area long before them.

“You defend the animals? Isn’t it obvious one of them killed both of your—”

“Smithers will shoot only if it attacks us, Marisol. You said he’s asleep, so no don’t worry. But if he suddenly wakes up, I’m sure he’s gonna be as mad as Old Ben whenever he runs out of Cortisone for his knees.”

Deputy Smithers snorted. Marisol knew it wouldn’t do her any good if she shoved the bat in between the deputy’s legs so she imagined she was grounding the tip of it against his groin instead. Satisfied, she looked at Sheriff Davis. He was right. The wolf might wake up mad. Unlike Old Ben, though, her wolf wouldn’t use a stick to whack people when in a cantankerous mood. Marisol thought about the wolf’s lethal fangs. He could hurt Sheriff Davis or Smithers. Still, shooting him seemed barbaric. “I have a baseball bat. If he tries anything, you could hit his legs.”

“Don’t go soft on the beast, Marisol. It probably has rabies.”

“Rabies?” God, she didn’t think about rabies or diseases. She touched the wolf’s blood and wound without wearing a glove.

“Wolves are wild. They eat god knows what.”

“Smithers is right. We’ll take care of the wolf. I suggest you step back, though. It’s better if you’re not standing behind me. Just in case.”

Marisol took one step back. Her eyes focused on the closed door. *Stay asleep, buddy.* She nodded at the officers then turned her back.

She only had taken a couple steps when a loud crash rang in her ears. She turned around. Smithers kicked the clinic door and now hung from its lower hinge. Jesus, if the wolf was asleep, he'd be awake by now, she thought.

Gun drawn with the barrel pointing inside the room, Smithers took a step inside. "Holy carmudgeon!"

"Is it dead, Smithers?"

"Come take a look, Sheriff."

Sheriff Davis stood beside his deputy and peered inside the room. "Lord almighty."

"He's big. I wonder if that's real."

"Real or not, it should be covered."

"I had a hard time with him and was in a hurry to call you. Covering him was the last time I had in mind." Marisol piped in. *Please, please, let him be okay.* "Is he still asleep?" She asked with hope burning inside her chest.

"Yeah. Looks like he had a work out. Must be awful tired. He didn't even wake up. Jesus, I didn't think that size really exists. Is that real?"

"Oh, believe me Deputy Smithers. He is real."

“What kind of a sick joke is this, Marisol?” Sheriff Davis turned to look at her. With his eyebrows deeply furrowed, Marisol bet the wrinkles would be permanent. And his puckered lips, they looked like a chicken butt. Marisol bit her lower lip to stop the beginning of a smile. “We are short handed and there are always important calls coming in everyday. A joke like this is not appreciated.”

Marisol sobered up in a hurry. “What? Why would I joke about this, Sheriff?”

Smithers cleared his throat. “Sir, must be the effect of Mark’s death. She wants attention.” Smithers whispered but loud enough for her to hear.

Aghast, Marisol couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Smithers, I am still in mourning, but definitely not starving for attention.”

“Marisol, I lost someone dear to me two years ago. I understand what loneliness can do to a person. If you need someone to talk to, call my missus. Or attend the prayer healing every Sunday at the chapel. Please don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?”

Sheriff Davis shook his head. His eyes registered pity and disbelief. “I’ve known you since you were just a tot, Marisol, and I have respect for your parents—may their souls rest in peace—that’s why what happened here will not show up in my report. Is that right, Smithers?”

Deputy Smithers' looked down at his boots. "Right you are, sir. No paperwork on this one. Fine with me. Time to clock out anyway. Shelli is cooking pot roast tonight."

"Sheriff, I don't understand. Why—"

"Marisol, please. Enough."

Smithers covered his mouth with his fist and cleared his throat again. "Well, we should roll, Sheriff. My wife is always available Marisol. That is if you need a shoulder to cry on." He glanced at the door he just kicked open then shook his head. "Sorry about the door."

What in the world? I don't need a freaking shoulder. "I don't care about the door. Aren't you going to take him away?"

"Do you want us to?" Smithers asked with a surprised look on his face.

"Well, isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

Sheriff Davis shook his head. "I do like to play games, Marisol. But not this kind. Make sure you lock your door. A real wolf might come in this time."

Now, what the hell is that supposed to mean?

"Sheriff, I don't understand. There's a wounded wolf in there and you should—"

"Enough. Good day, Marisol. Call when you need us."

"But..."

Sheriff Davis shook his head at her then walked out in the rain. Smithers following behind him. Through the glass window, Marisol watched the officers run, their boots stomping on the wet ground splashing mud and water. Hurriedly, they got in the police car. Minutes later, the car's siren made two short wailing sounds and then it pulled away.

Marisol watched the car disappeared around the bend. What in the world did just happen? A sick joke? Why would she joke about calling to report about a wolf? She turned to look at the clinic's door leaning against the wall. Damn it. *Just what I need. Another broken thing to fix.* Well, that could wait. For now, she had a wolf to take care of. If Sheriff Davis and his fervid sidekick wouldn't help this poor wolf then she'd do it alone. But first, she needed to arm herself. Where the heck did she put her bat? If this wolf woke up and decided to eat her for dessert, she'd whack him hard. She liked him but not enough to let him eat her. Ending up like her father and mother wasn't in her book—both died with holes on their necks.

Marisol spotted her bat. She picked it up in a hurry and gripped the handle as if her life depended on it.

Sheriff Davis was the number one advocate for rounding up every wild animal spotted in the area. Now, here was an opportunity to take a wild huge wolf away. Instead, he just looked at Wolf and accused her of pulling a joke. Was he out of his mind?

“Well, there is only one way to find out.” Swallowing hard, she held her bat and pointed the tip toward the room. Heart thumping hard against her ribs, she walked toward the wide open door and inside. Marisol’s gaze was on the floor where she left the wolf, but to her surprise he wasn’t there. She looked at the bed and then her jaw dropped.

Holy bananas! She wasn’t sure if the officers saw what she was looking at right now. She hoped to god they didn’t see this. There, on the cot was a man.

A naked man.

Chapter Four

“Where in heavens name did you come from?” Good god! How did he get in here? She looked around the room. “And where the hell is the wolf?” Maybe the wolf woke up, heard the officers, got scared and took off. Okay, so the wolf left and in came Mister Delicious Body here. When and how? Was he here when she brought the wolf in? No. Of course not. She would be blind to miss someone this huge. She’d bet her pottery wheel the bed was empty when she dragged the wolf in here.

Lordy, this is insane.

The man with a body only a great sculptor could create—whoever he was—made the single bed looked tiny. His legs dangled at the foot of the bed with his toes touching the floor. He must be over six feet tall, with long and thick legs made for running, and long arms sprinkled with silky golden hairs. With broad and muscular chests, he looked powerful. Marisol’s gaze lowered. Oh god. She bit her lower lip and stared at the penis resting on a thatch of hair. She thought men were smaller when relaxed. Hard to imagine how big he would be when aroused. In all her life, she’d never seen a man with such perfectly sculpted body she wanted to

rub herself all over him. Well, she'd never seen a naked man this close. Period. God, this guy must be the crème de la crème of male models. Model or not, why is he here sleeping? This cot was here for Dad's afternoon naps. Now, this man here was using it. Not that she minded. Who would?

Wanting to get a better look, she took a couple steps forward. His unruly hair was the mixed of colors of moonstone and onyx. Strands of hair partly covered his face. What she could see showed his almost perfect features. Whoever his parents were, they did a great job of creating him. Man, check out his tan. He must be exposed to the sun and wind a lot. An outdoors man? She noticed a long bright red scar that ran from his shoulder and stopped just about his nipple. It looked new and freshly healed. Whatever had caused it made him look dangerous and sexy. If it weren't for his generous mouth and shadow of beard that gave him a manly aura, she'd say he was beautiful.

What about his eyes. What color were they? Gah, beautiful or not, blue eyed, green or brown, how in holy caramel cookies did he managed to get in her dad's clinic? She heard about an actor who had wandered inside someone's house and slept in the bedroom. Was that what happened here? But she was here the whole time. Wait, she went to the kitchen to scrub her hands clean. But she was gone only a couple minutes. And where did the wolf go? How could he walk out of here when earlier he was practically dead? The poultice was that good?

Okay, let's just say his awful wound healed within the span of few minutes, which is hard to believe, still it hasn't answered the question of how he escaped. Am I going batty? This doesn't make any sense.

Did she just imagine helping a wolf earlier?

Wake up Mari. Maybe you are dreaming. No, she wasn't. The blood-stained towel she used to pull the wolf was still on the floor. Ha. She didn't just imagine what happened. Later, she would look outside for the wolf. First, this man should wake up. As much as she wanted to gawk at his great package, she couldn't let him sleep here. It wasn't right. *This man is a total stranger.* A total stranger that the Sheriff and his deputy saw. Crap! Smithers said something big. For sure, he was talking about Mister Delicious' manhood here. Marisol groaned. Smithers would most likely tell his wife about what he saw. Oh yeah, they'd be talking about her over their pot roast. And before the sun rises from the east, everyone on Shelli's phonebook would have heard about this man. She wouldn't be surprised if Shelli and her entourage knock on her door tonight.

"Ugh, I hate to think what the sheriff and his deputy are thinking about me right now."

Using her bat, she poked the man on the thigh gently. Hitting him wouldn't be good. It would be a shame to put a bruise on him. The mad didn't budge. He

was asleep. Definitely not dead because she could see the rise and fall of his chest. She inched closer for a better look and touched the man's shoulder with her finger.

"Excuse me, Mister Yummy. You need to wake up." Touching him was comparable to touching cement except he was warm and smooth. "I have no idea how you end up here, but you need to wake up now. My wolf is supposed to be here not you. Well, that's beside the point. You have to get up and get your pretty tush out of my house. I'm a single woman with a clean reputation, which you have ruined by sneaking in here." *Poke. Poke.* "I know you can hear me." Jeysus, she'd need a tow truck to get him out of here. "You know I am not going to stop nagging until you leave this room. You're in my dad's clinic, but he is not here. If you are drunk, you're not welcome in this house because I hate drunks. They hiccup, are smelly, and throw up everywhere. I know because my friend did that one time. She made it to the toilet okay, but the idea of putting her face in the toilet made her gag. So she tried to go outside and didn't make it. She threw up all over the floor and my favorite Birkenstock." Marisol tried pinching his arm. The man's arm was so packed with meat she couldn't even pull a loose skin. "Hey, stranger. You're beyond cute, okay. But you have to get up and leave. No? I hate to do this but if you don't get up I'll get a bucket of rain water and—Eeekkk!"

One minute she stood on the side of the bed, a heartbeat later Marisol found herself pinned beneath the man. He was on top of her with his nose inches away

from hers. Wave after wave of shock on how fast he moved held her immobile and speechless. Most of all, she couldn't believe how beautiful his eyes were. They were the sharpest, bluest and most attractive eyes she'd even seen in her life. *Nice.*

Heart beating against her chest, Marisol stared at him. Looking at him was like looking at someone she'd met in the past. The man angled his head from side to side and kept staring at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"Good god, Marisol. I don't drink, but you could drive any man to drink. Including me." His hoarse tired voice broke the stare-down.

"Why?"

"You talk too much."

"I don't—wait. You know me?"

"Yes, I know you. You shouldn't be here."

"Me? Wrong, buddy. *I* live here. *You* are in the wrong place. Wrong house, wrong room, wrong—" *Lord, is that?* She couldn't believe it.

Mister Yummy throbbed and grew while nestled in between her legs. *Oh no, no.* As much as she loved to keep his hard-on pressed against her pubic mound, he must get off her. Did she just thought loving his hard-on? Loving should the last emotion she should feel right now. Jiminy, her friend was right. She needed to unlock her invincible chastity belt. Otherwise, her sexual depravation would

result into something like this. Enjoying the pleasure of having a stranger's erection pressed against her.

"Please get off me."

"Shit." He promptly rolled off to Marisol's side with a loud groan.

As soon as she was free, Marisol scooted off the bed. She flattened her palms on her shirt and noticed they were shaking. Her legs suddenly felt like noodles.

Calm down, Marisol. Don't be a scaredy cat. He's a tall stranger but seems harmless. She noticed him winced as if in pain when he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. He ran his hands through his hair before rubbing his hands on his face. He looked exhausted.

"You look tired but I'm gonna ask you to leave."

"Give me a minute, will you."

"You don't need to explain how you end up here. The how and when doesn't matter to me. Just leave before I call the cops."

"No. Please. No cops," he looked about the room, a swath of wavy hair fell back on his forehead. "Do you mind if I use your bed sheet?"

Lordy, no. I like the view. "Not at all. Feel free to use my dad's clothes. He won't be needing them anymore. You'll find his old shirts and pants in the closet. He's a couple inches shorter than you though."

“Thanks.” He grabbed the sheet and yanked it off the bed. With his eyes on her, he stood up in one fluid motion. He looked weak, but an aura of power and ferocity surrounded him.

Sweet sugar, who is this man?

The face of a snarling wolf tattooed on his left upper chest didn’t help ease her nervousness. But it was his nakedness, his cock thrusts up that made her mind a crazy mixture of fear and excitement. Egad! She must kick him out of here before she drool all over and embarrass herself.

She broke the eye contact to watch the tantalizing display disappear from her view as he wrapped the sheet around his waist. Geez, there must be fat somewhere in this man’s body. If she were to guess, he was a big fan of running. He had the legs for it. And just look at his abs. Perfect for Jockey briefs commercial.

The man grinned.

Marisol felt her cheeks grew warm. Damn it. She really should do something about her bad habit of staring. “By the way, I’m at a disadvantage here. You already know my name and we’re not even introduced. So what’s yours?”

“Callum. My name is Callum Dyrdek.”

“Nice meeting you, Callum. Now, have you seen my wolf?”

Chapter Five

Despite the pain and embarrassing condition he was in, he found himself smiling over her claim. My wolf. Now that was shit-hot. She'd been calling him buddy for a month now and he liked it. To hear her claim him as her wolf, now, that was a direct hit on his...cock. Shit! It had been too long since he'd been with a woman that being near one was enough to make his dick throb. Marisol's effect on him was instant. It was primal.

"When you came in, did you see a wolf laying here?"

"No. I didn't."

"Interesting. Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"I left him here to call the sheriff so they could come and pick him up. When they arrived, what they found was you. You didn't use that window to crawl in here, did you?"

He looked at the window small enough to fit a child. He bet, even when he was in his puppy stage, no way in hell that he'd fit through there. "No."

“Of course not. You’re way too big to fit through there. How did you get in here then?”

“Would you like to talk now or after I get dressed.”

“Oh yeah. After would be great.” Marisol’s brows creased. “So you didn’t see a wolf crawl out of here. He’s wounded, you see, and near death. With the wound he’d suffered from, it’s quite impossible for him to leave the floor.”

Callum was sure she wasn’t talking to him anymore, but to herself. “Marisol, I need to get dressed.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. Rambling is my forte. I bet I could win a rambling contest if there is one. I think it’s the result of spending too much time in the drying room. Lack of fresh air is bad. Okay. I think I should leave you alone to change. I can think better if I’m not staring at naked man. I mean, half-naked. Not that I didn’t get to look...okay, I’ll leave.”

“You can stay if you want.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I better not.”

Marisol picked up the bat she dropped on the floor then left the clinic in a hurry.

Callum plopped back down on the bed and squeezed his eyes shut. Fuck! That was close.

The officers' voices barely registered in his mind when he realized what was happening. He had only split seconds to shift into his human form when one of the officers kicked the door open. His decision to shift was his best way to avoid ending up as the officers target practice.

Damn, he was lucky. He had a feeling if the officers found him as a wolf they would start shooting whether he was standing or not.

Callum touched the long thin pinkish skin that was his wound. Thanks to Marisol and her father's poultice, his wound closed up. For sure, the flesh beneath it was still as raw as the meat Marisol always offered him. He could feel it, but at least he'd stopped bleeding. Callum couldn't believe it. He didn't die after all. If Marisol had used the poultice a second too late, he'd be one of the fucking Cancer right now drinking and eating Marisol's flesh and blood.

Callum gripped his hair as reality started sinking in. Coming here was one fucking gutsy and stupid move. His promise to Mark had given him strength to run here. But what if he hadn't made it and he turned? He could have killed Marisol. What in the hell was he thinking? Staring at the wall, he knew the answer to his own question. It was simple. He hadn't wanted to die. At the brink of dying, he became weak and selfish. But damn it, he couldn't imagine turning into a Cancer. He'd rather stay dead than turn into one.

Callum let out a long sigh. Right when his vision changed from normal to black, white, and blood red, he felt Marisol apply the poultice on his wound. And then a sudden explosion of pain worse than his wound enveloped his body. It felt like his innards were being pulled out of him slowly. At one point, he didn't even recognize Marisol. Miraculously, somewhere deep inside him, he'd heard her voice and saw her beautiful face again. That must have been when the poultice did its job of healing him.

What happened to him must have been the beginning of turning into a Cancer. Everyone knew the first sign when one was becoming a Cancer. His eyes would turn grey like marbles. No pupils, no cornea. Now he knew what the ghosts eyes saw. Ugly red.

Shape-shifters knew, at least the smart ones, not to be near Cancers unless they were armed and ready. Their saliva was contagious like a Komodo dragon. Once bitten, a Shape-shifter could turn into them whether living in his first, second, or fifth life.

Cancer. What a fucking punishment.

Callum tried rotating his shoulder. He didn't even get to lift his arm. Fuck, it hurts.

He'd seen Doctor Saint James use the poultice before. The patients always screamed when it touched their wounds. And because it burned like a son of a bitch. Amazingly, no matter how deep or small the wound was, it always healed.

What the heck kind of ingredients was in that poultice? Didn't Marisol say she mixed the potion and added something weird in it? Whatever it was it surely made the poultice work like magic. Callum tried rotating his shoulder again. He winced at the shooting pain, but forced himself to move it carefully. If he didn't move, his muscles would stiffen. Not good.

It was great to be a Shape-shifter living with five lives. Unfortunately, the war gods thought to add a condition of turning into a Cancer when they die for the fifth time. A fucking curse all Shape-shifter's had to deal with. Cancer's were fucked up wolves. They were soulless. Walking on earth forever hungry for blood, angry, and with no purpose but to kill. They were evil in the dark waiting for a chance to kill anything that breathed. And minutes ago, he was close to turning into one. Thanks to Marisol. He'd still walk the earth as a shifter with soul.

If he scared Marisol, she was good in hiding her fear. She was one tough cookie he'd give her that. He hoped she wouldn't crumble when it was time to face Atos. The bastard had been planning her death since he discovered who her father was. Tough shit. Atos would have to go through him to get to Marisol. Even if it cost him his last life.

I gave you my promise, Mark. I won't let Atos touch your daughter.

Sadness from a loss of a dear friend was a blow in the gut no one could block. Taking a deep breath, he looked around Doctor Mark Saint James's clinic. The room looked the same as it was before. Anatomical and physiological charts of different animals posted on the walls. Open storage spaces with buckets, medicinal tools, books and stacks of rags were still there. He noticed a towel stained with blood on the floor. It was what Marisol used to drag him in here. Someday, he'd find a way to thank her for saving his life.

He walked toward the small sink, turned on the faucet to cold and splashed water on his face. The water felt good, but nothing compared to the awesome feeling of having Marisol pinned beneath him. Damn, he couldn't believe he tackled her in bed. Callum braced his arms on the sink and closed his eyes.

When Marisol walked into the room, he pretended to be asleep. Through half closed eyes, he watched her stare at him with shock and admiration. Her perusal, as if admiring something she'd never seen before, began to take effect on him. When he grabbed her waist and rolled her on the bed, his intention was to stop her from talking his ears off. But the moment he felt her softness, inhaled her sweet vanilla scent, he lost control of his body. He reacted like a teenage boy loaded with hormones. For a moment, he forgot where he was and the pain deep

inside his shoulder. All he could think about was to spread her thighs apart and feel her heat, kiss her plump wet lips, and suck her breasts.

Without a doubt, Marisol was one hot human. On top of her soft Barbie doll shape body and a fascinating character, man, she had a genial mouth and sparkling green eyes heavy with thick long lashes. He could just stare at her and never get tired of it. He bet it would be fantastic to have her ride him while her dark hair hung down like waterfalls. Callum felt himself stirred. Shit, he couldn't ever remember a woman asking him to get off of her. Marisol was the first and he was glad that she asked him to. Who knew what he could have done next. Damn him, he enjoyed that few minutes of being so close to her.

Thinking about her soft flesh and round breasts, his dick began to throbbed and thickened. *Come on, Callum. Think about something else. This is not the right time to be fucking horny.* He opened his eyes and looked in the mirror. A horrible face with dark rings around his eyes stared back at him. *I look like shit.* Well, what did he expect? Only hours ago, he was battling death. Anyone who went through that ordeal would definitely look like he'd gone to hell and back. Callum ran his fingers on his cheeks and jaws. He needed a shower, a shave, and damn, he needed food. He's fucking starving.

"Callum?"

"Yeah?"

“I just want to know if everything’s all right.”

“Yes. It’s cool.” He pushed off from the sink and suddenly felt light headed. “Son of a bitch.” His physical and mental strength were sapped. Fuck. He couldn’t believe he faced death so close he could smell its fucking acrid smell. Well, he lived and now he must face life and be happy about it. Marisol said there were clothes in the closet. He’d borrow a shirt and pants and hopefully he could return them in good condition.

Inside the closet, he found Mark’s plain white shirt and faded Levi’s jeans. The hems were torn. Must be too long for Mark and dragged them on the ground. Callum put on the clothes. They were snug on him, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Now if he could just find a pair of shoes, he’d be good to face the beautiful siren who taunted his dreams every freaking night. Callum grinned. What if he went out there as a wolf? He bet he’d blow Marisol’s mind. She’d probably talk to herself until she was breathless. What a beautiful chatterbox.

Mark wasn’t kidding when he said his daughter possessed a knockout beauty. He should have mentioned her deadly charms. Any man who’d looked into her dark green eyes would definitely feel instant attraction. As a wolf, he suffered from watching her straddle the pottery wheel with her long legs, her wet hands moving slowly and gently down the clay ball to form a cone. Man, it was so erotic

he had to run for miles just to get the image out of his mind. Asleep, he dreamed about her almost every night—naked, on all fours...

Stop brain. You're not here, Callum, to drool over Marisol but to protect her and get a hold of Youven's sword.

Fuck! Why did he have to be the one in charge of taking her sword?

Chapter Six

Oh, Lord. Marisol sucked in her breath and held it until she thought her chest would explode. Naked, Callum looked perfectly sculpted and magnificent. Clothed, he looked like a yummy cinnamon bun fresh out of the oven with melting glaze she wanted to lick. How could someone be that gorgeous, sexy and look dangerous at the same time? Dang, he had a body made only for the gods. She recognized the shirt and pants he wore. Sighing, she remembered they were a bit loose on her dad, but to Callum the shirt and jeans were as tight as a tick on a dog's ear. Tall, lithe, suntanned and drool-worthy. What a package. Man, she wanted to take a bite of that... Marisol stopped from her musing when Callum grinned showing his perfectly white teeth. God, he did it again. Grinning as if she just told him what she had in mind. Holding the baseball bat behind her as a precaution, she lifted her chin a fraction to see his eyes better. "Glad you found something that fits you."

"Yes. Thank you."

Sweet caramel. Finally, a thong-dropping ruggedly looking hunk came to her barn. But why did he have to be a naked stranger and not the usual tourist

asking for a direction or something? “You can use the phone to call a ride.” *Wish you don’t have to leave, but yummy or not you’re still a stranger. And Dad told me not to talk to strangers.*

I can stay.

“Of course you can...not stay.” Marisol leaned forward. “Did you say something?”

Yes. I said I can stay.

“Oh my god! You’re a...” she snapped her fingers repeatedly trying to remember the right word she wanted to say. “I got it! You’re a ventriloquist.”

Callum laughed. The sound was deep, warm, and rich. “I never thought of myself as one but it’s never too late to learn. No Marisol. I am not a ventriloquist.”

“Right. Of course you’re not. Ventriloquists can’t hear thoughts and for a minute there I thought you heard my thoughts. Nobody can do that. Thoughts won’t be called thoughts if—”

“Mari.”

“Hm? Did you just say my name? I swear heard you say Mari.”

“You heard me.”

“But you didn’t say my name. Okay, you are freaking me out. I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“But don’t you want me to stay?”

“Yes. No! Oh god, did I say that out loud? I did, didn’t I? Yes, of course. It explains how you know what I’m thinking. It’s a habit, you know. Talking to myself out loud.” Marisol took one big step back.

“No,” his mouth twitched with amusement.

“Yes, I tell you. It’s my habit.” Was he making fun of her?

“I meant no to the saying out loud part.”

“Oh. Okay. You’re not a ventriloquist but a mind reader. Or whatever.”

Perhaps a handsome twat.

“A mind reader but definitely not a twat. Twat. Man, it’s been a long time since I heard that word. Twat,” he repeated.

The shock hit her full force. The man could hear her thoughts. Marisol merely stared, tongue-tied. When she finally recovered, she gripped her bat tight.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Callum Dyrdek.”

“That’s what you said. What I want to know is *what* are you? And what kind of shit are you pulling here, Dyrdek? You’re reading my thoughts! That’s freaking nasty.”

“You’ll be able to read mine if you put your mind to it. And with practice, you can block private thoughts. It’s handy and not at all that nasty.”

“How did you know that I’ll be able to read your mind?”

“Because you’re able to hear me.”

“Are you implying that I’m a freak like you?”

“No. Hearing someone’s thoughts is at talent. Not very many can do that.”

Legs apart, a warrior stance her father showed her to intimidate people especially men, Marisol held the bat in front of her the way she would her sword—with both hands on the handle and the tip pointing at Callum’s heart. If this man were smart, he’d see that she was ready to fight. “I don’t like what you’re telling me and I don’t like the idea that people could hear my thoughts. Nobody can read thoughts. That’s, that’s...insane. You need to leave.”

“Not everybody can hear you, Marisol.”

“Leave.”

“We need to talk.”

“Ha! Tough luck, mister. I don’t talk to strangers.” The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of his mouth. Did he find her amusing? “You’re beginning to irritate me with that slow smile of yours. Nothing’s funny about not talking to strangers.”

“I didn’t say it’s funny.”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not.”

“Then what do you call that?” she pointed at his lips. “A smirk?”

Callum just shrugged his wide shoulders.

“Leave. Don’t think I don’t know how to swing a bat. I’m deadly when armed with a bat.”

“And a sword.”

Callum said the words matter of factly her hand shook a bit. “What sword?”

“*The* sword. The one that you’ve been practicing with.”

“How did you know about my sword? Have you been watching me?” *Oh god, please don’t tell me he’s a stalker. Only celebrities’ get stalked not a potter.* Marisol realized Callum heard her thought again when his eyebrows shot up. “Stop reading my thoughts! That’s wrong. Like watching somebody use the toilet or getting dressed or—just stop it.”

“Put the bat down. We really need to talk, Marisol.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I don’t talk to strangers. Especially weird freaky ones.”

“Just give me a minute.”

“Why? Give me one reason why I should.”

“I know Doctor Mark Saint James.”

“So? A lot of people knew my father. Including animals. That’s not a good enough reason, Callum.”

“What if I tell you I know who killed him? Would that be enough for you? Or maybe I should tell you how he died.”

“Why? Because you killed him!” Marisol attacked. She pivoted and swung the bat with a purpose of hitting him on the side.

Callum took a step back avoiding the blow. “Listen to me. I know things. Do things you would call magical. ”

“Magical my ass!” Marisol feigned an attack. She twisted at the last minute and stabbed him in the gut. But Callum was fast. He moved to the side. The bat just nipped his side.

Stepping back, she repositioned herself. She circled Callum, a strategy she knew well. To buy some time, to think. She twirled the bat like a baton. It was a scare tactic. And then while holding its grip as tight as she could, she pointed the tip again at Callum’s heart. This time with hopes of intimidating him. “You know things. Could do magic? What are you? A Harry Potter fan?”

“Better actually.”

“You’re insane.” *Insane!* It dawned on her that he must be an escapee from asylum.

“I am not insane, Marisol. I know your father.”

“This is your last chance. Leave or I’ll call Sheriff Davis back here.”

“Come on. Just give me a chance to talk. All I ask is a few minutes of your time and—”

“How did you know my father?”

“Dinner. Can we talk about this while having dinner? I haven’t eaten—”

“Dinner?” Marisol surged forward with an intention to incapacitate him. She missed her mark, which was his groin. *Damn, he’s fast.* “Would you like a case of beer with your dinner while you talk about my dead parent? You asshole!”

“Beer sounds good.”

“Cabbage head. You just blew your chance of leaving here in one piece. You’re a dead meat. Say your god damn prayers.”

“Cabagge—”

She faked a stabbing motion. When Callum turned to avoid the tip, she changed her move and tried to slice him as if the bat was her sword. This time she connected with his ribs.

“Oww! Damn it, woman! That hurts.”

“Oh, you think so. Take this!” She swung upward. A sickening sound of wood hitting a bone echoed in the spacious barn.

“Fuck!” Callum grabbed his right elbow as he backed off.

Marisol smiled and raised a brow. She took advantage of the situation and thrusts the bat to hit him below the beltline but Callum grabbed the tip and pulled it hard. Unprepared for that move, Marisol jerked forward and landed on his chest.

“Baby, you don’t want to piss me off.”

Callum's mouth was inches away from hers. She could smell his breath. Mint. He must have had something with mint in it. *Concentrate Marisol. You're in the middle of a fight.* Smiling, she roamed her gaze on his face before staring at his firm and sensual lips. She cupped the back of his neck pulling his head down closer until her lips grazed his then whispered, "I'll do more than piss you off, jerk." She kneed him in the groin.

Callum collapsed on the floor with his hands in between his legs.

"Not so tough now, are you? Stay where you are if you don't want your brains—if you have any—all over my floor. I'm calling the cops."

"You don't want them involve in this, Marisol." Callum sat back on his heel breathing hard. "Mark was my friend. I've known him for years. He was a good man, good friend of my clan, and I know he was a good father, too."

"Friend? Not once that he mentioned you. If you're looking for him, you're looking at the wrong place. He's resting at the Evergreen Cemetery."

"I already know that."

"Oh, I forgot. You know things," she said. Her words heavy with sarcasm.

"Marisol, I was at the cemetery when he was buried."

"Yeah, right. You're the tallest and biggest man I've seen in my whole life of living here. I'm not blind. You, Mister Dyrdek, was not there."

"I was. You would have seen me if you were looking at the right spot."

“And where would that right spot be? Beside the cherry tree where dogs like to stop, sniff, and pee?”

Callum just stared at her.

He looked as though he was debating whether to answer her question or not. She decided to make it easier for him. “Why are you here if you know that my father isn’t?”

“Because I made him a promise.”

Marisol kept her eyes on Callum. It must have been the lights, but she thought a shadow of sadness crossed his face. A twinge of guilt for hurting him stabbed at her heart. “What kind of promise?”

“To keep you safe.”

Chapter Seven

Over the rim of his half-full glass, he sat on the chair and watched Marisol from across the dining table. Except for the barn and Mark's clinic, he'd never been in this part of this house. It was cozy and homey, smelled of dish soap, bread, pie. Everywhere he looked, signs that a woman lived here was evident. He loved it. The woman presently sitting across from him, however, was not a typical homemaker. Man, she was one nasty fighter. His elbow still throbbed and his cock...Damn, her knee took the breath out of him.

His brain forgot that she was on an attack mode and forgot to defend himself when he stared at her eyes and felt her warm lips barely touched his lips. Fuck, even while avoiding her hits, he had an erection. What the hell was wrong with him?

Marisol had been staring at him the way a kid would when looking at a bearded woman on a carnival. He wished he could read her right now, but he promised not to read her mind in exchange of a microwavable chicken potpie as small as a saucer. He should have bargained for a dozen of those damn things. Right now, he could eat more.

“You said you knew my dad. Why did he never mention your name then?
Not even once.”

“Maybe there was no need for it.”

“Or maybe you’re lying.”

“What would I gain from doing that?”

“A free place to stay, food, clothes. You tell me.”

“He was a friend who saved me and more...animals. I would never abuse his
friendship. Mark was the best vet there was.”

“I know about the animals he saved. But nothing about you. Dad and I used
to talk about our days, how many pets he cured and released in the woods, how
many pots I broke. He never said anything about saving a man.”

“I wasn’t a man when he saved me.”

Marisol’s eyebrows shot up. Her eyes were rounder than the beer bottle
caps. “Oh,” she said. “Ohh,” she repeated in a tone as if finally understanding
something. “I see.” She tapped her fingers on the table obviously thinking. “Were
you a man when you attended Dad’s funeral?”

“No.”

“Ah, that explains why I didn’t notice you. Still, with your size...What, are
you over six feet?”

“Six feet, three inches.”

“Right. With your height, I would have noticed you. But then I wasn’t really looking at everyone present. Dad saved you, you say?”

“Yes.” Damn, he wished he could read her thoughts right now. He didn’t like the way she was nodding to herself as if she was talking to herself and coming up with a conclusion. And he had a feeling her conclusion was wrong.

“Have you been in my dad’s clinic before?”

“Twice.” Marisol had never seen him because Mark made sure she was busy in her Bisque It store. Mark wanted to protect his daughter. He said the less she knew about his work the better. It was why he only came here when Marisol was not in the barn.

Marisol chewed her lower lip. “That explains why you were in the clinic. You’ve been there before. You knew how to get in. He showed you where we hid the extra key. I get it.”

Oh fuck! He wasn’t hearing her thoughts but he had a pretty good idea now about what she was thinking. “Look, Mark was a good friend and a doctor. When I said I wasn’t as man—”

“You don’t have to explain. And don’t you worry, Callum, I am an open-minded person. Believe it or not, I have friends in the pottery business who are like you. My father’s personal business and your sexuality is not of my— ”

“The hell! Your assumption that I am talking about my sexuality when I said I wasn’t a man is way off.”

“My assumption is way off? I found you naked in my dad’s clinic, you knew each other and you were not a man when he saved you. Dad never mentioned you. Not once, Callum. Anyone in the right mind would jump to a conclusion that you are...Oh my god! Was Dad really a...a, uhm...”

“What?”

“It makes sense now. Dad never dated anyone since Mom died. And it’s because...Oh Dad.”

“What? My foot, woman. You could drive any man to lunacy. Say what you want to say and stop forming your own answers before you hear everything. What was it you were asking about your dad? If he and I were, were—”

“Never mind. You must be his secret and you will stay a secret. Dad’s private business was his. And I don’t want to think about it. Maybe someday, I’ll think about what you told me.”

“Wait, what exactly did I tell you?”

Marisol waved her hand dismissing his question. Man, she was irritating.

“Right now, all I want to talk about is why my dad asked you to keep me safe and you said you know how he died. How? The doctors couldn’t even figure out who or what caused the bites on his neck and shoulders.”

Callum wanted to know what conclusion she came up with about his sexuality, but kept his mouth shut. There were pressing issues they need to talk about. His sexuality wasn't one of them. Although his ego was squirming right now. "This will take all night."

"I'll fire up the coffee pot. Better start talking. You aren't leaving this house until you tell me all you know and then—"

"What?" Callum grinned.

Marisol narrowed her pretty eyes at him. "Then we are going to the police."

"I already told you. There's no need for them to come."

"That's for me to decide."

The tight smile she gave him indicated it was the end of the conversation. Callum helped clean up the table. He noticed she saved the scraps on the familiar deep dish and filled the terracotta bowl with water.

"I'll take this to the barn. Can I trust you to behave and stay where you are?"

"You still think the wolf will show up?"

"He's hurt. I don't know how he managed to leave the clinic without leaving a trail of blood. He might come back. "

The worry on her face had him sighing. "Don't worry about him. He doesn't need that."

"How'd you know?"

“I told you, I know things.”

“You sound like Shelli. Deputy Smithers’ wife. In this town, she’s the number one gossip she could put tabloid magazines to shame. She knows who’s going out with whom, what her neighbor ordered from Sears, and who’s pregnant even before the woman started showing. And I bet, she already knows about you.”

“Worried you’ll be the center of the gossip in this town?”

“I’ve been subjected to harsh gossips. So yeah. Thanks to you.”

The gossip was nothing compared to what she’d be facing soon. “I wouldn’t worry about it. And don’t worry about the wolf. He’s fine.”

“For some reason, I have a feeling you have something to do with his disappearance.”

Callum smiled. She looked so worried and disgruntled at the same time that he wanted to kiss her frown away. Standing close to her, he noticed the top of her head nearly reached his chin. Without the fire in her eyes, she looked vulnerable and fragile. And deceiving. She could bring any man or in his case a Shape-shifter on his knees. Marisol possessed all the womanly charms and softness and could render a man speechless just by looking into her eyes. Like right now. It was hard to think when she was this close and staring at him. She was so damned appealing.

Callum felt his body stir. Damn, he was physically reacting to the woman he promised to protect. If this continued, Marisol would need protection against him.

How was he going to correct that? He took the bowl from her hand. “Sit down. Please.”

“All right. He might not eat the scraps anyway. He is such a picky wolf.”

As soon as Marisol sat down, he took the other chair. This was better. Sitting down, he could hide his growing erection. “Maybe if you gave him cooked meat on a plate he might eat it.”

“I might offend him if I do that.”

“Why?”

For the first time, Marisol gave him an easy smile. “Well, would you eat your food in a dog dish?”

His heart started pounding as if he ran for miles and miles. Her whole face lit up when she smiled. And lord, her eyes were so enchanting. Callum squirmed in his seat. He’d better get a hold of himself, he mentally reminded himself. He wasn’t a teenager anymore, for fuck sakes.

“Would you, Callum?”

“Would I what?” Even to him his voice sounded hoarse.

“Eat on a dog dish.”

Callum shook his head. If she continued smiling and staring at him like that, he might just eat her. In a most pleasurable way he knew.

“Of course not,” Marisol continued. “I think it’s the same way with the wolves. They’d rather eat using their dog dish and not plates. Oh wait. Maybe the wolf is used to eating carcasses in the wild that’s why he snubbed my food. He’s a wild animal after all.”

Carcasses? Callum didn’t know what to say to her reasoning so he just shrugged his shoulders and changed the subject. “How do you want to do this? Like a question and answer type of thing?”

“Sounds good. Let me start with, why my dad thought I need protecting. From who?”

“From the ones who killed him.”

“Who are they?”

Here we go. “Shape-shifters.”

“Oh dear.”

Her reaction was exactly the kind he expected. “Mari, I am not kidding.”

“Did I say you are?”

“You don’t have to. No, I didn’t read your mind. Your oh dear and rolling of your eyes says you think I’m bullshitting.”

“Couldn’t help it.”

“What I said is true. The Shape-shifters killed Mark.”

“Forgive me, but unlike some people, I am not a big fan of Sci-fi’s. So it’s kind of hard to digest your story.”

“I’m not just telling you a story. By the way, Shape-shifters fall under the category of paranormal. Have you heard of them?”

“Yeah. Hollywood movies. I’ve seen shows about them. Humans changing into different forms like werewolves, bear, hawks, rats, worms, snails or snakes. Fiction stuff.”

He’d never seen or heard of a movie with snails or worms Shape-shifters. He bet it would be hilarious to see one. “Atos and his clan are not. They are as real as they can get.”

Marisol raised one brow mockingly. “Are you sure you’re not on something? Meth users, once addicted would start seeing—”

“I don’t do drugs.”

“Hash, ecstasy pills, cough syrup?”

“No.”

“Dementia?”

“For the love of humanity, Mari. I am neither a drug addict nor crazy.”

“Alright. Are you a frustrated writer who got rejected numerous times so you’re going around telling your story instead?”

“You are one incorrigible woman.”

“Sheez. Who’s talking about paranormal shit here? And why are you calling me Mari. I didn’t give you leave to shorten my name.”

“You don’t like it?”

Marisol raised one dainty shoulder. “Well, I kind of like it.”

“I wish you’d like my paranormal shit story as easily.” He hunched over, his arms resting on his thighs.

“It would take a great deal of persuasion before anyone believes a story like paranormal stuff. Anyway, you’re saying about this Atos?”

What a rambler. She was better than a couple of loud squirrels fighting for an acorn. She’d be a wonderful company on a long lonely night. “Atos is a powerful wolf.”

Marisol leaned forward. “Like Padfoot. Harry Potter’s godfather?” she whispered and wiggled her eyebrows. Her eyes danced with merriment.

Callum let out a defeated sigh. “If you don’t take this conversation seriously, Marisol Saint James, I’ll leave.”

“Can you blame me? I’m a big fan of historical romance movies like *Pride and Prejudice*. Now those stories are real and believable. If you tell me that this Atos is the reincarnated King Henry the VIII, I’ll believe you. But Shape-shifters? Man, that’s just crazy stuff written by overly imaginative authors. Some made a gazillion—”

“Mari!” Callum snapped his fingers. Damn, what a chatterbox.

“What? I’m just saying there are authors out there selling crappy books.”

“Okay, but Atos is not a character in a book. He’s a real Shape-shifter.”

“And he killed my dad?”

“He killed Anna, too.” That did it. Laughter in her eyes disappeared like a bubblegum that popped.

“You knew my mom.”

Callum nodded. “Yes. Atos killed her. Although at the time, he didn’t know who she was. He thought Anna was just another Midnight Howl bitch protecting a wolf.”

“A what?”

“A Midnight Howl. It’s a wolf clan. Enemy of the Blood Robbers that Atos leads.”

“Jesus, resolving the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan is probably easier to understand than what you’re telling me.”

“It’s easy to digest if you let it sink in.”

Marisol’s brows drew downward in a frown while her fingers tapped the table.

Callum had seen that expression many times before especially when she was trying to come up with a new design. A tell tale sign that she was in deep thought. Finally, it looked like he made progress penetrating her senses.

“You said Atos didn’t know who Mom was at the time, but he recognized her. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“She looked like your ancestor.”

“What do you mean? I don’t even know what my ancestors looked like. We don’t even have pictures of my grandparents. I wondered about that, but I didn’t bother to ask Mom and Dad. Is this Atos related to Mom?”

“No. Anna’s not related to Atos.” *Thank god for that.*

Hell, why did he think this would be easy? He wished he could just hand her a book and let her read it. His mind grasped for an easy way to explain what happened to her parents and why they were dead, but his attention kept directing to how good she smelled. It was hard to concentrate when a beautiful woman was sitting across from him. And one whom he’d been lusting for over a month now.

“How would he know what my great great great remote relatives look like?”

“Mari, even Shape-shifters have libraries full of history books. Shape-shifters study them. So images of your mother’s ancestors had been passed down from generation to generation. To let everyone know who their enemies are. Think of the pharaohs or the leaders of Ming Dynasty. Something like that. When you see their images you know who they are. You recognize them.”

“Midnight Howl. Blood Robbers. Clans. I’ve never heard such groups. Okay, this Atos saw my mom and she looked like my ancient relative. So what? Why kill her?”

“You know your mom was a healer, right?”

Marisol nodded her head. “Dad told me Mom was the best. And so were Dad and other vets in Marrowstone when you think about it. In every little town, big cities, everywhere, you’ll find a first class vet. So I don’t see why she was targeted.”

“It was what she used to heal the animals that caused her death. The poultice.”

Marisol’s brows creased. Obviously surprised at the mention of the word poultice. “What do you know about Mom’s poultice?”

“That it is powerful.”

“No kidding. I used a poultice on my wolf today. Now, he’s gone.”

“Do you know how to make it?”

Marisol nodded. “I have to be present to make the poultice work although I didn’t think my contribution was necessary. When Mom was alive, she used to make it and I didn’t have to be there. Which, I tell you, was awesome. Imagine me, a tiny tot getting uhm...” Marisol swallowed. “Uhm, anyway when Dad started making it, he asked that I helped. My parents believed that my presence is vital.”

“What do you mean?”

“That I have to help make it. Go on.”

She was hiding something. Perhaps the secret of the poultice. He heard that Atos sent the poultice that he stole from Marisol’s mother to the lab in Swedish Hospital. The lab tech came up with nothing. Until now, they couldn’t figure out the secret ingredients that made it work. “Marisol, everything that I will tell you is going to be impossible to understand. So I ask that you listen first.”

“Alright.”

“The poultice, your sword, the death of your parents, and Atos are all connected.”

Marisol shook her head. “This kind of information is not what I expected to hear when you told me you know how my father died. Now, you’re throwing in added information about my mother’s poultice being the cause of her death that it is powerful, and a Shape-shifter is after it.”

“Sorry, baby. You’ll get a headache from all of this, but I think it would lessen the blow if you learn about your history.”

“This isn’t a load of shit you’re dumping on my lap, right?”

“I wish. Sadly, every bit of information I tell you is true.”

“Okay, back to Mom. Why would Atos kill her for using the poultice?”

“He didn’t kill her because she used it. It was her refusal to tell him what she knew about the poultice that made him angry.”

“You mean what was in the poultice.”

“Yes. She didn’t tell him what it was made out of.”

“That’s why she died? Because she didn’t share what we mix in that poultice.”

“Yes. Although, I doubt he would’ve spared her life if she did.”

Marisol bit her lower lip. “Do you think Dad did the same thing? Denied Atos what he wanted to know? Must be. Oh god. They sacrificed their lives for, for the recipe because sharing it with anyone would mean...I’m going to have a migraine soon.”

“What’s in that poultice?”

“I can’t tell you. Mom and Dad made me promise not to tell anyone.”

“Good. You shouldn’t. Guard the secret.”

“Then why did you ask.”

“It’s a test.”

“You’re not making this easy.”

“I know.” Callum combed back his hair. He decided he’d stick to the history and the truth about her mother. It would be easier that way. “Marisol, listen. There were two Celtic immortal Shape-shifter clans. The Crom and Arcus. Older than the Atlantis. They were powerful immortals led by their respective leaders. Valdo, leader of clan Crom and Youven led the clan Arcus. They were both sons of gods.”

“Not related to Jesus, I hope.”

Callum swatted a lock of hair that hung from her temple. “You’re funny.”

“I’m not trying to be.”

“Which makes you even funnier.”

“And you’re a horrible story teller. You’re off your track. So Youven and Valdo were sons of gods. What kind of gods?”

“War gods.”

“Okie-dokie.”

Callum laughed aloud this time. Marisol, he learned was so easy to like. “Okay, back on the storytelling track. The war gods created two powerful swords. One for Youven, married to a human and the other one for Valdo who had married a goddess. The swords were gifts for the leader’s loyalty and for keeping the

harmonious relationship between the humans and immortal shifters. But Valdo turned into a greedy, cruel leader when he discovered the extent of the sword's power. With the sword in hand, he did whatever he wanted, the unthinkable."

"Like what?"

"Kill the humans he considered rejects and Arcus' members who disagreed with him. Also those who refused to bow to him suffered the same fate as the rejects."

"Rejects?"

"Yes. Drunks, whores, addicts, killers, rapists, outlaws, etc."

"But spared the good citizens."

"Yes. Unfortunately, the fine line between the good and the bad citizens was too thin. Suspicion was enough grounds for him to kill the human."

"Oh my god. Why?"

"Simple. He despised humans."

"So the reject thing was just an excuse."

"You could say that. To him humans were weak and should be eliminated to prevent the Shape-shifters, like Youven, from getting involved with them."

"Who the heck he is to kill us?"

"Valdo wanted to rule everyone. No one, not even Youven could stop him."

“I understand Valdo could easily kill the humans, but the immortals...”
Marisol stared at him. “The sword. It could kill immortals.”

“Yes. It’s the only weapon the shifters are afraid of. It prevents an immortal wolf from using its power to heal. A nick from the sword could turn fatal.”

“Leabhar Buidhe Lecain.” Marisol whispered.

“You know about The Yellow Book of Lecan? The medieval Irish manuscript?”

Marisol lowered her gaze and focused it on the spot on the table where she tapped her fingers. “I know everything about the book. I remember reading about a sword not swords and its power to prevent wounds from healing. It also mentioned the Sacred Spear, Cauldron, and the Lia Fail also known as the Stone of Destiny.”

Callum shook his head. He was surprised to hear her familiarity with the yellow book and amused by Marisol’s cute habit of talking to herself. And right now, he could tell she was doing it again. He waited until she looked up again.

“So Valdo abused the sword?”

“Yes. With the friendship between him, Youven, and the humans broken, he led his clan pillaging the villages, fed on humans, killed those who refused to obey him, and raped women. He believed to have the right to rob anyone of their lives. Valdo declared that immortals were above humans. To him, he became god. The

power of Valdo's sword poisoned his mind. The war gods didn't like what they saw, what had become of the sword. So, the war gods summoned Youven to give him the task of retrieving the sword from Valdo.

"They should have done it themselves and hung Valdo upside down."

"Gods designate jobs, Mari. Anyway, they also gave Youven the secret on how to heal the wounds caused by the sword."

"Let me guess. Poultice."

"Yes."

"Wow. Nice gods. Very generous. How about a hundred magical swords to end Valdo and his cronies' life?"

"And end up having more Valdoses running around with a sword so powerful it can take over your soul? The gods were smart not to make that kind of mistake again."

"Obviously, they weren't smart enough. Some gods they are. They should have thought about the consequences first before handing out powerful swords."

"Marisol, the swords history is what brought your mother and father together. Let's say the war gods made a mistake, but without it you wouldn't be here. Everything in the past happened for a reason."

Marisol didn't say anything, but her brows slammed down again and drew deeper together. Callum decided to continue with his retelling before Marisol

started talking to herself again. “Youven had a soft spot for humans. After all, his wife was one of them. So he took the poultice. He and his wife Kurah and their daughter Kyra made more and distributed it to the villages. Valdo learned about the poultice and tried to put a stop to it. Youven refused. Cunning as he was, Valdo burned Kurah’s village. A trick to make Youven leave his home, his family. While Youven was gone helping to save the village, he came into Youven’s house, raped, and killed Kurah.”

Marisol’s knuckles where white from gripping her coffee cup and her eyes conveyed the rage inside of her. “Bastard.”

“I can think of other names worse than that.”

“I take it Youven didn’t just sit and mourn his wife.”

“Right. Youven sought Valdo out. He found him and his wife in bed. The two fought. Rage consumed them both. Youven, being stronger and better, defeated Valdo. He meant to kill Valdo that night, not the wife. But he accidentally killed her when she threw herself around Valdo. Youven didn’t have the poultice with him to save Leanne. Both died leaving their son, Elam. That night was the beginning of an all out war between the two clans.

“At his age, Elam was already skilled in fighting. He took Valdo’s sword and challenged Youven in a fight. Stronger and younger, he inflicted a fatal wound on Youven. It was told that Arnulf, Youven’s second hand along with other Arcus

came to save Youven. Everyone heard Elam swear that he would kill all of Youven's family and would not stop until Youven's blood dried. Youven was found dead on his wife's grave. Elam looked for the sword but it was gone and so was Kyra and Arnulf.

The war gods were beyond furious. Since both leaders were dead, they punished the following generations of Shape-shifters by ending their immortality that night. Giving them only five lives."

"Five lives in exchange of immortality. That's better than having only one life. Once we, humans, die, we stay dead. I didn't realize this, but it sucks to be us. Too bad we have only one life. Dad would still be here if we have five lives. And Mom, too."

Callum wanted to tell Marisol that the war god's punishment didn't end by ridding them of immortality, but he held his tongue. When the right time comes, he would tell her what happened after a Shape-shifter died the fifth time. Right now, the information about becoming a Cancer was inconsequential. "I suppose there is good and bad about being human."

"You suppose? You say that as if you don't know what it's like to be one. So Kyra disappeared with the recipe for poultice and the sword. Now the poultice resurfaced."

"Yes. After hundreds of years."

“Let me make a guess here. Kyra took the sword and poultice. Mom was a healer. Am I right to assume that Mom somehow got hold of the secret recipe for poultice and the sword?”

“Baby, she didn’t just got a hold of it. It was passed down to her. Anna is Kyra’s descendant. That’s why Atos recognized her.”

Marisol’s eyes grew openly surprised. “Shut up!”

“I know it’s hard to believe it, huh?”

“You sure about this?”

“Baby, I am.”

“Mom came from an ancient clan that used to be immortals. My god, Hollywood producers would go nuts on this story. But you’re not just telling me a story, are you?”

“No.”

“I want to believe you, but this is too much. Okay, say you’re telling me facts. Did Mom inherit the five lives?”

“No. Baby, Anna wasn’t a shifter. Because Kurah was human her daughter Kyra was half-breed. By the time Anna was born, Youven’s blood became diluted. There were more immortals that married humans and I am sure their descendants still roam the earth. Some of them possessed special powers that somehow stayed in their DNA, which they couldn’t explain.”

“Special powers like what?”

“Like the dreamers, foretellers, ghost seers, telepathists.”

Marisol stared at him. For the first time, she became quiet.

“Your mother knew all about her family’s past because she was one of the few that had a direct connection to Youven. Babe, Kyra kept Youven’s story alive. And like the history of Atos’s clan, it was passed down from generation to generation.”

“Including the sword and poultice.”

“Yes.”

“But you said that the poultice only resurfaced because of Mom.”

“Right. Kyra lived a long life, but when she died the poultice died with her, too. Her children and grandchildren tried but somehow failed to produce it. History said she did. But whatever she told her family didn’t work. They couldn’t mix the kind that heals wounds caused by the ancient sword. It was a mystery to both clans. No one heard about the poultice again until Anna. Your mother found what was needed to make a poultice potent.”

Callum watched Marisol chew her bottom lip. It was obvious she was processing everything that he just said and it was apparent, just by looking at her furrowed brows, that she too was wondering about the poultice. *What’s in that poultice that no one can figure it out?*

“It’s impossible. Mom wasn’t pure blooded. When I help make it...Can’t be. This is all so weird. Hard to believe. You know, Mom was an adopted. She doesn’t have any relatives that I know of. Dad had only one sister. She died when she was fifteen. Kind of weird growing up not having cousins to play with.” Marisol drummed her fingers on the table. “Wow. I’m related to a Shape-shifter.”

“Mark mentioned that your mother possessed the power to foretell the future.”

“I didn’t know that. Was she able to see my future?”

“Yes. She knew about yours and Marks. Except hers.”

“She should have told Dad about Atos. Dad could have—”

“Babe, Mark knew about his fate, but the when and where—no.”

“What’s mine? Did Dad say? I bet he knew. Why else would he insist that I learn how to use the sword.” Marisol hugged herself then began rubbing her arms. “The sword of Youven from the clan Arcus.”

“Yes.”

“How come it took Atos years before he came after Dad?”

“Atos didn’t know Anna had a family.”

“Until he caught Dad. I was five when Mom died. Dad took over her job when I was ten. Dad waited five years before he started working as a vet again. I’m twenty-three now. It took Atos that long to find out about Dad.”

“Mark was careful. But spies and traitors are everywhere. Word finally reached Atos’s camp about him.”

“And one night this Atos tracked dad. Because of his poultice.”

Callum nodded. He watched Marisol’s face. Although she kept her features deceptively composed, he could see that she was getting angrier by the minute.

“You said Atos belongs to the Blood Robbers clan?”

“Atos, now leader of the Blood Robbers is Elam’s descendant. Grandson of Valdo.”

“Blood Robbers are the new Crom.”

Callum grinned. She was quick. “Yes.”

“And the Howl clan you mentioned. Am I right to assume they represent the Arcus?”

“The Midnight Howl, yes.”

“A pretty name.”

“Pretty? The name is supposed to invoke fear.”

“Nope. Sounds like a title of a love song to me.”

Fuckin eh. His brothers would go nuts if he told them their clan’s name is *pretty*.

“So, even when the war gods punished the two leaders and the following generations by taking their mortality away, war still continued between two clans.” Marisol shook her head. “Why Midnight Howl?”

“When a wolf is on a lookout they’d howl at midnight to warn the Blood Robbers that they are watching. That they are in a protective mode.”

“Protecting the humans, the rejects?”

“Yes. Baby, the Midnight Howl is your friend. The clan protects you from something that your military couldn’t see and stop.”

“Okay, you know what? What you’re telling me is giving me hibbygibbies. I hate to think that the missing prostitutes or those who were found dead were victims of the Blood Robbers.”

Callum took a deep breath. Marisol would feel worse if she learn about the Cancers. “Would you like to stop? We can continue later.”

“No. Later won’t make any difference. Callum, shouldn’t we tell the police about the Midnight Howl and Blood Robbers? There are people sitting in jail because they were accused of murder or rape or something.”

“We can’t.”

“We have to.”

“Listen, baby. Think about what would happen if you go to the precinct and began telling the police about who killed your parents. Most likely they’ll pity you instead of believing your story.”

“They need to know.”

“There are things that must be kept secret to keep the earth’s balance, harmony, peace. Think of the White House. You don’t know most of what was going on in there or what they’re not telling the people. I bet if the president released all the confidential records, there’d be riots everywhere.” She’d feel worse than getting the hibbygibbies when he opens the topic about Cancers. He would be if he were a human finding out about soulless animals wandering around especially during sundown to hunt on their kind.

“Alright, the Blood Robbers are preying on animals and human rejects. Do they kill them the way vampires do?”

“If the vampires really drink blood, then yes. They kill their victims the way they did your parents.”

Marisol nodded. “Drink the blood.”

“Yes. Unlike the vampires—if they really exists—the Blood Robbers can survive without drinking blood.”

“What? Then why couldn’t they just capture the bad people and turn them in to the authorities instead of killing them?”

“Good question. But you see, that’s not how the bastards operate. Like I said, the Blood Robbers hate humans. They think the humans were to blame why they’re not immortal anymore. Since they couldn’t just eliminate the entire race, they went on killing the rejects or the ones they think fall in that category.”

“Those people don’t deserve to be killed without being tried.”

“Exactly.”

“I’d like to think everything you said is a crock of shit.”

Callum just smiled at her comment. “Nothing about what I told you is bullshit. Especially about Atos. He is a full-blooded cunning shifter and still has five lives.”

“Unless I chop his head off with a sword.”

Callum swallowed and touched his neck. “Yup.”

“Can an ordinary sword kill a Shape-shifter?”

“If beheaded, chopped into pieces, skewered that his vital organs are ruptured beyond repair, and wounded so severely that healing would be as impossible as stopping the sun from rising, yes. Most of the time a Shape-shifter will survive any injury because they can heal wounds faster than humans. If wounded badly, a Shape-shifter must shift to his wolf form to sustain his strength. In human form, Shape-shifters are like humans.”

“Do they age?”

“Yes. The same rate as humans.”

“So they would die of old age anyway. Why have five lives?”

“Because they don’t live like humans. The two clans are constantly fighting. They need more than five lives if you ask me.”

“Okay, when a Shape-shifter dies, he’ll come back again unless he has no more lives left. If it’s Atos’s sword that cuts a Shape-shifter, with or without spare lives, he could die because his wound, small or not, will never heal. This is too much. You know, listening to all this doesn’t mean I’m buying your entire story even though you seem to know stuff about my parents. I shouldn’t even listen to you. You’re a total stranger despite your claim that you’re my father’s friend.”

“You should listen to me, Mari. For your own safety. Anna and Mark wanted you to be safe, babe.”

Marisol nodded although the pain of hearing her parents’ wishes reflected on her beautiful face. “Why didn’t I hear about all of this when Dad was alive?” Marisol’s frown deepened. Her face clouded with anger and hurt.

“You’re angry.”

“Wouldn’t you be if you were left in the dark about the truth? If, indeed, what you said are all true? Dad knew about Mom’s history and the Shape-shifters and didn’t tell me anything about it.”

“For a reason.”

“My mother came from an ancient powerful clan, but she wasn’t pure bred. Her blood was already diluted. And my parents died because of a sword and poultice,” she recited the new facts a loud. “God, mixing my clay is a lot easier than this. At least when making a terra-cotta, I know what I need—a generic composition of twenty five percent ball clay, twenty eight percent kaolin, thirty two percent quartz, and fifteen percent feldspar. Not so hard on the brain. But Shape-shifters and ancient clans? I thought it was a myth.”

Callum listened. He wished he could have softened the blow about her family, but there was no way around it. He knew this was all too much to take in, but Marisol must know everything the sooner the better.

“Baby, brace yourself. Mark wore a locket the night Atos caught him.”

“The locket’s been missing.”

Callum noticed the worry on Marisol’s face. She was biting her lips again. “Atos has it. Anna inherited Kyra’s features. Just as you shared Anna’s.”

“Atos now knows I exist.”

“Yes.”

“Callum, there is only one sword in this house. Mom’s. She gave it to me when I was five. The sword belonged to Kyra’s father, Youven. Elam was after it. Atos is after the poultice. Tell me. Is he after the sword, too?”

“Yes, baby. He’d been looking for it.”

“He’s after me.”

A loud rumble of thunder followed by a flash of lightning made Marisol glance at the window. Her eyes searching, fearful. Callum left his chair to squat in front of Marisol. He took her hand in his and rubbed her knuckles. Her indrawn breath told him that his touch surprised her. Perhaps even more than him. Gad, her skin was so soft, her fingers long. Neither of them said a word for several moments. They merely stared at each other.

He wondered what was going on in her head. Was she thinking about sinful thoughts like him? Did she have a sudden burst of desire coursing through her veins the moment he touched her? Callum suddenly felt uncomfortable. Mark’s pants felt even tighter now. Damn it. Marisol, without a doubt, was one attractive woman. His growing erection proved that he was attracted to her. But heck, she wouldn’t be his first choice if presented with beautiful nymphs. Just look at her. Too tall, slender, chewed her lips until they resembled a thoroughly kissed lips, her nose so straight one would think she was a goddess from Olympus, with creamy skin, perfect breasts...shit.

Who was he kidding? He could sit here all day long staring at her and feel contented. The way he had done in the past month while in wolf form. Marisol was too appealing to give him peace of mind. With her, all he wanted to think

about was how it would feel to be inside her, what she would taste like, how she would react when he sucked her—

Marisol twisted her hand saving him from erotic thoughts bouncing through his head. Damn it. He was one fucked up wolf. Here he was having a boner while fear coated Marisol's eyes. He let out a deep breath and concentrated on the topic at hand.

“Baby, Mark told me that Anna foresaw a vision—”

“The reason why Dad insisted that I practice wielding my sword. Because a Shape-shifter, a full blooded descendant of some god, wants me dead.”

“And he will fail. I am here to protect you. Baby, I won't let him come near you. I won't let them take Youven's sword. Your sword.”

Marisol leaned her back against the back of the chair as if trying to put more space between them. Her unblinking eyes focused on his face. “You said earlier that you can do magical things, you can read my thoughts, talked as if you're not a human, spouted about the ancient two clans and you know about my family history. You know things that a normal being or human would never know. You're one of them, aren't you? You're a Shape-shifter.”

“I am.”

“You lie.”

“I'm telling you the truth.”

“If you are, how would I know that you’re not one of Atos’s men?”

“Arnulf’s blood runs in my veins, baby.”

Marisol sucked in her breath and let it out slowly. “Youven’s second hand? The one who disappeared with Kyra?”

“Yes.”

“Is your blood diluted, too, like Mom’s?”

“No.”

“So you can shift.”

Callum tightened his hold on Marisol’s hand when she tried to pull it. Feeling her hand relax beneath his touch, he moved his hands higher to feel her pulse. The beat jumped beneath his fingers. “I am one of the Midnight Howl.”

He was impressed. Marisol’s reaction to his declaration was to keep staring at him while chewing her bottom lip. He couldn’t be so sure, but he thought he saw her eyes sparkle. Was she laughing at him? When she spoke again, Callum got his answer.

“When Dad saved you, you were in a wolf form and not a man.”

He knew it! Finally, he didn’t have to find a way to correct her notion about his sexuality.

While they continued to look at each other, Marisol gave him an earnest smile. “Glad to know you’re the good Shape-shifter.”

He couldn't help the surge of happiness in his system knowing that she accepted him. Callum lifted her hand, kissed her palm and inhaled her scent that drove him crazy every night.

Marisol lifted her free hand to move the lock of hair that fell on his left eye. "Your eyes are blue. My wolf has blue eyes. He comes here every day but snubbed the food I left in his bowl."

"Maybe if you tried cooking the meat, he might have eaten the food. He likes Starbucks Cappuccino also."

Marisol smiled a big smile. "What if I put the food in the dog dish? Would he like that?"

Callum grinned. "If it's cooked. Maybe."

Mark was right when he said Marisol possessed charm. The kind that was so strong it hit the oomph factor. She had pizzazz and damn him for noticing. Marisol didn't belong in his league. She and her kind was what the Midnight Howl stood for—protect the humans but avoid them at all cost. That was rule number one. A rule that he broke. How could he not. Any man would lose their heads once they look at Marisol. He knew the moment he laid eyes on her that he'd protect her no matter what. Even if it meant breaking more codes. He'd do anything for her.

“Sheriff Davis and Deputy Smithers didn’t find my wolf. Instead, they found you. Because you shifted. The wolf that often visits me, you are him, aren’t you?”

“Baby, your wolf and I are one and the same. I am your buddy.”



Marisol was having difficulty breathing. She couldn’t tell if the wild beating of her heart was due to his shocking revelation or the slow caress that he was doing on her hand. Her reaction to Callum was of course understandable. After all, he was handsome with amazing blue eyes. She’d been in love and very much attracted to her old boyfriend before, but she couldn’t remember acting like this—staring at Callum as if he was his favorite Oreo cookie. And another thing, Callum wasn’t exactly a man. He just said so himself. Boy, she should run as far away as Timbuktu and never come back. But for the love of her, she felt differently. She wanted to purr, lick his skin, and rub herself all over him. Good god, she must be nuts. Callum was a Shape-shifter for crying out loud.

Use your good sense, Marisol. Think hard. He could be lying to you. Yup. He could be.

“I should call the police.”

Callum raised an eyebrow. “But you’re not going to,” he said in soft tone.

“No.”

“Because you truly believe me now?”

“No. Because you’re too pretty to go to jail. Most likely you’ll escape anyway.”

When Callum laughed, she knew he didn’t buy her reason. Deep down, she didn’t believe herself either. God help her, but she like him enough to keep the police out of this.

Once again, Marisol tried to pull her hand from his grip. He was quick though and wouldn’t let go. She stopped pulling away.

“For a human, you are so calm. Others would be screaming like crazy.”

“Believe me, I am screaming inside.”

“Mari, listen.”

“Yeah?” She saw the moment the smile left Callum’s face.

“Now that Atos knows that you exist, it’s only a matter of time before he finds out where you live. So I want you to pack your clothes.”

“What?”

“It’s good to be ready. It will save us time if you pack now.”

“I never thought about leaving this house. Callum this is the only home I’ve known. I can’t leave this place. My only memories of my parents are here.”

“I understand, baby. Pack, just in case.”

She shook her head at him. “I’m not going anywhere. If Atos wants me then he’ll face me here. I won’t run away from him.”

“Baby, leaving this house doesn’t mean we are running away. It is to keep you safe.”

“I can and I will fight him. Thank you for your offer, but I will not leave. I’m quite safe here. Besides, I want to see his face. And I want him to see me before I kill him.”

Callum didn’t argue with her. He just smiled and raised a brow. She was sure they were both thinking the same thing—that her remark was ridiculous.

The house was old and penetrable. Wolves could get in just as how Callum did without her knowing it. Lord, how could she pack memories, the sound of her father’s voice that still lingered around the house, the scent of his tobacco? What about her first cat, goldfish, parakeet all buried in the backyard?

“How are you going to keep me safe?”

“In any way I know how.”

A flash of lightning that lit the room followed by a rumble of thunder had them both looking at the kitchen window. Rain was still coming down hard.

“Listen, the Blood Robbers are fools. Since rain hasn’t light up, they might want to stay dry and forget about hunting tonight. But, like I said, it would be best if you pack. In human form, they can mingle with people and ask around. It wouldn’t take long before—”

Marisol pulled her hand from his grip, grabbed his hand with both of hers then placed it on her chest. “This home is my life. I want to grow old here and maybe raise my own family here. I’m not leaving unless we have to, Callum. Callum?”

He didn’t say anything, but his smile had disappeared from his lips. In fact his face had turned hard. She could see his jaw muscles twitch and his nostrils were flaring. Darn man. He didn’t like the idea of her staying. Of course he wouldn’t understand why she didn’t want to leave. Wolves travel from place to place. They were used to moving around.

“You want me to pack and leave. Is that it?”

Callum nodded then shook his head no.

What the heck is the matter with him? “Callum,” she squeezed his hand.

Callum responded with a sharp intake of breath and he grimaced, too. “Uhm, babe,” he began. His eyes lowered then raised back up again to stare at her.

Marisol finally understood. She let go of his hand. “Sorry,” she made a move to leave her chair, but Callum stopped her by placing his hand on her shoulder.

“Pack, okay?”

Understanding her situation, she nodded. “You really gave your promise to Dad that you’d protect me.”

“Yes. The night before he was killed. Mark knew his fate was inevitable. He must have felt it coming.”

“Thank you for giving him the promise. It must have made him feel a little better.”

“Perhaps.”

“I’m glad you weren’t a member of the Blood Robbers. I wouldn’t think twice killing you if it had been you who robbed me of two beautiful people I love the most. Sorry for hurting you.” Could she do it, really? Kill someone? Marisol felt her shoulder slumped. God, she was tired. She’d been working all day. The load of information about her family history was so heavy to carry that she didn’t think she’d be able to stand up at all. “There’s nothing about what you told me that is easy to accept. But I have to, don’t I?”

Callum held her chin and forced her to look at him. “I would change everything if I could. Believe me, baby, nobody wants this war. We hate it. And I particularly hate the fact that humans are caught in the middle.”

“We are in the middle and we don’t even know it. Really, it sucks to be human.”

Callum leaned forward until their faces were only inches away. “Now that Atos has learned about you, yes, being human indeed sucks. But your life ahead

will be easier if you listen to me. When I say sit, you sit. When I say we go, we go. No questions ask.”

“You sound like Dad.” Marisol stopped breathing all together. If she moved her head even a quarter inch, her lips would touch his.

“He told me you’re quite Miss Contrary. One answer isn’t enough for you and you always question everything.”

“Good. Now that you know that part about me, your life ahead will be easier if you accept that I don’t like being told what to do.”

Callum grinned. “Baby, you *will* do everything I tell you to do.”

“And if I don’t?”

A shiver of excitement ran through Marisol’s spine when Callum moved his thumb to touch her lips. “Try me and you’ll find out.”

Chapter Eight

Marisol stood in the middle of her father's study. After Callum branded her lips with his thumb, it took her a while before she finally able to breathe normally again. Lord, all the man had to do was grin and she turned into a melted butter right in front of him. She couldn't believe she acted like a silly schoolgirl. Gah!

She rubbed her temples. Her mind hurt. Boy, she couldn't recall the last time she used her brain this much. Repeating everything Callum had told her was tiring. In the end, she found no reason to doubt him. Still it was hard to grasp the idea that her mother was a descendant of a Shape-shifter. Who would believe that? Why couldn't she be King Henry the VIII's duchess or mistress? More glamour there. But a wolf's descendant? Geez.

Scientists believed that humans shared common ancestors that existed five or eight million years ago with modern African apes like the gorillas and chimpanzees. Well, they should look into the genetics of wolves deeper. Man, if they get the gist about humans sharing ancestors with wolves and war gods, they'd go nuts.

Callum mentioned powers. Aside from her being able to hear Callum's voice, which to some people wouldn't think as power but a sign that she was schizophrenic, she doubted she possessed a power at all. She would have known by now if she had it. Man, any power would be nice. If she were given a chance to chose, she would ask for the power to stop the war between the two clans and spare the humans from being victimized and the power to chain Atos for the rest of his miserable life.

Phew! Who was she kidding? Peace was something people dreamed of for so many years. It would never happen so long as greed, mistrust, betrayal, corrupt politicians and all that nasty stuff, exists. She bet the Tibetan monks never stopped praying for peace, but it had taken them nowhere.

Callum had already told him a lot. Still more questions bounced around her head. Later, after her nerves calmed down, she'd talk to him again. Right now, she needed a break. Marisol sighed. Who would have guessed that a drool worthy man like him could change forms?

She walked toward her father's deep red mahogany table. Running her hand on the edge, she looked up heavenward. "Why did you keep a secret from me, Dad? Did you think hiding the truth would hold the danger at bay? Well, looks like danger is coming this way anyway. Atos is looking for me. You're friend, Callum, told me everything. Well, enough to make my head hurt. He showed up as a

wounded wolf and near death and then he shifted into a naked man when Sheriff Davis showed up. Glad he did, otherwise happy trigger Smithers would have shot him. Thank you for sending your friend though.”

“You have a funny habit of talking to yourself”

Marisol jumped at the sound of Callum’s voice. She turned around to look at him. “I know.”

“I took a quick shower. Hope you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all.” His hair still dripping water on his shoulder. He must have finger-combed his messy hair, which only made him look so scrumptious.

Marisol wondered if his lips tasted as good as they look. Man oh man. She licked her lips. Good god, she was salivating over a Shape-shifter!

Leaning against the door, Callum gave her an irresistibly devastating smile. “Done looking?”

Embarrassed, she tried to hide her discomfort by squaring her shoulders. “I was just admiring my father’s clothes.”

“I’ll make sure you get these back.”

“You can have them.”

“Sorry to intrude, but I heard you talking so I thought about checking on you.”

“Thanks I’m fine. I’m curious. I thought Shape-shifters had powers to manifest clothes?”

“So you’ve read paranormal romance junk.”

Arms crossed beneath her breasts, she leaned her hips on the table. “I told you I’m not a big fan. But a friend of mine is. She would tell me all about the books she read. Mostly about shape shifting wolves that could make weapons appear in their hands.”

“Ah. Well, it would be great if I have those powers.”

“So let’s say you shifted into your wolf form and then back to human again, you’ll be butt naked?”

“Yup. That’s why we change forms only when it’s safe and not in front of kids and ladies or in the middle of the crowd. What happened earlier, I didn’t have enough time to cover myself. Sorry.”

“I’m not.” Her answer was already out of her mouth before she could stop herself. Her blood pounded, her cheeks burned from embarrassment. When Callum grinned, she wished she had the power to disappear.

“You’re not?”

“Well, your image kind of shocked the officers so they forgot to be angry. They just started talking about something...big.”

Callum laughed. “Did I shock you?”

“No.” Hell yes. The only time she’d seen a man’s penis was when she and Renee watched Papa John’s porn one night. Other than that, her personal experience about a man’s physical characteristics was zero. So yeah. He shocked her, but it was a good kind. In fact she wanted to see him naked again. “Damn brain, stop thinking about him naked,” she muttered.

“You know it’s not a good sign if someone talks to herself.”

Marisol scoffed. “With the kind of info that you dumped on me. I’m surprise I can still think straight. Talking out loud helps me sort out my thoughts.”

“Ah, that’s why you always talk to your wheel and pots.”

Marisol groaned. She remembered talking to him whenever he came by as a wolf. What did she tell him? Did she say something no one else knew about? Secrets perhaps? “That’s downright wrong, you know. You listened to everything I said while you sat by the door looking like a tame puppy.”

“As I recall, you asked me to listen. Glad whenever I showed up so you could talk to me.”

“That’s because I didn’t know you could understand what I am saying. I know you’re a wolf but not *the* wolf kind I know.”

“Right you are. I’m a big badass wolf. Not a tame puppy.”

“I didn’t say you’re a puppy. I said you look like one.”

“Puppy my ass.”

“Sheez, you’re sensitive.”

“Are you trying to shrink my self-esteem?”

Marisol laughed. “I think it would take a lot to do that.”

Callum walked inside the room again then stood beside her. His lithe body, Marisol noticed, emanated warmth and an aura of invisible power.

“Mark’s study.”

“Yes. Have you been in here before?”

“No. Only in his clinic.”

“When I was a little girl, I used to spend hours here watching him smoke his pipe. I don’t know how many times I fell asleep on that same couch waiting for him. It was a habit that turned into hours of talking about his job, my business, and the gossip we both heard. We shared so many memories here. I could still hear his voice, you know. When I come in here, I feel his presence. It helps ease the loneliness, the pain. Too bad Dad never mentioned anything about Mom’s past. Or the truth about me. He should have. I could have kept him company whenever he went somewhere. Maybe I could have saved him from that horrible Shape-shifter Atos. He would still be here and I wouldn’t miss him until it hurt.” Marisol’s vision became blurry from her unshed tears.

Callum place his hands on her shoulders forcing her to face him. And then his warm fingers curved under her chin. “And have both of you killed? Mark knew

better than that. He was preparing you, Marisol. Mentally and physically. He was waiting for the right time. Do you know that he never stopped talking about you?”

Marisol sniffed. “No.”

“Yup, Mark was so proud of his little girl he talked nonstop about your skill in pottery, your voice and guitar playing. About your incredible talent in remembering things. He said, anything you see, you remembered. You could read a book and memorize its contents. And you know what else?”

“What?”

“He told how beautiful you are. I couldn’t agree more.”

Marisol sniffed. “Parents always think their kids are the most beautiful kids in the world. You should see my baby pictures. I look like a ripe pumpkin.”

“I’m a stranger and I believe you’re beautiful. I bet Mark had a hard time telling the boys to go away. He even refused to introduce me to you.”

Marisol stared at him. As a wolf, he was handsome. As human, he could put X-Men’s Hugh Jackman to shame. The way he made her feel, without a doubt, she was deeply attracted to him. Who wouldn’t? Callum was one magnificent species. “Maybe because you’re not handsome enough for me.”

“Maybe. But, babe, admit it. You are attracted to this face.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“How’d you know?”

“I’m a wolf, baby. I can smell your heat.”

“Maybe you’re handsome, but you are one big fat jerk.”

“I am everything, but a fat jerk.”

“You are. Not to mention bossy.”

“I’m not. You’re not just used to being told. Which reminds me, I want you to pack before you go to bed.”

“I will pack when I feel like it.”

Something flared in his eyes seconds before Callum lowered his head to capture her mouth with a kiss. Marisol’s heart jolted and her pulse pounded against her ribs. *Lord, oh lord.* Like a glass of wine, Callum’s kiss travelled from her throat to her chest and down to her belly. Hot delicious feeling in between her legs had her moaning.

Lifting his head a fraction away from her lips, Callum whispered, “Now you know what I’ll do to you if you refuse to obey me.”

“I will not follow hmpph.”

Callum growled low before covering her mouth with his again. This time, gripped her hips as he lifted her higher. Bodies aligned, she felt his arousal in between her legs. She should stop him. Instead, she wrapped her leg around his hips to feel more of him. She felt careless. The khaki skirt she wore rode up. She

didn't dare look, but she knew her thong showed. When Callum cupped her ass and sat her on the desk, she anchored her other leg around his hips. With her legs spread apart, Callum's hard cock pressed intimately against her throbbing pussy.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled him closer for a deeper kiss. In her twenty-three years of age, she'd never felt anything like this before. Not as hot, intimate, and wicked as this.

"Baby, you feel so good," he breathed in her mouth before tracing her lips with his tongue.

"Ohh."

Callum slowly penetrated her mouth with his tongue while he grounded his hips to press his erection harder against her heat. Through his jeans, she felt his hard and throbbing cock. When Callum tore his mouth from hers to trail kisses on her jaws and neck, she gripped his hair. She didn't want him to stop.

Pain mixed with pleasure made her mewl like a cat as she felt Callum nip at her neck.

"Baby, you're hot." He trailed kisses on the column of her neck and down to the tops of her breasts as he leaned her back a little. Through her shirt, he sucked her hard nipple. "Hmm... lift your shirt, babe."

Burning with unspent desire for the man she hardly knew, Marisol raised her shirt and surprised to find her bra unhooked. "You're swift."

“You have no idea.”

A loud gasped escaped her mouth when she felt Callum’s hot mouth wrapped around her aching nipple. He suckled her as if sucking a lollipop. A hot ache grew in her throat and somewhere deep in her stomach. “Callum...God...”

His hand snaked down in between them and didn’t stop until he reached her throbbing pussy.

She felt her blood surge from her fingertips to the toes. “Oh god!” Her thong was no barrier to his invading fingers.

Callum moved the slip of a material to the side and touched her clit. “Callum,” she whispered his name again.

“You’re wet.” And then he plunged his two fingers inside her while his thumb rotated her clit. “I love your scent. I want your scent all over me. I’ve wanted you for so long.”

Marisol’s mind reeled from the strong unfamiliar pleasure he was giving her. Touching herself in the privacy of her room and in the middle of the night was different, her one and only ex-boyfriend made out with her, too, but not like this. Way different from this. Callum’s hand was magical, touching a part of her that quickened her heartbeat. She panted from the inner excitement. Her body temperature rose to a higher degree. It felt wonderful, lustful.

“So fucking wet.” He pulled her earlobe with his teeth. “I can feel you contract. Come baby. Come in my hand. Now.” His mouth captured her nipple again, sucked on it in time with his fingers thrusting motion.

Marisol moved her hips, meeting his thrusts. His fingers went deeper inside and a prick made her gasp.

Callum’s fingers stilled. His mouth released her nipple. He lifted his head and stared at her. He looked at her as if she just killed his uncle. “You’re a virgin.”

Heat that had nothing to do with sex burned her cheeks. “I...”

With urgency missing from his touch, Callum moved his fingers again as if testing his suspicion. “Fuck, babe.”

“What’s wrong with being a virgin?”

“Nothing. Except, except I could have hurt you. Real bad. Did I?”

“No.”

While he stared at her, he pulled his fingers slowly before lowering Marisol’s legs. As soon as she scooted off the table, Callum smacked both palms on it. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Didn’t think it necessary.”

“I could have hurt you.”

“Yes, you already said that. But isn’t breaking my hymen part of sex? I heard the pain is just a prick. And once it is done, pleasure—”

“Stop!” Callum placed his hand on the side of her face. “You’re killing me. Fuck, baby. How did you manage to stay a virgin?”

“You’ve met my dad. He was overprotective of me.”

Callum groaned. “I swore to protect you and here I am ravishing you in his study.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Like hell.”



Callum stared at her green eyes. Good god. All he wanted was to give her something to think about so she’d listen. But his plan backfired. Just a taste of her mouth and he forgot all that he stood for.

There were many rules a Midnight Howl must follow. One of them was never tangle with a woman. Wolves must stick to their kind. They didn’t want a repeat of the past. Youven fell in love with a human and it had cost him, his clan, their immortality. The border that divided their realm must remain thick and strong. He’d sworn to protect the humans, but keep them at bay. Befriending them, not to mention deflowering a virgin, was against the rules. With the exception of Mark, of course since his friendship and poultice was vital to the clan.

He should have known Marisol was an innocent. The way she responded to his touch without inhibitions spoke eagerness to discover more. Like a child

tasting candies for the first time. Damn, she lit like kindling wet with gasoline. She was one explosive woman.

She looked so beautiful with her lips red from his kisses, hair mussed and eyes still held the remnants of passion. He touched her rosy soft cheeks. “You’ve been in my head since the first night I saw you working. I dreamed about touching you. Of you touching me.”

“Stop dreaming. Touch me—again.”

Ah, that’s wolf blood speaking. A bitch in heat is a fantastic bitch to mate. “I can’t.”

“Is it because I don’t shift?”

Because you are forbidden. “No. I wanted you the way I never wanted anyone before, Mari.”

“But I am not one of your kind.”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Marisol moved a fraction away from him.

He hurt her feelings. Damn code. For the first time, he wished he wasn’t a shifter. “Baby,”

“I’m okay. Just a little embarrassed. Just so you know, Callum. I don’t normally let any man kiss or make out with me. Don’t know why I acted like a cheap whore. Promise, it won’t happen again. And if I lost my wit again, it wouldn’t be with you.”

“Not with me.”

“No.”

Ah, hell. In full possession, he clamped his mouth on hers. Through his kiss, he wanted her to know how much he wanted to mate with her. Why that mattered, he didn't know. He couldn't quite understand why his body came to a full attention when she was around and why he didn't like the idea of her mating with anyone.

I'm fucked up.

Callum buried his face in Marisol's hair inhaling her womanly scent. He could give her what her body screamed for. Douse her heat. He was sure there was nothing wrong with heavy necking and petting. The Midnight Howl's code was plain and simple. No hidden traps unlike the banks and credit card companies. No small prints at the bottom that said foreplay—forbidden.

He could please her.

“Mari,” he pressed his thumb on her chin. Marisol's lips parted and he swooped down to taste the sweetness of her mouth. His touch meant to kindle her fire, calling out emotions, responses, and feelings her virginal body was unaccustomed to. The simple knowledge hit his body like a hammer making him groan. A virgin, for his to take but he could not and would not claim her. He'd give her what she wanted, but he wouldn't take what she was offering.

You're an idiot! Take her. She's yours. Pure, untouched, and fucking beautiful.

“Callum, I thought—”

“Shhh...” He lifted her blouse over her head and threw it on the floor. Next, he unbuttoned her skirt and lowered the short zipper. It landed on the floor with a wispy sound. Marisol’s already unhooked bra followed. He took his fill looking at her exquisite body covered with nothing but a skimpy thong. “Beautiful. Perfect.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.” Reclaiming her lips, he crushed her to him. One hand on her back, the other found the soft rise of her butt. He cupped one cheek and pulled her harder against him. Marisol’s eyes widened. Gods, he loved looking at her face. He lifted and sat her again on the table. “Wrap your legs around me. That’s it. Is this the first time a man touched you? First time to have a man lave on your breasts?”

“Yes and no.”

Callum stopped. “What’s that suppose to mean?”

“I had a boyfriend, but...”

“He’s gay.” And he continued loving her breasts. He didn’t want to talk about her ex. Not right now.

Give her what she asks of you. Make her yours. Join your bodies. Mate with her.

“I’ll give you ecstasy you’ve never experienced before.”

“More than this?” He answered by taking her mouth with such savage intensity it had Marisol whimpering. Flattening his hand against her spine, Callum moved one hand around to cup her breast. Raising his mouth from her, he looked deep into her passion-coated eyes. “I will taste you, baby. Lick your juice, suck your clit until you release your orgasm. You taste sweet, but I want the sweetest part of you.”

“Oh god.”

Callum smiled hearing the catch on her breathing. He felt victorious seeing Marisol’s body quiver. She was so aroused he bet she’d come as soon as he touched her pussy. Pushing up her breast, he lowered his head to capture one taut dusky pink nipple. Marisol moaned and thrust her chest. A woman’s breasts. His weakness. Night and day, he could do this. Suck, taste, lave, nip, tease. A rolling nipple against his tongue—fantastically erotic.

“Jesus, Callum.”

“That’s it, baby. Let me have a taste of your breasts. Hmm...” *Gads, what did I do to deserve heaven.* He slid his hand down her stomach to the mound he’d been dreaming of touching. Inching lower, he raked the pubic hair her thong failed to cover. The coarse hair told him he was close to finding her virginal pussy and the clit that could bring great pleasure to both of them.

Inching his fingers even lower, he touched her slick pussy.

“Callum.”

“I’ll be gentle. I won’t hurt you, promise.” He kissed her again as he guided her body down the table. Hooking his finger, he pulled her thong to the side. He spread her lips apart then dipped his middle finger inside her slippery entry. “Just how I like it. A dripping pussy.” Callum slowly pumped his finger drawing in and out of her hot juice. He spread her pre-cum around her vagina making her slicker to his touch.

Marisol moaned and clamped her legs tight around his waist. Her ass flexing beneath his hand.

Sticking his tongue out, he made a path from her cleavage down her ribs to her stomach. “I want to taste your come, baby. Will you let me?”

“Yes, yes, Callum.”

Hot and ready to burst himself, he removed Marisol’s thong. Fuck, her scent was driving him crazy. Hungry for more, he suckled her nipple again. He was rewarded with Marisol’s erotic whimpers. Slowly, he kissed his way down her stomach. When he reached the soft skin just below Marisol’s navel, he hooked his hands behind her knees, lifted her legs up, and rested her heels on the table. He nearly lost his control when he saw how ready she was. “Baby, you’re so ready and so beautiful.”

Callum stared at Marisol's weeping pussy for a full second before lowering his head to give her one long lick. Just as he thought—fucking sweet.

“Oh god, Callum.”

“Yeah, I know. Good, huh?” He combed her springy curls back and then sucked her clit.

Marisol screamed his name.

Damn, it had been way too long since he'd tasted carnal desire it felt like he was a teenage pup again—eager to please and to be pleased. His dick throb so hard it hurt. He wanted to slide in and out of her but reminded himself that she was not his to take. Instead of his cock, he used two fingers to penetrate her beautiful wet pussy. While watching his movement, he pumped his fingers in a slow tempo.

Marisol let out a sound that told him she liked what he was doing.

His body as tight as a wound string, he lowered his head to inhale her scent. Callum nearly ejaculated. Fuck! Unable to withstand the anticipation, he devoured her little nub men craved for. So little flesh and yet it held a power that could weaken even a stronger man. Her walls clamped around his fingers. Careful not to touch her hymen, he moved his fingers in and out of her slick pussy. With her juice covering his fingers he pulled them out and licked them clean. “Honey-sweet,” he said then inch by inch pushed them back again inside her pussy.

Marisol licked her lips as she met his gaze. He smiled at her then stuck his tongue out to tickle her clit. Her groan and the erotic move of her hips served as fuel to the fire growing deep inside of him. What he'd done to her nipple, he did it to her clit.

"Callum!" she screamed and gripped his hair tighter.

She's begging to be fucked. Do it, Callum. Just look at her body. And that pussy...

He closed his eyes and concentrated on giving her what he promised. Lust fever would go down as soon as she reached her orgasm. Then he could keep his distance.

Pressing the flat of his tongue on her clit, he moved his head from side to side. Damn, he wanted to free his hard dick and bury his length deep inside her but he mustn't. He meant to pleasure Marisol. This was all about her. He reached for her breast, squeezed her nipple lightly then lowered his head again to feast on her honeyed pussy.

Marisol whimpered erotically pushing him off the edge.

Since his ex-fiancé Viola, he never touched a woman this way. His clan boasted beautiful she-shifters, but only a few of them had caught his attention or had made him as hard as he was right now. And Marisol caused it.

When was the last time he had a good fuck. It had been too long. He couldn't do this a minute longer.

Callum trapped her sweet clit between his lips and sucked. He knew this little part of the woman's body very well. Maybe it had been too long since he'd had a taste, but his experience was extensive. Not letting go, he continued to pull the nub with his mouth until Marisol's thighs and ass muscles tightened. She called his name repeatedly seconds before he felt the gush of warm liquid around his fingers. Damn, he loved feeling a woman climax.

Pulling his fingers out of her pussy, he replaced them with his mouth and tasted her juice out before clamping his mouth on her clit again. Lust pounded the blood through his, chest, head and dick. With his two fingers formed like a V, he spread her pussy lips and laved her clean. Right that minute, Callum wanted nothing else but to fuck her from behind and claim her innocence, be one with her. The beast inside him screamed, wanting to mate with Marisol, but he summoned his powers to contain his urges. Someday, in a different life, in a different realm, perhaps he'd get a chance to claim her.

Not now. Not here. Not yet.

He clamped his mouth on the soft skin inside her thigh as he tried to control his breathing and raging lust. After planting a long lingering kiss on her pussy one more time, he slowly scooted back up, pressing kisses on her quivering belly, breasts and mouth. "Feel better?" He whispered.

Marisol smiled languidly as she lay panting on the table, her chest still heaving. “Yes, I feel so, so...pleasured.”

With tenderness, he hugged Marisol’s limp, soft, and curvaceous body. She sighed against his neck, her breath hot against his skin when reality dawned on him. He’d protect her until he drew his last breath. Until he knew she was safe from Atos. He kissed the side of her neck. For the mean time, what was he going to do with her? In a short period of time, she crawled right inside his skin. He couldn’t recall a time in his life when he wanted someone this bad. Someone he couldn’t have.

“Baby, what did you do to me?”

“I haven’t done anything.”

Callum chuckled. “Woman, you have no idea how powerful you are.”

“Guess not. Callum?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m a virgin, but not naïve. You gave me what my body sought, but you didn’t get yours.”

“Baby, I can’t mate with you.”

“I know. But I want to please you, too. And there is another way, right?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

“Marisol,” he breathed her name. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to. It’s only fair.”

He trapped her still flushed face between his large hands. “I’ll be fine.”

“Show me. Tell me what to do.”

“Damn, you’re one stubborn beautiful human.” Growling low deep in his throat, he devoured her mouth. He only released her hold on her to unbutton and unzip his pants. His dick sprung. Relieved, he sighed in Marisol’s mouth. But he wanted a different kind of relief.

Grabbing Marisol’s shoulder, he helped her sit up. He took Marisol’s hand and guided her toward his throbbing dick. “Touch me.”

He trembled when Marisol’s finger touched the tip of his cock. A woman’s touch. Magical. Precious. And so fucking good. “Hold me.”

Soft and smaller than his, Marisol wrapped her hand around his cock.

Callum groaned. He leaned his forehead on her shoulder and savored the feeling of her hand slowly moving up and down the length of his shaft. “Fuck.”

He thrust his hips in synchrony with her hand pumping.

“So velvety. You’re hard and smooth”

“Baby...” He covered her hand with his and thrust harder. In his mind, he was moving in and out of Marisol, feeling her tight passage. He was getting closer to his release. “Kiss me.”

Marisol opened her mouth to him and kissed him without inhibitions.

“Hmm...”

His desire overrode everything else. He pumped faster and faster.

“Callum,”

“Baby, don’t let go.” It was the way she uttered his name; sensual, loving, so sincere that made him growl and release his seed in her hand. Another thrust followed by a couple more and he emptied himself.

Tired and satisfied—temporarily, he hugged Marisol tight. It was so damn good to be in her arms, to feel her soft curves, to feel her heartbeat against his, but he couldn’t let this happen again.

“Are you okay?” Marisol asked. Her voice laced with tenderness.

“Never been better.” He nipped the smooth skin on the base of her neck.

“Never been better,” he repeated.

Chapter Nine

Feeling better lasted exactly three hours.

Callum was finally able to convince Marisol that she needed to rest. The dratted woman asked more questions about her family, his background, and complained that she wouldn't be able to take her pet cemetery before she finally agreed to pack. He wanted to laugh when she pouted and grumbled her way into her room. He wanted to follow. God knows all he wanted was to lay with Marisol, but kept his feet from taking one more step and remained outside her door. From there, he watched Marisol. "Pack light. Take only what you need."

"What I need would require at least three suitcases."

"A bag. That's it. Do as I say, Marisol. It's for your own good."

Marisol's brows arched high when she looked at him. Her eyes showed annoyance. "You're not the boss of me."

Sheez, Mark raised a brat. The way she was staring at him while chewing her bottom lip, Callum could tell she was considering ignoring him. He shook his head in warning.

In truth, deep inside he wished she would try ignoring him again. To give him reason to ravish her mouth again. Hell, with her bed only a foot away from her, he'd surely do more than just a kiss. He'd make love with her in a hurry. And damn him to hell that was what he wanted right now.

Finally, Marisol must have realized that she wasn't going to win so she walked over to her closet and pulled out an empty black hiker's backpack. Leaning against the doorjamb, he oversaw her packing.

"A small toiletry bag, underwear, shirt, boxers, a pair of jeans, and my father's medicine kit. How's that for a light packing?"

"Good enough. If you need anything we can buy it later."

"Fine. I guess I don't have to take a suitcase full of my things anyway. Surely, I wouldn't be gone long. Two or three days tops?"

Callum didn't answer. Contradicting her would only result to more questions that required long winded answers. And he wasn't in the mood to explain. The quicker he distanced himself from Marisol the faster he could forget about how soft she felt and wonderful she tasted. There were demons outside her cabin, lurking around. He needed a clear head and stay focus.

Marisol placed the backpack at the foot of her bed. He hoped it stayed there. Chances were it wouldn't.

"Go to bed. You need rest, Mari."

“You’re worried. You think something will happen, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what will happen, baby. What we don’t know could hurt you.”

“Like Atos coming in the middle of the night.” Marisol glanced at the window. “That’s why I shouldn’t sleep. I want to be awake when he or they arrive,” she muttered.

Damn. He reached the spot where she stood in two quick strides. “Stop worrying.”

Marisol looked up and met his eyes. “They are coming.”

Callum held her face between his hands, leaned down and kissed her. Hard. He kissed her to make her forget about Atos, but as soon as their lips met, the kiss overshadowed his purpose. He slanted his mouth he plunged his tongue deep into the depth of her mouth.

Marisol’s tongue touched his before she gently sucked him. He cupped her ass, splayed his fingers then pressed her on his already hardening cock. The kiss wasn’t gentle. It was as sensual as it could get. Deep, arousing, erotic. This woman, a virgin one, was a raging fire in his blood. Her physical heat was too hot, exciting, and god damn it, he liked that about her.

He couldn’t get enough of her. Right that moment, he wanted her naked again and him on top making hot love with her.

A flash of lightning lit the room jarring Callum's mind back to the task at hand. He ended the kiss abruptly and looked at Marisol. Her lips were wet and swollen from his kisses. Keeping his hands on her shoulders to keep their distance lest he lost control again, he said, "Leave the worrying to me, baby. Get to bed. I'll see you tomorrow." He didn't wait for Marisol to reply. Quickly, before his dick ruled his mind again, he walked out the room and closed the door. He strode into Mark's study, grabbed the back of the chair with a black leather covered seat, picked it up with one hand, carried it and walked back outside Marisol's bedroom. He shoved the chair in front of the closed door and then sat on it. Fuck! Not even a day and he already tasted Mari. Why the in fucking world did he let it happen? Hell, it happened because he let his cock dictate his actions. And Mari...Damn, he could smell her. Like a bitch, she was in heat.

Callum rubbed his face with his hands, unable to believe what just happened. This wasn't what he had in mind when he came running here. Okay, he'd been fantasizing about Marisol, but he didn't think he'd actually touch her. Damn it. His brothers gave him the job of taking the sword from Marisol not pleasuring her. They made an exception when he befriended Mark because he already knew about the Shape-shifters' existence and he was valuable to the clan. But getting physically involved with his daughter was a totally different story. If

they found out what he had done, they would definitely kick his ass. And maybe kick him out of the clan.

Thunder rumbled from the distance. He knew it wouldn't take long for Atos to find Marisol's home. The dip shit knew how to mingle with humans and get information. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if they already knew where Marisol lived. She must be the only vet's daughter in this town. Easy to find, to track. It had been a month since Atos viciously attacked Mark. Atos wouldn't wait any longer. Dust had already settled. Atos was done biding his time. He would come for Marisol. Deep inside his bones, he could feel their presence. The Blood Robbers were near. Their foul smell spoiled the air.



Less than two hours later, three bastards broke in and began prowling inside the barn. Callum wasn't surprised. Behind a shelf full of pots, he watched the SOBs sniff and touch everything in the room.

Surprise, surprise. What took them so long? He must let Mari know she had unwanted visitors. There must be a place where she could hide or run to. He would fight these assholes, but not when Mari was around. Without making any noise, he quickly went back to Marisol's room.



Marisol moaned and arched her back. The sun beating against her skin felt so good. It had been raining for weeks. She needed this break. Her body sank deeper into the sand when a hard torso pressed on top of her. Wet and warm mouth clamped on her nipple while gentle expert fingers stroke her achy flesh.

“Oh yeah.”

“Marisol,”

“Mmmm.”

“Baby, wake up.”

“Please. Don’t—” A hand covered half of her face.

“Wake up.”

Marisol opened her eyes. Sunshine, salty scent in the air, lapping waves quickly disappeared replaced by darkness. What the heck? She didn’t have to look around to find out that she wasn’t at the beach at all, but in a dark room with a dark shadow looming above her. Heart thudding against her chest, she tried to scream but couldn’t. She swung her fist instead and connected it to a hard cheekbone.

“Owww! God damn it, Marisol. It’s me.” Callum buried his face on the pillow muffling his groan.

“Callum? Oh, I’m sorry.” She sat up and tucked her hair behind her ears. “I, I was dreaming...What a dream.”

“Later, tell me all about it. I’m curious.”

Marisol was glad the room was dark. At least Callum couldn’t see how embarrassed she felt at the moment. “Did I say something?”

“Yes. Even in your sleep you talk out loud.”

“Well, it was a vivid dream.”

“I bet. You were moaning.”

“Oh god.”

“You awake?”

“I think so. What are you doing here? Did you have a nightmare or something? You scared me.”

“Scared? I’ll remember to wake you up with a long stick next time.”

Marisol smiled. She’d hit him so hard she bet he’d have a shiner tomorrow.

“Sorry. Is it morning already?”

“Dawn.”

“Too early.”

“It’ll be too late if you don’t get up now. Get up. Get dress. Be quick, please.”

“Are we leaving? I haven’t had my coffee. I need at least a cup in the morning to get me going so I—”

“Later, baby. You need to get up. Hey, look at me. We have more important things to do right now.”

“And that is...”

“To make sure we stay alive. Baby, Blood Robbers are here. Atos found you.”

“What?” A strong cup of coffee in the morning to keep her moving was nothing compared to that bit of news. She was wide awake now.

Callum’s big hand clamped on her mouth again. “Quiet. Baby, they are here.”

“Whadintyouayso? Ohmygod.”

With the help of the moon shining through her lacy curtain, she saw Callum smiled before removing his hand off her mouth. “Now you know. Is there a place for you to hide other than this room?”

“No.”

“Shit. Okay. No matter what you hear, you stay here. Keep your back against the wall and make sure whoever or whatever walks in that door stays in front of you. And baby, get your sword. Got that?”

“Sword. Keep the whatnots in front of me. Got it.”

“Don’t leave this room. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

“Stay here, beautiful.”

Callum gave her a quick no nonsense kiss. Before she could say anything Callum was gone. Bounding off her bed, she kneeled on the floor then reached under the belly of her bed. Her father installed hooks under there where she kept

the sword. Her fingers touched the cold leather scabbard right away. It had been months since she'd unsheathed and practiced wielding the sword, but she was nowhere near being rusty.

A loud crash reached her ears.

Atos. If it's you in my house. You won't get out of here alive.

Quickly, she removed the scabbard off the hooks. Gripping the handle, she pulled the sword out of its sheath. The metal gleamed in the dark. Holy mackerel, why did it feel so great to hold this sword? Was it because of the magic it held? Whatever power this thing possessed, she'd use it to her advantage.

In the far corner of the room, she stood with her back plastered on the wall. She did what Callum instructed. She directed her eyes on the door and waited. If someone other than Callum walked in, she'd kill him.

A couple heartbeats went by. Still, Marisol waited. Awful sounds of something breaking made her cringe. What if there were a dozen Blood Robbers trying to turn Callum into minced meat? Oh my god. He could be bleeding again. She hoped not. Damn it. She hated standing there not knowing what was happening. More so, she hated waiting.

I don't have to, do I? Why wait here when I can go down and help?



He could smell their stench. They reeked of blood. And not of animals either. From where he stood, Callum watched the three Blood Robbers. Atos's brother, Pic and his runners. The fucking assholes made a kill before coming here. It was dark in the barn, but he could see them as if the sun was high and shining inside. These ones were good fighters. *Fuck. This is gonna be one hell of a fight.*

Callum came out of his hiding. "You won't find carcasses with maggots here."

The bastards stopped sniffing around and turned to look at him. It never failed to amaze him how these motherfuckers were born to look like angels. Women were often blinded by their charms and wit. Little that they know these Blood Robbers were evil made from hell. Fuckers. The one asshole closest to him dropped a vase on the floor.

"Oopps. Shit happens."

The crashing sound was so loud Callum was sure Marisol heard it.

"Stop fucking touching anything. You're leaving filthy imprints all over this place".

"Ah, what a surprise. Callum Dyrdek is alive. Fancy meeting you here. Survived the cut, huh? Oh, let me guess. The vet's daughter helped you live using the poultice?"

Callum wanted to wipe away the smug on his face with his fist. “Unlike you, Pic, I don’t give up easily.”

Simultaneously, the three let out a laugh that sounded more like a snarl.

“Good. I like it when I have to fight for my food.”

“Who the fuck are you fooling, Junco. You never fight for your food. You prefer rotten meat. I can smell the stink coming out of your pores.” He fought the bastard before. Unfortunately, he escaped. Not this time. He dared come in Marisol’s barn. *Now it’s personal.*

The three started to move forward like predators ready to make a kill. They were as tall as him, sylphlike, and without a doubt had their shares of experiences in battle. These Blood Robbers were fast and skilled in capturing their victims.

“You talk too much, Midnight Howl. Like the drunken whore I just had for dinner.”

“You’re pathetic. Going after those who couldn’t defend themselves. You’re a coward.”

“Boss, want me to make him howl for his life?”

“No, Raul. I don’t want this one howling. Hate the sound.” To Callum, he said. “This time you will die, Midnight Howl,” Pic’s tone of voice could freeze even the hottest part of hell.

“Not if I lopped your heads off first.”

Suddenly fluorescent lights came to life. Through his peripheral view, Callum could see Marisol still wearing her camisole with her nipples visible. Damn it. Well, at least she wore her jeans. He should have known she wouldn't listen to him. Stubborn woman.

With a quick glance, he saw that his baby held her sword like a swordswoman trained to kill, to defend. Damn woman. And did he just think of her as his baby? "Stay where you are, babe. These three are the bottom feeders. Unskilled. Filthy. And cowards." He lied about the unskilled part.

"Fuck you, Midnight Howl."

Callum gave Pic a benign smile, as if dealing with a temperamental child. "You're doing errands for your brother now, Pic?"

"The errand is to bring this nice smelling woman and her sword back to Atos. And since you're here, faggot. I'll add ending your pathetic life to the job. Which I don't mind doing at all. Glad to find you here. I get the sword and end your life." Pic sneered before looking at Marisol. His sneer changed into a smile that Callum bet never failed to capture a woman's interest. "Sweetheart, thanks for bringing the sword to us. Now be a good little girl and put it down. Come with us, tell Atos what you know about your father's poultice and you'll have a warm spot beside my bed. How's that, huh?"

"Not gonna happen, you fucking asshole." Marisol replied.

“Bitch. Then you’ll die like your father and mother. Squealing like pigs, begging to be spared.”

Callum saw the flash of anger on Marisol’s face. “Marisol, don’t talk to this animals.”

Marisol ignored him. “My mother and father would never make such pleas. They willingly gave their lives to protect the ones they love. You know that, Pic. I understand why you said such a lie. You’re jealous you don’t have anyone willing to die for you, to keep you safe.”

“You don’t know that bitch.”

“Oh? Your brother must have known you have a small chance of getting out of here alive. And yet, he gave you the job of getting this sword. Does he not care about you?”

“Atos sent me here because I am the best. He knows I can do the simple task like wringing your puny neck to get the sword.”

“Simple tasks, eh? Well, little pup. Your brother is misinformed. Callum?”

Callum grinned at Pic whose face turned from bright pink to mottled red. “Yeah, baby?”

“Go ahead and tear their hearts out.”

He barely heard Marisol's gasp before the three men shifted into wolves. Two lunged at him. Callum avoided the first wolf by crouching low. He met the other one with his punch hitting the wolf on the jaw. "Fucking morons."

The wolf hit the pottery wheel, landed on the floor on all fours with its tail high. Both wolves were snarling and their furs at the back of their necks bristled like sharp porcupine quills.

"Callum, what should I do with this one?"

"Don't hesitate. If he moves kill him?"

The wolves crouched in front of Callum. A position he knew well. He changed form, jumped, and met the wolves in the air.



Marisol cringed at the sound of angry snarls resounding around the room. She wanted to see what was happening but didn't dare take her eyes off the one circling her. "Just so you know, blood icky robber, I will not use the poultice on your kind. So you'd better tell your friends to back off and leave us."

"Pathetic little bitch, I can fit your neck in my mouth with a room to spare. You are too skinny to lift that sword."

Marisol stared at the wolf. She could actually read him. "Wanna try me?"

"You can hear me. Good. Now, listen to this. You'll die, bitch."

"Fool."

The wolf lunged at her. She lifted her sword in time. She'd never used the sword to kill anything that was alive before. She never knew how it felt to cut flesh. Now, she knew. It felt like cutting a pad of butter. Soft and smooth. At least until she hit the bone. Her sword went through the wolf's side and connected with his ribs. A yelp that resembled a dog crying in pain rendered in the air before it landed on the floor with a sickening thud.

The wolf turned back into a man. With his piercing dark eyes, he rose to his feet. His blood dripped on the floor as if he just got out of a blood bath. He was almost as tall as Callum. All muscles and he looked so pissed. Oh dear.

"I fucking hate humans."

Despite his wound, the naked man still looked vicious. His face contorted with anger. Good god. He looked so strong he could probably break her body like a twig. Marisol remembered what Callum said. If cut with an ancient sword, a Shape-shifter wouldn't be able to heal himself. Perhaps he'd bleed to death and she wouldn't have to fight him. Marisol prepared for the man's attack.

To her relief, the man's legs buckled beneath him. And then he shifted to a wolf form again. He didn't move. His eyes were open and blood oozed from his mouth, nose, and chest.

Good god, I killed a Shape-shifter.

Wrong. The wolf opened his eyes. They were grey like Callum's when he woke up after she applied the poultice on his wound but something looked far different on this one. He looked like a diabolical, vile, rabid animal. Jesus! What was he?

"Kill him, Marisol. Now."

Marisol heard Callum's voice in her head. His urgent tone made her grip the sword's handle, as if she was facing death itself. "I think I killed him already."

The wolf stood on all fours.

"Maybe not."

"Stupid girl."

Now it was the bad wolf talking to her. Good god, this must be what paranoid schizophrenic experienced when they hear voices in their heads.

"Didn't your daddy tell you not to play with sharp objects?"

"No. He told me the opposite."

The wolf's hind legs buckled beneath him but he forced himself to stand up again. And then he leaped. Marisol sidestepped avoiding the sharp claws from landing on her chest. Before the wolf could attack again, she swung her sword and cut the wolf's throat leaving only the skin on the back of his neck intact. The body skidded on the floor. When it stopped, it instantly turned back into a man again.

Marisol couldn't decide which was worse. The sight of a nearly headless wolf or a nearly headless naked man. She looked at the body lying on its side. Its head angled so that it looked like it was lying against the body with its unseeing eyes upside down.

A vicious angry growl had Marisol turned to look. She froze. Fear rooted her to the floor. A wolf with dark as midnight hair standing on ends was slowly moving toward her. He was so tall, his back must have reached her stomach. And she was five eight. My god!

"I will send you to hell, you fucking bitch!"

The handle of her sword felt slippery from her sweaty palms. She wanted to drop it and run. No wonder her mother and father died without a fight. They were no match to these animals.

"You will die like your pathetic mother and father."

This one was beyond angry. He almost successfully robbed Marisol of her strength and will to fight, but he made a mistake of mentioning her parents. Reminding her that parents died violently in the hands of these filthy, good for nothing dirtbags renewed her physical energy and strengthen her belief that they should die without mercy. She felt no fear, but rage. Oh heck yeah. She was beyond fear now.

“You think you can get passed my sword, you bastard? Come on, try me. You have no fucking idea who you’re dealing with here.”

“You are cocky for a daughter of a simple veterinarian.”

“You forget hairball, in my blood runs Youven’s of Arcus clan. I’m sure you know the two clans history.”

“Bitch. You’re not immortal.”

“Against my sword, you aren’t either. I will take your five lives here, ugly-puss.”

The wolf blinked then took a step back. The look of surprise passed over his face, which was gone a heartbeat later. The wolf lowered his head. *“Fuck you. Prepare to die.”*

Marisol held her sword tight until her fingers began to hurt. She raised her sword and waited. “Come meet your maker, dickhead.”

The wolf surprised Marisol with his agility and speed. He leaped for her throat but she was faster. She didn’t spent hours of training on how to use her sword for nothing. She swung it with a deadly aim. The wolf’s body landed on the floor. His head followed. Seconds later, both began to disintegrate. The whole decaying process happened so fast all Marisol could do was stare on the mound of ash that minute ago was growling at her.

She was still trying to comprehend why this wolf tuned into ash while the other didn’t when she heard a loud crash. Taking her eye off the dead wolf, she

looked at Callum whose mouth had a good hold on the last Blood Robber. He threw him against the wall so hard the barn's wood paneling splintered. The wolf stopped fighting. Instead, he let out a loud howl, stood up then jumped through the open window.

They're gone, she thought. Thank god. Marisol looked down at her sword covered in blood that slowly ran down from the blade to its tip to drip on the floor. Did she just kill two wolves? She looked around the barn. What a mess. It looked like a hurricane just came by and destroyed everything she worked hard for. There were blood spatters on the wall and the floor...Good god. How was she going to clean this up?

"Mari?"

"Callum, I killed two Shape-shifters. That one and the pile of ashes over there. Why did he turn into ashes?

"Babe, decapitation saves us from burying dead bodies. Small favors from the war gods."

"Good god. This is a nightmare. Am I still on earth or in hell? I'm sure this never happens on earth so I'm sure I'm somewhere—"

"Mari."

"Yeah?"

"Are you hurt?"

She finally looked at Callum. He was wrapping what was left of his shirt around his waist. “No. You?”

“I’m good. Sorry I can’t return Mark’s clothes anymore. And I’m going to borrow another pair of jeans,” he snapped.

“No problem. You mad about the clothes? Don’t be because—”

She wasn’t prepared for Callum’s next move. He grabbed her arms. “You are one crazy woman,” he snarled the words before he leaned down to give her a bruising and punishing kiss. When Callum ended that kiss, her mouth tingled.

“I told you to wait. You didn’t listen.”

“I couldn’t just wait in my room. I kept hearing things breaking and loud thudding sounds. I wasn’t sure it if was your head getting smashed on the wall. Have you any idea how hard it is to just stand, not do anything and not know what was happening? I kept thinking what if you’re hurt again. I don’t want that to happen again.”

“Sorry, babe. I’m not hurt. Thank you for your concern and thank you for saving my life earlier. But baby, when I tell you to stay put, you have to listen. Gad, Marisol. Do you like to disobey me so I would kiss you or are you just plain stubborn?”

“Well, I like it when you kiss me, but Dad called me stubborn every single day.”

“God help the man you’ll marry someday. You’ll be the death of him.”

Marisol punched him in the gut. “I’m not that bad.”

Callum pulled her against him and hugged her tight. “Thanks for coming to my aid in your revealing tank top and jeans.”

“Changing was the last thing in my mind.”

“They broke your vases.”

“I don’t care. Those things are just samples. The good ones are in my drying room.” She pressed her hands on his chest gently. “Callum, this one is not totally decapitated. Is that why he still lays here?”

“Yes. You cut him bad. Even if you just nicked him. He’ll die anyway. His body won’t be able to heal his wound.”

Marisol raised her sword. She couldn’t believe she held the most powerful sword in her hands. “I think something different happened to him. After I stabbed him, I thought he was dead, but then he came back and looked...different.”

“He became a Cancer.”

“Cancer?”

“Yeah, but he was still no match to your sword. Cancer or not. You killed him. Good.” Callum sat on his haunches to look at the dead man. “Baby, we got to get out of here. Now.”

“Why? What’s a Cancer? Like a disease or tumor or something? Is the air contaminated with deadly germs?”

“I’ll explain later. Right now we have to leave.”

“Why? Did I kill someone important?”

“Yes. Atos’s brother, Pic.”

Chapter Ten

Callum revved his Ducati's incredible 180hp L-Twin Testastretta Evoluzione engine. The chassis' set-up tipped the scales at an unbelievable lightweight of 165 kilogram. His motorcycle was built for speed. The kind that they needed right now. Thanks to the Ducati family and Bolognese investors, he could use another form of speed other than his own. He was grateful to Mark for keeping his motorcycle in the garage. His friend must have known that it would come in handy. He looked at Marisol. She'd been punishing her lips from her constant chewing since she saw the bike. He could tell that she'd never been on one before.

"Afraid?"

"Just wondering how in the world I could have missed something so beautiful like this in this garage. Well, I noticed the tarp but didn't think any of it. Dad likes to tinker in there and he's got enough junk to start a junkyard, but it never occur to me that he's hiding a...What kind of motorcycle is this?"

"Ducati."

"Yes. Ducati. So beautiful."

“It rides beautifully also.”

“Do you think I can keep my heinie on that seat?”

Callum wrapped his arm around her midriff. “Just hang on to me. It’s going to be okay.” He tilted her chin and gave her a kiss that made him wish they were in a different place, time, and situation. “Are you still thinking about the Shape-shifters?”

“Hard not to.”

“Baby, don’t worry. They will not attack in broad daylight and in the open. We’ll stay on the road and the ride will be smooth.”

“Callum, those were the wolves that hurt you.”

“Not particularly those bastards but yes. A Blood Robber wounded me.”

“Atos.”

Callum nodded. “He has been after me for a long time now.”

“Good. Now I don’t feel bad for what I did.”

“You like me that much, huh?”

Marisol’s cheeks turned bright pink. “Well, you’re my dad’s friend and you kiss nice.”

“I’ve been told.”

A shadow of annoyance crossed her face. “Who told you?”

“So and so. Jealous?”

“Why would I be?” She turned and mumbled something about lobbing someone’s head off. “I don’t even know you.” Marisol lifted a finger stopping him from replying. “And don’t tell me that you can smell my heat. That just sounds so icky.”

He wanted to laugh but thought better of it. After witnessing how good she was with her sword, he’d better learn to curve his tongue. Although, he had better ideas on how to use his tongue on her. He eyed Marisol who continued to stare at his motorcycle as if it was a newly found specie. Dressed in sexy low hip hugger jeans and with her sword in a leather scabbard she carried on her back, she looked so hot. Like a modern day warrior. Mark fashioned the straps so Marisol could carry the beautiful weapon comfortably like a holster. He wondered what she would look like in leather.

“What if we get pulled over? How are you going to explain my sword to the cop? Or should I just lob his head off?”

“You worry too much.”

Marisol hitched a black backpack on her shoulder. “Why couldn’t we use my car?”

“Baby, a bicycle would go faster than your old Subaru.”

“Sweetheart, thanks for the compliments. You just earned my heart,” she answered with sarcasm. Her mouth was set in annoyance.

Callum coughed in his fistful hand. “Are you sure you got everything you need in that backpack?”

“No, but you told me to pack light.”

“We’ll stop at the store later. We’d better get going. By night fall, this place will be swarming with Blood Robbers.”

“Why is Atos after you? Did you cut his tail or something?”

“I wish. He’s after all of us Midnight Howl.”

“And me.”

“Yes. So we have to go.”

“How did you guys manage to hide from us? I mean, it’s not like there’s only a few of you roaming around. You have a clan for crying out loud. But I’ve never heard anything about you on the news.”

“We’ve made it on the news. But your government and military are good in covering stories they couldn’t explain. When something inexplicable happened, they know how to cover it up. We cover our tracks, too. We have Cleaners to pick up our mess that’s why you don’t hear about dead wolves or weapons lying around.”

“Wow. You have maid brigades to clean the ashes and blood in my house?”

“Yes. I already placed a call. They’ll be here in a minute. When we come back here, you won’t see a trace that wolves died in your barn.”

“What if the Cleaners couldn’t make the cleanup right away? What will happen then?”

“We use our connections. Like a Midnight Howl working in the government or hospitals. And other humans who knew about our existence. Now, enough talk. We have to get going, babe.”

Marisol looked back at the barn with a wistful look on her face that stabbed at Callum’s heart. He understood her sadness. She’d never lived anywhere else but here. “This is temporary, baby. You’ll be back here. I promise.”

“You like giving promises?”

“Only the ones that I can keep.”

“I was really looking forward to seeing the kids. They’ll be disappointed to hear their field trip is cancelled.”

“They’ll hear worse if we don’t leave now.”

“True. Well, I bet everyone in town has heard about a naked man in my house. The parents might not want their kids coming here anyway. And Miss Bode will probably not believe my excuse for cancelling the field trip.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I have a sore throat.”

“That’s a lame excuse.”

“What would you rather have me tell her? That I have to leave because Shape-shifters are after me? You know how that would sound, right?”

Callum just shook his head. When Marisol rambled on like this, he learned to keep quiet.

“That I totally lost my mind.” She went on. “Sheriff Davis thinks that I pulled a prank on them because I want attention. Imagine that. As if I’m a deprived little kid. If I tell the teacher about the Blood Robbers and Midnight Howl, she’d probably send someone from the insane asylum to come here and put me in a straight jacket.”

“No. At least you could have said you eloped. Looks like that’s what we’re doing right now. You have your backpack and I’m taking you to my place. We’re running away. That’s more believable—I think.” Marisol merely stared with an arch brow. “Okay, elopement is a bad idea, but better than a sore throat.”

“I should have let you talk to her. You’re good at coming up with excuses.”

“Not as good as my brothers.”

“You have brothers? Do you all look alike?”

“Kind of. Why?”

“Nothing. So you mean to tell me that there are more men out there who look as perfect and handsome as you. I hope they’re not as bossy and vain like you.

Callum grinned. Marisol just complimented him and yet she called him vain and bossy. “My brothers are worse. If you’re lucky, you won’t have to meet them. I doubt it though.”

“Lucky me.”

He straddled his bike. “Babe?”

Marisol sighed then sat astride behind him. “Yeah?”

“We got to run.”

“Okay. Please be careful. I hate skinned knees. Remember, poultice doesn’t work on me.”

The spunk in her voice was gone now. She looked and sounded so melancholy. He hated taking her away from her home but it was something he must do. “Don’t worry, baby. I have Band-Aids at home.”

“Ha. ha.”

“Hang on. We’re going to fly.”

Marisol’s arms wrapped around his waist. The feel of her body pressed against him was a comfort he needed. The whole time he was fighting against the wolves, his thoughts were on Marisol. He couldn’t believe how afraid he was. Never in his life had he felt so afraid. Yes, she held her own. She had the skill without a doubt. Still, fear of her getting hurt gnawed his insides.

In a short period of time, the woman hanging on tight behind him became too important in his life. He knew the moment he touched her that he was a goner.

Why did Mark's daughter have to be so beautiful?

"Where are we going?"

"The Honey Moon Cabin."

Callum took the long and narrow road of Marrowstone toward the south end. The Honey Moon Cabin is located near Port Townsend on the Olympic Peninsula. Sitting in the middle of six acres, towering firs and cedar trees surrounded his cabin. He could see unwelcomed visitors coming from different directions. It offered sanctuary. Perfect for hiding. More so, it was private.

Signs of a new day began to peak behind the mountains. The shoreline view would be spectacular, but today wasn't the right time to admire the scenery. There'd be another day for that. For now, Marisol's safety was important. With the sword or not, the two of them were no match against Atos and his cronies. He needed to call for help.



The sun had already painted the sky orange and purple by the time they reached his cabin. He parked the bike on the graveled driveway and waited for Marisol to release her hold on his waist. She didn't. Her hands were cold to touch.

“Marisol, are you okay, baby?” She didn’t move. “We’re here.” Lifting her hand to his lips he blew on it. “Talk to me.” She didn’t say a thing.

He quickly got off his bike and faced Marisol. He grinned at the sight of his black helmet on her. Flicking his finger on the visor, he waited for her response. She didn’t give him one.

“Babe?” He raised the visor. Marisol’s eyes were closed and her cheeks were wet from tears. Shit! She’d been through a lot the past few hours. Poor baby. Her feistiness was gone now. He’d seen grown Shape-shifters collapsed on their knees from grief when they made their first kill. He understood. He took the helmet off of her and dropped it on the ground. With the pads of his thumbs, he wiped her tears. “Want to talk?”

Marisol shook her head, but kept her gaze on the ground.

Callum didn’t like seeing her looking so defeated. He’d rather listen to her constant gabbing and incessant questions. “I didn’t think a woman who could wield a sword with deadly precision would be a crybaby, a snot-nosed—”

Marisol punched him in the gut. “I’m not a crybaby. I’m upset. When I’m upset I cry. What do you do when you’re angry and couldn’t do anything about it? She sniffed.

“I find something to hit. I spar with my brothers but I never cry.”

“Well, it makes me feel better to cry.”

He figured what she just said was female logic so he didn't comment on it. "You need to rest. Maybe coffee? We didn't get a chance to have a cup this morning." He picked her up, carried her inside the cabin and into his room. He had his guestrooms prepared all the time because his brothers had a bad habit of dropping by unannounced, but for some odd reason he wanted her in his room. It seemed that Marisol belonged there. What a freaking strange feeling. The woman in his arms was beginning to muddle his way of thinking.

As soon as he lowered Marisol in bed, she curled up in a ball and buried her face in his pillow. He should leave her alone, but he remained standing beside the bed.

"Need anything? Tea, coffee, hot chocolate?"

Marisol shook her head no.

"I'll be outside. Howl if you need me," he turned to leave.

"Callum,"

"Yeah."

"Thank you."

He was back on the side of the bed in an instant. The overwhelming need to comfort her filled his chest making it hard to breath. "Baby, I should be the one thanking you. For saving my life with your poultice and for coming to my aid. You did great tonight. Mark would have been proud. Maybe my presence is not enough

to make you feel safe, but you should know, I meant it when I said I'll protect you. I owe you one, babe."

"You don't owe me anything. Anyone who found you would have done the same thing, Callum."

Callum doubted it, but kept the thought to himself.

"I'm sad because I know I won't be able to go back to my home, to my old life. From now on, things will be different. I killed Atos's brother. Unlike my parents, I have blood in my hands. Worse, I know now that Shape-shifters exists. My life just made a big turn."

"I don't know what kind of power runs in my veins, but I will do everything to restore your life. Maybe not right away. Eventually, you will be able to go back. About what happened in your barn, remember, they killed your parents. If they were still around maybe they are looking for someone to victimize. A child, woman, anyone. They deserve to die."

"Without being tried?"

"This is an ugly business, baby."

"And it'll get uglier. I'm probably on the Blood Robbers bite-to-kill list."

"Below mine."

"That's not comforting."

"I'm trying to be funny."

“Wow. You suck at it.”

Callum smiled. Marisol would be okay. “You need to sleep.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“I’ll end up making love with you if I stay.”

“Would that be so bad?”

Callum grinned. “You can use thought transference.” The bed dipped a little when he sat on the side. Barely touching her skin, he combed back her hair.

“I don’t know how it happened. When I was facing the first wolf, I heard him talk to me. And then something inexplicable went through me. I was able to use telepathy and block my thoughts but penetrate his.”

“Welcome to my world, baby. As to making love with you, no. It wouldn’t be so bad.”

“You wouldn’t do it. You, you refrained when I offered myself to you last night.”

“Because it was your wolf’s blood dictating your body. I didn’t want you to feel regretful after your human blood knocked sense into you.” It was partly true. His main reason for not touching her lies on the code he followed.

“Wolf’s blood. I thought mine is diluted, watered down.”

“Diluted or not, Youven’s blood is still in you. Your ability to read minds and use telepathy is a proof of that. This is great, babe.”

“And when I begged you to make love with me, you think it wasn’t my human self talking.”

“Hard to comprehend, huh?”

“You know, I read somewhere that wolves mate for life. That they stay together for as long as they live. Is it the same with the Shape-shifters? Do you wait until the right one comes along?”

It must have been the subdued light, but he thought he saw sadness flicker in her tired green eyes. “Yes, if we find *the* one. And no, we don’t stay celibate until we find our mate. I think that’s how it is in your world, too.”

“How would you know if she is the one? Are there signs?”

“Yup. Like you’ll suddenly feel like dancing around the fire naked and drink goat’s blood.”

Marisol elbowed him in the side. “I’m serious.”

“You ask the question as if you’ve never been in love.”

“I have.”

“Is he still alive?”

“Yes. And married with two beautiful children. They live in Oregon now. Anyway, forget about him. You didn’t want to mate with me because—I am assuming—you have already found *the* one. Sweetheart, fiancé, wife. I don’t know.”

Marisol shook her head, her brows in deep frown. “Oh, god. I’m stupid. I’m sorry, Callum.”

“For what?”

“It didn’t even occur to me that you could be married and I seduced you into—” Marisol groaned. “You refused me because you’re married or promised, right? I’m sorry.”

Callum stretched his long body beside Marisol then stacked his hands behind his head for a pillow. “Attached? No. Married? No. I had a fiancé once. She was beautiful and she knew it, too. Can’t remember how many losers I had to fight to get to her. In the end, I won her but the relationship ended too soon.”

“Sorry.”

“In the beginning I felt sorry too. The first month that we went out, I heard rumors that I was just a game to her. I ignored it. I threatened to kill anyone that dared defile her name. In the end, the truth won. I was pissed. I fought for a woman who wanted me as a trophy. She swore about love and all that crap when I confronted her, but it was over for me. What I represent in the clan was all she cared about. Her deception made me realize one thing—my attraction to her was purely physical.” He couldn’t explain why he felt he had to divulge the bit about what he had felt for his ex-fiancé to Marisol. It wasn’t necessary.

“Don’t let her stop you from loving another.”

“You’re right. But it’s hard to trust someone after what she’d done.”

“But you’ll still protect her despite the fact. Because you’re that honorable.”

Marisol guessed right. He’d do anything to keep Viola from harm because they belonged in the same clan. “Don’t know about me being honorable, but yes, I will protect her. Same way I’ll do to keep you, my brothers, other Shape-shifters or humans, from harm.”

“That’s one heck of a job.”

“If protecting means being around a beautiful woman like you, the job gets easier.”

“Thanks, Callum. Just so you know I am good at taking care of myself. Did Dad ever tell you that? So scratch me off from your list and look after your fiancée—”

Callum rolled and pinned her beneath him. “Yes. Mark told me how resourceful and independent you are. Don’t be irritated. Having someone to shield you from danger and harm doesn’t mean you are weak and incapable. And weren’t you listening when I said the word used to? I *used* to have a fiancée”

“Of course, I am capable. And I am not irritated. And I don’t care whether you used to have a fiancée or you’re a divorced man.”

Callum grinned. “Baby, my *ex-fiancée* saved me from a lifetime of grief and worries when I learned about her true feelings.”

“Yeah? So why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re irritated.”

“She hurt your feelings. I can still see it in your eyes.” Marisol said. Her voice soft and heartwarming.

“You like me now, huh?”

“You just saved me from getting eaten by Shape-shifters.”

Touched that she cared, he leaned down and kissed her forehead. “You saw how your parents respected and loved each another. I think you see love that way. Not all couples are the same. You’re parents were lucky to find each other and they were proud to have you.”

“I know. Dad treated me like a jewel. He taught me many things, put up with my attitude, and did everything for me.”

“He told me you’re a quick learner and talented except...”

“Except what?”

“You’re a horrible cook.”

“Wha—”

He took advantage of her open mouth. God, he’d wanted to kiss her again. Watching her talk, lick her lips with her pink tongue drove him nuts. When Marisol moaned against his mouth, he lost all sense of control.

As deep as he could, he plunged his tongue into her mouth. Marisol sucked him greedily.

Cupping his face, Marisol lifted his face an inch away from hers. “Stay with me.”

“I want to, baby, but I can’t promise—”

“I’m not asking you to be my mate. Just stay.” Good god. She was so innocent she had no idea what was going through his head right now. If she did, she’d most likely run away from him. “If I stay, I might do something regretful.”

“If you’re talking about making love with me, I won’t regret it. I don’t care if you’re a Shape-shifter. I still want to give you something for coming to my rescue and also to have a memory of you. We don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. If I die, at least—”

“You’re not going to die.”

“Okay. If we live and you’re done protecting me and we’re back to living our normal lives, I’ll have something to remember you by. And perhaps when you’re with whoever said you could kiss nice, you might think of me, too. So when I am with—”

He didn’t let her finish her rambling. He kissed her again. Hearing her talk about memories annoyed him. Damn it. Memories weren’t what he wanted from

her. He wanted... He wasn't even sure about what he wanted either. "Marisol, baby. You are addling my brain."

"What is so confusing about my offer? It's very simple. I am seducing you into taking my virginity and you are supposed to take it."

Callum grinned. He couldn't ask for a better offer than that. "I'll take it."

Fuck the code. Face the clan later. Right now, he would make love to a woman worth dying for. He sat back on his heels to remove his shirt. "Need help with yours?"

"I'm not a weakling, buddy. I just killed two wolves today."

Callum laughed and tugged at her jeans. It didn't take him long before both of them were stark naked. He was glad to see spark back in her eyes. A moan of ecstasy slipped from her lips the moment he aligned his body with hers. He snaked his hand along her body to cup her breast. She felt hot to touch and not ashamed to show her body's reaction. His hands explored the soft curves of her breasts, waists and hips while his mouth traced the sensuous path down her stomach.

Each moan she released served as a pump on his dick. He grew thicker and harder by the second. And it so fucking hurt. Callum imagined flipping her on her belly, lift her ass up in the air and driving deep inside her pussy. Marisol needed a gentle loving. This, after all, would be her first. He'd tear her apart if he weren't careful.

“It’s not too late to stop.” It would be one hell of a fight to control his own urges, but he’d stop if she said so.

“No. Don’t stop.”

Thank god. “Spread your legs, love. That’s it. Fuck, you smell so good.” Callum stared at her gleaming pussy for a second and then he flat tongued her.

“Callum!”

“Yes, baby. I know it’s good.” He cupped her round ass, lifted her higher and ate her. Her scent, arousal and taste teased the beast part of him. He wanted to shift, but fought the urge. Wolves preferred to have sex while in their wolf form. He couldn’t do it with Marisol. He closed his eyes then sucked her clit, loving the feel of it between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Using his two fingers, he penetrated her tight pussy.

“Callum.” Marisol moved her hips in a thrusting motion, fucking his mouth.

Warm juice covered his lips and his slick tongue. “Hmm...yeah, baby. Come in my mouth. Oh fuck, you’re great.”

His scalp tingled from Marisol’s sharp nails. The pain only heightened his pleasure. Opening his mouth wide, he worshipped her pussy. Marisol’s breathing became faster and ragged. Her walls were tight around his fingers.

“Callum, oh my god. I’ve never...So good.”

She was close to reaching her orgasm. He could feel it. Callum gave her pussy one long lick and then continued sucking her clit.

It didn't take long before Marisol screamed his name as she climaxed.

Callum slid back up her supple body until his mouth was inches above her. "Baby, tonight you're gonna be mine."

Marisol's eyes were half-closed and her breathing fast. She looked as aroused as any woman could be. "Take me."

"Hang on to me. Wrap your legs around my waist. Marisol, I'm long and I grow bigger once inside of you. Let me know if you can take me whole." Guiding his dick on her entry, he slowly thrust feeling for her maidenhead. "Mari, love."

"More, Callum."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You will never hurt me, Callum. Not on purpose."

He eased more of his length inside her until he felt her hymen. "Baby," he said. And he drove home. She'd gone tight beneath him.

"Are you okay?" Sweet, so sweet he wanted to howl. Marisol's slit was so tight.

"Yes. I'm fine Callum. Good god, you're big."

Callum wasn't sure if she was complaining or complimenting him. "You want me to stop?"

“No. What I want you to do is move.”

“Off of you?”

“No, silly. Like the way you’re supposed to move. Make love with me, Callum.”

“Now who’s a bossy bossington.” Wrapping his hands around Marisol’s shoulders, he began to make love with her. Slow at first until he couldn’t handle the urge to go faster. He pulled out until the head of his cock was almost out of her entry then drove deeper until he saw stars.

The bed creaked beneath them. Marisol screamed in his ears, but he was beyond control. He fucked her hard and fast. What he was feeling was primitive. Screwing was never this good but then, he wasn’t just screwing Marisol. He was making love.

Callum slowed his tempo and looked at Marisol. This sheen of perspiration covered her forehead. Her hair was wild and tangled. He kissed her open mouth. God, she was so beautiful.

“This is wonderful.” She dug her heels on his ass and hugged him tight.

The tenderness in her voice was too much for his wolf’s soul. It seared him deeply. His mind, his heart. Planting kisses all over her face, he repeated the words “You’re mine.” He withdrew his cock, touched her pussy, spread her lips, and then

buried his dick inside her over and over as her nails raked his back and his hands wrapped behind her shoulders.

They held each other, bodies hot and rippling with pleasure. Callum couldn't think or speak, but only move. He'd had sex many times in the past, but never this good. This so far, was the best fuck ever.

He knew his infatuation with Marisol had gone deeper. What was so special about her? Whatever it was, it had him forgetting what he stood for.

"Marisol," he breathed her name.

Marisol replied with a sexy moan. Her hold on him tightened and her muscles strained. She was nearing her peak again. Callum braced his arms on each side of her head and then began thrusting hard. He quickened his movement. "Fuck, baby. So good."

Her hot wet grip undid him. They released their orgasm together. Their cries of pleasure mixed together like a chorus. It was only a miracle that he managed to pull out then spend his seed on her belly.

Gasping for breath, he collapsed on top of Marisol. "That was..."

"Perfect."

They lay together, breathing as if they ran a marathon, arms around each other's sweaty body. He pulled Marisol tighter against him. "Yes. Perfect."

Chapter Eleven

Rays of sunshine penetrated the white window blinds. He'd been awake for hours, lying in bed, watching the yellow-orange hue dance on his white painted wall. An early riser, he couldn't imagine wasting the morning away flat on his back. But this morning was different. Both he and Marisol welcomed the new day fighting the Blood Robbers.

Callum turned his head slightly to the right to kiss the top of Marisol's head. He had almost forgotten how it felt like to wake up with a woman on his side—howling great, romantic, arousing.

Last night changed everything. His and hers. Especially hers. She wouldn't be able to go back to her barn and use her pottery wheel without endangering her life. Her Bisque It shop would remain closed until he made sure no danger would sneak from behind her. Marisol made an enemy. Even when she restored her life, it would never be the same again.

Marisol shifted. The side of her knee lay on top of his groin and her slender arm wrapped around him. So trusting, innocent, fierce, sensual, and beautiful.

He was about to go back to sleep again when he heard the familiar sound of cars and motorcycles. The sound was faint, but he heard it. *What took them so long?*

Careful not to wake Marisol up, he slowly moved her leg. He lifted her arm to his lips and kissed her soft skin. Marisol didn't wake up. She just curled on her side. He didn't want to leave her, but if his brother's paid him a visit they meant serious business.

Here we go. Ass whipping.



His brothers Victor, Ty, Rodolf and stepbrother Zambro were already waiting in the living room. Callum had to laugh. Man, they need to find a different profession other than modeling for Abercrombie and Fitch. Tall and lithe, all men wore dark sunglasses, black shirt, shiny Chippewa boots, and low rider jeans. Unlike the models on television or magazines, his brothers were different. When provoked they'd kill without blinking, without fear, without regret. Each one was skilled in their chosen weapons.

Like him, they were sentries living amongst the humans, bound by the ancient code they strictly followed. A code he'd recently ignored.

Except for Zambro with shoulder length blond hair, the men were sporting the same gray-blond colored hair as his, cut unevenly, and shoulder length. Over

six feet, the men seemed to have filled the room. They were called the Heartthrobs. As far as Callum were concerned, the name Heartbreakers would be more apt.

Callum couldn't think of anyone more anal when it comes to following rules than his brothers. And he had a good idea that it was those rules that made them all come here today.

"Hello, bros. To what do I owe this visit?"

"Your stupidity. What the fuck are you thinking?"

"I love you, too, Ty." Callum met his brother's angry stare.

"Cool it, Ty. Let your brother speak." Victor, ever the peacemaker in the family inclined his head at Callum. "You know why we are here, Callum."

"You got an email from Atos's crib."

"Yes. The asshole is livid about what happened to Pic."

"He would still be alive if he didn't dare come to Marisol's home. He and two other Blood Robbers came in search of a sword."

"You stopped them from taking the sword, but now Atos wants your head."

"That's old news."

"Callum, we thought you're dead. The snitch told us about Atos nearly cutting you in half," Zambro's gaze touched him from head to toe as if trying to see the truth.

“He did. But as you can see, I am still alive and kicking. Marisol helped me live. She used her poultice on me.”

“And you fuck her in exchange of your gratitude.”

“Oh? And you know that how?”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Callum. I can smell her scent all over you. Why did you bring her here?”

“To keep her safe and the sword. She can’t stay in her house anymore. You would do the same if you were in my situation.”

“Wrong. Because unlike you, I will never get involved with a woman and break the principle that we stood for.”

Callum grounded his teeth. His brother was right. He grounded the Midnight Howl’s principle beneath his heel when he touched Marisol.

“Wow, bro.” Rodolf grinned. “You broke the code so many times in one day. And it’s all because of a woman.”

“What, you listen outside my bedroom door now?”

Victor laughed. “Bro, Rodolf’s talking about your new habit of leaving the den alone, bringing a human to a Shape-shifter’s home, and...Man, you just admitted that you slept with the woman.”

Callum wanted to wipe the grin off his brother’s face with his fist. “Bros, the sword safe. Isn’t that what we care about?”

“Yes, the sword is here *and* the woman who owned it. Guess you can’t fuck a sword so you have to bring the woman too, eh?”

“Ty, got a bee in your bonnet?”

“Callum, you know where Ty is coming from.” Victor gave him a sly smile. “You’re living your last life, Callum. And you made a stupid move. If you die, you could turn. Do you think it would be fun for us to kill you if you become a Cancer?”

No. You have to, though, Victor—if it happens.”

“See, that’s the thing. Ty is angry because we don’t want to do anything to get us closer to that possibility.” Rodolf said in his slow meticulous speech.

“I know and I apologize for making you all worry about me.”

“Callum, by attaching yourself to Mark’s daughter, you put her in a far worse situation than she is in right now. She’s a liability. You won’t be able to fight with someone clinging on your pantaloons.”

“She knows how to fight. You should see how she swings her sword.”

“She’s still a human. Easily killed. She was lucky you were there to kill the Blood Robbers and save her.”

“Wrong, Ty. She killed them. Pic included.”

“What?” His brothers asked in unison.

“You heard me. She killed the sons of bitches.”

“I’m sure there are more humans who could swing swords or throw spears.”

Ty shrugged his wide shoulders.

“She is capable of fighting.”

“Send her to Iraq or Afghanistan.”

“Ty, you’re testing my temper.”

“Callum, listen. We coexist with humans to protect them from the Blood Robbers. Not to get cozy with them. Getting involve with a woman is strictly prohibited. Our ancestors already made that mistake. We are not going to have a repeat of that.”

“Victor, have you any idea how many Arcus and Crom married the humans? How many children belong to our kind? Arcus and Crom’s descendants are everywhere. Including Marisol.”

“It has been thousands of years since the warlords prevented us from befriending humans.” Zambro interrupted. “The half-breeds are no longer half but whole again. Marisol is human.”

“I will protect her at all cost. Mark was a good friend of mine, of our clan. How many lives had he saved using his poultice. And his wife, she helped out, too. They both died helping us. I will not renege on my promise.”

“You’re forgetting why you befriended Mark, Callum.”

“I didn’t forget. Didn’t I get the job done?”

“You did. So there’s no need to get too close to his daughter. Bro, protect the humans, but do not cross the line between friendship and your duty as a Midnight Howl. We are here to stop the Blood Robbers from hurting them. If you really want to protect Marisol, take the sword now to keep the heat away from her.”

“With the Blood Robbers after her? How could I do that? She’s vulnerable.”

“And so as the rest of humanity. We can’t save each and every one of them.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Rodolf?”

“The friendship between humans and Shape-shifters was the reason why Arcus and Crom clans fought each other. Don’t go softie on them.”

“Wrong, Rodolf. Humans were just the first step for Valdo. If the humans weren’t around, he would have gone after the Arcus instead.”

“He wouldn’t because Youven owned a sword as powerful as his.”

“He was a greedy son of a bitch, Rodolf. Just like Atos. That’s why he’s after Youven’s sword.”

“That’s beside the point. The Midnight Howl formed under the principle of sticking to our own kind. Protect the humans from the Blood Robbers, but do not sit at the same dining table with them or spend a fucking night in bed. We are of different breeding. Wolves and humans do not mix. Haven’t you learned anything from your history?”

“You’re being a hypocrite, Ty. You knew Mark as well as I. He helped more than a handful of Midnight Howls.”

“And we are doing the same thing. Every night we put ourselves at risk of stepping on animal traps, of get killed by the Blood Robbers and of turning into Cancer. As for Mark, we didn’t ask for his help. He took it up upon himself to continue his wife’s work.”

Callum took a step closer to Ty. “Mark died helping our kind. It didn’t matter if he volunteered or not, you fucking dick.”

“Fine! Yeah, I am grateful for his help. We are doing our job watching after them but I didn’t get physically involved and fuck his daughter.”

“You son of a bitch. Don’t talk about Marisol like—”

“Callum, enough.” Victor’s voice was soft, devoid of anger.

The opposite of what Callum felt at the moment. He wanted to punch, kick, and hurt someone but deep inside his brain, he knew his brothers were right.

“Stick to your purpose and that is to bring the sword to us. We need to keep it safe, away from the Blood Robbers.”

“Marisol has the right to keep it.”

“Oh fuck! Now you change your mind about the sword, too?” Ty shook his head.

“Ty, you ass. Did I say I changed my mind?”

“Talk to Marisol. Tell her we’ll keep the sword for her. She’s not strong enough to keep the Blood Robbers from taking it from her.”

“And where would she go. How can she defend herself if she didn’t have the sword? She’s Atos’s target now, Victor. I can’t just leave her alone.”

“This is exactly what we’re trying to avoid from happening,” Zambro said shaking his head.

“Somebody’s in love.” All heads turned to Rodolf. “What? Just stating the obvious.”

Callum didn’t comment. He didn’t know what to say. Mentally, he repeated what Rodolf said. In love? Impossible. He cared. In love—most definitely not. Who would fall in love in such a short time? He’d known Viola since he was a pup, they mated so many fucking times, but in the end he realized it wasn’t love that had kept him awake all night. It was a strong case of infatuation. So how could Rodolf say he was in love?

“Brothers, our job is to protect the humans. Marisol is in need of protection as well as Callum here. They’ll need all the help they can get. Us.”

“Thanks, bro.”

“Don’t thank me, Callum. After what you’ve done, I should just let the council kick you out without a trial. But I can’t do that, can I?”

Shit. How could he forget about that? Callum looked at his brothers. Fuck, he couldn't imagine the shame he brought on their heads especially Zambro's.

"Sorry, guys."

"I don't give a fuck about the others, Callum, but Zambro will have to face Salazar and the other council members. If he fails to plead your case, you're out of the Bluff. On your own."

"I'll make this work. Bring the sword to the Bluff, Cal. It might help the council's decision about your action. And I'll find a safe place for Marisol."

"Thanks, Zam. I'll call if I need help."

"I hope so. One more thing. Don't expect a warm welcome when you visit the chapters."

Callum nodded. His thoughts were back on the woman upstairs. Was she worth all of this trouble?

Questions, plans about how to stop the Blood Robbers from coming to town and prey on domestic animals, and humans, covered their topic of conversation. He returned their jabs, answered their threats seriously with half a mind. Callum's mind kept wandering. He kept thinking about the warm spot beside Marisol and what he could be doing to her right now. For the first time, Callum didn't enjoy his brother's visit. Two hours with them seemed like an eternity.

An hour after his brothers left, Callum remained standing in the middle of the room. He'd never been in this position before. God damn it. His emotions roiled like a sea in the midst of a violent storm. How could he forget what the Midnight Howl stood for? What his callous actions would do to his brothers? Callum turned on his heel and well-nigh ran back to his bedroom only to find an empty bed.

Chapter Twelve

Marisol followed the grassy path she assumed was the way out of the woods. It seemed like she'd been walking for an hour already and yet couldn't see any sign that she was getting closer to the main road. The trees where she stood looked wet and covered with moss. If she would make a guess, she'd say this area had never seen sunshine.

Lost. Without a doubt, she missed a turn somewhere or followed the wrong path. She looked behind her. The two-story cabin—if one could call it that since it must have had a dozen bedrooms—was no longer visible. Going back was out of the question since she didn't know which way to go. If she could just find that damn road. Fudge it. She was exhausted, hungry, and in need of a hot cup of coffee. She didn't get a good night sleep last night, woke up super early this morning, fought snarling wolves, had her fantastic first time making love in the cabin, fell asleep naked beside a Shape-shifter, woke up hearing male voices, and she had never felt so damn stupid in her life.

Why she believed there was something special happening between her and Callum she had no idea. Maybe it was a normal stupid feeling a newbie always felt

for when meeting a dashing...Shape-shifter. Ugh! She knew him as a wolf for a month and as a man for nary a day. So what prompted her to offer him her virginity? Who knows? What kind of a woman would do that? A freaking idiot, of course. She wished she could talk to that wacky psychiatrist for celebrities she saw on television. Maybe he could dissect her brain and rattle some sense in there.

This morning, feeling lethargic and as content as a kitten that had a bowl of cream, she curled up beside Callum. Her body hadn't adjusted to its new experience. She was a bit tender in between her legs and muscles she didn't realized existed on her body hurt so she didn't want to get up. All she wanted to do was lay there and not leave the room. She was half-asleep when she felt Callum leave her side. She decided to remain in bed, but then she heard voices. She listened, but could not quite make out the words. When curiosity won, she got up, and left the bedroom. She stood at the top landing hidden from the view down below.

Peering down, she spotted Callum's brothers—all towered in heights, svelte, with a body like the perfume models in magazines she often perused while waiting in line at a grocery store, and devastatingly handsome. They all came to ask questions, to express their concern and disapproval, to remind Callum of his job to secure the sword.

It was shocking to hear that Callum lied to her. But finding out that Callum had only one remaining life was a blow to his senses. Was it the reason why he came to her when in the brink of dying? Did he just use her?

She couldn't believe what she heard. It was all she needed to leave the cabin. She found the back stairs that led to the back door. With a heavy heart, he left in a hurry.

Marisol looked around for any sign that she was close to the main road. But all she could see was thick trunks of trees. God, she was so gullible. With a sword as powerful as hers, of course even the good clan would want to have it. Callum had befriended her dad and came to her because of the sword. Because of the damn sword! Why was she surprised? What did she expect? That Callum came for her? Jesus! She seduced a man she barely knew. If he and his brothers were laughing at her right now, it was her damn fault.

God, she'd never been so humiliated in her life. The truth about Callum's intention made her blood run cold.

She had just crossed the small stream she couldn't remember seeing earlier when she felt a presence. The air became heavy and thick. A bad feeling that she wasn't alone anymore made the hair at the back of her neck stood. Something or someone was watching her. Scanning the area, the woods suddenly looked spooky. It was as if something was about to happen any minute. She raised her hand to

reach for the handle of her sword. With her heart drumming against her chest and blood pounding in her ears, she slowly pulled it out the leather scabbard. The sound of the sword gliding out of the scabbard was barely a whisper.

The trees creaked, the branches broke and made soft thudding sounds as they hit the ground. God, whatever was out there, she hoped it wasn't Atos or any members of the Blood Robbers.

Callum's words echoed in her head. "*What you don't know could hurt you.*" "That's comforting. Not." She continued walking but didn't let up her grip on her sword. This must be how it felt like to be in a fish bowl and being watched. Creepy. With her eyes scanning the surroundings, she kept on going. Wet tall grass that reached her calves made her nervous, too. What if she stepped on a snake. Holy bananas, she hated those things.

Where is that damn trail?"

And then she heard a faint humming sound. The sound grew louder every second. She turned around, sword at a ready. The sound seemed to be coming from everywhere. "What the—"

Like a blur, a huge black motorcycle went past her spraying dirt and grass all over. Marisol protected her face from the debris. The motorcycle stopped abruptly in front of her, one would think it hit an invincible brick wall. The back

tire went up in the air. The driver remained in control and spun the motorcycle around so he was facing her.

Wow. How did he do that?

“Put your sword away, Marisol.”

Marisol had never heard a quiet voice with such a menacing quality. Seeing Callum again made her want to cry from relief, but only because she hated being in this woods. She was still mad at him for deceiving her. “It’s you. I thought you’re a devil in black. Well, you look like one. Before you came I thought someone was after me. I got this feeling that I was being followed and then you came. So my feeling was right. You were following me. If I’d know that it was just you—”

“Mari.” Callum revved his motorcycle.

“Now, that’s rude.”

Callum revved his motorcycle again.

“Stop it. How many of these devils do you own?”

“For Christ sakes, stop talking.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I should ask you that question.”

“I’m going home where I should be.”

“Did you wake up from your nap missing your pillow? Or your stuffed puppy?”

Pointing the sword on the ground, she returned his rude stare with her own.

“Don’t talk to me like that. I am not a child.”

“No, but if you use the mature part of your brain, you’ll know the repercussions of your unthought-of move.”

“Excuse me! As far as I know it was you who made a stupid move and broke some code by taking on the sole job of protecting me and sleeping with me.”

Marisol saw the flash of anger in his eyes. “I wouldn’t consider sleeping with you stupid. Do you have any idea what you put me through?”

“Yes. I heard everything. Your brothers grilled and castigated you for being with me, for putting your life in danger of becoming a Cancer because you have only one remaining life, which by the way you forgot to explain to me. And I gather that your brothers are ready to kick your butt out of the Midnight Howl clan because you didn’t do a very good job of taking the sword away from me. I would never have thought—”

“I don’t give a shit if they kick me to the moon as long as you’re with me.”

“And the sword.”

“Yes. Baby, you need help protecting that sword. It is too powerful to land on the wrong hands.”

“Fine. Here, take it. It’ll save you from sticking with me. If you get killed fighting for me, your brothers would surely hate mankind when that happens. You

shouldn't be fighting anyway. I'm sure there are other jobs for Shape-shifters with one last life. You should just ride a desk or do some accounting jobs. Safer that way. Those of you with one life—"

"Shush, Mari."

"Shush? Fine." She removed the straps off her shoulders and dropped the scabbard and sword on the ground. "I'm going home." She started to walk away from him.

"Don't be such a brat."

"A brat? You're being a bully. And I don't like bullies."

"I'll do more than bully you if you insist that you go home."

"Excuse me. I should be the one angry here. Not you. You're not the one referred to as a liability. Right now, Callum Dyrdek, you are not my favorite person in the world. I don't hate you, but I surely don't like you this very minute. You lied to me."

"Get on the bike, Marisol."

He wasn't asking. He was commanding her. After what she'd heard, no way on earth that she'd listen to him again. "No. But I'll appreciate it if you show me to the right direction so I can get out of here."

"Don't push me. I am not in the mood to listen to your—"

“Then don’t. I’m the one not in the mood here, Callum Dyrdek. I heard everything that you and your brother said about me. So I don’t understand why you’re in a tizzy?”

“Tizzy?”

“It’s better if you just forget about your promise and go to your brothers.”

“Tizzy?”

“And forget that we had sex.”

“Tizzy?”

“And I’ll also try to forget the memories. I’m so stupid for seducing you.”

“Tizzy?”

“Tizzy. Yes. God, is that all you’re going to say?”

“Marisol. I am too fucking upset right now to even describe how I feel. You were supposed to rest in my bedroom not race back home. Atos and his ugly cronies are after you. You know that.”

“Ah, so that’s why,” she enunciated each word. “You’re mad because without you by my side the Blood Robbers have greater chances of taking the sword away from me. Because I, being a weak human, am not capable of protecting it. And if I lose the sword, the Midnight Howl clan would be mad at you for failing to do your job of bringing it to wherever your Bluff den is.”

“Fuck the sword. That is not what I am worried about, Marisol. You really don’t know what I went through when I found out you were gone?”

“No. Why don’t you just tell me then leave me be.”

The look Callum gave her was enough for any woman to faint. He looked deadly, menacing, and angry. However, she wasn’t just another woman, was she? She had guts and was capable of killing bad Shape-shifters.

Callum got off his bike. She stood and waited until he was toe to toe with her. She had to tip her head up a bit to see his eyes.

“Baby, you are seriously pissing me off.”

“It seems I always piss you off. I’m not afraid of you, of your guns strapped on your thighs and... What kind of guns are those,” she pointed at his thighs.

“Beretta 92FS”

“And the two on your back?”

“Brügger & Thomet MP-9 9x19mm”

“And you have a sword, too. Good god! You’re a walking arsenal.”

“Mari, you *shouldn’t* be afraid of me.” He bent down to pick up the sword and sheathed it in the scabbard. To Marisol’s surprise helped her strap it on her back again. When he was done, his large hand took her face and caressed it gently. “I will never hurt you, but Atos would.”

“I’m not afraid of him either.”

“You should. Fear is not a sign of cowardice or weakness. When you feel threatened, of losing your life or someone special, that’s when courage, energy, and will to live surfaces. Fear is good sometimes. It was fear that made me push my bike to the limit to find you and bring you back to The Honey Moon Cabin.”

“You can’t keep everyone safe, Callum. Do whatever it is you think you should to keep me safe but stay away from me. I won’t be responsible if you become a Cancer.”

“I already told you I don’t care if—”

“Yes you do. I watched you talk to your brothers. They love you Callum. And with me, you’ll be facing far more danger.”

“If they love me, they’ll have to accept you. I can have both you and my family.”

“I didn’t give you leave to have me.”

“Yes you did. We mated. You’re mine.”

“We had sex. It was great but that’s it. Let’s face it. You’re here because of my sword. I am giving it to you freely. Take it.”

“I don’t want your sword. I want you. And we didn’t have sex. We made love, baby.”

“Whatever. Leave me alone, Callum.”

“Can’t”

“Why?”

“Who knows? You talk to yourself, you can’t carry on a conversation without getting distracted, you don’t finish your sentences, you’re a brat, you punch people when you wake up, can’t cook, tried to feed me with raw meat, and you hog the blanket. I’m beginning to think that my brother is right.”

“About what?”

“What I feel about you,” he said the words forcefully, but amusement showed in his eyes.

He was laughing at her. “Well, you made your feelings obvious to him, to all of them, didn’t you? I’m such a goof to like a Shape-shifter.” She meant to keep the last remark to herself but the words flew out of her mouth.

“You’re not a goof.”

“Whatever.”

Callum lifted her chin and licked her lips. “Open your mouth.” He put pressure on her lower lip until she was forced to open for him. His tongue swept inside.

His kiss melted Marisol’s anger. She wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kisses with fervor.

“Marisol,” he whispered in her mouth. “I don’t know what it is you do to me. All I know is—”

The air suddenly turned stale. Snarling sounds he knew so well surrounded them.

“Fuck.”

“The Blood Robbers are here?”

“Worse, love. Cancers are here.”

“What in the world are they?”

“Soulless Shape-shifters.”

“What?”

“Not now.” He drew his Beretta strapped on his thigh. Converted to fully automatic pistols, his handguns could create damage on one of these Cancers. But there were so many closing in on them. Fuckin’ eh. How could he be so stupid to lower his guards?

The tallest, ugliest, and scariest wolf with its eyes the color of white marble was coming toward them. Its movements calculated, looking for an opening to attack, to break their necks. He felt Marisol’s back touch his.

“Callum, they’re multiplying. We’re surrounded.”

“Baby, do you know how to use a gun?”

“Better than Dad.”

“Good. Take both Brüggers.”

“Oh yeah, baby.”

Despite the situation they were in, Callum smiled. Later, he'd show her how much he appreciated her courage. If they survived.

"Now what?"

"We fly. I drive, you fire. Aim for their heads. Got that?"

"Clearly."

Through his peripheral view, Callum saw movement from his left and right. With speed he was known for, he drew the other Beretta, spread his arms and fired repeatedly. "Two down. Fucking more to go."

It was all the Cancer were waiting for. They attacked. He heard the sound of his Brügger. *Oh, yeah* "Let's go!" With the number of Cancer's coming toward them, he didn't have to aim. He kept shooting until he was on his bike.

Marisol was right behind him firing like a pro. Damn beasts kept appearing left and right. They must get out of the woods. Ugly son's of Satan would not follow them out in the open road. As dumb as they were, they knew better than to expose themselves to humans. Once the mortals learned about their existence, hunting would be more difficult. As it was, they'd have to pass the Midnight Howl to feed.

One hand on the handlebar, he shot a wolf in midair.

"They keep coming, Callum!"

“Keep firing. That’ll slow them down. Shoot the one closer to us. Don’t let them come near you.”

“Got it!”

His motorcycle kicked dirt. Roots and branches made it difficult to go as fast as he wanted to. He used his foot to keep their balance. Marisol kept the firing steady. Good girl.

“We’re almost out of the woods.”

As soon as they got closer to the main road, Cancers gave up on their chase. Fucking bastards never came to his property before and they never come out until the sun goes down. They never wander in this part of the woods. Why would they come here? Callum gritted his teeth.

He felt Marisol’s head lean against the back of his neck. Good god, it was a good thing he made it to her in time.

Gearing to full speed, they took the black asphalt road in a blur. He wouldn’t take her back to the Honey Moon Cabin. Fucking Blood Robbers or Cancers would expect them to return there. Seattle’s Best Den was too far of a drive. There was only one safe place where he could take Marisol quickly.

Turtle Bluff Den.

Chapter Thirteen

Like always, the restaurant was full. Through the glass window, Callum could see people waiting for their table. He drove the bike around the back where Turtle Bluff owner, Goon had saved parking spots for Midnight Howl.

The green dilapidated door with a painted doorknob was unnoticeable. Its color blended with that of the building. Garbage bins filled with all kinds of crap that must have been there for weeks could flip anyone's stomach. The whole place reeked with sour and spoiled rotten food. And possibly dead animal.

Health and Sanitary inspectors had been here before and seen how awful and unsanitary the place was, but they never shut down the Turtle Bluff. Goon had offered the inspectors a lifetime free soup in exchange of his permit to run the business. Well, who could resist that offer?

Callum parked the motorcycle beside the pile of sagging wet cardboard boxes. The sound of his motorcycle must have scared a family of rodents because they started coming out of old boxes like overflowing black water.

“Eww! Please don't tell me they are Shape-shifters, too.”

Callum got off the bike and faced Marisol. She was watching the rodents with the corner of her lips pulled down and her eyes wide open. She looked so charming he had the urge to kiss her. Cupping her face, he forced her to look at him. “They’re just rats, baby.” Marisol met him halfway when he dipped his head for a kiss. It was just a kiss, but powerful enough to make him burn. Their tongues dueled, plunging, seeking, tasting. Somewhere, laughter penetrated his senses reminding him of where they were. Reluctantly, he broke the kiss. “Keep kissing me like that and you’d find yourself flat on your back. Naked. Me on top.”

“Promise?”

“Minx.” With one last long drugging kiss, he lifted her off his bike. “I don’t give empty promises. “Hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Good. Goon makes great soup.”

“Rat soup?”

“Better.” Holding Marisol’s hand, he led her through the kitchen.

“Hmm, smells wonderful. Oh, I think the cook is making stew.”

“Keep walking and stop craning your neck.”

“I love bread with my stew.”

“Noted.”

A burly dishwasher with dark long hair plastered on his head from the heat blocked their path, his arms akimbo.

“Hey, Max. How’s the jaw?”

“Still attached, bastard. Next time, Callum, I’ll break your bones and stuff you in the dishwasher.”

Callum responded with a grin that didn’t last. Before he could react, Marisol had the tip of her sword digging in Max’s thick neck. Hot damn, that was what he called speed. The noisy kitchen turned quiet. The staff looked unconcerned about the threat, but Callum knew better. “Baby, put down your sword.”

“Not until he takes back what he said.”

“This is Max. A good friend of mine. He’s a prick, but on our side.”

“I apologize, Mark’s daughter.”

“You know me?”

“I knew your father. He was a good man. A good friend. My condolences to you. ”

“Thank you.”

“Please accept my condolences as well.”

Marisol and Callum both turned around. “Goon, how are you?”

“Getting old. So this is the most talked about woman that fluff the wolves’ fur. I can finally put a face on your name Marisol. Beautiful name with an equally beautiful face.”

“Thank you.”

As if someone had turned on the play button, the noise in the kitchen came back. Everyone started moving again, doing his or her own business. None said a word. They didn’t have to. The sideways glances and blatant stares said it all. They didn’t like Marisol and he’d bet his guns they knew about him breaking the rules.

“Goon, we’re hungry. Do you think you could send your best soup and bread to my place?”

“No problem. I’ll have fresh bread delivered. Your brothers cleaned my pantry earlier.”

“One thing we don’t have in Seattle’s Best is a great soup and bread.”

“That’s what I heard. Well, good to see you, Callum. Oh, Cal.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s gonna be different down there.”

“I know. My brothers warned me. Thanks.”

“Pleasure meeting you, Marisol.”

“Same here, Goon. I’ve never seen a charming goon in my life.” Marisol sheathed her sword and gave the old man a smile.

Callum almost laughed when Goon blushed like a teenager.

“I’ve never been called charming before. So thank you.”

“You’re welcome. So you’re responsible for that wonderful smell. I’m not a very good cook. Perhaps someday you could show me your secret.”

“The secret of my Turtle Soup will go to my grave. Now, the bread. That I can show you how to make.”

“Oh, goody! I’m a quick learner. Show me what to do just one time and I’ll remember it.”

“I’ll save a day just for you.”

Marisol giggled. “Thank you.”

“Mari, let’s go.”

“Where are we going? Could we eat here? I saw people eating and I do believe they have an empty table.”

“We’ll eat in the room.” He practically shoved her in a hallway that twisted and turned.

“A dead end. Did we miss the elevator?”

“No.”

Endy, the busboy working for Goon sat on a stool with his back leaning up against the wall flipping the pages he held too close to his face. The kid had been working in the morning and going to school at night.

“Endy, we need to get in.”

The kid just grunted and kept on reading.

“Were already inside. Get in where, Callum? I don’t see a door.”

Callum ignored Marisol. “Endy,” he smacked the side of the kid’s head none too gently.

“Oww! Christ, Callum. What the fuck man.”

“Watch your mouth, kid. If you want to teach kids, better learn to curve your tongue.”

“What are you doing here? Uhm, does she need to use the ladies room? You passed it already.” Endy let out a big yawn then made a move to continue reading.

“Damn kid. Will you stop for a minute and let us in?”

“Unlike you Callum, I have tests to take. What do you want?”

“We need to get in.”

“We? But Callum...,” Endy glanced at Marisol. “You know outsiders are not allowed. Is she...I heard about—”

“My brother’s are expecting us.”

“They are?” Endy and Marisol said simultaneously.

Damn, he’d better to remember to brief Marisol next time. “Endy, have you seen Youven’s sword?”

“No.”

“Marisol carries it on her back.”

Endy’s eyes couldn’t have gotten any bigger. His jaws dropped. Sleepiness left his eyes. “Really? Is it true it has engravings written in Gaelic on it?”

“Wanna see it?” Marisol offered.

“Later. Open the door, Endy.”

“Callum, I can show the sword to Endy right now.”

“Not here, Marisol. We’re still outside. It’s not safe.”

“Right. Well, later Endy. Promise I’ll show you the sword.”

Callum watched Endy’s face turn bright red when Marisol gave him the same smile that she gave Goon—seductive. Her smile could make anyone think of a sunrise, green grass on the meadow, rainbow and butterflies. Man, did she have to smile like that?

“Thanks. Okay, here we go.” Endy recited a poem in Gaelic language in such a way one would think it was his native tongue. Just like their ancestors, the Gaels.

A deep mechanical sound like an elevator sounded before the cement wall slid to the left revealing a passage Callum had entered many times before.

“Wow. That’s incredible.”

“I know. Who would have thought there’s a door there, huh?” Endy said with pride in his voice.

“Oh yeah. The wall opening is cool, but I am talking about your proficiency in Gaelic. You’re awesome.”

“Sheez, thanks. Not very many appreciate my hard work here.”

“Callum, isn’t he wonderful? Gaelic is a hard language to learn.”

“Good job, Endy. Let’s go, Marisol.” He tugged Marisol’s hand but the dratted woman dug her heels so she could talk to Endy.

“I like your poem, Endy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is my all time favorite poet. How do I love thee in ancient Gaelic sounds sweeter than English.”

“Eh?” Endy’s face turned pale. He swallowed visibly and then started breathing hard. The boy looked ready to pass out. “You, you know the sacred language of Nuada where your sword came from?”

“Uh-huh. I can read and speak the language. Studied it before I learned to ride a three wheeler.”

Endy started rubbing his palms on his apron. “I’m fucked. I’m going to lose this job.”

“Why?”

“Babe, to open this door, Endy’s job is to come up with tough passwords that only he would know. This time he came up with a poem.”

“In Gaelic! And you know the language, too, Callum?”

“Very few of us could read and speak it. It’s old and dying. Endy here took the task of studying it so he could teach the new generation.”

“Do you think *How Do I Love Thee* sounds sweeter in Gaelic than English?” Marisol asked.

“Yeah. Okay, can we go now?”

“Oh my god! I so love Gaelic. Sorry, Endy. Don’t worry, no one will know.”

“I do.”

“Come up with a different password then.”

“That means memorizing another poem.”

“I’ll help.”

Endy let out a deep breath. “Cool.”



Marisol followed Callum to a narrow passage that led them to an elevator. Where they were going, she had no idea but one thing for sure. Once inside, it would be tough to get out. She watched as Callum punched codes instead of floor numbers. “Penthouse?”

Callum grinned. “Better.”

When the elevator opened, she found herself staring at a beautiful town with a fountain in the middle. The place reminded her of an old Wild West show

with taverns and salons. Man, he wasn't kidding. "Where are we? A town underground?"

"The Turtle Bluff Den."

"This is your Den?"

"Yeah. We have dens like this all over the country. Sorry to disappoint you, baby. You must be thinking about a hole in the ground."

"Silly. This is amazing."

"This town is the size of downtown Seattle."

"People, I mean, Shape-shifters live here?"

"Yeah. We run different businesses here to finance our cause. Later, I'll show you the Christie's."

"Christie's as in the world's most renowned clay pot maker?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. Who would have thought Christie is a Shape-shifter. I've been to her gallery in Seattle and saw her collections. They were remarkable. Do you think I could meet her?"

"I'm sure she'd love to meet you. Come on. You could ride a bike and see this whole place in one day."

"Neat. I might do that."

"Not without me."

“Of course. You’ll be my tour guide.”

“This is the safest place for you. You can stay here while I go back up to—”

“Whoa. Hang on, buddy. You’re not leaving me here. I don’t care if this is paradise or the president of America hangs out here. I am not staying down here while you go up there to fight Atos, Blood Robbers or the ugly ones that chased us.”

“You will do what I say, Marisol.”

“Or? You’ll kiss me again. You should know by now that your threat is not a threat at all.”

“I’ll take all of your clothes then lock you up in the room naked.”

“Well now, that’s a threat. Okay, I’ll do whatever you ask me to do.”

“Marisol,” he sighed her name.

“I said okay, didn’t I?”

Callum stared at her. “Need anything at the pharmacy?” He pointed at the small building with a brown façade and red roof.

Above the door, painted images of chamomile, clover, thyme and other leaves she didn’t recognize was the only sign that the place was a pharmacy.

“Uhm, do you think we can find Chapstick for my lips in there?”

“No but we can get pigs fat in a jar. Of course, we can get one there. Anything else?”

“No.”



A minute later, Marisol regretted going inside the pharmacy. It was bad enough that the cashier glared at her and other shoppers avoided standing near her as if she was a plague, but when Callum tossed six boxes of Trojans condom beside the Chapstick she put on the counter, she felt like melting from embarrassment. When she glared at Callum, he just raised his brows and said what.

She stuffed her plastic bag in her backpack, shaking her head. “That was humiliating.”

“Does it embarrass you when you buy Tampons? Buying condoms is the same as buying ladies sanitary napkins.”

“Oh, and you’ve done that?”

Callum ignored her question, which really irked her. Had he shopped for napkins before? If yes, for whom? His ex-fiancée maybe?

“Stop torturing yourself with nonsense.”

“Hey, for your information, when I think, I think about important stuff. And not nonsense.”

“Good.”

Marisol followed Callum to a motorcycle shop. The bikes on display resembled the one that Callum hid in her dad's garage. She watched him talk to the man he called Carl. They shook hands. Carl gave Callum a loud smack on his back that would topple an ordinary man. Lord, Carl must have been seven feet tall. His hands were big, his feet looked as long as her thighs, and well, everything about him was big. Despite his height and size, he moved gracefully. Aura and major power oozed from the man. Carl's almost ghostly eyes pierced her. He looked at her as if he could see all the way to her bones. She quickly erased the freaky thought and smiled when Callum introduced her to him. Carl, to her surprise, smiled shyly, blushed, combed his hair with his long fingers and then he scowled again.

Marisol opened her mouth to inquire about the motorcycles, but Callum anchored his arm around her shoulder and pulled her tight beside him. Odd, that.

Another man came. He too gave her a you-do-not-belong-here look. He scowled. She smiled. He blushed. Interesting, she thought.

"Thanks Carl. I'll come by to look at the bike later. Let's go, Marisol."

"Callum, I have a feeling I am not welcome here," she whispered as soon as they were out of earshot. Although she suspected they could still hear her.

"What made you think that?"

"The scowl."

“They scowl because you’re not a Shape-shifter. Besides, you’re not supposed to be here.”

Marisol stopped on her tracks. “Then why did you bring me here?” God, she wanted to remove her shoe and throw it at the back of his head.

Callum didn’t answer. And he stopped walking, too.

A beautiful woman came to stand in front of him. Dang, she made Marisol feel bland. She wondered what kind of shampoo she used to have such shiny and healthy looking hair. And look at her skin—milky white, no blemish. This woman’s body was clothed in leather tank top and short skimpy leather skirt that put Angelina Jolie’s boobylishious shape to shame.

“Callum, darling. I knew you’d be here.”

“Hi, Viola.”

Watching the two, Marisol could tell they weren’t just friends. They’d been beneath one sheet, shared the same bed, and pillow. They knew each other intimately. The woman’s next move proved her right. She took a couple more steps until she was toe to toe with Callum then leaned in for a kiss. She did it with familiarity and ease. Callum didn’t try to avoid the kiss. He just stood there but he did smile.

If she knew how to get out of this underground city, she’d leave right now. She hated what she was seeing and what she was feeling. Her chest hurt so badly

as if someone clamped it with a viselike grip. The kiss shouldn't affect her but it did.

I'm stupid.

"Hmmm...you always taste good. Happy to see me?"

"Viola, you're looking good."

"I wish you'd prove that I am pleasing to look at, Callum. It has been a long time."

"What are you doing here?"

"You haven't been in Seattle in a while so I thought to come here. Glad I did. Will you come back with me to Seattle's Best?"

"I have business to do here, Viola."

Marisol listened. Who was this woman to Callum? Is she the one who needed the sanitary napkins?

"Viola, this is Marisol. Mark's daughter."

"Ah, that's why I smell something...not quite right. Marisol, you're brave to come down here but then, you're with Callum." Viola wrapped her arm around Callum. "Understandable since my fiancé has a habit of taking hapless humans under his wing."

Fiancé? He said... Another lie. Damn it, she wanted to kick Callum's ass. "Your fiancé didn't take me under his wing. I'm on my own. And if you are

referring to my Dad as a hapless human—” Marisol didn’t get a chance to finish her sentence. Viola had already turned her attention back to Callum.

“You know where to find me, Callum. I’ll wait. Nice meeting you human.” With a smile that annoyed Marisol, Viola walked away.

“Don’t let me stop you from going with her. You said this is a safe place. I’ll be fine here. Just tell me where I am staying and I’ll find it.”

“Marisol, she’s—”

“Hey, there’s no need to explain. You know why? Because I don’t care about your lovelife, what you do or whom you hang out with. Just take me to my room and go back to Seattle or wherever. You probably have dens everywhere littered with puppies. What are you grinning about?”

“If I leave you’re coming with me.”

“No I am not.”

Callum shook his head. His gaze roamed around her face then centered on her lips. “What ruffled your feathers?”

“I’m not ruffled at all. Just annoyed to find myself in a den of wolves who want my sword.”



One bed, one bathroom. A studio apartment. Perfect for a bachelor.

“Food will be here soon. Do you mind if I take a shower?”

Callum took his shirt off and threw it on the nearby chair. When he began unbuttoning his pants, Marisol turned to inspect the crystal wolf that served as a bookend on the shelf. “Of course not. This is your room. I want to shower, too. Care to tell me where my room is?”

“You’re in it.”

“Don’t push me, Callum. I am not in the mood. Where will I sleep?”

“See that bed? That’s where you and I will sleep.”

“I don’t think so.”

“If you’re in a *tizzy* because of Viola, you’re just wasting your energy.”

“Oh! I told you I’m annoyed about being here. Not because of Viola. Why would I be upset because of her?”

“You’re jealous because of what she told you.”

“That’s the most arrogant and stupid opinion I’ve ever heard. Just because we had sex doesn’t mean I’ve gone soft and fell in love with you. I’m not jealous and I don’t care if you two swap saliva or bodily fluids.”

Callum had the audacity to laugh. She punched him in the stomach. As soon as her fist connected to his stomach, he grabbed her hand and pulled her against him. “She’s nothing to me.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“I’d like it if you did.”

“Why?”

Callum shrugged his shoulder. “You did great today. You rode my bike without your arms squeezing the breath out of me. Instead, you used your thighs to keep from falling. And the way you fired my guns—a pro. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks. Well,” she pulled her hand and grabbed her backpack. “Since you won’t show me where my room is, I’ll take yours instead. I am sure you’ll have another place to shower. Excuse me.” She tried to walk around him. “After all the shooting we did, I need a long shower.”

Callum didn’t let her pass. He blocked the bathroom door (it was an easy thing to do since he was almost as tall and wide as the door.) “Such a brat.” He cupped her face with his hands then captured her mouth with his before Marisol could say anything.

The moment their lips touched, her anger flew out of the room. Marisol dropped her bag on the floor and ran her fingers through his thick hair. “You’re taking too much liberty of kissing me.”

“No, I’m just taking what’s mine.”

“Why would Viola say that she’s you’re fiancée?”

“Because that’s what she wants.”

Callum let go of her to run the shower. “We share this bathroom, too, baby.” He said with a grin then began stripping her clothes. The anticipation of what was

to come nearly killed her. The wait was well worth it especially when she stood under the hot shower while Callum ran the bar of soap on her back.

Her skin puckered when Callum nipped her shoulder. “I could do this for eternity.”

“That’s a long time of soaping my back.”

“Not just your back, love. Here, too.” His hands glided to her breasts and began massaging them. “And here.”

Marisol moaned when Callum ran the soap back and forth in between her legs. He was seducing her and she loved every minute of it. “I’d be sparkling clean when you’re done.”

Callum chuckled. “Turn around.”

She did. Callum adjusted the showerhead so the water sprayed on her chest. Once the soap on her breasts was gone he began sucking her nipples. “Hmmm...perfect.”

“Callum,” she gripped his hair and watched his mouth suckle her. The image was so erotic that her pussy turned even hotter.

Callum didn’t stop his ministrations on her breasts. He continued going down until he was directly in front on her pubic mound. “Spread your legs, love. I want to taste you again.”

Biting her lower lip, Marisol moved her left foot to the side.

Callum took her hand. “Now open your pussy lips for me.”

Marisol knew what he meant. Using her fingers, she spread herself.
“Callum.”

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.” And he laved her like a cat licking its paw. Over and over, he ran the flat of his tongue on her pussy.

“Callum, please. I want, I want...”

“You want to come, baby?”

“Yes.”

Callum stood up and opened the shower’s glass door. He wrapped his arms around her hips, picked her up and took her back to the bedroom where he tossed her on the bed. “Now my love. You’ll come.”

He didn’t waste any time. Callum quickly positioned himself in between her legs and ate her pussy. “Oh god, Callum. I’m going to die. Oh...oh...”

His mouth left her pussy so he could finger fuck her. “Yeah, baby. Come on. Let it go. Just let it go.”

Marisol watched Callum. His eyes were of deep shade of blue. “Come to me, Callum. I want you inside me.”

“I will, baby. Right now, I want you to come in my mouth.” He cupped her butt cheeks and again, sucked her clit. This time he didn’t stop.

Marisol moved her hips. Thrusting her pussy toward Callum's mouth. Sharp claws of pleasure wracked her body as wave after wave of orgasm rippled all over her. She was still catching her breath when Callum shifted his position. He stood at the foot of the bed, pulled her legs and flipped her on her belly. "Callum?"

"Hang on, babe. I have to protect you."

Marisol heard a ripping sound. Seconds later, Callum wrapped his hands on her hips and pulled her gently towards him then raised her ass higher. The position was so indecent and erotic. He pointed the tip of his cock at her entry. "Baby, I'll fuck you deep and hard." And he penetrated her.

Marisol cried from the sheer pleasure of having his dick buried inside her. She felt the beginning of another orgasm. Feeling Callum's balls slap her clit heightened her excitement. With each thrust he gave her, she met him by pushing her ass back. The tips of her nipples barely touching the sheet tickled her.

"Oh yeah, baby. You're good. Move your ass. Just like that. Yess...fuck." Callum thrust faster and harder. "Marisol!"

His body heat course down the entire length of her, but it was his shout of joy that touched her heart.



"Did I hurt you?"

"Like you said, you will never hurt me. No. You didn't."

Callum covered both of them with the sheet. He'd never tire of having her on his side. Too bad they didn't meet before. When he still had lives left. When he knew for sure that they'd have more time to share and days to live together. As a Shape-shifter, his job was too dangerous. Chances of him getting killed was high. Unless he stayed holed up down in this den, he was only one step away from becoming a Cancer. Yeah, he had only one last life left and he'd use it to keep Marisol safe and kill as many Blood Robbers and Cancers as he could. Feelings of sadness and regret crawled in every pore of his being. Emotions that never visited him before touched his heart. He knew what triggered his emotions—the woman breathing softly beside him. Marisol.

“What’s wrong, Callum?”

“Nothing, love.”

“You’ve been sighing.”

“I’m just thinking how lucky I am. Not everyone has a beautiful woman to keep them company.”

“Me, too. I am so lucky to have you—to soap my back.”

Gathering her into his arms, he held her snugly. As far as he could remember, he never asked anything for himself until this time. He wished for the time to stop ticking, for the sun to stay suspended in the sky. He wished for a lifetime with Marisol.

A knock on the door stopped his musing. “Must be our food.”

Callum picked up his clothes laid scattered on the floor. He noticed Marisol looking at him with a mischievous grin on her face. “Keep looking at me like that and we won’t be able to eat.”

Marisol snorted and covered her face with the sheet.

Chapter Fourteen

After another round of wild sex, he and Marisol finally got around to eating their already cold burgers and wilted French fries. If it weren't for Zambro's summon, he'd stay cooped up in his room. Callum couldn't ever remember liking to be in a room for more than an hour. He preferred to be outdoors. But with Marisol on his side, he didn't care. He liked cuddling with her.

However, there were important things to do other than making love. Although, he couldn't imagine meeting with his brothers being more important than loving Marisol.

It took great strength to leave the bed. Marisol didn't help either. She kept nibbling his neck until he was hard and ready again.

Twenty five minutes after he received a message about his brother's request for a meeting, he was finally able to leave.

Zambro's office looked like an old library. It mirrored his personality—a big reader and fan of history. Old leather bound books filled his shelves. Behind him, a glass case held different types of weapons historians would fight for. His brother led the pack here. Known as a great fighter and just leader, everyone respected

him. Recently, Callum put a smear on that respect by hooking up with Marisol. How could he ever fix that?

Zambro raised his brow when he walked in his office.

“You took your sweet time. Had a hard time leaving your warm bed?”

“Zambro, you didn’t call me to talk about Marisol.”

“Yes and no. We need to discuss your situation and hers. What part of our visit today didn’t you understand?”

“I’m not stupid. I heard and understood everything.”

“Then why bring her here? I said I’ll find a place for her. I didn’t say this is the place for her.”

“This is the only safe place for her, Zam.”

“Fuck, Callum. I’m still trying to think about how to get you out of the first mess that you laid on my door and now you add another one.”

“After you left my house, I found out that Marisol left. She heard us.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“She didn’t want to have anything to do with me, with us. So she decided to walk home. I followed her and so did the Cancers.”

“What were they doing in your neck of the woods? Ah, I know. Atos must have promised them something in exchange of your head. You just made your world smaller, brother.”

“I figured it was Atos that sent them to my property. So what do you want to talk about?”

“Nobody appreciates Marisol’s presence here. The moment you entered the den, you created quite a stir.”

“I don’t give a fuck about what others are saying right now. If they are curious and want to hear the details, I’ll be happy to explain.” He knew he wasn’t supposed to bring Marisol here. Or in any den for that matter. That was why he told her not to leave his apartment until he gets back. They’d lost brave members of their clan because the humans mistook them for big bad wolves. The family of those who died resented humans. “You would do the same thing if you were in my shoes. Here is the best place for her. Atos will not be able to reach her if she stays here. I would take her to Seattle but even with a short distance, anything can happen.”

“Did you notice how everyone looked at her? She’s not welcome here.”

“She will be if you show them you approved.”

Zambro stood up and walked around his desk to face him. “If you weren’t my brother I’ll kick your ass until you’re raw.”

“But I am.”

Zambro sighed. “And I can’t do a damn thing about it. Do you realize that you put me in a difficult situation?”

“I know. If you ask us to leave, we will. I am hoping you won’t”

“Believe me, I thought about it. Lucky for you, a Midnight Howl never turns his back on his family.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m doing this because I promised to keep our parents to keep an eye on you. On all of you.”

“I know.”

“This is one big mess you’ve created, brother.”

“I apologize, Zam. However, I’ll do this again if I have to.”

Zambro speared him with a look that showed how disappointed he was. “I never should have given you the task of getting the sword.”

“But you did. Now, I need your help.”

“I’ll help make Marisol’s stay here easy for her until I find another place for her. On one condition.”

“Anything.”

“You cannot patrol on your own. I’m saying this to save me from your brothers’ rants especially Ty. And if Marisol insists on leaving, the sword stays here. We have Youven’s sword where we want it. On the Midnight Howl’s side. And here it’ll stay.”

“Agreed.”

“Now, on a more serious and important subject. Atos threatened to attack the humans. Unless we give him Marisol and the sword, he will start killing.”

“Son of a bitch!”

“I called a meeting, but I wanted you to know about this before anyone else.”

“You know I will never give him Marisol. He’ll have to walk over my dead body to even breathe the same air she breathes.”

“Did you hear what I said? He will kill the humans. Rejects or not. We have a week to make a decision.”

“Did you hear what I said, Zambro?” he threw the words back at his brother. “I don’t need a week to think. Atos will not get what he wants. Not Marisol.”

“You love Mark’s daughter.”

Callum paced the room. Of course he loved Marisol. How else would he explain the fear of losing her, of overwhelming happiness of being near her, of hoping to have a future with her? Some people would say he was a nut, and that loving someone in such a short time was impossible. He didn’t care. It only takes a heartbeat to fall in love with someone. He bet those who knew what love was would agree with him. “More than life itself.”

Zambro slowly got up. He walked to stand in front of him. “In that case, I give you my word that she has my protection.”

“Thank you brother.” He offered to shake his brother’s hand but Zambro pulled him for a big bear hug.

“Make a stupid move of going up alone and I’ll kill you myself. The heck with the promise I gave to our parents. Got that?”

Callum nodded. “I hate to say this, Zam, but Atos is not that stupid to ask something as simple as giving him Marisol and the sword. He knows what we stand for.”

“I thought about that. So what are you thinking?”

“He’s been after me since Alisha’s death.”

“You have nothing to do with her death.”

Callum took a deep breath. True, he had nothing to do with Alisha’s death, but deep down he felt somewhat responsible. He should have been stern and hard with Alisha. Then perhaps she would have not followed him back to his den.

“She died because of me, Zam.”

“The girl died because she fell in love with you, with what you stood for, the Midnight Howl’s principle. You spared her life. She admired that. She followed you home and exposed herself to hunters. She chose her path, Callum. You didn’t. If fucking Atos refuse to accept the truth, the hell with him. You had nothing to do with the death of his sister. If anything, he should be blamed not you.”

“Send word to him, Zam. If he wants blood then I shall give it to him. I’ll offer him a bargain.”

Zambro’s brows rose. “A bargain.”

“Yes. I’ll fight him to death. If I win, he would give up chasing Marisol.”

“And if he wins?”

“He can choose between letting me walk this earth as Cancer or chop my head off.”

“Callum, are you fucking nuts?” Zambro roared.

“This is my decision, Zambro. I have one life left. What better way to use it than secure the sword and Marisol’s freedom. Marisol is safe here, but she wouldn’t live here forever. I know her. She’d go up and live her life among her kind. When that happens I want Marisol to be able to walk without having to worry that someone or something would attack her from behind.”

“You would gamble your life for her.”

“I already made my decision.”

“What about the sword, Callum?”

“It’s Marisol’s, Zambro. She has the right to keep it.”

“Fuck. I knew you’d say that.” Zambro ran his fingers through his hair. “We are facing a bigger problem now, Callum, because you have gotten yourself involved with Mark’s daughter.”

“And I just told you how we should handle it.”

“You know what I think? The sword’s poison damaged your brain. You would strike a bargain with Atos? How would you know if the bastard would not renege on his promise of staying away with Marisol?”

“I don’t. I’ll try everything to keep her away from harm. I know you, Zambro. You wouldn’t just hand Marisol to Atos. So how do you propose we stop the Blood Robbers from killing the humans? We do everything we can to uphold our promise. Besides it is time to shut the motherfucker’s eyes for good.”

“I understand. I can’t guarantee you that the clan would back us up on this.”

“Zambro, I’ll face Atos alone if I have to. The clan can stay here. I don’t give a fuck. Just keep Marisol down here until it is safe for her to go back up again.”

“God, so it’s true. Loving a woman could make one man’s dick as hard as a marble and his heart into mushy dough. It damages ones reasoning, too. Fine. We’ll select who comes to fight with us. Practice in the arena in an hour. We’ll need all the skills in this world and luck. See you there.”



Callum went back to his apartment. He bet Marisol would want to watch the practice. Yeah, he’d ask her. If it were up to him, he’d rather that they just watch a movie, eat popcorn, and make hot love. Later. They would do all those things later. Thinking about what they would do tonight made his dick harden.

Damn, he'd walk around with a hard-on if he kept on thinking about Marisol naked in his arms. He became soft though when he found out Marisol wasn't in his apartment. What he found was a note taped on the bed's headboard.

"Gone for a walk."

Dratted woman. He should have known she'd never listen to him. The Den wasn't so big. He'd find her. Fresh face like hers had no place to hide here. *This is a good reason to have a cellphone.* He was in such a hurry to go after her that he didn't find the time to grab his cellphone.

He left the apartment in a hurry. *Now where did she go?* When he finds her, he'd wrap his fingers around her lovely neck. Yeah, maybe he'd do that while pounding hard on her sweet—

A loud whistle interrupted his line of thoughts. It was Carl and he didn't look happy.

"Hey, Carl. What's up." The head of the Midnight Howl Patrol looked like he ate something bad and was now affecting his stomach.

"You need to go to the infirmary. You're girlfriend is there,"—he formed his fingers like bent bunny ears—"helping. Dude, she maybe Mark's daughter, but she ain't a vet."

"Dammit. Let's go."

They found Marisol wrapping a bandage on one of Midnight Howl soldier's leg. The man was wincing but obviously enjoying the attention.

"There. I think that'll hold. Next time, don't use your leg to block a sword. Not a very good idea," Marisol was saying.

The soldier nodded with a smile. If Callum was right, the man was besotted. He was blushing and couldn't take his eyes off Marisol.

"Mari?"

"Hey, Callum. I'm helping the wounded."

Yousney, the African American best doctor Midnight Howl ever had, grinned. "Yes, Callum. She's a good help." He threw a rag on the dirty basket and walked toward him. "She makes the men feel appreciated. Our women know that we could heal cuts and slices on our own—unless inflicted by *the sword*—so they don't fuss over the men. Which is what Marisol is doing right now."

"Fussing over men."

"Yes. A little TLC goes way deep into the heart, Callum."

Callum watched Marisol move from one man to the next. He wasn't a doctor, but he could tell Marisol had no clue what to do with the wounds except clean and wrapped it with a bandage, which by the way wouldn't stay on. Yousney was right. He'd never seen any wounded soldiers look happy the way they looked now.

“She’s turning them into puppies. Look at them pretend they’re in horrible pain. Asses.” Carl shook his head. “And not one of them mentioned that their wound would heal in no time.”

“What happened?”

“A few Blood Robbers dared go down near a preschool. Our soldiers stopped them. They’re getting bolder each day.”

We’ll put a stop to that.

Marisol’s face was beaming when she came to him. She looked so lovely, like a ripe peach he wanted to take a bite of. Without a doubt the soldiers felt the same way.

“Hi Callum. Sorry I didn’t wait for you. I got lonely so I went for a walk. Glad I did because the soldiers just arrived and needed help. They had a fight with the Blood Robbers. I didn’t know there are fights going on all the time.”

“Marisol, Shape-shifters’ wounds heal ten times faster than humans unless the ancient sword cuts them remember?”

“I know that. Doctor Yousney told me the pain takes time to go away. So I thought I should help. Oh and I gave him some of the poultice. In case someone needs it.”

“Are you done helping?”

“She’s done. Come back anytime, Marisol. I’m sure I could find something for you to do. That way you don’t have to stay in Callum’s apartment all the time.”

“Thank you.” To Callum, she asked, “Are we going somewhere?”

“Not a tour. A show. Wanna see the Midnight Howl fighters practice?”

“You betcha.”



Practice? If this is practice, I can’t imagine what a battle looks like. Good god.

The arena must be half the size of a football field. Whoever built this place must have had the Colloseo, the Roman stadium in Rome, in mind. Smaller, yes but definitely looked like it. Racks loaded with weapons of all kinds lined the far end of the arena. Shape-shifters waiting for their turn stood on the sidelines twirling, lifting, and swinging their weapons. If the weapons were impressive, the men’s bodies could make any woman sigh in appreciation.

Who would have thought sweat could make a man looked yummiier. Lordy, just look at the rows of abs and muscles on those men. They all possessed an athlete’s build. Interestingly, with all the lifting that they were doing, none of them look anything like the men in Mister Universe. No, those guys resembled rocks. These, the Midnight Howl, could be mistaken for Hollister or 21 models with rock-star hair.

“Like what you see?”

“Oh yes. I’ve never seen so many beautiful men in my life.”

“I’m sure they’ll say the same thing about you.”

“Enough with the flatters, Callum. You already use your first box of Trojans.”

“We have five more to go.”

“Stop it. Uhm, Callum. We’re just going to watch, right?”

“You are.”

“You’re going to practice?”

“Worried about me?”

“Of course. How are you going to wash my back if you lost your hands?”

His eyes twinkled with understanding. “Don’t worry, love. As long as my heart and head is covered, I will be fine.”

“Seriously, Callum. Can we just sit here together? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You wound my pride, baby.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that you can’t fight. Of course you can but they all looked so good and strong. Yes, you’re strong too—”

“Mari,”

“Okay, call if you need help.”

Callum stared at her then burst out laughing. “I will. Now, stay here and watch. Don’t touch the weapons. Don’t even get near the rack.”

“Why?”

“If you do, that means you want to practice.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that. The view is better from here. Take care will you?”

Light smoldered in his dark blue eyes. “Marisol, I—” he cupped her face with his calloused hands. “I will.”

“Callum!”

Both Callum and Marisol turned. Three drool-worthy men with swaggers that surely would make women sigh approached them. Yup. Without a doubt they all came from the same womb except for the tallest one with blonde hair, Marisol thought.

“Bros. Come to challenge me?”

“I came to knock some sense out of you.” Ty punched Callum on the shoulder. “That the scar from Atos.”

“Yeah. Ty, this is Marisol.”

“Beautiful. Are you worth my brother’s life?”

“Excuse me?”

“I asked if—”

“Ty, shut the fuck up. If you want to release your anger, fight me.”

“Cool. Let’s do that.”

Both men took their shirts off. Ty threw his shirt on the floor. Callum handed his white Nike t-shirt to Marisol then gave her a handsome wink.

Ty’s words bothered Marisol. She didn’t have time to reflect on his question because as soon as Callum and Ty picked their swords, everyone including those who were already practicing quieted. The floor cleared.

The arena maybe quiet, but not Marisol’s heart. “Better not get hurt, Callum, or I swear you’ll face my wrath. What kind of practice is this anyway?”

“To improve our skills.”

Marisol turned to look at the man standing beside her. “I know that,” she said.

“I thought you were asking about why we’re doing this.”

“Oh, I’m talking to myself. It’s a habit, you know.”

Zambro grinned. “Callum forgot to introduce us. I’m Zambro. And these are Victor and Rodolf. We are Callum’s brother’s.”

“I figured as much.”

“You did?”

“It’s the swagger and the height. Plus the hair. Nice to meet you all.”

“It’s our pleasure to meet you.” Victor said.

Rodolf nodded and grinned at her as if he knew something she didn't.

"Same here. So they're not going to kill each other are they? Callum has only one life left. He shouldn't be doing this."

"They're just sparring, Marisol. Callum will teach his brother to keep his mouth shut. And Ty, he'll show Callum how much he cares. This is a brotherly love show."

Marisol doubted it. The way Ty swung his sword one would think he wanted to chop Callum in bits and pieces. Both men were equal in strength. They danced around each other, measuring, calculating.

Ty attacked, Callum blocked his blows swiftly and effortlessly. The fight was amazing to watch. And heart stopping, too. Both men broke a sweat. Watching their body language, it seemed they could do this all night.

"Excuse me, Marisol. I badly needed this practice as well."

Zambro left her side and quickly got in the middle of the fight. Victor and Rodolf joined.

The crowd's chanting turned into a roar. They cheered and urged the brothers to keep fighting. Without a doubt, the brothers' were skilled but her eyes focused on one man alone. Callum.

Muscles, talent, skill, beauty, and tenderness (she knew that side of him now) packed in one body. He was a living god. And god help her—she loved him.

“They’re magnificent, aren’t they?”

Marisol was so engrossed watching the brothers’ she didn’t even realize someone stood beside her. How Viola managed to sneak beside her, she had no idea. She supposed being a shifter, she could move stealthily. Still, it kind of freaked her out.

“They are.”

“I heard you are good with your sword.”

“I can swing it. If you could call it good. Then I am.”

“Prove it.”

“What?”

“Practice with me. We all need it. Especially if we are to fight the Blood Robbers to protect you and Youven’s sword.” Viola smiled so sweetly, Marisol could smell poison coming out of the woman’s nostril. Fear enveloped her body. This woman hated her.

“Who says you need to fight Atos for me?”

“Unlike you, human. A member’s fight is the clans fight. We help each other. Callum may have broken the code because of you—although for the love of me, I couldn’t understand why—but he’s still one of us. He’s a Shape-shifter, a *pure* blood. We are not going to turn our backs on him because he’s so foolish to give a promise. It’s hard enough to patrol your world every night, but to add the

unnecessary baggage of watching you...well, it kind of makes life hard to live. Don't you think? So, if I were you. I'd hone my skills. At least you could do something more than watch the men fight for you. Despite what you humans believe, we are not immortals. We do get hurt, we bleed, we die. Our lives are limited to five. So practice with me. You don't want to look like a useless princess all your life, right?"

"No." What was Viola talking about the Midnight Howls fighting Atos for her? Why would they do that? Callum had only one life left. What if he dies fighting? Marisol shook her head to stop her mind from forming a morbid thought.

"Hello? Still there? What, did I scare you? Afraid?"

Marisol met Viola's stare. She would love to practice, but she doubted it was what Viola really wanted. Marisol suspected that if Viola got her chance, she'd kill her on the spot. "I'm not afraid to face you or anyone."

"Good. Pick your sword." Viola inclined her head toward the rack where the swords lined up.

Marisol never held another sword other than Youven's. She wasn't quite sure if she could wield another the way she did hers. She glanced at Callum still sparring with his brothers. Callum said not to go near the weapon stand, but she couldn't and wouldn't ignore Viola's challenge. Callum would understand.

Marisol walked toward the rack. *Ini, mini, miny mo. Lordy, give me a sign.* In the end, she picked the one with a yellowish handle. Its blade was so shiny she could see her reflection on it. The sword was light and nimble. Designed for stabbing and faster stroke. She liked this one. The moment she lifted the sword, the crowd's loud cheering died down and turned into murmur.

"Good choice. Now let's see what you could do with it."

"We shall see." Why hadn't she just stayed in Callum's apartment and watched cartoons.



Callum noticed the moment the mood changed in the room. Through his peripheral view, he tried to spot a pink tank top. He didn't see it. Marisol wasn't where she should be. He blocked Ty's blow and took a step back buying more time to find Marisol among the crowd. He spotted her standing by the rack holding a sword. What the hell. He made way toward Marisol. Zambro stopped him with repeated blows.

Callum pivoted to avoid the tip of Zambro's sword then walked away from the fight. Didn't Marisol hear what he said? Once she pulled a weapon out of its rack that meant she would fight. God damn it! What was she doing holding a sword? He met Viola's gaze. And then he understood.

Fuck.

Zambro delivered another blow. His blade came close to slicing Callum's neck. "Stop."

"What's going on?" Zambro lowered his sword and walked fast beside him.

"Marisol is going to practice with Viola is what it looks like. She can't do this. I have to stop her." He quickly sent Marisol a message through telepathy.

"Put the damn sword back, Mari."

Marisol met his gaze. *"I've accepted Viola's challenge."*

"Just put the sword down. Mari." Damn it. She blocked him off then focused her attention on the sword in her hand.

"Bro, maybe she wants to prove she's worth your blood." Ty who flanked him on the other side shoved him playfully.

"She doesn't have to prove herself to me or anyone. She's not like us. If Viola kills Marisol, she'll stay dead—forever."

"Do you think Viola would do that?"

"What do you think?" He shrugged off Zambro's arm then ran to get Marisol before she stepped beyond the white line on the floor. "Marisol!" he yelled.

Viola and Marisol turned to look at him. While Marisol looked glumly, Viola's grin reached her ears. His ex-fiancée blew him a kiss then walked to stand on the practice floor.

"Callum, let her fight. Prove that she deserves to keep the sword."

Callum didn't know who it was that said it, but he wanted to punch the son of a bitch.

"Yeah, man! If she is really Youven's descendant, let her prove it!"

"Come on! Fight!"

"Fight! Fight!" The crowd chanted.

When he reached Marisol's side, he saw that her eyes were big with fear. He could see her knuckles had gone white from gripping the sword she picked. "Baby, give me the sword. Let's go."

His heart sank. Marisol shook her head and took a step back. "If I leave, you will end up carrying my shame, Callum. I want your clan to respect me. I'll make Youven's family proud. I'll make you and your brothers proud."

"No. Baby, this is not a game. You saw how we practiced. We try to make contact, to incapacitate the opponent. It's because we'll heal. She has five lives. You have only one."

"And you have only one, Callum. Were you planning on going back up to fight Atos for me?"

"We'll talk. Come on. Let's go."

"I'm not leaving. You need practice. Well, I do, too."

"I'll practice with you. But I won't let you fight Viola."

“And let your fiancée laugh at me. No.” She kicked off her blue and white K-Swiss shoes then bent down to remove her ankle high socks.

Damn. She’s going to fight barefoot. Is she out of her mind? She needs armor as it is.

Marisol turned her back on him. He tried to stop her but once again Zambro grabbed his arm.

“Let her, Bro. We’ll stop them when it’s time. She’s right. Earning the clans respect on her own is better than earning it through me.”

As soon as Marisol started walking towards Viola, the crowd quieted once again. Callum fisted his hands. *Damn it, baby. You better not get hurt.*

Viola wearing tight black leather shorts, red halter leather top embossing her size D breasts, and black knee high boots emphasizing her long legs, could make any man drool. She looked as lithe as a leopard. While his baby wore faded hip huggers and a pink tank top showing the flatness of her stomach that he licked until she squealed looked simple, sensual, and beautiful. Damn, he loved her so much it hurt.

The women stood facing each other. Marisol held the sword on her side, its tip pointing down while Viola held the sword in front of her. He’d seen Viola practice many times. She nearly maimed a soldier once. Viola was one of the best female fighters of the clan. Marisol had her first kill only days ago and he wasn’t sure how strong she was, how long she could stand before she gets tired.

Viola began circling Marisol who remained on her spot with her feet shoulder-wide apart.

“Teach the woman a lesson, Viola! Her kind killed my husband.”

“Make her bleed!”

“Come on Marisol. You can beat her.”

Callum recognized Endy’s voice. At least Marisol had a fan in the crowd.

Viola attacked striking downward with an obvious intent of cutting Marisol in half. However, Marisol launched a preemptive strike. She was quick on her feet and parried with the sword close to her. Her foot placement kept her balance. Mark taught her well.

Marisol engaged with care, which Callum was so happy to see. She was able to maintain control and stayed focus. She used her best defense of sidestepping whenever Viola was on the attack not allowing an opening for the winning blow.

Callum watched Marisol change her hold on her sword. The sword’s position runs from the bottom of her torso to the top of her head. Suitable for any skill level, Marisol used the middle position to respond to Viola’s attack with reasonable speed. When she began striking, Callum felt a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. His baby would be okay.

The sound of clashing metals echoed in the room. Grunts and screams from the crowd added to the noise. Marisol’s tank top turned dark pink from her sweat.

Her hair became undone and clung to her wet shoulders and forehead. She didn't show any sign of tiredness. Marisol extended her sword a comfortable distance away from her body with the tip toward Viola's throat.

Ah, so Marisol knew how to taunt, to put her opponent *on point*.

The action might intimidate an inexperienced fighter, not Viola. Callum saw Viola's mouth tightened before she began an offensive attack. Unsettled, Marisol parried.

When the two swords locked together, Viola surprised Marisol with a punch on the face. The crowd cheered. Callum took a step forward, but Zambro's arm blocked him from going any farther.

"Not yet, Callum. She's doing great."

Blood trickled down the side of Marisol's mouth. She didn't release her hold on the sword. She kept her stance.

Viola leered then released another blow. Marisol avoided the hit but not fast enough. Blood quickly painted her right arm.

Roaring shout of approval and thunderous clap shook the floor.

"Come on, baby. You could do this," Callum whispered. He didn't dare send Marisol a message through telepathy. It would distract her.

"You talk to yourself now, too, Callum?"

"What?"

“Never mind.”

Blood dripped from Marisol’s elbow. If she made a mistake of stepping on the sticky red fluid, she’d lose her balance and Viola could win.

Callum’s body felt like a tightly wound string. He wanted to end the fucking *practice*.

“We need to stop the fight right now, Zambro.”

“And Marisol will hate you if you do. She has it in her to win, Callum. Even if she loses, she’ll walk out of here with her head held high. Finishing a fight is a win in itself, brother.”

Zambro was right. He’d witnessed Marisol’s stubbornness. That personality would fuel her to keep fighting.

Marisol lessened her blocks. She was avoiding Viola’s brute force. She stepped out of line of Viola’s attack then pushed the sword off to the side giving Marisol an opening for an offensive move.

Take advantage, baby.



“Drop your sword before I start playing tick tack toe on your skin.”

Marisol gritted her teeth. Her cut hurt so bad she wanted to cry. She would never give Viola the satisfaction of seeing her as weak. She would show her that Callum didn’t stand on rotten wood that could collapse anytime by giving his

word to her father. She was not a liability, baggage, problem or mistake. She could defend herself if necessary. Her father didn't spend years training her so she could quit at a mere sight of a small cut.

"FYI, Viola. Surrender is the word I don't believe in." She smiled mustering calmness confidence, and poise. Viola cut her, but the three deciding factors to win a fight remained deep inside her. Of course, she was a bit nervous and frightened. Who wouldn't be in a situation like this? But just as Callum had said, they were not signs of weakness. He was right. Those emotions help her strategy become more effective.

And perhaps to believe in herself. Feeling a surge of energy, she went for an offensive attack, thrusting her sword as if she was born doing it. Viola didn't have a choice but to block her and take quick steps back.

Her smile widened. Cool warriors tend to make others wary, or even unsettled. Viola looked liked one.

Marisol swung the sword, slicing the air. The sound was barely a whisper in contrast to the gasp Viola made when Marisol's sword made contact with her upper chest slicing the leather halter top.

The sight of blood didn't deter Marisol from slowing her attack. Heart banging like crazy against her chest, she took advantage of Viola's momentary

shock and thrust. This time she stabbed Viola's arm holding her sword. Viola's arm went limp and dropped her sword.

Marisol felt more aggressive now. Even after Viola's sword clanged on the floor she attacked. She made a slicing motion meant to cut Viola's throat but she stopped right when the blade touched the woman's skin. A drop of blood trickled on Viola's neck.

The crowd cheered, whistled, and then they began chanting her name.

"You lose," Marisol whispered.

Anger flashed in Viola's eyes. "This time. Next time we meet, your head will roll on the ground."

"And I am sure you won't stop until that happens?"

"Got that right, bitch. If you want me to spare you, leave Callum alone. He is mine. Anyone who tries to steal him away from me will regret the day she was born."

"I didn't steal him away from you, Viola. You lost him a long time ago. You had your chance but you blew it. Accept it. " Because you cheated on him, she would have added but she was tired. And catty remarks would only take her as far as her spit would land. "Besides that, Callum is not mine, Viola. He promised my dad to keep me safe not to keep *me*. Big difference."

Viola gave her a hostile glare. Her facial expression showed her emotions. Rage was one of them. “We are not over, human.”

Great. Another enemy she had to watch out for from now on. “I look forward to our next meeting.”

Viola left without picking up the sword she dropped on the floor.

It's over. Loud whistling and applause brought her attention back to the crowd. It was incredible that she didn't hear them at all while fighting with Viola. The smile on their faces, though, was what surprised her most. *What, do they like me now? She hoped so. For Callum's sake.*

With her adrenaline quickly leaving her system, Marisol felt so tired and achy. Her wound hurt so badly and she couldn't seem to move. Suddenly the sword weighed like a ton. This must be how it felt like after fighting a lion or a bear. God, she spent so much of her energy in that fight it was surprising she could still stand.

She pointed the tip of the sword on the floor and watched the blood from her arm travel the length of it and down the floor. Marisol focused her gaze where the blood pooled.

Warm hands cupped her face and lifted her head up. “Callum.” Callum's eyes were hard and piercing. Lordy. He was mad. “You have no idea how happy I am to see—”

Before Marisol could finish her sentence, Callum gave her a quick kiss. “Is it so hard to listen to me?” he asked, his voice sounded like he was in pain.

“No, but your girlfriend challenged me. I couldn’t just—oww!” Pain shot up her shoulder when she tried to lift her arm.

“I’m sorry, love. You got hit. Hang on.” He wrapped his shirt on her wound. “How’s your lip.”

Marisol touched her upper lip with her tongue. “Fat.” She groaned from the pain as Callum tightened the shirt around her arm.

“You okay?”

“I am now. Can you take me home now?”

Callum responded with another feather kiss.

Marisol dropped her sword and gave her weight into him. If each time she practiced she would get a kiss like this, heck, she wouldn’t mind coming here.

“Baby, right now my apartment is your home. We need to take care of your arm and we need to talk.”

“You’re mad at me.”

“Mad no. Afraid yes. You put me through hell by fighting Viola. She’s a seasoned fighter and knows how to protect her head and heart. Her cuts will heal in no time. While you, you need stitches.”

“I beat her.”

“Yes, you did. I am so proud of you. Could you make me proud without shortening my lifespan? I won’t be surprised if I look in the mirror and see my hair has turned grey.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Kiss me again and I’ll forgive you.”

Marisol smiled, wrapped her fingers at the back of Callum’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss that promised something wonderful to come.

Leaving her mouth wet and hungry for more, Callum pressed his lips on her forehead, hugged her tight and whispered, “You gave me purpose in life, love. I’ll be lost without you. Don’t you dare disobey me again.”

“I’ll try.”

“Marisol, promise you will listen to me.”

“Callum, I will listen if I know you’re safe. I will not stay put if I know you are in trouble or need my help. I’m not like other woman who waits for her man to come back whole.”

“Promise me Marisol or I swear I’ll lock you up in the apartment.”

“I swear.”

Callum stared at Marisol’s big green eyes. She batted her lashes. An action that made him smile. What a minx. Of course, she wouldn’t listen to him even if

her life were on the line. She already proved it two times. He took her hand in his.

“Let’s go before I forget that we’re not in the bedroom.”

“Bro,” Zambro called. “May I have a word with you?”

“Can you wait? Marisol needs to see Doctor Yousney.”

“I know that’s why I ask for him. He can take Marisol to the clinic. That is if you don’t mind, Marisol.”

“No. I don’t mind at all. I’ll see you later, Callum.”

Callum held Marisol’s hand tighter unwilling to let her go. He wanted every minute and seconds of the day spent with her. God, in a short time, he’d become so obsessed with her that he’d turned into a selfish dog. Kissing her temple, he released her hand. “I’ll see you at the clinic.”

“I can take her back to your apartment, Callum.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

You’re welcome. All right, we need this young lady fixed. I want her to help in the clinic again.”

Callum nodded. With Marisol and Doctor Yousney gone, Callum faced Zambro. “What’s up?”

“Atos accepted your challenge. He wants to avenge his brother. The son of a bitch practically squealed when he heard your proposal.”

“Did he agree to our terms?”

“He did. He won’t kill the innocents, but his clan will continue feeding from the whores, drunks, rapists, etc. The fuckers are addicted to human blood like vampires.”

“Will he leave Marisol alone if I win?”

“Yes.”

Callum’s shoulder dropped a bit. “Good.”

“One week and we’ll face him and his bastard followers. I warn you though, Atos is bloodthirsty.”

“I know and he wants Marisol’s blood.”

“He will not see nor taste a drop of her blood.”

“No. Have you told the others?”

“Yes. Our brother’s didn’t approve of your decision, but we’re all in this together, brother. We have your back.”

“I owe you one, bro.”

“Callum.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, brother.”

Surprised at his brother’s words, Callum didn’t know what to say. He simply nodded his head. “Ready for more ass kicking?”

“Better believe it.”

Chapter Fifteen

It was almost midnight when Callum came back to the apartment. Sweaty, tired, angry, and resigned. And what was that look he gave her? As soon as he walked in, he shut the door, leaned against it and stared at her as if trying to memorize everything he saw. He didn't say anything. When he looked away, he went straight to the bathroom. He'd been there for a while now. Marisol wondered what Zambro told him.

Wearing her shirt and underwear, she sat cross-legged on the bed and waited. Marisol gathered her still wet hair and then tied it in a bun with her pink ribbon. Maybe she should have it cut. When she was *practicing* with Viola, her hair bothered her. At one point during the practice, her locks hindered her vision. Later, she'd go out and look for a better hair tie or maybe a salon. Yup, she'd do that. As much as she'd like to stay in Callum's apartment, she'd been itching to look around. The Den looked wonderful and she thought she spotted an armory near Doctor Yousney's clinic earlier. It would be interesting to see the weapons.

Marisol looked at her arm. The doctor told her to replace the bandage twice a day to prevent infections. Slowly, she lifted the gauze off her wound. The medical tape pulled her skin.

“Yeoww!” *Dang that hurts.* She didn’t look when Doctor Yousney stitched her up. She couldn’t. Local anesthesia numbed her arm, but she felt each time the doctor pulled the thread. It felt freaky.

“Leave it alone, Marisol.”

“I just want to see...” her words trailed off as she looked up to see Callum freshly showered with nothing but a blue towel wrapped around his hips.

Callum raised a brow then grinned. “You’re parents must have had their hands full when you were younger.”

“Ha. Ha.” *My hands were definitely full when I cupped you.* Marisol imagined the first time they made love. He filled her to the brim.

“Does it hurt?”

“No, it was wonder—what hurts?”

“Your owwie, Marisol.” Callum sat on the bed beside her then leaned in to brush her lips with his. “What were you thinking just now?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh? Would you like me to kiss your owwie away?”

“Hmm. Just my owwie, big boy?”

Callum chuckled. His breath fanning her open mouth. “Baby, I’ll do more than kiss you.” His hand found its way inside her shirt.

Marisol felt her skin pucker when his big hand cupped one breast. “Hmm...that’s nice.”

“No bra?”

“I don’t like wearing a bra in bed.”

“I’d rather you don’t wear anything at all.”

Marisol laughed as Callum began to nibble her neck. He didn’t stop until she was lying on the bed. “I’ll remember that.”

“Don’t know what I did to deserve heaven.”

Wrapping her legs around his hips, Marisol cupped the face she learned to love in a short time. “Honestly, I have no idea what kind of heaven you’re talking about. If you are referring to this,”—she kissed his mouth—“Maybe. But I think, when you ignored the wall bordering humans and Shape-shifters, you opened the gate to heaven.”

“I am talking about you. Of all the men and Shape-shifters in the world, I’m the lucky one to get the privilege of holding you, kissing you, making love with you.”

“There are better, more beautiful woman, than me out there. I’m nothing special, Callum.”

“In my eyes, no one can be better than you.” He first kissed her eyes, then the tip of her nose, and finally, with satisfaction, he kissed her mouth.

Marisol opened for him. Welcoming his warmth, savoring his taste, loving every second their mouths melded together. Callum’s declaration was not exactly what she wanted to hear but close enough. Leaving her mouth burning with fire, Callum helped her take off her shirt. And then his mouth was back on her skin again. Marisol arched her back offering him her already aching breasts. While fondling one mound, his mouth sucked her other nipple with possessiveness.

“Oh, Callum.”

“I love your breasts, your body. I love...love being with you.” His tongue caressed her hard nipple over and over.

Marisol whimpered. She locked her legs tighter around his hips feeling his erection through his towel. When his hand slid down her belly, Marisol wanted to scream and beg him to touch her where she throbbed.

Callum’s fingers slid inside her silk underwear and cupped her pubic mound. The tips of his fingers touched her wet pussy. “Love, I’ve never met anyone as eager as you. You’re wet.”

“You’re driving me mad, Callum. Please touch me. And take your damn towel off.”

“Patience. It’s the key to winning any game.”

Was this a game then, she wanted to ask. The question might push him in the corner and give her the answer she wanted to hear instead of the truth. Her silent musing stopped when Callum began sucking her nipple the same time his fingers snaked inside her panty then dipped inside her throbbing pussy.

Callum began a lust-arousing exploration of flesh. He moved his fingers in and out of her stoking her fire. Smiling, he shifted his position so he was only partially covering her body. “You feel so soft.”

Marisol followed his gaze. He was looking at his hand moving inside her panty. What he was doing was so erotic.

Callum sat back on his heel and removed his towel that formed a tent. As soon as he shucked it, his cock sprung.

Marisol swallowed at the sight of him—large, nodding, and beautiful. Clear liquid had emerged from the tip of his cock. “You’re so big.”

“We fit perfectly, love.”

“I know.”

Marisol couldn’t stop licking her lips as Callum helped her remove her panty then positioned himself in between her legs. Gently, he spread her legs apart. “You’re beautiful. And I can’t get enough of your taste.”

“Callum...”

“Shhh...”

Callum licked his fingers. Staring at her with his eyes heavy lidded, he spread his saliva around her pussy then began making love with her with his fingers. “Ah, Marisol. You’re weeping.”

Marisol moaned her pleasure when Callum slowly penetrated her with his fingers, stretching her a bit. “Oh god, Callum. You’re driving me crazy.”

“You’re crazy for me, babe?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Good.” Callum pulled out his fingers. Before Marisol could complain, his mouth was on her with his tongue flat on her clit.

Marisol couldn’t resist thrusting her hips.

“Callum, please...”

“Yeah?”

“Stop torturing me. Come to me now.”

“After you come and I lick you clean.”

Marisol screamed the moment Callum’s lips wrapped around her clit and began to suck. Pleasure racked her body. “Don’t stop!”

Callum didn’t. He concentrated on her clit until her orgasm exploded. “Callum!”

Ripples of her climax was still bouncing off her body when Callum lifted her one leg, anchored it on his shoulder and turned her on her side. Wide open, he positioned his cock on her entry and swiftly penetrated her.

His thrusts were hard and almost punishing. The pleasure was unbelievable. All Marisol could do was hung on to the sheets. His long strokes triggered another orgasm. “Callum, oh god. This is good.”

“Remember this, love. We fit. We’re perfectly molded.” He quickened his strokes. “I’m coming, baby.”

Three more powerful strokes that touched her womb then Callum’s warm sperm pooled around her pussy. Marisol smiled. Callum didn’t use a condom.

Their bodies were still warm and moist from their lovemaking when Callum lifted her left hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. He took his time rubbing each one to his lips. The tenderness in his expression never ceased to amaze her. For a Shape-shifter who would kill his enemy in a heartbeat, he proved to be a gentle soul.

“Mari?”

“Yeah?”

Callum removed a ring off his little finger, kissed it, and then took her hand.

“Father told us Mother had this made for the five of us before she passed on. A reminder of her love. She had one made for Father, too. He took it to his grave. I want you to have this ring.” He slid the ring on her index finger.

Marisol was momentarily speechless. She was so happy and touched by his tenderness that her eyes began to blur from unshed tears. She blinked her tears away and stared at the ring. A simple band with beautiful engravings on it. “M'anam álainn. My Beautiful Soul. Why are you giving this to me?”

Callum turned so he was facing her. “Because you are what this ring represents. You are my soul, love. I didn't realize I've been living a meaningless life. I'd been empty until I met you. You gave me a reason to live other than to fulfill my duty as a Midnight Howl.”

He said his explanation as if he was proposing. It was obvious that he loved her but he never said the words. What was holding him back? “I don't know what to say.”

“Thank you would be enough. And if you can add a kiss here and there, that would be great.”

“Thank you.” Gently she pushed Callum down and sat astride him. “I think I have more kisses stored for you. Only for you, Callum.”

Her heart thudded noisily within her the way it did while facing Viola. With just one difference. She felt excitement not fear. Love not anger.

“You’re beautiful.”

Marisol’s face heated under his gaze of admiration. He made her feel beautiful. Boldly, she raised her ass high enough to make room for the tip of his already hard cock to touch her swollen lips.

“Mari...” he whispered.

Callum’s eyes fluttered shut when she began to lower her body impaling herself with his cock. Seeing pleasure registered on his face, a knot rose in her throat. She wanted this to last, to stay with him forever. God, she was so in love it hurt to think that everything was just temporary.

Closing her eyes, warm tears rolled down her cheeks. She was aware of where his warm flesh touched her, but she kept her eyes closed.

“Mari, baby.”

“I love you, Callum.”

“Open your eyes and tell me again.”

Marisol’s misty eyes met Callum’s hooded and passion glazed blue eyes. “I love you,” she repeated.

Callum pulled her arms gently gathering her into his arms. “Baby, why?” Taking her with him, he turned keeping their bodies still joined as he lay atop hers.

“Why? How could I not? Aside from you being so handsome, you make me feel special by breaking the clan’s rules as if I’m important. And when I am in your arms like this, I feel safe. Loved.

Callum buried his face against her throat. “You are special, baby. I’ll make love with you all night through to show you. Right now, it’s just you and me.”

The touch of his hand was so tender, she felt like crying again. When his mouth covers her, she gave in to passion freely. The gentle massage his hands were doing to her breasts sent strong currents of desire through her that she became restless. She loved the feel of his cock inside her.

Marisol moved her hands gently down his back, loving the hard contour of his body. Callum didn’t say he loved her back. What was holding him back? In every move he made, the way he looked at her, she could tell he had feelings for her. Why hadn’t he said it? Was he afraid of commitments, of getting his heart broken again?

“Marisol,” Callum whispered. “Look at me.”

“Yes?”

“I want to see your eyes. They’re more than beautiful.”

“Callum,” whatever she wanted to say flew out of her mind when Callum began to pump his hips.

Callum loved her like there was no tomorrow. He was gentle and rough, tender and sweet. Although, this time Marisol couldn't shake the feeling that he was saying his goodbyes.



It had been a week since Atos agreed to his challenge. Now, it was time to dance with the mother fucker. Behind the Turtle Bluff restaurant, his brothers stood. Like him, all were dressed in black leather pants. Except for Zambro who added a black trench coat in his ensemble. Ty's boots shone from the metal plate on the tips. His young muscular torso showed in his tight black long sleeves shirt. While Rudolf sported his biker studded jacket, Victor wore a black shirt with a wolf's face painted on the front. Except for Victor, his brothers were heavily armed.

Callum fingered the pink ribbon he took from Marisol. She was still asleep when he left, which was good. She'd only insist that she come. He glanced at the ring's mark on his ring finger and felt as though his heart would break in million pieces. For a week, while he spent the days practicing, he devoted his nights making love with Marisol. And each time, he showed her how much she meant to him.

"The others are already running. Are you ready, Callum?"

"I am. We'll paint the night red, brothers."

“We will.” Zambro turned around to address his brothers. “Remember, except for Callum we each have three more lives left. If Callum dies tonight, he will turn. Do not hesitate. We have to kill him.”

Curses started flying out of his brother’s mouths. None of them wanted to do the task, but one of them must. “Brothers, we always do what we can to protect the humans. Only this time, we’re not just going to stand guard, we’ll face Atos head-on. Our fight tonight will define the Midnight Howl’s vow to guard and protect. Not only does Atos want Marisol’s heart, he threatened to harm the innocents. That, my brother’s is not acceptable.”

“As long as the Midnight Howl exists, there is no way he can repeat what the Crom did to humans.” Rodolf grounded the words out.

“Right, brother. And we’ll show him tonight that he can’t make threats to humans or someone we care about and not get punished for it.”

“Severely punished.” Callum added. “Victor, remember what I told you. Do not let Marisol out of your sight. And no matter what happens, keep her in the den.”

“Got it, bro.”

“This is idiotic, Callum. Why couldn’t you just stay here? Stay with Marisol and, and produce little...I don’t know, my little nieces and nephews. You don’t

have to fight with us. We'll kill the bastard for you." Ty kicked an empty recycling bin. It flew and hit a pile of rotten wood leaning up against the wall.

Squeaking sounds Callum suspected came from a family of rats made him think about Marisol. The first time he took her here, she made funny faces when she saw the pests. God, how he missed her already.

"Brother, I think you need a woman to worry about." Callum cupped the back of Ty's head and ruffled his hair. "We are a Midnight Howl. Think about the people we swore to protect. We'll fight Atos, if he kills me so be it but if I kill him, we'll be saving more lives."

"Temporarily."

"Nothing is permanent, Ty."

"Except love?"

"Except love. So, are we ready to roll?" His brothers gave him their wicked grins. "Let's go kick some Blood Robbers dirty asses."

Chapter Sixteen

Atos Deilo lay sated on the tangled sheets that held the musky scent of sex and sweat while he watched the sheer curtain dance from the breeze coming through the partly opened window. The king size bed he shared with his longtime lover, Zenaida, was perfect for the kind of wild sexual play they both liked to partake in. He was glad for Zenaida's company, for taking his mind off the recent death of his brother, Pic. Only she could take him in the world where worries, hatred, doubts, and pain didn't exist. In between her legs, he was free to let go of himself and enjoy life's bliss.

Zenaida understood him, his belief in ridding the earth of drunks, whores, rapists, drug addicts, pushers, and all kinds of dirty scabs not worthy of calling themselves humans. Unlike the goody-two-shoes Midnight Howls. The fucking morons think feeding on criminals was wrong. If they would only open their stupid eyes, they'd see the Blood Robbers were doing this world a good favor of purifying the line of humans. Why use the law, corrupt lawyers, judges and juries to decide whether to let an offender lose or not. Most of them were repeat offenders and deserved to die a painful slow death. So why not feed on them?

They were not vampires by any means. Vampires feed on humans to live. The Blood Robbers feed on filthy humans. Of course, occasionally Blood Robbers would kill an innocent especially when threatened or cornered. So fucking what? Humans breed like rabbits overpopulating their world.

The Crom's leader, his ancestor, was right about ending the friendship between Shape-shifters and humans. The humans' greed and thirst for war proved that they were beneath the Crows. The fuckers were the reason why Shape-shifters lives were limited to five instead of forever. If stupid Youven didn't rut in between his human wife's legs, they'd still be here. They would all still live with immortal lives.

Five fucking lives and after that whoever was stupid enough to lose his or her fifth life would turn into Cancer. It was all the Arcus fault. Although his brother did not enjoy his third, fourth and fifth lives because of the bitch Callum had taken in his den.

His runner's anguished voice reverberated in his mind. Echoed in his brain so loudly he felt he'd go crazy from it.

Callum and the doctor's daughter killed Pic without mercy. They laugh at him as he lay bleeding on the floor. Pic begged for his life, but they didn't listen.

Doctor Mark Saint James bred the bitch that killed his brother with the help of Callum. For that, *both* must pay.

Ha! Tonight, war between the Blood Robbers and Midnight Howl would take place at the old cemetery because stupid Dyrdek refuse to give up Marisol. The bastard fell in love with Mark's daughter and he called for a challenge with an absurd condition instead. If Callum wins he'd leave Marisol alone but if he wins, he could choose between killing Callum or let him turn into Cancer.

Atos laughed. What a stupid ass if he thinks killing him would be enough to avenge his brother. No, he would not make his death easy for him. He heard the bitch was a beautiful woman. He could hardly wait to see her gag from wolves' dick. He would enjoy watching the Blood Robbers take turns tasting her body while Callum watched. And when she was covered with thick cum, he'd slit her throat.

Slay them both. Feed them to the pigs.

He was breathing hard now. The anticipation was too much. Yeah, his cock thickened from impending victory.

"Darling, what are you thinking? You look *excited*." Zenaida walked in the room. Her gaze shifting from his hard cock and face.

"I'm excited whenever you are near, Zen." That part was true. Staring at his lover's body clad in a red silk skimpy Victoria Secret nightgown, his cock became painfully hard. Zenaida's body would make anyone dream of fucking her. Through the opening gap of her nightgown, her taut rosy-hued nipples peeked. He could

see that she wasn't wearing an underwear. He crooked his finger, motioning for Zenaida to come. The outcome of tonight's fight might not favor his side. He knew how skilled Callum and the Midnight Howl's were. Possibly this could be the last time he'd see Zenaida again. Heart twisting in knots, he quickly got up and walked toward the woman he loved. "Make love with me."

"I want nothing else in this world but to share this bed with you."

"Good. Because we'll use this bed in any way possible to Shape-shifters."

Atos snaked his hand in between Zenaida's legs. Her pussy was still slick from their last lovemaking. Inserting his fingers inside his wet passage, he finger fucked her the way she liked it done—rough.

"Atos, I'll fight with you tonight," she moaned the words.

Atos bit her neck and focused his mind on pleasing her. "No. It's too dangerous. You're not in a condition to fight."

"Don't worry about me, love. I won't get in the thick of the fight. I'll be there to make sure your back is covered. Pregnant or not, I still belong to the clan of Blood Robbers, a warrior. Not a cry-baby." Zenaida rode his hand. "Let me fight tonight."

"Let me think about it, love." He lowered his head to capture one exposed nipple with his mouth while rotating his fingers inside Zenaida. His cock was

ready, her pussy waiting. Slowly, he pulled his fingers out. “Put your hands on the bed, love.”

Zenaida shrugged her shoulders seductively to dislodge her nightgown. The wispy material barely made a sound when it landed on the hardwood floor. Naked, she licked his lips and then did what he asked her to do. With her bending down, ass up, and legs wide apart, Atos could look at her wet pussy. Beautiful, plump, perfect in his eyes and all his.

Breathing hard, he ran his fingers inside her legs. Earlier, he lifted her legs up in the air and mounted her hard and wild. It was great fucking her from behind. He wanted a repeat of that. Atos spat on his fingers then spread his saliva on her pussy to mix with her own juice. Zenaida moaned and lifted her ass even higher.

“Darling, what are you waiting for? I want your hard cock now.”

“Just enjoying the view, Zen. You can ride with us tonight. Right now, I’ll ride you the way you fucking like it.” He aimed his cock on her glistening opening. “Just you and me,” he said then rammed Zenaida in one swift move.



Marisol woke up alone in bed. She checked the bedside clock. Dang, her body was on China time. Awake at night and asleep in daytime. How long was she asleep? Rolling on her belly, she buried her face in the pillow inhaling Callum’s scent.

Wow. What happened in the past few days must have been what people call a fast lane. It seemed like she was still in her home planning to watch *Pride and Prejudice*. Now, here she was in love with a Shape-shifter, killing bad Blood Robbers, and having sex. Lots and lots of it. Lying on her back, she stared at the ring Callum gave her. It wasn't an engagement ring. Not a promise ring even. Callum gave it to her because...how did he say it? She was what the ring represents.

I am his beautiful soul. So does it mean we are one?

He loved her. He must be in love with her, but couldn't say it. Well, maybe she should ask. Why not? This is the twenty first century. Women tumble in bed with men outside the sacrament of marriage. Therefore, it would be okay if she asked. Marisol sat up. Yup, she'd do that. Now, for the first step. She must find him.

"Callum, are you in the bathroom? I got to pee." She waited for him to reply. He must be practicing with his brother again.

Swinging her legs on the side of the bed, she looked about the room. Her sword and backpack were on the chair and her clothes hung on the back of it. Callum tidied up a bit before he went outside. How long was he going to be gone? She looked for her hair tie. Damn thing disappeared again. She should really get a short haircut. Although Callum liked it when she sat astride him leaning forward

and her hair served as a curtain imprisoning their faces while she rode him hard. Okay, she would think about cutting her hair.

Marisol put on her Levi's 505 jeans and white wrinkled shirt she stuffed in her backpack. She was searching for her Chapstick when her stomach rumbled. Should she go up and eat at the Turtle Bluff. She already knew the password to the door and could come back anytime. Unless Endy changed the password already. Carrying the sword on her back, she left the apartment.

Outside the front door, her nostrils picked up the acrid scent of cigarette smoke. Victor and his two burly long haired friends, Bruce and Watt, sat on a low concrete fence. They were puffing away their cigarettes. She didn't know Victor smoked.

"Hey guys. Have you seen Callum?"

Watt and Bruce ground their cigarettes on the fence. Both sniffed as if smelling something odorous. And the way their nostrils flared, she would think the men smelled something bad. Marisol had the urge to sniff her armpits. The men acted as if her very presence stunk. Victor took one more puff of his cigarette then he, too, ground out what was left of his cigarette on the wall. He pitched the stub in the nearby can surprising Marisol when it landed inside.

Something was bothering these three. She could feel it. In a short time that she'd known this clan, she learned that they could change their moods in a hurry.

Well, she would be too if she had to fight Cancers and other Shape-shifters. What surprised her most was their dedication to keep the humans safe although some of them hated the job. Like some American soldiers fighting for Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.” Marisol said apologetically. She smiled at the men. They stared back.

“You didn’t.” Victor angled his head trying to look at her sword. “Where are you going?”

“I thought about visiting Doctor Yousney and then walk here and there. Then my stomach chose the perfect timing to growl, so now I am going to eat at the Turtle Bluff. Besides I’m not sure if there are stores open at this time of night.”

“That’s why you’re carrying your sword.”

“Yeah. I thought I should take it with me if I have to leave the den. Do I need the password to leave here?”

“No. Only coming in. Why go up? You can order anything from the restaurant. Delivery is free. I’m hungry, too. How about I order the food and we’ll eat at the park. It’s well lit.”

“Sounds great. We should tell Callum. He doesn’t have a cell so I can’t call him. Do you know where he is? When I woke up he wasn’t in the apartment.” She tucked the loose tendrils behind her ears. “Damn hair. If I keep losing my hair ties maybe I should cut my hair short.”

“I think you should keep it long. Women should have long hair. Nothing beats a woman with hair like yours while carrying a sword. Super sexy and—”

Victor elbowed Watt. “Well, I don’t think he can eat with us. He’s busy right now. Doing something important.”

“Like practicing?”

“Not this time. He and his brothers and a few soldiers are running tonight to fight for—”

“Watt!”

Bruce pretended to move but Marisol saw him elbow Watt’s side again. Watt’s brow rose and his mouth formed in a perfect O the way one would when he finally realized something.

They’re hiding something from me. “Why would Callum run tonight? He’s fighting for what, guys?”

“A woman.”

“Principle.”

“Love.”

The three men said simultaneously.

“What?”

“Forget it Marisol. Let’s get something to eat. We’ll order Mongolian Beef to go for Callum.”

Marisol used her thumb to roll the ring on her middle finger. What did they mean by fighting for a woman, principle, and love? “Are you talking about...”

Callum told her despite what Viola did to him that he would still continue to protect his ex-fiancée from harsh criticism or anything. Viola often go up to patrol. Maybe something happened to her so Callum left her bedside to lend aid to his old flame. Damn it. He spent the majority of his days sparring with his brothers including Viola. Now it seemed he was gone to fight for her. Marisol shook her head. Here she was thinking about asking Callum if he loved her when his heart was set on protecting another woman. How long was he going to be Viola’s knight in shining armor? And should she continue believing that she meant more to Callum than a midnight snack? The thought made her feel sick. She wrapped her arms around her midriff and stared on the ground.

“Marisol? You were saying?”

“I’m just saying, I know all about Callum’s and sworn offer to fight and protect his,” she waved her hand in the air toward no one in particular. “Someone.”

“You know about his offer?” Victor frowned.

“Yeah. Callum was quite honest and open about it.”

“See? Damn it, Bruce. You elbowed me for nothing.”

Bruce just grinned then pretended to box Watt. “You probably misheard Callum, Victor.”

“No. I know what he said.”

“Keep Marisol here and never let her out of your sight. Make sure she stays here and the sword.” Watt said running his fingers through his shoulder length hair.

So that's it then. It's always about the freaking sword. The urge to stomp her feet was so strong, Marisol had to chew on her lower lip from doing it. “Well, I’m going up. Callum probably doesn’t care if I get eaten up there anyway.”

Within a heartbeat, the men changed their demeanor, their faces masked with anger. They flashed her a menacing look she hadn’t seen from them since she arrived here. Marisol swallowed.

“I saw you spar with Viola, Marisol. You’re good. In fact, more than good. But you know so little about us, our clan, our enemies to say that Callum doesn’t care about you. Yes, we are skilled warriors, if you want to call us that, but to win a fight is not as easy as pissing. There are emotions and lives involved. We don’t casually walk into the middle of a fight and come back smiling ready to have dinner.”

Taken aback, Marisol didn’t know what to say to Victor’s sudden burst of anger. Victor’s words stung. The simple reminder of how different she was from these men, from Callum, hurt. Why? Because deep inside she wanted to belong here. To become a part of this world. Callum’s world.

“Dilluted maybe, but Youven’s blood still runs in my veins. I am not afraid to face anyone. Your enemy or mine. Yes, I am a woman. Weak to some people’s eyes. Born to wash the dishes and sweep the floor. However, I am not like any other woman. Push me and I’ll push you back. Love me and I’ll give my whole heart to you. But make a mistake of hurting those whom I love and I’ll take you to the devil myself. Yes, I know little about your clan and I am not a Shape-shifter. But my mind is open to anything. I am willing to learn. If I sounded callous, I apologize. It’s just, it’s the woman...thing that had me, well, Sorry.”

“Well, Callum should have taken her with him. She’d probably kill Atos in a heartbeat. Then they could all come back in time for dinner.” Watt directed his words to Victor and Bruce as if she wasn’t even there.

“Her sword would definitely help send the bastard to where he belongs. Hell.”

Callum is fighting Atos. “Watt, did you just say Callum is fighting Atos right now?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why I’m this angry, Marisol. I’m the one who should apologize. Forgive me. It’s not easy standing here knowing one of my brother’s could die and I’m not there to help. Callum’s last remaining life is on the line right now and I am here instead of fighting beside him.”

Oh my god!

“You know I’d be with your brother right now if we were not assigned to do police work down here, Victor.”

“I know, Watt.”

“I don’t get the others. They stayed because Callum’s fight is personal they say. Dammit. If Callum kills Atos, the whole clan would benefit from it. And you know what the others are saying? Callum has gone mad because of love.”

Love? Love for her? “Excuse me, but am I to understand that Callum is still in love with Viola that’s why he challenged Atos?”

“Viola?” The men asked in unison.

“Am I wrong?”

“Marisol, Callum challenged Atos because of you. He loved you enough to—
Fuck!”

Watt snorted. Bruce choked on his own spit. And Marisol, well, shock was an understatement to describe how she felt at the moment. Callum loved her and he left to fight Atos without telling her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that my brother loved you because he wanted to...you know.”

“I know, but the part why he challenged Atos, you need to explain.”

“Didn’t you say Callum already told you everything?”

“About how he remained as Viola’s protector. I thought that’s what you were talking about. Callum is fighting Atos because of me. Why?”

“Shit.”

“Uh-oh.” Bruce took a step back. “You didn’t know Callum made a deal with Atos?”

Marisol shook her head. “Start talking, Victor. Or you can tell me, Bruce. Or you Watt. What the hell is going on?”

Chapter Seventeen

Even the crickets were silent tonight. Was it possible they could feel the impending doom? That in a few minutes blood of Shape-shifters from two different clans would spill in this place? A soft breeze blew disturbing the flowers resting on the graves. Callum could smell the bastards. They were somewhere around. Most likely hiding behind the centuries-old Cedar trees, he thought. The muscles in Callum's jaws tightened. They twitched as he clenched his teeth. The cowards were watching them.

"They're here." Zambro broke the silence. "Fucking pigs will make us wait. Waiting is not good for the nerves and that's what they're doing. Wracking our nerves."

"Why? We're used to waiting. It's part of our job. To wait in the dark until one of them stupid Blood Robbers show up."

"We know that, Ty. They don't. Because like you said they are stupid."

Callum clenched his fingers. The familiar feel of his ring was absent. And it made him smile. Marisol would keep it. He hoped she understood his meaning when he gave it to her.

The sky was pitched black with nary a sight of a single star. Darkness, death, hung heavily in the stale air. Somewhere a howl hooted.

“Brothers, we have a long night ahead of us.” Callum braced his legs apart, his hands touching the guns strapped on his thighs. “I wish for a chance to repay you all. If that chance never happens, know that I am one lucky son of a bitch to have brothers like you.”

“Uhm, Callum. Do you have to go sappy on us right now? Atos is coming.”

Sure enough, the Blood Robbers dressed in black began to emerge from the dark corner of the cemetery where the mausoleum stood. His entourage fanned out like a bird spreading its wings. Callum recognized Atos right away. Who would miss his trademark? Black trench coat, black hair, and metal arm protector. The woman on Atos’ left hand side caught the attention of the Midnight Howl. What the heck was she doing here? To beguile? To create turmoil among the Midnight Howl soldiers? A freaking distraction. Callum took a quick look at the soldiers. Yup, just look at them. Acting like they’d never seen a stunning woman in flowing black hair before. Damn dogs.

Atos and the rest towered in their over six feet height. Some even reached seven. Callum heard they like to hang out at Emo Nightclubs where emotionally depressed, socially shunned, addicted to My Chemical Romance teenagers, liked to waste their nights and days away. Most likely they supplied Meth and Ecstasy,

too. The muscles in Callum's jaws tightened even more. He wouldn't be surprised if his teeth turned into dust from the grinding he was doing. Atos and his worthless cronies never failed to put him in ugly frame of mind.

"No, wrong time to be sappy right now, Ty. Although, it's a perfect time to kill, destroy and fuck the brains and heart out of these dirty bastards."

"That's why I'm here."

Callum smiled at his younger brother. "I'll give you my case of 1992 Screaming Eagle if you kill more beasts than I do."

"You're on, brother."

Zambro stood on his other side. His eyes narrowed as he directed them toward the Blood Robbers slowly getting closer to where they stood. "Make sure you keep your head attached and we'll all share a bottle."

"I say, take care of your fifth life if you don't want the beautiful woman waiting in your apartment to wait in vain." Rodolf smacked his hand on his shoulder.

Callum nodded at Rodolf without turning around. Marisol was probably looking for him now. He hoped to god that Victor was cunning enough to keep his baby in the den.

Shuffling footsteps muffled by the soft ground came from behind them. Power sizzled in the air. Callum straightened his spine, his hand moved to grip the handle of his sword.

“Take it easy, brother. Seattle’s Best is here.”

Callum looked at Zambro. His brother just grinned. “Salazar’s here?”

“We need all the help that we can get, bro, but this doesn’t mean you’re off the hook.”

“Callum, we meet again. Your bitch helped you live, huh? Oh look. You brought your brothers with you. I see the punks from Seattle decided to join in, too. Nice. The more the merrier.”

“Got that right, kitten. You know us Seattleites. We enjoy skewering pussies.”

“Fuck you, Salazar.”

“Hmm...do I smell fear?”

Atos laughed maniacally. “From you, cocksucker? Go back to your den full of matted hair.”

“Not until your business with Callum is over.”

“You gave your word, Atos. When I win, Blood Robbers will leave Marisol alone.”

“When?” Atos laughed. “Arrogant prick. I will leave your *puta* who killed my brother alone, *if* you win. When you lose, I’ll have your head.”

“You just try, son of a bitch.” Ty took a step forward. His Heckler & Koch MP5K at a ready.

“Ah, the runt in the family. I heard about your temper, runt. We’ll see if you are as bad as they say you are.”

“Oh, I am. By the way, your brother must be a pussy to get beat by a human.”

“You’ll die, motherfucker!”

Before Callum could react, bullets rained on them. He should have known. Atos planted shooters up the trees. He heard Ty grunted before he returned fire.

All hell broke loose.



Marisol couldn’t believe it. Callum challenged Atos, placed his life in danger all because of her. His brothers including the Seattle leader Salazar supported his decision. All except for Ty.

Beautiful. Are you worth my brother’s life?

Ty’s question echoed in her head. Now she knew what was behind his question, his hostility toward her. My god. Callum gave her his ring and didn’t tell her that he loved her because he thought he might not come back alive. What a knuckle head!

“Marisol, are you okay?”

“Victor, okay is not the right word to define how I feel right now.”

“How do you feel?” Watt asked.

“I feel like choking Callum.”

“Marisol, he’s fighting Atos because he wants you to have a free, quiet, and peaceful life. You can go back to your house without Atos sniffing around you.”

“He is nuts if he believes that I can have the kind of life I want if he’s not around. Without him my life would be miserable, dull. Imprisoned inside my loneliness. Do you understand?”

The three men looked at each other then nodded.

“He could be hurt right now. Bleeding like a stuck pig. Like when he came to me.” She practically yelled the words. “Gad! Take me to him, Victor.”

Victor shook his head. “I promised Callum that I will keep you here.”

“You can’t keep me here. It’s either you come with me or I leave alone.”

“Marisol, my brothers are with Callum. They will protect him. Have faith in him. He can protect himself. But if Callum sees you, you will only distract him.”

“We will hide and intervene only if necessary. If he needs us. I just want to make sure he’s safe, Victor. Isn’t that what you want, too? To be there with him” Watt, Bruce? Would you rather stay here patrolling or up there where you are needed?”

“Fuck it. Callum will kill me if I let you leave.”

“Listen buddy, I will whip your ass with my sword until you’re raw if you stand my way.”

Victor’s deep blue sea eyes were as round as saucers. He looked incredulously surprised at her implied threat. “You would whip me.”

“Try me. Victor, I love your brother so much I will tear this whole place down if I have to just to get to him. Take me to Callum. Please.”

“She’s right, Victor. We could watch from afar and be at a ready.” Bruce nodded. “I want to decapitate at least a dozen of them and watch each one turn into dust.”

“Same here.” Watt agreed.

“What are we waiting for gentlemen? Let’s go up and watch our men kick Atos and his members’ bloody asses.”

Chapter Eighteen

It was a horrible sight.

From the top of the hill where Victor instructed her to hide, she looked down at the old, grass-overgrown cemetery. Men and wolves were fighting. Blood permeated the air. The sound of clanging swords, powerful guns, and chilling growls cut the air mingling with the moans, grunts, and cries of pain.

Unaccustomed to seeing fights like this, to her, the scene seemed unreal, staged. So Hollywood. But nothing about the fight was fake. The screams were real, the blood fresh, and the smell of bodies turning into ashes—surreal.

Marisol spotted Callum. Her heart screamed at the sight of him swinging his sword. He was on the offense, but as soon as he felled his opponent, another would come charging. God, why did he have to be so big? Like his brothers he towered among the other fighters. And they were all bloody. She hoped the blood covering his shirt and pants wasn't his. Her heart sank when she saw gashes on his arms and chest.

Ty, Zambro and Rodolf weren't too far away from Callum. The brothers were watching each other's back. She glanced at Victor. His face was hard. For sure, he wanted to be in the thick of the fight to help protect his brothers too.

Marisol turned to look for Callum again. When she spotted him she screamed when a sword nearly missed Callum's back but Victor's hand clamped hard on her mouth muffled her voice.

"Marisol, screaming from here will not help Callum or any of the Midnight Howl. Got it?"

She nodded her answer before Victor removed his hand. "This is horrible, Victor. They all looked hurt. And...Oh god. I forgot to bring my backpack. I don't have the poultice with me."

"We'll help if necessary. See the man in black boots and motorcycle chaps?"

"I see a lot of men in boots."

"Well, that's Salazar. Head of the Seattle's Best. He's as good as Zambro. Right now, it looks like they're handling the fight well."

Victor spoke too soon. A man in black with shiny metal arm protector holding an equally shiny sword made his way toward Callum.

Atos.

"Oh my god," she whispered.

“Son of a bitch. Victor, Atos is swinging Valdo’s sword like death itself. ”
Bruce spat the words as if they were vile.

Atos was the same height as Callum. The moon provided Marisol a glimpsed of his profile. He was a handsome man no one would suspect he had an evil soul. The way he chopped and sliced the men on his path, one would think he possessed none at all.

One man blocked Atos. The man lasted a few seconds before his head landed on the blood soggy ground. He turned into ashes a minute later.

Marisol noticed a woman carrying a high-powered gun kept close to Atos. The way she looked at Atos told Marisol that she wasn’t just another member of Atos’s clan.

“Victor, is Atos married?”

“No, but that woman is his lover. Why?”

Marisol shook her head. She found a weapon against Atos. In time, she’d used it. Right now, she would have to remain hidden.

It didn’t take long for Atos to reach Callum. Both men, panting and covered in blood faced each other. Marisol kept her gaze on Callum.

Please, please be careful.

Marisol held her breath when Atos lunge his sword at Callum in three quick thrusts. Callum blocked him. Atos laughed. Bastard. Atos knew the power of his

sword. Marisol heard Victor cursed beside her when two more men swaggered toward Callum. Heart thudding against her chest, she scan the area for Ty or Zambro or Rodolf. She saw them, but all were engaged in battles. Callum's back was unprotected.

“Victor, Callum should at least use a gun to keep the others away from him.”

“This is a battle, Marisol. If your opponent drops his sword, you give him a chance to pick it up. That's just how it goes.”

“That's insane. A fight is a fight. Use whatever to win.”

One man built like Gym rat, took a swing at Callum. He nearly hit Callum straight in the back if Callum hadn't turned around in time to block the sword. It didn't take long before Callum killed the man. He was still panting when Atos rounded Him. He was about to charge Callum when the woman protecting his back screamed. Atos changed direction. He immediately killed the man that hurt the woman then shoved her away from harm's way.

It didn't take long before Atos was back to facing Callum. The two circled each other. It was a sight Marisol would never forget. She was overwhelmed and astonished. Both men were equal in strength and skill. The only advantage Atos had against Callum was his sword.

She could clearly see Callum, his brother's and Atos now that most fighters were on the ground. Some were still alive, in pain, unable to move, and waiting for

their bodies to heal. The others quickly turned into wolf form and continued fighting.

Somewhere near where Atos's woman stood, Marisol noticed movements. Judging by the sound of Victor's curse, he saw it too.

"Atos brought more men."

They were right. Armed men swarmed the cemetery again.

"We need to help."

"We? You stay here, Marisol. We have more than one lives. You can't—"

"Callum is not the only one who could give his life for love. I will die for Callum, Victor. And I am sure you'll give everything for your brothers as well."

"You are one crazy woman."

Marisol wrapped an arm around Victor and gave him a kiss on his temple. "Follow my plan and we might live to face Callum's wrath later."

"What's the plan?"

"Cover me."

"That's the plan?"

Chapter Nineteen

Through his peripheral view, Callum saw more Blood Robbers coming. Fuck! His brothers were all standing, still fighting for him, with him. But for how long. They were outnumbered.

“You’re one fucking dead wolf, Callum.”

“Don’t start counting your chicks before they hatch, pighead.”

“Oh, believe me. I’ve already counted you when you killed my sister.”

“You’re a fucking lunatic to believe I killed her. If you only ceased to believe in your ancestors’ crooked ways of killing humans, Alisha might still be alive today. Your stupidity was what drove her out of your den. So don’t you fucking blame me or others for her death.”

“Alisha knew and understood what we stood for.”

“Wrong, bastard. She knew all right, but did not understand at all. You, Atos are the only sole responsible for her death. You killed you sister.”

“No!” Atos charged. The force of Atos’s sword meeting Callum’s made his knee buckle.

Callum's own blade cut his forehead when he blocked Atos's blow. Sparks from the metal flew forcing him to look away. It was what Atos had been waiting for. He kicked Callum sending him sprawling on the wet grass. He tried to regroup, but the slippery ground made it impossible. Atos's took advantage. Callum couldn't do anything but defend himself. Warm blood trickle down his face.

"Die you fucking bastard!" Atos's screamed sounded maniacal.

Callum saw Atos's sword come down. He rolled a couple times then quickly stood up. He didn't have to block Atos's attacks. His brother Ty did.

"The runt wants to fight me."

"Fuck you." Ty held his double straight sword in front of him in a crisscrossed position.

Atos laughed.

Callum gnashed his teeth. His brother still had three lives, but it wouldn't matter when Atos's sword cut him. He wiped the blood off his face. From where he stood, he watched for sneaky attackers. He didn't dare take Ty's attention from Atos. One false move and it could cost his brother his precious life.

"Ready to die, Runt?"

"Of course. I'm always ready to die for what I believe in, which is getting rid of dirty asses like you."

Callum intercepted one Blood Robber running toward Ty.

Ty and Atos measured each other. Atos, a couple inches taller than Ty had the advantage. Ty surprised him with his skill in using the double sword. His brother attacked, twirling the swords like a baton. When he stopped, Atos found his chest bleeding.

“Impressive display, but I’m still standing, Runt,” Atos taunted.

“Not for long.”

Callum didn’t get a chance to watch his brother. He was busy defending himself from the swarming Blood Robbers. He just skewered a wolf’s heart when he heard Ty’s grunt. Zambro called Ty’s name. Callum turned in time to see Atos stab Ty deeper in the stomach.

Ty’s body bucked from the force.

“Ty!” Callum roared. Blinded by anger and fear, he charged Atos.



Marisol saw it happen. She couldn’t get to Ty without fighting a Blood Robber blocking her path. While Victor kept her back protected, Watt and Bruce remained on her side as she made her way toward the woman.

She must end this fight right now. Before it was too late. There were so many that Atos had wounded. Why didn’t she think about carrying the poultice with her?

As soon as Marisol came close to the woman, she stopped. The woman looked at her then touched her belly. She was carrying a child. Fear registered on her face, but it was gone a heartbeat later.

“Well, well. What do we have here? A human. I know your kind is stupid, but not stupid enough to join in a fight like this—with or without a powerful sword.”

The woman’s voice was steady Marisol thought to commend her mentally. “I am here to end this fight.”

“You’re giving yourself to Atos?”

“No. By letting you and your baby live.” She didn’t give the woman a chance to absorb what she just said. Marisol had the tip of her sword on the woman’s neck even before she could lift her sword. With Watt, Victor and Bruce standing guard, Marisol looked at Atos and bellowed his name. She called him twice before her voice penetrated his hearing.

Miracle of all miracles, men and wolves stopped fighting.

“Lower your sword or I’ll kill your woman.”

“Marisol?” Callum growled her name.

“Don’t you fucking touch her or I’ll kill you, bitch.”

“Not before she dies. I swear to god, Atos. She’ll die and the baby she carries if you don’t lower your sword.” To prove she wasn’t bluffing, she pressed the tip of her sword on the woman’s neck drawing blood. The woman gasped.

Atos lowered his sword. Marisol let out a shaky breath. Good god.

“Let Zenaida go.”

Marisol looked at the woman. “I shouldn’t let her live. After what you’ve done to my parents, Atos. But I’m not a beast like you. Next time though, I will not show mercy.”

“You didn’t show my brother mercy. Why is this situation different?”

“Your brother came to my home and threatened my life and Callum’s. It was only right to defend ourselves.”

Atos looked at the man to his left who looked ready to bolt. Marisol wondered if he was the wolf who dared come in her home and escaped through the window.

“I should kill Zenaida, but I don’t kill love, Atos. You love her. I can see it in your eyes. And she’s here because she loves you. I’m giving you a chance Atos. Leave, take your men with you before I change my mind.”

Atos didn’t move fast enough to her liking. She pushed her sword deeper into Zenaida’s neck. Blood stained her sword and the woman’s neck.

Atos looked around then nodded to his men. Like ghosts in the dark, the Blood Robbers disappeared one by one. Some helped carry the wounded.

“You’re free to go anywhere you want and we will not harm you.” To Callum Atos said, “This hasn’t changed anything between us, Midnight Howl. I gave you my word. We will not attack the humans, but we will continue hunting the tainted souls. And when we meet again, Callum, I *will* kill you.” Atos spat then walked toward Zenaida.

Within minutes, only the Midnight Howl members were left standing in the cemetery. Just like that the fight was over.

Marisol met Callum’s gaze. He looked ready to kill her. She mentally prepared her explanation to save her from his ire when Zambro’s anguished voice pierced the air. He looked where Zambro and the others were gathered.

“Ty, brother.” Zambro held one paw on his lap.

Marisol rushed to his side. “Ty, darling. Look at me,” she cupped his face and choked on her sob when she saw how badly cut he was.

“Marisol, we need your poultice,” Zambro whispered. “Please. He can’t. I won’t let him die.”

“I, I don’t have it with me,” she looked around frantically. “We need to stop the bleeding.” Someone thrust a shirt in her hand. She pressed it on Ty’s wound. The shirt was soaked with blood in a matter of seconds. “Find me mint leaves,

mar—marjoram, rosemary, beeswax or honey. Now!” She turned to look at Ty again. “Ty, just hang on.” She knew the men shifted into wolves, but didn’t pay much attention to them.

Ty whined. Blood oozed from the side of his mouth. “*It’s okay, Marisol. Share the wine...the wine...with Cal for me.*”

His voice was weak, but Marisol heard him. “What? What wine, Ty?”

Zambro let out a string of curses. Rodolf held Ty’s head as he wept openly. Callum sat beside her gripping Ty’s huge paw.

“We’ll keep the bottle unopened until you’re better, bro.”

“*I don’t believe in fairytales, Cal.*”

“Ty, save your energy.” She rubbed his soft fur. “Where the hell are the leaves?”

She couldn’t tell how long it took before the Shape-shifters came back with the leaves. She didn’t care. All she cared about was that the leaves landed on her lap. “I need a bowl.”

Someone handed her a helmet. Marisol used the hem of her shirt to wipe it clean before pouring the honey inside. “Callum, please help me cut this in small pieces.”

Callum quickly tore the leaves. He didn't say anything, but his actions spoke loudly. He feared for his brother's life. His hands shook the leaves were landing outside the helmet.

"Is that it? That's the secret of this poultice?"

"That's no secret."

"Them leaves are everywhere?"

Marisol ignored the murmurs. Ty looked dead and his chest barely moving. She mixed the honey and the leaves. When the ingredients were at the right consistency, she knew it was time to add her blood. Was it really necessary? Were her parents blinded with false belief that her blood could help cure fatal wounds? Why would her parents believe it so, she had no idea. When she was little, adding blood to the poultice was cool. She didn't mind the small prick on her fingers. As she got older, she considered the process a secret. One that made her feel different, above others. The secret in itself was power but when she hit adulthood, contributing blood became a tradition. She didn't ask questions whether her blood was necessary or not. Perhaps it had to do with her secret wish that her blood was indeed helping cure wounds. Dad's poultice helped cure Callum's wound and stopped him from turning. Would a poultice without her blood work?

Ty groaned. His body made a spasmodic jerk.

"Callum, help me apply this on his wound."

Callum nodded. He helped spread the salve then sat back on his heel. “I’ve seen Mark use this poultice. It should work right away. Come on, bro. Hang in there.”

Ty’s body continued to jerk and more blood came out of his mouth. He was dying.

“Marisol, I don’t think the poultice is working. It should hurt him. The poultice burns the wound before it started healing. Are you sure about the leaves? Is this the same one that you gave me?”

Callum was right. When she applied the poultice mixed with her blood on Callum, the effect was right away. “Give me your knife, Callum.”

“A knife?”

“Yes. Now,” she practically screamed the last word.

Callum handed her the most beautiful dagger she had ever seen. “Will this do?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Taking a deep breath, she opened her hand, palms up and cut it open. She hissed from the sharp sting. Her eyes blurred from tears. “Callum, mix my blood with the rest of the salve. Quick.”

While she dripped blood into the helmet, Callum stirred the mixture using his fingers.

The wound was so deep Marisol hope the poultice would work. “Put this on his wound.”

As soon as the mixture touched Ty’s open flesh, his body lifted off the ground. He growled so loud Marisol’s hair stood on end. And then he quieted. Marisol couldn’t contain her emotions anymore. A sob escaped her mouth.

Ty’s agony was over.

Chapter Twenty

Memories of her father's casket lowered into the hallowed ground came back without warning as she listened to Zambro give his short prayer for the ones who didn't survive the fight. Pain, sorrow, regret, and fear swallowed her whole. Her knees buckled from the weight of it. If it weren't for Callum's hold on her waist, she would have collapsed on the ground. She collapsed on his chest instead.

Death was cruel. It took not only the life of the dead, but part of the living, too. For Marisol, a big chunk of her heart broke off and went with her father to his grave. Bits of her heart went to the Midnight Howl members who fought beside Callum and his brothers. For the sake of humans and her. It amazed her how the Midnight Howl clan continued to protect the humans, the very same species that cost them their immortality. How could she repay them? She wished the humans knew how lucky they were to have guardians of the night, protecting them without expecting anything in return.



Her energy was practically zero by the time they got back to the den.

Marisol sat on the bed staring at her bandaged hand. She felt refreshed after a long hot shower and relieved to be back in the comfort of the den. Endy met her outside the elevator and welcomed her back using the ancient language. Those who heard them communicate in Gael were surprised, but it was the murmur about her blood that rang in her ears. The secret of the poultice was no more. Tonight, her question about whether she possessed a power like her mother or not was answered. Now she knew. In her blood lies Youven's DNA.

It must have been during the time when she was little, helping prepare the poultice when her mother discovered the potency of her blood. She was helping cut the leaves when she accidentally cut her finger. The blood dripped in the mixture. Her mother didn't throw the poultice away but saved it. Her mother must have tried it on a wolf and found that it was potent.

She wiggled her fingers. It was interesting how the poultice could cure other wounds but not her own. Kind of like her mother's power to see others future but not hers. Marisol sighed.

"Does it hurt?"

Marisol looked up. God, how the Shape-shifters could move stealthily was beyond her. "A little."

Since the fight, he hadn't talk to her. He just kept on looking at her with his angry blue eyes. Just like what he was doing right now. She wondered if he'd take her back to her barn. Funny, but thinking about leaving made her feel melancholy.

She raked his body with her gaze. Now clean from blood, dirt, and grass, she could see the cuts on his body. All were quickly healing, but still visible. Thankfully, Atos's sword didn't hurt him again. When she was at the clinic, waiting for Doctor Yousney to clean her cut, soldiers and women talked about the fight, the brothers magnificent fighting skills, how she nagged Victor into taking her to the cemetery, her intervention and bold threat to kill Atos's woman, and Callum's last life. Life that he thought worth losing just for her.

"You're angry."

"And you know why."

"I didn't listen to you, again."

"No, you didn't."

"That's alright. Be mad at me, but please don't get mad at Victor. He didn't want to take me to the cemetery, but he didn't stand a chance. My persistence and stubbornness wore him out. Besides, he wouldn't have been able to keep me down here anyway."

"I'm not mad at Victor. At least not anymore."

"Why did you do it?" she asked then lowered her head.

“Do what?”

“What do you mean do what?” She realized she snapped the question. Annoyance and irritation quickly spread in her system. Her father would always guess that she was tired based on her mood. And right now, she was so freaking tired.

“Victor told me you didn’t get to eat. You were planning on going to Goon’s restaurant when he saw you.”

“So what? What has my missing dinner got to do with my question?”

“When a person is hungry, he or she tends to become snappy.”

Marisol sighed. “Sorry. I am hungry and tired. And the remnants of fear still linger in my blood.”

“There is nothing to worry about now. Atos will not come after you especially after sending him a small jar of your poultice for Zenaida’s cut.”

“I’m not worried about me, Callum. You know that.”

“I know.”

“So are you going to answer my question? Why did you challenge Atos?” Of course she knew why he did it. Victor told her but she wanted to hear it from him.

“Because he threatened to hurt the humans and...and...he asked that I give him my soul. I can’t do that. My love for my soul is deeper than the sea, beyond life

and death. While I am living and standing, and with the fifth life, I will fight for my soul. And the only way to do it was to challenge Atos.”

“Your soul?”

“Yes, love. My soul.”

Marisol’s heartbeat drummed so fast when she heard the caress in his voice.

“You love me.”

“More than you’ll ever know.”

“Why didn’t you want me to know?”

“I didn’t want my love to burden you.”

Marisol got off the bed and stood in front of Callum. A lock of hair had fallen blocking his left eye. Marisol combed his hair back with her fingers. “Why would your love be a burden?”

“Baby, I am a Midnight Howl, a Shape-shifter. As one, I often dance with danger. The very reason why I have only one life left in me. If I tell you how much I love you then leave you, how would that make you feel?”

“And knowing about your love after your death would be easier?” Marisol took his hand in hers and kissed each finger. “I would rather know, even for a second, that you love me than live my life wondering if I am wrong about your feelings. I love you, Callum. I have only one life, but however short or pathetic it may be, I want to share it with you.”

“Marisol,”

Callum grasped her hips. She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissed the scar on his shoulder and inhaled his scent. He was such a beautiful man possessed with power and a gentle heart.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you, Marisol. From the moment I saw you, I knew you were the one. My mate, my soul.”

She kept kissing his shoulder, chest and flat nipples. Callum groaned before he fisted his hand in her hair. He jerked her head back gently forcing her to look up. For a brief moment, he stared at her before his mouth claimed hers.

Slowly, Callum urged her to walk backwards until the back of her knees touched the bed. “I love you, Marisol,” he whispered again and again. His hands snaked inside her shirt, fondled her breasts before pulling the shirt over her head leaving her in her red panties. “I never knew fear until I saw you at the cemetery with my knuckle head brother and his friends. Don’t do anything like that again, love.”

“You know I will, Callum, especially if it meant saving you.”

“Dear god. Of all the women in the world. I fell in love with a stubborn one.”

Marisol grinned. “I love you, too.”

He lowered her to bed. His hard body followed covering her. And then he began kissing every inch of her. Marisol writhed from anticipation. Callum was such a gentle lover. He made her feel like a goddess he worshipped in bed. When her body screamed for something wild and fierce. He understood.

Callum left her to shuck his pants off. She only had a chance to glimpse the size and length of his cock and he was back on top of her, spreading her legs with his knees. Without any sexual fondling or stimulation, he moved in between her legs.

Callum snaked his hand in between them to guide his cock on her entry. Slowly, he penetrated her. She cried from pleasure. He groaned.

Foreplay wasn't necessary. Both of them were on fire. She was so aroused their body contact made her shiver. And judging at how Callum's body tautened, she knew he felt the same way, too.

Marisol ached. Her breasts heavy. She wanted all of him. "My love,"

"Yes." Callum pushed deeper. "You are mine, Marisol. Mine."

Marisol tried to concentrate hearing all the love words she'd wanted to hear from him, but her feelings were so consuming she couldn't make out some of his words. She wanted to respond, too, but speech was impossible. She let her body do the talking instead.

She clung to him, raised her legs higher to take more of him in. The bed rocked from Callum's controlled and yet hard thrusts. Marisol cried from ecstasy.

Callum gave her more. He shifted so he could suck her breast while his magical finger touched her clit. When he began massaging her flesh, she nearly came apart. She was close, so close to reaching her orgasm when Callum pulled out.

"Callum, please."

"Yes, baby. You'll come." He said in a harsh yet full of love tone while scooting down her body.

Marisol knew his intent. She gripped his hair in expectation. She didn't have to wait long. Callum's hot mouth clamped on her throbbing clit and began to suck. The intensity of her pleasure overcame her body with so much force she bucked. Callum gripped her hips tight and continued to worship her pussy.

He was groaning. She was whimpering and panting seeking release. Marisol moved her ass in a thrusting motion making love with his mouth. Her orgasm came shattering her body in million pieces with the help of his three fingers he had forced inside her.

As soon as her orgasm began to ebb away, Callum crawled back up her body. His eyes directed at her while his lips and tongue took turns torturing her body with his licks and kisses.

“We are one. One heart. One body. One soul.” He slowly eased into her tight sheath moaning as he did. “I love you,” he said, and then he slammed into her over and over until he shouted her name.

Warm liquid poured inside her. Marisol hugged Callum tightly. She didn’t want to let go. God, she loved him so much. Having Callum buried deep inside her warmed her heart like a candle glowing in the dark. She wanted this.

Deep in her consciousness, she thought of her father. This must be what he wanted, too. For her to be happy. To be with Callum.

“Am I squishing you?”

“No. I like it when you cover me like this.”

Callum chuckled while planting kisses on her face. “Everyone’s forming their ideas about why Kyra’s family failed to produce a healing poultice. You want to hear mine?”

“Yes.”

“I think they failed because they didn’t have a heart like you and your mother. Anna made the poultice to help us even though she knew it was too dangerous.”

“I didn’t know anything about the Blood Robbers or Midnight Howl when I helped make the poultice and yet it’s potent.”

“That’s the thing. You didn’t know. Your heart is not tainted with evil thoughts, of secret plan to use the poultice to your advantage. When you cut your hand to save my brother, you showed how unselfish you are. A trait, I’m sure, that you inherited from your mother.”

“If I have to drain my body to save you, I’ll do it Callum.”

“You made Youven proud.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Heart drumming against her chest, Marisol moved even closer to Callum when they reached the door to Goon's restaurant. Callum stopped walking, wrapped his arm around her waist, and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

Knowing Callum was there eased her worry. The reception she received at the arena wasn't something she wanted to experience again. It was obvious the clan didn't want her here. Aside from the Dyrdeks, Bruce and Watt, she didn't make any friends since she arrived just over a week ago. The women never talked to her and the men, well, sometimes their hatred couldn't have been clearer. Now they would all be in Goon's restaurant for the feast tonight. Just thinking about it gave her a stomach cramp. Marisol adjusted her green dress. The neckline was a bit risqué, but she had only an hour to find something to wear other than a tank top and jeans. The spaghetti strapped dress was the only thing simple that was available at the store where Callum had taken her. It was snug on the chest and the material clung on her body like a second skin. God, she felt naked.

"Stop fidgeting, love. You look wonderful."

“You’re just saying that. When you saw this dress, all you did was scowl. Victor said that after dinner you would toss this into the fire. I hope I am not in it when you do. Did you really say that? Of course. Why would Victor lie? Did you see him? He is so adorable in his sports jacket. I feel naked.”

The change of topic didn’t escape him. His lovely Marisol was nervous being around his clan again and he couldn’t blame her. If staying in their room and skipping this feast wouldn’t hurt Goon’s feelings, he wouldn’t place Marisol in this situation. God knows all he wanted—especially after seeing her in this dress—was to toss her back in bed and make slow love with her all night long.

“Look at me.” He placed his fingers beneath her chin then tilted her head. Marisol’s worried eyes met his. “You are worrying about nothing. I am here, love. If you see someone scowl at you, let me know and we’ll leave right away. Although I doubt anyone would treat you differently now especially after what you’ve done, what we’ve learned about your power to heal, and your kindness to help another including an enemy.”

“My blood isn’t enough to repay you and your clan for what you’ve done to protect us, Callum. I’ll try not to worry so long as you’re beside me.”

“I love you Marisol Saint James. You’re my soul, love. I’ll be by your side forever.”

“Forever is endless.”

“You betcha.”

Marisol’s lipstick free lips were as red as a newly bloomed rose from her constant chewing. Callum leaned down for a short kiss, but Marisol went soft on him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her soft breasts pressed against his chest. He pulled her up tight against his growing arousal. Over and over, he slanted his mouth on top of hers. God, how he loved her. She was his to take, care for and love.

He pressed his thumb on her chin to open her mouth even wider then penetrated her with his tongue even deeper. Lust burst like a million stars enveloping them in brilliant lights. Callum felt like standing in the middle of the lustrous room undimmed with worries and pain, uncertainty and boring existence.

Tightening his hold on her waist, he pulled Marisol harder lifting her higher to align their bodies the way they did in bed. He lowered his hand a bit to cup her ass when a loud clearing of throats penetrated his senses.

Just a fraction, he lifted his mouth from Marisol whom he noticed had gone bright red. With his heart slowly beating back to normal, he remembered where they were and realized that the door to the restaurant was already open. He ran the pad of his thumb on Marisol’s smooth cheek back and forth.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“And I you.”

Zambro cleared his throat again. “If you two lovebirds would come inside we could start devouring Goon’s wonderful food.”

Callum kept his hold on Marisol’s waist. He felt Marisol shiver and heard her moan when the men openly stared and some women showed appreciation and others envy.

“I told you they don’t like me. Look at them stare, Callum.”

“Baby, they are staring because you are beautiful.”

Marisol looked up at her then smiled. “Love is indeed blind.”

“Perhaps. I say truth is love and I am telling you the truth.”

One clap echoed in the room. A second one followed and then more. Callum grinned down at Marisol. The look of surprise on her face was priceless. She began chewing on her lower lips again.

“What’s going on, Callum.”

“Everyone is here to celebrate with us.”

“What for?”

“How about if I let them tell you.”

Goon stepped forward and took Marisol’s hand. “Welcome to the clan, Marisol. To face and threaten Atos the way you did showed us loyalty and bravery

and who you are.” Goon placed his right hand on his chest. “You have my allegiance and my kitchen will stay open twenty four seven just for you.”

“Thank you, Goon. If you could show me how to make bread that would be enough.”

“As soon as Callum lets go of his hold on you, I will.”

“I believe you’ll have to wait a long time for that to happen, Goon. You’ll just have to snatch her. Hey, Marisol.”

Ty pushed Callum weakly. Callum moved and pretended to lose his balance. His brother hadn’t recovered fully yet. It would take a day or two before he regain his strength.

“Ty.” Marisol walked over to his brother and wrapped her arms around him. “Good to see you.”

“Thanks for saving my life.” Ty said then wrapped his arms around Marisol with his cheek pressed on the top of her head.

“Oh no. Don’t thank me. I should be the one thanking you and the rest of the Midnight Howl for watching over us humans. But thanks for the hug.”

Someone from the crowd said something about the soup getting cold. Ty showed Marisol and Callum their seats.

Callum noticed the bottle of wine he promised his brothers on the table. It was still unopened. He looked around. The other bottles were on the other tables as well.

They'll have one heck of a celebration.

Ty uncorked the bottle and poured every glass with the crystal clear wine. Victor took only half of his glass.

"You're not drinking, Victor?"

"Have to work tonight."

Bruce and Watt joined them at the table.

"Finally. I'm tired of playing MP down here. Time to kick some asses up there. Watching you guys fight made me hungry for blood." Bruce said while chewing his food. "Say, Marisol. Do you suppose all of us should carry a Ziploc bag with your poultice in it? Just in case."

"Not a bad idea. Or I could go—"

"Not gonna happen." Callum immediately cut Marisol off in mid-sentence.

"As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted, I could talk to Doctor Yousney and perhaps he could think of something better than a Ziploc bag."

"Sounds good. So," Bruce lifted his glass for a toast. "Here's to our clan. May the souls of our ancestors keep us safe from the smelly Blood Robbers."

Everyone at the table raised their glasses. Callum noticed when Marisol tasted her wine, her face turned comical. It was either she didn't like the wine or she'd never had alcohol before.

Hours later, Marisol's speech slurred. She could hardly stay in her seat. He had to put their chairs close together so he could anchor his arms on her shoulders. He was having a great time watching Marisol enjoy the night. Her nervousness was gone and she was waving at everyone. What a happy drunk.

"Marisol, is this your first time to drink alcohol?" Asked Rodolf.

His brothers, Watt, and Bruce all looked at Marisol. They were obviously enjoying her company.

"Yup. Dad was overly protective of me, you see. He never let me go farther than two blocks from my house. That's why our house, the barn and my Bisque It store are all connected." She giggled. "This is my first time away from home, first time to drink, and I had my first time having sex with Callum. I was a virgihhhppppp."

Callum covered Marisol's mouth, but it was too late. His brothers and friends were already choking from laughter they were trying to suppress.

He stared at Marisol when she looked at her with her half asleep eyes, licking his palm. "Baby, I think it's time for us to go." He must take her back to their apartment before she blurted something she'd regret tomorrow.

“No. Please stop moving, Callum. You’re making the room spin.”

Callum looked at his brothers for silent plea for help, which he was glad they offered right away.

Victor stood up. “Well, time to roll. As much as we’d like to hang with you all, there are humans in need of protecting up above.”

“Green Day concert tonight, Callum. Lots of goofy teenagers wandering around downtown Seattle. Seattle’s Best needs us.” Bruce took another sip of his wine and finished it with a big ahhh. “Good stuff. Thanks Callum. Hope you save a bottle for your honeymoon.”



After what seemed to be endless goodbyes, he was able to take Marisol back to their room. His baby would definitely suffer from her first hangover tomorrow. Callum smiled remembering the hilarity on his brothers and friends faces.

He helped Marisol remove her provocative dress, skimming her skin as he undid the buttons on the back. She had such exquisite skin. Smooth, unblemished and soft to touch. Down to her strapless lacy bra and white thong, Callum couldn’t stop staring at Marisol. His body reacted swiftly and badly. He wanted to make love with her right that minute but Marisol looked asleep already while standing.

She yawned lustily then crawled to bed. “I had fun tonight, Callum. I think your clan likes me now.”

“Hard not to like you, love.”

“God, I’m so sleepy. I have to give Doctor Yousney the poultice. Someone might need it soon.”

He hoped to god that his brother and the others wouldn’t need the poultice tonight or tomorrow. Or never. Ty coming close to dying reminding him how fragile even the Shape-shifters lives were. “Sleep and we’ll go see Doctor Yousney tomorrow.”

Callum removed his clothes then joined Marisol. He didn’t have to tuck her in beside him, which he’d been doing since they began sleeping together because Marisol scooted closer to spoon with him.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Marisol.”

Unlike the other days, tomorrow would be different. He would be facing it with Marisol. He kissed her hair and inhaled her scent. What a remarkable woman. She gave her trust and care quite easily. Perhaps it was the reason why she was the one chosen to carry the burden of bleeding herself to save others. Her unselfish act proved how kind she was. Doctor Yousney couldn’t believe it when Marisol asked if it were possible to send a jar of poultice to Atos without putting the courier’s life in jeopardy.

Callum closed his eyes. Youven's sword was safe and in the hands of a woman who possessed great power to heal wounds. How cool was that?

Marisol moved again. Her ass pressed hard on his thickening cock. Callum laced their hands together. He looked at the ring around her finger. His chest swelled from his overwhelming love for Marisol. "Baby, you're my beautiful soul. I love you."

"And you're my Wolf. I love you, too."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Key Arena, Downtown Seattle

Victor, Watt, and Bruce finally cornered four Blood Robbers that snagged the young group of teenagers coming home from watching the Green Day concert at the Seattle Arena. The back alley was perfect. Last thing he wanted was exposing the unsuspecting humans to a blood bath.

The Blood Robbers pinned the kids beneath their massive paws.

“Let the kids go, you son of a bitch.” Victor snarled.

The inky black wolf snarled back. *“Bad human soul is a good food for us. That’s how it work, Midnight Howl. These are no good for nothing scum. They must die.”*

“Not under our watch, asshole. Let him go.” Watt spat.

The wolf replied by biting the stunned kid’s neck. Screams from the other kids and Bruce’s shout bounced off the walls.

“You’ll die, Blood Robber.” Bruce shifted then attacked. With his speed, the Blood Robber didn’t get a chance to react. He was dead before he hit the

pavement—headless. The body disintegrated. Within seconds the head, too, turned into ashes. The kids ran away screaming.

Victor didn't bother shifting. He pulled his double sword from its scabbard strapped on his back. It didn't take him long before he beheaded two wolves. He looked around. Watt was just finishing off the other wolf. The acrid smell of disintegrating body mingled in the nauseating piss and garbage coming from the alley.

Thank god for small blessings, Victor thought. He kneeled beside the dead boy's body. *Damn, he must be no more than nineteen. Too young to die.* He leaned even closer and then sniffed. Just as he thought. The kid was clean. Not drunk and he didn't pick up the pungent aroma of marijuana. The fucking Blood Robbers were killing innocent kids.

Victor noticed the plastic bag the kid still held. In it were a birthday card and a Green Day T-shirt. Anger and sadness rioted in his chest when he read the card. The kid bought it for his sister. Damn.

Heart breaking, he tucked the bag in his back pocket then cradled the kid in his arms. He'd leave him outside the hospital. His kind would know what to do with him. As to the card, he'd make sure his sister gets it.

Don't worry, kid. Your sister will know you didn't forget her birthday. With all of my heart, I promise you that.

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Author Bio

Tierney O'Malley graduated from PATTS College of Aeronautics and worked for an airline company. She also worked for a non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of natural resources. Her debut novella, *To Trust a Wicked Man*, is published by Cobblestone Press. She resides in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, their two daughters and a golden retriever.

Red Rose Publishing

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Irresistible Knight- coming soon

Wolf's Soul: A Midnight Howl Novel

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